

# Get Student Writing into Students' Hands

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Walk into the classroom of any master teacher and you will likely be surrounded by student work. Pictures, essays, poetry, and projects often adorn the walls and bulletin boards of a student-centered classroom.

The reasons why good teachers post student work are numerous. First, teachers want to show students that they value their work. Also they want individual students to feel proud of their efforts. And, they want to provide models of good work for others.

While I agree that posting student work demonstrates that we value the work students do, and it can also help instill students with a well-deserved sense of pride, I question its value in providing models of good writing. Teachers who post their students' essays in the classroom or in school hallways should think about the last time they saw students studying any written work pinned to a bulletin board. If their students are like the students I teach, unless they use that work for an activity that requires students to read it, I would guess that student writing rarely gets more than a cursory glance, at least not while anyone is watching.

If we really want students to learn from the writing of other students, I believe we need to get that writing into their hands. Somehow we need to make it available to them so that they can read it at their own pace.

For the past 18 years, I have sponsored a student newspaper called *Silver International* that publishes the writing of English language learners. While produced in a large comprehensive high school in Silver Spring, Maryland, *Silver International* includes the writing of students in many different schools at all grade levels. Many of the articles that appear are first person accounts of the difficulties students face when they leave the comfort and familiarity of their birth land and re-settle in a strange and foreign country.

Many students have told me how much English they learn from reading the paper. A number of years ago, as part of a teacher-research project, I surveyed more than 200 English language learners who read *Silver International* in our high school. Ninety six percent of them believed that reading the newspaper helped them improve their English. While the response of students is encouraging, I am sometimes challenged to document examples of precisely how students learn from the publication. The best way to illustrate this is to tell the story of Miguel and Vichea.

Miguel was an extremely quiet, sad, withdrawn student from El Salvador who struggled with English. Even though his English was not very good, he had a story he wanted everyone to know. One day he handed me two sheets of paper and said, "I've been reading the stories in *Silver International* by the students from Vietnam and Cambodia. I want to tell my story, too."

I glanced at his paper and sighed — four pages in pencil, one paragraph, no periods, many structural and mechanical errors. But I started to read it, forcing myself to pull meaning from the mass of words he had put together, asking him to explain the confusing sections. I realized that Miguel did have a story to tell, a story others needed to know, a story about living through a frightening experience of war in his small village.

Once a week, after school, for about five weeks, before he went to work cleaning nearby offices, Miguel and I met to go over his story. I helped him find his sentences and paragraphs. I helped him see where he needed to use past tense or where present tense would be better. I helped him understand direct and indirect

speech and was able to get him to use quotation marks and commas correctly.

When the paper finally came out, and he saw how his story completely filled one page, it was the first time I saw him smile.

Miguel was a different student after that. I don't think he thought much about how the process might have helped him improve his written English. But I know he was pleased that he finally had the courage to share an experience that had haunted him for a long time. I also doubt that Miguel thought much about how his story would affect others. But it had a profound effect on some, one of whom was a fifteen-year-old named Vichea.

Vichea had recently come to the U.S. from Cambodia and was in a high beginning English class for non-native English speakers. I knew that Vichea also had a story, a story I only knew small bits of, but a story the school needed to know as well. Since I didn't think his English was developed enough to write the story himself for *Silver International*, and since the paper did not at that time have skilled reporters who wrote about others, I talked to the advisor of the main school newspaper and suggested they do a story about Vichea.

A few days later Vichea came to me. "Mr. Bellino, why didn't you ask me to write my own story?" he asked.

"I didn't think you knew enough English to do it yourself," I answered. "But if you want to, that would be a lot better."

About a month later, Vichea handed me his story. As I skimmed through it, I was surprised at how good it looked. There were a lot of grammatical errors, but it had periods, paragraphs, and, most surprisingly, he had used dialogue correctly. I knew this was not something he had been taught in his English class for non-native English speakers. "Who helped you with this?" I asked.

"No one," he answered. "I did it all myself."

That evening I read Vichea's story more closely and noticed amazing similarities with Miguel's story. I could not help but wonder if he had taken sections from it as his own. Both stories took place in villages that were attacked by rebels. Both writers were held at gunpoint by boys they knew from their schools. Both engaged their captors in dialogue and questioned the usefulness of their captors' actions.

The next day I asked Vichea about the similarities between the two stories. Vichea explained that he himself was surprised at how parts of Miguel's story were so much like his own. "But the same things happened to me," he said. "I knew the boy who was holding the gun at me just like Miguel wrote about in his story." But Vichea had also been able to learn a lot about correct written English, especially how to format dialogue, by reading Miguel's story. "I used Miguel's story



Joe Bellino



International student at Montgomery-Blair High School reading *Silver International*

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to help me with mine,” he said, “especially with the talking part because I didn’t know how to do that.”

My many years of helping students publish their writing in *Silver International* have strengthened my belief about the importance of getting interesting writing into the hands of students. For many of my English language learners, *Silver International* is the only English publication in their homes with writing that interests them. Some students have told me they collect issues of the paper, share them with others who know English, and translate sections for those who don’t speak English. Because of its content, *Silver International* promotes literacy, first because it has topics of interest to students, and second because it offers correct grammatical models and a rich vocabulary.

Large newspaper productions like *Silver International* are not the only way to get students to learn from the writing of fellow students. For those lucky enough to have a place to post student writing, a simple way to get students reading the work of others is to have students evaluate work that teachers have posted on classroom walls. Students can be required to read and select pieces that they like and perhaps write a short explanation of why

they like them. Another activity is to produce an end-of-year class publication with students selecting a favorite piece of their own to publish. And finally, another easy way for some to share student work is take advantage of Internet resources and post writing on the Web. A number of teachers have their own Web pages with samples of student poetry and essays that students can read on their own using school or home computers. Any of these methods allow for time and intimacy necessary for student writing to have an influence on others.

While the thought of getting involved with projects like these might seem overwhelming, the positive reactions of students are likely to encourage teachers who are brave enough to try it, to do it again. The finished products will contain appropriate models for students. And getting the work into students’ hands will make it much easier for them to learn from the writing of others.

*Silver International* can be viewed on the Web at <<http://silverinternational.mbhs.edu>>.

For a free sample, write to *Silver International*, Montgomery Blair High School, 51 University Blvd. E., Silver Spring, MD 20901