

iWrite

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Using Blogs, Wikis, and Digital Stories in the English Classroom



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What It Means to Teach Reading and Writing Today

Vinnie* sat in my class for an entire semester and never uttered a word unless I asked him a direct question. He kept his New York Yankees cap pulled low over his face and slouched down so far in his chair that at times the bill of the cap almost touched his desk. More than once, I caught him asleep, his chin nodding just above his chest.

Vinnie's assignments, when he did them, were terse and surface level; I couldn't really get a handle on what he knew and what he didn't. If I called on him in class, he became red and even quieter, and a painful silence descended as we waited either for Vinnie to speak or for me to give up and call on someone else. No matter what I did, I didn't feel like I knew Vinnie at all. At the end of the semester, he was just as much a mystery to me as he was at the beginning. After all the weeks he spent in my class, I felt like I had barely gotten through to him; I wasn't sure Vinnie knew much more or thought much differently on the last day than he had on the first.

I wish I could say Vinnie was an anomaly but, unfortunately, he wasn't. I teach a basic literacy class, required for students whose incoming scores

*Student names have been changed.

demonstrate a need to work on their reading, writing, and thinking in order to be successful in college. These are the students most at risk of dropping out, and from the very beginning of their college careers, they're angry and ashamed that they have to take a reading class at all. Something in their preparation didn't go quite right; for many reasons, these students graduated high school unable to meet college literacy demands.

On occasion, I got it right—achieving the necessary balance between teaching students and helping them learn on their own. Sometimes they got excited about the class; sometimes I found the right books for them, and they made the connection between who they are as readers and writers and how successful they could be. But the successes seemed few and far between. Using traditional reading assignments and occasional papers typically left my students frustrated and me wondering what to do differently. What I decided to do differently was to implement blogging—and things began to change.

How It All Started

As a young professor and former seventh-grade teacher, I had taught literacy methods courses for several years, both to kids and to preservice teachers. I had never taught a basic skills or remedial class before, however. I started my teaching career in an urban, seventh-grade, balanced literacy course, but since that time, I had come to work nearly exclusively with preservice and inservice teachers through professional workshops and college teaching. In other words, I was used to teaching *how* to teach literacy effectively, but it had been a while since I had taught literacy itself.

I came into the classroom with the misconception that college students would be excited to take the course and ready to learn whatever I offered. I was wrong. These students were frustrated and confused about being labeled as deficient at the college level, just as students are in high school and middle school. (Several didn't know there was such a thing as a reading class for college students.) Many had good GPAs, but had made it all the way through high school without ever learning to be truly effective writers and readers. In particular, they struggled with using writing in order to demonstrate what they knew; these students were not comfortable with writing in order to explain,

and were even less comfortable with themselves as writers. These students could think of a hundred things they would rather do than read a book, write a letter, or discuss literature—all typical literacy tasks in a middle or high school English class. And they were forced to take this class in their first year in order to continue college. I realized that my college-age basic literacy students weren't so different from my seventh graders after all.

So I turned back to my training as a middle school balanced literacy teacher and tried to implement the workshop model in the classroom, as well as a reader-response-based approach to reading. My idea was that using a workshop model for writing and a response method for reading would build on students' interests and keep them motivated as they learned. So I asked students to work through drafts of their writing, had them respond to the things we read, and tried to come up with writing prompts and reading assignments suited to their interests and experiences. At first, I just focused on the reading and writing aspects of the class—teaching academic literacy by assigning research papers, reading assignments, and traditional comprehension tasks. I stayed within the traditional boundaries of a college reading course, using a text that focused on skill development, asking students to read and complete comprehension tasks, teaching basic research skills, and assigning a research paper.

Most of the writing my students turned in, however, was pretty flat—papers that were essentially empty except for restating ideas we went over in class discussions. The echo was overwhelming; I felt like they were just telling me what I wanted to hear. One after another, as they brought up their drafts for me to look at or raised their hands in class, they would ask, “Is this right?” “Is this what I should do?” “Is this what you want?” Hardly any of them trusted their own voice, and none pushed back even enough to ask why we were doing the things we were doing. If the university told them they needed to take a reading class, they were going to do just what I asked of them—nothing more, and often less. After all, what did I, as an Ivy League graduate, know about having a hard time reading, writing, and understanding?

As the semesters piled up and I taught the class over and over again, the same issues stood out. I didn't have daily contact with these students, as I had had with my seventh graders, but I got to see patterns that were emerging pretty clearly—and they weren't very different from the patterns my seventh graders showed when they struggled with comprehending. Twice a week my college

students came in and sat quietly in their seats while I did most of the talking. I tried to get interesting discussions going about things I thought would spark their interest and connect to their lives, but to them, this was a reading and writing class period. What exactly did this have to do with real life, anyhow?

These were the same questions and concerns I saw teachers struggling with in middle and high school classes. Rarely did some of their students want to engage in academic reading and writing tasks. Instead, they read Spark-Notes and, inadvertently or not, copied from information they found online without really absorbing it. I wasn't the only one struggling to connect with these students—far from it. It took me a little time, but I suddenly realized that the connection was staring me in the face: I watched as students all across campus listened to their iPods while furiously text messaging on their cell phones.

Literacy in Students' Lives Today

Let's go back to Vinnie for a second. Born and raised nearby, he had always planned to go to college even though he wasn't entirely sure what he wanted to do when he got there. The things he loved to do weren't related to school—playing video games, watching movies, and spending time at the beach. He was pretty good with cars and an avid football fan, spending time at as many NFL games in the area as he could.

When I asked him at the beginning of the semester what he had been reading lately, Vinnie couldn't remember the last time he had picked up a book; he wasn't sure he had ever finished one, even if it had been assigned for school. As for writing, he hated it more than anything else and struggled with every word he put down on the page. Vinnie was never sure what the teacher wanted or why some of the things he wrote were judged wrong; he had no sense of why writing and reading might be important in his life, other than because he had to do schoolwork to be successful. Along with my class, Vinnie was struggling to make it through College Writing I, which was also taught using a workshop model with multiple drafts, peer editing, and conferencing with the teacher. Despite all of this support, Vinnie had not earned higher than a C on his essays through the semester thus far.