Statement

A MAGAZINE OF THE COLORADO LANGUAGE ARTS SOCIETY

SPRING 2023

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Looking Back

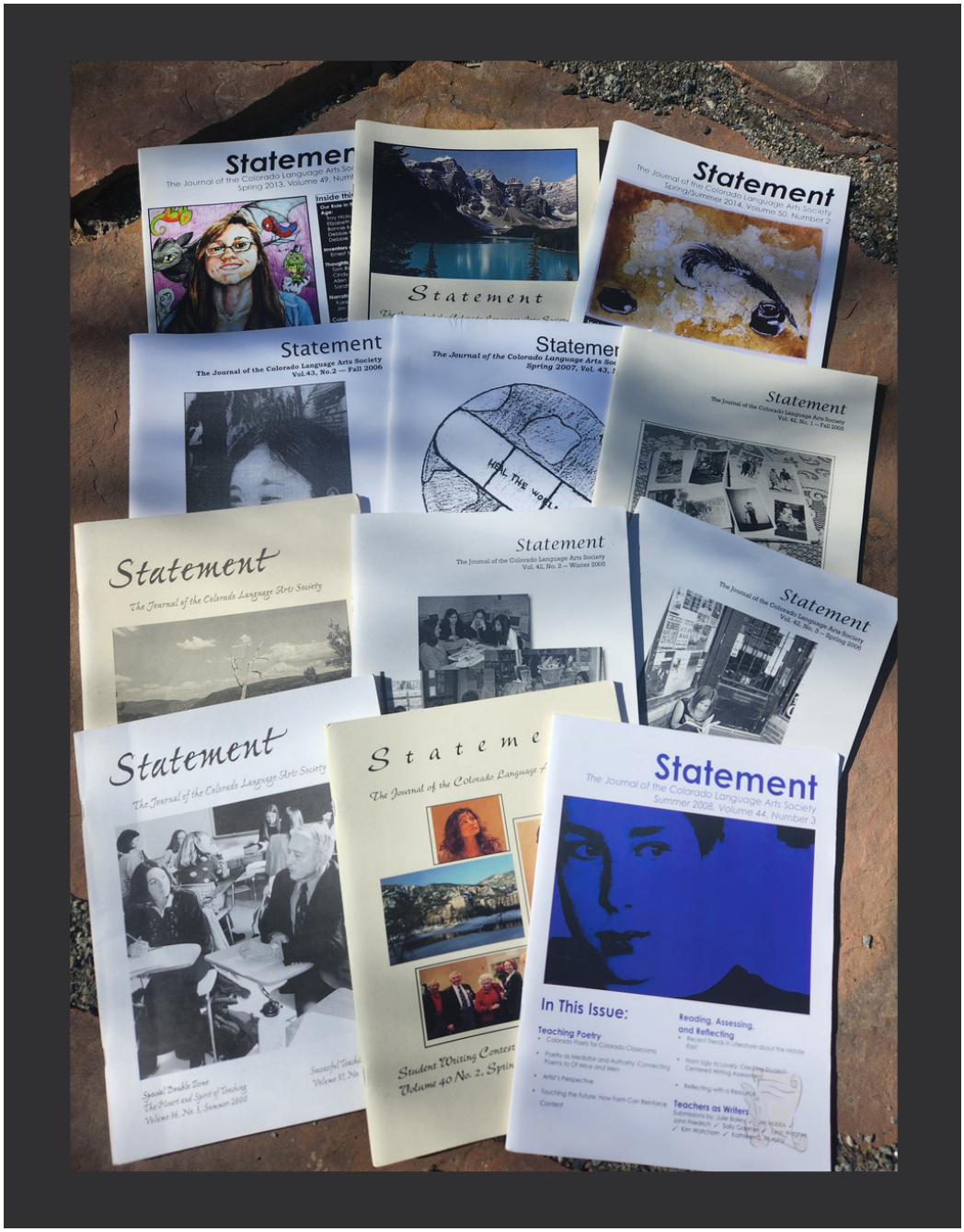
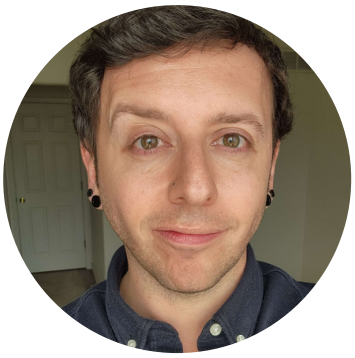


Table of Contents

SPRING 2023

A Letter from the CLAS President

JAY ARELLANO



Jay Arellano is a classroom teacher at Legacy High School in Adams 12 and a lecturer at the University of Colorado Denver. He is a member of the *Statement* editorial team, and has served on the CLAS board as recording secretary, two terms as a member-at-large, most recently as vice president, and is greatly honored to be stepping into the role of president for 2023-2024.

Recently I have been rereading a favorite book of mine: Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*. In the book, Kafka Tamura, the protagonist, says, "I don't know what it means to live." This line echoed through my mind for days.

For our coming issue, *Statement* invites submissions discussing why you still teach, how you connect and sustain, what challenges and triumphs you've experienced, and how your practice has been shifted or affirmed. In a sense: as an educator today, what does it mean to live?

Twelve years ago—a wayward college dropout restarting his undergraduate career—I joined CLAS and it helped me to find some facet of what it means to live. Even as CLAS struggled to situate itself amidst the tumult of a pandemic and maybe-post-pandemic world, the value gained through professional collaboration on the executive board has fueled my motivation to remain. And here I am, writing this letter, grateful and excited, as the CLAS president.

The power born of collaboration—invigoration, connection, affirmation—is fantastic. I hope you feel that as you read this issue featuring some of the best writing to ever be published in *Statement*. I hope that you are spurred to join or rejoin as a member of the Colorado Language Arts Society, to submit some of your writing to *Statement*, to join us at our upcoming conference, or even to volunteer as a member of the executive board. I hope that in your journey as an educator—as it has been in my own—that CLAS can foster an environment which helps to sustain your practice, and maybe, helps you to uncover even a small aspect of what it means to live.

Return of the CLAS Conference

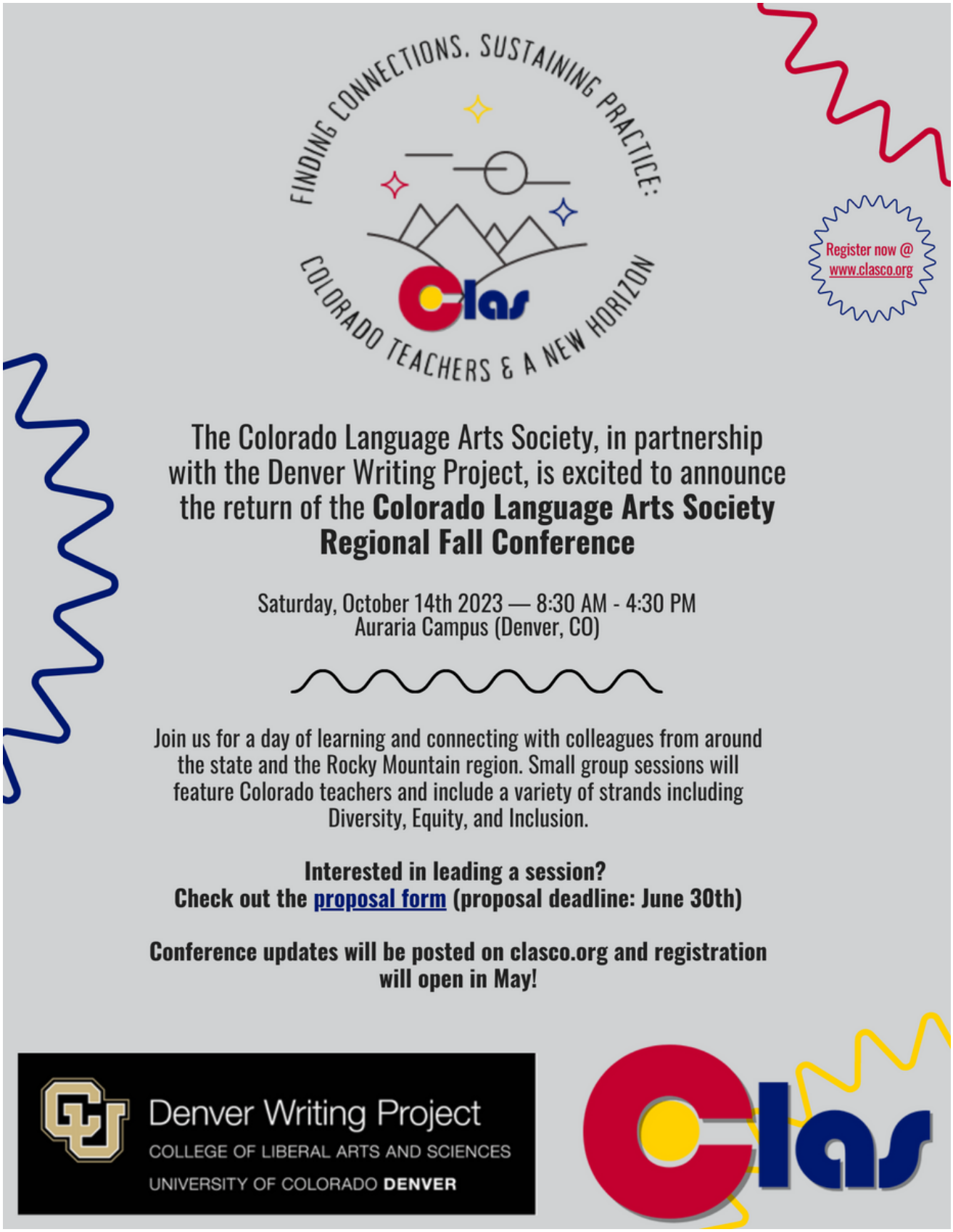
FALL 2023

For decades, the Colorado Language Arts Society has proudly hosted an annual regional conference that has served as a hub for connecting teachers and providing inspiration and professional development to English educators in and around our state. In 2020, CLAS was poised to defer our own conference in order to lend our full support to the NCTE Annual Convention, which was to be hosted here in Denver. Unfortunately, as we all know, COVID changed everything.

While we won't belabor the tremendous complexity and unease that has characterized the last few years and inhibited our ability to plan and host a conference, we do wish to express our frustration with not being able to facilitate these gatherings, which we hope serve as a fundamental aspect of your professional growth as Colorado educators.

That being said, it is with great excitement we announce the Colorado Language Arts Society is back, and we are ready to hit the ground running.

The Colorado Language Arts Society Regional Fall Conference is returning to Auraria Campus this fall, on Saturday, October 14th. We have an outstanding lineup of speakers, and will offer a variety of meaningful, engaging sessions that are sure to reconnect and reinvigorate. We hope to see you there.


FINDING CONNECTIONS. SUSTAINING PRACTICE:
COLORADO TEACHERS & A NEW HORIZON
Clas
Register now @ www.clasco.org
The Colorado Language Arts Society, in partnership with the Denver Writing Project, is excited to announce the return of the Colorado Language Arts Society Regional Fall Conference
Saturday, October 14th 2023 — 8:30 AM - 4:30 PM
Auraria Campus (Denver, CO)
Join us for a day of learning and connecting with colleagues from around the state and the Rocky Mountain region. Small group sessions will feature Colorado teachers and include a variety of strands including Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.
Interested in leading a session?
Check out the proposal form (proposal deadline: June 30th)
Conference updates will be posted on clasco.org and registration will open in May!
Denver Writing Project
COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO DENVER
Clas

The Literacy Lessons I Learned from Hamilton

The Pulitzer Prize winning play by Lin-Manuel Miranda has lessons to teach us all about passion, creativity, genre, and the process of writing. Each year we can help students construct identities of power and opportunity, to challenge themselves as readers and writers, and to act with agency in our classrooms. We will unpack the classroom conditions and practices that are grounded in key principles for motivation: relevance, engagement, and community.

Penny Kittle

Cris Tovani

Removing the Masks of Disengagement: Strategies That Hook Our Most Reluctant Learners

The best reading strategy in the world won't work if students are disengaged. Now, more than ever before, students want authentic reasons to read, write, and discuss. During this keynote, Cris Tovani will describe the masks of disengagement that teachers will recognize. She will share planning structures and literacy strategies that will help teachers anticipate students' needs so they can better remove the masks of disengagement.

Humanizing Assessment: Grading Practices that Liberate Students and Teachers

As Cornelius Minor argues, grading is a system in schools where oppression can hide. How might we use grading practices to liberate instead? Once we center students as the most important users of classroom assessment data, grading can cultivate student agency while it liberates teachers from the seemingly constant demand of evaluating students' work. Join me to consider a continuum from traditional grading practices toward those that liberate, including a look at some practical, sustainable strategies to reimagine and streamline grading and assessment.

Sarah Zerwin

Register now @ www.clasco.org

Call for Submissions

FALL 2023

The pandemic and its ubiquitous influence has been cited as a possible reason for almost any change, trend, or sociocultural "conversation" for about three years now. Whether or not this credit is being aptly applied is up for debate. Though, whatever the case may be, it does appear that in everything from work to social unrest to calls for equity to politics to the economy and even to education, we are indeed on the precipice of a new horizon.

As educators, we have again been called upon to tackle and take responsibility, both during and in the receding phases of the pandemic, in a way that no other profession—save for those in the medical fields—has been asked to do. In addition to teaching, mentoring, counseling, and all the other roles we have been tasked with over the years, we were also asked to become experts at remote instruction, custodians and monitors of mask-wearing and social-distancing, and frontline mental health paraprofessionals. This is, of course, in the context of skyrocketing cost-of-living and real estate expenses in Colorado, in the context of what seems like perpetual threats of violence in our schools, and in the midst of unending accusations about our supposed ineffectiveness and "agenda-pushing" whenever there are LGBTQ people, people of color, or anything deemed controversial included in our curriculum and our classrooms.

Yet here we are. Educators are leaving the profession at unprecedented rates and teacher education programs are enrolling just fractions of the students they had only a few years ago. Yet here we are. In this issue, we want to know why it is *you* are still here. How do you develop meaningful connections? How do you sustain your practice? What are the obstacles (and maybe the triumphs) specific to us locally and regionally in Colorado? And how has your teaching been changed or resolved to meet the new challenges on the horizon, without losing sight of your beliefs about teaching and what your students need?

Statement is also seeking to publish student and teacher writing. We hope you and your students will send us some of your personal writing—poems, memoir, narrative, informative—you decide.

Guidelines for Contributors

FALL 2023

The editorial board requests that all submissions to *Statement* follow the specifications detailed below.

- Google Docs are the preferred form of submission (ensure that share settings allow for viewing of the document), but we will accept .docx as well
- use current MLA formatting and style standards
- do not use or incorporate deviations from MLA (accepted submissions will be reformatted for publication, and formatting standardization supports ease of transfer)
- charts, graphs, photos, illustrations should be sent as separate file attachments to the email submission (when these are embedded in the document, it sometimes creates difficulties with transferring them for publication)
- submissions should not exceed ~3,000 words (10-12 double-spaced pages)
- include an attached photo of yourself in .png or .jpg format
- include a short bio of yourself (no more than 100 words)

Statement is a refereed journal, which means that at least two outside reviewers will read each submission. Once the manuscript has been accepted, the editor may consult with the writer regarding revisions, and may share comments from the editorial board as an aid to revision. In light of deadlines, we reserve the right to make minor revisions. Minor formatting changes are likely and should be expected in the published version of *Statement*.

In the body of the email which contains the link to or attachment of the manuscript, please include (1) the title of the piece, (2) the writer's name, (3) job title, (4) affiliation or place of employment, (5) city/state, and (6) website (if applicable).

Inquiries and submissions may be sent to the editor, Jay Arellano, at jay.arellano@clasco.org. Contributors will receive an email acknowledgement of the manuscript's receipt. Please include a statement verifying that the manuscript has not been published or submitted for publication anywhere else.

Statement Information

SPRING 2023

STATEMENT STAFF

Content Editor	Karen Hartman
Design Editor	Jay Arellano

The Colorado Language Arts Society opposes discrimination against any person and promotes equal opportunities for access to its activities and publications.

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Thank You, Karen

FRIENDS OF KAREN HARTMAN

There are moments in a career when you meet someone who not only leads by example, but motivates you to do better as well. Karen Hartman is one of those people. As she steps down from her role as the editor of *Statement* this year, and tries to take a step back from her activities with the Colorado Language Arts Society (we keep reeling her back in), we wanted to share some memories of Karen's teaching and volunteerism through the years. We hope they bring smiles and inspiration to you.

I doubt there has been a more dedicated teacher-and-student advocate than Karen Hartman over the years of her career. Strong in opinion and visionary, Karen has impacted the work of thousands of educators across the country and, most directly, in Colorado through her work with the Colorado Writing Project, Colorado Language Arts Society, and National Council of Teachers of English. Always ready to host a meeting, often in her home, Karen pushed for excellence in all aspects of English education; fiercely loyal to teachers, Karen had little patience for any barriers that might limit the independent decision-making of teachers as they nurtured their students. Her knowledge of YA Lit is amazing, and her presentations at conferences and conventions were always packed with eager learners. And if these qualities and achievements aren't enough, Karen's love of English Springer Spaniels is legendary, and she's one hell of a great cook —her lasagna is fabulous! Thank you, Karen, for your years of work as editor of *Statement*, work that is just one slice of the extraordinary career you have had.
—Dave Wendelin

I want to tell you about Karen Hartman's leadership in CLAS, but first I must digress to tell you about an English department in its smoking heyday.

For those of you under 50, you may not know that, at one time, most teachers smoked in schools. So in our high school English office, about six dedicated smokers indulged while we planned, graded, and gossiped—that is, until a new member joined our department. "Don't you know students walk by here? You've got to think about them." To appease her we added an air cleaner, but she

wasn't satisfied. "This isn't good for the kids. What if someone has asthma?" Eventually she prevailed and we dumped the air cleaner, put out our cigarettes, and breathed cleaner air.

And this was Karen: persisting in her commitment to fairness, refusing to give up when she saw inequity or any cause that threatened young learners. This was what Karen carried into her involvement with CLAS: as a regular conference presenter, clarity about what mattered; as the editor of *Statement,* adamant about offering issues that impacted all students, especially those who might be overlooked; as the Director of Conferences, passionate about themes and presenters that took on the heavy issues teachers were wrestling with; and as a member of the CLAS Board, willing to voice concerns that needed attention.

Since long before many of our current teachers were born, Karen has dedicated her professional life to advocating for all. In her advocacy, she has influenced the lives of many English/language arts teachers and, therefore, our students.
—Stevi Quate

Looking Back

KAREN HARTMAN

Karen is the director of the Colorado Writing Project and has served for many years as the content editor for *Statement*.

She is an active contributor to the Colorado Language Arts Society, and currently serves on the executive board as the director of conferences.

Statement was last published in the fall of 2021. Then COVID hit and most teachers were overwhelmed with learning to teach online without much help and no time to figure it out. We worried about our students who missed their school and their friends and didn't always show up for online classes. Teachers didn't have time to even think about writing for *Statement*. Last spring, we decided to look through older issues of *Statement* and publish those articles we thought new teachers would enjoy reading and teachers who were teaching twenty years ago might enjoy revisiting.

Stevi Quate and I recently presented at CCIRA's annual conference looking at the work of Peter Elbow who wrote about writing in the 80's. One of the questions we asked ourselves is why study those writers from so many years ago. We looked to historians to give us some insight. Here's what we found:

It might seem counterintuitive that one of the best ways to illuminate the present is by studying the past, but that is precisely why history can be so important.

—Stanford Department of History

History is not the past; history is a conversation we have in the present, in order to examine and evaluate human complexity, past and present, with an eye towards improving the future.

