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Connecting

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Connecting

Authors

Helen Walker, Louise Morgan, Amy Wink, Marcia Nell, Gergana Vitanova, and Judy Huddleston

Connecting

Section Editor's Message

Dear Readers,

This year, I entitle our collection of narratives “Relevance”—and begin with this: “I just feel irrelevant to their lives,” writes Louise Morgan about her high school students. “I feel so white, removed, and wrong for these kids. . . . As important as I think our [class work] is, . . . IS IT?” My reaction to this email lament, sent to me at the end of her particularly difficult day of teaching, is that her question concerning relevance is right on! Despite the hopelessness of kids mired in horrific home situations, inadequately staffed and funded schools, indifferent or unknowledgeable legislators—despite whether we teach in a school like Louise’s or in a school for the privileged—a beautiful focus of our teaching can be, must be, the relevancy of what happens in our classrooms to our students’ beyond-school lives. The narratives for this issue of “Connecting” each tell a tale concerning this issue.

First, Louise Morgan’s story “Street Science: An English Teacher’s Introduction to Street Life” tells us how she navigates her difficult teaching days and what allows her to center on what the people facing her need from her.

Amy Wink entitles her piece with a quote from Albert Einstein: “In the Middle of Difficulty Lies Opportunity.” Hers is a story where, at least this once, her students understand deeply the “necessary union of theory with practice.”

Marcia Nell sends her colleagues everywhere a call to action. We must not stay behind the closed doors of our elementary classrooms. In actuality, the federal government has already opened them and entered in. She calls us to “educate our new partners” so they will know that their misguided reforms are *not* presently grounded in research based on what teachers know about children and on pedagogy that works. It is up to teachers to speak out.

Gergana Vitanova gives us a firsthand account of “Negotiating an Identity in Graduate School as a Second Language Speaker,” fascinating in its real-world relevance.

Finally, in “A Cat in the Sun: Reflections on Teaching,” Judy Huddleston gently admonishes us to encourage more “connected ways of knowing.”

So the question remains, what do our students take with them out of our classrooms that really matters in their lives? Before anything else can happen, they need to be able to survive, and, if we need to start there, we need to start there. There is where they are. There is what is relevant in their lives. Then, once we have addressed their “there,” maybe they will, as a favor to us all, let us help them to live with greater depth and greater courage.

To us!

Street Science: An English Teacher's Introduction to Street Life

Louise Morgan

After a number of years as an adjunct professor teaching college courses in English, theatre, and speech, I embarked on a course of study to obtain certification in secondary English. To fund this venture, I took a position in a failing inner city vo-tech school. It has to be a desperate situation when an emergency certificate places an English teacher in a *learning support science classroom*.

It took months before my students accepted me as their teacher. They questioned my hands-on style. "Why don't we use the book?" They doubted my alternative approaches. "Why are we juggling?"

And, of course, I doubted myself all the while. It wasn't until I created a unit on the science of sound that I found common ground. I immersed myself in the language my students know best: the rhythm of the street, the music of the hip-hop generation. This led to the creation of another unit where hearts and minds from different cultures communicate: theatre.

We began with a field trip to Harrisburg's Whitaker Center for Science and the Arts. The students studied the physics of dance, the basics of chemical reactions, and the way an opera singer produces sound. And they watched the center's repertory company do a play on clouds called *Are You Cirrus?* The hope was that my students would see the connection between art and science. At the very least, I was hoping they would see the potential for fun and creativity if we wrote our own science play.

I decided the project was really too big for me to handle alone, so I enlisted the help of the learning support English and Math teachers. Now our project was interdisciplinary as well! I wrote a proposal for a budget of \$1,000. The local community theatre became our consultants. We took a number of field trips there for lessons on every aspect of theatre. What would be our science subject for the play? Somehow *Are You Cirrus?* did not seem relevant for our kids of "the ghetto."

I found inspiration from an activity we did earlier in the year. As I was getting to know my students, I often incorporated "improvs" into our days. This was a chance for me to take a break from science and reside in the comfort of my true knowledge base. I taught them how to create dialogue, plot, and setting on the spot. They continually amazed and dazzled me with their honest portrayals of their lives.

It was the desire they had to mirror and reflect on their lives that produced the title and subject of our play. *Street Science* is the story about a young boy who learns that knowing scientific facts can keep him safe and help him make the right decisions.

