

Volume 3 - Issue 3
March 2009

Publishing with Students

*At Big Sky High School Chelsea Boyfield, student teacher, checks Dove Ashby's letter before it is sent out acknowledging submission. Students at Big Sky publish both *ERIE* and *Montana Writing Project*.*

ERIE BIG SKY
a literary magazine

The Practice of Teaching

- 5 ◇ "One Teacher's Perspective" Lorilee Evans-Lynn
- 9 ◇ "From 'Show & Tell' to 'Write and Publish'" Shirley M. Olson
- 24 ◇ "Improving Writing Through Real Audiences" Christa Umphrey

Words from our Writers

- 3 ◇ "Publication: It's Like an Addiction" Billie Loewen
- 4 ◇ "Lessons of Love & Death" Donna Miller
- 11 ◇ "Questions of Sacrifice" Lorrie Henrie-Koski

Announcements & Updates

- 2 ◇ Call for Submissions

J
the
Montana
W
R
Writing
N
Project
A
T

From Our Writers

Submission Deadline: May 1, 2009

Publication Date: June 2009

The Montana Writing Project encourages teachers to see themselves, regardless of their grade level or content area focus, as teachers of writing and also as writers themselves. For this issue please consider sharing some of the pieces you are working on which may or may not relate to your teaching. What genres are you experimenting with? What issues are you sorting out through your writing? Look through your writer's notebook and find something you'd be willing to share. Also, we are interested in the writing work you that are doing with students and welcome you to select one or two of your students' pieces to submit for possible publication. This issue is a celebration of the diverse writers and writing that comprise the Montana Writing Project.

And as always, *The Montana Writing Project Journal* welcomes submissions for any of the following areas. There is always room for quality work that does not fit the categories or the current thematic issue.

The Practice of Teaching: As you work to teach writing, what methods get results? You might build an article from a demonstration lesson or a successful classroom unit. Reflect on what pedagogical practices have proven effective and share some ideas or strategies that we can put into play in our own classrooms. The length of the submissions for this section could vary wildly. They might be brief pieces of no more than a paragraph or two that outline a successful lesson, but they might also materialize as lengthier pieces that explain a whole unit and give some theoretical background or support for your work.

Fresh Insight: What is happening in education that you feel you must say something about? Use this as a forum to share your views on writing education. There are many things going on at the classroom level up to the national level that we as teachers are thinking about, wanting to change, or are hopeful or angry about. This is a platform to expand and articulate some of those ideas. What important issues are those around us (or are we ourselves) not thinking enough about?

Teachers as Writers: Amid the daily chaos of teaching, what personal writing have you been able to do? What are you ready to publish? What better way to encourage all of us to continue to be writers than to offer one another some of the work we are doing. Submissions of any genre are welcome.

Book reviews: What titles have you found useful when working on writing? Consider reviewing one of your favorite texts to give others an idea of the content and approach that they can expect from the author. We would be especially interested in fairly new releases with which others may not yet be familiar.

Original Photography: Share images from your classroom, professional development, or photos that complement any of your writing submissions. Images should be sent as jpeg image files with a resolution of at least 1200 by 1800 pixels. Anyone who appears in the photo should be identified, along with any other relevant caption information such as a brief explanation of what is depicted, the photographer's name, and an approximate date the photo was taken.

Announcements/ Upcoming Events: Please pass on any information about upcoming events, opportunities, or any other information that would be of interest and use to the Montana Writing Project Community.

Upcoming Issue:

Implementing Indian Education for All

Submission Deadline: August 1, 2009

Publication Date: September 2009

Submission Guidelines:

- Send any submissions to montana.writing.project@gmail.com.
- Manuscripts are only accepted in digital form saved as an RTF, Mac Pages, or Microsoft Word file.
- Do not embed image files or diagrams in your text files. Please send them as separate attachments.
- In general, manuscripts should not exceed 2,500 words.

Publication: It's like an Addiction

Billie Loewen

I attended an extremely fortunate high school. We not only had a large student newspaper and journalism program, but a huge creative writing program which published two literary magazines each year. Our newspaper and literary magazine classes were primarily student run, which meant school officials trusted us enough to allow us to publish as we wished. We had dedicated teachers that went far beyond their duties as high school educators to make sure these projects were successful. For me, writing had always been my release. Since the sixth grade, I knew I wanted to be a journalist. Now, as a freshman in college, double majoring in journalism and creative writing, I attribute my continued love of writing to the opportunities I had in high school. By my junior year of high school, I had been published in our student paper, our in house literary magazine, and our local paper, the Missoulian. Publishing opportunities got me hooked on writing. Publishing gave me the confidence that I needed to continue writing.

For me, publishing gave me a greater sense of responsibility. The idea of publication urged me to find honesty within my writing, to clear my facts, and be sure that my writing fit together. I had been an editor of my student paper for three years, and by my senior year of high school I took on the position of Senior Editor for the Sun Journal. By this point I had written and edited an array of journalism pieces, however, like with most student papers, little of the content was very controversial. I was also writing for our local paper in a student section known as Represent. It was at this time that I took on my first big story. It dealt with student rights and whether a student's Halloween costume, which had caused quite a stir within the school halls, was breaking any school rules. The costume, a white sheet with a pointed hat and belt was ghastly familiar to a KKK dress, though the students in the costume argued they were ghosts. My story contained interviews with one of the two students who had worn the costumes, teachers, and other students. It wasn't until this story that I finally understood the importance of careful editing, of being fair in my writing, and making sure the piece was polished and honest as it went to print. Because I knew the story would be published in a paper with readership in the thousands, I felt a heightened responsibility to make sure every element was completely honest, that my opinions about the subject were eliminated. For me, publication pushed my writing to a new level. It brought something out of me that I never would have done before. It made me research, double and triple check facts and quotations, and gather multiple editors together to make sure my story was as perfect as it could be. And it felt great to turn in my most complete piece. I received loads of feedback on the story, which was mostly that it had broadened readers' views of the subject, brought clarity, and shared both sides. Without publication I never could have learned in high school how to write a story of that caliber.

I've seen the effects of publishing in another totally separate way. At Big Sky High School, we publish two literary magazines. One, Aerie Big Sky, is a collaboration of pieces from students just within our high school. The other, Aerie International, collected pieces from high school students around the world. As Editor of Aerie International and Co-Editor of Aerie Big Sky, one of my jobs was to make decisions on the pieces we would publish in the magazines. With hundreds of submissions and less than fifty pages designated for poems and short stories, we could only choose a few of the pieces we received. We first eliminated pieces still clearly in draft form, or pieces which lacked the clarity we were looking for. We looked for pieces which, because we had gone through the process ourselves, we knew had been carefully edited to perfect the precision, timing, and overall effect of the piece. When we finally got to a point where we had chosen the pieces for print, we as student editors were excited to let the authors know. For many students, especially students from countries like Turkmenistan, Russia, and England, Aerie International was their first opportunity to be published. Their excitement at the news was



Billie Loewen graduated from Big Sky High School in June 2008 after being named High School Journalist of the Year for the state of Montana. Her senior year, she was Senior Editor of her high school paper, the Sun Journal, which was awarded Best High School Paper in Montana. She edited two literary magazines, Aerie International, awarded the Highest Award and Aerie Big Sky, Nominated for the Highest Award, by NCTE's Program to Recognize Excellence in Student Literary Magazines. Billie is a freshman at the University of Montana and is traveling this summer to work with Compassion International to help build schools and improve education in northern Uganda.

worth the time before, after, and during school that the editors had contributed to make the magazines possible. In our Aerie Big Sky magazine, the published students were in a similar position. For many, they had never been published, but doing so gave them an incredible sense of accomplishment in their work, and their writing. Many of the Aerie Big Sky students didn't see themselves as good writers, but by having pieces published, many were pushed to continue writing, and continue editing and polishing pieces into a completed state.

To me, publication is an essential step in writing development. Publication pushes writing in new directions and allows students to feel a sense of pride in what they are writing. If only every student could be as fortunate as I was in high school, there would be an incredible influx in the quality of high school writing. I also believe that students would stick with writing longer if they felt the encouragement of publication. It's like an addiction, if you experience being published once, you strive to feel it again. Wouldn't that be a beautiful change? High school students addicted to writing.



Donna Miller teaches in Chinook and is also assistant co-director of the Missoula Summer Institute. She wrote this piece "Lessons of Love and Death" last summer where she was a part of the Columbus Summer Institute leadership team.

Lessons of Love and Death

To benefit others, to give the gift of survival, perhaps these objectives explain why my son, my only precious blood, wishes to join the Air Force as an officer to fly for his country, a rapere, like the peregrine falcon who swoops from river cliffs.

In protest, I have cursed the patriotism party line with its promises of gallantry and heroism, its talk of just causes and of proudly bearing loss. I have known tears, both choked back and freed. How does one die gloriously when what remains is the grimness of death, the pain of loss so deep that the womb screams its emptiness, the belly swoops in shock, an x-ray apron settles on the chest, and the heart pounds with a dizzying whirlwind of anger?

Because there is no consolation for such bereavement, I can not willingly give my son to the war effort. How would I survive minus my blood? Although these decisions aren't mine to make, the passions of another not in my control, in reproachful moments, I still search my elder's role and wonder where I wandered astray in guiding my son as he interpreted his coming of age vision.

But some power, some force must flow through the blood of certain people that they feel inspired, that they believe their sacrifice will redeem others. They possess incredible confidence, faith, deeply held hope, courage, and a love so great that they would blind their ponies and ride them off a cliff like the legendary Crow warriors, hunters, who upon returning from a long hunting trip, found all their people—their wives and children—dead from smallpox. Overcome with grief, sure that they would join their families and friends in the next life, and hoping to put an end to the pestilence, the warriors committed an act of selfless martyrdom.

