

# Empowering Students as Readers and Writers:

*making connections,  
finding relevance,  
fostering independence*

2009 Professional Writing Retreat Anthology



**CWP<sup>3</sup>**

*Connecticut's National Writing Project Sites*

University of Connecticut, Storrs **Fairfield University**  
Central Connecticut State University

# Empowering Students as Readers and Writers:

*making connections,  
finding relevance,  
fostering independence*

**2009 Professional Writing Retreat**  
June 24-27

**Editor: Jason Courtmanche**  
**Layout and Assistant Editor: Shawna Lesseur**  
**Copy Editor: Benjamin Miller**



# Contents

---

<b>Dedication</b> .....	1
<b>Retreat Participants</b> .....	2
<b>Preface</b> .....	4
<b>Retreat Writing</b> .....	7
“Last Day” by Denise Abercrombie, CWP-Storrs .....	7
“Rekindling the Joy of Reading In and Out of Your Classroom” by Joe Anastasio, CWP-Storrs .....	13
“A Window Pane on Dwindle Pain: Rediscovering Publishing Centers in the Elementary School” by Lynda Barrow, CWP-Storrs.....	21
“Deinstitutionalizing Writing: Making Reading and Writing Relevant to Undergraduate Students Studying Early American Literature” by Jason Courtmanche, Director: CWP-Storrs .....	31
“Reading: It’s More Than Calling Out Words” by Ellen Coville, CWP-Fairfield .....	39
“Five Young Men” by Andrew Neidich, CWP-Fairfield .....	43
“Barely Competent Writers as Teachers of Resistant Writers” by Dr. Steven Ostrowski, CCWP .....	48
“Writing Our Way Out of the Labyrinth: How to Use Literature’s ‘Big Ideas’ as Springboards for Student Essays” by Joanne Peluso, CWP-Storrs.....	54
From “Writing A Family: Home-School Connections that Incorporate Cultural Diversity” by Maria Truscinski and Lynda M Valerie, CCWP .....	70
“In Search of the Right Words” by Kristin Veenema, CWP-Fairfield.....	75

# *Dedication*

---

## **Retreat of the Scribes**

Some are colleagues, some acquaintances,  
some strangers,  
teacher-writers all,  
gathered on the green-hilled grounds  
of a sacred space  
to create and recreate.

Nourished on good meals, laughter,  
conversations and quiet  
--sustenance for needs  
seen and unseen--  
they share into the wine-bright night.

Together and alone, they write out  
of the labyrinth  
of ideas and aspirations  
toward new knowledge to make public  
and, with a little luck,  
toward wisdom.

*-Steven Ostrowski*

# *Participants*

---

## **NWP Professional Writing Retreat, June 24-27**

*Wisdom House Retreat and Conference Center, Litchfield, CT*

### **Connecticut Writing Project – Storrs**

**Denise Abercrombie**, *E.O. Smith High School*: Denise has taught English and theatre at E.O. Smith High School for over twenty years. She has also taught acting at the Arts at the Capitol Theater in Willimantic (A.C.T.) as well as Creative Writing and Expressive Writing in Performance at Quinebaug Valley Community College and the University of Connecticut.

**Joe Anastasio**, *Bacon Academy*: Joe is an English teacher at Bacon Academy in Colchester, CT. He attended the CWP Summer Institute at Storrs in 2008.

**Lynda Barrow**, *Annie Vinton Elementary School*: Lynda is an enrichment teacher at Annie E. Vinton Elementary School.

**Jason Courtmanche**, *University of Connecticut*: Jason has been teaching English for sixteen years. He is currently the Director of the Storrs CWP and an English Lecturer at the University of Connecticut. Before coming to UConn, he taught English at RHAM High School.

**Joanne Peluso**, *Bristol Eastern High School*: Joanne has been teaching English at Bristol Eastern High School since 2004.

### **Connecticut Writing Project – Fairfield**

**Ellen Coville**, *Regional District #10*: Ellen has been in classroom for over twenty-five years. She has taught grades seven through high school, as well as courses at two colleges, Western CT State and Norwalk Community Technical College.

**Faye Gage**, *Fairfield University*: Faye is the Director of the CWP-Fairfield.

**Andrew Neidich**, *Briggs Academy*: Andrew teaches English and mentors students at Richard C. Briggs High School in Norwalk, CT. Andrew co-founded and co-teaches a high school-college partnership academy to help bridge the gap between secondary and post-secondary schooling for students who have a history of academic failure.

**Kristin Veenema**, *Staples High School*: Kristin is an active member of CWP-Fairfield; she plans continuity events for TCs and works with students at the annual Young Writers Institute during the summer. A teacher of English, she currently works at Staples High School in Westport, CT and is pursuing a master's degree in Cognitive Studies at Teachers College.

## Central Connecticut Writing Project

**Dr. Steven Ostrowski**, *Central Connecticut State University*: Steven is an Associate Professor at CCSU, where he directs the Professional Program in English and the Central CT Writing Project. He has taught at CCSU for nine years, and has published widely in poetry, fiction, and scholarly work on literacy issues.

**Marie Truscinski**, *Wethersfield Public Schools*: Marie was a classroom teacher for sixteen years, grades one and three. She became a reading and language arts consultant in 1997 after her sixth year at CCSU. She has been working as a consultant at the Charles Wright School in Wethersfield since then. She has also served on the CRA executive board and the conference committee for many years, and taught graduate courses at UCONN, SCSU, and St. Joseph College in West Hartford.

**Lynda Valerie**, *Central Connecticut State University*: Lynda's educational career has centered on reading and writing. She is part of the graduate clinical faculty of the Department of Reading and Language Arts. She brings her experience as a reading consultant in teaching the clinical sequence courses, diagnosis, remediation, and clinical practice. She also teaches courses on literacy for diverse populations, and the teaching of writing in elementary school. Another aspect of her present position is being a director of the Central Connecticut Writing Project (CCWP), which is a site for the National Writing Project. As part of CCWP, Dr. Valerie was instrumental in starting summer writing program for middle and high school students.

# *Preface*

---

## **Empowering Students**

This was a difficult year for teachers. Budget cuts decimated our districts and our programs. Many of us lost colleagues to reductions in force, eliminated positions, and golden handshakes. Winter was long and snow days accumulated. Spring brought nothing but rain and thunderstorms, and some schools even closed for a couple of days in response to swine flu outbreaks. School years encroached upon the last days of June, even threatening in some cases to affect our sites' summer institute start dates. There were seventeen teachers from our three sites committed to our first ever Connecticut State Network Professional Writing Retreat, but several found it necessary to pull out in the days leading up to the June 24-27 retreat, leaving us with just twelve participants in the end. And several of these twelve taught right up to the day before or even the day of the retreat, but still they arrived ready to write about their classrooms and their students.

Prior to the start of our first discussion on Wednesday night, we all felt some concern about whether or not we would find a common theme upon which to base our research, our writing, and, ultimately, this anthology. However, from among these highly dedicated professionals, two important and interrelated strains immediately emerged. One was the idea that writing is how we and our students craft identity. Summarizing what I heard from the other teachers, I said to the group that identity is a continually revised narrative we tell ourselves. In the more succinct words of essayist Philip Lopate, writing "is an enactment of the creation of the self." The other related idea was that as teachers of writing we

feel the need to take risks that subvert or divert from the institutional practices (standardized testing, scripted programs, canned professional development) that we feel plague education and that threaten our ability to help students to successfully engage in this essential practice of identity creation.

Time and again we talked of students having a choice in what they read and what they write; of students being encouraged to make connections among their reading, their writing, and their personal interests; of promoting family and community literacy; of promoting writing that has relevance to personal history and to the real world; and of the personal (and historical, and cultural, and social) baggage that students bring to our classrooms. We spoke of how these life challenges can and should be engaged by our teaching and the students' writing, rather than be swept aside as irrelevant to the purposes of education and secondary to the current emphasis on assessment and data collection. Everyone spoke of the various ways they had bent or broken rules, customs, and curricula to design an interesting unit, share an unapproved text, get to know a student personally, or allow students to write about so-called taboo or ostensibly inappropriate subject matter. Many of us strove to hold back tears of love and frustration as we wrote and talked about our students and our sometimes desperate desire to reach out to them and help them to navigate the challenges of school and life. It became quickly apparent to us that our writing was itself an attempt to craft our identities as dedicated teachers willing to question, challenge, and take risks.

The pieces in this anthology are drafts—not necessarily the proverbial shitty first drafts, but drafts nonetheless. They are incomplete, fragmentary, preliminary, and tentative. They are our attempts made during a seventy-two hour retreat holed up in a rain-soaked former convent in the beautiful, but isolated, northwest hills of Connecticut to explore some of our ideas for papers

we hope to be able to publish in relevant professional journals. Enjoy them for what they are. We hope readers will find in them inspiration and motivation to bring to their teaching and their students.

Jason Courtmanche  
Director, CWP-Storrs  
Facilitator, CWP3 PWR 2009

# Retreat Writing

---

## Last Day

Denise Abercrombie, CWP-Storrs

*"Grades are structuralized violence."* —caption on a postcard

I'm ready to go home for the summer—my exams are corrected, my grades entered, my accountability slips in, my room boxed up, my desk cleared, and my computer ready for shut down mode. But first I double-check one last time that my grades are really in there. I log in and the grid comes up—empty. Just an empty gray matrix. Panic sets in, and I call Phil at IT. He confirms the dreaded fact: they're gone. They're really gone. I've been vaporized.

Yet, on another level, my fantasy has come true: grades vanish into thin air. If only I worked in a grade-less high school—a mini version of Hampshire College. But this is no private liberal arts college in the foothills of Massachusetts; this is a public high school. This is no fantasy: I'm fucked. I'm in lock down. I can't leave without having entered my grades. I look around at the white cinder block walls, the empty white boards, my broken wall clock. Old Glory in one corner, and me in the other.

In the end, grades are all that matter. Grades are evidence that I taught. Proof that they learned, or didn't learn. Grades make up cumes; and cumes make for college admissions; and college means careers, including my own. I'm like a powerless librarian shushing the masses with no grade book to threaten the non-reading world. Without grades, I'm a fairy godmother with no wand. Without grades, I'm unaccountable. My intricate rubrics, my outcome-based assessments, my data-driven instruction, have virtually flown the coop.

I've spent the weekend calculating grades—by hand with a giant calculator from Ocean State Job Lot—having resisted Integrate Pro as my on-line grade book. I've spent the better part of the day entering the grades and comments into the system aptly known as SASI.

I hate grades. I put them off to the last possible moment. When it comes to the final grades, I'm like a kid with a paper due the night before. I agonize over nines. My mentor, Harrison Nettles, told me early on in my career that there is no such thing as an eighty-nine. *An eighty-nine is an A-. That's all there is to it.* But sometimes a kid's work feels like a B+—and that's where subjectivity comes in and that's where I get in trouble and I just want to add a point or two to everyone's final average . . . . And then I feel like what I do means nothing and is a sham . . . . And then I revert to the old hard-liner school and won't budge on their number . . . . But when I see my students in the halls the next year, or wherever they pop up, I want to feel as though I've given them the highest possible grade I could conscientiously give them.

SASI has sassed back and I'm not going home for the summer. I look out the window past the football field into the green banks of sugar maples. Yes, I have all the marking period four and final exam grades recorded in my paper grade book, but all that counts are the grades in the system. I cry. I sob. I picture myself like Chief from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, lifting my bulky, grey monitor off my desk and hurling it through my second floor classroom window. A custodian on second shift notes: *The Luddite in 213 has finally cracked.* The head of IT reports into her Blue Tooth: *Monitor down in 213.*

Like McMurphy, I feel lobotomized, ready for the blank slate of summer vacation; I'll never make it to a gradeless state of mind. June has been a D—raining, raining, raining right through exams. Great teaching weather, but the garden is a swamp, and the corn will need to be replanted. The students have

been well behaved, subdued by exams and the surprising gray of June, but the weeds are wild at home.

Why is everything so complicated? Technology is supposed to make my life and job easier. So why do I feel as though I'm being tortured? So close to summer yet so far away . . . . I remember my own high school report cards and how simple and direct everything seemed. So personal. On report card day we would travel from class to class with a blank report card. The teachers would call us up to their desks and write the grade down and sign their name next to it. It was the student's responsibility to take the report card home. Each grade meant eye to eye contact with the teacher. Each signature gave the grade a certain personal touch. A certain authority. Nothing was an accident or incidental. Picture grades passing from teacher to student very much like God touching Adam's finger in the Sistine Chapel. If you failed, you endured an extra moment of hell. If you made the A, you felt giddy as an angel with newly sprouted wings.

I want to go home. With all my being, I want my grades to re-emerge. I believe in my grades . . . . I believe in my grades. I boot up the grid again and something magical has happened: there they are. I'm relieved to see all the numbers in their perfect rows. I can go home—but I feel traumatized—degraded. Guilty that I'm so quickly back in love with the digital world. I feel I'm in some kind of abusive relationship with a cyborg. Get me the hell out of here.

I call Phil, apologize for my meltdown, and let him know the grades have been successfully exported into the matrix. He confirms their presence, but isn't sure they're in both SASI and Integrate Pro.

"You'll have to re-enter them into SASI, but not until the fall. We need that data in long term storage, in the proper warehouse," Phil says in a measured tone.

"I've entered my grades. I've got the hard copy proof in my hands . . ." I glaze over looking into the numbers and begin to cry. The thought of retroactive data entry sends me into shut down mode.

"I'm not re-entering the grades, Phil."

Silence. I look at my broken wall clock. Nine thirty-two.

"I'm sorry, but I've done everything I'm supposed to do, and I'm not re-entering my grades."

Phil knows he's dealing with a teacher on the edge. He states calmly, "Report cards will be fine. Let's revisit this in the fall."

