How Do I Grade This?
Using Student-Created Scoring Guides to Assess Writing

Barb Montfort, SDAWP 2012

I'm standing off to the side of the classroom watching them write; a classroom full of eighth grade struggling writers. I've been writing with them for two months, and at this moment, I have ripples of "the goosies" covering my arms. They're writing. Some are piling words upon words on the page. Some are writing, stopping to rethink, writing again. Some are rereading, moving words around, asking their neighbors for advice. This is the first day the class identified themselves as writers.

One student approaches me with a massive smile of pride, saying he has finished the assignment and is ready to share his work. It is one long sentence—periods missing, capitals in random places, spelling I can only identify with his support. I ask him to read it to me. As he reads, his creativity and word-play ring out. He reads with verve, with panache, with confidence. It's fantastic. He has poured his heart and soul into the writing assignment and he is finished. Done. Not a doubt in his mind.

In my hand is the current district scoring rubric for writing: *accurate, clear, maintains focus, correct punctuation and capitalization, correct spelling, free of fragments and run-ons.* It's heavy in my hand. It's important. It's required. It's clear. It's what they should be able to do by now. Their inability to do it is one reason why they are here. On this rubric, he would score Basic or Below. I am supposed to use it.

But. And I rebelliously begin and end a sentence with a conjunction here: *but.* I don't want to use it. I don't want to impose this measure on him at this moment. He and his (mostly male) classmates had been taught this rubric. They knew it by heart—could recite it to me. But when they began to write—really write—the rubric disappeared and they became authors, creators, poets. I want them to succeed—to exceed. I want to be able to measure their success and share it with the folks in charge. I want them to strut into the room knowing they earned Proficient on their writing assessment. I also want them to continue to write and revise, and share and smile while they do it. How do I manage both? To answer the fundamental question, I developed the List of Agreements.

I remember when I first used the List of Agreements. I was teaching a mixed-grade class of 6th-8th grade learners in an alternative program. They were excited about our current project—we were creating superhero personas—and I sensed there was enough interest to push their limits. They had thorough knowledge of the content, they had a desire to express themselves, and I wanted to shape how they did it. I intended to show them a list of my expectations, but I hesitated. They were so interested, so ready, and so eager. They were also just starting to trust themselves as learners and creators, having had a history of failure before coming to my program. I left my list of expectations on my desk and handed out examples of two-page magazine spreads on various topics.

"I'm thinking this might look cool for our superhero articles. What do you think?" I said. They looked at the pages skeptically, but appeared willing. I waited and gave them time to look and think.

"Can I do a border like this one?" asked one.

"You could do that," I said. "What do you think? Should we require a border?" And that is where it started. They decided, no, it shouldn't require a border. That went on the optional list. They pointed out the headings, the captions, the sub-articles (which they named AWAs—Article-Within-An-Article) and other details. For each we decided if they were required or optional. Every student was engaged, thinking about how to apply this format to their ideas, and more than ready to start working. They were like the horses at the beginning of horse race—rustling in their seats, chomping at the bit, so very ready to format their work. And they did. They did so beautifully. That is where it started.

In my current position I work in a

variety of classrooms as a coach for general and special education. I have taught one-day lessons, week-long projects, and I have one or two classes that I teach regularly. I have used the List of Agreements with every assignment and every class. It has been successful for me in each situation. Of course, I have to modify how I approach each class. I have used this with first graders, with students on the autism spectrum, with eighth graders who had never met me and didn't want to like me, with a multi-grade classroom of students with moderate to severe disabilities, and in college classes.

I use this method and, by successive approximations, they begin to revise with a rubric in mind, they begin to edit errors, and they do so while building on and retaining their pride and excitement to write.

How it Works

For each writing assignment that will be assessed or graded, we create a List of Agreements and this becomes our scoring guide. After reading, sharing, and playing with a variety of mentor texts, we, as a community of writers, list what our finished product will look like. I divide the list into two columns— Required and Optional. For the most part, I let the class discuss and hash out any disagreements. I have at times allowed myself one veto per assignment— where I can take something from the list and move it or remove it. This has only happened in classrooms that were new to me and where I was trying to stretch the boundaries. For example, classes will often list "Finished" on the required list. One class tried to put it on the optional list and I used my veto. That is pretty rare, though, most of their decisions are acceptable—even if they aren't what I would pick in my own ivory castle. More often than not, however, the students create a list for themselves that is more rigorous than I might have created on my own. When it is complete, they have a copy of the list (in an intranet folder, written on their project folder, posted on chart paper, on the Edmodo page) and they can refer to it as they work. When they are "done" they can point to each of the agreements on their finished product. At the end, they have either reached

the agreements or not. If not, they go back and finish. No false feeling of "done." No heavy sigh and refusal to revise. No Fs. Agreements reached or not yet reached. They accept the list because they took part in creating it. They refer back to it, help their peers check it, they use it just like we would want them to use a scoring guide, and they do so easily and willingly.

How It Looks

When I first begin working with a class, it takes some time. For example, near the beginning of my time with a class of eighth graders, we created CD covers to practice summary writing. The final product was to be a CD cover of a soundtrack summarizing a specific time period in their lives. The learning outcomes were to practice summary writing (previously taught by another teacher), to practice making correct references to existing texts (songs in this case), and to practice editing for grammar. We spent one day looking at CD covers of all kinds (they're actually becoming obsolete!) and making a list of the characteristics of a CD cover. The next day we reviewed CD covers of soundtracks and compilations. We created a second list of characteristics and compared the two. The third day I gave them time to brainstorm and draft ideas for their own lists. I wanted them to have some time to play with the idea of the assignment before we made our agreements. The next day, we made a list of agreements. It included:

Sound Track CD Cover Assignment	
Required	*Optional*
Title	Cover art
Creator or author	In a CD case
List of songs with titles, authors, and years	Typed
Make it clear which is which (songs in italics)	3-4 extra songs
Summary of what the song-track is about	Photos

Purposeful punctuation	
8-12 songs	Lyrics to songs (VETOED)
Summary paragraph of acknowl-edgements or dedications	Pull-out section in the middle
Looks like a CD cover	Recording company names of each song

Some of the items on the list were complex, like the summaries and the completed song lists, and I set some due dates for those pieces prior to the final due date. This allowed me to assess those sections prior to the final

product. On the day the final product was due, eighty percent of the class had a soundtrack that met or nearly met the required agreements. While the goal is one hundred percent, this is a class of students that struggles with work completion—eighty percent was high. I had already scored the two summaries and song lists using agreements we made separately. I had them show a peer where each item on the list was and add it if it was missing. During that process I roamed the room to gather a preliminary measure of how they were manifesting as a whole—asking students to show me the requirements on their final products as I went around the room. After class I was able to sit down with the final prod-

ucts and easily score the remaining requirements. I collected all of the final products on the due date. The projects that met the agreements were displayed on a bulletin board in the room. The unfinished ones were put in a folder next to the display so the students could access them to complete them later. This way, the importance of a deadline is clear, but the students are also able to follow through and complete their work—not just because it is due, but because that is what we agreed.

Over the course of the next week, all but one student retrieved their unfinished CD cover, completed it, and added it to the display. I then sat down with the single remaining student for some extra support in finishing. The process of creating the list of agreements added two days onto the project itself, but decreased grading time while increasing the student completion rate. Those two days were solid days of learning for the students, and I don't consider them wasted time. Students were engaged in conversation about their writing and what good writing looks like. They were immersed in a genre and took ownership of their knowledge of that genre. The revision process took less cajoling and convincing from me and was thorough and effective.

When I have the opportunity to work with the same group of students for a longer period of time, the List of Agreements takes much less class time to develop. When I assigned multi-genre research reports to a group I'd worked with all year, we spent one class period reviewing magazine spreads and other multi-genre writing sources. At the end of that class period we were able to create a List of Agreements in less than 10 minutes. In this case, a student typed while we talked, then worked with me to finalize it.

