

June 27, 2013

Dear Colleague,

As part of the Chippewa River Writing Project Summer Institute, we were asked to write a letter to a colleague about our reading of Ralph Fletcher's *What a Writer Needs*. I chose to send you this e-mail because I am hoping that we can collaborate in using some of the ideas from the institute, including the information presented in Fletcher's book.

According to Fletcher, one of the essential needs of every novice writer is a mentor. I love that. I never really thought of that term as a way to refer to the relationship between writing instructor and student, but it is an apt one. What's more, Fletcher outlines the characteristics of effective mentors. These were reassuring to me, and I know they will be to you as well. Fletcher says that real mentors have high standards, build on a student's strengths, value originality and diversity, encourage students to take risks, are passionate, and look at the big picture (13-19). Since we already do these things as teachers, I saw this as confirmation for what we do in our writing instruction. What's more, Fletcher says, a mentor can be a book as well as a person. One of my most significant learnings over these weeks at the institute has been the notion of mentor texts - books, stories, nonfiction pieces that students can use as models. Fletcher puts it this way: "Our students cannot write in a vacuum: They need to get an image, a vision, of what their writing might look like in [a] genre" (77). I am going to try combining this idea with Kelly Gallagher's "Article of the Week" idea next year, so maybe we can talk more about that before September.

Another idea in the book that resonated with me was that of the development of student voice. In addition to the bodily changes of adolescence, somehow, student voice is squelched before kids arrive at high school. Elementary kids have more voice than they can handle in their writing, but by high school, students are afraid of asserting their voices, and the fear grows in proportion to how much they care about grades. I find every year that the students who like writing but care only moderately about grades write with their own unique voices while those students who write with the sole purpose of getting the highest grade eliminate their voices - or maybe never take the time to develop them in the first place. I am sure you can think of kids in your Accelerated classes for whom this is true as well. Fletcher says that voice is a way to measure whether a student has internalized learning. Students "put the indelible stamp of their personalities on the information they are learning;" they write from a position of authority and confidence when they know the material (80). In addition to encouragement from the teacher and establishment of an environment that welcomes voice, we have been discussing strategies to help students develop voice. Two, in particular, are strategies that I think will not only be do-able with my students but will make my life easier. Namely, one repeated suggestion is to do more frequent smaller writing pieces as opposed to big papers. This allows students to stretch and explore their voices more and it sounds like a more manageable paper load. The second goes back to the notion of mentor texts - having students read writing that can serve as a model for the pieces they will create. Again, I hope to have some time before fall to explore this in real terms for my own classes.

In retrospect, the Fletcher book is not just written to an audience of writing teachers, but to an expected audience of teachers who write for themselves as well. Admittedly, some

portions of the book are about how to improve one's own writing and other portions might be hard to apply to the kind of writing we do in our classes. For example, several chapters are dedicated to narrative writing, which, although a part of the common core, is not the primary focus of the writing we do in high school. Still, I found the reading valuable. Fletcher put together a list at the end of the book which I have been keeping in mind during these weeks at the institute. His list is titled, "My Latest Thoughts about Writing." I've put most of it below, though I did omit some of the lengthy parts to whittle down to the main idea (181).

1. "Write about what makes you different." (Sandra Cisneros)
2. Set your own standard and hold yourself accountable to it...
3. Write small. The devil is in the details.
4. Don't "overmix the batter." Revision is a crucial part of the process, but beware of revising the life out of a piece.
5. Develop an internal sense for what makes good writing...
6. ... "Do the writing only you really want to do." (Don Graves)
7. ...Be brave. Write the unspeakable.
8. Use a writer's notebook to collect lots of random stuff...
9. Violate the expected. Strong writing contains surprise...
10. Keep reading...
11. Forgive yourself for not being able to write like Milan Kundera or Sandra Cisneros but...
12. Don't be afraid to set high goals for yourself.

As I was reading this part, I wrote in my book that this would make a great poster, so maybe I will take these precepts and put them into something that I can post at the front of the room as writing advice to students. These words of wisdom alone may not get students to their full potential as writers, but each presents an idea that I can turn into a mini-lesson or a focus correction area for them to internalize more.

I hope I have given you the gist of what the book is about. I do have a copy, and you are welcome to borrow it if you like. It's been a cornerstone for the work we have been doing in the summer institute, and I am excited to implement the ideas in my classes in the fall. I am also looking forward to sharing more about the institute before September.

Sincerely,
Janet