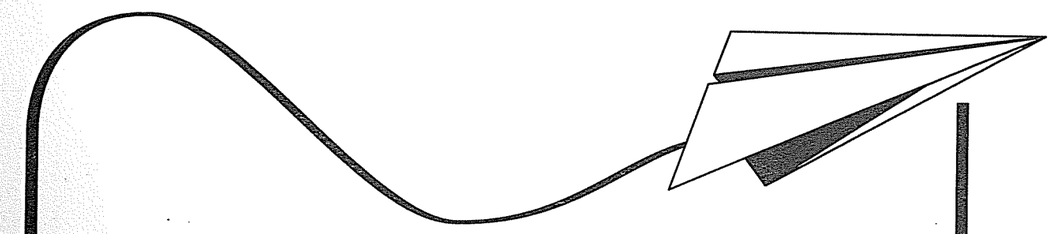

Beyond Test Scores: Teachers' Ways of Knowing

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Introduction

Connie Aloise and Sheila Murphy

Teaching, learning, and testing have always been tied together. It is common practice for a teacher to deliver instruction and then to design tests to assess student learning. For example, the physical education teacher demonstrates the correct posture for distance running—position of the arms, hands, head, shoulders, and pelvis, as well as pronation of the feet. After the demonstration, the teacher presents the students with the appropriate diet and exercise regiment for distance running. After a period of practice, the teacher assesses the student by having her run "the mile." In this instance, the test is the mile run. Likewise, an English teacher instructs students in the writing of a persuasive essay. She discusses the criteria for persuasive essays, defining terms such as assertion, concession, counter-argument, and fallacy. After analyzing the rhetorical strategies used in other essays and applying their terms, the teacher asks students to choose a controversial topic and then write a persuasive essay, arguing for a particular position. The teacher provides opportunities for students to share their drafts in progress to receive feedback before they are submitted for a grade. The persuasive essay, in this instance, is the test. So it goes in all the disciplines. Teaching, learning, and testing are inextricably linked. Testing of this sort is generally considered appropriate, a valuable tool in the learning process.

Besides the teacher designed tests which monitor student understanding of the immediate curriculum in the classroom, there is another battery of tests that have become linked with teaching and learning. But their value as a learning tool is more controversial. I am not speaking about the SATs or the AP exams, which have existed for many years. Rather, I am referring to the more recent state-imposed standardized academic/achievement tests such as the CMTs, the CAPT, and the MCAS. State experts outside of the individual districts and removed from the classroom regard these tests highly. Outside experts argue that these standardized tests result in more student learning and better teaching, in short, excellence in the classroom. Thus outside experts champion these tests as the way to reform the schools.

While classroom teachers would agree that valid data is often culled from standardized tests, they would be more likely to assert that educational practices, the habits of teaching and learning, the interactions of teachers and learners, are far more messy, far more intricate, and far richer than standardized tests and their champions indicate. Reform in the schools and the subsequent excellence are not necessarily the result of designing and administering a standardized test. Standardized tests may well indicate to an outside expert the areas of weakness toward which funding should be directed, but to assume that standardized testing automatically improves teaching and learning is an oversimplification of two very complicated processes.

On the other hand, the data culled from teachers, those experts who live in the classroom before and after the standardized tests are given, might better inform the movement to improve teaching and learning. In fact, reflective teachers, those whose practice it is to observe closely the "phenomenal reality of the classroom, what it looks like, the objects that define it as a material and social space, how the people in it look, talk, move, relate to each other, the emotional contours of their life together, the things that happen, the intellectual exchanges, social understanding and misunderstandings, what the teacher knows, plans, hopes for, and discovers, how different students react, the subtle texture of the teaching experience, the subtle textures of the learning experience" (Knoblauch and Brannon 25) are most likely to know best how to make changes that will result in better teaching and learning.

Following is a collection of stories written by teachers about day-to-day life in the classroom, sometimes merely surviving, sometimes luxuriating in abundance, always looking for what works for this student in this moment and trying to understand why. Jean, Jenny, Peg, and Nancy ruminate about their changing relationships with teaching, students, the classroom, and public opinion. Claire, Evelyn, Sandy, and Georganna are veteran teachers who analyze the impact of new methods in their individual classrooms. Janet and Mora focus on one student each—a high school senior, and a fifth grader, respectively—to see what they might learn about addressing the issues of the resistant student. Kathy moves with three very different students, always changing the dance to accommodate their changing needs, and finally, Sheila, who has been taking notes ever since we began doing research, steps back and zeroes in on our research group.

As you read through these stories, notice the complexity of teaching and learning. Notice the information that is revealed when the teacher reflects on her day-to-day practice. Notice the life in the classroom that goes well beyond standardized test scores. Notice teachers' ways of knowing and what they reveal.

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Josh and I: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Mora Geoffrion

Introduction

Josh and I have been together for almost two school years. I am a looping teacher in a grade-three-through-five elementary school. Looping means that the class I receive in third grade is promoted with me to fourth grade. Josh's class is my third looping group. My classroom is also an inclusion classroom. This means that my special education students remain with me most of the day and receive services within the classroom from either the special education teacher or her aide. Liz is the special education teacher assigned to me, and we have worked together with this class for two years. She and I co-teach reading, planning and modifying lessons for the various reading abilities included in the classroom. We also work together to modify math and other content area subjects. Josh does not receive and has no need for special education services. On the plus side Josh has average to above average ability as demonstrated on standardized tests, and he reads fluently. On the minus side he is described by previous teachers as lazy and exhibits few behaviors to contradict this opinion.

I remember Josh's first day in my third grade. He is over an hour late. When I ask him why he is so late, the details of his explanation elude me, but I do remember the words, "It wasn't my fault." This is the first of many mantras Josh will fall back on when asked why he chooses to do or not do something. Josh uses these stock answers combined with a barrage of words to ward off any possible attempts at disrupting his reasoning or dissuading him from his point of view.

As those first days pass, I discover several interesting patterns to Josh's behavior. He spends entire lessons staring blankly into space, only coming to consciousness when I call on him, and responding with yet another mantra, "What? I didn't hear you." He is comfortable refusing to do many kinds of assignments. While the rest of the class is busy setting up their journals or math papers, Josh's hand is raised to ask to go to the bathroom or the nurse. When my co-teacher or I attempt to help or coax him into participation, he replies with one of his other mantras: "I'm thinking," "I'm reading to myself," or "I don't get it." Often if he is not permitted to leave the room, he will spend time distracting others during lessons either by playing loudly in his desk, making vocal noises, talking with his neighbors, or twisting his head about. Getting attention is the next best thing to being allowed to leave the room. If we survive to the end of a lesson, and Josh does attempt the assignment, the final result is a poorly spelled, poorly written, punctuationless response.

In addition to Josh's lack of enthusiasm for doing classroom work, he also does not do homework, return notes or notices that require parental signatures. I send home duplicate copies repeatedly. Some forms need to be sent by mail to make sure they get there. The excuses for the missing papers are endless and relentless: "I forgot," "My mother forgot . . . didn't have time . . . wouldn't sign it," "I lost it." Often most of the forms and homework papers are found in his backpack. Even after I routinely check for homework and unreturned papers on a daily basis, he never empties the backpack. He has no desire to eliminate the proof that papers are not really lost or forgotten.

In third grade, as well as fourth and fifth, the consequence for missing homework is detention. Children are sent to a special supervised room to eat their lunches and sit in silence, isolated from the rest of the class, during lunch and recess. A special form is filled out by the classroom teacher and mailed home to notify the parents of the detention and the reason for it. A parent is required to sign the form and return it to school with their son or daughter. Josh serves

so many detentions that the school secretary is heard to comment that she could wallpaper her family room with Josh's detention notices.

The lack of recess also impacts Josh's opportunities to socialize with his classmates. His aberrant classroom behavior, while entertaining to some, has the effect of isolating him when he receives "time outs" and because his classmates choose to disassociate with someone who is always in trouble.

Third Grade Interventions

Throughout most of the third grade year, along with my co-teacher and other support staff which include the social worker, speech teacher, and occupational therapist, I expend a great deal of effort trying to expand Josh's participation level in the classroom. To eliminate distracting behaviors and noises, positive incentives are used to encourage Josh to reduce these behaviors to a manageable level. The positive results achieved are short-lived. When the incentives are removed, the negative behaviors return.

Barb, our school social worker, begins seeing Josh weekly. She attempts to engage Josh in conversations. Her goal is to improve his social interaction skills and increase positive class participation. Josh enjoys and looks forward to these meetings. Sometimes he is asked to bring a friend. Unfortunately, no discernible improvement in his classroom behavior results. Barbara notes that their conversations tend to be very lopsided. She has difficulty getting him to listen to what she or the invited guest has to say. When she or the guest comment or ask questions, they are ignored. Josh is only interested in talking and often much of what he says is made up. He talks about friends he does not have and doing things with them he does not do.

At some point I have Bonnie, the occupational therapist, do an informal evaluation of Josh's fine motor coordination and handwriting. She determines that his poor letter formation and cursive writing are due more to lack of effort than poor coordination. She suggests that I allow Josh to use a pencil grip to make holding the pencil more comfortable and gives me some exercises to help improve the flow of his cursive writing. He takes apart the pencil grip the first day he has it, and I don't have the stamina to force him to take on an extra activity.

At the beginning of the year, home contact is almost on a daily basis. The response from Josh's parents is positive. They understand that he can be difficult, that he needs to do his homework, that papers need to be returned and signed, and that certain behaviors are inappropriate. However, the positive responses to my calls do not result in any improvement in the aforementioned problems. Furthermore, neither parent ever comes to an open house or a report card conference.

In spite of Josh's best efforts to avoid learning, I am able to get him to turn in enough work so that grades can be recorded on a report card. He is barely passing in all subject areas except language. He refuses to do any writing, so there is nothing to grade. Josh's painfully slow progress and never-ending resistance is causing me to burn out. Daily I listen to the never-ending mantras. Daily I fight the battle of wills, my will that the work should be done, his will that he shouldn't have to do it. My temper is becoming short. It is beginning to affect the way I speak to him and the way I interact with the rest of my class. I am beginning to hear my pain echoed by others who work with Josh. Josh is not the only student I have to worry about. I have twenty-two other students that I am responsible for: the bright, the not so bright, the learning impaired, the learning disabled, the hearing impaired, the socially awkward, and the students with ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder). Josh is sucking the life out of me, and I resent it.

By the end of third grade, I am sure that Josh and his mother have had enough of me. I try hard to act professionally when it comes to dealing with Josh, but I am sure my anger and frus-

tration with him show. Mom hears from me often, and though she never gives me a hard time, she also gives me little support. I am sure that neither he nor his mom will want him to be in my classroom for another year. Surprise! He is one of the first students to return his signed permission slip stating that he wants to loop to fourth grade with the class. Oh well, fourth grade will be a new year and hopefully a better one.

Fourth Grade

Fourth grade begins more smoothly for Josh and me than third grade had. Although he isn't the most enthusiastic class participant, he does make some effort during lessons. He will raise his hand once in a while, and this year, knock on wood, so far he hasn't fallen asleep. As long as he feels confident about what we are doing, he is O.K. The same is true for homework. If he listens during class and has some confidence in the task that he is asked to do, chances are fifty-fifty that he will turn in his homework. Josh is still not an enthusiastic writer, but he does write enough on the CMT to score above the remedial level. His reading and math scores on that same test achieve mastery. I am relieved to discover that Josh has mastered third grade work even though he is giving little evidence of it in the classroom.

The challenge for this year will be to see if I can get Josh to feel more confident about his work, expand on his initial willingness to write, and hopefully help him become more socially accepted by his classmates. Because Josh is the complicated guy that he is, one cannot hope to solve one problem without working on the others simultaneously. The challenge for me is to see if I can relate to Josh in a more neutral problem-solving fashion. Realizing that the usual punishments of "time out" and detention, and attempts at behavioral modification such as charts, smiley faces, and ice cream will not work successfully with Josh, I need a fresh approach, a new means to get to him. I will try to listen more carefully to what Josh says following the mantra responses. I will need to make sure he hears what I have to say to him. I will record the issues as they arise and try to reflect more on my responses to them while simultaneously working to accept the defeats, the times or days when nothing works, in a calmer, less emotional way.

Opportunity Knocks

Towards the end of the third grade year, I decide to participate in the Teacher As Researcher Project sponsored by the Connecticut Writing Project at the University of Connecticut. I know that Teacher Researchers devise questions around classroom situations. They use classroom journal entries in order to collect and analyze data, and evaluate progress. I have read several articles written as a result of this type of research and have come away impressed with the usefulness of teacher journaling as a tool to help initiate change. I think journaling might be the way to assist Josh and become calmer and less emotional at the same time.

January 26: We Begin

I have a large spiral notebook open on my desk and a sharpened pencil nearby. I decide that I will spend the first week of the Josh-research-project just recording what he does or doesn't do in the classroom. I want to note my responses to him as well. After observing him for a week, I will look over my notes and come up with ideas that will help Josh.

During the first week of note taking, I discover that my notebook is too large and bulky, my pencil keeps disappearing, and some of my responses to off-task behavior probably shouldn't be published. Instead of decreasing my frustration, journaling is increasing it. I am not coming

up with insightful ideas to cure Josh, but I discover that I am learning a lot about him and me, and the way we interact. I am also learning about how Josh interacts with individuals in the class. I hope that if I take enough notes, eventually some of the answers I am looking for will hit me.

A Typical "Bad Day At Black Rock"

Josh comes into the room, signs up for lunch, takes his morning work from the back table and sits down to do the assignment. Upon completion, he turns in the finished paper, takes out a library book, and begins to read.

Josh hasn't turned in any homework. When I ask where it is, as I check off the turned-in work, he tells me: "I did it, but I forgot it," "I forgot my book at school," "I didn't have time to do it," "I left my student planner in school," or "My mom didn't put it into my backpack." Take your choice.

During the math lesson Josh puts his head down on his arms. When asked to sit up and pay attention, he begins to roll his head, take a pencil apart in the desk, stare out the window, or make annoying noises. The lesson finally comes to an end and I assign seatwork. Josh sits and stares. I ask what the problem is. He responds, "I don't get it."

We line up to use the lavatory. Josh talks nonstop down the hallway. He is not talking to anyone in particular, blowing on the neck of the person in front of him in line, making irritating noises, waving his arms and turning in circles while he walks.

At snack time he sits at the table in the back of the room to finish his homework per my request. He loses his pencil, needs an eraser, needs to go to the lavatory because he didn't have to go five minutes earlier with the class, needs a new eraser because he just ripped the top off the last eraser that I gave him. He sits and stares into space. He is "thinking" again.

During our writing time, he once again stares into space and is thinking. He doesn't have anything to write about. He does not want to write about any of the suggestions I or other students have made. He claims that he doesn't have a pet, he doesn't like any TV shows, he only plays computer games and he knows he can't write about them, and he has never been on vacation, shopping, to a movie, or an amusement park. If he admits to doing something, his excuse is that he cannot remember anything about it. I suggest that he make up a story. He responds by thinking about that. We try a box of commercially made story starters. He does not like any of these. He asks to go to the bathroom. His stomach hurts; he asks to go to the nurse.

During the reading lessons, Josh is always finished reading the story before everyone else—in remarkable time. If we read orally and as a group, he reads fluently. But, when called upon, someone often must show him where we are in the story because he hasn't been following along. If I ask why he is unable to keep his place, he tells me he is tired or bored.

At lunch he sits alone. Most of the boys sit at one table and the girls sit at another. Some boys and girls share a third table. No one makes any effort to include him. At recess, which he rarely attends because of the detentions he gets for not doing homework, he walks around the playground by himself. I ask if he would like to join the four-square game or basketball—the girls and boys play together—Josh is not interested: "No one ever gives me the ball," "They always try to get me out."

After lunch and recess we line up to reenter the building. The class stops at the lavatory. Josh never uses the lavatory. He will need to go as soon as the afternoon lesson begins. He once again displays a variety of annoying behaviors as the class proceeds down the hallway.

As we get ready to pack up to go home, the class is fairly noisy. Students are discussing recess and doing classroom jobs. The homework assignment is displayed on the white board and everyone is busy copying it down in their student planner and organizing what they need to take home. Josh is making annoying noises again. He appears to enjoy making his classmates recoil

from him. He does copy down the assignment but usually abbreviates it to the point where there is only a page number. I guess he figures that there isn't much of a reason for writing down the assignment if he has already decided that he is not going to do it.

As we leave the building at dismissal time, Josh redoubles his efforts to be loud and silly. At this point everyone, including me, cannot wait for him to get on the bus, and no one is about to do anything that might interfere with that outcome.

Not all of Josh's days are bad days, and bad days do not always include all of the above-mentioned elements. Rather, the above is a synthesis of two to three days when everything went wrong. Journaling about Josh will help me find the positive moments in his school day and enable me to expand upon them throughout the day or throughout the week. How and where do I begin?

January 31: The Battle Begins, One Skirmish at a Time

Josh has been given a chapter to read in the book *Go Free or Die*, a biography of Harriet Tubman. This short seven-chapter book outlines Tubman's life as a slave and details her dangerous escape to Philadelphia and freedom. The story is very high interest for readers of various reading levels. Josh, who is a fluent reader, has no problem with the book.

Following the reading of Chapter Two, the assignment requires Josh to respond to the chapter by summarizing the important events in his journal. Josh's complete and unedited journal response is: "harriet grew up."

"Let's see if we can find a few more details from the story," I suggest. Josh begins to look at the page, and there is dead silence for the next minute. "Maybe if you read aloud it might help."

"I am reading," he responds.

"I would like to hear you read out loud," I repeat. Josh begins to read orally and fluently, and almost immediately identifies an important detail. I am thinking that this is probably the first time Josh has read this passage.

"Nat Turner," Josh responds.

"Why was Nat Turner important? Why was he special?"

After several attempts, Josh manages to put together the idea that Nat encouraged other slaves to rise up and kill their masters. "What does this information have to do with Harriet?" After more exhaustive questions and answers, Josh is able to piece together other important details that punctuate the chapter. But this dialogue wears me out.

I am dealing with a bright young man who is either incredibly lazy, incredibly lacking in confidence, or both. I find that I would not mind the extra time and effort, if only I sensed some cooperation from him. I feel more like a dentist pulling teeth than a teacher teaching reading. In spite of my frustration, the extra, patiently given attention produces positive results. I also notice an improvement in attitude when compared with his effort in third grade. During this intense question and answer period, he never once asks to go to the nurse or the bathroom. Aside from the initial mantras, "I am reading," and "I'm thinking," the rest of our time is spent in search of major events and supporting details. After one-on-one instruction, I continue to doubt that Josh is reading the assignments when he is left to himself. He is always done before everyone else, and his knowledge of the most basic events in the chapter is almost nonexistent.

February 1: Another Teacher Enters the Fray

Holly is the speech teacher. She comes into my room three times a week during social studies to monitor one of my hearing-impaired students. She also helps other students who may

need assistance. We are working on an exercise in which students record what they learn from their reading in their journals. I am helping one of my nonreaders with his outline, and Holly is patrolling, checking student responses, and answering questions. Josh raises his hand and she goes to his desk to help. He wants to go to the nurse for a new band-aid. Luckily, I keep some in my desk drawer. She gives him the band-aid, then checks his journal. Josh has written nothing. "I'm thinking," he responds when she asks why he hasn't started. She asks if she can help. "No, I'm thinking." Later the thinking requires a new band-aid and so it goes. At lunch in the teachers' room Holly shares with me Josh's incredible avoidance routine. Not all days go well and setbacks occur. For every two steps forward, it seems that one step back is required.

March 10: Running Out of Mantras

During writer's workshop Josh displays avoidance routines similar to those in other subject areas. We start the class by passing out writing folders. Following some organizational matters such as who will conference with whom, and "Does anyone need help with editing questions?" the class settles into the routine of writing. There is often the buzz of discussion and some fooling around, but in general everybody eventually gets to work at their individual tasks. Josh sits at his seat with his chin resting on his fists staring into space. After observing five minutes of his inactivity I ask what he is working on.

"I'm thinking."

"What are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking about what to write."

"Why don't you bring your paper and pencil over here and maybe I can get you started." Josh brings over his paper, forgets the pencil, goes back for the pencil, can't find the eraser, and finally sits down at the conference table with me and the other students with whom I am working. I mention to the group that Josh can't think of anything to write about. Immediately several students respond with possible ideas. None are acceptable to Josh. I suggest that he write about what happened to him today. Sometimes the act of writing about a mundane daily occurrence generates an idea.

"Nothing happened to me today."

"Did you eat lunch?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Write about lunch. First you got into line. Please write that on your paper."

Out of the blue an idea hits.

"I thought of something to write about," Josh states emphatically.

I am positive this is a subterfuge. I am busy with other students, so he is hoping I will just accept this statement with relief and ignore him for the remainder of the period. It doesn't work this time.

"What is your idea?"

"I'm writing about computers," he answers.

I finish what I am doing with another student, pick up Josh's still unused paper and pencil and announce that I will help him create a story outline. All he has to do is tell me what to write. "After the outline is written, you can fill in the details."

"I don't need an outline. I know what to write."

"If that were true you would be writing."

"I was thinking."

"Let's get some of that thinking down on paper." I ask for character names, setting, and four events: "first, next, then, and finally."

It is always important for Josh to have the last word, "I can't think how to start the story."

One of my other cherubs perks up, "How about once upon a time?"

"Great idea," I respond and begin to write Josh's first sentence. At this point Josh needs some ownership of this story, the story that he did not want to write in the first place. He takes his pencil and paper back and begins to write, "One dark and stormy night." It is not a very original beginning, but he pushes on from there.

As hard as it may be for me to believe, this tactic of forcing the issue of writing with Josh by persistently asking questions and recording responses actually generates three conferenced, edited, and published stories by the end of the year. Each new story is a little longer, more fluent, more controlled, and more interesting than the previous one. This is not the first time I forced the issue with Josh; however, this is the first time that forcing the issue of writing when he did not want to write actually worked. Bringing Josh to the conference table and allowing him to receive enthusiastic input from his peers probably made the difference. His classmates' willingness to help may have given him the confidence he needs to begin and the encouragement to continue the story. Later in the process he makes the most of peer editing and revision conferences. I pat myself on the back for persistence. Getting him to write never becomes easy or a non-issue, but there is no prouder author in the class than Josh when he reads his first published story in the author's chair.

"The Power"

In fourth grade there is a review of the third grade math curriculum including place value, trading, addition, and subtraction. Because it is hard to do any computation or problem solving in fourth grade without knowledge of multiplication facts, some students with certain learning disabilities use charts to help them, but the number and difficulty of examples they are able to do is modified. What do you do with a child who resists taking part in the lesson, won't do homework, and won't practice his flash cards? Perhaps the reason for Josh's lack of participation and effort is because he is afraid of failure. He reasons that if he does not pay attention during class, does not learn his multiplication facts, and does not do the assignments, it will be clear why he fails the test. The reason for failure won't be because he is stupid. It will be because he didn't try. The mantras and excuses are used in an attempt to protect him from the consequences of lack of participation.

In fourth grade, I talk often to Josh about what I call "The Power." I explain to him that only he has it and can choose to use it or not use it. I cannot make him do the homework he needs to do to practice the multiplication and long division operations. I cannot make him participate in lessons. I can call on him during a lesson, but I cannot call on him all the time. I cannot make him practice his multiplication facts. His mom and dad cannot make him do these things either. We can help, encourage, offer to practice with him, but at some point he has to decide that doing the work is important to him. Only he has "The Power" to make that decision. All the consequences for not doing homework are still in place. Josh's choice results in his not having recess for almost two months.

During this time Barb, our social worker, steps in and offers a positive incentive chart as a means of getting the homework in. Josh returns to our classroom with the chart and tells everyone about the prizes he can earn if he gets his homework done. I am not thrilled about the bragging. The rest of my class does homework because I ask them to or because their parents demand it. They get no presents and receive consequences for noncompliance. Barb reminds Josh that this bargain is between them and that he is not to mention it again to his classmates. Josh does not talk about the prizes again, nor does he do the homework. He won't use "The

Power."

At some point, I sit with Josh and we make flash cards. I offer to practice the multiplication facts with him before school. By the next day he has lost most of the flash cards we made. Once again he chooses not to use "The Power." He is not ready to take a chance.

April 13: Signs of "Power"

Mrs. M. comes to my room during math. She is the special education aide assigned to help in my classroom. After a math lesson she and I provide assistance to those who need it.

"Josh, can I help you with that problem?"

"No."

"Then pick up your pencil and get started. At least put your name and date on the paper." Josh complies but does not copy the example. "Copy the example, please." Josh does. "What do you do next?" she asks.

Josh replies, "I'm thinking." At this point I intervene and attempt to reteach the lesson. I am sure that he hasn't got a clue about how to do the assignment. One example is finally done and the second one is started. I ask what he will do next. He answers correctly. I walk away. Several minutes later I glance across the classroom from the desk of another student with whom I am working. Josh is sitting with his chin resting on his fists staring into space. "Josh, do you need help?" I call from across the room.

"No, I'm thinking," he answers without moving his head.

I cross the room and again question him about how to do the operation. He has a rough idea but wants to skip writing the steps on the paper. "I'm doing the example in my head," he states.

Based on my knowledge of what skills Josh does not have, this particular long division example is far too advanced for him to attempt in his head. "Show me," I respond. He can't.

"I'm thinking. I can't think if you keep asking me questions."

"I'm afraid that if I don't ask the questions, you will choose not to think." We are getting nowhere and snack time is approaching. I bargain, "If you can finish five examples, I will let you eat your snack."

"But, I don't get it," he now begins to whine.

I assumed as much, but I can't resist pointing out the obvious, "Then how were you going to do the examples in your head?" Before I lose total control, I suggest that he eat his snack with me, and I will help him through the computations.

Eventually Josh learns to do multiplication of multi-digit numbers by a one-digit number. He does not master long division. He continues to figure out harder multiplication facts "in his head." I feel badly that he will enter fifth grade without the math skill he needs, but I am sure that there was not much more I could have done. I have too many other students in this class who want and need my help. He makes the choice not to use "The Power," and he must live with the consequences. Fortunately for Josh, he has more success with the final unit on fractions. It does not require mastery of multiplication facts. During fraction weeks Josh has recess.

Interpersonal Relationships

All is not doom and gloom. Things are not going well in the math and homework departments, but they are looking up for Josh in the friendship department. During third grade and at the beginning of fourth, the only friend Josh claims to have is Robby. Robby doesn't really like Josh and is uncomfortable around him, but he is kind and wouldn't hurt Josh's feelings. Robby is

the boy Josh invites to his discussions with the social worker. He is probably one of the two boys in my class who would accept Josh's invitation to attend.

When Josh does go out to recess, which isn't often, he begins to hang around with Lyle. Lyle, like Josh, has problems getting homework done, but, unlike Josh, is learning disabled. During the winter months when recess is indoors, the two boys play with the Legos. Since most of my boys enjoy the Legos, Josh gets to play with them also. Unfortunately, any further progress at this time is limited by his lack of recess opportunities.

As Josh becomes more confident with the boys at lunch and recess, he begins to look for ways to get their attention during class. He watches other boys get each other's attention in inappropriate ways or at inappropriate times and begins to model their behavior. Like the inappropriate boys, Josh begins to receive the accompanying attention from me that the others receive. Since he rarely has recess, taking five minutes off his recess is useless. Josh's persistent attention-getting behaviors earn him "time out" in the classroom. For "time out" a student is moved to the back of the classroom and ignored by all, a type of banishment. Failure to ignore the separated classmate by other students results in loss of recess time for his classmates. Most students are easily able to ignore Josh from that point on. Once again I feel badly about taking something from Josh that he desperately needs, time to socialize with his classmates. Unfortunately for him, he chooses the wrong role models to win esteem from and so dictates his own consequences.

February 10: A Battle Won

One day in February, Josh's class has just entered the library. Susan complains, "Josh bumped into me and hurt me, and he didn't say he was sorry."

I ask Josh to join Susan and me in the hallway. Susan tries to repeat her complaint, but Josh interrupts. I let her finish.

Josh replies, "I said I was sorry."

"I didn't hear you," Susan responds.

"I was in line. You [meaning me] said to go." Now, I am the excuse for the missed attempt at an apology.

"Sorry doesn't mean much if your back is to the person you are apologizing to," I respond.

Josh's eyebrows merge and his chin juts out. This is his defiant, you're-being- unfair-to-me pose. "Well she is always bumping into me when she gets her backpack, and when she says she's sorry, you can tell she doesn't mean it."

Susan admits that this is probably true. I ask if they think they could be more careful around each other and especially at the coat rack. If accidentally one bumped into the other, would it be possible to apologize and mean it? They both tell me they can. Josh's facial features begin to relax and Susan's demeanor is less agitated. We practice apologizing with meaning. Both Josh and Susan appear more relaxed with each other and enter the library to join the rest of the class.

As time goes on, I continue to listen very carefully to what Josh has to say. Future conversations between us become productive times for getting at the root of some of his concerns and problems. He and Susan never become fast friends, but over the remaining months left in the school year they first learn to tolerate one another and eventually interact with mutual respect.

June 13: Grade Level Meeting

During the last week of school I sit with other fourth-grade colleagues and the art, music, Spanish, and gym teachers, trying to place students in fifth grade classrooms for next year. This yearly juggling ordeal requires us to rate our students by behavior and academic ability. The gym teacher asks me where I am going to place Josh. I tell her that I haven't decided. Her next comment floors me. "I can't get over how far he has come in the two years he has been with you. He is so much more outgoing and cooperative." I usually don't take compliments well, but I am totally unprepared for this one. I thank her for reminding me that Josh has made a lot of progress and tell her I was glad that she had noticed. Sometimes we as teachers in the day-to-day activities of the classroom are so overwhelmed by our daily concerns for our students that we don't take the time to step back and take notice of the progress that a student is making. I'm quite sure not stepping back was what was going on with Josh and me. I wish I had asked the gym teacher in what context she had noticed Josh's improvements, but I didn't. It probably does not matter, but it is important for me to remember that any strides, large or small, that I can make with a student are important reasons to celebrate.

Where Josh and I Are Now

I am learning through teacher research that journaling is an effective tool for me to use in the classroom, especially for dealing with problems and evaluating successes as they come along. I am able to read my journal entries and reflect on the day's events in a calmer more relaxed atmosphere such as my home. Reading back over my notes helps keep the daily ups and downs of classroom life in perspective. Sometimes it is easy to become so overwhelmed by what goes wrong during the day that I ignore what goes right. Outside the classroom, away from my students, however, I am able to pick out successes and capitalize on what works, for instance, when I forced the issue with Josh about starting a story. With so much going wrong where Josh was concerned, I desperately needed to focus on what was going right. As a result of being able to note and eventually focus on the positive outcomes, I was able to be more objective and less uptight or critical when dealing with him.

In addition to benefiting from my journaling, Josh and I benefited from our participation in a looping classroom. For many students and teachers it takes more than one year to figure out how to make teaching and learning work. In third grade I tried and often failed in my attempts to figure out strategies that would help Josh learn. Fourth grade gave me an additional opportunity to use what I had learned about Josh from the year before and to look for a fresh approach. My steady and, for the most part, calm insistence helped him take the first steps in building his confidence. Josh has discovered that he can write, revise, and publish a story. He can also summarize a story and record journal responses. He has friends and can get along with his peers. Although I was not completely successful in turning Josh into an "enthusiastic" learner, I believe I was able to give him some confidence in himself and hopefully a willingness to take chances with learning and friendships in fifth grade. I have my fingers crossed.

* * *

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A Math Teacher and An English Teacher Find Congruent Lines

Sandra Ferrari and Georganna Trosky

Why, you might ask, would a math and an English teacher be working on a teacher research project together? What do the two disciplines have in common? You have probably heard of social studies and English departments or math and science departments teaming for interdisciplinary units, but math and English?

Since there are always many ways to consider ideas, we ask you to consider math and English as separate languages, with their own unique symbols and vocabularies. When a language is foreign, people cannot take part in the conversations that occur around them. However, once the language is mastered, communication occurs. Within this framework of language and communication, questions are asked and explored. A cacophony of sounds is heard as people try to understand what is being said. Once languages are understood, the wonders, nuances, implications and beauty of the languages can be appreciated. Ultimately, when people master the language and talk, a community is formed, anxiety is minimized, and learning and understanding deepen.

As teachers, we know it is our responsibility to help students unlock the codes of the languages that occur in our classrooms. As teachers, we know it is our responsibility to teach and make sure that students learn. We do not take this responsibility lightly. As teachers, we want our students to ask questions, to explore possibilities, to learn from each other, and to develop deeper understandings. As a result, many questions confront us. They include, "How do we do this?" "How can we unlock the code for all our students?" "How can we motivate them?" "How can we understand their needs and know where their understanding breaks down?" "How can we help them?" Because it is through communication that we can begin to tackle all these questions, we must encourage students to speak the same language in order to unlock the codes necessary for communication, learning, and understanding.

The following is our story—the story of a math teacher and an English teacher in a small suburban town in Connecticut—as we try to make sense of these questions for our students and ourselves. The story begins with background information on our school, our developing philosophy of education, and our attempts to create a community of learners among faculty and students. We then give you stories from our classrooms as we attempt to become teacher researchers, and reflective practitioners.

Our Beginning as a Team

Five years ago our high school staff was challenged by our principal to rethink our use of time, our curriculum, our methodology, and our assessment activities. During this time, we looked at teaching and learning. We talked, asked questions, and learned many new languages. We discovered our individual strengths and weaknesses and how to use them to complement each other. We learned to ask ourselves the hard, essential questions about what we teach and why. We learned that action research is a tool to effect change in the classroom. We learned how to run meetings and workshops. We read about and discussed learning theories. We questioned ways that students learned, and compared them to how adults learn. We discussed emotional and multiple intelligences.

Focused and energized by what we learned, and understanding that we no longer had to be isolated in our individual classrooms, we entered our classrooms, optimistic and eager. We learned to dream. We understood the need to take risks. Inspired, we took up the gauntlet. We

believed anything was possible and that we could make our dreams reality.

Realities of the Teaching Life

While trying to change the culture and expand our small community, we hit numerous roadblocks. Changes in administration, block scheduling, renovations, New England Accreditation of Secondary Schools, state-mandated testing, and the everyday realities of working in the trenches consume us and sap our energies. While we understand that change takes time, and that dips in achievement usually occur when change is implemented, we are concerned that Connecticut Academic Performance Test scores (CAPT) and Scholastic Aptitude Test scores (SAT) have not improved as we had hoped. We understand that in order for our languages to be learned and embraced, students need to be active participants in the conversations. However, the reality we face is that students do not understand or embrace the idea of active learning. "Just tell us what to do," they say. "You are the teachers!" Making everyone aware of the different nature of education today, at times, seems a daunting task.

As a result of our frustrations, when we talk together as colleagues, we vent. Math teachers complain that students cannot articulate their thought processes in order to form the questions necessary to solve problems independently. They complain that students have not mastered the basic skills needed for computation and higher order problem solving. They see the need for these skills when students take the Connecticut Academic Performance Test but also understand that skills, process, and product are all important. As low CAPT scores are discussed, English teachers express frustration over students' inabilities to mark up a short story independently. During guided instruction students see the benefit of making comments during the reading of a story but for some reason do not internalize and use this process on their own. Teachers in all content areas wonder why students have such difficulty writing coherently and critically. From these conversations and observations, more questions surface. Do our students understand the steps they need to go through to complete assignments satisfactorily? Do they know what questions to ask if they do not understand the assignment? Do students know how to turn assignments into a series of questions that need to be answered? Do they have the skills needed to answer those questions? Do they see the value in what we ask them to do? If not, do they at least trust our notion that there is purpose and value in our work together?

As we discuss our individual concerns, a common theme emerges. We believe that our students have not developed the "habits of mind" that Ted Sizer refers to in his Horace series of books (*Horace's Compromise, Horace's School,* and *Horace's Hope).* Rather than bemoan our students' lack of motivation, we ask ourselves: are we encouraging them to develop these habits? While we each have respective disciplines to teach, we all want our students to be able to know what they need to know. We want them to be able to gather valid evidence to support conjectures, consider and recognize different viewpoints, make connections between previous and new ideas, and ponder the relevance of new understanding (habits of mind). We agree with Jeffrey Golub's comments in his preface to Virginia O'Keefe's book *Developing Critical Thinking* that "one does not *teach* critical thinking; instead, one designs and structures classroom activities in such a way that *critical thinking happens" (viii).* Our school values both process and product. We want students to be reflective about what they are learning and how they are learning so that they can internalize the process. Jeffrey Golub's comment in his book, *Making Learning Happen,* resonates for us: "If they [students] cannot articulate what they are learning then they are not learning in a way which is conscious and under their control" (3). We want our students to be in control, to be reflective thinkers and independent learners, but how do we accomplish this? Since student reflection and independence are part of our mission statement, and as a staff we collec-

tively developed this statement, we need to make it a reality. However, another reality we face is that many students only want to know what they need to do to get an "A," or worse yet, what they need to do to just pass. Feeling as if we are at in impasse, we ask: "How do we change the culture of our school so that students are actively engaged and learning skills? How do we become coaches on the sidelines rather than sages on the stage? How do we structure activities to allow reflection and active engagement?"

The Question

Action research provides the vehicle that finally moves us forward. From our conversations and concerns, we list the common themes. The question that begs an answer is "How can we get our students to develop the habits of mind they need to become independent learners?" Since this question is too broad and not measurable, we finally frame the question that seems manageable and logical: What happens in the classroom when the questioning process is brought to the forefront of all we do by showing the students our thinking and asking them to articulate that thinking? As part of our action research project, we begin tracking what kinds of questions are posed in our individual classrooms, who asks the questions, when are the questions asked, and what happens after they are asked.

Come! Enter Sandy's math classes, Georganna's English classes, and our meetings together discussing the project. Share our enthusiasm and joy in finding congruent lines.

Evolution of our research question – Fall Semester, 1999
Sandy, Math Teacher

While preparing for first semester final exams, I ask students to determine when Shaun will have enough money to buy a stereo system if it is marked down 10% every hour, keeping in mind that the state of Connecticut has a 6% sales tax. I also ask them to decide at what time the stereo will be free—if ever. Several students stare with blank faces. "She expects **us** to answer this," they joke. "Do we have to show our work? Does the answer have to be in complete sentences? Can we work with partners?" they continue. All good questions, but why aren't they asking, "Where do we start?"

Exasperated I reply, "We have been working on problem solving techniques all semester. Yes, I do expect you to answer this."

It seems as if I am on this roller coaster ride that never ends but just keeps going round and round until I am so dizzy I no longer know which way is up. I begin each semester with a positive attitude and try to build that community of learners that I feel is central to successful student learning. I take it slowly. I understand that I cannot afford to waste any valuable time now that we are in block scheduling and only have these students for half a year. I model the processes that students need to internalize to be successful in all subject areas and provide support as I encourage them to become independent learners. However, just like a ride on a roller coaster, there are ups, downs, wild turns, and excitement. Just when I catch my breath, I reach another summit and start the big plunge downward with my stomach in my throat. I am eager to begin the teacher research project with my second semester classes.

Georganna, English Teacher

Michelle, a senior in my first-semester, college-level composition and literature class, is frustrated. I look into her eyes as I see them fill up. Feeling vulnerable and defenseless, she attacks: "What is your problem? Don't you know I worked hard on this? Don't you know I need an A in here to stay in the National Honor Society? What I write will never be good enough for you!" She storms out of the room and slams the door.

Michelle and I have had many discussions about her essays. Unfortunately, her products and revisions do not improve. I too am frustrated and concerned. At first I think that her writing skills are the problem. However, after reading her third essay and discussing it with her, I discover that she does not always understand the readings I ask her to complete. Since she seems to read only on a literal level, she often misses the bigger picture or the inferences that can be drawn from the reading. Not being able to get beyond "what happens" seems problematic for many students. When Michelle finally gets beyond her anger, she confesses that she has always had trouble reading and writing and that she "stayed back" in elementary school as a result. However, Michelle firmly believes that if she just works hard enough, she will succeed and her academic record reinforces this idea.

As Michelle and I continue to work together, I encourage her to focus on generating questions about the reading, ask those questions in class discussions, and take notes on comments made in the discussions. We also go over writing assignments carefully. I ask her numerous questions: "What does this say you need to do? How will you do it? What area would you like to write about? How can you back up what you say? On what criteria will you be judged? Can you tell me how you will know if you have met the criteria? Do you have an editor that you can trust?"

By the end of the semester, Michelle has made progress. Her final writing assignment, a research paper, has a defendable thesis, and her writing is, for the most part, focused and clear. She includes some critical interpretations and at least demonstrates an understanding of how to cite sources and integrate quotations into her paper. She fulfills the requirements, and although the writing is not perfect, she feels satisfied. She states that she will use the writing center at college next year for all her papers.

As I sit down to write in my journal about what I learned from Michelle, I am reminded of the poem "Teaching" by Jim Miller. Miller compares teaching to "running in place / With weights on your feet" (2-3). I spent much of last summer revising the sequence of assignments for Michelle's class. I thought I had given the students opportunity to practice and hone their writing skills. Since there are many Michelles in my classes, I feel I spend a lot of my time running with those weights, trying to build up speed but ending up exhausted.

On the other hand, I am encouraged because I do reach some of my students. I think back to Morgan's comment in the cafeteria when she told me that she and Laura were discussing my class. They tell me that the sequence of assignments I gave them made sense. "We started with personal responses on our goals and dreams," she said, "went to short stories, critical essays and a literary research paper all centered around the American Dream." "My definition changed so much from the beginning of the course," Morgan continued. "I learned so much about myself and what I want in the future." While I thank her for her comments, I think back to the words of the Miller poem that compares teaching to sculpting in ice, and I wonder why some students like Morgan and Laura attained my goals for them while others did not. I remember that we are "Sculpting in ice / Shapes that melt in the mind. / I write on water, I sweat" and yet "always come away wet / Behind the ears" (14-18). But isn't this what makes teaching exciting? Each day brings new challenges. As I yearn for the crisp, cool air that allows the ice sculpture to take shape and not melt, I feel privileged for the opportunity to be a sculptor at all, since I do not have an artistic bone in my body. Remembering our plan for second semester, I smile and look forward to beginning our teacher research earnestly with second semester classes.

Second Semester – January – June, 2000
Sandy

I am teaching two classes second semester. One is a geometry class and the other is a pre-algebra

class. I begin my project with both groups. I decide to determine where my students are in the problem-solving process by giving each class an open-ended question to solve. The format I require includes stating the problem, developing a plan to solve the problem, executing the plan, presenting the data in a meaningful way, and stating the conclusion.

In geometry, I ask for a definition of parallel lines. Doug replies, "Two lines that never cross."

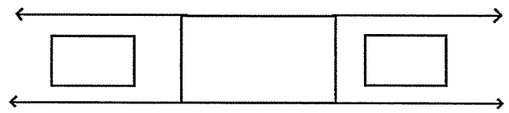
"How do you know that the two lines will never cross?" I ask.

"They are the same distance apart," he responds. "Like railroad tracks."

"Oh, I see. By the way, what does distance mean?"

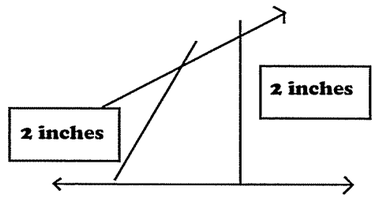
"How far apart two objects are," he replies again with surprise. I know he is wondering why I do not know what distance means. He goes on to make his point clearer: "If you draw two other lines connecting the parallel lines, they will be the same length."

"Oh, I think I understand," I reply. "Show me what you mean using Sketchpad on the computer. Convince me that two lines are parallel."



Doug and the other students proceed to draw their parallel lines, being sure that the line segments connecting them are equal, and agree upon the following conjecture: "The lines are parallel because two other lines can be drawn between them that have the same lengths."

I proceed to find a counterexample by moving their lines so that they are obviously not parallel, but are connected by line segments equal in length.



I ask again, "What does 'distance' mean?" One by one the students begin to recognize that angles have something to do with the definition. In this early exercise, I do most of the questioning. The students focus on depicting the situation and making the evidence fit their intuitive definition. They do not search for examples that do not fit and hope that I will not find any. As I keep making them refine their work, they wonder when I will accept their lab reports. I tell them that I will accept them only when I am convinced that it is the best work that they can do. I wonder if they are overcoming the "Just tell me what I need to do to pass" attitude.

In my pre-algebra class, I ask students to calculate how long it will take to pass a basketball from Connecticut to California. I must model the procedure I expect them to follow. As a class we paraphrase the question and we begin to develop a plan. We decide to pass a basketball in the hall and time how long it takes to pass it among the 15 of us—but wonder how far apart we should stand? Tanya suggests that we stand 3 feet apart and everyone agrees. Joel decides that we should do it several times and find the average.

"How far is it to California?" Nate asks.

"Good question," I reply. A group goes to the library to find out. "What is the next step?" I ask. After much discussion, we decide that if we can determine how many groups we would

need to pass this ball, we could then determine how many seconds it would take. As a class, we have developed the steps necessary to perform this task. I think that they have enough information to continue and send them off to finish their reports.

The covers are beautiful, the plans are nicely typed, the data is presented but very few students realize that they are supposed to execute the plan and solve the problem. They never perform the calculations necessary to answer the question! I am stunned. I think, "Why didn't they do the work? **I** led the discussion and helped them develop the plan. Why didn't **they** follow the plan?" I wonder. I ask Sue.

She responds, "I thought we were just supposed to copy what **YOU** put on the board."

We have a lot of work to do, I think. I am reminded of Virginia O'Keefe and her book *Critical Thinking in the Classroom*:

> Teachers should not worry if students seem to talk over-much, or if they fail to grasp an unfamiliar concept in just one activity. The primary object is to allow students the freedom to express their ideas and examine a problem or concept through different approaches. Rather than our defining results ahead of time, students explore possibilities through trial and error. (22)

At this stage, I am not concerned that I am forcing my students to explore possibilities. Independence can come only with practice and confidence. For now, at least, this ride on the roller coast is exhilarating.

Georganna

I too am teaching two classes this semester, sophomores and juniors. I decide to use both classes for my action research question. I plan to collect baseline data at the beginning of the semester by giving my classes short stories and asking them to construct five questions that could be used for discussion. Then I will use Bloom's Taxonomy of Hierarchical Questions (89) as a tool to teach students to ask their own questions. While I realize that Bloom's model is just one of the many models available, it is the one I choose to use. Cautioned by Christenbury and Kelly's remark that "[h]ierarchies, however, should be viewed as descriptions of cognitive processes rather than as prescriptions for classroom questioning strategies" (4), I decide to make the questioning process explicit to students, and to provide time for practice and reflection.