Superhero Magazine Spread Agreements *Prepared for Room 18 By A.K.*	
Required	*Optional*
Title	Secondary title
Author	Border around the page

1+ infographic or diagram with captions	AWA*
2+ photos with captions	Additional body para-graph
1 poem or narrative piece (can be AWA)	BFL**
2-page spread (11 x 17)	
Introduction	
3 body paragraphs	
Conclusions	
No mistakes in spelling or punctuation (so it looks real)	

* An Article Within an Article: Named by the students—a sub-article related to the topic.

**Big First Letter: Named by the students—when the article starts with a large letter at the beginning.

Again you'll see that some of the items were more involved than others. As before, we set sub-due dates for these, and, in the case of the introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion, reviewed our List of Agreements for those (from previous assignments).

Grading

How does all of this translate into a grade? I say, however you like. If you are open to the concept, grades become moot. If we, as a class, agree on what "done" looks like, lugging a pile of writing home and laboriously grading it is not necessary. The students themselves can mark on their paper where they have met each of the agreements (with pre-arranged symbols, a number system, or abbreviations). Before using this method, I was continually surprised at elements of my teacher-created scoring guides that students had ignored or missed and their surprise when I marked them down for missing it. When using a List of Agreements, I watch students notice these things in their own work before it comes to me. I watch them check off items on their own list, search through their

own work, ask peers to help them remember items. Once they have reviewed their own work, revised where necessary, and rechecked their list, it's ready for your review. At this point you could simply stand there, hands behind your back, while they grade it for you. Or, you can snap a photo of it in Evernote, slap a sticky note on it with comments, or have them file it in their portfolio. Agreements met. If the agreements are not yet met, students can make a plan for how they will work to meet them.

Additionally, students become more comfortable with scoring guides through the process. Eventually, students will have to be able to adhere to a set of expectations that is handed to them. After using the List of Agreements style of assessing, I found that my students were more willing to take ownership of a teacher-made or formal scoring guide. When it came time for STAR Writing test prep with one of my fourth grade groups, I handed out the scoring guide and told them that state had agreed with themselves and created this List of Agreements. They gave a nod, and we set to work understanding what they wanted.

Now, when a student excitedly shows me a piece of writing, he is also able to show me how he met the agreements we set—with an equal measure of excitement.

For many of us, the process of teaching writing and then grading it is counterintuitive. We want our students to be passionate about their writing, to draft fluently, to revise willingly. We tell them to just let it go. Get the words on the page. Risk. Then we pull out the rubric, the scoring guide, the district benchmark assessment giving the message that yes, we want to them to be free and daring and effusive and passionate, but please do it according to this checklist, thank-you-very-much.

Before I began to use the List of Agreements, I waged an internal battle between my desire to gently guide my students as writers and creators with my need to teach them the discreet skills they needed to improve. I felt that the flow of writing was interrupted by the revision process and halted entirely by the grading or assessment process. With the List of Agreements, I have found a comfortable middle ground. I can guide their learning with a more gentle hand, continue to develop their skills, and steadily increase the level of expectations. As a class uses this method, I am more and more able to guide their learning directly to skills I know they need. Even better, they begin to seek learning, to challenge their writing skills, and raise the expectations they set for themselves. They begin to strive for learning in a way I could only have hoped for before.

Now, when a student excitedly shows me a piece of writing, he is also able to show me how he met the agreements we set—with an equal measure of excitement. He is a writer who can review his own writing. No matter how far he has to go to improve his writing, this is the most important first step. I can respond to his writing with equal enthusiasm and a clear conscience. When an eager student approaches me with a piece of writing, we have a common language and a common set of expectations with which to review it.

Empowering
Students to Revise
Marion E. Wilson, SDAWP 2013

My mother-in-law takes great pride in her yard, and she gave considerable thought to selecting a new young tree to plant to replace one lost in a storm. About a month later, we casually asked if she was still pleased with the tree—she told us somewhat sheepishly that it was dead. What happened? Well, it seems she overwatered it. Instead of nurturing the tree as she intended, she overwhelmed it.

…my point is that we must be very deliberate and intentional with the way we respond to the writing our students do in their drafts.

Her story makes me think of the comments and feedback many new university composition instructors give on their students' drafts. They are convinced that they are doing the right thing, and that the number of comments somehow demonstrates their dedication and generosity. Indeed they are dedicated and generous educators; I argue, however, that they are not doing the best thing for their students. Their students are drowning in feedback without guidance to make sense of what to do first. How will those students know how to revise on their own after this class is over?

Students have a role to play in this dynamic, too. They frequently come to our classrooms with their minds already made up about whether they are good writers or not. The students who consider themselves good writers will not view revision in any way other than the chance to "fix" what we marked as wrong (and if their grade does not increase based on their "fixing," it is our fault for not indicating all that needed to be fixed). In contrast, the students who do not view themselves as good writers will

view the multitude of our comments as confirmation that they are poor writers. I am oversimplifying here, but my point is that we must be very deliberate and intentional with the way we respond to the writing our students do in their drafts.

I want to convince my fellow instructors to shift the ownership of the revising to the students, to the writers themselves. This shift does not

mean for us leave the student-writers without any guidance; instead it means that we should help the student-writers break down the process into prioritized steps that they can work with realistically whether with us or on their own. It means thinking about how much water we use to help them grow.

In making this argument, I am working first with the premise that revision is the opportunity to take preliminary thinking and writing on a topic, with a given purpose and audience, and develop it further. As educator and author Katie Wood Ray

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explains, "Writers go back to drafts not because the drafts are bad and need fixing, but to see what else is possible" (*Wondrous Words*). Revision is the opportunity to "re-see" a piece of writing in ways that will both help develop the writer's understanding of his or her ideas and

strengthen the ways the writer communicates those ideas to the reader. In other words, revision allows the writer the chance to "think like a reader," to rearrange ideas and examples, to expound, and to clarify.

Secondly, I believe there is no reason to mark everything that is "wrong" on an essay unless the instructor is trying to justify a poor grade—whether to the student writer or to the instructor himself or herself—and even then I urge instructors to resist that impulse. I suspect that this "mark everything" with drafts for revision approach serves double duty in that it allows the instructor to feel like she or he is doing a good job while it simultaneously does not require the instructor to make any decisions about what to mark and what not to mark. Thus, contrary to expectation, marking everything can be seen as a faster way to get through the stack of drafts than marking selectively.

So what should we do instead?

If, like in my program, there are multiple opportunities for revision for each written assignment, I urge instructors and student-writers alike to view each of these draft-assignment/feedback-for-revision cycles

as working on different elements of what they are trying to accomplish rather than a fixing-the-whole each time attitude. This approach will help student-writers get away from the whole "but I changed what you told me to so why didn't I get an A?" response instructors often get which

I believe indicates in and of itself that we have not effectively communicated the purpose of revision to our students.

What I propose is to take two factors into consideration: first, how much time do the student-writers have to revise? Is it a forty-eight hour turn-around time? Is it a full week? As author and former director of the Harvard freshman writing program, Nancy Sommers asked when she visited the UCSD campus in October 2012, "What do we realistically expect students to learn between drafts?" The amount of time available for revisions will dictate how many lessons can actually be learned and how many problems can be worked through between drafts—and thus how many comments we should make. And we do want students to learn from revision, right?

Second, before instructors start to read and mark any papers, we should think through the top three non-editing "higher-order concerns" we have at this point in the writing process. In her handbook *Writing Matters: A Handbook for Writing and Research*, Rebecca Moore Howard points out that these revision goals almost always have to do with content (46). When student-writers are still wrestling with content, issues such as sentence structure and even topic sentences do not matter because as the content changes and develops, those sentences and paragraphs are going to change, too. Having these top three higher-order concerns written down beside us will help us stay on-message especially when we feel that need to start marking problems we see with wild abandon. I use something like this with my students:

Higher Order Concerns
Is the writer's claim debateable?
Is there sufficient evidence or grounds to support the writer's claim?
Has the writer sufficiently analyzed his or her grounds to support the claim?

