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Connecting

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Connecting

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Helen Walker, Louise Morgan, Danielle Sahm, Laurence Musgrove, Rae Ann DeRosse, Joonna Smitherman Trapp, and Beverly Faxon

Connecting: Exponential Complexity

Section Editor's Message

Is history speeding up, or are we doing the speeding? Picture yourself in a little bumper car with an infinitely complex overhead grid in interconnected rooms with multiple layers of floors and, of course, other shiny bumper cars everywhere. Six degrees of separation seems a good way to view not just your relationship with Kevin Bacon but with everything animal, vegetable, or mineral. In the February 29, 2008, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Russell Jacoby satirized “the new academic tongue” for its heavy sprinkling of “complicates, multiplicities,” and “complexifies.” Academe may overdo the verbiage, but the sentiment makes sense to me.

We get regular validation of physics's fairly new theory of complementarity on the nightly news. There are the melting arctic glaciers affecting trans-hemispheric hurricanes, tsunamis, and droughts. Policies for illegal immigrants crossing the Mexican-U.S. border affect my hometown's unemployment statistics. And the most omnipresent connection of everything under the sun, the internet, is even called “the web.” This layer upon layer of complexity is our daily experience, our life truth.

This is what I like about the narratives for this issue: they speak of this truth. They recognize that what happens among our students and us, in and outside of our classrooms, inside and outside of ourselves, is quite the complicated process, all part of a widening and deepening teaching/learning process. For me, these narratives illustrate the beauty of this new interdependence, this dynamic back-and-forth flow of energy that engages more of our humanity than ever before.

Our students' writing processes are far more complicated than, perhaps, we can ever understand, although we must try to. They involve their emotional, social, and spiritual intelligences as well as their reason. And, what is even more complex, their continually dynamic processes are interwoven with our own processes as we engage in theirs.

We surely want to come to grips with our students and ourselves as whole human beings, and this time in history seems to be rooting for us. We have likely spent far too much energy far too long keeping parts of our whole isolated. There is a lot to learn, so let's think of these stories as gentle teachers. One small event at a time. Stories of someone else's struggles—of survival, since each one lived to tell the tale, which means we will likely survive as well.

Louise Morgan shows how involved our egos can get with our students, how special the moments are when we get free. She also shows us the widening parameters of the “classroom.” Danielle Sahn presents a light-hearted look at the complex issue of societal roles, which some of our writing students as well as some of us contend with in the search for identity. Laurence Musgrove writes of his realizations about emotions in the mix. Rae Ann DeRosse's narrative reminds us that some problems are so complicated that deeper questions are their legacy. Joonna Smitherman Trapp makes it clear that students can be our best teachers, and Beverly Faxon “complicates” the notion of what writing instruction can be. All gentle reminders that, although this teaching life is one big demanding endeavor, we, along with Laurence Musgrove, can applaud the “celebration and laughter, the crazy enthusiasm and embrace of the privilege to teach and to meet semester after semester new souls, minds, bodies, hearts, passions, and pains.”

Email about the Ego

Louise Morgan

Dear Helen,

What does the ego have to do with teaching? Plenty. I am watching Eckart Tolle talk to Oprah tonight on Webcast about the ego construction. The purpose of the ego is to have a "place" for thoughts . . . an identification of the one having the thoughts with the thoughts themselves. I construct this thought, this role: teacher. But time and time again my students "spit" on that role. They have no construct as student that tells them to honor my role as teacher. In fact, truth be told, they may have labeled teacher as oppressor. White oppressor. Is this why they don't see me? Because they have me labeled? Or because I have labeled myself? I don't know. I do know there is something I want to shed about this label. My students say, "I don't like how teachers get all up in your face." I don't want to be in their faces. I want to be in their hearts. How do I do it?

I feel close to doing it in occasional, very small "feeling tones": one sunshiny day, Jamisha asks to run the track. She races around, and I decide to simply join in the oval and walk my own pace. Soon, she says, "Hey, Ms. Morgan." And she catches up to me.

