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Innovation *Old-School Style*

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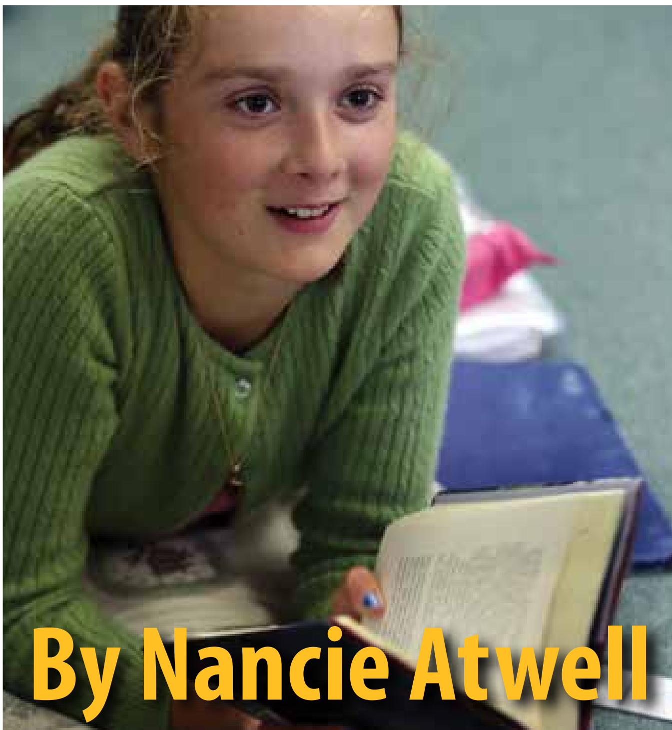

By Nancie Atwell

When reformers discuss how to improve U.S. education, *innovation* is a word they use a lot, preceded by the modifier *technological*: innovation gets defined as devices and apps. But as a growing body of research has begun to question whether tablets, e-readers, and assorted digital platforms are doing children more harm than good, I'd like to reclaim the term. Methods, created by teachers in a quest to develop students' skills and understandings, are the essential innovations. In my forty-year career as a middle school English teacher, the simplest and most powerful innovation was to give my students *time* and *choice* as writers and readers.

In a writing–reading workshop, students choose the topics they write about and the books they read. Because they decide, they engage. Because they engage, they experience the volume of committed practice that leads to stamina and excellence. Each year, my students read an average of forty books and produced over twenty pieces of writing. They won writing contests, were published, and earned money. Most importantly, they discovered what writing and reading are good for, here and now and in their literate lives to come. Time and choice encourage and transform children of every ability and background.

Take Mike. He entered our K–8 school as an eighth-grader. On the reading survey students complete in September, he wrote that comics was his favorite genre. He couldn't name a book he'd like to read and identified no strengths as a reader. His only reading goal: "Staying with the book. Sometimes I doze off." He said he hadn't read a single book over the previous twelve months. Mike summed up his feelings about himself as a reader in one word: "Bad."

I asked him, "You read *zero* books last year? How can that be?" He explained he'd been given one book in English class, a fat textbook. The teacher assigned students to read a selection and answer the questions at the end. If it was homework, he fudged it, copied someone else's, or didn't bother to do it. He said, "When I was supposed to read in class, I 'fake read.' Usually I played with a computer game that I hid behind the book while I fake read it."

More than anyone we teach, our inexperienced, unenthusiastic readers—our Mikes—need compelling stories, characters they can identify with, vicarious experiences, and *pleasure*. Give them intriguing introductions to compelling stories and time in school to read them. Give them a community to read in, a healthy collection of books from which to choose, and conversations with a teacher who knows the collection, and they will grow into fluent, passionate readers.

On his first day of reading workshop, Mike practically ripped Carl Deuker's baseball novel *High Heat* (HMH Books for Young Readers, 2003) out of my hands when I finished my book talk on a cliffhanger, inviting intrigued readers to find out what happens next. Mike finished *High Heat* in a week. Its reading level was beyond his ability, but my introduction, his curiosity, and baseball enticed him into Deuker's fictional world and held him. In our

conferences during independent reading time, he could tell me what was happening and what he thought so far, and that was all I needed to know. Then he was on the lookout for the next title on his "Someday List" of books he wanted to read.

Mike finished thirty-six books that year and became an avid, adept reader. There were no book reports, quizzes, vocabulary lessons, discussion questions, close-reading sessions, or digital platforms. There was time for him to get lost in stories, other readers to talk with and write to about books, and lots of titles by authors who respect and get adolescence—writers who know how to craft plots and themes that appeal to teenagers.

Anyone's achievement is driven by interest. Until eighth grade, Mike had no reason to be interested in reading. But when he was offered vicarious adventures with characters he came to care for, he wanted to practice reading; through engaged practice, he became good at it. The lure of stories is a reading teacher's superhero power.

Student writers, too, learn best in the context of texts that matter to them. Topics they develop, time to practice, conferences with the teacher about their drafts, and authentic, age-appropriate genres to write stretch children in profound directions.