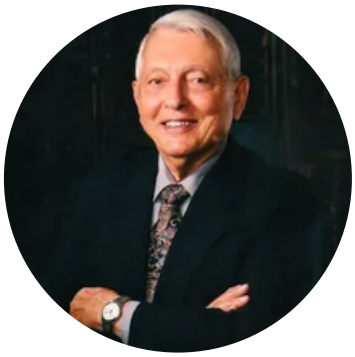
—Dr. Andrew Hartman
Illinois State University

I like that idea that “history is a conversation we have in the present . . . with an eye towards improving the future.” As teachers, we don’t let go of those ideas from the past that we know are good instruction, but, instead, we build on those ideas as we work to improve how we engage our students in the work of literacy.

This issue highlights ideas about instruction that were worthy in the past and are still worthy in the present. It also gives us a look into teachers’ perceptions of what we can bring to the classroom and to our students. We hope you enjoy looking back. We also hope you will consider writing for the fall issue of *Statement*.

Some Sixty Years Later

BILL MCBRIDE



Bill graduated from Colorado A&M (now CSU) in 1950 and, sans credentials of any kind, began teaching that fall.

One of the first lessons he learned was that students must be the center of the educational process. When he retired forty-eight years later, that lesson was still uppermost in his mind.

CLAS' dear friend, Bill McBride, died on June 22, 2022 at the age of 93. He was a charter member of CLAS and my English teacher in 1965 during my senior year in high school. He made literature come alive for his students and is one of the reasons I became an English major. I reconnected with Bill when I became a member of CLAS. We shared a love for Young Adult Literature, and I was soon booktalking with Bill and Ruth Cline. Seeing Bill at conferences was a highlight for many of us. He was so respected and loved by Colorado educators and is so missed. This following essay written by Bill speaks to his teaching career and what he believed stayed the same over his more than 60 years of teaching. Bill wrote this essay about his career in early 2014.
—Karen Hartman

Last October at the fall CLAS conference, as I listened to presenters and talked with colleagues, I was struck by how much education has changed over 6+ decades and how much it has remained the same. In all of the changes, some better than others, teachers continue to strive for effectiveness.

In 1950, I graduated from college with a degree in Animal Science and headed back to the farm. In the middle of the summer and a changing situation, I was invited to interview for a job teaching English in a neighboring small town high school. I needed a job, but I had never planned to teach and wasn't prepared to do so; nevertheless, the superintendent hired me, but not to teach English. I had no preparation, no student teaching, nothing that would help me with a high school agriculture class and the twenty-five sixth graders with whom I was to

spend the majority of my day. But teachers were in high demand, and superintendents were scrambling. I had a degree, and by the time the school year began, I had an emergency certificate. I don't remember any concern about facing an entirely new situation. I had a job and was sure I could handle it. Concern for the students' well being didn't really hit me until I actually faced them.

The sixth graders were a revelation. Girls perhaps outnumbered the boys, but not noticeably so. There were probably equal numbers of Anglo, Spanish, and Mexican youngsters. Students had no evident prejudices. Spanish youngsters and Mexican youngsters were very clear about their individual cultural heritage, but that made no difference in the classroom. The acknowledged leader, athletically and academically, was a Spanish boy who was one of the smallest boys in the class and whose parents were farm laborers. Prejudice became a factor when the students began to date, but that was an issue for the parental generation, not the teenagers. And there was no bullying. There were, of course, rivalries (some of which were pretty intense) but no bullying in the classroom or on the playground. The students and I got along well. Our social and economic backgrounds were similar, and the ten-year difference in age was pretty insignificant.

I had neither mentor nor supervisor. In the eight years that I taught in that district, no other adult was ever in my classroom. The other elementary teachers were all middle-aged women who were extremely nice to me, but they never offered suggestions or advice. The principal required a weekly plan book, due each Friday and returned on Monday but never with any comments. I was fine with that. I received many useful teaching suggestions from my mother, who was an effective sixth grade teacher in another district; other than that, I was quite happy on my own. Had I gone the traditional route, student teaching would have been six weeks; I taught for three years without direct supervision before the State Department waived the requirement.

Fortunately, those kinds of situations no longer exist. I'm not sure that emergency certificates are ever used or that people with no training and inadequate backgrounds are allowed in classrooms. The experiments with putting content experts in the classroom become problematic; it isn't true that scholars are automatically great—or even good—teachers. A former governor once said that a teaching shortage should never exist because retired or out-of-work engineers or scientists, etc. could simply take over. Knowledge doesn't necessarily bring with it the ability to share it in meaningful ways.

Now, though, we have come to recognize the effectiveness of mentoring and cognitive coaching, and the value of effective professional development. While I didn't have a colleague mentor, I did have twenty-five youthful mentors who were very free with their comments, their opinions, their advice. In retrospect, that was the best thing that could have happened. I wanted them to be challenged and interested, and I encouraged their independence. Between us, we truly had a student-centered classroom.

Often when I see students today, I see the ubiquitous cell phone or equivalent thereof. Often, too, that's substituting for actual conversation or involvement. Although we didn't have all the equipment that's available today, we did have active involvement, group work, and much discussion. While I am impressed by all the technological advancements, I wonder if those possibilities occasionally deny students opportunities to be both physically and mentally involved in their learning?

When I moved to a suburban system, problems with diversity became more visible, partly because of numbers, partly because we didn't seem to have enough time, perhaps because we didn't yet know enough about how children learn, partly because as adults we were sure we were in a better position to determine what was best. Sometimes, bright students maneuvered their way into "slower" classes and were allowed to get by with less effort. Occasionally there were discipline problems, often because they were not challenged and were bored. I don't know that "now" is better than "then," but I do know that some of those problem kids were among the brightest. The profession has come a long way both in knowledge about young people and ever-increasing awareness of the individuals in our classrooms.

In my early career, there was no question about who was the authority figure. It was the teacher. I worried more about discipline because I knew that if (and it was almost always when) the parents learned that their son or daughter was in trouble at school, punishment at home would frequently be greater than the punishment at school. That wasn't a perfect system, of course, but we weren't constantly second-guessed or forced to allow the students to have the upper hand. The overall attitude in school and in the community was that people in authority were treated respectfully; and, if questions arose, protocols were in place. Courtesy to others in the classroom and on the street was a given. As a society, we've lost much of that; and it was the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 that created significant differences in education. Teachers became the scapegoat for much of what was wrong in the country; and the loss of respect

remains a problem.

In the last six years that I taught in that small town, I was the English language arts teacher for grades 7-12, the journalism teacher, the speech teacher, sponsor of the paper and the yearbook, coach of the debate squad, director of the class plays, and a class sponsor. On one hand, I liked it. I was the English department, and the curriculum was what I designed it to be. I don't advocate that, but what it did for me—and I hope for the benefit of my students—was force me to have a student-centered classroom and to develop a vertical program. Student-centered and vertically articulated curriculum were not then in my vocabulary, but they were real. The literature anthologies helped because each level was different; the grammar books were sold as sequential, but they weren't; and composition texts didn't exist. I have always believed that students should be at the center of the learning process, that our task is to help them learn how to learn and how to take charge of their own education. Materials had to match knowledge, interest, abilities, and learning styles. I knew I had to have varied approaches to challenge and interest my students and have a number of ways to evaluate because grading written work for seven classes as the sole determinant was simply not possible. Group work, discussion, presentations, observations - all were tools for grading. I was there long enough for students to be in my English class for six years. It just could not be six years of exactly the same thing. Neither was it then nor is it now possible for a single instance of evaluation to determine the overall effectiveness of teaching or learning.

In retrospect, I suppose those early years helped me more than they helped the students. I went back to school to learn more and better ways to work with students and to become a real part of the profession. The 1950 sixth graders spent three of their high school years in my English language arts class, became the Class of 1957, and I was their senior sponsor. We have remained close, and today some of them remember some pretty lively discussions in literature and say that they became lifelong readers and learners because of classroom experiences. Others say that they remember nothing except that school was relatively painless and that I was always available to listen and to help with personal problems. In 2009, when I was honored by NCTE, the Class of 1957 sent flowers. When CLAS honored me the following spring, two of them were there. Was that a result of my teaching all those decades before or of their learning? Teaching and learning are far too complex to be held to simple solutions. I can - and do - point with pride to many former students who have done really well in their careers and in their lives. I value them and the time they spent in my classroom; however, I do not know for sure, nor do I claim to know, wherein any

effectiveness lay.

The concept for this issue of *Statement* is what effective English language arts teaching looks like and how we might measure it. Can we say precisely what it looks like? Any answer will depend on whether we mean short-term or long-term. Effective teaching means that effective learning took place. But learning is the result of overall experience. How does what happens in one classroom correlate with what happens in all the other classrooms and at home? Is learning a matter of content or is it a combination of things? Are we talking about English language learners, students with special needs, the gifted, the talented, the disinterested, the uninterested, all of the others?

Some fifteen years after I began, I was asked to articulate my philosophy of teaching. I stressed helping students to become critical thinkers and independent learners and to take charge of their own education. I believed then in that philosophy. I believe in it now. There are many useful strategies and activities for helping students in the classroom, and teachers continue to handle the numerous variables—including their own—that occur every class period. No perfect formula exists; and in trying to define and measure effectiveness, the intangibles may be more important - as well as more difficult to measure - than the tangibles. It is true, however, that any single test, of any kind, is an incomplete picture and a totally inadequate way of determining an overall evaluation of learning and, therefore, teaching.

And in all of these changes, what remains the same? The students. Every presentation last fall and every conversation emphasized that, technology or no, awareness of students and their individual needs, interests and abilities are central to effective teaching and learning.

On the following pages we have collected various memories from CLAS board members who worked closely with Bill over the years.

Jackie Swensson is a past president of CLAS.

Bill McBride was a primary influence in my professional life by exemplifying the engaged, informed, caring educator, setting the model for us all, but doing so in his inimitably quiet manner. I counted on his advice because I knew it would be informed by his good sense and experience.

I have never had a colleague whom I valued more than Bill or with whom I

worked more compatibly as we served on local, state, or national committees. Bill's background as a teacher and professor informed his NCTE and CLAS work. Always articulate and inclusive, Bill helped us develop the habit of naturally reaching out to others. His approach to discussions ensured opportunities to be heard; however, when the rest of us paused for breath or to clarify our thinking, Bill would calmly capture the essence of the matter in a thoughtful comment, one that we all wished we had said in the first place.

Bill was historically CLAS's and NCTE's champion, and he brought many educators to the organizations, encouraging active participation in subtle and generous ways. Because he was a hard man to say no to, many of us accepted leadership roles at his urging. If he thought we were up to the job, it just might be true. When one of us in Colorado buys a membership, pays for a young teacher's conference registration, or offers to share a conference hotel room with a pre-service teacher, we have long called that McBriding.

He urged us all to do our best to be professional, so as not to disappoint our students, our colleagues, or ourselves. Those who come after his sad departure may not have the advantage of his direct influence but will benefit from the mark he has left on CLAS and on education in Colorado.

Dave Wendelin is also a past president of CLAS.

I recently came across this thought by Alice Walker, from *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart*: "She thought of how precious it was to be able to know another person over many years. There was incomparable richness in it." My friendship, affection, indeed, love for Bill McBride added an "incomparable richness" to my professional and personal life for which I will be forever grateful. My first "awareness" of Bill was from a distance, seeing him stride around the lake at the Broadmoor Hotel during one of my early CLAS conventions; what I saw, with his multitude of convention ribbons flapping in the breeze, was a man of importance, of purpose, one who exuded leadership. Did I know Bill then? Not by a long shot; in fact, I was too intimidated to think of starting a conversation with such an impressive guy. Even from a distance, though, I felt his presence, his influence. Little did I know in those early days of my career how much Bill would come to impact my life. Slowly nurtured by Bill and other CLAS members, I began to find my way in CLAS and ultimately in NCTE; Bill always, without fail, mentored me, nudged me, introduced me, and at times pushed me to be more than I thought possible. How did that happen?

The “how” was Bill McBride and his unwavering friendship; he always made sure the light shown on others, but all who hesitantly stepped into that light knew the source of illumination was Bill, always Bill, who cared so deeply for others. I am forever grateful to say Bill became one of my best friends—travel partner, convention roommate, dinner companion, confidant. Each opportunity to be with Bill, whether at a large convention or a quiet lunch in Fort Collins, was marked by an “incomparable richness” that Bill’s friendship made possible. He is truly missed.

Stevi Quate is also a past president of CLAS and was a graduate student of Bill's.

Bill McBride was a man who respected, believed in, and trusted teachers. Even though I’m sure there were times he wanted to just tell English teachers how they should teach, he restrained himself, trusting that with provocative text, engaging conversation, and time to reflect, that teachers could be agents of their own learning. Let me give just one personal example.

When working on my master’s degree, Bill was my advisor and my favorite professor. Always he modeled the kind of pedagogy he advocated. So I knew that when he assigned us to read Knoblauch and Brannon’s *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing* that I could learn methods to bring to my classroom. Little did I know that a deeply engrained belief would be altered based on that book, conversation, and time to reflect.

In this provocative book, the authors argued that the traditional paradigm of learning to write was highly ineffective. In particular focusing on form initially was not how real writers write and often resulted in students leaving school hating to write. Their arguments pushed back on my fairly recent method of teaching expository writing: focusing on the five-paragraph essay. As a result, I wrestled with the authors’ ideas. After all, couldn’t I still teach students to write that introductory paragraph that ends with a thesis, three supporting paragraphs, and a conclusion that restates the thesis and still engage students? Wasn’t I providing the building blocks for writing a strong essay? But as hard as I tried to synthesize my current pedagogy with the arguments in this book, I couldn’t and I struggled.

And Bill let me struggle. It was, after all, my battle to fight. He couldn’t do it for me. He could give me more information, more data, more research, but then his job was to step back and trust that I could figure it out myself.

And I did. After all these years, I remember the moment of the epiphany, the moment I realized that two different paradigms were in conflict and that one paradigm, the one advocated by Knoblauch and Brannon, was the better one.

Bill could have told me what to believe and how to teach composition, but instead he provoked and provided time to think and time to struggle. It was a lesson I've never forgotten. He knew teachers were to be trusted and that with more information they could make the right decisions. His job was to offer them provocations and then step back.

Thanks, Bill, for believing in me and in my English teacher colleagues.

Taking Best Practices from Belief to Action: Using Writing Methodology to Impact School Culture

DAWN LATTA KIRBY

At publication, Dawn Latta Kirby was a Professor of English and English Education at Kennesaw State University. She and her husband, Dan, had recently published, with Tom Liner, *Inside Out: Developmental Strategies for Teaching Writing.Third Edition* (2004). They were working on a new book, entitled *New Directions in Teaching Writing: Memoir* (2006). Dawn is now (Full) Professor and Associate Provost, Academic Programs and Curriculum Development at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU).

The author shares her values and beliefs about best practice and then illustrates how these values are translated into effective writing instruction. She contends that a caring curriculum and pedagogy create a caring school community.

Every teacher that I know, those who teach pre-K through college graduate courses, wants to be an educator who effectively uses best practices in her teaching. Teachers talk to each other, swap lesson plans, read professional journals, and attend professional conferences to find out what works and to get new ideas for teaching well. This search for what works is likely a pragmatic, even random effort by individual teachers based on their experiences in the classroom. Lately, however, as teaching and learning processes have become the focus of empirical and applied research, teachers' searchings have the opportunity to become more focused and more grounded by applying emerging research findings to their teaching.

The term best practice has become popular in many recent discussions of

research-based effective teaching and is defined variously as "solid, reputable, state of the art work in a field" (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998, viii) and as a concept that "has its roots in law and medicine and implies that professionals have standards, are aware of current research, and offer clients the field's latest knowledge, technology, and procedures" (Chenoweth, Carr, & Ruhl, 2002, 2). Teachers' efforts to be effective and to stay current are therefore aided by applying research findings to everyday teaching practices, generally termed best practice.

Because best practice is grounded in research findings, notions of what best practice is necessarily shifts and changes as research about various aspects of teaching and learning alters focus, explores new territory, and generates fresh findings. In fact, Chenoweth, et. al. further suggest that "Education has not had a tradition of best practice because the field, until recently, has lacked well-developed standards or clear outcomes informed by previous work and research. Educators have failed to take advantage of what has been learned in the past and tend to tinker anew each time that change is proposed [Wilson & Daviss, 1994]" (2). This assertion that instructional practice is a constantly reinvented wheel is supported by additional recent research (Bickmore, Smagorinsky, & O'Donnell-Allen, 2005) indicating that teachers often don't realize that their teaching methods come from two opposing traditions—teacher-centered vs. student centered—so they rather randomly choose what seems to work best with their students.

How, then, are teachers to stay current with what is considered to be best practice at any given moment in time? For most, it is a hit and miss endeavor for two interrelated reasons. One, best practice is based on research; two, the very nature of best practice is an evolving, moving target that changes based on continually emerging new research findings. With a lack of sufficient time to read and reflect on research findings and then to devise ways in which they could enact these results in their teaching, most teachers rely on interpretations of research delivered to them by a host of conference presenters, in-service directors, workshop leaders, and authors of accessible articles in practice-oriented professional journals. Such venues make it more feasible for most teachers to stay current, but they don't address the fact that these many sources of information may, themselves, be more fragmented than consistent, more varied than uniform in their philosophical underpinnings. The work of reflecting, staying current, and selecting best practice is therefore a demanding, time intensive effort that, even if fragmented, teachers are working on in order to discover and achieve best practice.

Research findings ring true and evolve into best practices when both the findings and the practices are consistent with what the individual teacher thinks is reasonable and feasible, with what the teacher values, and with actions that the teacher can envision performing in her own classroom. Teachers consistently strive to match their teaching styles and instructional activities with their beliefs about effective methods for delivering instruction and for attaining student learning, and they use their teaching goals and values as a type of filter to judge what they think will work for their students.

One Best Practice?

The term best practice may seem to suggest that one best practice exists among all of the possible instructional strategies from which a teacher could select at any given time. But good teachers know that all classroom practices are not created equal even though they may be grounded in sound theory and research, and are therefore termed best practices. How do I select from among the myriad of best practices? Which best practices are most appropriate for my teaching situation? How should I go about implementing a coherent set of best practices? Is there, in fact, one uber-practice that supercedes all others? I have found it helpful to answer these questions by conceptualizing best practices within a larger set of values for teaching and learning. Hastily constructed lists of classroom activities and haphazard attempts to improve my teaching are unlikely to help unless I have a strong sense of what I believe about teaching and learning. I need to engage in a process of reflection in order to consider those values and beliefs, and then shape my instructional actions to align with those beliefs and values.

Moving from Belief to Action

Valuing and believing a concept is one thing; making it come to life through deliberate action is another. The process of moving from belief to action requires (1) knowledge of the values and constructs that lie behind instructional methods and practices, and then (2) the commitment to take action to align instructional practice with those values and beliefs. Regardless of the best practices that teachers choose in order to enhance students' learning outcomes, the movement from values to beliefs to action is necessary for optimum instructional impact. Otherwise, values and beliefs lose their luster when they remain only ephemeral ideas, and action that is random and groundless carries little impact. We need only to look at how the perception of writing processes has changed teachers' instructional values in order to see a

model of connecting beliefs and action - a model that can be useful when examining new research findings and when considering the implementation of new best practices in our teaching.

Values for Writing Instruction and Their Impact on Practice

The general acceptance of using instructional strategies grounded in writing processes as a highly effective method for teaching writing has certainly altered the instructional values and beliefs that teachers generally embrace about writing and learning. In order to examine the beliefs part of the equation of moving from belief to action in best practices, think about the following list of beliefs and values to which many contemporary teachers of writing now subscribe.