I am struck by her beauty, her muscled grace, and I tell her, "You are so beautiful."

She smiles and turns a cartwheel. "You know, I am trying to hold it together." She goes through a litany of her desires: "I want to quit smoking, I want to go to college, I want to take care of myself." We talk a bit about her identity. Her latest issue is dating a much older woman. Her mother is furious. Jamisha wants to move out. She says her mother is dating a crack head; why should she listen to her anyway?

The conversation goes beyond my ability to grasp. The complications baffle me. I am not Aisha, the social worker who sorts through teenage drama finding the meaning and motives for actions and reactions. It all spirals into some kind of mishmash to me. I do better staying present. "Jamisha, you are so athletic. Are you comfortable in your own skin? With your sexual identity?" I go there with her because it is a present moment, not rehashing the past.

She walks with a lilt, "Yeah, I feel like a woman. I don't want to hide that. It's who I am."

So here we are walking the track. Who are we—really? A white teacher, a black student? A heterosexual, a homosexual? We breathe and walk, breathe and walk.

I don't know if I am being a teacher. I know that I want to be present at this moment for Jamisha. I appreciate my students today. I appreciate Jamisha now, in these moments when my ego is vanquished. ☹

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The Poet Rewritten

Danielle Sahn

With a few variations, the encyclopedia article generally begins when fate takes the young poet (born in such-and-such a year, dead three decades later), and sets him aside from the rest of humanity. Dark skies glower over his birthplace and the rumble of thunder announces his arrival to the world. A careful observer might, if he or she looked closely, see the mark of genius glowing surreally on the baby's smooth, ivory brow.

In the second paragraph, the article will usually inform us that, soon after his birth, one or both of his parents died in tragic disasters or wasting illnesses. And, unfortunately, any surviving parents are completely incapable of understanding the poet's true nature. The father, if he lives, has inevitably made his fortune in some business or other and will insist that his son follow in his profitable and practical footsteps. If the poet complies, he is miserable; if he rebels, he is disowned. On the other hand, if the mother survives to raise her child, she often hires a governess to keep the boy out of her way. While she and her friends laugh and sip champagne in their vivid swaying evening gowns, the poet stays in his poorly-lit playroom, taking no interest in his toys and trying to remember what his father looked like.

More often than not, the encyclopedia article will tell us that the great poet only has room in his heart for one true romance, and that woman is inevitably either forbidden by law or fatally ill. Either way, he cannot have her, and the passionate but unrequited desire eats at him until he becomes incapable of loving at all. After that first and only romance, he ruins woman after woman with his despair and infidelity. Sometimes he marries one of these women in a desperate attempt to avoid a lifetime of loneliness, but they never make each other happy. And even on his honeymoon, the silver light of the moon pouring through the half-shuttered windows makes him think not of his love, but of the coldness of his approaching death.

Toward the end, the encyclopedia article waxes eloquent on the poet's tragically short life, which ends in a sinking ship or in the unfamiliar bed of a foreign hotel. And then, in the thin white space between the end of the poet's biography and the beginning of the next article, the encyclopedia whispers to its readers, "If you want to be great, then pay attention because this is what makes a great poet."

So, taking its advice, we gather up our knowledge. We have learned from this and other sources that the great poets were plagued by either their poverty or their wealth; their parents were either dead, dying, or heartless; and they wrote from the very center of their despair, in the anguished cry of their hurting souls. Suffering followed them like a shadow, like a storm cloud, like a perpetually falling evening.

For some of us who want to produce great work, this formula presents a problem. We were born in hospitals on sunny days. We played games with other children, went to summer camp, and didn't learn to read until we were five. Our

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parents are living members of the working middle class who anxiously read Dr. Spock to find out how long they should breast feed. And we do not, except on rare occasions, feel anything approaching despair. There are no monsters in our heads, no tragedies trailing us, and no desperate motives driving us.

The tradition of great writers traces the progression of isolation, despair, death. It asks us to struggle against our good health and happiness, and to embrace darkness instead of light.

