Teacher Research: Guess Who's Learning

A Publication of the Connecticut Writing Project
## Teacher Research: Guess Who's Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Glenda Bissex</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Just Like Lightning!&quot;</td>
<td>Anne Alpert</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renovation in a Classroom: Is this a Literature Course or a Writing</td>
<td>Sheila Murphy</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Anyway?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinosaurs, Hearts, and Rainbows</td>
<td>Dora Glinn</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Honest Interaction</td>
<td>Mary T. Mackley</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carole Jonaitis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two by Two</td>
<td>Cheryl Timion</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations and Co-Authorship: Listening to the Undersounds</td>
<td>Constance Aloise</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome to the Literacy Club</td>
<td>John Goekler</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa: How Do You Know?</td>
<td>Esther Heffernan</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smiles and Belly Buttons: A Whole Language Teacher Looks at a Whole</td>
<td>Patricia Korol</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask the Children</td>
<td>Geraldine Green</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living At Risk</td>
<td>Lissa Jean Eade</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaffolding With Francois and Company</td>
<td>Joan Sereda</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journaling the Landscape</td>
<td>Lamont Thomas</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it Okay? Reflections on Writing Conferences</td>
<td>Carolyn Drescher</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Minds: Learning with the Kids’ Point of View</td>
<td>Margeen Reynolds</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Introduction

Glenda L. Bissex

The teachers who have written this book invite you into their classrooms -- not cleaned up ones for visitors but real, sometimes messy, often unpredictable ones. They invite you into their questions and conflicts, into their insights and discoveries, into their lives as teachers. They invite you to share in their reflective community.

I was privileged to work with this group of Connecticut Writing Project teachers as they learned from observing their students and themselves. They determined their own research questions, for deciding what issues need to be studied is part of the power of teacher research. They learned in many ways. They learned by watching and listening and recording their observations in journals, then reflecting on these observations -- raising questions, noting patterns, developing interpretations. They learned by audio and video taping discussions and student conferences, which they reviewed again and again, as one rereads a book for new insights. They learned by sharing these materials with each other; they were interested in what each other had to say and believed in its importance. The meanings and shapes of their studies were built, to some extent at least, collaboratively. And they learned by writing -- lots of writing: tentative drafts, full wastebaskets, new beginnings, revisions. They wrote their way to the heart of what they had learned. Ideas that seem clear to you and to them now were not always clear and did not come forth without struggle.

One theme running through many of these studies is teacher change. Cheryl Timion looks back on the many years and events that led up to her current practice of having first graders read in pairs. Dora Glinn and John Goekler, who co-taught the students they write about in separate chapters here, vividly record and reflect on their experience of setting aside an isolated skills approach and trying instead to welcome their at-risk students into the literacy club. Sheila Murphy, Lamont Thomas, and Lissa Eade all closely observe changes they were making in their teaching and their students' responses to these. Each critically weighs the gains and liabilities, raising questions we all
face as teachers. Anne Alpert takes a hard look at her expectations of and responses to her "reluctant" writers and comes out with some astonishing conclusions and some tough questions for all of us.

Other teachers, beside Anne Alpert, sought to understand more about their most challenging students -- the students we were given, in Marlene McCracken's words, to teach us how to teach. Patricia Korol, focusing on the quiet students who tend to be overlooked, found that the act of studying them changed her teaching. Geraldine Green helps us as well as her students become more conscious of how they learn and see the talents that low test scores don't reveal. Lamont Thomas tapped into his basic Social Studies students' learning experiences through journal writing. John Gockler and Dora Glenn enlarged their vision of what their special education students knew. For Esther Heffernan, a very accomplished student provided the challenge.

Both Carol Drescher and Sheila Murphy examine aspects of their students' writing about literature. Carol found herself having to encourage her academically high-ranking students to think independently and take ownership of their writing. Sheila's students both thrived on and resented the freedom to select their own writing topics in an American literature course. Margreen Reynolds, too, discusses her concern with encouraging independence and involving students in their own learning as she seeks to define the essentials of her teaching practice.

Collaborative learning and the social contexts of language are closely intertwined threads through several studies. Joan Sereda explores how her heterogeneous students, as they discuss folk tales, build upon or "scaffold" each others' comments. Constance Aloise contrasts the conversations of two groups of collaborative writers, one female and one male, and provocatively reflects on the educational implications of the privileged competitive dynamic. Esther Heffernan also explores gender and power issues as they are played out through the learning experiences of a capable young woman. Mary Mackley and Carole Jonas find that students' honest, non-academic responses to literature raise many provocative issues for English teachers in training -- and for all teachers.

These studies do not give us pat answers to narrow teaching problems but offer many avenues to enrich our understanding of our classrooms and ourselves, and thus to change how we act. I speak for all these teacher-learners and myself in hoping that our work will encourage you to learn ever more fruitfully from your own classrooms.

"Just Like Lightning!"

Anne Alpert

Someone once told me, and I'm sure it was a teacher, that often it's more important to figure out the right questions, than to come up with answers. I have been struggling for a long time with the problem of motivating children in my fifth-grade class who produce very little writing. What was I failing to do for them that I seemed to be doing for the others?

I decided to concentrate on finding out what I was doing wrong. I began taping my conferences with the children I had labeled "reluctant writers" hoping that, by listening to my part in the conferences, I would find some answers. After hours and hours of taping and transcribing, I was no closer to any real insights than when I had started.

Ironically, a conference with one of my students named Tom helped me to find some answers and pose some important questions. I had not taped my conferences with him because he was not one of those I had targeted as a reluctant writer. By March, when we had this conference, he had already published ten pieces. He is very cheerful about writing. He confers with friends often and loves to share his pieces with the class at whole group share -- not at all what you would call a "reluctant writer." Since I didn't tape the conference, this is approximately how it went.

Anne: What would you like me to help you with, Tom?
Tom: I'm publishing this piece.
Anne: How long have you been working on it?
Tom: Since Monday (two days).
Anne: Are you sure it's ready to be published?
Tom: Sure . . . I'm done.

Teacher Research: Guess Who's Learning
Teacher Research: Guess Who's Learning

Anne: Okay, let's hear it. (He reads the piece to me).

Tom: Can I publish now?

Anne: Is there anything you want to add?

Tom: Nope ... that's it.

Anne: What will you do next?

Tom: I'm going to write about going bowling with Rohan yesterday.

Anne: Tom, would you consider trying a different form of writing like those poems I've been reading to you, or a fairy tale?

Tom: I like this.

Anne: I know ... and you work hard at writers' workshop. But you can mess around with different things, too.

Tom: Can I publish now?

Anne: It's your choice.

Tom: Okay. ... I'll publish.

I watched him saunter over to the computer to "publish" his piece and I realized that most of his conferences were like this. They were boring for both of us and I never felt very satisfied that we had accomplished too much. After school, I decided to take out Tom's "Final Copy Folder" to see what he had published so far. All his pieces were personal narratives, and all about his best friend, Rohan. They were all about the same length and pretty much the same level of complexity. Tom certainly wasn't a risk-taker and he had been resisting my suggestions for a long time. He had been turning out pieces, though ... so why was I feeling so uneasy about him? After conferring with him all year long, I realized I really didn't know him as a writer.

I began to think about the three students I had been taping all these months. What did I really know about them as writers? Maybe instead of asking questions about their writing, I needed to ask them questions about themselves as writers. I decided to have individual conferences with each of them ... very different conferences than I had been having. These are the conferences verbatim.

The first conference is with Jesus, the second with Samantha, the third is with Ronnie. Ronnie and Jesus have published one piece this year, and Samantha has published none (this is March).

* * * * *

Jesus never initiates a conference with me, and I literally have to force him to meet me about every other week. I poke and prod him when we confer and he reacts by agreeing with everything I say just to get away from me.

Anne: Read me what you have, Jesus, and then I want to ask you some questions.

Jesus: (He reads his piece to me. It's about a mouse named Itchy who has adventures traveling around the world. In each place, he makes a new friend and the friend joins him on his travels. He has been working on the same piece all term. He makes lots of starts, puts it away, starts again. It seems to me, he never commits to anything.)

Anne: What do you think of it, Jesus?

Jesus: It's good, I guess.

Anne: You don't sound too sure.

Jesus: What do you think?

Anne: I think I talk too much when we have a conference. I want to hear what you think about writing.

Jesus: I like it. (Long silence ... he's waiting for me to say something.) I like this Itchy character. I have to use the globe to find the countries he'll go to next ... and then I look up the country to find out about it and make up his friends' names and stuff like that. I keep getting new ideas for new places. It's fun.

Anne: That's what writers do all the time ... they do research like you're doing.

Jesus: It takes time to do it ... sometimes the whole writing period and I'm still not done. I read slow. Sometimes I have to ask Greg to help me with words.

Anne: I see. What do you plan to do with your Itchy stories?
Jesus: It's a chapter book. Every chapter is a different place. I have six places already. But it's taking me long to put it all together.

Anne: Read me the very first one you have.

Jesus: Why?

Anne: I don't remember hearing it. Don't you want to?

Jesus: Okay. (He reads the first draft he started months ago. He stumbles where sentences end and begin and had to go back to correct himself.)

Anne: Why is that happening?

Jesus: I don't have any periods. I can't use them when I write.

Anne: How come?

Jesus: It stops me from thinking so I put them in after. I haven't done it yet.

Anne: Oh . . . I see . . . It's good you know that about yourself.

Jesus: Yeah.

He continues reading his piece. It really is very funny. I realize I never asked him before why he was stumbling over words. I thought it was because he has difficulty reading and didn't want to embarrass him. He really is a good storyteller.

Anne: You're a great storyteller. Did you know that about yourself?

Jesus: Yeah. I was trying to write poems and mysteries and stuff like you wanted us to write, but it's too hard for me. I like to write funny stuff like this. It's easier to write about animals than about people too. You laughed at all the right places, Anne.

Anne: Was this a test?

Jesus: Yeah. (laughs)

Anne: What will you do now?

Jesus: I think I'll try to bring Itchy home again and go back and see what I can change from the beginning. It might take me a long time.

Anne: Should I wait for you to sign up for a conference when you're ready?

Jesus: Yeah. Sometimes I'm not ready when you call me.

Anne: Okay. Thanks, Jesus.

I felt bewildered after this conference. What made him think that I wouldn't value his piece because it "wasn't as hard as a poem or a mystery"? . . . and why didn't he tell me before why he wasn't ready for a conference when I called him? . . . and why didn't he object to being called in the first place? The usual procedure for a conference with me was to sign up when you needed one. The implication was that he couldn't be trusted to do that for himself. Why didn't I trust him?

Samantha never wants to confer with me or with other children. I have to seek her out. She's very non-committal at a conference. She always makes me feel as though I'm intruding on her privacy.

Anne: What are you working on, Sam?

Sam: The same thing.

Anne: Read me some.

Sam: (She proceeds to read a piece she has started months ago. It's a "chapter book" about a brother and sister who decide to run away because their mother is getting married again and they hate their prospective stepfather and stepbrother. The first chapter is very well done. She has set up the characters very carefully. The second chapter, the one she is reading to me, is an elaborate explanation of how they plan to run away and where they're going to go, etc. She reads slowly and methodically with very little expression or enthusiasm. She seems uncomfortable and angry at having to share it with me. She obviously wants to get it over with.)

Anne: I feel like you don't want to share this, Sam.

Sam: Well, I wasn't ready.
Teacher Research: Guess Who's Learning

Anne: Do you think I should wait until you sign up for a conference by yourself?

Sam: Yes. You don’t call the other kids . . . just me. Why do you do that?

Anne: I guess because I’m afraid you’re not writing anything and I need to find out what you’re doing. You haven’t published anything all year.

Sam: So what? You said authors take a year . . . sometimes two years to write a book. Nobody tells them they have to publish seven books a year. I don’t think you’re being fair.

Anne: How come you never told me that before?

Sam: Because nobody else seems to care about it.

Anne: Oh.

Sam: You let everybody else sign up for a conference when they need it. Why don’t you wait for me to be ready?

Anne: Do you want to talk about your piece now?

Sam: Not really.

Anne: Okay.

Sam: I’ll sign up when I’m ready.

Anne: Okay.

Sam: Maybe tomorrow or the next day.

Anne: It’s okay, Sam . . . really. I’m glad you told me how you feel.

Sam: You see, when I write, it takes me a long time to figure out how something ends up. I try it different ways in my mind, but only one way fits right. I have to do it with every chapter because there’s something that happens in each chapter that leads to something else in the next chapter. I have to think about things a long time without writing anything.

Anne: . . . and you don’t need to talk to anyone to help you solve the problems.

Sam: No . . . it just interrupts me and I have to start thinking all over again.

Anne: Oh . . . so when I call you for a conference, it just interrupts you.

Sam: (big sigh) Yes!

Anne: Thanks, Sam . . . that’s a big help to me.

Sam: Okay.

I’ve told my students so often that writers make many starts and sometimes take a long time to finally come up with a piece of writing that satisfies them. By saying that, wasn’t I giving them permission to take as long as they needed? If I meant that, then why did I decide to require seven published pieces? Is that why Samantha has seemed angry at me all this time?

***

Ronnie does everything but write at Writers’ Workshop. Mostly he draws or reads or talks to other people about their writing. He loves to have peer conferences and he’ll confer with anyone who asks him. He has produced one piece of writing, a fairy tale of some length that he worked on for about six weeks. He made many revisions and was very proud of the result. Since then, he hasn’t produced anything.

Anne: What’s happening, Ron?

Ron: I can’t think of anything to write about.

Anne: I know . . . that’s what you tell me every time we have a conference. Don’t any of my suggestions help you?

Ron: No.

Anne: Tell me how you get an idea for a piece?

Ron: Myself?

Anne: Yes.

Ron: Why do you want to know?
Anne: I don't know... It occurred to me after listening to all the tapes of our conferences, I never asked you that and I really want to know.

Ron: Well, it usually takes me a very long time. I never know when it hits... It just comes to me... bam... like that. Then I write and write and... like my fairy tale. I got the idea from Andy when she was telling me about this movie she saw and then it just hit me... just like lightning.

Anne: Okay... so you get your idea and then you write and write and then what happens?

Ron: After I publish, it's like I'm worn out... like when a balloon loses its air... just flat. I don't feel like writing again for a long time... so I do other stuff and just wait for another idea to hit me again.

Anne: Is there any way to make the ideas come faster?

Ron: I don't know. Do you know any?

Anne: I guess not... the ways I knew I shared with you and they didn't seem to work.

Ron: I know. I guess writers all have their own way and nobody can really help them.

Anne: I guess real writers know that about themselves.

Ron: What should I do now?

Anne: What do you want to do?

Ron: I think I'll read some more Shel Silverstein. I really like his poems.

Anne: Okay. Let me know when another idea hits you.

Ron: Okay. Thanks, Anne.

Ronnie was really happy with himself as a writer. So why was I feeling so frustrated all year? If he had been less independent and secure would I have felt more useful? What did all this have to do with Ronnie being labeled a reluctant writer?

As I looked over my transcripts of past conferences with these three children, I realized my focus was constantly on ways to move them along to publish. I heard myself remind them over and over that they needed to publish seven pieces and they were nowhere near that number. I accused them, also, of doing nothing constructive at writing time, which, as you can see from these conferences, was the furthest thing from the truth. And most importantly, they knew themselves as writers much more intimately and intelligently than I did.

So then, what is a "reluctant" writer? Is writing a social act for everyone? What drove me to require a particular number of published pieces? Where was the ownership of the writer in that decision? Are we talking about "writing" or about "composing"? And if we're talking about "composing," isn't it much more than "writing"?

It seems clear to me now that "writing" is only one piece of the puzzle that is "composing." I should have known that from my own experiences struggling to compose. Composing is the getting ready to take the risk; it's the struggling to develop an idea; it's the self-doubt, the inner critic constantly challenging you; it's all the revision that happens before you ever get a word down on paper. Composing is the thinking, the problem-solving, the choices. It's the totality of every act that finally produces "writing." And this whole process is so different for each one of us.

If all this is so, then what is the purpose and value of Writers' Workshop? Is it to help children to know themselves as writers or is it to publish? (That question is rhetorical since one of the revelations that came to me "like lightning" is that Writers' Workshop time is for helping my students see themselves as writers and be secure with what they know.) Publishing is important if the writer thinks it's important, but it's no more important than any other piece of the composing process. It took these three children all term to get up the courage to tell me who they are. I read in a "teacher book" that children decide what is important not by what you say, but by what you do. My message to these children was that publishing is writing. These three children had the courage to resist me so that they could be true to themselves. There is nothing "reluctant" about them. There are other times of the day to be concerned about product. Writers' Workshop will be a time to be concerned about the process of composing.

There's clearly another issue that can't be avoided. If I really believe that the writer must have ownership of decisions about his/her writing, what drove me to establish a requirement for published pieces? Knowing what I know about my own writing process, I never could have met this requirement myself!
suppose it was my "easy out." Evaluation of writing has always been impossible for me. Except for mechanics, everything else seems so arbitrary. The final product is the end of a long road. I've never been able to simply look at the "finished" piece all by itself. Maybe setting a required number of pieces helped me to avoid the real issue. Why should writing be graded at all? How is this helpful to anyone?

As you can see, I have a few answers, but many more questions. Thinking about Tom, he is much more afraid of writing than Jesus, Ronnie, or Samantha. He won't even talk about himself as a writer. It may be that he is whipping off all these pieces just to keep me happy and avoid having me ask him the questions I know now that I need to ask him. Would I call Tom a "reluctant" writer? He's reluctant to reveal himself, he's reluctant to share, he's reluctant to ask for help or admit he has needs. Maybe the real question is, why label him anything? It just gets in the way of knowing who he is. Schools shouldn't be for judging . . . they should be for listening, and respecting, and helping.

So . . . how do I help Tom? . . . and how do I break it to the class that there are no required number of published pieces?

Anne Alpert has been a city teacher for seventeen years, first in Brooklyn, New York, where she's lived most of her life, and now in Norwalk, Connecticut, her home for the past eleven years. "During all this time, I've tried to do what the nuns at St. Joseph's College for Women taught me to do . . . teach the way children learn. They were so wise and so ahead of their time. Instead of teaching me 'methods' they taught me Dewey and Piaget . . . they taught me how to observe children and learn from them. It's always a challenge and it's always a struggle . . . but I feel like I'm learning all the time.

"I've learned so much about myself from the writing of this chapter . . . about composing and what it really is . . . about how easy it is to be a hypocritical teacher and not know it unless someone or something forces you to look at yourself and your practice and measure those against what you say you believe . . . and mostly for me, how insidious the SYSTEM is and how it creeps into your pores and affects your judgment. The SYSTEM doesn't exist for kids . . . it exists to perpetuate itself. Putting a grade on a fifth grader's report card for writing is ridiculous. As difficult as it is, I know I have to develop some way of getting around this that makes sense to my administrators and is still fair to my students. Someone once told me that 'teaching is a subversive activity.' I dedicate my chapter to all my fellow 'subversives.'"

Renovation in a Classroom: Is This a Literature Course or a Writing Course Anyway?

Sheila A. Murphy

Renovations – First Day On Site:

September 5, 1990, is a sweltering, humid day here at Glastonbury High School. During my first class, "American Literature-1," the jarring rumble of jackhammers echoes insistently down the hallway to room 117. Walking around the room, I'm watching and listening as twenty-four juniors and seniors dutifully perform their first academic task of the semester. They are comparing small strips of paper. On each strip I have typed half of an aphorism written by Anne Bradstreet. Instructions are to find partners by matching the halves, and then to interview each other. On another day, after writing up their interviews, partners will introduce each other to the class by reading their compositions aloud. Some are having trouble matching up their quotations, so I look over shoulders and give broad hints. This is a Level 1 class, the highest of our school's three achievement levels. At least on day one, these college-bound students in this affluent suburban community seem content -- or at least resigned -- to start another school year.

Anne Bradstreet lived three hundred years ago in another New England town that, like this one, was settled in the mid-1600s. One of her "Meditations Divine and Moral" states: "If we had not winter, the spring would not be so pleasant; if we did not sometimes taste of adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome" (274). Later in the semester, as the stress of ongoing renovations to our building takes its toll, that "Meditation" will seem particularly fitting as a motto for this school year. On our first day, though, neither teachers nor students can predict that noise, dust, packing and unpacking, moving and moving again, will become our background for learning during 1990-91. Today, the "adversity" of renovations around us is eclipsed by an air of expectation and optimism that permeates every school come September.

Teacher Research: Guess Who's Learning
As I look at these sullied faces, still without names to match, I see that pairs have now formed. Students are sitting, or sprawling — long legs jutting out into the aisles between desks — asking questions, taking notes, getting to know a classmate, renewing a friendship. Outside room 117, great clouds of black dirt twice swept by our window and obscure the sunlit day. I remark that many seventeenth century Americans, including Anne Bradstreet, might well have been frightened by such an ominous sign.

We, of course, are not frightened. We have been alerted by the principal's "Renovation Bulletins" which began telling us a year ago that 1990-91 would be an unusual year at GHS. Like our school renovation, my teacher research project is another unusual feature of this year. As the principal did, I will tell my students, early on, to expect change. With two "identical" classes, one with twenty-three and one with sixteen students, I should be able to gather ample data for the research question I intend to investigate. The question is this: What happens when a teacher decides to encourage student ownership of writing topics in an American literature class?

Student ownership of writing topics, I think rather smugly on this bright September day, is a laudable goal, even in a literature class. Like the real stress of school renovations, though, this process-centered goal will bring as yet unnamed tensions to room 117. Such tensions, like the hunks of debris tossed from the second floor into a dumpster outside our classroom window, will be impossible to ignore. A few days later, before handing in his interview, Brett sums up the sentiments of most of his classmates when he complains that he "found it difficult because of the lack of directions. It was hard to decide what information to include and in what order."

How incredibly naive I was to expect that the changes I was attempting in my American literature classes would proceed smoothly. After reading many comments like Brett's, I begin to realize that I may be offering ownership to students who don't want to buy. In the town of Glastonbury, a outspoken taxpayers association opposed renovations to our high school as costly and unnecessary. At one point, the project was slowed by the need to remove more asbestos than had been anticipated. My "renovation story" from room 117 is less visible than the bricks and mortar, glass and steel, of the new wing at GHS. Though intangible and perhaps hard to measure, my story documents true change. "It is not down on any map. True places never are," says Ishmael of Queequeg's native island of Kokovoko (Moby Dick 56). My story attempts to map or to blueprint, after the fact, changes that sometimes, even now, seem as elusive as Kokovoko — but also as true.

Blueprint — What's Being Renovated Anyway — and Why?

After sophomore year, all English courses at GHS are semester-long electives. Typically, many more students elect the "modern" semester of American Literature than the "early" one. For a teacher, the challenge of selecting readings from works written from the mid-1600s to the mid-1800s is formidable. One strategy, suggested in the teacher-made guide for this course, is to pair early works with modern ones. My choice of Anne Bradstreet "Meditations" for day one introduced a poetry unit contrasting Bradstreet with Sylvia Plath. Such partnerships of "old" and "new" authors help to offset the difficulty of many early readings while still enabling students to experience the chronological development of American literature. (The appendix lists assigned readings.)

Writing is an important component of all GHS literature courses. In Level 1 courses, especially, students expect to write essays of literary analysis, often from a list of assigned topics. After teaching American Literature I for ten years, I had accumulated a storehouse of topics based on the readings for the course. In working with composition, though, I had come to agree with Donald Graves, whose two year study of second graders had shown that "choosing a topic is a learning process." In this literature class, I didn't want to "deny voice, intercept revision, and rob the child of ownership" (Researcher 161). In recent years, my choices of assigned topics had grown longer and longer. Such a strategy, though well-intentioned, was a partial gesture. A comparison might be made to adding a new coat of paint, new curtains, and a new tabletop to a kitchen that is out-of-date and ill designed.

This year, in American Literature I, I decided to "tear down some walls" in an attempt to reshape the writing component of the course. I wanted to implement Ann Berthoff's suggestion that students use writing to "practice interpreting, in such a way that whatever is learned about reading is something learned about writing" (Making 45). Also, teaching American literature courses for many years had made me want to help students to enrich their reading by making discoveries of their own — discoveries, for example of the art and music that, like literature, reflect the American experience.

My "renovation" of this course was sometimes as unsettling, at least for me, as those jackhammers down the hall. At times, like Huck Finn, I was tempted to say, "If I'd 'a' knowed what a trouble it was . . . I wouldn't 'a' tackled it" (Twain 281). Like Huck, though, I wanted to escape from the past, I was game for risk-taking, and I didn't know what was ahead — so I have a story to tell. My story, unlike a building inspector's report, examines words and people rather than bricks and mortar. The "words" are my students' and my own, and the people are my students and myself. A combination of informal and formal writing was my plan for composition.
Building Blocks — Compositions:

After the initial interview assignment, students worked on four "major compositions" (besides keeping informal "reader response" journals). These included: 1) an essay of literary analysis; 2-3) two compositions offering a choice of genre; and 4) a multi-media project — an I-Search paper plus an oral presentation. For all of these, process became an integral part of composing. Without assigned topics, students needed time for conferences, time to compare ideas for writing, and time to read each other's drafts. "Ownership" evolved gradually. In September, most students needed the built-in structure of the readings to write a comparison of Bradstreet and Plath. Their topics were mostly conventional — comparisons of Bradstreet and Plath on motherhood, childrearing, death, or "insecurity."

A few students did branch out. Six brave souls had the courage to write only about Bradstreet. Pete, a lively contributor to class discussions, was one. He documented and criticized "Bradstreet's shortening of words and reversed sentences and poor word choice." An option to generate a topic from individual reading of other early authors was chosen by only three students. Dana's topic was ambitious. She proposed to "examine Puritan theology by using Anne Bradstreet, Cotton Mather, and Jonathan Edwards." Alas, her ambition faltered. Despite three conferences, and two days in the library for research, Dana's product was but a one and a half page skeletal essay. Reading her essay to a small group before passing it in, I heard her say anxiously, "Mine's too short." Indeed it was. For that essay, as for the interview, I had purposely not specified a required length. After that, based on the experience of Dana and a few others, I did give guidelines for minimum length.

In October, following Walden and three short stories, students could write an essay, poetry, or a short story. In previous years, all my students had been required to write a "Walden-type" journal after reading Thoreau. This time, though, such a journal was but one option out of many. Interestingly, student nature journals this year were the best I've ever read. Rob's "Kongscut" (the Indian name for "rattlesnake") included entries with sub-titles such as. "The Grouse Ballet," "Conversations with the Trees," and "Rattlesnake Mountain." His journal was interspersed with lively computer graphics showing a map of the region, trees, a grous, even a rattlesnake.

Walden prompted one student to write a children's book. Sarah's preliminary notes show how she generated her topic: "Children's book written from Thoreau's point of view — stressing preservation and appreciation of nature and the environment. Tie into environmental issues of today: 1) air and water pollution, 2) littering, 3) recycling, 4) pesticides, 5) endangered species." Her large-print book, Walden Pond Revisited, was illustrated in color and ended like this: "But as Rusty Rabbit and his family hopped along, looking for a new place for their burrow, Rusty could still hear in the distance the rumbling of bulldozers and the forest trees crashing to the ground."

Sarah's book treated a serious issue, but her lively sense of humor came through too. A dedication read: "This book is dedicated to my mother who thought I would never finish this project on time." An "About the Author" note at the end stated: "Sarah previously published two books while she was in elementary school — one entitled Frogs and the other The Futuribles." Rob and Sarah, and many others too, were experiencing the satisfaction of ownership of their writing topics. We were all enjoying the results of their work.

In November, after reading The Scarlet Letter, students let their response notebooks lead to a topic for writing. Later, Tim wrote, "I am pleased about how I understand Hawthorne's use of the 'Black Man.' I also liked my illustration" (of the 'Black Man's Book' — a page of names — the name "Hester" is last). Gino remembered liking his "basic ideas about Pearl and how unique she is. Lots of people didn't like Pearl but I did and it gives me a sense of originality with my idea." Robin wrote of Hester's parenting of Pearl and noted that her topic evolved from her experience of working for the past several summers at a day camp for children. "I have finally found a topic on which to write a paper that really excites me!" she cheered.

I was cheering too. After a day of conferences in which students discussed the topics they were discovering, I wrote in my log: "I am SO excited after talking to everyone today — such GREAT ideas! Kids are so vested, so committed, so HAPPY when THEY choose what to write about. Our read-around, on Monday, will do more 'teaching,' I suspect, than a series of teacher lectures."

With the final project, in December and January, came the opportunity to tap a variety of student talents and interests. Katie began her presentation by passing out a box of Whitman's chocolates to the class. Later, she recalled:

It all started with Dead Poet's Society. Before this movie I could only vaguely differ Walt Whitman from Whitman's chocolates. And if given a choice, I would rather have filled my face with chocolates than fill my mind with poetry. . . . I ran across Whitman's name in an art book where it mentioned that he influenced a whole generation of 'genre painters.' [Katie's initial idea was to explore nineteenth century American art.] I soon found that Leaves of Grass was full of poetry I couldn't get out of my mind. Most of it was very patriotic, embracing democracy, the common man, a united country, Chevrolet, and apple pie and all that good stuff.
Katie's slides showed genre paintings by William Sidney Mount and Thomas Eakins, also Eakins' moving portrait of his friend Whitman. Katie read carefully chosen excerpts from Whitman's poetry as we enjoyed viewing the American scenes she had selected. Another effective slide presentation was a collaborative effort by Kara and Meredith. We heard alternate voices of a soldier and a master's voice while viewing Matthew Brady's Civil War photographs. The diaries of Mary Chesnut and George Templeton Strong brought life for us two very different views of the war. Given the events in the Persian Gulf, this January presentation was both timely and chilling.

It would be misleading to suggest that all presentations were as good as these. Even though my first objective for the final project was "to provide context/background for the major texts," a few students, Pete and Ross, for example, let their major text almost be forgotten. In conferences, they had claimed to being more of Thoreau. (Besides Walden, they had a copy of Winter, a collection from Thoreau's journals.) Their report, though, went off on a tangent presenting places where they decided Thoreau would travel if he were living today. Had I relied less on Pete's verbal reassurances, and also questioned both boys more thoroughly as they worked, their focus might have stayed closer to their text.

A second objective of this unit was "to introduce students to a variety of multimedia tools for research and reporting." Gabriel's report on "the societal causes of Salem witchcraft," read perfunctorily to the class, lacked any media component. That night, in my journal, I thought about Gabriel's "newness in the school and his quiet persona." I surmised that he 'hated 'going public' and didn't make an effort at the 'media' component at all. Might he have done better if his report had been scheduled late instead of early? Other good reports might have prodded him to excel -- as he is able to do.

With few exceptions, most projects were of such a high caliber that those January classes, near the end, were a pleasure for all. Brennan and Andy treated us to an excellent taped rendition of Civil War songs. Brennan had sung, Andy had played the piano, and together they had used a music synthesizer for background. Another fine presentation was Rob's, on whaling. My log recounts:

Rob began apologetically -- he feared his project would overlap with Jean's (also on whaling. It didn't.) Also worried he was being repetitive, considering we've all read Moby Dick. He needn't have worried. He didn't show many slides but they were so well chosen, e.g. a few sea captains' homes in New Bedford juxtaposed with a slide below deck on the Charles W. Morgan -- to show contrast in living arrangements between captain and crew. Rob hadn't wanted Mrs. Fecko [the librarian] to come when he presented his slides. "I'd get too nervous," he'd said. I wish she had been able to see how good that project was.

