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OUT OF THE BOX

Rattling Cages

Pamela B. Childers

Like many of my colleagues, I took the normal path of undergraduate and graduate degrees in my majors (English and Biology) as well as secondary education. Those degrees gave me a strong foundation in content and experience in student teaching. However, as soon as I stepped into my own classroom, I felt what my science team teaching partner and co-author Michael Lowry describes as an “unsettled quality.” That is, by observing and listening to my students, I sensed a need to rattle some cages and make changes in the status quo. My first assigned mentor’s answer to everything was “We’ve always done it this way.” Right or wrong, I wanted to see how we could make things better than the way we’d “always done it.” So, when I began teaching, I started learning from students as they learned from me. We were both going to make changes to improve teaching and learning.

The first year I taught 9th grade English at Red Bank High School (now Red Bank Regional High School in Little Silver, NJ). The students were quite aware of their status in sections English 9-1, 9-3, 9-5--all odd numbers, starting with the highest performing students. English 9-17, on the other hand, was a diverse group of kids that included Kenny, an African-American senior who had flunked a semester of 9th grade English; Juan, who communicated his limited English by tapping on my shoe as I walked down the row of desks; Harry, an African-American basketball player whose shoes could stomp on a cockroach halfway across the room; and Theresa, nicknamed “Pioneer Woman” because she dressed in long skirts, blouses buttoned tight at her neck and shoes more appropriate for a grandmother. We met the last period of the day. They were respectful of me but tired at the end of the school day. I was tired, too, but determined to meet the challenge of engaging them and myself each day we met in a former science classroom. We worked together trying a variety of interactive activities to cover the required literature and grammar in the curriculum. I let Kenny be a leader that first semester, giving him assignments to teach, and he loved his role that one semester. From this class I learned more about child abuse, poverty, determination, ESL, and different religious, ethnic and racial factors. I also realized that these students needed more than one period to complete whatever we were working on and a commitment from the school to prove they were important, too.

One day I heard a loud voice “teaching” a history lesson from a classroom down the hall. I peeked in the open door and saw most of the students from my English 9-17 class trying to stay awake as the teacher continued his lecture. I thought, “What if I could convince this teacher to team teach these students with me for a double period?” This

had never been done at the school, but with little convincing, the history teacher agreed, and we presented our idea to the new principal for the following school year. The principal thought this idea might eliminate some potential discipline problems and prove to the community that he cared about all students, not just the top academic and athletic ones. We took the lowest scoring incoming 9th graders from four sending districts, invited some to attend a one-week summer program to select their history and English texts before we team taught them a double period the following school year. English 9x and Social Studies 9x (for experimental) started in 1967, and we met in a house next door to the school. We made this downstairs a “home” for our students with a telephone connected to the school switchboard, a pantry for our supplies and coffee in the kitchen, our desks in the dining room with a portable chalk board dividing it from the living room where we had 25 desk/chairs for students, an enclosed front porch with a few outdoor chairs, and a bookcase under the stairs.

The results of this new program were that students wanted it to continue for all four years of high school. We formed teams of teachers who had never worked together, and I had the privilege of following the original group all four years with a different team teaching partner each year. After the initial group graduated, I remained teaching the seniors when we moved to the new regional high school. Because of the program, many of the students went on to college, the military, or became self-employed and community leaders. It was a risky thing to do as a new teacher while also continuing to teach regular classes, but the professional and personal rewards of collaborating with a colleague in a different discipline and learning from the students outweighed the hours of additional preparation. By listening to and observing my students, I could discover what was and was not working for them in their learning process; in other words, my students were my most important resources and greatest collaborators to improve teaching and learning. When you have an itch, you scratch it; if a situation is uncomfortable, collaborate with others to make it better.

From that point in my teaching career, I continued to rattle cages. I even took a different route for advanced degrees, including a new teaching of writing MA at Northeastern University and a Doctor of Education with a specialization in writing in the disciplines at Nova Southeastern University. These two low-residency programs allowed me to work with top scholars from other institutions who taught their specialty for these graduate programs. From the Northeastern program I created both a writing across the curriculum (WAC)-based writing center at Red Bank Regional High School in New Jersey and a creative writing elective as part of a new state-designated Performing Arts Program within the same school. Both of these programs offered students unique opportunities, leveled the playing field for diverse students, and introduced technology and new methods of teaching. I also published my first book, *The High School Writing Center: Establishing and Maintaining One*, based on the research I did at Northeastern.