I find that martyrdom mentality troubling; it escapes my frame of reference somewhat. Maybe that missing link, my inability to go to that place, identifies a weakness in me, a selfish tendency. Even the sorrels of C Company at the Battle of Little Bighorn gave their bodies to build a barrier; they served as breast plates for their riders, a buffer against the bullets and arrows when soldiers and Indian clashed against their cultures, when fanatics on both sides prevented unity, fighting for real estate both saw as God's gift. Pragmatic and compassionate, I shun fanaticism, and leaps of faith are hard to take—the feeling of nothing solid beneath my feet, the loss of control, the blindness of an unknown outcome. My philosophies align more with those of Chief Plenty Coups who envisioned cultures living in unity through education or with Black Elk who invites us to "know the power that is peace."

As I reflect, Sherman Alexie's words whisper their way into my consciousness: "It is all love and death," and I realize he may have penned the truest six word memoir in defining life's inextricable links. In spite of all life's polarities and mysteries that I may never embrace, I do know the warrior's depth of love, a love so strong that I'd rather be dead than lose my son. This feeling suffocates me as I sit on the edge of my own sacrifice cliff and ask, "Why must peace be purchased by blood?"

In lamentation, my eyes lift to the heavens where I spy a falcon, alert as a scout, scanning, searching, until his eyes fasten, harder than love, on some distinct rustling. He dives, dropping like a saber to the silvery green sagebrush to seize a mouse. I marvel at the thrust of his feet, his keen accuracy, his milk chocolate beauty, and imagine death wrapping itself around me, soft as feathers.

--Donna L. Miller, Summer 2008

One Teacher's Perspective on Writing, Revision, and the Power of Publishing

Lorilee Evans-Lynn

*Publishing and celebrating writing are essential phases of writing.
Writing becomes real when it has an audience.*

Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing
Dan Kirby, Dawn Latta Kirby, Tom Liner

I first determined the power of peer editing, revising, and publishing in my early years teaching poetry writing. It probably shouldn't have come as a surprise that revision would take on new significance when I became the literary magazine advisor and had a magazine to publish. In the end, that fact more than any other altered how I approached all writing with students, and was conceivably why they have tolerated me driving them so hard.

"I don't read first drafts."

Peer editing can exact tricky maneuvering, and students know it better than anyone. Chelsea, one of my advanced creative writing and literary magazine students, identifies how sensitive editing of poetry can be, particularly at the beginning. "Peer editing is awkward. . . You have to be so careful about how you react, what you say." She appreciates the rewards when students move beyond those first self-conscious sessions, however. "Peer editing has made it easier for me to accept criticism and criticize my own work. I am able to look at writing from multiple perspectives: Is it easy to understand? Does my intended message get across? This applies to all forms of writing in all my classes." For those students who hang in, the returns are enormous.

That first poem of the year and its subsequent drafts is the tough one. I'm meticulous in our first rounds to explain why some editing choices might improve their work. I also ensure the poem has transitioned from journal status to public arena. Student journals are private. I give them prompts with free rein. I explicitly teach students to approach poetry writing forays as more or less stream of consciousness, to allow the words to take them where they will and to set aside, for at least a few minutes, what people might think. I assure them we will employ every rule they know about good writing, but for the time being, I urge them to chuck their brains into the physics room across the hall where Mr. Harkins will tend to them for the next 30 minutes.

When they decide which journal poem to work on as a formal piece, they enter the public arena. I offer students anywhere from 4-7 writing opportunities in their journals. They choose to bring one or two to class to edit, revise, polish, and ultimately submit to our literary magazine. Every one of those pieces will go into the *Aerie* submissions box. When we're ready to begin editing, I haul out the 6 +1 Traits of Writing and use the rewriting of poems to explicitly focus on conventions, sentence fluency, word choice, ideas and content, organization, and voice. Especially word choice and sentence fluency. It's all there, and it's often easier to teach those 6 +1 Traits effectively in smaller chunks on a piece of writing in which students are personally invested.

Admittedly, students do not immediately buy into the seriousness with which I approach revision. No one before has asked them to rewrite down to the studs, if you will, but once they see the results, they begin to approach their writing as something that develops in stages. Alissa, who has been my student for two years in creative writing and is our *Aerie International* Managing Editor, explains rewriting from a student perspective and perhaps why students are willing to stick with it to the final draft: "I do my best writing in *Aerie* because I know I will be rewriting and possibly reading and submitting. Although rewriting can be tedious, it has been a great learning experience. It helps to get specific, direct feedback on your writing rather than just turning a rough draft in, getting ten points written in the gradebook and being done with it. With each draft you learn ways to improve your writing you can use in the future."

Clicking In: A Mere Mortal Wrote this Poem?

As we write, both publicly and privately, we also: read professional poets; I share some of my work, both raw and revised; and we share other students'



Lorilee Evans-Lynn, an English teacher at Big Sky High School in Missoula, Montana, teaches in a collaborative American Studies program with Kevin Ritchlin, a U.S. history and government teacher. She also teaches creative writing, advanced creative writing, and two literary magazine classes, *Aerie Big Sky*, and Big Sky High School's new international literary arts magazine, also edited by her students, *Aerie International*.

Journal of the Montana Writing Project

writing, particularly work published in our past literary magazines and Montana's k-12 literary magazine, *Signatures From Big Sky*. We discuss what they see in the published pieces, what they like, what impresses them, what surprises them. Surprises always emerge. The published poets are often the quiet ones who let others dominate class discussion. They are often seen as the least likely candidates for publication, and that alone turns heads.

I always provide models for the prompts, and I try to make first drafts the lowest stakes writing experience possible. I focus on the senses—what they can see, what they can smell, what they can hear, what they can taste, what they can touch—and I inform them they need never explain how they feel. If they focus on describing the experience and the place, what they are feeling will emerge naturally through voice and word choice. I keep that conversation on the front burner throughout the year, and we observe how it evolves in virtually every piece we read together.

This last week in my junior English American Studies class, I set out six stacks of our *Aerie Big Sky* literary magazines, past and present, and our brand new literary arts magazine, *Aerie International*. The task was to choose one magazine and read 10 minutes, after which we would write. I was in the process of building our bank of journal poetry and we were on writing experience #4. At the end of 10 minutes, what happened was what always happens: “I had no idea Kelsey could write like that. . . . Most of the poems I read were about personal experiences I could relate to The poems all used great images I love this line of Emily's, ‘In the evenings I unfurl my body/under the crabapple tree. . . . Where was Mike's photo taken? I think I know where that is at El Mar.’ Every year I am lucky to have a younger brother or sister in class who tells a behind-the-scenes story: ‘That picture on the last page took Rachel forever. She stippled my name and my Mom and Dad's into the leaves. You can see them on the original’ The real surprise this year was when I read Jesse's poem aloud in class and it referred to Cody, who was sitting in the room, a connection even I made only in that moment:

The moon is a luminous orange
I long to devour. Miles away,
sulfur and radiant heat rise
from Horseback Ridge.
I taste ashes. I have no proof
but that of sight. Cody sees it too
as we near Missoula. It's not the moon,
it's the sun and it's red
and it has just passed its highest point.

Perhaps best of all is when I confessed to them that the poem they just read, the one above, was written from a prompt to which they had already written, and many of the poems in the magazines originated from prompts I either had or would give them. That's when something clicked in. That's when something always clicks in. Who can resist the idea of being in print? When they discover these poems are written by mere mortals and they have the same tools and support at the ready, they're caught, hook, line, and sinker. By the time of this particular writing opportunity, these students had written a poem for a contest our *Aerie* literary magazine class sponsored in November, several journal poems, and they were beginning to feel more comfortable with this odd new way of approaching writing. The prompts they'd already completed included: a winter memory; the model a poem of mine about my children; an early memory for which I used “Oranges” by Gary Soto as a model; and a prompt called “20 Little Poetry Projects” from *The Practice of Poetry* edited by Robin Behn and Chase Twitchell, which straps them into a poetry straitjacket of sorts and forces them to include metaphor, senses, and very unexpected juxtapositions of images. The excerpt above is from that prompt.

For the present prompt, I sent them to the whiteboard to plaster it with words from the literary magazines they held in their hands. The task was to allow the words to take them where they would. I reminded them to look for unexpected combinations such as: if they use the word sand don't follow it with dune; if veil, don't put it over the eyes of a woman; if bury, don't make it a dog, parakeet or grandparent. Then I modeled an impromptu poem aloud following the words on the board. It's fun and strange for them, if maybe a little scary, and it definitely doesn't make sense at the outset. That's what I want. To shake up the marbles, to help them drill some holes in the box, to take a hiatus from convention, to crack open the egg. Here's how it might look: “The **week's shirts** were here on the doorstep, not the **shelf** where **I remember admiring** them like Daisy admiring Gatsby's. But this was no mansion, the **silo** rising like a **bruise** against a sky that promised only blue. It was the **week to remember**, the **wind** carrying sand like **jewels** and **spilling** them into my **dreams**. We chased the **rats** that summer and set the **table** with **need**. We would remember the way the train moved through town without stopping.”

I don't have students indicate the words in any way as I have done above, I simply bolded them here so it might be easier to see how the sentences emerged from the jumble of words on the board. Students can change endings and use whatever words they wish, though I encourage them to use many, hoping the words will coax them out of their familiar voices, patterns, and preconceived notions about what a poem is. This time when I asked students about what they wrote, most said it was easier and felt better about what emerged. This from students who do not like writing without planning exactly what's going down on the page, students who are not used to checking their overachieving selves at the door or allowing a white board full of words to have their way with them. Interestingly, the “average” students often have an easier time of it. When they get the hang of it, though, when they allow themselves to let go, they all like the way the words free them.

Beginning the Conversation

When I feel like we have enough journal poems to choose from, we gather their pieces together and observe what has happened in their writing from the first piece to the most recent. They gather in small groups and talk to each other about what they see. Each student decides on one piece, in some cases two, to take through the drafting process. I make it

clear that their favorite writing may not always their best—they are to choose the poem with the strongest images, the strongest use of the senses, the one with details and specifics rather than generalities.