Since this is my first time teaching a junior general level class and my first time co-teaching with Barb, a special education teacher, I discuss my plans with her. She is hesitant and is not sure that the students can handle coming up with their own questions. We compromise. I explain to her what I learned from Kathleen McCormick, Professor of Literature and Pedagogy, and Director of Writing at Purchase College, SUNY, in an advanced summer institute of the Connecticut Writing Project at the University of Connecticut last summer. Kathleen suggested using easier material when asking students to complete complex, new tasks. I decide to use a story I had success with in the past and assure Barb that "[i]f it does not work out, I will not use this class for my teacher research project."

We hand out copies of the short story "The Toy Killer" from an old Alfred Hitchcock magazine that had always hooked my reluctant readers in the past. While my objective is to let them practice constructing questions on a higher level, I only ask them to construct three questions they would like to discuss in class. The story is about the seemingly perfect, attractive, young and affluent family (mother, father, and son) with a terrible secret. The parents believe that their six-year-old son is mentally ill because he destroys his toys. They love their son but want this bizarre behavior to stop, so they threaten him. If he doesn't stop "killing" his toys, there will be no Christmas. Everything is fine for a while. Overcome with love for their son, and the sadness at seeing Billy so forlorn, they tell him "Christmas will be wonderful," because you have been so good. In the end, it is clear that the mother is the "Toy Killer." Although she exhibits bizarre behavior during episodes of toy massacres, it is never explicitly stated that she knows what she is doing. We read the story aloud with the students and give them the assignment for homework.

The next day, Jermaine begins the discussion with "I wonder why the mother is doing this." I think to myself, this is a good question which asks them to think about motivation. I use the question as a reason to go back to the text and re-read because finding evidence to support your thinking is a skill that is important to making meaning. The students recognize the mother did not realize what she was doing and that she was mentally ill. Students love to voice their opinions. As we move away from a one right meaning of a text, the importance of a reader supporting his/her opinions and understanding with evidence from the story has become very important. Supporting opinions with textual references is another shift in the culture that takes direct instruction, practice, and patience. Jermaine's question affords me the opportunity to model this process with my students. It gives us a common experience that I will be able to call upon time and time again as we read different and more complex literature. Although the students do not come up with the conclusions that I make from the story, they are able to support their ideas. I accept this small success and move on.

Nicole, who is also a mom, comments, "I just can't understand how a mother could do something like that—make her son take the blame for something she did. I would never do that to Melanie."

Wow, I think to myself, another great comment that lets me talk about background knowledge. "What we bring to a story helps us determine what it means to us," I say. "What the story means to Nicole may be different from what it means to Jermaine or Jared because of who we are and where we are coming from. I understand what Nicole is saying because I am a mom too. I could never do anything to hurt one of my boys—at least not intentionally. I'm reading an Oprah Book Club novel, *Back Roads.* The mom is in jail for supposedly murdering her husband who was abusive to her and the kids. The oldest son, who becomes his younger sisters' guardian, discovers that the youngest girl was the one who actually killed their father but that the mother takes the blame. The family continues to fall apart and while I could see the mother trying to protect her child, she just makes everything so much worse. One line that especially struck me from the book was that the children blamed their mom for all the problems because she did not leave the abusive situation. I know a woman who has lived in an abusive situation for about thirty years and the kids say they hate their dad. But, the oldest son definitely blames his mother for not leaving his father a long time ago. Like Nicole, my reading is affected by who I am and what I have experienced.

The discussion continues. When my co-teacher and I meet that afternoon, she agrees that the students did a good job with what we asked them to do, so we decide we can continue this research project with this class. She also kindly suggests that maybe I am talking too much. I explain that my rationale is based on the book, *Mosaic of Thought,* by Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmermann. The book explores the question: "How do students become thoughtful, independent readers who deeply understand what they read?" I continue: "The authors show the reader how they make meaning by demonstrating their thought processes. They really make the process explicit by talking through their thinking in front of the students. Then they let the students practice with readings of their choice, listen to what students say and model or talk some more." It just makes sense to me. Since the authors are staff developers, they show the process with students from kindergarten to high school. I feel that in trying to instill the habits of mind into my students, I need to make my thinking explicit, especially at the beginning of the

semester.

Since the discussion went so well, Barb and I decide to move forward with this class in exploring our action research question: what happens in the classroom when the questioning process is brought to the forefront of all we do by showing the students our thinking and asking them to articulate their thinking?

Sandy

I continue to model the process of developing "recipes" that students can follow to help them solve new problem situations. As a teacher, I keep stressing that we must move from specific examples to generalizations. For example in pre-algebra, we solve two-step equations, such as $2x - 3 = 5$.

"How do we solve for x?" I ask.

"Add 3," Caitlin answers.

"Add 3 where?" I ask waving my hands in see-saw fashion.

"To both sides!" someone exclaims.

"Then what?" I continue.

"Divide," Nick continues.

"Divide by what?"

"Two"

"Where?"

"Both sides of the equation."

I continue, "Now, how could you explain what we just did to someone else—in a way that would work all the time for equations that look like this?"

The class comes up with the following recipe:

1. Which side of the equation has the variable on it?
2. Get rid of the term on the side that does not have the variable by adding or subtracting the same number to each side of the equation.
3. Divide out the coefficient on both sides.
4. Check your answer to see if it is correct!!!

The strategy of modeling the questions and gradually encouraging students to formulate their own does not always succeed, however, as it did in the above situation. For example, this same class works on solving equations with variables on each side. We develop rules together, we recite these rules, we write these rules down, and we state the rules as we execute them. After three weeks, I hear, "I can't do this."

I respond, "Where are you getting stuck?"

"I don't know," Eric replies.

"How far did you get?"

"Not very."

"What is it that you don't know how to do?"

"I don't know."

I expect him to be able to follow our "recipe" and to identify the step that is giving him difficulty. He won't even begin. I wonder to myself: "Can't do it? Won't do it? Or, hasn't internalized the process yet?"

Since I seem to be getting dizzy from this roller coaster ride, I decide to get off for a while and take some time to read and reflect. I think back to Sizer's chapter on *Habits* in his book, *Horace's School.* During a heated discussion about these habits, a teacher in his book states:

> We must give the basic tools, the basic ideas, and show how these ideas were derived and can be used. We must get the students into the habit of such use and into the habit of learning on their own by means of this use [. . .] If we do this, we'll wean them from us, from their textbooks, from the list of facts that we give them, from the little crutches for using their minds that we in schools construct for them. Going deeper, insisting that serious understanding is there, is at the center of work. (76)

I decide that what we are doing is worth doing but will take time. I will continue to construct activities that are meaningful and interesting so that students can practice these important habits. Refreshed, I wait in line for another turn on the roller coaster.

Georganna

My co-teacher and I introduce my research project to the students. We tell them that "The first real step in learning is figuring out the questions" (Hubbard and Power 31). We put a diagram of Bloom's Taxonomy of questioning on an overhead and talk about the different levels of questions. We tell them that while we need to "know" and "understand," we should not be satisfied with these levels. We remind them of the good discussion that came out of some of the questions from "The Toy Killer," and put those questions on the overhead so that we can decide which level they are on. Students are given handouts on Bloom's taxonomy, and we spend some time practicing this technique with many short stories. The students try but are bored with the short stories that we thought they would like and "don't really get this Bloom stuff." "We do the same thing every year," they complain. "Why can't we read novels?" they ask.

We gladly oblige them and introduce *Lord of the Flies.* We decide to use a modified literature circle approach. Students are grouped and assigned chapters for which they will lead the discussions and be the teacher(s). Bruce Pirie states that "Thought flourishes as questions are asked, not as answers are found" (qtd. in Burke 135). Louise Rosenblatt in her *Literature as Exploration* rejects the notion that literature can be "taught" for its own sake, as content. We believe students will have an emotional response to this novel. However, Pirie "warns us about dangers of limiting thinking to its relevance to the self when the greater needs of society as a whole are so urgent" (qtd. in Burke 135). We decide that we can connect this text easily to current events in a final discussion or Socratic Seminar format. Since we also understand that exploratory talk, as Doug Barnes states, is "marked by frequent hesitations, rephrasings, false starts and changes of direction" (qtd. in Burke 136), we will be prepared for this in the classroom. We decide to follow the students' leads, and see where they will take us.

While we believe this structure should create "teaching experts for each chapter," we want to make sure all the students read the entire book. Therefore, we require them to keep a journal on each chapter with modified activities from those that they would use if they were preparing to lead the discussion for a chapter. I model Chapter 1 as the discussion leader, while Barb models what the journal entries should look like for the class. We then switch roles for Chapter 2. Both teachers summarize the chapter, talk about what they like and dislike and why. They ask the class for their questions and answer them, at times asking for input from the class. Then the teachers share three quotations from the book that they think are either important to the plot, important to the character development and motivation, or have some bigger significance for our world and us. Finally, they share their rationale and interpretation of each quotation.

All students must have the following in their journals for those chapters where they are not in charge: their reaction to the chapter and reasoning for their reactions; what sense they make of the chapter; and two questions from a level above the knowledge and comprehension section of Bloom's Taxonomy. After the discussion of each chapter, he/she chooses one of the

quotations that the teacher shares and explains why he/she thinks it is important. Finally, each writes about what he/she learned from the discussion and how his/her understanding changes and develops. We expect that all these components will provide us with students' understanding.

I record all the questions students ask during each chapter presentation and discussion. They range from: "Why is Jack so into hunting" (comprehension); "Do you think he will get a pig" (prediction); to "Why is Jack's hunger significant" (analysis)? Although not all the questions are on the higher levels, they are useful in that they show us where the students' understandings break down. Some questions provide the class with fodder for rich discussion. Others cause the students to look at the clock, their feet, or out the window. Since we are participants rather than teachers for this process, we too ask questions. As a result we are able to continue to model the process for creating more complex, open-ended questions.

At times I feel weighed down and disheartened because the discussions are not really discussions but rather exercises that the "teachers ask us to complete." Other days, we really make progress—and students seem to be independent "thinkers" and "meaning makers." Most of the journals are completed superficially with an "I need to get it done and get a grade" attitude. We wonder if the activities and requirements we devised for reading *Lord of the Flies* are really any different from the work sheets or questions at the end of the chapter. Although some students did not keep up with their journals and some did not keep up with the reading, all the students learned about human nature and the capacity we all have for evil.

Sitting down to reflect on this process, I return to Miller's poem once again; "Loving the possibilities / Of wood-slender shapes, / Wings, visions in flight / Frozen in seasoned stock / Dry and durable" (8-12) and remember to be patient. We have asked these juniors to take on a great deal of responsibility, and they might not be used to the process. However, as I look over my notes, I realize that when the students' questions come from a real need to know, the class is more lively and interesting. Relying on classmates for answers rather than the teacher invites multiple interpretations. Teachable moments spontaneously erupt and students listen to what is being said, and share their thoughts. Barb and I conclude that we like this approach but that we would need to make some modifications for future use.

This teacher research has made me more aware of what goes on in my classroom, and what is going on with individual students. Being reflective, flexible, and listening closely to what students say provides the direction of the class. Both teacher and students need practice within this framework. As I sit here I hear Kenny Rogers singing in my mind: "Know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em." From the final class discussion centered around the question "Are we all capable of evil?" it is evident that they did learn about themselves and the world they live in from our reading *Lord of the Flies.* I remember Sandy's patience, and my co-teacher's acceptance of students and their abilities, and am satisfied.

Sandy and Georganna

Our teacher research project leads us to the realization that it is not enough to ask students to formulate questions that will clarify understanding, but that when questions are authentic and genuine, learning happens and interest is sustained. The best learning comes during those "teaching moments" that we all cherish. The conditions are just right. Somebody says something that makes a connection for somebody else. The question is asked, and the class is off and running.

While trying to come up with conclusions for our teacher research, we are surprised when our students unexpectedly sum up what they have learned from our teacher research project.

Sandy's Story

While correcting a tedious homework assignment that asks students to find the slopes of line segments in various triangles and the midpoints of these lines, Ron notices that some of the slopes are always the same in each problem.

Doug remarks, "Well, what does that mean?"

"What **does** that mean?" I ask.

He shouts in amazement, "The lines are parallel!!"

"So what are we saying?" I ask.

"That line segments that connect midpoints of sides of triangles are parallel to the other side," he says.

Melissa wonders if this is always true and if it is true in trapezoids as well.

"Off to the lab—let's go see! " I reply.

This is a major shift! The students are posing the questions to explore. In the lab, sketches are drawn. Data is collected and tabulated. Conjectures are made. The only question I ask during this process is "Did you check your spelling?" I smile and take a moment to bask in the success of this moment.

Georganna's Story

I give my sophomores the short story, "The New Kid," to read for homework. I choose this story because I am reviewing for the CAPT the following week and think the students will be able to connect with the feelings of the characters. The story is about a boy who is constantly picked on and ostracized while he tries to do everything he can to belong to the neighborhood group of boys. When a new kid moves into the neighborhood, rather than being sympathetic, the protagonist becomes the bully and treats the new kid just as he had been treated.

The next day, I ask them to take out the story and their responses. As they rummage through their notebooks to find the story and their reactions, Kyle looks at me and says, "This story is not an example of good literature." Although I planned to start the discussion with their questions, I seize the teachable moment and ask him why.

"I always thought good literature just had to be interesting," he says. "But now I think it has to make you think. It has to have metaphors and similes—you know, good words."

"You get an 'A' for this class," I teased. " But tell us what made you change your mind?"

" I guess all those questions you made us write when we read something and those short quotations and passages we got to practice on. When you asked us to try to explain some of those passages, we had trouble. Then you talked about what questions you asked yourself while trying to make meaning. Then you made us practice and practice. I really liked the way it made me think. Now I know that if I don't get it right away that's okay, because sometimes you don't get it right away either. You even admitted that we helped you understand or see things differently," he continues.

As the rest of the students tease Kyle about "kissing up," I am elated. Kyle changed his thinking. He talked about what goes on in the classroom and in his own head. This one moment is more than I had anticipated from this teacher researcher project! The students are becoming more discerning readers. In the past, when I asked students to read stories like "The Toy Killer" or "The New Kid," they would come in the next day and ask why all the stories we read couldn't be like these, but now they want good literature. I hope they will be able to transfer this to their new reading and learning as I remind them to use all these strategies when they take the CAPT.

Congruent Lines

Sandy bustles into Georganna's classroom, grinning from ear to ear. "You've got to listen to this," she says excitedly. "We were doing proofs in geometry today. Jeremy noticed that two lines were congruent. I asked, why? He said that he just knew they were. Another student said that answer was not good enough. She wanted to know the support he had to back up this statement. Jeremy stood up and exclaimed: 'That is what I hate about geometry! I can't have opinions. I must always have evidence to support my statements. In English I used to be able to have opinions. My teacher is making me defend my opinions there too!'"

As Sandy beams, she continues, "It gets better! I asked them why these supporting statements are necessary. They cried in unison: 'To lead to a convincing conclusion!'"

"Wow!!! Success! Our students made the connection," Georganna exclaims, sharing Sandy's enthusiasm.

Our Final Thoughts

A few weeks later, we sit down to see what have we learned. We go over our journals and notes and find surprises.

Five years ago, after deciding to change the culture of our school and reading Ted Sizer's books, we each entered our classrooms and announced "Okay, I'm the coach and you're the workers." We did some community building exercises, and planned group activities, but we did not achieve the academic results we anticipated. We blamed it on the students' workbook mentality, but there is more to it than that. We began this project by recognizing the different levels in Bloom's Taxonomy and decided to concentrate on higher order thinking skills. We soon realized that students need to master the knowledge and comprehension levels before anyone can ask how and why. Although our action research focused on student questions, we were surprised to discover how much our school culture has changed. Students are at the center. They are becoming active learners who are confident enough to explore alternative possibilities and defend their conclusions. They are speaking the languages that once seemed so foreign to them and as a result more communication and deeper levels of understanding and connections are made. We have been sculpting and changing what students do and their attitudes toward doing it. We will continue the work we began with our teacher research because of the results we have seen. No longer do we feel the lethargy and futility of the sultry greenhouse air. We get in line, eager for another thrilling ride on that roller coaster.

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Georganna Trosky started her career at Windsor Locks High School in 1986 as a Title I tutor in reading and math after her third child entered school. She just completed her fourth year as a full time English teacher at Windsor Locks High School. Georganna participated in the 1997 Connecticut Writing Project Summer Institute.

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A View of Teaching in Two Parts

Kathy Uschmann

Part One: Challenging Mandates and Mountains

I remember when I began teaching in 1963, asking myself daily, hourly, "Why am I teaching this? What is the purpose of this information, of this skill?" I felt I had to discover a bottom line before I could teach effectively, that I needed to offer reason and justification to my students for their learning to be meaningful. I remember, specifically, mathematics, taught by way of formula in those days. In the third grade, the grade I was teaching, students were—still are—taught to borrow (today we might "regroup" or "trade," the term used depending on when and where one learned this piece of algorithm). As I began preparing lessons to teach the various ways of regrouping in addition and subtraction, I realized that, being math phobic and a true formula learner, I had no real understanding of why regrouping worked. I could not verbalize the meaning of place value, and so I sat down and figured out for myself the "whys" of the algorithm. It seemed to me, now that I was a teacher, that while an algorithm might be well and good, a mathematician needed to know why the algorithm worked. That analysis of the algorithm gave me a bottom line for learning and for life: you have to begin where you are.

I began my motherhood career two days after school ended in May and was out of the classroom for many years. I put the math algorithm aside but always tried to remember that bottom line: you have to begin where you are. My middle daughter offered a defining question when she was seven. She had been reprimanded for some misdeed. As parents, we had made one of the classic adult remarks, roughly translated, "You need to grow up." And Beth asked, "Why do I have to act big when I am still little?" Why, indeed? We stopped in our tracks and never forgot what Beth said. You have to begin where you are.

Why do we have to act big when we are still little? Why do we have to be at some place other than at the place we occupy at the moment? Back in the classroom for a number of years now, I continue to ponder these questions. As adults, as teachers, our concern is that the children in our care develop the ability to handle life's challenges, that they grow and develop so that when we launch them into the hard world they fly with tensile resources, able to bounce off the obstacles of life unharmed and still functioning. To help us in our missions, we, wisely, have studied how children grow and mature: physically, emotionally, academically, intellectually, and socially. This job is never-ending as we continue to fine-tune our conclusions, to observe, to risk, to experiment, and to learn to understand the process of becoming independent and adult. From our store of collected knowledge we have extrapolated ages and stages, age-appropriate percentiles, and expected rates of development in all areas of growth. Teachers and parents are given these statistics, these benchmarks, and struggle to nurture individual children within their framework. And THEN, as test scores have become the focus and **the** measure of academic success, society has insisted that we direct tunnel vision to the crest of the bell curve, to the average, and has made this crest **the** benchmark of growth at any given time or place.

This need to make this middle ground, this crest of the bell, our educational goal, causes us to become unnerved by the students who slip down the sides of the statistical mountain. So, with all good intentions, coupled with sometimes effective strategies, we put students who are somewhere below the desired crest into remedial classes and classes for the learning disabled taught by specially trained teachers. Or, if our school system is progressive, our special education teachers might join us and their remedial and learning disabled students in the regular classroom. And if our system is advanced, teachers may actually have time to collaborate and work together

to determine the most effective instructional strategies. On the other side of the crest, we in the regular education classroom anguish because our very strongest students are called out occasionally to a class for the gifted. Mourning our loss, we cannot help but wonder how the lesson we are about to teach would have been enriched by those students who handle the academics with aplomb, and we resent the idea that there may be activities in our school buildings beyond our classrooms which would be enriching to the exceptionally strong student. Meanwhile we keep a focus on the students who are making it over the crest with relative ease, working with the information deemed critical for them to make that crest. The result is that all children are identified. In fact we may fight to have a child identified as a special education student, for we want all children to have the very best support, the very best opportunity.

Curricula and testing keep classroom teachers focused on the crest, so that it is hard to make accommodations. It often becomes imperative to put aside the fact that it is proper and natural for individuals to take different routes to a destination. Some may climb on the edges while others spiral up or down the mountain. Some prefer a zigzag path, perhaps stopping to smell the flowers. Still others may need to slide or ski backwards a distance in order to eventually advance. It is hard to remember, when the statistics and the benchmarks are handed to teachers as the goals of learning, that all of this random motion is right and important. As we take notice of the academic Olympians on the down slope, we may be relieved that we won't have to review our lessons with them too many times, if at all. But we may not have the freedom or time to look more intently to see flaws in their technique, which may cause a nasty fall at the base of the mountain. Or we do not see that their progress along their trail to maturity may be aimless or unsteady. We glance toward these children who intuitively seem to make steady, solid progress beyond academic expectations; we may even take some credit for their successes. For **all** children we assign value: F, C, A; Good, Better, Best; Not So Good, OK, Great; Hopeless, Successful, Our Heroes; Remedial/Learning Disabled, On Level, Gifted. All values are based on a child's placement on this mountain. All designations perpetuate a label.

Each year passes with teachers' eyes on the crest, our eyes on the test. Soon it is time to begin a new year, and we discover that the profile of the mountain has had the audacity to change, to shift. Last year's apex has now fallen to the left, is now on the uphill slope. What was just below the crest, on the downslide, a year before is now this year's benchmark. Statistically, this shift may be an appropriate reflection of the bell curve of academic growth. Statistically, it gives a clear picture of averages. But it tells us nothing of the individual child's growth, and when the crest of the curve must be our goal, what does this do to our view of children? What of the children who climb more slowly or who pass by more quickly?

If the child who is struggling to meet the benchmark spent the past year with his special flowers and has stayed in the same place for a long while, the issue is not how well he understands this blossom. Or if he has skied back to a former place, reinvestigating old information and ideas, the issue is not how solidly he has forged acquaintanceship or understanding there. The issue is that he has not moved upward toward the crest, and now he is beginning the new year even further down the mountain. So we do not rejoice.

If the struggling child has climbed steadily upward during the past year, there is a good chance, because of the mountain's new profile, that he will begin this year in exactly the same spot on the mountain that he occupied the year before. Again we do not rejoice, though we may experience mild relief that he has not fallen further behind. If this child experienced some academic epiphany during the previous year and is found a step or two ahead on the new mountain, we may rejoice, but only a little bit, because the child is still some distance from the top. On the other side, on the down slope, though this is of less concern to us because the expecta-

tions of our current benchmarks have been met and exceeded, we may or may not notice that certain children may not have proceeded further down the mountain of development as they slide toward maturity. Once they are placed on the new mountain, they may actually be closer to the top than they were the previous year rather than further down the slope toward deeper understanding. The shifting mountain keeps the remedial and disabled perpetually remedial and disabled; it fails to ensure that the gifted continue a successful downhill progress, and it maintains the middle ground at the crest—the status quo.

There is no doubt that many teachers struggle with this mountain, striving to facilitate learning, to view children individually. But outside forces bring new issues into the educational arena, effectively stabilizing the concept of the shifting mountain and guaranteeing that instruction be focused on a single purpose. The most recent criticism from outside the educational setting has caused us to refocus on teaching practice and student learning, an appropriate goal with doubtful results. Schools must respond to criticisms of business and industry which claim job candidates are under-prepared. Communities, hearing this, believe schools should go "back-to-basics," a vague concept that seems to mean, "You need to teach my children the way I was taught." Such practice would no doubt fly in the face of the goals required by contemporary business and industry. Today's technology and business practice is changing so quickly that flexibility, communication, and strong critical and analytical thinking skills have to be keys for survival. Additionally, our education system is compared, unfavorably, to the education systems of various other countries, but we fail to tally the price necessary to emulate the educational system of Japan, Germany, or other countries with desirable test scores. (At this juncture in the discussion, I often wonder at the number of foreign students who choose to be educated in American schools and universities.) In response to the various external voices, state education departments have increased their efforts to develop tests based on recently developed standards and tied firmly to benchmarks. These test results are offered up to the public, a public that considers these results the measure of how well teachers are teaching and how well students are learning what they need to know.

There is nothing wrong with reevaluating what, why, and how we teach curricula. There is nothing wrong with looking into the community and into the future and attempting to determine what education needs to provide for future adults. However, there is a great deal wrong with accepting tests as our measure of success, as **the** measure, or at least the **only** measure valued by business and industry and the community at large. Teachers may protest that children grow in many ways, that assessment and evaluation must be varied to have true measures of a child's growth, but with our current focus on tests, we reinforce the shifting mountain by locking all children into specific instructional goals which are aimed at pacifying these critics: business and industry, and the community at large. And so, we only intensify the importance of this shifting curve as we create instructional packets designed to increase scores on these tests.
I am told that all questions for the Connecticut Mastery Test, Connecticut's state test for grades 3 through 8 with grades 4, 6, and 8 scores reported to the state, are piloted with Connecticut school children. And I say, "So what?" Why does this make the test appropriate? Why does this make the test right? Why does this justify the fact that a huge portion of our instruction goes into teaching formulas for successful test taking? Why does this insure optimal learning and development at a time when we do need to work to make our children's education a true preparation for their future? Why does this make it appropriate for my bilingual student, struggling with language, to be evaluated in mathematics using a test that requires reading beyond his current ability, without modifying the testing situation so that he can at least understand the questions? A well-constructed test can drive instruction in a positive way, and encourage children to think and

explain. However, when school systems bow to a test as **the** measure of achievement, when the test makes it imperative that each child accomplish a given body of tasks in a particular way, at a particular level, at this particular time, it seems to me that we are making all the wrong decisions. It seems to me that the end result will be the exact opposite of what we hope to achieve:

- Formulas in place of understanding: "Memorize the formula, Area = length X width," vs. "Develop a generalization for discovering the area of a rectangle."
- Compliance in place of creativity: "For writing we will follow this organizer to create a five paragraph essay," vs. "Here are strategies you might use to inspire YOUR story."
- Blind faith in place of thoughtful decision making: "The answer is …" vs. "Explain how and why you came to that conclusion."
- Trivia in place of learning: "The American Declaration of Independence was written in 1776," vs. "Explain the reasons groups of people might struggle for independence. Focus on the American colonies."

There is a huge difference between instruction with high test scores as the focus for the end results and instruction with critical thinking, understanding, and personal growth as the goals.

As teachers, it is our charge to help prepare children for the "real world," and yet a child can go no faster, no further than he or she is able at any given moment. Rather than short circuiting what is happening at a given time because the child may not be moving as fast as we'd like, we should be applauding the baby steps which keep a child steady so that, when he has reached a goal, there is no falling back, so that goal will be held in a firm grasp. If development is to happen in a positive way, in a way which insures maximum growth toward individual potential and, subsequently, toward future productivity, then the bottom line must be what we know about individual growth and development, not what we see when we look at the aggregate score of a bell curve. What do we know about how children learn best? How do we apply this? What has happened to all the research? How can a test supplant all we have learned over the years about learning and about children? How can we continue to scale mountains whose requirements, with testing, have become more and more inflexible? Why do we not forsake the mountain to apply what we know about learning on a larger and more varied landscape?

If children were born at the age of twenty-five, our attitudes would not matter, for the child, at birth, would have arrived at adulthood. We would not need to be concerned about the time and place of childhood benchmarks. We would not need to know how children bloom and become. But children are not born at twenty-five, and we do need to know about child development. And more: we need to apply what we know. And I ask, what if the mountain stayed still? Or better yet, what if the mountain became a landscape through which children must pass, in which children must explore to become successful, to mature? What if the mountain became a landscape woven from the fibers of variety and choice with infinite textures and patterns? What if the routes through the fabrics of the landscape were designed to suit each child? Given such a landscape, children would be asked to traverse not only mountains but also deserts and forests, prairies and foothills, rivers and oceans, sunsets and seasons. This landscape would have to do more than study the process of successful passage from childhood to adulthood. This landscape would remember **how** children grow and be accountable to that. This landscape would have to do more than offer up a bell curve of growth and development. This landscape would have to understand that curve. Even though it is true that most children exhibit particular behaviors at a particular point in time, this landscape would understand that the individual differences in learning styles, talents, rates, and behaviors are all appropriate and a part of the process of growth at any given time. This landscape would be respectful of all children at every point on the terrain,

acknowledging that it is their right to be wherever they may be along their route to maturity. This landscape would cherish and respect the various and unique paths which are being forged as children follow their quests and would allow children to re-sew the patterns of their growth. And more: this landscape would understand that most children reach a successful twenty-five because of careful attention and nurturing by adults who know when to stand aside, when to push or direct, and when to rejoice. Adults within the landscape would accommodate the learning process of slow ascent, occasional backward glances, times for even deeper scrutiny, and the need for side trips as well as the sudden bursts of speed on a clear and sunny slope. They would understand when the landscape's fabric needed to be redesigned and resewn.

This landscape would understand the complexities of childhood and would not expect that a child be at the same spot on the mountain in each of his areas of development: intellectual, academic, social, emotional, and physical. Instead, it would allow the fabrics of the landscape of childhood to be cut in various patterns, to be stitched, undone, reassembled, in myriad designs as the child proceeds on his journey. It would be O.K. to take ten years or longer to master the complexities of reading. It would be imperative to take the hand of the visionary child and help him wend a path to deeper insights, through uncharted forests and lands. It would be essential that we as nurturing adults traverse the entire landscape, patrol the trails, conduct search and rescue, instruct and coach, be there as the child proceeds step by step, being sure he is on solid ground before asking him to leap across chasms. It would be required that we keep pace with each child, slowing our steps on new or difficult terrain or racing to keep abreast when the child finds a clear path. It would be essential that we stand ready with the shears and threads of reconstruction as children connect learning into new patterns of understanding.

But now, for the sake of someone's dubious perception of the future, we sacrifice our understanding of children. For what purpose do we educate? For the businessmen of the world? For the satisfaction of community members? For the expectations of parents? Or do we teach for the flourishing of individuals? And if our goal is to create individual people and learners, aren't we, at the same time, preparing our children for that real world?

Now, faced with renewed emphasis on increasing our students' state test scores, given practice materials and instructional strategies and lessons, teachers are charged with preparing children to score well on these tests. I pondered how we go about nurturing the individual child and creating individual learners in the midst of these initiatives. What truly has to happen in the classroom? How do we, as teachers, prepare and respond, and what do we learn . . . ?

Part Two: Dancing With Children

I was asked once, not so very long ago, to describe my teaching as a metaphor. At that moment, the image of a garden came to mind, and I assigned myself the role of gardener whose job was to nourish and encourage and tend young seedlings so that each would achieve maximum growth and maximum production. This metaphor allowed for individual growth and development as well as variety—for children might be petunias or roses or sugar peas or broccoli or squash or spinach—and the point was that each plant and variety required individual care and attention within the confines of the garden. I still like that metaphor for many reasons, and yet, since that time, I have come to regard teaching in a different light, as a different metaphor. Today I see teaching more as a dance between me and children, between one child and another, between children and children. I have come to prefer this metaphor, for not only does it offer variety from the featured performer to the Prima Ballerina, to the Waltz, to the Virginia Reel, to the Fox Trot, to the Samba, or Disco, it also allows for movement and change. Where the specimen plant is forever rooted in one spot, and has few options if conditions do not guarantee its ability to thrive, where the sweet pea or the poke weed is forever a sweet pea or poke weed and may or may not

be the best sweet pea or poke weed in the garden, the child engaged in the dance may pirouette, leap, slide, and change steps entirely to continue on toward the dance's conclusion. This defines my role as teacher in a way which more accurately reflects my practice; for in fact, it more accurately describes my place as the teacher who must be constantly alert in my efforts to keep the dance graceful, flowing and growing, who must be ever vigilant to note the misstep and respond so the child is less likely to fall, who must be ever ready to introduce a new step or form. And so, when asked by my principal to reflect on the school year just past, I wrote:

Narrative
1999 - 2000

> As irresponsible as it may seem, the fact of the matter is that I cannot find my goals for the 1999 - 2000 school year. I am fairly sure I am correct when I recall that the goals had to do with improving writing instruction and working to integrate the 4/5 curriculum without overlapping activities done in the regular 4th and 5th grade classes. I am pretty sure I wanted to improve my instructional skills in implementing the Mimosa math program, and I wanted to continue to develop various computer skills to improve instruction in that area. Also, this was an important year in multi-age for me. Being the third year and working, for the most part, with new students, I had the opportunity to check my perceptions about multi-age classes—how they are alike and how they are different from straight grade classes. For the most part, I made progress in all of these areas . . . but . . . **The fact of the matter** is that, regardless of the global professional goals I may set for myself at the end or beginning of any year, the reality is that the complexion of each class is what ultimately causes me to decide what I need to understand, what I need to learn, and how I need to proceed to make a year successful.

My principal asked me to rephrase the first sentence to eliminate the word *irresponsible* so that I do not reflect negatively on my teaching, and I did that for him. And yet, that opening sentence was the point: in truth, what did those goals matter? In fact, how did I truly grow as a teacher, as a person?

The fact of the matter is that while I looked at my professional goals and began planning ways to mesh the fourth and fifth grade curricula of the Mimosa math program, **Paul** walked into my room, more than a little reluctant to be there, more than ready to be oppositional and difficult. I immediately needed to react to that, to invite Paul onto the dance floor in such a way that he understood that it was important to me that he have a productive year and that I was willing to work with him to make his time with me satisfactory. I needed to be able to respond to unexpected twirls and bends and to be ready for the complicated leaps and oblique twists of a solo performance. Paul came into the 4/5 classroom as a fifth grader. Over the previous summer his father had spoken with our principal a number of times with grave concerns about the multi-age classroom. Finally, I was asked to contact the parent to see if I could alleviate anxieties, and we talked for some time. At the end of our conversation, Paul's father felt more at ease, but the fact still remained that Paul did not want to be in the class. His fourth grade teacher felt that if he didn't want to do something, he simply wouldn't do it, and placing him in the multi-age class would probably be counterproductive. At that point, the decision about his placement for the fifth grade year was left up to his parents. I never expected to meet Paul, never mind see him in my classroom. And yet, on the first day of school, he walked through the doorway. What I saw was a cautious young man, holding tightly, protectively, to a tender core. What I knew was that he was ready for a challenge, and he would be ready to take me on. I liked him immediately. We developed a quick rapport, which I hoped would be my key to wiggling in between the creases of his

resistance, the key to the safety zone that would allow Paul to let his guard down. He was never belligerent but was definitely resistant and cynical, and liked to be bored and uninvolved. I wanted to see the excitement and joy of learning illuminate his face each day. I wanted his slouch to straighten, his half grin to become a smile, his lassitude to become excitement.

Early on, Paul resisted assigned books, decided quickly that he did not like *Tuck Everlasting*, a book that should have captured his interest. Perhaps, unbeknownst to me, it did. After that experience, I broadened the range of book selections, and agreed to work with books of his choice at least some of the time. This was a compromise acceptable to both of us, and Paul, a strong reader already, continued to enjoy challenging books.

Later in the year, I learned that in his previous year as a fourth grader he could be unkind, impatient, and sharp with classmates who did not rise to his expectations. While this did not particularly surprise me, I never saw this side of Paul. If I needed an illustration of the social advantages of a multi-age classroom, Paul's growth over the year gives the perfect picture. While it was not O.K. for Paul, in Paul's view, to be particularly compassionate toward age-mates, apart from the almost adolescent need to defend anyone's right to be whomever he/she wants to be, it was O.K. to look with compassion and understanding toward a younger child. That fall, while I was working with a young fourth grader having trouble completing a project that had become difficult for him, Paul walked over to the table. "I know you can do it, Eric," he encouraged, and offered a suggestion about how to proceed. Instantly, Paul and I became partners in the job of encouraging the younger student, and Paul finally said, "Why don't you tell me, Eric? I'm a boy, too, and I'll understand." Eric seemed willing to confide in Paul, and I left the two of them alone to complete the assignment. As the year progressed, Paul became the first to cheer a classmate's success, the first to offer words of encouragement, the first to understand and sympathize. "Wow! That is really neat!" became a statement Paul frequently offered to other students.

Forging a new partnership, begun with the "Eric Intervention," Paul and I shared other conversations. We talked about lizards, Paul's passion. Most of his tee shirts boast a handsome likeness of some type of lizard. I learned a great deal from him. He emailed me web site addresses about reptiles. He wanted to bring his lizard to school. We had a tank in the class, and I charged Paul with researching what it would take to have lizards successfully as class pets. Paul did this. We purchased lizards. Paul brought in Lumpina to join Lizzie and Lumpy, our newly acquired pets. The lizards were beautiful green anoles, small and fast, and changed color from a bark brown, which allowed them to be practically invisible in the wood chips, to an incredible jewel-tone aqua green. Paul was keeper of the tank. At noon one day, two of the lizards were obviously mating. "Oh, GROSS!" cried Caitlin, "At lunch!!"

"You need to be quiet and stay back," Paul instructed in a stage whisper. "They need their privacy." Everyone stepped away. In the aftermath, as the children again wanted to surround the tank, Paul announced, "You need to stay away. They're probably tired." The class accepted Paul's requirements without question and went back to games and conversations. Paul took good care of his charges.

I now had Paul in the palm of my hand, his cynicism muted, diverted away from the class and from other students, and for the entire year we experienced the kind and gentle side of a young man who likes **not** to like too many things other people ask him to like. At the end of the year, Paul still maintained a resistant stance but also threw himself into at least some activities. He thrived on pointing out, in a diplomatic way, inconsistencies, so that fairness prevailed in the classroom. He immersed himself in books that challenged his imagination and his ideas. He was a dynamic representative for the Patriots during simulations of the Continental Congresses that preceded the United States' bid for freedom from England. He was sensitive, helpful, funny, a

good friend, and he felt comfortable complying most of the time. He felt free to offer his points but also was able to empathize with the perspectives of others. I know I rarely saw his best academic work, but I saw the best side of him. I felt we had had a good year.

The fact of the matter is that while I studied workshop notes and planned for Literature Circles and for skill development using trade books and literature, **Michael** was a part of the class—an English Language Learner in a system which offers minimum support and understanding of the process of second language acquisition. My dance with him had to be intricate and delicate, a soft shoe, for Michael struggled terribly with written language. Instruction in the Learning Disabilities classroom gave him structured support in acquiring reading skills, but he was in my classroom many more hours than he was away. I drew on every instinct I had to decide what I needed to do to give him experiences that would allow him to continue to grow in his ability to understand, read, write, and speak the difficult English language.

The autumn of 1999 was the beginning of Michael's third year with me. Michael was born in New York, but soon moved back to China and came again to the United States shortly before he started kindergarten. He spoke Chinese and had little support at home as he began to learn English, for neither of his parents had a strong command of the English language. I first saw Michael in late spring of his second grade year. Students who would be coming to our grade 3 - 6 school as third graders were visiting the classes they would be in the following fall. Michael, tiny then, tiny still, was leaning against the school wall, crying. Eventually he was consoled, though it was weeks into the school year the next fall before I saw him smile.

Michael was reading at a pre-primer level when he entered third grade. From the beginning, though, he received his "official" reading instruction in the Learning Disabilities classroom under the guidance of a strong teacher who gave him solid, sequential structure and instruction. He thrived there, but my instincts, my response to the music of Michael's needs, told me I needed to do more, so I made sure he was involved with all the reading and all the literature the rest of the class did as a matter of course. In the classroom, all were part of Michael's support system: teachers, aides, classmates. We read to him, talked to him about books and stories, worked with him as he wrote about stories, about language, as he created his own story. In the beginning we served as secretaries so that Michael could experience his personal words in print.

In the beginning of that third grade year, he spoke little to classmates, or spoke so softly it was difficult to understand what he had to say. He never raised his hand or volunteered, refused to present even the simplest information in front of the class. Occasionally, he felt pressure to the point of tears and could be found sobbing at his table. These meltdowns were invariably a surprise, for Michael kept a stoic countenance, and the class learned to let him cry, to console him, to help him get back on track, and support him through the difficult time. He never wanted to quit even after intense frustration, and we made sure we helped him complete the work he felt he needed to do, even though it might have been appropriate to let the assignment go till another day. Yet he was always attentive, loved to hear language, and sat like a sponge soaking information. Eventually, he began to come to me to share pictures from books, information from the Discovery Channel, to ask questions. It was exciting when, during his third grade winter, Michael made the connection between the discussions about a storm and a picture of the movement of weather fronts he happened to have in his library book. Michael's mind was, is, quick, but English remained a struggle.

Gradually, through grade three and then grade four, he began to bridge the very large gap between his reading and writing levels and the grade level goals in those areas. At the end of fourth grade, he dictated some, then wrote on his own stories with some substance. He would participate in class plays, allowing a classmate to stand close by to help him read the words, and

would occasionally raise his hand to offer an answer or to share information, though his voice was still barely audible. Michael would read aloud from simple text, if asked, and though he would rarely self-correct, I could see much progress in his ability to decode words.

This year, when Michael came into my classroom for the third time as a fifth grader, I knew that he had come an incredible distance. Serendipitously, I was able to attend the National Writing Project Annual Conference in November and there participated in a workshop that addressed the needs of children learning English as a second language, English Language Learners. I became aware that it takes many years for the ELL student to become proficient in a new language —seven to nine years—many more years than schools seem to allow. The information was helpful, for now I knew that Michael was, in fact, making excellent progress. I learned about sources of information and purchased books about second language acquisition, adding strategies to my intuitive reaction that this child needed to be immersed in language as much as possible. From these books, I learned to better understand the strengths, not just the weaknesses in his written work, learned indicators of growth. Other strategies were eliminated as being counter productive, and I felt better equipped as I went through the day-to-day, moment-to-moment, processes of deciding what needed to be done to ease Michael along the way.

Early on as a fifth grader, Michael exhibited a new independence and confidence, which was heartening. Decoding, still improving, still inconsistent, climbed to a new level when Michael could make meaning using context and various reading strategies if asked to reconsider a mispronounced word. His love of books continued, and he could never get enough of Brian Jacques' *Redwall* series. Jacques creates wonderful culture and exciting dialogue through rich language and images as he relates the adventures of the *Redwall* characters. Each day someone read to Michael from one of these books, and Michael would listen and listen. By spring, we often had to stop reading to Michael altogether for many minutes as he burst into peals of laughter at humorous antics of the *Redwall* characters or a play on words. Other times we would stop reading because Michael wanted to predict, offer solutions and extensions to the adventures, to tell what he would do. I knew his senses of language, of English, of culture were growing and growing. I had read the first two Harry Potter books, *The Sorcerer's Stone* and *The Chamber of Secrets,* to the class. Michael asked to hear the third Harry Potter book, *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, and I anguished because there was no time to read it .

Michael became more and more a part of the social scene, and I heard his voice and laughter mingle with those of his classmates each day. His hand flew into the air almost daily as he offered answers, suggestions, opinions. While he still needed much help to carry out research and to prepare a project, he willingly presented before the class and began to take more and more initiative in preparing assignments. "It has to be in my own words," he announced once. I agreed, relayed this to our aide, who would help Michael. Later she told me that that he would dictate to her again and again, until he was satisfied. Michael joined the Chess Club and developed a reputation as an excellent player. If he wasn't involved in a chess game during lunch, he was kibitzing with authority. He became definite and confident about expressing his opinions. In the spring, our police department offered the "Drug and Alcohol Resistance Education" lessons to fifth graders. During a lesson on relieving stress, the officer teaching the class commented on the idea the crying might not be the best way to deal with a difficult situation. I was sitting a few feet behind Michael. His head whipped around so that he was facing me, black eyes snapping. "**I** cry when **I** have stress!!" he announced to me with great feeling, indignant that anyone might consider crying an ineffective approach to stress relief. "Yes, I know," I said. "And it works, doesn't it?" He nodded and turned his attention back to the lesson.

By January of his fifth grade year, Michael had reached a new plateau. He came to me

one afternoon and asked how to spell a word. This in itself was not particularly unusual. Michael's style had been to write a word and be content with the spelling or know he didn't know how to spell a word and ask for help. This time, he wrote a word and **then** realized there was a problem. The good news was that he seemed to have taken a giant step in the ability to make connections between letters, words, and meaning. I was thrilled with this level of analysis. The bad news was that the word was "more." Such a basic word. Michael leaves my class next year to go to sixth grade. The learning disabilities teacher will follow him, support him as best she can with an increased caseload. I wake in the night wondering, "Who will read to Michael?" For as far as Michael has come, he still has such a distance to go. I am terrified for the future of this child, hoping, but not feeling assured, that support will be there for him for as many years as he needs it. Will he always have partners for his slow dance?

The fact of the matter is that while I studied our school mandate to update technology skills and was learning to use Power Point on the computer, **Sean** was living with very serious illness in his family, and my dance with him had to be measured and slow, a minuet, each step carefully considered. It was imperative that I stay aware of this young man, to take the temperature of how well he was dealing with the uncertainties and the successes as the illness followed its course. It was critical to hear the questions, stated and unstated, that Sean had so that those of us who were with him during the school day could keep the classroom a safe place for him as he dealt with a hard life situation full of maybes and hopes which may or may not come true.

Sean was new to our system in the fall of 1999. A fourth grader, he was placed in my class. When he enrolled, we learned his mother's breast cancer was in remission. In January, during a routine check-up, a growth was spotted on her liver, and aggressive therapy was selected. Throughout his mother's ordeal, the children had been kept informed, and now Sean's mother told me that he, of her three children, was having the hardest time with the new developments. He was the child who, at home, cried and asked the unanswerable, "Why?" Sean decided that he wanted to keep the status of his mother's health private, and only one friend in the class knew, officially. We honored his decision, feeling that school was a sort of haven in which Sean could step away from the hard realities at home. He knew who in the building was aware of his mother's condition, to whom he could turn if necessary, and he seemed comfortable.

I was stunned in January at the news of the spread of Sean's mother's disease, felt at a loss, not knowing how to handle a situation so basic and so uncertain. How should I respond to Sean? What should I say? Do? Or not say or do to give him what he needed to work through this situation, whatever the outcome? I learned that cancer of the liver was more treatable if it was a cancer on its own, but when a growth appeared on the liver as a secondary site from breast cancer, the prognosis was very poor and that the disease could progress quickly. I knew that Sean's sister's First Communion, scheduled for the following winter, had been moved to May of this year. I knew the year could bring anything and that an entire classroom might need comforting. I knew that I had no idea about how to handle this situation. Our counselor had no information or experience with children living with serious illness. I went next to my physician for advice and she suggested I talk with our counselor. My initial efforts blocked, I found *How It Feels When a Parent Dies*, a book of essays edited by Jill Krementz and written by children who have experienced grave loss. I rediscovered *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf,* by Leo Buscaglia, which puts the cycle of life and death in beautiful perspective. Even more helpful, I found Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and read *On Death and Dying* and found this book strangely comforting and informative. It gave me a bottom-line understanding of death, and more. It escalated my awareness of the importance of realistic hope—the attitude we needed to maintain for Sean. I felt that I could relax into the moment, into each day, feeling some confidence that I would be able to

handle whatever happened in an appropriate way.

