

# New York City Writing Project NEWSLETTER

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## A Note From The Editors

The editors of the Newsletter take great pleasure in welcoming you to the issue corresponding to the tenth anniversary of the Writing Project. We enjoyed seeing so many old friends at the Anniversary Celebration; conversations there brought back memories of first writing groups, summer institutes, moments when we knew we were with other teachers who cared about their profession. As we reviewed the material for this issue, we were struck by the connections between the themes raised by the articles submitted, and those raised in speeches at the celebration.

In his opening remarks, Ed Osterman led us on a geographical and technological odyssey of Project expansion--a growth not only in professional expertise and critical thought, but in office space and computer equipment! With affection and humor, Ed traced the history of the Writing Project from its roots as a small teacher support group based from month to month in people's living rooms to its present incarnation in our offices at Lehman College. The importance of creating an environment which provides resources and support for teachers is central to *Researching a Community of Teachers*, in which Nick D'Alessandro describes his research study of the work of one of the teacher/consultants working in the Writing Teachers Consortium.

During her speech at the celebration, Sondra Perl shared her delight in the unexpected and exciting directions taken by the Project in the past ten years. In *Escape: Into Another Teacher's Classroom* by Marsha Slater, and *Students and Teachers as Partners in Research* by Joan O'Connor, these participants in the Classroom Researcher Project share the discoveries and surprises they encountered while doing their research projects.

During the festivities, Carla Asher spoke with modesty of how she sees herself as a facilitator who supports an environment in which teachers can continue to do excellent work and to explore new territory. As we begin a regular column here at

the Newsletter reviewing current books and articles of interest to members, we realize the significance of her work, which celebrates teachers as learners and professionals.

In her talk, Elaine Avidon modeled a way of playing with language as she spoke about the Project and introduced Sondra. Elaine, who so often finds herself in the role of inviting people to "find a way in," both in her academic skills classes and in teacher in-service courses, found her own way into her talk. She began with the "loop" process of telling lies--in this case, about how insignificant a role the Project has played in her life. It was a reminder of some of the methods we use to bring our students "in" to their own writing processes. Mary Mulkeen's article, *Seventeenth Century Puritan Meets the Computer Age*, describes the approach one special education teacher used to help her students overcome their fear of writing and find their own ways into it. Candy Systra's *Dear Mom* tells about part of the journey we take to find our way "in" as teachers.

By choosing not to focus on a moment from the Project's history, Marcie Wolfe gave us back the reason why we all participate in the Project: our students. Her vivid reminiscences of individual students ranging from her current adult undergraduate students back to some she remembered from teaching high school moved us all to remember particular students we have struggled with, succeeded with, and loved. The importance of students in our teaching lives is reflected in Lisa Rosenberg's piece in this issue.

The celebration at Lehman was an exciting landmark in our development. As Richard Sterling summed it up: "If the next ten years are anywhere as good as these, then we should start seeing the effects and the recognition of these effects on our children in the New York City public school system."

Enjoy the issue.

## Reasons To Do Research: One, Two, Three

### Introduction

The Classroom Researcher Project, a New York City Writing Project program funded by the Matsushita Foundation, completed its first year in January. The program was designed for teachers on sabbatical, who during the year take courses in research theory and method, and, at the same time, design and carry out their own qualitative research projects.

In 1986-87, Carla Asher and I had the pleasure of meeting with the first group of seven teachers to begin to build a community of researchers. Not surprisingly, we built it along Writing Project lines.

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The class often looked (and felt) like an ongoing writing group. During our twice weekly meetings, we wrote, and read what we had written to each other; read from field notes or interview transcripts or memos; read, eventually, from evolving drafts of research reports. We helped each other through the arduous process of doing research; as one of the teachers put it, each study had the benefit of "nine brains and hearts instead of one."

The articles that follow are versions of talks given at NCTE and CCCC, where the teachers in the program presented their work to a wider audience.

*Nancy Wilson  
Lehman College*

## Researching A Community Of Teachers

On my research sabbatical, I observed the Language and Learning Core at Washington Irving HS. The Core consists of four tenth grade classes where the major subjects are taught with a heavy emphasis on writing-to-learn methods. Its coordinator, Thomasina LaGuardia, worked with the Core teachers to help them develop writing strategies for their subject areas. I wanted to see how writing was used in this kind of program and, more specifically, how staff development was handled. I want eventually to do staff development at some level, and it seemed to me that a good way to learn about it was to see, from a neutral position, how someone else did it.

I spent a good deal of time watching Thomasina work: with pen and note pad and tape recorder, in consultations with individual teachers and the whole group of Core teachers, in presentations to the faculty, in meetings with department chairs and with the principal of the school.

I watched Thomasina build a community. Her office door was always open, and the Core teachers would often stop in, for a few minutes or a full period, to discuss something they had done in their classes, lessons that worked, as well as ones that didn't. They were comfortable with her because she was non-threatening and non-judgmental. She was their collaborator, and could speak to them honestly from her experience as well as her specialized knowledge. It was never a case of, "You must do this," or, "You have to do that." Her approach was always along the lines of, "Well, I've done this in my classes and it usually worked -- You might consider trying it this way or doing it that way." She was always respectful of teachers, of their skills and limitations, as individuals and committed professionals working at a difficult and often thankless job. She believed that teachers would do their best if invited rather than directed or ordered. She made a conscious effort to provide teachers with an opportunity to share a successful lesson or strategy with the coordinator and other teachers. "Teachers," Thomasina said, "are left alone, to sink or swim, in most schools." The value of the program, she believed, was that it removed the loneliness of the teacher, whether with failure or success.

One day, Don, the new Core social studies teacher, was explaining the thinking behind one of his lessons, and when I asked him if he discussed his approach with any of his colleagues in the department, he responded, "One of my greatest criticisms and one of the areas where I'm least comfortable or satisfied is what takes place at department meetings, or what doesn't take place. What doesn't take place is a serious, honest, positive and constructive discussion about education and approaches to education... It reinforces the notion that people are just out there in their own little cubicle, operating on their own, dealing with paperwork and that's what they're here for. If they so happen to come up with anything academically related, O.K., fine, but it really doesn't take center stage, the way it should... You're not invited to be interested in how other people teach... There's not much in the way of sharing. Every now and then I ask some of the teachers who've been around for some time, 'What are you up to in this particular class; am I doing the right thing?' and I don't feel as though the answers are really genuine and concerned. It's almost like a hostile attitude. It's not inspiring, to say the least."

Don and Bill, the other new Core teacher, took particular advantage of Thomasina's invitation, stopping in at her office at odd moments to tell her casually about things they were doing in class, to ask her advice, to discuss personal matters or just to say hello and relax in a place in the school where they knew they would be welcomed, respected, and valued.

One of Thomasina's consultations, a more or less typical one, began with the special education teacher coming into Thomasina's office with tears in her eyes, threatening to quit her job because she couldn't take the abuse of her class anymore. The question occurred to me: was there anyone else in the school Brenda could talk to in the way she talked to Thomasina? Their discussion could easily have become a gripe session, but Thomasina, while offering sympathy and understanding, never lost sight of the fact that she was there to help Brenda become a more effective teacher through the use of writing. She helped plan some point-of-view writing for a social studies assignment and directed Brenda's enthusiasm and energy to her work with her class.

"Teachers find support in the company of others," said Thomasina. "For most teachers, I think the fifteen-week in-service course--and this is going to sound terrible--may be the only place they have ever been able to talk about teaching, students, real educational concerns, day-to-day planning. Being told is one thing, but having a chance to be heard, to be taken seriously and to be asked to take the steps of thinking something and planning something--this may be their first and only chance for that."

