

Essay 4

Pumping up your Language and Literature course: fitness classes, the higher level essay and writing workshop pedagogy

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Fitness class

‘Welcome to Body Pump!’ the instructor says. I’m in a room with 30 or so other adults, waiting for the exercise class to begin. It’s my first time there and my eyes are darting around the room to see what others are doing, how others are behaving. I wonder if I am supposed to wear spandex, as that seems to be the outfit of choice.

When I moved to Singapore, I joined a gym, intent on staying in shape. I had never been to a gym that offered exercise classes from yoga to dance to muscle-building. Two days after signing a one-year membership, I am in a room full of windows and mirrors, with a small elevated stage at the front. Following the lead of the others around me, I pick up a small barbell, various weights, clips to hold them in place, and a step stool like the one you see in aerobics classes. I lay them out in the space I’ve created for myself in that small, soon to be sweaty, room.

‘Is anyone new here?’ the instructor asks. I make eye contact with him and give him that small head nod that tells him this is my first time; it’s much easier than raising my hand and drawing attention to myself. ‘I’m Woody and this is the Body Pump class,’ he says. ‘If you are new, you’ll want to watch me first to see how to do the exercise and then follow. Let’s go!’ It’s a relief to be able to follow his instructions.

As the hour goes by, and we move from legs to chest to back and arms to shoulders and return to legs again, I am spent. It’s a total body workout and I have squatted more than I ever have in my life. I tell you this story because I find that exercising is a lot like the teaching of writing. Just as people in the Body Pump class learn from Woody, students need to watch and witness me – the writing expert in the room – at work. In a similar way to how Woody begins with a quick demonstration about how to do correct squats and the pacing of the squat sets we will be doing in class, I do the same with my writing mini-lessons. Woody walks around the room, giving short, precise, specific and tailored advice about exercise techniques; students also benefit from conferences that meet their developmental needs. Both groups thrive from those intimate and personal conversations with the teacher expert. It is that starting structure

that allows for participants (writers) to make radical and miniscule changes to their exercise regime (writing) that yield huge overall improvements. It's as if they are revising and editing their lives. Through it all, there are setbacks, roadblocks and immense frustrations along the way. Yet, in the end, there is also a celebration of success, of weight loss and physical alterations, of concise and transformative writing.

My goal is no different from anyone in an exercise class, from anyone working with a personal trainer, or anyone changing and altering their diet. Using a fitness metaphor, this essay will guide you in helping your students to become confident, capable, enthusiastic lifelong writers. You will notice that many of the same philosophical underpinnings of how I teach reading are evident in how I teach writing: choice, voice, sharing my writing life, conferring, and of course time to actually write about what matters to students. These are not my original ideas, but rather a synthesis of writing research, of what I have learnt in the last 15 years of teaching. As an IB Language and Literature teacher, nothing has had more impact on how I teach writing. But as a workshop leader for the IB, I find that these pedagogical approaches are often left either to university or elementary school classrooms. This pedagogy does not permeate and penetrate IB English classes. So let me show you what I've learnt and how I have let it drive my teaching. Like you, I want to do everything possible to help my students succeed as writers; this is the best way I know how to make that happen. While I am going to use the higher level essay to frame how to do this, I think you can use this approach at any point in your teaching, in any unit and with any assessment component.

Fitness experts: teachers as writers

Similar to the gym I go to which employs several fitness gurus, including Woody, I like to think of myself (and those of you reading this) as writing experts. I'm no Margaret Atwood, but I've learnt from reading Kelly Gallagher in *Write Like This* that I am the strongest writer in the room. In fact, he goes further and states, '*no strategy improves my students' writing more than having my students watch and listen to me as I write and think aloud.* None' (p. 15). He reminds me of what I know but don't do enough: show students my own writing. This is probably *the* most important thing I've learnt about writing in the last decade.

