

NEW YORK CITY WRITING PROJECT



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A NOTE FROM THE Editors

That Friday morning, I wandered, quite innocently enough, down the tree-shaded path to the Speech and Theater Building at Lehman College. This is my second year as an on-site teacher-consultant for the New York City Writing Project (NYCWP). I was looking forward with anticipation to our Friday meeting. At these meetings, I have the great pleasure of joining with my colleagues to write and reflect together, study current issues in education, discuss a book, share ideas, strategies, plans and gripes; in short, do the work that supports our day-to-day consulting in schools and classrooms. It is wonderful to have at one's fingertips the collective experience and wisdom of the group to help one plan lessons, workshops, courses and other Writing Project endeavors.

One such endeavor that I got involved in last year was being part of the editorial/writing staff of the NYCWP newsletter. I had, as a classroom teacher, published my share of student chapbooks and magazines, and run a student newspaper for Offsite Educational Services for several years, so I liked the journalism thing. I had learned a lot from Grace Raffaele, who did the layout, and Joe Bellacero and Ed Osterman who had worked on the newsletter in varying capacities from, it seemed, time immemorial.

Now, the newsletter was in need of a head editor. Katherine Schulten had moved on to other challenges (see page 3), and Joe and Ed were, although technically retired, engaged in many other Writing Project activities. So I shouldn't have been surprised when I, Alison Koffler-Wise, emerged from a meeting with Ed and Joe, wondering what had happened, with the mantle of newsletter editorship draped dizzily around my shoulders.

I suspect that my tenure as Editor will be an interesting one. We are at a crossroads in the world of education. Teachers and administrators wait to see how the Chancellor's new edicts will affect life in the classroom. Teachers struggle to raise test scores to meet the demands of standards-driven curriculum while still honoring inquiry and student-centered learning. During the winter, there was some discussion on the NYCWP listserv about the movie *Freedom Writers*, and lively talk about how teaching and the learning process are represented on the silver screen. In the media, we see teachers portrayed either as Hollywood saints or scandal-rag sinners, but very rarely do we see an accurate portrayal of the caring, focused, day-to-day hard work that teachers engage in with students.

Following the lead of my predecessors, some of my goals for this newsletter are to provide a window into that rewarding and challenging world, to share ideas and experiences, and provide a forum for teachers to explore writing issues that affect teaching.

In this issue, we'll have a look at some of the New York City Writing Project's various initiatives from writing marathons and retreats to our annual Teacher-to-Teacher Conference. We are pleased to include pieces from two participants in the 2006 Summer Invitational Institute. We will follow one of these teachers, Cecilia Espinosa, through an exploration of poetry in her life and in the classroom, while another, Emel Topbas, uses the form of poetry to share inner thoughts and concerns about a student. In a piece that emerged from our new Satellite Invitational Institute, Scill Chan reflects on the emotionally complex connections that often exist among language, family, and school. This issue also includes a book review from Erin Dowding, affording us the opportunity to consider a graphic novel as a tool for reaching learners of English as well as struggling readers. Finally, our regular feature "Listsrv Conversations" excerpts a conversation from the NYCWP listserv focusing on Georgia Christgau's success with a new instructional approach.

It is my hope to help this newsletter continue to give you updates on what's going on in the New York City Writing Project and provide some perspectives on things that matter in the world of education today.

WRITING

PROJECT

NYCWP CALENDAR OF EVENTS

NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT Annual Meeting*
at National Council of Teachers of English
Annual Conference

New York, NY

November 15 -18

* New York City Writing Project is the host site

SATELLITE INVITATIONAL INSTITUTE
New York City College of Technology
Manhattan, NY
Spring 2008

2008 TEACHER-to-TEACHER CONFERENCE
Lehman College
Bronx, NY
Spring 2008
(date to be determined)

ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' STUDY GROUP
Spring 2008
(date and location to be determined)

CONTENT AREA LITERACY STUDY GROUP
Spring 2008
(date and location to be determined)

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EDITORS:

Joe Bellacero (NYCWP)

Alison Koffler-Wise (NYCWP)

Ed Osterman (NYCWP)

Grace Raffaele (Institute for Collaborative Education)

INSTITUTE FOR LITERACY STUDIES

Executive Director, Marcie Wolfe

Associate Director, Anne Campos

NEW YORK CITY WRITING PROJECT

Director, Nancy Mintz

Associate Director, Felicia George

Associate Director, Joe Bellacero

Program Assistant, Maria Rocchi

ON-SITE TEACHER-CONSULTANTS

Joe Bellacero

Julie Conason

Ann Ellis

Debra Freeman

Linda Garcia-Torres

Felicia George

Diane Giorgi

Amanda Gulla

Lucie Harris

Lona Jack-Vilmar

Alison Koffler-Wise

Kami Lewis-Levin

Barbara Martz

Gina Moss

Ed Osterman

Jamie Pollard-Smith

Laura Schwartzberg

Susannah Thompson

Patsy Wooters

Institute for Literacy Studies

Lehman College/CUNY

250 Bedford Park Blvd. West

Bronx, NY 10468-1589

Telephone 718-960-8758

Fax 718-960-8054

On the cover:
 "Getting to the Writing Project"
 Photos by Grace Raffaele

NEWS BRIEFS

2006 Summer Invitational Institute

With the launching of the 2007 Summer Invitational Institute, it is easy to see how the Institute is an integral part of the culture of the NYCWP. Over the years, our Summer Invitational Institute has provided participants with an opportunity to form a supportive community of writers and practitioners. The Institute is designed to first immerse participants in the experience of writing and then move them on to reflection and inquiry with a focus on sharing classroom practices. Each year is different, each group of participants is different, and the nature of each Invitational reflects their interests and those of the facilitators.

