

Dialogue



A Publication of the San Diego Area Writing Project

Winter 2010

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Authenticating the Writing Process: Using an Inquiry Approach to Teach Feature Writing at the Secondary Level

Shannon Falkner—SDAWP 2008

Changing the Paradigm: The Importance of Authentic Student Writing

When Annie turned in her essay on Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, I knew I had messed up. I also knew that preventing the same mistakes I had made from happening again would mean rethinking the entire premise undergirding the writing instruction that I do in my classroom.

Throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde satirizes many of the social and moral customs of Victorian England, but one of the most humorous aspects of the play is Wilde's reversal of the traditional morality tale that touts the importance of honesty in order to suggest that there is no real "importance of being earnest" after all. Now, I've taught Annie for several years, and so I know her quite well. Through our conversations, her writing, and my observations of her interactions with others, I know her to be an honest person as well as a devoted Christian. In short, she is probably fairly likely to disagree with Wilde's flip-pant dismissal of honesty; however, as a result of the way in which I structured the class's writing curriculum, she never had the opportunity to voice those beliefs and, instead, she handed in an essay in which she eloquently and effectively proved that "lying is acceptable if it protects one's reputation"—a belief she most certainly did not personally support.

I used to believe that being an effective writer was largely about a student's ability to make some kind of original claim and then support that claim using well-developed evidence and examples. After all, isn't this the very skill that the SAT, AP, ACT, and STAR tests seem to hold so dear? Well, yes. But if there's one thing that Annie and I did learn from Oscar Wilde, it's that those who set the standard for society's expectations are often grossly out of touch with reality. If we're asking students to disregard their own real beliefs in favor of the easiest provable belief, as I unwittingly asked Annie to do, we are doing our students a great disservice. We are sending them the message that writing is at odds with reality, which just couldn't be further from the truth. Writing should not be taught as an activity disconnected from students' actual beliefs and ideas, but as a means to express those beliefs and ideas. One effective way to foster the kind of classroom environment that presents writing as a means to this end is to use essential questions in conjunction with an inquiry approach.

Essential Questions in an Inquiry Approach

The central component of the backward design approach to curricular planning is, first, determining the goals you want students to achieve, and then figuring out which activities and assignments will help students to reach those established goals (Moore, "Backward Design"). In an inquiry approach, however, teachers engage in curricular planning as an on-going process throughout the year, based on what students want or need in the

way of instruction; goals are not pre-determined (Ray, "Exploring Inquiry as a Teaching Stance in the Writing Workshop" 239). While these approaches may, at first, seem to be at odds with one another, these seemingly oppositional theories can actually work in tandem to maximize student engagement and achievement.

A key component in the backward design teaching model is the use of essential questions in the classroom. Essential questions are questions about larger issues that we face in the world. They are thought-provoking, open ended, and they have no single "right" answer. They can only be answered individually, through introspective reflection on our own values and beliefs. Examples of questions that have worked well for me in the past (and apply to almost any text) are the following: What causes people to bond and/or conflict? What is "truth"? Do people control their circumstances or are they victims of circumstance? How does trauma (or power, or memory) impact people? Are people basically alone, or are they integral members of a society? What is the purpose of

Dialogue

Winter 2010
Issue No. 23

Choices in the Classroom: The Everyday Judgments of Teachers

Editors: Stacey Goldblatt
Jennifer Moore
Page Design: Janis Jones
Writing Angel: Susan Minnicks

Published by the
San Diego Area
Writing Project at UCSD

Director:
Kim Douillard

UC San Diego
SDAWP
9500 Gilman Drive
La Jolla, CA 92093-0036
(858) 534-2576
<http://create.ucsd.edu/sdawp/>

life on earth? Are people inherently good, evil, or something else?

In order for this approach to be successful teachers must pose questions that are, in essence, the very same questions that plague philosophers, economists, CEOs, environmentalists, humanitarians, judges, world leaders, and every other professional scholar and thinker that ponders our world. The examples that I listed above will do the trick, but there are many other equally effective questions lurking in every teacher's own brain.

Because it is imperative, in a literature-based curriculum, that the course reading be an exploration of the essential questions, we must consciously tie the two components together. While it would be ideal for students to craft the essential questions for their course and have the teacher select appropriate literature, this situation is not always possible. In my case, for example, my department requires that students read certain texts in each course, so the questions students come up with may not necessarily work well with the content of the required texts. Because, in the beginning of the year, I am the only one in the class who has previously read the texts students will be required to read, I choose several essential questions that I know will apply to or address the ideas, themes, or issues raised in the particular set of texts required. I try to allow the questions to remain as open-ended and as general as possible to allow students to pursue the sub-issues within each of these questions that most interest them.

Benefits of Blending Essential Questions and an Inquiry Approach

Blending essential questions and an inquiry approach provides an answer to the inevitable question that each student asks (aloud or not) about every assignment, activity, or assessment, which is: "what for?" The premise of my approach is that teachers present the course as an inquiry into the essential questions, so that everything that students do in the course becomes purposeful. *Why are we reading? Why are we writing?* We are seeking answers to real questions.

Additionally, through this approach, writing becomes a starting point as opposed to an endpoint, as current research suggests it should. Samway notes that "it is a mistake to assume that writing is simply a mechanism for expressing already-conceived, developed thoughts...[T]hrough writing we discover what we think and know" (Samway 7). In using an inquiry approach with essential questions, students (and teachers) begin to see writing as a means to explore thinking instead of only a way to express their thinking. In the "state a claim and prove it" method to writing instruction, we're leaving out a critical piece of the writing process: the thinking.

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The benefits of this approach are apparent when we consider Annie's Oscar Wilde essay. Instead of asking Annie to answer the question "What does Oscar Wilde think about truth?" I should have been asking her "Based on what you know about what Oscar Wilde thinks about truth, what do you think about truth now?" The difference may seem subtle, but the implications are huge. We are changing our approach from teaching students to focus on what other people think (whether it is what we think, what authors think, or what other scholars think) to facilitating their own explorations of what they think.

