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Connecting

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Connecting: This Listening Thing

Section Editor's Message

By far the majority of narratives that come in for “Connecting” are stories about teachers’ perceptions of something important happening when they *listened* to a student. The point, I suppose, is that they actually *heard* the student, which is what listening really is, isn’t it? How perfect a theme for “Connecting,” then: teachers sharing about connecting to their students through listening, or, in one case, what happened when he did not listen.

This “listening thing” keeps coming up. We had a symposium, “Peace Making and Poetry,” at my college in April. Someone said at a luncheon that she thought the world was evolving toward world peace because of the increasing recognition of global interdependency and complementarity not just among poets but also among scientists and politicians. One of the panelists, poet Julia Kasdorf from Penn State, took the microphone and said, “But people would have to listen to each other.” That is all she said. It was a big “but.”

The stories that follow of teachers’ lives—lives with breakthrough insights and watershed moments—show the dramatic nature of what can happen when listening occurs.

Just today I got another valuable perspective on listening in our end-of-the-year writing faculty workshop. We ended our two-day sessions with a panel of senior students, all excellent writers. The one thing that all four mentioned is that their writing got better when teachers and peers listened (deeply) to them during their writing process. Ironic, isn’t it? Both partners in the teacher-student relationship need the same thing to create a high learning curve.

Listening seems a simple act. We have ears; we hear constantly. So what makes this reported “special listening” unique? We can do it; surely all of us have deeply listened to someone sometime. This proves our capacity for it. Should we intentionally teach listening skills so we get better at them? Maybe many of you do. Does it work? What if Kasdorf is right and deep listening is the necessary skill for world peace? Perhaps this can be the topic for *JAEPL*’s next “Connecting.”

And a note about what follows: I have deviated from the typical collection of teacher narratives. I asked one of the college students I mentioned above, Danina Garcia, to write up the comments she shared, and she happily complied. Her name for listening is “deep conversation.”

Message from a Student Writer

Danina Garcia

Without a doubt, the single most important thing I learned in four years of studying English at Messiah College was this: writing is conversation. Most of us literary types reach college not having thought of that. Writing is that thing you do alone (preferably in a damp, romantic garret) to communicate your own thoughts to the world; it's always perfect—or nearly perfect—the first time through, and all you worry about after that is tweaking (sentence structure, word choice). I'll never forget the shock I had when I handed a draft to a peer editor, expecting suggestions for a stronger topic sentence, perhaps, and maybe a comma or two. She handed the paper back to me with a single sentence written above the title: "Why is this important?" I'd never had to explain that about a paper before, but she wasn't going to let me keep writing until I could.

The most effective writing assignments I was given were those where I as a writer was taking part in a conversation. This might have been a conversation with an author, other scholars, fellow-students, or a professor. Before college, I was accustomed to professors seeing my work at most twice, in rough draft and final form. In college, for the first time, I found myself expected to write papers that I could defend fluently and easily when I sat in a professor's office with draft two or three or four. Professors' comments, whether delivered after class or scribbled in the margins, reflected the idea that scholarship was dialogue, not monologue.

It wasn't only professors who taught me that. In many classes, I worked closely with groups of other students, "peer groups," who carefully reviewed each others' writings. Sometimes this backfired, and groups ended up as little more than fan clubs or grammar checkers. Frequently, however, I discovered how exciting and thrilling (and challenging) it could be to tackle my writing on a deep level. The peer groups that worked forced me to move beyond changing a word here or reorganizing a paragraph here. I needed to think about what I truly wanted to say on the deepest level, and so I rewrote and rewrote and rewrote, each draft drastically different from the one before. If writing was like building a castle, I had been accustomed to fret about the towers and the turrets; my fellow writers would pack me off down to the cellar to explore the foundation, and I wasn't allowed to come back until it was perfect. Meanwhile, I was forcing them to do the same with their work, inspecting the deep structures of their writing. By the end of the assignment or the course, we had all been irreversibly influenced by each other in the best of ways.

