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Motivating Reluctant Writers: A Cumulative Research Project Aimed to Improve Student Motivation and Writing Outcomes

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Introduction

My love of writing began when I was a young child. In fact, some of my earliest memories revolve around writing. I can vividly remember the pride I felt as my dad taught me how to spell my last name and the stars I received on my research paper in elementary school when I wrote about my chosen state of New Mexico. Learning to hold a pencil was all I needed to inspire and motivate me to put my thoughts on paper.

Although the love of writing came naturally to me, I feel the fact that I was intrinsically motivated to do any assignment asked of me throughout school was because I was engaged at the task at hand. Often times, my teachers did their best by making the work presented relevant for us students, and for those times that my teachers didn't, I was able to find the relevance on my own. I believe this was because I knew writing skills were going to be a vital part of my future plans. I knew this was not the case for all students, as I watched some of my friends struggle with writing in high school. It wasn't until I began teaching, however, that I was immersed in the struggle of motivating reluctant writers.

In previous school years I taught Junior/Senior composition classes which was made up of students who had yet to pass the writing graduation demonstration exam in Lincoln Public Schools. Even though I did everything in my power to make my classroom a place where students felt welcomed, safe, and free to experiment with the written word, these students came to me feeling unmotivated and even depleted. My composition students felt as though they were terrible at writing, because for many years they failed to meet their own expectations when it came to writing. Too many times they had received low scores in their English classes and after failing grades on their graduation demonstration exams, some after their fourth attempt, they

again opened the letter to see that they had not met the requirements and would need to try again. Because of these failures, many of them had given up and the last thing they were motivated to do was write; for me or themselves.   A prime example of this came from a student of mine whom I will call, Ryan. From the first day Ryan walked into my classroom, he seemed to have a grudge and expressed this feeling by simply refusing to do any writing tasks asked of him. Ryan wasn't necessarily rude about his refusal, he would just choose to do other tasks, such as drawing, even after I would specifically instruct him to begin writing. It became obvious to me early on that drawing was a passion of his. Spending time creating was not only important to him, but he knew he was talented at it. He liked the praise he received from his peers and adults, which was the opposite of the feelings writing gave him. I tried several different strategies with Ryan and my other students to motivate them, but I unfortunately did reach the level of success that I was aiming for.

Even though I no longer teach composition, I find myself dealing with similar issues in my English 9 course, and surprisingly in my differentiated English 10 course as well. Recently in differentiated English 10, I was walking around as my students were brainstorming for their personal essay, in which I had asked them to examine themselves as a writer; the good, the bad, or the ugly. As I introduced the essay, I was met with the usual groans and the same question that surfaces next, "why do we have to write again?" Although some may think that this issue only surfaces when it is time to write an essay, which is more academic, that is not the case. Even in their daily writing where they write briefly to a prompt, I am often met with the same response. Students simply answering the question without thought or explanation because they either just don't want to write more or do the thinking that writing requires of them.

Before beginning this project my students were unmotivated and unwilling to put forth the effort expected of them, both by myself and Lincoln North Star High School. I had already decided on studying motivating reluctant writers before the school year began, but once my students began their first writing assignment, I knew I was concentrating on the right topic. My decision was validated when the first assigned essay was due in my differentiated English class and only eight out of 31 students placed their work in the turn in tray as they walked into my classroom. The essay asked students to reflect on themselves as writers and they were given several class periods for brainstorming, drafting, peer editing, and revising. I was extremely disappointed in the lack of effort my students gave, yet it was the lack of work completed which spoke in greater volume about the types of writers they are than the essays themselves. Simply stated, these students were reluctant writers.

These are the students I see daily at North Star High School. This reluctance stems from many different sources. Some don't have much support at home, while others may be rebelling. Some had to work late into the night the evening before in order to help provide for their family, while others are simply distracted by technology. Some are fearful of failure, so they are unwilling to even try. While sadly, some have convinced themselves they just don't like writing.

These reactions towards writing and trying to better understand the causes of reluctance are the reasons I chose to focus on motivating reluctant writers for my final semester of graduate school. I was inspired by both my past and present students; probably more than they will ever know. Whatever the reason my students are reluctant to write, I want to help them. I want them to be able to find the joy that can come from writing; the same joy I experience from it. I hope

through their writing they will be able to find their voice and express their creativity, both

through the writing done in class and, hopefully, the writing they choose to create on their own.

Introduction to the Class - Differentiated English

Within this project, I am choosing to focus on my English 10 differentiated courses,

particularly my current fourth period class. I realize that some may feel that with a differentiated

course there wouldn't be such a need to focus on reluctancy to write, as these are typically the

advanced students, who are often assumed to be the more motivated. For many of them this is

the case, but it always surprises people when I tell them that I have more than several students in

the differentiated classes who in their words, "hate writing." A common reaction to this

statement often times goes back to questioning why they are in differentiated English if they

don't like to write. One answer to this question is that just because these students are capable of

doing the work doesn't mean that they enjoy it or are motivated to do so. Although I also teach

regular English courses, I feel that the struggle to motivate reluctant writers is something that all

educators deal with in any course they teach, not just those courses where students are at grade

level or below.

Demographics. In my fourth period English class I have 26 students, which is the

smallest course I teach. Of the 26 students, 12 are male and 14 are female. Six of the students in

this course are identified as gifted, while none have special education accommodations. Two of

my students who struggle the most with motivation and a reluctance to write this semester are in

this particular course section; one of the two is identified as gifted. I would consider this

particular class to be fairly attentive and engaged, while fairly quiet. Although we have

authentic discussions throughout the course of the semester, not all students participate during the large group discussions and often times need to be called upon.

