

YOU DON'T KNOW ME UNTIL NOW



A MINI CURRICULUM FOR TEACHERS CULTURAL CONVERSATIONS THROUGH CREATIVE WRITING

by Abe Louise Young, WKCD Writing Facilitator

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CULTURAL CONVERSATIONS THROUGH CREATIVE WRITING

Supporting Students' Diverse Identities

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Dear Teachers,

Thank you for reading this guide to creating cultural conversations in the classroom, and supporting students' diverse identities through the simple environment of the Writing Workshop.

First, I lay out a series of Writing Workshop Principles, followed by three consecutive lesson plans, or workshop maps. Though intended for middle and high school students, they can be used with any learners who are reasonably comfortable with a pencil in hand—from fourth grade to adulthood.

WRITING WORKSHOP PRINCIPLES

In successful writing workshop, we do four things:

- Use Prompts
- Write Together
- Read the New Work Aloud
- Respond Appreciatively

A complete writing workshop can take place in one class period, although students might want more time.

Use Prompts

A **prompt** is an **experience** that connects to the material we are studying. (For example: a walk in an outdoor environment, a model poem or piece of literature, a group discussion about an issue, a taste or smell, an artifact, a photo.) The teacher offers students the prompt(s) as a doorway to the writing process.

Write Together

We **write** in response to the prompt. The teacher announces how long we will write for (5-30 minutes.) Each student is free to write in any manner s/he wishes (with a few exceptions.) There is no "expectation" set for the content; students are encouraged to take risks and follow their own imaginations. Encourage them to write about what they **care** about and are interested in. Say "yes" to all questions that begin, "Is it okay if I write about...?"

Proper grammar and spelling do not matter at all at this stage. The important thing is that the student is guided to write about whatever s/he is actually thinking about, and helped over any bumps or blocks.

Read Aloud

After the writing time, it's time to share aloud. Ask, "Who would like to share their piece? We have time for ___ readers." Sharing aloud is voluntary: no one is required to read his or her work. (From time to time, the teacher should share his or her writing as well.)

A shy student may ask another person to read their writing for them.

Respond Appreciatively

We **appreciate** the writer by snapping or clapping after each reading. If there is time, teacher and other students **respond** by offering short, positive reactions naming what they:

- like
- heard
- notice
- remember
- can relate to

about the writing. We do not critique or make suggestions at this stage. (Peers may need guidance in how to respond to writing positively, but it is not difficult to set a standard of appreciative response once everyone experiences the vulnerability of sharing their fresh work aloud.) It is essential that students understand that the work is not graded.

Voila! You have a writing workshop.

Now, you can use it to support students' various learning styles; remove fear about writing; build community bonds; introduce new curricular material; learn about your student's lives, knowledge, and areas of expertise; honor their indigenous knowledge; make space for emotion; and nurture healthy self-esteem.

After Writing Lots, Choose Work to Revise and Polish for Publication

Students need to associate pleasure, competency, and creativity with writing—not boredom, fear, or 'getting things wrong.' They need ownership over their own words as a special creative part of themselves, just as they need to feel freedom and pleasure when creating visual artwork. Writing is art.

For this reason, we don't revise, correct, or ask them to polish every piece they write. We offer enough opportunities to write creatively that the student can choose their favorite pieces to correct, revise, and polish from amongst their wide portfolio.

Publication of that portfolio or selected pieces from it is the natural finish for a writing curriculum. Publication can take many forms: a reading for family and friends, a blog, a

handmade book, or an actual anthology. The true purpose of writing—the sharing of emotion, ideas, and experience with an audience—will motivate students to put words on paper, and be a cause for celebration.

THREE WRITING WORKSHOPS ABOUT PLACE and CULTURAL IDENTITY

Workshop One: "Where I'm From" Poem

Prompt

Read the classic poem "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon:

Where I'm From

I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening,
it tasted like beets.)

I am from the forsythia bush
the Dutch elm
whose long-gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.

I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,
from Imogene and Alafair.
I'm from the know-it-alls
and the pass-it-ons,
from Perk up! and Pipe down!
I'm from He restoreth my soul
with a cottonball lamb
and ten verses I can say myself.

