

# JAEPL



The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning

**AEPL Keynote: Using Careless Speech for Careful, Well-Crafted Writing—Whatever Its Style, Peter Elbow**

**Sheep in Wolves' Clothing: How Composition's Social Construction Reinstates Expressivist Solipsism, Keith Rhodes & Monica McFawn Robinson**

**The Journey Metaphor's Entailments for Framing Learning, Bradley Smith**

**A Teacher's Terminal Illness in the Secondary Classroom, Sarah Hochstetler**

**It's (Not) Just a Figure of Speech: Recuing Metaphor, Anna O. Soter**

**The Power of the Poetic Lens: Why Teachers Need to Read Poems Together, Amy L. Eva, Carrie A. Bemis, Marie F. Quist, & Bill Hollands**

**Stillness in the Composition Classroom: Insight, Incubation, Improvisation, Flow, and Meditation, Ryan Crawford & Andreas Willhoff**

**Fear Not the Trunchbull: How Teaching from a Humorous Outlook Supports Transformative Learning, Kathleen Cassity**

**Thoughts on Teaching as a Practice of Love, Sharon Marshall**

**Out of the Box: Teaching and Learning in Other Ways, Ilene Dawn Alexander**

## **Executive Board, Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning**

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Co-Chairs                                  | Wendy Ryden, Long Island University<br>Irene Papoulis, Trinity College   |
| Associate Chair                            | Sharon Marshall, St. John's University   |
| Secretary                                  | Yvonne Siu-Runyan, University of Northern Colorado   |
| Treasurer                                  | Bruce Novak, Indiana University of Pennsylvania  |
| AEPL Website                               | Betsy DeGeorge, University of Tennessee, Knoxville   |
| TRACE Website                              | Lindsey Lyle, University of Tennessee, Knoxville   |
| Advisory Board                             | Peter Elbow, University of Massachusetts at Amherst<br>Alice G. Brand, SUNY College at Brockport<br>Richard L. Graves, Auburn University, Emeritus<br>Ron Miller, Goddard College, VT<br>Doug Hesse, University of Denver<br>Nel Noddings, Columbia University - Teachers College<br>Sondra Perl, Lehman College, CUNY<br>Peter Stillman, Charlottesville, NY<br>Charles Suhor, Montgomery, AL<br>Jim Super, Olathe East High School, Kansas<br>Jane Tompkins, University of Illinois at Chicago |
| Ex-Officio Voting Members                  | Sophie Bell, Shedherd University<br>Nate Mickelson, Guttman Community College<br>Christy Wenger, Shepherd University   |
| Founding Members                           | Alice G. Brand, SUNY College at Brockport<br>Richard L. Graves, Auburn University, Emeritus<br>Charles Suhor, NCTE   |
| Membership Contact<br><i>JAEPL</i> Editors | Bruce Novak, bruce.novak@iup.edu<br>Joonna Smitherman Trapp, Emory University<br>Brad Peters, Northern Illinois University   |

JAEPL is a non-profit journal published yearly by the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning with support from Emory University, Northern Illinois University, and TRACE at University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Back issues are archived at:

**<http://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/>**

JAEPL gratefully acknowledges this support as well as that of its manuscript readers, including, for this issue:

Lois Agnew, Syracuse U, NY  
Cara Anderson, King U, Bristol, TN  
Cristy Bruns, Chapman U, Orange, CA  
Martin Cockroft, Olympic C, Poulsbo, WA  
Phil Eubanks, Northern IL U, DeKalb  
Kristie Fleckenstein, FL St U, Tallahassee  
Amy Heckathorn, CA St U, Sacramento  
Brooke Hessler, Oklahoma City U  
Sue Hum, U of TX, San Antonio  
Libby Jones, Berea C, KY  
Tom McCann, Northern IL U, DeKalb

Bruce Novak, Indiana U of PA, Indiana  
Paul Puccio, Bloomfield C, Bloomfield, NJ  
Robert Randolph, Waynesburg U, PA  
Wendy Ryden, Long Island U, Brookville, NY  
Noam Schleindin, CUNY, LaGuardia  
Stanley Scott, U of Southern ME, Portland  
Roger Thompson, Stony Brook U, NY  
Elizabeth Vanderlei, Calvin C, Grand Rapids, MI  
Carl Vandermeulen, U of WI-Stout, Menomonie  
Elizabeth Woodworth, Auburn U, Montgomery, AL



*The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*

**Co-Editors**

Joonna Smitherman Trapp  
Emory University

Brad Peters  
Northern Illinois University

**Book Review Editor**

Judith Halden-Sullivan  
Millersville University of Pennsylvania

**“Connecting” Editor**

Helen Walker  
Messiah College

Copyright © 2014  
by the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning  
All rights reserved

(ISSN 1085-4630)

An affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English  
Member of the NCTE Information Exchange Agreement  
Member of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals  
Indexed with *MLA Bibliography*  
Website: [www.aepl.org](http://www.aepl.org)  
Back issues available at: <http://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/>

**Volume 19 • Winter 2013 - 2014**

# JAEPL

The Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (AEPL), an official assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English, is open to all those interested in extending the frontiers of teaching and learning beyond the traditional disciplines and methodologies.

The purposes of AEPL, therefore, are to provide a common ground for theorists, researchers, and practitioners to explore ideas; to participate in relevant programs and projects; to integrate these efforts with others in related disciplines; to keep abreast of activities along these lines of inquiry; and to promote scholarship on and publication of these activities.

The *Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*, JAEPL, also provides a forum to encourage research, theory, and classroom practices involving expanded concepts of language. It contributes to a sense of community in which scholars and educators from pre-school through the university exchange points of view and cutting-edge approaches to teaching and learning. JAEPL is especially interested in helping those teachers who experiment with new strategies for learning to share their practices and confirm their validity through publication in professional journals.

Topics of interest include but are not limited to:

- Aesthetic, emotional & moral intelligences
- Learning archetypes
- Kinesthetic knowledge & body wisdom
- Ethic of care in education
- Creativity & innovation
- Pedagogies of healing
- Holistic learning
- Humanistic & transpersonal psychology
- Imaging & visual thinking
- Intuition & felt sense theory
- Meditation & pedagogical uses of silence
- Narration as knowledge
- Reflective teaching
- Spirituality
- New applications of writing & rhetoric
- Memory & transference



Membership in AEPL is \$30. Contact Bruce Novak, AEPL, Membership Chair, email: [bruce.novak@iup.edu](mailto:bruce.novak@iup.edu). Membership includes that year's issue of JAEPL.

Send submissions, address changes, and single copy requests to Joonna S. Trapp, Co-Editor, JAEPL, email: [joonna.trapp@emory.edu](mailto:joonna.trapp@emory.edu). Address letters to the editor and all other editorial correspondence to Joonna S. Trapp, Co-Editor, JAEPL, email: [joonna.trapp@emory.edu](mailto:joonna.trapp@emory.edu) or Brad Peters, Co-editor, email: [bpeters@niu.edu](mailto:bpeters@niu.edu).

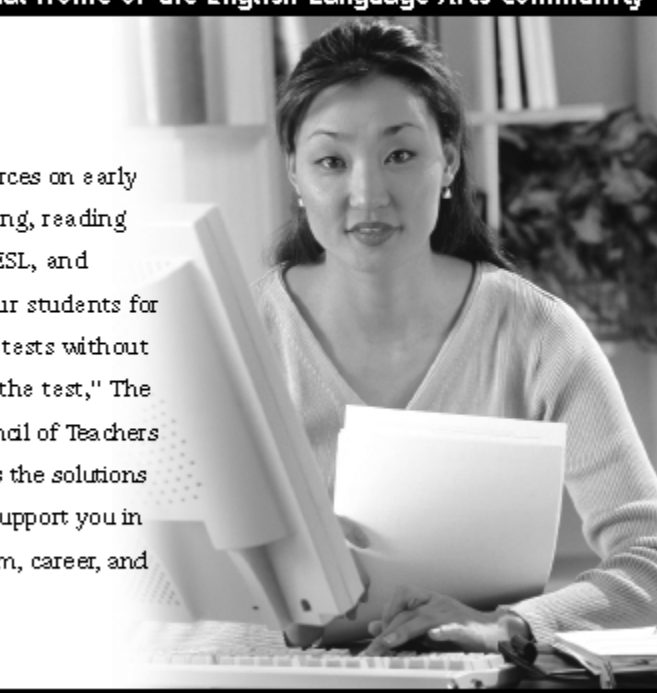
JAEPL website: **[www.aepl.org](http://www.aepl.org)**

Back issues of JAEPL: **<http://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/>**

Production and printing of JAEPL is managed by Parlor Press, [www.parlorpress.com](http://www.parlorpress.com).

# NCTE National Council of Teachers of English

The Professional Home of the English Language Arts Community

A black and white photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a light-colored sweater, sitting at a desk. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. In front of her is a large computer monitor and a keyboard. She is holding a white folder or stack of papers. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a bookshelf.

**W**ith resources on early literacy, writing, reading instruction, ESL, and preparing your students for standardized tests without "teaching to the test," The National Council of Teachers of English has the solutions you need to support you in your classroom, career, and community.

Resources, Strategies, Lesson Plans, and Membership information  
available online at [www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org) or call (877) 369-6283.

## Contents

### vi Editors' Message

### Essays

- Peter Elbow      1 **Using Careless Speech for Careful, Well-Crafted Writing—Whatever Its Style**  
*Bringing the resources of speech to writing enables writers to understand and attain written eloquence.*
- Keith Rhodes &  
Monica M. Robinson      8 **Sheep in Wolves' Clothing: How Composition's Social Construction Reinstates Expressivist Solipsism (And Even Current-Traditional Conservatism)**  
*Reframing the theory of social construction from Romantic/ Classic perspectives yields surprising insights about writing studies.*
- Bradley Smith      23 **The Journey Metaphor's Entailments for Framing Learning**  
*Analysis of differing frames for learning to write shows that the journey metaphor best serves our efforts to convey how writing and learning are linked.*
- Sarah Hochstetler      38 **A Teacher's Terminal Illness in the Secondary Classroom: The Effects of Disclosure**  
*How does it affect learning when cancer becomes the prevailing metaphor through which students see their teacher?*
- Anna O. Soter      49 **It's (Not) Just a Figure of Speech: Rescuing Metaphor**  
*Look for ways that students can study metaphor in everyday language, rather than confine its study to poetry.*
- Amy L. Eva, Carrie A. Bemis, Marie F. Quist, & Bill Hollands      62 **The Power of the Poetic Lens: Why Teachers Need to Read Poems Together**  
*Poetry reading circles can become the means for new (and experienced) teachers to reflect on their professional growth.*
- Ryan Crawford & Andreas Willhoff      74 **Stillness in the Composition Classroom: Insight, Incubation, Improvisation, Flow, and Meditation**  
*Studies of brain images provide scientific justification for encouraging meditation among young writers.*
- Kathleen J. Cassity      84 **Fear Not the Trunchbull: How Teaching from a Humorous Outlook Supports Transformative Learning**  
*Empirical and historical evidence suggest that humor is a key tool for discovering ways in which learning can become transformative.*
- Sharon Marshall      94 **Thoughts on Teaching as a Practice of Love**  
*Approaching classroom diversity from a Nichiren Buddhist perspective guides students toward a "value-creating education."*

## Out of the Box

- Ilene Dawn Alexander 108 **Learning and Teaching in Other Ways**  
*A teaching and learning consultant suggests that “oscillating narratives” are the means for helping unconventional students become critically aware.*

## Book Reviews

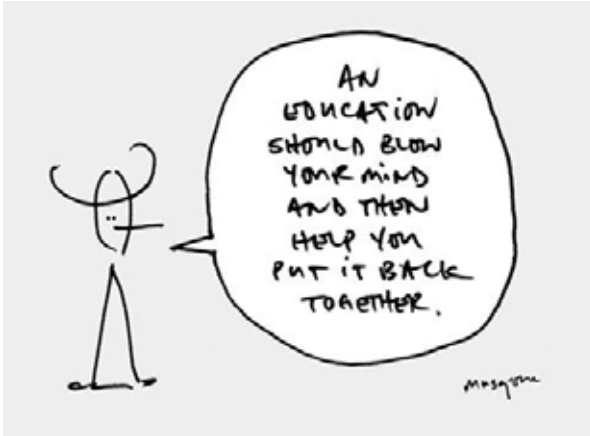
- Judy Halden-Sullivan 114 **Making the Familiar Unfamiliar**
- Karen Walker 116 **Ritchhart, Ron, Mark Church, and Karin Morrison.**  
*Making Thinking Visible.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011.
- Timothy Shea 119 **Jobrack, Beverlee.** *Tyranny of the Textbook.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012.
- Julie Nichols 122 **FitzGerald, William.** *Spiritual Modalities: Prayer as Rhetoric and Performance.* University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2012.
- Edward Sullivan 125 **Quesada, Donna.** *The Buddha in the Classroom: Zen Wisdom to Inspire Teachers.* NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2011.

## Connecting

- Helen Walker 128 **Gratitude**
- Bob Randolph 129 **Poetry Teacher’s Prayer**
- Leigh Ann Chow 129 **What Teachers Carry**
- Andrea Saylor 131 **A Brief History of Holy Writing**
- Jill Moyer Sunday 132 **For My Students**
- Kattie Hogan & 132 **Lines on the Body: Confronting Personal Experiences through Poetry**
- Matt Ittig
- John Patrick Cleary 133 **New Teacher**
- 135 **CONTRIBUTORS’ BIOS**

## EDITORS' MESSAGE

Many of our contributors to this year's *JAEPL* took the 2013 summer conference's subtheme—"reimagining writing and speaking"—and revised it. Appropriately, they substituted Lakoff's and Johnson's term "reframing" for "reimagining." Lawrence Musgrove's alter ego, Tex, comments on the results, below.



As record, sub-zero temperatures ice over the nation, brew a good hot drink, sit down, and read the rich topical mix Vol. 19 has to offer you. The authors link together in unusual, surprising, and deeply moving ways—ranging from theoretical shifts, to brain science, to the painful disclosure of a brave teacher's illness.

AEPL's 2013 keynote speaker, Peter Elbow, leads

off with another major tenet of teaching writing well—the infusion of “vernacular eloquence.” Elbow persuades us to reframe the overly wrought metaphor of voice in new, yet classical light. He always acquaints us with ideas we feel we should have figured out long ago. But it takes his special gifts of insight to articulate and help us train our students to use those ideas well.

Riffing on critiques aimed at Elbow's and others' considerably influential work, Keith Rhodes and Monica Robinson launch a lively debate on social construction's shortcomings. They reframe the theory from a perspective that we suspect will fan controversy, despite their ultimate intentions to create balance and reconciliation.

Though less likely to invite hot debate, Bradley Smith's fine analysis of the journey metaphor in composition studies causes us to revisit our disciplinary cousin, cognitive linguistics, to reflect on how our theories represent an assumption we've long held but have not adequately examined—the relationship between writing and learning.

Re-conjuring Susan Sontag's analysis of *Illness as Metaphor*, Sarah Hochstetler reiterates the origin of most conceptual framing—the body. Hochstetler recalls a team-teaching experience when her partner's disclosure of terminal breast cancer made an unsettling impact on Hochstetler as well as the students they were teaching. Hochstetler blends the personal and the theoretical in a poignant inquiry that *JAEPL* readers will not soon forget.

In a timely nod, Anna Soter recommends that we stop restricting the study of metaphor and its framing/ reframing potential to poetry. Why not have students examine how metaphors occur in their everyday conversation, shaping the way they think and act in the world? Soter's notion of language as a field of energy doesn't eliminate teaching metaphor as a means of appreciating poetry, though. Instead, she clears space for Amy



Eva, Carrie Bemis, Marie Quist, and Bill Hollands to share how their poetry reading circle enabled them to frame their teaching experiences in ways that never would have found voice, otherwise. They make good on Soter's claims by demonstrating precisely where poetry can illuminate professional lives.

Meanwhile, Ryan Crawford and Andreas Willhoff debut as interdisciplinary scholars who reframe a well-rehearsed JAEPL topic: meditation in the classroom. Scientists' images of brain activity demonstrate the salient effects that meditative practices induce, laying groundwork for the claim that if standards outrank the cultivation of creativity in young writers, critical thinking may be less likely to develop. Kathleen Cassity pounces immediately upon that claim, drawing upon brain-imaging studies as well as research in critical pedagogy to advocate for the place that humor, and even fun, must occupy in the classroom. She agreeably reframes learning in terms of vigor rather than rigor, emphasizing how integrating humor into teaching breathes life—not rigidity—into our students' minds.

Sharon Marshall calls upon critical pedagogy as well, noting that the Eastern concept of self-actualization resonates deeply with the philosophies of American Civil Rights advocates. She goes on to demonstrate what she does in the composition classroom to further this East-West connection, reframing as love the ways we could think about the NCTE stand on "Students' Right to Their Own Language."

In JAEPL's Out of the Box section, Ilene Alexander ponders her past as an unconventional learner, observing if students get the right to their own language, they can recover the often-suppressed stories which have framed their lives. In so doing, students become teachers in turn, connecting with—rather than separating from—others whose lives differ. Informed by trans-Atlantic scholars, Alexander still identifies her Minnesota grandmother as her wisest mentor. Find out why.

To round out this volume, book review editor Judy Halden-Sullivan and "Connections" editor Helen Walker have assembled some of the most exciting new books and inspiring vignettes/ poems on the teaching life that we've yet seen. Begin with Julie Nichols' review of William FitzGerald's *Spiritual Modalities* and Andrea Saylor's "Brief History of Holy Writing," and you'll want to read everything else, too. We promise.

A word about the 2014 AEPL summer conference: we join Canadian colleagues in our first international effort to bring together teaching and learning scholars. Come to the lovely Laurentian University Residence in Sudbury, Ontario. Meet Canadian folk-singer and story-teller, Ian Tamblyn. The theme of this June 25-28 event is "The Art of Noticing Deeply," which invokes the languages of landscape, place, and stillness in a lakeside setting that will inspire all. See this issue's final page for further details. Bring a friend.

And finally, a brief thank-you to the AEPL Executive Board for voting your editors into a second 3-year term with this journal. We're delighted to serve.



### Works Referenced

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1980.

## Using Careless Speech for Careful, Well-Crafted Writing —Whatever Its Style

Peter Elbow

*Here's the epitaph I want on my grave: "He loved thinking."*

Imagine me standing in front of you in a button-down white shirt, necktie, and sports jacket. I've created this essay from an informal talk at the annual 2013 AEPL conference, and I used formal dress to call attention to something that my readers often forget: my traditional side. My father ran a men's clothing store with his father, and they sold high quality, well-crafted clothes. That's the theme here. I've not been fighting all these years just to make writing easier; I've been fighting to make writing *better*. I've been trying help people break out of the unclear, roundabout, or mashed-potatoes prose they so often produce—the various weaknesses that commonly result when people try to write right.

My recent book is about bringing speech to writing (*Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing*), so it might seem as though it's a book about overthrowing old fashioned, writerly standards of writing. But it's not. It's a book about how to make writing better—more eloquent. In my opening analogy for the book, I say that it represents not just my wild love affair with speech, but also my conviction that I can bring her home to live with me and my wife, writing, and that we'll all get along just fine. My focus today is not on the excitement of a new love affair; it's on my commitment to a stable, long term *menage a trois*. My goal in the book is to show how we can use the resources of careless speech to create high-quality, well-crafted writing—whatever its style.

### The Resources of Speech, Not Speech Itself

I got the germ of my thinking here when I read a thoughtful, gracious review of the book by Chris Anson: "Review Essay: A Word for Peter" (in *WPA: Writing Program Administration*). He expresses "great admiration and fascination" for the book and calls it a "must read" for all teachers and writing program administrators. Of course, he finds plenty to question, and I'm grateful to him for his careful reading.

Chris and I share a long interest in the relationship between speech and writing. He points to his early and ongoing use of dictation for responding to student writing: "I began using cassette tapes in 1982 to respond to my students, who would first talk to me on the same cassette about what they'd tried to do in their papers" (160). He's gone on to diverse explorations of speech and writing and the uses of speech for writing. So it's fun that he wrote a review in the mode of an oral response to a draft—almost as though it were a transcript of a spoken cassette. (But where were you when my book was only a draft?) Chris starts off, "Hi, Peter. I've read your remarkable book . . .," and the entire review uses second-person direct address. In addition, he writes as though he's telling reactions as they occur: "My own countering instinct wants to say . . . I can already hear your counterpoint . . . Part of me screams . . ." (164); "So I'm agreeing with you

about . . .” (165); “I get an almost fleshy feel from your descriptions of ‘blurting’ onto the page . . .” (163). This is a rhetorical mode that I appreciate. Ever since *Writing Without Teachers*, I’ve celebrated responding by giving “movies of the mind” in the act of reading.

About his speech-inflected style, Chris says, “I think I’ve followed the spirit of your [book]” (187). His oral register works intriguingly well for a review, even in a scholarly journal. But he gave me pause when he wrote this near the end:

There’s something about really *written* text that I’m drawn to, even when it leans toward the formal and stylized. It may be that I need to unlearn this, or that I haven’t yet seen the shortcomings of such prose. But it may also be that what you gain from a strongly spoken text you also lose in the polish that formal, written prose can often yield. (167)

Perhaps he’s just saying that he’s pondering whether he actually prefers a “really written” style—despite his successful experiment in this review. But could he be implying this interpretation of me: that I was not just arguing *for* “strongly spoken text” but was actually arguing *against* “the polish that formal written prose can often yield”? Could he be implying that I was making an either/or argument? I’m not sure. His ambivalence about his own writing style obscures a clear statement about the logic of my argument.

But I’m grateful that the worrisome thought came into my mind. It’s helped me figure out what I need to focus on today: that I’m definitely not making an either/or argument. The goal of my book is good quality writing of *any kind*—not just informal oral-inflected, good quality writing. What I celebrate in *Vernacular Eloquence* is careless unplanned speech, but my reason for celebrating it is for the sake of good writing: it is full of linguistic and rhetorical values that writing badly needs—even formal or high-register writing. In short, what speech has to offer good quality writing of all sorts is *not* spoken language itself as it comes out of our mouths, but rather *the resources of speech*.

To highlight this point, I use extended quotations in the book. I point to three passages of excellent writing from three different writers: from the 18th century, an elegant passage from David Hume that is full of extended “periodic” cadences (231); from the 19th century, a passage from Henry James’ late style that is amazingly intricate and mannered in syntax (114, and interestingly, he produced his late prose by dictation); and from the 20th century, a passage from Clifford Geertz that is highly stylized yet modern (114). The speech resource that I focus on in these examples of “highly written” prose is intonation or prosody—and in particular intonation units: tiny groups of words that carry a shaped tune and tend to be separated by pauses.

Intonation units are ubiquitous in all human speech, even careless speech, but what Hume, James, and Geertz exploit for excellence are *well-shaped* intonation units. I argue that such intonation units are a common feature in good prose of completely different styles throughout the centuries—some of them very florid, as with Euphues (251). My point is that good writers have produced wildly different kinds of music, but for all the differences, they are always mining the resources of intonational rhythm, pitch, and stress that are universal in human speech.

### A Hierarchy of Values for Good Writing?

My book is called *Vernacular Eloquence*, and it celebrates unplanned spoken

language—and I even argue that good writing can accept some grammatical features that are condemned by purists as bad grammar. So perhaps some readers will think I'm saying that a vernacular style of writing is *more* eloquent than other styles.

In a small book, Dante did something like that. He argued that the everyday vernacular language spoken by uneducated people on the streets of his native Florence was more eloquent than Latin. (He called his short book *De Vulgare Eloquentia*. But his word *vulgar* stood simply for the spoken language “of the people.” It's worth noting that a term that used to mean “of the people” has now, in our culture, come to mean crude and ugly.) I'm not calling the vernacular better.

Just because I say that high quality writing *can* be looser and more speech-like in register and grammar than is currently acceptable to purists, it doesn't follow that I'm calling this kind of writing better or the only kind of good writing. My point is that we can harness features of spoken language (not speech itself) in order to produce careful, good writing of all sorts—even of the sorts written by Hume, James, and Geertz.

### A Process for Harnessing a Speech Resource for Any Kind of Good Writing

In my book, I suggest an out-loud revising process for mining the power of intonation for good writing. This means taking every sentence or longer passage and reading it aloud—respectfully but without commitment to it—and fiddling with the words if necessary till they feel right in the mouth and sound right in the ear. This process can be trusted to produce well-crafted sentences—or at the very least, major improvement in the quality of writing. This process is not so different from what many good writers naturally do quietly in their heads. Here are two examples of how it can work.

One common problem in writing—even of skilled professionals—is too much nominalization. Consider this example:

*The conversion of hydrogen to helium in the interiors of stars is the source of energy for their immense output of light and heat. (from Halliday 79)*

We'd be lucky if this was the worst writing we had to deal with, but too many nominalizations can sap the energy from writing and make the meaning less clear and harder to process. Reading aloud leads many writers to notice the muffling of linguistic energy that carries meaning. When revisers fiddle with new versions to please the mouth and ear, they tend to come up with fewer nominalizations and more energy. For example:

*Stars need energy for putting out so much light and heat, and they get it by converting hydrogen into helium in their cores.*

Or:

*Stars convert hydrogen into helium in their cores, and that's how they get energy for so much light and heat.*

Speakers may speak carelessly in many ways, but it turns out that they characteristically *avoid* this kind of over-nominalization. No native speaker would ever *utter* a sentence like that nominalized sample. Speakers tend to use active verbs like “stars convert hydrogen.” We can't count on speech (or freewriting) to yield crisp clear sentences, but when we

harness the *resources* of speech by reading aloud to revise, we can count on the intonational habits of the mouth and ear to produce sentences that are stronger and clearer than are often produced when people try to write with care.

It's fun to call on stylistic theory to illuminate what the mouth and ear know without thinking: The nominalized sentence allegedly talks about *action*, but there is no action in the sentence itself. The only verb is *is*. The sentence allegedly talks about *concrete things*: hydrogen, helium, stars, light, and heat. But what is the subject? *Conversion*. The sentence's claim is a dead abstraction that has nothing to do with things or actions: *A conversion is a source*.

It's important to note that this revising process is not quick and effortless like unplanned speaking: it takes time to dream up and try out alternative wordings. But the time and effort are not devoted to thinking about what makes good writing; they are devoted to trying to please the mouth and ear. (Reducing nominalization is one of the nine virtues of spoken language that I treat in *Vernacular Eloquence*.)

Here's another example. Consider this sentence I freewrote as I was drafting an essay for publication:

*When I set up my classes so that students have to read some of their words aloud—read their drafts, read their revisions, read short exploratory pieces—read something at least once a week in pairs or small groups—or even in ten or fifteen minute conferences with me—I think I see them more often writing words in which readers hear meaning—words that do a better job of silently giving meaning to readers.*

I gave this to one of my classes to revise by mouth-and-ear. When students read it aloud, they could hear the repetition and feel the loss of energy as I kept piling on caboose phrases—making the sentence go on too long and sort of dribble out. This kind of syntactical “tacking-on” is characteristic of speech and freewriting as we search to work out our meaning. One of the students, using mouth and ear, revised it as follows:

*I set up my first year writing classes so that students have to read some of their writing aloud every week. They read a draft, a revision, an exploratory exercise; they read in pairs, in small groups, or they read to me in mini-conferences of ten or fifteen minutes. I think I see them gradually learning to write words in which readers hear meaning.*

No doubt one could do better, but the process calls on the *resources of speech*—in this case, the tongue's sense of intonation that carries meaning. It doesn't lead to speech itself. Let me call attention to two contrasts between this revising process and the process of speaking:

- This revising is *not* like speech because it doesn't let us just open our mouths and let the words come out quickly with little or no effort. It takes time and effort (like writing). You have to try one version after another and make a conscious choice.
- And yet this revising process is *like* speech in this interesting way. When we use it, we don't call on our conscious knowledge of what makes for good sentences; we call only on the mouth and ear. I like to put this crudely and say that we use

only the body, not the mind. To say this is to skate over the thin ice of centuries of philosophical and psychological precision about mind and body. I can add some precision by acknowledging that of course the body is part of the mind, and the mind is part of the body. Still, most of you know the difference between two very different linguistic experiences: trying to *think* about whether words are right versus trying to tell which words *feel* and *sound* better.

What might seem startling in my book is this central hypothesis: the mouth and ear know what good writing is. Without the help of conscious thinking, the mouth and the ear *want* well-crafted sentences. The hypothesis is radical because it derives from the root of spoken language.

### What is Good Writing?

So how do I define good or well-crafted writing? I think my standards are both linguistic and rhetorical. I'd point to these qualities:

- It makes no sense to call writing good unless it says what the writer wants to say. (It's often a long struggle for us to finally manage this.)
- The language is clear and strong because it is crafted into well-formed intonation units—intonation units that comfortably *enact* both the intended meaning and also the grammar of the language. When we achieve this kind of language, we help readers hear our meaning.
- The organization or structure also invites comprehension, helping readers hear the architecture of our larger meanings.

I need to repeat from my book an important clarification here. Sometimes the mouth and ear want “bad grammar” (“Ain’t nobody don’t like double negatives”), or a low slangy register (“Obama knocked the socks off Romney in the 2012 election”). The mouth and ear do know grammar, but it’s grammar as linguists define it—the vernacular or spoken grammar of one’s native language. The mouth and ear don’t know “proper,” school-marm grammar that’s considered necessary for serious public writing. So for a traditional register of serious writing, the mouth and ear are not enough. A writer needs some “book” or conceptual knowledge. But this knowledge, I’m insisting, is *not* central to what makes good writing good.

But let’s not underestimate the powers of mouth and ear over register. For register is not so much a matter of form but of rhetoric: creating the kind of language that is suited to the audience. One of the most frequent weaknesses in writing stems from writers being too preoccupied with what is “right” writing or “good” writing, and forgetting to consider audience—forgetting to try to imagine the actual humans who will read their words. But when people speak, they seldom ignore the audience in front of them or on the phone line, and so they naturally tend adjust the language to those persons as well as they can. Revising by reading aloud tends to harness that rhetorical instinct rooted in speech.

### A Common Slippage in Logic

In our culture it is too common to slide unconsciously into a binary, either/or logic that declares that anyone in favor of X must be against the opposite of X. I started my career with a dissertation and book about Chaucer and his ability to affirm logically opposite points of view (*Oppositions in Chaucer*). I've always had a soft spot in my heart for the medieval ability to live with contradictions. When I was teaching a freshman great books course at M.I.T. from 1960 to 1963, I often saw some loss of intellectual richness and sophistication some weeks into the second semester when we moved from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. (This is not to deny the obvious intellectual advances that came with the Renaissance). What I finally noticed was that we were leaving a culture where people were not so prey to simplistic, binary, either/or logic. In our post-medieval culture, we are justly proud of a greater commitment to logic, but this pride often slips into careless thinking that mistakes binary either/or thinking for logic. People who actually care about logic understand that "*X is good*" is different from "*not-X is bad*."

I don't actually think Chris was really saying that I'm *against* "the polish that formal written prose can often yield." But my momentary suspicion has roots: this is exactly the kind of misreading of my work that readers have made throughout my career:

- Because I've been such an enthusiastic cheerleader for freewriting, many people have had a hard time seeing that I love carefully revised writing just as much—that I especially love writing that is tight, clean, and well organized. People too often fail to see that freewriting is not just for ease in starting and finding words, it's also for better thinking and better language.
- Because I've been such an enthusiastic cheerleader for the believing game, many people have had a hard time noticing that I keep repeating my equal commitment to the doubting game. The believing game is not just for crazy thinking, but for better and more careful thinking. We sometimes need craziness for good thinking. For example we can't see the flaws in the assumptions that we unconsciously take for granted—by definition—unless we can get ourselves into an alien (crazy) world with different premises.
- I've always defended personal writing, creative nonfiction, collage form, and other experimental kinds of writing; I've always fought against the forces of propriety and conservatism that try to exclude these genres and kinds of language from the classroom and serious sites of writing. I fear I haven't been explicit enough in my commitment to the other side. But in truth, I seldom write in those genres (despite frequent claims that my academic writing is too "personal"), and I seldom read them by choice (except for many op-eds).
- And so now with *Vernacular Eloquence*: because I celebrate unplanned careless speech so vociferously, many people have had a hard time noticing that my main commitment in the book is to well-crafted good quality writing. (For my long commitment to "embracing contraries"—insisting that logically conflicting ideas

can sometimes have validity—see “The Uses of Binary Thinking” and “The Believing Game or Methodological Believing.”)

### Summary Final Point

My argument is that we can call on the resources of speech to produce good writing in many different styles—even the styles of Hume, James, or Geertz—or indeed of Euphues or Hemingway. When writing is good in any style—so goes my argument—it is good because it builds linguistic structures out of well-formed intonation units. And intonation units are basic building blocks of all human speech. When they are well formed, they embody the grammar of the speech community’s native language—the grammar-in-the-bones. For that reason, intonation units sing the music that the mind likes to hear. Of course, we all know that there’s not just one style of music that humans like to hear. Sophisticated thinkers about style know that any truly good reader needs to learn to appreciate the virtues of good writing in all sorts of styles—even in styles that one is not intuitively drawn to. By the same token, sophisticated musicians and students of linguistic intonation know that any truly good listener needs to learn to appreciate the virtues of all kinds of music—even kinds that they are not intuitively drawn to. For example, truly cultured readers refrain from dismissing rap—or philosophical theorizing—just because they seem alien. They know that rap and philosophical theory are also capable of singing high quality music, but that it may require time and effort to learn to appreciate them.



### Works Cited

- Anson, Chris. “Review Essay: A Word for Peter.” *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 36.2 (Spring 2013): 160-168. Print.
- Elbow, Peter. *Oppositions in Chaucer*, Wesleyan UP, 1975. Print.
- . *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing*. Oxford UP, 2012. Print.
- . *Writing Without Teachers*. 1976. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. Print
- . “The Uses of Binary Thinking.” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 12.1 (Winter 1993): 51-78. (Reprinted in *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*. NY: Oxford U P, 2000. 48-80.) Print.
- . The Believing Game or Methodological Believing. *Journal for The Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning* 14 Winter 2009: 1-11.
- Halliday, M.A.K. “Spoken and Written Modes of Meaning.” *Comprehending Oral and Written Language*. Ed. Rosalind Horowitz and S. Jay Samuels. San Diego: Academic Press, 1987. 55-82. Print.



## **Sheep in Wolves' Clothing: How Composition's Social Construction Reinstantiates Expressivist Solipsism (And Even Current-Traditional Conservatism)**

**Keith Rhodes and Monica McFawn Robinson**

The main premise of this article is that social construction, under the guise of being the radical wolf that will empower teachers and students alike, has instead promoted a pervasive sheepishness, a passive disinterest in large-scale progress in composition studies. While social construction ostensibly offers a contextually-sensitive open field for scholars and teachers, its practical effect has been to fragment composition studies by encouraging ultra-specific scholarship that does not readily cohere into shared knowledge. We believe that social construction is fundamentally a form of Romanticism, enabling not only the solipsism of which its advocates once accused “expressivists,”<sup>1</sup> but also the conservatism for which expressivists once excoriated current-traditionalists. And while some scholarship has clearly turned away from social construction in recent years, we believe that its influence continues—most obviously in the durable arguments against the “positivism” of data collection.

We believe that reframing social construction through a Romantic/Classic lens might clarify the roots and the lasting consequences of the theory's enduring appeal. Composition's long-standing resistance to data-rich research approaches, fully explored by Richard Haswell (“NCTE/CCCC's”), is one of the most prominent signs of social construction's Romanticism, and our essay aims to untangle both the philosophical causes and practical effects of this orientation. Finally, we invoke a different line of thinking available from the beginning of these disputes, Robert Pirsig's “metaphysics of quality,” as a compelling example of one possible way out of the feedback loop of current social construction and into a more progressive and responsive philosophy.

We pause here for an important preliminary note. During the course of trying to publish this article, here and in other journals, we met with criticism from several reviewers for not outlining social construction theory with complete care before forwarding our own argument. We want to make clear that this perceived omission is by design. While it might be academic custom to sum up previous studies to prove one's credibility, there are two reasons why we have streamlined that part of our article. First, we contend that social construction is such a nebulous theory that attempting to pin it down would take an article in itself. That is indeed one of the problems with social construction that we directly

---

<sup>1</sup> We will follow the conventional labels for different movements in the field of composition, but we cannot let pass the fact that “expressivists” have never so labeled themselves. The term is a curious case of the kind of diminishing “othering” that social constructionists decry when used in other social settings. In drafts, the authors were frequently tempted to write asides arguing against the unfair trivialization of the actual writings and thinking of Elbow, Macrorie, and others so labeled, an injustice that bothers the authors even if neither of them holds particularly close to that style of pedagogy. Keeping our critique focused on social construction requires that we deal with what social constructionists see themselves as doing, so we will focus on their own construction of “expressivism.”

address below. Because social construction can encompass so many modes and directions, and because its very nature eschews judging claims by any means other than popularity, it has rendered itself nearly immune to a clear reassessment or even summary. The muddy, shape-shifting nature of social construction is one of the very things we discuss at length in our article, and wading into all of that at the onset would have distracted from our purpose, which is to demystify the basic orientation of the theory. Secondly, we believe that the demand itself is unreasonable and hegemonic, considering how often discussion in the profession simply assumes the primacy of the theory. Nobody can miss the reign of this cloudy theory, nor can anyone miss how closely that reign has corresponded with what Haswell has clearly documented as a “war” on scholarship from other perspectives in the pages of the field’s most central and powerful organizational journals. We appreciate that the editors of JAEPL have permitted this admittedly contentious argument simply to go forward.

### **Social Construction’s Well-Constructed House of Cards**

The root of the problem with social construction is easily stated: if reality is what the discourse community says it is, then what the present community believes is, by definition, right. The only way to enter the conversation is to join the established in-crowd. The best way to do that is to show allegiance to its beliefs. Thus, social construction is functionally tautological; by such means cults are born. The further credo has become that all knowledge is local (Huot 105), so that all judgments need to be made within local discourse communities and are essentially incommensurate. That is, in-crowds can proliferate and become their own judges of what’s best locally. By that means, social constructionists render themselves beyond critique. Who is to say what is better or best locally? As long as one declares fealty to the larger dogma of social construction, we’re all right. We’re also incapable of producing what Richard Haswell called “RAD” research—replicable and aggregable (neither is relevant if everything is local), and data-supported (that is, suspiciously “positivist”) research—information that might inform some of us, sometimes, that we are wrong. Hence, within the construct of social construction, nobody can ever be wrong, except by rejecting social construction itself. We do not mean to be snarky by using the term “in-crowd”; we earnestly believe it accurately represents the exact philosophical situation in a way that the field should confront more overtly.

The inability to declare anything wrong has real and interesting consequences. For example, many leading lights in rhetoric and composition cooperated with the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) in constructing its “VALUE” rubric on writing. AAC&U is itself a responsive and responsible academic organization. While the resulting rubric has many good features, it makes the curious claim that the number of errors in student writing steadily declines through a student’s college career. In fact, close study indicates that error rates remain close to constant throughout writing careers, even though the nature of the errors changes as students’ syntactic abilities develop (Haswell, *Gaining Ground* 191-205). As Haswell explains, growth in other dimensions of writing tends to produce new kinds of errors, particularly at the early stages of learning. But without careful attention to research—and an attitude that it matters—potentially misleading “lore” like the decline of error cannot really be challenged. Indeed, social

construction offers no path to challenge “folk wisdom.” Thus, even our best and brightest can be coerced into accepting demonstrably false lore.

Composition scholarship has produced little new knowledge about how writers make gains throughout the reign of social construction. Without a full philosophical shift, neither will it be likely to persuade more realist or idealist audiences that it has anything to offer to anyone outside its circle—which circle does not necessarily, or even with much likelihood, include the students who encounter composition briefly in an early stage of their college careers. Far from having the sort of radicalizing social influence that social constructionists ironically idealize, social construction has mainly established a way for composition practitioners to insulate themselves from stumbling across the kinds of accumulating anomalies that, as Kuhn pointed out, become the force that drives paradigm change. Composition has built itself the perfect rut. Furthermore, social construction incinerates any ground for complaint about standards imposed on us by any outside forces. After all, these outsiders to us are simply insiders in other discourse communities, constructing other realities. If they think their reality includes us and controls ours—and if they have the power to insist on that—social construction offers no principled basis for saying otherwise.

The main advantages of social construction have been in the professionalization of composition itself, of course. By proper operation of its own theories, once one joins the social constructionist in-crowd, the tickets of advancement become more readily available. Those who are good at social moves advance, entering the position to advance the similarly oriented and gifted. But this interesting professional game would seem to have no practical ends. It threatens to offer status as its own end. Of course, in plain fact many scholars do a great deal of practical and progressive work, essentially ignoring the social constructionist credo even while paying it homage, at least implicitly. Nevertheless, the logic of social construction predicts that we should end up with exactly what we have: more tenured specialists, but few advances in pedagogical methods, few measurable results from improved practices, and little over-all progress for the field of writing even in its political status. Given that composition teaching has been pushed constantly to the lowest economic levels, for most students in most first-year writing courses, writing remains the writing of “Engfish” (Macrorie 1) for processing by contingently-employed teachers who have little hope of ever joining or engaging the full professional apparatus that has built itself around the social constructivist paradigm.

### **Zen and the Art of Composition Theory: Using Pirsig’s Lens to Examine Social Construction’s Move towards Radical Romanticism**

We have found an unusual value in looking at the enterprise in light of Robert Pirsig’s related attempt to unravel the problem of avoiding a Romantic-Classical oscillation, essentially the same problem that drove the field of composition to social construction. Pirsig carefully examines the nature of Romanticism as part of an inquiry arising out of his experience teaching college composition—which he steadfastly calls, presciently for 1974, “teaching rhetoric.” His central question was this: How do we know when we are teaching Quality in writing? As Pirsig relentlessly and copiously demonstrates, we seem to know it when we see it, but everyone has trouble explaining it. Pirsig’s most concrete realization

is that conversations about this topic mainly bog down in an endless argument between Classicists, who believe Quality results if we quantify and technologize the results, and Romantics, who believe that quantification and mechanization necessarily destroy the Quality that we seek. His focus, given the times, is mainly on the irrational resistance of Romantics to anything technical—typified by his cycling companions' aversion to learning how to maintain their own motorcycle, a reaction against the technologies that so largely define our lives. There are clear parallels between the attitudes of those who want to drive motorcycles without maintenance and the attitudes of those who want to teach composition without any resort to empirical study or discussion of standards. Large factions of the field decry as "postivists" anyone who wants to open up the "engine" of teaching and learning and start taking things apart to see how they work. The collective behavior of our published scholars has remained decidedly on the Romantic side of Pirsig's split, with the attraction to information technologies representing less a shift to the "Classical" side than a sensible adaptation to new social realities.

Romanticism, as Pirsig describes it, covers a constellation of attitudes, all positioned in opposition to Classical thinking. Preliminarily, he describes Romantics as "inspirational, imaginative, creative, intuitive" and proceeding not by "reason or by laws" but by "feeling, intuition, and aesthetic conscience" (85). Romantics therefore reject systematic, scientific thinking as "inhuman, mechanical, lifeless, a blind monster, a death force" (19). Pirsig uses the phrase "blind monster" as the Romantic's summary of the Classical view, a view both cold and indiscriminate, a steamrolling objectivity that oppresses rather than clarifies. Along with their suspicion of systematic thinking, Romantics aim to be independent of oppressive social systems, including government and bureaucracies. As Pirsig puts it, a Romantic revolts against being "a mass person" (21). Finally, Romantics do not believe Quality can be quantified. It cannot be broken down or measured. Even the attempt does violence, as all measurement by its very nature leaves something out. Ultimately, they see classical thinking as reductive, painting over complexity and sorting individuals into false systems—numbers, datasets, results—that cannot represent fully human reality.

