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Teaching Writing: Fostering Joy in Writing Through "Commentarying"

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For the past 15 years, I have run an after-school education center specializing in reading and writing instruction for students of various age groups. Despite my role as an English writing teacher, I must confess that I secretly disliked teaching writing. My approach was often rigid, focused on perfection, and lacked the joy and creativity inherent in writing. This perspective shifted dramatically when I returned to graduate school. In a Rhetoric and Teaching course, I engaged in weekly commentary assignments on assigned readings. This process transformed my perception of writing and, consequently, the way I teach it. This transformation also positively affected my students' attitudes toward writing.

In my small private education center, serving about 60 students from kindergarten through 12th grade, I work as the education director overseeing three core subjects: sciences, math, and English. Additionally, I serve as a college consultant and teach standardized test preparation classes, including the SAT, LSAT, and MCAT verbal sections. Most of the students are of South or East Asian American descent and are enrolled in programs that are one to two grade levels higher than those offered at their schools. Admission to the program requires an online application, school report cards, and an interview process. Students are placed in appropriate classes based on these results. While most students are enrolled in enrichment classes, the English lessons focus on improving their reading and writing skills for their respective grade levels.

Teaching writing at my center came with its own set of challenges. As a writing teacher, I often felt unmotivated due to my

students' reactions and attitudes toward writing. I doubted their ability to produce quality writing. Regardless of gender or grade, they entered my class with the same dejected demeanor as Eeyore from *Winnie-the-Pooh*. The routine was predictable: hesitant entries, monotone queries about writing tasks, and collective sighs upon hearing the day's ELA assignment.

Most of my students are second-generation Asian Americans. Their immigrant parents, facing English language barriers, particularly in legal or official matters, enroll them in my education center, valuing reading and writing as a crucial skill in the U.S. While these students excel academically in their predominantly White schools in Long Island and are fluent English speakers, they prioritize math and sciences over literature. Their academic reports often show high grades, but they falter in English, with feedback highlighting "missing essay homework" or a "weak thesis."

As their private ELA teacher, I aimed to boost students' school grades by teaching them the dreaded "five-paragraph" essay. This rigid format, drilled into students' minds from elementary school and emphasized in standardized exams, insists on clear writing with an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion—because apparently, that's the only way to write academically. As a result, I felt obligated to follow what's being taught in most public schools, and since that's also how I was educated, I ended up emphasizing academic over creative writing, echoing Moffett's concern about prioritizing exposition writing from prescribed topics

(Moffett 1988). In class, I highlighted every grammatical error, expressing my frustration with remarks like, “Didn’t I explain this before?” My meticulous feedback, laden with Google Docs comments, dampened their writing enthusiasm. This rigorous focus on perfection hindered their expression (Flower and Hayes 1981) and inadvertently fostered a dislike for ELA and writing.

My Changed Perception of Writing

My perspective on writing and teaching transformed during my graduate Rhetoric and Teaching course. Initially, I expected our weekly commentaries to be formal essays adhering to strict academic standards. However, our professor encouraged personal reflections and interpretations, promoting a more relaxed and engaging writing style. This approach contrasted sharply with my Applied Linguistics background, where using first-person pronouns in academic writing was discouraged.

My professor assigned weekly commentary writing tasks on Canvas. Each week, he would introduce the lesson with a brief explanation, such as: “This week, we’ll expand our examination of academic writing by reading articles that critique how it is taught and question its hegemony in college prep and first-year college writing courses. We’ll also read Moffett on the relationship between personal and academic writing and how writing is construed or misconstrued in school writing assignments.”

He would then outline the writing task: “Writing Assignment: Two Parts: 1. Post a commentary on the discussion forum for this week on one or more of the assigned (or recommended) articles and reply to or participate in an ongoing discussion. 2. Write and post a brief reflection on the two related questions or problems: ‘Why I Write and When I Want to Write.’”

I had never done assignments like this as a PhD student and never considered this

kind of writing to be academic, especially since we were using first-person pronouns. However, as educated adults, we provided supporting details and appropriate citations in our commentaries. We didn’t follow the strict five-paragraph essay format, but we successfully conveyed our opinions with intended meanings backed up by scholarly sources.

After completing our readings, we would individually post our honest reactions and opinions, responding to the writing prompts. Some students wrote extensively, while others wrote less, depending on how much they resonated with the readings. We openly posted constructive criticisms and critical questions under our classmates’ postings. What was wonderful about these commentary assignments was that the professor also completed the same writing assignments, posting his feedback and reactions to each student’s posts as if he were one of the students.

