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Writing to Think Critically: The Seeds of Social Action



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Kendra is a student in a writing workshop, and she keeps a writers notebook so that writing can become a tool for thinking in her life. She has written about the day she saw a blue jay aggressively tossing twigs and leaves out of the gutter on her friend's apartment building; about her feelings regarding being on a soccer team that loses all its games; about her memories of each room in her grandmother's apartment. She has even written reflections on her life history as a reader. She has entries in her notebook about sunlight, icicles, and the early-morning sound of crows. Today, she writes about her ex-boyfriend, whom she makes a point of not naming, and how his jealousy whenever she talked to male friends made her break up with him.

When Kendra walks home from school, she may be thinking about any of these things. Or she may think about other things around her. She may think about the housing project she walks past and the friends who live there. She may think about the air she breathes, as she avoids the rear of buses because the exhaust makes her cough. Like many of the children in her neighborhood, she has asthma and so takes care, when possible, about what she breathes. She may notice the billboards advertising cigarettes on the sides of buildings. She sometimes thinks about the rumors she's heard about drugs being sold out of the building in front of which she always sees the same couple fighting. Usually, the man is yelling at the woman, but once she heard the woman scream back at the man, calling him a "faggot."

On her eight-block walk home, when she is out in the world, Kendra encounters dozens of sights, sounds, and interactions that could potentially speak of social injustice, exploitation, and risk. But none of these find their way into her writers notebook. "It just doesn't seem like they belong there," she says. Why would that be?

One of the goals many writing teachers share is that of enabling students, usually rendered voiceless in the world at large, to speak for social change in their writing. Many hope that students will feel empowered to make memos, letters, pamphlets, posters, speeches, agendas, and other texts that seek to address unfairness in society, that ask for redress, that call for public attention to problems and possibilities. We want students to view their writing as more than exercises for learning to write, as more than obedience to teacher instructions, but rather as a unique form of social action. In many of our classrooms, however, it has been hard to get this agenda rolling, except when the teacher sponsors it. Students seldom walk in the door of our classrooms sharing our vision of writing as social action, and the topics they choose, important to them though they may be, often seem socially static as *the topic I am writing about for English*, rather than as *the social agenda I am pursuing in the world*.

This is not a flaw in their thinking; they have learned well the lessons school has taught. We may not have done enough yet to disrupt their expectation that their work is nothing but compliance. It is ironic that so often, when they do write to address social issues, it is in obedient response to a teacher prompt. Wouldn't it be useful to teach them to develop their own topics and agendas for social action in response to the world they walk through every day? Perhaps a way to begin might involve attention to their use of writing as a tool for thinking. Since writers' notebooks have been so valuable for many of us in helping students develop the habits of mind that lead to the writing of poetry, memoir, fiction, essay, articles, and other writing, they might be useful, too, in bringing a socially critical lens to the lifework of writing.

Teaching writing as a tool for thinking, we teachers cannot help but emphasize certain

kinds of thinking over others. For instance, in *Time for Meaning* (1995), I describe having students sit with one object they find in the room—a square of tile, a pencil, a shoe—for 10 minutes and write just about that one thing. In demonstrating this sustained attention, I usually describe the object in detail and sometimes think associatively off of it. In my way of teaching this lesson, I'm valuing observation and associative thinking. The other minilessons I describe for teaching a variety of ways to write in notebooks similarly underscore the value of particular ways of thinking and writing, including: a curiosity about people (a characterizing mode of thought), an ear for spoken language (a vocalizing thinking), a style of deep lingering in memory (reconstructive thought), a reflectiveness about current life events (interpretive thinking), a responsiveness to literature and other media (a dialogical habit of mind), and others. Sometimes, people mistake these for attempts to get at the writer's own, real, true, individual voice, but they are not. Really, they are modes of thinking that I'm setting up as values in the classroom community, the ways with words I'm trying to socialize the kids into. Of course, there is no way to be exhaustive in the kinds of thinking-with-writing one chooses to emphasize: there are always more possibilities excluded than included. But it's important to note that our choices create and constrain the reservoirs of possibility from which our students will draw, at least as long as they're in our classes.

