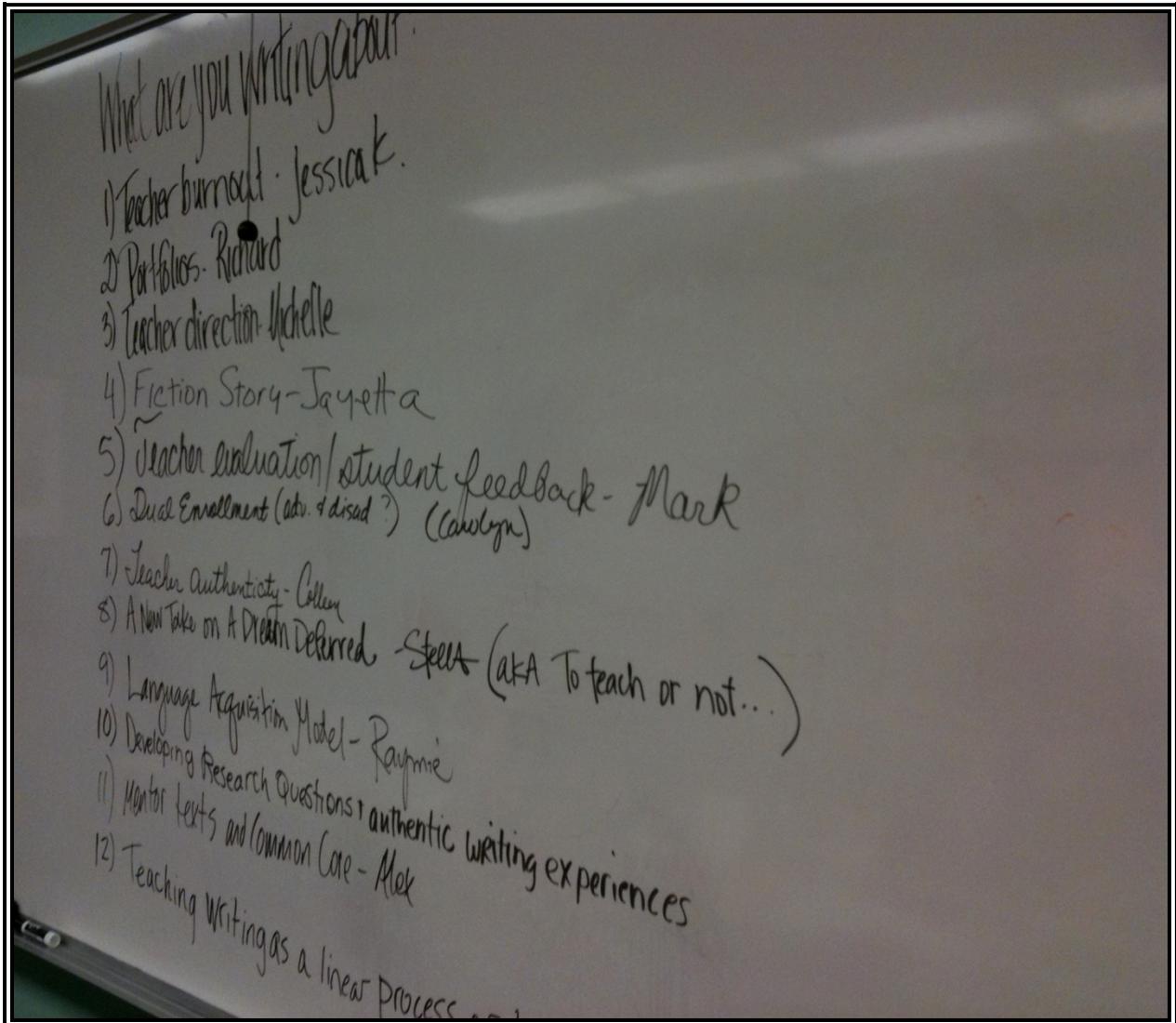


Writegeist



Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project

2013 Summer Institute Anthology

Writegeist

Anthology of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project

Edited by
Kacie Walker

Summer Institute
2013

The 2013 SLWP Summer Institute



From left to right: (Seated) Michelle Russo, Jayetta Slawson, Natasha Whitton, Carolyn Waller, Stella Wood, Colleen Hildebrand, (Standing) Richard Louth, George Dorrill, Mark Ebarb, Jessica Kastner, Jessica Rushing, Michelle Knox, Raymie Bell, Alexandra Burris, Melanie Kramer, Nikki Lombardo, and Heather O'Connell.

Writegeist

Melanie Kramer

A theme throughout the week has been developing a community of learners, more specifically, writers. In this park we are alone, writing our thoughts and potential wisdom to impart on each other. Another musician has entered the park and has begun to pick at his acoustic guitar. I don't know much about music, but I still find myself overanalyzing what is played at events that I attend. Like writing, music can produce a certain reaction from the listener, so music selection is very important depending on the mood that you want to evoke in the listener. It is starting to really heat up in this park, but the faint sound of the guitar from across the square has made my time here somewhat pleasant. Under the gazebo we have become a community, formed based on our common goals and interests. Much of this has come from conversation, but most of our conversations have begun with a discussion about our writing; so, in essence, through writing we have developed our own community of local teachers who have come together to discover new ways to develop this same type of community in our classrooms, throughout our schools, and within the city of Hammond.



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Essays



There is no barrier when you're in the classroom. On that floor – that stage – there is no curtain. There are no scene changes. There seems to be a script but no prompter when the lines are forgotten and the audience is relentless...

Stella Wood

Writing and the Use of “Living” Words

Raymie Bell

As infants, children begin the process of language acquisition naturally. Hearing sounds prenatally, infants come into the world mimicking what they hear, learning to communicate their wants and needs. According to educators Dan Kirby and Tom Liner in their seminal work *Inside Out: Developmental Strategies for Teaching Writing*, infants do not choose to speak; rather, the sounds they make from birth confirm that “[t]alking is primary human behavior” (4). While speech acquisition is natural human behavior, Kirby and Liner posit that writing is “an *unnatural* act” (5), a difficult process to learn. However, their research and experiences in education show that success can be found in teaching writing if teachers use the “language acquisition process” (Kirby and Liner 5) of infants, a process that includes language experimentation and growth in a supportive environment. Even high school writing teachers should utilize this model, not expecting lower-school and middle-school teachers to shoulder all the responsibility of teaching the writing process.

As infants attempt rudimentary speech, caregivers and parents encourage even the most unintelligible of noises by speaking in a soft, sometimes “sing-song-y” voice to tempt the infant to “speak.” Linguists tell us that certain phonemes are acquired first – the hard consonants like “d” and the short vowel “a.” Much to the chagrin of mothers everywhere, a child’s first word is usually, “Da-da.” The child is praised, applauded for his effort. Sounds develop, words form, and communication begins.

As children enter the classroom, they begin to experiment with written language; they write the sentences that create the thoughts and the paragraphs that create the structure. Teachers may reward students’ efforts with stars and stickers, encouragement they need to continue developing as writers. Through the middle grades, students begin to develop vocabulary, write longer sentences and, hopefully, string those sentences together to create more cohesive paragraphs. Their rewards often become less tangible in that stars and stickers are sometimes viewed as “not cool” by budding teenagers. Instead, they seek verbal and even written approval from their teachers, the temporary “parental” figures in the classroom. Because of curricular expectations imposed upon teachers, perhaps some of the encouragement first given in early childhood and in lower grades diminishes as dedicated teachers prepare their middle-school students for the rigors of high school.

As students enter the high school arena, we expect them all to know how to write words, sentences, and paragraphs. However, they have, somewhere along the way, learned that written communication may not come as easily to them as spoken communication. While students speak fluidly at this age, their writing typically suffers from a lack of fluency. High school English teachers express frustration that perhaps the lower- and middle-school teachers have not done their jobs; we want to blame someone somewhere for our students’ deficiencies. Our expectations go unmet because many of our students cannot write with any level of maturity, unity, or cohesion. We are not the only ones who suffer from frustration: the groans, complaints, and actual fear in their voices – these are the sounds we hear from our students with every mention of the word *writing*. While the students have learned basic speech patterns and sentence structure, many have not developed into fluent writers. So, how do we as upper-level writing teachers get our students to progress from infantile words, sentences, and paragraphs to become more mature communicators of written language?

The first step of the language acquisition model is to reject the notion that middle-school teachers should send students to us who are mature, fluent writers of the English language. We simply cannot impose “adult expectations” (Kirby and Liner 3) on beginning writers, even if those beginners are high school students. The second step is to provide constant encouragement on a *daily* basis (not on a haphazard schedule of “we’ll write when we have time” or “we’ll write when they know grammar better”) as novice or inexperienced writers attempt putting words and phrases on paper. Encouragement is the only way our students will gain confidence, maturity, and fluency.

Because of the pressures of standardized testing, near-constant evaluations by administrators, state-mandated curricula, and parental expectations, the high school writing teacher often falls into the miry clay of segmented lessons as a teaching strategy. Our focus becomes words, sentences, paragraphs, usage, and mechanics. Once students master these discrete elements (or so we tell ourselves), we will then proceed to teaching rhetorical strategies. We, like our middle-school predecessors, follow the “artificial sequences [...] [of] the eighth grade report, the eleventh grade term paper. The topic sentence in the seventh grade. The descriptive paragraph in the eighth grade. [However], [n]one of these [...] is tailored to the developmental ability of the student” (Kirby and Liner 3-4). As Kirby and Liner warn, “By fragmenting instruction and drilling on one part at a time, [teachers] kill motivation and destroy the very process [they’re] trying to develop” (3). Teachers must temporarily “suspend [...] formulas and [...] prescriptions. Put the models away, and get immature writers producing written language, writing out of their own experiences, and using the language in their own heads” (Kirby and Liner 2-3). Kirby and Liner caution that we must guard against a fragmented approach to our teaching strategies, for if we do not, the implementation of a successful writing program that produces fluent writers decreases.

The language acquisition model is often difficult for teachers of writing. Many of us chose English as a college major and profession because we love the precision of language in both spoken and written forms. We find beauty in a well-turned phrase and grimace at poorly written prose. Some of us bemoan the removal of Warriner’s as the penultimate guide to all things grammatical, the lost art of penmanship, and ignorance of the literary masters. We secretly hope for a Chaucer, a Hemingway, or even a Dave Barry in our classes. We want fluidity and grace in what our students write; we need it; we thrive on it. Nevertheless, as hard as it may be for us, high school English teachers must offer praise for even the most meager attempt at written communication. If we do not, our students will shut down on us. They will become even more afraid of the process, and their growth as writers will stagnate. Yet, how can we offer praise for writing riddled with apostrophe and comma errors, misspellings, incomplete or run-on sentences?

Our focus needs to shift from finding and correcting errors to that of searching out and appreciating the *meaning* within our students’ work. Writing is a complex human endeavor, and novice writers – just like an infant’s learning of spoken language – need constant encouragement and reinforcement. I am not advocating the acceptance of consistently shoddy work or mediocre attempts, but rather the finding of something praiseworthy in students’ personal writing. With encouragement – that of “Good job!” or “Nice sentence!” or “I like that thought.” “Develop it more!” -- students will want to continue to write because they will think, “Cool! My English teacher likes something I wrote! Maybe I’m not such a bad writer after all.”

Consider an exchange student from China in my tenth-grade English class a few years ago who carried around his electronic translator because he could not understand the most basic

English words and phrases. I had serious doubts that he could make it in my class or in our school, for that matter. With every instruction I gave, he needed me to write it down for him so he could translate it. If I was helping other students, he asked those around him to write it down. He seemed frustrated and nervous. Because the Chinese translation could not capture the idioms of the English language, I struggled to understand what he was *trying* to express in his writing. What he lacked in fluency of both spoken and written English expression, I lacked in knowledge of the Chinese language. We both typed on that electronic translator during our conversations trying to find a way to communicate our thoughts with one another. Even through that awkward back-and-forth on an electronic device, I always made a point to encourage Andrew's thought processes, his basic descriptions, and even his simplistic "See-Jane-run" sentence structure. I learned that the more I praised him for his efforts and for the ideas he was trying to express, the more he relaxed and hoped that he could write in English and actually pass the class. By the end of the year, he had earned – really *earned* – a B- in the class. His grammar and punctuation were not perfect, but neither were the grammar and punctuation of many of my other students who were native speakers of English. He earned a good grade and some confidence, and I learned to appreciate the meaning in his writing. Because of the encouragement he found in his first English class in America, he persevered and, ultimately, found a measure of success. To the amazement of every administrator in our school, Andrew graduated with his class. His fluency, both spoken and written, and his confidence had improved significantly, and those attributes followed him throughout his high school experience in his other classes.

While Andrew's story represents an extreme case of a student's lacking in fluency, I believe that the process that worked with him will work well for all of our students. As teachers of writing, my colleagues and I need to focus less on correct forms and grammatical correctness, initially, in order to give our students "time to develop fluency and time to develop confidence in a personal voice" (Kirby and Liner 7). Once our students have found a safe and encouraging environment in which to experiment with language and meaning, the errors they may make in usage, mechanics, and sentence structure will eventually sort themselves out. If these same grammatical errors continue, "[t]hose controls [...] can be taught directly at more appropriate moments when the student is motivated to learn them" (Kirby and Liner 7).

We must accept our students where they are in their acquisition of writing fluency and expression. While we certainly do not use the "sing-song-y" voice of the past, our acceptance and encouragement are the keys to producing a successful writing program in the high-school English classroom and to producing more confident writers. The British poet and novelist Walter de la Mare (1873-1956) once wrote the following: "Until we learn the use of living words, we shall continue to be waxworks inhabited by gramophones." I do not know to whom he was referring, but I, for one, as a writing teacher, want to encourage my students to use *living words* of their own – words that come alive to them as they share their own experiences and emotions in their own words. I, too, want to use living words, *life-affirming* words of encouragement, with my students so that I will be more than a yammering waxed reminder of ineffective teaching strategies of the past.

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Using Mentor Texts to Teach Writing to High School Students

Alexandra Burris

I love expository writing. This may seem like a natural admission for the English Language Arts teacher to make, and this passion instills in me the desire to pass on my love of writing to my students. One of the primary functions of the high school teacher is to build on the skills the students have already learned. The writing teacher takes the skills the students mastered in elementary and middle schools, and refines them. The end goal is that the student be able to communicate proficiently in collegiate and professional settings. I would dare to pose that this goal be coupled with the goal of instilling a love for writing in the students. One issue that I continually wrestle with is the question, how much freedom do I give my students in terms of the writing process? Do I impose on them a structure for writing, which includes all the rules of grammar and mechanics of Standard English or do I allow them to learn how to write more organically, slowly discovering their own style of writing? Or is there another option, which is to teach them a variety of structures for writing through modeling and using a teaching method that is heavily based in both reading and writing? Finally, what is the role of passion in teaching students how to write? One way to teach students the craft of writing well, which includes using audience appropriate grammar and mechanics, is to model well-written and beautiful texts for the students through the use of mentor texts.

A teacher quickly realizes that most of the students do not necessarily learn the same way. In fact, I now know that there are going to be several different ways of learning in my classroom. Actually, there are as many methods of prewriting as there are writers. This truth has profound implications for me in a discussion of mentor texts, because I am, by nature and education, a structural learner and writer. In High School I learned how to write sentences and paragraphs through two methods. The first was through practicing sentence combining. We used the text *Sentence Combining and Paragraph Building*. Prior to this exposure, in Middle School, I excelled in the art of diagramming sentences because I attended a private school that was built on a more traditional, classical curriculum. At that school, instruction included one year of Latin Grammar. In 10th and 11th grade I attended Maury High School, in Norfolk, Virginia. The English Department at this High School drilled into its students an entity known as the “Maury Paragraph.” I now know it to be the basic structure for a paragraph that includes a topic sentence, three main details, each with one to two supporting details, and a concluding or transitional sentence. I used this background to pass the English Proficiency test at a private university, and tested out of both English 101 and 102. I began my college education taking 300 level English Courses. After two years in a private University that, again, was built on a more traditional and classical mentality (all exams were either essay exams or oral exams), I transferred to Southeastern in my Junior year. The English Department at Southeastern introduced me to literary analysis and MLA, but I never forgot or lost the structure of my early training. I built on it, and in a pinch, completely relied on it. The “Maury Paragraph” became the 5 paragraph essay, which became the 10 and 15 page paper, and eventually my Master’s Thesis. Why do I go into this detail of my writing background? My point is to show that not only was I comfortable with structure, I thrived on it and had been trained in it. I believed in it until I became a teacher myself, and realized the structural approach is not necessarily the best way.

