

Jennifer Connolly

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I have been teaching high school English for 18 years in the blue-collar, suburban St. Louis city of Granite City, Illinois. Most recently, I've earned my Masters' Degree in the Teaching of Writing and have become a Dual Credit instructor with Southwestern Illinois College, providing qualified students at GCHS access to first year college writing courses while they are in high school. I truly saw wonderful things start to happen in my classroom when I built a library (Thanks for the help along the way, Book Love Foundation!) right inside my own classroom walls and made guided choice reading a priority for ALL of my students. Follow me on Twitter @MrsC_English or check out my classroom website mrsconnollysclass.com



“Inquiry, meet Innovation.” This is the place where teaching lives. Perhaps it matters that teenagers are some of my favorite people, ever. Something about the time of your life when you get to start making decisions, deciding who you are, who you want to be, and how you are going to get to there from here reminds us all that the world holds limitless possibilities and that our beliefs are continually reshaped throughout our lifetimes. My own teaching is predicated upon the value of CHOICE, the importance of revision and self-reflection, and a connection to the “real” world that helps students see value in what they learn. For those pieces to fall into place in the language arts classroom, I work to bring relevance to reading and meaning to writing.

Writing is dependent upon reader, writer, and context, and I start with this theory-based thinking in the writing classroom. Anytime I can give kids the opportunity to see “good” writing in action, to analyze what makes it tick and keeps the reader engaged is an opportunity for them to notice what they can incorporate into their own work. Choosing what to write about within the confines of the actual “assignment” is an important element of how I teach. Students keep notebooks in which they regularly add quickwrites and then later use those brief musings or experiments for places to begin longer assignments. For quickwrites, I ask students to dabble in different genres, examine short articles, poems, pictures, videos, the variety is endless. Eventually, they find topics about which they have “something to say.”



Reading is a non-negotiable. Kids have to be reading in my room. Something. Anything. It is my goal to help students become lifelong readers, people who might actually pick up a book just because. It is not enough to assign whole class texts (of course, I do this also), but students learn to take ownership of their own reading lives through choice and opportunity. At this point, my personal classroom library is just over one thousand books (and counting). I’m available for guidance, conferring with kids about what their reading, making personalized suggestions based on student interest, and even offering class book talks where kids get a preview and sample of titles new to them. In today’s digitally saturated world, it is far too easy for students to escape the lit class of whole class novels without actually reading the books. Besides, students need to read far more than those required reads to build the stamina they need for college reading and to develop empathy and awareness needed to

be a citizen of the world.

Grades are nice. It’s comforting to find students completing work and memorizing information and making the grade. However, the biggest rewards are found in student progress: reading a student portfolio cover letter to see how she sees the writing progress she’s made, noticing the aha moments he has in a conferencing session, checking out the handwritten comments on end of semester course evaluations, knowing I made a difference. So, it’s reading, it’s writing, it’s choice. But more importantly, teaching is believing the world can be a better place and knowing that I can help make it so.