



# NEW YORK CITY WRITING PROJECT



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## A NOTE FROM THE Editors

At a recent meeting of teachers who have been affiliated with the New York City Project for many years, a veteran social studies teacher commented how difficult teaching is at this moment. Thinking about his students and the atmosphere in his school, he declared, "We are living in a new age of anxiety." Many of us in the room nodded in recognition. As we go to press, the environment in which we work could not seem more unstable. Talk of the war dominates the headlines, the city and state economy present the prospect of devastating budget cuts, and the very structure of New York City's public education system has been reshaped in broad, bold ways that will result in major shifts in administration and curriculum. We don't know what the future will bring on local, national, or international fronts. It is, at the moment, a challenge for many of us to remain focused on the details of ordinary life and the regular ongoing demands of schools.



Photo by Gina Moss, Bronx Coalition Community School for Technology

Linette Moorman and Nancy Mintz

In this issue of the newsletter, you will not find reflections on the current national state of mind. As always, our focus is in the classroom: on what our colleagues are doing and thinking about and on what our students have accomplished. Unlike the previous newsletter issue, full of "who's doing what" information around the Project, this "journal" issue features the writing of Project members throughout the city. We start off with Vanessa Santaga's "Blurring Boundaries between *Personal* and *Academic Writing*" in which she explores the importance of using personal narratives in the classroom. In "A Class of Immigrant Nonreaders Reaches Out to the World," we join Suzanna McNamara as she encourages her students to write from personal motivation. By using a story about racism chronicled in both *Oprah Magazine* and on her television show, Suzanna guided her students through the

writing process. In "On Reading, Writing, and Puffins," Griselda Guerrero tries to reconcile how her obvious success in getting her students to enjoy reading and writing was countered by their failure to score well on the standardized test. Changing gears a bit, we peer into Luke Janka's classroom in "Playing Around" and follow his students through a drama unit. Finally, we are pleased to present two works of poetry by Fred Arcoleo. We hope that after you read "Ramon at Dusk" and "Darker Shades of Truth" you might just be inspired to submit some of your own poetry for possible publication in a future newsletter issue.

Finally, we dedicate a portion of this issue to saying farewell and thanks to Linette Moorman, who, upon her retirement, ended her seven-year tenure as the NYCWP director. In this issue, many colleagues pay tribute to Linette, describing the impact that her grace and guidance have had on their work and on their lives. As many colleagues look back fondly on their years with Linette, the newsletter's editorial staff wants to note that our new director, Nancy Mintz, will be sharing her thoughts about the Project and its future in an upcoming issue.

We hope you enjoy all of these pieces and, as always, invite you to share your writing with us. We are always eager to help writers at any stage in the process! If you'd like to submit a piece, please contact Ed Osterman at [osterman@alpha.lehman.cuny.edu](mailto:osterman@alpha.lehman.cuny.edu). Our next issue will include our regular columns: Steal These Ideas, Resources, and Listserv Conversations. If you have any news you'd like to share with the NYCWP community, please contact Ed or any member of the editorial staff with the information.

NEW YORK CITY NEWSLETTER

# WRITING PROJECT

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## NYCWP SUMMER PROGRAMS

### 2003 Invitational Summer Institute

Lehman College, NY

June 30–July 24

### 2003 Advanced Summer Institute:

Literature and Technology

Eastside Community HS

June 30–July 17

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# TRIBUTES TO ..... LINETTE

**Linette Moorman** is retiring this year after serving as director of the Project since 1993. From her beginnings as a teacher in 1961 in a small town in Jamaica, B.W.I. to her "professional transformation" in 1980 when she participated as a fellow in the NYCWP Invitational Summer Institute, through the early '90's, when she co-led the Junior High School Writing and Learning Project, Linette committed herself to be an agent for change in the schools. A superb listener... to teachers, children and administrators alike... Linette embodies grace, courage and integrity. The heartfelt tributes that follow are indicative of the enduring bond between us and Linette.

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Linette Moorman came into my life and my classroom about a decade ago, when I taught a bilingual kindergarten/first grade in Central Harlem. Of course, I thought that I already knew everything about writing, since I had student-taught with a Teachers College-trained teacher and taken a summer institute at the Teachers College Writing Project. Despite my arrogance, Linette was patient with me, always letting me know what was working well in my classroom while steering me gently in the direction of deepening my practice. Over the years, she became my true mentor. When my district called upon me to give workshops, whom did I call? Linette, of course. She freely gave me hours in which we brainstormed and planned together so that my work would be successful. When I was going through job searches and needed wise counsel about changing my career from an early childhood/elementary teacher to a middle-school/high-school teacher, whom did I call? Linette. When I broke up with my boyfriend, was having problems with administration at my school, needed a holistic cure for whatever ailed me, whom did I call? When my mother passed away last winter, who stepped into the breach to let me know that mothering would always be available to me in many different ways? Linette.

When I came to the NYC Writing Project as a full-time consultant 4 years ago, Linette helped me to understand that even though I felt like a neophyte, I had much to share with my colleagues at the Project and in schools. Throughout the past decade, Linette has been my teacher, my mentor, my guide, and my friend. I'm extraordinarily grateful to be in her life, both professionally and personally. I'm not alone in missing Linette. I know that she's already greatly missed in all five boroughs: in schools, in district offices, in superintendents' meetings, at the Institute for Literacy Studies and at breakfast, lunch, coffee breaks, in all the small and large interactions that make up the work of creating a better educational system for students, parents, teachers, staff developers and administrators.

## **Julie Conason**

*Teacher-Consultant, NYCWP*

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Linette introduced me to tofu — not the tasteless blob I'd encountered in supermarkets, but a delicious blend with scallions, ginger and soy sauce. It was in the '90's, during a Summer Invitational that I coordinated with Linette and Marianne Rose. We traveled from three different corners of New York to collaborate— Linette from Brooklyn, Marianne from upstate and me from Staten Island. That didn't mean that we skimped on the time it took to plan. There were many long days for all of us, but these were days filled with enjoyment from our work with the group and our work together. Yet Linette still made time to create delicious healthy food and share it with us. That is her secret. Even on a tight schedule, with an impossible job, she takes time for a personal touch with style and warmth. Linette, when I think I don't "have time," I think of the tofu and try to make time.

