



Winter 1984

## Volume 3 Number 2

### A Note From The Editors

The New York Times Winter Survey of Education, January 8, 1984, had several articles on the teaching of writing in which the National Writing Project and our own New York City Writing Project were given significant publicity. The pieces in the Winter Survey of Education explored changes in the teaching of writing and, more centrally, how writing can be used as a powerful tool for learning. In one of the articles James Gray, Director of the National Writing Project, states, "We put a real premium on trying to find teachers who use it that way."

While we can congratulate ourselves on riding the crest of this wave of interest in the teaching of writing, we should not lose sight of our goals. What matters in the end is that we keep look-

### Writing In Groups

As a teacher of composition, my chief concern is a selfish one: to spend a week-end without a mass of student essays looming over me, 165 works in all, and each author expecting a graded approval and thorough correction of his efforts. I do not say that an English teacher's work is impossible, but the workload is life-defeating, if we let it be. Exuberance fades in the wake of tense and patient perusal, and I walk into Monday morning a stunned and beaten man who - like Sisyphus his ancestor - will repeat the massive effort the following Saturday.

How to help students without ruining one's eyes and souring a taste for living? This paper is a description of an experimental approach I used in sophomore English classes in Norman Thomas High School.

I started with the idea that I was not going to kill myself, that each week I would take home no more than twenty-five

ing for new ways to play the craft and develop our collective professional commitment to ideas, learning, and curricular change.

The focus of the winter edition of the Newsletter is twofold. First, we'd like to continue presenting articles by teachers who are involved in the Writing Teachers Consortium. Second, we have a variety of pieces that come under the heading, "A Moment of Teaching." These testaments were hastily scribbled and read in small groups at the November 1983 meeting of the N.Y.C. Writing Project.

Sit by your sputtering hearth and enjoy.

Toby Bird, Nassau Community College  
Michael Simon, Literacy Center

essays which I would read, grade holistically, and comment on; that each week I would personally confer with students until I had reached every one of them three times during the term. Well, I did, but did their actual writing improve? In most cases yes, and I think in all cases there was a change of attitude; and I noticed a kind of self-awareness and reaffirmation that motivated each to sit down, think, feel, and write with an audience of their peers in mind. This did not happen because of my input, my direct intervention, or my teaching the strategies at the blackboard. It was a group affair, or rather an affair of groups.

[2]

My purpose here is to discuss classroom management and the mechanics involved in setting up a workable operation. The teacher in this activity is not a foreman, nor even a visible manager, but a roamer among aisles, a troubleshooter at

various tables or turned-about desks, and in some cases a moderator who might solve problems by incisive questioning. His presence is available but is not the extended shadow of authority that stands like some notetaking historian over the forays and treaties in various parts of the room.

And I discovered that this initial planning was the most difficult part of the job. I had to work it out carefully beforehand, and that involved a heightened and sustained sensitivity and the willingness to take risks, as does any experimental approach in any field. I would make students the writers, editors, proofreaders, revisers, active listeners, morale builders, and oral readers of one another's work. I would attempt to create a harmonious classroom in which peer loyalty and self-motivation became the unspoken and true commitment of a unit in writing. I would involve every one of them regardless of personal potential as a writer. And I would give them the freedom and responsibility for running the show.

Faith is the dominant chord in this relationship with teenagers. I had to believe they could do it. I chose seven in each class, each a fairly enthusiastic and responsible student, and made them group or committee chairpersons. First, we gathered at my desk and I told them my general idea for a unit in writing, and then they went to work.

Two of the seven conducted the first lesson. They elicited ideas for discussion and later writing, wrote them as topics on the board, and with the class's very active verbal participation, finally decided on the three most challenging topics. The two leaders appointed a secretary who took notes, and the next day gave us a complete rundown of that tempestuous and creative session. I had virtually no say during that period. I sat in the back of the room and made some notations on verbal communication habits. The assignment, the homework, was to choose one topic and write as much as possible. This was to be their first draft, although I did not tell them at this time of the amount of work, the revision and rewriting they were going to do over the week. The second day my leaders and I formed groups.

