

I Was a Journal-Topic Junkie

BY ANNA COLLINS TREST

When I came through the university education program eight years ago, journal topics were hot. The notion I gleaned from all I was taught was this: any teacher worth half a peck of pencils required students to keep daily journals, and the best way to get them to write in those journals was to assign a journal topic each day. Clutching that little nugget of information, I began categorizing teachers according to their classroom writing practices. To my way of thinking they could be divided neatly into five groups:

1. DUDS: Those who never gave students creative writing opportunities at all.
2. HAS-BEENS: Those who used the old mundane, hackneyed topics such as “What I Did on My Summer Vacation” and “What School Means to Me.”
3. SEMI-PROGRESSIVE: Those who used journal topics from store-bought books in the exact order listed.
4. PROGRESSIVE: Those who carefully scavenged only the best topics from the store-bought books and rejected others.
5. EXTREMELY CREATIVE: Those who used store-bought lists as a springboard for developing their own clever topics for journal writing.

I fell somewhere between progressive and extremely creative depending on the day of the week and my state of mind. I had my routine: pick a topic from my list, date it so I wouldn't reuse it, write it on the board, hand out the journals, and give the command to write. Then I would wait fifteen minutes, ask for volunteers to read, take up the journals, write a personal response in

each one praising those who wrote and threatening/cajoling those who didn't. It was a tidy little process that we could all accomplish in our sleep - and often did.

I arrived at the South Mississippi Writing Project's Summer Institute with four years of teaching under my belt and the confident assurance that my advanced approach to journal writing made me an upwardly mobile instructor. I perceived myself as being on the cutting edge of teaching classroom writing. After all, I had by that time a closely guarded, highly coveted list of story starters gleaned from umpteen sources and including such gems as “A Dragon Lives in My Closet,” “I Was a Wart on a Witch's Nose,” and “My Bed Is a Cloud.”

Imagine my dismay when no one asked to see my list. When I casually draped it over my bookbag, no one even noticed. Everyone was busy doing something called “free writing” and “reflection.” After a couple of days, I began to pick up on derisive comments made about journal topics. I got huffy. “What was wrong with journal topics?” I asked. “I never could get very good response,” said one teacher. “I wouldn't want to have to write about anything as stupid as ‘My Life as a Comb’ or ‘You've Been Captured By a Band of Pirates on the Way to School Today,’” said another.

I moved from huffy to indignant and replied, “If I asked you to pretend you were a watermelon seed, couldn't you just think of gobs to write? Imagine - you're surrounded by moist squish. Your whole world is crimson red. Suddenly there's a blinding light and an earthquake-like crack. You're out! But before you've even tasted freedom, a tongue laps you up, wallows you around,

and swallows you. You pass by an esophageal hernia, through a spastic colon, and down to the nether regions. You're searching... seeking... yearning... for a way out...” My enthusiasm peaked, then waned as I realized the group was staring at me as though I had brought new meaning to the word lunacy.

“Did you ever get that kind of response from a journal topic?” one woman drawled laconically. That was the sixty-four thousand dollar question. Had I ever gotten really good writing using journal topics? A time or two but not consistently. “Of course I have. Often,” I told the woman. She just rolled her eyes and changed the subject.

This conversation caused a new wrinkle on my brain: could I eliminate journal topics? The idea seemed almost blasphemous. Give up my list of story starters? But I'd worked so long and hard gathering them, and they were so darn clever! One of my all-time favorites was “I Was An Elf in the Christmas Parade.” What could be cuter? Granted the results were mediocre as in this piece:

I am an elf named Happy. I am in a parade in Laurel. I say Merry Christmas and throw out candy. It is fun. Bye bye now.

—Heather, 4th Grade

I chalked up the mediocrity to apathy or sheer laziness on the part of my students. These kids just didn't want to write; they'd rather whine about the assignment. A story starter like “Today I Planted an Egg, and This Is What Happened” really fanned my creative flames. I truly believed that any student who made half an effort could produce a fabulous

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something from that premise. Not so. Some could; most couldn't.

Today I planted an egg and guess what? An egg tree came up!!! Then I planted peas and butter beans. Then I went home. I hope our team wins tonight. GO BRAVES!!!!

