

Letters: In search of a voice

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ABSTRACT

What follows is a case study of a freshman at Millersville University who shall be referred to under the pseudonym "Root Beer," who is enrolled in her first semester in the Spring semester of the 2010-2011 academic year. This case study began with an inquiry-based approach which was applied by presenting the student with a survey of questions which would help to identify the student, her background, and the various characteristics of her writing. This inquiry-based approach was utilized throughout the case study to address the puzzles of practice that came up during the course of determining this student's needs as a writer. As the research process continued, the center of gravity for this student was identified as voice. Utilizing the knowledge gained about the writer, this researcher was able to provide materials that were selected based on the writer's profile as a unique individual, in order to provide a familiar foundation to the student writer Root Beer as she worked through the difficulty of expressing voice in her writing. This case study with Root Beer was completed over the course of five separate one-on-one meetings with the student outside of class, each of which was at least one hour in length, although at least one meeting with the student ran two hours in length. This case study also included five observations of Root Beer's English Composition class with Dr. Shea, conducted in Byerly Hall, Room 120, from 9 AM – 10:15 AM, Tuesdays and Thursdays. This case study will include a detailed explanation of the exercises employed to address the center of gravity issue of voice, the reasoning behind the selection of these exercises, an analysis the results, and how these results were employed in the selection of successive exercises. The potential implications and possible future applications of these exercises toward addressing this issue within a classroom of student writers in the future will also be expounded on in the final pages of this case study.

Keywords: Writer, Teacher, Voice, Vision, Writing-Process, Revision, Letters

1. Background: Researcher as Writer and Teacher

I have over five years of teaching as a high school English teacher, and several years of experience as a writer. I have had several poems published in school magazines and have written longer works over the years, so I would consider myself to be both an experienced practitioner and teacher of writing. The issue of voice is not one with which I have experienced much trouble, but as a teacher, I have found it to be one of the more difficult concepts to define and assess in fixed terms. The reason for this is the seemingly ambiguous nature of the concept of voice. One of the central puzzles of practice in this case study thus became one of defining voice; what it was, what elements it consisted of (for purposes of recognition), and how to bring those elements out in writing. Generally, assessment tools accomplish this task in a concise fashion, so I used a 6+1 Traits of Writing rubric from Education Northwest to get a good definition: "The unique perspective of the writer evident in the piece through the use of compelling ideas, engaging language, and revealing details" (Education Northwest, 2010, p.1). Essentially, "voice" is a measure of how well the writer is expressing herself through topic, details, and language and how well the writer is connecting and communicating herself to the audience. There needs to be evidence of understanding and commitment to the topic and the writing must be honest, personal, and engaging.

Therefore, the identity of the writer—who she is as a person—is the critical element in addressing the focus issue of voice. This identity is also the central focal point of the methodology I employed from the beginning of the case-study: inquiry-based research, a method that can be employed in every-day teaching where the teacher actively tries to find out who a student is as a person and as a writer in order to assess their needs, strengths and weaknesses. Discovering this information is critical to providing education suited to each particular student in a classroom. The methodology and the center of gravity in this case study complimented each other well by directing my research towards a common purpose: that of discovering Root Beer as a person, as a writer, and her interests and needs respective to each.

2. Discovering the Student Writer

This initial one-on-one meeting with Root Beer took place primarily at a Starbucks which I drove her to after class on Thursday, February 10th, 2011. The meeting lasted from 10:45 AM to 12 PM when I dropped her off in front of the International House of Millersville University. I had drawn up a consent letter and a survey for Root Beer to sign and respond to, and I informed her that I would offer to take her to Starbucks in exchange for filling out the survey questionnaire and signing the consent letter. Not only would this put me on friendly terms with Root Beer, but it would give me time to find out where she was from and what kind of background she had.

