

Creating A Community of Writers

Melissa Heaton

An essential focus of English teachers is to help their students read, think, and eventually write like writers. However, these lofty goals are more challenging to reach when students write in isolation. Budding writers need to collaborate with peers who share common goals and purpose. When done correctly, a writing “community has the power to motivate its members to exceptional performance” (Bickford 4.2). Thus, elevating students to become the writers that their teachers hope they will become.

Most teachers understand the importance of collaboration to support student writers, but it’s often a difficult task to create an effective community that propels students forward—especially when some students are reluctant to share, or they always view writing as a high stakes experience and don’t know how to enjoy the process. So, how can teachers improve their collaborative classrooms as they develop enjoyable, meaningful, and authentic writing opportunities for all students? I have found some answers during my summer travels. When I observed how other communities write and share their writing, I was able to come up with ways to better help my students.



Figure 5.1

It all started when I traveled to Washington state. As I walked around historic downtown Winslow, I stumbled upon a few trees with white tags blowing in the wind. The trees demanded attention. Each tree had a prompt, pens, and tags. People were invited to write their thoughts and hang them on the trees. Even children were welcome to climb up the stairs and contribute. I watched as several people read the responses and shared their own.

Winslow accomplished exactly what researchers have found. A true community requires its members to “interact in a meaningful way that deepens their understanding of each other and leads to learning” (Bickford 4.2). Through writing, this little town interacted to deepen their understanding.

Those writing trees had such an effect on me that now I have a writing tree in my classroom. Throughout the school year, I post prompts by the tree and encourage students to write and share their responses. From time to time, we replace the tags with new ones.

I start off the school year with a simple prompt: What is your favorite book? My students don’t take to the writing tree immediately. A little time is required for them to get used to sharing their ideas freely and without expectations, so I’m usually the first person to put tags on the tree. After a few weeks of nothing, inevitably, a student will approach me after class and ask if she can put a tag on the tree. Of course, I encourage her to share and to put her tag on a branch that will be noticed. As the days go by, more and more tags seem to appear on the tree, and students no longer ask permission. It’s not unusual to see students standing by our

class writing tree, before or after class, reading the tags that are hanging from its branches, talking about the responses, and sharing their own. The writing tree has created a community where my students feel comfortable sharing, and we have learned a lot about each other in the process.

In another oceanside town, I stumbled upon a poetry post nestled in some overgrown bushes. Each month someone in the neighborhood shares a poem, writes

an analysis, and makes copies for everyone to enjoy. The fact that there were only a few poems left inside the post made me realize that this town found value in sharing their ideas through writing.

Whether they realized it or not, the poetry post connected the citizens of that town together and built community. Robert P. Yagelski explained that “As we write, we become connected to that moment and other moments we may be trying to describe and indeed to all those other selves who may somehow figure into our writing, including potential readers who are thus connected to the writer in a real way through a future act of reading.”

Today, I have a poetry post in my classroom. Each month a student shares a poem--original or written by another author--and includes a short analysis. Students are encouraged to read the poem. At the end of each month, I randomly ask students questions about the poem and whomever can answer first gets a reward.

The poetry post is not an assignment. There is no grade attached. It's available to anyone who wants to share a poem. At the beginning of the school year, I'm the one who shares. As I get to know my students better, I gently encourage students to add to our poetry post. Most students prefer to share poems or songs written by other authors. On occasion, they will share poems they have written in class. Since I've added the post to my classroom, I've had former students email me their original poems and ask me to add them to our class poetry post--making our writing and reading community expand to outside the school. The poetry post has been a fun addition to my classroom and helps students, in a small way, become a community of connected readers and writers.

One morning, I was eating brunch at the top of the Space Needle. As the restaurant slowly revolved around the needle, I noticed a piece of paper stuck to the panoramic fishbowl overlooking Seattle. It said, “Write a sentence to continue the story.”

Without hesitation, I grabbed the paper and added to the story.

As the paper made its way around, several restaurant goers contributed and some even shared their comments about the humorous narrative. I was impressed with everyone's willingness to add to the story and comment. There were no remarks about the story's abrupt conclusion or the incomplete sentences. It was just fun.

I adapted this idea in my classroom by using notebooks. I have a box full of spiral notebooks with a different topic written on each one. Food, vacations, and pet peeves are some of the most popular topics. At the beginning of class, students choose a notebook and write whatever they want as long as it relates to the topic on the cover. They like to read what others have written--especially something I wrote--about the topic and respond to what was said or add their own ideas. Then, we share. Students can either read what they wrote about a topic, or share what someone else wrote.

