Student Authors Share Time at the Podium During a Publication Celebration. Photograph © Juliette LaMontagne.

A Growing Sense of Audience

The Power of Curriculum-Based Publication

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I like to supervise the production of my own books. My theory is that the author might be the maker even of the body of his work—set the type, print the book on a press, put a cover on it, with his own hands: learning his trade from A to Z—all there is of it.—Walt Whitman [1]

During my years as a classroom teacher I came to believe in the power of an all-inclusive approach to publishing the work of young writers. That is, I came to see the great value of giving all my students the opportunity to publish, rather than just the elite few who make it into the school literary magazine or newspaper.

As publication became less of an afterthought and more of an integral part of my curriculum, the books I made with students grew more and more elaborate. I worked to professionalize the process—moving from saddle-stitched books to perfect binding, from simple card stock to full-color, film-laminated covers. As the stakes grew higher for the writers in my class, I watched with excitement as even resistant students made strides in their writing in ways that surprised both them and me. Revision became more important to them as their notion of audience shifted from an abstract concept to a body of real readers. And I celebrated with my students when our books were finished, sharing with them the unique pride that seeing oneself in print can bring.

I have been publishing with students for almost 15 years now, and I am not only convinced of the validity of Peter Elbow's assertion that "publication is the single strongest way to help encourage students to revise and copyedit," [2] but also that embedding publication in the curriculum can have a profound effect on the ways students engage with the entire writing process. That said, during each of my early years of teaching for publication, I would invariably reach a point when I vowed that this year would be my last. Somewhere along that arduous path—from fundraising to managing submissions to editing, layout, cover design, production, and distribution—I would question if the investment of time and effort were really worth it.

Like many teachers who teach toward publication, I felt isolated in my exhaustion, solely responsible for running a business on a bake-sale budget. I was teaching myself design software in moments of free time, researching affordable printers, reading draft after draft of student work late into the night, and most of all struggling to teach for publication within the demands of my already packed curriculum. It can take weeks, even months, to fully build publication into a curriculum in ways that involve and support students throughout the whole process, not just at the end.

Publication of student work still plays a central role in my life. But now I work in a different classroom, teaching teachers in a college of education where four years ago colleague Ruth Vinz and I set out to build a professional development program called the Student Press Initiative (SPI). SPI seeks to provide the support I wished I had had as a classroom teacher. The program works to share strategies and develop networks among the many innovative teachers who teach for publication in classrooms that might otherwise feel like islands. We promote curriculum-based publication by working in partnership with teachers on planning, design, production, and distribution of all-inclusive student publications. SPI is part professional development, part artist-collaboration, and part not-for-profit publisher. We offer teaching for publication workshops at Columbia University's Teachers College; a project-based curriculum series; sample student publications (to date SPI has published almost two dozen books representing hundreds of student authors); and a web site that supports production and the sharing of best practices.

SPI's overriding goal, however, is to honor the creative spirit of teachers. We believe that classroom teachers, not state and federal legislators, know best what their students need. They are also the ones who know best what teachers need to keep their practice vital and engaging. SPI aims to build on teachers' unique visions for themselves and their students, and we do everything we can to support, nurture, and ultimately make those visions public through publication. These curriculum-based publication projects do recognize the necessity of meeting standards, but we believe this is achieved far better in writing for publication than by traditional assignments.

In a typical English classroom, a student will produce dozens of "products"—literary essays, personal narratives, summaries, critical lens essays, reader's notebook responses—essentially for an audience of one: the teacher. The student will be asked to craft a range of genres, and attempt to alter her writing approach based on what the teacher demands. Yet if her audience remains the same throughout, what incentive does a student have to truly explore the idea of audience as she develops her writing abilities? When teachers introduce and work to define a larger audience, one that will offer relevance and insight, it can have a dramatic impact on how a student approaches the writing tasks at hand.

As Tom Liner suggests, "One of the most desirable sensitivities to cultivate in growing writers is a heightened ability to 'feel' an audience out there as they write. Students develop distinct voices as they learn the control they have over their readers. The classroom can provide opportunities for them to develop a growing sense of audience."[3] This belief that writers need an exciting range of readers to mature and develop is at the forefront of the SPI program. A writing assign-

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ment that requires an investment of original thinking and one that the writer knows from day one will be taken public has the potential to inspire a student's best work.

At SPI, we encourage participating teachers to identify a specified genre that can fulfill multiple objectives. Most often, it is creative nonfiction genres that are at the center of the projects. But these are typically idiosyncratic subgenres, ones that will be memorable and engaging for students, invite opportunities for innovation, yet be identifiable enough to offer texts that provide accessible models of success. For example, "editorial" is a broad genre category that encompasses many subgenres, one of which is "review." Within the category of "review" there is a popular niche in urban periodicals called "best of"; these are the critics' picks on everything from pizza parlors to pet parades. The more specific the genre study, the better able the class is to examine and experiment within its conventions.

This subgenre study provides the backbone of the publication. It begins with a search for models within the genre, and the process of working to identify with a specific audience—in this case, a reader looking for advice. My eighth graders at the NYC Lab School took up the "best of" genre for their publication *Coring the Apple*. They were able to tap into their individual knowledge to create a survey of Zagat-like reviews. Their enthusiasm about these reviews is reflected in catchy, perverse and off-beat titles of pieces, for example, "The Best Chinese Food Store in the History of America, in the History of Human Existence, in the History of…Well I Think You Get the Point"; and "Best Place to Get Sick to Your Stomach"; and "The Best Place to Look Up and Say: 'What the…?!'"

