Developing Socially Productive Communication Within the Secondary ELA Classroom
Methods and Principles for Encouraging Student Voice

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Abstract: Facilitating the development of socially relevant communicative skills in the secondary English language arts (ELA) classroom helps to guide the coursework towards personal relevance and usefulness for the students. It also encourages participation and engagement for students who might not find value in ELA content matter. This approach allows students to develop skills that are useful to them outside of the classroom: in their social lives, family relations and career navigations. Guiding their own personal voice through expressive writing and effectively sharing their ideas with others (through discussion formats and the instructor's openness to student input) are the key components of this approach. This article expands upon the principles and methods an instructor can use to engage students and provide them with personal value in the ELA content matter.

Introduction

In 2014, a struggling high school in the lowest-performing school district in Rochester, New York was preparing for a forced closure. That year, the graduation rate was 33 percent. There were 2,400 suspensions. Average daily attendance was 77 percent. In lieu of closure, the school chose to take part in a five-year reform option offered by the state.

Five years later, this high school was on their way towards their highest-ever count of graduating seniors. How did they do it? This shift took place because the school began to incorporate student voice into all of its proceedings. East High School formed systems from the classroom up to administration that allowed students to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, be acknowledged, and create change in the way their education was run (Marsh, 2020).

Giving students a voice in their school proceedings is incredibly important not only for their success in school, but for their development into adulthood. If a student knows that their opinions and personal expressions are, in fact, valued by the systems they depend on, this creates a secure, confident, well-functioning human being. East High School's success is not only in improving the performance and engagement of their students, but in teaching them to develop as participatory members of society.

Developing Participatory Communication

In its most basic sense, the ELA subject matter is rooted in education around methods of communication. The guiding principle is that students should develop to use their voice and receive others effectively. The ELA instructor's role is to facilitate

this growth and provide the means to develop socially relevant forms of personal communication. Encouraging personal expression through reflective writing, interpersonal skills through collaborative discussions, and student input in classroom procedures are all ways to facilitate the growth of socially productive communicative skills.

Encouraging Student Voice

ELA instructors and school culture should work to encourage student expression at every opportunity. This is especially effective in a writing classroom. Students should be given opportunities to create and express themselves in a wide variety of mediums, and that work given recognition and celebration.

Writing is often beneficial to the writer on a personal level. In expressive writing, the author shares their thoughts, feelings and experiences with the reader. It becomes an outlet for the writer's unique voice. Reflective writing goes one step further to offer new insights, doing the "work" of processing emotions and transforming them into a clear message (Gallagher, 2011). For adolescents, in a time of self-discovery, in marking the difference between 'I' and 'You,' expressive and reflective activities are invaluable. They help form the values of the adult that the young person will grow into. Some of the more disadvantaged students are the ones who will most benefit from an expressive outlet. Dealing with not only developing into personhood, but family challenges, the toll of poverty and inherited struggles can leave a person with a lot to process and sort through. Additionally, modern cultural influences; the constantly available input of social media, internet surfing, television and film streaming, these all pull individuals away from the time and space needed for these reflective processes (Gallagher, 2011). It is more important now than ever before to encourage this expressive and reflective writing.

Everyday writing can easily be socially and culturally relevant to students. Consider adapting any short bellringer writing prompt to a Twitter post or short Facebook post. Bellringers are fantastic opportunities to draw a little bit of the student's personal selves into the classroom. A short reflective writing assignment: what do you feel the most gratitude for today? Or: if you won the Ohio "Vax-a-Million" drawing, what would you do with your winnings? They can put themselves in the shoes of a main character facing a dilemma in a current reading and create a video blog to portray the character talking through the process. Think about the ways students communicate in their own lives and bring the ELA content to them. It is already a part of their lives - using what they know makes the content that much more accessible.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with stretching into writing a good poem - but since this can be intimidating, some "warm-ups" are helpful. Students can write a copy change poem, as mentioned above. They can analyze their favorite song lyrics, and then write their own - perhaps one verse at a time. They can use a reflective bellringer to write a short story - or build on classic myth with their own personal re-telling (perhaps one recently adapted into a new film or series). They can write in private journals regularly for a participation grade. They can write letters to each other, to parents, administrators, or even political officials and other figures. The more often a student writes, the more their communication style improves. Expres-

sive and reflective writing allows for the emergence of the student's personal voice. Once it emerges fully, it can be adapted and colorfully flexed into any medium, over time. Yes, even a research paper! These writings become that much more fun to write, and enjoyable to read.

Celebration and recognition are large motivators for student success, as seen in the previous story about the young poet. Several universities have found it greatly benefits first-year students, who most often "fall off the books," to have an installation that celebrates the work they did in their first year. This can also easily be incorporated at the high school level. The "Celebration of Student Writing" is formed and expressly designed by the students themselves (Carter, 2017). Students that are unsure of their abilities, don't yet know their own talent or where they "fit" can find a lot of personal meaning in these installations. Possibilities to consider are e-zines and publications, or an artistic showcase like a "writing fair." This can be incorporated near the end of the year and promoted throughout. Its great advantage is giving students recognition for their hard work, but also being a student-driven project.

Growing Interpersonal Skills

Many schools and individual classrooms have problem-solving or analytical discussions at the center of their coursework. This can be engaging and fun for the students, build connections between them, and build confidence in public speaking. It's no secret that group discussions are productive in any subject area but especially in a subject area surrounding communication. There are some obstacles to this, especially in the secondary classroom. The instructor might feel they can't force students to talk, and it never really seems to go anywhere. Or, certain students always seem to carry the weight of the discussion, while others rarely participate.

Previous paradigms for grading discussion activities are typically based upon volume of input into the discussion ("contribute something meaningful three times for an A"). This individual method of grading might work, to some degree, but there is an even better way: a method that works to invite cross-categorical thinking and develop social-emotional skills.

