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## Connecting

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## Connecting

### Authors

Helen Walker, Sheryl Lain, Matthew B. Ittig, Laurence Musgrove, Julie O'Connell, Leslie A. Werden, Donna Souder-Hodge, Tanya R. Cochran, Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel, and Beth Godbee

## **CONNECTING**

### **No “New Normal” Needed**

**Helen Walker, “Connecting” Editor**

The poems and narratives in this space have always represented a deliberate move away from the form of the traditional, documented journal article. Poetry has more white space, fewer words, more feeling—and perhaps less persuasion. Narratives raise more questions, give fewer answers—they are about the tacit knowledge embedded in story, rather than the stuff of explicit claims or easy proofs.

We’ve long questioned the classroom scene of the towering expert behind the podium, separated from students by distance and power. Sheryl Lain’s poem “Hey, Teach!” raises a simple question in reply—“Do you love me?”—which becomes a pathway to new questions about the students we teach. Following up, Matthew Ittig captures a classroom moment of student-centered learning in a carefully designed workshop that highlights how one student reader explores her changing point of view—and by example, how she encourages her classmates and teacher to join her.

While it’s still “normal” to walk up and down the hallways of the academy and hear lectures hammering students with material soon to be recited on multiple-choice tests, Laurence Musgrove’s “Writing Program” not only reminds us of what can happen to the students who fail those tests, but also advises us that our responsibilities do not end when those students fail—because remarkably, their hunger to learn does not go away. Julie O’Connell’s short piece on why she teaches Frederick Douglass’s slave narrative follows, powerfully reflecting upon how it impacts her so-called “developmental” students. And in turn, Leslie Werden’s classroom scenario responds to Musgrove’s poem and O’Connell’s reflection by offering some thoughts about how a little chaos can not only transform what students like to read, but also how they read it, so that they gain valuable insights on their own.

I was about to end the above paragraph with the following sentence: these poems and narratives give us glimpses of teaching and learning that represent the “new normal.” But I stopped myself, recalling that the *Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning* does not document the normal. Instead, its authors challenge the normal, asking readers—as Donna Souder-Hodge does—to find new ways to teach things that we would rather avoid, such as the Holocaust, so that the important lessons of history are not lost, or much worse, “normalized” as material to put into one more lecture, or one more standardized test.

Furthermore, the co-written piece by Tonya Cochran, Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel and Beth Godbee portrays us as professionals changing our personal learning practices as well, so that in these collaborators’ words, “we mix ourselves together, breathe air

into each other's work, and inevitably become together the fertile soil from which we all grow."

The poems and narratives of this volume of *JAEPL* tell of living learning, of teachers loving the students and colleagues surrounding them, each a testament that no "new normal" can replace the old without turning what we do into rote and prescription. Indeed, the authors in the pages to come remind us that together, we can, we will, and we must do better.



## Hey, Teach! Do You Love Me?

Sheryl Lain

Do you love them,  
These brassy busybodies,  
Awkward children  
Of our species,  
Their split hooves tapping rhythm down  
The corridors of youth?  
Do you love them without apology for such a potent word  
In this pabulum setting?

They crash themselves  
Recklessly on the shores of experience  
With airy nonchalance  
About the scars.  
Cloaked only in blind faith  
They abandon caution and leap from sandstone cliffs,  
Trusting in rumors of soft sand below  
To cushion their landing  
Because the cost can't be counted,  
Can't be conceived,  
Yet.  
They yank and jerk on the breast of life,  
Greedy, like sightless kittens suckling.  
They walk into every red sea  
Expecting waves to part,  
Defying water walls to tumble.

Do you love them—  
Accepting your new part as anchor, bystander,  
Definitely not center stage?



## Ask Me Tomorrow

Matthew B. Ittig

The room is dark, save a shaft of light beaming from a projector mounted to the ceiling. Laura passes into the light, and the letters of her poem map her for a moment. She reads from the opening of a multigenre narrative she composed in response to Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*:

Softness touched me, brushed me, held me for a brief moment, then, nothing. I opened my eyes and there was no one, there was nothing, and yet I knew something, sweet and soft, had graced me. So I reached out into nothing, searching for what had to have been there. I felt something, but it was cold and hard. Not at all what I had remembered. I tried to grasp it, to bring it close, so I would have something in all this nothing. But when I did it pulled away and my fingers slipped. And so there was only nothing. Time passed and still there was nothing, I thought I might have felt that what was soft and sweet again. And when I did there was still nothing. I feel alone in all of this nothing. The only company I have to console in this the haunting softness that would touch me and the coldness that would always slip from my grasp. I don't know how long I have been in this nothing there are no clocks here, no watches to tell you the time. For this is all nothing. I've grown to love the nothing. And the softness that is altogether sweet and the coldness that is hard. Those feelings so opposite and different, yet so much the same and together, have become the only thing I look forward to the only thing I can feel.

