



capitol county

Changing the Writing Climate of a Whole School

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I had planned to spend my sabbatical from The University of Alabama sequestered in my study at home finishing my fourth book of poems. I envisioned having five days a week, while my son and husband were away at their respective schools, in the privacy of my study, my personal demons and delights haunting my private blank page. This was the plan I drew up, in elaborate terms, to satisfy the University's sabbatical-granting machine, one that had just implemented a new requirement for sabbatical applicants: Not only must one prove one's worthiness as a writer/researcher in terms of past publications and future plans, one must also be able to document a commitment to and success at teaching. There was much professorial grumbling in the hallways. This one semester of writing and research that finally arrived every seven years, what did this have to do with teaching? Confident that I had proved myself worthy as a college teacher in the six and a half years since my last sabbatical, I swept my spring schedule clear of any obligations save those to the blank page.

But then my son, my bright creative son, seven years old and reading voraciously on the sixth grade level, said to me, repeatedly, defiantly, and finally in tears, that he just hated writing. It was late at night, very late at night for a seven year old. The task before him was to finish a brief essay about the Native American chief Black Hawk, complete with visual effects of some kind, to deliver to the class as an oral report the next day. He had dutifully done his research; he had before him several articles, downloaded from websites intended for kids, as well as several dog-eared, yellowing volumes my husband had found for him in the "School Library"—a model but moldy library in the basement of the university's education building.

On this night, however, nothing was helping. Just tell me a little about Black Hawk, I said. There's nothing to tell was the answer. Where did he live? Here's a map, can you show me? And then my son's knowledge began to pour out like a coconut speared in just the right place. It turns out my son knew, well, just about everything about Black Hawk. His problem was that he couldn't see why he needed to write that *everything* down when someone else already had.

After a jag of crying and stomping out of the room—him, not me, though I certainly shared his frustration—and a hurriedly rescheduled following morning in which I gave him a little treat by allowing him to miss morning school while we went to his favorite donut shop and had a little chat about this cool Indian with me frantically writing down his sentences word for word; after my realizing that, for him, “writing” meant the agonizing process of forming the difficult shapes of the letters on the page, remembering to leave a space between each word and the next, meanwhile forgetting what the whole sentence was about; after the magic of my son discovering his mother happens to know how to type awesomely fast; after his mother realized that, at this rate, this kid might grow up hating writing his whole life, this mother called up the director of the school and volunteered to teach some writing during her sabbatical. And so that this sensitive kid wouldn't feel singled out, nor even part of a singled-out class, she volunteered to teach it to the whole entire school—from pre-school through high school.

It was, it is, after all, a mighty creative school. Founded in 1993 by a retired education professor who wanted to put into use the “best practice” she had researched for years, particularly the idea of teaching to the “multiple intelligences” (Howard Gardner's term) of each child, The Capitol School has a strong tradition in the arts. (It is also certified as an International School—two languages are taught beginning in preschool.) A composer teaches general music to all students. A practicing studio artist serves as the campus-wide art teacher. And so the idea of some practicing writers entering the classroom was easily accepted.

Besides, I had to do some sort of job. Part of the founder's wisdom was to require a commitment of an hour a week from all parents. For years I had been the “fish lady,” setting up and maintaining aquatic habitats in the classrooms. This non-verbal, meditative activity was, I told myself, the perfect complement to my otherwise word-ridden life. That particular year, I was one of three writer-parents at the school. The other two, marvelous poets enrolled in the university's M.F.A. program, with lots of experience teaching creative writing already, agreed to join me. Our task, we decided at our first powwow, was to take over the school, to create a kind of parallel universe, not a school-within-a-school, but a place as big as the school, an imaginary place created by language, an entity jointly imagined by all the kids in all the classes. We planned to turn each class into an imaginary “town”—the original idea for a writing town came from my colleague Michael Martone, who had invented it for his Harvard writing students—and the whole school into a “county.” The director suggested calling our endeavour “Capitol County,” for this was The Capitol School. This, we hoped, would give them something to write about.