When it's time to edit, I might choose something of mine we can edit together. If I have a student piece that will work well—something initially strong but which will benefit from revision and whose author has enough experience to enjoy the process—we edit a student piece.

Then they peer edit. With poetry I have students remove their names and make a pile on a table in the room. The poems **MUST** be typed—it makes a significant difference in what emerges from editing. Their first order of business is to find the things they like and + them. They also comment on places they might not understand, circle words that could be stronger or ones that don't seem to work to the poem's advantage, and cut what might be redundant or unnecessary. Though I encourage them to make conventions corrections, they usually focus more on their first responses. Some of my students have actually begun to write on first drafts "I can't see that" rather than "that sounds so cool" when there's an abstraction they assume is brilliant because they don't understand it. That is a major achievement. They edit in a particular color (I have invested in colorful pens—they love them and it's easier to see who wrote what—never red) and they sign off with a comment or two and their names. Then the next editor. This is where they begin to have a conversation on the paper. They either agree or disagree with what has been written before. The intention is to give the author the most possible feedback to consider when rewriting. I want each piece to include the responses of 1-6 editors depending on how much writing can fit on the paper and still be useful.

The Poem on its Own Terms

It took me an embarrassingly long time to realize young writers could take what they learned in the revising of poetry and apply it to all writing. Hannah, *Aerie International Art and Photography Editor*, speaks for many of my students of her discoveries:

"After editing other people's writing it makes me more conscious of my sentence fluency and structure, of how it sounds from someone else's perspective . . . I can be more aware of the writer's perspective. I have an understanding of why they broke the sentences where they did, why they used certain words instead of others. Knowing the basics for structure and fluency carries me through extended writing assignments like research papers because I know where to stop and start an idea and how to get there in a polished manner."

Part of what fosters such real revision is abandoning the notion that a particular number of drafts constitute a finished product. In *The Writing Workshop: Working through the Hard Parts (And They're All Hard Parts)*, Katie Wood Ray speaks about what most students who enter our classes consider rewriting: "Students tend to think of revision almost exclusively as 'fixing what's wrong.' I struggle to help them understand that revision is more about seeing what else is possible in a draft: seeing what could be left out, what could be added, what could be cleverly worded, what other endings there might be. Revision is 'playing around with the possible' in a lot of ways." When young writers begin to see each piece on its own terms, each piece on its own particular "journey," as Ray calls it, investment shifts, and writing improves exponentially.

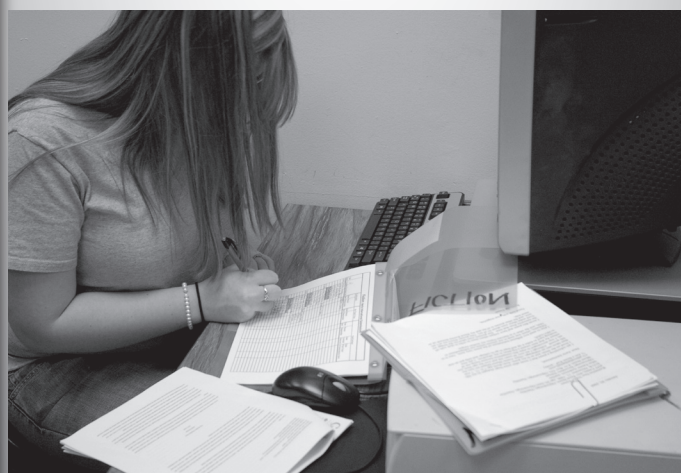
When they're first embarking on the editing process,



Students peer editing.



Creative writing students critique group poem performance readings



Caitlyn Brendal, Correspondence Editor, logging in new submissions.

writers, particularly ones who perceive themselves as pretty good, often disregard their peer's suggestions. It is not uncommon for me to come along in the next draft, make virtually the same suggestions, and point that out to the authors. As the year evolves, they begin to trust each other. They ask for my opinion when editors disagree. It's not magic and it doesn't produce finished work, but even if they don't know how to correct something, they're usually right that there's a problem. By the time those drafts hit my desk, significant reworking has taken place and both the students and poems are better prepared for my comments. What matters most, they improve.

In the last few years it has helped that I tell students I wouldn't work so hard on drafts that show little promise. I tell them the better something is, the harder I will push because I see in it something extraordinary. I don't say it directly, but we all know that publication is a possibility and that it's a greater possibility if they've done everything they can to improve their writing. We often compare numbers of drafts students are on and laugh about who claims current high count. The other thing I tell them is that if they trust me and work through those drafts, somewhere along the line magic occurs. It's different for every student, but something breaks loose and the writing moves to another level. It is guaranteed. I absolutely believe it is the combined effect of writing constantly for a variety of purposes, peer editing that assumes community and practice, serious revision, sharing and appreciating work of all students in the class through small and large groups, reading silently and aloud, and finally, when it's truly ready, submission for possible publication and readings, assured it's the student's best possible work.

We all know that peer editing is a lot of things, not always positive. Students who don't like peer editing have legitimate beefs. Hannah has less than glowing comments about her experiences with peer editing: "When I have gotten back papers that have been peer edited I often find mistakes in their corrections usually occurring in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. These mistakes aid neither the editor nor the editee but sometimes result in a worse paper than before. If the editee is perhaps ignorant of the incorrectness of the comments, then he or she replaces a potentially correctly spelled word with the incorrect suggestion of the editor." She's right. That does happen. Hannah, of course, is not the only person concerned about such possibilities. I know teachers who have given up peer editing precisely for those reasons. In the end I fought through those issues, primarily to rescue myself. To teach writing is a terrific commitment of time and creative energy, and I am constantly searching for ways to shift responsibility back to the student. That was when I built strategies into peer editing poetry, essays, and papers that I thought would benefit both student and teacher and which I hoped would combat the Hannah-factor.

What About Essays?

When peer editing essays or more conventional prose assignments in English, I provide precisely written guidelines for the assignment. Depending on the length of the piece, I might show examples of previous pieces or parts I'm focusing on. We often look at paragraphs that integrate quotations effectively and not so effectively. In senior papers, I might give 4 or 5 examples of introductions and conclusions, again in various levels of effectiveness. When it finally comes to the day of peer editing, I am very careful. All students with a typed draft ready to edit move to the left side of the room; all those who are not ready, for whatever reason, stay right. I hand out editing sheets to everyone, which follow the 6 Traits applied to the particular assignment. Then I create groups, usually of 4-5 students, ensuring at least two are strong writers. They must have 3-4 editors look at their paper—enough to begin a conversation and ensure that if they have a weak editor, they will also have a stronger one. They are graded for taking editing seriously, which means writing all over the paper. Their revised draft should earn a higher grade than it would had it not received suggestions from several editors.

Again, it's not perfect and plenty still remains to be addressed when the papers land on my desk, but it's often amazing what the students see. In the process they read other student's papers, they practice skills they're usually better at when looking at other's work, and I am intentionally building community. They are clearly in it together and they act like it. For big essay days, I have been known to bring milk and Graham Crackers, though I think the giant bags of Gummi Bears from Costco are their favorites. Over the year, the students get better and most of the time we avoid the Hannah-factor. By the time the third editor hits the paper there's a conversation in progress, and if someone has given bad advice, there's a far better chance someone else will catch it and ask for clarification.

With very weak students, I have tried a variety of things. Some students are in study skills classes and have outside help. In some cases I've lined up peer tutors. Occasionally I have waived peer editing and over the year attempt to pull students along so that at some point they are ready to dip their toes in a peer editing group. They also self-select. The not-yet-ready bunch on editing day work at catching up and have to edit on their own time. Unfortunately, it's a pretty safe bet they won't edit, even when they know I won't read their first drafts. Eventually, if it's the difference between handing in the paper or not, I surrender. If all the planets somehow align, the students who just need a kick in the butt see what happens on the first editing day and approach their homework differently in the next round. I wish I could say that happened more than it does.

No More Walls

The other major issue is the assignment. This fall my English classes read *Fools Crow*. We followed it with the study of a variety of issues that grew organically from our reading and discussions. The students' final assignment was to choose one of several topics and write a formal letter on behalf of their personal concern. The topics included Columbus Day as a federal holiday, protection of the Rocky Mountain Front, commemoration of the Baker Massacre of 1870, apologizing to America's native peoples, and the banning of *Fools Crow* in public schools. The students could write either in support of or against their issue. All were timely in that formal resolutions were before lawmakers at either the state or federal level.

In the past, I have had students write in response to the banning of *Fools Crow*. The first year we sent the letters to the Laurel School Board, where it was banned in March 1999. Two years later we sent letters to Hamilton where the father of a freshmen student at Hamilton High School had threatened to challenge the novel if his daughter were asked to read it her

AERIE INTERNATIONAL

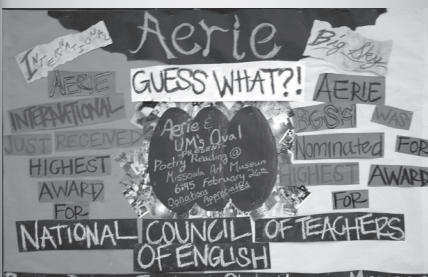
a literary arts magazine



In 2008, 489 schools submitted entries to the Program to Recognize Excellence in Student Literary Magazines; of those, 92 magazines were nominated for highest award with 59 selected to receive highest award, 67 Superior, 239 Excellent, and 77 Above Average. Aerie International was given the Highest Award and Aerie Big Sky was Superior, Nominated for Highest Award.