But some, as they stare at the empty page or blank screen and desperately want to fill it with the rich texture of their lives, realize that the poet of genius does not need to be a man pursued by melancholy and despair. In fact, the poet doesn't need to be a man at all. The poet can be a woman, young and inexperienced, who wants to remind the blind and wandering world of the incredible, inviolate goodness of life.

Perhaps someday the encyclopedia will be filled with articles like this:

In her youth, she played in the sun, in the water, in the dirt, with her friends. Not even a careful observer would have suspected any genius. Her parents, both kind and loving, encouraged her to do whatever she wanted as long as it made her happy. They sent her to a public school where she gained no particular distinctions, and, when she declared her intention of becoming a writer, they asked only that she dedicate one of her books to them. Eventually, she fell in love with a clever, loyal man who, she suspected, loved her for the whole of her being. And she wrote when she had time, and when she had something to say, and even when she didn't have time or anything to say.

And life went on from there. It wasn't always easy; no life ever is. But even when times were a little tough—when she was between jobs, or received a rejection letter in the mail—she was always essentially, unalterably happy, and what she wrote flowed out of her happiness like green growth from dark, heavy soil. ☺

People, Get Ready

Laurence Musgrove

Like many faculty members, I'm starting to get ready for the fall semester. I'm preparing syllabi, and I'm sending my textbook orders to the campus bookstore. I'm putting some resources on Blackboard, I'm waiting to hear where my classes will be located, and I've incorporated my school's academic calendar into my own: general faculty meetings, Labor Day, Thanksgiving break, finals week, and so forth.¹

Also, I'm getting myself ready for the emotional demands of teaching. In the past, I never made my students' emotional needs a priority. When they came to my office with this or that teary-eyed story about why the paper would be late, I

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¹ This article is reprinted with permission from *Inside Higher Ed*, July 23, 2007. <www.insidehighered.com/views/2007/07/23/musgrove>.

just waved them off. I'd say, "No reason to explain. Just get it to me as soon as you can." No tissue box in my office. No time for tears. See you later, alligator.

I also told my writing students to change all instances of "I feel" to "I think" in their papers. They were there to learn how to be critical thinkers, not to share feelings. After all, how were they going to provide clear and verifiable evidence for those kinds of claims? Focus on what's up there in your head, no. . . uh, you know, wherever your feelings happen to come from.

Sad to say, that's been my story. Not that I'm a cold fish. I've learned over time that my feelings about my family, children, students, and colleagues are pretty much an open book; in other words, I'd never make it to the final table of the World Series of Poker. My wife can easily tell the crabby Laurence from the sad Laurence from the confused Laurence. Marcel Marceau I ain't; still, my face is a pretty accurate map of my emotional life. And it's a life I've tried to ignore, especially on the job.

Why? Well, I think I'm beginning to arrive at some answers. Earlier this summer, I was attending a conference at the YMCA of the Rockies in Estes Park, Colorado, sponsored by the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning, an affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English. The organizers of this conference selected the topic "The Emotional Life of Teachers," and they invited Peter Elbow, author of *Writing Without Teachers*, to be one of the featured speakers.

During a morning plenary session, he asked us to reflect upon the emotional logic of our teaching, to play "the believing game" when it came to the feelings we have about our students and our work. According to Elbow, the believing game is refraining from doubt, and, in this case, purposefully accepting the truth of those feelings to better understand them. In other words, he asked us to commit to the idea that our feelings made sense and to identify why the emotions we have are the emotions we have.

As you can imagine—that is, if you know anything about Elbow's work—we also engaged in quite a bit of freewriting about this topic. And as I was writing along, opening myself to whatever came my way, two very simple things struck me. First, emotions take time. Second, we probably need reminding which emotions got us into teaching in the first place.