One class I remember primarily because of my peer group; Dr. Walker sent us off to write a "group paper." No sweat, I remember thinking. I'd written group papers before. "You take paragraph 1 and 2 . . . I'll take 3 & 4 . . . and she can

Danina Garcia, a native of Philadelphia, has just completed her degree in English and French at Messiah College. She student taught in an inner-city Harrisburg high school and found the challenge exactly what she was hoping for. She will spend the next year with Real Change News in Seattle, Washington, an organization for homeless empowerment and advocacy. After getting more life experience, Danina wants to teach the kids in whose lives she can make a big difference.

write the conclusion and type it up.” Instead, however, Dr. Walker insisted that the paper reflect a “group voice.” More than a little apprehensive, we took a laptop and five sodas to a picnic table on a warm Indian summer afternoon. Then I learned what writing could be like when five minds were delving into a subject, lobbing ideas back and forth like tennis balls, the shape and concept of the paper changing under our fingers like clay until slowly it began to settle definitively into something that none of us could have written alone, something more than just the sum of its parts.

Perhaps this is a problem unique to me, but I’ve never been very good at seeing beneath the surface of my writing. The kinds of conversations I was forced to have in college took me above and beyond that—or maybe beneath and beyond it. Writing was no longer just words on a page; it was actual ideas, beliefs, thoughts, concepts that I had to find from the deepest part of myself and somehow render into two-dimensional print. If the thoughts were going to come from that deep, the writing process itself had to be willing to go that deep. I couldn’t go there alone, but I learned you’re not really supposed to. Writing, after all, is just language, and language is about communicating. The other writers I dealt with at college forced me to think about what I really wanted to say—and to go deep enough to say it. ☐

Anger in the Teaching Life

Libby Falk Jones

I’m a seasoned teacher. For nearly 40 years, I’ve experienced the joys and frustrations of my vocation, working—and usually succeeding—at embodying what Parker Palmer terms good teaching’s two essentials: love of learning and love of learners. I am though, even now, even with all my experience, sometimes an angry teacher.

What is it that makes my blood boil? Let me tell you about Jennifer. Jennifer’s a bright, motivated junior taking my upper-level journalism class this term. Jennifer speaks up in class, volunteers to drive the van the Friday we attend a play in nearby Lexington. Exuding enthusiasm, Jennifer is the sort of learner it’s easy to love. At least she was. Two weeks ago, I sat in my office holding Jennifer’s mid-term journalism portfolio. She had turned it in late. The “portfolio” was a mess—a clutch of disorganized papers without even a paper clip, violating just about every stipulation of content and process. So out of whack it was—what was supposed to be a three-page place story on the college’s beehives was half a page, a single paragraph!—it was easy to feel it as a deliberate affront. Had she even read the syllabus? Her introduction, supposed to be two-three pages describing and analyzing her growth, was a single page, a long vent about her frustrations. I had

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just read and evaluated the twenty portfolios from Jennifer's classmates. Some were less strong than others, of course. But none evidenced such disregard of both the letter and spirit of the writing and portfolio requirements.

Sitting in my office flipping through those disorganized sheets, I could feel my heart speed up, my breathing quicken. How many times had we gone over news style's need of short paragraphs? How many times had we reviewed the portfolio's requirements? I stood up and walked to my window. Sure, Jennifer was frustrated—but she wasn't even trying. I was the one who was trying. Didn't she see that? Twenty other students were catching on. Why wasn't she? Then followed the bottom-line conclusion: how could she do this to me? I reached for my pencil, ready to retaliate, to demolish. I wrote Jennifer's name on the top of the feedback sheet, then scanned the categories of reporting and writing skills, mulling over the best place to start, nursing, even congratulating myself on, my righteous indignation. I was, as Mary Rose O'Reilly writes, "hooked" on my anger (18).

