

Making Learning Personal

Dialogue



A Publication of the San Diego Area Writing Project

Winter 2018

Inside This Issue:

Biography: The Power of Teaching Children to be Change Agents

Margit Boyesen, p. 2

“Our country’s political climate has changed since 1922, that’s true, but it has a distance yet to go. Daily, we are reminded by the news—and for many by our own experiences—that the fight for equal rights, pay, and respect for minorities and women is an ongoing one. Through studying biographies in my classroom, we have a platform for not only learning about great Americans, who through grit and perseverance, have helped change history, but we have an opportunity to apply what we’ve learned from these biographies to our own lives. To discuss dreams, hopes, goals, and the obstacles that may stand in our way.”

Leveraging Technology to Create and Cultivate Classroom Community

Denise Maduli-Williams, p. 5

“Nobody doubts the power of technology, but who would imagine that technology can transform education in such a significant way? It has been a long journey from teaching in outdoor classrooms without books or pens to walking into college classrooms fully equipped with technology and students with devices in their pockets. By integrating technology in ways that support analog and face-to-face learning en-

vironments, educators can increase student engagement, personalize the learning experience, and foster classroom community.”

Cognition, Culture, and Multimodal Texts in Composition

Rodrigo Gomez, p. 11

“I take every opportunity I can to infuse my classroom with texts that come from different contexts, cultural backgrounds, and ideological perspectives. I vary what they encounter and how they engage with it. Perhaps the best part of using web-based media and elements of pop-culture to engage students in thinking and writing is that students walk in with opinions and ideas that they can then develop into sound, rational arguments with good development and organic structure.”

Spotlight on Young Writers' Camp Summer 2017

Ian Dunkle, p. 8

Brenna Howard, p. 8

Annika O’Conner, p. 8

Abhiraj Singh Rathore, p. 9

Sadie Wheeler, p. 9

Also in this issue:

Project Notes, p. 4

Summer Institute Fellows, p. 10

Call for Manuscripts, p. 15

Calendar of Events, p. 16

Fall into Writing SDAWP Fall Conference September 30, 2017

“Education is equity,” Christine Kané began before asking us to write down our names with the names of five people we trust listed underneath. She then asked us to mark an X, Y, or Z next to each depending on where they fall on the political spectrum. As expected, many in our “tribe” share similar beliefs, and Kané emphasized that we tend to surround ourselves with like-minded people, and we often reject ideas that do not fit our world view. Meanwhile, she asserted, we are challenged in our classrooms with Xs, Ys, Zs...and Os and Ms! So, how do we navigate in a “post-truth world?”

We need to “know our purpose,” which should be for people to get along even if they disagree. The goal is to develop relationships and break down the “us versus them” mentality. Kané then shared an alternative essay structure: students can develop their claims, evidence, and reasoning to find common ground. The message: teach tolerance. She ended with, “Be the role model you needed when you were young.”

And, then, we were off to diverse demonstrations, choosing from ten sessions, such as *Superheroes and Polarity Mapping: Moving Beyond the Binaries* by Henry Aronson, *Supporting Language Development Through Reading and Writing* by Emily Yamasaki, and *What’s in a Name? Honoring Identity and Building Community* by Denise Maduli-Williams.

Biography: The Power of Teaching Children to be Change Agents

Margit Boyesen, SDAWP 2008

She sits there with her face scrunched into a pucker and her arms crossed hard with surly indignation. “What do you mean black women weren’t allowed to get a pilot’s license?” she demands as we read the biography of Bessie Coleman, a pioneer in the field of aviation and the world’s first black woman to earn a pilot’s license. Squinting through narrow eyes at me, my little third grader could not fathom that Coleman had to move to France (and learn French!) to test for her pilot’s license. In 1922, a time of both gender and racial discrimination, flying schools in the United

States denied Coleman entry. It only took her seven months to earn her license from France’s well know Caudron Brother’s School of Aviation, after which she returned to the United States to perform as a stunt pilot.

