One Student at a Time

Dialogue

A Publication of the San Diego Area Writing Project **Fall 2005**

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Learning From What Didn't Work: One Teacher's Story

Dena Hause, SDAWP 2005

"Teachers are expected to reach unattainable goals with inadequate tools. The miracle is that at times they accomplish this impossible task." (Haim G. Ginot)

Experienced teachers know that the classroom is not a perfect world, where every child comes in with a love of learning and receives support in a loving home environment. Most classrooms reflect a cross section of society. Some students come to school intrinsically motivated and eager to learn. Others are facing such overwhelming personal challenges that it's amazing that they can accomplish anything at school. Yet despite these dilemmas teachers face on a daily basis, and despite the expectations placed upon them by the district and the state and the nation, they are driven to walk back into their classrooms every day. Teachers tackle the challenges in their jobs because they care about kids and they want to help them be successful. Andrew was one such on-the-job challenge for me.

Andrew's Story

Andrew was a cool kid. The girls thought he was cute and vied for his attention in the courtyard before school. They tried to sit at the table closest to his at lunch and giggled and pointed in his direction until he looked over, then they quickly looked away. The boys competed to earn a place in his orbit, wanting to be known as his compatriots. They waited in front of the school until he arrived, and walked into the building disappointed if he didn't show up before the bell rang. They started dressing like him and used the phrases he used. Yeah, Andrew was cool—at least that's what the kids at his middle school thought.

But the teachers at the school had a different opinion. All of the 5th grade teachers knew who he was, as did the vice principal, the school counselors, and the aides on duty at lunchtime. Andrew was the kid who came to class late and usually didn't have a pencil or a backpack. He was the kid who never brought his homework or returned notes sent home. He was the one who was regularly sent to the vice principal because he was disobedient and disrespectful and because he argued with the noon duties when he had to pick up trash at lunchtime. In the teacher's lounge at the school teachers shared horror stories and called him a waste of time.

Because of Andrew's poor standardized test scores, he was placed with me in a three-hour literacy block. The theory behind the three-hour block is that students who are struggling to read and write, those who are reading and writing below grade level standards, should receive more literacy instruction. But three straight hours of reading and writing for kids who have given up after years of failing must have seemed like some sort of torture. From the beginning, Andrew was rarely engaged in the work of our classroom. I watched him start many books, but he never finished one book all year. He rarely contributed anything

to classroom discussions or in book clubs with his peers. He was very social, and enjoyed hanging out and talking with his friends, but he was apathetic about any and all schoolwork.

I was involved in those disparaging conversations about Andrew in the teacher's lounge, although I never personally used the phrase "waste of time" to describe him. It seemed wrong to think that of any student. But after a year's investment of time and effort into this kid, with little to no effect, it is what I came to believe. So why is it, a month after school is out, that I'm still thinking about Andrew? Why do I find myself still wondering what else I could have done to get through to him? The truth is I did like Andrew, and I feel like I failed him.

So why is it, a month after school is out, that I am still thinking about Andrew? The truth is I did like Andrew and I feel like I failed him.

My Story

I tried a variety of interventions for Andrew throughout the school year. Early in the year the 5th grade counselor set up a meeting with Andrew and his mother and stepfather. Andrew had been sent to this counselor repeatedly because of behavior problems in more than one class, and the counselor wanted to put him on a behavior contract. His teachers were to fill out the contract, noting whether Andrew had met specific goals for the class. The contract was to be sent home, reviewed and signed by the parents, and returned to school the next day. The counselor talked to Andrew's parents and Andrew about appropriate consequences, both positive and negative, based on the notes from teachers included on the contract. His parents appeared to be very pleased to see a plan being put into place and they told us they were anxious to work with us to help Andrew be more successful at school. They admitted that they were having similar problems at home and welcomed the counselor's ideas on how to work with him. We agreed to start the contract immediately. I walked out of that meeting feeling that we were going to be a team and that we had a strong plan in place that would help Andrew. Unfortunately, the contract never got off the ground and Andrew's behavior didn't change, so I decided I needed a new plan.

The next thing I tried was being on Andrew's case every moment he was in my classroom, not letting him get away with anything. I figured the only thing I had control over was what went on in my classroom and I was going to make sure that Andrew followed my rules. When he came in late he had to pay the consequence and pick up trash at lunchtime. When he broke a classroom rule he was immediately sent to time out. When he didn't return homework he had to do it during lunch recess. I was hoping that Andrew would get tired of being nagged, that eventually he'd realize that his life would be more pleasant in my classroom if he just did what was expected. But that magical transformation never happened. Andrew had learned how to play "the game" before he even walked into my classroom. Eventually I got tired of being the nag and his personal supervisor and I chose to start ignoring his behavior, thus beginning the cycle again.

My hopes were revived in the spring when I was finally able to talk to Andrew's mother on the phone and she agreed to a parent conference in March. My team partner agreed to sit in on the conference, and we confronted her with our concerns. She said she was very upset as well and she convinced us that she was going to follow through on the contract plan we had devised at the beginning of the year. She also told us she was worried about Andrew's grades (and whether he would even pass to the next grade) and she agreed to work with him on completing his homework. So once again I was hopeful and determined.

Unfortunately, Andrew's mother was not true to her word. I tried using the contract for a couple of days, and even called her several times when Andrew's behavior pushed me to my limit. When she was home and took my calls she said the right things, but I could see there was never any follow through at home because Andrew's poor behavior continued to disrupt the class. She had learned how to play the game as well, to say what she knew we at school wanted to hear so we would leave her alone. I quickly became discouraged and stopped calling Andrew's mother. I basically gave up on Andrew. I told myself that I needed to focus on those students who were receptive to my teaching, that it was better to spend my energy on those students who wanted to learn and who came to class prepared.

At the end of the year Andrew earned an F in my class and a U for behavior. He earned similar failing grades in his other classes as well. His behavior problems continued to

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the end of the year, and he was excluded from an end of the year field trip. We still talked about him in the teacher's lounge, and we warned next year's teachers that he's coming. But the school year was over and grades wer turned in. So why, if he's no longer my "problem," is he still on my mind? Why is it so hard to let go?