Addressing the Skeptics

The example questions I posed earlier may seem, at first, to be beyond the scope of a high school English

class. Some skeptics would argue that such sophisticated concepts should be reserved for the college classroom because some low-performing students are not ready to take on the challenges facing advanced scholars. However, this is simply not the case.

Lisa Delpit argues that educators “need to rethink the general belief that critical and creative thinking, the ability to analyze, and the ability to make comparisons and judgments are higher order thinking skills” for all students. She claims that “[i]t is often the case that for children who are from poor communities, critical thinking skills are basic. Those are the skills they come to us with. They are accustomed to being more independent. Often they are familiar with real-life problems and how to solve them.” Consequently, Delpit encourages teachers to “appreciate and make use of the higher order knowledge that [students] bring from home” and fill in the blanks in some of the more traditionally accepted “basic skills” areas (i.e. spelling, grammar, etc.) as the need arises (Delpit 228). In light of these ideas, I truly do believe that all of our students, including those who may seem deficient in basic skills, are capable of finding success using essential questions because the questions are so challenging. But, in order for this approach to be successful, we, as teachers, must believe that our students want to address authentic, challenging questions, and we must believe that they are capable of finding their own answers.

Other skeptics may suggest that exploring these questions is pointless, as they don't have answers.

Other skeptics may suggest that exploring these questions is pointless, as they don't have answers. It is imperative that teachers recognize that the purpose of asking these questions is not to find the answer, but to find *an* answer (or, better, several answers). The emphasis should be

on individual exploration as opposed to consensus answers. Finding an answer is, really, secondary to recognizing and articulating the complexity of the issues.

Using Essential Questions to Write Feature Articles

A feature article that explores an issue related to one of the essential questions is an ideal outcome that students should achieve as a result of their on-going inquiry into essential questions. Although we usually think of news writing as a specialty suited to elective courses, there are tremendous benefits to using news writing in the English language arts classroom. Moffett believes that “[journalism] ought to be mainstreamed... [because] reportage and research represent an important bridge between personal writing and [analytical] writing” (Moffett 70), and I wholeheartedly agree. News writing allows students to write about issues that interest them, and they require the kinds of elements that teachers value in good writing. I believe that feature articles are one route to engaging students in an authentic writing process.

Feature articles are pieces that go much deeper than the headlines we read on the front page and are much narrower in scope, addressing a particular sub-category within a larger issue. Feature articles require research and interviews in order to achieve this in-depth coverage. Sometimes, a feature article also includes the writer's opinions.

I feel that the feature article is an ideal final project in large part because of its fluid place on the spectrum of subjectivity. If you picture a spectrum with one side marked “subjective writing” and the other side marked “objective writing,” editorial writing would be located on the outermost point of the “subjective writing” side of the spectrum, and straight news writing would be on the far reaches of “objective writing.” The feature article, however, could fall anywhere in the middle of those two poles. In my own reading of feature articles, I've noticed that some feature articles are just short of editorial with regard to their overtly persuasive purposes, while other feature articles attempt only to

educate readers on a particular issue or event. Most feature articles, however, fall somewhere in the middle.

The variety inherent within the genre of feature articles allows students to write the type of article that best suits their own purposes and needs. If they have developed strong feelings on a particular essential question, the article may include more opinions; however, if they are still exploring their understanding of the questions, they can inform their readers about the complexity of the issue, and they need not feel compelled to use an opinion as the driving force behind the article. In my opinion, it is much more valuable for students to recognize the inherent contradictions, implications, and complications within an issue than to necessarily formulate a steadfast opinion on it.

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Another benefit of feature articles as a final project is that they often combine multiple modes of writing into an authentic genre (Ray, “Understanding the Difference Between Mode and Genre” 99). Almost every set of state content standards in English Language Arts requires students to write in a variety of modes, with exposition, persuasion, narration, and description probably being the most common. Feature articles utilize all of these modes; an article may have a narrative opening, but it will inevitably need to include expository information as well as description in order to fully take the reader into the depths of the issue. As previously discussed, the degree to which the article is persuasive is left largely up to the writer. This kind of combination writing inherent in the feature article genre mirrors the writing

that real people do in their real lives, which makes this assignment meaningful in a way that single mode writing assignments just aren't. Katie Wood Ray, a writer of professional books for teachers, notes that "in a single text, writers usually move among different modes in order to accomplish their purposes" (Ray 102), so aren't we pigeon-holing students by assigning "persuasive writing" or "narrative writing"?

...so aren't we pigeon-holing students by assigning "persuasive writing" or "narrative writing"?

**Final Thoughts:
Why This Approach Works**

In setting the expectation, early in the course, that students will be writing a feature article focused on some aspect of an essential question, we are encouraging students to collect a plethora of knowledge and information and then use that knowledge and information to formulate and express their ideas. This approach is almost the exact opposite of the traditional "state a claim and prove it" method, in which we ask students to scrape the bottom of their brains in a desperate attempt to locate knowledge—that may not even be there—to prove their ideas. In the essential question-inquiry approach, we are encouraging them to begin from a place of "plenty" as opposed to a place of "scarcity" (Moffett 72). James Moffett eloquently conveys the importance of this distinction:

"The deductive approach is to work from the top down, from the higher level abstractions to the lower. If you are given a topic...then you start at a higher generalization and go downward, looking for something to support or illustrate the generalization. That is what I call a wrong strategy, working from scarcity. What we

(Falkner, continued on p. 14)



MUSE BOX

Jenny Moore, SDAWP 1999

2010: New Moon Intentions

I've never been a fan of New Year's resolutions, those guilt-inducing albatrosses so easily abandoned before any meaningful self-improvement transpires. But years ago a friend of mine suggested creating 12 "intentions." The idea is to implement them one month at a time so that they (hopefully!) become habit, one by one. I was drawn to the idea back then, as well as to the noun "intention," which allows for human frailty, forgetfulness, and our tendency to abandon our ideals from time to time. As educators, we tend to measure our years in academic terms: August or September to June. A calendar year, though, beginning in January and ending in December, encapsulates the second half of a school year for most, a summer of renewal, and the beginning of a new academic year. Compose an intention for each month of 2010 with your whole person in mind: how will you view the remainder of this school year? What do you intend to accomplish or afford yourself during the recess? What new directions will guide you next school year? How will you balance work and life?

