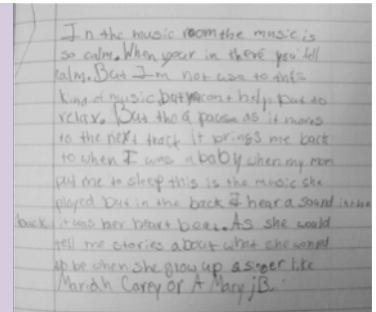


Literacy Leads

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A Reluctant Writer's Story



During the first 15 minutes of writing time, Desmond (not his real name) didn't write very much. He's a big, middle school boy who dragged his feet as he moved; he didn't appear to have much energy for this writing-marathon thing.

(We actually spent 3 hours with pen to paper in Writing Camp *on the first day* although not straight through mind you. We talked, moved to another place, shared, talked, moved some more, and snacked, of course. Before you knew it, time was up! The kids could not believe they wrote so long. For more about writing marathons, click on <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/315>)

When he shared I thought, "Okay. Good first try." Then the second 15 minutes of writing time started in the courtyard. He wrote about 5, standing, resting his daybook on the wall and leaning on it as well. As he moved into the room where we were going to share, I took him aside. "I noticed you didn't write very much. You probably wrote only about 5 minutes. You're really supposed to write the whole time. Did you have trouble?"

"I wrote more than that I think. I wrote a poem. The rest of the time I was thinking," he said.

"Well," I nodded. "Thinking time is good." His teacher had asked me to talk with him because she knew he didn't work very hard in school last year. She thought maybe he was also not taking camp seriously. I felt foolish after chatting with him but when I told her about our conversation, she said, "You have to keep an eye on him. He'll snow you." Knowing he was such a reluctant writer, I re-doubled my efforts to offer support.

When he did share, I made sure I copied a line of his into my daybook. He surely had written a poem – like he said. This line of his struck me: "Tomorrow will be unlike any other day." I told Desmond and his other writing-group listeners that we can write lines in our notebooks that move us in some way. I liked this line of Desmond's. I thought it sounded poetic. It might be something I'd like to give some more thought to and maybe write about myself. "You wrote a golden line," I explained as I recorded it in my daybook.

We moved to the music room. Classical music played and the effect was calming. Desmond wrote the entire time. I believe he wrote differently after the golden-line experience. He wrote with purpose, with something to say, thinking about lines he could birth that others just might copy into their daybooks. And when he shared, we found out just what it was he wrote...

(Sic) In the music room, the music is so calm. When your in there you fell calm. But Im not used to this kind of music, but you can't help but to relax. But tho a pause as it moves to the next track it brings me back to when I was a baby when my mom put me to sleep this is the music she played but in the back I hear a sound in the back it was her heart beat. As she would tell me stories about what she wanted to be when she grow up a singer like Mariah Carey or A Mary jB.

When he finished reading, the whole writing group sighed. Sighed! Then, there was silence. I waited a minute and said, "Desmond. What would happen if you read that to your mom?"

"I think she'd like it," is all he said.

When I checked the pile of daybooks left in school at the end of the day, his was not in the stack. Desmond took his writing home.

My Reflection:

1. The best way to engage students is to find what they do that is worthy of an authentic compliment. Compliments cannot be phony. With older children, compliments go a long way when given individually or in small groups.
2. This writer would not have expressed himself in this way if we had given him a prompt. When writers write from the heart about topics they know, we can start instruction. An authentic writer can become a prompt writer. A prompt writer can't become an authentic writer unless he was one to begin with.
3. Sharing, choosing, and moving to different environments spurred writing.
4. Writers need think time. We cannot rush the process.
5. Even though Desmond was supposed to be freewriting, he made the writing task his own. Freewriting means don't lift your pencil for the full 15 minutes, but he didn't do that. I differentiate better if I ask, did that work for you? What worked better today? What could even work better next time?
6. Writing Marathons are a joy. Try one! Read <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/315> to find out more or email me.
7. How can I involve Desmond in sharing what he learned about writing with others?

Epilogue: I asked Desmond the next day if he shared his writing with his mom. He told me he had. What did she say? "Write more like that, Desmond. Write more like that."