— Courtney, 5th Grade

I checked with the other thirteen teachers at our school and discovered their experience to be similar with one notable difference. The pieces their students wrote from journal topics were considerably longer than those of my students. Granted it was still drivel, but it was lengthy drivel. "How do you get them to write so much?" I asked. All of the teachers, without exception, told me that they required students to write at least one page before they could go out to recess. I couldn't do that. Two things I strongly believed: no one should tell a writer how long a piece had to be, and everybody's piece certainly didn't have to be the same length.

Hardheaded soul that I am, I muddled along into spring without altering my journal writing plan. Along the way I read whatever I could find on the issue, talked to anyone I thought could help me, and fumed over the meaningless junk my students wrote. I continued to badger them with cries of, "You're not *trying* to be creative. Just think . . . you've opened a jar of Jif, and there in the peanut butter is written the word 'help.' How could that have gotten there? What does it mean? Use your imagination!" Edward, who is a third grader, wrote this response, typical of what most students wrote:

It was a big jar of peanut butter. I like peanut butter very much. Somebody wrote in it, but I don't know why. That's all I have to say.

Toward the end of the school year I was so frustrated that I resorted to giving no topic at all. "You may write about whatever is on your mind," I said. Just as I thought - they had *nothing* on their minds. By the time the school year was over, an Alexander Pope couplet kept repeating in my brain: "Be not the first by whom the new is tried/ Nor yet the last to lay the old aside." While I hadn't come by my methods haphazardly and certainly wasn't going to give them up nonchalantly, I had to admit that cutesy journal topics did not produce good writing. It was time not only to "lay the old aside" but also to try the new. The problem was how to go about it.

All summer long I thought about my problem and how it could be solved. I considered the unique situation in which I teach. Our school serves a different grade of "gifted" student each day. On Monday, all of the sixth-grade gifted students from the ten elementary schools in the district travel by bus to our school for the entire day. On Tuesday, fifth graders come and so on through second grade on Friday. My classes are small, about ten or twelve, but with a total of fourteen teachers we serve about 150 students each day. So many potential writers! How could I make their potentiality a reality?

By the time the new school year began, I had a plan, and it included my perception of what reflective writing could be for children. I had completed the writing

project too embarrassed to ask the definition of reflective writing. I was fairly certain it involved contemplation, but beyond that I wasn't sure. Was it like metacognition — thinking about thinking? Could one only reflect on issues and actions? Maybe "one" could, but I didn't think that was practical for my elementary students. However, I felt confident that I could teach them to reflect on a concrete object.

I decided to begin by using real mirrors to teach the reflective process. I borrowed enough for each student to have one. As the students gazed at their own reflections, I asked this question: "What can you think about while looking in a mirror at your own reflection?" As they answered, I categorized each response and wrote the categories on the board.

Student Response Categories

I think I'm a queen.
Pretending/Imagining

I look at my cavities.
Examining/Observing

I think I'm having a bad hair day.
Forming Opinions

What will I look like when I am old?
Questioning

My hair is parted in the middle.
Describing

I'm thinking about when I broke my nose.
Remembering

I look better than my brother.
Comparing

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Everything on my face looks sad today.
Expressing Emotions

We talked at length about the various categories, and I invited the students to give personal examples of each. Then I asked them to look in the mirrors again, reflect on their images, and then write about what came to mind.

When I see myself in the mirror, I think about many things.

Sometimes I look in the mirror, and I see my grandmother's reflection. It reminds me of how she used to call us when she wanted us. I sometimes cry because missing her makes me so sad. I look in the mirror, and I say to myself, "Boy, why did it have to be this way?"

I look in the mirror and think about bad things that might happen.

I think I'm going to fail a test and I won't be allowed to go on a field trip. I look, and I say to myself, "Why am I so discouraged?"

Sometimes I look in the mirror and think about my future, like where I want to live. I even think about what I want to be when I grow up. My younger sister Mandolin tells me I will never do the things I want to do. My older sister Zandra tells me that things will work out if I have confidence in myself. I believe my older sister.

