

New York City Writing Project NEWSLETTER

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A Note From the Editors

The irritation of doubt causes a struggle to attain a state of belief. I shall term this struggle Inquiry.... When doubt ceases, mental action on the subject comes to an end; and, if it did go on, it would be without a purpose.

C.S. Peirce

Belief and doubt, wondering what works, what doesn't, questioning why one thing runs beautifully with one class and is a disaster with another, going back to old standbys, trying new techniques—these issues remain central to inquiry. We believe in our philosophy, yet sometimes we doubt our ability to put it successfully into practice. Even when we are sure our students are learning, we are doubtful whether such success will translate into standardized assessment. In this issue of the newsletter we begin to look at how doubt and belief interact to produce new answers to old questions.

In "The Reading Mob," Nancy Mintz writes about both her difficulties and successes with reluctant readers in her seventh grade class last year. Sue Case explores both her comfort and discomfort working against tradition in her article "It Depends: Reconciling Theory and Practice." These articles reveal self-doubt and the attempts teachers make to try something new while they struggle against the old and comfortable. In Amelia Arcamone's "Writing Like Journalists," we hear how one teacher recognized that "chaos" is not necessarily an obscene word. She brings fun back into learning while questioning the stuffy "professional" attitudes of those who wonder why their students just don't write.

Two articles focus on language in the classroom. Barbara Watanabe Batton uses conversation to develop critical thinking by documenting kids' talk in the classroom, and Amanda Gulla recounts her experiences working with the Elementary Teachers Network (ETN) using the Primary Language Record (PLR) as an alternative method of assessment.

In his teaching journal, social studies teacher Michael Kilbert, reveals his fears and worries over the "English teacher in the background" censoring him as he develops his "Inquiry Project on War" While in her

article "From In-Service to Practice" Miriam Borne describes collaborating with a social studies teacher to incorporate history in an English class. Another history teacher, Matt Clayton, describes a collaborative learning technique he used in conjunction with creative writing assignments to break down boundaries between disciplines while teaching Chinese philosophies to his ninth grade global studies classes.

Linda Correnti reviews two books, *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence* by Keith Gilyard and *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* by Jonathan Kozol. Paula Murphy responds to Jane Maher's article which appeared in our last issue "Should We Guarantee Students?"

Two teachers have contributed poems: "Our Crusades" and "My German Body" by Len Van de Graaff and "The Power of Words" by Richard August. Student writers, Unjong Mun and Maria Valdez, both in Benita Daniels' classes for non-native speakers of English at Newtown High School, have contributed memoirs, the first titled "Puppy Love" and the other, "My Memoir."

Last year Carla Asher left the Institute for Literacy Studies to join the DeWitt Wallace - Reader's Digest Fund. We mark her departure with recollections and memories.

As always, thanks to our contributors, and we hope more of you will write to us here.

For a future newsletter, we are interested in articles which examine the issue of expectation. You might write about how the expected outcome for a lesson was or was not achieved and how you documented what happened, or you might examine some deep underlying assumptions that have shaped the ways you teach and expect students to learn. What are the challenges you ask students to meet and how do they answer these challenges?

On another level, we'd like to see articles dealing with the greater expectations of society at large. What impact, if any, do books such as Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* and Theodore Sizer's *Horace's Compromise* have on our classrooms? How will

the Board's decision not to rehire Chancellor Fernandez affect us? As always, we are interested in what happens in your classroom. How do these issues play a role in our changing belief systems?

Give one of us a call at the Writing Project if you'd like to discuss an idea or you aren't sure how to get your ideas down on paper. We'd love to hear from you.

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The Reading Mob

Nancy Mintz traces the development of her seventh grade class as the students grew into increasingly motivated readers. At the same time she examines her own practice and questions whether her students' new enthusiasm will carry them through the standardized reading tests.

Dear Reader,

Nancy Mintz has been teaching junior high school LA [Language Arts] for 24 years. She is currently teaching at Wagner JHS in Manhattan and is a teacher consultant for the JHS Writing and Learning Project.

The Reading Mob is a group of students that used to hate reading but now really get into their books.

These were the words written by 7-6 as an introduction to their class publication. The words are theirs and when the group chose them, I knew that the year had been successful. Up until that point I really didn't know if what went on from September to June had really worked. I took a risk and it paid off.

Let me tell you about 7-6. They were the bottom reading group, the last or next-to-last class in the 7th grade and boy, were they aware of it. Anyone who has taught in an inner city school knows about them or students just like them. These kids are trapped by their past performances in school. They are tracked at the bottom and because they can't read well, they are given all the drudge work, drill sheet after drill sheet, always the same work which they still don't learn. They are difficult to control mainly because so many are in one class. There is really no way to individualize, especially if one's class load for the year is 175 to 180 students. Teachers don't know what to do with them. How can they learn social studies or science or any other subject when they can't read the text? So many teachers survive by having students copy information off the board, a task few do well, but they do it quietly. They fail test after test until in desperation teachers create tests that are so easy that they think no one can fail them. But it's too late. By that time the kids have stopped trying and still they fail. The cycle continues and since our district has age-appropriate placement, we keep pushing them along hoping, maybe, some day they will learn.

Sometimes I think that I've found the key to working with this type of student and at other times no matter what I do, it's not good enough. There are so many variables that affect what goes on in a classroom. I'm not the only teacher who has wondered why her period one class works so much better than period three even though what's being taught is basically the same.

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When Kids Hate Reading

This past year I was lucky; for whatever reason 7-6 and I worked well together. The year before, all my methods and theories were really put to the test and nothing I did worked. It was a daily battle and I was the loser. I was reduced to tears weekly, sometimes daily, something that hadn't happened to me since my early years of teaching. Here I was, a teacher-consultant for the JHS Writing and Learning Project, working with teachers to help integrate writing as a learning tool in their classrooms, and I was failing miserably at the same task. This kind of experience is an eye opener; it knocks one's ego down to size and starts the questioning process. Maybe my colleagues were right, I thought. This work with writing was all well and good with the brighter kids, but there's no way to get the lower-tracked kids to work in groups and to write.

Because my experience with 7-5 the year before had been so problematic, I was reluctant to try the same things with 7-6. My confidence had been shaken badly. Fortunately for me, front-of-the-room teaching just doesn't fit me anymore. Although some of the same academic and emotional problems that were present in 7-5 were present here, my gut feeling was that these kids were different, especially in their attitude toward learning and their willingness to respect each other. So I took a deep breath and dove in.

It is so very difficult to chronicle what actually goes on in one's classroom on a daily basis. When a class begins to work, slowly a sense of being a part of a group develops, as well as the ability to listen to what others have to say. Students begin to comment constructively rather than negatively. Respect for each other grows, takes giant leaps forward and then moves backwards as the social life of the class interferes with the academic life of the classroom.

I believed that these kids knew a lot and needed to find the confidence to express what they knew. We did a lot of writing. Each class period started with a journal assignment. This always got them settled quickly and it helped routinize the period. They knew what was expected of them as soon as they entered the room. I gave students a guided free-writing to focus the journals but always gave them the option of writing about anything they wanted. I tried to write with the class but found things worked better if I walked around and made contact with individual students as they wrote. Sometimes a touch on the shoulder was all that was needed to let someone know that they were noticed. If someone volunteered, we would listen to a journal entry or two.

At first the class was reluctant to share, but I could always depend upon Ayeisha to read anything she had on paper. Once Ayeisha got going, others joined just to make sure she didn't get all the attention, something she was very good at doing. Some of the first writing workshop pieces evolved from those journals. Anyone who has worked with reluctant writers knows how difficult it is to get them to revise anything they have written. By constantly modelling the various types of revisions, I helped students see what was possible. They began to make changes, and their writing began to improve.

We also worked on responding to literature. We read together and used double-entry journals to write about what was happening in their books as well as their reactions to the reading. Students learned to ask questions about what was unclear and as a class we tried to answer them. I pulled books from my class library and read opening

paragraphs or chapters and tried to “sell” the book to someone. Sometimes I had takers but most of the time nobody wanted to take the books home. We began to talk about this reading thing and write about it in our journals:

“I don’t read too well by myself Ms. Mintz.”

“It’s OK when you read to us or with us but I don’t like to read by myself. It’s lonely.”

“I can’t follow the story, it doesn’t make sense.”

“There’s too much noise in my house.”

“I got better things to do than read a book.”

“They don’t write books that I like.”

“Only nerds read books.”

“They put me in this damn class and said I can’t read. I can read if I want to. I just don’t want to.”

“I hate that reading test. My hands get sweaty and I can’t think. It’s so boring.”

“I don’t know any books that leave blanks and make you guess the words.”

I had a problem here. If learning was all about reading, and they hated it so much that they wouldn’t read, how were they ever going to move out of the bottom track? If you don’t think of yourself as a reader, then you’re not one. I had to do something about this, find some way to make these kids read on their own and enjoy it. They knew that down the line was “THE TEST.” They always went into the test room knowing that they would fail and that’s just the way it was. We needed a big attitude change. They needed to feel like readers. They were beginning to feel like writers but that seemed easy in comparison to reading.

Reading with Partners

A few years prior to this one, I had experimented with reading partners, and it had been fairly successful so I decided to try it with 7-6. Having a reading partner meant two people would decide to read the same book and write each other letters about that book. They would be responsible for selecting a book, assigning pages to read, and deciding on whose turn it was to write. I spoke with the school librarian who pulled a number of books off the shelves that might be of interest to them. We also had to be sure there was more than one copy of each title. When I brought the class to the library, they had already selected their partners and appeared to be excited about the idea of writing letters. After a brief book talk, we let the kids browse and began to help them find books they might enjoy. They did not have to select from those we had pulled for them.

Some pairs were clearly mismatched, but I let it go hoping that a better reader would help pull his or her partner through. I also had a number of students whose spoken English was clearly better than their ability to read the language, and some of them chose each other as partners, while others chose native speakers. Clarice, whose reading ability was limited, was absent on the day partners were chosen. I asked her if she would work with Antonia on a very simple book. Antonia had been in this country for over two years and was just beginning to understand some of what people were saying to her. I had no idea if this pairing would work, but it certainly was worth a try. I simply needed to monitor it carefully.

Many students left the library that day with books while others still had not made their choices. After all, two people had to be satisfied with the selection.

The next day students came into class with their books. Some students had already started to read, but the majority had not even thought of it. We were going to use class time for reading and letter writing, but first we needed to set up some rules for how the class would run. I provided each student with a response folder and paper.

The folders were to remain in the room although individual papers could be brought home. The class felt that they would prefer to sit next to their partners, just in case they needed to discuss something in a letter or even do some reading aloud. I agreed to this but we needed to set up some rules so that we wouldn’t interfere with other people who wished to read silently. If a pair

decided to read aloud, they had to move to a spot away from others and they had to keep their voices down. Considering that this was a class of thirty-three students, space arrangements were not easy, yet we managed. My clothing closets were empty so there was no need to close the doors. These niches soon became places to curl up and read. We also began to use the hallway right outside my classroom if things got too noisy.

I say ‘we’ for at this time I fully expected to be reading with the kids. That’s not the way it turned out. Managing wasn’t easy. I was asking reluctant readers to spend a class period involved in silent reading. It took time to get quiet enough for us to be able to concentrate. Then there were pairs that were so mismatched that they couldn’t keep up with each other. There were passes to the library so that books could be exchanged. There were students who came to class without their books. There were absences and kids moving ahead of each other and then having to wait for a partner to catch up. I spent a lot of time moving from pair to pair talking about problems they were facing or helping them to discuss their books. I also spent a lot of time asking them to be quiet and to stay on task.

I would love to say that working in pairs was just what the doctor ordered and that it was the answer for my turned-off readers, but it wasn’t. Yet, for some students it really did work. Ayeisha and Jane quickly went through every book in the library with African-American protagonists and became very clear about what they liked in a book and what they didn’t. This partnership continued long after most of the other partnerships had been abandoned. It ended when Ayeisha decided she liked R.L. Stine’s books and Jane decided they were garbage. For other students the pairings ended more quickly. Clarice worked with Antonia on one book and then felt she would prefer to work alone as did Antonia, whose English really hadn’t advanced enough to read even the simplest of books. What really began to happen was that the partnerships ended after one or two books were read together, but the in-class reading continued. As one partnership after another died, I suggested they write their letters to me and I would answer them.

Reading logs and letters are not a new idea. I had tried it with my brightest groups for years but it had never worked perfectly. The

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“I don’t read too well by myself, Ms. Mintz.”

work load was just too much to handle. Instead of responding weekly to independent reading logs, I just barely managed to respond once or twice a marking period. The independent reading logs became a chore for my brightest groups who loved to read but hated to write.

But it did work with 7-6 because I made an effort to answer every letter as quickly as possible. I also love adolescent literature and have read a great deal of it. There were very few books being read with which I was unfamiliar, and those I quickly read. I began to know these students through their letters; I loved being able to talk directly to each of them and they liked writing to me, getting my complete attention even though it was on paper.

I realized how well our project was working when I noticed the students comparing the length of my answers to their letters. They asked me why some kids got long answers while others received shorter ones. We looked at letters that got longer answers and began to devise new ways of responding. We began to talk about their books and started to deal with problems they were having with the reading. They wrote about changes they noticed in their reading and compared reading at home with in-class reading. They started to keep a list of all the books they had read as well as the ones they were unable to finish.

