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JAEPL



The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning

AEPL Keynote: Immersion, Transformation, and the Literature Class

Cristina V. Bruns

My Kanawha

Anne DiPardo

Who Cares? Exploring Student Perspectives on Care Ethics

Kelly A. Concannon Mannise

Playing the Believing Game with Dr. Seuss and Reluctant Learners in Science

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Being the Unbook, Being the Change: The Transformative Power of Open Sources

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Suffering and Teaching Writing

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“We Were the Teachers, Not the Observers”: Transforming Teacher Preparation

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Re-Seeing Story through Portal Writing

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“Poetry is Not a Luxury”: Why We Should Include Poetry in the Writing Classroom

Nicole Warwick

Out of the Box: Notes from Teaching at the Ends of the Earth

Colette Morrow

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The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning

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JAEPL

The Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (AEPL), an official assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English, is open to all those interested in extending the frontiers of teaching and learning beyond the traditional disciplines and methodologies.

The purposes of AEPL, therefore, are to provide a common ground for theorists, researchers, and practitioners to explore ideas to participate in relevant programs and projects; to integrate these efforts with others in related disciplines; to keep abreast of activities along these lines of inquiry; and to promote scholarship on and publication of these activities.

The *Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*, JAEPL, also provides a forum to encourage research, theory, and classroom practices involving expanded concepts of language. It contributes to a sense of community in which scholars and educators from pre-school through the university exchange points of view and cutting-edge approaches to teaching and learning. JAEPL is especially interested in helping those teachers who experiment with new strategies for learning to share their practices and confirm their validity through publication in professional journals.

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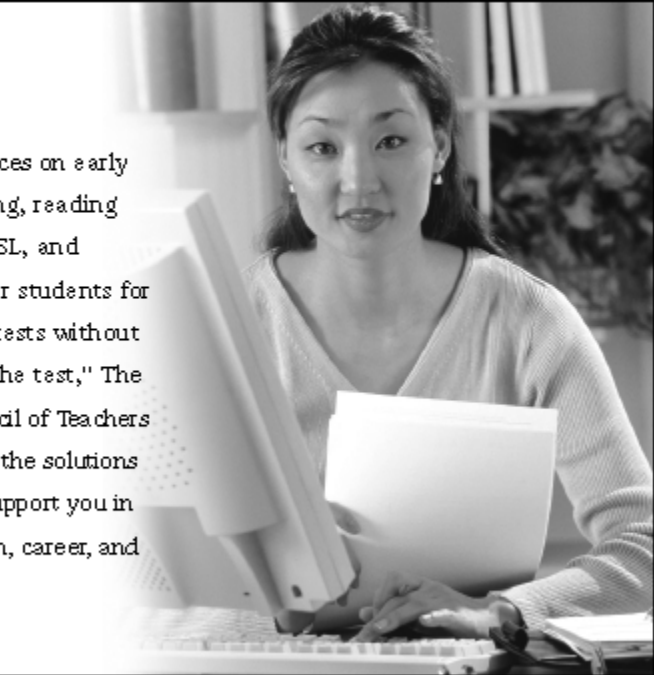
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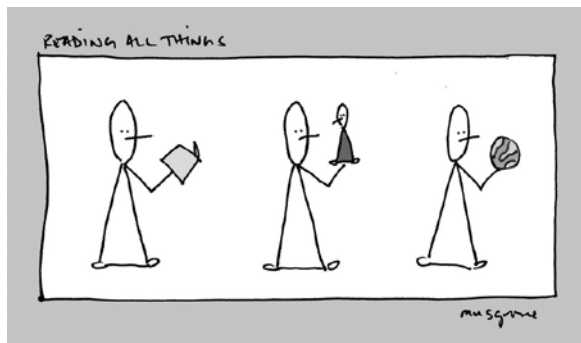
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EDITORS' MESSAGE

Reading is a quintessentially human activity. We read meaning into all things, as the caption to Laurence Musgrove's wonderful cartoon tells us, below. As we put together this 17th volume of *JAEPL*—we find ourselves reading all things indeed: our students' papers, our spring semester schedules, changing seasons, the political follies on TV, the holidays' advent.



A year has already gone by since all of you so graciously received our first co-edited issue. We hope the time has passed as richly for you as it has for us. Joonna was delighted to join many of you in Colorado for another invigorating meeting of AEPL, while Brad went to Italy to visit friends he hadn't seen for 30 years. And now we come together again—in this

other AEPL meeting place—to continue our lively exchange of ideas.

So let's return to the subject of reading, which reiterates throughout this new issue. A keynote speaker from AEPL 2011, Cristy Bruns takes the lead, with her thought-provoking discussion of reading as a means of immersing and transforming our students. Being true to the conference theme, "Literacy for Love and Wisdom," she calls upon us to teach reading as "a reworking of the usually fixed boundary between self and world, producing a more responsive way of relating across that boundary."

Anne DiPardo follows up on what Bruns advocates, showing that such immersion can move us beyond the easy assumptions and biases that we all harbor. Her discovery of family ties to the mountain folk of West Virginia, steeped in what James Moffett termed *agnosis*, or "the will not to know," causes her to re-examine her own *agnosis*. In so doing, she reminds us that Moffett's ideas and beliefs still reside at the core of AEPL, and that reading enlightens us in ways that are not always easy to accept—unless we let texts teach us humility.

Developing that thread of thought, Kelly Concannon Mannise introduces us to a course at a private university, where students encounter reading experiences that cause them to question what privilege means in a world that has always sought to deny that privilege to many. Her students see that literacy for love and wisdom puts demands on readers to cross boundaries we don't necessarily want to cross—boundaries that will always confine us to apathy and stunted growth if, in denying our common humanity, we misread a division between ourselves and "others."

Buchanan and Cook playfully imply that we, in tandem with pre-service science teachers, should also allow texts to guide us back to that childlike sense of wonder and fun with which the beloved Dr. Seuss taught children to try green eggs and ham. Seeing *Green Eggs and Ham* as a metaphor for the trepidation that elementary students feel when first learning about science, these authors use the text to help teachers recognize that *agnosis*

is learned early. We can head it off with humor and awaken the faculties of curiosity and imagination instead, if only we “Try them! Try them!” In the same spirit of play, Elizabeth Woodworth urges us to investigate the exciting possibilities of giving students free electronic texts that are the results of “commons-based peer production.” As electronic communication becomes cheaper and more accessible, the texts shared through CCPP promise to make higher education more available. So “Try them! Try them!”

On the other hand, Keith Duffy recognizes that the current model of higher education often demands higher productivity, not better teaching. It affects working conditions and morale for a great many of us. He addresses teacher burn-out with an unflinching honesty and advocates turning to texts that examine human suffering, to put this occupational hazard into perspective. Helen Collins Sitler invites us to look at a similar malaise among many of our students. When, in an obsessive pursuit of perfection, they misread our instruction as somehow demeaning to themselves, she spells out a loving and wise response informed by cognitive therapy.

Nikki Holland, Iris Shepard, Christian Goering, and David A. Jolliffe also do a critical reading of the educational system in which we work. Their development of *Razorback Writers*, “a literacy enrichment program built on the concepts of arts integration and project-based learning” provides a counter-model, excitingly reminiscent of Chicago’s Little Red Schoolhouse, but going further.

S. Rebecca Leigh and Nicole Warwick concern themselves with arts integration, too, focusing on poetry as the means of encouraging students to develop a profounder engagement with literacy. Leigh claims that elementary students can learn to reread their own written work more insightfully through “portal writing”—a technique of identifying key words that transform drafts into poems. In conference with the teacher, portal writing becomes a means through which students expand upon, and even substantively revise, their work. Warwick uses poetry in another way, to help her students read “transnationally.” Like so many authors in this issue, she finds this process of reading enables students to cross the boundaries that would confine them within their own worlds of experience. As they explore poetry’s other worlds, they develop the connections that transform them into better writers. In this process as well, Warwick learns to read her students with greater love and wisdom.

Colette Morrow brings her own form of transnational reading to *JAEPL* with a compelling account of how her experience of teaching abroad in third-world nations has enabled her to reread her pedagogical practice in American universities. A director of women’s studies for many years, she invites us to seek the same kind of experience, which can altogether revitalize how we perceive teaching and learning.

Finally, you will find two substantive book reviews on texts that deal with the evolution of thought and criticism. You will also enjoy our perennially satisfying “Connecting” section, which brings us the classroom tales and poetry that remind us why we teach in the first place. So please, take a moment right now. Sit back and “read all things” that our contributors have set before you in this latest *JAEPL*.

Immersion, Transformation, and the Literature Class

Cristina Vischer Bruns

Many readers have had the experience of finishing a novel or short story and feeling that they would never be quite the same after having read it. The *Chronicles of Narnia* may have been my first taste of that experience when I read them in middle school. More recently I've felt the impact on me of Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, *Jane Eyre*, and, I'll confess, the Harry Potter stories that I read aloud to my children. I expect that many of us can point to works of literature, to stories, that have in some way affected us, that have stayed with us long past our reading of them. In this essay I will claim that this sort of transformative experience is a valuable capacity of literature and that we as teachers of literature should do what we can to make experiences like this possible for students in our classes.

The best explanation I've found for this powerful encounter between reader and text comes from the work of D. W. Winnicott and the object-relations branch of psychoanalytic theory, which offers both a conception of the mechanism that produces such a literary effect and an understanding of that effect's significance. At the heart of this theory is the concept of transitional space, a middle state between self and world, in Winnicott's words, "an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute" (2). Winnicott developed this concept as an explanation of the means by which infants initially establish their own sense of separateness from the world around them and also their relationship with that world. When the infant can perceive external objects, a teddy bear for instance, as if they are her own creation or of herself, that illusion allows her to inhabit temporarily this intermediary space between self and world. This transitional space makes it possible for the infant to move from symbiosis to individuation—to begin differentiating between her self and what is other—gradually, without an unbearable experience of sudden separateness. For a period of time an infant needs to be allowed the illusion that this bear or blanket is at the same time "me and not me." Through this means the infant can tolerate beginning to experience herself as separate.

Beyond this initial work of infancy, opportunities to return to the transitional area of experiencing are still essential. Winnicott explains "... that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.)" (13). Temporarily returning to transitional space in adulthood—when the illusion is not challenged but is tolerated that an object or experience is both "me" and "not me"—allows the reformation or adjustment of an individual's boundaries between self and what is other, an on-going work that is crucial to remain responsive to an ever-changing environment. Any engaging and creative activity where the distinction is blurred between inner and outer realities enables a person to enter this intermediary space, whether listening to a piece of music, playing a sport, watching a movie, or participating in a religious ceremony.

This blurring of inner and outer worlds makes possible two valuable outcomes.¹ One is that the tangible shape of the activity or object becomes available to give form to inner states of being of the individual—self-states, moods, or ways of being that are unconsciously part of one's self but would otherwise remain inaccessible to conscious awareness, as when a song provokes sudden tears at some unexpected, even uncanny resonance. The other outcome is that the shape of the activity stimulates a reworking of the usually fixed boundary between self and world producing a more responsive way of relating across that boundary. Both outcomes result in a changed or even transformed sense of the self, as formerly unconscious moods or states become available for self-knowing and as the object or experience encountered in transitional space leaves its imprint upon the self's way of being in the world. The human need to experience such moments of fluidity across both the boundary between the conscious and unconscious in the self and the boundary between the self and the other can produce in us a sense of craving for activities that foster this kind of transitional experience. This process also operates on a cultural level as well as an individual one as a culture's practices take place within the transitional space between a collective self and other.

This kind of transitional activity depends upon periods of time when an individual releases himself into the experience of the object, temporarily letting go of his sense of himself as separate from the object and immersing himself in it. According to psychotherapist Christopher Bollas, the subject must project a part of himself into the object, to invest it with psychic potential, in "a type of erotic action that must be unconscious and one in which the person is not being, as it were, thoughtful," but must be "a rather simplified consciousness, even out of touch with himself for a moment" (22). With a return to self-awareness and differentiation, to being a complex self again, a person is able to reflect on the experience of the object, much like she ponders a dream upon awaking. A return to a state of separateness allows for normal functioning, but it is immersion in an activity like literary reading upon which its transitional potential depends.

While any kind of practice in which a person becomes fully engrossed can provide transitional experiences, the reading of literary texts is especially well suited for activity in this intermediary space. The process of reading requires constant interaction between self and text, between inner world and outer, as the reader must create in her imagination the world that the words on the page call forth. These worlds that we create are experienced entirely in our own inner world but arrive there at the prompting of the text which has a way of presenting its world, a shape, feel, and even sound that is wholly other and external to us. Yet in the moment of immersing herself in the literary world, the reader becomes a part of the text as the distinction between self and text blurs. That literary reading demands from readers greater effort and creative activity than other pastimes, like watching movies or listening to music, and presents an additional challenge to its popular use. But it also means that a work of fiction or poetry has the potential to blur more thoroughly the boundary between self and other, between inner and outer worlds, as the reader must invest more of himself in the process. This investment means that literary reading makes possible an especially potent form of transitional experience.

¹ The role of this type of transitional experience in adulthood is explored in two books by Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object* and *Being a Character*, from which these ideas are drawn.

Informed by the insights of object-relations theory, we can affirm that deeply affecting experiences with literary works are as significant in their effect upon others as they feel to “readers like me.” Through the mechanism of transitional space, the temporary blurring of boundaries that occurs in immersive reading facilitates a reworking of the self’s relations across those boundaries. If, as Winnicott claims, we suffer from “the strain of relating inner and outer reality,” then relief from that strain comes through opportunities to enter the space between self and other where we can rework those boundaries, where we can gain access to otherwise unavailable parts of ourselves, and where we can try on new ways of being in the world. This effect can reverberate through cultures as well as in individuals. Perhaps this effect of literary reading has been difficult to identify and describe because it tends to be unconscious, producing powerful experiences that can feel diminished when one attempts to put them into words. With its theorization of psychic operations beyond conscious awareness, object relations theory elucidates this valuable contribution that literary reading can make to human life and society in terms of transitional space. But this contribution is realized only when the reader temporarily gets lost in the world of the text.

Do our literature classes invite that to happen in our students? No, when the focus of a course is solely on literary texts as illustrations of the workings of cultures or as instances of the operations of language, or even as works of art worthy of careful analysis. Nor are students invited to read in ways that will allow transitional activity when they know their reading will be followed by any kind of questions they must answer correctly. (They read for the answers.) These approaches to literature instruction exclude from consideration what takes place between the individual student and the text, and they convey to the student that works of literature are not meant to be read in order to get lost, or swept away, or to experience anything at all.

If literary works are to serve as potential sources of transitional experience for students, what is most important in a literary education at all levels is that it must invite and encourage immersive reading as the mode essential to literature’s activation of readers’ transitional space. The more analytic ways of reading that are the typical preoccupation of school then derive their importance as they inform and support immersive reading. One cannot assume, however, that such opportunities to get lost within literary worlds will produce transitional experiences in every student with every text. The resonance required between reader and work for transitional effects is impossible to anticipate (although attention to the characteristics of one’s student population can aid in the selection of texts in which such resonance may be more likely). Nor is it necessary to instruct students explicitly in the operations of transitional space since the process is largely unconscious, and effort and intention may interfere with it. It is enough to invite students to “live into” a work of literature, to borrow a phrase from Gary Saul Morson, creating from the work a world into which one enters as one reads, and then to step back out of that world to write about the experience (355).

The importance of the student’s experience with the text means that the focus of a literary education, especially at introductory levels, is best not placed primarily on the particular texts themselves as objects of study, but on what transpires between the texts and the readers in the class. The transformational value of literary reading is located in that interaction and its effect upon young readers. In other words, what must be of pri-

mary importance to a teacher of literature is what happens for her students when they read an assigned text (a claim much like one Louise Rosenblatt made a couple of generations ago). However, these experiences tend to be excluded from literature instruction. When a student reads an assigned text in order to perform well on a test or to answer the questions at the end of the story, or when she is directed to focus on some particular aspect of the text such as evidence within it of cultural bias or its uses of irony, she is prevented from attending to whatever challenges, resistances, engagements, or reactions her own reading of the text might evoke, thereby removing from her consideration whatever might make the text most substantial or meaningful for her, keeping her from creating any sort of imaginary world from her reading into which she might immerse herself.

The surest way I have found to make space in my own literature classrooms for students' experiences with the literary texts I assign is nothing new, radical, or profound. I merely require students to produce a brief piece of writing about each text they read. This open-ended assignment asks students to describe what happened as they read and to react (not to explicate, analyze, or even summarize, but to *react*) to the experience. When students share with one another their writing in small groups, they discover reading practices and textual experiences different from their own, provoking greater awareness of what characterized their own approach to the text and the experience that resulted, as well as what other possibilities their way of interacting with the text excluded. Then as I read students' responses, I can identify characteristics of their reading experiences and obstacles they face in "living into" the text, obstacles which can be addressed in class as I direct students' attention to those issues for analysis and reflection.

This enables me as their instructor to place at the center of our work together whatever challenges, frustrations, surprises, or sources of attraction they encountered in their reading. These reactions, whatever they may be, become the impetus for critical reflection on the assigned text, driving both the analysis necessary to create more fully a world from the work and an awareness of what the world-making process entails and produces for different readers. In asserting the primacy of this kind of "direct response" in literary education, theorist and educator Deanne Bogdan, in her book on the subject, *Re-educating the Imagination*, observes, "... there is always somewhere to go in criticism, but one can only be where one is" (283). By making their written responses the initial focus of our class interaction about a text, I invite students to be where they are as the ground beneath wherever we go together in reflecting on the text and our reading of it. Even more importantly, space is made both in students' individual encounters with texts and in classroom work together for the experience of immersing themselves in literary worlds, the mode essential for using literature as a transitional object.

Through one student's written reaction to Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, I learned that he was shaken by the realization he shared with the novel's protagonist that he had lived as the center of his household, allowing his mother and older siblings to wait on him while doing little to care for them. In another class a student wrote that she was so moved by Virgil's depiction of Dido's grief in *The Aeneid* that she could not find words to describe its affect on her beyond saying that it made her cry for hours. Deeply affecting encounters with literary worlds are a key sign of transitional experience, but much more common in students' written reactions are expressions of frustration or confusion with an assigned text. Transformative literary experiences require an unpredictable fit

between reader and text, and so should not be expected to occur for most students in a given class. (This unpredictability is also reason to offer students, when possible, a choice of texts to explore more deeply in order that they can pursue whatever draws them.) Yet students' reactions to a literary encounter still carry value when they only give evidence of the distance between reader and text. Even expressions of indifference make a significant contribution to class reflection when students point to the sources of their indifference. Turning our attention to the paragraphs of "pointless" details in a Flannery O'Connor story, for instance, or the lines of one of John Berryman's Dream Songs that "make no sense" gives us opportunity to inquire into the role these parts of a text play, what they ask of us as readers, and what our struggle with them might suggest about the expectations we bring to a literary text.

When students in an ancient world literature course I teach offered their reactions to portions of *The Odyssey*, I learned that many questioned Odysseus's heroism because he is unfaithful to his wife, he often weeps openly, and he does little without Athena's help, each of which seem unheroic to many of my students. These objections gave form to the cultural conflict students were experiencing with the world of *The Odyssey*, and they gave focus to our class inquiry into differences between Odysseus' culture and ours, differences in conceptions of a hero, expectations of marriage, expression of emotion, and the relationship between humans and the divine. More significantly, we discussed what entering into the "alternative reality" of Odysseus's world entails. The potential impact for transitional experience of this instructional activity alone was apparent in essays students wrote at the end of the course on what reading texts like *The Odyssey* require of them. I read repeatedly that they learned they had to temporarily suspend their own views in an attempt to understand another world more fully, a practice that some students recognized as necessary to understand difference in any context, not just in the reading of ancient literary works. Whether these students' experience reading *The Odyssey* could be considered to occur in transitional space, I can't be sure, but it is clear in the written reflections of many of them that their experience influenced their understandings of themselves and of others and their ways of relating across that boundary. What made this outcome possible was inviting students to bring into the classroom a written account of their experiences reading *The Odyssey* and letting those experiences raise questions for class reflection.

Welcoming into the classroom students' own experiences of immersing themselves in the imaginary worlds of the literary works on which a course focuses, and using those experiences to motivate and direct critical inquiry into those texts, do not guarantee that reading those works will become a transitional activity for those students. But it will become a possibility. If reading literature indeed gives us opportunity to form and reform our sense of ourselves and our relation to the world around us, then it is imperative that we do what we can to open up for our students the possibility of a transformative experience with literature.



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My Kanawha

Anne DiPardo

‘Out of many, one’ does not refer to conformity and standardization and cultural chauvinism, which caricature this ideal. The founding fathers drew this saying from ancient mystical traditions . . . where it referred to the unity in spirit behind the plurality of material manifestations. According to this teaching, the reason that it is possible to make many out of one is that the many came from the one in the first place.

(Moffett, *Storm*, 214)

Regarding *Agnosis*

For over a decade, my students and I began each new academic year with *Storm in the Mountains*, studying maps of “West—By God—Virginia” as we pondered Moffett’s intuition of “a rawness, a danger, a suffering” lurking in its forgotten backwoods (8). These words inevitably excited a vague sense of dread—and gratitude that we were here, now, and not there, then, back in that place where Moffett’s visionary *Interaction* book series sparked violent protests.¹

Each year, a new group admired the distance between our well-educated selves and these wild-eyed book-banners, these half-crazed people who displayed in such abundance what Moffett termed *agnosis*, “the will not to know” (184). How, after all, can one *not* be a touch judgmental about people who think it’s a fine idea to torch school buses by way of protest? How backwards they seemed, with their fear of differing perspectives, their off-handed racism, their belief that kids will emulate in monkey-see-monkey-do fashion whatever they happen to encounter on the printed page.

But Moffett seemed to anticipate such wrong turns into self-congratulation, nudging us toward self-interrogation in *Storm*’s second half. As we read on, he invited us to ponder the universality of *agnosis*—our own implication, and, especially, our responsibility as educators to make whatever inroads we can in expanding our own as well as our students’ consciousness. My classes and I had many rich and soul-searching conversations about so many of the issues that Moffett raised—the limits of local control, the sometimes fuzzy line between church and state, and, particularly, the promise of the language arts to open up new ways of seeing, to foster habits of heart, hand, and mind that might lead us toward city-upon-a-hill social futures. But truth be told, I always sensed that none of us—certainly not I—were fully taking in the possibility that there may indeed be things *we* didn’t want to know.

When I tried to articulate my own *agnosis*, my words always came out sounding measly and comfortable: good soul that I was, I didn’t want to know about the inner workings of sociopaths, hated violence so much that I steadfastly avoided action movies, would just as soon cover my ears at the first sign of meanspiritedness. I sensed that I was swimming in the shallows, but how, after all, can one know what one doesn’t know

1 Editors’ note: *The Interaction* series, based on James Moffett’s student-centered approach to teaching language and reading, was to date the “largest program of school materials ever done” (*Storm* 4). Covering K-12, its 30 co-authors produced 175 volumes, accompanied by 800 activities, games, and 80 recordings (244). The series’ pluralist, multicultural expression reflected America’s “diversity of situations, values, tastes, dialects” (6).

when one has chosen *not to know it*? If such choices are symptomatic of insufficient consciousness, how do we bring them up for conscious review?

I was of course constructing rather than simply receiving this notion of *agnosis*, and my architectural moves—grounded in historical and cultural circumstances, as such moves inevitably are—were informed by my accustomed first-person-singular way of looking at things. A California baby boomer, I'd come of age fully believing in my existential freedom and responsibility, my ability to reinvent myself at will, my essential mastery of the road ahead. When I entered academia later on, I found myself in an arena where solo authorship was considered not only possible, but decidedly preferable. Even as I peppered my conference papers with references to Vygotsky and Bakhtin, I stood visibly alone at countless podiums, hoping anxiously that audiences would find what I had to say quite new and quite wholly my own. I often referenced the importance of historical context—and while I'd learned a version of our country's history over my long years in school, it seldom occurred to me that I knew next to nothing my own forbearers' roles in shaping our national legacy.

I'd grown up far away from grandparents, in a household where ancestors remained unknown and unacknowledged, where no one seemed to know quite where our people were from ("They were all English, Irish, Scottish, *boring*," my mom would say). We were living that downside of the American character that Alexis de Toqueville observed so early on—a certain tendency to forget history and, in the process, overlook those standing before and beside us. Noting the determined energy of the then-new country's citizens, de Toqueville aptly worried that as "they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone . . . they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands" (*Democracy in America* 194). Two centuries later, Joan Didion would describe growing up in a California where "we did not believe that history could bloody the land, or even touch it" (71). I had grown up in this country and this California, bringing to my thinking, teaching, and living a historical *agnosis* of which I was quite entirely unaware.

And so it was that I understood the subtitle of Moffett's *Storm—A Case Study of Censorship, Conflict, and Consciousness* along the lines of: (1) *censorship* brought on by close-minded reactionaries; (2) *conflict* arising from progressives' righteous indignation; and (3) our educators' responsibility to expand students' *consciousness* to more closely match our spacious own. My essentially us-them perspective notwithstanding, I tried to invite a more intellectually generous approach, encouraging students to consider Moffett's acknowledgement that the book banners were not just individually but generationally bitter, their families and communities poorly served by governmental powers for decades, even centuries. What if your own students' parents were feeling similarly disenfranchised, I'd ask—how would you help them feel heard, and how would you go about explaining your instructional choices to them? ("Them," always "*them*".) While kindness and tact are important, we inevitably agreed it's our job to insist on opening up the world, to communicate that we're emissaries of knowledge who will enlarge and enrich their children's horizons.

Alongside *Storm* each fall, my students also read Dewey's *Experience and Education*, with its classic (yet ever-so-relevant) argument against the dualities that continue to inform educational discourse in our own time. Dewey warned us wisely of the reduc-

tive effect of polarities, of assuming righteousness on the one hand and blame on the other, thereby obscuring the inevitable complexities and ambiguities of teachers' work and worlds (MacDonald, *Teaching*). Oh, I tried—but the *Storm* book-banners seemed themselves such striking practitioners of us-them thinking, and they seemed so different from those of us gathered in our fluorescent-lit classroom. As our soaring, often highly charged discussions lifted away my late-afternoon weariness, I gave little thought to the idea that perhaps—just perhaps—my own thinking was shot-through with either-ors, too.

Mixed Up

I'd known just enough about my mother's family to understand that there were lots of details that she'd rather not bring up for review. Although I didn't really know any of my grandparents, I must have mentioned some curiosity about our background in a rare conversation with my mother's mother because I remember opening a letter in which she warned me that if I began poking around, I might just find things better left unknown. She mentioned an ancestor who had died in a Union prison, perhaps to underscore her concern that our genealogical details were not quite the stuff of greatness. When my mom developed Alzheimer's many years later, she began to share long-silenced family stories now and then, pulling details up from long-term memory as her inner censor waned. Many were just snippets—her own mother's tenacity and courage during the depression years, her astonishing purchase of the graduation gown that allowed my mom to march in her high school ceremony ("I wish I could have done more to thank her," she said again and again.) But once in awhile, she began stories that stopped at tearful mid-sentence that ended abruptly as I murmured something about not needing to know if she wasn't ready to tell me.

After my mother died amidst visions of angels and ancestors last year, I flew out west to visit my 94-year-old aunt. She'd always lived far away from us, and while I'd talked with her from time to time during my mother's final weeks, the frail, white-haired woman before me seemed at first a near stranger. Earthy, candid, and mentally spot-on, she struck me in many ways as the polar opposite of the mom I'd just lost. I was struck by my aunt's keen understanding of the woman she continued to call "my little sister," with her hidden vulnerability, stoic courage, and, particularly, deep aversion to discussing family history. In our short time together, my aunt set about filling in a few of the gaps, surveying the possibilities, and pulling up key moments for review. Some of this I'd known in broad outline but not in detail—the deaths of a brother and father, the family's desperate struggles in Great Depression, long periods spent with distant grandparents. My aunt tirelessly recounted story after story, often in heart-stopping detail, always with an unspoken acknowledgement that we could now speak of these things in a spirit of respect and love. I needed to know all that had been so long kept in the shadows.

Venturing still further back, she spoke of the family's long-ago immigrations from Virginia to West Virginia to Missouri and, finally, to the west coast. Our family had been on the continent for a long time, my aunt noted with a meaningful gaze—long before the Civil War, long before West Virginia's state boundaries were drawn. Then she spoke of her belief—grounded, it seemed, in long family lore—that we had ances-

tors who were slaves as well as ancestors who were slave owners. Our white ancestors, she added with grim authority, were hardly a moral set.

That a multitude of interracial children were born in colonial and new-nation times is well established (Nash), and it seems safe to surmise that countless Americans remain unaware of their mixed-race lineage (see, for instance, Daniel Sharfstein's *The Invisible Line* and Bliss Broyard's *One Drop*). This would seem so common a phenomenon as to be entirely unremarkable—were it not, that is, for a widespread decision not to acknowledge it, and, as generations have come and gone, not to *know* it. As I grappled with the possibility, I realized three things: (1) that the prospect had an unmistakable ring of truth; (2) there was deep meaning here that I wouldn't fathom anytime soon; and (3) my hunger to know bordered on obsessive.

But since we were talking about my maternal *grandfather's* people, my lack of a Y chromosome ruled out genetic testing. Instead, I gave up sleep to troll Ancestry.com, contacted archivists, family historians, professional genealogists, and complete strangers who might just be relatives. Finding my grandfather was easy, and I managed to obtain a photograph of *his* father—a lanky mountain man standing beside a woodpile in soiled workclothes, enormous shotgun in hand, big black dog and pet bobcat by his side. He had high, prominent cheekbones, a nut-brown complexion, and intense, distantly fixed dark eyes. I kept looking, finding family trees, portraits, and letters, discovering my bobcat-owning great-grandfather's parents, aunts, and uncles, all of whom were caught up in one way or another in the horrors of the Civil War. My great-great uncle, a Confederate soldier, had died at 19 in the Battle of Glendale. Another—described in military documents as “dark complexioned, with blue eyes”—served for three years before taking the Union amnesty oath, by then shell-shocked, starving, and desperate to be home. These were not slave holders, but poor mountain people who struggled to compose plaintive letters to loved ones. “I Preye,” wrote one of my Confederate ancestors,

thate this war will close, Prey to God for him to close it if it is his will oh thate we cood have Peace thate ward Peace is the sweetest ward thate cood be utered may God savers all in his everlasting kingdom is my Prears. (Bailey)

I'm not sure what my mom's “boring” English-Scots-Irish were supposed to look like, but somehow the available images of these people didn't seem to quite fit that particular ethnic bill. There were plenty of tantalizing teasers, lots of “could-be's”—a portrait of a white ancestor holding a Black baby, stories of similarly named families adopting Shawnee and Cherokee orphans, old portraits and early photographs of dark-haired, dark-eyed people of uncertain race. But as far as our certain ancestors were concerned, the trail stopped with a man named James, a Methodist minister and hardscrabble West Virginia farmer, his tombstone reading “pious father, gone to a better place.” (One can't visit it now, a newly discovered relative told me with a West Virginian's twang, “cause the lady who owns the property will come out with a shotgun and her two *real mean* dogs.”) James was my great-great-great grandfather, and while traditional lore abounds, no one knows for certain who his parents were. He was born in Virginia in 1796 or 1797, showing up mysteriously in the home of a white couple who had remained childless for the previous 10 years of their marriage. We know that the source of James' sur-

name moved nearly 200 miles away soon after the child's appearance, and that later legal papers indicate that this presumed "father" was in fact childless. An enduring bit of family lore casts James as an orphaned Native American adopted by this later-estranged couple. There is no "bastardy bond" for James—a legal requirement at the time where children were born out of wedlock. James and his ancestors remain as mysterious as a local artifact known as the "Kanawha Madonna," its human face worn to a smooth, featureless slab (Jefferds, Jr.)

Do I have Black ancestors? Native American ancestors? Likely, I'd say, though my exhaustive search has turned up little by way of convincing evidence, let alone proof. What I *do* know is that those little lower-Kanawha valley towns where Moffett sensed "a rawness, a danger, a suffering" are places where my ancestors lived, places filled even today with people bearing their now-familiar surnames. In this "skipped-over part of Kahawha Valley," writes Moffett,

Most human life—mines, little stores, cottages, highway, railroad—crowd between the Kanawha River and the mountains, which are really wild except for settlements along the occasional ravine road. Several hundred yards up the precipitous woods is another world (8).

These people, it seems, are *my* people—but then again, in this unfolding scenario, who isn't? My people are the "them" of the book-banners, but also, quite plausibly, the multicultural "others" of the banned books. Am I really so devoid of any of these histories, identities, from any of this raw suffering? In this gallery of carnival mirrors, the once-sturdy distinction between "us" and "them" becomes elusive. I'm realizing that this only seems exotic, that this story of secretly mixed-up genes, of a commonality that quietly binds us even amidst our most rancorous strife, is as common as Kanawha clay.

What If?

In re-reading *Storm* over the years, I've been struck by Moffett's prescience, the Kanawha episode foretelling the rise of the religious right, anti-government sentiment, and calls for an emphasis on values-neutral "basic-skills" in our nation's classrooms. It often seems these days that the nation has gone the way of the Hatfields and McCoys, our opposing political, ethnic, and socioeconomic resentments filling the 24-hour airwaves. As I've coasted about on these waves of history, all this is striking me as less inevitable, less natural, a touch ridiculous, even.

Narrative theorists across disciplines have long argued that we make sense of experience through storytelling (e.g., Bruner, *Actual Minds*; Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing*; and Sarbin, *Narrative Psychology*). Recently, psychologist Mark Freeman has taken up the related business of what he calls "moral lateness"—that is, the power of historical hindsight to foster consciousness-expanding reflection (*Hindsight*, 67). Drawing on the work of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and sociologist Edward Shils, Freeman maintains that the "self"—so often seen in our own times in ahistorical, wholly self-determinable terms—can be understood only with reference to the "fabric of history" into which we are all enmeshed; "the modern autobiographical subject," Freeman writes, "whose past appears limited to his or her own life, is something of a *mistake*" (121). For

Freeman, our historic baggage—what he terms “narrative reserve”—doesn’t have to be fully conscious to inform our lives in important ways. We all carry a “narrative unconscious,” he maintains,

untold and unwritten stories, cultural as well as personal, that are in important respects constitutive of experience and identity. Narratives are with us in ways we don’t quite know; they are part of our deep memory, as I have called it, which is itself comprised, in part, of sedimented layers of history. By recognizing this via the reflective work of hindsight, we open ourselves to the possibility of exploring new and different forms of making sense of personal life. (123)

Freeman, it seems, would take one step further Faulkner’s famous observation that “[t]he past isn’t dead. It’s not even past” (*Requiem*, Act I / Scene III). Our pasts, Freeman argues, connect us to our ancestors and to one another—a reality that we may choose to ignore in the spirit of *agnosis*, or meet as avenues of wonderment, mystery, and expansion.

When Moffett left us in December of 1996, I was in the midst of planning a small conference at which he was to be a keynote speaker. At the gathering a few weeks later, Betty Jane Wagner, his close collaborator on the *Interaction* series, stood before us delivering a remembrance. We all laughed at the prospect of Betty Jane being identified as a purveyor of “dirty books,” and we gazed in astonishment at the full set of *Interaction* texts that she’d placed on display. All of us had heard of the books, of course, but none of us had ever actually seen them, all copies save those in private collections having been long since expunged from schools and libraries. It seemed no one wanted to know about them anymore, least of all anyone with personal turf to protect, these pages filled with mind-corrupting works by the likes of Rudyard Kipling, Jack London, Frederick Douglass, and Langston Hughes. Betty Jane spoke of how calm and forgiving Moffett had been in the face of all the Kanawha ugliness, how he could hear hateful things but never give way to hate.