But my learning did not stop there. I learned about faith. Sean's little sister, a mature first grader, expressed the opinion that, if the family truly expected that her mother's treatments would be effective, her Communion should not be moved ahead. And the date for that important event was moved back to its original place. I learned about acceptance when we heard the stories of Sean's mother's guests, old school friends, other friends from the past, who came to visit, each for several days, last spring. With one friend, Sean's mother bought toe rings and went to the hairdresser where her friend had her hair cut and "streaked" in a style similar to that of Sean's mother's wig. They laughingly showed off the rings and their matching hair styles in church that weekend. "These are the people who will take care of my children," she said, and I knew these visits could be a parting or a celebration, probably both, and that the difference did not matter. I learned about doubt and fear, too, for the first grade teacher, a breast cancer survivor, was very distressed that Sean's sister, unlike her brother, was so open about her mother's illness. She was upset that the child could say, "My mother has a ten percent chance of living," was concerned that this child could talk with authority about her mother's surgeries. I felt that in the long run, being so open was probably best for a little girl, but I felt compassion for my colleague. I learned about hope, and was able to keep this as my operative attitude, comfortable doing what I could to maintain Sean's haven.

I was tuned, always, to Sean. The day we compared the relative size of Alaska to that of the rest of the United States, Sean was sitting closest to my feet on the rug. He stared intently at the globe, at the line of latitude at 23 1/2 degrees North. "Why is that called the Tropic of Cancer?" he asked, and I realized, despite his stoic demeanor, what a little boy he truly was. "I think it has to do with the stars, with the astrological signs and constellations," I told him, and we talked for a few moments about why there are lines on the globe that aren't really there, about latitude and longitude, and about navigation. At lunch I found the Tropic of Cancer in the encyclopedia and read that this northern line of the Tropics is so named because of the constellation of Cancer, which appears in the area of the heavens. I shared this with Sean and a friend who was sitting nearby. The friend announced that he is a Cancer, and we talked for a moment about our astrological signs and the horoscopes that never come true.

Another day I stood by Sean's table at lunch time, warming student lunches in the microwave. I gradually tuned in to the boys' conversation. They were talking about cancer, the disease. The conversation seemed easy, comfortable, supportive. The boys didn't mind that other students moved in and out of the almost casual discussion. "It's not like the people who give themselves cancer—like smoking gives you lung cancer," one of Sean's table mates offered. I believed he meant to be comforting. He sounded comforting, matter of fact. The boys all sounded matter of fact as they agreed with the comment. Soon the conversation shifted to other topics and to their game of checkers. I don't know for sure that the boys had been talking about Sean's mother, but the conversation was a healthy one, and I sensed that Sean was still O.K.

Only late in the spring did Sean mention his mother's illness directly to the class, and this was done calmly, as a matter of information, during Disabilities Awareness Week, as Sean countered a statement that people with cancer were disabled. "My mother has cancer," he told us, "and she was never disabled." The class took this in stride, accepting Sean's comment at face value, and the discussion of disabilities continued. My reaction was two-fold: that Sean had little inkling of the impact of some of the ordeals his mother had experienced, and that Sean, at some level, was staying positive and hopeful.

Sean stayed on top of his school work, worked on his writing, and was Master of Ceremonies for the end of year Coffee House. At the end of the school year, the new tumor had

shrunk, and Sean's mother was scheduled for an innovative treatment. It was good news at last. Sean had made it through the year, keeping his personal life intact while coping with his mother's illness. And I had learned so much about death, about hope, about perspectives, about life.

The fact of the matter is that those lofty goals and mandates which dot our landscapes and enclose our dance floors, are always in mind, but are not the critical day-to-day experiences which dictate the real professional development which must go on in any classroom. I know I can always improve, and can grow as a teacher, but I also believe I am a competent teacher, and the lofty goals, workshops, and strategies are more frosting on a cake than the essential ingredients in the batter of instruction. I have seen instructional initiatives come and go and come back again. As I reflect on the years I have been teaching, I believe that there is truly very little that is new in the teaching process. While we address new information and respond to children's changing needs, ultimately a good teacher now was probably a good teacher long ago, and will probably be a good teacher in the future. It isn't the mandated test or the information of a bell curve that should define what we do on a day-to-day basis. It isn't the practice sheet or the strategy that should dictate what is essential for children. It is the child himself who should point the way to appropriate instructional choices. It is the way we respond to children, what and how we determine our expectations for them, how well we understand when to push, when to hold a hand, and when to stand aside. It all depends on how well we dance with children.

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On Giving and Receiving: Life with a Student Teacher

Peg O'Blenis Blum

What's wrong with me? I finally have my class back. I don't have to find things to do to keep busy so I don't interfere with the learning process. I can talk to my children without feeling like I'm usurping power. It's finally O.K. to comfort, question, problem solve and even hug without feeling guilty. Then why am I so depressed I can hardly function from one day to the next? I have to convince myself to write even the barest lesson plans. I'm not even excited about the new math unit. I can't seem to think of centers, my favorite part of the day.

I had taught first grade for twelve years at Manna Elementary when one of my students' moms came to me with the request to observe in my room. She had enrolled at CCSU in the elementary education program and wanted to see how I had made so much progress with her daughter. I was flattered and saw this as a way to "give back" a little. So many people had enriched my teaching with their generous gifts of time and advice; I was delighted to have the chance to share. When this same mom wanted to come to my room as a student teacher, I was embarrassed to have to tell her that I wasn't qualified to take on a student teacher.

I vowed never to allow myself to be placed in that position again. I applied to join the next available training session offered by the state. I took the required course and studied the Connecticut Competencies. I had forgotten how complex the process of planning and executing a lesson could be. After being overwhelmed and intimidated during the first day of training, I relaxed when I had time to reflect and realize that all those terms for competencies of teaching were for practices I incorporated into my lessons on a daily basis. I finished with mixed emotions. I was finally going to be able to help someone else find joy in learning with children. Would I be able to remember all those new terms and discuss them intelligently if my student was unfamiliar with them? I had my questions, but the impact of another teacher in my classroom was not yet a reality.

When the idea became fact and my student teacher was scheduled to visit, I reacted as I always do to a new challenge: I would find a book. It wasn't possible that I was the first new master teacher to panic and buckle under the responsibility. After considerable searching, I was beginning to wonder about my decision. Was having a student teacher so hard no one wanted to write about it?

Just when I was the most worried, I found out I was leading a charmed life. This time my savior appeared in the form of the mailman carrying an ad for a new book called Company in Your Classroom. Of course I ordered it immediately. However, when it arrived, most of it was common sense to me or something covered extensively in our summer training session. I already knew about establishing a working relationship with, and allowing, my student teacher to proceed at her own pace. I was comfortable sharing my students and was excited about seeing them from a fresh perspective. However, most of the quotations in the text came from students, not teachers. I suppose I gained something from their perspective, but I still had so many unanswered questions. How would her ideas about discipline affect the routines and expectations I had already established? What would I do if there was a serious problem, and she wasn't handling it as I would? Should I intervene?

I decided to keep a journal to help myself think through just what happens when a student teacher enters a classroom midyear. I was especially concerned about my reactions and how they

would affect the learning environment as well as all those fragile relationships within the room: mine with the children, mine with the new teacher, hers with the children. I had had these children for almost a year and a half, since I "looped" from first to second with them this year. We had a strong bond born of our extended history together. I felt secure in the relationships we had formed. Would that be detrimental to a new teacher? I had had some trouble finding a substitute teacher who could handle this class. Whenever I had to be out, I always returned to find a curt note about misbehaviors and unwilling workers. I had even established a special behavior chart for use with a substitute and practiced it with the class after an especially desperate plea from our school's sub-in-residence. Would a student teacher have the same problems? I began keeping a journal of this new teaching experience and returning to it when I had the chance for reflection.

January 5, 2000

It was Lori's first visit. She called and made an appointment to meet and talk almost a month before she was to begin her student teaching with me. I bustled down the hall trying to finish just one more thing before her scheduled arrival. I figured if I kept moving, my nervousness wouldn't have a chance to manifest itself. My first student teacher! I knew who she was the minute she rounded the corner to the office. Nervous smile, slightly overdressed for our casual atmosphere, definitely a stranger to Manna Elementary. Despite her obvious tension, she had that same bounce to her step I had heard in her voice. Her silky black hair swished as she approached me. I felt an immediate kinship. (My husband doesn't call me "Tigger" for nothing. I certainly have that bouncy, trouncy approach to life.) When she reached out her hand after I introduced myself, I allowed my impulses to take over and gave her a big hug. She could have been my daughter! I could feel her soften. As we walked back to the room, we chatted, both of us a bit too fast. We were both fighting nerves even though this was a positive start.

I had pulled a set of routines I always leave for a substitute and an overview of some curriculum areas we would be starting during her term. Lori asked if she could come in to meet the kids before her scheduled start. She didn't want to waste a moment of her precious teaching time. I was delighted. She seemed to be here for all the right reasons. She loved kids and education was a passion. Eight weeks was such a short time to enable her to become comfortable with the children and have her take over the class completely. I had reviewed the guidelines from my summer course and felt overwhelmed for her.

Since our second grade team had a scheduled meeting that afternoon, I decided to offer to have her sit in and get to know how we worked together. Often we plan math and science together, and we touch base about language arts so the new member of our grade level can feel more secure about pacing. Already I was beginning to feel proud of Lori. Where did that come from? I wondered. She fit right in and offered ideas about our new math unit on geometry. Math was her strength. We had so much in common, I reflected later.

January 19, 2000

Not only did Lori return to meet the children, but she also stayed and joined all our activities with that helpful extra pair of hands every teacher yearns for at least once a day. She was so enthusiastic when I introduced her to the class as a new teacher who would be working in our class for a couple of months. The kids warmed to her immediately. I was prepared for that. I had been told in the training that a jealous master teacher was most detrimental to a student and vowed not to fall into that trap. I knew there would be enough mistakes I wasn't prepared for, so I'd better work extra hard on the most obvious ones! Actually it wasn't so hard to see them welcome her and reveal some of their little secrets. I felt secure enough in our relationship to be

able to share them. Would I be able to let go completely and not interfere in her teaching process? That remained to be seen. I couldn't picture myself sitting silently in the back without any interaction at all. I'd have some time to work on that though. For a while we could team-teach.

Before Lori left, I asked her what she wanted to start working on first and asked her to let me know when she felt ready to take over an area of the curriculum. I didn't want to push her, but felt I needed to offer so she could gain as much experience as she wanted. She surprised me by asking about beginning work on a unit of study, which was part of her requirements. Since she had taken part in our team meeting, she knew solid geometry was next in math. She had a few ideas and wanted to work on putting together her unit right away, so I gave her the math teacher's manual with all the required objectives and told her I'd leave that until she was ready to take over. A little part of me was protesting, "Not math, not geometry, that's one of my favorites." I squelched those thoughts and smiled as we hugged and parted.

January 24, 2000

Lori's first official day! I was careful to have planned meticulously with clear objectives and well-organized procedures. I hadn't realized how casual I had gotten since I had become more and more comfortable with my role and the routines of our day. I knew Lori might need a model and hoped to provide an appropriate one. My idealism was showing again. Should I try to watch that? My husband often reminds me that I live in the real world, but I contend that teachers need to strive for perfection. That way when we fall short, the gap is less. Would Lori be intimidated by my attitude? I shouldn't have worried. Each time we had a moment or two to chat, I found her to be a kindred spirit. Her heart and soul were in teaching. She was so excited about the little things she learned about the children. "Josh has the cutest penguin story started." "Did Ellen tell you about her weekend?" "Pam's worried that she won't be able to do a good job for her dance recital next Saturday." "I hope it's O.K. that I suggested that Don try the dictionary. He was so concerned about how to spell 'toboggan.'" Her boundless energy reminded me of my student teaching days. Somehow enthusiasm compensates for inexperience in those beginning years.

Lori became actively involved immediately as the children came in and did their morning chores, then moved on to work on Writers' Workshop. She just chatted with the children about their stories. I was worried that she'd offer too much help. It was important to me that the kids come up with their own solutions and write their own ideas. This was one time when I gave them complete freedom of choice. Had I communicated that to Lori clearly enough? How would I remind her of that, if I saw her take over someone's writing too much? I learned again to trust my children. Brian listened attentively as she offered him an idea then politely added "I don't think so. I don't want to solve the problem yet." When she looked up at me and smiled, I knew she got the message that the kids were completely in charge of their own stories, at least until they began the publishing process. I made a mental note to go over that process with her later. I'm glad she appeared comfortable with a workshop atmosphere. It is one of my favorite styles of teaching. It's the one time when everyone is truly able to work at his or her own level, and no one can be intimidated by the curriculum. To me that is the epitome of individualized instruction.

January 28, 2000

Lori took over a reading group this morning. I'm still not sure how it happened. We didn't plan it. All of a sudden Ben came to my door for his group, and Lori pulled them into the corner just as she had seen me do several times before. Donna, the principal, had come in for a quick word just as Ben arrived and rather than have him wait for me, Lori just took over. Of

course I didn't mind, or did I? I should have been proud to hear my words coming out of Lori's mouth. She had obviously observed me very carefully when I met with them. What was my problem? I made a mental note to have a long talk with myself about being possessive. I had started that reading group because I was worried that Paul didn't have anyone in my class reading at his level. Sue, another second grade teacher, had voiced similar concerns about Ben, so we put them together. I had been working with them for a couple of months, and they were beginning to show some real progress. I began to hope Paul would finally learn to read! I had intended to use Lori's time with me to devote more time to them. Now she was teaching them! I couldn't let her see how anxious I felt.

When I reflect on this entry, I remember how totally unprepared I was for the rush of emotions that flooded over me when I heard Lori use the same words I had used with that group as I tried to help them cope with unfamiliar text: "Does that make sense? Do you think it will help if you read the next sentence, then go back?" Was I feeling replaceable? Could I handle it if she did as well or better than I did with my little pet project? I know I felt guilty to even consider those thoughts, but they were very real at that moment. At the same time I was very proud of Lori. She had found some of my best teaching to emulate. I was glad to be a part of her success. Would I be able to focus on the positive side of this relationship?

February 3, 2000

Lori did her first lesson with the whole class this afternoon. It's great to see how her eyes sparkle when she looks at the kids. She's really having fun! She introduced the geometry unit. The kids just need to learn how to name 3-D shapes and review flat shapes. We had talked about centers where children could practice a piece of the overall objectives in a small group, and she wrote up plans for four as well as an introductory lesson. She planned to start with a "scavenger hunt" and "shape museum." The kids would find three-dimensional shapes all over the room, then categorize them by name, and place them in the area designated for that shape. Each center was designed to help the kids become more proficient naming a certain shape. I enjoyed looking over her plans and seeing her creative energy. We discussed a few modifications. I hope she's O.K. with that. She seems interested in ways to improve. She seems to think as I do, that every lesson could be better, and she wants to improve them. When we sat down to discuss today's lesson plan, we had a good conversation. At least I hope she saw it that way. I made sure I told her how much I liked the way she had the kids actively involved and gave each a chance to practice what he or she had learned. Instead of letting all go at once to place their shapes, I suggested taking turns. She did listen to my comments because she rearranged some of the logistics to allow smoother movement and prevent congestion.

When we went out to recess after the lesson, she knew it went well but still wanted to know how it could have been improved. We talked about always looking for what to do with the kid who's done first and with those who never seem to finish. We talked about holding attention and how hard it is to keep everyone's attention for any length of time in a whole group. We also talked about ways to bring students back on task and when it was best to do so.

When I reread that entry, I'm glad I didn't act on my first selfish impulse to ask Lori to choose something else for her unit since geometry was my favorite topic because of all the neat hands-on things that can be done, and how it always turns into a kid favorite. She needed a success in the beginning and the kids loved this topic. I know she has much more confidence than I had when I started, but I'm sure she is still fragile. This experience will also get her to develop a sense of what works when kids need to move around the room and what pitfalls might develop from too much freedom without enough structure. I hope if things get chaotic, I'll know

when and how to intervene. I feel like the tightrope walker who can't see the other end. I don't want to stifle Lori's creativity or make her feel unsafe trying new ideas, but I have to live with the results of her experiments. I pray for the wisdom to know what's best for all of us.

February 8, 2000

Lori seems very excited with her reading group. James amazed her. One word in the question completely confused him. She had written, "Why was the character angry with his teacher?" When they talked, she changed "with" to "at" and he "got it." I'm glad she's picking up on the little idiosyncrasies in each child. She spends a lot of time trying to get to know each one better. I love watching her first thing in the morning as the children come in by busload, a few at a time. That allows for some private time with each before an official start to the day. I overhear her ask Paul, who just went through his parents' divorce, "Did you have fun with Dad last night?" She has learned how important those evenings are to him. "Did you earn your painting badge?" Emily had Brownies the afternoon before and they were working on a project to earn a new patch for the uniform. This personal interaction continued through writing time, as she would ask, "Did you figure out how to get the butterfly out of that cage? Will the aliens stay here with their new friends or go back to Mercury to help their old friends there?" She remembered what the children were working on and helped them reach a transition to the next step with her questions.

Looking back, I could see myself beginning to trust Lori more to value what I had started with the class, and to take them the next little bit. She knew not to rush them but also prodded those who needed it. I noticed she kept returning to Jason and Paul when they seemed to drop back into their own little worlds. She also handled each of them differently. She realized Paul knew what he wanted to say but couldn't get it down, so she helped him through the thinking process of spelling and stretching out words. Jason, on the other hand, would go through stretches of writer's block. He truly didn't know what to write. She asked him questions about future characters and problems they might work on solving until a light would come into his eyes, and he'd write furiously for a while. I felt safer sitting in the back observing, even though I missed my kids and being part of their little worlds.

February 9, 2000

This morning Lori eavesdropped on my conversation with Sam. I mentioned my planned meeting with him so she could listen in if she wanted. He had copied verbatim the summary in the back of the book and turned it in as his own. We talked about stealing and how it isn't always *things* that are stolen. When words or ideas are taken, it is called plagiarism. He seemed to understand my words but never admitted that was what he had done. I'm glad I didn't ask. I knew what he had done and remembered not to ask a question when I knew the answer. I didn't want to cause a confrontation that provides a no-win situation. I wanted Lori to see that my goal was simply to let him know what was acceptable and to make sure he didn't think that was the way to complete a summary.

As I review this incident, I'm glad this opportunity presented itself. This class has been so much easier to manage for me than many previous groups that I was afraid Lori would not get a true picture of how important the little things can be in the overall picture of class management. This private conversation with Sam is typical of the kind of thing I do with kids to shape individual behaviors that I don't want to bring before the whole group.

The next day Lori came in and told me what she shared at her education class that evening. She was most impressed with my class management. I guess I'm glad she noticed the

underlying structure beneath what sometimes looks like chaos to the outside observer. She has copied many of my techniques. I especially notice her leaning over to privately remind a student about one rule or another that may have been forgotten at that moment. I wonder what she has observed that she has chosen to be sure and NOT emulate. Certainly the neatness of my workspace needs a more concentrated effort. I just never have the time to keep it clean until I dig out at the end of the day. It's interesting that she seems to value a neat desk as little as I do. She just drops her stuff wherever there's a space and goes off with the kids.

February 14, 2000

I had been concerned that I was growing so attached to Lori, and I didn't really know if she felt the same about me. I was uncomfortable just asking, "Do you like me?" What could she say? I hold the key to her future in my hands. I wondered what she said to her friends about me. That old insecurity was rearing its head again. What a wonderful surprise to get home and find a valentine from her mixed in the stack from the children. I never seem to find the time to open the cards during our party because it's so much fun watching the kids interact. Today was even more hectic because I wanted to have some photos for Lori of her with the children.

When I finally read her card, I was so touched by her words. She expressed her gratitude for all the time and tips I'd given her. She told me she realized how hard it was for me to share the children, and she appreciated the effort I'd made to "step back" and let her enjoy them. It was better than a hug!

February 16, 2000

Josh's mom came by to help in the computer lab today. She said Josh came home and said, "Miss Cayhill sure does know her shapes." We all enjoyed that one. I'm glad she's getting to meet some parents. Maybe we should set up a couple of conferences so she can experience that facet of teaching, too. There's so much I want her to be able to do, but time passes so quickly.

February 17, 2000

Lori got a huge lesson in flexibility today. First we had a delayed opening on a day when she was scheduled to be observed again. I suggested she call Tom, her supervisor from SCSU, and reschedule. The class is always a little high on snowy days and it wouldn't be the ideal setup for her to make points with Tom. However, he wanted to see how she could handle all situations, so he was on his way. When I arrived, one of the playground aides came in with a paper she had confiscated from recess the previous day. There was a new game the children were playing that involved answering silly questions then giving predictions based on those answers. Usually it was foolish at best and a bit disgusting at worst. What I read on that paper, however, went well beyond the acceptable range. There were words like "sue, beat, kill, bite, have sex." I decided we needed a class meeting as soon as the children came in. They needed to know that I took this very seriously and was willing to drop everything—even Tom would have to wait for this one. Our morning message read: "Get your morning work done as soon as possible and come to the meeting space right after announcements." The faces on the kids when they read that told it all. We had had class meetings before and they knew to take them most seriously. Everyone stayed focused during that meeting. We didn't even have our customary greeting first. When I passed our sparkly rock that was the signal for a turn to speak, I told them I wanted to know everything possible about their game. They knew they would all get a turn and listened respectfully to each other. As the rock progressed around the circle, I could see that they really enjoyed the game but

knew there was something evil in it, even if they hadn't actually played it. I chose not to play judge or jury and outlaw the game. Somehow this went deeper and I needed to learn more. At this point I had forgotten about Lori and was concerned about my children only.

This time when the rock went around I asked them to convince me to allow them to keep the game by telling me some things they could write that would be fine with me. They thought very seriously, and Lori started it with the idea "slap high five," which is a favorite greeting. They all said nice things that they would like to do with a friend.

When I reflect on that, I'm glad I had Lori join us. She had become part of our community and needed to share in our problems to continue strengthening those bonds. She also set the tone for that first round of comments.

I needed to dig deeper if I was to get to the root of this problem. I'm not sure why I was convinced of that, but all the violence expressed on that paper made me most uncomfortable, and I knew we hadn't really addressed that yet. So next I passed the rock and told them to share something they could say or do with a person they didn't like. They were wide-eyed, so I explained that it was O.K. to not like people as long as they didn't hurt them. We all have favorite friends and people who don't like the same things we like, so we prefer to avoid them. I knew they remembered the time that I insisted that everyone had to be able to work with everyone else, even those they didn't especially like. I mentioned our hard fought rule that no one can refuse to let someone play if the person asks. Then I added that I still notice that not everyone plays the same games or chooses to join some classmates, and that doesn't hurt anyone. They seemed to have the idea when I heard their responses: "I just want to play by myself," "I don't like it when you do that," "Make a frowny face." Finally, we talked about that teasing voice inside telling you to have some fun, and how hard it is to ignore it. I wanted to help the kids who wrote those hurtful things to feel less guilty and be able to let go of this event. I knew they would know not to do it again and wanted them to be able to move on. We talked about feelings when you do something bad and how important it is to learn from those mistakes.

At this point I had totally forgotten about Lori and her supervisor's impending visit. My only concern was my children. I wanted them to realize I knew how they felt and also knew who had been involved in this incident. I very seriously explained that teachers have a very special job just like parents to be sure children grow up to be good people, so they are the best detectives. "Teachers know stuff you would never believe!" I made eye contact with as many as possible, especially those I strongly suspected had been part of this problem. Beth was so cute. She couldn't let go of what I had said about the voice inside that makes you want to do bad things. "What do you do when you hear that voice?" she innocently asked. I knew I had to answer honestly. They always know if you aren't. So I thought about it, and said, "If it's not too bad, I go someplace quiet and read. That helps me forget about it. Sometimes it's strong and I have to go outside for a walk or go to the gym for some exercise. That usually works. Sometimes nothing seems to work and I cry. I used to talk it over with my dog. He always listened and he never told anyone. It helped to talk things over with him, but since he died I can't do that anymore." She seemed satisfied and a lot of them wanted to share what they did.

We had been sitting for over a half-hour and I knew we needed to end. After listening to a few, I held up the rock and told them they had to decide if they should continue playing their game, and that if they did, they needed to promise to use appropriate language while playing. I reminded them that that hadn't happened yesterday and I had been very worried by all the violent words and things that were only for grown-ups to do. I didn't specify since I knew some truly didn't know what had been written. Poor Emily was somewhat taken aback when she passed, and I told her this time she couldn't do that. Everyone had to promise to use appropriate language or

we couldn't let anyone play. She knew she had the power to cancel the game for the class and didn't want to spoil their fun even if she herself would never play that game. She very formally repeated my words, "I promise, if I play the game, I will only use appropriate language." I knew the meeting had been a success when Bruce told me we needed to make the whole school do the same thing because a lot of kids were doing it. I told him I couldn't control the whole school, but I trusted them to stay away from anyone who couldn't follow our rules, because they had all promised.

Tom had come in about three-quarters through the meeting, and Lori must have gotten up and greeted him without my even being aware of it. Later I found that she had asked him if he could wait so he could observe the rest of the meeting. I hadn't noticed and the children for once didn't announce his arrival. When the meeting was done and I saw Tom waiting, I sent her reading group off and got the rest settled on an assignment that would allow her lesson to continue without more distractions.

I began to think about what I had done that morning. Just when Lori's role as teacher was becoming stable, I took over morning meeting completely, and Lori was merely part of the circle. I hoped the children wouldn't shift allegiance away from her because of it, but I also knew she wasn't ready to take on such a heavy, multi-layered problem. In many ways it's good that the problem occurred when it did. Lori knew the children well enough to follow the meeting and realize why I spoke to each as I did. She would notice the looks I exchanged with certain students and read more into them because she knew the kids. I reasoned that it would have been worse if it happened after her take-over was complete. Because the incident occurred when it did, Lori experienced a problem-solving meeting that was in no way contrived. I was contemplating just how to show her that kind of meeting without having to do it as a role play with the kids. That really wouldn't be the same, even if they got into it and took their roles seriously.

Upon reflection, this was a turning point in my relationship with Lori. Up to now things had flowed very smoothly in the gradual take-over process. She was running most of morning meeting now, and I often didn't even attend. She picked up one, and then two reading groups, began math instruction, and had just started planning how to incorporate our science curriculum into the afternoon schedule. During the first few days the children did look to see if I would interfere or correct her when she did something a little differently than they were accustomed to. When they saw that didn't happen, they gradually stopped checking. She was a very astute student. I'm not sure if we were such a good match that it was easy for her to mimic me or if she just was a quick study, but the result was the same. I was very comfortable with what I was observing. Yes, she could tolerate a higher noise level than I could, but that was very minor. She used many of my phrases and followed most of the routines the class had come to expect.

That afternoon Lori, Tom and I met to discuss the morning's lesson. I can't believe how lucky I am to have Lori's supervisor turn out to be my old principal from my tutoring days. I always respected him and felt comfortable talking and joking with him. I was surprised when the three of us conferred after his observation. It's a good thing we had a good relationship because I was really angry when I read his evaluation. I was feeling very protective of Lori and questioned his grading rather fervently. I surprised myself with that outburst. I never would have questioned his judgment before. He gave Lori a few 3's (the top grade) and mostly 2's. When I disagreed about a few objectives I had been working on with Lori, he just laughed it off and said he wasn't focusing on that yet. This time he was looking for initiation (the way she began her lesson). It would have been nice if he had let me in on that little secret. She had only been in my class for a short time, but I'd become quite attached. I'm amazed at how nervous I was for that visit. Tom wasn't there to observe me at all, but I had that same queasy feeling as if he were.

After Lori left, Tom and I chatted about her transition into her role as teacher. He was pleased to see the children seeking out Lori's attention and accepting her responses without double-checking with me. I explained that I used the phrase "Miss Cayhill's in charge now" and backed it up by asking her permission to do anything during her lessons. It only took a couple of times hearing "I don't know, ask Miss Cayhill," to convince them that she really was in charge. He reminded me to do that more and more so she could have as much actual teaching time as possible. I knew that was going to be my biggest challenge. Team teaching was fun. Teaching is not a spectator sport to me. How would I be able to sit back and let questions remain unanswered during center time? I was having trouble with Writers' Workshop too. I missed listening to the kids' stories and seeing the excitement when an idea actually blossomed into a publishable narrative. I decided to seek "busy work" to lead me out of temptation.

I've been taking many pictures during Lori's lessons. It helps keep me occupied and away from the danger of offering assistance. Our digital camera has been such a blessing! When Tom came again to observe, I found myself bragging about all the things Lori did in his absence. When had I become a parent in this relationship? I seemed to be taking more pride in her accomplishments than my own. I also confided to Tom how scared I felt. I told him that the other day I heard Lori use my exact words when addressing Bruce's misbehavior: "Please get your self-control if you want to stay." Tom's smile was gentler than I'd ever seen. He obviously shared my humble feelings about such an awesome task. He reminded me of what I already knew. We can't expect perfection, but we can discuss our failings so they may lessen with effort. I told him I would be out the following day and a sub was scheduled, but I had instructed her to allow Lori to teach alone. I was sure she was looking forward to the opportunity to try her wings. He was pleased that I'd be forced to stay completely out of her lessons for a day. When he observed Lori's combined math and science centers, I did act as an extra pair of hands. Tom graciously said he understood since that was such a complex set of centers, and called Lori "ambitious" to even think of attempting them. I tended to agree when I thought about it. In fact when we realized Tom would be observing them, we carefully scheduled the group that would be doing sink and float, so water would remain where it belonged. That couldn't be guaranteed with all the groups.

The following day when I stopped by at the end of the day, Lori had a few questions about class meetings. There had been a small problem that she wanted to address in a class meeting. From the questions, I gathered that the meeting wasn't as smooth as she would have liked. I told her it took a lot of practice and was always easier if you work on setting procedures and rules together first. She was trying to just jump into a structure I had created for my comfort level. I hope she's convinced to try again with her own class. This structure has proved its worth to me so many times; I can't imagine teaching without using meetings.

March 1, 2000

At the beginning of the month my children know it's time to change partners. Anyone entering my room at this time would panic at the apparent chaos. It begins with an open selection process with the only rules being that the one reason to refuse an offer to be partners is if you've already been partners previously and you may not have the same partner twice for the whole year. Next groups are chosen and they stand where they wish to sit that month. The trick is that each person in the group must agree before they can move. Consensus often takes some time as one stubborn holdout can thwart the whole group's efforts. Since the children had been doing partner selection for almost two years, I hoped they wouldn't turn it into Lori's nightmare. She had been intrigued with the idea of orchestrating partner change when we talked it over. I

thought I might need to sit bound and gagged if I was to keep still throughout the process, but I promised not to do anything unless she appealed for assistance. As I watched, I bit harder and harder on my tongue, but remained silent. I'm relearning that many ways can work. In the end chaos did not prevail, and the month started with new partners in new locations. The noise level was uncomfortable for me alone. Our routine end-of-the-day chat confirmed that for me. Lori knew how hard it was for me to stay out of that exchange and appreciated my efforts. She has learned to read me as well as her students.

How interesting! I just noticed that *my* children have become *her* students in my journal. I guess I'm beginning to internalize the shift. I think I'll pat myself on the back for that one. Maybe I can pull this off after all.

March 2, 2000

I still can't believe Lori was willing to take on the Wednesday afternoon buddy time. We meet with sixth grade buddies once a week for a combination of fun and learning. Usually I give the "buddies" a job to help the "kiddles" complete. Often it is some area of the curriculum that lends itself to one-on-one teaching. Lori decided to let them all make 3-D shapes with pipe cleaners and straws. She modeled it, and then let them loose. It went beautifully. She was even able to get all forty of them quiet for sharing and pictures before dismissal, no easy feat! She just beamed when we went over that lesson. The kids wanted to do it again!

March 3, 2000

Wow! That evaluation form from the state is a doozey! I was almost afraid to show it to Tom. I know we are in opposition philosophically when it comes to evaluation. I grade at the top unless I have a reason to do otherwise. He starts at the bottom and expects proof that more is deserved. I gave Lori all top grades except where parent interaction was questioned. We hadn't scheduled conferences, so that was left blank. I focused my comments on her work in math and science, since that is where she had been teaching the most. I was reminded of final exam week at college—so much riding on my words—how to say the right things to give the best example and influence a prospective employer. I knew how talented Lori was, but I needed to convey that through a few short essays.

At least she is self-confident, so unlike me. I remember being terrified by such a huge responsibility, all those precious little lives to be influenced. They soak up every word, even those unspoken. I wonder if mind reading is a gift that we gradually forget as we mature. It was years before I was convinced that I was doing a good enough job with my children to consider "giving back" and taking the state course required to have a student teacher in my room. Now all those original inadequacies returned. How could I think I could teach someone else how to teach? Lori has such potential. I wished she could have had Maryann, a third grade teacher at Manna, for her model. I had admired her style for many years. When I mentioned that to a colleague, she was annoyed. "She doesn't have your enthusiasm!" she almost shouted at me. I realize that's true. I am very passionate about my children and what I want for them. But is that enough?

Tom was laughing at me again. He was actually glad I was so enthusiastic in my praise for Lori. He reminded me that my report was the one principals would be reading.

March 17, 2000

I wanted something extra special for Lori's last day, not just from me, but also from the children. I finally decided on a book bag. She had one, but I use more than one. I hoped she

would too. I sneaked out during special time and went to each class where my children were. (They are divided and join other classes for art, gym, music, and library.) The specialists were great. They sent out my children a few at a time to sign the bag. It had a teacher's desk with an apple on it and Lori's name embroidered across the top. As they left their message, each commented that it was perfect because Miss Cayhill likes apples. I wonder how they knew that.

It was very touching to watch Lori say her individual good-byes to each child. One at a time she gathered a child in her arms for a big hug and a little bag of Hershey's hugs and kisses. She told each one something personal and special she had noticed. She had to make a little joke after she spoke to Don, and told him to be less serious and stop worrying about work. He got teary and that was the last thing she wanted. It was wonderful. She had been there for only seven weeks of teaching time, yet she was able to say something true and good about each of them.

At the end of the year, I reflected fondly on Lori's parting comments to the children. This year's end was especially difficult for me, because we had shared two years together. I had often thought of a personal chat with each student, as Lori had done, but I didn't know how such young children would react. This time I decided to go with my inner feelings. This was a serious moment for us, and I wanted to use that to the fullest advantage. I didn't sleep all night thinking about what I would say to each of them. I needed to let them know how important they had been to me and our class. I wanted to make them realize that they would never walk out of my heart even if they never saw me again. How could I get all that in a few quiet words whispered in a group that would be all ears? Somehow, it happened. I could tell by the solemn expression after our hug that I had stirred something inside. At least at that moment, I knew they felt my unconditional love for each of them. I silently thanked Lori for teaching me a most valuable lesson. I will never be embarrassed to tell my children how I feel, especially when we part.

March 28, 2000

Lori is gone. She's on to another assignment. I can't believe how much of a void I feel. Everyone's teasing me. They say I'm depressed because my vacation is over. I need to do all the work myself now. That isn't the problem, and I resent the connotation that I did nothing while Lori was taking over the class. Yes, my responsibilities were different, but I sure wasn't off! I had come to really enjoy our quiet moments to talk over a particular incident or share an insight about one of our children. No one else knows those children the way I do, so we can't discuss particular concerns with any detail. It was very special to have someone see what I saw and offer insights with true understanding. I envy teachers who have the opportunity "to team." What a gift to be able to share ideas and questions with a partner. Our lessons got better and better as we worked together to refine ideas and use time to the best advantage. Now I'm back to the occasional stolen moment to bounce an idea off another teacher who only knows the generic child in my room. It was easier not knowing how beneficial that exchange could be. I feel like a little kid. I'm not handling this well at all. It's the same feeling I had when my dog died. He was the world's best listener. Some of my best ideas came from talking to him. He even helped solve some of my most serious problems. Lori was like that in our classroom. Professionally, it's energizing to have someone to share and to expand thoughts with every day. Teaching shouldn't have to be so lonely. How can we find the time to become more involved with each other's classes so our conversations about children and instruction can be more meaningful? That's the question I'll ponder this summer as I reconsider my perspective about student teachers. I hope I will remember that there's nothing wrong with me for missing that very special relationship that comes from sharing one's lifework with a kindred spirit. I'm sure time and my children will lift my depression. One thing I do know right now. I will jump at the chance to have another student

teacher come to enrich my classroom as well as my life.

* * *

Peg O'Blenis Blum has taught first and second grades at Norton School in Cheshire, Connecticut. She strives to make teaching a more collegial profession by encouraging the exchange of ideas and thoughts with other teachers whenever possible. She continues to celebrate learning with her children and feels when a class is not the "best" she has ever had in at least one way, it will be time to stop teaching.

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Throwing Desks and Questions: Critical Points in Learning Communities

Jenny Shaff

How My Year Was Going . . .

During the February 2000 school break I begin a draft of a fictional story about teaching high school. I do this all of the time—write about teaching. Usually I fictionalize my own experiences—changing names, conversations, motivations, and often taking others' experiences for my own narrative purpose. This is what I do. I write about school. I actually do have more going on in my life, and contrary to students' opinions, I do not sleep in the closet in my classroom. I have a home, family, cats, life, problems, joy, hockey teams, friends, etc., but I write fiction about what I struggle with. That struggle, right now, is teaching.

On some level, I think that I write about teaching because I feel the need to explain to a larger audience what is happening at my high school. I have an inherent belief that someone somewhere is interested in these stories and absolutely needs to hear them. The larger universe will benefit from seeing a school from a teacher's perspective. I also know that I continue teaching because I write. I have to keep going in to school to see what is going to happen next. That sounds like a crass use of students and colleagues for entertainment purposes, which is not what I mean. I use them, but I use them to survive, if that makes sense. I use them to understand what I think about what is happening.

In February, in the middle of vacation, this story continues to focus on my life as a teacher. In the middle of a two-day stint of writing about the experiences and place that I was supposed to be vacationing from, I write: "Why I don't want to teach anymore—by Jenny Shaff." This couldn't possibly be the title because the story is roughly about people swearing in school, racist substitutes, my mother's dying, the Holocaust posters, my college roommate, and surprise when we think things are the worst. So why that title? Before I continue with a scene about having library duty before school starts, I answer my question with, "It's really hard and I spend all of my time worrying, and it's just really difficult to let go." After that, I dive into the noise and chaos of library duty. There are pages detailing where different groups of students congregate before school, how some juniors reveal their love through a brief slap fight, and how we teachers, in the early morning, talk about kids.

I am obviously full of contradictions. The same moment I complain that I can't "let go" of teaching is the moment I dive into such a deep memory of library duty that I must not have escaped for hours. I run headlong into the experience and don't stop for two days until I think my story has resolved itself. My narrator has broken up a fight, yelled unjustly at a student, learned from a wiser teacher and used completely inappropriate language. I haven't let myself escape; I've just written it all down. The title of this story has to either say something about swearing or at least have the word, "fuck" in it. But why am I writing all of this? Why am I teaching? There has to be a reason why I live with such contradictions—such pain and fascination. I know that when I'm finished writing about teaching, I'll probably leave teaching. But I'm not done yet. There's just too much to explain.

Before I can begin thinking about my career choices, I need to begin surviving a terrible school year. My mother passed away from breast cancer in August. I missed the preliminary days of school, before the students arrive, to stay in the Midwest to be with my family and attend her memorial service. I returned in time to start the year with my students, though, and it was a tough start. I remember giving myself the treat of Dunkin' Donuts coffee every morning just so that I would have a reason to get up. In November I remembered to put make-up on before I went to

school, and one of my senior girls told me that I looked a little better.

What I Thought Would Be My Question

At the beginning of this difficult year, I started a Teacher as Researcher project with the Connecticut Writing Project. When I began this Teacher as Researcher project, I decided that I would be writing about my peer review groups within my classes. I actually had been planning to do teacher research some day, so I had been taking loose notes on my peer review groups for roughly seven years. I had folders filled with the words students said as they worked in groups on each other's writing, how they shared, why they shared and what got in the way of sharing or critiquing. I had records of how members of the same family worked as I cycled through some brothers and then younger sisters of a certain family. One older brother barely did any work in class, but shared his poem on visiting his brother in jail with a girl who had dropped out of the gifted team. Three years later his younger sister started a fight in the middle of peer review because one member of her group didn't speak English very well and wore fake Tommy Hilfiger shirts.

I also had records of how students performed in peer review groups after I had been their English teacher for one, two, or even three years. I was fascinated by the way my students talked. I wanted to remember what they said, how they sat, how John smiled sheepishly before and after reading aloud the poem about visiting his brother in jail, and how Denise, on hearing the poem, looked terrified for a brief moment and then bravely dove into her response.

I thought this would be the way to go, so I set out in the beginning of the year by taking some fresh data with a group of senior honors students. They brought in their rough drafts of their *Hamlet* essays. I assigned groups based on my knowledge of them from a few weeks of school and they were off. I began circling the room with my notebook. They began talking, sitting and shuffling through their papers. What I notice when I look back on my early notes is what I decided to write down and must have omitted. I'm sure they said other things about each other's writing, but I focused on comments that showed they were developing as a group. When the group was working well, I heard them say things like, "You haven't made a strong point about whether he's going to kill the king," or "Is everyone going to use that quote? I'm going to avoid that because everyone else is using that." I tried to catch the moments of honesty, the moments they were most open. They began well and there was hope.

But I mostly see notes like, "9:45—Margaret laughs." The class began at 9:20. It took a long time for Margaret to begin to feel comfortable with her group, and I worried about her connection or lack of connection in the same way that I remember worrying about Denise being able to comment on a poem about a brother in jail. I don't know that Margaret ever became a brilliant writer, but I seemed more concerned with her connection to the group. Margaret had joined the honors group as a junior, so she was somewhat of an outsider. In this class there were the insiders who had been together in gifted classes since eighth grade and the outsiders who had joined the group as juniors or seniors. I knew enough to write down the time when Margaret relaxed enough in the group of four students to laugh. That was as important as students being able to articulate thoughts on *Hamlet*. On some level, it was more important to me.

I continued with some good research strategies to observe peer groups. At the end of peer review sessions, I had students write me short notes about their groups and what happened that day. The notes would not be shared with others so that the students wouldn't worry. I asked them to write about what was good, not good, and what could be improved upon in their peer review group.

Kim surprised me with: "Ms. Shaff, the peer review group was the same as last time for

me. It was good even though I didn't get to read my paper, but it was okay. Everyone's opinion was said. I think I'm the dumbest one out of the group." This stunned me. What do I do with that? I read this letter and it hurt. I didn't know how to change the other students in Kim's group so that they wouldn't be so pompous or intimidating, but that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to change them. I wanted to make them a nice, helpful community of giving and sharing writers, so that Kim wouldn't feel dumb when she worked in her group. I recognize now that my desire to change them was ridiculous.

I was frustrated. But parts of the peer review process worked. A sense of community developed in Aneika's and Ann's letters about the group that they shared with Mike and Justin. Aneika, who later became valedictorian of the senior class, wrote the following:

> My peer review group was good at pointing out the problems in other rough drafts. We heard one good paper about Hamlet's struggle to take revenge or not. In order to improve, maybe we could possibly be more talkative and judgmental. The problem in my group is that they are not critical of me at all. I don't understand how I should improve my paper.

Aneika was mostly upset because no one critiqued her writing. My first thoughts that Aneika was unconsciously intimidating because of her status within the class were echoed in Ann's letter. Ann wrote, "Good—lots of good suggestions, good help, group works well together. Improve—we tend to get off track, not enough time." Finally, after writing what I would want to hear as a teacher, Ann became very honest. She wrote, "Problems—On one person's paper we didn't have almost any suggestions, even though it wasn't that great." I loved it. Ann articulated enough of the problem to help her group begin to be more analytical. She may not have consciously known that Aneika intimidated others with big words that were sometimes the wrong ones, but Ann knew that something didn't go right in their peer review. They should have been more analytical, so there was the possibility that next time they would be.

As my research moved forward, I found myself focusing on the community that developed within a class and smaller peer review groups. I questioned where the problems were and how I could fix them, which might be too big a problem. I had a sense that students needed to develop a working relationship/community on their own terms within their peer review group before they used the group to improve their own writing. I was interested in the ways that I, as a teacher, helped that process as well as the ways I hindered it. I looked at where they struggled to get along, or gave up. I worried about who felt stupid and left out of the group, who intimidated others intentionally or not, and who with tiny steps began to laugh, speak honestly, relax or listen to another's vastly different experience.

I took notes on my freshmen as well. In November I wrote in my journal:

> Today I had all of my freshmen do peer review, and I'm not sure how it went. I think that I want them to be doing more or less of something. I think that my F and G [period students] need to do a type of responding that is silent first and then maybe talk later. But I'm afraid that they'll end up like E—never talking. E is almost too quiet and G is too noisy. I think that a lot of it is patience and waiting for them to realize what they want to do. Frank was not half so bad as last time when I asked him to work in a group and he threw a desk over. Now he just wanted to go to the nurse so I bargained with him.

I wondered if they were talking enough or too much. I wondered if they felt comfortable with each other. I was concerned about the developing community as well as individual growth. Will Frank be able to share his ideas with us through writing? Will he ever feel confident enough to share what he has written with another person in the class or will he continue to find ways out of

the physical classroom when we do peer review? Whom would Frank work with best? Whom could he trust? Who will be kind to him? Who will nurture him? I can see by his desk-throwing antics that he does not want to take encouragement from me right now. I had so many questions from simply observing my students share in peer groups.

At the end of the year, when I thought that I was thinking clearly, I still wrote about Frank; however, I included another student as I wrote about Frank. For some reason, I felt a drive to write about Frank and Robin, as their names spread infectiously over my notes. At a writing conference I wrote, "What I know is that I am half of Frank's problem. My energy stimulates him to insanity." His energy was not calming for me or some of the other students, but neither was mine. Frank didn't appear to get along with another student named Robin. Robin wouldn't talk to anyone in the class and then dyed her hair black and started wearing radical t-shirts about Marilyn Manson. If Frank said something to Robin, she would shout out, "Shut up!" and he would take that as encouragement to continue pestering her. By the end of the year something strange happened either as a result of my allowing the students to focus their teasing natures on me, or as a result of Robin's knowledge of, and Frank's interest in, Greek myth. They began to get along right at the point when we needed to review and Frank realized that Robin would tell him anything he wanted to know about Greek mythology. He stopped asking me questions and simply began asking Robin. Although this was frustrating because it happened in the middle of class, and I decided to let it happen. Robin could insult Frank as long as she also told him about Greek myths and history. She would rudely chastise him about how he should have done his reading, and he would just sit there smiling and asking more questions. It was an odd combo, but a developing of community between people who needed each other. Robin needed to feel proud of her knowledge, and she needed to share it. Frank needed to know about Greek myth. I must have been more concerned with how students developed communities than how they acquired a knowledge of Greek mythology. I also know that Frank never did the original reading for my class, and I guess that turned out all right for him because he had Robin.