"Wow, says Desiree, "it made me think of all the whiteness in the book, how huge the margins are. Is that what you were thinking about?"

"Yeah," says Laura, "I really like that. Billy's words are always bouncing all over the place. There's a lot of white and not very many words."

"I love how it's sad," Jordan says, "but it's also—I don't know...sweet, like you're writing about a boyfriend."

"Yeah," says Laura, "I think life is a lot like that. There's long periods of nothing, but when something comes, you sort of miss the coolness—the softness of nothing. Something is always hot and sharp. That's how I feel anyway. You're alone, soft, and then bang something happens, and you have to react."

"I wonder if that's how Billy felt," I ask.

*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* reads like a fight between the fixedness of the letters and pictures against the overwhelming size and whiteness of the margins.

"You seem to like those blank spaces?" I ask.

"Yeah, nothingness, blankness...but I don't think that idea makes much sense." Laura says.

"Why?"

"Well, there's never really nothing. Even when I'm sitting in my room: there's always something. Everything is always deteriorating or fading with time, but nothing ever really disappears. If I'm angry when I come home from school and I sit with the lights

off in my room for a while, I'll calm down, but the angry girl is still there. It's like she's standing next to me."

"Standing next to you?"

"Yeah, there's lots of me's standing next to each other."

"Do they talk to each other?"

"Yes."

"What to do they say?"

"I guess it depends...ask me tomorrow—of course I'll probably have a different idea about it by then. Like I said, 'I'm everything I am, but I'm also the opposite.'"



### Works Cited

Ondaatje, Michael. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. New York: Vintage. 1996. Print

## Writing Program

### Laurence Musgrove

A letter arrived today  
Addressed to the writing program  
Here at the university.

It was postmarked last week  
From a prisoner living  
At the Robertson Unit,

A correctional facility  
North of Abilene  
With a capacity shy of 3000.

Written in black ink,  
The lettering is clean  
And easy to read.

The college-ruled paper  
With three holes punched  
Is folded nicely.

*My name is \_\_\_\_\_  
And at this time I'm writing  
To see if your program have*

*Any type of writing programs  
For inmates within  
The prison system.*

*So would you please  
Write me back  
And let me know.*

We do not offer  
Writing programs  
For prisoners.

Though it's easy  
To imagine my students  
Sometimes feel that way.

The correct thing to do  
Would be to write him back  
And be his program.

*Why are you looking  
For a writing program?  
What do you like to read?*

I tried to fold my letter  
And write his name  
Just as neatly as he did.



## **The Power of a Slave Narrative**

**Julie O'Connell**

I teach the narrative of Frederick Douglass in my developmental English class. I ask students to read about his literal and emotional journey from slavery to freedom. I expose them to the cruel inhumanity of slave owners who treated slaves like livestock, binding them up in chains, examining them, bidding on them at auctions, stripping them of their humanity. Slavery robbed individuals of their families, cultures, and identities. We treated people in the United States like this for economic reasons, I tell my students: we did it because of greed.

I teach mostly first-year students. Douglass is relevant to them. We feel his pain and fear; we also become grateful for our own relatively easy access to literacy. The narrative leaves us with monumental questions. How did he survive? How did he escape and

then learn to write in such an eloquent way? Why did he take on this struggle to save others? Douglass helps us understand that we, too, can overcome any obstacle. The first step, though, is acknowledging the evil, then writing about it articulately—narrating the story. Douglass shows us that no one can ever be enslaved if they can read and write. Education means freedom.

Douglass resounds with my students when it comes to setbacks. When Douglass's mistress, Sophia Auld, is warned not to teach him to read, and when he later reads the philosophical dialog between a master and a slave, my students and I discuss how we also cannot rely on the generosity of people in power. He writes, "In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as I do to the kindly aid of my mistress" (38). This lesson resonates with my students. Developmental students are still mastering academic skills, and they need additional support in order to succeed.

Still, people complain that these students do not belong in higher education, or that they take their educational opportunities for granted. My experience has been that the vast majority of developmental students are competent, sophisticated, and serious. They have their own histories of endurance against oppressive systems of race and class. I find that if I can create an atmosphere of safety, guidance, patience, and respect, and if I can give them meaningful curriculum, I am often entrusted with their own extraordinary narratives. Hearing about the hope that comes from injustice gives them permission to make sense of the injustices they experience. All told, this slave narrative gives them (and all of us) a foothold to survive. Douglass also shows us that the journey is not over until we help others overcome as well.

