

New York City Writing Project NEWSLETTER

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Spring 1989

Tapping Wellsprings And Moving To Action

It is Saturday, January 14. I am part of a two-day inquiry workshop. Twenty-two Writing Project teachers have come together at Lehman College over the weekend to be part of a workshop directed by Elaine Avidon and Gail Kleiner. I had heard a lot about "inquiry." I thought it was a technique that would be useful for me as a teacher and as a teacher-consultant;

a variation of the "theme" idea that would aid teachers in various subject areas, and be great for social studies teachers. Every time I asked someone about inquiry, I got a response like the one I give when people ask me about the writing process: "You have to experience it."

Important Risks

How we teach, and, as a corollary to this, how we allow our students to learn, has a profound impact on the life-long stances of our students. The roles students are continually permitted to play contribute to the roles they take on in the larger world of ideas and institutions. We worry greatly about this, given the passive roles urban students are asked--sometimes overtly and often covertly--to assume in the classroom. If our goal is to educate for active citizenry, if we want (and we do), as David Dillon states, our students "...to become protagonists of history rather than merely spectators or it" (Language Arts, October 1987), what then must our classrooms and our schools look like? This question has been at the heart of much of the Project's work over these eleven years. It has led us to inquiry as a pedagogy and model for classrooms.

So here I am in a classroom on this cold gray Saturday morning. We are given our topic: *the impact of race on the success of minority students in urban schools*. "Fine," I think, "It's a place to begin." We have only two days and I have not come with a specific agenda. I really just want to experience an inquiry for myself, and get a look at the various procedures one can use.

I am intellectually, if not emotionally, engaged by this topic. The group assembles. I look around at many familiar faces, people I've worked with before in many contexts and have come to appreciate and trust. This could be fun. Our inquiry begins as we write "first thoughts" on the topic, and then move to reflecting on "a time in your life where you experienced racism, or that you perceive as racist." My mind went back to the early 70's, a time of re-evaluation of teaching materials following the upheaval of the "relevancy" issues of the 1960's.

Teaching as inquiry implies that learning occurs when students have an opportunity to explore a subject slowly over time. The pursuit of knowledge is turned over to the communities of learners, and learning takes the form of addressing and exploring questions that arise as that community begins to read and write about the topic, with the goals of developing new questions. In form, this may look like good teaching and good research. The difference lies in spirit. Students are viewed as both knowledge-makers and learners; as people with something to contribute to as well as gain from the questions being addressed.

I am in the English department office. I have been asked to review new grammar textbooks and workbooks for the department. I glance at a workbook. The phrase "Black English" catches my eye. Sentence combining in Black English. I am horrified. I've spent my entire English teaching career upholding the Standard English banner, carrying it despite all the

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Last summer, there were two summer institutes based on inquiry. Because of further interest on the part of Project members, we decided to do a weekend inquiry in January. Project teachers spent a Saturday and a Sunday at Lehman, participating in an inquiry on the impact of race on the success of minority students in the public schools. The topic was one we felt was important as well as a little risky; one that was worth our asking the group for the sustained work and occasional discomfort that arises in inquiry. What follows are pieces that grew out of that weekend of struggling, laughing, writing and talking together.

Elaine Avidon
Lehman College

Inside

Saying Goodbye to Brooklyn	4
Listening To The Silenced Dialogue ...	6
No Experience Necessary	10
From A Teaching Journal.....	12
Steal These Ideas	13
Teachers As Writers	14

whims of educational reform that swirled about, threatening it. After all, have I not been sworn to transmit, as Matthew Arnold says, "the best that has been thought and said"? I veto the Black English workbook, not only because it is a workbook, but because it reinforces the very language patterns I am trying to homogenize into Standard English.

We finish writing on the topic. We share our writing in small groups and begin to create a living list of questions, which we pool in the large group. "To what extent does a teacher have to use the cultural background of her students? Do we treat our minority students differently?" We group, pair, react, share. I

find I have already changed; I have shifted from a neutral, objective position to an active, involved one. From an initial reaction of *I'm not a racist, I don't have these problems*, I am moving into an interrogative mode. Am I a racist? Is the system racist? What is racism? So this is inquiry, something disquieting, not always comfortable. Itchy. I need to know more, to move the prism to the other side, pose and re-pose questions. The group's concerns are shifting, too, from general to specific. The workshop is dynamic, alive. Before I know it, it is 4:30, and I'm tired. We have a piece to read for homework by Lisa Delpit, called "Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive"

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Call For Manuscripts

The NYCWP Newsletter staff would like to publish a cluster of articles grouped around a theme in future issues. Below we've described the topics we'd like to address for the next three issues. We hope they are of interest to our loyal readership.

Summer 1989: "Skills" Instruction

For our next issue, the Newsletter would like to address the issue of how we deal with *skills*. What does the term *skills* mean to you? What role, if any, does *skills* instruction play in your classroom? At what point do you deal with grammar and punctuation, if ever? What techniques have you found effective? How do you feel about teaching—or not teaching—*skills* in writing as a separate entity?

Deadline: May 22, 1989

Fall 1989 - ESL/Multicultural Classrooms

In this issue, we would like to explore how the changing ethnic population of our classrooms affects the way we teach. What differences have you noticed between teaching English to students for whom it is the second language and students with English as a native language? Was there a specific incident in which the lack of what you assumed to be common cultural assumptions surprised you? How did you handle it? How do we base lessons on common cultural assumptions in a multi-cultural classroom? How have you changed your teaching to allow for the variety of cultural experiences our students have? What do you do with the problem of *other language* interference? What happens when we can see learning occurring cognitively, but the student doesn't have enough English language to express what she knows?

Spring 1990 - Cooperative Learning

The heart of the Writing Project has been the model of working in groups and sharing ideas with each other. Many of us have organized our classrooms on this and other models we believe to be student-centered. What has your experience been with these models? How's it going in student groups? What do you do when it's not going so well? Are our groups student-centered? Can they be? Are they successful? What techniques have you used that turn out to be more successful than others? (Peer tutoring? Conferencing? What?)

Feel free to send us articles in a variety of forms. Send us suggestions for our Steal These Ideas column, experiences for our From A Teaching Journal column, reviews of articles and books you have read which deal with these issues. Write about what you have been thinking and reading.

Send them to: Newsletter
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Black Educator." [See pages 6-10.] I wonder if I'll be able to. I have to. Tomorrow we'll begin again.

It's Sunday, January 15th. I have been to an early church service, and at 10:30 I find myself back in the same room, again confronting "the issue." It's different today. There's a concentrated quiet energy in the room, a focus, a tangible sense of commitment to exploration. If a color scale described my feeling as I begin to respond to the articles today, I'd say I'm moving from the beige zone to the red zone. Issues are both expanding and narrowing. How can that be? Questions arise that we might not have thought of when we first began the inquiry, but the focus also seems to be shifting as we find ourselves more specifically addressing the problems of Black youngsters in a school system whose teachers are predominantly white. The inquiry has also taken another turn I didn't expect. I approached this topic from an intellectual standpoint, and now I find I am emotionally involved as well. I hadn't realized I would be so enraged at the injustices.