Here I intervened to make certain that each committee was well-balanced, that a not-so-enthusiastic writer or a shy boy or girl would sit in with understanding and helpful classmates. Once groups were formed, the leader or chairperson appointed a secretary who would record attendance and write a summary on each day of the unit. The leader then collected the assigned writings and established the aim for the period, to proofread each manuscript for common errors in spelling, wrong-word selection, and sentence structure. The papers were corrected and redone in this meeting, and then each was discussed (this often flowing into the next day). Was the writer reasonably content with the piece? Could more be said on the subject? Did the writer leave his readers hanging in mid-air? In what ways could the paper be better developed? What was original in the piece, either as thought or turn of phrase or use of words? Could a thesaurus help? "Hey teacher, come over and give us a hand."

A second draft was written that night. Those few who were absent or simply had not done the work were (grudgingly perhaps) given the period to complete it. While they worked I reviewed the list of common errors submitted by each secretary. Each group decided what I should teach, and my lessons for the next two weeks were carefully tailored to their demands.

On the fourth day we pulled the grand switch. Each group traded papers until no one person was reading any paper of the original committee. During this period, which extended into the fifth day, Friday, every member read five papers, wrote down a response to each and gave this to the secretary. They then selected one paper which could be read to and discussed with the entire class. The criterion was original thinking on a challenging idea or topic. A reader was appointed and rehearsed by the group. I sat in on several of these. Eye contact, pacing, and tone were stressed, and the reader would prepare the oral rendition over the weekend. In addition, the group would prepare the discussion questions. In some cases, the original writer was called in and certain revisions made. Cooperation,

so far, had worked beautifully. Over the weekend, with no papers to correct, I prayed.

On Monday, the read-around commenced, and it continued all week. I was quite amazed at the enthusiasm they had generated, at the sudden great interest and real concern for one another's efforts. Each reader and committee had a full period for their presentation. One group led a discussion on student responsibilities to the school, a kind of in-depth look at the G.O., another examined the relationships of teenagers with their parents, and a third took on the awesome topic of teenage pregnancies and a boy's, young man's, moral responsibilities. By the end of every period each secretary had also taken notes, even of the beautifully worked-out summations of the presenting group.

The second week I began the process of evaluation. I had taken home and gone over the twenty-five papers, five from each class, and not necessarily the papers that were read. On Monday I asked each class to write and submit a process report. What did they think about the unit? Had their own writing improved, had it become communication and not merely self-expression? Had they learned while doing, while reading, listening, discussing? What more could be done to revise and improve the unit? How did they feel about a teacher's quieter role? While they wrote their responses to these, I conferred with the student writers whose papers I had read, and twenty-one of the twenty-five decided to revise for a better grade. They decided, not I.

## Letters From The Front

"The three reasons why Napoleon fell from power were the lost against Russia when Napoleon lost 4/5 of his troops. The Cotenental System failed. Napolen navy neve won against Ritin. Britain Navy was the strongest."

Look familiar? If you teach Global Studies, it probably does. We've all been dismayed at the quality of our students' writing. While the above answer to a traditional social studies question has some elements of fact, there is no doubt that it is poorly written.

Now, in terms of paragraph structure, grammar, and usage, what was learned? I think quite a lot, but not from any textbook. Often, most often, the voice and a native logic were their guides. They'd learned that communication is an exacting art; that one must carefully hunt down the right word; that a comma in the wrong place can alter the meaning of a sentence; that one should take pride in a piece of prose because it is a true mirror of the mind and soul.

The committees, of course, had decided what I was to teach in the third week of this continuing unit. Formal lessons in the avoidance of the run-on sentence, the semi-colon, the comma, and quotation followed. As our second project we wrote narratives in which quotation marks abounded. [I read them Hemingway's "The Killers" as a great example.] We continued the active listening in groups, and they learned that the human voice can catch all kinds of errors, a flaw in a sentence, or the outward drift away from the theme that unifies a paragraph.

I learned much from this unit, most importantly, that kids have a lot on their minds beside each other and sex and money. If not afraid, they'll manage to say it, and with peer compassion and understanding, not pressure, will try to say it well.

Robert E. Miller  
Norman Thomas H.S.