Lori Krause, Digital Editor, organizes incoming submissions



Aerie bulletin board

junior year. In both cases I sent copies of their letters to Jim Welch, the novel's author. Never before, however, had I expanded the list of topics to include so many subjects, nor had they ever been so relevant. As we finished *Fools Crow*, lawmakers were on their way to Helena and Washington for the 2009 session. The Rocky Mountain Front, which two years before had been protected from drilling at the federal level, was opened to leasing by Governor Schweitzer at the state level. Australia and Canada recently extended formal apologies to their native peoples for atrocities committed by their governments, and in 2004 a joint resolution introduced in the U.S. Congress calling for acknowledgement of past wrongs against Indian tribes was still awaiting action. Montana recently allocated \$10 million to be used for new state parks and a family with a ranch on the Rocky Mountain Front was lobbying to sell it to the state in order to protect the land. The story of the Baker/Marias/Bear River Massacre of 1870, the central event *Fools Crow* builds to from the opening pages, had been "buried" in history until Carol Murray began researching it in the 1970s and more recently, has been exploring ways to commemorate the site and honor those who died there. Ironically, it was the banning issue that was least relevant until this fall in Missoula County Public Schools where a number of new challenges have emerged. Though no one has challenged *Fools Crow* in our system, other challenges have been gaining startling traction with the MCPS school board, making these letters far more germane.

One of the aspects of the assignment most students appreciated was the ability to choose their topic and position. They wrote letters to Montana's U.S. delegation, Senators Max Baucus and Jon Tester and Representative Denny Rehberg; Governor Schweitzer and their individual state senator and representative; or the Missoula County Public School superintendent and school board. Several students asked if they could write the Laurel School Board even though the novel has been banned since 1999—they felt very strongly about informing the trustees in Laurel exactly what they were keeping from their students under the guise of protection. The packets were all delivered by students in class, one who was a page for Senator Tester, one a page for a state Representative, and one student our school's representative to the MCPS School Board.

When Students Choose (And Teachers Determine the Choices)

What I haven't said directly, and the point I have been weaving toward for some pages, is that having a real audience, "publishing," if you will, created an investment in these letters quite different than if the assignment were theoretical and popped into a portfolio at completion. If I hadn't already believed that to be the case, my students would have convinced me when I asked them how sending their letters to real people about real issues affected them. Kiley was clear how she felt about her letter: "Knowing I was writing to a specific person made me take the writing more seriously. Sometimes when I'm assigned an essay I think what's the point and don't try very hard. Knowing this letter was going to be read by someone other than my teacher made me work harder to sound more intelligent so that my opinion would be taken seriously. This also changed my writing style for the assignment. Since I was trying to persuade and inform someone of my opinion, I wrote in a more personal way so they could see my point of view. Making this assignment so personal and real made it easy and enjoyable to write." Ninety percent of the students voiced similar feelings. Cody was one of them: "Writing the letter to an actual person outside of school caused me to subconsciously put much more effort into my writing. Although I feel as though I put more effort into my letter, I believe that this writing was much easier than previous assignments. Writing a letter from my own perspective presented a new challenge, expressing my opinions along with facts that support them without sounding too radical. I am confident that I overcame that challenge in the letter, though it took some revision."

I'll admit it, those are the opinions of students who take every assignment seriously. What about the strugglers? The ones who sometimes (or often) don't turn in anything and consistently skim the line between satisfactory and unsatisfactory. Trevor sometimes fits that description. "When I first started out writing the persuasive paper; I didn't write it with literal meaning but just to finish it. As I started the rewrite it occurred to me that not only my topic was significant, but it was something I wanted to fight for. As I looked into the topic, I found myself not only writing from information, although a lot was, but most came from

Journal of the Montana Writing Project

my opinion and I found it was easier to write.” Luke is another student, who though engaged in class, doesn’t always get his homework done. He said openly what might have been on everyone’s minds: “Writing the letter to someone was very different than writing an essay for you. It was different because it made me think about how the Governor perceived the subject. It also changed how I wrote the paper because I wanted it to affect him and make him want to do what I wanted done more. It also affected me in that out of all the letters I wanted mine to stand out the most.”

The letters we sent are imperfect. Even so, every letter is written, peer edited, rewritten, edited, rewritten, edited, and in some cases rewritten again, until each student could convey his or her arguments clearly and convincingly. For both teacher and students it took significant commitment. I guarantee we would have let it go far earlier if the stakes had not been so high. Authors Kirby, Kirby, and Liner put it this way: “Publishing is a primary reason for the writing to be important enough for the hard work of editing and proofreading.” Without a doubt, students cared how their letters were perceived and they were proud when they handed the final copies in, one for me and one each, personally addressed, to the people they chose to write. And they knew it wasn’t just about writing. Frankie spoke about the opportunity to voice her opinion in the political arena: “These letters are a lot bigger than just writing for our teachers. It is something that can give our voices a chance to be heard even as a minor who cannot vote.”

Making the Connection

“Publishing” is more than encouraging investment in the process or the product, and thus inspiring students to move beyond a predictable outcome meant only for the eyes of the teacher. It certainly is those things. But something less tangible happens when we project what we care deeply about onto a public stage. It was humbling to read how earnest my students were when writing about their experiences with these letters. Though a few said they didn’t approach this assignment differently than they would any other, most discussed how they felt about being included in something so important. They wanted to be taken seriously and knew their letters needed to be “intelligent”, they wanted to craft their arguments clearly and effectively, and many said they found their opinions evolved in the course of writing. Perhaps the point that most turned my head, though, was how they felt about being included in the decision making process for our schools, or state, or country. For Kelsey: “I felt like I could make an impact or change something just out of writing a letter.” For Peter: “Knowing my assignment was going to a Senator and a House Representative and could make a difference in their decisions made me want to persuade them to listen to what I had to say.” Like Stephanie, no one wanted their letter “to be like the hundreds of letters they have read before.” They all understood the significance of what they were engaged in, but Sarah nailed it when she said: “I tried to make my point very clear and precise, knowing I only had one chance to present the argument.”

I have seen cruel behavior from young people, and I have seen some of the most selfless. Young people wear their hearts on their sleeves, and when they feel like what they have to offer is valued, they will go to incredible lengths to give their all. Bradley is another student who is engaged, but who doesn’t always complete work outside class. He speaks for a lot of students when he refers to the process he went through writing his letter and why it mattered so much: “I wasn’t just thinking about finishing it, I was also thinking about getting my facts lined up correctly and writing them so they popped or showed the reader my strong points. . . I learned more about what citizens do to show the government their personal opinions and how those actions change a decision.” This is how Kirby, Kirby and Liner put it, “Publishing gives the writer an audience, and the writing task becomes authentic—a real effort at communication—not just writing to please the teacher.” Indeed it does.

Kicking Free

Whether it is sharing a journal entry in small groups, reading an original poem or short story, writing a senior paper that will be evaluated by a panel of trained scorers outside the school, submitting a poem for publication in a literary magazine or an article for the school newspaper, or writing a formal letter of personal importance, making work public in some fashion clearly changes investment, the quality of the final product, and how students feel about the task in which they are engaged. In her *Writing Workshop* text Katie Wood Ray reiterates that notion: “Writers need readers, and we need to help them find those readers.”

Making education relevant is not a new concept, nor is connecting students to the world outside the confines of the classroom. So many opportunities exist to kick free of traditional bounds and students love us for it. I don’t think I will ever forget the morning this January when I heard the voices of fourth, fifth, and sixth grade Navajo children reading their letters of advice to Mr. Obama on National Public Radio’s “Morning Edition,” letters that also gave a glimpse of their lives in a land rich in nearly equal measures of culture and poverty. Nor will I soon forget the response to my questions about publishing from a student who lives with his father and who together support themselves selling firewood. He’s in creative writing “for the simple reason that I love to write.” When I read the first batch of short stories this fall, his was the most surprising, honest, exposed, devoid of guile. He writes in simple, clear, clean sentences. And he has a story. “I’d like the public to see my work because it’s my only choice. Few know how deep I am, how much real emotion I have. On the outside I have a BA rep. to keep. If I show weakness then I’ll have to defend myself a lot more than I’d like.”

It was my need to reach beyond the walls of my school and district that prompted me to launch a new literary magazine, *Aerie International*, last year, an international high school literary arts magazine edited by Big Sky High School students. Believing in writing and art as essential to the human condition and powerful vehicles for finding our way in a very confused world, I wanted to give students an opportunity to meet through their art and writing, I wanted to give them a voice. John Updike, who died several weeks ago, spoke of the importance of creative writing in his 2005 NPR “This I Believe” segment: “I seem most instinctively to believe in the human value of creative writing, whether in the form of verse or fiction, as a mode of truth-telling, self-expression and homage to the twin miracles of creation and consciousness.” Updike speaks exquisitely for the transformative power of the creative word. I can’t think of a more potent gift to offer our children, or a better one to share.



Lorilee and the Aerie students

I couldn't have been more pleased with our first *Aerie International* magazine. Last year we were proud to publish work from students across the U.S., England, Russia, and behind what still functions as an Iron Curtain along the border of Turkmenistan. Word has obviously gotten out. We are hearing from places and people I never dreamed possible. We received a submission from Namibia through a former student teacher who recently returned from the Peace Corps. The submission is from a boy who was orphaned by HIV/Aids and who lived as a street kid from 7 to 12, until he was taken into an orphanage and offered an education. He submitted a poem about his life written in three languages, English, Afrikaans, and Damara Nama, his mother tongue. A woman running a poetry writing workshop in Baltimore, submitted "raw, lyrical" poems from 13-14 year old young women "reflective of . . . growing up in Baltimore's inner city." Of course the vast number of our submissions are from "average" American students in the U.S, but that's the point. These students will meet, and they will meet in an arena where truth telling, self-expression, and beauty are recognized as miracles of creation. In that meeting, maybe our world will come a little closer.

Katie, *Aerie International's* 2009 Editor, brings home the public nature of writing, and what it does for all of us: "Each rewrite brings me an inch closer to getting published, which is one of, I think, the most empowering things in the world. We all write secretly in journals at night about our lives and what's happening, but when that writing gets published, you just know that someone else out there understands and believes in what you are feeling or saying or thinking."