The 2006 Summer Invitational Institute was led by **Ronni Michelen**, NYCWP teacher-consultant and Assistant Principal at the HS for Media and Communications, and **Jennifer Rygalski**, teacher-consultant and English teacher at Mott Hall II Middle School. **Jennifer Ochoa**, of Michigan's Red Cedar Writing Project and currently living in New York City, was presentation coach, and **Patsy Wooters**, on-site teacher-consultant at Columbus HS, facilitated during the third week of the Invitational. There were eleven participants, all educators from varied backgrounds ranging from elementary, middle and secondary teachers to an assistant professor.

During the Invitational, participants had the chance to write and think about writing in many ways: as freewriters, guideline-composers, point-of-view writers, drafters, revisers, readers of research, active listeners, and many more. They used the online discussion board *Nicenet* to pose questions and pursue discussions related to reading, writing and teaching. They experienced a variety of writing activities, took part in reading groups, went on a writing marathon and, in response groups, carried a piece of their own writing through the revision process to publication. (For two samples of this work, see pages 8 and 9.)

Together, participants became "teachers of teachers," reflecting on their experiences during the Invitational and in the classroom, and sharing their work via presentations and portfolios. The Summer Invitational Institute, as usual, showed that while teaching can sometimes be a challenging and isolating experience, the results are truly profound when a committed, intelligent and thoughtful group of teachers gets together.

Writing Retreat: It's Like Going to Camp

Writing Project or no, somehow making the time to do serious professional writing always settles to the bottom of our priorities list. Well aware of this, teacher-consultant **Amanda Gulla** signed herself up for a National Writing Project (NWP) Writing Retreat last summer. The result was a completed article, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackboard: Developing Voice and Community in English Education" which is soon to be published in *The New Educator*.

Realizing that a number of us might benefit from the same opportunity, Amanda teamed with NYCWP Associate Director **Joe Bellacero** to submit a proposal to the NWP to receive funds for NYCWP to run its own retreat. Focusing on members of recent Summer and Satellite Institutes, a small group came together in two meetings at Lehman to struggle with ideas, write, talk, share, suggest and write some more. Using *GoogleDocs* and *GoogleGroups* to communicate between meetings and to share progress, the group helped each other move from ideas to drafts. Finally, a group of seven retreated to the facility of Camp Oakhurst in New Jersey over the last week-end in April. Through large blocks of writing time, focused small group meetings, and two well-structured activities, participants finished the week-end well on their way to publishable pieces. We hope we can make such retreats a yearly ritual for our membership.

Writing Marathons for All Seasons

For the first time in the 29 years of NYCWP's existence, its fall, winter and spring seasons were each punctuated by a writing marathon. For those of you who may not know, a writing marathon is an elegantly simple idea created by **Richard Louth** of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project. People carrying notebooks and pens meet in an interesting place, break into groups of three or four and head out to look, talk, think, write and share. Every fifteen minutes or so they stop at a bench or in a coffee shop and do some writing about any topic of their choosing. They share if and what they choose, thank each other, and move on. The fall had us meeting at Columbus Circle to form small groups and head out into the gale, writing in Manhattan churches, malls, centers of the arts, and restaurants. In the winter, we met on the chilly steps of the Fifth Avenue Library, where Patience and Fortitude prevailed sending us indoors to the tented Flea Market/Crafts Fair in Bryant Park and the crowded arts and crafts booths thronging the halls of Grand Central Station. The flowers of spring found us in the cozy, less-traveled confines of the Conservatory Gardens of Central Park.

In each venue, teacher-consultant **Julie Conason** and NYCWP Associate Director **Joe Bellacero** shared their experiences with writing marathons and gently directed the group. The writing never failed to surprise its authors, leaving them with notebooks filled with the deeply personal and the frankly hilarious. We're already looking forward to next year's opportunities to walk in the company of writers.

We Have a Friend at The New York Times

Some of us remember **Katherine Schulten** as a young English teacher at Edward R. Murrow HS in Brooklyn. Still oth-

continued on next page

ers have had the pleasure of working with her as an on-site teacher-consultant at Jane Addams HS and the James Monroe HS Campus in the Bronx and at Queens Vocational HS. Many of you may simply recognize her name from her years as an active listserv participant or as former editor of this newsletter and of our publication, *Teacher to Teacher: Ideas that Work from the New York City Writing Project*.

A year ago, Katherine was offered an exciting opportunity to become the editor and producer of the *New York Times Learning Network*, a site for teachers, students, and parents that uses Times material for teaching and learning (www.nytimes.com/learning). Every day, Katherine chooses an article from that day's paper about which a team of writers, editors, and consultants writes a lesson, complete with interdisciplinary and extension suggestions and links to standards. The lesson topics change daily: Monday is American history or civics; Tuesday is science; Wednesday is international news or geography; Thursday is journalism, business, technology, or math; and Friday is language or fine arts.