Throughout our commenting practice, we need to explain what we are doing to the students. Of course they are going to grumble and blame us for not telling them how to make it "right" if we do not explain to them what we are doing and why we are doing it. To that end, we need to be specific with the students about our higher order concerns.

With each student-writer's draft, we should read it through and decide which of these three issues is the most pressing. We should write to the student about that one highest-order concern we noticed when reading. For example, if the claim is still more of a statement of fact, then we need address the issue of having a debatable claim and pose questions about what makes something open to debate. Along with these comments, we can direct the student writer to the course materials that he or she has at her disposal to help review and understand this problem. To break the mark-everything habit, at least at first, I restricted myself to notes at the end of the paper instead of marginalia. I recommend this approach because it helped me be more global about my comments, and it puts the onus on the student-writers for taking that feedback and applying it to their writing.

For the second issue to address, we can select one of the other top three higher-order concerns as appropriate. If there is not another one of those that applies to this draft, take a minute to realize how awesome that is! The student-writer is in a great place to revise other parts of his or her paper now! In this case, I consider assignment-specific concerns that I had while I read the draft. Did something hang me up or otherwise interfere with the student-writer's communication of ideas? Was there something that I had specifically discussed in class that the student-writer seems to be misunderstanding? Is the student-writer trying to squeeze a thirteen-page research argument into the five paragraph essay format? (Don't laugh—I have seen it happen!) I select the most pressing, and write comments at the end of the paper, explaining why that issue interfered with my reading. And, in most cases, I am done for this round of feedback/revisions—at least for this particular student-writer.

A large part of what I am arguing here is that we need to hold off on issues that would fall into the "lower-order concerns" or into the category of editing and proofreading, and not inundate the student-writer with them at the same time as we are addressing higher order concerns. These are the concerns that, as Howard generalizes, do not have to do with content (46). This prioritization does not mean, however, that a grammatical or syntax issue that rises to the level of significant interference with the reader's ability to make meaning should be ignored, even in the early drafts. Indeed, if we cannot even understand the claim, it is hard to assess whether it is debatable or not. At this point, I make the decision to comment—again at the end of the draft—on whatever issue of grammar is interfering with my understanding. I always include a chapter or page number in the handbook we use as a class, and the label used to identify that problem, not because the name matters to the student-writer, but so he or she can look it up and ask questions about it. Depending on what the issue is, I will take, say, one paragraph, and identify all the places where that issue occurred, leaving the student-writer to apply that new information to the remainder of the draft. If the student-writer is a multi-language learner, I may even make corrections in that one sample paragraph since research has shown that these student-writers process and learn better from explicit corrections like this in ways that native English speakers do not.

Lower-order concerns that I address eventually, again in notes at the end of the draft, as the revise-resubmit process continues include the following:

Lower Order Concerns
Do the repeated issues with sentences suggest that the fused sentences or fragments seem not a choice but a persistent misunderstanding?
Do the repeated errors in the documentation style or format indicate a persistent misunderstanding?
Are there other writer-specific issues like an over-fondness for semi-colons (all of which are misused)?

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Note that while these fall into lower-order concerns, they are important to the student-writer to communicate his or her ideas. They just are not as important. A fused sentence does not matter if there is no evidence cited to support the claim or thesis.

...the responsibility is on the student-writer to learn from the feedback and apply what they have learned.

How do my suggestions empower the student writer? When repeated over time, whether throughout the school year or just over the course of an academic quarter, the responsibility is on the student-writer to learn from the feedback and apply what they have learned. Learning and applying potentially have much more lasting impact than rushing through an undifferentiated "fixing" of all that is marked. Likewise, the student-writers now have a sense of teasing apart various aspects of their writing in order to work on those aspects separately—and to prioritize their revisions. The student-writer and instructor can now approach a revised draft together with a shared understanding that, for example, now that one of the higher order concerns is taken care of and the student-writer is working on another one, we can turn our attention to the next most pressing problem. I believe that this is a pattern student-writers can learn and emulate on their own the next time they have a writing assignment whether for a class that has structured support through drafts or not.

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SDAWP's Fall Conference—2013

Reflective Practice: Exploring Writing Complexity

Jamie Jackson, SDAWP 2010

"When was the last time you wrote as a writer?" This question was posed at the keynote opening of the 6th annual Fall Conference by SDAWP co-director Christine Kané. Participants of this year's conference were then presented with a challenge. They were asked to write a story. And their only direction was to include a setting, character, and conflict. And, to be creative. The room fell silent as participants nobly attempted to craft their pieces, as what we often refer to as "SDAWP Time" rapidly ticked away.

Christine then shared Claude Hopkins' work on the power of habit and spoke about how we as educators must build writerly habits with our students in our classrooms. Kané implored that we must also prime habits of writing. She asked everyone to refer back to his or her writing and generously primed the crowd with ways to develop a setting, a character, and how to give the character a secret as a way to develop conflict. Eloquently making the connection that when writing is assigned, it often feels like a set up, but that when writing is taught, however, students are supported each step of the way.

The conference presenters all reiterated Kané's opening message in their sessions. The message is clear: When teachers write, they become positive models for students and become partners with them in a community of writers. Teachers who write in front of and with their students not only learn empathy but also help demystify the act of writing itself. Lesly Easson, Amy Mody, and Katrin Goldman all presented on the use of mentor texts in regards to the *Common Core Text Types*, how to write in a variety of genres for authentic purposes and audiences, and how to develop the habit of "reading like a writer."

Wendy Weisel-Bosworth and Miriam Sikking introduced argumentative thinking as a foundation for deeper reading and writing and shared how they instruct their students to craft logical arguments centered around real-world writing and student choice based on relevant evidence, substantive claims, and sound reasoning. Aja Booker explored text complexity with her participants and presented strategies students can use as a way to gain deeper levels of comprehension when reading difficult novels or challenging texts.

Barb Montfort shared resources to help students produce and publish writing using digital tools. While technology may seem insurmountable or daunting, Barb empowered participants to harness this uncertainty and integrate technology into their teaching practice now, asking, "Would you wait until next year to teach literacy? Don't wait to teach digital literacy either." Breanne Lagomarsino introduced writing response groups to participants and explored ways to encourage rigor and independent thinking, while Sonja Munevar Gagnon introduced ways to scaffold and support English learners in writing and how to build their strategies for reading critically and responding analytically.

Everyone's biggest take-away from this conference will likely be the resource Kané shared in her opening keynote, called *The Hemingway Mode*, which is an editing resource that, when enabled, prevents you from deleting any parts of your document. The profound words, "Write drunk; edit sober," often attributed to Ernest Hemingway, are greatly appreciated by those who live the writerly life and those who teach the reflective practices of writing complexity.

I Am Who I Teach

Linda Hirschmiller,
SDAWP 2013

When I walk into my classroom—at Johnson Elementary School, the same school my son attended in kindergarten—I recognize that the very high percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students are a mirror image of my son. They are members of families that love them unconditionally. Those families may struggle to find time in their hectic schedules for adequate or lengthy conversations. They may labor to put food on the table and clothing in the closets. But despite their worries, these families attend to their children's needs the best way they know how.

In sharp contrast to how my parents attended to my own needs, I have always fought to provide my son with a stable and nurturing foundation. After a lifetime of instability, my parents' violence, meth addiction, and volatility became utterly unbearable. That is when I petitioned the juvenile courts for emancipation. I was fifteen years old when the court granted my petition, and when they did, I had one life-goal: make better choices than my parents made. It was my cardinal rule.

Within a single year of living independent of my parents, I had already made two of the most irresponsible choices I could imagine. I had dropped out of high school, and I was expecting my first child. I loved that baby dearly, worked very hard to provide food, clothing, and shelter for him, and forged through the next six years the best way I knew how.