I discovered on the short ride to the Starbucks that Root Beer had actually just returned from Albania, where she had close friends and family, and had spent several months there with her church group. She mentioned that she enjoyed writing letters to her friends there, and when questioned, she admitted to an intention of majoring in International Studies and Foreign Language with the intention of returning to Albania or a nearby country. Her experience there obviously meant a lot to her. I asked her if she was from there, and she replied that no, she grew up in the Millersville, PA area; so she was a local kid.

A photocopy of the survey I presented to Root Beer is attached to the end of this case study. When composing the questions for this survey, I tried to get a detailed snapshot of Root Beer's reading and writing preferences and background. To do this, I asked her what sorts of things she reads and writes, what her preferences are for both, and the reasons behind those preferences and the way she utilizes both of these forms of media. Keeping in mind that many of today's students make use of technology, I inquired as to which technological devices she used and for what purposes. Finally, I gathered data on her prior experiences with reading and writing on her own and in school assignments, and inquired as to what her one wish for her writing in the future would be.

The answers I received from our conversation and the survey questionnaire made a few things very clear about where the importance of reading and writing lay with Root Beer: 1) She enjoyed forms of reading and writing that involved socialization with others, particularly the letters she enjoyed writing and receiving from her distant friends; 2) The forms of reading and writing she routinely engaged in were shorter forms, such as texting, emails, Facebook messages, and she mentioned that she typically "loses interest fairly quickly", getting distracted in class and counting the number of pages she has left to read for a particular work, especially for class, even if she is interested in the work. This matched what I had already observed in the class observations; 3) As such, her writing, admittedly is mostly geared towards "practical purposes" and she derives more enjoyment from the interaction of others through socialization than more isolating, longer experiences such as movies or novels; 4) Her interests as are tied in closely with her church experiences and the friends she has made there; and 5) given the nature of her preference for informal methods of written communication, Root Beer admitted to not revising much of her work.

So, I had an outline of the student from which to start: here was a girl who was invested in foreign culture in Albania through her church, and enjoyed communicating with presumably distant friends who she considered valuable. The means of writing she employed to this end came in the form of informal letters and online communication. I concluded that this would be my starting point, as these forms of writing were inherently most familiar to her—given her history and usage of them—and that they were also most meaningful, given that they allowed her the social connection that she highly valued to her friends abroad.

Bob Fecho advocates an inquiry-based approach in his book, "Is this English?". The book is as much a journey of self-discovery for Mr. Fecho as a teacher, as it is a discovery of the students he is dealing with. This theme of inquiry, however, is central to the entire book, and each chapter has common sections such as the "making meaning" question. For Mr. Fecho, there are no models, no "best practice"; teaching is a learning process; one that is as different for each person as each student or teacher is from another. Chapter 7, titled Learning as Aaron, of this book focuses on one student in particular by the name of "April". April's identity is not so simple or easily recognized even with regards to her name, as her other name is "Hafeesah"—her name among her sisters in Islam. Fecho's handling of this particular student is deeply representative of his consideration and belief in the importance of a student's identity to the process of teaching:

As a teacher, I have always been committed to presenting my students with the full spectrum of options before them, urging them to seek the most from the world, to see education as a means for pursuing their individual rainbows and challenging the status quo. But equally, I also have always been committed to respecting the

beliefs of my students, to allowing them to understand their own needs, to giving them the room to bring who they are into the classroom. (Fecho, 2004)

In much the same way, I wanted to give Root Beer a chance to bring who she was to my one-on-one meetings with her. I wanted her to feel like I not only respected who she was, but that I was doing my part to come to her, instead of making her come to me. On the drive back to the International House where she lived, I made that point clear to her: that I believed that every teacher should make the effort to come to his/her students as much as s/he expected his/her students to come to him/her.

3. Exploring with the “Pros”

To that end, I resolved to bring some “experts” to our next meeting together. These would be experts in the form of writing that Root Beer enjoyed the most: letters. I did not want Root Beer to think of letters as a specific genre of writing that took a particular form, but rather I wanted her to see, by examples, that letters, like writing itself, could take a variety of forms, for a variety of purposes, to convey a variety of meanings and messages. The versatility of this form of writing would, I hoped, open her mind up to the possibilities of any form of writing, but it would do so from a form that she was familiar with and found personal meaning in.