I read the computer's digital time in the bottom right of my screen. 4:38p.m., and stammer, "Okay, Phil. Okay."

Phil's quiet. I'm quiet. It's over. For now. I must apologize to him face to face.

I walk out of the brick building with my usual Holden Caulfield chorus of "Sleep tight ya morons." I'm not sure who I'm talking to—there's hardly anyone here—but Holden's words seem so perfect for this time of year. I suppose they are words for the guardians of any institution. And like Holden, and James Castle, I won't take them back.

I head for Red's Café with my colleague, Jo. After teaching three classes of *Catcher in the Rye* in June, I need a goodbye feeling. Even without technological glitches, there's something entirely anti-climactic about the last day of school. Focused on getting out, finishing their respective checklists, colleagues tend to trickle out without proper goodbyes. There is no closure for us, especially when graduation comes before our last day.

We head for the bar in search of our own good stories and try to forget about grades. The restaurant is deserted. The bar is empty, except for a young, beautiful bartender who looks vaguely familiar. It turns out she's a former graduate, not one of my students, but I have her brother—a wonderful boy who

got hooked on Thoreau this spring. Shelly's putting herself through school—art history—and it's taking her longer than she would like. Jo and I drink to our scholar bartender, whose degree is only six credits away. I picture Shelly working all kinds of jobs over the past decade to make the grade. I feel lucky to have a teaching job, guilty about my grade-induced tantrum.

After a few rounds of Blue Moons with orange slices afloat in our glasses, we are ready for summer. I turn to leave, and poof—two sophomores from my all-boy F Period class—Isaiah and Kevin. Grades still at the forefront of my mind: both are in the low sixties. Both are in danger of failing because of the attendance policy which subtracts two points per unexcused absence from their marking period grades. Even I don't know what grade they'll get after the attendance penalty. Only SASI knows. They look so young hunched with their hands in their jean pockets. They stand at the crossroads between the carpeted restaurant and its booths and the wood flooring that leads to the bar.

"What are you two doing here?" I try not to breathe my beer breath on them.

"It's wing night!" Isaiah pushes his long blonde hair out of his eyes. "We come here every Monday for wings. What brings you here, Ms. A?" He grins, standing as close as he can to the bar's invisible threshold.

"We're celebrating the end of the year . . . You guys both made it, but if you have cuts, I can't do anything about those."

"We passed?" Kevin registers his shock.

"You both did. You both wrote those *Of Mice and Men* essays, and that's what made the difference. You had a 59.8, Isaiah. I had to give you the .2 for performing your rap song for Lennie Small. You, Kevin, you had a sixty-four."

Both of them are smiling, in part because they'd caught their English teacher in unexpected territory—on their turf—and I wasn't eating wings. In

part, because they both needed a wing and a few prayers to pass, and their passing must have felt as miraculous as my grades resurfacing in SASI. There's something loveable about those who invest no meaning in grades. Most teachers will confess: there's nothing worse than a grade grubber.

Then I tell them the real reason I'm at the bar: "My grades went up in smithereens . . . they disappeared from the computer . . . I was so upset . . . I was in front of all those empty grids and I just felt horrible and I cried and . . . well . . ."

That's when Isaiah reaches over and takes me in his long skinny arms and hugs me. And then Kevin hugs me, and it's as though everything is okay—whether they passed or not doesn't seem to matter to them—they forgive me all the grades I've ever had to give them or anyone else. They give me permission not to worry so much about their grades and to know that what we had for 180 days (well, less than that in their case) was more than those numbers in the grid. Who we were and what we did mattered. Our stories mattered.

It is one of the most unprofessional and rewarding moments of my teaching career.

I look into their twinkling eyes and say, "Goodbye guys. Stay out of trouble."

"Take it easy, Ms. Abercrombie," they say almost in unison.

And suddenly I have that goodbye, A+ feeling at the end of June.

# Rekindling the Joy of Reading In and Out of Your Classroom

Joe Anastasio, CWP-Storrs

Today, I am a guest reader for a third grade class at Colchester Elementary School. The children sit in a circle on the floor, and their animated teacher introduces me as the mystery reader from the high school come to pay a visit. I clutch a tattered copy of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, a book I'm sure they are all very familiar with by now. I pick a spot next to a boy sporting an orange and white striped shirt, crouch low, fold my legs Indian style, and begin reading amid smiles and energetic fidgets. Sure enough, they know the story, know it quite well, and as I turn each page and read aloud in character voices, their eyes widen, hands clamp together, and their voices whisper excitedly, "I love this part!" Every child is focused with rapt attention, hanging on every word I utter, every illustration flashed in front of their bright eyes. The joy and wonder they express is infectious. I leave rejuvenated, happy, a slight skip in my step.

I return to my high school classroom just in time for period three. Twenty-seven level two seniors drag their sluggish teenage bodies through the door collapsing into seats. Two students can't seem to make it that far, instead finding a clear space on the carpeted floor, stretching out prone and silent. Cell phones pop open on the sly and a barrage of text messages filter through the air. The late bell rings, and I ask the students to break into discussion groups to review and discuss last night's assigned reading from *Slaughterhouse-Five*. A collective groan emanates through the room. A few students claim they have forgotten their books and beg to leave so they can dig through lockers; another whispers within ear shot to a friend, "You read it?" "No," says the girl. Others shake their head in

agreement. I glance around at the grumbling assembly of bodies and the feeling of elation I experienced earlier this morning dissipates. Reality hits home.

Something happens between the golden years of elementary and high school. Some pandemic disease creeps through houses late at night stealing our children's joy for reading, or maybe, just maybe, the culprit is school itself. Students move from reading circles of excited elementary-aged children to middle and high school teens beleaguered by benchmark assessments measuring results relating to out-of-context articles thrust in front of bleary-eyes, a stopwatch ticking overhead, a school-wide rubric poised to pounce, the results set for publication at the next Board of Education meeting. Read, respond, measure, report. Standing orders from on high that data is to be collected, analyzed, and reported. By the time students reach high school, educators have sucked the joy out of reading by attaching questions, essays, tests, projects, and practice essay prompts.

Such academic demands have helped create a culture of "fake readers" as Cris Tovani calls them. Students use Spark Notes as frequently as they *friend* one another on Facebook. School is not the only source of this problem. There are plenty of distractions preventing students from picking up a good book, and this is not a new phenomenon. An article on the subject of free reading published in 1969 identified that students have "exceptionally heavy demands placed upon them by daily schedules, not only class schedules and extracurricular activities at school, but by time demands for activities at home, at church, or by part-time jobs" (Fleitz & Harman, 1969). That was written forty years ago. Consider the exponential explosion of detractors for the everyday adolescent that has evolved over four decades. Television, once labeled the electronic babysitter, may now be a close second to the Internet. Teens spend an inordinate amount of time surfing the *Net*, downloading music, watching videos on YouTube, gaming, and social

networking. For the average teenager, the idea of picking up a good book and curling up on the couch has all but dropped from the to-do list.

So, the question becomes how does a classroom teacher balance the demands of a school district's mandate for standardized measurement and improving CAPT scores, in addition to encouraging students to pleasure read, and more importantly, improve students' reading in terms of motivation and skill? I raised this question to a colleague during our seventeen minute lunch. The conversation went something like this:

"Wish I knew the answer to that one," he said.

"I think I have an idea," "I offered. I call it, Free Read Friday."

"What is it?" he asked.

"Simply put, it's sustained silent reading without the grade."

"No grade attached? What will the administration say? You're nuts!"

"Hear me out on this one," I insisted.

My colleague left lunch shaking his head, and I wondered if he was right. After all, the school followed a very traditional seven period day, forty-nine minutes each, no rotation. How could I justify taking every Friday to quietly "free read?" I decided to ask my students if they thought the current system of reading one book as one class really seemed to work.

In January of 2009, I surveyed seventy-four senior high school students about their attitude toward reading in the school setting. As one might expect, the survey upheld educators' concerns about the decline in reading. When asked if they liked to read assigned reading for school, sixty-seven percent of seniors fell into the strongly disagree to undecided range. The reasons included lack of choice for reading material; little to no relevance to their lives; lengthy assignments, quizzes, or tests associated with the assigned reading; and no time to read outside of school. However, a majority of students acknowledged that it

all depended on the book that the teacher chose to assign. As one student stated, “*Childhood’s End* was assigned reading and is now one of my favorite books; however, I’ve also had *Ethan Frome* assigned, and I’m pretty sure we can all agree that’s a fate worse than death.” For many students, the reverse might be true. But in the end, it was the teacher making the decision on the book the class would read, not the individual student.

Based on the results of the survey and what I had learned in researching the topic, I decided to experiment and see if allowing students time to read in class, any book of choice, with no grade or assessment attached to the activity, would have an effect on motivation and skill. This is not a new or novel idea. Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) has existed for decades, and many variations operate in classrooms. Some teachers include a system of grading while others do not. The duration of time devoted for SSR can range from five to ten minutes during the class period every day of the week, to every other day, twice a week, or for an entire class period once a week. Whatever the form it may take, the question arises as to whether the inclusion of some sort of free reading built into the school day will have a positive effect on motivation and improve students’ skills as readers.

Certainly, dedicating class time for unguided reading raises concerns for some educators. It is often perceived as difficult to manage and monitor, and often scares away many classroom teachers from what one might consider a perceived unorthodox or lazy approach to teaching. The old adage that if the teacher is not lecturing or moving about the room then she is not teaching still holds true in some eyes today. Detractors argue that it becomes little more than a free study period where the students quietly sit occupied, thus affording the teacher an opportunity to grade papers or plan for the next class. The SSR model encourages teachers to read right along with students. University of Connecticut

professor Sally Reis takes this idea further through the Schoolwide Enrichment Model- Reading (SEM-R), by incorporating a conferencing piece in which the teacher supports independent reading by encouraging and aiding in the choice of challenging, yet appropriately leveled reading material. The conferencing piece allows a teacher to get to know the student as both an individual and a reader, and to help match his or her interests with appropriate books. In turn, this helps create a nurturing and “free” environment for students to stretch ability levels, or begin anew with different selections if the books they are reading do not meet their satisfaction.

Still, the question remains as to whether it works in the classroom setting. There is research supporting the value of free reading within the confines of the school day. In an article published in *School Library Journal*, researcher Stephen Krashen highlights the results of twenty years of studies surrounding the impact of SSR programs in schools, noting that when comparing students in classes that included SSR with those that did not, “that children who read for pleasure do as well or better than their SSR-deprived peers” (Krashen, 2006). In fact, in eight of ten studies in which pupils were tracked for a year, “students who read recreationally outperformed their counterparts in classes that lacked leisure reading—and in the other two studies, there was no difference between the two groups” (Krashen, 2006).

Successful SSR implementation involves more than simply just letting kids read; it involves providing quality books, encouragement, and a quiet environment with time to read. In addition, educators who take the time to learn their students’ interests and help match those with related books yield even better results. With this in mind, Free Read Friday was born. It would take the form of an entire class period dedicated to silent reading of a choice book with no grade or assessment attached to the endeavor.

When I announced this change to the weekly schedule, many students responded skeptically. “No grades?” “What’s the catch?” It took several minutes for the concept to sink in, and many of the students were still trying to navigate for loopholes.

“So, we can read anything?”

“Within reason,” I responded.

“What does that mean?”

“Whatever you read has to be of quality and meaningful to you.”

“And all we have to do is read?”

“Yes, just read—quiet and focused reading for the full class period.”

“No grades, right?” someone repeated. “No tests or quizzes or discussion?”

“No,” I responded. “Just read.”

They left class wearing Cheshire cat grins, like they just swindled me for millions.

Within a few weeks, the students fell into the routine of remembering their choice books every Friday and settling in to read right after the bell rang. As months passed, Fridays were met with anticipation and, dare I say, some excitement. Side conversations about books sprouted up around the room, and a few dog-eared paperbacks even exchanged hands, some even passed on two or three more times. One particular Friday class period was interrupted by a school assembly, and students were disappointed about missing class because they were just “getting into” their books.

In May of 2009 I administered a follow-up survey of sixty-four senior high school students with results that revealed implementing “Free Read Friday” did have a positive impact on students’ perception of themselves as readers in terms of motivation and skill. Seventy percent of students indicated that choice reading

and time to read in class improved motivation. Eighty-one percent of students said they looked forward to “Free Read Friday” and sixty-one percent of students claimed that “Free Read Friday” improved their ability and desire to read. Sixty-three percent of students agreed that allowing choice in school encouraged them to want to read on their own outside of school. “I’ll start a book on Free Read Friday and then I’ll want to go home and read more if it is a good book. It has made me start reading more at home,” wrote one senior high girl.

Some students surveyed indicated they were undecided when it came to free reading and choice in the classroom. Fourteen percent said they were unsure if they looked forward to “Free Read Friday” and twenty-two percent said that they did not notice a difference in their ability or desire to read more. Thirty-one percent said they were undecided if allowing choice in the classroom made them want to read more outside of school. Reasons for all three questions generally centered on established behaviors. If students felt they were not good readers, they claimed that “Free Read Friday” did not sway their behavior or interest as a reader. Similarly, students disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the effect of choice increasing their interest in reading on their own, and that “Free Read Friday” improved skill or desire to read noted that they were either already established independent readers, did not have time to read outside of class, or quite simply, hated any type of reading altogether.

As I reflect on the past year and what I observed in class and infer from the survey, I come away with the sense that implementing choice and time to read in class proved fruitful for improving student motivation and skill in reading. Looking ahead, I plan to incorporate a student interest survey, administered right at the beginning of the semester, and a conferencing system based on Sally Reis’s SEM-R model to encourage and guide students toward positive reading experiences. I think if I had included this model along with the

time to read, many of the undecided and “disagreeing” students would have benefited from the experience.