We are writing dialogues in response to Delpit's article, which described her experiences as a Black teacher using the process approach. She had begun her teaching career emphasizing process, and then decided that the needs of her Black students could be better served with teaching strategies using more of a skills approach. I disagree with her. As I begin my dialogue with her, I remember that I began my teaching career with a skills approach, saw that it wasn't working, and switched to the process approach. I tell Lisa in my dialogue that the improvement of skills is not antithetical to the process approach. The teacher can still teach the skills her class needs before publication, as part of the editing process, for example. While disagreeing with Lisa's conclusion, I admire her commitment as a Black teacher to her Black students. She, too, is trying to communicate "the best that has been taught and said."

We are beginning to focus on Black English, a development that connects me again with the piece I wrote on Saturday morning. We read an article by June Jordan called, "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You And The Future Life of Willie Jordan." [See an excerpt from this article on page 4.] She raises the whole question of Black English, defining it for me for the first time, giving it a logic, a rubric. "You cannot," Jordan says, "translate instances of Standard English preoccupied with abstraction or with nothing/nobody evidently alive into Black English. That would warp the language into uses antithetical to the guiding perspective of its community of users. Rather, you must first change the Standard English sentences themselves into ideas consistent with the person-centered assumptions of Black English." She posits guidelines for Black English that help me understand the language my Black students speak and write. Black English has "a minimal number of words for every idea;" the verb "to be" is eliminated whenever possible; "be" or "been" is used only to describe an ongoing state of things, e.g., He be at the office by 9; the present tense is relied on for the overall context of the ideas, for the conveyance of time and sequence. Reading Jordan's list in its entirety helped me to see that what I

considered "annoying, persistent errors" on the part of my Black students was a part of a larger structure of race and culture.

We return to the larger group to share our feelings about the Jordan article. It proved to be an emotional experience, because part of what the article was about was the decisions people may make about whether or not they should hang on to parts of their cultural heritage, and what that may cost them. Many of us recalled our own ethnic roots—the power of metaphor in languages other than English spoken in our families by grandmothers, parents, uncles and aunts. Had we forgotten the power of that language to communicate emotions and ideas? We questioned and fell silent. The memories and their implications for us, then and now, were too powerful and too painful.

It is 4:00 Sunday afternoon. The late winter sun washes the room with its light. We are exhausted, but also galvanized. We have questioned, dialogued, discussed, reflected and discovered. What now? We break into groups, many of us determined to act, even in a small way, excited by the possibility of action. My group decides to write a letter to Chancellor Green. We adjourn to another room to compose a letter. How much to say? How little? Sentence after sentence is hammered out. We finish, reconvene in the larger group, talking about what we've been thinking.

They ask us to write one more time. Oh, no. I pick up my pen. The words of the *Inner London Education Authority* article on race from the first day come back to me. "Racism is morally wrong because it is contrary to basic principles of natural justice. It damages and dehumanizes white as well as Black people." I start to answer my own question from day one. "Racism is a moral issue." The inquiry ends, but, on many levels, my own inquiry has begun.

There are things about inquiry I leave feeling certain about. I know that a teacher cannot be "talked through" it. Without the actual experience, it's reduced to another series of techniques without the richness of meaning we shared on that weekend. "Inquiry" is more than just using Writing Project techniques around a theme. Not every topic can be an inquiry, only those that engage students on an affective as well as on a cognitive level, that touch wellsprings of energy and interest on their part as well as ours.

I'm curious to see just how this will work. How do I set up an inquiry so that students will really feel empowered to act, as we did? How do I choose a topic with them? And how do we choose texts? I look forward to trying to create an environment with them where we can acknowledge our own epiphanies as they occur; I am thinking about exactly how to take each step in my classroom. I leave the workshop feeling inspired and moved. I know I have had a rich experience that will change my teaching

Helen Ogden
Writing Teachers Consortium

Black English Rules

Editors' Note: This is an excerpt from June Jordan's essay, "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You And the Future Life of Willie Jordan." Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 58, No. 3, August 1988. (Originally published in On Call: Political Essays by June Jordan, Boston: South End Press, 1985). Used by permission.

...Most of the students had never before seen a written facsimile of the way they talk. None of the students had ever learned how to read and write their own verbal system of communication: Black English. Alternatively, this fact began to baffle or else bemuse and then infuriate my students. Why not? Was it too late? Could they learn how to do it, now? And, ultimately, the final test question, the one testing my sincerity: Could I teach them? Because I had never taught anyone Black English and, as far as I knew, no one, anywhere in the United States, had ever offered such a course, the best I could say was "I'll try."

I remember an early class when a young brother, replete with his ever-present porkpie hat, raised his hand and then told us that most of what he'd heard was "all right" except it was "too clean." "The brothers on the street," he continued, "they mix it up more. Like 'fuck' and 'motherfuck.' Or like 'shit.' He waited. I waited. Then all of us laughed a good while, and we got into a brawl about "correct" and "realistic" Black English that led to Rule 1.

Rule 1. Black English is about a whole lot more than mothafuckin.

As a criterion we decided, "realistic" could take you anywhere you want to go. Artful places. Angry places. Eloquent and sweetalkin places. Polemical places. Church. And the local Bar & Grill. We were checking out a language,

not a mood or a scene or one guy's forgettable mouthing off.

It was hard. For most of the students, learning Black English required a fallback to patterns and rhythms of speech that many of their parents had beaten out of them. I mean *beaten*. And in a majority of cases, correct Black English could be achieved only by striving for *incorrect* Standard English, something they were still pushing at, quite uncertainly. This state of affairs led to Rule 2.

Rule 2. If it's wrong in Standard English it's probably right in Black English, or, at least, you're hot.

It was hard. Roommates and family members ridiculed their studies, or remained incredulous. "You *studying* that shit? At school?" But we were beginning to feel the companionship of pioneers. And we decided that we needed another rule that would establish each one of us as equally important to our success. This was rule 3.

Rule 3. If it don't sound like something that come out somebody mouth then it don't sound right. If it don't sound right then it ain't hardly right. Period.

This rule produced two weeks of compositions in which the students agonizingly tried to spell the sound of the Black English sentence they wanted to convey. But Black English is, preeminently an oral/spoken means of communication. *And spelling don't talk.* So we needed Rule 4.

Rule 4. Forget about the spelling. Let the syntax carry you.

Once we arrived at Rule 4 we started to fly, because syntax, the structure of an idea, leads you to the world view of the speaker and reveals her values. The syntax of a sentence equals the structure of your consciousness. If we insisted that the language of Black English adheres to a distinctive Black syntax, then we were postulating a profound difference between White and Black people, *per se*. Was it a difference to prize or to obliterate?

Saying Goodbye To Brooklyn: An Excerpt

I went to a Catholic elementary school in Brooklyn where most of the students were either Irish or Italian. That was logical, since most of the houses around the school were owned by Irish or Italians. They all got along relatively well, except for an occasional fight; then, one neighbor would threaten the other by declaring that he was going to sell his house to Blacks.

There was no overt racism in school, but perhaps that's because there were no Black students in our school. While the rest of the country read about the desegregation of the University of Alabama, we read our Maryknoll mission magazines and learned about the Chinese communists who were torturing the

Maryknoll priests and nuns by removing their fingernails. When one of the brighter students in the class asked Sister if these missionaries would have fingernails when they got to heaven, Sister simply had us turn the page to the articles describing the missionaries' work among the starving children of Africa. The children in the pictures were almost ashen; they were naked, emaciated, and scabby. But we didn't concern ourselves with such details; after all, the missionaries had baptized these children--and that's what mattered. The missionaries in the pictures holding the children looked very bright and sparkling and clean in their starched white habits. They sent us messages

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through the magazine to pray for them and the success of their work, and to send them money.