When I sent Christian off to kindergarten, I didn't realize that I was living in poverty or what that meant for my family. I had lacked a lifetime of positive parenting models, I had abandoned my high school education, and I scarcely had the monetary resources to provide basic learning utensils for him. Ashamed of our family's circumstances, I was mortified and deeply embarrassed.

Christian's conflicts in kindergarten illuminated my lack of knowledge and life experience. The reality of my immature parenting haunted me. While other boys and girls were cheerfully writing their names at the top of their papers, Christian struggled to grasp the pencil. That class was buzzing with boys and girls reading letters, describing objects, cutting out shapes, singing songs, and completing projects. Meanwhile, Christian was laboring to form a single letter that he could not even name.

We did not read books at home. Was I supposed to do that?

We did not cut, paste, color, draw, or sing songs at home. I thought that's what school was for.

How did all of these children develop all of these skills? Isn't the school supposed to teach him these things?

He was—like many of the students that enter my kindergarten classroom today—far below his more affluent peers in vocabulary development, fine motor skills, and background knowledge.

As I watched him struggle, ashamed of my pure ignorance, my heart ached. The guilt was unbearable. I chose to drop out of school, and I chose to have a child at the age of sixteen. As a result of my choices, I was unqualified to effectively parent and he was not prepared for school. I had broken my own cardinal rule. My baby was suffering because of my poor choices.

Marjorie, his teacher, did not judge my lack of parenting knowledge, my lack of knowledge about middle-class values, or my lack of knowledge about education. The fact is, Christian's teacher embraced our family, understood how much we loved our son, and in the most graceful, tender, and loving manner, helped us learn more about the needs we did not even realize our family had.

My own personal experience has defined my role as a teacher and motivator of young learners and young families with incredible potential. I am who I teach!

Marjorie treated us respectfully, engaged us in conversations, learned more about our family, and then acted upon our needs. She suggested games I could play with Christian. She sent home basic school supplies, and she loaned us books for our family to read together. After inviting me into the classroom, she even took the time to model how I should engage Christian in conversation. Marjorie slowly and methodically took the time to empower our family with a key resource we lacked—knowledge. Knowledge about learning, teaching, parenting, community resources, and education.

Because she took the time to recognize she was an agent of change, because she acknowledged our family's love for one another—despite our severe lack of knowledge—and because she continued to teach our entire family regardless of how much we still needed to learn, my

family began to change.

Marjorie could have easily assumed that there was no hope for Christian: He was, after all, being raised by an inexperienced, uneducated teenage-mother. She could have negatively judged our family based on his poor nutrition, his tattered torn and dirty clothes, his sleep deprivation, or his lack of vocabulary. However, Marjorie did not. She, instead, chose to view our family as one that was in need of nurturing and guidance.

With Marjorie's nurturing and guidance, Christian grew into a successful young scholar. Currently, Christian is a high school graduate that works full time while attending Cuyamaca Community College. And despite the fact that I had dropped out of high school in the tenth grade, Marjorie's respect for and confidence in our family encouraged me to resume my own education. Marjorie inspired me to become a teacher.

Today, I am a first generation college graduate who currently holds a Masters of Science in Education. Every day I strive to become my own Marjorie. Because I have experienced the impact of a teacher's tolerance and understanding, and her willingness to learn more, and judge less, I know I am personally capable of making a difference in the lives of the children I teach. I believe in them. Every day I fight to show them what they are capable of, and I strive to provide the students and their families with the tools, resources, knowledge, and confidence that will inspire them to accomplish unimaginable goals.

I have students who exhibit aggressive outbursts, repetitive tardiness, unmet medical needs, poor hygiene practices, and who regularly come to school hungry. These dilemmas might make it easy for a teacher to overlook parents' good intentions. There is plenty of room to judge, to assume I know what is happening, or to act upon what I think is happening. However, I refrain. If I were to make assumptions about each of these situations, I might have missed out on valuable opportunities to help them, and their families—just like Marjorie might have missed out on the opportunity to help my family.

If I have learned anything from my personal experience, I have learned that compassion, understanding, exploration, and truly listening to others will lead me toward much greater insights than assumptions and judgments ever will.

As educators armed with the power to nurture and guide young families, we must bypass the temptation to formulate opinions or assumptions. We might just discover families lacking either the knowledge or the resources that they need to address their families' dilemmas. The love may be there. All of the right intentions might exist. However, they simply might not know how to care for their babies, yet.

My own personal experience has defined my role as a teacher and motivator of young learners and young families with incredible potential. I am who I teach!

Analysis of Young Writers' Camp

Lesley Easson, SDAWP 2005

It's about kids coming together
to form a writing community
listening, collaborating, imagining

It's about youthful words and
different points of view
looking to the future
and remembering the past

It's about response,
revision, conversation
It's about a praise, a question, a wish

It's about poetry, nonfiction,
mysteries, and observations
Letting our senses drive our creativity

It's about finding rainbows
in the clouds
giving life to
our pencils
and embracing change

*In the garden...
a stump is just a stump
until you add
a child,
paper,
a pencil—
and then it becomes
an author's chair*

Young Writers' Camp

Writing About Writing

The scurry of a pencil
dashing across the page

The sweet smell
of a new notebook
a portal to new worlds

Limitless power
at your fingertips

Dive into the world
of dreams
ideas
thoughts
feelings

And write

—Sidney Brown

Talking About Surfing

Talking about surfing relaxes me
Cool water laps against my board
as I wait in the lineup
I effortlessly glide over swells
I calmly anticipate the coming of the waves

Talking about surfing terrifies me
The thought of being endlessly pummeled
by huge masses of whitewash
As I wait on the outside, I dread the possibility
of being torn apart by a shark

Talking about surfing relieves me
I am no longer concerned
with anything but myself and the waves
I am at one with the ocean
Talking about surfing

—Luke Weinbaum

Playground

I am standing on the top
of a playground
I glance to my left
Peeling red poles
To my right
Dirty swing sets
I can smell the stench of wood chips

And in the distance, I can faintly hear
A bell ringing

Two girls speed down stone steps
They run to the playground
The red, bright, shining, playground
And instantly transform
Into spies, wizards, and superheroes

We climbed, slid, jumped
As stories soared from our minds
Our flying freedom of being kids
Never dreaming that it would change

Our play is different now
Black mascara coats our eyelashes
While we talk and gossip
About stupid things
No more stories or make believe

Yes we're "adults" now
Our freedom and innocence
down the drain
No more running
down the stone steps
To a bright red playground

We're running to something else
We don't know exactly what, yet

But I don't want to run to the unknown
To that alluring
and mysterious black hole

I want to run to the playground

—Julia Price

Skywatching:
A Lifetime of Glances

When you hear the word sky, what do you think of? A broad expanse of pure azure? A deep sapphire plain, filled with all kinds of fluffy white creatures? Perhaps you remember a day when the sky was gray or even pristine white like a vanilla twilight? Or maybe you don't need sun to make sky. Maybe you remember a dark velvet curtain filled with pinholes through which light twinkles, a great opening, a silver circle set within. The ceiling of the world , a great celestial sphere of obsidian with tiny glowing lights like fireflies and a brilliant white orb hanging like a lamp over the world in night. And at dawn, the stars falling beneath the edge of the world, moved, chased along by their lunar shepherd, as the sun, the great golden light above, rises up and dries everything in a heliotrope rainbow of color. Upon a blue tarp, clumps of white sand lie scattered about, like whorls of cream colored paint upon an indigo canvas. The clouds move through a great blue sea, fantastic beasts, structures, symbols, drifting through the air. The flock grows gray and heavy; great dark masses build and unleash a fury of lightning and floodwaters at the land below. Exhausted, they fade, leaving behind a seven-shade chromatic line stretching though the sky. Now look...*up*.