At Nova Southeastern, the director of the postsecondary program convinced me to take the adult education path, since he sensed that my background in content was strong but I needed to learn how to teach teachers. Through that program I wrote a manual for creating a secondary school WAC program and became much more involved in faculty development with secondary and postsecondary colleagues through NCTE, CCCC, IWCA and IWAC.

In 1990, I was offered a chance to rattle more cages at a new institution, The McCallie School in Chattanooga, Tennessee. As Endowed Chair of Composition, I was able to create a new WAC program and writing center, and teach poetry at this all boys' day/boarding school. I brought in WAC specialist Art Young of Clemson University for a retreat with faculty across disciplines, the students became involved in setting up the Caldwell Writing Center by even naming the computers and printers, and Michael Lowry and I began working on writing portfolios with his 8th and 9th grade physics students. But that wasn't enough after I had finished my doctorate and completed research on how writing to learn activities improved student learning of Algebra. There were other cages yet to rattle including work with Art Young and Anne Gere of University of Michigan on *Programs and Practices: Writing Across the Secondary School Curriculum*.

Also, I missed the salt air, and Michael Lowry approached me with an idea. What if we offered a team-taught senior interdisciplinary science seminar on oceans to students in a landlocked state? We could help them understand the importance of where they lived to the ocean and how the ocean impacted where they lived. We proposed the course, it was reluctantly offered at first, but became a successful senior science seminar even though student evaluations said they worked harder and read more than they did in their English classes but loved the collaborative approach to teaching science with literature, history, art, music, and other disciplines. We team taught the course for a dozen years and even gave workshops at the National Science Teachers Association convention together.

Finally, I created a new writing fellows program in place of a paid assistant director of the writing center due to budget restraints. It was a highly selective senior program that required recommendations, application, interview, and an essay explaining why the student wanted to become a writing fellow. Writing fellows studied the teaching of writing, wrote and gave workshops, taught classes, helped faculty create writing activities to improve learning across disciplines, prepared materials for student and faculty use on the website, and even presented at IWAC and CCCC. Although the administration had not allowed students to travel out of state to present at conferences, we rattled a few more cages by comparing these experiences to competing in sports events out of state.

My interest in changing how students used the visual as an essential part of learning developed from my study of learning styles, Howard Gardiner's work on multiple intelligences and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Through workshops Eric Hobson, Joan Mullin and I learned from participants that what we thought was important might be worth collaboration to produce the book *ARTiculating: Teaching Writing in a Visual World*. Through our partnership on this project, I also discovered the essential connection of high school and postsecondary education. The more I interacted with other educators through AP Language and Composition readings as a table leader for over a decade, through my work with IWCA, IWAC, NCTE and CCCC, I realized that WAC partnerships were the natural solution to bridging the gap for students entering postsecondary institutions. Jacob Blumner, a writing center and WAC colleague from University of Michigan-Flint, agreed. We created several workshops for conferences, wrote an article, and recently completed *WAC Partnerships Between Secondary and Postsecondary Institutions* (2016).

None of these experiences would have occurred without the support of administrators at both schools who allowed me not only to rattle cages but also to take on other challenges nationally and internationally. I was a visiting professor at Utah State one summer, began working as a consulting editor for *The Clearing House* where I later became an Executive Editor, taught graduate courses in the teaching of writing for Lesley University at cohorts in Georgia on weekends, and consulted or presented at high schools and universities throughout the world.

I have learned so much from those experiences working with students and faculty, but I was also influenced by Donald Murray, who inspired me to move from behind the desk to in front of it and finally taking risks by writing with my students back in 1980; and Malcolm Knowles, the father of adult education, who practiced andragogy in his own presentations by asking question to help students learn rather than talking at them. The following books helped me feel safe rattling cages and suffering the consequences of my actions: *A Writer Teaches Writing*, *Learning by Teaching*, and *Write to Learn* by Donald Murray; *Insult to Intelligence* and *The Book of Learning and Forgetting* by Frank Smith; *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, *Self-directed Learning*, and *The Modern Practices of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy* by Malcolm Knowles; and *Lives on the Boundary* by Mike Rose.

But I am not through rattling cages. I want to know “What have high school students learned about writing that has influenced their pursuits as adults in their diverse careers and personal lives?” Sixteen former students who are at various stages in their lives have agreed to answer that question to determine if there is a pattern of characteristics or important lessons that have influenced them. My hope is that educators on the secondary and postsecondary level may benefit from what I learn. There is still much to observe and learn from our students and professional colleagues and many more cages left to rattle.



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