The school was only a few blocks away from Fort Hamilton, the largest Army base in Brooklyn, but none of the children whose fathers were stationed at the fort came to our school. The Fort kids, as we called them, went to the local public school. But one morning, while Sister convinced us of the importance of daily prayer to our patron saints, the principal appeared at our classroom door and announced that Sherri Butler Owens, whose father had just been transferred to the Fort from North Carolina, would be coming to our school. It was early in November, and for the first time that season the oil burner had been turned on in the building, so while the principal talked she walked toward the radiators to see if they were hot. Pleased that they were all working, she hoped that God would be with all of us and disappeared down the hall to check the other classrooms, leaving Sherri Butler Owens standing alone in the front of the classroom. We had the impression that Sherri Butler Owens was going to be in our class because she had arrived on the day that the oil burner was turned on.

Sherri Butler Owens was Black. She was the only Black person in our school, probably the only Black person in the parish. She was wearing a yellow blouse, a red skirt, and white patent leather shoes, and she was standing alone in front of 59 navy blue gabardine uniforms and white faces. She was standing there, dressed in those bright colors, in a school where a set of rosary beads blessed by the Pope was the year-end reward for perfect uniform dress every day.

Our teacher was almost 80 years old. She had lost most of her hearing and sight, and she only got up from her desk for fire drills and morning prayers. I don't think that Sister had heard a word the principal said, but she spotted Sherri Butler Owens' yellow blouse and beckoned for it to come nearer. We had recently had a day off from school for the Feast of All Saints, and although Sister had never managed to learn our names, she was giving us the patron saint lesson in a general sort of way. I suppose that something stirred in her old brain about trying to include a new student in the lesson, so Sister twisted her body toward Sherri's blouse and asked here to say her name for the class so that we would all know who her patron saint was. After Sherri Butler Owens said her name three times, most of the class realized that Sherri Butler Owens were three distinct words, but Sister still insisted that she was whispering. Sister wondered aloud if the new student was ashamed of her patron saint. Did she realize that she must pray to her patron saint every morning, on her knees, before she so much as brushed her teeth? Even though she had been teaching for more than fifty years, Sister had never had a student who didn't know who her patron saint was. Did the new student realize that no matter how clever she may be, nothing is achieved without some help from heaven? The new student would not go to heaven if she didn't realize that she had to seek help from God through the intercession of her patron saint.

Sherri Butler Owens was close to tears. Although we felt some pity for her, the fifty-nine of us were so restless and bored that we didn't necessarily want this scene to end; if Sister didn't scream her questions at the new student, she would scream them at us. The radiators were working too well: the room was hot and close and smelled of the sandwiches we had brought for lunch. We were sleepy; we hoped that Sister would concentrate on Sherri Butler Owens and leave us alone until lunchtime. As if she knew what we were thinking, Sister turned her good ear toward the class and asked us if we knew who the new girl's patron saint was.

All the while, Sherri Butler Owens, whose face was contorted in an effort to control her tears, was twisting the papers she had gotten from the principal's office into a tight cylinder and holding it up near her mouth. We could see that the papers were getting wet with tears and saliva. Despite this, or maybe because of this, the class was turning on her, especially the girls; we resented her white shoes. Even though we had been passively curious at first, she now seemed ugly. She was an intruder; she was different, we had heard our fathers' and our neighbors' threats. She was upsetting the pattern of things and getting Sister agitated. We had trained ourselves as a class to answer Sister loudly, to always pretend we understood. Furthermore, even if we had learned little else in that school, we knew that what Sherri Butler Owens was doing to those papers from the principal's office was an atrocity, a mortal sin against neatness and orderliness; a most grievous offense where any student could get by as long as his or her papers were neat and clean and had a little cross pencilled at the top.

"Saint Butler is her patron saint," one of the students yelled out somewhat logically, since many of us prayed to our middle names.

"A butler isn't a saint. A butler is a servant," someone retorted.

"Well then," somebody screamed in a final attempt to satisfy Sister, "Saint Sherri is her patron saint."

We thought that was funny, quite a contrast to Mary, the name that about fifty-two percent of us prayed to, and we laughed until Sister demanded that we stop. Sister didn't know what we thought was so funny, but she did know that the new student had better memorize her multiplication tables. And all books were the property of the school; if they weren't covered by the next day, they would be taken away. Sister wasn't sure where one was supposed to procure these books, so she sent Sherri Butler Owens back to the principal's office to find out.

When we came back from lunch that day, Sherri Butler Owens didn't; Sister never even missed her.

*Jane Maher
Nassau Community College*

Listening To The Silenced Dialogue: Four Responses To Lisa D. Delpit

Editors' Note: On pages 6-10 we present four different reactions to two articles by Lisa D. Delpit:

"Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator," Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 56, No. 4, 1986, 379-385.

"The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 58, No. 3, 1988, 280-298.

Reprints are available from:

Harvard Educational Review
Longfellow Hall, 13 Appian Way
Cambridge, MA 02138-3752D

If you would like to add your voice to this dialogue, send us your response to Delpit to be published in a future issue.

I Don't Know What I Don't Know

From the moment she became involved in teaching, Lisa Delpit found herself asking questions about the teaching methods she used. In the article, *Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator* (1986) she describes the contradictions that she encountered between the theory she studied in college and believed, and the results she confronted in the classroom.

Raised in Louisiana and educated in Catholic schools, Lisa Delpit began to question her early skills-based schooling, and during her teacher training embraced the notion of "writing in meaningful contexts" (p. 380). Hired full-time at an alternative inner city school in Philadelphia after student teaching there, Delpit brought theory into practice with an open classroom. But as she watched and analyzed, she began to feel that the white children benefited from an open classroom, while Black children did not. "My Black students...practiced karate moves on the new carpets (of the open learning stations)" (p. 381). Searching for successful learning styles for Black children, Delpit moved further and further from progressive methodologies each year.

It seemed that my Black students steadily improved in their reading and writing. But they still lagged behind...I felt that I had failed in the task that was most important to me--teaching Black children and teaching them well. (p. 381)

After six years in that school, Delpit left teaching for the next six and a half years while she returned to graduate school. There she learned about a writing process approach and, "Went out into the world as a professor of literacy armed with the very latest, research-based and field-tested teaching methods" (p. 381). The process approach was soon challenged in a dialogue with a close friend, another Black educator in the Philadelphia

school system. This woman charged that the Writing Projects were doing a "monumental disservice to Black children" (p. 382). Delpit started to defend the Project; then decided to listen, instead of questioning the woman's negative attitude. This educator felt that the Black students needed skills, not fluency, which they already had. "This is just another one of those racist ploys to keep our kids out." (p. 382) Reaching out and questioning other Black colleagues, Delpit discovered that most Black teachers chose not to stay involved with writing-process projects after an initial look.

Delpit was puzzled by the discrepancy. She respected the college professors from whom she had learned and doubted their "sinister intentions towards Black children" (p. 383); at the same time, she felt that all of those Black teachers could not be wrong.