To write the script, we alternated between doing science lessons and research projects on tobacco, drugs, and teen pregnancy and doing improvisations and

Louise Morgan, M.M.C., teaches in an inner city school, writes plays, and takes college classes. She teaches Find the Art in Earth during the summer months and hikes the Appalachian Trail. She currently performs Theatre for Personal Transformation—New Life Scripts.

writing workshops. I listened to them create dialogue using their own language and slang, phrases like “You wawlin’” and “get the bogies” and “whas up cuz?” The language that they lived was the language of this play. I never could have written it. Many times, I wrote down what they said verbatim.

We booked our show *Street Science* at five elementary schools. We struggled each day to keep it all together while we practiced for our shows. Low attendance, skipping class, and constant disciplinary actions like in- and out-of-school suspensions plagued our efforts.

Who were these kids? John was a true artist and of course our set designer. He had come to school high on drugs and was constantly getting detentions for being tardy or misbehaving. Still, when he was in my class, he created. He had painted the scenery of his life on wooden Louon boards—the corner store, the school, a graffiti wall, and the stoop.

Leroy got his most recent detention for throwing a pair of scissors at Tyrell. His wide Jamaican smile belied the stormy emotions he often hid or suppressed. He was learning to pronounce the words “neurotransmitter” and “dopamine” because he was the lead of the play and his character must teach another character about the effects of drugs on the brain. It was doubtful Leroy would have been able to hold still long enough to memorize those words for a test, but for this play he bounced a basketball (in character) while he pounded out sense and meaning.

As I write this, I begin to tear up thinking of Leroy. He had the whole play memorized! Much of the time, I feel I have little or no effect on the lives of these kids. I have always believed in the power of words, literature, and art to transform, but I wonder if it can ever be enough for them. It can’t. Writing a play and turning a classroom into a theatre company will please some, but will not entice every one of my students to attend school. Many still don’t come.

This “island” in the inner city challenges everything I know of beauty and everything I understand about education. You ask, “How does an English teacher survive in a science learning support classroom?” Any time I sense beauty, inspiration, or love, I follow that inclination. Is this any way to design a curriculum? I’m not making recommendations, but here is one true thing I know: in this environment, the heart leads, and the head follows. ☐○

“In the Middle of Difficulty Lies Opportunity” — Albert Einstein

Amy Wink

In my writing class I ask my students to write about a community problem and determine what action they, individually, can take to effect change. In es-

Amy Wink currently lives in Austin, Texas. A graduate of Southwestern University, she earned her MA and PhD from Texas A&M University-College Station in 1996. Her book, She Left Nothing In Particular: The Autobiographical Legacy of 19th Century Women’s Diaries (U of Tennessee Press, 2001) explores the significance of private writing as an act of daily creativity.

sence, what can an individual do on a personal level to solve a large, sometimes overwhelming, problem? They do very well describing and pointing out problems, writing ardently about things that need change. They flounder when describing what they can do, falling heavily into cynicism and ennui. It's not that they don't want to create change; it's that they do not recognize how or perhaps even that an individual continually creates and re-creates the world in which he or she lives. This year, I may tell them this story.

In the summer when James Byrd was dragged to death behind a pick-up truck outside of Jasper, Texas, many of us in the region were fixed in our horror. The heat was unbearable as well, rising to near 120 on many days, as if Hell had been invited in and decided to stay on awhile. I was teaching an eight o'clock class to heat-exhausted undergraduates. One day, a colleague noticed one of her basic writing students, an African-American woman, nodding off in class. When she asked her if she were ill, her student replied that she was very tired because she had been walking to the university from her home . . . 30 miles away. Her story unfolded. She had been refused Medicaid benefits for her epileptic son because, when she'd gone to court in her clothes from Goodwill, the judge thought she dressed too well to need the money for medication. Because she didn't have enough money to keep her car, and she knew that getting her education was the only path out of her life in poverty, she walked. Because she wanted to be in school, she walked, starting well before dawn so she could make it for her first class at 8:00. She walked in the dark, in the piney woods of Deep East Texas, which stretched on to the east, where her cousin James had recently been killed.

Profoundly troubled, my friend started to find assistance for her student, whose needs were so many. If nothing else, we will get her a ride, I said. I asked my class if anyone came from the same direction. My quietest student, her Irish ancestry clear in her red hair and porcelain skin, volunteered, her eyes widening when I told her why she was needed. We arranged for our students to meet, and they began their daily commute together. When I met my colleague's student that day, she could not speak, but, to *this* day, I can still feel her hand grasping mine.

