Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District

Instructional Office Newsletter

Passing Notes as a Middle-School ELA Strategy

"Most teachers acknowledge that when they hold class discussions, four or five students typically participate, and always the same four or five students," says former middle-school teacher Lesley Roessing (Georgia Southern University and Coastal Savannah Writing Project) in this article in *AMLE Magazine*. If students are discussing a text in pairs or small groups, there's a different challenge: keeping them on task, avoiding inappropriate topics, and controlling the noise level. Here is Roessing's strategy for getting all students involved in discussing an ELA text (a poem, short story, novel chapter, play, or informational text):

- Students are divided into groups of three and told that the first five steps of this process will be conducted with no talking.
- All students silently read the text.
- On their own piece of paper, students spend two minutes writing a response to the text – something that seemed meaningful, significant, or interesting, and sign their name.
- A timekeeper gives a signal and, within each triad, students pass their responses to the right, read the paper they received, spend two minutes writing a response that keeps a conversation going, and sign their name.
- When time is up, students again pass their papers to the right, read the new paper they received, and spend two minutes writing a response and sign their name.
- When the signal is given, students pass papers again. Students now have their original papers back and read the responses from their two group-mates.

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IMPORTANT DATES

December 1	**World AIDS Day**
December 2	**Hanukkah**
	(Begins at sundown)
December 7	**Pearl Harbor Remembrance**
December 10	Hanukkah ends
December 21	**Winter Solstic**e
	(Begins @ 5:23pm)
December 22-January 1	**Holiday Vacation**
December 24	**Christmas Eve**
December 25	**Christmas Day**
December 26	**Kwanzaa** begins
December 31	**New Year's Eve**

IMPORTANT NOTICE:

Central office is a **fragrance-free zone** so please be respectful and plan accordingly when you visit.

Due to one of our members at the CO being highly sensitive to any type of fragrance, we ask that staff visiting/meeting at the Administration building refrain from using any scented products. Fragrances from personal care products, air fresheners, laundry and other cleaning products have been associated with adversely affecting a person's health. We ask that we all work together to make the environment a safe and healthy workplace for everyone.

Thank you very much for your cooperation!

- Groups talk about insights and points made in their comments.
- Each group shares with the whole class the different topics of their conversations and one point about the text that they all believe is important.

An important preliminary to notepassing lessons, says Roessing, is teaching students opening lines that initiate discussion (for example, *When the article said ----, it made me think of ----*) and encouraging students to cite facts, quotes, or ideas from the text. It's also helpful to give students structures for creating a discussion in response to classmates' writing – for example, *I agree and also thought that ---, I think that's true; however, I was also thinking ---, That is a good thought, but did you consider ---*.

Asked for their reactions to this activity, students told Roessing they liked several aspects: everyone gets a turn; students can jot thoughts before they forget; there's time to reflect before "blurting out" answers (as some students would do in a regular discussion); they can look back at what someone else said; and they can revise before passing their papers on.

Teachers also had positive reactions: all students take part; turn-taking is built in; the room is quiet even when as many as ten groups are actively reacting to a text; the two-minute limit gets everyone going; students tend to write for the whole two minutes even when they finish early (they look around and see that everyone else is still writing); very few students write inappropriate comments; there's no eye-rolling and other negative nonverbal affect; and students are writing for a peer audience rather than for the teacher.

Roessing says there's no reason to limit this activity to English language arts classes. Other possibilities:

- Social studies textbook chapters, articles, or visuals;
- Science articles, textbook chapters, artifacts, or experiments;
- Math problems or concepts;
- Music scores, lyrics, or reactions to a piece of music;
- Health charts, visuals, articles, or textbook chapters;
- Works of art.

"During-Reading Response: Notepassing Discussion" by Lesley Roessing in *AMLE Magazine*, August 2018 (Vol. 6, #3, p. 44-47), https://bit.ly/2MGgxGn; Roessing can be reached at lesleyroessing@gmail.com.

