

Keeping It Real: Valuing Authenticity in the Writing Classroom

In this article, the author proposes that authenticity requires actions related to four areas: authentic process, authentic genre, authentic audience, and authentic teachers and students.

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e all crave authenticity. Our metaphors reveal our desire for authenticity in our relationships with others: “Look behind the mask.”

“Get to the heart of the matter.” “Go beneath the surface.” Whether it’s in writing or simply in living, authenticity means not pretending. It means contending honestly.

Teachers of writing strive for authenticity. When we ask students to write, we want it to be for authentic purposes. When we engage students in writing processes, we want those to be authentic processes. When we ask students to compose a particular kind of text, we want those texts to be authentic genres reflecting authentic writing situations in which students might find themselves. When we develop audiences for our students, we want those to be authentic audiences, real readers who can provide authentic responses to the work. And in our relationships with students, too, we value authenticity: we want to be ourselves, and we want the students under our care to become their own best selves too.

The Challenge of Maintaining Authenticity in School

We draw too sharp a line between the world of school and the “real world.” School, the story goes, is where you prepare for what comes afterward; much of what happens in school, in turn, is “just practice.” But even if most of the activities kids are asked to do are oriented toward “preparing” for something outside, the world of school is actually

very real to kids. Students at least begin school with a sense that everything is real and worthwhile. They don’t ask, at first, whether the assignment is for a grade; they don’t roll their eyes if we ask them to make observations as scientists or craft masterpieces as artists. And then, a few years later, the spell is broken. Where does that sense of reality go? Too often school glosses over what is most real and immediate, such as students’ day-to-day experiences and concerns, their hopes and fears, their relationships with one another and with their families and communities, and the powerful relationships they have—or at least *can* have—with us. Instead, we focus on the writing skills in a disconnected way, having them write “for practice” about topics that are safe, easy, and distant.

Committing to Authenticity as Practice

Most of us know what writing feels like when it is really authentic—when it is useful, important, or necessary to get a job done. Do our students know this? Or do they just write because it’s an assignment, the same way they do practice problems on a worksheet? As teachers, we prize authentic writing opportunities for students, but what does that really look like in practice? How can we structure authentic experiences for student writers, that they might discover writing’s power for themselves in the here and now?

Brené Brown characterizes authenticity as “cultivating the courage to be imperfect” (50). Defined this way, being authentic means not only doing things that are real, and not only seeing what

is real in another person or situation, but also *revealing* what's real about yourself and what you are doing. That's difficult. And it has specific implications for teaching writing. Committing to authenticity in your classroom means committing to:

- Authentic genre
- Authentic process
- Authentic audience
- Authentic teachers and students

Each of these areas of authenticity helps us to better "keep it real," both with respect to writing and with respect to people.

Authentic Genre

Authenticity means having writers work on real tasks, not fake ones. Nell K. Duke et al. define "authentic literacy activities" as "those that replicate or reflect reading and writing activities that occur in the lives of people outside of a learning-to-read-and-write context and purpose" (346). Think of the many genres you know that, really, have no life outside the walls of schools: "five-paragraph essays," "book reports," "short answers," even "summaries" as freestanding texts. Many of these began in ways that are *related* to writing outside of school. But they grow apart from their origins, becoming "school genres," of a breed that lives nowhere outside captivity. Students can tell, and in turn they often divest themselves from writing.

How might we better enact a value of authenticity with respect to genre? The following are steps my teacher partners and I have taken:

- Use authentic language to describe genre. Students shouldn't be writing "papers." They should be writing travel essays, book reviews, advice columns. Study the layout of bookstores, magazines, and websites to see the nuances of genre. What different kinds of "articles" can students find in a single magazine?
- Encourage students to pay attention to the writing they see people doing outside of school. My students have done a "writing audit" in which they document every act of writing they see over the course of a few days, then combine their data as a whole class. Make time to talk about the purposes

people fulfill with writing. Show that you value their attention to writing in the world.