I also see allowing choice as a vehicle to differentiate within the classroom and meet each child’s needs. My goal is to encourage reading inside as well as outside the classroom. Free reading in the classroom with no threat of grade or assessment is one effective way to achieve it. As one student stated, “If I discover through choosing books at school that there are books that interest me, I will be more likely to read outside of school.”

#### Works Cited

- Caldwell, Kathleen, and Thomas Gaine. “*The Phantom Tollbooth* and How the Independent Reading of Good Books Improves Students’ Reading Performance.” Dominican University of California. Oct. 2000. Reading.
- Fleitz, Jeanette, and Ronald Harman. “Free reading is simple idea, but it works!” *Arizona English Bulletin* 11.3 (1969): 6-8.
- Flowerday, Terri, Gregory Schraw, and Joseph Stevens. *Journal of Experimental Education* 72.2 (2004): 93-114.
- Krashen, Stephen. “Free reading: Is it the Only Way to Make Kids More Literate?” *School Library Journal* (2006): 42-45.
- Reis, Sally. *Using the Schoolwide Enrichment Model Reading Framework*. N.p. Web. 26 June 2009. <[http://pages.unibas.ch/kongress-erzwiss/doku/Vortrag\\_Reis.pdf](http://pages.unibas.ch/kongress-erzwiss/doku/Vortrag_Reis.pdf)>.
- Tovani, Cris. *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2000.

# A Window Pane on Dwindle Pain Or Rediscovering Publishing Centers in the Elementary School

Lynda Barrow, CWP-Storrs

In Connecticut public schools, publishing centers seemed to be growing in popularity during the late eighties and early nineties of the twentieth century. Today, few schools continue to have them, and I was able to find very little recently published scholarly literature on school publishing centers. Their popularity seems to have dwindled, and I'm left wondering why. Are students and teachers left to suffer the resultant "dwindle-pain?" Is it "dwindle-pain" when our eyes glaze over from reading too many predictable student essays that are written prescriptively for rubrics instead of self expression?

"Don't bother to write if you're not going to publish," seem like harsh words for anyone, much less a child. Admittedly, I balked when I first heard them. They sliced through my sensitivities as a teacher and as a writer, yet like the proverbial pebble in a shoe, I couldn't shake them from my memory. Though I've forgotten its source, this dictum seems to hold a profound underlying truth that I'm just beginning to uncover. Now, I daresay, I use these same words with complete conviction when I address my writing students.

Why do we write? I venture to say that we write to communicate. Since the earliest cuneiform script was etched into clay tablets, it can be surmised that this was the purpose of the written word. Written communication is meant to be more lasting than the spoken word, and it requires a reader in order to complete the exchange of information.

I consider myself a writer, primarily because I've habitually journaled for the past thirty years. I write for myself (*woe to the person who reads my diary*), and

the practice helps me to sort out thoughts and emotions, document experience, plan, and create. Though I do not intend to stop journaling, I can see that my entries have an unfinished, almost dreamlike quality. Rarely, do I re-read my diaries, and I can assume that no one will ever read them. Thus, my creative writing comes in fits and spurts and gets buried, unrevised and unedited, in the pages of journals on the bookshelf. It will never be read, and so never communicated.

I'm comfortable writing reports and proposals for a real audience as part of my profession. I'm not in the habit of sharing my creative writing with a reader. Last summer, I participated in the Connecticut Writing Project, a summer institute designed to promote teachers as writers. There, I discovered a new level of artistic satisfaction from putting pen to paper.

During the CWP experience, I became passionate about my creative writing. Late nights and early mornings would find me at my keyboard, sometimes giggling aloud as I coaxed new ideas from my imagination. Why was I enthralled with creative writing more so than ever before? I believe the difference maker was that I was now connecting to a reader. I was now publishing.

Connecticut Writing Project participants publish weekly and receive feedback from total strangers as well as response groups and fellow teachers in the institute. Our creative writing is shared with a real audience via a closed national internet network. Writers can read the comments and resubmit revised and edited editions repeatedly, until the written piece accurately reflects what the writer wants to say.

This publishing process revealed to me a new dimension of my craft. I found that when I write creatively for a real audience the words take on a life of their own, and I become more interested in shaping and refining them as a

watchful mother might nudge her toddler toward walking. The process becomes a joyous birthing experience that's not complete until witnessed by a reader. This personal epiphany led me to wonder how I might bring that joy to my writing students.

*"It is terribly important for kids to read and write for the reasons that people the world over read and write, which is to communicate, to be delighted, to laugh." -Lucy Caulkins*

Publishing student work for a real audience has been considered a crucial part of the writing process commonly taught in elementary schools. It's often seen as the final step and can easily be overlooked or omitted, yet I contend that publishing is the single most important stage.

### **Publication is the Crucial Final Step that Drives the Entire Writing Process.**

In the early eighties there was a movement to bring "process writing" to instructional practices in schools. This is the practice of breaking down the craft into six stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, final drafting, and publishing. In the eighties and nineties, it was the preferred teaching strategy toward writing and each stage was developed in itself and as part of the process.

Today, the drafting stage is emphasized, and it is the ability to write drafts that is tested on standardized exams. Revising and editing are also tested, but in isolation from the student's draft. Students seem to be getting the message that these are skills unrelated to their writing, or at least an after-thought. When publishing is emphasized, revising and editing become an integral and satisfying part of the writing process.

The publishing stage includes numerous possibilities for selecting a reader for a final draft. This includes simple notes, letters, class newsletters, and newspapers and extends to having student work published in established

journals. In the early years, there was a great deal of celebration connected with every stage of the writing process, and indeed there seemed to be a joyousness in the writing classroom. The publishing stage was perhaps celebrated most joyously.

Over the past two decades, student writing is increasingly graded according to a rubric whereby points are earned through conformity. Little credence is given to original thought, the child's voice, or new ideas. There is an increased emphasis on teaching students to score high on standardized tests and prescriptive writing techniques are directly taught to students. Grades are based on how well the writer conforms to the rubric with little or no consideration for voice, creativity or originality. Writing is evaluated more and celebrated less.

### **Are Students Losing Their Joyfulness in Writing?**

I teach enrichment students in an elementary school. They have the skills to write beautiful prose and poetry, yet many of them balk when I begin a writing unit. One might think that a child under ten, who has the skills to read and glean ideas from admired authors and the vocabulary and grammatical skills to write their own thoughts, would be ecstatic about writing! In truth, the opposite is usually the case. I find myself wondering why so many are reluctant to write.

### **Why Do Students Write?**

I complete this exercise with my students yearly. We make brainstormed lists of all the ways we write from texting with friends, to business letters, to storytelling. It has been my experience that the majority of students are more comfortable writing non-fiction than they are with writing prose or poetry. They

are usually more confident in reporting events than they are in sharing their thoughts.

*“If children are to write, they should be encouraged to write about topics that are significant to them. This gives children the concept that the real purpose of writing is to communicate one’s ideas and feelings to others.”*

*–Lilian Gold*

### **Do They Know Why They Write?**

When asked, students usually admit they write when a parent or teacher gives them an assignment—e.g., “Write a thank-you to Aunt Donna,” or, “Write a letter to your pen-pal in our sister school.” Rarely, does a student report that he or she elects to write to sort out thoughts, express emotions, or simply to amuse oneself creatively. They tend to avoid re-reading, revising, and editing their work and would prefer to simply “hand it in” as quickly as possible. These students are “drafting,” rather than writing. They are completing an early stage of the process and avoiding the later stages. This avoidance is lessened, and even transformed, when the publishing stage is emphasized in the process.

### **Rediscovering the Publishing Center**

Educational theorists generally agree that if children enjoy writing their skills will eventually improve. In our rural k-4 elementary school, a self-formed committee of four teachers decided to address the need for student publication with a school initiative. We chose to resurrect the practice of running a school publishing center to create books from student writing. The center would be available to all students in all grades and would accept manuscripts written on any topic at any time. A school publishing center would provide every student

the opportunity to share in the joy of crafting words to accurately communicate their thoughts to a real audience.

Drawing on the experience of our literacy coach, we formulated a plan for opening the center in January 2009. She had established a publishing center in a school where she formally worked, and she generously shared tips, strategies, and templates to get us going. She also agreed to train the parent volunteers who would run the operation.

Volunteers would be instructed on how to participate at varying levels. Some who were unable to visit during school hours would type at home. They'd receive templates of several styles e-mailed to them as attachments and they'd use these to type and print the student manuscripts. Other parents and grandparents who were able to come to the center would bind manuscripts; then, they would deliver them to the students in their classrooms. Two parents would co-chair the parent volunteer committee and oversee the typing and delivery of the student books. They would keep a list of student authors and titles on a spreadsheet and see that typing responsibilities were evenly distributed among the volunteers. All parent volunteers needed to attend one of two scheduled training sessions.

Two of our committee members were CWP alumna, and we received a mini-grant to help us get the center running. In October we created a timeline to help us reach our goal to open the center by mid-January. Tasks to be completed included writing the mini-grant proposal, notifying teachers and parents, purchasing and organizing materials, locating a space for the publishing center, and planning a "grand opening" to draw the students' attention to this new addition to our school. The mini-grant proposal hinged on planning the "grand opening," so that became a priority.

Three committee members had the privilege of being students in Iris Van Rynbach's class on writing children's literature, held at Manchester Community College. We all agreed that she was not only a prolific writer, but she also had a wealth of knowledge about writing and publishing children's books. She was happy to share her thirty plus years of experience as a published author. And she selflessly spent hours reviewing her adult students' manuscripts, helping to shape them toward publication. We were confident that she would be as inspirational to our students, and we invited her to "kick-off" the grand opening of our school's publishing center.

Letters to parents and teachers, and student-made posters heralded the opening of our school's publishing center. Guest children's book author and illustrator Iris Van Rynbach kicked off the opening with a series of workshops in which she shared her work and inspired students to write their own. Students delighted in seeing her display of familiar and unfamiliar children's books she wrote and illustrated. They marveled at her illustration skills as she sketched familiar book characters on poster paper. Student requests and suggestions helped to create the illustrations.

Later, third and fourth graders participated in a writers workshop, led by the author. They received tips and suggestions for their writing from Mrs. Van Rynbach. Working in this way with a professional in the field made them seem like "writers" in their own eyes. Several students used the writing exercises from that day in the books they went on to write.

Within a week, the publishing center produced the first student book, a non-fiction piece written by a fourth grader. It described how to own and care for a horse, and it contained photos and student illustrations throughout. The next day, a third grader arrived with his first of three books that were "spin-offs" of the *Star Wars* series. With emphasis on writing for rubric assessments, there's

little time in the school day for this kind of student writing. The young author was giddy with joy that he could get teacher recognition for his extra-curricular writing. He became a regular visitor to the publishing center as he continued the theme with two more sequels for *Star Wars*.

Student manuscripts began pouring in, and in four months over a hundred books were published by various student authors. These were created both in school and at home, and for the most part, they were not assigned writing. Several students were repeat authors. There was little reward for publishing other than recognition in the classroom and applause from the student body during monthly assembly announcements. Those who published were proud of their accomplishments, and many others took the time to tell me of their intentions to publish. I'm wondering if the rewards aren't as "intrinsic" for them as they had been for me last summer. Indeed, there was joyfulness about these authors as they proudly shared their books with their teachers and their peers.

The reception of the publishing center was successful in our school. Parent volunteers seemed to enjoy participating in their child's schooling in a meaningful way, and teachers used the publishing center as another outlet for students' creative writing. The children loved getting their books published, and several came back with another book to publish or to share their plans for future publishing. There was a new, almost audible buzz of "excitement over writing" beginning to happen in our school. By most accounts, the center seemed to be a big success, and I was happy to overhear a first grade teacher in our school exclaim, "I don't know what I'd do without the publishing center!"

I daresay that many students feel the same way. By re-contextualizing the revision and editing process we found that students became proud of the editing

marks on their manuscript. They were motivated, and even eager, to work on perfecting their piece. As I reviewed the 149 student titles at the end of the school year, it became evident that these writers are using their craft to deepen their understanding of themselves and the world around them. In publishing, they're communicating these understandings to a real audience. Their originality is revealed in their book titles, some of which I include below:

- I Have a New Brother
- The Swimming Pool
- The Trophy Quest
- Boo Hoo
- Learning to Ride
- The Broken Leg
- The Snow Monster
- I Marched in a Parade
- I Grow Flowers
- King Pizza and the Knights of the Kitchen Table
- Dad Saves the Day
- Bloody Noses
- Exploring in the Forest
- Amanda Left and I Cried
- Hurting Ears
- A Life with a Horse
- Orphans

Karen Wasson writes that Children have an innate desire to communicate. They want to be successful as readers and writers. Our responsibility is to help them achieve the successes they desire. Children should feel they are writing for real purposes rather than for artificial purposes such as teacher-given assignments. The 149 student-written books in a school of 250 children over a period of four months has shown us that our children really do love to write.

What's next? The committee that formed the publishing center plans to meet before the next school year begins and make adjustments so that the center may grow and develop along with our writers. Some questions we might address are:

- How might we bring the publishing center further along in this digital age by expanding our use of computer technology?
- How can we broaden the readership of student-written books?

- How might the publishing center encourage student writing over vacations?
- Would an “author’s tea” twice a year prove beneficial?
- Can we set up a display of student-authored books in the school library?  
The public library?
- Should the publishing center host “Writers Workshops,” to further build student interest?
- How might we conduct surveys with students, teachers, and parents to determine benefits of  
the publishing center and areas for improvement?

#### Works Cited

Atwell, Nancy. *In the Middle*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987.

Caulkins, Lucy McCormick. *Living Between the lines*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991.

Gold, Lillian, *Elementary School Publishing Center. Fastback 282*. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation (1989): ERIC. EBSCO. <<http://search.ebscohost.com/>>.

Graves, Donald. *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann (1983): ERIC. EBSCO. <<http://search.ebscohost.com/>>.