Jennifer Gonzalez on Teaching Narrative Writing

"With a well-told story we can help a person see things in an entirely new way," says Jennifer Gonzalez in this *Cult of Pedagogy* article. "We can forge new relationships and strengthen the ones we already have. We can change a law, inspire a movement, make people care fiercely about things they'd never given a passing thought. But when we study storytelling with our students, we forget all that. Or at least I did."
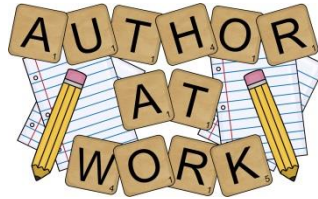
Over time, Gonzalez developed a way to get her middle-school students writing effective narratives. For starters, she let them decide whether they would (a) write a true story from their own experience, but written in the third person, with fictional characters; (b) write a completely fictional story told in the first person; or (c) tell a true story that happened to someone else, written in the first person (for example, a grandmother's experience getting lost as a child, written in her voice).

Gonzalez found that the best way to get students ready to do their own writing was writing a narrative "live" on the classroom projector, "doing a lot of thinking out loud so they could see all the decisions a writer has to make… I have seen over and over again how witnessing that process can really help unlock a student's understanding of how writing actually gets made." Here are the eleven steps she suggests:

• *Show students that they tell stories all the time*. "Students are natural storytellers," says Gonzalez; "learning how to do it well on paper is simply a matter of studying good models, then imitating what those writers do." She suggests having students tell brief anecdotes in journal quick-writes,

think-pair-shares, or playing a game like Concentric Circles. Hearing classmates' stories (and the teacher's) will bring back memories of their own experiences.

• **Study the structure of a story.** A simple diagram shows students the classic sequence: exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

• **Introduce the assessment criteria.** Students are told what they need to produce and how it will be evaluated. Gonzalez suggests a single-trait rubric (see the link below for details).

• *Study models*. Students should then read at least one example of a well-written narrative to which they can relate. She suggests lots of possibilities.

• **Have students map their stories.** At this point, students need to decide what they're going to write about and complete a basic story arc. If they're stuck for a topic, Gonzalez suggests having them write about something they *can* write about. "A skilled writer could tell a great story about deciding what to have for lunch," she says.

• **Write quick drafts.** Students get their story down on paper as rapidly as possible – perhaps a long paragraph that's basically a summary. Having the teacher model the process is helpful.

• **Plan the pacing.** "Now that the story has been born in raw form," says Gonzalez, "students can begin to shape it. This would be a good time for a lesson on pacing, where students look at how writers expand some moments to create drama and shrink other moments so that the story doesn't drag." Students could do a rough diagram showing the components of their stories and how much detail each one contains.

• **Write long drafts**. Next, students can slow down and write a proper draft with a beginning, middle, and end, expanding some sections and adding details.

• **Workshop.** Gonzalez suggests devoting a week to this step, starting with a mini-lesson on some aspect of the craft of narrative writing and then letting students work, collaborate with peers, and conference with the teacher. Possible topics for mini-lessons: selecting effective dialogue; how to punctuate and format dialogue to imitate the natural flow of conversation; using sensory details and figurative language; choosing precise nouns and vivid verbs and

varying sentence length and structure; starting, ending, and titling a story.

• **Do final revisions and edits.** Students shift from revision (playing with the content) to editing (making smaller changes to the mechanics). It's important that students save the latter for this stage, so they aren't nit-picking as their stories take shape. Reading their drafts aloud is a helpful way of focusing on revision and editing. Missing information, confusing parts, unintentional repetitions, sentences that sound weird – all these are readily apparent with oral reading.

• **Produce final copies and "publish."** Rather than trying to grade more than 100 papers, teachers might consider several options: Caitlin Tucker's station rotation model, which keeps the grading in class, or Kristin Louden's delayed grade strategy, where students don't see their final grade until they have read the teacher's written feedback. Students might also publish their stories on a collaborative website or blog, create illustrated e-books, or create slideshows to accompany their stories and record them as digital videos.

"A Step-by-Step Plan for Teaching Narrative Writing" by Jennifer Gonzalez in *The Cult of Pedagogy*, July 29, 2018, https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/narrative-writing/

What Effective Feedback Looks Like

If a teacher says, "I give my students effective feedback, but they don't do anything with it," something is wrong, says author/consultant Tom Schimmer in this Solution Tree Assessment Center article. He believes several elements spur student reflection, ownership, and improvement, and this applies to teacher-to-student feedback, student-to-teacher, or coach-to-adult, and is helpful in a variety of feedback formats – face-to-face, written, or digital.

Good feedback is:

• *Goal referenced* – The intended learning outcome or standard needs to be front and center for affirmations and correctives to be focused and effective.