Many of my students realized that they had specific tastes in books. Some of them realized that they didn't like fiction and preferred to read non-fiction. I was amazed to find out that some thought non-fiction books were not proper reading books. If they read for information, that wasn't reading. I found out that parents and teachers had given them that impression. When David's father came to see me, he was concerned that David wasn't reading. I showed him David's folder and book list and his father said, "Oh yeah, those books, I see him reading those but they're not really reading!" It took me a while to convince him. It took me a while to convince David, too.

Discovering Poetry

The class discovered poetry by accident. Tiffany was running hot and cold on reading in class. She was a volatile kid whose moods shifted from day to day. She had been taken in by an aunt who demanded a great deal from her. Tiffany was a poor reader and just couldn't match up to her aunt's expectations. She had trouble finding books that held her interest and she had trouble sitting still. One day I handed her a copy of Langston Hughes's *Panther and the Lash*.

"Why don't you take a look at these. They're short and you don't have to read them all. You can skip around and find the ones you like."

"I hate poetry Ms. Mintz."

"Give it a try. If you don't like them you can put it back but you've got to write me a letter explaining what you didn't like."

A few minutes before the bell rang Tiffany told me that Langston Hughes was prejudiced and used words like "nigger" and she didn't like it one bit.

When I told her a little about Hughes, she didn't believe me but she did ask to sign the book out. She said she wanted to check something out at home.

The next day Tiffany sidled up to me with the book and shyly told me that I was right. She had read all the poems with her grandmother and they had talked about them together. Hughes wasn't prejudiced; he was just writing about what was at that time. She had liked some of the poems very much and wanted me to read

some of them aloud to the class. She had marked the ones to read. So I read poetry to the class and we talked about the poems. Later that day one of my colleagues told me that Tiffany had told her that she had finished a book of beautiful poems.

All of a sudden everyone wanted to read poetry books. I didn't have very many on the shelves of my library but some

money had been available to buy books and I was waiting for an order of about 20 poetry books to arrive. In the meantime, we used Mel Gusso's *Class Dismissed*, Shel Silverstein's *A Light In The Attic*, Richard Brautigan's *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle* and assorted anthologies of poetry that I had collected over the years. They read independently, sharing with a partner when a particular poem struck them. Sometimes they would ask me to read a poem aloud. Sometimes we would talk about the poem and sometimes we just let it be. They began returning from the school library with poetry books.

New Books

The day the new books arrived I don't know who was more excited, them or me. I had picked the books up from the main office right before 7-6 was scheduled for class and was opening the box when they entered the room. I hadn't even gotten a chance to really look at the books. As soon as the class got settled, I started to show them the books. Their spines were still crinkly and stiff. I can still see the way I caressed each book as I took it out and opened a page or two to read a poem aloud and show an illustration. After each one, a hand went up.

"I want that one."

"No, I want that one. You take the other one."

Before I knew it, all the books were out and in the hands of the kids—all of those crinkly new spines being bent and used before I even got a chance myself. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. So I just watched and listened, and the kids handled the books gently and with respect. They moved around the room leaning over each other and reading poems aloud, calling others over when they really found a great poem or calling me over to talk or just to listen. What a day. By the time they left the room, not one book was left in the class. They had never even made it to the shelf. I feared for the life of my new books, but I didn't have to worry. The kids treated those books like newborn infants. They read them and returned them promptly because they realized that others wanted to read them. Most of all, we had fun with them.

If they read for information, that wasn't reading.

The Reading Test

The reading test was getting closer and I felt guilty because I wasn't doing Cloze practice with them. We made a deal. We would read independently for three days and do Cloze for two. That lasted one week. On Thursday of week two I handed out the Cloze practice books. They groaned and someone said, "Please Ms. Mintz, can't we just read our books. This is so boring and I'm at a really good part right now." I just looked at them, shrugged and said, "OK." I had letters to answer and students to talk to and Cloze practice was boring for me too. But this just compounded my guilt. I had given up everything to get these guys reading. What if they didn't score well on that blasted test? What if a parent objected and said I hadn't taught anything to their kid this year? What if it wasn't working? My gut was telling me it was. Amanda, who had written in her last letter that she thought she had really gotten this reading thing down, was telling me it was working, but what if the test proved to be too much for them?

A week before the exam, we began to spend time talking about the test and how it made them feel. What went on in their minds before the exam? While they were taking it? At what point did they start to turn off and get discouraged? We talked about what they could do to help themselves when that happened. But most of all we talked about the fact that they had become readers. We compared the number of books we had read this year to previous years; we talked about how they had specific likes and dislikes in books and could talk about them with other people. They called themselves readers, and they didn't care if the test said they were or not. They knew they were readers. The day before the test they left my room chanting, "I'm a reader and I know it." They also knew that the next day I would proctor the last period of the exam. Since the DRP (Degrees of Reading Power) is an untimed exam, if they didn't finish, I would let them stay another period if they still needed more time.

Just a few students stayed a full extra period, but their body language and their level of concentration told me they were handling it well. Nobody told me it was easy, a response I usually got from the poorest readers in previous years.

Now there was nothing to do but wait. We kept reading and writing letters. Finally the class decided to put together a publication of selected letters and responses. We brainstormed a title, called ourselves *The Reading Mob*, and got busy selecting and revising our best letters. Finally the scores came in. I tried telling myself that it didn't matter whether they had improved or not on this test. But it did matter because if they didn't score above a certain mid-unit, they would remain on the bottom. Although some of the kids didn't score high enough to get them out of the bottom track, all of them increased their scores, many of them by at least 20 points.

So what we did that year together was worth it. We got to know and respect each other, and we learned a great deal. My hope is that they really do believe they are readers and will continue to read without my support. I am realistic enough to realize that some of them will revert back to old habits, that all those years of being labeled and poorly taught can't be reversed in a year, yet I'm hoping that many of them are truly on their way.

Nancy Mintz
JHS 165M

It Depends: Reconciling Theory and Practice

Last spring Sue Case participated in the New York City Writing Project coordinators' seminar. This past summer she coordinated the Open Summer Institute for the Project, her first course. Here she explores her doubts and beliefs about practice and theory as she moves from job to job, and collegial community to collegial community.

After teaching in Brookline High School for almost thirty years, I moved to the New York area where I joined the New York City Writing Project and began to look for teaching jobs. The experience of change has solidified many of my beliefs about education; at the same time, it has made me think about why it is sometimes so hard to follow those beliefs.

I have always used an "open" approach and lots of writing. When I have given quizzes or right-answer assignments, it has been in the context of exploration and discovery. Still, even with years of experience, at times I have felt driven to use methods that seem contrary to my beliefs. I have come to believe that these adaptations are a necessary part of what happens when theory is put into practice.

More than fifteen years ago, in Brookline High School's in-house publication, I reported a conversation with a colleague in which I said,

I don't have a thing, a philosophy, an answer that will help people learn how to teach. I don't believe in correcting papers for just one mistake, and I don't not believe in correcting papers for just one mistake. It depends. I mostly don't teach thesis statements as a way of organizing papers, but sometimes I do. One thing I do believe in: I believe in helping students feel good about what they do; I believe in encouraging them. On the other hand, sometimes it seems more important to give them some good hard criticism.

It depends. At that time my philosophy grew out of uncertainty as much as conviction. My basic approach was to look for ways to engage students' minds and move them to become actively involved in their own education. Most of my writing assignments asked for personal responses; my discussion questions invited exploration and openness; there were always elements of choice. Even so, I was not always able to teach the way I wanted, and I envied teachers who seemed centered in a particular philosophy.

My last year in Brookline, I taught a small group of juniors — including white, Asian, and African-American students. They arrived in the classroom full of energy and punch. Only two of them brought any books or materials. Within five minutes, four of them were almost asleep; one had asked me twice if I would pass him if he came to every class; and I repeatedly had to ask two of them to sit down. I learned that day that most students were making up an English course they had failed. They were consistently inattentive during class, and their responses to open-ended questions consisted of a few words or phrases. Because they would not work unless they

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"had to," I incorporated reading quizzes and questions at the end of a chapter into the curriculum. They needed success. This return to a tighter structure provided a framework within which I tried to help them connect personally with the work and to develop their own sense of themselves and their thinking. Writing assignments and questions inviting personal opinions and responses were embedded in what I did, but most of the work was traditional, some of it in the worst sense.

I often wondered if a more consistently traditional teacher or a more determinedly radical one might be better for this group, but I was basically confident. I provided a familiar structure that students knew how to handle. The more personal and less traditional assignments I gave often made them uneasy or rebellious. Writing had bad associations for most of them, so that they were discouraged rather than helped by expressive and open-ended assignments. It seemed important to listen to them as I tried to move them towards greater commitment to their education and new confidence in their thinking, and as I tried to help them with their skills. At this time, in Brookline, I was surrounded by colleagues who helped me assess and reassess what I was doing, and I was in a community of students, teachers, and parents who valued my thinking.

The New Rochelle Juniors

When I moved from Brookline to the New York area, I brought with me this sense of comfort with the tension between traditional approaches to education and my ideal vision. The summer after we moved, I participated in a Writing Project summer institute, and believed I was gaining insights into ways of relying less on the kinds of traditional assignments that suggest right answers and inhibit independent and critical thinking, even in difficult classes.

Then I started teaching in New Rochelle. I faced an eleventh grade academic class that met the last period of the day. Except for one young man with a loud voice and visible challenge in his eyes and behavior, students came in watchful, obedient, and a little wary. There was an even mix of male and female, white and minority students (Latino, African-American, and one Asian). I began with a very short story; then gave them ten minutes to respond to it. They could write anything they wanted, and there were three suggestions available to them as well. The class became restless and questioning, many asserting that they had nothing to say. Others began shouting, "Just shut up and do it." I was (or tried to be) reassuring and insistent. When they finally settled down they wrote for at most three minutes, and when I collected the papers, I found none that reflected any sort of personal engagement or thinking.

I persisted for several weeks in teaching them how to do this writing. Meanwhile, the behavior in the class grew worse, and the writing didn't get any better. The class became almost evenly divided between students who did whatever they were told, and

those who did very little.

I responded the same way I had responded to the class in Brookline: I offered highly structured traditional activities, and I struggled to engage the disruptive students. I succeeded in getting the class to be more orderly and to get more work from most of the students. But I was very uncomfortable with what I was doing and with what the students were doing. Although they were working better, their minds were not engaged. They all liked vocabulary lessons the best, and they continued to hate writing. Teaching these students felt very different from teaching the students in Brookline because I couldn't find a balance between what I thought they needed and what they would do. They were sunk in passivity, and I felt trapped in mind-numbing traditional methods. Furthermore, I was alone with the problem. Most teachers in my school seemed to rely on traditional methods, and many felt angry at their students for not learning. I was no longer in a community where my thinking was acknowledged and valued.

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The Writing Project Courses

In February, I began the coordinators' course where I heard stories of classrooms like my own and worse. Still, people presented lessons that opened up rather than closed down thinking, and they talked of their students with respect. I listened to success stories that made me feel both guilty and jealous, and at the same time renewed my hope. Keeping the teaching journal and being in the coordinators' course helped me focus on the issues I thought were important. I began to make changes in the curriculum giving a lot of class time for reading, and I also reintroduced response writing in that context. I introduced free-writing at the beginning of the period. Now that I felt more confident, I was able to be insistent and directive. Although the class continued to be difficult to manage, most of the students became more engaged in their work, and much more responsive to me and to each other. All of them became more comfortable with writing.

I thought, with the help of the Writing Project, that I had regained my sense of priorities. Once again I was comfortable with my uncertainties. This past summer I taught a summer institute with a full and confident sense of commitment to all of the methods we presented, and with the belief that these methods would help teachers overcome difficulties with reluctant students.

The Edgemont Seventh Graders

However, in September I began teaching a seventh grade class in Edgemont, and my doubts returned in full force. I had been told that the students would probably be scared and docile at first; there would be time to establish my routines and get to know them. My group banged open the door and flew into the room, yelling at each other with great excitement about their courses and teachers, and

recalling sixth-grade experiences at the top of their lungs. The tone was wonderfully happy and enthusiastic, and on that day I didn't have trouble dealing with it. Almost immediately, however, things became more difficult: when I gave an assignment, six or seven hands would go up—"How will you grade this?" "Should we write in sentences?" "How many sentences?" "Is this kind of paper OK?" "May I go to the nurse?" "I don't understand what to do." "Is this due at the end of the period?" I couldn't give assignments, I couldn't give back papers, I couldn't ask open-ended questions without opening the door to chaos.

In order to establish a learning environment, I have had to resort to rules that are more authoritarian than I like: the desks are in rows and students are not allowed to leave the room. Students do some structured, factual activities, and I am unable to ask truly open-ended questions to introduce discussions. However, this time around, the compromises have been easier for me. I am still envious of people who operate with a philosophy that allows them to be more consistent, but I am no longer alone. I am supported by my associates at the Writing Project and my colleagues in Edgemont. I have become much clearer that the central issue is whether students are reading, writing, and engaging their minds; everything I do is directed towards accomplishing that.

Friends of mine are immediately able to introduce lessons which are radically different from what students are used to; I do better starting with what's familiar to students. Lessons designed to help students learn facts, engage in analysis, or understand patterns of thought are not in themselves a compromise, and have been for me a way to begin to change the way my students approach learning. When my students feel secure, I am able to help them bring thoughtfulness and critical thinking to the work they do. Once they trust their own thinking, traditional lessons gain a new kind of value, and students are also able to accept open-ended assignments that help them explore issues and ideas in greater depth. With or without the desks in rows, I am always looking for what will help the students learn and think, but I can't be sure what the particular lessons and structures will be. It depends.

Sue Case
Edgemont Jr./Sr. HS

Writing Like Journalists

Amelia Arcamone worked at the New York Post for eight years. This article describes what she learned as a journalist about writing and how she took that learning into her classroom.

