

Conquer the Blank Page in the Classroom

In the English language arts classroom, there is no greater bully than a blank white page. It stares students down and reminds them that writing demands they do the impossible: pull something out of nothing. Thanks to science classes, students know this is impossible—so why bother?

English teachers understand that learning to fill that white void with language is necessary for students to develop the ability to communicate with others while understanding and expressing their own individuality. That's really why we bother.

But how do we encourage our young writers to stand up to that menacing bully and fill the page? Enter Piclits (www.piclits.com), a Web 2.0 tool that gives students prompts for writing, be it a picture or a bank of seemingly random words. The idea behind Piclits is to offer students the infinite possibilities of a blank page but suggest starting points to avoid the intimidation factor.

On the Piclits homepage, young writers can get a writing prompt by selecting a photo. It can be a person, car, baseball glove, animal, landscape—anything really. A picture of a scared kitten could, in the student's mind, give birth to a protagonist in an epic adventure about standing up to the terrifying bulldog next door or trigger a memoir about a pet. A picture of a mountain under an overcast sky could lend an ominous setting to an epic mystery or provide a solemn and serious mood for a poem.

If the picture fails to evoke an idea, the student can choose another. If the picture is not enough, the young writer may pull in words from a word bank. Seeing an image paired with a



few words can fire countless synapses and bring focused ideas that can serve as a starting point.

The problem with the blank document is that there is no limit to the possibilities, so it is hard to find one idea to take and run with. Matching a picture with random words can “trick” a student writer into thinking there is a finite number of paths to take, making it easier to just choose a direction.

One great feature of Piclits is that it allows users to save their work and come back to it later. Peers can even comment on each other's pieces and develop a writing community. Additionally, students can share work through a blog, MySpace, Facebook, or another networking site. Not only does this allow students to share creativity and inspiration, it helps them develop writing skills communally.

Students will be able to teach and learn from each other. Through this communal aspect and individual practice on the website, Piclits is naturally able to differentiate instruction.

Young writers can work at their own pace, whether the student is stringing words together or using the images for inspiration in writing a complete narrative or poem. Piclits can get writers over their fears and uncertainties in the classroom and inspire students to welcome the blank page.

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