



Why NaNoWriMo is a Great Teaching Tool

By Jennifer Rae Atkins (2005)

Why would a middle school or high school student want to write a novel in a month? Why would a teacher want to encourage such a venture? And why would parents and administrators agree to a quixotic plan like this one?

Students: This is a rare opportunity in school: a whole month devoted not to spelling, not to grammar, not to preparing for standardized tests or writing essays, but to unbridled creativity. For a full month, all students have to do is create a new world out of their own minds. No one will judge them, no one will red-pen their work, no one will ask them to make any changes. They can write about anything they want. And at the end of the month, each student will have a completed novel or novella, something that not many adults can claim, much less teenagers! After you've written a novel in a month, no five- or ten-page research paper in high school or even college can daunt you.

The students will be part of a real, elite community of writers, most likely the only students in the school participating in NaNoWriMo. NaNoWriMo is such an intense experience that students will bond over their shared effort, and they will see each other's goals and help each other meet them. Finally, at the end of the month, we'll have a huge party for all participants, and any who make 50,000 will get to go out to dinner on their teacher's dime.

Teachers: The benefits for teachers overlap with those for students. I can't imagine a quicker way to establish a real writing community than writing a novel together. It's also a wonderful way to teach fluency and creativity. It's important for students to write a lot, and that's what NaNoWriMo is all about. There's also a good chance that students will have a new appreciation for the novels they read after experiencing what it's like to write one. In order for this unit to really succeed, the teacher would also have to participate in NaNoWriMo, so at the end of the month, she will have the same sense of achievement and accomplishment as her students. Finally, since students are spending almost all their classroom time working on their novels, lesson planning and grading duties are noticeably diminished.

Parents and Administrators: Imagine what a busy NaNoWriMo classroom would look like to an administrator: Students quietly pecking away at their computers. Walls full of bars denoting students' ever-growing progress toward their individual goals. Some students quietly helping each other with ideas for furthering their stories. Periodically, everyone cheers and blows bubbles when a weekly goal is met. A NaNo classroom is an industrious classroom, and students are working. Writing a novel in a month builds

important skills that are useful in college, in taking tests, in completing other assignments, and in brainstorming. Fluency is something that teenagers often have trouble achieving; they tend to stress over words and can sometimes stare at a blank sheet of paper for an entire period, convinced that they have to know what to say before they say it. There's no room for that in NaNoWriMo: you have to write...and write....and write. Parents get all of these benefits, and they get to see the sense of gleeful accomplishment in their children's eyes when they call themselves novelists. People who have completed a novel in a month are inspiring to be around.