Wasson, Karen L. *Implementation of a Publishing Center To Enhance the Writing Process for Primary Students*. Diss. Nova University, 1993. US Department of Education. 1993. ERIC. EBSCO. <<http://search.ebscohost.com/>>.

# Deinstitutionalizing Writing: Making Reading and Writing Relevant to Undergraduate Students Studying Early American Literature

Jason Courtmanche, Director: CWP-Storrs

A recent edition of *Academe* pointed out that approximately 1% of the total US population holds a Ph.D. That figure climbs to a whopping 3% if you include professional degrees such as MDs and JDs. If we approximate the US population at 300 million people, then roughly 3 million people in the US hold a Ph.D. Some small fraction of that number hold their Ph.D.s in English, and a fraction of that number are regular faculty members in university or college English departments. A still smaller fraction work at tier 1 research institutes where scholarship and publication are essential job requirements. I have heard it said apocryphally that only 300 fiction writers in the US live by their writing alone; I wonder, then, how many adults in the US hold jobs for which scholarly publication is an essential feature of their daily work. Perhaps a couple hundred thousand? And yet in English classrooms all over the country—middle school, high school, and college—the goal of most writing programs and classes is literary analysis. This is the holy grail of our profession, but most of our students, even those who will go on to major in English, will never have to write literary analysis for their careers. In fact, most of us who teach English do not have to write literary analysis and have not done so since we were undergraduates or in some cases graduate students. That's all the secondary teachers and most of the adjuncts as well as the professors at community colleges and many state universities and smaller liberal arts colleges.

For many years as a high school teacher I required—no, forced—my students to write literary analysis, and generally experienced success only in my

sections of advanced placement language and composition, or literature and composition. Then for many years I did the same thing with my undergraduates in American Literature survey courses. I was often frustrated, especially with the undergraduate students. I felt that at least with the high school students I understood that their relative youth and the fact that many of them were not even college-bound explained why they would and could not write quality literary analysis, but I could not understand why the undergraduates were likewise incapable. However, eventually I came to wonder why I had been so obtuse for so many years.

At the University of Connecticut we offer two survey courses in American Literature called respectively American Literature To 1880 and American Literature Since 1880. I have taught sections of both. The courses are open to sophomores and meet many general education requirements, and there are typically several sections of each offered every semester, as both writing intensive and non-writing intensive courses. The writing intensive sections, what we call W courses, are highly sought after by the undergraduates because the gen ed designation and the W help the students to kill two birds with one stone in terms of meeting their graduation requirements. And so the off-shoot of this situation is that most sections of the American Literature survey courses are filled by non-English majors. In a typical W section capped at nineteen students, I might have five or six English majors with the rest covering the entire spectrum of majors from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. For many if not most of these students, this class is the only English class besides Freshman English that they will take in their entire undergraduate career. So it should be no surprise when even the best and brightest among them struggle to write literary analysis, something they may not have done since high school, save in their Freshman English class.

This is not to say that non-English majors are incapable of writing quality literary analysis. I have read some excellent essays from biology, anthropology, economics, and Italian majors, to name just a few that come to mind. But they have never been the norm. The other related problem that I found myself encountering (and I certainly encountered this with high school students, as well) was that the students struggled to find relevance in the literature we read, especially in the American Literature To 1880 class, which began with journals, sermons, and legal documents like “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” the Declaration of Independence, excerpts from *The Mayflower Compact*, and “On Christian Charity.” Some of you reading this now, good English teachers all of you, are cringing at these titles. Just imagine the students’ reactions. I wanted desperately to find other ways of writing for these mostly non-English majors and to make them see the relevance and, yes, even beauty that I saw in these early American texts.

I began to think about some curricular work I had done in my final years as a high school teacher in which I had designed a course called the Contemporary American Novel that was intended to be a senior elective. One of my overarching goals for that course had been to give students books and a course design that allowed them to read popular fiction and write just about anything that they were inspired to write in response to these novels. Students wrote many personal essays about issues from the books; they wrote about their personal responses; sometimes they even did research on a relevant issue, like rape or anorexia, something that was an important part of a character’s development and which was likely very personally relevant, as well. My favorite piece was one I have written about elsewhere, in a co-authored chapter of *What Is ‘College-Level’ Writing? Volume II*. In that chapter I write about a girl who read John Edgar Wideman’s *Brothers and Keepers* and then interviewed her dad about

his estranged relationship with his brother. Another student who read Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* wrote a similar paper in which she interviewed her father, who was himself a Vietnam veteran. This was a wildly successful course, popular and sought after by students, and I loved teaching it because I loved the freedom and independence the students were granted, which they embraced.

Adapting this model to the American Literature survey courses presented me with several challenges. First of all, though I could of course choose my own texts for the course, they had to fall within the prescribed time frame, and I had to be realistic about how many texts I could require. I was no longer asking the school district to buy class sets of twenty or thirty different novels. The students were going to have to pay for these themselves, and so I could not reasonably require more than eight or ten books. I also had to be more rigorous in my writing instruction and in my assessment. The elective course at the high school was, by design and by credit, not an honors course and not a writing course. One of the stated curricular goals was to create an opportunity for students to have a positive personal experience with reading and writing in order to help encourage them to become lifelong readers. (I felt that, in a sense, the course was designed to undo the damage of the preceding three or more years of too many five-paragraph expository essays, exclusively required readings, and preparation for mandatory state assessments).

My focus for the new design of my course became writing through literature, something that should be at least remotely familiar to the undergraduates from their Freshman English courses, the training for which emphasized this model of instruction. The students wrote short (one to two page) weekly response papers to the readings, and two lengthier (seven to eight page) papers that were revised several times, workshopped in peer response

groups, and reviewed in conferences with me. The following is the assignment, sans minutia about length, pagination, and such:

American Literature To 1880

Jason Courtmanche

Connecting with 19th Century Literature

This assignment is based on two premises. One is that most of you will not become English teachers or English professors and so therefore there is no need to require you to write traditional literary criticism. Two is that students often find it difficult to see the relevance in 19th (and 18th and 17th) century literature.

Your assignment then is to compose a personal essay that makes connections between one or more texts from our American Literature To 1880 course and an event, person, or text (broadly defined) from the contemporary era. In other words, use a nineteenth century (or earlier) text as a lens through which to view and interpret an event from your personal life, or a contemporary political or pop culture figure, a book, a movie, a TV show – or just about anything else.

You must still quote and cite from the course text(s) as well as from the contemporary event, person, or text (where possible, understanding that if you write about an event from your life you would likely not be able to cite a text). Use a movie or TV clip, a news article, an image, or an anecdote.

Additional guidelines/advice:

- Find something to focus on, a theme, an issue, a metaphor, anything. But be focused.
- Do not write plot summary or character descriptions.
- Be careful not to just write an oversimplified comparison. (I.e., “Look, these texts are similar. See!”).
- Don’t overdo it. You don’t have to deal with a whole text, especially one of the longer ones. You’re trying to open up a conversation with your readers about the relevance of some classic American works of literature and how they can help shed light on a contemporary issue. You are not trying to write the definitive analysis of a major work of American fiction. Save that for your dissertation some day.
- A personal and informal tone is fine. You do not have to avoid the first person point of view. In fact, I encourage it.
- Textual citations are a must! You must quote from and properly cite all works and any other sources of research.
- Additional research is not required! But if you do it, cite it!

The first time around, the papers were decent, but not what I had hoped for. Despite my advice and guidelines, I still found myself reading a lot of simple comparisons. Students struggled to find and say something interesting, struggled, in fact, to find points of contact between early American texts and contemporary anything. And they struggled to write in a personal tone of voice. It was as if even though I said I wanted the personal and the informal, they suspected that I didn’t really mean it, and as soon as I saw a first person pronoun I was going to get medieval on their papers with my red pen. What I did was share some papers I had from high school students who had taken the

Contemporary American Novel course and talked about what I liked about these papers as well as discussed my reservations about the relative lack of rigor in these compared to what I hoped to see from the undergraduates. I shared some short articles from the *English Journal* to show how writing for some professional fields blends personal and anecdotal writing with analytical and research-based approaches. I spent a good amount of time and effort sitting in on response groups and in conferences talking with the students about their papers, helping them to find points of contact, and encouraging them to allow topics and voice to evolve organically from the acts of reading and writing.

Slowly, the one page response papers got better, and I became sanguine about the next long paper. As the drafts I saw in conferences came along, I began to think that maybe I had successfully communicated my goals. The students began to believe that I was serious about having the license to write something other than literary analysis, something other than staid expository essays, something in their own voice (even if they weren't so sure what that was yet). In the end, in a class of nineteen students I received several good essays and six truly excellent essays in which the students successfully wrote through the literature about contemporary texts, people, or events.

Aloise Brewster, a junior English major, discussed the movie *Bruce Almighty* and its relation to transcendentalist themes found in Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Divinity School Address" and Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." Alexandria Ramos, a senior double-majoring in Spanish and English, wrote about Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* and "Down the River with Henry David Thoreau" and Thoreau's *Walden* and "Walking." Natalie Abreu, a sophomore majoring in design and theater, discussed the graphic novel *The Watchmen* through the lens of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Lisa Curatola, a junior English major, was one of the students who struggled the most with the first

assignments, but for the second paper she discovered a subject that inspired her because it made her so angry. She wrote about President Bush's foreign policy, and wrote specifically about Cindy Sheehan and Free Speech Zones using the lens of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" and *Walden*. She cited CNN reports, an article from *The Nation*, and a national poll on citizens' attitudes about the Iraq War. Shaun Wrinn, a junior education major, discussed Batman from *The Dark Knight* and Roger Chillingworth from *The Scarlet Letter*. John Hogan, a junior economics and political science major who was active in student government, critiqued current US government economic policy using Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The American Scholar" and Thoreau's *Walden*. For contemporary texts, John cited Christopher Conte and Albert Carr's *An Outline of the US Economy* and Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson's press releases, which he found on the Treasury Department Web site.

# Reading: It's More Than Calling Out Words

Ellen Coville, CWP-Fairfield

*This article was prepared for a newsletter that goes out to board members and parents of our school district.*

*"Reading?"* I'm sometimes asked, "You teach *reading* – in high school?"

Yes, I do teach reading in high school, and this reading program may not be what some people expect.

To begin, the philosophy that drives our reading program holds that *all high school students* can benefit from reading instruction. Thus, being in reading class does not diminish a student's inferred intelligence or ability.

Always a work in progress, presently the reading program has three components. The first phase, the Literacy Program, was designed to help ninth graders adjust to the requirements of reading in different disciplines. Using the latest reading research, the teaching staff work to improve comprehension using their respective content area texts. In the 2008-2009 school year, the instructional focus included the reading/thinking strategies of inference, determining importance, and visualization. During quarter one, students in science class applied selected thinking strategies to better comprehend the text assigned in preparation for a discussion of the solar system. In quarter 2, those same students, in social studies classes, read, we hope more deeply, about India and China with the help of the strategy of inferencing. In quarter 3, in math, students applied the strategies of visualizing and determining importance to understand the demands of math problems. And in quarter 4, freshmen English students worked on the strategy of inferencing with nonfiction texts. Literacy instruction in content area classrooms occurred once a week, for one-half a period. The

classroom teacher would then pick up the instructional thread until the next literacy session.

By working within the content areas, students can embrace a cross-curricular carry-over: (s)he will see that one strategy, for example, inferencing, used in English class to comprehend theme, is the same strategy used in social studies to get to the larger meaning of events following, for example, the Cultural Revolution. Moreover, through this approach, content area teachers may be encouraged to engage in best practices of reading instruction in their own setting, using their own instructional materials.

A second part of the reading program aims to help sophomores master the demands of one part of the reading portion of Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT). Called Reading Across the Disciplines, this reading test is divided into two sections: in the first section, Response to Literature, students read and respond to fiction, typically to a short story. This section is covered in work done in English classes. The second reading test section, administered on a separate day, is (perhaps misleadingly) named Reading for Information (students are not really looking for information; they are asked to interpret information). This is the nonfiction portion of CAPT Reading Across the Disciplines; herein lies our instructional focus.

The requirements of the Reading for Information test are relatively substantial. Students read and process three nonfiction articles; they then respond to 12 multiple choice questions and six open-ended questions in forty-five minutes.

In terms of content, the Reading for Information test can encompass several disciplines: students may read, for example, about a new cure for chronic pain, the discovery of the remains of a World War II submarine, or about the contrasting lives of extreme athletes. With such topical diversity, no single high

school discipline “owns” the test. Also, historically, those of our students who scored at the proficient level or lower on the two-part Reading Across the Disciplines Test were brought down by their scores on the Reading for Information section. This data has driven the instructional focus for this section of the reading program.

Working in English classes, with both freshmen and sophomores, I provide instruction on test-taking strategies that meet the demands of the Reading for Information test. In their open-ended written responses, for example, students are asked to demonstrate not, as is sometimes mistakenly assumed, their writing skills, but their reading processes. (This is not to say that students should write poorly; good writing, after all, most clearly communicates our thoughts. That said, the student’s writing, as long as it is comprehensible, will be judged on this test not as a writing exercise but as an indication of his/her reading process.) And simply put, that reading process, at its best, shows a healthy respect for two elements: the details from the reading that clarify and the critical stance that signifies the reader’s personal interaction with text.

Beyond these larger demands, the test itself, like many other tests, has its own idiosyncrasies, such as recommended length for open-ended responses (seven lines). Some time spent in class illustrating these idiosyncrasies can quell the insecurities of young test-takers.

Of course, it is understood that the CAPT tests are by no means ends in themselves. The test tells students how, in high school, they have/have not matured as readers. Moreover, the achievement of Goal or Advanced Level indicates a student’s readiness for the joyful exercise of a lifetime of critical reading.

The third component of the reading program involves professional development. Both formally through workshops and informally as questions

arise, I meet with teachers to plan instruction and evaluate reading needs. As a result of this ongoing dialogue, literacy instruction in the district is truly a collaborative effort. What is more, in time the classroom teachers will no doubt develop literacy strategies of their own.