- Any time you ask students to write something, make sure you have examples from the world outside of school. Rule of thumb: If you can't find it, your students probably shouldn't be writing it. This includes published writing, but it's also helpful to have examples of the kinds of writing people do simply to maintain their lives: notes, lists, letters, etc.
- Make sure you define genres in authentic ways. As Katie Wood Ray describes in *Study Driven: A Framework for Planning Units of Study in the Writing Workshop*, study the examples you and students collect to determine what makes a review, a review. An essay, an essay. A blog, a blog. Be open to the idea that definitions of genre are always dynamic rather than static.
- But don't stop with the surface characteristics of a genre. Notice not only features of the text but also the conditions that led to the text: its purpose, audience, and context. Genres aren't fixed forms existing in the abstract; they are patterns of human *response* to recurring types of situations. Help students recognize similar situations in the future where that genre might be called for.
- When students ask "How long does it have to be?" or "Can I include a story in my feature article?" have them look to your real-world examples of the genre to answer these questions. This ensures the content of your teaching is authentically grounded, but it also teaches students how to answer questions like this independently.

Authentic Process

I think a brave commitment to authenticity is critically important if we are to help writers grow. As Brown says, "we are all made of strength and struggle." When we teach writing, at least if we're doing it right, we put students in situations in which they are sometimes strong but also sure to struggle. Do we acknowledge the struggle inherent in the process of writing? Do we exercise compassion in its presence? Do we reveal the ways we, too, are imperfect and how we, too, struggle? Authentic process is sometimes *difficult* process.

Writing, like the rest of real life, never goes according to plan. Plans change, and in fact they must change. In writing, the inability to change one's plans when called for is actually the definition of writer's block (Rose). Writers who stick to the plan no matter what are writers who are not responsive to the reality of what they are doing. Thus authentic process is also *flexible* process.

Do the students writing in our classes have flexibility in process—the flexibility of time, of form, and of content to follow a piece of writing

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where it leads in an authentic way? If their drafts take them somewhere deeper than they thought, do they have the space to follow the thread and see what they write, or does the assignment make a neat fence around their ideas, keeping their writing as tidy as a manicured lawn, but with wilds unexplored on the other side? And do they have compassionate support when things get difficult?

I want students to have experience in navigating the real challenges that come up in any act of writing. This means I have to let them in on what authentic process is like. The following are ways colleagues and I have shifted our teaching of process in a more authentic direction:

- For your own writing, keep a process log. For you and for your students, this can be a separate document on your computer, a private blog, pages in the back of your notebook, or sheets stapled inside a writing folder. Jot notes about what you did in a writing session, process goals, and points of struggle.
- Write along with your class—and when you do, sometimes do it on your word processing screen in front of students, “thinking aloud” as you decide what comes next, what to cross out, etc. This is modeling process, not just offering a model product.
- Have students set “process goals” (see Figure 1) as well as text-specific goals for the products they create. For example, one student challenged herself to write for longer sessions when writing at home—a goal she worked toward by setting a timer and not (a) getting up from her seat or (b) opening

FIGURE 1. Some Examples of Process Goals

Write more words per session.

Write in longer sessions.

Try three new prewriting strategies this month.

Try a new revision strategy.

Seek out two sources of feedback on this draft.

Use a scribe when brainstorming or stuck.

Edit *before* the due date this time.

Experiment with two different organizations for this essay.

Develop three different leads and seek feedback on what works.

Use supportive self-talk when drafting.

an Internet browser window until the timer went off.

- When conferring, any time you suggest a step they might take, you can also *name* the step and say when else it might be helpful. For example, if a writer has trouble getting started, you might help by scribing for him while he talks a bit about his idea, then hand him the paper and ask him to continue. But before moving on, say “that’s called ‘scribing.’ It’s helpful when you’re having trouble getting the very first words down. You can always ask a friend or parent to scribe for you to start off a piece.”
- Throughout the year, chart writing “process moves” that you and your students find helpful in the face of various problems. For example, a writer who is stuck on a short story might adopt another character’s perspective and see where that leads. A writer whose persuasive essay lacks energy might add specific images of what the desired outcome would look like. These “process moves” charts can stay on the walls all year—for students to refer to and internalize in the same way they would use other reference charts.
- After a writing session, if you have students share what they have written, you can also ask follow-up questions about process. “What was hard about writing this? How did you deal with that? Did any surprises happen while you were writing? How did you handle it?”
- Sometimes whole-class sessions can focus on a particular aspect of process. For example, perhaps everyone can find one example of

something they took out of a draft. As a class, list the different reasons people took things out. What can we notice about this list of reasons? The same thing can work with any aspect of process: a revision strategy, an instance of peer feedback, etc.

