

Quote Your Students:
Seven Ways to Quote Your Students to Transform a Writing Class
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The other day, a teacher asked me, “If I could do one thing that would change my classroom, what would it be?”

I had to think about it. The elements of a great classroom are true for any grade level. And my first reactions would have been:

- Read the greats: Don Graves, Mem Fox, Jerome Bruner, Thomas Newkirk.
- Join the professional conversation: NCTE, ILA, attend. Present. Visit with peers, both famous and not.
- Smile more.
- Don’t stop learning. Let kids see you learning.
- Constantly clean out your teaching closet, throwing out things that don’t work, and expanding on things that do.
- Let your kids see you writing and talking about what you write.
- Let your kids see you reading and talking about what you read.

And then I slept on the question.

Now, a few days later, I have an answer for her, one that I wish someone had told me when I was starting out.

Find ways to quote your students.

Quote your own students in as many ways as possible. Use their words. Be on the lookout for powerful or whimsical things they say, and draw attention to them. Here are a few ways to accomplish this.

Do a listening double-take when they are sharing their pieces aloud.

When kids are reading aloud what they wrote, listen, and when you hear something that surprised you, ask them, “Can you read that sentence again?” Listen to something twice sometimes, just to hear it again. Explain (in very few words) why you wanted to hear it again. Maybe it was really thought-provoking. Maybe you just liked it. Then move on.

Collect “keepers” of their written words in your own journal.

If you really loved a short blurb (a sentence, phrase, small paragraph) they wrote, ask that student to copy it on a sticky note, sign it, and put it in your own journal. (If they never write anything that you love, rethink what you’re asking them to write.)

Keep a “Hall of Fame” folder or composition book of pieces you always want to own.

I keep my copies of my favorite journal entries in a composition book, along with a folder of “Best Essays Ever.”

Collect “keepers” of their spoken words in your own journal too.

When a student says something out loud that you’d like to remember, or that you find fresh, thought-provoking, or delightful, hand that student a sticky note and ask them, “Write that down, just like you said it! And sign it.” Then stick it into your journal. It doesn’t take any time at all, but it makes a lasting impression on them and you.

Share their writing aloud because there was something striking about it.

Get permission from the student writer to share something you have read alone, and tell the class, “You have to hear this.” I heard Kate DiCamillo tell about a time in college when a teacher did that with one of her papers, and she became a writer that day.

Build a “Truism Wall”

Have them write life lessons on small pieces of paper, truths about the world or people, truisms that have surprised them in their lives. Thoughts from the heart. Fill a bulletin board with these, with the author’s names. You can use these as main points for essays for months. You can ask students to browse, choose, and copy five (or three or ten, any number) of truisms they would like to remember, to keep in their journals too. And they now have a bank of topics for writing, the best kind of writing, from the heart.

Make a habit of “Sparkling Sentences”

When you’re reading their writing, snag the occasional sentence and type it onto a page. (I sit near a computer with an open Word document while I’m reading their writing, so it’s easy to turn and type a sentence now and then, with the writer’s name.) Then you can do an activity similar to Daily Oral Language, by putting the sentence up and having everyone read it twice, focusing NOT on the mistakes or problems in the sentence, but on the strengths, the beauty of it. “What did this writer do that makes this sentence so powerful?” And let the students identify the craft they notice, whether it’s punctuation, word choice, word placement, anything. You can keep copies of those sparkling sentences up on your walls or in the hallways. Our friend Jayne Hover says that this one practice has the greatest impact on their school’s writing climate and achievement.

Students will stretch to dazzle you, but only if you are dazzleable. You remember teachers you’ve had, the sour teachers who have taken pride in never being impressed. After a while, you quit trying to dazzle them. But you watched for a teacher who could be dazzled. We can find things to love about every student. We

can. Some of the treasure shines out at us at first glance, and some requires hunting. So make sure that no student is left out from at least some of these practices.

It's not enough to listen to students; they have to know they have been heard. When someone tells you, "I miss you" or "You matter to me," these are good, but it's more striking when someone says, "I remember something you said," and then tells you the words. These are all concrete ways to pull text from kids, to show them the power of their own language, and open them to notice and value the living language all around us.