1—The value in believing that kids can learn to write. Before working with writing processes emerged as a best practice for teaching writing, many English teachers seemed to think that proficiency in writing was a divine gift given only to the chosen few. Process-oriented practices and teachers' reflections on their effectiveness, however, indicate that when given the opportunity to write and when supported by insightful coaching, almost all students can write thoughtful and cogent pieces.

2—The value of coached practice. Historically, teaching writing consisted of not much teaching, but mainly of assigning writing and grading writing. Lately, however, by using writing process-related methods, teachers are seeing that the time and effort necessary for interacting with student writers before, during, and after their efforts to create a text yield better pieces of writing. Writing teachers are discovering that the more time we take to help students think through and plan their pieces, the better those pieces are likely to be. As writing coaches, we engage in conversations with our student writers to help them extend and elaborate upon their pieces of writing while they are still in-process pieces. We have also discovered that having students share their pieces and debrief their writing processes with fellow writers leads to writing development. What we've also learned is that when student writers reflect on both the pieces and their processes after the pieces are completed, they develop an increasingly positive attitude toward writing. This coaching is labor intensive; we know that. But most teachers of writing now think that the remarkable improvement in student papers and in students' motivation and willingness to write is worth that effort.

3—The value and importance of peer response. Once upon a time, the only person who read a student's piece of writing was the teacher, or maybe Mom who helped the student write the paper. Multiple drafts and many eyes on a piece of writing as it developed and numerous responses to the writing as it improved from version to version simply was not any part of the way in which writing was taught.

Now, however, many of us would agree that one of the most important actions writing teachers can take is to help students become attentive and supportive audiences for each other's writings. Students most often do so by working in Writers' Groups to read and respond to their pieces of writing, or by working with a responsive partner to devise a technique for smoothing over a rough place in the writing. Notice that there is a tremendous difference between students as audiences and responders and students as proofreaders. That essential difference has to be taught directly to students. Responders relate to the piece of writing as the real people they are. Proofreaders correct the usage and surface errors in the piece of writing. Once that distinction is established, and when I carefully organize and manage peer interactions and peer responses, the communication and work in the groups goes well. I recently observed a student intern who said to students, "Okay, discuss last night's reading," and kind of waved her hand for students to begin. This was sixth grade. The students just sat there and looked at her - of course.

Telling students just to get into groups and respond is the same way. Students need more than that to work as effective peer response groups. They need a step-by-step guide and some specific direction from the teacher about what to do first, second, and third. They need to learn and have modeled for them respectful actions and ways of talking to each other as they respond to the pieces of writing. They need to know what to say and how to say it, and they need to know how to work as a group. This type of learning and responding leads to increased writing development.

4—The value of time well spent. The bane of writing teachers has long been the paper load and the enormous amount of time that teachers spend in grading and marking all of those papers. English teachers once believed that all students' papers had to be carefully marked, corrected, and graded. If the teacher wasn't grading the paper, the teacher had not yet seen the paper. To collect the student's writing was to grade it. Such is no longer the case. The value of responding to papers is evident. Teachers are learning that authentic and knowledgeable responses to papers foster writing development more

quickly and efficaciously than does merely marking and grading them.

Responding effectively is supported and promoted when teachers of writing view students' draft pieces in holistic, global ways, paying less attention to the minutiae of surface errors, pristinely correct usage, and precise wordings, and more attention to the big picture, to the major ideas and concepts in the piece, and to the overall aptness of the writing to its audience and purpose. Because we are no longer marking every misplaced comma, we are using our time more effectively, giving us the time to respond to writings before they turn to stone. When it is time to grade the papers, rubrics and scoring guides help focus our attention and responses to students' pieces.

But the real change in my belief has been in seeing the value of responding early and often to students' pieces as a fellow writer, not as a grader. To do so, I hold conferences with students about their writing, talking to them about what's going well and how to tackle the rough spots still in their writing. I've learned to lean over - to work at the elbow of my students - and to come into close proximity with the writing, indicating that this text is important and worthy of our full attention. Most importantly, because I am no longer reading just for the purpose of grading, I have learned to leave students to solve some of their own writing problems. I'm no longer so much the answer person. Instead, I'm the one who asks questions, such as, "What could you do to make your introduction more interesting to the reader?" and "What's your point here?" and "What details do you need to add to create a clearer image for the reader?" Spending more time coaching and less time grading is an important tradeoff for the mental health of the writing teacher and for the progress of students' writing.

5—The value and power of authentic revision. When I was in school, the papers that I wrote were rarely revised. I might copy them over neatly in ink, skipping every other line, catching and correcting a mistake or two, but once I had written a draft of a paper, I rarely even considered making major changes to it. That paper was a done deal. Now, however, most writing teachers have come to believe that it's important to view students' writings as works in progress, not as done deals. As such, we have also had to realize that only some of students' writings will be worthy of their editing and revising efforts.

Taking a rigid or lock-step approach to revision just because we know that revising is important for quality writing doesn't do much to improve writing. Some drafts just don't work, and they need to be abandoned. Those drafts can

still be filed in the student's Writer's Notebook, but there's just no valid reason to force students to work more on a dead-end piece of writing. Instead, I ask my students to try another angle, start with a different section, give the piece another voice, add another example, or otherwise give it a different approach to try to get to a better piece of writing. Such a view breathes life into revision since students will then be working only on the pieces that capture their interest and that have real potential. Then, their efforts at revision are authentic ones, not something they are doing just to please the teacher or earn a grade.

These values represent recent developments in teaching writing and connect to our beliefs about how to teach writing well. Most of us, with time and effort, can focus on and determine our particular values for teaching and learning, and then apply those beliefs to our instructional practices. The remaining part of the equation to which the title of this article refers, however, is action - specific action to realize our values and beliefs as best practices in our classes.

Because all beliefs are not of equal importance, the first step for each teacher interested in moving from belief to action is to determine her own set of personal beliefs about teaching and learning. Some beliefs are so foundational that we need to work to establish those before others, especially since it's foolhardy to attempt to change all of our teaching actions at once. Setting goals and working toward translating our beliefs into best classroom practices, however, is important enough to reflect upon and work on regularly.

Moving from Beliefs to Action

As I've reflected on my beliefs and on how to transform them into actions in my classes, I've established some fundamental beliefs and concomitant actions for my work with best practices. I find that these beliefs and actions are consistently part of my teaching, regardless of specific content.

1—I focus on and work from a set of values that are foundational for caring teaching and responsible learning. I spend some time each week thinking about what I believe, what I care about, and what I want to have happen within the writing and learning community that is my classroom that week, and then I work on meeting those goals very directly. For example, one of my values is that of acceptance. After identifying the value, I next seek an operational definition for the value by asking questions such as, "What does that value really mean? How can I define it?" For this example, I define acceptance in a classroom context as making space for all of the voices in the class to be heard. Then, I

consider very specifically, "What is it that I must do in order to enact that value in my classroom?" For the value of acceptance, which operationally means creating a space for all of the voices to be heard, my actions need to include acting as the referee in the classroom, the traffic cop, the facilitator, the coach, the one who encourages.

Once I have decided that those are my roles for the week or the month or for the semester, then I walk into my class and make those behaviors of referee or traffic cop or whatever else I need to do a reality. My values and my actions are then in alignment—which is when the most effective teaching occurs-and acceptance is operational, not just a pretty construct. Moving from belief to action is both a reflective and a deliberately thoughtful process.

2—I focus on work. After I reflect on and establish values for my teaching, I next focus on work and on altering the balance of work and responsibility in my classroom. I want the work that I ask students to do to be engaging and intrinsically interesting to them. I want the students to be as tired as I am at the end of the day because they've learned how to work rather than how merely to sit and watch me work. That means that I have to establish reasonable and student-friendly rituals and routines in my class. I have to teach students how to go to work in there.

Redefining work means creating learning experiences in which students see themselves not as doing work for teachers but work that is meaningful to them. For writing instruction, for example, some of the rituals that I use include conferences, response groups, and peer editing, and they become routines when I schedule them regularly-for example, scheduling writing groups for every Thursday, meaning that students have to produce a new draft or piece of text each week. Giving them that opportunity means offering options and encouraging students to render writing in their own unique ways. I try to avoid templates and "do it like this" assignments, offering instead a framework for how to get the work done. One of those frameworks with which I often work is memoir, about which I have often written.

3—I focus on individual lives. Because I see narrative as the infrastructure of learning, we tell stories in my class - the stories of the characters in a piece of literature or our own stories or the stories of current events and struggles—like the recent very personal stories associated with the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma. I extend invitations to my students to talk about their experiences and feelings, and I offer them reassurances that no one will attack

their stories and their feelings. When necessary, I become the game warden in the wilderness preserve of my classroom, posting the No Hunting signs and making sure that the poachers stay out of my class.

For writing instruction, we focus on students' stories and narratives as points of learning and as a technique that can be used effectively to improve writing and to grow as writers. Focusing on life stories and on lived experiences helps students to write from the self and to connect what they read to their own experiences. Focusing on life stories also means that I must refrain from judging my students harshly. I model how to listen attentively and respond with respect to what they have to say, and I don't use their stories against them at a later date. I listen to the mainstream and to the bizarre, and I set up a space within which all of the students are invited to interact without fear of reprisal. Using the genre of memoir for both reading and writing has been especially helpful for drawing out life stories in my class and for giving students the opportunity to share personal struggles and triumphs

4—I focus on helping students create texts, not just on doing assignments. Focusing on completing assignments or on having students turn in lots of busywork does little to promote effective learning and instruction. Instead, during the writing instruction when my emphasis is to grow writers who are learning and thinking, I refuse to let my students rush to the final product. I provide opportunities for students to work on multiple short pieces that will ultimately lead to a more comprehensive final product.

For example, when I teach memoir writing, students first author short pieces about various memories from significant times in their lives: the memory of a beloved stuffed animal, the games played in a friend's backyard, their first kiss, the time they first faced death, for example. After they have written these many short pieces, students then focus on finding a thematic or metaphoric connection among their many pieces, and they select the two or three or four shorter pieces that they will weave together to form their final written memoirs. By starting with individual short writings rather than with the complexity of the whole, the final memoirs display rich, fully developed details and storylines, and they have become meaningful texts to the student writers.

5—I focus on and encourage reflection. I ask students to go for the meaning, not just for the surface outline of events. I ask lots of questions that cause students to reflect on why, not just to stick with the bare facts of the storylines offered in literature and in their own lived experiences. We get out our shovels

and dig for meaning and reflect on what we find, but we don't dig into personal meanings so deeply that someone is injured, maimed, or murdered. I also provide a reflective infrastructure that promotes students' self-assessment, self-monitoring, and self-advocacy. I use a variety of reflective tools.

For writing instruction, these reflective tools include personal audits of writing progress; class press conferences in which we air writing problems and, as a group, suggest solutions; reflective pieces about the strengths and weaknesses of their products that become part of students' writing portfolios; and whole-group discussions of students' and published texts that work effectively to illustrate and illuminate various specific writing techniques. These conversations center on both Writerly Talk and Readerly Talk.

Writerly Talk consists of using the vocabulary of writers, of making observations about writing, such as, "I notice how this author develops her concept by repeating the same word throughout this chapter, and that's a technique that I can use in my own writing." The focus is on talking about the techniques that writers use that any of us, with practice, can discover and then transfer into our own writing.

Readerly Talk consists of making a deliberate connection between the piece of writing and your response to it, by saying to the writer, for example, "Your description of your father reminded me of my own dad. I like the way you included details about how his voice sounds." Taking the time for reflection creates teachable moments as students explore and consider how writing works and what specifically makes a particular piece of writing appealing.

6—I focus on the group, on building the community. Part of the work of community building involves more mundane actions such as setting boundaries and reasonable limits for language and behavior so that students don't veer into unacceptable danger zones. No one is allowed to make racist or sexist comments, for example. If students do veer into these and other realms of unacceptable comments, I don't preach sermons or tell them that they're bad people. I simply tell them that such comments and conduct are unacceptable in my classes, and then we move on. Focusing on respectful interactions contributes to a positive atmosphere in the class, and knowing that I will allow only respectful comments helps to develop a responsive community in the classroom.

But community-building doesn't stop with the mundane. It also involves

complexities like attitude and the nature of social interactions. Fostering an attitude of respect builds community. For writing instruction, nurturing an atmosphere of caring about the writing and of caring about what others have to say builds community. Promoting constructive social interactions about writing during our reflective Writerly and Readerly Talk builds community.

None of these actions occurs automatically. I deliberately model and promote the attitude and the talk necessary for effective response to and growth in writing, which also promotes the development of a caring community of writers and learners. I work hard at this modeling and community-building because I know that unless I can transform my class from a gaggle of disinterested and disparate adolescents into a writing community, writing will not thrive. In contrast to what most people think about writers who work in their lonely, dark garrets, writing is really a social activity, one that is best supported by a caring and responsive community.

Ultimate Best Practice

This process of establishing values and beliefs and of then enacting them by choosing best practices for teaching writing applies readily to teaching any English/language arts content. When I consider best practice, however, I am still left with the question that I posed earlier: Is there one uber practice, one ultimate best practice that supports all others? Although this is certainly an arguable point, I suggest that the best practice of all is one that allows teachers to focus readily on how to impart not just content knowledge, but on how to convey to students habits of mind and habits of action that affect school culture and, ultimately, societal interactions. That is, my focus in teaching is to work with best practice that changes how students interact with each other, with teachers, and with others whom they encounter. To my way of thinking, that best practice-the one that helps to create the atmosphere in which all other best practices thrive-is that of creating what Noddings (1992) has called communities of caring.

Because we are English content teachers, we know that writing promotes and supports learning. But I think we can extrapolate another concept from our content knowledge, one that posits that the methods we use to create writing communities in our classes can teach more than just content and writing processes. The processes we use to create a community of sharing and caring in our writing classes can carry over into what happens in the hallway. When I teach writing, I'm not just teaching writing. I'm also teaching about the value of

caring and respect, the value of hearing all voices in the classroom, and the value of community. When students learn how to be effective and responsive members of a writing community or of a writing group, they are also learning how to be effective members of the larger school culture. That is, the climate of respect and inquiry, and the expectation of thoughtful and caring interactions start in my writing class and then spill out into the hallway.

We can change the culture of the school by changing the culture of the classroom. These transformations begin with writing and sharing and with having open discussions within the safety of acceptance. Without a doubt, the classroom culture predicts the larger culture in the school. That is, the methods that we use to produce writing communities have ripple effects on creating a community of caring in our schools and can become the model for building larger, more inclusive communities in our schools.

Because English teachers necessarily work at what Palmer (1998) calls the "dangerous intersection of the personal and the public" (39), what is really needed for effective teaching is a disposition toward respect and what Palmer (1998) calls hospitality in teaching. Relating hospitality to teaching carries a metaphoric dynamic that we can readily grasp. Palmer states, "Good teaching is an act of hospitality toward the young, and hospitality is always an act that benefits the host more than the guest. By offering hospitality, one participates in the endless reweaving of a social fabric on which all [of us] can depend—thus the gift of sustenance for the guest becomes a gift of hope for the host.

It is that way in teaching as well: the teacher's hospitality to the student results in a world more hospitable to the teacher" (50). Hospitality and caring are, indeed, contagious, which promotes the atmosphere necessary for the development of caring communities.

The Caring Community

So, I return to my premise: The principles of caring, democracy, and respect are foundational to all best practices and to students' optimal learning. When these principles are solidly operational, as they are in contemporary classrooms grounded in writing process methodology, then what happens in my classroom carries over into what happens in the hallway.

The actions that I take to support the caring community include those of modeling and sharing. When I model caring and validation of individual

perspectives in my classroom, I then give students a window, a glimpse into how to act in tolerant ways throughout the rest of their day. When students gain the habit of respectful action and the habit of a caring mind, those caring attitudes transcend the microcosm of the classroom and impact the macrocosm of the school. When I tell my own stories and share my own writing with my students, I believe that they, in return, will open up at least a bit of themselves to me, to their fellow writers in my class, and to their peers in the lunchroom and in the hallway. I find that when I work to make my beliefs a reality in my classroom through honest discussions about life and literature and through creating authentic opportunities for students to write and to exchange their stories of life experiences with others, then I am acting as a more effective teacher of writing, and the interactive community of learners, readers, thinkers, and writers flourishes. Because a writer's words indicate what a writer values, what a writer does and does not hold in esteem, and how a writer thinks (cf. Vygotsky, 1962), I work with my students to promote respectful interactions and to use caring language. These are, indeed, the actions for teaching and learning under which all other practices thrive. Without first establishing a democratic and caring community, no practice has a chance to impact students' minds and actions.

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A Room of Our Own: Alternative Spaces for Authentic Practices

CINDY O'DONNELL-ALLEN

Cindy O'Donnell-Allen taught in the English Department at Colorado State University when she wrote “A Room of Our Own." She is now a Full Professor of English, site director for the CSU Writing Project, and holds the William E. Morgan Endowed Chair.

The author explains how the National Writing Project offers support and information for teachers attempting to apply best practices in their classrooms. Her own involvement with NWP is described to help others see how they, too, can grow as writers, teachers, and researchers who bring current knowledge in writing instruction to their students

...For my belief is that if we live another century or so - I am talking of the common life which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as individuals - and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think... then the opportunity will come....
- Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

A few months ago, I was speaking with the young woman who had been my junior high daughter's English teacher the previous year when the conversation turned to teaching writing. Hannah, as I'll refer to her, is a graduate of the English education program where I teach, and even though she had completed her Master's degree before I arrived on the scene, I am familiar with the program's emphasis when she was a student. While we have added and refined courses in the past few years, our course on teaching writing has been a constant, and I happen to think it is and always has been a good one, even in Hannah's day. In a nutshell, students in "Teaching Composition" study recent theory and research on the teaching of writing and learn firsthand through

lesson design and their own field experiences how these principles play out in actual practice.

So I was surprised in our recent conversation when Hannah confessed her struggles with helping her students become better writers. She explained something to this effect: "I mean I learned a lot in 'Teaching Composition,' like teaching multi-genre research papers and using Six Traits, and our school has had training in teaching expository writing, but how do you really teach kids how to write well?"

Because Hannah taught high school prior to teaching junior high, she has a strong sense of the writing demands her students will encounter after they leave her class. She knows how important it is that they learn to analyze literature and write essays because that's what they'll be asked to do in high school. At the same time, she is troubled that much of her students' writing sounds the same-voiceless, formulaic, as if they're "cranking it out" rather than "creating it." And she is at a loss about where to go from here.

Hannah's question of how to teach writing well has been with me ever since, especially because at first, I was also at a loss in answering it. I happen to think that Hannah is an excellent English teacher. She has high standards for her students and cares about them deeply. She designs creative lessons and assigns interesting books. My daughter not only loved Hannah's class, but she also learned a lot, and she became a better reader and a writer as a result. Despite Hannah's success in her university program and in her teaching since, how could she of all people feel that she didn't know enough about teaching writing?

The Sobering Truth about Learning to Teach Writing

Hannah's uncertainties stuck with me, eventually leading me to question whether I myself know enough about teaching writing.

"Well, of course you don't!" my inner voice snorted back immediately.

I know what you're probably thinking. "But you're the professor. You teach this class for a *living*. Some of your own research is focused on how kids make meaning. You direct a *Writing Project*, for heaven's sake. If you don't know enough about teaching writing, why are my hard earned tax dollars contributing to your salary?"

The simple answer is that none of us will ever know how to teach writing once and for all. The composing process is a complex one, the demands of which change over time and across contexts. Consequently, the processes of learning how to write, of learning how to teach someone how to write, and of learning how to teach someone how to teach someone else how to write are like so many layers in a kaleidoscope-ostensibly loose and individual fragments that, when reflected by mirrors set at various angles, combine to produce an endless field of patterns. In other words, in order to know enough about the teaching of writing, one would have to fully understand:

1. the process of composing in all modes and genres for every possible audience and rhetorical demand,
2. the developmental process of learning how to write, which necessarily shifts in relation to students' ages, individual needs, and the components listed in item 1,
3. the process of instructing someone to write, and
4. the process of preparing the teacher who will teach writing.