The class is fairly diverse, as North Star High School is one of the more diverse schools in Lincoln. North Star High School has always been a diverse school, in part to our location within the city and also open-enrollment within the district, shaping the feel within our building as a place which is inclusive and allows for varying perspectives and beliefs. Although not without imperfections, I feel this diversity makes our students more accepting of one another and open to differences in lifestyle and backgrounds. If anything, I feel our diversity teaches our students about a world outside of themselves and that of even Lincoln, Nebraska.

This diversity is seen in all areas including: race, religion, and economic status. North Star has a large English language learner population and at last count there are a total of 22 different native languages spoken within our halls. A large population of our ELL students are refugees who have fled their home countries due to war and other violence and know very little English. In regards to economic status, over 60% of our students come from families that are, by definition, living in poverty. The same percentage of our students receive free or reduced price lunches.

Patterns of Reluctance

The patterns of reluctance that I see in my classroom vary from student to student, but there are some common behaviors that these students display. The two different types of reluctance that I observe in my classroom are active and passive. Although these patterns may look different, both patterns produce similar outcomes that are not beneficial to the learner. It sends students on a downward spiral they have a difficult time coming back from.

Active. Often times, these students tend to distract themselves with anything they can think of; such as other students, their phones, or other tasks to keep their hands and minds busy. As I mentioned earlier, my student Ryan would often times appear to be working, but when I would get closer to him he would be drawing rather than focusing on the writing assigned to him. Fortunately, my students who tend to distract themselves from getting started on their writing most often still complete the assignment, just in their own time. On the downside, these students have spent a good majority of their time procrastinating and distracting themselves, which results in a low quality piece of writing because the student wasn't able to put in the proper amount of time or effort that the writing required.

There are also students who get started immediately, but they do so just so they can finish and move on to something else they are much more motivated to do. The outcome of this reluctance is often times a piece of writing far below what they are capable of. I am reminded of a student from my fourth period class named Samantha, who during the writing of the personal essay came to me a couple days before the final deadline stating she was finished and wanted to turn it in early. I did my best to try and convince her to use the remainder of the class time given to continue to work and improve on her essay; she refused. Even after some minor suggestions for revision, she still handed in her essay as it was. The result was a lower grade on the essay, but for Samantha, that wasn't what was most important to her. Rather than putting in the extra effort for a higher grade, Samantha was simply more motivated to be finished and to put the writing behind her.

Passive. When students use this particular strategy, they are testing just how much the teacher will persist. Many of these students have learned from past experiences that some

teachers, and even parents, will eventually give up and leave the student alone; no matter how much one may insist these particular students to get to work. When the teacher keeps pushing the student to complete the writing, the student will simply grow more quiet and distant. For most, it is a battle of wills. Meaning that once a student has refused to do the work, they will continue to resist believing the teacher will eventually need to move on. Passive students are masters of avoidance; simply refusing to write anything. This is what separates the active, distracted student from the student who purposely avoids the work. The distracted student, although reluctant, will eventually produce some amount of writing in order to earn some sort of a grade rather than the passive student who avoids the work all together and completes nothing. This is something many teachers can relate to. I can think of many students who fit this pattern. One student from my fourth period differentiated course who used avoidance is someone I will refer to as Ivan. Ivan was a student who came up to me after the first week of the school year and asked if I would email his school guidance counselor and recommend that they pull him out of my class and move him into a regular English 10 course. This obviously sparked a curiosity in me and when I pressed the issue with him he simply responded that he "just isn't good at English" and doesn't understand why he was ever placed in advanced courses for the subject. Later, he came up to me at the end of the same period and told me to disregard everything he said because he wanted to stay. I told him I felt that was a good decision. Over the course of the quarter his avoidance of work had continued to grow, even though many interventions had been utilized, such as conferencing, parent contact, and conversations between teachers and counselors. I think the work that we do in the differentiated course, although rigorous, was not above his capacity. I often times had conferenced with him about his lack of turning in

assignments and although he was aware of the problem and genuinely seemed upset that he wasn't doing the work, he hadn't done anything to change. Sadly, many students who start off avoiding one writing assignment will then continue to avoid the following writing assignments, as Ivan had, because they no longer see a way to catch up. This can be especially daunting for students like Ivan, who feel that they are not strong in their writing abilities or capable of completing the writing assigned to them.

Causes of Reluctance

There are several causes for a reluctance towards writing. One cause is that a student may have a low self-concept and not feel that they are skilled in writing, such as Ivan. Bruning, Schraw, Norby, & Ronning wrote that "although they judge writing to be very important for such things such as success in school and on the job, many plainly do not see themselves as good writers" (2004). This was Ivan; through our discussions with one another he expressed the importance of writing, yet gave up because he did not feel writing was a strength of his. Along with his low self-concept, he had a fear of failure when it came to writing. Ivan felt better by receiving a zero in the gradebook for doing nothing, rather than putting forth effort into his writing and receiving a low grade. At least by doing this Ivan, and students like him, don't feel as though they are a failure or stupid. Writing is a difficult task for anyone because it is complex and effortful. It is so much more than simply putting thoughts down on paper. I can think of a number of my students in my classes that struggle with this fear of failure when it comes to their writing.

