

# New York City Writing Project NEWSLETTER

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## A Note From the Editors

New York City Writing Project members teach writing, talk about writing, write alone and collaboratively, read writing, think about writing, write about writing, publish writing. We also proofread it, edit it, correct it, and grade it...in other words, as teachers who have made a commitment to developing literacy, we are often placed in a position where we need to assess writing. Simple enough to state, but myriad questions arise when the topic of assessment of writing is considered. The topic has arisen at our monthly meetings, and recent submissions for the newsletter from Project members indicate that many of us are concerned with issues about assessment of student writing. We decided to devote this issue of the newsletter to an exploration of the questions and concerns that we, as teachers, have about assessment of student writing.

To provide a background of actual classroom methodologies and teacher philosophies, we polled a number of Project members across the grades about their practices and thoughts and present the results of these interviews in *Roundtable on Writing Assessment*. Further examination of issues related to assessment in adult literacy classes include Kathryn Schwertman's *Invitation to Revision* and Bryna Diamond's *Reinventing Intake: Developing Student-centered Approaches*. A personal statement about the ramifications of assessment is struck in *Michael*, by Susan Bartolone, and Rikki Asher, Reina Pincus, and Jeff Repka add their voices with pieces developed from their teaching journals which reflect their concerns about assessment of high school students. And, for our last piece, Ed Osterman describes the experiences of one teacher taking the reading license examination when he really ought to be having *A Date with Liz*.

Our engagement with this issue has brought us all closer to our own questions and thoughts about what we do, and don't do, when we assess our students' writing. We hope that you will find the ensuing articles thought-provoking, and we invite your involvement with the issues raised within these pages.

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## Roundtable on Writing Assessment

In the process of changing the ways in which we teach and respond to writing, many of us in the Writing Project have become studied non-evaluators of what our students write. We've found that when we step out of the evaluator's role, our students are able both to take more risks--risks that nourish the development of writing power--and to revise their writing in the contexts of genuine communication. For many of us this attempt to cast ourselves as listeners instead of evaluators, as communicators instead of critics, or as coaches instead of judges has radically changed the ways in which writing is used and responded to in our classrooms. We've traded in our red pens and our multiple-choice tests for . . .

Well that's the problem. What new criteria are we using to assess writing now that we don't bloody our students' papers with red marks referring to poor grammar and faulty logic and now that we see little value in multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank homework assignments, quizzes, or tests? A related, but different, question is: How do we grade writing now that we are looking for such elusive, almost mysterious qualities as voice, "some sort of change" between drafts, "how much thought has gone into it," or how any one piece of writing compares with a student's previous work?

For me, grading writing has been something that has never seemed to work. Given my process-oriented approaches to the teaching of writing, how could I pretend to be evaluating it when I felt so unsure about what writing progress or improvement was in the first place? And then, even if I could settle on something that represented "good writing" or at least "better writing," these things have often proved to be so elusive that I haven't had the tools I've needed to measure them. The one thing traditional teachers always had over me was data. Although this data was gathered from surface or technical accuracy, at least these teachers could concretely justify their grades to students, parents, and supervisors. Or so it seemed.

I've felt that this must be a real weakness in my teaching. Wasn't everybody else happily putting mysterious checks, pluses, minuses, numbers, and letters at the top of their students' papers and then entering these into long thin marking books? Was I the only one who didn't have clear, objective, and satisfying ways of measuring my students' progress as writers?

Of course, I've found that I'm not alone. Many other teachers are also uneasy about how the assessment and the grading of writing fits with what they want their students to experience and to know about their writing processes. The other editors of this newsletter and I carefully interviewed a dozen New York City Writing Project members who work in a variety of settings. These interviews brought to the surface a number

of questions about the contradictions and the problems that Project teachers face when we grade what our students write.

First, what happens to our students' writing when we don't grade it at all?

Generally we found that Writing Project teachers assess writing all the time. We do everything from individual conferencing or writing responses on papers to deciding whether or not to give a piece of writing credit, to even more subtle gestures such as that of either accepting a student's paper or returning it for changes. Although we do it in different ways and in widely diverse contexts we all find ourselves making judgments about our students' writing. What we do with these assessments is another matter.

Many of the teachers whom we interviewed do not grade writing at all. Even before we asked our first questions, nearly everyone warned us that they would not be very good subjects for an interview about how teachers grade writing.

Andrew Galinsky (City-as-School), for example, began by explaining, "Well, I don't give grades for writing. I either accept it or I don't accept it. and if I don't accept it, I give it back and tell them to do more with it."

After saying that she doesn't grade writing either, Anne Lawrence, who has worked with adults at the New York Public Library Centers for Reading and Writing, told us why she personally prefers not to grade. "When you're working with beginning writers," she said, "confidence and comfort are more important than a superficial judgment." First grade teacher Shelley Hoffman (P.S. 152 K) put it this way: "You don't give children 'F's' if they fall off their bikes. You analyze deficiencies and work to correct them."

Linda Farrell (Martin Luther King, Jr. HS) doesn't grade writing in an ESL English class that she teaches. In this class, which is "for verbal students who have limited reading and writing ability," Linda feels that it helps her students when she doesn't "give a mark or put red pencil marks all over their papers. It frees them," she claims. She gets "insightful writing from them that is truly heart-felt" because she doesn't grade.

Working with eighth grade remedial writing classes, Heidi Atlas (Baldwin, L.I. JHS) is also able to teach without giving marks because no final grades from the classes appear on her students' report cards or records. As a result, Heidi finds that her students "eventually become more concerned with audience and process, and with reading other students' work." The focus becomes "the piece itself," she observed, "rather than the grade that they are going to get on it."

These teachers work with a wide variety of students, and all of them feel that by not grading their students' papers, they've found it easier to do some of the basic things that Writing Project teachers work to accomplish: (1) establish a more supportive atmosphere where risks are encouraged; (2) help students write more from and for themselves instead of for the teacher; (3) emphasize the revision process in writing; and (4)

move students from a dependence on grades toward more of an interest in the writing process and in actual communication.

Although this might suggest that we should stop evaluating writing altogether--that Writing Project teachers should trade in our red pens for nothing at all, not everyone agrees that this is advisable even if it were possible. Many Writing Project teachers work in schools where grading writing just can't be avoided.

For example, Joel Goldstein, an English and computer teacher at Winthrop JHS, finds that "grades are extremely important to the kids," and he uses this concern about grades as "a powerful motivation" for them to "work harder." Joel mostly grades his students' "performance writing," which he explains "is quantitative, not qualitative." This kind of writing is graded "solely on how much writing they've done and how much effort they've put into it."

As students like Joel's junior high school students move on to senior high, they become even more aware of the fact that grades are the basic currency of exchange in school. In their efforts to either survive or to excel, they often become so driven by grades that they tend to undervalue assignments or projects that are not carefully and traditionally marked.

Nearly all of the teachers whom we interviewed seem to agree with Ed Osterman (Writing Teachers Consortium, Newtown HS) who told us that he "would love to never grade." But he feels that if he didn't grade his students' writing, "they wouldn't value it, and they wouldn't revise it." Ed, who says that he "knows better, but I find it hard not to grade," told us a story about how grading helps students treat their writing more seriously. "Sakreu always got 70's on his work," he began. "One day he saw his neighbor's paper. The neighbor had gotten an 80. The next day, Sakreu gave me a fourth draft of a piece--totally unsolicited! It had a great opening! It was the best piece this kid had written." Ed said that this showed that "when a kid sees someone else getting a high grade, and you tell that kid that he'll get a higher grade, he'll revise."

This leaves those of us who would prefer not to mark writing with a paradox: How do we help our students to hook into that intrinsic power of writing--that personal commitment or near compulsion that drives thoughtful inquiry and industry--when they are caught up in a system of extrinsic rewards and punishments?