Let's back up a few years to the early 1980s because there's something to learn about teaching — and letting writers be — from the old city room at the *New York Post*. That's where I learned to research, interview, and write for a million people. That was before the South Street Seaport was built and before the *New York Post* realized they had to cater to a new yuppie readership. In short, back then, the city room was wild.

It was a factory-looking nightmare setting with grey walls, unidentifiable wires cascading from ceilings and twirling out of poles to suddenly zap a chair that was rolling its passenger towards a desk-top computer. There were never enough chairs, a fact that always made an impression on people who visited the city room to write about our achievements. So we had some very unprofessional fights over who got to sit in the chairs, the victors wheeling them about the wired-up room, catching a few snakes that pulled the electric plugs out of some very well-written exclusives. As you can imagine, there was always a lot of noise in the city room with the fights, ringing phones, and intense interviews.

Young people from journalism school came here, saw the chaos, and left. How could someone like that cover a story of, say, a collapsed building with bleeding bodies and crazily-angled firetrucks?

In the time before the carpet, we arrived for work by bike, skateboard, and roller skates, and didn't dismount from the wheels until we reached a telephone, computer terminal or a chair. The only decoration on the wall was a hitchhiker's sign that read: "PICK ME UP, I'M A POST REPORTER." The owner of that sign once mooned his colleague when he was accused of stealing a sandwich from the communal refrigerator.

When the *Daily News* ran that ad campaign proclaiming how much fun it must be to work for that "other" daily, we were having food fights. The city editor was once spotted hunched over a lead story with lettuce on top of his head.

In all the time I worked at the *Post*, we could never figure out who was in charge. Al Whitney, who used to be the editor when he worked the lobster shift wore those glasses with eyes that bobbed on springs. One night, the FBI asked a copy person to take them to the "leader," and they were brought to Al.

My First Day on the Job

I started to work at the *Post* in the fall of 1980, after a few years spread between a small weekly and a trade publication. Before going up to the fourth floor of 210 South Street, I stopped at a doughnut shop and ate one-half dozen to weigh down my fears. Preparing to walk into the heart of "the fastest growing newspaper," which then had a circulation of 700,000 and would soon peak at a million, I expected an army's worth of discipline. I expected absolute silence, professionalism, maturity, and order. And I was

Continued ...

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willing to sacrifice my spirit for a writer's glory. But when I went upstairs I immediately felt — at home.

Early on, I used to sweat over my leads, demand complete silence, and write stiff copy. The first story I wrote came from a wire copy that stuck to my elbow. Steve Dunleavy, the city editor at the time, was at the desk. He always liked to give new people a chance. Bobby Sands was on a hunger strike to protest "the violation of human rights by Northern Ireland." I was scared. Then I saw two of my colleagues having a water pistol fight, and my story flowed.

We danced, we threw paper balls, and we stuck signs on each other's backs beginning with KICK ME and leading to the unspeakable. Nothing and no one was sacred or supreme. Peter Faris was probably the closest to being our disciplinarian, since as managing editor he approved promotions and expense sheets. To prove it, someone pasted a sign to his back: "I'm the Big Wheel around here." It's no wonder that the City Room was also called The Sand Box.

Fun, puns, and practical jokes helped us survive. We knew that if we took ourselves too seriously, we might realize we were tap dancing in front of a million people, and we could no longer do the impossible. Anne E. Murray wrote a history of the Beatles in twenty minutes on the night John Lennon was shot, an hour before the first edition was to roll. The *Post* printed stories, headlines, photos seven times a day. In this rush, accuracy was required because lawsuits and credibility were always at stake. If we thought too much about it, if we became aware of the clock, the blank page, writers' block, the audience, reputations, it was all over. When "none were charged with armed robbery" was printed as "some were charged with armed robbery," everyone who touched that story felt the sting.

Then they built the South Street Seaport and the carpet got rolled out in the City Room. The walls were painted, and the wires were tucked in place. The memos went on the bulletin board which said cigarettes could not be ground into the carpet and we could not write on the walls. We all had chairs in which to sit. Rupert Murdoch was told he could not own both broadcast and print media because he was a foreigner, and the FCC wouldn't allow it. Even after he became a citizen and we called him Citizen Murdoch, things felt grim. We knew we would soon be sold and were being tamed for the market. The new furnishings were just the first stage. Our environment began to look like the guts of a bank. Conversation dividers were added and the noise was muffled. Roller skates were traded for skirts and high heels. The reporter who traded his moon for a sandwich was the last to go down. He put a tack on the wall, drew a hook, and hung up his coat. Everyone cheered. But we knew it was the end. Someone put a sign on my back: "I want to go back to teaching." Soon after, I capped eight years at the *Post* and went into the class.

The Classroom

I found absolute silence, professionalism, maturity, and order. There were some classrooms where students sat in rows and were not allowed to talk to one another. In these quiet, orderly classrooms, teachers were surprised that their students couldn't "write" when they didn't even know each other's names.

When I took a workshop in cooperative education, I was surprised that teachers had to be sold on the idea of writers working in groups. The biggest fear seemed to be a "loss of control" of the classroom or that the students might talk in groups about things they are not assigned to discuss — time OFF TASK.

But if the genesis of language springs from group living and shared experiences that form a context for ideas, then my students must be allowed to speak to one another—just as they did at the *Post*. There are no food fights, bikes, skateboards, or eyes bobbing on springs in my classroom, but there is a sense of community. There are circles of conversations and circles of friends and slowly the circles expand into a safe environment for reading and sharing personal and sensitive writing out loud. Poetry readings are spontaneous.

One student wrote in her journal that she likes the class because "sometimes it's noisy and sometimes we are serious." Another said that the class is made of students from many different ethnic origins. Now I know what the group in the back has been discussing. This is a writers' environment.

Having worked for so long in a place where no one was really "in charge," I sometimes feel uncomfortable playing my serious teacher role and start to feel for the sign: "I'm the Big Wheel around here" across my back. In such times I allow a student to conduct the class. When the class was matching words and their definitions on the board, I asked a reluctant student to take my place. "It's easy," I said, "just ask them to give you the answers." Without me up front, there were some excellent debates about shades of meaning when the teacher-student came across two possible words for one definition. It's easy to get someone to play teacher when doing group work because my replacement simply asks the speaker of each group for the response.

It takes a lot more energy to teach in a classroom that is not formal. The students want individualized attention when the teacher leaves the front of the room. But in the five classes in which I am currently teaching, I'm getting the best writing from the noisiest class. This is reminiscent of the one-to-one editor/reporter relationship.

There are many other applications from the newspaper to the classroom. Students revise their formal papers until perfect. At this stage, they also write informal papers, like journals, just to continue the flow of written communication.

If Anne E. Murray can write a history of the Beatles in twenty minutes, or if an editor can give a fledgling reporter a small camera with instructions to photograph Billy Joel's wedding reception, I can ask my students to work from an American Literature book that's usually reserved for the "honors" classes. Even my "transitional" students work through the tough discussion questions with their groups.

If a student writes an excellent introduction to a report, I'll write nearby: "Show this to _____ because she had trouble with this part." When my classes become too quiet, I know the work is too easy. And if they say: "We can't do that," I tell them great adventure stories of people who had fun doing the impossible.

Amelia Arcamone
Louis D. Brandeis HS

The Itchiness of Talk

Barbara Watanabe Batton has been teaching elementary school for over twenty-five years. Currently she is the field-based co-director of the Elementary Teachers Network. In this article she takes a close look at talk in her classroom.

- Mike: You put lotion on chicken pox. Lotion is lotion.
 Victor: You know, that pink stuff...
 Jamal: 'Cause the chicken pox itch.
 LeShawn: There's this stuff you put on chicken pox...
 Victor: Yup, it's pink...it stinks.
 LeShawn: And it makes your legs white...
 Mike: That's what you put on chicken pox...
 Jamal: You said you don't put lotion...
 Mike: No, I didn't!
 Jamal: Yes, you did!
 Mike: No, I didn't!
 Jamal: Yes, you did!!
 Mike: O.K., I did...are you happy now? (he laughs sheepishly)
 Victor: You all fighting over that?
 Mike: (laughs, pauses) Ooooo!! (reading book cover)
 You know when you've got an itch—in your nerves—when somebody bothers your nerves? I'm writing "nervous" down...
 Victor: It's 10:05.
 Jamal: (putting his hand behind Victor's head, as if to hit him) 10:05, my butt! Mrs. Batton, do alcohol stop itching?
 Ms. Batton: What do you think?

The above snippet of talk is part of a conversation which took place during reading group time in my fifth grade class last December. Those in the reading group were six students (three boys and three girls), who were brainstorming together about the word itch, as a prelude to their reading the book, *Isabelle the Itch*, by Constance Greene. I collected this talk from my perch on the edge of one reading group, in the role of teacher-researcher—part participant, part eavesdropper, fulltime kidwatcher.

Collecting a chunk of talk was the homework assignment for the twenty-five teachers in our Elementary Teachers Network (ETN) study group at Lehman College. We had all completed the initial ETN summer '91 seminar and were beginning to use the Primary Language Record (PLR) in our classrooms. Developed by teachers in London inner city schools, the PLR is a framework that informs teacher practice by documenting the language and literacy development of students. Utilizing both parent and child as knowledgeable partners in the child's literacy history, the PLR focuses on observing and recording samples of the child's reading, writing, talking and listening. Talking/listening was our initial focus, mainly because we all felt this was the most often neglected and undocumented aspect of language and literacy development within the classroom setting.

As a novice to using the PLR, I had chosen to observe and document just three of my students. Angela was one of them. I'd met Angela two years before when she was in third grade, and I was her teacher in a remedial reading pullout program for one period a day. She seemed very quiet and passive then, rarely speaking, even within our small reading group setting. It was for this reason that I selected her. I wanted to find out more about Angela by watching her through the lens of the PLR.

Angela was one of the three girls in the reading group from which I collected talk. The members in this particular reading group were struggling to get along with each other. The class had read several books together prior to breaking up into smaller groups. Reader response through literature logs had become a common practice, but responding to literature through negotiated talk was unfamiliar territory—for the group Angela was a part of, and for myself as a teacher as well. While I've used reading groups many times in my twenty-plus years as an elementary school teacher, I was more determined than ever this past school year to value student voices in response and discussion as readers, writers, and critical thinkers. My plan and hope was that by stepping back, I would not only be able to see and hear more of what students could/would do, but that at the same time, somehow the students themselves would become more engaged within an explicitly social context for learning. So I typed up the chunk of talk, which was a struggle to jot down verbatim, and took copies of it to our next ETN study group.

We looked at this talk sample, using the Review of Work process (developed by Patricia Carini at the Prospect School in Vermont) to help us describe what had been said. First we read the talk aloud, taking the children's parts. Then we went around the

Reader response through literature logs had become a common practice, but responding to literature through negotiated talk was unfamiliar territory. . . .

room, giving overall, general impressions, and targeting specifics about what we noticed in the talk. In this way, certain themes emerged. We noticed how the three boys in the group dominated the talk; how one boy was the only one to continuously ask questions of me; how another grappled to remember a particular lotion used to stop itching (Caladryl) and did remember, long after the others had stopped thinking about the lotion; and how only one student reached beyond a literal meaning for itch, speculating that itch might have something to do with "an itch in your nerves." We also noticed that each of the students took on different roles and stances within the talk, and that the three girls were generally quieter. Even so, all six students freely contributed and collaborated together.

Continued . . .

After three go-rounds of describing and summarizing what we noticed in the talk sample, the study group offered some recommendations, like how the group might function more cooperatively, and which of the students might benefit from being paired together at times. The whole experience reminded me of just how valuable the Review of Work process can be. At some point in our discussion, I decided to try and bring this same chunk of talk back to my group of six students, share my study group experience with them, and see what would happen.

It wasn't until a few weeks later, after Christmas vacation, that I was able to sit down and take time to listen to the six students talking about their "talk." They'd received copies of the typed-out chunk of talk and had commented enthusiastically about it, all of them feeling rather self-important to have been quoted on paper. In fact, they were rather amazed at just seeing their talk, their very words, validated by print. After we reread the talk out loud, taking our same parts, I asked the six students to tell what they noticed. The following is a chunk of what was said:

- Victor: People laughed. People are helping each other and stuff...
- LeShawn: People...they argued a lot.
- Tanisha: It was funny and you put every word that we said down.
- Victor: Yeah, except the roaches' part...
- Tanisha: And everybody answered each other's questions—and Mike did too!
- Angela: Mike and Victor talked the most, and I think they have big mouths!
- Mike: I talked the most, and I'm happy about it!
- Victor: How about Jamal? Jamal talked the most too.
- Mike: Every time I talked, Jamal or Victor was next to me. Look, look...it's true! 'Cause, look!
- Victor: I know, man...
(Jamal walks in and joins the group)
He come all late...
- Ms. Batton: If they talked the most, then who talked the least?
(Tanisha, Angela, and LeShawn raise their hands)
- Tanisha: The girls hardly didn't talk that much...
- Mike: It was a boys' conversation...it's like three boys talking to each other. The girls you hardly notice...
- Ms. Batton: How does that make you girls feel?
- Tanisha: Like the girls should have talked more...we should do it over.
- Mike: It was like we were talking to ourselves...
- Jamal: Yeah, they was all quiet...
- Victor: Talk about dresses...
- Tanisha: How do you know what we girls know about

what. . . It's like he's trying to say girls can only talk about dresses.