## **Barbara Martz**

*Teacher-Consultant, NYCWP*

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Respect, affection, gratitude and awe are not words that people in the education business usually get to use when talking about their supervisors. Yet, in describing my feelings about my brief time working with Linette, they hardly seem adequate. In 1995, during my sabbatical, my first work as a facilitator was at her side, or more accurately, at her knee, in a mini-course at CES 23. I believe my contribution was to watch her with my mouth open. I felt like a Little Leaguer whose first game has him playing in the outfield with Bernie Williams. Perhaps that metaphor is truly apt, for like Williams, Linette plays the game with a high quality of grace, intelligence and skill. I would say I was lucky to work with her, but I suspect I was blessed.

*For you, Linette:*

### **Parted**

I will miss your smile  
From which there is no escape.  
It is there in the turn of the road—  
The wave of a hand's good-bye.

The wave of a hand's good-bye,  
It is there in the turn of the road  
From which there is no escape.  
I will miss your smile

### **Joe Bellacero**

*Evander Childs HS  
Teacher-Consultant, NYCWP*

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The first thing to note about Linette Moorman is that she is beautiful. I don't mean simply physical appearance, although that is certainly the case. She is beautiful in spirit and character. She embodies a generosity and exudes a humanity that transcend the ordinary. To work with her, to be part of her orbit, is to ascend into a rarefied atmosphere. It has been evident in her role as director of the Writing Project, in her work with individual teacher-consultants, in her chairing of various workshops, committees and reviews. She has the unique ability to make you feel as if you are the center of her attention.

To recount the many times that her person and her work have astonished me would take much too much space to recapitulate. What impresses is her belief in the work, her commitment to the teacher-consultants, her empathy for those out in the field struggling against insuperable odds to perform the daily job well. She is a realist as well as an idealist, a role model for us all. What stands out from all the years I've worked with her and for her is an innate dignity that lifts her above the menial details of the work, that allows her to triumph over arrogance and rudeness, and that permits her authority to prevail.

I would say that over the years, I've fallen a little bit in love with her.

## **Alan Stein**

*Teacher-Consultant, NYCWP, retired*

One memory I have of Linette goes back to the days when we were beginning to work with community districts in Brooklyn in the early '80's. We were trying to choose schools for our new elementary program, and we were set to visit five schools from which we were to choose two. On each occasion just before we approached the school entrance on our way to meet with the principal and teachers, Linette would disappear and then reappear about five minutes later. Was she joining the basketball game in the school yard? After this happened three or four times, I finally asked her what was going on. "I'm getting information," she said, "from the people who really know what's happening - the security guards, and the other adults in the yard." This proved to be the crucial piece of information we needed for our decision, and saved us from trying to implement a program in places where chaos reigned under the surface.

**Richard Sterling**  
*Director, National Writing Project*

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 Linette is a leader who offered me the opportunity to pursue both professional and personal goals. She created an enjoyable workplace that was rich in trust, respect and fairness. Her support gave me courage to reach goals I had set for myself. She praised my work when I was heading in the right direction, and was always there with helpful advice when I was discouraged.

**Paul Sunda**  
*Operations Coordinator*  
 Institute for Literacy Studies

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 What city person, squeezed by the constraints of a city apartment, can ever forget her first visit to Linette's generously proportioned and lovely home in Brooklyn? All those chairs, occupied by WP-ers, in the double parlor.... AND a grand piano. All those family photos on actual tables. Seemingly endless numbers of rooms and alcoves for breakout discussions. Many bagels. Much orange juice. License to take over the kitchen. A real back staircase, like the one in the old television series *Family*. Best of all, the gracious and thoughtful presence of Linette, whose quiet and charismatic management style teaches us by example what we need to know about leadership.

**Benita Daniels Black**  
*Teacher-Consultant, NYCWP*

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 For six years I saw Linette Moorman at work, first-hand. Certain things need to be a matter of public record:

1. She was fearless and thoughtful when tackling challenging projects, like borough-wide literacy initiatives, in-service or national conferences, and yearly administrators' meetings. She wanted the work to feel both fresh and grounded. It always had to address the audience's concerns. She gathered journal articles and books written by educators she respected and then quietly read for weeks, before talking with anyone. She conferred with knowledgeable colleagues: Marcie Wolfe, Elaine Avidon, Cecelia Traugh, Nancy Mintz, Linda Vereline, and many others. She then thought about the teachers who could carry out this work with her. Who *had* to be involved? Who could bring something necessary and valuable? At a crucial point, the thinking became more public; plans were shared and revised among our group of on-site teacher-consultants and other ILS staff members. And despite all this careful work, there was always a flurry of last-minute decisions, minor but crucial changes. Her process was not mine, and sometimes it drove me nuts! But Linette always modeled collaboration, and the results were usually splendid.
2. No matter how many phone calls had to be answered or reports written (and there were, trust me, more than any of you might imagine), Linette always made time to work one-on-one with her colleagues: to help them design an in-service course, prepare for Staff Development Day, or figure out how to approach a difficult

meeting. The office door would close. She'd ask questions about context, listen hard, and look at what you prepared. She then made suggestions, offered reasons for her thinking, and sent you off, feeling more secure.

3. At city-wide meetings, Linette often had the courage to say the hard things, the uncomfortable truths that other people at the table might not want to voice or acknowledge. She said them and did so with grace.
4. Linette was amazing at networking. Over the years, she kept in touch with dozens of teachers, often calling someone to touch base, to find out what they were doing, to see how, when, or if they might have some time for the Project.
5. Finally, Linette always believed in the Writing Project: its values, its vision, and its belief in the power of teachers coming together to share their work and learn from each other for the purpose of transforming children's lives.

