A Letter from the Editors—Towards a Conversation:

It's a quarter to November. Time for lots of pretentious Halloween parties thrown by big-time car dealers at sprawling McMansions only incidentally for kids. In a week, the end of Daylight Savings Time will turn my morning commute from Bloomington to Mankato into a cold and pitch-black probe across the prairie. And there'll be lots to do once I've trudged from the farthest point in the parking lot (my first new car EVER!) through eddying funnels of fallen leaves to my office—piles of papers; thesis defenses to get ready for; exams to grade; student conferences to schedule; the details of class trips to button down; committee work to do and meetings to attend; and, yes, this year's issue of the *MEJ* to finally put to bed.

But there's always the sense for me around the first of November of turning a corner, making the transition from a long up-hill pull to a steady and controlled coast toward "finals." It doesn't matter that I haven't begun to see a fraction of the work I've assigned or begun to struggle with the damned reports I'll have to write. It's an attitudinal thing. The heat of late summer is *gone*. Bring on the frosty blasts and gray, sunless days. The rain and sleet driving against my office windows buoy my spirits. Call it perversity—however, my energy and enthusiasm for my work quicken with the onset of drafty windows and banging pipes. I *am* the Prince of Darkness.

Among the many things I'll be expending my second wind on this fall is a little faculty development organization called The Valley Writing Project. Originally formed through a big Bush Grant in 1979 to foster writing across the curriculum through annual workshops for faculty at State University campuses, the one at Minnesota State University—Mankato is the sole survivor. At first, these workshops (which recruited faculty from math, the natural and social sciences, engineering, nursing, computer technology, law enforcement, and the humanities) were wonderful mechanisms for social interaction for faculty who rarely got to interact with folks outside their own units. And they provided an effective means for faculty to share their ideas about how to incorporate writing in large classes, how to respond to that writing, and at the same time reinforcing the message that *all* of us are writing instructors.

I've been involved as a member of the VWP presentation team since 1986. The five team members from across the university (one of whom, Anne O'Meara, is well-represented in this issue of *MEJ*) spend a good part of the fall recruiting around twenty faculty participants, articulating the theme of the workshop that customarily occurs over three full days just before Christmas (this year's theme is "Writing Intensively"), dividing the labor of building workshop presentation segments, and gathering supportive materials that we'll gather into a large notebook for distribution to the participants.

There are a couple of relative "newbies" in our team—a chemist and a computer scientist who've been with us for only a couple of years, who are chronically overcommitted to far too many tasks, and, of course, that's why they are so *good*. But the rest of us—a professor of sociology and corrections, Anne, and I—have been connected with VWP forever. We can't let it go. Obviously, part of our attachment is to each other. We more than like each other. We feed off of each other's craziness and humor. Our meetings, which have just begun again, are profane little affairs. We expend a few minutes at the start of each meeting dishing the dirt of university gossip. But we all come together in our commitment to the improvement of student

writing, in assisting students with their struggles to focus, read, think critically about what they've read, write analytically, and rewrite beyond mere editing. That commitment includes assisting, where we can, instructors from a variety of disciplines, to evaluate the assignments they're contemplating creating for students, considering efficient and effective ways for responding to their students' writing, considering methods for incorporating re-writing in their classes, and constructing "tool boxes" (i.e., supportive activities, sometimes enabling the "staging" of portions of an assignment; explanations and short demonstrations of tasks crucial to the completion of a writing assignment; models of effective responses to assignments; web resources).

And the workshop ends with each faculty participant's identification of an assignment they want to build for a specific *real* course they'll soon be teaching. They'll each need to first clearly identify (and modify where necessary) the goals of the course they'll be building their assignment for. The assignment construction will come next, along with the need to fully understand how that assignment configures with their course goals. They'll need a rubric (not one of *my* favorites!) for evaluating that assignment, along with other supportive materials (their *own* tool boxes) to assist their students to respond successfully to it. And, in addition to developing a strategy for responding to the results of their assignment and for managing students' revision of their first attempt, they'll also need to invent an assessment tool for determining how well their assignment succeeded and how it can be fine-tuned to work better. By December 22nd, when we say good-bye to each other, all participants (the team members included) will have been assigned to a group of five other faculty. Their job, up to the time when we come together at the end of March for our "reunion," will be to meet and support each other in their work, seek feedback on the reports they each will be writing on their "assignment packages" and the relative effectiveness of those packages in their classes, and seek further aid and comfort from the "team" members. After they've presented these "assignment packages" to the larger group in March, along with what they've learned in the process (about

themselves as writing teachers; about their students as writers; about the faculty members in their group), we will—with their permission—publish these projects on the VWP website and make available to the rest of the MSU community what all of these folks have created.

It's pretty gratifying stuff for the "team" members. Of course, it's fun. We will have written and performed some new skits and "improvs" that support some of the issues we'll be engaging our participants in. We have no shame, and we'll laugh like hell. And we'll all *need* this release and interaction after a demanding semester of work. But we'll also discover among those participants a number of people—no matter what their professional discipline—who are and have always been writing teachers. We'll be expanding the network of truly committed teachers who are teachers of writing as well. We'll make their work public and accessible to their peers in order to expand that network. As most usually happens, faculty will leave that spring "reunion" feeling good about themselves and what they've done, about the connections they've made with similarly interested and challenged faculty from other areas, and about recommending what they have done to other faculty who may sign up for the next VWP workshop.

But, in the end, it's *all* about *communication*. I'm probably way off base here (consult Olson's and O'Meara's paper on student writing in high school and the university for some grounding here), but my feeling is that the greatest majority of us are fairly isolated in our professions. I don't mean that we're hermits or aliens. But, for the most part, we operate in our own little hermetic space. I find that talking to others—even those in the same department—about teaching (what we do in the classroom; how we respond to papers; what assignments we use; how we conduct class discussion; how we manage re-writes; how we construct our exams, and why; how we assess our own teaching; how we're using our classroom time) is a rarity. I know—we don't because we're *preparing* to teach those classes we don't talk about with others. At an otherwise forgettable meeting with my dean concerning her reaction to my most recent Four-Year

Professional Development Plan report, she and I mourned the loss of some of that collegial coming-together that occurred when I came aboard twenty-seven years ago—I remember Friday afternoon discussions about how each of us taught "Comp," complete with our syllabi. We both—the dean and I—agreed that not much of this happens anymore and that all kinds of demands on faculty time had caused most of such opportunities to evaporate.

And that's why I cannot let the Valley Writing Project go. As team members, we talk to each other about what we do with writing in our classrooms in ways that are not for the faint of heart. And we regale each other with what we do badly. No punch-pulling. And we expect no less from our participants in December (perhaps with a little cleaning-up of the language) because we don't *lecture* to them. We *facilitate*—they must talk to each other and to us about what they're doing; and they must *write*, early and very often and throughout the workshop.

Anne O'Meara will tell you if you ask her about her experience as chair of a university assessment committee charged with evaluating student performance in General Education "writing-intensive" courses offered across the university ("writing-intensive" can mean lots of things, but, for our purposes, it's a course in which at least twenty pages of writing are assigned, at least ten of which—not very much at all, really—must be revised and re-written by the student under the instructor's direction). The bottom line?—students performed *worse* than they had five years earlier (in their ability to use, evaluate, and cite evidence effectively; in their basic writing skills; in their ability to organize a piece of writing). The reasons for the evident decline in students' writing performance in these classes are complex. Students don't read, and, thus, their ability to read closely, carefully, accurately, analytically has declined. And there's an immediate connection between students' ability to write well and their critical reading and thinking skills.

But another reason for the abysmal results in those "writing-intensive" course assessments is the teaching. Instructors were all over the place in terms of the way they interpreted and implemented "revision." In many cases, it seemed as if whatev-

er revision occurred in these courses proceeded with no faculty interaction. Why? Perhaps because many who were assigned to teach these courses had no training in teaching them. They were, by and large, newly-hired faculty, low on the pecking order, who'd been greeted upon their arrival on campus with this new responsibility. And these courses are among the most difficult to teach. Period. And one of the several recommendations of Anne's committee to the Provost and the assistant VP of Undergraduate Education was the need for a university commitment to train and incentivize instructors of "writing-intensive" courses.

Will that happen? I'm not going to bet my retirement on it. But, short of such a commitment, all of us need to be *talking with each other* about what we do and how we do it. I'm lucky that I have one such professional outlet for doing just that in the Valley Writing Project, and that, when we're not talking among ourselves and our participants about "writing-intensive" teaching issues and strategies, we're talking about our *own* writing and enlisting groups of each other in order to keep our writing projects moving forward. And, when we can't directly talk to each other, there need to be locations we can go to in order to read and interact with and respond to what our peers are saying about the profession, their teaching, their implementation of theory into their teaching, their struggles with various audiences of student learners and their attempt to engage them in various writing enterprises.

And you're about to be involved in one of those locations *right now*. This issue of *MEJ* is all about pedagogy. And there are some stunning pieces represented here, not the least of which is Peter Henry's award-winning laying-down of the gauntlet concerning testing. There's no question in my mind that this is the best issue of *MEJ* that I've been affiliated with over my little four-year tenure.

So read it. Swallow it whole. But do not forget your responsibilities as *readers*, as *audience*. There is an interactive function I'm counting upon you to energize. You'll find a second attempt to begin what the *MEJ* has never had before—a "Letters to the Editors" component. We want your reactions

to the essays contained here that have been written by talented writers and committed teachers. *They* want them. Please send your responses (they can be very short or expansive) to me (straits@mnsu.edu), but don't think that you need to restrict your responses and remarks and opinions to the contents of this journal issue. I refer you to a list of possibilities for this proposed new section of *MEJ* on the very next page.

Imagine that. A conversation. About teaching. About what we do and how we do it.

Enjoy. And I look forward to hearing from you.

Bill Dyer, Editor

Letters to the Editor

A Call for Responses from the MCTE

Membership
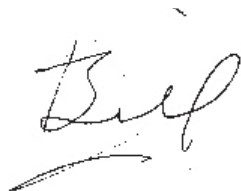
Starting with the next issue of *MEJ* (Fall 2008), the editors hope to feature a "Letters to the Editors" section, which could respond to a number of topics. A partial list could include

- The content of articles represented in this issue
- Suggestions about issues in teaching that MEJ's readership should be responding to and writing articles and letters about
- Positions on the state of the profession
- Positions on High School literature, composition, and language standards
- Concerns about censorship
- Concerns about whether a list of books that students should read before graduation should be "standard procedure" for teachers
- Issues surrounding the appropriateness or inappropriateness of teaching certain types of literature
- Issues related to teaching with technology
- Positions on how to teach grammar to students relying on "grammar and spell checks"
- Issues related to literary theory

We hope you'll view this list as we do—a very incomplete set of possibilities. We invite you to send us a letter on a subject that moves you. We would love to receive those "letters" at *any time during the year prior to June 1, 2008*.

Contribute to our discussion. We look forward to hearing from you.

Bill Dyer
Co-Editor, *MEJ*

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Addendum

What We Teach and Why:
Contemporary Literary Theory and Adolescents*

Deborah Appleman

> The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions…. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.
> - James Baldwin

> Everything we do in life is rooted in theory.
> - bell hooks

Introduction

Over seven years ago, in my introduction to *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*, I made the following statement: "We live in dangerous and complicated times and no one is more aware of it

than our teenagers" (Appleman, 2000, p.1). It's ironic to note that when I wrote those words, the 9-11 attack hadn't happened, the war in Iraq hadn't begun, and Columbine had just heralded the era of mass school shootings. Now, almost a decade later, the times we live in have become considerably more dangerous and even more complicated. We are all, in the twenty-first century, poised precariously between ecological, economic, and political crises. It has become more and more difficult to navigate our way in an increasingly ideological world.

In addition to the crises wrought by war and both natural and human made disaster, we are also bombarded with messages, slogans, and pleas from the left and from the right. The radio airwaves, the Internet, print and television ads, and films and documentaries all compete for our attention as they attempt to sell us their version of the truth. While this cacophony of ideologies can be deafening even to adults, it can be absolutely overwhelming to young people. For those of us who engage with adolescents through literacy, our charge, as Paulo Freire (1987) has pointed out, is to help students read both the world and the word. Our job is not simply to help students read and write; our job is to help them use the skills of writing and reading to understand the world around them. We want them to become, in the words of bell hooks, "enlightened witnesses," critically vigilant about the world we live in. In order to become enlightened witnesses, young people must understand the workings of ideology.

Ideology

What *is* ideology? Bonnycastle (1996) offers an adolescent friendly definition:

> In essence an ideology is a system of thought or "world view" which an individual acquires (usually unconsciously) from the world around him. An ideology determines what you think is important in life, what categories you put people into, how you see male and female roles in life, and a host of other things. You can visualize your ideology as a grid, or a set of glasses, through which you can see the world.
> - Bonnycastle

Bonnycastle rightly emphasizes the unconscious quality of ideology. One is reminded of Leo Lionni's classic *Fish is Fish* (1974), where a tadpole's lively description of what he observed on land is translated by his fish listener into mental pictures that all look like fish-cows, birds, even humans. The fish is unaware that everything he hears is translated unconsciously into his own limited, fishy paradigm.

While Lionni's depiction is playful and points to the foibles of limited experience and imagination, Ryan offers a somewhat more sinister definition of ideology:

> The term ideology describes the beliefs, attitudes, and habits of feeling, which a society inculcates in order to generate an automatic reproduction of its structuring premises. Ideology is what preserves social power in the absence of direct coercion. (1998, 37)

In other words, when we teach the concept of ideology to young people, we are helping them to discern the system of values and beliefs that help create expectations for individual behavior and for social norms. Although ideology can be individual, it is generally a social and political construct, one that subtly shapes society and culture. As history has taught us, ideologies are not always benign or harmless and they need to be questioned and sometimes resisted.

Although ideological constructs help each of us learn how we fit into the world, ideology is often invisible and transmitted unconsciously. It is what Norman Fairclough has dubbed "ideological common sense." He writes, "Ideological common sense is common sense in the service of sustaining unequal relations of power."

I was recently on an airplane when a woman in a pilot's uniform boarded the plane. The gentleman sitting next to me whispered, "That's the co-pilot." As a frequent flyer on the airline, I recognized the pilot's uniform and knew the man was mistaken. His ideological common sense kept him from seeing that a woman was the pilot. While this example may seem trivial, ideological common sense also influences who we think are

college-bound students, trustworthy renters, or plausible presidential candidates.

A literature or language arts class at the secondary level is an ideal place to help students learn to read and, if necessary, resist the ideology that surrounds them.   In our literature classes, we teach texts that are full of ideology. As Fairclough explains:

> Ideology is most effective when its workings are least visible … Invisibility is achieved when ideologies are brought to discourse not as explicit elements of the text, but as the background assumptions, which, on the one hand, lead the text producer to textualize the world in a particular way, and on the other hand, lead the interpreter to interpret the text in a particular way. Texts do not spout ideology. They so position the interpreter through their cues that she brings ideologies to the interpretation of texts—and reproduces them in the process!
> -Fairclough, 1989, p. 85

When we read Frost's "The Road Not Taken," we attend to the assertion that "taking the road less traveled by" makes all the difference. From Fairclough's perspective, the text "positions" us to embrace the ideologies of American individualism and nonconformity. In Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the racialized portraits of Huck and Jim normalize a particular kind of America, whose ideology of inequality was unquestioned for too long. Our responsibility as literature teachers is to help make the ideologies inherent in those texts visible to our students.

The best way to uncover and explore these ideologies is through the explicit teaching of contemporary literary theory. Literary theory provides readers with the tools to uncover the often-invisible workings of the text. As Bonneycastle explains:

> The main reason for studying theory at the same time as literature is that it forces you to deal consciously with the problem of ideologies … There are many truths and the one you will find depends partly on the ideology you start with. [Studying theory] means you can take your own part in the struggles for power between different ideologies. It helps you to discover

elements of your own ideology, and understand why
you hold certain values unconsciously. It means no
authority can impose a truth on you in a dogmatic
way—and if some authority does try, you can chal-
lenge that truth in a powerful way, by asking what
ideology it is based on … Theory is subversive be-
cause it puts authority in question.

But isn't it too political?

There are those who may say that they signed on to
teach English, not social studies, and that this approach is too
political. I have two rejoinders to that objection. First, being a
teacher is essentially a political act, a political stance—a stance
that advocates for the literacy rights of everyone, a stance that
acknowledges that when you give someone literacy, you give
them power.

Second, even our seemingly neutral reading of texts is
political. In our literature classes, then, we should focus on
helping students read texts with an eye toward ideology that is
inscribed in them. An African proverb puts it this way: "Until
lions tell their stories, tales of hunting will glorify the hunter."

Our canon has been filled with tales of the hunter. Re-
cently, tales of the lion, works by authors such as Toni Morrison,
Alice Walker, Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexie, Amy Tan, and
many others have begun to fill our schools' bookrooms and our
students' sensibilities. In addition to hearing from the lion, we
can continue to teach tales of the hunter but with the remediating
lens of literary theory—a postcolonial lens for *Heart of Dark-
ness*, a feminist lens for *The Great Gatsby*, a Marxist lens for
Hamlet, just to name a few possible examples.

For those who say, we should simply teach the literature
"neutrally," I offer the perspective of literary scholar R. Staton:

Contemporary theory holds that there is no such thing
as an innocent, value-free reading. Instead, each of us
has a viewpoint invested with presuppositions about
'reality' and about ourselves, whether we are con-
scious of it or not. People who deny having a critical
stance, who claim they are responding "naturally" or
being "completely objective" do not know themselves.

We could continue to uncritically teach *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* because they are classic pieces of literature without regard for the problems engendered by the use of the "n" word. That decision privileges the arbitrary literary value of a canonical text over the significance and relevance of a changing student demographic. It ignores the deeply politicized history of the "n" word and how it differently affects different populations. Teachers often make these kinds of decisions, teaching the same texts in the same way without re-assessing their changing effect. That, too, is a political decision, just as political a teaching as offering a post-colonial analysis or reading the texts through the lens of critical race theory.

The importance of multiplicity

On the other hand, it is very important that we don't offer only a single theory to our students, for that truly is dogmatic or propagandistic teaching. It is the mono-theoretical approaches of most secondary English classrooms that drew me to the notion of multiple perspectives as an antidote. Even a reader–response lens is limiting if it is the only possible theoretical frame in which one can produce a reading. Bertolt Brecht extols the virtues of multiplicity this way: "A man with one theory is lost. He needs several of them, or lots! He should stuff them in his pockets like newspapers."

Offering students several ways to look at texts does more than help them learn to interpret literature from multiple perspectives; it also helps them develop a more complex way of thinking as they move from the dualism of early adolescence to the relativism of adult thinkers (Perry, 1970). F. Scott Fitzgerald perhaps most notably stated the virtue of this kind of thinking:

> The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise. (1964)

Reading media, Reading the world

> The relationship between the text and the world is not simply a fascinating problem for textual theory. It is, above all others, the problem that makes textual theory necessary.
> - Robert Scholes

Three years ago, in one of my weekly visits to local high schools in Minnesota to help teachers introduce literary theory, I asked students to find a cultural artifact worth analyzing. I told them that they should find a print ad, television commercial billboard or even a web site where they might find some cultural ideology inscribed and then use the literary lenses or perspectives that we had learned together to help them read the ideology within the ad. Remembering that it was Super Bowl weekend, I enthusiastically recommended that they used the halftime of the super bowl to view the commercials. Yes, it was *that* halftime. Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction. And even a card-carrying ACLU member like myself was taken aback by a primetime breast-baring!

When I realized that I had assigned this viewing to over 60 high school students, I panicked. Then I also remembered that I had armed them with literary theory cards. Sure enough, students streamed into the class the next Monday with feminist, Marxist, reader-response, and deconstructive readings of the events, to name a few. For example, one student, using the Marxist lens, wrote that the incident was a capitalistic ploy timed to coincide with the release of Jackson's latest album. Another, using the feminist lens, observed that what was shocking about the episode was not the bare breast, but the seeming acceptance of a somewhat violent gesture toward a woman (ripping off her clothes). What, I wondered, might their viewing have been like if they hadn't been armed with the theory cards?

In addition to reading media, students have also fruitfully used literary lenses to read the world. For those who think that this is not in the purview of the English teacher, Bruce Pirie offers this perspective:

> It is *not* that we shouldn't care about individual students and texts. We should, and I do. We also recognize, however, that students and texts are embedded in huge, living, sometimes contradictory networks, and if we want students to understand the workings of textuality, then we have to think about those larger systems. (1997, 75)

Our study of texts is deeply intertwined with the social world in which the text was produced and the social worlds in which we read them. Studying theory does mean that we study and read the world as well. At a local metropolitan high school, students who had studied several of contemporary theories and had applied them throughout the year were asked the following question:

> Think of something you've heard about or seen outside of class that struck you as worth thinking about. It could be related to school:
> - an interaction between two people
> - a school policy
> - a social group
> - something about the building itself
> - how the school day is structured
>
>   or
>
> Something outside of school:
> - a state, national, or world event or circumstance
>
> Describe this event or issue and explain why it is important.
>
> Then, consider this event from at least two of the lenses we've been working with. What do you notice or what questions emerge for you as you apply these critical perspectives to that event? How do these lenses affect or increase your understanding of the event/issue?

Here is a list of the kinds of things the students chose to read using the perspective of the lenses:

- Racially motivated fights in school
- The mild winter
- The existence of God
- The war on drugs
- The lack of school funding and school overcrowding
- September 11
- Hurricane Katrina
- The high school dress code
- Cliques and divisions within the school
- Government spying
- The continuing war in Iraq
- The effects of the media on teenagers

And here is an example of some of their readings:

Topic: Fights and violence witnessed during high school

The psychological lens helps interpret these fights very well. It brings up questions like: Are they scared? Do they enjoy it? Why are they doing it? Do they know what will happen afterwards? It [this lens] increases our understanding by asking why. The gender lens also helps us understand fights. In our society guys are taught to be "tough" and not take anything from anyone. They often resort to violence, and think violence actually solves something, which is absurd. Genderlenses shows us that males are more prone to fighting and the sexes are raised in different ways.

Topic: The cliques in the halls at the school

I noticed all of the different groups and cliques at CP. One way to view that would be with the cultural lens. The groups could be formed to with everyone's many different cultures and/or religions. People seem to hook-up with the other people who like the same things as them and the same backgrounds. Another lens to use for the different groups is the gender lens. Most guys and girls seem to be forming groups with their own gender, girls with girls and guys with guys.

Though there is some breaking of this pattern.

Topic: The effect of media on high school students

> Looking at this issue I believe that the Gender lens is a good way of looking at it. It affects girls in a way of personal appearances and how they think they should look. It affects boys in their mannerisms. After analyzing it a question does arise; What gives media the right to tell millions of kids how they should be? Looking at the subject though a psychological lens might be more interesting. It will give you a look into why kids decide to follow the ways they see. What makes them want to and why feel it is important to be just like everybody else.

Topic: Iraq weapons of mass destruction

> Looking at this issue through the historical lens helps a great deal. It seems that many of the wars we into to try and help people, have a tendency to "backfire" on us. For instance, the Korean War, we went in to try and help the South Koreans fight the North, and ended up going no where, just spending a lot of money and losing many lives. This is basically what is happening in Iraq. It is costing us a lot of money and we are losing soldiers, and it does not seem to be getting us anywhere. Another lens to look through on this issue is the psychological lens. It is hard to tell what the real reason we came into this war is. Many people believe it was to stop terrorism, stop communism, keep our oil, or even that President Bush is only trying to finish what his father never did. It could be anyone of these things, but looking through the psychological lens has helped me to come to the conclusion that it is a combination of all of these things.

These students, "regular" students in a non-advanced English class, demonstrated that they were able to use the tools of critical theory to read local and national and world events from at least two different perspectives. They were able to sustain the possibilities of multiple explanations and to apply an abstract system of thought to an empirical event.

Conclusion

In the end, by teaching literature with theory, we help students learn to decipher the world inscribed within the texts we read together and to help them read the world around them. They can become the enlightened witnesses that bell hooks calls for, noting how power and privilege are inscribed all around us, and learning to read both texts and worlds with a nuanced and critical eye. Our students can become, with our help, truly educated in the way James Baldwin envisions, able to critique one's own society intelligently and without fear. This kind of teaching is difficult. It requires a willingness to give up one's ultimate authority in the classroom. It reminds us, as Smith and Rabinowitz suggest, that we are not teaching readings but teaching ways of reading (1998).

This kind of teaching changes our conception of what we teach and why. We are no longer transmitting knowledge, offering literature as content, as an aesthetic experience or as neutral artifacts of our collective cultural heritage. Instead we are offering our students the chance to view the world from a variety of lenses, each offering a unique perspective sure to transform how adolescents read both words and worlds. As Lois Tyson writes:

> For knowledge isn't just something we acquire; it's something we are or hope to become. Knowledge is what constitutes our relationship to ourselves and to our world, for it is the lens through which we view ourselves and our world. Change the lens and you change both the view and the viewer. This principle is what makes knowledge at once so frightening and so liberating, so painful and so utterly, utterly joyful. (1999,11)

* This article is adapted from a keynote address given by Deborah Appleman to the Annual Conference of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English in April 2007 in Brainerd, Minnesota.

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Wait Until You Get to College... Transitions from High School to College Writing

Cindy Olson and Anne O'Meara

CINDY: After 30 years of teaching high school English, I find myself plagued by the same questions: What do colleges and universities expect of their entry-level students in terms of writing ability? Am I preparing students adequately for those expectations? How have those expectations changed over time?

I am equally plagued by the fear that I have lost touch with what college writing is all about these days. It's been a long time since I was an undergraduate, and although I have had several opportunities to reconnect with college writing as a graduate student and teaching assistant since then, I have never had the opportunity to have a real dialogue with college instructors about what they think of the writing skills of their entry-level students.

In 2001 I had the good fortune to attend the NCTE conference in Milwaukee, where I heard Dr. Edward Kearns from the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley address this very topic. He surveyed instructors at UNC about the kinds of writing they assigned and how they evaluated it. The common sense and pragmatism of this study really appealed to me.

Since over 85% of the students who graduate from the high school where I teach will go on to post-secondary education, and since at least half of those students will attend the "hometown" university—Minnesota State University, Manka-

to—it seemed a good idea to me to have a similar dialogue with MSU professors.

My good fortune continued when Anne O'Meara from the MSU English department responded to my query in January of 2005. Since then, we have had a very productive conversation about just what that transition from high school to college writer means.

ANNE: I began teaching in junior high school where I taught 7th and 8th grade English among other things. Later, I went back to graduate school and was a teaching assistant as I worked on my doctorate. I taught all kinds of composition—the first and second course in college composition as well as upper-level writing courses in writing for the sciences, writing for the social sciences, and writing for the arts. When I was hired as a composition specialist at Minnesota State University, Mankato, I trained TAs to teach Composition 101 and occasionally taught various graduate courses for middle and secondary school teachers in the theory and practice of teaching writing. In the last several years, my attention has turned more to college teaching and faculty development in writing across the curriculum. So it had been quite a while since I had thought about high school writers.

When my department chair asked if I was interested in answering Cindy's inquiry, I really was. I thought that high school had changed a lot since I had been around teachers there and since my own sons had graduated. Talking with my nieces and nephews made me curious. I wondered what kinds of things would help students like them make a smooth transition into college writing and make them want to write well there.

The Study

We met and brainstormed questions we wanted answered—questions to help us understand how "the other half" lives:

Purpose

- How independent are high school and college writers in conceiving and executing their writing assignments?

- What types of writing do high school and college writers typically do?

- What are the strengths of high school and college writers?

- What are the areas of concern expressed by high school and college instructors?

- What are the key assessment concerns of high school and college instructors?

Design

Surveys

At the university, we enlisted the help of our technology team who helped us launch a Zoomerang survey, inviting responses from college instructors of all 100-level courses (except Composition 101) and college instructors of 200-level writing-intensive courses. We asked them to identify their rank, department, and whether they assigned more writing in their classes than short answers on exams. If the writing required in their classes went beyond this, we asked them to continue with the survey and tell us about the kinds of writing assignments they made, including the length of papers and the number of drafts; the ways in which they assisted students with their writing and research processes; the methods and criteria they used for evaluation; and their experience dealing with plagiarism. Ninety-six college instructors completed the long survey.

We gave the same survey to all high school teachers at two area high schools. Fifty-four high school instructors completed the long survey.

Focus Groups

After studying the data from the surveys, we conducted

focus groups. The focus groups with college instructors included two groups: composition instructors in one, and instructors from other disciplines in the other.   The high school focus groups included instructors in several inter-disciplinary professional learning communities (PLCs). For the past several years the district-wide focus for the PLC groups has been to study writing practices across the curriculum.

Data

The 45-item Zoomerang survey took the form of positive statements with Likert-type response choices. For example, one question was about types of writing the instructor assigned:

I assign reaction or response papers.				
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost Always

The data we report here is the sum of the "Often" and "Almost Always" responses.

The data we include in the boxes below represent the sum of the percentages of instructors choosing the "often" and "almost always" responses.

We also include in the boxes quotations from the focus groups and from relevant articles in print. For the amount of attention student writing receives in the press, there is not a great deal of scholarly writing and research about the transition from high school to college writing.

Discussion: Surveys

Kinds of Assignments

Our first question concerned the types of writing assignments given to high school and college students. We wondered about assignment genres, topic choice, and page limits.

Assignment Genres		
	HS	**College**
essay exams	40%	38%
informal writing	48%	46%
summaries of readings	21%	17%
creative writing	33%	11%

Assignment Genres		
	HS	**College**
reaction/response	20%	43%
analysis	15%	44%
research papers:		
informative	16%	30%
analytical	24%	29%
argumentative	13%	19%

ANNE: There is a large crossover in kinds of genres that have to do with writing to learn. About equal percentages of college and high school teachers assign informal writing (46% and 48% respectively), essay exams (38%, 40%), and summaries of readings (17%, 21%). The differences emerge in the genres where independent thinking, particularly analysis and synthesis, is called for, writing in which the student is to take a stance in relation to the course material. A greater percentage of college than high school instructors assign analysis papers (44%, 15% respectively), reaction or response papers (43%, 20%), and research papers of various kinds: informative (30%, 16%), analytical (29%, 24%) and argumentative (19%, 13%). These findings seem developmentally appropriate, but do point to a leap that students must make when they move from high school to college.

CINDY: The crossover surprised me, and rather pleasantly in some respects. As a staunch supporter of research pa-

pers, I was pleased to see they are still a mainstay of the college experience. The issue of whether or not high school students should be assigned research papers is an ongoing discussion. On the one hand, high school teachers note accurately the onerous task it is to lead students through the research process. Often class sizes and time restrictions make this virtually impossible. Teaching students how to gather information, synthesize it, and formulate a sound thesis is labor-intensive work. However, this is perhaps a result of what some of the other data show: the significant differences in the amount of reaction/response and analytical papers. It leads me to believe, first, that we at the high school level need to do much more in critical analysis than we currently do, and, second, that perhaps if we did, the research process might be smoother. In other words, it seems to me that, developmentally, something is lacking in critical thinking and analytical skills that makes the transition from high school to college writing more problematic.

Topics of Assignments		
	HS	**College**
select own topic	31%	42%
assigned topic	28%	42%
choice within genre	35%	49%

CINDY: Anne and I mulled over this data for a while before we came to any theories about it. Here we have some distinct differences. The significant differences in topic autonomy reflect the differences in clientele and the ability of students to work independently as well. The most frequent strategy in high school is the topic choice within a genre (35% compared to 49% in college). Thirty-one percent of the high school teachers reported having students choose their own topics while 28% report "often" or "almost always." assigning a topic. My experience leads me to believe that choice within a genre is most popular because it combines the best of the other two strategies: the freedom of choice tempered with some structure so students have some direction. I know that most of my students struggle when given

complete control over their topic choices. Most appreciate some place to begin, although they are resistant to strict prescriptions.

I had to rely on my own experience to come up with an explanation for the high school results. When I assign writing, students usually balk at being "prescribed" a topic. Their experience in English classes has been based heavily on personal writing; writing more formally in third person is something with which they are less comfortable. However, they also balk at being given free rein. Having complete autonomy in topic choice is uncomfortable for many reasons, but probably mostly because they have a limited sphere of experience and interests upon which to draw. This ties in directly to observations on the part of both high school and college teachers about the depth and breadth of the reading their students do or, more accurately, DON'T do. Consequently, my students like some parameters to their writing topics. They are happy to choose on their own within a prescribed general topic area or genre.

ANNE: The data here mystified me. I thought that college teachers would give students much freer rein in the choice of topics. My explanation for the data we received is that college teachers often have students analyze a particular article, situation, or work of art according to a given framework then being studied. Sometimes teachers have students choose their own object to analyze but specify the framework or genre (analysis, comparison etc.) to be used. All of these other assignments could be considered "specifying the topic," even though they require a great deal of critical, independent thinking, more than "assigning the topic" would seem to represent.

Page Limits		
	HS	**College**
1 page or less	35%	29%
2–4 pages	23%	49%
5–7 pages	3%	16%
8–10 pages	0%	8%
11 and up	0%	8%

CINDY: The page limits data didn't really render any surprises. I would expect to find longer page requirements at the college level. Students tackle more complex writing assignments in college, which logically necessitate longer discourse. At the high school level, students find themselves writing shorter papers but probably writing more frequently. Although we didn't ask this in the survey, it might be interesting to note the total numbers of papers required in courses at each level. Shorter papers are theoretically less time-consuming to assess, although that's not always the case.   Longer papers take a tremendous level of focus that is not very prevalent in high school writers. My guess is that paper reading and evaluating consumes more time at the high school level because the class load is usually larger, less time is given to teachers for paper work, and papers tend to be more problematic and require closer attention.

> "Students must be able and willing to take responsibility for engaging with the course materials … [In high school] students were expected (and accustomed) to simply follow directions and do their best to meet the teachers' expectations … The college writing classroom, on the other hand, resisted such a stance actively."
>
> Peter Kittle,
> "It's Not the High School Teacher's Fault."

Instructor's Support of Writing

Next we investigated the kinds of support offered to writers in high school and college writers, including modeling of processes and discussion of writing in class, the number of drafts required, and types of feedback provided during the writing process.

Instructional Support		
	HS	**College**
Model research	51%	46%
Model writing process	49%	41%
Use exemplars	41%	28%
In-class writing	52%	20%

Numbers of Drafts		
	HS	**College**
1 draft	62%	70%
2 drafts	56%	36%
3 or more drafts	21%	11%

[NOTE: These figures include "sometimes" as well as "often" and "almost always."]

Conferences and Feedback		
	HS	**College**
Required with instructor	15%	22%
Required with student peer groups	45%	26%
Required revision after written instructor feedback	31%	27%

ANNE: My immediate impression from the data on instructional support is that college instructors in lower-level courses expect their students to be in charge of their own writing and their own writing processes. Many expect that when students complete Composition 101, they should be ready to write independently. Less than half "often" or "almost always" model writing or writing techniques in their classes and only one draft is required by 54% of instructors. Revising after instructor feedback, conferencing about writing with the instructor, or conferencing with student peer groups is required by less than

27% of the instructors. Students can, of course, seek out instructors or friends to give them feedback, but unless they take the initiative, they will be left to their own devices in most cases. My guess is that as they get into their majors, they may get more help on writing in their discipline. College instructors, like high school instructors, have many students and many demands on their time. In major classes, where instructors and students share a knowledge base as well as various purposes for writing (lab reports, incident reports in social sciences etc.), talk about strategies for writing is more integral to coursework.

> "Only ten weeks separate a twelfth grader from a 'thirteenth' grader. These two and a half months are metamorphic ones, but, essentially, the 18 year-old who graduated from high school in June is the same young adult navigating the maze of first-year college orientation in August."
>
> Herb Budden, Mary B. Nicolini, Stephen L. Fox, and Stuart Greene "What We Talk about When We Talk about College Writing."

CINDY: I certainly expected to see more autonomy at the college level, and our data reflect that. In high school, student autonomy is also greatly impacted by the diversity of the clientele. We deal with a huge range of ability levels. Some of our students are not college-bound; if they are not, they tend to have many more achievement issues that necessitate additional support—access to technology and to remedial writing and reading help, for example.

ANNE: One surprise for me, in understanding differences in the high school and college settings, was the difference in students that Cindy alludes to. Although we college professors think we have a wide spectrum of self-motivation and work

ethic, our range is quite small compared to that range in high school. Most of the students at MSU are paying their own way through jobs and loans; they want to succeed. Most of those who are insufficiently motivated at the time drop out. As students select majors, they join what could be called "discourse communities;" they share knowledge, ways of analyzing and evaluating, and even a specialized language in some cases. College teachers can assume a much more homogeneous audience in terms of goals and motivation.