—William, 6th Grade

Another day I asked the students to choose anything from my desk for me to use to model reflective thinking. I asked them specifically to select something very

ordinary that they thought would be difficult for me to reflect on. My fifth grade group picked a stapler. As I reflected aloud, I asked them to categorize my reflections.

My Response Categories

This stapler has seen better days.
Forming Opinions

I wonder who invented this thing.
Questioning

Last year a student stapled her finger and I had to do some first aid.

Remembering

It's bright blue and slightly lopsided.
Describing

Paper clips are more useful than this.
Comparing

One student challenged me to *imagine* something about the stapler. "There's no way to pretend about a staple," she said.

"Sure there is," I said. "How about this?" And I related the following: Mrs. T. was sitting at her desk quietly reading journals when she heard a tiny voice chirp, "Good grief it's crowded in here." She looked up, but no one else was in the room. Being the curious sort and a firm believer in listening to tiny voices, Mrs. T. waited patiently. There it was again! "Hey, out there. I could use a little help! One of us is jammed, and the rest of us are crammed!" There was no doubt about it. Mrs. T. had heard that small, metallic voice, and it was coming from her stapler."

For the next three or four times I met with each grade, we continued to practice reflecting aloud on a number of very simple objects in the room until I felt like the

students understood the technique. Finally one day I held up a toothbrush, and we brainstormed writing ideas. After the discussion I asked them to write a reflection about the toothbrush. I wrote while they wrote, and I was amazed when the time came to read aloud. Almost every student was able to write something significant. The responses were meaty and varied. From second grade to sixth grade, students had something remarkable to write about that toothbrush. There were great remembrances about lost teeth and braces, opinions about which toothbrushes are best and why, comparisons of people teeth and animal teeth, and wild tales about wicked dentists.

The day after my birthday I woke up and gave myself a good stare in my reflecting glass. I noticed one of my teeth was leaning like the Tower of Pisa. I thought to myself, "I'll give it a little wiggle and see if it's loose." But my mom said, "Don't touch it. Leave it for Dr. Drillo. He'll get it out for you."

I remembered Dr. Drillo, the man who pulls teeth. I didn't trust him. He always got this funny gleam in his eye every time I sat in his chair, and he would lie and say, "Now this won't hurt a bit."

I decided to pull the tooth out myself. I got a piece of paper towel and pushed and pulled. After so much agony, I finally zipped it out. I ran into the kitchen screaming, "Yahooooo!" or in other words, "Thank you, Lord!"

—Monique, 4th Grade

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Over time productivity ceased to be a problem. Journaling was no longer the hair-pulling ordeal it had once been, and reflection became a buzzword for us.

Slowly the students and I were able to move away from simply trying to grind out some writing and move on to other parts of the writing process such as making interesting word choices. As the year progressed, we made a giant leap toward reflecting on famous artwork, classical music, and fine literature. I was always careful to make selections that I believed had meaning for my students.

I got an idea when I looked at a painting called “The Piano Lesson” by Romare Bearden. I imagined I was walking down a sidewalk, and I heard an angry sound. It was coming from the instrument store. I went inside. There was a woman trying out the instruments. She was playing the piano. I said to the piano player, “That was very good. Will you play it again?” A second-grader, Edwin, responded differently!

The music sounded like elephants stomping their huge feet on the ground because they were mad that a leopard came and got their baby.

We reflected on paintings by Claude Monet and Pieter the Elder:

*The rosie, red poppies surround and swallow
The resting family like a small child
Devouring his first meal since yesterweek.*
—Susannah, 6th Grade

*I imagine Pieter the Elder’s painting
“Peasant Dancers” shows poor
country people dancing at dawn to
celebrate the king’s birthday. They are*

*happy. I know because their lips are
not in a straight line. Their lips look
like a “u” with their smiles so big and
wide showing their white teeth.*

*I imagine that later that day the king
dies, and his son becomes king. Three
months later a secret agent is in town,
and he hears a servant telling a friend
how he poisoned the king. The secret
agent tells the new king, and new King
James hangs the servant and his
friend. No servant ever tries to poison
the king again. All the people live
happily in my imagination.*

—Allen, 4th Grade

We reflected on poetry:

*When I hear Longfellow’s “Arrow and
Song,” I think about my fort in the
woods covered with trees. The sun
shines through them like a river of
light going in so many different
directions I can’t keep track of it.
Before I know it, I am standing in that
river of sunlight and millions of
thoughts run through my mind like
cars on a busy highway. I sit and for
once enjoy nature’s sweet sounds.*

—Fredrick, 6th Grade

And we reflected on music:

*I am listening to “The Gypsy Baron” by
Johann Strauss. The music is pretty
and exciting. Part of it sounds slow,
and part is fast. It makes me feel good
and happy like the time.*

*I went to Pep’s Point. When I went to
Pep’s Point, I got a mat. We had to
wait in line for our turn. When it was
our turn, Mom and my brother and*

*me put our mats together and went
down. Around the curves we slipped
up and then back down. The mat felt
wet, and it went zoom like wheels on a
skate board. I was going so fast, and I
was so full of excitement that I felt like
it was my birthday.*

—Joshua, 2nd Grade

Looking back, I think there are several reasons why this strategy worked so well. First of all, when the students wrote, I wrote using the same reflection item they used. This was a new experience for me. Initially I didn’t write with students because I was a new teacher and didn’t have time to use the bathroom, much less write with my students. Over the years I read their miserable little responses, and I simply didn’t want to show them up and make them feel bad about their feeble efforts. Writing with my students made a tremendous difference in their perception of journal writing. They began to believe that it *must* be important — the teacher did it.

Now when we shared our writing, they asked me to read out loud what I had written. They especially liked the times when I would tell them, “I wrote garbage today. I just couldn’t think of anything creative.” Through that little confession, they came to see that *all* writers have days when they cannot produce something wonderful.

Secondly, we succeeded because we spent so much time discussing before we wrote. In the past I have been guilty of severely limiting pre-writing conversation because I thought too much talk would give away too many ideas. Now I see that’s the point — to

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No Excuses: An Interview with Eugene Garcia

willing to accept the challenge. More students are finishing school and GPAs are up.

The Quarterly: The report also asks teachers to engage parents and community in the education of their children. How is this involvement different for immigrant parents?

Garcia: Parents from other nations have a different conception of the responsibility of the school. In Mexico, Japan and Korea, parents expect that teachers will have a good curriculum. The U.S system operates

on the basis of parent advocacy. The truth is you are going to be taken advantage of if you don't communicate with the teachers. But schools need to be proactive in helping these parents understand what is going on in school and in what ways parent participation is necessary to help their children learn. One school in Berkeley, Columbus, has a program worth looking at. They have a parent liaison who serves more as a community advocate than as a representative of the school. Parents are invited to Saturday meetings at the school that are conversations not "top down" lectures.

These conversations are relevant to the kids' academic work. There is none of the preaching that has characterized such session in the past. Everyone comes to learn. Baby-sitting is provided. Parents need not wait around for the occasional teacher conference that they may or may not be able to attend.

But its not just at Columbus School. Models such as this are being taken up with considerable success all over the country. As the report from the Hispanic Dropout Project makes clear, we know what to do; now let's do it.

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make available plenty of ideas, to crank the creative motor, and to be certain there is something familiar about the road the students will travel. I think that the discussions and subsequent writings convinced many of a Trest Truism: if you can say it with your mouth, you can write it with a pencil. Extended, meaningful conversation also resulted in one other unexpected dividend. Students began asking if they had to write about the discussion topic or if they could write about something else that came to mind while we were talking. I was pleased to acquiesce.

Another reason this plan was successful was because I chose starting points that were relevant to the students. Elementary students are extremely concrete and literal in their thinking, but that doesn't keep them from being creative. They just can't be creative about elves and peanut butter messages and other things with which they have had no experience. When I stopped relying on goofy subjects, I was able to tap into the students' prior knowledge which included love of the outdoors and things of nature. When I gave up the eggs and the elves and offered a branch instead, Edward was able to give me the following:

A leaf is a remarkable thing. It helps ants when there is a flood. They can get

under it like an umbrella so they won't get washed away. A leaf helps caterpillars stay alive because the caterpillar can eat a healthy leaf lunch. A leaf is also like a big cup for a wasp. He gulps down the water ... glug, glug, glug.

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