My sweet, funny, and charismatic third grader has a *girl power* and *girls can do anything!* outlook on life thanks to strong-women role-models in her life. At the recent Women’s March, she proudly walked alongside her mother (who serves on our local city council), her aunt, and her grandmother, as well as her brother and father. She is being raised to feel empowered and for this I’m grateful. It is not to knock her down or discourage her that I teach biography, rather the contrary; I teach biography to fuel her passion for equality and to help her understand the shoulders on which the Women’s March stands—the shoulders of brave women in history who relentlessly fought for what they knew was right. When Bessie Coleman started wowing audiences with her aerial stunts, she also refused to perform unless the organizers would allow African Americans to attend the show, which had previously been prohibited. This tenacious pilot won a victory for civil rights, and it’s this tenacity—the sheer and utter refusal to give up in the face of difficult hurdles—that I want to teach my students.

This empowerment my third grader possesses is not the reality for many of the girls we teach. Our country’s political climate has changed since 1922, that’s true, but it has a distance yet to go. Daily, we are reminded by

the news—and for many by our own experiences—that the fight for equal rights, pay, and respect for minorities and women is an ongoing one. Through studying biographies in my classroom, we have a platform for not only learning about great Americans, who through grit and perseverance, have helped change history, but we have an opportunity to apply what we’ve learned from these biographies to our own lives. We can also discuss dreams, hopes, goals, and the obstacles that may stand in our way.

After learning about Bessie Coleman, my secret plan was to teach the students more about the grace, tenacity, and resilience of notable women and African Americans. And as if planned, I came across an article in *Scholastic News* (a current events publication for elementary students) about one of the soda-fountain sit-ins in Alabama in the 1960s and shared it with my students. We read that the kids sat for hours, refusing to leave, while the soda fountain refused them service. Again, my little advocate was shocked to find out these kids had to endure racial slurs, insults, and food thrown at them. Because we had already learned about Martin Luther King, Jr. in a variety of contexts, she had some sense of the Civil Rights Movement, but learning about kids her age, who sat for hours at the soda fountain, refusing to move, changed something in her. “They were only kids!” she cried, and I could see wheels spinning in her mind. So, we talked about kids as powerful change agents and drew comparisons between the recent Women’s March and the Civil Rights Movement. We discussed that in order for things to change, people must take action and join together to demand something different, and throughout history, this has been hard, messy, and often, with minimal positive results—at first. And I know that this is the crucial part of the lesson—that in the “Yes We Can” there is also a “yes we must continue to make what may seem like miniscule steps in the direction of positive change.”

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After reading several biographies as a class, I invited students to engage in small group research on a remarkable person of their choice. I pulled Brad Meltzer books from the library about Ruby Bridges, Amelia Earhart, Jane Goodall, Helen Keller, Abraham Lincoln, and others. I showed them the selection of biographies and gave a quick synopsis about each person to help with their decision making. As a supplement to the books, I also found informative videos on each of these great Americans and gave the students direct access.

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After reading the book and watching at least one video, students worked in their small groups to answer questions about their hero: *What decision did they make to alter history? What type of personality did they have? What hardships did they face and overcome? What losses did they have to endure?* As a class, we focused on “concepts” in the stories; concepts that emerged from their lives such as bravery, resilience, and tenacity. Then each student wrote an essay sharing not only what they learned, but also their opinion and the concept(s) that emerged while studying their hero. Each group shared their learning and other groups asked questions.

With their interest sparked, many of the students continued to check out Brad Meltzer books about other famous Americans to further their learning even after our biography unit had ended. And that is one of my favorite moments as a teacher:

when an excited young learner runs in to class, out of breath, waving a book, “Ms. Boyesen, Ms. Boyesen! You won’t believe what I learned about [name]...” And perhaps this is the best measure of success; that young learners, in their own time and by their own volition, continue the learning after the unit is over.