CINDY: Students at the high school level also tend to have a very utilitarian view of education, seeing their coursework as a means to earn credits and ultimately to earn a diploma. They are more inclined to stick with the familiar—strategies that make them feel secure and don't require stepping out of their comfort levels as do higher-level thinking tasks. Consequently, it is no surprise to see that high school teachers use models of process and products more frequently than do college instructors. The most notable difference is in the amount of writing done in class, an amount that is necessary to provide the kind of support needed and to compensate in part for the lack of time to conference.   High school students need much more assurance that they are "doing it right."

The irony is that although students are expected to work more independently at the college level, they do have much more access to their instructors for support. College instructors have regularly scheduled office hours during which they are available to conference with students about their papers. High school teachers have no such thing. If conferencing occurs, it is on the fly, either a few minutes grabbed in class with a roomful of students present or squeezed in before or after school around extracurricular activities and meetings. Clearly if high school students need more instructional support for their writing – and it is evident they do – we should be building that time into our daily schedule.

In 1999, the NCTE wrote composition class size recommendations, citing research showing "significant" achievement increases in classes of fewer than 20. Yet rarely do we find this

to be common practice in the real world.

> "No football coach in his right mind would try to teach 150 players one hour per day and hope to win the game on Friday night. No, the team is limited to 40 or 50 highly motivated play-ers, and the coach has three or four assistants to work on the many skills needed to play the game. The 'student-teacher' ratio is maybe 15:1. But the English teacher—all alone—has 150 'players' of the game of composition (not to mention literature, language, and the teach-ing of other matters dropped into the English curriculum by unthinking enthusiasts)."
>
> John C. Maxwell, quoted in
> "More than a Number: Why Class Size Matters."

Evaluation of Writing

Finally, we examined the priorities of instructors in high school and college as they evaluated student writing.

Evaluation Priorities		
	HS	**College**
Spelling and punctuation	83%	73%
Complete, coherent sentences	80%	76%
Organization	75%	75%
*Introduction and conclusion	74%	
*Paragraphing	73%	
Idea development/evidence	72%	75%
Grammatical correctness	72%	74%

Evaluation **Lesser Concerns**		
	HS	**College**
*Introductions and conclusions		46%
Word choice	45%	45%
*Paragraphing		42%
Manuscript preparation	24%	30%
Range of abstraction	33%	26%

CINDY: Here I was pleasantly surprised to learn how in sync the high school and college instructors we surveyed were. A college instructor friend of mine once told me, "Even the most brilliant paper can be marred by excessive technical problems. They get in the way of those brilliant ideas as much as if they were blotches of mud." I always liked that analogy. That being said, I'm also glad to see that these are not the only high priorities. Organization is a very high priority, although it's interesting to note some differences in interpreting just what that term means. At the high school level, we do focus a great deal of time on the structure of a paper, which is why the five-paragraph theme is so widely used. It is a formula that works for students who have difficulty sorting their ideas. It helps them differentiate between a thesis and supporting arguments. We do, however, see the five-paragraph essay as just a starting point and not the be-all and end-all of rhetorical structure. Ultimately, we want them to convey their ideas in a logical, coherent manner and to break away from any pat formulas.

ANNE: I'm very happy to see that our evaluation priorities are so similar. As the data show, organization and idea development are two of the top three among college teachers. They are also very high among priorities of high school teachers; the focus on paragraphing, introductions and conclusions as well as the conventions of English seem entirely appropriate as well for high school students. The big gap between percentages

for the top five or six concerns and the lower ones—a drop from 72% to 46%—is a clear indication of agreement on the priorities.

My guess is that high school and college teachers mean different things by "organization" and "idea development/evidence," but that is probably very appropriate. I think the important thing is to continuously point out to students that they are writing to communicate ideas clearly to an audience. At whatever level of study, students need to see writing as something more than repetition of ideas presented in class or displays of correctness. These are necessary starting points, but not sufficient places to stop. As some of the college focus group instructors remarked, students shouldn't just "clean up" their writing when revising. In revising students need to pay particular attention to their (evolving) purpose and the ideas. They need to see writing as something they construct.

Focus Group Discussions:

Although the survey data were interesting, in all honesty we found it much more enjoyable to talk to our colleagues than to look at numbers. It's something we just don't ever get the chance to do and we thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Although we talked separately to our high school and college colleagues, we were very surprised at the common concerns expressed. Problems identified and discussed by both groups centered around reading and research skills.

ANNE: To me, shoptalk about teaching is very interesting. I feel somewhat ashamed to say this (because it is so boring to people outside the profession), but I do think it's really interesting, especially when teachers are talking about teaching the same class. How people teach, what they notice about their students, how they think students learn—all these are quite fascinating topics. The interminable shop talk is one of my best memories of being a TA, so I was really happy to be at the focus groups with the volunteer university teachers. It was really heartening to hear the teachers from other disciplines (Women's Studies, History, Urban Studies, Philosophy) so engaged in stu-

dents' writing problems. I hadn't realized it, but I guess I thought English teachers were the only ones who thought about writing problems in detail. These teachers noticed the same problems we English teachers always discuss: lack of close reading, not enough evaluating of sources, and problems with thinking through ideas and then writing articulately about them.

The English TAs (our second focus group) were treading more familiar ground—English 101—but again it was very interesting to hear how they characterized their students: they're really willing to learn, to experiment, and they are enthusiastic, but they want a pattern to plug into and are reluctant to take off on their own or to take a stand. The TAs also identified problems: students need to be able to distinguish between fact and opinion, to think critically, and to see how an argument is working on the page.

The two focus groups noticed a lot of the same problems and were so upbeat about the importance of trying to find a better way to address them. Occasionally the conversation took a "tangent" (from the "official" purpose of information gathering), and people exchanged ideas about how they had tried to address problems. It made me think we could all use more of these conversations from time to time to keep us energized about our field.

CINDY: I was very encouraged by what I heard in the university focus group sessions. Certainly as a high school teacher, I felt somewhat intimidated initially—not because I felt any inferiority, but because I expected to take some flak about the preparation—or lack thereof—of entering college students. That was absolutely not the case. What I found were individuals who were very engaged in the teaching of writing regardless of their disciplines, and who were very interested in discussing what we all could do to help our students succeed. As Anne said, we saw a number of common concerns emerge, and, most importantly, a desire to continue our dialogue on a regular basis.

Reading

CINDY: One thing that seems to have eroded from the high school curriculum is critical reading. It's not that we high school teachers don't try to address this, but it is becoming increasingly more difficult to integrate it into what we do because we see such a need for basic comprehension instruction. Many of my colleagues see this as a societal issue. Reading is not something that many people do for recreation anymore. Even some of our brightest students report not enjoying reading or not doing much of any reading outside of what is required in a class.

"… many students report that they do not read regularly at all, and when they do, they often find reading to be boring …
These responses suggest that reading is not an integral part of many entering students' communications experiences."

John Pekins
"A Community College Instructor Reflects on First-Year Composition."

This lack of reading is one reason we have reinstituted Silent Sustained Reading in our school. At first it was difficult to get kids to take part, but now that we've been at it a few years, I am seeing less resistance.   In fact, it is not uncommon to see many students carrying around their SSR books all day and reading them when they have a spare minute in a class. Sometimes they get so involved in their books that they read them in class when they should be paying attention to the lesson. That's a delightful problem.

This delightful problem is tempered somewhat by the choice of materials. I'm not sure students are equipped to make the best decisions about what to read, although I know the research shows that any reading is better than no reading. My school provides the local newspaper for each classroom, and I

am always glad to see how many students will pick it up and read it. However, many of them report not getting the local newspaper at home.

HS Reading Concerns

"Many are quick readers, but they don't comprehend the information. They only get bits and pieces that do not fit together. It often reflects that they don't understand the author's intentions."

"Students who read a lot are much better critical thinkers."

"Poor readers can't express themselves, can't explain in depth."

"I find myself having to spoon feed the information too often because they have trouble comprehending."

ANNE: Perhaps the most surprising thing to me in this research was the adamant discussion of college students' poor reading skills. Reading isn't something that college instructors naturally tend to think about, but it is becoming a major concern.

College Reading Concerns

"They don't write like readers. They don't appear to read writing that will help them; that is, models of good writing."

"Reading comprehension is a problem. They don't recognize that something is an argument, don't distinguish an argument from information or an opinion."

"They don't seem to have a sense of the author's opinion when they are reading."

> ### College Reading Concerns
>
> "They have difficulty assessing material they're critiquing, looking closely at WHAT and HOW the argument works."
>
> "They don't critically reread their own work."

ANNE: It appears that college instructors need to be much more explicit in their discussions of reading strategies and spend some class time assessing and addressing students' reading skills. Teachers in both college focus groups—the composition teachers and the teachers of courses outside of English—spoke about this problem in several areas, which boiled down to the students' inability to understand WHAT is being said (the content), HOW (recognizing the presentation and argument strategies being used), and WHY (recognizing and questioning both the content and the strategies). This inability to read well also shows up in student writing both in terms of how they put their own writing together (a lack of models to call on) and in terms of their ability to read their own writing critically—to re-read, assess, and revise effectively.

> "… the time has arrived for first-year composition instructors to become more knowledgeable about the reading process and its applications to the process of writing college compositions."
>
> John Pekins
> "A Community College Instructor Reflects on First-Year Composition."

Research

According to both high school and college instructors, research problems were closely related to reading problems. Ad-

ditionally, students had problems finding, evaluating, and using their sources well. Electronic sources were a big area of concern.

> "… as novices, most freshmen have neither the tools to pry open their sources nor the familiarity with them to ask "why" questions rather than "what" questions. They tend to summarize and describe."
>
> Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz
> "The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year."

College Research Concerns: finding sources

"Students are generally very adept at navigating the Internet, but they have a great deal of difficulty using more sophisticated search tools and databases."

"They don't think of synonyms or alternate search terms."

"They don't use hard copy sources."

College Research Concerns: evaluating sources

Lack of ability to determine the quality of websites

Source credibility

They use the first hit on Geocities, Wikipedia, Google

"Wikipedia! If I see one more paper using this source, I'll scream."

> ### College Research Concerns:
> ### evaluating sources
>
> "It's not Wikipedia itself; it's the mindlessness of using it. I want students to make more responsible choices in their research."

> ### College Research Concerns:
> ### using sources
>
> "An insecurity in understanding text leads students to cut and paste information without citation, accidentally or intentionally."
>
> "Citation conventions are a problem."
>
> "You have to keep asking for elaboration, have them keep looking for it."

ANNE: I was surprised at the vehemence of the focus groups about the use of Wikipedia—and it didn't matter if it was high school or college instructors. Everyone had the same complaint. Wikipedia is often the first hit when something is googled, and students, for all their technological savvy, don't stop to think about where the information comes from. It looks official. If we teachers thought about how many hits we go through when we google something (I certainly don't go through very many), I think we might be a little more sympathetic and may be able to offer some realistic methods we use to get to the more reliable sources. We are all in information overload, so we need to focus on better research strategies to find what is needed (for example, creating better search terms), to identify good sources, and to use those sources effectively as support in the writing. There seemed to be so much agreement about the pervasiveness of research and reading problems that it's probably not enough to just point strategies out; we need to adjust our teaching, so that the

time spent matches the importance we attach to these parts of the research process. This is not an easy task in high school or college. It is slow, meticulous work. But it's especially important, as we combine our efforts in teaching research and reading along with writing, to help students select the important points and visualize the arguments they see in the articles they have found and then elaborate on the information they cite and show how it supports the point they are making. The teachers in the focus groups felt that it was necessary to persuade students that this kind of painstaking work is worthwhile.

CINDY: The research process is so overwhelming to high school students, and it's overwhelming for the instructors who try to teach it. My colleagues and I see huge issues with students being able to critically evaluate sources. A social studies teacher told me, "One of my students wrote a paper claiming there were some 350 million homeless shelters in the U.S. His source was some 8th grader's website." I hope this is an extreme example, yet my own students also tend to ignore the evaluation process in favor of simply accessing the information. When they find something, they want to use it, whether it's reliable or not. We also see Wikipedia as a huge problem, but I don't see this as any different than the problem we had years ago when students simply summarized entries from encyclopedias they accessed easily on the library bookshelf. Today is much more complex, though. We have so many sources of information in so many different formats. It is a real challenge to teach students how to maneuver their way through this plethora of information. Add to that the technology gap that is becoming more and more of an issue with needy students who simply don't have the access that their fellow students have. They don't have the luxury of spending all kinds of time learning to navigate the Internet. We have a real obligation to level the technology playing field.

Looking Forward

ANNE: Another surprise for me as we were conducting this research is the extent to which NCLB and college entrance

tests negatively impact high school curriculum and teaching. It now appears that colleges may have a similar challenge. Recently in the *New York Times Magazine*, there is an article, "No Gr du te Left Behind," which considers the recent move on some fronts to extend standardized testing to college. It is easy to say, as proponents often do, that teachers—in high school as well as college—object to these tests because the tests will find them out. The tests will show that they are not doing their jobs and need to be "held accountable." It is hard to argue with such an audience that these tests are poor measures of actual critical thinking and writing skills. It is even harder to argue that they are, in fact, destructive because they leech away instructional time that should be devoted to the teaching and learning of the very skills they purport to assess. If an institution's funding or ranking or reputation is dependent on student performance on these kinds of tests, the institution will make sure that students know how to perform adequately on the tests.

A student learning outcome that states "Students will perform adequately on NCLB (or NGLB) tests" is certainly, however, a short term goal of questionable educational value. Completing a 30 minute written essay on "My Favorite Food" or even "Creativity" is not a good indicator of one's ability to perform research (to read, analyze, critique, and synthesize sources for a particular project) or to convey complex information strategically or persuasively to a given audience. The time spent teaching test-taking strategies for such a short-term goal detracts from the already scarce time allotted for teaching the tasks we have outlined above. It would be better for the test evaluators to spend the extra time it would take to read essays composed in a more natural situation that more accurately demonstrate student abilities to research, read, and write. Even this essay testing situation, though, is unlikely to address the further problem that students see no reason to perform for test givers with the abstract mission of ranking their school for funding or marketing purposes.

I've gotten on the soap box here and don't want to close without making a plug for the value of continued conversations

between high school and college teachers on how best to help students continue learning to read, write, and research effectively.

CINDY: My colleagues and I have talked extensively about how our curriculum has been plundered because of the demands of standardized testing. As Anne said, the topics in the writing tests tend to be of dubious value when we consider what information we want these tests to give us. For many students standardized testing is a daunting experience; for others, it is a mere inconvenience. Both situations reinforce over-dependence on the good old five-paragraph essay format. For the first group, it's something they can rely on and feel comfortable about; for the second group, it's a quick formula that's easy to follow. Students know it works, and they are leery about breaking out of the pattern.

In an ideal world, we would remind ourselves that the more students write, the better they write. We would recognize that class size has a direct impact on how much we can have our students write. We would acknowledge the benefit of writing conferences. In this ideal world, we would assert the need for writing teachers to have manageable class loads and ample time for conferencing and reading student work.

I am encouraged, though, that in my district writing has become a comprehensive goal. The administration has begun to support a "writing across the curriculum" initiative which I believe has tremendous potential. Students are starting to see writing as an integral part of every class, not just English class. Teachers are being given support to learn how to teach and evaluate writing in their disciplines. It is vital that we English teachers do our part to support this initiative. It is vital that we have opportunities to work side by side with our content area colleagues to continue our dialogue about writing instruction.

As the world economy continues to change and we see even greater demand for highly skilled, articulate workers, we will have to provide support for the increasing numbers of students who go on to post-secondary education. We can't do this without a continuing dialogue with our counterparts in higher education.

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The Case Against Standardized Testing

Peter Henry

More than ever, K-12 public education in the United States is beholden to, and synonymous with, standardized testing. From teacher merit pay plans linked to test scores,[1] to school 'report cards' based on exam numbers under No Child Left Behind,[2] to high-stakes tests determining who walks and who waits,[3] policy makers display an abiding faith in the importance, meaning and authority of standardized tests.

But, is this faith justified? Is it borne out by research and academic studies? Corroborated by cognitive theory? Substantiated by best pedagogical practice? Supported by neuroscience? Confirmed by international comparisons? Does it create motivated lifetime learners? And, does it stand the ultimate test—successfully preparing students for active participation as citizens and workers in today's complex, multi-faceted society?

This paper examines these issues in detail, particularly from the perspective of English instructors, whose sacred domain, building literacy and critical analysis, demands that such questions be answered fully and fairly before handing over our prerogatives, and our curriculum, to those seeking radical change in how we teach.

It must be said at the outset: standardized testing has muscled its way onto the educational stage in very short order. In little more than a decade, the frequency and number of stan-

dardized tests has doubled and redoubled in response to public concern about the quality of high school graduates, and thus, the effectiveness of public schools. In 2005, 11 million exams were added in elementary and middle schools; another 11 million tests for high school science are expected to bring the national total to near 50 million by 2008, amid signs that the quality, reliability and validity of exams are eroding.[4] (Fairtest puts the total of all tests—including I.Q., screening and readiness at 100 million; that does not include the ACT or SAT college entrance exams.[5]) The rapidity of standardized testing's ascent means that few teachers are well-versed in its language, terms or accepted uses as most teachers' educational programs did not include such coursework.[6]

Ignorance, however, is not a defense; not in legal venues, nor should it be in education circles. It is my thesis that teachers' collective ignorance around standardized testing must change— and change quickly—if we are to preserve our autonomy and professional status as educators. The entire gestalt of the "ac-countability" movement holds that teachers are not to be trusted or believed when it comes to student learning. Even grades, acquired over the length of a semester are presumed suspect: subjective, inadequate measures which do not allow direct com-parison across the domain in a cohort.[7]

For many outside critics of education, only a standard test can reveal the "truth" about what transpires in classrooms, and, thus, successful teaching is reduced to a single, narrow measure on a multiple choice instrument. Ultimately, such a system makes teaching the provision of defined information in-puts—synonymous to a functionary responsible for conducting transactions on behalf of some distant monolith. And when the numbers rolling off the computer print-out appear unsatisfactory to those in authority? They will have their justification to take public education private[8], where due process, labor agreements and unions are not barriers to the prerogatives of management.

If that dystopic future alarms you as much as it does me, then I urge that you learn more about standardized testing (start by reading this article) and commit to sharing it with students,

parents and the larger community. At this point in education history, teachers are the last best hope for preserving not only the autonomy of local schools, but the very meaning and essence of American democracy.[9]

To be blunt: as of this writing, I am not impressed by the collective response by those whose very job it is to know better. Shame on us for allowing the train wreck of standardization to get this far down the track without raising a substantial ruckus, as in: *Wrong way! That approaching light is not a tunnel's end but the spear tip of a massive social and educational disaster!*

Defining Terms

We need to understand the language of standardized testing before confronting and critiquing its nature and assumptions.

What is a standardized test? An examination made up of uniform items which can be replicated across an entire domain of students, typically by asking short multiple choice questions which can be easily and cheaply scored by machine.

Validity. Does the exam accurately measure the kinds of skills and aptitudes it purports to? In other words, if we are trying to measure vocabulary skills, is that what we end up effectively measuring, or are we actually tracking something else, like reading skills or the level of advanced course work?

Reliability. Would the exam, if given again, yield analogous results from the same cohort? In other words, is the exam measuring a narrow band of knowledge that has been prepped for and will soon evaporate, or does a subsequent test yield similar scoring?

Transparency. Is the examination open to public scrutiny, debate and monitoring as to quality and accuracy? Or, does it remain a proprietary instrument of the corporation that created it and thus is unavailable?

Norm-referenced exams. Exams specifically designed to spread students out across a normal shaped curve. These instruments are field-tested to prove that they effectively identify high and low achieving students. In other words, psychometricians

(test makers) select questions knowing how many students, on average, will get each answer correct.

       <u>Criterion-referenced exams.</u> Exams pegged to a specific domain of knowledge or skill. There is no attempt to arrange questions to produce a normal curve, only to meet the "criteria" of those designing the test. As a result, in a given cohort, any number of students could pass or fail depending on the match between what they know and can do and what is on the exam.

       <u>High stakes exams.</u> Tests which decide a final outcome for students, yea or nay, in terms of passing a course, advancing to the next grade level or even graduating.[10]

High-Stakes Testing: The Poster Child of Failure

       I am focusing here mainly on "high-stakes" exams since they are the most pernicious, least accurate and least defensible of standardized tests. (There are good uses for standardized tests: in the form of short, frequent measures that assist teachers in making "formative" decisions about pedagogy.[11] But, that isn't what is transpiring in K-12 education today.) The rationale for high-stakes exams is that by upping the ante and letting students know there will be serious consequences for failure, it will provoke a better effort, more scholarship and greater attention to the subject matter. Teachers, too, are thought stimulated by potential excessive "failures" and, thus, focus their efforts more effectively on what will be tested.

       Yet, giving a "norm-referenced" exam and counting it for high-stakes is simply an exercise of shooting fish in a barrel, since the test has been designed precisely because it identifies a declining level of achievement across a cohort.[12] Before the test is even given, a good psychometrician knows how many students will and will not pass. Why exactly, would a state administer a norm-referenced "high stakes" exam, well aware of the pre-determined fail rate? A question that has fueled speculation that privatization ideologues want to use public school "failure" to wrest control of schools from the government.

       So, the only defensible exam used for a high-stakes pur-

pose would have to be "criterion referenced",[13] meaning that as many students who know and understand the material could, in theory, successfully pass. Quality criterion-referenced exams are tied to state standards. However, to believe that every state has successfully meshed its standards with its exams or that every school and teacher teaches to state standards in similarly enlightened and effective ways is not credible. Further, to believe that one entity, a state board for example, can adequately, fairly and effectively delineate all the important elements of a subject like history or mathematics, then encapsulate those perfectly on one multiple choice exam, is similarly without credence.

Thus, in terms of validity, the best that can be said of high-stakes exams is that they measure effectiveness of instruction toward pre-selected material (again, selected by whom?) on one particular exam. And, in terms of reliability, since most schools and teachers focus relentlessly on the material just before the exam is given, it is likely that, a year later, if tested again, many students would not be as successful. This is why most thoughtful educators decry the "narrow" focus of testing: it measures a small domain of select material; one that, when prepped for, regularly distorts the depth, complexity and steadfastness of student ability.

But, putting all this aside, let's return to the central premise: student effort will increase when there is "more" riding on a test's outcome. Astoundingly, there is no research data showing that such "high-stakes" environments actually work to improve effort, achievement or scholarship. None.[14] Nor have long-standing college-entrance exams, like the SAT and ACT, shown any significant change in student achievement over the last decade.[15] In fact, in 2006, they experienced their biggest decline in 31 years.[16] Nor do international comparison exams like TIMMS[17] or national comparative tests like the NAEP[18] show much improvement amongst the body of American students. In other words, if the claim is that high stakes exams are somehow improving "student achievement", it is not showing up in numbers across class cohorts.

Moreover, a well known sociological principle, Camp-

bell's Law[19] applies directly to "high stakes" exams. Campbell's Law, states: "The greater the social consequence riding on an examination, the more likely it is that the exam will be manipulated or corrupted to outflank the social pressures surrounding it." Campbell's Law has proven true for centuries, starting with ancient Chinese civil service exams based on Confucianism. It has certainly proven to be true with high-stakes testing as David Berliner documents assiduously in his book on the standardized testing craze, *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools*.[20] Campbell's Law, by itself, makes clear that high-stakes exams—far from producing "certainty" of educational excellence—are a set-up for schools to forego real learning in favor of the only thing the system truly values: producing an acceptable numerical appearance of learning.

So, despite all the rhetoric surrounding the need for "accountability" in public schools, the one operational strategy designed to demonstrate accountability has itself escaped accountability—at least in terms of having any kind of a research base to justify its widely accepted use. High stakes exams typically feature low validity, low reliability and a high likelihood of corruption. Further, when you factor in that these high-stakes exams, which have so much riding on them, are not generally available to the public or subject to the safeguards or oversight that you would expect from such a consequential event, it should set off alarms across the country.

Think about this: if a school or a teacher announced to the student body that there was going to be *one test* to determine who graduates, and that what was on that test, its scoring and methodology *could not be revealed*—in fact, anyone found to have revealed specific material on the test could be tried for felony theft—does anyone think that such a policy would survive the next school board meeting? Of course not.

And don't imagine there have not been errors in administering and scoring these exams—huge errors that have cost students diplomas, access to scholarships and even admission to college.[21] Such flaws turn up in the local press every year across the country. But, how are errors even discovered? So far,

only through the relentless pursuit of the truth by parents and a willingness to initiate court action. But, for poor families, when handed a score on official school stationary, with a young child standing nearby looking ashamed, what are the odds they will spend considerable time and money to contest it over the course of the next year?

Let me say this again because it is terribly important: *There are no large-scale, peer-reviewed academic studies that prove, or even suggest, that a high-stakes, standardized testing educational program improves learning, skill-development or achievement for students.* And, in fact, when you think about some of the best students and schools in this country—I am talking about the 10% of students in private schools—they do not, as a rule, employ high-stakes testing. And why not? Because they have a clear educational mission[22] in most cases, and understand that high-stakes standardized tests do not fundamentally move students closer to learning goals.

The academic motto of the Blake School in Minneapolis is: *Challenging the mind; engaging the heart.* And from their program description: *One of Blake's core values is love of learning. Every day, in every classroom our students embrace this value by actively engaging in the learning process.*[23] Here is the Mission Statement of St. Paul Academy and Summit School in Saint Paul: *In pursuit of excellence in teaching and learning, St. Paul Academy and Summit School educates a diverse and motivated group of young people for leadership and service, inspires in them an enduring love of learning, and helps them lead productive, ethical and joyful lives.*

If private schools are the gold standard in American education and they do not utilize high stakes exams, why then is it being foisted on public schools?

Why High-Stakes Exams?

Principally because we, as a society, unlike most private schools, have not decided what the goals of education should be. As a result, the aims of learning are easily diverted, misused

and hijacked to fit the latest campaign slogan, administrative fiat or position-paper. There is no clearer example than the 1983 report, *A Nation At Risk*,[24] put forward by business interests, supported by the Reagan Administration and swallowed whole by an uncritical media, portraying America's schools as being so disastrous that they were ruining America's competitiveness. (Funny that the decade of the 1990s turned out to be one of America's most successful, at least economically, in its history.) All this served the purpose of undermining confidence in the public system, softening the ground for dramatic change, and lock-stepping education policy with business interests—pushing us inexorably toward an over-reliance on standardized tests.[25]

The same thing has now happened under the more sanguine title, *No Child Left Behind*, which sets as a condition of aid for Federal Title I funding tests in reading and math for grades 3 through 8. While these exams are not high stakes for students, NCLB provides an ever increasing level of punishment for schools who do not move rapidly up to 100% proficiency by 2012—a level of student achievement that has never been attained in any school, district or country around the world.[26] (And, in fact, given that some states are using norm-referenced instruments, a level of achievement that *is already known to be impossible* before any tests are given!)   In a sense, what the onset of NCLB means is that virtually every standardized test around the country is now high stakes, for schools if not for kids. What's more, there are some in Congress who want to extend the annual testing into high school and use the results to rate individual teachers.[27]

It is disheartening that there is not a stronger public understanding about what is important in education so that it doesn't become a political football to be tossed and kicked by self-serving politicians. Do we really want an education system driven by the latest political slogan? With education policy housed in fifty different state capitols around the country, the notion of consensus in terms of learning goals is inherently problematic. In fact, for most of our history, and, ironically, as recently as the Reagan Administration, local school-board con-

trol and individual states as incubators of innovative educational reforms were viewed as major assets in America's educational program.

As a child of two life-long educators, a teacher of 20 years and an author who has studied these issues, I feel compelled to confront the unchallenged assumption that the current hyper-testing regime is a sound approach for developing the human capital that is today's younger generation. In fact, I am prepared to argue that not only is the entirety of the standardized testing regime ineffective in its aims of improving education, but that it is, in fact, *the very reason* drop-out rates are accelerating,[28] the achievement gap continues to widen[29] and so much of America's educational program is dull and uninspired.[30] High stakes, standardized exams have been billed as a panacea for our educational ills. I declare this a sham and an appallingly bad educational strategy which guarantees poor results, reduced motivation and legions of graduates without the skills necessary to live a decent and fulfilling life.

The Dirty Dozen:
How High-Stakes Tests Fail Our Kids

Below, I identify twelve principal harms that flow from the high-stakes, measurable accountability movement in U.S. education policy. Each contributes its share to making schools a less than welcoming and dynamic place for young people, but, taken cumulatively, they are conspiring to make the experience of school something that children learn to hate.

1. In the trash-bin of history: low order thinking skills

Standardized tests, typically multiple-choice and lacking in breadth and depth, tend to measure low-order thinking skills, the kind of short-sequence logic operations which are routine and involve immediate recall of discrete but obvious facts. There are two problems here: first, these types of questions are often abstract, with no connection to a student's life and are therefore inherently uninteresting and unable to pierce through to their real-world concerns. We know, or should, that connection to a

student's identity is one of the surest ways we can bring him or her into the world of academia.[31] In a word, students find these problems unimportant and useless, and many don't care enough to put forward a good effort. Second, the kind of skill-set that these questions build is rapidly becoming obsolete in today's economy. When you look at jobs that are being outsourced to Asia, it is exactly this kind of rote, sequenced operation that workers in India and China are able to do much more cheaply than the best-trained American workers.[32] Bottom-line: even if American students master these kinds of short, logical operations, executing them over and over again, the reality is there won't be much demand for these skills in the world of work.

2. The future is in the right-hemisphere.

The skills that are most necessary for today's work environment are much more right-brained: creativity, whole analysis, a collaborative people orientation, aesthetic appreciation, complex reasoning and critical problem-solving.[33] It is a fact that standardized tests do not, and cannot, measure these kinds of aptitudes.[34] Right-brained abilities are much more dependent on instructor modeling, personal exploration and experience, effective pedagogy and inspiring curriculum. This is precisely why America's best private schools do not overly bother themselves with standardized tests, but, rather, attempt to directly build academic skills—love for learning, creative problem solving, stimulating reading and discussion, critical thinking—that can be transferred to other endeavors.

3. A lousy way to teach and learn.

Standardized tests result in the kind of "drill and kill" pedagogy that we know is ineffective. In his ground-breaking book *How Children Fail*, John Holt wrote this about how and why children learn:

> The child who wants to know something remembers it and uses it once he has it; the child who learns something to please or appease someone else forgets it when the need for pleasing or the danger of not appeasing is past.

Brace yourselves: Holt wrote this 50 years ago in 1958! Teaching in a standardized testing environment encourages lousy teaching techniques—memorization, drill-and-kill, rote learning—and results in the kind of shallow, fleeting and compartmentalized knowledge that is ineffective and prone to turn children off from school. We have known this for over five decades—why would we go back to a kind of instructional practice that never worked in the first place?

4. Learning is natural and inherently valued.

As mentioned above, a standardized classroom results in poor pedagogy that gets the learning equation backward. Learning should be pursued for its intrinsic value, not because someone is forcing one to learn. Why do students put in hours and hours rehearsing for musical concerts, plays or practicing sports? Because, in fact, they see intrinsic value in those activities; in a word, they *choose* to pursue them. The same could and should be true for our academic subjects if and when we focus on giving students choices and responsibility for designing a learning plan. Course work should have much greater relevance to a student, as well as a specific and practical application beyond school. Mostly this means making explicit the connection between a given subject and a student's life—contextualizing it, bringing it home personally, giving them and their community a stake in seeing that learning matters.[35] Once students are hooked on learning—not for reward or avoiding punishment—they will do far more for themselves and their intellectual development than we could ever imagine. Unfortunately, in the current environment, students are told repeatedly: the reason they need to spend hours learning some abstract, disconnected operation or set of facts is that it will someday be on an exam.

5. We are ruining brains.

Brain development is perhaps the most pressing reason why we need to rethink our current high-stakes testing mania. By age 9 or so, young people have the physical structure—the hardware, if you will—of their brain in place. Over the next ten to twelve years it is crucial that they actively utilize different brain functions—develop the software—in order for it to reach

its maximum potential.[36] Structured complexity in the classroom, an enriched array of choices and modes of assessment, varied social groupings all contribute to growing the brain in particularly fruitful ways. And so does creating an environment in which adequate time, physical activity and low stress levels are baseline considerations.[37-38] Similarly, the aesthetic appreciation found in music and the arts as well as more contemplative activities like spirituality and compassion are not things that happen without schools making them a priority, or at least a possibility.[39] All of these are currently being shunted aside in our mad rush to increase test scores. As a result, we are in danger of producing a generation of learners who cannot critically think, appreciate the arts, nor marvel at the profound mysteries of our universe. And, tragically, once these abilities are neglected long enough, up through the age of 24 or so, there is less of a chance that they will ever be fully integrated into a person's intellectual repertoire.

6. Exams merely ratify the achievement gap.

The oft-stated purpose of NCLB is to narrow the achievement gap between whites and students of color. Yet, we know, and have known for a long time, that the most reliable predictor of a student's standardized test score is the square-footage of their principal residence.[40] In other words, students of affluent families almost universally score higher on exams than do students in under-privileged homes. Researchers have found that by the age of six, children in affluent families have been exposed to fully 2 million more words than have been children in more trying circumstances.[41] They are more likely to have been read to regularly, engaged in enrichment activities like travel and museums and also to have had access to adequate nutrition and health-care. Is it any wonder that there is a substantial achievement gap when there is a veritable gulf of difference between the haves and the have-nots in America? (I don't even understand why we are surprised by this.) But to then take the one reliable instrument which has always privileged well-to-do students and make it the basis of comparison and academic achievement for every kid in America is simply to lock in place existing inequi-

ties. Poor children are, by far, more likely to drop out, have a stressful home-life, get suspended, repeatedly move and change schools, run afoul of the law and act out during class.[42] They are also least likely to be interested in or motivated by abstract questions or the need to score highly on an instrument far removed from their personal experience. We are not closing the achievement gap under NCLB as major research studies have shown,[43] but, rather, we are confirming and institutionalizing at the level of policy how real and profound are the differences between rich and poor.

7. More anxiety = less learning.

High-stakes standardized tests increase the levels of fear and anxiety of young students, and it is a well-documented fact in education that the higher the levels of affective interference, the less able students are to complete even low-order thinking tasks—not to mention the more reflective, higher-order skills which are crucial for brain development and future employment. The stories coming in from around the country, even around the world,[44] of students unable to sleep at night, acting out, exhausted from stress[45] and generally working themselves into emotional wrecks[46] as a result of hype surrounding exams[47] is truly disgusting. These are children, some as young as eight years old, being put in highly stressful situations where their test performance may have extremely serious repercussions for their teachers, their parents and the fate of their school. Why are we doing this again? Oh, right—for the good of the children.

8. Narrowing the curriculum to a lifeless skeleton.

Fact: 71% of schools[48] report having to cut back on important electives like art, music and gym class in order to find more time for remedial instruction in math and reading. Some critics might consider this a step in the right direction, more like our highly competitive adversaries in China, India and Japan. But, as previously mentioned, in terms of brain development, pedagogical excellence, real-world skills and fostering intrinsic interest in learning, this is a huge net loss for children and our society. Doing more and more of what is not working does not equate with an effective educational program. We are asking

children to do the metaphoric equivalent of bang their heads against a concrete wall for hours every day—and when we discover that it isn't working, we are urging them to do it harder and for longer periods of time.

9. The higher the stakes, the lower the bar.

High-stakes standardized tests are not good measures of academic excellence. As mentioned previously, they measure a narrow band of logical sequence operations which are useful only for taking further exams. In fact, because states are under tremendous pressure to show that their academic programs are working, the truth is that state exams are becoming less and less demanding.[49] It is a truism: just as in gym class where every student must jump over a bar at some minimum height, the temptation is to continually lower the bar until a vast majority can make it. This is not driving the system toward Olympian heights of excellence; on the contrary, it is driving the system toward lower and lower levels of acceptability. Why is it that some states like Georgia and North Carolina have such remarkable pass rates on their State-wide exams but such a dismal pass-rate on the NAEP exam?[50] The answer is that high-stakes exam bars are not set very high, and are certainly not indicative of students who are ready for college, work or the complex demands of being an adult. Look at the amount of remedial instruction now required on college campuses before students can even begin taking introductory classes. On the route of trying to measure and prove academic excellence, we are guaranteeing ourselves a progressively larger share of mediocrity. We are being dumbed-down in a systematic, organized and expensive way.