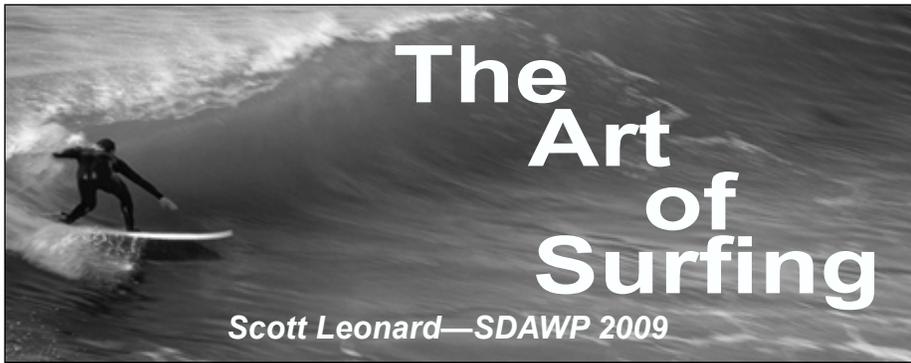
SDAWP NOTES

Congratulations to the following Fellows on their retirements:

Karen Wroblewski, SDAWP 1989, SDUSD; Sara Watts, SDAWP 1995, SDUSD; Margo Andara, SDAWP 1996, SDUSD.

Kudos to Patricia "PJ" Jeffery, SDAWP 2008. PJ was honored in Sept. 2009 by local radio station Smooth Jazz 98.1 and received their "Teachers Are Heroes" award. PJ teaches at Hickman Elementary in San Diego Unified School District and is a hero because "she always goes above and beyond to send the message to our students, faculty and parents that we need to be conscious of our environment by recycling, reducing and reusing." PJ was also cited for her innovative ideas and progressive programs. As the nomination letter said, "Her expectations are extremely high and she makes all of us, particularly her students, stretch and be all that they can be! She is a very special and unique individual and is not all about creating a great student **but about building a better person—one that is productive, a self-thinker and one who wants to live up to their potential.**"

Thank you to those who participated in The National Day on Writing. To view SDAWP's gallery, "Fall in Love with Writing," please visit: <http://galleryofwriting.org/writing/957930>



I was tired, jetlagged, and slightly scared of sharks. There had been a few attacks one month earlier. I climbed on the slippery rock shelf and timed the waves before jumping into the ocean. I was about to go surfing farther away from my home than I had ever been before. I caught my first wave and it was a beautiful, long ride that brought me right back to my comfort zone. As an avid surfer, I have discovered that every bit of practice pays off. It is easy for me to paddle out and surf in a distant ocean for two reasons. I have spent hours, days, weeks, and years honing my surfing skills. I also have taken these skills outside of their element. I have questioned, reflected, and anticipated the next time that I would be surfing. My passion was a constant that never ceased, even though I was not always in the ocean. I reflected on how to reach the next level in surfing in the car on the way home, at dinner, even as I slept some of these skills were developed in my dreams. Osmosis did exist, but only because I had the freedom to express myself and positive role models who helped me to grow as a surfer.

Hard work, dedication, studying the experts, and the eternal enthusiasm of a six year old have helped me become a better surfer. I observed and studied how the experts made turns on waves. I tried my best to replicate these maneuvers with my own style. I built a toolbox of maneuvers that I could use in a variety of different ocean conditions. This helped me develop my own style, a very important aspect in the art of surfing. I have now taken all of this experience into the classroom where I teach children to become better writers. I have used many of my life experiences to help children become powerful writers and lifelong learners.

I teach my first grade students that they have to first understand that even the experts were once novices. Children need to begin thinking like authors. Once my first graders realize that Mark Twain, Dr. Seuss, and Patricia Polacco were once children just like them, they are ready to take their first step or catch their first wave. When they understand these texts, sentences, poems, and songs and use them as models, using their own thoughts and emotions, a new revival takes place. They can replicate what another author is doing but put in their own ideas and vocabulary, making it their own. They

***I have used many
of my life
experiences
to help children
become
powerful writers
and lifelong learners.***

begin building their own unique writing toolbox. By trying this with a variety of different books and authors, children develop their own style. Everyone is an individual with different thoughts, ideas and experiences and these need to be developed to create innovative, fluent writers. By practicing this frequently, young writers are now developing their own voice. They are becoming more empowered as they augment their toolboxes and continue developing their writing as they think like authors. I would have never thought that six and seven year olds could reach such a profound place. I went

through a paradigm shift in my writing instruction that advanced my students to a higher level in bilingual writing than I ever would have thought possible in a first grade classroom.

Seven years into my profession as a teacher, I decided that I really needed to become a strong writing teacher. I walked in on a new writing cohort that my district was offering as an ongoing professional development consisting of teachers from around our school district. I thought that I was invited but was told that I was not on the list. I could have walked out heartbroken with three more days of summer to plan for the school year or refuel; instead, I decided to try to crash this cohort. I turned around and headed out and I mentioned to the group that I had a decent writing program. Maybe it was out of pity, maybe it was that they wanted a token male in their all female cohort, but they asked me to stay. I was unaware of the impact that this would have on me and my students. Over this three-day professional development introduction to teaching the craft of writing, I experienced yet another paradigm shift as an educator.

It is difficult for me to describe the paradigm shift. I'll start by describing the environment in which I teach. I am a first grade teacher in a 90:10 Spanish Dual Immersion K-6 elementary school. Half of the children in my class are English speakers and half are Spanish speakers. In the first grade and kindergarten, 90% percent of the school day is instructed in Spanish and 10% is instructed in English. The ratio changes each grade level, as Spanish loses 10% and English gains another 10%. This continues until the fifth grade when 50% of the day is instructed in English and 50% of the day is instructed in Spanish. The program has goals that children become bilingual, biliterate, and receive a multicultural education. This is all accomplished through an additive approach to bilingual teaching where children develop advanced cognitive skills via bilingualism and biliteracy. The reason that our program model instructs 90% of the day in Spanish in kindergarten and first grade is to immerse English speakers while supporting

Spanish speakers. This is due to research that states that minority cultures should be supported in their native language to become bilingual and the majority culture should be immersed in their target language to become bilingual. Spanish also makes phonetic sense, which in many regards makes beginning literacy easier in Spanish. Many opportunities and even more challenges come with teaching in a bilingual program and the foremost challenge is second language development. Cooperative learning is essential as students develop language from one another. I use this cooperative learning model as the cornerstone for my instruction and to develop a very powerful community within the classroom. I was constantly searching for ways to incorporate this cooperative learning experience with my writing program.

