

Ad-dull-escence

There is an achievement gap in my 99% white classroom that has little to do with ethnicity, and more to do with some teens' perpetual state of boredom. Ad-dull-escence.

Everything is "boring." They drag through the halls in slow motion. They slowly search their lockers for notebooks, pens, pencils, and still enter the classroom empty-handed, surprised even in May that I would expect them to bring a pen or pencil to a class where we write every day. They arrive for each class three, five, seven minutes late, missing directions or the introduction to the lesson. They *want* me to send them to the office for a pass, where they choose the longest way *to* and *back*. Each time they enter or leave the classroom, they let the door slam shut behind them.

If I manage to entice them to stay in the classroom, they slump like snakes slithering slowly out of their chairs, or worse, blatantly sleep at their desks. I am talking about a small number of students, maybe 8–10%, but enough to keep me awake at night, wondering what I can do to motivate these 14-year-olds. Their peak energy display last year was motivated by a swan that flew into an electrical wire over the street outside. There was a loud cracking sound, an explosion of sparks flying, and then the electrocuted bird plummeted to the road in a heap of white feathers as our power went out. These normally sultry students leapt from their seats. "Oh my God, that was *so* cool. Did you see the explosion? Awesome!" *Finally*, I thought, they're awake, but I can't provide such excitement every day, nor do I wish to.

I'm not talking about students who struggle

to learn; I'm talking about students who can't figure out why reading and writing would matter to them. They *can* read and write; they just don't *want* to. They want something hands on. They want to make something happen. They want an immediate tangible response—a reward or payment.

Finding out what interests these students helps me put a book in their hands that they might actually read. Steve admitted he liked *The Outsiders* enough to read every S. E. Hinton book I gave him. Trina ignored everything we did during class, but read any book I put in her hands: *Son of the Mob*, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, *One Child*—she read at least 89 books that year. Matt read every book we could find about keeping snakes as pets. He kept a journal about snake facts and drew out his plans. What interests these kids? Struggling teens and, often, nonfiction.

Giving them choices about the kind and format of writing they do has helped them make a commitment to that writing. Giving students credit for the writing and reading they do in other disciplines (reports in health class presented as cartoons, reader response in Life Skills where they read *Tuesdays with Morrie*, marine biology studies presented as pamphlets or picture books, etc.), showing them alternate genres for presenting that writing, and helping them design, revise, and edit the pieces, have also helped motivate many of them.

Emiliano researched chewing tobacco and designed a series of sophisticated cartoons to teach younger kids about its dangers. Jay finally found a reason to write when he designed, wrote, and illustrated a 25-page beginners' manual about bowling that his instructor is now using for younger students. Alia used a fictional stance to show how older teens entice younger ones to try some dan-

gerous lifestyles—a gift to her friend. Jared had so many questions for Natalie Babbitt, he wrote to her. She recognized his genuine concern over *Tuck Everlasting* and wrote back. For each of these students, the rewards came from someone else wanting, enjoying, or learning from their writing.

But some still have a difficult time connecting with the reading and the writing I am asking them to produce. They need a reason, an audience, and some kind of reward to do this work, and grades aren't necessarily enough. I never did fully engage some students: one who loves working outdoors, several who want to be chefs, many who love racing dirt bikes and fixing cars, the ones who want to be hairstylists, and several who are just waiting to turn 16 so they can quit school.

So what's the answer? No doubt there are many, but let me share a few strategies gleaned from my own experience.

In reading:

- Find short pieces that might engage students' interests, such as sports articles, editorials, short stories, comics and graphic novels, even the drivers' manual, hunting regulations, and cookbooks
- Show students how to use stick figures and key words as they take notes on their understandings from a variety of texts
- Read lots of different kinds of materials aloud to the students, short pieces using the overhead projector and handouts, so they can hear and see language, how it's shaped and all it means
- Read several full-length pieces or novels aloud and/or together as a class so students can hear, see, and discuss their thinking of longer, more complicated writing
- Use movies, picture books, and graphic novels to help these students see story, characters, issues, conflicts
- Don't make their success dependent on something we know won't happen, especially if we know they won't or don't read on their own

In writing:

- Try to get to know the students well enough to know their interests and passions
- Show these students how to use storyboards and tellingboards (with stick figures and key words) to initiate and shape their ideas
- Encourage students to use different formats for presenting and shaping their writing—brochures or pamphlets, cartoons and comics, book reviews, editorials, songs, films—all to reach a real audience
- Give students credit for the writing they do in other disciplines: researched topics in health classes, songs in music class, current events essays in social studies, etc.
- Encourage writing to authors and other professionals, entering contests, sending opinion pieces and reviews to newspapers and magazines, writing poetry and personal memoirs as gifts, so students know real writing is for real reasons for a real audience
- Show kids how to shape their personal narratives into effective fictional pieces to help them sort through issues in their lives that interfere with their learning
- Teach all students how to write resumes and cover letters for various audiences/purposes: college admittance committees, job applications, volunteer opportunities

Last, I am suggesting that as educators, we reconsider vocational-technical classes for students at eighth grade instead of making them wait until their junior year to get into programs they know they will like. For many students, the wait is too long, and the reading and writing we are asking them to do make little sense based on their strengths and goals. We need good auto mechanics, chefs, hairstylists, computer wizards. When adolescents are allowed to participate in programs that are hands on, when they make something for a real audience for a real reason, they move out of ad-dull-escence into young adulthood, the gap begins to close, and our teenagers wake up.