What's interesting to note in the follow-up discussion above is that while Angela was the quietest in the initial conversation about

itch, she readily speaks up about the boys with "big mouths" in this talk. Either Angela now felt more comfortable about sharing her thoughts with the group, is simply more of a listener than a talker, or is someone who chooses to speak up when she feels it matters—not just to talk for talk's sake, or to get attention. Since I'd been

observing Angela closely all year using the PLR, I had evidence which suggested that all of the above was true. In the discussion, the boys again try to dominate the talk, but this time the girls speak up more freely and refuse to be pigeon-holed. More important, perhaps, is the fact that by allowing the students to see their collected talk in printed form and use it for discussion, time itself was given for reflection, self-assessment, and even metacognition, all of which are rarely made room for in a given school day.

I'm not about to suggest that we elementary school teachers can realistically collect this amount of talk on a regular basis while orchestrating the myriad of things we do in our classrooms. But I think it can be done at least a few times a year and used to help both ourselves and our students notice and reflect on what's going on within the social contexts in our classrooms: small groups, pairs, or even the whole class setting. Moreover, working collectively with both my ETN colleagues and my students to describe what we saw in a piece of talk has helped me to view talk itself with more respect. It has given me new resolve to assess children's work through observation and sampling and continue to document as my students work and talk together.

Shortly after the talk sample experience, something happened that confirmed my resolve to extend the opportunity for talk in the class. This same reading group of six (described above) wanted to forego quiet reading time and just talk to each other instead. Sound familiar? I was suspicious of their motives at first, but I'd brought in new clipboards that day, and the children spotted them. It was Tanisha who asked me: "Ms. Batton, could we use the clipboards and interview each other about our choice books?" Gradually, handheld clipboard chats became very popular. Purposeful and meaningful talk within a generous learning community had begun to take over my classroom!

Over the years, the classes I've taught have always made room for real-life and political issues of concern. Racism, war, oppression, injustice, violence, drugs, abuse, homelessness—are all themes that resonate and become embedded within our shared territory throughout a school year. But something else happened in early February that was unexpected and bears examining.

Angela's group of six was reading *Freedom Train* by Dorothy Sterling. One day, during quiet reading time, Angela came up to me and asked: "Ms. Batton, do you think the writer of this book was

This time the girls speak up more freely and refuse to be pigeon-holed.

white?" I gulped back my amazement and replied, "Why do you ask?" She showed me a passage from the book (p. 39) where Harriet Tubman is described: "She was not beautiful. Her hair was short and crinkly, her mouth was large, her heavy-lidded eyes the blackest black." Excitedly I asked Angela if she'd shown this to any others in the group. She was way ahead of me. "Yes," she replied, "that's why I came up to ask you about it because we'd been talking about it."

I rushed over to the group, sat down, and we all proceeded to look at the text, carefully rereading the whole passage. I asked the group why they thought the writer might be a white person. Angela said, "Because she didn't think Harriet was beautiful, and we know that some white people think black people are ugly." "That's true," I said, "but does that mean all black people are beautiful? The writer doesn't say Harriet was ugly, just not beautiful." They seemed a bit confused. We went on looking at the text. The book continued to describe Harriet: "Despite her plain appearance, there was a magnetic quality about Harriet." We discussed what 'plain-looking' might mean. Angela said it was "when you look like everyone else." We agreed, and I asked, "So then what is beauty?" "Beauty is when you look different than other people," Victor replied, and we tried to decide what that meant. "Who decides what beauty is? What does Walt Disney say about beauty?" I asked. We talked about who is considered beautiful in *Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. I pointed out how all the beauties in those films are white, and most have "blond hair, blue eyes, and skinny bodies." The boys laughed at that. "Yeah," they all agreed. "But then where does that leave us? Are there any black beauties in most movies?" I probed further. "And when is the last time you saw any Asian beauties?" I asked them. "I wasn't in any of those films either. How do you think that made me feel when growing up?" I am a third generation Japanese-American.

Then Angela surprised me again. She matter-of-factly said: "Ms. Batton, my brother told me that the first Statue of Liberty had dreadlocks." I was thrilled—both by her statement and that I could verify what she'd said. Only a few weeks earlier, I'd heard this same information myself while listening to a tape of the widely-publicized speech given in Albany last summer by Dr. Leonard Jeffries of CCNY. In the speech, Jeffries mentions how Bartholdi, the French sculptor of the Statue of Liberty, originally wanted an African woman in chains to be his model for the Statue. The idea was rejected. Subsequently, a white woman holding the torch and book became the Statue as we know it today.

Angela had learned this information from an older brother, a student at CCNY. I was later to discover when interviewing Angela's mother for her PLR just how much of a role this brother plays in her literacy development. Her mother told me of the many hours they spend talking together. Angela's mother also shared with me how both Spanish and Garifuna, an African-derived dialect

learned in their native country of Honduras, are spoken in the home.

A part of me was totally amazed we had this discussion at all. "Do you think the writer of this book was white?" It seemed I'd been waiting my entire teaching career for such a question. Critical thinking rising to the surface independent of any teacher-directed agenda. Wow!

In retrospect, I would argue that Angela's question did not happen totally by accident or as an anomaly within the life of our classroom community. Rather, I see now that it came about as the cumulative result of two things happening concurrently in the classroom:

1) thought-provoking, political issues were established as part of our on-going classroom conversation. When such issues are viewed as important and always addressable, a context is created and a collective memory can be built from the journey of the classroom's shared experiences that gives permission for political questions to be raised and examined at any time.

2) the talk of students as a vehicle for learning was validated and encouraged by my kidwatching, recording, and documenting of talking/listening samples as part of my PLR work. In retrospect, I realize now that by encouraging talking and questioning in this way, students like Angela were given the room to have

an individual voice in the class.

The combination in our classroom of talk as a social construct for learning and the omnipresence of political dialogue empowered Angela and others to speak up. Carol Edelsky, Bess Altwerger, and Barbara Flores address this in the following way:

The whole language theoretical premise underlying which topics are pursued and how they are treated is All knowledge is socially constructed. Therefore all knowing is political. In an effort to promote critical literacy and thus to help children learn to read the world, not only the word (Shor & Freire 1987), teachers who work with theme cycles try—no matter whether the topic is overtly 'political' or not—to show how the topic is related to other more general questions...They know that not making connections is as political as making connections (Edelsky, Altwerger, and Flores, *Whole Language, What's the Difference?*, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1991).

Angela, Tanisha, LeShawn, Mike, Victor, and Jamal (the six members of the reading group) all knew this, and trusted that I and the others in our classroom would take seriously their matters of concern. So I guess what I've been discovering—in the midst of looking at talk—is what had to happen in my classroom for Angela to ask her critically thoughtful question, and, even before that, what had to happen for me to hear that question. And I've learned that when talk itself is valued in a classroom alive with interaction through many contexts, and coheres to on-going and meaningful conversation, the literacy habit of critical thinking won't be far behind.

Barbara Watanabe Batton
Elementary Teachers Network

*It seemed I'd been waiting
my entire teaching career
for such a question.*

Elementary Teachers Network: One Teacher's Journey

The Elementary Teachers Network (ETN) is a diverse group of New York City teachers who came together to learn new ways of assessing the children we teach. The network began at Lehman College, under the auspices of the Institute for Literacy Studies. Amanda Nicole Gulla is a member of the ETN and a first grade teacher at P.S. 26 on the U.S. Coast Guard base on Governor's Island, New York, part of Community School District 2. In her article she discusses the use of the Primary Language Record (PLR) and Descriptive Review as alternate means of assessment.

As I was ferrying to work on the picturesque military island on which I teach, a colleague of mine commented, "This whole language stuff is just another trend. Believe me, I've been around over twenty years. I give it maybe five years until they come up with the next thing."

We have all been exposed to a raft of "teacher-proof curricula" and rigidly scripted lesson plans. These are usually designed by so-called experts, who have spent little or no time in an actual classroom. Until recently virtually the only method of assessment that has been given official credence has been standardized testing. This is indicative of a lack of trust in the ability of teachers, parents, and students to shape a meaningful curriculum with an effective means of assessment, but those of us who are with children every day, and who come to know their personalities, their strengths, and their needs know how painfully inadequate these tests can be. The sum total of a child's literacy and numeracy simply cannot be reduced to numbers on a pressure-sensitive label. Okay. Enough said. So what do we do about it? Clearly, we must find more informative ways of assessing children's abilities and skills.

In the summer of 1991, the Institute for Literacy Studies offered a course in alternative assessment methods for elementary school teachers. Although I was new to the primary school scene, I had an instinctive distrust of the cut and dried numbers of traditional assessment tools used to define children's ability levels. What interested me was the thought that a group of like-minded people would join me in questioning traditional assessment and that we would work to develop new tools for articulating our observations of what children can do. What happened in that alternative assessment course was a natural introduction to the type of classroom we want for our children, one that reflects a pedagogy informed by alternative assessment. As we sat on the floor and read and listened to each other, we came to realize that this atmosphere was an integral part of setting the right tone for such an experience.

The PLR—a Vehicle for Growth and Learning

Developed by the Center for Language in Primary Education in London, the Primary Language Record (PLR) is a detailed record of a child's reading, writing, and language used both in school and at

home. Teachers gather information through interviews with parents and children, and by collecting samples of the child's work. The PLR operates under a series of assumptions that respect a child's individual worth. Rather than look at where the child has failed to hit a predetermined mark, we assume that every child can do something, and whatever a child can do will serve as the foundation for further learning.

The PLR also assumes that listening to a child and her parents will help teachers learn ways of teaching that child by building on what she knows. It is an approach to assessment that represents a major shift in thinking about schools. Not only do teachers' opinions carry a new weight, but parents have an official voice in their child's schooling. Most exciting of all is that children themselves take an integral part in their own assessment. It is not just the idea of replacing or supplementing report cards that makes the PLR revolutionary—it is the notion that we can use observation and assessment to inform our teaching on a daily basis.

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit a first grade classroom in another school as part of a professional development program. One boy in the class had recently arrived from Bulgaria and spoke only a few words of English. In pantomime, I asked him if he had Bulgarian books at home. He enthusiastically nodded yes, and I shared this with his teacher. She now had information she could use, if she chose, by allowing him to bring Bulgarian books into the classroom. The question I asked may have been simple, but I would not have thought of it if I hadn't seen videotapes of teachers in England talking with parents of Gujarati-speaking children about their home languages during the course of PLR interviews.

Further Exploration of Assessment

In the following summer of 1992, many members of the original ETN group met again to explore further the possibilities of alternative assessment. We had a year of working at building a community of classrooms. Some people had brought colleagues into the fold. One had even started a new school predicated on the notion of a community of learners. From a hopeful summer of thrashing out our problems and seeking threads of optimism, we had come to a place where it was abundantly clear that change was happening, and we were right in the midst of it. Probably most exciting of all was the knowledge that across campus was a group of worthy neophytes—new ETN participants—who were on a similar journey to the one we had undergone in the previous summer. We were growing and unstoppable.

During the school year, we continued to meet in study groups to share stories of progress, insights, and obstacles we encountered in implementing the PLR. The nurturing atmosphere of the summer seminars carried over into the study groups. The tenor of the discussions shifted from the theoretical to the practical, as we grappled with the question of how to observe and record and still manage a classroom. The study groups helped us rise to the challenges of breaking new ground because we knew we were not

alone. So by learning to use alternative assessment methods and sharing these with our colleagues, we began to create a wave of meaningful change in our educational system.

Other Tools

Another valuable set of assessment tools is the Descriptive Review of Work. In this process, a teacher takes a long and detailed look at a student or her work. Colleagues contribute to the discussion and lend their perspectives to unravel puzzles that can be difficult to comprehend alone. Last summer I brought the work description of one of the children in my class in for a review. While she was not physically present, we evoked her so powerfully she filled the room. We talked about her strengths, her stance, her ways of coping with the world. We didn't judge or diagnose; they asked questions and I answered by describing her specific behavior in real circumstances. By the time the process was over, I had learned things about Melinda that I hadn't figured out in an entire year of knowing her. When this process takes place during a school year, the insights directly benefit the student-teacher relationship.

What these various methods of assessment have in common is that they celebrate children for who they are and what they can do. We are so trained to look for the problems and the deficits, that it can be a hard habit to break. Taking the opposite stance is liberating and extremely useful. Sometimes we can get so caught up in worrying about what children can't do, that we have no idea of exactly what they can do and how to bring them along from where they are.

My colleague on the ferry, tired of having a new expert come along every few years to tell her why she has been doing everything wrong, wants only the best for children. The other day I walked past her room and saw the walls covered with children's work. Children were out of their seats, busy and productive. It looked like a happy place. Maybe she is more of a whole language teacher than she thinks she is. Maybe she is beginning to understand how whole language theory celebrates children. I'm thinking of sharing some of my PLR interviews with her. Who knows what might happen?

In the book *Among School Children*, Tracy Kidder writes, "The task of universal, public elementary education is still usually being conducted by a woman alone in a little room... She feels her way. She has no choice." Belonging to ETN helps teachers feel that we are not helpless to change what needs to be changed, nor are we crazy to want to try. We learn from others who have been doing the work before us and build on that knowledge with our own expertise. Too many good teachers have been demoralized by years of isolation and subservience. Collegiality is empowering. When teachers are at their strongest, children gain immeasurably.

Amanda Nicole Gulla
Governors Island P.S. 26

From A Teacher's Journal

Through his teacher's journal Michael Kilbert shows us how he developed his inquiry project on war. He subtitled his journal, "How I Began a Task That Seemed as Large as Any Cecil B. DeMille Extravaganza."