Last year, I was a first year teacher at St. Thomas Aquinas High School, teaching English II, which is World Literature. I quickly realized some of my students thrive on a more structural approach to teaching writing. These are students who do well in school, but they want me to tell

them what to do, give them a road map so to speak, and they will do it. These are bright students, but not necessarily creative students. I believe I myself fall into this category. On the other hand, some of my students listen to what I have to say, and then proceed to write the way they want to write. They get the assignment done, and are great students as well, but by nature take a much more fluid and creative approach to writing. They come to me with questions that are most often of the sort, "I know you said we should do it this way, but is it OK if I do it this other way?" These students make it necessary for me to figure out what the parameters are of the writing class. How much freedom am I willing to give them in regards to the writing process and the final product? Finally, the third group of students are those who listened to the instructions, and still needed more explanations and more examples. These students are unsure of their writing ability. Many of them come to class saying, "I can't write." Many of them want to do well in the class, but just seem uncertain as to how to begin. In the midst of balancing the learning needs of these different students, I realize on a practical level the need to differentiate between different types of writing for different audiences, and understanding that different guidelines are necessary for the students. As we worked on our end of the year research project, which was a literary analysis paper, I went over the fundamentals of MLA and Standard English grammar and mechanics. Most of the students were able to catch on and complete the project. But I resolved, in my teaching next year, to place greater emphasis on the different types of writing earlier in the year. I wanted to integrate it into my whole approach. I think this is key for teaching writing. I found confirmation for my experience in a workshop I attended earlier this summer on the Common Core Standards for Writing.

This June, I attended a Summer Writing Institute that focused on the Common Core. The focus of the Institute was tri-fold: to introduce and reinforce the Common Core Standards for teachers across the curriculum, to encourage the use of the website Criterion as a tool for teaching writing, and to highlight the importance of using exemplary or mentor texts to teach writing. The "Anchor Standards" remain the same for each grade level in high school, with the profundity and requirements deepening as students' progress toward graduation. The aspect of the Common Core that impresses me most is that there is no one set way to achieve the goal of a particular writing skill. Students are to be given the tools to distinguish between different types of writing, and by the time they graduate, they should be able to make critical decisions regarding their own writing. What type of writing is appropriate for what audience and purpose? The bottom line here is that we are not merely forming writers, but are forming thinkers. Thinking and writing are almost synonymous in practice, writing being merely the communication of one's thoughts through symbols on a page. The refrain, over and over again throughout the institute, was that writing should be modeled and taught to students by means of exemplary or mentor texts. As I believe fully in all of this, it somehow seems dry and antiseptic to me.

The answer as to how to teach writing is almost too simple. A person is taught to think and write well, through reading a high quality of writing and thus being exposed to the thoughts, arguments, and logic of other people. In her article, "Grammar Apprenticeship," Cornelia Paraskevas explores the use of mentor texts in the context of teaching students the craft of writing eloquent sentences. Paraskevas discusses the importance of imitation for teaching younger writers how to write well. She writes of, "texts that help students see how accomplished writers have used their understanding of language, their power as writers, to make significant choices at the sentence level. Our knowledge and understanding of sentence structure, then, guide us in helping students describe what they see in beautiful texts." Through such exposure,

the students learn almost by osmosis how to think and reason, consequently becoming proficient writers. But wait a moment. Let's reevaluate the quote, which talks about the beauty in texts, in sentence structure. Does Paraskevas mean the students may possibly see the beauty in writing? On a certain level beauty has to do with passion, more so than with thoughts and argument and logic. Is it too ambitious to think the students will experience passion in regards to their writing?

There are certain touchstone or mentor texts that I remember from High School. I was greatly influenced by Fitzgerald and Steinbeck. This is not to say that I write like either Fitzgerald or Steinbeck, but I loved reading about them during my 10th and 11th grade years. I read *The Great Gatsby*, *The Beautiful and the Damned*, and *Tender is the Night*. I also read *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cannery Row* on my own, the summer between my 10th and 11th grade year. Even though the way I write does not mirror either Fitzgerald or Steinbeck, reading both writers made me fall in love with writing. Even though my major went from Journalism, to Great Books, then to Philosophy, before it settled on English, the common thread running throughout was my love of writing.

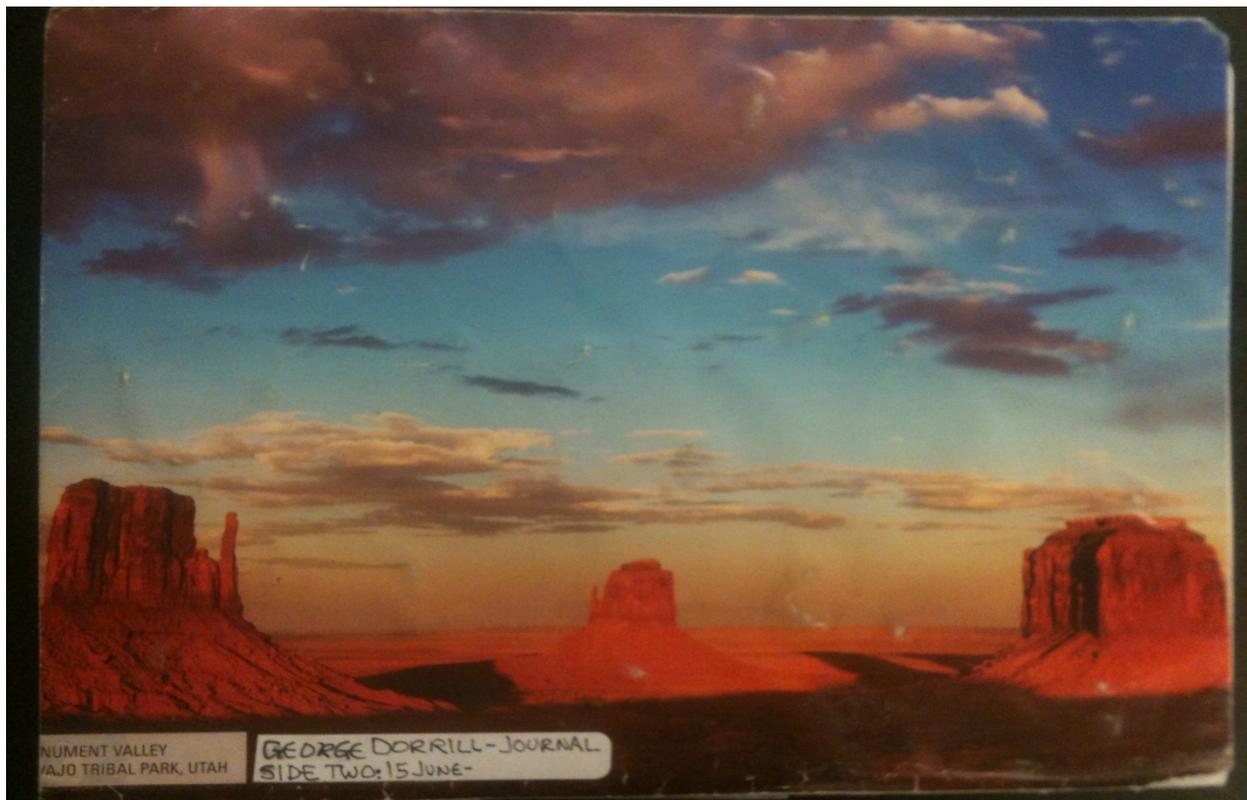
I would like to identify this, then, as the answer to the problem of how to use mentor texts to teach students how to write. Let them fall in love with writing. Not all of them will, but some will. Use mentor texts to model the mechanics, but at the same time use them to spark the writer's flame, the muse that lies dormant within each student. This is the value of mentor texts. The wonderful aspect of this is that we do not leave it up to the students to guess which texts to read. The Common Core gives specific suggestions as to appropriate mentor texts for each grade level. The Common Core, mentor texts, all of these are tools and guides that we use to engender not merely skill, but passion. And passion, more than skill, is what makes a good writer. An effective writer.

A Journal Cover Worth a Thousand Words

George Dorrill

The weekend before the Summer Institute began, I came over to D Vickers to try to get a little head start. We had had a couple of pre-Institute meeting marathons that week with Richard, Michelle, Heather, Tasha, and I participating. We had prepared the room by arranging the tables and putting brown paper on them and magazines and glue sticks and magic markers in anticipation of our first activity Monday morning, making our name plates and decorating our journals. I decided to choose a place to sit and to decorate my journal. Since I am left-handed, I always try to get the leftmost seat, so that my left elbow won't be banging into my neighbor's right elbow. I also wanted to be sure that I had plenty of leg room—some of the corner places had table-ends underneath. The corner nearest the Symposium seemed to fit the bill best. I wrote on the brown paper "This is George's place" or something like that, and enclosed the words with a snake biting its tail. I had no idea why I did that, but later, going through my t-shirts, I realized we had used that image on a previous Institute's t-shirt. The snake surrounded a bull's head: I have no memory of why that image was chosen.

And I started decorating my journal. I had found a picture of Monument Valley on a calendar, and I used that picture to cover the back of my journal. Monument Valley is one of my favorite places in the world, and the particular view—Merrick Butte and the two Mittens—is my favorite view.

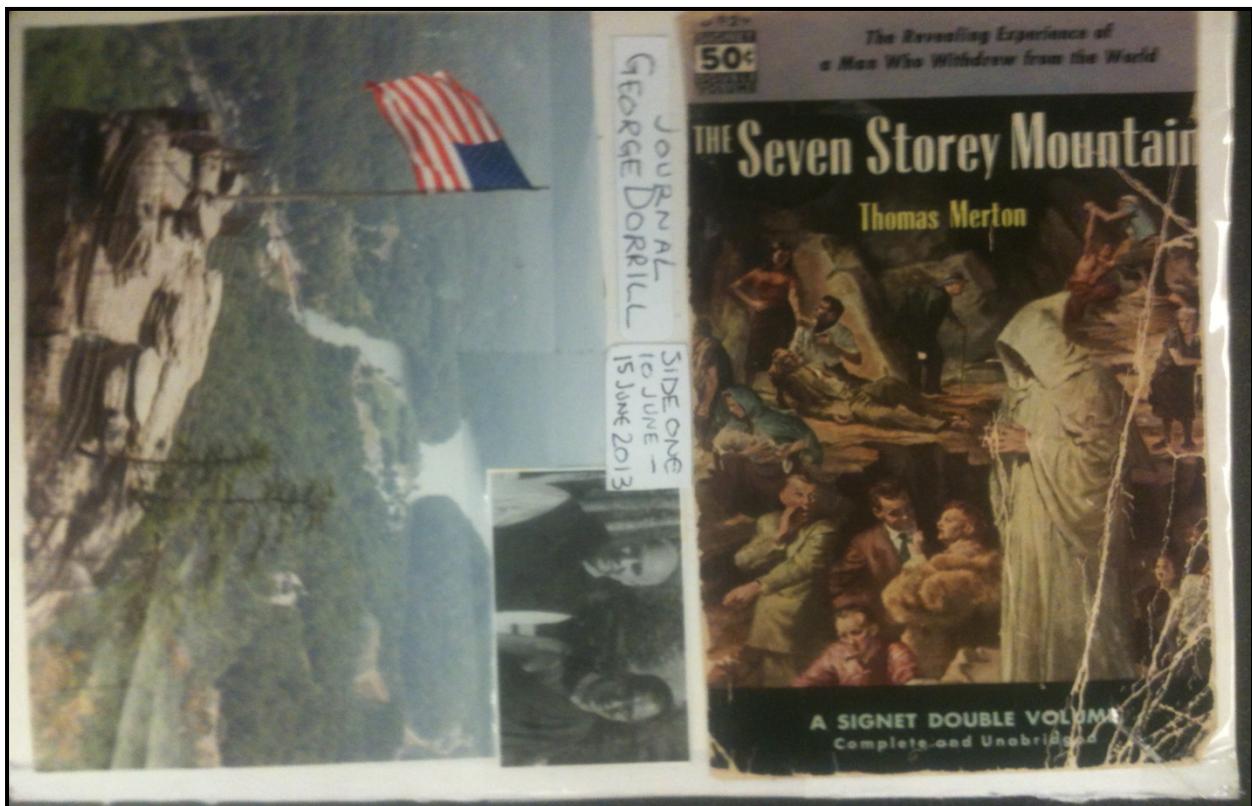


On the front, I put a picture of Chimney Rock, N. C., also taken from the calendar. My earliest memory of going to the mountains was climbing to the top of Chimney Rock. The picture covered only half the front cover, however, and I had an idea of how to cover the remaining half.

Since between the first two days and the last two days of the Institute—that is, the middle four days and the intervening weekend—I would be absent, attending with my wife the thirteenth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut, and would be taking the journal with me on the trip to keep up with the daily writing, I decided to put something related to Thomas Merton on the remaining half of the front side. I remembered that I had something at home that would be perfect. So I left DVIC 319 and drove home. At the end of the entrance hallway at our house is a large wooden bookshelf (scrounged from the third floor of D Vickers, left behind by a retiring instructor) containing my Merton and Mertoniana books and related material. Among the books was an old paperback copy missing its first forty-seven pages of the book that made Thomas Merton famous—his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, first published in 1948. I had found the book at a used-book store a few years ago. I had bought it because it had the same cover as the book that had first attracted me to Thomas Merton, some fifty-five years ago.

Let me describe the cover. It is the cover of a mass-market paperback, 41 by 7¼". There is a ¾" black band running across the bottom of the cover containing this copy:

A SIGNET DOUBLE VOLUME
Complete and Unabridged



Across the top of the cover, there is a ¾" gray band with a logo—Signet Double Volume 50¢—and the words “The Revealing Experience of a Man Who Withdrew from the World.” Between the two bands is an illustration, upon which is superimposed the title—*The Seven Storey Mountain*—and below it in smaller yellow type the author’s name, Thomas Merton. The cover

illustrator for the book was James Avati. It was a revelation to me when I found his name in my Google search. It turns out he was a famous illustrator. The Wikipedia article states that he was known as the “Rembrandt of paperback book covers.” When I browsed through his covers, I realized why his work was so familiar to me. To explain this, I need to backtrack a little.

I had a very blessed childhood. I was blessed by the fact that my father was a “piccolo man” [According to Google, “piccolo” is 1930s Harlem slang for “juke box,” but for us, “piccolo” was the default term for what others may call a coin-operated music (record)-playing device]. When I went with him on his collection route and helped him with counting the coins, I would get any coins that were left over after the rest were rolled. I was blessed by my two grandmothers. One, my mother’s mother Grandmamma, was the jailer of the Orangeburg county jail. It was a wonderful place, surrounded by giant pecan trees, an oasis in the middle of town. And my other grandmother, my father’s mother Mamie, had a store just a couple of blocks from the jail. Mamie ran what was called a newsstand, but it was actually much more than that. In addition to newspapers, she sold magazines and paperbacks and candy and soft drinks. But what attracted me most were the comic books, or “funny books,” as we called them. I spent many happy hours reading funny books and drinking cokes and eating Almond Joys. A blessed childhood, indeed.

As I grew older, I switched from the funny-book side (one half of the store was devoted to comic books), to the paperback side. My major reading consisted mostly of science-fiction and fantasy books, but I occasionally read more serious material, such as *The Return of the Native* or *The Catcher in the Rye* (also with an Avati cover). That’s how I came upon *The Seven Storey Mountain*. What attracted me to the book was not so much its lurid cover (nearly all the paperbacks published in the forties and fifties had similar covers), but the strange spelling of the word I thought should be spelled *story*. I read the book some time during my sophomore year in high school, 1957–58. Reading that book literally changed my life. I have written about this elsewhere (See “A Call Not Answered?” in *Roots to Branches* or *Word and Image*), so I won’t write more about it here [Besides, I’ve already exceeded my thousand words by 133 words], so I’ll just end by saying that that lurid book cover stands in for a man whose influence on me was and is so great that I would miss half the Summer Institute, spend over a thousand dollars, and drive over 2800 miles just to spend a weekend listening to papers, celebrating liturgies, and talking with longtime friends about a man who first attracted me over fifty years ago with his strange spelling of the word *story*.

