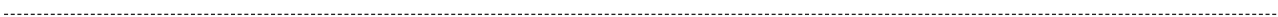


Teaching Adolescent Writers

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Hawker Brownlow Education



Running with the Literacy Stampede

Let's start with a scenario I ask my students at the beginning of the school year:

You're standing in a large field minding your own business when you hear rumbling sounds in the distance. The sounds begin to intensify, and at first you wonder if it is thunder you hear approaching. Because it's a beautiful, cloudless day you dismiss this notion. As the rumbling sound grows louder, you begin to see a dust cloud rising just over the ridge a few yards in front of you. Instantly, you become panicked because at that exact moment it dawns on you that the rumbling you're hearing is the sound of hundreds of wild bulls stampeding over the ridge. There are hordes of them and they are bearing down right on top of you. They are clearly faster than you and there is no time to escape. What should you do? Survival experts recommend only one of the following actions:

- A) Lying down and curling up, covering your head with your arms

- B) Running directly at the bulls, screaming wildly and flailing your arms in an attempt to scare them in another direction
- C) Turning and running like heck in the same direction the bulls are running (even though you know you can't outrun them)
- D) Standing completely still; they will see you and run around you
- E) Screaming bad words at your parent(s) for insisting on a back-to-nature vacation in Wyoming

According to the *Worst Case Scenario Survival Handbook*, a favorite in my classroom library, the correct answer is C. When encountering a stampede of bulls, the handbook states, you should "not try to distract them. . . . If you cannot escape, your only option is to run alongside the stampede to avoid being trampled. Bulls are not like horses and will not avoid you if you lie down—so keep moving" (Piven and Borgenicht 1999, p. 49).

It's an important lesson that I want my students to consider carefully: If you don't want to be crushed by an oncoming stampede, you have to run with it.

Though few of my students have ever been to Wyoming, much less seen an actual stampede, all of them come to me in danger of being trampled. Not by actual bulls, mind you. My students are threatened by a different stampede—a literacy stampede. Consider the following:

- More information was produced in the last thirty years than in the previous 5,000 years *combined* (Wurman 1989).
- A weekday edition of *The New York Times* contains more information than the average person was likely to come across in a lifetime in seventeenth-century England (Wurman 1989).
- Information is doubling every four years (Wurman 1989).
- The blogosphere is now doubling in size every six months. It is sixty times larger than it was three years ago (Sifry 2006).
- The Internet is the fastest growing communications media in world history. It took the Web four years to reach 50 million users. Compare this to the number of years it took radio (38), personal computers (16), and television (13) to reach that many users (Warschauer 1999).
- Getting into college is more competitive than ever. A friend of mine was accepted to UCLA twenty-five years ago with an SAT score of 1,070. In 2005, the last year before the scoring range of the test changed, the average SAT score needed for admittance was 1,310. What's more, the new SAT has eliminated the analogy section and has replaced it with close readings and on-demand writing. Getting into good schools now requires a higher level of reading and writing than ever before. Last year UCLA turned down over 7,000 students who had a 4.0 GPA or higher (College Board 2006).
- The job market is rapidly changing. Unskilled jobs are disappearing. There are two reasons for this: (1) technology is replacing menial jobs,

and (2) unskilled jobs are increasingly outsourced. Today, “Eighty percent or more of the companies in the service and finance, insurance, and real estate sectors, the corporations with the greatest employment-growth potential, assess writing during hiring.” In addition, half of all companies take writing into account when making promotion decisions. As one executive remarked, “You can’t move up without the writing skills.” (National Commission on Writing 2004a).

After I share this information in class, and with the stampede metaphor in mind, I pose a second scenario to my students:

You are growing up in the dawn of the Information Age. More than ever before in history, the ability to read and write will determine how far you will go in this world. For the most part, people who read and write well will compete and prosper; people who read and write poorly will be left behind. Simply put, there is a literacy stampede approaching, and it is bearing down right on top of you. What should you do?

- A) Go home, curl up on the sofa, watch a lot of MTV, and hope the demands of the literacy stampede go away.
- B) Stare the Information Age in the face, screaming wildly and flailing your arms, in an attempt to make it go away.
- C) Elevate your reading and writing abilities to the point that you can run with the literacy stampede.
- D) Stand completely still. Pray that the Information Age will avoid you.
- E) Scream bad words at your parent(s) for conceiving you in the shadow of a literacy stampede.