Our second meeting together took place on Tuesday, February 22nd, 2011, in the Main Level of Ganser Library, from 10:45 AM-12:45 PM. Prior to this meeting, I had Root Beer send me a recent assignment she had been working on in her composition class, titled *A Lesson in Dumplings*. This was the first significant sample of writing that I had seen from Root Beer and after reading through it, I recognized at that point that Root Beer lacked voice in her detailed account of making dumplings with her friends in the International House she lives in with the other students there. While her grammar and sentence structure were relatively error-free and varied, she included no personal experiences or thoughts that she had while making the dumplings, or any information on the background of her Chinese friend, even though she expressed interest in this. I praised her on the quality of her grammar and structure, but suggested that she include a more personal voice in her revision. The result was that she did include a little bit of personal thoughts in her revised copy, but did not go extensively into depth as I would have liked her to do. Later on, during the course of this case study, I conferred that it seemed Root Beer had an issue with voice to Dr. Shea, and he agreed and had come to the same conclusion after reading her material as well; I had spoken to him about this prior to Spring Break during and after class on March 3rd, 2011, around 5 PM.

For the second one-on-one meeting, I had brought with me a number of materials for a number of exercises to more deeply explore writing in a way that I had hoped would connect with Root Beer personally. To this end, I acquired several letters of different types, from different authors, from different time periods, and different countries to use for the exercises that I planned to run through with her during this meeting. These letters included the following: Abraham Lincoln’s Letter to the Editor of the New York Times in response to Horace Greeley; Albert Einstein’s Fourth Letter about the dangers of atomic weapons to FDR; two of Jane Austen’s letters to her cousin Fanny Knight; Martin Luther King Jr.’s Letter from Birmingham Jail; Sullivan Ballou’s Civil War letter to his wife; and a few passages from St. Paul’s letters in the Bible. These letters represent a wide diversity of writing styles which was directly incorporated into my goal for this session with Root Beer while providing real-world historical examples from “pros”.

Kelly Gallagher, in his book titled *Teaching Adolescent Writers*, calls the approach of putting a model that is well-done before students the “Grecian-Urn” approach, after Ron Strahl’s labeling of it as such, and he says in Chapter 3, *Beyond the Grecian-Urn, The Teacher as a Writing Model*, that it “doesn’t work” (Gallagher, 2006). This assertion presented a conflict with my own approach and experience, and I do not personally agree with it entirely. Gallagher places the flaw of this approach in the following context: “It’s the idea that simply showing students a Grecian urn will be enough to inspire them to produce Grecian urns of their own” (Gallagher, 2006). Framed in those specific terms, I quite agree with Gallagher that the “Grecian-Urn Approach” will meet with mixed results at best, but I do not think Gallagher quite captures a realistic example of teaching in his criticism of this model. In my own personal experience both as a student and as a competitive swimmer, it was very helpful to see “how it was done” by someone who knew what they were doing. After all, if we had no mental image of how to do something properly, how could we possibly have any certain idea of what we were working towards?

One might take issue with the idea that there is just one proper way to do something, and again, I would agree that in any case involving writing, there are certainly a number of well-done forms a good piece of writing could take, but when you're learning, very seldom do you have access to any of those forms (or recognize them as such), unless you are a diligent reader, and not all of our students are. I support the approach of presenting a "good example" for students to visualize, provided that the teacher understands that writing is a process, and showing the students a good example is only one step on that process, which involves working with the students, and not simply showing them "the destination" and expecting them to get there on their own.