While I never had that chance to meet Moffett in person, his words on the page have left me with much to think about. I meet many young teachers who’ve never heard of the Kanawha controversy, for whom this whole explosive affair has become one of those unconscious narratives of deep memory. I find that while I don’t really care whether or not they know the concrete facts of it all, I do long to provoke the counter-cultural questions the book raises for those of us who’ve found it good company along our winding paths. What if Moffett was right: What if it turns out that we’ve more in common than we know? Why wouldn’t we want to know this? Why shouldn’t we let the very possibility rock our worlds?



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Who Cares? Exploring Student Perspectives on Care Ethics

Kelly A. Concannon Mannise

Recent interest in global citizenship and civic responsibility illustrates a commitment to learning in ways that extend beyond the classroom (see Mayhew and Fernandez; Miller, et al.). Service learning is no stranger to this milieu. According to the National Service-learning Clearinghouse, “Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (“What Is Service Learning?”). Service-learning brings together “academic” expertise and experiential learning to create new ways of viewing the world (Mitchell; Moely, et al.; Rosenberger). Further, these opportunities afford students with the ability to engage in *real* rhetorical situations with *real* people (Deans; Rhoads). Implicit are assumptions about the potentials of these situations to create conditions of and for connection and engagement; these rhetorical situations position students and teachers to *care*.

The complex role of care in service learning sites has to this point been highly invisible—with the exception of personal narratives revealing success. In these narratives, pedagogues discuss their ability to create effective assignments and readings that solidify students’ engagement with others, and those who conduct service are lauded for their ability to “care” (Keller, Nelson, and Wick; Bay). However, these practices potentially reify rather than alter relationships of power and privilege (Densmore; Himley).

In this essay, I explore how care—as an ethic, practice, and value—is represented through students’ accounts of their experiences in a themed writing course with a designated service-learning component. I bring to light how students see, value, and define what constitutes effective practices of care. My purpose is to make visible how exposure to carefully crafted readings, assignments, and discussions produce both possibilities and conflicts when attempting to cultivate care. My work poses new directions for complicating relationships between care ethics and service-learning and reveals a strong commitment to pedagogical scholars’ call for critical reflection (Rice and Pollack; Rosenberger; O’Grady; King).

Who Cares?

Care ethics intend to significantly impact how students engage with course materials. The teacher’s effectiveness in caring is directly tied to her ability to create the most effective conditions for the student. However, early versions of care ethics in education do not account for the complexities of relationships both inside and outside the classroom. For example, Nel Noddings, in her now foundational project, *A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, focuses on the necessary conditions that the one caring needs to create in order for the student to feel cared-for. Although Noddings provides her audience with concepts to guide the one caring to “feel with” another, the teacher is positioned to direct all of her energy towards the individual student and her/

his needs in the classroom.¹ Caring, then, is not understood for its ability to impact relationships existing outside of the classroom (Applebaum; Tronto; Clement). Thus, this “traditional” version of care unfortunately does very little to account for the “real world” in ways that progressive pedagogues like Paulo Freire and Ira Shor suggest.

My introductory writing course was constructed to challenge traditional notions of care ethics and, fundamentally, to make visible the role of care in the classroom as well as in service-learning sites. I placed value on the role of interpersonal relationships, as Noddings suggests, but worked to extend my understandings of these relationships. I turned toward a critical ethics of care in my practice and took time throughout the semester to expose how identities, experiences, and histories factored into our ability, and more importantly, our privilege to care as members of a private institution. In doing so, I drew on Fiona Robison’s *Globalizing Care: Ethics, Feminist Theory, and International Relations*. Robison develops the term “critical” care ethics to attend to how relationships to others are historically constructed. She reveals how our moral obligations are linked to oppressive historical practices, and she argues that only through critical reflection can we expose these multiple relationships to power. Thus, I saw consistent reflection of our moral obligations to others, including myself, as foundational to bringing about a critical ethics of care.

Throughout the semester, students engaged in theory, enacted the theory through service-learning sites, and then reflected on the most significant aspects of these processes. I believed the creation of carefully constructed readings and assignments might bring about a more complex and critical understanding and experience of care, although many scholars reveal that outcomes and intentions do not necessarily produce desired results (Tilley-Lubbs). My intentions were further complicated by the fact that students would be engaging with difficult course materials and would be placed in situations that may run counter to their previous experiences. Indeed, I anticipated significant challenges in fostering classroom conditions where students felt their experiences and identities were valued, and where these experiences and identities were situated alongside larger systems of power and oppression. However, despite these challenges, I imagined that confronting all of our expectations and assumptions would make visible multiple and competing relationships *to care*.

Framework

I designed the honors version of Syracuse University’s introductory writing course to encourage students to examine relationships among care, literacies, and service-learning. The course, “Fostering Community Engagement, Exploration, and Analysis in and around Education,” exposed students to theoretical debates regarding power and privilege, and students explored these issues through reading, writing, and experiences in service-learning sites. Students were placed in different literacy-based sites. These included working with younger students in afterschool programs and aiding teachers in

¹ Caring requires the suspension of the beliefs, motivations, and judgments of the one caring. Concepts like motivational displacement and engrossment guide the one caring in her/his ability to “feel with” another through the process of reception. For Noddings, this concept of receptivity is integral to effective caring (30).

a local middle school.² The course brought together theoretical discussions of identity, experience and history. It addressed theoretical and practical debates surrounding what it means to “do service,” mainly focusing on complicating interpersonal relationships. Throughout the semester, the course addressed current debates surrounding public and private education. The idea was to set strategically in motion particular ideas about encountering others (textually, physically, emotionally) *before* students entered a literacy-based service-learning site. Thus, the intention was to move students from a theoretical understanding of literacy, access, education, and care toward practical engagement, and then to urge them to continuously reflect on these processes. Students were asked to construct three formal papers: a general point of inquiry, a rhetorical and ideological analysis, and a final collaborative project. They also maintained a service-learning journal.

Care 101

Students were introduced to the complexities of care early on in the course. I wanted them to develop the personal engagement and investments that would allow them to participate effectively within their service-learning sites. To that end, I invited the class to develop a conceptual lens through which to assess, challenge, and refine how they made sense of their relationships to others. This work would help students examine relationships between “service” and “care.” Initially, students read Nel Noddings’ essay “Why Care About Caring?” In this essay, Noddings exposes the value of the interpersonal dimensions of care and asks readers to examine critically how *their* experiences and interests may affect accounts of care. Although Noddings does not directly address the relationships between service-learning and care ethics, her work challenges students to engage in practices of care in ways that are attentive to the needs, desires, and experiences of others.

We discussed the importance of a more historicized, more theoretical, and more responsible understanding of interpersonal relationships. Students were encouraged to complicate Noddings’ definition of care through postcolonial theory. Students drew from transnational feminist Sara Ahmed’s essay “Encountering Strangers,” which illuminates multiple relationships to power and privilege, and highlights the role of history in determining, but not predetermining, immediate relationships. Ahmed creates the concept of “encounter” to reveal relationships between histories of colonialism and the (re)production of varying relationships to power which are infused throughout our daily lives.

Students used these readings to expose emotional and physical barriers between the university and the community and to examine how care is inextricably linked to exclusion, privilege, and power. After conducting a series of observations of a designated space—usually a space “off of the hill”—students assessed how they inhabited the uni-

² The middle school that the students volunteered in consisted of predominantly African American students. Thus, racial differences posed a complex dynamic. In fact, “In 2010, T Aaron Levy Middle School had 81% of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch programs” (<http://www.education.com/schoolfinder/us/new-york/syracuse/t-aaron-levy-middle-school/#students-and-teachers>)

versity space and related to others.³ Students exposed different barriers, drawing from David Sibley's "Geographies of Exclusion," and examined how their identities and experiences affected their readings of these spaces. They also drew from Minnie Bruce Pratt's essay, "Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart," as a model for exposing how their identities and experiences significantly affected their presence in these spaces.⁴

Students continued to explore and assess relationships through a focused rhetorical and ideological analysis of representations of education and literacies. Class discussions involved an examination of who was in a position of power—in a position to care—in relation to those who needed to be cared-for, or, according to students, those who needed to be "saved." Students discussed the movie *Freedom Writers*, a 2007 film about an idealistic white teacher who sets out to alter the lives of underprivileged high school youth. Conversations involved multiple assessments of racial and gendered dynamics of identities, oftentimes invoking the need to explore these issues through additional readings of power and privilege.⁵

The purpose of this rhetorical and ideological analysis was to get students to make ethical arguments about how they understood relationships to education in ways that were attentive to larger questions of access. We complicated concepts like "hard work" and "individual merit" through a discussion of how oppression is historically constructed. Students read Anyon's "From Social Class to the Hidden Curriculum of Work" as well as McNamee's and Miller's "The Myth of Meritocracy." Both of these essays reveal complex systems and practices that stifle individual success and merit. Students finished this unit with a careful reading of Kozol's *Shame of the Nation*, which offers an ethnographic account of racial segregation in education. All of these sources gave students access to more complex and thoughtful methods through which to understand the lives of others, especially in literacy-based sites.

The combination of readings afforded students with the ability to use their expertise to incite action. In their final collaborative research project, students created models of service-learning that addressed the relationships amongst care, citizenship, community activism and engagement. In order to do this successfully, they returned to notes, readings, and observations. They discussed, complicated, and challenged what they saw as the most memorable moments from the course. Students then demonstrated what they saw as the best theoretical model for making sense of their encounters in service-learning sites and made suggestions for the future of service-learning at the university, based on their engagement with essays that directly addressed the construction of service-learning in responsible ways (Rhoads; Barber and Battistoni).

³ See "Syracuse University Facts," <http://www.syr.edu/about/facts.html>.

⁴ Pratt uses narrative to illustrate how she experienced a more complex and layered understanding of the world through reflection; "So often we act out the present against a backdrop of the past, within a frame of perception that is so familiar, so safe, that it is terrifying to risk challenging (changing) it even when we know our perceptions are distorted, limited, constructed by that old view" (33).

⁵ Students read essays that addressed both gender and sexualities.

Methodology

I asked students to reflect on their experiences in the course. Participants were chosen, based on their willingness to complete a series of interviews that were conducted, tape recorded, and transcribed in Spring 2008, after students received their final grade in the course.⁶

Students were asked the following questions:

- What were your experiences of care?
- Can you provide examples of instances where you were given the opportunity to understand the perspectives of others?
- How did care factor into these interactions?
- How do you define/construct a definition of care that takes into account the identities and perspectives of students, on the one hand, and the lives and perspectives of others on the other?
- Do you feel that service-learning creates opportunities of care? Why/why not?
- Do you see the university enacting various systems of care? If so, how effective do you see this work? If not, explain why.

Students who agreed to participate in the study represent—but are certainly not representative of—classroom dynamics, attitudes, and levels of engagement with course material. Interview responses were initially read in light of the tensions between traditional and more complex understandings of care. In other words, I was trying to see if students mimicked traditional theories of care—those which involved the “good” citizen—thereby resisting a more complex and critical understanding of accountability, identity, and receptivity. I also was attentive to how theoretical concepts of power and privilege factored into their reflections. I wanted to get a rich sense of students’ learning in the course in ways that resisted a static representation of their processes as privileged members of the university community. Students interviewed ranged from 18-20 years of age, identified themselves as predominantly white, came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, and were predominantly women. I tried to capture what I saw as the most striking resemblance of the *challenges* involved in bringing about conditions and practices of care—both in the classroom and in the service-learning environment—and how those challenges related to students’ experiences and identities. I was hopeful that my study would expose gaps, potentials, and potential pitfalls of bringing together care ethics, literacies, and service-learning. Thus, my energy was to follow Kevin Kumashiro’s call in *Troubling Education* to look beyond theory and to turn towards students’ perspectives in order to sufficiently assess what we do in the classroom.

⁶ I created the dimensions of this particular study in the summer of 2007, and received approval from the Institutional Review Board at Syracuse University prior to the beginning of the fall semester. Students were provided with pseudonyms for the study.

Students' Readings of Relationships

Based on the findings of my interviews, students stressed the need for close relationships that revealed a commitment to *their* needs and identities in order for conditions of care to emerge. They complicated different aspects of these relationships and highlighted the effects they have on the most conducive conditions of and for care. Students discussed the complexities of encountering others in service-learning sites and revealed how they encountered texts. Although students posed different ideas about how to bring about conditions of care—and consequently change—they all agreed on the importance of classrooms that are open and welcoming to their identities, opinions, experiences and beliefs.

Students discussed how difficult it was to connect to others, even though readings and discussions were intended to prepare them for multiple encounters in their service-learning sites. Kayle, for example, upon being placed in an after-school study program for middle-school children, recounted her observation of an interaction between a student and a teacher. The interaction struck a chord with her because the student, a young girl, in Kayle's words, had "terrible grammar." Kayle was shocked that the teacher neglected to correct the girl's grammar.

Kayle explains:

I was really confused as to how she got that far in school without understanding simple grammar rules, and it was just an insight into the quality of education and the way that education is addressed in these schools and the ways that students seemed to be just shuttled through it, you know? There were standards in my school, and if you didn't meet them, then you got held back and the teachers made sure.

Kayle's response highlighted a large gap between her experiences in education and those that she observed in the middle school. She revealed how her beliefs, values, and experiences prevented her from making sense of the complexities of this interaction. Indeed, the conflict appeared to be not only between herself and the student but also between herself and the teacher. This interaction suggests Kayle's difficulty making sense of the complex institutional context in which such an interaction could occur.

This interaction proved to be very significant to Kayle. She talked about how, in the past, she did not have a difficult time talking to others, mainly because they had similar experiences. Implicit here are her relationships to language and privilege; either she had been disciplined for her lack of "proper" English, or she had been conditioned through her experiences that "proper" English is the most accepted way of speaking. The evident lack of understanding of different relationships to language left Kayle confused and angry that the teacher was doing the student disservice. Thus, as she reflected on this experience, she explained that this encounter, as well as others, positioned her as "very distant" from the students at her service-learning site.

Later, Kayle revealed another instance where her values and opinions were in conflict with those she was exposed to at the middle school. She witnessed a teacher telling an African American student to "leave your ghetto-fabulous attitude at the door." She explained that this was an interaction she had never heard before, and that it "threw her

off.” Her reading of the institutional space differed from her definitions of what constituted caring classroom conditions. What Kayle valued as care—a student’s ability to express herself in a classroom—was stifled. In her view, a caring classroom was one where students’ experiences and identities were welcomed in an institutional context. Yet, based on her reading of the relationship between teacher and student, she viewed this learning environment as being devoid of care. Telling a student to “leave their attitude at the door,” according to Kayle, does not create a caring environment

Kayle’s reflection illustrated the complexities of these experiences in service-learning sites. She examined power differences and highlighted distinct boundaries between herself and the experiences of others. These differences emerged not only from her experiences in education, but also from her experiences outside of the classroom. However, she argued that the *process* of learning about others was really “intriguing” to her because she identified herself as an “open” person. At the end of the interview, Kayle revealed her desire to explore alternative perspectives through service-learning and volunteering at the university.

Another student, Jayne, discussed how her service-learning site functioned as a space where she was unable, based on what she identified as “cultural differences” to connect to others. Jayne highlighted how she had to take a step back and begin to understand her own identities and assumptions in relationship to her mentee. For example, when her mentee came to school with a broken school binder, Jayne noted that she felt compelled to buy the little girl a new one because, as she said, “What’s two bucks?” Thus, Jayne revealed her commitment to care in her desire to provide the little girl with functional educational materials. However, Jayne also made explicit the need to be attentive to the desires of others. When the girl indicated that she and her mother simply could not afford a new binder, Jayne reconsidered her initial desire to “save” her mentee. She explained:

And that made me think, would that make it inappropriate for me to get her a new binder? I had to think of how her mother would react—well her adopted mother because she has been switching homes—but how she [the adopted mother] would react to her [the little girl] coming home from the mentoring program with a gift—not even a gift, but something that was like a necessity. So, you know, I decided I didn’t want to because I never had met her mother before and didn’t know how she would react. I decided not to get her the binder, but instead I got her a gift that was more trivial, because I wasn’t sure where the boundaries were on that. So, I mean, it has just been a different experience trying to understand boundaries for people who have different backgrounds. And I guess I would call it culture. I think it is a different culture too.

Jayne discussed what she saw as a significant moment highlighting boundaries between herself and the little girl. She exposed a disconnect between competing value systems and illustrated how she made sense of the significance of these boundaries. While she argued that she still felt distant from the little girl, she indicated that she was “beginning to understand.”

Jayne’s insight crystallized how her discomfort factored into getting her to think critically about some of the assumptions she brought to the service-learning site. Her version of care involved building a relationship with this young woman, and included an

assessment of needs. Jayne brought to light a variety of competing theories about what constitutes care—mainly based on some of the underlying assumptions that the one caring brings to a particular encounter. She was aware of how her beliefs factored into the caring situation, and she emphasized the role of reflection. Jayne delineated these as integral to attachment. Indeed, she became conscious of her relationship to power and privilege, as she revealed her commitment to respect the girl's wishes.

In other cases, students did not always delineate how to address boundaries between themselves and those that they encountered in service-learning sites. For example, Catherine argued that she did not have the “temperament” to continue this kind of work. For her, growing up in a “white, homogenous, suburban school district” drastically affected her ability to successfully work with students in her service-learning site. During the interview, Catherine identified the kind of temperament necessary to work with middle school students in the after-school program. She discussed her lack of experience with “non-white” students:

Just because you grew up in a 97% white school district, you cannot work in urban schools, but it helps to have this experience [of urban schools]. I mean, what do you know about urban schools? You went to a rich white school district, you went to a rich white college. What do you know about what we are doing? I mean, I don't have a clue.

In her reflection, Catherine was aware of the impact of her identity on actually caring for students. She identified race as a key factor in bringing about care in an educational site. Catherine presented a complex account of how racial difference in her service-learning site created distinct boundaries. Interestingly, though, despite her indication that she lacked the temperament to work with students in urban schools, she quickly made the claim that background does not necessarily mean that you cannot be in these sites. Thus, through the interview, she resisted making a definitive claim about the impact of different racial backgrounds in the enactment of care.⁷ Further, it is not clear whether or not Catherine believed she could actually effect change.

Catherine's version of care revealed an awareness of how difference factored into the caring situation. If the one caring should be attentive to the desires, beliefs, and experiences of others, then Catherine's reflection suggested that similarities produce more amenable conditions through which to produce care. Significantly, she did not say that she could not care, but instead, that her abilities to care were constrained by her difference as a white student who grew up with little to no (identifiable) exposure to what she saw as difference. Thus, Catherine's discussion of the visibility of difference in situations that involve care merely point to the significance of commonality. She indicated that she was unsure of her abilities and raised attention to the role of conflict in actually bringing about care and connection with others. What was striking about her reflection was the way she resisted a traditional narrative involving white privilege. That is, she did not create a narrative espousing the idea that we were all the same. Rather, she seemed, incredibly aware of how race factored—both hers and the race of those she encountered.

⁷ Catherine indicates that her identities affected the extent to which she was able to attach to the lives of others. That is, our approach to *Shame of the Nation* helped her see how her own experiences of and with race, positioned her

Textual Encounters

The interview questions were also designed to encourage students to discuss the value of texts in their understandings and experiences of care. I wanted to see if readings significantly influenced the way that they thought about care and consequently practiced care outside of our classroom. This analysis would allow me to see what students took from the readings and whether or not particular readings engendered complex, critical understandings of care. Indeed, student interviews revealed the value and influence of texts in understanding the complexities of care. When asked to reflect on their most significant experiences in understanding the perspectives of others, students almost unanimously interpreted this question as involving readings and discussions from the course. Most students interviewed referred to a particular class session where we discussed the impact of identities on access to education. Surprisingly, Catherine, Kayle, and Caleb, another student in the study, each drew attention to discussions where we examined the impact of gender on identities.

Catherine used the readings as a springboard to discuss how she had previously been punished for not adhering to gender roles. She indicated that her experiences with gender were easy to share, given the exploratory environment of the classroom: "I have opinions about that which were pretty solid, like the story of my ex boyfriend who asked me why I didn't dress in something that was feminine." Catherine discussed the difficulties she had experienced, given her own relationships to gender identities, sexuality, and the eradication of oppression: "I was kind of in the middle. I wasn't with the boys who [thought] that is a load of crap, and I wasn't like, oh yeah, women are oppressed. So I was half way, and it was difficult for me to identify with people."

Similarly, Kayle referred to a particular moment in the course when students disagreed about the tensions between individual choice and gender performance:

We had read something about kids who had decided that they were the opposite gender, and when they were really young they decided that, and so we had a discussion pushing creating women's roles and men's roles. And I remember talking about how I was quite the tomboy when I was younger, and having someone tell me that those basketball shoes are boys' shoes, and I felt comfortable that I could share that in our class—my unique experiences to the discussion—and that it would be addressed and acknowledged when we were discussing this topic.

She positioned herself as struggling with gender constructions and expectations, based on an incident when she was penalized as a young girl for "choosing" to defy gender expectations. Her "unique" experience provided a way through which to connect to larger struggles related to gender construction—in this particular case, a larger discussion of the visibility of a transgendered community.

Both women acknowledged different understandings of the same readings. Each exposed how their identities and experiences served as a starting point for making sense of difference. Experiences were used to directly connect and relate to course material, and students' representations reveal a somewhat superficial and individualistic understanding of the relationships between gender and sexualities and oppression. Because

each student discussed difficulties adhering to standards of masculinity and femininity, they revealed a clear connection to how identities and experiences mattered on a larger level. However, it is not clear the extent to which these readings directly impacted how they understood the complexities of a critical care—both in terms of their own genders and sexualities, as well as how they may have engaged with others in an institutional context.

On the other hand, Caleb presented a different reading of gender, sexuality, and oppression. Rather than revealing a personal connection to the readings, Caleb referred to this class to indicate his distance from the readings. In other words, Caleb used his identity to disconnect from the readings. Caleb explained,

We did a lot of reading on transgender people, and that was enlightening, and I hadn't really thought about it before then, and we did a number of readings on that. And I found that that was helpful to understand more of what they were going through, to understand the situation better.

This passage revealed Caleb's discomfort, as he repeated the idea that we "did a lot of readings of that" during the interview. But while he explained that the readings helped him understand, his discussion of his encounters with the readings revealed more of an inability to take his engagement one step further. In other words, he distanced himself from the readings, even as he asserted a connection. During the interview, he discussed his relationship to his girlfriend, confirming his heterosexuality, rather than outlining specific details about what was "most helpful" in the texts. Thus, he highlighted the problems of fear and instability in the process of beginning to care—indicating that to care, students may need to experience moments of stability, and in the process, they may invoke their privilege in order to maintain stability.

Students shed light on the difficulties of reading about the complexities of a critical ethics, and then explaining how their readings led to significant classroom discussions. In some cases, students used their lack of privilege—in terms of gendered oppression—to connect to texts. In other situations, students relied on their privilege to determine the extent to which they connected to readings.

Overall, students' experiences in the course revealed the extent to which their identities, experiences, and histories factored into their ability to be engaged in *critical* practices of care. As Robison suggests, their engagement with gender and sexualities in these interviews, or their engagement with racial differences in the previous interviews, reveals in turn just how difficult it is to confront the impact of various aspects of identities on our moral obligations to be accountable to others.

Student Recommendations

All students expressed the need for an open and safe environment for care to occur. All students outlined significant classroom moments where they felt that they were being cared for. Their definitions of care involved how they were situated in class discussions. Thus, students created clear links between a classroom space that is open to a series of opinions about difficult topics, and feeling cared-for. Most students emphasized not feeling punished or ostracized for their opinions, especially if those differed from some of

the more difficult course materials and topics. Thus, they revealed the role of emotions in the cultivation of a caring classroom, even as they argued for particular classroom conditions.

Catherine, a self-identified shy student, indicated that classroom discussions about inequality and oppression oftentimes compelled her to present her opinion—an opinion that she saw as valued in our classroom: “If it felt like it was important enough to say something, I didn’t feel like I would be penalized or humiliated or whatever.” In the interview, she discussed a particular class where students were introduced to Marilyn Frye’s illustration of the systemic nature of oppression.⁸ “And I wasn’t crazy about her whole thing about holding doors, and you said that you didn’t agree with us that she was too far, but I still made my case because people were going to listen and not make fun of me.” Catherine proclaimed that she did not experience a sense of shame because she felt part of the community. She stressed the role of productive conflict in care insofar as differing opinions about the readings were present. However, she highlighted the extent to which she was granted the ability to speak.

Similarly, Caleb indicated that being cared-for involved being able to voice one’s individual opinions in the classroom. He explained, “I felt that I could really express some of my opinions, and that we really connected with each other ... so I didn’t feel as hesitant to say what I thought.” Caleb made the role of institutional power and authority and its connection to care visible through his discussion. Instead of highlighting the role of shame in presenting opinions that may differ in the classroom, Caleb discussed the role of punishment:

You didn’t get in trouble if you said you didn’t like the readings or you didn’t agree with them. As long as you did the work, you could say mostly whatever you wanted, as long as it wasn’t directed at someone in the class, I guess, or hurtful to anyone in class. I mean, it was an open atmosphere and easy to voice your opinions, as long as they were based on the work in class—generally, at least.

In both of these cases, students felt cared-for because they perceived the freedom to express their opinions. Their readings and opinions mattered.

The fact that the classroom was “discussion-based” allowed Kayle the ability to share aspects of herself. She created a definition of “openness” which draws attention to the general set-up of the course:

It was just the general air of the class that I felt that I could always speak my mind when we are having discussions, regardless of the topics, and I could always put my two cents in. And other people would counter it, or agree with it, or whatever, but it was really open.

⁸ Students read Marilyn Frye’s “Oppression,” which provided them with one method through which to understand the complexities of an immediate situation. Frye used the example of a man holding a door for a woman. On an immediate level, this act can be read as one of kindness. However, on a historical level, it can be read as part of a larger system of oppression that maintains gendered divisions.

Kayle highlighted the ways that she read the classroom space in general—as being one that welcomed her contribution. She further argued that care mostly manifests in the teacher’s willingness and openness to hear what the students have to say within this type of environment: “And also, not to just hear what they are saying, but also to think about it and relate to it and be able to talk to them about it, whether it be in a discussion in class or outside of class, but, you know, wanting to hear what the students have to say.” Her idea of openness lent itself to a classroom environment where multiple kinds of opinions and experiences made their way into classroom conversations and discussions. Thus, she noted that within a classroom of “openness,” conflicting opinions and values have a presence.

Jayne also contributed to these ideas about openness but directly addressed the idea of safety. For Jayne, a “safe-zone” was a classroom space where the teacher did not force her opinions onto students, but rather created an environment where students were given the opportunity to critically assess different aspects of arguments:

We had a hard time seeing where your opinion was. It wasn’t like you were on the one-person side. Sometimes you played the devil’s advocate, as far as allowing everybody to express their views in a safe zone, which I think is really important because sometimes you get some really strong willed teachers who are really intimidating for some of the students to even present their ideas, even if they’re similar to theirs. . . because you know, a lot of the time students are not even sure what they think. They just kind of need to talk about it before they can sort out what their ideas or views are even.

Jayne discussed the ways that a “safe zone” allowed students the ability to jump into conversations with ease. She also suggested that this “safe zone” encouraged students to explore their opinions without being explicitly influenced by the professor’s opinions. Safety required the teacher to be conscious of the ways she expressed her viewpoints so that she did not necessarily silence students, but rather, allowed them to make decisions about where they stood when various knowledge claims were set in motion.

Students began with a discussion of how open-discussions and ideas about “safety” affected the extent to which they felt cared-for in the learning environment. In most of these cases, students made visible the role of institutional structures in determining—but not predetermining—the extent to which they felt cared-for. In all of their responses, students referred to a series of classroom based discussions and/or interactions with teachers. Being cared-for—in all student responses—did not extend outside of the classroom environment. Rather, students emphasized their ability to engage with course materials, each other, and their teacher.

Although students’ discussion of safety involved a classroom space where they felt cared-for, they had mixed feelings about how varying opinions and value systems impacted practices of care within the service-learning sites. They presented conflicting views about the role of embodied encounters in bringing about the conditions of and for care. Jayne, for example, argued that you can “care” about someone that you just met, but to actually be attached to someone involves a much more complex process. Jayne used the concept of empathy to further describe these distinctions: “But to be attached to somebody, I feel is kind of like a more empathetic aspect. You have to be able to learn to understand them more and . . . to be aware and be able to see where they are coming

from.” Her account of care emphasized the willingness to not only reflect on particular assumptions, but also to begin the process of connecting beyond a superficial encounter.

Some students argued for the role of practical and embodied encounters with others in bringing about effective care. Caleb indicated that we did enough reading in the course about various groups, yet he argued that he would understand them better if he met them. “I think that it is kind of difficult without meeting them because it is still disembodied, and hard to make a connection.” In another example, Caleb identified the limitations of texts as the most effective method for attaching to, or engaging with, others. He referred to one of his current courses where they were discussing how pictures of starving children in Africa were supposed to elicit emotional responses:

I think that a lot more people would be changed to do something for it, and understand it, if they went to Africa or to some other place that needed help. And just seeing it in pictures. . . . It doesn't bring you there, and you don't experience it first hand and it is still disembodied, I guess.

Caleb refined his definition of embodiment by contrasting it with practices in other institutional spaces where people are told to assume the role of the “other” for a day. However, Caleb revealed that engaging in this practice for a day is “not even a comparison” to the real conditions of others. Instead, he argued that *everyone* should be face-to-face with others. Thus, he saw real limitations in both visual and textual representations of others. Significantly, Caleb compared these with the first-hand knowledge he gained through his service-learning experiences in our course. Thus, his account challenges pedagogues to be attentive to various methods that cultivate care, as well as how students read the value and purpose of these methods.

What We Learn about Care and Service

In her work, Noddings highlights how the caring situation occurs in a classroom. Little to no work extends beyond the immediacy of the classroom and into situations where students must care for others. Students may thus create definitions of care that situate their perspectives and experiences in the classroom, with little to no description of how these experiences and insights might relate to—or more importantly, affect—others. This approach does not illustrate a critical definition of care ethics. It only reveals conditions that are directly tied to and limited by the confines of the classroom.

However, students provide valuable insight into the usefulness of employing an institutionalized version of care ethics through their reflections on readings and writing assignments, if they concurrently have experiences in service-learning. Then, students' responses may highlight values of care that are more directly tied to what extends beyond immediate classroom relationships.

Even so, these responses leave a lot of unanswered questions about the limitations and possibilities of caring when students directly confront oppression, privilege, and exploitation. The ways that students represent their experiences may leave professors resistant to creating a “safe” or “open” space for students to explore difference, especially if students assume the space to assimilate information about others in ways that gloss

over, rather than critically assess perspectives, experiences, and identities that are counter to their own.

Students create multiple ideas about the most effective conditions of learning to bring about social change and care. Students argue that sustained relationships in immediate contexts are significant in giving them the opportunities to attach to others. Many students in this study discussed the significance of their individual encounters as being moments that challenged some of their assumptions. They provided insight into the messiness and complexities of developing relationships with those who were different. For some students, these differences provoked in them a willingness to learn more; in other cases, these differences served as a disconnect. Students' "willingness" to challenge cultural representations and to see beyond their experiences were integral to caring.

The strategies or stances that I thought were most inextricably linked to care ethics, social justice, and service-learning did not neatly translate in practice—if they translated at all. Students were offered several models for exploring the complexities of power and privilege, and the course was designed as a space where students analyzed, assessed, and experienced the complex relationships that emerge between education and care. However, the ways that care is defined and made intelligible—by students, by teachers, by those who are represented as assumedly in need of care—*matter*. My experience teaching a course that centered on questions of care, where students were provided with both readings and practical experiences in service-learning, has taught me significant lessons. I did not necessarily learn about the perfect model for bringing about care in a classroom. Instead, I learned about the crucial questions and choices colleges and universities need to raise if they value community service that is linked to both care and social justice.

This study also draws attention to the difficulties involved in representing how students engage with alternative ways of thinking and being, regardless of whether these encounters are textual or embodied in service-learning sites. Interviews with students reveals the amount of emotional and unconscious work involved in their learning and reflective processes. Thus, future research needs to account for how these complexities factor into the learning environment. As a feminist researcher emotionally invested in the course, I find it difficult to represent others.

Further, only the students whom I interviewed indicated that they felt cared-for. This small percentage of the student body does not necessarily account for students who may not have felt cared-for and consequently did not volunteer to participate in the study. Future studies should produce additional ways through which students who did not feel cared-for and did not engage in practices of care could candidly represent these experiences, free of institutional constraints.

Moreover, although I carefully sequenced a series of readings and written assignments—beginning with traditional understandings of care ethics and complicating these definitions through postcolonial theory and readings on service-learning—student interviews did not necessarily reveal the understandings of care, social justice, and service-learning that I intended. In other words, I cannot claim that I established the most effective learning conditions. Therefore, future work on students' readings of the relationships between care ethics, service-learning, and social justice pedagogy needs to be completed. Students provide an account of the learning environment and the learn-

ing process that resists a neat and defined account of care that can promote change beyond our classrooms.

In *The Future of Service Learning*, Strait, Lima, and Furco echo this sentiment. They argue that the future of service-learning *depends* on theorists' and practitioner's abilities to continuously refine, revise, and reflect on our practices. This future, they indicate, requires us to bring together the most effective theories, practices, and strategies, to work with students and community members to incite change (6-7).



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Playing the Believing Game with Dr. Seuss and Reluctant Learners in Science

Kym Buchanan and Perry Cook

You do not like them.

So you say.

Try them! Try them!

And you may.

(Seuss, *Green Eggs and Ham* 53)

Introduction

We believe that Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* can be an inspirational guidebook for teachers trying to reach reluctant learners. *Green Eggs* offers lessons to teachers and learners at every level—early childhood, K-12, and higher education. For the past decade, Perry has started his science education methods courses with a read aloud of *Green Eggs*. Perry's students are pre-service teachers majoring in Early Childhood, Elementary, or Secondary Education. Each year about one hundred and fifty novice teachers experience the dialog and tension of *Green Eggs*. Perry urges them to look and listen as Sam persuades a reluctant stranger to try something new. After experiencing *Green Eggs* with a fresh perspective, these pre-service teachers report a new or renewed enthusiasm for trying to engage reluctant learners. They gain a deeper appreciation of the kind of teacher and teaching that can make a difference. Here's how one student described it:

The concept of Dr. Cook's lesson is so simple, yet so powerful—use encouragement and persistence to get tenacious students to try new things—because you never know . . . you may like it, you will see! This concept can be applied to all subjects, but especially ones that can be “hard sells” for students and teachers alike—like science. (Danielle, pre-service teacher)¹

We believe Sam models an admirable attitude and a variety of compelling choices for teachers. We invite others to share our beliefs. Belief and doubt form a continuum, and learner reluctance can be an expression of doubt. In this article we'll draw on Elbow's believing game as a lens for exploring Sam's approach to reluctance. Elbow and others recently revisited the believing game and expanded on its utility in teaching (*JAEPL* Vol. 15, cf. Harkness, et al.; Moneyhun; Elbow “Reflections”). In particular, the believing game can serve as a promising response to the cognitive, emotional, and social entanglements of reluctance. In *Green Eggs*, Sam faces the stranger's reluctance and urges him to play the believing game in Seussian style: Try them!