Reflecting On What Didn't Work

I know that one reason I continue to reflect on my experience with Andrew is that I know I will have other students like him in the coming school year. I know I will need to face challenges like those I struggled with last year, but I want to have new strategies to draw upon in order to interact with them more effectively. I want to learn from my experience last year and use it to make me a better teacher. So what will be different next year?

One thing I can do to reach out to students like Andrew is to focus on developing a strong community within my classroom. I can't control a student's home life or even what happens at recess, but I can impact each of my students during their time in my classroom. Upon reflection I realize that learning everyone's name and what they like to read is only the first step in building a relationship with my students. Next year I will focus at the beginning of the year on building a community based on trust. It is important for my students to trust me and I must trust them as well if we are to work well together for an entire year. I know I will have to give up some of the "power" in my classroom. In order to do that I need to provide opportunities for each child in my classroom to be an "expert," whether it is about skateboarding, cooking, playing video games, or an academic subject. We will take the time to get to know each other by doing interviews and sharing with the class about those areas of expertise as a means of really getting to know each other. As I look back I wonder—if I had known how much Andrew loved soccer could I have used that to develop a relationship with him that would have enabled me to motivate him in my classroom?

...teachers need to give themselves permission to say, "I messed up," or "I need help" and turn to each other for support. These conversations can only make us stronger.

Another personal commitment I am going to make for next year is to reach out to my colleagues for help. I have come to realize that reflecting upon my practice with other teachers can help me to come up with ideas that might not occur to me when I'm alone in my classroom and feeling the pressure of being responsible for 60 or more students. I will turn to the counselor as well, for advice and ideas, tapping into his expertise to help me face the day-to-day challenges. I am alone in my classroom, but I don't have to be alone in my professional practice.

Finally, I'm going to take the time to reflect on my successes as well as my failures. For every Andrew, there was a Leslie, a student who learned to love reading over the course of the year because of the books I introduced her to. For every James who made it clear to me he didn't want to be at school, there was an Andres who confessed to me, with disbelief, that he couldn't believe he actually enjoyed a book I had suggested to him. For every Michael who went through the motions at school because he had to, there was an Alex who eagerly reported to me how many pages he read every night and shared the exciting parts of his book with me. I will reflect upon those success stories and use them to guide my practices as well.

Why Are These Stories Important?

I know I am not alone in wondering why things didn't work as I hoped they would with some students. I know other teachers face similar challenges and many already reflect on their experiences over the course of a year in the hopes of learning from them. I think that we can gain strength from each other by sharing our stories of success and failure, and reflecting on how those experiences affect the climate and the instruction in our classrooms. In these days of increased challenges and high expectations teachers need to give themselves permission to say, "I messed up" or "I need help" and turn to each other for support. These conversations can only make us stronger.

Teaching is a difficult job; some would argue it is one of the tougher jobs anyone can undertake. Teachers tend to be isolated in a classroom with kids like Andrew who are so frustrated by school that they have given up trying. But giving up is not an option for dedicated teachers who took on the job because they care about kids. I am making a personal commitment to myself not to give up. I will continue to reflect on my practice, collaborate with my colleagues, and search out new strategies to help me, and my students, be successful in my classroom. I owe this to the kids, but I also owe it to myself.

But giving up is not an option for dedicated teachers who took on the job because they care about kids. I am making a personal commitment to myself not to give up.

"A successful teacher needs: the education of a college president, the executive ability of a financier, the humility of a deacon, the adaptability of a chameleon, the hope of an optimist, the courage of a hero, the wisdom of a serpent, the gentleness of a dove, the patience of Job, the grace of God, and the persistence of the Devil."

—Anonymous

Protecting Students' First Amendment Rights

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

—Jeff Meyer, SDAWP 2005

"Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without the newspaper, or the newspaper without a government," Thomas Jefferson wrote, "I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." One can easily deduce that he would not have a favorable impression of contemporary America given the state of our press. The arrest of *The New York Times* reporter Judith Miller is but one recent example of the growing hostility toward a free press which has only intensified during this decade. "Make no mistake," wrote Eric Alterman in the May 9, 2005 issue of *The Nation*, "The Bush Administration and its ideological allies are employing every means available to undermine journalists' ability to exercise their First Amendment function to hold power accountable." Worse yet, Fox News, arguably a propaganda machine for the Bush administration, continues to masquerade as a "fair and balanced" source of "news." This is not what our founders intended.

But these disturbing trends are not what I wish to address here. I would like, instead, to deal with an issue which many probably see as a much smaller and more trivial matter: curtailment of the rights and independence of student journalists.

I have been the newspaper adviser at a large urban high school in Southeast San Diego for over six years. Last year, shortly after a comprehensive change in our leadership, a relatively new administrator came to my classroom and told me that during the year she would be reviewing the student newspaper before it went to press. I bit my tongue, suppressed my emotion, and went straight to the district policies regarding student newspapers. After defining student rights and explaining what is appropriate and inappropriate material for a student newspaper (things that I hope any journalism teacher would cover), the district paperwork goes on to say that a principal may, in fact, "designate [an] administrator to function as his/her designee in carrying out all or part of [the] function of reviewing materials submitted for compliance with district policy and procedure."

The policy indicated that I had the obligation to comply, so I obeyed the request to submit copy. But the more I thought about the "prior review" policy, the more uneasy I became. And when the potential copy was returned to me, and I noticed that the principal had actually modified student writing, I decided that I could not in good conscience allow such "review" to continue.

I am not alone. Advisers and student writers across the state have recently and increasingly been fighting censorship and administrative meddling. In Fullerton, a student editor was told to resign or risk firing after the publication of an article which profiled several gay students. It was immaterial whether the article was well written, balanced, or fair, nor did it matter that the gay students all spoke of their own volition and knew that their names would be used. All that mattered to the administration was that the parents of the gay students had not given their permission. A similar article in a Kern County school never went to press—the administration prevented its printing, citing safety issues.