Emotions demand a different kind of schedule. They put the brakes on the frantic rush of our daily lives. Thus, feelings get swept aside because they slow us down, they make us late for class, they spill out in a mess, and they produce unnecessary conflicts. They simply interfere with the clockwork of teaching and learning. They have no place in the faculty meeting because they aren't on the agenda. They have no place in the classroom because they can't be tested or multiple-choice'd. And in this age of setting and measuring outcomes, what can't be assessed certainly shouldn't be included.

Emotions also reveal how unprepared we are for them. Sure, some of us stand more at the ready than others, but emotional readiness as a topic of study in education scholarship focuses almost exclusively on the emotions of pre-school and elementary students, not college teachers. In addition, the emotions we generally think of or encounter are negative or hurtful, like fear, anger, and sadness. When we characterize colleagues or students as emotional, they are overly dramatic, out of control, or just can't be reasoned with. We say, "Why can't they get a grip? Can't they see how much time they're wasting?"

In an effort to do a better job of accepting the emotional reality of my pro-

fession, I made an important decision this summer. In the past, when a student or colleague came into my office with a look of concern, I always asked, “What’s on your mind?” I now realize this question is sorely insufficient. If I really want to get to “the heart of the matter,” I have to take the extra time to ask questions that explore the emotional dimensions of that concern. I also have to take the extra time to explore and express my own, to dignify the full humanity of that concern and that person.

Finally, and especially as we approach the new school year, I feel we need to recall the emotional logic of choosing our careers in the first place.

Wasn’t it the joy of learning? And wasn’t it the joy of teaching? Wasn’t it the passion-filled hallelujah of the miracle of our students’ lives? The celebration and laughter, the crazy enthusiasm and embrace of the privilege to teach and to meet semester after semester new souls, minds, bodies, hearts, passions, and pains?

Who else gets to do what we do? Who else gets the glorious privilege to teach what we teach? Who else gets to read what we read? Who else gets to live in the continually increasing variety and wealth of ideas? Who else gets to see and recognize and argue for the gifts our students don’t even see in themselves? Who else recognized the joy we felt at the joy our teachers felt in seeing our futures for us? Who else heard the honest soul-piercing *yes* that affirmed us? Who else gets to join the choir?

Who sings this? I mean, who lifts their voices in song about this miracle? Who bows before it? Who recognizes the undeserved grace of this joy? Which of us thanks our students for coming into our lives? Who says “Amen” to the love we receive from this joy? In all creation, sky to earth, ocean to ocean, man, woman, parent, child, teacher, student, animal, plant, rock, and soul, in all creation: why us? Why this joy?

I say, people, get ready, there’s a train a-coming. ☺

Authority Issues

Rae Ann DeRosse

During our first conference—in which we discussed his first essay about alcoholism—Sam told me that he “wanted to experiment,” and so he got drunk while he wrote the essay. “Is that a problem? Am I going to get in trouble?”

I laughingly responded, “I’m not your mother; you’re not going to get in trouble with me.”

At first, I thought nothing of Sam’s behavior in my classroom: the way he would compliment me, his implicitly sexual body language, and his continual disrespect of my “authority.” Since authority is something I already had difficulty assuming in the classroom because it seems to run counter to my desire for a democratic learning space, when Sam would talk while I was talking, I blew it off.

When he came to me during free-writing time, however, to ask me if I would

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read his “story” because he was thinking of putting it in his portfolio and it might be “too mature,” my heart fell. I knew I did not want to read the piece, but as his teacher I felt manipulated into doing so; what kind of writing teacher refuses to read her student’s work?

I tried to tell myself it would be fine, that his version of “mature” probably meant drug and alcohol abuse. Instead, his paper contained the sordid details of a tumultuous sexual relationship and all of the resulting violent sexual fantasies. Here was Sam in the full embodiment of his male aggression, and I was frightened. I was angry too because he certainly had manipulated me into reading this writing.

Had I encouraged him in some way? Should I have coldly shut him down when he complimented me? Sternly admonished him for talking while I was talking? Refused to read his work? I still don’t know what I should have done, but I eventually did have to assert my authority when he ignored my request not to attend class until we could meet with the composition director. After our eventual meeting, at which he “apologized” very unapologetically, Sam voluntarily dropped my course.