In class, the learning also did not stop when we finished reading the biographies. We continued to synthesize our learning using poetry. Poetry is a powerful tool for writing on a topic without plagiarizing. It can be a challenge for young writers to lift lines from published works and string them together to create writing without plagiarizing. But if my young writers read, learn, discuss, write notes, and then weave ideas, opinions, and reactions together into a poem, they can truly internalize the subject matter and make it their own. This is exemplified by the following poem about Amelia Earhart, co-authored by the writers in the group who studied her:

*Say that I don't do "girly" stuff...I fly.
That I am determined to fly
an airplane myself.
Tell them that I fly like a bird
through the air,
And whatever hits me,
I will stay who I am
and not give up.
Mention that the big mentors
in my life were Frank Hawks,
The man who let me fly his plane
for the very first time.
Neta Snook, my flying instructor,
and George Putnam,
For believing in me,
both as husband and manager.
Don't forget that I did make it across
the Atlantic Ocean,
and that was when I finally proved
to the world that it can be done
by a woman.
End that I died on a foggy flight
across the world,
But I died doing exactly
what I always loved.*

—Lukas, Alex and Theo

As a culminating project and informal assessment, students then distilled their person down into a six-word memoir. Not an easy task for 8-year-olds. We studied published six-word memoirs to discover a variety of ways to approach these little word-treasures. Each had to maintain the essence of the person they were studying, while maintaining the integrity of the six-word structure, and so the list making began... then revision, some frustration, and more revision. But with some coaching and prodding, finally, six-word memoirs began to emerge.

I believe in “play” with language, so I asked my writers to write three or four memoirs before choosing their favorite. Here are a few of the memoirs students created:

No more slaves allowed, he said.
(Abraham Lincoln)

*March. Speak. Advocate.
Change lives. Die.*
(Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Fly until your heart is content.
(Amelia Earhart)

*Africa. Silent observation.
She saved chimps.* (Jane Goodall)

Later in the school year, as part of a unit on “photography as advocacy,” we studied famous photographers Gordon Parks and Dorothea Lange. Picture books are my favorite treasure in the classroom and there are so many wonderful biographies out there for young readers. In *Gordon Parks: How the Photographer Captured Black and White America*, the author, Carole Boston Weatherford, invites young readers on a lyrical journey from poverty to Hollywood.

Parks was a self-taught photographer who is perhaps best known for being the first African American director in Hollywood. To me, his first years as a photographer have so much to teach our young readers and budding advocates. As the Gordon Parks Foundation explains, “After buying a camera at a pawnshop, he taught himself how to use it, and

despite his lack of professional training, he found employment with the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which was then chronicling the nation's social conditions. Parks quickly developed a style that would make him one of the most celebrated photographers of his age, allowing him to break the color line in professional photography while creating remarkably expressive images that consistently explored the social and economic impact of racism."

His passion for using the lens to expose racism and disparity in our country and his self-made success in the face of poverty struck my students. This book makes the life of Gordon Parks and the daunting subject of discrimination in our country accessible to young learners; it provides another beautiful example of the power of exposing the truth.

Similarly, in the picture book *Dorothea's Eyes: Dorothea Lange Photographs the Truth*, Barbara Rosenstock shares how young Dorothea Lange refused to give up on her dream of becoming a photographer, even in the face of childhood polio and criticism from her family. During the Great Depression, Lange photographed migrant workers and often captioned her work with their comments.

Dorothea Lange is perhaps best known for her striking black-and-white photos of the Dust Bowl, including *Migrant Mother*, an image of a worried mother holding her child. This book is a reminder that what we choose to see, document, and expose depends on what we are willing to advocate for. It also reminds us that to see rightly we must also look with the heart.

