

2009

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Recommended Citation

Walker, Helen; Statum, Andrew; Kryston, Vic; Li, Jie; Zino, Dominique; and Trapp, Joonna Smitherman (2009) "Connecting," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*. Vol. 15 , Article 15.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl15annv>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol15/iss1/15>

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Connecting

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Helen Walker, Andrew Statum, Vic Kryston, Jie Li, Dominique Zino, and Joonna Smitherman Trapp

Connecting—Teaching: A Hero Journey

Section Editor's Message

First, let me make a suggestion to you: try a retreat of two-plus weeks on the top of a mountain somewhere, preferably a mountain where using email and cell phones is impossible. Bring books and a notebook, a pen, sunglasses, and hiking shoes. Adding a good friend is fine, too. This is where I am right now, in Oregon where the Southern Cascades and Siskiyou Mountains converge. We leave only on Fridays to go to Ashland for groceries. I am in this place, like Mary Oliver and Annie Dillard are in their *Nature*. My work is to keep myself healthy, to roam the fields and woods at will, and to notice so my eyes and heart will bulge with metaphor.

I share a cabin with a friend who teaches in a wilderness school back home in PA. She's here to write a new curriculum for adjudicated girls, and she runs her emerging lesson plans by me most evenings. Between the two of us, we are obsessed with the inspiring metaphor of the Hero Journey—perfect for her girls, perfect for my rhythmic Hiawathan days. Joseph Campbell and others have popularized its mythic stages: hearing the call, crossing the threshold, then slaying the dragons, crossing deadly swamps with help from wise women and amulets, arriving, and deciding to return to the world—to get ready to start all over again.

As I sit here beside the millpond, I see “the call” happening in front of me! A line of six geese splash into the pond, the two parents calling to their brood of four: “Follow me, follow me.” They do and then glide smoothly out of my view. Two weeks ago, they were downy goslings, today almost as big as their parents, training for their hero journeys, of course.

Almost hidden in the algae, a frog stares at me—the same fellow as yesterday, I am quite sure, with his disproportionately long legs. I envision my own dive headfirst into the black depths to the root-entangled bottom of this pond to save a prince and thus the world; no one else is here to do it, and I say, “Yes!” and swim with a powerful frog kick to the rescue.

In this context, with this metaphor influencing everything I see, I have been reading the submissions of teacher narratives for “Connecting.” Not surprisingly, some are the adventures of heroic teachers. They speak of the courage it takes to cross thresholds into the maze called classroom to “save the prince and princess.” Perhaps you will recognize yourself here and remember that you too are the hero of your teaching journey.

Hero Andrew Statum discusses his call to the teaching journey in “The Question.” Vic Kryston’s “Conflict Resolution” narrates how he handled a wily little dragon and turned her into a princess. Jie Li’s “Teaching with Accent” broadens our metaphor-making skills across cultures as she discovers the “wise woman” in herself underneath the “hag in rags.” Dominique Zino courageously and patiently navigates impenetrable spaces. Finally, the narrator of Joonna Trapp’s poem “Composition Class 7:45AM” is the lone-hero-voice-crying-out-in-the-wilderness. She gives us hope that the voice is sometimes heard and, when we really get lucky, can even become a chorus.

Blessings on your own Hero Journey.

The Question

Andrew Statum

“So what do you do?”

The Question. My old adversary. I’ve been answering it my whole life. It haunts me like a specter. At family reunions, at gatherings of old friends, in polite conversation, it shows itself. This time, it has followed me to church where, home for Easter, I am confronted by the blue-haired Mrs. Baker, first alto for twenty years in the St. John’s adult choir. The Question seems to know my every move. It knows where I am and where I’ll be next, though I’ve learned not to fear it. Rather, I’ve come to loathe it with the frosty stoicism of an aging catcher whose knee, yet again, is acting up: it’s not really a surprise, but the ache is wearisome, and it forces me to consider a new line of work. Maybe insurance isn’t so bad. My cousin Frankie in Michigan is making a killing. . . .

“I’m getting my PhD in English.”

“Oh, really?” she says. “How interesting.” Yep, there it is, that familiar look of bafflement, the kind nod, the fluttering eyelids, the pleasant smile. I can feel her panicking to keep the conversation alive though we both know this is going nowhere: “And what exactly do you want to do with that? Do you want to teach or something?”

