



Joy Write: Cultivating High-Impact, Low-Stakes Writing

by **Ralph Fletcher**

Heinemann, 2017

ISBN 978-0-325-08880-8

A resource for educators looking for manageable strategies to breathe life, energy, and engagement back into their writing programs.

Joy and innovation should not be exclusively found in math, science, Kindergarten, and STEM, but must be factors in writing programs too. The simplest form of the Engineering Design Process indicates that we should Ask, Imagine, Plan, Create and Improve, and that's what Ralph Fletcher has done in *Joy Write*. He saw the problem of a lack of joy in writing and writer's workshops and wondered why. So, he asked teachers what created the energy necessary for writing programs to "defy gravity and lift into the air" (p. 9) and what caused them to sink. It seems that with the emphasis on testing and the Common Core, non-negotiables such as test preparation, rigid writing formats and an emphasis on persuasive writing, students are locked into a writing program with a lack of choice, ownership, audience, originality, voice and, ultimately, engagement. He asked teachers questions to confirm these ideas and the result...tales of students groaning when they hear the word essay or paragraph, so what has Ralph Fletcher imagined and planned?

The main high-impact, low-stakes strategies that Fletcher defines are what he calls "Greenbelt Writing." Like a physical greenbelt, he recommends that we save a place in our program for informal, exploratory writing where students can be personal, passionate, joyful, whimsical, playful and display the humour and

"quirkiness of childhood." Some of the strategies he explores are participating in The Slice of Life Challenge (twowritingteachers.org/challenges), Wonder Notebooks, Popcorn and Poetry Fridays, A Class Blog, Morning Pages, Impromptu Shares or Writing Workouts.

Another type of writing he sees as necessary is Feral Writing which, he and others admit, may "not be very good but is something students have chosen to work on because the idea of writing it gives them energy" (p. 64). Although this writing isn't marked or "official" kids love it. Fletcher believes the energy and purpose feral writing brings to a writing class makes it a worthwhile endeavour.

A major point of both types of writing is that they will not be assessed, graded or corrected but are written because a student wants to write. The freedom may be a hard concept for some, but the philosophy is that the greenbelt and feral writing will allow the school writing and the wild writing "to rub up against each other and cross-pollinate" (p. 93). The dream is that the freedom, creativity, and energy will start to appear in the school writing and the skills/strategies taught in the workshop will spill over into the wild writing. Interviews with many teachers who experimented with this format declared it to be the case.

But why should you trust what Ralph Fletcher recommends? Put a little Engineering Design Process into your class. Read the book. Try some of the strategies. Give your students a chance to create in a wild way and examine the results yourself. What could the impact be on your writing program!

continued on page 18