# Five Young Men

Andrew Neidich, CWP-Fairfield

*"If you can look into the seeds of time, and say which grain will grow and which will not, speak then unto me."*

-William Shakespeare (Macbeth)

*"I know it seem hard sometime but remember one thing  
Through every dark night, there's a bright day after that  
So no matter how hard it get, stick your chest out  
Keep your head up, and handle it"*

-Tupac Shakur (Me Against the World)

I began to get to know, really know, the five young men in 2002 when they became participants in a case study I was conducting at the time on the challenges and coping agents in the lives of young high-risk African-American males. Had I expected a sterile research project, in which I would retain an 'acceptable degree' of professional detachment, this was not to be. As my interviews with Donnie, James, Danny, Omar, and Richard progressed, I found myself alternately angry about some of the circumstances in which these young men grew up, and concerned about their futures. It is this concern, which has remained with me through the years, even as I lost contact with all five, that prompted me to revisit the original study, and attempt to locate these young men, now in their late twenties, and see where their lives have brought them, and how their early challenges and coping strategies have continued to affect them now that they're adults.

As an educator, hearing these young men's stories has forever changed me. Before undertaking the original study, I had begun teaching in an alternative high school so that I might help at-risk young people as they struggled to make decent lives for themselves. It is one thing, however, to term a group of students

“at-risk,” and another thing altogether to experience (even second-hand) the detailed stories of the lives that put them at risk.

As teachers, many of us often take personally our students’ behavior that has nothing to do with us, our assignments, or our classrooms. Frequently, young men like the participants who took part in this study are simply seen as disruptive to the educational process. Becoming aware of the details of the tremendous difficulties these young men have faced in their lives, however, should compel educators to ask how these young men have been able to persevere in their lives, remain in school, not become incarcerated or heavily involved in drug use, and not lose all hope for their futures.

Drug-addicted, incarcerated parents, or otherwise absent parents, and the attendant lack of adult guidance; poverty amidst affluence; an educational system that perennially favors the type of ‘social capital’ that is virtually unavailable to the disenfranchised; dismally poor prospects for decent jobs; and a popular culture that perpetuates young people’s misconceptions about the nature of relationships and of success: these are the disruptive factors in our classrooms and in these young men’s lives.

I remember marveling over the fact that not once during the hours of interviews with these five young men did I hear even a trace of self pity. This reaction to their life circumstances, I thought, would have been understandable, even expected. Also absent was any outward resentment toward a culture that has continued to allow some children to grow up in such adverse conditions amidst others who have been given a surplus of opportunity.

I hadn’t expected to feel so saddened by the personal stories of these young people, and at the same time so filled with awe of their resiliency. I remember that soon after beginning to interview them, I began to feel that I had stumbled upon the opportunity to give voice to these young men, and by so

doing, hopefully add something to the understanding of their life experiences. Maybe in some small way, I thought, telling their stories will help them as they continue to persevere in the face of considerable adversity.

On election night in 2008, I watched as Barak Obama delivered his victory speech in Chicago after winning the Presidency. As I watched the television, my thoughts drifted back to these five extraordinary young black men. I wondered where Donnie was at that historic moment, whether James was watching Obama too, what Danny was feeling that night, if Richard was watching the events unfold in the company of his (now) six-year-old son, and if Omar had even lived to see a Black man become a leader among men. I knew then that I wanted to see them again, talk to them. Listen to them.

### **The 2003 Study**

*“Children who hurt, hurt all over. Children who fail, often fail in everything they do. Risk is pervasive”* (Frymier, 1992).

During the time they were involved as participants in the original study, these five young men lived in an area of the city, like many urban areas in many cities across the United States, where drugs, gangs, shootings, and poverty abounded. All five scored among the highest on a life risk factor assessment inventory I adapted from the well-established Phi Delta Kappa, *Study of Students At Risk* (Frymier, 1989). In September 2002, I administered the inventory to all African-American male students at an alternative high school in the city. The school serves a population of students who are in danger of dropping out of, or being expelled from, school. The assessment scores of Donnie, James, Danny, Omar, and Richard reflected young men at or near the highest risk level for several undesirable life circumstances. These risk factors have repeatedly been shown to strongly correlate with such outcomes as not finishing high school,

drug addiction, incarceration, and death at a young age. The five agreed to participate in the case study. All names and identifiable features of people and places have been changed to ensure the anonymity of the young men who entrusted me with their stories. I continue to feel grateful for and humbled by their willingness to share their life experiences with me.

### **Donnie**

*“My mother did dope, you understand, she did heroin. My grandma also did it too. You know. Basically, my whole family. Hell, my whole family was on dope because my grandma got them all turned out on it.”*

An only child living in a small, cramped house with seven adults, Donnie grew up witnessing the ongoing drug use and addiction of his grandmother, mother, and each of his aunts and uncles. His grandmother, an enterprising and well-known figure in the neighborhood, kept the family solvent by selling ‘dollar joints,’ beer, alcohol, bootleg, and drugs. She also ‘did’ neighbors’ hair and nails. Donnie’s grandmother also provided heroin for her daughters, including Donnie’s mother. Her sons, Donnie’s uncles, needed to secure their own drugs. His grandmother was also the closest thing that Donnie had to a caring parent.

*She was like my mother! My grandma sit around and give me attention and stuff. Have me do chores and stuff like that. Taught me basically how to cook, cause I just sat around watching her. She was just like my everything.*

The adults’ drug use permeated his home. They would refer to this proximal need for a fix as “feeling sick,” and would tell Donnie that they would feel better once they took some ‘medicine.’ At a young age, Donnie understood this euphemism, along with the attendant need for secrecy and protection from ‘nosy’ school officials. He followed his grandmother’s standing instructions as to how to handle meddling school officials, adding to his awareness that something

was askew: “You want to know something about my mother, go ask her yourself.”

DCF caseworkers were also periodically involved in Donnie’s life. He recounted one home visit as a way to illustrate the degree to which adults would underestimate his awareness because of his young age.

*I remember a white lady coming around with her notebooks and stuff like that. I kinda had a feeling it was about me. Nobody ain’t never sat me down with them in a room, cause I guess they figure ‘he’s too young, he don’t really know what’s going on’ . . . They didn’t know I was a grown man at a young age. I had no choice but to grow up. Fast. Maybe she come in cause I wasn’t going to school. It had to be that, cause I never told them nothing. That I was hungry or nothing.*

In looking at Donnie’s kindergarten records, I noticed he was absent fifty-four times, almost a third of the school year. He told me that he had always gone to school when he wanted to go, and when he woke up on time.

*I basically could do whatever I wanted—even as early as kindergarten—and they were kind of lazy, or if they wasn’t being lazy they were high, or they wanted to get high, or they were trying to get money to get high—stuff like that. Um . . . low-lives. Sometimes I wake up wanting to go and don’t nobody want to take me.*

# Barely-competent Writers as Teachers of Resistant Writers

Dr. Steven Ostrowski, CCWP

Even under ideal circumstances, teaching writing to middle and high school students can be a daunting and often frustrating task. This is in no small measure due to the strong resistance that many students demonstrate to engage in virtually any kind of writing activity (at least beyond emailing and texting). Students resist writing for a host of reasons: they claim they never learned how to do it; they find it boring and fail to see the point of it; they're just no good at it; they're convinced that it will not play a significant role in their lives once they are out of school.

As the director of a professional program in English at a fairly large state university, one of my responsibilities is to help prospective English/language arts teachers develop strategies for teaching reluctant writers to write, if not enthusiastically, at least competently. An increasingly significant problem is that a certain percentage of the teaching candidates we work with are resistant and, to be frank, sometimes barely-competent writers themselves. For the purposes of this article, I will define writing competence as the ability to write clearly, effectively, fluently, and creatively, with a good working sense of the conventions. One might rightly ask, then, why people who are only "barely-competent writers" are admitted to a professional program in English in the first place. Aside from the fact that being a "barely-competent" writer puts one ahead of the majority of other students, the short answer is that they're admitted because they're competent enough to have written a passable essay, garnered several letters of recommendation from professors who have read their writing, passed an oral interview, and to have garnered at least a B average in a

minimum of six college literature and writing courses at the time of application to the program. It is not the purpose of this article to explore whether or not the writing bar is set too low for admittance into professional programs in English at institutions like the one I work at, although it *is* an on-going topic of discussion at our shop, and a worthy topic of future exploration.

While it is important to acknowledge that all the candidates admitted to our professional program are bright and hard-working and certainly do possess academic strengths, few of the barely competent writer-candidates dispute the fact that they are resistant writers. When asked to reflect, orally and/or in writing, on what makes them resistant writers—a question I have been asking my students for more than ten years—they are usually quite forthcoming. Typical responses include variations of the following: “I was never really taught to write.” “The majority of my high school teachers only corrected grammar and spelling, which I think is all that they themselves were confident about responding to.” “We weren’t given a lot of substantial writing assignments in my classes. I don’t think the teachers wanted to have to read them and give a lot of feedback to them.” “All I ever learned was how to write a five-paragraph essay. I can do that pretty well, but anything that requires a different format, or approach, or creativity, and I’m lost.” “There was no room for any kind of creativity in the writing I’d done in school, at least not since fifth grade. When my college professors said they wanted sophisticated writing, writing that had voice and a point of view, I had only the vaguest idea of what those things were and no idea how to put them into my own writing. And even though the professors insisted that they *wanted* those things, they didn’t teach us *how* to do it. Maybe they could do it in their own writing, but I’m not sure they knew how to teach it to others.” “The most typical response I received all through school and college was, ‘develop this.’ Nothing else.” It is clear from these comments

that too many students are not receiving adequate writing instruction, and too many English teachers are not effective teachers of writing.

At this point I want to make three very basic assumptions about what defines effective teachers of writing: 1) They are confident about their own competence, versatility, and effectiveness as writers, and will, if asked, comfortably (and with all due modesty) refer to themselves as writers. 2) They know how to respond to student writers, especially to a myriad of writing problems, in effective ways. 3) They have solid ideas about how to motivate their students to want to write and to write better. Of course, I well understand that even the best writing teachers face challenges with certain students that are nearly insurmountable. I'm talking here about teachers who succeed in helping the majority of their students become genuinely better writers than they were before they entered those teachers' classrooms. I would argue that an English/language arts teacher who is himself only a barely competent writer even after completing a professional program, will almost never have that kind of success in his classroom. Thus, it is incumbent upon those who teach in professional programs to make sure that their candidates at the very least begin to transcend their status as "barely competent" writers so that they can become effective teachers of writing.

### **How One Professional Program Attempts to Help Barely Competent Teacher Candidate Writers**

In what follows, I briefly describe three of the ways our program attempts to help our barely-competent teacher candidate writers become stronger, more competent writers and, hence, better, more confident teachers of writing who can improve the writing and the motivation to write of their own students.

## Writing for Teachers

We believe it is important to promote all areas of writing development for candidates in our program. One of the things we have done at our institution is to implement a “Writing for Teachers” minor. Although no student is required to take the minor, professional program advisors strongly recommend it to almost all prospective candidates, especially to those whom they identify as barely-competent writers.

In brief, three, three-credit courses were specifically created for the minor, with specific pedagogical aims in mind: Fiction for Teachers, Poetry for Teachers, and Teaching Mechanics. In the poetry and fictions courses, candidates study the elements, concepts, and terminologies of the various genres. They read in the various genres, write in the various genres, workshop their writings, and explore and create methods for teaching works in the various genres. The Teaching Mechanics course focuses on students critiquing their own and others students’ writing in terms of a host of mechanical issues. Students create lessons and units on mechanics topics, with an aim of making the lessons effective and motivating.

Students take three other three-credit courses, choosing from among the other creative writing and journalism courses our English department offers, including Fiction, Poetry, Creative Nonfiction, Drama, and Journalism. These are more traditional workshop-oriented creative writing courses.

The goal of the minor is to allow prospective English teachers to experience a deep immersion in a variety of kinds of writing, in reading and discussing a wide array of relevant literary works, and in studying and learning to apply relevant concepts and terms associated with a variety of literary genres.

## **Writing in the Methods Course**

In the semester before they student teach, our candidates take a methods course called Teaching English in the Secondary Schools. In our program, in addition to creating numerous lesson plans and a major unit plan, students do a great deal of other kinds of writing. Some of it is personal—journal reflections, narratives on early school experiences, narratives on field experiences. Some of it is in the form of responses to professional articles. Some of it is in the form of field reports. And some is in the form of ethnography or action research. The course instructor—being a writer himself and conscious of the fact that his students will soon be in charge of classrooms full of students who deserve the opportunity to become competent writers—offers careful, rubric-based feedback to the candidates, not only on the content of their writing but on many other relevant aspects, including voice, organization, point of view, style, and mechanics. Students who receive unsatisfactory grades are strongly encouraged, though not required, to conference with the professor and to resubmit their work.

## **Permission to Teach Writing Differently**

Quoted earlier were comments by teacher candidates that decried school writing experiences that they claimed were inadequate to make them solid, confident, fully-competent writers. Without some kind of intervention, candidates who felt comfortable with virtually nothing more than how to compose a five-paragraph essay would almost certainly revert to that form when they became teachers of writing. In our program, the intervention might be looked at as the formal and practiced extension of permission to go beyond the limits of forms like the five-paragraph essay. That is, without abandoning the five-paragraph essay altogether—it has its place—we want to grant our students

permission to dare to teach writing in ways that they never experienced. For example, significant time is dedicated to discussing and trying out alternatives to the five-paragraph essay. A few examples are the I-search paper, the multi-genre essay, and the creative non-fiction essay. Candidates not only read models of these kinds of writings, they write them as well, sometimes exchanging and critiquing each other's work.