The site includes an impressive array of resources. There is a "test prep question of the day" that links to a word of the day, with its definition and a recent usage of the word in *The Times*. There is also "On This Day in History," a feature that links to an historical *Times* article. The site also includes a "Snapshot of the Day" feature for younger students or for students new to English, a student crossword, and an "issues in depth" section where current topics such as global warming, terrorism, or Hurricane Katrina, are explored through lessons and links to past articles. Finally, there is a searchable archive with over 2,000 lessons on a huge range of topics, all with "evergreen" links to *Times* articles from the past nine years.

Currently, students have two opportunities to have their work published on the site. One way is through the "Letters to the Editor" column which Katherine updates about every two weeks. Through the "Ask a Reporter" feature, students

can write in questions which the *New York Times* reporter featured at that time will answer; then both question and answer are posted on the site.

Katherine says, "I'm working on creating many new features for the site, including more interactive and writing opportunities for both teachers and students. I'm hoping teachers will check in regularly to see what's new over the next year as we start to redesign the site. I really want NYCWP teachers to visit the site and have kids write in." So, do yourself a favor and see what's there, if you haven't already.

From Writing Retreat to NWP Monograph: The Journey of a Piece of Writing

You never know what will become of a piece of writing. In January 2004, at a NYCWP Writing Retreat, **Ed Osterman** began a piece reflecting on his history as an on-site teacher-consultant and the ways in which the NYCWP supported the work of its on-site teacher-consultants by arranging for them to meet every Friday for study and critical reflection. Soon after, he developed this piece into an article for this newsletter. But it didn't stop there.

Feeling there was a richer, deeper story to tell about the professional development of teacher-consultants, Ed applied to participate in a NWP Professional Writing Retreat in June 2005. There, he got to meet with other NWP colleagues interested in writing for publication about their practice. Through the support of a writing group and the leaders of the retreat, the article developed over those four days and by January 2006, Ed completed a version he liked and intended to send out.

Soon after, Ed received word that the NWP was producing a second series of monographs for its national network. These monographs are distributed to all NWP sites as resources for Project directors and teacher-consultants as they plan their local site's activities. The first series

had focused on in-service (our own **Alan Stein** and **Nancy Mintz** had each written a monograph for that series). This new series will focus on continuity: what each NWP site might do to expand and strengthen its teacher network. Ed was invited to reshape his article into a monograph.

In August 2006 Ed attended a NWP Writing Retreat at which about 20 different teacher-consultants from around the country began the process of writing a monograph. This time each writer was supplied with an editor to guide and support him/her through the composing and revision process; the final monographs are due to be published early next year.

"It's been quite a journey," Ed has commented. "I've never lived with a piece of writing for such a length of time. But the NWP has been so supportive."

We look forward to the publication of Ed's monograph on a key aspect of the NYCWP's work. We also want to remind all of our members to check the NWP website for announcements about its various writing retreats and then contact the NYCWP office. These retreats offer teachers the time and support they crave to write that article that they have been putting off for so long.

TEACHER-TO-TEACHER 2007

The sky was blue, the air crisp - a perfect day for venturing outside. But for those of us who gave up sleeping late and playing in the outdoors, our day spent at the NYCWP's 9th Annual Teacher-to-Teacher Conference was well worth the sacrifice.

"My entire life is this idea of revision, writing and rewriting," said our keynote speaker, **Walter Dean Myers**, noted author of young adult, children's and adult books. His passion and enthusiasm for all aspects of writing was evident and he generously shared that with the audience. Mr. Myers gave us a privileged

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look into the world of an author, showing us how he found his ideas and how he shaped those ideas into his finished works.

Mr. Myers spoke about how writing takes time, effort, organization and preparation. His advice to novice authors was that writing is not a matter of genius, but of "craftspeople working their craft." He shared with us that much of his energy goes into research, prewriting, and revising. Mr. Myers claims never to experience writer's block because all his preparation paves the way for his writing. "The plan of the book is what frees me up," he said, "then I can go into the writing and the writing can explode." Mr. Myers told his admiring audience, "Writing is process. I love the writing process."

After his presentation, teachers left for their workshops. Gillet and Carman Halls were a hum of varied activities. Participants attended a range of workshops, from interactive gallery walks to blogging with high school students, from the writing of research papers to using drama in the social studies classroom. Teacher-To-Teacher participant **Rachel Paiser** enthused over one workshop she

attended, "RA/TATA + RAFT: Purposeful Reading and Writing" with Emel Topbas, "This was great!" she said, "I plan to use this strategy immediately!"

Once again the Writing Project offered teachers something worth getting up for on a Saturday morning in Spring.

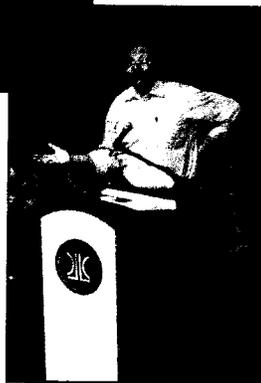
**THANKS AND CONGRATULATIONS
TO ALL TEACHER-to-TEACHER PRESENTERS:**

Paul Allison, Jamie Anderson, Meny Beriro, Madeline Brownstone, Alette Carrasco, Al Camacho, Renee Drygg, Susan Ettenheim, Erica Fairfull, Jackie Fiore, Dorian Herron, Nina Kramer, Sara Miraldi, Ed Osterman, Jennifer Rygalski, Laura Schwartzberg, Jennifer Smith, Ken Stein, Susannah Tamarkin, Maribel Tineo, Emel Topbas, Amy Weidner

Walter Dean Myers, the book sale table and two helpful students.