Why I Couldn't Focus on Peer Review Communities

In January, however, when I went back to my Teacher As Researcher notebook, I couldn't continue to analyze my peer review groups or the communities that developed within my classroom. I was still not focused or too focused and not completely interested in my questions. I thought that I should be writing about peer review, but stopped. In my notebook my frustration concerning my TAR research erupted. I wrote about the difficulties focusing on one aspect of my teaching when so many other problems crowd in. I wrote:

> I'm having a lot of difficulty focusing on peer review when…Peggy was arrested, Miguel missed 2 days, Derrick and Anthony have to talk to experience movies, Juan broke up a fight between Harold and Joe, Harold threatened to blow up the middle school last year, Joe is OCD [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder]...

And it goes on. What I noticed was not that the problems of teaching got in the way of my thinking, because I was still thinking, but that they sapped my energy. I had strategies to work with my classes on group dynamics or at least strategies to watch them as they didn't work out, but I didn't want to watch them anymore.

In January, I questioned if I even wanted to continue teaching. I went to our TAR meeting and said finally, "I don't even know if I want to teach anymore." It wasn't that I wanted to move into administration or guidance or become a reading consultant. I wanted to waitress at Friendly's and just escape from everything and everyone who ever made me think or feel anything about teaching. I didn't want to feel good about connecting with difficult students who had

been kicked out of a few other schools last year. I didn't want to watch Frank and Robin slowly begin to need each other. I didn't want to feel good about meeting with Ann after school and watching her evolve as a writer. I didn't want to feel good about sharing poetry with students or getting them to stop fighting over sharing their writing. I certainly didn't want the bad parts of the job like grading papers, doling out detentions, controlling rowdy classes, or lunching with burnt-out teachers. I didn't want any of it. It was a strange moment for me. I could tell (in snippets) people remarkable things that were really happening at school and watch their shocked expressions at my ability to cope with these terrible events, but that only gave a minimal high, and with it came its own guilty downer afterward. I wrote in my journal, "I want out, but if I'm out, what do I write about?" This job, career, school, group of students and teachers had become part of me—but I didn't like that me anymore. I wanted to escape not only the job, but also myself, which probably was the crux of the matter because on some level I knew there was no leaving myself. So was I locked into this job where people outside of education either hated me because I made so much money, or put me on some strange sort of pedestal because they thought teenagers were antichrists? I hated being hated. I hated being honored by people who said things like, "Oh you're in the trenches." Our children are not soldiers. Our children are not the enemy. But then I would go back and recognize that they are not my children. They are mine and not mine.

I realized that I had a seething, below the belt, sort of hatred for teaching, which was odd, because for years I had loved teaching. But somehow that love flipped over to its natural other side and what kept emanating from me was anger. But if you asked me, I wasn't angry with the students; I was angry at the job. I was angry with my colleagues. I was angry with the professionals who wrote articles about how I should teach. I was angry with the other teachers in my school who tried to share with me their joys and frustrations. I was angry with Jane Austen. I was angry with Shakespeare.

My journal is pages of frustration. When I tried to articulate my research question, I write, "Here is my question: What does peer review do? Does it help my students write better? talk better? argue better? get along? share? emote? Is it some big multicultural fest? What?" Obviously, something is happening here. I'm frustrated, flip, sarcastic, and trying to throw back at the world jargon that I don't even accept as defining my school population. It limits what we are and where we are going. I was not asking true questions. I was throwing them at someone. Maybe I was throwing questions at myself, maybe the field of education in general.

Shortly after this note, I wrote some bits of conversations with my students. John, a freshman, says to me, "How much do you get paid? Do you enjoy this? Man, we're annoying!" And I see the problem. I love what John says because it shows our connectedness and humor. He knows my F period class is too loud, and I am getting frustrated. He also knows that he can ask me real questions. I laugh when I read John's comments. I can visualize him sitting in the midst of my rough F period class squirming in his seat as other students' voices blare out across the room. I remember feeling that everyone in F period was doing his or her own thing, and it was like shaping a really hard piece of stone into a sculpture that kept biting back. That's what that class felt like. And they weren't vicious bites, but the bites of an antsy puppy running at full speed from his excitement to see you, nipping to show love. That's the only way I could explain it—a piece of stone sculpture turning into a puppy. That was F Period. I enjoyed teaching and I hated it. I also wasn't asking a real question about peer review anymore.

What Had to be My Question

As I continued to refine my research question, I gave up on peer review communities and

simply wrote, "Why do I want to stop teaching?" and "Why did I used to like this and now I don't want to teach anymore?" and "Why do I really want out, and do I really want out?" My research group suggested more dispassionate questions like, "How has my relationship with teaching evolved? and why?" I finally settled with, "How does a teacher learn about herself through teaching others?" and "How and why has my attitude toward teaching evolved?" I felt focused on these two questions, no longer floating on alternate riffs of anger and peer review communities. To answer these newer questions, I needed to really look at myself and my teaching honestly. I needed to recognize my fears, frustrations, dishonesties, and joys. I couldn't hide behind metaphors describing my classes, laughter at bits of student conversation, large-scale dissatisfaction with racism, classism, or professional jargon. I needed to see what made me fit into teaching and what is now making me grow beyond the confines of the job. I needed to see if my personal life had brought me closer to, or farther from, teaching.

Of course in February I realized what was frustrating me about the job, and it was both the job of teaching and not really the job at all. I was frustrated because I fit so easily into the job of caring for students and working to teach them. What I needed to examine was that part of me that can care so easily for students or be patient enough to make them a focus. At this time, I began to recognize the stress of dealing with the loss of a parent and how that loss affected every aspect of my life. I also began to see the influence my mother indirectly had on my teaching career. In February I wrote:

> And then there's this whole thing with my mother—which sounds like a line from a sitcom but it's true. My mother. My mother is such a huge part of my life right now, and she keeps popping up here and there, and then I'm just like her and then not like her.... And then I realize that I need to confront this anger, fear, exhaustion. I need to see what this is and not run away, but I really want to just run away.

This year I learned that there are so many ways that I am like my mother—the bad and the good. My desire to escape an overwhelming situation echoed her lack of coping strategies. There was no support for her when she grew confused and dissatisfied so she took the only option that she saw to escape from a marriage. My desire to escape into a career that required no thinking reminds me of my mother trying to escape from painful situations. Teaching was painful for me this year, and I would love to just pack it all in and work construction, shoveling dirt or hauling bricks. I remember watching a show about Victorian England and thinking that I wanted to and could easily be a blacksmith. I wanted to use muscle instead of my computer. It just seemed right...blacksmithing. In February, I wrote in my journal: "I think that I'm angry at this job for being so hard for me and so painful that I just want a break and I don't think summer is enough. One week in February certainly isn't." Whatever made teaching painful to me also made me want to escape from it. I was angry at the job and ready to leave.

But of course I didn't leave. I continued venting for a few more months. But, I didn't leave. I also learned that I am my mother in many good ways. I continued in my February journals with this reflection:

> And in trying to figure everything out, I remember my mother as always taking care of children, dogs, cats, crazy people, crazy dogs, crazy children—everything. She was a caretaker in a way, and I see how I take care of these kids I have in class, and sometimes I know that I am standing very successfully in a classroom not because I was educated so well at UConn, but because I'm my mother, and the stranger my students get, the more I can take care of them. Sometimes it's just that obvious.

I remembered my mother taking care of children and so many others. She became who she was

by caring for others, which was really important in her life. I have to recognize that the nurturing qualities I see myself having with my students come from my mother. This is an extremely important realization to me because in dealing with my grief, I began to see more connections.

I also recognized that I had many mixed emotions about my teaching. I am insecure sometimes and confident others. I realize that my insecurities about my own teaching heighten my dissatisfaction with the job. My desire to escape was evident when I wrote in April: "I actually cried on the way to work today because I didn't want to be there. I hate my job and cry on the way in. I feel O.K. now, but everything feels like a chore and I just want to scream to people 'Don't you get it?! I can't do this job! I hate it!'" I know that the grief moved into most of my life. My insecurities about my teaching did not allow me to continue to look for better ways to teach. Instead, in this stressful year, they seemed to implode. When I was upset, I blamed myself. I wrote, "I can't do this job," not that the job is too hard, that there are too many expectations, that the students have too many problems, that the structures within education limit the ways I can teach, that my school population has a large transient population, or that the struggles of a low-income, urban, multicultural school would be very difficult for anybody. During this stressful year, I was able to articulate the problems I saw within my school; they just felt more overpowering than normal. I cried quickly. I got angry easily. More of my emotions were on the surface, and I felt more vulnerable. When students were glib, their comments hurt me when in the past, these comments would show up humorously in a short story. My grief affected my teaching, but that felt odd. It shouldn't affect how I teach or how I feel about myself and my job, but it did.

My guilt and dissatisfaction with my own teaching overwhelmed me at moments and then subsided when I had brief flashes that I knew what I was doing or if I didn't, then nobody else really did, and everything would work out somehow. In March I came to the crux of my insecurities and logically wrote in my journal: "If I knew less about teaching I wouldn't feel guilty when I didn't do what I thought I should, and if I knew more I could really do this right." Looking at this now, I have to recognize either some huge, unhealthy desire for perfection, some overpowering feeling of inadequacy, or an inability to cope with both grief and with the emotional difficulties in teaching. I also echo my own previous desire for life in some predetermined state either still teaching or hammering horseshoes.

I found myself getting sick of the constant questions and guilt. I had guilt about whether I was teaching the right material, whether I was assigning enough writing, whether I called parents enough, whether I was strict enough. Oh, I had guilt about everything! I had guilt about what to teach in my British and World Literature classes. I had guilt because I didn't teach Greek drama while the other British and World literature teacher did. I had guilt because I didn't do a research paper, and therefore maybe I was not making my students work enough. I had guilt that I couldn't explain clearly what I was teaching and why; had someone asked me, I probably could have explained. I felt I didn't really know what I was doing and it stopped me. Looking at these feelings now, I can recognize the bitterness. I recognize the utter feeling of hopelessness that overwhelmed me. Not only was I feeling unsuccessful as a teacher, but I was feeling unsuccessful as a person because so much of my identity was in my career. I was a caretaker. If that wasn't working, what was I? If I left teaching, whom would I write about? Who fascinated me more than my students, what they said, did or didn't do? They were occupying too much of my mind and heart, and yet my anger at what I was expected to do with them was overwhelming me.

How Two Journal Entries Helped Me Think Things Through

In April I still struggled with my feelings. I had moments of joy and moments of deep despair. On April 11th I wrote a long journal entry about a very long day. In the morning I had

been asked to cover one English teacher's class because she had a field trip. She was a friend of mine, but always had a different way of looking at things from the way I did. I was surprised to have to show a video on female infanticide to her A period class and even more surprised with how it affected me. I was miserable all day and unable to really cope with the video and the student reactions. One girl started crying in class, and I wanted to just leave. Later that day, I found myself short-circuiting on my students. I yelled at G period and even made them sit down after the last bell of the day and wait for my dismissal. Although I was sick of having to control people, I still had some strange power to do so.

After school, I still wanted to cry, but instead I made sure that some of my students volunteered to help set up for our Cultural Food Night. A guidance counselor runs an annual food festival once a year in which students bring in food from their culture or native country. It is always a wonderful night filled with remarkable food and music. We have watched through the years as Italian food has given way to more Spanish and African dishes. There's always curried goat, rice and beans, as well as a few pasta salads. At the end of the evening, I was responsible for taking the leftover food to a homeless shelter and to tell the boys' volleyball team that I met in the parking lot that the food I was carrying wasn't for them even though they were hungry and had won their game. After that I had to get soda for another teacher's poetry event and then get some much-needed sleep. Since I was reading *Cider House Rules*, I found myself at some point breaking into the journaling style of one character in order to express the uniqueness of East Hartford High School.

In my journal I start out with the negative:

> I need to write so much about why I hate going into school, and having to control people when I don't want to control anymore, and talk when I don't want to talk. There's so much bitterness/sarcasm in my C Period that it overpowers me. It's miserable. I can't teach like that. I feel too positive and that's just miserable.

The strange thing that I notice is that even in my disgust with teaching I feel that I am too positive. I hate the attempted worldly contempt from my seniors and wish for happy, optimistic people like myself. Was I happy and optimistic? I continue with:

> I feel I've been everywhere today from the depths of covering Mona's class as they watch a video on female infanticide in India to hating my C period class to screaming at my G and actually enjoying F period. Crazy. Robin is coming out of her shell and joking with Frank. I have to let that happen. I have five newish kids in my G period class. That's crazy. The world is crazy. I screamed at them after the bell and made them sit down and be silent because they were arguing again. They're nuts and when they get like that, they don't listen to me. I had to cry and sleep and now I'm drinking wine.

These are the normal frustrations of a bad day, but I also recognize the parts of the day that were good. I continue with:

> I want to write like Dr. Larch … in other parts of the world kids are making Ortega Tacos for Cultural Night. Here in East Hartford we eat plantains and watch real Africans dance to the drums of Mr. Penney and the drummers. We have a step team that's getting ready to go to Washington and Double-Dutch performs with flips.
>
> Here in East Hartford I go to *Stop and Shop* to get soda for a Poetry Circus, and the cashier is the crazy girl who was in my study hall but kept storming out, and I try to remember it as she didn't like someone else in the room, but she corrects me to say that she just didn't like the room, so I give her exact change just to be sure. Outside I see the girl from Mona's class who had been crying from the video on female infanticide. I ask her if she wrote the assigned letter. She smiles and said that she did.
>
> Sometimes it's hard for me even to experience joy with the nice kids. When I get home, Gail calls to make sure that I made it home from the homeless shelter, and I did, and I remember thinking about Sara and her two volleyball teams that won. We move in and out of these strange communities. Sometimes they just don't make sense.

The strange thing is that I remember that day as being very important. I can still visualize standing by the bus with the volleyball coach and chatting about her games while holding two big pans of cooked shells and rice and beans. I still know the gray of the sky and the light drizzle misting on my face. I remember the drive to the homeless shelter and shaking the manager's hand quickly but firmly before leaving. I remember buying the soda on sale and digging for exact change at the register. I remember the crying girl smiling to see me in the parking lot at the end of the day that began with me showing her a terribly depressing video against both of our wills. It is somehow important that I could move in and out of these strange communities and arrive at home with a trunk full of deliberately caffeine-free soda.

The day somehow resolved itself and I'm not sure why. Was it the conversation with the volleyball coach who just won two games? Was it seeing that the girl from my study hall actually had a job? Was it the matzos that I had brought to food night or the cannoli that one of my students saved for me? Was it the African dancers or the crowd that formed tight around them to enjoy the dance? I don't know, but I wasn't finished. The school year was still difficult for me as I continued to cope with my mother's death. There were still no easy answers. Maybe I knew that day was important because it felt terrible and wonderful. I could recognize how overly sensitive I was and that I also enjoyed feeling a part of my school.

Another point in my journal stands out to me as a positive point and also focuses on community. I brought five students to a writing conference, and at one of the sessions I remembered a previous group of students who would have loved to attend the conference. I particularly remembered one student who had been on our poetry slam team and how that community of writers was just wonderful. I wrote:

> I didn't remember how perfect we were till I got on the bus. I didn't remember that we were perfect and that I had to write about Erin whom I almost couldn't stand her senior year, which I guess with seniors, is normal. I need to write about Erin because at the same moment that she would be complaining about the school or her job at Starbucks or my ability to love fuzzy cute cats or even pictures of them and, yes, figurines, she would be able to get on the bus and then off again and recognize our perfection. It would probably come out something like, "Ms. Shaff! We rule!" in her cheerleader lingo, but it would be honest under her fake maniac smile she used when she had too much sugar. Or she might just look out over the contestants at a Poetry Slam and know that our team was right even if we didn't win, even if the judges were stacked against us or we just were not that good.

Erin recognized that our school consisted of many different cultures that made us just "perfect" in our eyes and because of this we had a broader knowledge of existence than the people at all urban or all suburban high schools. Our Poetry Slam Team had a mix of people who never realized they were a mix until they came in contact with other schools. I know that I had brief conversations with Erin concerning these issues, but my confidence about what she would say, do, and think surprises me until I realize that I knew her very well. She was my

student for two years and on my Poetry Slam Team for four years. I felt that there were certain things we would agree upon because we had been in this small writing community together. We didn't always get along, but we had a bond through writing which was fun. It gave us opportunities to view the world from the same standpoint.

Some Conclusions

I'm still working on the fictional story with all of the swearing. Although I'm not sure what the meaning of the story is yet, I continue to revise and ponder why this language is important to me and why this job is important to me. I have no definite conclusion except that I have decided to stay in teaching for at least another year. I can't pin down clearly what helps communities develop within classrooms or even what I would define as a community. A community probably begins to grow the moment someone tries to throw a desk to get out, the same moment that I think I, too, need to leave. Maybe it's the tension between acceptance and dissonance that helps communities develop. Perhaps the continually changing communities within my classroom, school, and town are what keep me interested enough to write about them. I know that teaching frustrates and fascinates me and leaves more questions than I could answer in a lifetime.

I know that this year was not a great year of teaching for me for very personal reasons. The struggles made me question my own career motivations. Living with the grief of my mother's death became a powerful force in my life that made simple duties difficult and accepted theories complex. I couldn't see my life or career choices in the same way that I had before my mother's death. I needed to question everything all over again. Although I felt the need to leave teaching, I also began to recognize aspects of my personality that were influenced by my mother that allowed me to be a successful teacher. My mother had the patience to care for the most problematic child, and I began to see patience as a gift she left to me. She had a positive attitude through the most difficult times which influenced the people around her more than if she had lectured them on personal strength. She left me some of that energy, and I am grateful to her.

I still have questions about my own teaching career, but I feel comfortable in my fascination and as comfortable as I can be in my frustration. I have learned that I enjoy the company of my students. I enjoy watching them grow and develop their individual personalities as well as watching them grow and develop in classroom communities. I can't yet explain how this happens or why it sometimes doesn't. But just as Frank has accepted his classmates enough to know that he needs them so he shouldn't throw desks, I also can stay in these communities of learners and maybe find out.

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Extremes too Hard to Comprehend at Once: Doing Teacher Research, Together and Alone

Sheila A. Murphy

Awed by the power of metaphor in poetry, I often search for metaphor when attempting to explain something I don't fully understand. As facilitator for a year-long teacher research project, I needed to talk to myself, and to the group, through metaphor. I often found myself trying out metaphors, comparing ourselves to other interdependent groups, looking for parallels. After our year ended, I turned to metaphor to help clarify my own role in the group's experience. At the same time, I kept remembering Robert Frost's caution that "All metaphor breaks down somewhere. That is the beauty of it. It is touch and go with metaphor, and until you have lived with it long enough, you don't know where it is going. You don't know how much you can get out of it and when it will cease to yield" ("Education by Poetry" 723). I tried to be mindful of the "breaking down" that is inevitable with metaphor, but also of the near "breaking down" of our fragile teacher research community. At the end, having encouraged data-gathering and nurtured drafting and revising for twelve teacher researchers, I knew each of their essays would portray the satisfactions and the excitement of teacher research. I also knew that our group of researchers, functioning without a professor's guidance or a course's structure, had met unique challenges. By highlighting the background of the group's experience, I wanted the story of our journey to become instructive for future researchers.

A brief Frost poem called "The Armful" mirrors my sense of trying to juggle the "parcels" of our project. The poem begins:

> For every parcel I stoop down to seize,
> I lose some other off my arms and knees,
> And the whole pile is slipping, bottles, buns,
> Extremes too hard to comprehend at once,
> Yet nothing I should care to leave behind. (1-5)

It's not surprising that, now, I would tend to identify with that solitary and weary speaker. Our project ended in July. Here I was, in December, still trying to reconstruct the precarious balancing act of sustaining our group for a year. My unwieldy armful of data kept surprising me in its shifting, just as unforeseen circumstances had seemed, sometimes, to threaten the viability of our group. Our success, witnessed in these essays, renews my conviction that teacher research builds a habit of inquiry that is at the core of professional growth. The seasoned teachers who participated in this project brought their questioning stance, their stories, and their laughter. Even now, my memories of their shared teaching stories sustain me as I look at *my* role in the group's experience. During our year together, I sometimes felt sole responsibility for the "whole pile" of decisions, meetings, and membership, and had to will myself, consciously, to continue. Like the speaker in the poem, I wanted to do my best, without any degree of certainty about the outcome:

> With all I have to hold with, hand and mind
> And heart, if need be, I will do my best
> To keep their building balanced at my breast. (6-8)

Frost ends that poem with an image of a person still struggling with unwieldy bundles (similar to my prolonged task of bringing our whole project to completion):

> I crouch down to prevent them as they fall;

Then sit down in the middle of them all.
I had to drop the armful in the road
And try to stack them in a better load. (9-12)

Of course my metaphor breaks down. Those teachers, and their essays, have a life and liveliness that Frost's parcels lack. Nonetheless, my story needs to show the "extremes," the struggles and the satisfactions, of teacher research by examining the way I tried to balance an "armful" of responsibilities for the group as a whole.

By summer's end, Connie, my sometimes co-facilitator, and I had spent fifteen months choosing, assembling, balancing, and sometimes dropping, the paraphernalia to support, for the second time, a teacher research group. We were used to juggling notes, books, drafts, my laptop, pizza, and the sole key to an empty University of Connecticut lounge. On that August day, Connie was trying to dispel my gloom about still-missing final drafts, incomplete citations, unreturned phone calls, unanswered emails, and about my hazy memory that our first group, two years ago, had gone more smoothly than this one. Smiling, she startled me by articulating what I knew intuitively but hesitated to say, yet, about this unfinished book manuscript: "These essays are *better* than last time, individually and as a set. We were a good group, Sheila. Admit it."

And I did—finally, I could acknowledge our success, though my "armful" of experience with this project would continue to unbalance me for months longer. With this group, hoping to replicate the best parts of our previous experience, but realizing that our records were scant and our memories were blurred, I had decided to record our experience. I knew that the demands of my role would prevent my drafting while others were doing so. I knew also that circumstances would possibly preclude my writing an essay of my own. Nonetheless, my laptop notes, shaped and shared in the "log-minutes" I would send after each meeting, could model the need for ongoing data-gathering. What I did not realize was that the new group would be dramatically different from our first venture, and that writing my own essay would become a way to understand the differences.

The other "parcels" in this collection are rich in stories and reflections from teachers' classrooms. My unwieldy parcel is heaped with the group experience of twelve teachers balanced, precariously, in the arms of a new retiree. Teachers' lives are always filled with "extremes too hard to comprehend at once." By documenting our struggles and our successes, I hope that future groups of teacher researchers will balance their "parcels" without having to "stoop down" as often as I did. While the laughter that plays in the background of my story is submerged, that camaraderie is a real, and important, benefit of such groups. As my teaching career winds down, I hope the next generation of teachers will join the "conversations" of teacher research as a valuable resource for professional growth, and, often, personal pleasure.

Long before finding "The Armful," I had needed to search for metaphors about the process of teacher research. Once, I thought about sports, especially those that, like teacher research, include individual as well as team elements. Recalling many years as parent-spectator at athletic events, my mind kept returning to memories of our oldest son, Russell, who stayed with his sport, rowing, through college and beyond, when he joined a national crew team. Hmm. I found myself wondering:

- Do the individual, *and* team, natures of crew offer parallels to the experience of a teacher researcher group such as ours?
- Can the exhilaration of participating in teacher research leave a lingering "high" comparable to the deep satisfaction our son felt when his team placed fifth in a world championship regatta in Montreal?
- Does the habit of fitness that rowers acquire echo the habit of reflective practice that can result from a teacher research experience?

Even though differences between teacher research and any team sport are obvious, some similarities are intriguing. To all three questions, my answer became a resounding "Yes."

Participation in crew, or in teacher research, begins with an interest triggered by proximity, or perhaps by casual exposure. My son's dorm room at MIT during his freshman year looked out on the Charles River. Weary from studying too long and hard (or perhaps from procrastinating), he would look with envy at the sleek racing shells gliding smoothly, all eight oarsmen pulling together. He joined the crew team and became immersed in group workouts and practices, solo running drills, and timed exercises on rowing machines. Then came competitive races, and, finally, championship regattas.

Participation in teacher research, for me, began ten years ago, answering a need to balance the isolation of classroom teaching with professional reading and writing, as well as with some kind of group experience. The reasons for members' participation in our group were varied. Some were introduced to teacher research by a colleague, some through readings, and others through a conference presentation. A teacher research group, unlike an eight-person rowing shell, has no set number of participants, and no "coach" as such (unless it is a university course). Connie and I labeled ourselves as "facilitators" and "co-editors," although we often found ourselves in coaching roles.

In a racing shell, the coxswain (seated in the prow, and not rowing) is the only one who can see the course ahead. Rowers depend on the cox to alert them for obstacles, and to encourage them to pull together, exhorting everyone to work harder and harder as the final marker looms ahead. "Start keeping that log!" was my exhortation in the minutes I sent to all members a week after our first "official" meeting in September. Although we were far from the finish line, my call recognized the rocks and shoals that could topple all of us if we didn't have the ballast of data to steady our course. Sharing that crew team metaphor with the group, I wanted to suggest that each individual's effort was important to the success of our group. Only now do I acknowledge my ongoing concern that some members' uneven participation would not just slow down the race but could sink our ship. Connie and I, as "coxswains" in our wobbly "boat," more than once steered a rocky course. As the finish line finally appears just over the horizon, twenty months after we started, I become, with this essay, rower as well as coxswain.

When our project reached a halfway mark, in March, I found yet another metaphor for teacher research. Concerned about the lack of drafting, the minutes I sent to members state: "Miller and Power, in *Living the Questions*, as well as Peter Elbow and others, encourage writers to think of metaphors for experience." To model the use of metaphor for our group experience, I began:

> To me, this project has sometimes seemed like a roller coaster, or a derailed train, or a hike without map or compass. Or (at last, a metaphor close to me) perhaps our project is like sewing without a pattern, or making a **sampler quilt**, such as those made by groups to commemorate town histories, or milestones in a family. I think I'll run with that idea: we each have designed our individual squares, with some colors and motifs overlapping, but each distinctive. How neat those lengths of bright new uncut fabric lie on a sewing table. How lovely, in the abstract, each design, and the overall pattern, looks before starting.

> Quilting, for me, seemed an appropriate framework to show the complex dynamic of our group experience. Like the coordinator of a sampler quilt project, I would set deadlines, discuss options for "color and design" choices at the beginning, support anyone who needed help, oversee layout at assembly time, and, make sure the borders aligned neatly at the end.

Reading that metaphor now, I realize my subtext was too subtle. By March, with sporadic attendance and limited or no data-gathering from some members, I was anticipating a quilt with blank squares, or, bluntly, a lot of talking but little data to use in essays. Without a classroom of my own, I had assumed that meetings, minutes, and email would help the group operate smoothly. I should have known, after thirty-two years of teaching, that any new group—students or quilters or teacher researchers —would have unimagined challenges.

The quilting metaphor is still appropriate, I decide now, as I take countless stitches in my piece, and prepare, with Connie, to showcase our group's creation. Each participant's essay, like a carefully-crafted quilt square, tells its own story. My essay, more like a quilt border than a "square," attempts to give background and cohesion to the individual stories that are at the center. A catalyst for focusing my interminable drafting came only after Connie's October 10 email message, weeks after I had sent her yet another partial draft. As usual, her reaction was perceptive: "The only thing I would suggest is more candidness—didn't you feel overwhelmed, isolated? You can suitably show just how complicated, how messy life in Teacher as Researcher can be." Connie's phone call repeated her message: "I think you have to be more candid about the whole situation." Nonetheless, I continued to repress her call for extensive revision, and continued drafting. Two weeks later, sharing that fuller draft with my Connecticut Writing Project writing group, I heard an echo of Connie as those writers (two of whom had participated in the teacher research group) urged me "to confront openly the unexpected forces beyond our control." I drove home recalling how Donald Murray talks of revision so buoyantly—could I find that spark now, with little time, and less motivation, to continue?

My revisions have had to take place against the background of many classrooms. This fall, in a part-time position as an adjunct lecturer in UConn's NEAG School of Education, I taught ten seniors in an English "methods" course and also helped to conduct an interdisciplinary seminar with twelve seniors from various disciplines. My position required me to observe all of these prospective teachers in their internships in secondary classrooms in eastern Connecticut. I saw the complicated dynamics of varied classroom situations: equine science in a regional vocational school, pre-calculus in a rural school, and a writing workshop in inner-city Hartford. Sitting in the back of classrooms watching novice teachers has added new dimensions to my understanding of teaching, in part because of my distance from the intensity of everyday classroom life.

Connie's point about the isolation of my role as facilitator of our teacher research group helped me to refocus my question one final time: *How does one facilitator's view of a teacher research project illustrate the complexities of practicing teacher research*? In trying to learn from our group experience, I sorted my data, those "extremes too hard to comprehend at once," into three overlapping categories: our *community*, our *curriculum*, and our *worlds.*

- The *community* section sketches the make-up of our group, and the ongoing professional and personal issues that affected our year together.

- The *curriculum* section looks at the group's role in finding questions, selecting a text, and pursuing research.
- The *worlds* section examines our experience in relation to broader communities that intersect with our group: the Connecticut Writing Project, the University of Connecticut, the National Writing Project, and the teaching profession.

Our Community

> I know that all teaching decisions must begin, not with the general objectives of a curriculum plan, but with an intimate understanding of a particular group of students, their particular abilities, needs, and potential. (Hynds161)

This fall, when I was nervously anticipating a transition from high school to college teaching, Susan Hynds' emphasis on the need for "intimate understanding of a particular group of students" validated my instincts and my experience in secondary classrooms. I knew I would need to take time getting to know the ten senior English Education majors in my class. When our group of teacher researchers came together a year earlier, I had made a calculated decision to implement our *curriculum* of teacher research from day one. I assumed that our links as colleagues in a demanding profession, our voluntary participation in an inquiry project, and our connections, direct or indirect, to the Connecticut Writing Project were scaffolding enough for "an intimate understanding" to grow over time. What I didn't acknowledge, even to myself, was that fundamental need of group members to get to know one another. I also didn't recognize the extent to which our varied professional and personal concerns would affect the function of the group. Visible to me now is my naïve assumption that a collegial atmosphere would evolve effortlessly, perhaps because my memory was that the earlier group (except for two "members" who had been required by a supervisor to join) had quickly become a supportive community. "Every group has its own personality," Kathy reminded me this fall, as I meditated on who we were, individually and collectively.

For Connie and me, the thought of working together with another group of teachers was too tempting to resist. When Mary Mackley, director of the Connecticut Writing Project, approached us, in the spring of 1999, about taking on another teacher research project, our hesitations were professional and personal. I had just decided to retire "early," after thirty-two years of teaching (the last twenty-seven in an affluent suburban high school where state-mandated testing, litigious parents, entitled students, and uneven leadership had begun to dull the satisfactions of the classroom). Also, retirement would allow me the time for frequent visits with an ailing granddaughter. Cecilia had just been diagnosed with Spinal Muscular Atrophy, the disease that had taken the life of her eleven-month-old brother a year earlier (and would claim her life, at fourteen months, before our project was over). Connie, a veteran teacher in another suburban community, had a myriad of professional and personal issues of her own. Like me, though, she had acquired a habit of reflection, a habit we wanted to keep alive in ourselves, and to encourage in others.

After our first venture, a memo we had written for ourselves included recommendations for "next time": to have the next group read and discuss articles about teacher research, to focus meetings with a printed agenda, and to write and send minutes of each monthly meeting to members. An initial mailing brought inquiries from only a few Connecticut Writing Project "alumni." To encourage more members, Mary Mackley, the director, decided to send a copy of our previous teacher research book to all "active"

CWP teacher consultants. (Published in-house by UConn, that collection of essays, somewhat uneven in quality, has had a limited circulation.) In July, my cover letter urged teachers to "recognize parts of your classrooms, and your questions in our stories. We hope that reading our inquiry projects will trigger your own ideas for pursuing classroom inquiry." Also, at Mary's suggestion, we invited "non-CWP colleagues of your choice" to join our group. That idea excited me as a way for some teachers to pursue what had remained only a dream throughout my teaching career —to have a colleague in my school as a partner in a teacher research project.

In September 1999, our group had nineteen prospective members. Our numbers eventually "stabilized," though continuing to fluctuate between twelve and fifteen until the last meeting, and even beyond (with lingering uncertainty about whether a few final drafts would materialize). Although three men were on the initial list, the final group was made up of women, with teaching experience ranging from a few years to a few decades. Schools ranged from rural to near-urban. Nine members teach in high schools: seven English teachers, one math teacher, and one in special education. Another is a special education teacher in an elementary school. Three are "looping" teachers in elementary schools. My compulsion for sorting led me to further categories: "solo" members and "partners," and writing project "alumnae" and newcomers. Five were **solo** members, driving to meetings on their own, sometimes from far distances:

- Two solo members, Peg and Kathy, were "veterans" of our earlier teacher research project. Their prior knowledge would offer quiet, steady stability to new members. Both are "looping" teachers.
- Three solo members were also writing project "alumni" who came from different schools and teaching situations: Mora is a "looping" teacher of third and fourth graders; Jenny teaches high school English in a near-urban school; Evelyn, a special education teacher, came from a shoreline elementary school.

Nine **partnership** members, in four sets, joined our group with connections formed outside the CWP network:

- Three "novice" members (Janet, Sandy, and Claire) were new not only to teacher research but also to the writing "immersion" that writing project summer institute "alumni" have internalized. Their recruitment by colleagues seemed to insure a natural support system.

Novice and "alumnae" groupings included two groups of two, and one group of three. Only one partnership pursued a joint research project:

- Two were pairs who teach at the same schools: Georganna teaches English and Sandy teaches math in a suburban high school; their joint project was a spin-off from a system-wide initiative to encourage critical thinking. Nancy and Janet teach English in a public-private high school that serves seven small communities. Both pairs not only supported each other but also inspired the group as a whole through their ongoing stories of almost daily conversations about research.
- The third set that included "novices" and writing project "alumnae" was a group of three: Claire, the novice, and two writing project "alumnae." Although they drove to meetings together, and had known each other for many years, they worked in different schools. While I assumed that their "togetherness" would lead to supportive sharing, that was not always the case. Indeed, while the two writing project "alumnae" did not complete their essays, Claire, the novice, did so.
- Another odd "partnership" consisted of Jeanne and Connie who are colleagues in the same high school English department. Jeanne is a writing project veteran (from a different Connecticut site) who attended only two meetings, but received ongoing support toward

completion of her essay from Connie.

An obvious, but important conclusion from looking at the make-up of our group is that prospective researchers who can recruit partners from the same school have a built-in advantage in ease of communication, and a natural network of support. Another conclusion is that a blend of "novice" recruits and writing project "alumni" is a logical way for writing project sites to broaden their base, and to expand the growth of teacher research communities in schools. Like the challenge of rowing for my son or of quiltmaking for his mother, a teacher research project can become habit-forming.

Although many members had personal traits that were complementary and supportive, many in the group had personal experiences that were unavoidable distractions. Nancy's distraction turned out to be positive for the group. Her prior commitment to go to Europe in June with a school group resulted in our scheduling a second summer week for writing—additional days we all turned out to need. Other distractions were not planned, nor were they positive. During the year Georganna and Janet had health problems (Janet's involving not only herself but her mother and sister). Connie, during the summer after our year together, while we were writing our essays, acquired live-in teenage stepchildren. Also during that time, Peg's mother and my granddaughter both died. Jenny's mother had died during the previous summer. At our very first meeting Jenny had written: "My mother and grandmother recently passed away and I truly need time to grieve. But I also know that I need to remain connected to groups that will allow me to feel connected to other writer/teacher people. That is important to me." I can't speak for others, but I do know that the need for connection to "writer/teacher people," during my sad year, was important to me also.

Those distractions, plus the varying degrees of commitment of members—evidenced by absenteeism, tardiness, and lack of homework—illustrate another feature of our fragile community. Numbers on my attendance chart aren't sufficient to tell the complete attendance story because of many variables. Although thirteen names appear (including Connie's and mine), only eleven essays (including mine) were completed. Attendance figures fall into two categories:

- 9 monthly meetings—8 during the 1999-2000 school year, plus a preliminary meeting in April 1999. Only **five** members (one third) attended 7 or more meetings. (One member joined in November; another in January.)
- 8 day-long meetings, June 19 – 23, and July 26 – 28. **Ten** members attended 6 or more days. (Two members did not come to any summer meeting days.)

An obvious conclusion for the higher percentage of attendance at summer meetings is the fact that intense professional development during the school year is a burden. On the April survey, Claire described the exhaustion that all teachers sometimes feel: "I cannot work at the pace I work and always come to a Friday meeting. There are some Fridays I crash. I am asleep. One Friday I was too tired to even take off my trench coat." Reasons for absences varied: illness, conflicting meetings, and "too busy, too tired" were the most common. Even Connie missed one meeting because she forgot. (We do not have attendance records from our first group, but we both recall better attendance rates.) Despite email reminders, which asked members to verify attendance plans, lack of notification was common, and, for me, somewhat demoralizing. Besides an uneven pattern of attendance, a similar pattern showed in response to "homework," whether the "assignment" was reading, data-gathering, sharing of data, or drafting. Like the variables that affect the way a class jells (or doesn't), the facts of our busy personal and professional lives affected participation. Although our monthly meetings enabled most of us to form a

supportive community, it was not entirely surprising to read Claire's negative response to the April survey:

> "Knowing two individuals in the group . . . I don't know if this was the best idea for me. As friends of 20+ years . . . I'm not sure if it is wise to "mix hats" because I am seeing a degree of stress and conflict among all three of us over the project. I am hoping it will work out for everyone."

Claire's worries were prophetic. In her group of three, she was the only one who completed her essay. One of her friends had attended six of nine meetings during the year but participated minimally, orally or in writing. During our June week I learned indirectly that she had left teaching for an administrative position. Claire's other friend had attended five meetings during the year, regaling us with school stories when she was there. She came for part of two days in June, but participated minimally in peer critiquing of drafts, and withdrew without an explanation. Ironically, Claire, the "novice" member to a CWP-sponsored project, was the one of that group who stayed to completion. Did the hour-late arrival of these three to most meetings during the year make them feel somewhat isolated? Did their previous personal connections, rather than strengthening a bond, stand in the way of our efforts to work with them in this project? Did other personal or professional issues intervene? Any conclusions would be purely speculative, and would oversimplify a set of variables to numerous and oblique for clarification here.

Fortunately, the overall cohesiveness of the group was apparent, as shown in this sample of comments from the April survey. The question focused on meetings:

> Peg: I leave with renewed energy. It helps to be able to speak some thoughts. It helps formulate ideas more clearly . . . I am a person who writes better when I share so these meetings have been most helpful.
> Evelyn: The discussions were great, helped me focus or try to focus on how I would start to write, what I would write about, etc. I have felt encouraged, stimulated, and connected.
> Mora: Group discussions are helpful—moral support, suggestions, and helpful hints.
> Janet: The group meetings are energizing. Admittedly, I sometimes dread going to the meeting because I'm tired or worried that I'm not "pulling my weight." I enjoy listening to other people's stories. It's comforting, but also inspirational. Teaching, as we have so often noted, can be, ironically, very isolating.

These four, and others, felt connected as a community, a connection that supported their desire to pursue classroom research.

Our Curriculum

In a teacher research project, the *curriculum* focuses on finding and pursuing research questions. My minutes of our first "official" meeting in September remind me of the inevitable discussions, today, of the testing mania in America's public schools. "I'm not going to think about my issues regarding the mastery test," asserted Kathy, echoing others. Eventually, Kathy's essay, while not focusing directly on testing, included a perceptive meditation on how testing affects students. In our discussions, testing continued to surface, especially concerning the ways that "teaching to the test" can distort the curriculum. Peg's comment, at the bottom of her September questionnaire, foreshadowed my essay: "I hope Sheila and Connie will write about the process we are going through to get to topics and write about that." More than a year later, my

writing encompasses more than the process of "getting to topics," but that long process is part of my story.

Of necessity, teacher researchers make a large commitment: to meet regularly, to learn about teacher research, to gather data over time, and to write an analysis of results for a public audience. Fourteen members signed on for a school year of monthly Friday night meetings, discussion of readings, and gathering data on their own, then spending a week in the summer for writing and revision. At the first meeting, one potential member voiced a common concern: "I have no clue of what I want to research—revision vs. editing? co-teaching? what is interdisciplinary planning? creating a community of learners? how to use writing in the content areas? the use of reader response? effective peer conferences?" Amy was not able to continue. Those who stayed had "no clue" either, but they decided to commit time and effort in a journey of discovery. At the beginning, when we didn't know each other as teachers, researchers, or individuals, Connie and I chose readings about teacher research to focus our discussions. Articles we read as a group led some members to thoughtful reflections in our opening journal writing. In November, Peg links one of our readings to her second graders: "I am struck by the comment in 'Small is Beautiful'—'the end of a case study should be *insight*, not *control*' (Bissex 72). It seems that sums up my ideas about curriculum. Can children learn what they need to learn when they are moving, NOT sitting quietly at their desks? Can children read or write while lying on the floor and occasionally chatting quietly?" Sandy, a math teacher, reflects on the process of journal keeping which we had urged members to begin in September: "I have not kept journals for a very long time but have considered myself a reflective practitioner. I was struck this past week that forcing myself to reflect on paper did help pinpoint difficulties that students were experiencing in class." She continues by relating one of the readings to her experiences: "One of the articles states that trust develops as a group works together and then participants feel comfortable raising sensitive issues and risk self-revelation. I noticed that my co-teacher and I were much more open to self-criticism this week. We were able to focus discussion on what we were doing and how our students were responding."

Our community took time to feel comfortable with self-revelation too. Our relationship, like that of Sandy and her co-teacher, was a relationship of colleagues, not of teacher and students. Nonetheless, my role, and Connie's, set us apart. Although we weren't "teachers," we (mostly I) did the planning and organization. Like some classes, this one had many complications. One problem stemmed from the unforeseen delay in choosing a book. Our earlier project, during which we had continually tried to find helpful readings, theoretical and practical, convinced us that a text would be a helpful support for everyone. In September, passing around a copy of Brenda Miller Power's slim volume, *Taking Note: Improving Your Observational Notetaking*, Connie and I lamented that our earlier group had lacked such a guide. We had learned, though, of a more comprehensive source for teacher researchers: *The Art of Classroom Inquiry: A Handbook for Teacher Researchers* by Power and Ruth Shagoury Hubbard. By the October meeting, Connie and I had received copies of that text (purchased by CWP), and liked it. I mentioned, also, that a brand new book by these authors, *Living the Questions: The Art of Classroom Inquiry*, a revision of the earlier one, had been published but was apparently unavailable. We had learned that disappointing news just that day (in a message from the CWP secretary who had tried to order a single copy for us through the UConn Co-op). At the meeting, therefore, the group decided to order the earlier edition.

Because we were a community of colleagues, collaborative decision-making was important. Still, the idea of implementing the group's decision to order the earlier edition troubled me. I was perplexed that a new edition would be "unavailable." I called the publisher the day after our October meeting, and was assured by an editor that the new edition, extensively revised, was

available. When an examination copy arrived, I read it, loved it, and called Connie who agreed that we should delay ordering until members could compare the two editions. At the November meeting, I pointed out the rich resources in the new book, *Living the Questions*, and the group agreed to order it. (CWP would mail the book to members since we had not scheduled a December meeting.) In the interim, we had selected a few seminal readings for the first meetings, including a set of note-taking guidelines. Also, the agenda/outline shaped our discussions; the minutes sent afterward were an additional scaffold for beginning our research. Claire's survey response in April surprised me: "Sept.—Feb. was 'vague.' It would have helped me to have more structure, more writing time, a Xerox copy of the chapter each month. More writing time, 'thinking time,' 'jell time,' each session would help me on site at UConn." (The late arrival of Claire's group usually meant that they missed preliminary talk and writing.) As in the classroom, a text can be a reassuring anchor. And lack of a core resource, especially at the beginning, can make a class, or a project, seem unfocused, at least to some.

During meetings, I used my laptop to record snippets of conversation, hoping to capture the flavor of people and ideas, and to record the developing awareness of our questions and our searching. The evolution of research ideas and our growing understanding of the process of classroom research during meetings made for lively discussions. I wanted to sustain that excitement between meetings, and to communicate it to those who had not attended. Mailed from the CWP office between monthly meetings, my "minutes" went beyond summary, quoting amply from our discussions to parallel the readings from *Living the Questions* and other sources. I hoped members would be inspired to turn to the readings, and also to capture the flavor of their classrooms in their own data-gathering. Sometimes, summary was at the center of the record, as in minutes from the September meeting summarizing responses to my query about "What 'teacher research' means to each of us, *why* we're plunging in—the 'What's in it for me?' or 'Why am I doing this?' issue":

> Jenny: "I think that taking time to reflect honestly will be good. I don't always know what I should be doing, so I need some time to think."

Jenny's journal-writing habit served her well during the months that passed before she settled on her question.

> Nancy: "For me, TAR means an opportunity to improve my teaching. There are two areas I need to improve. One is challenging my students to think more critically. I want to work on ways of changing my lessons so that students will have time to think. When I hear a student say, 'This is boring,' I take it as a challenge to change that lesson."

Nancy's focus stayed with these concerns. Without realizing it, she had began to explore her question.

> Connie: "For me, I like to keep myself busy. I like life in the classroom—a learning life, a sharing-gestalt life—a writing to find out what I'm thinking/learning life—so TAR has been satisfying. I, too, am curious why I continue to like teaching and I'm right now curious about how I will leave it."

(Besides Connie and me, the following two members had participated in the earlier group.)

> Kathy: "Having a group to 'hear' you is an incredible springboard to help you move ahead and take chances in your efforts to analyze and improve—and understand. I am 'plunging in' again because my first experience was so valuable to me. There are always areas in my teaching which need scrutiny, and the TAR group is such a real support when going through this process."