Sizing Up Teachers: Student Voices and Extracurricular Endeavors

Mark Ebarb

“What the teacher is, is more important than what he teaches.”
-American psychiatrist Karl Menninger

I can only smirk at this assertion, as I now find myself teaching in a system that quantifies all that I do as a teacher based on numbers. People ask me, “Oh, what do you teach?” and I always quickly respond with something I once read in an article: “I teach students.” I am not sure if this mini-crusade of semantics influences anyone’s thoughts about the profession, but it at least keeps clear my perception of what I do.

Evaluation Background Information

This leads me to my overarching inquiry about the profession itself. Quite simply, which elements in the profession make a teacher good? I think we have this obsession with categorizing things and people as either good or bad. Consider the most recent *Compass: Teacher Evaluation Handbook* teacher evaluation levels of effectiveness - Highly Effective, Effective: Proficient, Effective: Emerging, and Ineffective. All of these levels take into consideration both “professional practice” and “student growth.”

There is math to it, I am told, where student performance is fifty percent of a teacher’s “effectiveness.” The other half is what the rubric calls “professional practice.” Teachers are observed twice: once announced and once unannounced. Growing up, I remember in science and math class that two pieces of data were by no means enough to make a graph, so I chuckle at this concept that two evaluations through almost 200 days of instruction are somehow an accurate gauge of “professional practice.” Is it possible to get accurate data? And for that matter, is merely observing (even if it is ten times) enough information to make an assessment?



Student Assessment and Reflection

This brings me back to Menninger’s idea that “what the teacher is, is more important than what he teaches.” At the close of the last school year, I asked students to complete a candid, informal evaluation of my course. While nearly each comment was supportive, praiseworthy, and positive, there were a couple that negatively rated something about my class. Either way, each response was genuine; students were speaking from the heart. Below, I offer some samples of what was provided. The most interesting trend in these is an analysis of not only my teaching skills

but also my personality and how it affected the class:

A. “Ebarb is an absolutely amazing teacher! His personality makes English not so painful. He pushes his students, which is awesome cause most teachers don’t push their students anymore. Ebarb actually cares about his students.”

B. *“Mr. Ebarb is sarcastic, jokes a lot, and likes to have fun! The first week you might think he's a dick, but once you get to know him he's totally awesome! This year has been great. Ebarb knows how to relate to kids and teach in different ways.”*

C. *“He wasn't serious enough for me. And there were times where he just made me feel dumb, even though I seriously did not understand.”*

D. *“Mr. Ebarb really brought English to life, especially British literature. His sarcastic sense of humor kept us all entertained long enough to grasp the points he was making. One of those teachers you just don't forget. My favorite teacher ever.”*

E. *“Very easily my favorite teacher I have ever had. Very knowledgeable, clever, witty, and serious when needed. Very persistent in enlightening high schoolers...very forgiving when needed. Overall, great teacher who needs to make one hundred million dollars a year.”*

I am not sure I will ever make “one hundred million dollars a year,” but seeing the perspective of the students does offer some sustenance. Even the comment from the student who thought that I made him or her feel dumb offers valid feedback. Because of it, I must acknowledge and reflect why perhaps my bubbly, sarcastic sense of humor might not work for each kid. One student even called me a “dick,” but then admitted he later grew to appreciate my personality. While I should not discount the one student, I do embrace the other 98% of positive feedback because it offers important insight into my style of teaching.



More importantly, it raises more questions. Should the students have a say in a teacher's evaluation? In a study by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, researchers concluded that “student feedback promises greater reliability because it includes many more perspectives based on many more hours in the classroom.” This seems so obvious, yet why is it so overlooked?

Effectively, the current rubric on teacher evaluation mentions nothing about this. *The Evaluation Handbook* makes clear that “principals and other instructional leaders will observe all teachers and will provide feedback based on a Common Core-aligned rubric.” Nothing and nobody more.

Consider more feedback from two male students:

A. *“The class was not easy because it made me do a lot of thinking and work. I never knew how to bullshit in English until I had Ebarb for a teacher, and it is true that if you know how to bullshit, you will do really well.”*

B. *“Mark Ebarb is a wonderful teacher. He will teach you to look at things in different ways to understand things better. He will also teach you how to be unique and different from the students around you. While teaching you all these things and preparing you for college, he makes class fun and interesting each day. He is a hilarious person and one of my favorite teachers ever.”*



Instead of “bullshit,” I wish the student had used the appropriate term for “defend yourself with textual evidence, and magical things happen.” But really, I do not wish that. He gets it; he understands what is expected at the next level. The other student weighed in on me teaching students how to be “unique and different.” Nowhere on the teacher assessment rubric are “bullshit,” “teach you how to be unique and different,” or “hilarious person,” yet all of these seem so vital to the development of students. Are not these intangible lessons important for the students to grasp? And how can any observation prove this has happened?

Extracurricular Activities

Included under the umbrella of professional practice is a tiny five-percent piece known as “Professional Responsibilities.” This is a small number, one that I think devalues what teachers do outside of the classroom. I am not bragging, but what about teachers who perform more than just the tasks in the classroom? I am the Beta Club sponsor; I am the Quiz Bowl coach; I am the boys’ tennis coach; I am the dual enrollment coordinator.



More importantly, I am the safe-haven for students who have no other place to go during lunch; I am the laugh generator; I am the after-school help.



Students feel comfortable. Students feel they have a safe place. Most importantly, students feel valued. Do I think any of this makes me more special than any other teacher? Absolutely not. I

see other teachers do this every day. But I do think that the current system that asks administrators to rate how good and how bad a teacher I am refuses to take the intangible factors into consideration, and that scares me. Some of the best teachers I ever had did not receive the credit they deserved, but the students always knew.

Conclusion

Menninger is on to something when he claims that the identity of a teacher is more important than the subject matter he teaches. Students need a mixture of both. Rigor. Relatability. Relationships. The three R’s seem to be valued, but are they truly considered with enough weight? Academic journalist and historian Henry Adams maintains that “a teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.” How can anyone ever truly know the effect a teacher has on a student in the long run? Unfortunately, it is nearly impossible. For now, I suppose, administrators will keep coming into my room, checking off some boxes, typing

up a report, and making a final judgment on my efficacy. And the students? Well, they get to speak with one collective sigh via test scores.

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A Journey Made on Horseback

Colleen Hildebrand

When I was three years old, I wanted to be a horse when I grew up. I didn't know what, exactly, I saw in horses that drew me to them. I did not grow up in the country. No one in my family rode, but one summer we vacationed in Tennessee, and at what was probably a roadside tourist trap, I sat astride an appaloosa, my hands holding the reins tight. He - or maybe she - paced a steady circle, once, twice, three times around a well-worn track - a living merry-go-round. That horse, the warm smell of leather, my mother's nervous hand twirling the tip of her own braided black hair--this is one of my first vivid memories. Its details carried me through several horseless years; as I grew, my imagination sustained me. Rather than playing Barbies, house, or school, I played horses in my hushed childhood world. At the age of five, I began to ask: Can I have a horse of my own? And, I heard promises, "Yes, sweetie. We'll buy you one when you're ~~eight, ten, eleven.~~" That day seemed an eternity away to me, so I took to other means to exercise my growing passion. Pencil and paper, clay, and books kept me busy. Over the years, my need to know led me to read encyclopedias of equine care, and a black beauty and red pony introduced me to my second great love. I read, wrote, drew, and molded the majesty of horses, and although I certainly refined my artistic skill and readied my mind for my current life, I met with so much frustration. No matter how much detail I added or how much I learned, I could not breathe life into clay, perhaps, because my own life had scarcely begun.

Then it happened; at the age of twelve, I was finally born. Proving that horses were no passing phase and contributing an entire \$32.17 to the purchase of my first horse, I rode into a world I had read in countless words and drawn into my heart. Ironically, or maybe expectedly, when my dreams became tangibly wrapped in the wiry mane of the horse I named Patience, I read, wrote, and turned to art a bit less but felt more alive, more aware, more authentic. I felt something wonderful happening within me, weaving itself in and out of my past disappointments and hopes, making sense of all those years I spent in preparation for the reality of horses. They are hard work. And, striking the right balance between horse and rider, I learned, involves more cooperation than control. Horses have minds of their own, and although they will obey out of fear, they delight me far more when their spirits are not broken, when they are respected as living, breathing beings, when they are not reduced to machinery. To machinery - my heart breaks, now, for the poor appaloosa of my first memories. I wonder if he knew what it was like to run.

My horses did. During the wind-in-my-hair moments of my teen years, I did not imagine I would ever exchange the tangles of chestnut mane and braided leather my heart held so tightly for the certainty my mind holds today, but my husband, my children, and yes, even my students make me understand how my youthful dreams have transformed into a common reality. Being a wife, mother, and teacher often invites complaints of ingratitude and weariness more than it champions accomplishment. Yet, when I recall feedings at 5:00 a.m., mucking out stalls in mid-August heat, and braiding manes with blistered hands for the possibility of success in the arena, I realize horses have been the best teachers I've known. From them, I have learned faith and frustration, freedom and routine, risk and responsibility. Equipped with this knowledge of my past, of myself, I find the courage to teach.

Although the role of self in pedagogy lies largely unexamined, Parker Palmer investigates the importance of identity in his book, *The Courage to Teach*. He discusses the temptation teachers have to objectify the classroom - everything from students, to content, to themselves. He

says that from safe distances, anything we view becomes an object, devoid of life, and “when it is lifeless, it cannot touch us or transform us” (52), and shouldn’t education be a transformative process? In his words, I hear a self-defeating prophecy, one that renders students automatons at worst and beasts of burden at best; content, no more than inert ideas; and self, a concept divorced from professional life. Wisely, Palmer recognizes some impossible truths of the profession: first, that “teaching requires a command of content that always eludes our grasp;” second, that dealing with the individual personalities and needs of students and colleagues requires an understanding of psychology and a wisdom gleaned from life that few people ever achieve; and finally, that good teaching requires self knowledge (2). These three strands, tangled together in unequal combinations, often leave educators working unproductively, for the first two premises speak of impossibilities, even a lifetime is not enough time to learn so much, but the third premise, the most attainable, often goes overlooked. Teacher education courses usually objectify self out of school, and in doing so, turn out teachers who distort their relationships with their subjects, their students, and most importantly, their own identities, draining education of its life, of its authenticity—reducing it to machinery.

I wonder how many classrooms are carousels whose movement, mistaken for forward progress, lulls teachers into comfortable complacency, or worse, inertia, as Alfred North Whitehead would say. Like Palmer, Whitehead, an English mathematician and philosopher, addressed the question of identity in education, though a bit more indirectly and nearly seventy years before Palmer. Whitehead argued against the unexamined life, believing that people must know their pasts to make use of knowledge in the present (3). Sometimes I think myself silly musing on my love of horses and my experience with riding in order to make sense of my current life. I know how disconnected some must see it, but I see the path I’ve taken and realize that the foundational values of my life come from experience and knowledge which welled up in a little girl’s brown eyes every time she cried for what she lacked. Perhaps I still rely on that little girl’s quiet intuition so much that I cannot adequately explain why I know Palmer and Whitehead are right. Their reasoning suggests that teachers, who must also convince others to make use of knowledge, should know themselves as a prerequisite to any other subject. Whitehead says, in *The Aim of Education*, “It should be the aim of a university professor to exhibit himself in his own character...as an ignorant man thinking” (37). Yet, I know several teachers who cannot admit to students that they don’t know something, who rely more on control than cooperation, and consequently, rob themselves of the opportunity to appreciate their students. They hold the reins too tightly, I suppose.

I wonder if the teachers who refuse to run lack trust in their students or themselves or both. Palmer reminds his readers that high levels of trust often equate to high scores on standardized tests, and low corresponds to low. Does this mean that trust is more important in a classroom than content? Probably not, but teaching involves so much more than content, although knowing it, loving it certainly helps students trust the teacher’s knowledge. Trust is a risk that works in both directions. I remember one of my first riding lessons. I was learning to jump, but my lesson horse, Tony, balked momentarily when I trusted him to sail over the wall. Maybe he had trusted me to get him there from a better angle. I fell off and broke my arm, but I did not know at the time I had cracked a bone. So, embarrassed by my insecure legs and seat and angered by Tony’s refusal, a breach of trust, I got back on, and a bit more aware, took him over the obstacle. I learned a little more about what I was willing to risk to pursue my passion that day. And, the truth of it is that I was and am willing to be disappointed, to fall, to suffer injuries, and I do. They cause me to reflect and reacquaint myself with the “me” who continues to grow

and learn and trust myself to know more next time. I carry this part of my past into my classroom.

I often wonder what other teachers bring. I wonder if they have thought about it, and about whether they feel a sense of belonging there, and if they do, what from their pasts imparts that feeling. Do they see their personal and professional lives as separate threads, stretched parallel to each other or intertwined, like the braided strands of chestnut mane? What about their subjects? How did they determine their content areas, because I bet *Black Beauty* didn't bring them to English? Do they, like me, reflect upon their past and see the path that prepared them for the classroom?

The questions of selfhood in the teacher's life should begin the educator's journey toward the classroom. Whitehead proposes that a teacher must elicit enthusiasm for his subject through "resonance from his own personality" and simultaneously create "the environment of larger knowledge and firmer purpose" (40), which is no easy task. Yet, if a teacher has come to the classroom through some experience of passion and learning, perhaps that enthusiasm, knowledge, and purpose will come more naturally, more authentically. Whitehead also cautions that "in the hands of dull people" education can suffer "the dryness of the Sahara" (17). I do not know who could be more dull than the teacher who looks into the paths of his own past yet cannot retrace his steps. Perhaps he, too, suffered the tight reins of a desiccated landscape, but Whitehead makes it clear that "pedantry and routine" results in "inert knowledge" (1), which serves no authentic purpose in a student's life and arises, most likely, from a lack of authenticity in a teacher's.

The questions of what to teach and how to teach it dominate pedagogical conversations and public policy, but who will teach - that remains unexplored. Maybe that's because the answer seems obvious or inconsequential. Of course, the teacher will teach, but who are our teachers? I certainly cannot answer that for anyone except me: I am a wife, mother, and teacher who celebrates rather than laments her roles. I have braided manes with blistered hands and woven together this life from strands of my past. The journey from there to here has taught me much, and I hope along the way I've acquired some of the beauty, grace, and strength that made a little girl intuitively long to be something she could not, yet makes a woman understand who she is. It's strange to think that our past was once both our present and our future. Sometimes we don't remember how we've gotten where we are. I remember though. I was carried by horses.

An Administrator's Guide to Identifying and Preventing Teacher Burnout Syndrome (TBS)

Jessica Kastner

Overview: The New Face of Teacher Burn Out

For many, the phrase “teacher burnout” conjures a mental image of some antiquated educator who assigns busy work, lectures about the “problems with education” or perhaps “the problems with kids these days,” and counts the days until retirement. However, thousands of new teachers are burning out before they even notice their first wrinkle or pluck a gray hair. According to the United States Department of Education, half of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years of teaching. So why are educators leaving so soon? Though they are overworked, underpaid, and disrespected, thirty-eight percent of teachers who leave during those first five years cite the reason as “dissatisfaction with administrator support” (NCES). The chances are that many of those administrators were pulled in a million different directions putting out a million different fires and were too busy to notice the early signs of what I like to call, Teacher Burnout Syndrome (TBS). While irate parents and cyber-bullying victims are serious issues blaring at administrators, a more silent problem is brewing under the surface of the faculty. A problem that is detrimental to the teaching profession: exodus.

The following is a guide to help administrators better understand the three stages and intervention strategies for Teacher Burnout Syndrome (TBS).

Stage 1: The Eager Beaver

Early Career: This stage occurs in teachers who are in their first through fifth years of teaching.

At-Risk Characteristics:

Extremely energetic, creative, hard working, optimistic, idealistic, sensitive, compassionate, eager to share ideas and ask questions.

Physical Symptoms:

Relatively easy to spot, the overachiever always has a large shoulder bag or pull-cart when arriving or departing from campus. His or her car is still in the parking lot after dark and on weekends. Though new to school, this go-getter type is a regular fixture on the scene. Spotted at athletic events, plays, and choir performances, the overachiever displays a bright smile and walks with a bounce in his or her step. The last and most dangerous symptom is the jerking of one hand in the air when the principal asks for volunteers in faculty meetings.