At first, expressivism seems far more closely aligned with Romanticism than does any other composition theory. Certainly, it is the theory that has been most consistently connected to Romantic ideals within composition scholarship, particularly by its detractors. Lester Faigley breaks down expressivism's three Romantic goals: "integrity," "spontaneity," and "originality," thereby highlighting the theory's perceived inner-directedness (529). James Berlin describes the theory as a "descendent of Rousseau on one hand and of the Romantic recoil from the urban horrors created by nineteenth-century capitalism on the other" ("Rhetoric and Ideology" 484). In Berlin's earlier work, the discussion of expressivism appears under the heading "Subjective Rhetoric," and focuses on tracing the movement's early ties to art and literature, leading to its later focus on "the cultivation of the singular vision and voice of the student" (*Rhetoric and Reality* 152). Overall, expressivism is linked to Romanticism through both its lineage and its focus on finding inner truth through the writing process. And overall, these Romantic features are most often singled out as weaknesses. Berlin ultimately faults the theory for its denial of "the place of intersubjective, social processes in shaping reality" (146), a widely shared criticism of expressivism by social constructionists of all stripes.

This overview may make it appear that expressivism represented the last gasp

of Romanticism in composition studies, but we argue that this tidy result is far from the case. By looking more closely at the tenor of the social constructionist critique of expressivism, the first contours of an alternative, social constructionist Romanticism begin to surface. Social constructionists criticized expressivism for being myopically focused on the individual's subjective experience. A large part of this criticism revolved around the idea that by focusing on only the student's inner mind, expressivist theorists neglected the social constructions within which and by which students write. The student's social class, cultural history, and region of the country, the social dynamics of the institution and the classroom itself—all these made up the student and therefore the student's orientation to the writing task. So social constructionists saw expressivism as ultimately *reductive*—reducing the student's complex social situatedness to a too-simple sense of “self.” Social construction's fear of reduction, however, is clearly a Romantic fear, as it plays into the idea that all elements of a whole contribute to its ultimate Quality, and therefore no one piece should be extracted for measurement or even comment. The self can't be discussed apart from the social. Reality can't be considered apart from the language within which it is mediated. An essay cannot be considered apart from the dialectal swirl from which it issues. Berlin's description of the dialectic is a clear example of the Romantic idea that no piece can be taken from the whole, and also includes language that is explicitly anti-Classical:

The dialectic, moreover, is a complicated process that is not cumulative or arithmetic in nature; knowledge does not usually result from simply adding or subtracting rhetorical elements. Instead, meaning comes about as the external world, the conceptions the writer or speaker brings to the external world, and the audience the writer or speaker is addressing all simultaneously act on each other during the process of communicating. (*Rhetoric and Reality* 167)

And while all this makes intuitive sense (of course we do not want to reduce our students or the complexity of our work), the fear of reduction itself has led to a new, even more radical Romanticism, requiring scholars to continually describe more and more of the social field surrounding the writer at the expense of doing other work. Ignoring the lesson of Zeno's paradox and really of social construction itself, researchers dig more and more deeply toward a “reality” that can never actually be reached. To have any other aim but to widen this portrait is to be reductive, positivist, Classical, square. This infinite regress finally creates a scholarship that can blend in almost anything from any other field, but cannot make distinctions between what is important and what is not, what works and what does not. Left alone with this ever-expanding interdisciplinary portrait of the social situatedness of student writers, theorists and teachers must finally lean on their own subjectivity to make sense or use of what they see—a Romantic predicament. The isolated, discerning self, then, becomes just as central in social construction as it was in expressivism. The only difference is that the “self” here is not the student, but the teacher—the one who ultimately makes judgments about better and worse, and sets those judgments into the “positivist” concreteness that is grading. Social constructionists' argument with expressivism was not a rejection of Romanticism itself, but instead a way of advocating for a different and ultimately more fanatical Romantic view.

One protest here might be that while social construction may seem Romantic in its

preoccupation with irreducibility, its central claim is anything but. The idea that truth or reality is socially constructed seems, at first, explicitly anti-Romantic, since Romanticism is often thought of as a private quest for a fixed and inner truth. Yet Romantic truth itself resists definition (e.g., the beauty of art is ineffable), just as the antifoundational socially-mediated “truth” in constructionist theory cannot be pinned down, since it is forever in an irreducible cultural flux. Neither theory, then, provides an assessable goal. We can never be sure if students in an expressivist classroom have found their inner truth or not, since we cannot see into their minds. Likewise, we can never be sure if students truly understand their social situatedness, if they are sufficiently aware of the cultural forces bearing down on the writing task, or if this awareness has in fact done them any good. We cannot even be sure if our own classroom presentation of discourse and community is adequately dynamic, or if we have fallen into harmful reductions. For both expressivism and social construction, there is no defined end result and therefore no way to know when a result is achieved. The search for inner truth or the search for any “real” social discourse are similarly endless processes, and any successes must be intuitively felt rather than measured or named. Despite the differences in epistemology, both expressivism and social construction are similarly Romantic in their orientation towards Quality. Both theories contain a conception of truth that does not lend itself to any measurable outcome—a shared weakness that produces problematic results, as illustrated particularly when it comes to assessing writing.

### **Social Constructionist Assessment as Romantic Enabler**

Nowhere do both the extreme Romanticism of social construction and its resistance to Classical thought stand out more starkly, or to larger effect, than in the area of assessment. The basic uses of assessment are to decide how well things are going, and then what you should do more and what you should do less. As we will see, social construction essentially prevents such judgments by making all assessment an exercise in infinite regress. The practical result has been a standing critique of all such judgments as “reductive,” “objectivist,” and, of course, “positivist,” greatly complicating disciplinary decisions about what to do with assessments, and even whether to conduct them.

We take Brian Huot’s *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning* as the main exemplar of social constructionist assessment. We begin our examination there precisely because Huot has presented social constructionist assessment so well, and because his vision in its general scope has been so widely accepted. With expert scholarly method and considerable rhetorical skill, Huot develops a “new theory and practice of writing assessment,” establishing the principles that the new practice of writing assessment be site-based, locally-controlled, context-sensitive, rhetorically-based, and accessible (105). Thus, assessment in Huot’s view would not ever become what Richard Haswell later called “RAD” research—replicable, aggregable, and data-supported. Whereas Haswell would have us build a larger body of research that can be tested by others, accumulated, and represented in a variety of ways, including as collected data, Huot pointedly insists that assessment should focus on serving only the precise purposes at hand. Indeed, Huot seems to reject even the possibility of Haswell’s project, decrying as “positivist” error the very idea that “human traits ... can be measured accurately across individual contexts.” Here,

the Romantic resistance to any reduction and systemizing is made plain. Huot's reasoning begins by criticizing this erroneous "classical test theory" as (in part quoting assessment expert Egon Guba) "based on a positivist philosophy which contends 'that there exists a reality *out there*, driven by immutable natural laws'" (83). Again, we should pause to note that, apparently, anyone who actually believes there really is a law of gravity might not agree with Huot's construct. Such are the extreme philosophical claims in which social construction genuinely is grounded, a fact too often glossed over. Huot does go on to limit the range of his claim more carefully, seeking mainly to guard against any assumption that a complex ability like writing is a "fixed, consistent, and acontextual human trait" (83). Huot asserts that all positivists would believe that premise—which may be true enough as it goes, but it does not follow that all believers in a more nuanced realism—such as Haswell, for instance, whom Huot later praises for his assessment method (106)—are positivists.

Huot, then, essentially builds a straw scholar, positioning all opponents of social constructionist assessment as entirely duped by positivist objectivism, with every step toward objectivism leading inevitably down the slippery slope to "positivism." In remarkable, ungrounded leaps, any believer in empirical study of any kind becomes willing to accept without question or qualm the most dubious and reductive of assessments. As he notes, "those of us who teach and research literacy have always known that writing assessment could never be totally objective, and that writing which *approached* such objectivity would never be effective communication" (92). Huot also charges that "within the positivist assumptions that construct and rely on the technology of testing, there is no need for different sets of procedures depending on context, because writing ability is a fixed and isolated human trait" (83). Yet it seems patently obvious that a great many people who understand that writing always has subjective and interpretive aspects also demonstrate a faith that it also has objectifiable aspects, ideas about reality that can be shared and tested. It is just as apparent that many non-positivists simply use tests as one piece of information among many, arrayed to construct a more complete picture of a complex reality. For instance, Haswell's call for RAD research ("NCTE/CCCC's") makes plain that his wish is not to use any one measure reductively; quite to the contrary, he wishes to have us accumulate a vast amount of varied information in ways that we can "aggregate" to make complex decisions. Huot, speaking accurately and expertly for social constructionist assessment, posits it as a way to save us from the excesses of positivism, but his argument simply goes too far. One may in fact believe in a reality that is "out there" and still believe that this reality is also interpreted rhetorically by discourse communities, and is extraordinarily difficult to pin down with confidence. That blended belief, in fact, opens up even more room for interpretation, given that multiple findings from local sites must then be read and interpreted together within a larger interpretive community—the RAD approach posited by Haswell.

Furthermore, in the area of assessment we once again find that advocates of social construction, in part by failing to claim their underlying Romanticism, actually end up enabling Classical systems with which they cannot adequately contend. Huot notes that "[at] present, assessment procedures that attempt to fix objectively a student's ability to write are based upon an outmoded theory supported by an irrelevant epistemology" (94). Yet we find little sign that current scholarship roundly condemns grading student

writing, a result that such a statement would seem to demand as a necessary consequence. Just as social constructionists will (paraphrasing Walker Percy) order a pizza and expect to get one, they continue to give simplistic, five-category ratings of student ability and expect people to accept them. Indeed, they do so knowing full well that students, other schools, and employers do in fact accept grades. Among ourselves, then, apparently we should “[acknowledge] the indeterminacy of meaning and the importance of individual and communal interpretations and values” (101). But to the outside world, we may still unproblematically display our judgments in simplistic grades—and indeed, if anything, must resist norming them so that they might mean the same thing in different classrooms. What Huot does not acknowledge is that teachers and theorists must already make compromises with social construction, since so much of what we do—like grading—requires us to step outside of our social constructionist (and Romantic) roles. Instead of making this negotiation a feature of our disciplinary conversation, theorists like Huot instead simply skip over discussing the parts of our tasks as teachers that are simply too hard to reconcile. Furthermore, the larger project in which Huot is engaged betrays his own faith that composition scholars can indeed make meaning together in ways that go beyond our local sites and contexts. After all, if all knowledge of any kind is always only local and contextual, then nobody could ever say we should publish and use any particular theory of writing assessment, either.

The consequence has been a burgeoning field of assessment, but curiously very little new information about how it is that students become better writers or what teaching practices produce that result. Of course, those who follow social constructionist orthodoxy must accuse us of “positivism” for even considering the idea that there is such a thing as “better” writing outside a local rhetorical context. But there’s the problem. If our discipline really has no way of saying what is better or worse in any way that transcends the local site, then we have no means by which to critique anything at all that teachers might do in their classes. Furthermore, it then becomes obvious that, even locally, any attempt to enforce a course-wide policy must be similarly flawed; after all, the most refined and accurate local rhetorical site will be the individual classroom. Indeed, in that every individual has a different subjective and cultural location and a different construct of the rhetorical situation, the students themselves are the only ones who can genuinely assess their own work.

Hence, we can see how the social constructionist paradigm, carried to its own logical conclusions, produces Romantic, individualist results. In the most Romantic of senses, WPAs become the heroes of the program, teachers the heroes of their classes, students the heroes of their writing. Of course, in practice what happens is that whoever in that chain has the most authority “wins,” and gets to declare what will be valued. Or, all too often, authority has its center in some other social location, like an excessively literature-focused English department or a more fully committed positivist somewhere higher up in the academic administration. Yet much as compositionists complain whenever this authority gets located somewhere outside the ranks of those who understand composition well, the ideas underpinning social constructionist assessment theory itself will rule out any resort to studies or measures that might contradict the narrative offered by those with the power to impose it. The discourse community in charge, after all, has spoken. Ultimately, being a form of Romanticism in denial, social construction produces results that simply vacillate



between the Romantic and the Classical, depending on whether the individual or the system happens to have more power to define a satisfactory result.

### **Irreducibility and Inaction**

Essentially, social constructionist assessments have not had the practical effects they surely intend. Because such methods are non-replicable and offer no measurable outcomes, they are neither transferable nor appealing to anyone beyond the relatively small circle of those already immersed in composition scholarship. The resulting vacuum has been filled by genuinely positivistic, objectivist assessments sold by testing companies that do not share our qualms. We rightly decry these assessments, but the problem is that our field's critique of such poor methods errs on the Romantic side of the Classic/Romantic split. Social constructionists are correct in pointing out that these assessments are reductive and harmful, but they tend to attribute these flaws to the mere existence of Classical, reductive elements in the assessments—the data, the numbers, etc—rather than anything else.

The problem with this critique is twofold. First, our critique of bad assessments by outsiders is weakened by our outright rejection of all things Classical. Instead of advocating for better assessment methods, social constructionists make the unpalatable (especially to even well-intentioned outsiders) argument that data-driven assessment itself is reductive and wrongheaded. For those on the periphery of our field, such a sentiment paints composition scholars as an eccentric band of Romantics, not as professionals with any authority worth heeding. Secondly, the inability of the field as a whole to create a cache of knowledge of what works in the classroom has left teachers with little to guide their practice. Hence, writing teachers must find guidance elsewhere—be it a from a textbook, a common syllabus, sets of rules and regulations, or from simple social pressure. As should surprise no one, the two most common kinds of social pressure lead to an “anything goes” Romanticism and a current-traditional Classicism—too often in a combination that says, “Leave me alone in my classroom (to teach grammar)!” Social construction, and its assessment scholarship, advocates for a highly responsive understanding of student writing in relationship to the social sphere. Yet the radical Romanticism of such scholarship restricts its influence, which has had the practical effect of leaving huge swaths of the field untended and therefore vulnerable to outside assessors, uninformed administrators, and individual teachers whose classroom practices reflect the uncured range of the history of composition studies—from retrograde grammar drills to literature study to pure cultural studies to expressing the inner self, and everywhere in between.

Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* again provides a useful gloss on composition's current impasse. The book is both the memoir of the author's motorcycle trip with his son and a work of original philosophy concerned with fully exploring why people get locked into certain styles of thought. Pirsig's early travel companions, John and Susan, refuse to work on the mechanics of their motorcycle and demonstrate a resistance to technology in general. Pirsig begins his exploration by fully describing the differences between the Romantic mindset, which describes his friends, and the Classical mindset, which often is seen in good technicians and scientists. Pirsig, using a handful of sand as a metaphor, describes how differently Classicists and Romantics approach understanding.

The handful of sand looks uniform, at first, but the longer we look at it the more

diverse we find it to be. Each grain of sand is different. No two are alike. Classical understanding is concerned with the piles and the basis for sorting and interrelating them. Romantic understanding is directed toward the handful of sand before the sorting begins. Both are valid ways of looking at the world although irreconcilable with each other (96-98).

Romantics, with their unwillingness to reduce phenomena into categories, instead describe all the ways the phenomena might be viewed. A student is both a student and a member of the classroom discourse community—the school as a whole, the region, the country, etc. The student is a gender, a race, a class, an age. Cultural, societal, familial, institutional pressures are all at work. The Romantic, however, does not make these observations to split the students into groups, but to simply describe the many facets of their situatedness. Huot refers to this large picture as “contextual integrity,” which is notable for both its clear articulation of a Romantic value (the whole is more than the parts), and the whiff of ethical necessity. Pirsig points out that the Romantic can add to a description indefinitely, since any subject has an infinite context. As Pirsig writes, “You’d think the process of subdivision and classification would come to an end somewhere, but it doesn’t. It just goes on and on” (96). Yet as Pirsig later points out, this worldview often produces a paralysis born of unsorted information:

The overwhelming majority of facts, the sights and sounds that are around us every second and the relationships among them and everything in our memory...these have no Quality, in fact have a negative quality. If they were all present at once our consciousness would be so jammed with meaningless data we couldn’t think or act. (400)

In the case of composition studies, we are overrun with the data of discrete observations that do not cohere into shared knowledge. Haswell’s study of the 2004 CCCC conference found that of the 478 presentations, only 17 were RAD scholarship, the majority of such panels adding a tiny new facet to the contextual portrait of student writers. The problem with even these studies, as Haswell points out, is that they do not build on one another. He uses the 2004 article, “Redneck and Hillbilly Discourse in the Writing Classroom: Classifying Critical Pedagogies of Whiteness,” as an example of scholarship that might add to the contextual picture of writers, but is not applicable beyond itself. The title typifies the hyper-specificity that often marks this scholarship, and while the article included observational data, it was not gathered using any classical methods. “[T]he data do not much help a scholar who might want to test or add to these facts,” Haswell explains, “because there is no system by which to sample, elicit, and analyze student response” (202). His call for RAD scholarship is based on the fact that the field itself has not built any shared, systemic knowledge, only at best a small pile of one-offs hidden among a vaster pile of entirely un-RAD discussion.

Pirsig would argue that this result is typical of what a hardline Romantic would produce, since “Romantic Quality always correlates with instantaneous impressions”—the context as we see it, a specific moment in the discourse community (316). Social constructivist composition scholars constantly redraw the picture, with no bit of knowledge meaningfully building off the past or stretching into the future. Pirsig contrasts this approach with classical Quality, which is “concerned with more than just the present.

The relation of the present to the past and future [is] always considered” (316). Science is Classical because knowledge comes from data that are accumulated and tested over time, so that each study adds to a narrative line of understanding. In composition, the research is instead a collection of snapshots—of a specific discourse, of a local context, of a cultural moment. The paralysis of the field that so frustrates Haswell is born of composition’s unwillingness to review its store of knowledge, to find what is worthy of continued testing and study. The field, Haswell warns, is at risk of stagnation or even obsolescence because of this refusal. Pirsig would agree. Under Romanticism, there is “no formal way of evaluating, no way of acknowledging this Quality...the entire train [of knowledge] has no way of knowing where to go” (363). Composition studies, through a somewhat unwitting championing of the Romantic over the Classical, is philosophically opposed to what is foundational to nearly every other academic discipline—summarizing what it already knows.

### **A Way Out: The Idea of Quality**

Haswell’s exhaustive study of the state of composition studies reveals two things: one, that the field is not aggregating its own knowledge, and two, that field indeed has a lot of knowledge. Composition studies remains a perpetually new field, not because it doesn’t know enough, but because it has no apparatus for sorting through and verifying what it knows. Pirsig boils down the problem with being wed to such a Romantic, anti-objective style of thought: “If Quality is subjective, existing only in the observer, then this Quality that you make so much of is just a fancy name for whatever you like” (291). If social construction cannot produce aggregable and summarized findings, how can we know that the pedagogies or the scholarship is anything more than what that particular scholar liked? If we cannot test another’s method or idea thereby applying its insights, how can we trust or make use of the insights? And how can we blame students for so often believing that our grades reflect simply how much we like them?

Using RAD scholarship more widely is the surface solution, yet this approach would not get at the root of the philosophical resistance that has thus far shut it out. Before scholars and journals in the field can generate a truly RAD project of inquiry, there needs to be a philosophical recalibrating on the most fundamental level. Social construction, as we have shown, is too limited a worldview to carry the profession forward. Yet part of the reason why “positivism” remains such a fear, even to those theorists not married to social construction, is that we do not have an alternative philosophy at the ready that can meaningfully incorporate Classical thought. A free-floating RAD scholarship, unattached to any compelling worldview, will make little systematic difference, despite the laudable recent increase in such scholarship. Social construction, despite its flaws, clearly still appeals to teachers and scholars, so the strongest option for a new epistemology is one that can fold in its best features while expanding the types of knowledge we can pursue.

Pirsig’s notion of Quality offers a view of reality that is neither reductive nor meaninglessly expansive. It can be the backing for RAD and non-RAD scholarship. Most importantly, it provides a view of reality that makes discernment—the center of assessment and knowledge-making in general—central. We do not hold that Pirsig’s Metaphysics of Quality, as the theory has come to be popularly labeled, is the only such solution; but

we do find it interestingly consistent to explore a potential solution that was originally worked out in the context of teaching composition—and calling it “rhetoric.” After all, there remains keen value in attending to local contexts in all their particularity.

Pirsig’s *Metaphysics of Quality* emerges slowly in the text of *Zen*. Because *Quality* aims to join Classical and Romantic thinking, Pirsig’s groundwork involves debunking the perceived differences between the two. One of his first major sections leading into his idea of *Quality* is concerned with challenging the idea that the hard sciences are entirely objective, neutral, and mediated by facts. Essentially, Pirsig argues against the charge of positivism that so worries theorists like Huot. In his book, Huot contends that classical thinkers such as mathematicians ignore context and the importance of the observer, agreeing with Guba that science is “‘context free,’ because the laws revealed by this type of scientific method are held to be independent of the observer and the particular events in which they were discovered” (83).

Huot dismisses science as insensible to context in a few lines, and continues on as if the matterd is settled. Pirsig is puzzled by people like Huot who believe that science is simply an announced act of detached observation. He uses the mathematician Poincaré as one example of how classical thinkers nonetheless subjectively make choices based on context.

[Mathematics] isn’t merely a question of applying rules . . . . It doesn’t merely make the most combinations possible. The combinations so obtained would be exceedingly numerous, useless and cumbersome. The true work of the inventor consists in choosing among these combinations is to eliminate the useless ones . . . . and the rules that must guide the choice are extremely fine and delicate. It’s almost impossible to state them precisely; they must be felt rather than formulated. (342)

The selection of methods or facts or observations—a subjective act—is as critical the work of the sciences. The observer, unlike in Guba’s formulation, is not independent from the observed. Yet if scientists and mathematicians select from reality, rather than simply apply rules, then how do they make their selections? What governs their decisions? And if composition studies were to use RAD methods, how could we be assured that we are choosing the right methods, the right facts to observe? Pirsig’s central investigation in *Zen* is centered on questions like these, since neither the facts of the world nor the individual filtering of those facts seem to explain reality fully. He uses Poincaré’s view of mathematical discovery as a critical clue. Poincaré was sure that the discoveries that he had made did not come from the facts alone, since the facts themselves didn’t automatically produce a discovery. Instead, it was as if the more interesting and relevant facts eventually made themselves known and harmonized into an insight. There must be a unconscious element at play here:

Poincaré then hypothesized that this selection is made by what he called the ‘subliminal self’ . . . . The subliminal self, Poincaré said, looks at a large number of solutions to a problem, but only the interesting ones break into the domain of consciousness. Mathematical solutions are selected by the subliminal self on the basis of ‘mathematical beauty,’ of the harmony of numbers and forms, of geometric elegance. (336)

Pirsig continues, challenging the idea of science's objectivity and hence pushing past Poincaré's ideas to begin a full articulation of Quality. Pirsig's Metaphysics of Quality has three main parts. First, it recasts reality not as a objective fact nor a subjective construct, but as a third entity, Quality, that is neither. The subjective and objective are not pitted against each other as incompatible worldviews. Instead, both are contained under Quality. The second piece of Pirsig's philosophy eliminates the romantic/classical dualism by showing that both are merely ways of reading the same Quality. Finally, Pirsig's Quality is dynamic and temporal. It exists in the moment-by-moment choices people make when ordering their world, the precise way subjective readings play off of objective facts. Quality is what drives us to choose the interesting facts, to make the discoveries that would be worthwhile to us just then. As Pirsig puts it, "Quality couldn't be independently related with either the subject or object but could be found *only in the relationship of the two with each other*. It is the point at which subject and object meet" (304).

Such a philosophy is difficult to summarize, but even this surface description has promising implications for composition studies. On a basic level, both RAD scholarship and scholarship concerned with student context could unproblematically coexist, since both are equally legitimate ways of confronting Quality. In fact, both styles of scholarship could more easily be seen as interchangeable lenses for viewing student writing, rather than competing visions of truth. Pirsig emphasizes the idea that even what appear to be natural or scientific laws are just the best—the most Quality—way of reading the world at the moment, discussing the idea that we can posit more than one geometry that seems to correspond with reality:

One geometry cannot be more true than another; it can only be more *convenient*. Geometry is not true, it is advantageous. Poincaré then went on to demonstrate the conventional nature of other concepts of science, such as space and time, showing that there isn't one way of measuring these entities that is more true than another; that which is generally adopted is only more convenient. (337)

Scientific knowledge and Romantic insight act as complementary languages for understanding reality; neither are reality itself. This backs up Haswell's idea that RAD scholarship, far from being dry and positivist, is actually as just as dynamic and flexible as any other language. This is why RAD scholarship "may be feminist, empirical, ethnomethodological, contextual, action liberatory, or critical" (201). Beyond the versatility of what could be studied, the resulting data itself is plastic. The information "doesn't just lie there" but is "potentialized," its value being its "capacity for growth—its comparability, replicability, and accruability" (202). The data that jump out at us—the surprising change in sentence length, the similarity of arguments in a certain region—would be the kinds of Quality facts that would lead to more studies and discoveries. Social constructionists see hard data as confining and controlling. But under the idea of Quality, we are in complete control of how we view the data, and the information itself will make its Quality known.

Pirsig's philosophy provides, among other things, a framework for valuing the intuition and the serendipity that accompanies intellectual discovery. In some ways, Quality validates what he calls "preintellectual reality," that Romantic sense of rightness.

The moment a teacher sees something striking in her classroom is just as much a part of Quality as reams and reams of numerical data about student writing. They are equally weighted, both parts of the same whole. The Quality is in how they interact. Perhaps the teacher's intuition led to a RAD study that others are building upon in their own classrooms. Or perhaps she consulted older data on student writing after her class, and her insight helped her see a trend in the numbers that no one else had. Under the idea of Quality, the Romantic and the Classic symbiotically move knowledge forward.

We need not turn only to Pirsig for such models, though we might pause to consider carefully the way forward suggested by a work that serves so well to diagnose the current problem. In ways far too involved to address here, strains of philosophical pragmatism urged by composition scholars such as Ann Berthoff and Thomas Kent have addressed these same problems in great detail—and in ways that should certainly give comfort to anyone who fears a lapse into outright positivism. What seems most clear is that the field needs to move on. Social construction has had its uses, but it has become too comfortable an oasis. It's time to pack up and move on down the road.



### Works Cited

- The Association of American Colleges and Universities. "Written Communication VALUE Rubric." *The Association of American Colleges and Universities*. The Association of American Colleges and Universities, n.d. Web. 28 Oct. 2011.
- Bartholomae, David. "Writing with Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow." *College Composition and Communication* 46:1 (1995): 62-71. Print.
- Berlin, James A. "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class." *College English* 50.5. (1988): 477-94. Print.
- . *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1987. Print.
- Beech, Jennifer. "Redneck and Hillbilly Discourse in the Writing Classroom: Classifying Critical Pedagogies of Whiteness." *College English* 67.2 (Nov. 2004): 172-86.
- Berthoff, Ann E. *The Making of Meaning*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1981. Print.
- Elbow, Peter. "Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals." *College Composition and Communication* 46:1 (1995): 72-83. Print.
- Faigley, Lester. "Competing Theories of Process: A Critique and a Proposal." *College English* 48.6. (1986): 527-42. Print.
- Guba, Egon G. "The Alternative Paradigm Dialog." *The Paradigm Dialog*. Ed. Egon G. Guba. Newbury Park: Sage, 1990. 17-27. Print.
- Haswell, Richard H. *Gaining Ground in College Writing*. Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1991. Print.
- . "NCTE/CCCC's Recent War on Scholarship." *Written Communication* 22.2 (2005): 198-223. Print.
- Huot, Brian. *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2002. Print.
- Kent, Thomas. *Paralogic Rhetoric: A Theory of Communicative Interaction*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1983. Print.

- Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1962. Print.
- Macrorie, Ken. *Telling Writing*. New York: Hayden, 1970. Hayden English Language Series. Print.
- Percy, Walker. Letter. *Harper's* (Feb. 1990): 4-6. Print.
- Pirsig, Robert M. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values*. 1974. New York: HarperTorch, 2006. Print.

# The Journey Metaphor's Entailments For Framing Learning

Brad Smith

Discursive framing is clearly becoming an important part of our work as writing teachers. This insight, made most notably by Linda Adler-Kassner, focuses on the use of conceptual metaphors and framing for communicating what writing instruction means to stakeholders and students outside the composition and rhetoric community. Yet Adler-Kassner argues that writing program administrators and writing instructors as a group have used frames that are all over the map, without any shared ideals or strategies, and so a more consistent use of framing is needed (5-6). Lad Tobin agrees that the pedagogical metaphors writing teachers use are often offered so haphazardly that “most are rarely integrated into the course as a whole or into the students’ own conception of and experience in composing” (446). This problem has culminated most recently in the position statement “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing.” Created by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project—this document is designed to offer a shared set of ideals for discussing what is meant by “college readiness” in terms of writing. Though the document never explicitly states that its goal is to “frame” first-year writing, some of its authors, e.g., Adler-Kassner and Peggy O’Neill, have extensively researched and discussed framing as part of their own scholarship. Moreover, Judith Summerfield and Philip Anderson write that they applaud the “Framework’s” effort, even though they are disappointed with the result (544). For those outside the field, the document helps focus the conversation about the kind of framing consistency that writing teachers can use to discuss what it means to be prepared for first-year writing.

While much of our use of conceptual metaphor remains tacit, we must pay careful attention to how shifting the use of conceptual metaphors can lead to a shift in the way that a concept is framed. As Keely R. Austin states, repeated and wide-spread metaphor use “offers the potential for change if a community chooses to strengthen a new, repeated pathway (270). When a discourse community collectively uses one set of conceptual metaphors over another, the cumulative effect reframes the concept being discussed.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, writing teachers have shifted away from framing learning to write as collecting ideas (i.e., writing is a process of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing) to moving through space, following what Nedra Reynolds terms contemporary theories’ “fascination with ‘movement’” (“Who’s Going” 541). I would argue that this shift is occurring for two

<sup>1</sup> The journey metaphor for writing is one of the most widely used, but there are a myriad metaphors for writing and activities associated with writing that have been proposed and critiqued in composition scholarship. To name a few: Burke’s parlor metaphor; writing is *not* speaking/ writing is growing (Sommers “Revision Strategies”); writing is/is *not* like playing a sport (Hart); writing is chaos (kyburz); cultural linguistic difference is transcultural literacy (Lu); citing research is “passing on” and plagiarism is *not* theft (Robillard); writing research is an ecology (Fleckenstein, et al.); writing is travel (Clark); writing is jazz (Clark); writing is music (Elbow); collaborative writing is quilting (Fischer, et al.), etc. Such metaphors remain outside the purview of this essay, the focus of which is the role that the journey metaphor plays in conceptualizing learning and writing.



reasons. First, numerous scholars criticize frames that employ the conceptual metaphor, *Ideas are Objects*—e.g., the banking model. Second, communication technology has changed in recent years, from stationary devices requiring connection to “land lines” to mobile devices which are wireless. This change is bringing about a shift from a reliance on the Conduit Metaphor (a word directly conveys an idea) to other conceptual metaphors. For instance, because of our new use of mobile technology, Nicole Brown observes that metaphors of graffiti and public art may help composition theorists build location-aware pedagogies that can bring writing from the streets to the classroom (242). Such metaphors frame communication in a new way, when compared to the conduit metaphor.

Because this shift in usage is flourishing, the field of composition and rhetoric would benefit from critically reflecting on the different ways that journey-based conceptual metaphors can be employed to frame the act of learning to write. This essay shows the different ways that the conceptual metaphor *Learning is a Journey* can be employed to frame the act of learning to write. It delineates, where possible, that *Learning is a Journey* can collect together different pedagogical metaphors for the act of writing.

### **The Importance of Framing and its Relationship to Conceptual Metaphor**

Erving Goffman defines frames as “principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them” (10-11). In other words, frames serve as “schemata of interpretation” for social interactions (21). Or as Gunther Kress puts it, “there is *no meaning without framing*” (10; emphasis in original). While Goffman’s early work is certainly an important beginning, we must take into account scholarship on the role of analogy in cognition in order to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of semantic conceptualization. Frames are one of a few different components of mental space and must be analogically blended to produce complex thoughts. Frames work in conjunction with conceptual metaphors to organize experience. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write, conceptual metaphors that are “constitutive” of a theory limit the way that you can draw conclusions within the framework (117). For this reason, the way that students and teachers frame the context of the classroom and the interactions entailed within that context are only one part of a larger cognitive system for creating meaning and interacting with the world. Because frames are connective and relational structures, they organize and interpret meaning based on previous experiences by establishing an analogical relationship between those experiences and the current context. Therefore, any discussion of framing must be accompanied by a discussion of conceptual metaphors, which serve as part of the conceptual structure that frames use to shape meaning in context.

If we think in terms of a certain frame, it will influence what we do and how we do it. As Mark Johnson asserts, image-schematic models (frames) based in analogical reasoning “*constitute* an individual’s understanding of a phenomenon and thereby influence her acts of inference or cooperation. The metaphors, or analogies, are not merely convenient economies for expressing our knowledge; rather, they *are* our knowledge and understanding of the particular phenomena in question” (112; emphasis in original). Take, for instance, the way that political debates are framed using the conceptual metaphor *The Nation is a Family*. George Lakoff shows that conservatives and liberals use this metaphor to construct very different frames for what government should do. While

the family metaphor is consistent across the two frames, other *entailments* vary, leading to variations in the way that people conceptualize the role of government on a number of different issues. The family metaphor fits with the experiences of liberals and conservatives and is linked with metaphors for morality. Conservative morality is characterized by the strict father model, which entails discipline and self-reliance (70). Liberal morality is characterized by the nurturant parent model, which entails empathy and fairness (114). These two different systems of metaphors lead to different ways that social policies like welfare or student loan programs can be framed, i.e., in terms of self-reliance or in terms of fairness. Conservative morality rejects such policies because they do not promote self-reliance, and liberal morality promotes such policies because they strive to create fairness. This is why framing learning in a consistent and specific way is so important. The frames and their analogic entailments will drive the way that teachers and students conceptualize the work involved in learning to write.

### Frames for Learning and the Conceptual Metaphor, *Ideas are Objects*

The conflicting differences that occur in the conceptualization of American politics also occur in our collective conceptualization of learning in a writing classroom —though perhaps to a lesser extent. Many of these frames have been analyzed and critiqued already but deserve mention, since as Lakoff and Johnson argue, for important and complex domains of experience, a single conceptual mapping cannot fully allow us to “reason and talk about the experience” (*Philosophy* 71). For instance, teachers of writing will, of course, be familiar with the “banking model.” In the banking model, ideas-as-objects are “passed through” language as if through a conduit (see Reddy, “Conduit Metaphor”) from the teacher and “deposited” in the students’ minds, metaphorized as containers. Paulo Freire’s critique of the banking model is based on a critique of the use of metaphors like *Minds are Containers*, *Ideas are Objects*, *Learning is Receiving*, and *Teaching is Giving*. Freire argues that, “In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (72). Under this conceptualization of learning, instruction is inherently lecture-based, because the lecture format best allows for the transfer of ideas-as-objects. In sum, this system of thought creates a pedagogical environment where the teacher’s job is to share knowledge and the student’s job is to receive and store knowledge.

Certainly most first-year writing instructors have noted the critiques of the dissemination of knowledge and have worked to change the way they teach accordingly.<sup>2</sup> In some instances, teachers have replaced the banking model with a frame that relies on the metaphor of learning as the act of constructing knowledge, loosely based on Piaget’s theories. There are some real benefits to the constructivist frame when it is compared to

<sup>2</sup> While the Conduit Metaphor for communication has been roundly critiqued, it’s worth mentioning that it has also been supported by Philip Eubanks, who argues in “Understanding Metaphors for Writing: In Defense of the Conduit Metaphor” and *Metaphor and Writing: Figurative Thought in the Discourse of Written Communication* that the conduit metaphor’s relationship with the metaphor *Language is Power* creates metaphoric entailments of “linguistic accuracy and directness” (*Metaphor and Writing* 162). According to Eubanks, these entailments necessitate the use of the Conduit Metaphor and, in fact, make it preferable.

the banking model. Yet the frame also relies on a conceptual system that defines learning as collecting, ordering, and storing ideas-as-objects. Within the context of both frames, ideas are still objects to be stored in students' minds even though the way the teacher presents the ideas and students store the ideas are different.

Because the constructivist metaphor *Learning is Building/Constructing* is so common, it has permeated educational discourse, framing a number of popular pedagogical theories—theories that talk about the “foundations” of learning, theory-building or theory-construction, classroom “scaffolding,” etc. As a result of its object-based metaphors, the frame leads people to interpret the world as an objective reality that can be broken up into “concrete” parts. When *Learning is Building/Constructing* is employed to frame pedagogic interactions, teaching involves creating an environment designed to help students build a mental object in their own minds through an assembly of its parts. The theory shows that once the student has received the information from the teacher (via the “conduit” of language), the student actively orders that information by stacking it in metaphorically vertical (wall-like) structures. Thus the constructivist metaphor helps to frame learning as consisting of two separate but connected operations: collecting and ordering, with a greater emphasis placed on the ordering operation. The frame leads teachers to create a series of related sub-tasks, beginning with the simplest and working up to more complex tasks, until students have learned the whole concept that comprises the course or sequence of courses. Here we can see that the tasks involved in learning are framed differently from the banking model in that the constructivist metaphor privileges students' ability to form relationships between ideas over the simple collection of ideas. Yet, despite the merits of this conceptual frame, teachers are given the authority to choose which parts to pass on to students, and it is up to students to “rebuild” and mentally store a reconstruction of objective reality. Knowledge under a conceptual frame that employs *Learning is Building/Constructing* is essentially cumulative and is based, among others, on the conceptual metaphor *More is Up*. Thus, under this theory, knowledge “grows” bigger, taller, and stronger over time.

Joseph Williams notes some of the problems of using this frame to think of educational contexts. According to Williams, the constructivist metaphor is part of a broader educational metaphor, the metaphor of growth. The metaphor that Williams is referring to thinks of learning as growing in the way one grows in height, weight, or strength. This growth scale translates into the idea that intellectual development is movement on a graph from lower left to upper right (248). Williams writes that this metaphor allows us to explain a student's failure to learn through his or her previous learning experiences, because “At whatever level, we can blame the failure of our students on those who did not provide them with the foundation, the base[ics] that the student needs to perform at a higher level” (Williams 249; brackets in original). Williams writes that this metaphor can lead to other consequences as well. He argues that reasoning using this metaphor as a frame leads to the conclusion, “Just as getting taller and heavier is something that just happens, intellectual growth seems inevitable; it is what all normal people do. So if a student does not grow, then something may be wrong with the student” (249).

While the way that the metaphoric processes involved in the collection, ordering, and storing differ in these two frames, one constant holds true: in both frames knowledge is characterized as a collection of discrete objects. By reifying ideas in this way, frames that

rely on the metaphor *Ideas are Objects* lead students and teachers to conceptualize what/how they should be learning differently than we might like. Under these two frames, learning is a kind of unproblematic accumulation of the type where more is better.

### Moving About: Spatial Frames for Learning

While object-based frames represent a large portion of the way that learning to write is conceptualized, spatial frames for learning are equally as important in the writing classroom context. As with the object-based frames, there are multiple frames that rely on spatial metaphors and that teachers of writing are likely to use—though one's relationship to that space changes, depending on the way that the frame for learning employs the metaphor *Learning is a Journey*. Williams, for instance, offers another metaphor for thinking of learning. Instead of thinking in terms of “higher” and “lower” learning—where we can again see the relevance of the *More is Up* conceptual metaphor—Williams suggests that we might think of learning as “insider” and “outsider” learning, where learners become members of an intellectual community (250). Here the spatial metaphor becomes clear. As part of this frame, learning is conceptualized as travelling to a specific place, a place where like-minded people gather and dwell. Entering this community requires novices to acquire new knowledge and new “habits of thought” (Williams 252). In opposition to the first set of frames that conceptualized ideas as objects, spatial frames rely on the conceptual metaphor *Ideas are Locations*, in addition to metaphors like *The Mind is a Vehicle*, *Learning is a Journey*, *Teaching is Guiding*, and *Discourse is Space*.

In alighting on this metaphor for teaching and learning, Williams has shown his affiliation with the field of composition and rhetoric, its roots firmly planted in Burke's parlor metaphor (110-111) and Bartholomae's notion of “Inventing [and entering] the University” (4). In this frame, based on the metaphor *Discourse is Space*, writing and speaking in a certain way is the act of practicing knowledge in a discipline. Here, we can see the connections to the metaphor that Williams has described. Working within this frame, in order for learning to occur, learners must enter into a community of skilled practitioners and work to adapt their writing and speaking practices—their ways of rhetorically navigating that space—and their habits of mind to the expectations of that community. Furthermore, this metaphor is supported by Linda Flower's research on the construction of negotiated meaning, where she defines literacy as “a move within a discourse practice” (20). Flower, like Williams, calls for a reexamination of the “basics” and suggests that the “new ‘basics’ should start with expressive and rhetorical practices” (25). Beginning with these new basics, Flower sees writing instruction as the process of “helping students enter into a discourse practice, helping them to understand the logic of the practice—who is doing what with whom and why” (25).

While Williams' metaphor of space and Flowers' metaphor of movement may seem like a small stylistic difference, their implications about the way that learning is conceptualized have large repercussions. If learning is “entering into” a new space, the “position” of the learner changes in relation to a group. Here, learning is not about *what* you know but *where* you position yourself in the landscape of ideas and in close proximity to whom. Under this frame, learning is becoming a part of a community, dwelling intellectually near people who are interested in similar subjects and who speak and write about them in similar ways.

Nedra Reynolds also uses this frame to think about learning to write. Reynolds observes that “writers dwell in ideas to make them their own; they squat, intellectually, before moving on” (*Geographies* 141). Thus, there is a shift in the kind of learning that occurs in classroom contexts. Instead of lecture-based or activity-based learning, teaching becomes inherently discussion/ discursive-based. In this frame, learning is about “positioning” your ideas in relation to others, and the only way to do that is through “coming to” an understanding of what and how others think. Thus, the frame addresses first and foremost the role that context plays in learning. Class discussions in a writing course become places where students explore knowledge within the context of a specific community, a practice that they can use to rethink their ideas, showcase the relative proximity of their ideas to others’, and push the boundaries of their community to accept new and related ideas. And so the work of learning under this frame is not the collection of facts, and it’s not the use of skills. Instead, it is characterized by a *tête-à-tête* that establishes and changes distance and proximity. For this reason, learning in this frame is best achieved through the communication of ideas. Thus, students have to communicate ideas with one another and with the teacher, to work through disagreement, and to explore how close or how far apart their ideas are.

Certainly, there is room for contention and disagreement in discursive communities. While the metaphor *Discourse is Space* defines the way that ideas are relatively positioned, we must remember that the space defined in this frame is a bounded space, a space with borders to which admittance is granted or denied—even though those borders are permeable and nebulous. Thus, disagreements and cultural differences are metaphorized as borderlands and contact zones. Mary Louise Pratt argues that contact zones can be useful in setting the activities for pedagogical environments which become

exercises in storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others; experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison (including unseemly comparisons between elite and vernacular cultural forms); the redemption of the oral; ways for people to engage with suppressed aspects of history (including their own histories); ways to move *into* and *out of* rhetorics of authenticity; ground rules for communication across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect; a systematic approach to the all-important concept of *cultural mediation*. (40; emphasis in original)

While Pratt’s original description of a contact zone was an analysis of real, historical spaces, the concept is often used metaphorically as part of spatial frames to describe the ways that ideas conflict in discursive spaces. Reynolds, for example, metaphorizes borderlands and contact zones to conceptualize the work of writing, while at the same time privileging the material conditions of space and the way that people navigate real spaces.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Reynolds’ use of the borderlands concept raises a conflict with Darsie Bowden’s article “The Limits of Containment: Text-as-Container in Composition Studies.” While Reynolds argues that spatial metaphors lead one to frame learning in terms of containers, where borders serve as the container boundaries (*Geographies* 12-13), Bowden argues that framing writing as a community of writers provides an alternative to the container metaphor, with the exception of the pervasive and perhaps unavoidable use of the prepositional in/out binary (Bowden 375).