**Ed Osterman**  
*Associate Director, NYCWP*

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 In the summer of 1984 I took my first New York City Writing Project course. From the beginning I was hooked. I had read about the writing process, but here was an opportunity to immerse myself in writing, to learn all kinds of wonderful strategies to teach writing, and to share my writing and learning with colleagues in middle school, high school, and college. Yet I still wondered how I would bring all of this back to my elementary classroom in the fall. And then one day Linette came in to class, presenting the work she did with her second graders in Brooklyn, and inspiring all of us with her knowledge, her warmth and her passion for teaching.

Afterwards, as others in the class talked about how they wished they could go back to second grade to be in Linette's class, I felt proud and fortunate to be in the company of such a teacher, a master teacher who deeply understood children and pedagogy and knew how to work in a public school system that often makes it so difficult for teachers to teach and children to learn. I hoped that I would have the opportunity to learn more from Linette when I returned to my classroom in the fall.

Since that summer, I have had many opportunities to learn from Linette. First, as one of a small group of elementary teachers meeting monthly on Saturdays, she helped me understand how I could adapt what I had learned about writing to a large class of second- and third-graders. Later on, as I watched Linette move into leadership roles within the Writing Project, I marveled at her intelligence, her tact, and perhaps most of all, the stands that she took about issues she believed in. When Linette invited me to become a teacher-consultant three years ago, I didn't hesitate. I was ready to take on the schools in the Bronx, and I knew that Linette would provide the support and leadership I needed to do the job.

Thank you for everything you've taught me, Linette.

**Laura Schwartzberg**  
*Teacher-Consultant, NYCWP*

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 Nearly eight years ago, Linette Moorman took me under her wise and sturdy wing. I can think of no greater place to have been given shelter. Yet it is on a day like today, with a deadline fast approaching, that I am paralyzed in my attempts to capture the well of emotions I feel, or to name all that she has helped me to see.

This is a most daunting task, because in my head there is this montage of shots and images and memories: of readying for the fight; of the cool and tempered burst of wind; of energy toppling exhaustion; of expecting more, always more; of mountains of wisdom and boundless generosity. How do I find that one moment, that one memory, which scoops it all up and captures it?

Here is my feeble attempt. A dear friend of mine was at my home for a gathering. The next day she called me and with great excitement in her voice said, "Your boss Linette! My God, I could listen to her all night."  
 Fortunately for me, I did. Lots of times.

**Debi Freeman**  
*Teacher-Consultant, NYCWP*

# BLURRING BOUNDARIES

between *personal* and *academic*

# WRITING

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*As an undergraduate, Vanessa Santaga sought out teachers who acknowledged the role that personal writing plays in the development of a student's growth as a critical thinker. She looked for classes in which she could bring her personal experience to her analyses of text. As a teacher, her own students don't have to look very far for such freedoms. By inviting students' experiences into the classroom, she blurs the boundaries between the personal and the academic. This is not only an interest of hers in her own classroom, but in her doctoral work in English Education at New York University.*

Vanessa L. Santaga  
Kingsborough Community College

I first became acquainted with the argument that denies the importance of personal experience in academic writing as an undergraduate English major at Dartmouth College. The rift between the *personal* and the *academic* was reflected in the course offerings in the Department. The highly academic English Department only offered four writing courses: Introduction to Creative Writing, Creative Writing Fiction, Creative Writing Poetry and Creative Writing Non-Fiction. The other courses in the Department were literary criticism courses; students were expected to leave their personal experience out of their analyses. Because of the English Department's position, I searched outside the Department for instructors who invited students to make personal connections to texts and in essays. I found several non-fiction writing courses in the Environmental Studies Department that encouraged me to read texts and consider my personal experience when writing response papers. As I wrote personal narrative pieces in the Environmental Studies courses, I grew as a reader, writer and learner. I solidified and questioned my beliefs and understandings. I changed the way I approached not only writing, but creative and critical thinking as well.

I met with conflict when I visited the Vice Chair of the English Department and requested that my Environmental Studies courses be applied to my English major. The Vice Chair aligned himself with those in academia who believe that the personal and the academic exist as a strict dichotomy. I urged him to see the value of my personal connections to the texts and how these connections, when articulated in a paper, honed my critical thinking and writing skills. But I had no luck. The Vice Chair was not ready to acknowledge personal experience as anything more than something that should continue to be compartmentalized away from academia.

Perhaps the reason why the Vice Chair wanted to keep students' personal experiences separate from the work they completed in the English Department is because personal experience does not exist in a neat box. Personal experience is a variable that challenges "expert" interpretations. Certainly, reading Shakespeare and analyzing what is being said according to one professor's expert interpretation leaves less room for surprises than analyzing Shakespeare in the contexts proposed by 25 individual students. Professors definitely have it easier if personal experience is not part of students' analyses of texts. However, it is this challenge and conflict of experience that engages students and professors alike in an ongoing effort to rethink and reshape what they know and how they know it.

Because my experience with the Vice Chair and my present experience as a teacher exist along a continuum that is constantly engaged in a dialogue, my own freshman composition and basic reading and writing classrooms provide students with opportunities to write about their experiences (the Vice Chair did not get the last laugh). I begin every course I teach with an essay assignment that asks students to share something meaningful about themselves through an autobiographical narrative. We read a variety of non-fiction narratives before and during the writing process so that students become familiar with authors who have conveyed meaning by simply sharing significant stories from their lives. In sharing their stories, these authors, Maya Angelou, Joan Didion and John Edgar Wideman among them, teach their readers lessons and make their readers think; it is a subtle art, not an explicit, didactic formula.

For my students, sharing stories in the context of a classroom, a place in which they have typically engaged in the more mundane academic writing exercises (writing summaries and five paragraph

theme essays, for example), presents an interesting and sometimes puzzling juxtaposition. To many students, stories of personal experience are to be told out of the classroom. Students share stories to convey meaning to their parents about how they are doing in school, or to convey meaning to their friends about how their dates have been going, or to convey meaning to their boyfriends/girlfriends about why they are in a bad mood. All of these everyday stories they tell, some more meaningful than others, exist outside of the confines of academia. Because students are generally well-practiced in storytelling in their outside-the-classroom realms and they are not as practiced in conveying meaning in a more academic format, creating a bridge between the two meaning-making activities can often be an effective way to help students use what they know to learn what they are on the brink of understanding.