Although I was relieved, the situation with him has made an indelible impact on me. When I walk around campus, I look over my shoulder. I wonder if I’ll pass him in the halls, and, if I do, how I will react. The worst part, though, is how this situation has affected my relationship with my other students. I am now slightly colder, a little more distant, especially with the males. I wonder if they realize it and whether it hurts my effectiveness in the classroom. I am also trying to use my authority issue with Sam to be more thoughtful and creative in establishing democracy in the classroom. Learning is, after all, what teaching is about. ☹

The Importance of Being Ernie

Joonna Smitherman Trapp

Ernie was not a particularly good student. He was one of those guys who show up in my college writing class every semester because they have to, one of those whose name I forget a couple of semesters later, a typical Midwestern student—too polite, too eager to please, too earnest.

Overly tall, lanky, bright red hair, his face a field of freckles, Ernie seemed to be a favorite of his classmates. I quickly discovered why. He loved people; his thin frame became waving hands and nodding head in the presence of others. And his smile struck me as amazingly genuine. He loved people much more than he did writing or reading. Oh, I was fond of him, but I quickly wrote him off as a writer. No need to invest in him. No need to pay much attention. It was the common attitude I developed with such students. An okay student. He will do fine—high C or low B. He won’t need special help to survive, and he certainly will not warrant any extra mentoring.

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At mid-semester I read his portfolio. No real surprises. Some progress. Some effort. B minus.

But one of his papers kept nagging at me. In this paper, Ernie talked about wrestling—why he did it, what it gave him, and why he stopped doing it. The paper was a standard essay, nothing especially noteworthy for my attention as a writing instructor. But running in and out and underneath the positive narrative was this feeling of regret, and I couldn't stop thinking about how sad and final that attitude felt in his writing. The sense of regret kept haunting me primarily because I didn't believe that Ernie consciously intended to show any regret in having quit wrestling. In fact, I wasn't even sure that he knew he felt regret. But it was there. I had to talk to him—not about writing but about why he left wrestling. I asked him to stop by.

He was nervous as I handed him his portfolio. "Is there a problem? I know I'm not a very good writer, Mrs. Trapp."

"There's nothing wrong with your writing." I saw him visibly relax. "It's about wrestling in general." I began then to ask him a series of questions about why he had quit wrestling. As the story unfolded, it became clear that he felt forced by his own physical limitations to give up something he loved. Tears glistened in his eyes as he talked. I finally just blurted out my opinion. "I don't think you are done with wrestling yet. You should think about it." We had some more conversation and a quick hug, and he left.

I took note some time later that he had indeed rejoined the wrestling team. Good deed for the week, I thought, even though it felt strange to need to talk to a student about wrestling. I was glad I said something. Move on.

The awkward Ernie, much loved, was voted President of the Student Government Association his senior year. I was baffled. Ernie? When it was his turn to speak at graduation as the representative of the student body, I was a little embarrassed by his talk. Was this the best we had to show to parents and guests? I wished Ernie had sent me a copy of his talk to preview. I wished he had valued his social life less and his education more.

Ernie graduated, and I stopped thinking of him unless he stopped by to say hello or took the time to write a quick email. I always noticed in his emails that he still wasn't a wonderful writer. Ever the writing teacher.

One day in the summer, Ernie showed up in my office, sweating from the heat of the Iowa sun. I was annoyed. How was I ever going to get this book finished if students kept interrupting me, even in the summer? I greeted him, fed him some chocolates, and invited him to talk. Talk he did.

He was excited about his move to the Czech Republic. He wanted to thank me. I was clueless. He reminded me that I had challenged him to rethink his decision to stop wrestling. I could barely remember the incident. He said that he had listened and decided to join our wrestling team. As a result he had traveled to the Czech Republic with the team and connected to an organization that worked with troubled youth in the capital city through sporting activities. They had offered the friendly redhead a position as a mentor and wrestling coach. He was leaving the next day and just wanted to thank me for taking the time to care about him. We hugged, and I wished him well. As a committed evangelical, Ernie left convinced that God had directed his teacher to show him the way into helping others. Now it was my turn to be embarrassed by my own inadequacies because I knew I hadn't been the thoughtful or caring teacher as he believed.