But this story has a happy ending. Of course I paused. Of course I say, in that pause, that nothing I could write, especially at that moment, would be helpful. Of course I realized that to vent my anger, no matter how justified I perceived myself, against this student writer would shame me, would violate my integrity as a teacher. I knew I had to "unhook" myself from my emotions, to reach beyond my human responses for wisdom. As teacher, I have knowledge; I have power. In a contest with an undergraduate, I'm the automatic winner. I can and should be generous, should assume—until proved otherwise—that a student's actions, however egregious and insulting, emanate from error, not from malice. My job here was to listen beyond the surface, listen to Jennifer's need, try to understand her behaviors from within her frame of reference. My job was also to assess my own role in Jennifer's performance. Setting aside her portfolio, I tallied up her grades. I was surprised to see check-minuses and zeros accumulate. I'd known she'd missed some assignments but hadn't attended to the pattern. Why hadn't I noticed the extent of her struggles?

Despite these realizations, I still wanted to hang onto my anger. When Jennifer came in—she had accepted my neutral invitation to make up the required conference she'd missed the week before—it was all I could do to keep my voice calm, to will away the red blotches threatening to rise to my cheeks. My heart pounded a little, though I don't think she heard. I was able to ask about, not sneer at, her processes in preparing her portfolio. We looked together at the assignment guidelines, at the textbook's description of the news story.

And of course she had a point of view, one I needed to hear. Jennifer's beehives story was short because "you're always telling us to condense," she said. And condense she had, omitting substantive details and jamming what was left into that one paragraph to claim less space on the page. Good impulse, wrong application. Easier to correct that application than the impulse! As I looked beyond form to content, I saw that my anger at the fact of that paragraph had actually prevented my reading her words, words that turned out to be orderly, lively, and direct. "I love writing," Jennifer told me. "This style cuts out everything I love."

I told her I understood. I suggested that, if she gave this tighter form a real try, she might see some creative possibilities—much like a poet who chooses to write a villanelle. Then I stressed that though I could see her viewpoint, her work

at this point was not acceptable. No, I hadn't succeeded in banishing my self-righteousness—it felt good to say that. I offered Jennifer a chance to revise and resubmit her portfolio. More work for her, of course, but a promise of redemption. And penance for my own blindness to her needs. She walked out silently. I brooded—had she heard me?

She must have. Jennifer's portfolio came back in: still no paper clip, but some genuine revisions, at least now a passing effort. I could even find some things to praise. I passed Jennifer in the hall. "The conference helped a lot," she told me. Two hours later, she emailed me some of her poems—a clear act of trust.

To reach serenity as teachers, writes O'Reilley, we must stop denying our anger and instead experience it, "sitting with it in a kind of mysterious love, knowing it like a beloved, naughty animal" (19). My dance with Jennifer hasn't ended. Nor, no matter its outcome, are its patterns likely to reshape my teaching world. I'm sure I'll feel anger again. I may respond in ways that are better, or worse, than these. I'm setting down this small experience so I may acknowledge and inhabit my feelings and thus honor the shadow side of the teaching life, a shadow side that deepens, rather than lessens, the longer we walk.

But still we walk. ☐

O'Reilley, Mary Rose. *The Garden at Night: Burnout and Breakdown in the Teaching Life*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005.

Connections of a First-Year Teacher

Ryan Skinnell

Last semester I taught my first section of first-year composition, which also happened to be the first class I'd ever taught. I was nervous and exhilarated before I walked in the first day, and, if it weren't so clichéd, I'd consider recounting the wide-eyed dewiness of my students. If it weren't so clichéd, I'd also consider talking about the dismay I felt at having not planned in detail any of my opening comments, or I'd consider describing the conviction that I'd come to about being a compassionate authoritarian: a professor who demanded respect while encouraging personal connections.

I began class with a lecture. I started by informing my students that we would be investigating some pretty heavy topics in our time together: race, gender, sexuality, politics, religion, etc. I also gave them some background information about my views of a student-centered classroom. We discussed (actually I discussed) student responsibilities such as being prepared, giving input in classroom instruction and assignments, posing problems instead of being passive learners, and taking a proactive role in their educational pursuits beyond the classroom.

Ryan Skinnell is a master's student in Rhetoric and Composition at California State University, Northridge, where he teaches First Year Composition. He has his sights on entering a PhD program in the near future and hopes to continue teaching writing as part of a career in academia. Mr. Skinnell contends that no students were harmed in the making of this submission.

