



Teaching NaNoWriMo

By Daniel Moulthrop (2003)

Looking back, NaNoWriMo seems both the most absurd and the smartest project I ever attempted in any of my classes. I had wanted to participate ever since Chris came up with the idea, but, as anyone who has ever taught knows, a full time teaching schedule can present obstacles to even the most structured of outside creative endeavors. It always sounded nice in theory, but I knew the idea of gearing up to write 1,500 words a night after a day filled with ninety adolescents lay somewhere between pipe dream and fantasy.

So, I thought, I only had one section of freshmen, and we could do it together, turn the class into a kind of writers' club. Writing alongside them, I knew, would further motivate me to produce, and I couldn't think of any other activity that would more effectively help my kids get over the fear of writing that seems to strike so many high schoolers.

When it worked, the classroom was somewhere between Stand and Deliver and Rocky, with the contemplative silence of a Buddhist abbey.

Those were the days when, before the tardy bell had rung, I would return from my sprint to the bathroom to find 20 freshmen seated in front of their computers, already tapping away at keyboards, staring at the screens, finding out where they'd left their main characters and where they were headed.

Those were the days when my most garrulous students would disrupt the silence not with the usual comment designed to derail the class through laughter and targeted derision, but with shouts of their word count and challenges to their peers. "I'm at 7,200! Where you at? Awww. you're not going to catch me today."

Incredulity, Reality, and a Shared Vision

At this point, I should probably reveal how it all turned out. One of my kids reached 50,000 words, God bless him, his laptop and his nimble fingers. Three wrote novellas of about 25,000 words. And the rest of the class was spread out, reaching individualized goals from between 3,000 and 23,000 words. I wrote 25,000 words. A novella. Half a novel. I'm still proud of it. I'm not as good as that kid of mine, but I'm not jealous either (not too much, anyway).

When I raised the question to my class in mid-October, they were incredulous. Can anyone really do that? they asked, write a whole novel in a month? 50,000 words? No

way. Wait, you mean, all we'd do is write stories? Just stuff from our own head? No essays? And we can write about whatever we want? And we don't have to share it with the class unless we want to? And you'd be the only one who would read it? As we discussed all the implications of this as a class project, they began to realize I was serious and began to consider the proposition: a month of unbridled creativity vs. school as they knew it.

I assured everyone we would set individual goals they were comfortable with and no one's grade would be based on the difference between 50,000 words and a final word count. A few days later, after a few one on one conversations with the two or three students who were deeply unsure about their possibilities of success, I raised the question again, and we had consensus: We would become NaNoWriMers on two conditions -- opening and closing parties, and no other work but writing.

It was amazing. My class of 20 fourteen year olds and I had a shared vision. That was a first for me.

Before opening day, each student had enrolled on the website, come up with a working title, a character or two and a situation in which to start the plot. Some students had clearer, more worked out ideas of what they'd write about -- reflections on growing up, a murder mystery in the style of *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, a kung-fu epic, a time and space travelogue. Other students, like their teacher, had a character and no real idea where he or she was headed.

And on opening day, we threw our party for half the block, chatted about what we were going to write about (some students were protective of their ideas because they didn't want anyone "stealing" their plot), and I gave a kickoff keynote replete with all the go-get-'em-you-can-do-it, quantity over quality, screw the bastards who say it's not possible Nano-prop. There was buzz. There was hype. My kids were the only students in the entire school doing this, and they felt special, smart, like members of an elite intellectual cadre. They were going to be writers. Hell, they already were, right, or there's no way their teacher would ever let them do something like this. Maybe he was deluded, but there was a palpable excitement and a real sense that anything was possible.

I am reminded of the end of "Howl," where Ginsberg writes, "O Victory! Forget your underwear! We're free!" And we were, just not commando style.

That Brain-Stopping Fear

If there's one thing that high school students need to learn, it's how to be free with their writing, how to get beyond the insecurities that tell them they're not capable of writing an essay of 1,000 words. You know the kid, the one that always asks "how long does it have to be?" and when you respond with "a page" or "two pages," he groans and tries to bargain you down to something he can slip into commercial breaks or in the ten minutes between looking after his little brothers after school and his evening shift at Walgreen's. My classes typically had anywhere from five to 10 of these kids.

What they don't know is that writing doesn't need to be cause for fear or concern, that spilling words from your brain onto the page can be fun, can even be joyous. Many of my students had never experienced writing as fun before, much less writing as an opportunity for success. I don't have to tell you what writing was like for them. We've all had miserable writing experiences, I'm sure. Whatever the least inspiring writing task could be, we've all had teachers who assigned it to us. And some students seem to get those same sort of assignments over and over and over again.

What I'm talking about here is writing fluency -- the ability to fluidly translate the ideas in one's head to words on the page in coherent sentences. Inspiring this, nurturing this, giving my students a chance to find this in themselves was my motivation and rationale for turning my class into a NaNoWriMo experiment. The whole purpose of a month like NaNoWriMo is to forget the insecurities, the voices that say we can't, the fear of saying it the wrong way, of not having the right words, of not sounding smart, of not knowing the grammar rules -- the million and seven reasons our students have for fearing the next assignment in your class or mine.

It's revolutionary, really, and it's exactly what education should be. Kids should always be coming home from school saying to themselves, "Wow, I did something today I never thought I could do. I see myself in a whole new way now." I'm not making this up. That's what some of my kids were saying by the end of the month. Even some of the ones who only wrote a few thousand words. They lost their fear.