I feel that the only way I can report on my "adventures" will be through a diary. The diary will, I hope, serve two purposes: (1) fulfill the requirement of documenting my efforts, and (2) become process writing that might help with some insight into my successes (may the gods grant me many) and my failures (a given).

I choose this day to begin my diary because I feel that I am now entering the last phase of my preparations. (It's funny that I want to refer to this as my battleplans. Bad subconscious pun.)

November 6th: Ideal

Day One - Introduction to topic using Picasso's *Guernica* as the centerpiece of a full day's exercises. This painting will be used to explore the themes of point of view, method of expression, and text rendering a painting, culminating in the students' entries in an ongoing process journal kept for this project. I hope that I am able to respond to the students' journals or at least that they will have the opportunity to respond to each other.

WARNING: It took about four periods to track down a suitable copy of this painting and then xerox a class set, and I think I was lucky. Access to bits and pieces seems to be a recurring problem. This procedure forces me to think about what I really intend to do.

Part of the introductory exercise will be a free-association exercise using the word 'war'. The student responses will be recorded on newsprint. Large sheets of paper will be posted every day. I hope these sheets will evolve into journal entries. Students will also be involved in a three to five minute free-writing exercise at the beginning of each lesson.

I met with Helen Ogden today, and we have laid out the rest of the project. I may revise it over the next few days - I plan to use it starting Tuesday, November 12th. Wish me luck, I need it.

Day Two/Three - All Quiet on the Western Front

This novel will be used for three separate exercises over the span of two days. We will explore the theme of irony and the concept of another point of view - The Earth itself.

We will encounter our first example of irony in a pivotal scene in the book. One of the main characters finds himself with someone he thought he had killed. While trapped with his victim, he begins to see the war differently. As a result of the change, he makes a promise to himself to write a letter to the other man's wife. He never writes the letter. He loses his "good intentions." I will ask the students to write this unwritten letter.

Day Four - Introduce "Buttons" by Carl Sandburg and "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" by Randall Jarrell

Day Five - Break up the students into committees to view poetry and to work on some collective exercises. (Social Studies

Continued...

teacher versus poetry - give each group two sets of thirty lines of poetry each. In my imagination an English teacher in the background: I can't believe it. How sacrilegious. Heathen!)

November 12th: What Really Happened

Forget all the previous. Morale check. The plans of mice and men go awry. It was not what I expected, except that I think I felt unsure from the beginning.

(The night before I had second, third, and fourth thoughts. I just couldn't settle in my mind what was going to happen and how it would fall into place. I was even afraid that my instincts would fail me. I had the beginnings of a bad case of stage fright. But I hoped to prevail.)

The students hesitated over the painting. I expected it would be a slow go but not that slow. I had some intrinsic outline in my mind, but method of presentation was pure improvisation.

1. Students free-write for a few minutes, "What does war mean to you?"

2. Students give me a free association of one or two words which I write on the newsprint sheet. (I will tape it to the board everyday before we start. A record of what we have done, where we started from).

3. Form committees to "text-render" copies of the painting. I also thought students might have trouble with the painting, but the text-rendering would serve as a way into Picasso's classic.

While the students were doing this, I paced nervously around the room, picked up some comments, overheard some things, and felt that all might quickly be lost. I posted another piece of newsprint. I tried to cajole them, to encourage them, to make them feel they were capable of overcoming their initial reactions. Bottom line, the only wrong answer today will be something that starts with "I can't, I don't, I won't."

They are too inhibited to let go, to use some creativity, to let their emotion run free. I have to rethink for tomorrow.

Wednesday the 13th: It's Show Time

I want to go on to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, but I don't feel that I can leave *Guernica*. I am pressuring myself to wait and to move forward at the same time. Must stop and regroup.

Gave them a sheet with questions that would hopefully open them up to an understanding of what Picasso was trying to do.

Never got to process write, but I did send them back to committee. Asked each committee to submit an analysis of the painting. Some of these were fairly insightful, some were poor, but very few rose to the heights that I over-enthusiastically hoped for. I will continue; I am enjoying the project and most of them seem to be picking up some of it (the concepts and my enthusiasm). I cannot be as optimistic; I must pace it better. I can't rush it; I must be patient.

Thursday, November 14th: The Link

A story I improvised and retold to my second class, "If you were angry at something that happened in school, what would you do? You would storm out of the building after slamming every door and breaking every window in every door. Then you would come back

around midnight and spray: 'School Sucks' on the side of the building. You're making your statement; you're showing your anger in your own way." I want to emphasize that people, artists and others, have a need to express themselves.

Let's look at the painting.

Who is dying? (Women and children)

Did this happen in a big city? (No, there is a horse and a bull).

How do you know this is not a military base? (There aren't soldiers, tanks, airplanes,)

How did these women and children die? (They were bombed)

How do you know? (The horse, the man, everything is shattered into pieces)

See, you know what happened. A village was bombed. Women and children were killed. An artist was angry. He had to vent his anger. He had to make a statement. He told of his anger in the best way he knew - to paint a painting.

You knew it all along. You're just not willing to let yourself go.

(Would love to do some other paintings at this point, but I am cracking under the pressure of the curriculum. I'm twenty years and Two World Wars behind everyone in the department.)

Reading from *All Quiet*. The scene: a soldier is lost in the middle of a battlefield with only a knife as a weapon. Suddenly there is machine gun and artillery fire coming from every direction. He leaps into a shell-hole. He's frightened. The soldier resolves that he will kill anybody who leaps into the hole with him. He steels himself for the task.

Students begin to read a 10 page selection.

The narrator is forced to stay in the shell-hole with the man he has stabbed and who is dying slowly before his eyes. He is remorseful as he realizes that he has killed "an abstraction," that his enemy is a man just like him. He finds the now dead soldier's wallet and promises to himself that he will write a letter to the man's wife. By the end of the selection he knows he will not really write this letter.

Home assignment for the students: fulfill the promise, write the unwritten letter to the dead soldier's wife.

Tomorrow we will delve deeper into this section of *All Quiet*. I feel better about tomorrow, but what will I do about Monday?

Part One: Completed—the improv continues on Monday.

Friday, November 15th: "Dear Mrs. Duval"

With their letters in hand I ask the students to meet again in their committees. (They will stay in the same committees throughout the project. I think that this will save time, and it will keep the chemistry of the group intact. I always feel the pressure of time, so I don't want to set myself up where students hesitantly form groups). The task at hand is to take all the letters from the group and submit a group letter. I encourage them to use the best of each letter and to work together to achieve a product that is a matter of pride for the group.

I also hope that they will learn the mechanics of converting all of this individual work into a cohesive whole.

The students have about 20-25 minutes to work on the letter. There is a buzz in the room, but I feel more confident today that they

are working on task. (After all these years of teaching from the front of the room, it takes a while to get used to a room of students talking and learning from each other. Instinctively, I feel like saying "O.K., quiet down.") Later we talk about how tone was important to their work. I look over the individual letters as the students are working and find, as I expected, that the tone varies from a cold, official notification to letters that "lied" and spoke of how "he loved you very much," how "he was a very brave soldier that you would have been proud of," to letters that asked forgiveness for having "murdered" or "accidentally killed" him. There are other letters that describe how it happened, and letters that promise to "help the family of a good friend." Students are able to see and understand how these letters could vary so much.

METAMORPHOSIS: We discuss how feelings toward another person can change from the idea of killing one's enemy to having that "abstraction" suddenly become a human like oneself, a living thing that we have been told to think of and treat as a sub-human organism. Once again we look at the selection they have read and discuss their reaction to having written this letter. Some of them realize how the letter might have changed their feelings about the enemy, but they can also understand why the narrator decides not to write the letter. Wrap-up the lesson with a reprise of their essay on "What are your attitudes toward war?" I hope to show them this essay in both versions they wrote, the one in the beginning before we started this project, and this one as we approach the mid-point. A very enjoyable day and I look forward to Monday.

Monday, November 18th: P-Day

I have never taught poetry, but I have enough material and positive vibrations about it. I meet with Helen, again she patiently takes me through my plans and intentions, a guardian angel, and I decide as I speak with her to improvise even more.

Step 1 - They must have a definition and understanding of irony before they can undertake this part of the unit. They come up with: (1) a word or a phrase that is used opposite to its normal usage, and (2) an event or action that has a totally unexpected turn of events. They understand that irony is something that they have a sense or a feeling of, something that they cannot quite define but would recognize. Examples: He tried to save the dog and ended up drowning himself.

Step 2 - Hand out copies of "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" by Randall Jarrell. A great, short poem. Perfect for classroom use.

Brainstorm - instead of using the poem as is, I cut off the last line.

*From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.*

When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose. I save this line for the end of the period as a sort of dramatic exclamation point to end the period. It has its desired effect. The students do not leave as the bell rings; they just sit for a few seconds as the line hits

them. Boy, it felt like a scene out of a movie. I probably need some great Greek phrase to describe this usage. (Oh, to be an English teacher.)

After asking some pointed questions, I allow them to analyze "Buttons" by Carl Sandburg, a longer poem that speaks of a large public map that is used to chart the progress of a battlefield, seeing if they can find the irony in using buttons on a map to represent men dying on some battlefield far away. The boy who moves the buttons laughs, jokes with the crowd, and "Who by Christ would guess what it cost to move two buttons one inch west on the war map..."

Admittedly the students are resistant to the use of poetry: (1) they treat poetry as if it is out of place in a social studies classroom, (2) most of them are unfamiliar with poetry even in their English classes, (3) they would rather attempt some less challenging assignment—copying notes from the chalkboard, and (4) without the threat of a failing grade or a measure of things as right or wrong, students do not have some internal desire to just try something different.

It is unfortunate that students have been shaped throughout the years into finders of the "Right Answer," crusaders in search of their Holy Grail. They do not seem to want knowledge for its own sake or to want to attempt exercises beyond the ordinary. When did they lose all spirit for learning? Did they ever have it?

I try to explain that poetry is perhaps analogous to much of the music they listen to. They don't necessarily understand all the words, but they do have some understanding for what feelings or ideas the songwriter is attempting to convey. I ask them to look at poetry in this way.

Slow go the first day. I have done much hard work in class, but it was necessary to lay the groundwork for the rest of the week. I feel good about tomorrow.

Tuesday/Wednesday: Poetry by Committee

I gather various pieces of poetry then break the poems into five separate sheets. Each sheet has approximately 30 lines of poetry. I use this rather arbitrary method to make all assignment/poetry sheets equal.

By giving each committee different sets of poetry, I hope to make the experience more varied. Overambitiously, I hope each committee will present their pieces to the rest of the class so I can get the whole class to have the experience of a dozen pieces of poetry without having to analyze each one. Also to maintain my own sanity, I want some variety in the work that the students are doing. I hate reading forty essays on the same question.

On each sheet there are questions to help students understand and appreciate the pieces.

Poetry I included: "Losses" by Randall Jarrell; "The Man He Killed" by Thomas Hardy; "plato told" by e.e. cummings; "Dulce Et Decorum Est" by Wilfred Owen; "Lost in France" by Ernest Rhys; "Reflections in an Ironworks" by Hugh MacDiarmid; "Base Details" by Siegfried Sassoon; "If I was not a soldier" by Hugh MacDiarmid; "Does it Matter" by Siegfried Sassoon; "The Effect" by Siegfried Sassoon; "Grass" by Carl Sandburg; "Eight Air Force" by Randall Jarrell.

Continued . . .

Some committees really work well together and are making this a worthwhile experience. Other committees are just dividing up the questions. Each student does two questions while others attempt to socialize. I try to convince them that the end product will be much better if they work together. For some this falls on deaf ears and closed minds. Don't give up. They will succeed despite themselves.

The next day each committee is given a different sheet of poetry. Their exposure will represent a total of about 60 lines of poetry. At the end of both days' work, I collect their notes.

Thursday: Almost There

After dealing with other matters that intrude on my classroom time— announcing the mid-term and quiz schedule for next week, explaining the mid-term, reminding them that their notebooks will be checked, explaining the need for Regents review books—they are given an assignment to be done in class so that I am able to answer any questions that may crop up. I am very interested in seeing their essays.

Which of these poems comes closest to your feelings of war? Why? Which part?

Friday: Let's wrap it up.

Two closing exercises :

1. My Poem (Choose one of the poems your committee worked with, turn it into your own poem, in your own words, don't worry about making it rhyme or making sure that the lines are the same length)

2. Write the first draft of a letter expressing your feelings about war to: someone in the government; a newspaper; the school newspaper; the an officer in the army; a recruit in the army, navy; the United Nations; a pen-pal; your child, if you had one; your parents; anyone.

This letter should reflect something that you specifically learned during the course of the unit. Make reference to it.

Reflections

After devoting so much time to this unit on war, I feel as if I have to somehow process and reflect on what happened. Unfortunately, there seems to be very little interaction among teachers about successes and failures in the classroom. We seem to go into the classroom as if "no one has gone there before." We act as if we were the first person to teach World War I, or *Hamlet*, or Picasso. Why don't we share more of what we have done? Everything we do seems to be an experience in trial and error. Fail and you don't do it again; get it right, and you'll beat it to death the rest of your career. Every teacher invents the wheel from scratch. Instead of building on the "shoulders of others," we force ourselves to build sandcastles on a deserted island beach. I'm not going to change the world, but I am going to change my own situation.