As a result of my participation in the Writing Teachers Consortium 1982-83 I made a concerted effort to try to upgrade students' written expression. While not claiming a total victory by any means, there certainly was some improvement. To show this, what will follow will be samples of students' writing in the Spring 1983 term in one of my Global Studies III classes.

Not all writing errors disappeared magically, but what I did find is that students consistently wrote more, more imaginatively, and to the subject under discussion. Their answers were interesting

and gave me new insights into how students internalize and conceptualize materials being taught. For all of us, it was fun!

Later in the term, the same student quoted above was asked to imagine himself a soldier in Napoleon's army on his way to Moscow in 1812. He was to write home, as soldiers have always done, describing two problems he faced. This is his response:

"Dear Mom,

We are marching to Moscow and Napoleon said we must not stop. We have no food any more. We look all around But the Russian people are burning everything. We are also trying to keep warm. If we stop or fall we have orders to shoot that person. The snow is up to our legs and our legs are blue. We are coming Home but there are grulliards troops trying to shoot us. Beaing in the French army is hard.

Say Hi to everyone for me.

I will try to get home soon.

Love, Marco P."

While the letter still contains errors, this piece of writing is much better than the initial one. The information is correct, and one can sense the student's emotional involvement. In true 1983 teenage style, he concludes with his "Say Hi to everyone for me."

To show this is not an isolated case of improvement, here are two more examples of student writing.

Student I:

- (1) "3 reasons Napoleon fell from power:  
1) Russian campaign, 2) he didn't have a good Navy, 3) countries joined against him"

(Brief and to the point; correct but not explained.)

- (2) "Dear Dad:

The Russians have been retreating for a while. They keep moving back into their land. Napoleon keeps following them deeper and deeper into their territory. Every now and then guerillas hit and run us. Our supplies are getting less and less, and the days are

getting coler and coler. I think pretty soon we will have to return and hope at least half of us make it back alive.  
(unsigned)"

Student II:

- (1) Napoleon feel from power because 1) Russia bet his army 2) Napoleon started getting people against him 3) Napoleon wanted to make his army powerful but he couldn't do. he was not doing such a great job any-more people weren't pleased with him.

- (2) "Dear Family:

Being a member of Napoleon's army during the war with Russia is bad. The Russians are leading us deeper into the country in the winter. we are all cold and have no warm clothes. The people in Russia won't give us a break the hotels are too crowed for us so we don't sleep. I just lost my best friend he was tired, cold and angry and couldn't keep up with the rest of us and he was left to die. All of us are very hungry were feel like animals looking for any kind of food to eat, anything will do. Well I have to go now.

See ya, Lynda"

Again, despite grammatical and minor historical errors, both students did better on their "letters home."

I'm quite sure that if a more scientific study were to be conducted over a longer period of time, the results would be equally conclusive; namely, that given a chance to express their viewpoints, use their imaginations more fully, "step into someone else's shoes," or just write what they think or feel about any topic studied in social studies, students' writing would continue to improve, and their understanding of historical concepts would improve as well.

All the students in this mini-study did that. They still have far to go, but they have begun, and they haven't been turned off to social studies, thinking as they often do that instead of being about real people history is only a chronology of names and dates. How dreadful to reduce so vital a study of life itself to

merely names, dates, and attempts at memorizing.

Hopefully, these students will continue to write and improve both their writing and their knowledge of history. If any of us meet again in class, I'll do my best to help them advance yet another step forward.

Finally, I feel the Writing Consortium adds a further dimension to teacher-student relationships and openness, as witnessed by the following letter, written at the end of a test paper:

"Dear Mrs. Harrison,

I feel very badly about how poorly my test was done; but my grandfather on my mother's side just died of a heart attack last Thursday and he and I were very close. I can't think straight and I don't think I will ever get over it.

I know I am not the only one with problems in this world and I know you can't

possibly pass me that would not be fair to the rest of the kids that worked so hard.

I just wanted to explain to you why I did so terrible on this test.

Thank you for your time and understanding, Allen."

If students weren't encouraged to write, to express their views, I feel this boy would never have been able to tell me why he failed this test.