Given the possibilities I introduce for writing in notebooks, it's not surprising that, when students reread their notebooks and construct a theme or topic on which to expand and create a piece for readers, they usually select topics about people, memory, reflections on current personal issues, and topics based on close observation of the material world around them. Rarely do they develop in their notebooks top-

ics related to social issues, everyday justice, power relationships, possibilities for collective interest and action, or other topics I would think of as social, political, or critical. Sometimes, there *could* be a critical angle on the material they choose. Often, I, as a reader, see this potential because of the lenses I bring to their drafts. However, their ways of thinking about their topics, their ways of "writing well," usually remain more personal, poetic, and descriptive.

For example, when Sarai wrote in her notebook:

The whole time I was little, my mother owned a candy store. I use to walk there after school. I could take a piece of candy and something to read. As long as it wasn't too much. Then a bigger nice store opened up on the same block. My mother didn't have any customers and she had to close the store. Now she works in an office, but I never saw it.

That could have become a piece about the ways people with little, struggling businesses are defeated by bigger, richer companies. It could have dealt with themes of people trying to integrate families into work, sometimes possible in entrepreneurial venues, rarely possible in more bureaucratic contexts. Instead, when Sarai used this material as part of a larger memoir, it became a lovely, wistful description of those afternoons in her mother's store. As was almost always the case, the lens Sarai brought to her memory was not social, political, economic, justice-oriented, but rather private, personal, and aesthetic. Nothing was wrong with what she did; in fact, I liked it. But might she have thought and written about it differently—with different questions and purposes—if I had found a way to highlight more critical habits of mind in the notebook itself, the seedbed for their larger works?

After all, my own notebooks are full of critical reflections, a good deal more of those, in fact, than close observations of objects. So

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are the notebooks of many of my writing friends. Flipping through the last week or so of my notebook, I see notes from a workshop on feminist literature, followed by my response to the workshop in which I question whether the professor-presenter's self-aggrandizing subtext positioned the middle and high school teachers she was addressing in the same sort of oppression as the women experienced in the story she discussed. There is a narrative of a fireman from the station down the street rudely ordering workmen at my next-door neighbor's house to move their truck that was blocking his personal car, and my wondering about the tone of authority automatically lent by a uniform. One short entry notices a little girl asking her big brother, "Can I watch you play?" An entry I made while waiting to see a teacher describes in detail the physical appearance of the school's interior. Since it is a school in a poor neighborhood, nothing in it seems to be in clean or good condition. I remind myself to make a similar entry the next time I am in a corporate office, waiting to see a grants officer. There is, very often, a sort of second act to my thinking. There is the description of things that happen, but then there is a critique of it, usually through some sort of concern for the kind of society we should have. It is that second act I would like to bring to students' thinking in their notebooks.

Noticing in School

School, of course, is no more immune to the issues of justice, power, and association than any other human institution. Follow any student around for the day at school, and you will likely encounter:

- questions of fairness about how people get picked for jobs, teams, or groups;
- evidence of the low esteem in which school is held in society, including inadequate supplies and decrepit buildings;
- oppression of younger people by elders;
- the power relations that surround "respect" and "disrespect";
- complexities of how a group of people can get along together;
- decisions about how a group deals with an individual who will not conform;

- issues of voice and silence;
- abbreviated rights of free speech, free association, free press, and other Constitutional "guarantees";
- the relations between individual choices (of topics, inquiries, reading material) and shared community pursuits;
- the power relations encoded in language, e.g., "correct" usage and pronunciation;
- the consequences of cruelty and kindness;
- restrictions on being able to move freely among different groups (classes, small groups, friendship groups).