10. Shallow is as shallow does.

The American public's perception of how public education is performing continues to slide in an era of standardized testing. Surveys confirm that Americans view public education unfavorably, saying that standards are too lax and that students are leaving with low skill-levels.[51] Interestingly, when the same respondents are asked about their own public school, the one at which they send their children, their perceptions are that the school performs quite well.[52] In other words, it is the "other"

schools that aren't doing well, the ones that are educating "other" children. No doubt, media coverage of school shootings, falling test scores and inadequate supplies and resources contribute to a general perception that schools are failing. But even when the news is apparently good, when pass rates or test scores move up, the public is being encouraged to believe in a very shallow and unreliable measure of what makes for a "quality" education.[53] As much as students are being dumbed-down by the lowered bar of high-stakes exams, their parents and the public are being asked to swallow whole that the complex, interrelated and open-ended process of education can be reduced to a single number, up or down, black or white. Standardized exams are equally adept at dumbing-down the American public—the very ones being asked at election-time to vote on school-funding levels, school-board candidates, and—yes, sadly—even presidential candidates.

11. We are undermining and losing our best people.

As an educator, I can attest to the increasing levels of frustration and dissatisfaction within the ranks of teachers. We are losing fully 50% of new teachers in the first five years of embarking on what they hoped was a lifetime career.[54] We are also losing a staggering number of veteran teachers, some through retirement, others through the frustration of seeing what has happened to education.[55] Think about it: are we really supposed to believe that a teacher comes home at the end of the day and says to her husband—"Honey, it's been an unbelievable day at school; our reading scores just shot up 2 percent over last year."

The real truth is that educators are made from a complex confluence of personal factors, and principal among them are a love of learning and a kind of reverence for making a difference in the lives of youngsters. By subverting that, by elevating merely routine performance to the front of what makes for education, we are actively undermining the very rationale for why good teachers want to teach.[56] And slowly, over the course of a generation, if we lose enough truly inspiring educators, we will lose their students too—the ones who see no particular reason to want to go into teaching themselves.

12. We are undermining essential American values.

Last, but not least, and perhaps most insidiously, high-stakes standardized exams support a very dangerous world-view. Jim Cummins, the intrepid advocate for literacy and second language acquisition, calls the NCLB mindset "an ideology."[57] It is one that believes there is a single measure of human excellence, that conformity to the designs of those in authority is mandatory and that deviating in any way from the norm is wrong and to be punished Had it been our principal educational impulse since America's inception, I believe there would not have been developments like Jazz and women's suffrage, or figures like Anne Sullivan, Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony or Franklin Delano Roosevelt—that we would be today a much less confident, innovative and resilient people.

At its core, the high-stakes standardized testing movement is asking students not only to not think for themselves, but to passively accept that all knowledge is controlled by authority. That you exist only as an individual, not as part of some larger social whole, and that you will be successful or fail based upon your individual ability to do exactly what others expect you to. If you step outside of that and try to do something based upon conviction, creativity or critical insight, your academic record along with a raft of social opportunities will be damaged. In fully embracing a high-stakes standardized testing regime, we are subverting a substantial part of what makes America unique and productive: our ingenuity, our self-reliance, our faith that we make a better tomorrow through creativity and collaboration, not conforming to others' ideas about what we ought to know or be able to do. Instead, we are being asked to stay passively in our chair and make a selection from answers provided, obey all commands and regulations—no matter how punitive, ridiculous or restrictive—blithely accept the accuracy, fairness and lack of transparency surrounding the exams, and voice not a single word in opposition to the entire noxious enterprise.

Standardizaton versus Customization

To be fair, there are other voices, education experts, policy wonks and business executives,[58] who see it different and want to continue even more aggressively down the path of tougher standards, measurable accountability and doling out rewards and punishment based on test scores. They have their reasons.[59] They are well-educated (in a non-high stakes environment, of course) and they aim to convince: *We have to measure what is happening with public dollars. This is about system accountability. We need to keep up with what other countries are doing. Why should poor kids be left without options in the inner city?*

Two of the largest and best-funded of these groups are the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable, and they have banded together to fight any major changes to the No Child Left Behind Law as it faces renewal. Their reason: "competitiveness." As Charles E.M. Kolb, president for the Committee for Economic Development, a Washington-based group of business, academic, and philanthropic leaders puts it: "Business is probably the largest consumer of American education", and the priority of learning should be "having people in the workforce who are capable and have the skills you need in the workforce today."[60]

I have already spoken to the issue of "real-world" skills: how quickly low-order thinking jobs are being outsourced abroad, and how 21st century workers will need a much more flexible right-brained skill-set—whole analysis, critical thinking, creativity, an aesthetic sensibility, and a host of collaborative people skills—not to mention the intellectual flexibility to constantly learn new things and be able to switch careers as the modern economy evolves and restructures.

But let's put that aside. Let's consider Kolb's claim that "business is the largest consumer of American education." This gets to the nub of America's lack of understanding about the goals of education. Do we really agree that children are going to school so that they can serve the interests of the economy? That is, that the goal of learning is to prepare students so that they can successfully work for a local business or corporation? Or, is

the goal of learning *to further that individual's—and their family's—own prospects*? That is, to help them discover who they really are, what they value, and prepare them to live a healthy, dynamic and meaningful life? I submit, by tradition and routine, that the goal of public education is the latter. That, in fact, student achievement is higher, more sustained and more valued when student identity and autonomy are affirmed and enhanced. And also, that the largest "consumers" of American education are the very people who need and use these schools—students, along with their families: the exact citizens upon whom all of us are dependent in a governmental system "of the people, by the people and for the people."

The core of this debate over whose interests education is meant to serve characterizes a simple but important distinction in our approach to how learning actually works: On one side are people who believe that education is centered in the learner, with their interests, passions and enthusiasm as the driving force. On the other are people who see learning as being more about the system and adults: developing effective structures that allow *the system* to manage, control and direct children to "achieve" what *the system* determines is important, measuring that and handing out rewards to those who comply.

The latter impulse, which generally falls under the rubric of "standardization," requires students to conform to a certain mold and become, more or less, products that are kicked-on from school when they "pass" a minimum level of uniformity with everyone else. The former, which might best be defined by the term "customization," asks that we listen to each individual, establish relationships, help them build identity and assets as learners and then provide assistance in determining a workable route—given their affinities and abilities—into the future. One side looks fearfully at young people as inputs to an economic scheme that might not be capable of achieving a minimally viable result (a la *A Nation At Risk*); the other looks optimistically at learning and seeks to maximize what students can become, create and provide the world.

Both sides say they want the best for children. Yet

only one side actually takes time to ask what children want for themselves—only one side supports getting students to confront their world honestly—in full possession of vital literacy skills and critical perspectives. And only one side has the professional training, background and experience to fully understand the complexities of human learning and how to make it happen. And this to me is the crucial difference between standardization advocates and genuinely effective educators. Who is willing to listen? Who is willing to go down the aisles of classrooms and discover what it is that kids really want for themselves, for their lives and the world? Who wants the truth, original and authentic, to emerge from a child's encounter with learning? And who, looking at the economy and education as a series of interconnected systems and policies to be controlled and managed, assumes an infallible knowledge about what every kid needs, then forces them to jump through the same ludicrous hoop no matter the human cost?

And it has to be said: the agents of standardization are not nearly as interested in the lives of poor and disenfranchised students as they claim. For the truth is this: well-to-do students and their families have access to fully "customized" learning experiences—tutors, charter schools, private schools, academic camps, test-prep centers, travel, enrichment of all kinds—whereas the poor are consigned to the dumbed-down standards of accountability and vacuous debates about whether they can obtain these low-level skills and out-dated curriculum from their local school, or, with government help, attend one further away.[61] In either case, they end up without an education aimed at furthering their unique abilities, but rather, curriculum and instruction designed to make them like everyone else who is not succeeding.

The agents of standardization have an awesome advantage in this debate: the American public does not have a high tolerance for nuanced discussions about education policy. Tell them that schools are bad, that numbers from test scores prove it, that the younger generation is about to ruin this country and a majority buy it. Ask them to consider a list of qualitative reasons why that scenario is a misconception and a massive fraud

and a majority will beg off for not enough time.

I am not suggesting that educating children is easy or un-complicated. Nor that it is currently being done well or should be radically more expensive. What I am saying is that we are doing a dreadfully dumb thing in embracing whole-heartedly the standardized testing agenda. It is unproven, and a rotten educational strategy: harmful to kids who need education most, fundamentally unfair, counter-productive to brain development and ignorant of the demands the world makes on kids as adults. It also represents a fundamental change in the goals of public education: from serving the genuine needs of learners to cater-ing to the demands of business concerns and an unjust economic arrangement. And I also submit that believing we can reduce the very complex, profound and multi-faceted process of educating a child to a single number, to see those numbers as everything we need to know about millions of professionals working to educate kids, and then to assert that all will be better if we just hand over control to bureaucrats in Washington is the height of arrogance and reveals a severely authoritarian impulse.

The high-stakes, measurable accountability advocates are in ascendancy, and with every indication that the system they put in place is not effective and not working, they demand more power and more control over how we teach children—while si-multaneously decrying the scourge of taxation that sustains pub-lic schools. They variously blame teachers, parents, the bureau-cracy and notions of public education itself. But never do they provide real solutions, real resources or new ideas on how we can restore America's faith in a dynamic public education sec-tor—one that utilizes the latest pedagogy, curriculum, brain-re-search, technology and inspired instructors. Rather, they use the cudgel of "testing data" to flog everyone in their way and spout an endless parade of statistics to confirm what everyone already knows: we need real reform, real ideas and real resources if we want to change the status-quo in America's public schools.

But even before that, and now more than ever, America needs one thing above all: an informed, dedicated, and effec-tive teacher corps. One willing to effectively combat outmoded,

counter-productive and wrong-headed educational strategies by using well-grounded research, experience and insight. One that has the courage and vision to articulate and create thoughtful, dynamic and highly relevant instructional programs that help every child in America realize their potential as full human beings. And, I believe, that must start with the set of teachers whose very job it is to engage multiple perspectives, enhance communication and build critical literacy; those whose job it is to work with language and human expression to further ennoble the cause of being human: teachers of the language arts.

Notes

1. Houston, Denver, and the state of Florida all approved programs to provide "merit pay" to teachers based on test scores of students. In Houston, the upshot of administering these bonuses resulted in a chaotic scene in which teachers complained bitterly about why, how and if the process approximated reality. Denver backed down from its plan to extend a pilot program across the district. Whereas, Florida is dealing with problems of testing errors and fairness to the extent that the legislature is revamping the original law only one year after it was implemented.

> < http://www.susanohanian.org/
>   show_atrocities.html?id=6905 >

> < http://www.questia.com/googleScholar.
>   qst;jsessionid=GrpHnymQd15mp2Bb6Vs6Tp
>   G0KW4YWk3Fw7CnWTZJkpxZX7psQR7P!-
>   646413792?docId=5009329158 >

> < http://www.uft.org/news/teacher/reality/
>   pay_performance >

2. Currently, 27 states produce school report cards, most of them based significantly on test scores.

> < http://www.nea.org/accountability/
>   reportcards.html >

3. Even the U.S. Congress is on the case of assessing the wisdom of using high-stakes testing for promotion.
< http://www.nap.edu/html/highstakes >

4. Both *Education Week* and the *New York Times* have recently raised serious questions about the quality of standardized tests given their rapid increase in number and importance.
< http://www.edweek.org/ew/
articles/2007/07/23/44toch_web.h26.html >

< http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/22/
education/22education.html?ei=5070&en=583026c
a0f9ed068&ex=1185768000&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=
1185655644-SIUKO8HwQ3c/Olangj+N1Q >

5. The *Fairtest* site is one of the few credible and independent sources of information about standardized testing.
< http://www.fairtest.org/facts/fallout.htm >

6. *Education Week* broaches the question.
< http://www.edweek.org/ew/
articles/2007/07/23/44toch_web.h26.html?levelId=
2300&rale2=KQE5d7nM/XAYPsVRXwnFWYRqII
X2bhy1+KNA5buLAWGoKt77XHI2terRpWBSgkt
LIAhcBHMqi8LK >

7. This is just one of many "wonks" who are willing to go there on trusting standardized tests more than the judgment of the professional educator.
< http://www.eduwonk.com/2006/11/
test-scores-and-grades.html >

8. The "free" market, as espoused by Republicans, is most often depicted as "the" savior for public education.
< http://www.heartland.org/
Article.cfm?artId=17727 >

9. How are young people supposed to learn and practice democracy if they do not see it and understand it from their experience in school?
< http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/
recordDetail?accno=EJ725990 >

10. *Fairtest* is considered one of the few unbiased sources of information about standardized testing.
> < http://www.fairtest.org/ >

11. An extensive review of the literature reveals the one valuable role for standardized tests.
> < http://www.fairtest.org/facts/
> formulative_assessment.html >

12. Once again, *Fairtest* has the data and the quality information.
> < http://www.fairtest.org/facts/nratests.html >

13. Criterion-referenced exams are sometimes called "standards referenced exams."
> < http://www.fairtest.org/facts/csrtests.html >

14. Anyone who can prove standardized testing's efficacy would have lifetime job prospects. The National Academy of Sciences is no small player in this debate. Can you find any evidence in peer-reviewed studies?
> < http://www.123helpme.com/
> preview.asp?id=34046 >

15. Test scores have either inched up within the margin of error, stayed the same or declined.
> < http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0MJG/
> is_1_6/ai_n15969879/pg_12 >

16. Why would test scores be going down for our best and brightest? Perhaps because we are focusing on minimum standards instead of achieving excellence.
> < http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F60
> E15F93A5A0C738FDDA10894DE404482 >

17. International comparisons have their own problems but clearly the U.S. is not exactly sprinting to the front of the pack in the standardized testing era.
> < http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/Bridging-
> Differences/2007/05/should_data_matter.html >

18. NAEP scores show little movement nationally, leading many to suspect states are lowering their standards to give the "appearance" of improvement. And Gerald Bracey has had

to work overtime to swat down claims made by Education Secretary Spellings about the success of NCLB testing.

> < http://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/commissioner/
> remarks2007/5_16_2007.asp >

> < http://64.233.169.104/
> search?q=cache:oMmAkvW5dqIJ:www.america-
> tomorrow.com/bracey/EDDRA/k0610bra.pdf+The+
> 16th+Bracey+Report+on+the+Condition+of+Public
> +Education&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us >

19. America sometimes believes that it can ignore, avoid and transcend the long history of humanity: Campbell says otherwise.

> < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Campbell's_Law >

20. Berliner and Nichols demonstrate conclusively the fatuousness of the standardized testing myth.

> < http://www.tcrecord.org/
> Content.asp?ContentId=13828 >

21. Compiling all the individual states and their errors would be a heroic undertaking.

> < http://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/21/
> business/21EXAM.html?ex=1185768000&en=4f6b
> 0c6b305ed4a2&ei=5070 >

22. Their missions may vary, but the focus of their vision does not.

> < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independent_school >

23. Captured from http://www.blakeschool.org/academics/index.html on 7-28-2007.

24. The original report makes an interesting read in light of the 1990s economic success.

> < http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html >

25. Gerald Bracey has the data to reinforce his ideas about why *A Nation At Risk* was way off base.

> < http://www.susanohanian.org/show_atrocities.
> html?id=492 >

26. There has never been any country or school system in the world that has recorded 100% proficiency on any mean-

ingful exam.
> < http://schoolsmatter.blogspot.com/2007/03/
> nclb-0-chance-of-meeting-proficiency.html >

27. There are many players calling for "tougher standards" on students and teachers, but the Aspen Institute's NCLB Commission is among the highest profile.
> < http://www.aspeninstitute.org/site/c.
> huLWJeMRKpH/b.938015/k.40DA/Commission_
> on_No_Child_Left_Behind.htm >

28. Dropouts are notoriously hard to measure, but many people believe it has reached an "epidemic" level amongst the urban poor.
> < http://abcnews.go.com/US/
> story?id=2667532&page=1 >

29. Harvard's Civil Rights Project weighs in with authority and long experience on this question.
> < http://www.edletter.org/current/ferguson.shtml >

30. We have known the shortcomings of programs like NCLB for a long time; in fact, this is an old idea wrapped in a new cover.
> < http://www.amazon.com/Many-Children-Left-Behind-Damaging/dp/0807004596 >

> < http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/0807004596/
> ref=sib_dp_pt/104-8955214-6838341 >

31. One of the premiere thinkers about literacy, Jim Cummins, knows a bad thing when he sees it.
> < http://www.dailykos.com/
> storyonly/2007/7/26/131722/394 >

32. Maintaining profit margins in today's economy means a race to the bottom.
> < http://www.susanohanian.org/
> show_commentary.php?id=473 >

33. Some business leaders "get it", and are attempting to move education into the 21st century.
> < http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/
> index.php?option=com_content&task=
> view&id=254&Itemid=120 >

34.   Applied thinking, creating new knowledge, critical thinking—we know what kids need to be successful but we are not doing it consistently at the K-12 level.

> < http://www.edweek.org/ew/
> articles/2007/01/17/19global.h26.
> html?levelId=1000& >

35.   Among many books and thinkers espousing "human development" above the need to sort and measure, Thomas Armstrong stands out.

> < http://www.tcrecord.org/
> Content.asp?ContentID=13942 >

36.   Dr. David Walsh, who lives here in Minnesota, is a leading thinker about adolescent brain development.

> < http://books.google.com/books?id=YOaR4angPQk
> C&pg=PP5&lpg=PP5&dq=david+walsh+adolescen
> t+brain+development&source=web&ots=41uUFpg
> 5LB&sig=LxHSVz5pR1Btaedu2660fz1g0M0 >

37.   Dr. Eric Jensen is also a leading thinker on brain development, particularly as it relates to educational design.

> < http://books.google.com/books?id=iftjAQAACAAJ
> &dq=Eric+Jensen,+Enriching+the+Brain >

38.   Neuroscience is quite clear, united and convincing on the needs of adolescents relative to brain development. Why don't we listen to their recommendations more often?

> < http://www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/template.
> MAXIMIZE/menuitem.459dee008f99653fb855
> 16f762108a0c/;jsessionid=GspsLDRgRdocCnd
> o2dbvFWL25bhc0yRccqabbo5NwJorOnK79GC
> d!-1298136751?javax.portlet.tpst=d5b9c0fa1a4
> 93266805516f762108a0c_ws_MX&javax.port-
> let.prp_d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_
> viewID=issue_view&javax.portlet.prp_d5b9c0-
> fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_journalmoid=307
> 9b465e4013010VgnVCM1000003d01a8c0RCRD
> &javax.portlet.begCacheTok=token&javax.portlet.
> endCacheTok=token >

39. If we want a better future, we have to equip young people now with the tools and skillfulness that will allow them to get there.

> < http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/greatergood/
>   current_issue/suttie.html >

40. Why does no one ever invoke public policy to undo the "wealth gap", the "health care gap" or the "income gap", given that we know quite well what educational impacts those gaps have on children?

> < http://www.news-record.com/apps/
>   pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051009/
>   NEWSREC0101/51009006 >

41. Once again, David Berliner has the data that proves this point clearly.

> < http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.
>   asp?ContentID=12106 >

42. Dropout numbers, when they can be obtained, are quite damning in regard to America's overall educational program.

> < http://www.csba.org/csmag/csMagStoryTemplate.
>   cfm?id=103 >

43. There are many such studies: closing the achievement gap when there are other significant gaps is not at all likely.

> < http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F10
>   B13F93E5A0C738EDDA80994DE404482 >

44. England has just recently come to its senses and moved away from such an extreme testing regime. When will the U.S. wake up?

> < http://www.susanohanian.org/
>   show_atrocities.html?id=7101 >

45. Some states are worse than others. Massachusetts was among the early offenders in high-stakes testing profligacy.

> < http://www.susanohanian.org/
>   show_atrocities.html?id=6114 >

46. If you page through the "Outrages" column at www.susanohanian.org, you will find many examples, like this, of what is being done in the name of "good for the children."

> < http://www.susanohanian.org/ >

< http://www.susanohanian.org/show_atrocities.
html?id=6952 >

47.   Our children are being manipulated by a system that clearly has little regard for their overall emotional and educational health.
< http://www.susanohanian.org/
show_atrocities.html?id=6806 >

48.   This was from two years ago. Recent trends suggest the percentages, both in terms of the number of schools and of the time on math and reading tasks, has increased since then.
< http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F30
713FF3F540C758EDDAA0894DE404482 >

49.   Thomas Toch writes for *Education Week*.
< http://www.edweek.org/ew/
articles/2007/07/23/44toch_web.h26.html >

50.   This story is being repeated virtually everywhere around the country.
< http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.
cgi?file=/c/a/2006/06/30/MNG28JN9RC1.
DTL&type=printable >

51.   *Phi Delta Kappan* has done extensive surveying in this area.
< http://www.aei.org/publications/
filter.all,pubID.25667/pub_detail.asp >

52.   One of many surveys that reveal essentially the same data. "Our" schools are okay, it's the other ones that don't measure up.
< http://newsroom.msu.edu/site/indexer/1844/
content.htm >

53.   Bill Spady, veteran educator, gives the lowdown on America's 19th century thinking about education.
< http://www.edweek.org/ew/
articles/2007/01/10/18spady.h26.
html?levelId=1000& >

54. Some states and districts lose less than 50%, which means that some must lose more. Ouch.
< http://www.csba.org/csmag/
csMagStoryTemplate.cfm?id=101 >

55. Brookings has the numbers on supply and demand for teachers.
< http://www.futureofchildren.org/information2827/
information_show.htm?doc_id=468990 >

56. This scene is being replayed over and over across the country.
< http://www.edweek.org/ew/
articles/2007/07/18/43gill.h26.
html?tmp=1579681080 >

57. Four standing ovations for Mr. Cummins at a recent meeting of literacy educators.
< http://www.dailykos.com/
storyonly/2007/7/26/131722/394 >

58. The Business Roundtable has led the charge in favor of No Child Left Behind.
< http://www.businessroundtable.org/newsroom/
document.aspx?qs=5976BF807822B0F1ADD4084
22FB51711FCF53CE >

59. The profits from publishing and testing companies have improved greatly over the last six years, in direct proportion to their coziness with Congress and the Bush Administration.
< http://www.rethinkingschools.org/special_reports/
bushplan/test192.shtml >

60. Business leaders are not shy about what they want, and why.
< http://www.edweek.org/ew/
articles/2006/10/18/08biz.h26.
html?levelId=2200& >

61. The duplicity of the Department of Education will eventually be uncovered, but, for now, we only have the voices of renegade administration officials.
< http://www.ednews.org/articles/7315/1/NCLB-
tweaking-aids-voucher-wish-list/Page1.html >

Annotated Bibliography

Berliner, David and Nichols, Sharon. *Collateral Damage: How High Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Press, 2007.

A well-researched, thorough and devastating exposition of the role of standardized testing in America's K-12 schools. Invoking "Campbell's Law", Berliner and Nichols scrupulously document the folly behind the idea that standardized testing can be used over and over as a legitimate measure of learning outcomes, school effectiveness or a teacher's instructional ability. They maintain that such "high stakes" measures have historically led to corrupt practices wherever they have been attempted and are doing so now across the United States. Excellent reviews of this book can be found at http://www.hepg.org/page/40.

Dorn, Sherman. *Accountability Frankenstein: Understanding and Taming the Monster*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2007.

Sherman Dorn, one of the country's pre-eminent education historians, looks at the accountability movement in a broader, historical perspective. He posits that the system's need for accountability has become so all-encompassing that it has become a rapacious beast whose outrageous demands must be satisfied before all others—including educational excellence or innovation. A good book for understanding the political contexts in which education policy is determined.

Pearlstein, Linda. *Tested: One American School Struggles to Make the Grade*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007.

Pearlstein, a former *Washington Post* reporter, spent a year at an elementary school in Silver Spring, Maryland, documenting the efforts of students and staff to "make the grade" in terms of No Child Left Behind. Her account describes well the impact that standardized testing has on both the human beings and the programs of our nation's schools. This is an excellent qualitative look inside the reality of NCLB at a typical school. A longer review of the book may be found at http://www.dailykos.com/story/2007/7/23/61531/6495.

Wood, George and Meier, Deborah. *Many Children Left Behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is Damaging Our Schools and Children*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007.

A short book of essays with a foreward by Linda Darling-Hammond, including work of Meier, Wood and the masterful Alfie Kohn, this book reveals once again the perfidy and twisted motives that seem to lie behind federal education policy in the age of George Bush. These authors are well-known for practicing a "whole child" approach to education, and share no love for the idea that more testing will lead to better schools or outcomes for children.

Ohanian, Susan and Emery, Kathy. *Why Is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools?* Boston: Heinemann Publishers, 2004.

Susan Ohanian and co-author Kathy Emery peer inside the box of corporate America to ascertain the hidden motives behind wanting to disparage public education

through over reliance on standardized testing. Both authors have long been advocates for non-standard students and the educational practices that allow for individual excellence to emerge across a broad spectrum of unique individuals. Radical but well-grounded in reality, this is a book that should give every educator pause in regard to the current rhetoric around accountability, charter schools and the quest to move toward a voucher system.

I would also like to recommend two very important articles that have come out over the last couple years. The first, again by David Berliner, is *Our Impoverished View of Education Reform* (Published through Teacher's College Review, it is available online at http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=12106). What makes this article so important is the clear linkage Berliner is able to establish between results on standardized testing and a child's corresponding level of affluence. The correlation is unmistakable: the higher the level of income, the higher a student's score on standardized tests. No amount of massaging statistics or of faulting public education can undo this key fact: test scores are part and parcel of a society which has generated significant disparities in wealth. Fighting the "achievement gap" while simultaneously doing nothing to fight the "income gap", the "health care gap", the "incarceration gap" is simply a shell game in which schools are made scapegoats, politicians are elected and nothing fundamental changes in America's social contract.

Second, an article published by Richard Rothstein, Tamara Wilder and Rebecca Jacobsen, entitled *Proficiency for All: An Oxymoron* (also published by Teacher's College Review and available at http://www.epi.org/webfeatures/viewpoints/rothstein_20061114.pdf), goes a long way to clarifying terms, numbers and hype surrounding student scoring on the oft-cited National Assessment

of Education Progress (NAEP) exams. In short, Rothstein, et al, scrupulously recount debates around the "cut scores" of the NAEP exams and show how they are set unrealistically high and have been repeatedly criticized by the government's own agencies, including the Government Accountability Office and the National Academy of Sciences. Despite repeated findings that NAEP results are "flawed" by the government's own researchers, the National Assessment Governing Board continues to use the exam and promulgate their results which the media then swallow without a second thought. This article is essential reading for those who need ammunition, facts and research to refute the "crisis" type language so commonly used when NAEP results are announced every fall.

Devising the Appropriate Program of Studies for the 21st-Century English Major:
The Consumer as Designer

Martin Warren

In the fall semester of 2001, a newly required class for undergraduate English majors was introduced at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. The class was called Issues in English Studies. As a member of the UST English department, I was invited to teach a section of this class. Teaching **English 380: Issues in English** was one of the best educational experiences of my life as teacher and learner. The class provided me with the opportunity to address the practice of the discipline of English at the beginning of the 21st century. What better way to do this, I thought, than to have the students not only investigate the present state of the discipline, but also construct an appropriate program of study for an English major in this age of pluralism and diversity.

Constructing and leading the class caused me to reevaluate my understanding of English as a discipline and as a profession. Ultimately for me, the most important element was learning how UST's English majors defined English as a discipline. This definition took concrete form in the main project for the semester. Class members had to study the structure of the English major at UST and UST's eight peer institutions and then **each** student was to construct an appropriate program of studies for an undergraduate English major. This program of studies was to be described in two forms: a concept map and an accompanying narrative of approximately 10 pages in length. At the semester's

end there was to be a symposium in which each student presented her or his appropriate program of studies for the 21st-century English major. In the class there were 18 students: 11 were seniors, 6 juniors, and 1 sophomore. One student was not an English major but was very interested in the topic of English Studies. Of the remaining 17 students, 7 were majoring in English with a Teacher Education emphasis, 5 were majoring in English with a Writing emphasis, and 5 were traditional English majors.

In explaining the context, structure, and results of the project, I would like to make clear that this is done at the behest of and with the permission of the students of the English 380 class. Their hope here is to prompt debate about the shape and nature of future, potential courses, and the structure of programs of English studies in general.

In the semester's first class session, we examined the course description for English 380 as found in the undergraduate catalog:

> This course focuses on ideas and practices central to advanced work in the field of language and literature. In addition to refining students' facility with critical concepts and scholarly methodology, this course will explore a number of key questions for current work in the discipline: How do we define such concepts as literacy, literature, and interpretation? How do we understand the relationship between reader, writer, and text? How do such factors as gender, culture, and history affect our understanding of literature and of ourselves as writers and readers?

Our exploration of that description led us to define English 380 as an introduction to the history, theory and practice of the English profession. From there we agreed that as a profession, English is dedicated to the analysis and discussion of texts. Having arrived at that point the class uncovered a number of important questions to ask, such as what does it mean to major in English? What are "we" English teachers teaching, and what can be done with what we teach? Can a living be made from books? What are the economics of this profession? What makes English Studies and Cultural Studies distinct from each other?

Where, in short, did English come from, and where is it going? These questions formed the context not only for the semester but for the students' main project.

As we constructed the list of questions to address during the semester, one student asked: Why were we using the label *English Studies* in the title of the class? My explanation of the term was that it (1) points to an extremely large subject matter (*English*, which is much more than the traditional study of literature) while (2) giving equal emphasis to the educational process of understanding it.[1] Using the distinction made by Rob Pope in *The English Studies Book*, I suggested that another way of describing what is meant by English Studies is to say that throughout the semester we would focus on English as something we *do* (*know-how*, skills, techniques, strategies, interaction) as much as on what English *is* (*know-what*, knowledges, a body of set texts, a hierarchy of textual and social relations). In other words, we would be addressing what we considered to be the essentials of the "know-how" and "know-what."

The first unit in the semester was *Introduction to English Studies*, in which we looked at what "English" has been, is at present, and what it may be. Two important questions we worked with were: Which "Englishes" are we talking about? And how have they been studied? Beginning with the development of English as an educational discipline in the 19th century, we mapped out how such subjects as rhetoric, history, and classics have affected the evolution of our discipline. In particular, we sketched out the significant shift from the discipline's origins as literary *appreciation* to literary *criticism* and from thence to the late 20th-century emphasis on literary and cultural *theory*. Hence we looked at English under such configurations as literary, composition, communication and media studies. As the first unit came to a close, the students launched off into the main project, i.e., their considered review of current courses and the program for UST's English major. The next unit, Textual Activities and Learning Strategies, brought students to consider the significance of cultural criticism and pluralistic approaches to learning as they laid the foundations for their project.

The main project was designed as an inquiry-based learning exercise in the belief that such an approach would (a) involve the use of pluralistic approaches to learning, and (b) help the students develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of the English profession, and the social and political issues that surround the field of English.

The goals and objectives of the project were outlined as follows:

1. The problem students were to investigate centered on creating the kind of program that would prepare an English major for a successful career in the English profession.

2. As a basic structure for the final product, students had to use semantic networking, otherwise known as a concept map, which is the process of identifying important concepts, arranging those concepts spatially, identifying relationships among those concepts, and labeling the nature of the semantic relationships among those concepts.

I chose semantic networking because knowledge is organized semantically in memory, that is, according to the meaning that defines the relationships among ideas. When learners construct semantic networks for representing their understanding in a domain, they reconceptualize the content domain by constantly using new propositions to elaborate and refine the concepts that they already know. This leads to

- the reorganization of knowledge.
- explicit description of concepts and their interrelationships.
- deep processing of knowledge which promotes the ability to apply knowledge in new situations.
- relating new concepts to existing concepts and ideas
- spatial learning through spatial representation of concepts in an area of study.
- understanding the structural foundations of the content domain.

- problem solving and procedural knowledge acquisition.
- understanding the differences between the experts' structural knowledge and that of novices.

In other words, in using a semantic network to design a program for English majors, I hoped students would see why we study what we study, how we study, and what issues are central in the English profession. The class used Inspiration software to create the semantic network of their ideal program for an English major.

The first step for the students was to make a plan for their individual project and set the perspective for analyzing the domain of English. Thus students had to identify and consider such important concepts as literary theory, writing theory, historical foundations of English as a discipline and profession, cultural theory, human diversity, the historical distribution requirement, elective courses, and the computer technology requirement.

Next students had to create, define, and elaborate nodes. Semantic networks and concept maps consist of nodes representing concepts and labeled lines representing relationships among them.

In step 3, students constructed links and linked concepts in an attempt to create a workable and valuable program of studies for an English major. Once the concept map was completed, students had to reflect on the project by writing a narrative in which they explained the philosophy and reasoning behind the character of the program of studies they created. Some students went so far as to devise course descriptions for the classes they envisaged as part of their ideal program. At this point, a couple of examples are appropriate, allowing the reader to see how this project helped students step out of the traditional model of English and consider how the discipline needs to develop.

Danny Cleary created the following two concept maps. The first lays out the general framework for the major. Students would be offered three emphases in terms of English Studies. They could approach it through a literature track, writing track, or cultural studies track as you can see in the following semantic framework:

The English Studies Major	Cornerstones	Core Curriculum	Capstone
Literature	Introduction to Genres (Required)	20 Credits in Literature	Advanced Literature Elective
Writing	Introduction to Writing (Required)	8 Credits in Writing	Advanced Academic Writing
Cultural Studies	Introduction to History (Required)	8 Credits in Cultural Studies Plus Service Project	Interdisciplinary Senior Project

More specific details of the three emphases are described in the second map:

Dan's Major in English Studies
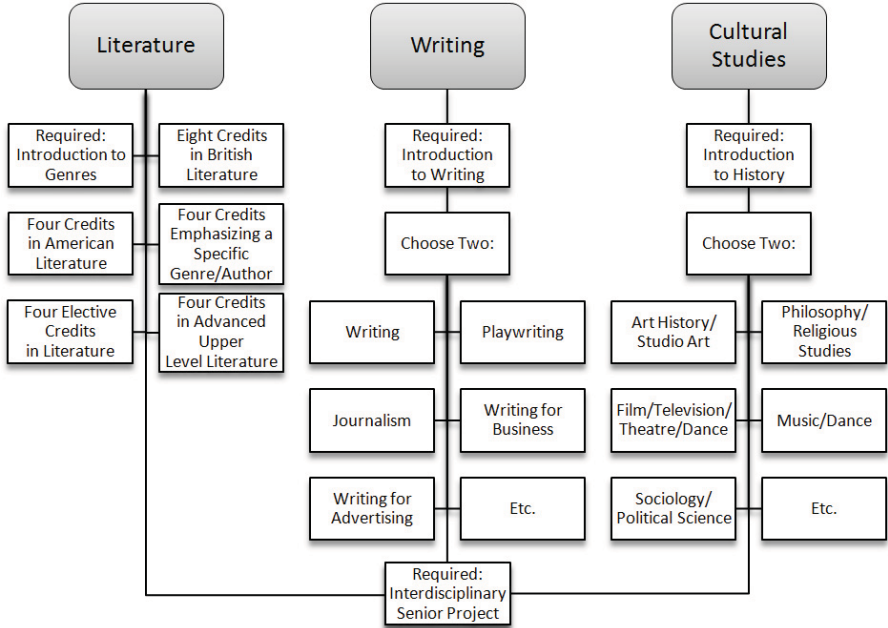
Dawn Sommers, in the narrative that accompanies her description of an appropriate program of study for an English major, offers the student the opportunity to choose one of four concentrations: literature, writing, multicultural/world literature,

or American cultural studies concentration. This is how she describes the multicultural concentration:

> The Multicultural/World Literature concentration is designed to offer interested students the opportunity to engage with literature representative of a diverse selection of cultures and geographic regions. Many of these courses will overlap with the American Cultural Studies concentration and therefore students will be required to divide the distribution of their required courses between those that appeal for issues of culture (with only one being in American culture) and those dealing with geographic location outside of America. This will ensure that students receive the appropriate knowledge of cultures and literary traditions outside of America, the fundamental difference between this concentration and that of American Cultural Studies. Some courses included in this concentration include *African Literature, Caribbean Literature, European Literature, Irish Literature, South Asian Literature, Border Literature, Studies In World Literature, Literature and Ethnicity, Literature of Classes, Literature and Race, Literature and Education, etc.*

Dawn then goes on to describe the American cultural studies concentration in this way:

> The American Cultural Studies concentration is designed to appeal to students who wish to 'acquire a critical intellectual framework for thinking and acting in a diverse and increasingly fragmented society, developing a political, economic, artistic and spiritual consciousness that is informed by and expressed through popular culture,'[2] with a special emphasis on how such elements are informed through various "texts" (including literature, poetry, film, drama, media, advertisements, music etc). Courses students may choose from to fulfill their four course concentration requirement include *History of Cultural Theory, Literature of High and Low Culture, African-American Literature, Native American Literature, Literature and Gender, Great Books of the American Tradition, Literature of Oprah's Book Club Selections, Literature and Class, Topics In The Study of Culture, Novel of Labor In The United States, Literature of The Harlem Renaissance, Literature and*

War, Contemporary American Literature, Literature and Music: Jazz and Blues In the African-American Experience, The Literature of Media and Advertising, Literature of American Dramatists, Race, Class and Gender in Contemporary American Novels, etc.

