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Tapping Students' Interests to Develop Literary Analysis Skills

Passion blogging is a low-stakes chance for students to analyze texts of their choosing before they move on to complex literary texts.

By *Allison Berryhill*

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Keith Negley / The iSpot

Analysis rhymes with *paralysis*, I have discovered: Too often in the past, the texts I asked my freshman English students to analyze left them frozen, detached from their own thoughts and feelings. They scratched at the surface of literature that was not particularly meaningful or accessible to them. The result was cold, inauthentic writing, and I dreaded teaching analysis.

But last summer I read Allison Marchetti and Rebekah O'Dell's book *Beyond Literary Analysis* and decided to use their approach. Marchetti and O'Dell uncouple the task of analysis from traditional literary texts and instead invite students to delve into a broader definition of *text*: "anything that has a beginning, middle, and end and can be broken down into smaller pieces and studied."

Songs, movies, sports events, and personal experiences are all texts for our students. Marchetti and O'Dell argue persuasively that the keys to strong analysis are passion, ideas, structure, and authority. Students do their best analytical work

with texts they know and love.

ENTER PASSION BLOGGING

I had tried blogging with students in the past, but prompt-generated blogs felt forced and student-generated blogs often devolved into rants or stream-of-consciousness free writes that were painful to read and not especially helpful to my students' growth as writers.

Passion blogging (https://blog.heinemann.com/classroom-routines-to-deepen-passion) is founded on what students know and care about. Their online space is built on their own authority. Their classroom community of readers provides a genuine audience, and the focus on analysis gives shape and purpose to their writing.

Before setting up blogs, my ninth graders created heart maps, as suggested by Marchetti and O'Dell—they drew large hearts and filled them with illustrations and words about their interests and passions. I nudged them in this process by asking them what they would do if I gave them 20 minutes to look up a topic on the internet. What did they want to know more about? What topics fascinated them?

Students selected interests from their heart maps, determined related research to explore, and began the analysis process. Because they were already knowledgeable about and invested in their topics, they could apply their writing energy to developing a strong structure and ideas with sound support.

We read mentor texts, including movie and video game reviews, to explore how professional writers analyze their topics. In addition, students wanting to follow their mentor texts by enlivening their posts with photos learned about open source licenses and photo attribution, and formatting the blog posts gave students practice with transferable tech skills.

My 36 students and I wrote 10 posts apiece during our first semester. Before each blog post, I reminded students to research support for their analysis and then attribute, quote, and link to their evidence. That provided opportunities to discuss the credibility of sources.

After each post, we each read and responded to at least five posts. Teachers can ask students to respond to at least five blogs that have fewer than five comments to ensure that all students garner feedback—they can respond to blogs with more than five comments but can't count those toward their required five. A bonus of peer reviewing is that it creates opportunities for lessons in digital citizenship.

Our class blogs are intended as a practice space for developing skills, and I grade them accordingly. Blogs that show attempts at passion (voice), authority (attribution and care with mechanics), structure (organization and transitions), and ideas (supported with examples) earn full credit. Intermittently, I meet with students for writing conferences to discuss strategies for strengthening their blogs' effectiveness.

My students' passion blogs resulted in creative, voice-filled analyses on wide-ranging topics such as the 19th Amendment, the best local hiking trails, why Austin Forkner is an amateur Kawasaki legend, a student's cataract surgery, ways school kills curiosity in students, a weekend of pheasant hunting, the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, an *Across the Universe* movie review, hunger strikes, a grandfather's escape from Iran, and the Best of Iowa competition at the county fair.

TOWARD LITERARY ANALYSIS

Analyses of news events, political proposals, new technologies, and entertainment options flood our digital lives. Analytical dexterity is essential for participating in this world of arguments. But as English teachers, we also want our students to

analyze literature to understand how writers bring ideas to the page.

As Marchetti and O'Dell note, students can and will transfer what they learn through blogging to literary texts. My students and I have used what they learned from blogging to guide our discussions of poems and short stories.

In November my freshmen wrote their first formal literary analysis papers of the year, based on George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The work we had done in passion blogging was evident in students' confidence as they approached the assignment. Their ideas—the heart of strong analysis—were bold and supported with examples from the text. Their voices reflected the authoritative tone we had worked on in blogs. They employed transitions similar to the ones they'd used to engage their readers in their blog posts.

Students given frequent low-stakes opportunities to analyze living texts of their choosing will develop the skills of structuring arguments, providing evidence, and explaining their thinking—skills they can apply in the analysis of literature.

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