What is writing at school like before writers start teaching it? In the case of this school, it was fully integrated into the daily curriculum at all grade levels. The faculty council had, just the previous year, decided that a focus on writing should be a school-wide endeavor. I observed the gamut. On one hand, there was an effort to teach traditional “school writing”—“especially since writing is now a part of the S.A.T.,” more than one teacher

remarked—that brought about assignments such as the Black Hawk report, in which students were asked to re-present data, or a story, already told by others, or to write a book report summarizing the plot of a book and passing judgment on that book’s appeal to the reader. In these sorts of assignments, the students, from a very young age, were being asked to tailor their writing into prescribed forms—to repeat information or a plot to show that they knew it, and, sometimes, to present an argument for or against a book, or an historical or contemporary idea. The writing samples I saw from the students, ranging from six to sixteen years old, included much “good” student writing—if what we mean by “good” is that it has a reliable structure, makes sense, and has not too many mechanical errors. What I wasn’t seeing, much, were students actually enjoying writing.

At the other end of the spectrum, I observed some teachers encouraging “freedom” in writing. One required the students to take the first few minutes of every English class to do “freewriting.” This was, she explained, a chance for them to “get out” whatever was bothering them—a grudge against another student, a problem at home, any sort of preoccupation—so that their minds would then be clear for the literature lesson to follow. A kind of scribbling before an art history lesson begins, or noisemaking before settling down to hear a concert, I couldn’t help thinking. There was time for writing at this school, but what was happening during that time?

It seemed that on the one hand students were being given assignments that were too prescribed, so that the purpose of them—why retell Black Hawk’s story when someone else already has written it?—was either not clear, or if clear, not particularly engaging *as writing* (no matter how fascinating the subject matter). On the other hand, they had assignments which were too open-ended—whose pedagogical value lay more in the psychological than in artistic, rhetorical, subject-based learning. Either way, writing seemed a very solitary activity. Aside from listening to each other’s formal presentations, the students did not collaborate on the writing, nor did they have a sense of shared excitement about what they were doing. The country, the county, of writing, I could see by looking at my son bent over the page in agony, was a very lonely place.

And so we decided, myself and my two fellow poet-parent colleagues Dan Kaplan and Sande Fowler, to give all of the kids something to write about—something that, by writing about it, would in turn create more to write about. And this progressive school, which has a vigorous co-ed cheerleading squad but precious few sports teams overshadowed by the chess team, rose to the creative occasion with what I can only call “school spirit.”

Ezra Pound has written that all art consists of “the fixed and the variant.” What’s fixed might be anything from formal conventions to repeated elements to an ongoing subject matter. But without that “fixed” part, the variations are merely chaos. The writing that had been taking place at the school seemed either too fixed (a one-page summary on Black Hawk’s life) or too variant (write privately in your journal). We were looking for a balance between the two: Enough parameters to give the kids something to grab on to, but not so many that they’d worry about “doing it right” or “what the teacher wants.”

The next breakthrough came when my printer died. I drove down to our local office supply store to find a replacement and, while I was waiting in line, eyed the reams of paper. Not just white paper, paper of all colors. My son was with me. Have a look at this paper, I told him. And the pens, he said. And the Post-It notes, I said. And the index cards, he said. And the folders, and the erasers, and the pencils, he said. Cool, cool school supplies. In a

range of colors. Beside that mountain road I did not hesitate. We grabbed a shopping cart and loaded up. A ream of yellow, of orange, of green, of blue, of pink. And, in those same colors: notes, cards, pencils and erasers to match. By the time we'd hauled it all to the trunk of the car, I knew what we would do. Each class would be a town, and each town would have a color. And since the town would be created through writing, the color of the writing tools would be part of the entry into the imaginative act.