Like Jenny, Kathy would use her journal-writing to find her question.

> Peg: "Being part of a group of caring teachers who really listen and share concerns about teaching is such an energizing experience—I'm hooked and suffered from withdrawal all last year—I just couldn't wait to be part of this again. I also find myself thinking more clearly and giving more in-depth thought to what I do when I write. However, that alone hasn't motivated my writing sufficiently to make it a regular habit. Having an audience and a deadline worked for me two years ago and I hope it will continue."

Peg's question, about her relationship with her first student teacher, did not jell for many months.

Because of uneven attendance from the outset, I realized that our minutes would need to be a record to share with all. The minutes dated November 4, for example, echo a reading given for October, and also attempt to use discussion comments to model the sorting and classifying recommended by Miller and Hubbard in *Living the Questions*:

Writing and sharing classroom experiences during the October meeting reminded me, once again, of the power of stories. That oral sharing hints at the "rich narrative statement about classroom life" that Knoblauch and Brannon assert "suit people's intuitive recognition of the complexity of that life" (25).

We voiced our recognition of the "subtle textures of the teaching experience" summed up in:

- Nancy's and Janet's "frustration."
- Evelyn's experiments with "trying a hybrid of Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Slingerland . . . doing everything in every modality."

We listened to, and laughed at, many examples of "story as knowledge" such as these:

- Mora's "skunk in the petshop" idea.
- Kathy's portrayal of her Chinese student.
- Connie's reality check about the boy who found the ending of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (despite the prompt) as "not hopeful."
- Claire's hilarious dramatic monologue imitating two of her students in encounters with the varied adults in their school day.

Because of the holidays, we didn't meet in December. At the January meeting, many were still floundering as they tried to settle on research questions. After that meeting, I decided to sort tentative questions by using categories from Glenda Bissex' *Seeing For Ourselves*, hoping that members would find, in this orderly presentation of everyone's ideas, more ideas to trigger their own:

> **Category #1: Professional Autobiography**
> Jenny: "I have no idea what I'm doing . . . feel I'm freeloading pizza . . . not enthusiastic about teaching but . . ." (What does peer review do??)

How and why has my attitude toward teaching changed/evolved?

Peg : "I thought I wanted to continue on looping/one student . . . but I have a student teacher . . . I'm psyched."
What happens when a veteran teacher takes on a student teacher for the first time?

Connie: "I'm living with contradictions . . . my question gets bigger and bigger."
What are the promises and disappointments of mission statements?
What happens when a 30-year-teacher confronts the contradictions of competing educational philosophies/systems/pedagogies?
What are the implications, for teacher and students, of "all students will achieve at high levels"?

Evelyn: "I have written nothing but an LD evaluation . . . and too many checks."
What happens when a veteran teacher works with LD students with their writing?
What aspects of intuitive teaching of LD students can be made explicit?

Nancy: "I need to have a personality change; I wish I could be more creative . . ."
What if I let students design the curriculum?
How does a teacher try to motivate students who are repeating ninth grade English?
How does a class of reluctant learners affect a teacher's attitude to teaching?

Category #2: Case Study of a Student or a Small Group of Students

Mora: "one very reluctant writer . . . I thought I'll see what works and doesn't work. . .like pulling teeth to get this child to do anything . . . feel myself tense up . . . I'm wondering if . . . trying to keep the judgmental tone out of my voice . . ."
What happens when I use a problem-solving approach (questions) to motivate my reluctant writer/learner?
What does a teacher learn from attempting to motivate one very reluctant writer/learner?
How does a reluctant writer/learner respond to varying strategies and approaches?

Kathy: "went back to my 'old boy' who is Chinese . . . good news/bad news . . . afraid he's going to get lost . . . I know so little about strategies about English language learners."

Category #3: Focus on a Single Problem

Janet: What strategies will improve student accountability for their own learning?
What factors influence student accountability in two British Literature classes?
How does a teacher try to make students accountable?

Category #4: Case Study of a Tool/Method/Strategy

Jean : vignette: "Dave/Hawthorne/psychology/sniffled . . . Berthoff as "distant mentor" (Hubbard and Power, *Living* 181-182).
What to do with dialectical notebooks in the classroom?
How do dialectical notebooks influence the dynamics of classroom and reading/writing process?
Sub question—issue of evaluation of notebooks

Georganna and Sandy: (gave us handout of ideas—in "yes/no" question format—rephrased below)
What happens when teachers focus on having students articulate their thought process, orally and in writing, in math and in English?
How does a conscious focus on the process of problem-solving affect student learning?

After the January meeting, and during the February discussion, I was becoming increasingly uneasy that some members, while eager to share teaching experiences during meetings, were doing little or no note-taking, and little or no reading of "assigned" chapters from *Living the Questions*. In the minutes of the February meeting, I decided to model coding and analysis to supplement, or replace, the explanations and samples in the book. After each person's place in the minutes, I intersperse, for the purposes of this essay, a comment in relation to the way research questions were (or were not) developing at this point. My comments begin:

> I've tried to code (naming issues/challenges that I saw) and analyze (puzzling about how TAR meeting functions as a research community) each member's contribution. In other words, I'm trying to learn from my data (notes taken during meeting). In doing this, I want to model for you how "cooking your notes" (Hubbard and Power, Living 128) *as you do research* pays off. Also, I want to show those individual *voices* are so essential in presenting research.
> My analysis appears immediately after person's name, followed by excerpts of the person's voice. My coding is at the end of each entry, with the heading 'Issues/challenges.' (I tried to code by using different issues for all. If more entries were available, there'd be overlap and repetition of issues/challenges.)

Sharing after preliminary writing—highlights:

Janet's question, focusing in part on her relationship with one student, and in part on the evolution of her teaching, was coming together, though slowly.

> Janet: TAR meeting tries to be a community for sharing strategies about taking notes "in the midst" of teaching.
> "I'm lost, feel as if I'm taking, not giving, to group . . . strains of a crisis-laden year. . . how are others taking notes?—I want to solve problem . . . feel this process is very foreign to me."
> Issues/challenges: finding note-taking strategies; coping with personal/professional stresses.

Jenny's forthrightness always startled us. "Why I hate teaching" evolved into an examination of the richness of her teaching environment, and her place in the profession, as well as a meditation on the loss of her mother.

> Jenny: TAR meeting, like other writing communities, can bring complexities and conflicts within a question to the surface.

"I haven't taken any notes . . . I like my question . . . probably will make me cry but I'll read . . . about my mother (who passed away in August) . . . to try to separate that grief from why I hate teaching is hard . . . caretaker . . . I take care, but . . . I want to leave—my mother left when I was 9 . . . I feel silly but . . ."
Issues/challenges: comfort level with personal sharing; committing to note-taking after slow start.

Nancy's need to "question everything" became a focus on the challenges of motivating disaffected students.

Nancy: TAR meeting, identifying anxiety and uncertainty as common to research, tries to act as 'cheerleader.'
"Guess I'm not in great shape . . . go to so many workshops but don't have time to implement . . . I told my husband that my job was ruining my life . . . when I do take notes I feel they are inconsequential or redundant. I question everything this year . . ."
Issues/challenges: finding energy to persist in questions and problems that seem unanswerable; reaching out for support.

Mora's study, as we listened to stories of a boy who often frustrated her (and others), became a record of how she adapted her teaching to motivate this challenging student.

Mora: TAR meeting brings out concerns about "product"—essay at end of project.
"I feel a little more confident about what I'm doing in my research [one child, 4th grade, had him last year too] . . . warm and fuzzy . . . initial notes lack any focus . . . try to use interview . . ."
Issue/challenges: pursuing varied forms of data-gathering, grounding research in theory.

Claire's "Leonardo" book became "hook and anchor" for her students, as well as the unifying element for her essay.

Claire: TAR meeting promotes discussion of issues common to many grade levels (e.g. homework, structure, and report cards).
"I write before I go to sleep [reads from notes she had brought] . . . I want to tie together—brain work, guided visualization . . . some have no role models—if I tried the archetype of role model—Leonardo da Vinci . . . fantasy land: doesn't dawn that homework factors into grade . . . LD—need hooks and anchors . . . *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci* —Michael Gelb"
Issues/challenges: returning to "distant mentors" whose ideas continue to prod us to use or adapt their ideas.

Fortunately, after February, some members' questions were beginning to jell.

By April, much progress was visible. Minutes reveal that all attendees but Nancy felt their questions had become focused. Though Nancy continued to feel uncertain, her question would focus on the motivation issue that she had raised in September. Nancy's colleague Janet hadn't yet narrowed her focus from two students to one. Peg and Evelyn had changed their questions. The rest focused more sharply on an issue they chose at the

outset:

Nancy: 2 ninth-grade remedial classes
"Don't really have a question . . . wrote for three hours last night in stream of consciousness, pressure to . . ."

Janet: student accountability
"No draft, lots of notes, two students in particular . . ."

Peg : relationship with her first student teacher
"I'm not even close to a draft . . . when she [student teacher] left, I shut down . . . as if I lost a really good friend . . . having someone to talk to, someone who knew my kids as I know my kids . . . didn't realize how much I had come to rely on a relationship until it was gone . . . colleagues don't live with them, don't know them."
Book: *Company in Your Classroom*
Data: journal, plus pictures from digital camera, student's letters—"special things"

Evelyn: LD
"I was going to do something on what I do to help kids improve writing, but not a lot to say . . . something that included more—3 of us went to training . . . intense—re how sound is being made in mouth . . . got permission to work together (speech and language pathologist, LD teacher—i.e. Evelyn, and reading support teacher) . . . now 8 adults in room, all estrogen-deprived."

Sandy and Georganna: re authentic questions
"How do we get to be 'coaches on the side' or 'sages on the stage'? This week we think kids helped us out a lot . . . process vs. product . . . accountability pressure . . ." Supt.'s motto: "Dare to be great" . . . training kids vs. teaching them to think . . . distant mentor: Sizer—"habits of mind"

Mora: fourth grader , his behavior/my behavior, our interactions
"Think I've finally focused in on what I'm doing . . . helped when forced to start writing . . . around midnight stopped . . . not coming up with answers . . ."

Claire: Leonardo
"Question started about the impact of role models. Leo comes to our lessons with Mona Lisa . . . have painted and read to rap, jazz, Bach . . . 3 mainstreamed students have asked to join daVinci group . . . not saying they are bored . . . period 8—1:20—2:10, no one has cut . . . we are building a community . . ."

Connie: "I pretty much stuck with two questions: what happens if you teach Paulo Freire with Kathleen McCormick's questions? But then it became a given that

McCormick's questions do allow students to better understand the issues in their own education, and given that students can and do make coherent, intelligent, and practical suggestions for improving local education. What forum is available to students to make their issues known? Then it went from "What happens when all students must achieve at high levels?" (short lived) to "Is it possible to get people in positions of power to hear what you are saying if you are a woman? Are women received differently? Or—For how long can you straddle the contradictions before falling into the chasm?—or 'Caught in the Contradictions.'" I like your idea, Sheila—how does a town's mission statement translate into practice in the teacher's classroom on one assignment for two girls who wrote one letter one weekend in November?"

By gathering data and sharing ideas over time, members were engaging in ever-deepening reflections about their teaching. Had anyone else's question continued to expand as Connie's did, I would have worried. Connie, though, was a veteran researcher. Also, everyone was learning from her discussions about the philosophical implications of one classroom incident.

In May, a discussion of "Where are we now?" revealed how far members had come despite much faltering through the fall and winter months, and revealed a few lingering, or new, uncertainties:

Sandy and Georganna: We found a common theme for <u>all</u> of our research. And we even have a *title* for the whole book: *Tension within the Spiral.* [Both spoke of how the whole culture of teaching is changing, and resulting tensions.] Our role has changed so much . . . the culture is changing, becoming more student-centered. We were focused on all the negatives but now we see some growth.

Janet: I have a rough draft—what to do now?

Mora: What are some of the issues I can do something about? and what are some of the issues I can't do anything about? It's a means of stepping back and taking a look . . . started in my usual linear fashion . . . but, now, I began with a conclusion and am going "backwards."

Kathy: confidentiality issue not a problem, boy's parents only speak Chinese.
It seems there are more questions now [Jenny echoes this observation].

Jenny's question still: Do I want to continue teaching? my role in teaching? . . . chaos . . .

Nancy: I had projects, Hester Prynne's diary, etc., all over the classroom, and other kids said how come we don't get to . . .? . . . gave them choices: projects, writing, test-taking, involved kids in planning . . . some did nothing . . . their chance to . . . but . . .

Connie: I had become immersed in my research project, and had left Sheila to do all of the work of facilitating the group . . . I decided to abandon my research project.

The school year was nearly ending, even though our project wasn't. One reason

my notes were copious was their usefulness in communicating, as well as documenting, our experience. Besides using the minutes as a means of communication, I had expected that email would be routine for us, in communicating with each other and with me. Two members of the group didn't have email, and the group decided at the outset that "snail mail" was preferable for the minutes. Although the same few members did communicate their ideas about research questions to me throughout the year, I came to feel that most communication was one-way. Reactions to classifying, coding, and analysis in my minutes were minimal. At times, my communications seemed an exercise in futility, as well as a labor-intensive solitary task. The April survey countered that feeling. Only Claire seemed unaware of the multiple purposes for the minutes: "I do not see the need to have minutes about a meeting I attended. I read them but find them repetitious. Knowing our comments are 'logged' can be potentially inhibiting." Fortunately, all other comments about minutes were positive, even from Evelyn, who confessed to a minimal reading:

Evelyn: I read them in a cursory way. Am not great about opening my mail, but usually manage to get to the critical bills before phone or utilities are turned off or mortgage foreclosed. So the most helpful part of log/minutes and general messages was to come anyway, even if I've written nothing.

Nancy: I read and re-read them. Very helpful.

Peg: I look forward to the log/minutes. I enjoy reading them and remembering the conversations. They energize me and jog my writing. Thank you for them—especially when I wasn't able to be there. I love the quotations.

Georganna and Sandy: We read them. They focus us, remind us of deadlines.

Mora: Yes, I have read them. Because I attend meetings, they are meaningful.

Connie: I looked forward to the logs—was delighted when I made it—am shocked at what I don't remember anymore.

Janet: I do read the log/minutes. They help to keep me on track.

Again and again, the complexity of teaching was mirrored in our group. Some members would ignore the suggestion to reflect on the readings, and would state, matter-of-factly, that they hadn't had time to read. Even though, after so many months, the chapters in *Living the Questions* and other readings were becoming patently relevant to the research we had started, some still did not read. Because we were colleagues, though, without the inevitable power relationship between teachers and students, the consequences of non-participation were nebulous but real. An obvious example relates to coding, an important step in analysis. My efforts to promote coding weren't very productive. Individual coding "lessons" weren't practical, or requested. While I had hoped for collaborative efforts at coding (and used one meeting to have groups work together), I saw that most were reluctant to code their data systematically:

Nancy: As far as *Living the Questions* goes, I cannot bring myself to code my notes. I find that task tedious and not helpful.
Peg: The kind of research I'm doing doesn't lend itself to coding.
Mora: I haven't gotten as far as coding. I don't find much of it to be helpful.

Marian Mohr's reflection that "Honesty and the acknowledgement that the picture is NOT completely rosy characterize the research process and its results" (28) had freed me, years earlier, to look critically at my own teaching. I should have known better than to expect that facilitating a second teacher research project would be "completely rosy" either. During our last days together in the summer, those who stayed worked in harmony, and high spirits. On June 22, my memo to the group begins:

> Finally, drafts are beginning to take shape. Yes, that's my perception—*beginning* to take shape. What comes to mind as our week is winding down? First of all, gratitude—how teachers supporting each other becomes something magical, and vital. I find the CWP "network of support" a professional lifeline. Hope you do too. Second, although the "finish line" may be closer, we aren't there yet. So . . .

The fact that I didn't focus more on forming our community at the beginning still surprises me, especially because *my* first exposure to teacher research had been so isolated. In 1989, after reading about teacher research, I designed a sabbatical project to investigate teacher research. My husband was on sabbatical too; we coordinated our professional and personal schedules to include travel and research. My teacher research activities, while enlightening, were somewhat disjointed, as well as lonely. In alternating between theory and practice, I spent a semester auditing a university course in qualitative research, and observing kindergarten and first grade classes in Glastonbury. Then, on a trip to England, I collected and devoured "action research" books. In Spain I observed secondary school English language classes. Learning experiences all, but unfocused, and never brought to closure by writing for publication.

Like the lure of rowing for my son, or of quilting for his mother, though, that initial exposure to teacher research opened a door I wanted to enter, a place I wanted to explore for the challenge, and the fun of learning more. Of course I was thrilled with the Connecticut Writing Project's decision to support teacher research, first by having Glenda Bissex speak at a conference and then by sponsoring her to lead a year-long teacher research project with a group of writing project "veterans." It's no surprise, either, that Connie and I, part of that first group, went on to lead the next one, and then another. At the end of this venture, where does our "community" stand in relation to the larger communities that intersect with ours?

Our Worlds

Our *worlds* included the Connecticut Writing Project, the University of Connecticut, the National Writing Project, the teaching profession itself, and our personal lives. There were many financial and personal issues to consider in these worlds:

1. Funding one facilitator was possible using the NWP grant monies. Funding two facilitators at that level for a group of eleven was not financially feasible nor in alignment with teaching stipends. Since the exact number of participants in the group was in flux for several months, this did create some problems. Connie and I both felt strongly that leadership would be my role. Connie assisted at the meetings she could attend and faithfully picked up the CWP-purchased pizza and soda provided at each session;
2. Part way through the year (and once the number of participants became fixed) Connie agreed to assume responsibility for a separate CWP project involving the publication of multi-cultural literature annotated bibliographies, in addition to reading drafts of Teacher as Researcher work. This uniting of two editing responsibilities allowed the CWP to pay Connie for her work;
3. Because of my granddaughter's illness, the cloak of responsibility I had assumed never fit comfortably. I was driving frequently between Connecticut and Massachusetts, trying to maintain a façade of calm that threatened to crack, and relying on my laptop to unravel the loose ends that continued to plague our project. Did I have ample reserve to weigh the best solutions for inevitable problems and glitches? Of course not.

The intersection of personal and professional lives proved challenging during the academic year. We looked forward to the sustained meeting our summer week provided. During the eight days of summer meetings, Connie and I both spent days and nights critiquing everyone's emerging drafts. Members, too, were supportive readers and editors for each other, when they weren't working on their own drafts. Those of us who had participated in CWP summer institutes were reminded of the euphoria felt as we finished revising our "best" writing there. After group meetings ended, Connie and I worked together and separately on editing members' articles. Because she would not be writing an essay, Connie agreed to write the introduction to the book, and to finish editing the group's essays. I would use my ample data to write the essay I hadn't expected to be able to do. In the meantime, though, I had agreed to teach two courses in the University of Connecticut's NEAG School of Education. My writing an essay, besides being an isolated task, would necessarily delay the completion of our project. The positive aspect, of course, was the learning I knew would emerge from coding and analyzing my data.

The *world* of the Connecticut Writing Project is housed, physically, in the English Department of the University of Connecticut. Consequently, our group was able to use an English Department lounge for our meetings, and also the department's copy machine. These are obvious benefits. The downside is the University's location. As a land grant university, UConn is located in northeastern Connecticut, a long drive for many of us.

The National Writing Project, with its articulated goals and mandates, also touches our world, as it has since some of us first attended a Connecticut Writing Project Summer Institute. (For me, that was in 1985.) A teacher research project, like the Summer Institutes, provides exposure to theory, immersion in writing, and sharing of teaching practices. Richard Sterling, Executive Director of the National Writing Project, states: "The ways in which teacher researchers make their findings public is critical to the ongoing dialogue about educational change and avoiding simplistic solutions to complex problems" (17). Our collection of essays continues that dialogue. The NWP's stated commitment to promoting teacher research strikes a hopeful note for the future of professional development.

The National Writing Project overlaps with the widest part of our "world"—the teaching profession itself. Do the "extremes too hard to comprehend at once" of our group contain lessons for future groups of teacher researchers, and for our profession? Yes, indeed. Some of our difficulties can be avoided, and some of our successes can be replicated.

Lessons for Future Groups of Teacher Researchers

The are different benefits as well as different problems to consider, depending on whether public school teachers are facilitators of the Teacher Researcher seminar, or whether the program is conducted by a university faculty member. Both have merit and need to be considered.

- Should **leadership** be shared? Perhaps that will depend upon whether the program is offered as a course for credit through a university's School of Education or whether it is offered as a non-credit seminar. If it is the latter, perhaps instead of a second facilitator, a participant could be paid an additional stipend to handle administrative demands (that although needed do not rise to the level of a co-leader).

- Should participants be **paid**? Again, that will depend upon whether Teacher Research is offered as a course for credit through the School of Education or whether it is offered as a non-credit seminar. If it is the latter, participants need to be paid stipends.

Other issues are less complex:

- A **text** is a useful guide. If the group decides to use one, it should be available early.

- The **time** we allotted for our project was not sufficient. Instead of coinciding with the hectic start of the school year, a group would benefit from starting with a week in the summer. Community-building through writing could combine with exposure to research, and with mini-research exercises to practice data-gathering, and yes, coding. (This sequence, then, would involve a commitment to two summers plus a school year.)

- Teachers' **essays** in this collection tell stories that are enlightening for the problem-solving strategies they illustrate, and for the habit of inquiry they model so well. I hope the NWP's commitment to teacher research will include support for publication and wide dissemination of teacher researchers' stories.

- The **isolation** that often plagues teachers disappeared for us, especially in supportive oral sharing during meetings. For some, regular interchanges with a colleague about teaching issues continued outside our meetings, either in person, by phone, or by email.

- The entire **process** of teacher research, from finding a topic to publication, requires us to practice the same composing strategies we teach. In adopting an inquiring stance, teacher researchers become as vulnerable as our students, as prone to "failure," and as open to learning.

- The addition of **non-CWP members** to our group expanded our horizons, and provided a model for writing project sites to emulate. In this way, the NWP sites can become a vehicle to support all reflective teachers.

As I try to balance this "armful" for the last time, I think of Robert Frost's claim that a poem is "a momentary stay against confusion" ("Figure," 777). Isn't that true of teacher research too? Teaching, in these troubled times, often mirrors the confusion of life. During the time of this project, the confusion of my life centered in the slow dying of my beautiful granddaughter Cecilia. That profound sadness overshadowed my involvement with research concerns. Nonetheless, my experience with the group, and with the writing of this essay, renews my hope that teacher research will become a widely-practiced form of professional development. The Connecticut Writing Project, as a beacon for professional development in our state, continues to foster a "momentary stay" against the "confusion" that can stem from unexamined teaching. Richard Sterling's words feed my optimism: "The sites of the National Writing Project provide professional communities for teachers where we can make our teaching public and demonstrate our knowledge over time" (17). If this national organization mobilizes to support teacher research, its challenges, benefits, and pleasures will become more visible to teachers everywhere. With our publication, a public demonstration of our teaching knowledge, we celebrate the complexities and rewards of teaching.

* * *

Sheila Murphy taught English and Latin for thirty-four years, in grades seven through college, in Massachusetts, Hawaii, and Connecticut. After teaching for twenty-two years in Glastonbury, she returned to supervise student teachers for UConn, to write more poetry, to play with her grandchildren, and to become a kayaker.

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Contemporary English: A Lesson in Survival

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I have been a teacher at The Norwich Free Academy in Norwich, Connecticut, for fifteen years. I began my teaching career at NFA in September of 1985 as a business teacher. I had been a business student at NFA and had utilized my business skills in my career as a secretary for several years while attending college in the evening. It was only natural that I would eventually teach skills that I enjoyed and that had enabled me to support myself for many years. In the spring of 1990, after teaching business only five years, my principal asked me to leave the business department and join the English department to teach a new reading program through the use of technology. Although this was a difficult decision, I accepted the challenge and have evolved as an English teacher through graduate work, workshops, extensive reading, and on-the-job training.

In April of 1999, a flier from the Connecticut Writing Project announcing an informational meeting about teacher research appeared in my mailbox and grabbed my attention. The first line said, "Are you curious about why something is/isn't working in your classroom? Do you want to know how to make your teaching more effective by reflecting on your practice?" My immediate response to both questions was "Yes!" I was excited about the prospect of continuing my growth as a teacher by reflecting on my teaching. What an opportunity this would be, not only to take notes on my teaching and what happens in my classroom, but also to share those findings and receive feedback from fellow teachers throughout the state! I was certain it would make me become a better teacher and help me reach my professional goal of engaging students in critical thinking skills.

Early in my research, I read Glenda Bissex's article "Small is Beautiful: Case Study as Appropriate Methodology for Teacher Research." Her statement, "The end of a case study should be insight, not control—an understanding of others and of ourselves that helps us to be educators, not manipulators," resonated with me. My immediate response to Bissex was, "I don't want to be a manipulator; I strive to be an educator." I feel that many teachers are manipulators, making all the decisions in the classroom and allowing students no choice. In my own case, I have assigned the same book to every student, and we read it together in class. After reading together, I have resorted to having the students answer comprehension questions. I would have preferred thought-provoking, student-led discussions, but students never seemed interested in this kind of approach. In my journal, I posed the questions: "Why are kids bored? On a daily basis, how can I get students more engaged?" I wondered what my students were learning from study guide questions. Why did I have to tell them what they should be learning from a work of literature? Why couldn't they or didn't they make their own meaning? I wanted to do less of this manipulative teaching, and more educating.

I was approaching the end of a great school year in 1999, with students who were motivated to learn and willing to go the extra mile when it came to projects, homework, group work, and class assignments. I was eager to begin teacher research and was looking forward to the 1999-2000 academic year with great expectations. I would be teaching the same courses as I had the previous year: two tenth-grade English 2 classes, two Contemporary English classes, and one senior Speech class, a schedule which also contributed to my positive attitude. Rather than spending my energy on lesson plans for new classes, I could concentrate on fine-tuning old lesson plans. One thing I love about teaching is that I have a chance to change and improve

lesson plans, thereby simultaneously challenging my students more and helping me be a better teacher. I like teaching at the NFA because I feel that I have a fair amount of academic freedom within the parameters of the curriculum.

The Norwich Free Academy, located in southeastern Connecticut, is not a typical public high school. It is a privately endowed independent school governed by a Board of Trustees and is the designated high school for Norwich students as well as for students from seven surrounding towns. The campus, which resembles a small college, has four main academic buildings where students are assigned homerooms. Each building has a principal who oversees teachers and students assigned to that building. In addition to the four main academic buildings, the NFA campus also includes an art school and Slater Art Museum, the Latham Science and Information Center which houses the multi-media Land Library, two gymnasiums, an administration building, and Alumni House where class reunions and fundraising campaigns are planned. Student enrollment is approximately 2,100. The class schedule rotates channels A through G, with six fifty-two minute periods on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and five sixty-four minute periods on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Lunch period is ninety-four minutes every day and includes a thirty minute lunch. Although most teachers like this schedule, which has been in effect for the last four years, the reality of the rotation is that some classes meet both Tuesdays and Thursdays, our long period days, while other classes do not. The result is approximately ten minutes more class time each week for those classes that meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Longer class periods can be difficult when a teacher has unmotivated and unruly students in those classes, especially since two of those channels meet at the end of the day on Thursday and Friday.

A unique program at The Norwich Free Academy is the ninth-grade house which was instituted in the Cranston building approximately ten years ago. The program is a response to the concern of many administrators and parents that students who came to NFA from small towns might have difficulty with the transition from eighth to ninth grades. All ninth grade students are assigned to units of approximately 120 students each. Each unit has four teachers and a guidance counselor. The four unit teachers and the guidance counselor meet weekly to discuss curriculum and students in their unit. Teachers are pro-active, beginning with individual orientation conferences in August and continuing with weekly meetings and frequent parent contact. Even though I no longer teach these students and have asked to be moved out of the building, my classroom has remained in this building. I have recently been notified that I will move out of the ninth grade building for the 2000-2001 academic year.

During the 1999-2000 academic year, NFA instituted a tenth-grade unit. Although the unit is not housed in one building, these students are all assigned to homerooms in one building with the building principal who was instrumental in beginning the tenth-grade unit. The tenth-grade unit also consists of four teachers who meet weekly and contact parents frequently. The tenth-grade unit has approximately eighty students who are recommended by their ninth-grade teachers. These students are identified as needing some encouragement and special attention in order to be more successful academically. Both the students and their parents have to consent in order for the students to be placed in the tenth-grade unit. These students take their four core academic classes during Channels A through D, and they have their electives during the other three channels. The administration had decided to add a second tenth-grade unit for the 2000-2001 academic year, although the faculty had mixed feelings about the effectiveness of the program. Faculty members at NFA serve on various committees, but the consensus among faculty members is that our input is sometimes ignored. For example, our Student Mentor Program has been retooled this year much to the chagrin of both students and teachers. This program is designed to bring a group of students together with a faculty member on the premise that students will

connect with that adult. Even though students and teachers have consistently given the program low ratings, the administration has told us that we will keep the Student Mentor Program.

In September, when I received my class lists the day before classes began, I panicked. While my English 2 and Speech classes had enrollments of twenty-three students each, the enrollment for my two Contemporary English classes was twenty-four students in each section, well above the customary seventeen. In a normal school year this would have been difficult to deal with, but this was no ordinary year. Because my older daughter was getting married in September, I had been occupied with wedding planning and house preparation for the majority of the summer and did not have an opportunity to rejuvenate myself before the beginning of the new school year. As a result, not only did I return to school tired, but I was not as organized as I usually am for the start of classes. In addition, I would be absent from school on my daughter's wedding day during the second week of school. Even though I prefer not to be out of my classroom, especially so early in the academic year, I had no other option. Needless to say, the overcrowding problem in Contemporary English made the return to school a tad more difficult than usual.

Contemporary English is a class that consists of all students who did not receive credit for ninth-grade English. Since students take this class to make up credit for ninth-grade English, most students are tenth graders; however, the classes usually have a handful of third and fourth-year students who have not yet made up their ninth-grade English credit. Usually, a student who fails English must repeat that English class the following year, mixing in with other students who are taking the course for the first time. If a student fails his or her ninth-grade English class, however, an exception occurs because the ninth grade house cannot accommodate ninth-grade failures as well. The administration's solution to this unique problem is to offer a course, exclusively for upperclassmen who have failed English I, called Contemporary English.
I have taught Contemporary English almost since its inception, and enrollment in these classes has been manageable, averaging about seventeen students. Without warning, the number of students shot up to twenty-four. This class would be difficult to teach, both because of the higher enrollment and because these Contemporary English students had already proved that they had difficulty with the subject.

I wasted no time in contacting the curriculum director who assured me that he would do something to rectify this problem. What I received was not a change or a modification in my class size, but an explanation as to why my numbers were so large. It seems that when our administration assigned English teachers to other new programs, they overlooked one teacher who had previously taught a section of Contemporary English. By giving that teacher a new assignment, he would no longer be available to teach Contemporary English. For whatever reason, the administration did not assign anyone else to take his place, and as a result the master schedule ended up with two, instead of three, sections of Contemporary English—and I was teaching both. Compounding the problem further is the policy that allows students to take their regular level of English along with the Contemporary class, so several of my Contemporary English students were also scheduled in my English 2 classes. We would be together eight times a week, which was not good for a number of reasons. First, course expectations, including homework and independent work, differed in both classes. Second, if there was a personality clash between a student and me, it would not be beneficial to either of us to see one another twice as often. Third, I believe that classroom learning is more than the infusion of knowledge; it is learning to deal with different instructors and teaching styles. The students who had me for both English classes would be deprived of the breadth of that experience. I asked the curriculum director to remove those students who had me for both English classes from one class or the

other; I did not care which. A month passed before he eventually complied with that request and removed those students, except one, from my Contemporary English classes. When I questioned him about the one remaining student in both classes, he said that he had spoken with her counselor, and there were some problems that precluded the student from being removed.

In addition to high enrollment, that year's Contemporary English classes were scheduled for periods that met two days each week at the end of the day for sixty-four minutes. For students who are predisposed to behavior problems, the end of the school day is not the most conducive for learning. First, those students who have skipped breakfast and lunch are tired and worn down, while those who have eaten junk food during lunch are hyperactive. Second, students have had the better part of the school day to interact with other faculty and students, and they often carry "emotional baggage" into the class. Third, since many are reluctant learners, they feel they have had all the learning they can handle for one day, and all they want is to go home. As if all of those problems were not enough, there was another. Some students who had taken Contemporary English during the previous year had failed it and were repeating. This repetition meant I would have to change the curriculum to insure those repeating students did not have the same readings and assignments from last year, which would have only added to their boredom. (I have had some students in the class three consecutive years because they failed repeatedly due to lack of effort or frequent absences.) While I usually change lesson plans, I resented that I had to change books, stories, and other readings, especially since many of the texts I could no longer use were high interest books for teenagers, and students in the past had enjoyed reading them. On the other hand, I considered myself fortunate that the Contemporary English curriculum gave me the freedom to choose alternate literature for those classes.

Since I had no choice but to wait for the administration to alleviate my overcrowding problem, I quickly revised some lesson plans to accommodate the repeating students. I usually begin the new school year with short one-period assignments in Contemporary English because frequent schedule changes during the first two weeks of school create an unstable enrollment. From a practical standpoint, this approach makes it easier because I do not have to collect books issued, students entering are not too far behind, etc. In the past, this approach has worked beautifully. This year, on top of everything else, I immediately ran into a stumbling block. I had ordered an analogy book during the summer and was excited about trying some analogies. When we began the first analogy worksheet, Justin said sarcastically, "Gee, I don't know. What could this answer be?" Obviously, the worksheet was too easy for these kids, and they were insulted. We finished the worksheet, but the next day I gave the book to a colleague who teaches low level students. I had gotten the message. Keeping in line with my philosophy that students should have some choice in their learning, I vowed that I would try to find more challenging materials. Looking back on that incident now, I wonder why I continued with the worksheet. In hindsight, it might have been beneficial to stop the analogy worksheet and have a class discussion or go on to another assignment.

Meanwhile, during the entire month of September, I spoke with the curriculum director on a daily basis, asking him to do something about the large numbers in the Contemporary English classes. Even the students realized the absurdity of the situation. On the first day of school, Christina walked in, looked around the room, and remarked, "Well, this is stupid, putting all of us in the same class!" Since I was the only teacher who taught Contemporary English, I felt as if no one cared and that it was my problem. Although I had mentioned the problem to my department chair several times, she did not offer a solution or intercede for me. First, the curriculum director said he was hoping to hire another teacher who could teach English part-time. When that plan fell through in the third week of September, he told me to ask my colleagues at our

department meeting if one of them would be willing to teach a sixth course so he could add another section of Contemporary English. One teacher (who in my opinion was already overloaded) agreed to teach a section. Finally, on September 28, the curriculum director arrived at my classroom and told ten students to come with him. "You're going to be in Mrs. Gilman's class from now on," he informed them. The students were upset and felt that I should have said something to them. They believed I had asked for their removal and they did not understand why. The curriculum director had told me the previous day that he would be in that morning to switch ten students to the new section, but I did not mention it to the students. In retrospect, I wish I had mentioned it to the students so the transition would have been smoother.

I think I secretly hoped that the behavior in the class would improve with ten fewer students, but to make matters worse, the students who were left behind were upset, especially Angela, whose boyfriend was one of the students transferred. She was furious and yelled out, "This class sucks, anyway." I told her to leave the room and wrote up a discipline referral. Fifteen minutes later, Angela's dean showed up at my room to get Angela's backpack. "She's really a very nice girl," he said. "Not with me, she isn't. She's had an attitude since day one," I told him. Angela is a petite young woman who had an attitude at the beginning of the year. Shortly after the discipline referral incident, Angela's mother came to see me on our first parents' night. Because the line was too long, she left before I had an opportunity to speak with her. When Angela told me this in class the following day, I asked for her mother's telephone number and called her mother promptly. Angela's mother was concerned about her daughter's behavior, and we had a nice conversation.

Angela frequently asked me how you knew you were in love. She and her boyfriend were off and on all year, and she often sought advice, which I did not dispense, but I did listen well and she appreciated that. As the year went on, Angela lost her attitude and became one of the best students in my class. She volunteered to read every day and always handed her assignments in on time. I felt she was engaged in her learning. I think she really wanted to learn, but she wanted innovative and fun methods of learning. But early in the school year, with my busy personal schedule and the problems with the Contemporary English enrollment, I felt set up and unsupported—again! I realized the strong influence administrative support, or lack thereof, had on me. Because I didn't feel supported, I did not have the energy or the confidence to provide the choice to students which I think is so important to educating and not manipulating students. This was not the good beginning I had anticipated.

Unfortunately, behavior continued to be a major problem in Contemporary English classes. For example, students are not allowed to wear head coverings in the academic areas. When I asked Curtis to remove his doo-rag, he replied, "Why don't you take off your hair?" In another instance, I gave Justin his progress report indicating a failing grade. He argued with me that he had submitted all his assignments and that I must have lost his work. Then he became upset and told me that he did all his "f—ing" work. When I asked him to leave, he threw his notebook across the room.

Again, I wrote out a discipline referral. When I received Justin's discipline referral back from his dean, however, I was appalled at his punishment of a detention, which seemed a slap on the wrist in comparison to Justin's behavior. I also noted a comment on the form that Justin had told the dean he did not use the "F" word. When I contacted the dean face-to-face to say that Justin did, in fact, use the "F" word, the dean said, "Are you sure, because he said he said 'frigging.' You know sometimes when you're angry you think you heard something that you didn't."

I was furious and replied, "You have known me for years and know that I am a person of

integrity. If I wrote on a discipline referral that a student said something, then that student said it." I was livid that the administrator had taken a student's word over mine. The dean said, "Well, that changes his punishment, but you know Justin's home life is almost non-existent." Was that supposed to make me feel sorry for him? I was tempted to say that it shouldn't make any difference if Justin had said "f—ing" or "frigging" because either word is disrespectful and inappropriate. The dean did give Justin a more severe punishment, but I was still angry that, as a professional, I was not believed. The year certainly was not off to an auspicious start, and the problems continued.

Another behavior problem occurred in September, when I inadvertently left my keys hanging from the book closet. Someone stole them, and they never showed up. The school had to hire a locksmith to put new locks on my doors and file cabinets. When I assigned detentions for tardiness or behavior, students cut the detentions. Students accused me of yelling at them. I didn't think that I was yelling, but my tone of voice was probably not the friendliest, so they construed that as yelling. The classes were out of control, and what was worse, I felt as if I was out of control. I felt isolated and alone. On parents' night, one mother was shocked to hear that her son was one of the worst behaved students in the class. She was very pleasant and supportive, and she told me she was going to visit the class to observe her son in action. She wrote down the meeting times of the class each day and said that she would call me to let me know when she would be in. She asked me not to mention it to her son because she wanted to surprise him. Instead, I was the one who was surprised because she never followed through, and unfortunately, her son's behavior did not improve.

Generally speaking, I have found that unless parents and teachers work together to effect change, there is little or no improvement in the students' grades or behavior. I am tired of uncooperative parents who enable their children and blame teachers for their children's difficulties. In looking through the notes I was keeping for my teacher as researcher project, I found, "No confrontation in G Channel today." I have been teaching for fifteen years, and I find it incredible that I would even write that comment. The lack of confrontation was so unusual that I felt the need to document it. The Contemporary English students were so unruly and disrespectful that I dreaded meeting those classes. To make matters worse, the two classes met for consecutive periods. I began to get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach when those students arrived in my room, something that had seldom happened to me prior to this year. My teaching career seemed to be at an all-time low.

I knew if I was going to survive, I had to get those kids hooked on something. I remembered that on the day of the mid-term exam, several Contemporary English kids asked me what "theme" meant. Disappointed that they still did not understand the concept of theme, I wanted to find a fun way to teach theme. I was grasping at straws when I asked the students to list five songs and five movies or TV shows they liked. After they wrote their lists, we went around the class, and I asked each student to tell me what one song and one movie/TV show was about. The students listed them on the easel pad: "love, money brings problems, having fun, love and abuse, maturing, money and survival, and fun/entertainment." Angela asked, "Why are we doing this?" I told her that was a good question, wrote the word *theme* on the board, and asked if they knew what it meant. At that moment I felt that I was an educator, not a manipulator. I felt the students were engaged. I told them I was disturbed by the fact that on exam day they did not know what theme was, so I was trying to think of a way to teach theme. Inspired by their engagement, I explained a song assignment I had given my classes the previous year and asked if they were interested in doing it. I explained that we could tie theme into their songs. They seemed excited about the assignment, so I decided to recreate the lesson that had been so successful only one

year ago. It took me a few days to type up the instructions and hand them out. In the meantime, they repeatedly asked when they were going to do the song assignment.

The assignment consists of the student choosing a song that he or she likes (not necessarily their favorite song) and submitting the song lyrics. The lyrics must be appropriate for classroom viewing and listening, as set forth in my criteria. Students usually find lyrics on the CD jacket or on the internet; however, for those students having difficulty locating lyrics, I offered to locate and print them on the condition that the student give me the pertinent information such as song title, album title, artist's name, and genre. The student must also allow sufficient time to locate the lyrics. The song may be a contemporary song or it may be an "oldie." After I approved the song lyrics, I made an overhead transparency of each student's lyrics to show during the student's oral presentation. On the assigned date, the student must give an oral presentation, play the song, and submit a written report which consists of answers to questions based on the Connecticut Academic Performance Test. For example, what is the theme of this song? How does this song relate to you? What is the artist/writer trying to say in this song? The student must also do some research to include the year the song was recorded, as well as the name of the recording artist and the name of the lyricist. Students may give any additional information about the song or artist that they think is interesting. When I finally gave them the assignment instructions and discussed them, several students "took the ball and ran with it." They handed in each item on time and brought their music on the assigned day. Some students, who had been the most vocal in favor of doing the assignment, however, never got it done.

I was pleased with those students who did the assignment on time and in an enthusiastic manner; however, I was upset with those who did not complete the assignment. I finally felt as if I had been teaching and giving them choice, but still so many did not complete the assignment. As a result, I asked my students to do a reflective writing about the song assignment. In response to the question, "What problems did you experience while doing the song assignment?" several students said that they had problems finding the lyrics to a song. Since I had offered repeatedly to locate lyrics for my students, I was surprised by this reply. Another popular response was that students had difficulty finding song lyrics that were appropriate for class use. I refuse to relax the standard for appropriateness since there are many song lyrics that are appropriate. In response to the question, "What can I, as a teacher, do to make the assignment go smoother?" most students said that there was nothing more I could do, that my expectations and deadlines were reasonable and clear. Still, I find myself wondering why these students who did not complete the assignment couldn't seem to work independently on an assignment of their choice that should be fun.

One day, in the midst of my musings, Angela came into class and announced, "Mr. Pitney is so cool." I asked, "Why?" She said he wore a glove that day while teaching and never mentioned it. The students noticed the glove but didn't ask Mr. Pitney why he was wearing it. Finally, he told them it was because of a story they were going to read called "The Minister's Black Veil." Angela said, "We all thought that was cool." This exchange with Angela left me wishing I could be cool, or at least creative. I wanted these kids to like English and to feel an excitement about learning. Angela complained again, "All we ever do is read." I asked what they did in English 2 class. "Today we learned how to do a bibliography for our research paper, and we did vocabulary," Angela responded. I said that I do those things in English 2 classes also, but that the curriculum for Contemporary English class is different than English 2. I felt as if my answer was a copout. I was tired of hearing, "This class is boring. All we ever do is read." I kept asking myself, "Why are they bored? Even when given a choice, why don't they take advantage of it? Why don't they complete assignments when they are given the choice of the subject matter, such as the song assignment? How can I engage students to make their own meaning?" It seemed to

me that the students didn't want choice. All they wanted to do was talk, sleep, or complain. Still trying to find material that was both interesting and stimulating, I decided to have the students read Stephen King's novella *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*. I was pleased that they seemed to enjoy it and showed it by staying interested in the story, although I did hear complaints of "This class is no fun. All we ever do is read." When they were done with the reading, I showed the edited version of the movie. They were upset that the movie was not exactly the same as the book and were vocal in pointing out the differences. We had a good class discussion about why a filmmaker changes things in the book when he or she makes the movie version. The students were very perceptive and came to the conclusion that the book was better than the movie.

I started to feel as if we were finally, in February, coming together as a community of learners. Once again I felt myself an educator and not a manipulator. As the culminating activity, I gave students a choice of final assignments. Several students chose to write a letter to Stephen King, and most expressed surprise that he wrote the novella, since they thought he wrote only horror. Many also asked why the filmmaker had changed so many parts of the book. My one regret is that I did not have the students polish the letters so that I could actually mail them to Stephen King. That would have made the lesson even better, and I will include revision and polishing the next time I do this assignment.

Because I am a reflective teacher, much of my lesson planning is responsive. So after reading a set of papers and being appalled at the grammar, I decided to do a grammar lesson with my students. I began with an easy worksheet on which students were to identify nouns, pronouns, and verbs. We did several examples together and then I asked them to do a few alone. They were enthusiastic, and I observed that they seemed to enjoy doing these exercises. We then wrote all pronouns on the easel pad. I told them we should make up a pronoun song. Emily offered to bring lyrics to a song that she thought could be adapted for a pronoun song. They left class excited and I was hopeful, but Emily never brought the lyrics, even though I reminded her several times. It's interesting to me that these kids seemed to enjoy these concrete worksheets, rather than an assignment where they are asked to think critically. This was evidenced by the fact that they worked enthusiastically on the parts of speech worksheet but dropped the ball when they were asked to create something such as a pronoun song. I wonder what would have happened with the pronoun song if I had pushed Emily to bring in lyrics and then given students class time to create a song. I could have chosen lyrics that students could have adapted, but I wanted to put some responsibility on the students, as well as give them some choice. Does it take more than giving students choice? I wondered. Are there some students who can't handle the responsibility, even though they had volunteered?

My next attempt to hook these kids was to have them read three plays featuring teenage characters. I told students they were going to break into groups and write original plays featuring teenage characters. They could use the three plays we read as models for their plays. We talked about the essential elements of a play: characters, setting, dialogue, narration, conflict, plot, and resolution. The students appeared excited about it, so I let them choose their own groups. I signed my classes up for one week (four class periods) in the computer lab so they could break into groups around the computers to compose and type their plays. On our first day in the lab, Emily's group wasted the entire period and left class at the end of the period without writing anything. My frustration with this group was clear when, on March 7, 2000, I wrote in my journal: "Contemporary English classes dragging their feet on plays. Why should I give them more class time when they waste it?" The other groups worked well together, and by the sound of their raised voices, I observed that they were enthusiastic about their original plays. After a

few days in the computer lab, some groups finished their plays and began rehearsing, while other groups continued writing their plays. Those students who did complete the assignment practiced and performed their plays for the other students in the class. In the end, Emily's group never finished their play, and all group members took a grade of zero for the assignment. Naturally, they all blamed each other for not finishing.