Before these new understandings can be achieved, the stories the students write and how they work at conveying meaning within them must become part of their consciousness. In my classroom, this process takes place as students begin to deconstruct their own and others' stories to see how meaning is created. A student may, for example, notice how he focused on the two-hour period of his life when his parents told him they were getting divorced to represent the experience of divorce as a whole. Another student may notice how she never wrote "I was excited," but instead described the setting with words that convey excitement. Yet another student may notice how his classmate's story did not contain "what I learned from this situation was..." because the lesson naturally unfolded as the story approached its ending. All of this noticing, done within the classroom with my support, takes what may be perceived by skeptics as simply "personal" and raises it to a level of reflection that character-

izes academia. Yet, the advantage of using students' stories rather than other material as the springboard is that students are already familiar with the content because it comes from an organic place—their experience.

At the point at which students seem to have mastered an understanding of the qualities of their autobiographical narratives that make them work—focus, descriptive details, logical sequencing of events, appropriate language (not necessarily “standard” English), evocativeness—we transition to a discussion of how to write essays that use not only their experiences, but also texts we have read, to convey meaning. In that discussion, we ask the question, how do texts affect our understandings of our own and others' lives? As we consider the question, students begin to see that texts can enrich and expand their understandings of their experiences and therefore, provide them with another layer of meaning to explore within their essays.

We move from personal narrative to what I like to call “text-based” essays. I prefer “text-based” to “analytical” or “academic,” as personal narrative may not be explicitly analytical, but I would argue, if written well, is implicitly analytical. “Text-based” acknowledges that a text plays a significant role in the essay, but it does not preclude experience, if students choose to incorporate it as well. As a bridge activity, we discuss how the qualities of their effective autobiographical narratives transfer or do not transfer when writing about texts. Students generally come to a consensus that certain qualities transfer directly: there is one event that serves as the focus for their autobiographical narratives, and there will be one aspect of the text that will serve as the focus for their text-based essays; there are descriptive details to show the reader the meaning of their autobiographical narratives, and there will be descriptions and quotes from the text to show the reader meaning in their text-based essays; a logical sequencing of events helps their autobiographical narratives flow, making them easy to follow, and a logical sequencing of paragraphs, revealing their analyses of the text(s), will be selected for their text-based essays; they use appropriate, often informal, language for their autobiographical narratives, and they will use appropriate, although more formal, language for their text-based essays. The qualities of their essays that transfer smoothly, although crucial to their understanding of effective essay writing, are not as discussion inspiring as those that do not transfer as smoothly. The class often engages in a thought-provoking discussion as to why meaning may have to be conveyed in a more explicit way in their text-based essays than in their autobiographical narratives. Part of that discussion includes the

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*To many students, stories of personal experience are to be told out of the classroom... All of these everyday stories they tell, some more meaningful than others, exist outside of the confines of academia.*

necessity of opening and closing paragraphs to help guide the reader in their text-based essays in ways that unfolded more naturally in their autobiographical narratives.

By the end of the discussion, which generally occurs over two days and includes the use of student-generated and published writing, students have a conscious understanding of how the strategies they have employed while writing their autobiographical narratives apply to writing text-based essays. As an example of the positive results that come from encouraging students to bridge the personal and academic, I will share the story of one student, Anna<sup>1</sup>, who used her own experience making a decision about her pregnancy to further her understanding of Robert Frost's “The Road Not Taken.” Anna not only wrote a comparison between herself and the narrator in Frost's poem, but also addressed the differences between the two. In the process, she

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*... students begin to see that texts can enrich and expand their understandings of their experiences and therefore, provide them with another layer of meaning to explore within their essays.*

raised some critical questions regarding her own experience as it fits into the greater context of decision making. Anna wrote:

Like Robert Frost, I also came across a rough decision in my life because of the actions I chose to perform. “Should I keep this baby?” haunted me for three months, day in and day out. All types of questions and issues arose in my head: How would I take care of this baby? Is he [the father] going to be there like he says he is? What would my parents/friends think? How can I start college? What kind of future would we have? Is it wrong not to have the baby? You can imagine the type of agony I was going through at this time.

I too looked at both possibilities and like Frost says, “looked down one as far as I could.” I looked into my future, at least twenty years down the road to see where I would be if I decided to keep the baby and where I would be if I decided not to keep the baby. Both choices did have pros and cons to them, but I still couldn't make up my mind. I detached myself from the world and just made believe I was the only one with the decision to make, because I thought it was only going to affect me in the long run; I still believe that. Sometimes I just wished that everything would go away including me. I wished that I didn't have to make a decision that it would just go away and stop haunting me. I thought to myself, “What did I do to deserve this?” I took it as a punishment.

Anna's decision-making process takes the narrator's decision-making process in Frost's poem and elevates it to a new level of complexity. In earlier paragraphs in her essay, Anna analyzes the narrator's decision-making process and although her analysis is solid, Frost does not provide enough detail in the poem for her to really assess the process in any great depth. Her own decision-making process, however, provides her with that opportunity. Anna has the details of her own situation, details that she does not have about the narrator. The specific decision to be made, for example, is not provided in Frost's poem; Anna uses her own specific decision to expand her analysis where Frost simply leaves her wondering.

Anna's essay is not an isolated case. There are many students whose critical thinking and writing skills flourish as they move from what is familiar to what is new and uncharted. The distance between students' lives and academia will continue to narrow for students only if classroom practice invites students' experiences into the classroom. The work that students are capable of generating when they move fluidly between their personal experiences and their academic pursuits is insightful and original. The personal gives birth to original thought in that it is the one aspect of a student's repertoire of skills and knowledge in which the student is the expert. As teachers, we must consider how classroom practice can continue to blur the boundaries between the personal and the academic so that students' have the opportunity to learn to become meaning-makers in any context.

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym has been used to protect the students anonymity.