While this belief no doubt comes from Gallagher's personal experience, this statement is also couched in relevant research. Two of the most prolific and dominant voices in the writing community for the past 30 years, Donald Graves in *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* and Donald Murray in *A Writer*

Teaches Writing, among other books, have both tirelessly argued that in order to teach writing, we must be writers ourselves. This is their central premise – and the central premise of writing workshop pedagogy. While everything won't fall into place if you become a writer yourself, it is the first step in the teaching of writing. They have shown me the way and I am indebted to them, and others, for these insights.

Being a writer, though, is much more difficult for me than being a reader. It's a lot like lifting weights and trying to bulk up. It's hard work. I find it a breeze to talk about my reading life, to share with students my joy for reading. I've become quite good at it too. I find it easier to be passionate about books because, like many of you, I became an English teacher because of my love for literature. We are all readers; we don't all have to be writers.

Graves and Murray reject that idea and push us to be writers. But my confidence sags considerably when it comes to writing. It's not that I don't know how to do it. It's just much more personal, complicated and complex. I fail often. I put myself down and then I have to pick myself back up again. I also think it takes much more courage to be a writer and to share that writing with students. I've become more open with my students; as a very private person who does not share his personal life, I've had to learn to tell selected stories through my writing. It's hard. It's also rewarding.

The National Writing Project – a network of professional development sites in the United States and elsewhere – commits itself to developing teacher writers at all levels of education. I encourage you to enrol in their summer institutes if this feels foreign to you; if you feel on edge with this idea of teacher as writer, they lift you up, support you and help you take on the identity as a writer more than any other group I know. It wasn't until I attended a summer institute that I understood this key point of Graves and Murray.

The teacher as writer is just the beginning. What I've learnt from those on the writing workshop frontlines is that once you become a writer yourself, you must model your writing for your students to make writing visible. Kelly Gallagher talks about the Wizard of Oz effect in the conclusion of *Write Like This*. He argues:

We can't hide, like the Great Oz, standing behind the curtain, barking our writing assignments . . . If we want our young writers to improve, we have to plant ourselves in the middle of our classroom and demonstrate how we approach this confusing thing we call the writing process. (p. 225)

The process of writing is often hidden from students. They see finished products. They read polished pieces. I do this too. I give them examples from past IB papers of work that was graded 7 and I will also do this for the higher level essay. I show them model writing that achieves the top ends of every markband. I'll even provide a wide variety of samples with a range of scores so they can compare and contrast the differences between them. I believe these exemplars are vital in my teaching.

But if I do only this, students don't get to see the mess; and writing is a mess. Gallagher is telling us that this is our chance to show our students that process. Once I have taken on the identity as a writer, once I write myself, then I can show students my writing. I can work them through how I generate an idea for a piece of writing. I can demonstrate for them how to use a writing technique that I have deliberately left out, so I can teach it that day in class. I can show them my revision process, the recursive nature of writing, the constant drafting and redrafting of a piece I am working on. Graves says that 'the *force* of revision, the *energy* for revision, is rooted in the child's voice, the urge to express' (p.160). When I can show them my voice, and my reasons for revision, students get to see me as a writer; they get to see that there are surprises and contradictions, delights and downfalls. They get authenticity.

In actual practice, this means I am writing my own higher level essay, and I will write a different one, live, in class, every single time I have a new group of students. If I was more organised, I probably wouldn't have to do this, but I like being in the moment, just as they are in the moment, trying to figure things out.

Fitness transformation: time, choice, voice and heart in the IB

Let's start with time. There is always a time issue in any curriculum, and the IB is no different. Tough choices need to be made. I'm sure you have faced very similar conundrums, but just as those that are attempting to lose weight need to dedicate time, energy and resources to exercise and nutrition, I must do the same for writing. Using a writing workshop model when students are writing the higher level essay, my 75-minute lessons look like this:

Time	Activity
15 minutes	Silent independent choice reading
10 minutes	Mini-lesson on a writing technique
40 minutes	Time to write – generate, rehearse, draft, craft, revise and/or edit
5 minutes	Share and celebrate
5 minutes spread throughout the lesson	Book talk, explain the homework, miscellaneous other things that arise

All the while, I am conducting writing conferences with as many students as possible during that time. If I want students to become confident, capable, enthusiastic lifelong writers, then I must design my curriculum and my daily schedule around actual writing so that students can become writers, not just producers of writing.