Oh, yeah. Specifics

Enough digression. For the first week, class was marvelous. I had about fifteen computers in my room and scrounged around for some laptops for the others, so everyone had a computer. This seems to me to be a prerequisite. I'm not sure kids would stand for 90 minutes of writing by hand everyday. Kids would come in early, set themselves up at their computers and they needed almost no encouragement. This was a good sign, I thought, but I made a mistake of letting them be too much on their own. I guess it was my own projected fantasy, but I let myself believe that each kid was as jazzed about spending the whole period writing as I was. Of course, some kids mentally checked out. So, I made the mistake of getting too into my own writing. This wasn't entirely bad, because I was modeling the "writerly" or "nanowrimerly" behavior I wanted to inspire in my kids, but some of them needed more direction. If I could do it over (I'm not going to this year because I'm in grad school, not teaching), this is what I'd do.

Check in with every kid every day. With 20 kids you can do this. With 30, maybe it's every other day. When we'd check in, I'd ask them to share something they were pleased with or a problem they were having. I'd find out where they were and we'd agree on a word count goal to reach by the end of the day. The days when I did this were the most successful days we had. When I gave a kid a goal I thought he or she could reach, each child managed to surpass my expectations and end the day pleased and empowered. Why I didn't continue to do this I can only attribute to my own thick headedness.

Everybody writes every day. I did this last year, and it would continue to be the most important piece -- a majority of the class period would be devoted to all of us writing. If I didn't have computers in my classroom, I'd sign up to dominate the school's computer lab for the month. If that was unavailable, the whole endeavor could be modified to allow for handwritten work (and estimated word counts). No one can produce as much by hand as they would with a computer, so the goals could be different. Without access to computers, I might just do it for a week or two, as National Novella Writing Week.

However, ideally, I would get every kid a laptop. Somehow, some way. Some schools have these resources through special grants, or because they are privately funded. Outside of that, a donation drive to locate used laptops could work. If all the students have laptops, then the kids can be writing at home, on the weekends -- they'd be able to live in and with their novel. That could free up more class time to talk a little about writing strategy, to read inspiringly good prose. As it was, though I planned to spend more time talking strategy and reading inspiringly, the shortness of the month and the fixity of the desktop computers demanded that we use class time to write as much as possible.

Put some sort of word count/progress chart up on the wall where they could write down how far they'd made it each day. I'm not sure if this would make word counts public in a potentially threatening or embarrassing way. If it did, the poster could just be about whether or not the student's own personal goal was reached. This plays the crucial role of the NaNoWriMo website's public word counts and "winner" designation.

Create huge posters of auxiliary characters, settings, or situations that writers could draw on. The lists could be generated by the students before November and added to as time went on. If I were to teach a lesson today in which I wanted students to start these lists, I'd talk to them about characters like the crazy seeming guy on the corner who pretends to direct traffic but sometimes causes accidents, the friend of someone's older sister who believes she's a superhero, the barber, the butcher, the bagger at the supermarket who dreams of moving to Paris, the uncle who's a professional gambler in Vegas. You know, that sort of thing.

We'd talk about the plot implications of setting a scene on a riverboat, or a bridge, in the Spanish desert, at the border to Juarez, in a cave, a kitchen, or convent. Or what could be revealed by having a character write a personal ad for an online dating service, go to the supermarket, try to use their gym membership, or get a traffic ticket. Then some days, I could give the whole class or individual writers the assignment to introduce a new character, or somehow work in a certain situation, or describe a setting. It could get as specific or choice filled as you like. The main characters from all of our novels could go up on the lists and then they could make cameos in other people's novels.

More looking at inspiring writing. We could spend half a class two or three times a week looking at writing that gets us excited about writing. A lot of Nanowrimers keep their favorite writing close by while they write. Last year, Nano-legend Tim Lohnes had Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* on hand during a group writing session. He passed it

on to me and it inspired at least 50% of what I went on to write. There's every reason to bring this into the classroom. My freshmen were also doing regular independent reading, and I should have asked each of them to bring in a passage they thought was well crafted so we could talk about what made it brilliant and how we could make our writing more like that.

Parties and T-shirts. Last year, I subsidized T-shirt purchases for my kids. We also had parties at the kick off and completion. This is one of those cases where extrinsic rewards can work. This is true, mostly, because the whole endeavor is a celebration of everyone's potential, of the class as a bunch of writers. The t-shirts, parties and stickers build that community feeling, the sense that we're special because we know we can do this, or at least we're crazy enough to try. The thing is, it's simply got to be fun. It's hard enough when it's fun. If you're not having fun, or the kids aren't, forget it.

Have a backup plan. There's always the question about the kids who get left behind. I would want to have an out for them but not make it too easy to find that out. Before I offered the out, I'd try to help the kid identify the obstacle, then maybe the young writer could spend some time looking for inspiration -- reading some of his classmates' work or that of his favorite author. If after all of my cheerleading, cajoling and strategizing, the student still wasn't able to write, I'd consider some individualized alternatives, like writing a poem a day, or keeping a guided daily diary, a special reading project. I'd probably ask the student to suggest something he thinks would be equivalent. The important thing would be to find something the kid will enjoy and want to do.