—Shivank Nayak

Birds of Writing

Fly through the sapphire sky
The sky of peace
The sky of love
Where the birds peck at imagination
Chirping out poetry
Creating nests of wonderful ideas
With words and pencils
Writing stories of a lifetime
Sitting on eggs of creativity
Soaring and taking risks

—Wyatt Marshall

Write For Real:
Why English Learners Require
Authentic Writing Opportunities

Ana Martinez Reyes, SDAWP 2013

During my years as a classroom teacher, I couldn't bear to teach writing because I didn't know how to "fix" the writing my students, particularly my English learners, produced. Believing I had to be a writing expert in order to teach writing effectively—and knowing I wasn't—I turned to formulaic writing programs.

I had heard they offered stability, regularity, and, best of all, they simplified the grading process, making it easy to check that students had employed the appropriate structures, transition words, and number of sentences. For a time, I felt satisfied that I had effectively taught my students how to write.

What I have learned is that this highly structured approach denies English learners authentic writing experiences. Worse, due to my over-reliance on graphic organizers and worksheets, my students saw very little authentic writing. Teachers like me believe they are helping their English learners when they implement formulaic writing programs. What we don't realize is that often English learners are subjected to this approach year after year, making formulaic writing a permanent fixture throughout their academic lives.
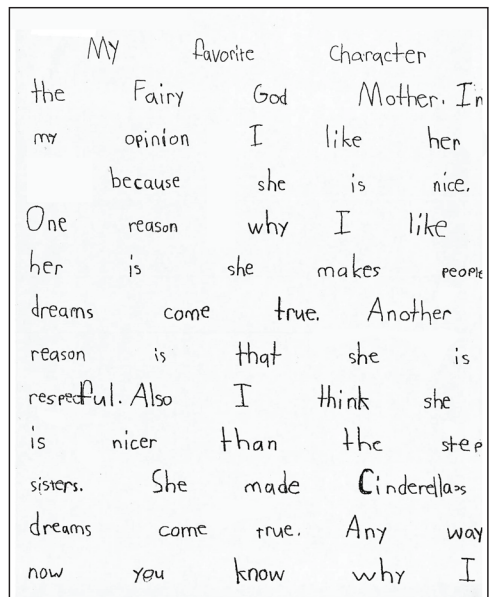
My current role as a district coordinator has afforded me the opportunity to observe instruction on a frequent basis, and heavily structured, scripted writing programs continue to be popular in many classrooms. In our sincere attempt to support our ELs, we are teaching them how to form sentences, paragraphs, and five-paragraph essays—often in precisely that order—from the early elementary grades through high school, converting a temporary scaffold into permanent training wheels our students have come to depend on.

What I failed to realize about counting on heavily scripted writing programs to teach writing was the potential damage I was causing by training my students to follow a formula rather than encouraging them to emulate favorite authors and write about topics of real interest to them. I relied heavily on this structure with the best of intentions and did not understand why the writing my students produced never seemed to improve.
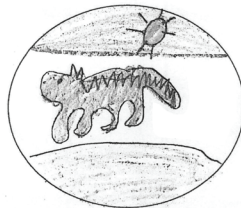
Like other teachers that care deeply about their students, I had convinced myself that I was "building the foundation" or "setting the stage" for good writing, and that next year's teacher would take their writing further. Unfortunately, this is not what is happening.

Rather than being a temporary scaffold, formulaic writing has become the way to teach writing in many classrooms. Each teacher believes the scaffolds will be removed the following year, and yet it is evident that this over reliance on formulaic writing permeates all grades (see student samples), causing teachers to place more importance on the structure of the essay than on the content.

When more focus is placed on structure versus content, students spend their time filling in sentence frames and making sure they have the right number of sentences in their paragraphs, and learn next to nothing about the art of writing itself. While well-intentioned, students taught to write in this manner produce dull, voiceless pieces and are unable to write thoughtfully.

My favorite character the Fairy God Mother. In my opinion I like her because she is nice. One reason why I like her is she makes people dreams come true. Another reason is that she is respectful. Also I think she is nicer than the step sisters. She made Cinderellas dreams come true. Any way now you know why I

Title: Charles Tige

In my opinion I like charlesTige. I like charles Tige because he is cute and silly. Also, he has shtips. Next, he is orange. Lastly, he found his roar. Finally, he likes animals. That is why charls Tige is best
3-8-2012

6th grade camp

For various reasons I believe 6th grade camp was awesome. Some people may disagree because the price is very expensive. You need to pay $210.00. However, I believe the food at camp was the best. Also, the game Gaga is a cool game. Finally, the most important reason is canoing . Consequently ,I will argue that the activities at camp is a once in a lifetime opportunity.

First, the food was awesome. In fact, the food was way better than food in the cafeteria. Also, they gave us 3 meals a day and even dessert. For example, brownies, cake, and cookies. Therefore, the food on camp was spectacular.

Second, the game of GaGa was cool. In fact, it's the best game I ever played. In addition, its kind like prison ball/doge ball, but with different rules . For

Step Up to Writing is a structured writing program popular with many teachers. Carlos, Alejandra, and Francisco are English learners whose teachers use this program, and their writing samples reflect this. In the program's formulaic approach, students are initially taught to form a proper sentence before moving on to paragraph writing and the five-paragraph essay in a part to whole approach. For example, Read 180's "Scaffolded Instruction for Precise Writing" requires that students complete a graphic organizer to "build vocabulary," then organize their ideas for writing by following a strict format.

Other programs such as *Interactive Writing: First Steps* and *Learning Headquarters* subscribe to a similar highly-structured approach. Many problems exist with this type of instruction. It limits a student's creative ability by forcing them to conform to an overly rigid pattern. Formulas tend to discourage depth and result in student writing that is shallow and devoid of thought because their restrictive nature provides no room for creativity. With the exception of the plan sheet introduction of different transition words, the writing produced by students changes very little as they move through the grades.

Such a formulaic approach to the teaching of writing reveals an extremely problematic practice: delaying extensive writing until English learners attain a "sufficient" level of proficiency. It creates the perception that students must work on correct grammar and spelling before they can be allowed to write longer pieces. Often, because there is so little writing to evaluate, teacher feedback does not move beyond correction. In *Scaffolding EL Learners to be Successful Writers*, Pauline Gibbons argues that students' lack of exposure to different, authentic text types and a dearth of classroom discussion opportunities reduce their ability to produce quality writing.

Moreover, because of this approach, struggling writers, including English learners, are often hyper-focused on mechanics and become overly concerned with grammar, spelling, or overall "correctness."

Over time, this undermines their confidence and can keep them from producing pieces of any meaningful length. Worse, because skills are taught devoid of context through worksheets that have little or no connection to the reading and writing demands of their areas of study, students are unable to produce writing in a variety of genres.

English learners will benefit greatly if we instead employ a mentor text inquiry approach to the teaching of writing, where the questions asked by students, arising from an exploration of text, determine what elements will be studied.

Employing mentor texts (texts used as examples of exemplary writing) means we look to published authors, our real writing experts. Through this approach, students can be taught, for example, to analyze craft elements (techniques used by authors to capture the reader's attention) or word choice in well-written texts, and then be encouraged to try these approaches in their own writing. This is important because it means the teacher does not need to create an artificial frame for students to follow. Judy Kozak, (SDAWP 2013), recently shared her experience using such an approach. She showed her third graders a variety of leads and conclusions taken from authentic texts and walked her students through an analysis of different craft elements.

In one example, Judy used *Sea Turtles* by Gail Gibbons as her mentor text, and the examples below demonstrate student approaches to writing using an article on great white sharks taken from *National Geographic Explorer* as a mentor text.

Extraordinary Elephants

Some animals eat meat—elephants don't. Some animals fly—elephants can't. There's even an animal that can climb on trees—elephants wouldn't do that. But of all the different kinds of animals, I still think elephants are the best. Elephants are extraordinary.

Jane Goodall

Tall trees surround you. The hot sun's rays gleam on your face. You can smell the ripe fruit and flower pollen from the high trees above. Then you spot a chimp using a stick to get food.