A second set of questions that seems to concern the teachers whom we interviewed had to do with what we are trying to accomplish when we do grade writing. Those of us who must or who have decided to mark our students' papers have to make a lot of other decisions along the way. What criteria are we going to use? Are we mainly trying "to encourage and motivate" our students? Or are we trying to let them know how close they are to measuring up to some sort of standard? In other words, are we measuring progress or accomplishment?

Robin Cohen (Martin Luther King, Jr. HS) told us that she sets up different standards for each of her classes, but that once

these standards are established, she measures accomplishment: how close each individual student comes to reaching their class' goals. "I have my own idea of what something is worth for each class," she explained, "and that's how I mark." But then she smiled and admitted, "Except for Sandar Aung. She gets higher marks for trying!"

Ed Osterman posed this as a conflict that he faces all the time when he grades. "You know your kids have worked hard and have moved from point A to point B," he explained, "yet if judged by outside standards, they'd get only a 70, for example, on a paper that I gave an 80." Ed grades this way "to encourage and to motivate the kids." But he feels guilty about it, "because if an outsider looked at the paper, the marks wouldn't be as high."

Another approach seems to be to adopt more conventional standards when we want to help our students to develop their writing in such ways as to enable them to demonstrate their skills and pass tests. For example, Linda Farrell, in an approach different from the one she uses with her ESL English class mentioned above, also teaches a "formal research class where her more advanced ESL students learn research techniques, write several drafts, and hand in a final research paper." In this class, Linda marks her students' papers on "the quality of the research, organization, bibliography, footnotes, outline, etc." In other words, she asks herself, "Did the student master the skills needed to write a formal research paper?" The specter of college seems to be why Linda evaluates writing so differently in her two classes. She feels that the research course is one in which her students prepare for their academic futures. "They're learning the skills necessary for college," she explains.

Barbara Gurr (Grover Cleveland HS) has a similar concern in her Advanced Placement class. Because it's a college-level class, she uses "college-type grades." Barbara also limits the kinds of writing assignments that she gives to these students, trying to keep them "geared to the exam." She gives essays like those on the Regents, and she grades them "as if they were real Regents questions." In the spring term, she even uses "the ETS scale of 1 to 5," because she wants her students "to have some idea of where they might rank on the AP exam." Barbara claims that her "marks have a strong impact on her students." Although she makes extensive comments as well, she observes that "they are very concerned about marks and take them to heart."

But what if we don't want to use outside standards such as these? In fact, for many of us, our ways of grading writing seem to have very little to do with any outside standards. In the absence of any agreed-upon values for what an 85, for example, represents, we have adopted subjective guidelines for the marks that we give writing. We try to use grades to reinforce the writing and thinking goals that we have set for ourselves and for our students. When we adopt or are constrained to use standards that we have not developed ourselves, many of us find that these evaluations become hurdles in the way of our students' progress as writers. Instead of allowing this to happen, not a few writing teachers have started to use their own criteria. The things that we personally value in writing, in thinking, and in learning become our own, subjective guidelines for the grades that we give. What is needed is for us to question, to explore, and to share--

with each other, with our students and their parents, and with our supervisors--what our standards for judgment seem to be.

Many of us are beginning to talk to each other. From elementary schools to adult basic education programs, Writing Project teachers are asking questions and experimenting with new ways of grading what their students write.

In many alternative high schools, teachers work with "credit/no credit" rather than with number or letter grades, a system which allows the teacher of writing to make assessments and judgments with more flexibility. For example, when Andrew Galinsky determines whether or not to give credit to a student's piece of writing, he mainly looks for "some sort of change" between drafts, but he also looks "to see if a piece is clear without any gaping holes in it." He feels that this method of assessing writing helps his students see that he takes "their writing seriously, and it helps them get another point of view on the piece." Although his students also find their peers' responses valuable, Andrew thinks that "they need to feel that the teacher is involved."

Anne Lawrence agrees with Andrew about what happens when the teacher grades writing: the teacher becomes a most important audience for the writer. But she spoke about the negative side of this. Reflecting on her own experiences as a writer, her "own fear of taking a risk, of being open to experimenting," Anne worried that when the teacher becomes such an important audience, "you're not going to take a risk. You are not going to develop a style. You need to experiment with your style--find your voice, in other words."

Suzanne Valenza (University Heights HS), uses her school's point system to grade her students' writing. Instead of number or letter grades, Suzanne determines how many points any particular assignment is worth, and then by accumulating a certain amount of points in the term her students earn credit for her courses. Suzanne says that she assesses her students' writing like this: "First of all I look to see if I got what I asked for, and then I look for how much thought has gone into the writing. If I see that the student really thought this out and came up with something, then it gets all the points assigned to this project. If the students go far in their thinking, then they can get even more points. If I don't see any thought in the paper or the response, they don't get any points. I don't accept it. I guess I scale my points on how much thought is shown."

Fourth grade teacher Ellen Shatz (P.S. 105 X) is required to give report card grades that she says "do not fit with process writing," but she points out that "grades are not meaningful to children." Rather they serve as a means of "communication between the parent and the teacher." Ellen's questions about grading at the elementary level have to do with how our reporting procedures can change so that parents get more clear messages about how we assess, grade, and teach writing. She also asks how our evaluations can better fit our belief that young children should be given the freedom they need to experiment with and to enjoy their writing, to play.

Ellen evaluates writing in conferences, which she conducts daily, trying "to get to everyone as needed." Her concern during these private meetings is more for the growth of the student than it is for the quality of any particular piece of writing. Ellen's aim "is to have progress, to have them grow as writers, to have them make changes, to have them look at their writing in new ways."

Shelly Hoffman (P.S. 152 K) grades her first graders' writing "holistically," by which she means that "mechanics are never an issue." Rather she focuses on how well her students "express themselves and their thoughts" by not only looking at "how well developed their paragraphs are" but also by "considering their experiences." Shelly conducts individual conferences with her students in order to see their writing within the context of their previous work and to give them positive feedback.

Conferencing is clearly one way that NYCWP teachers include students in the evaluation of writing. Some teachers, in their attempts to establish new guidelines for grading writing, are not only looking to their own values, but are also trying to find ways to bring their students' values into the process of grading.

For Azi Ellowitch (Adult Learning Center, Lehman College) "People seeing that they can do more is the way to measure progress." She has her adult students do "a lot of writing," and soon, they themselves "can tell when a task is easier than some time earlier." Because "they can feel when they write better, more organically," Azi believes that it "would be useful to develop with the students a set of criteria to make it easier for the students to actually see and to articulate their own progress." But she also feels that we have a responsibility to teach our students new ways of thinking about how they might go about making these judgments of and for themselves. "We have a lot of work to do before we give students the tools to assess themselves," she warned.

Marcie Wolfe (Lehman College) does some of this work with her freshman writing students to build consensus and to give them alternative means to assess themselves. "Before the first round of conferences," she explained, "I have a discussion in class on whether or not they want to be graded on individual pieces and on what role they want in that." She continues this negotiation process throughout the term, using conferences to "provide some kind of service to the students that lets them reflect on how they're doing." Clearly, Marcie makes no claim to be objective in her approach to grading. Instead she told us that she works from "a set of subjective criteria... including a student's choice of topic or project that indicates a willingness to invest, a kind of ambitious work plan for the project--indicating that they're making a commitment to engage in a variety of inquiry-related activities including the drafting and redrafting of a final piece." Beginning with these personal goals, Marcie is careful to work with her students to help them to understand them. "I train them in those criteria," she said, "and then I have conferences with students where we discuss their finished pieces and negotiate their grades based on the criteria."

Candy Systra (Bronx Regional HS) also negotiates with her students to determine "what weight will be given to what aspect

of their grades." She gave us a couple of examples of how she does this. One of her classes chose to include "effort" as a large part of the grade, and another class chose not to have this as part of the grade at all. Her students also argued that "it isn't fair to judge a piece of writing by its length," and the example they gave was a story by their classmate, LeRoy. "They pointed out that the piece had a lot of feeling in it, and that if you read between the lines, you could really tell where he was."

