Living & Writing Deliberately—Influencing my Instruction in the High School English Classroom

Submitted by Erik Borne, August 2017

This NEH-sponsored session at Concord really inspired me to think about the word “deliberate.” The week reinforced my notions about what it means to teach deliberately, to be purposeful in deciding upon and constructing meaningful objectives and lessons that really get at the marrow of what is most essential for my young scholars to acquire, practice, manipulate, and master. For my sophomores, the year’s theme is going to be “Living, Writing, Reading, and Learning Deliberately.”

I will share the photograph above to inform students where these ideas are rooted, that these are the words of Henry David Thoreau. Because Thoreau is occasionally quoted and referenced in Jon Krakauer’s Into the Wild, a book we study in the sophomore curriculum, we will read excerpts from “Economy,” “Walking,” “Solitude,” “Sounds,” “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” and “Civil Disobedience” in addition to several other short passages and lines from sections of Walden. Chris McCandless, the subject of Krakauer’s book, read much of Thoreau’s writing and highlighted his texts and made connections to his works in his own journals while in the wild of Alaska; he has also been referred to as a modern day Transcendentalist. But the more I have learned about the Transcendentalists—especially Thoreau—from my studies at Concord, the more divided I am about this idea. I am not as convinced now that all of Chris’s philosophies and points of view about people, government, consumerism, and family necessarily align with the thinking of the Transcendentalists of the 1800s. So after we read Into The Wild, read some of Thoreau’s works, and review the definition and principles of Transcendentalism, students will write a brief 1-2 page argument defending their claim as to whether Chris should be considered a more contemporary Transcendentalist.

Throughout the unit—and even extending throughout the year—students will participate in some activities that focus on economy of time and money, keen observation, and the importance of journaling for the purpose of recording and reflecting. I have also purchased Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom (Craft) as a choice novel for SSR and as a choice novel for my juniors to read for the “What does it mean to be an American?” project.

Activities follow in the next few pages.
Henry David Thoreau wrote many of his journals while at Walden Pond and in his home at the desk below. Thoreau wrote in his journals almost daily from 1837 (at the age of 20) to 1861 (a few months before his death at 45), writing over two million words in several notebooks. These journals later contributed to his publication of books and essays because he recorded his deep, personal thoughts as they came to him—not allowing them to disappear into the abyss like a puff of smoke.

**When we think, we should write; when we write, we should think.**

For that reason, at the closing of most classes, you will have about three minutes to write in your journal to get those thoughts down.

Here are *just some* options for writing:

What did you learn about in this class today?

What still confuses you about today’s lesson?

What was the best part of your day so far?

What is bothering you?

What keeps coming into your mind?

What are you most looking forward to today?

Begin/continue writing a poem or short story.

Wherever your thoughts and pen take you...

Most important is that you write for the full 3 minutes whatever comes to mind. You can always go back and erase or cross out, but you may never be able to find that thought you lost because you did not write it down. In the end, you may be surprised with what you wrote, and perhaps one (or more) of these journals will be the beginning of something great! At the very least, they will serve as a record of who you were on any given day.
PART I.

After reading excerpts from “Sounds,” students will take a walk outdoors and choose a location at least 20 feet from one another to sit and write, recording all sensory details they observe in 30 minutes. They will be encouraged to engage in stream of conscious writing, seldom stopping and lifting the pen from paper.

The next day we will return to the same spot for 10 minutes to notice what they may not have the previous day or perhaps even some changes over the 24 hours. Both journals can be in prose or poetic form.

Students will have a chance to share their developed journals in small groups, noticing how they recorded their observations differently—the differences/similarities in what they noticed, what they emphasized, what senses drew more attention, choice of language, literal vs. figurative language, etc.

Students will then capture the scene in exactly 100 words—no more, no fewer—to practice economy of words (conciseness). The objective is to try to capture as much as possible from the scene while still painting it—making every work count.

Finally, students will create a haiku, following the “rules” of three lines (5 syllables in the 1\textsuperscript{st} line, 7 in the 2\textsuperscript{nd}, and 5 in the 3\textsuperscript{rd})—again trying to capture as much as they can in a tiny poem. Make every word count in the practice of brevity.

