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Got voice?

By Leslie Laud

We cannot teach writing effectively without nurturing students' voice in their writing.

Why don't the Common Core State Standards use the term voice in writing standards? Common Core authors consulted the existing research so the lack of research on voice may be a factor. Also, the major English language arts shifts of using evidence, complex texts, writing to sources, and building knowledge may also contribute to de-emphasizing voice. Can we teach writing without directly addressing the ever-elusive yet so deeply appealing concept of voice? From many passionate, expert teachers, the response is deafening: No.

So how can we nurture voice in students and remain true to Common Core's vision? While just defining voice and even identifying it in student writing poses vexing challenges, its appeal is so powerful that reconciling teaching voice with Common Core is vital.

What is voice?

In this exchange, a 5th-grade teacher addresses voice as students work to make meaning from multiple complex sources. She wants students to build knowledge but also new insight.

"When we write, we want to put ourselves into our writing. It should sound like us, reflect what we think and feel that is uniquely who we are. We don't want it to sound like everyone else's. We want to put ourselves on the page. How can we put our own thinking or voice into how we open this piece about westward expansion?"

"I'm reading 'Taking Sides,'" volunteered a student. "It is about a boy who looks different from others, and sees the world differently. The Indians in this text saw the world differently than those moving out west. How about opening with this idea and doing some word play in the lead? Travelers or trespassers?"

"Or we could do a historical play on words like 'When in the course of human events there is not enough land left, then people must move westward!'" offered another child, a history buff.

How do these students show voice? One considers the Indian angle, while the other stylishly alludes to another historical event. Perspective, particularly an angle that illuminates social justice concerns, along with rich, whimsical style may be two key components of voice. Experimenting with addressing perspective enables students' ever-evolving worldview musings about complex terrains to peer through in their writing, yet it also involves taking risks that leave them more vulnerable on the page than might a mere book report. Rich, inviting style that captures the whimsical through wordplay, figurative language, allusions or other techniques reveal such a deep command of craft and subject. True voice does not come out easily. It requires qualities such as rigor, risk, vulnerability, and a masterful command of knowledge and craft.

Identifying voice

Not only is defining and nurturing voice challenging, identifying this in student writing confounds educators as well. One prominent attempt has been the Voice Intensity Scale (Helmspark & Stapleton, 2003), which conceives of voice as assertiveness, self-identification, reiteration of central point, authorial presence, and autonomy of thought.

Even the National Writing Project (2011) struggles to identify voice. Its definition similarly brings forward the importance of writers engaging deeply with the topic and audience, driving home perspective, and orchestrating stylistic elements. The writing project invites teachers to consider the following questions when evaluating writing for voice:

- Does the writing show evidence of passion?
- Does the writing suggest a strong commitment?
- Can I name the perspective from which the author is writing?
- Can I find textual support for the perspective I see?
- Does the writing suggest audience awareness?
- In what ways do stylistic elements work together to establish a sense of perspective?
- How do I distinguish among degrees of voice?

Appeal of voice

These signposts offer valuable direction for recognizing voice, despite its elusiveness. As challenging as voice is to define, teach, and identify, writing teachers nevertheless will not retreat from it. Our hunger to reach for and teach voice is undaunted by how out of reach it may be. What is the drive we feel to empower students to develop voice? Quite possibly, some of the most important work we do as educators may be developing voice. The Latin root of education, *educare*, calls on us to draw out and cultivate the individuality in each student. Promoting high-quality voice sends the message that we honor the individuality present in each child we teach, that we humbly recognize the enormity within each child, and that we commit to nurturing it.

Reconciling voice with Common Core

For states using the Common Core or similar standards that shy away from voice, how can teachers reconcile these? Common Core's Appendix A acknowledges that skilled writers blend the "three text types to accomplish their purposes." The narrative standards call on writers to use effective technique and descriptive details, while the opinion standards emphasize point of view. The anchor standard W4 reminds writers to consider audience whenever writing. All through, Common Core emphasizes the higher-order work of analysis, synthesis, examination, and individuality in thinking. Emphasizing all these elements may offer a promising avenue for reconciliation.

As a writing consultant, I support hundreds of teachers reconciling these as they move to a workshop model of standards-based writing instruction, grounded in evidence-based practices. As an example, teachers using the evidence-based practice Self-regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) (Alharbi et al., 2015) invite students to analyze mentor texts for voice, practice using voice in classwide collaborative writings, then self-score their writing for voice, while using Common Core terms. As the schools I support continuously work to embrace Common Core along with evidence-based practices such as SRSD, we celebrate growth in voice regularly, alongside gains in achievement.

A word of caution: When teaching voice, we nurture initial seedling attempts. What distinguishes high-quality voice from merely personal writing that lacks Common Core's formal tone and rigor? Phrases such as "I think" or "You know" do not always indicate rigorous voice. We need to pay attention to students who confess that they have discovered that if they write about something sad, they get a better grade. We need rigorous standards for voice.

Voice may be the thorniest element of writing yet one of the most important. Exploring the teaching of voice inspires us to reflect on the fundamental purpose of education, which has changed over time and will continue to change. What do we believe is the purpose of our work as educators? If we believe our

purpose includes a responsibility to empower students to find and develop their voice, then we can make our voices heard in how Common Core is interpreted and perhaps even re-envisioned in the future.

References

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