I do understand the logic behind the school district policy. I imagine that somewhere along the line a district was sued for the content in one of its school's newspapers, and I understand the attempt to prevent that from happening again. I also acknowledge that student publications, like textbooks, are paid for with public money, and both must be consistent with the educational goals of the district. And I agree that each administration has the responsibility to create a safe environment, which could be subverted by a controversial or irresponsible article.

Advisers and student writers across the state have recently and increasingly been fighting censorship and administrative meddling.

I understand the policy, but I am adamantly opposed to it. As a journalism teacher I cannot accept any decisions about the content of the student newspapers that are not made by the students themselves. As the adviser, I never make unilateral decisions without student input. To do so would be analogous to an ASB adviser making all of the decisions for the senior class president, relegating that president to nothing more than a puppet. Such practice would cause significant long term harm to the legitimacy of our public schools; additionally, it runs counterproductive to the basic principles behind public education

in a representative democracy.

My passion for this issue can perhaps best be understood anecdotally. Several years ago, our staff was informed that a student at our school, recently returned from the Philippines, had tested positive for tuberculosis. The nurse and administration decided that they would contact only the parents of the students who shared a class with the infected boy—roughly 300 kids. After serious discussion, the newspaper staff unanimously decided that this story was newsworthy—it definitely had potential consequences given that T.B. is a contagious airborne disease. One reporter showed concern for the fact that only ten percent of the student body was informed. It was important to her that the story be written.

Shortly after that student left for the nurse's office seeking an interview, my phone rang. I barely got the "hello" out of my mouth when I began hearing an impassioned admonition that what the reporter was doing was foolish and irresponsible. The nurse told me that she could not possibly handle thousands of concerned parents calling her hysterically; nor was the administration in any mood to deal with potential mass absences after the article ran. When I tried to reason with her, she flatly stated that she would not be granting an interview to the reporter.

At my school and other schools, the administration is pushing hard to break up the campus into smaller learning communities, each one based around a "real world" theme. On almost a weekly basis, we hear how too many students are not interested or engaged, and too many are "falling through the cracks." I often hear "If only we could give students hands-on projects and connections to the business community!" This refrain obviously has some validity to it, but I often wonder if we really need to restructure the school completely, especially when I remember the young reporter returning from the nurse's office without an interview. This student was engaged in a serious, hands-on, "real world" learning experience. She was producing authentic writing. She had talked seriously with the editorial staff about the ethical implications of the story. She had thoughtfully pondered the legal issues. She had serious motivation to conduct research about tuberculosis, from its symptoms to its contagiousness. She was willing to sit down with me and revise the story until I had deemed it fair, balanced, accurate, and responsible. She was acting on moral imperative.

I barely got the "hello" out of my mouth when I began hearing an impassioned admonition that what the reporter was doing was foolish and irresponsible.

And she was being told that she was doing the wrong thing.

The nurse failed to realize that the student was a responsible young adult and a talented writer, and that as the advisor, I would have worked with the reporter to ensure that the story was accurate, and the risk not sensationalized. Nor did she realize that the reporter could have actually acted as her ally in terms of educating the student body about the relatively low risk of infection; such information could have actually helped dispel rumors and assuage fear. The nurse failed to appreciate that we were all wasting a unique teaching opportunity for the entire student body, whose motivation to learn about the science of contagious diseases was at a high point.

Call me foolishly optimistic, but I believe that even if a flawed story were published, it would have been a powerful learning experience for the newspaper writer and the staff.

As a teacher, some of my most valuable growth has come from my most miserable mistakes, and we have all seen students coast easily through the year in our classes without failure, only to learn that they had great difficulty when they finally had to adjust to challenge. Furthermore, moments of controversy are learning opportunities. Many people, especially adolescents, are interested in debate and disagreement, and I cannot imagine a more appropriate forum for discussion than the student newspaper; the entire student body could have learned a great deal even in a worst-case scenario.

After some explaining and convincing, we received approval from the principal (who has since been replaced) to run the story. Yet this was only one small victory, and without a happy ending. That is because the "prior review" policy continues at our school and others. This policy sends the same message to my young reporters about their writing that the nurse sent about the tuberculosis story. It inadvertently communicates that the work of a student journalist is somehow just pretend journalism, that students can write whatever they want as long as it is innocuous, does not shed negative light upon the school, or create a headache for anybody on the staff. The policy takes away motivation and authenticity and therefore is detrimental to learning.

They understand that being disliked is necessary for a journalist, because people often do not like to be held accountable for their actions.

Sadly, this issue is not just an educational one. Sure, prior review hurts student writing by removing motivation and authenticity, but the damage runs much, much deeper. Aside from giving the students an opportunity to develop their writing, journalism class offers an important civics lesson. I proudly hang two posters in my classroom. On the first is Jefferson's quote; on the second is the first amendment. I expend much energy at the beginning of each school year teaching about the importance of the press. During my unit on journalistic

ethics I often show my class *All the President's Men*, from which my students learn that a newspaper staff which produces a totally innocuous newspaper is not doing its job. They understand that being disliked is necessary for a journalist, because people often do not like to be held accountable for their actions. And they understand how incredibly frightening it would be to live in a society in which government has control over the press. "Could you imagine," I ask my students, "what our nation would be like if *The Washington Post* had to submit copy to the White House prior to going to press?"

But near the final deadline of each issue, when each student sees an administrator stroll into the classroom and begin reviewing copy, my students witness something out of a George Orwell novel. I do not allude to Orwell intending hyperbole. A recent survey found that a majority of high school students think newspapers should not be able to publish without government approval. Almost one in five said that Americans should be prohibited from expressing unpopular opinions. And why shouldn't young adults think this, when they are learning that lesson in their schools (and in their journalism class, of all places!)? We are not that far off from the repressive dystopia that Orwell wrote about in *1984*, a dystopia that Jefferson and other framers of the constitution sought desperately to prevent.

