

Literacy Journeys: Reflecting on the Past to Create Future Goals

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Background:

Andy Schoenborn is an award-winning author and grades 9-12 English teacher in Michigan at Mt. Pleasant Public Schools. He focuses his work on progressive literacy methods including student-centered critical thinking, digital collaboration, and professional development. He is a co-facilitator of the monthly #TeachWrite Facebook slow chat, past-president of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, and teacher consultant for the Chippewa River Writing Project. His first book, co-authored with Dr. Troy Hicks, [Creating Confident Writers](#) was published in 2020.

Principle(s) in focus:

My project addresses in particular the following strands of a *Writing For Pleasure* pedagogy:

- [Build a community of writers](#)
- [Set writing goals](#)

Aims:

For our students, and for all writers, literacy stories are born out of a culmination of experiences that have shaped, changed, and challenged our expectations. These experiences can, ideally, ignite a fire sparking newfound literacy passions. Or, unintentionally, they can dampen a love for literacy; they can cause that love to lie dormant. Lost in the shuffle of school, students rarely have a chance to consider their personal literacy journeys. Therefore, my aim was to invite my students to reconnect with their personal literacy story - their literacy journey.

Description:

As with any goal-setting activity, it is useful to know where you have been and know where you are now in order to determine where you would like to be. Thus, I begin by sharing my story. I believe a writer, more than anyone, needs to know they are not alone. Though it can be embarrassing or intimidating to share successes and failures with reading and writing, I believe that when teachers share authentically with students, we show them the way. I talk about my positive experiences with literacy: being read to as a child, adventures at the library, and writing my own comic books. Then, I share my literacy challenges, those moments when literacy was reduced to packets, worksheets, and requirements. I am candid while telling my story and acknowledge falling out of love with literacy when assignments lacked flexibility and choice.



I am honest with my literacy challenges, but I do not dwell on them. I am sure to describe those teachers who sparked my love for literacy into life by helping me find my own way into writing. I conclude by acknowledging that, whether we want to admit it or not, we each enjoy writing to tell our stories, both with words, sentences, and paragraphs as well as with multimodal expression. And point to student use of technology to text, chat, snap pictures, and share them as evidence for my claim. For writers, this means that each of us requires a purpose, an audience, and self-determined goals for motivation and to generate a writing momentum.



After sharing my literacy journey, I ask students to gather something to write on (and with) and invite them to join me on our high school football field to write. Sitting wherever they feel most comfortable to write, students enter a 40-minute writing session to draft their own literacy journeys. While they write they consider the following writing prompts: (see [Living Your Literacy Journey](#) for more details)

- **Literacy Experiences:** Where have I been? What are my literacy roots? What are my literacy branches?
- **Challenges and Sparks as a Reader:** Who am I as a reader? What are the challenges, both small and significant, that have affected your abilities and confidence as a reader? Recall and reflect upon your reading sparks: What pulls you into reading?
- **Challenges and Sparks as a Writer:** Who am I as a writer? What are the challenges, both small and significant, that have affected your abilities and confidence as a writer? Recall and reflect upon your writing sparks: What draws you to the page as a writer?
- **Literacy Goals:** Where do I want to be? What are three to four reading and writing goals you have for the term? ([Hicks and Schoenborn 2020](#))

Impact:

Choosing to share my literacy journey opened the door for students to follow my lead and dig into their own personal literacy experiences. One student, Kayleigh, shared that “for the past two years I had a major lack of actual book reading, and I was afraid that I would never love books the way I used to. The way the class is set up in terms of making individual goals and pushing ourselves to achieve these goals was exactly what I needed to get over this slump” (Reilly 2018). Another student, Taylor, offered that “with creative writing I went from being terrified to share my work to being excited to share it with the world. I used to be very private when it came to my poetry but, when I shared it, I felt a huge weight lifted and freedom to write” (Williams, 2018). As a teacher, student reflections have shaped my pedagogical approaches in the classroom. It is during our readings of student literacy journeys that we build community, share our literacy truths, and learn how to meet each other's needs as writers.

If you would like to take a deeper dive, another student, Esme, has granted permission to share her literacy journey with her post, "[My E.L.A. Journey; From Beginning to Other Beginnings](#)." In her reflective narrative, Esme touches on many of her experiences that challenged as well as sparked her literacy development. Among her thoughts I have noticed a few themes that emerged along the way:

Themes from Esme's Literacy Journey

Esme's Experiences as a Reader: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Enjoys reading self-chosen books → Grew up around books → Had mentor models → Frequent library visits 	Esme's Experiences as a Writer: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Learned by encouragement and practice → Shared with authentic audiences → Wrote for self - journaling/notebooking → Peer review
Esme's Reading Challenges: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Lack of choice → Focus on grades instead of learning → Teaching curriculum > Student needs → Lack of agency in assignments 	Esme's Writing Challenges: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Busy schedules / Lack of in-class time → Writing for tests > Student needs → Perfectionism driven by grades → Rigid writing assignments
Esme's Reading Sparks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Reading for pleasure → Manageable challenges → Book choice → Interest driven 	Esme's Writing Sparks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Mentor texts → Low-Stakes practice → Encouragement → Authentic audiences
Esme's Reading Goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Fall in love with reading again → Step out of genre comfort zone → Build reading stamina 	Esme's Writing Goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Stop procrastinating → Meet deadlines → Space for personal writing

When I read student experiences, challenges, and sparks regarding their literacy lives, I am confronted by the practices they share that stunted their growth and work to actively change those practices that do not meet their needs. On the other hand, when I read what sparks their literacy growth and it matches the promising practices found in professional journals, my practices are affirmed, and I actively seek to expound on those practices.

Reflection:

Though Esme's Literacy Journey is her personal experience, her reflections are echoed in the sentiments from students across grade levels. To sum, student empowerment occurs when they have a choice and voice in their learning - including naming their own literacy goals. While there is still work to do to enable goal setting practices in our writing classrooms, encouraging students to share their experiences, challenges, sparks, and goals is one way to move in this direction.

References:

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