Bearing this in mind, I led Root Beer through a guided exploration on the reasons why we write. I wanted to start with a broad focus, just to get her thinking about writing in general. This served two purposes: 1) it would reveal what Root Beer thought about writing, which would give me insight into what she had been taught, and what she thought writing was as a concept; and 2) it would form a self-fashioned starting point from which we could build. I considered it important that this starting point, like the exercises that were to follow, represented Root Beer; that they were of her own making, not mine. I would not tell her why we write, she would tell me. Drawing on her preference for writing things in her notebook, I had her carry out this exercise there on a blank sheet of paper, and we began to brainstorm reasons why we write in general. This guided exploration went on for about 5-10 minutes, after which Root Beer had listed several reasons for writing, many of which tied back to communication of a point/idea to an audience from a writer. We then narrowed the focus to a type of writing that does this quite well: letters. We then segued to an analysis comparison and contrasting graphic organizer chart comparing Poems, Letters, and Essays to each other. For this exercise, I guided Root Beer with identifying differences and similarities between these popular forms of writing. She listed several of each in a very organized chart.

Now that we had identified the main reasons for writing, provided by Root Beer, and had compared three different forms of written communication with each other, with the focus being on letters, with similarities and differences provided by Root Beer, we were ready for the next exercise, which involved the model letters that I had brought with me for her to analyze. I provided a number of prompts for her to consider in her analysis of each letter. These included the following: Who is writing the letter (author)? What is the situation (context)? What is the nature or purpose of the letter? Why are they writing it? How does the situation impact the form that the letter takes? What does that form look like? Who is the intended audience? How does this impact the letter's form and content? Root Beer addressed these questions for each letter that she read and wrote down her answers in her notebook. A similar kind of writing exercise is demonstrated in Gallagher's "Purpose Chart", found on page 36 of *Teaching Adolescent Writers*. He uses this chart to "demonstrate understanding" by "having them give careful consideration to the author's purpose" (Gallagher, 2006). This was exactly the kind of thing I wanted Root Beer to consider in her readings of these model letters before we moved on. After completing this exercise, we revisited the comparison chart together and Root Beer realized that the letter in particular is a very versatile form of writing that contain much of the formalistic and stylistic elements of the other forms of writing (Poetry and Essay) that we compared it to originally, thus providing her with a context of examples demonstrating how versatile this form can be, and a first-hand understanding born of her own analysis of these letters written by "pros".

With this new perspective, we embarked on the final exercise of our time together, where Root Beer was to compose a letter of her own to someone about how to write a letter. I had her consider the following factors: the letter should be instructive, but necessarily contain Root Beer's personal opinion, since it was, after all, her view of how a letter should be written, coming from her personally; of course, she was required to support this opinion with details and reasons; she was also tasked with creatively and specifically describing the ideal setting where one should compose the letter and what the most important factors are in the composition of a letter; and finally she was tasked with paying attention to the organization and flow of the letter in her composition. It was understood that this would be a "rough draft" of the letter, to be revised later.

Finally, this letter would represent another opportunity for Root Beer's voice to come through. Given that she was in familiar territory, with a form of writing that she personally was experienced with, and had just been exposed to via a number of significant historical examples by well-known writers, I felt that there was one other way I could help provide her with the materials to plant the seeds of her own details that would eventually grow into the voice of her writing: a pre-writing exercise. This exercise would give her a chance to organize her thoughts into a list of things that she thought should go into the letter and the sequence of this content as it should appear in the final written form. Now she had familiarity, she had exposure and analysis of models, and

she had an organized list of details that she considered important. I felt that, armed with these tools, she was now sufficiently prepared to write the letter I had assigned to her.

The progression of these exercises took Root Beer from a general question about writing that she answered herself, through comparisons with other forms of writing, to analysis and comparisons of models of letters, to a pre-write for a letter about how to write a letter that she composed on her own. While she may be more aware of how versatile her favorite form of writing can be, and how important people throughout history have utilized the letter format to communicate a variety of messages, it was the final exercise of the letter on letter writing that was most important to me. This exercise contained within it a student-provided insight into Root Beer herself: how she prefers to write, in what setting and how she would compose a letter if she were to do so in the ideal environment. This information, disguised as a writing assignment, provided me with an important personal perspective into her mindset, perceptions, and preferences—a valuable insight, considering Root Beer’s reserved and normally quiet nature, that contributed to my central goal of unearthing and revealing her inner voice, since Root Beer’s voice is inherently tied to who she is as a person and as a writer.

