

Write for My Teacher, or Publish to The World?

by Alan November of November Learning | NovemberLearning.com

When students participate in out-of-class learning, teachers should recognize that potential

Fifteen years ago, a student I never taught forever changed my perspective on how students perceive authentic teaching and learning. The circumstances of how this happened was one of the more auspicious turning points of my career, and the experience continues to challenge and inspire my thinking to this day.

My daughter Jessy, who was 11, (1998) at the time, was enamored with a phenomenon called “fan fiction.” Fan fiction is just as its name suggests: young fans of various genres of literature are encouraged to write chapters and publish work in the style of their favorite authors. On fanfiction.net, authors are able to share their writing with the world, and readers can leave comments on the work that is posted to the site. While sharing their writing with the world, users are actively learning from other aspiring writers. Notably, the site originated before MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter altered the face of online social interaction.

At the time, the *Harry Potter* series was all the rage, and Jessy quite literally could not get enough of it. As was the case for many young readers, J.K. Rowling simply could not pump out books fast enough to satisfy her. Having to wait an entire year to experience more of Harry’s adventures was torturous. So she got her Harry Potter fix by reading work published to fanfiction.net in the way of thousands of young authors aspiring to write in the style of J.K. Rowling. Jessy read the site voraciously, leaving thoughtful comments and feedback for many of the authors. She even developed many favorites on the site and returned frequently to check out their work.

When my daughter showed me the site and how she was using it, I was blown away. Here were young authors participating in one of the most genuine teaching and learning experiences I had encountered. Students were practicing their writing skills while

publishing to a global audience that gave meaningful, in-the-moment feedback. Students were building a global writing community, while individually creating digitized writing portfolios that captured their progression as writers over time. If you follow individual writers on the site, you can see the progression in the quality of their work and the various ways in which they have incorporated the feedback left for them. Incredibly, student work posted to the site long ago continues to be reviewed and commented on years after it is published. Talk about continuous, authentic assessment. This site quickly became a subject of my talks to schools across the country.

I was presenting the work of one of Jessy's favorite authors on fanfiction.net at a private middle school when a student in the audience raised her hand. This was her work. Entirely coincidentally, one of my daughter's favorite fan fiction authors was sitting 10 feet away. Shocked (and feeling a bit embarrassed to be presenting the work of someone in the room!), I instinctively called her up to speak about her work and experience on the site. This young author had around 12 stories posted on the site, and you could clearly see her development as a writer across her portfolio of work. She captivated the audience, and when she finished, students were lining up to ask her how they could create their own account on the site. She was an absolute rock star.

After all of the students had filed out of the auditorium, the student's English teacher who had remained behind approached me. His words remain imprinted in my memory: "That was an inappropriate acknowledgement of that student. She used to be a great student, but recently she has not been completing assignments and has shown indifference in class. You made her look like a world-class writer." I was stunned by the teacher's observation, but also by the teacher's claim that the same student who wrote and spoke so beautifully could be struggling in her English class.

That night, at a dinner event at the school, I had an opportunity to pull the student aside to ask about the inconsistency. When I asked her why she was so motivated to write online yet not finish her homework assignments, she explained matter-of-factly, "Every day when I wake up I have an important decision to make. Do I write for my teacher or publish to the world? I prefer to publish to the world." As the British would say, I was gobsmacked.

This response has enormous implications for how educators structure learning experiences for students. Although this student may seem exceptional, countless students yearn for an

audience that values their work beyond a grade. They seek learning communities that support their growth and share their passion. Above all, they value authenticity and purpose in their work.

The story highlights the virtues of shifting the focus from an audience of one (the teacher) to a more global audience. The teacher's response to my commendation of his student reflects the fears of many teachers resisting such a shift. For this teacher, the student's activity on fan fiction represented a loss of control and a distraction to the learning environment he sought in his classroom. The teacher was fixated on the student's recent negative behaviors and thus failed to see the ways in which he could leverage this online tool to motivate this student to achieve in his classroom and beyond.

Thankfully, many teachers are working to provide a global audience for their students, a key to investing them in life-long learning. When students see that others value their work, they are more likely to invest time and effort into the assignment and are more likely to act on feedback that will improve their products. It is incumbent upon us as educators to continue to craft meaningful, rigorous assignments that students believe are worth sharing with the world. With the rise of modern social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook, in addition to a wide array of blogging software, students have more opportunities than ever to publish their work to the world. As this story illustrates, students are already doing this—the opportunity is for teachers to take advantage of these online tools to build learning communities that are valued by students and inspire learning.

One of my most re-tweeted lines over the years has been, “Stop saying hand it in, start saying publish it.” This paradigm shift from an audience of one to an audience of the world will inspire more students to achieve up to their potential, while instilling a life-long passion for genuine learning.