AN ETHIC OF EXCELLENCE: BUILDING A CULTURE OF CRAFTSMANSHIP WITH STUDENTS
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- Schools play a major role in shaping values in children. Though society debates the question of whether schools should teach values, the process of schooling itself imbues values – we have no choice about this. If we want citizens who value integrity, respect, responsibility, compassion, and hard work, we need to build school cultures that model those attributes.
- I believe that work of excellence is transformational. Once a student sees that s/he is capable of excellence, that student is never quite the same.
- Peer pressure was not something to be afraid of, to be avoided, but rather to be cultivated in a positive direction.
- Self-esteem from accomplishments, not compliments
- The overall quality of work that emerges from the classroom is a concern for every member of the class. If any student is failing to succeed or producing work without care, it is a concern for every student.
- Models are great teachers. Save student work and use as teaching tool.
- Tribute work is the work of a student who built off, borrowed ideas from, or imitated the work of a particular former or current student. This practice is no called copying or cheating in my classroom; it is acknowledged as legitimate and wise practice.
- The norm is one draft; anything else is a failure. Students need to know from the outset that quality means rethinking, reworking and polishing. They need to feel that they will be celebrated, not ridiculed for going back to the drawing board. When I have students draft blueprints for houses, they know that the minimum number of drafts I four.
- Rules for feedback
  - Be Kind. It is essential that the critique environment feel safe, and the class and I are vigilant to guard against any hurtful comments. This includes sarcasm.
  - Be specific. No comments such as "It's good" or "I like it"; these just waste our time.
  - Be Helpful. The goal is to help the individual and the class, not for the critic to be heard. Echoing the thoughts of others or cleverly pointing out details that are not significant to improving the work also wastes our time.
- We try to begin with the author/designer of the work explaining her ideas and goals, and explaining what particular aspects of the work she is seeking help with. We critique the work, not the person. We try to begin our critique comments with something positive about the work, and then move on to constructive criticism. We try to use I statements when possible: "I am confused by this", rather than "This makes no sense."
- We try to use a question format when possible: I am curious why you chose to begin with this. Or, "Have you considered including?"
- In a Gallery Critique, the work of every child is displayed on boards or photocopied to read. We first look at all of the work silently before giving comments, and the focus is primarily positive. Students elect examples form the gallery that impress them and we discuss why.
- When doing an In-Depth Critique, we look at the work of a single student or group and spend a good deal of time critiquing it thoroughly. Advantages to this style include opportunities for teaching the vocabulary and concepts of the discipline from which the work emerges, for teaching what comprises good work in that discipline and opportunities for modeling the detailed process of making the work stronger.
- I think that the typical strategy of pairing off kids to critique one another is not often particularly useful unless it is preceded by a formal class critique that gets students focused an excited about a specific dimension of writing. Also, try to differentiate between critiquing for specific content qualities and critiquing for mechanics (conventions); if this is not clear, critique can quickly become just copyediting.
- Our critique is largely a search for good strategies and ideas that we can learn and borrow.