First, we'll map out reluctance and the believing game. Second, we'll recap *Green Eggs and Ham*. Then we'll explore belief and doubt in pre-service education and science education. Next we'll highlight Sam's playfulness and his other effective teaching strate-

¹ The names of pre-service teachers are pseudonyms.

gies. Finally, we'll arrive at several broader interpretations related to *Green Eggs* and the believing game.

Reluctance and Belief

The possible entanglements of learners' motivation and reluctance are numerous and varied (cf. Brophy *Motivating Students to Learn 2nd Ed.* 119; Stipek 85). Low expectancy or low value may occasion reluctance: learners may have low self-efficacy beliefs relative to the challenge of a task or they may not see a good reason to learn the content (Lee and Anderson 587). Learners may already have a negative emotional relationship with the content, because their previous interactions have been marked by anxiety, frustration, or boredom. The social context of a class may occasion reluctance: in the presence of the teacher or the students, it may not be admirable or safe to demonstrate engagement. The possibility of failure may threaten learners' self-worth (Martin et al. 617). Once reluctance is occasioned by one or more of these entanglements, it manifests as undesirable behaviors like procrastinating or applying token effort.

In place of undesirable behaviors, teachers should encourage and reinforce desirable behaviors. Three desirable behaviors form what we call the "Trying Trio": admitting ignorance, taking risks, and making mistakes. These behaviors are desirable because they catalyze learning. Learners who confront their ignorance and actively experiment with answers and strategies will learn faster than learners who conceal their ignorance and only passively observe.

Many possible strategies exist for fostering Trying Trio behaviors in reluctant learners. Elbow's believing game is one of the most promising strategies, since it explicitly urges taking a risk. The game is meant to be played when encountering a new or unfamiliar idea—a time when reluctance often occurs. Playing the believing game means adopting dispositions of engagement and believing. We start by appreciating an idea with the deliberate passion of belief—an intellectual and affective risk. Then may we move back from the idea, perhaps to deprecate it (Elbow, "Methodological" 258). Elbow contrasts the believing game with the doubting game. Many teachers and learners have already learned the doubting game, especially in content areas like science and literature. Playing the doubting game means adopting dispositions of reluctance and doubting. We start by deprecating an idea with the deliberate passion of skepticism. If the idea survives then we may move towards it.

Both the believing game and the doubting game are useful because belief and doubt each play an important role in learning and truth-finding. The doubting game is only a problem "when it tries to hog the whole bed" (Elbow, "Methodological" 258). Teachers should consider the classroom climate that could arise when the doubting game hogs the bed. Learners may mistakenly believe that reflexive skepticism is the same as critical thinking. But in many domains, especially complex domains, learners should explore thoroughly from multiple perspectives before discarding or adopting a model or conclusion (Spiro and Jehng 186). So we should teach the believing game and support learners as they play it, including fostering a classroom climate that protects admitting ignorance and making mistakes.

Belief, doubt, and reluctance are complex phenomena. However, teachers and learners don't need to be serious in all their choices and attitudes. For example, Kym requires his young daughters to play a light-hearted version of the believing game during meals. When offered a new food, the girls may doubt that they'll like it. But they must take one "no-thank-you bite" before declining. Sometimes the girls are delighted to discover they actually like the new food. This is the heart of the believing game: the value of being pleasantly surprised. When asking reluctant learners to take similar bites of new ideas, teachers may want to use a similar playful attitude. In *Green Eggs*, one no-thank-you bite has fulfilling results.

Recap

Green Eggs and Ham focuses on the conflict between two characters. Sam appears first, riding unusual beasts and introducing himself with bold signs (e.g., "Sam I am"). Sam approaches the character in the top hat, who we'll call the Skeptic.

Sam wants the Skeptic to try eating green eggs and ham, but the Skeptic refuses. Sam offers a variety of contexts for eating the eggs and ham: "here or there, in a house with a mouse, in a box with a fox, in a car, in a tree, on a train, in the dark, in the rain, with a goat, and on a boat." Sam doesn't just describe these contexts: he joyfully confronts the Skeptic with each context or even accompanies the Skeptic into the context. With each new context the Skeptic repeats his refusal. The Skeptic recites the growing list of unsuccessful contexts to emphasize his exasperation with Sam and his dislike of green eggs and ham.

While pursuing the Skeptic, Sam demonstrates an unflinching optimism that the Skeptic will accept the offer if he can find the right context. Sam and the Skeptic are joined by all the people and animals they meet along the way. Sam's strategies become progressively bigger and bolder, including driving a speeding car down a hill and riding a train into the ocean. Finally, the exhausted Skeptic bargains with Sam. He will take a bite if Sam will let him be. Lo and behold! The Skeptic likes green eggs and ham. This outcome delights Sam and the crowd of people and animals. The Skeptic recites the list of contexts a final time, only this time he emphasizes his great fondness for the eggs and ham:

And I will eat them in the rain.
And in the dark. And on a train.
And in a car. And in a tree.
They are so good, so good, you see! (60)

The Skeptic eats all the green eggs and ham. The story ends with the Skeptic emphatically thanking Sam.

Belief in Pre-service Education

Green Eggs is a story about Sam's belief and the Skeptic's doubt. Belief and doubt play central roles in pre-service education. In addition to learning skills and knowledge, pre-service teachers learn values. They learn "to believe in what teachers believe in,"

including beliefs such as all children can learn (Lampert 29). Teachers' beliefs can influence their students' self-efficacy beliefs. For example, students are more likely to have higher self-efficacy beliefs when their teachers have higher self-efficacy beliefs (Midgley, Feldlaufer, and Eccles 254). But pre-service teachers bring doubts based on their prior journeys as students. They may doubt their abilities as teachers. They may doubt the relevance and utility of education courses (Bransford et al. 202). They may doubt their ability to use progressive teaching strategies once they're in schools that seem to value traditional strategies (Smagorinsky et al. 17; Agee 758). Many pre-service teachers were eager, successful students. They may have limited experience with the entanglements of reluctance, so they may doubt their ability to connect with reluctant learners. In short, they may have strong doubts and weak beliefs. *Green Eggs* provides a context for surfacing and exploring beliefs and doubts with pre-service teachers.

Sam persistently believes he can overcome the Skeptic's reluctance. When writers want to overcome skepticism or reluctance, the believing game prescribes putting "themselves in their readers' shoes [to] address the ways in which a reader might not understand or accept the message" (Moneyhun 57). Teachers can do the same thing with reluctant learners. For writers or teachers, the believing game unfolds in at least two frames—personal and interpersonal. In the personal frame, we can use the game to better understand a different perspective in a contentious space. In the interpersonal frame, we can use the game to better connect with others, by at least temporarily sharing their perspectives. Both frames have benefits in teaching. As teachers, we want to better understand our students' thinking. We also want to build relationships of mutual caring and respect, and the game can help us demonstrate a sincere interest in our students and in their thoughts and feelings.

In pre-service education, we work at two degrees of separation. The first degree is between professors and our university students—we want to be good teachers. The second degree is between pre-service teachers and their future students—we want *them* to be good teachers. Perry uses *Green Eggs* as an unconventional approach to reluctance across both degrees. He wants his pre-service teachers to see reluctance in new ways, and he wants them to approach their own students' reluctance with caring and creativity. Perry helps pre-service teachers better appreciate the entanglements of reluctance so that they can be sensitive, responsive teachers. This matches the sensitive spirit of the believing game. The game prompts a teacher "to consider believing students' thinking before making pronouncements about right and wrong. . . . the teacher must be able to think from the student's point of view" (Harkness et al. 43). One of Perry's students explains the value of this consideration: "If kids are afraid of being wrong and don't have enough drive to dig in and experiment and try everything once, they will never know what they are missing out on" (Cammy, pre-service teacher). Erickson and MacKinnon explored this sensitivity in their research on teaching science using a constructivist perspective. An experienced teacher named Colin was training a student teacher named Rosie. Colin describes something like the believing game:

Colin: Now I could say, 'No, that's not what I'm looking for. You're wrong.' . . . [Instead, I try] validating the students' ideas. That is, try to give some sense to the students' responses. Because, well, one of the things, if you don't do that. . .

Rosie: They'll stop responding.

Colin: Yeah.

Rosie: Because they think that, 'Well, if I don't have the right answer, then I'll shut up because I'll just get put down,' or whatever.

Colin: And instead of saying, 'Is that the right answer?' in my mind, I just kind of think consciously, or almost unconsciously now, 'What is right about that answer?' Or 'What can I make of that answer?' (Erickson and MacKinnon 21)

In *Green Eggs*, Sam never criticizes or upbraids the Skeptic. Reluctance is not shameful. Pre-service teachers can apply Trying Trio behaviors to their own education, admitting their own ignorance and recognizing their own doubts about reaching reluctant learners without self-recrimination. Then they can find the courage to take risks and make mistakes, like Sam. By trying to relate to and reach all students, including reluctant learners, pre-service teachers can play the believing game with their teaching abilities. Believing and trying will be doubly effective: the strategies may work and the teachers are modeling Trying behaviors.

Whatever doubts Sam may have, he doesn't reveal or dwell on them. Instead, Sam courageously presses on, taking risks and making many mistakes. Each new context is a risk (e.g., "with a fox in a box"). Each time the Skeptic rejects a context, Sam has made a mistake. Elbow describes the believing game "as an exercise in developing courage" (Elbow "Reflections" 5). Sam's vulnerability via Trying behaviors may help Sam build a connection with the Skeptic. The Skeptic is clearly aware of Sam's persistence, and perhaps the courage and sincerity of Sam's persistence are what finally persuade the Skeptic to take a bite. When trying to reach reluctant learners, acting courageously is good for our students and for ourselves. Teachers can overcome learners' reluctance and simultaneously recommit to the open-hearted nature of good teaching. "When I feel brave, I find myself a better more generous person" (Elbow, "Reflections" 5).

Belief in Science Education

Belief and doubt also play central roles in science education and in science. When Perry prepares pre-service teachers to teach science, he's working on individuals' relationships with science across two degrees of separation. The pre-service teachers already have relationships with science and science teachers. These relationships could range from confidence to trepidation, and from enthusiasm to dislike. Soon these pre-service teachers will have students of their own—the second degree of separation. Those students will have their own pre-existing relationships with science and science teachers. If Perry's pre-service teachers have little confidence or enthusiasm for science, they're less likely to positively impact their own students' relationship with science. In science education, pre-service teachers may discover they can relate to reluctant learners by examining their own reluctance. In Perry's class, *Green Eggs* is often a catalyst for this self-examination. For example, "As someone who personally experienced the disinterest and unwillingness to participate in science-related activities, [*Green Eggs*] gave me a sense of wonder as to what science really has to offer, as I realized I never actually gave it a fair chance" (Amy, pre-service teacher).

A science teacher should consider the roots of learners' disinterest and unwillingness. Students with high expectancy beliefs and high value beliefs will have high motivation to learn (Brophy, "Value Aspects" 75). Conversely, students with low motivation to learn may be doubting their ability to succeed or the utility of the content, or both. A teacher can explicitly address the challenge level and possible applications of the content, to change learners' beliefs about expectancy and value.

Another possible explanation for disinterest and unwillingness suggests itself: a seductive escapism in reluctance. Learning takes work. If students can preemptively dismiss science then they can escape work. In the language of identity construction, they can foreclose on an identity that includes engagement with challenging content and thus avoid putting their self-worth at risk (Lee and Anderson 605). This kind of seductive escapism is possible in any content area. Learners can avoid engaging in Trying Trio behaviors by prematurely deciding they aren't scientists, mathematicians, historians, writers, artists, or what-have-you. They play a kind of doubting game with a selfish bias, prematurely deprecating an idea to avoid challenge.

When approaching reluctance and identity foreclosure in science, it may help to teach students to notice how belief and doubt function in science. To a novice, the practice of science may seem solely driven by methodological doubt. We may think that we begin with a blank slate to which we carefully add only proven hypotheses. Novices may get implicit or explicit messages that their amateur perceptions of the world are naïve and misleading and that their existing beliefs are false. These messages may deepen their doubts about their self-efficacy in science.

True, amateur perceptions can be wrong, and novices can start with incorrect prior knowledge or erroneous theories (cf. McCloskey, Caramazza and Green 1139). But how a science teacher responds to these issues can change students' intellectual and emotional relationship with the content area (Posner, et al. 225-6). One of the benefits of playing the believing game is developing a responsive understanding of how a novice may have used amateur perceptions to adopt an erroneous theory. For example, suppose a teacher wants her students to understand the phases of the Moon. Novices may believe that the phases are caused by the shadow of the Earth as the Earth blocks the light of the Sun. A novice can observe that the phases of the Moon have a curved quality, which suggests the shadow of a disc or sphere. The novice may think, "Ah ha! The Earth is a sphere!" Via the believing game, the teacher can better appreciate this basis for an "Earth's shadow" theory, and thus find inspiration for a lesson that unravels the erroneous theory in a responsive way. For example, the teacher can use a sphere, darkness, and light to demonstrate how a curved shadow can appear on a partly-lit sphere.

Science teachers can also challenge the larger misconception that science is solely driven by methodological doubt. Assuredly, science privileges beliefs supported by data collected through rigorous and repeated measures. However, teachers should help novices appreciate that hypotheses emerge from divergent thinking and nonlinear thinking. Scientists play the believing game when generating hypotheses and designing experiments. Scientists routinely think in terms such as, "I believe this new procedure will reveal a meaningful property," or "I believe isolating this variable will explain causality." First scientists believe, then they test, and finally they accept or discard. Systematic belief and doubt each play a role in science.

The complementary roles of belief and doubt can be vividly illustrated by teaching how scientific knowledge is socially constructed (Driver et al. 5). The history of science is a series of eras and episodes in which a majority of people strongly held erroneous beliefs. An individual or a minority doubted the popular explanation and championed a new belief. In other words, our history is full of Skeptics who passionately doubt the appeal of a new “food,” only to discover they like it. A scientist can play the believing game to blaze a trail into unfamiliar territory and then change scientific consensus (with experimental and explanatory ingenuity). Teachers can overcome reluctance in science for reasons similar to those that Harkness et al. assert with math: “When we view [it] as a human endeavor, a discipline that is socially constructed and fallible, the believing game becomes more possible” (39).

Playfulness and Other Teaching Strategies

Green Eggs is useful for fostering conversations about belief and reluctance. It also illustrates several effective teaching strategies, especially playfulness. “It reminds all of us to dare to be different, to use our imagination, and to be persistent” (Elaine, pre-service teacher). A teacher’s attitude matters. As a phrase, “the believing game” implies a paradoxical attitude. Belief is often a weighty business, but games can often be light-hearted. So the believing game is a playful-serious activity. In a similar way, Sam’s attitude is playful-serious. Sam is serious because he cares deeply about persuading the Skeptic to take a bite, and playful because his attempts are always cheerful and unusual. Sam models how playfulness can be a powerful catalyst for learning. Games promote Trying Trio behaviors by changing the stakes. Inside the “magic circle” of a game, the stakes are lower or different (Rodriguez para. 33; Salen and Zimmerman 95). Players are more willing to admit ignorance, take risks, and make mistakes. They’re more willing to take no-thank-you bites.

The believing game changes the stakes. We might play the believing game in many contexts, and in some of these contexts the stakes are high. When we play the game as readers, we want to better understand another point of view to better master a topic. When we play the game as teachers, we want to better understand our students’ points of view to better help them learn and to learn from them. Mastering a topic or reaching a student can involve high stakes. Yet the believing game asks us to temporarily suspend the stakes, to put them aside. Instead, we invest ourselves in new stakes, wagering that the other point of view is compelling. This is a playful-serious action. It’s playful, because we know that the wager is somewhat artificial and that we may abandon those stakes soon and return to our own beliefs. But it’s also serious. We don’t pretend that the other point of view is compelling in a facetious way, as merely a setup to ridicule it. We try to be sincerely invested in the other point of view. At the same time we hold on to the larger stakes of understanding and relating. We step back in order to move forward.

When Perry teaches using *Green Eggs*, he encourages his pre-service teachers to emulate Sam’s playful attitude. He also urges them to note the teaching moves Sam makes. Sam uses a variety of tools to introduce himself and the eggs and ham (e.g., a telescoping hand holding the plate). Sam has a plan, and he is resourceful, much like a teacher with a variety of tools and strategies. Sam isn’t bound to one approach. He keeps trying

new ones. As teachers, we should focus on our goals and continually re-evaluate whether we're using the best tools and strategies. When the Skeptic lists the unacceptable contexts Sam recognizes that the Skeptic is attending to Sam. Sam sees that a strategy has failed and tries a new one. It's important to get feedback from our students to evaluate strategies and inspire new ones. "Sometimes we just have to find that right way to connect the material with the student in a way that engages them and interests them" (Ryan, pre-service teacher).

Sam is extraordinarily well-prepared. For example, a goat is apparently in Sam's car for at least 16 pages before Sam presents him. As teachers, we should have a similar, inexhaustible supply of strategies. We need to keep up with best practices in our focus areas. We should exercise our creativity to stay flexible and inventive. We should collaborate with our goats—or better yet, with our colleagues.

Sam doesn't merely describe the possible contexts. He accompanies the Skeptic into each context, urging the Skeptic to taste the eggs and ham under extraordinary and visceral circumstances (e.g., with the wind streaming through his ears as the car careens down a hill). Sam doesn't settle for the strategy of "I've been there and I'll tell you about it," but instead uses the strategy of "we're going there, so you'll know." The Skeptic has a visceral, immersive experience through a variety of contexts. We thrive on exploration and adventure. It arouses us, and it recruits our attention, energy, and persistence. Sam creates a journey for the Skeptic that has the palpable immediacy of "being there" and "doing it." Thus, at journey's end, the Skeptic's passion is transmuted from a fierce repugnance of green eggs and ham into an equally emphatic enthusiasm for the stuff: "Say! I will eat them ANYWHERE!" (61)

A change in dispositions can follow conceptual change, or vice versa. At first, the Skeptic is comfortable doubting the eggs and ham. Yet a better future awaits the Skeptic, filled with a new favorite food, if only he can change. Many theorists, especially Piaget, describe major conceptual change as a process of equilibration in response to discordant experience (see Miller 78). Learners must first experience unpleasant confusion and the dissolution of prior, brittle beliefs. Then they can form more sophisticated, truth-tracking beliefs. A change in dispositions or understanding may be unpleasant but necessary for learning and growth. Figuratively speaking, it tastes bad, but it's good for you.

In the relationship between teacher and learner, change is often reciprocal. The experience can change the teacher, too. As teachers, we can model a spirit of inquiry and openness, especially via Trying Trio behaviors. Admitting ignorance, taking risks, and making mistakes can be scary for both learner and teachers. Being vulnerable and taking risks "is not how teachers often see their role" (Bransford et al. 195). Yet Sam is willing to publically fail many times because he's focused on reaching the Skeptic. Sam is emboldened by his passion for the eggs and ham, just as we should be emboldened by our passion for our content. We may be as surprised as our students when we're also open to change and willing to play with belief. "What emerging understandings, students' and mine, might be quashed if we do not look at the thinking rather than just the answer?" (Harkness et al. 44) Above all, boldness and creativity are Sam's pedagogy and methods. No single strategy persuades the Skeptic. Ultimately, it seems like the Skeptic is persuaded by Sam's inexhaustible enthusiasm and creativity.

There are caveats. The lessons of *Green Eggs* apply to all reluctant learners, but reluctance can be more complicated. Sometimes a learner's reluctance isn't rooted in a motivation problem. Reluctance can be based on real obstacles, including a curriculum that's too easy or too hard, or learning disabilities or other special needs (e.g., an Emotional Behavioral Disorder). As teachers, we should tailor our curriculum to our students' abilities and prior knowledge. We also need to be wary of substituting flash for substance. The eggs and ham deserve Sam's energy and creativity because they are worth tasting. What we teach should be "worth learning for reasons that can be understood by the learners" (Brophy, "Value Aspects" 80). Exciting, visceral experiences can boost motivation where the value of the content isn't obvious, but no madcap journey should be used to gloss over content with no real value.

Broader Interpretations

We'll conclude by contrasting Sam's sincerity and the poison of cynicism. As teachers, all of us have at least tasted the cynicism of giving up on reluctant learners. We may catch ourselves thinking, "If they have bad attitudes, then why should I even try?"

The Skeptic is what we'll call a "Serious Person," without the time or patience for Sam's unusual food or outlandish contexts. In a comedy, a Serious Person can represent our collective skepticism, pessimism, or even cynicism. As a nation, we can seem very cynical. For example, we seem to delight in the faults of public figures, in their missteps and misadventures. We doubt that anyone can be completely honorable or resolute. We scrutinize our leaders and achievers closely, and since they're only human, we inevitably discover some faults. Then we bitterly congratulate ourselves on being miserly with our belief in greatness. In the same way, we may disparage entertainments and products. The new movie is probably over-hyped. The new restaurant is probably over-priced. Nothing is ever free. There's always a catch.

If we are cynics, then we distrust the appearance of virtue and seek out hidden flaws. Discovering flaws validates a dim worldview. In contrast, if we are optimists then we distrust our first impressions that something is worthless or unredeemable. We seek out hidden virtues in people and situations. If the narrative arc of *Green Eggs* validated a cynical worldview, it would end differently. The Skeptic would try the eggs and ham and hate them: "See? I told you so." Instead, the arc validates Sam's optimism. Furthermore, Sam doesn't gloat or upbraid the Skeptic: "Why did you waste my time? Do you know how much all this cost me?" Sam gracefully accepts the Skeptic's gratitude.

As teachers, when we struggle to reach reluctant learners we may be struggling against dispositions society has ingrained in them. When we present something as interesting and useful, our students may suspect another deceptive sales pitch. We can resent their skepticism and thus be poisoned with it. Instead, we should follow Sam's example. We should recommit to finding or infusing value in our content and to reflectively applying different strategies until our students take a bite. "If we give up on our students simply because they don't respond immediately, we are just as guilty as they are for not giving everything a fair chance" (Amy, pre-service teacher).

Beyond our classrooms, our students face problems of enormous importance and complexity. Cynicism robs of us of the most useful tools for tackling hard problems:

effort, collaboration, and creativity. Cynicism tells us that the problems probably won't be solved, so why try? People and institutions are corrupt and fractious, so why organize? Cynicism squanders our imagination on dire predictions.

We need to dream as big as Sam and find the pedagogical equivalent of crashing a train into the ocean. The Skeptic responds to Sam's inexhaustible enthusiasm, and our students will respond to our unapologetic dreams and passions. We should also be open to their dreams and passions. The believing game provides guidance. As teachers, we can create a relationship of mutual sharing by demonstrating openness to our students' beliefs—"Give me the vision in your head. You are having an experience I don't have: help me to have it" (Elbow, "Methodological" 261).

Did Dr. Seuss write *Green Eggs and Ham* for teachers struggling to reach reluctant learners? No. And yet . . . Sam believes the eggs and ham are delicious, and he wants to share this experience with the Skeptic. We are teachers because we believe in the value of the content we teach. We're often brutally reminded that our students are Skeptics. Seuss writes Sam as undaunted. Sam doesn't give the Skeptic a comeuppance, nor does he skip over the Skeptic to focus on someone less reluctant. Sam tries to improve the Skeptic's life by coaxing him to be open to change. Sam cannot make the Skeptic like the eggs and ham. Sam can only do this: believe in the virtues and flavors of the good things he has experienced; model being open to further adventure and change; and try a variety of strategies. That is the spirit of good teaching.



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Being the Unbook, Being the Change: The Transformative Power of Open Sources

Elizabeth Woodworth

It's an emergent property of connected human minds that they create things for one another's pleasure and to conquer their uneasy sense of being too alone The social condition of global interconnection that we call the Internet makes it possible for all of us to be creative in new and previously undreamed-of ways. Unless we allow 'ownership' to interfere.

Eben Moglen (1999)

[T]eachers need to develop a discourse and set of assumptions that allow them to function more specifically as transformative intellectuals.

Henry A. Giroux (1985)

Be the change you want to see in the world.

Mahatma Gandhi

In the summer of 2000, I began working in K-12 reading and writing curriculum development. My job came with a copy of Jeffrey Wilhelm's book on the shelf, *"You Gotta Be the Book": Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents* (1996). I read it, most of the time with my jaw on the floor. Wilhelm's book was both transformative, as I'd never read anything like this in graduate school for literature or rhetoric/composition, and it was wholly supportive of what I'd done the previous year (which felt scattered and stressful at the time). I taught sixth grade writing, moving the students to engage with text, reading and writing, in ways I'd never tried before.

I remember wishing that Wilhelm's book had come to me sooner, to guide me and be a mentor text for that year. When I read of Wilhelm's own love of books and reading and the relationships he had with books, I thought, "Ah, here is someone I get." And the distance his students felt from text, I got that, too. I know I didn't explicitly teach students to "be the book," nor was I ever able to describe it that way before reading his work. But the passion I bring to teaching now is from that time, from that thinking, borne from the mistakes I made on that journey.

Wilhelm's not only a transformative teacher to the students he taught, he is a transformative intellectual who influenced the way I wrote and thought and created curriculum for struggling readers, especially boys. Wilhelm couldn't wait for others to help him. Indeed, he had to act to reach his students right then and try many methods before finding an arts-integrated curriculum that allowed his students to "be the book." His boon companions were his students on his journey—each took a hero's journey, each in his or her own way. Their story continues to influence and unfold.

Wilhelm demonstrates what it takes to help turn students into readers through sharing his journey and his teaching material. But each of us still needs to do this for our students. They have to be in it, be it, be the book. Somehow the book must be made real, alive, visceral, active, enchanting. Don't all educators want all writing students, no

matter their age, to see the texts they use as inspiration, to see the texts they are creating—really *see* these things and become them, live them?

Does it help if the text is free? We have the digital covered. Our world is digitized or getting there. But can we help students to see texts in different ways, by giving them “books” they can carry around on their phones or listen to on their MP3 players that link with art, film, speeches, monuments, maps? By making these things free for them to own and interact with—giving them a place to explore and find other texts and images that might work for them—do we turn them into engaged readers and engaged writers? The “unbooks,” the texts that are free and open, can be a smorgasbord of information from which students may pick to satisfy themselves, to bring themselves the pleasure of learning. The “unbook” is already the best book yet for students to learn how to “be the book.”

This essay is about a learning/teaching journey that will attempt to explain something of what you just read. I have recently transformed as a writing program administrator, as a writing professor, as a literature professor because I began working in a commons-based group to create open educational resources (OER).

Yochai Benkler generalizes his definition of commons-based peer production (CBPP), based on the phenomenon of how free software is developed. He defines this commons as a large group of individuals who share resources and work together to create something that continues to be improved and changed by participation (see Drupal.org, or Wikipedia). Other ways people have named this model include mass collaboration, peer production, crowdsourcing. “Open education resources” is a term coined in 2002 the Forum on the Impact of Open Courseware for Higher Education in Developing Countries (UNESCO). OER are “teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing by others. Open educational resources include full courses, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge” (Atkins, et.al.).

During this academic year (2010-11), I participated in *Writing Spaces: Readings for Writing* as an editor, then as a writer, now as an editor again, and I plan to continue in whatever capacity our community needs or wants me. I know what I’m about to say sounds like advertising, but it’s not that. It’s advocacy. Advocacy is okay. I’m promoting an *open* educational resource. *Writing Spaces* is an OER—it’s open, free to any and all who want to use the contents of this online, *open* textbook series. Download either of the two volumes or individual chapters anytime you feel like it. Do it more than once. No kidding—it’s free—essays about writing by writing teachers for writing students (and writers), peer-edited and peer-reviewed by writing teachers. Send copies to your friends. Most essays in the collection are licensed by Creative Commons for ripping, remixing, and re-using.

It’s not like exactly like software development. It’s academic publishing with the *feel* of open-source software development, and it’s modeled on that process to create open materials free to all who want or need them. It’s created freely, too. I know. I’m not paid. Nor are the other editors, nor the co-founding editors, nor are the authors. But the essays are peer-reviewed by an editorial board of impressive scholar/writers and peer-edited by professional writers and teachers who work at universities in Michigan, Virginia, Min-

nesota, Alabama, and California—with two more folks: a specialist in Texas handling graphics, and a professor in South Carolina, who is our production editor.

Because this project was built on a model of open-source software production (and traditional academic publishing with peer-review and peer-editing *and* supported by partnerships with Parlor Press and the WAC Clearinghouse), I was led to explore what all *that* means.

Eben Moglen points to all the good that comes of togetherness in production: new ways of working, new ways of communicating made possible by instant everything, all those infinite connections that can alleviate our “uneasy sense of being too alone.” I certainly lost a large part of my uneasy sense of being too alone through participation in producing OER with a group of brilliant, interesting, creative, kind and generous colleagues—from whom I still learn constantly. I learn from the work they write for the project, the work I do with them as editors, the work itself, the process of working together. The act of writing this OER isn’t about the pleasure of ownership—that’s too industrial age for me now. It’s about sharing, as immediately as I can, notions about OER created with peers, and hearing what peers think.

By my very participation in an OER development project, I began to feel like a transformative intellectual. As a writing program administrator, I help teachers in our writing program learn about OER—so they can have more resources to help them teach and learn about writing. And they love it. So do my students who don’t teach, who are writers, but who may want to teach writing one day. In the last few weeks, as I have been crafting and re-crafting this essay (and hoping serendipity will inform what I do), a former student of mine, Katie, and I have been working on a project using *Writing Spaces*. She told me she was nervous about getting feedback for a story she’s written for a short fiction class. After it was her turn to go before the class and receive response, she wrote to me about finding an essay in *Writing Spaces* that helped her:

Have you read all the articles on WS [*Writing Spaces*]? I came across one titled “The Inspired Writer vs. the Real Writer” by Sarah Allen. I read this Tuesday night and found it relevant to my situation.... I was so worried about my story because it wasn’t something that just came to me. I had to work really hard on it—deleting, re-writing, cutting and pasting paragraphs in other places—it was crazy. It was nice to hear that even writing professors don’t love writing all the time!

About a week later, Katie started attending an open meeting for a course revision in our basic writing program and wants to be involved somehow in this project of openness. She’s taking the essay that helped her understand her own writing situation by Sarah Allen and pairing that with Elizabeth Gilbert’s talk on Ted.com in which Gilbert argues against the idea that artists and writers *are* geniuses. Instead, we should eschew that horrific burden and embrace the idea that we can be open to genius moments if we show up and do our work—and in Gilbert’s case (as ours), that work is writing. Katie is going to write a short reflective piece about how she really began to understand the writing process as doggedly-determined work and not as inspiration alone, by reading Allen’s essay in *Writing Spaces* (Volume 1) and watching this short speech. We’ll make

Katie's piece part of our course, with a link to the video in the Ted.com archives and with a link to the wide-open essay.

A Basic Writing Course and Commons-Based Peer Production (CBPP)

This semester, a group of us at my institution are creating an entirely open basic writing course that uses only open educational resources (like essays in *Writing Spaces*) and is supported by open source software for building and managing web sites, like Drupal-gardens.com.¹ The course will be a gift back to the commons that gave us the content that we'll be re-mixing to meet the needs of a student population who require us (though they know it or not) to give them instruction in writing, reading, information literacy, computer literacy, critical thinking, and more. And we can do more with open than we can with one or two static textbooks that don't move around as we need to move around.

While textbook publishers may be working to re-create who they are and what they offer in book publishing, I doubt that much of what they do will be free. But I want free because we'll be contributing to the free. Free is good. Free is open. It's easy to use free things and make them into what we need them to be. When everything is open, nothing seems insurmountable, and everything can be done with a lot of us involved.

We don't know if what we propose to do with our basic writing course is particularly innovative (none of us would call ourselves cutting-edge techno-ninjas). But this project must be done for our students right now. Is there a basic writing course somewhere out on the web for the program I direct—with readings and curriculum we can use and modify? Actually, I've found some fine open educational resources for writing instruction. But they are not all put together in the way our program would want it, for our students, at our school, taking into consideration the newly published *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, as well as the *Council of Writing Program Administrators Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition*. And they don't have the resources we want to use. It's our deepest hope that what we do with our basic writing course will be meaningful to others, to anyone who wants to share in our journey of thinking and writing instruction—students, teachers, parents, friends—anywhere in our state of Alabama, our country, our world.

We inspire each other, we teach each other, we learn together, we take on only the tasks we can handle in small free moments of our lives. The course might otherwise take hundreds of hours of an individual's life and then only reflect one person's thinking. Together we are spending an hour here, a few hours there, and seeing where there are difficulties, anticipating what might be needed, all bringing different vision and energy to the development of this OER.

¹ Drupal is an open source content management platform developed through a commons. On their web site, you'll see that as of 27 February 2011, "550,999 people in 228 countries speaking 182 languages power Drupal." If you watch the map at the bottom of the page, you can see the commons working live all over the world, together. It's thrilling.

When Eric S. Raymond wrote about the process of developing Linux, he named a principle of development “Linus’ Law,”² which is: “given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow” (“Cathedral”). If there’s a bug in the software, and fifty people are looking at it, two might immediately identify the bug, and another one or two might find a solution. Same for curriculum or OER development, same for our basic writing course development—we need lots of eyeballs. If something is not working, one of us will find what’s wrong; one of us will find a solution. What one of us can’t figure out, a lot of us can figure out.

Our basic-course “commons” includes a WPA, full-time writing instructors, adjuncts, our library archivist who’s on our WAC committee, community members, and graduate students. All of us come from mixed academic backgrounds—not exclusively writing studies by any means. And we are certainly not coding-capable. In fact, a couple of us are downright computer inefficient. What we know, though, is this way of working together is possible. What we know is that we can handle the software angle with others helping us (and thanks to the Drupal community who makes it available in ways we *can* handle). What we know is that we can rip, remix, and reuse, legally with OER, to the greater good of our community with existing open stuff: software, writing, images, videos, and more. What we know is that other people in various communities can help us make it better.

When we are finished with the first iteration of the course, we’ll release it with the expectation that everyone who wants to will use it, revise it, make it better, and share their insights and changes with the group—the whole group—through the course site or wherever any one might want *their* versions to exist. We’ll keep working, too. We know it will never be finished. What matters is that everybody gets the course, everybody has a chance to play with it, everybody shares back with everybody. It’s the only way a commons works. If you take from the commons, and remake something from the commons, you need to give back to the commons.

A Commons: More than Meets the Eye

So we have learned that a commons can rock. I learned that first from my personal experience with *Writing Spaces*.³ And next, I have learned from Yochai Benkler and Helen Nissenbaum about the motivation behind Cyber-Based Peer Production (CBPP) and its end result—virtue. Focusing on Wikipedia, Slashdot, Clickworkers, SETI@home, they posit that virtue is wrapped up in the commons’ production and commons’ goals:

² This “law” is named after Linus Torvalds, Finnish software developer, who created the Linux kernel in 1991, which has become an example of successful open-source, or free, software—it’s licensed under the GNU General Public License. It came from the GNU Project, which was about free software and collaboration, started in 1983 by Richard Stallman at MIT. MIT is a leader in OER opening all their courses for public consumption and learning: <http://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm>. That all this is connected so deeply—not a surprise.

³ What *Writing Spaces* does is something like academic peer production more than a whole and large CBPP, such as Wikipedia, but it’s the same basic idea of peers making things better because they are all in the production process together—lots of eyeballs on the same bugs.