As administrator of the Core and with her own class to teach, Thomasina was too busy to just sit and talk with me. Instead, she gave a running commentary on what she was doing. I was especially interested in how she conceived of staff development. She was thinking aloud, explaining her decisions, ostensibly to me, but really to herself. Did she come up with an appropriate strategy for the social studies teacher to help his class plan their

projects in groups? How could she help the science teacher with classroom management so that his students could respond to each other's writing? Was she too insistent with the English teacher about using double-entry logs with *Romeo and Juliet*?

Thomasina said she had the sense that, for teachers, "Somehow the record is written in water. When I was a new teacher, I felt that good things and bad things came and went. I always wished that there were a recorder of this somewhere. Nobody, not even I, could fully grasp what was going on." She saw herself as the recorder, the aural historian of what her teachers were doing. The English teacher, for example, ran into her in the hall one day as we were rushing to lunch and said, "Something wonderful happened in class today--I'll tell you later." I never found out what it was that happened in Holly's class, but I'm sure that Thomasina did.

I began to see that no one was doing for Thomasina what she was doing for her teachers--and this was where I came in. I became *her* recorder. My research had an unexpected benefit for Thomasina. She didn't know, she said, that she herself needed support until she had it. She worked under enormous pressure, from students, teachers, and the administration, but she had no one with whom to share her successes and failures, her doubts and anxieties and even, once or twice, her tears, until I found my way into her office.

I already knew that teachers should, must, be respected professionally. From Thomasina, I learned how to do it. I learned that you invite teachers to change. I learned the importance as well as the specific skill of listening to what teachers say, and that teachers, just like our students, want, and need, to be heard.

I'm doing staff development now, teaching a course for the Writing Project. As I listen to teachers tell of their successes and failures in the classroom and I respond with something like, "Have you thought about doing this?" or "You might want to try that," I can hear Thomasina, and her warmth and intelligence and concern, and I'm grateful, again, for what I've learned from her.

We still help each other, and I'm still learning from her. Recently, discussing a problem of timing and manner that one of the teachers in her course was having, she reinforced a lesson: invite teachers to learn by providing a place where we are free and comfortable, and we will learn.

*Nick D'Alessandro  
JHS 113K*

## **Escape: Into Another Teacher's Classroom**

You'd think that a veteran NYC high school English teacher on sabbatical would want to get out of the classroom and as far away from a school as possible, wouldn't you? A nice beach in the Fiji Islands, a little stroll on the Champs Elysees, a quiet cabin on the ocean at Cape Cod--escape.

But what I escaped to was another teacher's classroom. I spent my sabbatical interviewing and observing five NYC high school teachers whose disciplines are *not* English. I plan to tell you about the research I did, and about the effects of that study on myself and my school.

My research began over a year ago when I had the opportunity to do some classroom intervisitations with one of my colleagues, a math teacher, whom I call Pia Hernandez in my study. (*She* chose her own pseudonym.) I was so taken by what I saw that, on a research sabbatical the following semester, I formed my question around the ways she used writing to help her students learn basic mathematics. By itself, this is unusual. Writing-to-learn strategies are not exactly part of the standard NYC mathematics curriculum.

In addition, our small high school serves an exclusively Limited English Proficient population of 300 recent immigrants from over 30 different countries speaking over 20 different languages. Our classes are heterogeneously mixed by English and native language literacy levels and the stress is on group and collaborative learning. We teach ESL through the content areas, but, even so, writing-to-learn is not considered a standard ESL practice for low-level beginners.

I wondered why Pia was using writing in this way. Later, I expanded my question and research design beyond Pia to include four other teachers because I wanted to get a better idea of why teachers who are not English teachers use writing-to-learn. I interviewed and observed two more colleagues in my own school, David, a physics teacher, and Magdalena, a career education teacher. (The other two were a biology teacher and a health and physical education teacher in a large, comprehensive high school in Manhattan.)

As a veteran English teacher and course coordinator for the New York City Writing Project, I wanted to know why and how these five teachers had gotten started and why they continue to use writing in this way. What do they see in their classrooms that keeps them motivated to continue using writing-to-learn strategies? What has the whole experience been like for them?

I decided to do research that would give me pleasure, and that would allow me to look at a question of personal as well as professional interest. I must admit, though, that at times I was a little worried that if I enjoyed it too much, it couldn't be considered "real research."

I soon discovered that the answers to my questions went deeper than I had expected. I continued the interviewing and observing process. It was as much a time of discovery for me as it was of anxiety, but my curiosity kept me going. At one point I reached an impasse with Pia. I had discovered that though she was genuinely invested in using writing with her students, she did not keep a teaching log, nor do creative writing for herself. She did not use the techniques she was sure were helpful for her students. Or so she said.

Then one day in early April, during one of our interview sessions, Pia began crying. She was in the process of revising her own curriculum, which was to be published the following month by our school. Her fear of writing was oppressive. I found out that she is a highly traumatized writer who goes through several written drafts of lesson plans *daily* in order to discover the best way to teach each and every lesson. She told me, "So much fear. I mean, no one knows the fear, the apprehension, the sweat I go through whenever I have to write. If a job depended on that, I would say, 'Forget it!'"

This apprehension became a consistent pattern. The other four teachers echoed her lack of confidence in themselves as writers, though less dramatically. They all corroborated Pia's initial impetus to try writing as "an avenue to explore for getting kids to communicate with me and for them to clear their ideas," or as a method of getting reliable feedback from students to aid in lesson planning and test preparation.

Each of the five research subjects also spoke of another pattern, one which surprised me. They had changed their classroom management style because of their work with writing-to-learn, encouraging more group work and extensive collaborative learning techniques. Pia says it best: "And that's what I was looking for--to make everyone very responsible for his own learning."

At times, it was difficult being an observer in my own school. The students, most of whom I know, would want to talk with me in the halls and in the classrooms while I was observing. The assistant principal of the school was only half-joking when he told me that people on sabbatical ought to be banned from visiting: I looked too healthy and happy in comparison to the more tired faces around me.

Since September, when I returned from sabbatical, I find that the research is having effects on both me and my school. Every time one of my research subjects and I have a conversation, every time we engage in a faculty conference and I hear one of them say something which bears on the question of writing-across-the-curriculum, I start scribbling notes on my lunch tray or the nearest paper napkin. Then I run to my Macintosh to transcribe my notes before I forget and throw the pearls away with the garbage. I keep a journal of such quotes and my musings about them. Doing research has been like opening a Pandora's box for me: I never know what the outcomes will be. Research does not end with the findings.

For example, one day while I was in school doing an interview, a site evaluator from NCTE came to decide if our school were to be chosen as an NCTE Center of Excellence in English Language Arts. The evaluator was having a conversation with David, the physics teacher, Pia, and our principal. I asked if I could sit in and tape it. With my encouragement, Pia went into detail about her use of math journals and the way she taught word problems. When David heard some of her techniques, he said, "Wow! I didn't know that was going on!" and wanted to visit her classroom and compare notes. You see, he uses physics journals. It turned out that we were named as a Center of Excellence, but more importantly, David and Pia now exchange

ideas and revise their uses for journals and the way in which they have students keep journals.

Although the governance model of our school fosters collaboration amongst peers, our professional interdependence has been greatly enriched and expanded because of my research study. We now share ideas collegially in a way one would not expect a math, a physics, and an English teacher to do. Pia hands me articles from *The Mathematics Teacher* about using writing to teach calculus. David tells me that my use of journals in English classes makes it easier for his students to write comfortably about physics. Our principal remarks about the ease and facility with which our students sit down to write: he sees none of the usual hesitancy and rampant fear. He attributes this to the widespread conscious attention to writing across the curriculum. Other teachers see our mutual support and ask us for advice in planning lessons which include writing assignments. In our small teachers' room, we all listen and latch onto any good idea we hear.