Developmental students are going through a struggle that is much larger than they are. Part of the story is that they are part of the story. Douglass humanizes suffering and invites them to see their own chains of oppression. Slave narratives have that power. They invite us inside ourselves, which is where the true construction of meaning and the search for social justice begins.



### Work Cited

Douglass, Frederick. *Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates. NY: Library of America, 1994.



## Embracing Chaos

Leslie A. Werden

A little bit of chaos in the first-year classroom is not a bad thing. I'm not talking about the students who chit-chat in the back corner or the ones who continually glance at their laps, smirking as they read Instagram posts. I'm talking about the I-don't-have-an-answer-for-this-you-figure-it-out-on-your-own kind of chaos. Here's a scenario: students receive a reading they don't quite understand. They are irritated. They want immediate answers. But all they get from me is an assignment to discuss or, oh no, write something. *Write about what? Are you kidding me?* Hair pulling ensues. Pouting and frowny faces. Chaos.

What is happening here is the act of cognitive dissonance that occurs in the transition from high school to college. Four years of high school have given the students a fairly clear set of expectations, rules to follow given by familiar teachers, and a level of comfort in how to accomplish tasks. Obviously, there are many high school teachers who push students out of these "comfort zones," yet students arrive at college with a perspective of learning that they have trouble relinquishing. Instead, they try to mimic what others have done or said, often using language and ideas they think they should be using but don't quite have command of yet.

To practice this command of language and ideas, a little intellectual chaos in the classroom is necessary to encourage cognitive dissonance. In order for our students to regain a sense of authority in their own writing, they have to understand how they once learned and blend it with how they will learn. It's like taking a short story and reimagining it as a play. But that is hard work and kind of confusing. And that's okay.

So, what do we do to encourage our students to embrace chaos? Step into the chaotic moment with them. Here's an example: once I assigned the Kant essay on "Conscience"—a tough read; still, I was ready and lobbed out an easy starter question. Silence. I tried again by rephrasing and adding another angle. Nope. No go. Blank stares, shaking heads, and furrowed brows were all I got in response. I felt that uneasy tingle of frozen fingers walking up the back of my spine and knew Chaos was paying me a little visit, whispering, "You have no idea what you're doing." But Chaos had paid me a visit before, and I don't mind a little awkwardness, so I flicked that little bugger off my shoulder and stepped in the muck.

I said to the students, "This reading leaves me confused, and I'm the teacher. Now what?"

*Oh great,* they were most likely thinking, *our teacher has NO IDEA what she's doing!!!!*

I continued, "Sometimes we learn best when we have to push through something really confusing and try to figure it out on our own, so we are going to do this together."

Impromptu, we read "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson, and it was just creepy enough to grab their attention. Next, I asked them to try to find any online connection to this story. I really didn't know what they would find, but that's part of stepping into the chaos with them.

Someone found a music video by Marilyn Manson titled “Man that you Fear,” and the discussion revved up. Suddenly, they were pondering questions about how someone could consider human sacrifice as reasonable and could you condemn someone to die and so on. Then I asked, “Are you talking about having a conscience?” I saw nodding. Woo hoo! I asked if they noticed how they went from being confused about Kant’s piece to being slightly disgusted by the Jackson story to questioning their own ideas after watching the Manson video and circling back to the idea of “conscience.” More vigorous nodding. I said, “You did that on your own. You got through that confusion all on your own.”

Yes, part of it was me feeling comfortable with some intellectual chaos, but a majority of it was letting them explore and question and then, most importantly, realize that they could, indeed, find a sense of authority in their own thinking (and eventually writing) processes.



## Teaching Dachau, 2014

**Donna Souder-Hodge**

Yesterday we wandered off  
Avoidance Alley  
and took a walk in sync with  
32000 memories.  
Left-two-three-four;  
Left-two-three-four.  
A place of order:  
where noise is verboten...  
then and now.  
I turn Left-two-three-four,  
and we march in time with the past  
on silent parade grounds  
empty.  
Everything is erased, connected,  
forgiven:  
the horrors,  
the hunger,  
the hope.  
It is a new generation’s memory now.  
I feel the burden as teacher,  
rhetor, archivist  
for the dead.  
For their humanity,  
the anger,  
the fear.  
You are all that is Left-two-three-four...  
And just for the teaching of it,  
I find myself one degree more human.