They sat quietly, blankly, staring at me as if I were speaking another language. After a brief pause, I took advantage of their quiet and launched into my expectations of their classroom behavior, attendance, participation, etc. I pointed to applicable portions of my syllabus, gesticulated wildly, and raised the timbre of my voice to preacherly proportions. Finally, I finished and put them to work writing a short theme while I tried to recover from my zeal.

I was physically shaken after this first day of teaching. I left feeling as if I were recovering from a particularly bad hangover. I had a headache, felt jittery and overwhelmed, thinking that I'd somehow missed the right words that would have wooed them into action.

Five weeks later, I finally had my first student come to office hours. In fact, I'd been incredibly disappointed in how my students responded to the call to take control of their lives as evidenced by how few students had come to visit me. We'd read Paulo Freire, discussed media manipulations, deconstructed gender and religion, all with little enthusiasm beyond my own. Owing in part to my vanity, and in part to my insecurity, I took the opportunity of asking this student, one of my average students, why people weren't taking advantage of the problem-posing style of classroom management that I'd instituted to give them some authority. Want to know what she answered?

"It's just hard sometimes because there's a lot of homework and essays and stuff."

Connection: I gave my students the directive to make educational choices to benefit themselves, and then I complained when the choices they made ran counter to my ideals—even as I assigned "a lot of homework and essays and stuff," stifling their authority.

Connection: You can lead a student to enlightenment, but it's a lot harder when you're going the opposite direction. ☹

Guiding the Passion

Lee Roecker

I have never felt a student's pain so acutely. As I lecture about evolution, Jimmy's face contorts as if he is possessed by a demon. My words cause his pain.

"You claim that the earth is about 4.5 billion years old. Is this with or without God?" he asks on the second day of class. I reply that if I were a scientist who *did not* believe in God, after looking at the evidence, I would conclude that the earth was this age. If I were a scientist who *did* believe in God, after looking at the evidence, I would arrive at the same answer.

"Do you believe in God?" another student asks. This is a common question, but I disappoint many in the class when I reply that my beliefs are immaterial to this course:

Lee Roecker was a professor of chemistry at Berea College from 1988-2005. His narrative comes from a general education course called "Natural Science" that all students at Berea College are required to take. He currently lives in Chicago and is writing about issues relating to science education. Lee will be teaching at Gettysburg College for the 2006 school year.

My faith has nothing to do with my interpretation of scientific evidence. My goal in this course is to enable you, no matter what your religious beliefs, to better understand how science operates. I want you to understand that scientists have evidence that supports their beliefs. I want to show you a very small part of that evidence and to help you understand how this evidence is interpreted in the manner that it is. Your goal, as people seeking a liberal education, is to understand the arguments of science and to be able to interpret the world through that lens. The reply, “because God made it that way,” will never be an acceptable answer to any question I will ask.

I read the answers to Jimmy’s first exam. The question asks to describe how scientists interpret the fossil record as providing evidence of evolution. Jimmy responds, “God made us. God is love.”

When he sees that he has earned no points for many of his answers, he challenges me in the classroom. “This is about faith,” he says loudly. “You have faith in what you believe as a scientist, yet you have never seen an atom or an electron. You have never seen a dinosaur in the flesh. Yet you have faith. What is the difference between your faith and mine?”

I believe that faith is personal. I believe that faith is not based upon evidence. I only want to talk about science but know that he has raised an important question. It deserves an answer. I break my rule about discussing matters of faith in class:

Jimmy, here is the difference. Your faith is unchanging and needs no evidence to support it. My scientific faith, however, is subject to change. What I teach this term will be different next term if evidence is presented, and confirmed, that tells me I should change my beliefs. Being human, I might resist that change, but eventually the weight of evidence will lead me to a new view. No matter what I tell you, however, your faith has a right to be immovable.