To summarize the content of each student's project is impossible to do here. As a class, however, we did spend time in the end of semester symposium examining each project and discovered threads common to most of the programs designed:

1. **Required Freshman English seminar(s)** that will introduce students to literature, writing, history, ethical issues, and rhetoric. This seminar would involve other disciplines in the humanities.
2. **Required literary theory class.**
3. **Required rhetoric/public speaking/communication class.**
4. **Required class which teaches critical approaches to texts in the non-print media**, such as television, film, radio, and the internet as popular culture forms and forums.
5. Strongly recommend **a class in the history of the English language and linguistics**.
6. More historical and cultural context for literature or perhaps a class specifically designed to teach history for English majors from a literary perspective.
7. Along with the three present tracks of literature, writing, and teacher education in the UST English program, add one new emphasis: **technical writing**.
8. **Required career-oriented course**. A number of students suggested a class geared toward the value of English in terms of career. As just one example of this kind of class, I offer Becca Krupnick's description of English 350: "**… a required course for all English majors … [that] focuses on the variety of professions available for English majors. Students … must contact professionals in these fields to interview, and produce writing samples catered to those fields.… The course**

will help prepare them for internships and jobs in their chosen field."

9. **Required English lab in which students learn several software programs that are commonly used in English professions such as Microsoft Publisher**. Students would be required to complete several computer-based projects in this class. These projects could be connected to service learning to show the connection between English and the community.

10. Required Senior Research Seminar. As an example of this I offer the description given by Dawn Sommers: "**Under the advisement of an English faculty member/members the student will produce a substantial critical research essay on a specific author(s), text(s), genre(s), theory(s), study(s) etc. The student will be required to meet with his/her faculty advisor at least 6 times throughout the semester and turn in their final product along with self-evaluation forms no later than the last day of final exams. The course is designed to encourage students to work as an effective scholar by applying the tools and skills they have learned throughout their English courses.**"

11. Include **religious traditions in literature**.

12. The class was split on students following a clearly delineated path which builds on following specific modules as they progress from freshman to senior. Whichever camp students found themselves in, there was a stated desire for some kind of building blocks to be in place.

Thanks must go to the students of English 380: Mari Bauer, Shay Boero, Brigit Burk, Joe Casey, Danny Cleary, Megan Fee, Ali Gray, Courtney Hanneman, Jeff Hoganson, Matthew Kolstad, Becca Krupnick, Amy McFerran, Kristen McNamara, Andrea Nelson, Drew Smith, Dawn Sommers, Brianne Taylor, and Kara Zeilinger.

As the UST English department continues its discussion of the English core in 2007, the work of those students who participated in English 380 is proving of great value as we grapple with newer ways of understanding the discipline of English.

Notes

1.   The explanation of the term "English studies" is taken from Rob Pope's *The English Studies Book*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

2.   This particular description of the concentration was taken from UST's description of the American Cultural Studies minor informational booklet.

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Opening Doors with a Degree in English

John Banschbach

A few years ago, a student came to my office with a question about careers. She had been a student in one of my general education courses, and was intelligent and interested in literature. She was deciding on a major and wanted to know, "What doors would a degree in English open for me?" But I did not have a ready, responsible answer, one that would give her both a sense of specific career possibilities and a clear sense of how to achieve them. Fortunately, she was interested in teaching English at the post-secondary level, and I, with a sense of relief, sent her to the department's director of graduate studies.

Her question remains an important one. It is not uncommon for English departments to have webpages with titles like "What can I do with a degree in English?" There will be a list of dozens of occupations, including not only the obvious ones like "author," "teacher," and "editor," but also less obvious ones like "lobbyist" and "special events coordinator" (the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, http://www.uncwil.edu/stuaff/career/Majors), or "college development specialist" and "energy communications specialist" (the University of Texas at Austin, http://www.utexas.edu/student/careercenter/careers/english.pdf). And often there will be a discussion of English as a "pre-professional major": for example, "A major in English can be good preparation for continued graduate or professional

training in areas such as English, law, political science/government, public administration, psychology, counseling, communications, and religious studies (i.e., seminary)" (the University of Kentucky, http://career.utk.edu/students/majors.asp).

These three sites alone list over 150 occupations and professions that a degree in English is preparation for. The implication is that the skills that English majors develop in reading, writing, analysis, and research are so broadly applicable that English majors are qualified to do any kind of work where these skills are important. So the student confronts an almost bewildering array of possible careers, and both the student and prospective employers have difficulty seeing the connection between a degree in English and a career as an "insurance agent" or as a "policy and procedures analyst."

A recent study of U.S. Department of Education surveys provides some simplification and some guidance for students majoring in English and for those who advise them. David Laurence, editor of *ADE Bulletin*, reports on the results of the 2003 National Survey of College Graduates. About four percent of the 100,000 graduates surveyed were English majors; of these, three-fourths were employed, with only three percent unable to find employment. The variety of the occupations that the graduates reported being employed in partly validates the "What can I do with a degree in English" websites. There are about sixty job categories reported, including "engineers and scientists," "farmers," "labor relations specialists," and "architects." But fully fifty percent of the jobs are in four areas: education, communications ("artists, broadcasters, editors, entertainers, public relations"), marketing and sales, and law. And, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, the job outlook in all of these areas for the next several years is favorable (http://www.bls.gov/oco).

Unfortunately, the clarity that the data in the preceding paragraph provides about likely careers for English majors is muddled by reports about the economy in the next few decades. Former Secretary of Education Richard Riley has said that many of the employment opportunities that will be in the "top 10 jobs" in the near future do not yet exist (cited in Augustine). And the

skills in demand will change also. Studies of the twenty-first century workforce argue for the "growing importance of cognitive skills in the workplace," that jobs will increasingly entail "nonroutine problem-solving and complex communication tasks," will require "nonroutine skills, such as those requiring flexibility, creativity, problem solving, and complex communications," and will demand "the capacity for abstraction to make sense of patterns and symbols, the ability to view problems in the context of complex systems" (Karoly 109-111).

Another study, *Tough Times or Tough Choices*, is direr and more direct. In the near future, jobs in the United States that are routine, even complex routine jobs like the pricing of airline seats or the designing of sails for sailboats, will either be done by machine or by highly educated people in less developed countries (20-21). The work in this country that will pay well— the only work that will do so—will be creative, and will require a different kind of ordinary education: "Strong skills in English, mathematics, technology, and science, as well as literature, history, and the arts will be essential for many; beyond this, candidates will have to be comfortable with ideas and abstractions, good at both analysis and synthesis, creative and innovative, self-disciplined and well organized, able to learn very quickly and work well as a member of a team and have the flexibility to adapt quickly to frequent changes in the labor market" (9).

As Richard Riley implies, universities somehow need to prepare students for jobs that do not yet exist, and *Tough Times or Tough Choices* is finally an argument for a new model of the country's educational system. But I am struck by the appropriateness of the English major for the world of work that these studies foresee. Students who major in English learn, through the study of literature, not only to understand and express complex ideas, but to read and write rhetorically, understanding the interaction of ideas and purpose and audience. When students write literary research papers—a very specialized kind of writing—they are, in the process, developing the more general abilities of thinking critically and creatively and of solving nonroutine problems. They must accurately interpret and evaluate the arguments of

others on the literary work that is their topic. And the essence of such writing is creative synthesis, seeing connections among elements of the literary work that no one else has seen.

Students who major in English have much to offer. We need to help students who major in our discipline understand what they have to offer now and the careers in which their abilities will most easily be recognized. But, if these and other studies are at all correct, we also need to help them understand the nature of the economy they will spend their adult years in, and what they have to offer then, so that they are ready to open other doors when they finally appear.

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Writing Workshop for K-6 Success: Foundations for a Literate Democracy

Susan Perala-Dewey

Writing, not unlike the craft of architectural design, takes years to develop and refine. Developing the craft of writing takes on-going practice, expert modeling, guidance, patience, feedback and encouragement. Not until I returned to a college graduate program did I realize this truth … but could I believe it?

Have you ever been awed by a teaching method you've read about, wanting only to *see* "proof" that it really works? A few years ago, as a new college writing teacher, I wanted desperately to see a successful writing workshop, where writers learn and practice the craft of writing. While progressive education theory and pedagogy are widely published and available to educators, we are seldom provided opportunities to observe them in practice. In the fall of 2004, however, I was lucky enough to stumble into just such an experience. Pat Isbell, my son's 4th grade teacher in Duluth, Minnesota, provided a model for writing workshop I could learn from and believe in, and even though she teaches 3rd and 4th graders while I teach different aged adult learners, she became for me "a teacher's teacher" (Graves *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*). Today, my enthusiasm and belief in Isbell's approach to teaching writing have inspired me to share her story with others in hopes that K-12 educators around the state will take time to reflect on their own writing pedagogy and curriculum. I believe using a workshop approach

to teach writing provides us possibility to transform not only literacy education, but the state of our democracy. In this essay I weave a story inspired by my volunteer experience in Isbell's writing workshop into commentary on why we, as educators across all developmental stages of writing, might look to Isbell in shaping our own classroom practices.

Teaching as a reflective practice is no new or earth-shattering revelation. Good teachers think about and assess their own methods and interactions with students daily and work to shape their practices year after year to best suit student learning and achievement. But what about writing? Were you provided specific instruction and effective modeling for how to teach your students to write? In what ways has this training served you and your students? According to Carl Nagin's *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*, most teachers receive little or no instruction on teaching writing. In fact, literacy training in most elementary certification programs focuses solely on reading methods, with little or no exposure to writing pedagogy (17).[1] This is cause for concern since writing has been identified as a primary way for students to learn and demonstrate their learning in all disciplines. Fortunately, research shows that teachers who are provided on-going support and enrichment opportunities to learn about effective writing practices can, and do, create environments and communities of practice that make "a difference in both the writing and the writing lives of [their] students" (Ray 107). Pat Isbell is one of these teachers. Her journey of professional development is one of success for her students and inspiration for fellow teachers.

Evolution of Writing Workshop

Writing workshop, as a natural step to putting "process theory" into practice, has been discussed and written about now for well over a quarter of a century.[2] Still, even in progressive education communities across the country, it is rare to find the workshop method encouraged and practiced successfully. My recent graduate training at the University of Minnesota Duluth exposed me to workshop literature, such as Donald Murray's

A Writer Teaches Writing, but not to writing classrooms employing the holistic, student-centered approach Murray describes. As a fairly new college composition instructor, my major goal has been to develop a workshop environment where students come prepared to talk about and respond to each other's texts. Getting students to recognize themselves as writers, to take pride in what they write, and to realize the importance of their own voice in the world are "ideals" I am struggling to put to work in my classroom. Yet this kind of self-perception is just plain unfamiliar for most college students, pointing to the fact that such process-oriented practices are missing at the K-12 level. As one student commented recently: "You talk to us and treat us like we're all writers, but we're not. We just have to take the course to graduate." So, my desire to highlight Isbell's success is driven by my dream not only for a more literate and active electorate, but also for the more practical and immediate outcome of seeing students arrive in my college classroom ready to engage one another as thoughtful, reflective writers.

"The word *story* derives from the Greek *eidenai*, meaning 'to know'" (Atwell 3). *Ms. Iona's Gift* was written to acknowledge and celebrate Isbell's methods of teaching writing and articulates what I came to know and understand about writing workshop by seeing it "really work" for her students over the school year. The story was primarily written to help the children of Isbell's classroom realize the importance of their writing workshop and its lasting impact on their lives. As Donald Graves states in *A Fresh Look at Writing*, "if students had one good teacher of writing in their entire career … they could be successful writers" (14). I believed Isbell was that teacher and wanted her students to believe it, too. With the help of Linda Hagstrom, a student teacher at the time who now uses writing workshop in her own classroom, and Deanne Barta, a retired Kindergarten teacher, the children illustrated the text for *Ms. Iona's Gift*. We kept the book a surprise until the last week of school when we presented it to Isbell at a party in her honor. Isbell's favorite color is purple; her fictional name "Iona" means *purple jewel*. The story is a vision for how we teach writing and how the

responsive setting we create can profoundly impact our world.

Ms. Iona's Gift

Once upon a time, in a land of cold weather, many lakes, and sturdy, smart, and ingenious people, existed a class of 3rd and 4th grade students. These were not just ordinary students. You see their teacher, one of the many sturdy, smart, and ingenious people of the land, bestowed special powers upon her students each and every day. Their teacher, Ms. Iona, was a scholar in how to turn ordinary school children into extraordinary thinkers, incredible storytellers, and masters of imagination. Ms. Iona also had the good fortune of teaching in a warm and welcoming school that valued new ideas and approaches to teaching and learning.

This story began one Tuesday during my volunteer time in Isbell's classroom at Chester Park Lab School in Duluth, Minnesota. On this particular day late in the school year, I had no students to confer with during writing workshop. Recalling the importance of writing with students (Murray; Spandel; Graves)[3], I asked one of the children for some notebook paper. I thought for a few minutes and began to write. Looking up, I noticed several students watching me, while others moved to the conference table and quietly asked what I was writing. I said it was a story about writing workshop. They asked, "Our writing workshop?"

I said "Yes, this writing workshop." They asked me to read it to them and wondered who would be in it and what would happen. I told them I needed time to write in order to 'find out' what would happen, illustrating unknowingly the sought-after element of surprise, where a writer cannot tell what might show up on the page once they begin writing (Murray *A Writer Teaches Writing* 3; 107).

Her heart set on a career in acting, Isbell's first degree and career was in theater. She loved working with children in stage productions and decided on teaching for a second career. Isbell taught 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades in Duluth for a few years before entering graduate school in 2002. Teaching writing was a frustration for Isbell from early on. She does not recall getting instruction in her teacher training on *how* to teach writing, but rather *what* curriculum to expect. Isbell even admits she avoided spending classroom time on lessons in writing due to the lack of results she saw in student work. Most of her writing assignments were responses to textbook readings. Feeling it was her obligation, she would spend hours correcting these student papers for punctuation, spelling, usage, and grammar. After returning one too many papers marked in purple and overhearing a child complain, "Oh no, my paper's really bad … it's all purple!" she realized her focus for graduate school: teaching writing![4]

Isbell's degree program required an action plan for teaching writing in her classroom; her goal was to implement a workshop environment using the 6+1 traits of writing.[5] When time came to put the plan into action, the road was a little rocky, but it worked. Despite not having models to observe, Isbell embraced putting her plan to work because "she had nowhere to go, but up." Two of the major scholars she studied were Graves and Murray—the old-timers on the workshop method. For putting the workshop into practice, she relied on Calkin's *The Art of Teaching Writing*, Culham's *6+1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide*, and Nagin's *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*.

Setting the Stage

Each day in Ms. Iona's class children were given time to think, to write, to express anything at all that was happening in their heads and in their hearts. Each day they were given time away from memorizing facts and numbers, away from handwriting exercises and social studies tests, away from textbook reading and vocabulary lists. This special time was called "writing workshop". And just as Santa in his North Pole Workshop made special, magical gifts for children of the world, Ms. Iona made magic happen in the minds of her students and left them with gifts to last a lifetime.

Early in the school year I visited Isbell's class during *morning meeting* and at my son Jeffrey's request brought Charlie, our young, liver and white Springer-spaniel. Arriving in the classroom, I was surprised to find students sitting in a cozy circle around Isbell, who sat in her rocker, book in hand. The setting reminded me of kindergarten and first grade classrooms where teachers make an extra effort to provide a nurturing classroom environment. As Vicki Spandel notes in *The 9 Rights of Every Writer*, "Many of the conditions that nourish writing success are observable. They are things you can see, hear, and feel when you visit a classroom, the kinds of things that make a writer feel

immediately at home" (41). Every child indeed felt at home and participated in *morning meeting*, either to read the poem-of-the-day, read the riddle or joke-of-the-day, or respond to Isbell's 20-questions-mystery. The children waited their turn to talk, but also intently listened as others spoke. Since Jeffrey had a special friend on this particular day, each child asked something about Charlie. The questions were serious, funny, interesting, and sincere. *Morning meeting*, while not a writing activity, helped develop trust and personal engagement, where every child knew early on their voice would be heard and their opinion valued. Isbell, the actress, was setting the stage for successful writing.

I left that day wondering why, as educators at any academic level, we presume more orderly and distant classroom environments are needed as children mature and as greater academic expectations are set. Todd DeStigter makes this observation in *Reflections of a Citizen Teacher: Literacy, Democracy, and the Forgotten Students of Addison High* when he follows Rosa, a second language learner through a semester of high school courses. Unfortunately, Rosa only experiences a trusting, personally engaging atmosphere in her ESL class, while her other classes fail to provide the sense of place that invites participation and response (101). The transition to a discussion-oriented, student-centered classroom is not an easy one to make. It feels so different from most traditional classrooms for both students and teachers, especially in a college classroom. Today I often question whether the relaxed and personal atmosphere I strive to create is justified. However, one business writing student this spring, initially skeptical of my nurturing teaching style, put my fear to rest: "in the middle of the semester … I realized you really cared about my learning … When I finally came to this realization, my composition course with you became much better … once I left my ego at the door." Seeing Isbell's students allowed me to gain a greater level of trust and confidence in my own teaching practice.

Letting Go

At the beginning of the school year, Ms. Iona gave each student their own composition journal to use during writing workshop. Writing in these heavy, thick writing notebooks made each child feel proud and important, especially as the year progressed and they could see many pages filled with their own words and ideas.

One part of writing workshop many of the children loved was their freedom to write about anything at all. Being already nine and ten-years-old and in school all day, they seldom had time to play make-believe anymore, a time they recall from their earlier childhood where anything was possible. Every day Ms. Iona encouraged the children to stretch their minds and imaginations to places and people and ideas they never knew existed. By way of writing, a child could become someone they always wanted to be, confront an animal, alien, or place they feared, or act out a story as it unfolded in their mind's eye. Each day during writing workshop these students worked hard as young writers. They started new writing projects, discussed their writing and ideas with one another, read their writing aloud to others, revised their writing, edited and typed their writing, and finally, made elaborate illustrations and covers for their published work.

Calkins says, "In the workshop children write about what is alive and vital and real for them—and other writers in the room listen and extend and guide, laugh and cry and marvel" (*The Art of Teaching Writing* 19). Isbell encouraged the children to generate ideas and decide for themselves what to write and how best to represent those ideas. One student wrote an on-going series of adventure stories about a cat with super powers; another wrote multiple non-fiction descriptions of dinosaurs; several students worked on chapter books. One boy couldn't come up with anything to write about early in the year, struggling to get any words down in his writer's notebook. Then Isbell found out he loved mechanics and farm machinery, especially his Grandpa's plow. The next week she asked him to write about the machines. Delighted to write about something he loved so much, he went on to write and illustrate several pieces about farm machines.[6]

An incredible amount of writing took place in Isbell's class—an hour a day, four days out of five, was dedicated to writing. By the year's end, many children had filled two thick composition notebooks with original writing. Vicki Spandel emphasizes the positive correlation between how much writing students do and their ability to establish and take control of their own writing process (40). Ray discusses the need for students to develop a "stamina" for the time writing takes and to understand writing workshop as "time" to work as a writer, rather than a "task." She explains, "while there is much variation in how writers engage in the different aspects of the writing process, the one non-negotiable seems to be time" ("Why Cauley Writes Well …" 102).

Children were also encouraged to "personalize" their writing process, "because process at its best … is different for every person" (Spandel 40). Ray emphasizes the importance of valuing "talk" as part of the writing process: "students talk before they write, while they're writing, and after they write" (102). She contends that talk is support for writing and encourages children to talk about their interests and passions, as well as the writing itself ("Why Cauley Writes Well …" 102). Individual differences were recognized and respected in Isbell's writing workshop. While many of her students worked in groups and talked through much of their writing process, several worked quietly alone and chose not to share their writing in conference until they felt it was close to complete. Some students mastered one type of writing, perhaps poetry, and felt comfortable remaining in that genre, while others stuck with one or two topics throughout the year.

Isbell said ideally she would have writing workshop consist of a 15 minute mini-lesson[7] with the remaining time devoted to writing and conferring. The mini-lesson might be an introduction to one of the 6 writing traits (idea generation, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions), or a lesson on some aspect of the writing process. Currently, Isbell does not have mini-lessons consistently scheduled, but incorporates them when appropriate. I recall getting in on the tail end

of one mini-lesson for creating effective leads. She had the children listen—really listen—to how Kate DiCamillo opens her story *The Tale of Despereaux*. Isbell asks the class why this is a good lead, and the children have good answers: "it makes you want to find out what happens next" and "it puts you right into the story." That day during workshop Isbell had students revise to improve the lead in one of their writing pieces.

"Reading their World"[8]

Ms. Iona's writing workshop gave students time and freedom to pretend they were in a magical land of make-believe once again or to reflect on their own lives. They could pretend to be princesses and fairies, kings and knights, adventurers and world travelers. Ms. Iona had the children think about using words as tools, such as when they had to write descriptive pieces. Sometimes writing was hard work and required a lot of thought. The students had to learn to put their words to work in describing a picture or place or feeling they wanted their reader to experience. Throughout the year, they wrote accounts of family vacations, stories of aliens and superheroes, skits of summer camp, poems of the season, and lively, imaginative tales.

One part of Ms. Iona's writing workshop the children really liked was the conference. This was a time when each writer was able to share an idea or a piece of writing with a listener. The listener could be another classmate, Ms. Iona, a student teacher, a parent, or a helper visiting the class. When a child read their writing aloud and listened to how powerful their own voice could be, they could hardly wait to revise or publish their work, or sometimes to start something new. When they read, they watched eagerly for the reaction of their listener. Then they listened carefully to what the listener had to say. Through Ms. Iona's modeling, the children learned to respond to each other in questions, compliments, and suggestions. Everyday the students looked forward to this time and grew enthused and excited about their own writing and the writing of their friends and classmates.

Attending Isbell's writing workshop for the first time, and uncertain about what she was looking for from her listeners,

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq
Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz

$1 \rightarrow 5 = 4$
$2 \rightarrow 6 = 4$
$3 \rightarrow 25 = 10$

NAME _____
Total _____
Grade _____
File _____
ASD _____
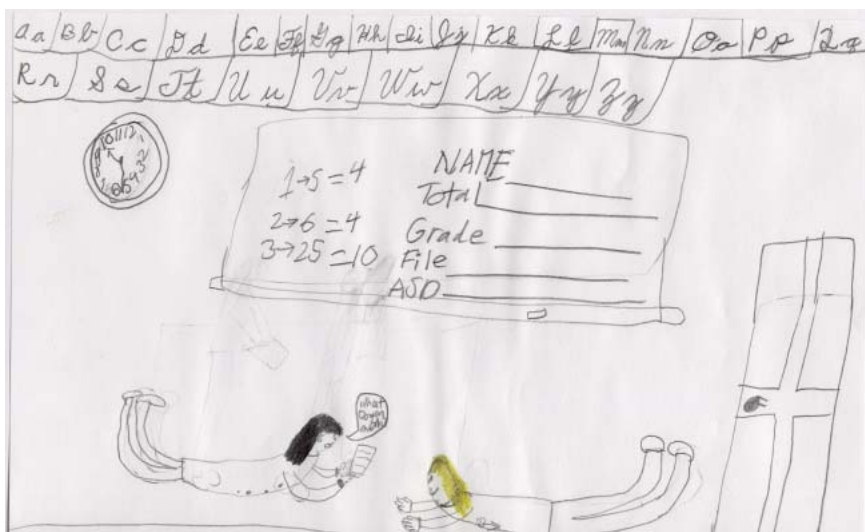
I was delighted to find *response*—compliments, questions, comments, and suggestions—her primary concern. Students were encouraged to come to conference with questions and new ideas for their listeners. After a few weeks in the classroom, my mom soon joined me every Tuesday morning. At first apprehensive, she looked for errors, pointing out misspelled words or where punctuation was needed, but soon fell into the rhythm of listening and enjoying the unique narratives, stories, and poems the children shared. As I asked the children questions about their own lives, she too asked questions and shared personal life stories. Before long, we both knew many personal details of each child's life: whose parents were divorced, what pets they had, how many siblings they had, what they liked to eat, and their favorite color—what Donald Graves describes as allowing children to teach us about themselves, their world, and their needs (*A Fresh Look at Writing*).

DeStigter contends these kinds of personal connections allow students to feel their growth and learning are valued and important to their classroom and school, "a space of understanding and empathy where the teacher listened carefully and offered words of encouragement, a space where students shared their lives" (97). According to Dewey, these are fundamental

building blocks of democracy, where learners are recognized and valued as individuals (*Experience and Education* 33). Getting to know each student on an individual level is a challenge in my college classroom. We meet only 50 minutes three times a week for a semester. I try to learn one or two details about each student over the first few weeks of class and have students work in small groups, sitting in on different groups each day. By the end of the semester, I really do know each student well, and they notice: "Your attention to detail and concern for everyone on an individual level are what helped." But more importantly, my students get to know one another and are comfortable sharing their work: "One of the best things about this class is that we got to workshop with our classmates and see what they had written, or even ask for some help. I really enjoyed being able to learn from each other because we all have something different to offer." In a successful workshop environment, as in a working democracy, participants learn from one another and show genuine interest in and concern for each others' lives.

      Perhaps the greatest concern for teachers trying to create a workshop atmosphere is how to make time to confer with and respond to all students and their writing. For this particular school year (2004-05), Isbell admits she was lucky to have plenty of parental support and volunteers to help with conferences. But how can a teacher run a writing workshop alone and still be able to confer with individual students? Shelton and Fu explain conferring needn't be planned or formal. In fact, a student conference might only take a minute or two and happen very spontaneously. It may be as short and simple as a student asking a question or sharing an idea as a teacher passes by their work area during workshop time (123). In addition, students learn to confer with one another, often getting excellent response and suggestions from their peers. Isbell offers the following commentary in regards to her class of first graders (2006-07 school year):

> One of my favorite things to do during Writing Workshop is to walk around the room and listen to students as they confer with each other. We discuss what "conferencing" is and I model it for them, but to

see them empowered to lead it themselves is inspir-
ing. As I walk around the room, I hear writers asking
questions of their listeners, the listeners offering com-
pliments and asking questions of the writers. And
they are using a writer's vocabulary the entire time.
Those moments are so rewarding … because they are
then "teaching" each other to become better writers—
everyone gets to be an "expert".

Ray describes what Isbell has done as empowering stu-
dents as members of "a responsive, literate community" (105).
Such response and support is at the heart of a *working* workshop
environment, where writers make choices and teach themselves
and one another by reading, writing, thinking, and listening to
what others have to say. As one of my college business writing
students reflects: "Perhaps one of the most beneficial features
of this class was the regularly scheduled peer workshops … the
feedback I received from peer workshops was oftentimes very
valuable. The workshops made me realize how valuable my
peers could be, not only in school, but also in a work-place envi-
ronment." Another student attests to his peers:

Today I would like to thank you for being such a big
help with my papers. As you may have noticed my
paper writing abilities are not as strong as I would
like them to be. With your help I am learning to
write a more smooth and readable paper. I have
learned that I use a lot of words that are unneeded
and places to put a comma instead of a period. As far
back as I can remember my writing skills have been
very weak, and before this class I never revised my
papers … I thank you very much for helping me be-
come a better writer.

As time passed, Isbell's students became increasingly
comfortable with the workshop and in sharing their writing with
listeners. Excitement and anticipation often showed in their fac-
es as I walked in the room each Tuesday afternoon for writer's
workshop. Most delightful and surprising was how cooperative-
ly and independently children worked. They really talked and
listened to one another. Several girls worked in small groups
and moved from one area to another, while boys often worked in

pairs or independently. The classroom was set up for students to move about freely—publishing materials were kept in a cabinet on one side of the classroom, computers were on the other side, conference tables were in the back of the room, while children worked collaboratively or independently at their desks and on the floor. I can remember only one or two times throughout the year when Isbell had to remind students to use their time for the writing process. Overall, children were engaged in their work.

Isbell also encouraged cooperative writing, and many children took time during the school year to compose pieces with classmates and friends. I recall one example in particular where two girls wrote an on-going play about summer camp.   During *Author's Sharing Day* they acted it out, props and all. They continued writing new acts throughout the year, providing us different episodes of antics and lessons in their imaginary summer camp. Helen Dale discusses how collaboration "allows for the face-to-face planning and revising that encourages the talk about writing so vital in learning to be a writer." Not only do students learn about writing, but also "become better problem solvers, and develop a tolerance for others' opinions and learning styles" (Dale 55).

This ability and willingness of teachers to decentralize classrooms, encouraging autonomy and active participation, has long been noted as a primary way to foster participatory democracy. Brookfield and Preskill emphasize that without the opportunity to practice autonomy "democracy is diminished, and the opportunities for growth and self-development … are greatly weakened" (17). A friend and fellow parent had this to say of Isbell's student-centered classroom: "When Isbell took the risk in giving up control in her class, she also gave students permission and occasion to practice autonomy." The practice of independent thought needs to happen over many years of student learning. While some of my college students embrace critical examination and discussion in writing workshop, others never gain this independence and authority over their writing. As one student complained: "Group workshops were not as beneficial as they could have been. Possibly a very brief, easy to complete worksheet would be helpful." However, learning to think

critically and reflectively, and negotiating difficult choices in presenting one's ideas is the methodical training a literate and thoughtful democracy needs. On the contrary, such *a brief, easy-to-complete worksheet* that my college students often expect encourages passivity, the downfall of a working democratic state.

Valuing Their Work

The children cherished the time in their writing process to publish their work. Ms. Iona encouraged them to make beautiful covers for each piece and to take pride in their finished work. She had plenty of brightly colored paper and a whole store of decorative items the children could choose from to complement their covers. There were shiny sequins, buttons of all shapes, colors, and sizes, colorful markers, and a variety of other decorations. The covers often revealed both the subject of the writing and a little something about the author.

Ms. Iona's writing workshop was a time not only to write and read, but to practice listening. For at this period in history, the world was in tumultuous times. There were wars, and many people in the world, especially in our own country, felt threatened by the ideas of others. During this time, the art of listening and the incredible gifts it can bring to humanity were not well known. Luckily, Ms. Iona had studied the little known, ancient texts of a peaceful people who lived in this land long ago. She learned from these writings that when children are taught at a young age to listen with concern, interest, and respect to what others express from their hearts and minds, a magical creation transpires: children come to appreciate how other people think, live, and dream. She had come to believe that when children learn to listen well, they also learn to value and respect other people's opinions and ways of life.

The most prized part of writing workshop for Ms. Iona's class was Author's Sharing Day, a time set aside each month when Ms. Iona turned the classroom into a small, comfortable stage. Parents, grandparents, friends, and others in the community were invited to listen to the stories and hear the voices of these proud, young writers. Each student had a chance to read aloud their published piece in front of a real audience. It was a special time where children learned confidence for themselves as writers and thinkers, and appreciation for their classmates and families as listeners.

The approach Isbell uses in assessing student writing speaks both to "evaluation" as the "act of finding value in a piece of writing" (Hansen 188-189) and to the 6+1 Traits assessment for teaching writing. Isbell confirms the "value" in every piece of student writing through positive encouragement and peer and teacher feedback during conference. She spends 6-week periods on each of the six traits during which time students write a number of different pieces. After six weeks, students choose one finished piece of writing to be terminally assessed on that particular trait. For each trait, students use a rubric to assess their writing during different stages of the writing process. During the six weeks, they revise and re-assess how each piece meets the writ-

ing trait criteria. When students are satisfied with their own development, they get more feedback, then edit and publish. Isbell defers terminal assessment until students are satisfied with their own assessment, and then uses the same rubric to assess the chosen work (Murray *A Writer Teaches Writing* 139). At this point, both Isbell and the student have familiarized themselves with the writing piece and rubric through conference, revision, and mini-lessons, so terminal assessment requires little time. One problem Isbell experienced with this process was having students choose the best illustration of the particular trait. Instead, students sometimes submit the piece they liked best or one they were spending a lot of time on. In the future, Isbell hopes to better assist students in selecting appropriate texts.

      At the end of each six week period, writers celebrate their finished work through presentations at *Author's Sharing Day*. DeStigter emphasizes the necessity for teachers to provide educational experiences that collectively prepare students for "democratizing action" later in life. Such experiences must transcend the classroom and "live fruitfully and creatively" in later life experience (99). Dewey writes, "A primary responsibility of educators is that they … recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to experiences that lead to growth" (qtd. in DeStigter 100). *Author's Sharing Day* exemplifies settings and individual experiences which lead to growth in lifelong language development by putting students at the forefront in discussing, presenting, and making choices about their language skills. These remarkable days provide students the opportunity to share their writing with a real audience of family members and peers who pack the classroom. Isbell never limited what kids read or how long each presentation took. As the year progressed, confidence radiated from their proud faces as they shared their finished work and listened to their classmates' voices. Isbell says, "I see a lot of growth in some students especially … mostly, I see growth in their confidence. Through all the writing and sharing and publishing we do, they really gain a sense of pride and accomplishment, especially during *Author's Sharing Day*."[9]

      Another way student work is both valued and assessed

in writing workshop is through the use of student portfolios. Jane Hansen promotes retaining student writing portfolios from year-to-year to demonstrate student growth in language learning. Teachers can also retain student work throughout the year and demonstrate growth in particular areas. Reflective writing can be a valuable tool in getting students to recognize ways their writing and thinking skills have improved over time. I use this type of exercise in my college classroom, asking students at the end of the semester to reflect on their portfolio contents, writing process, and growth as writers. Such reflective practice provides writers a window to lifelong growth and critical self-examination of their learning and writing process.

Reclaiming their Gift

By the end of the year, each student had a wonderful portfolio of published writing pieces and many more unfinished drafts in their composition notebooks. But even during the last days of school, Ms. Iona had her students look back at their writing to think about and plan what they might work on over the summer.

As the school year ended, Ms. Iona's students learned they would have to move onward, to another school[10] and away from Ms. Iona's writing workshop. They would miss their days of writing and the excitement of not knowing what new story or idea might come, "bubbling up to their brain and onto the page" (Cadence). They would miss the hard work of finding just the right words for their pieces, of revising, editing, and publishing their writing. They would miss the glory and joy of designing and decorating and finishing their beautiful book covers. And they would miss listening to their own voice and to the words written by their friends and classmates.

But mostly, of course, they would miss the pride and joy they felt when Ms. Iona and others took the time to listen, really listen, to their ideas and stories and poems that came from somewhere deep inside themselves. Because every child in Ms. Iona's class discovered, just as the ancient people of the land knew long ago, that when they knew someone would listen, they could shape and express their concerns and ideas in ways like never before. Now when they wrote, they thought about how their friends would hear their words and how their words might affect their world.

Learning to listen with interest, sincerity, and reflection is a critical skill to develop, both as a writer and as an active member of a democratic state. Donald Murray asserted years ago that "writing is mostly a matter of listening" (*Learning by Teaching* 46). Others have pointed out the importance of developing and valuing multiple intelligences, such as listening, which is best learned through classroom collaboration and cooperation (Dale 22). In fact, listening and collaboration are not intuitive and need to be learned through lots of practice and reflection. Brookfield and Preskill assert, "if the conditions for democratic, critical discussion are carefully created and respected, students end up learning collaborative habits. They learn to listen respectfully and attentively to each person's contributions … they

learn to create spaces in which everyone's efforts are recognized … they learn to value silence and reflective speculation" (33). The development of these individual habits and skills is crucial to an open, educated, and working democracy.

For teachers, seeing our students become writers in their own right is perhaps the most rewarding part of integrating a workshop-centered classroom. "Teaching writing is a matter of faith. We demonstrate that faith when we listen well, when we refer to our students as writers, when we expect them to love writing and to pour heart and soul into it … when children receive this kind of listening attention, when their stories and information and ideas and lives are heard and celebrated and channeled onto the page in this way, they respond … 'Listen to what I've got' and 'Will you hear my story?'" (Calkins *The Art of Teaching Writing* 17).

My last visit to Isbell's writing workshop exemplifies her commitment to immersing students in the language and craft of writing. On this day, Isbell had students take out their writer's notebooks and record from memory the steps in the writing process. She asked that they not spend too much time, but quickly record what they knew. Every student eagerly dug into writing, as they all had something to say as writers. Afterwards, they shared responses and clarified the purpose each step served.