Every one of these issues is deeply political, and any event in which they could arise is an opportunity for students to think about political themes that are continually present in our lives at all levels, from home to the world at large. These are the *same issues* for which people go to prison, endure torture, and die. I am not here advocating a student revolution, anarchy in schools, or classrooms completely run by children's wishes. My point is that these sorts of topics are just as available in children's daily experiences as the frost on the windows or their trips to visit relatives. And since they are so close at hand, we make a political decision in helping students develop an attentive lens to notice them—or in failing to do so.

Subjects of study (other than writing) in school also present locations for critical questioning. Social studies obviously focuses on relevant topics, but science and math are not free of potential problems, either. Since most readers of this journal do their work in English/language arts, it might be most useful for us to glance at the ways a critical habit of mind can be fostered in the reading of literature. When we read literature, we transact with the sentences of a text in order to construct a virtual world. We collaborate with authors, and to some extent, we allow them to set up shop in our own thinking. Critical reading (and here I mean socially critical in a Freirean sense [Freire, 1992; Freire and Macedo, 1987], as I have throughout this essay, not literary-critical or critical of the quality of writing) demands that we interrogate the worlds we read with lenses similar to the ones we use to ask questions of the material world around us. Critical reading can foster thinking that can lead to

social action, if we help readers learn to ask themselves questions like the following:

- Is this story fair?
- How does the purpose or point of this text address what people like me care about? (“People like me” are members of the same social groups.)
- How does this text address the perspectives of other groups, especially those who usually don’t get to tell their side?
- How does this story make us think about justice in the world?
- What perspective is missing in this text (one that *could* be there)? What would it be like if we put it back?
- How does this story deal with individuals and groups? Are the people alone and in contests with each other, or does the story help us imagine people getting together?
- How does money work in this story?
- How different are people allowed to be in this story? Does it assume everyone’s happy and good in the same ways?

Actively Teaching a Socially Critical Lens for Thinking

It’s one thing to be aware of the possibility of notebook writing that focuses on social issues and questions, but the problem remains of how to teach students to do this sort of thinking and writing. In order to think through the craft of teaching something so intangible as a critical lens, it will help us to consider three modes of teaching: demonstration, assisted performance, and reflective conversation (Bomer, 1998).

Demonstration

I don’t know how to assist students in learning to write in a particular way, or how to lead discussions about strategies and lenses, unless I am doing some of the same sort of writing myself. I can’t buy examples of writers’ notebooks shrink-wrapped with the lives from which they sprang: I have to use my own living, thinking, and writing as exemplars. A teacher’s own writing not only lends credibility to the teaching: it also provides me with material for minilessons and conferences. Fur-

thermore, my writing, full of local references, culturally familiar to the students, helps them see that social action inquiry is not out there somewhere, but is, rather, right here at hand.

Writing demonstrations can be of two kinds: after-the-fact and in-the-midst. In demonstrations after-the-fact, we read to the students our own notebook entries written outside of class, sometimes putting them on overheads or chart paper. The actual text of what we wrote, though, is only part of the story. We situate the text within a narrative of when and how we wrote it. Here is a rough sketch of the general idea:

Yesterday, I was driving home from school, and I saw [this or that], and I started wondering about it. I was thinking about [blah-blah], and when I got home, here’s what I wrote: [reading of text].

Depending upon the actual content, the minilesson would go on to describe what the students could learn from this example.

Demonstrations in-the-midst are perhaps even more useful because the noticing, thinking, and writing can all happen on the spot, right there where the students can see it. Choosing something out the window or in the room, or perhaps an event from the hallway during the passing period just before class, the teacher speaks aloud about her/his wondering and reflecting for a minute or so, then decides aloud how to write this thinking, and begins composing in front of the students on an overhead or chart paper. It is, after all, not self-evident how to start such an entry. Does one first write a description of what one saw, or does one begin with the larger critical issue that is now beginning to take shape? How does one start writing about a big idea? There’s no right answer, but the decision, one that some writers find paralyzing, has to be made, and no other mode of teaching can even get close to that level of detail.