[W]e argue that the remarkable social and technical phenomenon of commons-based peer production fosters virtue by creating a context or setting that is conducive to virtuous engagement and practice, thereby offering a medium for inducing virtue itself in its participants. (414)

They conclude that being part of CBPP “is an instance of an activity that not only enables the expression of virtuous character but serves as a training ground for virtue” (414). The process and the goal of CBPP are informed by virtue. They use Aristotle for understanding virtue (in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) and refer to many other philosophers, modern and ancient, Western and Eastern, to talk about motivation and virtue and conclude that being part of CBPP “is an instance of an activity that one only enables the expression of virtuous character but serves as a training ground for virtue” (414). The process *and* the goal of CBPP are informed by virtue.

What they don’t talk about explicitly is the essence of Aristotle’s notion of virtue as a quest for human flourishing: *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is created from two Greek words—*eu*, meaning well-being, and *daimon*, meaning spirit. The life of a professional academic should be about creating the conditions which foster human flourishing. Aristotle declared that “the virtues arise in us neither by nature or against nature, and we are completed through habit,” virtuous by acting virtuously (Aristotle 19).⁴ Our job as teachers is to do the things that enable human flourishing in our students (and ourselves), including moving students along a path to find civic virtue. We acquire virtue because we are trying to create the circumstances by which others may develop the same kinds of virtues, as part of a community.

Or to put it in other terms, virtue begins when we heed a call to participate in Cyber-Based Peer Production. We’re inward-focused on things that could be seen as all about ourselves: autonomy, independence, liberation. But as we engage in further participation, our inward focus moves to an outward focus on things that are all about ourselves, but which might also give others pleasure: creativity, productivity, industry. As we continue to participate in CBPP, we feel good about helping others who are participating. We become focused on outward things that are still about ourselves, but which will definitely give others something worthwhile as well: benevolence, charity, generosity, altruism. Finally, we find that doing good by participating keeps us participating. Our outward focus moves to an inward focus again—and again it’s all about us. But this time, it’s about us as a community, and it cycles back because we’re being supported, others are being supported, and we all flourish in the sustainability of a commons.

Trying to pin it down even more specifically, in a blog post from 27 February 2011, “Emergence vs. Community-Based Development for OER Commons Growth,” Charles E. Lowe, a writing professor at Grand Valley State University, suggests there are several reasons for embracing a proven way of working with “open” as a commons’ goal to create OER for writing studies:

Based on what open source development has demonstrated, we might better grow the commons [for writing studies] if we prioritize community-based development. Here are some lessons we might take from open source:

⁴ Matthew Jordan, philosophy professor at Auburn University Montgomery, has helped me think about this concept in relation to what Benkler and Nissenbaum write about CBPP.

- We can generally create better resources collaboratively than we can individually.
- People like to “belong” and are more likely to engage in creating resources and/or put in more effort by joining with others than when working alone.
- The synergy we gain through collaboration will not only influence the creation of resources, but the synergy will also help us to feel more strongly a part of a community with similar ideals.
- Educators can learn more about specific disciplinary knowledge and/or pedagogy from collaborating with each other.
- We can learn more from each other about useful resources that can aid in the creation of resources; we might avoid duplication of effort.
- People new to creating resources can learn strategies for the effective creation of resources from more experienced members of the open education community.
- Through collaboration, we are more likely to create resources that suit a wider context beyond our individual needs or resources that are more adaptable. Better usability will result.
- When we collaborate to produce resources, we have more people aware of what was created and promoting its use.

He’s right. We should all be talking about these points. Open-source software developers are an undisputed force in computing. I’m an advocate of working together like they do to produce anything free for education: lessons, syllabi, courses, essays, unbooks. Think what we could do with writing studies if we adapted something like the commons-based way of producing text—for learning, for readers, for ourselves, for our peers, for our students. Think what we’d get in return. Lowe is onto something here.

We should pay attention.



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Suffering and Teaching Writing

W. Keith Duffy

Ten years ago, an article I wrote titled “Imperfection: The Will-to-Control and the Struggle of Letting Go” appeared in *JAEPL*. My impetus for researching the piece came from realizing that the lessons drilled into me during my doctoral training as a writing teacher—to do anything and everything possible to help students become *perfect writers*—was some of the most damaging advice I ever received. The fact that popular media often idolizes the driven, dedicated, selfless teacher only made things worse. After all, I thought, these were the teachers “Hollywood made movies about” (1). Why shouldn’t we all strive to transform our students into perfect writers who consistently wrote gripping introductions, never misused commas, and always analyzed their audience thoroughly before undertaking a writing task?

As I said in that article, after years of struggling to help students reach the unrealistic goal of perfection in their writing, I found that not only had I made myself miserable, I also had allowed my own *willful needs* to define the very relationships I had with students. When in the classroom, I didn’t see individuals sitting at desks with varied backgrounds, academic pursuits, and interesting stories to tell. Instead, I saw a collection of imperfections that needed ironing out. Justifiably, some of the worse teaching of my career then followed. My pedagogy became prescriptive, my commentary on students’ drafts became directive, and I regularly appropriated student texts wholesale. Though I thought all of this was “for their own good,” I had a nagging feeling that I had not become the teacher I always imagined myself to be.

Finally hitting rock bottom (and through the process of researching and writing the *JAEPL* article), I discovered there was hope. Various spiritual thinkers and scholars of writing studies, like Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketchum, Wendy Bishop, Mary Murray, Michael Downey, Mary Rose O’Reilly, and Jerome Miller had already done the hard work of examining notions of *imperfection* and how it was an essential part of the human experience. In simple terms, these and other writers told me to relax. Imperfection was something to be honored, not eliminated. By embracing (and even celebrating) imperfection as a trait shared by humans throughout time and cultures—both my students’ and my own—I was, in a sense, delivered back into the writing classroom to facilitate real teaching. Oh, the perfectionist in me put up a good fight for control, but ultimately this was a happy ending.

Sort of. Truly, ten years ago I did experience an epiphany about my teaching practice and wanted to share it with *JAEPL* readers who may have found it insightful. But I hate to admit it that the black cloud has descended once again. No doubt, the nature of my suffering has changed over this last decade. Some of it comes from the dreaded mid-career slump. The jittery excitement of the first class day is a faint memory. I assign fewer and fewer writing assignments. My mood tangibly darkens as I collect a batch of essays (just ask my partner who has learned when to steer clear of me). My feedback on those essays has become shorter, more perfunctory. I don’t meet individually with students as much, my attendance at professional conferences has become sporadic at best, and journal articles go unread. With each passing semester, I feel like an unhappy shift

worker standing on a production line. I realize public admissions like these seem reckless, but having tenure affords the luxury of honesty.

The problem of teacher burnout is perennial. Arguably, an entire industry has evolved to provide solutions—conferences and seminars, motivational speakers, books and other publications. If I wanted a band-aid (or a tourniquet), I could look in a hundred different directions for practical suggestions. Improving learning environments, reinventing the professional self, sprucing up writing assignments, introducing new technologies into the classroom to energize student feedback sessions—scholar-teachers tackling topics like these have practically defined the discipline of rhetoric and composition over the last few decades and are far too numerous to mention here. I’ve tried many well-meaning approaches over the years, but like a yo-yo dieter I always seem to end up in the same place: a place that feels a lot like suffering. So, instead of blindly adopting some technique that may or may not salve my wounded psyche (and the psyches of my students), perhaps the time has arrived to actually travel in the opposite direction and investigate issues of suffering—yes, I said suffering—and what role it plays in the life of teachers voluntarily engaged in the seemingly endless endeavor of college composition.

While you might not believe it, my goal here is not to grouse about the material working conditions of writing teachers. Instead, just like ten years ago when I wrote the article on imperfection, I want to do the more challenging work of *being in* the difficulty of it, attempting to discover some insight, some idea, some notion that might explain why teaching writing and suffering seem to go hand-in-hand, at least for me. Using the phrase “expressive suffering,” David Bakan argues that enhancement of understanding is a natural option for coping with suffering, and that amelioration of suffering through understanding is a superior approach (see Reich 88). To accomplish this, I again feel driven to turn to the spiritual with this inquiry: How can academic conversations in theology and philosophy about suffering—both physical and emotional/existential—enlighten us about our craft, when we feel our darkest? I suspect that such an inquiry is likely to lead to more painful questions than soothing answers. Hence, any readers searching for feel-good solutions are urged to move along. That’s already been attempted by writers who have more concrete goals (and perhaps more optimism). I simply want to know why, as the new academic year approaches for the nineteenth time in my career, it feels as though my life is slowly being drained away? And when I feel this way, how is it coloring my practice? Does it have to be this way? To what end? Is there a purpose to this suffering? And most important, how is this affecting my students?

Suffering and Art

Before analyzing those teaching-related questions, it’s prudent to acknowledge that the more general issue of suffering (due to physical or mental illness) and *art* is well represented. One of the premiere books on this topic is Kay Redfield Jamison’s *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. In addition to categorizing the many illnesses befalling great artists (including bipolarity, postpartum depression, deafness, alcoholism, and anorexia, among a host of others), Jamison wonders what would have happened if great writers like John Keats, Virginia Woolf, and William Blake had access to the modern pharmaceutical “marvels” of anti-depressants. In

a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Lisa Russ Spaar admits that if they were medicated, “these writers might have led happier, more stable and, in the case of Woolf and others, longer lives,” but who knows how this would have affected their art? Other work in this area, such as Richard Berlin’s *Poets on Prozac* and Pulitzer prize-winning poet Philip Schultz’s *My Dyslexia*, also show the close relationship that suffering—in a multitude of forms—has with the art of writing, as well as the impact modern medicine may be having on the world of art in general.

In a similar vein, the discussion regarding trauma and its relationship to *student writing* is not a new one in the discipline of rhetoric and composition. Many notable scholars have examined the effects trauma can have on students’ processes and products (Rose, Kellner, Harris, Borrowman, Micciche). Much has been written to not only help teachers thoughtfully navigate the suffering experienced by our writing students, but to also guide them to understand and potentially use their traumatic experiences to enrich both their personal and academic writing. In this regard, writing teachers are some of the most trauma-sensitive and heart-smart people I know.

While perhaps related, these intriguing conversations are beyond the scope of this article. In my opinion, examining the ways in which *teachers of writing* suffer requires a different kind of perspective than either of these inquiries. When illness and art are discussed, the suffering experienced by the artist is often personified as a muse, a source of creativity and inspiration, something to be endured, or at least acknowledged, for art’s sake. Similarly, most writing teachers are urged to take a “positive attitude” regarding trauma when working with student writers, showing them how their experiences are both legitimate and a source of strength in writing. Paradoxically, it often seems the disciplinary conversation regarding teaching and suffering leans primarily towards inventing ways to cure that suffering somehow, so we can get on with the important work of the classroom.

Arguably, most pedagogical research in this area strives to ameliorate the suffering of writing instructors with practical (and sometimes impractical) solutions, instead of attempting to grapple with the origins of the suffering. So what might be the result if we examined the nature of suffering—as it stems from our practice?

Attempting (and Qualifying) an Operational Definition of Suffering

I’ve delayed researching and writing this piece for a while now. During that time, I’ve imagined a colleague in the field of Holocaust studies finding the published article, raising an eyebrow in protest over my use of the word suffering, and confronting me during a faculty meeting. Equally, I envision a respected writing colleague in a non-tenured position without benefits and a heavier teaching load than I, pounding on my office door demanding an apology—what right do I have to speak of suffering? In other words, given the subject matter and context, how can I possibly justify using such a grave word to describe my pitiful teaching woes?

This is a compelling argument. Indeed, the term suffering may be too strong (and too religiously laden) a descriptor to name the negative state of mind that I and other writing instructors confront—and the negative behaviors we exhibit in response. It would probably be safer to diagnose it as a form of professional depression requiring a

daily (or at least a semesterly) prescription. Even if this is the case, if left unattended and unexamined, simple depression can lead to a deeper suffering—for us and all the people we impact, including students, colleagues, and family members. But as a medical designation, does the term *depression* really do justice in naming the particular kind of suffering that some teachers of writing—especially veteran teachers—experience in a chronic way? Think about it: From the dread of facing mounds of student essays to the despair of scheduling endless one-on-one conferences, it seems a more complex notion is needed.

In her book *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*, Kathleen Norris exhumes the ancient term *acedia*—first recorded by fourth century Christian monk Evagrius Ponticus—to try and explain a kind of suffering that extends beyond our contemporary ideas about depression. Best translated as “the noonday demon,” the word was initially employed by monastics, and then later by laypersons, to describe a paralyzing “absence or lack of care” in completing the most basic tasks—from praying to bathing, from eating to answering the phone. It is a lethargy that is almost like a “kind of spiritual morphine,” making it impossible to “rouse yourself to give a damn,” and it forces the sufferer to question the importance of engagement in the world (3). But very early in her book, Norris argues that while the two may be interdependent and related, *acedia* should not immediately be equated with depression. Instead, *acedia* has a spiritual quality to it. The demon of *acedia* takes up residence in the soul, and not only in the mind. And, as Norris boldly states, its cure is not a quick trip to the psychiatrist for a prescription:

The boundaries between depression and *acedia* are notoriously fluid; at the risk of oversimplifying, I would suggest that while depression is an illness treatable by counseling and medication, *acedia* is a vice that is best countered by spiritual practice and the discipline of prayer. (3)

Especially interesting, there are some characteristics of *acedia* that seem to elucidate the kinds of suffering that writing instructors often experience. For example, Norris illustrates how monastic writers through the ages who have discussed the term often point to the repetitive nature of their tasks—saying prayers or performing tedious tasks hourly or daily, for example—and how this repetition seems to invite the numbing effect of *acedia* into the heart. As a simple example, Norris discusses her hatred of daily chores when she was a teen: “I was a bratty kid that didn’t want to make her bed. To me, the act was stupid repetition. One of the first symptoms of *acedia* . . . is a refusal of repetition” (13-14). Certainly, a large part of our lives—especially our professional lives as literacy teachers—is characterized by repetition. Case in point: How many hundreds of times in my life have I pointed out a sentence fragment to a student? How many thousands of times have I sighed after reading a perfunctory and unengaging introduction to an essay, or circled a comma splice while hastily scribbling directions on how to fix it? Feeling my sense of care slowly slipping away, I’ve had to remind myself that while I’ve encountered this error or that shortcoming innumerable times before, the student himself or herself is new to the problem. Letting apathy win and ignoring these teachable moments seems attractive when I am in my darkest place. But that’s not what I was hired to do. Yet, there are human limits, and mine have been repeatedly tested in this regard.

As semantically nuanced as it is, the term *acedia* doesn't necessarily resolve the issue however. Am I simply experiencing depression regarding the repetitive nature of my professional obligations? Or is this an existential crisis? Being unable to clearly respond to this internal conflict, I've relinquished the need to offer an answer and instead focus on the fact that suffering, its origins, and our varied responses to it are relative and complex. By academic standards, such complexity suggests that an operational definition of the term suffering is needed. Other than making some surface distinctions between physical and emotional or existential suffering however, fabricating a catch-all definition not only seems impossible, but also unnecessary and potentially insulting. In "Speaking of Suffering," Warren Thomas Reich says suffering is often characterized by "an anguish which we experience...as a threat to our composure, our integrity . . . and to the concrete meaning we have found in our personal existence" (85). However, he qualifies that definition by suggesting an "experiential interpretation of suffering," rather than a universal definition, is probably preferred (84). That is, we all know our own versions of suffering. You might not identify with the moments of suffering I described as a writing teacher in the introduction to this article. Chances are likely, though, that you do have your own.

While a singular definition of suffering may be reductionist, there are some commonly held religious beliefs about the idea of suffering which we've inherited from various theological traditions. For example, those growing up in predominantly Christian environments may have learned lessons like these: Suffering is brought to us by God; God sanctions it and is responsible for it; we must accept suffering as part and parcel of sacrifice, which Christianity is based upon; suffering always carries some meaning or purpose with it; and, because we might deserve to suffer in some way for past actions or beliefs, the act of suffering cleanses us, tests us, or improves us. As a child who was dragged to Christian church weekly (usually drowsy and protesting), I adopted these ideas with miraculous efficiency. As an adult, these notions would pop into my head unbidden every time the teaching job felt too painful to endure: Maybe some higher power was actually presenting me with a veiled opportunity, a gift, to become a better teacher through my sacrifice. After all, there had to be some greater purpose, some enlightenment, behind this awful, heavy, overwhelming feeling, right?

Well, I was only half surprised to discover that progressive thinkers reject many of these well-worn ideas regarding suffering. In his article "How Should Christians Speak of Suffering?" Claude Ortemann, writing about the physical and emotional suffering he has witnessed as a hospital chaplain, calls these notions "habitual conceptions" that are, interestingly, *not* borne out by the gospels. Even worse, these ideas may actually hinder our ability to turn things around: "Suffering is not meant to sanctify us, to stimulate our faith, or to contribute to our salvation" (44). Ortemann admits that he himself sees "no particular good in suffering itself" and urges sufferers to "attribute no value to it, but to combat it and to go on loving" (45). Similarly questioning whether suffering contains inherent meaning and should be willingly endured, Dorothee Soelle, in her book *Suffering*, protests that traditional theological interpretations of suffering have always assumed there is a greater cause that undergirds pain: "The physical pain of giving birth, which is used again and again as a metaphor for such suffering, cannot be compared with senseless kidney stones. Mystics have tried to turn all suffering into labor pains and to abolish all senselessness" (95). Emmanuel Levinas, in "Useless Suffering," argues simply that

“the least one can say about suffering is that in its own phenomenality, intrinsically, it is useless, ‘for nothing,’” regardless that individuals or societies might have uses for causing or enduring pain (158). In a more contemporary vein, Stan Van Hooft in “The Meanings of Suffering” concludes that

Western thinkers have usually falsified our experience of suffering in trying to make sense of it. In a postmodern age, their accounts seem implausible. A central project of human thought is to make [suffering] bearable or acceptable, and one of the most common ways of doing this is to show it to be good in some way. If suffering were seen as a positive event or force in our lives, we would be better able to endure it. Accordingly, our cultural tradition contains many attempts to make suffering positive. (1)

But if we accept that suffering is neither positive nor negative, and without inherent value, what is the nature of our relationship to it?

Responses to Suffering

For Levinas, Ortemann, Soelle, and many others, suffering simply exists: “It is impossible to remove oneself totally from suffering, unless one removes oneself from life itself, no longer enters into relationships, makes oneself invulnerable. [Suffering] is a part of the smoothest life one can imagine” (Soelle 88).

Accordingly, if we adopt the viewpoint that suffering itself is both ubiquitous and possibly senseless, what matters is not the suffering we may undergo as writing teachers, but our response to it. Over the last decade, I’ve done a good deal of thinking about the ways I have responded, pedagogically, to my own suffering in the writing classroom. (Warning: I wouldn’t call any of the following approaches “best practices” by a long shot.) In my suffering, I’ve opted to not engage students on a personal level; while I would of course agree to meet students if they requested a conference, I’ve avoided proactively offering up my time outside of class. I’ve chosen to provide only the requisite, and frankly scant, comments on their essays. I’ve opted to rely on the same lessons, approaches, and writing assignments year after year. Essentially I have, in Ortemann’s words, adopted the “resigned attitude” by surrendering without complaint (35). Soelle discusses this same typical human response to suffering as a kind of *stoic tranquility*: “It is borne—as a burden, suffered—as an injustice; it is tolerated, although intolerable; borne, although unbearable” (103). Even though my pedagogy has devolved over time, I have continued to begrudgingly, yet quietly, do what is expected of me as a college writing instructor with no outward show of pain—just with less engagement, less enthusiasm, and less substance. Being no stranger to this kind of torpor, Kathleen Norris says “I did what was expected of me” in order to get through the day, but that *acedia*, “feeding on a willing withdrawal from the pains and joys of ordinary life,” was a constant stalker (9-10).

Norris proves my experiences are not unique. I’ve often found myself scrutinizing a disordered stack of 75 student essays awaiting commentary—a feeling of absolute dread washing over me. And as masochistic as it may seem, in order to endure it, I tell myself that I deserve this feeling somehow. Due to choices I’ve made, or due to my past actions, I’ve arrived at this point in my life, and I need to make the best of it. This type

of response points to how deeply some of us believe, almost on a genetic level, that suffering is *punitive*—we endure suffering because the suffering belongs to us in some way, it is meant for us. Suffering as punishment, even for actions we may not understand or remember, is a notion that stretches back to the story of Job. In *Messengers of God*, Elie Wiesel describes Job as a once happy, caring, fulfilled man who, through a rapid succession of disasters and tragedy, becomes a “hapless victim drawn into the abyss” (217). Though ultimately it is revealed that poor Job is simply “a battlefield, a living example” of a power struggle between God and Satan, Job only wonders in what way he deserves all the suffering visiting him (222).

As September approaches, I hang my head and tell myself I must in some way deserve this suffering, as if it is a natural response. Indeed, it is also Job’s first response to his calamities. Delineating the various stages of suffering, Reich calls this first stage “mute suffering.” It is a state where “suffering reduces one to a silence in which self-disclosure, that is, communication about one’s suffering, cannot occur” (86). More dramatically phrased, Simone Weil likens this to a situation where “the victim writhes on the ground like a half-crushed worm, having no words to describe what is happening to them” (Ramakrishna Math 441). Considering, as writing teachers, that we are in the business of communicating, the concept of mute suffering seems particularly poignant, even ironic. Yet to make a further distinction, when we march through the hallways loudly “communicating” our teaching woes to whomever will listen, this doesn’t exempt us from mute suffering. Reich says that “an individual may experience mute suffering even when exercising the power of speech” (86). In this case, although we may be protesting loudly about plagiarism cases, the paper load, or lack of institutional support, we aren’t really “recognizing and describing our own feelings. Thus persons affected by mute suffering may not be mute, but their suffering itself is mute” (87). Ultimately, the nature of our suffering does not change; we continue to experience it, to endure it.

As I previously mentioned, I’ve sought a number of mainstream, practical solutions to this problem that are readily available on the market. New texts every once in a while, “blended” learning environments, cutting edge technology to boost the efficacy of peer-review sessions, and even making class “optional” here and there (where I am usually sitting in the computer lab alone waiting to see if any of my students will drop by for assistance and conversation). But still, the black cloud descends—and persists. Why do these approaches never seem to work for me?

Opting for the word *affliction* over *suffering*, Simone Weil argues that there may be nothing at all wrong with the various approaches I’m trying to use; instead, the reason why my situation doesn’t improve may be due to my complicity in my own suffering. She says that one major effect of affliction is that it “injects the poison of inertia” into the sufferer; the state of suffering itself can

... impede all the efforts [the sufferer] might make to improve his lot; it goes so far as to prevent him from seeking a way of deliverance, sometimes even to the point of preventing him from wishing for deliverance. Even worse, this complicity may induce him, in spite of himself, to shun and flee from the means of deliverance. (Ramakrishna Math 443)

Though it might be reductionist, in contemporary psychological terms we'd probably call this self-sabotage. The idea of self-sabotage is predicated upon the notion that "the attitude with which we approach something will have a substantial impact on the outcomes of experience" (Formica). Hence, if we suspect, even subconsciously, that a solution to a problem is not going to work—for example, making class optional every other Wednesday—chances of failure are high. I suspect as writing instructors, many of us experience less-than-stellar outcomes like these on a regular basis. For me, after several years of trying new approaches, I shouldn't be surprised to find that very little of my reality has changed regardless of the band-aids I've applied.

But rather than delving too deeply into clinical psychology, I want to remain focused on academic conversations, especially theological ones, regarding suffering. To that end, the question arises: If suffering is part and parcel of human existence and is itself without intent as progressive scholars generally maintain, what do these same scholars say about our responses to suffering? Do different responses create different effects on the sufferer? Are there responses I should avoid? How can our responses alter the material situation in which we suffer? Simply put: Will it ever matter what I do?

First, scholars have identified many different responses to suffering, and their opinions on these various responses are relatively clear. For example, if I were to ask Dorothy Soelle whether mute suffering—self-induced or otherwise—is a proper response to pain because I believe I somehow deserve it, she would say no: "The doctrine about the punitive nature of suffering . . . needs to be silenced forever. It is almost incomprehensible that it has survived and been renewed again and again through the centuries" (114). Counseling other hospital chaplains how to discuss the issue of suffering with patients, Claude Ortemann writes, "[I]t is very important that suffering should not be presented in our liturgical texts as a demand imposed by the Father, since they are nothing of the kind. Similarly, suffering should not be presented as a condition made by the Father, a condition which must be satisfied before he consents to forgive us. Let us clearly understand that the Father does not demand suffering" (44). While Ortemann's audience—and hence his rhetoric—is firmly rooted in religion, a more secular translation of his point is possible: Most human suffering is not punitive or required.

On the other hand, say I were to quietly resign myself to my suffering, not because I think I deserve it necessarily, but because I believe there is some kind of purpose or meaning behind it that will eventually rise to the surface, miraculously transforming me into the world's best academic writing instructor ever. Or better yet, my suffering may show me, in a flash of brilliant light, that I should be teaching oil painting or bread making or sailing across the world instead of teaching students about effective rhetorical arguments and how to cite sources. While those romantic notions might be enticing to some, Ortemann would suggest that enduring suffering in hopes of such a revelation is misguided. For him, the best response to suffering is not to resign to it without protest—nor to offer it up as a sacrifice, nor to expect any fruits from it. More poignantly, Daniel Harrington in *Why Do We Suffer?* says, "The slogan 'expect a miracle,' while a source of hope to some, is discouraging to others. What happens when the miracle does not come?" (105). Instead of patiently awaiting enlightenment of some kind, Ortemann suggests that the sufferer, if possible, should "combat it and go on loving, even in suffering, even when suffering is so hard to bear . . . even when illness prompts the invalid to

withdraw into himself and to lose interest in everyone but himself" (45). Soelle echoes this same idea of perseverance in love, saying, "The soul has to go on loving in the void, or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may be only with an infinitesimal part of itself" (442).

What this means for writing instructors may be less practical and more *attitudinal* in nature, but this notion of "persevering in love" might lead us to believe that no material change should take place in our hearts, minds, or classrooms. You might come to the conclusion that, as thoughtful writing instructors, our only responsibility is to stay engaged and to care deeply about the learning of our students, even in the face of darkness. After all, what *good* teacher would argue with that? But it's not quite that simple. Look again at Ortemann's use of the word *combat*. He suggests that we have a fight on our hands; in some way, we are going to have to fight the good fight, to act, to roll up our sleeves and confront this suffering with an eye toward change. His only insistence is that we do so in love.

In his book *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*, Andrew Solomon gives this same blunt advice to those who are feeling down: "Don't give in to your depression. Don't accept it as the norm. Dig up from somewhere within you the will to fight back" (15). Borrowing from ideas presented in Paul Tillich's *Systemische Theologie*, Dorothy Soelle makes a similar point, distinguishing between *meaningless suffering* that simply incapacitates or paralyzes human beings and *meaningful suffering* that may offset inertia and actually be *productive*. In short, while suffering may not be supernaturally foisted upon us with purpose or as punishment, and it may be misguided to expect suffering to lead us to some inexorable truth or solution, this doesn't bar us from reinventing suffering as a powerful motivator:

Suffering can bring us to the point of wishing that the world did not exist, of believing that non-being is better than being. It can make us despair and destroy our capacity for affirmation. The division into meaningless and potentially meaningful suffering seems to me the closest to reality. There is meaningless suffering on which people can no longer work, since it has destroyed all their essential powers. I would like to distinguish this meaningless suffering from suffering that can be meaningful since it impels one to act and thereby produces change. (107)

Soelle's observation here may be nothing more than common sense, an acknowledgement that suffering itself can be a catalyst to action and can hence provide the sufferer with some meaning. However, it is important to note she is not saying that suffering has *inherent* meaning, and that indeed some suffering is meaningless—specifically, she refers the suffering of children that could otherwise be easily ameliorated (107). Though as teachers it may be challenging for us to act when faced with overwhelming suffering in our jobs regardless of the particulars, Soelle's words give us a starting place, a foothold, to begin creating or finding whatever change might be helpful. And even if the ultimate decision is to cycle through a variety of temporary, mainstream fixes to the various problems plaguing us (as I've done), at least we have *first* spent some serious time examining the nature of our suffering, our natural and immediate response to it, how the process of suffering has affected our practice, and what outcomes we realistically expect from those external solutions.

Point of Arrival (Again)

As noted, I'm not interested in blenderizing these rich observations into a pleasant tasting cure-all. The practical has never been my strong suit. Nevertheless, I believe that distilling some of these notions might help in understanding a general approach to the suffering we encounter in our jobs. With a keen eye on not reducing these ideas too much, here's what I've learned from this inquiry: First, if I willingly endure suffering, all the while expecting there is some transcendental, supernatural prize at the end of the process, I may need to check those romantic notions. Thoughts such as these may only serve to prolong suffering and enable paralysis. Second, just like eschewing resignation, a key part of "getting real" is avoiding embitterment. Many scholars suggest that we take a combative stance to suffering while continuing to participate in and love this world, not to hate or resent it. Third, it's accordingly acceptable if we can only participate in a reduced capacity for now—the important lesson is to keep participating. This reminds me of a common refrain that exists within the world of 12-step spirituality. Alcoholics who are feeling overwhelmed by their attempts at sobriety—and the stressors of the world—may feel compelled to start drinking. When confronted with such anxiety, they are often counseled by their sponsors to "just show up" to a meeting. In other words, regardless of what is being experienced, alcoholics are urged to simply keep participating, even at a reduced capacity. Fourth, this participation is naturally anathema to all-consuming self-concern. For sufferers who withdraw into themselves, "the soul, even in this life, falls into something which is almost equivalent to hell" (Soelle 442).

Practically speaking, what do we do when we feel overwhelmed? Though it may seem like I am avoiding an answer, the truth is that I can't tell you what to do because what works for me might not work for you. The state of mind and heart being discussed here is highly individualized, and our paths through it, around it, or away from it vary from person to person. (This is also the primary reason why I am generally suspicious of pre-packaged pedagogical solutions.) About our individual paths, Norris says:

Over the years I have learned what generally helps me navigate life's more treacherous passages, but I have little idea of what might work for someone else. I have seen people blossom and mature with the help of therapy, and others become infantilized by it. I have witnessed people who had been all but crushed by despair be restored to life with the right combination of medication and counseling. And then there is my young friend who reached all the way back into the fifth century to find healing in John Cassian's description of the "spirit of sadness". . . . I believe that both science and religion have a legitimate place in the conversation. God talk may not be your fancy, but it is what worked for this woman. (265-9)

When it comes to formulating an individual plan of attack, though, there is a common thread woven through much of the literature on suffering. And while it may seem trite to some, it is a reality: No one is alone in suffering. Believe it or not, even though our individual paths and solutions may diverge, it doesn't mean we don't need each other. Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham's *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning* has much to say on this point. According to the authors, the only way any of us can survive and understand our suffering is by wholly participat-

ing in “communities of love.” Though the phrase implies something warm and fuzzy, a “community of love” is surprisingly *not* a place of sweetness and light, but is instead “earthy and earthly.” To them, truly participatory communities are not “places of angels and refined spirits . . . filled with heavenly bliss.” On the contrary, real communities are “painful places, places of grieving, places of loss” (86). True healing can only occur in a community that speaks the language of brokenness, unhappiness, frustration, ennui, depression, and addiction. *Mutuality* is the term Kurtz and Ketcham use when describing these communities, where members “give by getting, and get by giving” (85). Once a community based upon mutuality is founded, then in such company “one is likely to find friends who are also guides; wise women and men who listen well, who offer advice and support, who help us to clarify our questions, to recognize our options in making choices, *and who seek and find in us the same realities*” (87). In other words, mutuality. Norris simplifies this idea: “If I go to church feeling depressed, a congregation by its very nature, reminds me that I am not in the struggle alone” (274).

Personally, I know that I need look no further than the door across the hallway from my office to find another instructor who wrestles with the same personal and professional issues as I. While the particulars of her suffering—and her response to it and solutions for it—may diverge from mine, there is solace in knowing that, even if we are a community of only two, we are not slogging through the heaviness in isolation. As mentioned, withdrawing into ourselves and disengaging from others in the face of our suffering, while understandable, is likely to only worsen our outlook.

I distinctly remember one of the first places I encountered the *idea* of suffering as a child—something deeper and more complex than the surface pain caused by scuffed knees or bee stings. Attending Sunday school, I learned of the travails of Jesus’ first disciples, Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John. These fishermen were to be made fishers of men, and when Jesus came recruiting, they gladly threw down their nets and joined the cause (Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20). I remember thinking it sounded like a fun adventure!

However, underneath the story, something less pleasant lurked. Daniel Harrington notes: “As fishermen they would have enjoyed a relatively stable existence . . . since commercial fishing in the Sea of Galilee was (and is) a fairly prosperous business enterprise. However . . . the disciples leave behind their families, business, and stable lives to follow Jesus. (T)hey were willing to suffer” (95). In fact, other would-be early disciples ask Jesus if they might say goodbye to their families. In one instance, a potential follower asks if he might bury his dead father first, before striking out on the road. Jesus’ response is a firm no. Why? Clearly Jesus is using this “teachable moment” to inform his followers that they are to expect great suffering by relinquishing their stability, forfeiting material comforts, and disowning family members as they join his public ministry.

There are of course earlier (and more acute) stories of suffering throughout the scriptures, and the idea of personal suffering is fundamental to many spiritual practices. But this was my first vague sense of what suffering really was—the suffering of those early adoptees as they walked out of town into the unknown. If left at that, this parable is pretty straightforward: Living virtuously requires sacrifice and concomitant suffering. But Harrington illustrates that a much more complex reality exists. As these early dis-

ciples encounter increasingly darker suffering on the road to Jerusalem (akin, in a small way, to how my sense of suffering has increased the longer I teach academic writing courses), it doesn't quite work out as planned: While they start out fairly well (just as I did when I was a novice teacher), "the first followers of Jesus were not entirely successful in facing up to the challenges of discipleship" (104). Faced with the mystery of Jesus' passion, with mounting persecution, and with increasing physical suffering, many of these early disciples simply flee. Or they denounce the ministry altogether.

Apparently, suffering—at least in a prolonged or intense way—is not something many of us will endure willingly.



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Perfect

Helen Collins Sitler

Makaylah was the student every writing instructor wants to teach. She was eager and enthusiastic. She rarely missed class. She always had assignments completed. She readily participated in class discussions. She took her academic work seriously, pushing herself to do well.

Yet during Research Writing, her third course with me, Makaylah, the good student whom I loved to teach, left me struggling to understand something that happened one day. Readers will likely recognize that experience, a moment when a student's behavior is so out of character that it leaves us mystified. I invite readers into that moment with me and then into some subsequent realizations.

What Happened Here? A Dissonant Moment with Makaylah

It was mid-October during a semester when my Research Writing students were conducting field work. I was collecting early drafts of their papers as class ended.

"Were we supposed to include our library research?" someone asked.

"Yes," I said and discovered that some students had misunderstood; they had worked only with their field notes. "Leave it with me anyway. By next class it's late."

My policy for daily assignments was to award points for doing the work, not for having done it all correctly. In return, I wanted assignments on the due date. Anything turned in late incurred deductions. The students who had misunderstood about including library research would still earn the points, but would have more work to do than their peers on the next draft. It wasn't a crisis, I thought. But I did not say this aloud.

In the end-of-class rush, I saw Makaylah. She had waited until nearly everyone else had left. She moved toward me, short ponytail bobbing as always, sweat pants and T-shirt marking the early morning hour. But her face, usually bright and cheerful, was contorted.

By the time she reached me, she was crying. When she started to speak, she was sobbing so hard her words barely came out. "I misunderstood," she gasped. She had not added the library research.