Writing is more than improving or clarifying communication between teacher and student. It is a coming together in honesty and openness and friendship. Only when a bond of trust exists can students, especially today's teenagers, begin the steps to improve their English skills and the learning of other disciplines as well.

N.B.: Allen passed a make-up exam.

Marie Harrison  
Herbert H. Lehman H.S.

## New York Botanical Garden: Poets' Paradise

It was on a crisp November morning with enough bright sunlight to promise a warmer afternoon that 24 Lehman High School students and I waited impatiently for our bus. These fledgling poets were to be taken to a completely different environment for inspiration, and what better antithesis to an inner-city experience than the New York Botanical Garden? Some had been there before, perhaps on a family outing or on some botanical pursuit, but this was a first for all of us as a writing group.

Thus far this term, I had introduced a number of classical poems to sensitize the students to the beauties of expression and to develop a repertoire of poetry for many who had very limited exposure to the genre. They had practice in very structured poems, cinquains, and haiku. They had experimented with free verse. Since I had found from experience that rhymed verse for many high-schoolers approaches the level of

I love you  
Yes I do  
Let's be true  
What is new?

I steered them away from the classical form until time would permit more guidance. [Of course, Dennis Scullion's "Autumn's Splendor," below, contradicts this theory, proving that for some students you cannot discourage "doin' what comes natural."]

Asked to bring along writing materials, these novices were instructed to write as many poems as they could on any aspect of the trip--from the flora and foliage to the general landscape; or to describe any person, classmate, or stranger, as he or she appeared then; or to examine their own feelings; or to detail the whole or part of the trip itself. There were no limits as to subject matter, except that it had to come from the immediate experience. Eventually, they were to choose from among the collection five superior poems in varied forms to be handed in later. I also joined in the assignment. I have included at the end of this essay some of

the results, theirs and mine, and I think these samples are measures of the merit of the excursion.

We began in the recently restored Conservatory, whose design is aptly described in a brochure as one "to help the visitor experience the profound inspiration, aesthetic, and practical relationships that exist between plants and people." The proof of this assertion is that it took my students one and a half hours to meander through the great glass pavilion, where, along with oohing and aahing over the exhibits, they stopped often to record their impressions in poetry.

It was exhilarating to greet the brisk air and be enveloped in the noonday sun after our incubation amidst the warm, humid enclosure of the greenhouse. The gently sloping terrain extending towards rolling hills and forested groves, leading us to babbling brooks and charming bridges, seemed to speak more of a pastoral scene from a fairy tale than of a Bronx landscape. Our twenty-minute walk to the restaurant provided new subjects for writing as well as a welcomed chance for more vigorous exercise. Snuff Mill, a handsome fieldstone house beside the Bronx River, was originally built around 1840 to produce tobacco products, and it was restored as a restaurant in 1954. The weather had warmed up enough for us to lunch on the back terrace alongside the flowing river-brook, and we all had an opportunity to socialize and take stock of what we had done so far.

A few yards away was the not-to-be-missed waterfall, which many of the students had never witnessed. After admiring the fall for its own sake, we used its aura for our own; and settling down on some adjacent boulder, with the music of the rushing waters in the background, we read aloud some of the poems we had written. Though the voices were muffled and some poems needed revision, the moment was such a poignant, idyllic, precious one, that it itself approached the level of poetry. [As one poet put it: "Anything beautiful is a poem."]

We reluctantly left that halcyon site,

as the hour was getting late. To say that the aim and instructional objective of the lesson were realized would never begin to evaluate the experience. It had certainly surpassed my expectations. The end result, captured in the poetry which follows, could only be measured in this unique writing genre.

Cynthia Chase  
Herbert H. Lehman H.S.

#### AUTUMN'S SPLENDOR Dennis Scullion

As Autumn's splendor paints the days  
In rainbow colored falling leaves,  
And Nature races with the wind  
Amid the empty boughs of trees,  
Upon my face the north wind blows  
Inspired by its season's theme,  
While round my head the swirling leaves  
Give chase amid the Autumn scene.

So lush and green short days ago  
When fragrant blossoms filled the air,  
Yet Autumn's golden sunlit days,  
Show Nature's glory uncompar'd.