Sarah's show-and-tell props helped us all to sympathize with the lot of a Civil War soldier. As part of her report, Sarah let us hold a gun -- an awfully heavy gun -- that had actually been used in the Civil War. Many students, in their final projects, showed each other, and me, what pride of ownership is all about.

Work Crew -- Students:

Students were informed about my research, and participated directly, in two ways. After each finished composition, they answered three questions about their composing process:

1) What satisfied you most about this piece? Why?

2) What frustrated you most about this piece? Why?

3) If you were to change this piece, what would you do?

This ongoing audit of composing was supplemented, twice during the semester, by reflecting on the experience of "owning" their own topics, instead of having topics assigned. Most students, I believe, attempted honestly to examine their composing styles and their experience.

Some students decided, as Dana did, that generating one's own topic "is very, very frustrating. I don't like the unassigned topics. I think I spend more time trying to find a topic than working on the topic." As a senior, she was taking a Level 1 class for the first time. (Her junior English teacher had encouraged her to take a really difficult English course before going on to college.) A classmate's frustration stemmed, at least in part, on past writing experiences. "I have never liked to write," said Sharon, a junior. "Even letters I write I find boring, and essays are just awful. I have never had to pick my own topics before and found it difficult. I am not a very imaginative person."

Such troubled reactions reflect the opinion of a significant minority. A larger percentage, while ambivalent about their experience with "ownership" of writing topics, reacted favorably of overall. Jean decided that "the generation of our own topics was an uncertain thing at worst. It was great to have the freedom, but sometimes you wouldn't think of a really great idea. I thought I was really successful with my poem 'Foxfire' but then I got rather obsessed with that one." Jean didn't begrudge the inordinate amount of time she had
spent on that topic. "Foxfire" was a six page ballad she revised many times, and eventually sent to colleges as a writing sample.

For Karen, on the other hand, time was a real concern. "I find it easier to be told what to do and get it done. If not, I often waste excess time developing ideas. I have always preferred assigned topics, due to my lack of creativity. Although this is the case, I was fairly proud of my papers." Sarah's preference echoed Karen's but, for her, freedom nurtured creativity. Sarah reflected:

I tend to be a person who needs structure. I like for a teacher to tell me the steps I must take in an assignment. But it turns out that when I chose my own topic, I did a good job because I chose something that interested me, and once I found a topic I could easily expand on it. Once I found a topic the finished product was usually a creative idea that I could be proud of, such as my Walden Pond Revisited children's book.

Jean, Karen, and Sarah speak for the many students whose experience with generating their own topics was somewhat ambivalent. Many students, though, were enthusiastic. Like Sarah, they tended to point with pride to their successes. Tim, always brief, always direct, can speak for that group. He noted that "Students who come up with their topics will: 1) show their creativity, 2) write more material, and 3) be happier with the assignment." Tim was especially pleased with one assignment, a short story, "Faith Spilt Like Wine." Later, he remembered that "The story 'Young Goodman Brown' gave me the idea for this piece. . . . It was time-consuming and rather hard. . . . I like my ending a lot because it was so spontaneous. It just hit me as I began to reach the end of my story." (Tim's ending: "Then he [a priest having doubts about his faith] arrived at the pulpit, opened his mouth, and could not utter a word."). Whether admitting frustration or satisfaction, students were indeed finding their own topics and were also learning about their own composing processes.

For some students, the struggle to find a topic became quite personal. Jeremy liked Moby Dick. For individual reading he chose The Narrative of the Essex -- a true account of a whaling disaster. (I did wonder if the fact that his father owns a fish market might have influenced his taste in reading.) For a final project, Jeremy knew only that he wanted to do something related to whaling:

My mind was disarrayed with all sorts of ideas and prospects for my upcoming project. . . . I unconsciously opened an American Heritage book to a page containing the diary of Eliza Williams, the wife of a former captain of a whaling vessel. What would it be like, I thought, to live in the 1800s, in a whaling town? I was left muddling over the idea until the end of school, when I decided to take a drive down to Mystic Seaport and see if the atmosphere of a real whaling town could invoke realistic images in my mind.

Jeremy brought his camera along that day and also on the day our class visited Mystic. His project was a slide presentation of a whaling village, supplemented by his fictional diary written from a point of view of a crewman on a whaler.

After reading Walden, Matt wrote a short story titled "A Boy and His Bomshelter." Reflecting on writing his story, he commented, "This was the first and only idea I had. I was inspired by Walden and by 'Livvie' . . . . the seclusion portrayed in each story. . . . I wrote out notes, sat in a dark closet, and wrote what I felt." Jen used a similar strategy for writing her story: "On Halloween night I remembered this past experience and thought it would be a good comp. piece after my double entry about 'Young Goodman Brown.' . . . I found this relatively easy to write but could only write at night in a semi-dark room for ambience." The testimony of Jeremy, Matt, and Jen shows what happened to some of my students when "choosing a topic" became a personal challenge.

Clerk of the Works -- Teacher:

Sometimes, during the semester, I felt like a construction supervisor -- directing traffic, moving workers, inspecting a job, fielding complaints -- but I didn't have a hard hat to protect me from debris. And debris there was, especially in the form of complaints or problems, some new each day, some repeated over and over.

Gabriel's complaint never varied: "The teacher should assign, the student perform. Variety between student topics shouldn't come from different topics but from different approaches to one topic." Patty's complaints had a lighter touch. When students were sharing their Bradstreet essays, she pleaded, only half teasing, "Can we never hear Anne Bradstreet's name again after today? A whole month is enough." We did spend too long on that first composition. Sometimes, my agenda, or my carefully designed plans, turned learning into a chore. And, because I had required, initially, a literary analysis of Bradstreet and Plath, there was overkill with these poems. Encouraging freedom of topic choice was my plan from the outset but my first essay topic, I only realized in retrospect, had many built-in constraints.

Later essays prompted fewer complaints, probably because students were adjusting to choosing their own topics. Also, in response to time pressures, I
modified my plans for whole-class readings. Some readings were dropped. In previous years, for example, students had read six, or even more, modern stories to contrast with early works. This year they read but two. Also, this year, we had no unit comparing early and modern American speeches, and no unit on nineteenth century poets. Indeed, the only exposure students had to Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman was through individual project reports.

Whole class discussion of readings also decreased, especially in the final weeks of the course. Early in the semester, our circle formation and the response notebooks had fostered a free-ranging exchange of ideas. By December, students were reading Moby Dick, a difficult book. Also, students were getting involved in their final projects. They needed conference time and time for library research. Many needed help in making slides. After the course was over, Tim made an observation about class discussion that aptly mirrors my own: "When we read Moby Dick and The Red Badge of Courage, we had pages of double-entry assignments, but we didn't get a chance to swap notebooks or discuss them. . . . I know it was a tight schedule towards the end of the semester, but I feel that a lot of great ideas and thoughts were lost because class discussions ceased." In retrospect, I wonder why I didn't throw Moby Dick to the sharks. Alas, I didn't. Fortunately, for both of those last two books, Moby Dick and The Red Badge of Courage, student projects on related topics allowed us, on some days to have brief discussions during report time.

Some of my adaptations to student needs were clearly beneficial. On September 24, for a three-week unit called "Reading/Writing Workshop for the Colonial/Revolutionary Period," I formulated an objective to allow class time for conferences. Students were spending class time reading individually chosen prose or poetry from Colonial or Revolutionary times. A sign-up sheet was on my desk, and my clipboard with a xeroxed class list kept track of conference notes. Sometimes there would only be time for five or six conferences during a forty-three minute class. Occasionally, I was able to touch base with everyone. Three or four minutes seemed to be the average time students needed. These brief one-to-one meetings were pleasant and productive. The mini-conferences were an adaptation that worked.

My extension of writing deadlines was another adaptation to student needs. Katie, after the first quarter, said: "Choosing my own topic allows me to have interest in my writing subject, but I need more time to do it, because one interest invariably leads to another, better, topic, which I'm free to do and so I start over. This process takes longer, and yet I appreciate the fact that you do extend deadlines." Brett, in January, recalled his struggles for a project on Thoreau: "I began to write my paper, but I no longer had an exact topic and did not know what information to include. This created a difficult struggle for me that was not easy to overcome. I finally succeeded by doing a great deal of rereading and rereading, and even more note-taking. I believe that my paper improved greatly because of the three-day extension you gave me."

Matt was one who benefited from my modification of another assignment. He stated: "With our own ideas, we can write better because the topic is interesting to us. Take my Scarlet Letter comp., for example. There is no way any teacher would assign a horror story, and thus, that idea would be extinguished from my mind. When I was able to think of it and write it, I did it well, since it was my idea and my interest."

Like that construction supervisor with his hard hat, I had to become adept at finding solutions, solving problems, suggesting alternatives. And, humbly, I had to admit that some solutions worked better than others. Despite the problems, my "renovation" in American Literature I proved to be exciting and rewarding. A January scene can show what a semester of "ownership" had "bought."

Renovation — Last Day (Almost) on Site:

This January day is cold and crisp. The muddy ruts made by those trucks that kept rumbling by room 117 in the fall are now snow-covered humps. The workers with hard hats are inside now, and that plywood partition makes the main hall pretty drafty. Many students, like me, are wearing warm sweaters. Inside room 117, though, the atmosphere is comfortable if not warm. Dana is about to give her report. Later, my log recounts this scene:

As Dana was getting ready, in front of the room, she said (not to me but to someone up front, or maybe to no one in particular), "Boy, you can't get nervous about giving an oral report in this class. We're like a family in here." Her report (about Melville criticism) wasn't terrific but, for her, it was good. Interesting way she involved the class near the end — had kids give THEIR reviews of Moby Dick so far — with a promise to quote them in her written report.

Following Dana, Robin appeared in her "costume" — a long, white skirt and white tee shirt. As Emily Dickinson, she distributed cookies, then read and talked about Dickinson's poetry. She ended by showing a brief clip from The Belle of Amherst, and the class burst into applause.

Shannon sat up front, attentive as usual. She reported yesterday. I had invited Mrs. Fecko, the librarian, to enjoy what we both expected to be a fine report. Shannon had become intrigued with the friendship between Hawthorne and Melville. Her plan to "mix factual photographs with more artistic materials such as paintings, sketches, and art photography" had required
An Honest Interaction

Mary T. Mackley and Carole Jonaitis

Student Voices-- ages 15-18:

"This one sounds like a geek."
"Really? This one's cool. Look."
"This one sounds too smart; can I trade with you?"
"Oh My God...I've got somebody's mother!!!"
"Hey, I thought these were supposed to be college kids."

Student Voices-- ages 21-39

"How personal should we get with them?"
"What do I do if we've got nothing in common?"
"How can I talk to them about things I like without thinking I'm weird?"
"I think I'm feeling like their mother would when I read some of this stuff."
"How in the world am I supposed to respond to this? I'm the teacher, right?"

The beginnings of honest questioning. The initial effects of a semester-long letter exchange between college and high-school students. The foundation of a collaborative teacher-researcher project which asked: What can we learn through and about writing if we view it, not as an academic exercise, but rather as a social act?

During this four-month long correspondence, our respective students -- 21 of them in a teacher-preparation class entitled "Literature for the High School Student" and 42 of them in a high-school class entitled "Contemporary Writers"-- exchanged over 400 letters. We, ourselves, as teacher-researchers, assumed a dual role: 1) we became observers, and 2) we shared many of those observations with both sets of students in order to facilitate and encourage the metacognitive insights which they naturally and spontaneously shared with us. As we listened in on their conversations, we heard echoes of James Britton: Find ways to make in-school learning more like out-of-school learning. We heard echoes of Jerome Bruner: Language is the medium of dialogue, and in dialogue knowledge of language per se develops. We heard echoes of Louise Rosenblatt: The development of an effervescent, aesthetic reader requires a listener. We heard echoes of James Berlin: Language is never innocent; it is the terrain of ideological differences.

We heard one, long, reverberating echo from Kenneth Burke:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, too long for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for awhile until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your ear. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you.... However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still in progress. (110-11)

In teaching we always come late to our classrooms -- too late, that is, to have heard the beginnings of the kinds of conversations in which our students (all students?) have been engaged for years, those "real" conversations about life and school and literature and teaching and learning and difference, the ones that take place in the hallways, on the telephone, at their lockers, in their study halls, at lunch. As teachers we know instinctively, or perhaps through some primal memory, that those conversations are important, vital, intelligent, true. However, nowadays, circumstance often dictates that we come too late to hear them -- perhaps because our ears are filled with the curriculum we are called upon to teach, or perhaps because those ears are covered with doubts as to the appropriateness, within the academic confines of our classrooms, of those kinds of conversation. Or perhaps, because high school students, aware of both of these predilections, are savvy enough not to permit us to hear them.

The college students involved in this project were, on the other hand, new to teaching. Their ears were as yet uncovered, and they wanted to hear everything -- well, almost everything. For they, in seeking to become effective teachers, quickly saw how the expressive writing recorded in those letters could, upon analysis, serve as a scaffold to transform the implicit knowledge of their high-school correspondents into explicit meaning for them.
Dinosaurs, Hearts, and Rainbows

Dora Glinn

The study of literacy is all too often a matter of spinning words about words, without looking back to the images that precede words and the feelings that precede both.

Leo Lionni

"Ms. Glinn, I can drive to Daisy's house."

"Wow, Jennifer that's super," I replied, attentive though somewhat frenzied.

"I can drive there 'cause I'm big enough. Wanna see my pictures?"

"I'd love to!"

Jennifer and I continued walking down the hall into the classroom. She had just come in from recess. I was just arriving having spent the earlier part of the morning in my other resource room across town. I dumped my books and bag and paraphernalia. Jennifer animatedly continued her description of Daisy's house. She handed me an envelope with her cherished pictures of her trip to Disneyland. From Jennifer's conversation, I wasn't sure who or what Daisy was. But from her envelope I could surely tell; printed boldly in capital letters on the front was "DZNY PCTRS."

I smiled the deepest smile as I looked at her words. Jennifer bubbled over with tales of Mickey and Daisy as she showed me her pictures. I wasn't sure that I could recall Jennifer ever being so generative in conversation. I certainly could never remember her initiating a conversation outside the walls of the classroom. Whenever I saw Jennifer out of context, whether in the hall, at the other school, at recess, there would only be a glimmer of recognition: momentary eye contact followed by staring at the floor.

Teacher Research: Guess Who's Learning

25
I smiled and wondered what created this incredible transformation. I thought back a year ago, to Jennifer's kindergarten experience. As a learning disability teacher, I have often languished over those hollow moments in teaching: the moment that you realize, for whatever reason, you are not reaching a particular student. Jennifer was one of those youngsters.

Jennifer was first referred to me in kindergarten. I always cringe when students are referred to me in kindergarten. Readiness often clouds an accurate diagnosis of a learning disability. It seems to me that the curriculum should adjust to meet the child's needs rather than sounding an alarm the moment a child falls behind curricular demands. However, the kindergarten program teaches letters and sounds. If the student is not learning the letters and sounds, something is clearly wrong with the child.

The academic thrust of the kindergarten program swallows up children like Jennifer year after year. The vision of her last year haunts me still. I can't recall a time when I had less rapport with a student. I saw Jennifer for two half hour sessions weekly. She would look away from me the moment I entered the classroom. I pried her away from her classmates and began the long walk to the resource room. Jennifer neither spoke nor looked at me.

In the resource room, every activity required cajoling or bribery. She would frequently ask, "Can I go back yet?" Comments such as "My mom says I don't have to do this" or "My teacher needs me" portrayed her lack of investment in the task before her. I had never seen a youngster so seemingly detached. Although she longed to stay in the classroom, she did not participate there either. Jennifer did not seem to respond with frustration; she simply withdrew.

Her parents described a different child at home, one with an interest in reading and books. This was not evident at school, however. There were other children like Jennifer, five others to be exact. Out of sixty-eight children, six were considered incapable of the grade one program. Three of the six had been retained in kindergarten so retention was not an option. Perhaps an alternate reading program was needed. That's when our journey began.

John, the reading teacher, and I had shared reading groups before. This group would be different, however. In addition to sharing a classroom, John and I had the unique opportunity to share many professional experiences. Having attended the Connecticut Writing Project Summer Institute together in the summer of 1989, our vision of remedial education began a dramatic shift. Meaning and context became the focus of the program rather than the endless drill on discrete skills. Now we had the opportunity to work with these youngsters on beginning reading skills for two hours daily rather than the pull-out fragments of several half hours per week.

The children came to us as failures in September. They had not learned their letters and sounds. Each child wore that failure in different ways. For Jennifer, it was the total withdrawal that enabled her to shield herself from the unattainable expectations. I look back now and wonder what invited Jennifer into the literacy club.

John and I started the year with a desire to create a classroom environment that was child-centered rather than curriculum centered. There was no failure because the expectations were different for each student. What John and I could offer was a belief in each child's ability to learn and an attempt to structure the classroom so that each child would have opportunities for learning that afforded success.

Although our shelves were lined with phonics workbooks and readers, we had little material to begin a whole language classroom. We had ordered our material in the traditional way. In the spring when we placed our orders, we were very excited to get a new basal series for them, which we fully intended to use when it seemed appropriate. Somehow that time never truly came.

John and I knew that we had many behavioral and attitudinal issues to overcome with the students. We worked to create a secure environment by reading to them and by writing with them. As we modeled reading and writing behaviors for them, we also gave the students opportunities to read and to write in which they were guaranteed success. They were always reinforced for what they could do. There was not really an awareness of what they could not do. Any approximations of reading and writing behaviors were greeted with enthusiasm by both John and me.

Writing workshop was started from the outset. Jennifer's very first stories took on a non-language bent. She would draw repeated geometric figures or color in the lines on the paper. Jennifer sat in writing workshop one day drawing her collection of multi-colored shapes. "Donny, look what I wrote," she said. "My book will be a nice one. I made it all rainbow colors."

Her page was covered with carefully drawn hexagons of many colors. It amazed me at how uniform in size each shape was. Jennifer had difficulty with fine motor skills and was very resistant to both coloring and writing in kindergarten. She concentrated very intently on her work. Her words, "Look what I wrote," were significant to me. She didn't say "Look what I drew" or "Look at my pictures." It was "Look what I wrote."

The images that preceded Jennifer's text were non-language images. Her verbal skills and her language skills were weak. Having just reviewed her
special education folder, I was surprised to see just how low those language skills were. If she was still thinking in shapes and colors, it shouldn't have been any surprise that the letters and sounds had little meaning to her. The writing was very telling although I didn't realize it at that time. I was not listening to what I knew about writing and I was not listening to what I knew about Jennifer.

A journal entry in September described Jennifer working on a piece in her writing folder. She brought me her story, a picture of a heart and a rainbow as many of her early pieces were. She said, "You can copy this for the book, Ms. Glinn." I was reminded of Marie Clay's work on emergent writers and recognized how the drawing represented text to her.

"Tell me about your story, Jennifer."

"It's a heart and a rainbow."

Delving further, I wondered why Jennifer suggested that I might want to copy her piece for the book. It was early in the year and the children had not had much experience with writing and publishing. Here it was the third week of first grade and she viewed herself as an author. Looking back at our lesson plans those first weeks of school, I realized that the children had published both an individual book about themselves and a class book about birds. Jennifer had quickly made the connection that writing translated into publishing and sharing, a connection that surprises me now that I look back. I didn't realize the significance that the writing had for her.

Jennifer's early stories simply represented the naming of her pictures. After conferencing with her about her rainbow piece, she went back to her seat and began to write in conventional spelling, "Jessica, mom, dad, love." This inventorying or listing of the words she knew was also very common in her early work. Her writing took on a perseverative quality: hearts and rainbows and lists of words. John and I fluctuated back and forth with trusting the developmental nature of writing. I felt Jennifer was stuck.

I wasn't listening to the messages that Jennifer was giving to me. I wasn't assimilating the evidence that she was seeing her writing as communication. I expected more. My impatience led me to overlook what Jennifer had shared with me from the very start of school. In retrospect, her writing was exactly where it should have been.

But in September, we had tunnel vision, or at least I did. "Let's give them a topic," one of us proclaimed. The benefits of having two teachers working together meant there was always much discussion no matter what we decided to do. John and I provided a balance for each other. It seemed that we never lost faith at the same time. We had an unwritten law that only one of us could be hysterical at a time.

I remember a conversation with John when I had lost faith. We were sitting doing our plans for the week. "They're not writing stories. They just draw pictures that have no sense of story. They're stuck."

"Dora, they write first from their own experience."

"They don't have the language; they don't have the words to label their experience. I don't think that they connect with their environment in the same way. I'm not sure they have an inner dialogue. Maybe for LD kids it's different. Let's just try giving them a topic. We could write about dinosaurs. They love dinosaurs."

John and I immersed the group in dinosaurs: books and stuffed animals and art activities... We wrote and published a dinosaur book. They unquestionably enjoyed dinosaurs. But did the writing meet my standards yet?

Interestingly enough, Jennifer drew dinosaurs and hearts and rainbows. She still listed words though she had added several new words. There was still no story. The text was not reflected in the pictures and there was no attempt at invented spelling. The dinosaurs were clearly an artificial addition coaxed into her writing by teachers. There was no story, no description, no greater ability to write about dinosaurs despite the infusion of information. We knew the internal language to describe was not yet developed. Yet Jennifer did not seem able to use the models that were presented to her either.

I began to regret ever suggesting the dinosaur unit. The children got lost in the dinosaurs and John thought we would never get them back to writing from their own experience. We finally closed the door on dinosaurs and tried to return the writing to them. We had clearly modeled how stories were written. Maybe now we would see some carry-over in their own pieces. John and I structured their writing workshop time to assist them in generating their own topics, but the dinosaurs would not go away. Just as Jennifer perseverated with the hearts and rainbows, she also perseverated with the dinosaurs. They continued to appear in her writing day after day.

John became increasingly frustrated. "They're really stuck now; they're not making any progress. We've contaminated the process. I'm really unhappy with their writing," he groaned accusingly.

I felt guilty that traditional teaching tugged at me, but at times I just couldn't see the learning. I didn't know how to measure their progress and now I see that I also had difficulty in recognizing their progress. No matter how much
I had read about the emergent writer, regardless of the depth of my theoretical base, I wanted and expected more. I couldn’t understand why Jennifer wasn’t more generative. Only now am I seeing her work for what it truly represented. What looked at the time like minuscule steps forward were actually leaps that I just didn’t recognize.

In early November, I had questioned the children about how they selected their writing topics for the day. Jennifer had drawn a very large and detailed picture of a school bus. Her smiling face was peering out from one of the windows.

"Jennifer, tell me about your piece."

"It’s me on bus five."

"How did you choose that topic for today?"

"I’m going to my friend’s house on bus five today."

Why didn’t I recognize what this piece represented? The topic was rooted in her experience. The picture was lovingly drawn. This was authentic writing. Why did I expect more?

I hear the echoes of John’s and my conversation: "They have no sense of story." Going on bus five was Jennifer’s story. She would not have verbalized any more than she had depicted in her picture. Her reticence in writing was clearly part of her. I go back to the inner dialogue, to Jennifer’s inner dialogue. What images were there for her? Clearly the big yellow bus was taking her to her friend’s. That was the image that was foremost in her mind. What more did she need to be? My inner dialogue contained all the questions: What is your friend’s name? What are you going to do there? Are you having dinner there? My dialogue — not Jennifer’s. It was my inner dialogue that continued to find her writing lacking.

If I didn’t always recognize the progress in their written product, it seemed easier to recognize the progress in their developing role as writers. As we viewed the video tapes of writing workshop, it was evident that there was progress being made. Jennifer was clearly demonstrating writing behaviors. The conversation revealed what the actual writing did not.

"Look at my pretty ballerina. I write like a good writer," Jennifer beamed.

"What makes you a good writer?" probed John.

"My mom taught me!"

"But how do you know you’re a good writer?" John continued.

"Cuz I can do it by myself."

I had several similar conversations with Jennifer. It was evident that she felt that she was a good writer. I wanted to know why. Was it the pictures? Was it the letter formations? Was it the words that she had listed? It seems that John came closest to uncovering the answer: ownership of the writing. "I can do it myself." I’m not certain why this continued to surprise me. I have learned it innumerable times over the past few years.

Jennifer had the opportunity to explore the writing without external demands. There was acceptance and support for her efforts — efforts which in a traditional setting would have been dismissed. She was validated as a writer for those early attempts. Were they first grade level? Not even close. They were Jennifer’s level.

Jennifer clearly broadened her topic selection as the months progressed: a birthday party, the ice capades, dad’s work, cheerleaders. Her pictures definitely began to represent more of a story to her.

In January and February, Jennifer experimented more and more with invented spelling. Her stories still reflected the inventorying principle discussed by Marie Clay. However, rather than lists of words, Jennifer began to create her own text. The "Dad of Work" piece written in early January consisted of a drawing of an office building with many windows. Her text read "DAD WC." The entire page was covered with these words. Jennifer began to reveal her sense of left to right awareness. She had not yet recognized the need for spacing between words. It was clear that she was comfortable exploring sound/symbol relationships and was no longer bound by merely listing the words that she knew.

The pictures became less and less a focus. In her "Barbie at the Ice Capades" piece, full pages were filled with "Barbie’s ice skater," reflecting a variety of spellings of each word. The picture was no longer the text. Jennifer had made the transition to telling her story with words. A small picture of Barbie was in the middle of the page surrounded by Jennifer’s words. How different from her early pieces with a large picture with only several words written underneath.

Jennifer’s last piece was "My First Communion." The picture of herself was detailed, right down to the ponytail. Her text read, "I am very proud of myself" in her characteristic invented spelling. When she was finished, she folded it up very carefully and said, "This is for you, Ms. Glinn."
"Thank you, Jennifer. This is a really special piece. Do you think you might want to save it so that you can publish it?"

"Okay."

Later, when we were sharing the pieces in a group conference, Jennifer was eager to be the first to share. She read her piece and then asked for questions or comments from the group. When she was through sharing, she said, "Donny, this is for you," as she handed her piece to him.

Realizing that Jennifer's writing folder was almost empty and that she should be publishing soon, I intervened once again. "Jennifer, wasn't that the piece you wanted to publish? You can give it to Donny after we have a conference, okay?" That appeared to be fine with her.

I wondered about the artificiality of publishing for her. She was proud of her piece as it was. It was a treasure that she wanted to share first with me and then with Donny. The others seemed so eager to have their work published. For Jennifer, the satisfaction seemed to be in sharing her work more immediately. I'm still not quite certain what that means or how to respond to her. I know that she views herself as a writer and I am finally believing that she is a writer, too.

As I look back over the year, I see all that I had missed by looking through a traditional lens. Jennifer found her rhythm early on. She recognized the literacy club and entered on her own. I didn't see her first tentative steps as literacy. I was blinded by the view of literacy that I thought I had abandoned. I had viewed the emergent writing behaviors as inferior efforts rather than developmentally appropriate steps. I hadn't realized the warring that was going on within me.

I wonder, too, what message I gave to Jennifer. In talking with John, in reading my journal, in viewing the video tapes, it seemed that we provided her with the encouragement that she needed as she continued her exploration as a writer. I wonder what it might have been like to be on the journey with her rather than judging her efforts by my standards. Yes, I had shifted from the discrete skill model. It's become clear to me that I still have more work to do before the theory meets the practice. More importantly, I have to listen to the children's voices, to Jennifer's voice.

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WORKS CITED

An Honest Interaction

Mary T. Mackley and Carole Jonaitis

Student Voices-- ages 15-18:

"This one sounds like a geek."
"Really? This one's cool. Look."
"This one sounds too smart; can I trade with you?"
"Oh My God...I've got somebody's mother!!"
"Hey, I thought these were supposed to be college kids."

Student Voices-- ages 21-39

"How personal should we get with them?"
"What do I do if we've got nothing in common?"
"How can I talk to them about things I like without them thinking I'm weird?"
"I think I'm feeling like their mother would when I read some of this stuff."
"How in the world am I supposed to respond to this? I'm the teacher, right?"

The beginnings of honest questioning. The initial effects of a semester-long letter exchange between college and high-school students. The foundation of a collaborative teacher-researcher project which asked: What can we learn through and about writing if we view it, not as an academic exercise, but rather as a social act?

During this four-month long correspondence, our respective students -- 21 of them in a teacher-preparation class entitled "Literature for the High School Student" and 42 of them in a high-school class entitled "Contemporary Writers"-- exchanged over 400 letters. We, ourselves, as teacher-researchers, assumed a dual role: 1) we became observers, and 2) we shared many of those observations with both sets of students in order to facilitate and encourage the metacognitive insights which they naturally and spontaneously shared with us. As we listened in on their conversations, we heard echoes of James Britton: Find ways to make in-school learning more like out-of-school learning. We heard echoes of Jerome Bruner: Language is the medium of dialogue, and in dialogue knowledge of language per se develops. We heard echoes of Louise Rosenblatt: The development of an effenter, aesthetic reader requires a listener. We heard echoes of James Berlin: Language is never innocent; it is the terrain of ideological differences.

We heard one, long, reverberating echo from Kenneth Burke:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, too long for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for awhile until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your ear. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you.... However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still in progress. (110-11)

In teaching we always come late to our classrooms -- too late, that is, to have heard the beginnings of the kind of conversations in which our students (all students?) have been engaged for years, those "real" conversations about life and school and literature and teaching and learning and difference, the ones that take place in the hallways, on the telephone, at their lockers, in their study halls, at lunch. As teachers we know instinctively, or perhaps through some primal memory, that those conversations are important, vital, intelligent, true. However, nowadays, circumstance often dictates that we come too late to hear them -- perhaps because our ears are filled with the curriculum we are called upon to teach, or perhaps because those ears are covered with doubts as to the appropriateness, within the academic confines of our classrooms, of those kinds of conversation. Or perhaps, because high school students, aware of both of these predilections, are savvy enough not to permit us to hear them.

The college students involved in this project were, on the other hand, new to teaching. Their ears were as yet uncovered, and they wanted to hear everything -- well, almost everything. For they, in seeking to become effective teachers, quickly saw how the expressive writing recorded in those letters could, upon analysis, serve as a scaffold to transform the implicit knowledge of their high-school correspondents into explicit meaning for them.

Teacher Research: Guess Who's Learning

34
"Now what are we supposed to do with these, again?" asked our high school students after reading their first letters from the University.

Tell them what they want to know. Tell them what you know...about the things they want to know about. They're going to be teachers. What do you know that teachers need to know...about reading and writing and teaching and learning...about you? Be honest...tell them what you really think.

We can't.

Yes you can.

And they did. And the college students listened...and heard.

Susan, the eager new (college) student of reader-response theory listened to her high school student Brian's voice in response to The Color Purple. Brian's letter to Susan was short, direct, and honest -- perhaps too honest?:

I think [the book] sucks. It's the most feminist piece of literature I have ever read. I think Alice Walker is a lesbian, man-hating bitch.

Then Brian continued:

Right now I'm 17, but I'll be 18 in January. I'm a senior and after graduation I'm going into the army.

Susan, in an attempt to compose an effective response, chose to share Brian's letter with her college classmates. "Look at this," she gasped. "You can't believe it's o.k. for students to say stuff like this. It's not fair to the book or to Alice Walker." As the class talked, they reflected upon the question of just what do we mean when we ask our students to give their opinions? To discuss? To say what they think? One classmate asked Susan, "What did you ask him in your letter? That's important."