If there were ever a question about the importance of pressing students to prepare their work for publication, the act of writing this article has certainly answered that for me. I too am a student, writing to discover, writing to share what I believe to be most important in the world, hoping these words will find an audience to receive them.

Behn, Robin, and Chase Twichell, eds. *The Practice of Poetry*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.

Kirby, Dan, Dawn Latta Kirby, and Tom Liner. *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004.

Ray, Katie Wood. *The Writing Workshop: Working through the Hard Parts (And They're All Hard Parts)*. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 2001.

Questions of Sacrifice

Lorrie Henrie-Koski

White headstones,
uniform and stark
against the hillside,
tributes to soldiers,
spouses, and children,
their stories
haunt me.

Unknown U.S. Soldier:
Whose son were you?
Did your mother, heart breaking,
fears unanswered,
ever truly
accept your sacrifice?

Theodore and Margaret Smith:
babies of just two and three years
– children of P. and E. Smith –
lost to your parents
in three short days.
Did they recover
from the sacrifice
demanded by this harsh land?

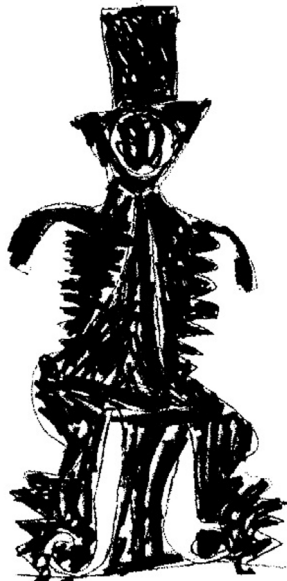
Indian Scouts:
Warriors, proud and brave,
serving an army
that would forget
your names.
What happened
to your people
left behind?
Was your sacrifice worth it?

Beatrice Long,
wife of a veteran:
Deprived of the touch
of your loved one,
how long did you bear
your sacrifice
until joining him on this hillside?

Silent sentinels
Bearing witness
To past sacrifices
Leaving lingering images.

From “Show and Tell” to “Write and Publish”: The Importance of Student Publishing

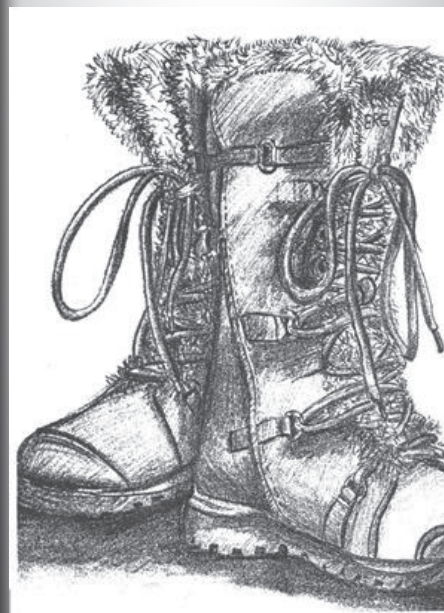
Shirley M. Olson



Artwork by Noah Harbot
Grade 2, Alder



Displays in the State Capitol Rotunda



Artwork by Celia Chan
Grade 12, Power

Creative writing starts very early in a child’s development, long before, in fact, he or she can read or even hold a crayon. Children whose families spend time reading to them, interpreting TV and videos, playing word and letter games, and encouraging naming and re-naming, nick-naming, and other word games are the fortunate future writers of our world. First the Helen Keller thrill of recognizing the meaning of the words, and then the deliciously heavy accomplishment of writing a word that others can read set a young child on the road to creative endeavors. The much-anticipated work of first grade may enhance a child’s creative abilities – or it may disappoint him by holding him and his class to lessons of strict guidelines and pedestrian concepts. American K-12 schools are not models of creativity; our “equal education for all” is too often interpreted as meaning the same curriculum, same activities and same age-level work for all, with few opportunities for creative writing. Student publication in writing contests et al are viewed by most teachers as “extras” they don’t have time for, an attitude exacerbated by No Child Left Behind requirements.

Creative writing can and does meet many students’ needs at many levels, all achieved in a common classroom. Writing enhances self-discovery and growth; it begs for excellence in editing and re-editing; it teaches humility and strength as it is tested by peers’ reception; it creates notebooks full of ideas for future papers in many classes from science to college entry essays. Creative writing should be considered as important as outlining and the six parts of an essay.

One opportunity we provide for young writers in Montana is the Montana Student Literary/Art Magazine, SIGNATURES FROM BIG SKY. SIGNATURES has been published annually since 1991 by three educator groups: MT AGATE, MATELA, and MAEA. In 1991, Del Siegle and I, AGATE board members at the time, gathered other teachers from around the state at the MEA conference to discuss the possibility of a state-wide magazine featuring student art and writing. Excited by the project, the group arbitrarily divided the state into seven areas, offered names of art and writing teachers from each area and set up a simple process. Each of the seven art and seven writing teachers would receive student work from their area, collect a committee to select a given number of the best work, and serve as a board to finalize the selections. Del Siegle, a graphic artist, offered to do the formatting and design of the publication and I offered to distribute information, communicate with the 14 board members, and generally administer the project. Jan Clinard offered to help set up meetings and co-chair with me.

These simple procedures have proved manageably sound over the years and we have never had a lack of volunteers for selection committee chairs, selection committee members, or submitting teachers. The three educator groups have worked together seamlessly, contributing funds, advertising SIGNATURES, and providing expertise. I doubt that any other state has a project involving multiple educator groups and so many volunteers! Each year 100-150 teachers submit work, 14 selection committees of 3 to 12 members meet, and about 200 students get published as a result. The selection committees draw in older students, college professors, and community artists/writers as well as teachers. We are very proud of this outreach! All work is volunteer except that of the formatter who is paid for her time and equipment.

Our first purpose was to provide an opportunity for Montana students K-12 to share their art and writing across our big state where many smaller schools live and work in some isolation. Technological connection is changing that, but the power of one’s own poem or picture on the page of a book is hard to match! The wide variety of backgrounds of the published students (from rural areas, cities, mountains and plains, special education and gifted, foreign students or travelers, American Indians, and students from correctional and support institutions) gives communities and the state a broad, true picture of the thoughts and feelings of our young people. We also know that the students themselves find inspiration and self-justification in reading and viewing the work of their peers. Working toward excellence on a piece of writing or art with their teachers is very different from participating in a blog. Their ideas may be the same, but their editing efforts and their sense of accomplishment in getting published will be building blocks for other life achievements. A testimonial from Missoula attorney Lucy Hansen Darty

speaks to the importance of being published in SIGNATURES:

I graduated from Capital High School in 1992 and had the empowering experience of having a poem published in the 1991 and 1992 editions. From my own experience, creative high school students do not have nearly enough avenues for receiving recognition of their gifts. It seems that much more deference is paid to the athletically talented students, than those who have artistic talent. Giving artists and writers the opportunity to showcase their talents and be published is a powerful way to recognize talented students. This recognition provides students with inspiration to continue to pursue their talents following their high school years

One new teacher sitting in on our SIGNATURES session at the MEA/MFT 2007 conference confirmed the long-standing effects of being published. She had had a piece published in SIGNATURES when she was in middle school and now is asking her own students to submit work. A current 10th grader in Missoula, Coty Carlson says:

The thought of my work being published makes me want to peer edit more and hear other's opinions to help my work. If it's just to turn it in for an assignment I would probably only go through one draft. For I am thinking, what's the point of making it spectacular when only two people are going to actually read it? I wouldn't put in half the effort if I knew that



Artwork by Preston Low Dog
Grade 9, Wolf Point

only my teacher was going to read it. Because I just don't see a point in making a perfect work if no one will get to experience it. And if I get to write about something I like or want to write about I will put in a lot more effort.

A personal experience the very first year of publication convinced me that the magazine could be an important positive factor in a student's self image. "Steve" wrote copiously in the back of my English classroom, but rarely ever handed in a paper. In fact, he was rarely present. But I asked for a piece I read over his shoulder to put in a new magazine, and he shrugged and gave it to me. It was chosen and published. I put two of the magazines at the front of the room and when class convened, walked back to him with a copy for himself, announcing that Steve's poem had appeared in this new publication. The class was obviously shocked (as was he) and contrary to all my expectations, I asked if he would like to come up front and read his poem. He would! It was an epiphany! He still missed a lot of school and didn't hand in papers, but he received new respect in that class. Alyssia Bashar, freshman in Missoula, says:

I wrote a poem that was published in SIGNATURES magazine and posted in the capitol building and it has had an effect on the way I write. The possibility that something may be shown to the world (or even just a class or group of magazine buyers, which can feel like the world) primarily scares me, which isn't a bad thing. It scares me into wanting to write better, wanting to edit harder, wanting to make my writing the absolute best it can be... It's a great feeling to know that you have written not just something, but something that matters.

A Laurel third grader, struggling with language problems, showed her published work in SIGNATURES to her parent, and the teacher and parent worked thereafter with her on her newly recognized abilities.

In several schools, students have used SIGNATURES as a springboard to start their own local school literary/art publication. A copy simply left on a table near a classroom door can become a constant stopping place for all ages whose comments include: "I can't believe a second grader wrote that!"; "I could do a poem like that – and better!"; "What a great story – I love stories."; "This poem is so sad, but I know exactly how she feels." In these published student writings are



Artwork by Brittany Anderson
Grade 10, Flathead High School

fresh metaphors, original concepts and comparisons, fantasies as compelling as Harry Potter and real-life experiences as painful as one girl's experimentation with cutting herself to relieve despair. The humor of children and youth is hilarious to other children and youth, and refreshingly original. High school girls write notebooks full of love poetry; occasionally a "diamond" is submitted:

"Love-sick" (Grade 11)

In love?
No, I think not.
Love is happiness,
Flowers, and slow dances.
I'm not in love.
So queasy and weak I can hardly talk
That's not love, it's the flu.
Odd sickness, really.