Book signing and chatting with Lona Jack-Vilmar, Felicia George and Nancy Mintz.



Photos by Grace Raffaele

TEACHER -TO- TEACHER 2007

So often the stories we tell about the people and places of childhood also bring to the surface an understanding of our relationship to “home language.” In this piece, written during the NYCWP’s new Satellite Invitational Institute, Scill Chan reflects on her beloved grandfather. As she recalls the conversations and experiences they’ve shared, she touches on the ties that connect her to her Cantonese language and heritage.

It’s a routine that I know must come to an end someday. I can’t imagine that day at all, what I will feel like, what I will do, where I will go on Friday evenings.

I have visited my Gramps weekly for as long as I can remember. It’s usually Friday evenings, to launch the weekend and give me a sense of calm. When I have more time, or during a holiday, I visit more often but it’s usually Friday, just me and Gramps.

Gramps definitely talks more than I do. He seems to have stored a week’s worth of comings and goings ready to unleash right after I say, “How’s it going, Gung Gung?” And out it pours—and I can update my mental files on the lady two doors down who asked to borrow a big jar and still hasn’t returned it; the latest murder committed by the emperor on the 3 pm soap on the Asian Cinevision channel; and the ingredients in the gook he ate yesterday morning, complete with peanuts and thousand-year-old eggs. Sometimes the physical therapist comes and gives Gramps a refresher in the exercises he should be doing, and Gramps will show me the move with a shrug and say he’s not going to do it.

If the weather is nice, we go for a walk, usually just out back where the complex has a vegetable garden. Gramps will point out what new growths he’s seen on the branches and vines, even specifying the precise measurements in inches without any tools, just eyeballing with 20/20 that won’t fade even as the rest of him does. During these walks, I listen with one ear,

responding where appropriate, “Oh yeah, Gramps, when will they be ready to eat? They look pretty ripe.” But my mind is in a calm panic, repeating over and over that he might stumble, and if he trips, I can’t possibly catch him and then it’ll be over. And then I’d have to leave him to get help and what if he’s alone when it happens and he will be in pain and I will not have stopped it... and then I bring myself back to his side. “Oh wow, Gramps, those are really long peas – I didn’t know they got that big...”

And it is on the days we’re outside, when the apartment releases him to breathe in the fresh air of life, that my Gramps says even more; as if being surrounded by trees and grass reminds him that he once lived far away from this concrete existence. The words come out one at a time at first. Slowly another word, a full sentence, and then it comes out rapid fire. He whispers and I lean in, struggling to maintain my balance as he unsettles it. The story comes so fast that I finish processing one line by the time he has finished three. I will catch snippets of heartbreaking women, squandered wealth, and odd jobs around the world with intrigue reaching so far it matches the distance he is from home. He is the main character in a never-ending story revealed in hesitation, one chapter at a time, over the last years in the life of a man far from his birthplace and reborn in America.

Gramps tells stories with the richest Cantonese vocabulary of anyone in my family. Words I do not even know blend together with spoken characters I have heard time and again to paint a picture

so vivid, bringing me to years and experiences I have never lived myself. When Gramps passes, I know I will lose the strongest connection I have to the language that brought us together.

The process by which I learned Chinese forged my relationship with my Gramps. I was born in Manhattan, an American-born Chinese who had my formative years on the streets of Chinatown. My first tastes of the language came from listening as my mother carried me to sidewalk stalls to buy groceries and to friends’ houses to catch up on news. When my mother returned to work full time, my brother and I were placed in our grandparents’ care. Every negotiation, every communication, every wish had to be expressed with words that we began to piece together. If we say this, Gramps gets us yummy egg tarts. If we say that, he makes a mad face. It seemed our Cantonese language education was well on its way to full development. During these years, it was my Gramps with whom I shared my new discoveries – the friend who had a role in each of this toddler’s fantasies. It was Gramps who had made learning Cantonese purposeful.

And then, like a defining moment for most students who are not English first-language learners, something happened when it came time for us to enroll in school. Now we entered a world that seemed much more exciting than the one we knew, and everyone spoke another language. So we struggled the same way to grab at the words to put together in this new language, English, and let our Cantonese sink in priority. It

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A CHINESE CHARACTER

Scill Chan
Manhattan Central HS

turned out that the only reason to hold onto to anything at all was Gramps.

When it became apparent to my mom that her Chinese children could no longer speak their mother tongue, she enrolled us into Chinese school. This academic/recreational madhouse was our weekly nightmare – an environment that served to make us despise Cantonese. Whereas before, our meager utterings were enough to get by on the streets, we were now expected to reproduce characters on demand, memorize ancient imperial sonnets, and compose elaborate thematic essays. And it was always Gramps to the rescue. Our get-togethers were characterized by my outbursts of frustration which would be soothed by a funny story from Gramps about whatever topic we were studying.