# ON READING, WRITING and PUFFINS

Griselda Guerrero  
PS36

I think it was the disappointment that got to me last year. I felt physically ill and disgusted after marking the EPAL, the two-day reading and writing exam my second graders took last May. Nothing else has made me feel more like a failure. Out of a three (three being the highest) two of my students received a zero, five received ones, and about twelve received two minuses. Those children who did manage to pass, did so just barely. This was the exam that would follow them to the next grade, the one that would stay in their cumulative record, the one that defined what they had learned in my class, the one that defined me as a teacher.

The year had not started out so dismally. In fact, the year had been pretty successful. I began with a mixed-ability class with a wide academic range. My students were not all enthusiastic about school, as by this tender age some had already begun to have difficulty with literacy. In particular, I remember Raul. When Raul entered my class, he disliked school. He especially hated reading, and writing was a task he never imagined he would choose to do. In September, he was struggling to read at a beginning first-grade level. I knew I needed to get him to relearn the joy of learning. That was going to be a challenge.

I set about my task diligently, creating a community of learners with small, flexible reading groups. I found reading material that they could enjoy and with which they could feel successful. We read everything, from Spiderman to *All About Spiders*. We read together and they read alone, books that they chose, books at their level. We also wrote a lot. Not essays and reports (that came later), but timelines, personal narratives, letters to their favorite authors and fairytales with humorous plots where the characters met characters from other fairytales. And unbeknownst to them, they were learning very important things, like story elements, plot, character strengths and character flaws (they especially had fun analyzing Rumpelstiltskin).

They practiced writing for themselves in journals and writing for others by publishing books. Raul became a successful learner in my class. He learned to read and enjoyed reading. He learned to write and enjoyed writing. Imagine my surprise when Raul informed me that he had learned "if [snakes] move on a soft surface it (sic) will get stuck, if it moves on

a rough surface it will move" from reading the snake book from our class library. He included that fact in his notes and it made its way into his nonfiction book, "Amazing Snakes," which he read (proud author) to a first grade class. He also helped Melissa learn about nonfiction books, and whispered to me afterwards, "She didn't even know what a glossary was, Ms. G."

My classroom was a model classroom. My administrators were proud of the success my students were achieving and often invited other teachers to visit and see my teaching practices. The students were proud of themselves. Raul liked to read and write. Then came the EPAL.

The two-day reading and writing test is broken into two sections: "Listening" and "Reading." On day one, "Listening," I am to read aloud to the students the story that is printed in the teacher's test manual. I am directed to read the story twice, after which the students are expected to fill in a graphic organizer and answer an essay question using details from the story. The exam is not timed but most children finish within the first 15-45 minutes. On day two, "Reading," the children are expected to read to themselves the story printed in their test booklet and then to fill in a graphic organizer and answer an essay question using details from the story.

Preparing for this exam changed the tone of learning in my class. Although everything the children had learned could be applied to this test, they knew it wasn't the same. They were learning how to take a test--listen and answer a question, read and answer a question. My administrators were pushing for higher scores: "We need higher scores to get more funding"; "We do not want to get on the SURR list"; "The superintendent wants to see if the money she is sending us is being used properly." Of course, improved scores would make them look good, and seemed to be of the utmost importance. To make matters worse, the test practice material given to us by the staff developers was not at all interesting for the students (or me).

My students did not take well to this kind of reading and writing. They did not see the importance of listening to countless stories about how a ghost town is made, what schools were like in colonial times, or answering questions like "Name three things you might find in a ghost town" or "How were

*Hard work, educational growth, joy in learning all take a back seat to the demands and pressures of standardized testing. Griselda Guerrero struggles to make sense of testing that cannot show the achievements of her students but can discourage them.*

schools different in colonial times? Use details in your answer."

One test discussed the life of puffins as the listening selection. The passage went on and on about puffins. Unfortunately, the children stopped paying attention within the first minute of the reading. What seven-year-old is supposed to know that puffins are odd-looking birds that live in the Arctic waters of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans? The stories and questions did not engage the students; they were cut and dried and left no room for expression. The children answered them accordingly, with one or two sentences and no vested interest, guaranteeing them a poor mark. And at the end of the school year, nothing but that mark determined the progress they had made.

It felt like the administrators forgot about the many narratives, fairytales, and nonfiction books the students had written and published. They could not see the hours put into reading, understanding, and responding to literature through journals and letters or the hours spent writing, revising and peer/teacher conferencing. The test score would not show that Raul had learned to love reading and writing in my class and that he was able to do it independently of me, and proudly. However, this was not the worst thing that happened because of the EPAL. The worst occurred when Raul asked me in June, "But Ms. Guerrero, how come I didn't do good on the test? I know how to read and write now, right?" What I couldn't explain to Raul was that this test was not designed to show all that he had learned this year. How could all of his learning be diminished into two testing days?

So I went home defeated that afternoon, wondering where all of our hard work had gone. It was not that my students had not improved during the course of the year. Raul was proof of this achievement. It was that at the end of the year, none of our accomplishments mattered outside of our classroom community. The strides Raul had taken would not be noted in his record card, or increase our school's chance of getting more funding or keep our school off of the SURR list. No. All that mattered was Raul's performance during two days of exams that were as meaningless to him as the puffins. All that mattered was the EPAL.

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# A CLASS OF IMMIGRANT NONREADERS REACHES OUT

Suzanna McNamara  
Bronx International HS

*Suzanna McNamara accomplished something remarkable with her ELL literacy students at The Bronx International High School last year... her first year teaching. Through writing, she and her students found a way to communicate how deeply they were touched by the true story of two women who reached out to each other across a racial and cultural divide. Suzanna, who sees her greatest challenge as teaching nonreaders to integrate critical thinking with decoding skills, participated in a Writing Project inservice seminar in the fall of 2002 with Ed Osterman and Gina Moss. She was also a participant in the 2001 Advanced Seminar in Technology led by Paul Allison and Dina Heisler. She calls herself a "voyeur on the listserv," "sending out an "occasional SOS" here and there. The seminar project described here shows a teacher of enormous talent and sensitivity, courageous in her efforts and ruthless in her analysis of the execution of those efforts.*

**CONTEXT:** My students at Bronx International High School are immigrants who have been in the United States less than four years, coming primarily from West Africa, Latin America, Macedonia and Bangladesh. They are acquiring English language and literacy skills. Many of them have limited, if any, native language literacy, although some may be able to speak as many as six languages. I try to capitalize on their somewhat proficient oral language skills. My West African students, for example, can be heard switching from Mandingo to Arabic to Fulani to French to English with relative ease, but struggle when it comes to reading and writing. My students have missed out on schooling for different reasons. Their native education may have been limited or interrupted by war, financial constraints, or possibly for other reasons. My students have not failed; they have simply not had the opportunity to go to school from kindergarten through 8th grade because of conditions beyond their control. What this translates to in the classroom are students who really value education and have a strong desire to be successful. All of us are on a journey together.