Thus began a scaffold. The ensuing dialogue, and others like it throughout the semester, became an analysis of texts -- the text of the literature, the text of the letters, and the text, both written and spoken, between and among our students and ourselves. Susan discovered that she had indeed asked for an honest response from Brian: "What do you think about The Color Purple? How does it make you feel? Do you like it or not and why?" However, Susan and others in the class still had trouble with students who thought like Brian and who were willing to believe, when asked about those perceptions, that it was o.k. to be honest in stating them. Another of Susan's peers, Emily, spoke passionately about what many of her classmates felt, "I can't believe you think what he says is right, about the book or about women. I don't think I could handle my students saying these kinds of things -- it's prejudice."

And so the college students began to wrestle with theory and with the implications and effects of its concrete, practical application. Through this searching process, they sought answers to questions asked daily by the classroom teacher. Questions such as:

How can I encourage my students to read and to develop pleasure in reading?

Cora went in through the back door of Burke's "parlor," so to speak, as she sought her high-school partner Kent's insight into the issue of wanting-to vs having-to read.

What kind of literature is your favorite (or who is your favorite author)? What do you think about poetry? When I was in high school, poetry seemed really meaningless and confusing. I used to groan at the mere mention of the word.

In this bit of collaborative college-high school dialogue, Cora, perhaps unconsciously, plays the role of listener, a role which Rosenblatt assumes is necessary in the development of those efferent, aesthetic qualities we say we look for in our students as readers. And Kent, in his responding correspondence, sounding "smarter" by the way than he ever did in his own classroom, testifies to the validity of Rosenblatt's assumption:

The last book I've read is The Dead Zone by Stephen King. I don't read enough to have a favorite author, but if I had to choose it would be him. I like poetry because it takes your imagination but when your tested on it I always get the wrong image. I think it dumb to have a certain point you have to pick out of it.

Further along in his letter, Kent talks about The Color Purple, and asserts his hope for Celie:

I'm up to page 60 in the book and hope Celie learns to stand up for herself. One other thing I thought was funny is when Sophia beats up Harpo. It reminds me of me and my sister.

Kent's honest, real, and non-"academic" response to his reading causes one to wonder: What kinds of readers of literature do we want our students to be? Are our students naively yet intuitively aware of much of the current research in reading and responding to a text?
Cora provides a scaffold for Kent in her direct, honest response to the text of his letter. She invites him to join her as a co-reader of Walker and as a co-listener to each other's aesthetic-efficiency probings:

How did you like *The Color Purple?* I really enjoyed it. It's so different from the other literature I've been reading lately. Some parts of the book were quite shocking. Did you find anything strange or shocking? I had a hard time at first with the book. The language is hard, isn't it? I kept translating everything Celie wrote into my own way of speaking or writing. I guess I had to make sense of the book through my own English. Many social problems come up in the book. Which one bothered you the most? Why? A lot of what occurs in the book does not apply to my own life. Growing up in the suburbs in a middle class family does not really compare to Celie's life does it? However, I learned a lot from this book about how life should be lived. Did you learn anything? In your last letter, you mentioned how funny it was when Harpo was beat up by Sophia. I thought that was funny because he lied to Celie about how he received the bruises. Celie saw right through him; she knew what really happened. I really enjoyed the ending of the book, but I won't say another word in case you haven't finished it.

In his subsequent letter, Kent piggy-backs off Cora's comments about her reading. As he does so, something important seems to "happen"-- 1.) He (happily) commits an age-old, always-to-be-guarded-against, student faux pas: Never admit that you haven't been keeping up with your homework because 2.) his mind seems to be occupied with other matters...namely a.) the social issues raised in the novel and b.) a previous class discussion which seems to have provided him with an entry point to his own feelings:

I can't believe you read that book so fast. I guess it's just because I read so slow. I'm [still and have been for the past two weeks] on page 60 and so far I find the book kind of bizarre. It's weird how the husband can just screw around and it seems like the wife doesn't even care. The thing that bothered me the most was the incest between Celie and her father. Our class had a discussion on which of the social problems bothered us the most and most chose the same one I did. I can't really compare anything in my life to this book because I grew up in an environment much like the one you did. I guess I can be thankful that I didn't have to deal with any of these problems and I hope I never will. I'm glad you didn't give away the ending because I probably won't finish the book for another week.

Both Kent and Cora, through their honest-white-middle-class language, have become engaged in one of those "parlor conversations." Alice Walker is also present. But even she is unable to "pause and tell [them] exactly what it is about." However, even though no one was "qualified to retract for [them] all the steps that had gone before," both of our college/high-school teachers/learners took the risk, "caught the tenor of the argument, then put in [their] oars."

As Cora, and the other more experienced college students began to see what they could learn from analyzing discourse with their high school correspondents, they became more reflective student-teachers. And, likewise, as the high-school students began to see, and to believe in, their roles as "teachers," they became better learners, better students, and better students of their own learning.

And all of us involved began to better understand Michel Foucault and Clifford Geertz's observations about power as discussed in Marilyn Cooper's *Writing as Social Action*:

> The source of power within a discourse [community] can be seen to arise not from the meaning, form, and objects of one's discourse, but rather from one's position in the structure of [the] society. (210)

During this four-month letter exchange, all of us found ourselves in the middle of a wrestling match going on between our "teacher" role and our "learner" role -- a state of mind, we eventually concluded, which is perhaps indigenous to a transactional model of teaching.

After discussing (agonizing over?) possible responses to Brian's letter with her college peers, Susan wrote him the following letter. Which role did she choose...which kind of "power" is she attempting to exert here...which of her many honest "voices" is she using?

**Brian,**

I suppose you expect me to start lecturing you on the finer points of literature. I won't. I'm sure you already understand them -- everyone does -- they just don't all know the right words. I am, however, going to be honest with you again. There is no way, just from reading the book, that you can define its author. The whole point of fiction is that the author is making it up. It's not a textbook, not history riddled with facts and dates. *The Color Purple* is how Walker imagines that a woman in Celie's situation would behave and react.

I have enclosed a poem that demonstrates what I have just said. Very rarely is the author the "speaker." This poem is about a man
whose wife is dead—he imagines her spirit is in the vacuum cleaner. That's no big deal—it's just a poem. The point is, that Nemeur's wife (he is married) is not dead. There was a big scandal when it was first published because of that. The literary critics felt that he could not adequately deal with the death of his wife in poetry because it hadn't really happened. Nemeur's poem, however, stands on its own—obviously he cannot be the speaker. But the poem is still powerful, moving. You see, the writer/poet doesn't have to have experienced what they write about. They don't even have to agree with it. I myself write horror stories that give my mother grey hair—and yet I got freaked out the first time I saw *Gremlins*. So who am I (or you) to say anything about Alice Walker, just on the basis of one book?

Why did you think of the book as "feminist"? Nobody really got "liberated." There are still a lot of unanswered questions at the end. Celine has to get to know two grown children that are hers, but she isn't their "mother." So really, she is alone at the close of the book—there is really a lot of sadness. So how is it feminist? Did Celine really "win" anything? Did the men in the book "lose" anything? Did they lose their manhood—or finally gain it?

Can you guess Brian's response to this letter?

In the subsequent weeks and months, Susan and her peers wrote other letters, and shared, reflected upon, and analyzed their high-school students' responses. Since the basis of that analysis lay within the context of the theorists they were reading at the time, the extended dialogue grew to include the voices of Rosenblatt, Probst, Britton, Corcoran, Evans, Knoblauch, and Brannon. Together, they searched the research for practical answers to difficult theoretical questions:

1.) How can teachers effectively listen to a student's honest, expressive response without reacting personally to a "skewed" interpretation? Is this possible, or even educationally desirable?

2.) How can teachers lead students from an expressive, gut reaction to-a text toward a textually based dialogue with the author of that text?

And as teachers (of an English teacher-preparation course and of a highschool English course) we searched for our own additional answers to:

1.) How do our students hear what we say when we ask for textual support for their opinions? Do they hear us saying "You didn't get it right, again" when what we really mean is "I want to hear more about what makes you think like this?"

2.) How does our role as the power figure in the class affect the transmission of language? Whether we label our philosophical stance as new critic, reader-response, student-centered, feminist, or something else, do we really want to hear the Why of their beliefs? Do we really need to overlook the language of a Brian's voice as we roll our eyes and tap our toes while we wait for the "right" interpretation expressed in the "appropriate" language of the classroom?

3.) What do our students, both high school and college, understand already, in a metaphysical sense, about this subliminal language of power which permeates and controls classroom dialogue?

"Language is never innocent," James Berlin said in a recent talk. "It is the terrain of ideological differences." When we question our students, when we evaluate their responses, when we respond to their questions, we are indeed treading, as both of us discovered, through a mine field of ideological differences. Every now and then, during the course of the correspondence, somebody would inevitably step on a piece of conversation that blew up, so to speak. And the question then became one of how to handle those differences in student-teacher ideology, those divergent interpretations of language, those dissonant philosophical stances if you will. Those differences were affecting the roles they were trying to play -- with us, with each other, and with their high-school/college correspondents.

When it came right down to it, the greatest difficulty lay in handling the "oars" with which each side -- student and teacher -- navigated. The one single force that seemed to underlie our advice to high-school and college students seems so simple: Be honest. Both groups of students struggled with issues of "I can't say that..." or "I want to tell them this but..." or "I don't want them to think I'm weird..." or "I don't think they'll care about...so I won't tell them" or "This is what I want to say but you can't say that to kids or you can't say that to teachers."

One strategy for how to create honest conversation is reflected in what one of the college students was willing to do with her high school collaborator very early on in the correspondence: Give someone permission to drop his/her "oar" into the conversation.

In this letter, Marian gives Tim permission to assume the "teacher" role:

Dear Tim,
In order to gather your input in a different and fun way, I am making you the teacher and myself the student...do the best you can and remember, you’re the teacher so have fun making your own rules.

She continues by asking her partners what their class syllabus might look like:

Let’s suppose I just received your syllabus with a list of assignments. Could you tell me what some of those assignments might be? Would I be expected to do a lot of reading and writing? If so, why? Are reading and writing important to you? What would these activities do for me, the student? What types of literature would you ask that I read? Does the literature deal with romance, sports, tragedy, humor, or beauty? Any other topics? Why do you think these topics are important to me to experience? Am I to read poetry, short stories, novels, essays, song lyrics, biographies, or cereal boxes? Are there advantages to reading each type? Oh, and by the way, teacher, what the heck is "literature" anyway?

As other readers of Marian’s letter, we, along with Marian’s classmates, found ourselves curious about what in the language of her text created a social context that allowed Tim to respond this way:

Dear Marian,

I find this Pen Pal thing between us neat. It’s something new. Let me tell you a little about myself. I love sports. I play hockey and plan on playing in college. I also play football and baseball. Sports is a big part of my life. Music is something I can’t live without also. I listen to RUSH, Don Henley and the Eagles, [the] Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Iron Maiden, and so on...I also love partying and being with my girlfriend.

Let’s talk English now. I’m the teacher huh? Sounds [like] fun. My syllabus for you would have a variety of different assignments. First I would have you write me a few papers on simple topics like, who am I, etc. Just to get to know ya as a writer. You would have to write on things you find comfortable writing on. I would also have you write a fiction paper on anything, a short story. Just to see what imagination you have. ‘To tell you the truth writing really isn’t that important to me. Reading on the other hand is. I feel reading broaden[s] your mind. You can learn a lot if you read. I would have you read nonfiction like sports stars, etc. Then for fiction I would have you read the classics all the way up to some of the authors of today. As for other types of literature, I like reading poetry. I would have you read a little [of it]. You get alot out of them. Short stories we will defintly cover some. I’ve read a little short story once and it taught me alot. I also find that reading up on current events is something that should be done. Reading things like George Will etc. Articles in Time, Newsweek and Reader's Digest. I really think it’s good to keep us [up] on things going on around you. I think I will have you write on things we read in class. Your output would be good. It would tell me how you think about certain kinds of literature. Your input would defintly help in my class. It will help me plan my class...

Sincerely,
Tim (your teacher)

As the college students re-examined the language of their own letters, they began to see them as texts which, in effect, did create socio-cultural contexts for their high school partners.

Each reflection on and re-examination of their own language prompted these college students to re-visit the theorists whom they were studying in their assigned readings. They began to engage in new conversations (and debates) regarding ideas they were often certain they had completely understood and were in complete agreement with. Earlier in the semester, for example, before dealing with the voices of our Brains, these future teachers were certain they agreed with James Briton: dissonance and disagreement need to be explored as a part of the talk of the classroom. Now, after hearing the language of the real students, they were not sure that these voices needed to be heard in order for effective learning to occur.

We, too, debated this issue -- and others. We viewed the letter writing as a "social act"; we scrutinized and analyzed the "honest conversation" in which these sixty-three students took part -- and thereby "created" -- over a period of four months. And though we often argued about the merits and/or appropriateness of their creation, we had to agree that the very structure of this collaborative discourse had in some way provided the high-school students with the position of power from which they were permitted a voice in which they could respond honestly. Each learner in this particular discourse community was truly a "teacher" of the others.

We saw, too, that the letter-writing structure enhanced a desire to connect with the "learner" rather than a desire to control. The drive to "get it right" (whatever that ambiguous educational "it" might be) seemed to be genuinely supplanted by the desire for connection. The high school students needed to "connect" in order to teach the future teachers what they knew about real learning. The college students needed to "connect" in order to learn all they could from these "teachers" about literature, about reading, about learning,
about motivation, and about their most not-so-secret desire: to become a great
teacher.

In discussing the complex issue of literacy, Jay Robinson suggests that we re-
examine the role of ethnography in the lives of our students:

A proper aim for writing programs in colleges and universities, maybe
even in schools (emphasis ours), might well be to invite and help
students to develop as ethnographers of thought -- as careful and
reflective participant-observers, critical thinkers of their own thoughts,
able to reach beyond the constraints of discourse, able to escape from,
narrow perspectives, able to move from restricted and restricting ways
of being and behaving in the world, able to assert and make a place for
themselves as makers of meanings that are personally satisfying, no
matter how constrained by the language they must use.

In many ways this four-month long correspondence between "students" and
"teachers" invited a social act that gave both groups of students the power to
become ethnographers of their own thinking.

And in some sense, it seems that, we, too, as teacher-researchers in our 45th
year of combined-classroom time, have accepted Jay Robinson's invitation.
When we entered Ken Burke's "parlor" in September, our ears were perhaps
"covered" by "curriculum" and by "appropriateness"; our student's voices were,
perhaps, muted in those ears. Perhaps they still are. But each of us has
come to realize that we will never be able to hear those voices clearly as long
as we allow other voices to fill our heads. Crisis-management administrators,
grade-happy parents, test-obsessed Departments of Education -- all possess very
loud voices. And those voices will continue to drown out those of our students
until we, as a profession, learn how to stand up for the right to be able to
hear theirs. Perhaps this project has "taught" us the most subtle irony of all:
in order to be able to hear their voices, we need to develop one of our own.

Mary T. Mackley is the Director of the Connecticut Writing Project. Prior to
coming to UConn in 1987, she taught high school English for seventeen years
in a department which also included her co-teacher/researcher, Carole Jonaitis.
Their professional relationship, born over two decades ago, continues to thrive
today because of each one's penchant for collaboration ("even before we knew
what to call it"), for debate ("it's fun to argue"), and for the experimentation
born of curiosity (I wonder what would happen if...). Both Carole and Mary
believe that their collective students -- during afternoons spent at newspaper
or literary magazine meetings, during nights spent with the drama club, and
during days spent in literature and writing classes -- gave them the lenses
through which to look, a bit more clearly, at their classrooms and at their
world.

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Two By Two

Cheryl Timion

Chelsea and Kelly had prepared well for their Book Share. As soon as all their first grade classmates were seated on the carpet they began to read to the class in unison. The Best Nest, by P.D. Eastman.

Mr. Bird was happy. He was so happy he had to sing. This was Mr. Bird's song:

At this point Chelsea sat quietly, while Kelly sang:

I love my house
I love my nest.
In all the world
My nest is best.

Their classmates were spellbound, no other pair of readers had ever read in this fashion before and the students loved it! Kelly and Chelsea showed the picture after reading each page and sometimes giggled behind the book in anticipation of what was coming next. The rest of the class was totally engrossed, some of the students even predicting out loud what was going to happen on the next page. The students who were familiar with the text were equally involved in the anticipation. They knew what was coming next in the story, but not how the girls were planning to read it. The students on the carpet were not passive listeners.

In preparation for their Book Share, Chelsea, Kelly, and I had discussed the fact that time would not permit them to read all the pages of the book, so they had decided to read just up to "the good part". True to their plan, the girls read up to the part of the story where Mr. and Mrs. Bird had built a new family nest inside the big bell in the church steeple. They read,

Every day at twelve o'clock, Mr. Parker came to the church. Mr. Parker came to pull a rope. The rope went up to the Bird's nest.

Teacher Research: Guess Who's Learning

Then Chelsea said, "Do you want to know what happened? ... You'll have to read the book and find out." There were groans of disappointment from the group on the carpet as the girls closed the book. Jeff proclaimed, "I already know what happened 'cause I already read the whole entire book." Ignoring his comment, Chelsea asked if anyone had any questions or comments. Several students raised their hands. "What was your favorite part?" asked John. One at a time each girl showed her favorite (but different) page in the book. Kelly called for the next response.

"Why did you choose this book?" asked Meghan.

"Well, Kelly had read it and she taught it to me," Chelsea replied.

Kelly added, "Once we got the idea that I could sing the father bird's parts, we got really excited about it."

"I like how you read in a nice loud voice," was Tamara's comment.

"Thank you," the readers replied in unison.

"Won't you just tell us how it ends?" asked David.

"Nope," the girls grinned smugly as they shook their heads in reply to David's question. "You have to read it for yourself, maybe you could read it for reading in pairs."

"How long have you been working on this book?" asked Laura.

"About a week," Chelsea replied.

"Was it hard to figure out how to sing the father bird's part?" I asked.

"Kind of," said Kelly. "At first it was kind of embarrassing when I did it, but after we practiced, I wasn't embarrassed so much."

As the students continued with their questions and comments, my thoughts drifted back to the day in late September when a pair of readers had come to me and asked if they could read a book for the class. This privilege was normally reserved for individual readers. When a student had successfully worked through the reading of a book, they were allowed to read it for the class. The class size allowed us to schedule each student to read for the class approximately once a month. I encouraged the student to share books that were new to the class, ones I had not read to the group. In our Readers' Workshop this was a form of "publishing" their acquisition of written language.
But the amount of time that the students worked with a partner each day had expanded, and now that the students were learning to read with a partner, it had not surprised me when the two students had asked if they could share a book with the class together. My answer came as naturally as the question had. "That would be great," I said without hesitation.

When that first pair of readers read for Book Share later that week, their enthusiasm for the book had been contagious. One of the readers in fact had been a shy child who I am afraid would never have asked to read for the group on his own. Their reading for the class had been a successful experience for both of the readers and as a result, other pairs began reading for us at Book Share time. It had evolved in such a natural way until now it was a daily part of our Readers' Workshop.

I was drawn back to the present as the circle of first graders seated on the carpet clapped for Kelly and Chelsea, signaling the end of Readers' Workshop. As the readers acknowledged their classmates' applause, expressions of accomplishment radiated from their faces. I noticed that Jeff was the one who was able to get the book from the girls so that he could read it during quiet reading time.

At home that evening, as I began to write in my teaching log, I took time to reflect on the Book Share segment of the school day. I saw again the first graders leaning forward, some upon their knees, as they listened carefully to Kelly and Chelsea, anxiously watching for the next picture. A visitor in our classroom had commented on the energy she could feel in the room and the critical thinking that was evidenced by the thoughtful questions about the text and comments about the readers' style that came from the six- and seven-year-old students. But the most vivid picture that came to mind was of Kelly and Chelsea perched on the bench top of the storage chest at the edge of the carpet -- their looks of anticipation rather than dread as they waited for all the kids to assemble on the carpet, the way they had planned the reading of the story, the way they giggled behind the book as they turned to the next page, and their great enjoyment of the response they were getting from the audience of their peers. Their love for reading and books was being nourished and reinforced by their classmates. A sticker on a workbook page seemed pale by comparison.

I was not their primary audience, but I was there to add my support and encouragement and to keep anecdotal records of the readers' role and participation in the Book Share. No one else in the class had a copy of the text. Though some of the other students had already read this book on their own, none of us knew for sure if the readers were reading each word accurately. We did know, however, that what they were reading had made sense.

I closed my journal, but my mind wandered on, unraveling the fabric of our Readers' Workshop . . . how had we arrived at this format? Just when had reading in pairs become such an integral part of my first-grade students' acquisition of written language?

I had first learned about reading in pairs as a graduate student while studying with Dr. Julia Sparrow at the University of Northern Iowa in the mid-sixties. We were learning to diagnose and remediate student reading problems, and one technique that Dr. Sparrow suggested was reading in pairs. She proposed that it was an efficient use of the students' time as it could allow each child to read whole passages of material aloud each day rather than having one short turn to read aloud each day or every other day, as was the practice in the reading group format used in most elementary classrooms at that time.

At first, I used reading in pairs this way exclusively, considering it a better use of the students' instructional time to provide for active participation. It was more or less an extension of the reading group, for I was teaching from the teacher's manual of the basal reading program at that time. I would first teach the words in the story by using flashcards. Then I would prepare the students to read one section (usually a page) at a time. The students would then be asked questions to determine if they had comprehended the section that had just been read silently. Finally, I would have the students read the page aloud to one student at a time reading a paragraph. We'd continue in this fashion -- flashcards, preparation for reading, silent reading, teacher questioning with particular attention to details, and then oral reading -- until we had worked our way through the entire selection.

Reading aloud in this system was my way of checking for accuracy. Accuracy was the exclusive purpose for this oral reading. One student reading aloud, the rest of the reading group listening and the rest of the class working silently on worksheets or dittoes at their desks.

Thus I made my first subtle change in the teaching of reading. After the group had been prepared for the silent reading of a story from the basal readers, I dispensed with the oral, round-robin type reading of each page. Instead, I would assign each reader a partner and also the spot in the room where the pair was to read. I instructed the students to read through the story, taking turns reading the pages. I would circulate among the groups or position myself in a place where I could hear several groups reading at a time. In retrospect, I realize that this change in my approach to the teaching of reading may have been more significant than I had realized because
accuracy was not my primary purpose in this activity; it was more like reading practice.

As the school year progressed, I was pleased to find that the students' performance on the end-of-the-book tests had not suffered from this change in format. In fact, some of the students were now scoring better. Perhaps it was at this point that I actually had begun to trust the learners. I had made a subtle change that had given the students a smidgen of ownership of their learning process.

Besides the encouragement from the test scores (at that time they were my only barometer of the students' progress), I was seeing other good aspects about the time that the students spent reading with their partner. I could see that they were actually reading more fluently in this non-threatening, less pressure-filled situation. A whole group of readers and the teacher were not sitting in judgment as each word was pronounced. Encouraged by what I was seeing, I made another subtle change in the format of our reading program. I'm not sure when we actually began to do this, but on certain days, after we had worked through a selection in the basal reading program I had had enough of it, and so had the kids! So we dispensed with the oral reading of the story altogether and instead I would assign each child in the class a partner of similar reading ability.

I would also select the reading materials for the assigned partners, different materials to facilitate the different reading levels of the pairs of readers. Stories came from outdated basal readers or any other reading materials in multiple copies that I could scrounge up. Perhaps I sensed that more than a check for accuracy, the students simply needed practice reading -- an opportunity to get the feel of reading fluently.

The students took to this like bees to honey. It was fun to read fresh material, like going to a place you had never been before. As I circulated among the groups, I discovered that the kids were reading; not just fooling around as I had envisioned might be the case if I were not totally in charge of each situation in the classroom.

About this time, I was also becoming more and more committed to using the writing process in our first-grade classroom and this also had an impact on the reading instruction, for I was reinforcing the phonic skills as they were appropriate in the individual writing conferences. Without consciously planning it, the Reading instruction in Room 2 was becoming a much more individualized process.

Very gradually, the reading program in Room 2 was transformed. We call it Readers' Workshop for the work that we do with the acquisition of written language mirrors the work that we do in our Writers' Workshop. In the format of our Readers' Workshop the students have time for quiet reading as well as reading with a partner. Phonetic skills are taught as they occur in the context of our whole class, shared reading, and in individual reading and writing conferences. Once a week each student has an individual reading conference with me or a parent volunteer. Approximately once a month each student has an opportunity to share a book with the class in the form of a Book Share.

The reading in pairs segment of our Readers' Workshop has expanded to include a variety of uses. My role as teacher has also changed as I have learned to trust the young learners in my charge. The students now choose the partner with whom they will work. Sometimes they choose to work with a classmate of similar reading ability. Other times they may choose to work with a friend with whom they are comfortable but who may be a more capable or less advanced reader than she or he is.

The students now also choose the materials they will learn to read. Some students choose to read the same book over and over again, sometimes reading the same text to many different partners, while other students choose to read new-to-them books, books by a favorite author, or books on a subject that is of special interest to them.

I listen to the pairs as they read and when I hear a pair using a strategy that is working especially well for them, I ask that pair to model their style of working together for the rest of the class, much the way Hiebert (1990) has described. I also model or have students model appropriate methods to use when working with a partner in the form of mini-lessons. As a class we discuss what works best for the individual students and we even try to speculate why these strategies work. As the teacher, it is also my job to intervene if a pair is not functioning productively.

While I knew that this method of learning to read with a partner was working for the six- and seven-year-old learners in our classroom, I gradually became very interested in the reasons why it was working so well. I began to dig into what other researchers were discovering about the acquisition of written language. I found Pellegrini's research on the subject insightful. His study cited research on the social origins of private speech and then suggested that children's language develops in a dialogic context. Pellegrini observed preschoolers in private speech in two different contexts: one supportive of oral discourse with peers in the housekeeping corner and the other in a situation that was not supportive of oral language (doing a puzzle next to a non-responsive adult). More oral language was developed in the supportive setting with a responsive peer (Pellegrini and Yawkey 1984).
We are learning that the acquisition of written language may mirror the way that oral language is acquired. Perhaps this research helps to explain why the students are experiencing more success when reading material with a responsive peer than in a formal reading-group setting with a teacher who was preoccupied with keeping order in the classroom; why students are learning more when the desired product is interacting with the text, gleaning meaning from the reading material, rather than pronouncing each word accurately.

I searched for more clues and found that Donald Graves talked about consulting with a friend to clarify meaning when reading (1990). He also became aware that the students' perceptions of themselves as readers was impacted by this social interchange in the process of acquiring written language. Yetta Goodman cited works by Piaget and Vygotsky that show the positive cognitive effects of social interaction when children help each other. She came to understand that cognitive development can be attributed in part to the effects of social interaction (1990).

My qualitative research in our first-grade classroom this year has clearly shown me that something very positive happens when the students work collaboratively to acquire written language. This method is allowing students to use what they know to figure out what they don't know. The students are working together successfully in a climate of affirmation, a climate that businesses and industries desire in their work places. From listening to tape recordings of the students reading together and from my personal observation, it appears that the students are not afraid to take risks when they are reading with someone, someone with whom they feel comfortable, someone who will not laugh at them because of a miscue.

The use of reading in pairs in our classroom has expanded greatly in the last year or two. During any given week some pairs do follow our original format and take turns reading the pages. The students voluntarily help when their partner gets stuck on a word. Conversely, a student feels free to ask the partner for help. As the year progresses and the students become more competent readers, the pairs often stop to discuss the text or to predict what will happen next.

Some pairs read in unison. I have noticed that as they read together, often one of the students is the leader while the other reads in a quiet voice. At times the follower actually pronounces the words a second or two after the leader, but in this fashion, the follower appears to be learning the text. In many cases I sense that the support of the follower tends to give the leader confidence to carry on in this fashion.

Another variation of reading in pairs occurred on Mondays when a fifth-grade class in our school came to be Learning Pals with our first graders. So on Mondays our students' reading partners were fifth graders. Other days we might read chorally as a class instead of working in pairs.

One day after an individual reading conference, I asked Kelly to teach Benji to read a book that she had read beautifully during her conference. She had brought the Dr. Seuss book from home, so we knew Benji would love it. She appeared pleased to be asked to assume this important role and Benji seemed to be anxious to learn to read the new book. As I have observed the peer tutor relationships in action, it has occurred to me that the learner in this format is not the only one who benefits from the experience. Anyone who has assumed the role of teacher knows that in teaching the material, the teacher often learns more than the student. It appears to be a way of confirming what one knows, a confidence builder.

Another variation of reading in pairs that we use is a type of readers' theater. After one of Michelle's individual reading conferences, I encouraged her to find three other students and to act out the story, each one reading the part of one of the characters in the story. She took my suggestion and a few days later, the group presented the story as a play. Some of the group had memorized their lines while others read theirs from the book.

At times reading partners choose to read through a story by taking the parts of the characters in the story. Sometimes the students use the reading-in-pairs time as reading practice as they prepare for their weekly individual reading conference with me or a parent volunteer. As I circulate among the pairs of readers, I see that some of the pairs are preparing for Book Share, practicing the words, planning how they will share the book with the class.

My goal as a teacher is to nurture independence in the learners in our classroom, to help each student discover her or his own unique process for learning. I try to gradually remove myself from the picture and allow them to continue without me. I now realize that much of what I did in the "basal" approach to learning caused the opposite response from the students. I was spoon feeding them and they relied totally on me to dole out the doses of what was to be learned that day.

But as I recall the scene during Chelsea and Kelly's book share, I am pleased that I was not the planner of, nor the primary audience for their presentation. They were clearly in charge, the response from their peers was the source of their pride and satisfaction. Reading in pairs is a learner-centered activity that is helping the students in our classroom support each other. Just as in the time of Noah, the students are coming aboard two by two.

Cheryl Timion has previously studied how her first graders decided on the books they chose to read in her classroom at Hazardville Memorial School in
Conversations and Co-Authorship:

Listening to the Undersounds

Constance Aloise

Background

... we are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of the conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. Education, properly speaking is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation.

Michael Oakeshott quoted in Kenneth Bruffee in "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'"

I am a high-school English teacher in a middle-class suburb. In the summer of 1986, I took a course in collaborative learning based on the work of Kenneth Bruffee. In his article, "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" Bruffee draws a causal relationship between thought and conversation: "... the work of Lev Vygotsky and others has shown that reflective thought is public or social conversation internalized" (639). Bruffee goes on to state that people learn the "skill and partnership of conversation" in this "external arena of direct social exchange with other people. Then we learn to displace the 'skill and partnership' by playing silently to ourselves in the imagination, the parts of all the participants in the conversation" (639). Based on Vygotsky's notion of reflective thought and Michael Oakeshott's notion of conversation taken from the quotation above, Bruffee concludes that "we can think because we can talk, and we can think in ways we have"
learned to talk" (640). Thus, Bruffee argues for a pedagogy in which teachers 'contrive to insure that students' conversations about what they read and write is similar in as many ways as possible to the ways we would like them eventually to think and write" (642). In this pedagogy, teachers design tasks that structure the conversations of their students to parallel the conversations of the wider academic community. In order to think well, Bruffee reasons, students must learn to converse well.

