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Connecting

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Connecting

Authors

Helen Walker, JoAnne Katzmarek, Steven L. VanderStaay, Irwin Ramirez Leopando, Christopher Sweet, and Howard Wolf

Connecting

Section Editor's Message

Dear Readers,

I am entitling this issue's section "Moving Toward Connections." Let me begin by pointing out a pleasant and appropriate irony. *JAEPL's* intent with "Connecting" is to give teachers the opportunity to connect with other teachers through sharing their personal stories. These five narratives persuade us of the importance of this very same goal: as they share their experiences, contributors point out benefits of connectedness in their lives.

"Moving Toward Connections" is a theme in my own life, too. Co-teaching our senior capstone Writing Seminar with a poet from Harrisburg was a beautiful, first-time experience. We were not only facilitators but also wrote the assignments along with the students, and, as one of the students expressed it, the class often "felt like real church." To be honest, my dilemma now is that because it was such a connected experience, and thus unrepeatable, I am nervous about teaching the class next year, trying to achieve again what seemed a miracle this time.

I have also been in the throes of designing a house with my three grown children for a year. The actual building together begins this summer. I mean literal building here, us with power tools, shovel, hammer—luckily with the help of patient professional teachers. They have assured us that they don't mind having their patience tested. They believe in this intense family project.

Building deep connections does test us. However, as these five stories detail, it seems that this is the season for openness to breaking down barriers among players, for removing hierarchies, for establishing connections. I have been contemplating with fascination what Ken Carey says in his *Return of the Bird Tribes* about hierarchy on a global scale: "Violence is the root of hierarchical society. . . . Their people will always be restless, at war—if not with others, then within themselves" (iii). A view of "moving toward connections" as peace education has great resonance at this time in our history.

In the first narrative, JoAnne Katzmarek writes of the classroom of the outdoors and convinces us with her sensory images that we cannot ignore its connection to our learning. The next piece, "I'm With You, Huck," presents Steven VanderStaay's internal struggle with his "interdisciplinary transgressions" with the standard collegiate emphasis on a teaching specialization. In actuality, though, the piece celebrates his choice to teach in several disciplines. His reward is the connections among his colleagues, students, and his scholarship which his openness creates.

Irwin Ramirez Leopando presents his "Moment of Connection" the day he read his painful narrative to his students, describing what happened as a result. After that, Christopher Sweet shares a speech he gave on Back to School Night for senior and sophomore English classes. In it, he presented to the parents his view of writing and what it means to teach out of this view of "inseparability" among the writer and writing and audience. As well, the attempt to demystify

this view of a transcendent and mysterious writing process to his students' parents is one more level of connection that we can consider.

Finally, Howard Wolf tells us from personal experience that the "rigid barriers" he finds in academia should and can be overcome "to discover the levels and layers of likeness" that will allow us to develop our collective potential in this interconnected world. ☺

Carey, Ken. *Return of the Bird Tribes*. San Francisco: Harper, 1988.

Thoughts Like Flying Grouse

JoAnne Katzmarek

The late afternoon sky is that special saffron color found in a Midwest winter. I am skiing across a frozen lake behind our house. I do this a lot. I am alone. I am sweating. My legs ache because my journey around this one hundred acre lake is nearly finished. And as I make the turn in the far bay and head back west to the house, the porch light has just come on.

This is an important learning environment for me; three years earlier I discovered the important connection between discourse theory and the data for my dissertation. Here, too, I understood the contribution Emily Dickinson's poem "I See It Lapping The Miles" could make to an article I was writing on passenger trains in Illinois. Here is the classroom, actually, where all the strands of ideas, images, and impulses come together for me, and I make meaning of my work, my teaching, and my reading and writing.

Aldo Leopold had his chicken coop, the Shack made famous in *Sand County Almanac*, where the ideas of his work at the nearby University of Wisconsin campus made the most sense to him. "Many thoughts, like flying grouse, leave no trace of their passing, but some leave clues that outlast the decade," he says as he ponders the central Wisconsin landscape (61). Today my thoughts are like those flying grouse, leaving clues about the work I do and the students I teach.