No matter what method of grading (or of not grading) they use, no matter what their goals are in grading, no matter what their criteria or approaches are, by the end of our interviews, nearly all of the teachers with whom we talked agreed that the assessment and the evaluation of writing were important parts of their teaching. Instead of giving up on grading altogether, perhaps our question could be: How can we make our grading of writing better fit the new ways in which we look at writing?

In the February 1988 issue of *Research in the Teaching of English*, Arthur N. Applebee writes, "We are in the Age of Alchemy in writing assessment, relying on old formulas and dictums handed down from earlier eras." He goes on to call for "a much more rigorous and dispassionate look at the issues we face [with writing assessment] and the approaches we might take to address them." We hope that this article can serve as the beginning of a dialogue within these pages on some of these issues. By talking to each other in the newsletter about this aspect of our teaching, perhaps we will be able to see more clearly what we are doing when we assess and grade writing and what we could be doing differently.

Our intention in this article has been to raise questions, not to answer them. We need you to join our roundtable, to discuss your thoughts about some of the questions that we are asking about the assessment and the grading of writing and to add questions of your own. We invite you to join us by writing a response to this article, by writing a description of your own approaches, or by posing other questions about writing assessment and grading.

To be continued . . .

*Paul Allison*  
*University Heights HS*  
*with research by the editors*

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We are eager for your manuscripts--your thoughts on teaching and writing, descriptions of successful/unusual lessons, your poetry and very short prose, student writing, reports on conferences, reviews of professional literature, etc., etc. Send them to:

**NEWSLETTER**  
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## Reinventing Intake: Developing Student-centered Approaches

We have been thinking a lot about how to make assessment and intake an organic part of instruction in our student-centered, process-oriented adult literacy program. Now, as students enter the program, we administer the Test of Adult Basic Education, the standardized test which is required by the funders, the Degrees of Reading Power, a standardized test which measures "using the context" skills, as well as an oral reading inventory, a prompted writing sample, and an interview. We are dissatisfied with this way of welcoming someone back after many anxious years away from school, so we are working on developing procedures which will encourage students to create their own measures of progress.

At one site of the New York Public Library Center for Reading and Writing in the Bronx, we are "borrowing" the intake model that the Adult Learning Center at Lehman College is using, which draws on the skills of students who are already in the program. They have been taking an active role in the intake procedure, by conducting interviews and assisting the new students in making a decision about which class they will join.

I asked the students at our site at Patterson Community Center how they wanted to be involved in developing a new intake procedure. They feel very strongly that they are best equipped to introduce new students to the program and to answer questions through the interview. They say that since they'd had the same fears, concerns, and expectations when they entered the program, they could best allay those fears and respond to those concerns for new students.

Though we were not able to tackle all the assessment issues at first, we began to experiment with intake. We started by spending two or three sessions writing questions for the interview. I collected the questions on the board so that we could examine the themes which emerged. It seemed like leaving school was the most emotionally fraught issue for many. One woman left in the ninth grade because she was pregnant. Others left because of substance abuse. All felt that in one way or another, their difficulties with reading had brought them to a point where they could not stay in school. This may not seem earth shattering, but it was incredibly freeing.

We spent time revising the questions. A lot of questions were repeated or awkwardly phrased. After we finished, we practiced. And practiced. And practiced. There were mechanical problems that I didn't anticipate, like, how does someone who uses one letter and a line for most words transcribe an interview? I figured out that it didn't matter that much, because we were learning. It really made me think hard about what function the interview might serve. Is it supposed to garner us "date of birth" and "year left school"? Is it supposed to help the student talk about themselves? What exactly is the point?

Four students were ready to conduct the interviews and administer the writing sample. One extremely interested student missed class the week before the intake because of work, and it

wasn't until the midnight hour that he figured out how he could be involved. Two students actually did interviews.

Normally, when we meet with students individually, they really only have access to one staff member and their fount of wisdom. If we are doing a group intake, there might be two staff members and the new students might get a chance to introduce themselves to each other. This other model proved to be substantively different. There were two students there ready to conduct interviews, but there was one other student there who had no predetermined task. He was able to meet with the new students while they were waiting to work with the interviewers. He answered questions and told anecdotes and was supportive and helpful.

The students have talked a lot about how one of the first people they met in the program was a student and now, they are just as likely to ask the student who interviewed them for help as me. It seems almost obvious that the next step is to train the students who are in the program to be tutors. We have talked a lot about how working in a writing group and asking questions of another writer can help you be a better writer, and how leading someone through talking about their book reminds you to ask yourself those same questions.

I don't know if I really believed, on a gut level, that the students would actually do what they did. I second guessed that poor attendance, always a problem, would render weeks of work and planning useless. I was afraid that the interviewers would be impatient. I could not let go of the notion that without my intervention at every step, the whole thing would fall apart. I hovered over the students unmercifully. I worried and worried that the student "counselors" would impart some inaccurate information, like we never work, all we do is read and write and talk. I think that I was afraid that they would say something about me, that I was mean, or a lousy teacher. I didn't actually trust that they would learn, as I had, that you have to try to let people have their own fears--you can't impose yours.

I was wrong about more things than I was right. There was some impatience and transcription was a problem, more because the interviewers felt inadequate than because we lost some profound bit of data. And just last week, when I participated in a large group intake with several other staff people, as I watched five experienced, fluid interviewers follow their own instincts, all considerate and competent, I was reminded that people craft their own "ways of seeing."

Though this was only the first step towards developing new strategies for intake and assessment, I learned a lot about what students in my program are capable of, and how little of that is documented by standard assessment measures.

*Bryna Diamond*  
*NYPL Centers for Reading and Writing*

## From A Teaching Journal

Writing is easier for me now. It's not perfect, and it's still difficult at times, but it's better. Teaching also has become easier, and better. It's still a struggle sometimes, but not as much as it was.

Several years ago when I began teaching, I was eager and highly enthusiastic. I wanted to impart the wealth of knowledge I felt I had accumulated to my presumably equally enthusiastic and eager young students. I thought little more was required or necessary to be a good teacher. This wasn't to be the case.

Although the ideals and enthusiasm remain, most of the naivete was out the window by the second day on the job. I know now that becoming a good teacher is a long and arduous affair. After years of day by day survival and dreaded Mondays, I feel as though I still have a long way to go before I can pick up my teacher of the year award.

However, there's hope on the horizon. It's called the Writing Teachers Consortium, and all the participants therein. For the first time in my teaching career, I'm feeling less and less defensive and more and more secure in my role as an effective teacher. That's a lot to be thankful for.

I've known for some time that something was lacking in my "modus operandi," but I wasn't sure what it was. Although I had overcome many of the difficulties new teachers are bound to encounter--stage fright, discipline, facility in writing lesson plans, etc.--there remained deeper, more intractable problems. I felt as though the progress of my students was not commensurate with the personal growth that I had undergone and experienced. As time went on, this became a source of increasing frustration that bordered on despair, and I wasn't sure where to turn for help. One does not readily broadcast one's shortcomings, and I wasn't prepared to expose what I felt were real inadequacies to the further scrutiny of my coordinator.

Most of my colleagues were only too eager to give me the assurance they felt I needed. I was told not to worry, that I took the job too seriously, or that my expectations were too high. The problems were not so much with me and my ability to teach, but with the students. "They don't want to learn," was the often heard refrain. Perhaps, though I doubt it. And even if it were true it didn't solve the problem: it only made it worse from my point of view, and I remained disconsolate.

Redoubling my efforts, I refined my lesson plans and tried to stimulate interest with new and improved classroom demonstrations. I made more worksheets, study sheets and review sheets. I tried giving more or less homework. Quizzes and tests were made easier or more difficult and given more or less frequently. It seemed that whatever I did they adjusted to in a way that undid and exactly counteracted my efforts, proving once again Newton's law that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

It began to dawn on me that I lacked a consistent methodology and approach that would shift the burden of teaching and learning from the teacher to the student. What I needed most of all were concrete methods and techniques that would convert passive listeners into active players and participants in their own learning process.