Martin. Martin was a student who could be difficult to read at times. The very first day of the school year Martin had his head down on his desk and was trying to sleep as I was going

over the class expectations, procedures, and introducing myself to the students. This was

surprising, as most students I have encountered are usually on their best behavior on the first day

of class in order to make a positive first impression. After our initial meeting, I would make sure

to greet Martin in the hallway and he would have a smile on his face as he walked to his seat.

Once class time would start he would be a willing participant in class discussion and have many

intelligent points to make on any topic being discussed. It wasn't until I would be introducing

the students to a new task, usually involving writing, that would cause Martin to pull back and

away from the class by placing his head on his desk. I had my own ideas as to why Martin was

reluctant to write or to even complete the most minor of assignments in class, but after having

the opportunity to discuss the issue with his parents during conferences, my hypothesis was

validated. Both Martin's parents and I felt he didn't have a very high self-concept when it came

to his writing. He would become nervous at the very thought of having a writing assignment to

complete and he reverted to the student I saw on the first day of class and become completely

unengaged. He would immediately put his head down as though he had given up before I could

even finish explaining the assignment. It wasn't until later that I had Martin and the other

students in my fourth period differentiated course complete a survey with questions asking them

to explain the reasons they are reluctant to write. As I read over the responses Martin's survey

stood out to me because of the honesty in his answers. His response to the particular question

asking students to explain why they felt that are reluctant to write was three simple words:

judgement, failure, and procrastination. There were a couple of other students who shared

something similar, but his bluntness seemed extremely reflective to me. I saw all three of these

words on Martin's face in class whenever we began writing.

During conferences, Martin's parents mentioned that this behavior was something they had been dealing with since he began high school. In his early schooling, Martin never feared writing, but once he began being challenged more is when he began to shut down. Similar to Martin's struggle to smoothly transition, Simmons and Blyth discovered a decline in some early adolescents' grades once they had moved into junior high school from their elementary school years (Eccles et al., 1993). Many causes for this decline were mentioned including: lack of interest in school, low intrinsic motivation, self-perceptions, as well as the lack of confidence in a student's' intellectual ability after a failure (Eccles et al., 1993). I feel that Martin struggled with the change in expectations of the work produced from middle school to high school, similar to those that Simmons and Blyth discovered in the transition experienced from the elementary to middle school years.

In previous years, our incoming ninth graders came to us unprepared for the course work that was assigned to them in ninth grade English. Our students were taught high expectations in elementary school and an expectation for the students was to complete homework, but unfortunately, once they went into middle school, homework was no longer counted in the students final grades. The lack of preparation was not the fault of the middle school teachers, but instead was a district policy regarding grading that in my opinion, and many of my colleagues, never should have been as it affected student perception of homework. Middle school teachers have also communicated that they would have preferred to factor homework into the students' grades because many students struggled to find the need for it and then would not complete it. Educators, and those who work in the field of education, understand that the practice of homework helps students master the skills necessary for the course, but is difficult for young

students to grasp. Unfortunately, Martin struggled to figure out the balance. Although he had never been without flaws, he was able to pull passing grades in middle school without doing the homework. Once he entered high school, the transition caused unsurity of his capabilities and the expectations required of him. Eccles and Midgley found that "junior high school teachers appear to use a higher standard in judging students' competence and in grading their performance than do elementary school teachers" (Eccles et al., 1993). The further a student goes in their schooling, the more difficult the work becomes and with the rise in difficulty, comes a rise in expectations. Although much of this research is focused on the transition from elementary to junior high, I strongly believe the same gap and transitional dilemma occurs between middle school and high school as well.

Many factors can alter a student's confidence in themselves, but "there is no stronger predictor of students' self-confidence and sense of efficacy than the grades they receive. If grades change, then we would expect to see a concomitant shift in adolescents' self-perceptions and academic motivation" (Eccles et al., 1993). I believe this is something many students face, including Martin. Grades are often times a stressor for students and many feel a low grade can only mean one thing; failure. As a student who struggled in math growing up, a low self-concept and lack of confidence, were the causes of my reluctance to complete the work required of me. I felt better doing poorly because of missed assignments, rather than putting forth the effort and receiving a low grade for the work I completed. At least then, I could say that my low grade was not due to a lack of ability. When students, like Martin, who have been accustomed to earning high marks in middle school then begin to receive low marks in high school, it hurts their self-concept. The answer is not to lower our standards and make the work we give students less

rigorous, in fact, I feel it is important to keep these two aspects high in order to force our students to rise to the expectations. In order to do so, we need to think about how we motivate our students. Simmons and Blyth "have argued that adolescents need a reasonably safe, as well as intellectually challenging, environment to adapt to these shifts - an environment that produces a zone of comfort as well as challenging new opportunities for growth" (Eccles et al., 1993). At times, this can be difficult for high school teachers to do because of certain school characteristics such "as size, connection to the community, and system governance, as well as such instructional organization characteristics as departmentalized teaching, ability grouping, normative grading, and large student load, undermine the motivation of both teachers and students" (Eccles et al., 1993). Although teachers are presented with many challenges, it is vital to work around the difficulties presented in order to help our students be motivated and in turn, successful in the classroom.