4. A Trip Down Memory Lane

While Root Beer put a lot of thought and details that were personal to her in the composition of the letter on how to write a letter, I still felt as though I was missing the person for the details, much like one might “miss the forest for the trees”. Somewhere in there, amidst all of those specific details, the real person of Root Beer was hiding, cloaked behind very specific instructions about setting and lighting, audience and reader, shared interests and considerations for communication was a person who I still wasn’t hearing in her words. It sounded to me as if a very nice girl was very carefully and kindly explaining in articulate detail what one was to consider in writing a letter—a justifiable result, considering that was exactly what I had asked her to do, but with the hope that I would find more of the person behind those instructions, rather than just the instructions themselves. In fact, the detailed instructions were very reminiscent of Root Beer’s point-by-point reporter-like accounting of the steps that she and her friends proceeded through in her work titled *A Lesson in Dumplings*. This presented me with a renewed puzzle challenge: how to separate the student writer herself from her tendency to break events down into impersonal, albeit descriptive detail, or, perhaps even better, how to get her to use that detail to reveal the person behind it.

On the day of our third one-on-one meeting, on Thursday, March 17th, 2011, prior to leaving Dr. Shea’s composition class with Root Beer at the conclusion of class, I had asked him for his advice about bringing out voice in a student writer. I consider Dr. Shea to be a respectable figure of authority and knowledge in this area, and so I wanted to see if he had any good suggestions that might be applicable to my work with Root Beer. He suggested an analogy, citing the TV show *The Wonder Years*, where the main character’s voice carries on a dialogue in his head throughout his experiences from episode to episode. This suggestion inspired the exercises that I would apply to this third meeting with Root Beer.

We met, as we would for this meeting and all of those that followed, in the Main Level of Ganser Library from 10:45 PM until 11:45 PM. I decided to begin my hunt again for the person that was Root Beer. I began by having Root Beer write down five words that she would use to describe herself, with specific regard for her personality. The point of this short exercise was to get an idea of what her personality was, according to her. Voice is directly and inherently tied to a writer’s personality; when the reader “hears” the writer, it’s the writer’s personality that is being reflected in writer’s style of writing, in the writer’s voice. The more details, provided by Root Beer herself, that I could get about her personality, the more I would know what kind of voice I was looking for, and thus be able to recognize it whenever and wherever it might emerge. Following this exercise, I asked her to list five topics that she would love to have a conversation about. I had asked her to do this because I wanted to know the kind of material that she would actually enjoy writing about before I set her to doing so. It was also an exercise of preparation, bringing these enjoyable topics to the forefront of her mind so that they were readily available to pick from for the next exercise.

The next exercise involved a memory. For this memory exercise, I instructed Root Beer to fill her notebook page with as many specific details from this memory that she could gather. She filled the entire page with a memory of her time in Albania with her church group there. Of course the memory was a fond one for her, and it served to

confirm that the responses I received from her on my survey that she completed during our first meeting were actually valid. By allowing Root Beer the choice to draw from these preferred topics of conversation, I gave her the chance to draw on material that was meaningful and enjoyable to her. Kelly Gallagher explains the importance of choice in Chapter 5 of his book *Teaching Adolescent Learners*, titled *Beyond Fake Writing: The Power of Choice*. In this chapter he explains that allowing students to choose the topics of their writing creates two immediate benefits: "1. Choice fosters a feeling of ownership in the writer. 2. Choice drives better revision," (Gallagher, 2006). I desired both of these benefits in pursuit of Root Beer's voice: I wanted her to own her work, to feel like it was hers, because if she did not, I would never have any chance of hearing the person behind those words. Also, it would be necessary, once Root Beer's voice was found, to bring out the full richness and beauty of that voice through a process of revision. Not surprisingly, Gallagher uses this chapter in his book to focus on exercises that bring out a writer's voice, such as the "What Bugs Me" activity (Gallagher, 2006). This memory would serve as the raw material and foundation for the final exercise I would have Root Beer complete in order to find and reveal her elusive voice.