There's an old saying that when the student becomes ready to learn, the teacher appears. If that's true, the Writing Teachers Consortium couldn't have found a more eager and receptive pupil, even if I didn't realize it at first. No doubt, like many others, I was resistant to change and a bit skeptical of these "California-style" innovations. However, the first time I employed the technique of guided free writing in my general science class, the unforeseen result was the first of many surprises I received this term. I expected groans and non-compliance, but when I looked up from my own writing, there was silence, bowed heads, and they were writing. It was working and they were working! The sense of relief was immediate: the burden had shifted slightly. Later, when I tried using group work in the same class, I had similar doubts about its value. I didn't feel they were capable of working together on their own without the teacher standing over them. But when I wandered about the room and overheard the lively discussions about the subject matter, I was rewarded with a long awaited sense of satisfaction and gratification. That night when I read their overwhelmingly positive process writing about the "group experience," I became a convert.

My students do desire to learn, and they are willing to do the work. But in my own misguided effort to impose my teaching upon them, I was denying them the opportunity to learn and work on their own. By presupposing that they were incapable or unwilling to work independently or together, I had taken away any occasion for them to express their innate desire to share their knowledge about what they were learning with each other.

I realize that much remains to be done (and undone!) before I can consistently make use of all that I've learned this past term, but the seed has been planted and I feel it's only a matter of time before I can harvest the fruits of the labor of love that teaching has become for me. And finally, for much of this, a special thanks must be extended to Thomasina LaGuardia for her enlightened guidance and the invaluable support that resulted from her active participation in my general science class. From the beginning, she was unquestioningly accepted by the students who sensed her genuine interest on their behalf and mine. The fruitful discussions we held afterwards provided me with the confidence and encouragement I had long sought.

*Jeff Repka  
HS for the Humanities*

## Steal These Ideas

What does a teacher do if the text designed for class use is not really suitable for the students? Richard McNamee, a shop teacher at William Cullen Bryant HS in Queens, found this to be true. The document that came with the computerized engraver in his plastics shop was not usable with his students. Since the class had already spent 15 weeks learning to use the engraver, he decided to enlist them in the creation and publication of a new manual.

Richard divided his class into four writing groups. The first group was responsible for the introduction to the manual. The second group wrote an overview of all the functions of the engraver, listing its limitations and capabilities. Groups three and four wrote detailed, step by step instructions for the manufacturing of simple and advanced products.

The entire project took seven days. The students wrote several drafts of their sections, working in peer-revision groups. Richard also responded to their drafts by giving them suggestions or helping them with technical details. On the fifth day, students handed in their drafts to Richard for additional comments. The next step in the process was to write as a group. When each group finished its section, students were sent to the engraver to check out the accuracy of their documents. The seventh day was spent doing final revisions and editing. After everyone was satisfied, one student from each group was chosen to type the final product on the class computer.

Richard felt that the project was a great learning experience for his students as well as for himself. The ESL students in the class were given the opportunity to write in their native languages, in the hope that the manual could be reprinted in more than one language. They were all proud of their manual, aware of the help it would give to the students of future plastics shop classes.

Bryna Diamond, of the New York Public Library Centers for Reading and Writing, works with students who "walk in" to use microcomputers at the West Farms Branch Library in the Bronx. Often, these adult students read above eighth grade and are ineligible for the tutoring the program offers. They feel, though, that they want or need to learn to write better, and spelling is a real problem for them.

She negotiates a schedule with the students which allows them time to learn to use the MacWrite software, time to write, and time to conference about which words, or word families, they want to learn to spell. Using the computer allows students to write without being bogged down in transcribing. There is less of a feeling that each word is the end of the world. The students feel freed to generate text.

When the students are ready to stop writing, they pinpoint words in the text that they feel are misspelled, and Bryna helps them to find patterns in these words. Sometimes it takes a few sessions to have enough words to see a pattern. Some students choose to learn a group of words that they need for work, and others choose to work their way through the "published" lists of words that the software provides.

The writing is really more of a way to generate text to find meaningful words and troublesome word families than a way to

compose, since conferencing and revising take place in a completely separate setting.

After the words are collected in some sensible way, they are entered into a program called Magic Spells, which scrambles and flashes and does other silly things with its own word lists or yours. It is a little babyish for adult students, but Bryna has not found a piece of software which serves the purpose nearly as well.

Finally, a great idea for final exams. Marcie Wolfe, Elaine Avidon, Beth Greenberg and Lisa Rosenberg all use a revision task for their final exams. Students are asked to choose a piece that was revised and commented on earlier, and revise it again. This allows students to demonstrate their increased competence in revising and reinforces the notion that some pieces can be returned to again and again for more work.

Melanie Hammer and April Krassner led a two-day writing retreat at Lehman College in January. To launch the writing, they took "a detour from the guidelines." Although they began with the standard Guidelines for Composing asking the participants to create several lists of possible things to write about, April and Melanie then moved in four other directions.

First, they asked the writers to focus on the following questions:

- a) What people come to mind?
- b) What places have you been to?  
Where do you want to go?  
Where have you been that you never want to return to?
- c) What answers do you have to questions other people have asked?  
What answers do you have to questions that have never been asked?
- d) What issues keep coming up?

From there, Melanie and April asked everyone to make two more lists: words and phrases that you like, and words and phrases that you hate. Once they had these words down on paper, the participants were given some time to make any connections, notes and diagrams that seemed to make sense to them; then they were encouraged to freewrite about any one idea that seemed to be running through these notes.

After writing for about fifteen minutes, they were asked to look back over all of the writing that they had done, and to develop first any descriptive passages and then any dialogue.

Next, the writers were asked to consider the parts of the piece that they were developing. First they chose a sentence or phrase from the piece and expanded it into a new paragraph. Next they skipped to another part of the piece, and wrote yet another paragraph, then a page.

The fourth step waited until the next day when April asked the writers to look over the piece from the day before and to transcribe the last two sentences onto a fresh piece of paper, and to pretend that this was the beginning of a new piece. Writers were then asked to find a part of the piece where they were having difficulty and to have a dialogue with it.

## An Invitation To Revision

The following exercise was used in an adult literacy writing class at The New York Public Library Centers for Reading and Writing, Fordham Branch. Writing levels in the class range from beginners to those more experienced who are preparing for the high school equivalency exam.

My co-teacher Barbara Greenfield and I were concerned that the majority of students in our class were not doing any significant revising, even after we had talked about it with the class on several occasions. As a result, we decided to model revision and to involve the class in the process as a collaborative effort. We hoped to convey revision to students by physically demonstrating revision, rather than just talking about it. Also, we felt that people often learn a concept better by "doing" it.

Prior to class, Barbara and I both did free-writing on a topic for five minutes. I copied my draft out on a large sheet of white paper, using magic markers, and taped the sheet up on a wall where everyone could see it. I also taped up on the wall a couple of blank sheets of paper alongside my draft so that I would have some blank space to work on as I made my revisions.

Both Barbara and I felt that we should not "plan" which revisions I would make. We wanted as much as possible for the revision to be spontaneous, a la Donald Murray. I must confess that I did spend several minutes before class thinking about my piece, but on the whole, my revision was spontaneous, especially as the students began calling out suggestions and urging me on. The first draft of my piece is as follows:

October 8, 1987

*Last night I called up my friend Henry in Albany. He said it had snowed six inches. Everywhere trees and telephone poles were broken. Power lines were down. "The city is a wreck" Henry said. He couldn't understand what had happened. But I knew right away. It reminded me of the ice storms we had in North Carolina where I grew up. I'd wake up one morning and all the pine trees would be laden with ice. Everywhere you looked was ice. When I walked outside....*

As I read over my piece, I shared my thoughts out loud. From re-reading, I realized that the story about Henry had triggered my childhood memories of ice storms in N.C. and that I was really much more interested in the story about ice storms in N.C. than I was in Henry. It seemed to me that the shift came where I said, "It reminded me of..." Therefore, I decided to throw away the whole beginning and start instead with the story about ice storms in N.C. I took a magic marker and crossed out the first 7 lines.