I remember once it was Gramps' 70th birthday and the whole family was heading out for a big celebration. I had a large composition due the next day about the theme of love in a particular Ming Dynasty poem. To say that the topic was over my head was an understatement; I didn't get any of it. Gramps sat with me, for hours, explaining each word, each phrase, each line. A twenty-character stanza sprang to life through his words, and together, we churned out quite the literary analysis. We were late to dinner, and I was sad to have stolen Gramps' time from the rest of the family. But, as I think now of how few moments we have left together, I would have stolen even more.

So the clock begins to tick, a looming monotony that pervades the back-

ground now whenever we are together. I hear it blasting in my ear as the lawyer asks my Gramps to sign his English name on his will. He strains with the pen in his hand, wondering why he can't make it do what he wants. The cursive is awkward, stiff, anything but smooth. It is a strange sight compared to the images in my memory of the man who taught me to hold a calligraphy brush. I remember his words appearing like ink pictures, of Gramps' hand flying across the paper, of how characters are like letters – just strokes on paper – but in this moment, my grandfather, composer of essays and poems, struggles to sign his name on the line.

“I remember his words appearing like ink pictures, of Gramps' hand flying across the paper, of how characters are like letters...”

One evening, I read Gramps an article from the English newspaper. The story was about an owner of a cheese-steak eatery in Philadelphia who had posted a sign on his store window saying: “This is America. Order in English.” (By luck, I knew how to say Philadelphia in Chinese because my brother just moved there. And I admit to substituting

“hamburger” for “cheesesteak” though I don't think it lessened the point.) Gramps liked that article, I remember. He said that was very typical American, order only in English. Gramps used to work in a very popular take-out restaurant where he was the head cook. He said the customers usually had trouble saying the names – Szechuan, Hunan, Ta-Chien. He liked when the customers ordered in English. That always gave us a good laugh.

So what is there to do now—in this space between where the laughter hangs in the air and the next funny story? And what will there be to do when the reason I learned Chinese is no longer there? During recent visits to my Gramps' place, I am now overcome with a deep, unsettling anticipation of loss and dread of arrival. I fear that I will no longer push myself to maintain the language when the only motivation I have ever had to know it is gone.

It is what I call the grandchild's dilemma. I am in a unique position to define for my own future children who my grandparents were—to describe persons who will never be real to them but who they must believe are crucial to the pathways of their lives. And that is a real dilemma I wish I did not have. How can I undertake the daunting responsibility of finding words to describe the man who showed me the words when I did not have them? It is something that eats at me continuously, not just on Friday evenings.

When teachers participate in the Summer Invitational Institute, they are engaged in the discipline of writing and revising daily and re-discover their identities as writers. For many of us, this experience releases a flood of creativity. Within a span of four weeks, teachers experiment with a range of topics and genres: essays, memoirs, dialogues, journals, and poetry, to name a few. In the following two pieces, two participants from the 2006 Summer Invitational reflect on the role of writing and literature in their own lives and the lives of their students.

The Roots of POETRY

Cecilia M. Espinosa
Lehman College

"Cecilia, I want you to know that I have been saving those poems in Spanish you sent home every week as homework with my grandson Fernando. I had no idea Spanish sounded like that, so beautiful. The reason why Fernando hasn't brought them back is because I save those poems in the drawer next to my bed, and when the house is finally quiet, I pull them out and read them out loud to myself," said Marcela, as she dropped off her grandchild in my multi-age class.

While still organizing the materials for the day, I found myself taken aback with no words to respond to her comment. I looked up at her and thought about her already shrinking body and wondered about her journey through school without access to her mother tongue. She continued the conversation by adding that she had grown up in Phoenix surrounded by negative comments about Spanish and the people who spoke it. "Our father would only allow it at home," she explained to me. "Out in the street we needed to sound like English-speaking people."

With her words still echoing in my mind, I stood up and walked over to the shelf and told her that I had some poetry books she might like to look over. Before putting the books in her bag, she held the books with one hand while she felt the covers with the other, back and forth and up and down. We looked at each other for a few seconds and said bye.

As I continued to get ready for the day, memories of my childhood flooded my mind. My first encounters with poems were the ones my mother shared

with me. As a child, she would spend entire afternoons reading and memorizing poems with her brothers and cousins. They would challenge each other to find the one with the most romantic words, the most beautiful sounds. She has never lost her immense love of poetry and passed this appreciation on to my brothers, sisters and me. During our trips between Quito and the farm, she would tell us about the lives of her favorite poets and often would recite to us her much loved poems, which she knew by heart. One of her favorites was "A Margarita Debayle," written by Nicaraguan poet Ruben Dario. Over and over, I listened to her recite the words Dario had captured so beautifully, "Margarita, esta Linda la mar, y el viento lleva esencia sutil de azahar; yo siento el alma una alondra cantar..." (Margarita, the sea is pretty, and the wind carries with it subtle essence of orange blossom, I feel in my soul a lark sing...)

There were entire afternoons when she also shared with us poems from her poetry books. These books were old and the pages she loved were wrinkled, as though she had turned them over and over. We would read from these old books while she invited us to discover Neruda's words, "Puedo escribir los versos más tristes está noche. Escribir por ejemplo, la noche está estrellada y tiritan azules los astros a lo lejos."

It was through these encounters with poetry that I developed a deep interest in and love for this medium. Later on this love for poetry had an immense impact on my development as a teacher.