A thousand things flew through my mind: another class will start coming in any second. She can't be here sobbing when they arrive. Why is she so upset? She'll get the points anyway. This is too much overreaction, inconsistent with the few points for this draft. I told everyone to add the library information. She wasn't listening.

I flipped through the stack of papers, looking for hers. "Makaylah, it's all right. Add the research in the next draft. You'll still get the points for this."

The sobbing resolved to sniffles. She apologized, repeated that she had misunderstood, and made a quick, embarrassed exit. Mystified, I shuffled the papers for a moment, needing to collect myself as students from my next class began to arrive. There was no time to talk with Makaylah, no time to make better sense of this scene.

This memory from ten years ago is uncannily vivid. Perhaps because at that time I was trying to understand more about trauma and how it affected student performance in the writing classroom. My reading about trauma and my efforts toward changes in peda-

gogy, though, had been focused on the kinds of more antagonistic classroom moments readers might expect as related to trauma in students' lives. Like Patrick's profanity-laced outburst on the day I returned a portfolio with a grade lower than he had expected. Later, apologizing, he said that his father, unhappy with his grades, was threatening to force him to come home and attend a local community college. Or Akaysha's ability to disrupt any writing group she worked in. She later spoke about the beatings her mother suffered at the hands of a boyfriend. Surrounded by conflict at home, Akaysha had brought it with her into writing groups. Or Will's alternate personas, one radiating hostility, the other ennui, and my never knowing which Will would arrive in class. At the end of that semester, Will wrote about his mother's cancer treatments, the deteriorating mental capacities of his grandmother, who also lived with them, and his responsibilities as caretaker in his home while he was still in high school. (See Sitler 2009 for more about Will). I began to understand how trauma was exhibiting itself through Patrick's, Akaysha's, and Will's behaviors.

But I never anticipated Makaylah's breakdown, not from the prototypical cooperative, cheerful, good student. I did not recognize that moment as a more subtle manifestation of trauma—perfectionism. The very impetus that made Makaylah such a joy to teach exacted a terrific toll on her. This expression of trauma easily remains invisible, masking itself in the form of the dutiful student.

Perfectionism and Control

"Perfectionism has particular relevance to college students It is a common presenting issue at college counseling centers" (Ward & Ashby 51). Perfectionism is linked with a veritable litany of outcomes, all signals of trauma—low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, psychosomatic disorders, eating disorders, and even suicide (Miquelon et al. 914; Ward & Ashby 51-52). Studies done with college-age populations by Miquelon et al and Ward & Ashby, as well as other studies they cite, establish that perfectionism is multidimensional, i.e., that multiple factors play roles. In common, however, numerous studies point to two types of perfectionism: adaptive and maladaptive.

Adaptive perfectionists tend to be more intrinsically motivated (Miquelon et al. 921). Their behaviors are marked by "resourcefulness and constructive striving" (914). Tending to have higher self-esteem, adaptive perfectionists had "high standards yet experienced only moderate distress when mistakes were made and personal standards were not met" (Ward & Ashby 60). For this type of student, challenge can stimulate greater performance, and failure can be viewed as a learning experience.

In contract, maladaptive perfectionists are more extrinsically motivated (Miquelon et al. 921). These students "possessed high standards and were highly self-critical when mistakes were made and had excessive concerns about making future mistakes" (Ward & Ashby 60). Possibly because they feel significant outside pressure on them to perform, maladaptive perfectionists experience "chronic disruptions in self-esteem" (Miquelon et al. 921; Ward & Ashby 62). Unreasonable expectations of self can exact a severe cost. When outcomes do not match intentions, the maladaptive perfectionist can experience "feelings of insecurity and internal threat" (53). Such a student can "experience greater

levels of perceived inadequacies,” despite possibly having an outward “facade of assurance” (55, 53). This student might find challenge in a course threatening or even overwhelming. Failure can feel disastrous.

While Miquelon et al. determine that motivation is a significant factor in perfectionism, more relevant to this writing is their commentary on locus of control. For a perfectionist, control emerges as a core issue. Adaptive perfectionists have “high levels of perceived personal control” (Miquelon et al. 914). Maladaptive perfectionists, however, are “characterized by a sense of helplessness about the inability to establish personal control over evaluative standards and by a great desire to please others and avoid punishment” (915). Control lies outside them, exacerbating the stresses of performance.

The same control issues noted in the literature on perfectionism emerge in the clinical literature on trauma where they are linked to beliefs about error and failure. Horsman, who researches the intersections between trauma and literacy, notes that for many who have experienced trauma there is no room for mistakes. A student may be trying to overcome years of negative input from authority figures. They [learners] “have continually been told they are stupid—in school, at home as children” (103). Trying always to “get it right,” a hallmark of the perfectionist, can be a means of mitigating the impossible expectations of someone else. Such learners can have “huge issues around making mistakes” (142).

Judith Beck offers an example of such a learner through a case study detailing cognitive therapy with a patient named Sally. Sally is a first-year college student who sought therapy for “persistent sadness, anxiety, and loneliness” (19). Among her concerns was doing well in a research writing course, even though Sally was a student who had developed strong work habits and high standards. She was often “overprepared” and “hyper-vigilant for signs of inadequacy” (22). Trying to control situations and trying to be perfect—control under a different guise—were both compensation strategies for Sally’s negative beliefs about herself, including doubts about her academic abilities (143-44). I came to discover that Makaylah was much like Sally.

Trauma Revisited—The Costs of Perfectionism

Six years passed before I understood what had happened with Makaylah in Research Writing that day, before I could fully realize the connection between her beliefs about herself, her perfectionism, and that moment at the end of class.

Makaylah’s e-mail about moving into her new home pulled us back into electronic conversation. When I wrote back to congratulate her, her response included this: “I can’t thank you enough for what you did for me and NEVER [emphasis hers] giving up hope. That is very important to me because so many gave up on students like me.” When I asked her what she meant by this, a floodgate opened. Though she had hinted at this in the three courses she’d taken with me, the full extent of her struggle with school and family expectations had never surfaced.

Several years after completing a bachelor’s degree, she told her story: “I was held back in first grade . . . I would never be able to catch on to things or learn much of anything. They even told my dad I wouldn’t amount to anything.” As a high school student she spent study halls working as a teacher’s aide in the elementary and middle schools. There

she heard teachers speak about children with learning difficulties. "Two out of the three teachers I worked for in the three years I worked there tell me 'don't worry about those kids, they will NEVER [emphasis hers] learn anything . . . just give up on them because I did.' That was the day when I realized I was that kid."

She closed with this: "There are very few teachers/professors who are willing to invest time and care in their students, and you did this." But it certainly didn't feel that way when I thought about the day she broke down in my class.

"That was the day when I realized I was that kid." For Makaylah, this moment in high school was a powerful moment of recognition. A confirmation; a judgment. Her e-mail clarified its connection to the incident in Research Writing. Makaylah writes:

I remember the day I walked out of your class in tears. It wasn't all about you. It was a mixture of anger from my personal life, feeling that I was going to fail and live with things that my dad said, and a sense that I had upset you by having a disagreement that had nothing to do with you. You just happened to be the innocent bystander.

Warning signals about her perfectionism had been present, like excessive highlighting when she read, afraid she would miss something. Or her frequent questions about taking adequate field notes. Makaylah filled an entire notebook with field notes so detailed that later she was unable to discern what to focus on. Her email also explained how she had overcome some of her performance anxiety: "It wasn't until college when I came to the realization that I learn in a way that very few do. I have to use note cards [to distill important aspects of content area reading] because they make me feel safe, and I'm not nervous. I just have to hold them [when taking a test]."

For much of what was required of her for field work in my course, she could not depend on text already prepared and ready to be absorbed. She had to generate the text, her field notes, herself and draw her analysis from them. The solid learning techniques she was just beginning to develop for other courses, like her note-card system, were pulled out from under her in Research Writing.

No wonder she cried that day. Learning she had done only part of the assignment was confirmation of all those years of being "that kid" who wouldn't learn, a kid who should be given up on. Overachieving with a notebook full of field notes wasn't good enough. She was still falling short. She was still subject to control by external forces significantly more powerful than she and unhappy with her at that moment.

Judith Beck's work in cognitive therapy serves as a useful frame for thinking about Makaylah's overreaction to the incorrectly done assignment. She details a clear cause-effect sequence: A situation, often stressful, uncovers deeply-embedded personal beliefs that produce an emotion and/or a behavior (18, 140). Through that lens, Makaylah's breakdown follows an understandable pattern that can be described this way:

- The situation develops: Makaylah did the assignment incorrectly.
- This thought followed: All that my dad and teachers said about me is true. I'll never learn anything.
- Emotions of distress and possibly sadness flooded through her, and she began to sob.

Aaron Beck remarks about “the relationship between vulnerability and stress” (viii). Indeed, Makaylah had been vulnerable, more than any teacher might have suspected. As Judith Beck notes, “It is not a situation in and of itself that determines what people feel but rather the way in which they *construe* a situation” (14). Makaylah construed the situation as one more failure, and her long-held belief that she was inadequate simply overwhelmed her.

In her classic book *Trauma and Recovery*, clinical psychiatrist Judith Herman describes patterns like this, repeated, traumatizing experiences from which the victim can find no escape. One outcome of such experiences is that for “the chronically traumatized person, any action has potentially dire consequences. There is no room for mistakes” (91). Olson writes about how fragile a perfectionist can be in the school setting. Such a student can believe that “failure or making a mistake will lead to catastrophe” (53, *Wounded*). Olson also documents “how deeply personal, internalized, and often hidden school lacerations are” (47, *Wounded Student*).

Makaylah had emerged from such an incubator. My classroom policies and structures added to it. The only choice she thought she had was to retrieve her draft, redo it, then turn it in later. I would punish her for this by taking away points.

Releasing Control

Control is a familiar concept to composition instructors. We call it ownership, and we have a long history of claiming that student writers need it. Makaylah had taken ownership of her research topic. Her field study site was the periodicals section of the university library where she worked. She had, in fact, parlayed her insider knowledge of the library into personal authority when she was able to escort her classmates into the periodicals area. There she explained the uses and locations of many of the materials they would later need. She used her research to build expertise that her employers would find valuable, making her continued employment in the library a sure thing. She expressed this in a final reflection: “I was excited to learn more about my workplace.... I will be able to take the information I learned with me and use it to further help others.... I now feel as though I am one step ahead of my fellow library workers. I have become more familiar with the place in which I work thus helping me in my future years.”

In these senses, the work for Research Writing was authentic and meaningful; Makaylah could claim it for herself. In the daily routine of the course, however, I maintained strict control over students’ time. It was not a problem I solved during the semester with Makaylah.

But triggered by the event with her, I asked myself why it was so important to get assignments and papers from everyone on the same day. Daily assignments were building blocks. As long as they were completed, a student who turned something in a day later than her peers was still building a foundation for more difficult or longer-term assignments. When students turned in drafts or papers, I could never respond to them all before the next class. So what was my fixation with all things coming in on the same day? I decided my due date policy was more about my control over students than about their learning. That was the impetus to release control over time to my students. For

perfectionists like Makaylah, as well as for students like Patrick, Akaysha, and Will, it has been a good decision.

To allow students control over their time, I instituted a system of vouchers. Students receive a limited number of them—two or three—for the semester. With a voucher attached, a student can turn any assignment in one class meeting day late (or two class meeting days late with two vouchers attached) and still receive full credit. As my classes do not meet every day, one voucher can mean two days' grace period (Monday to Wednesday, for instance) or as many as five days' (Thursday to the following Tuesday).

Vouchers, I discovered, allow for mistakes. More important, they create circumstances for better work. When major assignments converge on the same date, a student can choose to take some extra time with a writing portfolio. It is not uncommon now for students to schedule extra writing conferences with me and to visit the Writing Center more often. The cushion of extra time has helped students to turn in higher quality work.

Do students take advantage of these opportunities to turn things in late? Sometimes. But vouchers are limited, so students cannot take advantage too often. Under certain circumstances, a family hospitalization, for instance, most instructors would routinely accept late work. Whatever the circumstance, students do not have to ask me about it; they already know what to do. In addition, no explanations about special circumstances are necessary for other students who might legitimately question why a peer would receive an extension. Everyone has the option for the same extension.

On the day Makaylah burst into tears, I wish I could have said to her, "It's okay. Rework your draft and give it to me with a voucher next time." She may still have been overwhelmed at that moment over making a mistake. Even so, for her and possibly for other students whose stress never emerged as hers did, it would have taken only that small action to transfer control fully to their hands.

More recently I have adjusted the design of my writing courses in another way that also serves to release more control to students. At the same time the strategy keeps me aware of where students are getting bogged down and what I need to help with. I call it power conferencing. A power conference is a brief, three-to-five minute conference over a draft.

As I use the workshop model for teaching writing, I have always conferenced one-on-one with students, asking them to schedule office time when I could not get to everyone during class. Now, however, I insist that each student have at least one power conference with me during class as work proceeds on any new piece of writing. Students submit drafts during the class before they want to conference with me. I read the drafts and write minimal notes, often only two or three phrases on page one to jog my memory. The key factor is our conversation, not the teacher writing on the draft. During the next class meeting, I circulate to each of those students, often starting with the students who appear to be having the most trouble. We meet in their space—at their seats—not up front or removed from surrounding students who are at work on their own projects. I always begin by asking students what they need help with; students often point to exactly the same issues I had intended to bring up. Even if the student mentions something I have not identified as a concern, we can target one or two such items in our few minutes.

Conferencing is familiar to composition scholars. The brevity of power conferences may not be. And letting students choose when they are ready to submit a draft for conferencing may also feel unfamiliar. (See Kittle for more about short conferences and taking in drafts from students.) After several semesters of power conferencing, I have found that students who are more worried about their writing often submit drafts for conferencing earlier and more frequently. They also come to my office. Overall, students have been successful in responding to what we talk about in these brief exchanges. Perhaps the biggest success is that because of frequent, short talks, students feel supported to do more challenging work. I know, too, that when I talk with one student, those sitting nearby overhear what we say. They benefit from that indirect coaching as they work on their own revisions. One power conference becomes a mini-lesson for multiple students.

Had I power conferenced with Makaylah's class on their early drafts, she would have chosen when she turned that fateful draft in and what we talked about. That certainly would have been preferable to my confirming that she had done the assignment incorrectly and later returning it to her with notes that she may or may not have been able to act on.

Working With, Not Against, Our Students

Over ten years ago, Lunardini noted a shift in the college population:

Students frequently come to college from single parent homes where the financial, and perhaps personal/emotional, support for their educational activity may be fragile. They may also come with a collection of problems requiring psychological interventions, or a history of alcohol or drug use that can easily interfere with their successful navigation of the collegiate experience The number of students who require our special attention continue to dramatically increase. (10)

Now, a decade later, the same trends have reached mainstream media. According to an Associated Press 2010 article, more college students than in the past "report anxiety and depression" ("Modern Times" A1). From a 2011 *New York Times* article, readers learn that "the emotional health of college freshmen . . . has declined to the lowest level since an annual survey of incoming students started collecting data 25 years ago" (Lewin).

A few years ago, when I mentioned to a colleague that writing instructors need to be attentive to possible manifestations of trauma, she replied that she does not have students like those I described. Clearly the evidence suggests otherwise. In fact, we—all of us—have a surprising number of such students in our classes.

Writing instructors often notice and take steps to work with those students who are obviously in some pain, like Patrick with his outburst, Akaysha, with her uncanny ability to bring any writing group to a halt, and Will, with his smoldering anger. They are noticeable, in-your-face.

The perfectionists hide. They are the easy students to teach, the eager ones who exert their need for control by always having everything done—perfectly. It is harder to notice that they need support.

In a semester more recent than my time with Makaylah, one military veteran is memorable. A student in Basic Writing, he spent most of the semester trying to follow to the letter my suggestions for his papers. It was as if he were reading and trying to follow a training manual. He searched for the correct steps, the correct expressions. Years of training on an aircraft carrier had impressed on him the necessity of uniformity in procedures. Each man's life depended upon procedures unfolding in exactly the same way every time. Nothing could change; rote performance was the only performance possible. He struggled in Basic Writing, a site where "correct" was relative and where risk, i.e., devising one's own way, was encouraged. Permitting himself to take control rather than depending on preordained steps, took most of the semester. At times it was a rough ride for both of us. As an increasing number of veterans enter or return to college, composition instructors need to be aware of how military training may have inculcated tendencies toward perfectionism. It serves active duty personnel well; it hinders developing writers.

Certainly not every student who makes demands on her/himself is a perfectionist. And not every such student has experienced the kind of long-standing trauma that Makaylah lived with. Still, writing instructors need to plan and anticipate. "Writing is an intellectual activity carried on in an emotional environment" (Murray, qtd. in Romano 176). Writing is a site where judgment can occur and where a fragile student's negative beliefs about adequacy—accurate or not—can be confirmed. Research shows that learning proceeds best in an environment in which learners feel a teacher understands a student's challenges and struggles. There is "a robust positive correlation between high teacher empathy and student achievement" (McLeod 115). Battling over control, at least in my case, reduced my ability to empathize and to acknowledge the emotional environment in which my students tried to proceed with their work.

After the meltdown, Makaylah took control of her progress in Research Writing in another way. She frequented my office, asking for feedback on every draft. This was how we recovered from that awful October moment. Individual writing conferences were the way in which I could best support her learning. She finished the course successfully. At my request, she gave me her field notes, to show future students what detailed note-taking looks like.

Given the performative aspects of writing, writing instructors must, at the very least, be more aware that perfectionists in our classes might experience unexpected obstacles. And we must own our making of some of them. In studying writing assignments and students' responses to them, Scorzewski suggests instructor culpability in disappointing or unexpected results. She states that "difficult or unsettling interaction between students and teachers may have been generated by the teacher" (70). She views this dissonance as a strategic opportunity for instructor-student dialogue that can provide input for constructing a future assignment differently (70).

In writing about resilience, Benard does not lay dissonance at an instructor's feet, but does urge a similar strategic and even more pragmatic stance. She writes: "Healthy youth development must depend on deliberate policies, practices, and interventions

designed to provide young people with developmental supports and opportunities” (10). While Benard writes about students in K-12 classrooms, I argue that regardless of a student’s age—adolescent, young adult, post-military adult, or even returning older student—writing instructors need to review the foundational ground from which our courses have been built. Part of that foundational ground deals with authority and control. A teacher does need to create an environment that encourages student growth, and for that a teacher needs to establish a presence. We can posit for ourselves, each in our own contexts and at various places in our teaching lives, how that presence interacts with releasing greater responsibility to students. I found that maintaining authority through control of never-can-change due dates was not helping students improve their writing. I am currently finding that short conferences that let students identify their own problematic writing areas are powerful supports for increased complexity in their writing. It has been better to release control of these things to them. Perfectionists like Makaylah have directly benefited, as have many other student writers.

Factors other than control are also at work in writing classrooms. Interestingly, Herman, in her work on trauma, describes them. After a trauma of any kind, regaining one’s equilibrium to operate in the world “requires the restoration of a sense of efficacy and power” (Herman 41). This occurs, she indicates, through having control, connecting with others, and finding meaning in events. Composition scholars describe the ideal writing classroom in much the same way. We claim that ownership (control), community (connecting with others), and authenticity (finding meaning in one’s work) foster the development of strong writing. While this essay focuses primarily on ownership and control when working with perfectionist students, I urge readers to consider, too, how community and authenticity play out. They were saving graces for Makaylah. As noted earlier, Makaylah did have agency through control of her topic. She was able to create meaning from her writing, as her research about her workplace would ensure her job in the library for future semesters. Connection also occurred for her. From among approximately thirty sections of Research Writing offered that semester, she chose one of mine. We knew each other; she felt welcome and comfortable in my classroom.

Course design, course policies, small individual assignments, and intentional student-teacher interactions set the tenor for learning in our classrooms. I urge that instructors of composition take Benard’s call for deliberate practices to heart. If our day-to-day interactions with students offer control, connection, and meaning, or rather the composition terminology we are more familiar with—ownership, community, and authenticity—then students like Makaylah who are so threatened by mistakes can be supported in positive ways. Likewise, other students who find other obstacles in our courses can be supported to surmount them.



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“We Were the Teachers, not the Observers”: Transforming Teacher Preparation through Placements in a Creative, After-School Program

Nikki Holland, Iris Shepard, Christian Z. Goering, & David A. Jolliffe

We’ve reached an unprecedented time in American education, one fraught with demands of accountability, standardized testing, and national curricula. Students, teachers, administrators, school districts, and those of us working in teacher preparation all come under pressure for better performance. As educators, we concern ourselves with what works in the classroom, what motivates students and helps them learn, and what research demonstrates successful or promising practice. Yet we struggle against outside pressures while attempting to put our plans in action. At a recent professional development session that Nikki and Iris attended, teachers listened closely to a presentation on arts integration and spoke highly of its potential.¹ But when asked how they might integrate the arts into their own classrooms, these teachers expressed concern that there just wasn’t enough time, given the outside pressures. While anecdotal, the conversations that we overheard during this professional development session demonstrated that as teachers, we need experiences that enable us to apply new ideas, not just simply to listen and observe. Once the leaders broke the teachers into groups and asked them to reenact historical moments of history through tableaux, the impossible became possible. Ideas for classroom implementation bounced around the tables.

Housed in both departments of English and education, we who work in teacher preparation are concerned that outside pressures which tell new teachers to raise test scores and meet standards will take precedence over our efforts to coach them to teach well. In this article, we consider how to create a culture of artistic teaching and learning by changing the way pre-service teachers are trained. Specifically, we explain the evolution of an alternative field experience program called Razorback Writers. The program is based on the guiding concepts of arts integration and project-based learning for prospective teachers applying to the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program. We frame our discussion within the context of authentic, intellectual achievement. Further, we discuss why we were drawn to these methods, their merits, and goals. We describe a way to supplant observation with action in teacher preparation.

Our work initiated in an effort to address shared concerns between education and English faculty about teacher preparation, though admittedly we were concerned only about future English teachers at first. What prompted us to re-evaluate our pre-service teachers’ practicum experience and the associated course was our awareness that a traditional pre-service field experience, one where candidates observe in a classroom situation and perhaps teach a lesson or two, could actually be counterproductive to their development as future teachers. Those up to their elbows in education over the past ten years have seen many strong teachers leave the classroom, if not leave education alto-

¹ Editors’ Note: “Laying a Foundation: Defining Arts Integration,” a seminar developed by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C., has been presented to teachers in cities nationwide, 2010-2011.

gether. And when candidates report to a classroom for observations, they may actually see teaching that is anything but exemplary. As Jeff Wilhelm and Bruce Novak write in *Teaching Literacy for Love and Wisdom*, “a generation of teachers and several generations of students have had the enlivening possibilities of learning systematically drained out of them” (9). Test preparation activities or curricula that have been regulated by a constant pursuit of proficiency rule the day. While the intention of No Child Left Behind rightly concerns forgotten or overlooked sub-populations, teachers have been forced to focus their attention on getting their students to minimum proficiency levels rather than pushing them far beyond that goal. Arne Duncan’s observation that the standards of education have been lowered over the past decade is right (Dillon). In our opinion, educational standards are inevitably lowered by campaigns that promote rote teaching and excessive test preparation. When teacher-education programs send candidates into schools where these practices prevail, the candidates’ field experiences may actually reproduce an unacceptable status quo.

While this need pushed our thinking, we lacked the power to change national policies, to reduce pressures on the various stakeholders, or to significantly change the local teacher education program. We did, however, gain access to two critical groups: middle school students from four local schools and future secondary teachers of English, foreign languages, math, science, and social studies. These pre-service teachers participated in the practicum course required for admission into the MAT program. Essentially, we hoped to redesign our practicum so that these pre-service teachers would have the guaranteed opportunity to observe and directly practice creative teaching—an opportunity we hoped would open their eyes to the potential of creative, personal teaching strategies.

Razorback Writers

Because our pre-service practicum is titled CIED 4131—4 plus 1 plus 3 plus 1—we call our pre-service teachers “Niners.” We had two concerns about the Niners. First, the Niners needed better opportunities both to observe and to practice creative teaching. Second, as a result of rapid population growth and change in our community, middle-school students’ performance on literacy assessments had dropped significantly. The Niners would be observing and working with these youngsters.

Created in the summer of 2010, the Razorback Writers project responds to both of these problems. As a literacy enrichment program built on the concepts of arts integration and project-based learning, Razorback Writers exposes struggling students to creative, meaningful literacy work while also allowing pre-service teachers to see and practice creative teaching. Our program seeks to foster what Judith Langer calls “high literacy,” which is reflected by “students’ ability to engage in thoughtful reading, writing, and discussion about content in the classroom, to put their knowledge and skills to use in new situations, and to perform well on reading and writing assessments” (838).

By focusing on personal, reflective projects that challenge students to connect deeply to reading and writing, we hope to model for the Niners how creative strategies can motivate students to become stronger readers, writers, and thinkers. Razorback Writers transforms the middle-school classroom from a test-preparation site into a space that really matters for students. In their book *Third Space: When Learning Matters*, Stevenson

and Deasy write, “Creating works of art, which inherently calls for a personal stamp, seems uniquely powerful in generating the commitment to acquiring the skills to do so. Ultimately, students are helped to learn, read, speak, and write with skill and enthusiasm when to do so matters to them” (63).

Like Stevenson and Deasy, we believe that arts integration has the potential to teach students a great deal about empathy, tolerance, and community. Like Wilhelm and Novak, we see the importance of the reflective dimension of aesthetic experiences. And like Maxine Greene, we understand the potential of engaging the imagination to push students to reflect and connect more deeply (3). As Hephzibah Roskelley and Kate Ronald write in *Reason to Believe*, “The self does more than link itself through introspection to society; the knowledge of self attained in the process of self-examination becomes a lesson on how to be a self in a world populated by other selves” (60). Of all of the approaches that we could be modeling for our pre-service teachers, we felt that the reflective, personal nature of arts-integration would give the Niners something that they would not easily find in their first contact with the classroom as teachers.

Razorback Writers—an after-school, arts-integrated, project-based curriculum—was a natural choice. In the short time that the project has been running, it has made an impact on kids. We knew we had little chance of keeping middle-school students in their seats at the end of a long school day if we did not connect personally with them. We knew that bringing in fine and performing arts to help students “construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form” would help us get kids up and interacting with us, each other, and the texts in that “third space” where students are deeply absorbed in the creative process (“Laying a Foundation”; Stevenson and Deasy 10). We also knew from our own teaching and learning experiences that students would be more motivated to read, produce, and create if they were encouraged to “go through an extended process of inquiry”—especially if they felt that their work would culminate in some tangible end product that would have an audience outside of our classroom (“What is PBL?”).

Ultimately, what we wanted to do for the Niners through our partnership with Razorback Writers was to give them the opportunity to see and experience how arts-integration and project-based learning strategies can be used to deliver content, cultivate skills, and engage with communities. By giving this experience to the Niners before they entered the field of education, we wanted to illustrate how creative teaching could be done. Because some Niners are resistant to arts integration—many of whom are insecure about their own creative potential—we also hoped to give them the confidence to explore alternative strategies in their own teaching. As Stevenson and Deasy explain, in order for arts integration to become a realistic approach for teachers, it is imperative that they see quality arts integration in practice (82).

Authentic Pedagogy

As we began to create a new, stronger structure for our practicum through our partnership with the Razorback Writers project, we called on Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran’s concept of “authentic intellectual achievement” to make sure that we would be providing our Niners with authentic teaching experiences as well as opportunities

to learn and reflect outside of the classroom. In their article, "Authentic Pedagogy and Student Performance," Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran explain that authentic achievement has three criteria: "construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond school" (282).

To ensure that the pre-service teachers participating in Razorback Writers had an authentic learning experience, they were required to construct knowledge alongside the middle-school students. Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran write, "[students] express this knowledge in written and oral discourse . . . in the construction and repair of objects . . . and in performances for audiences" (283). Rather than memorizing and reproducing information, the construction of knowledge requires learners to participate actively in the learning process by expressing something new.

Next, the Niners were challenged to participate in disciplined inquiry, "using a prior knowledge base from one or more fields, striving for in-depth understanding rather than superficial awareness, and expressing conclusions through elaborated communication" (283). By activating the Niners' prior knowledge and adding to their reservoirs of information, requiring a long-term commitment from every Niner, and promoting reflection and communication through all parts of the process, we helped them to engage in deep inquiry about what they and the kids were doing with arts integration in Razorback Writers.

The third principle that we adopted from Newman, Marks, and Gamoran was an emphasis that the project needed to have value outside of the classroom setting. They explain, "The third distinction between authentic intellectual achievement and conventional school achievement is that authentic achievements have aesthetic, utilitarian, or personal value apart from documenting the competence of the learner" (284). To accomplish this goal of creating projects with authentic, aesthetic value, we made sure that all middle-school students' projects were aimed at real audiences and that the major components of the program would give the pre-service teachers a better understanding of their evolving teaching philosophy.

Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran write that the primary challenge that learners face is to "produce" rather than "reproduce" meaning or knowledge (283). For the Niners in our practicum course, we knew that this meant that they needed to be actively interacting through teaching, and we gave them the opportunity to do this by requiring that they all participate in the Razorback Writers project. Walk into any of the Razorback Writers' after-school sites, and these are some of the images you can expect to see: a pre-service teacher standing with a group of students, performing a readers theatre script; groups working on projects at tables or on the floor, teachers and students indistinguishable from one another; pre-service teachers on their haunches, sitting on the floor, or rolling around in office chairs—assisting kids with art and writing; pens, pencils and paper; feathers, sequins, and paint; cameras and computers. These are the images of a program steeped in the arts and driven by a constructivist paradigm that champions project-based, collaborative learning. By involving our Niners in the design and implementation of a project that is creative and student driven, we expose them to another vision of what learning can look like beyond the world of standardized testing.

For the Niners, the opportunity to see the arts in tandem with literacy instruction is invaluable. Too often, when new teachers enter the classroom they revert to what

they know, which for many of them is some variation on the theme of “drill and kill.” Especially in the traditional observation setting, it would be quite courageous for a pre-service teacher to try an approach that diverged drastically from that which they were observing. In her reflective essay for our practicum, one Niner who completed both traditional observation hours and time with Razorback Writers, explained, “While observing Mrs. Pincher, I also had the opportunity to see her teaching methods. She designed a similar schedule every week. For example, Mondays are devoted to vocabulary; Tuesdays are devoted to textbook material; Wednesdays are devoted to worksheets; Thursdays are devoted to group activities; and Fridays are test days.” Of course, while these kinds of regimented teaching strategies impact students in the classroom, they also influence the pre-service teacher observing mediocre teaching. Without a creative model and the autonomy to experiment with teaching methods, pre-service teachers are destined to copy what they have experienced as students or observed—what Dan Lortie referred to in 1975 as “apprenticeship of observation” (62). One attribute of our project is that Niners not only see creative teaching in action, but they are also given the opportunity to help to design the curriculum. And as the semester progresses, they are expected to take a more and more active role in facilitating. At the end of the fall semester of 2010, one of our pre-service teachers wrote, “While I have learned a lot by observing Mrs. Green, I feel like I got the most out of being a part of the Razorback Writers project. The project was more hands-on than observing. We were the teachers, not the observers.”

At one site, for example, we asked our pre-service teachers to talk to the students to decide what kind of project they would like to do and then to design a venture that would both fit with the students’ interests and accomplish our literacy goals. Ultimately, the project that these pre-service teachers and middle-school students designed was one of the most exciting to take place that semester. Our Niners and their students pitched the idea of an autobiographical portfolio that the students would fill with stories, poetry, photography, and art. This spring, the new cohort of Niners at this site has picked up the project and plans to have students tie the autobiographical material they have already produced in with the art and writing they are doing as they read the book *Seedfolks*. In *Seedfolks*, each chapter is a vignette describing one character in the book. At the end of the semester, students at this site will each compile their visual art, photography, and writing into a chapter of their own, which will then be published in a book to be shared with students, parents, and the school. Though many of the middle-school students at this site came into the project with a negative attitude about reading and writing, they have become enthusiastic about the final product and are working hard on their chapters. It is through successful experiences like this that our Niners can see how arts integration can change students who see reading and writing as unpleasant tasks into students who use these skills to get engaged in highly creative, literacy-based work.

At yet another site, the students are creating a magazine issue called “You, Me, and the World.” The goal of this project is to help the students develop both a stronger sense of their community and a stronger global perspective. The unit began by focusing on the most significant geological feature of Northwest Arkansas: The Ozark Mountains. Still on the Hill, a nationally and internationally acclaimed folk group that specializes in songs about Ozark characters, came to the site and performed a private concert. Still-on-the-Hill musicians Donna Sterjna and Kelly Mullhollan explained the stories

behind their songs and described their research experiences. After more research about the Ozarks and the Northwest Arkansas area, students were encouraged to go out and interview a relative or friend, to collect information that they could craft into a story, poem, or song with the assistance of the Niners and site coordinators. Gathering the stories of people in the community is an interactive method to learn the history of an area and to deepen the students' sense of community and family.

In addition to researching the history of Northwest Arkansas, the site coordinators also invited several international students from the University of Arkansas and Spring International—an intensive English language school—to visit the site. These international students taught the middle-school students phrases from their native languages, discussed their countries, and led the students in an arts-related activity. The participating international students came from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey, and Japan primarily. The direct contact with people from around the world would, we hoped, cultivate in these students a global, open-minded perspective of the world.

As we continue to interact with both local and international people, we will be processing these experiences through collage, tableau, short writing pieces, and other arts-related activities. All the projects will be archived and included in a magazine for the students to have themselves and distribute. The magazine will serve not only as a reminder for our students of what they accomplished over the term, but, hopefully, it will also help encourage anyone who reads the magazine to appreciate what it means to interact artfully with the world.

Newmann, Marks and Gamoran explain that students must rely on “disciplined inquiry,” a construct that “consists of three main features: using a prior knowledge base from one or more of the fields, striving for in-depth understanding rather than superficial awareness, and expressing conclusions through elaborated communication” (283). In all three of the aforementioned projects, disciplined inquiry allowed site coordinators and Niners to sequence activities in order to build on “prior knowledge base” to create “in-depth understanding” that would then be expressed through “elaborated communication.” At both sites, students read poems and short stories, discussed elements of style, and listened to international students' presentations about their countries, thus allowing them to pick up the vocabularies, concepts, and conventions that they would need to create their own work. During the second stage of the projects, students applied the conventions they'd learned to their own writing, focusing primarily on the concept of identity in both instances. At both sites, students had a clear vision of their final projects, which helped them to dive more deeply into one single topic. Finally, the middle-school students at both sites created and compiled a publication that showcased their verbal and visual pieces. Through the creation of these public artifacts, students were able to see their work as reaching beyond the walls of the classroom, a step that brought them closer to perceiving themselves as writers and artists.

What the Niners Learned: Two Illustrations

In addition to giving the middle-school students richer learning experiences, we sought to develop “a community of discourse” in order to “advance the knowledge” of teacher preparation (308). Though the field of teacher preparation isn't what Newmann,

Marks and Gamoran originally focused upon, areas beyond the traditional disciplines can be included when “a field of expertise . . . has a formal knowledge base and functions” like a discipline.

Our goal of pushing the Niners towards “disciplined inquiry” took multiple forms. First, we expanded the pre-service teachers’ knowledge base by exposing them to and involving them in professional conversations that are happening in the field of education. Each week, the Niners completed readings that covered a range of topics, such as teaching English Language Learners, working with students with disabilities, delivering content in the after-school setting, understanding adolescent development, etc. In addition, they were also asked to participate in electronic or face-to-face discussions with their site teams in order to discuss the relationship between what they read and what they were experiencing in their projects. At the end of each semester, Niners reported being better prepared for their final reflective papers as well as for their interviews to enter the MAT program. Both the reflective papers and the interviews ask the Niners to explain their teaching philosophies and place themselves within academic conversations happening in their field. If these pre-service teachers were allowed to enter the profession without experiences that prevented passive methods of teaching and narrow views on what constitutes education, the very situations we helped to repair would be replicated.