Another cause of reluctance stems from a lack of reasoning provided in the classroom. "Although other motivational processes also are important for understanding school success, goals and interest are central to understanding the underlying reasons for why students behave as they do" (Wentzel, 1998). If a student doesn't understand why they are being asked to do something they are less likely to be motivated to do it. "Interventions aiming to increase student engagement should ideally seek to foster both students' expectations of success and the value of the subject" (Nagengast, Trautwein, Kelava & Lüdtke, 2013). It is vital for educators to help students see and understand the importance of writing, both in their current life and as they move on to higher education or careers. Rather than solely teaching the skills required of various types of writing; we must also teach the relevance of the writing being taught. By teaching the

relevance, students are likely to work harder to understand the writing skills because they see the importance of the type of writing and its future application. Relevance is especially true for something as daunting and intensive as writing. If I can't help my students break the information down and show how it can be used in real life, they will not buy into what I am teaching. If that happens, students focus less on the skills that go along with the writing of an essay which are critical; such as clearly explaining thoughts, providing evidence, or even simple sentence structure. Often times I stress that regardless of their career path, knowing how to write is going to be an important skill to have. Even if it is as simple as being able to properly write an email to a customer, colleague, or boss; writing is crucial. As teachers, we have been told "if students don't value what they are learning or don't see how what they are learning will be useful to them in the future, they will not engage in mindful abstraction" (Driscoll & Wells, 2012). Students need to not only be engaged in the task at hand, but also find that it relates to them and their lives. It is similar to the "what's in it for me?" mentality that so many students exhibit and we need to help students answer that question.

Motivating Students

Identifying the patterns of reluctance and the causes are only the beginning steps required in figuring out how to motivate students. Motivating students and keeping them engaged in the lesson is often difficult as we work in an unpredictable field. Teaching is unpredictable because we work with students who are constantly changing and we need to be flexible and change with them. Although this is the case, there are some strategies teachers can use in order to help with student motivation, such as building relationships with their students and making the work we do in class relevant as previously discussed.

Building Relationships. One of the best ways for teachers to reach their students is to first build a relationship with them. In Deci's writings, he stresses the importance of genuine relationships, "the other person needs to relate genuinely to the target person" (1992, p.62). Looking back to my interaction with Ivan, it was the meaningful conversation we had that kept him in my class. I showed I cared about him and his education which forced him to think through his decision. Until we truly get to know our students and what makes them tick, we will have difficulty trying to reach them and motivate those who require the extra push. I think to Martin, in my fourth period differentiated English course and his behavior on the first day of class. Remember, Martin had his head down as I was introducing myself and going over the class expectations and procedures. I asked him to pick his head up which he did, but it was clear he was not interested in anything I was saying. While I was up speaking to the class I noticed Martin had a stack of "Magic" collector cards under his desk. I didn't know much about the cards, but I knew it was something I could use to begin building a relationship with him. Once I was able to get the class working on an activity, I went over to Martin and simply asked him what "Magic" cards were. His eyes immediately lit up and he began telling me all about the cards and how his Dad was the one who got him interested in them and then went into detail after detail. Are magic cards something that would necessarily interest me? No, but I am interested in and genuinely care about my students and by simply asking Martin about something he cared about made him feel important and showed that I care about him. Although Martin was somewhat of a distant student, and didn't outwardly crave attention, he would still come up and make a joke or talk to me about anything. If I would have never struck a conversation with him on that first day about his interests, he would still be sitting in class with his head on his desk.

One conversation hadn't turned Martin into a model student. It did, however, open the door for us to talk about school work and make him feel more comfortable with me, which made an enormous difference with Martin.

  Jeffrey. Jeffrey was a student who had been failing, yet told his parents that he liked school. I had been in frequent contact with his mother and she stated on numerous occasions that English was his favorite subject, not because of the content, but rather because I talked to him. Jeffrey struggled with organization, had been bullied, and didn't care much about learning. Over the course of our first quarter together, Jeffrey began to fall further and further behind in all of his courses which prompted administrators to call a parent meeting to see if we could try and solve the problem before the semester became unsalvageable. We left the meeting with plans for Jeffrey to attend after school study hall every day until his grades went up to passing. After some time, Jeffrey's grades remained the same which is when I decided to sit down to talk with him to see what could be done to help. During our conversation he confided in me that he struggled focusing in the after school program. According to Jeffrey, there were too many students who attended and most of them were as reluctant to work as he was. I offered to stay with him daily after school and he could work in my classroom on any school work he needed to complete. He jumped at the opportunity and came to my room on almost a daily basis. Although Jeffrey was reluctant to write and complete many of his assignments, he worked better for me than any other teacher. He told me the reason was because he liked me. A sense of belonging can play an extremely important role in a student's interest in school, stemming from interpersonal relationships. (Wentzel, 1998). It is clear that the more a student feels important to a particular teacher, the more likely they are going to be engaged in the work they are doing and

this was the case for Jeffrey. "Interest, intrinsic motivation, and self-determination have been reliably shown to be affected primarily by the autonomy support and involvement of teachers and parents" (Deci, 1992, p. 66). Once the teacher has built a relationship with a particular student; the student tends to be more motivated and will do better in class because of the support and the feeling of belonging that comes from the relationship. Building a relationship will not solve all problems with students, but it does help in many areas of teaching, including motivation.

Aside from engaging in conversations with our students, a way to build a positive relationship and make students less reluctant to writing, is to avoid judgements and provide positive feedback. Our positivity can impact students to feel the same way about their writing themselves. If we only tell students they are not meeting expectations or if we solely focus on the areas needing improvement, before long, these students are going to think they are terrible at writing. In return, students will have a low self-concept in their writing abilities. "Verbal or written feedback can be a powerful teaching tool if it is given while students are in the process of writing drafts. Comments on drafts of writing provide students with timely information about the clarity and impact of their writing" (Peterson, 2010). It is important to provide feedback to students while they are writing, rather than solely on a final draft when the grade is already given as this is counterintuitive and the students will only look at the grade.