To extend the kaleidoscope metaphor even further, the infinite variety of teaching contexts and individual student needs function much like the infinite number of positions in which a kaleidoscope might be held. Just as each change in the kaleidoscope's position results in a new design, each shift in teaching context and student need produces a unique and complex composite of learning and teaching demands.

But even before we add in the infinite variety of teaching contexts and individual student needs, the layers in the process of teaching writing are impossible to isolate from one another, for each layer necessarily depends on the one that proceeds and follows to complete the total picture. To further illustrate this complexity, I'd like for you to think about the questions that arise at each of the above layers.

With these questions, I've considered just one product, one writer, and one occasion for writing, but the questions make clear why the body of knowledge on teaching writing will never reach full maturity. One doesn't really learn to teach writing as if it were a subject with discrete boundaries. Rather, one learns how to teach students, and in this instance to teach Janie, who sits in the back row of the rowdiest sixth-grade class at the school that's been placed on probation by the state because it didn't show sufficient CSAP improvement, how to write a poem to be read at her favorite aunt's wedding. And if that is the

case, learning to teach writing is at best, a protracted process.

So what does that mean for us as teachers? Well, it can either drive us to drink or force us to realize that we won't ever know all there is to know about teaching writing no matter how much research is conducted, no matter how many classes we take, and no matter how many degrees are conferred upon us. In other words, we need to come to terms with the fact that we'll be learning how to teach writing for the rest of our teaching lives.

The Good News about Learning to Teach Writing

Lest this article take on a depressing tone, let me assure you that help and hope exist. The good news is that we do know much about each layer featured in Table 1 (page 33). In regard to the first layer, **Composition**, we know, for instance, that writing tasks are situation-specific and rhetorically bounded and that writers can learn or adapt writing strategies for use on particular occasions of writing, be they as simple as composing a grocery list (Witte) or as fraught with personal significance as the poem written to commemorate an aunt's wedding. We also know that writing is a recursive, rather than lock-step process (Flower and Hayes; Bereiter and Scardamalia). And often, once the myth that one must start with "In the beginning" and march dutifully through to "The End" is dispelled, writers are freed to find multiple entry points into a piece of writing.

In tackling the daunting task of writing my dissertation, for example, I didn't begin with a little pre-writing, move on to drafting each chapter all the way through to the bibliography, go back to revise, and finish up by editing my sentences for subject-verb agreement.

Instead, I developed the comforting routine of working on bite-sized writing tasks each day. Even though I set a daily goal for producing a certain number of pages, I didn't start with pre-writing or drafting. Instead, I began by editing the pages I'd written the day before because I discovered that doing so got me into the groove of writing and helped me generate what I wanted to say next. On the days when I got really stuck, I worked on my bibliography. Even though typing and proofreading citations was mundane, I still felt as if I was "writing" because I had something to show for my efforts in the end, and more often than not, my brain would eventually shift back into "drafting" gear.

As for the second layer in Table 1, **Development**, we also know a good deal about how writers typically progress from early ages (Calkins) through adolescence

(Kirby and Liner) and adulthood (Beaufort). Although we must be careful to remember that every child matures at an individual pace, these developmental guidelines allow us as teachers to have a general sense of what to expect from students at particular ages or stages so that we can adapt strategies and writing tasks accordingly. The multi-genre research paper provides a useful case in point. Tom Romano first taught his high school students to try this approach after he read Michael Ondaatje's book *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, which is written in journal entries, letters, poetry, and newspaper articles. Delighted by the passion and voice this approach restored to their writing, Romano eventually adapted it for use with his teacher education students and worked with secondary teachers to make further adaptations for students at other grade levels (you can see the fruits of their efforts in *Blending Genres, Altering Styles*). Later, Camille Allen described developmentally appropriate strategies for teaching multi-genre writing to 4th-6th graders. Since Romano's publication of *Writing with Passion* in 1995, then, multi-genre research has become a much-loved best practice that consistently results in stunning pieces of writing from students at many levels. Many other writing strategies can likewise be informed by our knowledge of students' development.

This brings us to **Instruction**, the third layer listed in Table 1. Since research has clearly indicated other best practices that help students to improve as writers (Hillocks 219-223; Nagin), teachers can use this knowledge, in conjunction with our understanding of Composition and Development, to provide developmentally appropriate help while a writer is composing a particular text for a specific occasion. In the case of the wedding poem, we could teach sixth-grade Janie a prewriting strategy like jot listing to help her generate ideas before she actually starts writing. While she's drafting, we could drop in for a writing conference (Atwell) to hear how the poem is developing and see if she needs additional help. If her draft looks more like a paragraph than a poem at this point, we could teach a mini-lesson on lining free-verse poetry (Tsujimoto, 30-38) and provide models of other free-verse poems that might guide her revision and send her back to the drafting process. As she shuttles back and forth between drafting and revision, we could offer additional help tailored to her needs along the way. Once Janie is pleased with her content, she can take the final draft to her peer-editing group for proofreading, and finally, she can "publish" her poem by reading it at the wedding.

While the body of theory and research pertaining to the first three layers of Table One does provide insight into Hannah's original question of how to teach kids to write well, it does beg another question related to the fourth layer,

Teacher Preparation: if teaching writing is indeed a lifelong task, how and where do you keep learning how to do it?

Warning: Do Not Attempt This Complex Task Alone

According to Mina Shaughnessy, "Few people, even among the most accomplished of writers, can comfortably say they have finished learning to write...writing is something writers are always learning to do." Likewise, I've learned that teaching writing is a lifelong task one ought not to attempt alone. Rather, room and resources are as vital to the art of teaching writing as Virginia Woolf once claimed they were to writing itself. And by "room" I mean more than a private office. By "resources" I mean more than a new desk with a fancy schmancy computer on top. Rather, I mean a supportive space where one can wonder aloud with compatible colleagues about the seemingly inscrutable quandaries that arise in the course of a teaching life. For me, such professional space has always been associated with the National Writing Project (NWP). This would come as no surprise to Jim Gray, who founded NWP in 1974, largely in response to the same questions Hannah and I asked above.

Although I didn't realize it in 1983, my initial connections with NWP were made when I was a high school senior in Kelly Ford's English class. I had written voluntarily from a very early age, but it was something I did outside of school. Of course, I wrote the book reports and answered the study questions my teachers assigned, but I didn't really consider that to be writing. "Real" writing consisted of my poems, song lyrics, and the occasional short story, and it took place in my journal on my own time. Even though I aspired to be a writer, I had nervously come to the conclusion that writers were born, not made, because in my experience, my teachers assigned writing and corrected our mistakes, but they didn't really teach us how to write in the first place. Writing well seemed mostly like a guessing game, or at best, like a process of trial and error.

But Mr. Ford's senior English class was different. For one thing, a "journal" was listed in our school supplies for his class. Each class period, I opened my turquoise five-subject spiral and began writing, or as he called it, "free-writing" in it. Writing (I mean really writing) in school was such an odd sensation that my classmates and I initially wrote most of our entries in response to the prompt Mr. Ford wrote on the board each day. As the semester progressed, however, we discovered our own voices more and more and became convinced that they were welcome in his classroom. At that point, we chose to ignore Mr. Ford's exquisite cursive more often than not and to follow the promptings of our own

heads and hearts instead.

Yes, from time to time in senior English, we still endured "school writing" (the requisite essay tests and the dreaded research paper), but we also wrote in other genres like poetry and short stories. We learned to make lists of potential topics and to plan our writing before we started. We could even talk with Mr. Ford about our writing in "conferences," as he called them, before we turned in the final copy. And that was another thing: he insisted that we produce "rough drafts" and that we share these in "writing groups" so that we could get "feedback" to guide our "revision." Along the way of learning all this lingo, another remarkable thing happened. We (even Marlon Gabriel, the class clown and rodeo rider) began to refer to ourselves as writers.

Even as a seventeen-year-old student who swore she'd never be a teacher, I knew that something was different about Mr. Ford's class. At the time, I chalked it up to his reputation as a great teacher. Several years later in my third year of teaching English, however, I discovered that the "something different" was the Writing Project, to which Mr. Ford (whom I called Kelly by this time) insisted I apply. Prior to my own Writing Project involvement, I had had one methods course in teaching English. I subscribed to *English Journal* and read many of the books the articles cited. I frequently called Kelly and stole every strategy I could remember from his remarkable class. But I often felt as if I was going it alone in an English department populated by wonderful colleagues who taught writing in mostly traditional ways. I was experiencing some success, but I knew I needed to learn more.

One thing I learned quickly, though, was that professional development wouldn't be of much help in answering my questions. On in-service days I routinely brought my ever-present stack of papers to grade so that I'd at least have something to show for my time by the meeting's end. Like students, I became a master at feigning attention, scribbling what appeared to be notes (but were in reality my grocery list) and making eye contact with the presenter every few seconds lest she become the wiser. I shuddered to think of the dollars spent and the hours lost in the name of professional development, but Kelly promised that the Writing Project would be the antithesis of going through the motions. So I applied.

The Writing Project: A Room of Our Own

Like all Writing Project summer institutes, mine was held on a college campus.

We met in the Architecture building, but our enormous classroom didn't begin to define the professional space with which the Writing Project has provided me ever since. As we immersed ourselves in personal and professional writing, I recovered my identity as a *writer*. When I shared my strategies for teaching writing with my Writing Project colleagues, I became a *teacher leader*. Because we read current research and voiced our own questions about teaching writing, I started seeing myself as a *teacher researcher*.

In the process, I made friends for life and became a part of a larger professional community. Along with other writing teachers across grade levels and disciplines, I regularly participated in subsequent Writing Project programs offered throughout the year and presented my work at schools and conferences around the state. The graduate credit I earned through the summer institute became the first six hours of my Master's degree. Later, I became part of the Writing Project leadership team and founded and facilitated the Red River Writing Project Teacher Research Group (a pseudonym), which eventually became the subject of my dissertation (O'Donnell-Allen) This group in particular has had a profound effect on my professional development to this day because through it, I learned that teachers can "develop themselves" by posing their own questions and working with other colleagues to find the answers.

As a Writing Project director, I have since learned that the three roles I've described above—teacher as writer, teacher as leader, and teacher as researcher—are at the heart of the National Writing Project (NWP) model for professional development. As explained on the NWP website, this teacher centered model is "based on the belief that teachers are the key to education reform, teachers make the best teachers of other teachers, and teachers benefit from studying and conducting research."

"Well, no kidding," you may be thinking. But in today's political climate, doesn't it floor you to realize that a national organization exists that recognizes that teachers—not testing, not textbooks, not outside experts—but teachers are the key to improving students' learning in the area of writing? Furthermore, NWP has consistently put money where their mouth is by providing the room and the resources necessary for nurturing teachers' development as writers, leaders, and researchers.

They do so by asking Writing Project sites to do three things: 1) host annual summer institutes much like the one I described above; 2) offer inservice programs led by Writing Project members in schools within the site's territory;

and 3) provide continuity programs (like writing retreats, writing groups, and my teacher research group) to support Writing Project members year-round. In other words, as professional development spaces go, Writing Projects aren't canvas tents pitched on temporary campsites; they're brick-and-mortar structures with plenty of room for expansion.

These spaces allow teachers to share what they already know about teaching writing and support them in their efforts to learn more over the course of their careers. After a yearlong study of two Writing Project sites, Ann Lieberman and Diane Wood came to the following conclusions:

Instead of assuming that all teachers are the same regardless of age, experience, and context, the NWP approach allows for their differences. Instead of a one-shot professional developmen workshop, the NWP creates follow-up sessions and ongoing relationships to support learning. Instead of feeling isolated and disengaged from professional development, teachers encounter a searching, inquiring community that promises to support better teaching practices and that drives home the idea that good teaching requires continuous learning. Instead of thinking about teaching as a solo effort, Writing Project teachers have opportunities to engage with others in continually shaping a network that is rooted in teachers' questions, that adapts to changing conditions, and that models professional work as a collective as well as an individual effort. (100)

Little wonder then that the running cliche among Writing Project members is that their experience with the Writing Project is one "that changed my life." Considering the fact that we're talking about professional development here and that the NWP is thirty years strong and running, how can this be?

The answer is actually pretty simple. As I've already explained, a solid body of research has indicated the teaching practices that improve student achievement in writing. Additional research conducted by the Academy for Educational Development indicates that Writing Project programs consistently feature these practices. And more research (St. John et al) reveals that teachers have overwhelmingly positive responses to the professional development experiences provided by the Writing Project- so much so that these experiences have had a lasting effect on their teaching. In fact, 91% report that they are now eager to seek more professional development.

Ask yourself, when's the last time you left an inservice program eager for more?

Yet, more professional development is exactly what the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges recommended in their recent report The Neglected 'R': The Need for a Writing Revolution. This report was released on the heels of the 2003 National Assessment of Education Progress scores in writing, which showed that while 80% of 4th, 8th,and 12th grade students have mastered basic writing, only about 25% are proficient, and only 1% are advanced.

In light of the frenzy these statistics and other measures like school report cards have provoked, teachers must feel even more beleaguered than I did when I became a Writing Project member. In 1991, we were just on the cusp of increasing curricular mandates and high-stakes testing, yet I often felt bruised by the daily demands of teaching. I needed to know that I was not alone in my efforts to make a difference in my students' writing lives, just as Kelly Ford had made in mine.

If you also find yourself wringing your hands and looking for a place to hide, I encourage you to follow your flight instinct in a positive direction instead. Run to the Writing Project near you and take a shot at changing your professional life. There you are likely to learn firsthand what I eventually confirmed through my own research (O'Donnell-Allen)-that teachers can create and sustain authentic learning environments for their students only if such spaces exist for them.

To paraphrase Virginia Woolf, the Writing Project can nurture the lifelong habit of freedom and the courage to write and teach exactly as you know you must if your students are to write as they must. Research suggests that you will learn to teach and assess writing more effectively, your students will be more likely to engage in "authentic intellectual work" as a result, and you will begin acting in, rather than reacting to efforts to bring about educational reform (Academy for Educational Development). Like it has been for me, the Writing Project just might turn out to be a professional room of your own.

For more information about National Writing Project sites in Colorado, consult the following:

- Colorado State University Writing Project: https://www.csuwritingproject.net/
- Denver Writing Project: https://clas.ucdenver.edu/denverwritingproject/
- Rocky Mountain Writing Project (2022 edit; no longer active)

TABLE 1		
LAYER OF THE PROCESS	FOCUS	QUESTION
1—Composition	Composing in various modes and genres for various audiences and rhetorical demands	How does a writer compose a free-verse lyric poem on the subject of love to be read at a mountain wedding attended by loving parents, jaded friends, and impatient children?
2—Development	Learning how to write	How would the following writers approach such a task: the father of the bride, the divorced matron of honor, or the doting eleven-year-old niece?
3—Instruction	Teaching someone else how to write	How would the teacher of the eleven-year-old niece help her learn how to write such a poem?
4—Teacher Preparation	Educating the teacher who will teach someone else how to write	How does the professor prepare the future sixth-grade teacher to teach her student to write this poem?

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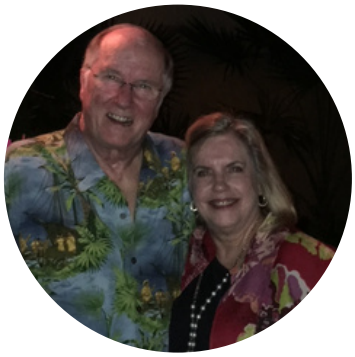
The New Face of Memoir

DAWN LATTA KIRBY & DAN KIRBY



Dawn Latta Kirby was a professor of English and English Education at Kennesaw State University when she and Dan wrote this article. Dan Kirby was and is Professor Emeritus of the College of Education, University of Colorado, Denver. At this time, Dawn and Dan were working on a new book entitled *New Directions in Teaching Writing: Memoir* (2006). Dan is now retired, and Dawn is now (Full) Professor and Associate Provost, Academic Programs and Curriculum Development at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU).

The authors examine the nature of contemporary memoir writing, citing a variety of types available for use as mentor texts. They discuss implications of their findings for teaching memoir to student writers. An extensive bibliography of memoirs follows.

Memoir is a well-traveled genre. Presidents, generals, tyrants, and movie stars have often had a need to tell the stories of their lives. Early memoir—or "memoirs," as in, "I'm going to write my memoirs"—consisted primarily of personal accounts of the events and accomplishments of famous people. Since these adventures in self-aggrandizement were at least partially written by the participants themselves, the authors often pictured themselves as the protagonists of their own stories. While the rules of memoir called for the authors to stick to the facts and offer well-documented evidence of their exploits, no doubt many of these larger-than-life figures took license to make themselves look wise and heroic. The audiences for such writings were often sparse, and in many cases the readers were historians, biographers, detractors, or family members.

Thankfully, memoir has been reborn during the last twenty years and transformed into a lively and highly readable genre, maintaining long runs on the New York Times Bestseller List for nonfiction books. Contemporary writers of memoir, many of whom were completely unknown prior to publication of their books, have begun to use the tools of the novelist and the poet, bringing to the

genre such innovations as character development, scene setting, dialogue, figurative language, metaphor, symbol, and image. The result is that these new memoir books read like good novels rather than dry accounts of historic or daily events.

Contemporary Memoir (CM)

In order to distinguish the new, more literary and livelier memoir from the older writings, we call these new versions of memoir "contemporary memoir" (CM). No longer merely heroic epics of lives well-lived, CMs explore not only what writers can remember and understand from their lives, but also clues about what they have yet to comprehend about their lived experiences. Contemporary Memoir (CM) has become a way for any individual to construct a version of his or her life. Contrary to popular opinion, CMs are reflective and sometimes partially fictionalized creations that "reveal" as they piece together the mysteries of childhood and beyond. Indeed, the contemporary, literary memoir is not traditional, not dated, and not boring. In short, it is not the memoir of old.

We date the birth of this remarkable genre, Contemporary Memory (CM), as being the publication of Russell Baker's *Growing Up* (1982). In interviews following the best seller success of his memoir, Baker confessed that he wasn't sure why anyone would be interested in the details of his life. But as Patricia Hampl's work. In her seminal essay, "Memory and Imagination," she situates "memoir at the intersection of narration and reflection, of storytelling and essay writing. It can present its story and consider the meaning of the story" (33). For us, that definition of memoir that locates it between story and essay is what also distinguishes it from biography and autobiography. The memoirist is not limited by a responsibility to scholarly accuracy, nor to factual documents, eye-witness accounts, and historical chronologies as are biographers. Rather, it is the memoirist's responsibility to work with the partial information and inadequate data that the mind offers in order to construct a text. As Hampl states, "Memory is not a warehouse of finished stories, not a gallery of framed pictures" (26). Memoir is unique as a genre because the writer must try to find the relationships between mind pictures and feelings, seeking to reconcile through story the details of what is remembered and what has been forgotten. The memoir is ultimately a version of one's life constructed from facts and feelings, truths and inventions.

Type of Memoir

In many bookstores, memoir is still shelved in a section entitled Biography. Take a casual stroll through that section, and you will be stunned by the proliferation of titles. Some will actually be biographies, but the great majority will be memoirs. You will know that fact because after the title, the publisher or author will offer as an explanatory subtitle, "a memoir." Just perusing titles may not be a very sanguine way of coming to understand the breadth and diversity of this genre. If you are relatively unaware of this genre, let us suggest several possible schema for classifying and cataloging and ultimately selecting appealing examples of the genre. Following are some of the subcategories of memoir that are interesting to us.

