

From The Florida English Journal

Can Medea Pay Me \$12.00 an Hour?

By M. Joy Gorence

Sure, I know that as a language arts teacher I can not expect my students to do writings that I can not do. I've been told again and again that teachers must be active in learning. We must be able to relive the agony of being called on in class and wonder whether or not what we wrote was "good enough." Naturally, all assignments should be grammatically correct, have few or no agreement problems, and deal with the subject at hand. As teachers we know these things, but conveying them to our students is another task, especially when we find ourselves guilty of the same mistakes.

Trying to write the answer to essay questions I have devised for classes has consumed some of my best creative powers. I also know that high school English is not a major priority for most of my students. Yet I try to instruct and at the same time battle the "homework vs. practice" syndrome that is prevalent in schools where sports are the pinnacle of success.

"But why do we have to do this?" is a question I have been asked, by one student or another, since I began teaching over sixteen years ago. My answer was formulated before whole language became the norm. "Because it forces you to think critically and evaluate various situations. If you can make judgments about the characters in novels, then you may be able to critically analyze real-life situations and make the best possible choice for yourself. "Yeah, but how will that help me?" a student asks.

After I could no longer be considered a rookie in teaching, I began to listen to what my students were actually asking me. Why did they have to write essays? Why did it matter to Tom that he could not write a comparative essay on Medea vs. Lady Macbeth when he could make more than \$12.00 an hour by driving a truck with his dad? The time he could have spent on the homework assignment he spent earning a living, a necessity in the impoverished rural community that I taught in. He did not need to know about Medea or Lady Macbeth, but he did need to know how to talk on a CB in order to survive in his world.

Perhaps I never really understood why language skills were essential until a writer, Diane Gallo, visited our classroom.

But dedication drove me to help my students understand that it did matter how one expressed oneself. Perhaps I never really understood why language skills were essential until a writer, Diane Gallo, visited our classroom. As part of a Writer in Residence program, which the school had encouraged in the past years, writers become residents of the community for approximately one week. During these programs I became a class member and there was little or no difference between my students and me.

When Ms. Gallo came into my classroom to share her poetic expertise, she asked us to recall a memory. A female student asked, “Do we have to share it?” Although the purpose of the workshop was to provide an audience for the writings, Ms. Gallo decided that since these writings were personal, it would be up to the student to decide if he/she wanted to share them. As I looked around, I noticed that some of my more reluctant students were busily jotting down their thoughts. I wondered what Ms. Gallo had that I didn’t have.

I then turned to my own memories. A close friend from college had died the previous year, and I had never dealt with her death. As I tried to deny images from surfacing, Ms. Gallo said, “Some of your memories may be painful, but if you can deal with them, you will give your writing life.” I began to record some of my surfacing images when the bell rang. That night I continued trying to convey my feelings on paper.

The next day Ms. Gallo shared her own piece with us. It was powerful and it showed us that she was a person just like us who had heartaches too. She was also a talented writer. She asked for volunteers. It seemed as if all eyes were focused on me. I began to perspire. When no one responded, I realized that I would probably be asked to share my piece. I tried to use the powers of mind over matter, but I did not disappear, and the inevitable was asked.

All eyes were focused on me. I could tell by the looks of my students that they were thinking, “Okay, now you are on the spot. Let’s see what you have done.” I looked around and realized that the bell wasn’t going to ring for another twenty minutes and I had enough time to read my piece. I hesitated and wondered if it would be okay to pass, but I knew “they” would be waiting. I took a deep breath and feebly tried to explain that what I had written was difficult for me to read. Then I began.

“Rainfall streaked the pane while the voice on the phone echoed with sorrow. Although I placed the phone on its cradle, the rain still splattered its life ... A web of gossamer promises clouded my sorrow. Between the strand of emotion, I saw the cases of Coke that Lorrie had convinced me to stack in the back seat of the car. They were necessary, she insisted, for the ride across the Arizona desert ... Death’s slap stung my eyes...”

While reading the piece, I felt the same sorrow strangle my breath as I reshaped the emptiness the day gave me when a colleague told me of Lorrie’s death. When I finished my reading, my students were silent. They just looked at me. Finally one boy broke the silence. “Phew. Did that really happen? When?” I answered his questions and,

for the first time, I felt that I was communicating with my students. I had become a real person to them, and they showed true concern for me.

The next day, while grading their papers, I did not see the errors in spelling or grammar because the writings were meaningful. Many asked that their work not be shared with other students. I complied, but it was the best lesson for all of us. They felt their writings were for sharing and communicating ideas and feelings. In the big picture it may have helped them cope with every day problems. But what about Medea and Lady Macbeth?

The student who asked me that question came to me before the year was out and told me he was dropping out of school to drive a truck with his dad. He thanked me and told me that it wasn't because of English class that he was dropping out of school, but that school was not the place for him. Medea couldn't guarantee him the wages a job could.

Ten years later, my students still ask why they have to write essays. Although I've changed school districts and states, I have learned that I need to communicate with them at the beginning of the year. So if anyone asks, "Why do we have to write essays?" before I get to assign the personal experience writing, I respond with the writing exercise Diane Gallo gave me. After we communicate, the students seem less reluctant toward other writing assignments.

Most of my students when writing literary essays seem to try to put themselves in the situations of various characters who meet with conflicts. Maybe my students won't all be literary critics, but they will learn to share and express their thoughts and feelings effectively. After all, isn't that what learning is about? Maybe Medea can't pay them \$12.00 an hour, but she sure can make them think!

St. John Neumann High School
Naples, Florida
Spring 1993