- When students publish or turn in finished pieces of writing, have them also submit written narratives about the process they used and what they learned from that. This can take the form of a letter to the teacher, a memo to members of a peer writing group, or even comments embedded in a Word document that form a meta-narrative about how the piece was composed.
- Keep those process narratives all year. Then, students can periodically revisit their narratives and highlight process moves. These can be listed on a whole-class chart, listing all the process moves that have come up over the year.

Authentic Audience

Audience is at the heart of a piece of writing. In a piece of writing, we don't just say something, we say it *to* someone. Teacher-writers know how important it is for writers to gain experience with different audiences for their writing: audiences with expectations, interpretations, interests, and questions; audiences who sometimes even reply to what has been written.

We've all heard the advice to have students write for authentic audiences. But the truth is that too many times, even when we try follow that advice, we accidentally end up just having students *pretend* to write for someone other than us. So our students write letters to the school board about lunch or the parking lot, but do we really deliver the letters? Is there a conversation with members of the board afterward? Or we tell students that the audience for their book review is "people who might want to read the book," but are these potential readers really around? And if they are, do they really read the writing at a moment when they are about to select some reading material (a time when the content of the review would be most salient)?

Finally, student writers don't just need *an* authentic audience, they need *a variety* of authentic audiences. For any one piece of writing, one

audience is enough—but to learn in a transferable, lasting way about how audience matters in writing, they need experiences doing things differently for different audiences. When I walk from a room of teachers into a room of second graders, I adjust my vocabulary and manner. When I walk from a room of colleagues I know well to a room of colleagues I am just meeting, I find I have to contextualize statements differently even if the content is similar. It's not just knowing about different audiences; it's the adjustment to new conditions that we're after.

Teachers who value authentic audience might try the following:

- Let some pieces of writing *begin* with an audience, letting content and genre follow from there. For example, invite students to write something for a family member that will tell that person something about what he or she means to the student. Genre and content will vary as much as do the living, breathing children and their families. Or have them write for a newly elected public official. What content do they have to offer that that reader needs to know? How best to shape a piece of writing given that reader and that content?
- You can occasionally have students develop two or more versions of pieces of writing, each directed to a different audience. This can work especially well when the writing is connected to other areas of study such as science or social studies: How does an informational piece about local economic issues change when the audience is a member of local government? A younger student?
- Designate small groups of peers as the audiences for one another's work multiple times over the year. After each piece of writing is completed, student reflections can include audience analyses for each member of the peer group. How did you respond to what you know about each of them as readers and people? How did this change over time?
- Make better use of the adults in students' lives as audiences for their writing. My colleague Virginia Squier invites community members to a "Writer's Tea" where they sit at tables with student writers, listen to students read personal essays, and have real discussions about the ideas therein using guiding questions she provides.

- Help students find—and understand—audiences online. *Who* can find this text online? *Why* and *how* have they come across it? Analytics can provide information on who is finding a class blog, video, or other digital text and how they find it (who has shared it or what search terms led to it, for example). All of this happens inside of ongoing discussions on what you are revealing when you write online, and what is best kept private for the sake of safety and simply of dignity.
- Think with students about the audience response they are after. With a tweet, perhaps the ultimate response is a retweet. With a letter to the editor, perhaps it's publication. With a humorous story, maybe it's a laugh. With a public service announcement, maybe it's a change in behavior. Have students follow their texts out to these effects, if any. Did the intended audience respond in the way they had hoped? Why or why not?