Isbell reflected recently how amazing it is to walk through the classroom and *listen* to her kids *talk* like writers. Upon reflection, Isbell sees her writing classroom today as a fun and productive environment, where students are not only motivated, but really like writing and understand the practice of the craft. Nancy Shelton shares similar sentiments from her class of 4th grade students after a memorable first year of workshopping together. Neither she nor her students wanted their writing and sharing to end. She says her students "had never felt so attached emotionally with their schoolwork, with themselves, and with each other in this learning community" (127). Writing workshop fostered in her students both a love for writing and an understanding of how to be a writer (127).

Reading their World, Again

Fortunately, Ms. Iona's students never forgot their treasured days of writing workshop. They kept writing and listening as part of their everyday lives. But most remarkably, they grew up and grew into people who changed their world. They grew into people who listened, really listened, to their own voice and to the voices of others. They spread the word and practice of Ms. Iona's writing workshop, and soon people of all ages and walks of life were finally learning to listen. And as they listened and thought carefully about each other's ideas, they came to respect one another.

The children of Ms. Iona's class grew up to be not only good listeners, but great leaders. They became ambassadors to other countries because they listened. They became legislators of their cold, sturdy, and ingenious state and built schools where new ideas were encouraged. They became congressmen and women, and senators for their great country, which was now at peace and becoming known worldwide as the land of listening, where everyone's ideas are heard, listened to, and respected. They became the finest teachers in the land. They wrote books on writing and books on listening, and always—always— read their work aloud to one another. And as these children became

parents, they knew to listen to even the tiniest members of their family and society. Soon, the troubled land they were born into came to resemble instead the ancient, peaceful culture Ms. Iona had studied, where learning to listen was just as important as learning to read and write.
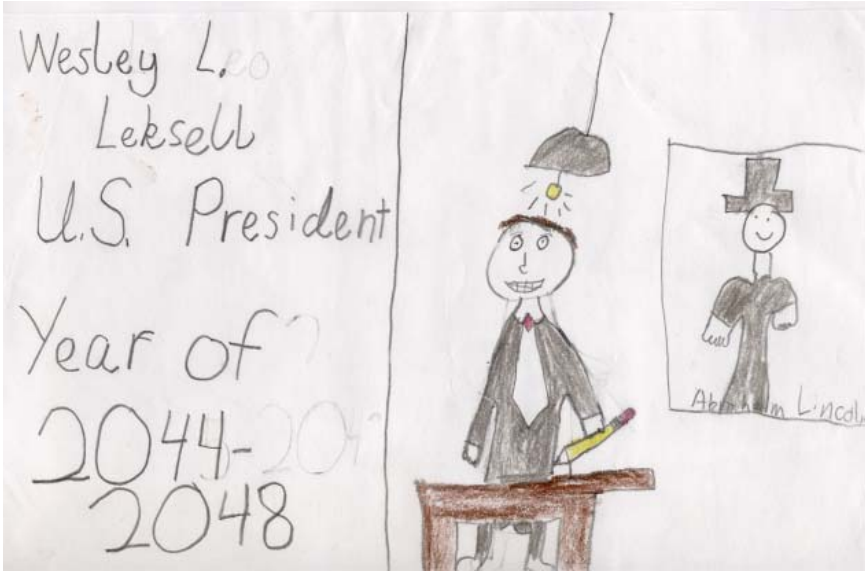
Isbell believes writing workshop can be used to teach writing to people of any age or ability.[11]   Her single, most important piece of advice to others is to realize: "writing is a social event."[12]   The same conclusion was reached by a veteran teacher who worked to change her approach to teaching writing: "we have gained a deeper understanding that social practices really matter in learning to write" (Bintz and Dillard 118).   While Isbell used to think of writing as taking place in silence, preferably far removed from others, she now believes just the opposite: a social, active, classroom environment will foster a love for not just writing, but the writing process as well.

Isbell also realizes she has not found Utopia in her current methods.   She hopes to further research using self-assessment effectively, along with portfolios to demonstrate long-term growth of student writers.   She worries some about how her pedagogy and student writing are perceived by parents and admin-

istrators.[13] But she is sure of one thing … kids are writing and she is learning. As Nancie Atwell reflects, "Teaching writing as a process gave me permission to view teaching as a process, too … I gained the courage to change my mind and my life and the humility to revise my practice" (16).[14] Isbell, too, has realized her own need for growth and resilience to orthodoxy in her writing classroom as she prepares to workshop this fall.

Lucy Calkins asserts, "giving voice to young writers and letting youngsters claim their authority … must also mean that children learn that their words can make a difference in the world" (*Living Between the Lines* 113). *Ms. Iona's Gift* is a vision for children changing their world by listening to their own voice and the voices of others, and in doing so learning confidence, respect, and humility, foundations Dewey dreamed our educational system might someday embody. World peace might be possible if we continue to *read the world* of our own classroom practice, of teachers around us, and of our students, whose lives we touch everyday and who are our own first teachers. Perhaps one day I'll have students entering my college classroom as *writers*, young adults who value their own voice and the writing and ideas of peers, who know the hard work it takes to develop and hone the craft of writing and who come to college ready to listen and expecting to be heard.

Notes

1. *Because Writing Matters* brings together 30 years of the National Writing Project (NWP) initiative to develop and support on-going professional development in teaching writing. Its mission, in part, is to de-silence the "silent R" by helping teachers develop new strategies to teach writing effectively. Over 175 projects nationwide have been developed in local areas, bringing together university faculty, K-12 teachers, and grassroots writing groups to enhance and support each other's pursuits to bring writing literacy to the forefront in their communities. NWP uses a teachers-teaching-teachers model to integrate best writing practices into classrooms in all disciplines. The success of such programs has been widely demonstrated to improve student achievement in writing. According to Nagin's book, the program serves more than 100,000 teachers annually. This text brings together the best classroom strategies that have come out of the program and demonstrates both the need for and success in bringing improved writing pedagogy to K-12 classrooms.

2. Process theory was introduced during the late 1960's by theorists and practitioners alike. Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, George Hillocks, Mike Rose, and Ross Winterowd all published discourse on how to integrate process theory into college English and Composition classrooms. Donald Murray's 1972 essay puts teaching writing as process in perspective: "To be a teacher of process … takes qualities too few of us have, but which most of us can develop. We have to be quiet, to listen, to respond … We must respect our student for his potential truth and for his potential voice. We are coaches, encouragers, developers, creators of environments in which students can experience the writing process for themselves" (*Learning by Teaching* 16).

In 1983 Donald Graves, Murray's student, published *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, introducing process theory into K-12 classroom environments. This text and subsequent publications by Graves and others provide K-12 educators tools and inspiration to integrate new practice into teaching writing. In a recent NTCE *Language Arts* special on writing

workshop, Graves reflects on what he has learned from teachers of writing over the past 30 years. He says the fundamentals to process pedagogy are that children need to select their own topic, but sometimes with guidance and encouragement; they need frequent response to their writing from teachers and other readers; they need to write often, ideally, an hour/day 3-4 days out of 5; they need to publish their writing in some form or another; they need to see others', especially their teachers', writing and thinking processes; and finally, they need to retain collections of work … their writing histories. Graves says more recent developments show a critical need for teachers to write in order to experience and share the process with their students; the need to recognize and enrich the link between reading and writing; the effectiveness of mini-lessons; the importance of teacher literacy; and finally, that writing belongs in every subject and in every field (89-90).

 3. Donald Graves argues for the imperative of teachers to model and participate in writing activities with students: "Writing with and for students is one of the best uses of instructional time there is, even when time is in short supply" (*What I've Learned from Teachers of Writing* 89).

 4. As both a linguist and writing teacher, Constance Weaver has researched teaching grammar extensively. Her *Teaching Grammar in Context* confirms what Isbell found to be true: rote lessons in grammar do little to improve student writing. Instead, teaching grammar in the context of student work proves to be much more effective. When students have the opportunity to "see" the correct and incorrect use of language in their own work and can practice these constructs, their retention is much greater.

 5. Ruth Culham's *6+1 Traits: The Complete Guide* presents a series of traits that characterize good writing: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. The idea is to allow young writers to identify how their writing may be revised. If a writer can focus on a single trait and assess how well their writing piece fulfills that trait's characteristics, they can talk about and determine strategies for revision. The advantage of incorporating the 6+1 traits allows

teachers and students a vocabulary to discuss writing, a way to define what good writing looks like, and a way for students to evaluate their own writing. The intent is for students to gain control and confidence in their writing process. For Isbell, incorporating these traits was a given, as they are required curriculum for Duluth Public School teachers. Isbell says meshing the traits into the workshop environment was a rich and practical fit. Culham would agree: "The traits taught within an active, positive, process-oriented curriculum is an unbeatable combination" (9).

6. Katie Wood Ray emphasizes how children often write on one topic over and over again. Such immersion illustrates a child's passion in a topic and is a great way for them to think about, read, learn, and explore a topic in-depth. She reminds teachers that writers must "care deeply" about what they write before we can expect them to "care deeply" about how they write ("Why Cauley Writes Well …" 101). For additional direction and discussion on setting up a successful workshop, see Ray's *The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts (and They're All Hard Parts).*

7. Lucy McCormick Calkins came up with "mini-lessons" as a way to integrate direct instruction into the workshop environment. Teachers incorporate mini-lessons based on what they feel their students need. Teachers might read aloud good examples of narrative, model how to come up with interesting details, or give a brief lesson in capitalization.

8. Donald Graves developed the idea of "reading the world" as a primary way for students to explore topics of interest and ideas for writing. He later recast the phrase to "reading their world", where teachers learn personal details about their students' lives and interests, a crucial step to developing responsive relationships with students and their writing.

9. In the 2006-07 school year, Isbell started a "casual Author's Sharing Day". She says: "I did this a lot with the first graders this past year, when I felt they were ready. The class sits on the rug and any writer who wishes to can share a piece of their work. They then call on three different people, each of whom tells the writer something positive--something specific (prefer-

ably using writer's language) that they liked about their text. Then, if anyone has a question or a constructive thought, they can share those as well. This is also a very rewarding experience and a chance for writers to hear directly from their peers."

10.   After the 2004-2005 school year, Duluth's Chester Park Lab School closed for good. For over 75 years the school led the state in piloting and integrating innovative educational practices in collaboration with University of Minnesota Duluth students, educators, and researchers.

11.   For detailed, practical advice on integrating a writing workshop in the primary grades, see Lucy Calkin's *The Art of Teaching Writing* and her FIRSTHAND series. Calkins asserts children learn literacy skills first through oral presentation of their pictures and stories. These presentations are excellent ways to foster oral and pictorial literacy which immerge developmentally prior to and in conjunction with written literacy forms. The 2003 handbook series includes *The Nuts & Bolts of Teaching Writing*; *The Conferring Handbook*; *Launching the Writer's Workshop*; *Small Moments: Personal Narrative Writing*; *Writing for Readers: Teaching Skills and Strategies*; *The Craft of Revision*; *Authors as Mentors*; *Non-Fiction Writing: Procedures and Reports*; *Poetry: Powerful Thoughts in Tiny Packages*. Each text takes a reader into the workshop environment and offers commentary, examples of student work, mini-lessons, and assessment rubrics.

12.   Graves, Murray, Calkins, Atwell, Dale, Hillocks, Elbow, Rose, Winterowd, among others, concur with Isbell's advice: social environments are key to successful language arts development.

13.   NTCE's *Language Arts* is full of excellent documentaries of K-6 teacher success in using and defending a writing workshop curriculum and pedagogy. For an excellent account of successfully integrating writing workshop into a high-risk student population with strict district test score expectations, see Shelton & Fu's "Creating Space for Teaching Writing and Test Preparation." Shelton says while she was pleased at achieving test score expectations, most important was "her students' love for writing and learning, and the understanding of the process

a writer has to go through to produce quality writing … what pleased her was the joyful and thoughtful community her students had created" (127).

14.   Atwell's *In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing Reading and Learning* is a primary resource for teachers in the 5-9 grade level wishing to incorporate a process oriented, workshop approach to teaching writing. Atwell says this is the age we tend to lose students from seeing themselves as writers as we put more formal and structural expectations on their writing assignments. Linda Miller Cleary's *From the Other Side of the Desk* affirms Atwell's assessment. Miller Cleary's research demonstrates the need for students to develop a strong writing identity in adolescent years by way of writing history interviews with individual 11th grade students. Her work shows it is most often the middle school years when students tend to stop enjoying the process of writing, and, more importantly, provides "ways to help students find voice and reestablish intrinsic motivation for writing" (jacket).

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Helping Refugee Students Find Their Voices

Michael Mutschelknaus

Despite my best efforts, in my community college freshman composition classroom, the students sit in clumps: PSEO students near the front; nontraditional students retraining for new jobs in the middle, student athletes in the back row, traditional students next to their Facebook or MySpace crews, and—in the back corner—two or three refugees.

I teach at Rochester Community and Technical College (RCTC). We have a significant population of Somali refugee students at our college. I have a special place in my heart for them because I lived in Africa when the Somali civil war started and raged on. Every night we would sit around the radio and listen to BBC Africa unfold the tragedy. Now that I teach Somalis here in the United States, I wanted to find out what their motivations for writing were. To find out, I needed to talk to them as people with complex lives rather than as students. I knew that if I maintained my traditional authority as a teacher they would just tell me what I wanted to hear. That is why I interviewed male Somali students who were not in my own courses.

My research project focused on male Somali refugee students in freshman composition classes, not ESL classes or developmental writing courses. In the freshman composition courses I teach at RCTC, there are usually two to three male Somali students per composition course.

To find out about writing motivations, I interviewed fourteen male Somali students. I then compared their responses to current composition theories in order to create a focused classroom writing project that would help male Somali refugee students find their voices.

From the interviews, I discovered that their complicated lives affect their perceptions of writing tasks. From the composition theories, I found some teaching methods that help to acknowledge cultural differences in composition classrooms. From the classroom writing project, I learned that my male Somali refugee students could develop their own voices once they were provided with the proper internal motivations for writing.

I am always asked why I did not interview female Somali students as well for my project. The answer is that I had to do the interviews off campus, without chaperones. It would have been culturally unacceptable for me, a single man, to ask female Somali students to coffee shops or restaurants for the interviews. That is research that I hope an enterprising female teacher can do after reading this article.

Even though my research focused on male Somali refugee students, I think that my findings could be useful for teachers with refugees from other countries as well. The experiences they describe are culture-general, rather than culture-specific.

I hope that my research is just the beginning of lots of other projects about refugee students. I believe that we need to know much more about our refugee students in order to teach them effectively. They are not like foreign ESL students because they cannot go back to their home countries. They are not like newcomer students because they did not choose to come to the United States. They have suffered. The standard definition of a refugee is a person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable … to return" (United Nations 16). Refugee students are an invisible population on our campuses. They are difficult to classify because they do not attend institutions in defined groups; their education is not com-

pulsory; and their education takes many different shapes (Cooke and Peckham 6-12; Potocky-Tripodi 361). For these reasons, research about our refugee students is important.

What I Discovered from the Interviews

This section is divided into a brief explanation of my interview methodology and an explanation of my interview findings.

Interview methodology

My research focused on male Somali refugee students in freshman composition classes, students who had already completed or tested out of the ESL or developmental writing courses. In composition courses at RCTC where I teach, there are mainly native English speakers and a few former ESL students in each course. The male Somalis in my composition courses are very motivated to do well.

My database consisted of interview transcriptions from fourteen male Somali refugee students. Another question people ask me is why I stopped after fourteen students. The answer is that in grounded theory, the qualitative research paradigm I used, there is no need for further data collection when later research subjects repeat the major themes of earlier research subjects. This is known as the saturation point (Creswell 56).

In the grounded theory research paradigm, interviews must be carefully planned and executed.[1] First, my interviews took place off campus, in the preferred spaces of my interviewees. I spent a lot of time in Somali restaurants and coffee shops, for example. If I had conducted the interviews on campus, the setting would have altered my interviewees' responses because of the institutional symbols of power and authority that are inherent to all colleges. Second, in order to find male Somalis to interview, I asked my colleagues if they had students in their classes that might be willing. I then contacted the students to explain the nature of my project to see if they would participate.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour. I asked each person the same questions. The questions focused on their

overall view of their college experience, people who affect their college experience, college accessibility, their work lives, their college courses, their desires for self-improvement, and basic demographic information. These questions were formulated after an extensive review of refugee education literature established that these were the topics that affected refugee students' college success the most.[2]

Table 1, below, provides the basic demographic information about the students I interviewed.

	Age	Semesters at Community College	Years in USA	Years in Somalia	Years in other countries
Subject 1	19	2	12	7	0
Subject 2	21	4	5	15	1
Subject 3	22	5	3	11	8
Subject 4	24	5	7	17	0
Subject 5	26	4	4	15	7
Subject 6	29	3	10	19	0
Subject 7	35	4	11	24	0
Subject 8	36	1	2	34	0
Subject 9	39	2	6	33	0
Subject 10	42	1	5	37	0
Subject 11	46	2	7	34	5
Subject 12	47	4	8	39	0
Subject 13	50	4	9	36	5
Subject 14	55	5	3	42	10

Table 1: Male Somali refugee student demographic information

Interview results

For interview results to be valid in grounded theory research, a homogeneous population has to be interviewed. This was accomplished in my research by having three important variables the same: gender, cultural derivation, refugee status. Even greater validity could have been attained if I could have interviewed students who were all the same age. I did try, but I was not able to find interview subjects in the same age range. Even so, the major findings of my interview research are credible because so many of the research subjects mentioned the same ideas.

In grounded theory, the researcher examines the interview data in order to find out the major themes that the interview group feels are important. I have chosen representative quotes from my interviews to illustrate these major themes. Therefore, do not imagine one male Somali saying the quotes that follow. Rather, imagine a whole chorus of male Somalis saying the quotes.

To summarize the results of my fourteen interviews in one paragraph, I discovered that male Somali refugee students shifted from external to internal motivations for writing by finding support from others at each stage of their writing development. As they began college, they sought encouragement from family and friends. As they got used to college, they hesitantly sought support from teachers. Finally, the refugee students described epiphanies when they realized that they could write well. I explain each of these findings in more detail in the paragraphs that follow. I have changed the names to protect the identities of the students.

At first, the students wanted to write well to provide for their families, both in the United States and abroad. Language skills were necessary for them to find better jobs. Twelve out of fourteen interviewees stated that this was their main reason for going to school and improving their English. Hussein, a twenty-two-year old student who had been in the United States for three years at the time of the interview and community college for five semesters, provided an eloquent explanation of how families motivated the Somalis:

> I have 18 sisters and brothers. They call me. You know, they listen to each other. One calls me, then the other calls me, and they always need my support, and my father knows they call me and he also needs my support and he says, 'I'm not asking you to send me money, you know. But I'm asking you to keep continuing your education.' Although, he needs my help, so I send him money.

So, the first major theme I discovered from my interviews is that male Somali refugee students wanted to learn to write well as quickly as possible in order to earn more for their families. This is an external writing motivation. In other words, it is a pressure

to succeed in writing that came from the outside environment rather than internal student desires.

The second major theme I discovered from the interviews was that male Somali refugee students also needed motivation from their friends in order to write well. Nine out of fourteen students used friend networks to stay motivated. Ahmed, a thirty-five-year-old who had been in the United States for eleven years and community college for four semesters, gave a succinct explanation of how these friend networks function:

> We talk to each other about what to take and who is this teacher there and who is not and who helps with the minority people and who doesn't interest well in English, who's helpful. We ask these questions, and we know the information when we reach the classes, and start. We know where we get the help and where we learn.

The refugee students' friend networks were cohesive, extensive, and efficient at passing on useful information. These networks were organized based upon shared major/certificate programs. For the most part, the Somalis were concentrated in major/certificate programs that would get them out of community college and earning money quickly. They therefore had a lot of classes and teachers in common.

The third major theme I discovered from the interviews is that, once the male Somali refugee students became used to college, they sought support from their teachers in order to write well. Thirteen out of fourteen interviewees discussed this in their interviews. They found it difficult to talk to teachers at first because of culture and power differences. Many Somalis felt that if they told teachers that they did not understand something, the teachers would think that they, the Somali students, were accusing the teachers of poor teaching.

The students vividly remembered instances where teachers provided them with encouragement. Ali, a fifty-year-old student who had been in the United States for nine years and community college for four semesters, provided a representative comment about teacher encouragement:

> The first thing was when I came to the teacher's class, he gave us to write a database article from anywhere, but not a book or web site. Then he said, 'You have to write with your own words.' It was almost one paragraph, two paragraphs. When he was collecting the paragraphs from the printer, and he read, when he read my paragraph, he said, 'You folks, you know that it does not mean that you're not American that you cannot write.' He said, 'These American people can talk English better than you, but they cannot write English better than you.'

Like all the other students who discussed teacher encouragement, this student was very proud of what the teacher had told him.

The fourth major theme I discovered from the interviews was that the male Somali students needed to feel welcome in a course before they could do well in it. Nine participants discussed this issue. They said that they did not like speaking up in class if they did not understand concepts or assignments. They remained silent when teachers asked if there were any questions. They suggested that teachers ask them directly in one-to-one conversations if they understood assignments or class main points. They also suggested that teachers end classes a few minutes early so that they could approach the teachers to ask their questions.

The fifth major theme I discovered from the interviews is that refugee students realized they could write well in English. Eleven out of fifteen students discussed this phenomenon. The timing of these epiphanies varied. For some students, it took place fairly quickly in the semester. For others, it took almost the entire semester before they realized their writing talents. The key point is that the epiphanies occurred for motivated students after assignments where the teachers provided focused feedback and encouragement. After these epiphanies, the male Somali refugee students enjoyed writing as a means of expressing their thoughts. They wanted to learn to write well because they took pride in their work. For example, Abdul, a twenty-nine-year-old who had lived in the USA for ten years and been to community college for three semesters, said, "I remember one time. I don't

know what happened to me. I did bad on a paper. When I got the result, I was so mad. Then I went to the teacher in the office, and after that I did well."

Another Somali student who had been in the USA for ten years and community college for three semesters made a similar comment about his light bulb moment that occurred in a developmental English course: "We were talking about how to take notes … The thing was … there was no understanding. But I just make them easy, how you understand and help the problem. Stuff like that. I was covering that … This course, I like it."

Finally, yet another Somali student who had been in the USA for five years and in community college for four semesters remembered his epiphany: "My [speech] teacher was, like, take control over your fear. He said it will take time to go through, but go through it. And it was fun. It was fun."

In conclusion I discovered from the interviews that these male Somali refugee students have complicated lives that affect their writing. They want to write well in order to care for their families. They talk to their friends to make it through their writing courses. They need to feel welcome in their courses. They make hesitant contact with their writing teachers. They have learning epiphanies. Like all community college students, they are liminal people.

What I Discovered from Current Composition Theories

After the interviews, I felt that I better understood the situations my male Somali refugee students faced in their composition courses. My understanding was based on lots of research and hard work, rather than assumptions, so I was happy with the results. Before the interviews, for example, I assumed that second language interference issues were the main writing issues my refugee students faced. After the interviews, I realized that they had several other pressures on them as well that affected their writing. However, the interview results did not necessarily help me to become a better teacher for refugees. In

order to further inform my teaching, I needed to examine current composition theories that apply to refugee students. In this section, I provide an overview of those theories.

Once refugee students know that we value them, several pedagogical approaches are available. Traditional students and refugee students, for example, would benefit from Grobman's difference curriculum ("Thinking Differently about Difference" 347-357). Grobman points out two misconceptions her students have when encountering difference. First, students base their understanding of an entire culture on their limited encounters with difference. Second, they over-generalize from their brief encounter with difference, assume that people everywhere are basically the same, and consequently ignore strong cultural forces (347). In Grobman's model teachers are to initiate "explicit efforts to ascertain difference in value systems; movement toward identifying difference within difference; engagement with the constructed nature of stereotypes, behaviors, and belief systems; and experience with *othered* [sic] subject positions" (351). In a similar way, Pipher advocates "selective acculturation" for refugees, the process of helping refugees decide what to keep from their old cultures and what to accept and what to reject in their new cultures (*The Middle of Everywhere* 77). We can help refugee students with these complicated processes.

Grobman's curriculum implies that we should select readings and assignments that emphasize that the United States contains a plurality of cultures, instead of the monolithic concept of United States culture that many of our students (refugee and traditional) espouse. Pipher's selective acculturation suggests that we should then help not only our refugee students but also our traditional students make informed choices about their cultural values. In essence, both Grobman and Pipher argue for a critical examination of cultural values and assumptions, a skill that we composition teachers need to develop in all of our students.

There is a risk when we teach about difference, though. Refugee students might be viewed as so different that we might probe refugee students' lives and ignore the subtler distinctions between other cultures in our classes. Marzluf makes this pre-

cise point by contending that we may "exoticize" our students if we privilege their diversity writing too much ("Diversity Writing" 505). Students could consequently become too committed to their own cultures and refuse to examine other viewpoints. Instead, Marzluf suggests that for diversity topics we should create assignments that compel students to examine issues from a variety of different viewpoints rather than from their own specific cultural perspectives (518). Williams agrees with Marzluf by asserting that we cannot step out of our own dominant cultural ideologies to understand our students' texts ("Speak for Yourself?" 594). Any understanding we do is in the context of the dominant culture. Any writing the students produce in our classes is necessarily an attempt to fit into the dominant culture, even if they are writing about cross-cultural themes (Williams 594). Marzluf and William's insistence on a variety of viewpoints may be especially helpful for our refugee students because refugee students may not have had practice shifting points of view.

We also need to let refugee students know that it is permissible to enter Pratt's contact zone in our classrooms ("Arts of the Contact Zone" 33-40).[3] Contact zones would probably work well for refugee students who have identifiable cultures. However, some refugee students do not. They flee as children, spend years in camps, live as guests in other countries, and finally come here as refugees. Such students probably do not feel that they have identifiable cultures. Because these students lived in contact zones long before they showed up in our classes, though, they can teach us how to handle cultural ambiguity, rather than we teaching them.

Flower's concept of intercultural rhetoric also informs refugee student pedagogy. For intercultural rhetoric to work, teachers and students must articulate the confusions that arise from difference: "The paradox of intercultural dialogues is that the things dividing us that are hardest to share—the deep roots of history, the racially shaped experience, and the repertoire of interpretive strategies we use to make sense of that experience—may also be the ones we need most to communicate" ("Talking Across Difference" 55). Intercultural rhetoric focuses on clear

explanations of cultural confusion. For example, when teaching "Young Goodman Brown," I asked a refugee student to describe the setting. He responded that it happened in the jungle. I was momentarily confused because I always imagine the story taking place in a pine forest. We then had a great classroom discussion about how true literature can transcend its original settings.

However, I do not think that teachers should believe that intercultural rhetoric is the only answer for improving refugee student writing. From my research, I discovered that refugee students want to judiciously assimilate to American culture. They want better jobs. They want to fit in. If we overemphasize intercultural rhetoric, we risk frustrating our refugee students.

What I Discovered from a Classroom Project with Refugee Students

Last year, I taught a section of freshman composition that had several refugee students in it. The students did research about newcomer adaptation to the United States based on Pipher's refugee book *The Middle of Everywhere*. The project was the culmination of freshman composition: a six-to-eight-page research paper containing citations from online, print, and field research sources. The refugee students, quite naturally, chose to examine the experiences of their own family and acquaintances in order to see how closely their experiences mirrored those in Pipher's book. The traditional students chose to examine the heritage of their own families. Many of them discovered family lore from the era of their grandparents and great-grandparents, newcomers all to the United States.

An unintentional, but welcome, contrast occurred. As the refugee students presented their research about recent adaptation to the United States, the traditional students heard the echo of their families' histories in the words of the new arrivals.

Even with such fortunate teaching moments, though, a split developed in the class. On the negative side, one student felt that he was being unfairly penalized for having to do a research project that he knew little about. The student said to me privately that I was making the refugees in the class the favored

students. Another student voiced the opinion, privately to me, that "they should all just go back where they came from."

On the positive side, a young man from Rochester planning to major in anthropology was overjoyed at the chance to get to apply real field-work investigative skills. One of my Somali males said that he finally could write about something he knew a lot about. Another Somali male said that, after reading the book, he and his family no longer felt so alone. A young female student said that she never really knew that refugee lives were so difficult. A post-secondary enrollment student said that she now understood students in her high school a lot better.

The research assignment made the refugee students in the class the experts because they talked to their friends and family and because they could read in other languages. It was a role reversal for them. For example, Omar, a Somali who had been in the United States for seven years and in community college for five semesters, wrote the following precise analysis of education in Somalia:

> Since January 1991, Somalia had no stable educational system because of the civil war that still exists in Somalia. Children who have been born since the civil war started are not getting reliable education. Therefore, American schools may have different kinds of Somali students who really need to get special educational services. The different types of Somali students are: A) Students who have some experience in the school system in their country already. B) Students who are new to the educational system. These students have had little experience or had nothing when they were in their home country. These students have more problems coping with the American education system.

Knowledge such as this would have been difficult for non-Somali students to obtain. The class consequently benefited from Omar's explanation. Moments such as these were what made the research project such a valuable experience.

Conclusion

Refugee students in our traditional composition courses move from external to internal motivations for writing. Our job is to facilitate this process. Composition theories show us how we can help our refugee students with this shift. We can not assume, though, that any one theory will give us all the pedagogical answers we need. Once we implement pedagogies for refugee students in our composition courses, we must expect initial confusion and eventual insights from the refugee and non-refugee students in our courses.

My own teaching has improved as a result of this project. From the many interviews I did, I learned to examine my own assumptions about refugee students in my composition classes. Composition theories about classroom cultures have also improved my teaching. I now believe that our classrooms can be places where cultures are examined, written about, and shared. Finally, the classroom research project has shown me that I need to create assignments that allow all of my students to succeed equally, no matter where they are from.

So, do my students still sit in clumps when they come to class? Yes, they still do. Now, though, the people in different clumps talk to each other before class starts. It is a small change, but I have hope.

Notes

1. For comprehensive information about the interview methodology, including the interview instrument itself, e-mail me at mike.mutschelknaus@roch.edu or call me at 507-280-3510.

2. Contact me at mike.mutschelknaus@roch.edu or 507-280-3510 if you want the literature review.

3. Pratt defines contact zones as cultural confusions that occur in places with several different cultures. These cultural clashes also may involve the unequal distribution of power. New ideas arise in contact zones if people acknowledge differences and work to reduce their confusion.

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Revision Think Sheets:
Supporting Writers from Draft to Final Copy

Suzanne Kaback

Picture this: I am sitting at my dining room table with two stacks of research paper drafts serving as armrests.   Under my right arm is a pile of student papers referred to as "best second drafts" written by juniors in my writing-intensive Teachers as Leaders course.   These are expected to be students' latest attempts to revise first drafts of their research papers using revision suggestions I made on their "best first drafts" (that pile of papers under my left arm).

I am reading paper number six, and so far I do not discern any substantial revision work between best first draft #1 and #2. I can document my intuition about the lack of revision by comparing the two papers a student has submitted. I can see that I have written on Hannah's "best first draft," for example, the advice to discuss why many parents and teachers are opposed to drug therapy to treat children with ADHD. Hannah's "best second draft" shows no evidence of attention to this suggestion to develop the complexity of the ADHD issue. Instead, she has copyedited this second draft to clean up the surface errors and resubmitted her work.

Nola's paper is similarly lacking in revision. On her "best first draft," I reminded her that one requirement for the research paper is a concluding section that offers the writer's own opinion about the issue addressed in her "hot topics in Education"

paper. Nola's first draft does not include her stance on merit pay for teachers, nor does her second draft. All her paragraphs, though, are now indented and her bibliography is in APA format.

One of the most challenging and often exasperating results of responding to student writing is students' inconsistent use of my feedback during revision. My professional background in writing theory and pedagogy, as a co-director of a National Writing Project site, as a language arts teacher, and as a writer myself, has taught me the importance of feedback. I know how vital meaningful comments can be in nudging the revision process by helping writers address unanswered questions, flawed logic, or lack of clarity in their drafts.

And yet, in my current role as an Education professor, I have found that my students do not always engage with my feedback in significant ways. I am often disappointed to receive final drafts that look much like the rough drafts I have read and commented on. Frustration inevitably follows when I think that the time I spent responding to students' papers was wasted.

I wasn't sure why most writers appeared to ignore my revision suggestions, but I had some suspicions. First, I wondered if students were used to the kind of thorough feedback I provided. As a former language arts teacher in grades five through eight, and then a college-level instructor in Education courses when I was a doctoral student, I had twelve years of experience learning about and providing feedback that motivates writers to want to return to their writing. Then, as now, I focused on providing revision suggestions rather than editing services. So, while I was confident in my skills as a reader-responder, I did not know enough about my student writers at this new college where I was teaching to feel confident in their experience with incorporating feedback into a final draft. What kind of feedback had they encountered in their past writing projects? Was the feedback mostly copyediting, content suggestions, or a balance of both?

Second, I wondered how often students were offered the opportunity to hand in drafts for feedback before their final copy was due. As an instructor of college students who ostensibly have a long history of writing instruction, I am frequently sur-

prised by students' confusion about—and sometimes belliger-ence toward--draft deadlines.   In my courses, I am compelled to be explicit about defining what a draft is compared to a final product, and then I often have to justify my decision to require a draft because many students are dismayed by the prospect of having to write something twice.[1]

As I thought about how to require more accountability from my students in the way they used my feedback in sub-sequent drafts, I returned to a seminal article by Nancy Som-mers titled *Responding to Student Writing* (1982). The article describes her exploration of how college professors respond to student writing and what students do with those responses. In re-reading her study, I found a quote that captures the synergy between high-quality feedback from teachers and improved re-vision from students. Sommers writes,

> The challenge we face as teachers is to develop com-ments which will provide an inherent reason for stu-dents to revise; it is a sense of revision as discovery, as a repeated process of beginning again, as starting out new, that our students have not learned. We need to show our students how to seek, in the possibility of revision, the dissonance of discovery—to show them through our comments why new choices would positively change their texts, and thus to show them the potential for development implicit in their own writing (p. 156).

Armed with this quote, and some concerns about stu-dents' experience with and dispositions toward using feedback on draft writing to tackle the revision process, I decided to es-tablish more definitive expectations for students' response to my feedback on their writing. I designed a "think sheet" for stu-dents to use as a way to interpret my feedback on their drafts, to make plans to apply the feedback, and to provide evidence that they acted on these plans. The template is attached to this article. Here is how it works.

When students turn in a draft of their writing, I return the piece with my comments and a blank copy of the "Revision Think Sheet." Students are then expected to re-read their drafts,

taking into consideration the marginal comments I have provided. After revisiting their draft, and my response to it, students complete the first part of the think sheet by explaining how they interpreted several of my revision suggestions. I leave space for five interpretations, although depending on the length of the draft, students may not have that much feedback to contemplate. I also ask students to indicate whether the comment they are interpreting is focused on the content of their ideas or the form in which they expressed themselves. At this point in the think sheet process, students are not required to actually make revision in their writing. They simply focus on my feedback, then write short notes describing the advice they think I have offered.

Revisiting Hannah's paper described in the introduction of this article provides a useful example of this first stage of the revision think sheet process. Had Hannah used a think sheet, she might have taken my comment about addressing resistance to drug therapy for children with ADHD, and written in one of the five spaces provided, "*You suggested that I write about why some people think drug therapy for ADHD is a bad idea. This feedback is focused on the content of my writing*."

Once they have completed Part 1 of the Revision Think Sheet, students hand it in for me to check. If I think anyone has misunderstood my comments, I have an opportunity to talk with her before she begins rewriting to help clarify my original comment. For instance, if Hannah's interpretation of my feedback was off-base, if she had written, "*You suggested I write more about drug therapy for children with ADHD*," I would step in to show her that she misinterpreted my suggestion.

Also, if a student appears to have focused entirely on my editing suggestions, rather than the more complex work of re-thinking or reorganizing the content of sections of her writing, I urge the writer to revisit my feedback.[2]

When my students and I have had a satisfactory exchange of ideas based on Phase 1 of the Revision Think Sheet, a process that takes place over a week's time in a course that meets twice a week, we move into Phase 2. At this stage, which takes two weeks, students complete revisions of their draft writing and then

use the second half of the think sheet to indicate which revision suggestions they incorporated in their final draft. By requiring students to be accountable for incorporating my feedback into their writing, I hope to help them recognize Sommers' vision of the power of high-quality feedback; that is, that "through our comments," students might understand "why new choices would positively change their texts, and thus to show them the potential for development implicit in their own writing" (p. 156).