Next, I told the class that I felt I needed to write a different beginning, though, for a piece about ice storms in N.C. I was also concerned about trying to remember all the details of what ice storms were like. I wanted to put more description into create a more vivid picture of what it was like. On a blank sheet

of paper, I began writing the following new beginning, adding description as I went:

### THE ICE STORM

*When I was a child growing up in N.C., every year we usually had an ice storm. I'd wake up one morning and all the pine trees would be laden with ice. Icicles were hanging from the branches. Everywhere, ice glittered like diamonds. You could hear tinkling sounds as the ice dropped down from the trees....*

After adding my description I stopped again, because, as I told the students, I was satisfied with the description but I was still not satisfied with the beginning of my piece. It seemed kind of boring. I wanted something that would grab the reader and pull them right into the story and make them feel like they were right there with me jumping out of bed and seeing the ice. "That's how I'll begin!" I said. "With her jumping out of bed." I turned to another blank sheet of paper and wrote the following:

*One morning I woke to the sound of a gentle tinkling noise like bells. What could that be, I wondered. I jumped out of bed and ran to the window.*

I stopped at this point and glanced over at draft two and suddenly saw that I could hook up with the part that said "Everywhere pine trees...laden with ice." When I explained this to the class, I took my marker and was going to re-copy that part from draft two onto draft three, but then I remembered that Barbara had put out scissors and tape. Quick, before I forgot what I wanted to do, I ran over and grabbed up the scissors and whacked off the section from draft two that I wanted and moved it over and spliced it onto draft three. By this time the class seemed to be enjoying the process.

As I was taping the section up, Juan called out, "Wouldn't it sound better if you said: 'Much to my surprise'?" The class all agreed, so I took a different color marker and stuck it in with a carat: "Much to my surprise, everywhere pine trees..." Here I realized I would have to change the verb, and almost simultaneously the class called it out to me: "...were laden with ice." Another student then argued that "world" would give a more accurate description than the word "ice." So my sentence now became the following: "Everywhere the world glittered like diamonds." I then said I wanted to add something to make the piece more dramatic, so I added in: "An ice storm!--which is what I would have said when I was a child.

At this point, I felt satisfied, but the class didn't like the way my last line was worded. They also got into a big debate over the precise word for describing how ice "drops" down from trees. They made a variety of suggestions including: "dripped," "rained," "fell," "tinkled." It was exciting to see how involved the students were calling out suggestions for description, word choice and placement. I chose the word "dropped" but took their suggestions on rearranging the sentence until I came up

with the following: "the tinkling sound was the ice dropping down from the trees."

By the time we were done making all the changes, we all felt pretty satisfied with the way the piece turned out. However, the draft was so totally marked up and messy that it was getting hard to read, so I told the class I wanted to copy over one section that was particularly messy. I taped up another blank piece of paper, copied over the messy part, and added it to the draft I had been developing. The final piece, after all the revisions, ended up looking like this:

### THE ICE STORM

*One morning I woke to the sound of a gentle tinkling noise like little bells. What could that be, I wondered. I jumped out of bed and ran to the window. Much to my surprise, everywhere pine trees were laden with ice. Icicles were hanging from the branches. The world glittered like diamonds. "An ice storm!" I cried. The tinkling sound was the ice falling down from the trees....*

I explained again to the class that this was just the beginning of my piece and I wasn't by any means finished yet, but that I felt good about the beginning and had a clearer idea of which way to go with the story; i.e., a story about my childhood memories, rather than a story about Henry.

Following my public demonstration of revision, a lot of the students began revising. The following week, in another adult literacy class, Barbara took her free writing piece and also modeled revision. Her results were more dramatic, with almost every single student starting to make major revisions.

Barbara and I both felt that until revision became a physical reality for students, the "talking about it" was too abstract. However, by demonstrating the physical messiness and the cutting up and moving around of text, students seem to finally get the idea, and perhaps the 'invitation' to take scissors to paper and play with a piece of writing.

As I reflected on the experience, I was struck by how easily students participated in the exercise and how astute their suggestions for revision were. This fluency of response was not as dramatic when it came to revising their own pieces, even though after the exercise, students did use more frequent and extensive revision for their own pieces. Why was this? I wondered if students, in the role of observers, felt freed from the multiple cognitive demands of composing, and thus were more able to devote their full critical powers to revising my text. Are students more capable of revising orally than in writing? If so, does this mean that their capacity to revise is not adequately reflected in their writing, because their capacity to revise exceeds their fluency in writing?

I hope that other members of the Writing Project can offer any insights, suggestions, or answers to these questions.

*Kathryn A. Schwertman  
NYPL Centers for Reading & Writing*

## Michael

Having read Nancy Wilson's article in the NYCWP Newsletter (Summer 1987), in which she affirms learning through stories, I find that I have a story to tell. It's about a child who is a writing partner of mine. He has had many awful experiences with his writing over the years. Long, involved research papers were torn apart as early as fifth grade. Last minute paralysis always set in on English assignments. With the text read, and discussions firmly understood, the final essay loomed insurmountable. Last year's ninth grade English teacher, the school's writing coordinator, filled his paper with corrections. Each assignment produced an ever-increasing list of his grammatical or stylistic errors, in barely legible script. Praise for his writing was limited to an infrequent "good" buried in the morass of scribbled corrections on every page.

I thought of the first NYCWP workshop course that I had taken at John F. Kennedy High School in 1983. There was a presentation on correcting papers which had made so much sense: praise one element in every paper; choose only two errors to be worked on. Beyond two, the errors seem legion to a student holding his ego in his hands. How many times had I seen returned papers crumpled and thrown in the trash basket by students hurt and angry at the corrections, rather than motivated to learn by them. Was it worth their teachers' misdirected time and energy to correct every mistake? I don't think so.

In my own classroom today I returned diagnostic compositions. They were holistically marked with only the type of error commonly found in the essay indicated at the top of the page. When I gave them out, I praised the overall competence of the students, and invited those with special problems to see me at the end of class. There were many smiles as papers were distributed. After class, students who needed help asked me to show them their specific errors; others asked for workbooks to take home. No one left feeling overwhelmed or defeated, and those who needed help asked for it.

So I turn to this tenth grader who struggles to write essay after essay, expecting each paper to be torn apart, not knowing from which direction the next criticism will come: format, content, grammar, specificity. Before the assignments, he forgets his literature book, or leaves his notes in his locker; his parents yell at his lack of responsibility, and he tenses once more for his English paper. So we sit down with the assignment sheet: a comparison between "The Sniper" and "The Upturned Face" using the class discussion of theme, characterization, imagery, setting and irony. We talk about the stories and the possible organization of the paper. I ask questions; he digs into the stories for quotes and pertinent details. I scribble in loose-leaf: he writes on the blank screen of the word processor. The paper develops between us. We reorganize, edit, rewrite, proofread and print. Two and a half hours later he has an essay. Tomorrow he will hand in his work with his fourteen year old pride tied to it, and I will pray, as only a mother can, that this time the teacher will be kind.

*Susan Bartolone  
John F. Kennedy HS*

## Teaching Journals: Reflecting on Issues

This fall Ed Osterman and I met with 15 teachers from various Bronx high schools for a seven-week course focusing on teacher journals. The course was initiated for a few reasons. For one, the Writing Teachers Consortium has been in many Bronx high schools since its inception in 1981 and we felt it was time to offer a course for participants in those courses who might like to meet again with other teachers to do their own writing and explore aspects of their professional lives. We also liked the idea of offering the course at Lehman College and opening it to teachers from various schools rather than any one school, to broaden our professional community and to share similarities from school to school as well as differences. In addition, we felt strongly that the teacher journal component offered the potential for deeper exploration and reflection than was usually attempted.