In contrast, at school we were expected to read the analysis of poetry developed by experts who supposedly knew the one correct answer, the one true interpretation. There was such great disparity between my experiences with poetry at home and the coldness of the experiences with it at school. As a consequence, many of us learned at school to resist poetry and push it away from our lives.

It took many years for me to reconnect with poetry and see its possibilities in the classroom. I was living in the United States and was already in my first year of teaching, but poetry was absent from my daily life. One day while browsing at the public library, I came across the work of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (Veinte Poemas de Amor y Una Canción Desesperada).

Finding Neruda in another country, as an immigrant and a speaker of language with low status in the United States, had a powerful impact on my life as a reader and as a teacher. Reading and re-reading his poems from this perspective gave me fresh eyes to understand the power of his work. For Neruda, poetry belonged to the everyday person, not just the educated elite. In his memoirs he writes about reading his poetry to a group of miners who were on strike. Although most of them did not know how to read or write, they listened to his words with such intent that there was absolute silence in the audience.

This was a moment where Neruda understood the profound power of poetry to move and touch all kinds of

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in the classroom where he belongs

**Emel Topbas
Manhattan Center
for Science and Mathematics**

crossing the threshold to the English classroom
he curses under his breath
calling to attention those who surround him
 he apologizes to the first-year teacher at the
 white-erase board
and takes his seat at the back of the classroom

drifting eyes drift away.
they stare at the desk,
at the walls,
at the ceiling,
at the windows
 they stare at everything except the novel in his hands

anger
irritation
he makes his way to the front of the classroom
 he takes a seat at the teacher's desk

copying notes from the board
his eyes are glazed
 the teacher wonders why he is not engaged

he enjoys writing
he writes rhymes
he writes short paragraphs
 the teacher thinks she has found a way

you're a great writer
 silence
no, really—you should write more often
 silence
do you like writing?
 he shrugs and smiles

he discovers a blank blue journal on his desk,
a blue pen affixed to the spiral coil
finds the pink sticky note on the cover
 dear B—
 use this journal to discover the world
 write about what you want to write about
 let's meet once a week to share
 --Ms. T.

he records his daily wanderings
adventures
and boredoms
 he shares the journal once a week to share his
 thoughts

the teacher devours his writing
feels that he is turning around
becomes excited that he is engaged
 the teacher learns more about the student who sits in
 her classroom

he writes about his life
his new kicks
his crushes
 he writes about the importance of an education

he feels he doesn't belong in school
he writes that he doesn't fit in
he writes that he fears he can't make it
 he thinks about dropping out of high school

the street corners by the grocery stores
begin to call his name
they whisper to him
and entice him with their street games
 the whispers from the street begin to lure him away
 from school

he begins to write less
he begins to cut more
the teacher tries to reach him
there are no responses to the ring rING RING of his telephone
 he begins to stand on the corner
 a block away from the classroom where he belongs

his presence begins to fade from the halls of the school building
he does not walk across the stage wearing a cap and gown
yet he lingers in the memory of the first-year teacher
 who wonders if he continued writing in the blue journal
 with the blue pen

Because there has been so much interest and curiosity among teachers about graphic novels—why so many students love them, how teachers can integrate them effectively into their curriculum—we have been eager to read about the benefits and challenges of working with such novels in the classroom. In this book review, Erin Dowding shows how a graphic novel helped her provide entry for her English language learners into the study of difficult historical material.

BOOK

Barefoot Gen, Volume 2: The Day After

by Keiji Nakazawa

A year after reading the graphic novel, *Barefoot Gen Volume Two: The Day After*, with my students, I still get a strong reaction from them when I ask them about it.

"Oh, that book. I like that book," Jessica tells me with a smile creeping across her face. "That book shows what happened in Hiroshima. That book showed how real it was." Jessica pauses and then continues. "It made me feel tense. It was scary. And kinda disgusting."

Even now, with distance, one of my students, Yaki, still recalls that book. "Eww. People's skin melted because of the bomb. People's hair was falling off," she remembers.

Yaki and Jessica are right. There are things in *Barefoot Gen* that are truly disturbing or "disgusting." It is a serious book, both powerful and memorable. It is also the opposite of what people think about when they hear the word "comic book." *Barefoot Gen* is cartoonist and writer Keiji Nakazawa's ten-volume rallying call for peace. On August 6, 1945, at age six, Nakazawa stood in the shadow of one of Kanzaki Primary School's concrete walls. That wall saved his life, but left him in what he calls the "living hell" of his horrifically changed hometown, Hiroshima. The blast of the atomic bomb destroyed Nakazawa's house, crushing his sister instantly and trapping his father and brother under rafters, which later succumbed to flames. The shock and helplessness of the situation sent Nakazawa's pregnant mother into labor, giving birth prematurely to a daughter who died four months later. In a city full of mounting corpses, the survivors, including Nakazawa and his mother, were left to recreate life while watching unreal nightmares unfold around them.

Nakazawa describes these experiences and the stories of others he knew through *Barefoot Gen*, his starkly graphic set of books that starts with seven year-old protagonist Gen and his family a few months before the atomic bomb was dropped on

Hiroshima. The story follows Gen through the waking nightmare of the bomb's aftermath and eventually ends with the promise of hope. Originally published as *Hadashi no Gen* in Japanese in 1972, it was translated into English four years later. I learned of *Barefoot Gen* through a Contemporary Japanese Literature class I took at the Japan Society a few years back where we read *Volume Two: The Day After* as part of our study. I was struck by the shocking and powerful, yet deceptively simple drawings that told the story of this complex and tragic part of global history. I was so moved that, as I sat down to order books for my ESL Through Humanities class, *Barefoot Gen Volume Two: The Day After* was at the top of my list.