The tactics I used and the skills I taught are practical for a wide

range of topics, so that I have in a sense created my own legacy. Through the Writing Teachers Consortium I have been able to create, in effect, a body of useful techniques. During the course I had one wish that I had a magic box, a box filled with materials that I could just dump out onto the desk. This box would be perfect for any lesson, a time capsule of any era I was teaching. All I would do is let students reach into the box and watch as they discovered what it is like in another time and in another place. Instead of going back with a time machine I would bring the time to them. For example, the box on the 60's might have a 45 rpm record from a Motown group, a Beatles record, a map of Vietnam, a scene from *The Graduate*, JFK's inaugural address with Robert Frost's reading, a Martin Luther King Jr. speech, a James Bond book, a piece of moonrock, a souvenir from the 1964 World's Fair.

Well, instead of this box of materials, I now have a box of skills. I have learned how to help students to learn using paintings, poetry, letters, novels, cartoons, and most importantly their own writing, their own voice. I learned that I spend too much time talking, lecturing, writing on the chalkboard, testing when students can learn so much more by listening to their own internal voices. Revelations, those things that we learn by ourselves, help us to understand and remember so much more.

What Difference Did This Course Make for the Students?

Instead of constantly hearing me or themselves, on a rare occasion they were able to learn by finding out for themselves, by experiencing some of it on their own. How could I top "When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose"? They could learn more about themselves and their feelings about war from *Guernica* than a chalkboard full of notes.

It required more effort on my part to get all the pieces together, but teaching is supposed to be rewarding, not easy. We spend so much time in class waiting and waiting for the light to go on in our students' heads, waiting for them to say, "Yeah, now I get it!" I experienced more lights going on in doing this unit than I have in a whole term.

If I sound like a born-again teacher, I am. I have seen the light. Hallelujah, brother and sister there is a way. For only a paltry...you too can find salvation, you too can look forward to the next lesson.

As adults we intuitively have some sense of what war is about and what it is not. We have some sense of what causes wars: nationalism, arms races, economic or territorial disputes, desire to conquer, desire to colonize... But young adults don't have this sense. They do not have the life experience to understand what it means for a country to be involved in a war. To them movies are real and television speaks the truth. In Vietnam we sent young men out as cannon fodder. I could have been cannon fodder. So few of us

I experienced more lights going on in doing this unit than I have in a whole term.

understood why. So few of us understand the veterans. Could there be another Vietnam if people understood war before they were battle-hardened? Before they were physically and mentally wounded?

One of the issues that keeps sticking me is the thought that the unit was not balanced. I should have included an equal amount of pro-war material. I became so enthusiastic about teaching the unit that I grabbed at the available materials and I forgot about the basics: Be objective. Students will never understand how countries can go to war if we spend all of our time on anti-war materials. Also by exposing the students to all types of propaganda (both pro and con), they will be able to filter through the haze and see what lies behind the smokescreen. We can't deny that there is considerable feeling on both sides of any truly important issue.

Bottom line: I spent so much time on this unit that my senses seem overloaded. Even now as I am trying to sort through my experience, I am having problems getting it all down on paper. There is so much there, there is so much to "process." No matter how much I put down, I always seem to have more.

For Next Time

1. Use some pro-war poetry; use examples of patriotic poetry.
2. Show slides of *Guernica* and other anti-war and pro-war art. Compare/contrast. This exercise was useful and enjoyable. Unfortunately, I had planned it as a sort of throw away introduction into artistic expression. It definitely deserves a place of its own in the unit.
3. Invite guest speakers i.e., veterans, armed forces recruiters. Again, I felt the need for another voice besides mine, for another point of view, for someone to shake them up and vary the experience.
4. Play war/anti-war songs through the years. Some of the songs throughout the years are very compelling measures of the effects of war on the men and women involved.
5. Find posters. Some of the posters from the World Wars are great examples of propaganda. Given the time I would have liked to devote a part of the unit to the theme of propaganda through the years not only in posters but also in all types of media expression.
6. Use photographs as a means of expression starting with the American Civil War. An interesting sidelight might be the use of photography to distort history either by "doctoring" photographs or by simply moving bodies as was done in the Civil War. What about the possibility of using computers to create impossible photos, i.e. photos I've seen of Sylvester Stallone as Rambo at the Yalta Peace Conference?
7. Look at political cartoons through the wars.
8. Show scenes from movies: propaganda films, Hollywood patriotic movies, anti-war movies, training films, music videos, or even stills with music or letters from PBS' *The Civil War*.
9. Give students a chance to express themselves in non-verbal media: photos, collages, drawings, improvised dialogues.
10. Use satire which can become a valuable experience in writing and reading.

11. Read soldiers' letters both real and those created in class. I seem to remember an HBO special *Letters from Vietnam*.

12. Do exercises showing how experiences in wartime are strangely similar throughout the years no matter what war or what era. This would be a challenging exercise that would require the resources and sheer manpower of a group of teachers. But once it was finished, it would be a really worthwhile part of any history unit.

13. Read articles from newspapers with references to dates or battles removed. Have students try to determine the date or the action involved in the article.

14. Introduce journals to be used every day. The initial idea fell by the wayside. I lost my sense of timing. The bell always seemed to be ringing at the wrong time.

15. Spend more time on *All Quiet* and perhaps scenes from other novels.

16. Team-teach with an English teacher, a cross-disciplinary, interdisciplinary exercise.

17. Look at war monuments around the world. It seems that in the United States we do not have as many or the same type as the Europeans. Wouldn't a slide presentation of these open up a lot of discussion? Our Vietnam memorial in comparison to the traditional general on horseback, the planned Korean War memorial (why didn't we have one erected thirty years ago?) in comparison to the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima?

A Wish: Perhaps if I would have used some of these methods at the beginning of the term, they would have been better prepared for this unit. Strangeness at the start would have enabled them to jump right in more easily.

Personal Note: As a teacher I feel like a German shepherd with its ears standing up all the time always listening for things that I can use in class, or maybe some kind of bug with its antennae scanning for anything that might be useful this term or next year. While I was teaching this unit I saw the movie *For the Boys*, and there were so many scenes related to war that my radar and sonar were on full alert. At one point, the movie moved to a setting in Vietnam. I was so engrossed, possibly because of this unit, that I experienced something that I had never thought of before.

I began my teaching career to avoid being drafted and sent to Vietnam. I have always had mixed feelings about somebody "taking my place" over there. Perhaps I forced someone to accept my fate. I was never dead-set against the war. I had mixed feelings about it. I just felt that going into the army would disturb the course of my life. My plans were made, and I couldn't let the draft get in the way. Besides there was considerable peer pressure; I wasn't going to be the only jerk in my crowd that would end up in Southeast Asia.

As I watched the movie, thoughts about this unit and the war in Vietnam surfaced. I couldn't help but think that if I had gone, I would have died there. I had never experienced or thought this before. Perhaps it was my preoccupation with the war unit, perhaps it was the movie, perhaps I'm right.

Michael Kilbert
Grover Cleveland HS

“Things Most Yielding Can Overwhelm Things Most Hard”

A Taoist Approach To Teaching Chinese Philosophies

Matt Clayton first participated in a Writing Teachers Consortium course in the fall of 1991. After the course, he designed and implemented a unit for his global studies classes about differing Chinese philosophies.

During the academic '91-'92 year I became committed to creating a student-centered classroom. What I wanted to do in my classes was, if not to eliminate totally my pontifications to my students, then at least to reduce my teacher-talking and to stop dominating the classroom. I was tired of struggling for power, of staying totally in charge. In brief, I was ready to share power and the limelight with my students.

My challenge in teaching, as I saw it, was to design meaningful cooperative learning activities where the students would remain center stage. I decided to try a moveable feast of group work which relied on a jigsaw technique. Five groups would meet to discuss and answer questions about different Chinese philosophies. In this way each group would become “expert” on one particular Chinese philosophy. Then, new groups would be created with experts from each philosophy. Each student expert would share his/her expertise with other members of this new group. Next a large class meeting would reinforce the information gathered by the students. Finally a writing assignment would be completed at home. By the end of the unit, students were expected to be able to describe and compare the major Mencian, Confucian, Legalist, Taoist and Chinese Buddhist teachings concerning religion, human nature, law, government, and death.

The unit started on the first day with a “hook” intended to get the students to grapple with issues of Chinese philosophy—namely what constitutes good government and law. What means should an emperor use in order to stay in power, and what constitutes human nature? In small groups students were asked to pretend they were the tutors of a newly throned, five-year-old emperor. As a group they were to form a consensus in answer to such questions as “Are most people by nature good or evil?” “What strategies should an emperor use to keep peace and prevent rebellion?”

The following day, students were individually given one of five primary readings on the Chinese philosophies Confucianism, Mencianism, Legalism, Taoism, Buddhism. Students answered questions about the reading in class. On day three those who had read about the same philosophy assembled in groups of five or six to discuss their answers while I circulated among them to help with any problems. The students were told that they were becoming “experts” in their philosophy. By the end of the third day, the class consisted of five or six “experts” on each of the Chinese philosophies.

On days four and five, using the jigsaw technique, new groups were composed of one “expert” from each philosophy. Students shared their answers about their individual philosophy with other

group members. By the end, they had a basic understanding of all of the major Chinese philosophies.

On day six the class filled out a large chart which showed the five different philosophies with its teaching about religion, human nature, law, government and death.

The unit culminated with a writing assignment where students were asked to select any three from the five Chinese philosophies we had studied and to write a dialogue between a Confucian gentleman, Buddhist monk, a Legalist, a Mencian scholar, or a Taoist philosopher concerning morality, human nature, law, government or death. The unit worked well. Groups discussed the philosophies, and a genuine interchange of ideas took place. The students came to realize they were responsible to other members of their group. In some cases, peer pressure even caused them to find out information which they may have missed.

One student demonstrated his basic understanding of the philosophies in writing “The Human Nature Show” in which a t.v. host interviewed Confucius, a Legalist and Mencius;

Ms. Wright: Legalist, you believe that most people are evil and ignorant. If this is true, how would you go about helping this problem?

Legalist: This is a problem and the way we go about helping these people is by law and order. We have a government who 1) makes taxes 2) builds armies 3) provides food and 4) passes laws to prevent disorder.

Ms. Wright: Mencius, you are the people who believe that most people are good. It is hard to say that in America because there are crimes in streets, drugs, prejudice etc. How do you convince someone that most people are good?

Mencius: Why do people do these crimes? They are taught it and then it is carried out. In the beginning they were good. Most people believe doing wrong can get them ahead or make them more confident but what it is really doing is driving them to destruction. What I am saying is in the beginning people are good and then taught evil.

Another student chose to write his dialogue about law:

Legalist: So what is your point of view?

Confucius: I believe there should be few laws because a ruler should not need laws to control his people. All he needs it to rule by virtue and decorum.

Legalist: Ha, virtue and decorum no one cares. If most people are evil, they need laws to control them unless you want total disorder.

Taoist: Most people are like an uncarved block... People that follow my way of thinking will need no laws because they won't have them to break and will respect each other...

Students gained skills in cooperation, oral communication, reading and writing. Furthermore, they were able use some creativity in writing their dialogue and I, the teacher, was able to teach with fewer of my words.

Matt Clayton
Clara Barton HS

From In-Service to Practice

Miriam Borne describes an interdisciplinary approach she used with her English classes as a result of her participation in the Writing Teachers Consortium.

Last spring to correspond with their global studies work on China, I had my students read Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*. Students' homework assignments included writing, at critical points in the story, diary entries as a major character, such as Wang Lung. As part of a test, students wrote a 'conversation' in which two of Wang Lung's sons discuss how their father treats their mother after the family becomes wealthy. The word 'conversation' seemed less intimidating to the students than 'dialogue.'

Because it is helpful in point of view writing to give students a few, but not too many, choices of characters from whose point of view they can write, as an alternative to writing the conversation between the Elder and Second Sons, students had the option of writing a monologue of Wang Lung's wife, O-lan, where she contemplates how Wang Lung treats her. These dialogues and monologues were read aloud later. After students had written dialogues at least once, they began writing dialogues in pairs, passing the paper back and forth.

For both the midterm and the final exams, I wrote a letter to my students as Li Po, a made-up friend of Eldest Son, and asked that they write back answering all of my questions about family events. To be more authentic, I signed Li Po's name in Chinese characters, which intrigued the students.

Another part of our English-social studies interdisciplinary program included a unit we called "Exploring a Country." Students were given a list of questions which covered different areas for them to explore. These questions included ones on geography, economics, environment, religion, history, art, family life, and education. Students were asked to answer all parts of the questions in the areas of economics and geography, and to choose one other area they wished to explore. They brought in magazines and newspapers and also spent time in the library. One day I brought in crayons and markers and asked them to design their own project covers. These "Exploring a Country" projects concluded with oral presentations. As students listened to each presentation, they wrote in double-entry form their responses to "What I Learned" and "Questions I Have." Each presentation was augmented with a large map and followed by brief, traditional musical selections from the country.

The discussions stimulated by the oral reports came from the students own concerns as to why many Vietnamese people have come to the United States; why tiny Japan is more economically dominant than its large neighbor, China; what might it be like to live in a country where it rains for long periods of time; what is it about Balinese music that makes it meditative.

Multi-dimensional education forces all of us to go more deeply into the material we are teaching and learning. It makes us seek answers to how course material applies to our lives and to the lives of those around us.

Miriam Borne
George W. Wingate HS

Book Reviews

Linda Correnti, a curriculum developer for Auxiliary Services for High Schools, is a WTC teacher-consultant who feels guilty about not reading and writing as much as she should. She has begun to explore issues that contribute to the high dropout rate among Italian-American students in New York City.

Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence

by Keith Gilyard, Wayne State University Press, 1991

But how are they ever going to get a job if they can't speak correct English? (Question often posed in faculty discussions where lack of standards is bemoaned.)