The course was not about personal writing--although the expressive nature of journal writing *is* of course personal. We asked that participants keep serious, reflective journals about any aspect of their work lives. After a few weeks of writing and sharing these entries (sometimes using particular strategies to help us look more carefully at the issues we were beginning to raise) we each began to focus our writing on an issue, problem, or concern that emerged from the journals. One teacher looked more critically than she might have otherwise at a classroom technique with which she was experimenting. Another participant explored how fear, created by conditions in her school, inhibited her growth as a teacher. Others explored relationships with administrators, colleagues or individual students. Each week in class, we shared our observations and helped each other look for ways to see our issues or concerns more clearly. Subsequent journal entries then reflected the input of the other teachers in the course.

Finally, we shaped our journal writing into more formal pieces of writing, two of which follow. Many of these pieces still feel tentative to us since seven weeks is really only enough time to *begin* to look at issues that really matter to us. But the opportunity to reflect on and write about our teaching and the luxury of sharing these thoughts with other committed teachers made the time together valuable.

*Gail Kleiner*  
*Writing Teachers Consortium*

### Fear, Guilt, and the Blackboard

I have often thought of teaching as a purely intellectual activity, one in which the teacher's brain is in full gear at all times--for it not only has to produce and communicate ideas, but it also has to receive and process a multitude of impressions which in turn dictate its performance. Lately, however, as I have taken more time to reflect upon my own teaching, I am more inclined to believe that emotions have an equal or perhaps more prominent role in my professional life. As I think back on any given day, I have come to realize that fear, anxiety, hostility,

guilt, and hopelessness have been as much a part of my teaching as the intellectual processes. So, I ask myself: to what extent do these emotions affect my teaching? Are they peculiar to me and my personality or do other teachers experience them as well? Are they a positive or a negative factor in my classroom performance? What causes me to experience them? The answers to these and many other pertinent questions seem quite elusive to me.

I view teaching as a very complex activity which requires the total output of all my intellectual and emotional resources. It is not easy to isolate any one of these factors and analyze it in terms of classroom behavior. However, I would like to focus my attention on the relationship between fear and guilt and how they impact upon my own functioning in the classroom. These emotions, when properly channeled, can act as a strong motivational force in human endeavor; but they can also inhibit us by making us vulnerable to criticism from others or from within ourselves. If we fear the consequences of open defiance to an established norm we will act in a manner which is contrary to our own convictions. In doing so, we create a false impression of acceptance and adjustment which may be quite the opposite of what we feel or think. As a result, we become uncomfortable with ourselves; we experience the guilt of having been less than truthful to our own principles. No doubt, this discomfort will have some repercussions in the classroom.

Sometimes, wonderful teaching experiences arise from experimentation or from improvisation in the classroom. Yet, we often fail to follow our instincts because we have been trained to depend upon a lesson plan, which, no matter how thoughtfully prepared, hinders our imagination and constrains our spontaneity.

My own dependence on a lesson plan may be the result of my basic fear of authority and a deeply ingrained sense of obedience to it. Or perhaps it comes from an awareness of the need to accept the so-called "standard procedures" simply because it is more expedient for me to do so. In order to avoid emotional discomfort, I have chosen to conform--not without realizing that conformity undermines my self confidence and reduces my professional freedom.

Thinking back to my high school days, I recall that my best teachers were those who came into the classroom without preconceived ideas of how the lesson should flow. They were free to develop a whole lesson from a question raised in class, or from an incident that jogged their memory about other topics. I cannot help but envy their flair for Socratic dialogue developed through years of experience and their thorough knowledge of their subject. I cannot recall seeing a lesson plan in front of them nor a supervisor observing their classroom performance. Yet they fulfilled the course requirements and managed to instill in us a life-long interest in their subjects.

Why, then, am I not able to follow the example of these wonderful models? Having been trained to prepare and follow

a lesson plan, it would be difficult for me to function without one. Furthermore, I would not dare to try it. Very often, when under the weight of heavy fatigue, I feel tempted to skip a lesson plan, but the image of a supervisor coming into my room and demanding to see one forces me to write it. Or else, my own sense of guilt compels me to do it. Otherwise, I would feel that I am robbing my students of the "benefits" of a previously planned lesson.

Because of my pervading sense of guilt, I find it very hard to allow my students to engage in self-directed activities such as group work. I feel guilty whenever my students leave the classroom without having learned something new from me. While rationally I can accept the fact that they have a lot to learn from each other, emotionally I am less willing to accept it. I feel as if something is constantly pushing me to perform what I perceive to be my duty as a teacher. There is so much I would like to explore in the teaching of writing, yet I prevent myself from doing it for fear that things may not work out the way I plan them.

I recognize the fact that I allow fear and guilt to intrude upon my teaching, inhibiting my imagination and closing the door to experimentation. And I am deeply disturbed by the thought that my students' performance may also be guided by a sense of fear and guilt to which I may have contributed.

My journal entries have helped me focus on two very complex emotions involved in my teaching. By becoming aware of the ways I deal with them, I have taken my first steps towards avoiding their negative effects. Hopefully, one day I will find myself teaching without fear, experimenting without guilt.

*Reina Pincus  
John F. Kennedy HS*

## Reflections on the Writing of a College Recommendation

Alexander was imprisoned at sixteen years of age for armed robbery. Now, two years later, he is a senior at the alternative high school in the South Bronx where I teach. At his request, I wrote a letter of recommendation to the college to which he is applying.

He has told me that he wants to be a lawyer. He has a 93 average. He wants to hurry up and graduate in order to get on with "more exciting things."

I am concerned about Alexander. There are many courses he will have to take before he can focus on his major. I wonder whether his writing skills are good enough. In my class, I find myself having to re-explain even simple directions to him. He comes to class unprepared to make presentations. Other teachers have told me that he isn't doing as well as he could be doing.

In a chapter in Allan Bloom's book, *The Closing of The American Mind*, which discusses the student and the university, Bloom states that those students who have already made a

career choice have it that much easier; they have just to go about preparing for that career. Indeed, college can be a very alienating experience for young people who come from stable homes and supportive background, let alone for those with backgrounds like Alexander's.

Alexander asked another teacher of his to write a recommendation; she refused. He asked me, and I said that I would, without knowing that the other teacher had turned him down. The day after he asked me to write the recommendation, he asked if I had finished it. I told him that I needed to get to know him a bit first, to ask him some questions about his ideas about life and his desire to become a lawyer. He seemed annoyed, but agreed to set aside some time to meet with me.

I learned a lot about Alexander from our interview. He hasn't had it easy. For as long as he can remember, his father has been out of his life, living somewhere in Brooklyn. He says he doesn't have a satisfactory relationship with his mother, although he recognizes that she has encouraged him to stay in school. During a time when she had her reasons to make him leave her house, she allowed him to stay, even though he was "messing up." He told me that he appreciates that, but that he probably would never tell her. He holds in a lot of anger about the lack of attention and lack of love he feels he has experienced. In his eyes, she provides a roof over his head, but no financial or emotional support.

He is extremely independent, washing his own clothes, doing his own shopping, cooking and cleaning up after himself. He has an after-school job in a supermarket. It was while he was in prison that he decided to become a lawyer. He told me that he wants to be the best he can. He feels that by going into community law, he can help others, and at the same time, help himself. Yet, he feels alienated from his peers. He tends to be a loner at school.

He said that he has always loved school. His teachers apparently provided the recognition and approval that he felt he didn't get at home.

When I initially thought about the recommendation I would write, I assumed that being a lawyer would make a difference in Alexander's life. However, it may not make the kind of difference he hopes for. Although he might realize his goal, he could become further disenchanted with the system. Yet, the strong possibility exists that he may not become a lawyer despite his strong desire.

I took great care to write a comprehensive recommendation. In the program he is applying for, the CUNY Pre-Law Program, a good recommendation can make a great difference. When I handed the finished letter and a copy to Alexander, he immediately folded the original into thirds and stuffed it into a legal sized envelope. He quickly sealed it and wrote the address on the front of the envelope. As I watched him start to head for the door, I asked him if he wasn't curious to read what I had written. "Why? I have a copy." He left the room without acknowledging how much thought and care went into the writing of the recommendation.