I had done a tiny thing, but the impact was great. Her world changed. My student later wrote how much she learned by talking with her new friend as they drove to campus, and I asked her if she ever thought about what she might be teaching with her own being. My friend and I continued to find help, and, while we could not change everything—the history of racism and sexism compounding the difficulties of her personal life, the poverty she struggled to escape—we did help. And we found more help. No, this small connection did not end racism, did not cure her son of epilepsy, did not free her from poverty. If we had thought only of solving these, we might never have solved the most immediate one. She needed a ride to school. We found her one.

I hope this is a story my students understand. I hope they learn to see solutions as quickly as they see problems. I hope that they see how they might practice in their lives the small changes that affect the larger world. I hope they understand the necessary union of theory with practice. I hope they consider how their ordinary lives can exemplify larger ideals. I hope they understand that generosity blesses the giver and the gifted. I hope that they see in the middle of difficulty many opportunities awaiting discovery. ☺

The New Partnership

Marcia Nell

Dear Educators,

In today's political and educational climate, the federal government has become an active, vocal partner in classrooms across the United States. This active stance calls for external accountability systems to validate that children are learning the predetermined standards it sets forth. This external accountability system relies on standardized tests for substantiating children's learning. Our new partner, the federal government, seems to have all the answers to the problems that exist in education today, which educators have allegedly not solved and even ignored. According to Richard Allington, our partner has begun a "campaign to convince everyone that not only is there a reading crisis, but that those in the educational profession have routinely ignored 'scientific evidence' detailing the nature and form of effective reading instruction" (4).

Given this campaign, it is imperative that we professional educators are able to articulate our professional and personal knowledge about learning, children, and pedagogy. I suggest that, given the new policies, our new partner is lacking the professional knowledge gained only through interaction in a real classroom with real children on a daily basis. Educators place great value on the tried and true daily encounters with children. Educators insist that new teachers have plenty of experience in the classroom before releasing them to be in charge of their own classrooms. Our new partner relies on information generated from sources of its own choice, and these sources do not seem to use experience in a real classroom to help guide decisions about policy. In fact, the new policies tend to indicate a distrust for classroom experience as a source of knowledge.

According to John P. Guthrie, a policy is described as a "defined or intended principle of operation" (27). A policy is a goal. This goal carries forward a way of thought or action that places the policy maker in the position of allocating their resources and commitment toward the specified goal. According to Jacqueline Edmondson, "policies are the articulation of one's hope for the way something should be, and they are revealed through various texts, practices, and discourses" and are an extension of what the policy maker believes the "ideal society" should look like (13). Policy is written so that the ideal society will become a reality. In our new partner's present policy, the ideal will become reality when children get high enough scores on standardized tests.

Yet the ideal society imagined by our federal government is very much different from the reality of what educators find in their classrooms. They too agree that it would be wonderful if the world's problems could be solved if all children just learned to read. It would be wonderful if children would live in homes that promote health, security, safety, warmth, and love—if only the children would score at the proficient level in mathematics. It would be magnificent if the par-

Marcia Nell is currently a doctoral candidate at The Pennsylvania State University in Curriculum and Instruction. Her emphasis area is Early Childhood Education. She has been an elementary teacher for the past twenty-four years.

ents of all these children were able to make a living and be able to provide for their families the same kinds of material goods afforded to other children. It would be outstanding if all these things could come to pass if only the *children* could take care of us all by scoring higher on their standardized tests.

The term “radical democracy” is defined as a “political ideology [that] places emphasis on redistribution of resources and recognition of groups and individuals, including those who have traditionally been disenfranchised by U.S. politics and society” (Fraser qtd. in Edmondson 12). Radical democracy begins with the people; it is a grassroots effort to bring about changes for groups of people who under previous circumstances were silenced. It is an ideology that gives a loud collaborative voice to these groups of people. According to Patrick Shannon, “Radical democrats seek to identify and establish the social conditions that produce democratic citizenship” (102).

Maybe you classify yourself as a radical democrat; maybe you don’t. Maybe the only category that matters here is advocate of children and children’s learning. The truth is that we *are* partners in this new classroom relationship.