As a writing teacher I tell my students to keep their language fresh and to avoid clichés. Yet I cannot resist saying that our nations' founders would be "turning over in their graves" if they could foresee the current press that is easily manipulated by the powers that be. Worse yet, what should be a lively forum for ideas and discussion has given way to apathy and intimidation. One of the most disturbing trends in my experience is that very few people—students, staff, or parents—ever consider writing letters to the editor. During the past seven years, I have received highly critical anonymous notes in my mailbox, and I have been openly admonished by more than one of my fellow staff members, both in private and in public.

But I would not make any decisions differently if I had the chance. My job is to help students put out the best product they are capable of producing. I cannot do this if I am making their decisions for them—or allowing others to do the same.

HAVE FUN WITH WORDS

Frank Barone, SDAWP 1977

Follow Alice through the looking glass
into a wonderland of words and wild adventures.
Sail with words toward tropical islands
and ride off with words toward enchanted castles.
Search for words in dictionaries
within the pages of a thesaurus
or inside the chapters of any good story.
Smile or laugh when the words of a poem
surprise your eyes and your imagination.
Hold hands with words when they lead you
into mysterious caves and through magical kingdoms.
Fling a fistful of words into the evening sky
and watch them turn into stars.
Slip a few nouns into your piggy bank every once in a while
and always carry a couple of verbs in your pocket
in case of an emergency.
Sprinkle some metaphors on your cereal for breakfast
and, after supper, treat yourself
to some chocolate-covered metaphors for dessert.
Remember to wash your hands frequently with soap and words.
When you find some new words that you like
hang them up in the closet
so you can wear them on special occasions.
When you go to bed at night
put one or two of your favorite words under the pillow
so you will have pleasant dreams.
But most of all, sing and dance and have fun with words.
Words like it when you play with them.
Sometimes, if you listen quietly,
you can hear them chuckle and giggle.

Project Notes...

Please welcome our new co-director, *Sam Patterson, SDAWP 1998, who joins Makeba and Kim in directing the work of our site. Sam has his M.F.A. from San Diego State University and teaches 7th grade math and English, and photography for grades 9-12, at the San Diego Jewish Academy. Sam is currently pursuing his doctorate in literacy education in the USD/SDSU Joint Program. Sam has always been an active Teacher Consultant, juggling the many tasks that come with classroom teaching and site leadership. His common ports of call at the SDAWP include responding to writing, the college essay, and secondary professional development. During the summer, Sam teaches—and directs traffic—at Young Writers' Camp.*

SDAWP needs your email address. *We regularly email information on upcoming events and education issues that are of interest to our Fellows. If you haven't been receiving our email updates, you can add your name to our contact list by visiting our web site (http://create.ucsd.edu/sdawp/) and emailing Carol Schrammel, Program Rep. (cschrammel@ucsd.edu) from the contact page.*

As a Writing Teacher I Believe:

I must write it before I teach it.
Students should make their own choices.
Kids need to be able to write functionally and fictionally.
Everyone has a story to tell and a point of view to share.
My job is to provide possibilities they haven't considered.
There is a huge difference between
teaching and assigning.

Risks are necessary!
Inspiration is everywhere.
No idea is too small to grow.
Planning makes drafting easier.

Models are crucial.
You should know your audience.
Sometimes you have to start in the middle.
Getting your thoughts onto paper takes practice.

No one should work in total isolation.
You can't always trust your spell check.
Revision makes the candle burn…brighter.
Re-reading aloud will make you change things.

Presentation counts.
We learn from our mistakes.
People will judge what you write.
No piece is ever completely finished.
Writing should be shared with a larger audience.

—Jennifer Roberts
SDAWP 2005

Congratulations to New SDAWP Teaching Fellows!

2005 Invitational

Sheryl Sharifa Abukar
Mt. Everest Academy—San Diego

Erin Bartosiewicz
Solana Pacific Elementary—Solana Beach

Vicki Calman
Nubia Leadership Academy—San Diego

Jennifer Cost
San Diego Mesa College—San Diego

Lesly Easson
Cardiff Elementary—Cardiff

Dena Hause
Dana Middle School—San Diego

Heather Lattimer
Kearny High Complex—San Diego

Jeff Meyer
Morse High—San Diego

Paige Pennock
Torrey Pines High—San Dieguito Union

Jennifer Roberts
Kroc Middle School—San Diego

Susan Serafino
Kumeyaay Elementary—San Diego

Ruthie Smith
Valley Middle School—Carlsbad

Susan Stark
San Diego Jewish Academy—San Diego

Linda Webb
Chollas Mead Elementary—San Diego

SUMMER 2005 Young Writers' Camp

The Adventure

Michela N. Rodriguez, 4th Grade

Look. An adventure lies ahead. It is extraordinary. The stories you will hear. The tales that are told. Perhaps the path to royalty. Not knowing where you're going but hoping to go somewhere new. A journey is waiting. The trail to power and beauty. Not only outside, but in. So search. Try hard. Open up to a whole different world inside.

Apology of a Self-Centered Child

Alia Wilkinson, 8th Grade

I'm sorry my mother
That I stole your cigars
I was afraid
You would fill up with tar
Your lungs would crack
Your liver would fail
And then you'd be dead:
Who would fetch the mail?
I would say Paige and she would say me
And then we would fight
All thanks to thee
So you can't die now, we're too young,
Too violent
Please do tell dad the same thing.

Orange

Natalia A DeKock, 4th Grade

Orange is a pumpkin waiting in a patch,
Orange is a parrot squawking on and on,
Orange is a dress that's waiting in your closet.
Orange is the sunset bringing in the night.

Orange is the kitten playing on your bed
Who also loves to sleep and curl up by your head.

Orange is a rainbow stretching in the sky,
Orange is the moment that always makes you cry.

Orange is an eagle swooping in the wind,
Orange is your cousin coming back again.

Orange is the fox that's running here and there,
Orange is a lock that's settled in your hair.

Orange.
The color.
The magic.

Honey I Love

Valeria Sarmiento, 3rd Grade

I love
I love a lot of things
A whole lot of things
I love my mom my
Family and I love my
Friends. But I don't
Love to go to sleep or
To color. I don't love
To run a lot or watch
Too much TV. But I love
A lot of things. And
Honey I love me too.