I want my students to recognize the stark choice they face—either they work hard at elevating their literacy skills or they risk being trampled by today’s literacy stampede.

Running with the Literacy Stampede

If students are going to have a fighting chance of running with the bulls, it is obvious that their ability to read and write effectively will play a pivotal role. In a previous book, *Deeper Reading*, I discuss at length the importance of helping students critically read difficult literature. I make the argument that teaching kids how to be critical readers in the classroom helps our students to become discerning readers outside of school. A student who critically reads *Hamlet* develops a lens useful for critically reading a politician, a commercial, or a ballot proposition.

In this book the focus shifts to sharpening the other element vital to our students’ developing literacy: writing. Now, more than ever, writing plays

a central role in our students’ literacy. As stated in *Because Writing Matters*, a book by the National Writing Project and Carl Nagin, writing “is no longer a concern, as it was in Harvard in 1874, of an exclusively white, male elite; in today’s increasingly diverse society, writing is a gateway for success in academia, the new workplace, and the global economy, as well as for our collective success as a participatory democracy” (2003, p. 2). In an increasingly demanding world of literacy, the importance of our students leaving our schools as effective writers has magnified. The ability to write well, once a luxury, has become a necessity. Today, writing is foundational for success.

Righting Writing Wrongs

I am now again a full-time high school teacher, but for three years I took time out of the classroom to serve both as the English Coordinator for a large urban secondary school district (eighteen schools, 37,000 students) and as a consultant to other school districts. One of the perks of the coordinator job (besides having more than twenty-two minutes to eat lunch) was that over a three-year period I had the opportunity to visit many English classrooms. During these visits I witnessed a lot of great teaching—particularly the teaching of writing. Let me preface what follows by first noting that outstanding writing instruction is taking place in many of our schools under some rather adverse conditions.

That said, I have growing concerns about writing instruction in our classrooms. In California, where I teach, these concerns emerge when tenth-grade students are required to write an on-demand essay as part of passing the High School Exit Exam. The essays are scored on a scale from one to four, with four being highest (a three is considered passing). Two readers read each essay, and the scores are averaged. Here are the results of the March 2002 test administration (the latest year in which the state released the figures broken down by each score level):

Score	Percent of Students Scoring
No score	6.5
1	15.5
1.5	13.7
2	27.4
2.5	15.3
3	12.2
3.5	5.9
4	3.5

(California Department of Education 2002)

A closer look at these results reveals some startling information:

- Over one-third of students scored at 1.5 or lower.

- Almost two-thirds scored at 2 or lower (and the “bar” for a score of 2 is not set very high; a “2” essay is what I would expect from a fifth- or sixth-grade student).
- Less than 10 percent of the students scored at 3.5 or higher.

I’d like to share with you figures for score breakdowns later than 2002, but the California Department of Education stopped releasing these figures to the public. I’m guessing that is a sign that things are not improving. Another sign is that the tenth-grade *average* essay score for the March 2005 test was 2.3 (California Department of Education 2005).

These poor results were also echoed in an informal study done in 2006 by the South Basin Writing Project at an urban southern California high school. After closely examining over 1,700 student papers, the project found the following:

- About 50 percent of the students did not demonstrate that they understood the basic essay form. These students wrote as if answering a test question—one chunk of writing that only engaged the prompt at the simplest level.
- Many students summarized the reading passage rather than interact with the passage. Many simply summarized in chronological order.
- Essays that contained clear thesis statements were few and far between.
- Students struggled with writing effective introductions. Many did not have introductions at all.
- Many demonstrated a lack of writing fluency, leading us to believe they are simply not writing enough on a daily basis.

Lest you think these low scores are a problem only found in California, there is evidence that secondary students are struggling across the country as well. In a national study conducted in 2002 by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the writing skills of adolescents were assessed to see if their skills were “advanced,” “proficient,” “basic,” or “below basic.” NAEP defines these terms as follows:

Writing Proficiency Level	NAEP Definition
Advanced	This level signifies superior performance.
Proficient	This level represents solid academic performance for each grade assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.
Basic	This level denotes partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade level.
Below Basic	(No definition is given, but one can infer that a student writing at “below basic” lacks mastery of basic skills.)

(NCES 2004)