Administrative Interventions:

- 1) Tell employee to go home. This should be done in a light-hearted way so that this sensitive employee does not feel like his efforts are not appreciated. Some effective expressions include a) “It’s quitting time,” b) “You know that you don’t get paid overtime, right?” or c) “The School Board wants to know why our electric bill is so high.” It is also important that you develop rapport with the eager beaver by asking what he/she is working on and if there is anything you can do to help. Though the overachiever will typically decline offers of help from superiors, showing your appreciation and concern is important to his/her self-worth. Depending on how often the sufferer in Stage 1 works late, you may have to develop a routine of gently reminding your hard worker that it is time to go home. If this measure fails, take away the building key.
- 2) Ignore the eager beaver’s involuntary volunteering. Though the new teacher may not realize it, the hand spasm is a reflexive condition brought about by his innate need to help and please others. As tempting as it may be to rely on this new fresh face full of energy, passion, and hope,

do not overload the eager beaver. Even if your employee says he or she can handle it, overachievers at this stage often do not understand how to pace and endure the longevity of a teaching career. As a more experienced and knowledgeable educator, the principal or assistant principal should ensure that the faculty teaching loads and extracurricular assignments are equally distributed and that newer teachers pace themselves for the long haul.

Rewards:

Find ways to reward hard-working teachers. Sure, money is tight, so this may require a little creativity. Ask people in the community (or a friendly PTSA) to donate gift certificates to movies, shops, restaurants, spas, etc. Create a teacher of the month reward and give gifts to those who go the extra mile.

Stage 2: The Tortoise in the Shell

Mid Career: This stage typically occurs in years five through fifteen.

At-Risk Characteristics:

Frazzled, rushed, less congenial, less social, less punctual, and less jovial.

Physical Symptoms:

Those affected by this stage are not always easy to identify. Look for subtle changes like smiling/joking less often, staying in classrooms during lunch breaks and before/after school, rushing to complete tasks, missing work more frequently, turning in lesson plans late, and saying phrases like, "I need a drink" or "eighty-two more days till summer break." Unless the teacher in Stage 1 is closely monitored, it is likely that he/she will slip into Stage 2 without administrative detection. The tortoise, growing bitter with job dissatisfaction - lack of parental support, unruly students, too much paperwork, not enough time, etcetera, etcetera - often quietly retracts into his or her shell.

Administrators should be aware of changes in appearance such as dark circles under eyes, unkempt hair, wrinkly and/or un-matching clothes, weight gain, and/or weight loss. Beware if a teacher reports sleep loss or school related nightmares such as drowning in a sea of student papers, running through a maze of school hallways, losing control of the classroom, or teaching in the nude. This type of tortoise is at the highest risk for leaving the profession before he/she reaches Stage 3.

Administrative Interventions:

1) Ask what you can do to help, and do it if at all feasible. For example, finding a co-sponsor or new sponsor for club, reassigning courses so that your tortoise never has to teach another freshman again, sitting in a class with Johnny-Boy so you can see how defiant he is. You may think this will open up a can of worms, and it might. But the longer the worms sit in the can running out of fresh soil and air, they sooner they shrivel up and eventually die, or in your case, quit. Ask yourself what you would rather have: worms or quitters?

2) Find funds to pay for a professional development day for the tortoise to catch up with paper work. You would be surprised how many teachers take personal days to stay at home and grade papers (especially essays) without any distractions. This feeling of never being able to catch up contributes to job dissatisfaction. If not resolved, it greatly increases the chances of teacher resignation.

Stage 3: The Old Dog

Late Career: This stage occurs in teachers who are in years sixteen through forty of their careers.

At-Risk Characteristics:

Sarcastic, cynical, apathetic, resistant to technology, and unmotivated to learn new techniques or try new methods.

Physical Symptoms:

Though teachers in this phase are resistant to learn new tricks, they are very loyal and will most likely stay with the system until they retire . . . if they ever retire. They often keep on teaching for “one more year.” The teachers in Stage 3 crave consistency: no new teaching preps, no additional duties, no new anything. They say phrases like, “I’ve been there, done that,” and, “Just let me teach.”

Intervention:

1) Just let them teach because they have been there and done that.

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Developing Inquiring Minds

Michelle Knox

"No, straighten your back! Move your leg forward! If you don't bend your knee, you are going to hurt yourself!" The instructor was probably concerned about the safety of his student, but ironically, the memory of hearing those "instructional" lines shouted at me across the microphone left emotional scars and unavoidable memories that are part of who I have become. As I sat years later in a cafe across the street from that same fitness center, the horrid recollection of that experience flooded my mind. Looking up from my writing tablet, I saw a toned and obviously in-shape man stretching as he prepared to take off down the street. He has figured it out. He probably likes popping out of bed, throwing on his gym clothes, and going for a jog where everyone can see his obvious success. If I can muster up enough bravery to go into a gym these days - and certainly not the one where "the incident" occurred - I have to give myself an emotional pep talk as I find some loosely-fitted clothes and later stroll inconspicuously to a spot in the back of the class in hopes of nobody noticing. Class begins, and my face almost immediately turns beet red - I have always hated that about myself - and the sweat trickles down my face as I try to keep up with the obviously more advanced students. The instructor doesn't publicly humiliate me, so I guess that is a form of success, but when the results of my effort fail to show as quickly as expected - like after two or three classes - the emotional pep talk begins to fail, and I stay in bed instead. Could degrading experiences within classrooms, intentional or not, be the root cause of what comes across as apathy that plagues many classrooms today? Moreover, are the successful students simply mimicking the hopefully well-trained instructors who are failing to raise independent thinkers?

Enduring personal failures and being raised by a loving, but unsatisfiable mother probably contributed to the reasons why I did not go to college until the age of thirty-two. Finally tasting success through earning exemplary grades, I prided myself at the thought of being able to provide an environment where students will not experience those sorts of nightmares; after all, rapport with my students has somewhat been my forte. It was not until reflection through writing that I had an epiphany: the mission accomplished banner must come down; my job is not complete. If my self-proclaimed goal is to guide these almost adult students into thinking for themselves, I have failed miserably. The honor students have gladly ridden my coattails to better grades while the struggling students have experienced utter contentment by "earning" passing grades as I hold their hands through each assignment. In the midst of wearing myself out by making sure they have the "right" information, I have robbed them of the invaluable experiences of reading, relating, and writing. Not only is it my personal endeavor to develop contemplators who can back up their assertions, but the new curriculum mandates it. So now the question is: How do I meet the standards set forth by the experts - who often have not endured enough of the gritty work to break a sweat - while choosing instructional tactics that motivate thinking, encourage voice, and cultivate skills necessary for students to clarify and support ideas in which THEY have a stake? Reflecting on past personal experiences and practices within the classroom, I recognize that tweaking my coaching methods will cultivate students who can be viable players in the game of academia.

Instead of wracking my brain for specific, guided questions that take students in a planned direction, the questions should lead the students toward their own inquiries and offer them a choice of their own making. During the planning stages of lessons, I considered it a best practice to compose questions that exercised the students' higher order thinking skills. To elevate

the level of engagement, I often grouped students based on mixed levels of ability and had them follow strategies that held each one accountable. Looking back, I still consider it a good practice, but imagine the possibilities if I had thrown in guided yet general questions that would have encouraged the students' voices as they developed personal ties to the text. Within those mixed groups, differentiation can occur by scaffolding questions for initial response and eventual input from others. Hence the wide gap that everyone is concerned with will occur from the implementation of Common Core and can begin to be filled. For example, after assigning a section of reading in *Scarlet Letter*, students who struggle can build confidence through prompts such as, "How can you relate to one of the events from the text?". The more advanced student will be responsible for answering and sharing a deeper question like, "What is the central issue raised in this reading and what are the author's views on the issue?". Both students have the opportunity to personally connect to the text, since even the advanced student will tend to gravitate towards different issues based on their ability to relate to it. I would imagine that quite often similarities occur spontaneously as many adolescents face some of the same issues. Simultaneously, writing, sharing, and modeling between students will occur while confidence naturally rises. Students who typically hide behind their poor work ethic and attitude will begin to move forward. The writing communities within the class will strengthen everyone, not just the ones already in shape.

The Teaching of Writing: Teaching the Formula or Facilitating Discovery

Melanie Kramer

As I looked to my left at Alex, I felt a tightening in my chest and a tense feeling in my stomach, until finally I was able to force out the words, “I am a writer.” I noticed that everyone else in the group seemed surprisingly comfortable fulfilling this requirement, so for a moment I felt like the village idiot in a community of authors. It’s not that I can’t write. In fact, academic writing has always come rather easily to me. I’m not sure why I felt so out of place at this moment, except for the fact that I have never in my life identified myself as a writer. In high school, my teacher taught me the perfect formula for the five-paragraph essay. Since then, I have simply plugged information into this formula, while using correct MLA format, which has allowed me to be pretty successful in my writing courses, but does not make me a writer. Many teachers would argue that it is necessary to teach writing in this way in order to prepare students for college. However, it seems that using models and creating the perfect formula to teach writing can stifle a student’s creativity.

In high school, the inexperienced writer is often taught to compose in a linear sequence - without divergence. This is a classical approach that is taught in many respected academic institutions throughout the country. In the linear process, the student only complies with what is being demanded of him and produces a linear outcome. They strictly adhere to the rules given by the teacher and provide information sequentially, adhering to a specific organizational arrangement. Such is the case in most of their courses: they are given a model of how the assignment is supposed to be completed in order to receive the grade that they want to receive. On the other hand, more experienced writers - at the collegiate level and beyond - tend to use writing as a learning activity aimed at uncovering a deeper meaning. Experienced writers know that, in many ways, writing is a process of discovery. For example, through journaling or free-writing, the writer can uncover some new information about himself that he may never have recognized before. In my own personal experience as a fellow during the Southeastern Writing Project 2013, we were asked to draw a home from our past and then to write about it. I began to write about my Granny’s house in Chalmette that was destroyed during Hurricane Katrina. Before then, I didn’t realize that my Granny’s house was the place that I had considered my home, although I had never actually lived there. Similarly, through analysis, students can uncover a deeper meaning of a text, and through research writing, a student can discover new information about a topic of interest. However, for high school students, the composition process can seem very tedious and they tend to feel as though they are robots mindlessly plugging in information and following rules given to them by their teacher. We teach them to pre-write, outline, draft, then revise and edit. The students complete each of these activities in isolation, which only allows them to see the pieces and parts of the essay and they never get the whole picture.

Because of this, in many cases, students are completely detached from the work they are doing at the time since they are only focused on producing a finished product that will lead to an extrinsic reward. They see writing only as a formulaic method that, if followed precisely, will be rewarded with a satisfactory grade, instead of a tool of discovery. After reflection, I realized that this is how I view writing. I was taught to write using models, so I usually follow the model precisely and I provide nothing more or less than what was asked of me. Would it be better for students to be taught academic writing as a process of discovery, rather than a linear process that only produces an extrinsic reward or is there a way to present both methods to the students and

let them choose the method that works best for them? There is a place for the formula in the teaching of writing, but it should not be taught as the sole method of writing. Some students feel more comfortable following a model, but some other forms of writing need to be incorporated into their writing curriculum, so that they understand that writing is more than just an assessment. Teachers can integrate free-writing into their curriculum, such as we do in the Writing Project, to allow students to begin to see writing as a process of discovery, as well as a creative outlet.

Sharing Stories

Nikki Lombardo

The ability to share stories allows listeners to gain insight into the speaker or writer that may not always be visible to the naked eye. I tend to attribute my love for stories to my inquisitive nature; however, my family believes I am meddlesome and often, impolitely, call me “Nosey Nikki.” It is true that I rarely leave a place without meeting someone or learning something new. I guess this is why I also love to read. As I turn the pages, I bond with each character and better understand his actions or motives. In the same way, a teacher has the ability to connect with her students when she shares her life experiences, as a way to bring fictional characters to life and help the students relate literature to their own lives. In Frank McCourt’s book *Teacher Man*, McCourt shares how stories from his own life saved him in the classroom and kept relationships alive when he writes:

I argue with myself. You're telling stories, and you're supposed to be teaching. I am teaching. Storytelling is teaching. Storytelling is a waste of time. I can't help it. I'm not good at lecturing. You're a fraud. You're cheating our children. They don't think so. The poor kids don't know. I'm a teacher in an American school telling stories of my school days in Ireland. It's a routine that softens them up in the unlikely event I might teach something solid from the curriculum (McCourt 13).

I interpret this to mean that teachers have the ability to set the tone of the classroom and present material to students using life lessons to make connections with the text. Some of my most memorable experiences in the classroom occurred when a teacher connected her life to the lesson. As I listened to accounts of my teachers experiences, I unknowingly accepted the lesson, as well as the teacher, simply because of her honesty. Those teachers’ willingness to expose themselves to me and the rest of my class has greatly influenced my own teaching style.

My high school English teacher shared her opinions openly and frequently with the class, vehemently expressing her dislike of narrow-minded people, silly teenagers, and of course, high school jocks. However, despite her frankness, I immediately felt a connection with her. As a result of her candidness toward the class and her passionate take on life, I found myself better able to relate the real world to works that were written in other time periods. When I read the assigned literature and participated in class discussions and analysis, I discovered that I acquired a greater understanding of the text when I was able to connect it to something in my life. I recall listening intently as she told the class about her life. Her college transcript consisted of mostly C’s in English because, she explained, her professors never agreed with her interpretations of the work; this was her warning to us regarding college English. In another instance, when we were studying “Macbeth,” she told us that her husband was a pilot for Southwest Airlines. I vividly remember when she shared her thoughts on living in a small town. She believed that in a small town, someone could be important one minute and a nobody the next, and she felt this was her family’s experience following her husband’s dismissal from his job. She tearfully shared this account with the class and concluded by informing us that while he quickly relocated, her fear of the past repeating itself left her with a constant feeling of uncertainty. My teacher empathized with Lady Macbeth’s struggle to be a supportive wife during trials. Her beliefs and stories made a lasting impression on my life, and her ability to present the material in a way in which I could relate sent me to the university level with a love for reading, although I didn’t have the same assurance about my writing.

As I left the small, private school I had attended for thirteen years and entered college, I quickly learned that my instructor did not view my writing as “A” material, but the safe environment within the classroom and the teacher’s devotion to her students persuaded me to write anyway. She always made me feel like a priority, even though I feel certain that she treated everyone in the class the same way. She constantly encouraged us to have confidence in our writing while sharing her own writing accomplishments and disasters as well. Toward the end of my first semester, she asked me to take her English 102 class. At the time, she was working as a graduate student, and as she was also a student, she was better able to empathize with the class. Having earned an undergraduate degree in marketing, she regularly allowed that passion to overflow into her assignments, and for two semesters, I had an instructor who not only believed in my writing but also permitted, if not promoted, real world application.

Sadly, following my freshman year, she left Southeastern, but I began my sophomore year eager to take another English class. I completed British Literature and remember reading “Beowulf,” *Heart of Darkness*, and one of Shakespeare’s plays. Although I loved the literature she assigned to the class, I admired her stories beyond the textbook most. I reveled in her nonconformist views when she spoke about the world and her thoughts of the assigned reading and was astounded when she informed the class that she didn’t own a television because she didn’t see its purpose when she had so many books. I opened my mind to allow her views to touch me like pixie dust and declared a major in English Education at the end of the semester.

After I graduated from college, I taught for a semester before transferring to a local high school. I spent the summer decorating my classroom and preparing my lesson plans. I had my rules and procedures displayed on the wall, and as the students entered the classroom, I knew that I couldn’t smile until Christmas, lest they take advantage of me. I exposed the students to literature, writing, grammar, and listened to the veteran teachers talk in the halls. I reminded myself daily not to connect with my students. My heavens, I was only three or four years older than the students, and I had to maintain a professional relationship with them. Discussing anything outside of school or veering from the lesson’s topic would make me vulnerable in the eyes of my students and a complete failure to anyone observing me.

However, on September 11, 2001, a teacher knocked on my door and told me that I could go to the principal’s office to watch a live news report of the terrorist attacks, and she would sit with my class. I had not made a connection with the faculty either, so I nervously walked into the principal’s office, quietly stood with people I barely knew, and sadly watched the Twin Towers fall. Minutes later, I returned to class and continued my day as planned. I had too many questions; my mood had changed, but I trudged through the lesson, never allowing discussion of the day’s events to become the topic of conversation in the classroom. While the students didn’t know any details as it happened, they were keenly aware that something catastrophic had taken place and, as the day progressed, they slowly learned more. By the end of the day, I was discouraged and disappointed in myself for not talking about the tragic events with my students.