Progressive white teachers seem to say to their Black students, 'Let me help you find your voice. I promise not to criticize one note as you search for your own song.' But the Black teachers say, 'I've heard your song loud and clear. Now, I want to teach you to harmonize with the rest of the world.' Their insistence on skills is not a negation of their students' intellect, as is often suggested by progressive forces, but an acknowledgement of it: 'You know a lot; you can learn more. Do it now!' (p. 384)

It's hard for me to believe that lines are so definitely drawn, that teachers who use a process approach don't recognize the importance of skills instruction in meaningful contexts, that teachers who emphasize skills instruction don't encourage meaningful learning. Delpit writes that "if minority people are to effect the change which will allow them to truly progress we must insist on 'skills' within the context of critical and creative thinking" (p. 384). So process/skills isn't the dilemma at all. Delpit moves herself away from a debate about skills vs. process teaching and into an entirely different educational arena, one which suggests that the title of the article itself misleads the reader. It's other dilemmas which seem truly to concern her, dilemmas about voicelessness and powerlessness, rather than methodology. "I have come to believe that the 'open classroom movement,' despite its progressive intentions, faded in large part because it was not able to come to terms with the concerns of poor and minority communities" (p. 386). Delpit suggests that the "dominant group members...must attempt to hear the other side of the issue..." (p. 384), must be open to hearing other voices in the educational debate, "and not to assume that the voices of the majority speak for all" (p. 386).

This is the point from which Lisa Delpit continues to develop a second article, *The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children* (1988). As the title indicates, Delpit has moved away from the skills/process debate per se; the debate about a skills or process approach becomes a

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jumping-off point for discussion of a much greater problem of literacy.

Using the terms "White" and "Black" admittedly loosely to refer to economic/cultural communities, and acknowledging that these generalizations are simplistic, Delpit quotes several sources--a Black male graduate student, a Black female teacher, a Native Alaskan education student, a Black female principal--to point out that the dialogue between white and Black educators has been silenced. "It becomes futile because they think they know everything about everybody. What you have to say about your life, your children, doesn't mean anything. They don't really want to hear what you have to say. They wear blinders and earplugs. They only want to go on research they've read that other White people have written. It just doesn't make any sense to keep talking to them," says the principal.

Delpit then describes the two communities' reactions to her first article:

All of the White respondents, except one, have wished to talk more about the question of skills versus process approaches--to support or reject what they perceive to be my position. On the other hand, all of the non-White respondents have spoken passionately on being left out of the dialogue about how best to educate children of color (p.282).

She then suggests that the skills/process debate "can lead to an understanding of the alienation and miscommunication" (p. 282) which led to the silenced dialogue.

At this point Delpit begins to address the fact that issues of power are enacted in the classroom, as in the world; that there are codes, or rules, for participating in a "culture of power" (p. 282) with specific ways of talking, writing, dressing, and interacting; that success in the institutions of the "culture of power" (such as schools) depends upon acquiring these behaviors.

The upper and middle classes send their children to school with all the accoutrements of the culture of power; children from other kinds of families operate within perfectly wonderful and viable cultures but not cultures that carry the codes or rules of power.... My kids know how to be Black--you all teach them how to be successful in the White man's world (pp. 283, 285).

But cultural differences may inadvertently prevent this from happening, because the language of authority differs from culture to culture. A "veiled command is a command nonetheless" (p. 289) and students may find themselves held accountable for knowing a set of rules about which no one has ever directly informed them.

Middle class parents are likely to give the directive to a child to take his bath as, 'Isn't it time for your bath?' Even though the utterance is couched as a question, both child and adult understand it as a directive. The child may respond with 'Aw Mom, can't I wait until...' but whether or not negotiation is attempted, both conversants understand the intent of the utterance.

By contrast, a Black mother, in whose house I was recently a guest, said to her eight-year-old son, 'Boy, get your rusty behind in that bathtub.' Now I happen to know that this woman loves her son as much as any

mother, but she would never have posed the directive to her son to take a bath in the form of a question....

[In the classroom], the attempt by the teacher to reduce an exhibition of power by expressing herself in indirect terms may remove the very explicitness that the child needs to understand the rules of the new classroom culture. (p. 289)

Much of *The Silenced Dialogue* discusses ways in which the needs of students from diverse backgrounds are not being met by those in control of the schools and classrooms. The debate is not about a skills or process approach. As Delpit says,

The debate is fallacious; the dichotomy is false... The dilemma is not really...over instructional methodology, but rather in communicating across cultures and in addressing the more fundamental issue of power, of whose voice gets to be heard in determining what is best for poor children and for children of color. Will Black teachers and parents continue to be silenced by the very forces that claim to 'give voice' to our children? (p. 296)

She earlier provides a reason for the silencing: "Many of the 'progressive' educational strategies imposed by liberals upon Black and poor children could only be based on a desire to ensure that the liberals' children get sole access to the dwindling pool of American jobs" (p.285).

I want to rebel at this point, to deny, to argue, to cite more of the evidence that Delpit says she no longer trusts because, "[It] has, after all, found us genetically inferior, culturally deprived, and verbally deficient" (p. 286). Maybe the reason so many progressive white educators wanted to have a dialogue about her position was because it was unclear, premature, judgmental. But I won't argue, I can't. One thing that I walk away from these articles (and a series of other readings and discussions in which I've recently engaged) with is the belief that 'I don't know what I don't know.' I've been raised within the culture of power--and it limits me, too. So I have to suspend disbelief, and listen well. "As a result of careful listening to alternative points of view," Delpit writes in conclusion:

I have myself come to a viable synthesis of perspectives. But both sides do need to be able to listen, and I contend that it is those with the most power, those in the majority, who must take the greater responsibility for initiating the process. To do so takes a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment -- and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue (p.297).

It's not about skills or process at all. Delpit's "viable synthesis of perspectives" refers to methodologies as well as educational ideologies. It's about dialogue for human rights, it's about voice and voicelessness, it's a plea for open-minded listening. It's worth reading for yourself.

Lisa Rosenberg
James Monroe High School

Don't Color This Voice

Lisa Delpit traces the low level of Black participation in Writing Projects to racism inherent in the philosophy of teaching writing as a process. Minority children need thorough training in skills, she suggests, not only the opportunity to discover their voices.

Like Delpit herself, I find it hard to believe that those who shaped the process philosophy really had sinister intentions towards Black people. The Writing Project people I have met are virtually all generous, sympathetic, caring people, the opposite of narrow-minded racists. Yet if she is right--and I see no reason not to credit her experience--then here's another example of inadvertent institutionalized racism caused not by malice but by failure of imagination. All of us, the founders and sustainers of the writing process model, are simply generalizing from our own experience, ignoring the possibility that minority children's real needs might not fit a white-folks' theory.

My interest in the Delpit article is not so much in the racism issue--though I know I would feel agonized by it if I had more than a few Black students and had invested myself in the Writing Project philosophy for their sake--as in the question of skills teaching in general. Could it be that, because process philosophy makes skills teaching less important, the model somehow fails to meet the real needs of all children, not just minorities?