The benefits to students of having a larger audience are personal and motivational. Good writing starts from the heart; all our efforts to show our students correct form, grammar and spelling will not "connect" unless they are first encouraged to think, feel and respond to their experiences from their own minds, hearts, and voices. We welcome these genuine offerings of our Montana students.

A second goal we have had in mind since the beginning is to produce a classroom tool for teachers. SIGNATURES can be used to model genres of writing, line breaks in poetry, metaphor, line, color and form in



*Photograph by Ruben Castren
Grade 5, Kalispell*

artwork, and many other techniques. To model one's own work after the greats like Shakespeare or Cezanne may seem impossible to students, whereas imitating the excellence of a piece by another 5th grader may not seem so intimidating! Sharing the magazine is also an experience in building tolerance for many kinds of ideas and styles. Copies are sent to each of the 890 public school libraries in Montana, available for teacher and student use. School librarians are encouraged to put the new edition out in the spring in a prominent place, and again in the winter with the new submission poster to remind students to work toward the February 1 deadline. Some copies find their way to waiting rooms in doctors' offices, the principal's office at school, or other places where children and youth gather. One teacher in Billings convinced her principal to put a copy in each room of the middle school in Billings where she teaches! In the 2008 (18th) Edition, 200 students were published from 118 teachers in 86 schools of 56 towns in Montana. This was an increase of 7 teachers, 5 schools, and 7 towns from 2007.

Freshness and variety of many "editors" or selectors gives SIGNATURES a universality that is unique. As the chairs gather for one final selection session early in March, real consensus takes place as well as some real learning about how evaluation of a work takes place in different areas, grade levels, and teachers. There is, for instance, an ongoing debate in art education about what is "original" and what is "copied" when a student works from a picture, say, of an elephant or anything not readily at hand. The 14 current board members work on these issues for the benefit of all. The board is fluid; there are 43 former board members from schools around the state or retired from education. This is evidence of the wide group of people instrumental in making SIGNATURES successful.

Our choices are made with three values in mind: originality, creativity, and excellence for grade level.

Originality is recognized more easily perhaps by seasoned teachers or those who have read a lot of student work, but at the most basic level, an original piece brings forth an "aha!" response usually shared by most or all of the evaluators. (See the poem "Those Who Don't Know Any Better" by Tessa Rubel p. 27 in 2008 issue.)

Creativity is a rare bird, but also recognizable by an uncommon maneuvering of character, plot, time, or nature;

and by out-of-the-ordinary use of color, placement, and combination of objects. Ashton Nagel's green crayons bend in the wind like spears of asparagus in a more natural setting than a crayola box (p. 49, 2008.) Isabella Whitworth's "Kathleen O'Reilly, Tamer of the Wild Men" (p. 31, 2008), is a humorous look at women-in-history.

Excellence in the writer/artist's grade level is easily spotted by our evaluators, since within each committee are elementary, middle school, and high school teachers, cognizant of what their students ordinarily produce. Our choices in selecting the pieces to be published are circumscribed by several elements:

- The broad age range. Some high school pieces are not appropriate for a younger audience.
- The attempt to balance grade levels, genres, serious/humor, dark/light, and area of origin - a daunting task!
- Creative and original pieces from students who have been encouraged to write honestly their deep hurts, unabashed joys, offbeat humor, outrageous discoveries and personal views of the world. Suicidal outpourings, however, are usually judged too personal for this publication.

We are happy to observe that many Montana teachers are encouraging creative writing although we also observe many writings in the cages of form, sample-example, ect. rather than free flying thought. Traditional forms from haiku to sonnets are beautiful and rhyming is fun, but when the form becomes the focus of our teaching, particularly elementary students' real inspirations or feelings may be skewed or lost. We do not accept class sets of any writing exercise. We depend on the classroom teacher to be our first "selector" and cannot burden our volunteer committees with stacks of material that has not first been judged "the best" by teacher or class. The writings must stand alone; unusual fonts, placements, or illustrations are not helpful.

We heartily endorse editing and work between teacher and student to make SIGNATURES more of a publishing experience than a "contest". Teachers can help by pointing out the terrible importance of every word in a poem and helping the student to clear away the "debris" in a story or essay. Our purpose is to encourage positive editing, which can inspire whole classrooms in the process, or at least help one writer to reach for excellence. Peer editing is also a very helpful process in preparing a piece for publication and usually spills over into group learning. We do expect sentences, punctuation, and spelling to be carefully done. The teacher may certainly serve as proof reader, seizing an opportunity to do a little one-on-one instruction.

Board members are often enlightened themselves by reading diverse types and levels of student writing, as Lorilee Evans-Lynn, of Big Sky High School in Missoula attests:

My biggest fear when I began as a board member was reading the little ones' work. As a high school teacher, I had no idea what to expect, and frankly, I dreaded it, thinking it would be tedious and dull, on the level of "See Jane run." Quite unexpectedly, it became the little ones' work my students and I fought over reading first. Their vision and clarity is absolutely pure. They are still delighted by the marvel of who they are and the world of their senses. I would encourage teachers from the youngest grades to introduce creative writing early and take it up often, especially allowing poems that do not rely on specific patterns, freeing them to think about something other than structure. If we could convince the students that we are interested in their particular ways of seeing the world before they are consumed by the need to conform, we might not

only give them a jump start on writing, but on the ease with which they move through later school years when being different is a disgrace.

A few testimonials by teachers illustrate how the publication is used and the effects observed on the students:

- As an Art teacher of 38 years in Montana and Alaska, I have used every copy of SIGNATURES until they show serious wear. The degree of excellence and quality of the work has been an inspiration to many students and to other classroom teachers as well. I have seen first hand the pleasure students and parents have shown at their work being accepted in the publication. I have used the good books as an inspiration and guideline for students of all ages to aspire to. The beautiful booklet and unique arrangement, combining writings with the artwork draws the students to work together to strive for similar publications in other schools where I have worked. I have placed copies in the school libraries of every school I have been associated with. – Jim Seaton, former President of MAEA

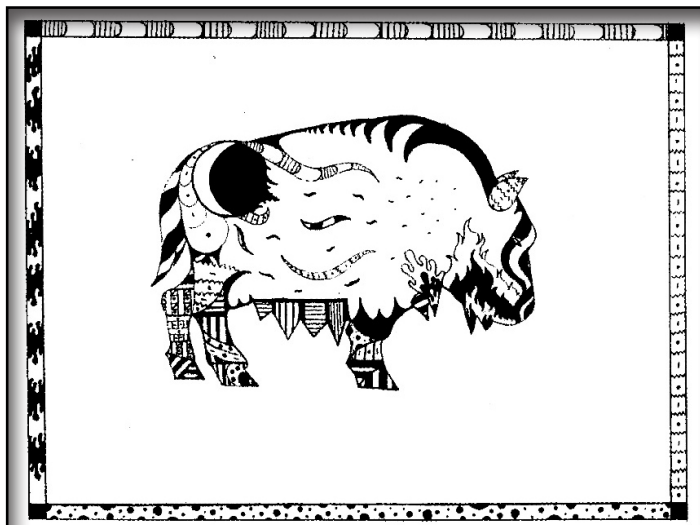
- SIGNATURES FROM BIG SKY fosters a love for language and visual arts and serves as a motivational factor for students who love to write or create original art. As a teacher of gifted and talented students, I have witnessed the observable pride in students whose work is published. When student work is selected for the magazine, elementary schools in Billings typically acknowledge the student's accomplishment at an awards assembly. How thrilling it is for the student, the parent, the teacher, and the school! SIGNATURES is a wonderful teaching tool. As students look through the magazines from different years, they find excellent examples of different types of writing. Because of this, students more readily accept the teaching of a variety of writing techniques. For first-time writers or artists, the examples in the magazine serve as a springboard to independent writing or art. SIGNATURES, past and

present, are used and enjoyed throughout the year. – Karen Nave, K-6 GT Teacher, Billings Public Schools

Finally, we are hopeful that parents' pride in their child's artistic ability will be enhanced by the experience of publication in SIGNATURES. Parents may discover the importance of arts being taught in the classroom and that their awareness can even save the arts from cuts considered when school funds are limited. Or their awareness can inspire increased opportunities in music, art, and writing in their children's schools. After publication, a flurry of requests for subscriptions come from parents and grandparents around the state, and some are even to be sent to others out of state.

Our reach has been extended by the use of twenty or so writings and pictures from the previous edition in the Montana Energy Conservation Calendar which is sent to people all over the state by the MT Department of Health & Human Services to those who request aid with their heating bills. Stefanie Flynn (MAC) has done a beautiful job of formatting the calendars and it is great advertising for us! Also Ms. Flynn, endorsed by Lt. Gov. Bohlinger, arranged a display of art and writings from the 2008 edition of SIGNATURES in the Capitol Rotunda during the month of October. The Montana Arts Council, particularly Beck McLaughlin, has been very supportive of the magazine for years; we are grateful for their continued contributions, suggestions and grants.

The march to conformity is ever-present in our schools; teachers are even hampered now in their efforts to offer their personal diversities to enhance their students' education. On the other hand, gifted education research has given us new impetus to differentiate in the classroom and renewed appreciation of the importance of the arts in K-12. Creative writing is a powerful tool, which SIGNATURES hopes to encourage in Montana schools. We have seen that it can be our students' defense against depression and fear in the face of world events and abuses closer to home. It can lift their spirits and ennoble their thoughts; it can surprise them with their own depth of thought and feeling and lighten the tasks of a fact-based school life. In 2001, students from elementary, middle school, and high school poured out their thoughts about 9/11 in SIGNATURES. Native American students often submit writings and artwork about their history and losses, as well as enlightening accounts of cultural customs and expectations. The flavor of our western state is always present in SIGNATURES' stories, poems and essays about hunting, fishing, mountain hikes, rodeos, wildfires, and chores. Always present, too, are writings about the puzzlement of growing up, of childhood dreams and fears, of grandparents, of illuminating moments of learning or growth. We feel that our Montana literary/art student magazine has been a record and a triumph of student artistic achievement and we hope it will continue to offer inspiration for their future endeavors.