With Bruffee's pedagogy in mind, when school opened in August of 1986, I arranged my world literature class, comprised of twenty-two seniors, into collaborative groups of five to talk about the literature we were reading in class. Early in the school year, I began to notice the influence of gender on the roles my students played in their collaborative groups: more boys rather than girls took on the role of recorder when class members indicated that they liked the final editing power as spokesperson for the group. What was at stake in the role change I wondered? Did some of my students have greater access to, more practice in, Oakeshott's "skill and partnership of conversation"? Were some of my students better at Bruffee's way of talking and thinking? Were some voices more readily recognized, more used to speaking and being heard than others? What remained unstated in the more assertive behavior of the boys, the less assertive behavior of the girls, I mused?

As the school year progressed, co-writing groups of two or three naturally derived from the larger collaborative groups, so I encouraged co-writing. While the collaborative groups were comprised of self-selected boys and girls, the co-writing groups were self-selected groups of either boys or girls. I wondered why boys chose to write with boys and girls chose to write with girls? Was this just a coincidence in this particular class? Or were there other issues at stake in the selection of co-authors? I also noted in my field notes that the male and female writing groups operated differently from one another. Specifically, the boys more often worked noisily and competitively while the girls were quiet and cooperative. Bruffee said, "The way they [students] talk with each other determines how they will think and write" (642). I had a hunch that gender might influence "the way" co-authors talked to one another, and that, in turn, might influence "the way" conversations and subsequent writing were structured. But, hunches are tentative and uncertain, and gender issues are slippery, so I decided to let the matter rest until I could give it more thoughtful consideration.

As the year drew to a close, the gender issues remained intriguing. After some thought, I focused on a few, more manageable questions -- questions which, I thought, might make gender issues more accessible to me and my students: What effect, if any, did gender have on the dynamics of the co-authorship? Did gender influence how co-writers talked to one another? If so, how did that gender-influenced conversation then structure students' texts?

Through these questions, I thought I'd look closely at gender and conversation and writing.

With these questions in mind, I made tentative plans for the next batch of seniors in the fall of 1987. Armed with journals and video camera, I would listen and watch their co-writing sessions as they wrote the critical literary essay, the kind typically written in an English class. Maybe the influence of gender on conversation about writing, if there was any, might make itself accessible.

The following study is thus a journey through the conversations of some of my students. It is an interested and attentive listening by a teacher who is actively engaged in the language habits of her students -- I make no claim to objectivity here. While there are incomplete and tentative moments, while there remain more conversations to be listened to, while there are more questions raised than answered, I am beginning to hear some of the gender issues that surround conversation and writing. I am beginning to hear a rumbling beneath the words of my students which I have come to call the undersound of conversation, a rumble which is tacitly aware of gender and its relationship to power, a rumble which might very well have pedagogical implications.

The Conversation of Ginny and Kim in Co-Authorship

Late in August of 1987, the new seniors arrived as anticipated, twenty-two in British Literature. By October, they had settled into working collaboratively, and in November an interest in co-writing emerged as a result of collaborative work. My students and I had just finished reading Adrienne Rich's "The Knight" and "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." With collaborative group discussions and large group reports completed, I assigned a critical literary paper on the readings. Several students elected to co-write the paper: Rob and John, Connie and Janet, and Ginny and Kim. The latter partnership, Ginny and Kim, was able to video tape their co-writing session.

Ginny and Kim are serious students, but there is a fun-loving side to their personalities that they often bring to the class. Kim runs track and is involved in student government; Ginny performs in the talent shows, school plays, and cabaret nights as a comic. They are friends both in and out of school. Ginny and Kim's video of their co-writing session reveals a cooperative dynamic, one in which they "scaffold" for one another as they write the paper.

Jerome Bruner, language and learning theorist, defined the interaction of mother and child in language acquisition as 'scaffolding' in 'The Role of
Dialogue in Language Acquisition (254). According to Bruner, scaffolding has three formats. First, the mother reduces the degrees of freedom with which the child has to cope, concentrates his attention into a manageable domain, and provides models of the expected dialogue from which he can extract selectively what he needs for filling his role in discourse (254).

Next, the mother "extends the situation and functions for which the utterances or vocalizations can be used." This extension provides an opportunity for the child to "observe and master the different senses of words and expressions and the different uses to which they can be put" (254). After extending the range of contexts, the mother moves on to the third format. She becomes the guardian of the new utterance: She does not let the child slip backwards to using fewer words. Instead, she moves her on to the next step in language construction. In Bruner's words, the mother "ups the ante." In this way, the mother first affirms the child's initial utterances and then supports the child in extending that utterance.

Ginny and Kim's video of their co-writing session shows that each are involved in focusing, extending, and upping the ante. After several minutes of playing to the camera, they settle down to write the paper. Kim makes statements which focus Ginny's attention to the subject at hand. Ginny makes one:

K: 1) What we are doing our essay on is how the poet views knighthood. (Spoken to the camera and to Ginny)

K: 2) Our main topic is the poet sees the knight as dehumanized. (Spoken to the camera and to Ginny)

G: 1) Perhaps you should read the poem -- why don't I read the poem. (Spoken to Kim)

K: 3) For dehumanizing, I see . . . (Spoken to Ginny)

Now that their attentions are focused on the matter at hand, both Ginny and Kim decide that they cannot write about dehumanization in connection with this poem, "The Knight." First, Kim challenges their thesis. She asks if the "key term" in the Viet Nam conflict was "dehumanizing?" Ginny confirms that it was the "key term" and that "dehumanizing" means that there was much "killing without feeling." Ginny goes on to say that the knight in this poem has feelings. So, Kim decides that the poem can't be about dehumanization since the knight in the poem has feelings. Having mutually challenged what they believe to be a weakness in their argument, Ginny returns to her notes and reads them aloud to Kim. Kim then comes up with another idea. It is at this time that Ginny and Kim affirm and extend their ideas for the paper. Following is a transcription of a segment of the video tape:

K: The poet sees the knight as weak because he has to wear so much armor.

G: (After thinking) So it's not that they're dehumanizing them. It's just that they've got to have so much to help them get through life rather than their own personal strength.

K: Personal strength, yes, yes! It's the armor that supports them instead of their own emotion.

G: And that's why their nerves are "tattered" and in . . . "ribbons" and all that stuff.

K: Ribbons.

G: (Reading the poem/talking) So their nerves are tear to "ribbons" so they're not dehumanized. They are feeling something. It's just that they're too weak to do anything about it and that's how we know it. That's a good quote.

K: He's like locked in his weakness.

G: Yes. He needs someone to bring out his strength -- get him off his horse -- figuratively speaking -- because I mean the horse is part of the whole ensemble of knighthood.
K: Yes, the constraints because he is in armor. He could be strong on his own but he...

G: if he could get out of -- get this armor off...

K: can't because it's the weight of what he's expected to be like. Sir Gawain was expected to be chivalrous and all that stuff. But, now, he wasn't and he's trying to live up their standards. He's wearing all this (she gestures armor) but he can't because the armor is starting to break him down, too... So, in conclusion - How are we setting up this paper?

As Ginny and Kim discuss the poem and write the critical literary essay, they are engaged in mutual conversation -- the "reciprocal give and take of ideas" as Cheryl A. Wall calls it in Changing Our Own Words (12). They are thinking together, building on to and scaffolding for, one another's ideas. This cooperative and supportive dynamic allows Ginny and Kim to question their ideas, explore the possibilities, change their minds, and test out new assumptions without becoming defensive of their initial readings of the poem. Besides providing the necessary confidence and support to explore ideas, their conversation marks each as an authoritative participant in the reading of the poem and the writing of the essay. Each sets the agenda.

I wonder about students who are denied this mutual and authoritative exchange of ideas. I think about those who are denied equal partnership in the conversation, about those who never participate in setting the agenda, about those who only get to react to it. What do these students tacitly know about the recognition of voices and the "proper occasions of utterance"?

I think hard about the pedagogical implications. How might I carve out a space in my classroom for conversations like Ginny's and Kim's? For learners like Ginny and Kim? What tasks might I devise? What lessons might I plan? I continue to wonder: How might the traditional format of the classroom interfere with the cooperative dynamic of Ginny and Kim? How might the competitive dynamic impede or overpower the cooperative dynamic? What might I do to provide space for both cooperators and competitors to practice their strengths and still provide space for them to become proficient in the other?

D: All right. We're going to do it on the comparison of Gretel's maturity and Hansel's throughout the story.

T: Yeah, the transformation of the forest...

D: Not really the forest because they change before they get out of the forest.

T: Yes.

M: Yes.

D: (Checking for agreement with both Mike and Tarrek as he talks) I think we all agree that the
forest was a transformation for Gretel... (Writing as he talks)

D: Do you think she is transformed as much as Hansel, or in equal proportions, or more?

T: Yes. Agreed. Transformed.

D: Well... Yeah... Where do you think the transformation took place? Do you think it occurred before they went in the forest, during their going in the forest, at the gingerbread house, or coming out of the forest?

M: During.

D: I tend to disagree with that. I think it's at the gingerbread house. I really do.

M: It starts there.

D: We really don't hear much of Gretel before... Gretel's role is totally reversed and so is Hansel's. In the beginning, Hansel's role is played up because once they get to the gingerbread house, Hansel is put in prison and everything is focused on Gretel. Gretel is the one who stuffed the witch in the oven. She's the one who had to do the work. I think that that point is obviously the point of transformation -- in my opinion anyway. What do you think Tarrek? Do you still think...

T: You're probably right. Nothing really happened before the gingerbread house.

D: (Writing) Okay, so we can all agree totally that Gretel was transformed. Okay, so what do you think of Hansel? I think he was downplayed -- his role was reversed.

T: I don't know about reversed. What do you mean about reversed?

D: In the beginning, we see Hansel -- well maybe they're not totally reversed, but they're somewhat reversed. Hansel is the father figure, the father figure to Gretel anyway. Okay. Gretel, I think she has more control than Hansel. That's my interpretation because I see Hansel's role as downplayed. I don't know. That's my answer.

T: Okay. It sounds good.

D: (Writing) Okay. So we agree that Hansel's role was downplayed, regressed, and perhaps we go so far as to say
M: How somewhat reversed with about Gretel's. Okay, any other the ground to cover?
symbolism of the pearls?

D: Okay. Make your point. I want to hear what you have to say.

(After pursuing Mike's argument)

D: Okay. We've got to start out with an intro paragraph describing what -- What can be our thesis? Something we can prove, something our whole paper is based on. Okay. How's this? (Writing) Gretel's maturity level is increased -- I'll change it -- throughout the story while Hansel's maturity level and control seemed to be downplayed. Now we have to get into the transformation at the gingerbread house... This is really easy. All we have to write is where the transformation took place and give the examples of it... We should go over to business and start typing.

T: Increased sounds like a math paper.

T: How are you going to word it?

While the cooperative dynamic of Ginny and Kim resulted more in the reciprocal give and take of ideas and less in the challenging of either's ideas, the competitive dynamic of Tarrek, Mike, and David, which does involve some affirmation and extension, resulted more in the postures of argument: David asserts; Tarrek challenges; David qualifies, defends, persuades; Tarrek acquiesces; Mike asserts; David challenges, etc. It strikes me that the competitive dynamic of Tarrek, Mike, and David is more akin to Oakeshott's "skill and partnership of conversation." The format of assertion-challenge-defend, is more like "the way" Bruffee would have students talk and write.

I think about the different way Ginny and Kim and Tarrek, Mike, and David talk to each other in their respective co-writing sessions -- about how cooperation structures one conversation and competition structures another. I think about the way of talking and writing that is cultivated by schools, by the larger culture, even by the critical essay I have assigned these students. I can't help but recognize that the competitive dynamic is privileged in the aforementioned contexts.

I wonder about students who have less experience with, less practice in, less tendency toward the competitive dynamic. How do they perceive access into the "skill and partnership of conversation"? What do they perceive as the "proper occasions of utterance"? What do they tacitly know about who gets heard and who does the hearing? Perhaps this is why girls chose to write with girls and boys chose to write with boys. Perhaps in the undiversed of the sociology girls know that if they talk and write with other girls, they increase their chances of being heard, of being recognized as an authoritative participant, of participating in the setting of the agenda.

Again I think hard about the pedagogical implications. How might I, as teacher, support the strengths of the competitors and still initiate the cooperators into the conversation? How might I convince the competitors that the cooperative dynamic, though presently less privileged and less valued in public institutions, is visible dynamic for exploration? How might I recognize and honor cooperative work in a system that is dominated by competition?

**Pedagogical Implications**

When I first began nagging about gender and talk and writing, I thought I might come to understand if and how gender influenced "the way" my students talked to one another and subsequently wrote together. After listening to two sets of co-writers, I can say that I've learned something about gender and talk and writing. I've observed that cooperation can structure a conversation which affirms and supports the mutual formation and exchange of ideas, and
competition can structure a conversation which challenges each participant to defend his or her existing ideas. I can also say that I am coming to know something about access to the "conversation of mankind." Though this notion is harder to articulate, I can say that I am beginning to understand that access to that conversation is not neutral as Bruffee and Oakeshott suggest. Rather it is privileged for some and not for others. Let me explain.

Classroom conversation, as I have experienced it both as student and teacher, is more often competitive than cooperative in nature. It is influenced by a competitive grading system, by the competitive entrance requirements and orientation of the academy, and by the competitive motives of the business community. Therefore, access to this conversation is privileged for those who have experience with, practice in, or a tendency toward the competitive "skill and partnership" of conversation. And that privilege, I am coming to understand, may be related to gender, and I suspect to race and class as well. While I have many more conversations to listen to, and many more questions than answers, I am coming, nonetheless, to understand the complex power relations that reside in the underbelly of my students' conversations.

As a result of this new understanding, I am no longer comfortable with Bruffee's pedagogy. I realize that to practice it runs the risk of perpetuating existing power relations since it urges teachers to structure students' conversations so that they parallel the existing and competitive academic community and wider culture. I would prefer a pedagogy in which my students problematize the dominant way of thinking, talking, and writing. I would prefer that they analyze its strengths and its limitations as well as explore the strengths and limitations of other ways of thinking, talking, and writing. I am aware that my students and I might have to engage in the vocabulary, conventions, strategies, and postures of the dominant and competitive ways of thinking, talking, and writing in order to be heard by those who are in positions of power. But, perhaps we might resist this accommodation, in some measure, through critique of the conversation and self-reflection. What I am thinking of here is a reflection that in some way analyzes and accounts for who gets to speak and why, how one speaks and why, who gets heard and why, and who does the hearing and why. In this act of reflection, perhaps my students and I might begin to make the underbelly of conversation audible.

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Welcome to the Literacy Club

John Goekler

"Mr. Goekler, instead of reading The Printing Machine today, can I practice my No Smoking book? I'm going to read it in my other class tomorrow." This question and a thousand others like it are the outgrowth of a year of huge professional change and soul searching. It has been a year that has caused me to understand Thomas Wolfe's statement that "You can never go home again..." It began as a simple alteration in teaching assignment.

In the spring of 1990, as I sat with my team-teaching partner at a meeting, I learned that we would share the responsibilities of a small language arts group of at-risk first graders. It was felt that they would be unable to handle the demands of the intense synthetic phonics reading series in our mainstream grade one program. Dora, the learning disabilities teacher, and I, the reading teacher, had worked with these children during their kindergarten year. They had not learned their letters and sounds. They seemed to be withdrawing more and more, showing less and less personality.

We knew that the traditional approach hadn't been successful and that something else was needed. Dora and I had talked about integrating language development with reading and writing, about using trade books, about using writing, about letting language be the focus of our program. The question then for us became: would this new type of approach work any better with these children? After all, they were (with the exception of one) diagnosed special education students.

Because we could focus, right from the beginning, on their assets they seemed to develop cooperative and collaborative behaviors which helped foster a supportive atmosphere. They worked together; they helped each other; they supported each other. It seemed as though this type of program where the skills grow out of the child's need to learn something allowed us all the freedom to be successful and to see success in others. Not only were the children successful learners, we were successful teachers. We all became, together, a community of learners.

Teacher Research: Guess Who's Learning

68

We were anxious as the year began. But as the first weeks of school passed, Dora and I both were feeling better and better about the children's progress. In fact, Dora began to jokingly refer to them as gifted. And we truly began to see them as more than merely capable. They were weak; their abilities fragile to be sure, but there was so much that they could do. This was a new idea for these children, the idea that they were capable.

One of our first thematic units was about bears. We all brought in teddy bears; we read bear stories; we wrote bear stories; we ate bread and honey as we read Bread and Honey, etc., etc., etc. The group was mildly successful; but something was missing. It was what Andrea Butler calls "the connection," what Bill Halloran calls "the glue," the thing that pulls everything together, that holds everything together.

That glue for Donnie grew out of a unit about birds. Part way through this unit, we read the story Are You My Mother? he had his mother buy him the book. He read it over and over. He took it with him everywhere. For Donnie this became a turning point. He really began to believe that he could read. He walked in one morning and saw my copy of Are You My Mother? on my desk. He slapped the book and bearded, "That's easy. I can read that!" Each time he became anxious, he had this important personal experience to fall back on.

For Julie "the glue" came from a link she made between a positive self-image program called "A is for Achieve" and a textless picture book. We had just learned the song for "C is for Confidence." We were developing the text for the Emily McCully's picture book The First Snow. Julie became very excited about the picture of a nervous little mouse with her sled at the top of a snow-covered hill. She burst out, "Jennifer is not too confident!" From then on she has been able to read that book and has been able to explain the meaning of many of the words in our "A is for Achieve" chart.

"The glue" for Randy has been rhyming. He has been intrigued with rhyming words since we began. He reads stories that have repeated rhymes over and over. He has asked his mother to help him write rhymes and label them as such. This process approach has allowed us the flexibility to capitalize on this interest.

By mid-December, Jennifer began labeling text to go with pictures. She wanted to write the individual words. Damon, on the other hand, used scribble writing almost exclusively. "I'm writing in curfiz," he would announce proudly as he held his piece to us. Donnie was moving along further. He wanted to use the scribble only when he was stuck. "The rest of the time, I want it to be like yours... right?" he would say. (We began showing him our mistakes!)
They all had truly joined what Frank Smith calls the "Literacy Club." By January Jennifer was writing: "mi skling" for "I went sledding." Julie was copying the title of a witch book "because I'm writing a witch story." Randy wrote a letter to his dad. He wrote "IHUHWNK" (I hope you have a nice time at work) and he asked for an envelope to mail it in. He wrote "to Dad" on the front, "so you'll know who to send it to." Donnie was making a book, on his own, sequencing several papers and reorganizing pictures so that they made a coherent story. And Carl was using quotation marks "because they work better than those bubble things!"

It was towards the end of January when we were told that it was unlikely that we would have this group again next year. We had assumed that we would have this year and next year to develop these children into readers. When the realization came that we might not have this group again next year, both of us panicked.

"We've got to get them into a reader," I said. "There's got to be something in this book."

"Let's try this," Dora said looking at a puppy story. "It's cute. The pictures are pretty. It's not too hard. The day we passed out the books and sang the song at the beginning was wonderful. They enjoyed the book then."

We were not prepared for the scene that followed. Not only did they dislike the story we had chosen; they cried! The story was such a frustrating experience for them that we put the reader away. No glue here.

We began to experiment with using different stories and adding a stronger skills component. My thinking was gradually changing back to the old skills-in-isolation model. "Look at this letter, Damon," I snapped one day tapping the paper. "What does it say?" The stronger the skills component became, the more frustrated I became.

"I've lost it," I said one day to Dora. I had no sense of the concept we had originally attempted to implement. "I hate where they are. They can't identify any of the sounds. I hate their writing. They aren't sustaining any of their ideas. They can't read any of the words in isolation..."

"I thought they at least knew the consonants," Dora said in response. "What are we going to do? John, they are leaving us in four months!"

I became sterner, stricter. So did Dora. We beefed up the phonics part of our instruction. We narrowed the focus of the writing workshop. We began to concentrate on isolated words. We both became more discontented. As we talked one day, me worrying over how little they really seemed to know, Dora said, "Maybe they do need more structure, but they are also special ed. They need what we were doing, too. Maybe this is where we see their "special ed. ness."

Ever since we changed our model, we had been extremely unhappy with ourselves and the learning we were seeing. We were now force feeding them in a way we had said over and over would not work. And we had proven it. They were not successful with the discrete skills that we tried to teach.

We began to float back to a more holistic approach, almost unconsciously. As we drifted back into it, I could see some learning. These children were special ed. and had diagnosed disabilities. When they came in to us, they needed to learn what reading was, not just how to read. They needed to focus on what their job was to be, what it meant to read and gain information from print. It was clear that the isolated-skill model would not have worked up to now for these little children. They were really at a readiness stage. Trying to isolate things for them would have been useless. Everything was isolated to begin with. We need to make some connections first. This we gave to them in the first half of the year. We were rather informal in our approach. And they learned.

The fact that these children are language impaired, I believe, makes this whole-language model essential. However, I also believe that they need an intentional and structured interpretation of the model. They had now passed the readiness stage. We had made some connections and they were ready to acquire some more reading skills. These needed to be presented in the context of meaningful units and not in isolation. However, they could not be presented as incidental or tangential learnings.

Many average children will develop and generalize from these tangential learnings on their own, as Carl did before moving to a different town. He was generalizing words in a variety of contexts. He had generalized basic phonics principles and knew the consonant sounds and their spellings and was beginning to use these in his writing. He was becoming fluent with the use of word patterns in decoding words and was able to connect main idea and details to assist in comprehension as well as decoding. This was the average child.

These other children are not average though. They would not generalize as broadly nor as accurately. They would not glean as much from the environment on their own. They would not benefit as strongly from incidental learning. This became very obvious when Julie came to me and asked who Chanukah was. I explained the difference between Christmas (which she celebrated) and Chanukah. "Now can you tell me what Chanukah is?" I asked. "Yes," she replied, "but what about the people in Massachusetts?" Jennifer showed the same lack of focused ability to generalize during a lesson about
short a. Instead of generating more words or expanding on the discussion, she said, "So, do you know that the Marriot has room service." Trying to capitalize on the "whole-language concept," I said, "And look at the word Marriot. It has a short a. Listen ..." Her response was, "So, it makes food in your room."

Because we had presented everything in context and in ways that seemed meaningful to the children, they saw the material as being useful tools. Even when we began using sight word cards, they saw the cards as having useful information. Donnie, for example, wanted to use the word "up" in a sentence that he was writing. He went to the word cards and looked through them. He then wrote "up" on his paper. He came to me and said with great pleasure, "Look, I wrote 'up.'" What he had actually written was the word "go." I said, "Tell me the letters you wrote." He spelled "u-p!" Interestingly, when we reviewed the word cards later in the morning he read "go" and "up" correctly. Because directionality and the perception of minimal differences were extremely difficult areas for Donnie, it is understandable that he would confuse them. I believed that his error was compounded by the fact that he was heavily concentrating on the meaning of his sentence and about smoke going up in the air.

This type of response, in the past, would have triggered a myriad of professional bells ringing. I would have veered off the task of writing and spent the rest of whatever time was available going over the difference between "go" and "up," the importance of directionality and the sounds of the consonants and vowels. This would have negated whatever writing was going on and scared Donnie from wanting to risk writing something he wasn't sure of again. It would have certainly confused the issues for him. Rather than doing this, I simply accepted his effort and later checked whether he did, in fact, know the words "up" and "go" when he read them. If he had chosen to publish that story, we could have again talked about the spelling of "up" and made the appropriate changes.

The change in emphasis had the effect of allowing the child to feel safe with his attempts at writing. It also allowed me to accept an inaccurate response and see it in context. I didn't feel compelled to have everything correct. And because things were done in a particular context, it allowed me to evaluate better which errors needed to be explored and which could wait for a more appropriate time and which didn't need to be dealt with at all. In this case, I did not need to be concerned with Donnie's misspelling of "up" because he was most concerned with the meaning of his sentence. When I saw that he was able to read the words, I felt that, for the time being, it was unnecessary to deal with the problem. As an emergent reader/writer this was all he really needed to do with those words at that time. I could deal with the directionality and sound issues later when the context and meaning were more appropriate. Donnie could have some integrity for his efforts and I didn't need to feel the overwhelming sense of correcting too many issues at one time.

From the beginning, we felt that skills in isolation would not be a successful approach. We had also decided that these children were too fragile for intense instruction in skills. However, we also wanted them to start using some metacognitive skills. For this reason, we began using a strategy we termed "noticing." We would simply say, "Look what I noticed about 'red,' 'men,' and 'fed'; they all have e in them." Or, "Look what I noticed about the words under this picture; they tell what it is about." After pointing out whatever principle we were talking about, we'd leave it. Carl, our non-special ed. student, began generalizing some of these "noticing" ideas to other books and other contexts. This approach allowed all the children to begin looking at their texts and "noticing" patterns. The patterns were developmentally appropriate for each child because he was selecting his own patterns and controlling his own learning. Because their "noticing" efforts were successful they continued them. They are constantly interrupting discussion excitedly saying, "Look what I noticed about ..."

There was an intentionality in presenting words to them just as there was an intentionality in what we pointed out to them with our "noticing" technique. They need to see the connection to the actual reading process and to meaning in general. We had presented many words from their stories and incorporated them into their vocabulary books (a looseleaf notebook that each of them had with a page of words from each story they had read). When we presented the preprimer Dolch list to them on flash cards, they knew many of the words. (We had picked them out of their reading stories.) They also, however, knew many longer and "harder" words because they grew out of their experience, such as "photographer" from the day they had their pictures taken. We had not asked them to memorize them. Rather we went over them often and kept talking about them when we encountered them in other stories.

Language is a deficit area for these children. This showed up intensely in their writing. Dora and I came to the conclusion that intentionality was going to be very important to their writing development. At the beginning we put no constraints on them at all. We wanted them to feel that they were competent writers in their own right. We believe, as does Peter Elbow, that it is not necessarily that the writing is better, but if you think you can write well you will try harder. Jennifer is often heard saying, "Look, this how a real writer does it ..." Donnie, Julie, Damon, and Randy are always saying, "I'm making a book about ..." They do see themselves as competent, I wonder if this view of themselves as competent affected the degree to which they scaffolded on each other.
Theory suggests that children will write very close to their actual experiences when they begin to write. These children, though, began very far from their own sphere of experience, perhaps because they didn't generalize it enough or internalize it enough to write about it. Perhaps, like the isolated skills themselves, their experiences were too isolated to write about. The children were, however, from the outset, writing fiction. Their stories became extremely cumbersome and difficult for them to manipulate. They ceased interacting with their texts often and would change directions in mid-thought. Their stories became so cumbersome that they would actually lose track of what they were writing about, and later what they were reading about. Here also, we felt the need to be very intentional in the way we structured their writing to make the experiences they wrote about manageable for them. I do not mean that we needed to present them with writing prompts. This, I believe would have been counter-productive for them.

We did, however, talk with them constantly about what they were writing. We had them set a plan each day before they began writing. We kept checking back with them about how they were following their plan for the day. "Randy, what are you going to write about today?" I asked Randy one Monday. "I'm going to write about building a fort with my dad in the backyard," he answered. As he wrote, I went back to him and said, "You were going to write about the fort in your backyard. How is it coming? Are you going to describe the fort?"

Their writing, initially, was mainly scribbles and pictures or simply pictures representing the text. Carl's writing in early October is very telling. "Look, I wrote a road. This is where we saw the snake. I didn't write the car yet, cuz we weren't in it yet." Then they began trying to use some letters in their writing. They were attempting to organize their stories in a way that would make sense. Their pictures definitely told the story. They were certainly viewing the process of writing as a way of communicating ideas to others. They had made the link between reading and writing. In April, we had finished reading a little book about pancakes. Donnie had really enjoyed the story and felt very capable of reading it. He left a note for Dora which read: "Mak a kope." When he got the copy of the book, he wrote a thank-you note and stuck it in our mail box!

We have had an opportunity to view these children in both contexts (i.e. the isolated-skills model and the whole-language model). I feel that the level of comfort the holistic approach created for both the children and us is a very important factor in its success. I think that the approach makes sense to and for these children. It also releases us from the frustration of trying to make sense of pieces of information that have no sense to begin with. We have seen the frustration experienced when isolated pieces of information form the plan of instruction. We have also seen these children blossom into beginning readers who focus on meaning and use print as a way of gaining more information and conveying messages to others.

I felt that when we began the year I had an understanding of what a holistic approach meant. I found that I was mistaken. Whole language, process, literature base, whatever term you wish to use is the name of a philosophy. It is not just a pedagogy. This year has been truly a year of exploration. I have come to see that I have changed the philosophy with which I approach my teaching. Out of this grew a series of activities that I feel match that philosophy. It is because of this change that I know, like Thomas Wolfe, I will never be able to return to the discrete-skills model of teaching that I was initially trained in.

There are many things we've learned. Yes, the approach does work. But we had to learn to look at and for things differently. We found that when we concentrated on the context and the meaning of sentences, we didn't focus on accuracy in their reading. We found that approximation allowed the children to successfully interact with print. We found that it was different for each child; but that this type of approach allowed each child to find his or her own "glue." We found that as they passed from readiness to emergent readers it was important to be very intentional about what we presented to them. However, we also found that "notice" provided a vehicle for presenting information in a low-key but directed way. We also found that this "notice" technique allowed the children to interact at their own level. And most importantly, we have learned to listen to the children's voices and trust them as learners.

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WORKS CITED

Melissa: How Do You Know?

Esther Heffernan

A group of six seniors and I sit in a small circle in the corner of a classroom in an 1100-student suburban high school. We are discussing popular culture, responding to Mark Crispin's critique of The Cosby Show. We confess our television-viewing habits. I admit to watching movies but not to regular TV programs. A bright-eyed young woman turns to me: "Do you always have to analyze? Don't you ever just watch a stupid show?"

My response is immediate. "I can't stand laugh tracks!"

She softens. "But how would you know when to laugh? The experts put those laughs in. They know what's funny."

Her words stunned me. I am interested in how students ascertain the making of knowledge. Her words struck me as paradoxical in light of my impressions of Melissa as independent thinker -- a knower who realized that knowing was a process of evaluating and integrating, one who knew that there is no knowledge without a knower. After all, she had read Henry David Thoreau's Walden over the summer. She said she had found herself in his Romantic philosophy; her "soulmate," she said. "Walden] was just what I was looking for since I have absolutely no faith at all in my Catholic religion... I also admire Thoreau for going to jail rather than paying a tax for a war he did not support." As he went to the woods, she longed to leave New England and live in the southwest. And here she was paying homage to the outside authority and "expertise" of a laugh track.

I first had met her when she was enrolled in an honors American literature course during her junior year. Her first written assignment, a letter to Mark Twain giving him a taste of his own polemic for criticizing James Fenimore Cooper's idealized frontier tales, made me notice her. In this piece of writing, Melissa's voice was clear and confident. She adapted Twain's styles and tone to contain her strongly held views, and it worked. It was one of those papers you put an A on without hesitation, and run into the teachers' room shouting, "Wow! Did you ever have Melissa in your class? Can she write?"

As Melissa always came to class, came to class early, and sat in the first seat (in the last row), it was easy to engage her in conversation. Early on she made sure I knew she wasn't used to taking "these hard courses"; she wanted to be a cowboy: could she do her project on cowboy poetry? Her presentation received an A even though I was on a field trip with another class on the day she gave it. By this time I knew she could do no less than perfect work, and I trusted her implicitly to conduct the class in my absence. During her junior year she also wrote a story about a captive dolphin in response to an assignment choice I gave on creating a microcosm. It was accepted for publication by our school's literary magazine. This was the Melissa I knew.