#### THE AUTUMN WIND Kin Ching Kong

Who says the Autumn wind  
Is heartless and cruel?  
Do you know why he blows  
Leaves off the trees?  
Because he heard,  
He heard the cry of the leaves  
Longing to return to their roots.

So, blow Autumn wind,  
So kind are you:  
When will come the time  
When you will carry me  
Off to my roots?

#### THE TACTILE TENTACLE Suzanne Finger

A giant spider  
Suspended from the ceiling;  
Soft legs reaching out  
To brush passersby  
And bewilder their senses.

## MORE THAN IDLE CHATTER

Eleni Seremetis

We sit around talking  
About certain ideas  
Personal perceptions;  
A camaraderie springs forth:  
It's real!  
It's warm!  
It's Humanity and Communication  
Between creatures who do  
Not always find it easy  
To be and act  
Themselves.

## Revision In A Bilingual Special Education Class

I have a small but diverse English class in which most of the students have a learning disability. English is their second language and their vocabulary is limited. Some of them still think in Spanish and then translate their thoughts into English. The highest reading and comprehension level is about 4.5 and the lowest is about 1.0. In their native language, however, their ability is greater.

To introduce the students to revision, three teachers volunteered to work with me and demonstrate group revision to the class. We sat in a semicircle in front of the class. I read an essay I had prepared earlier; all the others in the room read along on copies. Then the panel of teachers commented on the essay. The first technique used was active listening, where a person describes what they have heard or understood. Then the questioning technique was employed, again in a nonthreatening way, so that the writer realized whether or not her writing was clear. Finally, the other teachers made suggestions to help me improve or alter my piece.

The students write a biweekly essay. First, they write a draft which they read to their group for revision discussion. Second, they rewrite the piece to their satisfaction and turn it in for any grammatical corrections. If the student wishes he may rewrite his or her piece.

## FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

Are you a Writing Project teacher who is interested in sharing materials, lessons and ideas about writing in all curriculum areas? For those of you who teach in grades K through 6 and have not yet heard about the Elementary Writing Teachers Group, please get in touch with Ellen Shatz through the Writing Project office to find out when and where the next meeting of the group will be held. The group began meeting in December 1983 to write, talk, and plan for upcoming meetings. They met again in January to discuss the needs of elementary teachers in the Writing Project and to present new teaching ideas to each other.

The students have benefited in many ways by using the revision model explained above. Their reading has improved because of the constant practice and repetition. They are more enthusiastic about writing. Because of the sharing of ideas and suggestions, their vocabulary has improved tremendously. And the more they write the more they realize that they can write.

Helen Garcia  
Brandeis H.S.

## A Small Tribute

A few years ago, I was introduced to my first "basic skills" reading class. - (Actually, the class designation should have been "No Basic Skills" because that was a more accurate description of the students I encountered. I was given three classes of "basic skills," and all I knew about my students was that they all read below fifth grade level and were chronic behavior problems. I always believed that the more difficult students were a challenge, and so this new group did not deter me from high expectations for raising their reading levels.

Until I saw them! All three classes were similar in make-up and behavior, so that telling you about one of the classes will give you an idea about the others. About 25 students ran, jumped, and/or fell

into my room some time during our first period together. They did not come, like other classes, within the five minutes change-of-class time. Oh, two or three did--then every eight minutes or so, another few would come. Thirty-five minutes into the period, the last few entered.

There were constant interruptions of my initial presentation; there were students who had to use the bathroom; there were students who left their belongings in their rooms; there were students who didn't belong; there were students who were sick and needed the nurse immediately; there were students without paper and/or pens; there were students incapable of filling out delaney cards and/or incapable of following instructions. I had to explain everything repeatedly not only for those who had come late, but also for those who had been there all the time! By the end of the first day, I felt like punching the colleague who had talked me into this program.

I worked with these students for a whole year. I tried to gain their confidence, their friendship, and their trust. I tried everything I knew to reach them, to make the classroom environment conducive to learning to read, and to make them into better students. When June rolled around, I really was not sure about how effective I had been. Oh sure, there were some students I knew I had helped, but I felt the year had been a battle and I wasn't sure I had won it. Certainly, some students' reading scores had climbed, but I had wanted to reach all of them. I wanted them all to be successful, to like reading more and themselves better. It was the only year in my teach-

ing career that had ever come to an end without any certainty about what I had accomplished, without being sure that I loved them or that they loved me.

