

Dialogue

A Publication of the San Diego Area Writing Project



Fall 2022

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"I took a break from teaching. Many reasons why. There's one I can't ignore: I felt ineffectual with too many of my students. One randomly goes prone on the carpet. Several others shout out and talk, ignoring the task at hand. I've tried making connections with them—talking to them outside of class, commending them when I see positive behavior. Still, nothing seems to work. I feel like it compromises the tone of the classroom community and makes it hard for others to learn when I'm fighting little fires like this. I feel frustrated and sometimes mean. What should I do?"

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color with the grade I was teaching, and neatly wrote each of my students' names on the binding. I, then, found color-coordinated bins of each grade, placing them on the neatly labeled shelf. And just like that, I was ready to have my students "write into the day."

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"*Why We are Teaching for the Climate* speaks to the goals of the Environmental Literacy and Justice Advanced Institute: to infuse environmental literacy and justice into lessons; to provide opportunities for students to develop an appreciation for nature; and to teach climate change impacts and solutions both within and beyond science classrooms and curriculum."

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"New layers of paint were added to my lifemap when I became a credentialed teacher. I became a kindergarten teacher, coach, and learner seeking ways to build upon the unyielding curiosity of five year olds. As the years passed, my knowledge of teaching grew. I discovered the importance of modeling and teaching growth mindset and learned how to co-create learning experiences with students using the design thinking process. Today, I teach 3rd grade and have moved into mentoring new teachers. I have been afforded opportunities to learn alongside other teacher leaders and

have begun a journey of self-discovery in identity, biases, and practices that will hopefully make me into a better human that does better."

An Overpass

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"One-sided relationships plagued my personal and professional life, in similar fashion to ignoring the check engine light until there is no oil left, or coolant, or wiper fluid so the whole vehicle is a death trap. Except the vehicle was my self-worth and capacity to grow. Anticipating the barrage of other's needs who didn't consider my own almost drove me into an early grave. I've come to terms, acceptance and release, that I am the sole operator that can drive my way through obstacles and arrive on the other side safely. I exceeded myself from my first professional home because it suffocated my vibrancy for teaching. I had to escape that crash site."

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"Dear Bubbe"

Stacey Goldblatt, SI 1999

Dear Bubbe,
How do I rekindle the flame of teaching?

Dear Troubled One,
Light can't find room for flame when you're kvetching. I know, there's been much reason to kvetch, but it's the antidote to joy.

Once, during a gun-metal grey dawn in my grandmother's Galician village, a farmer fretted that it was too cold to milk the cows. A fire had taken the roof of the farm and there was little warmth for the cows. They shivered. Inside his scheckl, he twisted his face into a tumbleweed, and clawed at his hair with his warm fingers. His wife slapped his face. "Stop with this mishegas! Those hands could warm Siberia. Go milk the cows."

The work is hard. There are frozen udders to thaw and papers to grade. Teaching has been your mishpocheh, your students have been your children, colleagues your siblings. Troubled One, you must find out if your fingers are still warm. From there, you can answer your question.

Dear Bubbe,
I have more time now that I am taking a hiatus from work. I'm finding plenty to do. Still, as of late, I find myself spending an inordinate amount of time looking at Birkenstock shoes. There's a style that I purchased that is too big, so I go online to see if they're really too big or if that's the way they're supposed to fit. I really like these shoes, so I'm waiting to read a review that says this shoe is supposed to be big. I don't need any shoes. I've a closet full of them. Yet, I'm taking time here and there to search for shoes I already know are too big. I just need to exchange them. Why am I engaging in this illogical behavior? I catch myself doing it, and I feel shame. After all, there's

a war going on in Ukraine. People are losing their homes, their livelihood, and I'm fretting over a pair of Birkenstock Bostons, size 36 (should I get a narrow?).

Dear If-the-Shoe-Fits,
When my daughter—your Grandma Millie—became a young woman, she became obsessed with crystal wares, goblets and plates and platters. We were poor and she worked for my rich, married-into-wealthy cousin, Alice Elman, keeping her books up to date. Alice would offer her crystal instead of payment sometimes meaning that Millie would come home with a crystal trinket pot instead of a paycheck.

There was no World Wide Web back then, but when we sat for supper, slurping borscht out of our mismatched bowls, Millie sat with her mind far away, scrolling through a forest of crystal.

"One must do what they must in order to tread water during hard or boring times."

I said to her one night as she smeared cold cream on her face. "My sheifale, crystal cannot fill our soul. Save your money. Money in your pocket will allow you to make choices." After a few years, she had enough crystal to leave your own mother—my beloved granddaughter—with several boxes full. Now in a garage, no less.

One must do what they must in order to tread water during hard or boring times. The shoes are not about the shoes. Be kind to yourself. Put yourself in your own shoes. Notice what you are feeling when you are searching, what acorns are you able to put in your basket? Don't shame yourself. Just notice. Maybe even go outside, barefoot. Make a footpath. See what it's like to be with the elk and white stork. See what bunches up between your toes. When you return, reflect. Did you think about the shoes when

you reached down to pull a sugar beet from the ground? Did you worry of a shoe size when you examined the ruddy fruit and its stringy root? Did you wonder about Martha, the Zappos customer since 2009, and what she said about the shoes or were you too busy savoring the bite you took from the beet and the sweetness on your tongue and the red stain it smeared on your teeth when you smiled?

Dear Bubbe,
I took a break from teaching. Many reasons why. There's one I can't ignore: I felt ineffectual with too many of my students. One randomly goes prone on the carpet. Several others shout out and talk, ignoring the task at hand. I've tried making connections with them—talking to them outside of class, commending them when I see positive behavior. Still, nothing seems to work. I feel like it compromises the tone of the classroom community and makes it hard for others to learn when I'm fighting little fires like this. I feel frustrated and sometimes mean. What should I do?



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Dear Nothing Seems to Work,
Many years ago there was a disaster near my home town. I was long gone, entombed in my little wooden fortress in Hartford from which I now write and watch the world. This disaster involved the meltdown of a core reactor at a nuclear power plant. A thousand miles are still unoccupied because of the high radiation levels in the atmosphere. Some call this area the "New Eden." Bears and wolves roam, now more populous than people. Many spiders and rodents and birds occupy this space. The birds have deformed beaks. Spiderwebs have less structure and wider gaps between their gummy threads.