In one of our last interviews, David said that he did not use writing as his first recourse for clarification of his own thoughts. Now, David is the chairperson of our faculty curriculum committee which is responsible for publishing an annual report which the teachers write. A month ago in that crowded teachers' room, I overheard him explaining the reason for writing drafts of this year's project. I wrote it down verbatim. He said, "Writing forces you to solidify and get more concrete in your thinking. I view writing as a mechanism, that is, the process of revision, for changing your thinking about things." Apparently, he had changed his own thinking about writing.

The best outcome of my research for me is that I feel I have more partners in a deeper sense of the word. I do not label my colleagues by department any more. I have found nourishment and professional growth from looking at what I do with writing in my own classroom from the points of view of four other teachers from different disciplines. I have become more conscious and focused in how I use writing-to-learn in my *English* classroom.

If I have problems, I have more than just the two excellent English teachers in my school to collaborate with. Pia and David have become people for me to bounce ideas off of, people to share my teaching successes and frustrations with. I serve this function for them, too. Just over a week ago, Magdalena, the career education teacher, called me from Florida. She had relocated and left our school in September, but she wanted to tell me that she was still using the journal I had given her to write her thoughts in.

I think that having a teacher researcher in any school would be highly worthwhile. But in our small school, the research study we participated in has helped turn our school into a support team. It has fostered a climate and focused attention on writing throughout the school. In addition, I have a deepened understanding of my colleagues, their pedagogical and personal goals in teaching. Magdalena used writing to bring the shy Asian students into group work; Pia uses writing to help her students internalize the vocabulary and structure of mathematics, which she thinks of as a language; David uses writing to help

students focus on their learning and also to break down the traditional roles of teacher and student. In addition, they all view their frequent use of writing in their classes as a way to help students overcome the fears and traumas they have experienced because of evaluative, red-penning teachers in their own pasts. Pia herself has moved from being a traumatized writer to one who says, "I can do this!" when she works on the current faculty curriculum project.

I'll use David's own words from an article he wrote for publication about our school: "Writing is an example of how collaboration among staff has proven successful at the International HS. When students write logs in science classes, write in their mathematics classes, and write in their literature classes, they learn to write faster and with more confidence." Without his participation in the research group, he would not have known about and been able to rely upon the inter-departmental support he wrote of.

What he didn't say was that the teachers have also gained more confidence in trying out new teaching strategies and expanding old ones because of the support of our research network. We have each gained confirmation of what works well and why. Thanks to my on-going research, I have gained an unshakable commitment to writing-to-learn for our limited English proficient students.

*Marsha Slater  
International HS*

### **Students and Teachers as Partners in Research**

Like my friends here, I had my own hidden agenda when I joined the research course. I'm a high school English teacher who hasn't taught ESL in six years, and I intended to study ESL programs. This was to be my way to evaluate effective techniques and get a feel for such classes again. It would also give me contacts, people who might help me transfer from my present school to a more humane one. Presently I teach in what is called a "typical" high school -- this is a NY euphemism for schools that range from mediocre to disgraceful--like factories without quality controls. In my school both staff and students feel powerless; all of us are burned out. They're good kids, and we do try, but the system undermines and enervates us. If a transfer were not possible, I thought of teaching ESL overseas. I was *that* demoralized by the Board of Education and Kochtown. So, basically, my hidden agenda was research as a means to "go over the wall." Also, after the isolation of the classroom, I was drawn to the promise of collaboration in the research course. In prison isolation is punishment: in schools it's the status quo.

Unlike the other people in my research course, I was not eligible for a sabbatical, so I took an unpaid leave of absence. This led to a problem--paying the rent and watching my savings disappear. So I was happy to find a part-time job teaching at the Lehman College Adult Learning Center. I thought it would

at least help me pay a few bills. I got a lot more than I'd bargained for.

My plans for ESL research were soon forgotten because I was so busy with my literacy classes: begging, borrowing, and stealing materials; attending conferences; reviewing research; asking friends for advice, etc. I had never taught adults before and was determined to keep them in the program and help them reach their goals. The students were on my mind constantly. They are the most incredible group I'd ever met--anywhere--they are motivated, supportive of each other, appreciative of everything I do. I forgot my original agenda because I was seduced by my literacy class. This romance was quite obvious to those in my research course, so it was they who suggested I research my own class. I'd been so emotionally involved as their teacher that I hadn't thought of them as potential research subjects, but then I realized my research could help them. This change meant I wasn't going to have the luxury of researching as an observer in others' classrooms after all. Bye-bye to hidden agenda and hello to being teacher, participant, and observer. Research is filled with surprises.

My study on literacy grew out of my needs as their teacher. I wanted to learn why they couldn't read. How they had coped. Their goals. Their reading needs and strategies. The most effective ways to teach them and help them teach each other. How could I possibly see through their eyes when it is so difficult to imagine a world without reading?

As someone new to research, of course I floundered in seeking methods for the study. I observed them working and kept a teaching log. I recorded their working in reading/writing groups. I analyzed their writing and reading aloud. These activities gave me some insights, but they led to more questions. Finally, I interviewed students, typed up the transcripts of these personal histories, and read and discussed the transcripts with the individuals. The students found the transcripts fascinating, and our discussions supplied more data that clarified the students' problems and needs. We used the transcripts to collaborate on curriculum and learning strategies. The data grew and grew.

In addition to the interviews, there was on-going collaboration of all kinds. At the end of each class session, students would evaluate the evening's work and suggest future activities. They would review sample text books. Soon they were also developing a network among themselves, helping each other in the work, and also sharing information on housing, jobs, legal and medical problems, and schools for their children. When their children had a problem in school, they brought the child to class so that I might tutor or advise. Several of these children returned to class. They would either participate or help their parents. We were developing a community and a resource.

Unlike my high school, the Lehman College Adult Learning Center also encouraged the students' collaboration. Each month, a student committee meets with the directors to discuss the program. Our students run the open-house for new students. They make speeches, help the entrants with forms, reading samples, and are generally in charge of placement of new

students. Students also plan great parties with menus that guarantee enormous quantities of delicious food. We have the most fattening program in the Bronx!

My leave of absence ended, but I stayed with the literacy class. I didn't want to leave them. I was happy. Teaching was again rewarding. Then, when I returned to teaching high school in September, I found another way to expand our collaboration and community. Since my teenagers do not get enough attention or guidance, why not have my adults help them? This occurred to me after a high school student wrote about having been a crack addict. Since one of my adults had once had problems with drugs, she and I worked on an anonymous letter to support and advise the boy. Students with other problems, such as the death of a parent, the threat to drop out of school, etc., also received letters. Soon it became a two-way support system, with my teenagers writing to the adults with support or questions. Soon I was shuffling between schools delivering letters, get-well card, drawings and writing pieces to be shared. We were the pen-pal counselors. What better way for all my students to see the value of reading and writing?

All this collaboration has been valuable for me and my students. I learned how and what to teach. They learned how to learn, and became both my experts and advocates for others who are poor readers. I am now working with one student in writing her biography. As she said, "It would be good if they (non-readers) could hear about us. Then maybe they'll lie down that wall--that fear--and come to a program." My hope is that she will be able to write the second part of this biography: the story of how literacy changes her life.

Your response to all this may be, "Well, it's nice this broad found happiness in a literacy program." Or, "Gee, research is a cure for burnout, but so what?"

The point is that by making students my fellow-researchers, I acknowledged them as articulate adults whose experiences and views were valued. Since they developed much of our curriculum, they had an even greater stake in its success. They had entered the class feeling isolated, and ashamed of their reading problems. But our research gave them a feeling of community and purpose. The students shared secrets with me because they felt such information might be used to help others.