When we teach students to write by filling in the blanks or following a formula, they lose the opportunity to wrestle with the language and make it their own the way Judy's students did. As Katie Wood Ray tells us in *Exploring Inquiry as a Teaching Stance in the Writing Workshop*, the use of real world examples of writing frees us from the need to rely on formulas or worksheets to "teach" writing.

In order for English learners to develop strong writing skills, we need to immerse them in authentic writing and teach them to analyze the author's use of structure and language. While I agree that it is necessary to provide structure and frames to English learners as they begin to navigate through the demands that writing in English places upon them, less useful is an approach that erroneously teaches students arbitrary "rules" on how to use the language of any particular genre.

This type of approach may simplify the teaching of writing for teachers, but it's not about us. If you're a classroom teacher interested in transforming your writing instruction into a mentor text inquiry approach, you can begin the way I did, by searching out the strong writing teachers at your site and asking them about their approach. You can also begin by reading Katie Wood Ray's *Study Driven*, Lucy Calkins' *The Writing Workshop*, or Ralph Fletcher's *Mentor Author, Mentor Texts*.

I encourage you to take a risk—grab your favorite picture book and look at it as a writer. See if you can call out those elements of craft the author uses to grab your attention. Invite your English learners into the conversation and expose them to the work of real writers. Writing is hard. It's messy. It's frustrating. The mentor text inquiry approach will make writing interesting, exciting and rewarding. Best of all, your students will begin to look at themselves as writers.

The Power of Personal Narrative in Combating Single-Story Thinking

Dave Mattas—SDAWP, 2013

"How impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story"
—Chimimanda Adichie

Nigerian author Chimimanda Adichie, in a TED talk that has been viewed over four million times, eloquently describes the dangers of what she calls "single story" thinking. In her talk, Adichie describes her life as a child growing up in Nigeria and the ways in which Western thought infiltrated her early learning. She describes how many of her foundational memories related to reading involve books written by English

> *Adichie represents the "single story" as the broadly seen cultural narrative that is presented by those in power and projected through literature and other forms of media.*

and American men filled with cultural realities that, while foreign to her, she accepted as somehow representative of what literature was. She describes her own early efforts at storytelling—distant tales filled with white, blue-eyed protagonists who ruminated on the weather and swilled ginger beer—and reflects on how it wasn't until much later that she recognized that "people like [her] could also exist in literature."

I had seen Adichie's talk before, but after viewing it with a group of teaching colleagues and subsequently discussing it in depth with a specific lens towards education, I found her words bouncing around in the background for most of my day.

What struck me was how in responding to such a devastating critique of categorization, nearly every comment—mine included—was focused on groups: poor students, Latino teenagers, wealthy kids, teachers, and the list goes on. It left me thinking about how ingrained our instinct is to compartmentalize. Even within a diverse group of forward thinking educators, our responses were littered with commentary that in many ways echoed the "single story" thinking that Adichie herself sought to untangle. It helped me to understand just how ingrained this mode of thinking is and how difficult it can be to break out of it.

Adichie represents the "single story" as the broadly seen cultural narrative that is presented by those in power and projected through literature and other forms of media. She asserts that these "single stories" are most damaging in historically marginalized cultures, saying "power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person." While I agree with this, I would add that all people are impacted by an outside narrative construct. I'm a white male from a middle upperclass Chicago family and this places me firmly in a "single story" of my own. In many ways, my life has born out this narrative of privilege: I never had to worry about food on the table growing up, traveled often as a child, and graduated from college debt-free. At the same time, my full narrative is a lot more nuanced: I spent several years living below the poverty line, I live and work in communities where I am in many ways the minority, and I've had countless moments in my life where I felt a disconnect between how I was viewed and how I really felt. "The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue," Adichie remarks. "It is that they are incomplete." My full narrative is far more

complicated than the "single story" I project to the outside world, and the same can be said for every student that walks into my classroom.

So how do we as educators work to combat this single-story thinking when even informed and well-

> *By empowering students to share their individual stories and exposing them to the unique stories of others, the categories associated with "single story" thinking necessarily break down.*

meaning individuals have a hard time breaking free? A simple first step is to consciously invite individual stories into our classrooms. By empowering students to share their *individual* stories and exposing them to the unique stories of others, the categories associated with "single story" thinking necessarily break down.

In my own 9th grade English classroom at Helix Charter High School, I confront single-story thinking on a daily basis. My students are "poor," "Hispanic," "black," "rich," "Muslim," and "white." So many of them exist as labels to other students on campus. I try to use narratives that resist the commonly held single story as a means of breaking down this mode of thinking. Primarily, this has happened through a personal narrative unit developed with

my colleague Paul Reams. Together, we have worked to construct a unit founded in complex, well-written, autobiographical narratives that represent a wide range of ethnicities, genders, and backgrounds. My students read about the realities of being a soldier in Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried. They learn about life as a Sudanese refugee through Valentino Achak Deng. They hear about what it is to be a son of an alcoholic father in Scott Russell Sanders' "Under the Influence." Students read narratives by Annie Dillard but also by rapper and actor Childish Gambino. They read about lives that aren't always seen in English class and about people who don't always fit into traditional boxes.

The unit is structured as an inquiry into the personal narrative genre, and as we read, we dissect each narrative through student-led fishbowl discussions where a small group of students in the center has a focused discussion while the rest of the class listens. The conversation centers on how each writer works to include detail, dialogue, and meaningful reflection within his/her writing. More importantly, we talk about how each writer tells his/her story and how we can include similar traits in our own narratives. During this time, I am less a teacher and more a participant/moderator, empowering students to lead discussions and channeling their reactions towards a greater understanding of how stories are told.

This is an important part of the process, and I have had transformational classroom experiences as a result of it. While reading Scott Russell Sanders' piece centered on alcoholism, our fishbowl discussion in one class began to subtly change. The discussions are structured in such a way that a small group of students in the middle analyze the day's text while the outside circle observes and takes notes. Students have an opportunity to join and leave the center circle, and as this particular discussion progressed I began to recognize what was happening. The culturally diverse group of girls that ended up in the middle had all had an alcoholic family member at some point. The dialogue grew from being a discussion of Sanders' story to be-

ing a conversation between six girls, and while it strayed from the stated objective of the fishbowl, it was a transformative moment for not only the girls but the entire class. If even just for 15-20 minutes, the lines of culture and class typically associated with "single story" thinking broke down as six high school girls from vastly different backgrounds felt empowered to share their true stories. In doing so, they found a shared narrative that transcended any of their single stories.

Once we read and discuss a number of outside narratives, students then begin the process of writing their own stories. The assignment itself

is without any true prompt, though there are three requirements: it must include detailed imagery, it must include dialogue, and it must include a thoughtful reflection. These are all elements that are sought out and discussed during our inquiry-based reading and students have seen countless examples of them prior to writing. As a member of our writing community, I am also tasked with constructing a narrative. Structurally, the assignment is guided by the mentor narratives and students are encouraged to write about any topic. The freedom afforded by this opportunity leads to increased engagement, with many students producing their most honest and well-crafted

"Have You Seen My Sense of Humor?"

I looked for it in the usual places
the comic strips and cartoons
the music of jazz, swing, and doo wop
in my breakfast bowl of Cheerios
and between the lettuce leaves
of tuna fish sandwiches.
I reread fairy tales and fantasy stories
and watched reruns of old comedy routines on TV.
Then I remembered to check my memory bag
and once again heard my wife's laughter
and replayed my grandson's favorite "knock-knock" jokes.
Smiles flowed more easily after that
especially after I came face to face with myself
and those times when I spoke nonsense
displayed my ignorance
and acted a fool.
I began to laugh at myself
and when I did those smiles and that laughter
warmed the ice around my heart
and allowed my sense of humor to burst through
to sing and dance and create its own music.
The next time my sense of humor disappears
I'll know where to find it
because I've placed those smiles and that laughter
here inside this poem.

—Frank Barone, SDAWP 1977

pieces of the entire term.

