Meeting in the Middle

I would like to see my students communicating their knowledge values, and beliefs in an effective cooperative manner that allows them to understand each other. I realize there isn’t a lot of specificity there, but that is the goal. I think the demo on multi-genre projects heads where this is going. I don’t want the 5-paragraph essay to be the mode of choice for all my students, though I would like them to be able to write one if the need arose. To me the key is the difference between understanding and accepting/embracing. Tricia makes a good point. Incorporating the process of academic debate into classroom practice may be the answer.

Academic debate demands that speakers take on alternating sides of the resolution. In this way, student may find themselves actually arguing against their own position. Harold’s demo extended this idea by adding the concept of giving students multiple sources dealing with a given historical event and then having students assume the role of various persons in the event, exploring the event for possible audiences, and then determining the best genre to approach that particular audience with that information.

By giving students multiple viewpoints, not just of historical events, but of issues in science, math, current events, and literary themes and allowing them to synthesize that information before assuming a role in the issue that they would not normally have on that topic allows them to engage in “thinking like someone else” and seeing the issue from another perspective, if not a diametrically opposed viewpoint. Because they are assuming someone else’s role, they are “safe” from that opposing perspective. It is not them who is advocating the divergent viewpoint, but the role they have assumed. This should help them deal with the dissonance generated by holding an opposing view in their head long enough to consider it.

So much of the teen self-concept seems to be wrapped up in what they believe that entertaining the opposing view threatens their notion of who they are. By creating the “safe” environment for students to not only consider the opposing view should allow them to make the leap between the concepts of “understanding” opposing perspective and “accepting” or “embracing” those perspectives. Helping them bridge that cognitive gap by way of a pseudo-persona should allow them to examine the opposition’s perspective fairly without threatening who they perceive themselves as.