Despite her use of a frame that employs the journey metaphor, Reynolds has argued that the metaphor for the educational journey is a cliché (*Geographies* 10). And certainly the conceptual metaphor historically has been a part of Western thought, as is evidenced in words such as “curriculum” and “course.” But what’s important about Reynolds’ use of the frame is the way that she critiques and analyzes it. Reynolds not only reminds us to keep in mind the material conditions of movement through space, she also reminds us to employ metaphors with potentially harmful effects very carefully, e.g. “Metaphors of the frontier result from dominant ideologies of space, place, and landscape in the U.S.: the more the better; own as much as possible; keep trespassers off; if it looks uninhabited, it must be” (*Geographies* 30). Despite its clichéd status, this frame for conceptualizing learning based in the journey metaphor is not the preferred frame used in fields other than composition and rhetoric. And in this way, the rhetoric and composition community distinguishes itself from other academic disciplines.

As Judith Langer points out, often teaching a disciplinary discourse takes a back seat to content in college teaching. Langer writes that after reviewing literature on teaching biology, 90-95 percent of the materials still focused on having students memorize course materials (74). Moreover, she notes that similar patterns exist in the two other fields she studied, history and literature (75). The reason, of course, is that these disciplines are dominated by frames that rely on the conceptual metaphor *Ideas are Objects*. Writing scholars, though, see it differently. To them, language *constitutes* the ideas. In other words, writing scholars see knowing as a process of speaking and writing with others, using a shared set of practices about common subjects. This difference can account for some of the differing expectations of students, because their experiences in their other college courses do not prepare them for the way their writing teachers expect them to engage the work of learning to write.

Because she simultaneously employs and critiques the journey frame, Reynolds offers an important examination of the way the frame works in action. Moreover, her work fleshes out the complexities of the frame by accounting for both movement and stagnation. Reynolds shows that we must take into account the way that the lack of movement is figured into the act of spatially framing learning to write. As Eubanks argues in *Metaphor and Writing*, at times conceptual metaphors can work paradoxically to negatively frame their referents by pointing to the limits of the frame, the ways that the frame doesn’t accurately account for the concept (171). Through her negative framing of the journey metaphor, Reynolds has shown us some of the limits of movement as a way to conceptualize learning to write—particularly the exclusionary nature of “travel” as a metaphor. Reynolds shows that the notion of travel is typically limited to those with the privilege to do so. She concludes that “in the ‘real world’ people don’t move around that much”—unless their circumstances displace them (“Who’s Going” 543).

In addition to Reynolds’ argument about the material conditions of space, two major critiques advise against framing learning using spatial metaphors. First, Gregory Clark resists the exclusionary nature of an “insider/outsider” discursive binary. Clark writes in “Writing as Travel, or Rhetoric on the Road” that this binary creates conditions where one of the metaphor’s functions in defining a rhetorical collectivity “is the ongoing territorial project of policing boundaries” (10). Thus, the very notion of a discourse community and the act of learning how to enter it sets up a boundary that defines who belongs

and who does not. But Clark argues that such boundaries not only define who belongs. They also actively exclude ideas from consideration. Thus, Clark suggests that the idea of the discourse community denies “the distinctive humanity” that people enact in social contexts (12).

The second critique focuses less on the role that the “discourse community” plays in the frame and instead focuses on the idea at the heart of the conceptual metaphor on which the frame is based. Patricia Dunn argues that framing learning in terms of discourse actively excludes other knowledge forms: “Generally speaking, Composition believes that writing is not simply *one* way of knowing; it is *the* way” (15; emphasis in original). Dunn suggests that this tradition of concentrating on “word-based epistemologies” blocks out the use of other epistemologies that may be valuable to our students’ thinking and composing processes.

These critiques are not reasons to avoid frames that employ the journey metaphor. Instead, they remind us of the frames’ limitations and point out pitfalls to avoid when using the frames. First, Clark, Bowden, and Reynolds offer excellent reasons to avoid metaphors of contained space. That is, teachers should do their best to avoid the use of metaphors that rely on an insider/outsider binary, with the understanding that a complete elimination of such use is most likely impossible. Instead, teachers should focus on metaphors of proximity by discussing the relative distance between differing ideas and concepts. Second, Dunn and Eubanks remind us also to use the frame in its negative construction—to think about the ways that learning is *not* discursive—in order to help students understand the complexities involved in learning to write.

### **Diverging Paths: Two Uses of the Journey Metaphor**

While “travel” as a metaphor is problematic, as Reynolds has shown, embodied movement through space is a virtually universal experience around which a frame for learning can be formed—especially when Reynolds’ call for an examination of the material conditions of movement are taken into account. The question that remains is the type of movement that should be privileged. Depending on how the metaphor *Ideas are Locations* is combined with other metaphors, different frames for learning will be created. For instance, learning is typically metaphorized as one of two different types of movement. Learning can either be thought of as the movement of a person on a journey or as the movement of a projectile toward a target.

When learning is thought of as the movement of the learner toward a goal, it follows the path schema as described by Mark Johnson, where one begins in an initial state and, through an action sequence, moves to a desired state (115). Examples of these frames in action often can be found in an examination of writing teachers speaking about the work that they do. Take, for instance, the scholars who speak about the work of teaching writing in Todd Taylor’s film *Take 20*. Nedra Reynolds provides one example of the linear path metaphor when she says, “You have to start, of course, with—what are the goals of this course? What are the learning outcomes? Where are we trying to get?” Here Reynolds is thinking of her course as a journey and the learning outcomes as the goal: where the class is trying to get. In this case, the knowledge to be learned is a preset destination. The learning in the class is a journey toward that destination. Often, though, teachers talk

about learning as a journey of exploration, a journey with no clear destination, as in this example from Donald McQuade in *Take 20*:

Teaching writing is encouraging students to take risks and not penalizing them for taking those risks. And once they begin to discover that risk is going to be rewarded, they begin to relax into their ability. So they're going to stretch themselves out much, much farther, and they're going to be willing to explore their own resourcefulness with language a lot more if they're operating in a supportive environment, one which doesn't penalize people for taking risks.

McQuade, in this example, is suggesting that learning is characterized by “exploring” and “stretching oneself”—a combination of two different metaphors *Learning is a Journey* and *Learning is Growing*. Likewise, Donald Bartholomae uses an exploration metaphor to describe the act of learning, when he says in *Take 20*, “And if there's a second third [of the course], I want to continue to [open things up], but I want [students] to feel the power now in their ability to think beyond what are the sort of convenient and comfortable limits of their sentences and essays and paragraphs.” Bartholomae, like McQuade, is suggesting that learning is the act of leaving a comfortable space and striking out for an unknown space by thinking beyond the current limits of their knowledge. McQuade calls this work exploring. Bartholomae calls it thinking beyond “comfortable limits.” In either case, the student is setting out into the unknown with no explicit destination in mind.

The journey metaphor can also be used to think of learning as the movement of a projectile toward a target, a kind of movement that is external to the body, i.e., something else is moving in relation to oneself. Here, a compulsion is added to the path schema, creating a situation where the learner applies force in a specific direction and moves her understanding toward a learning goal. In this case, learning is distanced from a primary embodied state (where the body moves from one position to another), to a secondary embodied state (where the body experiences another object moving relative to the body's position). While still used to conceptualize learning, its use is much less common than the first construction. Andrea Lunsford provides the only example of this metaphor in action that occurred in *Take 20*: “For every writing class I teach, I have two major aims: one is that the students will do some writing, and two, that they will have an opportunity to reflect on what they did so that they know at the end of the class what our aims have been, what stages we have gone through, and what they should be taking away from the class.” In this example, Lunsford is analogizing the work of learning in the class as “aiming”: knowledge is the target. In this example, she also uses the metaphor of a person on a journey, when she uses the phrase “what stages we have gone through” to describe the learning that has taken place in the class. Thus, in this example, one might say that it is the course itself that serves as the compulsion that propels students along their path toward knowledge.

These two metaphors frame the act of learning differently, despite their shared use of the metaphor *Ideas are Locations*—and thus, they will have different implications to the way that writing is taught and the way it is interpreted by learners. This difference has to do with the amount (and kind) of guidance offered by the teacher. When the metaphor entails a journey of exploration, the teacher sets conditions where students are given the



chance to experiment with their writing. Curiosity is the driving force, and the direction and scope of learning is largely selected by the student. The teacher's role in this frame is to help the student through particularly difficult parts, to encourage a particular kind of curiosity that will serve as the reason for the journey, and to suggest directions that might be particularly fruitful for the student. In short, the teacher serves as a guide along the way. When a compulsion is added to the metaphor, then the journey/ movement is much more directed. There is a set goal (or goals), and the teacher compels the motion of the course toward those goals. While Lunsford's example above suggests that the students are moving toward the goal in her conceptualization, which is evident in the way that she uses the two journey metaphors together, the compulsion metaphor typically suggests movement that is secondary to the student. That is, knowledge of the course is moving in relation to the student, as opposed to the student moving.

Thinking of knowledge as a location in discursive space has its limitations, as do all metaphoric constructions. When dealing with conceptual metaphors and the frames they create, the question is not which one is objectively "right." Each expresses truth, to a certain extent, and each is limited, because the metaphors help us to actively select and focus our attention on specific aspects of a system of ideas. The purpose of studying and identifying which metaphors we use should be to find the ones that best fit our value systems. Finding the right metaphors to fit with the values of rhetoric and composition, scholars will help create new and productive ways to think about and discuss the complex environment of the composition classroom.

### Overlapping Frames: Learning as a Journey and Writing as a Journey

Wherever possible, I have restricted myself to discussing the way that *learning* to write is framed and have avoided discussing the way that *writing* is framed. This is a tenuous, but I believe, important distinction of which writing teachers should be aware. While Reynolds offers an excellent critique and analysis of the metaphors connected to dwelling and moving through space, the referents for the metaphors that she examines slip from time to time between learning and writing. The frame for education/learning that we have been discussing is one way she employs the metaphors and can be summed up as follows:

- Discourse is a space where learners move about.
- Original and new ideas are particular locations within the larger discursive space.
- Learners travel through discursive space, in order to understand by means of interaction.
- Interaction helps learners understand the proximity between similar ideas and situate their own ideas in geographic relation to others' ideas.

Therefore, at times, Reynolds discusses learning as dwelling or journey, e.g., "If movement seems essential to learning or persuasion, I will suggest that inhabitation or dwelling are equally important" (4). At other times she discusses writing as dwelling e.g., "In mapping some sites where spatial practices of dwelling and composing come together in both exhilarating and frustrating senses of space, I try to show that dwelling as *metaphor*

is helpful in re-imagining acts of writing in *material* ways even though the relationship is a messy one" (140; emphasis in original).

Since the two concepts are so interconnected, it is difficult to parse out the differences. However, Dunn's critique helps us see the reason that the distinction is often elided in the use of *Learning is a Journey*. Dunn's argument that the field of Composition sees writing as *the* way of knowing, rather than one way, explains why writing's metonymic relationship to learning is unconsciously glossed over. Therefore, we often overlook the fact that writing is *not* the only way of learning. It is only analogous to other ways of learning, if we define analogy as constituted of all tropological discourse. This metonymic relationship between writing and learning accounts for the field's tacit use of what might be a conceptual metaphor unique to the field of Composition: *Writing is Learning*. Lakoff and Johnson show that conceptual metaphors grow out of embodied relationships, such as the relationship between warmth and affection or physical exertion and difficulty (*Philosophy* 50). As writers, we have an embodied relationship with the act of writing—the physical act of typing a draft or penning a manuscript. Furthermore, we have noticed that this embodied act leads to new insights or understanding. Thus, unconsciously, an analogical relationship is formed between the two. The result is that Composition as a discipline has created a Venn diagram for learning, where the concepts of learning and writing overlap to create "writing to learn" and more generally *Writing is Learning*. When the two concepts are used in overlapping ways, they become a kind of meta-frame, where metaphors for writing stand in for metaphors for learning, adding an additional degree of analogical reference.

This conceptualization of learning, then, drives the way that learning is framed in writing classes. Since the distinction between writing and learning is unconsciously elided, writing and learning transform into one and the same concept. That is, when the conceptual metaphor *Writing is Learning* is used as part of a frame for learning in the writing classroom, a simplistic relationship emerges for learning and writing so that the frame suggests that *all* writing leads to learning. Now, it is clear that writing often leads to learning. I have learned quite a bit by drafting this essay, for instance. However, if you pause for a second, as I find myself doing while I write this, and think, "Of course all writing leads to learning," take a moment to reconsider. Experiment. Write a word or a sentence at random and consider what you have learned. Perhaps you can make the logical leap that you have learned something from what you have written, but does learning necessarily have to take place whenever we write? I would argue no. Thus, we must also consider the limitations of the *Writing is Learning* metaphor as it pertains to the way that it helps to frame learning to write.

In addition, we should be aware that there are two different ways to conceptualize writing: (1) written communication and (2) writing processes that entail different (but very similar) metaphors for representing each of these mental processes. Reynolds' analysis also slips between these two referents at times. Again, while these referents are closely related and at times connected, the two are distinct entities that should be conceptualized separately. When thinking of framing, it is important to remember that conceptual metaphors can function in multiple ways, simply because they offer differently contextualized ways for us to process information. Therefore, it is important when theorizing the use of frames and conceptual metaphors to distinguish between the different ways they can be used. This is

especially true when discussing closely related and interconnected mental processes. As I have suggested, while the journey metaphor is used to conceptualize and frame learning, it is also often used to conceptualize and frame written communication and writing processes.

Under the frame for written communication that employs the journey metaphor, the following mappings occur in our thinking, talking, and writing:

- Text is a space through which the writer and the reader travel.
- A rhetorical purpose is a path through the text-as-space, leading to a particular idea that serves as a viewpoint/ point of view, a place from which the reader can see the world from the vantage of the writer.
- Either the writer guides the reader through the text or the writer journeys toward the reader. Under the first scenario, effective communication occurs when the reader is able to “follow along.” Ineffective communication occurs when the reader “gets lost.” Under the second scenario, effective communication occurs when the writer is able to “meet” the reader “where he or she is.” Ineffective communication occurs when the writer “passes the reader by.”

Likewise, the writing process can be framed, using the journey metaphor. The difference is subtle but important. Under this frame the following metaphoric mappings are used to think, talk, and write about the composition process:

- The writing process is a space through which the writer travels.
- Completion of the writing task is the writer’s aim.
- Success occurs when the writer reaches her destination, and failure occurs when the writer’s path is blocked or obstructed.

Clearly, all three metaphoric mappings are similar, but I would argue that it is important to keep them distinct. Each uses the same general metaphoric structure but maps it on to different concepts that have to do with the different activities of a writing classroom. I have presented all three to highlight the differences between the ways the metaphors are used for different purposes in different frames, though sometimes in the same context.<sup>4</sup>

Entwined with our job of teaching writing, then, is the task of changing students’ conceptualization of the tasks we assign and their approaches to learning through those tasks. As Donald Murray characterizes it, “a process of unlearning has to take place” (174). This unlearning process is not about re-examining approaches to writing learned in high school. It’s about helping students to see the act of learning differently, to reorient them to a new way of thinking about what the act of learning entails. Succeeding in this venture will allow students to understand better what is expected of them in courses like first-year writing and will lead students to understand better how to succeed in the course. While helping students to see the course from the teacher’s perspective will be helpful for students, it should be noted that consistent framing will not necessarily result in student

---

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller account of how the journey metaphor can be used to frame of the composition process, see Bruce Erickson’s dissertation “Before Beyond: A Study of a Para-Pedagogy Which Uses Discovery and De-Mystification to Re-Visit First-Year College Composition.”

success—though in some cases student success may be attributed to a shift in framing. Just because a student is better equipped to understand a specific learning task does not mean that he or she can successfully complete it. However, shared framing does better equip students to understand why they have succeeded or failed. In short, consistent framing has the potential to remove some of the confusion from learning environments so that the learning process can proceed more smoothly.



## Works Cited

- Adler-Kassner, Linda. *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2008. Print.
- Austin, Keely R. "Transformative Reframing: From Theft to Passing On." *Journal of Advanced Composition*. 31.1-2 (2011): 267-73. Print.
- Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *Journal of Basic Writing* 5.1 (1986): 4-23.
- Bowden, Darsie. "The Limits of Containment: Text-as-Container in Composition Studies." *College Composition and Communication*. 44.3 (1993): 364-379. Print.
- Brown, Nicole R. "Metaphors of Mobility: Emerging Spaces for Rhetorical Reflection and Communication." *Going Wireless: A Critical Exploration of Wireless and Mobile Technologies for Composition Teachers and Researchers*. Ed. Amy C. Kimme Hea. Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2009. 239-252. Print.
- Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941.
- Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project. "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing." *Council of Writing Program Administrators*. 2010. Web. 20 November 2013.
- Clark, Gregory. "Writing as Travel, or Rhetoric on the Road." *College Composition and Communication* 49.1 (1998): 9-23. Print.
- . "Writing on Tour: Rethinking the Travel Metaphor." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 20.4 (2000): 898-908. Print.
- Dunn, Patricia. *Talking, Sketching, Moving: Multiple Literacies in the Teaching of Writing*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001. Print.
- Elbow, Peter. "The Music of Form: Rethinking Organization in Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 57.4 (2006): 620-666. Print.
- Erickson, Bruce. "Before Beyond: A Study of a Para-Pedagogy Which Uses Discovery and De-Mystification to Re-Visit First-Year College Composition." Diss. Illinois State University, 2008. *Milner Library Illinois State University*. Web. 15 July 2009.
- Eubanks, Philip. *Metaphor and Writing: Figurative Thought in the Discourse of Written Communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011. Print.
- . "Understanding Metaphors for Writing: In Defense of the Conduit Metaphor." *College Composition and Communication* 53.1 (2001): 92-118. Web. 20 September 2013.
- Fischer, Katherine, et al. "Crazy Quilts: Piecing Together Collaborative Research." *Teaching/Writing in the Late Age of Print*. Eds. Jeffrey R. Galin, Carol Peterson Haviland, and J. Paul Johnson. Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2003. 171-184. Print.

- Fleckenstein, Kristie S., et al. "The Importance of Harmony: An Ecological Metaphor for Writing Research." *College Composition and Communication* 60.2 (2008): 388-419. Print.
- Flower, Linda. *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning: A Social Cognitive Theory of Writing*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1994. Print.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. 30th Anniversary. Ed. New York: Continuum, 2005. Print.
- Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1974. Print.
- Hart, Gwen. "'Writing is like Playing a Sport': Letting go of Gendered Assumptions and Using Metaphor Successfully in the Writing Classroom" *Journal of Teaching Writing* 26.1 (2011): 21-38. Web. 21 November 2013.
- Johnson, Mark. *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987. Print.
- Kress, Gunther. *Multi-Modality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Kyburz, Bonnie Lenore. "Meaning Finds a Way: Chaos (Theory) and Composition" *College English* 66.5 (2004): 503-523. Web. 21 November 2013.
- Lakoff, George. *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*. 2nd Ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002. Print.
- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 1999. Print.
- Langer, Judith A. "Speaking of Knowing: Conceptions of Understanding in Academic Disciplines." *Writing, Teaching, and Learning in the Disciplines: Research and Scholarship in Composition*. Eds. Anne Herrington and Charles Moran. New York: MLA, 1992. 69-85. Print.
- Lu, Min-Zhan. "Metaphors Matter: Transcultural Literacy." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 29.1-2 (2009): 285-293. Print.
- Murray, Donald M. *Expecting the Unexpected: Teaching Myself—and Others—to Read and Write*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1989.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Art of the Contact Zone." *Profession* 91 (1991): 33-40. Print.
- Reddy, Michael J. "The Conduit Metaphor: A Case of Frame Conflict in our Language about Language." *Metaphor and Thought*. Second Edition. Ed. Andrew Ortony. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993. 164-201. Print.
- Reynolds, Nedra. *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004. Print.
- . "Who's Going to Cross this Border? Travel Metaphors, Material Conditions, and Contested Places." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 20.3 (2000): 541-564. Web 20 September 2013.
- Robillard, Amy. "Pass it On: Revising the 'Plagiarism is Theft' Metaphor." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 29.1-2 (2009): 405-435. Print.
- Sommers, Nancy. "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers." *College Composition and Communication* 31.4 (1980): 378-388. Web. 20 November 2013.
- Summerfield, Judith and Philip M. Anderson. "A Framework Adrift." *College English*.

74.6 (2012): 544-547. Web 20 September 2013.

Taylor, Todd, dir. *Take 20: Teaching Writing*. 2008. Bedford/St. Martin's: *Take 20, a Film by Todd Taylor*. n.d. Web. 16 September 2013.

Tobin, Lad. "Bridging Gaps: Analyzing our Students' Metaphors for Composing." *College Composition and Communication* 40.4 (1989): 444-58. Web. 18 September 2013.

Williams, Joseph. "Afterword: Two Ways of Thinking About Growth: The Problem of Finding the Right Metaphor." *Thinking, Reasoning, and Writing*. Eds. Elaine Maimon, Barbara Nodine, and Finbarr O'Connor. New York: Longman, 1989. 245-55. Print.

## **A Teacher's Terminal Illness in the Secondary English Classroom: The Effects of Disclosure**

**Sarah Hochstetler**

**M**y teaching partner Kathy first voiced to me her fear of metastasis at a technology conference for high school teachers in Southern California. It was fall of 2002, nearly twenty years after her original diagnosis of breast cancer, and she was confident the disease had returned. In our shared hotel room that night, as Kathy worried about how her family would handle a recurrence or how her body might tolerate cancer treatment the second time around, I agonized over our team-taught classroom, and how her illness—and death—would affect our common students and learning space.

In this essay, I attempt to provide a self-aware critique of my experience with one teacher's disclosure of her dying body in the secondary English classroom. I'll argue that context, pedagogical relevance, and ethical responsibility are vital considerations in a teacher's decision to disclose. I write with three goals. First, I'll contrast embodied disclosure in the high school classroom with similar disclosure in the college classroom, to foreground the effects of a more complex form of disclosure (e.g., related to death and dying) among younger students. Second, I'll problematize the empowerment pedagogy often used to advocate for disclosure by arguing that not all disclosure results in empowerment. Third, I'll reflect critically on this event from my first years as a secondary English teacher, to speculate on how a modified pedagogy of discomfort, applied in tandem with relevant curricula and post-disclosure support may have served as guiding principles for Kathy and I to better facilitate and manage the effects of Kathy's disclosure (see Boler, 1999).

Before further discussion, I want to address my subjectivity in this account. I was in my early twenties and only a few years into my career when I faced this traumatic experience. I was still forming my teacher identity and developing a sense of self in the classroom, which may account for the personal struggles that are a clear subtext to the analysis. Furthermore, Kathy was my district-assigned mentor, so throughout her illness I was witness to the deterioration of a friend, a colleague, a teaching partner, and a guide into the profession. I mention the specific context to address my bias and to show how my relationship with Kathy and her role in my life influenced how I managed the nature of her disclosure both personally and professionally. To suggest that Kathy should have disclosed in one way or another is to reveal my own reflections upon how she shaped her experience of teaching and dying. My intent is not to criticize Kathy, and I do not mean to judge how she dealt with her teacher's body by asking questions and making my reaction transparent. I share this story and examination of the pedagogical situation to extend the ongoing discussion about non-normative teacher bodies and to add to the conversation an alternative perspective on the effects of disclosing a terminal illness in the context of the secondary English classroom.

\*\*\*

Kathy and I team-taught a class of seventy sophomores in an urban area half-way between Los Angeles and Palm Springs. Our high school was the largest of the three high

schools in the city, both in the size of the facility and the student population. The school held nearly seven hundred students at the time, representing various socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups. Most students came from working-class, single parent minority households, and nearly half were eligible for free or reduced lunch. Attendance was an issue throughout the school due to a long list of factors including gang affiliation and teen pregnancy, yet our students mostly came to class regularly. Kathy and I were proud of this point.

While Kathy taught world history and I taught English, we blended the curriculum into a two-hour block of both college-prep subjects. Engagement was key with this group, as with many adolescents, so we enticed our reluctant students into learning through units with specific guiding questions. As an example, we began second semester that year by exploring the question, "How does geography influence destiny?" while reading Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* in my class and studying the history of India in Kathy's. Parents and administrators agreed that we made a great pair: she had decades of teaching experience, and I was new to the classroom and brimming with innovative ideas. Our students seemed to find our teaching relevant, and our collaborative class quickly built a reputation for high standards and high interest.

Shortly after returning from winter break, a few months after her admission in the hotel room, Kathy's doctor confirmed her suspicions. When Kathy started treatment she told our class. After the bell rang and everyone was settled, she announced that she had metastatic breast cancer. She explained to the students what this meant—that stage IV breast cancer didn't have a cure. Plainly, she said she was dying. Kathy then described how her hair would fall out from chemotherapy and she would be fatigued because of treatments to slow the disease's progression. But she wanted to continue teaching and hoped the students would be understanding of her situation. Some students cried. Others seemed unaffected. Kathy confidently responded with reassuring smiles. Then, as with most "off-topic" discussions in our classroom, Kathy attempted to refocus the students, and we moved on to review the previous night's history reading.

I could understand Kathy's need for transparency. In telling our students about her disease that morning before we began discussing our class reading, she was speaking the cancer before it spoke for her. She could directly address what was happening, what was likely to happen, and what we could count on to happen. Kathy wanted to control her cancer in some ways by controlling the dissemination of information, such as who knew what and how they found out. This approach to teaching made sense for this population of adolescents, where sometimes school was one of the few reliable routines in the students' lives: Kathy would want them to know why she might not be present every day, or why she might not seem like herself. Yet, when Kathy revealed to our class that her cancer was terminal, I felt she shifted her role from one who overcomes adversity to one who succumbs to it. Moreover, as Kathy shared the details of her disease she did so not for the purposes of enhancing student learning about English or world history, but to make them aware of her changing body.

I can speculate that perhaps Kathy was indirectly attempting to demystify the process of dying. In those moments when Kathy briefly addressed her cancer-ridden body, she might have been pushing back against the deeply entrenched Western fear of death. She was always a pragmatist, and I can imagine in some unspoken way, she may have seen



her impending death as an opportunity to demonstrate for our students that dying wasn't always the messy, undignified process sometimes shown in the media—or that it was—and that, too, was okay. Regardless of her intentions, Kathy felt her disclosure was not directly relevant in a pedagogical way. While she may have taught our students something about the fragility of life or drawn attention to the reality that teachers have bodies, her focus was not on finding a link between her dying and the students' coursework.

Shortly, the effects of her announcement were overwhelming, both for me as her teammate in teaching and to our students. I became increasingly frustrated by the illness' otherwise unassigned role in our classroom, by my sometimes choking grief, and my inability to answer student questions when Kathy was unexpectedly absent. On the days when she would mention her prognosis to the class in passing, I'd spend the remaining class time fighting back tears while facilitating activities. I couldn't always bottle my fears or emotions. But when I did share them with my students, I felt like I was losing precious instructional time. I didn't know how—or if—to connect our collective concern to the themes in our readings. I also worried over how my outward display of emotion impacted my ethos in the classroom, especially as a young female. In making myself vulnerable, was I disrupting the power dynamic in the classroom in positive ways? Was I demonstrating that fear and sadness in the face of Kathy's incurable cancer was appropriate? I recall being confused about my role in the classroom that semester. Then I thought if I was having this much trouble with Kathy's disease, I could only begin to imagine how our students were feeling.

Though a handful of students were voicing their fears to me, I suspected that others were meeting with their counselors and informally sharing their concerns with teachers around the school. I was pleased to think some students were reaching out for support and finding such healthy outlets. But then, otherwise "good" students started acting out in class soon after Kathy revealed her diagnosis, and still other students' grades began to drop and absences increased. I recall one student who told me directly that he couldn't focus knowing that Kathy was dying. Another transferred out of our class, and I discovered it was to avoid Kathy. And as Kathy's health deteriorated, so did some of our classroom management, which, while frustrating, seemed appropriate, given the circumstances and lack of any organized emotional scaffold for the class. I later met with some of the school's counselors who confirmed students were seeking help in coping with Kathy's illness because, I assumed, they didn't have opportunities to process their emotions as a class or with Kathy and me in any formalized way. The dearth of support for students in our situation leads me to highlight what Anette Ejsing calls the ethics of self-disclosure. She suggests that, "If, by using the powerful pedagogy of self-disclosure, we engage students but fail to guide them cautiously through the learning material, we have not taken seriously the ethical responsibility that teaching *also* implies" (235). Ejsing draws attention to the consequences of certain self-disclosures and the responsibilities teachers have for anticipating and/or addressing them post-disclosure. She argues that if teachers choose to disclose, they must then take steps to develop post-disclosure "teaching practices that involve clear and objective (i.e., very content conscious) expositions of the learning material" (237). It seems that Kathy (and I) neglected our post-disclosure responsibilities.

I wondered if maybe Kathy had gone too far when she told our class she was dying. Experience told me my students and I could handle the idea of illness and the hardships

expected from a temporary plight. But I wasn't emotionally or pedagogically equipped for teaching through the finality of death, and I couldn't be sure that our students were ready or willing to learn from this situation. But what were Kathy's options? The consequences of not disclosing could be far more severe. For example, if students learned after her death that Kathy purposely kept her prognosis from them, they might have had to face disappointment, anger, or resentment in addition to other emotions stemming from the loss of their teacher.

Looking back on the day that Kathy told our students she was taking a medical leave of absence and would likely not return, I wish she had arranged for a school counselor to join our class. In many ways I was helpless, and the most I could do was distribute tissues and hugs. The latter I offered with caution because of the physical boundaries inherent in working with minors. The class said their goodbyes to Kathy that week. Some students made cards or drew pictures for her, and I wonder if they were scared that this might be the last time they ever saw her. At least I knew she and I would continue visiting outside of school, but our students didn't have that luxury. In Kathy's absence, the substitute and I continued through the curriculum as planned, and I only sometimes talked about Kathy's declining health with the class when asked. It struck me that if I didn't have good news to report, perhaps I shouldn't report at all. Once or twice before the school year ended, Kathy returned to school to take care of remaining professional obligations and to briefly see our students. Selfishly, I remember feeling relieved by her visits. With some luck, Kathy would survive until after the school year ended, saving me from the horrible task of telling our class that she died.

In fact, Kathy survived several months longer than anyone anticipated. I had moved on to teaching in a new position and was living in another city when I received the call from her sister. On my drive down to the town where we had taught together and where her service was being held, I was curious to learn how our former students were coping with Kathy's death. Many were present at the memorial service, and though they were devastated by the loss, most said they were glad Kathy disclosed her illness. One student explained why by philosophizing that death was a part of life. Several students went on to say they thought Kathy was brave; she was a role model. I smiled at those responses, but now I question if they truly believed Kathy's disclosure was beneficial to them. Perhaps they were parroting the dominant cultural narrative of women with breast cancer as heroic, a term and framework critiqued in current breast cancer scholarship (for example, see Sulik and Garrison). I also wonder if our students felt compelled to make statements that supported Kathy's choice for fear of sounding callous or "disrespectful" of the dead. I will never know, but in that moment, the teacher in me was comforted to hear them report that they weren't as distressed by the experience as I remembered them being.

\*\*\*

Kathy was not alone in blurring the boundaries of the public and the private in her choice to disclose. Cases of instructors at the university level sharing personal experiences with chronic illness, disability, and death with their students are available in many publications. Diane Freedman and Martha Stoddard Holmes, for instance, edited a 2003 collection of narratives on the teacher body in post-secondary classrooms. One goal of

this text, as explained in the foreword, is to investigate how teachers with bodies labeled as “other” by society—“inferior, inappropriate, private and embarrassingly exposed in their embodiment”—must negotiate the classroom space to show that those who are ill or disabled can still do the job of teaching (Garland-Thomson xxii-xxiii). The editors explain that we need to engage in helping students see how those experiential conditions and the classroom are connected (Freedman and Stoddard Holmes 6). Furthermore, they claim that teacher bodies (and student bodies, for that matter) should not be dismissed or elevated in the classroom, but *acknowledged* because “we are inevitably, ineluctably inspired, limited, plagued, and aided by [. . .] our increasingly self-conscious bodies” (6).

Several of the teacher stories in this volume include the decision to disclose details of private lives to students. One example is from Carolyn DiPalma who took a path similar to Kathy’s. She told her graduate students about her experience with breast cancer, from diagnosis through treatment, as it was happening.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the semester, DiPalma notes, her course evaluations showed support for her choice. Students even went as far to say that their learning was enhanced by their teacher’s disclosure (54). In another text, Brenda Jo Brueggemann explains how her hearing impairment influences her teaching, particularly in the disability-focused courses she developed. An objective for the class was to make visible her disability to disrupt stereotypical responses to othering. Though not all students ended the term with changed perspectives on normative bodies, Brueggemann continued to use her class and her impairment as a platform for challenging student thinking about disability.

One of the more public examples of college teachers revealing their marked bodies is that of Carnegie Mellon University professor Randy Pausch, whose “last lecture” became an internet phenomenon in 2007. Though his disclosure was not in the privacy of the classroom, the context was essentially the same. Pausch revealed his illness in an educational space in the role of instructor. His speech, officially entitled “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams,” was given to a few hundred students, faculty, and staff two months after his diagnosis of terminal pancreatic cancer. The lecture was later developed into a book that spent over one hundred and twenty weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list, attesting to both the impact of his message and public support of his disclosure.

Secondary teachers working in the grey space between public and private are more rare, or at least seem so because evidence of this kind of disclosure is unusual. Publications that do take up marked teacher bodies in this context are typically framed in a way that encourages positive thinking or glosses over the drawbacks of disclosure.<sup>2</sup> In a 2010 *Dayton Daily News* story, teachers being treated for breast cancer explain the necessity of sharing their experiences with their students. One teacher said she shared her story because she wanted to be a role model; another said her primary motivation was to “give

<sup>1</sup> I’m actively resisting the common war metaphors of “battle” or “fight” in my description of cancer experiences, as such terms dehumanize the individual. I don’t want to equate others’ illnesses with words that may not resonate with them. For further reading on the topic of war metaphors and cancer, see Garrison, “The Personal is Rhetorical: War, Protest, and Peace in Breast Cancer Narratives” and Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*.

<sup>2</sup> This is unsurprising given our cultural shaming of any admission of unhappiness, disappointment, or otherwise natural yet “negative” emotions. See Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Bright Sided* for a discussion of the societal pressure to maintain a positive attitude about breast cancer.

hope” and help her students see that cancer was “nothing to be scared of” (Robinson). Meredith Stewart discusses how her prominent physical disability allowed her to explore her own vulnerabilities with her students. She explains that allowing for this dynamic is important, as it can begin a dialog with students about life’s trials and allows teachers to model for students “the ways in which challenges of their own lives can be opportunities for growth and reflection” (30).

The frameworks presented in the above sources are, in part, aligned with what many feminist scholars argue: that to deny one’s teacher body is to perpetuate the mind/body split, privileging intellect over flesh. Feminist pedagogy suggests that this approach is problematic because, among other things, it ignores the identities (constructed through race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.) that affect teaching and learning. Essentially, to be blind to the body is to be blind of how we function in the hierarchies around us. For example, bell hooks makes the case that, “once we start talking in the classroom about the body and about how we live in our bodies, we’re automatically challenging [power structures]” (136-137). I agree that to remain silent about how our bodies position us can be counterproductive in any learning space. However, as I explain in more detail below, disclosing a dying body in a secondary context is different from taking up one’s racialized, gendered, disabled, or otherwise non-normative body—and this distinction is what is missing in the current research on teacher embodiment.

Many scholars and practicing teachers argue that the English classroom is an ideal platform for discussing topics like normalcy and difference. Some claim it’s sensible to integrate subjects like these into the curriculum because we make sense of the world through the practices of writing, reading, and speaking. These literacy acts form the foundation of learning in English. Groenke, Maples and Henderson assert that creating reading and writing assignments focused on traditionally ignored subjects provide an avenue for tackling topics that, if avoided, simply serve to perpetuate their “sensitive” label (30). In reference to the marked body specifically, Kennedy and Menten say that students often see these issues as isolated to the one person. Students “tend to think about disability as an individual issue—something they ‘have’ that can be stigmatized and/ or a person who suffers from a deficit or loss [. . .] needs to be ‘cured,’ pitied, or treated different from ‘normal’ people” (61).

I would suggest that students think about a chronic illness like cancer in a similar way, as something to be pitied or fixed. But through reading, writing, and speaking about difference and the body, students can work to disrupt stereotypes and question assumptions about what it means to be normal, both in the context of disability and chronic illness. And certainly, opportunities to challenge accepted thinking and values allow students chances they might not otherwise have to talk about the othered bodies around them, and the English classroom provides them a supportive space to do this work.

But I also want to suggest that what makes such conversations about teachers’ bodies in the secondary classroom possible is that they aren’t focused on teacher mortality. “Sensitive” topics like disability are accessible because they don’t engage death. A significant difference exists between what I see as a pedagogically purposeful disclosure like Meredith Stewart’s and a disclosure that has the potential to disturb students on a deeper level. Some maintain that when a secondary English teacher brings otherness into the classroom through the example of her own body, she can be “an inspiration” like Stewart or the

teachers in the *Dayton Daily News* article. Groenke, et al. might claim that by making a disability or chronic illness an acceptable topic of discussion, and not something to dismiss or (worse yet) be ashamed of, the teacher is empowering her students to dismantle misinformed beliefs about what it means to be different. Furthermore, when a teacher chooses to use her physical disability or chronic illness as a tool for learning, she begins discussions that may be uncomfortable, but not traumatic. But Kathy's disclosure that her body was dying indicated that she was making preparations for end-of-life care and that she would not survive to see our students graduate. This disclosure created tensions and conflicts that were not resolvable. Kathy had no happy ending, like with a teacher who has found professional or personal success despite a physical disability or a teacher whose chronic illness is managed with careful medical supervision.

Lad Tobin provides specific points for post-secondary instructors to consider when faced with the question of whether or not to disclose personal information to a student or class. Interestingly, his piece is prompted in part by an inexperienced instructor's question to him about whether she should divulge her mother's history of breast cancer to a student who is facing a similar family health challenge. She wonders if this disclosure would be helpful for the student generally, and the student's success in the class specifically, and seeks advice from Tobin. The instructor's query prompted Tobin to articulate more carefully his position on teacher disclosure in such a context. He argues, among other points, that teacher disclosure should be strategic. More specifically, the larger concern about disclosure is not the nature of the information, but the pedagogical effects of the disclosure (198-199). Tobin draws on critiques of expressionist pedagogy and the work of hooks and others to suggest that the "question is whether any particular disclosure [. . .] helps rather than hinders a teacher's ability to illustrate a particular concept, maintain an effective teaching persona, or establish a more productive relationship with a particular audience of students" (198). And while Tobin maintains that each pedagogical situation is unique and applications of self-disclosure vary, the overarching goal of disclosure should be pedagogically motivated. In the context of secondary students as audience, I maintain that Kathy's choice to reveal her diagnosis might have been helpful in that she could endear herself to our students, maintain some sense of regularity with our schedule by telling our class about upcoming absences, and continue to be a responsible adult figure in their lives. But the nature of the disclosure—death—did influence our classroom, and not in the way that perhaps she had hoped.

Part of what privileges the claims of DiPalma or Brueggemann is the intended audience. Both DiPalma and Brueggemann work with college students. In the college classroom, much about the learning context is different, including the expectations for engagement. For example, at the college level if a student objects to the content of the discussion, she can leave with only some risk to her grade (e.g., participation points). High school students don't have the option to remove themselves from a curriculum that makes them uncomfortable, as doing so could be viewed as insubordination. This is not to say that students shouldn't be introduced to ideas and concepts that push them outside of their comfort zones—this is exactly what Groenke et al. advocate, and I agree that the benefits to this pedagogy are many. I also don't mean to suggest that death, pain or loss, are inappropriate topics to include in the secondary English classroom. In fact, these subjects are standard fare in most reading curricula (e.g., "*The Scarlet Ibis*," *Romeo and Juliet*) and

typical for writing assignments (e.g., “compose an essay about a difficult time in your life”). But death, pain, and loss are sometimes easier to process when there is distance between the subject and the event, or when they are approached in a less direct way, as in reading assignments. When these topics happen daily and the concepts become personified, when they stand in front of a student Monday through Friday, it becomes difficult to engage with them at the secondary level, even when approached with transparent pedagogical goals and an emotionally supportive framework, which I would encourage.

Secondary school learning spaces and students can suffer if systems of support aren't firmly in place to assist when a teacher discloses potentially upsetting personal information. Acting *in loco parentis* is part of the job. Options are more limited, unless a student shows signs of distress over an extended period of time or acts out in class in violent ways. If a student has any emotional difficulties, secondary teachers have to take action.<sup>3</sup>

\*\*\*

Recently, as my classroom-based research has come to include an interest in illness rhetorics and teacher embodiment, I have thought about ways Kathy or I could have made her disclosure more pedagogically purposeful as described by Tobin, and ethically responsible as described by Ejsing. I think about how Kathy could have maintained her disclosure, how we could have supported the emotional needs of our students better, and how, possibly, we could have made their experiences with the classroom content richer as a result. We may have been able to accomplish all or some of the above by employing a modified version of Boler's pedagogy of discomfort as a theoretical framework.

Farrell and Young, who have studied the effects of teacher disclosure, argue that “creating an environment of discomfort is useful in encouraging students to explore their ideas and to express them as well” (44). A pedagogical framework like this supports much of the pro-disclosure literature, and is at the center of Boler's proposed actions. She invites classroom inquiry through examination of how students and teachers perceive themselves and others. Boler explains, “Within this culture of inquiry and flexibility, a central focus is to recognize how emotions define how and what one chooses to see, and conversely, not to see” (177).

Boler suggests that a pedagogy of discomfort should invite students to “leave the familiar shores of learned beliefs and habits, and swim further out into the ‘foreign’ and risky depths of the sea of ethical and moral differences” (181). Given our specific context, I would modify this goal toward a more complicated view of death—through the experience of bearing witness to Kathy's terminal illness in conjunction with historical and literary texts appropriate to our secondary curriculum. Instead of our open-ended focus on the “sea of ethical and moral differences,” Kathy and I could have used her inevitable death as an instrument for teaching and learning, following models of secondary and university teachers who chose to self-disclose. Here, I will provide a rough and retrospective outline for approaching our shared situation, using Boler's caveats of pedagogical relevancy and attention to post-disclosure obligations.

---

<sup>3</sup> Though in recent years, in light of events like the shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University, college instructors are formally encouraged to report incidences of student distress in more systematized ways.

I would begin by mobilizing the appropriate support networks in the school to help support students—as well as faculty and staff—who would be affected by Kathy's disclosure. The next step would take the form of note home to parents/ guardians, with a concise description of Kathy's upcoming death, the grief-themed readings, and related course projects (as per Ejsing recommendations). Reaching out to adults at home would also allow us to assess student willingness to participate, and gauge the necessity to prepare an alternative curriculum for students who may not want to take part in the special unit. A district counselor or other mental health professional would be present to facilitate a discussion at the moment Kathy revealed her terminal illness. The on-site counseling office as well as the district psychologist would be made available for students with immediate needs in the class periods or days following Kathy's disclosure. Another option would include inviting a counselor to class on a weekly basis to further facilitate conversations about death and grief, in tandem with the course readings and activities. These specific steps—especially calling on those trained to work with adolescents and grief—would ensure our preparation for post-disclosure effects and assist us in meeting Boler's objective to help students (and teachers) better understand how emotions affect individuals and groups.