Authentic Teachers and Students

And finally, authenticity means sharing ourselves with students, being people and being writers (failable, imperfect people and writers) right out in front of the kids. It means not only doing work that is authentic but also finding ways to do the work together in which we can be ourselves.

Parker J. Palmer has written about the “divided life” we all live, beginning in childhood. It begins when we internalize the message that who

we are is just not going to be OK, and if we want to be liked or succeed, we’d better put on a different face. We learn to divide ourselves, “commuting daily between the public world of role and the hidden world of soul” (15). We learn to present only safe, public sides of ourselves and what we can do—and in a writing classroom, this leads to “safe” writing in which no risks are taken and, hopefully, no mistakes are made.

Trying to look smart, we block off what is actually most smart and interesting in ourselves. We try to make ourselves and our writing

look neat; we hide. The only antidote to this is brazen authenticity.

In a writing classroom, authenticity of teachers and students means showing students what our real, unfinished, in-process writing looks like, and it means engaging in real tasks and writing those for real readers. But it also means being real people while we do it. It means letting the students know you. No, they don’t need to know who you’re dating or about the health scare you’re having, if those things don’t feel ready for sharing. But I do mean your writing can’t all be about puppies, and you can’t be such a big and powerful and perfect adult that everything looks easy for you. You’re asking students to take risks. You can also risk them knowing you. So that means letting them know things about you, sure, but more importantly it means letting them know what you are *like* when you write. Excited. Nervous. Scared. Self-critical. Daydreamy. And when you encounter a student in struggle, you respond with a “me too.” Anne Lamott writes that these words “me too” are the holiest words in English. You say them and mean it. You struggle too: sometimes with writing, sometimes with life.

This means a classroom that is untidy. It means students not finishing, or finishing things that aren’t in the genre we had planned or as long as we had planned. It means starting over; it means sitting with a writer while she bravely tries to loosen her grip on the unusable words she has just written—words that were not easy to come by in the first place. It means tears when the writing goes somewhere difficult and unexpected. It means goofy writing and laughs, because young people are actually really goofy and laugh a lot. It means mistakes; it means frustration. It means being brave; it means taking chances. It means hugs. It means watching writers make wrong decisions and resisting the urge to tell them what better decisions would be at least some of the time so that they get a chance to feel what it feels like to discover something through a false start. It means living with things that are messy, messed up, and even not that good some of the time. It means sometimes not even responding to the writing, because the human being sitting next to you crying or taking a chance is more important at that moment.

At times when all this mess makes me feel like I’m doing it wrong—like when I’ve had to

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scrap an entire assignment because the earlier one took everyone longer to do, and one student has completely finished and moved on to something else while another has decided to turn in a song instead of an essay and is starting all over—I try to check myself and ask, did I want this to be perfect, or did I want it to be real? As Lamott tells us,

perfectionism means that you try desperately not to leave so much mess to clean up. But clutter and mess show us that life is being lived. Clutter is wonderfully fertile ground—you can still discover new treasures under all those piles, clean things up, edit things out, fix things, get a grip. Tidiness suggests that something is as good as it's going to get. Tidiness makes me think of held breath, of suspended animation, while writing needs to breathe and move. (28–29)

I want the life in my classroom to be *lived*. I want us to be a group of real people doing real

work. I pray that nothing we do in my classroom is “as good as it’s going to get.” Instead I want what we do with students to be just a beginning. To be provocation toward full engagement with themselves and their world. (E)

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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Teenagers are often outspoken and opinionated. Writing reviews of the literature they read gives them a chance to express their ideas while developing style and voice. This lesson uses discussion of student opinions about yesterday’s lunch or a popular TV show to serve as an introduction to the genre of reviews. Students then read and analyze conflicting reviews. After examining samples of movie, music, restaurant, and book reviews, students devise guidelines for writing interesting and informative reviews. They then produce their own reviews of the literature they’re reading in class. Finally, students compare their ideas and their pieces with published reviews of the same piece of literature. <http://bit.ly/1SOBMmM>