To improve my writing program, I had to first accept that I had to step out of my comfort zone and try something completely different. I had to be willing to be disturbed. This was difficult, as I saw a great responsibility leading not only their academic instruction, but their bilingual development. I considered myself a creative teacher who taught lessons with passion and enthusiasm. Looking back I see that most of my lessons were directed by me. The writing cohort taught me to try something new, giving my students more opportunities to discover their voice from within. I knew that I was

I used my passion and enthusiasm to inspire, becoming a model of learning as I too was trying something new...

taking a risk, to give so much responsibility to first graders as they had to develop a bilingual voice from within. This initiated the paradigm shift in the classroom. I used my passion and enthusiasm to inspire, becoming a model of learning as I, too, was trying something new as a teacher and a learner.

I initiated and prioritized bookmaking into my daily schedule. Students created the size, color, title, illustrations, and how many pages their

books were. They were given complete freedom to write. I allowed students to write about whatever they desired. They were allowed to write anywhere in our classroom. They could work individually or with others, but they had to write. My classroom was as loose as it had ever been, but the results were successful because of the environment, attitude, and continual learning that were created. Bookmaking time became the highlight of the day for every student in my class. For the first time in my teaching career, all students in my classroom admitted

Hard work, dedication, studying the experts, and the eternal enthusiasm of a six-year-old have helped me become a better surfer.

that they loved to write. I realized that it was the dedication of time and freedom that they were given, which created this community of writers. Everyone believed in themselves as writers, because that is what they did everyday. Girls wrote about Hannah Montana and puppies, and boys started to develop Indiana Jones comics. The passions of these young writers were so great that I was not concerned with the subjects of the books. I was especially impressed by how they were collaborating on their ideas with one another. My role as the teacher completely changed.

They were beginning to believe in themselves and what they were writing. The most important ingredient was consistent writing time to become fluent writers. My lessons started out long, but after time I felt that I was holding them back by not giving them enough time to write. They became more successful as I shortened my direct instruction to mini-lessons that focused mainly on voice and organization of thoughts. My main role evolved from motivating them to temporarily accomplish

a task, to inspiring them to permanently write with passion and meaning. I was the muse, the editor, and the publisher. I praised and encouraged and sought out what each student did well, never commenting on grammar or spelling errors. I was the positive voice that encouraged them to keep writing. After gradually building trust and rapport, I asked them questions that would further guide their writing, always with the inquiry method. I felt that they would improve as writers as they themselves discovered what made them the writers that they were.

Going to the library and read-aloud books took on whole new meanings. I consistently studied mentor texts with them so that they could start to learn from many different authors. Books were more than just good stories to read or listen to for enjoyment. They were a medium of language and illustrations that helped my students develop their own craft of writing. They became more and more empowered as they viewed themselves as authors, just like published authors.

I, too, was learning something completely new almost everyday. I shared my realization with my colleagues, parents, and cohort and became even more enthusiastic about my new development in my writing program. This enthusiasm was ongoing and reciprocal, transforming a first grade classroom into an environment of six and seven year old authors in my classroom. My first graders now knew much more than how to find the beach and wax their surfboards. They were on their own in the water riding waves. They gained so much responsibility for their own development as I guided them with mini-lessons, mentor texts, and encouraged cooperative learning and reflection. My role was continually changing as I gave them freedom to create and illustrate their own books everyday. They developed a passion for writing books that I can only relate to my love of the ocean.

Whenever they had free time, they were working on their books. Many parents informed me of bookmaking that took place at home. Learning and writing became a natural pastime that reached well beyond the 8:00-2:20 school day. The passion was continual and never stopped, just like I never stopped thinking about surfing.

Every child comes from a different background and has a different combination of learning styles than his or her peers. I found that giving kids freedom and encouraging discovery of self was the secret to their success. As an elementary school teacher, I believe that it is a writer's notebook and bookmaking that helps children find themselves as writers. I want my first graders to discover what kind of books they like to make and write and illustrate them to the best of their abilities. I feel that it is important for my students to think about the different genres of books that are being created by their peers and for them to discuss their writing with each other. Cooperative learning is a vital component and valuing each other's skills will only help them to grow as authors.

We must give children the opportunity to be individuals and discover their passions as they learn to express themselves through the craft of writing.

I still add to my toolbox as a lifelong surfer. I might be out of my physical prime and not have the energy that I had as a young boy on the beach, but I continue to grow as a surfer. I have more knowledge of the ocean and of surfboard design. I continue to travel and surf many different kinds of waves. I also continue to make friendships with others who enjoy the art of riding waves. We have discussions and grow as we collaborate about our experiences and passion for surfing. We also still have the enthusiasm of first graders. My surfing toolbox keeps growing and will never cease to grow. I have even transferred this passion of surfing to other facets of my life, such as skiing, running, raising a family, and teaching. This is the best part about developing a passion. There are so many transferable skills. We must give children the opportunity to be individuals and discover their passions as they learn to express themselves through the craft of writing.