So Melissa was in my thoughts long before she became the subject of this case study. As a senior, she is a student in Advanced Composition and Literature, Enrico Fermi High School's most heavily weighted English course. It is an Advanced Placement prep course and also part of the University of Connecticut's Cooperative Program. She will receive six university credits upon successful completion. Success is deemed as a C or better grade, and Melissa will, of course, have no trouble earning an A. Because she is one of only eight, now six students in Advanced Comp and Lit, I was drawn more and more to the puzzle of her inner world. I began to take notes on this class and to video or audio tape. I asked Melissa for her portfolio and for an interview. I reread her reflective writing. Themes emerged.

She no longer wants to be a cowboy. In the intervening year and a half her fluctuating goals have ranged from dolphin trainer through behind-the-scenes show biz manager to accountant. She is waiting to see if she receives a national IBM scholarship. For a month she spoke with waning enthusiasm about attending a local private junior college, with plans for interior design. When she first announced this, she said, "This is what I'm really good at, drawing and design." During the last week of March, she scurried to submit applications to local and state colleges before the April 1 deadline. She wanted to major in business. After April 15, the time when most students were sending in tuition deposits, she visited state colleges.

Her class rank is five, a surprise to me for such a multitalented perfectionist. I thought it would have been higher. When I asked her about it, she said she always took easy, unweighted courses because she doesn't "care about school stuff." But then she added: "If I stayed at Enfield High, I would have been valedictorian. I was first in my class at the end of my freshman year... None of the freshman courses are weighted." She sounded wistful. She told me also that she refused membership in the school's honor society: "I don't need a bunch of phoneys telling me how smart I am." I asked her why she
decided to take UConn English; she said, "You pressured me; don't you remember? I didn't want to let you down."

Not surprisingly, both of Melissa's parents came in for a conference on Parent's Night. She looks like her mother: bright, sturdy, engaging. But there was something appealing about her quieter father.

"She's a character," I said. "I love her." I remember exactly what her father said. "We don't know why she is the way she is. All we say is 'Is that the best you can do? If it is; it's okay.'"

Hmmm, I thought: Doing the best you can do is an explicit and difficult injunction. She is also "free" to choose her college, one not too expensive, or not too big, or too far away, or in a city.

Although she often says she likes to talk about ideas, she reflects pessimistically on the long, analytical papers she passes in to me: "This isn't important to me. I'll never use it." Yet her papers are always ready before the due date and she revises until I say, "Enough." Her voice falters in these assignments. It is for the most part dull and lifeless. It becomes more so as she writes about short stories and poems rather than her readings of essays. Here is a sample:

The purpose of this paper will be to compare and contrast the short stories "A Christmas Memory" by Truman Capote and "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen" by Bill Adams, utilizing the methods and terms detailed by Lawrence Perrine in his book Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense. In doing so, the stories will also be evaluated as to their worth as fictional pieces. The criteria which will be used to analyze these two stories is as follows: plot (the sequence of incidents or events of which the story is composed); theme (the piece's controlling idea or central insight); emotion and sentimentality (when a story aims at drawing forth unmerited tender feeling). Observations will also be made about the characters, point of view, what the stories will gain or lose on a second reading, and whether they offered chiefly escape or interpretation.

Although the assignment was to do specifically what Melissa states, other student papers came to life through either incorporating Lawrence Perrine as a "character," or arguing with him, or at least by eschewing passive voice. Melissa said her paper was "boring; cut and dry... Perrine's questions so obviously implied which story he considered superior, so after reading them it was simple to figure out which story I should praise and which I should criticize." In her first version of a poem explication, Melissa's point of view ranged from "we" through "one" to "the reader"/"he." In contrast, two of the males in the class included their names in their titles, and there was no mistaking who was speaking.

On a video tape last September, in the beginning of Melissa's senior year, I was struck by her consciousness of gender differences, perhaps reflecting Melissa's struggle to uncover the hidden currents of her life. The class assembled after being given the collaborative task of sharing their responses to the chapter entitled, "Silence," from Women's Ways of Knowing by Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule. For homework, each student described a time when he or she felt most like that state of inarticulateness described by the authors. The class was to reach consensus on which response was most like that described in the study. I will focus on Melissa, Neil, and Shane. Shane is a beautiful, studious blonde who is first in the senior class and has received early acceptance at Cornell. I use Neil's responses to highlight Melissa's. He is intelligent, handsome, athletic, graceful, and confident. His grade point average is virtually the same as Melissa's. He is comfortable with her, and he often challenges or teases her.

The group began reading the directions calling for the homework to be shared aloud so that the group might reach consensus. Melissa volunteered. The following passage served as impetus for the ensuing discussion.

One thing I understand very well was how a woman named Ann said how she had a difficult time understanding what people were talking about and would just sit there letting people ramble on about something she didn't understand and saying "Yup, yup" instead of asking "what do you really mean?" I cannot begin to count how many times I've been confused in a class, asked a question in the hopes of easing my uncertainty, and then sat there panicked because I had absolutely no understanding of the teacher's explanation but was too embarrassed to say "Could you explain that in a different way?" I still have no idea what you're talking about." I would just sit there nodding my head saying "Oh, I get it" just so I wouldn't look like an idiot for being confused on a topic in the first place and then being unable to even understand the explanation. I'm sure I've missed a lot of valuable lessons by doing that. And another thing I've noticed is that I mostly feel this way in a math or science class where I'm being taught by a male teacher. For some reason I don't feel as dumb asking for additional explanations from my female teachers as I do from my male teachers. I've never really thought about it before but perhaps subconsciously I feel that I have to appear more intelligent in a male teacher's class because I feel as though he thinks my intellect is just automatically lower than a guy's. I don't know.
Melissa speculates on the cause of her response: "I was not brought up to be silent, afraid to say what I think, that I need a man to guide me, someone to tell me what to do."

In response to Shane who tells in a soft voice how free she felt at Girls' State to campaign and compete, Melissa sighs.

Oh, that's true. The guys would have dominated the election. I notice that in some of my classes guys dominate. Am I allowed to use names? I hope no one minds; I'm not saying anything bad... guys dominate, Neil, Mike, sometimes Matt, in thinking. They just seem to be there all the time with all this knowledge and the girls, we -- I feel like the guys are really huge, just like in those Egyptian statues, hieroglyphics, the kings, no, the guys would be really big because they were supposed to be better and the women were really small.

Neil challenges: "Who does that? Not the teacher. You're being yourselves." He admits to this uncertainty: "I wonder why girls always say, 'This is so dumb. This is really stupid' before they speak in class." Later in the discussion he says clearly and succinctly, "I can't relate to silence at all. I couldn't think of any time I felt like that."

In a written reflection on the discussion of silence, Melissa notices that the dynamic of the class has reinforced her observations:

But Shane and I did notice something after class that goes along with the whole thing we were talking about: Shane said that she thought or wondered if there was some sort of biological or physiological factor which influenced the way women act or the way they feel about how they relate men, authorities, etc. But Neil, Matt, and Steve said no, there wasn't any biological reason, that women acted in the way they did because of how they were brought up by society, that the "outside" was what influenced women, not something present on their insides. Well, although Shane and I did believe that here could be some physiological influence, as soon as the men said "no, there isn't," we just shut right up and accepted what they said as being true, perhaps letting their (or our) sense of male dominance bully us into assuming we couldn't be right if the guys objected. Just thought it was an interesting observation.

Melissa recognizes that she and Shane have been silenced once again by the males in the classroom. Perhaps it is the cumulative effect of these silencings that has contributed to Melissa's unease and distrust of her own intelligence and voice. Had this lack of confidence been present the year before when Melissa had written so successfully in American literature? Had those assignments with their established literary forms provided a safe structure for her ideas? Or, like the "interesting" but not dominant voices reported in Carol Gilligan's study of thirty girls at Emma Willard in 1981 and 1982 on conceptions of self and the future, was Melissa reflecting "an increased awareness of difficulty, tension, ambivalence, and contradiction" in her life (249)? I wondered if what I was noting was this increasing awareness or, at least, her felt sense of disfranchisement.

Melissa's ambivalences also may be related to her notion of epistemology. She attempts to delineate the power of the "expert," and to define the allegiance she owes it. In a collaborative session focusing on situations where one can rely on experts, Melissa exclaims:

That's what I wrote to Mrs. Heffernan last night. I said how does a teacher get the authority to understand that they are at the point where they can help others, their students, or you know, students/writers. How they can know that they are able to help them and assist them. How does Mrs. Heffernan know that I should actually develop this or that I'm going off the point there... .

Neil: Experience...

Melissa: No. And then I realized that it has to do with more than experience because I can be experienced in a lot of things but it doesn't mean I know any more about it.

Neil: But you learn through experience.

Melissa: But that doesn't mean you're any great writer... . I mean my parents have been writing or whatever all during school... but they don't know anything more about it than I do.

Neil contends that a teacher's assessment is "just her opinion," but Melissa concludes, "... she's the one giving us the grade." Melissa doesn't take chances.

During a values-clarification activity in December, Melissa carried out a careful strategy. Each student was given "twenty thousand dollars" in poker chips to bid on such wonderful items as a stimulating intellectual life, fame, fortune, social contribution, among others. She did not hesitate, and she was not tempted by the bargains created by the small number of bidders. She waited and "bought" her two choices: physical beauty and the ability to attract love. Nothing left to chance here.

And never with teachers and grades. She thinks she took a big chance in the spring of her senior year. She wrote to Bobby Hurley, a Duke University
basketball star. After praising his performance and wishing him luck, she adds: "By the way, want to go to my senior prom?" She had already turned down two of her classmates.

Bright-eyed Melissa hasn't had a date, ever -- but she has many friends. She sent each of us in her English class a valentine. She is going to the prom by herself. She says she has my graduation present. It seems as though she longs for relationships, yet the high school boys do not measure up to some high standard, and she says no to their invitations. Her ambivalence spills over into her social life.

When I began the study of poetry, I asked each member of her class to write a poem. I had to assure her that I would neither grade nor criticize it. She wrote this:

Isn't There More?
Isn't there more than
chocolate cake with white frosting
more than pizza with extra cheese,
vanilla bean ice cream,
frosted mini wheats,
scalloped potatoes
and Butterfinger bars?
Isn't there more?

Isn't there more?
There must be more than
Salon Selectives hairspray,
more than "blacker than black" mascara,
hospital-white sneakers,
Gap jeans
and thin legs.
Isn't there more?

Isn't there more?
There's got to be more than
homework assignments,
more than English papers,
report cards,
essay tests,
A's
and valedictorians.
Isn't there more?
Isn't there?

All this makes me wonder about the extent to which we are free to create ourselves. I have for years identified with Albert Camus's Sisyphus, rolling his rock for eternity, denying defeat with his scorn, creating his own existence. Sisyphus pauses on his way up the hill, and Melissa too has her moments of consciousness. She admits her frustrations and asks why things are the way they are. Is she picturing the adult world that awaits her? Will her "picture" be another version of high school: "When I try to pick out the one or two people who dominate, that are really big, they are all males, and I always see the girls pushed in the background -- all blurry." I'm not suggesting that this is merely a gender-related problem, although it is clear that Melissa feels intimidated by the might of the male. Like so many females, she identifies what she feels lacking as a male relationship, and she sees the way to that relationship through the beauty that is defined in her culture. She trades off old authorities for new ones, but she still trades off. At times she makes her voice heard, but at other times she falls back to old patterns of uncertainty or silence.

And what does all this mean for me, for other teachers? We need to talk about which voices are heard in our classrooms. We need to look at the assignments we give, and the extent to which they invite ownership and authentic voice. We need to pay attention to the complexities in the lives of our young female students.

Esther Heffernan has taught English at Enrico Fermi High School in Enfield, Connecticut, for the past eighteen years. She holds a Master's in literature from Trinity College. She feels she is fortunate to teach two kinds of "special students," those who are behind their classmates in remedial English, and those who are ahead of their classmates, taking college courses in high school as part of the University of Connecticut's Cooperative Program. She says, "My classes provide the most valuable kind of learning a teacher can have." She is especially concerned with her young female students who display a lack of confidence in spite of their obvious ability. Melissa, the focus of her case study, was appointed English Departmental Scholar of the Class of 1991.

WORKS CITED


Smiles and Belly Buttons: A Whole Language Teacher Looks at a Whole Child

Patricia Korol

Feelings. We all have them, and we all have our own ways of dealing with them, or not dealing with them. They pop up all the time, usually the strongest feelings at the least convenient times, especially in a classroom packed with students and too many items on the agenda. Every teacher knows how difficult it is to get students focused on a lesson when they have something that they are feeling, whether it be a fifth birthday, or the beginning of a first relationship, or the first breakup, or the death of a loved one, or a war.

In my role as an early childhood educator, I have always given the expression of all feelings top billing, for learning how to express the full spectrum of emotions in a positive way is my primary goal of socialization. Fostering self-esteem and an "I Can Do It!" attitude toward learning takes priority over the readiness skills so prized by many first-grade teachers because only when a child has the former will the latter be possible.

Over the years, the children who have concerned me most are the enigmatic presences in the class who seldom show any emotions or involvement, the ones who are lost amidst the activity of their classmates. Neither the squeaky wheel of the acting-out child nor the symphonic melody of the enthusiastic band leader, these are the children that I think of as invisible. I have often wished for a magic wand to draw them out. I hoped that this classroom research project might be my wand.

Since reading Donald Graves' Writing: Teachers and Children at Work (22-27), I have accepted his challenge of a memory test and tried listing the names of the children in my class at the end of the first few days of school. When I compared my list from memory to the official class list, I always found that the names I forgot to list were helpful signals to me in my attempts to catch
these children who were getting lost in the new kindergarten chaos. I have also observed how I still miss seeking out for interaction some of these children after the new day's resolution. Others are not very responsive when I attempt to engage them in communication. With this experience, I suspected that those children whose names were left off the memory list might be the same children whose behavior would qualify them as invisible. I approached the memory task as a starting point for acquiring the names for my target group.

It is very curious to me that I remembered to include the name, Darlene, on the list I made the first day of school. I say curious because she did not attend class that day. However, on her first day of actual attendance, I omitted her name from my memory list.

I recall our first meeting. Darlene had missed kindergarten orientation and her mother stopped by with her just before school on the first day. As a late registrant, Darlene could not stay because her physical had been signed by a nurse instead of the doctor.

I remember the striking beauty in their appearance, the mother/daughter relationship apparent, reminding me of Snow White with a toy replica of herself. The mother chatted non-stop; in fact, from the familiarity of her manner, I wondered if I had met her previously. In contrast, Darlene was a smiling presence, quiet and still against the bustle of her mother.

As the first days of the school year passed, I frequently observed Darlene sitting, watching the other children, and also observing me. Suggestions from me were greeted with a smile and a shake of her head, but always her large, dark eyes watched. I thought often of Ferdinand the bull's mother, who left him alone to sit quietly under the cork tree and sniff the flowers. She knew he was happy there; I only had the intuition that Darlene could not be rushed. But happy? Darlene was always smiling her sweet little smile; it just never reached her eyes. They were busy watching the children, the activity, the teacher.

As I observed the class during free choice, she observed me. As I facilitated activities, she observed me. As I disciplined the misbehavior of others, she observed me. Every time my eyes fell on her, she was watching me. Sometimes she quickly looked away. Sometimes she smiled.

Either way, I was aware of the importance of each interaction with each student — of every reaction to every question, to every answer, to every problem. I sensed that I had to be accepting, worthy of trust, the center of a safe, caring environment.

As time went on, I began to identify with Darlene, to become aware of myself and my watching and waiting and evaluating each new situation I found myself in. At first, I was somewhat unsettled by this discovery of how much I had in common with Darlene; I did not like seeing myself as needy in the same way as she was. After much deep reflection and receiving feedback from my associates, I realized, however, that I had developed many ways of compensating for my own inclinations toward invisibility.

I became aware that my supersensitivity which so often seems a burden to me was also a gift when it helped me know how to respond. I was able to go back into my memories for a wealth of "when I was in school . . ." stories which I shared to demonstrate that I both understood and had felt that way.

I saw that it validated my intuition as a research tool. It explained why I am so sensitive to such feelings. I became aware that there is a moment for me when I consciously decide to risk, to become vulnerable, to participate. I began to wonder if there was such a moment of decision for the young learner. I began to look for indications that this might be happening in my class. I felt frustrated by the inability of my five-year-old subject to communicate such a sophisticated concept. I found that I had to resist putting my ideas and responses into the observations I was making.

Still, it reassured me that I did understand Darlene better as I came to understand myself better. Yet progress seemed slow. Even though I was almost always aware of Darlene's presence, there were times when I could not locate her without looking carefully. She seemed to be a chameleon, blending into the background, hiding amongst the classroom clutter as effectively as she hid behind her smile.

Her smile was always there, as thought it said: see, I'm happy; please let me be. And it appeared on her first chosen activity — drawing pictures of people wearing smiles and belly buttons, belly buttons and smiles.

Darlene began to bring more pictures from home. She left them on my desk without my ever seeing her place them there. I would discover page after page, day after day, whole families of figures, for which I would thank her, casually asking, "Can you tell me about your work?" The answer was always, "That's the monkey and that's the kid and that's the kid and that's the . . ." No scenery, no background, no houses, just people with smiles and belly buttons.

Then one day, after a month in school, she handed me a paper covered with random strings of letters.

"Can you read this to me?" I asked.
"I don't know how to read."

"What did you want to say?" I encouraged.

"I don't know," she answered.

"Who's it to?" I persisted.

"You."

"What did you want to tell me?"

"I don't know," she shrugged.

So I smiled, hugged, and thanked her, and she drifted off, to watch children working in the math area, eventually settling a little distance from her classmates. She remained the loner, working with the colorful links that are part of our math manipulatives.

That weekend, reviewing my notes, it hit me. Darlene was communicating with me! Not only that day with her letter, but all of the drawings, privately offered on that altar of knowledge, my big, ugly, cluttered desk. She was sharing her life at home, telling me about the importance of her mother in her life. At the same time she perhaps fantasized about how she wanted it to be, full of picnics and walks in the woods. Encouraged, I wrote her a letter, thanking her for all her work and assuring her of her importance in my class. I read it to her Monday morning, and she beamed and told me, "I'm going to give it to my mother."

The next day she came in without any pictures for me. She shared the news that her family was moving, but she said that she would still be in our class. She also brought back her little book we made of our color song we learned the day before.

Orange is a carrot,
Yellow is a pear,
Purple is a plum,
and Brown is a bear.
Green is the grass,
Blue is the sky,
Black is a witch's hat
and Red is cherry pie.

(Edge, I Can Read Colors 86)

Darlene wanted to read it to me again, pausing to look at me for help as memory failed her from time to time. I felt excitement that she would initiate a risking situation with me. It was evidence that our whole language approach with its integral component of joyful experiences interacting with the printed word was rewarding Darlene with success on which to build not only reading readiness skills but communication skills as well.

By mid-October, the move was accomplished with only the office notifying me of the change of address. It seemed to dry up the stream of writing from home, although I would still find her characteristic work on my desk, drawn on paper recognizably from our class supplies.

By this time, Darlene had been absorbed into the activity of her classmates. Each morning she came in, immediately sat and drew her families, until someone successfully enticed her into playing. This was most frequently in the play kitchen, where I would later find her notes on the pads supplied in that center. Her name was always present on the pages along with a listing of random strings of letters. Some letters appeared which were not even in her name. As she watched me less, she participated more, and I relaxed in the belief that she was making progress in her self-expression.

At the end of November, her stepfather came in to conference, arriving during the brief period between the children's arrival and going to our special of the day. My mouth just about hung from its hinge as I watched Darlene, vivacious and audibly talkative, even raising her hand for the first time in circle to offer an answer to a question. Wow, I thought, he must be her security blanket.

Later, he shared that he thought her behavior was characteristic of her at home and he was surprised by my description of a quiet child. He described her mother as scatterbrained and inattentive to details. He instructed me to send messages home to him instead of her mother and he would take care of the money and permissions that were needed. I found myself having to remember that this was Darlene's stepfather and not an estranged spouse who was placing blame on the ex-wife. He described how he attempted to train Darlene to be neat and orderly in her room and to always be the best she could be in all things. His concern was over the writing in the play kitchen. He compared Darlene to her friend, Heather, who has some "key words" in her writing that he had observed.

I explained that I do not compare student to student and that both the key words and random strings were appropriate. I cited the growth I had observed in Darlene opening up to our kindergarten experience. Still unconvinced, he pressed for at-home reinforcement of skills. With some misgivings, I suggested a word bank activity. He responded it would probably
be handled by her brothers. I quickly cautioned that they do one word a day, envisioning the boys dumping their entire wealth of words in one shot. He left; I felt he was still seeing only the product of learning while I was dealing with the whole child who is Darlene.

I continued to support, to nurture, to validate Darlene -- to give her a safe greenhouse in which to grow. I observed her increased interest in the printed word, her tracing of all letters that are on our weekly penmanship paper, her copying Heather's key words onto her own work. I noted that as her friend became more important to her, she moved her chair over until it could move no closer, and then she sat off-centered toward her friend. One day I observed her unawares as she used the pointer to follow our Christmas song chart, noting that she moved from top to bottom and left to right.

During the year, life invaded our classroom, personally as my family faced a crisis, in our class as a boy's father died, and globally as war broke out in the Middle East. Unable to fix all things for my precious young charges, I increased the portion of my day devoted to circle, letting them verbalize their feelings and their ideas about situations so I could short-circuit misconceptions. For example, one student asked, "What if the war comes to New Milford before my birthday party on Saturday?" They talked and I listened, and I shared; I became vulnerable and talked about fears and caring and tears and healing.

Curriculum fades and yet it is there, in the whole language, in the language of the heart, in teaching in context, in the context of the life we lead outside the walls . . . not needing to leave our feelings at the door but having a place to talk about them while we learn.

We incorporated a "news" chart into each day, where we wrote simple sentences of information: from the birthday of one of the bus drivers to the oil spill in the Gulf to the first troops arriving home. We charted the words to "Hurray for the World" and sang it each day to put some positive vibrations out into the air while we held hands and sent loving, peaceful, caring thoughts to the Middle East. We wrote messages to the troops. A little makeshift letter-writing center became a place to process the sad, confusing, frightening words we heard outside from sources who thought we were too young, too in need of protection to meet our need to understand. And here, without the forbidden word, "prayer," these kindergartners had a role, a positive action that they could take in the face of traumatic events, an empowerment of their personhood, a functional use of language to process and come to terms with situations with which we adults have difficulty dealing. It was not easy, and I had no answer for them, only tools I could offer that help me, such as process writing in the fullest sense of the term.

Through it all, I observed Darlene change from loner to a sought-after companion, and initiator. She went from being the observer to becoming a participant. I remember seeking her out on the playground at the end of the first week of school. I finally discovered her sitting in one of the cement tubes which is secured horizontally on the ground. She was sitting just inside the opening with her legs out in front while her head bent forward to accommodate the curve of the tube. Sitting next to her was a blonde girl from another class whom I at first assumed, erroneously, to be a friend from home. The second youngster was eager to chat with me while my attempts to draw Darlene into conversation met only with that quiet smile that never reached her eyes.

By October, there were brief glimpses such as the first time she became completely engrossed with another quiet girl in the play dough center. The two of them giggled softly as they worked together, showing each other the play dough creations and giggling again. Darlene did not notice that I was observing them.

Slowly the involvement lasted for longer periods, particularly in the play kitchen when I could observe her for longer periods of time. She was once again not aware of my observations as she moved freely about the area placing food on the table or talking on the telephone in imitation of the home life that young children spontaneously bring to their play.

By the beginning of November she was able to report to me about an injustice which had occurred between her and her friend, Alicia, at the water fountain line. It was the first of a few times during the year when huge sobs raised her chest as she tried to communicate an event which had upset her. A simple hug and apology from the person was sufficient to change her upset into acceptance. I felt heartened each time that she would persevere to make herself heard.

At the beginning of November, she sought me out to tell me a story. "My brother got bit by a dog on the face and had to go to the hospital." Although she would not elaborate on any details, I felt that we had made another step forward.

By the end of the month, when it was her turn to take home the letterperson bucket, Darlene came to tell me that she did not want a turn. Upon my probing, she admitted it was because she was afraid that no one would help her find something beginning with the letter "I" to put in the bucket. She was delighted when I offered to help her find an object and settled happily on a Playmobile Indian from our Thanksgiving Center. This concluded with her sitting in the author's chair, proudly sharing the clues she made up and smiling as her classmates tried to discover the bucket's contents.
In mid-January, I gave each child a manila folder to take home to glue on pictures and photographs of things that were important to them. Our "Me" folders would then be shared from the author's chair and later used in small groups to find topics to write about during our writers' workshops. Remembering how Darlene had been apprehensive to take home the letterperson bucket, I suggested her out to tell her that if she were to bring in some photos or pictures, I could help her glue them onto the folder in school. She gave me a spontaneously hearty hug, so different from the early days when a hug was a squeezeless affair. She then startled me by quickly placing a little butterfly-like kiss on my lips before releasing me. As I had stressed that she needed to get permission from her folks before bringing in any phoahs, I also felt that I had delivered a message when she returned early the next week with her folder completed at home. She was proud to tell me that her mother had helped her.

It was February when, during a circle time news charting, Darlene raised her hand and contributed the important information that, "Tomorrow is Valentine's Day." The next day I helped her as she tried to match the cards she had printed out to the holders we had made with our names and zip code number on them. I was as pleased that she participated with such enthusiasm as I was concerned that she still seemed to have no confidence that she could decode the names of her friends in their printed form.

It is no longer a startling event to hear her contribute an idea at circle. In March, as I showed a videotape about the ocean, I watched her sharing her knowledge of sharks with a small group of friends. Darlene was animated, punctuating the air with her hands. She was totally involved and caught up in the moment, as every five-year-old needs to be.

A few days later, I observed Darlene, flanked by her friends Heather and Alicia, reading, Brown Bear, Brown Bear, in unison. As they turned a page, Darlene picked up the pace, and the girls chanted faster.

Later, Darlene came to me to read "Humpty Dumpty," asking "What's that say?" about the title, and frequently throughout the short book. I asked if she would like to borrow a copy of Brown Bear, Brown Bear to take home. Later, she sought me out: did I say she could take the book home? After the buses left with the children, I thought to check and the book was gone too. Thereafter, Darlene frequently requested permission for herself and her friends to take home other books.

In early spring, she came to tell me about how, while playing in her backyard, she found several bullets from the people who "shoot animals in the woods behind her house." I validated her feelings and her handling of it by telling her mother. I suggested it may be something she would want to record during our writers' workshop as the class would be interested in hearing about it. Sure enough, when it was time for group sharing of our writing, she had a drawing of her experience. I noted that it was done primarily in turquoises, blues, and greens except for the yellow bullet shells outlined in purple with green lines dividing the tops from the bottom of the cases. While I observed that the figure of herself wore the usual smile in spite of the scary nature of the incident, I noted that she no longer included a belly button and the picture included a house and had a horizon line made of grass.

I reflect how far my young friend has journeyed this year. I can only estimate the effort that went into each step. But I count myself lucky to have walked a bit of the way with her as she celebrates each milestone with her. By allowing her to set her own pace, she has not fallen exhausted by the wayside.

There are still concerns and questions I have, unfinished business in this process of facilitating a child's growth. I can see that Darlene has had a full year's growth. I have seen her transition from observer to participant and I know that to have tried to rush it would have been to risk thwarting it completely.

But still the teacher-tape plays on and on and on: she only can identify the letters "D" and "A," she only does one to one correspondence to fourteen. What will her first-grade teacher think of her preparation? Can she produce the product?

Yet in my heart is the knowledge that I would not or could not teach her differently. Darlene has found herself, emerging from the shadows, comfortably beginning on the path of life-long learning.

I also see from the volume of anecdotal records on all my students that by concentrating on the target group all the students have received their fair share of my attention. I know that I have enough detailed information this year to tell the stories of the other thirty-nine students as well. I see that by concentrating my focus this year on the group of nine suspected invisible youngsters, the other students by virtue of their visible personalities have done what they have always done, successfully gotten their needs met. By focusing on those that wish to be missed, I have gently moved them into the foreground where they assume their rightful place among their peers.

With all the students and all of the notes and all of the review, I feel that I have also gotten more deeply in touch with who I am both as a person and as a teacher. I have been an active member of our community of learners and I find that this year has moved not only Darlene and her classmates but also myself a measurable distance along the path to being a lifelong learner.
The challenge and stimulation of meeting with other teachers as they too looked at their students and teaching to maximize the learning that was occurring also helped to prevent the feelings of isolation that can creep into a school year.

I have always considered myself to be an avid observer; I certainly have kept notes on the students. However, this year in my journal, I have commented and reflected on the mood and interactions of the entire class, teacher included. I found myself frequently wondering what the overall picture of the class was on a particular day last year while all I had were the scraps of details about individual students. I am sure that journal writing will become a tool of my teaching long after this study is put to rest.

My journal also clearly shows the parallels in my personal and professional life. Like Darlene, I have struggled with my shyness and my own inclination to remain in the background. I stretched the limits of my time and imagination, my own self-confidence and creativity, to grow each day. I have learned much about my craft as a teacher and as a writer. I have learned that my writing provides me with a means to enhance my understanding of myself, my significant others, and, in this troubled time, even of my world. I have learned that the process of writing to learn has enriched and empowered my own life in ways that cannot be understood unless one has been involved with writing oneself. It underlies the importance that a teacher of writing must be a writer.

As a teacher, I have encountered myself in my students and learned to be as gentle with myself as with my students. I have discovered in this daily review process that there are strengths to build on even in the lesson that seemed least successful. I have been able to readjust quickly on my lunch break to make modifications for the afternoon class based on what occurred in the morning.

While I have always been more of a facilitator than a traditional teacher, I was more aware of my actions this year and therefore more able to consciously extend and follow up on things which might have been more random or even forgotten in the daily rush. While I have always had a measure of success with the invisible students, I know that my regular and detailed journal writing enhanced the effect.

I think that I have learned to trust my instincts a little more, both in school and elsewhere. I see that I do more right than wrong and that I need to build on the positive in myself as well as my students. In the act of writing, I discovered my validation and found that in reaching my goal of making the invisible become visible, I more clearly saw myself.

Patricia Korol is an early childhood educator with eleven years teaching experience. She has also served as director of a nursery and a day care center. She is searching for her own invisible inner child and uses her parenting skills developed raising her own two wonderful children as a model. She has been married for twenty-three years to an avid sailor/boater and contrives to spend every spare moment on board her baby-yacht, Puffin, where she likes just to sit quietly and smell the salt air.

WORKS CITED


Ask The Children

Geraldine R. Green

On beautiful days I enjoy the walk to the M.I.A. (Multi-Instructional Area). On days like this, even when I have forgotten my sneakers, I’m comfortable and my thoughts are pleasant and positive. I can think about the children and hope they’ll be receptive to my lessons for the day. I seem to anticipate good teaching and learning experiences that will make the return walk to the main building satisfying.

