

Positioning Writers as Decision Makers

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In my 30-plus years of experience as a high school English teacher, as a co-director of two National Writing Project sites, and as a teacher of writers, I recognize that every writer and writing situation is “essentially unique” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 164). Focusing my attention on individual writers, not on the standardization of writing and writing instruction, reveals the wickedity of classroom writing. I see the space where the problems raised while writing do not have “true or false answers” and where the solutions to those problems cannot be judged as “good or bad” without considering the situation, purpose, and audience of the writing (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 163). To address these problems and solutions, I recognize that I must design an ecosystem (Cooper, 1986; Inoue, 2015; McCarthy, 2012; Williamson, 2023) of learning experiences that open spaces for students to explore language and texts and that provide opportunities for them to participate in dialogue about their writing. In their notebooks, students have the space to explore ideas that are important to them and to write around and play with these ideas and the language they might use to share the ideas with others. With texts students read, students have occasion to see the thinking and techniques other writers use and consider how these might play a role in their own thinking and style. In conversations with me as a responder and with their peers, students have opportunities to test out their thinking and writing and to receive feedback that they can choose to act on or not. All of these experiences can present them with a diversity of possibilities and with decisions they might make as writers.

In this environment, teachers privilege and co-construct relationships and community with their students. They co-create a climate that acknowledges that “To be a writer is to be human; to be a teacher of writers is to acknowledge and revere students’ humanity” (LeeKeenan & White, 2021, p. 93). Recognizing our students’ humanity and acknowledging and leveraging the interdependence in this ecosystem—among the students, between the

students and the teacher, and among the students, teachers, and texts—are the keys to addressing the wicked problem of teaching writers and of positioning our students as decision makers. This positioning means addressing each writer and writing situation as unique, the heart of the wicked problem that teachers face when guiding students to navigate the ecosystem in the classroom and to raise their awareness of their own decision-making power.

Thinking about the importance of positioning students as decision makers, I ponder the following questions:

- How can high school English teachers create classroom spaces that honor the humanity of their students, spaces where writers' identities and voices matter, spaces where students learn about the decisions they need to and can make as writers?
- What pedagogical and design moves might a high school English teacher make to create this space to show students about being writers instead of just telling them how to write?

Considering these questions makes helping students learn about themselves as writers a wicked problem, especially in a system designed to force their identities and ideas into a standard form. My hope is that instead of teaching students to conform to a standard, we guide them in learning more about themselves as writers and provide them space to breathe freely, exploring and sharing their identities as writers, and ultimately finding their niches in a writing habitat that supports their growth. Three of the resources I relied on to encourage this growth in my own writing workshop (Atwell, 1989; Rief, 1991; Wood Ray, 2006) are choice, mentor texts, and conferences.

CHOICE AND WICKED PROBLEMS

Vicki Spandel (2005) writes that teachers can guide students “not by choosing for them, but by helping them learn to choose for themselves” (p. 19). In doing so, students have space to address the “wicked problem” of learning to write; in other words, they become better “equipped, interested, and/or entitled to judge the solutions” to the problems they encounter in their own writing because teachers begin not only to accept but also champion the idea that students’ “judgments are likely to differ widely to accord with . . . group or personal interests, . . . special value-sets, and . . . ideological predilections” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 163). Once students and teachers adopt this belief in student choice, they will also recognize that all writing is context-specific (to the writer, the audience, the situation, the time, etc.), and writers must make decisions about how they will address those contexts. In other words, the writing students do is part of the ecosystem, fed

by the other texts they encounter in the environment of the classroom and nurtured by the other people in the space.

This chapter engages how teachers can support and nurture these decisions in this ecosystem. First, writers need time to write and read independently to help them discover what they might want to write about and how. They also need time for goal-setting and reflection as well as time for revision. Three tools or structures teachers can embed to support this use of time and to sustain students' abilities to make choices in this habitat are writer's notebooks, mentor texts, and conferences.

Writer's Notebooks and Wicked Problems

As Ralph Fletcher (1996) writes, "Keeping a notebook is the single best way I know to survive as a writer" (p. 1). My work with notebooks has taught me the importance of the freedom this space provides for students' decision making, including how they will use their notebooks, what they will put in, and when and what, if anything, they will pull out. These decisions are "judgments [about] which . . . *solutions* should be pursued or implemented" (italics added, Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 164). Fletcher (1996) names this work of using a notebook as a process of breathing in—collecting ideas and words, recording observations and thoughts—and breathing out—drawing the ideas, words, observations, and thoughts out of the notebook and into pieces of writing. This breathing process provides a sustenance for writers and offers a place to discover and compose. In this space, students also write alongside others' texts (Rief, 2003) and experiment with sentence structures (Anderson, 2005). As students make decisions, they rely on their "interests, value-sets, and predilections" while also working within the environment of the classroom where they can test out their ideas not only within the space of their notebooks but also in relation to other texts they are reading and with their peers and teacher (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 163). Notebooks can also provide a space for translanguaging (Seltzer, 2020), a space where students can explore their ideas with all of their linguistic skills, deciding what language best fits their thinking and opening up more equitable opportunities for writing.

For students to recognize the value in notebook work, though, teachers must make time for students to write in their notebooks regularly in class, ideally daily. In my own classroom, we wrote after reading or viewing a short text, such as a poem or photograph, or after students made a list, such as listing belief statements or people or places that are significant in their lives, or in response to events happening in their personal lives, in the school, or in the world at large. Importantly, students need choices and time to write around ideas and time to discover genres and ideas through writing. Designing this space and time for exploration is key for writers' growth in this ecosystem.

