Making English Fun Again



Down but Not Out

Educators have such a responsibility to their students, their place of employment, and themselves, so much so that it can weigh heavily on their minds and hearts in the pedagogy and strategies that apply to any given class. Upon the start of teaching English 1301 to college students, I was deeply saddened by the lack of interest many of them had in reading and writing. The students' strong aversion towards English and all its components, left me astounded. Admittedly, it was a bit discouraging to connect with students who were not enthusiastic about these essential skills, especially considering that reading and writing are integral parts of their college curriculum. Reading through the students' pre-course reflections, which is aimed to allow them to reflect on past experiences in reading and writing, it became clear to me that their previous educational experiences had stripped away the joy of reading and writing. Based on their reflections, students had grown to view English class as a collection of tasks to be completed, "most students need to write paragraphs, compositions, argumentative essays and reports for coursework and for exams." (Dragomir, 2020). Students have learned to write to the test, so to speak, rather than viewing writing as learning opportunities in a rhetorical sense with skills that solidify a foundation for their

further college writing endeavors. Feeling a bit defeated, I turned to Kelly Gallagher's Teaching Adolescent Writers for guidance and inspiration and the answer to my questions, how could I assist students in gaining interest in reading and writing after the interest had left? As well as what approaches could I incorporate to achieve the goal of changing the mindsets of students to make English fun again?

Golden Assistance from A Distinguished Educator/Author

Kelly Gallagher is a well-known author in the literacy education world. He is not only an author of books but also a teacher, coach, and public speaker - he is recognized as one of the most prominent figures within his area of expertise. His background in teaching gives him firsthand knowledge of the experiences he writes about with students.

In *Teaching Adolescent Writers*, Kelly Gallagher (2006) explains how to teach writing to middle and high school students effectively. The book focuses on strategies to help young writers develop their skills, confidence, and voice. Gallagher stresses the importance of teaching writing as a process involving prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. The book entails seven chapters in which he thoroughly addresses a variety of everyday struggles that many students and educators share, as well as strategies to assist in overcoming those struggles. Below is the breakdown of the chapter titles and themes:

Chapter 1: *Running with the Literacy Stampede* -

> Addressing writer's struggles and challenges are identified as well as methods to overcome them, such as writer's block, lack of engagement, and fear of failure.

Chapter 2: *Overcoming "The Neglected 'R': Establishing a Time and a Place to Write* -

The emphasis is given to creating a classroom environment where students feel safe expressing their ideas, sharing their work, and providing constructive feedback to peers.

Chapter 3: *Beyond the Grecian Urn: The Teacher as a Writing Model* -

Integrating well-written examples from professional writers, such as teachers and mentors, to demonstrate effective writing techniques.

Chapter 4: *Elevating Student Writing: Using Real-World Models* -

Advocating for assignments that are meaningful and relevant to students' lives, encouraging authentic writing tasks like letters, blogs, and editorials.

Chapter 5: *Beyond Fake Writing: The Power of Choice* -

Exploration of choice in writing with options, helps students feel more connected to their work. Discussion on specific ways to successfully incorporate choice in writing assignments.

Chapter 6: *The Importance of Purpose and Audience* -

Discussion of the concept that students become better writers when they know why they are writing and when they are writing for real people. Techniques are shared to help students understand why they are writing and how to inspire them by creating writing tasks where they write for people other than just their teacher.

Chapter 7: *Using Assessment to Drive Better Student Writing* -

> Advice on how to give constructive feedback and evaluate student writing in a way that encourages improvement in writing, instead of just giving grades.

To suggest that *Teaching Adolescent Writers* is a most useful resource for educators is an understatement. Kelly Gallagher seeks to inspire and empower educators with the knowledge to build up young writers while improving their literacy skills.

All the Way Up

One of the things I focused on was in Chapter 5, "Beyond Fake Writing: The Power of Choice." Gallagher emphasizes how giving students the freedom to choose their own writing topics is essential. "If we are to be successful in getting our students to turn the corner as writers, we must put them in a position to see that writing is much more than a school-oriented hoop to jump through to reach graduation. For literate adults, writing is one of life's staples." (Gallagher, 2006), but this is no easy task. Most students are accustomed to being given a topic with said criteria, and they produce the writing assignment. However, giving the students a choice in writing topics was daunting because they were forced to think carefully and critically about the topic and their rhetorical choices. Applying this strategy of choice was fun but challenging because most students did not know where to start - - they had never been given the freedom to write about something that interested them. The project was for students to think of a community group/business that they would like to make aware to the public. They would have to write an article highlighting the group or establishment and must

pertain information that could not be found on Google or Yelp, for example, a backstory of the community group/business and/or how they contribute to the community. They would also have to create a rhetorically sound flyer. Pictured below is an example of work that demonstrates the work students can create when given the freedom to choice. This student chose to highlight the public library's Teen Program, where she directed her rhetorical choices to her peers as her audience.