Let's go back to the fitness metaphor. You are not going to bench press two hundred pounds if you don't regularly exercise your chest muscles. It's going to be difficult to get better at writing if you don't constantly do it. Those dedicated to exercising will usually lift weights and delve into some type of cardio workout four to six times a week. I should be doing the same in my English class; since I see my standard level class only twice a week, I have to have them writing as often as possible. And it is the higher level essay that provides me with the opportunity to do so explicitly.

In my situation, if I teach students on Monday and Thursday, and I don't write on that Thursday in class, it means they will have gone almost a whole week, until I see them on the following Monday, without writing. I'm sure your sports teams practise more than that and I am personally exercising more than that. It's tough to get better at anything doing it less than twice a week.

The research about writing also advocates strongly for what I will call choice, voice and heart. In *Best Practice: Today's Standard for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools* by Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels and Arthur Hyde, they offer a neat little one-page set of recommendations for writing. What do they call for? More student ownership and responsibility; more class time on actually writing whole, original pieces; and more teacher modelling (p. 105). In other words, these researchers are arguing for less teacher control in the whole process and more opportunities for students to choose what to write about as they get into the higher level essay – thus helping to cultivate their voice.

Vicky Spandel expands on this idea in *The 9 Rights of Every Writer: A Guide for Teachers*. She talks about the right to choose a personally important topic, saying that ‘writers who discover their own topics write with voice and commitment’ (p. 18). She also says that ‘students look to us for writing ideas not because we inspire them, but because it is easier to follow an assignment than to think on your own what you will write’ (p. 26). I love that idea of thinking on your own. I want that for my students, deeply, in all that I do. In my over-obsessed school culture of grades and university acceptances, I have come to find students rely on me to tell them exactly what to do, exactly how to think; they are excellent at it, and have been for years. It drives me insane. Spandel is suggesting though that the reason I’m so frustrated is because I am not giving students choice or voice in their writing. She’s right. This all changes when students have something to say and a desire to say it well.

Other researchers also write prolifically about writing and how to encourage students to think on their own. Tom Romano in *Crafting Authentic Voice* presents an argument about the teaching of voice, especially in expository writing. He explains the qualities of voice: it’s the delights and dilemmas, how to craft it and how to assess it. It’s not the only thing that matters in writing, but it is essential to it. Murray says that ‘Voice is the magical heard quality in writing’, while Graves says that ‘To ignore voice is to present the process as a lifeless, mechanical act’ (as quoted in Romano, pp. 10, 11). The second quotation reminds me of my work as an IB examiner. Grading over 200 Paper 1 scripts each year, I receive too many that exhibit lifeless writing. The ones that attain the top marks inevitably have voice. It’s an interesting paradox as voice is not explicitly assessed on the rubric and it is not something I am directly looking for as an examiner. Yet, after reading ten in a row, when the eleventh has it – voice that is – there’s a spark, a sense of understanding the underlying nature of the text and an intuitive feel for interpreting it. Even the organisational structure the students choose shows me their thought processes, how their minds work. Before the IB adopted online marking, when scripts were posted in the mail, I would often read 20 or so scripts from the same school with the same structure, the same way of thinking and often the same dry voice. It doesn’t allow for what is, as Romano quotes one student as saying, ‘the writer’s presence on the page, the writer’s DNA’ (p. 1).

Drawing out that DNA requires time. It means letting students write about what matters to them. Through it all, their voice will emerge. This is true in the fitness world as well. When I commit to exercising, over an extended period of time, the results are evident. All I have to do is look in the mirror or try on an old pair of jeans.

Fitness basics: mini-lessons on writing techniques

If you've ever attended a group fitness class such as the one I go to with Woody, owned an exercise DVD from a famous actor or actress or worked with a personal trainer, you will notice that they almost always give short instructions at the start of their exercise routine. It may be about how to correctly lift weights, as in the Body Pump classes I attend. It might be about routines and ways of fitting exercise into your life. Whatever the content, the instructor usually gives a quick demonstration, showing participants the correct form, explaining when and how they use this exercise in their own workouts. They are teaching participants the fitness basics.