My students love the informal nature of the notebooks. In their words, “It's fun!” And, they have an instant connection with their peers. Deborah Dean and Adrienne Warren explain that “With regular informal writing, students not only develop as writers, they develop as a community, too. They know that they have this shared experience in common, this routine they can count on.”

Without question, building a community of writers is difficult; however, it's a challenge worth taking. As I've tried to incorporate what I have observed during my travels, I've found that there are little ways to move all students toward writing success.



Figure 5.2

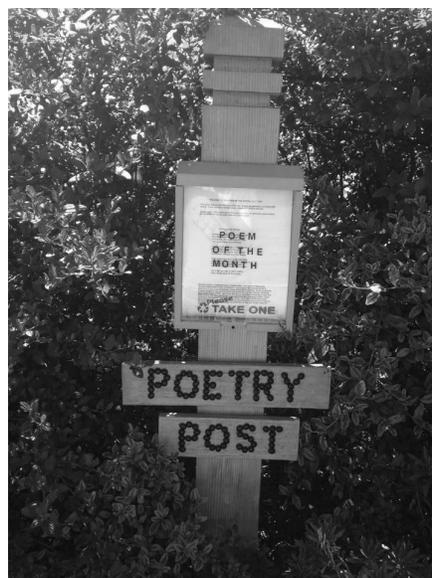