I think about the many classrooms where I have taught. For example, there is the sunny second floor of a Catholic school, Room 204. The seventh graders and I worked together there on creative writing projects, skits about characters in books we read, and lessons from the history of the church. Not once did I think to take the students outside to let them wander in the spruce-lined playground of Sacred Heart to integrate these ideas, maybe even discard some of them because finally they might not have made sense. Not once did I share with them how I do this. I wish now that I had.

I remember, too, the cubicles of countless rooms at the suburban high school where I taught American literature and sometimes a course called Writing in the

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Real World. Did I ever load those students onto a yellow school bus and ride with them away from the fast food palaces and athletic temples of the suburb and say, “Go. Go find your thoughts. See how they come to you. Listen to their sense where you can hear them”? No. I never did. Not even when they asked me to do just that. They seemed to know what they needed in order to have the learning fit their lives. In fact, one student asked specifically. We were discussing Jack London’s story “To Build a Fire,” and Lee was intrigued when the narrator said that it was so cold that spit froze before it hit the ground. Why didn’t we go outside on a very cold winter day and try this theory out? We all laughed. What a bizarre idea. Yet this teenager understood, perhaps better than I did, what they needed to have that London story or any story come alive. A chance to work through the ideas. Try them out in our own way and on our own schedule.

For me, learning is the processing of information we encounter, which leads to changes or an increase in our knowledge and abilities. An environment that facilitates that process for me is outdoors, in a natural setting. Adding physical activity is the spice for the stew. Then, ideas become clearer and connections among the ideas emerge. I am reminded of the story that Thoreau tells in his essay, “Walking.” A traveler had arrived at Wordsworth’s house, and, when he asked to be shown to his study, the servant answered, “Here is his library, but his study is out of doors” (25). This isn’t just a Romantic notion. This is what teaching and learning are for.

As I approach the snow-covered boat dock in our yard, the swish of my skis the only sound, I am planning the groundwork for my current students to have a chance to learn where there is space enough to know their thoughts. My plan goes beyond instructional objectives or content standards or authentic assessment. This is about self and the relationship of self to what we think we know, and to know it deeply maybe for the first time. I consider the possibilities.

I unsnap the skis and step off the slender runners, ski boots sinking into the snow. Without warning, an owl, perched in the top bare branches of a tall oak in the neighbor’s yard, hoots. I have participated in a great event, a winter dusk. I have learned much. As I head up the slight hill to the house, I think of Sigurd Olson’s lesson about his life. “The song of the North still fires me with the same gladness as when I heard it first. . . . within me was the constant longing, and when I listened to this song, I understood.” ☺

Leonard, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Ballentine, 1966.

Thoreau, Henry D. *Walking*. Berkeley: The Nature Company, 1991.

I'm With You, Huck

Steven L. VanderStaay

I moved to teaching in a university after seven years as a high school teacher, bringing much of my orientation and philosophy of teaching with me. Having enjoyed the range of courses and content I taught in high school, I volunteered to teach in each of the areas of emphasis within my department: linguistics, literature, composition and creative writing, as well as my own specialty, language arts methods. This breadth is something of a contradiction at the university level where professors, hired within specific concentrations, more typically teach in narrowly defined areas. I saw no reason to accept such constraints and happily began teaching courses across these areas, finding that the benefits of doing so far outweigh the costs.

Teaching a variety of courses, I have the opportunity to build relationships with students over time and across subject areas. I am more apt to have a student more than once and much more likely to develop an appreciation of that student as a whole human being, a person with multiple intelligences. Reading a student's creative writing after helping her revise a critical essay or solve a phonology problem, I have a better sense of the background she brings to her writing, a better sense of her strengths, and a better understanding of the balance of assistance and independence she needs. I can relate her prose to the syntax we studied or the novel we read. In short, I know her better. And I more fully know what she knows.

Teaching out of my specialties, I also find I teach within them better. Teaching literature after linguistics or creative writing, I find it easier to help students connect the style of a passage to its meaning. I find myself more willing to let students create art in response to art. I teach my specialties less narrowly, and, in so doing, I find I teach them more fully.

Admittedly, I am less of an expert in four areas than I would be in one. I need more time to prepare for classes. I ask more questions of my colleagues than they do of me. I spend more time researching answers to student questions than I would otherwise. And, openly violating the greatest of professorial taboos, I more frequently admit "I don't know" when I don't.