Congratulations

SDAWP Fellows Summer 2009

Elka Adams
University City High
San Diego Unified

Rob Meza-Ehlert
Kearny High
San Diego Unified

Valentyna Banner
Nubia Leadership Academy
San Diego Unified

**Victoria
Mossa-Mariani**
Garrison Elementary
Oceanside Unified

Aja Booker
Nubia Leadership Academy
San Diego Unified

Marti Peruski
Rancho Buena Vista High
Vista Unified

Wendy Craig
El Camino Creek Elementary
Encinitas Union

Laura Pribyl
Fuerte Elementary
Cajon Valley Union

Robert Gallo
San Diego High—
Science and Tech
San Diego Unified

John Rall
San Diego Mesa College
San Diego Community College

Edward Gillet
Eastlake High
Sweetwater Union High

Becky Rudeen
Escondido High
Escondido Union

Scott Leonard
Capri Elementary
Encinitas Union

Sarah 'Sally' Russell
Capri Elementary
Encinitas Union

Lei Li
Barnard Elementary
San Diego Unified

**Melinda 'Mindy'
Shacklett**
Education Center (Math Dept.)
San Diego Unified

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Young Writers' Camp

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Where I'm From

I am from the old white house
sitting tall and grand
I am from the beach,
and the waves lapping the shore
I am from an amusement park,
sitting on a pier in the ocean
I am from those endless summer
nights, catching fireflies in the dark
I am from tall skyscrapers
looking out to Lake Michigan
I am from the excitement of seeing
the ice cream truck
I am from the glistening snow
during the winter
I am from Chicago.

—Jeffrey Huang

Ode to the Stars

He waits until the sun
Has sunken beneath
His midnight coat, black.
And then the stars light up,
Dancing in the light of the moon.

The party has started,
Constellations are leaping
through the sky,
Orion is running from his scorpion,
The moon flashes a glittering smile,
As the night wears on.

When the first flickers of dawn arise,
The party is over—
Until next time!

—Samantha Pryor

Journey Through the Mind

I was thinking
What to write?
Wandering the path of ideas
When I approached
A fork in the road
Poem?
Or story?
I chose poem
Took a left turn
And found myself lost
A dark forest of lines
A storm of words
Losing control of thought
Lost in the depths
Of my mind

—Michela Rodriguez



Love to Learn

Found words from Frank Barone

Smile at purple surprises
To continue your love of learning
Jump, feet first, into summer.
Do a cannonball
into a pool of words.
Or squish words on the sandy beach
and smell salty metaphors.
Words that rustle and sigh,
And that dance in the wind,
In star bright skies.
Smile at purple surprises
To continue your love of learning.

—Justin Chung



Rainbow of Metaphors

Red is a violet strawberry waiting to be picked.

Orange is a pumpkin waiting to scare someone.

Yellow is a sour lemon getting squeezed for lemonade.

Green is the stem of a rose growing from the brown ground.

Blue is a sweet and soft berry getting eaten.

Purple is the violet sky filled with stars and twilight.

—Eileen Huang

Dreams: between the course
of two different hours
Our minds may go to sleep
But our thoughts
are more alive than ever

—Dylana Guth

Ready, Set, Write

*Pencils running
super speed
Mind racing,
full of ideas
Paper bouncing
with words
Losing control
and going fast
Hand aching
and head hurting
Writing is a
Contest for your mind*

—Ciara O'Shea





Boomers from Mars, Millennials from Venus

Ed Gillet—SDAWP 2009

"You're all special people, and don't let the world tell you different."

—EHS "Teacher Who Cares" award winner

Compared to earlier graduating classes I'd known, Eastlake's class of 2009 seemed dispirited, anxious, and reluctant. And who could blame them—for months they'd been subjected to a steady diet of apocalyptic doom and gloom. Jobs disappearing, tight credit-shrinking student

I was happy for my colleague who won the award—he deserved it—but I was less sanguine about his daily maxim.

loans, and dwindling state funding turning their safe-haven community colleges into expensive, competitive institutions.

Fortunately, our graduation ceremony dispelled the malaise that had permeated the campus for weeks. The buzzing confusion of mortar-boarded, medaled, tassled, and gowned students nervously queuing up, the spontaneous joyous roar rising from the kids when they heard the first bars of "Pomp and Circumstance," and the raucous cheering from their friends and families that filled the Southwestern College stadium to capacity banished all those depressing thoughts.

I listened to the roll call of graduates, meditating on where my former student's life might lead him or her whenever a familiar name rang out. After the valedictorian and salutatorian speeches—there were five this year—one honor remained to be meted out: an Eastlake teacher would be designated the "Teacher Who Cares" as determined by votes from the graduating senior class. We teachers glanced at one another—the plaque would be a nice addition to a classroom wall, but the thousand-dollar award would be a sweeter affirmation.

A representative from the Educational Foundation took the stage and noted that every one of the students who nominated the honoree mentioned something that teacher said every day as the class was filing out of the room: "You're all special people, and don't ever let the world tell you different." Most of the students in the audience finished the quote along with the presenter, and the crowd broke into a heartfelt cheer for our fortunate TWC.

I was happy for my colleague who won the award—he deserved it—but I was less sanguine about his daily maxim. Two books by San Diego State University psychology professor Jean Twenge, *Generation Me* (2006) and *The Narcissism Epidemic* (2009), helped me connect my difficulties teaching academic writing to my seniors to the rising self-obsession of the "millennials," the

So here's the rub. The world, justly or not, will place a value on one's accomplishments and contributions, and rather ruthlessly.

generation of students born after 1990. Now, I suppose there is nothing wrong with the first part of our TWC's observation that his students are all "special people"—if we don't mind dressing up some quintessential American egalitarianism in a new-age, psycho-babble leisure suit, but the second half of the statement is disturbing: "...and don't let the world tell you different."

In *The Narcissism Epidemic* (2009), Twenge and Campbell cite studies that compared the confidence levels of Korean and American stu-

dents regarding their math skills. While 39% of American students expressed high confidence that they performed well on a math test, only 6% of the Korean students believed they had scored highly on the same test. But when the actual test scores were compared, the Korean students' actual performance far exceeded that of the overly confident Americans (47).

In *Generation Me*, Twenge and Campbell note that while only 18% of American college freshmen described themselves as "A" students in 1968, a whopping 48% of entering freshmen in 2004 claimed to have an "A" average. Furthermore, this grade inflation occurred during the decades when SAT scores either declined or remained flat (47). Statistics, studies and anecdotal data led Twenge and Campbell to conclude that American students believe that they are more competent than they actually are despite the fact that the world certainly is telling them something different, and the authors attribute the disparity between perception and reality

to the American students' inflated sense of self-esteem.