Although I am an ELA teacher, I was not used to sharing my writing with anyone, and the thought of posting my writing on Canvas for others to read was intimidating. Honestly, I think I was more worried about how my professor and peers would judge my writing. Because I spent hours thinking about how to compose my first commentary, I empathized with how my own students struggled with writing. However, after reading my professor’s encouraging comments, which showed genuine interest in what I wrote, I smiled; I felt like an elementary school child who received 100% on her test for the first time.

Through Canvas commentaries, the professor shared personal stories, fostering mutual understanding among us. I discovered that two classmates, like me, had experienced second language acquisition of English after immigrating as children. Our discussions also provided insights into their Arab cultural backgrounds. Such exchanges,

as Heath (2009) points out, promote intercultural learning from experiences outside the classroom, aligning with González et al.'s (2005) "funds of knowledge" concept. Recognizing that good writing isn't always formal, I quickly introduced commentary writing to my after-school education center students.

In my typical ELA writing class, there are a maximum of four students placed according to their reading levels that I personally determine based on my teaching experience. On the first day of the class, we choose our reading list together for the entire 15 weeks of the semester during which we meet once a week for 1.5 hours. During each 1.5-hour session, I introduce the literature that the students will be reading for that week and assign a thought-provoking essay question pertaining to the reading. The students are required to read the entire book over the week before the next lesson and submit the essay through Google Classroom. In the following week, I introduce a new book and go over each of the four students' essays by projecting the writing on the wall. We verbally edit the essay together focusing on grammatical aspects and encouraging students to suggest improvements to make the writing better. This system works because students learn to organize their thoughts better and write with correct grammar, but it doesn't bring the same joy I experienced in my graduate class with commentary writing.

In my traditional ELA classes, the focus was on perfecting the five-paragraph essay, which often stifled creativity and enthusiasm. After discovering the joy and

freedom of commentary writing, I decided to bring this approach to my students. The difference was immediate and profound. I started to post questions similar to those my professor posed on Canvas, and the result was a success. The students engaged more actively, shared their honest reactions and opinions, and felt more motivated to write. This approach fostered a more dynamic and interactive learning environment, making the writing process more enjoyable and encouraging for everyone involved.

If it were not for the commentary writing assignments, I would not fully understand what is on the minds of every student. Typically, the more vocal students dominate classroom discussions, often overshadowing others. However, the commentary writing assignments provide an opportunity for my quieter students to express their thoughts and opinions, often using textual references to support their ideas in a natural manner.

Here is a brief excerpt or a screenshot of how my all-male middle school students, in grades 7 and 8, responded to one of the weekly commentary assignments: "Read Act I of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare and feel free to write anything in the commentary section of the Google Classroom about the reading. Feel free to respond to one or more of your classmate's responses." This class happens to consist of students who are generally disengaged and express a strong dislike for reading. Therefore, I instructed them to write about whatever they wished after reading the first act and purposely did not assign any specific theme for discussion.



James (Pseudonym)

When I was reading Act I in the book, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I wondered why love played such a big role in the story. I am sure this will be further elaborated later in the book, but since I cannot read any further in the book, I decided to figure that out myself. I think that since the book has fairies in it, some of the characters in the book may have loved each other because of a spell or a form of magic. This is very possible because there is not much information on Oberon and Titania in the first act. They are the king and queen of the fairies and could be there for evil or be there for good. I also feel that if there is this much love between characters in the story, it will eventually have to do with the plot of the story and how it flows. For example, if Oberon and Titania are actually casting love spells on one of the characters and they somehow find out, they could have a battle with the fairies and possibly have somebody get hurt or even die. If this happens, the plot will be changed especially if the character is important. This is why love is currently playing a big role in the story.



Benjamin (Pseudonym)

@James

When you said that the king and queen of fairies were maybe casting love spells, that would consider them as evil. I think that there is no way of them to be good unless they helped them with a big disaster. I also agree with you that love is an important role in this story. In the beginning of the book, it started with marriage and how Hermia was in love. Maybe later in the book, love will become a huge part of it.



James (Pseudonym)

@Benjamin

When I read your commentary, I also felt that it was unfair that Hermia was forced to marry Demetrius. She should be an independent woman and be free in what she wants to do. It is unfair that the men in this story had more power and rights than women did. Since this is not based on a true story, I think that William Shakespeare purposely made the men have more power to show the reader that a world like this would not be fair and balanced.