Jorin Vanruska,
Grade 8, East Valley Middle School (Helena)

Visit the Montana Writing Project online:

<http://www.cas.umt.edu/english/mwp>

• all back issues of the MWP Journal are available on our website

Improving Writing through Real Audiences: Students as Published Authors

Christa Umphrey

Growing up surrounded by words and stories, I have always thought there was something magical about books. Friends and family members who know me well will never let me run into a bookstore to pick something up while they wait. Trips into bookstores are never quick, and I'm always collecting books faster than I can actually read them.

When I was teaching high school, many of my students were baffled by this strange obsession with books. They couldn't see why people were so taken with these bound stacks of paper. But they'd see others like me and the ways we'd look at books and talk about them with excitement. They didn't get it, but they knew the obsession was real.

This is why it works to have students publish a book. Even those who have never valued books themselves know that many people are impressed with writers, and they wouldn't mind people talking about them the way they talk about other authors.

For many reasons, publishing a book was one of the most rewarding projects I worked on with students. When students know they have a real audience, it improves the quality of their work. Taking a project to a published final product makes students think a little more about the words they are putting down, and keeping the best student work around and visible helps raise the standards of quality from year to year. This helps students learn to think and write more clearly, which is one of the most important things I'm always trying to accomplish in the classroom.

At the beginning of each year, most students are only mildly interested in what I think of their work, and even then it's less about what I think than what grade I'll give them. I'm not a very important audience.

But when they see newspaper clippings of work other students have done on the wall, they become curious and ask, "How do we get our stuff in the paper?" When they see magazines or brochures from past years around the classroom, they get a little competitive and think they may do something better. With a bigger project, like a book, students are even more likely to buy in.

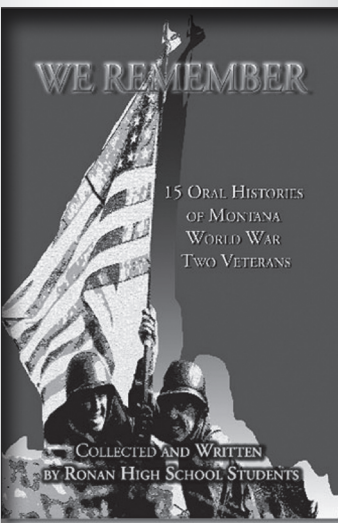
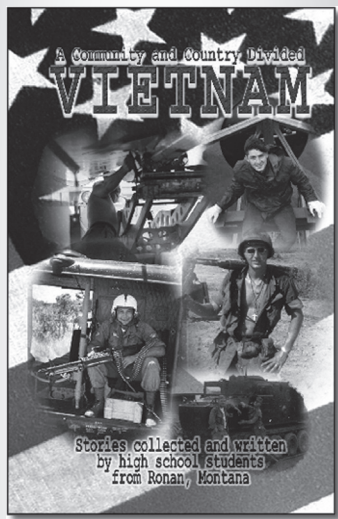
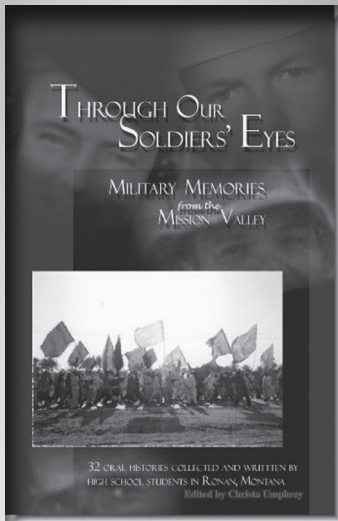
A few years ago, as students looked through a previous year's book – a collection of essays based on oral interviews with World War II veterans – I asked them to critique it and then to decide our direction for the coming year.

Their reaction came in two stages. First they were impressed: "Someone from Ronan published a book?"; "Freshman did this?"; "Why didn't we get to do this when we were freshman?" But they quickly turned competitive and critical. These students, with whom I hadn't yet had much of a discussion about writing, created a list of things their book would do better. It would be more focused and detailed, it would use stronger verbs, it would have more variety in sentence length, it would include more of the veterans' thoughts about events, it would give clearer descriptions of the settings. I was pleasantly surprised.

Though the book projects I've done with students probably required more work than anything else I've had students do, it was the work that they found most worth doing. As the project progressed, students went from apathy to annoyance to excitement.

Like any large scale project in which you are going to invest a large amount of student time and energy, choosing a rich topic is vital. In the community I was working, many students had very close connections to military members. Even those who didn't initially have friends or family who were veterans were still drawn in by the community members' experiences they began to record. Students got to know the veterans whose stories they were telling, and the topic became important enough that they wanted to get it right for them. If you are going to spend a lot of time on something, it needs to be something worth your time. After spending hours with veterans and their stories, students believed their time was well spent.

The publication process was simpler than I'd expected. We decided to use an on-demand publisher because this technology makes short run books much more affordable than they would have been a few years ago. Most of the on-demand publishers will take manuscripts at any point, from a Word or WordPerfect document to a finished InDesign or QuarkXpress file. The closer to a final product



The books above were all written and published by students in Ronan High School. They are all still available from Trafford Publishing (trafford.com) or through many online bookstores like Amazon (amazon.com), Barnes and Noble, and Borders.

you send, the lower your cost to get the book published. Many publishers also offer services to assist authors with editing, layout or cover design. Of course the more assistance you need, the more it will cost. And their time is expensive. More and more, many online companies are tailoring their setup to people without access to or experience with layout and design software, and they are incorporating layout tools and templates into their online sites to help people through the process. This makes book publication even more accessible to a wider audience.

The publisher we chose to work with for our work was Trafford publishing. We decided to use Trafford (www.trafford.com) because for our purposes they offered the best combination of services and costs. We retained full control of the copyright and we can reorder as many books at a special author's rate as we want. (The author's price is based on the number of pages. For a 100-page book with a glossy, laminated cover, this is about \$5 per copy.) Also, they gave us a substantial discount on all subsequent orders after that first initial time we worked with them.

We were able to send them finished InDesign file for the text and a Photoshop cover graphic, so we only had to pay for setting up the print file. Through Trafford, set up packages range from \$600- \$1200 depending on how much help you want with publicity and distribution.

All their options include assigning an ISBN number and creating a print file so the books will never go out of print. Because books are printed as they are ordered, there is no extensive inventory. Twenty years from now, a descendant of one of our veterans should be able to order a fresh new copy of the book. This was the selling point for us. Having the ISBN and a company that sent all our book information to online distributors like amazon.com allowed us to keep the book in publication even after students (and the teacher) moved on to other things. Since our topics dealt with local history and had a wider audience than just our classroom, this seemed important. (Searching [amazon](http://amazon.com) for "Ronan High School" today will allow you to see and purchase the three collections of veterans' stories my high school students wrote.) Trafford also sent out press releases, which led to a story in the *Missoulian* in addition to stories in our local papers.

After we'd done all the research, writing, and revising, we really did have the most difficult work behind us. Once we had the book assembled and the layout complete, it was just a matter of waiting, phone tag, and some e-mail exchanges over a few weeks to clear up small details as the publisher worked on production of the book.

The project worked well despite the wide variances in students' writing abilities. Though a small honors class helped, the first book was done by a typical cross-section of ninth grade students at Ronan High School. The subsequent two editions were done by eleventh grade and then a mixed-level group. These groups included quite a few students who skills were below grade level. Many of these students claimed to hate writing. They hadn't often produced school work they cared about, and most of their assignments got returned with a poor grade and were quickly forgotten. Instead of learning to write, they had learned they weren't writers. So it was important to allow enough time for revision and editing.

On the other end of the spectrum were students who wrote fairly well. Because of this, they were accustomed to getting good grades and moving on. They weren't used to getting suggestions, revising, or having to work on their writing.

Both groups were very resistant to spending so much time on one piece of work in the beginning, but as they spent more time on it, most began to develop something that pleased them.

And other people were pleased as well. The community response was wonderful. People who hadn't been involved in the school for years went out of their way to give students positive feedback. We received thank you notes from veterans, letters from local librarians asking to be kept on mailing lists for notifications about upcoming publications and suggestions for new topics, and inquiries about how to get additional copies. I took requested copies to the senior center every day for a week and a half.

But of course, the most important benefit of the project was that in the end, some of my students found books a little more interesting. Not only are they starting to glimpse the magic behind books, but they understand it's a magic they can create.

Nuts & Bolts

Some of the whys and hows of publishing with students

There are numerous ways other than full length books to involve students in publication. Often incorporating publication is simply a matter of taking the work you are already doing with students to one final step. Students may handle the publishing end of their work themselves, teachers can coordinate with technology classes looking for real world application of their skills, or teachers can encourage students to submit their work to existing outside publications. Publications can range from simple one day activities to month-long interdisciplinary undertakings, and the publishing piece may or may not actually happen in your classroom. Regardless of the level of your commitment, there are positive results for students seeing their work in print.

Benefits to Incorporating Publishing

Higher stakes equals higher quality. Many students are motivated to come up with something they're proud of if they know some one beyond teacher will see it. It's not going to sit in a folder on the teacher's desk; it's going to be visible somewhere with their name on it. Also, if students see others believe a piece of their writing is valuable enough to format, organize, and preserve, they look at it differently than writing assignments they are accustomed to completing.