Our focus on writing about literature includes giving candidates permission to assign a variety of reader-response essays, to have their students write alternative endings to stories and novels, "missing chapters," letters to the author, blurbs, and reviews. In every case, including those of the assignments that might be labeled "creative," we emphasize that responses to the writing should be based on pre-established and rigorous criteria, but that, because writing is a process, to be aware that students will "arrive" at different places in their writing experiences, and at different times. The important point is that they become better, more competent and confident writers than they were when they began the course.

### **Conclusion**

Our formally barely-competent writer candidates, when they student teach and later become fully-employed teachers, will recognize their younger, writing-resistant selves in many of their students. It is our hope and our goal that they will not perpetuate the limited and largely ineffective methods that their own teachers—either out of fear, inadequate training, or laziness—employed in teaching (or failing to teach) them to write. Instead, armed with a host of ideas and fortified with the permission to try them out, these new teachers can help their students to thrive as writers.

# Writing Our Way Out of the Labyrinth: How to Use Literature's 'Big Ideas' as Springboards for Student Essays

Joanne Peluso, CWP-Storrs

It hadn't been a very good year.

I'd been optimistic about my first try at teaching sophomores; after all, my favorite works of literature are part of the Grade 10 curriculum—*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Lord of the Flies*, *The Catcher in the Rye*—and I was delighted to have a chance to present these books to my students. Plus, I was part of an innovative and dedicated team of English teachers, led by a department chair whose vision was similar to mine; as a group, we'd created a thematic writing unit that stretched across the entire school year—how's *that* for using the writing process?—while calling upon our students' narrative and analytical skills.

September was a moderate success; students were writing about themselves in light of the overarching topic of "power." *Where does your power lie?* was the question we'd asked the sophomores to consider. *Where is your place in the power structure of society?*

The kids prewrote, drafted, and revised; they conferred with each other and with me. Most of the students claimed to find their power in sports or music, although many had a tough time differentiating between inner strength and physical talent. Other students, perhaps uncomfortable with or unaccustomed to writing about themselves, told the stories of Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, or George W. Bush. There were also a few confessional essays detailing run-ins with the law, a couple of patriotic tributes to the military, and one deeply religious student's earnest tale of finding her power in the Lord. Overall, it was what I'd expected: grumbles whenever I asked for a revision; shy smiles, or

downright *shock*, when I offered positive feedback; and eyes squinted in confusion when I mentioned voice. The one suggestion—or was it a command, or a cry of frustration?—that they didn’t seem ready to accept, though, was the idea that not every essay needed to have five formulaic paragraphs.

The very idea that they were allowed to write without the constraints of the five-paragraph essay sent my students into a frenzy. First, they acted as if I’d told them they could light up cigarettes during homeroom—*hey, this is cool, the teacher’s telling us to break the rules*. Then, they floundered. Without the familiar structure they didn’t know how to express themselves. Some did fine, eventually; others gave up and resorted to the comfort of routine. They all wrote *something* that first month of school. The plan was for the students to revisit those essays during the fourth quarter, after having read at least six books, and incorporate analyses of what they’d learned from those books about power, about the responsibilities of those who hold power, and about the attainment of power by those who’d fought for a place in society.

Somewhere along the way, we as teachers had overlooked one thing: whether the problem is trouble with comprehension, or lack of interest in the material, or a family situation that affords no time or place for solitary academic pursuits, the bottom line is *our kids don’t read the books we assign*. How are we going to teach them to *analyze* a novel when they haven’t *read* it? How are they going to dig beneath the superficial aspects of a book when they couldn’t get past the first chapter?

Rick VanDeWeghe, in the July 2008 issue of *English Journal*, wrote about how students develop a deeper engagement with literature when teachers present reading as an opportunity to explore life’s big mysteries. “Effective teachers,” he discovered, “influence students’ genuinely purposeful reading by

posing good prereading questions, especially those that cause readers to connect the text with their lives or that raise ethical dilemmas” (108).

What I believed had been an intriguing essay question, rich with possibilities for both oral and written assignments—*Are people basically good or basically evil?*—worked until I asked the students to support their assertions with evidence from *The Lord of the Flies*. Because I was asking them to read a challenging text and then think about big-picture topics that went beyond the words on the page (or the summaries on the sparknotes.com site), my students were overwhelmed. This is hard, they said. Well, yeah, the important questions tend to be difficult, I told them. Some of them tried; most of them resorted to that old standby, The Printer Problem, which is student-code for “You Will Never See My Essay Because It Doesn’t Exist.” I had time to work on them, I thought; it was only November.

Although the majority of the students did turn in work, many of them were still tethered to the five-paragraph persuasive essay; the preparation for standardized writing tests had stifled them so thoroughly that they couldn’t break free, even with my encouragement. Rather than let their minds (and pencils) run wild, they played it safe and structured, feeling compelled to browbeat their readers with emphatic but flimsy, formulaic arguments. They could not or would not present their ideas in their own engaging voices, because they didn’t trust those voices.

Then, because school districts like to spring initiatives on teachers in the middle of the year, our department was told to provide *rigor* for our students at all levels. Administrators made quick stops into our classrooms to check for student-centered, inquiry-based, rigorous instruction. Add the sudden focus on rigor to the ongoing initiatives—differentiation in the mainstream classroom; engaging male students; providing a safe, nurturing environment for all;

promoting steady attendance rates; raising standardized test scores; encouraging more students to take AP classes; creating monthly common assessments to compile data on student progress; and, of course, improving student writing—and it was enough to make even the most devoted educators feel defeated.

Rather than standing in the hallway at 2:05 screaming for mercy (yes, some teachers do that; we've all seen—or heard—or been—those teachers) I decided to reassess my beliefs about teaching, reading, and writing to see how I could weave this new emphasis on rigor with the already-established initiatives. I came up with the following core beliefs:

- The best writing is both personal and universal.
- It is the teacher's responsibility to engage "unengage-able" students in reading and writing.
- Every student, regardless of his or her academic abilities, deserves rigor.
- One of the reasons teachers have such a hard time encouraging students to cultivate a voice is because the traditional "underachieving" student has had his or her voice silenced by disapproving teachers.
- The writing process *works*.
- A curriculum must draw from both classic and contemporary literature—as long as the literature is good and allows students to address (or even analyze) questions that are both personal and universal.

And so I had come full circle, back to what I see as the foundation of my teaching philosophy: we need to strike a balance between the personal and the universal before we can engage with a text. By personal, I do not mean those surface connections we force students to make on standardized responses to literature—I *can connect to this story because the main character is in New York City, and I went there on a class trip in eighth grade*—but a more meaningful immersion into the

deep waters of a story. What is the author's purpose for writing this; why does it matter; and how does it connect to that big world out there?

With all of this in mind, I approached the second half of the year with a renewed energy and a determination to get my students to *think* about the universal questions, *read* how various authors have responded to those questions, and *write* personal, analytical responses in their own emerging voices. I thought getting them to read would be the biggest obstacle; it wasn't. First, they needed permission to *think*.

By getting to know my sophomores as individuals through surveys, daily conversation, and observation of their learning styles, I was able to tailor my second-semester lessons to their needs and interests. Many of my students were non-scholars putting in their time at a traditional school until they were able to move on to technical or alternative education; most of them were classic underachievers: very bright, original thinkers who'd been turned off to school somewhere along the way. They saw themselves as rule-breakers, rebels whose primary cause was bucking authority for its own sake. They had better background knowledge than most of my accelerated students, and were more intellectually curious than those students who valued grades above all else. They were polite, funny, and responded well to humor. And most of them had stories: I knew this because they told their stories in the detached way that survivors often do. Drunken parents, violent stepparents, foster homes, drug abuse, unbearable loss, emotional trauma—these were everyday events for many of my students, who didn't want to be pitied, who just wanted to be acknowledged. How could I let them know that I heard them, and I respected them, but I needed them to do some work, too?

There were four books I wanted to get through during second semester: *Night*, by Elie Wiesel; *The Sunflower*, by Simon Wiesenthal; *A Separate Peace*, by

John Knowles; and *Looking for Alaska*, by John Green. The first two were part of a broader interdisciplinary unit on the Holocaust, which I'd hoped would call upon my students' interest in history. The third was a classic, which would provide a good reference point for the common final assessment. And the fourth was fairly new to the curriculum; it had already caused a bit of a stir among parents who objected to the content on a few of the pages, but probably hadn't read the entire book.

Working with my Grade 10 English counterparts (never underestimate the power of collaboration), we'd decided to approach the Holocaust unit by presenting the students with the same overarching questions that Wiesenthal asks in *The Sunflower*: What are the possibilities and limits of forgiveness? Must we forgive the unforgivable? Is there any crime that's unforgivable? I decided to incorporate the Knowles and Green novels to the unit by looking at their fictional teenage characters in terms of these questions as well.

I began by handing the students index cards and writing one word on the board: *forgiveness*. "What comes to your mind when you think of the word forgiveness?" I asked. "Jot down your ideas. Take about three or four minutes." I instructed the students to remain anonymous, but most wrote their names on the cards, anyway: Did they do this by habit, or because they wanted a grade for their efforts, or was it something else?

Some of the students based their ideas on personal experience—"I can't forgive my friends for ditching me"—while others, trained to look for the "right" answer, offered dictionary definitions of the word. Most, though, gave me what amounted to their own thesis statements, although they surely would have looked at me with confusion if I'd asked for one. *There is nothing that can't be forgiven*, one student wrote. *If someone murdered my family I wouldn't forgive them,*

wrote another, *but everything else is forgivable*. Still another, from a girl who had made some bad decisions in the past year: *The hardest person to forgive is yourself*.

I read the most provocative statements aloud, one by one, and asked for students to engage each other in a discussion. At first, students were hesitant to address each other without approval from me, but I resisted the urge to direct the conversation, and after a few minutes, the class grew accustomed to the new routine. At the end of the discussion, I asked the class to write in their notebooks about the topic of forgiveness. "Hang on to these reflections," I said. "They will help you when you begin to write your forgiveness essay."

Then, I provided the students with various scenarios and asked them to label them from "most believable" to "unthinkable beyond belief." The post-September 11 generation doesn't view many things as "unthinkable," so most students wrote that they wouldn't be surprised if, one day, they woke up and found that, say, all of the Koreans in the neighborhood were forced to close their businesses, leave their jobs, quit school, and board a bus for a segregated part of town. Some students found it plausible, as well, that all of the elderly people in the city might be taken to an open field and forced to dig their own graves. The more personal it became, though, the less believable the situations seemed to the students. Suppose, I said, that all of the football players in this school, because they're strong young men, were ordered to do hard labor all day long, and were given nothing to eat but crusts of bread and lukewarm lumps of soup. *That would never happen*, my students assured each other. *We wouldn't do it; we'd revolt*.

I gave the students copies of Wiesel's *Night*. As a class, we read the introduction and the first few pages; then, I assigned them to read the first two chapters for homework and generate critical-thinking questions ("how" and "why" rather than "what" or "who") based on their reading. The questions were used as more than a perfunctory "reading check"; they were a springboard for

the class discussions that I hoped would flourish and lead to stronger written work as well.

In each of my sophomore classes, the students met my expectations by asking—and debating—key points from Wiesel’s story, without any interference from me.

**David:** “Why do you think the violin kept playing as the Jewish people were dying?”

**Jason:** “Maybe it wasn’t a real violin, maybe it was just a symbol.”

**Lindsay:** “How could a violin be a symbol?”

**David:** “Music is a symbol of hope, maybe. Once the violin stopped, all hope was lost.”

**Devon:** “Music is powerful. Maybe he held on to the violin because it was what gave him power.”

Many of my students confessed that *Night* was the first book they’d actually read all year. Literature circles, in which the students had been given a choice of novels, hadn’t been as successful, and *The Lord of the Flies* had been an exercise in futility, but I realize now that I’d been guilty of under-teaching the former and over-teaching the latter. *Night* was that wonderful, teachable combination: engaging, accessible writing coupled with opportunities for critical thinking and higher-level discussion. Its small size and relatively simple vocabulary didn’t intimidate the students, but its subject matter forced them to think about the big questions: *how* and *why*.

*The Sunflower* enhanced our study of forgiveness and gave the students access to essays by Robert Coles, the Dalai Lama, Cynthia Ozick, and Desmond Tutu, among many others. All of them respond to the same questions about forgiveness that the students were about to consider. After reading the first 100 or so pages of Wiesenthal’s book, which recounts the story of a Jewish prisoner

who is asked to forgive a dying Nazi soldier on behalf of all of those he's murdered, students then chose four of the essays which comprised the remaining two-thirds of the book. They read, annotated, and discussed their self-selected essays. Again, they were advised to use these essays to inform their own thinking about forgiveness.

While the students read *A Separate Peace* at home, they worked on their forgiveness essays in class. And yes, I had to answer the usual question: *Does it have to be five paragraphs?* But this time the kids knew me well enough to know that I was just *pretending* to beat my head against the chalkboard.

Using their *Night* and *Sunflower* notes as well as their own ideas, the students formulated thesis statements about forgiveness. This took an entire eighty-four minute class period because, despite the fact that they'd written thesis statements at least once before (back in November, for their research papers), they still didn't quite understand what a thesis statement *was*.

"Forgiveness can be difficult but sometimes easy," Arturo wrote on his index card.

"Would anyone argue that it's difficult sometimes, easy sometimes?" I asked.

"No," Arturo said.

"So what might be a better thesis statement, something that someone could reasonably disagree with?"

"Forgiveness isn't always easy?"

"When *is* it easy?" I asked.

"When the person didn't really hurt you."

"So if you're not really hurt, why do you need to forgive?"

"Forgiveness is not easy when you've been really hurt, but it's always the best thing to do."

“It’s *always* the best thing to do?” I asked.

“Yes. Even if it’s difficult, you should always forgive. It’s always the right thing to do.”

