

In the Classroom 140

Here is a Challenge to Participate in NaNoWriMo

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. I know you could be doing other things, perhaps you are, but you're still hanging out with me, and I really appreciate it. Well into October right now, at least where I'm sitting, the leaves are starting to change, the temperature is more to my liking, and football is on. Just finished a massive grading session with my students, and using TextExpander I saved myself 10 hours of work. I've talked about TextExpander before. It's not the reason this episode is out, but it is a wonderful tool. I definitely encourage you to check it out.

This week, we are going to explore one of my favorite opportunities. I'm getting excited. It is almost November, and November is NaNoWriMo month or the National Novel Writing Month. I have not ever written a fictional piece, at least to this scale, and I'm not going to be writing one for NaNoWriMo, but what I am going to do is take the opportunity to put down my initial first draft of a new nonfiction piece.

NaNoWriMo, basically you are challenged to write 50,000 words in 30 days. What I would like to do is challenge you and your students to come join me this November to participate in NaNoWriMo.

I have participated in NaNoWriMo a few times. The first resulted in a book. My book *Read to Succeed* came out of a NaNoWriMo writing month, and it helped get me started. My last attempt has sparked a book that I'm currently finalizing, I hope to have this new book out in the next couple of months. Certainly, you will know about it, you'll know more about it, I will let you know because I'm pretty excited about this book, but I am going to use this upcoming NaNoWriMo session as the catalyst to get my next nonfiction book started.

If you've ever thought of writing a book, this is a great way to just get going. It's just you and 50,000 words and a half a million other people who are doing the same thing at the time. What is NaNoWriMo? According to their website, NaNoWriMo began in 1999. A group of people basically grabbed some books off their shelf to find out what the shortest book was, and they calculated a number and they said, "We can do this." It ended up being a challenge of 50,000 words in 30 days. It is about developing the first rough draft. NaNoWriMo has been going on ever since.

Each year more and more participants join the challenge, and I'm challenging you to join me. NaNoWriMo became a nonprofit in 2006. They basically became a central hub and catalyst for budding authors. In 2020, half a million writers participated in the event. Every year, there's more and more individuals who are participating.

Libraries are encouraged to participate as being places where folks can gather to write. I'm considering of having my library support the event with come-right-in

sessions. Ideally, I want to find a supporting professor, somebody that will support this idea and this energy, but I'm also thinking of reaching out to a couple of the writing clubs that we have on campus and get their support. We'll see where it goes.

The nice thing about NaNoWriMo organization is they have a website. It's a place where you can commit yourself, where you can declare that you are going to participate with 50,000 words. It also allows you to track your progress as well as find support groups, and you can also invite your friends to participate with you. If you are thinking of doing NaNoWriMo, I really encourage you to sign up as a participant on the NaNoWriMo site. I think there's a lot of beneficial reasons for doing that.

Why do I think that NaNoWriMo is an activity that you should get involved in or get your students involved in? First of all, it is a perfect vehicle for jumpstarting a writing project. We have a lot of great intentions out there, but sometimes it takes a challenge to step forward and move forward. It is a challenge. You are asked to do something that is causing you to stretch and to grow as an individual. You're also participating in a global event where you get to compare your progress with others. Because you regularly share your writing word counts with others, you're also being held accountable, and there's a greater chance that you will stay on task.

In order to be successful, participants need to learn how to break down this huge task, 50,000 words, and break it into smaller manageable tasks. They also learn how to manage a schedule to deliver on time. 50,000 words, if you don't want to do the math, comes out to 1,667 words each day. This is certainly possible. About five pages of writing and you're able to do this. NaNoWriMo also forces you to dedicate part of your day to writing. The more you write, the better you become at writing. This is not a bad activity to get involved in.

The whole challenge is a very short but smart goal. You have to write 50,000 words in 30 days. That's it. Very simple, very straightforward, easy challenge, but it has been a challenge for me in the past, but I think I found a way to do this. The other reason I think that NaNoWriMo works is that it's a huge push forward. Even if you don't hit 50,000 words, you are still much further ahead than if you did not participate. Once again, encouraging you to think about, or not even think about, just do NaNoWriMo, come join me.

Let me let you know about my secret, how I think I'm going to be able to do this and be successful this go-around with NaNoWriMo. As I mentioned, I am writing a nonfiction piece around instructional technology. My approach is going to be different than previous years. In that, I am going to dictate my book. There is nothing saying how you write your book, and so I am dictating my book. I will be using Audacity, which I use to create this podcast, to capture audio recordings each day. Then I'm going to feed the recordings into Otter.ai, which will kick out a transcript.