Not completing assignments is typical of students in Contemporary English classes in general, and of Emily in particular. For example, after we finished reading *Before Women Had Wings*, I asked my students if they would prefer to take a test or have a choice of culminating activities. They overwhelmingly chose the choice of activities. If they chose a writing activity, the minimum was 800 words. If they chose a project-like activity, the written portion was a minimum of 350 words. Most chose project-like activities, and I gave them three entire class periods to begin their projects. I asked them to come up with a reasonable due date for completion of the projects, and they agreed on the due date. Emily went so far as to buy special poster board and bring in her own magazines. She was enthusiastic and set to work immediately, cutting pictures out of her magazines and gluing them on her poster board.

Another student, Georgia, decided to construct a model of the Travelers' Motel, the setting for the major portion of the novel. Georgia also purchased special poster board and used my construction paper to construct her model, which showed a great deal of thought and understanding of the novel; however, neither Emily nor Georgia finished their projects. Emily took her poster home, and I never saw it again, even though I asked her about it at least twice. Georgia left her model in the classroom and never completed the written portion. I decided to give Emily and Georgia partial credit for the work they had completed. When I asked Emily about her project, she said, "Oh, I never finished it. Just give me a zero." When I asked Georgia what grade she thought she deserved for her model, she replied, "I think I should receive half-credit since I did a good job on the model and that was half of the assignment." I agreed and gave Georgia half-credit for the completed portion of the assignment. Georgia is a young woman you could not help but like. She is a social butterfly with a vibrant personality who loved to run errands for me. The problem was that she got sidetracked and took too long. After a while, I would not let her go. Georgia repeatedly asked to go to the ladies room or to the nurse. She was very needy, and she did not like sitting in class. Because of Georgia, I instituted a once-a-week bathroom policy. On a more positive note, Georgia enjoyed reading and discussing books and often volunteered to read in class. Georgia usually began projects enthusiastically, even going so far as to buy poster board; however, she seldom finished any work outside of the classroom even though she was well aware of the consequences. Again I wondered, "Are there some students who take advantage of the choice and have the initial responsibility to begin the assignment with gusto but can't carry through?" My original research question was only leading to more complex questions instead of answers.

Emily is a student who likes to be the center of attention. Once she asked if I had any contact lens solution. I let her use mine once, but when she asked again, I refused. She asked me twice to go to the ladies room because her contact lens was coming out. The third time I would not let her go and told her to make an appointment with her eye doctor to get her contact lens checked. One day, Emily entered my classroom, stood in the center of the room with her hands on her hips, and bellowed, "Why did you tell my mother that I like to be the center of attention?" Since Emily's mother worked in one of the school's offices, I got the impression that Emily thought she was special. I once told Emily's mother, "Emily is a trip," and her mother replied, "I know. Just tell me I'll live through it." Emily was constantly talking during class while she was supposed to be working. She usually asked if she could bring the assignment home to finish it,

and I said yes as long as she brought it back the next day. Inevitably, Emily would forget the assignment, and I would have to keep asking for it. When I continued taking assignments late, Emily became angry with me and told me that I was a "wimpy teacher" because I did not stick to my rules. From that moment on, I no longer accepted any work after the due date. The other students in the class became annoyed with Emily, but Emily made sure that her work was in on time after that. Are there some students who take advantage of the choice and have the initial responsibility to begin the assignment with gusto but don't carry through unless there are *immediate* consequences? Again my initial questions about the relationship between student choice and engagement were becoming increasingly intricate.

The pattern with Contemporary English students is that they seldom work at home and, therefore, lose credit for some major assignments. With poor work habits, it's easy to understand why these kids failed English I. It was frustrating when I gave the students choices about the work they would do and actually allowed them to set the due date, and they still did not complete the work. Another frustration I experienced with this culminating activity is that I included a test as one of the options. Unfortunately, some students chose the test, which took only one class period. Since I had set aside three class periods for students to work on their projects, I had to keep the testing students busy for two class periods. By including the test as an option, I created additional work for myself.

I was really confused by and annoyed with those students who did not finish their projects for *Before Women Had Wings* because I had chosen the novel with my students in mind. It is written from a young girl's point of view and details her youth, including the suicide of her alcoholic father and her life with an alcoholic and abusive mother. The students seemed to like it, but as soon as there was a sexual reference, some of them said they didn't want to read the book. This puzzled me because these students frequently watch videos that contain sexual scenes on MTV and VH1. Why can't they see the bigger picture and appreciate the book for what it offers? "What am I doing wrong?" I wondered again. "How can I change my teaching so that students will be interested?"

I think the students were bored because we read and they answered questions. I asked them if they would prefer to write a response or summary about the book rather than do questions. I received a resounding "No! Questions are easier." Even so, many students in their year-end evaluations choose *Before Women Had Wings* as their favorite book because it was so "realistic." I do think that my students enjoy activities that make them think as long as they are interesting. I believe they are ready to complete more challenging assignments.

At the end of the school year, I asked my Contemporary English students to evaluate the course. They could do so anonymously because I wanted them to be candid. I explained that I take their evaluations very seriously and sometimes change elements of the course based on their responses. Surprisingly, many students said that I should give more work and that I should grade tougher. Many said that this was the first time they had ever read an entire book.

In pondering my research and the students' evaluations of Contemporary English, I have come to several conclusions. First, Contemporary English students are tired of reading young adult books because they are too juvenile. While some of these students may have low reading levels, most are very bright, albeit unmotivated. They want to read lots of challenging books. I would like to intersperse some excellent young adult books with more contemporary books; however, due to budget constraints, my department chairperson is reluctant to buy class sets of books that sell for over five dollars each, and most good books cost more than five dollars. I often feel stifled because neither the students nor I like the books that are available in class sets. One way around this dilemma is to have students choose their own books. I did try this a few

years ago but with limited success. At that time, students read quietly in class and kept reading logs. My main goal was to have students enjoy reading. Even though students seemed to enjoy their independent reading, after two or three weeks, some forgot their books, were tired, or did not like their books. I plan to modify this independent reading assignment to include more structure with regular check points and try it again with Contemporary English students.

Second, because Contemporary English students have already lost credit for English I, they usually do not like English and/or have trouble with it. It is difficult to engage them in reading and writing activities. I must offer a variety of activities and strategies that will interest the students and keep them engaged in every class. In addition, these students need structure and assignments that can be completed in one class period.

Third, for precisely the reasons stated above, our administration should make a commitment to lower the enrollment cap in Contemporary English classes. They should keep in mind that these students are all enrolled in a regular English class in addition to Contemporary English. The administration should consider this when scheduling these students into two classes, trying to avoid two consecutive periods of English. The administration should also support the teachers of these unmotivated students. Scheduling twenty-four unmotivated students into long classes at the end of the day is a recipe for disaster for both students and teacher.

Fourth, students have told me that I should be stricter and less tolerant of their inappropriate behavior. I could not believe my eyes when I read their comments: "Give out more detentions" and "Grade stricter." These comments, along with Emily's previous comment about my being a wimpy teacher, show that students do want structure and clear rules to follow.

Fifth, while I have a responsibility to present challenging material, students must take responsibility for their own work and grades. I pride myself on making my expectations and due dates clear. Students and parents must sign grading policies; assignments and due dates are always written on the board; a specific makeup folder is kept up to date for absent students, and I provide a basket for incoming assignments. In fact, in response to my question on the evaluations, "What can I do to make my expectations for class work and homework clearer?" most students replied "Nothing" or "You made it very clear."

Finally, spending the year with two "classes from hell" zapped my energy, but it also allowed me to grow professionally by reflecting on my teaching. I learned that I am resilient and I do have the capacity to renew myself after a horrible school year. About six weeks after school ended, when enough time had elapsed, I was able to read my students' evaluations. I had to distance myself from the students in order to accept their candid remarks. To my surprise, their comments showed that they were aware of my efforts to find interesting work for them. Furthermore, they knew more about their own learning than I did. Even when there was choice, they still needed guidelines and structure within that choice. They also needed consequences for not carrying through. I also learned that by being tenacious with my administration, I was able to effect change, at least in one class. I also learned that with the passing of time, I could actually laugh at some of the scenarios in these classes. I learned that I am a better teacher than I had previously thought. And most importantly, I learned that I can survive.

While the 1999-2000 academic year was a trying one, I have learned a lot from my students and look forward to interacting with students in the years ahead. In the spring of 2000, when my department chairperson asked for our teaching preferences, I told her I did not want to teach Contemporary English again. Nonetheless, I have been assigned one section of Contemporary English for the next academic year. The good news is that I don't have a wedding to prepare for this fall, and I am rejuvenating myself this summer which began with my first trip to Europe. Once I'm rested, I can spend the remainder of the summer planning for my new Contemporary

English class. As the French say, "C'est la vie" or is it "C'est la guerre"?

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Idealism, Methodology, and a Decade in the Classroom

Jean M. Evans

"Her optimism, her curiosity, and her love for teaching have brought me renewed energy at times when I felt tired and even discouraged with my own work." Looking back at those words used to describe me nearly ten years ago, penned in a letter of recommendation by a veteran English teacher at Darien High where I had just completed a two-year internship as a full-time substitute and a student teacher, it seems that I would have stayed eternally fresh, infinitely enthusiastic. Rather, I pose the following question to my colleagues in the profession:

What happens to an experienced teacher's idealism after a decade in the real world of education when one must try to incorporate everyone's fingerprint into the daily happenings of her classroom?

Is it possible to allow the teacher, distant mentors from research, the students, the English department, the Board of Education, as well as the parents, to share in the development of a meaningful classroom structure and still retain professional integrity, high standards, and a feeling of enthusiasm for the intellectual development of the individuals the teacher is charged with instructing?

Or, is the old adage true that "too many cooks spoil the broth"?

Just last week in rummaging through some old files in my storage unit, I happened upon the journal which I was required to write as an intern at a local suburban high school—a requirement for my Master's in Education. Having entered the program fresh from a career as a hairdresser and business manager, I had a clear-cut vision of what the real emphasis would be in my classroom—fostering the individuality of the learners and their intellectual curiosity. I was developing a humanistic educational philosophy. I knew back then that the reason I had entered the profession was simple and clearly definable: I had an interest in inspiring people to learn about human nature through literature and to find the pleasures that I had found over the years in writing and reading.

My decision to become a teacher was primarily, along with my subject matter, based on a love of people and the exchange of ideas. Therefore, I pondered, in that journal back a decade ago, issues such as how to best reach the students, how to foster an atmosphere of mutual respect, and how to be the type of person with whom students would feel a sense of ease in sharing their perceptions and experiences in relation to literature and life. In looking over this journal, I found an entry that compared the styles of two different teachers. Looking back at it now, I am struck at how easily I was able to divide the world of teachers into two types: the conservative taskmaster and the liberal facilitator. You can see for yourself whether or not I was biased in my account of who makes for the better teacher:

> Monday, March 25, 1991
>
> The teachers I chose to observe today have greatly contrasting styles. Teacher A keeps his students constantly busy. They have folders filled with publisher-available packets with various questions on the literal and inferential levels that are related to the various novels being read in class. The students keep a record of their scores on these "packets" in their folders, and they are responsible for calculating their current grade average at any given time. When the students have any free time in class, they are required to attend to their folder activities.
>
> Teacher B conducts his lessons in a less regimented manner. He introduces

a topic in class, such as realism, naturalism, modernism, or impressionism. Then he provides students with various stories or excerpts from novels which illustrate the topic he has addressed. Finally, he asks the students to individually choose a piece from the works available during class for silent reading and independent analysis. Toward the end of the class, he stops the activity for a journal writing session in which students critique the work and discuss the specific literary element from the lesson, and a group discussion ensues. I anticipated that the students would need a lot of reminders to stay on-task during the silent reading; however, they relaxed and stretched out and did the required reading.

Teacher B created the type of environment that I believe would be conducive to fostering a love of independent learning and recreational reading among his students. Teacher A's style seemed to have such a "task-oriented" approach that one may infer that students would not leave his class at the end of the year with a sense of being inspired to enjoy reading, analysis, and writing. In speaking with the teachers after the school day was over, I processed this contrast as follows: Teacher B was working with upper-division classes of seniors, and when he spoke of the class, he focused upon their individuality and their likes and dislikes and abilities. While Teacher A talked to me quite a bit about it being late March and having to achieve certain "curricular objectives" which must be instilled in his lower-division freshmen, so they can adapt to what will be expected of them in their following three years of English at the high school.

As I reflect on those days from my current vantage point, it is now blaringly evident that my bias toward Teacher B's democratic and communal approach to learning and against Teacher A's equally valid methods was primarily a result of not having been in the profession long enough to see the entire picture. At that stage, I only knew two pieces of the puzzle: 1) a genuine desire to shape an educational environment which takes into account the psycho-social needs of adolescents, and 2) a respect for their burgeoning ideas and ownership of their work. Ten years later as I review this journal entry, I see now that Teacher A and Teacher B each had sound reasons guiding their classroom strategies; furthermore, I did not yet understand the impact of what Teacher A was trying to communicate to me when discussing the pressure to achieve a set of curricular objectives by the end of the year and taking into account the variance in students' developmental levels.

So what then happens after a decade in the real world of teaching? A conscientious teacher feels the pressure of wanting to meld all of the expectations resulting from the various ideals she holds dear and to meet not only the agenda of the students and her beliefs but to satisfy the outcomes dictated by the primary policy makers, as well. Her job becomes increasingly difficult to do while maintaining a focus on the warm and fuzzy, liberal and democratic, aspects of classroom dynamics. Inevitably, over time, she feels the need to be effective in raising test scores, to read or "cover" a certain number of required books in each course, to teach the research process, and to assign and assess a pre-established number and type of essays dictated by a curriculum. Every day a teacher reports for work, she is more and more endangered of becoming a "task-oriented" bureaucrat, rather than a democratic "free-thinking facilitator" in the classroom.

I'm not sure exactly how it happens, but I do know it inevitably happens to even the most well-intentioned of us. Little by little each day, I have begun to look at my performance in the classroom as being measured by tick marks on a supervisor's checklist or a desired and sought after aggregate score on a state test. The students I long ago wished to nurture and shape into

independent learners are in the precarious position of becoming "education production-line" outcomes—their individuality deemed an asset only when it contributes to keeping the machine well-oiled. They become kinks to work out when their recalcitrance or good-natured apathy leads them to break a link in the product-oriented chain. The teacher who has integrity and a sense of responsibility strives to be something of a King Solomon in determining the best way to resolve a situation that is fraught with everyone grasping for ownership of the child. She must take into account the expectations and desires of her professional ideology, her distant and near mentors, the students themselves, the pre-established curriculum, the administration, the powers that be—whether a department chair, a curriculum supervisor, an evaluator, or the Board of Education, as well as the individual parents who have a vested interest in their child's education.

I still believe, after ten years in the field, that I must resist the temptation to lapse into some type of inhuman bureaucratic presence in my classroom. I still do believe in a student-centered learning environment. When planning my classes, the major exchange I take into account is my most effective style, my knowledge base, and the student and her interaction with content and learning. In November of 1999, I tried tenaciously to give my students *their* opportunity to put *their own fingerprints* on the curriculum. In keeping with this philosophy, when I began to teach the required text, *The Scarlet Letter,* by Nathaniel Hawthorne in my honors-level class, I instituted the practice of dialectical notebooks as a means of allowing students entry into a text and to become, as Anne Berthoff identifies them, the "meaning-makers" of the text. Knowing I was responsible to more than my strong allegiance to the strategy of the dialectical notebook, and taking into account that I must also address the standards of the curriculum, and satisfy all the parties which vie to leave their fingerprints upon the classroom, I forged ahead, confident that I could do so, and still have a very democratic, open, and free-thinking class engaged in the learning process. I wanted to function as a facilitator, and to charge students with making meaning of the text. A transcript of the opening discussion of chapters 1 and 2 of the novel, indicates my dedication to this goal:

Ms. Evans: Okay, guys, you are going to use the dialectical notes you did last night to help you have a dialogue about the book with each other today. What I want you to do is to read the quotes people have put on the whiteboard for us and find a place that interests you to launch into a discussion. You are going to need your books on your desks for this. And when you talk about an area of the text, be sure to cite the page number and to give everyone time to find it before you start to analyze or comment upon it. You can start off by using something from the whiteboard as a point of discussion or just use it as a springboard to recall something else that appealed to you as you read, or something that you questioned, or maybe something with which you disagreed. Remember, this is *your* discussion, so try to clarify each other's points when needed and try to respond to one another's ideas as you talk.

All it seemed to take was a few gentle reminders along the way in the initial days that students were to look to each other to puzzle out their questions and to form their analysis and identification of the "centers of gravity" in the text. I was actually quite impressed as they engaged in exchanges like the following:

Dana: I have another question for us. When she [Hester Prynne] walked out of the prison, the author writes about the light. It is on page 49, he writes, "The door of the jail being flung open from within, there appeared, in the first place, like a black shadow emerging into sunshine." I don't get it. Is the light a good thing or a bad thing? I am used to thinking of light as good. Why would light be on her if

she did something as bad as becoming an adulteress?

Joan: If you look back at the bottom of page 50, it says more about the light on her. "Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured"—that's the dark part—"were astonished . . . to perceive how her beauty shone out and made a halo of the misfortune . . . in which she was enveloped." Why the light?

Eric H: Also about the light, on page 52 it says, "'A blessing on the righteous Colony of Massachusetts where iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine! Come along, Madam Hester, and show your scarlet letter in the marketplace!'" So I think maybe the light is showing her wrongdoing. Maybe Hawthorne purposely uses the light in contradictory ways.

Heather: Back to the light and darkness and how it can be contradictory: Hester might be able to hide it (her shame and sin), but she will always be tainted in the eyes of the town.

The above excerpt from a transcript of their second day of working with the dialectical notebooks indicates my students' ability to maintain focus and to defend a point of view or contribute another piece to the evolving puzzle before them. At the end of a session such as the one above, I was highly encouraged to believe that I could still maintain a student-driven classroom, which would meet the objectives of the curriculum and the expectations of the district, as well as incorporate some of my core beliefs from research in teaching English. Outside of occasionally getting the students to frame some of the deeper questions, of which they were dancing around the edge, I was able to maintain the role of a facilitator rather than taskmaster or worksheet queen. In addition, by taking advantage of the "teachable moment" to insert relevant questions as a participant in their primarily student-driven dialogue, I was able to help them mold their discussions and direct them toward topics that were lying fallow in the conversations. Furthermore, I took advantage of the initiation of the lesson, as well as the closure, to emphasize the key ideas they had broached in discussion and to label or categorize the salient topics, so they would be encouraged to further explore these ideas. An example of a typical closure to a lesson of this sort is extracted from an early transcript of the classroom discussions:

Ms. Evans: Nice work today. You have all talked about a lot of the things that we would have focused upon had you been given a study guide sheet with discussion questions to answer, but the important thing is that you came to these issues on your own with no prompts given. Let me just remind you of some of the major issues you tried to figure out and examined today in your discussion: 1) Hawthorne's use of light and dark, and if its meaning is fixed or dynamic; 2) whether or not sin can be erased or hidden, or if it is always present inside the person; 3) whether or not it serves a purpose to bring sins out into the open; 4) how sin impacts a person.

In trying to establish a true work ethic in the classroom and to demonstrate how deeply I believed in the technique of recording dialectical responses to literature, I would occasionally allow a class period for sustained silent reading and the recording of journal entries. During this time, I would model my enthusiasm for the technique by sitting in the circle of desks and also reading and writing responses. I had a great desire to capture my students' enthusiasm and to encourage them to take the risk of beginning to critique and evaluate text. During one of these reading and writing periods, a student came to my desk and began a conversation with me which made me feel quite pleased with the way in which my student-centered classroom was progressing. I paused at the end of our conversation to capture the moment in my journal. We were

already well past the middle of the novel when our conversation began. Below are my impressions of the event recorded at that time:

I have to stop right now—BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT!!! Joel M. came up to me to tell me that he figured out that Hawthorne isn't really all that interested in telling this story, but he is more intent upon philosophizing on human nature instead. Joel said he really did not like the book as of yesterday because he was trying to read it for the plot. But now this student says that he sees the story is not in the foreground so much as Hawthorne's commentary on human nature. Joel says now he understands what the author is trying to do and he appreciates the book more. I told him that Melville once commented that if one reads Hawthorne's works he will wonder what private inner struggle Hawthorne was trying to resolve through his fiction. And Joel agreed that this really seems to be what Hawthorne is about—figuring out people and what makes them tick. This led to us having a brief conversation about why the classics are enduring works that remain relevant throughout the ages. Joel again said that the distinction he sees between Hawthorne and other authors he has read in English classes is that most of them seem to expound on human nature in the background of the text, but Hawthorne makes one of his primary aims to bring it to the foreground. I explained to Joel that Hawthorne was delving into the psychology of his characters at a time when the science of psychology was nearly non-existent.

I was pleased with the meaningful one-on-one relationship about literature that my classroom methodology seemed to be inspiring. After we each went back to independently reading the text and writing our reactions, Joel came up to me again. I wrote the following in response to my conversation with Joel:

Joel just came back to inform me that the book is something like an episode of the sit-com *Seinfeld*—the show that claims to be about "nothing," but uses those scenarios to get so many ideas across about the kinds of things that people do to each other. I told him it was a very "cool" analogy because it lets him make a connection to something from his relevant contemporary culture. Although I did encourage him to express his ideas, privately I had to laugh a bit thinking about how much of a teenager's perspective is brought into his connection between *The Scarlet Letter* and *Seinfeld*. I wonder if once life bats Joel around a bit and he matures and has serious relationships and struggles, he will want to revise that statement that turns a novel of infidelity and public shame into a story about essentially "nothing." I don't mean to sound pedantic or patronizing, but there is a point that I have to accept that these students are working on these major concepts of life with only fifteen years of insight and life experience. The most I can do is appreciate, encourage, and foster their desire to keep using texts to figure out what life and literature is all about. But it also makes me feel kind of warm inside to remember that stage of my own life. Some other teachers might not condone my letting him use that analogy—but on some level/his level, he is right in his own way. And after all, Anne Berthoff teaches us that the reader is the meaning-maker in the transaction between text, reader, and meaning. This greater comprehension regarding Hawthorne's focus on human nature issues is on target; who am I to shoot down his view? The bottom line is that, to Joel, *Seinfeld* is an analogy that helps him latch onto the deeper concept he is trying to articulate—the aspect I wholeheartedly agree with—that this novel is about human nature. So why split

hairs over a minor issue like using the word "nothing"? I want to inspire him to take such risks in the future, so now I am at the "cheerleading" phase of his journey.

The journal entry demonstrates that I felt firm in my conviction that I was operating with full integrity in the classroom, allowing all influences to lend a fingerprint to my daily lessons: students, teacher, teacher research and mentors, and department and district objectives. I felt equally satisfied that I was challenging my students and giving them the type of learning experience their parents and the Board would approve of. At this stage, it seemed as though all of the primary stakeholders were having a say in the classroom, and my integrity did not feel compromised. Furthermore, these conditions reinforced my educational philosophy, so I remained idealistic and enthusiastic.

After we had read about one quarter of the length of the novel, the discussions seemed so fresh and dynamic I wanted the students to share their impressions of how dialectical notebooks were influencing their learning. I offered extra credit if they responded to the following metacognitive prompt:

Metacognition Assignment

I would like you to think back to yesterday's dialectical notebook discussion. Even if we had been a lot more experienced in working this way, yesterday's dialogue was fruitful on some level. Enough of MY opinions. Let me find out what you think. I am providing you with a copy of a transcript of yesterday's student-led discussion. Please review what was said in class and try to think back to some of the thoughts you were having as you witnessed the discussion unfold. Take a look at your dialectical notebook responses from the preceding night's homework, as well. Be very honest, and write a full-page response to the activity. What, for instance, did you learn by recording dialectical notes for homework? How did that thinking become stronger or perhaps even reshaped as you were in class yesterday during the discussion? Did you get enough analysis of the text in guiding your own discussion or would a study guide with specific questions have been more fulfilling? If you take the extra work out of the equation, what kind of learning experience do you think this technique provided for you? What did you learn? What did you already know? What views did you change?

Only a handful of students chose to reply, and I was pleased to see that they were affirming that the dialectical journals were creating a classroom that was student-driven. In terms of the liberal and democratic aspects of the technique, their comments were fairly unanimous:

> **Student #1**: Dialectical journals are allowing us to express a full spectrum of our ideas. I think this technique teaches us to look deeper into the text and to find hidden meanings. I basically broadened my views and picked up on a few more things that I wouldn't have seen before. I find it interesting how a small, seemingly insignificant question or piece of text posed by a student can precipitate this whole long discussion, and you come up with ideas that you never thought of before. This method allows me to think more freely than I do when I have study guide questions to answer.
>
> **Student #2**: I do not enjoy responding to study guide questions. When I write my journal responses I get to organize my thinking. By having class discussions based on our journals, I get to listen to other people pick apart the text piece by piece, while if I was assigned a worksheet, I wouldn't have that opportunity to see all of the different views that are in class. Through this technique, which is not available in my other classes, I have learned how to better identify the important points of a novel as I am reading.

> **Student #3**: I like how we have the conversations using our journals in class because we are able to say our own ideas, whether or not they might be true. And when we disagree with someone's opinion, we are able and more willing to back up our point of view with quotes. That makes the reading more in depth, and it helps us to pick up some ideas that we might have otherwise dismissed. I really enjoy the set up of the class and how the homework relates to our discussions.
>
> **Student #4**: The discussion and our journals allow for debates and disagreements in class. We get to hear different people's opinions about the book, and that helps me to have a better outlook on reading this book.

Additionally, several of the students who responded to the metacognition assignment made reference to a discussion generated by their peers in which they continued to try to resolve their stances and interpretations regarding Hawthorne's stylistic use of light and dark in the text. The daily evolution of the discussions and the notebooks exhilarated me; I felt as if the students were truly taking responsibility for their learning and interacting with the text. It was the ideal set up for a teacher with my educational philosophy. I was melding all of the expectations of the various stakeholders—the students' right to shape the learning process, the teacher's desire to convey key content and to create an active learning environment, the curricular objectives for the department, etc. It was educational nirvana—I should have known it would be fleeting.

Once the class was more than two-thirds of the way through the novel, I was beginning to see that the powerful impact of privately shared exchanges like the ones recorded above was dissipating; a number of the students began making rather superficial comments regarding the novel in their discussions. They no longer seemed to be grasping the deeper analytical side of the novel. Their comments seemed random, and their discussion of parts of the text seemed to lack proper control over the greater context of events. In short, I began to wonder if they were all doing the required reading, or if they were just extracting random quotes out of context and only reading in the general vicinity of those selected passages. They were failing to challenge one another's perceptions of the text and characters, and the classroom was being dominated by about 50% of the students, with varying degrees of knowledge of the plot. I had no intention of retreating to a worksheet approach to tracking reading. Besides, most teachers and students alike will tell you that these exercises are easily copied from peers. I became distressed because it seemed as though they were no longer invested in the process, a process which I believed had the potential to give them a major stake in what was going on in the classroom day to day. Because of my suspicions that they might not be reading the whole assigned portions of the text, I gave them an opportunity to evaluate the techniques we were using in the classroom. I was not ready to prevent the students from shaping the curriculum in the classroom. If people had stopped reading, I wanted to know not merely that it had happened, but I wanted answers as to why the technique, which was designed to give them a voice and partnership in the classroom, was failing them.

This time, I required the metacognition of all students. To ensure honesty in their responses, I brought the class to the computer lab where they would type and print out their responses without including their names. Furthermore, each response was handed to a designated student in the lab who maintained a folder to ensure everyone had responded to the task. The assignment itself was very thorough in the types of prompts provided; for brevity's sake, I have excerpted only the sections of the assignment that I consider to have been the most enlightening as I processed the students' responses:

Metacognition/Process Piece—Thoughts on *The Scarlet Letter* Unit
Section I: Reality Check and The Dialectical Notebook Procedure

In all honesty, with no fear of repercussions and perfect anonymity, how much of the text have you read? Why? How much effort did you put into your responses in the dialectical notebook? Why? How much effort and attention did you put into the discussions? Why?

Section II: The Dialectical Notebook Procedure

How do dialectical notes stack up in comparison to the traditional worksheet approach you have most often used in your classes over the years? What qualities as a learner does this method enhance in you or ignore in your learning style? How knowledgeable, at this point, do you feel about the text and the author's style? Were you mainly "blowing smoke" in your responses, or did you come to any true moments of recognition as a learner? Explain.

Section III: The Classroom Discussions

How did you see your role in the classroom discussions, and how would you evaluate your input to the dialogue? To what degree were you a participant? What made you participate so readily if you were quite active in discussions? What caused you to hold back and not participate? When you chose to be silent, was the discussion process still in any way meaningful or important to your learning? Explain.

Section IV: The Objectives

I have had two basic objectives in approaching this text through the dialectical notebook approach. The first goal is to help you become an independent thinker and to gain confidence in critiquing texts, to help you to make the text your own, and to have freedom to identify your own "centers of gravity" in the text, instead of having someone arbitrarily tell you what must be important. The second goal is to help you pre-think a thesis grounded in the text that will lead to a more personally meaningful critical analytical paper than the assigned prompts many of you are used to encountering in classes—to make you an active learner, rather than a passive learner. Have I succeeded in this goal? To what degree? Explain.

This approach may seem a little too liberal, time-consuming, and inefficient to some, but my original intentions which prompted my decision to enter the career of teaching were shaping the way I was conducting the class. I was much more democratic in my student-centered approach to teaching and learning. I had been genuinely inspired when reading their responses to assignments like the one above—when the news was good. I could see that I was able to fulfill my need to focus primarily on three major stakeholders in the educational process: the students, the teacher and her distant mentors, and the curriculum.

About one half of the responses to the metacognitive exercise were exactly of the type I wanted to hear. Some of the responses that strengthened my conviction that I should continue encouraging students to shape the content of the lessons are as follows:

Student #1: I like the dialectical notebooks better than the traditional worksheet procedure. The freedom is greater, and it's an opportunity to guide yourself and let you find the different symbols and imagery, but I also think these assignments can get too redundant. I liked the fact that we were able to conduct the class with little interjection from you, but I also think there needed to be a manner in which to insure that everyone had a chance to talk.

Student #2: I like the dialectical notebooks because when I read the book I am not looking for answers to any specific questions. If we were to have a formal question sheet, then I never usually actually read the text—I would just look for

answers by skimming the text. The dialectical notebooks gave me a chance to express how I feel about the book. I feel very knowledgeable about the text to this point because of our class discussions. When reading I am able to understand the book, but when we discuss it the next day in class, I can look deeper into the book and understand its symbolism.

Student #3: I thought the dialectical notebooks were a simple and direct way to approach the chapters we were reading. They did get dry after a while, and it became rather a chore for a homework assignment. Worksheets, I think, help me get a feeling for what the chapter is about, but the dialectical notebooks gave me insight. I never really looked at books deeper than the story we are reading in class. This method and these discussions helped me understand what types of things authors are capable of doing with their writing and what they can do to the minds of the readers to really get them thinking.

Student #4: Because of this approach, I have my own ideas on the text and what it means to me. Most of the English classes that I have taken tell you what to think of certain things in the book and what they mean. I liked trying to decide for myself what symbols meant and what Hawthorne meant when he said certain things. This was an interesting, new approach that I have never faced before. I think you have succeeded in helping me to find a possible thesis or nine thousand!!! I like the way this class was run.

Encouraging, yes, but the above reactions are only half of the picture of what was happening behind the scenes. If I had garnered only the above positive responses, I would have felt like a budding Nancy Atwell, or like the Toby Fullwiler of my school building. However, there was another side to this coin. I was unprepared to observe the range of negative comments. These reactions ran the gamut from those which expressed a desire to avoid deeper levels of reflection to those which were downright hostile regarding a non-objective and qualitative measure of their progress and a method which put the onus of learning in their own hands:

Student #5: I wouldn't say I devoted full effort, but I did what was necessary. If I could go back, I wish I would've put more effort into understanding the text, but I think I tried pretty hard.

Student #6: I think that the dialectical notebook gives you more freedom to write about what you feel instead of being given a format. I don't feel too confident in my knowledge of this book because this story made no sense. I honestly tried to write in my dialectical notes what I thought, but sometimes I had better things to do than to read the book and write about it.

Student #7: I like those traditional worksheets, and those notebooks bore me more than anything. This method is stupid, and in no way do I enjoy writing those damn notebooks. They don't motivate or enhance me in any way. Hate to disappoint you, but if you ever looked around the room during discussion time, I would say 99% of the kids are sleeping, or end up having to hold their eyes open with their hands. I chose not to participate because I was too busy concentrating on trying to keep myself awake!!!!!

Student #8: I don't like this stuff about having to interpret a character, the story should be laid out and shouldn't require tons of hours of reading to tell what's going on. The in depth stuff sucks too. I like being passive and regurgitating canned knowledge.

Student #9: You do not know how to grade effectively and with the spirit that other teachers share at our High School. If you tell us to write one-page responses to dialectical notes, and we write one page, then we have done what you have asked. Doing what you ask is not considered a C average; it is considered a 100% completed assignment, and therefore should be given a grade that is an A. Furthermore, one student had written the expected amount and got a C. Another student wrote five times as much and only got a B, not five times the grade.

Student #10: There are people who write 2-3 sets of thoughtless mumbo jumbo just to get an A, then you get someone with less who only gets a B or a C.

After I had read these negative responses, I fell into a common trap that ensnares many teachers. Rather than focus on the positive and genuine responses, I became disheartened and disillusioned by the surly ones. I could see a small faction of students in my classroom were turned off and tuned out to my efforts. At this point, I decided I was creating an awful lot of extra work for myself that was not being appreciated by the students. Many of their behaviors had been modified by years of seeking the grade as objectively as a pellet or treat at the end of the maze—and, to them, the grade was all that mattered, not the process of learning. They wanted to be force-fed knowledge rather than to synthesize and evaluate on their own. I was sincerely disheartened, and at times I felt as though there was a developing conspiracy of silence in my classroom—students were not participating in the dialogue because they objected to being graded on journals based on their effort and ability in establishing comprehension, connections, critical stance, and interpretation—rather than being graded based on quantity of lines.

Two of the major stakeholders were growing disillusioned—the teacher in the apathy of her students and the change in the classroom dynamic, and about twenty five to fifty percent of the students who felt the process should require less of them. We only had a few more chapters to finish, and I felt myself coming down on the side of autocracy when I decided I wanted to see this process through to the end of the novel so I could assess my original goal of helping students to find personal transactions in the text, and to seek their own theses.

I conferred with several of my colleagues who had been enthusiastically reading the daily print-outs of the transcripts I was producing from the classroom dialogues and listening to me express my own eagerness for the independent thinking occurring during the study of the first two-thirds of the novel. The advice of my peers in the department was varied. One of them, who is equally idealistic as I tend to be, advised me that there is a general climate of apathy amongst the honors students in the junior class. This teacher believed that they were simply bucking high standards, and that it was beneficial to tune them out and continue to present the challenge. The only downfall he saw in the method was that collecting dialectical journal assignments created a lot of extra grading for me as an English teacher. My department chair sympathized with me over this change in dynamic, having personally observed the class in the process of one of these earlier sessions and being quite impressed. She suggested that I continue the approach, but that I also incorporate some basic reading check quizzes to keep them alert to their responsibilities in class. Another colleague proffered the opinion that there is not one panacea for engaging all learners, that maybe this method works for some students quite well, but not for others; perhaps, it would be best to vary my approach.

Once progress reports came out, without the hard and fast evidence of objective reading quizzes to provide insight as to whether or not the students were reading, a few parent conferences and phone calls made reference to "this dialectical notebook you are requiring is taking a lot of my child's time after school." In addition, several students indicated I was grading too much on the content of a response entry as opposed to the grading of quantity with which they

were more familiar. One parent who had come to see me during the advent of the dialectical notebook-centered classroom expressed that it was unfair for me to evaluate her child's ability to take a stance on text or to interpret text as she reads. The mother informed me that telling her child the interpretation in advance of the reading is my responsibility as the teacher.

Needless to say, these negative experiences dampened my enthusiasm for what I was trying to achieve in the classroom, so I incorporated my department chairperson's suggestion into my lessons and gave frequent reading quizzes in addition to requiring dialectical responses. I felt this would be a valid compromise. Imagine my surprise when the same parent called up to tell me it was unfair for her child to be quizzed on characters, plot, and other literal aspects of the reading assignments because she did not have a very strong memory. I reminded this parent gently that her daughter should come see me for some more effective reading and focus strategies. Yet I wondered why an honors-level class was deemed appropriate for this child given the irony of the situation that neither an objective nor a subjective assessment of her child's progress was satisfactory. I did try to maintain an open mind and began to do as some of my colleagues suggested which was to simply give one or two quotes from the assigned reading and to ask the students to identify the speaker, the context, and the significance of each.

Later in the year, I incorporated the advice of my colleague who suggested that not all methods work for all kids, so in the third marking period while reading Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, I assigned some fairly standard study guides during the course of the novel, with only three pop quizzes. At the end of the novel, I had the students take a seventy-five-question, multiple-choice quiz to get a grasp on who was prepared to begin writing the assigned critical analytical paper. That same evening while online trying to conduct personal banking transactions, I received an instant message from a student who previously had expressed great anger with dialectical notebook grades because he felt they should be evaluated quantitatively rather than qualitatively. The exchange was as follows:

Student: How did the class do on the quiz?
Ms. Evans: About the same as usual; some high, some low—an average range.
Student: I think you should curve the grade.
Ms. Evans: They have a good distribution already, no need for a curve.
Student: Considering I read it twice I should have gotten a 100%. That must indicate a problem with the questions asked.
Ms. Evans: Or the degree of care taken when reading; could be many factors.
Student: No. If you would ask me unambiguous questions I'd get them all right; the ones I missed are based upon your insight not what is written in the book. Believe me I have proof: I have a photographic memory; thus, if I missed a question, the answer was not written in the book .
Student: Hello...
Ms. Evans: Inferential level questions are fair, too; they require you to use your higher order thinking skills. If you want, we can talk about this tomorrow, but right now I am just here to try to do some online banking.
Student: Fine, bye.

Exchanges like this throughout the year, in this one class, were particularly unnerving. I can recall one student who, while reading *The Great Gatsby*, had never achieved over 40% on any of six given quizzes. At that time I was still working with the combined approaches of dialectical notebooks and discussions, a mixture of study guides, and literal level quizzes. One evening she was assigned to read Chapter VII of the novel, and to produce two sets of dialectical notebook entries, which I would collect. I also gave a reading quiz on that chapter, on which she

scored 20%. As I read her journal entries, it was apparent that with only two chapters remaining in the novel, she still did not know the identities or relationships of characters; she had written two full journal pages of sheer nonsense, for which I gave her a zero. When she came to me to discuss her grade, her argument was that while she had made up all of the information in her journal and had not even read the book, she had spent time out of her schedule writing; therefore, she should at least get at least a grade of 50% for having done something.

It took ten full years for it to happen, but in that moment I lost faith in students becoming the meaning makers of text. All of my democratic idealism was inherently flawed in this respect: in order to have a fingerprint on the curriculum, one must be willing to ante up and make some sort of investment in the learning process, not merely collect grades based upon daily attendance and amount of work. Allowing everyone to have a fingerprint on the curriculum doesn't work unless everyone is willing to tow the line—not just the teacher, not just the parent in the aftermath, not just the sentinels of the district standardized test scores, but the students as well.

To find that nearly half of my honors-level class was not continuing to do the required reading of the texts once the first marking period had ended, and that they had no intention of changing as the rest of the year proved, was a staggering epiphany for me as a teacher. A good deal of what brings most of us into the classroom is our sense of idealism, and our desire to inspire others to enjoy learning and growing as independent thinkers. Many of us, I have found, have experienced such an enormous delight in our own education that we have devoted ourselves to a career which merely allows us to switch sides of the desk, while still being an enthusiastic lifelong learner. By the end of the year, for the first time in ten years, I felt my idealism waning. I turned my seminar style circle of student desks back into the stringent formidable rows and columns I had been victim to as a pupil in the seventies and eighties. I sought the voices and opinions of those who had proven themselves willing to grow and develop, and tried to exist and flourish amongst the recalcitrant learners. In short, I became Teacher A for the remainder of the year in those classes, the teacher who was a conservative taskmaster. That was a means of survival. I decided to make it through the year, with routine, businesslike rapport with my students, focusing more on content, curricular basics, and less concerned on individual perceptions and expressions of self. However, I still remained faithful to requiring students to choose their own theses any time they had papers to write. For the first time in ten years, I had neither the idealism nor the relationships with students that were the hallmark of my career.

The other stakeholders in the educational process were satisfied with the work being produced by my students. I was not. In previous years, I had experienced what it was like to extract more from students, to see them develop, to watch them strive toward understanding the complexities of texts and life. But a large number of my current students did not want that challenge. They wanted the end result: a grade. They cared little or nothing for the journey to that destination.

Although changing my teaching style became an arduous and emotional process in this year of seeing my core beliefs erode under the pressure of this group of honors students, it made for much easier pre-observation and post-observation conferences with the administrator who was assigned to evaluate the English teachers. Earlier in the year, as I tried to explain the theory and the meaning behind these dialectical and creative journal sessions, it was evident that he wasn't quite getting it—my objective, that is. Though he liked what he saw when he came in the classroom, he was more interested in being able to water it down to the most concise description which merely conveyed a fraction of what was going on that particular day of observation. I would have preferred his interest in my carefully formed research-based ideology of what should happen in the classroom to elicit high quality dialogue and writing about texts. Although my

evaluations were always excellent, it was evident he wanted to have me tell him the bare bones version of what was going on so that he could complete the necessary standardized form. This, too, took its toll on my idealism and enthusiasm.

In my district, non-tenured teachers are required to write a progress report based on department and district objectives for the year. Having just transferred to this district after eight years in a different region, I composed such a report. This report was theoretically written to give my administrator who evaluates me, and the superintendent's office some degree of insight into how I was faring as a teacher in this system. In effect, I was to communicate with this other group of stakeholders to allow them to be sure their fingerprint was in my classroom. I responded thoroughly and with great integrity. I even tried to find openings in which I could work my beliefs in the democratic classroom into the feedback. I tried to explain to my audience the methods and the emphases that mattered to me, *in my own view* of what should be happening in the classroom—the ideas that form my core beliefs as a teacher of writing and literature. The disconcerting part was that in this entire five-page report based upon their five goals for English teachers, there was no place for me to focus solely on what matters most to me as a professional—the real things I was striving to perfect and develop in order to enrich my classroom and my teaching. I think many teachers in many systems feel this way when it comes time to write such an evaluative report for their administrators and superintendents. I felt so anxious in wanting to have full scope to emphasize what is most important to me as a teacher and to tell them all of the wonderful things I was working on, and all of my good-hearted idealistic goals that I was striving to achieve for the good of our school and the good of our students and the strengthening of the learning process. But because not one of their goals was made to elicit this type of information from me, I began to feel very imposed upon. I felt as if my fingerprint was eliminated. I was there to adhere to their fingerprints and to forget that I was an experienced professional with a unique knowledge base and a style that works for me. I was determined that even if limited, I was going to take those tangents, and work those digressions in, so I could do some thoughtful processing on what the year and my skills had shown themselves to be from the time period of September through December. The only place I could remotely identify as a portal to this authentic self-evaluation and a launching pad for this professional coup was in the prompt for the report that asks the teacher to comment on having achieved the following objective:

> Between October 15, 1999 and March 1, 2000, students in all English classes will have at least three opportunities to write a critical-analytical essay based upon the literature of the curriculum. As students go through the writing process, English teachers will give direct writing instruction addressing the five traits of writing [as established by the district and English Department]. Teachers will also provide opportunities for individual writing conferences with students as they go through the writing process.

Amidst the other four objectives, all pertaining to very concrete ideas and requirements, I found no other place but this to insert a reflection upon my progress in the district in authentic terms—the place to be able to discuss *my fingerprint* on the classroom. In early December when things were still going rather well with my dialectical notebook discussions in class, I offered the following feedback on how my methodology was developing, as well as how effectively these practices were moving the students and me toward achieving the district's goal:

> In my American Literature Honors classes, I framed all writing assignments within the context of our rubric. Additionally, my focus has been to eliminate canned prompts for critical-analytical essays. My philosophy is that if a student can really get fired up about something that matters to him or her in the course of

reading a novel, then he or she will be motivated to bring resolution to these issues and do a much more thorough and authentic job of analyzing text and supporting ideas. It has been my experience over the years as an English teacher that most students feel intimidated in critiquing text when the thesis is assigned to them. Additionally, I aim to foster a love of literature as an exploration of the self—a very personal process—and I want to invest my students with the freedom to become independent and inspired thinkers and analyzers of text. I provide a very flexible schedule for writing conferences with my students during all phases of the drafting process. I also exchange drafts, comments, and information with my American Lit H students via email throughout the writing process.

The critical-analytical essays the students wrote in response to *The Crucible* are a good indicator that these honors-level students are well-versed in the basic essay format and in what constitutes solid proof; nevertheless, they do not fully develop their ideas/analyses and tend to let the text do most of the talking for them; therefore, "elaboration" became one of the weaknesses of their papers. Moreover, their thesis statements, while they were their own choice, seemed to be sort of the standard classic prompts assigned in English classes or listed at the end of a study guide. In fact, one student went so far as to plagiarize a paper from the Internet. I, quite naturally, felt disappointed in falling short of the goal of enabling them to feel more ownership over their writing and to recognize their capability in critiquing and analyzing text without having to resort to academic dishonesty. This incident caused me to analyze this increasingly pervasive problem, and I began thinking about ways to foster a greater sense of confidence within my students for the validity of their own ideas; frequently, students might feel they are not "entitled" or "equipped" or perhaps even "authorized" to critique literature. Therefore, I decided to approach the next unit on *The Scarlet Letter* using dialectical notebook journal entries and conducting a seminar-style format of shared inquiry of the text each day in class. I have transcribed and recorded these class sessions because the discussions were consistently very rich. The students became true "meaning makers" of the text. I was energized by their exploration of textual inconsistencies, awareness of author's style, analysis of themes and symbolism, and other rather deep topics that they raised. The most amazing development was that every single comment made in class was embedded in the text. Each day the classroom became a "critical-analytical think tank." Students truly found an individualized version of the significance of this text. When it came time to begin discussing the assignment of the paper for *The Scarlet Letter*, the students reviewed the notes made in the dialectical journals and came up with some very innovative thesis statement ideas. They even sought to connect the text with other works they have studied during their high school careers. These class sessions and the wealth of reader response journals that were generated allowed students to find patterns in their own analysis of the text. This strategy invests them with a belief in their ability to meaningfully analyze text.

