

around the state:

teachers at their work

On Being a Teacher at Washburn High School

BY ANNETTE DAHL

Almost surely no one will contend that one cannot teach math or history or how to repair a TV set. Almost as surely many will contend that one cannot teach students how to write creatively. This latter viewpoint, with which I agree, places the teacher of creative writing in a unique position. What becomes important is the student-teacher relationship and hence a classroom atmosphere in which students can freely exchange ideas, can become acquainted with authors including contemporaries, will feel like writing, will write, and will share their writing.

Here at Washburn I feel very fortunate in that we have an English department whose faculty spends much time in the agony of self-analysis, in a constant search for new materials and methods, and in a sharing of methods, experiences, new authors on the English scene, and critical articles on books, methods, etc. Also, I feel, we are well served and fortunate in our Minneapolis English consultant who keeps his finger on the pulse of current censorship, supplies us with new books lists and new ideas in the English world, and reminds us that we can use live contemporary poets to speak to our classes. All these things and also the presence of the Guthrie Theatre and its work with schools in Minneapolis are important to me.

Having said, then, that I have a favorable atmosphere in which to work at Washburn, I must say that when I fail, and my successes are liberally interspersed with failures, I can blame no outside source. I intend to suggest here some of the areas or exercises in which I have been successful and some in which I have been much less than successful. When I say "successful," I mean that my plans or ideas have worked with one given group at one given time. Next year they may not work.

I feel I am fairly successful in getting the students to consider creative writing a class in which they can discuss relevant issues. I expect that occasionally a student will ask if the class may discuss a given question. He will then lead the discussion. This happened recently after the showing of High School at the University of Minnesota. Total relevance was the order of the hour.

Sometimes I am successful and other times I am totally unsuccessful in getting students to see any relevancy in reading literature of the past. On literature of the past, it seems they will listen only to very direct analogy. For example, when they realize that men of the seventeenth century were imprisoned for the voicing of ideas and that men today are imprisoned for the same type of crime, the seventeenth century takes on life and understanding.

Just when one has determined to discard Beowulf from required reading, one especial class will argue that it loves Beowulf because it's bloody and violent, but could we please omit Chaucer from the curriculum.

I constantly try to give the students a chance to be proud of their accumulated knowledge. I find numerous opportunities to make use of their tenth grade mythology and their Shakespeare backgrounds and also their biblical knowledge learned at home. Students exhibit true satisfaction when they are asked to draw from sources of knowledge that have become their own. This, I think, is essential to the continuity of the educational experience. And it works!

Some specific assignments that I believe have worked for me are:

1. This year, in opening a poetry-writing unit, I read "In the Beginning" by Dylan Thomas and asked the students to get up and write on the board any comment at all, emotional or intellectual, that came to mind. This was in practice for my reading of a very long poem, or what has variously been called a "political-satirical tirade" by the author and a "caustic even-tempered attack on the Face America wears today" by the editor. I speak of Tyrannus Nix by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The result of this reading was tremendous involvement. The blackboards on three sides of the room were packed with written and printed comments, some of which follow:

1. May Ferlinghetti rot!
Long live Nixon and America!
2. "You told them to get tough and they did--they killed one of us" Peoples Park - cops killed student I completely agree with what the poet says.
3. "Concentration Camp U.S.A."
4. Great White whale turns red
reference to paranoia about Commies
5. albatross - Ancient Mariner
6. leaves are green and wittier
favorite poet - Greenleaf Whittier
7. Yellow submarine freed Pepperland from Meanies.
8. "same sponsor soap operas and war"
gov't. industrial-military complex
9. Don't strike out in Mudville as Casey did.

10. Walk softly and carry a big wick. - Roosevelt
11. war against youth -- Vietnam death of nation's youth
12. faces are not mirrors; they're what we want them to show.
13. with wasps nest on Plymouth Rock - Pilgrims
14. "Jupiter Complex" Jupiter two-faced God
15. fallen apart like liberal opponents - reference to McCarthy
16. Race face = gradual integration
17. God's long nose
Nixon as God
18. "needs a third eye"
needs a third ear more
19. rock face - the presidents faces carved in rock on Mt. Rushmore
20. "buy a used war" is what Dick did.
21. Nixon is pitcher on the mound--bases loaded
22. He's been warming up in the BULL
pen for a long time now.
23. "run out of gas a mile from dealer"
we almost won war
24. Old Nick - Santa Claus
25. a Goy is a non-Jew
26. Question mark face
27. Quaker King Corporation politics
28. Souls on Ice won't melt - Eldridge Cleaver
29. "Don't wear sandals; avoid scandals" B. Pyler
30. And all of the below from one student:
 - a. Tuli Kuperberg - member of the FUGS; poet
 - b. Uncle Ezra - Ezra Pound
 - c. Very strange men, "Mr. Jones" = "Ballad of the Thin Man" Bob Dylan
 - d. Walk softly and "bury" the big stick - takeoff on Roosevelt saying
 - e. living theater - Avant Garde Theater group in Los Angeles
 - f. Santa Rita prison - where Ferlinghetti was imprisoned.

This proved to be an exciting exercise.