Less resistance to revision. Along the same lines, if students know other people are going to be seeing their work, knowing they are the author, they don't want to embarrass themselves. Often students who are usually very unenthusiastic about looking at a piece of work more than once will request I look at their work multiple times so they aren't missing anything if they know their work is going to be published.

Improved technology skills. Working on publications in the classroom is a way to have real technological integration. It can give students an opportunity to use technology as a tool rather than a distraction. If students have access to and experience with software used in the professional world they can also work on developing skills to use beyond their classrooms.

Journal of the Montana Writing Project

Community building. Whatever audience you choose—from your classroom to your community—it can be drawn closer through your publications. If you are sharing work within the classroom, students get to listen to each other's ideas. This naturally leads to students knowing one another better and becoming more accustomed to working together. If students are actually working with community members to develop the products they publish or spend time sharing them after completion, the results can be even more dramatic.

Knowledge dissemination. This works at every level from your class to your community to the larger world. Though doing publications to send out into the community you can provide the service of making available knowledge that wasn't available before. Most often we read to learn something new, and it isn't any different in a classroom. Publications can also help your students share knowledge they're collecting within the classroom walls when you structure time for students to read each other's work.

Increased quality from one year to the next. When you keep examples of good work around, you don't start from scratch each year. Student-created publications can facilitate this. Students see past year's work as a baseline and are sometimes competitive enough they want to do better. Also if they know you are going to keep their work around, they want to be proud of it.

Ways to Incorporate Publishing

Personal (or class) Writing Anthology or Chapbook.

As a final project (or portfolio) have students each make a book of their work from the term. This can be a comprehensive collection or one that showcases highlights from throughout the year. It also works well as a final project. If students have digital files, the actual time to format a book is fairly minimal. Although, many students will choose to put in extra time to incorporate graphics and design a unique cover, and ultimately they'll spend more time with their own work and actually revisit some of their earlier writing.

Though students could just use any basic word processing program, Microsoft Publisher is very user-friendly and gets students more excited because of the available templates. By choosing "catalogue", students can choose from existing templates to create a 5x8 book, incorporating any of their own photos and graphics along with their text.

A twist on this same idea is to create class anthologies. I have had students do this in creative writing classes (after having each student digitally submit 2-3 pieces) and I've often assembled all the assignments from one assignment (poems about the Great Depression or researched letters from the 1960s) by simply creating a title, adding a cardstock cover, and binding it. Students love to look at past year's collections, especially if they are doing similar assignments.

You can also do a more professional version of this if you can get funding. One year my freshman students professionally published a black and white glossy magazine that contained all their local research essays and photos.

When my students published books with Trafford Publishing (see pages 16-17) we paid for our set up fees with a grant, but if you have a limited budget (as most classrooms do) and still want to do a similar project, there are many other services that will publish books for similar per book price but don't require any of those initial set up fees. Our class also used Lulu (lulu.com) for other projects. The results were professional looking but the publication process was much

simpler and quicker. Students used this service to assemble chapbooks of their own writing in my creative writing classes and they were able to assemble and format everything online and have their book back in a few weeks. For most classroom projects where lasting availability or worldwide distribution is really unnecessary, the simplicity of services like this are a better option. And of course, the desktop publishing options like those mentioned above continue to become more and more user-friendly and professional looking.

Research Brochure. A brochure is a good way for students to arrange and present information on anything they've been writing about. In my classroom we've used these to showcase findings after an interdisciplinary unit with biology on infectious diseases; to share cultural aspects of Eastern European countries we were working with; and to share analysis, highlights, and author background on independent reading books. If students are paying attention to design. The brochures actually hold more information than you'd first think—at least as much as a short essay, but students can also use visual pieces to strengthen their presentations. We've used Microsoft Publisher to design these because the program is user friendly and the products turn out so well they seem to be one of the favorite projects for students. They also work well to share information among students.

Web Page. Because students spend so much time on the internet, they are familiar with (and many are interested in) web pages. Though you need to address the importance of privacy and appropriate content with students (and probably parents) before putting student work online, students are excited when they can find their own work on the web. It works well for teachers to have student work online as well because students in subsequent years or classes can access and evaluate the work from previous students. If students work on community centered research or work others might be interested in seeing, the web is an easy way for many different groups of people to have access to that work. The ideal would probably be to have a link on your school's webpage, but schools support this in varying degrees for a numbers of reasons from liability to limited tech support. There are many free web hosting sites where students can easily design webpages without learning html. Many of your students may already even be familiar with these sites. Even if they are not, most are not any more difficult to format and publish than a typical word document.

Calendars. This is another project that students really get into and often spend time out of class working on. In the years where we start out with memoir writing, I've had students look at their writing (usually they have a few different genres to choose from such as: poetry, essay, autobiography, and biography) and select a long excerpt that fits with each month. They also add images, which is where students get excited. Depending on the level of the writers, I sometimes give students a minimum word count for each month to keep the focus on the writing rather than just the layout and photo design. Since we do these in the fall, I'd suggest students give them to family members for Christmas. Most students usually end up printing a few copies of the final project.

Literary Newsletter. A simple 2-4 page literary newsletter sent home to parents (each quarter, just once or

twice a year, or as often as you can get it done) pleases parents and excites students whose work is included. Just gathering a few pieces of work, pasting them into a newsletter template (both InDesign or Publisher are easy to use) and sending them to the parents of the entire grade level with a very brief note about what you've been working on is a great way to share positive work you're doing. If you can find time, you can do this piece, but it's also a good job for a high school aide or again, the technology department if you have willing coworkers.

Weekly column in local paper. If any of your assignments might appeal to a wide audience, consider talking to your local paper about running a brief student column for a few months. Small town papers are especially receptive to these types of ideas. When my students collected oral histories from local veterans the local paper offered to run a weekly excerpt of student work, spotlighting a different veteran each week. In the process of teaching research, a colleague of mine had students research in local newspaper archives (each being responsible for a different date) in order to gather interesting happenings from the town's history. They used the material to run a "this week in our town..." students and their parents are always excited to see their work in print and often newspapers are eager to better cover student academic activities and will be willing to work with you.

Another take on this is, if you are working on persuasive writing, propose the idea of having some guest editorials by students. Even if you can't set this up in a formal way, you can have students submit their writing as letters to the editor.

Children's Books. Children's books are another genre that can be educational and enjoyable for students, especially if you give them a real audience. You can tie the content to your curricular goals. I've worked with earth science classes to have students write books that somehow incorporated a natural disaster. After doing content work and research in science, interviewing the first graders they'd put in the story, and working on fiction techniques in English, students each wrote a story for the kids that they'd interviewed. After they'd written and illustrated the book (original art, computer graphics, photos...) and written the essay (or scientific endnote) that was also required to explain the science in their story, we returned to the first grade class. Students read their stories to the first graders and gave them the books. Another year in conjunction with study of the Civil Rights Movement and the American Indian movements, my students visited a third grade class to read with them the book that the whole 11th grade class had created about local and national civil rights leaders and activists. Each student had chosen one leader to read about and research, and then they created one illustrated page that told that person's story. Once we gathered all the pages, we printed enough copies for all the elementary students so each of the 3rd graders could take a book home.

Classroom Binder. Just keeping a binder of student work in the classroom in a student accessible place is an easy way to showcase recently finished student work. This approach really requires no extra time or expense. Once students have a piece finished that they are proud of, then they can just print an extra copy for the class collection. This can work with the earliest elementary writers through college. Some students will need encouragement to include anything and

others will need reminders about not including everything, but it's an easy way to let students share with each other and remind them that we are all writers.

Wikis/ Online Forums/ Networking Sites. There are many different sorts of software and websites available for networking and discussion, but all those I've used, I used for similar purposes. While the current trend in schools is to ban many sites that fall into these areas, I've found that software that allows students to post their writing for classmates to see and then let allows them to comment and question what they've written can be a very powerful publishing tool, not just for publishing final drafts, but also for facilitating peer editing. When I used these tools, we had closed sites so only those in our class could see what was posted. This is different than the other options listed here in that the publication happens throughout the writing process not only at the end. The ability to have all the students easily connected to each other with all the work accessible proved to be really powerful. After students posted their drafts I could read and comment, and direct students to positive things I found in their classmates papers. In many cases, students' initial drafts were a bit more polished when they knew anyone in their class could be able to (and very often did) read the work they'd put online. It was an easy way to facilitate collaboration; students could easily see each others work and they liked to read what others had posted.

Students also posted work online when working on collaborative projects so all group members would have access to the entire group's work. This helped eliminate the problem of one student having the work on a personal drive or a network file, inaccessible to everyone else if he was absent. It this way the sites serve as sort of a digital file cabinet. It allows students working in groups or pairs to have a common, accessible place to keep their work. Having writing stored in an online space also allows students and teachers to access it anywhere (which means no more papers left at home or misplaced drafts) and students can still work on writing and turning in pieces even when they aren't at school.

Wikis are currently one of my favorite tools for this type of work. The software automatically saves all versions and changes to any posted piece and attaches a date and time stamp that also include the name of the author doing the adjustments. You can see all previous versions at any time. It instantly creates an amazing record of progress without the huge stack of papers.



Ronan ninth grade students edit their magazine of feature articles about their contemporary community.

Montana Writing Project MWP

MWP is one of 195 sites in the National Writing Project (NWP) network.

State Officers:

Heather E. Bruce, Director

Department of English, University of Montana

heather.bruce@umontana.edu

Donna L. Miller, Co-Director

English Instructor, Chinook High School

Millerd@chinookschools.org

Dave Christensen, Co-Director

5th Grade Teacher, Lolo School

christensens@montana.com

Staff :

Christa Umphrey

Technology Liaison & Publications Editor

montana.writing.project@gmail.com

Eileen Flannigan

Program Assistant

eileen.flannigan@mso.umt.edu

Montana Writing Project
Dept. of English (MENI 01)
LA 221
The University of Montana
32 Campus Dr
Missoula, MT 59812



The University of
Montana