Samuel (Pseudonym)

@James

When reading the second paragraph of your commentary, although confused at first, I believe you have read ahead to Act II but I still will comment on your commentary. I also agree with you how love does play a big part in the story and also believe this will be further elaborated in the story as there is still many pages left in the book. Although I also think it's possible for Oberon and Titania to love each other because they have fallen under a spell as this story is a fantasy and fiction, I personally do not think this is the case. In my opinion, as although it's possible for a reason to be revealed later in the story, I think that there's no actual particular reason on why they fell in love. I think it's because Shakespeare is not trying to bring the reason on why they fell in love into the spotlight, but rather the hardships, difficulties, and situations that will come along with them because they fell in love in the first place. But unfortunately, I disagree with the idea that there will be a battle between fairies and others because of them casting love spells, since this story seems to be more of a love story than an epic.

As I reviewed their commentaries the night before our session, I could not help but smile. The next day, the usually quiet students entered the classroom animatedly “disputing” what they thought would happen

in the next act of the play, playfully accusing one another of reading ahead. On that day, my classroom was transformed; it was dominated by the students themselves, who were actively discussing the

complicated theme of love, while I simply facilitated the discussion.

After experiencing the benefits of commentary assignments, I decided to implement this approach in all of my ELA classes at my education center. Writing commentaries and receiving feedback, along with open discussions among all students, including the teacher, brought joy and encouraged freer expression. This experience freed me from the constraints of writing perfectly formatted academic essays.

My Students' Changed Perceptions of Writing

Through Google Classroom, my students, aged nine to 16, engage in weekly commentaries on readings and discuss with classmates. With limited class sizes, I closely monitor their input for discussion topics. Relying on Lave and Wenger's (2020) situated learning theory, which emphasizes student collaboration and a centered learning environment, I anticipated richer conversations.

By examining these commentaries, I discerned their comprehension levels, eliminating the need for reading tests or in-class essays. The students collaboratively aided each other. After ten weeks of engaging in commentary writing, I sought feedback from my students. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive, revealing a dramatic shift in their attitudes toward writing. One student mentioned, "Ms. Kim, can we do commentarying this week?" Hence, "commentarying" became the term my students coined to describe the activity, and it quickly became a staple of our classroom vocabulary for the semester.

Having students write and review commentaries on readings has reshaped their views on writing and reading. Some mentioned that it made them "feel more at ease with writing" and clarified their thoughts. Reading peers' commentaries

enhanced their understanding of the material and broadened their perspectives.

Anticipating peers' responses, they felt encouraged to pose questions. One student likened waiting for commentary responses to awaiting postcards from friends, eager to read their reactions.

I was pleased to see how commentary writing prompted even my shyest students to join book discussions. I also understood why some were initially reluctant to participate. My 6th grader mentioned that posting commentaries reduced his fear of making mistakes in speech or writing. He noted: "Commentaries also help with seeing how we truly feel about the book without having to say anything that we feel what is 'supposed to be said.'"

I had not realized that my students thought there was only one correct answer to my writing questions, despite framing them as open-ended and seeking their opinions. Moreover, commentary writing made them feel more connected, leading to greater mutual respect and understanding.

Typically, one or two students dominate class discussions. It was challenging to engage quieter students without sidelining the active ones. However, commentary writing allowed all to share thoughts without monopolizing class time. One student commented: "[Commentaries] are extremely fun to do as I can socialize with people and give my opinions on their opinions ... it's fun to express ideas and questions you had about the book so other classmates can answer your questions and help you out."

Another student's response showed that replying to commentaries is not just fun to do; it makes the student feel important: "Having the ability to reply is the best part about the commentary because it would make me feel much more inclusive in the experience."

Some of my students have become more open-minded and expressive in both writing

and speaking. One female 8th grader wrote: “The commentaries opened up a small part of me to just write and stop worrying too much...the commentaries let me feel a bit looser and freer when writing.”

After seeing my students’ willingness to truly open up and share their thoughts, I decided to try something that would foster deeper conversations on literature. I wanted my students to use the commentary space to openly discuss topics related to politics, religion, or racism that they may not be allowed to talk about in their school classrooms. Before delving into these writing tasks, we engaged in open discussions on literary pieces they commented on, such as *Black Boy*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Stranger*. Inspired by Moffett’s (1989) inductive approach, I integrated students’ personal stories and peers’ experiences. The students’ commentary-based discussions on topics like racism, gender, and morality became more insightful and engaging. Often, the dialogue was so animated that I scarcely had a chance to chime in. Here is an example of how our discussion, which branched out from our commentary writing, tackled the topic of racism based on Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*.