2. I tried another new exercise this year. I asked each student to present to the class, in any way he wished, a poem that he himself really liked. Several students came to me after class and said that they really liked doing this, partly because they felt they became better acquainted with the student who did the reading. Some of the presentations were:

1. Student A asked the class members to sit on the floor. She read to music from modern Zen-Buddhist poetry and from Kahlil Gibran, while a bowl of very hot rice was passed around.
2. Student B sang beautifully five of her favorite folk

songs (Simon and Garfunkel, etc.) This was very moving and a great improvement over listening to records.

3. Student C read "Fire and Ice" by Frost and parts of "The Hollow Men" by Eliot and discussed phrases and asked questions like: "How do you think the world will end?"

4. Student D introduced her poem with the comment that she intended to read a sex poem and that after reading it, she would tell the class what her philosophy was on this subject. This precipitated an exceedingly thoughtful discussion of Victorianism and hypocrisy in the older generation. (A student leaned over to me and asked me in the air of one bestowing a gift if I did not feel that I was in a unique position in being able to listen to such a relevant teen discussion.)

5. Student E read Pasternak's poetry and played a guitar of the kind that she said Dr. Zhivago would have used.

This exercise was very delightful or else rather dreadful, depending on the individual student's planning. I do not know if I will do this again.

I require two projects for the year, a journal in the fall, and a more pretentious creative project in the spring. I confine the journal requirement to one semester because some students find writing a journal a chore. However, others come back to school to visit after a year or two and are still writing their journals. For the sake of the latter group, I shall probably continue to use journals. I have noticed, too, that some students feel less inhibited in their journal writing and actually do some interesting things. This is a recent poem from a journal:

Fountainhead for a thousand venal admirers
Lost hawk within the rifle sights of a million men with pencils

The telescope for the blind
The last refugee hiding in the harbor
The last Nazi shooting up in a Houston suburb
The last pilgrim dying of food poisoning
The last Indian shooting up on Montana reservation
The last cop brandishing a cudgel
The past life of a politician

"Why do police guys, mess with peace guys?"

while the peddlers of the Barb climb the Frisco hill
over the green grass of Berkeley
past the cycles and chevys
past the gates and across the winding road
past the clusters of hitchhikers
past the trinket shops and college stores
till the station wagon hurtles
across the cliff, through the

wired fence, through the
admonishing signs
through the air

The wire of Freedmen wings it for emancipation
The tire of our progressing society blows
The horse is brought from the policy burning stables
French lumberjack & the bushy-eyebrowed salesman vote for you
The gangsters, cutthroats, hoodlums go through the countryside
in the dead of night burning churches
ergo, forget everything, man

Expatriate over network T.V.
Interrupting "Let's make a deal"

"You've got a lot to live, and pepsie's got a lot to give"

Expatriate on the goal of America
As the silent generation goes home and gets drunk
As Zappa said, "America drinks and goes home."

A dearth of individuality
So Agnew, faithless Agnew
Go softly to your crony and cry away

The galvanization of U.S. public
slits your throat

plan the next planet better.

Written by Pete Gunn

Poetry with photographic illustrations, children's books with water-color illustrations, a movie, a musical, short stories, an illustrated book of a student's dreams--these and others were among the projects of last spring. One poetry book illustrated with inks and water colors contained the following verse:

a

sun baked hippopotamus
trots

to the purple

swamp

to cool his tired leather

and refresh

his pious
soul.

removing

his
clerical

collar

and donning his

swim

togs

he
settles
in the mud.

Written by Maury Partridge

Another poem the students enjoyed because they recognized the subject of the poem is this one called

Sister Marge

Sitting at the end
Of a ray of sun
Amidst scissors and tempera paint. . .
Her hair is shelf-dust gray
And tinted with the scent of turpentine
(Dear musty crusty Sister Marge)

She is framed in knotty pine
While shuffling through the mail
"Knutson, Brodin, Kupcho" . . .
And we scramble stupidly over the benches
To seize each battered postcard and
Letter . . . her whistle clanks at the end
Of her artsy-craftsy lanyard (eight strands! The hardest to make!)
Through her bluish glasses comes a brief giggle
As a softball crashes onto the chapel roof
In the middle of the Lord's Prayer. . .

I first realized that I loved dear old Sister Marge
On a cool, tangy North woods evening, in chapel
When, although she has sung every night the same song
For as long as I have been at camp, and for as many
Years as I can remember...I heard her for the
First time. . .

Have thine own way, Lord
Have thine own way
Thou art the potter
I am the clay
Mold me and make me

After Thy will,
While I am waiting
Yielded and still.

Written by Pat Brodin

This year I was unsuccessful with the use of haiku. Students claimed that they were tired of writing this kind of poetry. It did not say enough. A few thought it good practice in choosing a few words to portray a concrete image. I may have to give up this, as well as tonka and cinquain writing.

One always successful enterprise is that which involves outside speakers. In the last two years the students listened to Garrison Keillor, Keith Gunderson, and John Beecher, brought in through the downtown English department. My students invited Jim Klobuchar, Robert Smith and Molly Ivins of the press; science-fiction writer Gordon Dickson; Roger Lind, minister of education in a Minneapolis church; and others.

Another area in which I expect the students to be involved is in the reading of and commenting on each others' papers. This does not work well in my other twelfth grade English classes. Whatever conclusions I may arrive at concerning the teaching of creative writing, I usually end up with the belief that to get the students to write they must find relevancy and involvement in the course.

MRS. ANNETTE DAHL teaches English and supervises student-teachers at Washburn in Minneapolis.