I mentioned that Dr. Shea's suggestion of the Wonder Years inner monologue provided me with inspiration which I would use in my exercises with Root Beer during this meeting. This came into play when I had her complete the final exercise of this meeting: an inner monologue of her thoughts—just her thoughts—speaking within her mind as she recalled her memory which she had just provided the details of on the previous page. Those details served to provide her with ready material about which she could recall her own thoughts, as she progressed back over the now familiar details of her memory. Root Beer had already been down this road once, just a few minutes ago, recalling all of the details she saw; now that those details were accounted for, she could focus instead on her own thoughts about those details, instead of on searching for and locating the details themselves. She filled the entire page with quotes from her own inner monologue, which completed our exercises for this meeting. I now had the first rough whispers of Root Beer's inner voice, amidst all of the details she had scribbled furiously on the page previous, and I was ready to take these whisper-seeds and grow them into something more.

5. A Revision of the Vision

Reading over her lines of dialogue from our third meeting before our fourth meeting on Thursday, March 24th, 2011, I noticed that many of Root Beer's lines ended in a question mark. This is a good quality for a writer to have, because curiosity leads to the wide-eyed observation of details that a more made-up mind does not tend to pay any heed to. However, questions do not immediately lend themselves to a voice, because they are questions; not certain statements that convey a tone that the writer possesses. I thought that perhaps this was an impediment to Root Beer's voice in writing, but did not want to stop her curiosity or halt it in any way. This is where the process of revision became essential to good writing—not just for correction, but far more importantly, for transformation.

So, for the first exercise of this meeting, I had Root Beer turn to the inner monologue for her memory and underline all of the sentences that do not end in a question mark. Then I had her count them. She ended up with ten. This was a good number. Why these sentences? Because I wanted her to see the sentences where she had made declarative statements as models for the others where she had made questions instead. These sentences would form the initial material base she would draw from for her later exercises.

Then I had her pick out and mark (in her own way) the five most interesting sentences that ended in a question mark. Without much trouble, she did so. This brought into focus five of those sentences that ended in question marks which she herself would admit to being the most interesting, in order to preserve them and their validity for the later exercises. As I said before, I value Root Beer's curiosity, and I did not want her to feel like all sentences with a question were not valuable; the added distinction that separated these from the others was not the question marks, but rather how interesting these questions were.

Next I had Root Beer cross out the five least interesting statements that did not have question marks. (These were drawn from the original ten that she had underlined, obviously.) Once again, just because these sentences did not end in question marks did not immediately make them valid or worthwhile, and to prove this, I had her cross out the least interesting five, to reaffirm that it was the level of interest that made these sentences stand out, not their declarative nature. However, I did want to bring out her voice in declarative statements, not questions, so I had her turn her five interesting question statements into declarative statements. This gave Root

Beer a total of ten interesting declarative statements drawn directly from her inner monologue. This would be the raw material for the beauty of her inner voice.

Now that the raw material was assembled, it was time to polish it. I had Root Beer take the five statements that she had converted from questions and make them even more interesting with additional details, specific description, adjectives, adverbs, etc, and generally “dress them up” in a way that conveyed their imagery and meaning better and more fully than before .

Finally, using these ten statements, I had Root Beer write an account of her memory, beginning with the introductory prompt, “Dear Reader, I have a story to tell...” or “Dear Reader, I want to tell you about...”, or some other variation of the “Dear Reader,” opening of her own making. The reason for this is that this specific opening would immediately put her into the mindset of writing her favorite form of composition: a letter. She would be in familiar territory in order to tell about an account of a memory about a subject that she enjoyed talking about. She would be drawing on the revised and polished statements that she was left with after the previous exercises which came directly from her inner monologue, and she would garnish these statements with the descriptive details that she had written down from our third meeting when she had first recalled this memory. The preparations were made, and the stage was set and ready for her voice to emerge.