Cross-cultural: One of the most remarkable qualities of CM is the extent to which the genre crosses cultural, ethnic, and geographic boundaries. Writers of this version of memoir use the power of story and the uniqueness of their own cultural experiences to craft quite diverse accounts of their growing up years in locations throughout the world. Some examples include African writers such as Ken Wiwa; African-American writers such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., James McBride, Jamaica Kincaid; Chinese-American writers such as Da Chen, Anchee Min, Li-Young Lee, Maxine Hong Kingston; Vietnamese American writers such as Andrew X. Pham, Kien Nguyen; Cambodian-American writers such as Chanrithy Him; Latino and Hispanic American writers such as Tiffany Ana Lopez, Flor Fernandez Barrios, Marie Arana, Jimmy Baca; Jewish writers such as Louise Kehoe, Michael Heller; and Afghani-American writers such as Saira Shah.

Personal Journeys: Writers use CM to chronicle personal journeys, literal and metaphoric, that they have undertaken. Writers such as Tobias Wolff, Andrea Ashworth, and Frank McCourt preserve stories of their past, however painful and challenging. Steve Fiffer, Kay Redfield Jamison, and Stephen Kuusisto chronicle their journeys to overcome a handicap or physical disability. Frederick Buechner, Annie Dillard, Jane Goodall, Particia Hampl, Annie Lamott, and Lauren Winner pursue spiritual journeys. And Joan London and Nasdijj make sense of troubling and chaotic childhoods.

Multiple Memoirs: One might think that each of us has only one memoir book in us, but a number of writers of CM have written multiple memoirs, looking at their lives through a variety of lenses. In this category, try Mary Karr, Kathleen Norris, Alix Kates Shulman, Patricia Hampl, Jill Kerr Conway, Homer Hickham, and Elie Wiesel, all of whom have written accounts of different periods in their lives.

Blurred genre: Among the most interesting phenomenon associated with the evolution of the Contemporary Memoir is the way in which writers have blurred the hard lines of genre distinction. One of the most successful examples of this genre hybridization has been created by writers who merge their ability to write about their observations in the natural world and at the same time author memoir. One of the most unique examples of this genre experimentation is the work of Jannisse Ray in which she alternates chapters of the natural history of her native Georgia with stories from her childhood growing up in a junk yard in south Georgia. Terry Tempest Williams, Thomas McGuane, and Barry Lopez also are adept at using landscape as character in their memoirs.

Collections: In addition to single, book length examples of CM, collections of shorter life stories are emerging in themed books. Annie Dillard edits such a book, as does Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Alex Harris, and Claudine O'Hearn. One of our personal favorites in this category is Marilyn Sewell's *Resurrecting Grace: Remembering Catholic Childhoods*.

Teaching Memoir

Once you're up to speed on some of the latest writers of memoir, begin to consider some of the implications for teaching this popular, emerging genre. They are many.

Studio: We have found a studio approach to teaching memoir writing to be particularly effective. We lead students to write a series of short memories, and then ask them to find a way to connect some or all of those writings into a longer, more detailed memoir.

Triptych: We have also found success using the triptych form as a structure for pulling together three memory-based writings. When Ken Brewer, the current Poet Laureate for the state of Utah, and Bill Strong at Utah State University introduced Dan to the possibilities of the triptych form for writing, Dan immediately linked memoir and triptych. Like triptychs in art, which means literally "three panels," triptychs in memoir are three pieces of writing that the author juxtaposes to make a statement about his or her life. Possibilities for memoir triptych include an anchor piece and two smaller, supporting pieces; multiple stories in which the same artifact reoccurs; and multiple personae of the writer.

Author Studies: Because many artists, poets, and well-known writers are trying their hand at memoir, excellent opportunities for Author Study projects abound.

In an Author Study, students read and discuss multiple works by one writer in order to discover the writer's stylistic devices, typical themes, and other common elements of writing that occur across genres. The following are some of our current favorites for this project in order to pair memoir with another genre:

—Jimmy Baca: *A Place to Stand* (memoir) and *Black Mesa Poems* (poetry)

—Gregory Orr: *The Blessing* (memoir) and *The Caged Owl: New and Selected Poems* (poetry)

—Oliver Sacks: *Uncle Tungsten* (memoir) and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* (non-fiction clinical case studies)

—Elie Wiesel: *All Rivers Run to the Sea* (memoir) and *Night* (non-fiction account of holocaust experiences)

—Bobbi Ann Mason: *Clear Springs* (memoir) and *Zigzagging Down a Wild Trail* (short story collection)

—Michael Ondaatje: *Running in the Family* (memoir) and *In the Skin of a Lion* or *The English Patient* (fiction)

These works are for mature and perhaps sophisticated readers. Naturally, as you are selecting the readings and writing activities for any work with and by your students, you'll want to screen the works carefully and select materials that are appropriate for your teaching situation and students.

Some Final Thoughts on Memoir

What we've tried to do here is to provide you with a brief overview of memoir, both as genre and as an option for teaching. We like memoir because it is a large, inclusive framework that gives us the opportunity to work with our students as readers and as writers.

Memoir offers possibilities for in-depth literary study and analysis and for connecting literature to personal experience through writing. We've worked with this genre for nearly twenty years and find it to be still engaging, versatile, and dynamic. We encourage you to explore memoir with your students.

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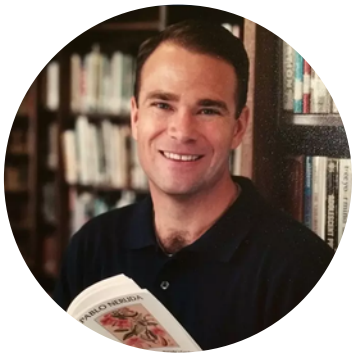
Fences

DAVID ROWE



David Rowe taught at Cherry Creek High School when he submitted this piece to *Statement* for our memoir issue in the 2005-2006 school year. He won the Bill McBride Writing Award for the best teacher writing for *Statement*, 2005-2006. David continues to teach at Creek.

Fences never stopped me.

Wood slat, chain link, barbed wire -- it made no difference: fences were my trusted companions. They were my step ladders, my playground equipment, my launching pads. As a fearless six year old, I knew nothing of barriers and boundaries and borders. I knew trampolines and trapezes and tree forts. Fences existed for my entertainment and recreation, enhancing rather than enclosing my expanding existence. I had never met a fence I had not crawled or climbed or conquered.

That is, until fences became deadly.

My world without limits started to collapse the day my mother warned me about a new kind of fence, one with electric current surging through its wires. "These electric fences are very dangerous, David," she said, looking me dead in the eyes. "If you ever touch one, it can kill you."

It could not be true. Beyond the occasional splinter or scratch, I believed fences to be utterly harmless. They were nothing like scary monsters or speeding cars or that blue stuff in the bottle under the sink -- those were the dangerous things. Fences were entirely different. Fences were my friends.

For weeks my mother's words haunted me, hovering around me as I played near

my house, making me suddenly cautious and hesitant in the world I had previously roamed imperiously. She had said that if you listened carefully, you could tell an electric fence because it made a humming sound. Instead of leaping ferociously onto fences as I once had, I would stand paralyzed near any suspicious barrier, holding my breath and listening for the quiet hum of death. I never thought I heard the hum, but I usually backed away from the fences carefully rather than taking a chance; after all, dying seemed to be about the worst thing that could happen to you.

As the days passed and I failed to discover even one certified death fence, I regained some of my old adventurousness. Some days I would forget my mother's warning entirely, pouncing eagerly on anything that stood in my path. But as any parent will attest, you should never forget your mother's advice.

One sweaty summer day I left my mother's words behind as my best friend Paul and I walked out of my backyard and across the corn field that stretched toward the mountains. Paul was always an eager accomplice, and we had watched as the field became more and more alluring as the corn grew higher and higher. That day it was nearly up to our shoulders as we darted in and out of the rows, hiding from and catching each other, moving farther and farther from my house. As our spontaneous game of tag became more competitive, I discovered a successful strategy to avoid being caught. I would duck my head and cross over several rows of corn before dashing full speed down a corn corridor, never lifting my head above shoulder level as I ran. Certain I had left Paul far behind, I felt the giddy thrill of victory as I flew through the stalks and ears.

I never saw it coming.

It was only two wires, one at my ankles, one at my chest. By the time I saw the top wire -- too late! -- grabbing onto it seemed my only option, a reflex more than a decision. But before I could vault over the almost invisible line, I felt a shocking surge, a surging shock. My entire body froze, my hands gripping the wire in an involuntary contraction. And then my body recoiled, falling back into the field of com and dirt. A low hum hung in the air. Shock waves raced through my veins, and my brain registered the most terrible truth: I had touched an electric fence. I was going to die.

Paul found me lying on the ground, a mass of despair. I could not hold back the sobs, but I could not find the words to tell my friend that I was going to die. I ran wildly toward my house, husks slapping my skin and tears blurring my vision.

When I threw open the back patio door, I wanted my mother to rush to me and scoop me up in her arms, holding me as the world faded to black. I wanted to tell her that I hadn't meant to touch the electric fence, that I was afraid to die. But there was no one to witness my agony and distress; I stood alone in the silent house, listening to my breathing become slower and slower. Then I heard the low whisper of music coming from my mother's basement sewing room, but I no longer wanted her comfort or protection. A realization rose within me: I would need to face my death alone, with bravery and strength, like my heroes on movies and television.

Resolved to die like a man, I retreated miserably but noiselessly to my bedroom. I sat on the edge of my bed, trying to feel the beginning stages of death in my body. My foot felt numb -- is that how it starts? Then a tingling in my arm -- is that what's next? I was sure my pulse was weakening. I knew I could not lie down, because if I fell asleep, I would never wake up. And who wants to die without even knowing it? I propped myself against the wall next to my bed and tried to feel the clock ticking inside me: would I make it to dinner, which was still several hours away?

The knock on my door jolted me back into awareness, and I looked frantically at the clock on my nightstand. It was 5:30. Had I fallen asleep? Or was I almost dead? My mother's voice asked me where I had been, told me that dinner was ready. I mumbled that I was coming, and she retreated to the kitchen. I felt my limbs, my lungs, my heart -- I knew I didn't have much longer to live. I thought about how awful it would be to die at dinner, food on my plate and my parents watching on in horror. Would I slump slowly to the floor, my parents sitting helplessly as I waved my napkin in a final surrender? Would my face suddenly pitch forward into my meatloaf and mashed potatoes as my parents gasped in disbelief? I decided I couldn't face such an undignified conclusion. So I stayed in my room, thinking I might die before they came to call me a second time, which would save all of us the pain and sadness of a death at dinner.

But when my mother knocked at my door again, I began to cry out loud, and she heard me. She rushed into my room, putting her hands on my shoulders and asking me what was wrong. I didn't want to tell her--I didn't want her to be mad at me for touching the fence, I didn't want her to be sad that I was going to die--but her voice was so warm and nice, and she was my mother, after all. So I told her everything--that I touched an electric fence even though she told me it could kill me, that I could feel death coursing through my body, that I didn't want to die at dinner. She started making a sound that I thought was crying,

and I saw tears in her eyes. But then I realized she wasn't crying at all--she was laughing. And I didn't see why me dying was all so very funny, so I started crying even more.

And then I heard her saying the same words, over and over again. "David, you are not going to die." What she was saying sounded impossible, and I reminded her that she had said touching an electric fence would kill you.

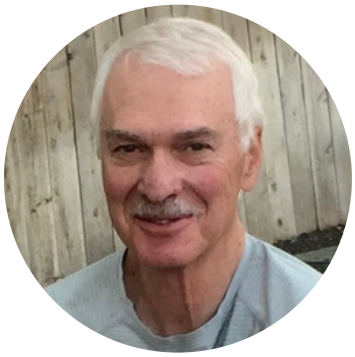
"It would have killed you right away, honey," she assured me, holding my head against her shoulder and stroking my hair. "It can only kill you while you are touching the fence."

It took even more convincing before I mostly believed that I wasn't going to die that night. Hours later, stuffed with meatloaf and potatoes, I was still afraid to let myself fall asleep. I lay in bed, feeling for even the slightest spark inside me, convinced I could defeat sleep just that one time.

And then it was morning, the sun streaming through the crack in my curtains. I was awake and alive, but somehow my life would never be the same. More fences were waiting out there, some of them humming with danger, and I would never roam the world so freely again.

Finding the Courage to Teach: A Memoir and Review

ALAN OLDS



Alan Olds taught English in Jefferson County for years, taking a few years break to work at the Colorado Department of Education as head of language arts. He returned to teaching in Jeffco and was a teacher/consultant for the Colorado Writing Project. When he retired, he and a buddy traveled to every major league baseball field for a game and a hot dog and to see the sights and drink the local beer. Now Alan loves to fish, travel, read and write, and he volunteers his time helping others.

The smell of snickerdoodle cookies baking. Standing on a chair, I get to roll out the next dollop of dough which my grandmother spoons onto wax paper on the Formica-topped kitchen table. Rain drums against the kitchen window. The warmth of the oven swells into every corner of the room, and we go about our baking, barely conscious of the dreary winter monsoon. Grandma cuts cookies with an inverted glass, and I lift them onto the cookie sheet with a spatula.

"Sing it again," I say. And we begin."A-B-C-D-E-F-G" breath "H-I-J-K-L-M-N-O-P" breath "Q-R-S-T-U-V." She taps my nose with her arthritic forefinger, syllable by syllable, so that U gets three beats. "W-X-Y and Z. Now I know my ABCs, next time won't you sing with me."

"Sing it again," I implore.

Before we are teachers, we are learners who fall in love with our subject.

Singing the alphabet with Grandma on a rainy California morning, sitting in my mother's lap listening and reciting along to *The Little Engine That Could* (I think I can . . .), "reading" the funnies with my dad—my teaching life is grounded in moments like these when language and communication intersected with love.

A part of what moved me to choose teaching as a career was the joy I had experienced as a child learning to read and write, surrounded by family and

friends who took an interest in what I had to say and who told me their own stories. Like countless teachers before me, I stood before my first class of students 30 years ago, knees shaking, wanting most of all to see those adolescent faces in front of me shine with the same pleasure of reading a good book, of having a good conversation. I never would have said so at the time, but I was extending an invitation to them: Join me as a member of the literate community. It was the same invitation I had received from all my "teachers"—parents, relatives, friends, authors, and educators from kindergarten to graduate school who guided me along the literacy trail.

Many of the writers and pioneers in literacy education who have shaped my professional life—Nancy Atwell, Donald Murray, Linda Rief, Lucy Calkins, Neil Postman, Tom Romano, Penny Kittle, Ralph Fletcher—extend the same invitation. I turn to their books and ideas time after time, often for techniques that I can apply to my teaching, but just as often for words of inspiration and wisdom. For, as every teacher quickly learns, it's about more than technique. Technique without passion leads to routine, detachment, frustration, even anger and despair.

Parker Palmer describes our passionate beginnings in his book *The Courage to Teach*. "Many of us became teachers for reasons of the heart, animated by a passion for some subject and for helping people learn" (17). We start out loving what we do.

Palmer portrays good teaching as coming from "the identity and integrity of the teacher" (10). For teachers of language arts this identity is inextricably intertwined with our personal literacy histories. When I first read Palmer's book, I found myself thinking about the relationship between my life as a teacher and my growth as a literate person. What did my own teachers do or say that prodded me towards literate adulthood? How have these same experiences shaped my teaching?How can I have the courage to stay true to my literate self?

Palmer lists six components of a journey towards courageous teaching. I suspect that many of us who chose to become teachers of language arts have followed and continue to follow a similar path, as we find the courage to teach.

1. Stay in touch with the impulses within us that connect us to our students and our subject.

For Christmas when I was twelve, I found under the tree the usual clothes and

a new knuckle scrubber from the Fuller Brush man plus a book and a gadget or two. And a diary. The five-year daily entry kind with a faux red leather cover secured by lock and key. I lost the key to my diary within a week but discovered on my first attempt how easy it was to pick the lock with a hairpin or paper clip. I scribbled a few mundane entries for a month and sporadically afterwards for several years: Rain today. Piano lesson. Went to the Dills for dinner. Won at Pinochle.

My mother wrote in a similar diary every night at the kitchen table, sometimes after dinner or often right before she went to bed. She was the secret Santa who bought and wrapped my diary, which came with no instructions, consistent with her Midwestern reticence. Despite her dislike of long explanations and emotional appeals, she unambiguously communicated what was on her mind with an oblique candor that made it virtually impossible for her to hide what she was thinking or feeling. In the case of my diary and her own example as a diarist, the message was clear: Write! Write every day. There is value in recording even the little events of your life.

When she died, my brother and I discovered a trunk full of her diaries. She had written something every day of her adult life from 1926 to 1988.

Reform movements in education, according to Palmer, often dwell on questions of what, how, and why. What should we teach? How can we teach it well? Why are we teaching what we do? He proposes a deeper question, the "who" question. "Who is the self that teaches?" (4).

Palmer put together a profile of that teaching "self" by asking students for years to describe their good teachers. He found a common thread among their portrayals of the best: ". . . a strong sense of personal identity infuses their work" (10). By contrast,"bad teachers distance themselves from the subject they are teaching—and in the process, from their students" (11). Good teachers love to teach because they possess "a capacity for connectedness.They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves" (11).

Teaching methods varied widely among the good teachers that students described. Some lectured, others questioned, some used rigorous laboratory investigations, while others engaged in creative problem solving and even "creative chaos" (11). But in all cases their teaching selves were a direct reflection of their overall "identity and integrity." Identity is described by Palmer as "my

genetic makeup, the nature of the man and woman who gave me life, the culture in which I was raised, people who have sustained me and people who have done me harm, the good and ill I have done to others and myself, the experience of love and suffering--and much, much more" (13). He defines integrity as the "wholeness" that a person is able to find, the "life-giving ways of relating to the forces that converge within me" (13). While those qualities may seem abstract, in practice they mean that what we share with our students must derive from the "authentic me," a person with an evolving history who seeks ways to bring teacher, student, and subject matter together.

When I think of my mother's gift of a diary, or the dimes my brother and I got to spend on one comic book apiece on our weekly downtown shopping trips, or family games of Scrabble at the kitchen table, I recognize some of the forces that formed my own identity as a teacher and literate person. At my best as a teacher, I offer these same gifts to my students.

2. Face head-on the fears that distance us from ourselves, our students, and our subjects.

I had never written anything more painful. Twenty-five rambling pages of autobiographical distress. The professor had been even less helpful on this assignment than on others in his creative writing course. Write an extended piece. Due Friday. That was it.I didn't have the emotional energy to write "an extended piece." It was my senior year in college. I was getting married in two weeks. Maybe a month separated me from a tour of duty in the jungles of southeast Asia if my draft board denied my conscientious objector petition. I faced decisions far more perilous and complex than anything I had encountered in my mostly comfortable middle-class life.

Finally I just started writing. About music and books I liked. About facing the draft and getting married. About Buck Owen's autograph at a Fillmore concert. No editing, no revising, just spilling my guts on yellow newsprint, my writing paper of choice at the time.

I picked the paper up from the professor's mailbox the day before I left for Colorado to join my bride-to-be. There was one comment in the margin about Buck Owens and a C+ grade at the end. Beneath the grade, the professor scrawled, "So what?"

My university professor, whether in the rush of grading finals or from an inability

to read between the lines of my autobiographical wailing, failed to hear my voice. All quarter he had shown little interest in anything most of us wrote, preferring only the couple of students who dabbled in satirical fiction, his genre of choice. The rest of us didn't fit into the figurative "box" that delimited acceptable writing. In the competition that he fostered among us, we knew that the winners would be those who imitated the master, not those who ignored or challenged him.