CAPITOL COUNTY: A PROPOSAL

PRESENTED TO THE CAPITOL SCHOOL TEACHERS' COUNCIL

Objective: To create a culture of writing. The aim of this project is to create a school-wide "culture of writing" in which students of all ages are energized to write in a creative, purposeful, and engaged way as part of their daily lives for a wide variety of purposes. By the end of the semester, students should possess a greater fluency and confidence in their writing, and a greater awareness of the uses of writing in the community of which they are a part, as citizens of both the Capitol School and the larger world. We hope not only to improve students' writing skills; we want to create writers who enjoy writing.

Concept: To use words to create and carry out the continuing life of a school "county." Each cluster or class will imagine itself as a "town" with a particular color to identify it: Blue Town, Green Town, etc. Together, all the towns comprise Capitol County. Town and county characteristics, characters, and activities will be created through writing, and will in turn create occasions to write. Each preschool through primary cluster, and each middle/high school English class, will have a writing consultant who will work alongside the lead teacher to design and launch "town" activities. In addition, the idea of the class as a town, and writing related to it, may carry over into other subjects and specialist teacher classes (music, math, science, art, languages, physical education, library) if those teachers so desire.

School-wide components: Towns will have color names whose identities will be underscored by their tactile writing materials. For example, in Blue Town, the paper will be blue. If an inhabitant sends a postcard from Blue Town, it will be a blue index card. If there is a mailbox outside the Blue Town classroom, it will be a blue mailbox. The colors give the imaginary places an instant (but not culturally-laden) identity, which will be refined over the course of the semester.

A county newspaper: Towns will publish *The Capitol County News* on a biweekly basis. It will include "real" newspaper elements alongside imaginary ones. Possibilities include news items from the various towns, personal ads, a gossip column, a crossword puzzle, an editorial page, letters to the editor, advertisements, announcements, obituaries, birth announcements, recipes, horoscopes, a farm and garden report, individual and collaborative poems, stories, features on particular towns or notable inhabitants, election coverage, surveys, overheard conversations, cartoons, classified ads, artwork, photographs, a foreign language section, a travel

section, book reviews. Rather than consistency of tone, it will aim for heterogeneity of writing and a ready sense of humor. The paper will be a method of publishing the students' writing from across the school. It will give students, young and old, the sense of writing for an audience that is each other.

Postcards and pen pals: Students will use their town-color index cards as postcards to send short messages to one another. Each student will have a pen pal in a different town. There will be a weekly exchange of postcards between pen pals. Postcards can be used for many other purposes as well, both within and between towns.

A county fair. The school's spring picnic will be a county fair at which the various virtual aspects of the town that have developed through imaginative writing have a chance to come to life.

THE RESULTS

Each of the three writers worked with two classes, either once or twice each week. The regular classroom teachers—plus parent volunteers and other specialist teachers such as the librarian and the music teacher—worked alongside us, elbow to elbow with the kids at their writing tables, modeling for the students the excitement of writing, responding to student writing, and participating in the project themselves—the teachers' personae were part of the towns right alongside the students' characters.

Within a week we had established our towns: the preschool was dubbed Rainbow City (since, as the preschool teacher explained, at this age the children are so attached to their favorite colors that they had to find a way to include all of them!); the K-1 level chose Yellow Town; and after a run-off election with "Salmon City," the 2nd/3rd grade opted for Orangopolis. Shortly thereafter, the 4th/5th grade named itself Greenville, the entire Middle School came to a consensus to be called Blue Town, and the High School was henceforth Fuschia City.

By the end of week two, every student in the school had created a character who lived in his/her town and had sent a postcard—on an appropriately colored index card— from his/her character to a potential pen pal character in another town. The first grade was so desirous of mail that they set up a huge USPS-approved box with a flag outside their room! The postcard pen pals continued all semester, once or twice each week—or even more often if the students wanted to. The 4th/5th grade wrote giant postcards block-printed on butcher block paper to Rainbow City. The teacher read these giant postcards aloud to enthusiastic response, and the questions and answers on them created an ongoing fount of ideas for the development of the towns and their collective stories. Week by week, students received specific tasks. Where does your character work? Where does he or she live? And now let's design that house (or tunnel, or platform, or underwater habitation).