Universities can make professors pay for such crimes. In my case, I began to worry that my interdisciplinary energies were sometimes read as evidence of my naiveté, proof to my new peers that I remained, in essence, a high school teacher. Of course, these crimes also made it easier for me to show what learning looks like and to place research in its natural context. Moreover, by the time I came to sense my colleagues' concerns, I was already convinced of the benefits to teaching broadly that I've described above. Yet, at heart a team player, I grew uneasy. Was I, in fact, a dilettante? Given the dominance of specialization in university

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teaching, might not there be some sense to it?

That was the devil speaking. I might have listened to him if it hadn't been for Huck Finn. Somehow, brooding about all this, my thoughts went to Huck and his quandary over whether to stay loyal to Jim or to do what was "right" and help return him to slavery. Sacrificing convention to science, Huck chose loyalty to his friend, deciding that, if helping Jim were wrong, he would have to be "bad."

In this way I came to accept my interdisciplinary transgressions, even—as I have done here—to celebrate them. In doing so, I've discovered yet another advantage to the practice: in teaching a variety of courses I more fully live up to Albert Schweitzer's admonition to teach by example. After all, inasmuch as a liberal education serves to create well-rounded students who are broadly educated, the tradition of academic specialization is contradictory, even hypocritical. What better way to teach the benefits of a broad education than to model it? ☺

A Moment of Connection

Irwin Ramirez Leopando

"Now, years later, I walk the streets of Manhattan and overhear fellow Filipinos laughing together, speaking with the old accent. Where I once felt condescension, I sometimes feel something else. I feel envy. Now and then, when I'm alone, I mimic them. I whisper to myself. I try to raise the dead. I float a trial balloon into an empty sky. One afternoon, my therapist asked me to pronounce my name like I did when I was a boy. I couldn't."

Last semester, I gave my Asian-American Literature students a choice between an analytic essay and a personal narrative. Most were more interested in the personal narrative, so, as an example, I decided to share one of my own. I had written the piece a few months before, and by some coincidence it ended up fitting perfectly with the themes we had discussed all semester. (Perhaps it wasn't a total coincidence; we teach what we need to learn.)

My narrative was about growing up in the Philippines, receiving a scholarship to the International School of Manila at the age of twelve, and, surrounded by the wealthy children of American expatriates, finding myself self-conscious about my thick Filipino accent. Ashamed, I forced myself to get rid of it and to speak with an "American" accent, which is the way I've spoken until today. I had written my piece as a way of working through my feelings of loss, my ambivalence about the price I paid to conform, and, ultimately, my sadness about the impossibility of retrieving the past. It felt like a particularly appropriate narrative to share because my class had spent the entire semester exploring questions of immigration and assimilation.


So I sat before my students on that Wednesday afternoon, my essay in my

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hands. I wondered: will they laugh at me? Will they think I'm pathetic? As soon as I started reading, I felt my confidence, my status, my authority all melt away.

That day I realized how power can so easily isolate us from our students, can so easily dull our sensitivity towards their fear of rejection and criticism. Hunched over my desk, my voice trembling, my palms sweating, crossing my arms over my chest (I needed a hug), I was learning firsthand about vulnerability. That moment, the most difficult of the semester, taught me that authenticity *can* slip through the cracks of routine and hierarchy and that teachers need to take risks, to make themselves vulnerable, to clear space for the possibility of such moments of openness and connection.

My students applauded when I finished. Shaky and grateful, I nodded to acknowledge their kindness. I could not look anyone in the eye. There was a feeling of warmth and community in the classroom that I remember to this day. "Silence has monstrous inertia," I had just read from the conclusion of my piece. "It makes me tired."

But not always. 

The Brightening Glance

(For Back to School Night Senior and Sophomore English Classes)

Christopher Sweet

I want to share with you some thoughts on schools and on some areas where we might make improvements if we had it in our power to do so. Since I am a writing teacher and a teaching writer, I cannot resist introducing you to one of my favorite poets, who left us a vision of school he thought was worth preserving.