The day before school ended, the colleague who coordinated this "basic skills" program planned a big party for all the students and all the teachers who had participated.

The teachers were to give out awards to those students who showed improvement in skills, attitude, attendance, behavior, etc. I didn't feel like going. I was worn out. I told my colleague not to expect me; my heart wasn't in it. She pleaded, but I said "no."

I went to lunch the period that the party was given. I sat down at the lunchtable and felt guilty. I did care about those students and I belonged at their party. I ran upstairs and the party was in progress. There was plenty of food, music, and noise. Teachers were called upon to present awards and the students did quiet down to listen for their names. When my name was called, I walked into the center of the room, as others had done, and started to call out names. All of a sudden, I heard chairs being pushed aside (maybe they were going to throw them at me?) and saw the students stand up and applaud loud and long. I was overwhelmed! I really was. In the scheme of things, it was a small tribute, but it was worth a million dollars to me. I'll always remember it.

Janet Mayer  
Herbert H. Lehman H.S.

## Other Voices

I sit at my desk near the open windows. It is humid, and I'm waiting for the first bell of the new school year. The floor is waxed, green chalkboards are washed and dust-free; desk tops have been readied for this term's graffiti. Two new posters with educational cliches have replaced yellowed news clippings. The posters were tacked up

to prevent the deja vu of September but the effect is illusive. Teenagers are coming.

The wall of student lockers, the pale green file cabinet, the two oak doors wait silently for anxious new faces to rush to their seats, eager to catch every word I say. I sip my coffee from a styrofoam cup and remember that a loose translation of teacher means optimist. I finger the coins in my pocket and think of other meanings.

My room is divided in half, with a wide space down the middle to the board; no student is more than three deep. I stare at the empty spaces and begin to hear echoes of education past. I hear myself at the climax of a lesson on Macbeth's motives. A visitor is in the back, a superintendent. Suddenly, a voice full of sound announces the never-before-seen rain or snow or was it a bird. Class confirms sighting. Ordered quiet. When? It is of no significance now.

I hear other voices. This time it seems to be a brighter, sensitive student. Hand raised with an insightful question, a breakthrough in understanding, I think. I hear, "Can I go to the bathroom?" My left eye starts to twitch. I swear off coffee; I vow to put up new posters. The room seems smaller. I'm depressed, and I hear students trying the doorknobs. I stand pressed to the chalkboard so the room looks empty when they look in. I need these three minutes to myself, to think.

I review the answers that I use at the beginning of the year: "No one is allowed to go to the bathroom unless they have a doctor's note for a kidney problem." "Let me see your program. You can wait till Mrs. B's class; she's a liberal."

A replay of student responses: "You have to let me go." "I have to go." "I'll walk out."

I practice aloud: "I'm sure you do."  
"Hold your breath." "Go ahead."

I tell myself there will be no revolving bathroom door in my room. I want to be more trusting, more lenient this year, but there are louder voices--compensatory time people: "George had your pass and he said you said it was all right for him to buy cookies in the cafeteria." (The twitch is strong but steady.) "Leon demanded to use the teacher's phone." "Diane was trying to get working papers." "Leon was in the girls' gym." All with my pass.

I sincerely believed they were going to wet themselves or develop a severe neurosis if I didn't free their bladders.

A minute to showtime. I chalk my name and date on the board to steady my nerves. Another voice. Where? The walls? The closet? From all the years, all the classes comes the voice of the "what if" kid:

"Ya know, teach, you're wrong. What if someone really has to go?" A chorus of "yeahs." (I think, "What if I kill you?")

"I can tell."

"No you can't. How can you tell?"

"A real bathroomee doubles up in pain and rolls on the floor. Of course this never happens during the first or last ten minutes of the period because bathrooms are locked. School rules." Choral boos.

"You're wrong. I'm telling my mother."

"Give me your number and I'll tell her. I like parent-teacher stuff."

"No way." The bell frees me from my dementia.