In the weeks and years to follow, I slowly welcomed the outside world and the thoughts and ideas of the students, as well as, my own into my classroom. I discovered that the more I connected with the students, the more the students connected with me, and the world. It was in making those connections that they began to accept the lessons and assignments of English class. If only I had followed my instincts and had the courage to share my life and my thoughts with my students on that day, I wonder how the dynamics of the classroom would have changed.

The stories that I heard in the classroom offered me a richer understanding of the text and opened my eyes to ideas, concepts, and impressions I had not considered, both in the classroom

and in life. I feel passionately about sharing stories and hearing stories from others to tie me to something grander than a place or a textbook. Frank McCourt used storytelling as a means of survival while building relationships and cleverly returning to the subject. The stories about his life saved his life. I don't know if any of my English teachers realized the influence their stories had on my life or the simple fact that I remember them. I wonder if they even think they made a difference or if somehow their stories saved their lives. I do know, however, that their modeling of an authentic teacher has made me want to be one, as well.

On Portfolios

Richard Louth

When Jessica Rushing, in our Institute, asked me for a copy of handouts I'd developed on portfolios, it made me realize how the handouts needed explanation and also how my thoughts about portfolios really weren't captured by the handouts. That, in turn, made me remember how I came to portfolios, what a learning experience they were for me, and how much they impacted my professional life.

My first two experiences with the concept of portfolios did not even include the word *portfolio*.

As a fledgling English 101 teacher at Piedmont Virginia Community College in 1977, I was required to use a system of teaching writing called the Garrison Method. In the Garrison Method, writing classes were based on the master/apprentice concept, where the teacher was a master writer and the student an apprentice. Though our class of 22 students met three times a week, it was not like any traditional class, for there were no textbooks, lectures, lessons, discussion, group work, or traditional grades throughout the semester. Instead, students were required to write five papers, four of them under the direct guidance of the teacher. Each class period, the teacher met every student for a few minutes and reviewed the student's paper-in-progress using a checklist divided into these categories: detail, unity, focus, coherence, and sentence effectiveness. While the teacher met with the student, the rest of the class sat at their seats, revising whatever paper they were working on. The first student might come to the teacher's desk with a narrative that had been checked off for detail and unity, and now needed a reading for focus. The teacher would read the paper quickly, concentrating solely on focus, and if the focus was adequate, the teacher would check the "Focus" box on a checklist that served as a cover sheet, tell the student to continue revising, and call up the next student in class. At the next class meeting, the teacher would read the student's paper solely for "Coherence," and if the coherence proved adequate, the student would continue revising the paper in order to bring it to the teacher the next class, when the paper would be scanned finally for sentence effectiveness. If the sentence effectiveness was adequate, the paper - which had been read five times by the teacher - was considered adequate, and the student would move on to the next paper. Students who completed four such papers under the teacher's guidance were assured a grade of "Adequate," or "C" for the course, and asked to do a fifth paper - an argument - totally on their own. That fifth paper was graded by two other teachers beside the student's teacher, and if the grade they recommended was an A or a B, the student received that grade for the packet of five papers. If the final paper was not exceptional (that is, if it was only adequate or inadequate) the student received a C, and if it was not turned in, the student was given No Credit for the course.

Even though we did not use the term "portfolio," we were essentially using a portfolio system. No paper received an individual grade, no comments were written on individual papers, revision was emphasized, and all papers were considered part of a packet demonstrating the student's capability as a writer. It's fascinating to me now to see how far-sighted this system was, and how by delaying grades it encouraged growth. Even the use of outside graders for the final assessment was ahead of its time. Unfortunately, when I left Virginia, I left this kind of system and this kind of thinking behind.

It wasn't until about 15 years later that I had my second experience with a portfolio-style system, again one that did not use the word "portfolio." This was a system that I myself devised, and it was a dismal failure. It was in a course on teaching writing where most of the students

were education majors resistant to writing. In this class, I had my students do a research project that was a packet consisting of a research journal, two drafts of a research paper, an “I-search paper” summarizing and analyzing the process that they went through, and an exam. Because of my own inexperience, I developed an elaborate grading scheme giving each paper in this packet some percentage value. The stack of folders collected on the last day of class stood about three feet high, and it was then that I realized I’d made a terrible mistake in designing a system that required me to read, respond to, and grade every paper in every folder.

Not long afterwards, Bonnie Hain, a new teacher in our department, taught me about portfolios and changed my life as a writing teacher. Bonnie had learned about portfolios while studying under Peter Elbow, a brilliant composition teacher who had created one of the first portfolio programs in the country. Bonnie had what was then a brand new view of portfolios. She saw them as tools that could be used for both assessment and teaching writing.

Her lesson to me in terms of assessment was very simple: a portfolio was a packet, and therefore should be evaluated as a packet. She showed me how it made no sense grading every individual piece in a portfolio when you are going to grade the whole thing anyway. I was dumbfounded by the simplicity of what she said. She told me to figure out how much time I wanted to devote to grading and to simply divide that amount of time by the number of portfolios. So, if I only wanted to devote two hours (120 minutes) to grading a set of 30 portfolios, then each student’s portfolio should receive four minutes. While that sounded like an absurdly short time to assess a packet of a dozen papers, it wasn’t. Since I’d read everybody’s drafts beforehand, I already had a feel for their writing. Moreover, since I was reading the portfolio with one goal in mind - to determine its grade - the task could be completed quickly.

The key, she taught me, was to understand the difference between “responding” and “evaluating” and how to use each at its own proper time. When a teacher responds, the teacher should say what she thinks of a paper and how it might be improved, focusing on just a few essentials. When responding to a draft, the teacher should not give it a grade, for grades are essentially a distraction in the learning process - something that students like to quibble about and waste time and energy on - time and energy that could be better used in revising. The more a teacher gets trapped into talking about grades or writing long comments to justify them, the more the teacher strays from teaching and the student from learning. Bonnie’s lesson was to separate response (a teacher’s authentic thoughts and advice concerning a piece of writing) from evaluation (the grade, pure and simple). She encouraged me, when I responded to drafts, to look for patterns in student work, to not mark every error, to be brief, and to return drafts as quickly as possible. As a result, I became adept at picking up students’ work at the beginning of each class, responding quickly while students worked at their desks, and returning it for revision by the end of class.

When the revised and edited work finally came in as a portfolio, she taught me it was time to switch gears from response to evaluation. My job then was simply to tell students whether their portfolio was an A, B, C, D, or F according to criteria I had already given the class. The easy way to do this was to set a timer for four minutes, pick up a portfolio, and skim it, looking for patterns across all the papers, and not making a mark on any of them. When the timer went off, I was told to throw the portfolio in front me, and then skim the next portfolio, either throwing it on top of the last one if it was similar in quality, or to one side or the other if it was better or worse. Portfolios tended to fall into five piles, and these usually corresponded to the grades of A through F.

Bonnie's advice was a revelation and a revolution. It took a little practice, but immediately I saw that my students did more writing while I did less grading, that my responses to their writing took little work, and that my grades became more accurate and easier to justify.

Bonnie taught me that portfolios were not only a good assessment tool, but also a great teaching tool. They allowed the writing teacher to focus on the writing process and on the writer. Since no one assignment in the portfolio outweighed the others, it allowed me to give experimental assignments that I never would have given before for fear of not knowing how to grade them. I saw that portfolios were also a great way to balance collaborative work and independent work and to balance tests, outside papers, and drafts. Portfolios allowed me to turn one assignment into a cluster of several related assignments and to dramatically increase the amount of writing my students did.

I realize now how much I owe to Bonnie Hain, who changed my thinking about portfolios *and* about teaching. I hope this essay will encourage readers not only to think about portfolios in a new way but also to reflect on their own practices and on those who helped them grow as teachers.

Dual Enrollment English 102 Pilot at Southeastern Louisiana University

Heather O'Connell

In the spring of 2013, I collaborated with Carolyn Waller and Jeri Gunulfsen to pilot English 102 for Southeastern Louisiana University's Dual Enrollment program. I believe the pilot was successful: 61 students turned in Proficiency Portfolios, and 60 passed the course. The one student whose Portfolio failed had not submitted final drafts for two assignments, and his course grade was 45%.

When Dr. Hanson asked me in the Spring of 2012 if I wanted to switch from the role of Dual Enrollment Mentor to Dual Enrollment Coordinator, he mentioned the pilot 102 program but the details were fuzzy. Originally, the plan was to pilot English 102 in 2012-2013, after a summer SLWP institute in 2012. A Board of Regents grant was written to fund the SLWP, and according to the grant, the DE teachers would be trained to teach English 102 using the Writing Project model and would incorporate the Southeastern's Common Read text into the 102 curriculum. I am not privy to the details, but some delay or threat of a delay for the grant that funded the 2013 SLWP caused Dr. Hanson to postpone the institute. However, we knew some teachers still wanted to pilot 102 in the 2012-2013 year, so I agreed to pilot 102 with only one or two teachers. Carolyn and Jeri were our choices because both are excellent teachers, Writing Project fellows, familiar with the Proficiency Portfolio, and willing to teach the common read. A bonus was the diversity of their schools - Carolyn Waller at Ponchatoula, Jeri at Bogalusa. Both planned to offer English 101 as a fall-only class from August to December 2012 and English 102 as a spring-only class from January to May 2013. I talked with Carolyn and Jeri over the summer about the 102 class, but we did not meet until the fall to discuss and plan the essay assignments.

When we met in early November, I suggested that I could collaborate with the Southeastern mentors to create the essay assignments for the 102 pilot. I was worried because in the Dual Enrollment English 101 class, the high school teacher creates the assignments and submits a course plan that is approved by the Dual Enrollment English coordinator. I feared Carolyn and Jeri would feel I was squashing their freedom, but both seemed relieved when I made the suggestion. I emailed the Southeastern mentors for assignments they had used in their English 102 classes and sent the list of the topics that I collected to Carolyn and Jeri, asking them to survey the students to find out which topics were the most interesting. Below is the chart I made from their comments; the highlighted topics are the ones we used for the 102 pilot.

Carolyn	Jeri	Topics	Essay
1	1	Beauty and Society	3
2	2	Body Image and Personal Identity	Midterm
4	5	Cheating	4
3	7	Film and Television	
7	6	Groups and Ethnicities	
6	4	National Border	
8	8	Politics of Food	
5	3	Violence in Sports	1

By the time we met in the fall, *Eli the Good* by Silas House, had been chosen as the common text. Carolyn and Jeri agreed to assign the novel for the students to read over the

Christmas break. I thought this was brilliant. Somehow they were able to attain copies of the novel for the students, but I'm not sure how. I included on the 102 course information sheet that the novel was required, but the students had the novel before 102 actually began. Dr. Hanson used some of the grant money to buy ten copies of the novel for students who could not afford to make the purchase. Jeri said she was using a school grant for her books, so I dropped the ten books off at Ponchatoula before the Christmas break.

I wanted to collaborate with Jeri and Carolyn on the *Eli the Good* essay topic, but because of our schedules and the distance between us, we couldn't just meet up easily, so we talked about teaching the novel over email from mid-December until mid-January. Our discussions focused on the themes, symbols, songs, and history present in the novel. I found one email I sent to Carolyn and Jeri saying "The students are going to have three topic choices for the *Eli the Good* essay. The first is a literary analysis essay. I am going to ask them to choose a character, symbol, or theme to analyze. I usually give them a list to choose from. For our first discussion, would you make a list of the characters, themes, and symbols you think are important in the novel and would be easy for students to discuss in an essay. The main problem students have with this essay assignment is they want to describe everything that happened in the novel. So as you make your list, think about the characters, symbols, and themes that would help the students go beyond the plot. Can you send your list by Sunday night? For this email discussion, please choose Reply All."

The next day Carolyn sent a document with this list as a reply:

I really like this passage and thought this really works with the tree symbolism and Eli's relationship with his father:

The beech tree says its old, true mantra: I am here. And this is a balm. But for the first time, the tree does more. Because it comforts me by reminding me of the last day of that summer back in 1976, when Daddy found me in this place I had thought was my own secret place, not knowing that it was his, too. (291)

Songs and artists:

The Beatles, The White Album songs: "Mother Nature's Son," "Blackbird," "Rocky Raccoon," "Bungalow Bill," "While My Guitar Gently Weeps"

"You Are My Flower"

"Softly and Tenderly"

"Blowin in the Wind"

"You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome"

"The Most Beautiful Girl (in the world)"

"Rubberband Man"

"Brown Eyed Girl"

"Dream a Little Dream of Me"

"Waterloo" ABBA

"Brand New Key"

"I Can Help" ABBA (Bought CD because I loved ABBA when I was young)

Bob Dylan: "Go lightly from the ledge babe, go lightly on the ground"

Leif Garrett

Steve Miller

Bay City Rollers

Eagles

ELO (Electric Light Orchestra)
David Cassidy (one of my favorites)
Queen (another favorite)
John Lennon (could relate his anti-war songs with novel, Stanton and Nell)

Novels mentioned was thinking the novels could be another topic maybe???

The Outsiders, The Diary of Anne Frank, Jude the Obscure, Charlotte's Web, Angel of Repose, James Michener novel quote: "Only the rocks live forever"

The same day, Jeri sent an email saying:
Here is my list:

"Let Your Love Flow"
the "Twist"
"I Can Help"
"Beautiful Loser"
"Brown-Eyed Girl"
"Blowin' in the Wind"
"Brand-New Key" (Melanie lived in Mandeville and recorded at Studio in the Country in Bogalusa)
"It Ain't Me, Babe"
"You Are My Flower"
"Softly and Tenderly"
"Now the Day Is Over" (This is a hymn.)
"Most Beautiful Girl"
"Mother Nature's Son"
"Bohemian Rhapsody"
"You're A Grand Old Flag"
"Blackbird"
"Rocky Raccoon"
"Bungalow Bill"
"While My Guitar Gently Weeps"
"Dream a Little Dream of Me"

We sent emails back and forth about interesting symbols we found in the novel, themes and the historical context, but I can't find those emails. I met with Michelle Bellevia, the other Southeastern instructor who would serve as a Mentor for the 102 pilot, and we used Carolyn and Jeri's ideas to create the essay topics for *Eli the Good*.

When the semester began, I went to the schools and talked about the Proficiency Portfolio and showed the students folders and the Moodle site. I posted all the assignments on Moodle with the readings and videos related to the topics, and then students submitted the drafts using My Comp Lab. Michelle graded the majority of the essays, about 65%, and I graded the rest. We used a rubric Michelle created to assign grades and focused our comments on what students should do to revise the essays if they planned to include the essay in the final portfolio. We did have some grades challenged, but not more than any other Dual Enrollment class. I went back to the schools during the semester: to show the students the *Reading Lives* website, to

collect work for the Common Read student panel, and to help them prepare for the final Proficiency Assessment.

Planning for English 102 in 2013-2014

According to my informal survey during the 2013 SLWP, Dual Enrollment English 102 will be offered as spring-only classes at Covington High by Stella Wood; at Fontainebleau by Colleen Hildebrand; North Lake Christian by Michelle Knox; at Ponchatoula by Carolyn Waller; and Bogalusa by Jeri Gunulfsen. St. Thomas Aquinas will offer DE 102 as a year-long course in 2013-2014, as well as Dutchtown in 2014-2015. Jessica Rushing at Hammond High is also prepared to offer DE 102 when the course is available. Raymie Bell and Jessica Kastner are prepared to teach DE 102 at the next schools lucky enough to hire them.

As the program grows, we plan to make some adjustments based on the feedback we received. Southeastern faculty during the Proficiency Grading process made comments about the DE 102 folders. Some graders felt that the Dual Enrollment students were relying too heavily on the *Word and Image* textbook and not using enough library research. I struggled with this comment because *Word and Image* is our departmental custom textbook, so I think that students should be able to use it for all of the assignments. Students were required to use additional research for all of the assignments, but next semester, I will stress the importance of the **library** research with a vengeance.

When the semester ended, I asked Jeri and Carolyn to reflect on the pilot and share what problems or issues they had faced. For both, the main complaint was the timing. The students graduated before the 102 Proficiency Portfolios were graded on May 13-15. Also, I was too slow in opening up the assignments on Moodle.

