

Engaging the Disengaged, Number 7

By Kathy King-Dickman | Categories: Classroom Community

How do we connect with students to support their writing? Topic Choice in Writing

In *Best Practices: Bringing Standards to Life in American Classrooms*, fourth edition, Daniels, Hyde, and Zemelman say, "Schooling should be student-centered, taking its cues from young people's interests, concerns, and questions,...asking kids what they want to learn" (pp 10-11). Paul Houston, the author of *Giving Wings to Children's Dreams* says, "Education is about doing what you are interested in doing" (p 27).

And one of the six steps to motivate and engage students in Stevie Quate and John McDermott's book *Clock Watcher's* is: CHOICE.

So what do we do when students say, "I don't got nothin' to write about."

When I first started working with Antonio, a seventh-grader, I struggled to engage him in writing. He spent the majority of class time tipping back in his chair snickering with his buddies. During an early conference I asked him what his passions and interests were. Like many adolescents who don't see the richness in their simple lives, Antonio began with, "I don't got none and I don't got nothin' to write." I persisted, prompting "Tell me about your life. Tell me about the items in your home or in your yard. Share with me some special memories you have. Who are the people you love?" Many students feel that if they don't have memories of Disney World or other family vacations, they have *nothing* to write about. Eventually, when he realized I wouldn't be deterred, he slowly began: "Well... the first gift I ever got was a '57 Chevy Camaro. It don't run, but my grandpa and I like to go sit in it an' talk. Ummm...our yard's a mess. It's covered with broken car parts an' cars that don't run...My dad likes to fix cars and he's really good at it. Sometimes he gets jobs fixin' cars."

Four years later, Antonio had written personal narratives about issues such as his first gift and the quality time he had spent there with his granddad, persuasives on which car models were best, reports on types of engines, and fiction stories about cars coming to life. And yes, Antonio still tipped back in his chair and invested energy in impressing his buddies, but there was one difference-he had become a writer, a writer with many solid pieces under his belt to demonstrate just how well he could write. And every time we embarked on a new genre, Antonio had somethin' to write about.

If we want to engage students deeply in the writing process, we MUST help them find topics they are passionate enough to write about. Topic choice engages student writers, but how do we engage them when they "don't got nothin' to say"? We must very explicitly support these writers in seeing that being human, means we have 'somethin' to say'. Antonio loved cars. It was my job to show him how that love could be turned into writing topics in all the genres I required. Therefore, showing Antonio how his interests in life are truly topics in writing was the most important job I could do as his writing teacher.

And yes, Antonio did pass the Colorado state writing test each and every spring that he was a member of my writers' workshop.