English (and Writing) Are a Pain

Megan Guarano, 9th Grade

Write, rite, right,
English is a pain.
Although the words all sound alike,
The spelling is never the same.

There, their, they're
English I cannot bare.
English may sound nice,
But it's not always fair.

Be, bee, B,
If you misspell a word,
It always has its fee.
You write the words three times each,
Then you'll see you spelled them right.

See, sea, C,
I have a friend named Dee.
She doesn't like English either,
Who else wouldn't agree with me.

To, too, two,
What is it you kids can't do?
I think I'll move to Neptune,
And leave this all with you.

Special Thanks

The San Diego Area Writing Project—Young Writers' Camp would like to acknowledge the generous community donations to our scholarship and transportation fund in 2005. We provided scholarships for nine young writers and were able to provide transportation for six of those young writers from East County! We are grateful for your support:

Greater San Diego Council of Teachers of English

Marquita and Mary Bell

Barnes and Noble Booksellers, Mira Mesa Marketplace

The many Fellows and community members who supported our "California Stories Ice Cream Social" on May 21, 2005

Black Oceans

Alexandra Chenelle, 6th Grade

Oceans filled with brown goo and debris,
Water turns into a churning spiral of black.
Children build Sand Queen castles with shells,
As dirty men with neon yellow suits crush their
Happiness with one evil stomp, and begin to dump cans
Of shimmering green waste, devil's formula
Bee swarms the water before the children are
Done sobbing.
Colorful schools of fish are overpowered by
Rainbows of soda cans. Towers of metal buildings
Canopy over whispering waters,
While inside greedy, yellow-toothed men
Puff cigar smoke as their cackles echo through the
Halls as cold as their hearts. Destroying the oceans

Nurturing a Sense of Self and Community through Writing and the Arts

Susan Stark, SDAWP 2005

I panicked when one of my 8th grade students slid the feared yellow ribbon card on my desk and asked "Can we talk during lunch?" Somewhat shocked and uncomfortable that we would be talking about suicide, I replied with a "Sure, no problem," and tried to whisk away beads of sweat as nonchalantly as possible. That day at lunch the student explained how he constantly struggled with severe feelings of insecurity; yet in my American Studies class he felt confident and safe.

Little did this student know that two days prior to our conversation, his teachers had met to discuss the Yellow Ribbon Day that our school would be hosting. The liaison explained how, if a student approached them with suicidal thoughts, teachers were expected to follow a certain protocol. At the meeting's end, I raised my hand and interjected, "What if I feel extremely uncomfortable with the role you want us to assume?" No gasps came from this audience of teachers: they already knew about my deficiencies in tact and my lack of nurturing qualities. Such a role honestly terrified me. I believed that if teachers really sought to create interesting and meaningful classes, they needed to master their content, so I tended to concentrate on lessons, not students. Throughout my teaching career, I never saw myself as a counselor or psychologist and I always felt uncomfortable with that extra component of perceived teacher "responsibilities."

Nonetheless, this unexpected lunch conversation forced me to consider why the 8th grader felt safe in my classroom. I struggled with this one. You see, I wasn't the kind of gifted storyteller who could create a sense of community with my tales, I didn't possess a vast knowledge of fun facts that could lighten the environment, I didn't know many jokes, I didn't listen particularly well, and I in no way projected a motherly persona. While the more "counselor-inclined" teachers lavished affectionate references like "sweetheart" or "dear" on their students, such words never came from my mouth.

Eventually I came to realize that what I don't feel comfortable doing emotionally, I achieve by exposing students to the critical and emotionally rich world of written and artistic human expression. Despite the fact that most teachers would acknowledge the inherent powers of writing and the arts, these disciplines are often underused in many classrooms, or rarely combined. It's a pity because I have observed that, when used in tandem, they provide non-threatening emotional outlets that can validate the voices of my students in ways I had not recognized. For one, students discover that their studies gain meaning when what they learn is examined critically and applied to their own lives through both artistic and written forms. Second, if a teacher provides an atmosphere that encourages the expression of individual thought and values what students have to say, she provides a forum where students can collectively express their newfound insights; thus building a vibrant community that is both safe and meaningful. If my 8th grader's remark was anything to go by, I didn't have to be a nurturer in the traditional sense. I could capitalize on the strengths of artistic and written expression and facilitate a gradual process of self-discovery against the backdrop of human struggles within American history.

Artists, whether they are musical, theatrical or visual, enable us to examine our world with new insight and sensitivity.

It is hard to overlook the critical, thought-provoking nature of the arts. Artists, whether they are musical, theatrical, or visual, enable us to examine our world with new insight and sensitivity. How different would our world be without works like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle;* plays like Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*; or Monet's "Waterlilies"? While works such as these can trigger radical thought and even significant change, the arts serve as agents of critical thought in other ways. They often act as concrete springboards that propel students into a stronger understanding of abstract ideas that become more articulate when their pens hit the paper. Cindy Sherman's photography, for example, offers a concrete way to deal with stereotyping. Students are quick to write down their reactions to *Three Possible Guests* based on the way they appear in Sherman's photos—that is until they find out that these seemingly disparate characters are actually the artist herself cloaked in different attire and placed within a variety of settings. They are shocked at how easily they fall prey to stereotyping. The class discussion that ensues is often lively and insightful, particu-

larly as students comment on why they think stereotyping occurs.

Eighth graders revisit this topic of stereotyping through the arts later on in the year, this time from different angles. To introduce a unit on Native American history, I ask students to draw a "Native American" and then a "scientist." This exercise invariably helps students identify the pitfalls of stereotyping when

…reference to the arts can provide a humorous segue into potentially controversial, or uncomfortable discussions.

they gaze at their very narrow renderings as well as those of their peers. Yet our examination of stereotyping continues further. As students listen to three different types of "foreign" sounding music, they are asked to write down their thoughts about where they might hear such songs, who might be singing them, and what the singer might be saying. Once again, students are startled to discover that all three songs are Native American. They can't believe they've been caught in the act of stereotyping once more. A month later, after completing a research paper that explores Native American history beyond a specific tribe's initial interactions with colonists/settlers, we delve into modern day issues that various tribes face. We conclude with reactions to the message of a Sioux rap group known as *Without Rezervation.* The song, "Are you ready for W.O.R.?" projects contemporary reactions to past and present injustices experienced at the hands of stereotyping. We then hear Johnny Cash convey the tragedy of a fictionalized Native American stereotype, Ira Hayes, in a ballad. A more tolerant, meaningful discussion follows—one that builds on our new understanding of Native American history and the many issues that concern different tribes today. By this point, students no longer laugh as they draw funny pictures of feathered men in teepees or react to music they aren't used to hearing. They have, through the process of writing and through layered experiences with various art forms, reached a more concrete, critical understanding of what previously misunderstand individuals and groups still experience in the United States.