From the beginning of the semester, we have been reading and writing about connections, i.e., our individual connections to other individuals. We began with an art and writing project where students created a matrix of themselves surrounded by their connections of help and support. We read several stories about connections, including a picture book, *Swimmy*; a short story, "Thank You Ma'am"; a film, *Central Station*; a song, "Luka"; and a book, *The New Baby*. We made a list of why connections are important. We discussed connections to family, friends, teachers, girlfriends/boyfriends, community organizations, religious organizations, etc. A focus of our reading, talking and writing became connections to strangers. This was the essential theme in

the central piece I chose for our class project, a letter project based on a story from the *Oprah* show and magazine entitled, "Can You Find it in Your Heart Not to Hate Us?" It is a story about two women from opposite sides of the world who make a connection through the mail in an attempt to end racism.

**RATIONALE:** I am constantly struggling with how to find accessible material for high school students who have powerful life experiences, but not age-appropriate reading skills. One day, I happened to catch an *Oprah* segment where I saw two women—one, a white woman from New Mexico, and the other, a black mother of two from South Africa—meet for the first time. I immediately thought of using their story in class. The next day, I obtained *Oprah* magazine and saw the same story in print. I was captivated by the story of these two women, one who was scared of whites because of the racially motivated death of her husband, and the other who read about the story and cried at the thought of being feared because of the color of her skin.

The text was several pages long, and dense with language. I adapted the text, simplifying the language without losing the essential elements of the true story. What followed was a three-week reading, writing, speaking and listening project that culminated in the students writing a letter to one of the two women. With new writers, I struggle with students seeing the real meaning of reading and writing—to get information about the world and communicate with the world. It is a constant challenge to get students to be concerned with the more global aspects of writing, of developing ideas and communicating them with clarity, with spelling as a final fine-tuning step. I felt that this project would be driven by authenticity, which would motivate students to write for communication, with the focus on

ideas over "correctness." I am finding that it is difficult to get students to internalize the importance of audience and not just write to please the teacher with correctly spelled words on the page. I let them know from the beginning that my intention was to send these letters to Oprah Winfrey, with the hopes that she would forward them to the women.

## THE STAGES OF THE PROJECT:

We started by brainstorming a definition of "racism," as students had seen this word before in Global Studies. We then read the adapted text together as a read-aloud. I stopped occasionally to ask students to respond with questions, predictions, reactions, retelling, etc. This reading allowed for a surface discussion of the text. We made predictions for what would happen to the women next, since the text version ends with Beverly saying that she would see Adelina even if it meant that she would have to "clean every toilet on the planet."

Students freewrote in their journals in response to the story, starting it in class and completing it for homework. We shared in class the next day.

Since we had been working on the skills of "compare and contrast," students worked in pairs to decide what was similar and different about the two women. They were familiar with this structure. This process allowed us to discuss the universality of some experiences despite differences in race.

We discussed the larger theme of racism in the story by returning to the working definition we came up with together and looked to the text to find examples of racism there.

As a surprise, I brought the tape of the *Oprah* show to class, and we watched the 20-minute segment to confirm and/or disprove our predictions about what would happen with the women. They were able to see and hear more of the details of the story of Adelina's husband's murder in a way that they might not have sensed from our adapted text. At the end of the segment, when the two women actually met, students were choked up and the members of the studio audience were crying. That day, I learned the word "amakinikini," Mandingo for a feeling akin to empathy.

The next day, students freewrote in response to Oprah's closing remark that she would pay for Adelina's children's education because "education is freedom." We shared this writing in class.

# to the **WORLD**

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After reading and watching the story, I felt that students would have an understanding of racism. I wanted them to do some personal writing. We revisited the word and then made a list of other ways people can judge you besides skin color. Students generated a long list including age, sex, religion, culture and, interestingly, education. From that discussion, we extrapolated the concept of discrimination, with racism being a specific type of discrimination. Students then wrote in their journals about a time they experienced some kind of discrimination. We shared at the beginning of class the next day.

I introduced the letter project by letting students know that just as Beverly and Adelina had made connections with each other through letters, we were going to connect with them through letters as well. They could choose which of the women they wanted to write to.

We discussed what a letter looks like and what we might write about if we wrote to one of these women. Then, with a kind of template complete with sentence starters, we could see that many of their ideas for a letter were the same that I thought of. Students began to write; some used the template, although some preferred to write in their journals.

After these first drafts, I met with students individually to confer about their writing. I chose two stronger students to work in pairs and respond to each other's work using a protocol we had used before. The conferences clarify and reinforce that ideas are what is paramount and that proofreading comes later.

Concurrently, I had read and responded to their discrimination stories. I thought it would make their letters richer if they could share their own experiences with discrimination with Beverly and Adelina, since the letters were feeling somewhat generic. I had highlighted parts of their stories and together we tried to find a good place to insert this personal piece.

Students worked on a final piece. Most typed, although some handwrote. Some made their letters very personal.

I wanted to send a cover letter to Oprah, so I shared my draft with students. It was on a piece of loose-leaf paper with a lot of cross outs. I wanted them to see a "real" piece of writing in beginning stages. I read aloud, as they followed. I asked them what they liked and what suggestions they had; as they gave me suggestions, I jotted notes. I pointed out what I was doing in an attempt to model what good writers do.

We took a class picture. I assembled the package and sent it off to Oprah with fingers crossed!