One way to assure positive feedback with student writing is through teacher-student conferences. By having conferences, teachers are able to hold conversations with their students about their work during the writing process, rather than simply returning a paper to the students with red markings all over it. Often times, when students see markings on their writing they tend

to focus on the negatives, even if there have been positive comments as well. Without a face-to-face conference, students may misinterpret the feedback because they may not completely understand the meaning of the comments made by the teacher. While conferencing, students are able to see their teacher's reaction to the piece rather than having to decipher the tone through written feedback. Students are able to ask questions along the way to clear up any misunderstandings, which allows no room for misinterpretation. "Teacher-student conferences also can provide time for students to write while talking about the process. Having students write while the teacher observes and interacts can be an effective way to teach skills in a personalized manner" (Bruning et al., 2004). Through the conversation, the teacher is able to gently nudge the student along while the student does the thinking to revise their piece to become much stronger. (Bruning et al., 2004). Conferences are also a great time for the teacher to show students the praise they need and gives students the confidence and motivation needed to continue the writing.

Relevance. As previously mentioned, another way to help motivate our students is to make the work we do in class more relevant. One way to make the work relevant is to tell our students the reasons why we are teaching a particular unit of study. By allowing our students to understand the reasoning, they are more likely to buy into the importance and be more motivated to complete the work assigned to them.

Another way to increase relevance is to tie material to current day references and examples. Even the material that may seem outdated to students needs to have connections. By having connections, students are more motivated and willing to put forth the effort in their work when they know how it ties into their current life. Connections are important for all people, but

especially for our students who are having difficulty understanding the material or the relevance of it. "Interest is a powerful motivator, children entertain themselves with activities that interest them…" (Deci, 1992, p. 43).   If we are interested in something, we are motivated to complete the task quicker and without stopping or becoming distracted.

How I Make Studies Relevant

My favorite unit to teach is the novel *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. It is my favorite unit to teach and it seems to be my students' favorite as well. I believe students can sense our own motivation within the content we teach and it affects them. I don't think it necessarily is the students' favorite unit because they love the book, as much as it is about the connections we make as a class to the themes in the novel within current society. Within the unit we focus on seven different themes, including: censorship, media addiction, commercialism, activism, education reform, positives and negatives of technology, and empathy. While reading the novel I intermix video clips, news articles, and various other sources in order to tie Bradbury's work of fiction into our reality. One of my students' favorite aspects of the unit is *Friday News Discussions* (see handout included in Appendix A). The weekly discussions require students to find recent and relevant news articles surrounding one of the seven themes. They look through the newspaper and once they find an article they are interested in, they write a summary. The summaries are shared with their peers and each develop three discussion questions to start a dialogue about their article. Once they arrive to class on their assigned Friday they are the facilitators of the conversation that particular period. We sit in a circle on the floor and one student gets us started by sharing their article and then asking questions. The student in charge then uses a stuffed gator to help the flow of conversation by passing it around. Similar to the

conch shell in *Lord of the Flies*, the person holding the gator is the one who gets to speak. During this time I am right there with the students as another participant. When I want to share my point of view, I raise my hand like one of the students and wait until I have the gator to speak. It is a conscious decision to show my students that I am learning as well, which seems to make an impact on them. We are equals and are working on a common goal which changes the dynamics of the classroom. During the discussions, our classroom community becomes a democracy, where we discuss and if necessary, solve problems, and hold one another accountable. Our classroom thrives when we have this type of interaction.

The focus on the seven themes is carried throughout the course of the book and ends with a research project. The project focuses on creating an annotated bibliography and a scenario writing piece based on a question they come up with regarding one of the themes. For example, a student may choose to ask the question "what would happen if schooling was no longer mandatory?" They would then research the issues surrounding their question and afterwards create a realistic fiction piece where school was no longer mandatory using the research to guide their story. This research project is one students struggle with at the beginning, but often times, produce their best writing from it. Their success with this type of writing stems from making it relevant for the students. Rather than writing a traditional research paper, they use the narrative writing skills they have gained from the first quarter and instead tell a story. The connection between prior and new knowledge, paired with relevance and choice, increases student motivation.

Writing Workshops

I wanted to find another way for my students to practice writing, while making both the process and the outcome relevant. One of the greatest take aways from my research has been relevance as a tool to help students become more motivated in their writing. In order to make the writing relevant, I began piloting writing workshops within my differentiated courses.   I became interested in the idea after reading the book titled, *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide* by Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi. Previously, most Wednesdays in differentiated English 10 were reserved for a mini-lesson over anything we needed to cover at the beginning of the period and then for the remainder of the class, students *choice read* to allow for sustained silent reading during the school week. I made this a focus during first and third quarter, but often times discontinued this time during second and fourth quarter due to a lack of time. It had always troubled me that I didn't also use Wednesdays during second and fourth quarters as a time to focus on writing but with the implementation of the pilot, I was able to focus on both reading and writing during all four quarters.