The process notion is that skills are learned in meaningful contexts. That works best in an individualized approach, but doing it effectively requires very tight organization. In *In the Middle* (Boynnton/Cook, 1987), Nancie Atwell describes her individualized teaching; she gives over most of her class time to private writing and coaching, and teaches the skills by keeping daily records on each conference: skill 1, skill 2, skill 3, all closely tracked and documented. Otherwise, she insists, you won't know from one day to the next what each child needs to work on. Or have anything to show parents when they ask.

But it takes persistence and determination to organize so tightly around matters that seem so trivial and uninteresting. And the Writing Project, because it takes little account of the need to teach skills, does not motivate that determination. We don't hear much about skills in workshops and presentations, for example. A purist will not use worksheets or workbooks or any other exercises disconnected from a context. You're supposed to postpone editing until the very last stage when the necessity of producing a clean text too easily gets lost in the euphoria of publication--publication which frequently occurs by means of reading aloud rather than reading printed material, so that the surface errors are masked. To edit the way a professional editor does is to appropriate the student's text--another no-no. I'm sure many teachers committed to teaching writing as process find ways to avoid these traps and get the skills not only taught but learned. Still, these tendencies in the Writing Project approach are undeniable. The skills that Delpit talks about--spelling, punctuation, usage, grammar, and so on, all come into

prominence late in the process. If we train ourselves to pay less attention to the product, aren't we relegating these issue to a gray area where, simply because they are less obvious than matters of form, tone, and voice, they don't always get noticed?

Ironically, in the product itself, the skills issues stand out. Misspelled words and comma splices smack you right in the eye; you don't even have to read a kid's paper to notice them. Attention to skills is often the first thing parents have in mind when they speak to their children's English teachers. White as well as black parents know that admission to the circles of power and privilege depends on mastering the etiquette of language. Delpit's right; it is important. People suffer when they can't do it. If we had more Black teachers in the New York City Writing Project, maybe this is what they would tell us.

David Nicholson
Riverdale Country School

Learning To Be Bi-Cultural In The Culture of Power

My background is very similar to Dr. Delpit's. I am a Black woman with undergraduate and graduate degrees from "progressive" schools. My student teaching experiences were primarily in Montessori and open classroom situations that I thought were absolutely wonderful, especially since I am the product of the very traditional New York City Public School system of the 1960s. So, as I read her articles I found myself feeling that I was on a seesaw, thinking "yes, she's right" at one moment but at the next feeling that everything she said went against everything I believe. Now that I've had some time to reflect on her writing, and on my experiences and those of my adult students, my views have become clearer.

Education has always been viewed as a means of upward mobility in the African-American culture (and, I'm sure in any other cultural or economic group that's not a member of the "culture of power"). So while it's vitally important that our students are proud of, respect, and carry on our cultural traditions, in this society it is a reality that it is also necessary for them to become participants in the "culture of power" to improve their economic circumstances and the quality of their lives. Education is the key to entry into a wider world of choices where people can make decisions about who they want to be. Students understand this and believe that they are being miseducated if they are not taught the rules needed to participate. In the classroom, the "rules" often translate into skills that make them proficient speakers, writers, and readers of standard English--the language of the "culture of power."

I believe that students learn better when their learning is based on their own experiences and interests. I believe that a

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classroom using a process approach to writing or a whole language approach to learning is a much richer and more exciting environment because students share and teach us and each other so much more than one using a dry, basic skills approach. I also believe that there are times when direct instruction in skills and rules is necessary. This instruction can be in the form of mini-lessons of skills that are relevant to students as they need them in the context of their own reading and writing for real uses and audiences. It may be individual instruction as needed by each student.

I brought this process-oriented approach to my classes. I had them share their writing with each other, talk about what they liked about pieces and ask questions, but often my adult students would say to me, "You're the teacher; I want you to tell me if it's right." Or, they would have letters and forms to prepare and would say, "I want the grammar to be right in this letter. Tell me how to do that." They wanted direct instruction because they didn't know the rules. They felt that the letters that they sent out were a reflection of themselves and they wanted them to be correct. They felt that, as the teacher, I was there to teach them how to do this correctly.

After some thinking, I began to realize that they were right. It's fine for them to share their writing and ask for suggestions and comments from their peers, just as we do in writing groups, but there are also times when they must communicate with a company or with their child's teachers and their letters are a reflection of themselves. These letters must be grammatically correct according to the rules of the "culture of power" and until my students learn these rules well, I am the one person in the classroom who can tell them what those rules are. While we as educators may feel that it is important to do such things as analyze, write about, and discuss a piece of writing, students may not perceive these activities to be as important as learning specific skills to move up on their jobs or obtain the GED to get a job. My teaching now takes their many needs into consideration. They do a lot of process writing, but I also give direct skills instruction in the form of mini-lessons and individual conferences and these skills are incorporated into their writing and reading.

It's important for us to realize that African-American students and teachers know best of all what their particular needs are. They know when the use of the language rules of the "culture of power" are necessary to function effectively in society. This is one of the ideas that Dr. Delpit is trying to communicate to us. We must help our students understand that one culture or form of our language is not better than another, just different--that they can be bi-cultural and speak either their language or the language of the "culture of power" when appropriate.

Lena O. Townsend
NYPL Centers for Reading and Writing
Lehman College Adult Learning Center

The Dilemmas Of An Adult Educator

I thought of Delpit's article, *Skills and Other Dilemmas* (1986), the other day, during a conversation with a student. The whole class was writing, and I was walking around having individual conferences with people. When I went over to talk with David, I found he had written down a long list of words on his paper--perhaps 80 or so. "I'm trying to write something using these words so I learn how to spell them." Rather naively, I assumed he had gotten the task a bit confused--and I suggested he proceed differently. "I think you'll find it easier if you figure out what you want to say first," I said, "then, later on, after you work on what you'd like to say, you can pick out some spelling words from the writing to work on."

I'm not sure I convinced David to try writing as opposed to spelling. What bothered me most, I think, was that he didn't see the connection. Why learn to spell, if you don't want to write? What can you do with spelling by itself? But to David, spelling seemed to be an end in itself--something associated with previous schooling--but not connected to writing. For David, like many other adult students beginning to write, spelling is writing.

Although David's position was extreme, I feel as though I've had this same discussion with many adult students--students who often ask to have every spelling and punctuation mistake corrected--because they believe that that's how they get to be better writers. I don't do this because I want students to understand that writing involves a lot more than spelling and punctuation. But aside from that, I don't do it because it doesn't work. If I give a student a paper back with 20 or 30 spelling mistakes--not so unusual for adult beginning writers--correcting all 30 words won't help.

But that's not to say I don't struggle with the issue of how to help people improve spelling and punctuation. Spelling is extremely important to many of the students I work with. For some students, like David, spelling and writing are the same--although this perspective changes as they become more experienced writers. For others, spelling is perhaps the most visible reminder of their difficulty with reading and writing. For many students, the first time they fill out an application or write a letter without assistance is a milestone. That's why I attempt to teach it even though I don't have a clear idea how people learn to spell other than through wide reading and writing.