The Irish poet William Butler Yeats was for part of his life a school inspector, a sort of superintendent. In his poem "Among School Children," he writes about that experience. In the last part of the poem Yeats thinks about the labor that goes on in the classroom, and he comes up with a prescription for the kind of labor that school should be. He uses metaphors of a tree blossoming and a dancer dancing.

Yeats tells us:

Labor is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.

Let's look at that. Assuming that we can all agree that we want our children's school labors to be experiences of natural growth and self-realization, we can also agree that we do not want teachers to beat our children—to bruise their bodies

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to pleasure their souls. Physical “discipline” was common in Yeats’ day, and he knew it was wrong, as we do.

But he also criticizes an education that uses children’s failures, their despair of achieving *beauty*, to try to force beauty out of them. The beauty I’m thinking of is the beauty of a really striking story or essay or poem. Yet I look around me at English education today, and I see that teachers often use *despair* as a teaching tool, forcing students to look at their failures for guidance. They say, “You did this and this and this wrong. Correct it.”

To give you an example, last year I taught a sophomore who was simultaneously retaking freshman English. He asked me to read and critique an essay he had written for his other teacher, and, after I read it, I said, “It’s a good draft, but still a first draft. Yet it is something you can work with. Try sounding it out to yourself until it sounds like you’re talking to someone, telling it to someone you can say *anything* to. Tell it to someone, in your imagination, with whom you can trust your own voice. And tell it to that part of yourself that listens to you. Listen to your voice as you sound it out, and make changes on the paper until it really sounds like talking to someone.”

Then I went to his freshman English teacher and told him what I had done. The teacher said, “Well, I just told the whole class that their papers sounded like they were talking, and I didn’t want that. I gave them the assignment to circle all of the *to be* verbs and replace them with better ones.”

I thought of the students, told not to listen to their voice, circling *to be* verbs and replacing them with others that they probably took from a thesaurus and would never use in real life, words that, in effect, meant nothing to them, because they couldn’t hear them as part of an exchange between concerned people. It was an example of “blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil” if ever there was.

I suggest to you that the problem is not a superabundance of *to be* verbs, nor is it solved by anything like a superficial stylistic change. The problem is that we have conditioned students never to trust their own voice when they write.

How did we come to this pass?

It may have started with the New Criticism movement of the 1930s. The New Critics were champions of *objectivity*. Writing must be objective, they said. Take all subjective notions out of writing. Take the biases of the writer away. Pay no attention to the author or to biography, but approach every text as an object, as if it just dropped out of the sky one day. It has no author, no history. And most important: do not try to give it one! Ultimately, writing that follows this prescription *is* objective and constrained to the point where there are no human voices, and thus no human connections, involved anywhere in the business.

And ever since, English and language arts teachers have tried to separate the voice from the writing.

Back to Yeats’ poem. He says that education should be blossoming or dancing, and that we must not try to beat anything into the child. Then, he considers that blossoming tree: “O chestnut-tree, great rooted-blossomer,/Are you the leaf, the blossom, or the bole?”

This goes right to the heart of the problem. As a writer and teacher, I can see the danger of dividing up the writing experience into small pieces and calling that a lesson in writing. The tree is more than its leaf, more than its blossom, and more than its bole or root-ball. It is in fact more than all three put together. It is far too complex to survive division and classification.

Yeats, then, considers the dancing student: “O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,/How can we know the dancer from the dance?”

What I like about this is the moment when the dancing girl meets the eye of someone she can connect with in the audience, that “brightening glance,” when the art and the artist are seen in their true relationship. They are, Yeats says, inseparable, one.

What has this to do with the way we teach writing? The writer and the writing are inseparable, and writing is an all-at-once activity, like dancing. More than that, the glance that the dancer gives her audience is all-important, in some ways the best part of Yeats’ poem and of the experience of writing. Yeats comprehends that the writer, like the dancer, seeks to connect with someone out there, with anyone who is listening. Write to someone, I coach the students, someone you can say *anything* to. Look for someone out there and in here, inside you. That “brightening glance,” on the page, comes out in the writing in many ways—as a way to say *just the right word*, as phrasing, punctuation, paragraphing, cadence, direct address, humor, irony, teasing, and more. These are all important elements of rhetoric, and we use them every day in our oral language, in meetings on the street and in the classroom, with our mates and friends and strangers, to greet the old and the new. English teachers appreciate how important these elements of rhetoric can be, but most of us never get to them, or never get them right, because most of us were taught to “circle your *to be* verbs and replace them with action verbs.”