A combination of memoir and scholarship, Voices of the Self explores key issues of language education for African-Americans and other minorities (blurb on book jacket).

I begin this review by acknowledging, and not plagiarizing, the book jacket blurb because it serves as a convenient point of departure. Keith Gilyard discusses Black English as a native speaker and as a scholar, but his book is a holistic journey beyond the issues of language education, into the life of an urban African-American male, who was torn between participating with his peers and excelling in his studies.

Sociolinguists William Labov, J.L. Dillard, and Geneva Smitherman-Donaldson have studied and documented features of Black English vernacular as researchers, but Gilyard's autobiographical, psycho-sociolinguistic study removes the third person and the "neutral voice" of the researcher, inviting the reader into the author's psyche. As with the writings of Claude Brown, John Edgar Wideman, and Richard Rodriguez, Keith Gilyard is able to take the reader into neighborhoods and situations, down alleys, and into the confrontations experienced by our students every day of their lives.

Through the device of alternating narrative chapters with discussions of scholarly research, Gilyard enables the reader to make connections between such writings and the students in our classrooms. His writing is urgent and inviting, and excerpts from the narrative chapters would be well-received by students in a language arts class, especially once the excerpts are accompanied by the knowledge that Gilyard is a living, breathing New Yorker who is also a professor of English at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn.

As a reader, a teacher, and a researcher, I was completely engulfed by *Voices of the Self*. It brought about a certain discomfort with past assumptions and comments I had made in my classrooms, but by doing so, it gave me cause to revise my beliefs and reconsider actions I will take in the future. Although Gilyard writes about the experience of an African-American male, the descriptions of his teachers struck raw nerves for me as I thought of teacher interaction with all students, and the ways that schools and communities force students to regard one another.

I close this review with an unconditional recommendation of *Voices of the Self*.

Continued . . .

Savage Inequalities Children in America's Schools

by Jonathan Kozol, Crown Publishers, 1991

This work, as the title suggests, is more than disquieting. Kozol describes the conditions of schools and neighborhoods in East St. Louis, New York, San Antonio, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Camden, New Jersey, then juxtaposes his descriptions with those of Riverdale and Great Neck, Alamo Heights, Winnetka, Montgomery County, and Cherry Hill.

Kozol describes the property funding formulae that require those in low-income neighborhoods to sustain their schools with higher tax rates than those paid by residents of wealthy communities. Disparities in the San Antonio area ranged from the annual expenditure of \$2,112 per Edgewood pupil to \$19,333 per Alamo Heights pupil for the 1989-90 school year as compared to New York City's rate of \$7,299 for the same period.

In spite of my experience within the New York City public schools and my awareness of the difficulties faced by our students, Kozol's descriptions of overcrowded P.S. 261, housed in a former roller-skating rink, the disrepair of Morris High School in the Bronx (especially in contrast to recent press accounts of the new and improved Stuyvesant) and the raw sewage that floods the schools and streets of East St. Louis often left me asking, "How can they get away with that?"

Kozol's answer is that policies of local control for school funding have ensured that indeed, the rich do get richer, and that many of the nation's poor, non-white students are receiving educational opportunities inferior to those guaranteed by the 1896 ruling of Plessy v. Ferguson, which upheld segregation by mandating "separate but equal" schools. Since school segregation was legally abolished by Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas in 1954, de facto segregation has increased through white flight from cities, gerrymandering of school district lines, and accelerated tax schedules. Federal and state aid is equally, rather than equitably, distributed among school districts so that such revenue is critically needed by impoverished districts, and incidental to their affluent counterparts.

Kozol emphasizes that citizens of California, where equitable distribution was attempted, staged a tax revolt with the attitude, "if we can't have it our way, nobody will have anything." Parents who have the means and are dissatisfied have the options of moving to better school districts or enrolling their children in private schools. The children of the poor have only the option of whether or not to attend their local, ill-equipped schools.

As we have learned, many elect not to attend local, ill-equipped schools. Although manipulated dropout rates indicate that approximately 25% of New York City high school students do not graduate, these rates do not account for students who decide to leave school between first and ninth grades.

Savage Inequalities is persuasively and crisply written, and evokes its fair share of emotions: in my case, anger at the bureaucratic denial of responsibility to children and guilt at the knowledge that I would use any/all of my resources to ensure that my child did not attend an over-crowded, ill-equipped school.

The shortcomings of Kozol's work are that he does not speak to the parents of the children in America's schools, and thus does not include mention of community and parent involvement as means of change, nor does he offer any solutions.

In spite of these shortcomings, I recommend *Savage Inequalities* as catalyst for thought and for tours of public schools that no students should ever have to enter.

Linda Correnti
Auxiliary Services for High Schools

Letter To The Editors

I read Jane Maher's article "Should We Guarantee Students?" [Vol. 11, no.2] and my answer is YES! If the educational institutions set up to educate the citizens of a society can't guarantee the education of those citizens, then who can?

Children fail not because they enter our schools as failures but because schools choose to see them as failures. These children enter schools as learners yet leave schools as failures. To believe these children fail because of the failure they bring with them is to imply that children who face problems of homelessness, substance abuse, parental ignorance, incompetence, neglect, poverty, and racism are essentially ineducable and therefore cannot be guaranteed success.

Many times what we interpret as "parental ignorance" is really our own ignorance to understand, accept and respect the fact that many groups in our society do things differently than we do. To see the parents of the children we teach as ignorant can only disconnect us from their world when we should be trying to understand it. As for racism, take a look inside the public high schools' tracking system where counselors decide who should be applying to college and who should not. Take a look inside the special education programs in New York City where African-American students represent 34.1% of the special education population, and 19.8% of the general education students. Latinos constitute 15.1% of the regular class, yet 23% are placed in special education.

Extensive research has been conducted in the area of teacher expectations and student achievement. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) found that teachers label students based on test scores. They found students perform and evaluate themselves according to the treatment they receive. Cicourel and Kitsuse (1977) found that personal and social factors such as social-class background and race are used in interpreting objective measures of a pupil's success or failure. So, if we see our students as failures not only do we succeed in making failures out of them, but we also succeed in making them believe themselves to be failures.

Improving children's lives is not the only answer; improving how schools perceive these students is essential. Unless we are willing to change our views rather than expect the students' environment to change, we will continue to blame the victim.

Paula Murphy
Bridge School

Teachers and Students as Writers

Our Crusades

1.

Some nights I bring the kids outside
to stare at the stars; around me,
in the yards, I can hear things cooking
as one by one the lights come on
to the steady popping of bones. Gazing
at the sky I imagine I hold the galaxy
between my teeth and am grinding
it down to fertilizer dust.
It is a powerful sensation.

2.

I always liked the sight of a town burning
in the valley where we roasted pigs
in the burning fields and then
threw the bones into the trees. I learned
the all night routine of muddy crossings
carrying blood over the pale faces of puddles.
The more I bind my hands with horse leather,
the more ghostly the night seems;
it begins to talk, the diseased wells are filled
with warnings that make my scrotum tighten.
I wonder what will really happen
when I cut the deck before battle: will I
get the sign, the go ahead to
slice open their mouths, remove the larynx
and paint the walls of the holy towns with them?
I have spiced my coffee with cardamon seeds
removed from their stomachs,
I have severed the legs of the holy
rooster man as he walked to the top
of the rock to call for a peaceful day,
god love us, I have sacked the inner sanctum
and licked five centuries of
oily, perfumed prayer.
This is not a game.
When I dismounted there,
the smell between my legs was
horse piss, the smoke of bodies I had burned
for one thousand miles and victory. Victory
so beautiful the sky grew larger with it
and I walked through every corner of
the new world, glinting and singing, a saint
casting no shadows and believing no other
tongue but the silence of the first place.

3.

I know that once the world was clean,
shaved and covered all over with fresh
dust, soft as Georgia peach.
There was no having your pockets
picked, watching your old neighborhood burn,
no barbaric people nicking skin
off of their bodies.

Maybe I want too much; still,
sometimes I wear a crown of weeds
to make the others laugh.
Sometimes I'd like the payments
to come from someone else.

4.

I beseech the desert to bring disbelief
upon me for my arms have not yet lost
the capacity to kill.
My legs have not yet lost the capacity
to carry my soul to the next great place
counted in miles of heads and hooved feet.
In the book, golden letters must
introduce my passage in history, the raised
blue faces of martyrs bellowing at a sky
alive with dark demons; their tails
make designs in the air, at night
their bodies rub against the walls.
Something has entered my stomach and
lies there crookedly growing.
I recognize night by the one million
crescent moons and the cold light that
drops from them onto the last and only
city in the word.
This is the only payment,
the expectation that I will conquer or
be worse than dead, having been born
as I was, a king.

Let my heart bleed for myself hung
in the sun to dry, my eyes
blinded by the litter of weapons
in the courtyard below. The crosses
I dragged here I hammered into fences;
the voice of my wife whispers to me from
stale alleys, I see her white fingers touch
the cool green leaves, her perfume curdles
in the stink of gangrene and goes rotten.
I will be fit to be hung above
the hospital walls, small as a child now,
hard and white as marble.

5.

This is the war that makes us kings.
This is the advent of our age at last,
our recycled bodies always rising.
It always comes out of our pockets,
the payment to contain the beast. Surely,
this will be the decisive year: the wind
will blow fire once again.
Our bodies are ready,
our horses are changing below us.
In the last filaments in the last desert light,
in the last city in earth we will see
our ships burning,
shoved into the angry hands of the sunset.

My German Body

The sunlight moves evenly through the cabin
of the train,
my face leans towards the window,
in the reflection
you can see only enormous cheeks.
A tank peers out of a wood nonchalantly,
a cow,
rising slightly up on a knoll of grass.
There is the story of the hunter who cut out
a heart in the dark wood,
but I only cut the skin
between thumb and forefinger.

Years later, a man related to my father
walks North with me
into the colder countryside, his mouth
a line,
with his dog, walks into the padded, wild area
between evergreens,
by winter's fields of frozen, tilled earth:
a highway cut out of the milk country,
a few poles,
and even here, among the outer property lines
on some strasse,
where country houses are filled with greasy apples
and venison,
a quiet sky of gray keeps falling,
on frozen telephone lines,

—the kind of graininess one expects
before death
in a pastoral setting, indifferent birds
grown quiet,
the smell of mulch and broken earth
and men's arms moving slowly their shovels and guns
above you.

But for me, having kept the secret this long,
there is only,
from childhood stories,
in a Bavarian house made entirely
of sweet hard candy,
an enormous oven,
into which I was pushed when lost long ago,
in a fairytale
about a father's son—
so I have recognized, at last, my reddish
burnt body,
smelling of sweet lies and forgetfulness,
and flesh.

Len Van de Graaff
Metropolitan Corporate Academy

The Power of Words

She warned me the day before
she said she would cry if we read
the last chapter in the class.
I said no sentiment survives
the cruel indifference of a classroom—
all beauty will turn to dust.
So we read the rest of *A Farewell
to Arms* and she cried.
The others looked disbelievingly
and I learned to read literally
the words a young student speaks.

Richard August
James Madison HS

The memoirs "Puppy Love" and "My Memoir" were two products of a unit in which advanced-level non-native speakers of English students were encouraged to write with vivid detail. They wrote several drafts repeatedly asking themselves and their writing partners the question: "Can my audience 'see' this piece of my life, as though I am 'telling a movie'"? The final drafts were presented aloud, each one a generous act, and responded to with equal generosity by the student audience.

Benita Daniels
Newtown HS

Puppy Love

When I was in 9th grade, I fell in love with my class teacher, and my heart was broken 6 months later. I know many people have had the experience of love, but it was a very special thing to me because it was my first experience of love.

March 3rd was the first day of my 9th grade. I met my friends early in the morning to go to school. When I was in 9th grade, I lived in a suburb and my school was far away from my house, about 30 minutes by walking. I usually walked that way.

The way was very beautiful. There were a hill and a large field on one side of the street and the other side of the street was a river. I could see very interesting and beautiful things in the spring and buds on the trees. I really liked that.

Anyway, I went to school with my friends that morning through this way. And then, I met my new classmates and the new teacher for my class. The teacher was a man. His name is Jinsu Kang and he looked very smart and kind. Also, he was really handsome and his age was in the mid-twenties. He was a man after my heart at first sight.

A week later, we elected the officials for our classroom and I got a job as vice-monitor. A few days later, during activity time, Mr. Kang had a chance to play the harmonica. I thought that he was a really good player, and at that moment I fell in love with him. The next day, I began to write a letter and buy some flowers for him. Also, I started to spend more time standing in front of a mirror!

One day, I remained in the classroom with the other officials to decorate the class room. When we finished the work, it was dark outside. My friends started to go home in their own way. So, I would have to walk alone to go to my home but I could not do that, because I was afraid of walking in the darkness. I didn't have any idea. So, I was slowly walking out of the school. After a while, I met Mr. Kang. He was going back home too. So, I could go home with him. During that time, I talked so much with him. I was so happy. I couldn't sleep that night.

Next day, when I went to school, he met me with a smile. In the days after that, we met sometimes and had dinner. I really loved him and I believed he loved me too. I studied so hard and I got the first rank of my grade. It was just for him.

One Saturday, he said he wanted to walk with me after school and I said, "Okay," After school, we were walking on the way. Each side of the street was lined with beautiful cosmos. The sun was shining beautifully to us, and we could hear the birds singing. We were just walking without saying anything. After a while, he began to talk quietly. He told me that he had to go back to Seoul. Also, he was going to marry and go to another country to study more. I felt everything change suddenly. The birds began to be crying and sunshine began to be fading. The cosmos movement by wind looked very lonesome. I couldn't walk any more and I couldn't cry, speak, or even hear.