I have found that I write 113 to 150 words a minute. I looked at one of my 15-minute podcast episodes, that resulted in 1,700 words. 15 minutes of my time and energy talking about a specific topic resulted in 1,700 words. If you remember, just earlier I said I needed to write 1,667 words each day. If I talk for 15 minutes on a topic, 15

minutes of that particular topic, and I've been talking for roughly 10 minutes right now, that I will end up with 1,700 words. I looked at one of my transcripts that was from a 36-minute episode, that was 5,400 words. If I speak for over a half-hour, I'm crushing it, I'm a 10th of the way there. I think I'm on track to be able to do this successfully this year.

Right now I've put together a Google doc of all the things that I want to include in my book. Each day, I plan to address a handful of these topics. It could be just one topic, it could be multiple topics, depending on what I'm feeling at that day. I feel really good about hitting my word count. The concern I have is to have enough to talk about. I'll be analyzing this as I'm going and updating my Google doc to make sure that I'm addressing all the things that I want to address.

I think NaNoWriMo is a wonderful challenge for students. It is a stretch goal, it lets them know what is possible. Some folks have thought they never could do something of this scale, and here we're putting this challenge forward, we're showing them a way to do this, breaking it down into smaller tasks, and they're going to come out successful at the end. Most of the events that I've seen relating to NaNoWriMo and higher education are usually sponsored at the campus level. That doesn't mean that you can't challenge your students for the class, maybe as something that's extra credit, or maybe that's the activity that your class is going to participate in.

Even if they fall short of that 50,000 words, I am confident that you are going to get some awesome writing out of them. Understand that it's a rough draft, and that's fine, but the fact that they're pouring out creativity is going to be great. At a campus level, normally, there is an information session with a call to action to join. I'm thinking about this in terms of my library, how we're going to do this. There is often educational sessions leading up to the start date.

I'm not sure I'll have so many of those, but usually those sessions include character and story development, as well as tips for successfully completing the event. There may also be options for how to publish or self-publish the final work. With these campus-level events, there's often writing sessions where students are brought in, anybody that's participating are brought into a place and they write together maybe once or a couple of times a week. That's something I plan to do. That's also a great way of developing community.

One of the other things that, if you're doing this, you should create some type of virtual community where participants can check-in and leave their daily word count and provide mutual support to other participants. There's some wonderful tools that you can do this, Microsoft Teams, Slack, Discord, a lot of tools like that that help build community. When you're talking to your community about being successful in this activity, these are some of the things that I would certainly recommend.

First of all, participate every day with the intent of hitting your word count. You're setting a schedule, you're building a routine, and ideally, you want to write at the same time each day, if possible, and also in the same place. Importantly, you need to block off part of your schedule to make this happen. You have to dedicate the time to do this and just block off your schedule. This may mean one month where you're

not going out and binge-watching TV. Instead, you're going to write. Get it on a schedule.

The other thing that's important to hit your word count is that you have to write forward. This means that you don't go back to edit. Separate your writing brain from your editing brain and just write, write, write. You can edit it after the first draft is done. If you don't know something, write TK and move on. If you're thinking, you're struggling as like, how does this item work or whatever, who cares, TK, write down a little note what you need to figure out, and just keep on writing. You can come back and edit that later.

Also, track your progress. Definitely keep a log. As I mentioned, I intend to dictate my book so I will have a separate transcript for each session. This is going to make it easy for me to log my word count because part of Otter.ai, it tells you how many words you have. Once I drop that audio file in, it kicks back a transcript, tells me how many words I have, I can either create a new audio file to continue on or I save it for the next day. I definitely want to get ahead and stay ahead throughout the month in terms of my writing.

NaNoWriMo is not the only game in town. For some, writing a novel may sound a little daunting, but there are other options. I have included these details in the show notes, articles that are talking about these options. Some of the ones that you may consider, this may be also great for your class, is participate in National Blog Posting Month where you write one blog post a day for the entire month of November, or National Poetry Writing Month. It's normally held in April, but there's no reason you can't do it in November where you write a poem a day for the month. National Ebook Writing Month challenges you to write a 20,000-word ebook and send it out for publication or get it published, self-published. The 750 Words Challenge has you, you guessed it, writing 750 words each day.

These are just different ideas. If you're trying to find writing activities for your students that are a high challenge, this is what you can do. What I want to leave you with is I'm doing this, I'm inviting you to come join me. I put my NaNoWriMo Profile link in the show notes so you can keep track of what I'm doing, but I hope that you will reach out and we can partner up, and I can cheer you on, you can cheer me on. That is a little bit about NaNoWriMo. I'm excited. I can't wait for November to get here. I hope that you will certainly join me. Before I let you go, since we're talking about books, here's a plug for my book.