While the Revision Think Sheet has the potential to be too prescriptive, I guard against this outcome by using it as a tool to talk about ownership. Before heading into Phase 2, I talk with my students about the writer's prerogative to pick and choose which revision suggestions to accept and fold into their subsequent drafts. Even the most well-intentioned readers, who provide feedback that shows genuine engagement with a writer's draft, do not always provide advice that a writer wants to consider. I remind my students that writers have the right to select the feedback they think will move their writing forward most productively. In fact, making these kinds of discriminating decisions suggests a writer, herself, is invested in her ideas—an outcome that is too nuanced to formally evaluate, but that signals the most significant progress a student makes in becoming a writer.

Last fall, a new crop of students in Teachers as Leaders utilized the revision think sheet approach to document the results of interpreting and then using feedback to revise a major research paper. With this first experiment using the think sheet, I took extra time at the Phase 1 stage to be sure students understood the intent of the template. Using what I called "Invited Office Hours," students signed up for a fifteen-minute conference with me to discuss their work on Phase 1. A majority of students interpreted my feedback accurately and indicated a mix of content and form comments that were most likely to influence their final drafts.

Several students—those who demonstrated a greater need for support throughout the process of planning and writing their first drafts—were less successful using the template. Two things were common with these struggling writers: First, they

overemphasized editing suggestions when interpreting my feed-back on their drafts. Second, even when redirected to consider my comments about reworking the content of their writing, my developing writers had difficulty conceptualizing how to take feedback that was less directive and letting it guide their subse-quent drafts.

For example, if I indicated in my feedback that the writer needed to use APA style formatting throughout her work when citing references, she included on her think sheet: "Look up APA style and use for all citations." No problem there. If, however, I wrote on her draft, "You need to synthesize the five studies you cited about cooperative learning, rather than summarizing each one and leaving out the connections among them", my less skilled writers often excluded this advice from their "rein-terpretation." When pressed to think about streamlining their writing by comparing and contrasting the key ideas in research they read, these students were often resistant, explaining that the articles they summarized were all different and needed to be summarized for readers.

From these kinds of conversations, I can easily iden-tify the intervention a writer needs to move forward with her craft. I often turn to Graff and Birkenstein's (2006) book, *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, to find templates that help students address the more complex stag-es of revising. In the case cited above, the writer would profit from a short tutorial in words or phrases that prompt synthe-sis. Graff and Birkenstein suggest sentences such as, "On the one hand, _____ argues _____. On the other hand, _____ contends _____ " (p. 24). Equipped with the skeleton of language that supports a well-written synthesis, my writers are guided to look at their research in more sophisticated ways. As a result, their revision process benefits.

By the end of the semester, students' final drafts showed evidence of attention to revision suggestions. Phase 2 of the Re-vision Think Sheet forced the issue of incorporating feedback by asking writers to name the specific changes they made based on draft comments. When I started the process of evaluating stu-

dents' papers, I began by consulting phase 2 of the Think Sheet for each writer's submission, noting in particular the places where she made particular changes based on her interpretation of my feedback. Students' final grades on the research paper were based on points earned for different stages of writing, including points for completing each phase of the Revision Think Sheet. Although the real value of the template was intended to be reflected in the higher quality writing in a student's final paper, I was comfortable assigning a point value to the process of completing the think sheet to emphasize its use in planning for revision.

Without oversimplifying the many writing obstacles less successful students face, I suggest that most writers' struggles arise from a lack of composing experience, rather than a lack of ability. Complaining with colleagues about students' lack of writing ability at a department meeting, or blazing into class after reading lackluster drafts to provide triage for the most painful aspects of students' writing—these rituals provide temporary relief for the frustration we often feel as teachers, but offer no lasting impact for our students. If we want to help writers at that crucial stage of converting a draft to a final paper, we need to devise systems of support that illuminate the connection between feedback and rewriting. The Revision Think Sheet is one tool to, as Sommers reminds us, "show [students] the potential for development implicit in their own writing" (p. 156).

Notes

1. This is when I pull out Elizabeth Bishop's seventeen drafts of the poem "One Art" to show students that it is not my own rogue theory that good writing is really revision.

2. In my nineteen-year career as a teacher/draft reader, grades 5 through graduate school, I have yet to respond to a student's draft writing without both content and form suggestions.

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Graff, Gerald & Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing.* New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 2006.

Sommers, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 33; 2 (1983): 148-156.

Appendix

Cover Sheet for Research Paper in EDUC 207W, Fall 2006
Interpreting Feedback & Documenting Revision

Your Name: _____

Title of your Research Paper: _____

Part I:

Read through my feedback and summarize your interpretation of what you need to address in your final draft. Record your summary, in a single sentence for each of my comments, in the space below. If the feedback focused on content (your <u>ideas</u>), circle content. If the feedback focused on form (grammar, punctuation, structure, spelling, APA format—all the surface features) circle form.

In my best first draft, I was advised to focus on:

1. _____
content/form (circle one)

2. _____
content/form (circle one)

3. _____
content/form (circle one)

4. _____
content/form (circle one)

5. _____
content/form (circle one)

Part II:

When you finish your revisions, complete the following section:

In the final copy of my research paper, I attended to a) all of b) some of c) none of (circle one) the advice summarized above.

If you answered a or b above, document several of your revisions by summarizing the changes below:

For example:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

The Western Canon in Today's High Schools

Jeremy Hoffman

> The value of books is proportionate to what may
> be called their plasticity—their quality of being all
> things to all men, of being diversely moulded by the
> impact of fresh forms of thought. Where, from one
> cause or the other, this reciprocal adaptability is lack-
> ing, there can be no real intercourse between book
> and reader. In this sense it may be said that there is
> no abstract standard of values in literature: the great-
> est books ever written are worth to each reader only
> what he can get out of them. The best books are
> those from which the best readers have been able to
> extract the greatest amount of thought of the highest
> quality; but it is generally from these books that the
> poor reader gets least.
> - Edith Wharton (qtd. in Ross, McKechnie, and
>   Rothbauer 53)

As a life-long reader and a high school English teacher, I have had my share of successes and failures with books. I have discovered a book over the summer and waited in anticipation for the opportunity to teach it during the coming school year, only to have the unit disintegrate into failure, mostly because I assumed my students would be as enthusiastic as I was about the book.

The reverse has also been true; I have loathed teaching a certain book that I thought perhaps lacked literary merit, only to have a new crop of unfamiliar students energize my appreciation for it. But in all cases the decision on what titles the entire class would read was mine. I never sought my students' input because I was the expert with a college degree and twelve years of teaching experience; they were the *tabulae rasae*. Surely I knew better than they what they should read. Or so I thought.

In 1988, Arthur Applebee began a comprehensive nationwide study surveying secondary school teachers as to what book-length titles (novels and plays) were the most frequently taught in English classrooms. His findings showed that not much had changed in the nearly twenty-five years since the last major study of its kind in the spring of 1963 (qtd. in "Stability" 27). The Western canon that had dominated secondary classrooms in 1963 still dominated in 1988. One might have expected a great shift in the canon's place in secondary schools. After all, the preceding twenty-five years had seen a civil rights' movement, a cultural revolution, and the rise of a "new" genre—Young Adult Literature. So the lack of change between the two surveys published some twenty-five years apart surprised some educators. More troubling than the consistency in findings between the two surveys was the dearth of titles from "alternative traditions" in the newer survey ("Stability" 28). Societal changes apparently had had little effect on what high school students were being asked to read in English classes. The times had changed, but what high school students were being asked to read had not.

As a high school English teacher, I was also troubled by the results of Applebee's survey. If the sweeping changes that took place in America's cultural landscape between 1963 and 1988 weren't enough to effect change in the canon, could anything bring about change that many saw as necessary to keep pace with the changing world of adolescence? After coming to the conclusion from my own teaching experiences that the traditional Western canon was not serving English students well, I was curious if there was anything teachers could do to improve students' attitudes about reading. What could make students

want to read, and thus, hopefully, read more? The answer to improving students' attitudes toward reading is not very radical: give students choice in their selection of reading materials in their English classes. Simply allowing students to choose more of their reading materials will result in more and better reading.

In order to test my hypothesis, I designed two surveys—one for teachers in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area, one for students at St. Michael-Albertville, a suburban high school northwest of Minneapolis—to solicit feedback on high school reading habits. In general, I was interested in what books were being taught at the secondary level and what secondary students' attitudes were about reading. More specifically, is the canon that Applebee suggested was in place in 1988 still prevalent in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area today, and do students value choice as a means to getting them to read more and better?

Applebee surveyed high schools throughout America to tabulate the top titles (novels and plays) taught in public, Catholic, and independent schools. The results of the survey (Table 1) showed that the "dead white male" phenomenon still dominated the Western canon.

Table 1

Most Frequently Required Titles, Grades 9-12

Title and Percent of School					
Public Schools		**Catholic Schools**		**Independent Schools**	
Romeo and Juliet	84%	Huckleberry Finn	76%	Macbeth	74%
Macbeth	81	Scarlet Letter	70	Romeo and Juliet	66
Huckleberry Finn	70	Macbeth	70	Huckleberry Finn	56
Julius Caesar	70	Mockingbird	67	Scarlet Letter	52
Mockingbird	69	Great Gatsby	64	Hamlet	51
Scarlet Letter	62	Romeo and Juliet	63	Great Gatsby	49
Of Mice and Men	56	Hamlet	60	Mockingbird	47
Hamlet	55	Of Mice and Men	56	Julius Caesar	42
Great Gatsby	54	Julius Caesar	54	Odyssey	39
Lord of the Flies	54	Lord of the Flies	52	Lord of the Flies	34

Significantly, of the top ten titles required in public, Catholic, and independent schools, only one was by a female (Harper Lee) and none by a minority writer (*Literature* 66). Furthermore, Applebee's study shows that not much had changed in the previous 25 years when it came to the books taught in high school classrooms. "Of the 27 titles that appeared in 30% or more of the schools, four are by Shakespeare, three by Steinbeck, and two each by Twain and Dickens. Only three women appear on the list, S.E. Hinton, Harper Lee, and Anne Frank, and there are no minority authors" (*Literature* 69).

While one might think that with the push for diversity and multicultural titles in recent years, the canon would have opened up a bit, Applebee concludes that "rather than being diluted in recent years, the role of the literary canon seems to have been strengthened" (*Literature* 69). Despite the findings, Applebee is encouraged that many of the changes in the list between 1963 and 1988 "reflect the schools' attempts to introduce contemporary literature, though many of these 'contemporary' titles are now 40 or more years old" [at the time of publication in 1993] (*Literature* 70).

Applebee's survey showed that the canon is firmly entrenched. But is reading the canon the best for high school students? And if it isn't, must we abandon the classics in order to get adolescents to read? These questions introduce the contentious point of what our young people should read, or, rather, what should English teachers encourage/require our young people to read in order to make them better, more willing, readers. There are no easy answers to these questions, and there are as many critics who support the canon as those who call for its dismantling. Rosenblatt believes there is much good in the classics, but urges caution in how they are taught:

> Many of the great classics have elements of vivid action, strong emotion, and suspense that may provide an incentive for the more mature or the more secure student to clear away the obscurities due to unfamiliar language or literary forms. Too often, however, the classics are introduced to children at an age when it is impossible for them to feel in any personal way

the problems or conflicts treated. (Literature 205-206)

Jim Trelease, author of *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, is a little more flippant in his response to this age-old question. According to Trelease, "about the only people in this country who read them [the classics] are teenagers—and only because they are required to … everything I have seen in the last thirty years indicates we are misusing them in schools" (140). Basically, high school teachers require students to read books that are never read by the general public. "Serious and classic book sales account for only 1 percent of bookstore sales" (140). The question, then, is not what to read; rather, what is important is the obvious declaration that kids need *to* read.

Defenders of the canon might argue that a watering down of the literature curriculum will result in a decline in the skills traditionally associated with the English classroom. Stephen Krashen, who has studied reading and second-language acquisition for more than thirty years, researched the effects of free voluntary reading and found that reading more, whatever that reading entails, does increase these skills. Krashen supports free voluntary reading programs as opposed to traditional direct instruction. Krashen uses the phrase "free voluntary reading" to include any programs that simply let students read what they want. They are often known by acronyms such as D.E.A.R. (Drop Everything and Read) or S.S.R. (Sustained Silent Reading). These programs may be part of a building-wide initiative to get kids energized about reading, or they may simply be variations of the reading workshop popularized by Nancie Atwell in which students are responsible for choosing their own reading materials. Krashen's comprehensive studies of free reading programs "show that more reading results in better reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, spelling, and grammatical development" (*Power* 17). He cites numerous studies to support his conclusion. A consistent finding in Krashen's review of free reading studies is that "reading itself promotes reading" (*Power* 81).

The research seems to indicate that students would be better served if more choice were offered in secondary litera-

ture classes. Specifically, it would likely lead to more reading, which would lead to better readers. Offering students choice, however, sounds easier in theory than in practice. What exactly does offering choice mean? How much choice? Are all choices students make equally valid?

If one's goal in the teaching of literature is to help students enjoy reading and to become lifelong readers, then offering students more freedom in their selection of literary titles would be an important first step.

To confirm or refute the findings of the above research, however, I needed to do more than consult secondary sources—I needed to do my own research. To this end, I designed two surveys—one for teachers and one for students. My survey for teachers initially began as an attempt to verify if Applebee's 1988 study, which concluded that the traditional Western canon still dominated, was still in place in 2006, at least in the suburban schools surrounding Minneapolis and St. Paul. Because St. Michael-Albertville is a suburban school, I wished to narrow down my search to metro area school districts. Therefore, I decided to exclude schools in the Minneapolis and St. Paul districts and focus on only suburban schools similar or larger in size to St. Michael-Albertville (approximately 700 students in grades ten through twelve). This narrowing left me with approximately forty-five districts to survey. By the end of the summer, I had gathered data for twenty-nine of the forty-five schools.

My initial survey to teachers focused on two main questions: 1.) What titles (novels and plays) are currently taught in your high school? 2.) To what extent are students allowed to choose titles that they read? The survey began as an attempt to replicate Applebee's survey (albeit on a localized scale). I was curious to see what, if any, changes had occurred since Applebee's study was conducted during the 1988-89 school year in those book-length titles taught in secondary English classrooms. I eventually added the second question to query teachers on the extent to which students were able to choose their reading materials.

My first question was a simple attempt to gather as complete a picture as possible of the titles taught at metro area high

schools. Table 2 (below) includes responses from the twenty-nine schools that responded. For ease of comparison, I've re-printed the results from Applebee's 1988 study (Table 1) prior to the results from my own study:

Table 1

Most Frequently Required Titles, Grades 9-12

Title and Percent of School					
Public Schools		**Catholic Schools**		**Independent Schools**	
Romeo and Juliet	84%	Huckleberry Finn	76%	Macbeth	74%
Macbeth	81	Scarlet Letter	70	Romeo and Juliet	66
Huckleberry Finn	70	Macbeth	70	Huckleberry Finn	56
Julius Caesar	70	Mockingbird	67	Scarlet Letter	52
Mockingbird	69	Great Gatsby	64	Hamlet	51
Scarlet Letter	62	Romeo and Juliet	63	Great Gatsby	49
Of Mice and Men	56	Hamlet	60	Mockingbird	47
Hamlet	55	Of Mice and Men	56	Julius Caesar	42
Great Gatsby	54	Julius Caesar	54	Odyssey	39
Lord of the Flies	54	Lord of the Flies	52	Lord of the Flies	34

Table 2

Most Frequently Required Titles in the Twin Cities Metro Area, Grades 9-12

Title and Number of Schools Book Required In (out of 29 surveyed)			
Rank	**Title**	**Number of Schools**	**Percentage**
1	To Kill a Mockingbird	24	83%
2	Romeo and Juliet	23	79
3	The Great Gatsby	22	76
4	Of Mice and Men	18	62
4	The Crucible	18	62
6	Hamlet	16	55
6	Huckleberry Finn	16	55
8	Night	15	52
8	Lord of the Flies	15	52
10	The Scarlet Letter	14	42
10	The Odyssey	14	42

The results indicate that there has been little change in the nearly twenty years since Applebee's study. Only two titles from Applebee's study did not make the updated survey: *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*. Both, however, still ranked in the top fifteen. My survey included only one title not included in Applebee's original study: *Night*, by Elie Weisel.

The fact that the results show little to no change is not necessarily surprising. To become part of the canon of books taught in secondary schools, a book must be deemed a classic. To be deemed a classic takes time. The latest published work in Table 2 above is *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1960. What did surprise me is the dearth of contemporary and or Young Adult titles. Only one novel, *The Things They Carried*, by Tim O' Brien (published in 1990), that is considered a contemporary work made the top twenty. It is taught in twelve area schools, ranking it tied for twelfth on the list of most frequently taught titles. For Young Adult literature, Walter Dean Myers' *Fallen Angels* led the way, but it was mentioned by only four of the twenty-nine schools, placing it outside the top forty. Only two females made the top twenty, Harper Lee (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) and Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*), whose books placed first and fourteenth respectively. Also, only two minorities made the top twenty—Hansberry and Chinua Achebe, whose *Things Fall Apart* placed sixteenth. These results show that, although there has been a lot of talk about opening up the canon in recent years, this talk hasn't translated into widespread practice.

In addition to surveying teachers, I realized that I also needed to survey students on their reading practices. After all, what better way to find out what students' attitudes are toward reading than to ask them. Since I teach sophomores, and all sophomores at St. Michael-Albertville High School must take English 10, I decided they would be appropriate survey subjects. I prepared a survey and distributed it to all sophomores enrolled in the spring semester of English 10 during the 2005-06 school year. This number was approximately 170 students from all ability levels, but I ended up receiving ninety-eight surveys by the end of the school year.

The questions on the student survey were open-ended. Students were given space below each question to answer the question however they saw fit. I was mainly looking to solicit feedback on what students' attitudes are on reading—both the reading they are required to do inside the classroom and outside. The questions were not directly related to Applebee's survey, but they did give me needed information on how adolescents view reading in the twenty-first century, at least sophomores at St. Michael-Albertville. Both the teacher and the student survey also gave me important feedback on the question of whether, and to what extent, students were able to choose their reading materials in area high schools.

When students were asked what English teachers could do to make reading more enjoyable, the leading response was "let us choose our own books" (23 responses). Other leading answers included "pick books that are interesting for us," (18) and "have a good discussion so that we understand what is going on in the book" (12). This last response was curious because presumably one would assume good discussions are going on with any book, but apparently, at least in the eyes of the students, that is not always the case. The relevant piece that emerged from the two leading responses was that students need to be interested in what they read to rate reading as enjoyable. Too many students view the books selected by their English teachers as not being relevant to their lives.

Students were also asked how their own list of books that they read outside of school differs from what they are expected to read in English classes. Interestingly, the majority of the students responded that they spent some time reading outside of school. The general response (paraphrased) was something akin to "Out of school I like to read mysteries, suspense, fantasy, sci-fi, romance, etc. but in school we have to read classics, old books, boring books, books that are trying to teach a lesson, books having to do with different races, etc." Several students commented that the books they read outside of school would not be appropriate in-school reading. One student said, "All the books that I've read [in school] were horrible. I don't like many

of them because they were slow usually from ancient days not many of the books we read in class are up to date or deal with kids/teens."

The responses on the student surveys indicate that many kids do enjoy reading, but most differentiate between the kind of reading required of them in English classes and the kind of reading they do at home. In short, few students would pick up a "classic" of their own volition and read it outside of school. On the other hand, many students reported a thirst for reading that is satisfied by choosing their own reading materials outside of the classroom. In the words of one non-reader, "The books that we read interest us and relate to us. We usually aren't able to read these books in school because they aren't school appropriate." What should be appropriate for school are books that relate to adolescent readers. The list of required books in Tables 1 and 2 above relate to the human condition, but they do not necessarily relate to the more particular adolescent condition. The question, then, becomes a philosophical one regarding what teachers view as being the purpose for teaching literature in schools and, thus, how to select literature to achieve those goals.

Nearly twenty years have passed since Applebee conducted his research on the most frequently taught book-length works in American high schools. His conclusion from the 1988 survey was that the Western canon taught in secondary English classrooms had changed little since a previous study in 1963. Applebee's survey of American high schools was an attempt to replicate this earlier study and compare findings.

My own research was a similar attempt to compare findings. I was curious as to whether or not this list of titles had changed since Applebee's study. After surveying teachers from suburban districts in the Minneapolis and St. Paul metro area, I found the results to be nearly identical: a certain canon of books—written mostly by dead, white males—still dominates secondary English classrooms.

In an attempt to remedy this "problem," I decided to implement my own version of a readers' workshop in sophomore English the next fall. Students, with a little coaching from me,

would be able to choose any fiction book they would like. They would bring this book to class with them each day and read for thirty minutes. When I say coaching, I simply mean giving book talks—picking up certain titles that have energized former students and me in the past and trying to "sell" them to my current sophomores. As students read, they would keep a journal which combined their thoughts as they read with an analysis of certain literary elements we would be discussing. At the end of the month-long reading workshop, students would produce a newspaper project consisting of a certain number of articles, such as a lead story (plot), Dear Abby column (conflict), personal profile (characterization), etc.

　　　The first time I implemented this new reading workshop, it was a great success. The advantages of the program are many—some enumerated in this paper, some not. Most importantly, students were able to choose what they read, which led to more reading. My top reader read four books during the unit; all students save one completed their book. Some had several false starts, but each false start taught them something about their own reading likes and dislikes. Students learned the elements of literature in a way that was more relevant to their reading interests rather than attaching it to a classic they had difficulty understanding. The disadvantage: I had to give up one classic (don't worry, Hansberry and Steinbeck still remain), but I doubt the students missed it.

　　　In my twelve years of teaching, I have noticed an increase in the number of students who struggle with reading. As our society becomes more reliant on images rather than print, the problem seems to be getting worse rather than better. For too many adolescents, the reading that they are usually asked to do in school is seen as a chore. Trying to motivate them to read has also become a chore. Allowing students to have more say in what they read in high school hasn't solved all my problems when it comes to the teaching of literature, but has made teaching literature more enjoyable. Giving students choice in their selection of what they will read, at least in the reading workshop unit, has helped energize their reading and my teaching.

As Edith Wharton said, "the greatest books ever written are worth to each reader only what he can get out of them." In my few attempts at the reading workshop approach, I've found that my students have gotten a lot out of the books they have chosen—much more than I could ever impart. While doing away with a classic or two in the literature curriculum may alter the canon in high schools, it will do so for the betterment of the student and will ultimately lead to his or her growth as a reader. In the end, high school teachers can do their utmost to guide students, but kids ultimately come to love reading through their own choices.

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Old Men with Wings:
One Look at Teaching Magical Realism through Gabriel García Márquez

Jessica Jorgenson

In literature, magical realism uses a backdrop of realistic elements with instances of the magical in order to portray an unconventional reality to the reader. Writers often use magical realism to portray events that many of their readers may not understand as reality, but are a part of the writers' cultural or political experience. For example, Native American writers occasionally use magical realism to show the power of nature or of a trickster figure. The African American writer Toni Morrison often uses magical realism to show the spiritual power of women in her novels. The focus of my essay will be teaching students magical realism within the context of Latin American culture in terms of the Columbian writer, Gabriel García Márquez.

When teaching magical realism, let your students know that one of the purposes of magical realism is to force the reader to use the idea of "suspension of disbelief." One way of breaking into discussions of magical realism would be to ask students questions like, "Do you have different versions of reality, and if so, why?" Looking at writing from another culture opens a reader's eye to the unfamiliar, where magical realism exists. What we may define as magical or mystical could be interpreted as very real to someone else; we may only view the particular reality as a type of amplified or "magical" reality. From this description magical realism does have a sense of tangible real-

ity within its background, though that reality tends to have aspects that morph into something one could consider unreal.   In this way, it can be said that magical realism attempts to improve upon realism in literature to create a new synthesis of literary understanding.

With this essay, I will provide a way for upper level high school students to understand magical realism by juxtaposing it with the genre of surrealism in order to show the differences between the two movements. I shall place magical realism within the context of Latin America, particularly through the work of Márquez. I shall use Márquez's short stories to provide a way for students and teachers to apply this knowledge of Latin American magical realism. This application will also be outlined within a lesson plan, which I have included at the end of this essay and refer to throughout the paper. This lesson plan functions merely as one way to instruct students in magical realism within the Latin American context, so it should by no means be taken as a definitive example.

Magical Realism and Surrealism

When teaching the magically real, it is important your students do not confuse magical realism with surrealistic literature, which I incorporate in my lesson plan (see appendix). The genres of magical realism and surrealism may be perceived as similar, though there are distinct differences. The *Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* defines surrealism in fiction as a convention that "expresses the irrational, the unconscious, especially the unconscious that manifests itself through dreams" (Murfin and Ray 468). Much of what defines surrealism originated and reached its peak with the French symbolist poets and the Dada movement during the 1920s and 1930s and therefore has been mostly confined to these areas.[1]

However, magical realism has been around in many cultures and contexts much longer and can be seen in the literature of Native Americans, African Americans, and Latin Americans. To give students a definition of magical realism, the *Bedford*

Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms describes magical realism through the following characteristics:

> [magical realism is] a quasi-surrealistic art form … mixture of realistic and fantastic elements. Realistic details and esoteric knowledge are intertwined with dreamlike sequences, abrupt chronological shifts, and complex, tangled plots. Magic realists also frequently incorporate fairy tales and myths into their works. (Murfin and Ray 242)

From this definition, you may notice that a number of different characteristics surface within the context of the magically real. For every culture magical realism is a bit different because the history of every culture is different. Therefore, when you and your students look into the magical realism of Latin America through the work of Gabriel García Márquez, you should look at magical realism from the Columbian and Latin American perspectives.

Magical Realism: A Brief History

Before discussing magical realist Latin American writing, I incorporate a day on my lesson plan where I look at magical realism in a historical and cultural context (see appendix). From this perspective, the term magical realism seems as elusive as the device it represents—but is it?

According to Scott Simpkins' essay "Magical Strategies: The Supplement of Realism," the German writer "Franz Roh first introduced the term magical realism into artistic discourse in the mid-1920s through the German phrase *magischer realimus*" (Simpkins 141). Roh described this as a "counter movement in art through which the charm of the object was rediscovered" (Roh 70). Roh outlined magical realism in a way that opposed it with realism: "history is the basis for realistic writing whereas in magical realism myth and legend takes over where history leaves off" (Simpkins 141). Magical realism undoubtedly had an influence upon Latin American fiction since the cultures within Latin America are heavily influenced by superstition and myth, which they interpret as a kind of history. The definition of magical

realism originated by Roh would later spark the minds of Latin American writers, such as Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez: "[magical realism] had a strong influence on Latin American writers searching for a suitable means to express the marvelous reality unique to their own culture" (Simpkins 142).

The Magically Real of Latin America

As descendants from tribes like the Mayans, Incans, Aztecs, and other native groups, Latin Americans have juxtaposed the mythological beliefs of the past into the advancing reality of the present. A good overview of the culture of Márquez's Columbia in terms of the magically real is discussed in a video titled "Gabriel García Márquez: Magic and Reality," which discusses two of his major works: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Autumn of the Patriarch*. This video would be an excellent resource to introduce students to how Márquez interprets the magically real (see appendix). The video also provides a good opening for working with students to further uncover how magical realism functions within the work of Márquez. The video will further the ability of students to place the magical realist elements within the framework of Columbian culture. Briefly introducing students to the political issues within Columbia can open other ways of interpreting the work of Márquez.

For example, one important political influence within Márquez's work the film discusses is the problems of poor Columbian workers within the United Fruit Company. In 1928, because of the company's harsh labor policies coupled with little pay the workers began a strike. Gene H. Bell-Villada writes in his book *García Márquez: The Man and his Work* that "the strike [was led] by thirty-two thousand field workers [and] drew massive occupation and bloody repression by the Columbian military (who, evidence suggests, were in the pay of the United Fruit Company)" (Bell-Villada 32). To this day, there exist no adequate reports as to how many of the Columbian workers were murdered in the time frame of the strike, but the episode caused major problems within the coastal towns of Columbia,

including the town of Márquez's birth. Because of this blood-shed and turmoil that struck his birthplace, Márquez has incorporated the incident, and others like it, within his fiction, and the example of the United Fruit Company strike can be followed within Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Another source of information beneficial to students would be to discuss the influences of African slaves on Latin American belief systems. When African slaves arrived in Columbia, they carried with them their own religious beliefs and ceremonies that Columbians have incorporated into their own culture. The Africans were also an imaginative people, carrying rituals and beliefs with surrealistic qualities. Their legends and myths became juxtaposed with established pre-established Columbian and other Latin American countries' belief systems. This meshing of cultures becomes evident in the Argentine novelist Luisa Valenzuela's novel *The Lizard's Tail*, where Latin American reality becomes superimposed with surrealism. Valenzuela shows her characters discussing the obsession with Eva Peron, particularly through the character of the Sorcerer—a nickname for an advisor of Juan Peron and later for his second wife during her administration in the 1970s. This demented individual believed he was capable of magic and miracles, and he was known for his elusiveness and brutal methods of torture. The novel recounts the political turmoil and civilian obsession with Evita, or "the Dead Woman." Though Valenzuela's novel isn't magical realist as much as it is surrealist, literary elements within the text speak toward the influences Africans had upon the Latin American people.

Though magical realism has been prominent in traditional Latin American writing, the boom novel can be seen as inaugurating a deeper understanding of the magically real. Shannin Schroeder writes that "Latin American literature often addresses the impossibility for Latin Americans of situating themselves in a specific historical moment" (20). A discussion of Márquez's works could start with this quote. A disruption of linear time occurs frequently within the works of Gabriel García Márquez. One of the best examples of the of the uprooting of time from its

chronological associations occurs within the story "Monologue of Isabel Watching it Rain in Macondo:"

> On Wednesday noon it still hadn't finished dawning. And before three o'clock in the afternoon night had come on completely, ahead of time and sickly, with the same slow, monotonous, and pitiless rhythm of the rain in the courtyard. It was a premature dusk, soft and lugubrious … (Márquez 93)

Though Isabel tells us that she believes it is Wednesday at noon, the sun has not finished rising. Later on, Isabel claims that the sky darkens like that of night in the middle of the afternoon keeping in rhythm with the rain. What does this mean? Has time gotten away from Isabel, or is she correct in her estimations? At the end of the story, Isabel claims that she did lose track of time as she states she was in a place where "senses lost their value" (Márquez 96). Isabel's assertion introduces one of the concepts that magical realism thrives on. Her senses have become confused and, as a result, she loses the concept of time.

   In a second Márquez story, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," the image of time is again confused:

> The world had been sad since Tuesday. Sea and sky were a single ash gray thing … The light was so weak at noon that when Pelayo was coming back to the house after throwing away crabs, it was hard for him to see what it was that was moving and groaning in the rear of the courtyard. (Márquez 203)

Here, a sky during a rainstorm is again described as an "ash gray thing," which defamiliarizes the sky. And at noon, the sky is dark like night as Pelayo can barely see the thing that is "moving and groaning" so close to him (Márquez 203).

   These examples, as well as many others that can be found in Márquez's work, will help to demonstrate to students how Márquez does not place events within a historical framework, as Schroeder asserts when she makes the statement that Latin American writers do not place happenings within true historical time. In other words, nothing is dependent upon time as we ex-

perience it each day through the clock or the calendar.

Gabriel García Márquez as Literary Magician

As I indicate in my lesson plan, a good way to lead into discussion of Márquez's short fiction is to give a short biography on Márquez to show where he found inspiration (see appendix). An important resource Márquez used for developing his stories came out of what he remembered from growing up with his grandmother, Tranquilina Iguarán Cotes, and grandfather, Colonel Nicolás Ricardo Márquez Mejía. Through his grandparents, Gabriel García Márquez became well acquainted with the legends of his Columbian ancestry. His grandfather and grandmother were great storytellers. His grandfather focused on stories of a realistic nature; however, Márquez's grandmother often told him stories filled with the magical elements that permeate Márquez's fiction today.

In fact, some of Márquez's stories are transformed versions of stories his grandmother told him. Márquez's imaginary city of Macondo is based upon cities in Columbia, particularly that of his birthplace Aracataca, a banana town.[2] The people inside Macondo are based upon people he knew or people that appeared within his grandmother's stories. Perhaps these influences help to explain Márquez's realistic characters inside unrealistic occurrences. In the short story "Monologue of Isabel Watching it Rain in Macondo," Márquez demonstrates the astonishment of Isabel as she watches her family react to the rain that doesn't stop for what seems to be an entire week. As Isabel leaves church, she notices it has begun raining:

> After Mass, before we women had time to find the catches on our parasols, a thick dark wind blew, which with one broad, round swirl swept away the dust and hard tinder of May. Someone next to me said: 'It's a water wind.' And I knew it even before then … Then it rained. And the sky was a gray, jellyfish substance that flapped its wings a hand away from our heads. (Márquez 89)

For Isabel, the sky becomes a living thing capable of movement and almost of touch: a "jellyfish … that flapped its wings away from our heads." The sky has become animal-like so that with one of its wings it may touch the onlookers below in Macondo. Also, the rain being described as a "water wind" is also interesting to note as it describes a blending of natural elements. We may ask ourselves, what exactly is a water wind? It is a thing of the imagination, like the sky becoming a "jellyfish substance." The context of the sky and rain is real, but the way these two elements are portrayed takes their reality and makes it something new and imaginative.

Márquez's magical realism exists not only within the forces of nature but also through strange appearances of people or creatures. This occurs in the strange appearance of a man with wings who many believe is a sort of angel or perhaps, as is comically described by some, "a Norwegian with enormous wings" (Márquez 207). This stranger to Macondo, and perhaps to the world itself, gives title to the story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," detailing how Pelayo and his wife come across a man who seems to have fallen from the sky during another rainstorm. Many magical elements exist with this story, and the subtitle of the tale is "a tale for children," which leads the reader to assume that this story is mainly just a fairy tale. But is it?

Though "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" is introduced as a tale for children, there exist deeper meanings within the story as some of the magical elements hold a political force. For example, after Pelayo has placed the man with wings within the chicken coop, it is discovered the stranger does not speak any known language, though people speculate it may be Latin. Márquez' investing the old man with an unknown language gives credence toward a political reading of the text. Much of Márquez's work has been influenced by the political climate of Columbia. In Columbia, there are two major opposing parties: the liberals and the conservatives. Furthermore, Márquez has labeled himself a *costeño*, one of a group of people who are "racially mixed, verbally outgoing, and superstitious. They are descendents of pirates and smugglers, with a mixture

of black slaves" (Ruch 1). In "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," the issue of racial difference is apparent and Márquez is making a political statement through the strange, winged man. The winged man represents himself as an outsider, but someone who is of the culture and yet separate from it.

Considering the arrival of the African slaves, and the fact that the *costeños* are part of this subgroup, Márquez could be making a statement on how Columbia has changed. And since Márquez aligns himself with the *costeños*, the winged man could be interpreted as being Márquez himself, just with the veneer of magical realism. Just like the winged man, Márquez aligns himself with a group composed of different races and criminals such as pirates, and he comes across as an outsider. The winged man isn't only an instance of the magically real. He also represents political beliefs covered in a vision of the magical. Therefore, magical realism isn't only consistent with fairy tale-like qualities; it also expresses political and cultural values. In this sense, magical realism via Márquez can, and should, be interpreted in a variety of contexts, such as through the political.

Another reading of the language of the old man exists within a religious context. Because the people of Macondo believe the language to be Latin, they feel he may be an angel, and therefore capable of miracles. People come to him with problems like "being unable to sleep because of the noise of the stars" (Márquez 206). However, none of these people who come to the winged man are healed. In one instance, the leper who came to the winged man to rid himself of leprosy instead has his "sores sprout sunflowers" (Márquez 208).

Because of the failure of the miracles, the people of Macondo forget the winged man. They have moved on to another spectacle: a girl who has undergone a metamorphosis into a spider, which is surely a nod towards "The Metamorphosis" by Franz Kafka. In discussion of the spider girl, it may be beneficial to give a synopsis of "The Metamorphosis" because it was a huge influence on the writing of Márquez. It was partially Kafka's story that persuaded Márquez to become a writer in the first place as Gloria Bodtorf-Clark states in her book *A Synergy*

of Styles: Art and Artifact in Gabriel García Márquez:

> A borrowed copy of Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" caused a metamorphosis in the life of young García-Márquez. At a very young age, seventeen, he realized the power of the written word which he has pursued ever since, through the writings of journalism and literature. (112)

Meanwhile, the winged man continues to live, though many in Macondo have forgotten him except for Pelayo, his wife, and the town's doctor. Through the observations of the doctor, a reader uncovers other magical qualities of the winged man, such as his having a heart that does not beat but makes a "faint whistling," and the doctor also hears what he describes to be "noises in his kidneys" (Márquez 209). The doctor also marvels that the wings appear surprisingly natural on the man's body. Márquez shows that what we believe is unnatural can instead appear natural to someone else, or perhaps even to ourselves if we were to take the time to really look at the spectacle.