As the writing nears completion, I offer students a chance to workshop their writing using the same fishbowl discussion method of our original inquiry. In doing so, student writing is treated with exactly the same critical eye as the published narratives read earlier in the unit. Finally, students are given an opportunity to read their finished narratives in front of the class. While not every student chooses to do so, those who do often reveal incredibly poignant personal stories that would otherwise go unheard in our classroom. The "single stories" that impact so many of my students disintegrate into narratives of pain, humor, sadness, and triumph that serve to define them as more complex individuals. It is an experience that many students find incredibly empowering; in year-end reflections, many consider the unit their favorite and see the narrative essay as their most successful piece of writing. Reading their stories aloud gives many students a chance to give voice to their writing in a way they have never done before.

Several years ago, I had a student who wore a traditional Muslim veil with Converse All-Star sneakers to class every day: a combination that embodied her unique spirit. When it came time to read narratives, she tentatively raised her hand and walked to the front of the room. She began quietly, gaining confidence as she spoke. The story she shared was of walking home from school two years prior when three boys she had never met walked out from a side alley and began hurling religious insults at her. It was a devastating story and my entire class was in stunned silence as she recounted the difficulty she had in trusting anyone thereafter. Through tears, she thanked our class for accepting her and helping her to trust people once again. It was a moment that caught me off guard, and as I spoke with her after class I told her how proud I was of her for being willing to share her story. All members of our classroom community, myself included, left class that day with a deeper, more nuanced, and more honest understanding of her as an individual and not merely a "single story." As an instructor, it validated my investment in narrative as a unit focus. Not only

was her story incredibly powerful, but it also revealed a deep critical understanding of the genre and craft of narrative.

I'm by no means the first person to suggest the power of narrative in breaking down single story thinking. Across the country and around the world, good work is happening that is empowering people to tell their personal stories:

- In the Middle East, a group of Palestinian and Israeli schoolteachers sought to create a hybrid textbook that presented each individual side of the conflict as told by individuals who experienced it. "The two-narratives approach recognizes that, in an unsolved and enduring violent conflict, it is impossible to write one bridging, reconciled narrative. Instead, this program gives teachers from both sides of the conflict the responsibility of jointly creating a history textbook and using it in their classrooms" (Steinberg and Bar-on).

- McSweeney's *Voices of Witness* series publishes collections of narratives written by men and women who have experienced some form of tragedy and injustice. Subjects include wrongfully imprisoned criminals, victims of Hurricane Katrina, undocumented United States residents, and Sudanese refugees. Along with an accompanying teacher's guide, their goal is to use "oral history to illuminate contemporary human rights crises in the U.S. and around the world."

- Similarly, National Public Radio's StoryCorps seeks "to provide Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of [their] lives." A recent series called the "National Teachers Initiative" celebrated the individual stories of public school teachers from across the country.

- More locally, the California Writing Project's "I Write the Future" campaign empowers high school students to "use writing to address intolerances, such as discrimination, racism, homophobia, bullying, and cyberbullying, propose solutions, and advocate for changes that will write a very different future than our present."

Adichie suggests that to break out of single-story thinking we need to acknowledge that everyone has a compelling story of his or her own to tell. My experience has shown this to be true. I believe that giving students a space to honestly share their stories is an essential component in not only building stronger writers, but also in building more compassionate and understanding young adults who view each other not as "single stories" but instead as individuals. Not every student will have a transformational story to share in my class, but I believe there is incredible value in providing the space for moments like this to happen and for fostering a community where the unique voices of all writers are valued and heard.

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The Power of Multiple Mentor Texts

Kim Douillard, SDAWP 1992

Writing is hard work. Some days the writing flows and I know how to put my words together to achieve the desired effect...but at other times I feel stuck or confused or unsure about how to approach the writing task in front of me.

That's where mentor texts come in. I look for pieces written by others that do what I am trying to achieve... and study them to learn from those writers who are acting as my mentors. Sometimes I learn about structure and how to organize my ideas. Sometimes I am inspired by word choice and craft elements. Sometimes I notice text features and literary devices.

And for the young writers in our classroom, we work to find mentor texts to support their development as writers. We like to use multiple texts, knowing that not all texts work for all students...and to show that not all writers approach the same kind of writing in the same way.

And sometimes the just-right mentor text sings.

Last week our students studied four poets and their poems about snow as they got ready to write poems about snowflakes. We started with an old friend, Valerie Worth. Her small poems are a treasure: short and rich, filled with imagery and powerful language. And then we turned to an unusual mentor text...an "old" poem with some unfamiliar language.

On a Night of Snow

Cat, if you go outdoors you must walk in the snow. You will come back with little white shoes on your feet, little white slippers of snow that have heels of sleet. Stay by the fire, my Cat. Lie still, do not go. See how the flames are leaping and hissing low, I will bring you a saucer of milk like a marguerite, so white and so smooth, so spherical and so sweet–Stay with me Cat. Outdoors the wild winds blow.

Outdoors the wild winds blow, Mistress, and dark is the night. Strange voices cry in the trees, intoning strange lore; and more than cats move, lit by our eyes' green light, on silent feet where the meadow grasses hang hoar–Mistress, there are portents abroad of magic and might, and things that are yet to be done. Open the door!

—Elizabeth Coatsworth
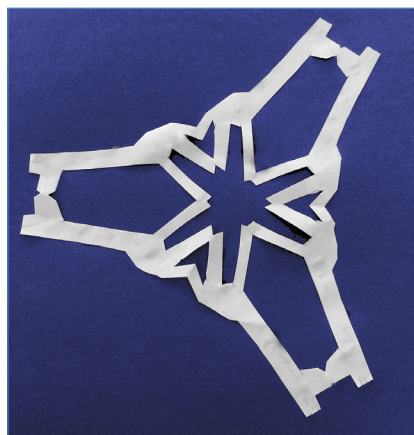
The first response from my students was, "What?" We reminded them to focus on what they understood about the poem rather than what they didn't...and they picked up on the "little white shoes" right away. Then one of our students pointed out that each of the stanzas was told from a different point of view...the first was talking to the cat, the second was the cat talking to the Mistress. With that comment, one of our third graders, M, couldn't contain herself! "Oh, now I see it! I want to try that!"

When we went to write, she started immediately. M had already talked about the metaphor she wanted to try on...an idea about a blank canvas to represent the whiteness of snow...when we had studied Valerie Worth's poem the day before.

Here's her poem:

The Snowflake Outside

Snowflake, you have no choice but to fall. So keep dancing down like a ballerina, making the world empty of color like a frustrated artist's blank canvas. Snowflake, keep whirling magically and descend daintily onto my sleeve. From a great sky you fell.

Yes, from a great sky I fell so let me keep falling forever and ever. Don't let me land on the frosty ground. I want to have my life forever. I want to show my style and unique ways. I don't want to land, melt, or be unnoticed. Let me keep falling and blowing with the wild whistling wind
.   —M

There's magic when the just-right mentor text provides the just-right support for the writer. You can see how M used the structure of Coatsworth's poem as a container for her ideas, images, and feelings about snowflakes. Before she was introduced to this poem she had already done some writing about snowflakes, thinking about movement, metaphor, and imagery. The idea of shifting the speaker inspired her writing and gave her the shape she was looking for. Most of the time we try to avoid mentor texts that directly address the topic/subject we are focused on. But poems about snow are plentiful and we had many choices of mentor texts about snow...and our students have little experience with snow and snowflakes (except those they made by cutting paper) beyond what they have seen in books, movies, and photographs since it doesn't snow where we live.

I love when a mentor text nudges a writer to try something new and stretch her wings. And I am reminded that writers need a variety of mentor texts to learn from...rather than a single model.

MUSE BOX

Divona Roy—SDAWP 1996

As a high school teacher, I get to work with only the most often anthologized pieces by Edgar Allan Poe—they are "most famous" because every school kid reads them.