Ugh. It’s that “or something” that gets me every time, that vague, condescending gesture to the possibility of other possibilities that she doesn’t believe exist. I smile back though I feel my insides curdling. “Yes,” I say. “I want to teach English literature,” and then I politely excuse myself for the cookie table, much to the relief of us both.

I love talking about literature. But to discuss it as an aspiration or a profession, rather than as a hobby or abiding interest, is, for me, to engage in an existential offensive that is just too exhausting to bear. Maybe it’s my family. Maybe it’s the company I keep. Maybe I’m too sensitive. Whatever the reason, The Question puts me on the defensive, for I can’t help but perceive the slightest twinge of contempt in its delivery. It’s as if, underneath the feigned interest, my interlocutors are insisting I justify what they consider to be a frivolous, unambitious vocation. Nobody asks this of someone who’s getting her MBA. No one questions the ambitions of a law student. Hell, nobody’s ever questioned Frankie’s decision to sell insurance.

But, when I stop for a moment and breathe, I realize that, behind The Question, there are other questions I’ve yet to confront. Why do I want to teach? And why English literature? Furthermore, why don’t I want to do anything else? Just who do I think I am?

I’ve heard many people refer to the profession of teaching as a “calling,” imbuing the entire enterprise with a kind of Oprahesque spirituality. Does this really happen? Do people get “called” to teach, the way some are called to God? This has yet to happen to me. I am not, nor do I want to be, a high priest of pedagogy. Like most of us, I want to be happy doing what I do for a living, and

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I've found that I'm happiest when I'm engaging people in a critical dialogue about the things that matter to them. I feel a genuine connection to the larger picture of humanity when I'm exchanging ideas in an environment of curiosity and discovery. I thrive in situations where it's my job to break down complex ideas and communicate them to others in an enlightening way. Teaching, then, was the most logical career choice.

Which begs the second question: why English? Why not mathematics or welding—you know, something useful? First, let me say that I am not espousing the utility of any one academic discipline over that of another. There's room enough in this painting? collage? for everyone. But I do think an education in literature is a valuable part of any pedagogical agenda that proposes to create a "well-rounded" human being. Literature—real, solid, good literature—has the effect of stretching our moral faculties to the point of breaking them or strengthening them. Literature teaches us to question the appearance of things. It teaches that suppositions are not enough. Literature and, more specifically, the understanding of a piece of writing as a product of careful intellectual construction, teaches us to look beneath the facade of words, to kick the tires of the text and find out what the words are really worth. An education in literature empowers readers, shaping them into critical thinkers. Ultimately, it is as a critical thinker that we develop the confidence to articulate, and to believe in the validity of, our own conscience.

And, if I don't teach that, then who will? Okay, maybe there is a hint of the messianic about me after all. But literature has taught me to analyze and to refine and, finally, to believe in my own voice. And if I'm given the opportunity to set up that same lesson for others, well, I'm going to jump on it. And I don't think I need to feel defensive about that. ☐

Conflict Resolution

Vic Kryston

Sometimes it is a good thing to measure what students don't know. More often, it is a great thing to measure what they do know. Here is a final exam I handed out the day before the test.

- * Final Exam, Question 1. Use pens or pencils or crayons or cut your finger and write in blood: demonstrate to me and to yourself how this class changed you.
- * Final Exam, Question II: There is no Question II.

Some might say I shouldn't have given them the question the night before. But then how would they know to bring crayons? And Samantha would not have had time to dwell deeply on her answer.

Samantha was a significant part of the class. She was a strange mixture of

Vic Kryston came out of Brooklyn, NY. During an extended adolescence, he carved out a career in the teaching of English to non-native speakers. He currently resides in Loudoun County, Virginia, where he is an adjunct teacher of Developmental Reading and Writing at N. VA Community College.

cosmetology student and punk rocker, the type that wouldn't have cared if I went to her for a manicure with dirty nails. Each day Samantha came to class wearing a black dress, black shoes, black make up (a goodly amount), along with the dark sneer announcing her punkness.

And each day she followed her own inner drummer into class late.

But there came a time when I, feeling pressure, angst, impatience, and sensing it was time to sell my soul to the wily administrators walking the halls, accosted Samantha. How dare she so consistently miss the first minutes of our class?

The class was already in a circle and starting a discussion. When Samantha joined us, finally, I asked the class to suggest some way to deal with Samantha's tardiness. I had worked hard to encourage the students to feel ownership for the class; Samantha's "tardiness issue" had become a class issue, and the class should help deal with it. Samantha blanched under her make up. The class decided that, as a punishment, Samantha would wear all white the next day.