What curricular changes could we have made? We could have shortened our unit on geography and destiny or replaced it entirely (assuming significant state learning standards wouldn't be bypassed) to accommodate a unit guided by an essential question about death and grief, taking an historic and cross-cultural focus. In English, Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* seems well-suited given the novel's focus on a student-teacher relationship and the many available instructional materials available online. Excerpts from Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* could emphasize differences between views on illness and death. Kubler-Ross' stages of loss and grief could supplement. Students could journal, compose poetry or personal narratives, compile research, and otherwise explore their feelings about death and grief through writing. Though world history is not my area of expertise, I imagine Kathy could have addressed cultural and social practices surrounding death and grief in certain parts of the world and across time. A key component of teaching this unit in both content areas would be helping students think critically about normative reactions to grief and death, so they could not only process their own reactions to Kathy's illness, but also gain insight into how rules about feelings are socially situated.

Is it possible that if Kathy had used her terminal cancer as an instrument for teaching and learning, as Meredith Stewart did with her disability, that the effect of her disclosure on the classroom would have been different? If Kathy had approached her disease in a pedagogically relevant and ethical way by, perhaps, comparing her situation to those of characters in our readings, or sharing her fears through counselor-supported discussion, or bringing cancer into our classroom in a holistic mode, would it have eased the students into the idea of her dying? If Kathy had not situated herself in the framework of what Freedman and Stoddard Holmes refer to as "heroically [or] tragically ill" or "not [a] subject matter related to our work," would students have had more space to work through their uncertainties and curiosity surrounding death, by asking questions in a sympathetic environment? What if we had employed a version of Boler's pedagogy of discomfort? Might the outcome have been different? I can't be sure.

What I do know is that the implications of Kathy's abrupt disclosure were emotionally

troubling and affected our students and me in significant ways. Student attendance dropped, as did academic progress for some, and I felt deserted, fearful, and unsure as an early career teacher. In retrospect, I think we could have harnessed Kathy's desire to be frank and transparent about her terminal breast cancer in ways that may have benefitted all of us both educationally and emotionally. Through a modified pedagogy of discomfort our secondary learning community may have become more comfortable learning with and through the dying teacher body in our classroom.



### Works Cited

- Albom, Mitch. *Tuesdays with Morrie*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1997. Print.
- Boler, Megan. *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Brueggemann, Brenda Jo. "An enabling pedagogy: meditations on writing and disability." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 21.4 (2001): 791-820. Print.
- DiPalma, Carolyn. "Teaching Women's Studies, E-mailing Cancer." *The Teacher's Body: Embodiment, Authority, and Identity in the Academy*. Eds. Diane Freedman and Martha Stoddard Holmes. Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2003. 41-57. Print.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Bright Sided*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2009. Print.
- Ejsing, Annette. "Power and Caution: The Ethics of Self-Disclosure." *Teaching Theology and Religion* 10.4 (2007): 235-243. Print.
- Fadiman, Anne. *The Spirit Catches You And You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, And The Collision Of Two Cultures*. New York, NY: Noonday Press, 1998. Print.
- Ferrell, Mary Beth and Suzan Young. "The Effects of Teacher Self-Disclosure in a Classroom That Addresses Controversial Ethical Topics." *Studies in Teaching 1999 Research Digest: Research Projects Presented at Annual Research Forum*. Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University, 1999. 36-45. Print.
- Freedman, Diane and Martha Stoddard Holmes, eds. *The Teacher's Body: Embodiment, Authority, and Identity in the Academy*. Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2003. Print.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Foreword: Bodies Enter the Classroom." Ed. Diane Freedman and Martha Stoddard Holmes. *The Teacher's Body: Embodiment, Authority, and Identity in the Academy*. Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2003. xi-xiii. Print.
- Garrison, Kristen. "The Personal is Rhetorical: War, Protest, and Peace in Breast Cancer Narratives." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 27.4 (2007): 1-13. Web. 12 Jan. 2011.
- Groenke, Susan, Joellen Maples and Jill Henderson. "Raising 'Hot Topics' Through Young Adult Literature." *Voices in the Middle* 17.4 (2010): 29-36. Web. 2 Feb. 2011.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Hurst, James. *The Scarlet Ibis: The Collection of Wonder*. Mankato, MN: Creative Education, 1998. Print.
- Kennedy, Tammie and Tracey Menten. "Reading, Writing, and Thinking about Disability



- Issues: Five Activities for the Classroom.” *English Journal* 100.2 (2010): 61-67. Print.
- Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On Death and Dying*. London: Routledge, 2009. Print.
- Markandaya, Kamala. *Nectar in a Sieve*. New York, NY: Signet, 2002. Print.
- Pausch, Randy. “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams.” Carnegie Mellon University. Pittsburgh, PA. 18 Sept. 2007. Speech.
- Pausch, Randy and Jeffrey Zaslow. *The Last Lecture*. New York: Hyperion, 2008. Print.
- Robinson, Amelia. “Teacher with Breast Cancer Giving Students Lifelong Lesson.” *Dayton Daily News* 2 Oct. 2010. Web. 3 Dec. 2010.
- Shakespeare, William. “Romeo and Juliet.” *The Norton Anthology*. 2nd ed. Eds. Greenblatt, Stephen, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katherine Eisaman Maus. New York: W.W Norton, 2008. 20-30. Print.
- Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978. Print.
- Stewart, Meredith. “Doubly Vulnerable: The Paradox of Disability and Teaching.” *English Journal* 100.2 (2010): 27-30. Print.
- Sulik, Gayle A. *Pink Ribbon Blues*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011. Print.
- Tobin, Lad. “Opinion: Self-Disclosure as a Strategic Teaching Tool: What I Do—and Don’t—Tell My Students.” *College English* 73.2 (2010): 196-206. Print.

## It's (Not) Just a Figure of Speech: Rescuing Metaphor

Anna O. Soter

*"It's as hot as Hades..."*

*"It's hotter than a kiln..."*

*"It's so hot, I'm burning up..."*

Poets may grind their teeth, chagrin and impatience coursing through their arteries with the above commonplace metaphoric declarations. These declarations pervade what may go down on record as the hottest summer (2012) since weather records have been kept. I won't concern myself with teasing apart various metaphoric cousins (most commonly, simile, metonymy and personification) on the grounds that all language is essentially metaphorical, and equally important. We essentially think in metaphor as Bartel, Lakoff & Johnson, Ricoeur, and others have also argued. "Metaphor" wrote Jose Ortega y Gasset "is probably the most fertile power possessed by man" (cited in Ivie 1). And yet, we may well wonder why metaphor and other kinds of figurative language have caused so much anxiety in schools. Why has metaphor, in particular, created concern for countless nonplussed and hapless students as they hunted for an example in poetry or attempted to explain what such a metaphor "means?"

We encounter metaphorical language daily—language that bears closer scrutiny beyond the typical comprehension-like questions that accompany typical metaphor-focused exercises in literature/language textbooks and classrooms. Consider the following: "Explain the metaphor in lines 5-9 of 'Love Without Love.' How does the image of love expressed in this metaphor compare with some of the images you identified and discussed in the section Connect to your Life on P. 346?"<sup>1</sup>

Our daily activities—thinking, acting, teaching, and learning—are, according to Ivie, "supersaturated with metaphor" (1). The unruly classroom depicted in the cartoon that accompanies the opening pages of Ivie's *On the Wings of Metaphor* suggests the classic response of suppressed life to artificial constraint. Centered on a large blackboard is printed the infamous acronym of basic literacy: "ABC." Looming over a classroom in chaos, a teacher brandishes a horse whip. His recalcitrant, vibrant-with-life students are depicted as animals such as bears, tigers, and lions. They are standing on desks, dancing, jumping, and shouting. One exception: a quiet creature that appears to be a shy, befuddled groundhog wearing a dunce cap, sitting behind a desk in a corner of the room (x). The scene is both hilarious and sobering, representing what many of us in education know to be a clichéd but traditional illusion: teachers have to constantly constrain the life in their students in case it erupts and bursts forth against the minimalistic view of learning that public education has, unfortunately, long been prey to.

I am puzzled that in the P-12 educational setting, metaphor remains almost exclusively secluded in the literature classroom, specifically appearing during the poetry unit. All of us use metaphor, whether clichéd or newly invented, without realizing we're using it. More recent texts for language arts, primarily intended for pre-service language

---

<sup>1</sup> This typical example exercise is drawn from McDougall Little's *The Language of Literature*, an integrated literature/reading/writing/grammar text for 10<sup>th</sup> graders, 2000, 349.

arts teacher education (e.g., Harmon and Wilson's *Beyond Grammar: Language, Power, and the Classroom*) give a nod to metaphor beyond its traditional role in poetry. But the figure itself does not rate an extended discussion, nor does it serve as the core concept for exploring how we use language and how others use language to influence us. Harmon and Wilson note that "meaning is multiple and metaphoric, and thus, ambiguous" and that words are "polysemous," their meanings "multiple and varied" (42). An explicit discussion of metaphor expands on this description (42-44), but neither the term nor the concept is referred to explicitly. Extensive and thoughtful discussions occur in successive chapters about uses and abuses of language in advertising and politics: doublespeak, euphemism, jargon and slang—uses of language that abound with metaphorical expressions. Consider the authors' example of "cleansing" as a metaphor for the clearing of an area of Iraqi troops (49). What should our students make of such a sanitary, domestic term for such a bloody act? Shouldn't we ask them?

Texts intended for use by pre-service and professional teachers tend to be constrained, not only by editors of major publishing houses as well as their marketing divisions, but also by reviewers of proposals who are typically familiar with standard curricula. What is considered to be appropriate in language-focused texts, or rather, what will *sell* these texts typically excludes the more extended, radical discussions about metaphor that Lakoff, Johnson and others have provided. Why? Such texts are geared for use in the P-12 educational setting. Another issue with respect to wider applications of metaphor in current Language Arts curricula is that many teachers have not conceived of metaphor as a common phenomenon in daily language use. Yet it pervades many fields including advertising, politics, business, mass communication, even in health and wellness. Teachers' own education in metaphor has typically been restricted to its role in poetry as one of the "figures of speech." Unless they have read widely about other ways of considering metaphor, I've found that it takes extensive professional development for teachers to reformulate instructional materials that present metaphor in relation to language and thought.

Scholars such as Lakoff and Johnson, Bartel, Postman, Ivie, and Botha continue to argue that metaphor is a critical missing phenomenon in educational settings. The most prevalent reasons as to why metaphor matters are that:

- metaphor is the conduit through which we conceive experience of the world around and beyond us and our relationship to that world and each other (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* 200)
- metaphor constrains as well as creates (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors* 10, 152)
- metaphor underscores the ultimate unity of all existence and we express this concept of life through metaphorical means (i.e. primarily through comparison and analogy—conveying the interconnectedness of all things) (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors* 22-23)
- metaphoric uses of language enable us to "express this interconnectedness, to express the abstract in the concrete, the macrocosm in the microcosm, the essence of many thoughts and feelings in the single metaphor or symbol" (Bartel 82)

Metaphor is also dangerous if unexamined in that metaphors become conceptually and

linguistically constrained as containers. Because of their figurative nature, metaphors slip under the wire of thought unobserved unless we pay attention to the implications inherent in the comparisons (Lakoff and Johnson 236). Consider again the metaphor “cleansing” that euphemizes wartime murder.

Another, more mundane example of how metaphor is potentially dangerous if unexamined is the vehicle-length Nationwide Insurance caption, *Life Comes At You!* that was posted on buses in my city until recently. The caption implies that we are outside of life, that life is a separate, agentive force that behaves always as a threat—like an out-of-control bus. How much life insurance was sold as a result of that caption worming its way into the consciousness of those who happened to see it? We can only speculate. I suspect that market research by Nationwide must have found it effective enough to have been worth the cost of retaining it for several months.

Bartel writes of our “addiction to comparison,” and his teaching suggestions certainly reveal how pervasive that addiction is, given the wide-ranging domains of language available for close metaphorical analysis, e.g., sports, politics, common proverbs, popular music, business, relationships with humans or animals, human events, medical practice, science, education, and human development (48). Conceptual metaphor systems as identified by Tim Rohrer on his “Center for Cognitive Science of Metaphor Online” encompass a range of metaphors, such as: biology metaphors (e.g., “biosystems are text”), business metaphors (e.g., “unemployment is a foe”), computing metaphors (e.g., “the Internet is an information highway”), education metaphors (e.g., “learning is growth,” “students are plants”), metaphors of mind (e.g., “the mind is a databank”); legal metaphors (e.g., “the law is equal protection for all”); military metaphors (e.g., “lives lost are collateral damage”), medical metaphors (e.g., “the body is a machine”), and so on.<sup>2</sup> A study of each and any of these fields will likely yield rich data sources for a study of how human beings and their lives are constrained or contained by the metaphors that dominate them.

Given what we know about metaphor’s conceptual power, how do currently available teaching materials actually represent it? An overview is revealing.

### **Metaphor in Traditional and Current Pedagogy**

In P-12 education, the Common Core Standards (CCSS) sought to revamp Language Arts in the post-No Child Left Behind era. Most states have adopted the standards, offering us an opportunity to reconsider how we view language instruction. But instead, every document and every discussion that can be cited indicate that the system has cemented the teaching of figurative language in general, and metaphor in particular, to its traditional oversimplification. To be fair, policy-makers are not typically educators, but they are informed by our community, many of whom serve on advisory boards to government agencies.

The following is what the CCSS have to say about language, limiting it to terms of “conventions, effective use, and vocabulary”:

The Language standards include the essential “rules” of standard written and spoken

---

<sup>2</sup> Editors’ note: Rohrer’s website is a very early example of his scholarly work. Links may be unreliable or risky.

English, but they also approach language as a matter of craft and informed choice among alternatives. The vocabulary standards focus on understanding words and phrases, their relationships, and their nuances and on acquiring new vocabulary, particularly general academic and domain specific words and phrases.

In other words, the CCSS begin with a reductive vision of language. They go on to emphasize, among other things, that students should experience complex texts. However, they focus primarily on reading informational texts and exposition to fulfill that goal. Metaphor remains a fringe element, relegated to the poetry section of the English Language Arts Curriculum. Granted the CCSS asserts, in reading poetry, that students need to recognize the many layers of meaning that entail metaphoric language, its elusiveness, its semantic and cognitive complexity, its embodiment of abstract concepts in concrete form, and its relationship to symbolic representation.

Individual states' consequent CCSS documents generally give the impression that they had flexibility in implementing the standards. But I've found that states closely approximated the original CCSS document, notwithstanding. For example, an alignment document of English Language Arts produced by *Learn North Carolina*, a North Carolina University College of Education program similarly limits the study of metaphor to literature—poetry specifically. The document preserves the typically reductive way that such study has been conducted: recognition and identification of metaphors in poetry; metaphor as a literary term; the study of metaphor in an exemplar poem; some analysis and interpretation of metaphor. Then the document recommends that students create “an original extended metaphor poem,” requiring them to make the conceptual leap from metaphor to allegory.

In my informal analysis of several English Language Arts textbooks, I also found that metaphor is discussed as a simple “figure of speech” situated in the context of poetry. Metaphor is not addressed in any systematic way in any other subject across the P-12 curriculum. Contrary to Lakoff and Johnson's urging that we consider metaphor as central to all language, English mother-tongue language pedagogy continues to relegate metaphor to the poetry course or poetry segment of literature units only in relation to its defined function as a “figure of speech,” that is, in terms of its function in poetry. The metaphoric nature of similes is often not made clear. Personification, in function a metaphoric figure, is dismissed relatively quickly. Metonymy is usually omitted.

To cite one of the better examples first, I turn to a recently published and otherwise informative text, *Teaching to Exceed the English Language Arts Common Core State Standard*, where authors Beach, Thein and Webb list metaphor in only three locations. They have this to say under the category of metaphorical “framing”:

Beliefs about an event shape people's actions. Based on the success of your negotiations, both you and your buyer (imagine you are selling your car to a friend), may frame your negotiation as a ‘fair deal.’ As our simplistic example illustrates, beliefs are constituted in language: a ‘fair deal.’ Students could reflect on how use of language or metaphors in framing events reflects certain beliefs (Goffman, 1986). Metaphors reflect underlying cultural models shaping the meaning of actions (Lakoff, 2002). People may use metaphors of madness to describe a love relationship (being ‘crazy’ or ‘out of my mind’ about someone) or metaphors of war to describe sport (being in a ‘battle,’ ‘throwing bombs’ or ‘launching a counteroffensive’). (47)

The second reference to metaphor in Beach, et al. is less illuminating: a teacher (one of the authors of the text) has students “intervene in literary texts” as a way of encouraging “powerful and creative ways to engage in close reading”: “One student worked with a collection of Garcia Lorca poems, hyperlinking them to each other around key images and metaphors and adding images that the poems referred to...” (110). Frequently claimed as a goal in this text is the development of students’ thinking through critical inquiry which in turn is intended to “lead to an empowered sense of citizenship” (111). However, having students engage in unpacking the pervasively metaphorical landscape in which our thinking is grounded and, in many ways, held captive, does not appear to present an equally challenging approach to the development of critical-thinking. In fairness to the authors, particularly to Beach who has had a long and highly respected reputation as a significant scholar in the field of literature instruction, the limited focus on metaphor in this text reflects the general state of mind about metaphor. Metaphor is an object primarily related to literature, and in particular, the study of poetry—it reflects where we are in the field.

The reductive study of metaphor in the context of poetry, despite some reference to the common occurrence of metaphor in everyday use, is similarly apparent in common high school literature texts such as Arp & Johnson’s *Perrine’s Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense*. Metaphor appears in one of two chapters that deal with “figurative language.” In their introduction to this chapter, the authors comment that “Many people may be surprised to learn that they have been speaking a kind of sub-poetry all their lives. The difference between their figures of speech and the poet’s is that theirs are probably worn and trite, the poet’s fresh and original” (785).

The authors then elaborate on the value of figurative language:

It may seem absurd to say one thing and mean another. But we all do it—and with good reason. We do it because we can say what we want to say more vividly and forcefully by figures of speech than we can by saying it directly. And we can say more by figurative statements than we can by literal statement. Figures of speech offer another way of adding extra dimensions to language. (786)

The authors do not make explicit what these “extra dimensions” are. But the notion of “saying more” with figurative language and the rhetorical force achieved through using metaphor (our language becomes more “vivid” and “forceful”) suggest that our students could benefit from a study of how these attributes can be explored in their own “sub-poetry,” spoken all their lives—even if their metaphors are probably “worn and trite” rather than “fresh and original.” A systematic study of students’ own use of metaphor in their daily speech is, however, not the focus of literature instruction. In terms of its study in poetry, metaphor and its relative, simile, fares little better.

Simile and Metaphor are both used as a means of comparing things that are essentially unlike. The only distinction between them is that in simile the comparison is expressed by the use of some word or phrase (e.g., like, as similar to, than, resembles, or seems); in metaphor, the comparison is not expressed but created when a figurative term is substituted for or identified with the literal term. (786)

Having been provided with the definition of the term “metaphor” (and its cousin,

simile), the text asks students to identify one or more metaphors in a poem. Having identified the metaphor(s), they are then asked to identify two or more metaphors in a poem and explain what these mean. As a follow-up to this identification process, the student may be asked to “create” one or two metaphors themselves. Interestingly, in this inauthentic, artificial context, my own students have often found it difficult to “invent” a metaphor, forgetting those that naturally pour forth in their own informal conversations. In the process of generating metaphor, students are also warned to avoid the “mixed metaphor” problem. This text series, as others, omits examples which have students identify extended metaphors and allegory—a problem since, in naturally occurring literary texts and in many poems, metaphor often builds upon itself systematically as well as artfully.

Questions focusing on the use of metaphor in the Perrine text are typical of what we’ve experienced as both students and educators:

- Explore the comparisons in the following poem [Frances Darwin Cornford’s “The Guitarist Tunes Up”]. Do they principally illuminate the guitarist, the conquering lord, or the lovers? What one word brings the literal and figurative together?
- Work through the metaphor in this poem [Robert Frost’s “Bereft”]. . . . To what is the wind compared in Line 3? Why is the door ‘restive’ (4), and what does this do (figuratively) to the door? (789).

These are not questions that emphasize the freshness and vividness of image that metaphors are purported to produce. Nor are they questions that encourage students to see metaphor as having intrinsic merit because of its semantic and rhetorical value in producing thought that is *more vivid and forceful*, or given “extra dimension” than if it were literally expressed. As to the value of metaphor, Arp and Johnson suggest that metaphor like any other use of “figurative language”:

- affords imaginative pleasure (794);
- provides a way of bringing additional imagery into verse, making the abstract concrete, making poetry more sensuous (794);
- provides a way of adding emotional intensity to otherwise merely informative statements and conveying attitudes along with information (so and so is a ‘rat’) (794-5);
- is an effective means of concentration, a way of saying much in a brief compass; and is multi-dimensional (795).

The impact of these qualities of metaphor in daily life remain unexplored although a study of any of these properties in, for example, the ways metaphor is used by large corporations would have significant relevance to the lives of students as consumers of products produced by such corporations.

An analysis of grades 9 and 10 McDougall-Little *Language in Literature* textbooks—also in widespread use—reveals very similar patterns of how metaphor is treated in current ELA classrooms. Not much has changed.

## Examining Metaphors in Daily Life

In the course of any regular conversation among two or more participants, or indeed with oneself, metaphors clichéd or not, abound. While studies such as that by Gibbs and Nascimento have examined the level of congruence among participants in terms of how they recognize metaphors, my research indicates that a Language Arts classroom focus on how metaphor actually functions in the speech and in the lives of ordinary people has been largely left untouched. If metaphor is indeed the conceptual fabric of our thinking, why is it not of interest to teach what kinds of metaphors pervade the thinking of a society, or groups within a society?

Other than literary analysis of metaphor by literary theorists, analysis of metaphor in linguistic systems has remained the dominant focus of research to date, most notably the work of Lakoff and Johnson. Others, such as Auburn and Grady and Kovecses have utilized metaphor in their research on growth, learning, and identity. Indeed, scholars such as Feldman claim that the human brain is wired to think in metaphor—and hence, we use metaphor to express that thinking. Yet the English Language Arts community does not seem interested in the ongoing study of metaphors generated by ordinary people, let alone student-generated metaphoric language. If metaphors are conceptual indicators that enable us to discover underlying beliefs, then analysis of metaphor as some isolated stylistic phenomenon provides only a very superficial understanding of their power.

Classroom practice could examine metaphor as a way of perceiving and understanding experience. For illustrative purposes, I have unpacked several common metaphors and suggest insights they provide into the core beliefs of individuals who utter them (Table 1). This is purely a representative sample but I invite readers to begin to keep records of the metaphors they hear and generate in daily life, to attempt a similar analysis. Even more important, if students examined what they may unconsciously have accepted as ‘truth’ in uttering such metaphors, they may discover how much of their lives remain unexamined, and how many assumptions they carry unquestioningly. I am not suggesting that all of these concepts and experiences students (or we) hold as hard truths are necessarily “bad,” or that they have negative consequences in and of themselves. However, through unpacking such metaphors, we discover which of these are of use (or not) to us in the present, which of these enable us to live present, fulfilling lives, or conversely, which ones hinder us from doing so.

Table 1: Metaphors, Situations, and Interpretations of  
Underlying Assumptions about Reality

| Sample metaphors             | Situations that May Generate Such Metaphors | Underlying Assumptions/<br>Beliefs                      |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| It never rains but it pours. | When events happen in unbroken sequence     | We have little, if any, control over events.            |
| Life comes at you.           | When an unplanned event happens             | We're at the mercy of life, or somehow outside of life. |



| Sample metaphors             | Situations that May Generate Such Metaphors                                  | Underlying Assumptions/<br>Beliefs   |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| Marriage is a trip.          | When marriage seems unpredictable and surprising—or, ironically—the opposite | We have to accept whatever happens in a marriage; marriage has a destination beyond our expectations |
| It's a noose around my neck. | When feeling threatened  | We have an obligation that's not of our own choosing.  |
| It's my bread and butter.    | When identifying a main means of support                                     | We could not survive without this source of income.  |
| Fly off the handle           | When feeling very angry  | We have lost the ability to direct or control our emotions.  |
| Lick something into shape    | When presented with a challenge or task.                                     | We can meet a challenge or complete a task to our satisfaction.                                      |

As Bartel notes, the clichés we utter seldom “forget their metaphorical origins” (9). How conscious are we of these utterances as having the possibility of being replaced with others? How conscious are we that they may embody deeply buried beliefs about potential, possibility, punishment, and so forth? While such phrases can indicate that our thinking in everyday life remains relatively unexamined, more significant are what I term ‘systems’ and “field-based metaphors,” whereby we remain trapped in thinking that has gained the status of reality. Bartel suggests that teachers could do well to have students study such common examples of these, and in analysis, uncover the assumptions that reflect beliefs and seem fixed, despite how readily we may approach new fashions, technologies, or circumstances.

The above table also shows how metaphor “physicalizes” language through its appeal to the senses, and through those senses enables us to imagine the tangible experience that the metaphor represents. That is, by activating the imagination, metaphor acts as a projection of an experience so that it becomes not only cognitively registered but also “felt.” In this way, metaphor also taps into language as a “field of energy.”<sup>3</sup> By this phrase, I mean that language is not simply inert, a representation of things, phenomena and experiences, but it acts upon us. Thus, even if we continue to generate metaphors that have become so worn that they no longer surprise us, no longer alert us to a subliminal semantic field, we are still receptive to the word as more than just a word.

<sup>3</sup> In a short paper for the general reader (*Intentions, and Old and New Language and Thought Habits* to appear in *Self Growth Wisdom*, Winter, 2013, I propose that we consider language as a “field of energy.” The concept is more extensively discussed in a conceptual paper, currently in review: “A Proposition: Language as a Field of Energy: Quantum Metaphysics Meets Language Education” (Soter, A. & Connors, S. Unpublished manuscript. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University).

## Perspectives of Language as a Field of Energy

In Goethe's *Faust*, we are introduced to Faust as he struggles with the meaning of the word, "logos," literally meaning "word" as it is used in the Gospel of St. John. Resulting from his musings, Faust concludes "Im anfang war die Tat" (x). At the literal level, the German word "Tat" means "deed" or "act." However, in the poetic drama, the metaphoric intent of "act" is "word": "In the beginning was the word." Goethe drew on the dual biblical meaning of "word" as the equivalent of "act," conflating the two words so that "act" and "word" were synonymous. Discourse analyst, Neil Mercer provides a variety of other, less literary examples—including marriage vows—to demonstrate that "saying something amounts to performing it" (11). The Russian cognitive psychologist, Lev Vygotsky asserts that a "word is a microcosm of human consciousness," and he believed that words "give humans the power to regulate and change natural forms of behavior and cognition" (153). Many of us, in our personal lives, have asked others to not utter words that we fear to hear, thinking that to do so would bring them to actualization. Philosophers, playwrights, poets, and theorists across diverse fields appear to agree that the relationship between language and what happens (i.e., becomes actualized) is integrally related.

In articulating language as a "field of energy," we can embrace a close relationship between language and action—a quality that has always been intuitively known to anyone who has used language to bring about some "act" (e.g., clergy who declare couples married; judges who determine if a party is guilty or innocent; shamans who chant healing mantras, and so forth).

Even pedagogy in the P-12 context has *implicitly* recognized the metaphoric power of language in promoting non-sexist language in the past decade. More recently, various agencies involved in social development have been engaged in promoting non-violent language. Likewise, we have discovered that our habitual thoughts and the language used to express those thoughts are intricately linked to our physiology. In essence, researchers have long maintained and are now providing scientific evidence that an etiological relationship may exist between thought, language, and the conditions of our lives. According to Lakoff and Johnson,

Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies. (*Metaphors* 156)

What are the implications of this way of thinking about the role of metaphor (a linguistic and rhetorical phenomenon) in our lives and our students' lives? Bridging the thinking of social constructivism and the world of metaphysics, Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors, in addition to encoding beliefs that already exist, create realities for us by shaping our thinking in particular ways, which in turn shapes the lives we live (*Philosophy* 68).

Through metaphor, we highlight and hide thought, orient ourselves and others, create a cohesive society, provide a mechanism for "the coherent structure of experience," cement current meaning, and create new meaning (*Metaphors* 77). In his delineation of the significance of metaphor, symbol and language in our lives, Bartel argues that it lies in

the power of metaphor *to call into being* what we imagine; that language is not some inert object, but a “dynamic force” and that there is a “reciprocal relationship between language and life” (my emphasis 75). Similarly, in her thirty years as a Medical Intuitive, Myss’s case studies suggest a strong link between the way people define themselves and their chronic physical conditions; their illnesses develop metaphoric power in the course of naming themselves *as* their illness. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors function as elements of identity (*Philosophy* 193). Their example of the “war metaphor” utilized under former President Carter’s term of office when faced with an energy crisis has become a pervasive metaphor in the post-9/11 *fight with terror*, as well as many other aspects of life—we *fight* poverty, AIDS, environmental pollution, and ignorance. If we agree with Lakoff and Johnson’s argument that “no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis” (*Metaphors* 19), then it is time to take the study of metaphor out of the poetry lesson where it has exclusively resided in schools and bring it into the language-as-energy-focused classroom, where we can peel back the layers of meanings and intentions entailed in the metaphors we use in our daily lives, to at least be aware of to what extent the metaphors we use so unconsciously have become the “metaphors we live by.”<sup>4</sup>

### Concluding Thoughts

How can we invite students in our classrooms to become aware of these powers inherent in the metaphorically rich language they and others use, and, in becoming aware of such power, to engage in it as Mike Rose asks, “in some fuller way” (163)? A pedagogy that embraces the common notion in most if not all other fields of human inquiry and endeavor—the notion that language and thought are primarily grounded in metaphor—would result in a radical shift from the primary traditional focus on form and structure in the study of language in educational settings to a focus on the *creative power of language which is manifested in its bringing into being that which is conceptualized and uttered*. Such a view of language would entail a focus on its metaphoric qualities, but not in the restricted, limited way in which metaphor has been dealt with in the context of teaching poetry, namely, the labeling of metaphor as a figure of speech, and asking students to “find” metaphors in selected poems. Through its layering nature, through making the abstract concrete, a metaphor-based pedagogy connects language to life and the lives we live. In embracing a pedagogy of the metaphoric potential of language, we instantiate language as “a field of energy.”

The study of commonly used metaphors both in daily speech and in any institutional setting would provide abundant evidence of the ways in which we conceptualize life, our relationships with each other, our relationships with the society in which we live, our relationship with the planet, money, employment, roles, justice, or opportunity—indeed our relationship to all aspects of the lives we live. Those same clichéd metaphors so common in daily speech (and I would argue, thought), seem not only worthy of probing, but a vital source of information about the individuals who utter them, as well as about the social and cultural settings in which those individuals are located. If metaphors indeed

---

<sup>4</sup> Reference to the title of Lakoff and Johnson’s classic text: *Metaphors We Live By*.

reveal our fundamental conceptions of life and our expectations, then studies of metaphor as they are ingrained in the speech of ordinary people should offer us a significant window into our understanding of why beliefs embodied in the metaphors we use are so deeply ingrained. Researching and exploring metaphor from this perspective should reveal the prevailing consciousness within groups and communities, enabling us—and our students—to understand how to interact and even live with them.

A pedagogy that centers on metaphor acknowledges that to name a thing by another name is to perceive it differently, to allow space for multiple perspectives, and as Geary describes it, to unleash the synesthetic power of language to help students grasp “stimulus in one sense organ through a different sensory system” (76). A pedagogy that centers on metaphor introduces students to the means by which we create as well as destroy, discover the interrelatedness of language and experience, challenge collective uses of language (e.g., through media, institutions, and organizations), reinforce beliefs and values, make choices in our interpersonal relationships, and so on. A pedagogy that centers on metaphor attunes students not only to language as a field of energy, but also to language as “fields of play”—as Richardson puts it—providing students with personal goals to study language. Instead of the groans that often greet middle and high school teachers when the grammar/vocabulary sections of a language arts textbook are opened, we can, through such a pedagogy, provide them with a sound rationale for the study of language that truly offers them something of the same profound discovery that Helen Keller made when she discovered language:

Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought: and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me—I knew then that ‘w-a-t-e-r’ meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! (211)

I applaud the emergence of P-12 language texts such as Noden’s *Image Grammar* and Weaver’s *Grammar to Enhance and Enrich Writing*, which both focus on the relationship between language and contexts of use. The propositions about how we make meaning through written language as expressed in these books are sound and well-grounded in theory and research. Harmon and Wilson articulate in their introductory chapter the now widely accepted argument in scholarship of critical literacy that:

It is a commonplace to discuss the obvious influences of thought and culture on language—how what we say and how we say it are largely a result of our cultural influences and experiences—but it is equally important to consider the reciprocity involved in language and culture—how language influences thought, reinforces it, and shapes it . . . linguistic patterns (according to linguists) have the potential to constrain one’s thinking and shape it in culturally significant ways. (27-28)

If we accept the notion that language can, in these ways, profoundly influence our *actions* as well as our thinking, we will question yet again, why the most recent major overhaul of Language Arts curricula at a mandated national level continues to ignore the social and political significance that any serious study of metaphor would yield. Metaphor has remained, at this significant level, firmly chained to its traditionally prescribed role as

a figure of speech in isolated poems. Metaphor remains as yet, the Rapunzel of language, understood to be a “precious object” but potentially dangerous if freed from its long-standing constraints. We and our students court metaphor only through ineffective gestures, and more often than not retreat, frustrated with the little that we have gained from the encounter.



### Works Cited

- Arp, Thomas, and Johnson, G. *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense*. 8<sup>th</sup> Ed. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle, 2001. Print.
- Auburn, Axel and Grady, Joseph. Reframing Youth: Models, Metaphors and Messages. Framework Institute, 2001. Web. 9 September 2013. <[http://frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF/youth\\_reframing.pdf](http://frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF/youth_reframing.pdf)>.
- Bartel, Roland. *Metaphors and Symbols: Forays into Language*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1983. Print.
- Beach, Richard, Amanda Hertling Thein, and Allen Webb. *Teaching to Exceed the English Language Arts Common Core Standards*. New York: Rutledge, 2012. Print.
- Botha, Elaine. “Why Metaphor Matters in Education.” *South African Journal of Education* 29.4 (2009): 431-444. Print.
- Common Core State Standards Initiative*. 2012. Web. 8 August 2013. <http://www.corestandards.org/ela-literacy/introduction/how-to-read-the-standards>.
- Concise Oxford Dictionary, 11<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. New York: Oxford UP, 2004. Print.
- Feldman, Jerome.A. *From Molecule to Metaphor: A Neural Theory of Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. Print.
- Geary, James. *I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2011. Print.
- Gibbs, Raymond W. “The Processes of Understanding Literary Understanding.” *Journal of Literary Semantics* (1990): 19, 65-79. Print.
- Gibbs Raymond W. and Solange, Nascimento. (1996). “How We Talk When We Talk About Love: Metaphorical Concepts and Understanding Love Poetry.” *Empirical Approaches to Literature and Aesthetics*. Ed. Roger J. Kreuz and Mary Sue MacNealy. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1996, 291-307. Print.
- Glencoe Literature Series: Reading with Purpose* (Courses 1, 2, and 3; Grade 9). Columbus, OH: McGraw Hill/Glencoe, 2007. Print.
- Glencoe Literature Series: The Reader's Choice*. (Course 4, 5; Grade 10). Columbus, OH: McGraw Hill/Glencoe, 2007. Print.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Faust*. Seattle, WA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013. Print.
- Harmon, Mary.R., & Marilyn J. Wilson. *Beyond Grammar: Language, Power, And The Classroom*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006. Print.
- Ivie, Stanley D. *On the Wings of Metaphor*. San Francisco: Caddo Gap Press, 2003.
- Kovecses, Zoltan. *Metaphors of Anger, Pride, and Love*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 1986. Print.

- Keller, Helen. "The Key to Language." Eds. Charles Laird & Ron M. Gorrell, *Readings about Language*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971: 55-58. Print.
- Lakoff, George. *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame Your Debate*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2004. Print.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark. Johnson. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenges to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 1999. Print.
- . *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. Print.
- McDougall Little. *The Language of Literature Series* (Grade 9). Evanston, IL: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Print.
- . *The Language of Literature Series* (Grade 10). Evanston, IL: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Print.
- Mercer, Neil. *Words and minds: How we use language to think together*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Myss, Carolyn. *Why People Don't Heal and How They Can*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997. Print.
- N.C.T.E. *Standards for the English Language Arts*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English & the International Reading Association, 1996. Print.
- Noden, Harry. *Image Grammar: Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton Cook/Heinemann, 2011. Print.
- Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1985. Print.
- Richardson, Laurel. *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life*. Newark, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997. Print.
- Ricouer, Paul. The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling. *Critical Inquiry*, 5,1, (1978), 143-159. Print.
- Rohrer, Tim. "Center for the Cognitive Science of Metaphor Online." 16 Nov. 1998. Web. 7 July 2013. <http://www.gdufs.edu.cn/professor/pro-gui/myhomepage/metaphor.htm>. Print.
- Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of American's Educational Underclass*. New York: Penguin, 1989. Print.
- University of North Carolina College of Education. *Learn North Carolina*. Web. 14 June 2013. <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/ccss2010-english>.
- Vygotsky, Lev. *Thought and language*. Ed. & Trans. Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar,. Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1962. Print.
- Weaver, Constance. *Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2008. Print.

## The Power of the Poetic Lens: Why Teachers Need to Read Poems Together

Amy L. Eva, Carrie A. Bemis, Marie F. Quist, & Bill Hollands

*For it is important that awake people be awake,  
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;  
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—  
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.*

From “A Ritual to Read to Each Other,”  
William Stafford

After twenty years of teaching, I cried in the classroom. My students, a group of teachers in training, watched as I opened the most treasured gift I have received in my teaching career. They had decorated a simple black binder and thoughtfully assembled individually selected poems for my birthday. I thumbed through page after page of poetry and song lyrics, savoring the words that inspired them, including: “Hope is the Thing with Feathers” by Emily Dickinson, “Dreams” by Langston Hughes, “What Teachers Make” by Taylor Mali, “Invitation” by Shel Silverstein, and “Same Love” by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis—and I let the tears flow.

When I think back to that moment I still feel tender and profoundly grateful. For me, poetry has often served as a sort of spiritual balm, countering the incessant pace of life, which sometimes leaves me feeling shadowed by an inexplicable sense of loneliness—and disconnection from self. Perhaps Robert Frost captures a bit of the healing resonance I felt when I received that 8 1/2 x 11 binder:

A poem begins with a lump in the throat, a home-sickness or a love-sickness. It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where the emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words. (Frost and Untermeyer 220)

My students and I find and share the words Frost describes in a weekly reading ritual that I call “Monday Morning Musings,” and the poetry collection I received celebrates and honors that experience.

During Monday Morning Musings (MMM) a group of teacher candidates, often bleary-eyed with hot coffee in hand, meets with me for 15-20 minutes before official class time. We gather together, voluntarily, to read poems by favorite authors. Our process is simple—we don’t talk about the poems; we just sit in a circle, listen, and snap our fingers at the end of each reading. I have been surprised by students’ interest and devotion to this brief weekly encounter. Here are some of the things they say about it:

- Coming to MMM settles me into my day as those images and rhythms drift down out of the air. I feel we’re all threaded together for those quiet minutes.
- I enjoyed having a place to voice some of the things that are more meaningful to me—not just my thoughts on teaching, politics, etc.

- I am drawn to poetry because it creates a place to wrestle with and consider things in life that really matter.

Apart from the immediate benefits cited above, participants from my former reading group (who are now elementary and high school teachers) continue to teach, write and even publish their own poems. Some structure daily or weekly readings in their classrooms along with the occasional poetry slam while others participate and regularly attend their own slams outside of class. As a direct result of Monday Morning Musings, a handful of my students, a faculty colleague, and I have even presented at national conferences with the goal of sharing what inspires us most about poetry and how we bring it into our classrooms.

### **Arts Education and the Standards Movement: Is There Still Room for Poetry in Today's Schools?**

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and related high-stakes testing legislation continue to narrow the K-12 curriculum in favor of a more efficient, systematic approach to learning in both content and process. As a result, educators at all levels appear to be working in increasingly frantic contexts to produce acceptable test scores more than informed and reflective student citizens. Frederick Hess and Michael Petrilli claim that NCLB sets “a new precedent of federal involvement in curriculum and instruction” (94). With teachers and administrators driven to produce and report evidence of “adequate yearly progress” within an increasingly mechanized educational system, is there still room in the curriculum room for reflection, creativity, and the arts?

Despite the persistent call for accountability, federal legislators have not eschewed arts education. In 2008, Barack Obama's Arts Policy Campaign platform argued for a reinvestment in arts education and creativity. As a result, the President's Committee on Arts and Humanities (PCAH) conducted an in-depth review of challenges and opportunities in arts education. The review includes two seminal longitudinal studies, current brain research, and numerous arts integration cases studies. Schools in the toughest neighborhoods (e.g., Chicago and the DC-area suburbs) are increasing students' test scores and preparing graduates who are competitive in the work force. The summary states: “The value of arts education is often phrased in enrichment terms”; but as PCAH saw, “it is also an effective tool in school-wide reform and fixing some of our biggest educational challenges. It is not a flower, but a wrench” (1).

Indifferent administrators or teachers need to be reminded of these success stories. Edutopia's Mariko Nobori tells the story of an Annapolis, Maryland middle school that began fully incorporating an arts-based curriculum in 2009. Since then, Wiley H. Bates Middle School has seen significant shifts in both school-wide academic performance and behavior. Arts-based lessons and activities, in this case, don't serve as add-on projects; instead, they become the teaching tools for addressing the core academic standards and curricula while motivating and engaging students.

Poetry, as one art form, can also be used as a teaching tool for enhancing numerous skills and dispositions, including detailed observation skills, reflective thinking, creativity, inferential thinking, and higher-level cognitive skills such as analysis, evaluation and



synthesis. Poet and writer Georgia Heard argues for the value of poetry in the K-12 curriculum by practically aligning instructional activities with a variety of core standards. My own research with poetry outlines a “think and feel aloud” study conducted with 11<sup>th</sup> graders, where accessing and identifying comprehension processes outside of the traditional realm of literary analysis enhanced students’ ability to read, write about, and discuss poems while simultaneously increasing their reported interest in reading. Based on my findings, I argue that poetry lends itself to more expansive approaches to comprehension (and cognition) such as visualizing, using the senses, drawing on personal experiences, and identifying with a poem’s speaker. Some of these skills aren’t explicitly addressed in the Common Core Standards, yet they become comprehension tools for effectively meeting those standards. They also link to social and emotional competencies, which may be crucial to supporting and motivating students in their learning.

Evidence indicates that poetry, too, can serve as a “wrench” in leveraging students’ learning (e.g., Eva 51). However, this essay ultimately seeks to explore the ways in which poetry supports and sustains *educators* in their own professional growth—perhaps a less quantifiable phenomenon. In what ways can teachers benefit from reading and responding to poems together? Do reading rituals like Monday Morning Musings effectively serve as a social adhesive? Are they incubators for new ideas? And, how might poetry itself allow for the focusing calm, careful reflection, and open-mindedness that are necessary for meaningful teaching and learning?

### Why Poetry for Teachers?

When I began my work as a teacher educator at Seattle University eight years ago, I came to the job as a former high school language arts teacher and college writing instructor. My desire to share poetry with teacher candidates stemmed from the mild heartache I experienced in shifting my instructional focus from literature to lesson planning. Furthermore, I selfishly craved the benefits of the regular Monday morning soul boost that occurred as we lapped up the images and sounds of loved poems together. It was a chance to stop, pause, and connect within a fast-paced, intensive master’s program for K-12 teacher candidates. During this weekly pause, my students and I became complicit in discovering (and rediscovering) language that contained a spark of our humanity. Denise Levertov alludes to this phenomenon in the opening stanza of “The Secret”: “Two girls discover/ the secret of life/ in a sudden line/ of poetry.” Of course, the poems themselves held a lot of magic for us, but the fact that we witnessed and celebrated their “secrets” in community has perhaps been the most powerful element of the ritual.