So here's the rub. The world, justly or not, will place a value on one's accomplishments and contributions, and rather ruthlessly. But, if Twenge and Campbell are correct, the world's judgments don't matter to GenMe. When reality and fantasy conflict, reality can only drag you down. John Donne has been superceded—we really are islands now. We've spawned a generation of solipsistic navel-gazers who care only for how many "friends"

they can attract to their Facebook pages. The cogito for the age of web 2.0 might run: “People add me, therefore I am.” In a culture where everyone gets a ribbon simply for participating, of course our students expect a “B” for simply turning in their assignments. Like the children of Lake Wobegone, everyone is above average—or at least they believe themselves to be. The world’s judgment is irrelevant to them because they know they’re great—everyone affirms their special qualities, so they must be real. Twenge, herself a millennial, has ruthlessly pinned her generation to the wall for further study, and I highly recommend her books to teachers. What I want to do in the rest of this essay is to explore the generation-based miscommunication between Boomers, i.e., my generation, and millennials. To that end, I’d like to introduce you to my dog, Lucy.

Lucy is about a year old, but my wife and I only recently adopted her from the San Diego Humane Society, and before we took her home, Lucy lived in shelters for the first eight months of her life. The trainers warned us that Lucy was impulsive and might be difficult to control until we established our authority through positive reinforcement and consistent discipline. So we took a crash course in puppy training to try to deal with Lucy’s endearing wildness. As I tried to establish some

The world’s judgment is irrelevant to them because they know they’re great—everyone affirms their special qualities, so they must be real.

control over the dog, it struck me that she was training me every bit as much as I was training her. She trained me not to leave my shoes in the garage; she trained me to take her for at least two long walks every day; she trained me to stop regularly to let her sniff things. After a few weeks, Lucy and I reached a behavioral equilibrium that keeps us both reasonably happy — at least I don’t have to chase the dog for my shoes quite as often.

I thought a lot about classroom discipline while I worked with my dog.

As every teacher knows, class management is also a symbiotic process whereby a teacher reaches some sort of mutually agreeable compromises between themselves and their students. In effect, students train teachers to employ discipline methods and instructional strategies that work to keep the classroom a harmonious and productive place.

When instructional and discipline methods are dysfunctional, teachers try new approaches until they find something that works.

When instructional and disciplinary methods are dysfunctional, teachers try new approaches until they find something that works.

I believe at least part of the explanation for the prevalence of personal expressive writing in the K-12 curriculum must lie with the fact that students have trained their teachers to assign increasing amounts of personal expressive writing. Students in classes that indulge this style of writing probably derive a great deal of satisfaction from it, and they reinforce the teacher’s expressivistic approach through their positive behavior. And who’s to say that students who write journals and personal responses to literature are not developing as writers or experiencing profound personal growth.

A problem arises when students train their teachers to mostly assign expressivistic writing. Our narcissistic students love to write about themselves, and judging by their propensity for confessional blogging—as evidenced by their unabashed use of Facebook and Myspace—they are rather prolific and enthusiastic practitioners of the personal essay. By indulging our students’ preference for the personal, teachers see happier students, and so teachers experience less stress. Student resistance to the “boring and hard” genre of argumentative academic

writing, on the other hand, creates conflict and acts as a disincentive to writing expository essays.

But there is more to the story than student likes and dislikes. According to a 2002 report prepared by the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates of the California Community Colleges, the California

State University, and the University of California, “...only 1/3 of entering college students are sufficiently prepared for the two most frequently assigned [college] writing tasks: analyzing information or arguments and synthesizing information from several sources, according to faculty respondents.” Obviously there is a misalignment between reading and writing in the K-12 curriculum and the sort of reading and writing students are expected to do in college. Now I don’t think teachers are to blame for this. They are doing what is expected of them in the classroom: creating opportunities for students to write.

Consider the following quickwrite prompt, taken almost at random from a Holt 9th grade ELA text, and note how many times the word “you” is used:

Imagine that your family is leaving home because you’re all in great danger. You must leave now, and there’s no chance of returning. You can only take one special belonging with you. What will it be? List your top three choices. Then, quickwrite about what you’ll miss most about your home.

This prompt clearly asks students to explore their own intuitions, but I think we can find a missed opportunity to engage students with a larger socio-political context. For example, why not craft an opportunity for writing that asks students to comment on two scenarios: one the familiar—to Californians at least—scene in which hectic American suburbanites cram photographs, computers, and pet cages into their overloaded

car trunks. A second scenario might consist of a fleeing Pakistani family trundling down a dirt road, driving their farm animals ahead of them and pushing the family's weathered matriarch in a crudely built wheelbarrow piled high with their pitiful belongings. Not all quickwrites are equal when it comes to promoting critical thinking.

In their useful little book, *They Say, I Say* (2006), Gerald Graf and Cathy Birkenstein divide academic argument between explaining an author's position and responding to his or her arguments. Their book is premised on the reasonable expectation that a writer must first show he or she understands an argument before they are qualified to offer their own opinions. But the essence of GenMe's problems with academic writing is that while GenMe writers are adept at expressing their opinions, they struggle with the summarizing and analyzing, the "they say" portion of an academic essay. Some of this is attributable to our students' difficulties reading arguments in expository texts, but whatever the root cause of the problem, by almost every measure our GenMe students are falling short of the expectations colleges have set for them.

So, what is to be done? First, we need to teach students how to read rhetorically. Many teachers have made significant strides in this direction by using mentor texts and showing students how to "read like writers," but we need to make our teaching of rhetorical concepts more explicit. Next, we should add more expository and argumentative texts to our ELA curriculum, and we must teach students how to read and respond to academic argument. Finally, we should never forget that most of academia, at least temperamentally if not chronologically, is of a different generation from the millennials.