Your students are coming out of a few years of a modern day disaster where they were forced into lockdown and their parents were forced to let their children eat wild berries in order to cope. A world where hair wasn't cut and please and thank you's weren't necessary because gratitude is harder to come by when you're facing a wall. A world where your students couldn't safely roam and forage in the forest. It was scary and sometimes sad. Don't you remember how you felt? You, too, are recovering. Life is slow to recover, but there is hope. Hatching from an egg takes time. After thirty-five years, barn swallows, tree pipits, thrush nightingales and mistle thrush in Chernobyl have slowly adapted. You can hear their song.

You don't have to stay where you are. If you don't want to change, don't, but don't stay if you can't understand that the reactor exploded. Hatchlings require patience and aren't easy to cup in your hand. If you choose to stay, adaptation is imperative. Be like the scientist with her spray bottle, foraging through the trees in Chernobyl, looking for the gleam of spider web, spritzing to make the invisible, visible. Yes, there are more roots to tumble over in this landscape and sometimes it

gets hard to breathe. Do what you know to be true: Put poems in pockets. Sit beside them in the Scotch pines and feed them books. Listen to their warble and take note of patterns, know that it will not look or sound the same as before.

Be reasonable with expectations and hold hope. Make time for awe. In Chernobyl, the endangered Przewalski's horse experiences a surge in population. Sit with the student on the ground. Press your ear to it. See if you are able to hear the emergence of the galumph of hoof and stomp.

"She struggles openly with you, offering these bits of fear in her hand, shards of ore, not for you to take, but for you to acknowledge."

Dear Bubbe,
My daughter has an enemy named Eating Disorder. He tells her not to eat this and presses her to exercise too much. He whispers in her ear that she isn't enough and will never be. I see a young woman with stars in her cheeks and beauty in her heart. How do I get her to smear some oil on her salmon? To bite into the glory of a chocolate chip cookie? How do I help her to see that she deserves nourishment and joy?

Dear Concerned Mother of a Daughter,
If we mothers sat around the campfire and exchanged our worries about our daughters, our conversations would be rife with the moss fur of echo and connection. You were a daughter once and your mother worried about you. One might say it is the bundle we mothers wear on our back. (Do not mistake this as martyrdom.) But ED is no small bundle. He takes lives and maybe that is why the worry in you festers—you don't want this beast devouring your daughter. Standing next to your daughter at the stove and urging her to add more egg yolk to her meal only makes her feel that ED is more powerful than she, for if her mother has to nudge, she feels weak and unknowing, like

the blind mole. So, what to do? Maybe he lives in you, too. Can you see that first? Acknowledge that every day you throw stones at your body when all it wants to do is hold you and carry you to the well, the mountain, the poppy flecked meadow. When has there been a day in the past years when you've touched your body with the tender paw it deserves? This is not to blame you, it is only to see better that you must be tender with your body and hers. You may stand close, not hover. Acknowledge the gift that she shares with you. There is no secret, Stacey. There is a gift in that. She struggles openly with you, offering these bits of fear in her hand, shards of ore, not for you to take, but for you to acknowledge. Be with her. Not over her. Not on her. Continue to be honest with her with your concern. This poison root is a part of her. And you. Continue to share your awe with her at how she plants seeds for wisteria and morning glories. How she is working to sever the poison root from the feeding. Cull and reflect her strength and plant your own.

Dear Bubbe,
My sister opens up to me on the phone. As of late, she's told me some things that she's been hiding. When I see her in person, it's as if these tender things were never revealed. I am so proud of her for the courage to acknowledge her urge to live a more honest life. But, I don't know how to navigate time with her when all of what has been shared is covered up, as if she never told me these things.

Dear One,
Your sister is doing the best she can. When it is quiet and dark and safe, she brings you into the abandoned log cabin with her to share with you truths that are hard for her to hold. She cries into your lap because it is soft and open. Come morning, the fear ripens into an old potato with familiar eyes and bumps. The light is stark angled in the window. She only knows how to walk outside of the cabin in the shoes she's worn for decades.

The outside is not the same as that cabin and it is not up to you to determine how she should walk the path outside of the secrets. Love her. Listen to her. Walk in the birch forest with her. Hold her hand sometimes to remind her that you are there, inside and outside of the cabin.

Guardians of Nature: Cultivating the Art of Seeing

Wendy Schramm, SI 2016

Students are never too old to be read to, and I read to mine.

Each year that I have taught social studies to sixth graders, I have read out loud *Gilgamesh the Hero*, a retelling of the great epic by Geraldine McCaughrean. It clearly makes an impression on them as I have had former students return, even from college, to let me know that they still remember the time they spent in my classroom with an ancient Mesopotamian king.

While they recall the pride, despair, and ultimate redemption of this flawed hero, it strikes me that, in the future, we all would be well served to linger on one scene in particular: the slaying of the great Huwawa, Guardian of the Forests. Huwawa himself is the emissary of Enlil the Creator and is one demon who takes his job seriously. When Gilgamesh and his best friend and companion-in-arms, Enkidu, enter Huwawa's domain, they do so with impure intent: to steal the greatest cedar of all to take back to the treeless plains of Uruk, there to build a gate in honor of (naturally) themselves.

As Huwawa attempts to fend off these intruders, he dons cloak after cloak of power, seven in all, from the vines and leaves and branches of the forest. With each cloak, his strength waxes in the form of a great blue light that undulates across his woodland world, bowing out the trees with its power. Still, he is no match for

Gilgamesh, who raises his sword and then—hesitates.

“Enkidu, [he says] ‘if we kill him, all that glory will be lost to the world forever.’”

The hesitation lasts only a moment, though, before he raises his sword again: “It took three blows to dispatch the Guardian of the Forests [and] the phosphorescent glory which had hung about Huwawa went out like a blown candle.”

The pair return, triumphant, to Uruk with cedar wood and Huwawa's head in tow. But there is a price to be paid. One simply does not steal from the gods and expect to get away with it. Gilgamesh and Enkidu will pay dearly for their transgressions, and even 4,000 years ago, the natural world sat up and took notice.

And taking notice, both then and now, is crucial.