In many ways, my students were unprepared for the book I handed them in the middle of our World War II unit. Hesitant and more than a little daunted, they were surprised when they found stark black and white Japanese mangas staring back at them. Their perception of what normally gets read in school was altered. This change came not just because they were reading "comics" in school. They also discovered that they could understand the complex situations and harsh realities of Japan during World War II as articulately described through words and pictures. Nakazawa, a peace advocate to the core, not only condemns the actions of the United States, but also the racism of the Japanese themselves towards Koreans. He also shows the feeling of abandonment that victims of the bomb felt from their own government in Japan. It is hard to visualize the aftermath of the atomic bomb. Words hardly do it justice and film may be too gruesomely realistic a medium. *Barefoot Gen* is honest in its portrayal, but using a more innocent art form allows for a fitting expression of the atrocities. It is shocking, but not so unbearable as to be unreadable.

There has definitely been a rise in the use of graphic novels as a teaching tool in the classroom. As an ESL teacher, I have

Erin Dowding
Flushing International HS

REVIEW

found that numerous texts have been translated into graphic interpretations for English language learners and teachers looking to differentiate their curriculum. Since my Humanities class is a combination of ninth- and tenth-grade global history and English literature, I am constantly hunting to find legitimately compelling books that fit the content of my class as well as the needs of its heterogeneous student population. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and *Maus II* are amazing books about the Holocaust, but they are quite sophisticated in their drawings and approach to storytelling. The *Maus* books have given me a newfound respect for the art of graphic novels, but I found that they tend to be difficult for students who are new to the language and the content. It's hard for ESL students to access the true heart of the story in many ways. *Barefoot Gen*, with its child narrator and its mature but easy-to-read graphics instantly grabbed my students' attention and held their interest from the first panel to the last frame 233 pages later.

Marjane Satrapi, author of another amazingly written and amazingly teachable graphic novel, *Persepolis*, about her childhood in Iran during the Islamic Revolution, is often asked, "Why didn't you write a book?" She responds by saying, "Graphic novels are not traditional literature, but that doesn't mean they are second rate. Images are a way of writing. When you have the talent to be able to write and to draw, it seems a shame to choose one. I think it's better to do both. We learn about the world through images all the time." *Barefoot Gen*, lesser known than *Maus* or *Persepolis*, embodies this talent. Accurate in its history, personal in its voice, and powerful in its true historical content, *Barefoot Gen* is moving and stays with you. But as my student Matthew says, "It is great because the man who drew it was a part of this history and makes it so others believe and understand him."

LISTSERV CONVERSATIONS

The NYCWP listserv regularly provides a forum for its members to ask for help with classroom resources and instructional approaches. Often, teachers voluntarily share a classroom activity that has succeeded with students. When this happens, we all benefit from the sharing of the initial idea as well as from the many suggestions and connections that emerge from the ensuing dialogue. In the following listserv conversation, Georgia Christgau shares her excitement about an activity that worked with her students. As you read, notice how several other useful classroom strategies are identified and explained in the course of the conversation.

Georgia Christgau, Middle College HS:

I've just tried something that was fun, and I want to do more, but coming up with this stuff is hard for me. Reading *This Boy's Life*, we looked at the dynamic between mother and son. It's pretty complicated. I wanted to show the back and forth of relationships. Nothing is just one way. I made a list of words, about 20, from trusting and trustworthy to confused and vulnerable, indicating what each character might feel. I asked students to take a minimum of four words for each character and place them in a circle, cutting out (or drawing) in pie slices for each. Love – dependency – trust – confusion, for instance. Then, each word choice had to be backed up with a quote from the book. There were two "pies," one for each character. It went so well that kids were pulling out the books and pointing to their quotes to convince others (in groups of 4) of their point of view. FOR THE WHOLE PERIOD. On Monday we'll discuss all the pies. It seems such a simple activity now that we've done it. I want more. Got any?

Joe Bellacero, NYCWP:

That sounds great, Georgia. I'm stealing it. Speaking of stealing, the book *Teacher to Teacher* Katherine Schulten put together for the NYCWP with ideas culled from this listserv is a fantastic source of fun, tried and true ideas.

Elena Brunn, BMCC/CUNY:

Georgia, this sounds like an effective lesson! But I have a question. In your example, why did you use a pie chart rather than columns? Did you, or will you, draw up another chart to show which characteristics have greater

weight than others? And why did you have some students cut out their chart? For everyone--is there currently an emphasis, as I saw in my three years of teaching high school, on using visuals in the English classroom? If so, what's the rationale and what results have you found?

Ed Osterman, NYCWP:

Let me add my voice to the chorus of approval for the pie chart activity. I would say anything that varies the format in which students attempt to categorize or make sense of material can be a good thing. (It's visual in order to appeal to different learning styles.) You don't want students to get bored ("Not double-entry again!!!"). I think the cutting out section adds to the fun. A couple of years ago my colleague David gave students a series of about 15 key facts/events related to Germany and World War 2. They had to cut them up and then place them on a timeline. I think the cutting and pasting -- the sheer physical manipulation of the statements on paper -- enhanced the student's interest in the activity. I can't say graphic organizers and/or visual materials always work for everyone, but for a lot of students they help.

