Collaboration in the Writing Classroom

Writers in the Schools is a branch of Seattle Arts and Lectures, a Seattle literary organization. Writers in the Schools (WITS) run a variety of programs, but the core is just as it sounds: professional writers visiting Seattle-area schools to run writing workshops, ranging from single-day excursions to trimester-long residences. As a WITS intern this fall, I assisted with creative writing lessons alongside WITS teacher Celia in two fifth grade English/Language Arts classrooms at a school called Tower Hill.

Tower Hill hosts students from kindergarten through eighth grade. It is a public school, but an option one, meaning that parents have chosen for their children to go to school there rather than attend their assigned school in their neighborhood. It has a strong multicultural and social justice emphasis, which can be seen in the variety of faces within the classrooms, students of all different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The school also runs a self-contained Deaf and Hard of Hearing program, though these students are also given the chance to integrate into other classrooms (as in my afternoon class – two students were part of this program, one who merely relied on hearing aids, the other who had her own interpreter with her in the classroom.) Tower Hill is small, as many option schools are, with just under 500 students throughout their nine grades. Students in both fifth grade classrooms I observed all seemed to know each other and the students in the other class extremely well by the time I arrived.

I arrived at Tower Hill uncertain of the phenomena I wanted to observe, but the classroom’s most compelling aspect surfaced almost immediately. From its small size to its focus on uniting students from diverse backgrounds, Tower Hill is a school concentrated on its social environment, and this extended to the structure of the writing classroom as well. Throughout my time at Tower Hill, I focused my observations on the instances of collaboration I observed among students and the effects of this I inferred on their writing processes.

**Week One**

Following Celia into the classroom my first day, I encountered a scene that encapsulated much of my ensuing experience at Tower Hill. Students were finishing a loosely structured block completing a poster project; they were strewn across the room, with some standing or sitting at desks, some sprawled on the rug, some wandering nowhere in particular. Several waved and greeted “Ms. Celia” when they saw her, and poked each other and whispered when they saw me trailing behind. Celia selected a chair facing the colorful area rug, and I drew up a stool at her side. The students slowly trickled their way over, chattering, poking each other, tossing out questions about whether they were to sit with their ‘reading’ or ‘writing’ partners without expecting much of a response. The classroom teacher, Ms. Anderson, tried to regulate the chaos, but it was still several minutes before the students were settled enough for Celia to begin.

After allowing me to introduce myself and explain why I was there, Celia began the first stage of her lesson: a read-aloud of an American ‘tall tale’ story, followed by a discussion of its relevance to that day’s lesson on character. This cycle seemed familiar to the students; they all settled in to listen and conversation quelled considerably, though there were the occasional whispers and blurt-outs in response to the story. The kids monitored each other with gentle and not-so-gentle hushing, with the teacher interjecting only occasionally. Students were far more patient during the discussion portion – this was something they’d obviously practiced – and raised their hands for the most part and waited for Celia to call on them to share their favorite details from the story. The students also supported each other when Celia listed off a term that was unfamiliar to them, offering the word they used for it (the “story hook) and aiding each other in trying to explain. As in any classroom, there were students that were excited to share, raising their hands over and over, and others who lingered in the background, observing the proceedings, but none of them seemed checked out. Of course, there were the occasional daydreaming eyes and fiddling with school supplies that are to be expected with fifth graders, but on the whole there was a semblance of focus. Though the kids were goofy and distractible, feeding off each other’s energy, they also seemed engaged and excited about the lesson.