The first class of the new term sweeps into the room. New clothes, notebooks, a pen or two; bright eyes, a sneer, a smile, a nervous giggle; Fonzie, Jimmie Walker and a possible vamp in leather jeans. "Salsa" and "Disco Sucks" tee-shirts take opposite sides of the room.

"My name is Mr. ... Yes, what is it?"

"Why are you winking?"

"I'm not. Yes, you by the window."

"Can I go to the bathroom?"

"No way. Take out your programs."

James Fairclough

Adlai E. Stevenson H.S.

## A Moment In Teaching

I'm not liking writing about this topic, so I'll ask myself why. I just heard somebody say behind me that the topic sounded like something from Reader's Digest. That is true, but I'm not liking the topic for other reasons, too. I've just paused about thirty seconds to figure out what those other reasons are but I haven't come up with anything.

If I were an architect would I want to write about a moment of "architecting"? Let's say I'm a writer. How would it be to write about a moment of writing? There I was, sweating at my desk under the glare of an ugly fluorescent light when this great flash came to me. I put my fountain pen to the page, and as I began to put the first letter down on the page, I had this incredible feeling. I knew it was a great moment in my writing, a moment I'll never forget.

Maybe it's the idea of the cliché that bothers me: great moments in history; great moments in music; great moments in Jerry Megna's writing. No, not just great moments in, but a great moment in. I thought I heard Sondra say at the end: "A Moment of Teaching." How's that: A Great Moment of Teaching. I walked into my class, put my briefcase down, took out a batch of papers, my notebook, a textbook, another textbook, a case that carries four pens, and an attendance book. I sat down at the desk after I mumbled good morning half-heartedly, and as I looked out at the

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I only remember his last name--Arias. He was in one of my classes my first term at Art & Design, a ninth year mixed level class. His attendance was sporadic; when he showed up he frequently rolled his eyes and lowered his head to his desk. Arias had problems with his writing and his reading. He refused to do most of the work.

I liked him. I think I liked the way he looked--kind of tall and skinny, with a moustache of that first soft face-hair teenage boys have. He wore the same jeans

sea of faces I began to feel deep in my bowels this irresistable existential tremble: this was to be My Great Moment Of Teaching. As I opened my mouth, the words came pouring out with such eloquence, with such fluency, that the class sat mesmerized, unable to take a note. I flowed, I gushed, I locuted. I stood up, gestured dramatically during significant passages and started a casual pace across the front of the room. I stopped abruptly and asked everyone to write down exactly what it was they were thinking. They all scribbled furiously and I waited a full ten minutes before I continued. They didn't stop. I asked them to halt everything and look up at me. They kept writing. When the bell rang nearly an hour later they closed their books, clicked their pens, and left the room without uttering a word to me. I thought I could figure all this out the next day.

They must have playing some kind of a prank on me. When I walked into class, they were all sitting in their seats, writing, writing without pause, writing without looking up. I tried everything: I screamed. I read from my notes. I gave a boring lecture. I read them pornographic passages from my secret journal. They kept writing and it's been like that ever since, with every class I've had. This was my great moment, and everything that has happened in my classes subsequently can be traced to it.

Jerry Megna  
Brooklyn College

and shirt every day. He didn't have a warm jacket.

This was my first teaching job in more than two years. I was working hard now, writing lessons, teaching, remembering what it was like to connect to kids.

One day I said to Arias as I came by his desk and saw him with his head down, "So you hate school. What do you like?"

"Music," he mumbled, without looking up.

Later I saw him wandering around on the first floor outside the auditorium. "Hi," I said. "Whatcha doing?"

"Nothin'. It's my lunch."

But what happened then? I don't remember. All I know is that I met him two times a week after that, period 7. We'd sneak into the auditorium together and sit on the piano bench. I brought in music books and showed him how to find middle C, where to put his hand on the keys, how to follow the notes.