## “Hanging Out”: Cultivating Writing Groups Online

Tanya R. Cochran, Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel, & Beth Godbee

*It's Monday morning, 8:30 a.m., when Thomas gets the expected ring to join the hang-out. Beth and Rasha are already present, chatting about the weekend and what awaits in the coming week. Thomas joins in—adding what he hopes to accomplish during this morning's collaborative writing time—and by then, Tanya has also joined, finishing breakfast in the process. For the next three hours, we all settle down to work independently, but in shared space.*

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We are lucky to live in a time when technology makes remote collaborations easier than ever. As collaborators, colleagues, co-authors, and friends who work in four different states, we especially value google hangouts for hosting our weekly writing meetings. Just as writing group members often meet in person in coffee shops, libraries, or other spaces to negotiate the complexities of writing, we meet at least weekly (and oftentimes daily) online to write toward pressing projects. Like skype and other communication tools, google hangouts not only allow us to hear and see each other, but also to share screens when brainstorming, troubleshooting technology, answering how-to questions, and sharing passages from our texts when revising and editing. Paired with google docs, these hangouts additionally help us manage shared files, work collaboratively on a single one, and keep records of previous drafts.

\*\*\*

*Today Rasha is running late--still recovering from the long flight back from Egypt. When she arrives, she messages in the chat box before stepping away: "I'll make a cup of tea, as tea can magically heal anything." Meanwhile, Beth is giving Thomas feedback on his methodology chapter; Thomas takes notes, interrupting to ask questions as needed. Tanya gives her cat Calliope medicine, and once she has finished, Beth begins to ask about recent and upsetting events in the news. We spend a few minutes processing the social injustice we see around us before shifting into individual writing tasks we've set for the day.*

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A common challenge with writing is holding space for focused, diligent, ongoing, and committed work. As a group of four people, we have created a “critical mass,” allowing the hangouts to continue even if/when one or more of us has a scheduling conflict and is unable to make the writing group. We believe it is essential to deliberately and

consistently choose to protect time for writing, especially when other responsibilities connected with teaching, service, and life in general can (appear to) be more immediate, more pressing. To make the long-term investment in scholarship and writing part of our short-term and daily plans, we prioritize our hangouts as already-scheduled meeting time, and we schedule in longer blocks (3+ hours), while still honoring the changing circumstances of our lives, which means we may sometimes need to leave early, come late, or miss a week.

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*For the past hour, we have been working silently. The soundtrack involves keys clicking as three of us type, low-volume jazz playing in one of our rooms, occasional cat meows, a garbage truck collecting trash, a microwave beeping when hot water is ready, and pen scratching on paper while one of us handwrites. Tanya interrupts, "I need to head to campus now. Meeting in fifteen minutes."*

*Thomas looks up from his screen. "Have a great day. Good luck with student conferences."*

*"Ok, Tanya, may the day be beautiful," Rasha smiles.*

*"Bye, Tanya! See you tomorrow," Beth says without looking away from her draft.*

*As Tanya leaves the hangout, Thomas asks, "Are we okay to stay on for another thirty minutes or so? I have until eleven today."*

*"Yep."*

*"Sounds good."*

*The scene continues with writers back in action.*

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We honor these hangouts because we are able to invest in ourselves and our work by:

1. **Creating a refuge** from the pressures to perform a particular role or to compete for limited resources in order to invest in shared success and professional solidarity;
2. **Thriving intellectually** to realize our capacities and to strengthen our relationships across physical and institutional distance;
3. **Holding a creative space** for brainstorming, incubating, and developing writing projects while developing a repository for ideas about new projects and future collaborations;
4. **Maintaining momentum** for our shared writing projects even when other projects, teaching, and service take immediate precedence;
5. **Providing just-in-time support, mentoring, and processing** of the clamorous, eventful life of the writer, including research as well as teaching, service, familial duties, and other responsibilities and situations (e.g., thinking and strategizing with in-discipline colleagues not present at our home institutions); and, ultimately,
6. **Enjoying a live and life-giving writing environment** where we can think out loud and share spoken and written ideas with engaged, supportive, and sympathetic readers.

Underlying these investments is an understanding that collaboration is by its very nature a relational act, and hangouts allow us to cultivate and harvest our life-writing relationships. Hence, we value the hangouts as collaborating even when we're not directly collaborating because our process is like turning the compost heap of organic

material: we mix ourselves together, breathe air into each other's work, and inevitably become together the fertile soil from which we all grow.

\*\*\*

*Today we celebrate. Thomas exclaims that he has finished his methodology chapter and feels energized to begin the next step of writing about his interview data. Tanya shares her relief that a third and final draft of her most recent essay is off to the collection's editors. Beth, Rasha, and Thomas announce a major step they have accomplished with their co-authored book project: identifying an enthusiastic publisher. And we all delight over the contributor copies we just received in the mail--a new book by more of our colleagues and friends that includes a short piece we created together about our collaborations. This is the fruit of hanging out, and it tastes very, very sweet. Acknowledging these celebrations is part of what makes the long process joy-full and ease-full. The process continues.*

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