He left without saying thank you.

Why am I so concerned about Alexander? Is it because I feel that he has an opportunity to make it, and that I feel I can be of some help? Is it that he reminds me of myself when I was in high school, and needed someone to help direct me?

My mother died when I was a senior. Although she never offered any suggestions about college, she once mentioned an art school in Nova Scotia she had heard about. My father had died twelve years earlier. The main person to whom I would look for direction, my father's sister, was more concerned with preparing my younger brother for his entrance into the CUNY Pre-Med Program. She never spoke to me about art colleges. When I was offered a full scholarship to the Kansas City Art Institute and another full scholarship to Cornell University, I turned them both down. I turned them down because my mother had just died, and it didn't seem like a big deal. No one made a big deal about it, and so I ended up attending CUNY at Lehman College. It turned out to be for the best, since it was there that I met my scenic design teacher, who helped me to become a professional scenic designer. My aunt was the one who suggested I take a course in stage design.

She was the person who started me off in the direction of my goals. On some level, I want to be the person to help set Alexander on his way towards his goal.

Alexander and I had a long talk today. He feels that he didn't have to work very hard to get the high school diploma he will be getting. He wonders if he would have made it in a regular high school. I told him that the important thing is that he did make it, and that he still has a long way to go; that, the road he is travelling will require a great deal of hard work and perseverance. I told him that I have confidence in him. He appreciated the point, and told me that he felt good knowing that I have faith in him. I told him I would like to keep in touch with him after he graduates. He asked me not to ask him to do that. He told me that another teacher had tried to do that and he never responded to her inquiries. I felt hurt when he told me that he didn't want to keep in touch.

I thought of his mother. How difficult it must have been for her when he was, "messing up," yet she stood by him and didn't throw him out of the house. I thought of what Alexander told me, about how much he appreciated and cares for his mother, but would never tell her. He seems like a volcano that is ready to erupt. I see him holding onto a lot of rage and denying his feelings.

It is sad that he doesn't feel deserving enough of someone to care about him. Perhaps through the rigor of the law school program and through helping others, as he has said, he will be able to help himself.

Perhaps along the way he will allow someone to help him help himself.

Rikki Asher  
Bronx Regional HS

## Project Notes

New York Magazine included a special "City Child" section in its November 23, 1987 issue. Pedro Colon, one of Gail Kleiner's students in the Language and Learning Core at Alfred E. Smith HS, and Debra Persaud, a student at Jamaica HS who participated in the High School Students Writing Project, wrote pieces during their respective classes/workshops which found a wider audience in this edition.

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Carla Asher's article, *Developing a Pedagogy for a Teacher-Researcher Program*, was published in the December 1987 edition of *English Education*. In the article she describes what she has learned through the development of the program, in which teachers on sabbatical attend research courses led by Carla and Nancy Wilson while conducting classroom research.

Scholarship award recipients for the 1988 Classroom-Researcher Project include Marilyn Altabet, Marvin Axelrod, Carole Bertisch, Nancy Billy, Geraldine Gewirtz, Christine Kissing, and Ronni Tobman.

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The Writing Project was once again asked by Scholastic Magazine to provide readers for their annual writing competition. Maxene Kupperman-Guinal hosted Martha Sussman, Catherine Bambrick, Gerianne Scott, and Peg Anderson as they read short stories submitted by middle school students.

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Writing Project members are involved in a number of conferences this spring. Lila Edelkind and Linette Moorman were invited to present a workshop on March 16, 1988, at the "Links to Literacy" Conference sponsored by the Brooklyn Reading Council.

On April 16, 1988, Marilyn Boutwell and Marcie Wolfe organized and led a conference for 125 adult educators and students, called "Students and Teachers as Partners in Literacy." This conference, an annual event co-sponsored by Literacy Volunteers of NYC and the Institute for Literacy Studies, took place at Lehman College. Sessions were co-led by literacy teachers and students, and addressed issues of empowerment, multi-cultural education, and assessment.

Finally, on Saturday, June 4, 1988, the Writing Project will sponsor a Teacher Researcher conference, to be held at Lehman College. Nancie Atwell will give the keynote speech; workshop leaders include Marian Mohr and Sondra Perl, as well as teacher-researchers from New York, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. The workshops and presentations are designed for teachers who are involved in or interested in research, and for those simply interested in finding out what kinds of research other teachers are doing. Flyers with registration forms have already been mailed to Project members. The conference can only support 200 participants, so save the date and register now!

## A Date With Liz

He ripped open the envelope and his eyes widened when he saw the date of the test: June 9, 1982. His heart skipped a beat; his blood pressure rose.

"I don't believe it! I just don't believe it!"

No one in the English office paid much attention to Steven's wailings. Final exam envelopes were being distributed, teachers were darting in and out. Directions. Answer sheets. Bells ringing. He thought of approaching Mark, his chairman, about it, but what could Mark do? Steven sat down at a desk and just stared at the date, hoping the ink would disappear.

"Goddamn Board of Ed. If they don't screw you one way, they screw you another!"

He continued to sit there, muttering to himself, shaking his head. Around him, his colleagues continued to race in and out, grabbing composition paper while trying to juggle several of those hastily stuffed manila envelopes.

"Steve!" Mark shouted.

"Whaa?"

"Aren't you giving 7H their exam? The test starts in about 10 minutes."

"Mark, that stupid reading license exam is being given on June 9th. That's the day for my tickets to see Liz!"

"I can't worry about some rock concert now. We'll discuss this later."

"Liz Taylor's no rock group! I'm supposed to see Little Foxes that night! I've had these tickets for two months. The run's already sold out! What am I going to do?"

"Mr. Schwartz, may I remind you that you have a class of graduating seniors who are depending upon you to distribute their final exams in 20 minutes. We can discuss this matter at another time."

The "Mr. Schwartz" was the signal that it was time to return to the real world. But Steven persisted in his need to let out his anger.

"Mark, you don't seem to realize how upset I am about this. I didn't want to get involved in any of this to begin with."

"Look, Steve. I just thought it was good insurance for you, that's all. Why not have a second license?"

"You talked--no, you scared me into taking those horrendous finding-the-main-idea courses with Dr. Dodo last summer. I don't ever intend to do a reading program; you know how I feel about them. And now, of all the nights in the year, they have to select the 9th to give the stupid test! I'm sorry. I'm not taking it. I won't miss Liz."

"Isn't this a bit silly? Would you rather lose your position here to someone with a reading license in a year or so or miss a play?"

"You don't really want me to answer that," Steven responded immediately.

"Well, look. I can't help you. In the meantime, your students are waiting for this test."

"Maybe, I can tell the Board I can't take the test for religious reasons."

He proceeded to his classroom, but continued muttering to himself all the way down the hall.

For the next several weeks, Steven plotted to find a way to both take the test and see the play. To Steve's way of thinking, God had actually been kind to him. After all, unlike a colleague of his, he did not have to trek out to the depths of Brooklyn to take the exam. No, God had indeed smiled on him this time. Steve was scheduled to take the exam at a high school near Lincoln Center, just twenty blocks north of the Martin Beck Theatre, where Liz was temporarily ensconced.

"Mark just doesn't understand what this means to me. A choice between a license for teaching reading and a chance to see a movie star I love is simply no contest--Liz wins," Steven told friends. It was a remark he repeated continually, one phone call after another, almost as if he had to convince himself as much as his friends.

Of course, it came as no surprise to his friends that movies or theatre would win. Anyone who knew Steven knew he had wandered into teaching out of fear, fear to do what he really wanted to do. It was a happy accident that he ended up being both good at teaching and enjoying it as well. But people who knew him knew he really wanted to act or direct or write. It didn't matter what. The world of entertainment was all he was interested in, all he talked about. He read movie and theatre reviews but never literary criticism. He preferred the lyrics of Broadway to those of the cavaliers. He'd race out to see the newest film on the first day but could wait months to pick up a major new novel. His book shelf was lined with analyses of directors or film genres; his closets stuffed with old playbills, black and white motion picture stills, or old magazines yellowed with age. Had Mark known what Steven's friends knew he would never have even tried to talk with Steven seriously. In matters like these, Steven, normally a disciplined and serious worker, became irrational and childish.