Meanwhile, the map-making had begun. We designed an initial questionnaire for the students to fill out to help them imagine a town. It included both predictable and provocative prompts: "When I look out my window I see...." "And far in the distance I see...." "Hard to believe what just passed by on the street, it's a...." "The terrain includes...."

“They are still talking about the newest building, a....” and so on. From the outset, the rules were simple: Pay attention, have fun, and use your imagination. The last rule evolved into “no proper names from the outside world”—a handy way of banishing Pokeman, Power Rangers, MacDonald’s, and The Limited in one fell swoop. In place of the ready-made characters, products, and institutions, the students were given a space in which to imagine their own world, and the presence of the color served as a “fixed” element to give their imaginations something to push against. And so, in Greenville, there rose up Mount Jiggybob. In Orangopolis, someone lived underwater, someone else inside a volcano.

Another fixed element that seemed to help was giving kids not only paper but lines to write on. What’s your favorite thing to do on a Saturday afternoon in Orangopolis? Here are three lines in which to write about that; you can see from the space you have been given that one word isn’t sufficient to describe your afternoon. After these initial sheets had been filled out, I took a stack of white Post-It notes and jotted down every single town thing that had been mentioned—building, house, river, road, sight, and animal—on a Post-It, with the inventor’s name below it, then sorted them into types of things. At the next class, we watched the town materialize. Beginning with terrain, I called up to the blackboard the mentioner of every mountain, river, and road, to place that Post-It upon the big blank map. Then the urban planners who had mentioned things like a bridge, the town center, the founder’s statue. Then imaginers of individual buildings and geographic features. And so on. At the end of an hour we could see the whole town. Every single idea that every single kid had had appeared in front on us. This became the rough draft of the atlas. Then it was time to call in the art teacher!

Once the towns and their inhabitants were established, it seemed an endless idea-generating model for teaching not only writing but many other subjects as well. When one class was studying oceanography, they created, through writing, a town aquarium and wrote a guide to go with it. When another class was studying astronomy, we talked about the constellations, their mythic origins; each student made a pattern of dots, passed it to another who “found” the new constellation, then wrote the story about how that animal, being, or person ended up being cast from the town into the heavens. Still another town, having surveyed the actual plaques in front of local buildings, bridges, and statues, designed plaques for the famous persons and places of their town. On Martin Luther King Day, we read the “I Have Dream Speech” speech and talked about how rhetorical devices such as anaphora help to convey strong feeling, then wrote a letter to the editor of *The Capitol County News* about a thing that needed changing in the town!

Sometimes, the writing led to palpable action. Greenville, having corresponded with the little Rainbow City kids all semester—particularly about the exploits of a certain missing hedgehog and missing rainbow—invited them to a town fair and brought the mountain, the zoo, the games hall, the music hall, the museum, and the ice cream shop to life. Orangopolis invited Yellow Town to an unveiling of the pen pals (oh, so it’s you I’ve been writing to!), a town tour, and orange food. Another town learned about surveys—each kid decided what his/her character wanted to learn and why, designed a questionnaire, surveyed the other character, and ana-

lyzed and summarized the results for the county paper. Another town took a tour of the real town paper and brought back samples to glean ideas for sections of *The Capitol County News* (though, of course, with its universal acceptance policy, the *CCN* was not limited to realistic articles, regularly publishing poems, stories, fables, and outlandish news and notices of all kinds). At the end of the year, at the school's annual international dinner, each student gained admission by showing his or her town "passport."

How do you measure a sea change in the culture of writing at a school? The number of blue pencils sharpened? The flurry of colored postcards? The clamoring to read the new issue of the newspaper? Students feeling free enough to stop worrying about their spelling in the flow of a first draft? Someone shouting out, "Do we have Town Time today!?" All that, and that writing leads to more writing. It strengthens the imagination like a muscle, and one mind and heart joins with others and makes a magic place, and solves a problem, and issues an invitation, and discovers what others are thinking, and gets to know a pal, and invites that pal to come visit the town that writing built. What began in fear, ended with a fair.