While people recognize the critical merits offered by these disciplines, they are perhaps less aware of how a combination of writing and the arts sparks inner reflections that subtly strengthen community bonds in the classroom. As seen with the Cindy Sherman and Native American examples, reference to the arts can provide a humorous segue into potentially controversial, or uncomfortable discussions. But it is on a personal level where the arts really thrive. Once students understand that artistic works take on new forms with each of their audience members and that, depending on the level of reaction it ignites, works can forge a direct channel into the inner feelings of those members, the examined works become more meaningful. Art, by its very nature, is open to interpretation and I try to express this notion right away. On the first day of school, students read the lyrics as they listen to the song "Where is the Love" by the *Black Eyed Peas*. I then ask them an open-ended question: "Is this song talking about America or the world?" Because students find specific evidence to support both positions in the song and we don't reach a class consensus on the issue, students feel safer expressing their thoughts. They realize that thoughts or interpretations are viewed as opinions. From that point on, I continually reiterate that there are no right or wrong answers, only strong and weak reasoning.

As the year progresses, we continue to rely on the arts to nurture independent thought and to help students feel more comfortable voicing their interpretations of history. When we focus on how minority groups have experienced discrimination in American history and how they have sought to deal with that discrimination we see, for example, how Dr. Seuss likely played on anti-Japanese hysteria during World War II to express his support of internment camps. We also examine the ways in which late 18th century advertisements depicted African slaves as chattel to promote business interests, and we notice how Jacob Lawrence used various paintings to project his reactions to Jim Crow laws in the South. When students are continually reminded that works of art generally have some purpose, and that artists often use art to express that purpose, it is easier for students to understand how writing is one of many ways to interpret or react to the historical events they study. Just as they are entitled to an interpretation of art, they can react to textbook or primary source information any way they want so long as they back up their points in a persuasive manner. This approach gives students ownership over what they think and say; as a result, they are more willing to participate in a community, listen to other students, and take risks. And

From that point on, I continually reiterate that there are no right or wrong answers, only strong and weak reasoning.

for those who don't like to participate in class discussion, they can be "heard" strictly through visual and written expressions.

I noticed significant benefits from assignments that combined art and writing, particularly for my more silent students, when I asked the class to create murals for an expressed purpose and then reflect on those murals. I originally came up with the idea as a creative way to test their understanding of Mexican-American history by having students depict the types of discrimination Mexican-Americans faced over time and identify attempts made to overcome such discrimination. Fueled by simple curiosity, I tacked on the require-

ment that students also create their own personal mural on similar grounds. When students turned in their mural assignments the next day, I asked them to explain the symbols they chose, the colors they used, and the layout they created with a written response. While I noticed that basing written explanations on visual evidence enhanced their expressed understanding of Mexican-American history, far greater gains could be seen in both the visual and written expression of their own personal struggles. Never—not even in the autobiographies they wrote at the beginning of the year—did I have such a large window into their personal lives. It appeared as if artistic expression gave students the permission to open up and pin down their concerns in writing.

It was eye-opening for all of us. I realized that I had no idea about what went on in the lives of my 8th graders outside school...

A girl who never spoke in my class felt free to reveal her struggles with religion, depression, and peer pressure by placing quotes people have made about her around an American flag that highlights American ideals and inspirational quotes. As if her visual depiction of her personal experience in America didn't already reveal far more about her than I had previously known, her written commentary added new levels of understanding. She explained that, "In the left hand corner there is a cross because I am Catholic and a little tiny Jewish star because all my friends are Jewish and sometimes they say I have a Jewish soul." I took heart in the fact that even though this girl dared not take any risks in class discussions, she somehow felt comfortable enough to project such a strong voice in art and writing.

Having spotted a way to move into more meaningful applications of history, I began class the next day with a more personal writing prompt. I asked students to identify three issues/problems/ challenges that people their age generally face and then suggest ways that they think those issues could be resolved. The resulting discussion was eye-opening for all of us. I realized that I had no idea about what went on in the lives of my 8th graders outside school; they found comfort in knowing that other people held their concerns and even shared their experiences. After we identified common concerns like drugs, sex, peer pressure, school anxiety, and eating disorders, I asked students why presidential candidates don't seem to spend a lot of time on these issues and why other issues like taxes and defense spending have priority over their concerns. Students seemed to appreciate a forum that allowed them to talk about their voice in national politics as well as the kinds of things they could do to either make their voice stronger or solve their own issues. I was thrilled to see students link low self-esteem to many of the major struggles they had identified and then offer tangible ways to improve self-confidence on our campus. I was more delighted to note that the 8th grader who met with me on Yellow Ribbon Day helped guide his fellow students to that realization and then take comfort in the fact that he was not alone in his struggles. Best of all, the class as a whole took pride in the solutions they generated: a group of these students later met with our principal and proposed that he hire a school counselor who would offer weekly lunch sessions during which time students could meet and talk about ways to bolster self confidence. By this point it had become very clear to me that a continued reliance on artistic and written expression had provided concrete emotional outlets that were able to be voiced and heard by an increasingly empathetic audience.