In *The Writing Workshop* by Katie Wood Ray, she calls these 'focus lessons' (p. 141) while Regie Routman in *Writing Essentials* calls it 'demonstration' (p. 70). Lucy Calkins, probably the best known, refers to it as the 'mini-lesson' in *The Art of Teaching Writing*. They are all essentially the same; you dedicate a small chunk of time to teaching a specific skill or habit that day. It is teacher-centred, and that is OK. You demonstrate the skill in your own writing, look at a published piece of writing, or use a piece of student writing and walk students through your thinking and process. Each researcher has a slightly different feel and approach, but they all advocate for a small amount of time of showing students how to do something, with you as the expert. In fact, Ray has a very useful chart at the end of Chapter 13 in *The Writing Workshop* about what we need to do in focus lessons (I am using the term mini-lessons) that sums it up better than anyone else I've read. She says we need to make sure that:

- the lesson is focused – five to ten minutes maximum
 - we know what we are teaching and why we are teaching it; it should fit into a larger unit of study
 - the lesson has both showing and telling
 - the tone is right: one writer talking to a group of writers
 - we try to connect the lesson to the work that students are doing in the workshop
 - we look for evidence in students' work of their using the possibilities we are teaching them.
- (p. 154).

In an IB classroom, that means I am talking, possibly lecturing, about writing for a short portion of the class. I have clear teaching objectives, a skill usually, that I want students to practise and master. It might be on making claims or selecting the best possible evidence from the text. For the higher level essay, I have a list of techniques to study already figured out, although they change every year as I adapt them

based on the needs of the students in that current class: I add and delete my mini-lessons based on the skills of that current class.

Mini-lesson	Suggested resources
Generating a topic and title	Own writing + student exemplars
Creating claims	Own writing + student exemplars + published exemplars
Finding the right quotations to support one's claims	Own writing + student exemplars + published exemplars
Unpacking evidence	A student's current writing + student exemplars + published exemplars
Staying literary and author-focused	Own writing + a student's current writing
Plot/description versus analysis	Own writing + a student's current writing + student exemplars
How to edit and prepare for publication	A student's current writing + published exemplars

What I love most about this is that I'm teaching writing to writers. It changes the whole tone and focus of an IB class when you make the huge shift to using a writer's workshop approach.

The key to remember is to keep your mini-lesson short, concise, precise and to the point. I don't need to go into great detail. Students get it and do so quickly. If they don't, that's part of the purpose of conference time.

Fitness expert chats: conferencing

In the previous section of this essay, I talked about how Woody, or another fitness instructor, will provide a demonstration of the exercise; for example, the correct way to squat so that you don't injure your knees because of poor form. Some people in the class get it right away. They've been squatting for years and their technique is flawless. I, however, hate exercising my leg muscles. Sure, I'll go for a run, but I usually reject anything that has to do with lunging or squatting. That's part of the reason I go to these classes; they force me to do leg workouts. What's great about them is that Woody will walk by and offer individual advice to those who need it. When I first started doing squats, he pulled me aside for about 30 seconds, explained that I needed to keep my heels on the ground, showed me what I was doing wrong, how to correct it, and then made me demonstrate it on the spot so he felt comfortable that I had learnt and

could apply the correct form. Woody told me, right then and there, how to change. He didn't write it on a paper that I received two weeks later. This same strategy holds true for writing conferences.

Carl Anderson, the writing conference guru, has taught me that 'conferences are conversations' (*How's It Going?* p. 6). He notes that conferences, like many conversations, have the following characteristics:

- Conferences have a point to them.
- Conferences have a predictable structure.
- In conferences, we pursue lines of thinking with students.
- Teachers and students have conversational roles in conferences.
- In conferences, we show students we care about them. (p. 7)

These aren't pointless conversations. They are a directed, planned and thoughtful dialogue between you and your students about their writing, about what matters to them as writers. In fact, most of the learning that will take place occurs when you confer with students. John Hattie, in *Visible Learning for Teachers*, says that 'feedback [is] in the top ten influences on achievement' (p. 116). If feedback is so important, then how do we do it to maximise its benefits?