American Lit H has now been assigned a critical-analytical essay on *The Scarlet Letter*, and this will allow them to demonstrate whether or not they will have shown growth in their ability to support their ideas and elaborate upon text. Also, I am hoping that this process will help them establish a more authentic focus for their thesis statements. This essay will also enable me to see if the dialectical

notebook process has enhanced their ability to strengthen their performance in meeting standard in terms of support and elaboration.

Indeed, this is the way in which the classroom history and my ideology and methods shaped our journey toward the critical-analytical paper that would be assigned for *The Scarlet Letter*. The results of the anonymous metacognition assignment came later. At the time of writing this report for the district, I had neither seen the developing malaise as we neared the last few chapters of the novel, nor the increasing superficiality that was soon to develop in our final dialogues from our journal discussions. I am almost glad that I had not yet seen their honest comments on the classroom methods and their participation and effort before I produced the above report for the District. If I had known then what was going on among nearly fifty per cent of the students in this class toward the final chapters of the novel, I would have felt even more distressed. Furthermore, responding to the District's objectives made me feel as though the day-to-day happenings in my classroom were irrelevant unless they were consumed and superceded by the administrative desire to control my classroom. Seeing the students' responses to my anonymous metacognitive assignment made me feel as though the students themselves felt the same way about my fingerprint overriding the day-to-day workings of the classroom—in spite of the activities being grounded in my original intention to not only give the students a voice in the day-to-day proceedings of the classroom, but also to enable them to come to some degree of attachment to forming a thesis for a critical analytical essay on the novel—not a canned uniform prompt for the whole class, but something that had meaning for them as individuals. Could it be that the district, with its progress report, also felt it was being equally magnanimous and democratic in allowing me to evaluate myself on areas in which it perceived I had bought into its philosophy, too?

The links in the chain were not connecting; all of the various dynamics and relationships were becoming severed—unable to maintain a symbiotic existence. The teacher was interacting with research, but failing to get the interaction she desired through the research and experience with her students. Students felt a strain in the way the teacher was asking them to approach class objectives. The district was presumably feeling good about having a device in place to elicit input from teachers and making them stakeholders in their plan. But the teacher was perceiving that very device as exclusionary of her own desire to have a vision and to uphold her core beliefs which she could use to gauge her professional development and the success of her students. Parents were feeling the strain of being advocates for their children while wearing blinders to the reality that many of their children were by and large not coming prepared in the content of the course everyday. The big picture was overwhelming, and it altered my teaching persona. I very seldom, during this year, had the luxury of feeling like that highly democratic and liberal Teacher B from days of yore—that teacher I had prided myself on being. My autonomy and idealism were wrested away from me; the system was fighting to maintain the status quo. Eventually, I caved in, retaining only a few of my core practices.

This ongoing conflagration made for a year of unbridled professional growth for me. Maybe every teacher eventually feels this way at the close of a decade in the profession. This was the year that sapped some of my elemental resiliency, and left me questioning how to do better next year. I always ask that question at the close of every school year; however, I have never had such a compromising and confusing year in trying to sort out. Maybe the tenth year is the year we come to tweak our educational philosophy with the benefit of a greater modicum of real world research in our classrooms and a dash of skepticism. Maybe this was just the result of changing from an urban district where I was born, raised and educated, to a suburban district where I am only just beginning to learn how to fit in. Whether all of this confusion resulted from

a social class change, a different orientation in district and parental expectations, trying to infuse new research into a provincial and conservative town, or a result of having garnered more experience in the field, I cannot yet tell. One colleague comforts me by saying I just had a difficult mix of apathetic students, which happens sometimes in this system, even at the honors-level—students wanting the easy A and bargaining to get it.

I did the best thing I could do as a professional—I have processed my experience through this research project—laid it all out on paper to get another look at all of its intricacies. I am rethinking, revising, and reinventing for next year, even though it is barely July. And I am telling myself that it is easy to focus on the under-motivated 50% and to get tunnel vision to such a degree that I forget there are the other 50% out there in that same classroom using that same methodology and working hard, meeting expectations, and trying to be flexible and open to a new learning opportunity. Maybe that, too, is proof of my idealism being ever present—I was shooting for 100% feeling the enthusiasm the rest of us were sharing. Maybe that is not possible. But knowing myself, I will go back out there and seek it again.

All is not lost, I realize, while looking through the writing portfolios of those American Lit H students at the close of this school year. I read the opening paragraph of Louis' paper on *The Scarlet Letter*. I flip through the transcripts of his class's discussions, and I see the seed of his thesis forming way back on November 22 when he was only on page 82 of the novel, and he and Dave began dissecting the contradictory nature of the name of Hester's daughter Pearl. When processing what went awry in this class this year, I need to sometimes stop and remind myself that this is where Louis, barely one third of the way through the text, took up the challenge and began to think divergently about the text. He first found the rudimentary basis of an idea that later was formed into his paper's thesis. In other class transcripts I revisit the day he and Dave went back and forth analyzing the suitability of Pearl's name in comparison to her characteristics and circumstances. Louis made a rather elaborate analogy between the symbolic meaning of the name of Pearl and her character traits in comparison to the biological formation of a pearl in nature, starting from a piece of grit or an irritant and developing into something greatly prized and valuable. As the days progressed and he continued to read and comment upon the novel, he was able to work through his concept and articulate it to the class at various stages of our discussion until it became more formalized and structured with the strong support and elaboration developed in his final critical-analytical essay. A few other essays also were noteworthy and spawned from ideas the writers had offered to the class. So for the students who contributed in a meaningful way to the process, and who later continued meeting their obligations as I began to institute reading quizzes, these final papers were of a more reflective nature than their earlier two compositions required in class.

In the final analysis, I guess we teachers are the guardians of our own integrity. We have to incorporate into the classroom the precepts the bureaucracy imposes upon us, its employees—we cannot exclude from our consciousness that everyone—most often with the best of intentions and motivations—does, indeed, want a fingerprint on the curriculum. But in the end, we professionals must answer to ourselves, as to whether or not we feel we are effective teachers, contributing the best of what we have to offer to the master plan. And we carry out this assessment, hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, and even over the course of a decade—according to the only progress report which truly has the most significance and relevance to us—that is, the one that is drafted in our own sense of identity and our own ever-evolving core philosophy, not only on the blanks of those district progress reports filed at mid-year and relegated to some administrator's overstuffed file cabinet drawer.

I was once honored to have read a freshmen year college essay, drafted by a former

student, in which he writes about me for an assignment on a person who has influenced his life. He begins his essay with the following thesis: "A teacher affects eternity; she can never tell where her influence begins or ends. Although Ms. Evans has so many strong qualities, cleverness, awareness, and patience make her the best teacher I have ever had." I guess the end of a school year just leaves us wondering if we really have left our mark on those students and given them our best or not—trying to figure out just where our influence begins or ends with our students. I just want to be that teacher that Paul C. described in his college composition back in May of 1998. And I want to be true to myself in the process. Whether or not I have achieved my professional objectives is not as cut and dried as the district plan for teacher evaluation would have one believe. I try to reconcile all the input I have collected throughout my teaching career and throughout the particular school year which has just ended. So if I want to believe I am that inspirational person that Paul describes above in the excerpt from his essay, I have to juxtapose it with an anonymous comment, from a student in this year's American Lit H class, that gives me a mixed perception of whether or not I have imparted all I was capable of conferring to her:

Personally, I don't believe that journals or class discussions help a person to become an independent thinker because unless you have strong self-confidence, you most likely will go along with the majority point of view. Also, some people might just be plain lazy, and not have the will to involve themselves in a complex discussion, while others may dominate the class with their comments. I think it is a good idea to get us to think on our own, but I do like to have a more set formula and format when writing a paper. The way that I write is usually free form, so on a paper, I need to be molded into the correct formula.

It makes me feel like something was gained in that she refers to the dialogues as "complex discussion," but I cannot help realizing that I have not fully reached her if she has left my class feeling that there is one "correct formula" for writing an essay. That is the influence or fingerprint of the district's writing rubric reining in her creativity and obliterating the independence I have sought to foster in her this year. She has now been exposed to the district's expectations in writing and practice for three full years; the minor influence of my ten months with her in the classroom evidently is not enough to let her understand she can think outside of the box and be successful, insightful, and creative in expressing her written voice.

So, I find myself back at the original question which framed this research: "What happens to an experienced teacher's idealism after a decade in the real world of the education profession where everyone wants to have his/her own fingerprint on the daily happenings in the classroom?" Since I am one who believes in divergent views and independent thinking, I leave it to you, my dear reader, to provide the answer to that question. I merely aim to present you with a montage of incidents in my teaching career. I will leave it to you to garner your own interpretations, whether you come to view this article as vitriolic cynicism or cause for your own professional and personal assessment of your current methods and ideology. I have no doubt you will find the most value in this article if you challenge yourself to be "the meaning maker" of this text—and your career.

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Jean Evans has been teaching English in both urban and suburban public school systems for nearly ten years now. She credits her early association with the Connecticut Writing Project, through fellowship in the 1995 Invitational Summer Institute, as a defining influence in the relationships she has been able to foster with her students in her reader-response based approach in classes.

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Dendrites and Muscle Juice and One Clear Call for Me

Evelyn Foster

Background

Several years ago while attending a workshop called something like "The Brain for Teachers," I was presented with one bit of information that stunned me. Take a brain cell, float it in a petri dish in the fluid produced when muscles exercise, and the brain cell grows dendrites. From this I extrapolated that if there is muscle movement incorporated into classroom instruction (such as a child forming letters in finger paint, or dancing in the form of a letter, or acting the part of a character in a story), a teacher can assume that brain cells will be exposed to this muscle fluid and the brain cells will grow dendrites. The more dendrites that grow, the more synapses develop, the more synapses, the more connections, the more connections, the more learning. "Muscle juice" stimulates the growth of brain cells! This confirmed for me what I had suspected from years of teaching experience with the learning disabled and what I had intuited through my own learning style. Multi-sensory learning, the integration of a variety of senses into the teaching/learning process, enhances learning.

Some form of multi-sensory education has been around for a long time. Before all the recent methodologies, there was the ultimate hands-on learning situation, the apprenticeship. Michelangelo got his training from his family of stonecutters. Centuries later, Horace Mann, who believed in "real life" experiences for students, inspired the co-op program at Antioch College. Likewise, Herbert Read was one of the philosophers behind progressive education. In his book *Education Through Art,* he discusses in great detail the importance of artistic expression in the education, growth and development of children. Rudolf Steiner, another educator who believed in experiential learning, took his educational philosophy from his anthroposophist beliefs. These beliefs included creating cooperative communities, teaching through movement, the arts, and bookbinding. For example, to learn the alphabet, children formed themselves into the letters. Yet another educator who favored hands-on teaching strategies, Maria Montessori, provided Italian children living in slums with highly structured environments that included many exploratory activities. Children poured sand and rice into containers of various shapes and sizes, thus establishing the context for the notion of conservation of constancy: equal quantities can come in various shapes. Montessori schools used lids and puzzle pieces designed with small knobs to be picked up, just so, with the thumb, the index finger, and the middle finger together. This way small fingers prepared for good pencil grip. Another instructor, Beth Slingerland, worked with the ideas of Orton Gillingham. Gillingham and Slingerland were probably the first to use the term "multi-sensory." They had children use their large muscles and write in the air. While forming a letter in the air, they would chant the letter name, its cue word and its sound. For example, "A," apple, /a/.

Critical for me as a learning disabilities resource room teacher is that teaching and learning which incorporate a variety of senses can effectively reach more children than teaching and learning which incorporate fewer senses. As noted above, there is a history of educational innovators who have incorporated multi-sensory learning in one form or another into their teaching philosophies and practices. Recently I came upon two relatively new programs that offer useful multi-sensory strategies that teachers may find to be helpful additions to their strategies for teaching the decoding aspects of beginning reading.

I have been teaching in an elementary school resource room for eighteen years. I work with children who have been identified as having learning disabilities. My own multi-sensory

approach has drawn inspiration from a combination of sources. The "language experience" approach to teaching reading which evolved from Sylvia Ashton-Warner's book *Teacher* is the educational philosophy that rings true for me. My own background in art and art therapy as an art education major, a painter and a potter, has made incorporation of a variety of art materials and techniques into the teaching of anything obvious and natural to me. Classic Slingerland multi-sensory strategies such as those previously described for teaching children with specific learning disabilities helped me to understand the value of simultaneously combining large muscle movements with vocalizing and seeing or visualizing. With a little help from two other colleagues, I have been able to put my understanding of multi-sensory experience into practice.

Practice

Complex as the process is, most children learn to read and write with relative ease. A few children, however, seem to make little or no headway in decoding and encoding even though they may be very bright. For these children, lack of progress continues despite their motivation and effort, despite varied modifications on the part of the teacher, despite the additional assistance and interventions of a reading specialist, and despite a second year in kindergarten or first grade. These students are eventually referred to the child study team, then to the pupil placement team, then for evaluation, and finally, depending upon evaluation results, referred to special education services with the resource room teacher.

Toward the beginning of my teaching career, when I was struggling with scripted direct instruction programs (which do also have their value and their place), and other kinds of Skinner-like programs, Ashton-Warner's book *Teacher* came into my hands. Written in New Zealand, *Teacher* is based on the author's experiences teaching the native New Zealand Maori children. Ashton-Warner gave each child, on cards, the words he or she wanted, words that were important to each, words that had meaning for each. She taught them that the written word is talk written down, and she wrote down for them the stories that they dictated, stories that were related to things important in their lives at home or in school. Ashton-Warner's book became part of the impetus for the language experience philosophy and approach to teaching reading that came out of New Zealand and Australia. This movement has evolved over many years into Reading Recovery and the Early Literacy Initiatives, which are currently impacting teaching methodology in the United States.

Ashton-Warner opened an avenue for me to reach Bobby, one student I will never forget. I began working with him when he was in grade 2. Bobby was lost in his classroom. He could not remember letter names, letter sounds, or words. Direct instruction programs, full of drill and repetition to develop automaticity, left him cold and uninspired. But when he dictated stories, copied them, illustrated them with his drawings and paintings, made them into books, read and reread them, the results were expressive and personally meaningful. Bobby selected words from his stories to build a word bank on index cards. He became motivated to write and read for his own purposes. He wrote a scathing letter to a friend at whom he was angry. Purposeful reading and writing gave Bobby the confidence and the will to struggle with the enormous hurdle presented to him by the task of word recognition and deciphering. I know he made progress, but not enough. He is one of the students about whom I say, "If I had only known then what I know now." The work we did was good, but perhaps, with some additional multi-sensory strategies added to the mix, the process could have been made easier for Bobby, and taken him farther.

I worked with Bobby in the long ago days when my aide and I had a classroom all to ourselves in which to run the resource room program—the very long ago days. Now, the speech and language clinician, her tutor, three reading specialists, my aide, and I all share Room 18,

seeing students in spaces that are defined, maze-like, by bookshelves. We joke that we have worked closely together in the same room for a longer time and with more success than many a married couple. Three of us in particular, the speech and language pathologist, a reading specialist and I are familiar with each other's caseloads, consult with one another, and share strategies and concerns as well as successes and frustrations. We often go to workshops together, and have become familiar with elements of several programs that work with the recognition, segmenting, and sequencing of sounds and syllables. We have picked up and have been using bits and pieces of these programs, particularly an assessment called the Lindamood Auditory Conceptualization Test (LAC). Wanting more complete "phonemic awareness" training, and hoping to implement a program more fully, our "Gang of Three" attended a three-day training session of the Lindamood Phoneme Sequencing Program for Reading, Spelling and Speech (LiPS) in the summer of 1999.

The LiPS program was developed by the same people who designed the LAC. The LAC can help determine if a child's reading or spelling difficulty has to do with the processing of auditory material. Can the child isolate or segment sounds within words? Recognize the sequence of those sounds? Recognize changes in the sound sequence or of one of the sounds in the sequence? If the child I am evaluating does well on the LAC, I look to a more visually based processing difficulty or a weakness of skills integration. If the child does poorly on the LAC, I feel I have found at least part of the problem.

The LAC uses a set of shiny red, yellow, blue, green, black, and white blocks instead of letters. Colored blocks are used instead of letters in order to remove the complications of visual discrimination, memory for letters, and knowledge of letter/sound correspondence. The child hears the evaluator vocalize two identical sounds such as /p/, /p/, and is taught to show this sequence of two identical sounds by placing two blocks of the same color in a row from left to right. To show the sound sequence /p/, /p/, /ch/, vocalized by the evaluator, the child would leave the two blocks of the same color which he used to show /p/, /p/, and would add a third block of a different color to represent the /ch/ (one block only, because /ch/ is one sound, even though it is represented by two letters). Each time there is a *new* sequence, any color block can represent any sound; the child is not asked to remember, for example, that he used a white block to represent /m/ in a previous sequence.

The first part of the LAC presents sound patterns using isolated, discrete sounds, as in the examples above. The second part presents sounds as they would be blended within words. The student is asked to choose a block to represent /a/, is then told, "If this says /a/, show me /ap/." The student is expected to add a different color block to the right of the /a/ block. "If this says /ap/, show me /aps/." A third block of a different color should be added to the right. "If this says /aps/, show me /asp/." The student should move the third block (the /s/ block) to the middle position. Again, every time there is a brand new sequence, any color block can represent any sound; the child is not asked to remember, for example, that he used red as /f/ in a previous sound sequence.

Children who do well on the LAC but have difficulty reading and/or spelling may be having difficulty with memory, letter/sound correspondence, or with some aspect of visual processing, or with the integration of modalities such as writing what they hear. But their phonemic awareness is appropriate. These children are able to sequence isolated sounds, segment blended sounds, rearrange sounds, and demonstrate their understanding with the colored blocks. Children who do poorly on the LAC are thought to have difficulty with phonemic awareness. That is, they may have difficulty rhyming, recognizing same and different sounds, and they certainly have difficulty segmenting and sequencing sounds. These difficulties may or may not be accompanied by modality integration issues mentioned above.

So what does this have to do with multi-sensory teaching and learning? With brain cells and dendrites and "muscle juice"? The Gang of Three from Room 18, the speech and language clinician, a reading specialist, and myself, wanted to implement what we had learned at the Lindamood phoneme training session, and to master the LiPS program. We wanted to use "muscle juice" in our practice. We observed that several of our students had difficulty when it came to reading and/or spelling as well as telling which sound came first in a word, which next, and so on. These same students did poorly on the LAC, so they seemed prime candidates for LiPS, which uses a variety of multi-sensory strategies to strengthen student phonemic awareness. We three had been impressed with the program when we went through the training session in 1999. We each had severely reading delayed students whom we hoped would benefit from phonemic awareness. But we each felt insecure attempting to implement the LiPS program by ourselves. With support from school administration, we overlapped services for half an hour a day to teach LiPS strategies together and to plan, support, watch and learn from one another. Multi-sensory learning for us too? Well, definitely cooperative learning!

In the initial year of LiPS implementation, four second grade students, three boys and one girl, participated in the program from September through June. Three boys whom I will call Ralph, Kyle, and Evan had begun school in our "Junior Kindergarten, " a program for children whose developmental readiness suggests that they would benefit from additional preparation and time to mature. The fourth student, Tania, had repeated first grade.

At the beginning of grade 2, Ralph and Kyle had a few sight words; they could identify most of the letters of the alphabet, and they could write them from dictation. In addition, they knew some consonant and vowel sounds. But they could not apply this knowledge to the sequencing of sounds in words for the purposes of decoding or spelling. Unlike Ralph and Kyle, Evan had no sight words. He could not identify letters or write them from dictation. Tania was inconsistent in her knowledge of the alphabet and letter/sound correspondence. What she knew on one day, she would not know the next. She had no sight words for reading or spelling, and no decoding strategies. From the beginning of grade two, this group of four children worked together for two hours per day of special education services for reading and written expression. Of that two-hour time period, a half hour per day involved The Gang of Three.

Since the speech and language pathologist is most familiar with how sounds are made--lip position, tongue placement, air movement and so on, she was prevailed upon to begin. She first introduced the consonant sounds of the letters "p" and "b," encouraging the children to make the sounds, to feel what happened to their lips, to look in the mirror and at each other to see what lips do. The children were taught how to feel what was happening to the air, to touch their vocal chords, and to describe all the movements of the speaking apparatus to figure out why these sounds were considered "brothers." The children were told that brothers are alike in some ways, different in some ways. To find a good "family" name for these brothers based on how they are alike, the children were guided to the notion that the lips pop for both "p" and "b" so they are named Lip Poppers. The children listened as they made the sounds of the letters and felt their vocal chords. They identified the "quiet brother" and the "noisy brother." The "quiet brother's" sound is unvoiced /p/, so the vocal chords do not vibrate; the "noisy brother's" sound is voiced /b/, so the vocal chords do vibrate. As instruction progressed, the children identified the picture of lips popping, and matched it with the letters "p" and "b" and the sounds /p/ and /b/, placed them in their envelopes and began their LiPS picture/letter collection. "Brother" letter/sounds, all consonants, were explored in this way. Each morning the children emptied their envelopes, matched lip pictures with letters, reviewed the sounds and letter names, family names, which of the two is noisy, which quiet.

One day our dependable introducer of sounds had to go to a meeting, and I was persuaded by our third cohort to introduce the new brothers. I survived the trauma so well that I don't remember which brothers I introduced. Perhaps the "tongue coolers," voiced and unvoiced /th/, or perhaps those lip tickling "lip coolers," quiet /f/ and noisy /v/? While I no longer remember with which I began, I now present brothers and cousins, borrowers, and vowels with confidence and ease. I am fearless.

My favorite sounds are the "nose cousins" /m/, /n/, /ng/. Try making any one of these nasal letter sounds while holding your nose! It doesn't work. After holding their noses and trying to make the sounds, the children never forget them. The final group of consonants, the "borrowers," borrow sounds from other letters. For example, /x/ borrows the sound of the combination /ks/.

Vowels are taught after consonants through the "vowel circle" image, the tactile sense of jaw position and the feel and shape of the mouth. The first group of vowel sounds is the "smiles." The mouth is in a smile position for these sounds. As we go in the "front door" of the vowel circle, then down the steps to the basement, the jaw is lowered a little bit more for each sound. Children place the back of their fingers under their chin as they make each of the "smile" vowel sounds in sequence long /e/, short /i/, short /e/, long /a/, short /a/ and short /u/. They are able to feel their jaws drop with each "step." Once at the bottom of these steps, we reach the basement, where the mouth is open for short /o/, /aw/ and /au/. Then, as we go up the back steps, our lips become round for long /o/, long /oo/ and short /oo/, and we can leave by the back door to go visit the sliders. The sliders are vowel sounds for which the mouth must change shape during pronunciation of the sound, such as /oi / from round to smile, /ou/ from open to round, or long /u/ from smile to round.

The vowel circle is the hardest group for students to master, particularly the difference between short /i/ and short /e/ when decoding words. Evan, quite spontaneously, would place the back of his fingers or hand under his chin, and recite through the "smile" vowel list—feeling the degree of the smile and the position of his jaw as it dropped a little bit lower with each "step" down.

Even before the vowel circle was introduced, the Gang of Three had the students do exercises with real and nonsense words, using colored blocks or colored squares of felt. The children use a color for each sound in the word, and change the color as the sound changes. This is done without letters in order to practice "pure" sound segmentation. The reading specialist is rich with sound and syllable segmentation strategies. In addition to segmenting sounds with blocks and felt squares, she has the children tap out the sounds on the left hand, tapping left to right, thumb to index finger, then middle finger, then fourth finger, then pinky. When there aren't enough fingers, there are noses, chins, eyes, and so on. They tap up their arms for syllables, using heads and shoulders if they need more tapping space.

As the brothers, cousins, borrowers, and vowel circle letters were mastered, we added letter tiles to the colored blocks or felt squares. Ralph and Kyle were sailing by April, confidently applying their knowledge of letters and letter sounds to decoding words. Before, they might have guessed at a word, perhaps based only on its first letter—plum instead of play—or looked at one of us with large and imploring eyes for help. Now, when stuck, they stop and think, quietly give themselves the cues they need, sounding out the word letter by letter "p-l-a-y," and shaping their lips and tongues until they successfully blend the sounds. Next they read the word in the context of the sentence to see if it makes sense. This latter skill is picked up from guided reading instruction, a component of the Literacy Program, but is not discussed here. By the end of the school year, their reading had moved to an upper first grade, beginning second grade level.

Like Ralph and Kyle, Evan also made progress. While he had known none of the letter names or corresponding sounds, he now knew them all. In post testing for his annual review, he demonstrated that his decoding accuracy was nearly perfect for consonants, and that he was sometimes able to accurately decode vowels as well. He was the fastest and most accurate at laying out and identifying his LiPS letter groups and matching them to their identifying pictures. While reading an "easy reader" book at his level, Evan can now figure out consonant sounds. If unsure of the vowel sound, he may check the picture to see if it yields any clues. He sometimes is able to identify "peanut butter and jelly" vowel patterns (see below) that other students miss. Pattern books and repeated words seem to help him increase his fluency. Particularly unsure of short /e/ and short /i/, he runs through the smile vowels with his hand under his chin, checking that jaw drop. Clearly, he is not where most beginning third graders are, but he's come a long way, and he now seems to have the underpinnings, the phonemic awareness, that he needs to become a reader.

Tania, on the other hand, became somewhat overwhelmed with all the brothers and cousins and borrowers, their accompanying family names and pictures, so we reduced her participation in LiPS. Perhaps the most useful components of LiPS for her were the sound segmenting and the awareness of where and how sounds were being made. We found that she was more comfortable and less overwhelmed continuing in the Stevenson Program in which she had begun working at the end of the previous school year. The Stevenson Program uses mnemonics and story association accompanied with visual illustration to help students recognize word patterns. It introduces "peanut butter and jelly" words first. These are one syllable words with "oa", "ai", "ee", and "ea." Briefly told, the first of the vowels is wearing the crunchy peanut butter costume to the party, and asks the other letter to go along as the jelly. The crunchy peanut butter is noisy; the jelly is quiet. If the crunchy peanut butter forgets to speak and say his name, the quiet jelly kicks him with his invisible foot, at which point the crunchy peanut butter shouts out his name. We make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches; we write in the peanut butter and in the jelly. We serve goat sandwiches and coat sandwiches, rain sandwiches and hail sandwiches, seed sandwiches and feet sandwiches, mean sandwiches and seat sandwiches. We add the senses of taste and smell to the study of reading. When the cupboard is bare or the teacher is tired of sticky fingers, we use laminated paper sandwich parts, and we are hungrier for lunch.

In the Stevenson Program the silent "e" sequence is presented after the one syllable, oa, ai, ee, and ea vowel team words. Silent /e/ words are layer cake words. The bottom layer of cake is the initial consonant: the crunchy strawberry filling is the vowel. The top layer of cake is the next consonant, and the silent "e" is the icing. If the crunchy strawberry filling forgets to say its name, the icing quietly kicks it with its invisible foot. We make icing and crunchy strawberry filling and put it on little cakes and write in the filling and the icing. We've served lake cakes and Pete cakes and dime cakes and rope cakes and even plume cakes. As much as eating the goodies themselves, students seem to enjoy subjecting their guests to guessing what they are about to eat, then explaining to them what they are *really* eating.

The third sequence in the Stevenson program is the short vowel sound. For the short vowel words, I depart from Stevenson because I have devised Big Mac words. In a Big Mac word, there is nobody there to remind a vowel to say its name, so it reverts to its nickname. Borrowing from the Slingerland vowel chart, we have apple Big Macs, elephant Big Macs, igloo Big Macs, octopus Big Macs and umbrella Big Macs. For Big Mac words thus far we have worked with laminated paper, but as I write this, I realize we could use cookie cutters on Jell-O to make our apples, elephants, igloos, octopi, and umbrellas.

A year ago, Tania would look at text and seem to panic. Now however, she is able to read

peanut butter and jelly words, layer cake words, and Big Mac words in and out of context. She still goes blank, sometimes, so we go through the word pattern stories again, and she remembers. I am not sure why she forgets when she does, but it is clear that she responds to relaxed re-explanation and the allowance of time. She enjoys taking part in guided reading lessons in the regular classroom and with the LiPS group. She loves "easy reader" books and reads them over and over again. There is a tooth book that Tania's mother never wants to hear, read, or see again, but the Gang of Three is thrilled because Tania now considers herself a reader.

Conclusion

Dendrites and muscle juice,
And one clear call for me!
That every child can cross the bar,
To the sea of literacy.

In its introduction, the LiPS Program manual includes some relevant comments that have served to inform my current practice in the classroom:

> As educators begin to understand that decoding requires phonemic awareness as a precursor, there is a danger that they are not understanding the difference between teaching interaction that *elicits the development* of phonemic awareness, and instruction that merely attempts to exercise it through phonics activities [. . .]. The power of the LiPS Program is found in its focus on the primary source of sensory information that identifies phonemes—*the oral-motor activity that produces them* [. . .]. We have found that the key [. . .] lies in involving the conscious integration of the three senses of *hearing, seeing* and *feeling* in the task. (4-6)

Some students come to me and the other members of the Gang of Three with phonemic awareness skills in place. Some do not. I have learned, as have the other members of my gang, that the children who come without them can be directly taught phonemic awareness skills. This is important, because they are the underpinnings of reading (decoding) and spelling. When I say directly taught I do not mean directly taught in the sense of scripted, rote "direct instruction." Rather, I mean direct instruction in how and where sounds are made in the mouth. Once students have developed an awareness of phonemes, they are able to associate these sounds with letter symbols. They are, in turn, able to analyze and identify the sequence of those sounds and subsequently those symbols in words.

When reflecting with the other gang members about our year of phonemic awareness implementation, the reading specialist noted how far back it is necessary to go to give children the underpinnings they need for reading. She also mentioned that it is critically important to give children enough time to practice and build those underpinnings. During this communal reflection, I noted how easily the LiPS strategies can be integrated into existing reading and spelling materials or programs. The speech and language pathologist noted that the whole team of teachers working with the child should be responsible for the child's Individual Education Program (IEP). In a collaborative situation such as our Gang of Three, we each felt equally responsible; we each felt "ownership" of each of the children.

Having had each other's support and a year of experience, the LiPS Program manual seems less an intimidation and more a resource. Each member of the Gang of Three came to the collaboration with her own knowledge base from which to learn and build. As a result, we had more to teach each other and more to learn from each other. The varied perspectives proved to be rewarding for each of us as well as our students. We confirmed for our individual and collec-

tive selves that a "muscle juicy" multi-sensory program, monitored and tailored to the individual needs of the child, does facilitate learning. Excited by our new found success with phonemic awareness, the Gang of Three is now talking about going into kindergarten and first grade classrooms to work with phonemic awareness.

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The Renaissance Classroom: Throwing out the Rubrics and Sailing in Uncharted Waters With Leonardo da Vinci

Claire S. Kusmik

My pupil services supervisor in West Hartford approached me several years ago to inaugurate a new course based on the University of Kansas Curriculum for Adolescents with Learning Disabilities. The prospect of adding twenty-nine metacognitive strategies heavily based on Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences concept intrigued me. As the case manager for a minimum of thirty college-bound teenagers, and the instructor of four resource classes, I welcomed the opportunity to add new teaching tools to my toolbox. Over the course of three years, I participated in thirty training sessions at the Special Education Resource Center in Middletown, CT.

My students responded well to the Kansas strategy course. Many of the pupils earned honor roll for the first time and attributed it to the memory cues, note taking, test taking, writing, reading comprehension, and educational goal setting they practiced in the two semester, one credit course. With strong administrative, guidance, teacher, and parental support, it was decided that the Kansas strategies would be extended to mainstream courses. A cadre of "graduates" emerged from my classes and returned the next year to speak to the newcomers regarding their life stories, their educational experiences, which strategies they hated, and which ones had made a difference.

For the school year 1999-2000, ten students enrolled in Learning Strategies. All were mandated learning disabled. I was the case manager for two of the students and shared the case management for one student with the school psychologist. I lost one student to an outside placement in December 1999. Of the remaining nine students, eight earned honor roll for the first semester. All students, with the exception of one, had a history of, or were, currently in counseling. With one exception, all were college bound. Their ages ranged from fourteen to eighteen, although one peer insisted that the eighteen-year-old boy was really thirty-five.

At the beginning of the school year, I thought about splitting Learning Strategies into two strands: Kansas Strategies and da Vincian Leadership Principles. I hoped my students would benefit from the additional component of da Vinci as a role model for thinking and learning. I had more than enough for them to do, but my sense was that my energy as well as theirs wanted to be harnessed, inspired, and reframed. We all needed an antidote, a pro-serum. There were options besides Michael Gelb's *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci*. For example, Sean Covey's *7 Habits To Become A Successful Teen,* received an "excellent" peer review, and the UConn stock market simulation had been a dynamite success the previous fall. We were more than ready to move on, I felt; in fact, we yearned for the ultimate vigorous early morning row, followed by shrimp lunch, and then the midnight sail.

Concurrently, as I was charting a new course with my students, I was participating in the Connecticut Writing Project Teacher as Researcher Program. I met with several teachers one Friday evening a month at the University of Connecticut to discuss emerging questions and subsequently to form professional alliances and networks. My students knew that I had "homework" and "journal writing" to do for the teacher research project. They thought, like *The Five Chinese Brothers,* "It is only fair." In their collective mind's eye, my participation in the teacher research group was a wonderful bonus for them. As one succinct "sotto voce" enunciated, "She

can't keep us after school on Friday! She has to go to UConn!"

These students were used to my bringing in new *Borders and Books* acquisitions, reading excerpts of adventurous passages, adding to our "lead sentence collection," and at times, auctioning off books that they forgot to resist. They passed around the Gelb book. One student said, "Oh no, she's been to another conference!" In my heart, I sensed they might be a little intrigued despite the banter. The Italian terminology appealed to their sense of newness. I tweaked the discussion with my promise, "This would be new material, and I would try not to make it boring." I issued the caveat that "parts of it could be a little complicated—yet nothing you can not handle." They nodded, but the future attorney, class of 2001, continued to negotiate:

"Do we have to read the whole thing?"

"No", I responded, "Excerpts."

One boy asked, "Can we highlight?"

The peer jeer began. "You can't highlight the book, you ____."

"I'll Xerox parts," I replied.

"You use a lot of Xerox paper," pronounced the eighteen-year-old-going-on-thirty-five. The sage of the class, a grade 11 girl who aspired to be an art therapist, shook her head at him in her best Rave manner, and uttered the culminating summation, "So what? She has to."

Although it was not a dramatic moment, it was nonetheless one of unison. The commitment was made. They agreed to adding the Leonardo da Vinci leadership principles, and to taking part in my teacher research project.

The next day the sage announced, "Period 4 could never handle this!" Meanwhile periods 1, 2, 3, and 4 were demanding to know why they weren't invited to join what they all termed "the project." But without hesitation, period 8 pulled up anchor and began the sail to Renaissance adventure.

The Renaissance of a class posed several questions for me: Which students would respond to the more open-ended process of the Gelb Principles? Another question revolved around time management: How could I weave this tapestry when I was just learning how to weave myself? I had other classes and responsibilities. I needed significant time to delve into the mystery of Leonardo, his attributes, and then design lessons to not only engage my students but also increase their awareness, their empowerment and their ability to apply their strategies to all learning situations.

Finally, I pondered the three-pronged question: "Dare I do this? If I don't, will I regret it? Which is the worse thing that could happen?" Reflecting on another personal odyssey, Outward Bound, Chesapeake Bay, 1996, I remembered that my pupil services supervisor at the time said to me, "You know, you don't need to do this." He was correct and just knowing that I didn't have to go on the journey somehow inspired me to go for it anyway. In addition, I was inspired by the architect Rem Koolhaus who had said in a July 2000 *New York Times Magazine* interview, "Now is an existential moment for a discipline that will decide whether it will be a dinosaur or whether it will be reinvented" ("Rem Koolhaus Builds"). In a sense, I felt I was making the same kind of decision Koolhaus was talking about. Koolhaus' passion made me rethink and move forward with the daVincian leadership principles.

Gelb cites seven leadership strands, as demonstrated by Leonardo daVinci in *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci*: *curiosita, dimostrazione, sensazione, sfumat, arte/scienza, corporalita,* and *connessione.* The week before I introduced *curiosita*, a new student, Peter, grade 12, entered our class. I invited him to join us because he needed one half credit to graduate with his class. Having a senior changed the dynamic. Peter promptly told the group that he felt he had not taken advantage of the many educational opportunities afforded to him. Because he had a

moustache and some of kids already in the class had just discovered the razor, Peter was looked up to as the grandfather of the group. He quickly became a strong advocate of Leonardo da Vinci and his principles and because of his influence with the younger students, they, too, became advocates of Leonardo da Vinci.

Providentially, Peter paved the way for *curiosita* when, in the middle of my writing lesson, he blurted out, "I wonder what a trillion dollar bill looks like?" Remembering that da Vinci said, "Learning is the only thing man never regrets," I told Peter we would try to discover the answer to his question soon. That was probably the only time Peter was not held accountable for disrupting the instructional flow in his four years of high school.

"Curiosita: An insatiable curious approach to life, an unrelenting quest for continuous learning" (Gelb 48) was the springboard for student questions on any aspect of life. They ranged from the practical to the philosophical. The students seemed to like the rhythmical sound of the Italian word *curiosita* and chanted it in their conversations. The Thursday Group used a press conference technique in which students volunteered to share memories of kindergarten as part of a larger project to bring awareness to their educational backgrounds. Most pinpointed grade 4 as the spiral downward from "grace to academic torture." This catharsis led to a group discussion about living their dreams as opposed to living through their parents' dreams for them. Later, we talked about the concept of autonomy and how much of their job as adolescents was to individuate and become autonomous.

In their curiosity to learn more about themselves, they looked to personal role models whom they either emulated and/or respected. A diverse galleria of role models developed ranging from parents, to grandparents, to sport heroes such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, to wrestling figures such as Stone Cold and China, to musicians such as Tupac and 'N Sync, to historical figures such as Ben Franklin, to civil rights leaders such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., and to two politicians, the West Hartford mayor and John McCain.

While they investigated their selves and their role models, in the da Vincian tradition, they each kept a notebook of their musings on topics of interest to them. Some wrote backward, as daVinci did at times. Others relished in the idea that Leonardo did not believe in categorizing his thoughts and learning into different sections of his notebook. One freshman girl wrote, "One thing I admire about myself is that I believe in myself." Another girl shared that "The persons I admire most are my cousin and one of my uncles."

Shaun, a reluctant writer, sat at the computer for two days to compose what a role model meant to him. Typically, Shaun equated his rough draft with the final product. This way of working combined with his sense of entitlement kept Shaun in negotiations with several of his teachers. I was very surprised and pleased that Shaun approached his role model paper in a different vein. Foregoing his daily habit of checking basketball scores, he used the classroom computer to construct the following excerpt:

> A role model to me is a person who sets examples for other people to follow. A role model doesn't have to be a nice person. They just have to be able to inspire another person. They have to inspire you to do something. There can be positive role models and negative role models. The key to being a good role model is to be passionate and dedicated.
>
> An example of a positive role model would be Michael Jordan. Jordan has never been a loser or quitter. He does whatever it takes to win. He pushes his teammates to do this also. He makes his teammates better by pushing them to their limits in practices and games. Jordan also does charitable things such as contributing money to non-profit organizations.

As we shared role models, the intrusion of current events such as the Columbine tragedy and the Elian Gonzales affair never were far from our thoughts and conversations. We discussed these events at length, and I found that they lent themselves to another activity I do with every class. I ask students to cite two people in their lives they feel they could go to if they were in serious trouble. Peter was the only student who said he trusted no one to help him. He stated during our practice lock down, "If this was real, I'm out of here." To be eighteen and thoroughly on your own, and know it, was his reality. His matter-of-fact and stoic posture shocked some of the more sheltered students, such as the girl new to the United States from Thailand, who paid the following tribute to "Someone Who Understands." She continued, "She is S__, who gave birth to me fifteen years ago. She teaches me what is right and wrong. She works hard to get money for me to go to college. S__ always cares about me. I thank my Mom so much for being the person who understands what a teenager's life is like."

While I was generally pleased with what my students were writing about when they were exploring the self and their role models, I had a very difficult time accepting the rap singer Tupac as the chosen role model of David, grade 9. In his own words, David rarely chose to speak in school because he said he was afraid he would swear and "then get in trouble." He listed significant problems in middle school when he talked in class. But despite his reservations about talking, our discussions on Tupac began when I insisted that he sit next to me at the desk rather than isolate himself in the corner.

When David moved next to me I began to learn about Tupac. In four non-stop talking marathons, he told me about rap music, about Tupac, about Tupac's mother, about a feud between Big Daddy and Tupac that resulted in Tupac's being shot to death in Las Vegas. For a student who had managed to fail four semester-one courses, he was quite literate, articulate, and sequenced in the detail and chronology of Tupac's story. Every day I became David's secretary, and he dictated non-stop the life and legend of Tupac. He stopped asking to go to the lavatory, locker, library, and guidance counselor. Instead, he asked, "Are we going to work on Tupac today?" "Yes," I said. He patiently answered my questions as I, a child of the Pat Boone era, tried to fathom, without judgment, the current phenomenon of Tupac. A grade 11 girl fancied herself in love with Tupac and regaled the class with her admiration of him. I Xeroxed David's epistle for her class, and the word was out that you "could get a Tupac picture from Mrs. K."

The period 3 Resource English 9 class wanted to know why they could not be part of my teacher research project. Rick, an astute grade 9, live-for-hockey student, solved the problem when he brought in his personal copy of Tupac's poems and asked to see me privately in the hall. He looked me in the eye and said, "Mrs. K., I paid $12.95 at Barnes and Noble for this book. Don't you think this is a good poem?"

He had bookmarks in many pages but pointed to an eloquent poem that brought home to me that even a child of the '60s can gradually accept something new. "It is beautiful," I said. "Can I borrow the book to Xerox it for the class?" Rick entrusted the book to me until period 8. That day, David and I Xeroxed thirty-five copies of Tupac's poem. The next day both David and Rick smiled a little as their peers in resource English 9 and Learning Strategies enjoyed the fruits of their lobbying. These two young men tended to live in a concrete world of black and white, yet their interest in Tupac superceded their amotivational reading and writing profiles. With years of academic failure under their belts, perhaps they identified with the feelings of the boy whose book they never forgot to bring to school. I felt that professionally I was walking a balance beam. Previously, a student of mine had misunderstood a poem about rape that one of my colleagues had read. I worried that that same kind of simplistic interpretation and subsequent conflict might be attributed to one of Tupac's poems or any aspect of his life. I worried about this kind of

conflict being associated with my classroom.

I was pleased, however. that David was not only talking to me but opening up as well. I was surprised that Rick actually spent time to meticulously bookmark his favorite poems and then entrusted me with the book for three hours. These students shared part of themselves with me, so I could not put down their selection of a role model even though a part of me would have liked a safer choice. I realized that a safer choice would not have been honest for them.

Although I had not calculated it, trust grew between my students and me as I listened and learned from them about Tupac. No one stated he or she was bored. They accepted my decision that we could spend some time on Tupac, but that we did have other work to do. My acceptance of their interest in Tupac combined with actually using David's paper as a model, and then Xeroxing poems from Rick's book contributed to melding us closer as a group. I think that by accepting Tupac, I accepted and validated each of them. I found David's reverie to be profound and wise as he dictated the following conclusion to me, "I do not value the violent part of his life. I value Tupac because he made it out of the New York ghetto against many odds. He followed his dream to create music. He found and took care of his mother. People do not understand the real Tupac unless they read his poems."

"Dimostrazione: A commitment to test knowledge through experience, persistence, and a willingness to make mistakes" (Gelb 76) was a joint effort among the teacher school psychologist, his psychology intern, the students, and me. Each staff member researched the educational profile and learning attributes of three students. We then administered a Multiple Intelligences Inventory, study skills questionnaire, *Dimostrazione* self-check list, and the Dunn Rankin Reward Preference Inventory.

Meeting privately with each student, we shared collected information and then formulated personal and educational action plans. After seeing the results of the data, the majority of the students declared themselves to be hands-on, kinesthetic learners in a left-brained learning style in their mainstream classes. They cited study guides, extended time options, one-on-one tutoring, and meeting with teachers privately as ways they successfully navigated through the system. The notion of using mistakes as an opportunity to learn seemed alien to them so we spent two sessions discussing this concept. An outgrowth of *dimostrazione* was the option to create either "A Little Bit About Me" paper and/or poster.

Since most of the students opted for the poster, Peter gave up one of his free periods to help me inaugurate an "artists' studio" in our classroom. The art teacher sanctioned our borrowing ten paint boxes. Peter, knowing the meticulous and somewhat obsessive-compulsive nature of Candice and Melissa, inspected at least fifty boxes before he chose ten perfect boxes for them to use. Rick, the doubter, said it was impossible to turn our classroom into an "artists' studio." He watched as Peter turned over desks and pronounced them easels. Rick learned quickly. The entire class was literally turned upside down with desktops now covered with large 24X12" paper. Three creative souls chose to stand and adhere their paper to the two bookcases and one cabinet. This rearrangement was accomplished in about five minutes without uproar, nit picking, or the usual divisive bantering. The atmosphere was purposeful and serious.

Peter and Melissa went to the lavatories to get water for the styrofoam cups. Candice waited as the resident Princess for her water, and as Peter predicted, pronounced her paint box "Neat! All the colors are here!" Using desks, bookcases, large poster paper, and ten cups of water, the classroom was transformed into an artists' studio. We then added music, and three painting to music sessions ensued. I was surprised at the thoughtful and serious tone of this enterprise. When I had to speak briefly to Rick about a minor infraction, ever the litigator, he said, "But didn't I set up three easels for them? C__ did nothing."

Everyone painted on as he defended himself. The painting to music endeavor became public and resulted in three non-mandated students requesting to join the class. They joined the group and a real feeling of camaraderie flowed. Some of the titles of the paintings were "Love," "Rage," "Boredom," "Peasant," "daVinci Self-Portrait" and "Mona Lisa."

During another *dimostrazione* session, a time capsule was decorated with the beloved daVinci infinity symbol and his famous knot designs. Melissa chose to design dimostrazione wallpaper as I encouraged her to consider interior decorating as a potential career.