By utilizing the writing workshop, both reading and writing are addressed throughout the school year, as expected, yet go beyond the requirements of the curriculum. Since rigor is an important part of the differentiated course, I wanted to push my students further than the bare minimum, further than state or district requirements. Teachers currently feel the need to teach certain types of writing in a particular type of way due to the pressures we face with standardized testing. "Across a range of state testing programs, large percentages of teachers report considerable attention and time given over to material covered by a high-stakes test at the expense of non-tested content and skills" (Madaus & Russell, 2010/2011). Although we have

many lesson plans in both our mental and physical filing cabinets, we often fear digging much

further than what will be on the standardized tests due to the time constraints with all of the

preparations needed for the students in order to do well on those exams. According to Fletcher

and Portalupi, "students will perform fine on standardized tests so long as you provide them with

regular opportunities for writing in the workshop" (2001). The reasoning behind it is that the

students are still practicing and developing the skills related to writing that will be required of

them on a test, just simply with more choice.   "Students who write regularly learn about their

own writing processes. They know whether it takes them longer to generate ideas or to refine

those thoughts once on the paper. Because they have regular experience with editing, they know

how long that process usually takes them...they can call on this 'internal reader' during the

testing situation" (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Fletcher and Portalupi represent the overlap

between test environments and workshop in the following diagram:

Figure 1: Overlap between workshop and testing
(Adapted from Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001, p. 110)

Writing Workshop	Both	Writing Test
- Choice of topic - Untimed - No length requirement - Encouraged to use resource materials - Confer with peers or teacher	- Generate ideas on a topic - Work through cycle of craft - Use supporting details - Stay focused on the topic - Reread for meaning - Anticipate reader's questions - Proofread for errors - Confer with themselves	- Assigned prompt - Timed - Particular length requirement - Cannot use any resource materials - No talking or input from teacher

By focusing on the above skills during the writing workshop we set our students up for success, not only for testing, but also for writing in general. It is this success that will help make students less reluctant as they become more confident in their writing abilities.

Layout. The layout for my writing workshops were taken from the ideas of Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi. My students, like many others, were reluctant to write for several reasons. They become overwhelmed by the skills needed to be learned through their writing and then also the grade that comes from the final product. The beauty of writing workshops is that they create "an environment where students can acquire these skills, along with fluency, confidence, and desire to see themselves as writers" (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). This is one of my goals as an educator. I not only want my students to be motivated and successful, but I also want them to enjoy writing. I can achieve student motivation and enjoyment by giving the students choices and the time to write whatever they feel is important; rather than always writing a particular type of essay because it is required by state standards.

I previously completed a unit on creativity with my differentiated students and learned they felt as though school had *sucked the creativity out of them* because of the sameness from one class to another. In most classes the teacher is in the front of the room and feeds students the necessary information. By listening to my students, I could tell this type of learning and teaching was something many would like to see changed. The lack of creativity was another reason I felt writing workshops would benefit my students. I wanted to do something untraditional that would allow for them to delve into their creative being and become one with their writing. This is a change from the traditional teaching as Fletcher and Portalupi discuss in their book, "it does require a significant teaching shift. The writing workshop does not place the teacher under the

bright lights on center stage. Rather, the teacher sets up the structure, allows students plenty of choice, and gets them writing . You work off the energy students create" (2001). It is beneficial for my students to see me as a facilitator by allowing them to take the lead in their learning. This is something that is going to take time to perfect. My students have been in a traditional school environment for over ten years and although some may be excited to try something new, there are just as many who will resist any kind of change. With workshops only being once a week, I could work the time into the curriculum in order to benefit all my different types of learners, without completely disrupting the students who prefer school as it is currently structured.

A couple of years ago I took part in the Nebraska Writer's Project Summer Institute (NeWP) where we were in small writing groups throughout the course of the program. Working with the same group of people allowed me a sense of comfort. As I was able to get to know those in my small group better, I was able to feel more comfortable sharing my work with them; and they felt more comfortable giving me the feedback I needed on my writing. This aspect is something I hoped would happen within my students' small groups as well. Often times "adolescents' perceptions of their relationships with peers play a fairly unique role in motivating them to help and cooperate with each other" (Wentzel, 1998) and by using small groups, we better their relationships with their peers in order to decrease their reluctance to writing.

In order to place the students in groups, I had them fill out slips of paper telling me three to four people they would enjoy working with and any fellow students they would not like to work with for whatever the reason may be. Once I had their lists, I compiled them and created writing groups for the students which they would remain in for the duration of the quarter. I choose to do the groupings this way in order for the groups to be more productive. Sometimes

when students select their groupings, work doesn't get accomplished; and although it is fun to

work with our friends, sometimes it isn't the most beneficial. Fortunately, my students were

open to the idea of working with new people which made the task of arranging groups much

simpler.

Framework. As previously stated, the implementation of writing groups in my

classroom looked similar to those discussed by Fletcher and Portalupi. I first set them up as

discussed in their book in order to set the framework; especially as this was something new for

me to try in the classroom. As I become more comfortable with this type of teaching; if need be,

I will tweak the structure in ways that may be more beneficial to my students. To begin, the

chart below represents the amount of class time for each area of focus during the writing

workshops:

Figure 2: Writing workshop time allotment
(Adapted from Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001, p. 10)

Amount of Time:	5-10 Minutes	30-35 Minutes	10 Minutes
Activity:	Mini-lesson	Writing Time	Share Out

As shown in figure 2, the majority of the time on Wednesdays was spent writing. The

topics and styles of writing were completely open to the students. My only two expectations

were that all students must be writing and that no one could work on other writing assignments

for our class. I hoped that by allowing plenty of time for students to write in class, they would

find the task less daunting and overwhelming, especially for those students who were more

reluctant to write. Relevance and choice motivate students so this was the perfect opportunity to

allow for both of these aspects in the classroom.

To understand the expectations and procedures for the workshops I used the first Wednesday to go over a handout I created (see handout included in Appendix B) and addressed any questions that students may have had regarding the procedures for their small group meetings. On the first day we also spent some time socializing within their small groups in order to get to know one another better so the students would feel more comfortable sharing their writing with one another. After that, students participated in a condensed 20 minute writing workshop that ran the same as it would any other Wednesday.