It is understandable that our students feel as if they have been robbed of the Earth, that climate change wreaks devastation with the cataclysmic swing of a great sword, and like Huwawa, they are powerless to stop the onslaught. Anxiety and a constant torrent of really, really bad news about our planet surround our students with a burden that is not always articulated but one that is always felt. Despair, however, can lead to inaction, even inattention. It is this inattention that we can and must address.

“...what better way to do this than through the infinite power of words?”

If the story of Gilgamesh and Huwawa is taught as metaphor, it would be best, I think, to focus not on the sword but rather on the beauty—on hope, rather than despondency.

As the ever-luminous Jane Goodall noted, “If young people succumb to the doom and gloom—if they lose hope—that's the end.”

Yet another activist who is turning from anguish towards something

quite different is Chris Jordan. Artist, environmentalist, and photographer, Jordan may be most famous for his photograph of a dead albatross, its decayed stomach entirely filled with plastic debris, an image both heartbreaking and anxiety-inducing. However, in his most recent TED Talk, he poses the question, “Can beauty save our planet?” The images in this short talk are extraordinarily gorgeous, and as Jordan states, “Who has not stood in the presence of beauty and had their heart break open with joy? Every detail of the living world speaks to us in the sacred language of beauty.” He also adds, “Maybe the fact that we turned away from beauty is how we got ourselves into this mess in the first place.”

Perhaps if our students learned to turn towards beauty, to pay attention, to really see nature, they could use that embrace of beauty to cultivate hope and foment change, and what better way to do this than through the infinite power of words? As teachers of writing, we are well equipped to guide them in this process.

Gilgamesh went on a Hero's Journey, necessarily traversing the darkness before experiencing the light, yet a far gentler but no less profound journey took place thousands of years later in medieval Japan, one that has played a deep role in helping my seventh grade literature students learn the art of paying attention: Matsuo Bashō's 1,500-mile solo journey on foot along The Narrow Road to the Deep North. Along the way, he composed poetry. In fact, Bashō (1644-1694), is purported to have invented, or at least reinvented, the haiku form. (Hass 3)

He certainly wrote haiku with exquisite precision:

**The crane's legs
have gotten shorter
in the spring rain. (Hass 13)**

**A bee
stagers out
of the peony. (Hass 18)**

**I don't know
which tree it comes from,
that fragrance. (Hass 21)**

My middle schoolers move so fast in their world, particularly through their digital existence, that they have not inherently cultivated the art of slowing down and truly using all of their senses to “see,” so this is the point where Bashō comes in. The gift of haiku, by Bashō and others, is that it captures a moment in time, a moment in nature, and a moment of being that did not exist before and will not exist afterwards. Writing haiku with a pure heart is one of the purest forms of mindfulness.

Of course, my students are familiar with haiku and have been so long before I introduce them to Bashō. Who amongst us has not watched a classroom of students, from the earliest grades on, using their fingers to count off syllables? But at the beginning of the year, I bring in a wonderfully transformative program from The Center for the Art of Translation called Poetry Inside Out.

The basic premise is this: In partnerships, the students translate a poem from another language using a glossary and intense negotiations to produce a version in English. Their first poem is a Bashō haiku. Along the way, they learn compromise and something else: to pay close attention—to the poet's original intent, to the scene he captured, and to the immediacy and beauty of the natural world.

They also discovered that, in capturing the ephemeral partnership with nature that the poet so clearly meant to convey, the 5-7-5 syllable count might just have to go. This is our starting point for reimagining the power of haiku as a means of connecting with nature.

Ditching the 5-7-5 restrictions is not quite as revolutionary as it may seem. As Patricia Donegan writes in her marvelous little book *Haiku*, “You may have heard that, in English, haiku is like a

syllable counting game, but that is not the important thing for haiku in English. Haiku is an experience, not an act of counting syllables. The important thing is experiencing the ‘haiku moment’ and connecting with nature. In English, it is best to write haiku in three lines, with no specific syllable count. It should be one breath long.” (Hass 10)

While the seventeen syllable count is appropriate for the Japanese language, it can be cumbersome in English. Going back to Bashō, here is the poem that my students first translated:

In Japanese (seventeen syllables):

**furuike ya
(five syllables)
kawazu tobikomu
(seven syllables)
mizu no oto
(five syllables)**

In English (three lines):

**The old pond—
a frog jumps in,
sound of water. (Hass 9)**

T Donegan instead lists seven non-negotiable elements of haiku: form (three lines, one breath), kigo (the season word), here and now (writing from experience or memory rather than imagination), feeling (as opposed to explanation), surprise (there should be an “ah” moment), and compassion (expression of open-heartedness towards nature). (8)

Once freed from the strictures of syllables, they could skip counting on their fingers and my students can concentrate on the moment, truly see the natural world, and skip counting on their fingers. This was revelatory! Equally significant is the idea that haiku is packaged with care and delivered in a single breath, a bit like blowing on a dandelion.

This past spring, after watching Chris Jordan's TED Talk, we discussed the idea of beauty, of truly seeing the beauty of our world and appreciating it. Just as with a haiku moment, that beauty is ephemeral—but so worth saving—and the first step was learning to pay attention.

We are blessed with an outdoorsy

campus (some parents have likened it to “going away to summer camp”); it is short on buildings but long on trees. After studying the keys to haiku and with beauty and compassion in mind, the students spent some time outside, sitting quietly by themselves, focusing on their senses and their surroundings. Then, they wrote.

**Cedar branch
heavy with snow—
a red cardinal.
— Alexander Kefalopoulos**

**A red rose
covered in frost—
the perfect death.
— Rylan Parady**

**From secure buds
on shooting stems
comes a scarlet firework.
— Judah Presley**

**Leaves dead
rot sets in—
yet irises bloom.
— Thea Rowland**

**Ant line
just a stripe on a tree
made by millions.
— Addy Stahl**

I have read that, in Japan, haiku is written on paper strips, attached to bell clappers in the out-of-doors, and left to slowly succumb and melt into the environment—the potency of compassion having been delivered and breathed into the world in the form of words.