Inclement weather generates the opposite feelings. The approximate half-mile walk becomes a journey strained by my heavy bags of books and other materials for teaching. My thoughts become preoccupied with concerns such as children who may not have been properly dressed and are therefore sitting uncomfortably, feeling cold in damp or wet clothing. Perhaps, the heavy rain discouraged them, and they won’t even be there for the lessons. Such weather often makes necessary adjustments in the lesson plans that may or may not allow the return walk to the main building to be satisfying.

My school consists of eight buildings and two recently constructed portables to accommodate the increased enrollment. This campus-like setting is spread throughout a housing development that stretches at least a mile long. Most of the students live in this housing complex and having enrolled in either preschool or kindergarten, remain until completing the sixth grade. A sense of community and a strong student bonding often contribute to the challenges facing those who teach. Many come with intricate deficits in readiness for learning. Behaviors and attitudes often present overwhelming situations for both students and teachers. Thus, we’re faced simultaneously with conditions that identify all inner city schools and with those that make our campus design unique.

My responsibilities as a language-arts resource teacher for students in grades four through six have been filled with challenges, hard work, and yet, many satisfying experiences. Yes, I mean satisfying experiences that encourage students and lead to drafts and quality final pieces that are shared daily with peers. Written work accumulates in portfolios, and their best responses are published for parents and the community. My days often end with assessments of children’s work that can be compared and in competition with the accomplishments of students in any setting. These same children fail to achieve passing scores on standardized achievement tests.

This year my four groups represent those fifth-grade students who failed either language or reading components on the fourth-grade Metropolitan Achievement Test or the writing prompt or language phase on the fourth-grade Connecticut Mastery Tests. My immediate responsibilities are to assess needs and to teach for mastery of skills that will allow students to bubble in correct answers. I also need to provide literature that will enrich and connect with the content subjects, so students will have something to write. Most important is the need to do a better job of getting our children excited about learning and making connections that create new meanings.

There is much to do and yet, I must save time for strategies that encourage the children to process their own success in writing. As the teacher, I need to know what happens when students make connections and use strategies that allow them to know what they’re doing. I must let them experience the whole writing process. All of this must be done in one short hour a day and hopefully in five months.

* * * * *

I don’t really know why, but the words remedial/remediation bother me. I wonder why the label is affixed to only those students failing when everyone needs special services until they’ve mastered the skill being taught. On paper and in the minds of many people, I am performing remedial services for students who have failed. I have experienced daily accumulated work in portfolios and in composition books that prove that this is not true. Many of my students are bright and have special gifts and talents that aren’t being released and can’t be measured on standardized tests. I know this, but do the children know how great they are? Do they know that they know what I am teaching? Do the children understand how to use what they know?

I was glad when Miss H., one of our classroom teachers, asked me to teach my group poetry that would be presented as choral speaking at Open House. We share the same concerns and thoughts regarding attitudes and behaviors that affect the quality of the children’s work, so I knew she would agree that some of Langston Hughes’s poems would be appropriate. His messages would address our mutual concerns and also provide themes that students need to relate to. Langston Hughes tells them that they’re beautiful and that they can reach their dreams. We decided to use four of Langston Hughes’s most popular works: "Dreams," "The Dream Keeper," "My People," and "Mother to
Son. I was eager to begin the lessons because these poems are among my favorites.

For two weeks our lessons had themes that allowed opportunities for listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing. The children seemed excited that I was teaching poems that I could recite. They listened intently and learned them quickly. Serious discussions led to the consensus that dreams are necessary because they take you to where you want to be. We had no problems generating ideas for written responses to Langston Hughes's important messages.

The children had so much to say that I decided to have them write their own poems. The lesson began with our choral practice. The writing began with directions to address an audience and then to write the message in three to six short sentences. The children wrote, they read, they listened, and they responded with expressions and feelings that we had not previously experienced. Their words got out, and we could hear important messages from the words.

The following pieces were selected for publication in our parent and community newsletter.

**DREAMERS**

Dreamers,
Keep dreaming
Your dreams.
Let your
Dreams spread.
Let them live.

**HANG IN THERE**

Don't give up.
Your dreams
Mean something.
Don't throw them away.
Work hard.
Hold on.
Hang in there!

**ALEXANDER RIKETS**

**CHARMAINE MARTIN**

**DREAMER**

Dreamer,
Don't give up
Your dreams.
Don't sit down
And play too long
Go to school and
Think!

**MY PEOPLE**

My people,
It's hard,
But hold on.
Don't give up.
Hang on.
Keep going!

**AARON SLOANE**

**MY DREAM**

Well mother
This was my
Dream
I dreamed
I was doing drugs.
Then I woke up.
And I was glad
It was a dream.

**LATIESHA LURRY**

**MY PEOPLE**

Langston Hughes was a writer of dreams. He compares man with all of God's creations, and he tells us we are the same.

The night, the stars and also the sun are beautiful. The white man and the black man differ only in skin color. They are both beautiful.

**SHAOUKA CESAR**

My focus was not on teaching the poems but on providing an experience with literature that would generate responses through discussion, writing, and other creative modalities. I was pleased with the children's responses and hoped that the exposure to literature through poetry would serve as another attraction into the world of books and reading. Perhaps reading and sharing works by Langston Hughes along with their own would begin to penetrate and change some of the attitudes and behaviors that prevent children from displaying their knowledge and talents. Maybe the children would begin turning to books that give positive and supportive messages that subdue some of the negative themes from society. Then our children will turn not away from but to books and begin loving them and reading them not just for information but for life. Perhaps the wisdom and knowledge from books is what they need to be "in charge," as stated by Leslie, a fifth grader, in his piece about Langston Hughes' poem "The Dream Keeper."

**THE DREAM KEEPER**

Langston Hughes says
We should be in charge of our dreams.
Mrs. G's group has a lot of energy and personality. They seem bright, and I'm concerned that their scores on the writing prompt were failing. Perhaps the energy and thinking can be disciplined and channeled into their written work. Maybe they need an audience or a support that will help them create and appreciate their own voices. Perhaps my focus will be on this group of students.

I realize that it is the beginning of the school year, but it takes a long time for the students to leave their desks and to arrive at the language-arts corner on the opposite side of the room. Perhaps it is time for a break, because talking and playing often takes place as they move from their desks to our work space. Some of them, especially Anthony and Corey, often arrive at the table in the midst of an argument that is ready to erupt into a fight. Keisha keeps us waiting because she has to put away or arrange the things on her desk. Tiffany is just slow in everything she does. Just as Brenda arrives, she has to hurry back for a photo or letter she needs to show me. Summer comes ready to vent something that happened earlier on the playground, in line, or even down south (she has only been with us a couple of weeks). Marilyn sits wide-eyed and upright ready to be teased by Anthony and Leslie, because she knows they both like her. Then I stand, waiting and wondering if my lesson design will work, or if it is even the right one.

I think the children can tell that I like *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume. We're covering a chapter per day as a read-a-long, think-a-long experience. The children are listening attentively as I read, and they seem to be into the problems of the story. Everyone either has a younger brother or sister like Fudge or knows someone who does. Fudge is a great character and generates interesting discussions. His big brother Peter is sensitive and yet disturbed by all the attention given Fudge. The children empathize with Peter and think the adults are unfair.

I'm pleased with the written responses to the story. It has been great for integrating the language arts skills. The children are listening, and the story is often interrupted by their laughter and eager responses. It has been perfect for introducing clustering as a prewriting activity. Their written pieces have improved tremendously. One can tell that they're thinking, because they're including details and reacting to the problems in interesting and personal ways.

We've been clustering our thoughts both as a group and as an independent lesson. They're learning to use the cluster for thinking about writing even when I don't ask. We've had great school fun sharing and learning from the written responses. We're beginning to have real conferences, and they are more willing to rewrite. I wonder if it's the story or if it's the clustering.

The children agree that we should share some of our thoughts about *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* in our newsletter. It is decided that we will cluster why Peter feels like a nothing. Each student uses his/her cluster for writing. They like their pieces and decide that we should use Shari's cluster because her writing was neat. The following thoughts are shared.

Peter was angry, when Mr. and Mrs. Yarby called his turtle a thing. He didn't like the baby book, and he didn't like Fudge getting all the attention. He lied about the book, because he didn't have a choice. He wanted to be polite.

**Anthony Rogers**

Peter lied to Mrs. Yarby. He told her he always wanted a picture dictionary, but he already had one. When he lied it made him feel like nothing, because Peter knows that it's bad to tell a lie.

**Summer Bradford**

Now I know why Peter feels like a fourth grade nothing. When Mrs. Yarby came, she was so in love with Fudge. That made Peter feel like a nothing, and I know the way it is. When she finally remembered his name, I know Peter felt sad deep inside. I bet he felt more like a nothing when Fudge brought out his turtle, and Mrs. Yarby called it a thing. I know he felt like a nothing then also when his father yelled at him for the noise Fudge made. I know how Peter felt.

**Shari Barnes**

Peter feels like a fourth grade nothing, because Mrs. Yarby was always kissing Fudge in stead of Peter. Mrs. Yarby gave Fudge an electric train, but she gave Peter a baby picture dictionay. Mrs. Yarby even forgot Peter's name, and she even called his turtle a thing. Peter was disappointed, because Mrs. Yarby didn't like him. She treated Peter like a dog on the streets. She should have given Peter the electric train and given Fudge the picture dictionary.

**Tiffany Hairston**
If I were Peter, I would try my best to talk to Fudge. I would tell him how the family feels. We are upset, because he's not eating, and he is not acting bright. He looks foolish being under the table. He needs to listen to his mother and father. His mother shouldn't have to stuff food in his mouth and stay there until he chews it all up. He needs to behave himself. He's getting all the attention.

_Marilyn Cardona_

When Fudge jumped on the floor and started to kick, I started to laugh in my mind. It reminds me of my little cousin. He's just like Fudge. He gets all the attention.

_Corey Jernigan_

Peter feels like a fourth grade nothing, because Mrs. Yarby made him feel like a nothing. She gave him a baby book, and she even called his pet a thing. She forgot his name, because she was too busy kissing his little brother. She didn't pay any attention to Peter. I don't blame Peter for feeling like a fourth grade nothing.

_Brenda Gomez_

Since focusing on a smaller group, I'm observing great improvements in the students' behavior and in their written work. They seem anxious to come to the table for the lessons. Conversations and questions tend to be centered around their pieces or the story. They relate to Peter's problems with his brother Fudge. Peter is real to them, and they empathize and seem to feel his need for attention. Perhaps this connects with their own individual needs and desires for personal attention. Maybe the students' improved behavior and written contributions are connected with my new focus on them.

We've spent a lot of time brainstorming and clustering our ideas related to topics. Students are using the strategy daily and seem to be comfortable with it. The interesting discussions and written pieces have been encouraging, and I feel good about their improved interest in sharing their work. Pleasant and smiling faces appear when it's their turn to read a piece of writing. They aren't nearly as self-conscious or defensive when questioned by the peer group. I see them crossing out and adding words to their own writing. They're even asking if it's okay to rewrite. Yes, I think it's time to get some answers to my questions. I need to know if they're measuring or processing their success in writing.

Lately, it has not been enough to plan and to think about what I'm doing. I feel the need to go beyond what I'm doing to what I observe students doing. I need or want to know if they truly understand the skills that I'm teaching and if so, do they know why I'm teaching them. Are they using the strategies to create, to make meanings, and for writing to share? How do I know that my students know what I'm teaching and why I'm teaching a particular skill? To answer these questions, I've decided to ask the children.

The decision to ask the children should have been made sooner. It has always been important that I know what I'm doing. I frequently ask myself that very question. Thus, it makes sense that I ask the children how clustering helps them. This will help me know, if they know, why we are doing it.

It didn't take the group long to arrive at the writing table. Perhaps seeing the tape recorder made them curious about today's lesson. I greeted them with a more serious tone than usual. I told them that I had been reviewing their work and was feeling good about the written work from their clusters. However, since our teaching and learning experiences for this year were ending soon, it was important that I know that they know why we have been clustering before we write. I told them that I would like to tape their responses so that I could replay the tape and really hear and enjoy their voices.

I was pleased with the children's quiet excitement and their willingness to be serious about our lesson. They were told to share how clustering helps them write. I even gave them five minutes to cluster their thoughts. Their responses were great and helped me to know that they know what they're doing. This is what the children shared.

_Leslie:_ Clustering helps me think. It gives me more ideas. It makes me want to write more. It gives me every detail I need. It helps me to focus on my topic. It makes me brainstorm and makes me remember. Clustering makes me feel like writing more about my subject.

_Brenda:_ Clustering will help me as well as you to learn how to write a paragraph or story. Clustering will help you think about your ideas. It will help you focus on your topic. Clustering will keep your mind on your work. Clustering will never let you down because it helps you remember.

_Marilyn:_ Clustering helps me to think. Sometimes it gives me more information and more details. If I cluster it gives me more ideas to write. It helps to focus. Clustering makes me feel smarter than I am.

_Summer:_ Clustering helps me to think better and gives me lots of ideas. It gives me more information, and it helps me write better. Clustering
helps me focus on my work. It helps me remember details and ideas for writing.

Corey: It is serious that I plan before I write. So I cluster or brainstorm first. I have to plan before I write.

Anthony: Clustering helps me to learn more about what I'm writing. I do clustering to make better sentences, and to think better. I can work better.

Having the students tell me how clustering helps them write has revealed some of the answers to my research. Their responses indicate that they comprehend what I am teaching, and that they are learning to use the clustering technique to demonstrate higher levels of understanding. Moreover, they are extending and creating new ideas for sharing. To articulate that clustering helps them remember details and to focus on a topic is an indication that they know why I'm teaching the strategy. They are learning to use what they know. With the help of Judy Blume's *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, and the clustering strategy, my students are learning to read and write for life. I know this because they are willing to share. I can sense it. I can hear it. I can feel it. Like an echo, it is repeated in their responses.

* * * * *

It's amazing! Students are attentive and taking the test seriously. I hope it's part of the change within the group as well as with each individual student. Maybe we're beginning to realize how each of us affects the total audience. The tone, the mood, the responses are great. The students are on track and appear to be dealing with the challenges of problem solving.

It's interesting to observe how each student chose to use his time during the break between the math test. Almost everyone took out his or her book and read. The changes in attitudes and the growth in work habits have been remarkable.

I feel so good about this group. I hope and pray that our experiences with reading and writing will make positive and permanent changes in their lives.

**Conclusion**

I began this research feeling that my real search would be on how my observations and written data would fall into place. I was concerned with my sketchy and lengthy notes which made me even more frustrated thinking and wondering how and when I could even get it together.

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I caught my reflection in my classroom windows the other night and gasped, "I'm becoming one of those integrated teachers!" No, I wasn't wearing a full, below the knee length skirt and Birkenstock sandals, but I realized I had been wearing slacks, flats, and sweater sets all year. I couldn't remember the last time I had worn a three piece suit! My change in attire had occurred so slowly over the last seven years I hadn't been aware of the transformation. I reflected on how and when the transition had occurred. First, I remember leaving the suit jacket draped over the back of my chair. It was just too confining and warm once I began moving around the room from desk to desk. Next, the high heels and straight skirts were packed away. I couldn't comfortably kneel down beside a student's desk in a straight skirt and I didn't need to tower over my students any longer. I haven't given up color coordinated outfits or my efficient, organized, pulled-together "look," but I've eased into softer, warmer colors and a slightly more flexible, approachable demeanor.

My style of dress is symbolic of the change that has occurred in my teaching. That transition has also occurred slowly, bit by bit over the last five years. I noticed the change this year because as a teacher/researcher I gave myself time to observe and reflect. I discovered I was a teacher in transition. I was no longer the rigid presenter of content I once had been. I saw I had struggled all year to become a facilitator of learning. I still wanted my classroom to be organized, efficient, and productive, but the instructional pace and the class curriculum were no longer dictated by the district curriculum, the tests, the test, or my time schedule. The class curriculum this year was driven by my observations of the students and the change to heterogeneous grouping.

As I observed the students applying the language arts skills they had acquired, I challenged my assumptions, assessed their knowledge, needs, and interests, and I modified the instruction to match what I observed. I began the transition from a Boss-management teaching style to a Leader-management teaching style, as presented by William Glasser, M.D. in his 1990 book, The

Teacher Research: Guess Who's Learning

Quality School. I stopped assuming I had to have all the answers, do all the planning, set the standards, do all the assessment and evaluation, and meet all the needs of the students. I started inviting the students to take a more active part in the design and implementation of course content. I began sharing the responsibility for learning and classroom practices with the students. It was not comfortable sharing power. I often wondered if I was in some way negligent in my teaching duties, but the results were rewarding.

Heterogeneous grouping places great demands on the content area classroom teacher. Heterogeneous grouping demands that instruction be reflective and diagnostic, integrated, authentic, immediately rewarding, and appealing to diverse learning styles. I could no longer remain a teacher of content area, who rigidly adhered to the district curriculum and texts. With a homogeneous class, I could move at the rapid pace required to "cover" the district curriculum before the end of the year. As a teacher of content I could say, "I taught it. The class practiced the concept thoroughly. If the students failed the test, it's obvious they didn't study. They are responsible." I couldn't say that with my heterogeneous group. I noticed immediately, they came into the class with dramatically different background knowledge and abilities. The class contained special education, remedial reading, Chapter 1, average, and above average students. Just because they had passed the state sixth-grade mastery test was no indication of their ability to comprehend and critically read or use language proficiently. The scores derived on standardized tests are no indication of a student's ability to succeed in the classroom or in real-life language situations. I could no longer teach content and assume students were learning at a level that allowed them to use the skills acquired in unrelated, uncontrolled, academic, or real-life contexts.

I could no longer teach grammar, spelling, and the modes of discourse in isolation and expect students to transfer the learning to self-generated pieces of writing. It may be that students were not able to transfer their learning in the past, but that fact was hidden from me by their successful passing of standardized and teacher-made tests. The previous writing, though inauthentic and uninspired, did meet the stated requirements and imitated the chosen expert models. Those assignments and tests measured what was taught, but did not assess what had been learned by the students.

Over the last five years, I had become willing to share the responsibility for students' learning, to actually attempt to discover what the students were learning rather than assume, to watch them apply their knowledge in new contexts, and to facilitate their acquisition of additional strategies at the "teachable moment." I had become "developmentally ready" to shed the restrictive control of the texts, tests, and curriculum and move about more freely in my classroom to listen, to observe, to reflect, and to respond to students. I stepped out onto the skinny branches. I trusted that I knew enough and had sufficient
resources to support my break from traditional teacher of products to a teacher of processes. I began the transition from lecturer/evaluator to facilitator/assessor. I allowed myself and the curriculum to be buffeted about by the needs of the students and the world outside the classroom. It felt exciting and risky.

Shawna had transferred to our school at the beginning of the year. When we received her records, the sixth-grade state mastery test scores were missing, but her grades for the previous quarter were all A's and B's. The guidance counselor assumed Shawna was an average to above average student and placed her into one of my heterogeneously grouped classes. The class was working on locating information in the library to practice reference skills in preparation for an upcoming we-search project. Shawna came to me for help to find her topic, "Phu Falls." I asked Shawna what she had done already to locate the piece of information.

"I looked it up in the dictionary, the encyclopedia, the card catalog and I can't find it anywhere."

"What do you think you're looking for?" I asked.

"It must be a big waterfall. It has a kind of Chinese name. Maybe it's in China."

It was not "Phu Falls" but "Dien Bien Phu Falls." She was way off the mark looking for a waterfall because she was reading a headline that referred to the fall of Dien Bien Phu during the Vietnam War. What I learned from this exchange was to assume nothing, to check and recheck a student's prior knowledge, understanding, thinking, and comprehension strategies. This incident taught me to keep asking questions and to catch myself when I began to react or to speak out of my assumptions. It was daring to learn what questions to ask. It felt very uncomfortable not being an expert from the beginning.

Shawna taught me about taking time to ask the right questions. I should have asked to see the topic she'd been assigned. After I observed Shawna struggling to read a short World Book Encyclopedia article, and listened to her summarize what she had read, I knew Shawna had received those A's and B's in a remedial class. I became aware of how my prior knowledge of the topic facilitated my knowledge of where to go to find information and how it aided my comprehension of the text that Shawna inaccurately summarized. I questioned my assumptions and expectations. What do students know? Can they monitor their own learning? Do they know what to do when they don't know something? What do I expect seventh-grade students to know? What exactly do we mean by Seventh-grade level? How will I measure growth? How am I going to evaluate? How can I grade?

Heterogeneous grouping forced me to step out to become a reflective, observant, diagnostic teacher.

Because my students were at such different levels, I couldn't teach the way I had taught in the past. Direct teaching of concepts, whole group practice, paired practice, and individual practice continued to occur, but I had to make modifications for my students' diverse learning styles, interests and abilities. In the past, top groups tended to be independent, auditory and/or visual, competitive learners. They were motivated by teacher and parent approval, grades, and intrinsic rewards. Lower groups tended to be hands-on, kinaesthetic, collaborative, more dependent learners. They were motivated by extrinsic rewards and peer approval.

With a heterogeneous group there is a random assortment of styles and motivational needs. The heterogeneous class demanded I take class time to learn what motivated and interested my students, what learning strategies my students had acquired and what strategies they needed to learn. Because my students were pre-adolescents, the students wanted to spend class time getting to know each other and their teachers. They needed time to reflect on themselves, to question where they fit in the world and how they could fit in with their peers. This places a great demand on the language-arts teacher to adapt classroom practices, texts, and course content. It forced me to get to know my students and allow them to know me. This also seemed risky and uncomfortable. Becoming a part of the learning community, responding only as a member of the community and not being the expert with the answer was threatening, but exhilarating. By stripping away the wall of authoritative distance, I was freer too express myself in my classroom, but it also made me feel exposed at times.

I now know how important it is to begin the year by filling out surveys, interviewing buddies, and sharing information about ourselves. Heterogeneous classes need time to get to know each other and their teachers. They need time to form a group. Even when students have been together for years in other informal groups the classroom community takes time and attention to build a common ground of cooperation and partnership. This foundation allows for trust, self-evaluation, peer-evaluation, and coaching later on. Since few seventh-grade students are motivated by grades or pleasing teachers, the teacher must discover what will motivate these students to learn.

The teacher must encourage students to share their interests, special abilities, and what motivates them. When I asked my students what they liked about school, they all responded, "Being with my friends." When students responded
in their journals to the question, "What do you want to know more about?" they wanted to know if anybody liked them, if their peers felt as they did about things, why people act the way they do, how do you make important decisions, how do you keep your friends. Providing students time in the beginning of the year and throughout the year to work and talk with other students is highly motivating for the students and extremely informative and useful for the teacher. This sharing provides the teacher with clues to the world of the students, access points that she can later hook to content learning that will make the study of language arts meaningful and purposeful for the students.

During this "getting to know you" phase of the year, we read several short stories about childhood memories. The students wrote several short pieces, mainly narratives, about their childhood memories, shared them with a partner, and then the whole class, if they chose to. Once a few students shared their pieces, and received very positive responses from their peers, the whole class wanted to share their stories. Re-reading my journal from those early weeks, I smile at my enthusiasm:

The students all wanted to be the first to read their stories to the class. Usually I get a stony silence or a groan when I ask students to share. The stories were charming, witty, sad, touching, humorous, wry, enthusiastic remembrances.

They are so diverse! Some of the quiet students turned out to be wonderful storytellers. The two most vocal students had real difficulty reading their writing. Their narratives were "bare bones" but good tales. I feel so satisfied. Everyone had expressed himself. The voice of each student sang in each piece.

I was fascinated by one sharing episode. We had just heard several pieces about pets. The assignment was completely open-ended. The next student to volunteer prefaced her sharing with, "Well, mine's different. Weird . . . it isn't on the topic." This statement made me reflect. I thought about establishing standards and criteria for success. I reflected on how we interpret the directions we are given, and how quickly we assume we have done something wrong, or right, based on our moment-by-moment assessments. This student, because she had heard several papers about pets, automatically assumed she had done the assignment wrong, and regarded her story as "weird" because it was unique.

In another journal entry I re-visited the issue of voice and authority:

How can I help my students improve their written expression while maintaining the student's voice? Sure there are errors: verb tense, subject-verb agreement, bizarre sentence constructions, diction errors, strange usage, but their stories are so delightful, their voices so clear, their humor and humanness so apparent I don't want that to get lost. I want that voice to be encouraged, supported, and strengthened.

These early pieces facilitated the formation of the classroom as a community of learners, helped me to teach about the vital elements of the students' world outside the classroom, and encouraged me to continue to question, reflect, design, and revise instruction based on the information I was receiving directly from the students and from my observations. I stopped making classroom decisions based on my assumptions about what students wanted and needed, and invited students to show and tell where the curriculum needed to go.

Music was a universal student interest and major element of the students' world outside the classroom. The next natural curriculum direction was the study of popular rock music. We looked at lyrics, music, biographies, and articles written about the popular pieces. We developed a unit of study on Billy Joel's song, "We Didn't Start the Fire." The song is a historical review of forty years of United States culture, 1948-88. This unit integrated all the students' language-arts skills: reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. We combined study, library research, and reporting skills with the study of the forty years of history related in the song. Classroom activities integrated science and medicine, mathematics, literature, the media, politics, and history. Classroom activities extended beyond the classroom into several libraries and other content area classrooms. We extended the historical research to cover the years after the song was published, analyzing our recent history according to Billy Joel's categories. We wrote an addition to Billy Joel's song that covered the years 1988-91.

While we were reading and researching about the Vietnam War, mentioned in the song, the Persian Gulf War monopolized the news media. The President kept saying this war would not be another Vietnam. Students struggled with what he meant by that statement. They talked to their parents and older friends. They listened to the news and TV reports on the developments in the Gulf. In class we devoted class time to discussions of geography, religion, politics, world cultures, and basic human needs. The students' lives became touched by the armed services. Family members and friends were sent to Saudi Arabia. When the students heard about the terrible conditions and boredom the soldiers were experiencing, they wanted to write letters and send care packages to the troops. We read, we listened, we discussed, we made comparisons about the similarities and differences between Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars. We used class time to write letters to the soldiers, and to share the soldiers' responses when they came. The students demanded knowledge about the world and how to communicate effectively with that world. They were curious and had an authentic reason to apply the language-
arts and research skills they were learning in the classroom and library to the world outside the classroom.

We instituted a learning log that required students to record what they had learned and what they needed to know more about. This was a vital tool for my observation and reflection. With five heterogeneous classes of twenty-two students, it is impossible for the teacher to spend quality time with each student every day. The learning log facilitates a connection with each student. I used the logs twice a week, but it would be easy to use a "ticket to exit" daily that would give the teacher more immediate feedback. After reading the students' log responses to the two questions, I could readily see if further instruction or practice was necessary. If students had recorded inaccurate information or demonstrated confusion, I could clear up the confusion with a brief log response or recommend the student schedule a time for extra help. This personal and private communication was appreciated by the students and very instructive for me. As a result of these log entries I learned what was important to the students, what they said they were learning, and what they wanted to learn more about, academically and extra-curricularly. We adjusted the classroom instruction according to the needs and interests of the students.

At Christmas, we wrote "Holiday Raps." The raps were presented to the whole school at the holiday assembly. The students learned about poetry, music, and dance in an authentic, "fun way." I quickly learned that the major test seventh graders use to assess school learning was, "Is it fun?" Assessing and meeting student needs, interests, and learning styles is the major challenge for the content area teacher confronting heterogeneously grouped students. Trying to make that learning fun is an extra pressure demanded by adolescents.

The final project of the year was the class publication of students' we-search projects. Each student generated a topic, designed a research plan, researched the topic, summarized his or her research, wrote a report, word-processed the report on the school computers, edited the report with the help of peers and teachers, printed and delivered the report orally to the class. The class designed and silk-screened a cover, composed an introduction, printed and bound their class publication. Inviting students to generate topics and choose their own directions of study nurtures students' independence and responsibility. It can also become a burden for the teacher.

The large number of student-selected topics and focuses challenged me. It felt chaotic trying to manage twenty-two projects in each class. I'm not a person who is comfortable with chaos. It made me doubt I'd survive and was very stressful. I longed for the "old days," when I presented the material, the students took notes and studied; then I evaluated student learning by grading their tests and papers for accuracy. I think I would not push for a final class publication another year. It is enough for each student to publish. The great demands placed on the editors for wider audience publication overwhelm the teacher and destroy student voice and authority.

It was difficult to balance all the classroom activities and practices to meet the needs and interests of the students. Over the course of the year we were moving too fast for one student and not fast enough for another. I presented each concept through all learning styles: auditory, visual, and kinesthetic, and provided reinforcement activities designed to meet those needs as well as the need to sometimes work alone, in small groups, as a whole class, and directly with the teacher.

The heterogeneous group demanded that language-arts instruction be integrated. The language arts: reading, writing, speaking, hearing, listening, needed to be taught simultaneously. The students' response to texts became the heart of the classroom program. The definition of the term "text" was greatly expanded to include material from outside the language-arts classroom. Once students responded, we built on that response and expanded their knowledge by integrating it with what had been previously learned. We facilitated the students' making of connections between themselves, the text, others, other texts, and contexts. We integrated the language arts curriculum with the other content areas and with the world outside the classroom. Because many students in a heterogeneous classroom are not motivated by grades or teacher approval, lessons needed to be integrated with the world of the students. I was forced to relate the course content to the world outside my classroom. Being the designated leader of a classroom dance involving students' styles, needs, and interests and attempting to make language arts connect with the world outside the classroom, another student demand, was daring and dangerous. Living at risk with a class curriculum that is responsive to students and the world outside the classroom moved me to be spontaneous, creative, sharp-witted, reflective, and responsive. It was also bold to allow my observations and reflections of the students, myself, the curriculum, and the world outside the classroom to lead the dance. It was a year of living at risk in my classroom, a daring and dangerous dance. I had become one of "those integrated teachers."

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Scaffolding with Francois and Company

Joan Sereda

Teacher: Come on over here and sit on the rug, everybody. We’re going to read an old Russian folktale, The Wishing Well, and after you’ve listened to it, I’ll be very interested to learn what you think of the story.

Folktales, fairy tales, myths, and fables ponder questions that deeply concern children: conflicts between good and evil, how the earth, sun, and stars were created, or why animals were designed in such dizzying variety. And, because these stories tend to deal with great themes in simple contexts and familiar, traditional plot lines, they lend themselves beautifully for early training in discourse. They engage children quickly and hold their attention using devices such as fantasy, exotic settings, magical interventions, violence, dreams, wish fulfillment, pitting the weak against the strong (Huck, 251-57).

Francois: "When . . . when he was an old man . . . he didn't have nothin' he needed . . . so he lived by the wishing well . . . 'cause he was poor . . . He was lonely . . ."

Cortney: "I think that when he was a boy he tried this . . . what the boy did . . . and he learned the lesson not to ask for more than you need."

Margie: "You shouldn't ask for more than you really need."

By the third week of school my students and I had begun to reveal ourselves to each other. I looked at the faces gathered around me knowing who would need my encouragement to participate, children for whom the 'right' answer too often danced out of reach. This low-risk, whole-class analysis of folktales might, in time, encourage the shyest to trust themselves enough to volunteer responses. Twenty-four youngsters with reading levels anywhere between second and fifth grade sat around me on the rug, chairs, and desks, anticipating a story, waiting to be engaged.
On a whim we had taped that first impromptu experience early last September. But, once it had been transcribed, the patterns had begun to emerge: the various ways that my students had borrowed and built on each others' ideas -- had actually taught each other. I was excited to explore the implications this activity might have for my wildly heterogeneous class. (Phrases are highlighted in the children's comments above to illustrate this construction in action.)