“Could someone argue with that? Could someone say, hey, Arturo, forgiveness is not always the best thing to do?”

“Yes. But I wouldn’t change my mind. I still think forgiveness is always best.”

“*Now* you’re onto something! Support that thesis –use Elie, use Simon, use Finny and Gene, use your own experience!”

And so I went around to each student’s desk, questioning, questioning, and sometimes exasperating them. What I was trying to do was to force them to whittle their ideas down to the essence, and to do that, they had to exercise their brains a bit, the way, I reminded them, an athlete had to practice before taking the field.

“This is hard!” Sean said. “It hurts to think!”

I gave him The Look—the one that says *now you know why we’ve been spending so much time asking these questions . . . it’s all been leading up to this moment.*

Fortuitously, in the middle of the forgiveness unit, our school held a Challenge Day for sophomores. The mission of Challenge Day is to forge connections between the school community through a daylong immersion in facilitated workshops and activities that promote honesty, acceptance, and forgiveness. Amidst cathartic dancing and (sometimes awkward) hugging, students are asked to show their peers and teachers who they are beneath the façades they often put up as self-defense mechanisms. Without exception, my students emerged from Challenge Day as more tolerant, more secure people, with an understanding that *intolerance* (whether it be due to race, religion, gender, sexuality, or social status) often stems from *insecurity*.

Many of my students wanted to write about their Challenge Day experiences in their forgiveness essays. Alexis wrote about a friend with whom she'd parted ways in middle school due to a trivial argument. On Challenge Day, they reconciled. Aidan told of a bully who'd offered him a heartfelt apology for years of teasing. Jenna, on the other hand, doubted the sincerity of a girl who'd tried to make amends with her, and although she was polite on Challenge Day, she wrote in her essay that she would think twice before reestablishing a relationship with the girl. *I can't really forgive her*, Jenna admitted, supporting her argument that forgiveness shouldn't take place without true repentance. I loved how my students were weaving their personal experiences into their writing—it was true “reader response,” and it happened because the students not only read, but also understood and connected with the material.

So how do we find works that speak to our students? It's no secret that students divide literature into two distinct categories: “pleasure” books and “school” books. The task for English teachers, who, unlike other content area teachers, may have a bit more leeway in designing a curriculum, is to find books that will engage *and* educate. These books must address what the power standards call “the universal human experience” in a way that challenges the students' worldview.

Although my students liked *A Separate Peace* well enough, once Gene jostled the tree and Finny fell (and yes, they were quick to point out the symbolic nature of the tree, and many were moved by what they recognized from current movies and television as Leper's post-traumatic stress disorder), the slow opening was a hard sell for some of my less motivated students. I knew that *Looking for Alaska* would grab them, but not having taught the book before, I was apprehensive. The book addresses some issues that make parents uncomfortable but that are, unfortunately, everyday parts of many students' lives: cursing, sex,

marijuana, and drunk driving. Nothing as horrifying as the atrocities to be found in *Night* or *The Sunflower*, to be sure, but parents sometimes have different standards for appropriate reading material.

Before plunging into *Alaska*, I did some research on author John Green and found that his motivation for writing the book went a lot deeper than shock value. In an interview, Green said, "Throughout *Alaska*, Pudge is dissatisfied with everyone's answers for the question he keeps asking: Why is the world's suffering distributed unequally and unfairly? That's the question I keep trying to answer, also." I compared this to Elie Wiesel's statement in *Night*, "I did not deny God's existence, but I doubted His absolute justice" (42) and Simon Wiesenthal's observation that "God must have been on leave during the Holocaust" (9), and found that the overarching questions for all of the books (*A Separate Peace*, too, with its meditation on the dark side of human behavior and Finny's refusal to acknowledge that dark side) related to our need to make sense of things that are beyond explanation.

I began, as I did with *Night*, by introducing a big idea: *Why do teenagers think they're invincible?* I didn't even ask them to prewrite or take notes; I just wanted to listen to their ideas. All of my sophomore classes mentioned drunk driving, and the friends they'd lost in car accidents, and the times they'd knowingly taken a ride from an intoxicated person. In every case, we spent an entire class period (again, fortuitously, just before Memorial Day weekend, traditionally a time of bad choices for teenagers) discussing life, death, and forgiveness. Normally a passionate storyteller, I reined in my theatrical tendencies and let the kids talk. Later, one of my best students called this class session "The Day Ms. Peluso Went Off-Topic," but I'd never felt more *on*, observing as they—unknowingly—created their own pre-reading exercise for the next novel they'd tackle.

In *Alaska*, the main character, Pudge, collects the last words of famous people; knowing how successful people face death may give him some indication of how to live. The object of his affection, a smart, smart-mouthed rule breaker (like Finny, like many of my students), tells Pudge that her favorite last words are from Gabriel Garcia-Marquez' book *The General in His Labyrinth*: "How will I ever get out of this *labyrinth*!" The intricate maze, then, becomes a metaphor for the suffering of life, just as "The Great Perhaps" is Pudge's term for the world's infinite possibilities.

Instead of over-teaching (killing the joy of reading) or under-teaching (missing opportunities for rigorous instruction), I gave students copies of *Alaska*, warned them that they or their parents might be offended by some of it and, if so, they should see me for an alternate assignment. To be honest, I didn't expect much of a response from parents, who'd proven over the course of the year to be a realistic, supportive group, just as baffled by their intelligent kids' lack of academic success as I was.

The morning after I assigned *Alaska*, my first period students entered the classroom holding their copies of the novel, ready to discuss, question, and—in some cases—rant: *Why did Alaska have to die? Will we ever find out if it's a suicide?* Not only had they read the required chapters, they'd read more, and—here's the thing—they wanted to talk about it. Some of the boys had fallen in love with Alaska; one even admitted to crying when she died. (Hmm, I thought—crying over a person who exists only between the pages of a book? How—*wonderful*.)

For *Alaska*, I created brief response questions that challenged students to make inferences about the text without dwelling on what I call "what-was-the-dog's-name?" type of details. Discourse flourished as my students considered whether or not Alaska's death was a suicide. It was an accident, some said, because the flowers found in her car proved she had a destination. It was

intentional, others said, because she'd written "Straight and fast" in the margins of *The General in His Labyrinth*. I didn't have to remind them to "use the text." They did because they'd already read it, and they'd already thought about it. How and why Alaska died mattered to my students.

The only passages I read aloud to my students were taken from the last few pages where Pudge decides he's ok without knowing the answer, without knowing Alaska's last words. He forgives her, and he believes she would have forgiven him. As I read these words to the class, I watched it come together for them: there was something bigger at work here, something beyond these words on the page, something deeper than these characters who drank, and swore, and smoked, and made clumsy attempts at connection—these characters who reminded them of their friends, of themselves.

We remembered Elie who couldn't forgive the Germans and couldn't forgive himself for his abandonment of his father; we remembered Simon whose non-response was in its own way the most powerful response he could have given; we remembered Gene whose impulsive action changed his life and Finny's; and we remembered the people we needed to forgive, those we can't forgive, those we hope will forgive us.

And we wrote about it. Yes, I wrote with them, and I showed them my false starts, the gigantic Xs drawn through rejected passages, the scribbles at the margins, ghosts of ideas I couldn't let go. Writing's supposed to be messy and scary, I told them. Put away the whiteout. Show your work. Like *Alaska's* Pudge Halter, we can write our way out of the labyrinth. We all make mistakes, and we are forgiven.

I can't say that every one of my students turned in a strong paper. Scattered among the declarations of independence from violent stepfathers, pledges of love for drug-addicted mothers, and recollections of Challenge Day

epiphanies, I did find a few generic, five-paragraph disappointments. Still, I saw tremendous growth in the writing skills of each student, and I was impressed by the way they'd managed to weave their own stories with those of the four authors we'd studied. The best papers—Sean's and Lindsay's—Concentrated on the works we'd studied, the atrocities of the Holocaust, and the big-picture ideas of faith, family, and friendship, touching lightly upon the students' own experiences: that ideal blend of the personal and the universal.

So what did I learn from these ragtag, scatterbrained skaters and stoners I'd grown to love?

- The most engaging school writing does, in fact, combine voice and vision: A student's strong, passionate voice coupled with his or her interpretation of the author's vision. It is the teacher's task to provide students with the skills to create meaning from reading, and the room to discover his or her personal voice.
- We cannot reach them all. A few students didn't hand in work—despite my promise to give them credit for late submissions—didn't demonstrate understanding, didn't pass sophomore year.
- Beginning units with essential questions that speak to the universal human experience prepares the students to focus on how various authors have written their own way out of the labyrinth, and provides a rich purpose for both reading and writing.

What had begun as “the year from hell” ended with hugs, and laughter, and well wishes, and even though I'd spent months telling my students that “life isn't always tied up with a pretty bow,” well, this was pretty close.

## Works Cited

- Gallagher, Kelly. *Readicide: How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do About It*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2009.
- Green, John. "Seven Impossible Interviews Before Breakfast #19: John Green, Printz Winner, Nerd Fighter, WorldSuck Decreaser." Interview by Eisha and James. Weblog entry. Seven Impossible Things Before Breakfast: A Blog About Books. 13 Apr. 2007. 26 June 2009  
<<http://blaine.org/sevenimpossiblethings>>.
- VanDeWeghe, Rick. "Research Matters: Authentic Literacy and Student Achievement." *English Journal* 97.6 (2008): 105-08.
- Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Belmont: Perfection Learning Prebound, 1978.
- Wiesenthal, Simon. *The Sunflower*. New York: Schocken, 1998.

# Excerpt from: “Writing A Family: Home-School Connections that Incorporate Cultural Diversity”

Maria Truscinski and Lynda M. Valerie, CCWP

The cafeteria was abuzz, the long white table laden with paper plates and plastic utensils stacked neatly at one end. The feast unfolded. Mrs. Green had brought curried goat. Rachel’s grandmother brought coconut cake. Mrs. Lanier’s pot of collard greens was next to Nathan’s dad’s slow cooked roast pork and first grade teacher Sarnia Griffo’s paella. Victoria Osborne’s grandfather prepared a traditional Lithuanian tunnel cake that stood two feet high. There was more: rice and beans, kielbasa and sauerkraut, lentils, lasagna, Scottish shortbread cookies, brownies, cakes, and more . . . . Fourth grade teacher Sue Sinclair set up an exhibit to share artifacts from her Scottish heritage. Virginia Osborne gave Lithuanian dance lessons for students and adults. Mrs. Rodriquez led the salsa line dancing. Wanda Wright and her students had a craft booth to make a Native American toys based on information that her class had studied. The success of the night was not measured in the four score participants, or the outstanding feast, or the even the sense of goodwill, but that each family’s, students’, and staff’s, contribution had been needed, appreciated, and honored. It was apparent that everyone had something to bring to the table.

How did this come about? The idea for these projects stemmed from two seemingly unrelated chronic concerns. How can teachers get students to write more? How can we build stronger school-home connections? Each day, students need ample opportunities for authentic writing. Each day, there are a multitude of home literacy interactions. Why not utilize everyday literacy exchanges that tap into the wealth of resources that families have to offer, often unknowingly?

Families provide countless contributions to the school in terms of wide-ranging expertise, cultural traditions, and diverse literacy experiences. Writing improves with structured and authentic opportunities to write. Why not focus home school connections on providing valuable, authentic writing experiences?

Educational literature abounds supporting both the value of writing to learn and the benefits of home-school connections. In the world of standardized testing, the bulk of resources, time, and money are spent on the king and queen, reading and math. Writing sometimes seems a poor cousin. It is ironic, because focusing on teaching writing serves to extend and enrich reading and learning. Elbow expresses this well, stating that writing promotes more psychological and physical engagement than reading. "Reading tends to imply, 'Sit still and pay attention,' whereas writing tends to imply, 'Get in there and *do* something.'" The notion that the act of writing generates ideas and helps to develop higher order thinking skills and, by the way, results in high test scores is reiterated again and again (NCTE, 2004; Routman, (2005); Murray, 2004; Calkins, 2004; National Writing Project, & Nagin, 2003). Teaching writing takes time, lots of it. Students need lots of time to practice and develop writing.

Literature on family literacy corroborates that appropriately selected plans and projects can strengthen home-school connections, having an advantageous effect on students' literacy achievement (Allington & Cunningham, 2006; Sheldon, 2003; Taylor & Pearson, 2004; Neuman, Caperelli, & Kee, 1998; Saracho, 2002). Embracing family literacy is integral to literacy instruction; however, it is not automatic (Longwell-Grice & McIntyre, 2006). Crawford (2006) states that teachers must believe that the home lives of children matter, and there is much to be gained from working with families. Family literacy programs may integrate interactive literacy activities between family members and children, discussions with parents regarding how to be full partners in the education of their children,

and age-appropriate instruction to prepare students for success in school and life experiences (Amstutz, 2000; Cairney, 2002). The scope of family literacy initiatives may be as simple as the work of one class or extend throughout a school and community. Successful family literacy projects take into account the goals and expertise of both the school and the family to benefit the student's literacy development (Saracho, 2007; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinel, 2005; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006; Pahl & Kelly, 2005; Jay & Rohl, 2005).

The following relates successful school family/community writing projects from various suburban and urban schools that endeavored to respect and involve the cultural and linguistic diversity of the families and the communities of the students. Each of these projects begins with a reading-writing connection through read-alouds, book share rounds, or map reading. Each also has activities that extend beyond the classroom that tap into family connections and a culminating activity for families and community members. A sample outline is included at the end of this article. Also included is a sample of a letter to be sent home detailing the families' role and connection to the project.