Other projects inspired similar enthusiasm. Teacher Susan D'Elia's twelfth grade class at Manchester High School created a book called *Temporary Identity,* modeled on advice columns. In it, her students reflect on their high school experiences and offer advice to incoming ninth graders on—as the book's subtitle suggests—*How to Survive High School*. Kerry McKibbin's eighth graders at the New York City Lab School also had advice in mind as they authored *Filling in the Blanks*. Their audience, though, was teachers about to enter the field. As McKibbin put it, "The voice that's most often missing in teacher prep is the voice of the student." With this objective in mind, among others, McKibbin designed the eight-week curriculum that she describes in her article below.

Through our work with teachers and students, we've learned that the possibilities of genre and audience are limitless. Whether publishing the conclusions of a science experiment or profiling the life and times of a one-man crusader against homelessness, these student writers have all achieved an undeniable sense of purpose.

Notes

1. Quoted in David S. Reynolds's 150th Anniversary Edition of *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), p. 85.

2. Peter Elbow. "The Role of Publication in the Democratization of Writing." *Publishing with Students.* Ed. Chris Weber. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2002, p. 5.

3. Dan Kirby, Tom Liner, and Ruth Vinz. *Inside Out: Developmental Strategies for Teaching Writing* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook, 1988), p. 154.

happens as the computer prepares the document to be printed. It is a good choice for making simple saddle-stitched classroom books if you don't have a lot of time to learn software.

* Microsoft Publisher is also an easy program to learn, and has more design functions than Clickbook. With Publisher, you can import images and do some basic manipulation. This software, however, is not Mac-friendly.

* Quark Xpress and Adobe InDesign are the two programs that lead the desktop publishing industry. Many people begin Quark and InDesign with professional classes, but with some persistence, they can be learned on your own. (*Real World Adobe InDesign* is a good place to start with InDesign.) Both programs (especially Quark) are behemoths, requiring a substantial amount of RAM to run effectively. Both come in Mac and PC versions. With either, you should be able to create anything that your bookmaking/desktop publishing heart desires. I tend to recommend InDesign for school use, as it's more affordable and easier to learn. Adobe markets InDesign in a software package called "Creative Suite," available at significant educator discounts.

Gather Student Work Electronically: When publishing in the classroom, the number of authors can be staggering. I have made books with as many as 132 authors in a single volume! I find that it is important to take a few precautions before collecting students' final drafts if you hope to avoid many hours correcting simple mistakes.

Give Detailed instructions for Submission: Think things through in advance. One example: Alphabetizing 125 pieces from 125 files with different names could mean that you must first open each, then work it into a list from its random order. But if you ask students to title their files by their last name, the pieces will be alphabetized automatically.

Plan Your Format in Advance: To achieve a consistent look throughout (headings, fonts, etc.) with the least trouble, be very clear with formatting instructions. If 125 students have different headings, this alone could take hours to correct. Reinforce basic details like the order that the author's name and the title will follow, and how many lines to skip between the different heading elements.

Use Page Breaks: If you receive the work as an electronic file by email or on disk, you will have to cut and paste all of the pieces into one master file. Create page breaks as you go so that each new piece begins on its own page.

Protect Your Master Files: Consider carefully who has access to your master file. Allowing 125 students access invites problems. (I once had a student-hacker alter a number of final drafts with compromising statements about other students! Luckily I caught the errors before going to press.)

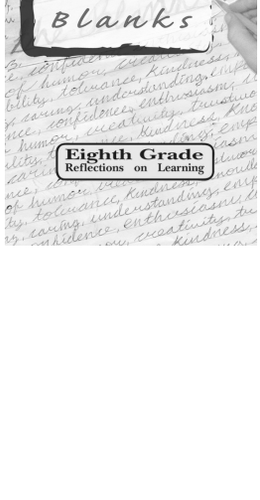
Beware of Corruption: Be on guard against viruses. If you are downloading 125 student works onto your own computer, it is inevitable that a few of them will come with an unwanted virus. The bottom line is, make sure that you have up-to-date virus protection on your computer or have students use your school's computer lab to burn their final drafts for submission.

Linking Literature: Using Oral History to Connect Books to the World

Linking Literature is a book of student-written oral histories that draw connections between the themes of justice, empathy, and innocence in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and theses same themes in contemporary society. This collection of 32 oral histories is the result of a two-month long process during which students tackled the sometimes daunting challenges that come with interviewing, transcribing, editing, and drafting. Those interviewed range from the unknown to the famous, and include Holocaust survivors, local political figures, and renowned journalist Bill Moyers.

About Face: Portraits of Activism, Numbers 1 & 2

About Face: Portraits of Activism was a student journalism project in which twelfth grade writers profiled over 30 contemporary social activists in New York City. The books grew out of a 15-week study of the history of social change. Two hundred copies of *About Face* were distributed to select ninth grade social studies classrooms around New York City. Subjects include historian Eric Foner, filmmaker Spike Lee, television journalist Anderson Cooper, artist James De La Vega, and historian Howard Zinn.



Filling in the Blanks

Filling in the Blanks is a book for teachers offering the student perspective on the classroom learning experience. In it, 126 thirteen-year-olds give carefully crafted reflections on their values as learners. The book's intended audience is new teachers and teacher educators. SPI worked with the school to assemble a panel of nine new teachers to exchange perspectives with the eighth grade student-authors on how students learn and how best to communicate their reflections to teachers.