This went on all term. He wasn't a talented kid or a bright kid. He didn't have a knack for music, didn't start doodling his own tunes on the keys. Our

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I see moments, not a single moment. I see myself in a writing group, sharing one of those moments when a writer's voice breaks through: Naomi, a woman in her forties in my class at Manhattan Community College, had refused to participate in a group, had handed in mainly essays copied from the newspaper and had spent most of her writing time scolding the younger students for not respecting their elders. She finally wrote a piece about her mother's life, and cried. The younger students, who had resented and disliked her, rallied around, comforted her, and told her how they had been moved by her writing.

Other moments of tears, or near-tears, in other classes: Gloria's voice shaking as she read about her teenage pregnancy, so many years ago, and the ostracism she endured because of it; my own tears, when Anne, a 10th grade student in Shoreham, read about her grandfather, whom she loved and who was dying.

Moment of laughter, too: when silent Len revealed a sharp eye and a sharper tongue in writing about shoppers at the

work was slow and hard. "What comes after C?" "What's this note?" "Play that part again." He kept trying, fascinated that his fingers could touch a piano and produce a noise.

He did one or two homeworks after that, but no miracle happened; Arias did not become a great student. The piano was our secret. It had nothing to do with English I. And it wasn't enough. He remained at school through that term and part of the next, coming to class once in a while, but usually just inhabiting the halls, a shadow in a blue jacket. He started to be absent on our piano days and finally disappeared.

Marcie Wolfe  
Writing Teachers Consortium

A and P; when quiet Kym broke into satire in her letter to the Community Journal; when Sandra wrote a funny poem--her first --and Sue and Audre and I couldn't stop laughing.

I wrote once, in some free writing shared with students in a class that was laughing and crying its way into literacy, that serious classes laugh a lot. Sue said something similar about her high school writing group: "We laugh, we kid around, we're serious, we get things done." And Suzanne Klein, in my writing group in the summer of '81, spoke of her sense of power as a writer. "For weeks I've made them laugh," she said; "yesterday I made them cry."

The moments of teaching I remember are these moments in which we are swept away by laughter or moved to tears by written language--our own or other people's. We know in our own hearts, brains, muscles, and guts the power of words to move us.

Nancy Wilson  
Lehman College

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Sometimes it really seems that all you get is a "moment" of teaching. There are all these preliminaries that lead up to the lesson. There's planning and reading and planning. And papers to fill out: weekly outlines and written plans. Then you get into the room and there's IOs and do nows and attendance. And just as you're about to start your lesson there's someone who needs a bathroom pass, and someone who left her book in her locker, and then the person with the bathroom pass returns and somebody else needs water because he's choking to death. And you figure now you can start your lesson, and you start with your motivation. And you throw out the first question and in walks the--take your choice--guidance counselor, assistant principal, principal, administrative assistant, bus pass coordinator. And you have to stop and look for a student, find your class list, give them your homeroom book, take a coverage slip, hand back the bus pass envelope. And then you say, "Where was I?" And the students look at you blankly and you look back at the board and your plan and try again.

Sometimes it really seems amazing that there's any time at all left to teach.

Suzanne Klein  
Lower East Side Prep

## The Literary Life

What is the significance of the story?  
How does the theme relate  
to your own obscure and amorphous existence?  
Does the setting of the story influence  
how the characters behave? What if  
they were naked in all that snow?  
How would you describe the author's tone?  
Is he sympathetic toward his characters  
or does he hate their guts?  
Does the main character remind you  
of anyone you know? Your uncle in Larchmont  
or maybe yourself? If so,  
how do you interact with the other characters?  
Do they resent you  
for telling the story from your point of view?  
When you fall in love  
with the skating instructor,  
an ex-icecapader, at the resort  
and plan several trysts with her  
at an undistinguished motel in Putnam County,  
is this in the best interests of the plot?  
How do you explain  
that when the story reaches an impasse  
and the characters run out of dialogue  
--just then--a raving maniac  
crashes through the quiet glow of après-ski  
with two shotgun blasts,  
miraculously killing no one  
but splattering the walls with fondue  
and inspiring the main character  
to take a new look at his life?  
Is this realistic?  
For a writing assignment, go home  
and for a week act like the main character.  
Do everything he does,  
see if you can feel  
the way he feels, see  
if the story becomes clearer to you.  
Ask yourself if there is really any difference  
between this story  
and what you call  
your own life.

Alan Devenish  
Hunter College