Looking ahead, I will continue my work with biographies because I believe in the power of learning about brave men and women who have paved the way for our country to become, even if incrementally, more equal and just. The recent film *Hidden Figures* (2016) reminds us that there are many more unsung heroes in history than textbooks give cred-

it to. So, this year, among others, we will read *Grace Hopper, Queen of Computer Code* by Laurie Wallmark and Katy Wu, as well as *Ada's Ideas; The Story of Ada Lovelace, the World's First Computer Programmer* by Fiona Robinson.

As for my little advocate, she traveled to South Africa with her family this summer to visit friends and to learn about the home of Nelson Mandela (her mom asked me to borrow books about Mandela before the trip—another great pleasure in the life of a teacher). It is my sincere hope that she and all the students I teach will continue to learn about the lives of remarkable people, the impact those heroes have made, and to discover what powerful change agents they themselves can become.

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Project Notes

Kudos to Margit Boyesen (SDAWP 2008)! Margit's piece, "Biography: The Power of Teaching Children to be Change Agents," has been published in *California English* (Vol. 23.1 • September 2017).

Way to go, Kelly Thomas (SDAWP 2008)! Kelly, Manager of Education at Get Lit, is the co-author, along with Diane Luby Lane (founder and director of Get Lit) of *Words Ignite: Explore Write and Perform Classic and Spoken Word Poetry*. The textbook includes Get Lit's year-long Common Core aligned curriculum, including 100 poems and writing prompts, rubrics, discussion questions, and an appendix of teacher handouts. We also congratulate Kelly for her new collection of poetry entitled *BOAT/ BURNED* which will be published by YesYes Books in 2019.

A round of applause for John A. Adams (SDAWP 1997)! John's new one-act play, *Against the Dying Light*, has been selected by a panel of Tony and Emmy winners for staging at the Duke Theatre on 42nd St. in NYC.

Congratulations to Darren Samakosky (SDAWP '11) and his wife Kristen. They welcomed Bryn Everly on December 11th (9lbs, 8oz!!).

Let's celebrate Frank Barone (SDAWP '77)! Frank has published *Hummingbirds & Other Metaphors*, a new book of poetry with a forward by Divona Roy (SDAWP '96). Divona was one of Frank's students at Poway High *back in the day*. We thank Frank for being our "Metaphor Man" and for sharing a love of words with our young writers each summer at YWC. *Hummingbirds & Other Metaphors* is available on Amazon at <https://www.amazon.com/Hummingbirds-Other-Metaphors-Frank.../dp/1946075086>

Leveraging Technology to Create and Cultivate Classroom Community

Denise Maduli-Williams, SDAWP 2017

“We need technology in every classroom and in every student and teacher’s hand, because it is the pen and paper of our time, and the lens through which we experience most of the world.”

—David Warlick

Technology has obvious practical advantages in our increasingly digitized and globally connected world. But in recent years, educators have begun to realize that the benefits of integrating technology in education are even more significant. Technology, it turns out, can impact student learning by increasing engagement, personalizing the experience, and creating equitable and inclusive environments. We are standing at a remarkable moment in history, and it is time to leverage technology in ways that spark change in meaningful ways.

From Counting Pencils to Counting Likes

I gained my teaching chops in prison classrooms, in outdoor semi-circles in remote villages in the Kalahari, and in NYC public high schools. This was before teachers needed cell phone policies for their classrooms and before smart classrooms put the internet, sound systems, and computer projectors at the fingertips of nearly every teacher. Over two decades ago, I remember counting pencils after students wrote papers and handed them in to me directly. Now, I count likes after I post reminders and share photos and videos to supplement classroom materials. The community college classrooms I enter are armed with Wi-Fi, computer labs, and online learning management systems (LMS). Teaching in a world where mobile technology is ubiquitous in the hands of each of my students makes it possible to employ a plethora of technology tools to

work magic that creates and sustains a classroom community that meets face-to-face, but cultivates community in online arenas ranging from social networks to real-time polls and published multi-media projects. In shared online spaces, students can read, post, and publish to an authentic, interactive audience. Using social media networks, students can grow and sustain their community outside the classroom walls.