Finally, Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran write that authentic intellectual achievement must have value beyond school in the form of “aesthetic, utilitarian, or personal value apart from documenting the competence of the learner” (284). For our Niners, we created a final reflective project that would allow them to focus not only on what they had learned and experienced through their field experience, but most importantly, how this new knowledge had informed or contributed to their feelings about entering the teaching profession. For example, we learned through the final projects that most of the Niners’ attitudes about teaching in the middle grades is impacted by their work with the project. While many Niners come into the practicum with an idea that they are interested only in high school, the experience with middle-school students through Razorback Writers gives them a favorable and more accurate understanding of what working with middle-school students would be like.

As Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran explain, “Understanding occurs as one looks for, tests, and creates relationships among pieces of knowledge that can illuminate a given problem or issue” (283). In the fall of 2011, the Niners at one of our sites modeled how this process would work. Our Niners were struggling with a particular student, Aaron (pseudonym), and eventually found out that this student had Asperger’s Syndrome. In addition to reading our class’ assignment on working with students with disabilities, the Niners contacted this student’s aide and did some outside research to get ideas for how to work with him. A Niner reflected,

We planned one activity in which we read the students a book about the three little pigs, but that was told from the wolf’s point of view. The goal of the assignment was to get the students thinking about how one story could be told lots of different ways and relate that back to their movie. However, we did not take into account that it can be almost impossible for students with Asperger’s to see things from any perspective other than their own.

In addition, after realizing that much of Aaron's resistance to the project was rooted in his anxiety in social situations and his discomfort with group work, the Niners were able to tailor the project so that Aaron had specific tasks he could work on independently. This experience not only involved constructing and producing knowledge but also disciplined inquiry. All of the Niners at this project reflected on their experience with this student in their final essay. Overall, this kind of experience models "authentic intellectual achievement," and is the kind of experience that we hope will blossom frequently from our redesigned practicum. Even if they had encountered challenging students like Aaron in an observation setting, it would be unlikely that they would be charged with addressing the issue on their own, which would have been a loss, both for our pre-service teachers and for students like Aaron.

In an interview, Michelle, a site coordinator, related a story about one of her Niners, Jocelyn, and a lesson gone wrong. In her first solo lesson, Jocelyn taught about Arkansas history, but she presented the lesson as a lecture, with the only student activity being a multiple choice quiz. Michelle explained that Jocelyn's handout was "aesthetically uninteresting" and that the lesson covered too much information. In fact, Michelle said that the quiz Jocelyn handed out at the end had even stumped her. When Michelle spoke with Jocelyn about the kids' negative response to the lesson, Jocelyn explained that she was not artistic and, as a social studies major, she just didn't know how to teach with art. This experience illustrates the precise need to guide emerging educators through processes like arts-integration. When the Niners fail to teach to their potential because of their own negative perceptions about themselves as readers, writers, artists, and thinkers, we see the importance of enacting creative teaching and providing a supportive environment for pre-service teachers to teach and learn from their teaching.

On the day after Jocelyn presented her lesson, the group scrambled for a way to reconnect with the students. Ditching their original plan for the day, Michelle's group told the students real, emotional stories about things that had happened to them, and then they asked the kids to write emotively about an experience of their own. Even though the students had had what Michelle called a "coup" in response to the previous day's lesson, she recounted that the day was one of their most successful, as students were excited about including the stories in their final project. The activity allowed the students and the Niners to connect in a personal way. This personal connection and affirmation that we can offer the students is what underlies our academic goals with Razorback Writers. When we show our students that we are working with them, that we are willing to share something about ourselves, and that we are interested in knowing about them, we can impact students in a different, more human way. When pre-service teachers experience the importance of connecting with students on a personal level and see how that connection can give more authenticity to school, teachers are created who can help to prepare students for life beyond school and tests.

Conclusion

We do a disservice to our children and our community as a whole when we allow individuals who are interested in becoming teachers to begin their professional lives by

sitting in the back of a classroom. By involving our pre-service teachers in a practicum with an arts-integrated, project-based program at its core, we are able to circumnavigate outdated methods and approaches. By taking control over how our pre-service teachers complete their “observation” requirements, we can be sure that they are experiencing engaging, creative teaching. By exposing pre-service teachers to the literature of their field, we enable them to participate in the fundamental discussions happening in education. And by showing them how to use the arts and a project-based approach to teach in all disciplines, we prepare our pre-service teachers to cultivate the creative dynamic energy that we hope they will all bring to the classroom. In this age of standardized tests and the never-ending pursuit of monotony, we must redouble efforts to ensure that our new teachers remember this: the ultimate goal is not just to prepare students for success on exams, but to prepare them to become moral, ethical individuals who can contribute to society. School should be more about teaching students than it is about teaching subjects. They must learn about English or social studies or science or math in ways that matter to them.

In her well-known 1947 address to Oxford University, Dorothy Sayers explained,

We have lost the tools of learning—the axe and the wedge, the hammer and the saw, the chisel and the plane—that were so adaptable to all tasks. Instead of them, we have merely a set of complicated jigs, each of which will do but one task and no more, and in using which eye and hand receive no training, so that no man ever sees the work as a whole or looks to the end of the work.

Through Razorback Writers, we hope to show both students and pre-service teachers “the work as a whole.” The work as a whole—creating empathetic, imaginative, and inquisitive individuals who are poised to contribute to society—will not be achieved through passivity. Rather, by asking our pre-service teachers to become involved in education through writing and reading, movement and art, we are modeling the kind of wisdom that we hope these individuals will be able to apply both in their classrooms and beyond.



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Re-Seeing Story through Portal Writing

S. Rebecca Leigh

"Writing is hard"; "Writing is difficult"; "Writing is work";

"Writing is just o.k. I'd rather go to the dentist."

Many authors would agree with these fourth grade students. Writing can become a low dread. Through regular practice the dread may go away. But what if regular writing practices are mundane? Where, then, is the motivation for students to improve? The verbocentric K-12 classroom with its emphasis on traditional approaches to literacy learning, often seen through fill-in-the-blank workbook exercises, drills, and prescribed essay formats, offers little motivation for students to ameliorate their craft. With limited and constrained writing practices, it comes as no surprise that many students struggle with writing and, in particular, they don't stick with the writing once it steers them through temporary periods of dread. Students need meaningful and engaging opportunities to play with language and reflect on their writing as a pathway for cultivating writer interests and envisioning new directions for their stories.

In this 6-week qualitative study, I sought to understand how students in a grade four classroom used portal writing to re-see, re-imagine, and re-create their story ideas from drafts where the writing became challenging, or the interest to finish waned. Portal writing is an aesthetic writing strategy that I developed where the teacher encourages the writer to circle (i.e., portal) with a marker what he thinks are key words in his unfinished draft of a story about a personal experience and study the redacted words in a different genre, a poem. The poem serves as a kind of portal through which the writer re-sees the story, and from which he discusses ideas with others, with the aim of finding the story's focus. The student then uses his insights to return to the draft and revise. Portals serve as entry points for new thinking, where the student decides if the story will change slightly or dramatically. With some literary license, I have created the words "portaling" and "portaled," as it suggests an action of circling words with purpose.

In this essay, I explore selected examples of children's portaled stories for re-seeing their writing in three ways: experiencing poetic form, developing new titles, and discovering small-moment writing. These pathways for writing serve as examples of what can happen when we take a creative stance toward writing. I propose that what the students in this study experience with portal writing can provide access to understanding the need for the aesthetic in writing as a pathway toward making the writing process both accessible and exciting for young writers. Throughout this essay, I invite teachers to examine how they approach writing when students become stuck, and to consider how they might use portal writing in their own classrooms.

Portal Writing: Background and Significance

In order to provide a framework for this research, this section provides a background to portal writing, showing how it was conceived. I examine the need as described in the field for visual pathways that enhance students' experiences with writing.

The practice of cutting up writing is not new. In the nineteenth century, British poet William Blake engaged in etchings involving painting over words, a process he coined *illuminated printing*. In the mid twentieth century, American novelist and painter William Burroughs popularized the technique during what is commonly known as the cut up period of the 1950s and 60s. During this time, artist Tom Phillips published *The Humument*, a Victorian novel altered with ink and gouache. In this text, Phillips artfully demonstrates story as multiple where germs of ideas, hidden behind ghost-like walls of existing words, emerge from paint and pen ink. Since this period, many poets and artists such as Bervin, Johnson, and Ruefle have reimagined great works from writers like Shakespeare and Milton, for example. Familiar lines are carefully chiseled away with a range of media (e.g., marker, paint, textured fabrics, rubber stampings, etc.) to reveal poems and ideas anew, sometimes through artfully rendered visual composition strategies to draw one's eye closer to selected words.

Though cut up writing is oftentimes abstract because words can be randomly selected, black out poems in Austin Kleon's latest text *Newspaper Blackout*, by contrast, are easy to understand. Kleon takes a strategic approach to portaling by carefully choosing words that collectively tell a story. In addition, his poems show how story ideas can surface from unlikely sources. Love stories, for example, emerge from the business section, and childhood memories surface from the economic pages.

Intrigued by aesthetic and writing connections, I took cut up writing a step further and coined the phrase portal writing, an artful writing strategy for students who seek direction in their writing. Where Phillips' and Kleon's work remains in a portaled state, portal writing by contrast asks: "What happens when students use their portals as entry points for new writing?" Thus the research question that guides this study emerged. As a literacy professor and researcher on how access to art serves as a pathway to literacy learning and its impact on students as writers, the idea of portal writing came to me because I am interested in the generative learning potentials that the arts can provide in the pedagogy of writing instruction.

Historically, language arts programs have been taught with an emphasis on language to the exclusion of other ways of knowing like art, music, drama, etc. (Berghoff, et al.). While verbal children are best served by a traditional model of language arts instruction, visual children by contrast are rarely recognized for their visual thinking capabilities and are thus relegated to construct meaning and express knowing through words exclusively. In response to warning voices over the last twenty years from researchers on the limitations of verbocentric curricula, research on writing has shown that access to the aesthetic offers generative writing potential and motivates students to write. Researchers Dyson and Olshansky, for example, argue that creating visual images as a way to search and organize ideas for writing is a natural process. Because this visual and verbal process is natural, when given opportunities to practice showing their thinking by creating visual images, students can further discover the aesthetic as a pathway for developing narrative writing. Reading visual texts critically, argues Ray, can also enhance meaning in writing. Harst, et al. found when literacy is experienced from a multimodal perspective, learning deepens because students are able to increase their communication potential by demonstrating their thinking and knowing through more than one mode.

A growing body of research on writing performance indicates a positive impact when integrated with the visual arts. Eisner, for example, has long argued that the arts invite students to tolerate ambiguity, explore uncertainty, sort out one's own questions, and participate in critical thinking, analysis, and judgment. He also argues that access to visual communication within the writing process can help students to envision their story ideas because visual form, with its open potential for meaning, can influence what we think about and therefore provide entry points for writing (Ernst, Hobson, Olson). Graves argues that the positive impact of the visual arts on writing performance may have to do with the complementary forms of art and language where in writing we invent, revise, and publish and in art we work on referential sketches, engage in preparatory story, and polish definitive drawings. In other words, students are able to apply skills learned in one mode to another.

In light of the above findings, the privileging of language in some schools continues and is troubling, as Kress and van Leeuwen point out, because the dominant mode of communication is shifting from writing to the image. In a growing visual culture, Crafton agrees and says schools are called to accept broader definitions and practices of literacy. The call is warranted. Recently, Epting argued that precision of thought and expression in writing continues to be an area in which students struggle as writers. Specifically, students experience difficulty with maintaining a paper's focus or expressing their own questions and ideas. She emphasizes the value of stopping, pausing, and thinking about what and how words mean. Students need time to absorb their writing and reflect on their language choices as a pathway for using language to shape their thinking.

Applebee and Langer echo similar concerns in a recent article in which they compare writing instruction at the middle and high school level from two separate studies conducted thirty years apart. While the data shows that students are writing more and across the curriculum, schools "are not providing students with opportunities to use composing as a way to think through the issues, to show the depth and breadth of their knowledge, or to go beyond what they know in making connections and raising new issues" (16). According to George, teachers of writing can support student writers through visually based writing experiences that invite students to think through their ideas and invent new ones. "Our students have a much richer imagination of what we might accomplish with the visual than our journals have yet to address" (12). Put another way, invention is essential for the writer as fully formed ideas seldom come on their own.

Study Context and Methods

Context

This study took place at the end of the school year in a fourth grade classroom in a public elementary school in the Midwest of the United States. There were 22 student participants. A total of 94 samples of portal writing were collected and analyzed. Over a six week period, six students worked on three drafts, ten students worked on four drafts, and six students worked on six drafts. Lauren, the classroom teacher and former graduate student of mine, encouraged students to choose their own topics for writing. My

reason for sharing my vision for this study with her was because of her interest to grow in her understanding of writing practices. She was in her sixth year of teaching at the time of the study. Prior to this study, no one had experienced portal writing or viewed texts by Phillips or Kleon.

Methods

There were two primary modes of data collection in this study: the portaled stories and student feedback shared in class about portal writing. I used my field journal to take notes on what the students shared about experiencing portal writing, doing my best to record feedback verbatim. These particular data, while anecdotal, illuminate what students thought about portaling as a tool for thinking about writing. The study comprised of the following phases:

- Phase 1. Students selected an unfinished story they had written.
- Phase 2. Students read their story, asking themselves, "Why do I think this story is incomplete? What can I do with this story?"
- Phase 3. Students selected particular words or phrases that stood out to them by circling or boxing them.
- Phase 4. Students read their selections, deciding to either keep portaling or stop. Students were encouraged to talk within their table groups during the portaling process as a way of sorting through and exchanging ideas.
- Phase 5. Students masked remaining text with dark colored marker so that selected words stood out and could be easily read.
- Phase 6. Students read their portaled story for story direction, asking themselves, "Do I want to change this story slightly or dramatically?"
- Phase 7. Students wrote a new story, using some or all of their circled words.
- Phase 8. Students shared their revised stories at the end of each week in whole-group settings.

They celebrated decisions made in their writing by reading their portals and explaining how portal writing affected their plans for a third draft. In this story sharing, students experienced writing as process.

To get a feel for how the strategy works, students first portaled the poem "Everyone Needs a Father" by fifth grade writer Stephanie Miller, as cited in Fletcher's book, *Craft Lessons*. Together, we circled words that stood out to us and asked questions such as: "What are we noticing about what happens when we portal a story? What kinds of words did each of us portal? Are they similar? Different? What do these words make us think about? What kind of images do they help us see? How can we use these images to help us think of a new story? What kinds of questions did we ask ourselves about the poem during the portal process? How do these questions help us think about the poem? And what directions do these portals give us?" In trying to answer these questions, students discovered how different story ideas can emerge from one story about a father, and how they can use portal writing to discover new directions in their own stories.

Results

In this study, children portaled their stories for re-seeing their writing in three ways: they experienced poetic form, developed new titles, and discovered small moment writing. In the following section, I share selected examples of how children engaged in portal writing.

Children Experienced Poetic Form. Before students created portals in their writing, we encouraged them to think like writers by asking themselves questions about their stories. For example: What is this story about? What was it supposed to be about? Which part(s) do I still like? Where can I take this story now? In my field notes, I took notice of some children planning their revised stories before they portaled a single word (i.e., looking for particular words they wanted to keep) while others circled words at random. This random approach is open and flexible, allowing for surprises in the way words look and mean when juxtaposed with others. John (all names are pseudonyms), for example, consistently took an open approach to his unfinished stories. One story in particular titled “Diabetes” (below)—which he wrote about his diabetic brother—illustrates:

One day when I Arrived with my mom At the hospital we walked in we went in the elevator I said I’m anccichise to see Brendan I said the elevator stoped we got out there it was one three I slowly opend the door the door went I heard a voice “hello” it was my brother and dad. I said what are you doing Brendan playing xbox his Room was so cool and there was a frige and microwave. So the Doctor told everything what he had to do so we packed all the stuff they gave us.

John decided to portal this story because, though he said he liked what he wrote, he wanted to “make it sound better.” In pursuit of improving his story, he portaled words that he felt captured the essence of his story:

arrived
hospital
elevator
anccichise
elevator
slowly opend
Bredan
xbox
frige
microwave
Doctor

Words in isolation, these portals elicit images of stopped-time. They also create rhythm and movement by retelling John’s story in a different form. Words cohere in a slow yet tumbling fashion. Though portal writing does not involve drawing pictures, these portals graphically identify key words from John’s original draft that help him search and organize ideas for writing (see Dyson, Olshansky) Together, these visual portals create imagery in the writing, making the writer wonder, what will happen next? What direc-

tion or focus can this story take? This aesthetic pathway for developing narrative writing offers students a creative structure for seeing story ideas. In a whole group share John explained: "I liked the shape. It made me think about who was in my story." Pointing to his portals, he explained further, "I kinda like how it's short." "Short?" I wondered out loud. "This is interesting to me. What do you mean by that?" I asked. As John tried to explain, I learned that short meant focused. "How do these circled words help you as a writer?" I probed further. "I don't know," he shrugged, "I guess the way they look." He paused for a moment and then continued to explain. "It looks different, like I notice words n' stuff." The poetic form that portals create, it seems, helped John refine his ideas in his revision, "Room 214":

There it was Room 214 I stoped and I wondered for a second I wonder how my Brother is going to React so I keep on walking I slowly opened the door there was my brother he was laying on the bed I asked my dad when is the doctor going to get here. he (said), I do not know She got there like 15 minutes After. it was really long when the doctor was telling us then my Brother Beged my dad to see what the doctor said.

Portal writing helped John improve his narrative by focusing on elements of his story from the original draft to the second. Where in the original he mentions being anxious to see his brother in the hospital, in his revision he takes a more reflective stance about the hospital experience. For example, he describes his anxiety (e.g., "I stoped and I wondered"), asking himself how his brother might react to having diabetes, and leaving the reader wondering what the doctor said that took "really long." By focusing on the portals "anccichise," "slowly opend," and "Doctor," John used portal writing to graphically think through issues in his writing (see Applebee & Langer) and was able to narrow in on his perspective as a concerned sibling. "Why didn't you use the other portals?" I asked during the group share. He explained that he only used words that stood out to him adding, "I was scared so I used words that helped me to write about that."

In talking to John later at his table, he helped me to understand that while adults may know the potential of poetry for helping writers discover language and form, children know it more acutely somehow when they have authentic opportunities to experience it.

Children Developed New Titles. In listening to discussions at their tables, I learned that some children enjoyed talking about which words they were portaling (e.g., "I'm circling *hospital*") and why (e.g., "Oh, this sounds good!"). As students circled and shared some of their word choices, they demonstrated that there is no one correct way of portaling text; the writer decides.

To help her students think critically about their circled word choices, Lauren and I asked several questions that the children could ask themselves as they reread their portals. For example, do the words construct a different story or the same story? Do the words magnify a person? A place? A mood? A voice? Do you notice a word or words that you did not notice before? Does a word make you think differently about your story? Is there a word that changes meaning? Do any of the words that you circled conjure up new words or images in your mind? These questions furthered thinking about story, but

they also nurtured thinking about the story title. While for some students this meant providing a title for their story, for others this meant revising an existing one. The opportunity to work on story title alone was particularly important for students hesitant to delve into hefty revisions right away.

Of the 94 stories collected, 18 were untitled. After students portaled their stories, 17 of those 18 stories were given new titles. Some of those titles focused on main characters within a story. An untitled story about two friends became, "All About Carlee and Gracie"; an untitled story about a pet dog became, "Dog Lola"; and an untitled story about two mischievous boys became, "Nate and Clone." Other titles focused on existing themes found within stories, such as "Scared in the Night," a story about getting spooked when trick-or-treating.

When coming together as a whole group, students acknowledged that titled stories can provide readers with a direction. "People should know what the story is about," clarified one student. Indeed, titles helped readers make decisions in their reading choices. The title's tone, as discussed in class, could also help readers in their decisions to choose books that sounded serious or funny. Of the 47 titles that were revised for clarity, some students experimented with humor when they reworked their titles. For example, "My Dog's Bath," a story about a dog who makes a scene in the bathroom and frustrates the mother who is washing him becomes "Mom's Look." The portals "mom" and "sad face" helped Jenna to come up with a title that emphasized her mother's reaction to the bath scene: "She was mad!"

Other students used portals of character names as a way to make the writing more personal. For example, "Vet Day," a story about a cat going for a routine checkup at the veterinarian's became more personal with "Harliey At The Vet." Students also used their portals to be as specific and clear in their titles as possible. Yet again, a story about going on a ride at an amusement park changed from a very broad title, "Univrs!," to the ride itself, "Twister." Using portals to create more focused titles was especially important for expository pieces. For example, George's narrative on the benefit of reading books to learn about bats and vampires was originally titled "Books," a broad title that could be misleading to readers. The portals "books" and "vampires" helped him to see how clarifying the title to "Books About Vampires" better communicated what his narrative was about. "I like this title better," he explained, "because it helped me focus on my story. I took out the parts about bats." In this example, George demonstrated the power of using portals to visually communicate ideas within the writing process. Portals, because of their potential for making words serendipitously cohere, can influence the story ideas students think about and provide necessary entry points for writing that Ernst, Hobson, and Olson argue as essential to the writing process.

As students presented their stories during group share, they also pointed out their revised titles, noting what they liked about the revision. For example, Jenny revised her lengthy title "Having A Aunt With A Machine In Her Chest Isn't Fun" to "The Heart Machine." Sitting in the author's chair in front of her peers, Jenny explained how her portals (e.g., Aunt, isn't fun, play, skating, whole bunch, machine, hard) got her thinking about what she was most upset about in her story. In talking about her aunt, she explained further how these words helped her to think about the machine in her aunt's chest. "That's how I got the idea for heart machine," she said. In circling and talking

about the words that mattered to her, portal writing encouraged Jenny to think of other words beyond the page. Thus, she was able to think of the word “heart” which gives her story title more focus and also shows her what Eisner has long argued about the impact of visual communication—that exploring what students know through visual means is a generative, meaning-making process.

Of course, not all portaled texts yielded improved titles. Sometimes, the original title provided more clarification to what the story was about than the revised title. For example, “Fishing At The Dock,” a story about fishing with friends changed to “Adventurer” in which there is no identifiable adventurer in the story, and “Halloween Camping” a story about spending Hallowe’en night in a camper with friends and family changed to “Costumes,” in which the camping experience, not costuming per se, dominates the story. Regardless, portal writing augured thinking about writing as creative process, where portals or circled words were not viewed as fixed realities of ideas. Rather, they offered students opportunities to re-see and re-think their writing and make decisions based on the portals they created.

Children Discovered Small Moment Writing. As children shared their stories, they often read a specific paragraph they were proud of, asking themselves, “Which part of my writing is effective and worth sharing today?” By being encouraged to do this kind of sharing, they participated in a community of writers. This supportive environment made it possible for students to engage in class discussions about focus in writing, a rather abstract term often used in writers’ workshops. But because portals can help students move from the general to the specific in their writing, and because portals provide a creative way to attend to language and details, students can experience focus directly. It no longer feels abstract. Rather, it feels like something they can do. To help demystify what it means to write with focus, we asked students questions that nudged thinking about their word choices:

1. Do the portals construct a different story? The same story?
2. Do the portals magnify a person? A place? A mood? A voice?
3. Do I notice a portal I did not notice before?
4. Does a portal make me think differently about the story?
5. Can a portal be used to change the title?
6. Is there a portal that changes the meaning of the story?
7. Do any of the portals I circled suggest new words or images?

By asking these kinds of questions, students were able to experience how in moving from general to specific details they could get even more specific. So specific in fact, that some full-bodied narratives with characters, plots, and crises developed into focused stories about a pair of shoes or a favorite toy. This kind of specificity in writing, this kind of focus, is what Ralph Fletcher calls “small moment writing.” In this study, children simply called it “Oh! Awesome!” and “cool!”

Julie experienced small moment writing through a story about her cat. In the original draft, like most first drafts, she mentioned a lot of ideas:

My cat has gone to the vet every year and it's time agann for the vet. The vet is a scary place for a cat. They get shots. Lots of needles. It can be scary. I don't like going to the doctor. I don't like getting shots. I know some people get sick.

Maybe she will be crazy or relaxed. Or go behind the refridgerater agann or they'll put a blagkit over her head like always. She gets more than one shots. It makes me sad. I don't like to look at shots.

Julie portaled the words “cat” and “vet” and the phrase, “she will be crazy.” Julie shared with me that she had to think about these words carefully, “like how I wanted to use them,” she explained. Ray would argue that by reading and rereading these portals critically, Julie was able to enhance meaning in her story by describing rather than telling what happens to Harliey when she goes to the vet. “I like how your story got funny,” remarked one peer during a group share, “Like when you said the devil is hatched. Cool!” More peers nodded in agreement. They had just heard Julie read her revised story about her cat:

Harliey gose to the vet every year to get her shots like rabies, fless, colds she gust got her rabes shots when we got there she was a Davil and when they give her shots she screams when she dose that I said the Davil has hatcht and wons we got home it was gross she had a dump they skared her so much she pooped her self.

I asked Julie during group share to explain how she decided to develop the scene at the vet. “Cause going to the vet part was funny.” “Do you like to write humor?” I asked. “Yes,” she said adding, “and I circled ‘crazy,’ so like I thought I could explain that better.” Julie helped me to understand that the portal “she will be crazy” helped her zoom in on a particular aspect of her story and develop it further. By identifying key words through portals and using them to develop her ideas, she had to think of how to describe feline craziness. In so doing, Julie—and her peers in their own narratives—practiced precision of thought and expression in writing, which Epting argues is essential in the writing process. By stopping, pausing, and thinking about what and how words mean, portal writing helps students with maintaining focus and clearly expressing their ideas. I asked Julie one more question before recess: “How do you think this story compares to your first draft?” She paused for a moment and then said, “I think you kinda know my cat in this one.” Indeed, the revised story offered a close-up of Harliey and highlighted the vet experience. Creating portals in writing as a way of discovering ideas for small moment writing made it possible to magnify and illuminate ideas. Julie took this small moment in Harliey’s life and developed it. When the idea is small, says Fletcher, the writing is big. Julie’s description of Harliey at the vet is big, the writing memorable.

Discussion

Though the sample size of this study is limited and thus makes it difficult to generalize from these findings, the writing that grew out of students’ portals shows that portal writing can be used as an effective tool for writing inquiry for elementary students. Students’ experiences with portal writing confirm that there are lessons to be drawn from this study.

First, students experienced revision as a creative process, one in which they could develop their ideas and discover new story directions by simply redacting words from a narrative text. A creative stance toward revision offered students a pathway to continue working on and improving their writing. Portal writing provided students a pleasurable pathway for reworking a story.

Second, students attended to detail in their by writing by looking carefully at word choice and creating unique word combinations and phrases. As students talked at their tables about their word choices, they reflected and revised, giving rise to portals that held a potential richness of story. With peer support, students attended more closely to detail and therefore participated in the ownership of their ideas through their own poetic inventions of groups of words.

Third, students wrote with focus by using their juxtaposed words as aids in finding a story's focus. Often, first drafts are packed with multiple story ideas where too many directions can confuse and frustrate the student. Portals provided students support in developing a particular aspect about their story that might otherwise have been missed in a draft.

Fourth, students used form to reflect on the potential stories that emerged from their portals. Eisner and McLuhan argue that form influences what we think about. The poetic form of portals where words can tumble, stretch across the page, or both, gave students another way of seeing their stories. McLuhan argues, "The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act – the way we perceive the world" (41). Media served as an extension of students' ideas through which they were able to graphically identify key words and perceive new story ideas. The playful configuration of words standing out against a darkened page affected the stories they saw. Form thus played a role in the revision process because it helped students to see different story structures and motivated them to write some or all of them.

Finally, reluctant writers experienced joy in writing by portaling a text other than their own. In so doing, they were able to ease into their own writing and discover their own interests. Access to different kinds of text (e.g., a poem, a chapter from a novel, a scene from a play, newspaper and magazine articles, song lyrics, recipes) can also help broaden students' perceptions of what counts as writing and ultimately help them participate in creating their own texts and forms.

Closing Thoughts

The data in this study raise several questions about how portal writing might extend to students beyond the elementary classroom. Specifically, I wonder: How might secondary and college students respond to portal writing exercises? How might English Language Learners as well as students taking second-language courses benefit from portal writing? In what way can portal writing be used in content-area classes? And how might students in art education benefit from drawing portals as a process of preparing and refining their artist statements?

As I watched the students in this study construct portals in their stories, discover new ideas and directions in their writing, and as I learned how portaling supported talk about writing and encouraged writing, I am convinced that Malaguzzi—teacher advo-

cate for the arts in learning—is right: “The wider the range of possibilities we offer children, the more intense will be their motivations and the richer their experiences” (72). Redacting words with marker or mixed media illuminates story as creative exploration, but more than this, it can widen children’s writing experiences by showing them how to look closely at language and apply new understandings to their own writing. In looking closely, students were able to experience the power of language through their own word choices. They experienced how portaled words can act like rudders, gently steering them in new or improved story directions. Through the creative act of circling words, they shouldered possibility for where to take their stories next. The students acted like authors, making purposeful and meaningful decisions in their writing.

I believe the more children experience portal writing, the more knowledge they will construct about how written language works and cultivate their own interests on what to write and how to write it. Given the open potential for meaning in portal writing, students can be empowered and develop confidence in their writing pursuits.



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“Poetry Is Not a Luxury”: Why We Should Include Poetry in the Writing Classroom

Nicole Warwick

The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom.

Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”

...and we all shared a war against the tyrannies of silence.

Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”

Recently, the director of the composition program where I teach sent out a link to an editorial piece from *Salon*. She explained the piece wasn’t a new conversation but that it was a conversation still worth having. In “Death to High School English,” Kim Brooks ponders the effectiveness of traditional high school curriculum, with its focus on “standardized test preparation and the reading of canonical texts” (par. 2). She questions these practices because she believes they may lead to “the creation of a generation of college students who, simply put, cannot write” (par. 2).

As evidence for her claim, she mentions “their shocking deficits,” “all the things they don’t know how to do when it comes to written communication in the English language,” as well as “all the basic skills that they surely need to master if they are to have a chance at succeeding in any post-secondary course of study” (par. 3). But her diatribe against this generation of students does not end there. She continues:

I’ve stared at the black markings on the page until my vision blurred, chronicling and triaging the maneuvers I will need to teach them in 14 short weeks: how to make sure their sentences contain a subject and a verb, how to organize their paragraphs around a main idea, how to write a working thesis statement or any kind of thesis statement at all. They don’t know how to outline or how to organize a paper before they begin. They don’t know how to edit or proofread it once they’ve finished. They plagiarize, often inadvertently, and I find myself, at least for a moment, relieved by these sentence- or paragraph-long reprieves from their migraine-inducing, quasi-incomprehensible prose. (par. 4)

The impetus for such a view and for such teaching as she describes above are the “professors in every area and every discipline telling them they’re going to fail if they don’t learn how to write a comprehensible, grammatical and at least marginally organized academic essay” (par. 9). So she wonders if reading Faulkner will really help students meet these demands in college (par. 10).

As I read Brooks, I wonder what she will put in the place of reading canonical texts. Apparently more lessons on punctuation: “Wouldn’t they have been better off, or at least better prepared for the type of college work most will take on (pre-professional, that is), learning to support an argument or use a comma?” (par. 10).

My director is right. This is an old story. It is also a dominant one, and it always seems to follow the same plotline: College writing teachers blame high school teachers for the inadequacy of student writing. We know this conversation has been happening at least since the late 1800s when such beliefs led Harvard to institute an entrance exam in hope of getting high schools to better prepare students for writing.

The plot line is also partly based on what Mike Rose calls the myth of transience: “. . . the belief persists in the American university that if we can just do x or y, the problem will be solved—in five years, ten years, or a generation—and higher education will be able to return to its real work” (355). Rose continues:

Each generation of academicians facing the characteristic American shifts in demographics and accessibility sees the problem anew, laments it in the terms of the era, and optimistically notes its impermanence. No one seems to say that this scenario has gone on for so long that it might not be temporary. (355)

I also believe that something deeper is at work in Brooks’ story and stories like hers—something that underlies the plotline and the myth—something that creates the very lens through which we look: a position of power and privilege. Teachers looking through this lens measure students against themselves, their values, their very ways of being and often find students lacking, deficient.

Writing through a Transnational Lens

Transnational theory has been useful to me as I have tried to understand the position which allows the perspective of deficit to persist and as I have tried to think of alternative ways to think of students and their writing.

Transnationalism is often linked to the crossing of national borders. For instance, Wendy S. Hesford and Eileen E. Schell explain: “*Transnationality* refers to movements of people, goods, and ideas, across national borders . . .” (463). However, according to Jacqueline Meisel, transnationalism can relate to border crossings of any kind. She writes: “The larger topic of Transnationalism refers to a variety of activities, singly or in combination, that have to do with actual and metaphorical border-crossings: economic, political, cultural, and personal” (Chapter 5, par. 1). Students are border crossers in the traditional sense as they travel from various countries, states, and even cities to attend college, but they are also border crossers in a broader sense as they cross over into the university system.

By seeing entering college as a transnational event, as writing teachers we gain access to different frameworks and conversations and new ways of thinking and talking about writing with our students and each other. For instance, Francoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih’s article “Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally” has been instrumental in helping me articulate why I find pieces like Brooks’ so troubling. This article has also helped me to reinvent and restructure my classroom through the use of poetry and has helped me to understand and explain in this essay why poetry can function in such a way.

In their article, Lionnet and Shih provide an important critique of transnational theory when they contend that within transnationalism, minor or marginal groups are

almost always defined in relation to major or dominant groups: "We study the center and the margin but rarely examine the relationships among different margins" (2). Minor groups are either seen as assimilating or resisting (Lionnet and Shih 7). They are constantly being measured against the dominant:

The logic of globalization is centripetal and centrifugal at the same time and assumes a universal core or norm, which spreads out across the world while pulling into its vortex other forms of culture to be tested by its norm. It produces a hierarchy of subjects between the so-called universal and the particular, with all the attendant problems of Eurocentric universalism. (5)

This applies to Brooks' view of student writing. She creates a vortex as she uses her power and privilege as a reference point, measuring student writing, even other teachers, against her values.

What is missing from this view of transnationalism, Lionnet and Shih explain, "is an awareness and recognition of the creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries" (7). Minor groups are capable of existing, creating, working, and building beyond the scope of the dominant. That is, their existence does not depend on the dominant. Lionnet and Shih suggest we need to stop constructing minorities only in relation to the dominant. Lionnet and Shih offer this view of the transnational instead: "The transnational, on the contrary, can be conceived as a space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center" (5).

Such an insight is important as we think about our students and their writing lives. It reminds us that they write across borders in many ways, in multiple languages and various genres. Perhaps it is our view of writing that is narrow. If we broaden our scope beyond dominant values, what might we see? What might we learn?