Georgia Christgau:

I need more "manipulatives" -- the math word for physically moving and working with materials because, as Ed said, too much double-entry, or too much of anything for that matter, gets boring. I have 9th and 10th graders and a 70 minute period. They get restless. Thanks for the reminder about Teacher to Teacher, Joe -- I do have a copy.

Four students in this class are deaf.

After class, one student's interpreter offered the observation that the fill-in-the-blanks outline I did on the board in preparation (to make sure kids knew where to look for what scenes in the current reading assignment) was difficult for this student, but the pie chart he "got right away." In fact, this boy, who is sweet and engaged, actually completes few written assignments. He wants to, but it's very, very slow for him. I saw his enthusiasm -- he was leading his buddy at the group table in finding stuff for the chart.

Another reason I used the pie chart was that I wanted kids to decide proportions for the emotions they chose. That wouldn't have been possible with a 2 column chart. In other words, if Rosemary (the mother)'s love for Toby (the son) is undisputed, that might get a pie slice of 75%; but her impulsive behavior, insecurity about men and her denial of Toby's problems might share the remaining 25% of the "pie." This activity didn't go that far. Perhaps we can revisit this activity later, when kids feel more knowledgeable about the characters and can use the pie chart in more subtle ways.

Lisa Rosenberg, Middle College HS:

Georgia, it strikes me that this idea of multiple facets of personality is illustrated so masterfully in the recent movie *Crash* and might work well alongside the pie charts to continue to broaden this understanding of the complexities of personalities and relationships.

Anita Dutt, DOE Mentor:

I recently saw an activity called Tea Party. Quotes from a text to be read are printed on cards or slips of paper. The students have a few minutes to walk about and talk in pairs about what their quotes could mean or any thoughts re: the quotes. The teacher times each encounter, and then there is more circulating. It worked with adults, although we strayed from the assigned topics!

Suzanna McNamara, Bronx International HS:

Like Georgia, I too am always on the hunt for thought-provoking, "move around" kinds of activities, as I teach 9-10 grade ELLs. I love the pie chart idea. One way I'm thinking you could add more moving around is by having a big piece of chart paper on each table. Write a character's name in large letters on each piece, a different one at each table. Have kids start at a table and find words and quotes to describe their character. Then after 10-15 minutes, have them move to another table to work on a new character. When they move, they can add quotes to already chosen words or they can choose

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Listserv Conversations continued: new words and new quotes. Each "character map" is then generated by the whole class. Does this make sense?

I've had lots of success with this moving from table to table approach in different content areas. The tea party is also great, BUT I've had it work more as an introductory kind of activity to generate background knowledge and to push kids to make predictions. Thanks for a great idea.

Ed Osterman:

Like Suzanna, I, too, have seen the tea party used as an introduction to a book at an NCTE workshop led by Linda Christensen, whose work some of you know from *Rethinking Schools*. Students are given one-line descriptions of who the character is as well as the name and maybe a quote or description. They

then move around and try to interact as that character. Linda asked teachers to try it out around the novel *Cold Sassy Tree*. One of the things she asked us to discuss afterwards was who was not INVITED to the tea party (Some of us had to sit on the sidelines during it and then discuss why; it introduced some of the racial and class issues in the novel.)

Julie Conason, NYCWP:

Linda Christensen outlines the way she uses the Tea Party activity in her book *Reading, Writing and Rising Up*. In addition to great structural writing activities, she also has a number of other strategies similar to the "Tea Party" which would be worth looking at and possibly adapting.

Joe Bellacero:

The Tea Party reminded me of a warm up activity we do at my camp that might be adapt-

able to characters in a novel. We call it "Amnesia." Each participant has the name of some celebrity taped to their back. As they go around the room they ask questions and try to figure out who they are. I imagine you might be able to do this with books that have a lot of characters (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example) and perhaps limit the questions to some area that you wanted the kids to think about such as personality ("Am I the kind of person who would work in my garden even on Sunday?" "Am I the kind of person who...?").

Ed Osterman:

Joe, I like the prompt "Am I the kind of person who...?" I imagine one could add on other questions for variety. "Which characters in the book like or dislike me?" "Do readers admire me or not?" Thanks for the suggestion.

The Roots of Poetry continued: people. In Ecuador, poetry is often used as a gift or a political statement. It is not unusual to see poetry written in large print on the city walls either to reveal affection or in the form of protest. He often wondered about the place of poetry and what it means to be human. He spoke of poetry as vital energy for the human spirit.

As I reflect back on these experi-

ences many years later, I think about the care with which Fernando's grandmother collected the poetry and her thirst for hearing the beauty of Spanish. The contrast of my experiences with poetry at home and at school, and my re-encounter with Neruda as an adult raised a lot of questions in my mind about the kind of space I wanted to create in my classroom

for poets: how did I want the children to experience poetry in my classroom? How could I bring to life poets and poems from both languages? How could I help them embrace poetry rather than resist it? The deeper answers to these questions I found through these experiences.

Institute for Literacy Studies • Lehman College • 250 Bedford Park Boulevard West • Bronx, NY, 10468-1589

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