I recall even now, thirty years later, the sense of dread I felt when I submitted my writing to him. From his responses to each assignment, I learned to anticipate a few sarcastic comments about my word choice or lack of focus. Or, as on the final paper, I might be denied any acknowledgement at all. I literally feared what I would find when I got my papers back.

Not until I became a teacher of writing myself did I ever consider what might have shaped my professor's behavior. Perhaps he was like many teachers who fear, according to Palmer, a "live encounter." And so they find ways to keep their distance. Palmer notes that many people, teachers included, "fear encounters in which the other is free to be itself, to speak its own truth, to tell us what we may not wish to hear. We want those encounters on our own terms, so that we can control their outcomes, so that they will not threaten our view of world and self" (37). Teachers hide behind "their podiums, their credentials, their power" (37). No wonder, then, that students hide behind their notebooks.

Another way that teachers and students (and parents and politicians) mask their fear is to hide behind the "pretense of objectivity."Students say, "Don't ask me to think about this stuff—just give me the facts." Teachers say, "Here are the facts—don't think about them, just get them straight" (38). For teachers this attitude can spring from our incessant struggle against the forces in education that distance us from ourselves and our students—grades, departments that fragment fields of knowledge, competition that makes faculty and students wary of their peers, and bureaucracy that pits faculty and administration against one another (Palmer 36).

But, says Palmer, we cannot allow these externals to determine our lives as teachers. "Educational institutions are full of divisive structures... but blaming them for our brokenness perpetuates the myth that the outer world is more powerful than the inner" (36). I see now that my professor was as afraid of me as I was of him. I feared failure, ridicule, being exposed as less clever and glib than my classmates. He, I suspect, feared students who challenged his prejudices

and perhaps also feared that he lacked the tools to explain the craft of writing to bumblers like me, whose pitiful, plotless stories needed more work than a 12-week class permitted.

3. Think beyond simple polarities and embrace paradox, so that we "think the world together."

The Sears book-of-the-month had arrived. You Were There with Genghis Khan and the Mongol Hordes. *I tore into the cardboard mailer and carried the book directly to my bedroom.*

I read it straight through, as I always did when a new book-of-the-month was delivered. This wasn't like last month's book on Clara Barton or the one from the month before about Abe Lincoln. No hero tales here. No nurses caring for the wounded or ambitious farm boys reading by firelight. This was a story about ruthlessness and ambition, treachery and intimidation. How could Khan give a ruler his word that if allowed into the walled city he would spare the lives of its inhabitants, and then turn around and murder the royal family and household and plant their heads on stakes at the city gates? Why would someone write a book about this? What was I supposed to think?

Through the open bedroom window I could hear the neighborhood kids organizing a wiffle ball game, the familiar practice swings of the plastic bat slicing through the summer air. I adjusted my pillows and started at the beginning of the book again, certain I had missed something that would explain the barbarian.

Real life is complicated, paradoxical. To make it manageable we simplify. But that simplification has consequences for how we make sense of the world and for how we come together as a community to solve its problems. Palmer points to our Western tendency for thinking in "polarities, a thought form that elevates disconnection into an intellectual virtue" (61). Instead of seeing a spectrum, we block out contradictory information and reduce choices to "either-or." I experience this every time our department gets together over the issue of the day—portfolios or grading or budget. One side of the room argues for a single set of strict guidelines while the other insists that we need the academic freedom to do our own thing. Allowing the conversation to explore other options feels too much like defeat, and so we stick to our guns and battle over the same territory, year after year.

Polarities determine the landscape of our thinking about many issues in education: phonics v. whole language, rote memorization v. problem solving, student-centered v. teacher-centered classrooms, and so on. Even those who advocate a middle ground, like "balanced literacy," sometimes resort to the rhetoric of divisiveness, chastising colleagues for failing to follow their example, dismissing other risky alternatives that might, after all, be the best course of action.

Once when Palmer was lecturing about the fear that kids bring with them into the classroom and how it interferes with learning, a faculty member responded, "So you want us to stop being professors and become therapists" (64). That was not what he wanted, but either-or thinking reduced a complex issue to simple opposites in the mind of that listener. Palmer responds: "Behind the critic's comment is a trained incapacity to see that heart and mind work as one in our students and ourselves. They cannot be treated separately, one by the professor, the other by the therapist. When a person is healthy and whole, the head and heart are both-and, not either-or, and teaching that honors paradox can help make us all more whole" (64).

Palmer recommends that classrooms be places where paradox is encouraged, not ignored. He lists six paradoxical tensions that he tries to build into his teaching and learning space -- that it should be bounded and open, hospitable and "charged;" it should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group, honor the "little" stories of the students and the "big" stories of the discipline and tradition, support solitude and surround it with the resources of community, and welcome both silence and speech.

Teachers of language arts would seem to be ideally suited to handle paradox, since our subject is grounded in literature that resonates with ambiguity. So why do we sometimes practice a "culture of disconnection?" We do this when we tell students what a poem means, or limit discussion of literature to only the themes that we have chosen. Our classrooms should be places where students associate with paradox in productive ways. Thank goodness, this willingness to honor the complexity of a text and reader responses to it has been validated by Rosenblatt and others, who have connected the reader back to reading, despite forms of literary criticism that place the text in some far-off realm of inviolable separateness. Books live in the hearts and minds of readers, and anyone who has reread in her 40's a book she enjoyed in her teens knows that a book's impact depends on the reader as much as on the words of the text. "Meaning" resides not in some rigid list of truths, but in the web of relationships among

author, text, and reader.

When I encountered Khan as a preteen, I knew that there was more to his story than I had been able to grasp. I had no frame of reference for understanding tyrants, but there are sadly preteens who do. What I needed was someone to talk to who could have helped me to comprehend a broader view of human nature. Now, when my students read, I work hardest at helping them to connect with a text as part of a community of learners, where we honor both what the author has created and our responses to it, our questions and our understandings, not just one thing or the other.

4. Recognize connectedness.

I had to connive to teach As I Lay Dying *(one of the sacred texts reserved for AP students) to my "regular" juniors in American literature, ignoring lamentations from the department chair about "appropriateness." But, we made it through, poring over each chapter like a puzzle, fitting the pieces together to figure out who these odd and interesting people were. To make them approachable, students created products based on Faulkner's characters and delivered a sales pitch to the class.*

"The Addie Bundren Doll. Comes in her own coffin-shaped box, body positioned head to toe, complete with wedding gown and breathing hole. Collect the whole Bundren family and play "I've got a secret" to see if you can guess why Jewel doesn't look like a Bundren, what Darl does on breezy summer nights, why Vardaman loves fish, whether Anse will get a life."

Laughter and learning make good companions.

An odd thing happened in that junior class. My role as an English teacher up to that point in my career had been the "sage on the stage." Perhaps because Faulkner is difficult and certainly because *As I Lay Dying* ranks as one of my favorite books, I knew from the outset that I would have to approach it differently than I had previous novels. One of the great pleasures of reading Faulkner lies in discovering something new every time you return to one of his stories. It was that pleasure of discovery that I wanted my students to experience, even as first-time readers, so I knew that I would have to get them engaged with the book if they were to experience the delight of unraveling its language and ideas.

In a crude way I stumbled onto a new relationship among myself, my students, and our subject. Sharing our understandings of a challenging text led to something approximating what Palmer defines as the heart of teaching: "To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced" (90).

Truth is a slippery word. As Palmer notes, it has become unfashionable to speak of truth in an age of overwhelming amounts of information, much of it contradictory and antagonistic. But he contends that if we are to create a "community of truth" we must discard the dominant model of truth-knowing and truth-telling, which is grounded in objectivism (100) and pursue a community of truth in which a subject resides at the center of collegial inquiry.

Objectivism starts with the notion of objects that reside "out there" somewhere, pristine in physical or conceptual space, such as the "facts" in a given field (Palmer 100). It is the role of experts to know these objects, a feat they accomplish in graduate school, "whose purpose is so thoroughly to obliterate one's sense of self that one becomes a secular priest, a safe bearer of the pure objects of knowledge (Palmer 100). Amateurs (i.e. students) depend on these experts to give them glimpses of the facts, without allowing the amateurs to taint truth with subjectivity (i.e their own responses to the facts).

Contrast that with a pursuit of truth that begins with the idea of a subject around which people in a given field gather, "guided by shared rules of observation and interpretation" (Palmer 102). All of these truth seekers are free to examine the subject and also free to express their observations, as well as to listen and respond to observations from others. Something different happens in this form of learning because "a subject is available for relationship; an object is not" (Palmer 102). Or as Palmer goes on to explain, "As we try to understand the subject in the community of truth, we enter into complex patterns of communication -- sharing observations and interpretations, correcting and complementing each other, torn by conflict in this moment and joined by consensus in the next. The community of truth, far from being linear and static and hierarchical, is circular, interactive, and dynamic" (103).

For Palmer and any teacher who creates a learning community with a subject at its center, "truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline" (104). Things that matter have a life and power of their own, far beyond our arrogant insistence that we can "know the world perfectly or... invent the world at will" (109).

5. Put the subject at the center of teaching.

A week before our new interdisciplinary technical writing course was to begin, the electronics teacher and I were pretty smug. We'd finished writing the WordPerfect instruction manual that we planned to use the first two weeks to familiarize our students with our lab's new computers. As a bonus, we felt we were "experienced" technical writers now! But, the day before school started an updated version of the software arrived and everything we had written no longer applied. What to do?

The usual teacher response popped into our heads first. "We'll be up late tonight and for the next week rewriting the manual." But then we remembered that we wanted our class to be about problem solving and communication. "Why not have the kids write the new manual?" suggested my partner, Dick.

So our first assignment was for students to write instructions for features of the software. Each student team selected a section of the manual to research and distill into a classroom friendly format. In one week, we had a new manual. More importantly, students had taught themselves how to use the software as they were writing instructions for the manual.

"My mother just paid $300 for a class on WordPerfect," one student told us. "And all she did for ten weeks was sit in class with her hand up, waiting for the instructor to get to her. In one week I learned more than she did because every time I had a question one of my partners was there to help me. And I had a job to do, so I had to teach myself."

Tremendous pressures exist in education for teachers to "cover" their subject. Fact-laden courses of study smother students in so much information that they come away confused and overwhelmed, or, if lucky, they remember just enough to pass the exam and move on to the next deluge of facts. I recall shutting the blue book at the end of three-hour exams in college, walking to the student union for a cup of coffee to rescue me from my exhaustion, and being unable to recall exam questions an hour later.

Palmer argues that teaching in a way that brings students into the "circle of practice in [the] field" (122) and spending more time on less -- teaching from the microcosm—results in a space where the community of truth flourishes. If that is our goal as teachers then we know that we "need to spend less time filling the space with data and [our] own thoughts and more time opening a space where

students can have a conversation with the subject and with each other" (120).

This does not mean that students will learn less. Actually, they learn more. Palmer cites the example of a medical school which worried that although its graduates knew the facts in the conventional curriculum, they were increasingly unable to keep abreast of new knowledge in the field, which often looked much different from what they had learned in their traditional medical education (124). In response, the dean and his allies redesigned the curriculum so that on the first day med students gathered in small groups around live patients with real complaints. Their job was to diagnose and suggest treatment for what they observed. Each new lesson started with the same scenario—real patients with real maladies.

The school put an authentic subject at the center of the classroom. And from this subject, this hub of the wheel of learning, students went out to libraries, to lecture halls, to seminars, workshops, and labs to practice skills and acquire information that would make them better at the central task of their profession (126). As a residual benefit, graduates improved bedside manners and developed a better sense of medical ethics.

Detractors predicted poor performance on standardized professional examinations. The opposite occurred. Test scores rose steadily. Students appeared to be getting smarter, faster (Palmer 127). As Palmer notes, "the human brain works best with information presented not in the form of isolated data bits but in patterns of meaningful connection, in a community of data, as it were" (127).

6. Converse with our colleagues

He didn't want to be there in the first place. His principal had ordered him to teach a freshman writing class, but he wanted to stick to theater classes. He was being forced to teach writing, so he came to the Writing Project reluctantly.

"It's just easier for me to say it. I never write. I'm not a writer, I'm a talker." On and on he went. When it came time to conference with me about a topic for his first piece of writing, he started the same litany of complaints and objections. After some time spent getting to know each other, we negotiated a possible topic. He had an autistic son who wore a hat everywhere, even to bed. He and his wife had to periodically face the problem of replacing old worn-out hats

without upsetting their son, who could not tolerate changes in routine. Could you write about that? I asked.

Sure. He wrote a one-page description of sneaking into his son's room in the middle of the night, switching hats, and waiting anxiously at the breakfast table the next morning. His son rose all smiles until he looked in the mirror, and then pandemonium. It's just your Taz hat, explained Dad. You know your Taz hat? And somehow everything returned to normal, until the next switch.

When he read his piece to his workshop group, there were tears and lots of praise for the powerful scene he had created. Slowly he joined in the morning discussions, each day contributing a bit more. On the eve of the last class he announced, "You know, you people have convinced me I can write, and I even think I might be able to teach someone else to write."

The saddest moments in my professional life are those spent with colleagues who have given up. My heart turns to lead when I hear capable, bright teachers moan that the "system" doesn't support them—classes are too large, dollars too scare, time too limited, kids too unprepared. So many impediments to good teaching make best practices impossible, they complain.

A part of the problem lies in the isolation that comes when the bell rings and the classroom door closes. Other than a few words at lunch time or in passing on the way into or out of the school building, teachers rarely have an opportunity to talk with one another. I remember traveling several years ago to a regional inservice day at a consortium of rural schools, where I had been invited to present information on portfolio assessment in three consecutive mini-sessions one afternoon. Judging from the number of teachers at the inservice (about 200) and the number of presenters, I planned for about 20 or so teachers to attend each session. At the first session three teachers showed up. At the second there were two. Before I started the second presentation, I looked out in the hallways. They were packed with teachers in animated conversation with each other.

"What's everyone doing in the hallway?" I asked one of the brave souls who had chosen to attend my presentation.

"Just talking," she said. "We never get the chance to see each other when we're in school."

As Palmer says, "If we want to grow in our practice, we have two primary places to go: to the inner ground from which good teaching comes and to the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft" (141). In my own career, working with the Colorado Writing Project, attending regional language arts conferences, going to the Fall NCTE convention—these professional gatherings have given my teaching a shape and vitality that it could never have assumed had I stayed in my classroom, door shut, year after year.

But even among conference attendees I hear grumblings about having to "go back to school" where professional conversation is not valued, where opportunities for teachers to talk with each other are seen as unnecessary or even counterproductive. Palmer summarizes the problem: "Good talk about good teaching is unlikely to happen if presidents and principals, deans and department chairs, and others who have influence without position do not expect it and invite it into being" (150).

We can be those "others who have influence" that Palmer talks about. Above my desk for years I have posted a quotation from *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White, which also appears in *The Courage to Teach*:

"The best thing for being sad," replied Merlin . . . "is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins . . . you may see the world around you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds.There is only one thing for it then -- to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you" (183).

Teaching demands courage, not just to face a classroom full of students, but also to advocate for time and resources that will create spaces where we can learn from and support each other. We have to call on the strength of our teacher's heart to connect with each other so that we can fight for the kinds of practices that we know optimize teaching and learning. As Palmer concludes, "If I care about teaching, I must care not only for my students and my subject but also for the conditions, inner and outer, that bear on the work teachers do" (182). Our literate lives depend on it.

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Learning the Writer's Craft Through Literature

MARY ADLER

Mary Adler is a former middle school teacher and was a doctoral student at the University at Albany, State University of New York, where she was a research assistant at the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement when she wrote this piece. She is now Chair and a professor of English at California State University Channel Islands.

It must be a near-universal experience among English teachers at some point in our careers: we are attempting to facilitate a discussion of symbolism or structure or foreshadowing in a piece of literature, when a student raises a hand and stops the conversation by asking, "How do you know the writer meant it that way?" This resistance is curious, perhaps frustrating, but not unexpected—students so rarely have the opportunity to see into the mind's eye of the writer that they may be suspicious of inferences we make. Yet we regularly expect them to make inferences about texts, to recognize unusual and often beautiful features of language, and to appreciate the effectiveness of certain literary techniques. We want our students to become able readers. One way to do this is to invite them to become writers.

I have been immersed in classrooms where students write for over a year now, observing and talking to and learning from high school seniors as they pursued electives in creative writing. I have discovered that literature in creative writing classes is used in a very specific and focused way: to teach the craft of writing. Consequently, students are asked not only to read like writers, but also to be writers. In exploring these two practices, I'd like to suggest that they need not only be confined to electives, for they have much to offer the mainstream English classroom as well.

Reading Like Writers

Louise Rosenblatt talks about reading in terms of two stances. One she calls efferent, or reading for informational purposes. You may take an efferent stance when you read this article—reflecting on and analyzing what you read in order to see what useful information you can bring away from the text for you and your students. The other she has named aesthetic, which represents the pleasurable literary experience to be enjoyed and appreciated during the reading activity (*The Reader, the Text, the Poem* 22-47). At a recent speaking engagement, Rosenblatt emphatically pointed out that these two stances are not opposites, but, rather, exist on a continuum—though you may read this article primarily for informative purposes, you may also enjoy the language and appreciate the rhetoric (18 April 2000). My notes from the speech point to her larger argument: "Students need both to be able to have experiences and to reflect and analyze these emotions, to consider the justification of the writer in evoking them." In other words, in a democracy, an educated citizenry needs to be able to protect themselves from propaganda and manipulation by understanding the source of the emotions and pleasure they gained from the literature. This is precisely what writers do when they read: *enjoy a text*, *then go back and figure out how the writer did it*. Did the writer use language to evoke pleasure, like D.H. Lawrence? To create a mood, as with Edgar Allen Poe? To initiate action, like Rachel Carson? To lull the reader into complacency, while shocking things are going on "off-camera," like Flannery O'Connor?

In order to read like a writer, then, students not only need to appreciate and enjoy a piece of literature but also be able to read it in a particular way. In an article titled "Reading Like a Writer," Frank Smith explains that this form of analysis is somewhat like prediction: "To read like a writer we engage with the author in what the author is writing. We anticipate what the author will say, so that the author is in effect writing on our behalf, not showing how something is done but doing it with us" (563-4). Or, as a teacher in my study, Jewel, explained to her class: "Read the story on a different sort of level. You're not reading it for the story itself-analyzing it-but really looking at the craft elements that are being used by the author and what the author accomplishes" (28 March 2000). This perspective translates, in individual questions, into a view of the writer's mind. Students are asked to consider the text as the result of a series of choices the writer has made. In questions ranging from the whole text to sentence-level details, teachers focus students in on facets of the text that are rarely accidental but instead point to the writer's skill, experience, and unique voice. [See Figure 1 for a selection of these questions that have been organized by topic and collected in a bulleted list].

But helping students to learn the writer's craft from literature is more than simply refocusing their perspective. As Smith has pointed out, it's about expectation and invitation:

There is not much opportunity to read like a writer when we are totally concerned with the act of reading, with getting every word right, or with trying to memorize all the facts. It does logue. And, interestingly, one student felt uncomfortable "rewriting someone else's story," indicating that for him at least, gaining entry into the writers' club would take more time (28 March 2000).

What We Can Learn about Literature from Writing

In several presentations earlier this year, I talked about some of these early results with mainstream teachers of English. Some teachers expressed interest in adopting more of a writer's stance toward literature but were naturally concerned that students who write, say, a point-of-view piece would not learn as much about literature as those who write straight literary analysis. In response to these teachers, I offered some of the gains suggested in the sections above. And while the research in this specific area is limited, some broader studies of writing in the classroom suggest that while the focus in creative writing activities may be slightly different, the learning remains.

Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer, for instance, studied the role of writing in learning across school subjects, and found that it plays a major role. They discovered that the more you manipulate content, the better you remember it and understand it. However, they also found that learning through writing is specific to the task: we learn about the particular parts of the text that we focus on when we write. This suggests that creative writing can be a useful activity to help students learn about literature in ways that are specific to the craft of writing.

On an aesthetic level, students who regularly engage both in reading like writers and becoming writers may be more aware of certain features of literature—such as diction, dialogue, or tone-because their experience has given them first-hand knowledge of the challenges of writing powerful prose. Elliot Eisner suggests that awareness itself has powerful benefits: "It is necessary to hear the melodies of language in order to use language in graceful and informative ways" (33). And finally, in addition to growing as writers and gaining a more meaningful connection to the text, students who learn to pay attention

to craft gain a knowledge base that lays bare the tricks of the trade. To return to Rosenblatt, behind every text is a writer's motivation to create an effect. As skilled and perceptive readers, students are better able to both respond to that effect and to recognize its source. As skilled and perceptive writers, they can then respond to the text in an appropriate and necessary way.

Note: All student and teacher names in this paper are pseudonyms.

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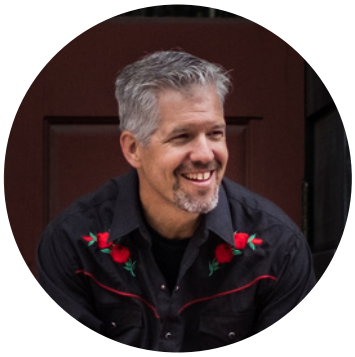
A Conversation Between Three Literacy Educators

KAREN HARTMAN, ERICA REWEY, JAY STOTT

Karen Hartman has been the director of the Colorado Writing Project (CWP) for more years than she remembers. CWP helps teachers to become better teachers of writing and better writers themselves. She is a retired high school English teacher. Her main goal while teaching was to make her students life-long readers and writers.

Erica Rewey taught reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking (English) at Palmer High School in Colorado Springs, CO when this was published. She is now a teacher at Village High School in District 20, Colorado Springs. She enjoys the outdoors, photography, and camping and fishing with her two sons and husband.



Jay Stott likes teaching literature and writing for the same reason he enjoyed being a guide in Alaska. You don't always know where you are, and you don't always know where you are going, but the journey is always interesting. He still teaches at Fairview High School in Boulder, but rumor has it he is retiring at the end of the year.

From the editor (Sarah Zerwin was the editor at the time this was published): Here I present a conversation between three literacy educators from Colorado. As explained in the previous issues of Statement, inspiration for this regular feature came from a conversation on the pages of *Adolescent Literacy: Turning promise into Practice*, a recent book by Kylene Beers, Robert E. Probst, and Linda Rief. Beers, Probst, and Rief argued that they wanted not a co-authored chapter by three national leaders in literacy education, but "something that suggested the starting and stopping, the rethinking, the interrupting, the contradictions (of self and each other), the hesitations, the silences, the rush of ideas, the spontaneity of the moment that comes when you put three very bright, very passionate, very dedicated teachers into one space" (105). That's what I am going for here. Teaching literacy is complex, and I hope that these ongoing conversations between Colorado literacy educators (and the occasional guest from the national stage) will capture that more effectively than anything else.

For this issue, I recruited three Colorado educators who I knew (either based on my own interactions with them or based on recommendations from others) would have compelling things to say about the need for teachers to tell their own stories. To these three educators, I posed several questions. They each responded to the questions via email and then had the opportunity to read and respond to what the other two had said. What follows here is the resulting conversation.

Editor: What do you think is the dominant story that society tells about schools, about reading and writing, about teachers? And where do you think this story comes from?

Erica Rewey: Our schools are failing because our test scores are not rising. Students don't see the value in reading anything longer than a text, nor in writing anything longer than a tweet. Teachers are lazy, overpaid, and hide behind unions. These are the types of headlines that catch a reader's attention, that make us shake our heads and click our tongues and say,"What's happening to public education?" The media uses stories of a few bad apples and unfairly generalizes our schools, our students, and our fellow teachers—and well-intentioned people who aren't actively involved in the public school system believe them. When was the last time a member of the community, a parent, a politician sat in on one of my classes? In fourteen years of teaching, I can tell you exactly—never. So the story that's being told about our failing schools isn't being told from within the classroom walls

Karen Hartman: You are so right, Erica. Too often we are so busy going about the jobs of teaching, planning, grading, attending meetings, writing curriculum, hall and playground supervision, testing, and calling parents to attend to our own stories. So, instead we hear our stories from the voices of those who would like to privatize education, those who want to make money educating kids, those who use us as part of their political agenda, or those who have good intentions but just don't know what it is like to teach in today's world. That is why we have to take the time to tell our own stories—those are the stories that will help shape the public's perception of education and teachers.

Unfortunately, too often politicians, businessmen, the media, and educators with an agenda, tell the public that our schools and our teachers are failing. They talk about test scores in writing and reading and yet seldom mention the teachers who go to work every day with too many kids in their classrooms, too many students who live in poverty and come to school hungry and sleepy, too many kids from broken homes, and too many kids who have learning disabilities. They fail to mention those teachers who work in run down buildings and who don't have enough books or supplies. They also fail to mention just how many of our young live in poverty. Poverty is a national disgrace and must be addressed before many of our school age children will have the resources and the simple necessities to be successful at school. I get tired of hearing that poverty is no excuse. Have these folks ever tried to learn on an empty stomach or with little sleep because they were watching their brothers and sisters through the night while mom worked a second job or third job? Have they tried to learn even though their family is homeless or their parents have kicked them out of the house?

These people, who think they know how to educate young people because, after all, they went to school themselves, often dictate programs that have nothing to do with what educators know about engaging and motivating students. But, they are so sure these programs will get better test results. They are sucking the joy out of learning and teaching and not addressing the needs of our students.

Erica: Karen's right when she says, "These people, who think they know how to educate young people because, after all, they went to school themselves, often dictate programs that have nothing to do with what educators know about engaging and motivating students." And yet, just because I've been to the dentist doesn't mean I'm qualified to make decisions on their behalf about what's best for their institution as a whole. But, that's just what most of our politicians are doing on behalf of public education.

Jay Stott: I think Karen has hit something really important. While there has been concern about education from many angles historically, there is now an "agenda" underneath certain strains of that concern. Sadly, the agenda is a commercial one, and the stories that get told often serve to amplify this agenda.

The overall narrative is that our public schools are a failing institution. Considering how long this has been the narrative it can't possibly be true, but it dominates the discourse. As far as any story that articulates something about reading and writing, most stories I am familiar with follow what I will call the "heroic teacher" narrative in which a teacher overcomes obstacles to help students read or write. The obstacles are usually external, not internal. In other words, we get very little articulation about how reading and writing actually happen, just how students and teachers overcome external obstacles (poverty, culture, institutional structure, the student's own lack of desire, etc.) to learn.

I think this story is at its heart, the narrative we (we being humans) like. Heroic individual overcomes external obstacles and self-doubt to help others achieve a worthy goal. It has a captivating power to it. As a story-oriented creature, we gravitate towards stories that cast our avatar (the protagonist) in an heroic light (unless you are feeling postmodern, where the story gets its power from violating that tendency, and so confirms the tendency as our narrative "center of gravity").

Karen: I wrote about this idea in the *English Journal* a few years ago. *In Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, Jonathan Kozol tells us we do not need to hear only positive. He tells us we are tempted to focus only on the success stories because they console us and tell us there are good things that happen in our schools. He would agree with you, Jay, that the public likes to hear about the heroes, but he would also tell us that it doesn't take a hero to tackle the issues we see in our schools. I think it takes dedicated, passionate teachers who are willing to go to work every day and face those problems you mention above. These are the stories we need to tell, along with the stories about our successes.

Editor: How close to reality is this dominant story?

Jay: About as close as an episode of *Law and Order* is to describing the everyday lives of police officers and attorneys, which is to say, not much. But the disconnect is exactly the same. The truth is that the everyday lives of attorneys and teachers are not particularly interesting. Mostly competent people go about

the work for which they were trained, doing a better or worse job than the day before. Repeat. Not much story there. In fact, I've just described most human experience. ALL stories that have any captivating power at all live at least somewhat outside the 'normal' context of their subject area. This is true in fiction AND journalism. We rarely see plots or stories about purse snatching in the headlines or on TV. Yet crimes of this type dominate the lives of criminal attorneys and police officers. In fact, all the "Law and Order" franchises have to keep coming up with even more outrageous plot lines to keep us interested. These stories rarely show, except in the briefest of snippets, the day in, day out drudgery of doing the job.

In the same way, the day in, day out work of teachers does not make for great drama, though it does make for great education.

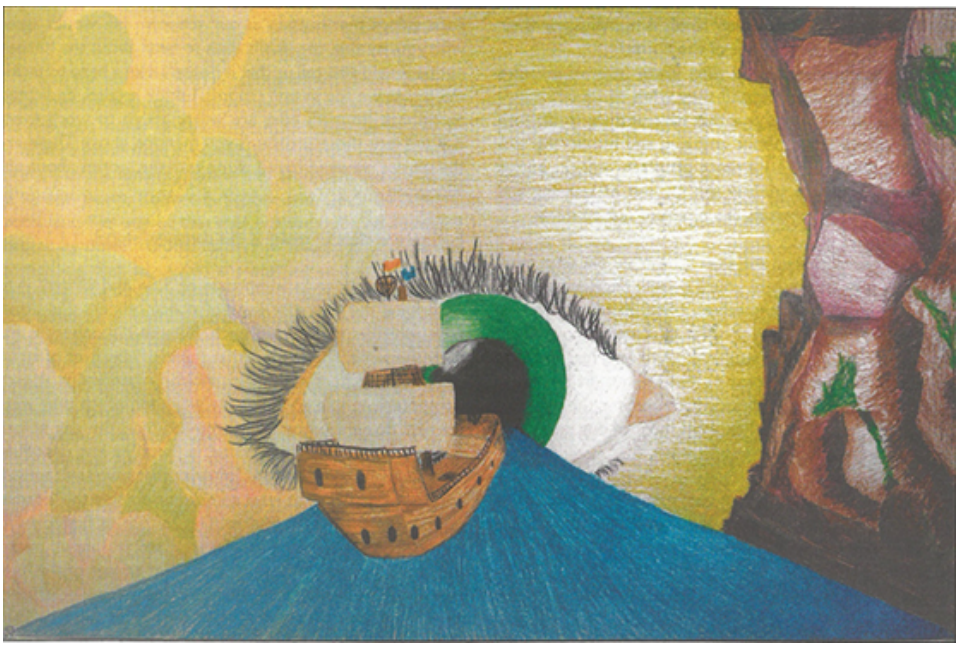
Erica: And just like a TV show, there is so much going on behind the scenes of teaching that many people just don't think about. Like a good TV show, there are hours of planning and staging and imagining and re-imagining and trying and failing going on BEFORE the actual production. The teaching part is often the most fun and rewarding part, but it can't happen without the research, the lesson plans, the calls home to parents, and the grading and providing of feedback on student work. "Teaching" isn't the half of it!

Karen: Jay is right—Hollywood glamorizes or demonizes our profession, and they make it seem as if kids need a hero to succeed. I think all of us would agree we aren't heroes, but we have all helped our students become better readers and writers and thinkers.

Erica: The dominant story, in my own experience, is lightyears from the reality of my classroom and school. Yes, we're struggling to get students' scores to improve from year to year, but we know that's only a sliver of a way to measure a student's success in our class. Can I measure a student's ability to read with a multiple choice test? To some extent. Can I measure a student's ability to write with a multiple choice test? Not hardly.

My students read a variety of texts, from blogs to poetry, from Shakespeare to Twilight. They read voraciously and for fun. Sometimes, during our extended learning periods, they beg me for more reading time." Can we read for 20 minutes today instead of just 15?" they plead, using the same voice they'll use on their parents on Friday night, trying to extend their curfew.

And they write every day. They write about themselves, they make connections between texts, their own experiences, and the wider world. They write to inform, to persuade, and to help their readers see the beauty in a world that sometimes seems oppressive and scary. And they don't just write essays. They write poetry, and creative nonfiction, and blogs, and newspaper articles, and journal entries.



They write for a variety of purposes, a variety of audiences, and they write to discover their own voice in the world.

In my first year of teaching, I made the mistake of adding up the hours I worked per week, including grading, planning, prepping, and teaching, and calculated my hourly wage. It was far less than minimum wage. And in that moment, I realized that it didn't really matter. I love what I do, and to do it with any less zeal just because of my salary would be to punish the students—the whole reason for teaching in the first place. Teachers work hard, and not just during the teaching part. We spend hours planning units and lessons. We spend more hours grading papers and giving students meaningful feedback so they can improve. We spend our "summers off" attending conferences and Masters Programs making sure we've got the most up-to-date and effective teaching strategies for the next school year. And most of these hours are spent at home, before and after the school day. Teaching is a 24-7 job.

Jay: I agree with Erica here, that what my students are doing is not 'failing' in any way. They are bright and enthusiastic and can compete with any students in the world (and do!). Over and over again the 'failing schools' narrative is driven

by a very distorted view of one sort of data—test scores. Not only are, generally speaking, test scores not my favorite barometer of success, we know from looking at disaggregated NAEP data that even on that basis schools are not failing. The more accurate narrative is that schools are struggling to mitigate the effects of poverty and class with scant resources. Schools in affluent suburban areas are doing, generally, fine. One story not getting told is that we are the only country in the western world facing widespread poverty in the way we do.

That said, I try to show my students that tests and grades really aren't a measure of success anyway. The things that are worthwhile can rarely be quantified so simply. Some numbers (and letters) data are useful, but they are never the end-all be-all.

Karen: I believe we can do better at teaching reading and writing and yet I also believe too often our failures come from what is forced on us from the federal and state government, from school boards and administrators—who all feel the pressure to get higher test scores. I believe teachers work incredibly long hours doing their best to meet state and federal mandates, to meet district and school demands, and to encourage a love of reading and writing in their students. The disconnect comes because those who criticize don't have a clue what it means to go to work every day and be responsible for 30 fourth graders or 150 high school students. They don't have a clue what it means to try and respond to student papers, plan, attend meetings, respond to parents, and also worry about whose couch Johnny is going to sleep on tonight.

Editor: How do you think the dominant story out there about schools, about reading and writing, about teachers helps (or not) to support students in schools?

Erica: The dominant story—that teachers and schools are failing their students—definitely undermines the entire process. When students hear that public education, or their school in particular, is "failing," they've got much less incentive to do the hard work.

Karen: The dominant story doesn't support students. Too often administrators believe the hype that teachers aren't knowledgeable about curriculum so buy them a program—a program that too often doesn't consider good pedagogy or student learning. Teachers don’t need programs; they need the best professional learning possible. They need support from their administrators to

make sure teachers get that professional learning. Students need the very best trained teachers we can find!

The dominant story is test-driven. Though it is important to know where kids are and where we need to take them, teachers are being asked to teach to the test way too often. Our students aren't learning the critical thinking skills they need to be productive in society—they are learning to take tests.

Jay: I think casting the teacher in the "heroic" mold does our profession a disservice. Reading and writing are technical skills, about which we understand a considerable amount. Trained professionals (teachers) are able to do excellent work with a wide variety of students, but it is work, not magic. It takes long term commitment on the part of students, teachers, families and communities. While there are 'heroic' moments, most of the time it is the day in, day out work that does the trick, work informed by specialized skill and knowledge in the hands (or head) of a trained professional. Expecting only heroic moments in education is like expecting heroic moments from your tax attorney. I don't need the person who helps me with a tax matter to be heroic; I need him to do his job well. We need to stop expecting our teachers to be 'heroes' and stop talking about them in that way. We need them to be competent professionals, which I think most of them are.

Editor: What can teachers do to make sure the story being told about their work is an accurate reflection of what they do?

Karen: Teachers need to tell their own stories and the stories of their students. We need to be honest about our challenges and how we meet them. We need to be honest about what we need from politicians, school boards, administrators, and the public. By telling the stories of our students and our own stories, we can help others see the challenges and the joys that meet us each day at our classroom doors.

Erica: We need to tell the stories of our classrooms, our students, our profession, and our school communities. We need to stand up for each other and what we do. We need to find ways to make our voices louder than the ones who are dominating the narrative now, using only numbers and data generated from standardized tests given once a year to determine the effectiveness of our job. There is so much more to teaching and learning than can be measured by that one test.

Jay: I think that is tough. We can tell stories about what teachers really do every day, but I think those stories will be about as compelling as stories about what tax attorneys do every day. Not everyone is Erin Brockovich. Nor do we want everyone to be. I think the "heroic" narrative does everyone a great disservice. It paints an inaccurate portrait of what teachers really do. It fails to illuminate what the actual work of teaching looks like. It reinforces the narrative about 'failing schools: and, I think it relieves our society of thinking seriously about the problems we do have in education. If all we need are more "heroic" teachers, then we commit energy to finding heroes—a resume that's difficult to discern. If we look at education in the same way we look at lawyers, then when there are problems in the system we might approach the solutions differently (it occurs to me that I should ask some lawyer friends if they feel they suffer in the same way, but I never expect "Law and Order" histrionics from the people who help me with my taxes or with a real estate transaction).

If there is to be a "counter-narrative," I think it will have to be about those forces that are encroaching on education and what they are doing. The story of how I make progress with my students in reading and writing is compelling only to the students and myself. Frankly, that should be enough, though I know in this politically fraught world. It is not.

Karen: Jay, I think there is room for all kinds of teacher stories. I agree that we have to tackle the "forces that are encroaching on education," but I also think we need to share our stories and our students' stories to a public that really doesn't understand what we do on a daily basis. I remember sitting at a dinner party with friends—6 teachers and a doctor. That doctor said, in front of us all, "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach." What? Really? I doubt if the man would have survived an hour in my reading classes with kids I adored—kids who were never easy but who always made me laugh, made me cry, made me figure out ways to reach them. So, yes, we do need to attack those forces that are dragging us down: politicians, publishing companies, businessmen who want to profit from education, and "do-gooders" who don't have a clue. But we also need to address those who only want what is best for their children, their grandchildren, and for America's children. They all need to hear our stories.

How have you changed as a teacher over the course of your career, and how has teaching changed you? (question from Erica)

Erica: When I first started teaching middle school Language Arts fourteen years ago, I established myself as a no-nonsense teacher who expected that every

child would walk into my classroom prepared to learn. No name on your paper? No credit. No pen to write with? Borrow one from a neighbor. I had high expectations for my students, and many of them rose to those expectations for behavior. Looking back on those first few years of teaching, I realize those little battles took up a lot of my teaching time. Over the course of fourteen years, I've learned to raise my expectations for their learning experience. My own experience has taught me that many kids who walk through my classroom door are woefully unprepared to learn. They're teenagers, and their minds are often on the social dynamics of the thousand other kids in the halls. Some of them have difficult home lives and come to school hungry and tired. Some of them struggle with writing but excel in math. As a teacher, I've learned that empathy is a powerful tool. No name on your paper? Whoops. Put your name on your paper so that I can give you meaningful and personalized feedback. No pen? There are some on the supply table—go ahead and borrow one. Removing the barriers to learning means that everyone has opportunities for success in my classroom.

In my first few years of teaching, I was barely aware of the impact I might have on my students' futures. I was trying to get them through eighth grade Language Arts and to recognize the parts of speech. In recent years, I've become much more aware of the larger role I'm playing in their lives: writing them letters of recommendation for college, being invited to their weddings, attending their funerals. Teaching high school students is less about standing up at the front of the room, throwing them information. It's much more about forging collaborative relationships with young people and empowering them to be critical consumers of what they read, see, and hear, and coaching them to find their own voice in the world. Teaching is about relationships.