Here are my Poe pet peeves:

1. Misspelling his "middle" name
2. Calling him a wasted drunk
3. Pronouncing him insane
4. Asking students to identify a theme for each of his stories

Poor Poe. He lost everyone he loved, got kicked out of school, and died at age 40—face down in a gutter. That's how my colleagues sum him up.

But Poe wasn't poor. He was different. And in the humanities, we embrace diversity.

Sure, you need a dictionary nearby when reading his stories (that, or rely on your favorite anthology's footnotes). Sure, there are "eew, gross" moments in his stories, and the romantic poems my students get to read reek with dark, supernatural sentimentality or mystery. Sure, he takes on personas that not even a mother could love.

> *Poor Poe. He lost everyone he loved, got kicked out of school, and died at age 40—face down in a gutter. That's how my colleagues sum him up.*

But everyone finds Poe irresistible. Even the faint at heart quote him on Halloween. Even the burliest football player feels for the beautiful *Annabel Lee* and her pitiful lover. Even the sweetest little ninth grader knows why my colleague Mrs. Webb has a raven atop the cabinet behind her desk.

So what is the problem? Why does it matter when students (and teachers) type "Edgar Allen Poe" at the top of their papers or assignment sheets? Doesn't it increase student interest when teachers tout supposed character flaws and mental issues of the upcoming author? Doesn't every story have a theme?

It's time to give the brilliant Poe the right kind of respect in high schools. Not the respect that resonates inside aesthetic teacher hearts and minds. The respect that causes our students to understand and appreciate the value of an intellectual who could form words into pictures, conflicts, and situations that make them think, feel, wonder, and say "eew." The respect that Poe and his "most famous" works deserve. The respect of perceiving his prose the way he perceived literature rather than shoving it into a format that makes it easier and more comfortable for us "to teach."

When I began my teaching career thirty years ago, I did what colleagues did; I asked students to identify a theme for each short story in our unit. When we got to Poe, they were ready. They smiled, confident and assured, as they shared their themes for "The Tell-Tale Heart":

- Don't kill people.
- Don't trust anyone, even your caretaker.
- Don't rat on yourself.
- Don't hurt others when you're supposed to take care of them.
- Don't hire an insane employee, especially when you have eye problems.

Yes, all of them start with "Don't" and all of them, I am sure, cause the great author to turn over in his grave.

Did Poe write his stories to tell readers what not to do? To enlighten them about the obvious idea that murder is bad? Did Poe write *Tell Tale Heart*, *The Cask of Amontillado*, and *The Fall of the House of Usher* to impart a moral or to make a comment about the universality of the human experience?

Poe believed that a good story creates a "single effect." And Poe wrote good stories whose effect was often horror. When he wrote *The Cask of Amontillado*, Poe was not moralizing about revenge, and his goal was not sheer entertainment (an alternative brought up by a student who was grappling with the "purpose" of the story). Of course, we can make our students come up with themes, and some sound tenable: "People need both mental and physical strength to make it in the world." But is this Poe's point?

> *Poe believed that a good story creates a "single effect." And Poe wrote good stories whose effect was often horror.*

I have stopped stereotyping Poe; instead, I challenge students to spell his name correctly, celebrate his brilliance, and apply his literary theory. I have stopped forcing students to manufacture themes for his stories; instead, I ask them to respect Edgar Allan Poe and his storytelling by analyzing his unity of effect.

Think about an author or a text that has challenged (or "peeved") you in a particular way. One that has changed your perception or nudged you to step outside your pre-conceived notions in such a way that you now fully embrace the idiosyncrasies of the author or the text. What did this evolution look like for you? Where do you sit with the author/text now and how has your change in perception affected the way your students perceive the author or text? Write about it and let us know.

SDAWP's
Project Notes

Good luck to each of the following talented Fellows:

Kathleen Gallagher (SDAWP 1999) recently became the principal at Baker Elementary in the San Diego Unified School District.

Cynthia Larkin (SDAWP 2011) has moved to Clairemont High School in the San Diego Unified School District where she is the new vice principal.

Barb Montfort (SDAWP 2011) joined the South Bay Union School District as a Coordinator of Educational Services.

Jacob Ruth (SDAWP 2011) has taken a position as principal at Chula Hills Elementary School in the Chula Vista Elementary School District.

Way to go, Susan Minnicks (SDAWP 1997). Susan's article titled "Collegian Collaboration: Why We need a Retention Model," was published in *California English*, Vol.19.2, November 2013, p.6-9.

Kudos to Mai-Lon Gittelsohn (SDAWP 1985), whose first collection of poems will be published this Spring. *Chop Suey and Apple Pie* will be available in March, 2014. This is part of the New Women's Voices series from Finishing Line Press. You can pre-order online at www.finishinglinepress.com.

Good work, Eric Ginsberg (SDAWP 2012). Eric, who teaches at Charter Helix High School, recently won the Golden Apple Award and is featured on San Diego State University's School of Education's website. Visit   http://go.sdsu.edu/education/ste/golden_apple_award_2013.aspx to read about his work and watch him rap with students.

Congratulations to our Fellows who have added to their families. Callie Brimberry (SDAWP 2008), Jeni Cass (SDAWP 2011), Shannon Falkner (SDAWP 2008), Jenny Moore (SDAWP 1999), Casey Payte (SDAWP 2010), and Matt Jewell (SDAWP 2011) are all *new* parents.

Break a Leg, Susan Minnicks (SDAWP 1997) and Janet Ilko (SDAWP 2008). Susan and Janet will present at the CATE conference, which is being held at the San Diego Town and Country Hotel in February.

"Like us" on Facebook at www.facebook.com/SDAWP where links to writing resources and research articles are posted daily, offering a wealth of ideas for curriculum design and implementation.

Visit our blog, SDAWP Voices: A place for conversations about writing, teaching and leadership. Subscribe and contribute to the conversation. Participate in SDAWP Photo Voices, share what your students are writing about, glean new information about digital media in the classroom, or join the discussion about the Californis Common Core State Standards.

Stay in Touch If you are an SDAWP Fellow and would like regular updates about upcoming events, please send us your email address. Visit our website at http://sdawp.ucsd.edu, and go to the 'Contact Us' link, or email us at: sdawp@ucsd.edu. We would love to add you to our eList!

Dialogue
Call for Manuscripts

Summer 2014 Issue Submission Deadline: August 31, 2014

Lifting the Common Core

"The field of American education is changing in ways that are more dramatic and more far-reaching than anything any of us could have imagined. If we are going to play a role in shaping the future...we need to see hope and opportunity. As part of this, we need to embrace what is good about the Common Core State Standards—and roll up our sleeves and work to make those standards into a force that lifts our teaching and our schools."

—*Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement*
Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth and Christopher Lehman

In what ways are you embracing the CCSS? How has this embrace improved or changed your instruction? As you implement what may be new strategies, what are you noticing about your teaching and the response from your students that you haven't previously noticed? What are the challenges you're facing as you lift the new standards and share them with your students? We're interested in hearing from the SDAWP community and look forward to sharing your voices in our next issue.

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/or Project Notes to

Janis Jones at
janisjones@me.com
or Stacey Goldblatt at
moonbeam5@cox.net

Calendar of Events

SDAWP's Invitational Summer Institute (SI) 2014 Dates:

Summer Institute Group Interview
February 8, 2014
UC San Diego

Summer Institute Orientation Day
April 19, 2014
UC San Deigo

Summer Institute
June 24 - July 18, 2014
UC San Deigo

CATE 2014 Paying it Forward

California Association of Teachers of English Statewide Convention
February 14 - 16, 2014
CWP Preconvention
February 13, 2014
Town and Country
Hotel and Resort
San Diego, CA
www.cateweb.org

Save the Date! SDAWP Spring Conference
March 1, 2014
UC San Diego

*For SDAWP applications, registration materials
or additional information regarding our programs,
please email us at sdawp@ucsd.edu or visit http://sdawp.ucsd.edu/*

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