Powerful observation and powerful writing is not merely the domain of older students. This past summer, I taught a weeklong session of Young Writers in Nature camp alongside my teaching partner, Alice Larsen. The grade levels spanned from rising third graders through rising sixth, but all students were able to learn the art of paying attention—it simply took a little extra nudging.

I have urged my own middle school students to “claim” a tree on our campus, spend time with it, and write both observations and other forms of prose and poetry to honor that tree. What I have found

with younger students is that they simply need a bit more preliminary work to train their eyes. An excellent starting spot for this is to teach students how to take field notes. Alice and I were fortunate in that Cardiff Elementary School, where we taught camp, has expansive grounds. Even so, I brought in numerous specimens of native plants that could “sit still” while we coached the students on how to look closely and ask questions as they made their sketches. An indispensable publication for learning how—and then teaching children—to take field notes is a free, downloadable booklet from the California Native Plant Society, *Opening the World Through Nature Journaling* (Laws).

"So how does running one's hand along the bark of a tree or watching the small twigs at the ends of each branch vibrate in the wind serve to create a cadre of activists?"

When our campers claimed a tree to observe and write about, we gave them additional support: a chart with a handful of directives, many of which added on to their expertise from taking field notes. The most gratifying part of this experience happened when campers took the time to zoom in on their chosen tree, using detailed sensory language to describe its trunk, bark, branches, and leaves, and finally to reimagine their tree through simile. By this time, and with urging to dispense with syllabic dictates, our campers were ready to write a haiku in homage to their trees. Even the shyest campers were proud of these poems, and even the quietest amongst them were eager to share.

So how does running one's hand along the bark of a tree or watching the small twigs at the

ends of each branch vibrate in the wind serve to create a cadre of activists? Quite simply, by turning towards beauty and asking questions regarding why beauty has been sorely tampered with or destroyed altogether. “What is an urban canopy?” for instance, and “Why are some neighborhoods dense with trees and others have no shade at all?” And, perhaps most importantly, “What needs to happen to make that change?”. “Investigate the World” is a launch-point standard adopted by the California Global Education Project. What better place to start than investigating nature on an intimate scale so as to be better prepared to investigate and “frame significant problems” on a larger scale? To walk into our fraught relationship with the earth with a firm hold on our planet's infinite beauty and the words to convey it? Huwawa, I believe, was a demon in name only. He cloaked himself in the awesome power of nature, fighting off those whose sole intent was to destroy the forest for personal gain. Bashō was a mindful witness of nature, who cataloged its beauty with brevity, insight, and above all, compassion. As teachers of writing, we can guide our students to be the fearsome guardians of the forests or beaches or backyards and to be the gentle poets on the narrow road to true north. These two roles are not mutually exclusive: Both call for paying attention, and both live deep inside the power of words—their words.

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Writing: A Love Affair

Melissa Smith, SI 2021

I left the 2021 Summer Institute invigorated. I had reignited my passion for writing, and it left me yearning for more. I had fallen in love with writing.

One of my favorite parts of the SI was “Writing Into the Day.” Sometimes I stressed over what to write about or if I would be able to post it by 8:30 am, while reading and giving feedback on others' writing. Sometimes I would end the evening brainstorming what I would write about the next morning. But every time, without fail, I would literally write about whatever was on my heart that morning, and the words would flow easily. I became smitten with writing. It was often stories about my family, my dearest friends, or some type of self-discovery that I was making in that life-changing summer. How did my childhood impact my views of myself? What were the specific events that shaped me into the woman I am today? How did my parents' example influence the views I had? I began to unpack integral parts of myself that I didn't know existed or that I didn't realize mattered. The best part was that writing never judged me. It allowed me to pour out my deepest emotions while still allowing me to feel safe and secure. Writing brought out the best in me.

I would get butterflies reading the

feedback or comments from my fellow SI colleagues. Through a pandemic and a screen, we were able to connect through like-stories and experiences, or the same taste in 90s music. And that's what writing does, doesn't it? Connects us to the people and the world around us. It's like hearing a lyric to a song that resonates with you or reading a good quote or beautifully crafted sentence from a text. It makes you nod your head and audibly say "mmm" out of relatability.

As a teacher of writing and as a writer, I realized the importance of writing about what was important to the author. Just as reading a novel about a topic you are interested in or have background knowledge of will lead to stronger comprehension and a more enjoyable read, writing about what you know, what you feel, what you've experienced allows for a more genuine, heartfelt piece that will, no doubt, resonate with others. During the SI, I shared my whole entire heart with strangers and was received with love, compassion, and new friendships. I enjoyed this newfound vulnerability one has when they are in love.

After those two weeks, I was determined to bring the same experience into my classroom. I was going to introduce my students to this new relationship. I wanted them to fall in love with the experience and outcome of writing, too.

Just like introducing a new partner to the family, I wanted to make sure this new love of mine made a good first impression. Before the students returned to campus, I bought composition notebooks for each student. I coordinated the binding color with the grade I was teaching, and neatly wrote each of my students' names on the binding. I, then, found color-coordinated bins for each grade, placing them on the neatly labeled shelf. And just like that, I was ready to have my students "write into the day."

The goal was for them to write for the first ten minutes of every class. I wanted my students to get to know writing and start to develop a more intimate relationship with the process. They could write about whatever they wanted, as long as they were writing. And while I wanted them to get into the habit of writing, I wanted them to get in tune with who they were, make discoveries about themselves, and find ways to connect to one another in order to further build our classroom community. We were going to be pouring out our hearts to one another in no time, thus creating an empathic group of writers, while also falling in love with the process. I had no doubt that my students would be weak in the knees in no time.

"Frustration sets in as I realized that I couldn't or maybe just didn't, commit to my goal of creating lovers of writing."

On the first day of school, after going over the syllabus and expectations, playing ice breakers, and answering questions, I pointed out the beautifully labeled "Writing Into the Day" journals. I beamed as I told each of my classes what we would be doing with these, and that by the end of the year, they would be able to look back at all of the writing they've done, and visibly see the growth they've made over the course of the school year—growth in their ability, but also growth in their love of writing.

You may be shocked to hear that they were less than enthused, and I was met with many groans and scoffs. But that didn't deter me! I was in love with writing, and no one could shake that feeling...

Until reality set in.