I contend that asking such questions not only requires a different perspective, like the one offered by Lionnet and Shih, but requires a different way of being on the part of both student and teacher. Where globalization or nationalism privileges one way of being over another, transnationalism hinges on mutual respect. To be transnational, we can neither overvalue nor undervalue our own ideas or the ideas of others, neither sacrificing our perspective for another nor expecting another to sacrifice their perspective for ours. The goal of the transnational is conversation, negotiation, and hybridity, not assimilation and not even opposition to the dominant. "Critiquing the center," write Lionnet and Shih, ". . . seems only to enhance it; the center remains the focus and the main object of study" (3). We need to divert our gaze from the center. We need to look elsewhere.

Of course, discussing teaching in terms of vertical and horizontal relationships and mutual respect is not new. I first learned about such approaches from educational theorists like Paulo Freire and bell hooks, but what has been a challenge for me is how to approach teaching horizontally, inclusively in my own classroom. Studying the nature of transnationalism with its aim of hybridity has helped me understand the way of being that allows for transnational exchanges to occur, has helped me challenge the view of teaching writing Brooks presents and has helped me create with my students new stories

about teaching writing. But to do so, I need to move beyond the major-minor dichotomy. I need to relate to students differently, see their writing differently. I need to stop constructing their identities in relation to me as teacher and the dominant writing values of the university. I need to work on seeing myself in them and them in me.

Poetry helps me do this work.

I believe poetry helps me transform my teaching and my classroom because it is transnational in nature. According to Adrienne Rich “. . . most often someone writing a poem believes in, depends on, a delicate, vibrating range of difference, that an ‘I’ can become a ‘we’ without extinguishing others, that a partly common language exists to which strangers can bring their own heartbeat, memories, images of strangers” (“Interview” 86). Rich describes a transnational way of being. Such a way of being is antithetical to the vortex; it is horizontal.

Poetry also helps us challenge the vertical structure. We create a vortex when we use only one point of reference as measurement, but by inviting poetry into my classroom, I provide another point of reference. Poetry becomes a counterbalance to academic writing. It’s writing that speaks to us without introductions and thesis statements and topic sentences and paragraphs. It gives us a sense of other possibilities in writing. However, poetry presents but one possibility. Once we introduce another reference point, we break free from measuring against the dominant and find even more points of reference. For instance, each student’s writing and ideas become possible reference points, as do other writers.

In *The Peaceable Classroom*, Mary Rose O’Reilley asks: “What would it be like to teach from the conviction that our students are artists, poets, indeed, from the knowledge that we ourselves are poets? How would that philosophy change the classroom?” (87). I write this essay in answer to O’Reilley’s question.

Being Transnational

When I read the work of Katie Wood Ray, I see her occupy a transnational way of being. In *Wondrous Words*, Ray writes about one of her students, Justin, a fifth-grader who is inspired to write his own poem after reading Georgia Heard’s poetry. At first Justin is perplexed by Heard’s poem, “The Frog Serenade.” This poem is written for two voices, and he doesn’t know how to make sense of it. Ray then sits down with Justin and teaches him to read this poem. Once Justin understands the concept, they read the poem *together* and then perform the poem two more times as other students gain interest.

At the end of the class, Justin runs up to Ray and hands her a poem he has written. It is a two-voiced poem called “Something Dead” about deer hunting in his community:

As I read through ‘Something Dead’ I knew that I was experiencing one of those moments we all live for as teachers. Right before my eyes I was watching a child do something he couldn’t have dreamed of doing only an hour before. I mean, he had never *seen* a poem like this. In one short hour Georgia Heard had given Justin a new vision of what was possible in writing, and Justin had used that vision to see his way into saying a big important thing in his life: *People are cruel—Boom—Men come with deer.* (6)

Ray plays an important role in this narrative. She introduces the tools that will help provide students with ideas and ways of writing. She also offers help in using these tools. However, she is not the only one responsible for the learning and the writing experience that takes place. Justin also has agency in this story. Ray brings the book of poetry, but it is Justin's curiosity and interest that lead him to pick up the book and thumb through it. When he becomes confused, Ray notices, takes on the role of mediator by showing Justin a way in, but she then retreats and lets him read and work with his friends and on his own. Ray also does not offer Justin prescriptions for writing, nor does she foist Heard upon Justin, telling him to learn to write poetry by reading Heard.

Of course we could say that Ray is telling the story from her perspective, but while she tells the story, she also shares the narrative space with Justin. Prior to the passage I quote, Ray reprints Justin's poem in the book, both in print and an actual image of his writing. I also notice the respectful way Ray writes about Justin and the way she honors him by speaking of *his* difficulty and later, but not seen here, her own difficulties as a teacher.

On the page, Ray maintains a fine balance between the different actors involved—Justin, Ray, and Heard. They all foster Justin's poem in some way, but none eclipse each other's work or the work Justin has to do as a writer. Justin is responsible for his learning, his experience, his writing, yet simultaneously he has a community that supports him, helps him learn, and also learns from him. I imagine she teaches and writes from the same place—a transnational place.

I aim to approach teaching writing from the same place as Ray, but this isn't always easy, and for me, it's a conscious choice I need to make every time I design a lesson or assignment or respond to student writing. I actively create room for the struggles they need to experience as writers as well as the answers they find on their own, even when I don't agree. To make our writing classroom work and move forward, we need the tension between our differing views. It's not that I sit idle when I disagree or if I think I might see a better way. I offer my opinion, but I'm also careful to find ways to not let my opinion swamp theirs. I create the opportunity for conversation and negotiation, and for this to happen, we all need to participate.

I begin to create this environment by starting the semester with the poem "It's a Woman's World" by Eavan Boland, a poem Hephzibah Roskelly and David Jolliffe inspired me to use. They include the poem at the back of their textbook *Everyday Use*, as one of the suggested readings for students. I remember reading it for the first time and the difficulty I experienced in trying to interpret its many layers of meaning. I continue to use this poem because of the difficulty I once experienced, believing that working through something difficult together helps us to build community. With its ambiguity, its multiple layers of meaning, poetry resists certainty, resists being figured out. This allows students the opportunity to find their own connections, foster their own ideas, learn to trust themselves but also be open to what others have to say, much like Ray did with Justin.

These aspects are critical for making writing and growth as writers possible. Much like participating in a conversation or negotiation, students need to value themselves and their own ideas to generate content on the page. To test their writing and grow in understanding, however, they also need me, the rest of the class, and the other writers

and theory we work with. But if I'm working with a student, I also need them to be able to withstand the weight of my opinion. I need them to put my opinion about their writing in conversation with their own ideas and the other ideas they encounter in class. As much as I try to make my feedback non-authoritative, the very fact it comes from me can make it difficult to ignore or disagree with. But being able to do this—consider and yet resist other people's views of writing—is critical to success as a writer.

We begin to learn together in this way by first working with Boland's "It's a Woman's World." Based on my own experiences with the poem and the students I have worked with, I know the poem is difficult. We are going to have to build connections and understanding, and we are going to need each other.

We often begin with the first stanzas:

Our way of life
has hardly changed
since a wheel first
whetted a knife.

Well, maybe flame
burns more greedily
and wheels are steadier
but we're the same . . .

When we read the poem, students often wonder how wheels can be steadier while "we're the same." Steadier implies change which contradicts "the same" in the next line. And we read on, still questioning. What does "milestone" mean when Boland turns it into a verb? What's "gristing"? What does it mean "to moth"? If the poem is about women, why are children the ones who are mothed and not daughters? What's a "stargazer," "a burning plume," "a fire-eater"? How can someone be defined by what she forgets?

When we begin to analyze the poem, I first have students write their own questions, and the above questions are some of the things they wonder about. Before we even get to that, though, I try to demonstrate ways they might connect to the poem and places where they might find their own answers.

I discovered my own connection to the poem through music a couple of years ago when I happened to hear Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'" soon after we finished working with "It's a Woman's World." As I listened to Sinatra's lyrics, I noticed both Boland and Sinatra use repetition, nouns as verbs, metaphor, and fire imagery. So before we begin analyzing the poem, I first show a YouTube video featuring Sinatra singing the song. As soon as I play the video, the atmosphere in the classroom changes. Students sit forward. They smile. They are interested and engaged.

I also create a handout with the lyrics, which provides the basis for the first group work of the semester: analyzing the song with the use of the journalist questions. It's our first walk into ambiguous territory. The most difficult question for them to answer is "how," and I respond with phrases they will hear over and over again throughout the semester: "There isn't a right answer. Trust yourself. Let's see what happens." They

always come up with something to say. From these simple song lyrics and questions, they always generate ideas, enough to fill the chalkboard.

As we make the transition from music to poetry, I demonstrate that we bring to the reading of poetry knowledge based on previous learning experiences; we don't arrive at the reading of a poem empty handed. It's important to recognize and point out to students that we do have prior knowledge and experiences we can access to help us find ways into the poem, any text for that matter, even our own writing. We begin to see how we can blend traditional approaches with new, creative ones.

I see the use of music and the transition to reading the poem much like the moment Ray sits down with Justin to teach him how to read "Frog Serenade." Once I show them some possible connections, I retreat to allow them to create their own connections and find their own ways in. It seems to work. In conversations on their blogs about the poem and in class and even in papers they write later in the semester, students often bring up Tupac Shakur's music and poetry, for example. Students also make connections to songs that carry similar messages to the poem. One semester, a student asked if she could play a song in class that reminded her of "It's a Woman's World," while another discussed on our class blog how themes of discrimination against women connected "It's a Woman's World" and the movie *The Changeling*.

After making our initial contact and connections with the poem, I ask students to develop questions they have about the poem. I think it's important that their questions drive our class discussion. Developing their own questions is a way of investing in the poem, to generate knowledge and their own understandings, which is important for them to see as writers.

This semester, for her literacy narrative, one of my students wrote about how she learned in her writing class from the previous semester the importance of students asking their own questions because, she explained, questions are the key to learning. Her paper made me think about how students answer a lot of questions throughout their education, but they often are not questions that come from the students' own interests and curiosity; they are questions their teachers ask. So not only do teachers pick the books students read. They develop questions about the books they've picked. Where are students present in such an education? Where do they get a chance to develop and follow their own curiosity?

I think of Justin in this instance. It was his curiosity which led him to pick up Heard's book of poetry. Ray brought the book and helped him over an obstacle to reading, but it was his interest and excitement that fueled his learning.

This is why I have students develop their own questions. When I first started working with poetry, I was afraid to let go of control. What if we didn't have anything to talk about? What if we didn't cover the "important" stuff? What if they didn't ask "good" questions? As it turns out, they often ask better questions than I do, and we cover more territory quicker and more thoroughly. Most importantly, they learn that questions generate knowledge and questions foster engagement, because as my student so thoughtfully pointed out, questions are the key to learning.

Once we have questions to work with, we begin the work of answering the questions they have developed. We do this work first in groups and then each group shares their ideas with the class. Once we come back together as a class, the groups find that

they have covered similar territory and have often developed similar insights. We reach a general consensus (though no one is obligated to agree) about many of the sections of the poem. Our consensus then gives us the courage to move on to the sections that remain elusive.

As we move into the areas of the poem that are less clear, someone will have ideas about a line that someone else finds inscrutable, and someone else will have an insight about a different section. But something is giving them the courage to speak, to offer *possible* ideas about what a line or word means. It's as though the community and the answers we have found together give us courage to move on and find more answers to our questions. Our discussion also does not become about right and wrong. It's about finding answers and learning *together*. It's about participating in a conversation, negotiation even. The class begins to see how we can learn as a community and how they don't have to rely on the teacher for all the answers.

Besides providing community, the infusion of poetry and music makes writing possible in other ways. For the second paper of the semester, a rhetorical analysis, many students choose their favorite songs as their subjects. Many seem to find this writing meaningful. For one student, rhetoric allowed her to explore the political nature of Los Guaraguao's Salvadorian music. For others, rhetoric allows them a different perspective of something familiar. One student, for instance, wrote about a song her mother sang to her. She focused on her perspective, the perspective of her mother, as well as the perspective of a friend she grew up with. In thinking about this song rhetorically, she was able to think about the song in a way she never had. She had always been the one on the receiving end and hadn't thought about what the song meant to her mother or to people who happened to be around.

This same student also explored music in her literacy narrative, the third and final paper, writing about her own process and development in writing music lyrics and then drawing parallels between writing music and writing papers. Another student also wrote about music for the literacy narrative, exploring how punk music taught him that first someone needs to be accepted by the system, and once he is accepted, he can then go about changing it. He connected this philosophy to his experiences writing in high school and college and how this message from punk music helped him accept and value his own writing even when his teachers didn't.

Windows to the World

Boland explains "that poems are agents of change" and that "there is no doubt the poets of the Harlem Renaissance opened a new window—not just to their own world—but to a wider world as well" (135). The more I work to understand poetry and its nature and background and history, the more windows I see it opening for both me and my students.

In addition to providing ways to build community and conversation with each other, poetry provides a window into conversing about the very issues we face as writers and teachers of writing. We can talk about norms and expectations, how those norms and expectations impact us, and what possible responses are available to us. Much as students and writing teachers who are often subjected to the universalizing influence of a

vortex (in this case, the vortex of academic writing), so too have poets and poetry felt this pressure.

In fact these themes are present in “It’s a Woman’s World.” How easy it is to draw parallels between the devaluing of self as woman and the devaluing of self as writer when we measure ourselves against the dominant norms and expectations of society. As Boland, to speak our truths as writers, to “score the low music of our outrage,” we must be “fire-eaters” and “star-gazers.”

Studying poetry helps us gain the courage to speak our truths because in poetry we find alternate stories and perspectives about writing difficulties. For instance, in an interview with Rich, Audre Lorde talks about how difficult prose was for her to write. Between writing her first story, “La Llorona” and writing “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” in 1977, there was a gap of about twenty-four years. She explains to Rich: “. . . it wasn’t that I didn’t have the skills. I knew about sentences by that time. I knew how to construct a paragraph. But communicating deep feeling in linear, solid blocks of print felt arcane, a method beyond me” (87). Lorde’s story gives us, both teacher and student, a new perspective on what might be behind our difficulty as writers—difficulty others might label as deficit. Lorde’s story reminds me to ask students to tell the story of their difficulty. I hope it also gives students the courage to speak.

Sometimes in resisting the dominant story about writing classes and writing teachers and the students with whom we work, I become afraid. Sometimes, the first seven weeks of the semester are the most difficult as I try to establish a different way of being a teacher and help my students do the same as students and writers. Against moments when I become afraid that a transnational approach to teaching writing will not work and against moments when my first reaction to student writing sounds more like Brooks than Ray, I have to stay firmly grounded in my commitment to the way of being I have chosen. I have learned that my doubt often comes from fear—fear of not measuring up to what the university expects of me or my students.

But then I remember to respect and trust myself and the students. They do turn in work that I find confusing, that is underdeveloped, that sometimes is riddled with error. What I have to tell myself and them is that what I am seeing in their writing is not a reflection of bad teaching on my part or deficit on theirs. These difficulties are to be expected. I have to tell myself a different story, help myself and help them see their writing from a different perspective.

Edouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation* explains that horizontal, transnational relationships work by “prompting the knowledge that identity is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation” and that “by taking up the problems of the Other, it is possible to find oneself” (18). Teaching students about writing is not just about what I know or what I see. I have to teach in relation to my students. I have to work with them, work to understand the stories their writing tells me, instead of making assumptions about it. I don’t know until I ask, and poetry and stories like Lorde’s remind me to ask, remind me to let them help define my teaching.

Student language often is like poetry—raw and unruly. Sometimes students break rules in their writing, like Boland who uses nouns as verbs, “milestoning” and “gristing” and “mothing.” We know students often occupy a space between their home language(s)

and English. It makes sense that hybrid writing would grow from this space. Poetry helps me consider the possibilities this writing presents.

Thinking of Lorde and her experiences also keeps me from filling in the blanks too quickly about what might be going on in student writing. As I have illustrated throughout this essay, the writing teacher's default mode often seems to be "deficit," something lacking on the part of the student. Lorde's story asks us to think otherwise, asks us to consider other possibilities.

A Counter-narrative

Just last semester in my basic writing class, I worked with a student named Raymond. He sat in the back of class. I felt him daring me to prove something, but I wasn't sure what. I suspected I would need a crowbar and some really strong rope to get him to engage. He seemed to resist everything. He wouldn't have drafts for peer review and only a couple paragraphs for his final draft. Only five or six weeks into the semester, warning bells were going off in my head. I asked him to meet with me because I was worried that he going to have a tough time passing the class.

Immediately after class, we headed to my office. I expressed my concern, especially about what was happening in the final draft of the first paper. I shared that the program expects three or four pages. Early in the semester, two pages is typical. One page is cause for a little more concern. I wanted to find out his story. I asked him, "What's going on?"

It turned out I didn't need a crowbar after all. I just needed to ask. He unloaded his fears and concerns about coming to college. He didn't feel prepared. He felt he didn't know how to write. He couldn't get anything on the page because of his fear. I think this is what Lorde suggests when she writes:

The way you get people to testify against themselves is not to have police tactics and oppressive techniques. What you do is build it in so people learn to distrust everything in themselves that has not been sanctioned, to reject what is most creative in themselves to begin with, so you don't even need to stamp it out. (102)

He had his laptop with him, and I asked him to bring up his paper. He had all his ideas crammed into one paragraph. Each sentence could be the focus of a paragraph, so I asked him to add some paragraph breaks between those sentences so we could see what he had. Suddenly a paper began to emerge.

We didn't meet again in my office, but I felt after that meeting we understood each other better. I understood the fear that kept him from writing, and I think he understood that I was there to help—but that I was also giving him space to work through the challenges he was facing. I think he needed that space. He needed to be released, at least for a time, from the pressures of expectation.

For the last paper of the semester, he again did not have a draft for peer review, so we talked instead about possible topics for his literacy narrative. In the beginning, he assured me he had nothing to write about, but as we talked, he mentioned the journals he kept in high school. He told me how he used these journals to work through all his problems. He wrote about everything in these journals: academic failures, letters to

friends and girlfriends, poetry. Suddenly I saw this student from a different perspective. He wrote poetry in his journals. Poetry. He was a writer. He was a poet.

Though the dominant story about student writers today would have us believe students can't write because of how much they don't know, I suspect that it is this perspective that often leads to the very problem we as writing teachers are trying to overcome. It silences students, makes them afraid to be who they are.

Poetry, I believe, helps reinstate that trust by showing students another perspective of their writing and by helping teachers create that space mentally as well as in the classroom. It is in this space where we avoid jumping to conclusions about what is wrong, so as to avoid jumping in to fix whatever it is we think is happening. It allows us space to consider other possibilities.

Perhaps that awkward sentence does not stem from some deficiency in grammar, but from struggling with an idea. Or perhaps that fragment is intentional, or should be intentional. And even if a student is struggling with fluency in English, to really make a difference, the request for help should come from her. I find my students ask for help more frequently and are much more receptive to the knowledge and perspective I have to offer if it comes from a place where we make a commitment to learn from each other, instead of a place of judgment and measurement—if it comes from a place that is poetic, transnational.



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OUT OF THE BOX

Notes from Teaching at the Ends of the Earth

Colette Morrow

It was the most miserable fall Friday in Northwest Indiana: winds near 50 miles per hour as I snailed through traffic in my junker Neon. At my university, students are clients, and retention is more important than teaching or learning. I thought, “There’s gotta be more to it than this.” At home, I found a message from Stan Rubin, U.S. State Department—apparently a perfunctory can-you-recommend-someone email. I suggested a few people and crawled into bed.

The phone rang too early on Saturday morning. It was Stan. He had found my name on a list of regional contacts for the National Women’s Studies Association. He wanted to know if I would travel to Minsk, Belarus to attend a conference on “Women, Education, Democracy.” ENVILA Women’s University, a new institution established after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, had organized it. He needed a reply urgently. I asked him to call me back on Monday. Then I pondered the invitation. I had a great babysitter at the time. I figured that a few days in Minsk under the watchful eyes of President Lukashenko, a former collective farm boss who idolizes Stalin, couldn’t be worse than pre-tenure scrutiny on my campus. I went.

Back in 1998, Minsk might have been the end of the earth. No Internet, just a black rotary phone like my grandma had since the 40’s. The hotel was a dim, Soviet-style box where the elevator only stopped on even floors. I wasn’t permitted to keep my room key when I left: a system, I’ve been told, that facilitates surveillance. But my Belarusian colleagues’ passion—pro and con—about Women’s & Gender Studies (WGS) was like nothing I’d seen before.

At that time, sentiments about WGS were splintered among students, faculty, and a small but emerging middle class. Those who associated the field with democratization embraced some or all its tenets. But for a lot of other folks, the mere mention of WGS bespoke Soviet exploitation of “feminism” to shore up the regime and justify quasi-forced labor programs. Furthermore, innumerable Belarusians misidentified U.S. culture’s most visible form of feminism, access-to-work feminism, as feminism *en toto*. They thought it foolhardy if not stupid that U.S. women, in the absence of economic necessity and government pressure, wanted to work outside the home.

Since my first visit, I’ve returned to Belarus many times. At one point, I lived there for a year and brought along my daughter. More than once, to my surprise, Belarusian students or colleagues accused me of being Communist in a tone that suggested I had violated a sacred taboo—often after I advocated anti-oppression praxis, particularly in resistance to racism and classism. Students were especially hostile to anything that smacked of social justice. They often championed a neo-liberalism that embraced the new capitalist era, and dreamed of becoming small business owners. Once, in response to my critique of sweatshop economics, a student declared that profits were all that mattered. It was workers’ responsibility to ensure their own safety at work.

I hadn't anticipated this kind of dialogue. But as I learned more about Soviet and post-Soviet society—years of enforced collectivist culture followed by Lukashenko's strongarm rule—I saw Belarusians' antifeminism from different perspectives. I responded by developing curricula that offered students skills in surviving this "brave new world."

I brought this curriculum back to my own university and delivered it online. North-west Indiana residents have many of the same needs that ENVILA students do, though for different historical reasons. The curriculum been wildly successful financially, which keeps anti-feminist administrators at bay, and, more importantly, the courses synthesize lessons in feminist theories and activism. The undergraduate track consists of five interdisciplinary courses that enhance students' workplace skills. The curriculum also develops students' efficacy in policy-making and advocacy processes at local, national, and international levels. The graduate track includes courses in sustainable economic growth, social development, conservation, and the environment. Together, these curricula foster feminist critical analysis, students' global consciousness, and their practical skills, which regional employers have told us they lack.

Last fall (2010), my ongoing work in gender and global leadership education led to an invitation to apply for a two-week Fulbright grant in Pakistan. As in Belarus, I observed an emerging middle class movement for Pakistani democracy, along with resistance to economic colonization by the West. At the same time, new historic intersections of class, ethnic, and gender hierarchies have created highly stratified groups with competing goals and ideologies. A major challenge is the lack of data on gender—no government statistics and little information through universities or Non-Government Organizations. This lack of data created obvious problems for feminist praxis. In the absence of "big picture" research, I emphasized remedies oriented toward individuals, such as mentoring.

But in a discussion on mentoring with women leaders in business, politics, education, and NGOs, one Pakistani colleague reminded me that until the government and other institutions adopt policies prohibiting sexual harassment and sex discrimination, mentoring alone won't overcome the impediments women face. They need Western feminists to address topics such as Islamophobia, violence (manifest particularly through warfare), and the economic injustice that our countries' foreign policies cause—as well as the roles that media and multinational corporations play in perpetuating all three. Building transnational feminist solidarity is more urgent than ever.

How can we do this?

Here's one way. Shortly after I arrived in Pakistan, I learned about a young Fulbright scholar who had just returned from his ancestral village where unpiloted drones had bombed his kinsmen and kinswomen. We can take a firm stand against the U.S. policy of bombing civilians.

Here's another way. Apply for a Fulbright grant to teach in countries such as Belarus or Pakistan. Funding is available, and universities are eager to host scholar-teachers in social sciences and the humanities. Today's Fulbright grants are more flexible than the traditional one-year model. Your stay can be as short as two weeks or as long as a year, and you need not be a regional specialist. There are programs for administrators, too. I'm happy to help you prepare an application. Contact me at colettemorrow@aol.com or check http://www.cies.org/us_scholars/.

BOOK REVIEWS

Evolution and Criticism

Judy Halden-Sullivan, Book Review Editor

“**H**ow close can we get to the origins of art in our own species?” Author Brian Boyd poses this ambitious question to focus his wide-ranging study, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*, a text reviewed in this issue (6). For millennia, humans have distinguished themselves by creating, enjoying, and debating art, but why do we do it? Why *art*? The books reviewed in this issue offer compelling speculation in regard to this query, and while scientific, psychological, and often Darwinian, each author’s response promises expanded perspectives on what it means to be human.

Julie Nichols, a professor of English who teaches genre studies, provides a double review that marries kindred analyses: Boyd’s aforementioned *On the Origin of Stories* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2009) and Lisa Zunshine’s *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2006). In his elaborate 540-page exploration, Boyd characterizes art as not simply a by-product of evolution but a trigger for human development: a survival-adaptive function that deepens our cognitive abilities, our mental flexibility. Boyd supports his thesis with findings from diverse evolutionary theorists, and when arguing for the innate necessity of humans’ drive to compose and share narratives, he also draws upon evidence provided by cognitive sciences—in particular, from the field called “Theory of Mind.”

“A cluster of cognitive adaptations that allows us to navigate our social world and also structures that world”: that is how Lisa Zunshine defines Theory of Mind in her study, *Why We Read Fiction*, and it is ToM (as it is termed) that grounds her examination of fiction as a humanizing evolutionary process that bestows upon readers keener social awareness. In turn, in reviewing Zunshine’s work, Nichols posits “evocriticism” as a provocative approach to understanding story-making: applying paradigms afforded by cognitive sciences to analyze narrative texts as material demonstrations of evolutionary principles.

In a similar vein, Denis Dutton applies evocriticism to the world of art in his book, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2009). Mary Pettice, a professor of English studies with a specialization in contemporary media, critiques Dutton’s argument that art, in all its diverse forms, confers survival and even reproductive advantages upon the humans who produce it. As Pettice notes, Dutton, for better or worse, does not hesitate to judge art from around the globe in terms of his evolutionary perspective.

Evocritics like Boyd, Zunshine, and Dutton amply attest to the primal survival-adaptive function of art, revealing that art is not only entertainment, dazzling craft, or moral insight. Art is a catalyst for our species: our commitment to dialogue with even the most intractable texts transforms us, making us more intensely, mindfully *human*.

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Those who belong to an organization called “Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning” may be an audience quick to embrace the notion of story-making as a profoundly human activity. Telling stories—true, false, or invented—identifies us as beings with consciousness and conscience, beings who seek not only factual knowledge but also connectedness with others like (and unlike) ourselves. When I recently taught a “Literary Genres” class on fiction, my undergraduate students predictably answered first-day questions—“What *is* fiction? What is its function in human consciousness?”—by pointing to fiction’s entertainment value. “It’s always been my escape,” they said in so many words. But, by the end of the semester, they were dancing a far more complex step: fiction co-creates reality, they asserted. In a world where binaries of truth/falsity, reality/fantasy, self/Others are felt to be rigid, fiction allows for the creation of a third thing, as Lewis Hyde argues in his study of myth and art, *Trickster Makes This World*: fiction is a third space richly dependent upon the transformative experiences of readers. As Nabokov points out, the reading of fiction expands emotional and mental awareness, brings into our consciousness types of people and experiences we may not have sought out before, and provides knowledge of being otherwise impossible to gain firsthand. As William Gass argues, such awareness is made possible on the level of the sentence, in the individual work, and within the subcategories of the genre. As those nourished by fiction, we award a plethora of prizes for it because it is essential to our growth and learning. We strive to perpetuate it, to encourage its ever higher quality. Fiction is in us. It is natural, inevitable, and even indispensable to the human race.

All well and good, if a little romanticized for these postmodern times, when theory has made contested sites of the author, the subject, and the text as artifact. But for that very reason, my students were assigned to conclude their semester with readings from two books I will now consider: Brian Boyd’s *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* and Lisa Zunshine’s *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*. The cumulative effect of these books might be visualized as the intersecting arcs of a Venn diagram made up of three—perhaps surprising—circles, one labeled “Darwinian evolution,” another “cognitive science,” and a third simply, “literary theory.” For reasons I hope to demonstrate here, my students’ sense of the role of fiction in human affairs was stretched and augmented by these final readings, which marry current neuroscientific findings about how the mind works with enlightening analyses of specific texts—their production, as well as their effects on those who read them. As writers and readers of fiction themselves, curious about the production as well as the impact of story-making, my students discovered much to ponder. Although our class did not unequivocally agree with either Boyd or Zunshine, we found them refreshing in their attempts to move from abstract postmodernism to practical, material methods of a “scientific” literary criticism. These volumes separately, but even more when read together, reward the

reader with both the immediate pleasure of logical and stylistic clarity and the long-term gratification of useful new ideas regarding the function of fiction in human culture.

Boyd begins by analyzing our longevity as a species, focusing upon the human qualities and behaviors that have guaranteed our survival. He wants to examine art and play. Both have essential adaptive survival functions, which is why they can be found in every human culture from the beginning of our time on earth. By the end of this 540-page volume (notes arrive on p. 417), the words “adaptation” and “survival” begin to constitute almost a mantra, a good-natured rhythmic repetition, as Boyd insists that, since fiction is “the *one human art* with no known precedent” (2, emphasis mine), the biocultural perspective—the one that acknowledges the survival-adaptive function of all human behaviors—is the only one that will allow us to “appreciate how deeply surprising fiction is, and how deeply natural” (3).

Boyd’s aim is to “offer an account of fiction . . . that takes in our widest context for explaining life, evolution” (11). For those who may accept alternative “widest contexts for explaining life,” the adherence to Darwinian *material* evolution has shortcomings. For example, Owen Barfield, whose work I reviewed in the 2009 issue of *JAEPL*, sees evolution as a process that includes consciousness and karma—not a solely material process at all. Nevertheless, Boyd’s two-part argument engages the reader with its clarity and erudite logic. Book One lays out the premises by which art and fiction can be considered biological adaptations, defining “art” and “adaption” with precision by citing numerous theorists, from Darwin through von Frisch (on honeybees and their dance), to Dawkins (on the improbability of performing complex activity for no reason), Cosmides, Tooby, and Geary (on evolutionary psychology), and many others.

“An evolutionary *adaptation*,” Boyd summarizes, “is a feature of body, mind, or behavior that exists throughout a species and shows evidence of good *design* for a specific *function* or functions that will ultimately make a difference to the species’ survival and reproductive success” (80; italics Boyd’s). He takes on Stephen Pinker, “the foremost critic of claims that art is an adaptation,” pointing out that “the compulsion to engage in art needs to explain the compulsion to *make* art as well as to enjoy it” (82; italics Boyd’s). Pinker’s notion that art is a *byproduct* of evolution makes no sense to Boyd. Making art is so energy- and time-intensive in comparison to its apparent immediate benefits that we would give it up—it would die out quickly—if it had no survival-adaptive function to compel us toward it.

Art, Boyd posits, is an adaptive behavior—a “kind of cognitive *play*, the set of activities designed to engage human *attention* through their appeal to our preference for inferentially rich and . . . *patterned* information” (85; italics Boyd’s). His italicized words are key. Attention ensures survival. The individual to whom attention is paid is more likely to survive. Attention to patterns, and to their variations, helps ensure the survival of the individual and the community in which those patterns appear. Boyd explains that,

The high concentrations of patterns that art delivers repeatedly engage and activate individual brains and over time alter their wiring to modify key human perceptual, cognitive, and expressive systems, especially in terms of sight, hearing, movement, and social cognition. All of art’s other functions lead *from* this . . . Art becomes a social and individual system for engendering creativity, for producing options not confined by the here and now or the immediate and given. All other functions lead up *to* this. (86-87; italics Boyd’s)

Art and play give humans opportunities to attend to patterns—either pre-existing ones or ones newly created by the play itself—*without* competitive or punitive consequences. The result is a more flexible mind, a wider-ranging intelligence, infinitely expandable brainpower: “By refining and strengthening our sociality, by making us readier to use the resources of the imagination, and by raising our confidence in shaping life on our own terms, art fundamentally alters our relation to our world By focusing our attention away from the given to a world of shared, humanly created possibility, art makes all the difference” (125).

Boyd then moves from a discussion of art in general to a discussion of story-making—fiction-making—as art, with a survival function equal to that of any art and unique to humans, with their capacity for language. Boyd begins Part Three of Book One by distinguishing between narrative and fiction, pointing out that we are not taught narrative. The drive and the ability to understand events in chronological and spatial order are built into us. If we cannot do so, we do not survive. Memory and prediction are fundamentally survival adaptations, and narrative develops both. It is in this section that Boyd discusses Theory of Mind (141-152), the idea from cognitive science which is Lisa Zunshine’s focus.

Like Boyd, to whom I will return shortly, Zunshine is eminently readable, personal in style (much more so than Boyd, actually, with frequent asides and appeals to the reader), logical, engaging in tone, and continuously thought-provoking in the development of her argument. Like Boyd, Zunshine cleaves to current scientific theories regarding the development of the human mind; like him, she cites numerous studies and the theorists who conducted them in their quest to understand how the mind works. Her considerably shorter but no less scholarly book (198 pages; notes begin on p. 165) defines Theory of Mind (ToM)—also known as “mind-reading”—as “a cluster of cognitive adaptations that allows us to navigate our social world and also structures that world” (162). Pointing to autism as a deficiency or lack of ToM, and to the inability in schizophrenics to attribute correctly the sources of the voices they hear, Zunshine analyzes the differences between “normal” people and those who cannot competently perform three processes that she defines in detail:

- “source-monitor” (47), in other words, identify who said what about whom and how that should be interpreted, explored in Part Two, “Tracking Minds”
- navigate the layers of thinking about *others* thinking about themselves or about yet others, demonstrated in Part Three, “Concealing Minds”
- interweave cognitive and emotional responses, elaborated upon in Part Three and in the conclusion, “Why Do We Read (and Write) Fiction?”

Finally, Zunshine asserts that meta-representation—the ability to keep track of what is being presented as true and by whom—is a crucial skill for effective living in the world. That is, it is an adaptation with survival functions. It is also a requisite skill for interpreting, understanding, and enjoying fiction. Zunshine’s thesis is, on the surface, more about reading than about evolutionary survival. But her argument is that the skills which good fiction reading requires make readers more “human,” more capable of “making it” in human situations. “Intensely social species that we are,” she says, “we . . . read

fiction because it engages [and exercises], in a variety of particularly focused ways, our Theory of Mind" (162). When taken together, Zunshine's book illuminates and expands upon Boyd's. Boyd's, in turn, constructs a broader foundation for the kind of thinking Zunshine's work demonstrates. Zunshine applies cognitive science to the service of better reading of texts. Boyd employs texts to illuminate his theory about the evolutionary survival-adaptive functions of art.

Indeed, much of the pleasure to be derived from reading Boyd's and Zunshine's books comes from the depth and originality of the case studies each recruits to illustrate his or her thesis. In Book Two of *Origin*, Boyd introduces "evocriticism" by investigating the *Odyssey's* origins in oral storytelling and the apparent conscious creative effort summoned to commit the work to writing, as the bard sought "strategically to solve . . . particular problems, immediate and longer-term" (218), having to do with garnering the attention of his audience. According to Boyd, one way he did this was by beginning the epic with an encapsulation of the story to come, putting it in a context of community—quoting Homer's appeal to his audience that, "if you are Greek, this concerns you" (as qtd. in Boyd 220).