Given this partnership, here is my call to you. Educators, open your doors, speak your truth, and educate our new partner. As educators, we surely do believe in the process of education. We also believe in the sanctity of the classroom, as that place where the sacred act of learning takes place. Since our new partners insist upon entering our classrooms, we must ask them to submit to the same kinds of rigor as teachers. They too must base their policies on research grounded in personal knowledge about learning, children, and pedagogy. We must insist that they prove that they are “highly qualified,” or they will need to leave quietly. ☹

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Negotiating an Identity in Graduate School as a Second Language Speaker

Gergana Vitanova

Initially, I came to the U.S. for family rather than academic reasons just

Gergana Vitanova currently teaches applied linguistics and TESOL at the University of Central Florida. Her research interests encompass critical approaches to second language learning, including gender, agency, and discursive practices. With colleagues Joan Kelly Hall and Ludmila Marchenkova, she has most recently published an edited book on Bakhtinian perspectives in second language acquisition.

after I completed my B.A. in Bulgarian Linguistics and Literature. I brought with me a portfolio of over 20 published poems, which I soon learned meant nothing in my new environment. Some people I met hadn't even heard of Bulgaria. I also brought a life-long appreciation for literacy.

Literacy is highly valued in my home community. Most children, for example, find themselves surrounded by print at a very early age. I remember being subscribed to a children's magazine and leafing through numerous, well-illustrated children's books before I was able to read. It is not surprising when you enter a Bulgarian home to see carefully arranged bookcases, heavy with books by both Bulgarian and foreign authors occupying a central position in the household. I learned to read long before I went to school. I remember taking turns reading with my grandmother. I quickly became an avid reader and a confident user of my literacy skills.

All of this confidence was lost when I arrived in the United States. Although I had studied some English in high school and college, I realized that this unsystematic knowledge wasn't enough to allow me to function as a literate person in my new society. Thus, from a well-read and published college graduate, I transformed into a silent immigrant.

For two years, I studied English, mainly on my own, surrounded by numerous grammar books and dictionaries. As I read novels in English, I kept a notepad by my side, entering each new vocabulary item, its definition, and an example of a sentence in which it could be used. Copious grammar notes accompanied words and phrases. During these two years, I also decided that I wanted to continue my studies in linguistics and applied for the masters program in an English department.

Success in graduate school is intimately related to writing. My first course in this country in a master's program in English was Versification. It was, according to rumor, one of the most challenging courses the department offered. I assume that because of my experience in poetry and formal linguistics knowledge, I excelled. I would count syllables and stresses, identify iambic and pyrrhic feet with precision. Just when I was becoming hopeful about my academic future in America, I got my first term paper written in English back. At the end, having summarized my achievements, the professor pointed out that if I were to succeed in graduate school, I had to improve my writing significantly. He suggested that I enroll in Advanced Composition for seniors. Most of my papers in Advanced Comp came back with comments very much like the following:

Gergana,

You have many wonderful ideas here. Your work is to keep working on the presentation, to present your ideas as smoothly as possible.

From the end of this course till the present, I have had a difficult but also exciting journey.

To summarize how I was initiated into an academic discourse community during these first years, I would say that I learned mainly by engaging with texts actively. Consciously noticing what sentence patterns other academic writers preferred, what discursive markers they employed, I acquired my writing voice as a second language writer in these first years of graduate school. Thus, reading

became an interactive, socialization practice. This practice continued when I entered my Ph.D. program in TESOL, but of course it became much more complex as the focus changed.

Gradually, I began to enjoy being able to take part in the discourse of my new academic community. Any appropriation of these discourses, however, was underlain by participation in dialogic practices with others. Thus, I would like to outline a few types of dialogue/interactions that I engaged in during the negotiation of academic identity in a second language in the different stages of graduate school. Dialogue, according to Bakhtin is a complex meaning-making activity that doesn't have to take place necessarily face-to-face with another human being. In this sense, one dialogue I already mentioned was the interaction with other writers of academic texts and with the academic texts themselves.

Dialogue with mentors (particularly during the process of writing a dissertation) has been very important during the last years of my Ph.D. program. I was lucky to have a dedicated advisor, Deborah Hicks, who read not only drafts of my chapters but also my first conference proposals. The feedback I needed at this stage was not on grammar or style any longer but, rather, on presenting an argument more cogently. She and other mentors during these critical years have also provided feedback on how to apply for an academic job and polish a vita. Presenting with my mentors at conferences has been one of my best learning experiences.

Another type of dialogue that shaped my current professional identity was, to my own surprise, the one with my own ESL students. I started teaching a variety of ESL courses as a graduate student, most focusing on reading and writing skills. Initially, I was afraid that my students would reject me as a non-native speaker of English, and I approached the classroom with apprehension. However, I found that I could serve as a model for those students who actually appreciated my experience as a second language writer. They often commented on my "good vocabulary" and wanted to know how they could enhance theirs. Since then, teaching has become an essential conduit for participating in academic discourses and a vital layer of my professional subjectivity.