**REFLECTION:** My goal was to create a project where students were motivated to write for an authentic audience, and, perhaps, with even the possibility of getting a response. I wanted them to experience taking the initiative to connect to a stranger. I not only wanted them to understand and react to a personal story, but also to the larger themes of racism and how a powerful connection can change what you think and believe. I wanted students to synthesize their reactions to Beverly's and Adelina's story and share some of their own experiences with discrimination. I wanted students to use low-stakes journal writing to support later high-stakes writing that would be mailed to someone who would actually read it.

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*We revisited the word and then made a list of other ways people can judge you besides skin color. Students generated a long list...*

With these goals in mind, I think the project was successful. Students were excited about the letters, asking me everyday if I sent them. The combination of the print read-aloud, followed by some writing and then the viewing of the show worked. The show added a rich layer that allowed the students to get more out of a story that was hard to capture completely in print. Kids were so excited to see Adelina and Beverly, as if they were actually meeting the women they had read about. The biggest success came with Haja, a girl who was brand new to school and often resistant to writing, especially outside of class. I saw her working before school and after school on her letters. She wrote to Beverly and Adelina, as well as to Oprah, thanking her for making the connection between the women possible. She put Oprah's pictures everywhere along with drawings of her own village in Africa. The most powerful part, however, was how she shared with

Adelina the story of her own father's tragic murder by rebel forces in Sierra Leone. Her desire to connect with Adelina was that strong. Haja was so proud of her work.

Although overall I was impressed with the process and the product, there are many aspects of this project that I would revise. I was surprised that students did not focus on the racism behind the murder of Adelina's husband. There was tremendous injustice reported in the story, yet students focused more on the connection between the women than what motivated that connection. Next time, I would think about building up this complicated concept before the reading, perhaps with visual images. That has been a general challenge: getting students to connect to larger themes, and not focus solely on the details of a story.

I thought the journal writing worked, but I might have tried a few more entries. Students are very comfortable in the class and are usually eager to share. The journal writing also serves as a good check of their comprehension. The scaffolding for the letter writing, while very helpful for some students, was too limiting for others. I often question: to what extent do structure and scaffolding help and to what extent do they hinder? I think of scaffolding activities like training wheels on a bike. If you need them, they are lifesaving and help you move ahead when you might have not been able to get started otherwise. However, if you are a more proficient rider, the training wheels slow you down and limit your freedom, direction, and speed.

I am challenged by how to deal with first drafts. The individual conferences are time consuming, but I do not know how to make pairs or group work effective. The pair I experimented with was only semi-productive. Abou worked hard to read and respond to Djinabou, but she was having a lot of difficulty processing his story. Truly, I want to do more peer work, but realize that early writing is full of errors that usually do not interfere with my comprehension, but cause problems for weaker decoders. The insertion of the personal discrimination story, while a good idea, seemed forced and less authentically generated. That might have been a good place to talk about transitions and to help students make choices about where and how to insert their own stories. This would require more time. I rushed the wrap-up of the stories, and we did not share the finished products aloud, which I now know must be an essential component. It is always important to celebrate hard work.

#### Postscript

As of this writing (March 2003), the class has yet to receive a reply from Oprah Winfrey or her staff. It would be a harsh lesson if her response were not forthcoming. We are still hoping that her famous heart will be filled with amakinikinini for us!

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# PLAYING AROUND

## A First-Year English Teacher's EXPERIENCE with Drama in a High School Classroom

Luke Janka  
Humanities Prep

*Luke Janka currently teaches English at Humanities Prep, but it was as a neophyte teacher at Brooklyn College Academy that he developed and practiced the technique presented in "Playing Around." The class consisted of juniors and seniors, predominantly of Caribbean descent. Luke has been associated with Writing Project ever since his colleague, Lucie Harris, recommended him for the Summer Invitational after only his first year of teaching. It was at the Project that he realized how much mentoring a new teacher needs. He hopes that at the "100% collegial" Humanities Prep he can find some of that good mentoring and be able to save his "sanity, patience, idealism and happiness."*

*She leaned against the bar, drink in hand, and scanned the dancing crowd. She saw what she wanted, and smiled—enticing him to approach.*

"Hey baby, what's good? I was just peepin' you all alone. What's it take to get a flower like you to dance?"

*Her wild eyes narrowed as she moved to him.*

(Purring) "Just a man...like you."

*She grabbed his hand, and led him to the dance floor, cutting through the useless bodies standing in her way—her red gown clinging tightly to her body. She spun around sharply and wrapped herself in his arms.*

"I never seen you before, baby. But you rockin' now. You new here?"

(Whispering) "...unsex me here, and fill me, from the crown to the toe..."

"What's that, ma? I got you...you a freak. It's good, though...we can grind all over this floor."

*Tightening her grip, Lady Macbeth smiled into the unsuspecting eyes of the tool who'd do whatever she asked.*

•••••

I started teaching in the fall of 2000, excited to be working at a small alternative high school in Flatbush, Brooklyn, with a large population of at-risk students, most of whom came from the West Indies. The other two English teachers on the staff were supportive of my ideas, energy and growing practice. A frustrating aspect of their advice, though, was that they'd tell me: "Teach what you want—you'll learn as you go." While that was practical and very sound, as a new teacher I was looking for a different type of advice. I wanted something concrete. I wanted their wisdom. I wanted them to show me and tell me what to do.

That first year, I taught two sections of eleventh grade British Humanities and two sections of twelfth grade College Prep English, a course that, unlike the Regents-based eleventh grade, lacked an established curriculum. As a result, I had free reign in deciding what to teach. However, my lack of success in engaging my students in either course with what I enthusiastically perceived to be exciting texts and ideas, left me disappointed. Consequently, my optimism and fire dampened.

To close the fall semester, I decided to teach two plays. Drama was a genre I had not yet tried, but I was convinced that it would be the perfect outlet for my students' creative, though not always positive, energy. For my juniors, I chose William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and for my seniors, Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, a play the school's bookroom lacked and each student had to buy. I chose these plays specifically because they deal with the compelling issues of paranoia, greed, trust, deception and identity, in the context of friendship and family. They are challenging in both theme and language. Yet, as evidenced often in today's newspaper headlines of political scandal and family members murdering family members, they are all surprisingly familiar,

and show the parallelisms that exist among literature, history and my students' lives. Teenagers newly aware of themselves contend with these issues in respect to how they interact within their circles of friends and family.