Below is a copy of my scheduled plan, but the dates were pushed back because of holidays and conflicts between Southeastern and the schools schedules:

Week of	Assignments
Jan. 14	Read course information sheet and Proficiency Notice; complete Syllabus Validation (in Moodle); begin literacy narrative (instructions on Proficiency Notice).
Jan. 21	Complete and discuss reading assignment posted in Moodle. Begin Essay 1.
Jan. 28	Submit first essay assignment to tutoring service in MCL. Revise essay.
Feb. 4	Submit revised essay to high school teacher in MCL. Final draft due in MCL by midnight on Sunday Feb. 10.
Feb. 11	Complete reading assignment posted in Moodle.
Feb. 18	Begin Essay 2 on <i>Eli the Good</i> . Submit first draft to tutoring service.
Feb. 25	Revise Essay 2 and submit second draft to high school teacher in MCL. Final draft due in MCL by midnight on Sunday March 3.
Mar. 4	Complete and discuss reading assignment for midterm essay exam.
Mar. 11	Peer review of literacy narrative. March 15 is last day to withdraw; deadline is 12:30 p.m.
Mar. 18	Complete and discuss reading assignment for Essay 3.
Mar. 25	Submit first draft of Essay 3 to tutoring service.
Mar. 29- Apr. 5	Spring Break
Apr. 8	Revise Essay 3 and submit second draft to high school teacher. Final draft due in

	MCL by midnight on Sunday April 14.
April 15	Complete reading assignment posted in Moodle. Begin Essay 4. Submit first draft to tutoring service.
April 22	Revise Essay 4 and submit second draft to high school teacher in MCL. Final draft due in MCL by midnight on Sunday April 28.
April 29	Final peer review of literacy narrative. Revise essays for Proficiency Portfolio.
May 6- May 8	Complete Proficiency Portfolio.
May 13	Proficiency folders graded

I cannot really speed up the common read assignment because the common read author for Spring 2014 has not yet been announced, so we will have to use the same create-as-we-go model as last year. For me, the common read was the most interesting assignment we created for the 102 pilot and the place the students seemed the most engaged. I was really impressed by the creative work that the students produced. You can see a video of the Ponchatoula students' creative work on the *Reading Lives* website (<http://english.selu.edu/readinglives/>) if you click on Student Presentations then scroll down to the video at the bottom. After Richard's discussion today, I am thinking that students should have the option to write about the creative piece they create as a response to the common read.

Jeri felt that her students waited to the last minute for the Independent Writing assignment and suggested that the students are required to submit the assignment on My Comp Lab for peer review or to the tutors early in the semester. I know that procrastinating is a problem, but I am kind of torn because it is supposed to be an "independent writing assignment."

Next year, we plan to use the same essay assignments, but they will be due earlier in the semester and closer together. For the pilot, I had to create all of the assignments. I had assignment ideas and materials to use from others, but had to create a cohesive unit in Moodle. We plan to use the same units for 2013-2014, so it will be easier to make all of the assignments available earlier. I am not married to these original assignments and will use new ones for the 2014-2015 year when we will have a new edition of *Word and Image*, and my greatest hope is that the SLWP fellows will help with the topics and the writing assignments.

Manifesto: Questioning our Questions

Jessica Rushing

A Dream Deferred
What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?
-Langston Hughes

Children seem to be hard-wired to ask why and have an innate desire to know the inner and outer workings of the world. And then they walk into my classroom, 14 years later, overfilled with apathy, and bearing the scars of a soldier stomped into submission. The questions inside them have shriveled into nothingness from hearing “because I said so” one too many times from one too many adults. The irony lies in the fact that we have instant access to more knowledge, today, at the push of a button; yet, the thirst to know has dried up. I have yet to be a parent, but as a teacher, I encourage my students to question everything. Question the motives, question the power, and question the world until you get an answer.

However, there is one point in which I defer from some teachers whom exclaim, “There is no such thing as a bad question.” Because we all know this is a fallacious statement. There is, in fact, such as thing as a bad question, and these questions have plagued my student’s writing, causing misery during the writing of research-based essays. I have encountered questions that are too obvious, too vague, too broad, and too easy. Is this a result from years of being asked the very same type of questions by a soul sucking society who holds no value in a young mind’s thoughts? I believe so.

When I encounter a terrible question, I try not to demean the thinker; rather, I encourage the student to dig deeper, to find the well of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that flow inside the individual. I value my student’s thoughts and have seen the flood when they begin asking the tough questions. The tough questions, oddly enough, usually revolve around “the why,” the how,” and “the what is at stake?” Why do we not care about the homeless? Why do we not have a solution for world hunger? Why do we live in such a violent society? How do we sustain the planet? What is at stake if we do not? Sometimes there is no answer.

Engaging students in asking questions beyond the concrete is an arduous swim against the tide. It is easy to get discouraged and give up, to sink beneath the power of the current. For so long, these young apprentices have been dejected and devalued. Many of them truly believe that they do not know, or cannot produce, any worthwhile questions (let alone answers). Students, thus, have stopped asking the why, the how, the what is at stake and now only ask, “Is this going

to be on the test?” or “How many points is this worth?” Just as their knowledge production has been devalued, the youth have begun to devalue knowledge. Why even bother knowing?

As educators, it is vital for us to ask them the tough questions and to value their questions. By encouraging these young thinkers to ask more questions we, as a society, can move beyond the wall to begin finding solutions to the major world issues generations to come *will* encounter. Furthermore, these tribulations have something major at stake. Thus, there is a call to action for us, as educators and citizens of the world, to produce authentic experiences for our students because we are simply running out of time. The tipping point is now, we need to break the dam, and answer the call.

Teacher Directions

Michelle Russo

I left the camp in Maurepas with intentions of going to Thibodaux for an appointment. I had two hours, so I wanted to find a different way to get there, a tiny hint of the adventurer in me. I pulled up my phone, did a quick search for directions, and the map app gave me three routes to choose from. I've always liked the freedom to choose, but the shortest, quickest route seemed like the most logical. And, doesn't it always?

As I began my trek over south Louisiana, Siri - the voice on my phone - provided me with directions aloud, telling me ahead of time that I'd be turning or changing roads. The overview gave me a clear picture of the roads I was on and my location on those roads. Siri would remind me as I got closer and closer to any change in my path, "in two miles turn left onto LA 641, in a quarter mile turn left onto LA 641, in 300 feet turn left onto LA 641." She is my guide and more often than not, I trust her on my little adventures. So, it wasn't until I was in Gramercy on a U somewhere in the middle of a swamp that, startled, I paused to double check where I was or where I was supposed to be going. It was there, on a road between trees and overgrown shrubbery, that I saw my trip - all my trips - as a metaphor for teaching.

Teachers look for guidance everywhere, hope for the best, most simple way to get where we need to go, and often we are okay with letting someone else lead the way, letting someone else tell us the plan. We have to have a plan. It's the nature of our trade. But, too often, I've found myself waiting for someone to tell me where to go when I know that I should trust my own sense of direction that always, inevitably, gets me where I need to go.

I recognize that we all have different vehicles to take us on our journey, and I believe that teacher autonomy is important, but I can't help but wonder what path, what map, what acid trip led us to the place where test-driven instruction is our destination. Several years ago, my former principal looked me right in the eye and told me to teach the test. As I gasped, he repeated, "I am telling you that what matters are the test scores. Don't worry about all that rah-rah relationships and rigor. Our kids need to know how to take tests." My vehicle drove me to the doctor the next day to get medicated. I'm so tired of feeling subservient to the powers that be, the ominous voices that tell me where to turn. These voices, like Siri, are trying to give us direction, trying to guide us, but I wonder if we, as teachers, take the time often enough to check our surroundings.

Do we look beyond the map and see what is behind us, ahead of us, or even all around us? Is it okay to feel a little lost along the way? And, does that make us inadequate, somehow? In the moments when I need to be most present, most aware of my surroundings, most clear about the direction I'm going in, I feel like I'm at a perpetual stoplight, waiting for someone to tell me how to teach what, waiting for someone to check my route on a rubric somewhere so that I can make the right turn and get to the right place.

Truth be told, we need guidance, we need the road to be there; we need a course that we should follow; we don't want to feel lost in a swamp somewhere. Good teachers, despite what the endlessly rewritten maps say, and the feeling of being lost sometimes, should always know where they are going. Honestly, if we look, the signs are there in our classrooms, in the way the students respond to us: the confused looks, the repeated questions, the roars of excitement, the relevant side conversations, and the pens that keep moving. Good teachers are made by the way they react to the present. Good teachers recognize the importance of honoring students' ideas and their need for guidance. The signs are our guides, and while I recognize the larger map that we

need to follow, that we need to look to in order to plot out our course, a diversion from the plan to foster student learning does not mean we are lost.

I know that test-driven instruction is not the direction I want my teaching to take. I know that I want to create life-long learners whose paths aren't guided by questions like "Is this going to be on the test? How many points is this worth?" Sometimes, with standardized tests and the push for accountability, it seems like we have reached the point of no return, but we are not at a dead end. We just have to be confident enough to trust in what we know and turn our classrooms in the direction that fosters real learning, real searching, and real writing.

In an *Old Friend from Far Away*, Natalie Goldberg writes the words "go" and "write" over and over again. She is guiding writers down a path towards memoir writing, but the metaphor remains the same. Writing is the map's key. Nothing else that we do can show the path of student thinking the way writing can.

If we are really looking for direction, the written word and the power it holds can lead us to our true destinations in teaching - a student empowered to do more than make the A, an authentic experience for them as learners, and a sense of fulfillment because we know we are on the right road.

A Lesson Plan for Crafting a Teacher

Carolyn Waller

Objective: In order to become an effective teacher, the student will apply strategies learned from experienced and effective instructors.

As a six-year-old girl, I enjoyed playing school in my room with my five, six, or eight imaginary students. The number of students varied daily because inevitably, just as an actual teacher dealt with absences, I, too, needed to simulate the absenteeism dilemma. My lessons to my imaginary students often started with a typical announcement: “Today, class, we are going to have a test on our new spelling words. Is everyone ready to review the words before our test?” As I called out our class’s words - cat, mat, sat, pat, hat - I awaited responses from my imaginary students. John and Mary always had the correct answer; they were the A students. Susan, a challenging student who needed extra time on her test, never had the right response on a test or in class. Her ineptness forced me to send notes home to her mother for not being prepared for class. Paul and Anne were mediocre students, and they received average marks most of the time. These teaching scenarios with my imaginary students were common occurrences in my bedroom and have actually become engrained in my memory. In fact, as every new school year approaches, I recall those moments that I spent in my room “playing school.” And now I realize that previous teachers, good and bad, all played a pivotal role during those formative years in crafting me into the teacher I am today.

Anticipatory set: An important lesson plan component includes “the hook,” captivating the learners. Attempting to immerse the students into the lesson facilitates the inquiry process.

Mrs. Donaldson, my kindergarten teacher at St. Joan of Arc in Laplace, La, was a kind, gray-haired, petite woman who made her students feel safe and comfortable. The days of me and my classmates playing in the sandbox with farm animals, painting innocent pictures with our tender fingers, singing Christmas songs as we rang tiny bells in our baby-like hands, listening wide-eyed to *Dick and Jane* stories, reciting the alphabet with our small voices, and playing show and tell all within the safe walls of our kindergarten family defined me as child. But these moments were more than that - they not only helped to define me as a child, but also as a person who would embrace learning. The foundation for learning was set before me like a field waiting to be tilled, amended, and watered. Mrs. Donaldson was my anticipatory set for my future years.

Guided practice: In order for students to master the intended objective, teachers model the concept and steps required for mastery. Allowing student collaboration serves as reinforcement of the objective being taught. Teachers facilitate and monitor this step closely since the next step involves independent practice.

Dr. Brian Schuster, a Southeastern education professor, taught me the components of a lesson plan. His method of teaching modeled the framework of a lesson. It was in Professor Schuster’s class that I learned how to create a lesson plan and take a student from point A to point B. One of Professor Schuster’s comments continues to stay with me, even though that was over twenty years ago. I can still hear him asserting: “You must see the lesson in a linear fashion. Ultimately, what do we want the students to know? To do? How can we get them to that outcome?” These words resonated with me and his words have left an indelible mark in my mind. Upon beginning any lesson or unit, I keep the end product in mind, and I scaffold the lesson in order for my students to find success and satisfaction in their learning. Dr. Schuster’s guiding and nurturing approach fostered my core beliefs and solidified why I teach.

Independent practice: Having students complete the concept taught independently allows for the teacher to measure the lesson's success.

Learning should never be boring; as human beings we love to laugh, joke, have fun, and feel alive. I knew that as a teacher I wanted my students to feel alive within my classroom, so it was imperative for me to have dialogue with my students as well as engaging lessons. Crafting innovative ways to teach complex concepts, classic literature, and writing was a priority. I wanted all of my students engaged, discussing, and contributing to the lesson. Being an idle learner in my class was not an option. I differentiated instruction to meet all learning styles in order to prepare for assessment. We danced in class, recited poetry, listened to music, performed interpretative dances to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, stood on desks and shouted our barbaric yawps - I did anything to lure that spiritless student. Oftentimes, my success rate was low for hooking those disinterested students, but most of the time those students succumbed to the playfulness of our classroom and found validation in our classroom community.

In fact, the realization that my students thrived lies within their commentaries of my teachings:

Victoria Bruno: My absolute favorite times in Mrs. Waller's class were the Socratic seminars and the barbaric yawps on our desks. Talking/debating the topics at hand as if we were on "The View" pushed everyone to delve more deeply into the literature.

Megan Monte: I loved the interaction! There was never a dull moment. We were either presenting something, working in groups, reading out loud, or acting out plays.

Amelia- Kate Johnson: I loved the group work we did. Also, I loved how much you interacted with us and really pushed us.

Emily Monteleone: In all honesty, I enjoyed every bit of your class, Mrs. Waller. The way you taught overall was truly remarkable. Though, what I enjoyed the best was how you broke down the Shakespearean sonnets line by line so we could understand it better. And of course when you would speak in a British accent out of nowhere! It made learning the lesson more interesting. (:

David Dobbs: I liked the way we could discuss our papers and revise over and over.

It is through my students' testimonies that I measure the successes and failures of my lessons.

Closure: A final component of a lesson includes having the students show mastery of the objective. By the end of the lesson, the student should offer an insightful response on the lesson concept and see relevance from the newly acquired skill.

I have come to the realization, after forty years of being that six year-old-child-teacher, that I'm fulfilling my role to myself. The closure that I have is that teaching is my chosen profession, and I embrace it because, for me, it's who I am. Teaching does define me. Yes, I'm a wife, mother, sister, daughter, friend, but I also carry the title TEACHER.

Confessions of a Nerd: Thoughts on *Twilight* and Potter

Natasha Whitton

Avid readers of fantasy frequently refer to themselves with the term “nerd” which was coined by Dr. Seuss in his 1950 work *If I ran the Zoo*. In this childhood favorite, the narrator Gerald McGrew intends to collect “a Nerkle, a Nerd, and a seersucker too.” Two recent series that have enjoyed nerdy popularity are *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*. I have a confession to make. While I teach literature in the college setting, I enjoyed both of these series. I guess that makes me a nerd. Last October, however, I found myself at a lecture on *Harry Potter* where nerds were celebrated and gladly associated with the series, while readers of *Twilight* were openly bashed. I didn’t understand this distinction.

I picked up Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* soon after the final book in the series was published and read through all four novels in a week. There were scenes that I went back to read again. The characters were clear in my mind. I got angry with them; I felt that I was in their world. I also experienced, while I was reading *Breaking Dawn*, what can only be described as a readingasm. I was sitting at my kitchen dining table. The rest of the family had finished and moved on, but I was still reading. I had become so immersed in the book that I did not anticipate a certain plot twist. I stopped admitting this in public after being repeatedly shamed by other readers: “Honestly, you did not see that coming? You have got to be kidding me.” I admit it now, to you. I did not.

After enjoying the books, I talked to other people about them, and I noticed something interesting. I could go back to the series in order to read a single passage and find myself falling back in. I would be up at midnight and realize that I was rereading one of the novels. I even found myself liking parts of *Twilight* better than *Harry Potter*. At least Bella, the protagonist, made a choice to embrace the person who she believed she was. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, the character of Hermione, Harry’s female friend, had drawn me in, only to leave me deeply troubled by the book’s end. She reminded me of my younger self with her messy hair, her bookish demeanor, and her bossiness. Throughout the novel, she is clearly the smartest, but she undercuts that strength near the end of the book while Harry is trying to build her up: “Me? Books and cleverness? But, Harry, there are more important things.” Of course there are more important things than books and cleverness, but though Hermione demonstrates loyalty and kindness, Harry is the hero, the one to be admired. Now, am I putting too much emphasis on these lines? Exaggerating their impact? Possibly. Do the books get better in terms of strong female figures? Absolutely. But, in that first book, I remember feeling disappointed. Why did Hermione have to discount her intellect? With Bella, I didn’t feel led on in the same way. I was furious with her several times, but primarily because she was acting like a teenager. So, what was I to do with this growing obsession with *Twilight*? Make a class, of course. I created a special topics class on *Twilight* in the Literary Tradition, and things started to go wrong.