The rhythm of the ensuing class seemed familiar to the students. After story-and-discussion on the rug, they found seats with their writing partners to complete a brainstorming worksheet on character. This too seemed to be a loosely structured procedure, with most students clustered at their own table-groups of desks, but several at other tables or still sprawled across the rug. There was a vast range of working speeds among the students, with some students struggling to get even the name of their character down on the page, and others speeding through the activity. One pair who finished particularly quickly spent the rest of the class time wobbling around the classroom arm-in-arm like a giggling, three-legged beast. I darted from desk to desk. “Can you tell me about your character?” I would prompt them. “What ideas do you have that you’re excited about?” Most students were willing to answer my questions, even the ones who didn’t have a clear sense of their ideas quite formulated. It was hard for me to tell whether this stemmed from a true desire to share and receive input on their work, or merely training on how to respond when asked a question by someone in authority (though they were more casual with me than perhaps they’d be with their teacher or Celia. Maybe I occupied an in-between space in their minds, bridging teacher and peer.) I tried to watch their interactions with each other as well, both their writing partners and the other students seated around them. Though the kids joked more with each other, they still were excited to share their ideas. Students’ patterns of collaboration seemed similar regardless of whether they spoke to me or a classmate, rooted primarily (it appeared) in their personalities both as students and people. There was a vast range of productivity displayed during this time. Students seemed eager to engage in collaborative processes even as it distracted them from their prescribed daily goals.

**Week Two**

I observed students interacting in a couple of different contexts my second week. In my first class of the day, I had a small group of students who hadn’t quite finished the preparatory story-crafting worksheets that would allow them to start to write their tall tales (that day’s goal). I distributed the missing pages and bounced between students, trying to ensure that each one got the guidance they needed to begin work on their own. Though starting idea-generation was a bit frustrating for a couple of students at first, I soon observed the same enthusiasm I had witnessed previously on the rug. The students were not quiet in their brainstorming; they loudly pronounced each new idea, much to the enjoyment and laughter of those around them. “My character is called Darby Barbie!” one girl exclaimed, scribbling the name on her character sheet. The others were quick to remark on this, cackling and suggesting ideas for her hobbies and features. “Make her the size of a doll!” said one. “All she ever wants to do is shop for makeup,” prompted another. It was hard to quell their joy, propel them back to their worksheets, even for the sake of expediting their (slow) progress. These students seem excited and engaged, though not the most efficient or productive in completing their writing tasks.

During the second class of the day, almost all of the students had completed their preparatory worksheets, at least to the extent where they were approved to move forward with their writing, so instead I floated around the classroom, providing aid and encouragement. One particular student, Sarah, was having a lot of trouble. The task was to write the opening sentence of a ‘tall tale’ story, followed by a paragraph describing the setting (Seattle) in an exaggerated way. Sarah wanted my help, but seemed frustrated by the assignment. In the planning stages, she had envisioned her story as set in a large valley full of rocks, and didn’t see how this could possibly tie into Seattle. I suggested that she could make her Seattle larger-than-life, warping real details to fit the purposes of her story. At first, she remained reluctant, and I chose to walk away from her a couple of times, both to assist other students and to give her room to attempt the work she was resisting so stubbornly, but always returned to check in. Over the course of our conversations, she slowly came around. Her story somehow shifted to be about asteroids plummeting towards Seattle from space (which may result in a future conversation on topicality), but importantly, she found her inspiration and motivation alike. Writing within constraints didn’t seem possible to Sarah when she faced it alone, but through a combination of collaboration and forced individual work-time, she was able to find her rhythm and move forth with the task.

**Week Three**

My third week in the classroom was the day after Halloween, and the entire room has a strange buzz about it, the combination of too much candy and not enough sleep. The kids were unusually quiet on the rug as we discussed the day’s lesson (introducing the story’s problem through dialogue), but quickly spiraled into silliness as we released them to write their stories. Our writing block was considerable that day, due to both the day’s task and the stage we’d reached in their composition, where time spent writing was key. Students bounced between writing and chattering about nothing in particular, swapping stickers shaped like horses and battling over chairs on the rug (Ms. Anderson stepped in here and became preoccupied for a large portion of the lesson, perhaps exacerbating the chaos.) Throughout my time at Tower Hill, social interaction appeared fundamental to classroom structure, but in the case of post-Halloween fifth graders, perhaps it caused more harm than good. Through the thin semblance of order during class that day, I found a few interactions of note.