I believe that poetry reading can foster a sense of belonging and connectedness among teachers. This personal bias, and perhaps the real inspiration behind my Monday Morning Musings group, stems from my interaction with the Center for Courage and Renewal. The Center, inspired by the works and philosophy of Parker Palmer, provides a range of programs and retreats designed to provide a nurturing environment for exploring the relationship between one’s vocation and inner life. Having attended a series of retreats during my graduate school years, I read and savored many different poems with other teacher-leaders. Retreat facilitators used art, music, and poetry, in particular, to invite reflection and discussion around the seemingly private issues of identity, integrity, and

authentic leadership. I find it rare in a university setting, to have tough, vulnerable conversations with my colleagues about issues as profound as purpose and role, politics, and social justice, to name a few. Yet Parker Palmer wisely points to the role of poetry as a potential tool for bringing groups of teachers together in community. Poems and other art forms serve as vehicles, prisms, or alternative voices, which are not as threatening as self-disclosure. Palmer claims: "We use these third things, these texts, because they allow us to follow Emily Dickinson's wonderful dictum: 'Tell the truth, but tell it slant'" (*Hidden Wholeness* 92).

Good poetry, when read aloud in a group, opens up a participatory space among its readers while offering up reality in kind and palatable doses. And when poetry expresses something seemingly inexplicable, the shared recognition of that truth can create human resonance—a sense of common experience. This subtle appreciation of connectedness can go so much farther in healing than many other more structured and direct approaches to "community building" in our institutions. Art gives us the excuse to talk about the real stuff of life with our students and colleagues, and poems can be tools for bringing groups of teachers together in community.

Sanders and Bennett discuss the importance of creative community literacy, in a broader sense, by describing their "Community Writer's Workshop" participants as non-student residents or "students of life" who focus on "collaborating, fostering the creative process, and careful listening" during free sessions at their university writing center (74). In their conclusion, the authors cite Cain's belief that with poetry, "We can make room for other voices, other forms of expression and other viewpoints that the academic classroom might otherwise seem to disallow" (240). I believe that we must venture beyond traditional academic discourse into more creative, collaborative contexts in order to sustain our work and our identities as teachers.

### **The Power of Group Literacy Experiences: Not Just for Students?**

Classic research in language arts suggests that the most meaningful literacy experiences for our students seem to occur in groups: book clubs, literature circles, writing groups, and workshops. Describing learning as social and inter-textual process, Kathy Short studied how collaboration among young readers influenced their responses to texts. Her seminal 1986 work informs current understandings of the fundamental components of literature circles such as choice, collaboration and development of thinking through discussion, while she also identified key characteristics of positive learning environments including:

- a community of equals learning together
- shared responsibilities and ownership
- differing responsibilities equally valued
- reciprocal giving and receiving trust
- openness and shared vulnerability
- shared communication and goals
- recognizing and dealing with disjunctions through consensus

In the years that followed, other researchers and literacy specialists have further studied

the classroom conditions, texts, and inquiry approaches for creating effective and engaging group literacy experiences (e.g., Sheridan Blau, Stephanie Harvey, and Harvey Daniels).

This predominant focus on literacy learners—in community—may be partially attributed to Vygotskian theory and other cognitive theories that foreground and celebrate the sociocultural context in which substantive engagement and meaningful change can occur. Barbara Rogoff and her colleagues explore the nature of collaborative learning in terms of each group member's transformation of understanding through participation. As communities of practice attempt to create meaning or solve problems in real contexts, this transformation occurs in the community member's movement from passive observer to active participant in the group process and potentially engages three planes of participation: the personal, interpersonal, and cultural/institutional (see Rogoff et al.).

### **Teachers' Group Literacy Experiences**

With all we know about the power of group learning, how do educators themselves benefit? Isn't there a valuable role for both formal and informal teacher groups? Christine Gould et al. acknowledge the motivating power of the group experience as they discuss the value of a faculty writing group. Drawing on Etienne Wenger, they describe a community of practice as one that grows out of a sustained effort that leads to significant learning—not around “static subject matter but the very process of being engaged in, and participating in developing, an ongoing practice” (780). Peter Elbow and Mary Dean Sorcinelli describe an ongoing program for faculty groups (“Professors as Writers”) at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Interestingly, after 15 years of programming, they describe the value in shifting from a more formal workshop format to an emphasis on simply offering space that is conducive to writing in what Elbow now likes to call a “non-program.” Some organizing principles include: “keep it simple,” “focus on opportunity rather than remediation,” “affirm the integration of scholarship and teaching,” “encourage the participation of all faculty, but especially early career faculty,” and “link the notions of academic work and community” (20).

Of course, the groups described above focus primarily on faculty writing rather than reading, yet reading experiences can be as active and participatory as the writing process is. Several recent research studies address the role of teacher book clubs in influencing reading attitudes and dispositions. Mary Burbank et al. examine book clubs more broadly as mechanisms for professional development among different types of teacher groups—including pre-service and practicing teachers. They also address the role of the reader response approach in influencing the goals and procedures for book club experiences by contrasting Louise Rosenblatt's reader response theory as a more aesthetic, personal experience that involves an interaction between text and reader with Lauren Liang's cognitive approach that focuses more on textual content while de-emphasizing personal interpretations. Although Burbank and her colleagues noted that groups studied some formalized structures in their reading, teachers largely “reacted in a more holistic fashion to the texts, reacting both emotionally and conceptually to the ideas presented” (70).

Moreover, Mary Kooy reports on a small group of novice teachers who met over a two-year period. She frames this book club experience in more holistic terms as well, pointing to the importance of self-directed teacher development—where new teachers

foster their growth in a social and supportive context from the start of their careers. These early experiences can shape teacher learning.

### Why Teachers Need Poetry

Additional studies and conceptual papers focus more explicitly on the use of poetry, in particular, as both a pedagogical and reflective tool used among groups of new teachers. Ann-Marie Clark describes how teacher candidates wrote or selected poems to deepen their understanding of themselves in relationship to the children and families they worked with throughout a service learning project. In this case, the poetic lens seemed to foster internal questioning and greater vocational clarity for teachers. Richard Brown highlights the value in “paying attention to our personal experience and integrating that with our teaching,” claiming: “Contemplative teaching begins by knowing and experiencing ourselves directly. We unlearn how we habitually think, sense, and feel so that we can return to the present moment freshly and clearly” (70).<sup>1</sup>

Sharon MacKenzie features poetry writing and discussions about “self and purpose within the world” in her student teaching seminars. Mackenzie reflects: “Teachers are thinking, feeling beings, who carry with them layers of stories that shape the person they are within a given movement. Teaching itself is a story or series built upon other stories, never ending and always unpredictable” (5). With these thoughts in mind, she engaged with her student teachers as they wrote and shared individual “Who am I” poems and also created a type of collaborative poem (known as a *renga*) made up of individually fashioned haiku stanzas.

Allan Evans and Kathleen Cowin also actively engage with teacher identity through poetry in their seminars. Cowin saw that poetry became a conduit through which teacher candidates could reflect on their relationships with both students and colleagues—moving beyond the technical aspects of teaching to focus on their social and emotional experience.

Some have said it is like a ‘mini vacation’ where they can process how they are feeling about the work of teaching and take time for their own thoughts about the one who that teaches.... Using poetry to help our students focus on their inner lives honors the diversity of their life experiences and can create a process that may help instill renewal and sustainability in their careers. (317-318)

Evans examines the role of poetry, “the music of literacy,” in discussions of teachers’ “inner lives.” He read weekly poems aloud and used them to frame brief group discussions and individual reflective activities that, as Cowin’s, provided insight into new teachers’ personal passions and struggles.

My intentions for my own poetry reading group, Monday Morning Musings, are similar. First, I hope to provide a venue for new teachers to access and acknowledge the very human work of teaching—in community. Second, I seek to provide a context where teachers can simply rest and revel in poetry for poetry’s sake. The remaining pages of this essay celebrate something alive, attuned, and respectful—the poem—and explore the ways in which it can awaken and enliven teacher-readers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Editors’ note: See Crawford and Willhoff, this volume, for more on the importance of *unlearning*.

*Poetry Slows Time and Heightens Attention.* We tussle with time as educators. Everything must be efficiently managed and scheduled—class periods, tests, phone calls, conferences—with the heartless face of the clock mocking us from the back of the classroom. One of the things I remember most vividly about the blur of my early teaching days was how frequently I forgot to take bathroom breaks. What strikes me most about teaching (and living) is how easily I fall into an unremitting pace and lose track of myself. Poetry slows me down and forces me to pause and be present to the words. Reading good poetry can be a calming, centering act that requires the sharp yet quiet concentration of the whole self. And I am arguably a better teacher when I am fully attuned to my students with my whole self.

*Poetic language can jar its reader into new ways of seeing and knowing.* Billy Collins claims that the study of poetry provides a model for learning:

I came to realize that to study poetry was to replicate the way we learn and think. When we read a poem, we enter the consciousness of another. It requires that we loosen some of our fixed notions in order to accommodate another point of view—which is a model of the kind of intellectual openness and conceptual sympathy that a liberal education seeks to encourage. (2001 B5)

*Poetry Thinks with Feeling.* Poetry holds the power to sway its readers simply because a thoughtful turn of phrase or a powerful image can catch us off guard and surprise us into an emotional response. Poets themselves engage both their thoughts and feelings in a written form that demands both *strategy* and *sensitivity*—a wonderful model for the act of teaching as well. Louise Rosenblatt claims that poetry helps its readers to “think rationally within an emotionally colored context” (*Literature as Exploration* 228). Ideally, poetic forms bring about the active, full engagement of a reader’s thoughts, feelings, and senses, which is what we strive for as teachers as we attempt to model the most compelling learning experiences for our students.

*Poetry Awakens.* I feel most alive when I slow down, attend, think with feeling, and appreciate the humanity around me. I believe that the act of reading poetry, for all of these reasons, can actually be a form of spiritual practice. Theodore Roethke’s often-repeated credo was, “You must believe: a poem is a holy thing—a good poem, that is” (see *On Poetry and Craft*). Reading poetry—like journaling, being outdoors, or enjoying a great meal with friends—can awaken the spirit. Opportunities for teachers to read poetry are crucial, particularly at a time when the richness of teaching and learning can be so easily reduced to mere numbers and technical trivia. Poetry especially awakens teachers to the kinds of people they are. As Stafford wrote,

If you don’t know the kind of person I am  
and I don’t know the kind of person you are  
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world  
And following the wrong god home we may miss our star. (135)

Parker Palmer’s query, “Who is the self that teaches?” also reminds us that who teachers *are* is as crucial as what teachers do (*Courage* 4).

With Palmer's words in mind, three of my former students reflect on their new teacher identities below. Having actively participated in Monday Morning Musings as students, they volunteered to build on that experience by selecting a personally meaningful poem excerpt and writing briefly about how it informed their early teaching challenges. Marie Feri Quist uses Whitman to explore what it means to achieve balance and focus in the classroom. Bill Hollands draws on Glück to acknowledge parents' fears about school (including his own). Carrie Allen Bemis finds inspiration in Rilke, as she stands at a professional crossroads.

### **Marie Feris Quist: Finding Courage to Be Spontaneous**

You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every  
moment of your life  
Long have you timidly waded, holding a plank by the shore,  
Now I will teach you to be a bold swimmer. . . .  
(From "Song of Myself" #46)

The art of gracefully balancing organization and spontaneity in the classroom is a challenge to perform as a beginning teacher. Whitman's words reinforce what is so easy to do during a lesson: become unaware—unaware of many un-planned moments that hold the potential to offer rich, genuine learning opportunities. Whitman calls this awareness a "habit": the habit of being aware of the dazzle and light within every moment and focusing on what that moment has to offer.

During my first week of teaching in the classroom, I found myself timidly holding a plank at the shore, frightened to veer from the plan I had spent hours devising. Whitman's words urge me to be bold and daring; to jump into the surf and challenge the waves; to take risks and travel where it may be unsafe, uncomfortable, or unknown.

I cheat the excitement of teaching and learning by wading at the shore, by timidly peering out across the horizon. Achieving balance between organization and spontaneity is crucial when trying to be aware of the dazzle of each present moment in my future classroom. I must boldly step away from the comfort of the shore and dive headfirst into the sea. This dive takes courage as a teacher-in-training! Maybe time will run out, activities will remain unfinished, and my organized plan will fly out the window. But by heeding Whitman's words, new water will be tested and this novelty will certainly bring authentic learning experiences to everyone involved.

### **Bill Hollands: Earning Parents' Trust**

The children go forward with their little satchels.  
And all morning the mothers have labored  
to gather the late apples, red and gold,  
like words of another language.  
(From *House on Marshland*)

So begins Louise Glück's "The School Children," which presents a mother sending her child off to school for the first time. It is not a happy occasion. School is described as an "orderly" place where teachers "wait behind great desks" (6) and "instruct [the

students] in silence” (11). Mothers are left at home to “scour the orchards” (12) for the last of the apples, the final bounty of summer and childhood. But these apples provide “little ammunition” (14) against the years of order and silence that await children at school.

As I begin my career as a teacher, full of anticipation about the exciting, stimulating atmosphere that I hope to create in my classroom, I am sobered by Glück’s depiction of school as a barren place—the “other shore” to which parents must abandon their children (5). And I have to acknowledge the truth in Glück’s assessment of how some parents feel when their children go off to school.

When I begin my first year as a teacher, my only child will be starting kindergarten, beginning his years-long journey at school. In addition to pride, I expect I will feel loss at this new stage of our lives. I will no longer be able to insulate him in a totally safe and carefree world, and I will be entrusting much of his upbringing to strangers. Will he feel loved? Will his unique strengths and challenges be recognized and nurtured?

As a teacher, I will work hard to earn the trust of parents who, like the mothers in Glück’s poem, may feel suspicious of teachers and excluded from their child’s life at school. I hope the parents of my students will know that I truly care about their children and that, in my class, their children will feel motivated, acknowledged, and safe. That is my goal.

### **Carrie Allen Bemis: Seeing a Way Forward**

My eyes already touch the sunny hill,  
going far ahead of the road I have begun.  
So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;  
it has inner light, even from a distance-

Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Walk” begins by stating, “My eyes already touch the sunny hill/ going far ahead of the road I have begun.” So often I feel that way in my own life. I can see future desires and hopeful plans, but I realize how far away I still am from my ultimate goal. I see my students wrestle with this notion as well. They know what they want to accomplish eventually but can only see their goals as intangible rays on a sunny hill. So often, teaching is about helping students stay on the road, helping them understand how to persevere until they reach their intended destination.

Rilke would suggest this perseverance comes from within, “So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;/ it has inner light, even from a distance.” Although I see in the glimmering light what may be, sometimes it is hard for me to believe that I am capable of making my own journey. Sometimes, my light is so dim I fear it will go out. And it is those people who see my light, who see the intangible, that allow me to once again be grasped by what I have not yet held. As I work with my students, I am reminded of this—how very susceptible their inner light can be to the slightest winds or soft hushes, which dull our charge to accomplish what we must help them achieve. I try to remember how important it is to be one of the voices that encourages the inner light of those around me, but does not blow it out.

As I walk along this current stretch of my road, I am faced with so many unknowns: where I will live in a month, whether or not I will attend more school, how I will overcome deep failure in my life. With this time and many to come, I hope I will cling to the light

within me. I hope I will have the courage to see the destination that lies ahead, and be grasped by what I cannot yet grasp. And if I cannot see my light, I hope I will have the courage to allow it to be shown to me by others who can.

### Conclusion

These three teachers' words demonstrate that good poetry can prompt us, as educator-humans, to *see* our students, their parents, and ourselves a little differently—with sharper eyes and softer hearts. Over the past several years, a simple Monday morning reading ritual has quietly yet powerfully connected groups of young educators, freeing them to shed a little bit of the pretense and to acknowledge their real selves. As demonstrated above, the poems new teachers select poignantly reflect their fears, anticipations, and vulnerabilities. Most importantly, their heart-felt responses reveal their deep commitment to an increasingly complex, challenging, and ultimately rewarding profession of service.

Poetry slows time and heightens attention, thinks with feeling, awakens, and humanizes us. When educators read and share poetry aloud, they jointly create a reflective pause that can set the stage for new learning. Poems, then, are not merely “flowers,” but tools for creating, turning, and sharpening new ideas. My teachers-in-training hailed poetry's power by inscribing the words of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe on the cover of black birthday binder: “A teacher who can arouse a feeling for one single good action, for one single good poem, accomplishes more than he who fills our memory with rows and rows of natural objects, classified with name and form.” Poetry and the arts complement, build on, and ultimately challenge mechanistic models of teaching and learning.



### Works Cited

- Blau, Sheridan. *The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003. Print.
- Brown, Richard. “The Teacher as Contemplative Observer.” *Educational Leadership* 56.4 (1998-1999): 70-73. Print.
- Burbank, Mary, Don Kauchak, and Alisa Bates. “Book clubs as Professional Development Opportunities for Preservice Teacher Candidates and Practicing Teachers: An Exploratory Study.” *The New Educator* 6.1 (2010): 56-73. Print.
- Cain, Mary Ann. “To Be Lived: Theorizing Influence in Creative Writing.” *College English* 71.3 (January 2009): 271-279. Print.
- Center for Courage and Renewal. Web. 10 August 2013 <<http://www.couragerenewal.org/>>.
- Clark, Ann-Marie. “When Privilege Meets Poetry: Using Poetry in the Process of Reflection.” *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* 20.2 (2009): 125-142. Print.
- Collins, Billy. “The Companionship of a Poem.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 23 Nov. 2001: B5. Print.
- Cowin, Kathleen. “Enhancing Student Teacher Reflective Practice through Poetry.” *New Educator* 8.14 (2012): 308-320. Print.
- Elbow, Peter and Mary Deane Sorcinelli. “The Faculty Writing Place: A Room of Our



- Own." *Change Magazine* (November/December 2006): 17-22. Print.
- Eva, Amy. "Take Two Poems and Call Me in the Morning (Or Why Teachers Need Poetry)." *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice* 22.2 (2009): 51-55. Print.
- Evans, Allen D. "Using Poetry to Encourage Passion, Courage, and Wisdom: Reflections from a Preservice Teacher Education Course." Oregon Association of Teacher Educators. Portland, Oregon. 25 February 2005. Conference Presentation.
- Eva-Wood, Amy. "Does Feeling Come First? How Poetry Can Help Readers Broaden Their Understanding of Cognition." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 51.7 (2008): 564-576. Print.
- Frost, Robert. *Robert Frost's Poems*. Introductions and comment by Louis Untermeyer. New York: St. Martin's Paperbacks. 2002. Print.
- Glück, Louise. *The House on Marshland*. New York: Ecco Press, 1975. Print.
- Gould, Christine J., Katzmarek, JoAnne M., and Patricia A. Shaw. "New Domains: Navigating the World of Academic Writing." *Phi Delta Kappan* 88.10 (2007): 776-780. Print.
- Harvey, Stephanie and Harvey Daniels. *Comprehension and Collaboration: Inquiry Circles in Action*. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 2009. Print.
- Heard, Georgia. *Poetry Lessons to Meet the Common Core Standards*. New York: Scholastic, 2013. Print.
- Hess, Frederick M. & Michael Petrilli. *No Child Left Behind: A Primer*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007. Print.
- Kooy, Mary (2006). "The Telling of Stories of Novice Teachers. Constructing Teacher Knowledge in Book Clubs." *Teaching and Teacher Education: An International Journal of Research and Studies* 22.6 (2006): 661-674. Print.
- Levertov, Denise. "The Secret." *O Taste and See: New Poems*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1964. Print.
- Liang, Lauren. "Scaffolding Middle School Students' Comprehension and Response to Narrative Text." Diss. University of Minnesota, 2005.
- MacKenzie, Sharon K. "Circles of (Im)perfection: A Story of Student Teachers' Poetic (Re)encounters with Self and Pedagogy." *International Journal of Education and the Arts* 12.7 (2011): 1-17. Print.
- Nobori, Mariko. "School Transformation Through Arts Integration." *Edutopia*. The George Lucas Educational Foundation, 29 August 2012. Web. 8 August 2013.
- Palmer, Parker. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1998. Print.
- . *A Hidden Wholeness*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2004. Print.
- "Reinvesting in Arts Education." *The Education Digest* 77.4 (December 2011): 29-35. Print.
- President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. "Re-Investing in Arts Education: Winning America's Future through Creative Schools." N.d. Web. 8 August 2013. <<http://www.pcah.gov/sites/default/files/photos/PCAH%20Report%20Summary%20and%20Recommendations.pdf>>
- Roethke, Theodore. *On Poetry and Craft: Selected Prose*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1965. Print.

- Rogoff, Barbara, Eugene Matusov, and Cynthia White. "Models of Teaching and Learning: Participation in a Community of Learners." *The Handbook of Education and Human Development*. Eds. David R. Olson & Nancy Torrance. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996. 388-414. Print.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke: A Translation From the German and Commentary by Robert Bly*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1981. Print.
- Rosenblatt, Louise. *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978. Print.
- . *Literature as Exploration*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1995. Print.
- Sanders, Shelly and B. Cole Bennett. "Gatekept: Inviting Creative Community Literacy." *Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning* 18 (2013): 70-77. Print.
- Short, Katherine. "Literacy As a Collaborative Experience: The Role of Intertextuality." Diss. Indiana University, 1984. Print.
- Stafford, William. *The Darkness Around Us Is Deep: Selected Poems by William Stafford*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994. Print.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1959. Print.
- Von Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. *Elective Infinities*. (1808). Book II. Chapter 7. Print.
- Vygotsky, Lev. *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934/1986. Print.

# **Stillness in the Composition Classroom: Insight, Incubation, Improvisation, Flow, and Meditation**

**Ryan Crawford and Andreas Willhoff**

## **Introduction**

Motivating students remains an elemental role of instruction. Many have “overlearned” the five-paragraph theme, grammatical rules, sentence and paragraphing exercises, citing sources, and other common forms of instruction. This overlearning presents challenges to the first-year composition instructor who often must disabuse students of what they have taken as gospel during secondary education, before introducing the idea that successful essays require students to engage in writing more creatively. But even the most carefully constructed curriculum or pedagogy must still be implemented in a classroom that contains a very unpredictable variable: the developing human brain. Technological advances in obtaining real-time imaging of the brain, when performing certain tasks, have led to more concrete information on some of its most mysterious functions. What implications might this research have for First-Year Composition (FYC)? To develop a more informed understanding of this question, and to initiate a search for concrete answers, we may need to look more closely at research and advancements in the field of cognitive neuroscience.

## **The Neuroscience of Creativity: Understanding Insight, Incubation, Improvisation, and Flow**

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) has proved especially useful in studying which parts of the brain “light up” during various mental activities. By mind mapping, scientists are beginning to understand the roles played not only by the left and right hemispheres, but the interplay of the various sections of these hemispheres during complex tasks. For instance, as Bowden, et al. put it, insight “is best described as impasse followed by restructuring. However, is reaching an impasse a necessary component of insight? Does one need to restructure a problem to reach an insight?” (323; also see Ohlssen).

Researchers have developed ways of artificially stimulating the brain in order to address these questions. Richard Chi and Allan Snyder of the University of Sydney conducted an experiment in 2011 replicating brain activity during moments of insight. They discovered that people having developed brain lesions in certain parts of the brain were able to avoid the “mental set effect” that often prevents fresh insight. In the healthy brain, these sets develop over time in order to increase the efficiency of repeated tasks. But this efficiency comes at a price, “Once we have learned to solve problems by one method, we often have difficulties in generating solutions involving a different kind of insight” (Chi and Snyder).

Most research on insight—despite its great complexity—has involved simple exercises called “insight problems,” usually word problems requiring “thinking outside the box,” or “matchstick problems” which require a single match to be moved in order to change a false equation into a true one (see Figure 1).

| False Statement | Corrected Statement |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| $III = IX - I$  | $III = IV - I$      |

Figure 1: A Matchstick Problem that Helps Measure Insight

By using transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS), activating the right hemisphere while inhibiting activity in the left, participants solved a series of matchstick problems, which require the exercise of insight. The participants showed a noticeable increase in success: “Only 20% of participants in the sham stimulation (control) group solved the [matchstick problems] by the end of 6 minutes whereas, in contrast, 60% of participants solved it in the L- R+ group.” Importantly, despite the ambiguity of the findings’ uses, Chi and Snyder proved the necessity of the right hemisphere to be most stimulated, establishing dominance: “[B]y diminishing left hemisphere dominance (either by L-, R+, or the combination of both), we might have increased our subjects’ tendency to examine a problem anew instead of through the mental templates of well-routinized representations and strategies.”

This result should sound a recognizable bell for writing instructors. Incubation has been proven to provide this same sort of “opening door to insight” in the brain. During a problem solving activity, whether it involves something as simple as moving matchsticks or as complex as writing a college paper, the sets of learned hypotheses in the left hemisphere of the brain may inhibit fresh insight. We lose time cycling through models students have learned (e.g., formulaic writing patterns), while often the solution is already there, waiting for a chance to make it through that left brain noise and be discovered.

To access this part of the mind requires a certain stillness, or “forgetting.” Margaret H. Freeman, co-director of Myrfield Institute for Cognition and the Arts, relates how this is achieved by poets who manage, by use of language, to create a sort of apartness or stillness, a “semblance of felt life” that she terms “poetic iconicity” (725). Reaching this semblance requires the same kind of forgetting that the matchstick problems encourage. As Freeman says: “. . . the conceptual reification that marks discursive language serves to block the underlying, preconscious experiences of the working mind” (724). The First-Year Composition student has no real need (nor, perhaps, the skill level necessary) to reach and maintain this complex level of disinhibition. But by finding his or her own kind of stillness—simply stepping away from a paper and working on something new, or participating in some form of meditation—the learned sets within the student’s mind may diminish in importance. Thus, the potential of new insight (which leads to motivation) increases significantly.

Chi’s and Snyder’s results back up decades of research on the hemispheric brain and how it relates to the creative process. The results are, however, inconclusive, as the exact balance of inhibition and stimulation remains at the end of their report a mystery. Chi and Snyder recognize that this relatively small experiment leaves much yet to question, concluding, “Further brain stimulation studies in combination with neurophysiological imaging and a variety of control tasks are needed to determine the specific mechanisms of actions leading to the effect and whether the pronounced cognitive enhancement we found is generalizable to other tasks.”

In order to provide a more developed understanding of exactly what is going on in

the brain during the process of insight, some researchers such as Charles Limb have—even before Chi's and Snyder's findings—constructed experiments that allow functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) paired with BOLD (Blood Oxygen Level Dependent) imaging during moments of improvisation. This process measures blood flow (increase/decrease) in different parts of the brain during different activities. Limb, an otolaryngology specialist, is also a practiced musician, serving on the faculty of the Peabody Conservatory of Music. His research, while examining creativity as a whole, has focused chiefly on music and music's influence on neural activity. His findings are among the most revealing to date on what exactly is happening in the brain during creative work.

Working with jazz musicians and freestyle rappers, Limb monitored blood flow in the brain during two sets of exercises. The first involved a piece memorized (“over-learned”) by the performer days before the experiment. The second exercise was improvisation based. The jazz pianist had to include particular chords as he improvised. The rapper had to incorporate certain words that Limb spoke into a microphone while the rapper was freestyling. During both exercises, the majority of brain activity was seated in the frontal lobe. Within this area is the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), believed to “be involved in self-monitoring,” and the medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC), “thought to be autobiographical or self-expressive” (“Brain on Improv”). The over-learned exercise revealed active use of the DLPFC, as the brain “remembered” the studied notes. During the improvisational exercise, however, the MPFC was significantly activated while the DLPFC was significantly deactivated. As Limb postulated during a TED talk in 2011,

We think that to be creative, you have to have this weird dissociation in your frontal lobe—one area turns on and a big area shuts off so that you're not inhibited, so that you're willing to make a stake, so that you're not constantly shutting down all of these new generative impulses (“Brain on Improv”).

To align these musical findings more with “expressive communication,” Limb then performed an exercise called “trading fours,” in which musicians trade off improvisational performance—in this case, piano jazz between Limb and a professional pianist. In these studies, he found that Broca's area, a part of the brain involved in communication, was activated during the “conversation” of trading fours. Limb believes this somewhat backs up the idea that music itself is a language, and therefore, has many correlations with language both written and spoken.

He furthers the correlation with language by conducting experiments similar to those with jazz pianists, but involving spoken word artists—in this case, freestyle rappers. Just as with the over-learned versus improvisational sets of the musicians, in every rapper studied, the MPFC was activated and the DLPFC deactivated. What is most interesting about the findings of these experiments is that the visual areas of the rappers' brains were also “lighting up” while their eyes remained closed. This occurred only during the freestyle section of the experiment. They were then, in some sense, “seeing” something as creation was taking place, perhaps watching insights stream past, choosing those they wanted to use and allowing the rest to plunge back into darkness.

A study published in *Neuron* in 2006 supports this theory:

. . . the role of self-related cortex is not in enabling perceptual awareness, but rather in allowing the individual to reflect upon sensory experiences, to judge their possible significance to the self, and, not less importantly for consciousness research, to allow the individual to report about the occurrence of his sensory experience to the outside world. (Goldberg, et al. 337)

More recently, Siyuan Liu and colleagues at the National Institutes of Health have conducted studies which confirm and expand upon Limb's findings. In a study comparing "freestyle (improvised) and conventional (rehearsed) performance," Liu and his team took fMRI scans similar to Limb's. In addition, they utilized spatial independent component analysis (sICA) to "remove imaging artifacts associated with connected speech or song." The results matched Limb's, displaying a significant increase in activity in the MPFC, as well as decreases in the DLPFC. Liu observed:

Improvised performance was characterized by significant increases in activity of the medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC), extending from the frontopolar cortex to the pre-supplementary motor area (pre-SMA), and decreases in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), extending from the orbital to superior regions. (Liu, et al.)

To take the research one step further, Liu also scanned the rappers over time. To investigate what changes might be taking place, changes in brain activity were recorded over eight measures. An examination of these findings shows clearly that at the start of improvisation more activity was present in the left hemisphere (associated with the over-learning hypotheses). By the end of the eight measures, the bulk of activity had shifted to the right hemisphere (associated with dreams and meditation). This shift suggests that the performing of a creative task can lead, over time, to a dream-like, meditative state, allowing for a break from self-monitoring and an increased chance of reaching more generative states of invention.

It may not at first be apparent how these studies apply to the composition instructor and the classroom. Jazz pianists and practiced freestylers are, if they are any good, highly trained, while the average FYC student is, at best, a journeyman in the craft of writing. But it is still training that provides the bridge between these disparate groups. Improvisation does not necessarily depend on a high level of skill, but it does require a certain amount of input. The amount of input (preparation) invariably affects the quality of the improvisational act, be it playing a piano or writing a paper. What tapping into the improvisatory parts of the brain could achieve, over time and with much practice, is an internalization of a student's metalanguage, automatically steering the student away from unproductive or over-learned practices and leading her, eventually, to richer insight generating in the early stages of the writing process, and more enjoyment (and therefore motivation) throughout the entire process.

Limb's and Liu's research backs up Graham Wallas's theory of generative structure in his classic text *The Art of Thought*. Considered the seminal text on the creative process, it first laid out what has become a strong support for writing theory. According to Wallas, there are four stages of creation. The first, preparation, involves the absorption of material. Problems revealed within this period of absorption may be solved during the second stage, incubation, during which connections are made and strengthened. The third stage,

illumination, involves the ordering of these connections and the generation of insight. Verification, the final stage, tests the validity of this insight within the context of the medium in which they are presented.

This process is indeed occurring with each individual (jazz pianist and rapper) under study, but so rapidly that they all appear to take place simultaneously. Improvisation can be seen, then, as a rapid succession of insights, achieved and ordered (verified) so quickly they seem to an observer to course effortlessly forth, as if on tap. For the FYC student, this process would, of course, be significantly slower. But by introducing the process early and practicing it often, a transfer may carry into further writing activities and facilitate communication beyond the bounds of the classroom, rendering an otherwise rote responder an enthusiastic generator of insight.

The process echoes numerous psychological studies conducted with the same goals in mind—in particular those of Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi, known for his theory of “flow.” Csíkszentmihályi has published much on this process, describing it in terms very similar to the work of Wallas, Limb, and Liu. His definition of flow is, as he explains it in an online interview,

. . . being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost (Geirland).

The fMRI scans of Limb and Liu, revealing areas of the frontal lobe “lit up” during creation, are visual representations of this flow, images giving shape and definition to what before was only theory. Csíkszentmihályi's theory has been applied to many fields, including alternative education systems like Waldorf (which involves a music-based curriculum) and Montessori, both of which support lengthy “free-form” class sessions to encourage the sort of deep absorption they believe necessary for a holistic understanding (read “incubation and insight”) of particular problems and the engendering of a student's motivation to learn curricular material.

Again, there is a very great divide between the skill level of a beginning piano student (in keeping with Limb's research subject) and a highly trained jazz pianist. The same goes for an FYC student and, say, a novelist like Günter Grass, or an essayist like Joan Didion. Csíkszentmihályi addresses this divide: “Flow . . . happens when a person's skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable” (*Finding Flow* 30). This balance, he says, is fragile. “If challenges are too high one gets frustrated, then worried, and eventually anxious. If challenges are too low relative to one's skills one gets relaxed, then bored. If both challenges and skills are perceived to be low, one gets empathetic” (30). This issue of challenge is of particular importance.

To a large extent it is not the lack of challenge in the FYC classroom that leads to stale or inadequate papers, but the wrong kind of challenge (often inflexible). The challenge may be one that attracts little or nothing from the student's personal perceptions—such as a topic that an instructor chooses for the student—resulting in an absence of interest. Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi argue that when flow is reached, there is an intrinsic motivation (89). There must, however, first be a problem or assignment flexible enough to

allow for genuine interest if this flow is to be reached, allowances for what Csíkszentmihályi calls “attentional resources and biases” (89). It might be helpful, then, to think of the requirements of reaching flow (in a composition classroom) as quadrants of a whole: skill level, challenge, *interest*, and *time* must all be matched.

Csíkszentmihályi has observed that those who “find” flow often achieve a great amount of happiness. The psychology behind happiness and its link with creativity is linked with evolution. We are biologically “rewarded” (in the form of positive feeling) for discovering new or novel solutions to problems. This feeling, or affect, encourages us to continue our search for these novel ideas. This is why, as Csíkszentmihályi said during a 2004 TED talk, people with creative careers tend to be happier. While others repeat the same basic patterns on a daily basis, these creative individuals are making discoveries regularly, setting off whatever combination of chemicals that lead to that “rewarding” feeling, and, in the process, encouraging further insight.

With this biological process in mind, we may more easily answer the question of how to motivate the FYC student. To start, we can create and implement exercises and assignments which allow to the greatest extent possible room for discovery. And that requires, among other things, that we focus more on the second stage of Wallas’s model: incubation.

### **Application in the FYC Classroom: Meditation as Incubation**

Limb’s and Liu’s research provides a definite physiological basis to once- mysterious processes, a foundation upon which, one hopes, further research will be conducted and applied to a variety of fields. A fascinating correlation to this research is the increasing number of studies conducted on meditation, utilizing the same equipment for brain imaging that Limb and Liu deployed.

Internationally, and for several years now, researchers have been using fMRI to scan the brains of monks during moments of intense meditation. During a 2003 study at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, researchers reported that while subjects were in a meditative state,

The fMRI images show a significant increase in the activity of the prefrontal cortex (gyrus frontalis medius, right side, Brodmann area) . . . . Simultaneously . . . significantly less activity was found in two other areas: the gyrus occipitalis superior and the anterior singulate...[which] is associated with conscious activities that are directed by the will. (Ritskes, et. al. 87-88)

The study discusses the role of the gyrus frontalis medius in relation to previous research:<sup>1</sup>

. . . based on studies of people with frontal lobe lesions [the same impetus for Chi and Snyder’s research] . . . increased activity in [the gyrus frontalis medius] is thought to be associated with enhanced insights and attentiveness, heightened interests, sharper mental focusing, and deepened emotional resonances. (Ritskes, et al. 89)

These areas of the brain are within the prefrontal cortex, closely linked with the MPFC.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Austin, J.H., *Zen and the Brain*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.



The brain images from the research resemble those scans taken from Limb's and Liu's studies. Brian Knutson, a neuroeconomist at Stanford University, conducted a similar experiment targeted towards a particular stage of meditation: focused compassion. He found the MPFC—the exact area activated during Limb's scans of improvisations—showed a noticeable increase in activity, as did the striatum, or reward center, of the brain (see May, *San Francisco Chronicle*).

The results of these studies on meditation offer many parallels to long-standing theories of the writing process. Meditation has been proven useful not only in increasing the overall well-being of participants but also in leading to greater insight. Some have already implemented meditation in writing classrooms, with success, cognizant, perhaps, that it is another form—merely a more conscious and focused form—of incubation.<sup>2</sup>

In the rush of a FYC semester, incubation is often overlooked or only briefly mentioned to students who, without a clear idea of what the instructor means or perhaps perceiving it as an unnecessary (because ungraded) part of the curriculum, dismiss it. While it is true that incubation often occurs whether students know it or not (as they clean their room or take a drive to visit their parents, for example) the benefits may increase when a certain “focus” is retained. In other words, planning incubation and “experiencing” it might lead, with practice, to more frequent and richer moments of insight.

Often cited, James Moffett suggests that students should be coached to meditate during the writing process in order to allow a more natural affect to imbue their writing. As Moffett writes:

All this traditional school and college writing only *looks* mature because it is laced with highly abstract generalizations, quotations from the greats, current formulations of issues, and other ideas received from books or teachers. Such haste to score, to make a quick intellectual killing, merely retards learning, because those writers have not worked up those generalizations themselves. (233)

Moffett goes on to suggest that what is lacking is adequate “expiation” during the drafting process. Students, he says, need more “small-group interaction” that would allow “task talk, improvisation, and topic discussion” (233).

Emphasis must be held on self-reflection in the composition classroom, not only to improve the quality of student work, but to foster motivation. Moffett notes that the practice needed for any novice to become a better writer (and improviser) can more effectively be achieved by allowing students to locate on their own a personal space in which writing becomes self-expression instead of rote reporting: “If practiced as real authoring, not disguised playback, writing *discovers* as much as it communicates” (234). This can be achieved by consistently encouraging students to reflect not only on what they are writing but why they are writing it, as well as incorporating as much as possible the silent moments necessary for that reflection to take place.

Whether they realize it or not, most writing instructors already do incorporate silence as part of their pedagogy. Charles Suhor states, “Teachers at all levels allow silent time for reading . . . . Silence is at a premium during in-class writing time” (24). Suhor is

---

<sup>2</sup> Editors' note: For example, see Wenger, Christy I. “Writing Yogis: Breathing Our Way to Mindfulness and Balance.” *JAEPL* 18 (Winter 2012-2013): 24-39.

referring to the humanities classrooms of secondary institutions, but his message applies to writing classrooms in general. He mentions silences during drafting, during “good class discussion,” and in peer editing, all of which apply to the FYC classroom. Suhor suggests various ways of integrating the silence that is necessary to generate students’ insight. He references Moffett and his advocacy of nonsectarian meditation in the classroom, echoing that similar techniques have been utilized in the writing classroom for years with positive results, despite the fact that a certain amount of controversy from outside institutions prevented a wider spread of use because some institutions have “equated it with hypnosis, mind control, and New Age religion” (25). Both Moffett and Suhor argue the insignificance of these potential dangers in comparison to the necessity of stillness, not only in the classroom but in the student’s life outside of the classroom.

Treating a research paper as an occasion for secular meditation is not counterintuitive. Meditation can, in fact, establish firmly in the student’s mind exactly how she feels about the subject or question, leading to a well-developed thesis before looking at page one of research. If sustained long enough, meditation can also lead to the kind of incubation that helps a student arrive at fresh insight. Moffett posits meditation in the writing classroom including the use of mantras similar to the “Jesus prayer of the heart.” Because the mind can be difficult to quiet, the repetition of a single word or phrase can lead, it is believed, to a state of transcendence, a “one-pointed” consciousness (238).

One of the authors of this essay has recently found success in his FYC classroom using guided mediation, with student-chosen theses as “mantras,” preceding freewriting exercises. After a short talk on connotations surrounding meditation, to dispel the discomfort that often accompanies the notion of meditation as New-Age nonsense, students were encouraged to close their eyes and focus on a particular image, then repeat their thesis mentally with every slow inhalation and exhalation of breath. After two minutes, they were to begin writing without pausing or editing. Following this activity, several students reported, unprompted, reaching insight (most often phrased as an “a-ha moment,” a “different angle,” or a “surprising turn”) that led to greater interest in their particular project (and, subjectively, to a more interesting paper). Another activity which met with similar success was an improvisational freewriting exercise modeled on Limb’s fMRI freestyle rap study. Preceding the activity, students were told that following meditation they would hear a series of words, one every thirty seconds. Each word, or an association elicited from that word, was to be incorporated into their freewriting (pausing and editing discouraged). Once again, students were asked to focus on a particular image and mentally chant their thesis mantra. Again, students reported experiencing insight and, later, a greater interest in the writing of their essay.

## **Conclusion**

This essay suggests that a better understanding of the human brain’s functions could productively lead to a partnership between cognitive neuroscience and composition studies, particularly in the use of fMRI to study the relationship between meditation activities and writing upon FYC students.

Regardless of particular pedagogical and personal beliefs, instructors should at the very least take a closer look at the role meditation can play, and how much emphasis we

place on it while teaching the process of writing. Students' experiences in our classrooms become the tools they carry with them when they leave, fundamentally shaping their work in subsequent classes and, to some extent, their interaction with the world at large. As communication becomes ever more complex, curricula designed to match this complexity will benefit the student the most. As skilled labor is increasingly outsourced, the majority of professional jobs are now based on forming well-considered ideas. Paradoxically, acquainting students with stillness and with accessible methods of meditation will prove most useful to them in preparation for a world that demands them to reach insight quickly and consistently, to think on their feet, and to take ideas off the top of their heads.



### Works Cited

- Austin, J.H. *Zen and the Brain*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988. Print.
- Bowden, Edward M., M. Jung-Beeman, J. Fleck, and John Kounios. "New Approaches to Demystifying Insight." *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences*. 9.7 (2005): 323-328. Print.
- Chi, R.P., and A.W. Snyder. "Facilitate Insight by Non-Invasive Brain Stimulation." *PLOSone*. 6.2. (2011): n. pag. Web. 25 October 2012.
- Csikszentmihály, Mihaly. *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*. New York: Harper Collins. 1997. Print.
- . (2004, February). Flow, the Secret to Happiness. [Video file]. Web. 7 September 2013. Retrieved from <[www.ted.com/talks/mihaly\\_csikszentmihaly\\_on\\_flow.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihaly_on_flow.html)>.
- Freeman, Margaret H. "The Aesthetics of Human Experience: Minding, Metaphor, and Icon in Poetic Expression." *Poetics Today*. Volume 32.4 (2011): 717-752. Print.
- Gierland, John. "Go With the Flow." *Wired Magazine*. 4.9. New York: Conde Nast, September 1996: Print.
- Goldberg, Ilan I., Michal Harel, and Rafael Malach. "When the Brain Loses Its Self: Prefrontal Inactivation during Sensorimotor Processing" *Neuron*. 50.2 (2006): 329-339. Print.
- Limb, Charles J., and Allen R. Braun. "Neural Substrates of Spontaneous Musical Performance: A Study of Jazz Improvisation." *PLOSone*. 3.2. (2008): n. pag. Web. 30 October 2012.
- Limb, Charles. (2010, November). "Your Brain on Improv" [Video file]. Web. 7 September 2013. <[www.ted.com/talks/charles\\_limb\\_your\\_brain\\_on\\_improv.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/charles_limb_your_brain_on_improv.html)>
- Liu, Siyan, Ho Ming Chow, Yisheng Xu, Michael G. Erkinen, Katherine E. Swett, Michael W. Eagle, Daniel A. Rizik-Baer, and Allen R. Braun. "Neural Correlates of Lyrical Improvisation: An fMRI Study of Freestyle Rap." *Scientific Reports*. (2012) n. pag. Web. 25 November 2012.
- May, Meredith. "Stanford Studies Monks' Meditation, Compassion." *San Francisco Chronicle*. 8 July 2012. Print.
- Moffett, James., "Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation." *College English*. 44.3 (1982): 231-246. Print.
- Nakamura, Jeanne, and Mihaly Csikszentmihály. "The Concept of Flow." *Handbook of Positive Psychology*. Snyder, CR, and S. Lopez (Eds.). New York: Oxford University

Press, 2005. 89-105. Print.