Although that 8th grader and I never had another one-on-one conversation after our lunch meeting, I noticed the ways he had made significant strides as a writer and a person; I don't think such growth would have occurred without a continued emphasis on critical thought fueled by the arts and reinforced through discussion and writing. It seemed fitting that a student so sensitive to what was going on around him was incredibly receptive to any class discussions generated from an examination of artistic expression. He made excellent contributions to our discussions about stereotyping, particularly in regards to our exploration of Native American music. It's also not surprising to note, then, that one of his most mature writing assignments focused on the inner reflections that his main character, a musician, faced as he watched the horrors of civil war unfold and reacted to its aftermath. Such a work, as well as others that followed, were a far cry from the disjointed commentary I had previously received from him. At the end of the year, his positive feelings about the class were even clearer. He wrote me a thank-you note in which he admitted that while he had never liked history before, he now did; he also mentioned that if we were the same age he was convinced we would be "best buddies." I may not have been the motherly nurturing type, but like a good friend, I gave him an outlet where he could find a voice and feel comfortable expressing it. In that regard he is not alone. Teenagers have questions and they often feel isolated; a critical study of the humanities can help them feel connected to others who have questioned their role in the world around them, especially when they see how artists themselves have tried to deal with their own struggles.

I may not have been the motherly nurturing type, but like a good friend, I gave him an outlet where he could find a voice and feel comfortable expressing it.

My Today

Romero Maratea, SDAWP 2004

I woke up tired today.
Today I was tired from all of the yesterdays
and the pleases
and the will yous
and the maybes.
Maybes I won't.
Won't that be something?
Something to slow
the way the yesterdays and the yesterday's yesterdays became the todays and why
I'm here.
Here is where the to do's for other someones become to dones.
Dones the way I like.
Like my way, the right way, the way my mama taught me.
Me,
the teacher,
the role model,
the husband,
the brother,
the father-to-be,
the athlete,
the friend,
the capital I.
I woke up tired today.

THE MUSE BOX

Look deep inside you
ideas screaming
expressing their thoughts
enchanting thoughts
choose careful words
but strong meaning
and see what is right
and when the wind whispers to you
read it out loud.
Your echo will weave through the trees, anyone will hear it!

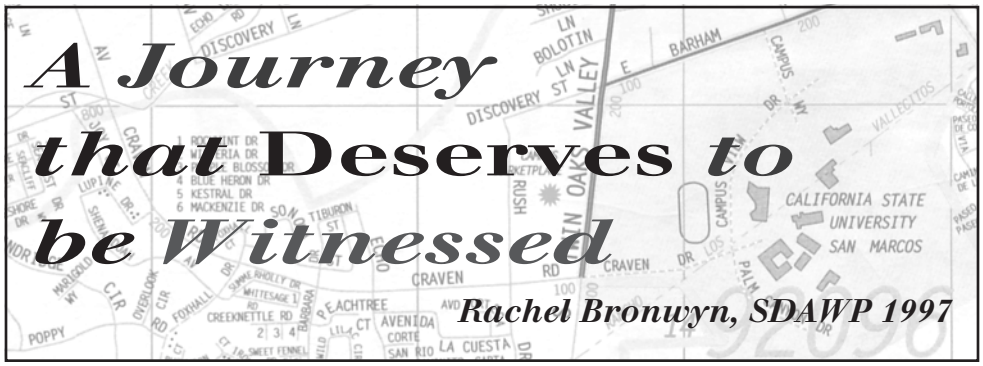
—Jane Han, 4th Grade
YWC 2005 Participant

When is the last time you talked to yourself out loud? The last time you recited a poem or sang aloud in the shower, even?

Sometimes we lose track of our voice in the rumblings of thought. How often is it that we allow our literal voice to speak in the open mic of our daily lives? In Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" he wrote:

> *I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,*
> *I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.*

Talk to yourself in the cabin of the car. Go back to a favorite poem, memorize it, recite it. Create a mantra that allows you to be who you want to be. Yawp barbarically. Hear yourself and listen to what you have to say.



Watching Ariana R's transformation from a street-tough, sullen student into a graceful, inquisitive scholar who will begin her first year at CSU San Marcos in a few short weeks has been one of the most moving experiences of my career as a teacher.

I first met Ariana when she was a student in my AVID class during her freshman year. While it was obvious that she was extremely intelligent, I could also tell that she didn't completely accept the possibility that in four short years she would go to college. She chafed against the high expectations of the AVID elective, and moreover, she outwardly resented my determined interventions on her behalf.

Ariana's first year in high school did not go well. She failed CPM I (an integrated math course) and English 9. Two years later when I asked her about this disastrous first year, she quite frankly explained that she couldn't stand that in AVID she was being told what to do—that I thought I had a right to "get into her business." Her comments were difficult for me to hear, because our entire AVID team at Orange Glen believes passionately that the hallmark of a good AVID teacher is his/her willingness to constantly "get into our students' business." It took me a while to realize that this determined resistance to outside influence is actually what has allowed her survive in her neighborhood and flourish despite the constant debilitating pressure of poverty.

Ariana slowly started to improve her grades during the second semester of her freshman year, and a full year later, she earned a 3.5 GPA in rigorous, college-prep classes. During the second semester of her junior year, Ariana earned a 3.71 GPA, despite the fact that she was enrolled in two extremely challenging classes—Chemistry and Advanced Placement Spanish Language. During her senior year, while many of her peers were indulging themselves in "senioritis," she continued to work diligently, earning a 3.5 both semesters. Ariana's transcript is a testament to her disciplined study habits and a manifesto which proclaims her considerable intelligence.

I am filled with admiration for the character that Ariana has determinedly forged. She deliberately decided what kind of future she wanted for herself. She had the strength to turn a deaf ear to close friends and relatives who skeptically questioned her college dreams. I know that Ariana even had to fight against her own beliefs about who she could become. She is the daughter of an undocumented, single mother who works long hours to support her children. Her father, though a citizen, has abandoned the family and offers them no financial support. Ariana lives in the poorest neighborhood in Escondido; the police regard her block of apartments as an epicenter of gang activity. To listen to the quiet persistent voice in her own heart—when so much in the surrounding environment crackles nosily with despair—takes tremendous courage. Ariana demonstrated again and again that she has heart of a lion.