I'm still bothered by Delpit's first article. I've read it several times, but I still react strongly. The reason for my reactions, I think, is that I think that writing instruction is too often only skills instruction. I would hate for the article to generate even more skills instruction without attention to the other aspects of writing. I fear that we'll cause more students to think as David does, that spelling is a subject unto itself, somehow separate from writing. I think that there are good reasons why using a process-oriented approach as a way of thinking about instruction helps students improve their writing more than a focus on skills

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only. The other reason I react strongly is that most writing teachers I know--who I guess would consider themselves process-oriented--are very concerned about helping people master the conventions of standard edited English as well as other aspects of writing. So although I agree with Delpit that both kinds of approaches are necessary, I think that a process-oriented approach frames the instruction in a way that a skills-oriented approach does not.

Delpit's point about Black and Latino educators being left out of the dialogue about education certainly merits our attention, but the situation may not be particular to writing projects alone. Do writing projects have fewer Black and Latino educators participating than other forums for discussion about education? I'm not sure. In adult education, the area I'm most familiar with, the field is heavily dominated by white women--although people of color and men are involved.

I found less to argue with in Delpit's second article, *The Silenced Dialogue* (1988). I think few people would argue

that the ability to code-switch is not a useful skill. Ideally, we'd like students to be comfortable in both their own cultural context and the one they might find, for example, at a job. On the other hand, we need to remember that education alone may not necessarily give a person access to the culture of power.

By the end of the second article, I felt that I was no longer clear about where Delpit stood. Her points about Black and Latino participation in discussions about education and her discussion of the language of power are well taken. But I finished reading still feeling unclear about what she wanted a writing classroom to look like. "Actual writing for real audiences and real purposes is a vital element in helping students to understand that they have an important voice in their own learning processes." (p. 288) But that's what those of us who claim to be process-oriented are doing.

Karen Griswold
Institute for Literacy Studies

No Experience Necessary: Reflections Of A New Teacher

About a year ago, I started teaching high school English. I quit my job at a business magazine to start teaching as a substitute. I had no experience, no education courses, no formal teaching experiences. But at the age of thirty, I decided to try teaching.

Three drives pushed me in this direction. I wanted my day-to-day work to be closer to the creative processes of reading and writing. I wanted to let out a part of myself that enjoys helping people, especially helping people with their writing. Finally, I felt an attraction towards adolescents, a mixture of curiosity and sympathy. I felt that I would enjoy working and spending time with young people.

My instincts were right. Despite being overwhelmed and sometimes physically exhausted by the newness of my situation, I was very much captivated by the wit and vitality of the students and by the challenge of the profession.

I like the students. I like them a lot. But there are big differences between these kids and the kids I grew up with in Rochester, New York. I left upstate New York thirteen years ago, but when I first started to work in the schools, I suddenly felt like a hick landed at the bus station, out of place, out of time. These differences have at times caused me to feel uncomfortable and unsure of myself in the classroom. They have also pushed me to reflect on my own growing-up process and to reconsider my own education.

City kids were very different from the kids that I grew up with. Frequently, my students seem to affect a stance that says,

"I know it all and if I'm in the right mood I might let you in on it." They can discuss street violence with a disturbing nonchalance difficult to interpret. They talk about sex with a worldliness that I certainly didn't have at that age. Yet they seem to leave all of this need to talk, the give and take of real discussions, in the hallways and the lunchrooms.

In my classroom, many students seem particularly distant, protective of their privacy. I've had students resist learning my name, and frequently they don't know the names of their classmates. At times, I've had difficulty getting students to express themselves in class discussions. And with one group of quiet juniors, I wasn't able to get them to work in groups. They expressly refused. One student said, "We don't like each other well enough to work in groups."

I discussed these issues with my students. What makes them so different from me? The largest part of my social identity when I was growing up came from my school persona--the courses I took and the activities in which I participated. I was also defined by my circle of friends or the boys I dated, but here students frequently report that they have made it a policy to remain at arms' length from other students in the school--not to mention where that puts teachers. One girl said that she saw clearly that having friends at school had "gotten her in trouble." She and others consciously chose to travel to schools far from home.

While I don't have definitive answers for the questions that I'm raising here, I sense that the social networks that exist for
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New York City teenagers are more complex than mine were. In my hometown, my friends tended to be people I met in school. Here, students don't seem to need school for that function, or even avoid it. Yes, some friendships are formed at school, but often students' important relationships are developed in the neighborhood, and have nothing to do with their school lives.

As an English teacher, I feel that this attitude of distance, of deciding not to reveal personal information, sabotages a great many activities that should, of necessity, be part and parcel of writing and reading activities. I frequently had the sense of invading a student's private life with the activities that I tried to initiate. Students openly objected to what they experienced as the prying nature of my classes.

My experiences as a student were very different. My high school was obsessed with the formal research paper. In almost every class, including Driver's Ed., I was required to write at least one research paper. However, I somehow found ways to turn these frequent demands for the research paper into inquiries that interested me. From my reading of James Moffett, Ken Macrorie and others, I now think my education would have been richer if other modes of writing had been available to me. However, I somehow found ways to turn these frequent demands for the research paper into inquiries that interested me.

Lately, I've remembered all kinds of strange projects that I created at the time. Like most teenagers--and not unlike my students now--I was fascinated by the existence of violence. So, in order to satisfy my craving for information I once read a number of books on the American prison system, and learned why people who went to prison almost certainly returned there at a higher level of criminal proficiency. Another time, I read a huge book--very dry, very dense--of the McKay Commission hearings on the Attica uprising, including tactical drawings and ballistic reports. I believe I was trying to come to some kind of acceptance of the violence that takes place between people, and also to understand the systems of law and order that have been erected to protect people from that violence. Ultimately, I was trying to get comfortable with the adult world and its ugliness that I could clearly see, even from my suburban environment.

It is this kind of learning, this need to know, that I invite my students to experience. Instead of leaving their talk and their questions on the other side of the classroom door, I want my students to feel free to explore their issues, their concerns with me and with each other. How can I help them to find that the most rewarding learning comes from following one's need to know?

I look forward to further teaching experiences and to re-reading this piece at a future point. Perhaps by then I will have discovered new perceptions about myself and my students.

Ruth Berkow

Project Notes

With an ongoing spirit of professional development, Project members applied for fellowships to participate in the Project's Classroom Researcher Program for teachers on sabbatical. Barbara Batton, Ron Bleier, Arlyne Tessler, Peggy Maslow and Judith Nusbaum are the five reflective teachers who received the fellowships, and are developing and exploring questions related to teaching.

Based on his article, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Inquiry*, in the last issue of the NYCWP Newsletter, Paul Allison was invited to present a paper at the *Tenth Annual Ethnography in Educational Research Conference* at the University of Pennsylvania in February. In an effort to broaden the definition of teacher-researcher, Paul explored some of the theoretical roots of his practice in a paper titled *Ideology: The Margins of My Pedagogy*, arguing that teacher-researchers need to reflect not only on what happens in classrooms, but also on their ideological framework.

Sondra Perl traveled to Charleston, South Carolina to present a paper at the *Spring National Council of Teachers of English Conference*. Her presentation described ways of creating trust in writing classrooms so that students will be willing to take risks with their writing.

In April, Denise Levine will be presenting a paper as part of a panel at the *National Testing Network in Writing Conference* in Montreal. She will describe and discuss the changes in theories of writing instruction and assessment that have led to increased interest in portfolios.

Carla Asher, Cynthia Carrasquillo, Linette Moorman, Richard Sterling and Ronni Tobman have been asked to study the impact of projects funded by the Lowenstein Foundation in five elementary schools. These projects were designed through the CSIP committees to improve instruction and learning.