Feedback. Feedback on students' writing during the writers workshop came in different forms. Rather than the main focus being around what the student did poorly on and what it is that they need to do to do better, I really wanted the students to receive praise. One thing I wanted to avoid was a student's creativity being squashed by negative feedback. The feedback the students received during this time was not to prevent students from being creative, but instead, help the students express their thoughts in ways that may be more effective (Bruning et al., 2004).   Although improving my students writing is important to me as their English teacher, I wanted this experience to be something that would turn their reluctance to write into, ideally, a love of writing. More realistically though, I aimed to increase their motivation when it comes to writing. When sharing, Fletcher and Portalupi suggest that the small group members respond to questions such as what they learned from the writing, what the writer did well, and any other questions that they may have (2001). By having our share time as a positive space, we are allowing our students a comfortable place to express their thoughts and increase confidence in their writing. Even if the writing was not exemplary, because more than likely it would not be in

the short time allotted for writing, their peers can tell them specific aspects of the writing that

they did well. They will in turn become more confident and less reluctant to write.

      Assessment. One important aspect that I wanted to address regarding writing workshops

is assessment. Although I would be doing some assessment of the pilot, I did not assess every

piece of writing that my students created. Like Fletcher and Portalupi, I "don't believe in

grading everything that students write" (2001). This sentiment is true especially within the

writing workshops. For my students to develop as writers, this experience should "encourage

them to try new genres and experiment with different literary techniques" (Fletcher & Portalupi,

2001). Often times, if a grade is assigned to all pieces of writing that the students produce they

will be less likely to try new things for fear of receiving a low grade and that was not my goal

during this pilot. I wanted the process to be more focused on experimenting with words and

playing with the ideas students have with writing. I didn't want my students to dwell on a grade,

especially since often times less attention is focused on the feedback when a grade is tied to the

writing. I wanted students to find their motivation to write intrinsically rather than have an

extrinsic grading scale be their motivator. I was also excited for the opportunity to have my

students start to evaluate their own work and the work of their peers, while "putting a grade on

top of a paper often erases the student's' own evaluation of the work. As teachers, we should not

be the only voice when it comes to assessing the quality of a piece of writing. We want students

to evaluate their work as well" (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). That said, at the end of the pilot,

which was also the end of the quarter, students selected their best piece of writing to submit for

grading. Although I wanted to make the students learn to do some self-assessing it doesn't mean

that I, or any other teacher, completely step away from being an evaluator (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001).

Although students received a grade for their piece, the grading was based more on the writing process rather than the final product, as it better matched my objectives for this pilot. The objectives also allowed for students to feel confident in the grade they earned while still experimenting throughout the writing workshops because they were able to choose a piece that represented their best writing. Students must be able to "...still take plenty of risks and not be penalized for the falls" (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Only then would those reluctant writers who fear failure become more motivated to practice their writing.

Piloting the Workshops

The first week I introduced the workshops I went over the expectations and procedures for our time on Wednesdays and to say I was met with reluctance is an understatement. I was still met with the eye rolls and the occasional groans, especially when I mentioned that the students would be spending around 30 minutes of the class period solely devoted to writing.

During the class period I introduced the concept of workshops we also ran a shortened version, as previously mentioned. This was done for a couple of reasons: one, I wanted the students to be able to get into their small writing groups so that they could begin to get to know one another better. To help students facilitate the conversation, I asked each group member to write down one question for all students to answer within their group. This activity was especially beneficial for the small groups that were not all familiar with one another. I felt it was extremely important so that once we really got into the writing, the students would be comfortable to write about anything they wanted and feel safe enough to share some of their

more personal pieces with their peers. The other reason I felt it was important to do a trial run of the workshop was so that I could make sure the format for the pilot was set up in a way that was most beneficial for the students. If it wasn't, I could then use the following days to revamp and tweak the layout before we met again in our writing groups the following Wednesday, although this was not necessary. The following weeks of our workshop went as planned. The mini-lessons were great for discussing proper ways to give feedback, how to correctly add dialogue, brainstorming, and any other needed instruction. During the pilot, I also used the mini-lesson time to share various works to help inspire and motivate the class to begin writing. The first couple of weeks I chose to share some of my own writings and by doing this it showed my students that it is alright to be vulnerable, but also that I am still improving and flawed as a writer as well. During the time allotted for writing, I also wrote with the students in order to model the behavior. I felt this was important, especially for my more reluctant students.   Those who were reluctant wouldn't have simply taken the instruction to write, but when they saw me doing it as well it seemed to reinforce the importance of the task. I also wanted to make sure I had my own piece of writing to share with the various small groups that I joined during the sharing portion of the workshop. By sharing my writing, I was seen as an equal in their group rather than the teacher or evaluator.

Reflection

I hoped the time used for writer's workshop would be beneficial to both me and my students, but even after the first session, I felt as though it was more successful than my early expectations. When beginning this project I said my students were reluctant to write, and although the piloting of my writing workshop is still in its infancy stage, there has been a change

in my students. I am not proclaiming that I have turned my most reluctant of students into lovers of writing, but I have seen less resistance from them when it comes to writing; particularly when it comes to writing in our Wednesday workshops.

One of my greatest surprises during the workshops has been both the amount of writing that my students have been able to complete in the short amount of time given, as well as the quality of writing. Although several students loudly expressed their distaste for writing before beginning, there was a change in them as the writing time started. I rarely had to tell a student to get to work or to keep going during our 30 minutes. All students simply wrote. Of course there were the occasional hand and brain breaks that I told them to take if necessary, but during the workshops, the room remains silent except for the sound of pens gliding along lined paper.