• *Clear on next steps* – "Effective coaches focus on *what's next*," says Schimmer. "This focus on growth allows learners to concentrate on what comes next to improve their practice."

• *Actionable* – Saying "Good job!" "86 percent" or "You made a mistake here" won't have much impact. Feedback needs to be concrete, specific, and move the recipient forward.

• *Personal* – Using the recipient's name conveys that the person giving feedback has looked at the work or performance and has a personal message. It's also helpful to affirm what the student knows and has done well up to this point.

• *Timely* – This goes for how quickly recipients get feedback as well as building in time for them to reflect and follow up. Timeliness is especially important when students misunderstand an assignment or demonstrate misconceptions as they work. Providing rubrics and setting up structures for self-assessment also help nip problems in the bud.

• *User-friendly* – Schimmer advises against overwhelming students with too much technical information on standards. Instead, redirect them with questions like, "Why did you make the choice to solve it this way?" or "Can you think of another way to present this information?" The key is students understanding the standards and being able to apply them to the task.

• *Ongoing* – "[A]ssessment is a conversation between teacher and student," says Schimmer. There's a continuing back-and-forth as students make errors and either fix the problems themselves or get corrective feedback from the teacher.

• *Manageable* – Timing, sensitivity, and giving feedback in bite-sized chunks are important to the feedback being received and acted upon. Not everything has to be addressed at once, since there will be other at-bats. Some questions to keep in mind:
- o Are students absorbing the feedback?
- o Do they understand the next step they need to take?
- o Do they have the tools and resources to be reach proficiency?
- o Do they believe the goal is attainable?
- o How's their self-confidence and self-efficacy?

"The Nonnegotiable Attributes of Effective Feedback" by Tom Schimmer in The Solution Tree Assessment Center, 2018, no e-link available

What Makes an Authentic Performance Task?

In this *Edutopia* article, John Larmer (Buck Institute for Education) asks us to decide whether each of the three performance tasks below is *fully authentic* (students are doing work that connects directly to their lives and has real-world impact or use); *somewhat authentic* (students do work that simulates what happens in the real world, take on roles, are placed in a scenario that reflects real events, and create products like those people really use); or *not authentic* (the task is purely academic, with the teacher and perhaps classmates as the audience, doesn't resemble the kind of work done in the world outside school, and has no potential to have real impact):

☐ *Students learn about endangered species in their region and take action to protect them, including a public awareness campaign, habitat restoration field work, and communication with local government officials.*

☐ *Students design and create a calendar with pictures and information about endangered species which they sell at a community event, donating the money to an environmental organization.*

☐ *Students play the role of scientists who need to make recommendations to an environmental organization about how to protect endangered species in various ecosystems around the world.*

To authenticity "purists", says Larmer, only the first (and perhaps the second) qualifies as a good performance task. But he believes all three are fully or somewhat authentic. Here are four ways he believes a project can be authentic:

• *It meets a real need in the world beyond the classroom, or the products students create are used by real people*. Some examples: Students propose designs for a new play area in a neighborhood park.

Students plan and execute an environmental cleanup effort in their community. Students create a website for young people about books they like. Students write a guide and produce podcasts for visitors to historic sites. Students serve as consultants to local businesses, advising them on how to increase sales to young people. Students develop a conflict resolution plan for their school.

• It focuses on a problem, issue, or topic that's relevant to students' lives or an issue that is actually being faced by adults connected to students' present or future lives. Some examples: Students create multimedia presentations exploring the question, How do we make and lose friends? Students learn physics by investigating the question, Why don't I fall off my skateboard? Students form a task force to study possible effects of climate change on their community and recommend action steps. Students decide whether the U.S. should intervene in a humanitarian crisis in another country.

• It sets up a scenario that is realistic, even if it's fictional. Some examples: Students are asked by the Archbishop of Mexico in 1819 to recommend a location for the next mission in California. Students act as architects designing a theater that holds a certain number of people, given constraints on land area, cost, safety, and comfort. Students play the role of United Nations advisors to a country that has just overthrown a dictator and needs advice on establishing a democratic government. Students recommend which planet in our solar system should be explored by the next space probe and compete for NASA funding. Students are asked to propose ideas for a new reality TV show that educates viewers about science topics such as evolutionary biology.