Hidden Treasures: An Annotated Bibliography of Puerto Rican, Nuyorican, and Caribbean Literature For Use in ABE Instruction with accompanying appendix of sample curriculum materials will be available for distribution in June 1989. The bibliography and sample materials were conceived, researched and field-tested at the Lehman College Adult Learning Center, and compiled and developed by Azi Ellowitch with assistance from the Adult Learning Center and Institute for Literacy Studies staff.

Sidney A. Hodges, a participant in last summer's Junior High School Summer Institute, wrote a curriculum guide which was recently published in *Heritage: The Magazine of the New York State Historical Association*. This innovative curriculum focuses on changes in urban/industrial areas in the last half of the nineteenth century.

From A Teaching Journal

A Letter To My Students

I wanted to end this course on a more personal note than usual, and at the same time provide you with some feedback about how I experienced the class from my perspective, teaching the course for the first time. I'm glad to say that, all things considered, my experience and feelings were overwhelmingly positive. I enjoyed my role as a teacher, but, even more, I enjoyed participating with you in the learning process as well.

As you know, I too did the journal work and wrote a research paper. This gave me an added perspective on the course that I wouldn't have had otherwise. Having done the classwork and homework along with you gave me a privileged insight into how the course was experienced from your point of view. I know what it was like to feel the pressure of having to meet deadlines and due dates when there was much course work in other classes to attend to. I knew the anxious feeling of not being fully or adequately prepared for the group work, and then having to read aloud something that was far from our best efforts! Remember the time I gave you an extra weekend to prepare for the "search" phase of your term paper? The reason was that I myself hadn't had the chance to complete the work and I knew you could probably benefit from the extra time as well. When it came to responding to the class notes, I was often at a complete loss for words, and this despite the fact they were my own lessons! I know too how hard it is to come up with a commentary on the group work when sometimes it seemed there was little to say that was worth the effort, e.g. "the group work was ok today, we all got a chance to read and exchange ideas, ho hum." And then I also elected not to read out loud my entries which I felt were dull and uninspired.

But there were other occasions when the journal writing just flowed, and it seemed I couldn't write fast enough to keep up with all my thoughts and the ideas that seemed to demand expression. And on those occasions I was anxious for a chance to contribute my writing on the group work or whatever it was that we were responding to.

What I enjoyed the most about the course, and also what was sometimes the most difficult, was the group work itself. When it "worked" it worked well. I knew it and you knew it, and as a group we all felt it. But when it didn't work, it seemed to me a real disaster, and a waste of time. Often it appeared that the only group even attempting to do the work was the one, not coincidentally I'm sure, that I happened to be in. I couldn't help but be aware of what was happening (or rather, not happening) in other groups. As the noise level rose I could glance about the room and it looked more like the cafeteria than a classroom. You were sitting on desks, chit-chatting, laughing, fooling around, and horror of teacher horrors, just plain socializing. Others, of course, were busy at work by themselves, doing homework for other classes which hadn't been completed the night before.

In any case, working within the groups was the only time I felt in direct contact with what was happening with you: whether or not you were enjoying what you were doing, experiencing difficulties, or whatever. I watched with great joy and satisfaction when your faces lit up with enthusiasm because someone asked a question about your writing that showed they were really listening and interested. It was during the group work that I felt more than just "the teacher." Instead, at times our roles were reversed: you became the experts on your topics, and I was the one who learned. When it came my turn to read, I found myself seeking your opinions, suggestions, and advice about how my own writing could be improved.

In group, you discovered that what was difficult for you was often just as difficult for the rest of us, and we all struggled for understanding together. This isn't to say that we didn't struggle alone. Many chose difficult topics for research, that I knew would be hard for you for a number of reasons, including "personal" ones because you were writing "close to home," so to speak. And I knew your despair and frustration would be great before it was over. And that in the end some of you would not be satisfied with your results.

I hope your despair was not too great. There's often much to be gained from our lack of success, as well. For at this stage, the final *product* is not all that matters, or even what matters the most. What is important is that you learned along the way. The process of learning, *how* it happens, is just as important and valuable as what is learned, even though this is rarely what we are taught.

*Respectfully yours,
Jeff Repka
HS For The Humanities*

Thanks Marcie

Marcie Wolfe has officially resigned from the editorial staff of the Newsletter so that she can devote more time to her many other projects at the Institute for Literacy Studies. Over the past eight years, Marcie has helped the Newsletter achieve higher and higher standards for itself with her incisive editorial skills, her sensitive attention to people, and her intellectual scope. She leaves a legacy of a highly respected, nationally renowned newsletter. The loss of her expertise and her understanding leaves us feeling in many ways separated from a vital source. But we wish her success in her other efforts. As we work to maintain the standards of excellence that she worked so hard to create, we are encouraged by the fact that she remains available for advice and assistance. Thank you Marcie, for all that you have given and will continue to give to the Newsletter.

Steal These Ideas

Janice Henderson, an English teacher at Sheepshead Bay High School, asked the students in her English 5 classes to take on the point of view of a drug abuser and write an interior monologue, or what drug abusers might say aloud if they were to verbalize their thinking. After ten minutes of writing, the class shared their work. "There were some remarkable moments," said Janice, "because they had succeeded in capturing the desperate feelings of drug abusers." After a lively discussion, the students chose lines from their monologues and contributed them to the following collaborative poem:

I'm calling for help! Can't someone answer me?
Can't somebody shake me into reality and then
force me back into myself.

I see nothing.

My youthfulness has turned to withered ugliness.

Please don't let my youthfulness turn into ugliness.

Can't someone lock up my stems, caps and spliffs?

Take away my E-Z wider

Take away my herbs with bambu

Don't even trust me with a dollar or two!

Take away my zookies

I am getting wasted, I'm tripping!

I am getting smacked by the cops

I am getting wacked by the caps

CAN'T YOU SEE

I'M TOO HIGH AND

I NEED TO COME DOWN

TO WHERE COLORS DON'T FLY

AND SOUNDS DON'T DIE!

I need to land

Can't someone answer me

I do things I can't remember

I's feeling scared

I believe maybe I maybe dead

I don't feel nothing!

Say, say, yo, man!

Yo, homeboy!

It's not funny when you don't answer.

Yeah! You think it's funny huh?

You got me hanging on,

Well, look man--I'm tired of hanging on--

Yo, man, I'm hanging up!

*When you think of the film, what picture comes to mind?
Draw or describe.*

*What feelings/reactions do you have when thinking of the film?
Free associate.*

What thoughts come to mind when you think about the film?

Once the areas of senses, emotions and thoughts are shared and listed on the blackboard, the students write an essay about the theme of the film. This activity segues into writing an essay about a novel.

There's always that feeling of anguish that writing groups aren't working, the students are not revising, and what do we do? Elaine Spielberg of the High School of Art and Design has introduced a step which helps the students to focus on their own concerns about their piece. When first drafts are completed, Elaine reads her piece aloud and shares several questions that she has about her own writing. The class is not asked to respond; instead, she invites them to reread their own pieces and make a list of questions they have about their work. They then go into writing groups and, after the group members have listened actively to the piece, they are free to pose their own questions to the group.

