

See the Brilliance in All Student Writing

By Katherine Bomer

Build a Writing Curriculum from Strength, by Noticing and Naming the Brilliance in Every Student's Writing



Bomer consults with a group of teachers in Austin, TX on how to see and teach from the strengths in their students' writing

My dream is that as teachers, we respond to all students' writing with astonished, appreciative, awe-struck eyes. But first, we must "fall in love" with our students' quirky, unconventional, and culture-infused texts. Writing teacher-extraordinaire, Brenda Ueland, wrote back in 1938 that "The only good teachers . . . are those who love you, who think you are interesting or very important, or wonderfully funny; whose attitude is: 'Tell me more. Tell me all you can. I want to understand more about everything you feel and know and all the changes inside and out of you'" (1987, 8). So what if we were to read student writing wanting to know more? With the belief that our student writers are interesting and "wonderfully funny?" With eyes to see the beauty and brilliance in our students' writing rather than the lack of topic sentences at the beginning of each paragraph?

Since writing reflects thoughts and feelings, and bares the self more than any other activity that children will undertake in school, it also tends to reflect the differences between children. What if we help create spaces for each and every child behind the writing—kids who have difficulty in school, kids who are quirky and outrageous, kids who don't fit in the boxes that standards, rubrics, and tests have forced us to draw—to shine?



I believe we can build a writing curriculum from strength, rather than from what is missing or what mistakes immediately leap from our students' drafts. When I read kids' writing, I too am almost swallowed up in a sea of punctuation errors, twisted syntax, and underdeveloped ideas. Yet, when I'm able to read past all those surface problems, what I find in young people's writing is passionate, surprising and artful.

Lucy Calkins (1994) describes the parts of a writing conference, the teacher-student instructional conversation, as Research, Name, Decide, and Teach. I focus on that second move—Name—where we listen and look for something a student is doing that we can build from and reinforce. We name something specific, something that writers honestly do or at least try to do, that we can see or hear in a student's piece already. I believe this *naming* portion of the writing conference is not a throw-away moment, not empty praise, or a pat on the head, but in fact the key to *teaching* students something they may not have consciously realized they are doing so that they can build on it and do it again. I also find that this information goes deeper and stays longer than even my most enlightened minilesson or teaching point in a conference does.

Perhaps this way of reading can renew our *faith*, as Donald Murray names it, that all of our students "have something to say and a language in which to say it" (1982, 160). "I hear voices from my students they have never heard from themselves."

Some student writing, especially in middle and high school, gets labeled "below grade level" or scored with a "1" on a four-point scale because its syntax differs from conventional English syntax or it struggles with a shape or logical order that helps readers uncover the meaning. Also, much student writing concerns topics we may dislike or prefer not to read about, like replays of cartoons and video games, blow-by-blow descriptions of soccer games, and graphic stories of desperate home lives that are beyond our imaginations. So when we confer with these writers or remark with our pens in the margins of their papers, we might have to work to find specific, positive things to say. But find them, we must. "In so many ways we are creations of language, the things that people have said to us, the things they tell us we are," says poet Linda Hogan (2001, 121). I agree that the language we use with our students has the power to create who they become as writers. I know that telling a young person that her writing voice slides around your shoulders and warms you is language that might create her as a writer and a person eager to learn more. Continually naming the same

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child as "low-performing" on state writing tests is language that might construct her as a failure for the rest of her life.

Using the discourse of writers and artists rather than the more abstract and often damaging evaluations fostered by tests, letter grades, and hyper-attention to surface conventions, we will be able to notice and name the specific technique each student is using. Students with writing difficulties feel better about writing and want to keep doing it when they have a sense of what they do particularly well. Strong writers more readily take risks with their writing by trying new styles, new genres, and new, sophisticated techniques when they have some names for their accomplishments. All of our students will have a place in this community of writers we build in our classrooms—a community born in *every* student's strengths.

The ideas in this article are explored in more detail in Katherine Bomer's latest book *Hidden Gems, Naming and Teaching from the Brilliance in Every Student's Writing* and new DVD *Starting with What Students Do Best: How to Improve Writing by Responding to Students' Strengths*.

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