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger,
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.

Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
a sift of lost faces
to drift beneath my dreams.
I am from those moments--
snapped before I budded--
leaf-fall from the family tree.

Discuss

What about this poem gives you the strongest feelings? Is there anything you can relate to in it? How do you think the author feels about where she is from?

Write

Ask students to write their own "Where I'm From" poem. Rather than using this as a template, or suggesting they "copy" her form and order, encourage students but to follow their own intuition in writing about the smells, sights, sounds, voices, people, and place they are from.

At any point, the teacher can stimulate creativity by asking a question aloud:

"What do you hear at night before you go to sleep?"

"What special foods does your family cook for celebrations?"

"What songs does your family or church/mosque/temple sing?"

"Who do you miss?"

"What smells float through your house or neighborhood?"

Workshop Two: Claiming and Naming Our Communities

Prompt

Read two poems by Langston Hughes: "Theme for English B" and "I've Known Rivers," and two poems by Gwendolyn Brooks: "We Real Cool" and "The Bean Eaters." (These are each easily available online.) Discuss.

Warm Up

Draw a series of at least eight concentric circles on the board. Write "self" in the center circle, and "family" on the next circle. Ask students to draw the same on a blank sheet of paper. Then, ask them,

Who is your "we"?

Name the groups, places, or communities they are a part of, labeling the other circles in order of size and importance. The goal is to map out fully the numerous communities and identities that apply to the lives of the students in the room.

Discussion

Discuss as the process takes place: *What's the largest group we are all a part of? Is anyone here a part of a community that no one else is? Are teenagers a community?* Discuss the idea that in our different identities, we are seen differently—and perhaps, act differently.

Does everyone see these communities as the students see them? If so, why? If not, why not?

Introduce the idea that all communities have challenges (things they struggle with) and strengths (unique resources to draw on.) If students wish, they can discuss **challenges** and **strengths** of their own communities.

Writing Time

Ask students to write the following statements, and complete them, one by one. Give students three minutes or so to complete each statement. The only rule is that each statement has to be completed in a different way.

On planet Earth, I am...
My mother came from...
My father came from...
In [country of origin], I am...
In [the United States], I am...
In [state], I am...
In [city], I am...
In [neighborhood], I am...
On [name of home street], I am...
At school, I am...
With [], I am...
To [], I am...
In my house, I am...
In my room, I am...
In my heart/mind, I am...

Follow Up or Continuation

Students might write freely, beginning each sentence with the word “we.”

Workshop Three: Taking The Leader’s Voice

Prompt

Hand out colored pencils and blank paper. Ask students to draw one of three options:

- the path they take from school to home
- their block
- their neighborhood
- their city
- their country

This artwork can be abstract or representational. No need to be artistically inclined here.

The goal is to stimulate memory and visual thinking. Suggest that they might include people and other forms of life in the pictures.

Discussion

Discuss the idea that all places have challenges and strengths, ugly and beautiful aspects. All places have things we appreciate and things we wish would change. Only by envisioning how things could be different, can we move toward creating the place we truly want to live in.

Brainstorm/List Writing

Make a list of good and bad, or ugly and beautiful, or challenged and resourceful things about their city/home.

Writing Time

Ask students to describe where they live, in words on paper, for five minutes. Then, ask them to envision the America/city/neighborhood/home they **want** to live in for fifteen minutes.

Title the writing, "The [America/city/community/home] I Want," depending on the scale they choose.

Challenge them to name concretely what they see and what they'd like to change. Nurture their power of dreaming. Support this writing process as an act of civic leadership.

What Kids Can Do

What Kids Can Do, Inc. (WKCD) started in 2001 to make public the voices and views of adolescents. On its website, WKCD documents young people's lives, learning, and partnerships with adults both in and outside school. WKCD also collaborates with students and educators around the world on books, photography projects, feature stories that expand views on what constitutes challenging learning and achievement.

Contact: [What Kids Can Do, Inc. \(WKCD\)](http://www.whatkidscando.org), 579 5th St., Brooklyn, NY 11215

www.whatkidscando.org | info@whatkidscando.org

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