In *The Writing Workshop*, Ray has shown me the four parts of a conference, adding on to the work of Calkins. They are: research, decide, teach and make a record (p. 160). Anderson goes on to define the roles of the teachers (p. 26) and the roles of the student (p. 83) in a conference. Both writers do what Hattie argues is effective: their feedback is 'focused, specific and clear' (p. 135).

To make it more visible, here is a breakdown of what a typical writing conference looks like for me:

Questions from the writer
Read the piece or portions of it with that framing in mind
Specific compliment
Teaching point or reteaching point
Prove to me you know it
Ending compliment
Record key points

I spend around four to six minutes with each student. I start by asking if they have any questions for me as a writer before I read their work. I use those questions to frame my reading of the piece. I then read the piece – quickly. I have learnt how to skim well. I don't need to read it all and I don't have the time to read it in the comfort of a reclining chair. I do have the time though to read it with their questions in mind and with my mini-lessons in the back of my head. This is me gathering evidence about the writer – what Ray calls 'researching'. This informs what I do and say next.

I then compliment the writer, being as specific as possible. I might say: 'Your evidence here is effective. The evidence you use matches the claim you are making and it's one of the better examples you could have used. This is effective.' At this point, I have to make a decision on what to teach or reteach the writer. With time, this becomes more evident and fluid. It was clunky and difficult for me at first. There are so many things to work on! What do I tell the writer? One thing will often stand out and that is what I jump on. I then ask students to show me right there that they 'get it'. Usually this is done verbally, and if they can satisfactorily explain it back to me, I tell them to work on it right then in their writing.

Finally, I end with complimenting them again. It might be something as simple as 'thank you for sharing this with me'. I might say something more complex, such as: 'See how you make a claim that focuses on the author's techniques. I want that same level of precision at the start of the next paragraph, which begins, unfortunately, with plot. I know you can do this because I've just seen it!' I make sure to record this conference, this actual conversation, in my notes, and move to the next student.

It's important to note that while I am conferencing with students, I am taking notes about the teaching point for that particular student. In the same notebook that I am using for reading conferences, I use the back page for my notes about writing conferences. I put down the date. I list the teaching point. This is then a running record of what a student is struggling with, what I have taught and retaught, and what areas I have not addressed with the student. I like to keep it simple. I also ask students to write down the teaching point they learnt that day on the top of their paper or in their writer's notebooks to reinforce the lesson.

While I am conferencing with students, it raises the question of what all the other students are doing during this time. This is writing workshop time. They have 25 to 30 minutes to write each day. Some days they are generating ideas or rehearsing them aloud with their writing partner. Other days they are silently drafting, revising or editing their work. Sometimes they are peer-reviewing their writing partner's piece.

In other words, they are all over the map. They might be rereading a mentor essay. Maybe they are looking at the whiteboard to see either my work or a student's work demonstrating a writing technique. It is and looks like organised chaos, but they know that I want to see what they have accomplished that day. It is not a time to slack off, doze or relax. It is a time to write, to talk about writing and to read the writing of others. It is a time to achieve that goal of becoming a confident, capable, enthusiastic lifelong writer.

Remember that conferring lets students improve, as writers, in the moment at that specific time. In his book, Hattie says:

Note that there is no discussion in this chapter on feedback relating to marking or grading. This is because the messages are about 'feedback in motion', primarily assisting to move forward based on correctives and information that reduces the gap between where students are and where they need to be. Too often, comments on essays or other work are too late, too ineffectual, or ignored. (p. 135)

I like that idea of 'feedback in motion'. It's what I get in fitness classes; it's what happens on the sports field and in the band room. Why shouldn't it be happening like that in my IB English classroom?