Ohlsson, Stellen. "Information-processing Explanations of Insight and Related Phenomena." Ed. M. Keane and K. Gilhooly. *Advances in the Psychology of Thinking*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992. 1-44. Print.

Ritskes, Rients, Merel Ritskes-Hoitinga, Hans Stødkilde-Jørgensen, Klaus Bærentsen, and Tue Hartman. "MRI Scanning during Zen Meditation: The Picture of Enlightenment." *Constructivism in the Human Sciences*. 8.1 (2003): 85-89. Print.

Suhor, Charles. "Surprised by Bird, Bard, and Bach: Language, Silence, and Transcendence." *The English Journal*. 80.2 (1991): 21-26. Print.

Wallas, Graham. *The Art of Thought*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1926. Print.

## Fear Not the Trunchbull: How Teaching from a Humorous Outlook Supports Transformative Learning

Kathleen J. Cassity

*"Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else."*

(Gradgrind in Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*)

In 1996 the film version of Roald Dahl's novel *Matilda*, the compassionate, creative, (and thus, necessarily renegade) teacher Miss Honey violates the precepts of her rule-bound school, Crunchem Hall, by lining the classroom walls with her students' artwork. Viewers know this move will surely enrage Crunchem Hall's sadistic and pedophobic principal, dubbed "The Trunchbull." Fortunately, Miss Honey and her co-conspiring students, all on perpetual lookout, have developed an emergency plan to be deployed in the event of unannounced administrator visits. Whenever the Trunchbull is headed their way, Miss Honey and the children pull down an elaborate system of wall screens that covers all evidence of creativity, morphing the previously joyous and colorful classroom into the dull and dreary space deemed "appropriate" for learning. To add a final touch, Miss Honey erects a sign that declares, "If you are having fun—YOU ARE NOT LEARNING!"

Unfortunately, in many educational quarters this scene is only slightly satirical. This "No Child Left Behind" era emphasizes standardization, "academic rigor," and high-stakes testing. Dickens' Gradgrind—the fictional 19<sup>th</sup>-century headmaster who values only facts and sees no pleasure in learning—has escaped the 19<sup>th</sup> century, morphing into Roald Dahl's Trunchbull. Yet he is anything but a fictional force. Take, for instance, this nonfictional critique by Zuhal Okan: "One unforeseen danger of adapting . . . technology into education so enthusiastically is that learning [might be] seen as fun" (Okan 258).

Even those of us value creative expression and what feminist philosopher Nel Noddings calls "happiness in education" can fall prey to apparently prevalent beliefs: learning must be uncomfortable; intellectual development and leisure are distinct opposites. Even in a modestly enjoyable classroom, the time comes when we must get down to business—and of course, those who are getting down to business (or busy-ness) are not usually laughing. Indeed, as philosopher John Morreall points out, all too often we all were taught—whether explicitly or simply by example—that humor was "frivolous," something "that pulled us away from what is important. We were in school . . . to 'do our work,' and doing one's schoolwork was part of the larger scheme in which we were to later 'do our work' in the factory, office, home, or wherever we found ourselves"; consequently, we learned that "life is fundamentally a serious business" (88-89).

In contrast with this "serious outlook," Morreall describes the "humorous outlook"—a world view based on "mental flexibility [that] brings an openness to experience," along with a sense of one's own place in the relative scheme of things that keeps one "more humble in moments of success, less defeated in times of trouble, and in general, more

accepting” (128). Teachers, says Morreall, never teach from a neutral viewpoint but are always conveying their own world view—whether serious or humorous—to their students, whether or not they consciously intend to do so: “A teacher is not someone who merely transmits a certain body of facts to a group of students. Like it or not, a teacher projects . . . a good deal of his or her view of the world” (97).

To teach from the humorous outlook does not necessarily mean we must become classroom stand-up comics, display endless streams of funny You Tube videos and Google images, or continually pepper our lectures with good jokes (though all of those might be valid ways to introduce humor into the classroom). Nor is this article intended to be a “how-to” guide for how to make lesson plans funnier. Instead, I argue here for teaching from Morreall’s “humorous outlook”—that is to say, from a standpoint in which humor is welcome, in an environment characterized by mental flexibility, openness, and what Morreall refers to as an awareness and delight in incongruity (97). This means treating students not as “mere receivers of prepackaged information, but as curious, playful, creative human beings. . . . Such a teacher will no longer be able to present his or her material as neat chunks of knowledge which can be understood in only one way” (98). Morrell acknowledges that to teach in this manner may require “more effort on the part of the teacher; exercising control in such a multidimensional relationship . . . is more difficult than in a one-dimensional relationship” (98). Yet, insists Morreall, “The rewards of this kind of teaching, for both student and teacher, are incomparably greater” (98).

For those of us who identify as critical educators, Morreall’s concept may not sound like news since it evokes many of the same principles of dialogical education set forth by, among others, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, bell hooks, and others. If we believe education should go beyond “teaching to the test,” helping learners live more meaningful and civically engaged lives, and working toward Giroux’s vision of a “radical democracy,” we should consider the potential resonances between the humorous outlook and critical pedagogy, as well as the concept of *transformative learning*—well articulated by Jack Mezirow, Professor Emeritus of Adult Education at Teachers College of Columbia University. In this essay, I will explore Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning, discussing the psychological/cognitive shifts that such learning requires. I will then touch briefly on the work of neurobiological psychologists Edward Taylor and Joseph LeDoux regarding how positive emotions support cognitive development, before turning to Morreall’s taxonomy of laughter. Considering these theories together does much to illuminate what happens when we learn in a transformative way, and why teaching from a “humorous outlook” supports this kind of learning.

In an often-quoted passage, Paulo Freire claims,

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (14)

Though I generally agree, I would suggest that Freire presents something of a false dichotomy by positing education as *either* facilitating conformity *or* “becom[ing] the

practice of freedom.” Mezirow—though he likewise posits the need for critical education that leads the learner to question current hegemonies—suggests that it is possible to engage both dimensions simultaneously. What Mezirow calls “transformative learning” does not *preclude* approaches that prioritize skill development, such as memorizing facts and applying formulas—what Freire calls “banking methods” of education. Instead, says Mezirow, one may develop skills *and* at the same time move beyond factual acquisition to develop an increased critical consciousness. The learner who does so transforms not only his or her own understanding of the world, but is now moving toward the possibility of making meaningful changes in our society as well. This deeper form of learning, however, does not come about automatically or easily, as it often requires the learner to shift her “frame of reference”—a process that is often difficult.

Before discussing in detail what it means to shift one’s “frame of reference,” it is important to discuss how Mezirow conceptualizes the purpose of education such that “education as the practice of freedom” can co-exist with factual acquisition and even “knowledge of the logic of the present system.” Mezirow draws offers a four-part taxonomy of learning modes based on Habermas: instrumental, impressionistic, normative, and communicative. Instrumental learning is, as its name suggests, learning that “enhance[s] efficacy in improving performance” (6). The impressionistic mode involves learning how to “enhance one’s impression on others”—what we might think of as social adjustment in lay terms—while normative learning is “oriented to common values,” or the cultural transmission of beliefs from one generation to the next (6). The fourth mode, communicative learning, is the mode that fosters critical thinking. Here Mezirow departs from Freire to point out that without the prior three modes in place, critical thinking is unlikely to develop. In short, before transformative learning can become possible, learners first need to understand what it is that needs to be transformed, *and* they need to have developed the necessary instrumental, impressionistic, and normative skills to do so.

While transformative learning does not necessarily need to conflict with the first three modes, it *requires* the communicative mode which is, first, collaborative—requiring “at least two persons striving to reach an understanding of the meaning of an interpretation” (6). Second, it is “critically reflective,” requiring participants to question “assumptions underlying intentions, values, beliefs, and feelings” (6). The goal, according to Mezirow, is to

. . . foster critically reflective thought, imaginative problem posing, and discourse [that] is learner-centered, participatory, and interactive . . . Instructional materials reflect the real-life experiences of the learners. . . . Learning takes place through discovery and the imaginative use of metaphors . . . . The educator functions as a facilitator and provocateur . . . [who] encourages learners to . . . help each other learn. (11)

Here Mezirow echoes both Freirean critical pedagogy and the process-writing pedagogy of such well-known figures in composition studies as Peter Elbow, the late Donald Murray, Ken Macrorie, and others—an approach that, despite two decades of critique, many of us who teach writing still know to be effective.

Central to my argument is the belief that meaningful education should do more than merely train learners in basic skills in order to prepare them for the work force. Clearly,

helping learners to develop marketable skills and preparing the next generation for an economically self-responsible adulthood is one of the most crucial purposes of education. Yet a true education can—and should—do so much more than simply train people to perform jobs. As Giroux puts it, a critical education should empower learners “to locate themselves and others in histories that mobilize rather than destroy their hopes for the future” (161).

Yet too often, discussions of educational issues imply that practical and transformative learning are opposites—as if someone well-grounded in the supposedly “useless” humanities will actually *fail* to become skilled and employable. Once again Mezirow’s framework is useful, as he points out that transformative learning does not preclude the development of skills such as memorizing facts and applying formulas. A learner may do all that *and* simultaneously move beyond factual acquisition, to develop attributes that not only serve economic production, but also enable the learner to experience a rich, fully human, socially engaged life. The key to such transformative learning, says Mezirow, lies in shifting the learner’s “frame of reference”—not necessarily an easy process, as we shall soon see.

Mezirow conceptualizes our frames of references as comprised of two components: *habits of mind*, the “broad, abstract, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by assumptions that constitute a set of codes,” and *points of view*, which are the concrete articulations of those underlying assumptions in daily life (6). To illustrate this distinction, Mezirow uses the example of ethnocentrism. The assumption that one’s own culture is superior to others’ is an abstract orientation influenced by multiple factors—“cultural, social, educational, economic, political, or psychological”—stemming from a set of extremely durable underlying beliefs that enable such individuals to hold negative “points of view” regarding those they perceive as different from themselves (6). To change these more deeply seated “habits of mind,” one must engage in “critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs . . . or points of view are based”—an uncomfortable and often traumatic process, rarely taken up by choice (7). Changing one’s deeply seated habits of mind rarely occurs in the absence of triggering events, especially for those who subscribe to what Sharon Crowley calls a “densely articulated belief system” whose disarticulation “might require abandonment of an entire ideology . . . such a sweeping change entails emotional upheaval and changes in identities” (79).

“Points of view,” meanwhile, exist at the surface level and may actually *appear* to alter in response to a particular experience. For example, an ethnocentric person may have a pleasant encounter with someone normally deemed “other” and decide she likes that individual anyway. Yet if the ethnocentric person fails to reflect critically on her deeper underlying assumptions—those “habits of mind”—she may simply make selective allowances for liking that specific individual while still clinging to the general underlying belief that members of this “Other” group are undesirable. In other words, while the “point of view” may have changed, the “habits of mind”—and, thus, the frame of reference—have not. According to Mezirow, to change one’s “habits of mind” requires a more significant “epochal transformation” that is “less common and more difficult,” often occurring only in response to trauma—if at all (7). This does not mean that shifting a frame of reference is impossible. After all, the genre of memoir is replete with conversion narratives. But for the critical educator, it is vital to remember that students may sometimes be faced with



the possibility of undergoing an “epochal transformation” that feels disconcerting and may generate a range of negative emotions—and, as we shall now see, neurobiological psychologists LeDoux and Taylor have demonstrated that in the presence of negative emotions, learning is diminished (233). Inversely, then, it would stand to reason that in the presence of positive emotions, learning is enhanced.

Edward M. Taylor, expanding on Mezirow’s work, has written extensively about the relationship between affect and cognition in learning; according to Taylor, Mezirow pays insufficient attention to the role of the affective dimension in transformative learning. Learning, Taylor says, is “not just rationally and consciously driven but incorporates a variety of extrarational and nonconscious ways of knowing for revising meaning structures” (221). He points out that neurobiology has historically understood the relationship between cognition and emotion, with emotions relegated to the “lower-order” limbic system, and “higher-order” operational systems (e.g., rational thought) located in the neocortex. More recent neurobiological research—such as the work of Joseph LeDoux—“reveals a more integrated relationship between the physiological processes of cognition and emotion” (222). While the frontal lobes are essential for higher-order mental processes and the amygdala plays a key role in regulating emotional states, LeDoux’s work demonstrates that emotions and cognition are intertwined rather than separated in our physical brains. Thus, asserts Taylor, they cannot be separated in a learning situation either—which explains why it is the case that “without emotions, rationality cannot work” (223).

Taylor then cites brain imaging studies using positron emission technology to demonstrate that blood flow to the frontal lobes decreases when negative emotions are aroused and increases in the presence of positive emotions (33). Thus, instructors who attend to learners’ emotional states are neither minimizing rationality nor short-circuiting critical thinking. As Taylor states, “In the practice of fostering transformative learning, rational discourse has to include the discussion and exploration of feelings in concert with decision-making” (233). In order to maximize learning—particularly when potential shifts in frames of reference may be unsettling to the learner—Taylor asserts: “It is essential to establish a positive classroom environment” (233). Then, as Taylor elaborates,

Promoting emotional intelligence in the practice of fostering transformative learning includes continuing some of the same methods that Mezirow has outlined but, in addition, focuses more attention on developing emotional self-awareness . . . and the building of trusting relationships. These outcomes rely on metacognitive activities that promote emotional expression and exploration through collaborative learning, conflict management, developing multiple perspectives, role-playing and peer networks . . . . In the practice of fostering transformative learning, rational discourse has to include the discussion and exploration of feelings in concert with decision-making. (233)

Often, those instructors who argue for the importance of attending to learners’ emotions are accused of being “touchy-feely,” excessively individualistic, anti-intellectual, or even “evangelical” (see, as one example, Hashimoto’s critique of composition’s evangelical attitude toward the concept of voice). But such critiques are misguided, since neurobiological research clearly demonstrates that both attention to learners’ emotional responses and the maintenance of a positive classroom environment are crucial for supporting transformative learning.

Though a positive classroom environment would presumably include humor, the suspicion of “fun” that Miss Honey feels obligated to display conspicuously whenever Trunchbull visits the classroom still pervades much contemporary discourse regarding education. We assume that “fun” (associated with laughter), must be the opposite of “learning.” Morreall points out that this cultural bias against pleasure is hardly limited to educational settings, and that this bias has multiple rather than singular roots. One easily identifiable “culprit” might be the fact that higher education in western cultures traces its origins to the model of the medieval monastery with pleasure forgone in favor of asceticism.

But the association of learning and meaning-making with “suffering” was hardly eradicated by the Protestant Reformation. Max Weber points out that “The earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life, is above all completely devoid of any eudaemonistic, not to say hedonistic, admixture” (353). Nor are dour interpretations of Christianity solely to blame; a longstanding cultural suspicion of enjoyment and laughter can also be traced through the classical tradition. Aristotle, for instance, claimed that “Most people delight jesting more than they should”—and “those who carry humor to excess are thought to be vulgar buffoons” (para. 8). In Plato’s *Republic*, one of the dialogues addresses whether or not it is appropriate for “persons of worth, even if only mortal men,” to be “represented as overcome by laughter,” let alone “such a representation of the gods be allowed.” The longstanding binary between tragedy/ comedy has always privileged the tragic as more culturally valuable and morally instructive. That bias continues today, with critical suspicion of “happy endings.” Comic films rarely win Oscars, for instance. Critical assumptions persist that comic literature is necessarily “lesser” than “serious” literature, and notions of academic “rigor” imply that purposeful activity such as learning necessitates suffering.

Morreall further points out that some of this cultural discomfort with humor may result from the longstanding assumption—in philosophy as well as other disciplines—that all laughter “is an expression of a person’s feelings of superiority over other people” (4). Morreall calls this the “superiority theory,” which once again stretches back to Aristotle (5-6).

These assumptions remained viable throughout multiple epochs of western intellectual history. Thomas Hobbes believed that humor results from “a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others” (46). Even in the twentieth century, classics professor Albert Rapp claimed *all* laughter develops from “the roar of triumph in an ancient jungle duel” (22), while biologist Konrad Lorenz concluded that laughter is a “controlled form of aggression” (293).

Certainly much humor does derive from a sense of superiority. Such forms of humor are ethically problematic in unequal power situations, especially when the entity with more power is ridiculing the entity with less. Given the power differentials that characterize the teaching situation as well as diversity among the learners themselves, then, humor based on an in-group’s sense of superiority over an out-group should have no place in a classroom—though as numerous writers have pointed out, such humor may be ethically defensible when the power differential is reversed. As Molly Ivins put it so well, “Satire is traditionally the weapon of the powerless against the powerful. . . . When satire is aimed

at the powerless, it is not only cruel—it's vulgar" (see Green, "Mouth of Texas").

But as Morreall goes on to point out, the superiority theory of humor turns out to be only one among many paradigms for understanding humor, and a limited one at that. Enlightenment thinkers, for instance, challenged the longstanding assumption that humor always derives from superiority. Morreall recounts Voltaire's claim that "Laughter *always* arises from a gaiety of disposition, absolutely incompatible with contempt and indignation" (8). He credits Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Idea* with the "incongruity theory," which posits that "[t]he cause of laughter *in every case* is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation" (95). Pascal held a similar conception, stating, "Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees" (72). Meanwhile, evolutionary scientists such as Herbert Spencer favored a physiological explanation: "... passing a certain pitch habitually vents itself in bodily action" (1)—and Freud famously claimed that jokes release repressed sexual and/or hostile feelings in a psychological mechanism similar to dreaming (*Jokes*).

While each of these theories may seem applicable in certain situations, Morreall points out that none of them can provide an over-arching theory of all humor. While I am less convinced than Morreall that such a totalizing theory is even necessary, I can nevertheless appreciate the definition he provides: "Laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift" (39). One source of laughter, for instance, is the laughter of identification—laughing at a situation because "I've been there" or "I can relate to that." In this case, the "pleasant shift" would be the discovery that one is not alone in an experience or viewpoint after all. This use of humor can be especially helpful in classroom situations.<sup>1</sup>

Morreall's recognition of the "pleasant psychological shift" is intriguing to ponder in light of Mezirow's assertion that transformative learning requires a "shifted frame of reference" which learners often resist because it feels anything but pleasant. Consider Taylor's point next—supported by LeDoux's research—that learning is enhanced in the presence of positive emotions. When changing one's underlying habits of mind often feels traumatic, might that shift be rendered less difficult in the presence of humor?

Clearly, key principles must be in place to distinguish "learning with humor" from light entertainment without educational purpose. And humor in educational settings needs to be approached with care, since most laughter based on superiority is clearly inappropriate (though students can often appreciate teacher self-deprecation, if not overdone—noting that this represents a reversal of the power differential). Given these caveats, however, I would posit that humor—especially when it gives the message to learners that "you are

<sup>1</sup> As one example, when I teach Shakespeare in a sophomore-level introductory literature class, students often begin groaning even on the first day of class when they see Shakespeare on the syllabus. A clip from the British comedy series *Blackadder*, available on YouTube, features Rowan Atkinson as the time-traveling butler Blackadder and Colin Firth playing Shakespeare. After accepting Shakespeare's autograph, Blackadder delivers Shakespeare a punch, announcing, "THAT is for every schoolboy and schoolgirl for the next four hundred years; do you have any idea how much suffering you are going to cause?" Though I can only provide anecdotal rather than statistical evidence, I have clearly found that students engage in less observable resistance after we realize, in a humorous way, that many or most readers struggle with Shakespeare. They are not struggling because they are "stupid"—most important, they are not alone in the struggle.

not alone”—may assist transformative learning by making the necessary cognitive shifts less threatening.

Yet another point of resistance to teaching from the “humorous outlook” is the frequent call for more “rigor” in academia. Here I agree with some of what is intended by the call. I do not believe that curriculum should be “dumbed down” or that educators should blandly accept mediocre performance from students. But from the perspective of the humorous outlook, it is problematic to use the term “rigor” to define the pursuit of excellence and the mastery of difficult material. Consider what “rigor” means; it derives from the Latin “*rig(ēre)*,” meaning “to be stiff” (an association which brings to mind the term *rigor mortis*). Definitions include:

1. strictness, severity, or harshness, as in dealing with people;
2. the full or extreme severity of laws, rules, etc.;
3. severity of living conditions; hardship; austerity;
4. a severe or harsh act, circumstance, etc.”; “obsolete rigidity” . . . “*the inertia assumed by some plants in conditions unfavorable to growth*”; “*rigidity or torpor of organs or tissue that prevents response to stimuli*”  
(WED; emphasis mine)

By examining this cluster of definitions, it would appear that encouraging “rigor” in a classroom might be the worst possible idea. If we make the “organs or tissue” in living organisms so “stiff” that they are incapable of responding to stimuli, and if we encourage conditions that are “unfavorable to growth,” just how is learning supposed to happen?

To argue against “rigor” as a term, however, is hardly an argument against holding high standards and expectations. On the contrary, Mezirow’s framework suggests that in order for transformative learning to take place, we need to set our standards higher than ever. We need to help learners reach *beyond* the expectations inherent in instrumental/ impressionistic/ normative learning, stretch *beyond* the predictable, and include the less easily measurable elements of communicative learning as well.

However, I would argue that we need to call “high standards” by another name. Here the term “vigor” comes to mind as a possible alternative: “an active strength or force; healthy physical or mental energy or power; vitality; energetic activity; intensity: force of healthy growth in any living matter or organism” (WED).<sup>2</sup> I would suggest that learning which emphasizes energy, vitality and intensity is far more likely to become transformative than learning under “conditions unfavorable to growth,” or “rigidity that prevents response to stimuli.”

“If we are genuinely interested not just in the transmission of facts and skills, but in the education of full human beings,” says Morreall, “we have no choice but to integrate humor into the learning experience” (98). This assertion resonates with Taylor’s findings that fostering an enjoyable learning environment characterized by positive emotions does *not* muffle critical thought but actually helps to create the conditions in which critical thinking—and, by extension, transformative learning—are likely to flourish.

<sup>2</sup> While some may point out that the term “vigor” has typically been used to describe qualities associated with maleness, that association is socially constructed, and we need not necessarily understand the term “vigor” in an androcentric way.

As critical educators, we want those we teach to be able to do more than one thing: to succeed in the world as it is, and to stretch beyond “what is”—to critique where necessary, *and* to envision and work toward “what might be.” Mezirow reminds us that achieving all this requires an often-painful shift in frames of reference. But perhaps these shifts can be less painful if we follow Morreall’s suggestion and teach from the humorous viewpoint—metaphorically tearing down Miss Honey’s sign and encouraging learners to have fun, and even laugh, while they are learning.

But what might happen if we set the Trunchbull on her head and realize that “having fun” may actually mean we *are* learning—perhaps in a deeper, more transformative sense than before? Could the transformative potential of humor be one reason why humor has historically been viewed with suspicion by entrenched power (including academic tradition)? Is cultural disdain for the comic a way of dismissing that which appeals to “the masses,” thereby perpetuating elitism? Do we perpetuate an insidious neo-monasticism and/or puritanism when we assume that enjoyment must be separated from purposeful activity such as work or learning? By doing so, what else do we perpetuate? If we create in “real life” the harsh fictional worlds evoked by Roald Dahl’s “Trunchbull” or Charles Dickens’ “Gradgrind,” whose interests are ultimately being served?



### Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. W.D. Ross. Internet Classics Archive, 1994. Web.  
*Blackadder Back and Forth*. Dir. Paul Weiland. Perf. Rowan Atkinson, Colin Firth. BBC, 1999. DVD.
- Crowley, Sharon. *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*. Pittsburgh: U Pittsburgh P, 2006. Print.
- Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007. Print.
- Elbow, Peter. *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. New York: Oxford U.P., 1998. Print.
- . *Writing Without Teachers*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. New York: Oxford U.P., 1998. Print.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1993. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious*, trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: Penguin. 1976. Print.
- Giroux, Henry. *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope. Theory, Culture and Schooling, a Critical Reader*. New York: Westview Press: 1997. Print.
- Green, Michelle. “The Mouth of Texas.” *People* 36.22 (December 09, 1991). Web.
- Hashimoto, I. “Voice as Juice: Some Reservations about Evangelic Composition.” *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*. Ed. Peter Elbow. Davis, CA: Hermagora Press, 1994. Print.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Mainebury*. Oxford, 1840. Internet Archive. Web.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- LeDoux, Joseph. *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*.

- New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998. Print.
- Lorenz, Konrad. *On Aggression*. Trans. Marjorie Wilson. New York: Harcourt, 1966. Print.
- Macrorie, Ken. *Telling Writing*. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. New York: Heinemann, 1994. Print.
- . *Uptaught*. New York: Boynton Cook, 1970. Print.
- Matilda*. Dir. Danny DeVito. TriStar Pictures, 1996. DVD.
- Mezirow, Jack. "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 74 (Summer 1997): 5-12. Print.
- Morreall, John. *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1983. Print.
- Murray, Donald. *A Writer Teaches Writing* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Cengage, 2003. Print.
- Noddings, Nel. *Happiness and Education*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.
- Okan, Zühal. "Edutainment: Is Learning At Risk?" *British Journal of Educational Technology* 34.3 (2003): 255-264. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 8 Nov. 2013.
- Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées et Provinciales Choiesies*. Project Gutenberg, 2005. Digital file. Web. 13 October 2013. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/18269>>.
- Plato. *The Republic*. Internet Classics Archive. 1994-2009. Web. 10 September 2013. <<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>>.
- Rapp, Albert. *The Origins of Wit and Humor*. New York: Dutton, 1951. Print.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Idea*. Project Gutenberg. Web. 15 August, 2013. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/38427>>.
- Shor, Ira. *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy*. Chicago, IL: U Chicago P, 1997. Print.
- Spencer, Herbert. "The Physiology of Laughter." Originally published in *Macmillan's Magazine*, March 1860. University of Oklahoma. Web. 15 August 2013. <[http://www.ou.edu/cls/online/LSTD2700cartooning/pdf/physiology\\_of\\_laughter.pdf](http://www.ou.edu/cls/online/LSTD2700cartooning/pdf/physiology_of_laughter.pdf)>.
- Taylor, Edward W. "Transformative Learning: A Neurobiological Perspective of the Role of Emotions and Unconscious Ways of Knowing." *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 20.3 (May-June 2001): 218-236. Print.
- Voltaire. *L'Enfant Prodigue*. Charleston, NC: Nabu Press, 2010.
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism; and Other Writings*. New York: Penguin, 2002. Print.
- World English Dictionary*. Web. 18 July 2013. <<http://www.world-english.org/dictionary.htm>>.

## Thoughts on Teaching as a Practice of Love

Sharon Marshall

*"I have decided to love. If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love."*

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

*"Ravitch. . . is right that teaching is a humane art built upon loving relationships between teachers and students."*

—David Brooks

*"Nothing is more important to most of us than stable and loving connection" (97).*

—Nell Noddings, *Challenge to Care*

### Multiple Visions of Love

I teach First Year Writing at a large racially, ethnically, economically, and culturally diverse Catholic university in New York City. Several years ago, I participated in an interdisciplinary symposium on the topic of love sponsored by our College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. In preparation for my talk, I turned first to bell hooks who has written a trilogy of books on the subject and whose liberatory philosophy of teaching has greatly influenced the way I conduct myself and conceive of my purposes in the classroom. I have been moved by the way she theorizes and acts as a witness for the power of love to transform individual lives as well as public realities. hooks explains: "The word 'love' is most often defined as a noun, yet all the more astute theorists of love acknowledge that we would all love better if we used it as a verb" (*All about Love* 1). hooks believes, "To engage the practice of love is to oppose domination in all its forms" (*Beyond Race* 198), in other words, to support freedom and self-determination for all. This squares with my own belief that the long-term solution to the inequality, violence, and environmental degradation that plague our world lies in increasing the number of people who commit themselves to an ethos of love and loving practice, and that the classroom is an ideal place to teach and learn how to do it.

In my talk, I mentioned a comment a dear friend made when she learned about the birth, that same year, of my first grandchild. "Another chance at love," she said, imagining the sheer pleasure we would derive from his very existence, what we would do to get to know and be known by him, and how we would help nurture him and safeguard his growth. What might happen, I asked my audience, if we viewed each foray into the classroom not only as an opportunity to teach a lesson or facilitate a discussion, but as another chance at love—at connection—that would not only enrich our students, but deepen our experience of living as well? What might happen if we stopped viewing our students just as vessels to be filled, blank screens to be written on, primitives to be civilized, test takers who must meet standards, or workers to be trained? What might

happen if critical thinking was not just something we claimed to be teaching our students but something we did regarding ourselves by interrogating whether or not we were able to connect to the lived realities, identities, passions, language, previous knowledge, and aspirations of our students and share the fullness of our humanity with them so that we could *all* become all we can be?

In asking those questions, I was imagining a way of teaching that addresses the whole student and the whole teacher, a way that Laura Rendón describes as

new teaching and learning. . . that is intellectual (i.e., includes high standards of academic achievement, allows students to engage in problem solving and critical thinking, engages multicultural perspectives, etc.) and spiritual (i.e., honors our humanity; instills a sense of wonder, sacredness and humility in our college classrooms; respects and embraces alternate cultural realities; involves social change and healing; and connects faculty and students in meaningful ways). (26)

I was using the word *love*, but as a Nichiren Buddhist who has practiced with the Soka Gakkai for over thirty years, what I was also trying to talk about was awakening to a kind of compassion, which in Buddhism means to share another's suffering—to identify with a person's struggles and to make that person's learning the mission of our lives by helping them access the vast power they possess within, a power that when tapped turns life's challenges into an opportunities for growth and even joy.

In seeking this way of teaching, I have been trying to follow the example of Buddhist philosopher, peace activist and founder of Soka schools and Soka University, Daisaku Ikeda, who views self-actualization—becoming all one can be—as the right of every human being. He writes,

Everyone has a right to flower, to reveal his or her full potential as a human being, to fulfill his or her mission in this world. You have this right, and so does everyone else. This is the meaning of human rights. To scorn, violate and abuse people's human rights destroys the natural order of things. Prizing human rights and respecting others are among our most important tasks. (*Buddhism Day by Day* 39)

Ikeda, author of over a hundred books and recipient of numerous honorary degrees, believes “student-centered education is the best way to promote peace and human rights,” and based on this conviction, he has founded a network of schools from kindergarten to university that embody the concept of “Soka” or value-creating education (Soka University website, “Mission & Values”). He writes, “The key element in Soka education is the quality of the relationship between teacher and student—the teachers’ sense of care for the student, their efforts to appreciate and develop the unique character and potential of each learner” (“Soka Education in Practice”). Regarding education in general, Ikeda asserts, “[It] is not something conferred in a highhanded manner from without. Consequently, teachers’ inner growth contributes to students’ happiness and educational and social advances” (*Soka Education* 219). In this Buddhist view, the growth of the teacher and the student are inseparable; the teacher’s dedication to the student brings out the wisdom needed to facilitate the student’s development. And the genuine desire to help the student helps the teacher deepen her knowledge and polish her character through altruistic action.



Although teaching is generally an altruistic profession that appears to be the very embodiment of the choice to love or act compassionately—and many who teach are loving individuals—to assume we have made the conscious decision to love just because we have chosen to teach is similar to believing that love is just a feeling and that it comes naturally. Loving is a pledge that has to be constantly renewed, which is why, even though many others have expressed the beliefs I am presenting here, I think it is important to revisit them until we have, in a word, *actualized* them.

While it will take time to actualize the lasting structural changes in education that will lead to a transformation of society, as individual teachers we can work towards change, viewing our teaching as another chance at love that might bring Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of the Beloved Community closer to becoming a reality:

In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger, and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. An all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood will replace racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict. ("The King Center")

And what I am arguing in this essay is that methods for creating a "beloved *learning* community" can be found in the spirit and many of the practices employed in English composition or First-Year Writing classes. Rather than being what our colleagues in other disciplines might think of as the "grammar fix-it shop," First-Year Writing classes are sites of change. Because of the ways these courses facilitate inquiry into and across multiple disciplines and put students' knowledge, curiosity, desires, experience, and research interests at the center of the class, they have the potential to become the compass, the conscience, and the heart of a college or university. In other words, we can look to some of the teaching practices employed by many composition instructors as models for a pedagogy of love. What follows is a discussion of how I and some of my colleagues implement four components of such a pedagogy: listening, engaging the passions of the learner, recognizing and valuing difference, and educating for social justice.

### **Love and Listening**

"This English Class is not what I expected," many students say in their reflections and evaluations of my first year writing course, English 1000c. Most of them say it approvingly, citing as happy surprises the absence of formulaic essays, boring books and topics they could care less about, and the freedom to not have to write like "a fifty-year old, white, Harvard-educated man," as one Black female student once put it. They express appreciation for the opportunity to choose their own topics, experiment with different genres, write for multiple audiences and share their work with others. The theme for my course for the past couple of semesters has been "Making the Familiar Strange and the Strange Familiar," which I borrowed from anthropological descriptions of fieldwork. I explain to students that they'll be using writing to take a closer and critical look at some of the things they take most for granted like their childhood, or standard English, or gender

roles, in an effort to see them anew or “problematize” them. I tell them they’ll be writing in new ways and researching phenomena or issues that might seem foreign at first but with practice and study will become more familiar.

Listening is one of the first strategies we practice. From the start, I am moving students in the direction of hearing and acknowledging each other. I begin the semester with an exercise that I learned from Peter Elbow in which students listen to a partner without saying anything back for 3 to 5 minutes (“Rhetoric of Assent and Believing Game”). The listener is not allowed to interrupt the speaker and the speaker can speak about whatever she wants. Then the roles are reversed. Later students introduce their partners to the class. Students enjoy this process although they say it feels unnatural not to be able to comment or interrupt. I ask them to do it to experience what it feels like to have the floor and know that you won’t be interrupted and in turn to listen without pre-empting the speaker, even when you want to ask questions or say, “I feel you.” The exercise is not a substitute for active dialogue; it’s meant to demonstrate what it can feel like to have the opportunity to speak along with the security of knowing that the students will not be interrupted. It’s meant to convey the idea that in this class there will be time and space for the students to formulate and express their thoughts (often on the fly), and that someone will listen. It is a way of opening up a space in the classroom for caring about what other people have to say, for acknowledging the right of each individual to speak and be heard. It is a way for students to put themselves in a position to experience what Nel Noddings refers to as engrossment: “When I care, I really hear, see, or feel what the other tries to convey. The engrossment or attention may last only a few moments and it may or may not be repeated in future encounters, but it is full and essential to any caring encounter (*Challenge to Care* 26).

Too often our interactions, especially in the classroom, are lacking in engrossment, in the commitment to really see, feel or hear another person out. Teachers are often fishing for the right answers and quickly pass over students who don’t have them. Students are either jockeying to demonstrate that they have the answers or playing that invisible cloak game—*please don’t let her see me*—and not speaking up at all.

My students also practice listening when they read their freewrites and drafts to each other. Even the shy ones look forward to reading to a partner or in a small group. Real bonding occurs between students when it is done in the spirit of what Horner, Lu, Royster and Trimbur call “an attitude of deliberative inquiry” (2). The teaching and learning of writing is a kind of dialogue that involves the constant interaction of teacher and student and student and student through the medium of their texts. Students write and respond to each other, and teachers respond to the writing and responding. Through our receptivity and responses we can communicate that we are present and listening; we can show that we care. Reading is a labor of love. When I read, I have to be mindful of the risks they have taken to share aspects of their lives and experience with strangers. Since I want them to bring their R game, meaning their real selves to the classroom, I have to make it a safe and affirming place. This loving place is the site for learning where we, both student and teacher are receptive because we have established a relationship of mutual respect, which is the pathway to love. I read their words and feel a sense of reverence for their lives.

Listening also happens during individual student conferences. In addition to, or sometimes in place of written feedback, I conduct at least three extended session conferences with my students each semester. This can be a daunting task given the large

enrollment. Students read their papers aloud, and we talk about them, a practice I learned early on in my teaching career from Donald Murray. Contractually, I am only required to meet with students for 15-20 minutes, but I choose to spend more time with them because I want to get to know them, and I want them to feel that I care. The bonds we create laughing and talking about their ideas and papers can be lasting. It's not uncommon for me to walk across the campus and run into a former student who wants to give me a hug.

Listening involves appreciation of the language of the speaker/writer, too. Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, John Trimbur, supported by a long list of "teacher-scholars" in the field of composition and rhetoric, point out that around the world people have always been multilingual, and increasingly in the United States, people speak multiple languages or dialects. They question the monolingual ideal of a Standard English and the assumption that using other languages or varieties of English gets in the way of meaning and comprehension. "We call for a new paradigm: a translingual approach. This approach sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening" (303).

Hating on our students' language and seeking to eradicate features of it that make them who they are is the opposite of loving them. In fact, it's a form of violence against them—especially against Black students. Elaine B. Richardson writes:

To date, the major invisible legacy of slavery in our classrooms is the transmission of White supremacist-based literacy practices which function to erase Black vernacular survival literacies. I do not mean here to suggest that White teachers who practice bashing Black cultural learning styles damage Black students. I mean that *all* teachers who have not had training in linguistic diversity and literacy education lack the skills necessary to support culturally relevant learning. From the beginning of the African American experience, education was not designed to empower African Americans but to socialize them into productive citizens. . . [but] the possibility exists that the same tool (literacy) that has been used to oppress can be used to empower. . . (158-159)

These ideas have been around *at least* since *College Composition and Communication's* 1974 publication of "Students' Right to their Own Language," but it bears repeating. Loving students means acknowledging the linguistic richness of their heritages and allowing them to think and compose in all the language varieties they possess. When students describe theirs or their parents' or grandparents' *patois*, for example, as broken English, I ask, "By whose standards?" This is not to say that we do not need to teach or that it's somehow wrong to teach in Standard English, but that we can choose to teach it alongside, rather than as superior to, other languages and dialects—and that we view the linguistic diversity that students bring with them into the classroom as part of their cultural capital that enriches us all. What Geneva Smitherman wrote in 1994 is even truer today: "U.S. Ebonics, framed in Hip Hop talk, is used to sell everything from McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and Gatorade to snow blowers, sneakers, and shampoo for white Hair" (38). The culture at large appropriates and creates wealth from varieties of English that are maligned in the classroom while robbing students of linguistic riches and ignoring the literacies they already possess. Theresa Malphus Welford writes about how she

encourages her students to “mesh informal and academic writing in all of their work”(21). She reports, “When my students hear these irreverent new rules, they practically stand up and cheer. Finally a teacher who respects and enjoys what *they* bring to the classroom” (22). Carmen Kynard and Robert Eddy write, “Our students’ skillful deployment of their trans-school literacies is part of how they make sense of the world and can provide unique opportunities in which to understand, critique, and re-negotiate the hostile nature of schooling” (39). If we don’t make a place for these literacies in the classroom we are not listening to but silencing these students.

### **Engaging the Passions of the Learner**

Nel Noddings describes the ideal precollege classroom based on the concept of care, but her model is applicable to all levels of learning and it looks a lot like the writing classes that I and my colleagues try to create.

Classrooms should be places in which students can legitimately act on a rich variety of purposes in which wonder and curiosity are alive, in which students and teachers live together and grow... a dedication to full human growth—and we will have to define this—will not stunt or impede intellectual achievement, but even if it might, I would take the risk if I could produce people who would live nonviolently with each other, sensitively and in harmony with the natural environment, reflectively and serenely with themselves. (*Challenge to Care* 12)

Composition courses can encourage “full human growth” for students and faculty where individual students can know and be known and where writing can be used extensively to facilitate inquiry and personal reflection. In a recent survey that faculty conducted among students in the First-Year Writing program at my university one student wrote:

I enjoyed being able to write about topics that I felt passionate about. It allowed me to put myself into the paper rather than just do something that I was forced to do. Also knowing that I can make a difference with my opinions and open others minds with them was satisfying. It encouraged me to do better and write stronger. It also made me more inclined to research the topics and go into more depth with them.

In explaining how her work extends the theories of John Dewey, Noddings says,

He insisted that students must be involved in the construction of objectives for their own learning; that they must seek and formulate problems, not simply solve ready-made problems; that they should work together in schools as they would in most workplaces; and that there is an organic relation between what is learned and personal experience. (“The Challenge”<sup>11</sup>)

Nearly one hundred years have passed since Dewey made these recommendations, but they strike me as being as necessary now as they were then, and to the extent that they can be applied to opportunities for writing and related activities, they are entirely possible to realize in the composition classroom. Like many English composition faculty,

I allow my students to research problems that concern or affect them, including student loans, income inequality, guns (especially in schools), mass shootings, gang violence, unemployment, racism, health care, unequal opportunities for women, bullying, finding a job after graduation, gay rights, poverty, and problems in personal relationship.

Our teaching not only involves rhetorical concepts or the use of a semicolon, but also the cultivation of heuristics that help students produce the texts—from memoirs to memes, to websites, to researched arguments—that become the content of the course, as students learn through their own investigations. A pedagogy of love certainly does not encourage students to float about in the warm waters of their comfort zones. But I do want to suggest that teaching as a practice of love sustains critical inquiry that is dependent on the spark ignited by genuine curiosity about topics and questions that arise or are elicited in the mind of the student.

### Recognizing and Valuing Difference

Learners in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century university include women, poor and working class people, and people of color and different nationalities. But it is still rare for institutions of higher learning to acknowledge as a legitimate resource what this diversity of students knows, or the cultural capital they bring with them when they enter college. These students' test scores, their presumed capacity for intellectual work, and perhaps their job experiences become the basis upon and filter through which many faculty may judge everything that the students will eventually learn. Such students are still largely thought to be almost exclusively on the epistemological receiving end.

In many composition courses though, what students bring with them becomes a resource for their writing and can add to the reservoir of knowledge that the class can draw upon. Derek Owens claims,

The territory of the writing workspace is shaped by a host of ideological impulses swirling around the professor, the institution, the student, the local region, and other involved parties—students in composition classes play an obviously greater role in that interior decorating, and the conversation cannot help but be more variegated and more unexpected—and often riskier—than in so many other classrooms beholden to the parameters of some predetermined subject. (6)

Whether born in Zimbabwe or New Jersey, as Rilke wrote in *Letters to a Young Poet*, all students possess a treasury childhood memories that belong only to them and shape how they have come to view the world and learning. These experiences can become the starting point for critical examination of who they are and how they view themselves and the social and historical forces they have experienced.