But more than that, Homer made use of patterns of character and event in new ways guaranteed to keep his audience's attention. Boyd reminds us that "storytelling can command the attention of others by delivering high-intensity social information" (222). Such information includes images of personalities and accounts of behaviors of highly influential people like Odysseus. Patterns of events which Aristotle approvingly termed "unity of action"—in which every episode fits and none is irrelevant—also constitute high-intensity social information. Recalling his key terms "attention" and "pattern," Boyd's detailed reading of the *Odyssey* stresses Homer's attention-getting choices in constructing a main character who embodies both an ultimate human being and the impulse to return home. The latter desire, based in the evolutionarily significant biological bond between parent and child and the equally adaptive cultural institution of the family, is hampered by an increasingly difficult set of obstacles. Odysseus overcomes these material and psychological obstacles in "a series of changes in perspective, pace, and tactics" (228)—in other words, through an evolution in his own intelligence, discernible to his audience as possibilities for their own transformation. Incidentally, in *Trickster Makes This World*, Lewis Hyde reads Odysseus as the first modern consciousness: a trickster who lies to get what he wants.

Throughout his explication, Boyd theorizes that, as an author, Homer was a strategist vying for his audience's attention in order to "maximize the benefits [he] could earn against the compositional costs [he] had to be prepared to pay" (253). This emphasis also drives his discussion of—surprisingly—Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who!* The contrast in texts is deliberately chosen. In his analysis of the 1954 picture book, Boyd emphasizes the fiction-maker as individual. For instance, little is known about Homer, so that readers of the *Odyssey* must make assumptions about audience expectations, literary traditions, and cultural norms. But in the case of *Horton Hears a Who!*, Boyd gives us Theodor Geisel's detailed personal history to illustrate the "play" and "attention-getting" choices he made as Dr. Seuss, from the repetitive lines and curves in his drawings to the rhymes and polarities in his narratives.

In both cases, the texts are illuminated by Boyd's insistence that art has evolutionary benefits both for the artist (the fiction-maker) and the audience: the survival of both is ensured by the best works of art. I might add that art itself co-evolves with its makers and audiences. Boyd's choice of texts, one ancient, one nearly contemporary, illustrates that evolution.

Zunshine's examples spotlight the ways in which fiction requires readers to exercise their survival-ensuring skills of meta-representation and mind-reading. She points to the convoluted revelations of character in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*; the self-deception of Katerina Ivanovna in *Crime and Punishment*; and the problem of self-represented "truth" in novels such as *Don Quixote* and *Robinson Crusoe*. She analyzes the ways in which the unreliable narrator of Nabokov's *Lolita* attributes states of mind to others in the novel which the skillful reader learns to distrust, understanding this distrust as part of the "lesson" of the fiction. Zunshine examines the role of meta-representation in effectively reading detective novels by Dorothy Sayers, Maurice LeBlanc, and Jane Austen, asserting at one point that, "[*Emma*] has been described as 'the most fiendishly difficult of detective stories'" (Sayers 31, qtd. in Zunshine 129). Like Boyd, Zunshine shows that fictional texts reflect and demand the complex workings of the human brain as it strives to maintain and also expand its own infinite possibilities.

Whether or not readers of these two books are convinced at the beginning that a Darwinian or cognitive-scientific approach to literature will prove to be more helpful than any other, by the end, they will certainly experience the benefits of having paid attention. Even if doubt remains whether the biocultural perspective is the *only* one that will allow us to "appreciate how deeply surprising fiction is, and how deeply natural" (3), Boyd and Zunshine's studies still reveal the distinctly human nature of story-telling and fiction-making, astutely raising awareness of the complexity of these behaviors, and their dynamic, vital role in our species' evolution.



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Dutton, Denis. *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*. 2nd edition. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010. Print.

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Denis Dutton's *The Art Instinct* purports to offer an argument for the development of the arts in early human evolution, but in the end, he relegates evolutionary science to a supportive role for his critique of modernist aesthetics and the last 100 years of artistic production. Dutton, who died in 2010, was the creator of the online *Arts & Letters Daily*, a thoughtful clearinghouse for scholarly writing online, some of it interdisciplinary. And so, Dutton admirably embraces the spirit of interdisciplinary exploration while building his argument, turning to his own discipline of philosophy and art—and also to evolutionary science, psychology, linguistics, and sociobiology. His overarching distaste for modernism does not diminish his main argument, but unnecessarily distracts us from an idea that is ultimately persuasive and quite fascinating.

This ambitious text opens up valuable and interesting lines of thought about how “the art instinct”—as Dutton terms it—came to exist within humankind. At its simplest, his thesis argues that humans universally feel moved to create and enjoy art of all kinds because these drives are hard-wired into our genes. He argues that this particular drive emerged as an adaptation during the same time our prehistoric ancestors acquired the species’ basic skills, social systems, and emotional and intellectual traits. His most persuasive argument comes early in the book, when he painstakingly stitches together evidence for his claim that the African savanna and nearby woodlands represent the worldwide human preference for “the blue, watery landscape,” an image that, he argues, offers prehistoric assurances of high-protein hunting grounds and the promise of security and refuge (18).

One of the more innocent and, indeed, necessary assertions in support of his argument that this particular landscape is favored across cultures is: “This fundamental attraction to certain types of landscapes is not socially constructed but is present in human nature as an inheritance from the Pleistocene, the 1.6 million years during which modern human beings evolved” (18). Dutton’s main thesis rests on two basic arguments: first, that the art instinct is universal in the species, and, second, that it developed not as a byproduct of other, more central adaptations to the genome through the evolutionary process, but as an adaptation itself, one that conferred survival and reproductive advantages upon those whose genomes first expressed the inclination. These claims may seem obvious to anyone who agrees unhesitatingly that the arts are integral to human experiences. However, the philosophical implications of the former assertion can be problematic.

In developing his argument that human universals exist in the first place, Dutton returns again and again to a criticism of those who, in contemporary anthropology, ethnology, and art history, suggest that many observable human behaviors are not based on biological preferences but social constructions. Indeed, he rejects the arguments of those who would caution us to resist applying our Western standards to analyses of non-Western art—and turns the tables on them, accusing them of “exoticizing foreign cultures and denying the universality of art” (4). In his chapter, “But They Don’t Have Our

Concept of Art,” he claims that, while no anthropologist says so openly, many imply that “since the meaning of any concept is constituted by the other concepts and cultural forms in which it is embedded, concepts can *never* be intelligibly compared cross-culturally” (74). And, using the statement that he has not been able to attribute to any anthropologist, Dutton rejects the caveats made by those who cautiously suggest that thinkers are wrong to apply Western concepts of art and other human endeavors to non-Western societies and cultures. Nonsense, he says; understanding other cultures’ artistic expressions “is hardly an insurmountable task for the Western intellectual imagination” (75). What follows that assertion is inevitable: he claims that if we cannot say another culture’s artifact production is art in a Western sense, then it isn’t art at all (76).

To be fair, Dutton uses a wide-ranging definition of art to justify this dismissal, saying that authentic art is expressed in the “great traditions of Asia and the rest of the world, including tribal cultures of Africa, the Americas, and Oceania” (76). But the overall message of the chapter affirms the centrality of a Western concept of art and further embraces what one might see as a narrow preference for one kind of Western aesthetic.

The African savanna as an enduring image for the book’s theme is, unfortunately, rivaled by the author’s insistence on returning again and again to the problem he sees posed by Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, the urinal offered—and rejected—as an *object d’art* in a 1917 exhibition. Dutton’s entire thesis rests on a universal definition of art and set of aesthetics that he discusses with persuasive detail. However, the existence of the last 100 years of art, primarily the modernist movement, often complicates Dutton’s definition of art. Indeed, he dismisses much of 20th century Western art, asserting that, “A determination to shock and puzzle has sent much recent art down a wrong path” (11). Dutton most certainly is permitted to embrace a particular aesthetic, one that some will not find agreeable. However, whether fueled by a personal distaste or a logical need to identify the modernist movement as an evolutionary dead-end, as it were, his attacks on both the philosophical underpinnings of the movement and individual works of art themselves lead us far, far away from the book’s promising and intriguing thesis.

Logically, however, his attacks on modernism cannot be said to be entirely off topic. He claims he hopes, through his analysis, that “Darwinist aesthetics can restore the vital place of beauty, skill, and pleasure as high artistic values” (11-12). The promising, even exciting hypothesis of the book—that one might be able to gather enough evidence to suggest that the drive to enjoy and create art is an evolutionary adaptation—seems much more monumental than the mere employment of Dutton’s thesis in a scheme to reclaim what the author sees as the real purpose and expression of high art.

Therefore, the most rewarding discussions Dutton offers are those that return to the enticing ideas expressed by his thesis. Art, he argues, is not simply a by-product of a species that found itself with discerning eyes and ears, capable hands and voices, and, once having met their immediate survival needs like food and shelter, then turned to art as entertainment. Instead, Dutton roots art’s primacy in the work of evolutionary biologists who point to several fitness indicators that are positively correlated with health and reproductive potential: facial symmetry, clear skin, an hourglass figure in women, and the appearance of upper-body strength in males. The ability to create art that pleases others is, he asserts, like language in that it serves as an evolutionary fitness indicator

and is indeed integral to survival and to sexual selection. Dutton claims that the abilities to think like an artist or be an appreciative member of an artist's audience denote both intelligence and an ability to relate to other human beings.

In addition, Dutton argues, the luxury of having time to create art also indicates to a potential mate a special kind of surplus: that a fit individual is doing more than just surviving. Dutton draws on the work of economist Thorstein Veblen, the inventor of the phrase "conspicuous consumption," and reinterprets human displays of wealth, arguing that creating or adorning oneself in useless but beautiful art reinforced the message that the individual, particularly in prehistoric times, could thrive even when engaged in behaviors not immediately linked to survival. He imagines the cost/benefit implications of the male peacock's tail and says that, for our ancestors, "The best way for an individual to demonstrate the possession of an adaptive quality—money, health, imagination, strength, vigor—is to be seen wasting these very resources" (156). To his credit, Dutton worries about inadvertently suggesting that "costliness and art are intrinsically connected in our aesthetic psychology," but the overall argument ably supports his contention that art demonstrates a kind of mental and imaginative fitness (156).

Dutton's work ultimately argues that art is not only essential to the species but one of its central attributes. He suggests that human evolution in the wake of our rapid development of large brains *needed* art as an intellectual coping mechanism as we negotiated our places in an increasingly social environment. Dutton writes, quoting the sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson, "'There was not enough time for human heredity to cope with the vastness of the new contingent possibilities revealed by high intelligence,' Wilson says: 'the arts filled the gap,' allowing human beings to develop more flexible and sophisticated responses to new situations" (120).

Our ancestors self-selected the art instinct by esteeming those with artistic sensibilities. Our efforts at creating aesthetic schemes by which to judge art happen, Dutton implies, as a byproduct of the centrality of art in our imaginative lives. In such an environment, then, his own particular aesthetic theories are welcome enough—but shouldn't be a distraction from the truly inspired connection he makes between human genetic history and the development of art.



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CONNECTING

Teaching as Spiritual Practice

Helen Walker, “Connecting” Editor

This year’s “Connecting” narratives go deep, stories of when we move past ego into the space of the other—or when we ache because we want to and can’t. Whether we get there or we don’t (yet, if we persevere, we may!), our path is leading us toward the mysterious space of spirit. Bette-B Bauer entitles her piece “Teaching as Spiritual Practice.” Perhaps that is a good title for this collection. As varied as these stories and poems are, each seems to me an exploration of the meaning of the supernatural or at least the extraordinary—the sphere of spiritual practice. The authors share their glimpses, each with a sense of humility, of what they can’t fully grasp except to know they are important beyond words.

Jan Buley’s poem “The Realization” celebrates her giving control over to the wondering of children. S. Rebecca Leigh does the same when she asks us to allow students’ passions into the classroom so that they can use what comes out of themselves in the service of their education. Christopher Bache follows with the ultimate question of spirit: who is in charge, when one opens the teacher self to “the magic of learning”? Bette B-Bauer affirms the importance of students finding their own paths, of teachers seeing this facilitation as their calling, and names this calling the spiritual practice of teaching. Rachel Forrester’s narrative goes outside the classroom into departmental politics. Her story of faith and belief that people can change despite certain evidence to the contrary searches for “the place of possibility.” Finally, Laurence Musgrove’s poem “Syllabus” takes us back into the classroom and focuses on that most important quality of the spiritual—love.

As I contemplated what unified the stories this year, I thought of what happened to me during and since the year I got an arts grant which took me out of my college classroom and into the alternative high school in inner-city Harrisburg—how things have shifted inside me, even though I can’t really name how, except to say that it is a spiritual shift.

I want to share a story about my friend with you, perhaps to widen your lens into this mysterious space. She is one of several high school students I still have a friendship with, after my year in their classroom. From her, I know that my primary calling now is to fight the injustice of poverty from my position as a privileged white woman—one who thought she had a handle on what acceptable behavior was and wasn’t, what a good person and what hard work were all about. All in all, I had it all together—until the arts-grant year. Now that things have shifted, I “see Jesus” in the eyes of this young friend. I put it this way to myself as a short cut, as a dramatic enough statement to get my attention. I heard no voice from on high and don’t even know the “moral of the story.” I don’t want to forget that something important happened. I want to persevere.

Seeing Jesus

My friend is a nineteen-year-old single mama who sucks her thumb in public. Her son just turned three, and if he thinks he's about to be bawled out, he bends his knees and curls up and gets still like he is trying to disappear.

Last night I took my friend to the Pure Movement Dance Concert at the Rose Lehman Arts Center in Harrisburg. I pick her up at the projects at 13th and Hanover. She jokes about my driving and laughs at my response and sucks her thumb. Her son, seat-belted in the back, starts to open his door just before I stop in front of the babysitter's apartment. She yells "What you doing? I'm going to beat you up." She is out and around to the back side door, and has popped him one before I have the car turned off. I see her son's eyes get round and fill full with tears before they run down his cheeks, one fat line each. He cries silently looking straight ahead. It breaks my heart. He is crushed by his mom's disapproval. He just forgot in his eagerness to go.

She and I talk about how she has to keep him safe in the projects. She agrees with me that hitting him is not that good, and she doesn't have to do it often because he almost always minds her. But she has to rough him up a little because he's too sensitive and spoiled. I tell her no one is ever too sensitive and never spoiled by too much love. She sucks her thumb and says, "Yeh."

My friend has told me quite a lot about her life, in bits and pieces. She's all alone now except for her sister who lives in the projects too, a far-gone alcoholic like her mama who died three years ago, from alcohol. She's mostly raised her sister's two sons; they are nine and seven and gentle like her son. Her grandma, at 90, died last summer. My friend took care of her, too, until her grandma's other kids made her move to Philly. They put Grandma in a home and sold her house in Harrisburg and took the money.

Last year when my friend turned 18, she moved into the projects, she and her son. Her rent was \$8.00 a month as long as she didn't work and make money. When her benefits from her mom's death ran out, her welfare check went down. It's harder to live now.

She keeps her place clean, and her son only watches shows like *Shrek* on TV.

Her mom was an alcoholic. My friend had to bust out the basement window once; the house was all locked up when she got home from school. She was 7 or 8, and she went to the neighbors to play. But when it got dark, she busted out the basement window to get in. No lights worked, so she got in her bed in the dark and waited for her mom.

She's all alone now. Except for her sister. Her dad was a pastor for a long time, and a barber. Everybody loved her dad. She didn't see him much though. Last summer, close to the time her grandma died, he was sentenced for molesting his daughters. One of the daughters testified. My friend said he never did it to her. Just her three sisters. He was almost sentenced a while back, but the sister who testified then took it back. This time she didn't. The neighborhood around the barbershop and the church was shocked.

The concert is the best of hip hop. Pure movement. Stories of the streets portrayed through the language of dance gone past what most bodies are capable of. My friend whispers that she can do most of what they are doing. I whisper back that I think she would be a good dancer and that she should take a dance class at the community college, and I'd help her. She lays her head on my shoulder.

We stand for an ovation, whooping and raising our fists in a salute to excellence. In the lobby she sucks her thumb as we wait for our coats from the coat-check.

On the way home she talks about her senior project and how she is almost done with the service hours except she doesn't want to write the essay. I ask if I can help, and she says, "Yeh." She makes her jokes about my bad driving and lets me know when the lights are green and I should go. "Miss Helen, oh Miss Helen," she says and laughs hard about how bad I drive. We don't have to pick up her son because he can just stay the night; he stays all night at the babysitter's a lot, and she will get him sometime soon. I pull up to the door that opens onto the littered sidewalk that winds past a myriad of closed doors like this one. This door that leads to her clean little place on the third floor. She smiles at me with those round eyes that look like her son's, and says, "See you, Miss Helen." I close my eyes and watch her climb 3 floors of dirty steps, hear her open the double locks. She slips inside to turn on her big-screen TV, to curl up on her black faux-leather couch and suck her thumb, to wait for what will happen next in her nineteen-year-old-going-on-ageless life.



The Realization

Jan Buley

I can remember my first teaching day three decades ago,
Anxious, tossing and turning throughout the night.
I'd already ironed my favorite blouse and denim skirt,
packed my lunch before I went to bed,
set the alarm clock and the oven timer just in case,
and then, arriving at school with swirling butterflies in my stomach,
wrote the date in my best grade-three printing on the blackboard.
Thinking that the kids in front of me would be all mine, just like

my cursive writing lessons
my smiles of encouragement
my poems and units and centers and penpals,
my laminated alphabet and my poster about migrating birds,
my seating arrangement with nametags already taped onto desktops,
my boxes of sharpened pencil crayons on each table,
my fossil collection and my box of seashells,
my colorful border on the bulletin boards,
my terrarium and my salamander,
my rules for the classroom library,
my read-aloud choices,

my big box of markers.

The bell rang, and they walked into my space.
They wandered around my classroom,
seeking their laminated names in silence
wondering who owned the air.

Out of breath, Monica arrived
with a smashed-open dormant hornet's nest
in a clear plastic bag.
Wondering and waiting exploded into sharing and shoving;
looking and touching spiraled into storying and questioning.

I wasn't in control of this buzz of learning at all.
Since then, I have tried to stay attentively dormant,
inviting the Monicas to remind me who owns the space
and who steers the learning.



Celebrating Ways of Learning

S. Rebecca Leigh

If you are a teacher, you have had a student like me before.
I am visual.
I am creative.
I know the difference between roller ball and gel pen.
The tool matters.
I wear marker on my hands like a tattoo.
I would rather draw meiosis than write about it.
I draw. I love to draw. Sometimes drawing gets me into trouble.

At twelve, I was caught drawing Scarlett, the Vivien Leigh kind. My name is Scarlett, so the interest is not unusual. But her pencil silhouette was discovered during a math lesson. I could not slip her fast enough inside a portfolio of similar sketches of 19th century life. In my 20th century life, I had a teacher who saw something in those drawings. He saw me, a creative spirit struggling in a word-centered school, a place where the pen was mightier than the paintbrush, the word produced mightier than the image

evoked.

At my teacher's urging, my portfolio became public. For one month, twenty of my drawings were showcased against red construction paper at the back of the room. For one month, I was the expert learner in the class on 19th century lifestyle; for one month, conversation stirred among us twelve-year-olds about Canadian and British history; for one month, some of the class came together to share ideas and technique about meaning from line and color; for one month, my drawings celebrated my knowledge of how to use line and perspective to create hoop skirts that twirled on the page and top hats that looked tipped; for one month, I felt like art as a way of knowing was valued in the classroom. Truth is, all that talk got me thinking about words, language, and the stories behind my drawn characters. I was a wordsmith buried in marker, felt-tipped and scarlet. Note to self (at the time): when you draw, you get ideas for writing. Who knew?

As a K-12 educator, I encouraged creative thinking in a variety of ways. Good thing for Antoine, a student in grade nine French who used illustration to support and extend his written ideas *en français*. An artist, really. A boy who wore marker like clothing. A puzzle piece made of something school could not easily recognize, understand, fit in a box. "Take his art tools away," said one teacher. "He has trouble focusing," said another. "Just give him one tool *and don't*," came that wooden tone we often associate with airport security, "let him draw or doodle or scribble during class. He can't art his way through school."

In my French class, he "art-ed" his way through by using illustration to support his ideas in French and English. In so doing, he improved in his ability to communicate in another language.

There are teachers out there who dream like I did, like I still do, about school climates that celebrate the Antoinettes of this world, school communities that allow creative expression to foster literacy learning by recognizing more than one pathway. I am not talking about the common practice of offering the last five minutes of class for drawing a picture or drumming the tables for attention and calling that music. I am talking about respecting process by using the knowledge one has in drawing, writing, music, dramatic arts, etc. to expand one's communication potential. Why not ask students to give what they have (and what they love) in the service of their own education?

Dream, I mean big by envisioning a classroom that accepts multiple pathways to learning;

Stand tall, I mean with colleagues, administrators, and policy makers who support your dream for offering literacy practices that embrace ways of knowing;

Act, I mean now in support of the Antoinettes in your own classroom.



The Opening Question

Christopher M. Bache

One day in class a student asked a question, but instead of giving the answer that first popped into my mind, I stopped for a moment to mull over the possibilities. There was a pause in the flow of my thinking, a break in continuity as I asked myself,

“Among all the answers I could give, which one has the best chance of getting through to this particular student?”

Suddenly I had a visual image of a small door in the back of my mind. The door opened, and a slip of paper came through it with a suggestion written on it, an answer I had never used before. A different slant on a familiar topic. I tried it and it worked. Not only was the student satisfied, but new ideas were sparked in the room. The magic of learning had happened.

I’ve always loved teaching and I’ve always had the gift of gab. I know how to work a room, how to pace an audience and take them through the material in a way that builds to peaks and crescendos. This was something different. This was about cooperating with some mysterious process that brought out what was inside me in a way that was exceptionally fine-tuned to my audience. So for the next five years I experimented with these moments of “deep listening” and learned how to weave them into my lectures. I learned how to integrate my prepared material with the novelty they unleashed. Then something new began to happen.

About the time I was jumping my first major academic hurdle going up for tenure and moving from assistant to associate professor, students started coming up to me after class, when the room had emptied and they were sure no one would hear them, and saying things like, “You know, it’s strange you used the example you did in class today, because that’s exactly what happened to me this week.”

The first time this happened, I thought it was interesting but shrugged it off. Then it happened a second and third time. In the years that followed it became a not uncommon occurrence in my classes. Not that it would happen every time I lectured, thank God, but it happened often enough that I couldn’t dismiss it. Students were finding pieces of their personal lives showing up in my lectures in ways that startled them, sometimes touching extremely sensitive areas of their life.

Was this just a coincidence as most of my colleagues would insist, or was something more going on? My colleagues would likely say that if you lecture to thirty people week after week, sooner or later you’re bound to hit a few bull’s-eyes even with your eyes closed. And they have a point. If you think about all the life experiences tucked inside our students, surely we are going to bump into someone’s experience some of the time. Do the math, and it looks less significant that it feels. That’s what rational people say. For a long time that’s what I said to myself. But the question kept bothering me. If something more were involved, what was it, and how did it work?¹



Teaching as Spiritual Practice

Bette-B Bauer

Walking home from school one afternoon, I passed four men working on the road, and we exchanged greetings. One man asked if I was a teacher. Surprised, I said, “Yes, how did you know?”

“By the way you walk—striding forth,” he said.

¹ This is an edited excerpt from *The Living Classroom*.

Becoming a teacher developed naturally out of a midlife search for more meaningful work in my life. At the time, I was moving from alienation to connection, from living in isolation to being part of community. Quaker educator, Parker Palmer, notes that “we teach who we are” (2). I could never in the world have done the work of teaching had I not gone through the spiritual honing—the surrender and self-exploration—that I experienced in this period of transition.

Palmer notes that “To educate is to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world” (6). My experience has been that I need to have made that passage myself, and be willing to continue to undertake that exploration, so I have sought to make the art and act of discovery, which has characterized my life, an integral part of my teaching.

Teaching is an act of hope defying the odds—a faith in a student’s ability, curiosity, and willingness to take this journey with me. There’s a Zen saying, “Leap and the net will appear.” That is exactly what teaching feels like to me.

In graduate school, I was fortunate to have as mentors a group of women friends in their thirties and forties who had taught before in high school. They called themselves the Fem Thugs, and met periodically for fun, food, and to discuss teaching. They helped introduce me to the concept of the student-centered classroom and the dialogic process, which takes more time, patience, and trust than presenting the “truth” via lecture.

To teach in this student-centered classroom requires particular spiritual practices—that I stay in the moment and listen carefully, that I be flexible in letting the discussion take its own course, that I respond when necessary but do not dominate discussion, that I am willing to allow periods of silence, and that I give students an opening to “correct” a misstatement or to solve a puzzle, rather than providing the “correction” or solution myself.

One of my best teaching mentors was Omaha storyteller Nancy Duncan. I learned how to be brave from watching her develop and perform stories—in parks, in auditoriums, in libraries, and at workshops. My exposure to the art of storytelling in workshops helped me to shape material for the classroom. I have found stories from my life and my reading, as well as from films and television shows that intersect with, and enrich, class material.

I enjoy the uncertainty, the creativity, and the surprise of involving students in the creation of knowledge. We work collaboratively with each other to assemble fragments of understanding into a whole tapestry which involves resolution as well as paradox and lack of closure. Through this process, students also develop an ability to entertain the co-existence of many ideas, rather than a resolution into one “answer.”

A friend observed me teaching, and noted how people surprise themselves by making comments that they didn’t even know they had in them. What is important to me is not just what is discovered, but that students find a path for themselves into understanding ideas as they help each other map new terrain. Then they feel a sense of investment in the ideas being discussed.

Theologian Anthony de Mello, in *Awareness*, talks about how most humans prefer living in the comfortable dream of their illusions, rather than to see life as it really is. To prepare students for this journey can be challenging spiritual work, as many of them are comfortable in the world that they have created for themselves, or that has been created

for them by family, church, coaches, or the popular media. Through collaboration, discovery, creating community, and sharing words, I hope to “wake up” students.

An old friend of my mother’s taught English at a tough high school in Portland, Oregon. She told me, “There are two things you need to know about teaching: set limits and love them.” As I approached my first class as a vetted teacher in the fall of 1992, I walked down an interminably long, dark hallway toward my new life waiting for me behind the closed door at the end, and kept saying over and over to myself, “love them . . . love them . . . love them.” Today, that is still my practice.

On the last day of class, I have a party to celebrate the community of learners that will soon be disbanding. It is the last time that particular configuration of people will be gathered, and it provides closure to our community: grapes and chips, cookies and chocolates—a benediction.



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Appalachia Finally in the Spring: Reflections on a Year of Departmental Angst

Rachel Forrester

I don’t know about you, but my department seems to be ripping apart at the seams. Last year, when a motion to allow non-tenure track faculty (of which I am one) voting rights in our department was tabled, the writing program administrators, God bless them, began searching for another way in for us. They quickly developed a proposal for the program to exit the English Department and house themselves (ourselves) in University College, our newest “department” on campus, which shelters all things general education.

A portion of tenured and tenure track-faculty of course did not take kindly to the proposal. We know what’s best for the non-tenure track faculty, they said. Sigh. It’s April now, and we await the final decision of the Provost.

The move makes some sense. I believe our writing center on campus owes some of its recent blossoming to a move to the more centrally located library, rather than remaining in the English building. Without doubt, there are similarities in the goals of both our writing center and our program. Though our composition courses have historically been housed in the English Department, it’s true that we serve the entire campus with them.

And I do very much believe that we, the non-tenured, need more of a voice in governing ourselves, more job security, and everything else that is on the table in this national (and international) debate.

But as I write, it's April, and being a lovely, long-awaited spring in the Appalachians, it's a little heartbreaking to look back and realize we've spent all year beating the war drums. Whenever it seemed to be quieting down again, something would happen on the department listserv or in a meeting—someone would stir the brew—and, well, there we'd go again. Our department has gotten a reputation as one of the most dysfunctional places on campus. It's a little embarrassing.

The bottom line is that really, we are all in the same boat together, at odds with, well, the bottom line. Colleges and universities, like businesses everywhere (and make no mistake, they are businesses) are always looking for ways to cut costs, in or out of recession, just as you and I are always looking for ways to minimize our grocery bill. Tenured and tenure-track faculty feel the push when the horde of non-tenure track faculty grows stronger and the rock-solid respect once granted a Ph.D. suddenly seems more sandy. Non-tenure track faculty feel it when the tenure folk pass that stress back downward, Yertle-the-Turtle fashion.

I'm probably preaching to the choir here, but I've had the urge all year to invoke the "L" word: we need to love each other at work. We don't just need to love each other in the rainbows-and-ponies way; we need to *fight* for each other at work, fight for the good in each other, do a lot of overlooking of thoughtlessness if we're to stop pouring all this energy, better directed toward students, down the toilet. These are conflicts that need sorting out, no doubt, both the erosion of tenure and the working rights of non-tenure track faculty. Maybe it's just growing pains: composition for so long seen as a non-discipline, now a teenager twisting for independence, Mom and Dad aghast at how ungrateful she is.

But in my idealism (and I freely admit to it), I see the possibility of staying together. After all, we're in wordcraft together. I don't just teach freshman composition; I teach business writing too, and I'm still a literature geek at heart. Yes, I want the right to vote, but I don't want just that. I want to roam freely among and between, dabbling in both Jane Austen and the *Wall Street Journal* online. Our minds are designed for these quirky combinations and fresh pairings; our synapses crave them. In other words, we need each other. I want positive relationships with the people in my community, even if I disagree with them, even if I think they're just wrong. I want to be able to work alongside them and model how it *could be*. I'm afraid that in winning the battle of moving, we'll lose the war—our ability to help effect gentle change on each other through the little interpersonal exchanges that only happen in office doorways and spur-of-the-moment invitations to lunch.

bell hooks reminds us in *Teaching Community* of the power of believing that people can change and of "loving our enemies" into doing so (one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s philosophies too):

Throughout my academic career I have sought the spaces of openness, fixing my attention less on the ways colleagues are closed and more on searching for the place of possibility. What I find is that often an individual who seemed closed responds to the

positive assumption that they can change. One of the powers of subordinate groups is the power to demonize those who are in dominant positions. This demonization may serve to manage the fear and anxiety that usually abounds in situations where dominator culture is the norm, but it is not useful if our goal is to intervene and change structures and individuals. (74)

She also reminds us, when we exclaim, “but it’s not my job to teach them how to be!” that:

One of the most harmful ideas popularized in the seventies was the assumption that it is not the role of subordinated groups to teach dominant groups how to change. In actuality, to intervene in dominator culture, to live consciously we must be willing to share with anyone knowledge about how to make the transition from a dominator model to a partnership model. (75-76)

Some years ago, I wrote for newspapers covering city and county governments, boards of education and the like. Believe me, I saw my share of ridiculously immature behavior and commentary. But there were groups that got a lot done. Interestingly, the most progressive work was never done by the groups who always agreed. It was by the ones who could disagree agreeably, who knew how to “duke it out” over the microphones respectfully, and then walk out of the room, shake hands and go to dinner together.

It’ll take some growing, but on my good days, I see the same thing for us.



Work Cited

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Syllabus

Laurence Musgrove

On the first page just after the required novels
And before the list of learning outcomes
I’d paste a photo of me from ‘73
Scraggly hair and wire-rimmed glasses
And then torn from my long gone journal
Some half poem or worry of the day
So they might see me and not me
Who could be their dad or worse
With these handouts and so much to read
How jealous I am, I am almost crying
How much I love them.

Contributors to JAEPL, Vol. 17

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Cristina Vischer Bruns teaches literature and composition at Chapman University in Orange, California. Her research centers on interactions between readers and literary texts, within the classroom and in the world. Her essay draws from her 2011 book, *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching*.

Kym Buchanan is Assistant Professor of Education at University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point. He has been an English teacher, zombie slayer, and starship captain. He studies motivation and the fuzzy line between real and unreal (e.g., in video games). More: KymBuchanan.org

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Authors are responsible for double checking all references for accuracy in page number citation, as well as the accuracy in the details of title, publisher, etc.

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Typing: Double-spaced, numbered pages, including works cited and block quotations; at least one level of internal headings, when necessary; wide margins for feedback; author’s name to appear on title page only.

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Inviting the Edge: Mindfulness in the Writing Classroom and Beyond

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Doug Hesse is founding Executive Director of the Writing Program at the University of Denver and Professor of English. A former Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), a former President of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, and editor of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, Hesse previously taught at Illinois State University, where he directed the Honors Program, the Center for the Advancement of Teaching, the graduate program in English studies, and the writing program. He is author of 55 articles and chapters, co-author of four books, including *Creating Nonfiction*, co-authored with Becky Bradway.

This conference will explore how mindfulness can transform our teaching, our learning, our thinking, our writing, and our ways of being in the world. In addition to reflecting intellectually on the conference theme, participants will have opportunities to experience various mindfulness practices.

"Mindfulness" can be a map for exploring "the edge" in meaningful human relations with attention, presence, and awareness. Its practices foster inner and interpersonal harmony, but they can also provide a rhetoric and a politics that mine chaos and discomfort, and negotiate difference and disagreement.

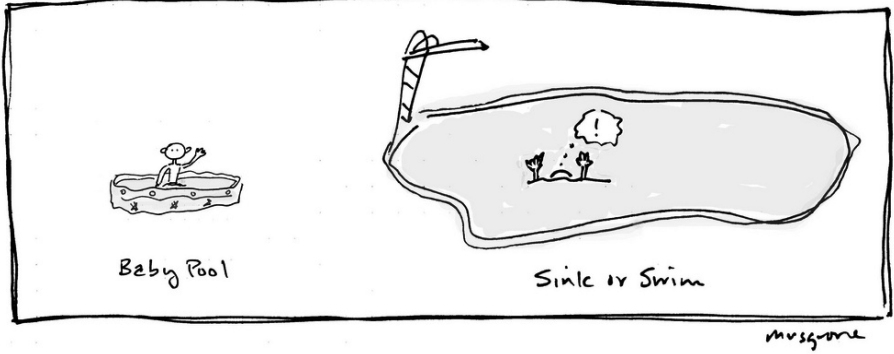
We welcome proposals for presentations (20-30 minutes), panels (75 minutes), or interactive workshops (30, 60, or 75 minutes) that foster dialogue about the uses of contemplative practices in teaching, learning, and scholarship, particularly in the teaching of writing from kindergarten through postgraduate study.

Possible topics include:

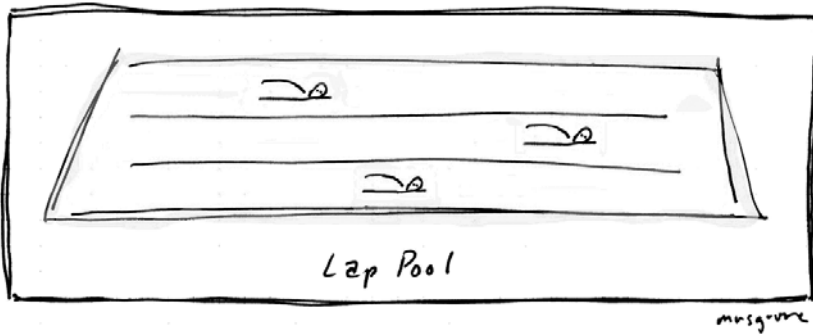
- The relationship between contemplation and writing/theories of composing
- Creative nonfiction and/as contemplation
- Contemplative strategies in the classroom
- Theories of contemplation
- Contemplative practices in the academic world
- Reclaiming contemplation from the realm of the "touchy feely"
- Contemplation as a source of knowledge
- Mindfulness and rhetoric
- Mindfulness as ontology/epistemology
- The relationship of mindfulness to spirituality/religion
- Mindfulness and critical pedagogy/cultural criticism

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