

## MCTE Grant...Journal Wish Opens Doorway to Self-Discovery

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*"I may not express it but if I get into a good book my heart will race and I will read really fast, which is a good experience. And today my heart was pumping. Also I was wondering if in my journal we could discuss things and just talk because the post-it notes really have changed me. I know it sounds weird but my self-esteem is really up." (9th grader)*

The day I read the above 9th grade student's journal entry I knew that the journals I had purchased with the MCTE classroom grant were working their magic. The post-it notes that this student is referring to are the feedback the students receive from me on their journal entries/writing. The feedback may be words of encouragement, general reactions and insight into their writing, or questions I have which they are to respond to in their journals; it can progress into quite a lively dialogue. I choose to write on post-it notes instead of directly in their journals because journal writing is such a personal form of writing and then they can choose to keep my notes or not. I have found that students are so hungry for this feedback

about themselves or what they've written that they become upset with me if I haven't read and responded to their journals.

I teach at an alternative high school for at-risk youth, and we have a special program for 9th graders to help them experience academic success. Journals have always been a big component of the program, and in the past, students have taken a lot of ownership in their journals, despite that they were just cheap, flimsy tablets. The 9th grade program is an intense experience, and it was my dream for each student to have a beautiful, artsy, hardcover journal/scrapbook record of their year. It was my hope that this journal would communicate to the students that we valued them, their writing, and their thoughts and ideas. It would also help to make their work more permanent, and it could show their growth and experiences for the entire school year.

The journals did all of this and more. I purchased the 8 ½ by 11 inch hardbound journals at Half Price Books for \$5.98 (minus teacher discount). Each cover had a different colorful and creative design or picture, and the inside pages had both lined and unlined pages, ideal for both art and writing.

I can still remember the shocked look on the students' faces and excited chatter when they first learned that they were each going to be able to choose a journal. One new girl said in disbelief, "You mean we each get to have one of the journals for free?"

Many students proudly carried their journals everywhere they went, with the required expectation that they have it in class every day.

The primary purpose of the journals was to increase student performance in reading and writing. In addition, the journals were intended for creative expression and reflection. To reach these goals, assignments in the journals focused on:

- Journaling—to develop "voice" in their writing
- Reader response logs for independent reading novels and other reading assignments—help students become active, engaged readers
- Daily vocab words—one new word a day which

the students used to create a visual and a sentence to improve and understanding of its meaning. This was done every day in the first 5 minutes of class.

- Informal writing assignments and brainstorming for polished pieces of writing—to process and develop thoughts for writing
- Reflections after class activities or field trips—to improve written self-expression and self-realization
- Practice and preparation for 9th grade GRAD Writing test
- Artifacts, ticket stubs, and photos from activities, field trips, and life—a fun way to increase student ownership of their work and express themselves creatively

I worried that the initial excitement and novelty of the journals would wane as the semester progressed. In actuality, the opposite occurred. The books grew fat with writing, art, doodles, photos, and field trip mementos. The writing became more depthful, insightful and authentic. Since the journals were the students' personal property, there was increased ownership and pride in their work. The journals inspired and motivated them to do their best academically. When students did assignments in their journals they seemed to lose the attitude that they were just getting it done as quickly as possible for school. It was as if the journals became a part of who they were—an extension of themselves, and they, therefore, responded and expressed themselves much more authentically.

As their teacher, I saw the journals providing a window into each of their lives. Some students who never spoke up in class freely expressed their thoughts and feelings in writing. Journals also solved the problem of “down” time in class. If a student finished their assignment early they had the choice of working in their journal or reading their independent novel.

On the first day of the 2009-10 school year, one of the 9th graders I had last year came running up to me smiling widely

and shouting, “Mrs. Konkol, Mrs. Konkol! I finished it! I finished it! I wrote in my journal every day this summer and filled my whole journal!” She was so proud of herself.

These journals provided so much positive energy during our school year, and, for some students, well into the summer. The journals were truly a gift to the lives of my students and me as their teacher. I would like to personally thank MCTE for providing teachers with these grant opportunities.