6. In Praise of Her Voice

For our fifth and final meeting on Thursday, March 31st, 2011, I again went with a process of revision; focusing in on this area that Root Beer often wanted to by-pass or skip entirely in her writing, in order to show her how it could help improve her writing first-hand. I continued with the material from the previous two meetings to maintain consistency, and to build on what we had already covered so that it appeared—and was—one long continuous process that logically proceeded from one exercise to the next. This is called “flow”, and if a teacher can build this into his/her classroom instruction, it helps the students to see and realize how everything ultimately ties together.

One way that brings out a writer's voice is a focus on what might seem to be a small and meaningless detail to anyone else, but transforms into a detail laden with meaning and significance through the voice of the writer. Root Beer already possessed the ability to write in a detailed fashion, but it precisely the writer's ability to see things in details that might seem small, insignificant, or meaningless to anyone and bring the richness hidden in such invisible details out to the unsuspecting reader. Tom Romano, in his article titled *The Power of Voice*, highlights five essential qualities of voice: Information, Narrative, Perception, Surprise, and Humor (Romano, 2004). Root Beer already had Information mastered, as evidenced through her attention to detail, and her “Dear Reader” letter on her memory from our fourth meeting set up the Narrative format for her, so it was Perception that I wanted to bring out with this fifth and final meeting's exercises. Romano explains, in regards to Perception: “I once heard a professional writer say that the most important thing a writer needed was sensibility: the ability to perceive, to look closely, to notice what others might not, to recognize hidden emotion” (Romano, 2004). Therefore, the first exercise I had Root Beer complete for this final meeting was to pick out three meaningful, small, specific details from the “Dear Reader” letter that she had composed during our last meeting together. I asked her to pick out “meaningful” details, but I made sure to emphasize to her that it was important that these details were “meaningful” to her, not to me or anyone else; that the value she saw in them was what was important for this exercise. I then had her select one of these details and write an entire paragraph that focused completely on it. I encouraged her to show why this detail was important (to her) and to really bring out all the significance of this detail in the paragraph that she was assigned.

Then I had her pick three statements from her “Dear Reader” letter that could use revision; she would underline these statements first, and then rewrite them in a way that made them pop with detail and description, just as she had with the five statements from our prior meeting. Root Beer immediately saw the connection and found three statements that she identified personally as in need of improvement. I wanted this to be a process she completed herself, because revision should be a process that the student writer can enact him/herself without the aid of a teacher. Tracy Rosewarne echoes the importance of the student's ability to take ownership of his/her own revision and improvement, without the teacher in her final reflection at the end of her book, *Purposeful Writing*:

My goal is to get students to see their own strengths and weaknesses so they can develop a critical eye for their own work. I have found this to be a necessary skill that I needed to teach my students to help them develop as writers. They are not going to be with me for the rest of their writing careers, so my comments alone can only take them so far. (Rosewarne, 2006)

Root Beer completed this exercise in revision without any trouble; she understood now what she was supposed to do, why she was doing it, how to do it (from previous exercises) and proceeded to revise without any assistance on my part.

Finally, using the three improved statements and the paragraph focused on the tiny significant detail of her “Dear Reader” letter, I had Root Beer rewrite the letter, incorporating these new elements into the final draft, keeping in mind the need for integration and organization as well as revision in any other part of the letter that she felt was needed as she composed the final draft. With these materials readily available, Root Beer was able to quickly compose an impressive final draft in about twenty-five minutes. Having the materials at the ready was something she indicated that she preferred on the survey from the very first meeting with her, so this enabled her to write comfortably and at her best for this final draft of what would be the culmination and end result of our work together.