PART II.

Each student will choose a different 10x10 patch of landscape for an ongoing observation exercise. They are encouraged to choose an area that has some distinct characteristics (trees, hill, valley, plant life, etc.)—one that they will remember. We will visit these same sites every other month throughout the year, documenting in great detail how they change throughout the seasons/months. They will “own” their little patch in their mind and in writing, noticing the significance of place and how it influences our thoughts and words/writing.
ECONOMY & DELIBERATION

What is Most Significant to Us: How We Spend Our Time & Money

After reading excerpts of “Economy” and “Walking” and becoming familiar enough with Chris McCandless’s principles, we will engage in some activities, writing exercises, and discussions about the following prompts.

Part I.

Students will be asked for one day over the weekend (or both days for over-achievers) to refrain from using any electronic communication and social media: texting, phone calls, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, e-mail, etc. This includes not reading it and not sending messages (words or photos). Students will receive a writing prompt, asking them to write about the experience. How did they feel about the experience? How long did it take before they were challenged or tempted to give in? What did they do differently with their time? Did they appreciate anything about the experience? Do they think they were more deliberate about how they spent their time? Would they purposely engage in this exercise again? Will this exercise influence future behaviors and/or choices?

We will engage in small-group discussions and then a large group conclusive discussion, connecting to whether students could do what Thoreau did and/or McCandless did. Important to discuss are the differences between Thoreau’s and McCandless’s “escapes to the wild.” What did Thoreau and McCandless learn? Was one excursion “easier?” How does society look upon each retreat differently?

Part II.

In reference to “Walking,” students will write and converse about what they do for leisure or to de-stress and reduce anxiety and the pressures of life. This will include explaining why and how this is so valuable to them and why perhaps others would benefit from engaging in this activity.

Next, students will select a weekday and a weekend day, documenting for each in detail how the day was spent—specific activities and for how long. Students will then examine how a typical weekday and weekend day is spent, ranking the value and influence of each period of time. Students will finally come to a conclusion about how they spend their time, determining whether they appreciate or want to be more deliberate about how they spend their precious time.

We will reflect on Parts I and II in combination to examine the significance of solitude in our lives—whether it is something to seek or prevent.

PART III.

Like in Part II, students will keep a record of money they spend in a week, ranking the importance and value of each expenditure. This exercise will prompt them to evaluate how deliberate and purposeful they are with their money and whether they modify their spending habits. A similar activity can focus on value of possessions, as in what they would take with them to Thoreau’s cabin or to McCandless’s bus—or, more importantly, what is most important to them today. Significance of Things.
Is Chris McCandless a Transcendentalist?

In a brief but developed essay (remember, conciseness with specificity—300-500 words), argue whether Chris McCandless can be considered a Transcendentalist. Review the principles of Transcendentalism and the perspectives, beliefs, and actions of Henry David Thoreau when coming to your conclusion. Think about whether these two would have gotten along and seen eye to eye. Would McCandless have been accepted into the club?

Begin with an introduction that creates context, introducing these two fine fellows, and then make your claim.

Throughout your multi-paragraph response, refer to the specific values of the Transcendentalists (see below and your notes) and then to McCandless’s actions, behaviors, and thoughts—including what was said about him; also, pay attention to what he highlighted in his books and wrote in his journals. Use at least two properly cited quotations from Into The Wild in your argument. You must also include at least one specific reference to any of the essays (or excerpts from) we read in class: “Economy,” “Walking,” “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” “Sounds,” “Solitude,” and “Civil Disobedience.”

Conclude by restating your claim (in other words than your original—keep it fresh) and emphasizing why or why not McCandless would be considered a Transcendentalist. Go out with a Bang!

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On Writing and Revision:

“Probe the universe in a myriad points. Be avaricious of these impulses. You must try a thousand themes before you find the right one—as nature makes a thousand acorns to get one oak.”

(Henry David Thoreau, 1851)