Colleen's stated ambitions at the end of eighth grade were to star on Broadway and marry someone famous. Like other students who grew up to become lawyers—as well as copywriters, editors, academics, businesspeople, environmentalists, engineers, and social workers, all adults who work at careers in which they write every day—she benefited from a developmentally appropriate curriculum that gave her autonomy, experience, and one-to-one advice about how to meet her intentions as a writer.

Writing workshop teaches children how to work hard as writers. It's not soft or easy; it is immersive and demanding. The goal is excellence. Exploring their ideas in authentic, kid-friendly ways fires students with a sense of purpose and impels them to craft and communicate meaning. Daily time to write gives them the practice they need to achieve their purposes.

Each school year, the writers at my school study age-appropriate genres. The seventh- and eighth-graders produce free-verse poetry, memoirs, reviews, short fiction, parodies, essays, profiles, and advocacy journalism. Along the way, they discover the uses of each genre—what it can do for them as writers and how it can influence readers. Because the writing is real, so is its impact.

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Colleen was my student years ago. She was an enthusiastic poet, storyteller, and reviewer—a child writer with a voice and an investment in self-expression. She wrote to me recently as a second-year law student about how the writing she composed in K–8 prepared her to write as an attorney:

> In the spring, we were required to write an appellate brief, and the process included peer editing. I was astonished to see the drastic differences between my writing and that of my classmates—the errors, confusion, and clutter. I was taught from a very young age . . . to love writing and to practice, regularly and passionately. It wasn't only about teaching us how to write professionally and effectively, but also to bestow the deeper appreciation and satisfaction that one derives from writing *well*. I approach writing today much the same way you instructed me, with an eye for creativity and analysis, and relentless dedication.

Colleen recognized that a school environment in which she was invited "to love writing and to practice, regularly and passionately" taught her *how to write, period*. None of her K–8 teachers was trying to prepare her for a career at the bar by back-mapping the curriculum. Instead, we taught a little girl how to express herself on paper about ideas she cared about.

When these middle school students take on the real work of advocating for causes they believe in, they begin by generating a list of local nonprofit organizations; then each writer chooses one to champion. The goal is to write about it so well that the younger children will vote to award it a small grant—one of three—to support its work. Sophia decided to advocate for Feed Our Scholars, which sends local students from impoverished families home on Friday afternoons with backpacks filled with meals for the weekend.

Sophia's class read powerful examples of advocacy journalism and teased out features of the genre. She telephoned the director of Feed Our Scholars and scheduled a site visit and interview. After the class generated baseline questions, she typed hers up on a laptop, and then spent a morning onsite collecting information—history, logistics, statistics, quotes, and anecdotes.

Back at school, she experimented with leads until she found a direction for her essay. She ordered her information, drafted it, clarified and tightened it, read and revised her text against the criteria her class created, and conferred with me along the way. Finally, students collaborated on a second set of criteria, for how they wanted the younger children to judge the writing.

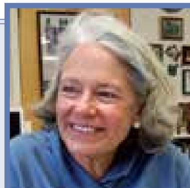
Sophia's eloquent essay was not one of the three that won over the littler kids. The kid it did win over is Sophia. The girl is on fire about food insecurity in America. She devoted a dawn-to-dusk Saturday to

. . . and they will grow into fluent, passionate readers.

baking hundreds of cookies, and on Sunday set up a bake sale at her church. She raised over $700 for Feed Our Scholars, enough money for a year of weekend food for three local families. Because she writes, Sophia is learning about the kind of woman she wishes to be and the difference an individual can make.

In this time of Common Core State Standards, public school teachers feel pressure to adopt methods geared to the new assessments. I sympathize. I also know what I would do if I were in their shoes: try to teach authentic writing and reading, but devote a couple of weeks in March to a genre study of test writing and to strategy lessons about multiple-choice questions and answers. During my years in public schools, my students drew on their rich experiences as writers and readers, along with a few tactical practice sessions, to perform at least as well as and usually much better than kids who'd been test-prepped all year long.

Students leave our tiny school in rural Maine as writers with voices, as critical readers. They succeed in high school, college, and life because they're ready for the world they'll meet *out there*—for concepts, cultures, and experiences they've already encountered in the pages of books they loved and writing they created. Time and choice motivate every child to engage, thrive, and grow up healthy and whole.



You may have heard Nancie Atwell's name in the news this year, and for good reason. In March 2015, Nancie was the winner of the Varkey Foundation's inaugural Global Teacher Prize. The award, the "Nobel Prize of teaching," is given to a teacher who has made an exceptional contribution to the profession. Truly dedicated to education, Nancie has donated the entire $1 million award to her demonstration school, the Center for Teaching and Learning, in Edgecomb, Maine, where she taught seventh- and eighth-grade writing, reading, and history, and now serves as a writing support teacher.

Nancie is the author of many well-respected books, including the classic *In the Middle*, now in its third edition, which has inspired generations of teachers; *Systems to Transform Your Classroom;* and *School, Lessons that Change Writers;* and *Naming the World: A Year of Poems and Lessons.*

To continue to engage with Nancie on this topic, please visit www.heinemann.com/pd/journal.