Anyone who has not finished the story might ask what happens to the winged man. The answer is that he disappears as magically as he appeared, and the only witness to this departure is Pelayo's wife, who, at the very end of the story, describes the winged man flying away as "an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea" (Márquez 210). This final scene in Gabriel García Márquez's story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" is a good way of showing what magical realism does and is within Latin American fiction. Describing the man with enormous wings as an "imaginary dot" makes one wonder if the very old man with enormous wings was real to begin with.

But to the characters in Macondo, the old winged man was very real. Surely the next time any one of us steps outside into the rain, there will not be a man with wings hovering, cold and wet, behind the nearest tree. In our neat, rational, and literal world of reality, we believe we will never encounter a stranger with a winged back speaking incoherent language to us. But Márquez, like his stories, steps outside reality's neat box to ask

us how we really know if our beliefs will transform into our reality. After all, we haven't stepped outside into that cold drizzle yet.[3]

Notes

　　1. See http://www.moma.org/collection/printable_view.php?object_id=79018 for a reproduction of Salvador Dali's "The Persistence of Memory."

　　2. Source: Allen B. Ruch http://www.themodernword.com/gabo/gabo_biography.html.

　　3. See Melquiades in Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, p. 25-26, 55, 74.

Appendix

Lesson Plan for Teaching Latin American Magical Realism Using Gabriel García Márquez's Short Stories

Objective

　　This lesson plan is structured to assist in teaching elements of magical realism within the context of Latin America through stories by Gabriel García Márquez.

Learning Outcomes

- Identify magical realism through comparisons with realism and other genres.
- Identify and discuss the literary elements within magical realism of Latin America. Students will also be able to identify certain aspects of the Latin American/Columbian culture via Márquez's work.
- Have students demonstrate understanding of magical realism through exercises. (handouts)

Materials and Resources

- Handout on elements and examples of magical realism

- Copies of the stories *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings and Monologue of Isabel Watching it Rain in Macondo* by Gabriel García Márquez

Recommended materials and resources

- *Gabriel García Márquez: Magic and Reality* VHS ISBN 978-0-89113-546-3 (about 60 minutes)
- Map of Latin America
- Map of Columbia

Day One

Start the introduction to the lesson by giving a short overview of magical realism. Also, to prepare for further discussions, it would be helpful to give a short introduction to the geography and culture of Latin America using aids such as maps.

In discussing magical realism, find an example of a piece of magical realist writing. This can be from Márquez, Borges, or anyone you choose.

In-class exercise:

Ask your students what they notice about this piece of writing. Refer back to the handout on magical realism compared to realism. As an exercise, have the students point out differences they notice.

Day Two

Discuss magical realism in Latin America in terms of its uniqueness in regards to its reliance on superstition, myth, and elements of time. Also, a good idea would be to contrast magical realism with other genres such as surrealistic fiction and/or science fiction or any other genre of your choice.

In-class exercise:

It would be helpful to hand out examples of magical realism and surrealist fiction and have students identify each in groups. Discuss results as a class and reasons for findings.

Day Three

Present the video on Gabriel García Márquez and magical realism. The video is approximately 60 minutes, but if you wish to shorten the length in order to answer questions/give more information, please do so. Only about 30 minutes is relevant to

this lesson plan. If you choose to do this latter route, make sure to cover important parts of the film and answer questions. If not, you will do this during the next class period.
In-class exercise:
Have your students do a writing prompt on what they understand to be magical realism from the video.

Day Four

Give a short introduction on Gabriel García Márquez. Be sure to describe resources where he acquired ideas for his stories. Also, assign one or two Márquez short stories.

I have incorporated the following into my paper in order to provide examples and discussions:
- *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*
- *Monologue of Isabel Watching it Rain in Macondo*

Day Five

Discuss the assigned story or stories. Have your students fill out the handout on where they find magical realism within the text in class (may be done individually or in groups. I prefer they do this individually as it allows for each student to actually pick out something from their own reading and interpretation.). As a class, discuss reasons why they feel each case is relevant.
In-class exercise:
Assign your students a writing prompt on where they find magical realism within Márquez's work and why.

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Teaching *The Old Gringo* through the Mexican Revolution and Ambrose Bierce

Michael MacBride

At 199 pages, Carlos Fuentes' *Gringo Viejo* (*The Old Gringo*) seems a light read, but the novel is deceptively simple and lures the reader in with a false sense of ease. As you peel back the layers of the onion, the complexities become exposed. These complexities are more easily discovered with a basic background of the Mexican Revolution and a study of Ambrose Bierce and his writing.

In the novel, Fuentes portrays Ambrose Bierce (the old gringo for whom the novel is named) as a man seeking his death at the hands of Pancho Villa. Bierce actively joins a band of militants, fights by their side, and pursues every avenue with the hope that it will lead him to Villa—who will in turn end his life. Though Bierce does not succeed in finding Villa, he does in fact give his life to the revolution at the hand of General Tomas Arroyo. Why would a man seek his death in such a way? It is difficult to say, unless the reader knows a little more about Ambrose Bierce.

Toward the end of his life, Bierce did in fact write (in letters) that he planned to travel to Mexico. He alluded to wanting to fight in the Mexican Revolution, and he also stated his desire to meet and be killed by Pancho Villa. For this reason, it is essential to read letters that Bierce wrote during the end of his life. In particular, the letter Bierce wrote to his niece on October 1, 1913, should be read in conjunction with the novel: "if you hear

of my being stood up against a Mexican stone wall and shot to rags please know that I think that a pretty good way to depart this life … to be a Gringo in Mexico—ah, that is euthanasia!" (Joshi and Schultz 243). This quote appears almost verbatim in *The Old Gringo*: "he also said that to be stood up against a Mexican stone wall and shot to rags was a pretty good way to depart this life … 'it beats old age, disease, or falling down the cellar stairs'" (7). Later, the other part of the quote appears as well: "'To be a gringo in Mexico … Ah, that is euthanasia.' That's what the old gringo said" (9). Of all the letters, this one concretely connects the historical record and Fuentes' fictional account.

Because the truth is no one knows exactly what happened to Bierce, what Fuentes attempts to do in *The Old Gringo*, then, is to tell one possibility—the one that seems most likely, based on the historical evidence—of Bierce's disappearance. In life, Bierce was a man fascinated with mystery, and he wrote several books devoted to mysterious disappearances. If the reader is to believe Fuentes' story, then they also believe Bierce's own words in his letters. But, Bierce's fixation with mysterious disappearances, his bitterness, and his disdain for the comfortable lifestyle in Washington D.C. call to question the authenticity of his own words. That Bierce ends his life this way is ironic because Bierce began his career as a journalist and as a soldier.

As a soldier, Bierce became the longest serving and highest ranking American author as he served several tours of duty during the American Civil War. He fought in many battles which then served as fodder for his literary career. Since his character in Fuentes' book is a soldier, many comparisons can be made between his military career and the actions within the book. While it is not necessary to understand every battle he was part of, it is important to note that he fought in the Civil War and served several tours of duty. This is especially important because his experiences on the battlefield greatly influenced his writing, and the horrors he was exposed to increased his sourness.

As a journalist, Bierce worked primarily for William Randolph Hearst. Hearst was a news mogul and also owned a great deal of land in Mexico and several large haciendas. This

last piece of information is important to Fuentes' novel because one of the key disputes of the Mexican Revolution is the concept of redistribution of land, and Hearst would have done anything to prevent that from coming to pass. As such, Hearst is a direct path into the Mexican Revolution for Bierce and for readers of Fuentes' novel.

Hearst also figures into another possibility of Bierce's disappearance. Though Bierce worked for Hearst, Bierce despised him and spent some of his final days writing an expose on Hearst and his practices as a news mogul. This expose was never released out of respect for Hearst's mother, for whom Bierce had a great deal of respect. Before Bierce disappeared, he left the manuscript in safekeeping at a hotel in Texas. When people with Bierce's estate went to claim the manuscript, it was nowhere to be found. As a result, some theorists link Hearst with Bierce's disappearance. This possibility is not explored directly in *The Old Gringo*, but what is explicitly demonstrated is the power of wealthy landowners in Mexico and the hatred felt toward them by Pancho Villa's soldiers.

Hearst's companies were also responsible for publishing much of Bierce's short fiction, and, similar to Fuentes, Bierce also had a career as a writer of fiction and poetry. His first published piece of poetry is "The Basilica" and it appears in *The Californian* in September 21, 1867. While Bierce's poetry is interesting, and it may be surprising to students that a journalist was also a poet and fiction writer, it may be more difficult to make connections between that poetry and *The Old Gringo* than Bierce's prose. Depending on the class in which this is being taught, Bierce's poetry may be an excellent opportunity to expose students to American poetry. However, my focus was on his short fiction.

Primary among these texts is "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." Echoes of this short story, published in 1890, can be seen throughout *The Old Gringo*. Comparisons between Peyton Farquhar's (from "Owl Creek Bridge") prolonged moment of death (as Bierce suspends reality to explore Farquhar's life) is not dissimilar to Fuentes' representation of Bierce's pro-

longed hunt for death—and his reflections on his life along the way. Likewise, both the Old Gringo (the character) and Farquhar are soldiers at the end of their lives.

Another short story that offers similar themes to "Owl Creek Bridge" is "Horseman in the Sky." Students should not have any difficulty comparing the two short stories, and in doing so it will help them get a feel for Bierce's style. Also there is an image in the third section that is very similar to a scene from the early part of *The Old Gringo*: "Straight upright sat the rider … his long hair streamed upward, waving like a plume … [the officer] filled with amazement and terror by this apparition of a horseman in the sky … was overcome by the intensity of his emotions; his legs failed him and he fell" (8). Compare the above image to Fuentes' description of the Old Gringo's (the character) assault on the Mexican revolutionaries: "They saw him coming, but the truth was, they didn't believe it … he wasn't like them, he was an avenging white devil, he had eyes that only God in the churches had, his Stetson flew off and they saw revealed the image of God the Father" (55). Again, "Horseman in the Sky" contains the similar themes of war, death, and a touch of the supernatural.

Finally, several entries from *The Devil's Dictionary* should be explored. The following entries seem most revealing about Bierce's world view, and offer a glimpse inside his mind: alone ("In bad company"), apologize ("To lay the foundation for a future offense"), battle ("A method of untying with the teeth a political knot that would not yield to the tongue"), happiness ("An agreeable sensation arising from contemplating the misery of another"), history ("An account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers mostly knaves, and soldiers mostly fools"), patriot ("One to whom the interests of a part seem superior to those of the whole. The dupe of statesmen and the tool of conquerors"), truthful ("An ingenious compound of desirability and appearance…"), vote ("The instrument and symbol of a freeman's power to make a fool of himself and a wreck of his country"), war ("A by-product of the arts of peace. The most menacing political condition is a period

of international amity"), and white ("Black"). Each entry serves multiple purposes. First, they give the reader a glimpse inside Bierce's mind (and also the mind of Fuentes' character). Second, since the entries were a reoccurring column in the newspaper, it gives students an idea of what kind of content newspapers contained in the 19th century. And third, while there are many other short and long stories that could be used to make connections to *The Old Gringo*, the above pieces offer a survey of Bierce's style and the diversity of his work. With this brief investigation of Bierce's work out of the way, the next necessary step is to look at the Mexican Revolution.

There are many different aspects to the Mexican Revolution, but for the purposes of this course, students will gain insight through the exploration of four major revolutionaries: Carranza, Diaz, Villa, and Zapata. Excellent books have been written on each of these historical figures, and what follows below is a quick synopsis of their background, what they stood for, and what they accomplished in their lifetime. This is not to suggest that these are the only worthwhile people involved in the Mexican Revolution, but these four have been selected in an attempt to simplify it for students. Depending on the size of the class, other members of Revolution could be incorporated as well—for example, Huerta, Madero, Obregon, and Orozco.

The following information is taken from three texts: *The Making of Modern Mexico* by Frank Brandenburg; *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution* by Hector Aguilar Camin and Lorenzo Meyer; and *Mexico: the End of the Revolution* by Donald C. Hodges and Ross Gandy (the last two are brief but thorough accounts of the revolution and the key players involved; they offer excellent side-by-side comparisons of them as well).

Porfirio Diaz (1830-1915) ruled Mexico from 1876 until 1911 with only a few short breaks. Interestingly enough, he was a mestizo, of Spanish and Mixtec background. But, most importantly, historians mark the end of Diaz's regime as the beginning of the Mexican Revolution. Diaz had a strict "no re-election" policy, meaning that presidents could not serve back to back terms in office. Initially, he followed this policy when

he allowed Manuel Gonzales to take charge (Gonzales was essentially a Diaz pawn). After a short period, Diaz took power again and conveniently overlooked that policy, stating that Mexico was not ready to govern itself. His regime was marked with corruption, rigged votes, and fear tactics. During his time, the economy soared, but civil liberties paid the price. Investments with the US brought money to Mexico, but the peasant class saw little of this influx. Instead, it benefited the rich. Diaz was the primary target of Villa, Zapata, and others.

Between Diaz and Carranza (1859-1920) there were other rulers, but Carranza was the next major governmental official attempting to institute major changes. He was born in Cuatro Ciénegas in northeastern Mexico and his government lasted from 1915 until 1920. He was very well-educated and highly intelligent. His government stood for an independent court system, greater decentralization of power, and land reform; but these changes were seen as being too modest, and so Villa and Zapata fought against Carranza's government. During his time, his government did in fact institute many of its reforms, and even drafted an early version of the Mexican Constitution. Unfortunately, as with most in power, corruption did abound in his government. He also placed a bounty on Zapata's head, which led to Zapata's death.

Pancho Villa (1878-1923) was born Doroteo Arango Arámbula in north-central Mexico in San Juan del Río, Durango. Villa received very little education, and he relied on his quick wits to stay alive. When his father died, Villa became a sharecropper to support his mother. He became an outlaw at the age of sixteen when he shot a man that raped his twelve year-old sister; Villa then fled from authorities and hid in the hills. He would be involved with the revolution until 1920, when Obregon signed a peace treaty with him, and Villa retired. He was killed in 1923 when his car was sprayed with bullets. Villa fought for land reforms and against the hacienda owners. He also saw the corruption of the Diaz campaign and sought to dethrone him. After Diaz fled, Villa focused his efforts on the Huerta dictatorship. Villa's revolutionaries were famous for overcoming enor-

mous odds and winning unlikely victories. He was also respon-
sible for one of the first attacks on US soil by a foreign country.
Villa attacked and killed eighteen Americans in Columbus, New
Mexico, at which point the US sent soldiers marching through
Mexico in an attempt to find and kill him.

Fighting on the side of Villa was Zapata (1879-1919),
who was born in the central Mexico town of Anenecuilco. He
was raised by a wealthy family and later joined forces with Ma-
dero to overthrow Diaz in 1910. One year later, he split with
Madero and fought to overthrow him as well. While Villa fought
primarily in the north, Zapata focused his efforts in the south.
"Tierra y libertad" (land and liberty) was his rallying call and he
believed that only through ownership of land would Mexicans
ever achieve freedom. Zapata succeeded in overthrowing Diaz,
but he could not convince Madero of the importance of land re-
form. He went on to write about these demands in Plan de Aya-
la, in which Zapata denounced Madero's presidency, announced
Pascual Orozco as the leader of the revolution, proclaimed that
the land belonged to all the inhabitants of Mexico and not the
hacienda owners, and proclaimed the agrarian foundation of the
revolution. Much of Zapata's plan was instituted by Carranza
when he took charge—but not to the extent that Zapata wished
them to be.

The above gloss of the major players involved in the
Mexican Revolution only scratches the surface, but it does pro-
vide background on which students can build upon when read-
ing *The Old Gringo*.

There are many ways to bring together Ambrose Bierce
and his works and the Mexican Revolution; one such way is
how Fuentes presents the story of *The Old Gringo*. Bierce's
past as a soldier made him familiar with combat, his journalistic
career kept him abreast of world events, and his mysterious dis-
appearance creates the opportunity for Fuentes to suggest, what
if? And so, Bierce is the perfect gateway for readers into the
Mexican Revolution. The Civil War soldier, bored with life in
cushy D.C., sets off for the battlefields of Mexico; it sounds too
unrealistic to be believed, and yet it could be true. Truth is often

stranger than fiction, and Fuentes finds that blurry line in the real life character of Ambrose Bierce.

Ambrose Bierce and *The Old Gringo* offer the opportunity to expose students to history—both American and Mexican— and the idea that there might be more to history than words on a page. Fuentes, in a 1979 interview, addresses this very issue:

> I would like to see History relativized as much as Literature is relativized, and not become an absolute. History's absolutism depends for its existence on one thing: the elimination of Tragedy. Tragedy is the great relativizer, the great poetical strength of all Literature … but the modern World and modern history have depended very much on the expulsion of Tragedy from their realm … History wishes not to recognize that in the world of Tragedy, in the world of conflicting values, there are no guilty parties. (Tittler 51)

The Old Gringo is Fuentes' attempt to restore the tragedy to history and express this notion of there not being any guilty parties. In the novel, Fuentes portrays Ambrose Bierce as a man seeking his death at the hands of Pancho Villa—who ultimately dies, but fails in his mission. This is not the way the modern media would spin the story. Instead, it is likely the headline would run: "American Slain by Mexican" or "American Author Gunned Down by Terrorists South of the Border." Fuentes simply offers the headline *The Old Gringo*. With the former, blame is assigned—as Fuentes points out, there are "guilty parties." With the latter it suggests a more complex, more ambiguous picture where no blame is assigned.

The fuller picture is what Fuentes offers in the text of *The Old Gringo*, and what educators can offer to their students. Ambrose Bierce is a man of mystery whose history is not fully understood. His disappearance in 1913 or 1914 has never been solved. Fuentes picks up on one possible answer to the riddle and explores the idea in the course of the novel, but he does more than that as well. He also paints a vivid image of what the Mexican Revolution was like—chaotic and disordered—and what the relations between Mexico and the US were like as well—just as

unsettled and unsure. To help students gain a fuller appreciation of the novel and the circumstances portrayed within, it is important to address several aspects of the history.

To appreciate the craft and gain a better insight into the message of the novel, it is essential to utilize other texts. The Old Gringo is a compilation of different texts. The characters are each a text; the setting is a text (you can read the land, find it on a map, explore the topography, look at the border); the history of Mexico and of the US is a text that can be read; the history of relations between these two countries is a text that tells the story of shifting borders and war and can be read; and of course the novel is literally a text that can be read in many ways.

It is very important to understand Ambrose Bierce as he is the main character of the novel. Who was he? What was he famous for? What happened to him? Why did Fuentes choose him, of all people, as the protagonist of his novel? As another character in the novel, and it is truly a character in the novel, the Mexican Revolution is just as important to understand. What was it? When did it end? Who was involved? To attempt to answer these questions, readers must first unpack the texts surrounding both person and event. Then, with a better understanding of the characters within the novel, readers can then make sense of Fuentes' *The Old Gringo* and discover the blurry line between reality and fiction. Furthermore, students might even be able to see themselves in this novel.

The Old Gringo is an opportunity to learn about American and Mexican history. The novel also is a chance to investigate the difference between fact and fiction, and to see if Fuentes is right when he suggests that he "would like to see History relativized as much as Literature is relativized, and not become an absolute." To accomplish these goals, it is essential to open a dialogue between students about these topics; and *The Old Gringo* is the perfect candidate to start the debate.

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A Pedagogical Approach to Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*

Nickie Kranz

The beauty of world literature is that it can lead to open-mindedness as the student comes to the realization that his or her own life is not so different from the lives of teenagers of other cultures. Cultural texts placed in a world literature unit focused on adolescents coming of age in a war-torn country will enhance your students' world view. The texts I have compiled will grab the students and place them into the lives of others, enabling them to experience heartbreaks, tragedies, and triumphs right along with the characters. These stories are about childhood passing, the loss of innocence, accepting responsibility, and surviving under the harshest of conditions. I highly recommend teaching *Like Water for Chocolate* to upper level high school students as one text in a series of world literature that focuses on children of war, and the lesson plan I have created for this novel is the focus of this article.

    Like Water for Chocolate is set during the Mexican Revolution, and a critical reading will enable your students to explore the family dynamics, love, traditions, rights of children, humor, and politics that are abundant in the novel. This lesson plan focuses on Esquivel's use of historical events, magical realism, metaphoric language, and adolescent coming-of-age in the midst of war. *Like Water for Chocolate* is valuable because studying it gives insight into the early 20th century female Mexican

woman that is not widely known. Although Esquivel's female characters are encased in the traditional Mexican roles of wife, mother, daughter, sister, and maid, these roles are developed to their fullest extent; this is a story about strong Mexican women filled with determination.

     Como Agua para Chocolate, Esquivel's first novel, was published in Spanish in 1989. The English translation was published in 1992 and became an instant best-seller.[1] The film adaptation was a success as well, becoming one of the most popular foreign-language films in American history, grossing $8.5 million at the box office (Altan). Point out to the students that the film will be viewed after the reading of the novel is complete.

     You can introduce your students to the characters in the novel by setting up the story in some variation of the following: This is the story of Tita, an adolescent girl who is struggling for independence and looking to claim her own identity. Her knowledge of life is based on her experiences in the kitchen, and the reader must analyze the novel through the role and power of food, guided by the recipes that begin each chapter. In this book, food is the direct cause of a person's physical and emotional state, and food also serves as a channel through which one person's emotions can be transmitted to another. Tita is trapped in a family tradition that will not allow her to marry her true love Pedro, who plans to ask Mama Elena for Tita's hand. Mama Elena says to Tita: "If he intends to ask for your hand, tell him not to bother …You know perfectly well that being the youngest daughter means you have to take care of me until the day I die" (*LWFC* 10).

     Before reading *Like Water for Chocolate*, it is imperative that the students gain background knowledge on the history of Mexico, the Mexican Revolution, and the culture of the Mexican people at the time of the revolution. This knowledge will prove to enhance their understanding of the novel. In this lesson plan, Mexico's history as well as the highlights of the Mexican Revolution are researched by the students; each student is assigned one specific time-frame of Mexican history to research, and each student should deliver a brief five minute presentation

to the class on their findings.[2] Their research will help them to better understand instances in the novel: how political instability made it impossible for Tita's family to travel safely, so they rely on their connections with a Chinaman who deals in smuggled goods to get certain items, such as wedding dress material; why bandits raid the family ranch and rape Chencha; how Tita's sister Gertrudis runs away from home and why she chooses to join a band of revolutionary soldiers.

The students' research should include the influential people of the revolution, such as Porfirio Diaz, Francisco Madero, Venustiano Carranza, Emiliano Zapata, Francisco Villa, and Lazaro Cardenas, as these historical figures are mentioned in the novel. For example, there is a reference to folklore about Villa that he was known to "remove his enemies' bloody hearts so he can devour them" (*LWFC* 68). Another example of how Tita's family is affected by the revolution is how Tita's nephew's wet nurse is killed when "she was struck by a stray bullet from a battle between the rebels and the federales" (*LWFC* 75). Upon conclusion of the historical presentations, the students should be able to answer the following questions:

> How did these influential men contribute to the Mexican Revolution?

> What was the cause of the Mexican Revolution?

> What was the outcome of the Mexican Revolution?

As a class, glance at the chapters so the students get a feel for the layout of the book, which is organized in monthly installments. Explain that one chapter/month will be assigned per day (this should not be a problem because the chapters are fairly short and easy to read). The lesson plan is divided into twelve parts, each part representing a chapter from the novel. Some of the chapters refer to aspects of Mexico that were not covered in the background information sessions. These aspects should be addressed as they appear in the novel.

Before the first chapter is assigned, take another day to define the following: aspects of the Mexican culture in the era of

1910-1930, magical realism, and metaphoric language, because the students will be expected to look for those elements in each chapter. Some "fast facts" about the Mexican culture of that time are as follows: close contact is at the center of family life in Mexico in the early 1900's; households can include several generations; grandparents share in the educating of the children just as much as the parents, and they are responsible for taking care of the house any time that both of the parents are away; older girls almost always remain at home until they marry; Mexican families form the core of the country's social structure; the strength of the family forms the foundation of Mexico's political stability; extended families are extremely self-sufficient and closed to outsiders, with the exception of very close friends who are considered family.[3]

Magical realism is a literary style that generally describes work that combines fantasy with reality to create a mythical occurrence. Magical realism is often described as a unique product of Latin America, but German Franz Roh is actually credited for its inception. "Roh introduced it into artistic discourse in the mid-1920s through the German phrase *Magischer Realismus*" (Simpkins 141). Latin American authors were drawn to Roh's literary concept because it proved to be "a suitable means to express the 'marvelous reality' unique to their own culture" (141). Laura Esquivel employs this technique throughout her novel in such a way that the mythical occurrences do not seem odd to the characters at all. The characters accept the supernatural incidents as a part of everyday life.

I suggest that you point out an example of Esquivel's use of magical realism so the students know what to look for when reading the first chapter. An excellent example occurs almost immediately in the novel when Nacha, the family's Indian cook and Tita's primary caretaker, is present at Tita's unusual birth; Tita is born on a tide of tears that floods the kitchen. This event is not at all shocking to Nacha, a woman who firmly believes in and abides by the mythical occurrences that occur in her domestic sphere: "Nacha swept up the residue the tears had left on the red stone floor. There was enough salt to fill a ten-pound sack

– it was used for cooking and lasted a long time" (6).

I also suggest that you encourage your students to reflect on an event in their own lives that may have had magical elements in it; in other words, an event that had an unexplainable, almost miraculous outcome. They may be more willing and able to do this if you provide an example of your own first. An example that students may be able to relate to is how, for people of the Catholic faith, the body and blood of Christ become 'mythically' tangible during communion. A suggestion such as this may open up their imaginations, thus allowing them to come up with personal life experiences.

When you address the definition and uses of metaphoric language, I suggest that you refer to examples that are in the novel. An example of a simile occurs on page 36: "She heard, as she passed, the whispers in the church, and she felt each comment like a stab in her back." An example of metaphoric language is on page 136: "You know how men are. They all say they won't eat off a plate that isn't clean."

Each day that a chapter is to have been read, the students should expect a quiz. These quizzes will be peer-graded (which will save the instructor time), with a class discussion following. The purpose of the quizzes is to ensure that the students are doing the reading, and to improve their critical thinking skills. The quiz that I have created to accompany the first chapter is as follows:

1. Who is the narrator?
2. What is Tita's world like in comparison to that of her sisters?
3. Why can't Tita marry Pedro?
4. Tita detests the family tradition – what questions does she ask?

The class discussion that accompanies the first chapter includes the following questions:

1. Where did you find magical realism?
2. Where did you find similes and/or metaphoric language?

3. Where did you find references to culture/family traditions?
4. Lastly, consider your findings. What was the author's purpose in utilizing them? Did these findings contribute to your understanding of this chapter?

Also, with each chapter a writing prompt will be assigned (to be done in class). These prompts will allow the students to bring the story into their own personal lives so they can make connections with the content in the novel. I like these writing prompts because I firmly believe that students become better writers with *practice*. The writing prompts are structured in such a way that every student, regardless of gender or ethnicity, can make their own personal connections to the story. The following writing prompt accompanies the first chapter: On page 7 we learn that the kitchen is Tita's 'realm.' I believe that everyone has a place where they feel most confident, as well as proud of who they are and what they can do. Where is *your* realm?

After the book has been completed, I suggest watching the film adaptation. It would be fun to make one of the recipes out of the book to enjoy while watching the film. Hand out the guidelines for the final paper, which is a written response to an essay question that focuses on the issue of the instability in the family and the instability in the political environment, due after the film has been watched.

If you are interested in putting together a series of cultural texts that focus on adolescents who are struggling for independence and who encounter obstacles while searching for their own identity in a time of political instability, you could move from this story into *All the Pretty Horses* by Cormac McCarthy—a book about an adolescent male dealing with unstable times along the Mexican border. A third selection for this unit could be Scott Simon's *Pretty Birds*—a novel about a teen named Irena Zaric living in Sarajevo whose family is brutalized by Serb soldiers during a period of "ethnic cleansing" against the Muslims. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* takes place in Afghanistan during the Taliban invasion; it describes Afghan customs and traditions, male friendship, the influence of fathers

over sons, and betrayal. If you feel that *The Kite Runner* is too long a read, a shorter, less dense story about adolescent life in Afghanistan is Deborah Ellis' *The Breadwinner*; it is a story about a girl who must disguise herself as a boy in order to survive during the Taliban invasion.

I believe it is comforting for students to realize that the difficulties and delights they are experiencing in their teen years are similar to those experienced by adolescents from other parts of the world. Reading about other teens going through common life experiences while also struggling to survive under the harshest of conditions will heighten the students' awareness of global problems and may also create a feeling of compassion for the young people who suffer daily in a war-torn country.

Notes

1. All subsequent references to Esquivel's novel will occur parenthetically, as *LWFC* and page number.

2. For a copy of the research assignments or for the lesson plan in its entirety, feel free to e-mail me at nickie.kranz@mnsu.edu.

3. Two texts that I used to verify this information, that efficiently explain the most basic elements of Mexican culture, are: Jermyn, Leslie and Mary Jo Reilly's *Cultures of the World: Mexico* (New York: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2004) and Jack Rummel's *Mexico* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999). See my Works Consulted page for other useful resources.

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Using Visual Art to Assess Thinking in a Language Arts Classroom

Jennifer Budenski

The students are quiet this morning (sleepy—not engaged). I decide against the overhead florescent lights and open the blinds. Most have their notebooks on the table and pencils in hand, but few are writing. I decide to meander around the horseshoe of tables and peer over their shoulders. I give them a lap to get used to the idea that I'm going to stop and ask some questions eventually.

"Anthony, which activity do you want to do?" I ask, nodding toward the three options on the board.

"I dunno. Write I guess," he says, looking down at his notebook, its pages outlined in sketches of muscular serpents and symbols.

"Okay," I say, pleased.

"But I already know how to do a three paragraph essay," he says, still not looking at me.

What's a three paragraph essay, I wonder. I say, "I haven't seen you write in paragraphs. Show me."

"But how could I have passed the BST if I didn't know how?" he asks, this time looking at me.

"I believe you, Anthony. But I'd still like to see what you can do." I'm not giving up.

"Man, I already know how." He rolls his head, then his eyes away from me.

"All right. Then do it," I say. When did this become a confrontation?

[Silence]

"Anthony, like always, it's your choice."

In my alternative setting, this is a typical and always dispiriting conversation. I work with students of average to high ability who lack what some researchers, like Shari Tishman and David Perkins from Harvard's Project Zero, call the inclination or sensitivity toward critical thinking. They *can* think, but they are not *inclined* to do so in school, or are not *sensitive* to the classroom cues that call for critical thinking (Perkins 272). I don't feel frustrated or angry about this. The baggage many of my students carry—addiction, periodic homelessness, depression, anxiety disorders, emotional/behavioral disorders, learning disabilities (both diagnosed and undiagnosed), broken families, isolation and alienation—this all overwhelms me. When I get a blank-faced stare in response to the question "What did you learn today?" I'm not bitter. I simply feel ineffective. I didn't know how to teach Anthony. He wrote beautiful "flows" for me, but never a paragraph, or anything remotely "schoolish."

I've experimented with using art as a motivator in recent years. These kids are all so creative, right? Unfortunately, I've had no personal experience with art since junior high. It has been frustrating to motivate students to perform a rap, draw a picture, or craft something—because my intuition told me that it would help them—and not know how to make meaning from the process or product. I graded those activities on whether or not the product seemed "polished," gave extra credit for explicit (often awkward) references to *Gatsby* or *Mockingbird*, and hoped someone had learned something. Could art be more than a motivating novelty in my classroom?

Looking for Answers

In the summer of 2005, during my professional development activities with the Minnesota Writing Project, Melissa Borgmann, Director of the Juno Collective, demonstrated

a thinking routine called Critical Response Protocol (CRP). Similar to Abigail Housen's Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) (Housen; Yenawine), CRP poses a scripted series of questions to students to engage them in critical thinking:

- What do you notice?
- What does it remind you of?
- How does it make you feel?
- What questions do you want to ask?
- Can you speculate to answer those questions?

I sought further training from Judi Petkau, Education Director at the Weisman Art Museum, and my Hopkins Alternative Program Off-Campus Pavilion (OCP-HAP) version of the Weisman's Artful Writing Program was launched. I won a grant that I used to pay Melissa Borgmann to consult with me, and in Judi I found a wise and willing arts partner. I implemented a nine-week arts-infused literacy curriculum and saw my students' engagement and performance improve measurably. For example, in the 10-day period preceding Artful Writing, only 60% of my students made adequate daily progress in terms of their classroom participation. During Artful Writing, 90% met our program goal for participation. In the term preceding Artful Writing, I taught traditional literary analysis curriculum. Twenty-five percent of my students didn't attempt even a draft of the final paper. After Artful Writing, 85% of my students not only completed the final art analysis essay, but, using the same rubric focusing on evidentiary reasoning that I had used for the literary analysis essay, the average student writing score moved from a C to a B—and their writing skills scores improved slightly on the 6 Traits Rubric as well. Finally, I was feeling effective.

Inspired, I set out to find more funding for the 2006-2007 school year. Our district was cutting back and even our meager elective offerings were to be curtailed. I applied for grants from Target, the StarTribune Foundation, and others to fund a series of arts residencies. I reasoned that if our program were never to have an art teacher, our core curricular teachers needed to learn how to paint, dance, act, compose music, take photographs and make films by working with experts in these fields. My requests

totaled $9000. I received $400 from MCTE.

At the end of last year, I started reading about arts education. Google led me to arts in education advocacy reports. For example, the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities' 1999 report on the impact of arts education claims that arts exposure or arts-infused curriculum helps "level the playing field" for students from "disadvantaged circumstances" (Fiske viii; Catterall et al. 2). While arts participation, whether infused into core curriculum or a co-curricular activity, seems to benefit all students, this report suggests that it seems to help students from low-income backgrounds more. Not all OCP students come from low-income families, but they share a sort of resource-deficit profile: educational gaps, lack of appropriate role models, physical and mental health issues, and more. Although Judi helped me to question the validity of advocacy reports which implied but could not prove a correlation between arts and academic achievement, my initial research and my Artful Writing experiment were telling me that my students could be motivated by arts exposure. Fortunately, Judi Petkau agreed to volunteer as my arts partner, this year visiting my classroom to teach art as often as she could, 2-4 times per month. The $400 would buy our supplies.

The Video Poem

After shepherding students through self-portraiture, manuscript illumination, and clay animations, all of which were peripherally tied to my curriculum, Judi and I found our footing. We collaborated to create a poetry unit in which visual arts activities were infused in the daily curriculum; that is, one where arts thinking was part of our daily routine. We had both read Kelly Gallagher's chapter on using metaphor as a tool of literary analysis in *Deeper Reading*, and Judi encouraged me to ask the students to interpret poetry through the use of visual metaphors. Her ideas reminded me of an MCTE presentation I had seen in which Mike Hazzard and David Bengston demonstrated video poems Bengston's classes had created.

We invented the parameters of the OCP video poetry

project with students, through trial and error, in one day across my three class periods. Students would use CRP both to perform close reading of a poem of their choice and then create a short video that would retell the poem in images.

Students spent several days culling their favorite poems from my classroom library. We practiced making visual metaphors by isolating lines in several of the chosen poems. For instance, the "broken vows" in Lord Byron's "When We Two Parted" "seemed like torn paper" according to Kori. Amber thought lines from the same poem evoked winter images. Mo saw a dandelion in Deborah Keenan's line "her nerve flared and fled." After a few days of reading and creative writing experiments inspired by individual poems, I directed students to choose one poem for focused, analytical reading. They knew they would have to find or generate visual metaphors for their texts. Many students initially chose Pablo Neruda's "The Mountain and the River" because, as Todd joked, it would be "easy to find pictures for it." It was one of three poems that Kori chose, and she eventually narrowed to this text because she wanted to find pictures from Honduras, where she was born.

Kori began her reading by finding literal associations for the images in Neruda's poem. A mountain was a mountain, a river a river. She was excited to share each image she found with me, sometimes to the point of my annoyance. On the second day of the project, I was relieved not to hear her calling for me. Between working with other students, I noticed Kori had left the room. I found her on the couch in our library area, crying. She had the poem in her lap and had annotated it. I sat next to her. "What's going on, Kori?"