"*Sensazione is the continual refinement of the senses, especially sight, as a means to enliven experience*" (Gelb 94). When I introduced *sensazione* to my students, it opened up a dialogue surrounding the five senses. Corollaries of Dr. Andrew Weil, M.D. in his *Eight Weeks to Optimum Health* book (Introduction) were mirrored as students shared that their parents filled their homes with flowers, music, soft fabrics, an emphasis on sound nutritional habits, and an atmosphere of acceptance, caring and laughter. I lost the debate to outlaw their consistent use of spritzer sprays in class because they now felt that to eliminate spraying the room with these aromas would negate their implementation of *sensazione*.

While all the success with da Vinci was occurring in my classroom, the goddesses of serendipity also shone on me one evening. I had vowed never to order anything from QVC or watch this show because I did not want to be even minutely tempted to sample its wares. As I channel-surfed, a flash of a three-foot-high doll caught my attention. It was Leonardo da Vinci accompanied by a miniature Mona Lisa portrait. QVC, my suspected nemesis, offered this deluxe package for $126.00 tax included. Instinctively I said "No." I even tried to find another channel. Then, my second reaction was a combination of scrambling to find my charge card while I memorized the 800 number in fear that the next QVC item would be coming on, and my students and I would lose this Leonardo artifact.

Once the decision was made, I never looked back. My transaction went smoothly and within two weeks, UPS delivered a source of much joy and inspiration. The advent of the Leonardo daVinci doll and a miniature Mona Lisa replica created quite a stir in room A108. Then, mysteriously, a fax from Alicia daVinci, grandniece of Leonardo, accompanied these gifts. The fax from a distant daVinci relative caused a major debate as the handwriting, departure time, and contents were analyzed and scrutinized by *sensazione* zealots. Peter analyzed the bill closely. "Why was the doll sent to your house and the fax sent to school?" he wanted to know.

"Peter," I told him, " I gave both addresses. QVC must have notified the daVinci relatives and told them we were studying about Leonardo. How could I get a fax at home when I don't have a fax machine there? They had to send it to the school." The rest of the students nodded in solemn unison and that discussion was over.

They named him "Little Leo." In their collective mind's eye, one of the desks in the room was superior to all the others. "Little Leo" had that desk as his assigned seat. He became an integral part of the class. Two students daily retrieved him from pupil services and returned him at the end of class. They insisted that he be stored in a safe place over spring break. Although this QVC venture did not help my charge card balance, what it gave us was priceless.

As Sebastian Junger wrote in *The Perfect Storm,* "The point is to participate actively in the world" (qtd. in "Living Dangerously"). Participation was a strong suit for my students. With Little Leo in tow, they included him in their Thursday discussion group. During one very heated conflict resolution session, with tempers flying high and the troops starting to build alliances that were subject to change based on a combination of illogic and whimsy, one student resolved the impasse when he said, "We should look at this situation THREE ways, like Leonardo did!" They made the connection from his philosophy to their situation. I was pleased, indeed.

Since September the group had participated twice a month in a guided visualization entitled "A Walk In The Woods." During *sensazione,* the visualizations expanded to an outdoor experience that included reading "Birches" by Robert Frost. Spike, grade 9, insisted that he got lost during the indoor walk but did not get lost when we went outside. A rare talker, Spike announced to the group as we looked at Finny and Gene's tree, "I wonder if things would have been better at Devon School if they had had *curiosita, dimonstrazione*, and *sensazione.*" At this time, my students were actively using the Italian terms in their conversations. I was happy that they were buying into the strands and applying them in their references to what they were reading in English class.

With Little Leo in tow, we experimented listening to various types of background music as we read and wrote. Although he was told not to, Peter slipped in the beginning of the "Thong Song" and promptly earned his first detention since joining the group. Listening to music as they worked seemed to be second nature to my students. I preferred the silence. My impression was when it came to academic productivity qualitatively and quantitatively, they yielded approximately four times more when listening to Bach than to 'N Sync. They liked the "Sea Wave" tapes. They verbalized a strong resentment to "Easy Listening." They seemed to like the repetition in Pachelbel Canon. Without solicitation, one older boy volunteered that since he had given up smoking pot, "The joy of music was more pronounced, and he was better able to focus on it." He would show me the poetry that he had started writing, but he refused to let me Xerox copies for the class.

As part of the *sensazione* experience the class began an elaborate collaboration plan for a fantasy daVincian dinner party. Initially this was to be a forty-minute exercise. I had not factored in their investment in making this a significant event. It took on all the complications of a wedding reception. Whether due to their upcoming junior and senior proms, their intrigue with having what I would term a degree of power, or the melding of their needs, wants, and personas, the dinner party became a week's production. With Candice at the helm, and her loyal subjects concurring, she said, "We have to have a theme." After much discussion, they finally settled on the "Sun, Stars, and Moon Event" because, as Melissa, grade 11, stated, "It ties in with Leo's love of nature." What amazed me was two-fold: 1)The class was running itself. I said little. They took complete charge. None seemed to have any excuse, reason, etc. why they had to leave the room. 2) Everyone was engaged in the endeavor and respectful of each other's ideas.

Given this fantasy project, all students dove in. Candice emerged as a calm and competent leader and delegator. As the dinner party took shape, the question of the guest list surfaced. I had originally opted for fourteen people. As they mulled over their names, it became apparent that we were going to have to rent additional space. They had a rationale for inviting everyone on their list. As the honorary "Aunt of the Bride," I capitulated. I was very heartened to hear them weigh the pros and cons of having children at the feast and come to the unanimous decision that multi-age parties were best! The final guest list, with Little Leo at the head circular table, consisted of their parents, grandparents, two cousins, Tupac, Stone Cold, China, four teachers, two infants, best friends, Einstein, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Benjamin Franklin, John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, Maya Angelou, Homer, Robin Lee Graham, Patti Graham, Harper Lee, Alice Hoffman, Marie Curie, the principal and vice principals, the Dean, the town mayor, and the current two Presidential candidates. Karina, grade 11, added her knowledge of the Japanese decorating method, Feng Shui, as a guide to enhancing the event's physical environment and karma.

"Sfumato: Literally going up in smoke; a willingness to embrace ambiguity, paradox, and uncertainty" (Gelb 142).The smoky quality of *sfumato*, used in Leonardo's paintings, was

apparent to some of the students and difficult for others to perceive. As part of the *sfumato* experience, students examined issues of their choice that lacked easy solutions, for example, drug use, homelessness, immigration, and civil rights. They compiled a chart of arguments, pro and con, for each issue. "No easy answers here. Lots of *sfumato!"* muttered a grade 11 student. While *sfumato* was a difficult concept for many of my students to understand, it was nonetheless becoming part of their daily vocabulary as evidenced by one student's announcement, "The *sfumato* has cleared in my mother's life. Returning to school after becoming a teen Mom helped her find her way in life. It had been very difficult with little parental or financial support, but the smoke has finally cleared from our lives now."

Another student who had admitted that he was currently "living with *sfumato*" in his life, but surging ahead, wrote in his journal: "Five years from now I will be twenty-one years old. I will be living in my own apartment in West Hartford. I won't be married but I may be going out socially. Going to work and school part time will occupy most of my time. Whether or not I'll have a car will depend on my financial situation."

Yet another student wrote in an open-ended journal entry about *sfumato*, "Having a learning disability shows me that it does not matter how popular you are. It is important to be yourself, to take each day at a time, let people help you, and fight back. When people bug you, walk away."

Searching for other activities to do in connection with *sfumato*, I hit the jackpot. In a composition text, I found a "Mock Resume" of Leonardo's skills, abilities, work experience, and interests. I asked my students to imagine that each was an employer to whom Leonardo had applied. Each had the assignment to write a letter to Leo informing him if he or she would hire him. Students responded with letters such as:

> Dear Leonardo,
> I have received your letter inquiring about employment and it is my pleasure to hire you as a War Specialist. I will give you money, room, full use of my palace activities, and your own work studio. As your Patron, I invite you to take meals by my side. You will start in two days. So good luck.
> Your good friend,
> The Duke

As the group navigated toward "*arte/scienza: the development of the balance between science and art, logic and imagination, whole brain thinking*"(Gelb 164), we entered May afternoons reminiscent of South Carolina's high summer. With *Pachelbel's Canon by the Sea* playing in the background, the group sat in their chosen square formation for the *arte/scienza* self inventory. Sharing a breeze with their thoughts, muting their posters, some vertical, others horizontal, one black and white, another on fluorescent pink or mint parchment paper, they again mused how period 4 could never handle listening to the *Pachelbel Canon.*

Arte/scienza dovetailed with the preparation for final exams and our frequent application of mind mapping and graphic organizers. Students prepared individual action plans comprised of realistic goals, potential obstacles, time management, and reinforcers. They completed three personal mind maps and concluded with a "Blind Walk" in the A wing. This involved trust. Eventually each student walked blindfolded, one time as the truster, one time as the trustee. Their dialogue was serious as they chose their partners. Peter volunteered to "walk" me. I wondered what my colleagues were thinking as he led me down the corridor!

It was amazing to see how far my students had traveled in terms of trust with each other and me since September. A major highlight after the blind walk was having one of my resource American government students return after school to ask, "What are you teaching next year? Can

I take that period 8 class with you?" As she ran off to catch the bus, I just said, "Fine. Period 8."

As we concluded our journey at the end of the year, the students compared some of their pre-exam travails to the dilemmas some of their favorite literary characters faced. In a poll of all my classes, they deemed *The Odyssey* by Homer the best book they had read. *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee and *Dove: The Boy Who Sailed Around The World Alone* by Robin Lee Graham were close behind. Odysseus and Penelope endured. One student wrote:

> Dear Odysseus,
> I miss you so much. I wish you were here. Some men from the village asked to marry me but I said no. I have been loyal to you. I hope you are staying loyal to me. I hear you are hanging out with Calypso. Please hurry back.
> Sincerely,
> Penelope
>
> Dear Penelope,
> The seas have been tough. Lots of gods seem to want us dead, including Poseidon. We have been trying to get back for the past 19 years but still nothing! I saw shore once. We were very close but a crew member opened a gift from the wind god. It sent us all across the world. Well, I will keep on trying. Here is some gold jewelry for you. Remember what Leo said, "Nothing can be loved until it is known." I know I will return.
> Odysseus

"*Corporalita is the cultivation of grace, ambidexterity, fitness, and poise*" (Gelb 192). The concepts of ambidexterity and fitness interested my students but the concepts of grace and poise were new to them. The individual *corporalita* self-check inventory helped them see that there were no right or wrong answers. I decided I would have to use Howard Gardner's approach to understanding concepts as expressed in the following statement of his, "You have to spend time on concepts for the most part, approaching them in many different ways and giving students many chances to perform their understandings" (2).

In *corporalita,* students had the opportunity to dovetail what they knew about health, fitness, and wellness with new concepts that they could either choose or negate in their own lives. It was interesting to note that all of my students except three participated in after school sports. Also intriguing for me was their unanimous habit of drinking water from an array of plastic containers.

Each of my students believed in the value of exercise. Each believed he/she was tired much of the time and wanted to start a petition to have school start later. All of the upper classmen had weekend and after-school employment and waxed eloquent on the ways they handled difficult customers. Several of them cited participating in the Thursday Group and/or seeing the school psychologist and social worker as one of the ways they handled stress. All felt the concept of poise was a little too elevated for them but they were committed to growing as persons and acquiring self-confidence.

After students took inventories of their health, wellness, and fitness, each conducted a mini stretch and exercise lesson. Thomas and Nick, football players, patiently coached Spike in the art of doing sit-ups. From jock to non-jock, I observed a visible respect regarding their different endurance and stamina levels.

We next examined a model daVincian eating plan, heavy on fruit and grain. But all students seemed to defer to parents when it came to eating patterns. They accepted apples and small boxes of raisins from me, but they secretly wished for pops and wiggly snakes. While the

daVinci eating plan did not make much of an impression on them, I did notice that once I gave them fruits instead of candy, much of their prior verbal bluntness and impulsivity dissipated. I was beginning to believe that we had a growing sense of decorum, more specifically, a growing awareness of how to interact with others. Perhaps *corporalita* was in our midst. I remembered that Jaime Escalante from the film *Stand and Deliver* said that "students rise to the level of their teacher's expectations." I was hoping that between daVinci and me, my students were improving. We were to discover a priceless jewel in all we learned from getting through the last strand.

"Connessione is a recognition of, and appreciation for the interconnectedness of all things and phenomena" (Gelb 220). In the *connessione* strand, I had planned ultimately for each student to make a Fandex, a fan constructed of flourescent poster strips of the daVinci principles. But my students were troubled. Two students in particular were not getting along. They exchanged verbal putdowns frequently. Private chats with both students were to no avail. Detentions proved fruitless. Peers in the room told one to "Stop it! This is bad karma," and the other to "Stand up for yourself."

In the meantime, the *connessione* strand remained in dry dock. We went back to sitting in rows. Slowly we began to rebond and heal. The students asked for "A Walk In The Woods" guided visualization. A grade 11 girl appeared one day and asked if she could audit the class for the remainder of the year. Her decision to audit changed the dynamic in the room for the better. One of my students said, thinking aloud, "How bad can we be if someone wants to take the course period 8 without credit?" We finally begin *connessione* and were immersed in constructing pyramid goals, life maps, and graphic organizers. We planned for exams.

Just as everything was finally getting back to normal, I learned that no teacher, least of all me, is exempt or immune from the large waves that can tilt a boat, jar a class, and challenge you to look within yourself and decide what you ultimately believe in. Now that we were back on course with *connessione*, we were in danger of losing one of our students to homebound instruction. As June approached, Charles tended to be absent at least once a week. He was very bright, very sad, and lost since his best friend had moved to New York. Other factors complicated his life. Sometimes, period 8 was the only class Charles attended and then the day came when Charles did not even come to period 8. My students wanted answers. "Where is he?" "Has he dropped out?" "Why is he so unhappy?" "Why wouldn't he talk to us more?" "We're good kids! Right?"

In a way this was unplanned, real life, *connessione*. I told my students that I was not sure where Charles was at the moment but I was saving his gold notebook until he returned. Their faces were serious and somber as I announced that we were each going to make a fandex. As they designed and constructed their individual fandexes, I said nothing. They seemed to be reconnecting without Charles, mulling over his absence. In many ways, it was like a calm grieving night. They discussed among themselves their sadness and indignation about his plight. No one criticized, teased, or put down anyone verbally during the fandex *connessione* sessions.

It was at this time that a former student, a graduate, came to visit us. He said, "I just wanted to thank you. I remembered what you said."

"What did I say?" I asked him. He replied,

"You said, never give up! Don't you remember? And you told us about the glass being either half-full or half-empty. I have a 3.9 GPA now in college. My glass is half full." He then turned to the group in the circle and quietly said, "I know what you're going through. I've been down some very tough roads. I've done it all. Please listen to your parents, listen to your teachers." His spontaneous talk to them seemed a fitting ending to *connessione*.

We ended on a sunny June day amid promises to visit next year, hugs, writing in year-

books, room cleaning, and packing up Little Leo and the Mona Lisa. Several students asked to borrow the Gelb and Covey books over the summer. My final memories were indeed satisfying as I concluded the year.

William J. Bennett, author of *The Book of Virtues*, wrote, "In the end we need to provide our children with sound moral instruction, teach them what things in life deserve to be emulated and loved, and offer tangible examples of our deep and enduring affection." Wasn't that what Leonardo believed in another era? A great deal had happened in one school year during period 8, the bulletin boards, the galleria, the letters, the feast, the peer coaching, the nature walks, the internet searches, the library visits, the scanning of fifty paint boxes for clean ones, the Thursday groups, the exam preps, the role plays. Did the daVinci principles make a difference? As Shakespeare's Prospero said in *The Tempest*, "Well, a great deal has happened since I conjured up that tempest this morning! There is just a little more work to be done before the day is ended."

I believe the daVincian qualities revitalized my approach to teaching and learning. They also gave my Learning Strategy students seven more hooks and anchors to call upon in shaping their lives for the better. Furthermore, I viewed the teacher research project as a personal and professional journey both for my students and me. I learned much. Throughout my many years as a teacher and parent, and through my own life experience, I have found that the concept of hope and self-empowerment guided me "step by step" through the many tributaries of life's waters.

I had doubted myself in the beginning—could I make the daVinci principles work in my classroom? Would modern day teens relate and identify with Renaissance beliefs and concepts? What kinds of lessons might foster their choice to decide for themselves which strands "fit" them? Their acceptance or rejection could make or break the implementation of this new project.

Being able to summon up hope within myself, no matter what the obstacle, is what enabled me to see the voyage in uncharted waters through to conclusion. As Maurice Lamm said in *The Power of Hope: One Essential of Life and Love,* "Hope injects tension into our beings—the tension of the bow that stretches to propel the arrow, the tenser the string, the more powerful the shot" (174).

What guided me? My belief and hope that in broadening my students' horizons, in dreaming dreams with them, in holding the course through logic and dyslogic—all within the reasonable structure of room A108, I would, as Lamm said, "open the spigot of hope and empowerment." Leo was the vehicle, the tool, and the inspiration that fostered an increased "reciprocity" of learning between teacher and student, reminiscent of Maslow's belief that the student is the teacher of the teacher.

Reminiscing about one of Leo's dinner parties, a student said to me, "That wasn't right that he only drew the ugly people there." A peer recanted, "How is it any different with you when you put down M___?" The silence that followed cannot be documented, calibrated, or factored into an equation, yet for the remainder of that one session, no one verbally put down another. To uncover even a minute's self-awareness, at that point in time, is the stepping stone to the next growth point for all of us.

As the captain on our daVinci journey, I had certain privileges and certain responsibilities. As with Outward Bound, the daVinci principles were a lot of hard work. I'm glad I chose to make both journeys. My teacher research project was everything—fun, frustrating, annoying, invigorating, and inspiring. It created a true opportunity for me to rethink and add new life to period 8 and within myself. As I progressed through my teacher research project, the runner's high came to me many times. As I taught, planned, wrote, meditated, and shared Leo with friends, a clarion call, Leonardo's mantra, came to me in a whisper, "Learning is the only thing the mind never exhausts, never fears and never regrets" (*I, Leonardo*).

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Questioning My Student and Myself: Searching for the "Holy Grail" of Accountability

Janet Wilber

In the summer of 1980, I spent three days at Hartwick College's freshmen orientation. I had no idea what I wanted to do, although I knew I would probably focus my studies on the Humanities. My advisor, a cheery, maternal Arthurian scholar, took one look at me and said, "You're going to be a teacher!" Naturally, she signed me up for her courses, one of which was a course in Arthurian legend. Mrs. Gratz spent her vacations searching pastoral England for proof of King Arthur's existence. She managed to weave Arthurian legend and Celtic Mythology into every course she taught.

Part of Arthurian Legend, the legend of the Holy Grail, involves the myth of the Fisher King. Though there are many versions of this myth, there are some consistent elements. A descendant of Joseph of Arimathea, the Fisher King is a lame man who has been wounded by a lance through the thigh. His job is to guard the Holy Grail, the vessel Jesus drank from at the last supper. Percival, who aspires to become a knight of the Round Table, embarks on a quest to search for the Grail. When he arrives at the Grail castle, he discovers that the area surrounding the castle is a desolate wasteland and that the king is dying. That night, Percival dines at the castle, where he observes several strange occurrences. Before the meal, a man enters the dining room carrying a bloody lance, and a lady enters carrying the Grail. The Grail supplies food for the entire dinner party. After resting, Percival wakes to discover the castle has been abandoned. For many years, he searches for answers. Finally, he learns that the Fisher King had been his uncle, and he had been called to be the Grail's new protector. Had he asked, "Who does one serve with the Grail?" the old king would have been healed and his land would have been replenished. Part of the beauty of this myth is in its ambiguity. In some versions, Percival asks the question; in other versions, he does not. In some versions, he is callous and arrogant. In other versions, he is profoundly despondent. But in all the versions, the question is central.

Such is the nature of questions. However insignificant a question might seem, the formulating and asking of the question can lead to a simple understanding or a profound insight. The quest for knowledge is, I suspect, a primary motive for becoming a teacher. We love to learn and we desire to pass that love of learning on to subsequent generations. Teachers yearn to be asked the "deep" questions, those questions that sometimes only lead to more questions. The insights that can evolve from such questions are truly at the heart of learning.

Today, unfortunately, the reality of teaching is that in the midst of an interesting or deep discussion, the vast majority of questions seem to center around permission to use the lavatory or visit the nurse. The central question is not "What am I learning?" or "Why am I learning?" but "What do I need to do to pass?" What has created this shift? Why are our students concerned about the outcome, but not the process that leads to that outcome? Has the emphasis on standardized testing and subsequent "teaching to the test" been a factor in this shift? How do the growth of technology, the video culture, the deterioration of social mores, and other complex factors influence this situation? As the 1999-2000 school year wound to a close, one of my students, a senior, and his mother posed the following questions to me:

> Tim, June 3rd: Will I pass your course if I pass the exam and make up a lot of work?
>
> Tim's mother, June 10th: How could my son have failed when he passed the exam

and worked so hard these past few weeks making up all of his work?

As in the myth of the Fisher King, the questions were asked too late to "heal" the problem. And perhaps the questions were not the "right" questions. Sometimes, however, our most important lessons are learned through our mistakes.

In order to understand my issues with Tim and his accountability, I need to reflect on my own background. My parents have been married forty-nine years and still live in the little ranch house they built in 1957. They raised five children, of whom I am the youngest, keeping three goals in mind: health, happiness, and education. My father worked as a design engineer for United Technologies where he designed parts of the original space suit and parts of the "life support systems" for the lunar module and the space shuttles. His job was extremely stressful and time-consuming, but somehow he managed to teach Sunday School, coach Little League, and attend all of our sporting and musical events. My mother worked off and on as a registered nurse. During my teen years, she worked second shift for a local doctor.

My siblings and I were responsible for preparing dinner, cleaning up, doing our homework, and any other chores she might have specified before she left. The phrases "Do your best," "Try harder," and "You got a B+; why didn't you get an A?" were mantras to live by in our house even for my oldest sister, who is mildly autistic and border-line mentally disabled. Because my parents could not get an accurate diagnosis/prognosis, they raised Cindy according to the same standards and expectations they had set for the rest of their children. Consequently, Cindy has been able to successfully complete an Associate's Degree, drive a car, and live on her own. Because I will someday be her guardian, I took her to be tested by a psychologist and a neurologist, both of whom were amazed by her high level of functioning.

Thanks to the role models provided by my parents, older siblings, and the expectations of good teachers, I was always a diligent student. In fifth grade, I worked so hard on reports on Thomas Jefferson and William Shakespeare that I had dreams about them. In fact, the pressure to excel was so great that I experienced a brief period of insomnia. Though this may sound unpleasant, my learning experiences were almost universally positive. I developed a deep and satisfying self-motivation. In high school, I would arrive home from school by 2:30, prepare my snack, and sit down at the kitchen table to do my homework. If my brother was listening to the stereo, he listened with headphones. The television may have been on, but I don't remember it being a distraction. If rehearsals for band, choir, or drama kept me long hours after school, I would get up at three or four the next morning to complete assignments or study. No one ever had to "encourage" me to do my homework or remind me about due dates. As I write this essay, I realize this ethic was probably unusual, but I was the fifth child in a family of achievers, my classes were tracked, and my closest friends were the valedictorian and the salutatorian in our class. I did not really understand that there was a significant population of my peers who were not as conscientious as I was.

In college, I was equally self-disciplined and motivated. It was a rare morning when I wasn't in the library by eight or nine o'clock. And when I matriculated at the University of Virginia to work on my Master's degree, the ghosts of Jefferson and Shakespeare haunted me as I studied *Othello* and *Twelfth Night* on the verdant lawn of "Mr. Jefferson's University."

When I completed my formal college education, it took me four years to find my current teaching position. The job market for teaching was extremely tight, and I really wanted to stay in Connecticut where jobs were especially scarce, in part because of the Education Enhancement Act instituted in the late 1980s that raised teacher salaries significantly. During those first four years, I held four long-term substitute teaching positions, sold Tupperware, sold clothing in a retail store at a local mall, worked as a mother's helper, and did free-lance writing for Prentice-

Hall. Though some people suggested that I give up teaching and get a job at one of the insurance companies or at a casino—we now have two very large casinos in southeastern Connecticut—I just couldn't do it. I had not gone to school for six years so I could sit in front of a computer at an insurance office.

Finally, ten years ago, I was hired by The Norwich Free Academy (NFA), where my parents had been high school sweethearts, to teach English. I include the latter detail because it speaks about where I come from and how I developed my work ethic. Not only did I want to do really well, because that is who I am, but also because I had this emotional attachment to this wonderful institution. My parents graduated in the 1940s, so none of my colleagues had known them as students. Still, I felt I was representing my parents, which increased my desire to be the best teacher that I could be. Because I had been hired a couple of weeks into the school year (an unexpected increase in enrollment necessitated hiring additional teachers), classes had to be formed for me. In the week that I waited, I sat in the teachers' lounge familiarizing myself with the textbooks and writing lesson plans. One of my colleagues frequently commented that I should enjoy all of this free time because it would be over soon. I remember being mildly offended by this comment because I didn't want to be sitting around. I had waited four years for this job, and I was anxious to be in the classroom.

When I began, I had idealistic notions that students would be self-motivated, diligent, and responsible, as I had been when I was a student. After observing varying degrees of apathy and lack of accountability during my ten years of teaching, I decided I wanted to focus this research study on improving student accountability for learning. What methods can I use to help students raise their standards of achievement? And what methods would make students acknowledge responsibility or lack thereof? The balance of responsibility seems to have shifted dramatically since I was a student. Ideally, the teaching/learning dynamic should be a 50/50 proposition. But I am doing 75% of the work and receiving 90% of the blame when students who lack responsibility, accountability, and motivation fail or earn grades lower than they expected.

I now realize my expectation that all or even most of my students would be as self-motivated and self-disciplined as I had been was highly unrealistic. Furthermore, the level of self-motivation and personal responsibility seems to have dropped continuously in the past ten years. One of my colleagues noted that we live in a "Mac-lit" world. We order our Big Macs and fries; we consume them, and then we return to the counter to order an apple pie or a shake. We want it quick, easy, and cheap. Our students read a piece, figure out the plot or the main idea, and expect a worksheet of questions. They question why works of literature need to be analyzed. Even if they don't need analysis, why not try to figure out all the possible meanings and levels of meaning a work has to offer? More simply, why don't they try to learn? This attitude represents to me the "it's too difficult; therefore it's not worth trying" mentality. What factors account for this phenomenon? Of those factors, which ones can I address? How does my role as teacher impact this issue? And what can I do when I can't even get some of the students up to the counter to sample the menu I've chosen with care?

I have long been bothered by accountability issues, but the students in one of my eleventh grade college prep British Literature classes really brought the issue to the forefront. Although a couple of students in the class were willing to accept responsibility for their academic and personal shortcomings, the vast majority of students were vocal about my shortcomings: "You give too much work," "You grade too hard," "I always got *A*s in English last year," "Mr./Mrs. _____ is cooler/ smarter/ nicer." If they spent half of the energy on their study habits that they expend on these diatribes, they might earn *A*s in my class, I would muse. Instead of reviewing the copious notes I wrote on essays and tests, they preferred to attribute their lack of success to excuses

such as "the teacher hates me," or "she's unfair." My offer to *re*-review their efforts carried the disclaimer that I might find positive points that I missed upon first reading the essay(s), but I might also find other mistakes/problems and therefore a higher grade would not be guaranteed. As one might expect, few students took me up on this offer.

For a test on the Middle Ages, folk ballads, and the morality play *Everyman*, I allowed students to do the essays in advance. They needed to study their notes, but they could use their textbooks in order to make specific references to the ballads and *Everyman.* The essay topics, given one week before the test, contained explicit directions on topic, length, etc. But, the day of the test, fifteen minutes into the testing period, students bombarded me with questions ranging from "How long should the essays be?" to "What is inference?" and "What was the medieval attitude toward death?"—topics that had been covered extensively prior to the day of the test. I consider myself to be a patient person, but this scenario tested me. I responded by telling the students to read the questions very carefully as they contained very specific directions. As for responding to the questions about inference and the medieval attitude toward death, I refused to comply. When students have the opportunity to do essays in advance, and then don't look at the questions until the day of the test, I feel I do them a disservice if I answer their questions. Students were also given the opportunity to do some of the essays for the mid-term examination in advance. Only about half of the class took advantage of this opportunity. Thus, the post-exam review inspired only negativity and denial. These students, who failed to make up a two-inch thick pile of tests and quizzes from the first two marking periods, complained that I was a hard marker and should relax my standards.

After taking notes and observing two students in particular, I decided that doing a case study would be the most effective tool to analyze this issue of accountability. My case study is a student I will refer to as Tim. Tim was a senior who had failed a full credit of eleventh grade English. Thus, as a senior, he was making up this credit in my eleventh grade college prep British Literature class.

Tim is a tall, slim, boyish, clean-cut young man who likes to be known as "Timmy" and who needs to be reminded daily to remove his baseball cap (a school policy). He is the only child of a divorced mother. He is a fairly social young man who seemed to get along well with the other students in the class in spite of a one year age difference. He frequently chatted with the students sitting closest to him. He was not loud, but the chatting tended to be a distraction, and I would often have to ask him to stop talking, a request with which he willingly complied. I did change his seat several times over the course of the year, but he is the kind of person who can and will talk to anybody. He was also chronically tardy and the usual tactics for addressing this behavior did not effect change. He did not serve my detentions, affectionately known as "Wilber time," and finally, after about fourteen tardies, I resorted to writing a discipline referral that resulted in his having to serve a week's worth of administrative detentions. Shortly after the referral was submitted, he entered my class late with a pass from his guidance counselor. When he handed me the pass, he intoned sarcastically, "I'm not going to be referred for being late, am I?"

Tim's class was a heterogeneously grouped eleventh grade college prep British Literature class. Though we do have a handful of sections of remedial English and Honors/AP English, about 80% of our students are heterogeneously grouped. However, I think it would be more accurate to say that these groupings are random, computer-generated. Thus, while my "F" channel eleventh grade class contained a heavy concentration of high achievers, the opposite was true of my "C" channel class, Tim's class. That class started out with twenty-five students—two seniors and twenty-three uppers, our school's term for eleventh graders. Three of the students

were mainstreamed special education students. At the end of the first semester, eight students had to do attendance appeals to earn their credit because of excessive absences. Three of those students did not attend the mid-term examination and therefore lost their credit anyway. After the mid-term exam, five of the students dropped the class. One transferred laterally to the exact same course taught by a different teacher; one transferred to my other eleventh grade class; one transferred to a lower level class; one went on homebound instruction, and the other senior dropped out. Of the twenty students remaining, I would classify eight of them as being borderline learning disabled. In addition, six students experienced extreme personal crises. Two students lost their fathers, two experienced serious illnesses, and two had unplanned pregnancies. One girl had an abortion and was kicked out of her home; the other girl is keeping her baby. Though I would classify about five of the students as possessing above average intelligence, only one student in Tim's class earned grades commensurate with his abilities.

Even under "normal" circumstances, this would have been a difficult class to teach. When the year began, however, I was teaching under very strained circumstances. Less than one week before school started, my mother suffered a stroke while on vacation in Nova Scotia. My sister, also a teacher, and I flew up to Halifax, saw our mother through her crisis, then drove our parents' car back to Connecticut so they could fly home. We literally drove into Connecticut hours before our first day with students. I missed that valuable week before school in which I would ordinarily set up my room, re-connect with my colleagues, and prepare myself emotionally for the year ahead.

That first day back, I truly felt like a deer stunned into immobility by the headlights of an oncoming car. And students, like dogs, can sense fear and anxiety. The tone set those first few days was tense, to say the least. It took me a long time to relax, enjoy my students, and find my teaching rhythm, and when I finally did, I was beset by more crises. In November, I broke my foot after one of our parents' nights; in March, I took some time off to care for a sibling who had undergone surgery; and in April, my mother underwent surgery to repair an abdominal aneurysm. I feel that in many ways, I was able to "salvage" the academic year and reclaim my joy for teaching, but I learned that stress had a significant impact, some of it negative, on my teaching style.

So, how did I choose Tim as the subject of my research? After taking notes during the fall semester, I concluded that he exhibited many of the traits that fall under the umbrella of accountability or the lack thereof. Though he was consistently tardy and unprepared for class, Tim started off the first marking period fairly well. His first four grades—for summer reading, a vocabulary quiz, and a test on *Beowulf* (which counted twice)—ranged from 88 to 93. Anyone examining Tim's work would conclude that he possessed at least average intelligence. But Tim failed all four marking periods. Why? When I review Tim's performance, I find several patterns in his behavior that contributed to his lack of success.

An inability/unwillingness to conform to my make-up work policy—students have five school days after an excused absence to make up work—certainly contributed to Tim's substandard performance. As a result, he received one zero in the first marking period, two zeroes in the second marking period, four zeroes in the third marking period, and five zeroes in the fourth marking period. After progress reports were issued for the third marking period, Tim asked me what he could make up. The deadline had already passed to make up two vocabulary quizzes he had missed, but I told him he could complete the *Macbeth* journals, although they would be late. This assignment involved developing a deeper relationship with the text of the play by asking questions, making observations, inventing dialogue with the characters, commenting on the historical context or relating events presented in the play to our modern society. Students were

basically allowed to write about anything except a summary of the plot. Tim never handed in the assignment.

Tim's failure to maximize opportunity could also be considered a contributing factor in his lack of success. For each of the seven major unit tests and the mid-term examination, students were given the opportunity to write at least one essay in advance. Tim never took advantage of this opportunity. In fact, as students were handing in their *Macbeth* tests, Tim confessed that he did not understand *Macbeth* and therefore could not do the test. When I offered to work with him after school, he did not show up for our scheduled meeting and ended up with a score of fourteen on the test. The second test of the year, on the historical background to the medieval era, medieval ballads and the morality play *Everyman,* contained four essays. Three of the essays were issued one week before the test. Tim did not do them in advance, nor did he attempt to do them the day of the test.

Unwillingness to embrace a challenge was another one of Tim's patterns. My students keep journals. Some of the topics are personal or topical and unrelated to literature and their purpose is merely to stimulate writing. However, each marking period, many of the journal assignments require students to develop a relationship with the material we are studying and to test their critical thinking skills. In many cases, Tim simply didn't do the assignments, and those that he did do were generally incomplete. When we studied *Everyman*, I asked the students to write about how they would live their last twenty-four hours knowing that they were going to die at the end of that time. While some students found the topic maudlin, most embraced the chance to describe a myriad of sensory and emotional experiences. Tim did not do the assignment. Another topic involved writing about what students would be willing to do to get something they really wanted. I stressed that the "something" could be an object or a goal, and I gave several specific but rhetorical examples: Would they be willing to steal to obtain some material object that drastically exceeded their price range? Would they consider injuring a fellow student who was competing for the same spot on a team? I was trying to get the students to think about Macbeth's motives and methods to becoming king. Tim's journal on this topic follows:

> My family owns a condo in Vermont, which is almost always rented out. We don't really get to go up there much because of this. My favorite thing to do is snowboard so I try to go as much as I can. We take a few day trips here and there and a few overnight trips every once in a while. My favorite place to go is our condo because it is at the mountain. Each winter, I push and push my mother to get it for a weekend. We normally only get it once or twice a winter so it is my favorite thing to do if the opportunity comes around. We don't pass it up and I will do almost anything to go.

I did not really know what to make of this journal entry. While I wasn't expecting students to write about their deepest (and perhaps illegal or immoral) desires, I expected them to understand that the "thing" they wanted was not easily attainable, something they had never possessed or achieved. I also wanted to know to what lengths they would be willing to go to acquire the object/achieve the goal, etc. Did Tim not understand this, or did he simply choose to write about something "easy"?

Tim took the same approach with homework. Homework assignments range vastly in level of difficulty, but in each marking period, Tim only did about thirty percent of the work. Three weeks before the end of the first marking period, I sent a memo to Tim's guidance counselor in reference to a phone conversation I had had with Tim's mother in which I told her that Tim's average was a 58. In order to pass, he would need to do very well on the final vocabulary quiz and complete all of the homework between then and the end of the marking period. He

earned an 88 on the vocabulary quiz, but he only did four out of the last nine homework assignments, lowering his overall average to 47.

In addition to his academic shortcomings, Tim's sense of personal responsibility fell far short of that usually expected of a senior. Tim developed a pattern of chronic tardiness. In those chaotic opening moments of class when I checked homework, updated students who had been absent, and dealt with administrative issues and reminders, Tim would slink into the room several minutes late. I tried to take a light-handed approach to the tardiness issue. NFA is a multi-acre, multi-building campus, and it can be difficult to get from one end to the other in five minutes. As a former "floater," I know this to be true. So, I had implemented "Wilber minutes." For every minute late, students must serve two minutes of detention, at their convenience. I issued detentions, which Tim did not serve, so I ended up having to issue a discipline referral. When we scheduled one of those detentions, he asked if it would be possible to get extra help while serving the detention, a request to which I would have happily complied. However, when he did not show up, I issued a cut slip. His punishment for cutting my detention was two after-school detentions served with an administrator. Tim was extremely angry, claiming that he did not know that one could be punished for cutting a detention.

Other incidents of personal irresponsibility include the following: On February 15, Tim showed me his homework approximately thirty minutes into the class. I would not accept it, and he was furious, but all of the other students had shown me the assignment at the very beginning of class and then we reviewed it. In May, Tim interrupted one of my other classes to request an "S" card, a library pass, for that period. My policy, which is posted in several locations in my room, is that I will only issue "S" cards before homeroom. When I refused to give him one, he angrily replied, "How am I supposed to get here that early?" On February 28, Tim asked for a pass to the nurse and spent the whole period in the nurse's office. He did not get the assignment that was due on the 29th, and he said he could not take a quiz that day, February 29, because he had been absent the previous class even though the date for the quiz had been established the week before.

About four weeks before the end of the second semester, as Tim handed in a homework assignment that was well over two weeks late (which I took even though we both knew that he would not receive credit for it), he asked me if he could do some extra credit work. "I really need to pass English to graduate," he said. Ordinarily, I do not offer extra credit assignments to students who do not complete the regular class work. But because he had finally shown some initiative, I decided to offer Tim and all of his classmates some extra credit assignments. I reasoned that these assignments might help Tim to improve his chances of passing if he followed through. During the last three weeks of school, Tim began handing in various assignments, many of them too late to be credited and one extremely well done extra credit assignment. His writing was clear and thoughtful, as if he'd had an epiphany. When I reviewed these assignments, I wondered if they were born out of desperation, pride, a willingness to please, or an unwillingness to disappoint. Unfortunately, the work that Tim handed in fell into the "too little, too late" category.

Lest this sound like a blazing indictment of Tim, I must also reflect on my accountability in this case. My grading and late policies are designed to be fair, to promote personal responsibility, and to minimize stress, both the students' and mine. But are my policies too rigid? These policies have evolved during my tenure at the Norwich Free Academy. Early in my career, I was extremely flexible; some would say I was a pushover, allowing students to hand in assignments late with no penalty, and allowing students to make up work right up until the "eleventh hour." My rationale was that it was better to learn the material/do the assignment late than to not do it at

all. Though this could be stressful for me, I reasoned that my students were learning the material. But what they were not learning was responsibility. The tightening of my policies evolved gradually as I canvassed colleagues about their practices, became increasingly frustrated with the deluge of make-up work that threatened to drown me at the end of each marking period, and developed a philosophy about my goal as a teacher—which began to encompass not just academics, but also character. Was it fair for me to evaluate assignments by the same standards for the students who handed in work on time as the students who turned in assignments late? Eventually, I adopted the following policies:

1. Homework may not be handed in late (unless a student is absent).
2. If a student misses a test or quiz due to an excused absence, he or she has five school days from the date of return to make up the work.
3. Any essay, project, or major assignment is marked down one grade for each day late.

Are these unreasonable policies? Are they fair to all students? When I was a high school student twenty years ago, I would have had no problem adhering to these policies. My number one priority was school, and I was raised in an environment that was extremely supportive of that priority. Maybe, however, Tim and some of my other students simply could not adhere to these policies for one reason or another. I know from conversations with Tim's mother that education was very important to her. But perhaps what prevented Tim from conforming to my policies—the distractions of part-time employment, family issues, or other situations unknown to me—extended beyond his mother's influence. I don't know, and I must admit that I never asked.

Barbara, my department chair, also had Tim in class this year. While he was repeating eleventh grade English with me, a practice which probably should be discontinued because in my experience very few students are successful when they re-take the same course after failing it once, he was taking his senior English, an elective called Human Concerns, with her. Herein may lie another factor in Tim's lack of success. Taking more than one English course can be very grueling, even for the best of students. And perhaps the nature of the courses had an impact. Maybe Human Concerns is a more accessible course for two reasons: the students in the class *choose* to take it, and it covers mostly twentieth century literature representing a diversity of ethnic groups with some gender equality among the authors of the works studied. It is also taught in thematic units. The course I teach is a British Literature course. To me, it makes sense to teach the material chronologically to provide a historical context. The language difficulties inherent in studying *Beowulf,* Chaucer, and Shakespeare, however, can make the early weeks of the course especially challenging. And even the most insightful students sometimes have a difficult time understanding that *Beowulf* is about more than a brave warrior fighting a monster, or that Chaucer's humorous depiction of the Canterbury-bound pilgrims is really an indictment of the church hierarchy. In this age of cultural diversity, students know there is a lot more than the canon of literature written by "dead white men." Because our book count cannot keep up with our burgeoning population, I was unable to teach one of the more modern choices in the curriculum, *Lord of the Flies*, a perennial favorite because the language is accessible, students easily relate to the young characters, and the work is considered "recent" when compared to Chaucer and Shakespeare.

When I asked Barbara about her experiences with Tim, I was interested to note that she had observed many of the same behaviors—a tendency to be social and a tendency to be tardy to class. Also, he frequently handed in assignments late and many of those assignments were done with a minimum proficiency. Our experiences diverged when she informed me that Tim had written her many notes apologizing for being a nuisance and expressing the desire to get work done, though he always fell short.

Why didn't he ever write to me? Did he feel I would be resistant to this approach? Why didn't he ever talk to me? Did he feel I was not accessible? I had wanted to talk to him and hoped that when he served detentions for being tardy, we could discuss all of our issues one on one. But he never showed up to serve the detentions. I even wrote him a note about mid-way through the year explaining what I felt he needed to do to succeed, but he did not respond. Quite honestly, I was baffled and hurt that Tim had not extended this gesture to me.

It was not until the final journal writing assignment of the year that I felt Tim began to communicate with me in the way that he had communicated with Barbara. This assignment involved writing personal essays based on the questions posed on the common college application form. These topics required reflection about one's significant experiences, personal influences, and topics of local, national, or international concern. All four of Tim's essays focused on his beginning to understand the consequences of his actions. He writes:

I have caused my problems. I have been taught that for each action there is a consequence. I have spent the last three years of my life here [NFA], and if I could go back, I would do it so different . . . I did not want to spend the rest of my life wishing I did things differently . . . I have not put effort into what is important and I spent most of my time sitting around with friends . . . I want to go to college and succeed in life to prove everyone wrong who has called me a loser.

Tim's question was beginning to form. How would I do things differently? How am I going to prove to my mother and others that I am not a loser? At one point in his journals, he commented, "The impact this has had on me makes me realize how hard growing older really is . . . " This reminds me of a more modern literary protagonist: Sammy, the hero of John Updike's short story "A&P." In that story, the teenage Sammy, in an attempt to impress a couple of young ladies whom he thinks were insulted by the store manager, impulsively quits his job at the supermarket, and saunters out into the sunshine wearing the white shirt his mother had ironed the night before. Just as suddenly, he realizes the folly of his rash decision, and he notes, "My stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter" (102). It is an epiphanic moment for the character in the story just as Tim's reflection will be for him. I may not have been able to help him, but there will be other Tims in my career, and my question must now be, what have I learned? What can I do to help the Tims of the future?

What kinds of strategies could I have used to improve this student's level of achievement and accountability without drastically increasing my already heavy workload? Negative consequences clearly had no positive effect. I held pre-test review sessions with bonus incentives (When did I become a salesman?). I also created a form acknowledging completion of (or failure to complete) an assignment or make-up work on time. A small minority of students benefited from the pre-test review sessions. And a form that a student has signed conceding that he/she did not hand in an assignment on time confronts the accountability issue in a direct and timely manner. But Tim did not respond to any of these strategies.

While thinking about Tim, I am transported back to the Fisher King myth. Which part does Tim play and which part do I play? Is Tim the wounded king? Am I Percival? Or is it the other way around? I don't know. In another version of the Fisher King myth, a fool enters the castle, and because he is simple-minded, he does not see a king, but only a man lonely and in pain. When he asks the king, "What ails you, friend?" the king replies, "I'm thirsty. I need some water to cool my throat." The fool takes a cup from beside the bed, fills it with water, and hands it to the king. As the king drinks, he realizes his wound is healed. He turns to the fool and asks in amazement, "How did you heal me?" The fool replies, "I don't know. I only know that you were thirsty."

So what have I learned about myself as a teacher researcher? I may not be as accessible

or as fair as I thought I was or want to be. I may have become too rigid. But in a system that stresses equality for all students, what else can I be? In an attempt to be fair to all students and to minimize my stress, I may have overlooked individual differences and extenuating circumstances. Balancing equality and individuality is one of the complexities of teaching of which I must always be cognizant. I also learned that I have little or no control over certain issues. Tim's class was comprised of an inordinate number of challenging students. Tim was enrolled in two English classes. Also, life stresses, both the students' and mine, can have consequences. I have also learned that I need to keep the lines of communication open at all times. Had I spoken to Tim's other teachers earlier, I might have gained some much-needed insight. Like Percival, I did not ask the question, the land remained desolate, and the wounded king did not heal. But now, I've begun to ask the questions, so healing/learning can begin, at least for me.

What did I learn about Tim as a student and a person? Like the wounded king, he did not realize the cure was around him and within him all the time. For the first thirty-six weeks of school, the "cup of water" was within his reach, but he did not grasp for it. Finally, when the possibility of not graduating threatened, he "began to drink." It was too late to heal the wound, but hopefully, it is not too late for Tim, and for me, to be cured. Hopefully, as Tim matures, he will understand and respect my actions not as those of a mean and spiteful person, but of a caring individual. Tim's writing skills and his appreciation and understanding of literature may not have improved while a student in my class, but I hope that he has learned important life lessons as I have.

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