For example, nearly all those I interviewed spoke of childhood traumas, horrible events that erased memory and left them feeling incapable of learning. This is, I believe, one of my most important findings, but such information was given only because of the intimate relationship I had as both teacher and researcher. A second example involves a student who was not doing well in class because she avoided reading tasks. Instead of reading, she'd try to get off task by impressing us with her knowledge on any and all subjects. We did focus on this avoidance in our interview, but a few weeks later she dropped out. By that time I had finished the transcript, so I sent it, along with a c'mon-back note. A week later she called me at home. First she gave excuses for her absence, and then joked about the transcript being "a book." But then she said, "I really want to read our talk. But I can't read. Please let me come back." She came back. Now this woman is a volunteer who teaches

ceramics to senior citizens. She told me she had found the confidence to do this because of our course. She also said, "Learning gave me confidence in myself. Besides, learning is fun here. I wanted these older people to have fun too.

She's right. It is fun to be in our class. Having this opportunity to collaborate with students, staff, and a supportive administration has made this the happiest teaching experience of my life. It's been rejuvenation through research.

My plans to "go over the wall" are gone. Instead, the research knocked down some walls--my students' walls of fear and isolation, the walls separating teacher and student, the walls between young and old, and my own wall of anger against the system and New York City.

My research took many surprising detours, but it's been a wonderful trip. I look forward to the rest of the journey.

*Joan O'Connor  
Walton HS/  
Lehman Adult Learning Center*

## Dear Mom,

Remember that book you kept on the shelf in your bedroom when I was little? I was amazed because it had no printed words, it had no lines, and it had your writing. You wrote anecdotes, cute or funny or telling, about us kids. I loved looking at those unconnected vignettes. They always seemed to add up to something larger, the same way that remembering where you were on as many previous birthdays as possible adds up. I used those little stories as doors to our pasts. Do you know where that book is, or did it get lost in one of the moves?

Thinking about the book must be one of those happy free associations you and I always talk about. How clever the brain is! Maybe this letter is going to be a new version of that book.

I remember going into the voting booth at election time, riding on your shoulders. I felt so special when you pulled the curtain closed around us and let me watch you pull the levers. You even showed me one that I could flip down. And afterwards, we walked all around the voting machine and I saw the place in the back where the count would be displayed that night.

You had a book at home, *Twelve Million Black Voices*. Maybe the words were too hard for a little child to read, but there was no misunderstanding actual photographs of lynchings in the South. I looked at it sometimes. That book was one of the most terrifying objects in our house. But you talked to me about the pictures and how it could be and ought to be different. I was hungry to learn more about democracy in school.

There, in school, I loved the Color Guard. When we dressed up for Assembly Day, white blouses with red ties and blue skirts, I guess I assumed it was to honor the flag. When they started

If writing is thought of as torture, rewriting is not even considered. Most simply will not do it. Getting them to rearrange their sentences and paragraphs seems impossible. Yet with a good program, this task, too, becomes an enjoyable activity. If they could use a computer to assist in their writing, perhaps their ability would improve.

One further element in designing this curriculum had to be considered. Most English texts for special education students are insulting. Written at third and fourth grade levels, the readings are juvenile and the tasks center on minutiae. Very often the students who are being asked to endure these texts are streetwise individuals who are successfully employed at jobs that require none of the skills in the book. Material that was neither juvenile nor repetitive and which contained useful and mature information needed to be found.

Attempting to address some of these problems, I decided we would read portions of Samuel Sewall's diary. No one had ever asked them to read someone's diary. It was certainly not repetitive. The subject matter was mature, as he addressed the deaths of his wife and children. In the end, the students came to respect this Puritanical gentleman who was "hooked on God," and who questioned all the laws of his day pertaining to slavery and witchcraft. They enjoyed discovering the misspellings of this important judge. The fact that he had really lived excited them. How could I translate this experiences into a writing activity?

Most of the students have great difficulty organizing any material into logical sequences, especially on paper. So we began by listing all the items we had come to associate with Samuel Sewall, and then grouped similar items with colored chalk. The students discovered that Samuel Sewall's diary discussed only a few topics: There were descriptions of life in the late 1600's; his job as a judge; his family; and above all, his religion. I asked the students to choose one of the four areas of his life and write one paragraph about it. Had I asked them, from the start, to write the eventual five paragraphs, they would never have started. However, most settled to this task quite easily, and there were pages of material for reference - a whole diary. When they had completed one paragraph, I asked them to pick the next easiest topic, and write another paragraph, and eventually a third. Regularly, they corrected their spelling using the word processing program, and together we corrected some grammatical or sequencing errors.

After completing the three paragraphs, we discussed the fact that they had to pass an RCT exam in order to get a diploma. To that end they needed practice in the five paragraph essay. We were going to use our three paragraphs as part of a five-paragraph composition. I instructed them to write a short introductory paragraph explaining who Samuel Sewall was in an imaginary note to their parent. Next, we learned to move paragraphs, on the computer, and rearrange sentences into more desirable order. Now they were hooked. This was easy. We could do this writing all the time. A short, concluding paragraph was necessary, and I suggested they might want to discuss what they would like to ask our friend Sam if we could travel through a time warp.

Now they had the desired five paragraphs, and were well on their way to completing a portion of the RCT exam. Correcting grammar and punctuation was an almost unnecessary task. Word processing came to the rescue again. No longer intimidated by putting words on paper, they made fewer initial mistakes. Some of the results are charming:

*I read about Samuel Sewall in high school. Some of this is from Samuel Sewall diary.*

*Samuel Sewall was a judge for the Salem witch trials. The negroes and indians were rated the same. The law said that indians and negroes was property to who ever owned them. After a while Samuel was getting to fell uneasy about trading negroes and indians.*

*Samuel Sewall was a Protestant. He prayed for a lot of people. Protestant men wear black suits and black hats, and the women wear grey dresses. Everybody in the town goes to church on Sunday. If a family did not go to church on Sunday they were not a part of the town.*

*I think Samuel Sewall was a good person. I liked him because he prayed for a lot of people.*

(Jeffrey N.)

*This man's name was Sam Sewall. I learned about Sam in the Diary he wrote in the past years 1685-1716. He wrote about: his son dying, the Salem Witch Trials when Sam was Judge, death again of his wife, a Public Apology, and the Course of Life.*

*Sam Sewall's family was messed up because first of all he had eleven children. Six out of eleven of his children died. Then the twenty-third year, of his lasted child's death. That is when his wife died and now he is in a widowers place left with five of his children.*

*Sam Sewall was a judge in the year 1692. When Sam was judge, he usually talked about the Salem witch trials. The person with the witchcraft would not drown. When held under the water, if the guy who does not have witchcraft, and drowns, the guy who drowned is innocent. Five people were executed for being witches in 1692. Three years later, on December 24, 1695, Sam had a public apology. He desires to take the blame and shame of it. Asking pardon of men, and especially desiring prayers that God, who has a Unlimited Authority, would pardon that sin and all of his sins. So after that, he decides that he does not want to be a judge any longer.*

*I thought of Sam as a nice and caring person. If I could see Sam, I would probably complement him on the true stories that he has written in his journal and I really liked what he wrote.*

(Kyrion M.)

Sharing their writing with other class members seemed a fitting conclusion to our work. Though the class could do the required discussion of works in progress, I discovered they could not share. Too often their work had been ridiculed. They would not willingly open themselves to it. They are becoming more and more confident in their ability to turn out a good piece of writing and I hope that, next time, we will share.

*Mary B. Mulkeen  
Truman HS*

playing *The American Patrol*, or some John Phillip Sousa thing, and those flags swept by my row, I always got tears in my eyes.

But school was tough. For one thing, the teachers made us practice those shelter drills--"Take... cover!" They gave out dog tags to everybody in the first grade and you and Daddy wouldn't let me wear mine. I couldn't decide whether to be mortified or proud. Probably I was both. But, Ma, it was very hard to match up the school teaching about how our country was so good with the pictures I was seeing at home. You were both talking about democracy but it was confusing.

Even songs we sang on long rides in the car had meaning. After the license plate game wore thin, and we had exhausted, "I see a cow, who can find a cow?" the family settled down to some serious singing. *On Top of Old Smokey* at the top of our lungs was a favorite. So was *Die Gedanken Sind Frei*.