"This is too close," she said. "Look," handing the poem to me. The final two stanzas had been labeled "birth mom to me" and "Davy [her adoptive mother] said to me." When she had read the seventh line of the poem "Who are those who suffer?" she began to personalize the text so that the eighth line, "I do not know but they are my people," pushed her to read the text as a metaphor for her adoption. Instead of searching on the Internet, she brought in pictures from home the next day.

Kori has been my student for three semesters. She does a lot of negative self-talk: "You know I don't write, Jen" or "I can't read." With coaching, she has completed enough assignments to get by as a "B" student and has passed her Basic Standards Tests in reading and composition. In her video interpretation of "The Mountain and the River," she demonstrated advanced literacy and critical thinking skills. As a writer, she had to decide how to present her voice, transition between key ideas, maintain visual coherence, revise, edit, and proofread. As a reader, she had to decode the shifting mood of the text, the possible relationship between the speaker in the poem and those who suffer, the movement and pace of the text, the fluidity of the river metaphor, and the richness of possible meanings.

While the order of ideas in the poem was clearly already established, Kori chose to foreshadow her ending epiphany about the voices of her two mothers by inserting a photograph of herself under the text "I do not know, but they call to me" and a photograph of Honduran children under "We suffer." By visually interpreting this shift in the poem, Kori demonstrated both her perceptive reading of its mood and the decision-making behind the coherence of her own visual text. As she neared the end of her video, she faced the complicated decision of how to represent her two mothers' voices. "We're lucky to have so many students here who speak Spanish this term. Why don't you ask Blanca or Victoria to read her lines in Spanish?" I suggested. But Kori was adamant about maintaining silence in the film. She had experimented with music for a sound track but hadn't been satisfied. She was becoming increasingly independent. Some time later, she showed me what she had decided upon—two converging lines of text, one English moving left to right (carrying her forward?) and one Spanish moving right to left (looking back?). Finally, she broke the final stanza of the poem into its three lines corresponding to three chronological photographs of her with her adoptive mother. I told her "this is the smartest reading I've ever seen you do."

Kori edited for two days, and still when I see her show this film to others, she has her finger poised on the touch pad to

use the pause button to get the timing of the text just right.

One of the chapters in an arts advocacy report I had read asserted that being engaged in an extended artistic process helps students become risk managers, making choices about project outcomes and giving themselves permission to fail and start again—thereby building resilience (Fiske xi). Kori's project is the best example of this assertion from my class. Others' video poems weren't as fluent, didn't have what Judi called Kori's "cinematic eye." However, I paid close attention to their thinking while reading. They delved deeper than they had before, even if they didn't know they were doing it—as Mo said when I explained how beautiful his dandelion image was for Deborah Keenan's poem, "I did that?" Up to the last minute, they were making critical choices in editing their films, perhaps more intuitively than intentionally, but, as Shari Tishman points out in one article about habits of mind, "Sometimes, to know something is to feel it rightly" (Tishman 45).

Todd, who had chosen the same poem as Kori ostensibly because it would be easier, spent the last day of the project trying to layer his vocal recording of the poem, images, and key words he had lifted from the text. He was a particularly astute problem finder:

> "Jen, how do I make that picture last longer?"
> "Jen, I don't have a picture for that word."
> "Jen, that line doesn't exactly match up with what I said."

While Todd's final product may not demonstrate the same level of cinematic sophistication or personal meaning that Kori's did, he did display much of the same thinking. He read the poem beyond the literal, created apt (if not totally coherent) visual metaphors, and arrived at a defendable and consistent interpretation of the poem, that the speaker was feeling isolated.

At the end of this project, I was satisfied with student engagement as a measure of success. I merely observed their thinking, didn't push metacognition. In the next unit, I would encourage students to articulate their intuitions.

Painting Our Visual Metaphors

We had experienced so much success with visual metaphors that I decided to use visual metaphors to organize a 20 day American literature unit. I surveyed my book collection and culled six themes that students could choose from: the American dream, immigration, women's issues, men's issues, religion, and mental health. Students voted on their three favorite themes, and I placed them in groups informed both by their choices and their abilities. Their first group task, before reading, was to create a visual metaphor for their understanding of their theme. For instance, the immigration group decided that immigration in America is like gasoline. Then, they searched for observable images of gasoline on the Internet and sketched a gas pump from observation. After creating their visual metaphors, groups read a common text that I had selected for each theme, ranging from "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" in the religion group to an excerpt from *A Gravestone Made of Wheat* for the American Dream. Instead of a traditional study guide, students applied their metaphors to the text to test their hypotheses. Some decided to change their metaphors; some decided to extend them. The religion group had chosen a heart as their visual metaphor, but ultimately specified that it had to be an anatomically accurate heart, not a Hallmark version, for example. Some students who had envisioned mental illness as a balloon decided that it was more like a storm after reading "The Yellow Wallpaper."

I presented each group with a range of classic, modern and contemporary American fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. I offered the American dream group *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragged Dick*, but they chose *There Are No Children Here*, *The Circuit*, Eminem's autobiography, and *A Hole in My Life*—all contemporary nonfiction, which simply meant that I had to help fill in the blanks by teaching them how the theme was presented in classic and modern American fiction to place their choices in context. I did this individually over the course of the 10 days we spent reading in class (we have a no homework policy in my alternative school), and as I did, I invited students to further complicate their visual metaphors. Stephenie added a lottery ticket and psy-

chedelic shadows to her initial wad of cash image after reading Eminem's story. Dennis added blood and a clock to his American dream visual after reading *The Circuit*. (Stephenie later told me that she had only pretended to finish reading the book and had made those choices based on what she already knew about Eminem. Dennis had been impressed with how hard Francisco Jimenez's family had to work just to get the basics that most of us take for granted.)

Groups also viewed films related to their themes before deciding on the final elements of their extended metaphors. Instead of writing thematic analysis essays as a final product, I invited students to paint their metaphors on canvas (without telling them they would ultimately have to write an explanation of their paintings).

Dennis is a bright, avid reader from a very large, supportive, deeply religious family. As a senior, Dennis had not passed his BST in composition. He rarely speaks in class, but always finishes his assignments. Writing in his class notebook is organized, but rarely punctuated or developed. During this unit he finished reading his book *The Circuit* so quickly that he decided to read its sequel also. Dennis' math teacher has often commented on his spatial intelligence, and he has said he wants to work on snowmobile engines as a career.

The first day working on his canvas for this unit, Dennis was unable to remix the particular shade of green that he had used to begin painting George Washington's face (observed from the dollar bill in his pocket). With Judi's assistance, he realized that he could use different shades of green to suggest dimension on Washington's face, opening a new range of interpretive possibilities for his metaphor. Because the left side of Washington's face where his eye appears became darker than the right, Dennis was able to conclude that "the face looks like it is sleeping and just waiting to be made or spent," adding a new dimension to his metaphor.

I saw this happen again and again as students worked to translate their original sketches onto canvas. The medium and their skill or lack of skill in it opened new avenues of thought.

They were *translating* their thinking from reading to the visual, from one literacy to another. Adam, working on his immigration metaphor, decided to place his gas pump in a desert at sunset because he liked the orange that he mixed, and the barbed wire of the border in his painting became sharper and more frightening because of the brush stroke he practiced. Erik's heart developed puzzle pieces because of the texture of the paint. Ben had to work in chalk pastels instead of acrylic paint because the paint couldn't capture his vision. He clarified his thinking through his choice of medium as others had extended or complicated theirs due to the limits and possibilities of the form.

Nearly all students were engaged and focused on our painting days, unlocked from what another advocacy report, *The Third Space*, refers to as their habitual "postures" of disengagement and cynicism, exercising their atrophied imaginations (Stevenson 22). My challenge was not only to make some meaning of their artwork, but to push them to articulate their thinking. I provided students with a metacognitive frame, which included these sentence stems:

- I chose (my theme) because…
- I see this issue in society/the world/my life…
- In classic/modern/contemporary American literature this theme…
- I know this from my reading because…
- In my painting this theme…

They worked on this assignment as they finished their paintings, and as they did that, I tutored individuals and small groups on how these themes have transformed over time as well as performing my own critical responses to their artworks. Judi literally turned their canvases upside down and asked them to reconsider their thinking. I saw many of them reaching for a richness and complexity of thinking that I had not seen from them in response to reading. I asked students to self-assess their thinking during the painting process using the Six Continua of Thinking published on the Harvard Artful Thinking website ("The Six Continua" online). Dennis felt that his greatest strength had been "essence-capturing" which describes student

work as "insightful, captures the heart of things. Identifies key themes, characteristics or elements. Sees deep structure. Shows an appreciation for the relative importance of things." He also indicated that he had thought "beyond the given," the continuum which describes student work that "probes beneath the surface, reaches beyond the obvious, stretches for new applications, questions, and connections." He worried that maybe his thinking hadn't been fully "multi-dimensional," but all other continua he rated himself at a 3 or above on a 4 point scale.

As a summative assessment, students wrote museum placards to hang next to their paintings in our classroom. Dennis wrote of his painting

> It seems that everyone wants the American dream. Now to today's standard it is having a house, money, and a nice car. I see the American dream everywhere. It's at school because you have to get an education to advance in life. Also at work, some people try hard get promoted and move up in life and get rich. On TV, the American dream is portrayed as being young, hot, rich, and having a house. The American dream has also changed over the years. It used to be focused on white males getting land and property; now it is about any one getting anything they want, but only if they are born into it or are lucky. In his memoir, The Circuit, Francisco Jimenez' family was Mexican and as hard as they worked and tried, they never really got ahead in life. But only because the author of the book was so smart as a kid and got scholarships was he able to go to college. So unless fortune falls in your face you don't have a good outlook on the American dream aspect of life.
>
> So after all of my thinking and reading, I decided to paint a face on a dollar bill, money signs, and a clock because the American dream is money, time, and power. The face looks like it is sleeping and just waiting to be made or spent. The clock symbolizes that stealing is another way to achieve the American dream. And last the money signs going red to black symbolize the blood that sometimes surrounds money.

Dennis allowed me to coach him through two drafts—a first for us. But when I challenged him for a third time to include

more of his ideas ("Dennis, what happened to what you said about the farmer in *A Gravestone Made of Wheat* that 'no matter what they take from him they can't take his hard work'?"), he told me, "Come on, Jen. It's done."

Dennis successfully synthesized information and impressions from a variety of sources and in both a visual and written medium. Yet, I experienced the dilemma of the alternative school teacher: I wanted to praise Dennis for his progress and learning, but I also wanted to push him to reach for higher standards in his writing. Adopting the attitude of the artist's workshop as a teacher allowed me to take from the experience what had been successful—student thinking. Rather than belaboring what we hadn't accomplished, I could consider how what we did accomplish could be used again. Is this the rationalization of the alternative school teacher, or a healthy definition of achievement?

Serendipitously, during this unit I was reading *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* by Eric Jensen. Jensen echoes the idea of breaking students out of their habitual learning postures and adds the methodology to do so:

> Once you learn to evoke a greater variety of learner states, you will begin to *uncouple the learner's rigidity*. You'll open up enormous flexibility because you will have artificially decoupled the stereotyped set of behaviors to which unmotivated students have become accustomed. (108)

Particularly for spatially oriented students like Dennis, visual arts activities seem to evoke a productive and focused mental state and a calm emotional one. In my setting, helping many emotionally challenged students learn to set aside their daily stresses, which can be as significant as worrying about where to sleep the next night or as insignificant (yet still seemingly insurmountable) as disliking a best friend's boyfriend, is critical to classroom engagement and learning. For many of my students, visual arts activities seem like a shortcut to a healthy mental space. Dennis, who habitually faced a blank page with trepidation, drafted his short essay in one class period after having spent a week rehearsing his ideas on canvas.

Artful Writing

As we neared spring break, many of us started to feel fatigue. We had created an American literature museum in our classroom with students' paintings and placards, and I decided to reteach pieces of my Artful Writing curriculum from the previous year in preparation for a visit to a "real" museum. The unit would give us a rest from lengthy reading and allow students to enjoy some creative writing experiments. Judi and I scheduled a trip to the Weisman for the week before spring break, and I settled into a comfortable weekly routine of reading short excerpts of "artful writing," critically responding to works of art from the Weisman, and watching as students attempted some of the strategies they identified in the excerpts and art. For example, we surmised that visual artists use color to move our eyes around a canvas, and perhaps writers use punctuation or line breaks to control the pace of how we read their texts. Then, students would experiment with purposeful run-on sentences and fragments to control the pace of a piece, or try to build a motif with color. Our essential questions for the unit were, "When is writing art?" and "What do artful writers do?"

I had such success with these activities and exercises last year that I was unprepared for students to resist. But they did. Maybe they were tired of winter. Maybe they were too eager for spring break. Maybe we had too many interruptions in our routine—a snow day, advisory groups, fluctuations in student attendance. Whatever the case, I ended up working so hard keeping everyone caught up and on track that I feel as though I lost sight of making progress. But in these hectic times, one student caught my attention.

De'Andre had enrolled in our program at the beginning of our American literature unit. He had chosen to read *There Are No Children Here* by Alex Kotlowitz and had connected with it deeply, he told me, because he had "lived in the projects in Chicago." His art in response to the book, however, was an uninspired bag of money on a black background. I was excited about my initial success in matching De'Andre with a book so soon after his arrival (I'm not usually so lucky.). In our advisory

meeting, he told me that in the mainstream high school he felt like he "was always in trouble." He would go to class, and then "they" would pull him out to go to the office. Or he would come to class late, and teachers would "disrespect him." Already in his first few weeks at OCP, he had experienced the significant success of finishing a book. I told him that I was surprised to hear he had been in trouble at the high school.

When we started our writing experiments, De'Andre just didn't get it—or he just didn't want to do it. When I asked him to take an object from his pocket and describe it, he chose his cell phone and wrote, "It's blue It has numbers It has a battery"; when I asked him to revise to show how he felt about his phone, he added, "I chose my phone b/c it is very important to me. B/c I need to call people and people need to call me. I love hearing my ringtones and the pics I have." By day two, we had read a few excerpts of descriptive writing including a short passage from Ann Morrow Lindbergh's *Gifts from the Sea* and some enigmatic imagist poems by William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. We had started to talk about how details evoke emotion. I asked De'Andre to write a description of his hand. He wrote, "My hand is rough and bruised and also scared. My hands are also big. Brown on one side and the other side is lighter. I have big knuckles on my hand." I stopped by his table to read his work.

"De-Andre, how do you feel about the bruises and scars on your hand?"

He smiled a little.

"Are you proud of them?" I guessed.

"Yeah," he said.

"Can you describe your hands in a way that shows how proud you are?"

"Yeah," he said.

Then De'Andre wrote, "My hand is rough like sandpaper, b/c of fights. I have brusied and scared hands b/c I earn it. They are also big, very big. They are brown like the coat of a lion. The other side is light and soft like the belly of a alligator. My knuckles poke out b/c their so big." With enthusiasm, De'Andre read this revision aloud to the class.

Day by day, we made incremental progress. Unlike other students, De'Andre hadn't been in my class when we had previously practiced CRP. His initial efforts in analyzing art were rushed, his conclusions sometimes off base. For example, he thought the purpose of the photograph *Men's Fashions* by Eugene Atget would be "an advertisement for a store." Yet at the same time, when I asked him to speak in the voice of the figure in the photograph, he wrote, "I don't feel or see anything I feel very stiff like I can't move," an accurate insight into the mood and perhaps meaning of the piece. While he wasn't analyzing or articulating very deeply, he was beginning to "feel rightly."

One of the Weisman's Artful Writing activities, "Traveling Through," asks students to pretend to enter into a work of art, to imagine how they would have to change physically to gain entrance, where they would travel, and how they would exit. I happened to have a book of medieval religious art by Hieronymous Bosch that Judi had loaned me when we had read *The Inferno* earlier in the year. Several boys had connected with the graphic oddity of the images, so I tried it with De'Andre. This day, his description took flight:

> First I shink myself
> I entered through the maze of vines as I attemp to climb, I realize that the only way out is up so I strive to get to the top but I'm approached with another problem. These two humans are hunting the dog looking creature. so I climb into the fresh wound of the beast and I exit through the mouth of this monster. Now I'm curious should I go back?

Tellingly, this page in his notebook has four words or phrases crossed out and the word "fresh" inserted; the line "So I climb into the fresh wound of the beast and I exit through the mouth of this monster" is underlined as his best work. De'Andre started to see himself as a writer in our classroom.

Before the end of the unit, De'Andre drafted and revised two poems in response to art. The first began as a description of the color blue in *Untitled #10* by Alexander Corazzo. He wrote, "Blue in the heart reminds me of the midnite sky with no

stars and it also looks like a intense blue. The light blue in the background is like moving stream of water on a tropical island." I told De'Andre, "This reminds me of a poem. Why don't you try breaking what you have here into lines?" So he wrote, "The Meaning of Blue" in class that day through several drafts.

>Blue in the heart
>reminds me of midnite
>sky with no stars
>The blue is solid
>compared to its context,
>a swift blue
>Does the blueish,
>Purpleish heart mean a dead heart,
>or just a broken one.

De-Andre's second poem was a monologue in response to the photograph *Young Boy Coal Miner* by Lewis Hine. He had successfully practiced monologue at our museum visit. The field trip was too quick, as usual, because our students only attend school from 8:15 until 11:35; with time for transportation, that gave us two short hours in the museum. Judi and I focused on two works of art: *Madam Twisto*, a sculpture by Judy Onofrio and *The Pedicord Apts* by Ed and Nancy Kienholz. We split into two groups and flip-flopped visiting the two pieces. With the sculpture, I facilitated the writing of a simple diamond poem using words from a student-generated bank (an activity that Judi had modeled in Artful Writing training). We celebrated the best word offerings on the list ("burlesque," "princess") and compared interpretations arising from these words. Then we cooperated to write the poem telling our predominant impression of the piece.

During all these activities at the museum, De'Andre fell into his typical physical posture, as if he weren't paying attention. Yet at some point he started a monologue in his notebook in response to *The Pedicore Apts*: "I'm tired of being here, in this place. I hate the smell in the walls. My Neighbor's need to shut there dogs up. the old man has his radio on blast and I can't sleep. the family down the hall keeps singing they need to keep it down." Undated in his notebook, I found his second poem, his

response to *Young Boy Coal Miner*:

> I'm tired
> I'm tired of working
> I'm tired of being dirty
> I'm tired of smelling coal
> I'm tired of doing dangerous jobs
> My hand are raffuled and my head throbs
> I'm tired, my back hurts and This
> chewing tobacco irritates my teeth and
> gums, my chest burns of anger,
> Now I lay me down
> to sleep, I'm tired.

Over the course of the unit, I saw both De'Andre's writing and his thinking deepening. Most notably, he began to take creative risks with word choice and form. He began to revise recursively, scribbling out lines and starting again in his notebook. He practiced shifting perspectives and using allusions. What he was writing started to remind him of other things he had heard and seen.

Our visit to the Weisman fell on the Tuesday of the week before spring break. Even my most dedicated students, including De'Andre, were losing momentum. Their final task during the museum visit was to find a work of art that "matched" an excerpt from our reading packet in any way that they could determine and explain. My plan for the last few days before break called for students to type those impressions into a short piece of analytical writing. De'Andre had made an incredible juxtaposition: "How Do I Love Thee?" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning next to *World's Fair Mural* by James Rosenquist. When I asked him about his choice in class on Wednesday, he said, "You know. They both feel so big. The painting is big, you know, but it *feels* big." "Another word for that feeling is vast," I told him. He worked quietly in his notebook for the rest of the class, and I let him do his thinking.

The next day—the Thursday before spring break—De'Andre said he lost his notebook and wouldn't be able to finish the assignment. He would try to remember it and write it again. During breaks in his animated conversation with another

student, he wrote

> The painting <u>World Fair Mural</u> reminds me of this called <u>How I love thee?</u> both of these thing gives me a vast feeling about them. The reason I say that is because they both had variety, it gives you a chance to explore your mind. The painting was very big, the poems has a vast feeling to it also. The painting has different pictures in one, like it had a spoon, a picture of the moon, and a box of popcorn. The poem talks about the different types of things the author loves. The poem also says, "I love thee to the depth and breadth and height by soul can reach. These are examples of variety both the painting and the poems has. Another thing that caught me was the mood or tone of both. The mood and tone was good. Because the painting has good feeling pics and the poem was talking about love and love is a sign of good.

I had told De'Andre earlier in the unit I was excited about his progress and wanted to write about him in this article. He was pleased and brought me a signed permission form to use his writing. Shamelessly, I used this article as a plea for revision: "Come on, De'Andre, I know you can do better. I want to use this for my article." That Friday, the day before spring break, while his classmates were in the multipurpose room playing charades, De'Andre worked with me to lift an outline from his first draft, and then alone, he wrote a second:

> The painting <u>World's Fair Mural</u> reminds me of the poem "How Do I Love Thee?" Both of these things gives me a vast feeling about them. The painting was very big. The actual size of the painting is 240 inches. On reason I say the poems gives me a vast feeling is because of something the author said. The author said "I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach. The two of them also had variety. The painting had different pictures like, a spoon, a picture of the moon, and a box of popcorn. The poem on the other list 16 reason why she loves him. Another thing that caught me was the mood or tone of both. The painting had good feeling pictures involved. Who wouldn't want to go to the moon? Who wouldn't want to drive that car? The poem had touching words that made me feel good, it talks about

love and love is a good thing, it makes you feel good. They both show excitement.

De'Andre's final writing wasn't entirely the typed, polished discussion I had hoped for. It was short, handwritten, and slightly formulaic. But consider what else it is: organized, developed, carefully spelled and punctuated, insightful. He showed a precision in this final draft that I hadn't seen before.

I suspect that De'Andre may have been capable of this all along, and that he is probably quite capable of even better, more careful writing (He did recently tell me he has three notebooks full of his writing at home.). However, my success with him was to reengage him in a learning process that, by his own account, he had disengaged himself from some time ago.

Some Answers and More Questions

After last year's unqualified success, I had high expectations for my arts curriculum this year. I examined my grading and attendance data, and I can't support any claim of improvement—other than I found more A's and fewer D's or F's during the video poetry unit, as much a support of technology use as visual art. Of course, this is not a reliable collection of data. I have different students, unreplicated curriculum, a difficult time of the year, a different focus. Last year, I was looking for an improvement in literacy skills. This year, I was learning how to assess thinking.

The stories of Kori, Dennis, and De'Andre, while not representative of all students throughout the project, are certainly representative of many students, sometimes most. I saw them demonstrating what David Perkins calls *mindfulness*: "perspective taking, comfort with ambiguity, and looking below the surface of ideas and concepts" (284). Perhaps more importantly, I saw students connecting with curriculum personally, intuitively, emotionally. I had questioned novelty as an appropriate reason to include art in my curriculum, but Jensen points out that "Novelty creates a stronger opportunity for new learning and pathways in the brain" (120) and furthermore, "emotions give

us a more activated and chemically stimulated brain" and "help us … form more explicit memories" (71). Most students did think more deeply—or, perhaps more demonstrably, they shared their complex thinking more often and with more confidence and enthusiasm when it could be shared under the guise of art. I believe that they will remember this learning.

Beyond the thinking they demonstrated in their artwork, writing, and conferences with me, I was struck by how my classroom environment changed on "art days." Most students were consumed by their tasks, didn't want to stop until they got it just right. Usually, I have to fight a bit for attention and dance a little to keep focus. But even those students who were unsure of their assignment, even ignorant about what art had to do with anything we had read, wrote, or discussed in class, even those students fell upon the art supplies as if my classroom counter were an all-you-can-eat buffet. There is an energy here to be harnessed and put to use: I just don't completely understand it, yet. Clearly, I look forward to more scholarly research, more classroom practice.

During our American literature unit, Kori finished reading a book for the first time she could remember doing so since elementary school. In February, Dennis passed his BST in composition with a 3.5. Since term 4 started, De'Andre's attendance rate has been slipping, not yet irreparably. Next year, OCP will see 70 more students just like them, trickling out of mainstream classrooms in search of learning that is relevant, meaningful and manageable. After my first two years of attempting arts-infused teaching, I've come to believe that art is an effective way to deliver it to them. As a language arts teacher, I feel rewarded by the insight visual art has given me into the minds of my students.

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Idea Exchange

This section represents a venue for sharing the work of our teaching peers. More to the point, what follows are suggestions for solving specific teaching problems. There is more than a small chance that some of these practical tips might be useful for those of us who teach. Should you wish more information on one or more of these tips, contact the author at the e-mail address attached to the tip.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Understanding Plot through Emblematic Episodes

Understanding basic elements of plot can sometimes stymie even the most diligent readers of modern fiction. An effective way to encourage students to think more critically about what happens in a novel or short story might focus their attention on the author's use of an emblematic episode as a key to understanding the complex narrative patterns that typify many works of modern fiction. I use the term emblematic episode to define the one event which, when properly understood, represents the key to understanding the significance of what happens in the entire novel or short story. Once a student has identified a specific event as being emblematic, he must then demonstrate how the author's depiction of this event relates to the story's overall resolution.

In both oral presentations before their classmates and in more formal essay assignments, I often require students to analyze a story's plot by identifying the emblematic episode, and then explain why they think that this single event is the key to understanding the remainder of the story. During oral presentations, in particular, it is interesting to hear from a panel of three or four students who have selected different emblematic episodes, develop competing rationales to support their conflicting interpretations of the significance of plot events as they unfold in the story.

Analyzing a story's plot by justifying one's selection of an emblematic episode turns what might otherwise be a boring exercise of plot summary into a more sophisticated way of thinking critically about works of fiction. It is a simple way to develop students' critical thinking skills and, at the same time, introduce an approach to teaching plot that for students is often insightful and always makes for compelling analysis.

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Note: The Idea Exchange is now a regular feature of *The Minnesota English Journal*. Most teachers are astonishingly busy. Sitting down to write a long paper is out of the question for people with five or more preps per day. Thus, we want our readers to "think small" for a few minutes. Jot down on an e-mail message (or an enclosure in an e-mail message in "Word") to the *MEJ* editor a teaching tip, an idea about teaching a piece of literature that has worked for you with a particular audience, a writing prompt you've used to generate discussion, a strategy for developing discussion on a piece of literature, a writing assignment (along with the context you've created for it), a research exercise, or an effective way of dealing with the writing process or revision or mechanics. Label your e-mail "The Idea Exchange" and address it to straits@mnsu.edu.

Thanks in advance for contributing your ideas to this enterprise.

Bill Dyer

Co-Editor, *The Minnesota English Journal*

Contributors

Professor of Educational Studies and Director of the Summer Writing Program at Carleton College, **Deborah Appleman's** primary interests include adolescent response to literature, multicultural literature, and the teaching of literary theory to high school students. A high school teacher for nine years, she works weekly with high school teachers and students in both urban and suburban schools. She is the author of *Reading for Themselves: How to Transform Adolescents into Lifelong Readers through Out-of-Class Book Clubs and Critical Encounters in High School English*.

A native of Winnipeg, Manitoba, **Cindy Olson** earned her B.A. in Secondary English and a Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wyoming and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Minnesota State University in Mankato. A high school English teacher for thirty-one years, she has also taught as a graduate assistant and adjunct instructor for Minnesota State University. Her current assignment is at Mankato East Senior High, where she teaches AP English, British Literature, Composition for College, and Oral Communications; coaches speech; and advises the school newspaper. She is a member of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English as well as the National Council of Teachers of English. In her spare time … never mind; she has none. One of her greatest language arts challenges has been practising (oops, *practicing*)

spelling words the American way rather than the British way.

Anne O'Meara has taught for eighteen years at Minnesota State University, Mankato, where her duties have included training and supervising teaching assistants who teach Composition 101; co-chairing (with Bill Dyer) the Valley Writing Project, a faculty development project which helps college professors across the university integrate writing into their courses; and teaching courses in composition theory, composition, and American literature. She began her teaching career by teaching math and English at (Edina) Valley View Junior High. She then earned her Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota in the Twin Cities. She's recently taken up golf and duplicate bridge and therefore has a lot of sympathy for freshmen who feel like they're strangers on an alien planet where the path to success is completely unmarked.

Peter Henry is in his 20th year of teaching, having worked at De La Salle (1988) and Park Center High Schools (1992), and since 2003, at the Urban Outreach site for Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College where he teaches Native Americans. A graduate of Carleton College (1983) where he majored in Comparative Literature, Mr. Henry has studied in France and Mexico and taught both French and Spanish before moving into English and Humanities in 1994. He received a Master's of Arts in Teaching from the University of St. Thomas in 1990. He is the founder of the *New Teacher Network* (www. newteachernetwork.net), an online learning community for new teachers, and consults with school districts on new teacher training and induction programs. He lives in a frontier era log cabin on the banks of the Apple River in western Wisconsin where he grows vegetables, raises chickens and serves as a board member in two local environmental organizations.

Martin Warren is an associate professor of English at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul. He is a medievalist who, besides teaching medieval literature, enjoys teaching speculative fiction, introductory linguistics, and literary theory. He is the author of *Asceticism in the Christian Transformation of Self in Margery Kempe, William Thorpe, and John Rogers*,

which is published by Edwin Mellen Press. An example of his scholarship in speculative fiction is: "Is God in Charge?: Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*, Deconstruction, and Theodicy," published in the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. At present, he is researching mysticism as a voice of rebellion within Christianity.

    John Banschbach is chair of the English Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato. He intends to retire in seventy-three months (the number changes almost daily).

    Susan Perala-Dewey teaches writing at the University of Minnesota Duluth, where she received her B.A. in Philosophy (1992) and M.A. in English (2003). Prior to returning to her native Duluth in the late 80s, she worked on the west coast in mortgage credit reporting where she developed user documentation as her company transitioned to new technology. She describes herself as a "quiet" community activist and hopes to promote professional development for teaching writing in Northeastern Minnesota.

    Mike Mutschelknaus, an English instructor at Rochester Community and Technical College for the past seven years, has taught in Russia and Chad. He has an Ed.D. in leadership from St. Mary's University and an M.A. in English from Kent State University. His research interests are refugee education, distance education pedagogy, and learning communities. In his spare time, he likes to play guitar and have fun with his daughters. Feel free to contact him at 507-280-3510 or mike. mutschelknaus@roch.edu.

    Dr. Suzanne Kaback is an assistant professor of Literacy Education at The College of St. Catherine. She taught in public schools for eight years and was the co-director of Maine's National Writing Project before moving into the world of pre-service teacher education. Her current research interests include professional development school partnerships, and the preparation of pre-service content area teachers in Literacy. A recent transplant to the Midwest from the East Coast, she is enjoying getting to know the Literacy scene in Minnesota.

Jeremy Hoffman is the English department chair at St. Michael-Albertville High School. He is beginning his twelfth year of teaching at STMA. He recently completed his master's in English at St. Cloud State University, and the crux of his research for his thesis led to the article in this fall's *Minnesota English Journal*. Over the last few years he has become particularly interested in the reading habits of adolescents. He hopes to continue his research on the reading "problem" among kids, but reading to his own two young kids currently occupies most of his time.

Jessica Jorgenson finished her undergraduate degree in English/Writing from Minnesota State University, Moorhead, in 2006. Currently, she is attending Minnesota State University, Mankato, as a MA in Literature candidate. She divides her time between classes and homework by teaching Composition students that they can write well if they work at it, working on her thesis on Franz Kafka and the perceptions of body image within his fiction, studying the Spanish language, and writing poems and short fiction. In her free time, she will always join you for conversation and Guinness.

Michael MacBride graduated from Minnesota State University in 2007; he is currently a graduate student at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, where he is pursuing his Ph.D. in Literature and is a Teaching Assistant who teaches English Composition. Michael loves to find new and inventive ways to encourage his students to connect with the material. His heart lies in the study of satirical literature, but Michael declares 19th Century American Literature as his area of focus. His dissertation will be a continuation of his master's thesis, which focused on Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. MacBride was awarded the Outstanding Graduate Student from Minnesota State University, Spring 2007.

Nickie Kranz teaches English composition at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She is currently pursuing her MA degree in English/Literature. Her area of interest is medieval studies, and the title of her thesis is "Seduction and Sorcery in the Middle English Secular Lyrics." Kranz lives in the Mankato

area with her husband, Luke, and her two sons, Judd and Zane. They enjoy traveling, hiking, four-wheeling, and downhill skiing.

Jennifer Budenski earned her secondary language arts certification from Carleton College in 1994 and her MFA from Hamline University in 2003. On sabbatical for 2007-2008, she's pursuing a certificate in writing and critical literacy at the University of Minnesota (and mothering her preschool daughter and kindergarten son). Budenski has been teaching for 13 years, the past nine in the Hopkins district. Since 2004, she's been an active member of the Minnesota Writing Project and serves on its advisory board. In 2005, she was named the midwest regional winner for the College Board's Bob Costas Grant for the Teaching of Writing. Her poetry has appeared in *Poetry East*, *The Saranac Review*, *The Front Range Review* and other journals.

Call for Papers
for *MEJ*'s Next Issue

As we did at the end of the last issue, John Banschbach and I *want to encourage all of you who are reading the Fall 2007 number of MEJ* to consider yourselves part of our continuing dialogue with language, literature, reading, and composition— dialogue that engages and shares and enriches *your* pedagogy and research. And, to aid you in expressing and shaping *your* interests in and concerns about the materials you bring to the classroom, the students you bring them to, and your invention of strategies for engaging those students in those materials, we would like you to consider one of the topics listed below as your focus. Please understand that these topics are merely suggestions. Should your teaching context or circumstances cause you to identify a topic not on our brief list, we invite you to pursue it and send us the results. We want to read and interact with your work, whether that work has sprung from a teaching context in the elementary, middle, or high school, either public or private; community college; technical college; public university; or private college. As you peruse the list, do not hesitate to contact us for clarification on any of the topics or for advice about responding to an item we haven't listed that you would like to respond to. We welcome the opportunity to work with you. Please think about

June 30, 2008 as a deadline, and think about the **Spring MCTE Spring Conference in April 2008** as avenue for presenting it.

Topics:

1. *Young adult literature* (multicultural, American, and/or British—traditionally structured or non-linear)

2. *Teaching and representing Shakespeare* for high school and college students

3. *World literatures* (Anglophone/commonwealth; African; Caribbean; Latin American; Chicano; Native American; Asian/American; East Indian)

4. *Assessment* at any level (we're not just thinking about rubrics that work, but the kinds of anonymous interventions that can be used to determine whether our students are learning what we intend for them to learn)

5. *Literature of the Americas* (any kind of literature to any number of audiences, related to Canada, the U.S., the Caribbean, and Mexico through Tierra del Fuego)

6. *Un-banning the banned books* (experiences and methodologies related to teaching them)

7. *Assignment packages that work* (i.e., prompts and materials situated around the development of an important assignment tied to a particular course and an audience for that course; a "tool box" of materials and rubrics and writing assists and prompts and strategies that will assist members of that audience with their struggle to complete successfully that assignment; and an assessment strategy that will enable some effective testing of whether the goals and objectives connected to the assignment have been reached—this is for teachers at any level)

8. *Writing across the curriculum*, issues and strategies

9. *Writing-intensive courses* (definitions, challenges, approaches)

10. Electronic distance learning (dealing with audience problems, delivery issues)

11. The "capstone" experience, from portfolio to research paper (problems of mentoring and assessing are connected here)

12. Teaching the world: Humanities at any teaching level

13. Collaborative learning: assignments and teaching strategies that work

14. Technology in the English/language arts classroom

15. The relevance of the Western Canon (expanding/re-envisioning the canon)

16. Standardized testing and its impact on English/ language arts curriculum

17. The world wide web and research paper writing

18. Poetry and its relevance

19. English language learners: how can we best serve their needs in the reading and composition classroom

20. Grammar and its place in today's English classes

21. Feedback on student writing and issues pertaining to responding

22. Practices in the teaching of English language arts

23. Research in and out of the classroom

24. "Audience" related issues

25. Teaching tips

26. Issues of diversity (representing race and gender)

We are hoping very much, depending upon the nature of your responses to these and other issues important to you, to incorporate two new areas into the journal: a "letters to the editor" section that either responds to essays represented in the pages of this issue or at the spring MCTE conference in Roch-

ester or to other issues of importance to you related to teaching literature, language arts, reading, and composition; and a section devoted to short and practical strategies of teaching in these areas (assignments; assessment pieces; collaborative techniques for engaging students in literature or the evaluation of their own writing; means for assisting students with their struggles to respond to your assignments or realize themselves as contributing members of your classroom environment; etc.).   We look forward to hearing from you.

Don't wait for the Spring Conference to renew your membership!

MCTE membership runs from October to October of each year, so new and renewing members should send in the attached form and payment today.
Don't miss a single issue of MCTE News!

Please make check or money order payable to MCTE. Print this page, fill out the form, and send both the completed form and payment in a stamped envelope to:

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