

New Jersey English Journal

Volume 9 *What's Next? Embarking Upon a New Decade of English Language Arts*

Article 7

2020

The Gift of Choice

Maria Geiger

The University of the Arts

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal>



Part of the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Geiger, Maria (2020) "The Gift of Choice," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 9 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol9/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Jersey English Journal by an authorized editor of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.

The Gift of Choice

MARIA GEIGER

The University of the Arts

Flash-drive loaded with a PowerPoint of Victorian Christmas images, check. Photocopied handouts of O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* short story, check. My own joyful enthusiasm to share a poignant story by one of my favorite authors, check. Fortunately for both me and my students, I had an epiphany before those teaching props left my tote bag. Walking into class on that fall day, I had every confidence that my grand O. Henry writing lesson would make the board and inspire students to write similarly styled essays. Instead, I learned that sometimes, the most meaningful learning occurs while writing about changing the oil in the family car.

In 2012, I was hired to teach developmental first-year composition at the satellite campus of the local community college. Aside from rather broad experience as a K-12 substitute teacher for the prior ten years, I had little experience teaching writing. To add to the challenge, I was replacing another instructor a full month into the fall semester. I never learned why the original instructor suddenly departed, but they left a parting gift in the form of lesson plans that had obviously been typed on a typewriter in my faculty mailbox. After reading a few of the yellowed assignments, I accepted that I was on my own. From the roster, I discovered that two-thirds of the class was male, and that more than a few of them were repeating first-year writing. To present a fuller picture of my first day, I will share that the "classroom" was actually a trailer that was detached from the main building. The main building was about half the size of my local elementary school and surrounded by dilapidated vacant former

military buildings. In other words, it was not the quintessential fall college campus scenario that usually comes to mind.

To be honest, I definitely didn't make a strong impression at the start. Being inexperienced was nerve wracking enough, but there was also the added mystery of stepping in for an instructor who suddenly exited. During the first few classes, I remember nervously scanning the room for friendly faces. That was when I noticed Kevin, a burly young guy with a shock of red hair and a winning smile. He sat in his own row, midway between the few students in the front who *seemed* eager to engage (but had yet to utter a word after even a few class meetings) and the majority who filled the last few rows. With his frequent turning towards the back of the room chatter, there was no denying that Kevin was drawn to where the "repeat" gang sat. That middle row was like a divide in the classroom; I instinctively knew that I needed to venture past it in order to gain credibility. Armed with my props on the *Gift of the Magi* day, I found the nerve to do just that. With a few examples of exemplary writing selected from a story I was comfortable talking about, I felt confident that O. Henry would help me engage the class.

With about five minutes before the official start of class and most of the gang already there, I thought I would begin with some casual conversation. So far, I felt as though I was not connecting with the class, and I could no longer blame the prior instructor's disruptive exit on that reality. As I ventured midway through the room, I overheard the guys in the back animatedly talking about what they heard on the police

scanner the prior night. Did I hear the phrase “jaws of life” spoken with unbounded enthusiasm? Hearing such passionate discussion about local emergency radio calls gave me a wake-up call of my own. Suddenly, the static Victorian images of O. Henry’s Jim and Della, in their Victorian holiday finery, seemed unrelatable. I hastily began organizing some books on the windowsill so that I could listen and learn about what made these students so enthusiastic. That was when I called an audible and decided to proceed right to an impromptu process essay, student’s choice of subject matter.

Kevin chose to write about learning to change the oil on the family car with his dad, who died in a motorcycle accident when he was eleven years old. He shared that his dad would help friends fix their cars in the evening after long hours of working at an auto mechanic shop all day, invoking memories of his dad as a kind and generous guy. Inspired by relevant choice, there were other meaningful essays written by students from both the front and back of the class that fall; I fondly remember an essay about creating batik prints, another about weightlifting clean and jerk fixes, and yet another by an aspiring cosmetologist about how to create a “flawless face.” The writing process started on a positive note because students were encouraged to draw upon their interests and hobbies for topic choices. They were invested, and suddenly, the classroom became a melting pot of artists, chefs, mechanics, and civic-minded doers.

Through subsequent discussions and writings, we learned that Kevin’s goal was

to be a police officer. He made no bones about the fact that he was there for the required 60 credit associate’s degree, no more. Before teaching this class, such knowledge would have been at odds with my thinking about higher education. I now think differently—as first-year writing instructors, our job is to prepare students for the transition from high school to their real world writing needs, no matter what they might be. Once offered choice of subject matter, student engagement immediately increased and grew throughout the rest of the semester. Most students felt a sense of personal ownership about their writing, demonstrated by their willingness to engage in the writing process. In end-of-semester feedback about what students most enjoyed about the class, the opportunity to choose their own topics was tops. Many shared that they previously felt as though they were “just giving teachers what they wanted” when writing in response to assigned essay topics. While driving down a local road a few years after teaching that inaugural class, I slowed down for a young patrolman directing a detour. In an instant, I recognized Kevin, who gave me that same winning smile and an appreciative salute—it was something to behold. While O. Henry’s beautiful story was never shared that fall, something just as meaningful as Della and Jim’s magical realization happened in our little trailer classroom. The importance of student ownership of their writing cannot be overemphasized, and it all begins with offering choices about what they write about.