*If tyrants take me  
And throw me in prison  
My thoughts will burst free  
Like blossoms in season.  
Foundations will tumble  
The structures will crumble  
And free men will cry,  
Die gedanken sind frei.*

I don't know if I ever told you about the car ride from L.A. to Baja California with Lenny and his family when I was twelve. I was so grateful that you let me go on a vacation by myself so far from home that I probably told you only "the good parts" when I came back to New York. But I remember being in his station wagon, Lenny's paunch nearly reaching the steering wheel. All us kids were in the back, playing some of the same car-type games. We were discussing where to stop to eat. We all had a vote; that felt good. Then Lenny said his one vote counted as much as the rest of ours put together. I was afraid to say anything but I didn't think that was very funny.

This wouldn't be in your little book, but I remember the first Presidential election after I got married. I wasn't old enough to vote yet, but Howie was, and under the guise of togetherness, I made him take me into that voting booth with him. I just loved the thought of our four feet sticking out from under the curtain. The volunteers were a little shocked, but that was part of the fun, no doubt.

Now maybe here is why all this stuff is surfacing. I have another school story, but it's from last week. My school received a grant to explore how democracy is working in a dozen alternative high schools. Guess who put her name in right away to be on that committee? We sat in the principal's office last week, trying to decide which six of our students would go to the overnight conference. We had a little problem because we had asked more than six people, and miracle of miracles, more than six had returned their permission slips. Someone suggested drawing the names out of a hat, but a couple of teachers vetoed that because they wanted to be sure a particular student went on the trip. Somebody else suggested we choose six and tell the students that we had done it by some fair process. You can im-

agine my self-righteous horror! So finally, we decided that each teacher would select one student and that we would be honest about it. The other students would have the first choice on the next trip.

This didn't seem too nice, but we had already gotten ourselves into the bind. Then I startled myself by saying that if we were going to go around and each name a student, I wanted to go last. I wanted to hear all the names so if somebody else chose my favorite I would have a second name to offer. That way, two of my favorites could be on the trip.

The next period, in class during free writing, I got so anxious. Anxious and embarrassed. I was really taking advantage of the situation to push for my kids! Then I realized the beauty of working with my colleagues in this way. Not only can I love democracy because it protects the underdogs, but the group can be relied on to protect itself from a pushy person trying to throw her weight around. The group as a whole could have told me I was out of line. They didn't. I am finally starting to feel free enough to say what I want, no matter what the motives or origins. It's very liberating.

So, Ma. I wish I could see that book you kept. If you find it, lend it to me. I bet it would be a mirror, not only to the past. I bet I could find lots of stories in there that foretell the future. And I'm finally in a place where my family life and my school life are becoming unified.

Love,  
Candy

*Candy Systra  
Bronx Regional HS*

## Seventeenth Century Puritan Meets the Computer Age

Inventing a curriculum for the new special education class called Computer-Assisted Writing seemed intimidating. There were so many factors to consider. The student's English language education must go forward. Their ability to complete the RCT exams successfully must be enhanced. Many special education students are sure they cannot write. Asking them to put thoughts on paper in sentence and paragraph form is asking for blood, that most have come to hate English classes as a form of torture must be believed. The dilemma, then, is to assist them to become successful at what they believe is torture.

I had come to believe that all students, and especially special education students, completed their writing tasks more successfully if given access to a word processing program. For these students, handwriting is often a problem. Even if they are physically able to write, their written work looks awful when completed. How discouraging to have your hard work look disgraceful. For so many, spelling is very difficult, though most can recognize the correct word if given a choice. A good program would quickly address these needs.

## Do Not Discuss: Silencing Our Students

As New York City high school teachers, we are often frustrated by students who, with all the necessary abilities, don't seem to want to or be able to succeed in school. I think of S., a young man who is bright and able to get along well with people, who gets to school and to class, but just doesn't do his assignments. He reads and writes and speaks well. I always see him as part of a group, looking like he's having fun. Why doesn't he do his assignments? When I asked him, he said, "You have to remind me." I felt like I was reminding him all the time. He had the ability to do the work, but he didn't. He wasn't angry or anything, he just didn't do it. He knew he was going to fail, but he couldn't seem to open a book or pick up a pen to help himself.

I think of L., a young woman who became pregnant in her senior year. She had a full scholarship to Columbia. Did she really mean to give it up to have a baby? Was this her intention? When I ask her about it, she shrugs. It's just something that has happened to her.

Two articles in the February 1988 issue of the *Harvard Educational Review* made me think about these two students in a new light. Both of these articles deal with the effects of silencing students about important aspects of their lives -- race in one article, and sex in another.

In the article, *Racelessness as a Factor in Black Students' School Success: Pragmatic Strategy or Pyrrhic Victory*, Signithia Fordham of The University of The District of Columbia discusses the conflict Black students face in order to succeed in school. Through an ethnographic study of six high-achieving Black students in a Washington, D.C. public high school, Fordham examines the attitudes of the Black community and of the students themselves on doing well in school, and the effects of these attitudes on these students.

Capital High, where Fordham did her study, is a large urban high school with a lot in common with many New York City high schools. Located in a decaying commercial and residential area, Capital High has a student body which is 99% Black. Many of the students come from one-parent homes, and live in low-income housing. About 25% of the student body is eligible for the federally subsidized lunch program. Unlike many NYC schools, however, Capital's teaching staff is predominantly Black. White teachers are the majority in the English department, and tend to teach the more advanced classes, as well as the extra-curricular activities. In addition, the student body includes working-class and middle-class students who come from other communities in DC because of the wide range of courses offered at Capital, which has four tiers of programs. Students in the academic programs receive extra academic and support services, which further set them apart from the other students. Fordham used three female and three male students for her study of Black achievers.

Fordham begins by describing the concept of "fictive kinship," a "kinship-like connection among individuals," who are

not related, which is the dominant cultural system in Black communities. This leads to a sense of "peoplehood", of a feeling of Black unity in opposition to the dominant White culture. As a result, success for Blacks becomes defined, "in terms of collectivity...as a people, not just individuals." It is not enough now to see the success of one individual and regard it as success for all.

Only the Black community decides who is in the kinship system, and who is excluded. It is not up to outsiders to decide, which means that the schools, with their emphasis on achievement as individuals and competition among students, create a serious conflict for Black students. It also means that there is a world within the schools, made up of Black students, where acceptance is not based on academic achievement, but on other standards of the community. These students don't need teacher approval or academic success to gain entry into that community.

Students who do wish to succeed in the "Whiter," more individualistic world of school must achieve "racelessness," defined by Fordham as an effort on the part of individuals to minimize their relationship to the Black community and to a stigma associated with "Blackness," and to engage in a "conscious or unconscious disaffiliation" from the fictive-kinship system. Fordham also found that students who succeeded in school held a strong belief in the American system of equal opportunity for all.

Fordham describes her female subjects as "less victimized" by the effort to achieve racelessness than her male subjects, although the cost to them was still high. She characterizes them as more committed to the "values of the larger society than to those of the Black community," but does that mean that it is not a value of any Black community to succeed in school? In interviews with Fordham, all three students expressed feelings of alienation from the Black community. They feel different from the people around them, with different interests and tastes. They feel distanced from "Black culture," which one student defined as "Music. Dance." When they succeed in school, other Blacks accuse them of "acting White." All three of these students talked about not wanting to be perceived as "Black," but as a person, and subscribe to the belief that hard work is the key to success for anyone in this society.

One of Fordham's subjects, Katrina, was able to minimize the social distance from her peers by "going underground;" for example, she took a test for an academic team only with the understanding that she was not to be chosen for that team. This allowed her to show a few select people what she could do, and still maintain a low profile and better chances of acceptance by other students in the school.