• The project involves tools, tasks, standards, and processes used by adults in real settings and by professionals in the workplace. **Some examples:** The students doing the skateboard project above test various surfaces for speed, using the scientific method and appropriate scientific tools. The students on the friendship project conduct surveys, analyze data, record video interviews, and use online editing tools to put together their presentations. The students acting as U.N. advisors analyze existing constitutions, write formal reports, and present recommendations to a panel.

"What Does It Take for a Project to Be 'Authentic'?" by

John Larmer in *Edutopia*, June 5, 2012, https://www.edutopia.org/blog/authentic-project-based-learning-john-larmer

Orchestrating Student-Led Discussions in a High-School English Class

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez describes the all-too-common way texts are handled in secondary classrooms: students read, answer teacher-created questions, and once in a while there's a test. When Gonzalez interviewed high-school teacher Marisa Thompson, that's what she said was happening in her English classes over a period of years. Some students were compliant but not particularly engaged or invested; others copied answers from their classmates; and a few didn't do the work and got calls home and office referrals. This dynamic was a source of great frustration to Thompson, who loved the texts she was assigning and wished her students could get past a shallow level of engagement and be motivated by more than grades. She realized that reading was a hassle to students, and her quizzes were more a way to check on whether they had done their homework than whether they understood or appreciated what they'd read. And the process unwittingly encouraged cheating.

After some experimentation, Thompson developed a much better way of working with texts. She calls it TQE and here's how it works:

• Students do the assigned reading at home – perhaps a chapter or two of a novel or another literary text.

• When students arrive in class, they get into small groups and have 15 minutes to discuss thoughts, questions, and epiphanies (hence TQE). Students who didn't complete the reading at home are invited to finish up in the hall during the small-group discussion time.

Early in the school year, Thompson supplies questions and prompts to jump-start group discourse – for example, *What did you like? Dislike? What surprised*

you? What imagery interested you? Why? What questions do you have? What do you think will happen? What notes did you take on the chapter? What symbols or allusions did you find? Why would the author…? What theme is the author creating by using…? Why does the author keep mentioning the element of…? Who/what is___ meant to represent, considering what happened? What is your favorite quote or life lesson from the reading? She has additional questions on insights, symbolism, allegory, allusion, changes, theme, and other elements.

• Each group decides on its top two TQEs and writes them on the board (these can be edited and improved by the group at the next stage). Thompson makes a point of getting students to pose questions about the author's intent, noting that the characters in novels are fictional, not real people. For example, when reading *Of Mice and Men*, she won't accept questions about Lenny's and George's actions ("Why did George do that?"). Instead, she has students pose questions like, "Why did Steinbeck have George do that?" and "What theme is Steinbeck trying to convey to the rest of us by having his character do that?"

• Thompson then moderates a whole-class discussion of the reading using the TQEs on the board, lasting about 40 minutes (her school has a block schedule so there's plenty of time for these segments every day they're digging into a novel or extended text).

• For grading, Thompson uses a chart to keep track of students' participation, checking them off when they contribute in a way that shows they've done the reading. Since she's using a standards-based approach, she doesn't need to grade every student every day; if they're showing mastery, that flows into their grade.

Thompson is thrilled with how the TQE plan is working. Her students almost always do the homework (if they don't, they're not present for the small-group discussions), are much more engaged with texts, and are having student-led, college-level discussions. The ability to participate fully has become its own motivation for doing the homework. "The peer pressure of *Everyone's discussing this book* – that becomes cool," says Thompson. "To have an idea, to have an opinion. So the student comes in, and all of a sudden it's, 'Wait, I read that part, and I think this,' you know? And you want to talk about empowering a student? You just turned that student into a part of the

classroom community."

One more thing: Thompson's prep and grading work is down to almost nothing. "I'm not creating, I'm not copying, I'm not collecting, I don't need to waste my time," she says. "My prep is reading before bed every night."

Gonzalez says this method is great for ELA, and can also be used with social studies chapters and documents, science texts, even math problems.