Consider assessing the quality of the overall discussion, not the individual. What would be assessed is the how effective the collaboration is within the discussion and if the discussion was effective (Wiggins, 2020). This is what ELA instructor Alexis Wiggins does in her secondary classroom using group-graded discussion. The whole class gets one grade. Their reward depends upon the success of their collaboration. She reports the result was an immediate shift in the quality of discussions. The overall atmosphere was warmer and included the whole of the group rather than producing the cold environment that often comes with competition with each other for talk-time within the discussion, (Wiggins, 2020). Not only did it result in much better discussions, but the students were building skills that she indicates employers often desire and require from new hires. Wiggins (2020) suggests that a group grade for discussion allows for the development of things like strong people management, coordinating with others, and emotional intelligence. As any new teacher will notice, feeling comfortable enough to share personal thoughts and feelings is no easy task for a teenager. Through peer support--working together to achieve the highest grade--the students themselves create a safe, comfortable

space for sharing ideas and building upon them. This, in turn, deepens connections between them and builds social awareness. Wiggins (2020) shares some formats she has created through her classroom experience and research for group-graded discussion, such as the spider web, and these can be explored in her article listed under References.

It is also important to consider the classroom environment from day one: the ways in which an instructor can create the space for students to feel comfortable expressing their feelings and opinions with one another and their instructor. "Ice-breaking" activities, and the quality of the activity, should be considered in every instructor's planning. Food Science Professor Shelley J. Schmidt (2018) suggests an excellent activity in her article: "Creating a Classroom Culture Built on Community." Schmidt places students into groups of four or five and challenges them to find four things they each have in common with one another (Schmidt, 2018). This is very effective, because not only does it encourage connectedness but forces discussion about a wide variety of topics to land upon the four similarities. Then, the groups find something that is particularly unique about each individual. A spokesperson will share each of these things with the rest of the class at the end of the period (Schmidt, 2018). These types of activities help the instructor get to know the students, the students get to know one another, and build a sense of comfort. It sends a message to the students that the instructor cares and wants to get to know them. Most instructors strive to have a rapport with their students, but it should be stressed that this is highly important if the goal is to encourage communication and interacting with one another on some probing, reflective questions surrounding ELA content matter.

Student Input

Regarding student comfort, engagement, and participation, it is important to note that a student will feel most comfortable and accepted in a classroom when they know that their individual input is desired and encouraged.

Returning to East High School in the introduction, the administration understandably faced challenges implementing their reform of incorporating student voice into their policies. One of the very first policies to be implemented after this shift was a uniform dress code. This move was widely opposed by the students. Unsurprisingly, the 400 students in the auditorium at the time of the announcement booed. The Assistant Principal Shalonda Garfield thought there was going to be a riot. The principal just stood there and listened allowing for the student reaction and then the students and administrators talked about it (Marsh, 2020). Students continued to advocate for themselves through the new avenues the school offered them: meetings with the principal, participation in the school's governing council, town hall meetings, and even protesting by showing up in personal clothes. A year later, the policy was reversed (Marsh, 2020).

Notice how the principal addressed the negative feedback she received from the students. She listened, and then continued the conversation through several avenues. This school learned from their past failures (2,600 suspensions in one year!) and did not seek to impose an external will upon the students. Instead, they shared that their place was one of facilitation, of leveling and advocacy, not imposition. In

the end, this administration's openness to hearing student opinion and allowing it to make changes in their policies led to their success, not only in keeping their doors open, vastly reducing punitive rates and doubling graduation rates, but in being an advocate for the youth they are placed to serve.

The ELA classroom can take from this example to incorporate student input in many ways: through the choice of texts, unit plans and lessons, assignments and differentiated projects. Small choices implemented throughout the lesson can be used to allow for student participation. Surveys can be implemented to best serve the students. The class can even form classroom rules, procedures and policies together, at the discretion of the instructor. The most important item is the instructor's openness to student input. It is important that any feedback, positive or negative, is received by the instructor, and then steps taken to form an action plan that benefits everyone.

An indispensable tool in any instructor's toolbox needs to be mentioned here. Marshall Rosenberg developed a method called Non-Violent Communication to help facilitate the way people relate to one another. Its effectiveness is in increasing the empathy of both parties involved. Rosenberg says that unmet needs produce responses like criticism, judgment, and anger (Rosenberg, 2015). When an instructor can approach negative feedback from students by seeking out the unmet need, it helps them to stay out of judgment and focus on solutions. Principles of this method can also be brought into lesson plans to help improve student communication. This method incorporates principles similar to the reform of East High School, whose administration and staff might agree with Rosenberg's principle that suggests that blame and punishment rarely produce what is positive and inspirational to others (Rosenberg, 2015). Instead, instructors should be a model for receiving others' expressions empathically, thereby building a balanced and equitable system that incorporates student input. There are workshops and a number of resources online for Nonviolent Communication, including Youtube videos and worksheets, but the best place to start is the book: Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life (Rosenberg, 2014). The entire process is bound to be one of personal and professional evolution.

Conclusion

The ELA instructor should consider the importance of their subject matter in relation to the lives of their students, and the adults they will grow to be. If the purpose of ELA is to create effective communicators, then the curriculum should be put into the context of the type of communication that is needed to be a successful student, professional, friend, family member, and citizen. Gaining student input into this process is important. What do the students want from the class? How do you know? Having personal input in the procedures of the classroom builds personal investment. This provides a platform for developing needed skills through the student's own agency. Students who don't believe the ELA content is relevant to their lives will find new ways to develop in the classroom and find new value in the instruction. Then, if their achievements and personal expressions are recognized and celebrated, they are certain to thrive.

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