Since the purported strength of heterogeneous grouping is the exposure children with a broad spectrum of talents, skills, and background gain from each other, I wondered what would happen were my students to regularly practice together by building upon (or "scaffolding") their classmates' ideas. Would it be reasonable to expect a significant leap in my students' ability to elaborate, analyze, and express ideas? Jane Stanton has written that "Just as we learn a language by talking with someone who is good at it in specific situations concerning tangible shared experiences, so we learn to think by thinking with someone to solve a joint task or problem." (2).

As I played back that first tape, I could hear the charge of excitement in the children's voices. What a lesson! They seemed to be completely involved, and so exuberant that we had to establish some ground rules. One person who would be called upon was to talk at a time. All were to listen carefully to each comment and decide whether they agreed, disagreed, or had something new to add.

I remember wondering what my role should be. Direct the flow of the discussion? Spotlight a special insight? Ask a youngster to clarify or enlarge on a thought? (That might halter a tentative effort by one little girl who was so nervous when she was called upon that the muscles in her neck and face vibrated.)

For the moment I decided to simply call on those whose hands were raised and to see what transpired. I'd use wait-time, and look enthusiastic, encouraging. (As for the tape recorder, its presence certainly didn't seem to be a deterrent. In fact, I was able to call on it to get the children to speak more clearly.)

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The Wishing Well, is a simple morality tale about greed. In the middle of a deep forest a child discovers and spies upon an old man, who, by means of a magic incantation, asks for just enough food, water, clothing, and shelter for subsistence. But, lacking the wisdom that age and experience should teach, the boy rashly demands riches of the well's spirit and is punished for his avarice when his hair turns to flame. At the end of the story the old man raises his hat to reveal that his hair and the boy's are one and the same color.

Cortney was anxious to start the discussion, even before the last paragraph had revealed the story's moral. Bright, competitive, but too impatient to pull her ideas tightly together before speaking, Cortney was frantically waving her hand to head off Margie, who was generally conceded to be the class "brain."

Cortney: "I think the author was telling us not to be greedy, 'cause most of the time you learn the lesson not to be greedy."

Margie: "I think I know why the old man's hair was fiery red. I think he wished for what the boy wished and was punished, so that now he only wishes for what he needs."

But, look at Francois! Ordinarily bent over the water fountain, pencil sharpener, animal cages, or just darting about the room, here he was practically on top of me, so anxious was he to wrestle with lessons inherent in the tale. "You shouldn't be that greedy . . . when . . . you want something."

Good boy! This youngest, who greeted me each morning with at best a tentative enthusiasm for the day ahead, needed successful experiences. Francois found it difficult to grapple with most class assignments. None of his homework had been returned. During writing workshop he was unable to produce more than a few lines of indecipherable scratchings which left him frustrated and reluctant to try again.

Although he had been placed on a third-grade reading level, Francois' poor phonetic skills and inability to match sounds with letters, placed him at a serious disadvantage whenever he tried to decode new vocabulary. Our eclectic reading program which incorporated a basal series for skills reinforcement with trade books for individualized silent reading, eliminated the basal's so-called controlled vocabulary advantage. Francois invariably found it an impossible task to select the 'right' book and wasted a good portion of each day's reading period (his own and others'), even when I was forced to select a book for him.

Besides his distractibility, this whirlwind saw little connection between his impulsive actions and any resulting consequences. Placing a series of events in correct sequence or determining the cause or effect in a story situation were for him puzzling enigmas. Could a child with Francois' thinking and vocabulary deficits internalize the behavioral patterns of more skilled students by practicing with them in a directed situation?
Is it Okay?
Reflections on Writing Conferences

Carolyn Drescher

Every student who has been successful and has jumped through enough classroom "hoops" knows that you have to write what the teacher wants. You write to please the teacher, to get the B+ or A, to pull up your G.P.A. to put on your transcript, to get into college, to go on to grad school and then . . . . The extension of this is up to your imagination, readers. If the teacher doesn't tell you exactly what is wanted, you may have a problem psyching her out. But if the teacher is process-oriented and believes writing is discovery, then figuring out what's in her brain may not be the answer. In fact, it may be just what the teacher wants students to avoid.

In English 105 - 109, or "UConn English" at my high school, I teach composition to seniors who are high achievers, exceptional enough to get six college credits for their freshman English course while still in high school. This year I was very lucky. Only four students! I could really have a seminar and every student would fully participate in a round table forum. I also wanted to encourage the process approach with which some students had little or no familiarity. The writing conference would help as a kind of intervention or interrupting interview along the way. In my role as coach I hoped I would really become a catalyst, a catalyst to help students change and improve, especially in the revision step.

Since I wanted freedom of expression, flexibility in ideas, open-minded reading and some risk-taking, I decided to begin the class with something visual. We looked at twelve posters of Salvador Dali's art work and commented freely in conversation and in writing. Students looked again and again. They compared notes, talked about what they saw the third or fourth time, and opened their eyes to many options they hadn't seen. The week-long study of viewing, talking, and writing set the tone of exploration I wanted from them. I hoped it would push me aside as an authority figure or the guru of interpretation. The course was also being redefined by the university as a "community of interpretive readers." Our first semester would focus on nonfiction and expository writing; our second semester would focus on an introduction to literature, with literary analysis as the dominant kind of writing. For my research I used our first-semester syllabus.

Most of the students had some experience with conferences from their previous three years of English. They had rewritten drafts often after explicit teacher instruction. They were not too familiar, however, with generating ideas of their own. Coming up with a topic or focusing a paper was new to them. There were no structured writing topics, so my class was a little unsettling to them.

For the first semester they read about eight general themes or areas as their textbook, *Little, Brown Reader*, had organized the nonfiction selections: family, education, work, the media, law and order, science, the depths of emotion, and religion. For each theme we read at least seven essays from such widely divergent thinkers as George Orwell and Joan Didion. We talked, wrote in journals, wrote back to each other, went to the library for individual articles of special interest and wrote more. After each of the thematic studies, a formal paper was expected: eight papers in all. I decided to tape three conferences and look at our progress, both mine and theirs. In our interviews I learned as much as students. That's the reward of teaching -- teachers learn too.

Writing conferences give a sense of audience, a sounding board for student writers. I often thought I had to nurture their writing confidence and create a delicate balance between encouragement and criticism. During a conference I read the paper briefly but refrained from writing any marginal commentary. Then I proceeded to question the student. My questions varied from broad thinking to specific detail, from prior student knowledge to knowledge which needed to be acquired. Above all, the temper of the conference was shaped by the student's sense of security with his or her ideas and general direction on the draft. Sometimes I was a cheerleader, sometimes a mirror, sometimes a coach, sometimes a mother, sometimes a literary critic, sometimes a fellow wayfarer -- lost in the world of philosophy and ideas -- sometimes a frustrated reader, sometimes even a strong authority figure.

Being involved with student conferences requires the flexibility to try on as many hats as the occasion warrants. I think most of all it requires some strange sense -- an intuitive sense perhaps -- of finding out what the student needs from the teacher. Talking about ideas or rehearsing ideas before a teacher lets the teacher pick up clues. Very often these clues are quite subtle cues. They indicate what students are uncertain about and help me to formulate the next question.
Kenneth Bruffee's assertion that, "we can think because we can talk, and we think in ways we have learned to talk" (640), could be applied neatly to the folktale discussion format I had in mind for Francois and the rest of my students.

* * * * *

In Arrow to the Sun, a Pueblo Indian tale by Gerald McDermot I read to the children some weeks later, a boy their age leaves his village to search for the father he has never met. After surviving many terrible ordeals, the boy discovers that the sun god is his parent and returns confidently to the pueblo to confront the children who had taunted him so cruelly.

There is a religious aspect to this story that might have suggested a biblical parallel to these Sunday School-attending youngsters, but after I asked late in the discussion whether anyone thought it was the Pueblo people's explanation for the earth's beginning, the children's concern continued to center on the human relationships in the story:

I think he wanted to get his father to love him -- not just to play with other kids.

He didn't just want to find his father so he could play with other kids, he really did love his father.

To begin our dialogue I had asked merely for a comment about the book, and as usual, Cortney was the first to volunteer:

Well, I think that . . . the story is telling you that everybody has a father in this world. The boy's trying to tell you that even though the mother's not married, the boy still has a father.

A third child introduced yet another theme for the class to consider:

I think he's trying to say if you love someone in real life, you'll find the strength to go through anything -- if you love them a lot.

The fourth speaker illustrated again the class's frequent use during the discussions of scaffolding, or building upon, a preceding idea.

Like ______ said, I think that you really . . . if you really love someone, you'll do a lot of things. And, I think that boy really loved that person (the father he never had), so he went through all the lightning and things.

Then Francois referred back to Cortney's comment and added to it:

The boy tried to prove he had a father, but he just didn't know where he is . . . Then when he got back to the pueblo he proved to the boys he had a father.

Several children followed up Francois, one of the more reticent girls giving him credit for his thought:

Just like Francois said, the boy knew he had a father, he just didn't know where to find him, and then when he went back to the pueblo, he told them he had a father.

Then she added to the observation,

And they were all happy to see him back again.

Later, Cortney referred back to her original comment, added Francois' scaffold and Margie's dictum on teasing, then continued:

Well, I think he was trying to say that, just because he doesn't have a father, doesn't mean they have to tease him . . . 'cause he does. He just doesn't know where he is. I think that it's not nice to accuse people, like, say in their face, 'Oh, you don't have a father' . . . and everything like that. I think that man [an old medicine man who befriends the boy] was nice to make him an arrow so he could visit his father [the sun god].

* * * * *

Early in January we read together a Peruvian folk tale by Ellen Alexander, called The Llama and the Great Flood. This provocative story has as its protagonist a valued, (and to the children, exotic) domesticated animal. When the llama learns through a divine source that calamity is to visit Earth and wipe out all life, he grieves and slowly wastes away. The simple-minded owner refuses to heed his beast's warnings until it is almost too late. When the rains begin to fall and all the animals gather high on the mountain, the parable reaches its climax. Cortney began the discussion once more:

What I thought about the story is that it told you a lot about the llama and what the llama thought. Well, it's not exactly, but it's almost like Noah's Ark . . . It's just that there isn't an ark, so he [the llama] saved a lot of people's lives.
Where the children had missed the religious allusions in *Arrow to the Sun*, they now made the connection immediately. François, for instance, reconciled the Peruvian version of a familiar biblical story and said:

I believe the Indians have different kinds of folktales and still believe about The Flood.

Another child said,

I think the author is telling us that the people of Peru believe that the llama is a holy animal.

Margie agreed with Cortney and scaffolded her comment with additional analogies:

I think that the story is of Noah's Ark. It's like the llama is God and the mountain is the Ark . . . but it only rained five days instead of forty.

Continuing Margie's matching activity, the next child concluded:

I think it was Noah's Ark because there were two kinds of each animal and they must have had dreams, too, about the mountain like the llama [did].

This initial explanation for the presence of all the animals on the mountain was followed by other attempts to analyze why everyone had gathered there. This youngster scaffolded the previous comment and resolved the presence of humans:

Like ____ said, I don't think the llama saved all those people. I think the other animals had a dream the same as the llama's and told other people and their owners.

The following interpretation and statement of personal belief belonged to a child who rarely volunteered and whose comment was not picked up by anyone else in the group:

I think they're [the Peruvians? the author?] trying to tell people who believe in fairytales that that is how the world began, but everybody knows it's not true.

Later in the school year I would have tried to draw out this youngster to provide a ladder for other children to consider. But, by the beginning of the second semester, the shyest in the class were just beginning to volunteer contributions -- hesitantly recalling details in the stories or illustrations, less frequently by analyzing some event:

I like . . . the story is good . . . I like the drawings and stuff, how the illustrator drew the pictures and stuff.

and I wasn't sure they were ready for additional pressure.

François returned to the puzzle of the animals on the mountain and suggested an alternative explanation:

I like the way the author wrote the book and the illustrator drew the pictures too. The animals must have had the same dream unless the llama told them.

He showed also that he appreciated the nuance in the situation where the llama attempted to warn his owner of the approaching flood and was ignored:

I liked when the man said to the llama, 'You're a fool!' And the llama said back, 'You're the fool!'

* * *

It was April when we reviewed and videotaped the final folktale, the Scandinavian classic *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*. (In the first week of June, the children's sustained enthusiasm allowed us to stage what became a four-part mini-series of the tale in dramatic verse form. This was a great culminating activity for all the folktales we had studied together this year.)

Every child volunteered at least one response during the April discussion. In order to record any change in students' participation as the year progressed, I had kept a tally of the number of comments and of the types of responses made -- whether, for instance, a remark was a simple restatement of some detail, or a more sophisticated evaluation or analysis of some aspect of a story.

As a visual aid in understanding the ways the children were helping each other to think critically in directed dialogues, I color-coded ideas to illustrate from whom they had been scaffolded (different colors for introductory contributions and for first, second, etc., scaffolds). This mapping activity was valuable because it showed how interwoven and complex responses could be.

In an article called *Scaffolding: Who's Building Whose Building?* by Dennis Searle, the author voiced a concern that in the school environment "too often, the teacher is the builder and the child is expected to accept and occupy a predetermined structure." He continued, "The notion of scaffolding ... should
not be used to justify making children restructure their experience to fit their teacher's structures. Then, Searle offered the recommendation, "What we should be doing, instead, is working with children, encouraging them to adapt their own language resources to achieve new purposes which they see as important" (482).

I tried to continue to be sensitive to this theory, giving everyone time and option to volunteer responses using their own language patterns, without any comment or correction by me. However, I would suggest what I hoped were provocative topics for consideration, if no one else brought them up. In that way I could influence the direction the discussion took:

First, I'd like to ask you whether the story reminds you of any other folktale.

To which Cortney responded:

Well, it's almost like Beauty and the Beast. Well, like Karen had kissed the prince and ... at the beginning where the bear told her not to tell her mother about her life with the bear in his palace, and not to talk with her mother unless her family was around ... but she did. ... So the bear was forced to marry the ugly girl with the nose three els [feet] long.

The story's characters include a poor Woodcutter, his wife, and three daughters, the youngest of whom is Karen, who is loved by a bear/Prince. The Prince has, of course, been bewitched by an ugly Troll Queen bent on marrying him off to her nasty daughter, Long Nose. The four winds and assorted other characters eventually help to reunite the lovers.

Margie added:

Like Cortney, I think it is like Beauty and the Beast because the beast took Beauty away and then she lived with him . . .

A third child broke in, extended, and then changed the idea:

It's sort of like Cinderella ... this girl was really nice ... and there was this other girl and she was really mean and it turned out that the nice girl got married to the prince and everything turned out okay in the end.

Other children made similar connections:

The girl with the nose three els long reminded me of Pinnochio.

At the end I just thought of a book that reminds me of that folktale. . . . It was Rumpelstiltskin. And, Rumpelstiltskin bursts too! [Like the Troll Queen.]

Francois synthesized two earlier responses:

Some of it was kind of like Cortney said and like Beauty and the Beast because she could only be with her family for a few days and then she'd have to go back to the beast.

Another child intervened, then Francois continued:

This story also reminds me of the one when all the gods added stuff to the Earth [water, plants, animals, etc.], and the gods keep returning 'til Man is made.

As ideas lagged, I moved the focus of the discussion in yet another direction:

Do you remember at the beginning of the story when the bear first came and asked the youngest daughter, Karen, to go off with him, and her family let her go? How did you feel about that? What did you think of her family? Did you think they really cared about Karen?

Cortney initially responded to my question, then reverted to an earlier topic:

In the beginning I felt sad because the girl's parents let her go just for the money, and that's being greedy. I disagree with everybody in the class about the princess with the long nose, because she didn't lie, but the other one [Karen] did lie. Remember at the beginning when the bear said, 'Don't talk to your mother alone.' Well, she did! The princess with the long nose didn't ... The princess told the girl she could see the prince -- not talk to him [if Karen surrendered a magical golden comb in trade]. She did get to see the prince alright ... it's just that he was asleep [drugged by the princess].

The next respondent did pick up on my cue, however, and chose to ignore Cortney's argument that the troll princess's position might be morally defensible:

I think the mother encouraged the rest of the family, and she's really a troll! And, I think she knew she wasn't supposed to talk to her daughter alone and so she encouraged her. I think that wasn't the family ... the family wasn't bad or anything ... but the mother was bad.
But the following child reverted to Cortney's comment:

I sort of agree with Cortney, because the woman with the long nose really didn't lie, but the other girl did. But, I also disagreed with her because the woman with the long nose was sort of mean to everyone. She also stole the golden apple.

Margie replied:

I think the family was very greedy because they were begging Karen to go and they just wanted the money. If I had been the father, I would have said no [to the bear who was asking that Karen accompany him in exchange for the family's much improved circumstances] because I would have liked my daughter much better than gold.

As students became more comfortable participants in the discussions, they seemed to really enjoy dismantling other students' arguments:

I disagree with _______. If the mother of the wicked princess with the nose three ells long was the old hag [a character who had helped Karen find the prince who was being held captive in the troll's castle at the other side of the earth], she wouldn't want her to marry the prince. Also, I don't think the prince didn't like the ugly princess because she was ugly. I think he didn't like her because she was mean.

Third graders also tend to sympathize with the underdog. After all, Karen now held the upper hand and no one contradicted the following startling view -- although both the text and illustrations indicated otherwise -- from a student who has tested an idea and revised her thinking:

I changed my mind. I think the girl with the long nose is pretty, but without her long nose, she's prettier.

Francois warmed to this Fey kindness:

The prince shouldn't hate the lady -- the princess with the nose three ells long. If he'd married the other lady, he could have been just friends with her.

He also wanted to clear up a question of his own:

Why did the bear have to do something to turn into a prince?

He was reminded of the wicked trolls who cast a spell on the prince. Another child attempted to join the conversation at that point, but Francois refused to surrender the floor.

I'm not finished! I think the mother was no good, no good for the child. . . . No wonder the bear told her not to speak alone with her mother 'cause probably the bear knew that the child always talked to her mother in private. And then . . . he always knew that the mother would always want to know what was happening. He was a wise bear.

To encourage him further I reminded Francois that the bear was, of course, a prince. He continued:

No, a wise prince. So, I think he was a very nice person. Probably the lady with the three-ell nose could be a very loving and caring and sharing person too.

As are Francois and company!

Over the months, did the opportunity to participate in directed dialogues make a significant difference in the children's ability to elaborate, analyze, and express ideas? To the extent that Bruffee is correct: "To think well as individuals we must learn to think well collectively -- that is, we must learn to converse well. The first steps to learning to think better . . . are learning to converse better . . ." (640). By that measure, our construction using the folk tale and whole-class directed discussions as building materials, has at least its foundation in place.

Joan Sereda lives and works in Bloomfield, Connecticut, where, with her husband, she has raised four children who now are beginning to raise her grandchildren. Extended winters in Ontario and brief summers in Quebec as a child, have given her (so her friends say) a skewed and somewhat tipsy view of southern Connecticut's climate. She putters around in her English country garden off and on for nine months of the year. Her crowded classroom and garden are metaphors for her and each other: work and play are tangled together in everyday plans and long-term goals: in all the surprises, whimsies, and dreams she has for children and flowers.

WORKS CITED

Journaling the Landscape

_Lamont Thomas_

"I was surprised that the Roman Empire had goals such as specificity and essay structure," wrote one of my students in his journal after fifty minutes of a world-civilization class. That student had all too clearly followed my instructions, that is, to select a suitable open-ended log prompt in order to indicate what appeared most significant from the day's class. And no wonder the student was amazed: he had attributed essay-writing guidelines given at the beginning of class to Augustus Caesar's strategies for unifying the Roman Empire. Never has Donald Murray's answer to the question "why write?" been so painfully evident: "To be surprised" (A Writer Teaches Writing, 7). I certainly was.

The present piece is very autobiographical, perhaps too much so. It contains a great deal of truth about my struggle to make meaning for students as well as to justify my having left the union picketline to make meaning as a teacher. Early drafts clearly telegraphed a subliminal message that I wanted to write about the university strike, not student writing. Only after truly studying the journals did I see they contained important insights for my teaching, and thus had a life of their own. Although I may never see some of my students again, I am deeply indebted to them for what they taught me. I have tried to represent their entries as honestly as the writers represented themselves.

Kenneth Macrorie, author of Searching Writing, says that desirable "I-Search" research topics ought to "find you," the learner, as opposed to the learner selecting contrived topics to satisfy someone else's needs (62). In my role as a researcher of writing, I decided upon the subject of journal writing, a topic that had found me during my 1984 CWP Summer Institute. What follows is my search into the use of journals for one semester with freshman basic-studies students at the University of Bridgeport.

The findings from this project basically depend upon journals written by six "successful" high-risk students. The selection of journals for the investigation became a case of social Darwinism: survivors got counted. Only nine of four-
teen students submitted journals for my use at the end of the course, and of those only six wrote a sufficient percent (70%) of the nine entries with enough quantity, thought, and involvement to be helpful. Three of the five who did not submit journals failed the course because they were no longer attending class. Therefore, information comes from the most conscientious and diligent students. The genders were equally represented.

From the beginning in the fall of 1990, journals by students and this teacher reflected the historical landscape. Two circumstances dramatized the writers' interdependence with the environment. The first was a labor strike by three unions against the university administration, and the second was the impending Persian Gulf War. Locally, a power struggle from pavement to president disrupted classes while fracturing a hitherto healthy relationship among students and faculty. My own journal entry for September 26, the day I finally left the picket line, described "my lingering guilt" while looking upon "disbelieving students." Meanwhile, we writers identified with another helpless pawn, Kuwait, caught in an international power struggle. The irony that Sadaam Hussein sought to dominate the ancient "cradle of civilization" furthered the immediacy of historical interdependence but drove us frequently to ask who is "civilized"?

Assigned journal entries usually began or concluded each class. At the second class meeting students were asked, "How is it possible to learn about the past?" Mimi wrote that "learning about the past would be kinda difficult" without many sources, even to track down details about the strike. "I would probably dig up information from past flyers, go about asking people for their judgment, reference librarians for extra articles, and "ask as many questions as I can." Shawn thought of earlier history. He had gathered information from "history classes in school," although he knew that some people "go on expeditions ... in some ancient places." Bruce would ask "some friends, teachers, or wise people ... [for] correct info." Shannon's fantasies were working: "I would learn by trying to place myself in that time period. Make it my own little movie or play I'm putting on."

I had doubted anything constructive was happening on paper at the time. Pessimistically, I had noted the sea of "scratching heads, disbelief, talking, whispering among themselves, staring at the paper, writing cautiously, staring." What a surprise when I read the above strategies about gathering historical data. Looks were deceiving, a lesson to be remembered when tempted to interpret body language over written language.

My own log entry that day recorded an early writing decision: "I've also mistakenly filled opposite page. Maybe I'll write left, respond right. Good idea." That correction subsequently allowed dialectical journal entries so as to distinguish between observable content and reactions to that content. These words appear on the opposite page: "I don't have a grasp on this class. 4 missed who were here on Wed. 3 here who had missed Wed." Thus, the journal began to be my mental account book for strategy, reflection, and commentary upon the students. This is a healthy reminder that teachers benefit from maintaining their own journals.

Sometimes my assigned entries called for feedback from reading and/or a lecture, the same objective a quiz might fulfill, except that in a journal the students may note and then correct errors, thereby retaining a bound record of their intellectual journey. For example, they were asked to recall assigned reading and previous lecture notes about "first civilizations." Stacey candidly confided "I don't as yet have my civilization book so I'll do the best I can remembering my notes." Shawn took an antediluvian shot in the dark: "One of the first civilizations was the dinosaur age." Bruce, on the other hand, knew "The Sumerians were one of the early civilizations." And Mimi categorized: "First civilizations usually deal with education, technology, and living."

More focused uses for the journal followed. The topic "Mesopotamia" elicited all the right stuff: Tigris and Euphrates rivers, delta, cuneiform writing, etc. Specifics continued, some clustered as requested, but most expressed within sentences. Only a few students, like Shannon, went beyond regeneration: "Their language started out as Sumerian. They wrote on slabs. It was changed into Akkadian and it was called the first dictionary."

Next class I asked for first thoughts when class commenced plus a log prompt (what they liked, disagreed with, questioned, etc.) at the end. The topic "Iraq" produced some personal engagement: "The Iraqis took over [Kuwait]," began Mimi. "Sadaam Hussein ... isn't a very pleasant man, nor is the country." Shawn noted that American drivers like himself would suffer from the "oil shortage [and that] gasoline is expensive." One writer listed a few words which were subsequently scratched out; another wrote nothing. Reflections entered at the conclusion of class benefited from new content vocabulary. Only one person's reflections indicated any personal engagement or applicability to current issues. Subsequent use of prompts suggest that I was asking too much at this early stage.

In retrospect, I am aware that I, too, had learning agendas. My own creative and didactic polarities rivaled one another, a schizophrenic symptom of history teachers in the writing mode. "I didn't ask for writing today," my entry began. "Should have. Must make this as routine as breathing." To that I added a familiar scenario: "I know one reason I overlooked the writing -- it's the same reason that I have omitted it before. I believe too much [content] must be covered." And to do so "may mean cover-up." Colleagues continue to remind me that "more is less," that the more content one teaches can
diminish substantive learning, not augment it. Such a truth still strikes terror in the heart of professional dispensers of infinite minutia.

In the course of assigning topics I randomly threw in an unorthodox question, not realizing its implications at the time. The simple question was this: "What am I most proud about having learned, and how did I learn it?" Writers were allowed eight or so minutes and told to keep the pen moving, underline key words, and conclude with a summarizing, potential thesis sentence. As opposed to the earlier classes, students immediately settled in to thinking on paper. I wondered what positive learning experience they would illustrate from their education. After finishing, one volunteered that his entry had made him feel good about himself; unfortunately, that student never completed the semester.

Shawn by-passed classroom learning entirely, as did nearly every student. At first he hesitated, then discovered his focus: "Right now I can't think of anything. My mind is blank - I know. I just have to get involved with some group... I miss it because I used to [attend] church every Sunday. Going to church is no problem. It's sermons -- they're killers - just kidding, some are all right." He returned to stress the grounds for pride: "I used to be principal of our youth group and I learned responsibility, leadership, and just getting along with the youth." Meaningful learning had social and personal consequences.

Mimi followed suit, dwelling upon a very recent family tragedy. "My most proud item that I have learned recently is learning to live without a father," she wrote. "I learned by my father passing away" shortly after the semester began. "It is extremely difficult, but then I know that I have to continue living my life... Learning to live without him is like a stab within the heart. At times my tears will be down my cheek." Until the past weekend she had felt totally alone, but upon returning home had learned of her mother's and sisters' pain as well. In fact she had learned all this, she said, "by feeling sorry for myself."

Writers repeatedly took the question to heart, as if their answer had chosen them. Bruce drew his proudest lesson from surviving years of misdirected education. "I am most proud about having learned how to learn," he purposefully began. "It was really hard for me to do because I am dyslexic." That translated into years of personal anguish in the classroom, plus self-designed compensating mechanisms. "I had tutors for years when I was in grade school and in junior high. I compensated how to read at an early age, but never really enjoyed reading." Inadequate high school learning continued until finally he took "special classes" that taught how to "study properly." Times have improved, he concluded: "Now I am doing much better in college than I did in high school." Ultimate learning was intensely personal.

Certainly, the conscientious Jorge would draw from classroom experiences, I thought. Wrong. Jorge's role model, Evel Knievel, had inspired him to ride a motorcycle. "I am proud," he explained, "because the bike [on which] I learned was intimidating to me by its size, weight, and look." When his uncle's "Honda Intruder 750" was offered for a lesson, Jorge seized the moment. He measured success according to sequential use of "brakes, clutch, and gear formation. . . . The tough part was learning how to work the gears with the foot." Independence, wrote the unassuming Bridgeport daredevil, made him feel "more accomplished." Once again, real learning drew from personal experience and enhanced self-esteem.

Stacey, on the other hand, prided herself on a new-found friendship. She found that goddesses not only exist but intervene in human affairs. Dreams come true. "I am most proud about the ways my dreams have become reality just through dreaming and thinking of [them]," she began. "A thought I had of meeting a famous group of recording artists came true. The name of this group is the Clark Sisters. I was able to meet their sister Twinkie Clark who is the songwriter, musician, lead & background singer for the group." Stacey would be Twinkie's nanny during the summer. She concluded, "I am so proud of just knowing her personally, and her knowing me personally." One step better than being a part of history would be that historical figures know the learner.

Each succeeding journal entry illustrated the intensely personal nature of meaningful learning, but Shannon took this relationship deeper. "I am proud about learning that I'm only human," she wrote. "I can't take everything without some scars, but I've only tried and I guess that could have been and still can be a problem. Also, I'm proud to take care of each accordingly. [Always having] been an "average student," she needed to push herself. "Little by little," she thought, "is better for me than one big jump. . . . Help. Pen can't leave paper. Keep writing. . . . Oh no, I can't think of anything except go to review sessions."}

Student journals had unexpectedly revealed internal experiential issues, from family affairs to the continuing strike, upon which cognitive learning must ultimately be based. Little more than a week earlier, similar pressures had preoccupied my conduct, as my post-class entry reflects. At that time I was tired and bothered by personal issues - like not getting paid [I had assumed this to be strike-related] - and can only imagine how personal issues must preoccupy students. That other agenda takes on dominant proportions. Word to the wise! Sometimes I wonder how often we professional educators are so blinded by our own problems that we discount those of our students.

Letters to, from, and about historical figures and their times appeared to augment the relevance of history. November election day provided an oppor-
tunity to dwell upon Greek and Roman democratic legacies. Stacey chose to address her letter to celebrity Twinkie Clark:

I trust all is well as you read these few lines. Yesterday here in Connecticut [there] were elections, as in Detroit and elsewhere.

Speaking of elsewhere, democracy in past civilizations such as Rome and Greece have a few similarities as well as differences. Some of the similarities are the 3 branches . . . Judicial, Legislative, and Executive.

Days later she linked her religious experience with Roman converts: "I believe that the people who changed over to Christianity are to be commended for their bravery. Living under a dictatorship for so long and then changing to Christianity took a lot of guts." Here a clear writer's voice recaptured the past in an intensely realistic manner.

Others awkwardly and superficially wrote letters. "Dear Todd," began one student, "You wouldn't believe how fun it is over here in Greece. The people are nice, the weather is nice . . ." Everything was nice. Several days later this same student recaptured the historical context. "I never knew about the Roman ruler Hadrian," he wrote. "Hadrian codified laws for the people and he suppressed a Jewish revolt against him." Sheer determination may have driven others to make meaning. About similarities between the Greco-Roman world and today's United States, Mimi cautiously concluded "Today's election process is a little different." She continued by saying that from Greece had come "cultural roots" such as the "socratic method to help people find answers."

One of the final assignments involved the confrontation between church and state in the Middle Ages, and two intractable personalities. Pope Gregory VII, famed for gregorian chants and papal reforms, had excommunicated Emperor Henry IV of the Holy Roman Empire for calling him "a false monk." Henry also practiced lay investiture, a blasphemous strategy of appointing non-ecclesiastical cronies to church offices. But when the emperor's subjects at home grew restless, faced with eternal damnation due to his political-religious ambitions, Henry had no choice but to mend his ways. Late in 1076, the peasant-clad emperor knelt three days in the snow outside Gregory's monastery before being allowed an audience. Students were asked "What transpired when the Pope permitted the emperor to come out of the cold?"