After a while I began to run away from him. When I came back home, I couldn't control myself any more. So, I cried and cried. In doing that, I slept. Next day, I was so sick. So, I thought I could not go to school, but I did.

When I arrived at my school, I saw him in a corridor and he said, "Hi, Unjong," but I ignored that and I just went into my class room. A few minutes later, Mr. Kang came in the class room and said "Good bye" to us. I couldn't control myself. So, I cried. Then, he walked to me and said, "Sorry, Unjong," and left me. I couldn't stay there any more; I cut the rest of my classes and came back home. I couldn't go to school for a week because I was so sick and I fell into a deep sadness. After a week, I received a card from him.

"PARTING IS A BEGINNING OF NEW MEETING." That was the last thing that he gave to me. Anyway, I really loved him and my heart was broken six months after we had met.

When I think about that event, I feel mostly sad but the other feeling is happy, because I knew a man who I really loved, and I remember what he said. So, I'm going to try to meet a good man and I want to fall in love again. If it is possible.

Unjong Mun

My Memoir

It all began in the house of my three aunts when my father left me and my brother to live with them. My brother was five years old, and I was 7 years old. The house was big. The place looked scary, but that was just the beginning, because the aunts looked scary all the time.

The house looked old. This house was in town, far from a city and inside the parlor was big, with old pictures, table and chair. I think in the entire house there were only three plants in different places. Those plants were the gaiety of the house.

My father was going to visit us every month, because he needed to work to pay the hospital. My mother was in the hospital because she needed an operation. That was the reason my father left me and my brother with my aunts. I should never think that my aunts were bad. Angelica was the oldest. I think she was 29 years old, Lourdes was 26 years old, and my aunt Jaqueline, the youngest, I think was 20 or 19 years old. She was a little bit good aunt, she told me that she would like to live in the city and not with her sisters. My grandparents traveled always for business reasons. My brother and I always looked sad because we wanted to see our parents, especially me, because I was older. My brother sometimes cried, because my aunts sometimes punished me. I didn't care, but I felt so terrible if they punished my brother.

I went to school months later, for the first time, in a school of a small town; that was a very good experience. I knew children of an other culture and also I learn their language called "Aymara." My aunts almost never wanted me to play with other children. I always was playing with my brother or sometimes I played alone.

In 1982, a year later my father came to take us. He told me that my mother was good. My mother had come out of the hospital, and I felt very happy, but my brother was changed with my mother because he hadn't seen her for one year. He rejected my mother, but with time he changed and now we are more together than ever.

Maria Valdez

Saturday, June 5, 1993
A Practitioners' Conference
Making Connections Through Writing
Keynote Speaker: Ann Lieberman

Project Notes

The school year is well under way and, as always, has brought with it many changes and exciting new endeavors. Here are some of the things you may want to know about:

Two long-time Project members, **Barbara Batton** and **Claudette Green**, have been released from their schools to work full-time for two of our in-service programs. Barbara will be working with **Elaine Avidon** on the Elementary Teachers Network, and Claudette will be assuming the role of an on-site teacher-consultant for the Writing Teachers Consortium at Columbus and Taft High Schools.

Ed Osterman has resigned as Associate Director of the NYCWP though he will continue to assist the directors in a variety of ways.

Nancy Wilson former staff member for the newsletter is travelling this year. She is in Paris.

Paul Allison, a long-time staff member for our newsletter, has resigned after many tireless years of work. We will miss Paul's thoughtfulness and dedication, but we'd also like to express how excited we are that **April Krassner** has joined the staff. Welcome April!

Kathe Jervis has assumed the role of Director of Publications for the Institute for Literacy Studies.

As the culmination of an interdisciplinary study of the AIDS crisis, students of **Paul Allison** and three of his colleagues at University Heights High School made new panels for the AIDS quilt. Paul and many of his students went to Washington last October to add their panels to the quilt.

Congratulations to **Christine Cziko** who has been awarded a National Writing Project mini-grant. Christine will be using the grant to design a writing course for high school students with children. The course will be called "Writing for and about Our Children."

Barbara Batton and **Elaine Avidon** are on the program for the Spring NCTE Conference in Richmond, Virginia. Their session, "Documenting Children's Language and Literacy Development: Making it Work," will present some of their work on authentic forms of assessment.

Emma Abreu and **Maria Giacone** of Brandeis High School presented the work they've done with bilingual students on I-Search at the recent New York Reading Association conference.

Although she has moved on to exciting new work, **Carla Asher**, former Director of the NYCWP, still continues to influence us. Carla's article, "On Teaching Nonfiction," about the summer institute she and **Gail Kleiner** taught, has been published in *Rebirth of Rhetoric, Essays in Language, Culture and Education*. This collection of essays is edited by **Richard Andrews**, a poet and teacher of composition at the University of Hull in England, who last summer coordinated an advanced institute "Narrative and Argument."

Louise Vallat, a participant in the 1990 Open Institute, has published a book of her own poems entitled *From Kindergarten to Graduate School*. This volume of poetry is based on her own recollections and experiences. The poems are published by Watermark Press, and you can purchase a copy by contacting Louise.

Benita Daniels, co-leader of the Writing/Study Committee at Newtown H.S., recently introduced the entire faculty to ways they might use expressive writing to initiate the study of a topic. The response was enthusiastic, and colleagues keep stopping Benita in the hallways to tell her how they used her suggestions.

Maria Matos of the Elementary Teachers Network is on leave from her school to attend the Principal's Institute at Bank Street College. Maria is an AP intern at Central Park East 1.

Linda Correnti is coordinating a writing workshop with para-professionals in the LYFE Project (Living for the Young Family Through Education).

Several Project members have just finished co-coordinating their first in-service series: **Pat Cox** is coordinated with **Barbara Martz** at John Dewey High School, **Sue Case** and **Eileen Cuff** worked together at Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx, and **Suzette Lippa** worked with **Barbara Martz** at the High School of Telecommunications.

Our exploration of multicultural issues continues. **Linette Moorman**, **Ed Osterman**, **Jocelyn Tord**, and **Linda Vereline** conducted a staff development workshop on ethnic sharing for the entire faculty of J.H.S.189. This workshop precedes a series of multicultural seminars that the JHS Writing and Learning Project will be offering to faculty members of J.H.S.189.

Rescheduled

The New York City Writing Project

Saturday Meeting/Guest Speaker Series

Speaker: Janie Ward

**Justice and Caring:
Negotiating a Racist Society**

Saturday, May 15, 1993

10 am - 1:30 pm

Room to be Announced

A Teacher of Teachers Moves On

Last year, Carla Asher left the Institute for Literacy Studies to participate in a year-long program at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. On her return to New York, she accepted a position as a program officer with the Dewitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, a major supporter of educational innovation throughout the country. As one of the people who helped define the Writing Project, she is, of course, greatly missed.

The following are excerpts from comments and reflections on the impact Carla has had on members of the Institute for Literacy Studies, and the New York City Writing Project:

It's frozen in a photograph: a group of high school kids from Scarsdale and the South Bronx, Flatbush and Forest Hills. Wearing t-shirts and shorts, they smile, pose, crush together for the camera. In the back row, next to Elizabeth, Josie, Ingrid and Eddie, stand their teachers — Carla and me. The first High School Students Writing Project, July, 1983. What a gas to invent and teach that course. After two years of consulting with teachers in the Writing Teachers Consortium, two years of "why don't you try...", "have you thought about doing...", we needed a class of our own, a lab for our own risk-taking, a body of work that showed what we could accomplish. We also needed to be with kids again.

It's impossible to recapture the process beyond these questions—the actual work we did together in the office we shared. We reviewed applications, interviewed kids, planned lessons, decided which journals each of us would read each week, discussed pieces of writing.

It's all there in the picture. Last day. Behind all of us posed for a group shot, the board is covered with the class's graffiti. Carla stands next to me, at the end of the row. She looks so delighted, smiling with surprise, joy, and exhaustion.

Marcie Wolfe
Associate Director
Institute for Literacy Studies

I have a very clear memory of a warm June day at Elaine Spielberg's apartment when you worked with all of the WTC consultants. The threat of budget cuts had been hanging over our heads since the previous December. There was a real question about whether the WTC funding would be renewed. We had been trying since then to redesign the WTC to present some coherent picture of our goals but now we had a deadline to submit a proposal to the Board. You cut through the details to ask us a few simple questions. "What should a successful school look like at the end of the year?"

What services do we need to offer to make this happen?" Under your guidance, from our writing and listening to each other, the plan emerged.

Was it that same year you initiated Ed, myself and Lydia into the mysteries of the budget on Lotus? The three of us huddled next to your computer trying hard to follow your explanations of what a spreadsheet does, "what meeting expenses" were. I had a mathematical block, but somehow you made it all seem reasonable.

Barbara Martz
On-site Consultant
Writing Teachers Consortium

In 1982, I was a brand-new teacher at Morris High School in the Bronx. I was fortunate enough to have a chairman who was quite helpful in terms of how to organize a class, but despite (or perhaps because of) all my education credits, I still felt lacking in terms of how to take what I understood about writing, reading and learning, and present it to a group of sometimes more, sometimes less, motivated adolescents.

Into this gap stepped the Writing Teachers Consortium, in the persons of Carla Asher and Ed Osterman. I realize now that, embarking on a new project as they were, what is now accepted Project practice would have been brand new then. Every week, I knew I would get something I could use in the classroom—preferably immediately, since at the time it was regularly taking me at least an hour to plan each forty-minute lesson. Whatever I tried, I knew if it didn't work I could run it by Carla in our meetings. As I remember ten years later, the things I got from the WTC invariably worked pretty well, and what I got from Carla in our meetings were more specific ideas, approaches that were tailored for the subject I was teaching and the range of student abilities in my classroom.

Melanie Hammer
Teacher/Consultant
Nassau Community College

In November, 1983 I was hired as a secretary to the New York City Writing Project. Carla Asher was responsible for office management and I often wondered how she was able to remember everything from printouts, payroll, labels for mailings, budgets, grant proposals, supplies, and also meet with teachers and organize their needs for each semester. Her organizational skills and memory were incredible and she has so much drive and stamina. She would always tell me "If you call someone and do not get satisfaction, keep calling until you do!"

Ellen Hegarty
Executive Secretary
Institute for Literacy Studies

1984—Carla encouraged me to apply for a teacher consultant position and co-coordinate the Writing Teachers Consortium at one of the city high schools. She told me I would train with someone more experienced and if I needed her help to just call. I wasn't so good at taking chances then, of trying something new, of believing I could assist teachers in looking at their writing process and thinking about the ways they use writing with students. My classroom was just beginning to change. But I kept thinking, if Carla thinks I can do this, then possibly I can.

Ronni Tobman-Michelen
Event Co-ordinator
New York City Writing Project

"I'm calling from Elaine Avidon's kitchen. We're planning for next semester, and we wonder whether you'd like to teach the Consortium at Sarah J. Hale High School," came Carla's voice over the phone. I was awed, floored, to think you thought I could do it....

We sat on a bench in the anteroom of the principal's office, while he expressed his power by keeping us waiting. You fixed your gaze on me and talked to me in a very quiet voice, with measured words, explaining why our request, for the good of the program, was entirely reasonable. I always felt important and well-cared-for when you came out to a school of mine.

Thomasina LaGuardia
On-site Consultant
Writing Teachers Consortium

It is one o'clock on a Friday afternoon. You are sitting, legs crossed, pen in hand, poised to listen and to respond, as five or six consultants tell of our progress and more likely of our problems during the week. Like a laser beam, you cut through the layers I bring and offer 'the words' I need for an administrator or a troublesome participant. I leave, strengthened by your support, making my position as a consultant a little less lonely.

Helen Ogden
On-site Consultant
Writing Teachers Consortium

Back in 1981, when the Writing Teacher's Consortium began, you asked me to coordinate the first fifteen-week graduate course with you at Morris High School. I was both scared and excited about

teaching with you: Did I know enough about writing across the curriculum? Could I hold up my end of the course? Would I do or say anything so ridiculous that the program would be imperiled before it even began? It was a demanding fifteen weeks. But I learned so many things from you that term, just by watching: the way in which you were able to hear the important points lying under the surface of the discussion, and give voice to them; the way you handled conflicts within writing groups; the way in which you brought us all back on task whenever discussion went off track; the way you smoothed things out with one or two participants (administrators, if I recall), who became so difficult at times; and your compliments meant so much to me—I felt so proud when you praised the way in which I introduced the point-of-view writing activity, or the way in which I responded to participants' journals. You were my teacher that year.

Ed Osterman
Coordinator
Writing Teachers Consortium

When you left us to go to Harvard, a sinking feeling overcame the teacher consultants. The New York City Writing Project without Carla Asher — unthinkable. What was temporary, however, became permanent and your departure created a missing beat in the rhythmic pulse of the Project.

Lydia Page
On-site Consultant
Writing Teachers Consortium

I learned a great deal from Carla Asher. She provided me, a non-native New Yorker, with a cultural education about the city, as well as teaching me about the needs of teachers and the schools in which they have worked. The Institute for Literacy Studies and the New York City Writing Project enjoy their reputation, in part, because of the hard work, education and commitment of Carla Asher who brought a fierce intellect and rigorous intelligence to her knowledge of schools and education. We will all miss her, but I know that she will bring these same qualities to her new position. I look forward to seeing her vision and commitment made visible through her new work.

Richard Sterling
Director
Institute for Literacy Studies

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