A particularly important type of dialogue has been the one in which I engaged with the participants in my dissertation. All qualitative research, according to Clark Moustakas, is autobiographical. My longitudinal project, which studied how eight East European immigrants establish their agencies in a new language, became a site of reflexivity and construction of my own subjectivity. The participants were not mere respondents, answering my carefully prepared questions and passively allowing me to observe them. In fact, they would often ignore my interview guides and fire questions of their own: "How do Americans treat *you*?" Listening to their voices and analyzing their experiences has allowed me in many ways to make meaning of my own.

As a Ph.D. student I also published book reviews and articles. Communicating with the editors of the journals as well as receiving and negotiating the feedback by colleagues in the field (in some cases, anonymous reviewers) has also contributed to establishing a sense of professional identity. Functioning as a column editor for a newsletter, soliciting articles, and guiding authors through their revisions served a similar purpose.

Today, I enjoy taking part in the discourse of my academic community. Modern cultural theorists believe that, when we conceptualize culture, we should

move beyond the level of nation-states and ethnicity. Instead, identity groups are formed on the basis of multiple factors, including gender and occupation. In a significant way, gaining access to this professionally defined discourse has allowed me to acquire an identity that transcends national, geographic, and linguistic borders. ☺

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A Cat in the Sun: Reflections on Teaching

Judy Huddleston

In addition to teaching English 101 this quarter, I led a memoir workshop through Writers in the Community at the Woman's Hearth, a transitional space created by Catholic sisters in downtown Spokane for women marginalized by poverty, abuse, addiction, and mental illness. In a recent workshop, a woman wrote and read a simple piece about seeing a cat lying in the sun. She saw the cat in front of a "noisy, smelly, dirty" apartment on a "bad street" downtown. Her words were unsparing, sharp as shards of broken bottles: stench, filth, garbage-filled, reeking of urine. Yet she conveyed the hope and hopelessness of the "disenfranchised" without using any kind of "long word," without reference to anything like objective correlative.

She spoke of observing a "pointy-faced" cat stretched over the warm pavement, just basking in the golden sunlight. And the woman marveled at it: the exquisite peace of that cat in that moment, in that deplorable environment. Though belonging to no one and living in an impoverished neighborhood, the cat was fat, obviously well fed. Realizing people from the subhuman apartment building had to be feeding it, she concluded someone cared for, even *loved*, the cat, that in fact "it belonged." She was heartened that a being could be content despite external conditions, loved despite being alone, and could belong despite being homeless.

I was moved to tears, humbled by the honest simplicity and raw power of this woman's words. Her truth came from and went straight to the heart, capturing life and humanity in one paragraph scrawled on a lined notepad. The words seemed the essence of all that mattered; they also reminded me of my own less than Zen-like consciousness.

Twenty minutes earlier, I'd had tears in my eyes over an entirely different matter: a parking space. Unable to parallel park deftly enough, I backed out and was intimidated by an impatient man in a huge truck. He insisted on allowing me

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back into the crowded traffic of the one-way street, so I had to re-negotiate the confusing, vaguely threatening streets and perhaps lose my coveted space. Which I didn't. I merely depleted my energy generating silent tears in a rush of frenzied heat and anxiety while circling the city block. I was about as far as one could get from the cat in the sun. Back to back, my two stories may highlight my subjective emotional response to life as the often clichéd female hyper-reactivity. Yet there is a deeper truth as well.

How easily, how unceasingly, we forget the point of expression. As teachers, we all too quickly reduce writing to academic discourse. How can we help get the meaning of the cat in the sun back into the classroom, into both the students and the teachers? Without it, what is the point? To drive around another block? Prove another thesis? Have we forgotten why we're driving, where we're going, what we'll do when we get there? What do we want students to learn and why? What do we need to teach and why? What kind of life do they envision—what are we preparing them for? Why does writing matter? Is there a bridge between the writing needed for academic discourse and the writing, thinking, and feeling needed for a meaningful life?

How do we provide it?

These issues concern me personally, as a writer myself and as someone who will continue teaching both English 101 and creative writing. A huge chasm separates an Eastern Washington University classroom and the Women's Hearth. While we should not believe writing courses are therapy classes, neither should we ignore student writers' problems and lives. Pedagogies using empathic observation and participation, what psychologist Erik K. Erikson originally termed "disciplined subjectivity," can serve as ways to form a more connected knowing. I believe it is up to us as teachers and students to create an honest, heartfelt discourse about what "really matters" within a context of respect, even reverence, for education and the power of knowledge disseminated through the written word to transform both our inner and outer lives. ☺