"Gregory, please!" began Bruce. "Forgive me of the wrong that I have done you! I will do anything for your forgiveness." Jorge described a continuing standoff: "Gregory listens to what Henry has to say. Henry tells him that he doesn't want to be excommunicated . . .[but] that he is the emperor." Shawn liked the convivial approach: "Henry comes in and talks to Gregory. Henry said he will stop lay investiture. Then they drink wine and have cheese and bread." Stacey began to orchestrate a Woody Allen scenario. Henry "began acting like an angel." He started asking "What can I do for you? You name it, it's done (while thinking to himself, what a jerk)." With varying degrees of specificity, student journal entries could, and often did, place the writer within the historical landscape.

Student logs by university freshman basic-studies students raise a number of possibilities. They indicate some of the risks, surprises, setbacks, and satisfactions when used in the field of history. Entries illustrated here, each of which were first drafts written in class, suggest a corollary to Kenneth Macrorie's "I-Search" guideline for meaningful research, that is, that students have pride in personalized learning, and that when engaged with the outcome they can demonstrate refreshing candor and a clear writer's voice. The writing also raises a number of questions for content-area specialists: what controls should be imposed upon journal content, when is an entry unsatisfactory, and who are the primary beneficiaries, students or teachers?

Lamont Thomas formerly tended to look upon writing as a necessary evil in order to communicate the intricacies of history, much as a mother might regard childbirth prior to enjoying a future child. For years he had labored through historical research to produce a biography while enduring the painful process of learning how to write a simple sentence. Then came the 1984 Connecticut Writing Project Summer Institute. It opened up a new view toward writing: the positive, exploratory, intriguing, and satisfying process for learning and thinking as ends in themselves. The long-awaited, documented biography -- Rise To Be a People, A Biography of Paul Cuffe -- finally appeared, followed by a paperback edition. But his positive writing approach toward high school and university students stem from CWP, not from publication through a university press. He is one of the few history teachers to have been trained in a CWP institute.

WORKS CITED


It is the subtle cues that are hard to see in print but readily comprehensible to the ear on tape -- my voice, its tone and pace, the student's voice and tone. The emotional or affective part of a conference cannot be told in print. It must be heard. There are modulations and nuances that are so minor yet so important in the interview process. It is the comfort level which can't be seen but must be there. The student needs to feel the teacher is receptive, even with the struggles of a very beginning paper. Risk taking is part of that comfort level. For my students who were used to a strong teacher-centered classroom, even in their previous writing experience and conference experience, the risk of generating topics of invention, was the most difficult of all.

As I listened to the tapes, I heard four voices of strong readers and writers who would certainly be college successes. But I heard some hesitancy and tentativeness, some real ambiguity about writing what I think. I had to encourage them to believe what they thought was important, and that they didn't have to be right or please the teacher. I knew I would have to help them break out of a pattern of writing for a traditional teacher assignment. Generating topics, or invention in the classic rhetorical sense, was one of the hardest parts of breaking out of old patterns. It seemed especially challenging for David, one of the four in our class, whose progress I followed over the course of six months and taped on three different occasions. The conferences taped were for papers #3, #4, and #6 of the eight required for our fall semester. I later took those three conferences and recorded them successively on one tape in order to note changes in our dialogue and on David's progress as well as my own. David's voice was the most audible and clear on the tapes. For this reason I chose to limit the study to him.

Early in the semester I gave a few guidelines to students about writing conferences. Some of the blackboard notes of September 17th were as follows: "Be prepared with a draft. Be ready to ask several meaningful intelligent questions and don't assume anything on the part of the reader. Take notes. Don't let the teacher dominate your paper. Think clearly. Good writing is very simply clear thinking, but clear thinking is not that simple." The blackboard notes were as important to me as they were to the students. I wanted to avoid imposing my presence in their writing. What emerged from the teacher-student conferences taught me much about my own pedagogy as well as David's progress.

On the first recorded conference about a topic broadly identified as "work," after our reading and discussion of six essays in the textbook, the tape revealed a problem for the student writer and a cue for me. As we began our conference I asked:

Tell me, what's the progress or the problem?

David: I started talking about the reasons why people work for my topic. I was going to use that. But as I wrote about it, it's not really working out.

Why not?

David: Because my topic's too broad.

Yeah, I would agree.

David: Basically I could say whatever I want and it might not even be right. The more I think about work.

Do you think anything does make sense that you could latch on to?

I noted, by repeating and mirroring David's dilemma, that narrowing and focusing his topic was a problem. I did not give him a specific approach to the problem but allowed him to stumble around with his ideas. I began to see that he wanted an anchor, a secure place with the teacher in which he could latch on to "what is expected." I had to reinforce his risk taking, his confidence. At one point I asked which areas of this issue were most interesting. He showed a strong need for encouragement to take intellectual risks in discovery and in generating his topic:

What hits you as most interesting of all these?

David: Probably the need to occupy time as a reason for work. But I don't know if there's enough that I could write on it, like a paper or something. See I have trouble when ... I mean, I could write a lot, but it probably wouldn't be right. Or I'd think it was right but other people might not.

Don't worry about what somebody else thinks. Do you think you could write clearly about it? Do you have an idea philosophically where you're coming from?

David: Yeah, I think so.

Because it's a very abstract, kind of theoretical view of work.

David: Right.

But it's an existential point of view and the existential question could be something you'd think about. Don't worry about being right. It's not a
question of being right or wrong. It's a question of being clear and convincing.

David: Right, clear and convincing. That's the main thing. I don't know why but I just have trouble when there's not, like, a set topic we're supposed to talk on. This is the first course I've had where you can write about whatever you want.

It's kind of scary, huh?

David: (laughter)

From this excerpt of our first tape it is obvious that being on your own to write about "whatever you want" was a new and challenging experience. As an instructor I had to build up David's trust in his own curiosity and ability to think for himself, to generate a limited focus to the broad subject of work. I mostly felt like a mother, coach, and cheerleader. I needed to encourage his confidence in building and defining focus for this third paper. I kept bouncing that responsibility back to David's court:

There are some very good things... just reading the opening paragraph. It looks great. You read it to yourself and see what you think is the strongest statement you make and, then once you've identified that strong statement, then maybe you can build upon it. Because you've made a lot of good comments as far as I can see. But it's true that developing a focus...

David: Yeah. (laughter)

That's your choice. It's not mine. Where do you want it? Where do you want to go with this?

From this initial tape in our series I recognize that strategies for limiting and focusing on a topic -- invention -- are needed for the class. In fact, several strategies can be taught and should be.

On the next paper assignment, broadly based on the study of media and its impact on our lives, David began with a little more certainty about what he wanted to say. I began our conference:

What's happening?

David: I'm writing about whether certain materials should be banned cause their content might influence views or people -- like horror movies or harsh lyrics or records -- whether these might influence people in a way that's going to have adverse effects on them. So I'm focusing on the reasons why these might be banned as opposed to reasons they shouldn't be banned.

Oh, that sounds good. Did you take Tipper Gore's essay to task? I mean were you interested in what that essay said? Especially in light of...

I challenged him on the structure of the paper more than on the focus, as it seemed he already had some clarity in his own mind about where he wanted to go:

So, are you presenting a balanced paper? The pros and cons?

David: Yeah.

So, it's kind of compare and contrast, in a way. Are you going to come to one opinion when you finally arrive? Are you working to a personal viewpoint?

David: Yeah. Is it okay in these kinds of papers to express how you feel about it?

Of course!

From this conference, the second on tape, I could still pick up a cue which indicated teacher pleasing and hesitancy about expressing himself without knowing if his ideas fit into an acceptable mold. He wanted to know if it was "okay" to show his personal feelings. My response was very direct and emphatic. This response is especially evident in the tone and mood of our exchange, a response primarily evident through listening to our taped voices rather than reading the dialogue.

By the end of our conference I found myself mirroring what David's cues had suggested. I also recapitulated what appeared to be his own invention or generation of a manageable topic:

It's certainly a hot topic.

David: Right. (laughter)

I mean really it is -- censorship -- really that's what you're talking about. You're talking about censorship in television, or movies, or in records, or whatever.

David: All types of media.
Yeah. The power of the media is such that that (topic) came up for you because it's such an incredible influence on all of us, that I guess for you this issue of censorship grew out of what you were reading.

Although our conclusion in this conference was left with little more than these last mirroring efforts, David had inched forward more in his confidence to think on his own and to pursue a more focused topic without so much concern over my approval.

One of the hallmarks of a good writing conference is balance. A good conference should strike a balance of give and take between student and teacher. The teacher needs to be supportive and non-threatening, particularly if experience with conferences on the part of a student is limited. Style, personality, timing, and the student's prior writing experiences all enter into this balancing act. At two points in the year I gave short surveys asking for feedback from the class on the roles and preparation both teacher and student should have for a successful conference. One of the questions I asked in November was: "What do you think is most valuable about holding conferences before you turn in your final copy?" David wrote "... they give me a more open-minded outlook on what I am writing. Teacher suggestions help me to think about what I am writing and to think about what the focus of my paper will be." Then on the same survey I asked: "What do you think is most important for your instructor to bring to a conference?" Student responses on this question were: "The instructor should bring questions to a conference ... should be able to form some meaningful questions about the paper after reading it ... should have some key questions to sort of guide the conversation and give it some direction. It makes it easier for me to talk if someone else starts me off." The most succinct of all the replies was "eyes and ears."

In March I posed a similar set of questions on a second survey. This later survey rephrased some of the same ideas of the November survey, but also asked students to identify qualities they saw would make a successful writing conference. Their varied responses indicated the general strength of a good conference was the mutual give and take between student and teacher. David noted some expectations for specific areas. He wrote, "The conference should cover material on the paper, structure of the paper, student's ideas, teacher's ideas, and feelings about the paper from teacher and student." When asked about the possible disadvantages of a conference, students indicated that the teacher might offer too many suggestions, might be "too helpful" and end up controlling the student's paper or that the student might rely too much on the teacher. Clearly, as their familiarity with writing conferences grew, students knew their limits and my limits.

Before the third tape of David's conferences, I made a deliberate switch in our reading and writing. The class had been steadily immersed in nonfiction for four months and the next theme in their text, science, had several demanding essays. I sensed some weariness and frustration from them. They needed a change in their reading selections. So, after reading several essays, we read a play, *Galileo*, by Bertolt Brecht. They had some experience in analysis and interpretation of literature up to this point, but not in our class. Rather than add the responsibility of selecting a topic to the challenge of explication, I offered them five options on possible topics to pursue. David chose the second of my suggestions: "Decide if Galileo is a hero, defining the nature of tragedy and the nature of heroism in your discussion. You might consider this question: Is the play a tragedy?" My direct guidance and instruction for this assignment seemed necessary. Rather than encouraging exploration of their own ideas in an expository mode, I wanted to encourage exploration of interpreting fiction -- a similar yet distinct critical-thinking skill, perhaps a little like viewing Dall's art.

Since reading this play was dependent upon knowing some further information about religion and politics of the Middle Ages, about the progress of scientific inquiry, about the role of the Inquisition, and about Brecht's artistic philosophy and experience in Germany during the rise of the Third Reich, more of my direct authority was already in place. I donned the traditional hat of teacher - one who imparts information and experience in literary interpretation. I found my questions in the conference were pinpointing David's choice, option two. After we talked a little about the nature of tragedy, I suggested he get a good stipulative definition of tragedy, deciding on whether the classical or modern concept would work. I needed to get more clarity from David, needed to know if his understanding of literary terms, as well as the play itself, was firm. I wanted his feedback on this writing option so I could give support and direction. I wasn't sure of his prior knowledge or experience in discussing tragedy. We had not discussed these ideas in class, so there was no possibility of regurgitation lecture notes from me. At one point I needed to check with him to see if I had been understood:

What have you done so far in terms of those ideas? What have you said so far in your paper?

David: Just defined the tragic hero and talked about Galileo. I think he is one.

In the classic sense or more modern sense, the antiheroic hero? The hero being the person who is more victim of circumstances and his own flaw. The flaw not being within. But where is the downfall? Do you know what I'm saying?
David: Right. I hadn't considered that aspect. That's the problem so...

Is that what's giving you trouble?

David: Yeah. I'd say he's more of a modern hero or it's more of a modern tragedy -- as Brecht presents him...

So you would say it's not a weakness within Galileo as Brecht presents him, but it's a weakness in society, in the world in which he lives?

David: Well, it could be either one actually.

Do you think it's both?

David: It's probably a little of both.

I then referred to Death of a Salesman, which David had read in grade 11. I relied upon his memory of Willy Loman and the kind of tragedy Miller presents. I hoped this allusion to another play might help David further. Whether he had a clear recollection of the play or comprehension of Willy's character I wasn't certain of, but I thought the reference might add some insight to his understanding of contemporary tragedy:

Does that help you out?

David: Yeah.

Is that answering your question?

David: Yeah. (a reflective pause)

I was looking for the student's knowledge and needs to help meet his inquiry, then asking him if I had helped. The analysis and interpretation were still his responsibility.

As our convergence came to a close, my questions indicated how far from merely generating a topic we were. I didn't think David would write what he thought the teacher wanted to hear. On the sixth assignment he was able to take more risks and to break through that initial insecurity which he had shown in the third assignment when he asked, "Is it okay in these papers to express how you feel?"

Of course, I've learned too. I need to develop more formal lessons to help my students use invention strategies. In our first semester I had to reassure them that the struggle for generating ideas was part of the writing process, the pre-writing and drafting stage, and that it was messy. But such messiness was okay. That is one of the clearest points this study has taught me. Indeed, I had given a few lessons on brainstorming, clustering, and making lists. Other strategies might be very valuable for next year: looping, the particle-wavefield approach, or cubing. I intend to incorporate more strategies to help the seniors who arrive in September. The study has also taught me that for the students my broad goal for the year may be working -- teaching them to think clearly and to think for themselves. Their writing has begun to show clarity and confidence. By the end of the year none of these students would worry about that earlier question, "Is it okay in these papers to express how you feel?"

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Active Minds: Learning with the Kids' Point of View

Margeen Reynolds

Greeting my fifth graders as they arrive, I aware of heightened energy today. This is a stressful morning of interruptions and changes in schedule. I make adjustments in my plans while Mike, our class leader for the week, begins the day.

The intended astronomy experiments require set up time we don't have now, but I'm determined to write report cards with each student as we look through portfolios and discuss their writing. The ever-present question enters my mind: How will the class be learning while I conduct individual conferences? The answer forms slowly with clarity.

Mike collects notes and takes attendance while I think. Since we have just read *Bridge to Terabithia*, the class should be challenged by composing poetry with a nature theme. But can they work productively without guidance or encouragement from me? This seems the moment to find out.

Mike says we're ready to begin, so I ask students to share their journal responses to Katherine Paterson's poetic language to set the mood. I offer saved nature magazines for inspiration and pass out a sheet with poetic forms. I assure everyone they may, of course, write free verse and draw illustrations.

Our beginning is auspicious, but the ongoing conflict between Jon and Kevin soon erupts. Before I can react, Mike steps in and assumes my role: "Jon, please stop. I have to write this." Mike then makes a peace offering to pesky Kevin: "I will help you at the computer if you wait till I write this and stop fighting."

The mischief makers willingly return to their groups in opposite corners. Mike later confides that he writes his poems by thought:

Teacher Research: Guess Who's Learning

I choose the kind of poem I want to write and just think. When I get my basic topic I start working more smoothly. I like writing freely. That's why Jon and Kevin disturb me when they argue.

For a long time the class works well. They look through magazines, laugh and talk while they share pictures, read their journals, think, and respond. Then the extended moments of silent, intense writing and sketching happen. My conferences are productive, and I feel pleased with the atmosphere in the room.

Students start reading their drafts to classmates, and a joyous momentum builds. The noise level increases and students begin to bicker, debate, and engage in writer's talk. Should poems rhyme? I suggest we all freewrite for ten minutes to explore our ideas. Then we move to writer's circle.

This large empty space in the corner of my otherwise active classroom structures the animation that brings higher-order thinking skills into being. Like a stage, the circle becomes a point of departure for creativity and the making of meaning.

Anne sits on my left and sparks fierce debate with a poem she just composed to support her point of view. Two lines renew the controversy:

I like to make poems that rhyme
But often it takes a lot of time

Jon rushes to support her declaration:

I like to write poems that have a rhythm too. I think poems that don't rhyme are serious and are meant to teach. Poems that rhyme make people laugh because they are funny, usually.

Susan disagrees:

But I like to write non-rhyming poems. I like to write messages, strong poems with meaning. Rhyming poems usually don't make sense.
I'm going to bed,
I hope I don't hit my head,
My favorite color's red.
You just come to a word, pick another word that rhymes and attach a sentence. I agree they do have a certain beat though.

This dispute between Jon and Susan becomes the focus of our circle. Intensity and knowledge are overlaid with their wonderful friendship and strong
personalities. She is free and creative. He acknowledges this but defends the need for form and rhyme.

They are across from each other and she leans toward him, using her controlled gymnast's body and expressive hands to emphasize her thoughts.

Jon moves around on the floor in relaxed motion and punctuates his remarks with his nodding head. Everyone else chimes in, measuring themselves against the two positions while Anne listens intensely. All bonds and loyalties are suspended including gender, friendship, and response groups. Writers are making meaning.

Tracey: I like rhyming poems because you have a rhythm steadily going in your head while you are busy writing.

Jill: I don't make any of my poems rhyme. I think they make more sense. You aren't as limited when you don't rhyme. You can let your ideas go free.

David: I like to write in rhyme even though it's hard to get any meaning out of it. Rhyme gives beat and makes the poem fun to listen to.

Mike: Poems that don't rhyme have meaning and are soft and beautiful.

Megan: I like to write free verse because most of the time if they rhyme they don't make sense. At least mine don't. When you write freely it sounds smooth and continuous. If it rhymes it's choppy and ends up changing the whole subject sometimes.

Eric: I write my poems by thinking of a sentence and the last word in the sentence I make it an easy word that rhymes with another easy word. From other people I learn how to rhyme better or even punctuate better.

Carli: I have trouble with poems, but when people share or talk about them I get words I like and put them in different sentences. I like to write in free verse because personally I think it is harder to write in rhythm.

Jane: I like to write about nature and about peaceful things. I like reading other people's poems and imagining my own pictures. I think life is a good subject to write poems on because sometime death can be like a horizon to you and sometimes it can be like the end of a maze depending on what kind of a mood you're in.

Sara: Movement is mostly what I like to express in my poems. You find dead ends and openings. You might stay with one a long time and go to an end. There is one opening that is eternal if you find it. I think everyone's poetry is a different way of expressing feelings.

Lynn: Rhyme or not, writing is relaxing. It gets all of the feelings in your mind out. It seems like writing is chasing the stress away.

Mike reminds us that it's time for lunch.

The poems that are the product of this discussion hang around the doorway of our classroom mounted on brightly colored paper reminding me of the butterflies Carli sketched around her words. I am impressed by the lively, carefully finished work created, conferred, and edited independently by the students. These moments of wonder when we cross a threshold and make new meaning crop up like golden dandelions in a spring lawn and push the question of how they come into being.

To search for an answer I record my teaching experiences in journals, tape conferences to improve my questioning techniques, save students' writing, assign ten-minute class freewrites to explore ideas and ensure that everyone will feel confident to speak in circle discussion, and, yes, I even submit to video tape. Reviewing and reflecting upon this data I make a surprising discovery.

I'm always asking myself questions. Sharing classroom management with my students is an answer to my concern about encouraging independence and involving students in their own learning. Fifth graders would gladly allow the teacher to assume responsibility while they attend to socialization. This preoccupation with peers can be used to develop collaboration when students are given genuine tasks that are structured and modeled when school begins.

The discovery that surprises me most concerns the success of the writing/reading workshop I adapted from Nancy Atwell's book, In The Middle, to address my question about how to improve my students' writing. At first I attributed their notable progress to Atwell's suggestions, but fifth graders do not have middle-school skills. Why do these methods work with my students?

The answer generates from the basic question I have struggled with for fifteen years: How can I successfully integrate heterogeneous students and accommodate learning styles so each person can share his or her strengths and learn with a minimum of disruption?

Keeping interest high is essential. Science with a hands-on, inquiry approach involves the kids and excites curiosity, so this method is the center of my
classroom. Including writing with Atwell’s advice was a smooth transition. However, the problem-solving skills needed when the teacher is not the focal point of the lesson require development.

Cooperative learning strategies and critical thinking skills enable students to build upon their knowledge and acquire new proficiency. This simplified version of Bloom’s complex taxonomy gives me a resource I can use to invite meaningful responses from my fifth graders.

If you want to measure: Use these key words:

Information recall: What students must remember
- list
- describe
- label
- repeat
- name
- define
- fill in
- identify
- what
- when
- who
- where

Comprehension: What students must restate in other words
- how
- why
- explain
- review
- discuss
- paraphrase
- translate
- interpret
- match

Application: What information is to be used to solve the problem
- apply
- employ
- draw
- simulate
- construct
- restructure
- predict
- sketch

Analysis: What is broken down into what parts
- classify
- dissect
- separate
- compare
- subdivide
- contrast
- differentiate
- distinguish
- categorize
- breakdown

Synthesis: What pieces of information are to be combined?
- combine
- relate
- assemble
- integrate
- put together
- collect

Evaluation:
What students are to express an opinion about
- judge
- rate
debate
- argue
- assess
evaluate
- decide
- choose
- defend
- should

Oceanography, astronomy, and ecology are favorite units and they coordinate well with literature. The chart frees me from teacher’s guides so I can develop themes that encourage students to make connections with the information and interest they acquire from science. Since many of our families vacation at the beach, we begin with a study of oceanography in the fall. This year I record our classroom dynamics in my journal.

The room is arranged in groups of four with interest centers and resources. Directions are clear and include cooperative techniques, but in the beginning you will observe disorder and hear the following comments:

Jon: The experiment wasn’t fun because I kept messing up. I just wish I got more prepared. My group didn’t help that much because I never really had any questions.

Carli: My group didn’t help me. It didn’t feel like I was problem solving, but I never knew when I learn something anyway.

Kevin: This is confusing because you have to think a lot. My group makes me feel left out and that doesn’t help much.

Matt: It was hard to think up questions. I also thought the directions were hard to understand, especially when we started without reading them.

Jill: In problem solving my group didn’t work too well. We usually just gave up on it even though I didn’t want to. Our challenge was finishing something we started.

Mike: Our group had lots of problems. One was we fought and all had too many ideas. We were overwhelmed.

Jane: Problem solving is kind of boring and impossible. I learned a little. Most of it was not successful.

Megan: The thing is there is usually too much socializing.
In some places we got stuck and we didn’t know what to do. It got very hard and we gave up. I thought we gave up too easily.

Putting all the information together was kind of hard. At first understanding everything was hard too. It seemed like we were in college.

When confusion predominates we stop for a group evaluation and list steps to untangle obstacles. Our class procedures and rules evolve from these discussions. Each year they differ somewhat, but are similar to the following:

**Procedures:**

1. Define the problem.
2. Brainstorm many ideas, and consider creative possibilities.
3. Recall previous knowledge. What do you know about this topic?
4. What do you need to learn?
5. Make predictions. What do you think will happen? Why?
6. Decide what steps you have to follow to complete the assignment, and order your work.
7. Group jobs: Reader, Recorder, Runner (to gather materials), and Reporter. [There are many other jobs that groups decide are necessary throughout the year, but these are needed most often.]

**Rules:**

1. Concentrate on your work.
2. Listen carefully.
3. Work silently during study time.
4. Treat everyone the way you like to be treated.
5. Kids who cannot work together don’t have to collaborate, but they can’t argue or fight.
6. Only ask the teacher for help when your group cannot figure out what to do.
7. Free time, about thirty minutes a week, is the reward for excellent, cooperative work. [Surprisingly, this time is a spring of positive feeling. There is a relaxed but purposeful recursive pattern that comes from these intervals.]

In four to six weeks the class is working with assurance. The simplicity and predictability of the structure is vital to success. The growth of the class can best be visualized through the students’ writing:

**Mike:** I had lots of fun. In the beginning I thought, OH NO! But it turned out to be pretty easy. I think the class helped me, along with my group, to answer my questions.

**Carli:** I think my group is working better, and we’re getting done with things a lot faster. It’s fun making decisions. If we have a problem we go back and check over everything, and if we don’t find anything wrong we ask for help. We were creative and accomplished a lot.

**David:** I learned in problem solving you should do it in steps instead of all at one time.

**Jane:** Some people have answers, others don’t. Sometimes if you think about the problem before asking, you already know the answer.

**Matt:** I also learned that when a book of directions is given don’t be too lazy to read it. Try lots of things to solve problems. . . . I also learned how to prepare.

**Chris:** Thinking of perfect questions was hard, but my group helped me.

**Dan:** If you just sit down and try you’ll get things done faster.

**Susan:** Sometimes the hardest problems have the easiest answers.

**Jon:** I’m happy with the group I’m working with because we all share our thoughts and add to our work. As a group I think we all worked hard and took part in everything. I like this group because we won’t put one another down.

**Kevin:** We did a lot of problem solving. I can’t say it was easy, but it was very fun. I also liked finding out the information. My group helped me a lot giving me their opinions.

**Anne:** You have to try hard to make something go right and it’s better to have a group to solve problems rather than one person.

Now that the class is working cooperatively, we’re ready for the transition to peer conferencing. Sharing your writing is a risk only to be taken in a supportive environment. I model the process with each student before I encourage them to respond to each other’s writing. Our guidelines, that evolve from fifth-grade composing, are printed on a chart for easy reference:

1. Sit next to the writer and listen carefully while they read.
2. Retell what you hear and praise the parts you enjoy.

3. Ownership of the piece belongs to the writer who asks for feedback on these questions:
   a. What do you like best about this writing?
   b. Is the beginning interesting? Does it catch your attention so you want to read more?
   c. Is the writing complete? Is there any information missing that you need to know so you can understand what the writer is saying?
   d. Are there parts that need to be explained because you aren’t sure what the writer means?
   e. Are there any parts that need more detail and description to help you visualize the writer’s ideas?
   f. Does the ending go with the story?

4. The writer decides what revisions to make on the draft.

5. Edit when the writer decides the draft is complete. Self-edit with a colored pen first, then have a conference to focus on the editing chart with a friend, and finally place the piece in the basket for the teacher to edit.

6. Celebrate the finished writing with a read-around in circle; publish for your intended audience.

I continue to be amazed and delighted with the positive group dynamics, the profound and humorous responses, and the comradeship that develops in the class. The improvement in writing is a fortuitous outcome. Comments from the students provide insight into the complex interactions of conferring:

Jon: Having conferences with my friends and with my teacher helps me know if other people find what I write interesting. It helps my writing improve because I know other people’s opinions, so I change a little. I write with more action in my stories and get new ideas for my writing.

Susan: Conferencing is fun. I like conferring with my friends because you can say more to them. If they think something is wrong and I like it I can explain why it’s right, in my opinion.

Kevin: Conferencing helps my writing improve. I learn to spell and edit by myself. I wasn’t able to before.

Megan: Conferencing helps my writing because what I write they have to hear so I always give it all I’ve got . . . when I read my stories I feel shy and can hardly pronounce the words. Conferencing prepares me for that.

David: You know what people your age think. That’s important to me. I don’t mind criticism because my writing improves a little bit each time.

Tracey: Now I can just sit down and write without stopping. I find an idea and keep adding to the idea until I get a good paragraph. Conferencing helps and it’s fun.

Jane: My writing has improved. I write better endings and more interesting beginnings. My plots are more exciting and I put in more description. I take more care when I write because conferencing makes it more interesting.

Carli: Sometimes they say things about my writing that makes me think of a whole new topic.

Jill: Suggestions that are made you either take them or not. It is completely your choice. While conferencing I notice how it feels to be on the outside and that helps me to improve in many other ways than just writing.

Eric: The best part is that after going over the response questions a few times I can also conference with myself.

Tom: It makes you feel good about your writing and yourself.

Mike: I like peer conferencing because you get the kids’ point of view.

Every response mentions the fun of conferencing and the improvement in writing that results. From the teacher’s point of view, the first conference I have with each student creates a bond that grows from my interest in their ideas. I also gain insights into thought processes and learn where support is needed. Talking together I can focus fifth graders on their topic by asking, “What is the most important idea you are telling the reader?”

Developing active listening takes time and patience with yourself. A student wrote, "I have to admit in the beginning I felt uncomfortable conferring, but I’ve gotten to know you better and now I look forward to it." My feelings exactly. I have come to know fifth graders well, to appreciate their perception and willingness to accept responsibility for their learning.
In *The Relevance of Education*, Jerome Bruner states the critical question: "How does one bring the child to his full analytic powers in a discipline while at the same time preserving in him/her a robust sense of intuitive thinking, both in intellectual activities and in daily life?" In my quest to have students participate freely in their learning, I have engaged this question and formed a new paradigm for my teaching. Ethnographic research enables me to truly see classroom dynamics and increases my awareness. These are the essentials of my practice:

1. Units are presented with basic requirements, but challenge students to explore and expand where their interests lead. Through questioning, students share their understanding of material and we formulate new questions together for further investigation. Therefore, individuals participate at their level while we collect a body of class knowledge; the media center is a vital extension of our resources. In a sense, students create our curriculum and feel ownership.

2. I teach problem-solving strategies, questioning techniques, research skills, and writing process in a context that integrates curriculum areas.

3. Students need experience in the linking of subject areas. Connections help learners to scaffold new material to acquire knowledge.

4. Structure must be clear, simple, consistent, and available (I use charts) for students to consult. The class fluently listed our procedures and rules for this paper in a relaxed dialogue while they worked. Charts are replaced when material is internalized.

5. Problem-solving strategies and critical-thinking skills are built upon a foundation of freewriting. Writing to think about a topic before discussion results in higher-level responses.

6. Collaboration produces a support network where risk is valued so individual growth and creativity are achieved.

7. Everyone has meaningful responsibility for the success of our classroom.

8. Expectations are high, but managed by each learner. A student wrote, "You have shown me how to fill my brain with learning . . . it's amazing all the brain can take and still it's fun."

9. The energy of the class is recursive like the writing process. Periods of rapid growth need to be followed by quiet time for reflection. The earned-time incentive for cooperation becomes the essence of our year.

Being together outside playing informal games, walking around, chatting is a creative space.

10. Portfolios become each student's story of their fifth-grade year and allow students to rethink and revise their ideas over a period of time. Evaluation is relevant when they participate.

My basic idea is expressed by Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth*. "Myths are stories of our search through the ages to understand being mortal. We need to tell our story to understand our story. We need to find meaning in our passage from birth through life to death. We need to explore the mysterious in our imagination." This research became the story of my teaching. In the telling, I have found new meaning in the narrative art. Writing to think for teachers and students creates an endless distance of reflection and myth that helps us understand and realize that "mysterious" in our imaginations.

_Margeen Reynolds is a Teacher/Consultant with the Connecticut Writing Project which, she says, "gives new meaning to my background in special education and literature. Teaching my fifth graders at Latimer Lane School in Simsbury, Connecticut, is both challenging and fun with the collaborative spirit of writing process."_

**WORKS CITED**