Discussing Racism After Reading Wright’s Memoir

Inspired by the profound impact of commentary writing, I wanted my students to tackle more complex and sensitive issues. We chose *Black Boy* by Richard Wright to explore themes of racism and identity. During our discussion on *Black Boy*, my high-achieving middle schoolers tackled the sensitive topic of racism, typically avoided by my Asian American students (Lee and Dijkgraaf 2022). David (pseudonym) shared in his commentary that he related to Wright’s refusal to give a pre-determined graduation speech, recalling an incident at

his school. In the memoir, Wright’s principal cautioned against speaking freely in front of Whites (Wright 1966). David recounted a similar experience: his White teacher preferred a White student as the mock trial group’s speaker, implying Asians were too quiet for leadership roles.

When I heard about David’s experience, my eyes widened. I felt my blood pressure rise. Then, one of my students responded to David by saying, “Yeah, that’s why we should read more books to be knowledgeable of others so we can deal with racism wisely.” Hearing this student’s response made me feel ashamed because my response would only stir up more hatred toward that teacher. I was relieved to hear that student’s pensive comment. After that, another student said, “We still have racism going on because we stay passive not because we don’t understand others.” Another student asked, “So, how would you stop racism?” Then, the discussion about racism continued.

The students brought up what they knew about the Black Lives Matter movement, George Floyd, the Georgia shooting incident that killed eight people, six of whom were Asians, and anti-Asian attacks since the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the students expressed their opinions about how Asian people should not support the Black Lives Matter movement because many Asian people are attacked by Black people, while other students said we should support all kinds of movements that involve anti-racism. I wanted to make our discussions more directly related to the chapters in *Black Boy*, but I did not want to interrupt their conversation.

Listening to my students discuss racism, I conceptualized a brief writing task. I wanted them to articulate in writing the racial hierarchies depicted in *Black Boy* and examine how social media, news, and pop culture shape our views on different

cultures, ethnicities, and races. Furthermore, I inquired how such influences might impact our self-perception of racial/ethnic and cultural identity. I instructed them to initially share their thoughts via Google Classroom commentaries and then draft an outline addressing these racism-related topics.

In support of Moffett's (1988) transpersonal writing, I wanted to help my students learn to express ideas of "universal value in a personal voice" (170-171). I told them that, in addition to using the books, they could include their personal experiences or those of others to support their claims. My students were so surprised that I let them write their papers using first-person pronouns, and I was surprised to hear my students' voices in the hallway. I expected them to talk about video games, but they were still conversing about *Black Boy* and racism. Smiling, I called out to them in the hallway: "Don't forget to submit your essay outlines next week!"

Becoming a Writer

Through the process of writing commentary, my students found genuine joy in writing, which naturally boosted their confidence as writers. This transformation not only improved their writing skills but also created a more dynamic and collaborative classroom environment. "Commentarying" transformed many of my students' apprehensions about writing. They began to understand writing as a social, interactive practice. Through these exercises, they expanded their viewpoints and learned to articulate them, either collaboratively or independently. This process made them confident writers, shifting their view from dread to see it as a vital social activity. Heath (2009) posits that learning is rooted in socialization, while Nieto (2009) emphasizes the role of social context in education. Moffett (1987)

suggests that successful learning connects with the broader "social world," fostering diverse ideas and choices (97, 119).

I agree with Hairston's (1982) argument that both skilled and unskilled writers must discover how to write by developing their topics intuitively, not methodically. Commentary writing provides students with a partial notion of what they want to write about, and they develop more profound ideas by dialoguing with their peers. As Murray (1976) emphasizes, we should teach writing as a process because we are not teaching a product.

Commentary writing enhanced my teaching approach, focusing on constructive feedback rather than unproductive criticism. Through discussions on racism derived from their commentaries, my students demonstrated an understanding that literature conveys cultural norms and attitudes (Rosenblatt 2005). They now walk into class resembling *Winnie-the-Pooh's* Tigger, full of energy and enthusiasm. During these conversations, they respected their peers and engaged in collaborative learning, recognizing and appreciating their writing abilities. Now, anticipating my students' writing feels like awaiting postcards from friends.

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