Ernie wrote to me often of his experiences overseas. Sometimes he was euphoric because a young boy was doing better and staying off the streets. Sometimes he was despondent because of failure and the loss of some kid in whom he had invested. He stopped by again a couple of years later to tell me of his decision to stay in the Czech Republic permanently. His face was radiant. He gave me a homemade CD of his kids singing. It was a beautiful thing. I remarked that it was good that he was able to keep doing what he loved.

“It’s all because of you,” he replied. This time we both cried, but not for the same reasons. After he left, I began to weep with abandon. I felt small in the presence in such self-sacrifice mingled with such joy.

I have come to believe that teachers teach all the time, in ways we don’t expect. We stand in the way of the students—not to block them in the conventional sense of the phrase, but rather we stand in the way they are going. We can’t be The Way, as Jesus says He is, but we can be a part of the journey our students are traveling. We push, prod, provoke, challenge, cajole, encourage, discourage, bewilder, and yes, even bedazzle them at times. More than that, though, the ways we are going get all jumbled up with the ways they are going. Intentionally or not, they direct our paths even as we direct theirs. Maybe Ernie is in the Czech Republic because of me and because of something ineffable that came out of hiding inside of him. Maybe. But, because of him, I have become more aware of my placement in a student’s way as a teacher.

Since Ernie, I have become a more intentional mentor to my students. I look for opportunities to talk to them, not just about their writing but about their loves and passions. I think now that my best teaching, the teaching that makes me feel connected to all teachers everywhere and to the perfect teacher of fishermen and tax collectors, is always outside the classroom. My best teaching is not planned, occurring in school vans, in the cafeteria line, at the local coffee shop, at a play rehearsal, by the soft drink machine. That teaching is terrifyingly beautiful, and I think I live for those moments, thirsting for them to happen again and again.

Someday, I need to share with Ernie stories of other students, students he doesn’t know—Sarah and her nearly complete PhD, Allison and her book chapter, David and his scholarship—because, you see, Ernie is responsible for all these events. He stood in my way and taught me that all Ernies in my classes have value. He reminded me of what it means to be a mentor in earnest just as I urged him to do what he loved in earnest. Both of us learned the importance of being Ernie. ☹

Why I Read Them Poetry

Beverly Faxon

When I started teaching English 101, a more experienced instructor offered a solution for students who came in late. He made the students read poetry out loud to the class. The implication was that the threat of poetry, or the reading

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aloud of it, served as a gentle humiliation, an impetus to arrive on time. The punch line was that one student seemed to enjoy reading Shakespearean sonnets; he apparently got into the habit of regularly arriving late so that he could take the stage.

Intrigued, not by poetry used as a deterrent, but by a student's pleasure in a sonnet, I decided to open each class by reading a poem into the silence of the classroom, a silence that, at other times, feels urgently uneasy, as though it is pressing to be filled with the worthwhile, with provocation and process. I like using that silence instead as a space where a poem can unfold for just a minute or two. And I like knowing that I have sometimes chosen a poem specifically for one student, a gift that may or may not be noticed. So I read Tony Hoagland's "Grammar" with the line about the robustly loved woman who has "some kind of light coming from her head" for a student whose recent in-class fast write about the writing process undergoes a heartfelt interruption, a few longing sentences about a young man she can't stop thinking about. "Here," I silently offer her. "In case he's still on your mind, this poem is for you."

No one ever comments on the poems I read. Yet the poems have had their moment as they spool out and create invisible connections in the room. When the business of the class begins, lingering words float into corners or rise without protest to the ceiling like a child's let-loose balloon nudging the rafters. I imagine that on a dusky evening a line may roll out in a student's head: a lifting, a spark, a question. ☺

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