Mentor Texts and Wicked Problems

Provided with multiple examples of a particular genre or technique, each one unique to its context but all offering options for how writers construct within that genre or use that technique, students can choose what works in their own writing. Instead of giving students a set of requirements to meet in their writing, they need possibilities for their writing, possibilities that they can see in the works of other writers. Then they could take up those possibilities and decide how they will do so, seeing that they might combine genres or techniques as well. Seeing these possibilities from multiple authors and texts supports the idea that students are the ones who will decide how to craft their work. They decide themselves what they want to communicate, how they want to communicate it, and who they want to communicate with. Such work with mentor texts can also help students recognize that “[p]art of the art of dealing with wicked problems is the art of not knowing too early which type of solution to apply” but considering a variety of solutions before deciding (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 164). This artistic approach is supported by the information students gain from mentor texts about possible ways of approaching their own work.

In other words, mentor texts provide ideal sustenance for the work that writers do in finding solutions to the problems of any given piece of writing/assignment, allowing students to visualize possibilities. For example, when my students were writing personal essays, we read a variety of mentor texts to examine how the writers set us into a place. In one, an author uses description of items to help us see the place she comes from in contrast to the place she is visiting (Kingsolver, 2002). In another, an author provides a sensory tour of the space he remembers from childhood (McDonald, 2012). In a third, an author shares a list of actions that happen in that place (Price, 2010). Those are just three of the options students would see as they continue to examine other texts during their immersion in a particular genre of writing, texts where they might see extended metaphors or a comparison of the place at different moments in time. Seeing these options, then, students experiment in their writer’s notebooks with some of the techniques they have seen, searching for appropriate choices for their contexts, messages, purposes, and audiences. The decisions they make are strengthened by observing other writers’ choices and by being guided by teachers asking them to notice and name what other writers do (Wood Ray, 2006). These ways of studying mentor texts for what we can learn as writers provide a structure to support students and to position them as decision makers.

Finding mentor texts can be a challenge but is made easier when teachers ask students to write in authentic ways, ways that writing appears in the world outside of school. It is also made easier by keeping our eyes open while reading and collecting examples of texts that contain techniques to share with students. In addition, inviting students to collect their own

mentor texts as they are reading is another way to add to their (and our) repertoires of ideas and possibilities. The overall point is to engage student writers in seeing possibilities and in decision making and teaching them that we exist in an ecosystem with other writers from whom we can learn. Positioning students as writers in this way can help them see themselves as people who have important contributions to make in the writing world.

Conferences and Wicked Problems

In this writing ecosystem, conferring with students is one occasion for better understanding students and their writing and for guiding them toward decisions they might make as writers. While time is always an issue, the time teachers and students spend conferring allows them to recognize the uniqueness of each student's work and consider how to respond to that work—what to notice, what to highlight, what to teach into, and what mentor texts to use to help guide the writer's work. The specificity involved in this uniqueness, though, introduces yet another wicked problem. As Rittel and Webber (1973) write of wicked problems, "one can never be *certain* that the particulars of a problem do not override its commonalities with other problems already dealt with" (p. 165, emphasis in original). Therefore, in a writing conference, teachers should spend time listening to understand the writer's intentions, purposes, and ideas to help guide them, while knowing that the writer is ultimately the one who must decide how to address the writing problem. In the writing classroom ecosystem, writers learn to work alongside others in their decision-making process. This interdependence involves the interaction among the writer, the teacher, other students, the text the writer is creating, and any other texts that might serve as mentors.

I usually began with Carl Anderson's (2000) famous question, "How's it going?" The answer to this question allowed me some insight into how the conference would proceed. I remember one student who wanted to write a piece about a relative who had been an important part of her life for 16 years. In a conference, she shared that the piece was unwieldy because of the number of "stories" she wanted to include and that telling them in chronological order could mean writing a book instead of an essay. As she talked, I remembered an essay by Marion Winik (1995), "Sixteen Pictures of My Father," that captured a long-term relationship in a vignette structure. Drawing on our study of mentor texts, I shared that text with her, and she had a new option for organization, one that she ultimately decided to use while also adding her own twist to it. We talked of the decisions she would need to make if she chose to adopt that structure: which "pictures" she would include and what order to include them. Having a knowledge of this text helped me offer this possibility and position this writer as a decision maker, too. And because we had established a climate where I was not

requiring her to use a specific structure, she knew that this one was only one possibility, not necessarily the “right” one. She would decide.

Starting by opening the conversation with students sharing what they are working on sets the tone for them to lead the work and to be positioned as decision makers. Then, as a teacher, I made sure to point out what I noticed is working in the direction the writers were moving and what some possible next steps might have been without making the decisions for them, creating an interdependent ecosystem that helped them thrive as writers. This kind of conversation offers opportunities for students to share their goals as writers and for a teacher to offer possible ways to address those goals, a way to honor, value, and support each student’s learning.

CONCLUSION

I have worked to use writer’s notebooks, mentor texts, and conferences to create a humane environment where I learned alongside students about how to do my work as a teacher while they learned alongside me about being writers—a classroom where we both learned alongside texts that we read and shared. My goal was not to promote independent decision making but to help students learn about the kinds of decision-making agency they have as writers and to design an ecosystem of learning experiences that create space for them to make those decisions alongside other writers, including me. In doing so, I hoped to address the wicked problem of the uniqueness of teaching writers and of being a writer.

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