We cannot know, analyze out, or separate the dancer from the dance, the composition from the writer’s voice, without doing harm.

In practical terms, this means a bit of chaos and confusion in the lives of the students in my classes. It means they experience not knowing for a while. It means they learn new lessons. It means we reshuffle the deck. The hardest hit at first can be the students who have successfully negotiated school this far, the ones who know how to play the game of school and win. My rules are different. Yet I am not asking these successful students to do anything they cannot do and do in spades.

One of my sophomores asked, “Do you really mean this?” I said yes. “You’re not kidding about this,” he said. I told him I was not kidding. He said, “I wish I’d known this a few years ago when I needed it,” and he chucked his pencil onto his desk and slumped that *I-suffered-all-that-for-nothing* slump.

Another time the same student said, “I don’t mean to be critical, but don’t you English teachers ever, like, get together and decide what you’re going to teach?”

I did not know how to answer him. We all teach as we were taught. The business is self-perpetuating.

The fact is five paragraph essays promise to be easy to read, easy to identify as meeting mandated criteria and conforming or not conforming to a rubric. Teachers know all about “blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil” and often believe it to be, if not the best way, at least the only practical way. Some have despaired of beauty and artfulness and settled for the illusions of clarity and valid assessment that the rubric gives us. But I can think of nothing more dreadful, more painful, than reading a set of themes that were written to conform to somebody’s rubric.

I should end on a positive note. Change is possible. I might have answered the student, “Most teachers are pretty much set in their ways. But you aren’t. I’ll

do my best to teach you, and then you can go out and spread the word to others if you think there is something valuable here.”

Thank you for coming. ☺

Personal Teaching

Howard Wolf

I recently received an e-mail from a former student which speaks in its simplicity and vulnerability:

I'm not sure if you will remember me, but I am hoping my last name will ring a bell. I took your Literary Journalism class along with your Short Fiction course. I was just wondering if you would be willing to write me a letter of recommendation for Graduate School. If you don't remember me, or don't have the time, that is not a problem.

This student's name happens to lend itself to puns, and I had often made them over the course of a year in class, some of them groaners. Because she had a bright spirit, I had often called on her for response. But she isn't convinced that I know who she is. There is, of course, some professional courtesy and assumed modesty in her "letter," but there is also an underlying insecurity about her academic visibility and identity. I do remember her, I shall tell her that I remember her, and I shall write a letter of recommendation. I shall fit my words to her achievements, personality, and professional needs. And I might even tell her, to balance the playing field, that I wasn't certain she knew who I was.

Another former student, working on Wall Street, recently wrote to me: "In the fish bowl setting of your classroom, I had some of the most memorable discussions and arguments of my four years at college." I like the notion that we were all in the swim together in the classroom, that the action of the dialogue was as important as the issues. I'd like to think that he meant as well the openness of our discussion, the light of our evolving enlightenment, but I may be making too much of his metaphor.

I remain puzzled, after five decades of teaching in the English department of an American university, by a set of divisions and separations that don't make much sense to me as rigid barriers: teacher vs. student, method vs. content (process and product, if you will), the phenomenology of the person (learner) vs. the patterns of the text, the active private lives of students vs. their anonymity in the classroom, the complex inferiority of the instructor vs. studied professional decorum, field vs. field, ism vs. ism, the interests of English departments vs. the interests of education departments.

The divisions are real, and if we do not find a remedy for some of these rifts, however hidden they may be to the world outside of the university, we may find

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that we will all be teaching electronically at The University of Phoenix one day (if we could all get jobs). We need, among other things, to tell each other who we are. If teachers and students can reveal themselves, in some fashion, to one another, it may become possible for them to overcome some apparent differences—ones that even provoke hostilities—and to discover levels and layers of likeness.

Each person's story is complex and incomplete. If teachers and students can find ways to tell the stories of who they are to one another, they will discover some areas of congruence and make a contribution to each other's continually developing sense of self. ☺