Some of Katrina's strategies will be familiar to any woman who "let the other boys answer" so as not to be perceived as too smart. Is there something about being female in this society that contributes to "racelessness" being easier for the females in her study? Do the young women in her study see fewer oppor-

tunities in the community for themselves, thus making it easier for them to be cut off, or is it just more acceptable for them to be "good girls" in school? Fordham does not speculate on reasons.

The males in this study, like the females, tended to minimize the idea of racism in this society and subscribed to the idea that anyone can succeed in this country with effort. Wendell, however, shows an awareness of racism when he suggests that in his school identity he was also trying to minimize the negative stereotypes associated with Black people, such as laziness or inability to do well in school.

The young men in Fordham's study mentioned one problem that the women did not in their discussion of success in schools: the nicknames that adhere to those who do well in school. Some of these names have a sexual connotation, such as "gay" or "pervert." These put-downs of their sexuality appear to be another factor with which the males have to contend and the females do not.

Based on her studies of these students, Fordham concludes that it may not be possible for Black students to become 'bicultural;' that is, succeed in the school world and still be accepted by the Black community. The individualistic school system, compounded in this specific case by a "tracking" system that further separates students, requires an ideology that is at odds with the "collective ethos" of the Black community. She questions whether "racelessness" is a "pragmatic strategy or a Pyrrhic victory," since the cost of being cut off from their community is a price too high for many adolescents to pay. Success in school leads to being cast out from the world of their neighbors and peers for many Black students. In that way, is asking Black students to do well in school also asking them to give up everything they care about in their daily lives? These are judgments that, Fordham says, can only be made by Black Americans themselves. She maintains that Blacks need to clarify their relationship to White society, and what they want for their children in the schools.

Fordham mentions in passing that she had also studied a group of "underachievers" at the same school. I would like to hear about them. Is their unwillingness to achieve "racelessness," to distance themselves from their own people, the major factor preventing them from seeking what the larger society views as success? Is that the key to understanding S., and other students like him? In that case, could the schools be restructured to reward the kinds of collective-responsibility behaviors Black students may be more accustomed to? Fordham suggests that the school curricula could be altered to "incorporate a more group-centered ethos," an added dimension that would be helpful to students from all groups. It would be interesting to hear ideas about how such a school would function.

Fordham's article dealt with a school in an economically depressed community. Reading it, I wondered if the cost of success for middle-class Blacks was as high. Are the parents who take their children to Jack and Jill, a club for academically-oriented Black children and their parents, subscribing to a group racelessness, or have they found a way to remain Black

and maintain a community of Blacks while still succeeding academically and economically in a White-dominated society?

On the whole, Fordham provides insight into a community that we as teachers need to understand. Black students in New York City are at high risk for dropping out of their predominantly White-run schools. This article investigates some of the reasons that Blacks may fail to achieve in school. Further discussion may begin to produce some solutions.

\* \* \* \* \*

In her article, *Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire*, Michelle Fine discusses both the reality of sex education in the schools, and the rhetoric that surrounds it. She finds that when people are talking about the need for sex education, they tend to focus on the dangers and immorality of sex, likening it to drug abuse. In the public urban high school where Fine conducted this study, she observed that married heterosexuality was presented as the only "right" sexual outlet, and there was no discussion of female desire. Sex was presented from a male perspective, with the female's role reduced only to being able to say yes or no to a question that isn't necessarily hers. Sex was presented as something that adolescent girls were victimized by and had to guard against. In one classroom exchange, a teacher tells her students to "go home and look in the mirror." Why? One student answers, "You should like your body." The teachers says, "you should know what it looks like when it's healthy, so you can recognize problems like vaginal warts." Her message isn't that the possibility of disease is the strongest reason for young women to know about their bodies. The assumption underlying all this is that young women shouldn't really want sex. What, then, are young women to make of the desires they may feel?

One view of sex education, advocated by Phyllis Schlafly, for example, is that if you don't tell children about sex, they won't know about it, and they won't engage in it. Fine cites evidence that flies in the face of this type of morality. She claims that sex-negative attitudes do not stop sex, but result in teenagers not using birth control. If they see sex as something they shouldn't do, they are less likely to try to control it and more likely to let it happen "spontaneously." Taking action to get birth control first involves the acknowledgment of desire. By seeing themselves as the passive object, entitled only to say yes or no to someone else's question, young women lose the ability to take responsibility for their sexual lives.

Fine quotes a Harris and Yankelovich poll that confirms that over 80% of the American adults believe that students should get some sex education in school. There is evidence that sex education can increase contraceptive use and that it does not necessarily cause an earlier onset or increase of sexual activity. In fact, some evidence suggests that the more information students have, the more they act with forethought, which may postpone the onset of sexual activity. In addition, Fine discusses the effectiveness of School-Based Health Clinics. With an SBHC, there is a reduction in pregnancy rates, a substantial postponement of first intercourse, and an increased number of virgins visiting the program for information, checkups, and con-

trapection prior to engaging in intercourse, as well as males visiting the clinic for checkups and information.

Rates of sexual activity and age of onset in the US correspond to that of other developed countries, but our rates of pregnancy, abortion and teenage childbearing are higher. Fine suggests that access to education and contraception would change this. She gives a quick nod to larger social forces by adding that relative equality in distribution of wealth would also be a factor, but her main argument concerns the way in which female sexuality is perceived, or ignored, in the very places in which it seems logical that it would be discussed. A young woman's ability to acknowledge a sexual self as well as an intellectual, social and economic self empowers her to take charge of her own life on many levels, to decide what she wants and to plan for it.

Like the Fordham article, the Fine article requires examination of the schools' attitudes towards a basic aspect of life, in this case, sexuality. As the education of a Black person takes place against a background dominated by Whites, so a young woman's sexual education takes place in a society dominated by male sexuality. In many ways, women's roles haven't changed much in the past 20 years. In the language of the sex ed classes that Fine observed, it seemed you could be a sexual victim or a "good girl", a proper married woman, or...nothing? What happened to the dialogues of the 60's with which many of us were raised, where sex appeared as something that both women and men might want, one option among many others? "Silencing a discourse of desire," Fine says, "buttresses the icon of woman-as-victim," and, "in so doing.. actually disable[s] young women in their negotiations as sexual subjects...away from positions of sexual self-interest."

It is true that there are sexual diseases in the world, but guarding against them is only part of why a young woman should know about her body. It is true that there are men who are sexual victimizers, but the surest way for a young woman to guard against them is for her to be able to understand and acknowledge that she has her own needs, desires, and a time-frame in which the sexual self fits as one among other important selves. She has decisions to make about when and what is right for her.

Race and sexuality are issues that don't go away even if there's no place to talk about them in school, even if they're not integrated into the rest of our students' lives. The conflicts that arise from not acknowledging these issues impairs the ability of our students to function. After reading these articles, I felt I had gained insight into student behavior which sometimes puzzle me. These are important issues for our students, and for us.

*Melanie Hammer*  
*HS of Art & Design (on leave)*

**Note:** This article grew from the fertile ground of NYCWP study group discussions. The author would like to thank the other members of the group--Paul Allison, Robin Cohen, and Gail Kleiner--for insight and inspiration.

The editors of the Newsletter would like to invite Project members to engage in a discussion of the issues raised in this article. Please send your remarks to Editors, NYCWP Newsletter, Lehman College, Bronx, NY 10468.

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### Steal These Ideas

In his honors class at Newtown HS, Nelson Acevedo asked his sophomores to read a novel, play, or biography about one of the historical periods they studied. The works read were a diverse group, ranging from a personal account of life during the industrial revolution to Martin Sherman's *Bent*, a play about homosexuals in Nazi Germany.

After reading and writing essays about the books, Nelson felt it was important for the students to hear about each other's books. For forty minutes, students talked in small groups of four about the works they had read. After each student gave a five-minute talk, group members asked questions about the book. Students enjoyed the activity a lot, and Nelson compiled a list for the class of the books read, who read them, and a quote from each reader about the work. Nelson or Ed Osterman can supply any interested teacher with a list of these works.

