

Inspiring through understanding

Candlelight poetry readings and rap sonnets tap into the minds of WA students



Veronic Lake and her English class

For teachers it can sometimes be difficult to measure true success but one English teacher from WA has proven that a love of learning can be nurtured through both innovation and individual respect.

Engaging her students using a range of creative initiatives aimed at fostering a love of literature is the mission of Applecross Senior High School English teacher, Veronica Lake.

Literature camps on Rottnest Island with a challenging and inventive program linking dance and performance, poetry competitions and candlelight readings and tapping into the culture of her students and the texts that are relevant to them have yielded rich rewards for Veronica, whose students regularly excel.

Her students have topped the state in English and Literature exams and writing competitions with many going on to achieve PhDs, First Class Honours and becoming published authors. Other past students have even pursued successful performance careers. Most importantly, they all continue to read and appreciate the complexity and delight of the English language.

This year she worked with the Bell

'I started *Primo Lux* because I had many students who wrote fabulous poems and no-one saw them except me'

Shakespeare Company during the renowned theatre company's production of *As You Like It* and discussing with key members of the educational part of the company many ideas about engaging students.

"We were definitely on the same page because a lot of the ideas that I had, they were already doing," she said.

With an uncanny knack of tapping into the zeitgeist of her teenage students – their music, their movies, and their way of communicating with each other – she regularly weaves these elements into her teaching.

In her own time, Veronica also coordinates many writing competitions and mentors English teaching colleagues. She produces the school drama productions, as well as editing *Primo Lux* – an anthology of West Australian under 18's poetry that she founded four years ago.

"I started *Primo Lux* because I had many students who wrote fabulous poems and no-one saw them except me," she said.

"I applied for an Arts WA grant and my school principal agreed to umbrella the project. *Primo Lux* has poems sent in from all over the state and when I launch each anthology, the students read their poems. It is very special for them to have their words published."

Veronica said she would like to see more emphasis on mentorship programs for young teachers.

"I would have liked to have had more mentoring when I was young; I was thrown into a country school and then a challenging city school and I learned from my own common sense and from reading widely," she said.

"I wish there were opportunities to work with experienced mentors where teachers could guide, interact and share ideas in positive and relevant situations."

Veronica also laments that increasing demands of administration prevent her from doing as much with students as she would like.

"Paperwork has quadrupled and is

dominating my working day,” she says. “I have less time to be in the classroom with my students. I am therefore a bit grumpy at school because unfortunately teachers in Western Australia are promoted out of the class room.”

To step into her students’ hearts and minds, Veronica also organises annual literature camps designed to inspire the imagination.

“They have geography camps and ski camps and I thought a literature camp would be a terrific thing to do, with a series of workshops based around *The Tempest*,” she said.

“Students work in small groups and had to choreograph and perform from a section of the play as well as writing something creative. They were pretty busy,” she said.

“I watch a lot of the shows that they watch and when we do *The Tempest* I include a rap version that I wrote just for fun. It has quite complex rhyme and rhythm and they know that rhythm. If you say, ‘write a sonnet,’ they think you are mad, but if you say, ‘write a rap tune’ then they are enthusiastic.

“When I teach Literature to Year 9 we look at *The Lion King* for class and at *Mulan* for gender. Students look closely at the words to the songs and the representation of characters and how they are gender oriented,” she said.

“For instance, the three female characters in *Mulan* illustrate the notion that older women



Veronica Lake

have more freedom to say what they want – they are past a marriageable age. The crone is everywhere in culture!

“Older students explore films like *Mean Girls* and *The Tracker* – as parallel texts to novels. They help promote understanding and meaning.”

Veronica’s office walls are crammed with interesting articles and thought-provoking

images, as is a corkboard in the classroom.

The idea is to tap into their world and to give more relevance to their learning.

“I put up the things that I think are interesting and they read it, or not. I have a section on *The Tempest* with a lot of images. Young people today are very visual, sometimes without understanding that they are.”

Candlelight poetry readings are another way to give students an opportunity to reflect in a quiet space. “I call their names out randomly, they come forward, light their candle, place it in a holder on my desk, which I have turned into an altar, read their poem, blow out the candle and return to their desk,” she says. “It is very moving when the young boys are reading war poems.

“For those that are not keen on writing their own poem, they are given the choice to write a ‘letter home.’”

Obviously Veronica is a woman who loves her work, but what keeps this teacher really motivated and inspired after many years in the classroom.

“I love young people,” she says. “They have an energy about them that is constant whether they are angry or excited. Youth cuts to the heart of things. When a student discovers meaning in a poem, is spellbound by a performance of Shakespeare or shares a book which they have read, their energy renews mine. And that is the motivation.”

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