Assisted Performance

To bridge from our own doing to students’ activity, it is useful to provide structured assistance, chances for them to try out these strategies and lenses with our help. As is the case with most major advances in students’ habits of thinking and writing, even as students begin

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to attempt to work independently, they also need our help. Even strong students may have trouble adopting a critical lens, sometimes because the very same compliant, uncomplaining nature that has made them successful in school also makes them reticent about detecting problems in their social worlds. Whole-class assisted performance allows the teacher to begin inducting students into the desired way of seeing. After a shared event, like yesterday's pep rally or assembly, a disturbance in the hall today, or a field trip, it's useful to spend first a few minutes of a minilesson orally constructing critical questions and perspectives, then asking students to write to extend their thinking, then asking them to discuss with a partner the angle they adopted in their notebook entry. Taking a walk together around the neighborhood, or even just around the campus, provides a chance to focus everyone's attention on critical reflection if the walk is followed up with time for writing and discussion. Photography and videotape provide media for bringing the world into the classroom. Taped news segments, short excerpts of shows, and student- or teacher-produced images of provocative scenes from the world can help students tune their attention to areas of experience they might not yet have considered. These whole-class strategies, which early on might need more than a minilesson to complete in any satisfying way, provide support for the large group to catch on to the intellectual process we are setting in motion in the class.

Of course, in a writing workshop, much assisted performance occurs in teacher conferences with individual students. Often, in writers' notebooks, students have summarized events without doing much critical reflection about them. A helpful conference, in such a case, is a collaborative conversation that brings out the potential political themes in the event and leaves the student writing into that same sort of thinking.

Early student attempts at being critical often tend to be over-simplified opinions or complaints, rather than a more complex analysis of a social problem. In conference with writers at that stage of development, the teacher helps the student consider the problem from

multiple perspectives, not in order to crush the writer's own view, but to allow the issue to develop more facets. When a student has begun to develop a catalogue of social ills, a useful conference may involve imagining together possible alternatives or remedies to the problem, especially planning the ways one could, by gathering other people together around the concern, begin working to make it better. As some of these conferences become successful, these same writers, by sharing with the class what they have learned, can provide a demonstration for others.

Reflective Conversation

Regular appointments in which students are asked to give an account of how they have been working toward heightened awareness of social issues in their writing help to keep student attention focused on the goal. If I know that, at the end of today's writing time, I'm going to have to write a note, talk to a partner, or report to the class about what I've been trying to do in my critical writing-to-think, I'm more likely to make sure my work gives me something valuable to say. Simple questions can begin complex discussions:

- What kinds of topics do you notice yourself getting passionate about?
- What is giving you trouble about this kind of thinking?
- If you were going to teach someone to do the kind of writing we've been working on, what would be important to tell them?
- Which strategies have you tried so far in your notebook, and which ones do you need to work on?
- Who tried something new today?
- What topics have you already written about that you want to write more about?
- What are we learning at this point?

Such conversations are more than share sessions. They help the teacher monitor students' constructs. They allow students to self-assess and name their own thinking and learning. They represent the community's ongoing collaboration toward the values informing this work.

Rereading for Themes and Possibilities

Once students have at least ten notebook entries focused on social issues, noticings, and questions, they should be able to reread their notebooks for themes. The question with which they read is something like: What has been capturing my attention? They may find that gender issues have been foremost in their minds, or they might realize that they have tended to write about the struggles of the poor. Perhaps they have focused often on the ways they and their friends are isolated from each other in school, or maybe they are concerned about the possibility of a war breaking out in some region of the world. Environmental concerns, looks-ism in the media, or care for the elderly may have come up, even tangentially, in several entries, taking on new importance as they take shape in the writer's mind on this rereading. Some students may realize, upon rereading their recent entries, that they have never written about the issues they care most about, and so they might need to turn their attention in a new direction now, making several entries about something that matters to them. By surveying the journey of thought they have made recently, writers allow a topic to choose them; confronted with the evidence of their own attentive noticing, they may realize for the first time that there are political concerns they care about.