I made sure to visit with different groups weekly so that I could give feedback to all of my students. At this point, I have visited with the majority of the groups and when asked how they felt about the process I had several students tell me that they enjoyed being able to write about anything they wanted. These students took anything that was on their mind and ran with it. Some students produced poems and short stories, while others simply put their thoughts on paper and I was completely happy with that. I was just excited to see them writing and watching some of the reluctance chip away as the time ticked on.

There were several students in my classes that struggled writing without a prompt so I simply wrote the beginnings of a story on the board, "it was a dark and stormy night…", and told them to continue it. In the early weeks I had a stack of prompts in the front of the room for those students that need a little guidance to get them going so that their writing time didn't turn into solely brainstorming, but as the quarter continued those students were able to come up with their

own prompt and simply write. Often times, a lot of my students started with a story one week then kept adding on to it and revising it the following weeks which has been exciting to see.

As previously mentioned, this pilot is still in its early stages, but I am extremely happy with the work done so far and I look forward to seeing where the implementation of writing workshops takes us over the course of the school year. I honestly look forward to Wednesday in my English 10 courses and I truly think my students do too.

Looking Forward

The pilot of the writing workshop has been a success in my classroom. I was especially pleased with the responses I have received from the students. I believe the main reason for the success that this pilot had was due to the framework provided by Fletcher and Portalupi. Our writing workshops were very well lined up with their proven model. If anything, I wish there could be more time in the curriculum to allow for longer periods of time for the workshops, but at this point, I don't see how that would be possible due to all of the required curriculum that needs to take place. I know that I am going to continue the workshops during the second semester and I intend on keeping with the framework that was used in the pilot. After listening to my students reflections of the workshops the one aspect that I will change for the following quarter will be to take a few minutes away from the mini-lesson and use those extra few minutes in the sharing space. Many students said that they wish they had more time to talk about each group member's pieces in order to give them better feedback. I am happy to move those few minutes, especially because peer feedback was such a struggle for my students at the beginning of the school year.

I had high expectations for this pilot as I began learning more about writing workshops, but I continue to be amazed at just how well my students rose to those expectations. Even my reluctant students have expressed their satisfaction for workshops, including Samantha, Ivan, Martin, and Jeffrey; my most reluctant of writers. Have they all turned into lovers of writing? No, but I have watched all four of them write for 30 minutes continuously and without hesitation. To me, that is success.

Appendix A
Friday News Discussions
(Period 4)

Every Friday during our unit on *Fahrenheit 451*, we will make extensions from the novel's themes to real-world contexts and how the concepts of the unit are playing out in society. To do so, we will be bringing in news articles that concern our themes in the unit:
- Censorship
- Media Addiction
- Commercialism
- Activism
- Positives and negatives of technology
- Empathy
- Ignorance
- Propaganda

What you need to do:
- Bring in a news article that you found either online, in a newspaper or a magazine dealing with the unit themes.
- Write a summary of the article that can be read aloud to the class to explain the article. You can include excerpts from the article in your summary.
- Include three discussion questions that you can ask of the class based on the article. It will be your job to lead the discussion over your article.

Expectations:
You will be expected to bring a news article, summary, and discussion questions for the Friday you are assigned to. If you are not ready the day you are assigned you will receive a "0" in the grade book; there will be no extensions. If you know you are going to be absent, you may switch with a peer in your class as long as you also notify me.

In addition to being graded on this news article assignment, you may want to use these articles as part of your research for your final creative research project for the unit.

Schedule:
11/6: (here is where I would have student names assigned to this particular date)
11/13: (here is where I would have student names assigned to this particular date)
11/20: (here is where I would have student names assigned to this particular date)
12/4: (here is where I would have student names assigned to this particular date)
12/11: (here is where I would have student names assigned to this particular date)

Appendix B

Writers Wednesday Workshop   **Turner 2015**
 I know that some of you become tense at the very thought of writing, but I hope this experience will change those feelings and maybe even give you the confidence to call yourself "a writer."

Our Wednesdays will be broken down as follows:

- **Mini-lesson** (5-10 minutes) – Often times you will be given some helpful tips to better your writing, but at other times, we may share a piece of writing to inspire you.
- **Writing Time** (30 minutes) – All of your writing will be done during class time…you heard me right, NO homework for this particular activity.
- **Share Out** (10 minutes) – This will be a time for you to share out the writing you have completed during the class period. Most Wednesdays this will be done in your small group, with the final read around as an entire class.

 As a small group member, you will be giving the person sharing any feedback that may be beneficial to the writer. Don't forget to give them praise too!

Guidelines and Expectations for Writing:
 On Wednesdays you will be able to write about anything you want. Yes, you read that correctly, anything you want. If you get stuck on topics to write about, here are some questions to get you going:

- What is your mood? Often times, our feelings/mood sway our writing. What is   making you feel that way?
- What are you interested in?
- What is currently on your mind? Are you struggling with anything, having to deal with anything?
- Is there something you have wanted to write about?
- If you are still having difficulty getting started, I have several books and handouts with writing prompts that may help you out.

The style of writing for each week is completely up to you! Whether it is a poem, short story, personal narrative, etc. it is up to you…all are acceptable! I do want to encourage you to try new things; you never know, you may find a new passion.

Every week you will be writing something new, but you are more than welcome to continue on a piece from a previous week if you feel you can continue to work on it.

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