We are standing at a remarkable moment in history, and it is time to leverage technology in ways that spark change in meaningful ways.

If You Build It They Will Come

There are many things to consider when incorporating technology in any classroom setting. Most importantly, it is imperative to have a plan before the semester or school year begins. Some important things to consider when setting up a tech-enhanced learning community:

Cultivate your digital footprint. We live in a shop-around culture where students Google instructors’ names and search Rate My Professor. What will students find out about you? Be in charge of your own digital footprint by having a welcoming web page, blog, or other site where students can find your basic information, sample assignments, and syllabi.

Decide on a landing page. This could be an LMS such as Canvas or Schoo-

logy, a social media network such as Twitter or Edmodo, or a class website or blog. Having one digital home to house your multimedia helps students have convenient access to your materials and information.

- *Streamline communication.*

What will be the best way for you and your students to communicate? Consider selecting one communication tool: work email, LMS, or an app such as Remind. Make it simple and straightforward and decide on a response-time policy so expectations are clear.

- *Reach out before day one.* Don’t wait until the first day of class to introduce yourself. Send a welcome video and letter before the semester begins. Give students a preview of your background, teaching philosophy, and class goals and they will be eager and confident when they walk in the first day.

- *Determine technology tools and accounts.* Establish the main technology tools you will use. Create and update your educator and class accounts. Include this information on your syllabus so that students know that technology is an integrated component of your course.

- *Establish netiquette expectations.* Before any sharing or posting begins, prepare and teach netiquette rules and expectations. Empower your classroom to be a safe and respectful space in both face-to-face and online arenas.

- *Decide on your classroom BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) policy.* Are students allowed and/or

expected to bring and utilize devices in your classroom? Be clear how and when it will be appropriate.

Thinking about technology integration thoughtfully before the semester or school year begins allows the classroom to become a learning environment where technology strengthens student learning and engagement in the best way possible.

Please Take Out Your Cell Phones

“Technology is not an event; it’s just part of everyday learning.”

—Unknown

It turns out that technology integration is not only an interest, but is expected by most students in higher education (Kyei-Blankson, Keengwe & Blankson). Despite this fact, many students arrive in classrooms or colleges with “No Cell Phones” signs on the walls and are handed syllabi that list dire consequences that face students if they are caught using their phones in class. Do you go through the day without using your phone? Why would you expect students to do the same? I take a different approach: I remind students to come with their phones charged and ready to be used for educational purposes. I challenge educators to incorporate technology and devices as an everyday aspect of learning as opposed to a special event.

I make it a point to incorporate a technology activity from the moment students walk into my class. On the first day, I announce to students, “Please take out your cell phones.” Students, in small groups, select one photo they have taken on the phone to share with the group. The groups listen to the details of where, when, how, and why the photo was taken and ask questions. In this way, a community of learners is built around sharing something of significance to each student, and there is no need to assign partners for what can be an awkward pair interview. After discussion, students write about the photo, giving details

and explaining it further. Students have had a jump-start to their writing by asking and answering questions, and are primed to write. I have garnered some of the most interesting writing from these first-day photo prompts.

Throughout the semester, I continually model a bevy of organizational tools and educational apps that I utilize on my devices to support my teaching and learning. Students become accustomed to walking in and opening an online poll through AnswerGarden or Poll Everywhere. They know we may review vocabulary or key ideas using Kahoot!, and many days they will complete an exit ticket using the Socrative app before leaving class for the day. When we have a major project, I show students how to set deadlines and alerts on their calendar and mobile To-Do app. I use my cell phone timer for

I challenge educators to incorporate technology and devices as an everyday aspect of learning as opposed to a special event.

many tasks. We share useful mobile and web apps from dictionaries to flashcards and time management tools. Making it clear from day one that mobile devices and technology are included in the classroom to support learning allows cell phones to be learning tools with an educational purpose, instead of the enemy.