The English Department where I teach has a 300-level special topics course that professors must apply to offer. My proposal focused the class on the *Twilight* books in the broader context of the novels and plays that Stephanie Meyer based them on. As an English major, Meyer was well read when she had a dream about a vampire and a human in a meadow and started writing. After she got the dream out of her head and on paper, her revision process involved adding new characters, delineating the story into various books, and looking to the classics for inspiration. The first book draws on *Pride and Prejudice*. *New Moon* is *Romeo and Juliet*. *Eclipse* is *Wuthering Heights*. And, *The Merchant of Venice* and *A Midsummer Night’s*

Dream inspire *Breaking Dawn*. For the class, I thought we would read the Meyer books, watch films to cover the others, and discuss the merits of each through comparison. Since these courses are special topic, faculty are required to advertise with signs interesting students in the material. So, I tacked up my posters of Bella and Edward using stills from the film version. The next week, they were gone. I had more printed, and again, they disappeared. Then headed to the faculty bathroom one day, I overheard this conversation outside the elevator between two English graduate students:

“Did you see that someone is teaching a class on *Twilight*?”

“Oh my God, yes, can you believe that?” [Bobby] took down all of the signs because he just couldn’t bear to see them.”

“Maybe it won’t make and then it will be cancelled.”

“I know, right?”

So, this was my initiation to *Twilight*-bashing, and once I went looking for it, it was everywhere, often prompted by comparisons to the Potter series. Facebook memes popped up with Stephen King proclaiming, “Harry Potter is about confronting fears, finding inner strength and doing what is right in the face of adversity. *Twilight* is about how important it is to have a boyfriend.” I like Stephen King. Unlike Hermione, he has not crushed a part of my soul. He has an excellent book, *On Writing*, though I will admit that I haven’t read many of his horror works. It’s just not my thing – my thing is evidently Mormons who write about vampires. The line in the sand seemed to be drawn – like Potter, you are an embraced nerd and automatically accepted as a *Twilight* hater, but like *Twilight* and you admit that you are a deficient reader who may be in serious need of a male protector. If you look into the novels and plays that inspired Meyer’s work, you’ll discover that some of those canon-worthy pieces were also derided. In a letter to Joseph Twichell, Mark Twain commented, “Every time [sic] I read *Pride and Prejudice* I want to dig [Austen] up and beat her over the skull with her own shin-bone.” Hardly high praise.

When the semester started, my group of thirty students was mixed – some had read *Twilight* and loved it (Twihards). Some had read *Twilight* and hated it (Twihaters/Potter lovers, you decide). Some, surprisingly, had not read any of the novels, and I was thankful to a colleague for reminding me not to make this assumption. We had a wonderful semester together, but frequently returned to the *Twilight*-bashing theme: “My neighbor can’t believe I’m taking a college course on *Twilight*.” Even those who came to like the series couldn’t quite accept their newfound affinity. On the final exam, one of my students wrote, “I can’t believe that I’m going to say this, but after all we have studied, I think that I may like these books. God, I need to go take a shower.”

This semester, I am teaching the course again, but you may not have known that. Last year, every 315 that the department has offered for the last five years was mentioned at the Potter presentation. Every one . . . except *Twilight*. And, once again, flyers disappeared soon after they went up. If anything, *Twilight* hate has intensified since the last time that I taught the course. My husband says it’s simple – Meyers shouldn’t have messed with vampire lore. Vampires don’t sparkle in the sunshine; they die! I think that the movies are partly to blame. Harry Potter got a series of award-winning directors and composers, along with well-established character actors. *Twilight* got two unknown leads that really fell in love, until she cheated. Wait, they are back together, no . . . sigh, he has moved out with his guitar. It’s hard to admit, but regardless of people’s reasons for bashing *Twilight*, I’m a fan. Has anyone read *The Hunger Games*?

A Most Beneficial Mistake

Stella Wood

As a 35-year-old teacher in her 13th professional year, I've come to question my place in this world. It seems that regardless of the quality of education and enthusiasm and commitment I bring to my classroom and my students, I still feel the calling to become a singer. I suppose this stems from wanting to feel the spotlight on me, to drink in the applause, and to know I was living the life I wanted - a life that meant I was living.

As a child, I moved a great deal because my father desperately needed promotions which kept us moving from state to state one year after the next. I remember feeling like making friends had to happen at a fury pace because I never knew how long it would be before we had to move again. Because of that, I found it necessary to find something that was "me." I had to give myself a title that connected to my identity. Early on, I had found my title - I was Stella Wood, the singer. As my journey as a singer began, so did that of my family.

Our family journey during my 3rd grade year took us to East Lansing, Michigan where I attended Pinecrest Elementary. The school year began and I learned that I was now a "little darling" according to Mrs. Darden. She would come in every day with her bright, obnoxious, floral patterned dresses, fake hair, heavy red lipstick - often much of which was on her teeth - and she would say, "Good morning, my little darlings." We filmed TV shows about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and for one show, I auditioned for a solo. Everyone told me what a great voice I had, so I was sure to get the "We Shall Overcome" solo. And why would I doubt this? After all, I was Stella Wood, the singer. Then Mrs. Darden announced that Janice Mallari would have the solo. I was stunned. Rejected. Devastated. At the time, I didn't understand why ½ white, ½ Filipino Janice was a better choice for a song about overcoming oppression than a 100% white, blue eyed, brunette could be. The rejection didn't stop me from believing I was a singer; it was just the first lesson in rejection regarding my talent. By the time 3rd grade came to an end, I was no longer oppressed; I had a dream, I had battled defeat, and through all that, I had found my voice.

My 4th grade year started at a Catholic school in Michigan. Then four weeks into the school year, I moved to Jefferson City, Missouri. It was in Jefferson City at Moreau Heights Elementary School that music became connected to my soul. It was the year of my very first school-wide assembly solo. Mr. Flowers, the music teacher, asked me if I would sing. He played the piano as my accompanist. There I was - on stage, singing, all eyes and ears on me - and I was hooked. At that moment, in that solo - "My Favorite Things" - I found my favorite thing - singing. Days at school got 150% better when lunch time/recess came about. A small group of us went to the choir room during our recess time. Who knows if we were really "allowed" there. But Mr. Flowers let us come in. We sang. We played piano, we played the glockenspiel, we played the bells - and I remember feeling more myself in that room with those people than I ever had before. I have no idea really who came in there with me. At that moment, my surroundings didn't matter - only the music did. When I left Moreau Heights and Jefferson City in March of my 5th grade year, I was worried that nothing would be better than Jefferson City.

We moved to Lansing, Michigan. This was the same school I briefly attended in 4th grade. A few people remembered me. One of my teachers, Mrs. Thorpe, realized I could sing harmony, so I suddenly became an alto in choir. I got the lead in the school musical, and as the "new girl" landing the lead meant that I was hated by everyone. A 5th grader beating out 6th through 8th graders for the lead role meant social death in middle school. I was also the fat

girl...wearing the plaid school uniform skirt - skirts were only allowed for 7th and 8th grade girls; the younger girls wore jumpers. Except me. They didn't make jumpers big enough for me. So I wore the skirt. The only problem was that no one could find out I had on a skirt. So I had to make it look like I was wearing a jumper just like all the other 5th and 6th grade girls. To achieve this lie, I had to wear a sweater or sweatshirt every day with the skirt. That was its own form of torture. Not only was the skirt a constant reminder of the big girl I was, but the sweater made me hot and uncomfortable - and my face was always beet red because I was hot all the time. The only way to escape the social rejection and the physical ridicule was to lose myself in singing. Another form of escaping the boxed-in feeling of middle school social life was by auditioning for the adult church choir. The director, Dr. Conrad Donakowski, let me, an 11-year-old, join. As a first soprano, I learned alongside adults what it took to give a good choir performance.

When 6th grade started, I was shocked that we hadn't packed up boxes again to move elsewhere. Instead, we stayed in the same state and I in the same school, and I kept singing with the adult choir. I was also cast as the White Rabbit in the school's production of "The Trial of Alice," and apparently, when you have to wear a stupid costume for a play, you are accepted back into the social realm of middle school life regardless of what theatrical role you are cast. I sang every day. I sang with Nikki and Angela. I sang in the basement with Natalie. I gave mini concerts to the stacks of moving boxes in the basement. I dressed in skirts with bike shorts, and combat boots and put on make-up and fixed my hair for my concerts to those boxes. Wow! What a show! No one could sing Debbie Gibson's "Foolish Beat" like I could. I went to an audition for the Mickey Mouse Club and got rejected. And then I performed to the boxes when I got home so that I could prove to the producers what they had missed.

And then it was time to load the boxes from the basement - and everywhere else in the house - into the moving truck. My audience was gone. Michigan was gone. Conrad Donakowski was gone. Mississippi was on the horizon. My grandmother called it the "Hell Hole." When school started that fall and I learned that I wasn't allowed to take choir until 2nd semester and that choir only met two days a week, I figured my grandmother was right in her name for this state. So I kept singing - in my room - to the mirror - hairbrush in hand as my microphone. School was there - a backdrop...People at school were just people who would one day say, "Oh, yes, I knew her when she was in 7th grade - I knew she had star quality and she would be a famous singer one day."

In those random moments when you suddenly realize life is happening just as it's supposed to be, I met a substitute teacher who had recently moved to Mississippi from New York and she was subbing until she could get her music studio started. She wanted to build a studio of piano and voice students. Sherry Neville arrived in Mississippi, thanks to her husband's job. We were kindred spirits because we both felt lost without music currently in our lives. Through the three years of being her voice student, we carried each other from hell and into purgatory in Mississippi on beautifully sustained pitches and phrases. Sherry Neville taught me about my voice. She taught me proper technique and she made me believe in myself. Then she began to pack up boxes. And I ended up with a new teacher who would see me rise out of limbo. Melanie Williams was the teacher who opened my boxed-in sense of self. She had vocal techniques and a competitive spirit that demanded I give more for the purpose of my musical future. My future opportunity came out of her past at LSU. Her pride led to my own pride. Her talent gave new life to mine. LSU became my next home, my heaven. My life as a voice major had begun. And then I experienced Armageddon in a piano lab class one day.

I fell apart trying to play a piece of music I had played in the practice room flawlessly the night before. Suddenly the fact that I couldn't tell my fingers to strike certain white keys or black keys became the first domino in a long precarious line up of everything tumbling down - down came piano class - down came theory with time signatures unknown, sharps and flats creating the wrong kind of discord, keys that no longer found a melodic connection - down came Italian words I once said well; they seemed to sound like the harsh, glottal German diction I hated as they came tumbling down around me and then my diphthong was back. It all came crashing down as I cried in the piano lab during what was supposed to be my test for the first level of piano proficiency. Level failed. In more ways than one. Boxes packed. And one box contained my voice and with it, my dream. I left LSU. And so, I began again. For if I was not Stella Wood, the singer, who was I?

To teach or not to teach? That was the question. It had been staring me in the face for 15 years. It had been gnawing at my heart for 15 years.

The confirmation should be in the words of former students. When I asked them, "why did you like my class or why did you like me as a teacher?" Their replies came back with comments that echo the benefit that I have been to my students.

Ashley Vicari said, "Because you care. You taught us both in and out of the classroom. You are one of the few teachers that everyday would push us to our personal best. You wanted us to improve and if we didn't then it would bother us too for letting you down. You made each day new and exciting and tried to put the information on our level and make us enjoy it."

Jay McDowell said, "I loved your class because it seemed like you really touched or had a great relationship with each and every one of your students. It seemed like you could talk to anyone of us as if we were your own real children. Just like the perfect connection you had with us. You had a beautiful personality and also your attitude was perfect day in and day out. You always told us a story or anything about your life and made an awesome bond with us. That's what I loved about you."

Jillian Carlos said, "Well overall, you are just real. You never beat around the bush. You tell us what we need to hear when we need to hear it...You tell us from the get go how things are run in your classroom and how you don't take anyone's shit. Plus you're organized. "

Chandler DeJean said, "That's honestly a pretty easy question to answer. First off, I think you related to us so it was very easy to have respect for you off the bat. I also knew exactly what you expected so I was never worried about asking the wrong questions. Also, the way you graded really helped improve my papers. I could just tell I was progressing as a writer as time went on in your class. You actually taught me how to write a structured paper. I didn't really realize that until I started writing papers in college. Honestly, I could go on and on Ms. Wood."

Their comments make me feel like I am a gift in their lives that they have been grateful to receive. I am glad I am the benefit (or gift) in their lives, but the mistake is the forsaken dream left in mine. That box remains unpacked.

Lagniappe
Stella

The rewards of reflection come into play when you look at the “big picture.” You don’t always see the rewards in a short-term spectrum.

Stella Wood

The White Girl, Monsters, and Geckos

Raymie Bell

As the door slowly closed behind them, I had never before felt such fear - that squeeze-your-eyes-shut, try-not-to-pee-in-your-pants kind of fear. Probably the closest I had ever come to that sort of paralyzing fear before was the time I almost drowned as a child. However, that memory paled in comparison to the terror I felt that humid night in a remote corner of the world.

Now with the final latch of the door, I was left terrified and all alone. With no cell phone, no pay phone for that matter, no way to contact the outside world, and no one who knew where I was - no one, that is, except the leader of our group - I knew that I had to survive. The leader, in all his wisdom, had decided that if I really *were* sick, I would have to stay behind until he and the other group members returned from the evening's events. It was an odd recuperation plan, but at age nineteen, who was I to argue?

I decided that, as fearful as I was, I would have to devise a plan - a plan to survive the three or four hours of my confinement in this God-forsaken outpost of eighteenth-century life. The first part of my plan was to barricade myself in the dingy, windowless room with a door that did not lock securely. I pulled one of the several twin beds in the room with its sagging, stained mattress in front of the door, wedging it as snugly as possible against the splintered wood of that door that needed replacing, oh, I don't know, maybe a decade earlier? I then pulled another bed into the center of the room. I figured that if someone, some monster, that is, some deranged madman, for instance, tried to get in, he would first have to push against the blocked doorway, barge through it, and then catapult over the bed before he could actually attack me. I would at least see him coming - would see who it was who would savagely rape and beat me to death in this far-flung corner of the world. It seemed like a reasonable plan. It was the only one I had anyway.

The other part of my plan to survive concerned the monsters *in* the room, the shiny, greenish-gray creatures that chased each other around the four grimy walls. I knew they were monsters, too, when one of them firmly attached its back feet against the wall, swinging its upper body, aiming right for me as I stood in the center of the room. I swear, that creature swung away from the wall with his front legs and slimy body three times before it jumped. A sort of one, two, three - "Whee! Here-I-go!" routine. All of this planning just so he could attack me. He wasn't fast enough though. I out-jumped him by two feet, anticipating his devilish plan. Recognizing his failure and figuring he would try again later, he quickly scurried back up the wall to join his friends in their little Indy 500 around the room.

I think I was as afraid of them as I was a raping, murdering madman. I thought, "If I just keep my eyes trained on him and all his racing buddies (when I'm not watching the blocked, unlocked door for the madman, that is), I can see them aiming, jumping, trying to attack me. I can then dive for cover under the far-less-than-600-thread-count, permanently stained sheets before they touch my skin." Like that would really help against the onslaught of the one hundred or so see-through, bulged, eyes-that-never-close reptiles of terror - the geckos of Southeast Asia.

My trip abroad began as a wonderful adventure for me, thirteen other college-aged students, and our adult sponsors. Our plans to sing inspirational songs and engage in humanitarian relief efforts on a tropical, Asian island afforded opportunities none of us had ever experienced before. The beautiful aqua-colored waters, the swaying palm fronds, the frenetic honking of the jitneys in the small towns and villages, the large prawns (we call them "shrimp" in America), the grilled octopus that tasted like I imagined a Goodyear tire would taste if ever I

had eaten one before - these are the myriad images of the island nation of my *Survivor* experience.

