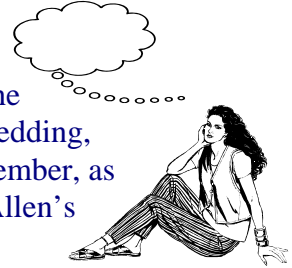


IT'S NEVER TOO LATE SOME THOUGHTS

By Lynn Havens

Earlier this year, a high school teacher and friend gave me a book called *It's Never Too Late, Leading Adolescents to Lifelong Literacy* by Janet Allen. I piled it on the towering stack of "things to read" on the upper right-hand corner of my desk, and there it remained through the hectic days at the end of last school year. The summer was filled with friends, relatives, a wedding, and never enough time to sort through the maze on my desk. In early September, as I was hurriedly packing things to take with me on a work trip, I spied Ms. Allen's book and grabbed it to read on the plane.



Janet Allen spent nearly twenty years teaching English and reading at the high school level before returning to school to work on a doctorate. After completing the two years of course work, she returned to the classroom to do qualitative research in a ninth grade, "at risk," reading and writing workshop class. In *It's Never Too Late*, she shares her classroom stories--stories about students, stories of success, and a few stories of failure. Powerful threads of reflection and caring tie this work together. I found myself laughing and crying right along with Janet. As I closed the book, I felt better about teachers and students and teaching and learning. What a nice way to start the new year. Since this book is on my mind, I decided to share a few of Janet's thoughts and discoveries with you . . .

Thought 1 *"I discovered that students will read when they are given the time and opportunity to read. I discovered that students will write when they are allowed to write about what is important to them."* (p. 5) This is an interesting discovery, but most teachers will find it difficult to implement. Secondary teachers have their classroom sets of novels they "must do," and there's the textbook to "cover," and only 10 months in a school year. Janet's message sounds good, but it is so hard for teachers to change and let go of that comfortable routine. A ninth grade science teacher in our district did let go. For one day each week, her students have S.S.S.R. That's Sustained Silent Science Reading. On Fridays, her classroom is filled with science books and magazines on all levels and topics--from picture and children's books to *Discover* and *Scientific American* magazines. On S.S.S.R. day, her students read and write about science topics of their own choice. By the end of the school year, many of her students are reading science articles on their own and bringing in selections to share with the rest of the class.

Thought 2 *"Asking students how they arrived at answers, not what the answers were; asking students to develop questions, rather than give answers; asking myself the purpose instead of the plan helped all of us look beneath the surface of our classroom and carefully examine our learning."* (p. 8) Throughout her book, Janet and her students look beyond the learning activity to the purpose of, or process involved in, the activity. She and her students spend lots of time reflecting on the "whys." They reflect through writing and discussions (whole group, small group, or student-teacher/student-student pairs). Her students always know why they are doing an activity, and they know what learning strategies work for them. They feel comfortably in control of their learning.

Thought 3 “GOOD TEACHERS... listen, have brains, respect the student, are patient, have a good personality, don’t give kids a hard time, understand students, help you when you need it, are nice, teach skills.” (Student generated list, p. 50) Is that YOU?!

Thought 4 On reading aloud: “(It) allowed me to model reading strategies I employed when I came to unknown words, concepts, or inconsiderate sentences; show excitement as well as sadness...; encourage discussions...; extend the story to our lives and build community background knowledge; and demonstrate ways in which readers question themselves, the text, and the author in order to make the experience personally meaningful.” (p. 63) Several years ago, I attended a conference presentation by Roger Farr and some teachers. Their topic was “think-alouds.” After one of the teachers had modeled how she read out loud using many of the components listed above, someone in the audience asked her when she would stop using the think-alouds as she read to her students. Her response was that good readers always used those strategies, so she always stopped to think aloud when she read to her students. The selections used by the teacher at the conference and by Janet, too, were narrative, but wouldn’t it be great if secondary content teachers read aloud to their students? Why couldn’t the chemistry teacher read aloud and model how good readers deal with a science textbook? How about the algebra teacher modeling how good readers read and solve situation problems in math? And wouldn’t it be nice if the American history teacher read parts of the supplementary text and showed how good readers determine the most important information?

Thought 5 “. . . how much more valuable it is to let students come to their own conclusions, to build their own content frameworks, than for me to give them a list of characteristics or definitions. Time, resources, and support are the framework for all of our learning.” (p. 122) When I read this comment, I couldn’t help but think of one high school history teacher several years back who uncomfortably sat through one of our learning strategies workshops. In the middle of the second day, he came over to me during the break. “Ma’am,” he said, “you just don’t understand how stupid *my* students are. You can’t just tell them the information once, you have to tell them three or four times, and they still don’t get it.” *What’s wrong here?* Students need to be actively involved in their learning. And *what does that take?* According to Janet, “Time, resources, and support.” All things that teachers can provide in a classroom.

Thought 6 “I have come to believe that we can continue to change curriculum and add new resources, but until we have teachers who believe that all their students can ask purposeful questions, communicate through reading and writing, and lead meaningful lives, we will have no systemic changes in the lives of many of our students.” (p. 166) I shudder to think of all the mandated changes that are being thrust at districts, schools, and teachers—some good, some bad, and many purely for the sake of change. Obviously, changing one’s attitude is not an easy shift, but after reading about the success Janet Allen had with her “losers,” I can’t help but think that we, as educators, can *turn on* most students to reading and writing. Believing in our students’ abilities is a good place to start.

Thought 7 “. . . discoveries my students and I were making together contained valuable insights for other teachers, and thus began my belief that being a professional is more than teaching, more than learning; it is collaborating and sharing.” (p. 7)

In my role as a staff development person, I often see this professional growth as teachers collaborate and share with each other. Teachers blossom and grow because they are given time to talk with others and share their stories of what works. During our trainings, we encourage teachers to try something new or different; reflect on the purpose, the process, and the result; and refine and try again. They collaborate in teams or pairs, then at a final session, share with others. In our district, every year or so, we sponsor a “writers class” where teachers write out their teaching ideas for publication. They consult with each other through the writing process, and final drafts are submitted to state and national journals.

I hope the *thoughts* I have shared with you here from Janet Allen’s book, *It’s Never Too Late, Leading Adolescents to Lifelong Literacy*, will recharge you as they have me. And, I hope you will pass on several of these ideas, intermingled with your own reflections, to your colleagues. Let’s start this year—and continue it—with lots of sharing and collaborating.



Allen, Janet, *It’s Never Too Late, Leading Adolescents to Lifelong Literacy*, Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 1995.

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