Perhaps it is obvious that writers' rereading of their notebooks should not be limited to the entries they have made since the class formally began turning its attention to social critique. Because political issues—imbalances, silences, associations—are everywhere, constantly present in everyone's life, even earlier notebook entries that at first seemed like "personal" stories or thoughts also contain possibly critical material. To spot the political potential in personal writing, students need to reread these entries employing lenses similar to those they've been applying to the world:

■ Embedded within some entries might be issues of *fairness and setting things straight*. Very often, the impulse to write was the complaint that some adult action was unfair, but in the margins or in a new entry, students can develop their ideas about how things can be made more fair.

■ Some entries lend themselves to *trying on the perspectives of others*. Perhaps the student has already begun, writing, "maybe she thought that . . ." If not, the student can look for opportunities to consider an event or situation from multiple points of view. This is helpful because, in many ways, it is the essence of imagining toward social action.

■ Some entries may be able to lead the writer to think about questions of *what people need for happiness and well-being*. What is it that makes it possible to have a good life? Does everybody need the same things? Who has those things and who does not? How could it be possible for more people to participate in a happy, well-lived life?

■ It is more frequently possible than one would think to find opportunities to *follow the money* in student writing. After all, many of the events that excite them or upset them have economic underpinnings. Focusing thinking on money itself, where it comes from and where it goes, can lead toward important socially critical perspectives.

■ Naturally, a critical habit of mind involves *questioning authority*. Fortunately for our purposes, it is also an adolescent habit of mind, and so we can help students to use their rebellious impulses productively in their political thinking. They may ask themselves: Why is this so? Who benefits from this? Who says it has to be this way?

■ *Feelings of anger and indignation* often contain implicit critique beneath them. It is sometimes difficult, but always important, to help students differentiate the anger that stems from their own sense of entitlement from a more righteous indignation in response to unfairness. *Feelings of empathy and compassion* are the positive face of social critique and may be just as useful in helping students to imagine themselves doing something to help someone else.

■ One could probably read every entry in a writer's notebook as embodying a theme of *identity and affiliation*. Writing that is for-the-writer often wrestles with issues of what sort of person the writer wants to be, or how she wants to view herself. Becoming a particular sort of person involves figuring out which other people I most want to be like. Who we

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are is partly a function of what team we are on.

■ Seeds of social action can be found in any entry that involves getting people together to do something. Thinking about *collective action*, even if it is not especially political in purpose, can help students draw on familiar experiences in order to imagine coming together with others to explore and pursue more complex common social agendas. Entries about baseball teams may provide the vision for ways of gathering people together to improve the quality of the water in the town.

■ Personal entries often, implicitly, carry themes of *difference*. The realization that we are not all alike provides many of the axes along which we affiliate, and also brings attention to many social inequalities that need addressing. Socially penetrating differences may occur along the lines of family structure, culture, race, sexuality, class, gender, or age. Naturally, just the noticing of difference, or even an extended analysis of difference, does not dictate what is to be done about it.

From Listening to the World to Talking Back

I have focused in this article on the thinking that might lead to social action, but I hope it is clear that this work in a writer's notebook, to be complete, has to lead to writing for readers. Students need to follow through on their initial thoughts with the inquiry process and the writing process, individually and collaboratively. In so doing, they say to readers in the real world: "Look at this! I've been noticing and questioning this thing that is happening in the world. I want you to notice it and question it, too. And I want us to work together to make it better." Writing for social action is thus a conversation with the world, involving both listening and answering, about how we all live together in the world.

We want students to be able to continue their dialogues with the world beyond the time that we know them, carrying what they learn in our classroom community out into the other communities through which they move in their lives. In order to do so, they need to know how to identify problems and possibilities, to think about given realities while envisioning better potential worlds. Maxine Greene has called for "teaching to the end of arousing a consciousness of membership, active and participant membership in a society of unfulfilled promises—teaching for . . . a wide-awakeness that might make injustice unendurable" (1998, p. xxx). This consciousness, this wide-awakeness can be born in students' writing in notebooks, if they use the work in the notebook as a lens with which to examine their world. It is time for us as teachers to invite students to wake up to their world in their writing to think.

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