The reality was I had five hours a week with my seventh and eighth graders, and only four hours a week with my sixth graders. I had to fit in vocabulary, grammar, reading, and writing, in addition to pre-teen drama, puberty, tardy and absent students, and Covid.

It was hard to justify spending one-fifth of my week "writing into the day" when I was "supposed to be" meeting all of these other requirements and expectations. In any romance, the other demands of life can leave less time for the initial relationship, and therefore requires more realistic expectations. Love isn't always easy; it often requires dedicated time and effort. So, just as you do in relationships with the ones you love, I decided to compromise. We began class "writing into the day" three times a week and began class with grammar the other two days.

But slowly, with holidays, minimum days, and special events, "writing into the day" took a back seat. The love had grown distant.

As of April, and my students had not written in their journals since January. The love had seemed to disappear.

Frustration set in as I realized that I couldn't, or maybe just didn't, commit to my goal of creating lovers of writing. That I've gone back to focusing on students completing formulaic assignments to prove comprehension or ability. I had gone back to what felt safe and expected.

How can I stick to what I believe and feel is right?

How can I establish a curriculum that allows my students to explore what they want to explore while strengthening their ability and passion?

What are the steps I need to take to ensure that their self-expression doesn't take a back seat?

How can I ignite and maintain the flame?

Well, I must do what I would do in any troubled relationship. Commit to finding a way and dedicating the time to rekindle a spark that will last—for myself and my students.

Why We Are Teaching for the Climate

Janis Jones, SI 1994

Why teach for the climate? This is an overwhelmingly complex question, but we began to tackle it during SDAWP's Environmental Literacy and Justice Advanced Institute, which was composed of a group of educators from across San Diego County working in a variety of educational settings who came together throughout the 2021-2022 school year to inspire and support one another.

Led by San Diego Area Writing Project (SDAWP) director Kim Douillard and coordinated by teacher consultants Janis Jones and Miriam Sikking, our work started with the development of a common purpose and shared focus. During our initial meeting in fall 2021, teacher consultants wrote a group poem entitled *Why We Are Teaching For the Climate*. Our mentor text was a piece written and read by poet Clara Fang in the video [Art and Identity in a Time of Climate Change](#).

"Why We are Teaching for the Climate" speaks to the goals of the Environmental Literacy and Justice Advanced Institute: to infuse environmental literacy and justice into lessons; to provide opportunities for students to develop an appreciation for nature; and to teach climate change impacts and solutions both within and beyond science classrooms and curriculum.

Why We are Teaching for the Climate

Because the seas are rising and the cliffs are failing

Because our homes will vanish in the waves
Because natural disasters are forcing people to flee

Because the oldest trees succumb not to age but to carelessness

Because habitat loss is causing species to disappear and new species to emerge

Because it doesn't affect one, color, race or socioeconomic group;

we all had a hand in the destruction

Because our world can spring anew

Because the food chain of life has taught us one positive action can lead to another

Because all children should be able to experience natural beauty at its finest

Because an empowered child can accomplish so much more

Because our youth have a voice and the ability to design for change

Because teachers deserve time to understand the problems and grapple with the issues
Because teachers need resources to effectively support change
as much as they're equally charged with being a part of the solution
Because teaching and learning are opportunities for meaningful action
Because we are finding our voices and are learning how to be heard too
Because our students care

Because if not us, then who?

Over time, classroom projects were developed by participating teacher consultants in hopes that their work would inspire others to embed environmental and climate literacy and justice topics into writing instruction and across the curriculum.

As stated in [Blueprint for Environmental Literacy](#) from the California Department of Education, environmental literacy should be "embedded into formal instruction for History-Social Science standards, and as part of CA CCSS and CA NGSS implementation. This is strengthened by meaningful learning experiences that build environmental literacy in nature; on school grounds; in the local community; in residential outdoor science programs; and in museums, aquariums, science centers, etc."

From inspiring students to appreciate nature to engaging students in passion projects, there will be something for everyone in this sampling of joyful work that emphasizes taking action.

In A Single Breath—Wendy Schramm

Wendy Schramm challenged her middle school students to connect with nature through Haiku." Wendy writes, "Perhaps if my students learned to turn towards beauty, to pay attention, to really see nature, the way the old haiku masters saw nature, they could use that embrace of beauty to bring about change." For more, read "[In a Single Breath: The Art of Seeing in the Natural World](#)."

Six Words for the Environment — Ann Zivotsky and Kim Douillard

Six Words for the Environment is an engaging and easy way to celebrate with students of all ages. Crafting 6-word statements will challenge young writers to create brief messages of hope and joy related to preserving and appreciating nature. Read Ann Zivotsky's interesting take on the six-word memoir format in her blog post entitled [Inspiring Eco-Warriors Through Writing](#). Then, peruse Kim Douillard's [6 Words for the Environment: SOL22 Day 30](#) to discover how she implemented the idea with her 1st graders.

Trout Talk —Dana Clarkson

Dana Clarkson and the third grade teaching team at Design39 Campus in Poway engaged students in [Trout Talk](#). Through this interdisciplinary unit,

students explored “the beauty found in our aquatic habitats and learned how the San Diego Kumeyaay Tribe thrived on, respected, and protected the ‘homeland.’” For inspiration, explore the [Trout Talk](#) infographic, which includes ideas, resources, and student samples.

The Future Looks Bright—Alice Larsen
6th grade teacher Alice Larsen took a broad approach to environmental literacy with the expressed goal to embed it within content area lessons and across the curriculum. Explore [The Future Looks Bright](#) for writing ideas from poetry to composing letters. Learn about the Adopt a Float program and solar ovens, and meet 6th grader Camille who will explain why she thinks learning about the environment is important.

2nd Grade Changemakers: Learning to become an Advocate for Change—Margit Boyesen
Margit inspired her young students to become changemakers by exploring the concept of advocacy and learning about the advocates who are creating change. In addition, students were prompted to become observers and to develop respect for nature. Explore [2nd Grade Changemakers](#) for helpful ideas and resources and to read the letters her students wrote the mayor of their town.

Cultivating Student Engagement Through Student Choice and Activism—Miriam Sicking
Miriam believes that “honoring students is about listening to their passions and joys,” and she does just that in her classroom by building upon students’ strengths, finding what makes them happy, and helping them discover what needs doing. The place where joys, talents, and passions overlap is where the work begins. Scroll through Miriam’s [project slides](#) and [watch her 5-minute overview video](#) to discover how her students developed into budding changemakers and activists.