Cultivate a Community Where Every Student’s Voice is Heard

“21st century teachers don’t say ‘Turn it in,’ they say, ‘Publish it.’”

—Unknown

In his recent article, “I Finally Found a Way to Get Students Talking in Class: Teach it Online,” Bill Berg-

man, who teaches digital marketing at the University of Richmond, reported that he found student engagement and participation increasing more in his online discussion forums than in his on-ground classes: “Give them the opportunity to communicate digitally and you unleash a freedom of expression that has been fading from the higher-education classroom in recent years.” There are many forms that this can take online: from discussion forums, to blogging, and voice tools. The common factor is that in these online settings, students have the opportunity to find their voice and share their thoughts and ideas. In this way, technology cultivates an equitable and inclusive environment.

Instead of having students turn in papers for an audience of one, blogging is one way that allows students to publish writing to a larger group. When blogging, students can add images, links, and videos that will appeal to their peers, who can comment on their writing. I have found that students go above and beyond with blogging more so than they do when handing in a written piece for my eyes only.

In one of my classes, students publish biweekly to a class blog. I create and moderate the class blog, adding every student as a blog editor. Students post in response to a variety of prompts. For example, I might ask them to write about their names, to compare and contrast two images, or to share a special object and describe its importance to them. The beauty of this is that students are thrilled to share their writing, knowing that their classmates will read and comment. I am relieved of taking home piles of papers to read and score alone. Instead, students receive and reply to personalized comments and questions. They are engaged in reading tons of writing and every student’s writing is honored. The classroom community grows as they encourage and support each other, and a community of writers is born from the shared experience.

In another class, students created

their own individual passion blogs. Students researched the important components of a blog, read blog posts as mentor texts, and then created personalized blogs with themes that matched their individual style and related directly to their interests. Class favorites included "Pugalicious," a blog that followed the adventures of one student's pug, and "Photoventures," through which a student shared travel adventures and photography. There were blogs about skin care, music, skateboarding, cooking, and more. Students were wildly invested in their blogs, researched their posts, wrote for an authentic audience, and learned how to upload multimedia and respond to questions. Importantly, every student could share and publish a topic that was essential to them. In class evaluations, students reported that reading and publishing blog posts were their favorite type of writing in our class.

Despite being a seasoned educator, I still struggle with making sure that every student's voice is heard in the classroom. Though I am adept at facilitating pair activities, small group interactions, and at managing whole class discussions, there remain some students who tend to dominate and some students who tend to be quiet. I sometimes worry about how to provide a setting that is equitable and inclusive. Then, I put up my first discussion board forum on our class Blackboard LMS. That evening when I checked in on Blackboard, I was surprised to find that the first responses were from students who were the quietest in class. They had written long and thoughtful posts that sparked discussion from others who were replying, commenting, and questioning. The students who posted first had never spoken first in class, typically had to be prompted, and usually never spoke for long or truly spoke their minds. They were confidently sharing in an online space after given time to prepare their thoughts and words and freed from classroom pressure; they were finally finding their voices, and receiving comments and compliments in an interactive way that they had

never had in the classroom.

Beyond participating in discussion boards, technology tools offer the opportunity for students to interact through voice and video in both synchronous and asynchronous ways. All students, but especially English language learners, benefit greatly from having the wait time to think, carefully prepare a response, and then record and re-record their

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ideas. A simple question in class may be met with silence, but online every student is able to voice an opinion.

I commonly use the web tool VoiceThread, which allows students to voice record or use their webcam to record comments—essentially a conversation in the cloud. For my introduction to a VoiceThread assignment, I post an image of a world map and students introduce themselves by digitally doodling on the map—circling where they are from and marking where they have lived, traveled, or wish to go. Essentially, they "map" their lives, narrating their journey through voice or webcam recording. Every student's journey is recorded and students are able to listen and learn about each other.