The first interaction was with a girl, Anna, who seemed reluctant to complete any work at all. I had worked with Anna the previous week on her planning worksheets, but she informed me today that she disliked all the ideas she had pre-written. Even with my prompting, she claimed she had no usable ideas to work with, yet still insisted she needed help. Collaboration became a crutch to her, perceived as so necessary that she could not work without it, despite the fact that she wasn’t getting much done with my help. When I finally left her and returned later, she seemed to have found a classmate more able to inspire her, and had at least a few lines down on her page. This collaboration with a classmate seemed to motivate her in ways our conversation had not, though I couldn’t pinpoint the shift that occurred that finally inspired her to put pen to page.

Even on such a hectic day, I found that sometimes conversation was all that was needed to get ideas flowing. I worked with a student called Morgan, who had missed several classes and was behind on her worksheets. Once I sat down with her, I realized she wasn’t nearly as behind as she had told Celia. Each time I read aloud one of the worksheet’s prompts, she had an answer immediately, which I encouraged her to write down. She had done a tremendous amount of planning for her story already, but it took voicing these ideas for her to realize how much she had generated. She finished her worksheets in a matter of minutes and snatched up her writer’s notebook, eager to catch up with the rest of the class. Another student, Michael, who had been shouting at a friend across the room before I came over, complied with my attempts to help him work surprisingly willingly. He couldn’t figure out how to start his dialogue between characters, a pair of brothers. “What would you say to your brother if you needed him to help with a problem like this?” I asked him. After articulating aloud what he might stay, Michael found the flow of his fictional conversation, and began to scribble in earnest. Talking through writing struggles with classmates and teachers alike seemed to help students significantly in the generation of their prose. However, it took commitment to battling the candy-crazed chaos of ten-year-olds in close quarters to arrive at these fruitful interactions.

**Closing Thoughts**

The typical image of a writer in our society might look something like this: a sweater-wrapped, coffee-drinking individual, secluded in some office or forest cabin, ink on their wrists and fingers stiff from typing for hour upon hour in a dimly lit room. These fifth grade writers were quite the opposite, not quiet or solitary. Though in part these acts of collaboration I observed may derive from the classroom setup (the designation of ‘writing partners,’ the open seating plan), it appeared that collaboration was not an imposed necessity but a given for these students, and solitude in their work was not something they even considered. Even their ‘silent writing’ hummed with activity as they whisper to their teachers and classmates. No idea appeared sound enough for them to impart upon the page without first consulting at least one if not several sources.

Children, like all humans, are social creatures. At Tower Hill, it seemed that students’ social nature was nearly impossible to quell, and their teachers did not attempt to suppress this. However, as I observed, opening a classroom to collaboration also invites risk of distractibility or silliness. Though I didn’t observe this, collaboration could even result in discomfort if students from different backgrounds or views clash. A children’s writing instructor can recognize and embrace this instinct to share and interact, but they must also be prepared to temper these instincts if they run awry. As with much of teaching, it appears that collaboration is a balancing act of creativity and order, a precarious marriage to birth a learning environment where students can learn and enjoy writing both.

Central Topic: I like how you came to your central topic, by examining the setting’s surroundings. You describe it nicely, and stick with it well throughout.

Framing: Your framing is implicitly clear-- that learning happens through social interaction. You might have included even one choice reference to scholarship to bolster your argument-- I’m sure there are many to choose from-- but with or without that, you attend nicely to the phenomenon throughout.

Organization: Your principle of organization was chronological, but it didn’t read like a laundry list (first doing this, then doing that). It worked well.

Context: I think I could have used a little bit more explanation about the relationship between Celia and Ms. Anderson. While it was initially clear that Celia was the writer-in-residence, Ms. Anderson then popped in, and it seemed like sometimes one was present but not the other…? Otherwise, your descriptions of the contextual details were nicely done.

Researcher: Your presence in the scene was nicely felt. You also talk a little bit about the stereotype of the coffee-drinking author, but I think there was room here for even more exploration of your own preconceived notions. What brought you to this internship before? What had you thought about collaborative writing before? Do you think that this effusive collaborative spirit gets socialized out of us as we move through school? Still, your movement through the setting was well described.

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