Stay Connected

Don't miss out on any of our posts, events, opportunities and much more!



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Congratulations SDAWP 2022 Fellows

Michael Morshed
UC San Diego Muir College
Writing Program

Alayne Flores
San Diego Community College
District Continuing Education

Kara Holtzman
Las Palmas Elementary
National School District

Bill McClain
Carver Elementary School
San Diego Unified School District

Jaymie Sacramento
Design39Campus
Poway Unified School District

Anthony Lince
San Diego State University
San Diego Community College
District

Matthew Gill
San Diego Global Vision Academy
San Diego Unified School District

Project Notes

Congratulations Divona Roy (SDAWP 1996) and Monique Lamphiere-Tamayoshi (SDAWP 1991) on retiring from Poway Unified School District June 2021!

Be on the lookout! SDAWP Fellow Cindy Jenson-Elliott's nonfiction book ***The Doomsday Detectives: How Walter and Luis Alvarez Uncovered the Mystery of What Killed the Dinosaurs*** will be published in fall 2024. Visit Cindy on the web <http://www.cindyjensonelliott.com/>, or follow her on twitter @CJensonElliott.

Stay connected! Do you want to join our mailing list or has your contact information changed? To ensure you don't miss our updates, including SDAWP's bi-monthly mini newsletter, please send your email address to sdawp@ucsd.edu, and include “Email Update” or “Join Mailing List” in the subject line.

Call for Manuscripts—The Dialogue serves to uplift the voices of educators and loves to receive reflective pieces written by teachers and their students. We encourage you to submit stories, essays, poems, book reviews, letters to the editor, and/or Project Notes. Email submissions to sdawp@ucsd.edu.

Teaching Beyond Van Gogh & My Present Self

Dana Clarkson, SI 2021

I have always loved Vincent Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* and its unique ability to frame conversations around perspective, color, and movement. Its ability to draw one in, to feel transported inside the painting, is truly captivating. So imagine my pleasure when I stepped inside *Beyond Van Gogh: An Immersive Experience*. Van Gogh's paintings and personal letters instantly came alive. I looked through open picture frames that had captured the intersecting lines and thoughts of Van Gogh. I heard soundtracks that mixed solos and choirs in careful orchestration to help one feel isolated, yet connected. And I wandered through rooms where today's digital dots cascaded across walls to connect past masterpieces with forms of present day, computer-generated art.

These animations had the ability to transport me back in time, giving me an innovative space to physically walk backward, forward, and even sometimes sideways through the paintings of one man's life. They also had the ability to give me a place to make sense and derive new meaning from the stories held captive within each canvas. It was truly a feast for my imagination that transcended the moment. It has moved me toward introspection, wanting to map my own life and grow understanding of what it means to be a post-pandemic teacher teaching post-pandemic children.

Recently a fellow teacher asked, "what experiences did you have before getting to Design39Campus that helped you grow to be a design thinking teacher? I am not sure that there

was just one. As I embarked on creating my own map filled with stories, important places, and special people, I quickly discovered that my lifeline is full of twists and turns taking me forward and backward. My childhood stories are marked by simple brushstrokes for each family adventure and new sport I attempted to play. I had to be flexible. My mom was not organized. She often ran late and truly gave me great freedom to pave my own way.

Experiences were often met with trials and errors. Like Van Gogh, new skills took me time to learn. They kept me humble as I took last place on swim teams and lost soccer games by scoring for the other team. They helped me develop a cognitive process Brené Brown refers to as hope. I developed the ability to set realistic goals and know where I wanted to go. As with students in my classroom today, I found the intrinsic motivation that comes with setting my own goals and found the determination and grit needed to stay the course when distractions surfaced. I also figured out how to achieve these goals creating alternative pathways when new paths were needed. (*Atlas of the Heart*, pg. 97) Eventually, the agency and mindset to believe that I could do it came. I competed at the high school level in both of these sports and was eventually offered an opportunity to play soccer at the college level.

"I am seeking, I am striving, I am in it with all my heart."

-Vincent Van Gogh

Trials and errors have been a mainstay in the lives of our post-pandemic students. For some, they have experienced adversity and discomfort over the past two years. They come with hope, ready to figure things out on their own. They are ready for tasks that offer personalization and relevance. They are ready for more project-based and community-based learning experiences where their "wonders inspire the wish to understand." (*Atlas of the Heart*, pg. 58)

For our other learners, hopelessness has set in. Parents have done for

them, protecting them from disappointment and emotional pain. They come to class not knowing what they want and lack the skills to figure out how to achieve them. They approach learning with fear and despair, giving up easily. They don't believe in themselves or their ability to achieve what they want. They, too, are needing tasks that offer personalization and choice so that they can work on "calm as a practice" and gain "perspective and mindfulness while managing emotional reactivity." (*Atlas of the Heart*, pg. 209)

Learning to make decisions, setting goals, creating a plan and experiencing the productive struggle that leads to success can cultivate these skills and grow a learner's ability to act with intention, to self-question, and to lean into curiosity. Returning to my map, energy and movement within the brushstrokes mark life changing events that took me through elementary into college. Most notable was the day that I met Kerry in the sixth grade. Both Kerry and I had just moved to Orange County, she from New York and me from San Diego. We instantly became friends, spending all our weekends together with sleepovers, cooking experiments, and 4-H groups. After a fun-filled year, Kerry became ill and was diagnosed with leukemia.

Our friendship was resilient but came with backward brushstrokes. I had to learn how to fill the void caused by Kerry's absences as she received treatments in the hospital and began attending summer camps for cancer patients. Eventually, I met new friends while navigating the new constraints on my friendship with Kerry. She and I stayed best friends, supporting each other through boyfriends breakups, academic failures, and friendship challenges until her death, six days before our high school graduation. Our graduation celebration included a toast to Kerry moving brushstrokes forward. There were twenty of us, standing at the shores of Newport Beach, sharing our favorite stories of her. I took these memories

with me as I moved to Santa Barbara to begin my studies at college.