Based on my haphazard success with the literature I had taught earlier in the semester, I knew that I had to be more creative and innovative in order to keep their interest and attention. This would prove to be a difficult task. The school lacked any type of drama program or public speaking course, and my background in the dramatic arts was limited to my love of plays and an acting course I took in high school, not to mention my role in my kindergarten Christmas pageant as the understudy to the Third Wise Man. To put it mildly, I was at a loss. Once again, I turned to my two colleagues for advice. They suggested that we do all of the reading in class. After a completely uninspiring few days, I realized their advice wouldn't do.

From my stint as a student teacher, I was familiar with The Folger Library's *Shakespeare Set Free* series. I miserably employed their ideas with *Macbeth*, finding the failing point to be their insistence on the majority of the reading to be assigned for homework, a task my juniors seemed to be incapable of accomplishing, *Macbeth* being one of Shakespeare's most linguistically inaccessible plays. Similarly, my seniors and I trudged through the first act of O'Neill's play, meeting with inert characters and their pipe dreams. Since reading for comprehension consumes so much time, acting was out of the question. Entering my classrooms, to stand before the glazed-over eyes of my students, was hard for me—harder still, I thought, for my students.

I couldn't stand it; reading all day was killing me, my students, and the plays. I returned to the ideas from my undergraduate methods classes at

NYU, and Joseph and Lucy Milner's *Bridging English* (Prentice Hall, 1999), an excellent resource for combining theory and practice in the English classroom.

My students needed to engage the worlds and characters of the playwrights. From *Bridging English's* chapter on creative drama and dramatic approaches, I culled and adapted two acting styles to suit the needs of my students: tableaux and chaos drama. While my students all liked the idea of tableaux, my poor understanding of how to model and develop it as an activity left it untouched for the more appealing chaos drama. Following the rules as I recreated them, my students were broken up into groups of three to five and given an extensive passage to read. When the groups finished reading, I distributed index cards with either an emotional, physical, or a mental state, such as anger, sadness, blindness or

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*I chose these plays specifically because they deal with the compelling issues of paranoia, greed, trust, deception and identity, in the context of friendship and family. They are challenging in both theme and language.*

fatigue, written on them. They, as actors, were to incorporate the feeling written on the card into the scene. For instance, a student playing Hickey might be asked to stumble around like a lost blind man while telling about his wife's murder in *The Iceman Cometh*, or Macbeth might have to yawn through cursing Banquo's ghost, ready to go to bed.

This activity succeeded in getting my students to think about tone, mood, and emotion, but didn't allow them to go as deeply into the characters as I wanted. To really meet the characters, I discovered, they really needed to Meet The Characters. Splitting them again into small groups, I assigned the pages to read aloud and discuss with each other for comprehension. After completing their reading, they had to pick a character to explore further, write a character sketch, and then transplant that character from the play into the students' own lives.

Each group wrote a small scene, and, as a group of friends, exposed the character to their

world. Some took Harry Hope of *The Iceman Cometh* to Coney Island to ride the Cyclone; others took Lady Macbeth clubbing at Webster Hall. They were encouraged to write their lives and speech in a natural manner as long as they realistically involved the playwright's character; it was essential that the character remain authentically the playwright's. By placing characters in familiar settings, students were able to give them authentic feelings and reactions.

While this activity was difficult for some groups, it was overall a success in engaging the class with the plays and their characters. However, in discussion, the majority of the class felt that they ended up teaching the character more than learning from him/her. Though this result was not what I intended, it was still great. When asked how the activity could be altered to achieve my intended goal, one student suggested that instead of exporting characters, they should put themselves into the plays. The class agreed and a new activity was created. This time, the reading groups rewrote their chosen scenes to include themselves. Although this assignment was difficult because they were responsible for interacting with more of the playwrights' characters, in the playwrights' worlds, my students found that they were free to really figure out what was going on in the plays by getting involved with the characters and their conflicts, either adding to the conflicts by ganging up on characters they did not like, or trying to resolve them with their "real world" sensibilities.

Initially, these two scene-writing activities didn't produce the results I wanted. I required the students to do about 70–90% of the reading at home, most of which was accomplished. There were students who would not read and would try to interfere with their group's work. Also, some groups took the easy road—writing simple dialogue with nothing learned. Some groups became frustrated with each other and their inability to work creatively with each other, and others turned the activities into an excuse to swear nonstop. On the other hand, through continued revision and practice, the activities and my students evolved with each other, and the groups began working seriously, producing works that were often as insightful into human nature as the playwrights' own, generating great instances of teaching and learning.

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## POETRY CORNER

*At the New York City Writing Project's Annual Celebratory Reading at Lehman College last June, Fred Arcoleo moved many of us in the audience that afternoon when he read several of his poems. With Fred's gracious permission, we share them with you.*

### Ramon at Dusk for Danny

he puffed himself up on the stoop  
facing north till his  
smirk slit a balloon  
and he came swooping

down on the street  
like a bat  
daring cars  
with his north wind howling  
I DON'T CARE!!!

i Quitate de allí, coño, carajo! the horns blared  
but he was already opening his cape  
sweeping away all understanding  
and evaporating into the dusk  
like the disappearing day

### Darker Shades of Truth for my students

You might assume this class was out of whack to see them squirming (trapped) inside this room. You have to look beneath the obvious facts: appearances to darker shades of truth.

The boy whose hair looks like a smoking gun can read a Shakespeare sonnet like a palm. The girl who only seems to swear and grunt writes essays that light fuses on a bomb.

Some big shots thought that they would have it made to banish these young people to this school. It's true, they pick a few off every day with hopelessness and drugs and gangsta cool.

Like squeaks that leak when bullies squeeze balloons, these minds are seeking revolutionary truths.

Fred Arcoleo  
HS for Law & Public Service,  
George Washington Educational Campus

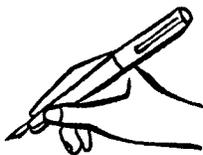
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