The latest iteration of the major assignment for the first unit in my class is something I've been calling alternately a cultural memoir, a life-map essay, or an "unauthorized autobiography"—the last term based on an essay that Indian (he prefers that term) writer Sherman Alexie composed. The assignment invites students to construct and examine the cultural identities they claim. Responding to a series of prompts and short texts by diverse authors, students write about their language, histories, their names, their families, fears, aspirations, desires, memories, dreams, neighborhoods, race, class, gender, sexuality,

religion and pull it together into a segmented essay that generally blows their minds (and mine). One student wrote,

I truly enjoyed sharing my experience and stories with my classmates. I never really had a chance to talk about myself and express how I felt about certain things, but in this class, I was able to tell my classmates and professor about my life. Something that made me more excited about writing was the fact that I could establish myself as a "writer." I never considered myself one, but after writing a couple of essays about my life and experiences, I realized that I was. . . .

I believe our students' diverse social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds demand that we acknowledge the literacies, histories, and the previous learning that they bring to the classroom and the University. And I don't just mean that for students whose ethnicities, nationalities, race, sexual preferences, economic status, and religious beliefs put them outside of the perceived—or I should say misperceived—"American" mainstream. I mean everyone who comes through the door, including the White middle-class protestant boy from Ohio, who at a school like ours is the exotic flower in the garden. This is important to do because it challenges what Laura Rendón has formulated as the "agreement of monoculturalism." The agreement of monoculturalism has created an epistemological dream underscored by (a) the almost exclusive validation of Western structures of knowledge, (b) the subjugation of knowledge created by indigenous people and people of color, (c) course offerings that preserve the superiority of Western civilization, and (d) the dominant presence of faculty and administrators in colleges and universities who subscribe to monocultural paradigms of knowledge production and comprehension (41).

Monoculturalism can remain invisible to students (and faculty) unless the curtain is thrown back and the familiar is made strange by questioning whether there are other ways of knowing and being in the world. One way to throw back the curtain is to draw out and draw upon the multiplicity of students' life experiences, languages, family histories and worldviews and to compare and contrast them with dominant assumptions and systems of belief. Although this can be uncomfortable at times for students who see no reason to question the status quo because they identify with the monoculture, or for students who have suppressed so much of themselves in order to fit in that they feel shame and fear, this too, is an act of love, as love acknowledges the presence of another, or in this case, the othered.

This past semester my students and I listened to Richard Blanco, the fifth inaugural poet of the United States, the first Latino and openly gay-identified person to hold the position, reading his poem "América" about his Cuban family's inability to "get" Thanksgiving, that quintessential American holiday, almost always presented in popular culture from a "mainstream," white American point of view. In the third stanza, Blanco he writes:

By seven I had grown suspicious--we were still here.  
Overheard conversations about returning  
had grown wistful and less frequent.  
I spoke English; my parents didn't.  
We didn't live in a two-story house  
with a maid or a wood panel station wagon

nor vacation camping in Colorado.  
None of the girls had hair of gold;  
none of my brothers or cousins  
were named Greg, Peter, or Marsha;  
we were not the Brady Bunch.  
None of the black and white characters  
on Donna Reed or on Dick Van Dyke Show  
were named Guadalupe, Lázaro, or Mercedes.  
Patty Duke's family wasn't like us either--  
they didn't have pork on Thanksgiving,  
they ate turkey with cranberry sauce;  
they didn't have *yuca*, they had yams  
like the dittos of Pilgrims I colored in class ("América")

Afterwards, I encouraged students to write their own poems or narratives about food and cultural traditions. It was a simple exercise, but because we all eat, and food is connected to the land, the economy, and our histories and families, it is a powerful embodiment of culture. Some students were surprised that I was encouraging them to write about something so basic; the familiar hadn't become strange yet. But others were delighted to be able to use food as an entry point for a discussion and writing about their family backgrounds. When I responded to one student that her description of Caribbean food took me back home, she sent me an e-mail saying, "You are making me fall in love with English, and I can feel a change within myself just from our 6 weeks together. . . . Thank you so much Professor" (Lyons).

Monoculturalism is one of the reasons why some students become alienated and feel silenced and uncared for in schools. Despite the well-meaning efforts of educators to "represent" different cultures, if we don't challenge existing paradigms, it's almost as though we're grafting pears and cherries onto a deeply rooted apple tree and wondering why the tree doesn't bear these fruits. It is impossible for plants and difficult for people to flourish when they are separated from their roots.

### **Educating For Social Justice**

Behind my exhortation to love students is an appeal for racial and gender equality and social justice, a call for an end to oppression of all kinds. And underlying this is a wounded child/adolescent who learned about inequality the hard way. Painful experiences in my years of schooling made me want to become a more sensitive, culturally aware and humble teacher than some of ones who taught me.

In third grade I had the loveliest teacher one could imagine, Miss Anne Gerstel. This was in 1961 two years before the March on Washington and long before multiculturalism became a buzzword in academic circles. Miss Gerstel acknowledged our different backgrounds and asked us to talk and write about ourselves. We were Caribbean black, American black, and Puerto Rican, with a sprinkling of Italian and Jewish kids. We were the children of waiters, domestics, factory workers, longshoremen, postal employees, and clerks. I remember explaining to Miss Gerstel how my mother straightened my hair with a metal comb, a hot comb, heated on the front burner of our narrow kitchen stove. Although I have since questioned this practice, at the time, I was proud to share it and

teach my teacher something about me. I loved going to school because my teacher loved me, and I loved my teacher—because I got to read, sing in plays, and learn folkdances.

Third grade, as it happens though, was also the beginning of the end of my love for school. And as the years of schooling dragged on, what I had loved I began to dread. Miss Gerstel was absent at one point that year, and they sent in a substitute. To get the class warmed up, she asked us what songs we knew. I can still see her standing awkwardly at the front of the room with her hands clasped beneath her bosom. She went through a list of songs. We stared at her as if she were speaking Martian. And then she pointed to me and said, “I bet *you* know the song ‘In Them Old Cotton Fields Back Home.’” I sensed I was in the presence of someone who had no genuine interest in me or my classmates. She started singing with an exaggerated Southern accent, “When I was a little bitty baby, my mama would rock me in my cradle in them old cotton fields back home. . . . You know it, don’t you?”

I shook my head no. I did know the song, which by the way, was first recorded by Leadbelly in 1951 and sung by a score of black and white artists including Johnny Cash, Harry Belafonte, and Odetta. But I was not going to sing it for her because something didn’t feel right. To her credit, she was trying to bridge what she probably thought of as a cultural chasm that prevented us from responding to her. But the gap was more affective than cultural: she just didn’t act like she liked us, so we did not like her. Besides that, we were urban children and even though some of us might have been down south to visit relatives, we thought of them as unsophisticated and country; the streets of Brooklyn were what we called home. In my case, “cotton pickin” was the only expletive my Sunday school teacher mother ever used, so “them cotton fields” were not something to be remembered with fondness; they were places to be feared. It was one of the first racial microaggressions that registered with me.<sup>1</sup> When I told my mother, she became incensed, but because she was the president of the P.T.A. and had the ear of the assistant principal, that particular substitute was never invited back to the school again.

Much later, shortly after I graduated college, I took a screenwriting course at The New School for Social Research in New York City, only to be told by my instructor that a scene I had written was completely implausible because “black girls from Brooklyn don’t go to Vassar.” Well, I had. But I was so humiliated and traumatized by his (public) comments that I never went back to the class. That fall when I entered a graduate program in creative writing, a well-known White male writer who had been invited to our fiction workshop, mercilessly critiqued a story I wrote about the heartache and struggles experienced by an older Black woman who worked as a maid. He told me, “Nobody is interested in reading stories about people like that.” The character in that story was based on a woman I called my godmother; someone I loved and felt a deep debt of gratitude towards because of all the sacrifices she had made for her nieces and me.

Making fun of students’ abilities and aspirations and denying their lived realities, even in jest, is the opposite of loving them. It’s also an expression of a kind of spiritual poverty and absence of empathy on the part of the teacher. When there is a racial difference between the student and teacher, it can be a manifestation of the hatred and

<sup>1</sup> “Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Nadal, 271).



fear of difference that still mar our educational institutions even when efforts are made at inclusion. Some would argue it is part of the very structure of those institutions. Carmen Kynard and Robert Eddy articulate a dynamic and multifaceted, color-conscious writing pedagogy to address, among other things, the silencing of students of color in the face of white supremacy and privilege—and the failure of historically white institutions to make efforts to undo the effects of racism and fully embrace and engage these students (W35-38). As bell Hooks maintains in *Writing Beyond Race*:

Irrespective of whether they are predominantly white or black, academic institutions are by nature and direction structurally conservative. Their primary function is to produce a professional managerial class that will serve the interests of the existing social and political status quo. Given that the ideologies of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy form the founding principles of culture in the United States, ways of thinking and being that are taught via mass socialization in educational institutions, it should be evident that the fundamental concerns of the academy in general are at odds with any efforts to affirm black self-determination. (166)

And I would add that hooks addresses the self-determination of *any* student whose background places him or her outside of the dominant culture. Teachers, and this includes teachers of color, may want to believe that we are agents of change in the classroom, but given our roles as gatekeepers and transmitters of the aforementioned cultural values, how likely is it that without activating a strong will to challenge the status quo that we can counter the hegemonic forces that invalidate other ways of being and knowing?

Manning Marable writes:

A humanistic, liberal education must. . . provide new insights for young people usually of privileged backgrounds, to understand the meaning and reality of hunger and poverty. It should create and nourish a commitment to a society committed to social justice and a culture of human rights which has the potential for including all of us. It should foster impatience with all forms of human inequality, whether based on gender, sexual orientation, or race. The knowledge to help to empower those without power, to bridge our social divisions, to define and to enrich our definitions of democracy, should be the central aim of a liberal education for the twenty-first century. (146)

If we choose to love our students, this is the type of education we will provide for them. And that means challenging the institutional forces and bankrupt educational policies that might obstruct us, as well as correcting the blind spots and rooting out negative tendencies in ourselves that contribute to societal ills. As Audre Lorde stated, “Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. *I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears*”(113). This is the kind of soul searching teachers who seek to empower all of their students need to engage in if we want to provide “new insights” and examples for our students. Millennials may be more open to equality in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation and economic status than older generations, but unless we are willing to tear down the walls of oppression, they are still being educated in the “master’s house.”

## Earning Respect by Choosing to Love

In the beginning of this essay, I used hooks' definition to argue that love is a choice. Earning respect, however, accompanies that choice. A couple of years ago at the beginning of the semester one of my students wrote, "I don't respect anyone just because they're in a position of authority, like a teacher. You have to earn my respect." At first I went to the bad place where the monk, Bodhisattva Fukyo (name translated as "Never Disparaging") would never go (Ch. 20, *Lotus Sutra*). I thought: *What! You little so-and-so*—especially because I saw her as a student who did not seem to respect herself. She was a Black female who had internalized standards of white beauty to the extent that she wore face powder two shades lighter than her complexion and a long straight wig that she fingered obsessively in class and referred to frequently as "my hair." Since she was African American and seemed to be so lacking in real self-esteem, I felt it was important to bond with her, but I put off by what she said. After while though, I realized that the self-loathing I recognized in her made it doubly important that she get the respect she deserved from me, especially since she saw in me the face of blackness that she had come to despise in herself.

How do we love students who, for us, wear the faces of difference? And how do we know if we're not showing them love? Discussing a study by Shaun Harper of Black men who succeed in college, Estela Mara Bensimon, professor and co-director of the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education, reports, "Harper's research shows that many teachers and professors 'are not sufficiently conscious about [which students] we notice and who we don't,' and that—given how powerful those signals can be—instructors should be more purposeful about reaching out to students from a range of backgrounds" (quoted in Lederman). "Purposeful." This term takes us back to where we began: to the idea of love as making a choice. We can consciously choose to nurture growth, our own growth in this case, by being more aware and intentional in our interactions with our students.

If we create an atmosphere of respect and trust, through skillful teaching, we can be purposeful about the dynamics in our classrooms and use them as a point of departure for developing a critical consciousness. We can also purposefully seek to expand our definition of who we are and who we identify with, so that we are more inclusive. We can recognize that as teachers and learners, right alongside our students—though our differences must not be dismissed or ignored—each of us embodies the university. In that sense, no one is "other." But each is a part of the other, whom the Bodhisattva Fukyo residing in all of us finds worthy of respect.



## Works Cited

- Alexie, Sherman. "The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me." *Here First: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*. Ed. Arnold Krupat and Brian Swann. NY: Modern Library Paperbacks, 2000. 3-14.
- American Civil Liberties Union. <https://www.aclu.org/>. Web.
- Blanco, Richard. *City of a Hundred Fires*. "América." Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998. <http://richard-blanco.com/book/city-of-a-hundred-fires/america/>. Web. 15 Mar. 2013.

- Brooks, David. "Smells Like School Spirit." *The New York Times*. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/opinion/01brooks.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/opinion/01brooks.html?_r=0). Web. 1 July 2011.
- Conference on College Composition and Communication. "Students' Right to their Own Language." *College Composition and Communication* XXV (1974).
- Elbow, Peter. "Bringing the Rhetoric of Assent and the Believing Game Together—And into the Classroom." *College English* 67.4 (2005): 388-399. Print.
- hooks, bell. *All about Love: New Visions*. New York: William Morrow, 2000. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*. NY: Routledge, 2012.
- Horner, Bruce, Min-zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur. "Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach." *College English* 73.3 (2011): 303-21. Print.
- "The King Philosophy." *The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change*. <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>. 28 Mar. 2012.
- Ikeda, Daisaku. *Buddhism Day by Day: Wisdom for Modern Life*. Santa Monica, CA: Middleway, 2006. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Soka Education: For the Happiness of the Individual*. Santa Monica, CA: Middleway, 2010. Print.
- Kynard, Carmen and Eddy, Robert. "Toward a New Critical Framework: Color-Conscious Political Morality and Pedagogy at Historically Black and Historically White Colleges and Universities." *College Composition and Communication* 61.1 (September 2009): W24-44. Print.
- Lederman, Doug. "When Black Men Succeed." *Inside Higher Education*. <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/02/06/study-aims-learn-why-some-black-men-succeed-college>. Web. 6 Feb. 2012.
- Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing, 1984, 2007. 110-13. Print.
- Lotus Sutra*. Trans. Tsugungari Kubo and Akira Yuyama. Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2007. [http://www.bdkamerica.org/digital/dbet\\_t0262\\_lotussutra\\_2007.pdf](http://www.bdkamerica.org/digital/dbet_t0262_lotussutra_2007.pdf). Web. 24 Mar. 2011.
- Lyons, Khadijah. "Thank You Already!" Message to the author. 8 Mar. 2013. E-mail.
- Marable, Manning. *The Great Wells of Democracy: the Meaning of Race in American Life*. NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2003.
- Murray, Donald. *A Writer Teaches Writing*. NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1985.
- Nadal, Kevin L. "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life." *American Psychologist* 62.4 (2007): 271-286. Print.
- Noddings, Nel. *Caring, a Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California, 1984, 2003. Print.
- . *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*. New York: Teachers College, 2005. Print.
- Owens, Derek. *Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2001. Print.
- Rendón, Laura I. *Sentipensante (sensing/thinking) Pedagogy: Educating for Wholeness, Social Justice and Liberation*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Pub., 2009. Print.
- Richardson, Elaine B. "Coming From the Heart: African American Students, Literacy Stories, and Rhetorica Education." *African American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary*

- Perspectives*. Ed. Ronald L. Jackson and Elaine B. Richardson. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007. 155-169. Print.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria, and Norton Mary D. Herter. *Letters to a Young Poet*. New York: Norton, 1963. Print.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Print.
- “Soka Education in Practice | Daisaku Ikeda Website.” <http://www.daisakuikeda.org/main/educator/edu/edu-04.html>. Web.
- Soka University of America. “Mission & Values.” [http://www.soka.edu/about\\_soka/mission\\_and\\_values.aspx](http://www.soka.edu/about_soka/mission_and_values.aspx). Web.
- Spellmeyer, Kurt. “”Forging the New Humanities”” SUNY Council on Writing Conference. Binghamton, New York. 18 Mar. 2011. Speech.
- Welford, Theresa Malphus. “Code-Meshing and Creative Assignments: How Students Can Stop Worrying and Learn to Write Like Da Bomb.” In *Code Meshing as World English: Pedagogy, Performance, Policy*. Ed. Vershawn Ashanti Young and Aja Martinez. Urbana-Champaign, IL: NCTE, 2011. Print.

## OUT OF THE BOX

### Learning and Teaching in Other Ways

Ilene Dawn Alexander

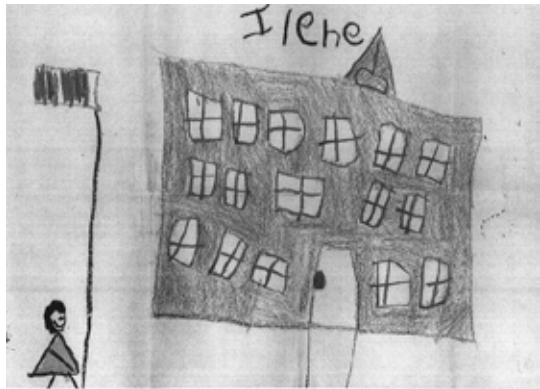
#### Stories

*"Distances and days existed in themselves then; they all had a story. They were not barriers. If a person wanted to get to the moon, there is a way; it all depended on whether you knew the directions...on whether you knew the story of how others before you had gone. He had believed in the stories for a long time, until the teachers at Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of 'nonsense.' But they had been wrong."*

—Leslie Marmon Silko

The earliest complex story I know and can tell about myself being a learner is this one:

The 4<sup>th</sup>-grade history curriculum at Jefferson Elementary School in Mankato, Minnesota, required each pupil to write a researched paper on some aspect of state history. Mankato's particular history includes being the site of the 26 December 1862 hanging of 38 Dakota men following trials that "guaranteed an unjust outcome" at the close of the Dakota-US War (Chomsky 15). In my growing up years, a granite marker—since taken down and hidden, lost, or destroyed—memorialized the site at the main river-crossing. I wanted to write about the history that marker had witnessed.



The 4<sup>th</sup>-grade Minnesota history folder I have kept houses a researched paper—with note cards I clearly didn't compose while researching. Topic: the state flag. Ask me about our state flag, and I'd have to dig out that paper to read to you my *schooled* answer.

Ask me about the paper I didn't write, and I will tell you the story I have shaped with my family about our multicultural Minnesota—curiosities and contempts, contraries and complexities, conflicts and compassions. I will tell you *learning stories* I have shaped across scores of courses and teachers, stories that come from navigating power, exposing privilege, and building my own learning communities in order to survive hidden curriculums, test-driven student obedience, and coerced teacher complicity.

Ask me how I became a faculty developer at the flagship university of my home state, and I will also tell you about building learning-teaching communities because of my family and those rare mentors and peers who value learning in other ways. Many of

them having been students like me: working class, ethnically- and community-rooted, alive with learning in stultifying contexts, and actively engaged with difference as richness.

I will tell you what I learned in practice at age 10, and now have confirmed in contemporary research rooted in people's lives: telling of real and complex stories—family, community, historical—engages children in sense-making endeavors. *New York Times* reporter Bruce Feiler explains the research behind “Stories that Bind Us” in this way: “The more children knew about their family’s history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem, and the more successfully they believed their families functioned.” Children need three sorts of narratives addressing family as a group and family from the vantage points of individuals:

- (1) ascending narratives—progression, challenge, new opportunities;
- (2) descending narratives—stumbling, re-grouping, lost opportunities;  
and most of all,
- (3) oscillating narratives—ups and downs, variations in life, decisions made about sticking together – or not

Oscillating narratives provoke sense-making—the development of a way to tell a life with meaning. Oscillating narratives unfold over time, through interaction in social gatherings and in small conversations. Each oscillating narrative involves reflection and action; prompts children to notice alternatives and possibilities; practices the basics of constructivist, transformative, and connectivist learning.

That paper I didn’t write has everything to do with my being the teacher I have become 45 years later. In researching that paper, I learned about then-contemporary race-, gender- and sexuality-based civil rights movements going on in the world—and on the college campus just blocks away. From my older cousins on campus, I learned that learning in other ways was possible—in fact had a body of scholarship and was practiced in diverse communities and classrooms.

It’s that lovely mashup of teaching and learning histories, theories, narratives that I want future faculty to engage—in words, in teaching practice, in being learners. It’s the learning-teaching sense making with regard to their own histories and those of students they’ve yet to meet that guides our weeks together.

### **Learning Stories**

*“Learning refers only to significant changes in capability, understanding, knowledge, practices, attitudes or values by individuals, groups, organisations or society.”*

—Frank Coffield

The part of that 4<sup>th</sup>-grade story that initially angered me was the teacher’s decision that we were “too young to understand” that particular history, coupled with her assumptions that my parents would certainly agree with her decision. She was half right: my parents suggested that my teacher meant well so I should write the paper assigned, and I could go to the public library to learn more about Minnesota history. In effect, their idea was that I should double my learning.

My paternal grandmother was the one to actually take me to her local library to look through reference books to learn something more than Mankato as the site of the largest mass execution in the history of the United States. I honestly remember little about what we learned that day. More vivid is her face puckering up just before she closed a book with a slap, and then again her face as we returned home where she read Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Indian Hunter" to me. In reading, Gram's brow scrunched tight as she read the line of "the white man's...love unkind," then relaxed as she turned her face to mine and asked, "What do you make of that?"

We talked that afternoon of Gram's few years in northern South Dakota, of starting school in a sod building and of leaving school after Grade 8—with perfect attendance—to help her grandmother set up the family home in Minnesota as a boarding house. She brought to voice that afternoon her still-deep despair as she remembered the township of her 1910s South Dakota growing up years—peopled with white settlers proud to speak hostile words and teach inaccuracies about Native Americans generally, and about state-based tribes specifically.

Across the years, as we continued to talk about the news we watched and novels we read, she linked America's removals of Native American children from the reservations to boarding schools (where home languages and visits were banned) to England's annexation of Wales and the 1840s imposition of English-only schools and Anglicized Bibles that left her Welsh great-grandparents "illiterate" and "unschooled." Suppressed home languages, imposed versions of Christianity, and commodifiable trades for boys and girls—these were indeed the shared, descending narratives she set out from the perspective of non-dominant cultural peoples. Still listening now to that storytelling allows me to glimpse the compassion Gram built from seeing parallels—still listening allows me to appreciate her keen awareness that the two narratives were not the same. Yet taken together, she knew they could be transformative for her young listener.

Yes, my grandmother was engaging in sense-making by sharing and speculating about two non-canonical life narratives she saw as threads in her life. Two non-conforming cultural groups—one in mid-Wales and one in middle-America—both informing her life, once she returned to Minnesota to aid her grandmother in running that boarding house. Stories—in novels from the library, in the monthly *Farmer* magazine passed through the family, in the weekly newspaper picked up as early as possible, and in the words of people who sat at the table when that boarding house again became our family house—these narratives staved off erasure for the tellers and established how I came to see learning: as something we do through interactions, rather than as something we receive with a set of directions for future use.

I understand my grandmother now as a first teaching mentor. She recognized the many ways I was an unsuccessful learner in 1960s schooling structures, and then she talked with me through other ways of learning – which included questioning of conventional assumptions about people and history and all sorts of social structures. I understand, too, that her mentorship sustained my critical thinking in PhD school while eschewing what Brookfield notes (9-10) in adult learners as "cultural suicide."

### Learning Stories for Resilience

*“Resilience is the ability to weather the inevitable storms of life, and to come out all right.”*

—Marshall Duke (in Kurylo)

In 1967, the summer following 4<sup>th</sup> grade, my parents and I packed our cobalt-blue, four-door Dodge Cornet 440 V8 with suitcases, books, and snacks enough to drive from Minnesota to Washington, DC. We drove through the southern border-states, then on to Long Island, before returning home via northern tollways that dropped off lanes to become Midwestern highways.

Words from radio stations, books I’d packed, and stories my parents told inside the car wove with local accents and tales at roadstops to shape our traveling words. Sing-alongs to blues-and-country radio stations pervasive throughout the drive. Speculation about family responses to my uncle’s upcoming visit with his male partner. Serious discussions when I asked why one horse was “riding atop another.”

Talking about my mother’s anticipation of standing at the Lincoln Memorial, where Marion Anderson sang in 1939 and where the 1963 March-on-Washington musicians and speakers stood, brought my father to talk about race for the first time in my memory. With his distinctly Welsh dark skin and wavy black hair, my father recounted people’s wary glances his way in the 1950s while on short Navy leaves in the South. In Alabama, he was “taken to be a Negro” when he ventured out alone—sent to segregated seating areas at the movies.

Standing at Lincoln’s feet, I held tightly to my parents’ hands and imagined a future built on the stories my grandparents and parents told. Moving back into that memory, I can now tell the story that my parents were taken to be an interracial couple by white Washington D.C. police officers who responded to a traffic accident that we were part of during that visit. As I write myself back into that afternoon, I see my parents trying to contain their anger at the demeaning and harassment, and their efforts to re-direct my eyes and ears as that story unfolded. From my files now, I can look back to my college constitutional law notes outlining the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Loving v. Virginia* ruling that dismantled state miscegenation laws just weeks after we drove away from our visit to the U.S. south.

Moving back in memory to re-enter Minnesota that summer, I see that my parents had peopled our home with diversity: with first-generation college-student boarders who were women from nearby towns or international men claiming educations not available at home; with activist cousins who as students helped create ethnic and women’s studies departments. I recall people and books opening my eyes to our community: Mexican-American blue collar workers; African-American professionals; Asian-American families whose Midwest location kept them from internment camps but not from local prejudice; Arab-American merchants; Jewish professors; gay and lesbian teachers; first-wave southeast Asian immigrants; biracial family members.

Pivotaly, the narrative I built from that summer onward let me join with others in and beyond classrooms to navigate schooling with our own questions and with our own learning practices, which required consciously jettisoning scripts that schools created for students from non-dominant cultural groups, who also learned in ways that didn’t align



with the dominant, industrialized, passive, banking-model learning ways.

In college, as in junior and senior high school, I came to look for teachers who required creative thinking from students – in the Sir Ken Robinson sense of having, pursuing, testing, and sharing original ideas of value. We created own scripts for learning, sharing them in peer learning communities, where:

students can be encouraged to share their private feelings of impostorship in an attempt to help them realize that their private misgivings can coalesce into publicly recognized truth. Knowing that one is not alone in thinking or feeling something that seems divergent is an important step in coming to take one's own experience seriously, especially when that experience is of a critical nature and therefore likely to be devalued by mainstream theory and practice. (Brookfield 13)

\*\*\*

Why and how do these stories matter to the learning lives of the diverse graduate students and postdoctoral fellows who enroll as learners and future faculty in the course I teach?

Quite basically, these stories matter in a big-picture way because the students who elect to enroll in my Preparing Future Faculty course know at tacit, gut levels that mastering traditional ways of teaching and learning allowed them to succeed in higher education. They worry, too, about cultural suicide in turning away from the teaching they've seen around them; simultaneously they might well be standing in front of those future classrooms as imposters, playacting at teaching if they don't risk figuring out something now. These future faculty come into our classroom energized by research involving complex problem-solving and high-functioning collaboration with amazingly diverse colleagues. This has excited and sustained them. This makes them wonder about the teaching stories they've glimpsed—in headlines, in past experiences, in conversations with departmental alumni now teaching out in the world.

If I am dead honest, the stories matter because when I stand in the classroom alongside my own learning stories, I am both teacher-mentor *and* the sort of student they most fear—the student who is different, dissenting, and difficult to figure out, yet who is a dedicated learner who could persist in higher education if a teacher could imagine learning and offer teaching in other ways. I personalize for a moment that at-risk, high-potential, achievement-gap student they very much do not want to fail. The oscillating narratives we draw from theory, experiences, observations and what we create in the classroom unleash a realization that active learning principles and practices are centuries deep, and praxis is rich rather than new and faddish, or newly invented by STEM disciplines and technology tools.

If I am lucky, my students will allow the stories they collect to reverberate in the teaching and learning practices they build to support the next generations of learners. And, in making that possible, I honor my first mentor – my grandmother.

+



### Works Cited

- Brookfield, Stephen. "Adult Cognition as a Dimension of Lifelong Learning." Working Papers of the Global Colloquium on Supporting Lifelong Learning, Milton Keynes, UK: Open University, 2000. Web. 26 December 2013. <http://z.umn.edu/brookfield>.
- Chomsky, Carol. "The United States-Dakota War Trials: A Study in Military Injustice." *Stanford Law Review* 243.1 (November 1990): 13-98.
- Coffield, Frank. *Just Suppose Learning & Teaching Became the First Priority*. London: Learning Skills Network, 2008.
- Coleman, Nick. "Minnesota Sesquicentennial of Hate: The Hanging of the 38 on Dec. 26, 1862." *The State I'm In*. 26 December 2012. Web. 18 August 2013. <<http://z.umn.edu/1862>>.
- Feiler, Bruce. "The Stories that Bind Us." *New York Times* 16 March 2013: ST1. Web. 18 August 2013. <<http://z.umn.edu/storiesbind>>.
- Fivush, Robyn. "Speaking Silence: The Social Construction of Silence in Autobiographical Narratives." *Memory* 18.2 (2010): 88-98.
- Kurylo, Elizabeth. "Profile: Marshall Duke." *Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life*. Web. 28 November 2013. <<http://www.marial.emory.edu/faculty/profiles/duke.html>>.
- Ken Robinson. *Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2011.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. New York: Penguin, 1977.

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Making the Familiar Unfamiliar

Judy Halden-Sullivan, Book Review Editor

Each book reviewed in this issue of *JAEPL* shows how little we may know about familiar things: human thought, textbooks, prayer, our minds.

For example, in her review of *Making Thinking Visible*, Karen Walker explores how authors Ron Ritchart, Mark Church, and Karin Morrison render palpable what all teachers strive to inspire in the abstract: students' deep thinking. Through carefully constructed pedagogical "routines," patterned with various "thinking tools," the authors demonstrate in vivid real-world examples how students can show their thinking as it grows more complex from the opening moments of a unit, through the synthesizing of various resources in the middle, and, finally, making associative connections that deepen memory and scaffold future thinking at the project's conclusion. But Walker's review also reveals what the term "routine" may *not* imply: that thinking is never neat, formulaic, nor linear. *Making Thinking Visible* delineates for our reviewer, who directs a secondary education program, that, while definable routines may serve as heuristics to open thought, the results of students' deep thinking are always open-ended surprises.

Another surprise sprung in this issue—one of a displeasing sort—is an exposé about textbook development, a process described in Beverlee Jobrack's study, *Tyranny of the Textbook*, reviewed by Timothy Shea, a professor of English education. Drawn sometimes from field tests or parent surveys or dictated by the adoption decisions of three enormous, dominant states (Texas, Florida, and California), the criteria for textbook creation rarely, if ever, are rooted in current substantive research. Ill-founded textbooks then become the quicksand in which curricula sink, Jobrack asserts in her scathing critique of contemporary American education. Jobrack shocks her readers, Shea explains, when she characterizes the textbook publishing industry as one that "stifles innovation, squashes competition, drastically limits choice, and creates a risk-averse development process that at best perpetuates the status quo," all for the sake of maximized profits (25). However, Shea detects the limitations of Jobrack's expertise in his review and counters them with pleasant surprises about the current state of educational curricula.

An unexpected analogy also awaits *JAEPL* readers in this issue: the mutual revelations possible when comparing prayer and rhetoric. Describing herself as "a professor of writing who also prays," Julie Nichols uncovers in her review of William FitzGerald's groundbreaking study, *Spiritual Modalities: Prayer as Rhetoric and Performance*, that, in her words, "while it's obvious that rhetorical analysis can shed light on what we're doing when we pray, it may be less obvious (but no less accurate) to say that a close look at prayer can illuminate what we're doing when we practice rhetoric." FitzGerald employs motives drawn from Burkean dramatism—scene, act, and attitude—to investigate prayer, revealing prayer as an ideal of rhetorical practice, a "relational and social art performed in concert with others across time and space" (FitzGerald 99). As Nichols asserts, "That people pray implies—actually *produces*—an acknowledgment of the divine . . . ." Prayer embodies language that makes the divine manifest in ways transformative for both the

“pray-er” and the world.

And apparently so can our Buddha-nature, as it is explored by Donna Quesada in her study, *The Buddha in the Classroom: Zen Wisdom to Inspire Teachers*. Reviewer Edward Sullivan is an economics and finance professor, and himself a Zen teacher. Buddhist precepts surprise us with our own nature and its many pitfalls. For example, Quesada suggests that, in encountering the frustrations of teaching such as students’ tardiness, excuses, and rude behaviors, instructors should wake up to this simple realization: it is *not* all about them. Quesada advises teachers to seek a return to “beginner’s mind”—to become aware of our own thoughts so that we may dismantle preconceived notions and so be fully present to and receptive of what is occurring before us, as opposed to our projecting upon experiences our own stories. As Quesada advises, and Sullivan confirms, “It’s about entering into the intimacy of whatever this moment brings, without agenda-driven conditions” (22). No easy feat. As an aside, Quesada’s study and FitzGerald’s book remind us of opportunities provided by our sibling organization, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, their *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, and their summer institutes for educators, such as summer 2013’s “Contemplative Pedagogy in the Classroom” (see [www.contemplativemind.org](http://www.contemplativemind.org)).

The books reviewed in this issue offer enlightened thinking about that which we might take for granted: the complexity of thinking itself; the extraordinary responsibilities of our everyday curricula; the invocation of and connection to otherness made possible in the rhetoric of daily prayers; and the ample invitations to spiritual awakening available in the regimen of classroom instruction. These studies surprise us with the familiar and remind us of our duty to persistently refresh our understanding of it.



Ritchhart, Ron, Mark Church, and Karin Morrison. *Making Thinking Visible*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011.

**Karen Walker, Lebanon Valley College**

At present, high stakes testing, implementation of the Common Core, and extreme pressure to cover a large amount of content in a short amount of time are paramount in the delivery of the instructional program. Even with all of these pressures, educators are expected to provide a high quality curriculum and produce students who can deeply process complexity and be divergent thinkers. Providing opportunities for students to genuinely listen to each other, to profoundly think, to totally process ideas and information, and to intensely examine a variety of views takes ample time and lots of practice. Most educators are dedicated to doing what is in the very best interests of their students, even when under duress. The authors of *Making Thinking Visible* foreground their study with an analogy about hearing only half of a conversation: hearing a stance on an issue while being unaware of the thinking that went into the position as well as what prompted it. The goals of this book are to discuss and promote "...not only learning to think, but thinking to learn" and "... why making thinking visible and related themes are so important to learners" (xiv-xv). The authors want to give voice to the full conversation.

At the heart of this book are questions from the authors about what real thinking is. "Thinking does not happen in a lockstep, sequential manner," the authors assert, "for every type or act of thinking, we can discern levels of performance. Perhaps a better place to start is with the purposes of thinking. Why is it that we want students to think? When is thinking useful? What purposes does it serve?" (8). The authors then center their study on modes of effective questioning, listening exercises, documentation processes, and facilitative structures called thinking routines—small sets of questions and short sequences of steps—that all spur thought. Throughout their text, the authors provide numerous examples of what thinking has looked like in a variety of educational settings from pre-kindergarten through staff development training in Harvard's Project Zero, to Traverse City Area Public Schools in Michigan, to the Cultures of Thinking Project in Australia. This journey of implementing deep thinking throughout an instructional program begins by suggesting that students need to do more than scratch the surface of theirs and/or others' perspectives. The authors claim that utilizing thinking routines to stimulate and encourage thinking should be a continuous facet of any instructional program's culture (221).

The authors also examine the concept that many students who are successful in school are so not because of the quality of their thinking but because they are good at playing the "game of school", an issue explored in the last portion of this book (221). They have learned what the teacher wants; they have retained information in their short term memory just long enough to regurgitate it when called upon and then will promptly forget it. Meanwhile, other students have learned that the same few students will always answer the questions, so they allow them to monopolize classroom interactions. In order for meaningful thinking to be an integral part of the educational culture, *all* students must be actively challenged to think: "... when thinking becomes part of the daily practice of the classroom and teachers show an interest in and respect for students' thinking, then students who had not previously been seen as academically strong begin to shine" (221).

In developing a culture of thinking, students need to know what types of thinking will be expected. The authors suggest that a realistic amount of time must be provided for students to ponder ideas and information so they can make important connections. The physical environment should be one where it is clear that the learner is the heart and soul of the classroom, where students can share thoughts and ideas, as well as be aware of what their peers are thinking. This book provides a myriad of case studies about how to do this task at all age levels. Some examples of this are:

- Exploring the concept of time in second grade. Initial questions included: What do you think you know about time? What puzzles do you have about time? Rich discussion emerged from physically handling clocks, to learning to tell time, to designing a time machine (76).
- Understanding and accounting for social issues in middle school. When a social problem or issue was the focus of analysis, the students wrote newspaper headline from their point of view. Then they investigated each other's views and wrote headlines from *other* students' perspectives. This helped students think about the issue from more than one vantage point and address issues on their own (112).
- Developing concept maps of a character analysis. First, high school students individually produced factors that may have led to the character's actions. Next, each student placed the most important influences in the middle of a piece of paper, with those that were more marginal positioned away from the center in descending order. Students then drew lines that connected items that were related. From this point, the same process was repeated in small groups which had to reach a consensus. The process promoted ample and appropriate discussion, thus preparing the students to write a well thought out paper about the character and her actions (128).

When planning to implement ways in which to make thinking visible, the authors explain that the word "routines" is used instead of "strategies" because routines indicate on-going patterns that are continuously developing, while strategies are more immediate—often once and done. To structure and promote thinking routines, the authors suggest the teacher select the correct thinking tools that comprise each routine (48). The authors provide 20 highly practical examples of thinking tools that have been structured as progressive routines. For example, Chapter Four's see-think-wonder activity would be used early in a unit. One of Chapter Five's tools—a game called "I Used to Think . . . Now I Think"—assists in the development of concepts and ideas throughout the unit. Last are those heuristics such as Chapter Six's "What Makes You Say That?"—an activity best suited for the end of the unit so as to connect with prior knowledge. Always teachers' planning should include how the students' responses can and/or will be used to connect to the next level of complexity. Each thinking tool includes a brief description, its purpose(s), when it should be used, a detailed step-by-step process, how to assess it, tips, and an example of a real educational situation in which it was used. A DVD accompanies the book in which six of these tools are demonstrated along with a modeled protocol for teachers who are developing their own skills.

Because this book's information is based on years of exploration and implementation,

it concludes with a section on “Notes from the Field”, which identifies common snags worth analyzing and discussing (247). This section reminds educators that the critical actions for making thinking visible are: being very clear about the information to which they want students to return over time; remembering that, although each tool was presented in what might have appeared to be sequential steps, thinking often does *not* follow in a linear fashion; not putting the thinking steps on a worksheet, which cuts short the process; connecting past information and knowledge to what is currently being learned. Finally, the authors invite educators to be kind to themselves when implementing these new tools and establishing fresh routines.

*Making Thinking Visible* offers teachers ample opportunities for personal thought, analysis, and reflection.



Jobrack, Beverlee. *Tyranny of the Textbook*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012.

Timothy Shea, Millersville University of Pennsylvania

Ever since public schools have been in existence, American citizens have worked to reform them. Their critical motivation and ideas of good education are as varied as there are schools: some communities look at low test scores and others at workplace inefficiencies as proof that our schools are failing. So, whether we're a "nation at risk," "leaving children behind," or losing our "race to the top," we are constantly reminded that we are failing as a nation and that our nation's future is in jeopardy. Cries of higher standards and teacher accountability pervade the airwaves, creating panic and distrust of our community schools. Schools respond with more testing, new teaching accountability measures, and better use of technology. Rarely, however, do they respond to the heart of good education: its curriculum.

At least that is what Beverlee Jobrack, the author of *Tyranny of the Textbook*, asserts, and she should know: for almost fifty years, she worked as a curriculum developer for Merrill Publishing and McGraw Hill and then as an independent consultant. She contends that the reason there is little change in the quality of education in the United States is because reformers rarely address the inadequacies of poor curriculum which she defines as "the teaching, learning, and assessment activities and materials that are organized and available to teach a given subject area" (xi). She further asserts that the key component to any curriculum is the textbook and that the main reason why these textbooks are ineffective in changing the quality of learning is that they are developed "based on tradition and competing products"—and not on educational research (xvii).

Jobrack proceeds to explain her own educational development from a student to a teacher to a curriculum consultant, and builds a case for her knowledge and experience in the publishing world. She describes from the publishers' vantage point the processes for choosing textbooks and shows how this process constrains best research from ever infiltrating the final product. In the textbook publishing world, there are "state" and "open" adoptions in which school districts use a range of processes for selecting their choices, from parent input to field tests, rubrics to state standards correlation. Whatever the process, however, it boils down to the decisions of three large states—Texas, California, and Florida—as to which texts are included for possible adoption. When teachers give their input, it's rarely based on research but more likely reflects what they have *already* been doing, enhanced by the promise of greater ease and a wider variety of resources. She also notes that it is usually the least experienced teachers who are involved in this development process.

Jobrack then explains the business end of publishing and how economics affects textbook development. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the free market opened school curricula to a wide variety of competing materials that provided options for schools and created a rich educational experience. In the past thirty years, however, as the publishing industry has attempted to maximize its profit, it has consolidated into a "monolithic industry that stifles innovation, squashes competition, drastically limits choice, and creates a risk-averse development process that at best perpetuates the status quo" (25).



She examines the development of materials for the three big publishers--McGraw-Hill, Pearson, and Houghton/Harcourt—and asserts, “Textbook publishers are in it for the money, not accuracy or thoroughness. To mollify the special interest groups, the history books are now 1000+ pages that have more graphics than substance. The authors are selected because they have written books previously, not because they know the subject matter” (29).

After this expose of the creation of American public school textbooks, Jobrack critiques past “solutions” to our educational inadequacies, ranging from standards and testing to technology and professional development. She explains that

Phonics, whole word, whole language, mastery learning, open classroom, team teaching, constructivism, discovery learning, multiculturalism, learning modalities, multiple intelligences, and differentiated instruction have all had their days in the sun. The educational pendulum swings from teacher-directed to student-driven instruction. Adults recognize that these techniques were used on them and have concluded that they have provided no lasting benefit to themselves. (xix)

Later, she makes this claim: “Enough years have passed to prove that a teacher’s seniority or advanced degrees, smaller classes, smaller schools, and higher teacher pay have not improved student performance” (164). This is where her argument veers from its powerful possibilities.

Had Jobrack focused on that about which she is an expert—understanding the creation and implementation of textbooks—she would have made a much stronger case: textbooks are the heart of American curriculum, and, as they are created without consideration of current research, we need to rethink and revise the ways we consider and adopt them if our curriculum is to be strong. However, Jobrack delves into territory where she is *not* an expert—the actual pedagogies in our schools—and dismisses some of the best ideas as ineffective and not of use. Yes, there are ways we can and should reform what pedagogies we use, but there is merit to using what can work if we reconsider why it does not work.

Jobrack’s criticism lacks evidence that these specific pedagogical approaches have inhibited reform. For example, in her critiques of past reform efforts such as small class sizes, differentiated instruction, application of technologies, writers workshops and other aspects of progressive pedagogy, she labels them as merely “trends.” (58-65). Then she asserts that these approaches have been tried before, and because some problems persisted, they “obviously” do not work. She further concludes that most traditional teacher education programs are not effectively preparing teachers to teach effectively. Though she attempts to explain how and why, her judgments ignore ample, research-based evidence to the contrary as she brushes off these efforts as ineffective (see Hansen, Tomlinson, and Ravitch). Her primary solution—revamping textbook development procedures—is too generalized and ignores the complexities of American public schools.

Like many reformers, Jobrack claims that the state of American education is crumbling by comparing our schools and students to those in other countries, purely based on test scores—a faulty and non-contextualized endeavor at best. In spite of this being the crux of her argument, Jobrack does not explain what the other countries are doing that is so

effective. In short, she makes accusations without viable solutions. So, while her analysis of textbook development is intriguing, it only provides a limited picture of American educational reality.