College marked the beginning of some lifelong friendships which included one with my now husband, Mike. Like Van Gogh, people stood by me leaving longer brushstrokes on the canvas. With their support, I learned to take risks, learned how to overcome failures, and found a strong sense of belonging. This strong sense of belonging came into challenge when Covid hit in 2020. In the blink of an eye, my “viewpoint on perspective” shifted. I went from sitting at a roundtable full of collaboration to a kitchen table met with isolation. I suddenly found myself connecting with students, colleagues, friends, and family through new, digital means, which brought on feelings of loneliness. As a result, I found myself needing to learn how to identify these feelings and to pursue ways to positively influence these feelings on my own. I became a designer for belonging, joining classes online to stay connected and picking up new hobbies that had me making and sharing my learning.

Similarly, post-pandemic students have been riddled with uncertainty, risk, emotional exposure, and social isolation. Many are feeling vulnerable and have unresolved feelings of fear. As a result, uncomfortable and difficult experiences often lead to feelings of anxiety rather than courage. To move students forward, we must understand and respect their anxieties and fears. They need opportunities to give and receive without judgment. They need to feel seen, heard, and valued and feel that they are connected and truly belong. Practices that include regular, dedicated time for relationship building is critical in building compassion. Equally important is building a “shared humanity” where students “feel loving-kindness and take action in the face of suffering.” (*Atlas of the Heart*, pg. 118) This type of empathy can be gained through collaborative learning

experiences and through using conversational strategies that connect people together and build a sense of belonging.

As parenthood found its way to Mike and me, my map burst with new colors. The brush stroked forward as we brought Emily and then Sara from the hospital and brushed backwards as I quit my job to stay home full-time. I had found joy and a new sense of contentment. It did not take long before I joined my first mom group. I was seeking knowledge on how to be a good mom and seeking the advice of those doing what I was doing. There was no parenting manual, just expectations. I had painted a picture of how things were going to be. Emily, Sara, and I were going to explore together. We were going to hike through the natural parks, visit local libraries, go to the zoo, and simply explore the free activities in the area together. I had also painted a picture of how things were going to look. Our house would remain drop-in ready for our friends to come by anytime and the girls would go to bed early so I could have nights for me. As one might imagine, this painting remained abstract, never really representing my present reality.

**"Close friends are truly life's treasures. Sometimes they know us better than we know ourselves. With gentle honesty, they are there to guide and support us, to share our laughter and our tears. Their presence reminds us that we are never really alone."
Vincent Van Gogh**

New layers of paint were added to my lifemap when I became a credentialed teacher. I became a kindergarten teacher, coach, and learner seeking ways to build upon the unyielding curiosity of five-year-olds. As the years passed, my knowledge of teaching grew. I discovered the importance of modeling and teaching growth

mindset and learned how to co-create learning experiences with students using the design thinking process.

Today, I teach 3rd grade and have moved into mentoring new teachers. I have been afforded opportunities to learn alongside other teacher leaders and have begun a journey of self-discovery in identity, biases, and practices that will hopefully make me into a better human. My life map remains in the abstract. It will be with the passing of time that new perspectives are drawn. As we move into the future, I call on you to create your own life map, to see when and where pivotal learning took place, and to reflect on how you can bring this knowledge to your learning space. From my own experience, I learned the value in protecting time for listening, elevating what I know about students and the importance of co-designing with them. The space is a place we create. Learning time will always embrace experiences that are relevant, contextual, and personal.

They will also embrace opportunities that remind students that they are never really alone. They belong to something bigger, to a “shared humanity,” where they matter in the present and in the future. I have learned so much from this experience. Thank you to the innovators and deep thinkers who brought us Beyond Van Gogh: An Immersive Experience. His life and paintings offered valuable connections. “I am seeking. I am striving. I am in it with all my heart.” My post-pandemic world needed to be “immersed” in an experience that connected the past with the present. I have had opportunities to slow down, map my own story, and really hear the story behind the man and the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh.

Works Cited
Brown, Brené. Atlas of the Heart: Mapping meaningful connection and the language of human experience. Random House, 2021.

An Overpass

Ashley Dahlstrom, SI 2018

2018 wasn't a good year. Nor was 2017, 2016, or 2015. I've never read *On The Road* or *The Road* or many novels that deal with the metaphor of driving through obstacles, while ultimately reaching a destination intrinsically changed. I did, however, watch "A Goofy Movie" endlessly during the summer between 1st and 2nd grade. 2013 was the last good year that I put a destination into my navigation system and put the pedal to the metal. Between the starting point of my career and the current road, I've approached many connectors, with few collisions. Since 2018, SDAWP is my new professional navigation management system of choice, alerting when it's time to change direction, or to check in on the journey. Now in 2022, I'm choosing to not enter an end point in favor of finally enjoying the scenery and driving the backroads of this teaching journey.

Road trips are romanticized; they're all fun and games until you decide you want off this journey and speed straight through from San Francisco to San Diego in six hours because the sheer emotional weight and pressure of the miles covered are suffocating in the dead summer heat, along with the emotional toll of realizing your life is now forever different for whom and what is not traveling back home with you.

My teaching practice prior to the 2018 Summer Institute was blindly following a map and listening to navigation interrupt my playlist. As a young teacher, assignments given to me were driven by budget allocations, not passion nor performance. Those six classroom moves added up quickly to burden and burn out. The inconsistency and insecurity fostered quick solutions that favored edu-jargon so evaluations would quickly lead to permanence.

Without romanticizing the profession, teaching is a slow burn of experience, respect, and payout. It takes those painful moments to accept and admit the trip has not been easy, nor will it guarantee an ending destination.

Arriving at my site and evolving to a resource and leader to my colleagues is the scenery I've yearned to reach and, ultimately, enjoy. The years pass and my mileage accumulates but the warmth of the students in the community remind me this journey is ongoing, with more roadside attractions to visit.

I commute against traffic so the rare occasions when I hit stop and go back ups are infuriating: I know the path ahead isn't difficult and someone is up there drinking their coffee too intently and going 60 in the fast lane. I enjoy progress, and the predictability of my normal daily drive. Introspective, I don't take phone calls and I cherish that silence, or jam session, to signal the state change of the rest of my day.