As soon as she completed this draft, I read over it, and was pleased to see Root Beer's voice shimmering through the work. I could see what she cared about, what she thought was important and why; the account left no doubt in my mind what she saw through her eyes, and how she viewed each detail, and why each one mattered to her. The voice of Root Beer that came through matched perfectly with the description of herself as “extravert; compassionate; feeler; and easy-going”. Throughout the account other people are mentioned with equal parts compassion and sensitivity; there is an aura of serenity and peace that pervades Root Beer's descriptive account that matches with the feeling of comfort and togetherness with others that she so richly values. There insights into both the people around her as well as into her own heart and soul that are clear and glittering for the reader to see. I related all of this to her and that I was proud of her progress and work, and that I feel that her voice, while it is often hidden beneath the details and the questions she has, and is the part of her writing that may require the most work to bring out—once it is revealed, it is perhaps the strongest and most beautiful part of her composition. With that praise, we concluded our meeting and I thanked her again for her time and effort, and I reiterated that I enjoyed working with her; that if she ever wanted me to help make suggestions or advise her on future works, that I was available, via email or other means. She appreciated this and we parted on good terms.

7. A Reflection on the Future

If I had more meetings with Root Beer, I would focus next on the other two elements that Romano mentions in *The Power of Voice: Surprise and Humor*. In regards to the element of surprise, Romano quotes Robert Frost as saying, “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader” (Romano, 2004). I think this is as legitimate as it gets for supporting free-writing in the classroom, in order to give students the chance to surprise themselves, without the worry of conventions, grammar, or assessment. Romano suggests looking for real-world examples of surprise in each of their own lives; teens who think they know “everything” would do well to be reminded that they might not have “everything” figured out just yet.

The other remaining element of humor is one that I definitely see the need to address in Root Beer's writing. In our brief time together, I did not have the opportunity to explore the possibilities for humor, and personally, I consider humor to be an advanced writing element; one that is easy to recognize, but difficult to master; after all, what one considers funny, another might not, so how can one ever be sure whether what one is writing is actually funny by definition or not? Romano confesses that “I would have to throw up my hands and admit that humor is not an essential quality of an interesting, appealing voice. But a little lightness and playfulness in writing makes the reading experience more pleasurable” (Romano, 2004). Indeed, in my opinion there are two understandings that form the heart of humor: 1) that the writer understands the absurdity of things we take for granted sometimes, which means questioning traditional points of view; and, 2) that the writer can see the absurdity of his/her own point of view, and laugh at him/her. Both of these understandings are difficult to come by, but can make the experience of any piece of writing one that readers remember fondly. I have no doubt that Root Beer's voice would be strengthened by the addition and enhancement of both of these remaining elements of voice.

In regards to my own future classrooms of students, I would approach such classrooms with an element of the “Workshop” that is talked about at length in Rosewarne and Sipe’s Purposeful Writing. I feel that the workshop methodology is the most effective way to promote differentiated learning that is tailored to each individual student’s needs, strengths and weaknesses, just as I tailored Root Beer’s progress to her specific writing skills and needs as a learner. A broad-based classroom approach fails to accomplish this, especially if the teacher goes in with a pre-made plan of what they are going to cover without any idea of who his/her students really are, and what needs they really have. Why teach six students how to work on commas if their commas are not a problem? It’s a case of wasted time, resulting from a lack of knowledge about where the students truly are. Better to have portfolios for each individual student, to have conferences, of the peer and teacher variety. This approach accomplishes the goal of gathering samples of student writing by which to evaluate his/her performances, and makes this approach one that is cataloged and easily tailored to that individual student. At the end of the course, the student can self-evaluate and see how far s/he has come, and what skills they still need to work on. If teachers were able to pass such portfolios up through the grades, you would see a vertical articulation that would waste less time on already mastered skills, and spend more minutes on skills in need of work. In my experience as a teacher, I have yet to see such a system of portfolios implemented at all, and I see that as a great failing on behalf of the education institutions and educators themselves who should be working together for the benefit of the students.

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