Changing your eating habits to enhance your fitness goals: revising and editing

While going to fitness classes, exercising regularly and making sure to do a variety of workouts is important, I also know that I won't reach my goals if I am not eating well. One of the biggest tips I picked up is to find a healthy food, put it into my diet and make it part of my eating habits. Take spinach, for example. I eat it all the time now. About five years ago, I read about it in detail and decided to give it a try. I liked it, and now I eat it every day at lunch as part of a salad I make. I made a significant revision to my diet by adding something new. I've done this with other foods too. I've started to eat almonds, walnuts and macadamias instead of a cookie or sugary snack of some sort around 3 p.m. I'm usually quite hungry at that time, but I've already had lunch and dinner is several hours away.

This same concept holds true in writing. In *Write Like This*, Gallagher calls it the RADaR method, or 'replace, add, delete and reorder' (p. 206). I've replaced the cookie with the nuts. I've added spinach to my diet. I've also simply deleted foods – white bread, for example – and have reordered when I eat fruit (in the morning and at lunch instead of at dinner). Because of these changes and revisions to my diet, I am not only much healthier but my fitness level is also improving. That's the point!

Gallagher argues that we need to teach students the power of replacing, adding, deleting and reordering their writing, similar to what I have done with my diet. I am reminded of the power of this at the close of Gallagher's chapter on revision. He says that 'when we design lessons that require [students] to pay attention to language, lessons that help them understand the importance both revision and editing play in strengthening writing', then students will take that first mess of a draft and craft a much better second, third or fourth draft (p. 222).

Student writing reaps huge dividends when they make significant revisions with purpose, and those revisions will be more meaningful if we allow them to write about something that matters to them.

Buying that new pair of jeans: sharing and celebrating

I have been diligently exercising for months. I attend the Body Pump classes. I lift weights on my own on two other days a week. I make sure to fit in some type of cardio routine as well, three times a week. I'm eating better – spinach, nuts and lean protein. I've cut out many processed foods, such as white bread and cookies. It's approaching the holidays, and I've decided it's time to treat myself. I'm not much of a shopper, but it's time to celebrate! I buy a new pair of jeans, and am happy with how I look in them.

While it's probably enough to know how I've changed in the last few months, it feels good to have a bit of external validation as well, from close friends or family. The same is true for writing. At some point, it's time to publish our work; it will go up on the walls of the English corridor for others to read. Some wonder why I take the time to put up student work. And then when I come back from lunch, I see a lone student reading some writing, or after school, while another student is waiting for his parent to pick him up, he's hanging out upstairs, reading the work of others in the school. It might not make a large impact. It might be a quiet thing to do. But, in moments like these, it makes the publishing of student work worthwhile.

More than the mere putting up of student work in hallways or on blogs, I am a vigorous proponent of what Penny Kittle mentions in *Write Beside Them*. She talks about a 'Quaker Share', a technique learnt from another colleague, Karen Hartman, in which every student stands and reads a few lines of their work to the entire class (p. 91). Or she does a 'Symphony Share', in which a few students read their lines aloud when she, the conductor, points to them; another quick tip picked up by watching a colleague in action – this time Sue Ann Martin (p. 92). But what Kittle is arguing, and what I have learnt from her, is to close

the class with a focus on celebrating student writing, their words, what they have to say. It validates their voices. It sends a powerful message to them: your stories matter, what you have to say matters. They leave the confines of your classroom, walking out into the hallways – and the real world – believing in themselves as writers.

Conclusion

My lessons don't always follow this format. But what I am attempting to do is align my values – I want students writing, often – with the IB curriculum I must teach. I've found this works best with a writing assessment, and the higher level essay is the perfect opportunity for me to do this. I find it's worth spending a bit more time on the teaching of writing, and how to be a writer, than on the texts or units themselves leading up to this writing. I chunk out that time for writing at the start of a two-year programme and I scrupulously keep to the time I've allocated – usually about a month. This gives me the space to teach specific writing skills and gives students the opportunity to try them out. All the while, I get to confer and talk to them about their writing, in real time, when it happens, knowing full well this is when the magic happens in terms of learning. It's something to consider as you approach the higher level essay, and the teaching and learning around it.

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