One morning, before arriving in the remote village of my solitary ordeal, our group traversed through lush mountain ranges and wide valleys in an open-air jitney with multi-colored bandannas covering our noses and mouths. Even with them, we were never really free of the dust and debris that assaulted our senses as our driver raced through intersections, honking at people and animals who dared to venture in front of him. As we approached one mountain pass in particular, our driver slowly inched the jitney across a bridge, a “bridge” made entirely of old wooden slats and ropes, a “bridge” perched precariously high over a green river valley stories below. When my side of the jitney tipped slightly toward the abyss, my bandanna made its way over my eyes as well. Because I was imagining the details of my gruesome death, I don’t think I fully realized we were safely across until we came to an abrupt stop several miles away.

Once I dared to slide the bandanna away from my eyes, I saw masked, armed men with Uzis hopping aboard the jitney. Our driver immediately raised both hands and began talking rapidly and passionately with the leader of our assailants, who then directed his young minions to walk down the aisle of the jitney, pointing those big guns at us. Before an Uzi pointed in my direction, my bandanna mysteriously and quickly climbed up over my eyes again. This time, the cloth was dripping wet from the tears that poured down my dirt-streaked face. The Uzis and their owner/operators traveled with us for several miles. The silence aboard our obvious death trap was palpable. A few minutes later, however, as quickly as they had joined us, the “terrorists” jumped off the jitney and waved us forward. Later, in the relative safety of another village, we were told that the men were merely trying to protect us from bandits in the area. Don’t bandits wear masks and point big guns at people? Again, who was I to question the adults around us?

Anyway, even that experience could not fully strip my memory of the swinging rubber band – that harrowing bridge-from-hell several miles back. As I thought through what had just happened, I reasoned that my Uzi-induced death would have been quick; the falling-from-the-sky death would have taken some time. It was a long way down to that beautiful valley. Therefore, I quickly forgot about the bandits, *ahem*, the “good guys” who tried to protect us. All they had taken from me, after all, was my peace, my sanity, my tears – things that could be replaced, I supposed.

Our next stop-over that day was in a *National Geographic*-nuanced village in another mountain range – a once-in-a-lifetime experience that put us in contact with a group of people who had never before seen white people, white Americans specifically. Not only had they never before seen white people, but they also had never held a mirror or even a piece of broken glass with which to look at themselves. (I’ll get to that in a minute.)

Their shock and awe over my particular version of the whiteness factor (the kind that has beachgoers shielding their eyes, laughing, pointing, and saying things like, “Look, honey, that girl covered her entire body with sand!”) nearly caused a riot as men, women, and children all jockeyed for a position to touch my arms, my face, my naturally light hair (at age nineteen, the color was more dirty blonde, rather than the golden blonde of my childhood), and even my white teeth. One scrawny, curious child even dared to touch my blue eyes. While they were open. While I was looking at someone else. With his dirt-encrusted little fingers. I wished I still had that bandanna.

While I was the freak in their little circus, I noticed something about them that made me temporarily forget my “oddities”: the villagers’ webbed toes - evolved from planting and harvesting crops up the steep incline of a mountain; as well as their charcoal and burgundy

decaying teeth - the result of chewing pitch-black and red berries that they believed increased attraction among the sexes. And they thought I looked weird. These physical traits, however, were mere vestiges of a society not polluted by *Vogue* or *Cosmopolitan*. I think if we had had a mirror that day, we could have compared the differences in the colors of hair, skin, and teeth that were prevalent among us and our little circle of newfound friends. I am certain that Margaret Mead would have had a field day writing about color and its influence on societal perceptions of beauty.

After such an eventful day, I eagerly anticipated a respite for the evening in a somewhat modern outpost of civilization – a little hotel with the promise of a warm shower and comfortable bed. I realized that the day’s travel, dusty ride, demanding itinerary, altitude variation, terrorist encounter, and a dirty little hand or two had finally challenged my immune system to the extent that blisters had quickly developed in the back of my throat, causing burning pain. Sudden high fever depleted my energy level, while a throbbing headache made the bumpy ride to the next village sheer torture.

While I certainly had not expected a Fodor’s-recommended or four-star hotel, I suppose my expectations were greater than I realized. Once we arrived in our dimly lit room, reality hit. The open “shower” in the corner of the room could better be described as a leaking roof after a thunderstorm, a leaking of frigid droplets that did little to soothe, warm, or cleanse my body. The sagging mattress did not exactly warrant the definition of a comfortable bed either. However, after the challenges of the day, a sickly body, too much soap, too little water, and too many lumps in the mattress, I was somewhat content in our little enclave of relative peace. Even though I probably needed medical attention, I was confident that a day or two of rest in this little room would help me get better - at least until we reached a larger city with twentieth-century medical services.

The next afternoon, as we were planning to leave for our mini-concert in a large soccer stadium outside of the village, the leader of our group noticed my red face and my sweating, feverish body. In a move that still shocks me today, he decided that I needed rest. Solitary rest. No other group member had permission to skip the planned festivities to stay behind with me. The other girls in the group begged and pleaded with him to let one or two of them stay with me. However, nothing altered or swayed his decision. Solitary rest, take it or leave it. I took it.

Alone in the room with nightfall approaching, the pace of the racing Andretti geckos increased. Their frenzied frolicking grew louder with each passing hour. Despite their competition, all those bulging eyes seemed to be centered on me – me, the girl with that inordinately white skin. I suppose, they, too, had never before seen such a hideous sight.

Even in the center of the room, my place of retreat into safety, I could not rest. I sat straight up in the bed for all those hours, watching the door, watching the race on the walls. I rehearsed everything that I had ever said or done in my nineteen years. Where had I gone wrong? What had I done to deserve death by gecko hordes, raping murderers, or dread disease? Yes, the disease that was getting progressively worse.

Yet, hours after the terror had commenced, everyone returned safely, offering hugs for the sleep-deprived girl who sat stone-faced on a single bed in a darkened room – the freakishly white girl whose pallor had kept geckos at bay. The girl with strep throat whose fears of a raping, murderous monster had never materialized.

After seeing a doctor the next morning, starting a course of antibiotics, and accepting an apology from the leader, I realized I had faced gut-wrenching fear head on and had survived. I had faced my fear all by myself. While I might not have won *Survivor* or *Fear Factor*, I knew

that my plan to stand up to the monsters around me had worked. At least that's what I would tell myself if faced with monsters (real or imagined), shiny geckos, and dilapidated doors again. I would now be able to tell my adult self that I did it once. I could do it again.

Mrs. Patsy Kay Field Turner

Mark Ebarb

I am sitting under a lanky oak in my black car, half covered in shade, half worried I am in the appropriate place. I scribble with a red pen; I'm not sure if this makes a huge difference or implies any anger on my part. It's 8:03AM, and according to my car's thermostat, it is 82°F. I see two small, bobble-headed black birds sticking their beaks into the ground. I'm early for the marathon; I wonder if these birds are late and missed out on the worm because they refused to believe the prophesying proverb. I hope not. Hunger makes me sad.

For a small second, I lose a sense of where I am. I do not know what "Hammond" feels like, but I do know that sitting alone in my car watching a couple of sunshine-headed kids play in the distance does not feel any different from Shreveport or Baton Rouge or New Orleans. These oaks do not seem old to me. Their arms only reach so far, but I wonder if these branches have any stories. I wonder how many kids tried to swing from them. I wonder how many kites fell victim to the timbers' phalanges. If they could talk, what would they say?

A Coldplay song just mellowed the inside of my car: "Look at the stars / Look how they shine for you / and everything you do." I have always loved these lyrics; they create an ethereal experience, one that allows for a galactic quest to a place of simplicity. Then I hear, "Your skin and bones turn into something beautiful." I wonder what the lead singer means. Is death a pretty thing? Consider a deceased squirrel with entrails hanging out on the pavement: its skin and bones are not pretty. In fact, they are a little repulsive. But we seem so desensitized to this grotesqueness. Why do *most* people not cry when a dead squirrel litters the pavement? It must be that death is not the scary part. If that were the case, we might feel bad digging a hole and killing grass. Or we might become upset when lightning hits a tree and sends it to its demise. Do we *really* cry because of the uncertainty of what comes next? In the instance of trees and grass, we know more will grow back. We have seen it happen many times; we are not unsure of the repercussions. When *people* die, there is no guarantee of where they go spiritually. Whether the body is buried or ashes spread, there is still that agonizing question: *What next?*

As I exit the car, I find a quaint bench under a hydra-like trunked oak next to a green fluted light pole with a plug box at the base missing its lid. The bench has two beautiful circular end designs of flowers with tendrils. Like Yeats, "I am looped in the loops" of these blossoming beauties. There is also a plaque:

*In Memory of
Patsy Kay Field Turner
1950-2010*

*"Playmakers play, Dreamers dream,
Dancers do your dance, Live and be Free."*

Based on the engraved picture of a profile of a woman with her hair in a bun, I guess this was a dancer at one time. It is funny to think that even though I cannot see her legs or body in this picture, there is something graceful and melodic about the whole experience. The curve of the iron-clad perennials on either side of the bench. The serpentine trunks and branches sprouting from the trunk of the main oak. The shadows of the leaves flickering at my feet like some spirit lives here. This woman's life must have been so beautiful. I wonder if Mrs. Patsy Kay Field

Turner feared death. I wonder how she died. I hope it was not painful. I hope she continues to inspire people to keep playing, dreaming, dancing, and living. Even though I never knew her to be able to forget her, I have a feeling I will not forget her now – or, at least, the remnants of this graceful entertainer next to the fluted light pole under the oak. I wonder if *she* ever considered “What next?”

As I stand up to meet others at the gazebo, a peculiar little thing happens. I turn to look at the tree that provided me with a few minutes of salvation from the looming heat of Mr. Sun and see the lost cover to the plug box. Maybe I should not call it “lost.” Displaced, perhaps. It was gone. And now it is not. It might not be in its original location, but it has not been destroyed. Is it any more *lost* than the spirit of Mrs. Patsy Kay Field Turner? I can sense both, and that makes me grin.

She continues to dance on my paper as my ink pen loops and scribbles and tries to do her justice. She continues smiling like in the picture because the sun just went behind the clouds and the wind has picked up. I revel in Zephyr’s zeitgeist as I begin walking to meet my new writing friends. My spirit is calm; I am excited to begin the marathon. Then I smile, dismissing that thought. *My* marathon has already commenced. Mrs. Patsy Kay Field Turner, may I have this dance?



Hammond Skate Park 10:15 am

Stella Wood

Although I like being outside, the fact that I sweat like a whore in church is a reason to keep me from being outside for long periods of time – or when I am outside, I have to reconcile with myself that I won't look pretty. So a date outside is not my ideal first date – I don't feel like I am making a good first impression. So after my conversation with Michelle and Richard and Colleen yesterday, I guess my writing is going to focus on ME like I wanted and why I teach - or why I should stay - or why I shouldn't. I really am ok with that as long as I'm writing about me more than anything else. I didn't want to feel like I was writing a research paper. But in a way, I guess it is research – it's self research. Who knows... maybe it will lend itself to sources and maybe it won't. I do always feel as though every day is a journey and that your daily journey leads to the journey of your life. It seems that somehow my journey has been structured and wayward all at the same time. Maybe at certain times I have been using someone else's map. That seems to be my biggest problem – that sometimes I do feel as though I have used someone else's map. Does the kid skating around here feel as lost as I do right now? Or does he find comfort in feeling lost? Or is he not lost at all? But am I really lost... if I believe that all things in life happen for a reason, how can I be "lost?" If it's part of the journey overall, there's never a truth to being "lost."

Apparently, sunflower seeds and Splenda are the food of choice for skaters. The shells and torn packets cover the ground under the bleachers. Do spectators come here often? Or are spectators as foreign to this public skate park as a skater would be to reading this journal? I don't know any skaters anymore.

Summer Institute 2013 Draws to a Close

Jayetta Slawson

*Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.
T.S. Eliot*

On June 20, 2013, the twenty-second Summer Institute of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project (SLWP) came to a close. The institute, whose motto is “Teachers Teaching Teachers,” is comprised of a group of teaching professionals dedicated to writing education. Throughout the two-weeks of all-day meetings, members gathered in DVIC 319 to inquire about and to share experiences on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which have recently been adopted by 46 states and the District of Columbia; to discuss readings, research, and teaching; but - most importantly - to write.

Each day of the institute was filled with what Director, Richard Louth, sometimes referred to as “moments of ferment” as the participants inquired: Who are we as teachers? What teaching moments and students have been most significant and why? The final day of the 2013 institute - as other days had been - was filled with writing and mining journals, hosting class visitors, and discussing issues related to the profession.



Heather O'Connell, Instructor and Early Start Coordinator for the Department of English at Southeastern, shared her account of the English 102 pilot, into which the Common Read was integrated. Photo by Richard Louth.



David Hanson discusses the Common Read program and site to which Early Start teachers have access at <http://english.selu.edu/readinglives/index.php>. Photo by Richard Louth.

English Department Head, David Hanson, gave an overview of the Common Read program and its website “Reading Lives” which Early Start teachers and their students can use. He discussed the upcoming visit of Yusef Komunyakaa, the Pulitzer Prize winning poet from Bogalusa, for the fall 2013 Common Read program scheduled Thursday, Oct. 24. He provided information for how the Fellows could access the Reading Lives/Common Read Website, attend campus events with their students, and have their students participate in writing contests sponsored by student publications. He mentioned that English Department GA Amanda Upton is available to visit schools of interested teachers, to bring computers, and to work with students.

Dr. Hanson encouraged fellows who were Early Start teachers to think about how they might involve their students in the Common Read as a vivid way for them to engage with a text. He mentioned that, while students generally buy a copy of the Common Read author’s book, there are some funds available to help students in need.

Raymie Bell mentioned that she had brought ES English 101 students to Common Read activities for Mat Johnson’s graphic novel, *Dark Rain*. She said her students saw the dramatic presentations, had lunch, and loved coming to the campus and interacting with an author.

The Fellows shared with Dr. Hanson and the group what this summer institute had meant to them. Stella Wood said this week was about building a sense of community that can continue after the institute. Michelle Russo added the institute provided a place to be a writer again and to look at writing from a revealing perspective. Colleen Hildebrand commented on the wonderful networking possibilities of the institute even as it puts the participants in touch with “the blank page we put in front of the students. We do have to write in order to teach writing successfully. That is what I am becoming invigorated with.” Carolyn Waller thanked Dr. Hanson for

supplying the life jacket of books, and noted the support system provided by Heather O’Connell. “It feels like it is a family. It is a community.”

Dr. Hanson said he was gratified the summer course had worked out so well, and suggested we need to find out a way to keep it going. Desk copies of the fall Common Read, *Pleasure Dome*, were then distributed to the members of the institute.

Michelle Russo encouraged Fellows to give a handful of copies of *The Best Teen Writing of 2012*, to use the classroom. The Fellows ended the morning by completing a survey for SLWP.



Richard Louth, Director SLWP. Photo by Jessica Kastner.

In the afternoon, the group took a few minutes to celebrate Writing Project Director Louth’s upcoming birthday. Then, several participants presented scholarly writing composed and revised over the course of the institute in an “Author’s Chair” event. Michelle Knox’s paper on “Developing Inquiring Minds” grappled with ways of helping individuals get their writing “into shape.” Colleen Hildebrand’s presentation on “A Journey made on Horseback” suggested that

questions of selfhood in a teacher's life could begin that educator's journey toward the classroom. Natasha Whitton presented a paper on a special topics course she developed and taught about the contemporary literary series *Twilight*. Stella Wood's presentation moved from humorous to serious as she presented on her "Most Beneficial Mistake" in which she shared that random moments can sometimes present the most helpful growth opportunities.

The afternoon session ended with a series of announcements including the July 1st deadline for submitting writing for the institute's publication. Richard Louth passed out a copy of a previous publication on Katrina and an example of an English 101 Music Writing Assignment. Each Fellow left the day and the institute with a fat stack of handouts and various books and materials to use for continued professional growth. Additionally, Michelle Russo recommended that the group continue the writing community through Edmodo.

The 2013 Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project was adjourned.



To move ahead sometimes means feeling as though you are moving backwards. Life sometimes rocks us around and we may feel like the curves in the path/road are too treacherous. But as anyone will tell you, when you are in a curve, you must lean into it. If you fight the curve, you only offer the opportunity for a disaster – a moment of lost balance.

Stella Wood

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