\* \* \* \* \*

Santa Grillo, who teaches Italian at Port Richmond HS, had his fourth-year students write poems in both English and Italian. "The project was not an easy one," Santa said, "The students had to pour their thoughts out in English first, and then render them in Italian." He found that this was more difficult to do in poetry than it is in prose because "the English versions were all wonderfully rhymed, and the students wanted to retain--in translation--not only the ideas, but also the rhymes."

Santa gave his students the theme of "Who am I?" for these poems. Although it was "a little shaky" at the beginning, Santa was able to help them by encouraging them to "relax and let ideas flow. Write whatever you think!" And they did.

Santa feels that "the product was wonderful!" He had the Italian versions of the poems published by the Foreign Language Department in his school. Here are a few of his students' poems:

*I don't know what to say,  
but when I get going  
I'm okay.  
I'm nice and loved by many,  
but when it comes to poems,  
I don't write any!*

*(Io non so cos'intendo  
ma quando comincio allora m'accendo.  
Son gentile e amata da molti  
ma quando si tratta di scriver poesie  
son come i morti!) (Deborah B).*

*I'm not Italian as you can see,  
but I like this class most definitely,  
I've learned a lot and had lots of fun,  
I think that goes for everyone.  
Well the bell's gonna ring and I'm about to go home,  
so I think that's enough of this brilliant poem.  
When I translate this poem people will not  
probably "capisc"*

*but all that counts was that it rhymed in English!  
(Italiano certo non mi potete definire,  
ma questa classe mi piace da morire.  
Ho imparato bene a parlar la lingua  
la mia pagella e veramente di buoni voti pingua.  
Ho imparato molto e mi son fatto  
quattro belle risate,  
ed anche gli altri le stesse cose  
come me hanno pensate.  
Beh, la campana sta quasi per suonare,  
e devo proprio scappare  
e questa brillante poesia  
mi tocca proprio terminare.  
Chissa se in italiano tradotta  
'sta poesia sembrera un po rotta,  
ma in inglese faceva rima,  
ce l'ho messa tutta, questo contra prima!) (Jeff M.)*

\* \* \* \* \*

Paul Allison likes to adapt John Cage's famous epithet about chaos and order to describe the English class that he team-taught with Suzanne Valenza at University Heights HS this past spring. "Where there's reading, bring writing," he says. "Where there's writing, bring reading." Suzanne and Paul feel that they are doing their best teaching when it's not clear which of the two sets of skills and processes they're emphasizing at the moment.

For example, they used a writing exercise to introduce *Black Boy*, and then used the first five pages of Richard Wright's novel to help their students to see how they might revise the stories that they wrote in the introductory lessons.

The writing was kicked off with an activity called "People, Places, Times, and Things." Under each of these categories, the students were asked to list four childhood memories, and then to write about one of these. Although Paul and Suzanne have used this memory technique before, this time they used it both to help students generate writing and to help them create frames of reference for their reading. The students were encouraged to think of stories from their own lives that related to the themes in the first chapters of *Black Boy* before they even opened the book.

Here are the topics from the novel that Suzanne and Paul had their students consider:

**A Person Who/Whose . . .**

- I hated.
- death made me the saddest.
- I respected very much as a child.
- taught me something very important.

**A Place Where . . .**

- I had to fight for the right to be there.
- I was hurt (emotionally and/or physically).
- I learned what it meant to be an adult.
- I liked to watch what people did.

**Something That I . . .**

- did that caused a terrible accident.
- had a fight about as a child.
- was angry about when I was young.
- don't like to remember.

**A Time When . . .**

- I had to learn to stand up for myself.
- I did something that made me look smart and my parents look stupid.
- my mom or dad wanted to kill me.
- I was scared to death.

After making this list of sixteen childhood memories, Paul and Suzanne asked their students to write the story of one of their incidents. Then they read these stories to each other in class.

Paul and Suzanne found that their students had written stories that were obviously similar to the ones that are in *Black Boy*. Several of them told about starting fires in their homes when they were young, making a direct link to the opening scene of the novel. A couple of students told stories similar to Wright's about his mother forcing him to learn to defend himself against a gang of boys who wanted to rob him of the grocery money. "Not only had the students come up with great stories," Suzanne told us, "but also they recognized themselves in *Black Boy* right away. It helped them to get hooked on the book."

Although they were happy with the stories that their students had remembered, Paul and Suzanne wanted to find a way to help them know how to revise more effectively. Having used a writing-to-read technique, they decided to adopt a couple of reading-to-write approaches.

Using Wright's prose as a guide, the students wrote dialogues to retell all or parts of their "People, Places, Times, and Things"

stories. Choosing a couple of people from their stories, they tried to recapture some of what was actually said at the time.

Suzanne and Paul also photocopied the first five pages of *Black Boy* and had their students find a few "words, phrases, or sections" that they thought were particularly "well written." Emphasizing that they were working now with stylistic matters, Paul and Suzanne had the class "text-render" these first pages of the novel. They read their chosen passages orally, taking turns, trying to have a conversation about this part of the novel using nothing more than Wright's words.

Then they asked the students to make a special kind of double-entry. After dividing their papers in half from top to bottom, in the left column, the students copied down the parts that they had circled earlier. In the right column, they speculated on why this particular section was so effective. "What do you notice about the way this was written?" and, "What do you think Wright did to make this so effective?" were two of the questions that Paul and Suzanne asked them to consider for their speculations.

Finally, they shared these double-entry notes and, together with the students, Suzanne and Paul made a list of the kinds of things that writers can do to make their stories effective. This list of techniques was later typed up and handed out to the students before they were asked to revise their original stories on the computer.

Many of the students found that they were able to see their stories in new ways and to make them come alive after they spent some time noticing the techniques that Wright used. They added dialogue, rewrote from another point-of-view, used images, tried to create dramatic irony, paid attention to the way the words sounded in their pieces, used all of the senses to describe things, and played with other techniques in an attempt to show, not just tell, their stories.

This interactionist approach of using writing to teach reading and reading to teach writing allowed Paul and Suzanne to use personal writing to introduce a novel and to use a part of the same novel to give more power to the personal writing.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Iris Schachter** has been busy keeping a family tradition alive. According to Iris, when her mother was in junior high school, "her assignment was to write to her teacher's mother, because she liked to receive mail." This assignment which "started a lifetime hobby of writing" for Iris' mother, has found new life in Iris' ESL class at Bryant HS.

Wanting her students to write friendly letters, Iris says, "I decided to motivate them by promising an answer from someone they didn't know, my mother. A few got very excited," she told us, "and wrote such beautiful letters!" Because of her own experiences in junior high school with this assignment, Iris' mother was motivated to answer each letter. A few students decided to write back again. "One boy asked if he could write

every other day." Here are some of these letters, written to and responded to by a real audience, the teacher's mom.

*Dear Mrs. Kay,  
How are you! I am a new student in Bryant HS. I am just from China. Only seven months.*

*In China I never learn English, so I feel studying English is very difficult. Like I need a lot of time to remember a word. But in my English class. I feel O.K. I hate some students, because they know some words already. So they are very noisy. The teacher say something to explain. I don't know meanings.*

*Please tell me how I can remember more words.*

*I am fine. I am in class now. Hope you like Chinese students. Please write soon.*

*Student,  
Hu Kim Lin*

*Dear Mrs. Kay,*

*We are in the classroom and studying about a friendly letter. It's a rainy day and I feel very good do you know why because it's Friday and tomorrow is no school. We can do anything we want to do like going to the movies.*

*You noticed my name on the top of the letter and I am from Afghanistan and this is my fourth month in United States. I have been here before three times and I know that much English to write you a letter.*

*I heard from Mrs Shachter our teacher that you have a lot of friends and you like to write letters to your friends. That's what I like too and I have friends in Afganistan, India, Germany and California. I write letters to them also.*

*Your new friend,  
Hedayat N.*

\* \* \* \* \*

**Ellen Shatz** suggests that if you want to help your students add focus to their writing, start saving your toilet paper rolls!