Harlingen Public Library

Teen Program

Maggie Caballero

11.26.24

English 1301


Let's Take A Look

Whether you have visited the Harlingen Public Library to check out a good book or catch up on schoolwork, you may have seen the Teen Room in the back of the library. While the Teen Room can get lost behind the many rows of shelves lining the library floors, it is nothing to miss out on. As the home to the Teen Program, the Teen Room is filled with interesting books with genres suitable for all teens, computers to relax and browse the web, or catch up on homework, and most importantly T.A.G or the Teen Advisory Program. This program is designed to give teens much-needed opportunities and skills that can leave a lasting impression and be beneficial throughout their lives. As teens navigate the world before them, the foundation they create for themselves in their youth will play a crucial role in their development as adults.

Straight To The Point

So you may be wondering, "What's in it for me?" For a busy teen, another obligation outside of school can seem like an added hassle but the Teen Program is meant to aid students and be readily available to teens throughout the community. Ultimately, the Teen Program seeks to broaden the range of skills and experiences of teens while allowing them to give back and connect with fellow teens in their community. When you join the Teen Program you are not only furthering your academics but building new relationships with others your age and being an active part of your community.

All The Facets

So what does the Teen Program community look like? As stated in the Teen Programs name, you will be surrounded by teens from all walks of life. This program is designed with teen socialization at the forefront and provides many opportunities for teens to become acquainted with new people. One of the amazing individuals you will see visiting the Teem Room often is Eva Belicke, the Teen Program advisor. Mrs. Belicke takes on the role of managing all activities, meetings, and events that take place in the program as well as signing off on teen volunteer hours. Not only are teens needed to allow the program to run smoothly, but also incredible people such as Mrs. Belicke, who make the program flourish. One major element included within the program is the Teen Room where most if not all the monthly activities are held for teens (Fig.1.). Some activities include Teen Video Game Day, where teens can enjoy snacks while playing on the Nintendo Switch against their friends or they can get creative and pick up new hobbies such as crocheting. When activities aren't being held or if you would rather use your time to relax, the Teen Room becomes a space that you can simply use to study on the computers or pick up a good book (Fig. 2.).

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(Assignment: Community Group Profile & Flyer – Harlingen Public Library, Teen Program)

Interestingly, not one single student had the same topic. Gallagher points out that not only does "choice foster a feeling of ownership in the writer", but also "choice drives better revision", students no longer dread revision or feedback, but they want to improve their masterpieces. (Gallagher, 2006)

All submissions were different and creative in their own way. The feedback I received from the students on the assignment was that this was one of the most enjoyable ways of incorporating writing and an interest they wanted to write about and share with their peers, the public, and me.

This leads me to my other focus, Chapter 6, The Importance of Purpose and Audience; through this chapter, Gallagher highlights the strategies students can use in their writing to display their abilities that reach an audience beyond their teacher, which they do not typically think of. Again, much like coming up with their own idea for their topic of writing, wrapping their minds around the idea that their peers could potentially be their audience or their parents was a new concept to them. In the project, shown above (Community Group Profile & Flyer), students were asked to make rhetorical choices in their articles and flyers, keeping their audience in mind. Word choices, font styles, colors, images were all aspects that were considered and identified as effectively considering their audience in every decision. As suggested by Sa'adah, "The writing skill is not automatically mastered by English learners, since it needs a long process and a really hard work to have this skill.", which students would agree with.

Learning Never Stops and Writing CAN be Fun

After integrating a couple of Gallagher's approaches to lessons in my class, the shift in morale was mutually felt. Students were much more vocal and seemed happier,

which was important to me. Creating a comfortable space where students have the creative freedom of writing "expressing their ideals, thoughts, and fears regarding their academic and personal lives was essential for the mental health of students", according to Zell et al. (2021). Being an educator is not always easy, "… a composition instructor plans, monitors, evaluates, and reevaluates their teaching practices and figures out the strengths and weaknesses of his or her teaching." (Ahmadi, 2024) Acknowledging and adapting is key to teaching, which I quickly learned.

By engaging in a text that was not necessarily aimed at teaching first-year college writers, but rather adolescent writers, as educators, it serves as a reminder that sometimes getting back to the basics is what is most needed. Incorporating fun activities that allow students the space to think critically, make rhetorical decisions, and fully grasp the idea of the writing process is what my first-year college writers needed. Adapting to Gallagher's approach and strategies benefited my students tremendously.

Kelly Gallagher is not just an author, but a true teacher with a wealth of knowledge embedded into every single page of his book, and the proof is in the strategies suggested. Without a doubt, this will continue to be a staple in my lessons because it is our responsibility as educators to step in and act when students might be a bit out of touch; "new knowledge is integrated with prior knowledge" (Meyers et al., 2024). When students enjoy what they are writing about, they no longer see the assignment as just a means to get a good grade, but rather they are enjoying the process of learning, exploring, researching, and guess what, writing too!

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