The day for the exam arrived soon enough and though Steven was tense, he was not worried about success or failure on the exam. He was simply worried about getting to the theatre on time. He had everything arranged. His friend Nina would have the cab waiting outside of the school at 7:40. That would give him exactly one hour and forty minutes to go through the test, provided that the test did begin at 6:00 as stated on the test announcement. He'd jump into the cab and they'd go down 9th Avenue to avoid traffic. Forty-fifth Street went east so the cab could easily turn left and stop right into front of the theatre. The only thing he had to do now was finish the test on time.

He arrived at 5:30, figuring he'd have plenty of time to fill out all the forms and still get to start at 6:00 p.m. What he had forgotten about was Board of Ed. bureaucracy.

He sat down at a seat and furiously began filling out all the forms on the desk.

"Do you think we should fill this out now or wait?" a woman sitting nearby asked him.

"Now," Steven advised.

"Do the directions on the cards say that?" the woman asked him.

"I wish they'd start the fingerprinting," Steven remarked.

He glanced around the room, noting that all the other teachers seemed nervous about the exam. People were trading possible test questions; others were slowly and methodically filling out the forms. Soon, a pretty young Chinese woman entered the room, carrying those large manila envelopes that contained the tests.

"Ladies and Gentlemen. Welcome. Everyone is here to take...." She paused to read the sheet.

"The license exam in the teaching of reading. Can you please leave your forms on the desks so we can check them?"

"Oh, Jesus," Steven thought to himself. "She's gonna follow procedures."

"Now, can you please sign your names on the dotted line on the top first?"

"Do we use pen or pencil?" someone asked.

"Let me see." She began to read through the forms slowly. After a minute or so, she announced, "It doesn't matter."

"NOOO! It says to use pen!" ten or twelve people sang out in unison.

"Now, then sign your name on the fingerprinting card."

"Do we sign it now or after we are printed?" another concerned individual asked.

"Slap your thumbs on the ink and let's go!" Steven muttered.

"We sign it now," the young woman announced, after another minute of silent reading.

"NOOO! It says we sign it after!" another chorus of ten chanted.

"We're taking the reading test and she can't read!" Steven cracked.

"Let me check with hall proctor," the young woman begged.

Steven glanced nervously at the wall clock. It was already five after six. A hall proctor entered with the woman and the two of them proceeded to study the direction sheets they had.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the male hall proctor announced in ringing authoritative tones, "You will please sign your name twice: before we fingerprint you and after."

"Oh no! When I took the early childhood license, both signatures had to be done in front of the proctor," the woman next to Steven insisted.

"Madam, I'm reading the directions."

"And not very accurately. We're not going to have this test declared illegal because of your procedural error," the angry woman declared.

"Oh come on, who cares?" Steven remarked.

"Are you talking to me, young man? Well, maybe you can afford to be laissez-faire. I didn't take all those courses to have it go down the drain because of some inept proctors."

"I'll check with the hall proctors on the next floor."

"Hey, she's the only one who's making a big stink about this. I'll sign! I'll sign! Let's just start." Steven urged.

The man left the room. 6:08. Steven turned on the complaining woman with a vengeance.

"If I miss Liz, lady, you're dead!"

"Listen, I'm doing this for your good, too. I can tell you dozens of horror stories--dozens--about people whose tests were declared invalid because of little technicalities like this one!"

"Oh come on! You're ridiculous. No one is going to care if..."

The hall proctor re-entered the room, whispered something to the room proctor, and the teachers became quiet again.

"Ladies and gentlemen. I repeat what I said before the woman in the floral peasant dress interrupted me. You sign both before and after."

"Finally!" Steven muttered to himself.

By the time the fingerprinting was done, it was almost twenty after. The proctors proceeded to pass out yellow lined paper.

"What's this for?"

"The writing sample. There's a writing sample."

"What? No one told me we had to write!"

"That's crazy! We are reading teachers!!" announced the complaining woman.

"I'm not writing anything!"

"God, this test must be a bitch."

The announcement that there would be some writing on the exam sent the teachers into another frenzy.

"You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?" Steven said, looking up to heaven. "This is I what I get because I didn't have to take the test in Brooklyn."

After calming everyone down, the proctor began to read the final set of announcements. She was interrupted, again, by the complaining woman.

"Do we have to hand in rough drafts or outlines along with our finished essay?"

"It doesn't matter."

"NOOO! You must hand in all the paper you use!" the chorus chanted.

Steven became furious. "What is with you people? If you know the answers, why are you asking all these questions? Let's get started."

The proctor checked her direction sheet again. "Sorry, you are right. Hand in all written work."

Finally, at 6:22, Steven began his exam. The motivation to make a curtain propelled Steven through the exam at top speed. His eyes darted across the page. He read all five choices for the multiple choice questions once, marking down the first answer that came into his head. Those he was unsure of, he skipped, making a mark by the question so he would remember to return to it, if he had time. As he worked at a furious pace, it seemed to Steven that he had never before felt so sure of himself on an exam. Maybe, the intense pressure to finish within an hour or so purified him, made his thinking sharper and clearer than ever before. Maybe, the realization that he didn't really care about the license gave this normally cautious man the courage to whip through the test with confidence and abandon. Startlingly enough, he thought he was making logical choices. The answers seemed obvious, and yet, he knew he really didn't know much about the teaching of reading.

After going through the test in about forty minutes, he grabbed the yellow lined paper, read the question, and immediately began writing his essay. Writing had always come easy to him. He dashed down a few thoughts, tossed them into a comprehensible order, and wrote what had to be written. He gave them everything he knew they wanted to hear. He proofread twice, went back through the short answers, and then, seeing that it was 7:30, declared himself finished.

Steve raised his hand.

The proctor looked up, somewhat surprised. "Yes?" she asked.

"I'm done. I want to leave," Steve declared firmly.

"What? He wrote the essay already?" the complaining woman said, looking up in a state of horror.

"He's done! Get him. He's done already," a man to his left said.

"Man, I bet he fails."

"Just like the students."

"First one out fails. I always tell my seniors that."

Steven felt uncomfortable, realizing his announcement had caused everyone in the room to pause and look around to see who this alien being was.

"I'm not sure you can leave yet."

"Why not?"

"It's before the official time."

"Oh come on."

"I must check with the hall proctor." She went to the door to silently signal the man to come over. Steven looked at the clock on the wall. 7:35. The cab would be downstairs in 5 minutes. He needed at least 3 to run down the two flights.

The hall proctor arrived and the young woman explained the situation.

"Did you write the essay?"

"Yes, yes. I did everything. I signed everything."

"You can't leave for another twenty minutes yet. No one can."

"What? That's insane. I finished and I'm leaving."

"You should check over your answers, sir."

"I did that! Look. I've got theatre tickets tonight and I've got to go."

"But the official directions say that no one can leave the room..."

"I don't care what they say! I've got to see Liz!" Steven shrieked.

Several teachers paused in marking off answers to watch as Steven ran back to his seat, grabbed all of his papers and forms, whisked his sports jacket off the back of the chair, and ran back to the two proctors.

"Here! It's all here! Check it! Everything is in order. Please let me leave."

The two proctors checked everything over as Steven nervously moved about the area.

"Well, I guess if you want..."

The man never got to complete his sentence. Steven was gone. As he raced out of the building, he saw Nina waving frantically from a taxi sitting at the curb.

"7:45. What happened?"

"Those idiots almost didn't let me out."

"How was the test?"

"I wouldn't know. Driver, step on it! We got a date with Liz Taylor!"

And he did. And six months later Steven was informed that he had passed the reading license exam with a mark higher than the one he received for English ten years earlier. He never used the license.

*Ed Osterman*

*Writing Teachers Consortium*

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