She used these little toilet paper "thing-a-ma-jigs" to show her fourth graders at PS 105X how to focus: how to elaborate and get details into their writing.

"First I have them just write about our classroom. Then I have them look through the 'thing-a-ma-jigs' to find one item to write about," she explained. For their second piece of writing, the students are instructed that they can only "write about what can be seen through the paper roll." One of her students wrote a delightful description of Ellen's desk. Another student wrote about a mylar balloon that was in the room.

Once these first two pieces of writing are written in their journals, then Ellen uses them to show what focused writing looks like. As an example of how her students use their imaginary "thing-a-ma-jigs," Ellen told us of a student who previously wrote about sports in a vague, general way. "After the 'thing-a-ma-jigs,' he started writing about specific Yankee games and other sports events," she told us.

How many toilet paper rolls will you need by next semester? Better start saving this valuable teaching resource now!

## From A Teaching Journal

Dear Jose,

I think back, time and again to that conversation we had last year. You insisted that you would gladly exchange all of your artistic talents for the ability to read and write. Your plea haunts me still; I am never free of your wish.

According to the academic standards established by our society, you may be a failure. I know that you feel that keenly, and that there is little, or nothing, that I can do to prove otherwise to you. Our schools measure all kinds of learning through the ability to read and write. How can I help you to distinguish between knowledge, creativity, thinking, potential to contribute, and worthiness as a human being, and the mechanics of a process we call reading and writing. For so long you've doubted your fundamental self, making a direct connection. "If I can't read or write, I must be dumb." If our association has given you anything, I hope it has served to reduce that equation to more realistic proportions. Your fertile brain follows my most intricate speculations; your thoughts are philosophical, synthesized, logical, and well-expressed. You use language as the tool it is meant to be, to make sense of the world around you and to deepen your own understanding of your experience; to converse, to laugh, to make relationships, to try to express the joy and pain that lodge in your soul.

How is it that the educators of the world have allowed--no, have forced--you to believe those traits are unimportant? We have taught you not to believe in yourself. We have so much to learn, and you are an unimportant pawn in the games of facts and figures.

I've asked you before, Jose, and now I'll ask you again: What is reading? What is writing? I believe that you are beginning to know that comprehension is the whole tamale; the mechanical processes are just some of the ingredients. But this doesn't help you; knowing is not yet feeling; your self-doubts are basic. I know that in your mind, you belong around a crowded table at a downtown cafe, sitting with a group of friends, discussing the latest art show and reading the critics' comments. I know that you feel forever excluded from this group. I know that you want to belong, fervently desire to be a "member of the club." And I will have no answers for you, Joselito darling, no reassurances that your sweet words will even flow into the permanence of print, not to be washed away by the next words which spill into the atmosphere.

Are you to be forever denied the joys of such a literate environment, solely because fate chose to block some simple synapse which makes written symbols as accessible, and as delightful, as a kiss?

So many others. Jose, do not care about discussing a book, or sharing a poem, or writing a story about a boy with desolate eyes. You, who would be a reader, and could be a writer, are denied what would be pleasures to you.

What does all this mean to you or to me? I guess what I'm saying is that reading and writing come from the heart, not from something that is learned. At their fundamental levels, both are acts of love. You feel that love, and I am optimistic that you will find ways to feed that piece of your self, to fulfill that yearning within you.

With much love and hope,  
*Lisa Rosenberg*  
*James Monroe HS*

## Project Notes

Summer courses blossom... This summer, the Project and the Institute are sponsoring six courses. The Open Institute for teachers K-college is being taught by **Melanie Hammer** and **Beverly Marcus**. The fifth High School Students Writing Project course is being taught this year by **Sondra Perl** and **Candy Systra**. **Marilyn Boutwell** and **Azi Ellowitch** are coordinating the course for adult educators, **Robin Cohen** and **Denise Levine** are teaching the course for junior high school teachers and **Bill Delaney** and **Ellen Shatz** are coordinating the course for elementary school teachers. An advanced course for high school teachers who have participated in the Writing Teachers Consortium will be taught by **Chris Kissack**, **Gail Kleiner**, **Ed Osterman**, and **Judy Scott**.

\* \* \* \* \*

There's a lot of excitement at Newtown High School these days. The writer in the March 28th issue of *The Daily News* had everyone talking about the article, entitled, *'Write On' is the Motto*, in which Language and Learning Core consultant **Ed Osterman** and teacher **Renee Kranz** shared their ideas about writing and learning. The article gave a brief history of the Writing Project and pointed out that Core students scored higher on the Regents Competency Test than other Newtown students.

There's even more news on the publication front from the Newtown Language and Learning Core. One of the Core students wrote a poem which was published in *The American Anthology of Poetry*. Guess they've got the *Writer's Cramp Blues* out there.

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Heartfelt thanks and warm appreciation go to **Candy Systra**, **Paul Allison**, **Suzanne Valenza**, **Ed Osterman**, **Elaine Avidon**, **Bryna Diamond**, **April Krassner** and **Sallyann Keith**, who, with a little help from **Gail Kleiner** and **Denise Levine**, made up this year's NYCWP Meeting Committee. This group worked to bring us all together in ways that continued to be thought-provoking and entertaining. Can't wait to see what they come up with next year!

\* \* \* \* \*

The Teacher-Researcher Conference, organized by Carla Asher and Nancy Wilson and held on June 4, 1988, was an enormous success. Two hundred people attended the conference, which included a key-note speech by Nancie Atwell and sessions led by teachers involved in research efforts in Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. We hope this becomes a yearly event!

The Classroom Researcher course coordinated by Carla Asher and Nancy Wilson earlier this year was a jumping-off point for a variety of ongoing research projects. Marsha Slater has been funded by the National Council of Teachers of English for her Teacher-Researcher proposal, "Writing Researcher as Colleague Across the Curriculum." Her research is detailed earlier in this issue.

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Kudos to Marcie Wolfe of the Institute for Literacy Studies and Jim Pateman of the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit from the United Kingdom for their work as conference organizers of "As We Teach It: A British-American Adult Literacy Exchange." On June 15th, 115 selected adult literacy practitioners from all over the United States and the United Kingdom converged on Lehman College for this five-day conference.

Participants worked together, sharing information and developing collaborative projects in the areas of assessment and evaluation, learning-centered education, literacy for community action, implications of adult literacy education, ethnic and language minority literacy, work-related literacy and teacher and tutor training.

Over the next four years, participants will be implementing the projects they designed, with support from the ILS and ALBSU. They will reconvene to share the results of their work at a conference to be held in London in July of 1989.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carla Asher has completed her dissertation and earned her Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from New York University. The dissertation, entitled, *Writing on Our Own*, is a study of six students from an alternative South Bronx high school who are "self-sponsored writers." Congratulations!

\* \* \* \* \*

The Newsletter is thrilled to welcome back Melanie Hammer to our staff. Her hiatus, which seemed all too brief to her, was endless to us. We are once again enjoying our collaboration.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Newsletter staff would also like to express their gratitude to Denise Levine, who, as Robin Cohen's officemate for the summer, was often drawn into our editorial wrestling matches. She was very generous with her time, energy, and green pen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Please let us know of *your* works-in-progress, research, accomplishments, articles, etc. We would love to share them with other Project members.

### Newsletter Staff

*Paul Allison, University Heights HS*  
*Robin Cohen, Martin Luther King, Jr. HS*  
*Bryna Diamond, NY Public Library Ctrs for Rdg & Wtg*  
*Melanie Hammer, HS of Art & Design*  
*Lisa Rosenberg, James Monroe HS*  
*Marcie Wolfe, Institute for Literacy Studies*

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