Figure 5.3

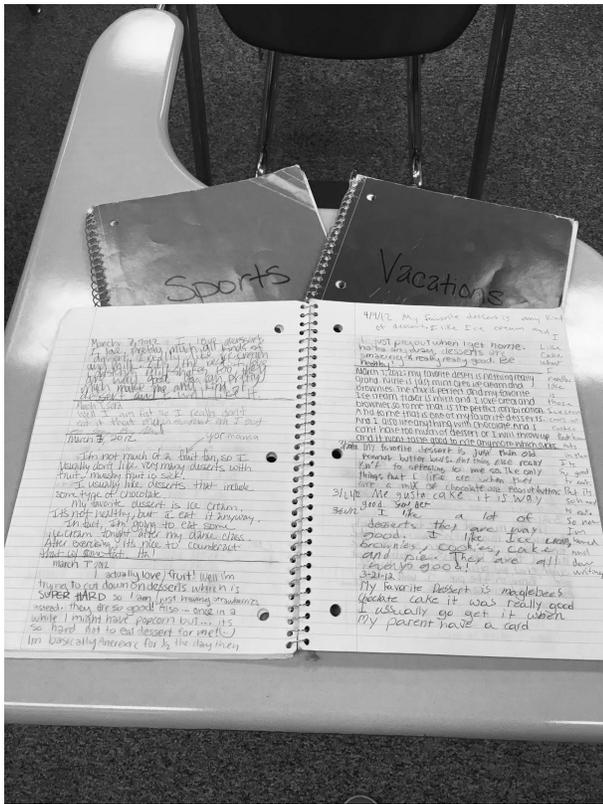


Figure 5.4

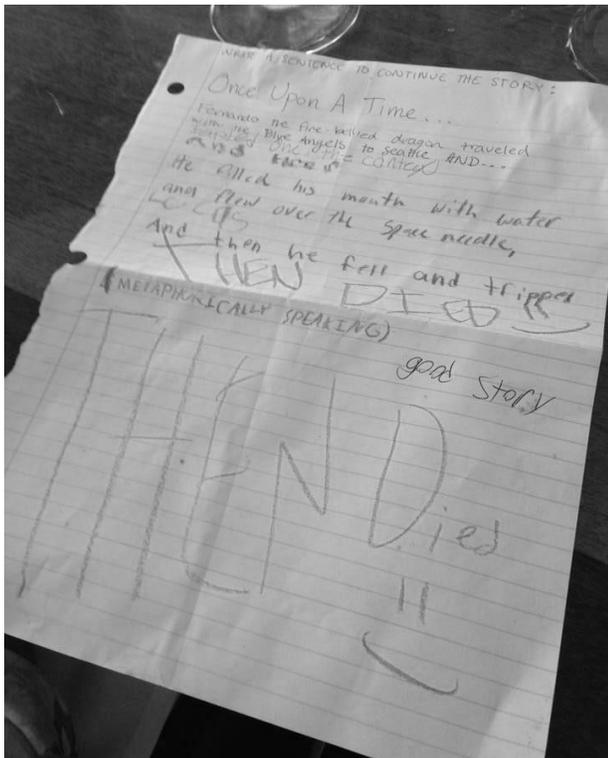


Figure 5.5

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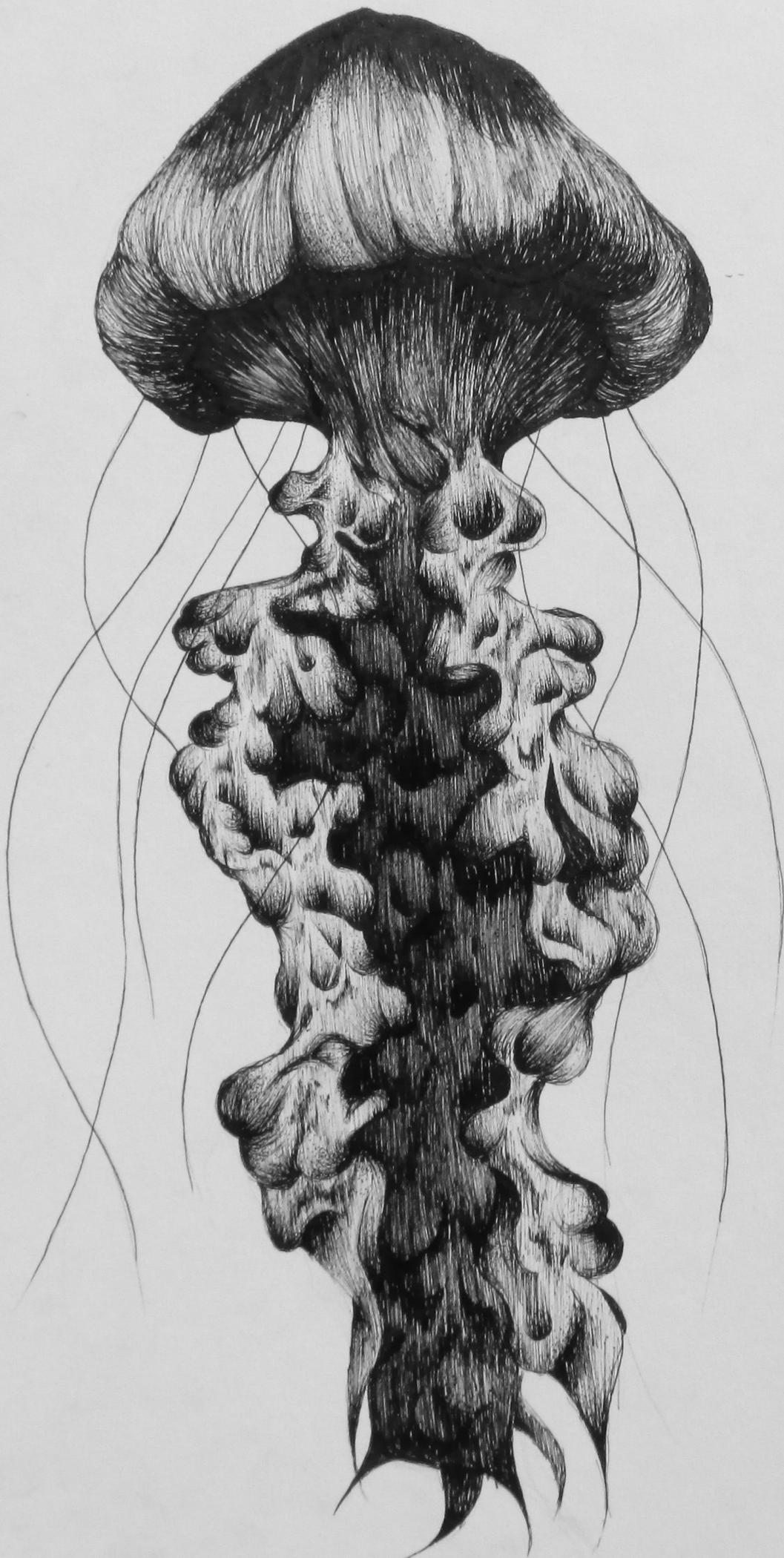
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Melissa Heaton has taught for 17 years and currently teaches 8th grade English at Mapleton Jr. High School in Nebo School District. She is an active fellow of the Central Utah Writing Project and is a former Utah Council of Teachers of English conference chair and awards chair. Melissa continues to enjoy her involvement with both of these organizations.



McClain King

12th Grade

Medusa: Pen

10x18

Corner Canyon High School