"Deeper Class Discussions with the TQE Method" by Jennifer Gonzalez in *The Cult of Pedagogy*, August 26, 2018, https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/tqe-method/

Common Problems with Discipline Consequences

(Originally titled "Getting Consistent with Consequences")

"Few topics cause as much angst in schools as consequences for problematic behavior," says teacher/author/consultant Mike Anderson in this *Educational Leadership* article. Anderson believes these are the reasons:
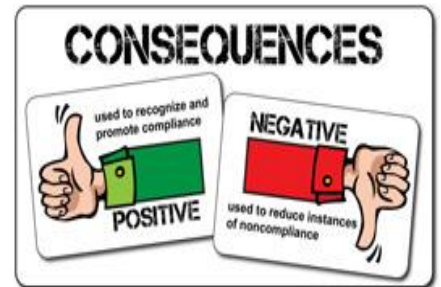
❖ *"Consequences" having different meanings.* There are three types: (a) natural consequences – a student doesn't wear a coat outside for recess and gets cold; (b) logical consequences – a student is getting silly working with a friend and is asked to work alone (ideally, logical consequences are related to the behavior, respectful of the student, reasonable, and not a surprise because the policy was clear in advance); and (c) punishments – a student is playing with base-10 blocks instead of solving math problems and is told by the teacher to move her clip down on the behavior chart (punishments are often harsh, involve shaming students, and do not have a good track record for improving behavior). Anderson believes natural and logical consequences are far more effective than punishments, and suggests that educators generate a list of unwise choices students make and think through what kinds of consequences

are most effective, while working to avoid the use of punishments.

❖ **Differing belief systems** – A teacher sends a misbehaving student to the office and the student is returned a while later, calm and smiling. The teacher, who wanted the student to be punished and shamed, feels unsupported: "I send them out of the room and nothing happens!" The principal, seeing her job as calming the student down so he can reengage with learning, feels unappreciated: "I helped get an out-of-control kid back in control, and the teacher isn't satisfied!"

Anderson says school staffs need to agree on a few shared positive beliefs about children and discipline – for example, *All students need caring adults in their lives. All students want to be a positive member of a community. All kids want to do well*. Staff members might privately brainstorm their own list of positive values, then talk in pairs and come to consensus, then repeat the process in groups of four, again in larger groups, until the whole staff has a common set of shared positive beliefs. When discipline problems arise, they could always ask, "Are we acting in ways that are consistent with our positive beliefs?"

❖ **Wanting consequences to "work" but being unclear about what that means** – Stopping misbehavior in the moment? Getting students back on track? Teaching students a lesson (if you drop your pretzels on the floor, you have to clean up the mess)? Teaching students missing skills (like how to calm oneself after a meltdown)? Anderson suggests that educators create and post a list of consequences that help manage student behavior in the moment (like having a student who is running in the hall go back and walk) and interventions that teach positive behavior and support long-term skill growth (like collaboratively creating rules and norms).

❖ **Missing the sweet spot** – Adults who don't set clear limits make students feel unsafe, inviting some to push the limits. But overly harsh, punitive adults spark fear, resentment, and acting

out. "Both permissive and punishment-heavy cultures put students, especially those already on the edge, in a place where it's almost impossible for them to learn well," says Anderson. He suggests that faculties brainstorm scenarios that feel permissive and those that feel too harsh and work to define the Goldilocks level where students "aren't necessarily happy when they experience consequences, but they aren't devastated."

❖ **Losing control** – There are plenty of times when educators experience frustration, anger, fear, even want revenge. But the last thing students need is adults blowing their tops, especially kids who have experienced trauma outside school. "Our students need us to be strong enough to react with reason, not emotion," says Anderson. "They need to see what it looks like when mature adults respond to frustration in calm, respectful ways. And they need to be treated with dignity and respect, especially when they're in a crisis." Role-playing discipline scenarios is helpful; so is compiling a personal list of self-calming strategies.

❖ **Not seeing the big picture** – "**Without relationships, everything else falls apart," says Anderson.** Relationships should be at the center of discipline, with all other strategies seen as tangents. Rather than asking, "What's the consequence that will fix this problem?" better to ask, "Is there a consequence that might be part of how we help this student?" This approach is especially important for the most vulnerable students; students with the most chaos and trauma in their lives – those who make us angriest – are the least likely to benefit from harsh punishments. Anderson suggests making a visual map with relationships at the center and other strategies and consequences radiating outward.

"Getting Consistent with Consequences" by Mike Anderson in *Educational Leadership*, September 2018 (Vol. 76, #1, p. 26-33), https://bit.ly/2O4Wqmb; Anderson can be reached at mike@leadinggreatlearning.com.