She did! White dress, white shoes, makeup—all of it. She looked stunning, and we all told her so.

The year completed itself, and Samantha's variety in outfit color became more and more "normal," and I moved on to other happenings. And exam day arrived. Samantha sketched a fashion drawing using her crayons. It was a series of fashion sketches of models wearing multi-colored outfits, and Samantha wrote about how the experience of being made to wear white had, ironically, opened up a whole new world of color for her. She discovered she liked wearing lots of color. She liked the freedom of colors, the diversity of moods. And she also discovered she liked irony in her world. That having been one of our semester's topics, she and I were both delighted. ☺

Teaching with Accent

Jie Li

I speak English with Chinese accent, so do I teach composition with same accent. For this deficit, I suffered a long time. When I first began to teach first-year composition, I tried to Americanize my speaking, thinking, and teaching. After a time, I found that my attempt made things worse. I felt less confident because I didn't seem to be myself, losing control of my tongue and my mind. Uncertainty accompanied and tortured me. I realized that "playing American" was not a technique I could acquire with ease. I decided to teach with accent, giving my class a style typical of my culture.

I taught writing for about ten years in China before I became a student and a teaching assistant in the rhetoric and writing program in an American midwestern university. The current-traditional rhetoric still dominated writing instruction in my home university. Product is valued over process; grammar is put to the fore.

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Students demonstrated a strong sense of accuracy and good command of sentence strategies because the teaching mode emphasized structure and rules. Admittedly, content and rhetoric did not get due attention, but, in their papers, Chinese students utilized different sentence structures, such as cleft sentences, inversions, parallel and balanced sentences, loose and periodic sentences. In my American students' works, I didn't find many effective sentences, so the beauty and musicology of the language was not fully displayed. In China, the large student population and test-driven educational system forced Chinese students to develop autonomy as well. Sifting through my memories, I decided to try out some of the methods I used in China. My motto was to make the best use of my advantages and bypass my disadvantages.

Adopting my own teaching method came after a long time of observation. I walked into the classroom, prepared but still frustrated because of my accent. First-year students brought to class their previous perceptions about writing and every second judged my ability or inability to teach. I saw doubtful and resistant eyes, but some smiling faces in the class were an incentive to do a good job. I taught the hard way: I spent far more time than my colleagues with and on my students to compensate for my own deficit. I prepared carefully, read every outline and draft they composed, responded to their questions in detail, held more conferences than required, and had a lot of online exchanges. Gradually, students paid more attention to what I taught than to my accent, and their writing improved too, though not tremendously.

My hard work brought about nice changes, but I found it was a big mistake to adopt fully what I had learned from the composition instructors' workshop. Students tended to be lazy and lacked motivation. I needed ways that fit my students and ensured better outcomes. I noted a big problem with process pedagogy even though the method nurtures students in many ways: teachers care about students' needs, creating various writing activities that help to build up their product. However, students become very dependent on teachers, which prevents them from developing critical thinking abilities. I found I thought and even wrote more than some of the students. Now and then students said, "I didn't fix this problem because you didn't mark it in my draft," or "I only looked at the part you pointed out and didn't realize I had the same problem in other areas." Some students procrastinated on revising until the last minute. In spite of the strengths of procedural pedagogy, its shortcomings in my eyes were equally prominent and worth attention.

Using my own cultural and educational background, I practiced motivating students by giving them some pressure and by connecting teaching with assessment. For example, I used a daily timeline to keep all students on the same page. I asked students to make progress reports. It worked well with serious students at first, and later most students formed the habit of finishing revisions on time. I also included mini-lessons on grammar and checked on them in evaluation. I taught students to write effective sentences and added sentence skills to the evaluative criteria. Students' papers seemed to come to life, and I could tell one paper from another. Students wrote in the evaluation saying they understood voice and style through the exercises. I was very excited to learn from students that grammar was not boring and intimidating but a magic touch.

I learned from the American system as well. One of my students, Sarah, didn't know how to write argument; her arguments were narratives. I worked with her

many times in my office, and finally she turned out to be one of the three strongest writers in the class. To my surprise, I got to know later that my practice was compatible to procedural composition studies. I noticed her to be the most frequent visitor to my office, and she worked more efficiently when she wrote in front of me. Later, she said it was because she wanted to impress me with her best work. In a sense, the office was like an examination site: she felt the pressure but did better. Used properly, pressure could turn into power.