In 1992, psychologist John Gray published *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* in which he popularized the idea that differences in communication styles lay at the root of gender conflict. The thrust of Gray's Mars and Venus metaphor is that disputes between men and women are more than simple disagreements over facts or values. Gender-based miscommunication resembles deeper, cultural conflicts in which seemingly incon-

(Gillet, continued on p. 14)

Guerilla Teachers

Victoria Mossa-Mariani—SDAWP 2009

Are you willing to be disturbed?
To get perturbed? To write your verbs?
To think critically and act politically?
You may feel uncomfortable and it's understandable
but change is tangible and what's imaginable is super duper,
a brighter future for all the boys and all the girls
in our schools, in the yards
playing hard even when the rules are fair
sometimes the game is not just a thought,
so keep it real and keep it true
education in the heart of the red, white and blue
every child left cared for will do,
we don't need rhetoric to tell us who
highly educated, motivated to cultivate and captivate our youth
to search for truth, respect each other
same or other, white, black or brown
in the country or downtown, everywhere in between
on paper or on a screen
we say and do what we mean
read and write, quote what's tight
keep in sight our students' rights
social justice will protect us
on this journey of life and learning,
we're yearning to see improvements
shift happens and it moves us forward, never boring,
we teach the stories of hope, of growth, of change
the comings of age tales that fill the halls
and sing, "Let freedom ring!"
Guerilla teachers, this is your rhyme, your paradigm,
your moment to shine
your time, your words, your acts give back, so don't stop
or let the ball drop because your lessons fall on precious ears
through the years and ripple like waves in the world,
in this space, through time and in and out of place.
your desire, a fire, a spark, a flame
Inspiration is the name, education is the game
and we're all players not pawns, not morons,
we rock on in our rooms, in the street, in the bleachers,
cheering on our kids, Guerilla Teachers



A Mission Statement on Ownership

Kendra Madden–SDAWP 2007



So, after our staff meeting on Monday, May 4th, 2009, I remembered a particular childhood trauma long forgotten.

I was about seven and my parents were having a large dinner party. I'd been practicing my table-setting techniques over many family meals (I'm an only child; we're talking about three place settings,) trying out some new ideas (utensils placed perpendicular to plate above setting; napkin in square fold on plate) and finally felt ready to practice my art in front of a larger audience—not three, but ten people, all adults.

I worked for hours making it perfect. Alone in the dining room, I arranged and rearranged until my fingers bled. Candles, candlesticks; flowers, vases; salad forks; oyster forks; all manner and species of the family china lay spread like an intricate and aesthetically pleasing yard sale across the dining room table. If my parents had been hosting a seven-hour, six-course banquet, this table would have been perfect for the occasion.

But they weren't—and it wasn't. And I'd missed my nap. And I was over-excited. So, when I walked back into the dining room later to find my mom undoing all my hard work, stripping away the art to leave only rudimentary, haphazard function, I threw a remarkable tantrum.

"Honey, I'm sorry, but we're just barbecuing... we don't need all this... I don't want to have to put it all away after dinner..." my mom's reasonable, pleading comments drifted down to the carpet where I maniacally twisted myself and tested the floorboards' resistance to fists, elbows, knees, and toes, and

even a little forehead. I wasn't having any of it.

She was trying to handle it sweetly enough, but her actions were too devastating. It wasn't that my craft wasn't appreciated, it was that my ability wasn't recognized. Why hadn't she just told me it was wrong and asked me to fix it? Why hadn't she worked with me to improve it? Why was she, after so many family dinners, now the only one considered capable of doing the job right? I was good enough for the chore, but not the actual event? Why had I even bothered? My goodness, the woman wasn't even as talented at it as I.

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the family china lay
spread like an
intricate and
aesthetically pleasing
yard sale across the
dining room table.*

She didn't understand the offensive depths of her action. I did eventually resume my craft again, but not for a very long time. Not until I'd been able to reclaim ownership of it.

On that recent Monday afternoon, teachers who viewed their work

in the classrooms as their craft walked in to find mom had dismantled everything. Only Mom was the administration who this time did not offer any logical, soothing responses to our uniform tantrum. Like Mom, they completely failed to realize the offensive depths of their actions. Like Mom, they robbed us of our ownership and implied that we have no ability in our field. Unlike Mom, not even an attempt was made to apologize or explain.

It started with the PowerPoint on "Non-Negotiables." Truly mimicking the role of parent and child, some touched soul had decided that the best way to approach individuals who are experts in their fields was to publicly present sweeping statements and unwarranted decisions without any consultation or conversation before or after, and to tell these professionals that there would be no cooperating to find something that might be a better fit. Our "Non-Negotiables" included: mandating that teachers submit all lesson plans for the following week on the Friday prior, as if our new parents were going to read our work over the weekend and provide feedback before we launched into the lessons on Monday; creating a chart (checklist) of the assignments students should complete during the school year; reassigning rooms on campus so that teachers might be situated in the same area as other department members, but said reassignment would be completely arbitrary and random, moving an entire three quarters of a department that is already positioned together to the other side of campus; cutting back one full week of instruction in order to have the students work the aforementioned move...

The "Non-Negotiables" continued with every new requirement reeking of disapproval, disrespect, and distrust for all the teachers seated before them. We were even provided with parables of the horrendous teaching that had been observed in our classrooms, although neither I nor my colleagues had received a visit since earlier first semester. Most ridiculous, though, was the response given by the admin to a teacher's question, "And what will YOU be doing to hold YOURSELVES accountable?" Answered with,

“We’ll be doing what we’re doing now, but it will be better because it will be easier next year when these things are in place.”

The meeting ended the same way it started: with the declaration that there would be no discussion. Everyone was to leave the auditorium and wait three days before approaching members of the admin team with concerns—three days to contemplate the situation and get our “hysteria” under control—three days for the admin team members to get themselves safely off campus and registered in a conference. Quite literally.

It must be human nature. When our effort and growth has not been recognized, let alone celebrated, we lose the drive to continue working. As a child, this meant it would be a long time before I again took an interest in the thing at which I’d been told I was not good enough. That disinterest affected only my mother and me. But here, among multiple staff members, the apathy spread like an air-borne pathogen. Our students provide most of the impetus we need to move forward, but when those who regulate how the system works (the administration) choose to start regulating how you work instead, it takes away all teacher ownership. And when they take away that ownership while belittling your craft at the same time, it makes you want to cross your arms tightly over your chest, pout, and demand, “If you know so much, why don’t you just do it yourself, then?” We all know how that would turn out.