After class, he asks if I will listen to his view of the world. I sit down in the front row and hand him my chalk. He fills the board—God and creation are on the left. Moving to the right, humans and dinosaurs appear. Then a cataclysmic event occurs—original sin. After that event, all hell breaks loose. Jimmy tells me that humans and dinosaurs walked the 6000-year-old earth at the same times. All dinosaurs were vegetarian until original sin made some of them carnivorous. He describes the great flood and how it scoured the walls of the Grand Canyon. As the result of 90 inspired minutes at the chalkboard, he is drenched in the perspiration of passion. I have countless objections to his presentation. Evidence does not support any of his contentions, but I know that evidence will not matter to him, and I keep my critique silent. I have given him his chance to speak: unchallenged and uninterrupted.

Jimmy never stops asking questions the rest of the semester; he never stops challenging me to support my statements. The biting edge, however, disappears after his day at the board. From that point on, we have conversations daily after class. We get to learn a little more about each other. I guess that he just needed to make himself heard.

Despite that turnaround in our relationship, however, I know that I failed him as a teacher. I was not able to guide his passion. I also know that he failed himself as a student. He was resistant to enlarging his view of the world. I wish that I could have opened his eyes, not to defeat his faith but to enrich it. ☹

Emails to Blow Off Steam

Louise Morgan

Editor: Louise Morgan writes me of her perplexity about how to reach these kids at this last-ditch-effort high school in Harrisburg, PA. Their next step is adjudicated residence homes or, if they are too old, out on the streets. She tells me writing emails to me helps and my listening helps. Her job this year is setting up projects mostly with seniors who still need credit to graduate, who are sometimes very close and yet too far if they can't motivate themselves to earn some education credit. Sometimes, too, the counselor brings in students who aren't close to graduation but have a spark that could be fanned into flame. Here are parts of two emails, the first about her listening to Cory and the second about her listening to Rosalie.

Email #1:

A young man comes into my room. He walks in with his head sort of down, not focusing on me. I say, "Well, let's start with introductions. I have learned it is really best to shake hands upon meeting and even every day." So then I find out it's . . . he is a senior. He picks up my drum and talks about it, what it's made out of, and starts sort of playing it. Then he lets me in on his agenda. He says this generation is the worst generation of African Americans.

He says youth are on the verge of extinction. They are the "Fearless Generation." He feels they could destroy themselves. He knows he is one of them. He says, "Look, I'm here, aren't I?" Meaning ACTS [this high school]. He says this generation has not been part of anything.

I say, "You mean like a movement?"

He says, "Yes."

That's what he wants to do. Start a movement. He isn't looking around now. He is focused, sitting several feet away and telling me, "I think that could be good." He says he has been writing a mission statement for his youth movement. He thinks the time is ripe.

I am sitting there thinking, "I am overwhelmed." Could I, a white, middle-aged, middle-class woman, possibly be one of the foot soldiers for this young man's movement? Wouldn't that be amazing?

So, he leaves . . . and I am sitting here in silence waiting for the orders.

Louise Morgan, M.M.C., teaches in an inner city school, writes plays, and is finishing up a second masters in education. She hikes the Appalachian Trail and currently performs Theatre for Personal Transformation—New Life Scripts.

Email #2:

She is brought to me by Ms. Smith, the homeless student coordinator. She must be Puerto Rican. She is nervous. Ms. Smith loves her and sees the beautiful person that she is. She tells me about herself, that she has decided that no matter what she goes through, she will always try to help others. She would like to maybe be a counselor for (then she listed the issues) domestic violence, rape, drugs and alcohol, homelessness, depression leading to suicide. And you know, looking into her brown eyes, with low lids and painful expression behind a slow smile, that these were all her issues.

She shares with me the contents of her little bag . . . so surprising, a Japanese language book. Then she says good morning in Japanese.

When I tell her I do drama, she says that she does, too, when she is lonely with her stuffed animals.

She looks over my list of assignments for portfolio work. I give students lots of choices, and one is “Find out about a school with a Diversity Club. Would this be good in our school? Why or why not?” She wants to know more.

As she is leaving, I hear her say to Ms. Smith, “I can’t wait. I’m so excited.” Our work is forwards, backwards, try and fail, and then . . . ☹