

WRITENOW: THE POWER OF PRINT

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Writing and learning interlock . . . when teachers ask students to write in order to create, contemplate, and act.
—Toby Fulwiller

When we began contemplating *WriteNow*, we did not do so in response to Fulwiller's thoughts nor did we envision the impact our small publication would have on writing across the curriculum.

WriteNow began several years ago around the lunch table in the English office. Between bites of our salads and sandwiches, we discussed how we could support the Colorado Department of Education's project "The Week That Colorado Writes," a celebration of student writing throughout our state. Recalling a college magazine an ex-student had shown her, one teacher proposed we publish writing produced in response to class assignments. Her idea caught hold. The journalism teacher suggested the format, an eight-page mini-magazine. The College Prep teacher remembered essays her students had written about banned books. Another teacher protested, fearing that only the best writers would be printed. From this dialogue emerged a far-reaching decision: our publication would be one for all students, from the gifted to the struggling. We scrambled to find our student authors.

At first students were reticent to submit their work. Certain that class assignments were worthy only of their teacher's eyes, they doubted a larger audience did indeed exist. With some cajoling, students already confident in their writing abilities slipped their work into the submissions box in the English office. Finally after much prodding, even students in the basic writing classes submitted an assignment or two.

After school one afternoon several of us reviewed the submissions. We wanted teachers rather than students to select the pieces for two specific reasons. The time was short. It was September, and "The Week That Colorado Writes" was in October.

Also we did not want popularity and peer pressure to enter into the selection. As soon as we were certain of the pieces to be published, we contacted a student artist to produce some simple drawings. After typesetting and layout were completed, our journalism teacher delivered the copy to the school's vocational print class, and soon we had enough copies for our student body and for the Colorado Department of Education.

When the publication hit the halls of our school, we knew *WriteNow* was a success. Students fell silent as they read what their peers had written and what we had chosen as exemplary. To their surprise, many students recognized the names of our school's sports stars next to thoughtful and well-crafted essays. Names of students nearly invisible in the classroom appeared to the side of poems and short stories. One such boy, Jeff Terry, gained fame for his poem "Pencil."

This long,
slender, wooden object
Innocent in shape and form
but
dangerous and deadly
when held in
a hand
can grind into
a mind
and completely destroy a
relationship.
can break a heart
or
be part of
a suicide. . .

The weeks following that issue, students ventured into the English office, asking if we would consider publishing a well-thumbed assignment. Basic skills students shyly began asking how they too could become published. Graves and Tchudi were right. Publication motivated our students. We knew we had to produce more *WriteNows*—and three more followed that year.

The next year *WriteNow* grew. Believing in Fulwiller's interlocking power of writing and learning, we encouraged teachers from other disciplines to submit their students' work. In the first

issue of that second year, we published poems from science classes and essays from social studies assignments beside work from English. Work from math, home ec, Spanish, and physical education drifted in, including this excerpt by Dawn Dieleman for a social studies assignment:

The older woman sat back in her chair and sighed. Her face was lined with wrinkles around her eyes and mouth that added to her youth not her age. Her face was delicate and when she smiled, her features blossomed into a dancing, shining kind of beauty.

Today when she sat down she slumped into her chair, her face haggard and drawn. Her granddaughter had unnerved her and for some reason she could not brush it off. Her thoughts ran back to just two hours before when her granddaughter had come into the room.

"Grandma, what if you could go back in time and change your life?" she asked. "What would you change?"

Because *WriteNow* was now interdisciplinary, we were forced to examine our selection process. Were English teachers the only viable judges of good writing? Knowing better, we approached three teachers from other departments: art, business, and social studies. This change in the selection committee created several surprising side effects. Prior to serving on this committee, the art teacher had felt that the goal of writing across the curriculum was for all teachers to police spelling and mechanics. Her perceptions changed. Fighting the impulse to edit submissions, she began to appreciate the creativity of students, recognizing writing's power to unlock the imagination. The business teacher, once unsure of the use of creative writing in her classes, started asking her students to compose poems and dialogues about problems in the business world. The social studies teacher began reminding her department that students need to write more than just one period daily if we want them to be thinkers. These teachers now advocate the importance of students' writing "in order to create, contemplate, and act."

Another small change reflects our commitment to writing in all disciplines. Originally the byline, set off to the left of the article, contained only the title of the article and the writer's name. Now the byline also includes the course title and the teacher's name. This additional publicity attracts attention. As one science teacher

points out, *WriteNow* is a gathering place for ideas. But, moreover, *WriteNow* proves to her, once a skeptic, that writing is a part of all disciplines.

Even with these changes, *WriteNow* continues to mirror our student body. Jeff Miers reminds us in his published piece:

Society seems to put people into classes such as dumb and smart. . . . These social and emotional discriminatory acts need to be coped with and eliminated.

To avoid this subtle type of discrimination, we have continued to publish students of all ability levels. As a result, the crisp details in this paragraph by Manuel Gallegos, a student in basic writing class, suggest the potential power of all writers:

As I made the long trip by bicycle over Raton Pass, I could feel a storm developing. I saw lightning shoot across the sky, along with the crackling sound of thunder.

On the page next to this paragraph is a thoughtful and provocative essay written by Kimberly Brown, an honor student, for a physics assignment:

The suggestion of numbers seems to escape the grasp of many people. We hear about the rise of the federal deficit and read about cases of poisoned painkillers, but how many of us really understand the numbers involved? The blame may be placed on innumeracy: the inability to comprehend very large and very small numbers.

WriteNow continues to provide a forum for all classroom writing, from a well-crafted answer on a business test to the more playful writing assignment, such as Larry Robinson's limerick written for a chemistry assignment:

It's good that Medeleylev was able
To design the Periodic Table.
How could we live
Without the info it gives?
We couldn't read the pill box label.

The following sniglets by Kim Sullivan, a creative writing student, capture the humor of Christmas:

Needlebot: the pine needles always on the floor, no matter how many times one vacuums.

Tailtrailing: the almost visible line of broken decorations and snapped branches from the height of and below the dog's tail.

We've recently begun to capitalize on one other strength of *WriteNow*: its power as a public relations agent. With the media's focus on the problems of education, *WriteNow* demonstrates that not everything in our schools is wrong. To show that our students do indeed produce quality work, we mail copies home to parents and drop off issues in local businesses, including a doctor's waiting room and the lounge of a nearby repair shop. At the end of this year, we will honor one published writer at the annual awards night. Standing next to the top athlete and most dedicated track star will be *WriteNow*'s Writer of the Year. Since these awards are reported in a local newspaper, writers will share the limelight with athletes.

True, putting together a publication like *WriteNow* takes time—about twenty hours spread over three weeks. But as Thomas Wolfe reminds us: “. . . I learned another lesson which every young writer has got to learn. And that lesson is the naked, blazing power of print” (quoted in Kirby and Linear). Each issue of *WriteNow* again confirms the widespread effects of that “naked, blazing power.”

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