Karen: In 1969, as I began my teaching career, I promised myself my students would learn to love reading. And, I promised myself that I would find texts they wanted to read. Without much YAL and with lots of trial and error, I was able to get many of my students reading, sharing, and loving it. I wasn't as successful with writing; I cringe when I think of some of the things I asked kids to do. When I took the Colorado Writing Project in 1987, a light bulb went on! I learned about both reading and writing workshop and my teaching changed dramatically. I was no longer the "sage on the stage" but became the person in the room who got things rolling and moved aside so my students could learn. I discovered the importance of choice in not only reading but also writing, plus I learned how to confer and to respond to student writing. I learned that the workshop approach was successful with my reading classes and my

sophomores, but it also worked with the college-prep classes I taught and with my I.B. classes. As a teacher of teachers, I have learned humility—working with so many talented, passionate Colorado teachers has been an amazing opportunity for me.

Teaching has given me so much joy. I loved my students and my colleagues, and I loved learning. I discovered early on if I was going to be a successful teacher I also had to be a life-long learner. What a gift that discovery was for me the teacher and the reader and the writer! I believe teaching gave me the appreciation of diversity, of culture, and of young people who struggle through adversity with strength and grace. I'm sure teaching has made me into the liberal, feminist old lady I am today. I want each of my students and my grandchildren to live in a world that is just and caring and that believes in social justice for all of humanity. I want each of them to have equal opportunities for success and for a quality education. I believe teaching has taught me that teachers have to fight to make sure our students have the opportunities they deserve. So, we come back to stories. Teachers need to tell their stories and their students' stories so that our communities know what is important. We have to be tough in this time of anti-teachers, anti-education, anti-unions. We can be the power that makes the difference!

Jay: Well, I hope I've changed a lot. I resonated with what Erica and Karen said above. I fought a lot of battles in the name of "excellence" in the first few years that were in hindsight, unnecessary. I really try to focus on the kids in front of me today. What do they need today to get a little better at reading, writing, thinking! I don't seek big breakthroughs anymore—though when a student has one I am happy to celebrate that moment with him or her. I spend a lot more time just connecting with kids now, showing them that I care about who they are, not their grade or score.

Penny Kittle says, "Teachers make the difference, not tests. What power-what opportunity-lies in our hands." She goes on to say, "Because I know this, standardized tests will not rule my world. Politicians will not tell me how to do my job." I would like to know how teachers can grab that power and do what is best for their students. (question from Karen)

Karen: I think one way we can grab that power is to make sure we know the recent research in the teaching of reading and writing, and that we stay on top of best practices. We have to show that we can get great results without programs and formulas and test prep every day. We have to know what is best

for our students and be politically active. We have to be the best we can be. Telling our stories and the stories of our students can help us grab that power. Our voices must be heard.

Jay: I've been so fortunate in where I teach and who I work with. We have been encouraged in innovation and experimentation. I agree with what Karen said; it helps when we really understand the state of research in our field. I speak with more authority now than I did ten years ago precisely because I am armed with knowledge. And I think we, as a profession, have to engage the larger discourse, whether you blog, as I do, about education, or attend meetings with elected representatives, or educate your neighbors while standing in the grocery line, we have to make space to tell these stories.

Erica: Teaching and learning is so important to me that I won't do it if it means undermining my students' ability to learn and grow. In my first year of teaching I told myself: I'm going to do what's right for my students, even if it means I'm unpopular with my colleagues and my administrators. We have to stop being afraid of "what might happen to us" if we don't ram test preparation curriculum down our students' throats.We have to focus on what will happen to our students if we continue to practice pedagogy that we know doesn't work just because it's popular.There's too much at stake.

Editor: Tell us a little story from your teaching life, a story that you think helps the world to understand the work you do.

Erica: When I was at a former student's funeral this summer, one of the parents overheard me introducing myself to someone else. Later, she scolded me: "Please don't ever tell people you were just his teacher. What you do is so much more than that:" That still makes me cry.

Karen: Yesterday I went into a 9th grade classroom in DPS and helped one of my CWP participants introduce memoir. We spent a great deal of time finding good mentor texts. Watching his students so engaged in the reading and then hearing them cheer for the slam poet Daniel Beaty made all that time well worthwhile! Teaching is so much about finding what engages and motivates kids and what can make them think and learn.

Jay: I show up every day and try to be present for my students. I have accumulated considerable knowledge about the work I do, and I do my best to use it in the best way I can. If it doesn't work today, I'll be trying again tomorrow. If there is any magic, it comes from that.

ELA in the 21st Century: Stories Will Keep us Human

PHILIPPE ERNEWEIN

Philippe Ernewein wrote this while he was the Dean of Faculty Training & Development at Denver Academy. He is now the Director of Education at Denver Academy. He recently edited and translated poems of the Belgium poet Willem M. Roggeman, called *What Only Painters See*, available at bamboodartpress.com. Philippe's other published works and training videos can be found at rememberit.org.

"Sun come up it was blue and gold
Ever since I put your picture in a frame."
-Tom Waits,"Picture in a Frame" from *MuleVariations*

A good friend of mine and fellow educator, Matt, recently shared a story that brought my mind and thinking right back to the language arts classroom. Snap. This often happens, a curse, or a blessing perhaps; I leave the classroom at the end of the day, but the classroom, and my students, don't seem to leave my mind. Matt's story resonated with me. It was a reminder of a critical ingredient that we as educators need to make sure we include in our recipes of lesson plans and unit organizers.

Matt found an old typewritten letter, more than twenty years old. It was written to him for his 21st birthday by his father, now many years deceased. The faded letter spoke of life transitions: seeing his son moving into adulthood and lamenting the opportunities he felt he missed as a father who traveled for his work. His dad also wrote of specific examples of the magical times they did have together.

He told Matt how proud he was of him as a son.

Matt had long forgotten about the letter, tucked away in a shoebox with relics from college. He threw out the old notes and papers from school, but he kept the letter; his wife put the letter in a frame.

After reading the letter myself, it was clear to me that the contents, the message contained in the letter, is a vital part of Matt's story. It is part of the fabric that makes up his character. This is part of the story that cannot be downloaded.There are no zeros and ones that will replicate this story for infinity. The letter is one of one. Authentic. Original. Real.

These are the descriptors I want my students to use when they talk and think about their own writing.

And my mind turns back to the classroom and specifically an idea that I learned about from Marshall Ganz, a lecturer at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Ganz has written extensively about the power and importance of story. He has even gone so far as to say that those of us in public work, like teachers, have a responsibility to offer a public account of who we are, why we do what we do and where we hope to lead. Matt's framed letter and the words of wisdom it contained would be a great starting point for him to think about his public story, his teacher story.

Ganz writes, "Some people say, 'I don't want to talk about myself; but if you don't interpret to others your calling and your reason for doing what you're doing, do you think it will just stay uninterpreted? No. Other people will interpret it for you" (Ganz).

While Ganz is thinking here in the framework of leaders and politicians, the connection to teachers is easy to make. Teachers are the instructional leaders in their class room; they are actively involved in public work.

Ganz's recipe for this public narrative starts with the Story of Self. He explains the importance here:

You have to claim authorship of your story and learn to tell it to others so they can understand the values that move you to act, because it might move them to act as well.

We all have a story of self.What's utterly unique about each of us is not the categories we belong to; what's utterly unique to us is our own journey of learning to be a full human being, a faithful person. And those journeys are never easy.They have their challenges, their obstacles, their crises.We learn to overcome them, and because of that we have lessons to teach. In a sense, all of us walk around with a text from which to teach, the text of our own lives (Ganz).

The text, the content that each of us walks around with, is of course vast and diverse. It is left up to the individual author to decide what that public narrative will include. He proposes a simple series of questions to start the thinking for the *Story of Self*.

- Identify a challenge you've encountered in your life.
- What were the choices you made when you were faced with this obstacle?
- What were the results?

For Ganz the *Story of Self* is the first of three components, the other parts are *Story of Us* and the *Story of Now*. The *Story of Us* can best be summed up by asking the question,"What experiences and values do we share as a community that call us to what we are called to?" I have found that successful classrooms often capture these *Stories of Us*, perhaps without specifically naming them as Ganz does. There are classrooms I've observed, from elementary to high school, that not only acknowledge the collective group, but also find ways to celebrate the diverse backgrounds, interests and readiness-levels found in each classroom. That's the *Story of Us*, focusing on similarities and common experiences held by a group, in the case of teachers, our classrooms.

In explaining the third part of the story cycle, Ganz writes, "After developing our *Stories of Self*, then we work on building relationships, which forms the Story of Us. From there we turn to strategizing and action, working together to achieve a common purpose, learning to experience hope--that's the story of now" (Ganz).

I have also seen examples in classrooms where teachers are able to capture the *Story of Now*; their students are acutely aware and invested in the challenge and wonder of the content they'll be learning and grappling with. To borrow from Wiggins & McTighe, these classrooms are engaged with seeking answers to the essential questions and creating frameworks for enduring understandings. Because the instructional leader of the classroom has set the purpose and created connections beyond the walls of the classroom, the students sense the urgency and importance of the now.

The *Story of Us* and *Now*, however, are difficult to reach without first authoring the Story of Self. This demands reflection. It implores that we step off the merry-go-round of the everyday routine and pause to interrogate ourselves with these questions. Authoring our own stories will help us maneuver through the bombardment of images and stories in media that report on what teachers are

supposed to be and do.

I firmly believe that carving out this time to reflect and think about matters of the soul, ideals and our purpose is a necessary component of effective professional development. Along with other key training in our content area, technology and strategies, composing our Story of Self will make us better teachers (or possibly highlight that we have selected the wrong profession).

Over the summer the teachers at Denver Academy had the assignment of composing their Stories of Self. During our first week back of professional development training teachers shared their stories. It was a powerful and invigorating activity. The stories we shared mattered; reading the stories in small groups felt like a sort of sacrament. Bonds and partnerships were established or strengthened between teachers. Some teachers brought in artifacts like pictures or objects to supplement the sharing of their stories.

The seeds that were planted at the beginning of the year during the training are starting to take root across campus. A number of teachers brought this idea back to their classrooms and assigned similar writing for their students. In conferencing with a number of students it was clear that the assignment was having a similar and powerful impact, but in a slightly different way. For the students I met with, their writing evolved into their *Stories As Learners*. They identified challenges they had encountered while learning or in school, wrote about the choices they made and the outcomes that resulted from those decisions.

During a writing conference this morning with Jackson, an 11th grader, he asked me if being called "lazy, crazy and stupid" in elementary school constituted a challenge. I said it did and asked him to elaborate. He went on to say that he wasn't diagnosed with dyslexia until 9th grade and wanted to write about that as well."I think if my 4th grade teacher knew I had dyslexia, maybe they would have been able to teach me better." Our conversation turned to advocacy, learning strategies and even forgiveness. Jackson said he doesn't hold a grudge against his 4th grade teacher;" I wasn't the easiest kid to have in class back then."

Jackson wasn't writing about his summer vacation or an essay illuminating the themes he found in his summer reading (although both types of writing may have their place); his writing and thinking was real. It involved heavy cognitive lifting. His reflection amazed (and I told him so).

The Story of Self provided a framework, a way for him to archive his specific learning experience. I could never have specifically assigned Jackson to write and deeply reflect about his 4th grade experience, but the questions Ganz offers act like a roadmap that can help move students toward starting to draft their own stories. And after they've found the words to shape and tell their stories, I firmly believe our students will have a stronger sense of who they are as learners and individuals.

With *Stories of Self* intact and in-draft, we could even reach out to the tools of digital media to help us tell the story.

So what does the *Story of Self* have to do with navigating the 21st century digital waters that seem to be ever-present and ever-growing? I believe that stories will help keep us human; our stories are reminders that not everything we need to know can be found by the right combination of words in a search engine.

"I love you baby and I always will
Ever since I put your picture in a frame."
-Tom Waits,"Picture in a Frame" from *MuleVariations*

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Ethan

PENNY KITTLE

When she wrote “Ethan,” Penny Kittle was a professional development coordinator for the Conway, New Hampshire, School District. She had written *Public Teaching: One Kid at a Time* (2003) and *The Greatest Catch: A Life in Teaching* (2005), and co-authored with Donald Graves, *Inside Writing: How to Teach the Details of Craft* (2005), Since then she has written *Write Beside Them* and *Book Love*. She also co-authored with Kelly Gallagher, *180 Days and Four Essential Studies: Belief and Practices to Reclaim Student Agency*. Penny now teaches freshman composition at Plymouth University in New Hampshire. Her latest book, *Micro Mentor Texts*, published by Scholastic, is just out. Penny is also the president of the Book Love Foundation.

Abstract

In her class a quiet young man chooses to write about a difficult personal topic. The author shows how giving kids the chance to write about what matters to them is at the crux of best practice in writing instruction.

As I moved from student to teacher, I came of age in classrooms, realizing things about my own abilities and limits, my talent and fragility, the interplay of understanding and uncertainty that defines teaching, the sheer hard human work of it.
—Mike Rose

From the first day of class in September he interested me. He sat in the front row, slouched low in his seat with his baseball cap shielding his eyes. He wore a clean and pressed button-down shirt most days, an atypical teenager. He never spoke to his classmates unless I forced him to. He wouldn't meet my eyes, although his warm mid-western accent drew me near. He wrote of his mother's

boyfriend that he missed, a man who had attended his baseball games his whole life, and he wrote of flying back home, 2,000 miles west, on his birthday this winter. He was filled with longing, but he never complained. He'd been sent out here to straighten up under the care of his father, he said. I didn't ask what he'd done to deserve it; in some ways I didn't want to know.

Sometimes Ethan would stay after class to talk about his writing. He needed help; the errors were complicated. Most of his writing was distant and detached, but Ethan spoke lovingly of the baby brother he'd met here in the east. They were pals. Ethan was gentle and silent, and he cared deeply about his brothers. Outside of school he worked 50 hours a week, every week. He couldn't get involved in clubs after school, or help out with the yearbook, or stay for tutoring. He had to get back to work. He was on at 5 a.m. for the breakfast shift, but he never lamented his hard life; he swallowed it and kept working. I handed back his drafts with suggestions, and he read my comments and tried again. Every time. Ethan was diligent, but joyless, so I watched him closely.

The heat of September turned to the brief magic of a New England October and into the cold, blustery brown of November, pre-winter. I was in the lunch room when Ethan approached with a smile to toss his trash in the bin beside me. He said, "Mrs. Kittle, do you think you could get me another writer's notebook? Because I left mine at my house, and I can't go back there."

"Of course. But why can't you go back there?"

"Well, my dad couldn't quit beating me up, so they said I can't live there anymore." He said this as if reciting the facts of the Civil War: just battle statistics, ma'am, don't be alarmed.

"Are you okay?"

He smiled. "Yes, I'm fine now, Mrs. Kittle."

"Really?" I whispered, trying not to leap too far ahead to years beyond when these images will still wake him in the middle of the night. "Do you need anything?"

"No, just a writer's notebook." Another shy smile.

"Yes, of course. I'll have one for you in class tomorrow." He ducked his head and

walked back to his seat. His elbows on the table, he knit his hands together and watched the clock, waiting for study hall.

I surveyed the room and swallowed hard. Stunned and angry, I didn't know what to do. Finally I went to sit beside him. "Ethan, I can't quit thinking about you. I just need to know that you have a place to stay."

He smiled. “I’m living with our neighbors. And my step mom is great, she would let me live with her if she could, but until he moves out, she can't. See, they're getting a divorce, so that's probably why he was hitting me. She brings me lunch money and stuff."

"Ethan, anything you need, you let me know. I mean it. I always have money if you need lunch. If you need school supplies, you let me know."

"Thanks, Mrs. Kittle, but I've got a new job at the mall. My dad never paid me for working at his restaurant, but now I'll have some money of my own. You know, somebody called from the restaurant; there was an anonymous call to the police. When they came and asked me about the hitting, I told them everything."

Thank God.

“I’m glad someone called, Ethan," I manage. "Yeah," he says, "he punched me in the face when I forgot the home fries on an order."

My hand trembles as it rests on the table beside me.

"I'll be okay until I go back to my mom's," he says, offering something to make me feel better. Still no rage, just resignation. You can't beat the goodness out of some kids.

After lunch I went to our guidance director. She knew the details and could confirm that Ethan was safe. I asked if he could go back to his mom now and finish his coursework through the mail. Impossible. If he wanted to graduate with his class in the spring, he'd have to stay until the end of the semester for the credits. Some things make absolutely no sense in school.

I was drawn back to the cafeteria, knowing Ethan would be there for study hall. He was sitting exactly where I'd left him, watching the clock.

"Ethan," I said, "you didn't turn in the most recent essay in class."

"Yeah, I know," he said, "I don't have anything to write about."

I waited.

Silence.

"It seems like you've got quite a story."

His eyes widened. "Yeah," he said, rising to his feet, "can I go to the computer lab?"

I went by a half an hour later. Ethan's screen was filled:

The abuse was not that bad at first, people would come up and tell me how that he was just taking his anger out on me and that I really had not done anything wrong. I mean even today he tells people that he was just doing what he thought was right. He thinks by beating the crap out of me for no reason it somehow helps me. I mean when your own son is scared to go anywhere with you or to bring friends over to the house, because his father likes to make fun of him and try to make himself look better than everyone else, something is wrong.

He'll need to write this again, of course. He'll likely write it hundreds of times. He'll write that experience into his relationship with his younger brother. He'll tell that story to his own children some day. He'll live his story every day for more years than we'd like to believe. But I believe if he can write about it, he can learn to live with it.

Ethan came to see me on his last day of school. He was nervous about the plane trip, and he wanted to say good-bye. I asked him to stay in touch, and he promised he would. I hope I'll get a graduation announcement in June. But here's what I hope even more: his mother will be waiting at the gate when his plane lands; she'll wrap him in her arms; she'll take off his hat to run her fingers through his hair and meet his eyes with hers. I hope she will love him fiercely and completely, so that he can begin to heal.

Craft Lessons from the writing of "Ethan"

Ethan was a student who haunted me. I couldn't seem to let him go, even months after he had left our school. I decided to write that moment in the cafeteria because it was so vivid in my mind. I pay attention to details when I feel overloaded emotionally. Writers notice: that is one thing I teach my students in every genre. And whether it is a fractured relationship or losing a pet, I tell them to first write a moment they remember with intensity. That often leads them to the rest of what they want to say about the topic. Topics are always too big, and there is too much to say; scenes or moments are the first steps that get us moving.

I wrote this piece a bit fearfully. Ethan's father still scares me. It felt risky writing this, but writing allows me to share what I feel, what I grieve, what I celebrate, line by line as I am ready to experience it again. In writing I slow down time and absorb all the emotional intensity I've been carrying from an experience, with a bit of distance that comes from narrating a story. I think we all need that. My students have written many troubling things, but they often say the writing itself is therapeutic.

I know what mattered here for Ethan. He wanted to write this story, so he gave it his full attention. The writing was challenging, but it wasn't work. Ethan wrote feverishly for days. He hadn't done that all semester. Don Graves said in *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (1983) that we won't have to 'motivate' students if we let them choose their topics. He says, "Many eight-and nine-year-old children can do extensive revisions of a single selection, rewriting well over six to eight drafts to get information the way they want it. Children write this many drafts because they have taken control of the writing process. They are writing to find out what they mean for themselves" (9). I am determined that every one of my students will experience the rush of wanting to write, wanting to revise until the story is right, at least once during the semester. I anchor my teaching philosophy in choice because I know how much it matters to me as a writer.

Writing was the only place Ethan could tell his story and maintain control of it. When he told it to the police, they removed him from the house. When he told it to his mother, she cried, and he worried about her. On paper it was all for him. He decided what to share and how. Every writer should have that experience; we should let them.