Grounding her argument in America's seemingly low comparative test scores, Jobrack fails to acknowledge that our schools are actually *not* in a state of crisis. The truth is our country is more diverse than most, and we try to educate a broader range of students more comprehensively. We are actually doing an effective job at this: according to the 24 April 2013 edition of *Education Week*, our students' National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores in both Math and Reading have gradually been increasing ever since they were first administered in 1971 (23). Not only are we educating a broader range of students, but we are doing it pretty well, too!

Perhaps the greatest flaw in Jobrack's argument is that she equates the textbook with curriculum. A textbook should be a tool that supplements the curriculum; it should not *be* the curriculum, even if busy teachers prefer it. If teachers are misusing this tool, then they need to be trained to create rich curricula that draw from a range of relevant texts and resources to help their students learn effectively. It would have been helpful to know ways she would envision our students moving beyond the textbook as the core of American curriculum. Some would assume this notion could lead to a watered down curriculum but, if curriculum returned to *local* control, was rich and varied, and incorporated a range of texts to strengthen it, then perhaps our schools would be more effective in preparing our students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I wondered who Beverlee Jobrack hoped would read and use this book. It bogs down in wordy textbook language and heaped with contradictory, condescending claims. Moreover, it does not provide practical suggestions for ways teachers and administrators can change the expectations of their textbooks and use them to develop a stronger curriculum. So, while we are all made more aware of the flaws of the textbook development process, we are not shown what to do about it. Also, Jobrack is fixated on the idea that revising our curriculum is the *only* way our schools can truly be reformed. She ignores research that shows many factors necessary to bring about lasting change in our schools. Curriculum is just one piece of this puzzle.



### Works Cited

- Hansen, Jane. *When Writers Read*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001. Print.
- "A Nation at Risk 30 Years Later: Where are we now?" *Education Week* 32.29 (24 April 2013): 22-23. Print.
- Ravitch, Diane. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. New York: Basic Books, 2010. Print.
- Tomlinson, Carol and Jay McTighe. *Integrating Differentiated Instruction & Understanding by Design: Connecting Content and Kids*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2006. Print.

FitzGerald, William. *Spiritual Modalities: Prayer as Rhetoric and Performance*. University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2012.

Julie J. Nichols, Utah Valley University

Politically and ethically, prayer is problematic for public educators in the United States. It's an especially thorny question for educators who regard spirituality as a fundamental human trait. By demonstration and example, as well as by direct instruction and experience, we may see a need to address within the educational system such issues as reverence, gratitude, and right action. In private, many of us acknowledge our dependence and interdependence in the world, invoke a divine power, stand in an attitude of reverence—in other words, we pray, using any of a number of forms. In public, in the classroom, during lessons we teach or meetings we attend, we may see opportunities for certain kinds of discourse or behavior that might be labeled prayer, or prayerful practice, as a corrective for inaccurate self-perceptions; as a source of comfort in the midst of difficult personal or environmental conflicts; or as an occasion to discover connections with others, to build community where it's sorely lacking. The aforementioned conditions can obstruct learning. Prayerful discourse could help.

But we are constrained. Our nation's founding *ethos* asserting the separation of church and state raises questions regarding whether or not prayers are appropriate in any school situations, and although talking *about* prayer is hardly *verboten*, praying itself may be, especially when it seems to advocate a particular religion or discriminate between or among religious disciplines. So we're frustrated and deterred. Our students deserve to understand and be able to use prayerful discourse, just as surely as they deserve to know and be able to use argument, or the language of mathematics, or electronic devices in order to accomplish the goals they set for themselves in school and in life. Many of this journal's readers are teachers of language arts who gravitate toward such definitions of rhetoric as Francis Bacon's—"Rhetoric is the application of reason to imagination 'for the better moving of the will'"—or Kenneth Burke's—"Rhetoric is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic and continually born anew: the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" ("Some Definitions"). "Wherever there is persuasion," Burke says, "there is rhetoric, and wherever there is rhetoric, there is meaning" ("Some Definitions"). In other words, when we consider our goals in teaching writing and language arts, we assume as foundational such values as right use of individual will and social cooperation. We assume, too, that language can be recruited to further those values and that the better our students know how to use language, the more effectively they can promote the values they choose to adopt.

Since both language and a notion of the efficacy of prayer matter to many readers of *JAEPL*, William FitzGerald's *Spiritual Modalities: Prayer as Rhetoric and Performance* may offer a number of juxtaposed concepts which illuminate these matters. To put it rather more simply than FitzGerald does, his thesis is that while it's obvious that rhetorical analysis can shed light on what we're doing when we pray, it may be less obvious (but no less accurate) to say that a close look at prayer can illuminate what we're doing when we practice rhetoric. For several interesting reasons, prayer can be seen as an ideal of rhetorical practice. "Indeed," FitzGerald says, "'prayer' is a name assigned to practices of

a better rhetoric" (6). To undertake this analysis is to give educators, rhetoricians, and pray-ers insight into their respective and communal work—and thus, perhaps, to loosen constraints and make us better practitioners.

FitzGerald uses Kenneth Burke's theory of "dramatism" (from *A Grammar of Motives*) to investigate prayer, particularly the three primary motives of *scene*, *act*, and *attitude*. As *scene*, prayer is "a complex auditory scene involving a range of *audiences* positioned as hearers and overhearers in relation to prayer's human speakers" (8; emphasis FitzGerald's). As *act*, prayer—in particular, *invocation*—is considered "a rhetorical encounter with 'the real'" (9). And as *attitude*, prayer requires *reverence* in order to *be* prayer. Chapters are dedicated to each of these three aspects of prayer as rhetorical practice. Two further chapters address prayer as an act of memory/commemoration and prayer as a "complex encounter with the real through the virtual, the spiritual through the material" (10). Readers are led to conclude that prayer is not only a legitimate rhetorical act, but an exemplary one.

"Prayer serves, above all," FitzGerald says, "as a practical meta-rhetoric whose ultimate purpose is to sound out the limits and possibilities inherent in social cooperation imagined at its most thoroughgoing" (10). Quoting Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, he defines the *scene* of prayer as "a radical receptivity to God's love. Experience of need . . . an experience of *blessing*. Discovering prayer is equivalent to discovering our real situation in the world" (15; emphasis FitzGerald's). "The critical task," FitzGerald says, "is to understand prayer as a set of strategies for sizing up situations" (17). This, of course, is the critical task of all rhetorical situations, if they are to be effective, but prayer's goal is elevated to the level of cosmic: "To attend carefully and to respond fittingly to one's real situation in an ordered cosmos is prayer's critical and ethical task" (21).

As "the human side of any human-divine encounter," the *act* of prayer recognizes the present, material human being within a relationship that includes both other humans and other audiences not present, but sharing linguistic ground (35). This notion of the role of language in human-divine relationships is one of many intriguing concepts in this book. FitzGerald is emphatic that real prayer is "not a one-way principle of projection. It is address to and apprehension of the real" (45). In the act of prayer, reality is summoned, defined, and co-created—just as in all rhetorical situations. That people pray implies—actually *produces*—an acknowledgment of the divine. Just as when people engage in the rhetorical acts of naming, describing, persuading, and arguing, so then human perceptions, logical faculties, and capacities to act are not only implied, but also certainly made more concrete, more accurate, more acute—in short, more real. FitzGerald claims that the "performative challenge of prayer is to discover one's character within [the scene of the prayer itself] and to remain in character before the other whom one addresses. In a phenomenological sense, prayer is a discovery of whom one stands before in a scene of address and who one is in standing" (49). In all effective rhetorical acts, rhetors must declare their identities and must know the identities of their audiences, but in prayer, the implications are larger, more inclusive, and more consequential than in any other situation.

Thus, it makes sense to speak of the attitude of reverence that attends prayer. FitzGerald asks, "Is prayer, finally, a form of address to specific beings apprehended as divine? Or is it a *manner* that infuses various modes of performance with an ethical dimension? Can recycling be prayer?" (83) Here again the implications of FitzGerald's

exploration are intriguing: absent the apprehension of a condition of need or dependence; absent audience and present speaker; or absent reverence—what do we have? Certainly not prayer. Prayer is “a mediating and mediated discourse,” a “relational and social art performed in concert with others across time and space” (99). And in the absence of any of these aspects of any rhetorical situation, “what we have,” according to FitzGerald, “is our present situation with respect to many relationships”—in other words, an absence of true communication, true connection, true efficacy (96).

FitzGerald’s “relentlessly intellectual” voice may be off-putting. He recognizes this as a danger from the outset, foregrounding his study by qualifying that “*Spiritual Modalities* articulates principles governing prayer in terms that may be alien to the practice and understanding of the discourse communities it examines” (5). However, these qualities of FitzGerald’s work are supremely affirmative:

- The gradual layering of multiple, open-ended definitions of prayer
- The persistent assertion, argued both in principle and demonstrated in well-chosen examples, that prayer deserves rhetorical analysis and illuminates the practice of rhetoric
- The implication throughout that prayer is a fundamentally human behavior that *does* things, both for the pray-er and for the material world in which she or he lives

As a professor of writing who also prays, this reviewer was ultimately enlightened and well-informed by this book. It does not address questions of politics, appropriate institutional programs of study, or pedagogy. But, as a legitimization of the discipline of prayer in terms of the discipline of rhetoric, for both members of AEPL and readers of *JAEPL*, it is sure to be a rewarding exploration.



### Work Cited

“Some Definitions of Rhetoric.” <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/english/courses/sites/lunsford/pages/defs.htm>. Web. 16 May 2013.

**Quesada, Donna.** *The Buddha in the Classroom: Zen Wisdom to Inspire Teachers.* NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2011.

**Edward Sullivan, Lebanon Valley College**

Let's say you've been teaching for ten years. Have you ever imagined singing this ambivalent duet between a teacher and her inner critic, expressed by Donna Quesada?

*I'm so burned out / You have it so easy/ I sing the same song every semester/ Be grateful you have work.* (218)

I suspect that you recognize the sentiments in this ditty, with its alternating lyrics of despair and gratitude. Donna Quesada artfully identifies the daily frustrations of dealing with exasperating students, overcrowded classrooms, and the nagging question of "Why am I still teaching?" As a philosophy professor at a community college in California, Quesada has paid her dues. Her book is a rumination on teacher burnout and her own attempts to rediscover "the joy that had been progressively declining" (ix). Her solution is to apply lessons learned from practicing yoga and Zen, with a particular emphasis on Zen.

Quesada divides her book into three parts: "The Burned-Out Professor," "The Classroom," and "Philosophizing Burnout." Chapter One begins with her driving to school on the first day of the fall semester. She writes, "For a teacher fighting the onslaught of burnout, driving to the classroom is worse than being there. It is where you anticipate your day and where you torment yourself..." (6). Sound familiar? With each chapter, Quesada includes a Dharma lesson and possible antidote for exhausted teachers. In this case, she recommends that you don't suppress those nagging thoughts. Instead, you simply observe them. Of course, those readers familiar with mindfulness-based, stress-reduction techniques (MBSR) will recognize her approach immediately. By observing our thoughts, we slowly begin to lose our identification with those thoughts. The solution, as one bumper sticker succinctly notes, is "Don't believe everything you think."

As someone who has meditated for many years, I can say that this is easier said than done. And here is where I encounter my only serious objection to this book: readers with little or no experience with a contemplative practice (Zen or otherwise) may find the author's recommendations very difficult to implement. On the other hand, it may inspire the burned-out teacher to investigate meditative techniques.

In the second chapter, Quesada deals with an important symptom of burnout—boredom. Suppose you've been teaching the same course every semester for the last ten years. Yes, you've tried to make the material more "relevant" with contemporary examples, collaborative exercises, more class discussions, but you're bored, and the students are bored. Even your best students are stealthily checking their phones for new messages. Is this class salvageable? Yes, and Quesada offers a solution by way of the following pithy Zen maxim: "*When the water is clear, you see infinite possibilities* (22)."

Huh? OK, let's make this statement a little more accessible. Clear water represents a clear mind, a mind that is free to respond effectively to the situation at hand. How do you attain such a state of consciousness? Quesada recommends that you "Turn your attention wholeheartedly to your students. They'll come alive, and you'll no longer have

to goad yourself on. You'll enjoy the interplay again. You'll be part of it. There is a magical shift that occurs with this simple shift of attention" (23). While I understand what she is saying, I am only partially convinced of her approach. Certainly, a bored teacher is most likely to teach a boring class. So, getting out of such a mindset is an important first step, but I am skeptical that the student napping in the back row will notice the change in me. Beyond that, there's another problem we confront, which she doesn't address: some of the things we need to teach *are* boring—the rules of grammar, the rules of calculus, the rules of (yikes!) accounting. I fear a shift in attention will do little to dissipate the inherent ennui of some material.

The longest section of her book, "The Classroom," is devoted to the day-to-day problems an instructor is likely to encounter while teaching. Consisting of sixteen chapters, Quesada's list of problems includes student tardiness, talking in class, cheating, and grading. Quesada does not offer pat solutions to any of these problems, but she does propose several guiding principles. Take, for example, students arriving late for class. How should one deal with these disruptions? Some teachers lock the classroom doors. Others, including Quesada, dock points from a student's grade.

While these external solutions are nothing new for most teachers, what I found interesting is her *internal* response to these offenses. This observation leads to what I would call her first principle: it's not about you. There may be a hundred good reasons why a student is late. Yet, tardiness makes us angry which, in turn, causes us to suffer. The trick, Quesada argues, is to find the "balance point between 'anything goes' and rigid intolerance" (61). Just how do you find that point? Well, it helps if you don't react from a place of anger. This is important advice. Recall the last time you caught a student cheating. Short of being a Zen master, you probably got angry; you probably took it as a personal affront. And that's her point—generally speaking, students don't see cheating (or being late) as an affront to you. Rather, it's an action born out of desperation or bad luck ("My car really did have a flat tire!").

The second guiding principle Quesada offers us is see issues with a "beginner's mind." In Zen, beginner's mind asks us to drop our expectations when coming into a new experience. Why? Because every situation is unique, and how a situation resolves itself is often different from what we expect. In Chapter 12, for example, Quesada deals with two students who talk while she is lecturing. After unsuccessfully warning them twice to stop talking, one of the students yelled at her before obeying her command for them to leave the classroom. After dealing with a torturous suspension process, the student who yelled at her in class was prohibited from taking an exam. Predictably, this student, the older of the two, dropped her course. The unexpected part of the story is that the other student became quite serious and committed to his studies. This was possible because Quesada did not presume the student was a troublemaker and police him, nor did she respond as with anger, unlike the older student who did. Did she know that the younger student would change his ways? No, but by maintaining a beginner's mind, this possibility was never excluded.

The final section of her book is entitled "Philosophizing Burnout." The author is, after all, a philosopher. In Chapter 20, Quesada challenges the notion that we must be passionate about our jobs. As someone who has been in the academy for more than a quarter of a century and has read too many job applications where young, aspiring

professors assure me that they are “passionate about teaching,” I read this chapter with great interest. As the author notes, many exhort us we to follow our passion. But Quesada claims that the folly of simply following one’s passion arises when one pursues a career for which one has absolutely no talent. In response, Quesada points to the Buddhist notion that we need to stop being a slave to our passions. What’s a presumably competent professor, whose passion for teaching has inevitably waned, to do? Here, the author suggests we accept, adapt, and abandon hope. “To accept is to simultaneously stop resisting,” Quesada suggests (209). When we stop resisting, we have a chance to enjoy our lives. Acceptance, in this context, is easily misunderstood as passivity, as giving up on teaching. It’s not. Rather, it is having the wisdom to know when something cannot be changed, at least for the time being. In Zen, there is a chant that begins, “The Great Way is not difficult for those who do not pick or choose” (Ming 8). Sure, you can have an agenda, but don’t get so attached to it that you make yourself miserable. Instead, abandon hope. Does this mean we should despair? Of course not. An old Taoist saying advises us not to push the river. Sometimes we really do need to “go with the flow” and get some peace of mind. A peaceful teacher, the author reminds us, is a good teacher.

Finally, Quesada compares the Buddhist way to existentialist approaches to life. She focuses on Jean-Paul Sartre, whom she asserts, “. . . never had a day of despair in his life” (215). Quesada notes, “Sartre’s freedom has more to do with *conscious choosing* than one’s *consciousness*” (217). Zen, on the other hand, says that free will emanates from our ego-driven consciousness, which is the source of our unhappiness. To elaborate, Quesada invokes another Zen saying: “*When the water is clear, you’ll know what to do*” (221). Knowing does not refer to concepts or ideas. Instead, Quesada says it is “a quality of uncluttered presence that inspires grace in action” (221). Put less poetically, I have found that when grappling with a difficult problem, an intuitive solution sometimes appears as a result of my meditation practice.

If you are experiencing career burnout, I would recommend reading this book. You won’t find an answer, but you might find out more about yourself—and therein lies the answer.



### Work Cited

Ming, Hsin Hsin. “Affirming Faith in Mind.” Sutra Book—In-house Publication.  
Baltimore, MD: Zen Community of Baltimore, 2001. Print.



## CONNECTING

### Gratitude

Helen Walker

Gratitude arises from surprise. Our rotations of students sit in those square desks, so present, so under our noses, so solid and visceral. Are we awake to the surprise they might bring to our consciousness—the surprise that wakes us up to that full-on sense of gratitude that causes poets to put words together in what John Keats calls prayerful ways (“All poems are a form of prayer”)?

This year’s writers in “Connecting” narrate stories of gratitude. David Steindl-Rast’s begins his discussion of gratitude, explaining that

. . . our eyes are opened to that surprise character of the world around us the moment we wake up from taking things for granted. Rainbows have a way of waking us up. We might not even understand what it was that startled us when we saw that rainbow, but our spontaneous response is surprise. It is also the beginning of gratefulness. . . Things and events that trigger surprise are merely catalysts. I started with rainbows because they do the trick for most of us. But we have to find our own, each one of us. No matter how often that cardinal comes for the cracked corn scattered on a rock for the birds in winter, it is a flash of surprise. I expect him. I’ve come to even know his favorite feeding times. I can hear him chirping long before he comes in sight. But when that red streak shoots down on the rock like lightning on Elijah’s altar, I know what e.e. cummings means: ‘The eyes of my eyes are opened.’ (9-11)

For teachers, our catalysts should be our students certainly. We do expect them; we can hear them when they are still out in the hall. Our question becomes how often are the eyes of our eyes opened by their presence?

e.e. cummings’ opened eyes are “eyes of hope.” Steindle- Rast tells us why: “Grateful eyes *expect* the surprise of finding beauty in *all* things. And they do find it. Hope, as passion for the possible, gives us a realistic alertness for practical possibilities. It gives us a youthfulness.” (142-3).

In reading and re-reading our authors Randolph, Chow, Saylor, Sunday, Cleary, Hogan and Ittig’s pieces, I am strengthened by the presence of youthfulness, hope, surprise—and, yes, gratitude. My eyes feel more open. These authors help me grasp what Steindle-Rast means when he tells us, “Once we wake up in this way, we can strive to stay awake. Then we can allow ourselves to become more and more awakened. Waking up is a process” (11). But it traces back to gratitude.



### Works Cited

Steindl-Rast, David. *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990.

## Poetry Teacher's Prayer

**Bob Randolph**

I pray for the school and the bells of fire  
I call my students, with their eyes open all night  
as they talk in their dorm rooms about football,  
who's hot, and how to pass Biology. Lord,  
show them snow in hell, cold rain in Heaven,  
endless plains aglow with spare parts of research,  
like a hymn falling on their bones through their skin;  
give them a season blooming with e.e. cummings,  
and not just Spring, but a low winter Hamlet sky  
like a protagonist bent on revenge; cut them with Eliot,  
and heal them with Eliot; help them complain  
after reading Virginia Woolf and sing cheek to jowl  
like a steel wool choir after Ginsberg;  
give them all hardwood floors made for pillows  
and papa san chairs; and glue them out of loneliness,  
but into good pay after their degrees. Teach them to pray;  
let their cell phones misarrange the clouds just once,  
so they realize what's enough. When they climb old age  
and expect one deep color introverted as dirt,  
open their hearts like delphiniums. Let every library  
be hungry for them to abide like sparrows on a quiet street corner.  
Lord, when their stumbling distances eternity,  
please rate them with a rubric that's all mercy,  
if that be Your will. Lure them with beauty;  
lead them to openness mirroring Your forgiveness,  
because at the edge of their lives (and thank You)  
the office door of the Holy Ghost stays open 24/7,  
that they might find the stars. Keep them alive and corporeal,  
slowly curving straight to you. Let the light through their windows  
fall on counters and desktops full of presence  
and their poems and marriages long remain.



## What Teachers Carry

**Leigh Ann Chow**

You can tell a lot about a teacher by what she schleps into school with her. Not to compare teaching to jungle combat (although the two sometimes seem to have something in common), but just as Tim O'Brien characterizes his soldiers by the contents of their rucksacks, so too can you make a pretty good guess at a teacher's content area by

the weight of her bag.

Math and science teachers often leave the building with nothing but their keys and maybe a thermos. Some of my colleagues on the other side of the hall even ride motorcycles to work. Meanwhile, my English department friends and I practically need a dolly to haul the piles of paper back and forth. Not to say that math and science teachers don't work as hard or are any less dedicated. They just have less paper to deal with.

And paper can be exhausting.

Yes, yes. I have tried online grading in numerous forms and functions. But just as I have tried reading books electronically, something about grading papers in pixels rather than in ink seems wrong to me. That's why we call them *papers*.

Despite the paper issue, I continue to assign writing. Last week, in fact, I collected papers from each of my five classes—95 students in all. I realize that I am extremely fortunate to have fewer than 100 total possible papers to grade. Smaller sections of Advanced Placement and lower-level English classes spare me from the ridiculous numbers of mid-level students taught by my colleagues, some of whom have 125 or 130 students total.

I keep assigning writing because they need to write. How can they possibly become better writers if they don't practice writing? And how can they practice writing unless they are required to do so in the context of a graded assignment? Writing is how we make our thoughts visible on paper. The very process of writing often helps students to reach deeper understandings about the content they are attempting to learn. Students should be writing every day in every class—in math and science, not just in English. But I digress.

As easy as it is to complain about the sheer volume of work, I try never to take for granted the privilege of being the first reader of my students' stories. These young adults (most of them, at least) pour out their hearts in their essays. I have learned more about my students from their writing than any grade report, IEP, or disciplinary referral could ever tell me. Some of what I have learned has left me speechless. Poverty, pregnancy, illness, death, abuse, self-harm. The human condition writ large.

English teachers enter into an unspoken pact with their students when they assign and collect a piece of writing, particularly a personal narrative. This pact can only be broken, in the worst of cases, by the burden of learning something that must be reported to protect the student's health or welfare. Putting these intensely personal things down in the context of an English class writing assignment may seem strange, but often students share these secrets in writing because they have no other way to cry for help. Sometimes it is the student equivalent of dialing 911. English teachers are the call center operator on the other end of the line, the first point of contact. I try never to forget the awesome responsibility that comes along with this role.

There is a reason why so many students develop deep relationships of trust with their English teachers: because as writers, we bare our souls. Especially in the years of young adulthood when we are struggling to figure out who we are, and what it all means. The emotional turmoil of the late-teen years can be so overwhelming; it is easy for us to forget the enormity of what, from an adult perspective, is so clearly temporary drama. And as a teacher who has endured the trauma of losing a former student to suicide, I am painfully aware of the consequences of suppressing these overwhelming emotions. Some students who would never reach out to anyone in person are willing to do so in writing. And we

can only hope and pray that they do.

So to return to O'Brien's metaphor, what teachers carry is far more than just the weight of the essays their students hand in. Even though I may not be able to leave the building without an auxiliary bag to transport all the papers I have to grade, I would never trade my job as an English teacher for any other. I have the honor and the privilege of being the first reader of some of the truest, most meaningful prose ever written. As a supporter of writing as a survival mechanism, I will welcome what they carry to me at the beginning of each class period and treat it with the care and respect it deserves.



## A Brief History of Holy Writing

Andrea Saylor

Moses let god write for him. With feet stripped bare, he learned the necessity of vulnerability, and waited to receive words from a face he could not see. He got them on stone, immutable, stronger than human craft. When he carried them down the mountain, he moved more carefully to make up for their weight, looking before he stepped. Like holding a baby, he suddenly felt responsible for something infinitely valuable, so he moved more carefully. It was almost too much to carry.

David wrote everything he felt. He knew the same god Moses knew, but more intimately. He asked questions like children who have not yet learned what they are not allowed to ask: "my god, my god, why have you forsaken me?" He danced like children who have not yet learned cynicism. Everywhere and in all things, he talked to God. It was the journey, inside and out.

Paul wrote in jail. Perhaps he was barefoot like Moses, not because he walked on holy ground but because of the poverty of the incarcerated. But his letters sound fully clothed, triumphant. Somehow his lawless time, when he must have felt the constant threat of torture or death or starvation or loneliness or monotony, turned into sentence after sentence about grace. He wrote about love in a transient life. It was seeing an invisible hope.

But Mary  
wrote with her whole body.  
She felt the weight  
of the mystery more than anyone;  
she sang:  
"It just comes.  
He grows and changes  
everything.  
Slowly,  
the weight bends me  
until I encircle the unknown.

Consuming and consumed  
we make each other.  
I learn how to eat, walk, sleep.  
All anew.”

Inside a slow birth,  
we sing our incarnate mystery.



## **For My Students**

**Jill Moyer Sunday**

You should know this.  
There's just a moment before I enter the room when I'm almost heady with anticipation. I jump in with both feet, ready to do it all again this morning, this afternoon, tomorrow, next week, another lifetime perhaps--to chase ideas around the room with you, to bat translucent, jewel-toned orbs down from the ceiling, to drink deeply of the poetic helium we discover inside.

When I drive the 50-odd miles to and from work each day, my battered grey Pontiac nearly automatic in rounding the curves of the interstate, I say prayers of gratitude. I move through my children, touching their heads in my mind. I count God's metaphors, the blood-red cardinal sitting on my windowsill; my friends who visit in my office chair--one with a guitar across her lap, another with a poem in his throat, one with a listening heart, and another with some old-fashioned southern comfort; and, most of all, the students who bear their stories like gifts for me to unwrap.

On some days, when I turn the key to start my journey, my heart hurts, abraded by the roughness of worry. By the time I stop the car, I am more at peace, having chanted my rosary of gratitude, rubbing my life's gifts between my fingers as I pray.



## **Lines on the Body: Confronting Personal Experiences Through Poetry**

**Kattie Hogan and Matt Ittig**

Students walk into classrooms everyday carrying with them backpacks, books, snacks—materials which will help them remain engaged in learning. They also carry their bodies and all the stories those bodies could tell, if given the chance to speak. Instead they may speak through tattoos, hairstyles, piercings, scars etched on arms. These students often do not find ways to safely voice their feelings and experiences to others.

Desiree entered our classroom with scars crisscrossing her forearm. The marks had faded to a strange shade of white against her pale skin, reminders of past experiences that needed to be told. Through reading and writing we were able to get a better sense of

Desiree's story, and, in turn understand the value of including personal narratives in our classroom practice.

Desiree's scars were hard to ignore but very difficult to broach. She saved us from longer awkwardness by turning toward the text she had in her hand: "I thought of this one just a few minutes ago. I was going to bring in *Alice in Wonderland*, but this seemed better." The pages were the novel *The Diary of an Anorexic Girl* by Morgan Menzie. She said this was the book that had taught her to be anorexic when she started reading it, and it taught her to overcome anorexia when she finished. It was the basis for her "sick diary," a diary she kept to count calories, rail against her mother, and vent her anger.

Literacy, both reading and writing, gave her a way to express and explore the challenging issues she was confronting. A good student, Desiree was bright and funny and social, with no outward appearance (except of course her scars) of a girl who spent time in Pathways, a "girls home," while she struggled to gain control over anorexia, substance abuse, and self-injury. Desiree, like many students, felt pressured to present an outward appearance of stability when chaos was bubbling below the surface.

In a literature course centering on self-definition, Desiree was given space to discuss the challenges of her past. One of the most profound experiences that emerged during those sessions was hearing a collection of poetry she had created which captured her struggles and her desire to find more peaceful ways of being in the world. Desiree's poetry provided a way to voice her feelings.

As we all sat together, listening to Desiree's story in her poetry, we were able to help students confront some of the many challenges that impact their lives. We could broach these delicate, deeply wounding stories. We could help them heal by paying closer attention to the stories adolescents often only express with their bodies, when their need is to give voice to them through their writing and to hear them reflected in others' stories in literature.



## New Teacher

**John Patrick Cleary**

I learned all the facts,  
presented them as new  
(My students better understand it!)  
held together by a subject  
framed (by me) as "true."

Be quiet, sit still—do as you're told!  
(I read the manual:  
"Come off as a scold")  
Troops obeyed their master;  
my information sold.

Don't imagine, pay attention  
to the paper lines, the ink.

(Solve *my* problem.)  
Hold your questions, freeze your mind,  
and most of all don't think.

Silence was my remedy  
encouraging anxiety  
(fear the reigning goal,  
legitimizing cowering,  
control of mind and soul).  
One weary rainy day last week  
(I think I had the flu),  
I forgot my lecture outline,  
allowing student voices,  
hesitant reflection,  
unraveling questions,  
nascent self-correction,  
bewilderment (and insight).

My monologue dismantled  
(for power, oppression,  
irrelevant instruction),  
out poured waters  
from a listening well,  
lively equality  
finally flowing...

+

## Contributors to *JAEPL*, Vol. 19

**Ilene D. Alexander** is a Preparing Future Faculty instructor, blog writer/editor, and consultant at University of Minnesota's Center for Teaching and Learning. She sustains research and 1st year writing interests as affiliate faculty in the College of Education and peer mentor to College in the Schools composition teachers. Her graduate school peers and faculty mentors at Mankato State University and University of Iowa are her heroes. (alexa032@umn.edu)

**Carrie Allen Bemis** is a PhD student in Educational Psychology and Learning Sciences at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Her research focuses on how to best support teachers in their efforts toward more equitable and mindful teaching practices, and how teacher and student collaboration can bring about lasting educational reform. Before beginning her doctoral studies, she was a high school English teacher, mentor and athletic coach. (Carrie.Bemis@Colorado.EDU)

**Kathleen Cassity** is an Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of First Year Writing at Hawaii Pacific University in Honolulu, Hawaii. She has published articles in the *Journal of Teaching Writing*, *Writing on the Edge*, *The Sun*, and the *Journal of Anglo-Indian Studies*, as well as several book chapters. Her current research focuses on cutting through ideological debates and negotiating differing belief systems in order to foster productive and effective environments for the teaching of writing and literature. (kcassity@hpu.edu)

**Leigh Ann Chow** teaches English at Mechanicsburg (PA) Area Senior High School. She came to teaching in 2008 following a 14-year career in publishing and communications. She is a fellow of the National Writing Project and holds an M.A. in Literacy Education from Penn State University, where she is currently working on a Writing Specialist Certification. (leighachow@gmail.com)

**John Patrick Cleary** teaches Philosophy at Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey. He was a teacher of English in the New Jersey public schools for 17 years, where he took an interest in critical pedagogy. He is also an instructor in outdoor education and a professional actor. His recent work concerns the role of philosophy in critical media literacy. (jcleary@raritanval.edu)

**Ryan Crawford** Crawford is an MFA student and composition instructor at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. He hopes to join the PhD program in Rhetoric and Composition in order to continue his research on the neuroscience of creativity and its applications in the FYC classroom. (r.d.craw@gmail.com)

**Amy L. Eva**, an associate professor at Seattle University, holds degrees in both English and educational psychology. Her published research centers on cognition, affect, and the psychology of reading while her current research focuses on the effects of a mindfulness-based curricular intervention on high school students' reported levels of stress and attention. (evaa@seattleu.edu)



**Sarah Hochstetler** is assistant professor of English at Illinois State University, where she teaches writing methods and other pedagogy-based courses. Her work can also be read in *Action in Teacher Education*, *The Clearing House*, and *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*. (shochst@ilstu.edu)

**Kattie Hogan** is a middle school educator in Michigan. She obtained her doctorate degree from Wayne State University. Her research interests center on the ways adolescents use in-and-out-of- school literacies to construct and negotiate their identities. Specifically, she believes that as individuals share stories, they open up new worlds of possibility and reshape themselves and the world around them. (hogankattie@gmail.com)

**Bill Hollands** teaches high school English in the Seattle metropolitan area. He holds a B.A. from Williams College and M.A.s from Cambridge University, the University of Michigan, and Seattle University. Prior to teaching, he worked for The New York Public Library and the Microsoft Corporation. (william.hollands@rentonschools.us)

**Matthew B. Ittig** teaches high school English in metro-Detroit and on-line courses for Marygrove College. He earned his Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction from Wayne State University. His research interests include semiotics, deconstruction, critical literacy, and poetic representation. (matthew\_b\_ittig@yahoo.com)

**Sharon Marshall** is an assistant professor in the Institute for Writing Studies at St. John's University in Queens, New York. She teaches first year writing and writes about composition pedagogy. (marshals@stjohns.edu)

**Julie J. Nichols** is associate professor in the Department of English and Literature at Utah Valley University. She writes reviews regularly for *Publishers Weekly*, newpages.com, and the *Association of Mormon Letters*, and her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Sunstone*, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, and, most recently, Editions Bibliotekos' anthology entitled *Puzzles of Faith, Patterns of Doubt*. (nicholju@uvu.edu)

**Marie Feris Quist** is a middle school teacher in Seattle, [Washington](#). She teaches language arts, social studies, and leadership. She loves teaching middle school because of its challenging, rewarding nature. Teacher collaboration and assessments that drive student growth are at the core of her educational philosophy. (mferis@seattleschools.org)

**Robert M. Randolph** is Writer-in-Residence at Waynesburg University. He has been a Fulbright Scholar in Finland and Greece, has published in Poetry, The Georgia Review, Poetry Salzburg Review, and upwards of forty other journals, and has a book from Elixir Press. His wife Amy, also a poet, plays guitar and sings, and his youngest daughter, Pilar, plays piano. The house is full of music, and he often gives thanks for that. (rrandolp@waynesburg.edu)

**Keith Rhodes** is an Associate Professor and the Director of First-year Composition at

Grand Valley State University. A former business lawyer, he has served as Secretary of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, as book review editor for JAEPL, and as a member of the five-person Steering Committee that finalized the original CWPAs Outcomes Statement for First-year Composition. Perhaps as a result of his attachment to American pragmatist philosophy, his scholarship tends, though not exclusively, toward practical matters like teaching style and modifying business-world thinking for use in composition administration. (rhodekei@gvsu.edu)

**Monica McFawn Robinson** is an Affiliate Professor of Writing at Grand Valley State University, where she teaches both composition and creative writing. Her scholarly and creative output spans from pedagogy to fiction and playwriting. Her most recent pedagogical inquiry has been on how classroom game design can benefit the teaching of writing. Her fiction and poetry has been published in several literary journals, and her collection of short stories, *Bright Shards of Someplace Else*, to be published by University of Georgia Press in 2014, won the 2013 Flannery O'Connor Award. (robinsmo@gvsu.edu)

**Andrea Saylor** graduated from Messiah College in 2005 with a B.A. in English. Since then, she has lived in Cairo, Egypt, and completed an M.A. in International Peace and Conflict Resolution at Arcadia University. She lives in Philadelphia, her adopted hometown and has worked in the non-profit sector there. Currently a full-time student at Temple University Beasley School of Law, she finds that reading fiction provides a much-needed respite from her studies. She is pursuing a career in immigration law. (andrea.saylor@gmail.com)

**Timothy Shea** is an English professor at Millersville University where he teaches courses in film & media literacy, English education, and writing. He is also the Director of Global Education and Partnerships where he oversees study abroad and international student and professor exchange programs. He loves good storytelling in whatever form it may take and is always looking for new ways to tell a good tale! You can find him on Twitter at TimothyPShea. (Timothy.Shea@millersville.edu)

**Bradley Smith** is an assistant professor of English at Governors State University. He has published works in *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*; the book collection *Pimps, Wimps, Studs, Thugs and Gentlemen: Essays on Media Images of Masculinity*; and a vignette forthcoming in *College Composition and Communication*. (bsmith7@govst.edu)

**Anna O. Soter** is Emerita Professor at The Ohio State University. She continues to conduct scholarship, research and professional development in Language and Literature Education. (annasoter@aol.com)

**Edward J. Sullivan** is a Professor of Economics and Finance at Lebanon Valley College. Also, he is a teacher in the White Plum Lineage of Zen and a member of the Red Rose Sangha in Lancaster, PA. At his college, he founded the Meditation at Noon Group, where he teaches a variety of meditation techniques to stressed-out students, staff, and, especially, faculty. (sullivan@lvc.edu)

**Jill Moyer Sunday** teaches writing at Waynesburg University, where she also mentors future composition teachers. Seeing stories everywhere, Jill writes primarily creative nonfiction. Her recent work can be found in the *New Delta Review*, *Connotation Press*, and the *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, Volume 5. (jsunday@waynesburg.edu)

**Karen Walker, Ed. D** Walker is an associate professor and director of secondary education at Lebanon Valley College, in Annville, PA. Her areas of interest include how people learn and preparing pre-service teachers to meet the needs of every student in their classrooms. (walker@lvc.edu)

**Laurence Musgrove** is Professor of English and Chair of the Department of English and Modern Languages at Angelo State University in San Angelo, Texas, where he teaches composition, literature, and creative writing. He is past chair of AEPL, and he writes and draws at [www.theillustratedprofessor.com](http://www.theillustratedprofessor.com). His cartoon website is [www.texosophy.com](http://www.texosophy.com). (laurence.musgrove@angelo.edu)

**Andreas Willhoff** grew up in Sycamore, Illinois. He received a B.A. in Fiction Writing from Columbia College, Chicago and is currently pursuing a M.F.A in Creative Writing at Southern Illinois University. He plans on doing further research into how neuroscience can improve activities in the classroom. (andreas.willhoff@gmail.com)

## Guidelines for Writers of JAEPL

JAEPL adheres to the format guidelines found in the current edition of the *MLA Handbook* or *Style Manual*. However, for experimental essays that bend MLA format for good reason, the editors are open to other choices.

JAEPL essays should cite sources parenthetically within the text as much as possible, using a “Works Cited” list on separate pages at the end of the essay. Use endnotes: 1) to offer commentary or facts that do not fit logically into the text, 2) to handle multiple citations, 3) to add editorial commentary regarding the source itself.

Authors are responsible for double checking all references for accuracy in page number citation, as well as the accuracy in the details of title, publisher, etc.

Avoid second-hand references to a primary source. Find the original citation, double checking it for accuracy. If citing an indirect source is necessary, explain why.

Any use of student writing or classroom research should be processed through the author’s institutional IRB committee for approval. Authors must obtain written permission from the cited student writers.

The editors reserve the right to reject any piece, even one that has been solicited, if in their view the piece turns out not to be a good fit for the journal. The editors also reserve the right to make editing decisions for clarity or limitations of space. Revision of manuscripts is done in consultation with the writer and reviewers.

If style or formatting questions arise, send a query to one or both of the editors: jstrapp@king.edu and bpeters@niu.edu. **Please consult past issues for examples of articles topics that get accepted. Go to:**

<http://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/>

**Deadline:** January 31, 2014 for Vol. 19; rolling deadline otherwise

**Typing:** Double-spaced, numbered pages, including works cited and block quotations; internal headings are helpful; author’s name on title page only.

**Title page:** Title of Article; Name; Address; E-mail; Phone; Institutional Affiliation

**Abstract:** 1-2 double-spaced sentences on title page

**Preferred length:** Articles, 5-6000 words, including works cited

**Documentation style:** Current *MLA Style Manual*

**Copies:** Electronic submission in rich text format (RTF)

**Images:** 300 dpi or higher, in uncompressed TIF or JPG format, greyscale. Images that contain text or line art should be 600 dpi for legibility.

**Special sections:** Book reviews (1000 words) are determined by book review editor (Judith.Halden-Sullivan@millersville.edu). “Connecting” editor (walker@messiah.edu) determines 500-1000 word personal essays.

**Editorial report:** Within 8-12 weeks

**Compensation:** Two complimentary copies

**Copyright:** *Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning* (Author’s contract specifies conditions for reprinting privileges.)

**Addresses:** Joonna Smitherman Trapp, joonna.trapp@emory.edu

Brad Peters, bpeters@niu.edu

## Join AEPL

Become a member of AEPL! We are a rich and supportive community whose members share unique perspectives on teaching and learning. Attend the annual summer conference or workshops and SIGs at NCTE and CCCC. As a member of AEPL, you receive a copy of the journal JAEPL and newsletters.

### Membership Dues

The membership year extends from January 1 until December 31. Members receive a renewal reminder in their Fall Newsletter. Dues:

Single year —\$30.00

Three years—\$75.00

Five years—\$100.00

50% discounted rates (student/retired/adjunct)

**Complete this membership form and mail your check to:**

Bruce Novak, English Dept., IUP, Leonard Hall 109B, Indiana, PA 15075

**OR Join online. It's easy! Pay via Paypal at:**

*[https://www.sworps.tennessee.edu/aepl/html/Join%20AEPL\\_ind.htm](https://www.sworps.tennessee.edu/aepl/html/Join%20AEPL_ind.htm)*

**Address questions to:** Bruce.Novak@iup.edu

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Institutional status:      ☐ Fulltime faculty      ☐ Retired  
                                 ☐ Adjunct                      ☐ Student

Institutional affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_  
                                 (City)    (State & Zip code)

Email/ Fax/ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Special interests: \_\_\_\_\_

Amount enclosed:    \$ \_\_\_\_\_

## Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning

### SUMMER CONFERENCE: The Art of Noticing Closely

June 25-28, 2014

Laurentian University Residence

Featured Speaker: Ian Tamblyn



The 2014 Conference theme is devoted to exploring the language of landscape, place, and stillness. Plan on rich discussions and experiences that will invite us to slow down, savor, and delight in the very essence of the world around us, in a serene lakeside setting. Ian Tamblyn will regale us with story-weaving and folk singing.

Restoration ecologist Peter Beckett, research chair for Stressed Aquatic Systems, John Gunn, and Canadian academic/ TV personality David Pearson will conduct a panel discussion. Whitefish River First Nation Professor of Indigenous Studies Brock Pitawanakwat will also speak. Soprano Brook Dufton will perform, along with Sudbury's vocal ensemble, Octatonic Decadence. Acoustic ecologist R. Murray Shafer will join conference participants, who will receive a copy of his book, *The Stones*.



#### Sessions will include:

- 90-minute experiential workshops
- 60-minute interactive experiences
- 20-minute paper presentations
- 2-hour evening Special Interest Groups
- Pre-conference session of shared doctoral work, in-progress or completed

**Early-Bird Registration opens and continues:** January 25, 2014 to March 1, 2014

**Registration Fees:** \$200, if paid by March 1  
\$225, from March 1 to April 15  
\$250 after April 15

**Accommodations:** Laurentian University Residence, \$75/day (continental breakfast, single and shared rooms)

Travelway Inn: \$125/day (buffet breakfast, [travelwayinn.com](http://travelwayinn.com))

**Air Transport:** Sudbury Airport (YSB)

**Meals:** \$135 (reception, 3 lunches, BBQ dinner, gourmet fish or pasta dinner)

#### Conference co-organizers:

Jan Buley, [jbuley@laurentian.ca](mailto:jbuley@laurentian.ca)

David Buley, [david.buley@gmail.com](mailto:david.buley@gmail.com)

**For further information, please contact conference organizers at:**

[NoticingDeeply@hotmail.com](mailto:NoticingDeeply@hotmail.com)

ISSN 1085 – 4630



Parlor Press  
3015 Brackenberry Drive  
Anderson SC 29621