All my students passed the portfolio evaluation. A big relief. A few students got so excited that they gave me a big hug and expressed their wish to invite me to have coffee together. I learned that students valued accomplishment, just like us! When I stepped into the writing class in the spring semester, I found some familiar faces in the new room. They became the most active and responsive students, taking leads in many interactive activities. I really appreciated their tolerance of my accent, my localized accent. ☺

Space

Dominique Zino

I teach first-year composition: thesis statements, paragraph structure, the research paper. This semester, though, I've found myself thinking a lot about outer space.

The universe that lies between me and my students measures approximately fifteen feet, from the front edge of my desk to the back wall of the classroom. At the beginning of every class, no matter how many times I encourage them to move, there are students who inevitably choose to sit against that wall, to define themselves in relation to it. There are those who rest against it to stabilize their sleep-deprived, bobbing heads; those who slide forward, legs extended, watching me, reflecting the pitch and volume of my voice in their wide eyes, yet refusing to speak; and then those who wriggle as far back in their seats as possible, notebooks close to their chests, heads down, bodies compact and closed off. This is the group that is hardest to coax off the wall. If that wall weren't there, they would happily put the length of the long linoleum-tiled hallway between us.

I speak too loudly in class. Sometimes just because I'm excited or am trying to rouse a dozing student at the end of the day but most of the time because I feel as if the success of my class depends on my ability to project across this cavernous space to the people in the back row. This space belongs neither to them nor to me. It's ethereal and yet dense with questions left unasked, relationships gone unexplored, topics waiting to be mined. For the first few weeks of school, we simply operate around it.

For one assignment I ask my students to go out into their neighborhoods and record a conversation between themselves and a person who interests them: a

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friend, a neighbor, a local store owner. These are not to be “interviews” but will be developed into portraits. I use Studs Terkel’s *Division Street: America* to model how these written portraits might be composed. In the forward to Terkel’s book, Alex Horowitz writes that the point of Terkel’s project was not just to ask a list of questions; he was in the business of “excavating the human soul” (xvi). I remember Natalie Goldberg’s advice that internalizing overheard language is the way we learn to write, so I read this phrase multiple times. “Excavating the human soul,” I repeat into the great wide open. In the last fifteen minutes of class, I decide we should not wait to start our portraits at home. Assigning each student a partner, they get up (groans are audible) and sit face to face with a classmate.

“Ask your partners to tell you about a really important moment in their lives, where something changed for them; ask them about their mothers, about their favorite breakfast food—but ask in a way that you don’t allow for a one-sentence answer. Get them to tell you a story. Put their words on paper.”

I walk around the perimeter of the room, the center now filled with desks, listening to the buzzing and scratching of pens punctuated with the occasional burst of laughter. I loom closer to each pair, yet they are looking directly at one another, not at me. They don’t need me.

The portraits they bring back to class display some of the most effective writing they have done so far: lively, provocative, and thoughtful sketches of a parent’s experience migrating to America, a music teacher’s enthusiasm for playing the drums, a peer’s struggle to make friends. Students quote from their conversations and narrate them as well. They listen carefully and hold themselves accountable for what they transcribe. They can see who they are writing about, shake the person’s hand, smell his breath. Suddenly, the focus is not solely on the student’s abilities (or weaknesses) as a writer. As a result, I think, they see their task more clearly. They have a responsibility to illustrate, as accurately as they can from their interaction with this person, a life. The empty page apparently seems much less daunting to them this time around.

I will continue to have students to coax off the back wall and navigate through the spaces that threaten to isolate us. Yet, in making our course about listening deeply, with careful consideration, I hope that the gulf between us is a space into which my students feel welcomed, one they will increasingly want to enter. ☺

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Composition Class 7:45AM

Joonna Smitherman Trapp

Perched in rows, puffed against cold,
they politely listen to my lone warble,
heads cocked, eyelids half closed.
One note elicits twitters, a sort of song.

Feathers smooth. One sings and another,
then another on our vibrating wire.

Joonna Smitherman Trapp is the incoming co-editor of JAEPL and also the new Chair of English and Foreign Languages at Waynesburg University in Pennsylvania. She is currently working on recovering popular oratory of the old South on the Lyceum circuit.