#### Works Cited

- Allington, Richard L., and Patricia M. Cunningham. *Classrooms that Work*. New York: Addison-Wesley Longman, 2006.
- Amstutz, Donna D. "Family Literacy: Implications for Public School Practice." *Education and Urban Society* 32.2 (2000): 207-220.
- Bryson, Bill. *A Walk in the Woods*. New York: Broadway, 1998.
- Bunting, Eve. *The Wall*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1990.
- Cairney, Trevor H. Bridging Home and School Literacy: In Search of Transformative Approaches to Curriculum. *Early Child Development and Care*, 172.2 (2002): 153-172.

- Calkins, Luck McCormick. *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994.
- . *Units of Study for Primary Writing: A Yearlong Curriculum*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003.
- Crawford, Patricia A., and Vicky Zygouris-Coe. "All in the Family: Connecting Home and School with Family Literacy." *Early Childhood Education* 33.4 (2006): 261-267.
- Jay, Jenny, and Mary Rohl. "Constructing a Family Literacy Program: Challenges and Successes." *International Journal of Early Childhood* 37.1 (2005): 57-78.
- Longwell-Grice, Hope, and Ellen McIntyre. "Addressing Goals of School and Community: Lessons from a Family Literacy Program." *School Community* 16.2 (2006): 115-132.
- Murray, Donald. *Write to Learn*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2004.
- The National Writing Project and Carl Nagin. *Because Writing Matters, Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*. Berkeley: Jossey-Bas, 2003.
- "NCTE Beliefs About the Teaching of Writing." *National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)* Nov. 2004. 15 Mar. 2009  
<<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/writingbeliefs>>.
- Neuman, Susan B., Billie Jean. Caperelli, and C. Kee. "Literacy Learning, A Family Matter." *Reading Teacher* 52.3 (1998): 244-252.
- Pahl, Kate, and Sally Kelly. "Family Literacy as a Third Space Between Home and School: Some Case Studies of Practice." *Literacy* 39.2 (2005): 91-6.
- Roberts, Joanne, Julia Jurgens, and Margaret Burchinal. "The Role of Home Literacy Practices in Preschool Children's Language Development and Emergent Literacy Skills." *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research* 48 (2005): 345-359.

- Routman, Regie. *Writing Essentials*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2005.
- Saracho, Olivia N. "A Literacy Program for Fathers: A Case Study." *Early Childhood Education* 35.4 (2007): 351-356.
- . "Family Literacy: Exploring Family Practices." *Early Child Development and Care* 172.2 (2002): 113-122.
- Sheldon, Steven B. "Linking School-family-community Partnerships in Urban Elementary Schools to Student Achievement on State Tests." *Urban Review* 35.2 (2003): 149-165.
- Taylor, Barbara M., and P. David. Pearson. "Research on Learning to Read – At School, Home, and in the Community." *Elementary School* 105.2 (2004): 167-181.
- Weigel, Daniel J., Sally S. Martin, and Kymberly K. Bennett. "Mothers' Literacy Beliefs: Connections with the Home Literacy Environment and Pre-school Children's Literacy Development." *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 6.2 (2006): 191-211.

# In Search of the Right Words

Kristin Veenema, CWP-Fairfield

The joy in the little boy's face was unmistakable as he looked into the camera lens and described what it's like for him to read a good book: "You don't hear anything around you; you don't even know where you are anymore!" As the screen faded to black, I tried to remember the last time I felt like that while reading. Then I tried to remember the last time I saw one of my high school students wrapped up in a book.

It's not uncommon to see elementary students excited about books. The oldies are still goodies: *Where the Wild Things Are*, the *Amelia Bedelia* series and *Ralph S. Mouse*, to name a few. Unfortunately, it's also not uncommon to see secondary students put off reading assignments as last in the homework line-up—if they get to them at all. And it's not a surprise to secondary teachers to hear the same students who once ran for the bookshelf cubbies in elementary school to defiantly claim, "I hate reading." While the plunge from eager readers to reluctant page-turners has been blamed on a multitude of factors—including the cultural shift caused by technology, overcommitted students with no time, and the onset of digital music downloads— after experimenting for a semester with my English 2B students, I propose a different reason.

*Jack and the Beanstalk* holds the first mile-marker in my literary biography, a timeline of the books that have been most significant in my life. I was in first grade, the golden year of circle time on the rug for stories read by the teacher, and eventually our classmates. It was also the year I noticed a select handful of students pulled from class once a week for special reading instruction, what I now know to call "enrichment," and I yearned to go with them. *Jack and the Beanstalk* was my ticket in; it was the first book I read to the class on the rug with

never a word of help from my teacher. Fast-forward my literary biography to within the past couple years and I might note *White Oleander* by Janet Finch or *Rule of the Bone* by Russell Banks. While neither of these more recent books opened doors to special programs or won me recognition, they feel just as important as *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Within Astrid and Bone's stories of changing their views on life in every new situation they encounter to eventually solidify, at least for the ending, an identity in which they are confident, I found a small piece of myself. Their stories are a little bit my story, and their words became a little bit my words. They linger in my conscience each time I read a new book with the same struggle to remake oneself and feel content with the results: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*; *Bright Lights, Big City*; even *Oleanna*—John wants so badly to live by what he sees as a fair and empathetic style of teaching only to have it thrown in his face by a student who comes into her own with the help of supporters. I get you John, I do; but I get Carol too.

My literary biography undeniably highlights how our needs for literature change as we hit the secondary level and beyond. While we are young, education meets our literary needs and lets us explore the world of books, reading some together and many individually. There is pure joy simply from the fact that there is so much that is new to us. And there is joy in a good story and in the achievement found in getting to that last page. As we age, we are as captured by the need to explore and discover as we were when we were young; what changes is what we search for and want to explore. It is here where literary education takes a turn and cuts short the ever-evolving student.

Just as I found a piece of myself in *White Oleander* and *Rule of the Bone*, we teachers have to remember that our students are not miniature adults. They are very much youngsters and in the throes of developing their identity beyond that of a student at just the time where literary education starts being much more

about the cannon than about the student. In good faith, we aim to teach the reader and not the text; the writer and not the writing, and it's a good start. We do not expect students to parrot interpretations we dispense and we encourage creativity and choice in assessments, making each core text as individualized as possible; but, there is so much more that can and should come from reading a book—more that is, yes, obtained through analysis and an understanding of symbolism and figurative language, which makes these skills highly important in the English classroom. What is not allowed to flourish in the classroom without choice reading and without providing the time for it is our students' need to explore extensively, to wander through the words of others. Like Juliet, we keep our students as wanton birds on a string, encouraging flight with thought and then yanking them back with another core text. As long as we prohibit choice reading time during class and strictly control the content of the course, it is impossible for us not to stunt our students' growth as individuals, in turn discouraging them from reading and finding the joy in a text they once felt in circle time on that first grade rug.

In the same vein, there are undoubtedly countless parents who can remember the days when their child eagerly read book after book but now lament the fact that their child doesn't even read the ones assigned in high school. Teachers battle their students' urge to turn to SparkNotes or some other short cut instead of actually reading. Bothered so much by this phenomenon, my district's K-12 Language Arts Committee charged a handful of high school English teachers to pilot a spin-off of Nancy Atwell's Reader's Workshop where students read a book of their choice silently for one class period each week. Here—I must confess—I tried our Reader's Workshop model with my English 2B class for a semester even though I was not selected to pilot the program. At first, as many students needed to be redirected to their book and quieted every few

minutes, I feared we were wasting time; I feared we weren't preparing steadily enough for the standardized test approaching in the spring. Here—I again confess— Our Reader's Workshop worked.

The day I *suspected* it worked came when Maddie announced that she had finished her book. Someone asked, "Was it good?" This started our impromptu literary circle discussion. Maddie hadn't been pleased, but she said it wasn't "so bad that I couldn't stick with it." Danielle said the same about her book, *Vanishing Acts*, referencing how her friends claimed it was a non-stop read, but she was having a hard time getting past the first few chapters. I asked Danielle if she thought it was worthwhile to persevere and give the book a bit more time or if it was a lost cause and time for a different one. Danielle said she would think about.

The day I *knew* the Reader's Workshop worked was when Danielle came back from the weekend and started off class by claiming how much better her book had gotten. Then Ari said the same about *The Rules of Survival*: "This book is *so* good, just *so* good." Stephen only strengthened my conviction when he walked into class before the bell rang and announced to me that he knew which book he was going to read next. It was two days before the end of the second semester. "Next" meant during the summer.

The majority of the students in this class commonly asked for help finding books for choice reading in which "bad things happen to people." *A Child Called It* (a man's recounting of the unthinkable physical and emotional torture his mother inflicted) and its sequels made their way around the room as well as *Thirteen Reasons Why* (a story about a girl who leaves clues in letters as to why she committed suicide). Kidnappings, rape, and school shootings abounded in their choices in *Give a Boy a Gun*, *Crank*, *Lovely Bones*, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* and *Nineteen Minutes*. How does one explain the violence in our world, the

unspeakable crimes against humanity teenagers like them commit? I don't have an answer, but I recognize and appreciate their interest in the question and their need to come to some sense of understanding. They're searching for answers, for words they can use to explain the answer to themselves and to others. Is it anymore a mystery then why they like *Romeo and Juliet* so much? How much worse could it get for two teenage lovers? In the same breath, though, is it any wonder that they struggle with *The Catcher in the Rye*, but seemed a bit more interested in *Tuesdays with Morrie*? While they can find interest in questions derived from *Catcher* or any other text included in the curriculum, it seems that only the books chosen for free-reading feed their curiosity about an issue that is clearly on the forefront of their minds, perhaps even making them more tolerant of the books I insist we read as a class.

Side note: Admittedly, they're not reading Dickens—neither Charles nor Emily—the Brontë sisters or Irving, but what they are doing is laying the path for themselves to one day arrive at the door of these novels with a profound readiness to work through the visions of humanity presented by these authors.

Beyond my particular class, after a year's focus on choice reading in the high school classroom by our district's K-12 Language Arts Committee, a panel of four local authors gathered to speak about the experiences that informed their writing at a book fair held by the English department to promote choices for summer reading. All four authors, besides speaking about their published works, chose a book from their personal bookshelf to recommend to the high school students as summer loomed in the near future. Regardless of which books the authors chose, what could not escape notice was the fact that each author spoke so passionately about his or her choice, convinced that it was the book that captured an experience or feeling they once had in just the right words. A week later, their excitement was real for me as I read an essay by Mary Gordon that

captured perfectly my obsession with writing in just the right journal with just the right pen. It was a moment all my own where I thought, “That’s it! That’s so how it is!” And suddenly I found the words about journals and writing implements I had been missing; I could thrust this essay at anyone who couldn’t understand my passion for the perfect pen (and the joy that ensues from standing in the pen aisle at the office store) and claim, “this says it all.”

Then I panicked.

Did my students ever find that in anything they read? More importantly, did I make it possible for them to experience that during their time with me? This wasn’t about probing questions and prompting thought; it was about finding the perfect words that I now wanted to adopt as my own. How was I, as the K-12 LA Committee asked all year, to balance my students’ need for individual reading material to satisfy their need to explore and their need still of what the English discipline had to offer? If they never felt moments like this where they were sure an author had gotten it “just right,” then no wonder they chose video games, friends, and sleep over spending time lost in a book.

And yet, the panic subsided for this need for words is easily addressed again through choice reading in the classroom.

If approached correctly by teachers, students, and administrators it is the ideal educational activity. A refusal to read with one’s students or to allow a teacher to read with her students perpetuates the transmission theory of the teacher as the keeper of knowledge and the student as the seeker who is powerless to create any of his own. Reading together, instead, perpetuates the constructivist model of teaching where the teacher is a learner alongside her students. Answers are sought as a result of inspiration. It is the ultimate form of differentiated instruction because each student encounters a text at a level with

which he or she is comfortable and then asks what s/he perceives as meaningful questions.

Choice reading in the classroom goes far beyond sustained silent reading. Some of the loftiest goals in any curriculum are tackled:

Through reading a wider, more abundant variety of texts and through discussing those texts with peers and teachers, students learn how to evaluate a text as to what makes it “good.” They learn what a good book is to *them*, how to identify the type of writing they enjoy, how to choose further books to read, and how to tell when they should endure a tougher text or put it down and turn to another.

The case for reading the core texts in the canon is reaffirmed, bringing a renewed sense of value and purpose to the time spent on them as a class. They serve as a venue to model how to read, which is a skill that can then be transferred to any student’s text of choice. Teacher and students together can work through the text to establish the author’s suggested vision of humanity and then decide for themselves whether the ideas are powerful enough to make them change their way of viewing the world.

Most importantly though, through allowing time for choice reading we exponentially increase the daily opportunities for students to find inspiration, whereby shaping who they become as citizens of the larger world. In his piece “The American Scholar,” Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, “Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end, which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire.” If we think of choice reading not as a time to read but as a time to be inspired we increase the validity of reading during class. It is in reading the words of others that we eventually find words of our own. We read books and establish the vision of humanity the author possessed at the time of writing; if it’s a good

book, we are inspired; if it's a great book we revise who we are. And what, if not to mold and discover who we are so we may significantly contribute to this world, is the highest purpose of education?

English class should be more like gym class, or at least how my gym classes were run. Each unit had skills and the game and regardless of whether you were a starting member on the varsity team or up for the award of best bench-warmer, you practiced the drills and you played the game. And while educators, or at least many of the ones that I talk to, hold this concept to be true for teaching writing on the secondary level, teaching reading on the secondary level has turned to an assumption that "the students will play the game on their own time if they practice the individual skills with us." While we would balk at such a notion in a gym class, somehow it is accepted in an English class. And as long as it is continued, our students will keep struggling with the skills and cutting corners in the game with disastrous outcomes.

Not ready to delete:

As I do almost every school year, particularly near the end when I am about to lose the students, I panicked for a moment when I feared that I had not done justice to the English discipline and had failed my students as a teacher, simply remaining one more person in their lives who threw disconnected material from books others deemed "good" at them and hoped for the best. What was different about this year's moment of panic, though, was that there arose a sure-footed philosophy for education.