There's been a growing sentiment that audio-visual equipment is not being used as fully as it could. Sallyann Keith of the Young Adult Learning Academy is working with another teacher and their two classes to convert Ray Bradbury's short story "All Summer in a Day" into a play, which will then be performed and videotaped. She's using a manual called Theater Arts, available from the Board of Education, which provides worksheets explaining how to change narrative writing into dramatic writing.

At the same time, other class members work with the other teacher on either fashion writing or sportswriting. For fashion writing, Sallyann uses W, "an outrageous fashion newspaper," among other fashion magazines, to teach alliteration (Seasons in the Sun), plays on words (pantemonium), color words (putty, bamboo), colorful adjectives and active verbs. Students can choose from among sixteen activities, including writing their own ad campaign, putting on a fashion show, writing copy for pictures and interviewing students about their fashion preferences. In the sportswriting component, too, several skills are taught and an assignment can be chosen from among many options.

Marjorie Pena of Baruch College helps her students to prepare to write an essay on the theme of a novel by providing a collaborative modeling of the types of issues they might raise. After watching the "evocative, powerful" film "Neighbors," a six-minute Canadian film without language, each student freewrites on three questions:

*Lisa Rosenberg
James Monroe HS*

Teachers As Writers

The power of our own writing is often part of what draws us to the Writing Project. We write with our students and we write on our own, for our own purposes, sometimes working in isolation, sometimes sharing our work in small groups.

This year, to acknowledge the importance of this writing, the NYCWP has begun a series of readings at people's homes. We've been welcomed to Manhattan and Brooklyn for brunch, Queens for dessert, and we'll be in the Bronx in May. In each place, we've had the pleasure of hearing four of our own members read from their poems, stories, and novels-in-progress. These sessions have been exciting and inspiring, moving and funny, and the NYCWP newsletter staff would like to celebrate these readings by publishing some of the work read there.

We are delighted to have the opportunity to lead off this section of the newsletter with work by Thomasina LaGuardia, whose carefully-wrought, beautifully-read poetry stirred all listeners at Linette Moorman's house in February. We'd like to thank Thomasina for permission to publish her work and we'd like to thank April Krassner, Linette Moorman, Lisa Rosenberg and Ellen Shatz for opening their homes so we could hear each other's words.

Capisco/Non Capisco

*After a poem by Kenneth Koch,
"Taking a Walk With You"*

I understand Sartre
though I don't understand much French
I understand solid
and analytic geometry

I understand when you come without
anything on underneath

I understand your collecting stamps
and even your tennis for seven hours
I think I understand a little
Italian

but when you say you want to make love
I do not understand to whom

Ode To My Bath

for Maxine Kumin

Bath, I owe you.
Pity the people
who don't know you.
Oh, the purple

pleasures you have given
as you reunite my soul and body
when February is driven
through the floor angry.

Bath, how I missed you
in Jamaica, West Indies,
my friends high
on *spliffs* and *Rastas*,

no food for my baby
there was no warm
squatting into your cradle
to quiet my storm.

The night John Kennedy
announced on Bay of Pigs
the obscene end of our
innocence, how I skittered

to the dorm over stony
Massachusetts hills
to fill that tub I shared
with fifty-seven girls.

Bath, I owe you
for melting me together.
And what did I ever do
for you? Two things:

one, a beautiful hairstyle
made by the quick barrette
for you, Lover,
most intimate explorer

of my folds,
such beautiful hair
no lover ever beholds
besides you, and, two,

Lifesaver, I swirl you
down the drain
to your ancestral home
in the Atlantic.

For Gabriel, To Read When He's Much Older

Stormy, stormy night
the house plants on the terrace
won't stand this beating.

In our apartment the weather
is like no place on earth.
Ours is a weather above the earth
the atmospheric.

Bandit.
Bandito.
The small old neighbor Willy
gives you money for treats
and more for treats for tomorrow,
answers my thanks with
"Bullshit!"
which is only his way of flirting.
And the shoemaker John
searches his shop
and his pockets
gives you dusty packs of gum
shiny coins.
You kiss his stooped mother.
My child, Gabriel the Great
telling Nicole, "I love you,"
and asking for two more oreos.

But you're only four years old
still small.
This howling, slapping wind -
what is it recording in your sleep
I don't know?

"I want my Daddy to live with me.
And you. And me."
I offer you the river instead.

"Your metal cheeks you think
in him it was warmer.
Don't I invite you well?
I offer you the river,
New York Harbor,
sing you tankers, tugs, seaplanes.
One day you will be master.

You can never really know
so I must tell you -
yes, we were attached
to anger
and I starved at the marriage feast.
I never meant for you to miss a home
but it seemed to me he hated me.
Don't you see I had to, for our safety.

But let the truth be told:
free is distracted
hovering on any storm
no mooring but the sky
Your mama's cold.
Are you?

Eskimo baby on my chest
you used to ride in the pouch I wore.
Now you say, testing me,
"Ooo, this meat is dead!"
We live a city distance apart.
Eskimos share a bed.
And that's my sorrow.

So I bake a crazycake
with wheat germ
pack the strangest lunchbox
in Hobbledy Nursery.

Yes, that's my sorrow
what we both miss most
the family bed.

When you hold my hand
to cross the street
I'm not cold.

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Thomasina LaGuardia
Writing Teachers Consortium*

A Note From The Editors

An Issue On Race And Cultural Difference

By focusing this issue on *Race and Cultural Difference*, we invite you to join us in a discussion of issues that will determine the direction of education into the Twenty-first Century. Welcome!

We believe that presently there are important wars that are being fought around issues of "cultural literacy," and that "inquiry" is part of the NYC Writing Project's response to the issues that are being hotly debated. We feel that there is a void in the area of curriculum development--that is, what will be taught in the schools, and how. Reformers of the right have misappropriated this issue and are trying to fill that void. Although we couldn't differ more with them about their solutions for this problem, we feel that they are on to an important question.

Writing Projects should begin to address issues of content in curriculum development. The writing process movement in general has represented responses to methodological questions, e.g., "How can we get our students to write (read, talk, listen) better?" Now that we have dozens of answers to such questions, it's time to turn to questions about what our students should be talking, reading and writing about. We in NYCWP need to be

asking ourselves what it means for our students to be educated in the 1990's in New York City. What should our students know?

Part of the answer to this question must include *Race and Cultural Difference*, which is why we have focused this issue on this theme. A few of the pieces contained here come from the weekend inquiry retreat led by Elaine Avidon and Gail Kleiner which addressed the impact of race on the ability of minority students to succeed in public schools. Others come from Project members who also see the importance of these issues. David Nicholson, Lena Townsend, and Karen Griswold wrote reactions to articles on this issue by Lisa Delpit. Our own Lisa Rosenberg gives us a reasoned and thoughtful guide to these controversial articles. Helen Ogden describes how the experience of being involved in the inquiry weekend changed her thinking. Ruth Berkow's piece considers the differences between ourselves and our students, and touches on what those differences mean to our students and to us as teachers. Jane Maher's story deals with a memory of a group of white Catholic schoolgirls and a Black newcomer.

We have, of course, included our regular features, *From a Teaching Journal* and the ever-popular *Steal These Ideas*. In addition, we are leading off our new column, *Teachers As Writers* with some poetry by Thomasina LaGuardia.

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