I’m going to be teaching at a new school now. The new principal asked to meet with me before summer started. It turned out, she wanted to give me a task: design the writing benchmarks for grades 9 through 12. She provided me with a couple of books, but only as guides—she said she thought I would have some great ideas and that this was something the staff had been struggling with. No mandates, no dictates, only a request, like being asked to set the table for a big dinner. Only, I get the impression that this time, whatever adjustments might need to be made, they’ll be made with me, not for me. That is ownership.



(Falkner, continued from p. 4)

should work from is plenty, from too much material, so much that you have to waste it, throw some of it away, edit it, winnow it out—in short, compose, select, abstract” (Moffett 72).

Using an inquiry approach to essential questions to write feature articles provides students with the material that they need to write authentically. The writing work that we do in the classroom must be grounded in the belief that it is better to work from plenty than from scarcity because this belief is our only hope of authenticating the writing and thinking processes our students do in school before they decide that school has little to teach them about life, at which point we’ve all lost. Our students will engage with the curriculum only so long as it remains meaningful to them, and to be meaningful, it must begin and end with that which is important in their lives. Let’s give ourselves over to them, for once, and trust that, with the right guidance, they can be the experts on their own thinking and produce writing that proves it.

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(Gillet, continued from p. 12)

sistent worldviews are at stake. More reputable psychologists, such as Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don’t Understand* (1990), also made the same point, but the Martian/Venusian dichotomy is a pithy concept that still resonates. I’d like to push this planetary metaphor a bit further and identify the academic tradition with the Martian conversational style and the narcissistic millennials with the Venusian. If we frame the failure of our students to assimilate to academic culture as a mismatch between the language of academic argument and the intensely personal GenMe style of communication, we may be able to find a way to “translate” the languages of the inhabitants of these two planets to reach some kind of mutual respect and understanding.

Or maybe not. A feminist critic (Tannen comes to mind) of the current push to incorporate rhetoric and argument into the K-12 curriculum might express some antipathy for the agonistic, patriarchal tradition that underlies the academy’s penchant for argument. But that, as they say, is another story. And until the Venusians wrest control of the academy from the Martians, the argumentative communication style will no doubt prevail. So, if we expect our students to succeed in college, we need to equip them with the proper rhetorical tools.

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PUBLISHING OPPORTUNITIES

English Journal NCTE

Green English
Submission Deadline:
May 15, 2010

Humans' relationship with nature has long been a major theme in literature. Since the recent dawn of the Green Movement, global environmental concerns have taken on renewed importance, and we are fed a constant stream of information—often conflicting—regarding the right way to protect, conserve, and sustain natural resources.

What should English language arts students learn about humans' role in nature and conservation? What does it mean to be environmentally literate in the 21st century? How have you helped students better understand, appreciate, and protect the natural environment, while acknowledging the effect of human actions on natural surroundings? What scholarly, pedagogical, or informational resources have you found useful for these goals? What new and classic literary works about nature and conservation do you teach?

For more information and submission guidelines visit: <http://www.ncte.org/journals/ej/calls>

Voices from the Middle

Looking Back
and Moving Forward
Submission Deadline:
May 1, 2010

NCTE and *Voices* have traveled together toward new understandings about young adolescents' literacy and learning. As NCTE celebrates its 100th anniversary, we are taking our final steps as VM's editorial team.

We invite you to get on board and join us as we reminisce about where we have been and as we look to the

future for new possibilities. In this final issue, we reflect on seminal literacy practices of yesterday and seek new and evolving ways of helping our diverse students become strong and independent learners.

What are the seminal literacy practices advocated by NCTE that every teacher of young adolescents should embrace? In looking forward to the future, what new and evolving practices should we take along? Let's get "on the road again" (Willie Nelson) and take one final journey together.

For submission guidelines visit: <http://www.ncte.org/journals/vm/write>

Language Arts NCTE

July 2011:
Inquiries and Insights
Submission Deadline:
March 15, 2010

In this unthemed issue, our last as editors of *Language Arts*, 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 supports these practices? 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. For submission guidelines go to: <http://www.ncte.org/journals/la/write>

DIALOGUE

Call for Manuscripts

Summer 2010 Issue
Submission Deadline:
April 1, 2010

Diversity and Democracy: Teaching for Equity and Social Justice

I am leaving this legacy to all of you...to bring peace, justice, equality, love and a fulfillment of what our lives should be. Without vision, the people will perish, and without courage and inspiration, dreams will die—the dream of freedom and peace.

—Rosa Parks

What do you do to inspire your students and how do you inspire them when the system in which we work reflects disparity of resources from school to school? How do you respond to this disparity? What are the ways you help students create their own vision within the established culture of your school? In what ways do you strive to meet the needs of your students and address issues related to language and ethnicity in your classroom or school?

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.

Email all manuscript submissions, suggestions, letters to the editor and Project Notes to:

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San Diego Area Writing Project
University of California, San Diego
9500 Gilman Drive, Dept. 0036
La Jolla, CA 92093-0036



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Calendar of Events

SDAWP's 3rd Annual Spring Conference

Saturday, March 6, 2010
8:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.
UCSD

Reading Like a Writer K-12

June 28 - July 2, 2010
8:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.
UCSD

Improving Students' Academic Writing

July 12 - July 16, 2010
8:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.
UCSD

2010 Invitational Summer Institute

June 29 - July 23, 2010
8:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.
UCSD

Pre-Institute Day

Saturday, April 10, 2010
8:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
UCSD

Promising Practices Conference

**with featured speaker
Stacey Goldblatt**

April 17, 2010
Marina Village, San Diego
For information, please visit
[lhs.sandi.net/faculty/
clecren/gsdcte/](http://lhs.sandi.net/faculty/clecren/gsdcte/)

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San Diego Area Writing Project

Director

Kim Douillard
teachr0602@aol.com

Co-Director

Christine Kané
kealoha2006@yahoo.com

Young Writers' Programs Coordinators

Divona Roy
mrsroy@hotmail.com
Janis Jones
aboriginals@cox.net

NWP Technology Liaisons

Kendra Madden
kmadden1@sandi.net
Christine Kané
kealoha2006@yahoo.com

Senior Program Associate

Carol Schrammel

**To contact
the SDAWP office,**
call (858) 534-2576
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