I am still undecided if the variety of classes taught within my expertise is a blessing or a curse; grades 7 through 11, ELD I through IV, yearbook, ASB, ASES program, literacy intervention, and a couple stints as a ELD resource teacher. On one hand, I can plan a dance, a unit, and input progress report grades within 48 hours of each other. On the other hand, the various complexities in my professional formative years were constant blockades to deeper learning. How can you figure out which grammar structures a group of 34 accelerated 8th grades needed intervention with before heading to high school? How does admin accept that I cannot keep up with selling cookies for a fundraiser over my responsibility to build language capacities in STELs/LTELs in my classroom? Or that asking to bend over backwards for another colleague's fundraising ineptitude during my lone prep period on Monday is actually violently inconsiderate.

Taking a leap of faith and landing on a true professional home allows me time to see the nuances in the daily

grind. Who could imagine paring down the volume and variety of responsibilities encourages growth and achievement? Not me. But as I grow more stable, I grow more purposeful. For me, stability is safety, and my Maslow base must be bedrock to find fulfillment in the arts and letters that soothe my soul. My current professional home will be the foreground and background of my life for the next 27ish years.

There is a tendency to look in the rearview mirror once you've slowly, painstakingly moved through a traffic jam. The lights blur as your RPMs surge, breathing deeply and changing the soundtrack of your journey. At this moment you forget the tension and hyper focus and picture getting as far away from the hold up as humanly possible. The unavoidable cliché of hindsight being 20/20 visits my life often.

One-sided relationships plagued my personal and professional life, in similar fashion to ignoring the check engine light until there is no oil left, or coolant, or wiper fluid so the whole vehicle is a death trap. Except the vehicle was my self-worth and capacity to grow. Anticipating the barrage of other's needs who didn't consider my own almost drove me into an early grave. I've come to terms, acceptance and release, that I am the sole operator that can drive my way through obstacles and arrive on the other side safely. I exceded myself from my first professional home because it suffocated my vibrancy for teaching. I had to escape that crash site.

Today, and tomorrow, I have the privilege to explore with the new ability to discover. That privilege was earned through patiently navigating life's traffic patterns and avoiding natural obstacles. My career has no end point besides retirement, lessening the need for navigation, creating space for foresight and space for awareness to see the red-tailed hawks on the street lights above the overpass.

Young Writers' Camp

2022

The Forest of Words

Ainsley Albert

Writing About Writing Contest Winner

Writing is like picking a fresh word from a tree, and putting it on your paper. After that the words come to you. It does not matter if you are writing a sentence or a book you always pick a word. You still have to pick off that tree when you are speaking, because you create words in your mind. This tree is pink, blue, green, yellow, red, and purple. It smells of moss, bark, leaves and paper. Instead of leaves there are words. It is in a forest of trees like it. The forest is called your imagination and the trees are called your vocabulary. Put all of your words together you might have a book bigger than the Harry Potter series or no bigger than one book.



Writing: A Magical Place

Mats Dykstra

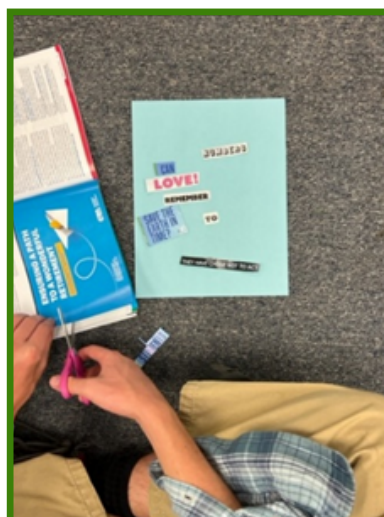
Writing: A magical place.
For some, it is ordinary,
mundane,
but for me it is wonderful,
smooth, magical,
with its flowing words
that stroke you like a gentle
breeze,
always challenging belief,
it is strong, tender,
and free.

It will continue to fight
for creativity
through its beautiful
rhythms,
ideas, and flow.

But its magic,
no matter who you are,
connects with you
in a unique way,
whether it is royally,
bitterly, or fairly.

I write to feel happy,
to express to the world,
in ways,
in words,
that are truly mine,
to show the world who I am,
to live a life
that just feels right.

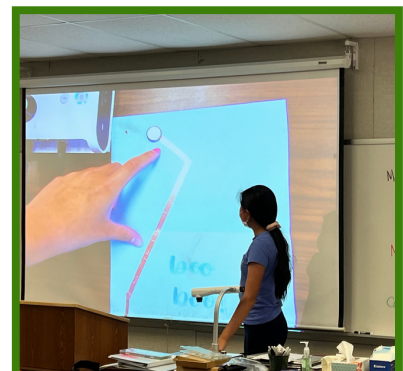
Writing: A magical place.



Writing About Writing

Joshua Hsu

Writing is filling up blank pages,
made of colorful ideas
Words spill
out of my mind
Appearing onto the paper,
Just like magic
As blank paper
starts to look
like something else
My mind
thinks and thinks,
as new ideas
pop into my head
My brain controls
what I write,
as I try to remember
the new ideas
Sometimes I delete it,
Sometimes I don't
More words appear
on the paper,
Building
a story of wonder



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Upcoming Events

CATE Pre-Convention by the California Writing Project

Date: March 2, 2023

Location: Hyatt Regency in Monterey

1 Old Golf Course Road, Monterey, CA 93920-4908

Visit <https://www.cateweb.org/convention/cate-2023/pre-convention/> for more details.

California Association of Teachers of English (CATE) 2023 Conference

Date: March 3-5, 2023

Location: Hyatt Regency in Monterey

1 Old Golf Course Road, Monterey, CA 93920-4908

Visit <https://www.cateweb.org/> to register.

Spring Computer-Using Educators (CUE) 2023 Conference

Date: March 16-18, 2023

Location: Palm Springs Convention Center

277 N Avenida Caballeros, Palm Springs, CA 92262

Visit <https://cue.org/events/24770> to register.

SDAWP Annual Spring Conference

Date: March 4, 2023

Location: UC San Diego Price Center Theater

Visit sdawp.ucsd.edu for more details.

SDAWP Annual Fall Conference

Date: September 30, 2023

Location: UC San Diego Price Center Theater

Visit sdawp.ucsd.edu for more details.

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