Because of her character and her outstanding grades, Ariana became a role model to other AVID students—especially the younger girls who had not yet shed their street-tough mien. Her classmates depended on her bold, impassioned judgments. They welcomed the sweet yet stern way Ariana directed them to their studies. She treated everyone with respect and offered them the full measure of her kindness. She inspired, and still inspires, all of us with her fierce and persistent intelligence.

There are not many women like Ariana, women who can combine grace with toughness, erudite opinions with street savvy, and tenderness with determination. She embodies the boundless arc of possibility.

California Writing 2005-2006

CWP Call for Submissions
California Writing Anthologies of Student Writing

California Writing offers students a powerful opportunity to read and write about four provocative themes:

- Growing up and finding our identity in a changing California
- Understanding how our community, history, and heritage have shaped who we are as Californians
- Examining the realities and challenges of life in California
- Dreaming of a better life in California, as newcomers and long-time residents

Students may choose the written genre that best communicates their response to one or more of the themes. They can choose from a variety genres that may include, reflective essay, biography, memoir, narrative, letter, poem, editorial, problem solution proposal, or persuasive essay. Students may submit pieces written in English and/or a home/heritage language if they are bilingual. Teachers are invited to use the CWP Teacher-to-Teacher Curriculum Resources as a springboard for writing instruction. Information about how to access these instructional materials and a wealth of additional resources are available on the CWP website listed below.

Teachers may submit no more than three student pieces for publication in one of two *CWP California Writing* anthologies, one for students grades 1-6 and the other for students grades 7-12. Submissions will be selected based on their connection to the themes and on the effectiveness and impact of the writing itself.

For more information, visit the CWP website, and follow the links for "Teacher" to "California Writing."

CWP Website:
californiawritingproject.org

PUBLISHING OPPORTUNITIES

Voices from the Middle

May 2006:
Past Lessons/Future Directions
Submission Deadline:
January 3, 2006

It's hard to imagine that we have reached the final issue for this editorial team. From December 1999 through May 2006, we have enjoyed being a part of your professional conversations. With the December 1999 issue, we tried to identify which ideas and practices would most benefit educators (and their students) in the new millennium.

Now, in the year 2006, we take time to look back, reflecting on what we've learned about adolescent literacy since 1999.

We encourage you to send your stories of what you've learned in these opening years of the 21st century. Take a moment to revisit the last six years of VM issues to find the articles that have most inspired you; then send us your short list of "The Best of VM 1999-2006," telling us why those articles (or entire issues) were important to you.

Reflect on the practices you've encountered in these pages and others, and tell us which ones have helped your students the most. What professional books published during this time would you recommend to colleagues? What trade books published between 1999-2006 have your students most enjoyed?

We want to include responses from as many readers as possible, so please keep your comments to 700 words.

Voices from the Middle
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English Journal NCTE

September 2006: Poetry
Submission Deadline:
January 15, 2006

In most of our classrooms, poetry is an object of attention. But it can also be a tool for instruction. While we prefer not to consider poetry in functional terms by asking how it is used, we do want to know what roles it plays in your curriculum and your school. For this issue, we are interested in a wide variety of approaches to teaching about and through poetry. How do you teach poetry as a genre? What poets and poems are successful in helping students understand and appreciate poetic form and language? How do you encourage students to write and revise poems? What connections do you make between poetry and other areas of the curriculum such as science, social studies, math, and so on? How do you work with English language learners?

We would like to see student and professional poems if they are relevant to your manuscript, but please note that you will be responsible for obtaining permissions if the manuscript is accepted for publication.

English Journal,
Louann Reid, Editor,
English Department,
1773 Campus Delivery
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523-1773
English-Journal@ColoState.edu

Language Arts NCTE

May 2007: Inquiries and Insights
Submission deadline:
January 15, 2006

In this unthemed issue, we feature your current questions and transformations as educators, community members, students, and researchers. Many directions are possible in this issue. What tensions do you see in literacy education today? What do readers of *Language Arts* need to notice and think about? What inquiry work have you done that can stretch the field of literacy and language arts? Describe your process of learning about literature, literacy, culture, social justice, and language. What new literacy practices do you see in communities, after school programs, and classrooms? What is getting in the way of change? What connections are adults and children making as they engage in the art of language?

Join us in creating a collection of inquiries and insights.

Editorial correspondence and manuscripts should be directed to:
Language Arts Editorial Office,
School of Teaching and Learning,
The Ohio State University 333 Arps Hall, 1945 N. High St.
Columbus, Ohio 43210
E-mail: langarts@osu.edu.

DIALOGUE

Call for Manuscripts

SPRING 2006
Voices from the Classroom
Submission Deadline:
March 1, 2006

What inspiring words have your students written? Is there an essay, excerpt, poem or profound thought a student has shared that you would like to share with us? Give your students and yourselves the opportunity to publish by submitting it to the Dialogue.

Writers love to get mail, and so do the editors of newsletters for writing teachers! *Dialogue* would like to receive your work or the work of your students. Submit a story of student success, a strategy for implementation, or a personal essay on your teaching experience. Send all manuscript submissions, suggestions, letters to the editor and Project Notes to:

Dialogue UCSD/SDAWP
9500 Gilman Drive, 0036
La Jolla, CA 92093 - 0036
Email: moonbeam5@cox.net
jenny4moore@hotmail.com

Calendar of Events

National Writing Project 2006
Urban Sites Network Conference

Writing Across Borders
Teaching Where Differences Matter

Hosted by the San Diego Area Writing Project
April 28 - 29, 2006

Conference Highlights:

—Keynote address and engaging interactive sessions
—Visits to local schools
—Writing marathons in the historic Gaslamp Quarter and/or Old Town San Diego
—Friday reception and dinner with entertainment

$95.00 Friday and Saturday (Full Conference)
$65.00 (Saturday Only)

For information contact
the SDAWP office
at 858-534-2576
or email cschrammel@ucsd.edu
http://create.ucsd.edu.sdawp/

CATE 2006

Adventures in Anaheim—
An "E Ticket" Adventure
February 3 - 5, 2006
Hyatt Regency Orange County
Register online: www.CATEweb.org

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Visit our website at
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