Especially in an ESOL setting, ensuring that each student has a chance to participate and feel included is paramount. It is not uncommon for me to teach classes filled with students from up to eleven different countries speaking fifteen different languages. Technology gives each one of my students, especially the quietest ones, a voice.

Instant Engagement with Instagram

"Social media can be used to build people up or tear them down. It's not the tool but the user of the tool that makes a difference."

—Jennifer Casa-Todd

Beyond the typically accepted educational technology tools, lie social media networks. You may be one who believes social media is a waste of time or a dangerous avenue that leads down the Internet rabbit hole. Or, you may be one who logs on often and posts actively on your own Facebook, Snapchat, or Instagram accounts. Either way, we know that students are active on social media.

With 300 million active users, Instagram is considered the most important social network by American teens (Internet Trends Report). Some research has already shown that social media can be used to strengthen the relationship between students, classmates, and instructors (Rutherford).

Why not leverage that interest by finding ways to merge social media and educational experiences? With careful planning, educators can find ways to capture students' inherent interest in social media and bring it into the classroom in an educational way through a wide variety of activities.

Instagram is a fun and easy way for students to share images and curate classroom resources. One Instagram assignment I have facilitated is a vocabulary challenge where each group gets one vocabulary word and must take and post a photo that showcases the use of the new word. In the caption students write the definition with an original sentence. Once each group posts along with our class hashtag, a gallery of vocabulary images, definitions, and sentences is created and at the fingertips of every student.

I also send students on scavenger hunts around campus with a variety

(Continued on p. 10)

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7

Young Writers' Camp

Writing About Writing

By Ian Dunkle

Release the dam
holding up all of
your thoughts

Let the words rush
over your dry pages

It doesn't have
to be perfect
You can polish it later

For now,
let it go
until you run out of
thoughts

Don't let a single
word escape your pages

Release it all

Advice from a Pencil

By Brenna Howard

Always be sharp
Never be dull
Be ready to look back
Know when to stop
Take time to erase
Don't ever slow down
Never break
Love who you are

Tale of a Passionflower (An Excerpt)

By Annika O'Conner

Silent as a glimmering snowfall
You wait and wait for it to come
For it to spread its vibrant wings
and soar through the sky
Gazing at the clouds
It has to come
You know it does
It needs to slurp you up to survive
You are sweeter than butterscotch
with extra sugar
Disappointed desire overflows
While still you wait
When you give in
They are here
Butterflies



Chained: A Found Poem

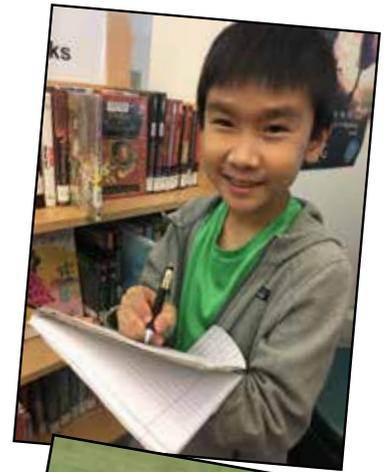
By Sheridan Liew

Break your chains
In the dark of night
You have no place to hide
Betrayed
Exiled Forgotten

Break your chains
Fulfill your legacy
An inferno of emotions
Terror
Anger
Sorrow

Break your chains
Find your own paradise
and with it
Genuine happiness
True joy
Real bliss

Freedom
Freedom
Freedom
Broken chains
Fall at your feet
You are free



A Dog Walk

By Sadie Wheeler

Let yourself take a walk across the page.
At first your thoughts will walk with you
like a well-trained dog.
Follow paths of other well-trained dogs.
Keep walking your thoughts beyond the park
and into the woods, new cities,
and hidden paths.
Feel your thoughts pull their leash
toward the mysterious.
Then let your paw print a story.
Keep on writing.

The Inked Waterfall

By Abhhiraj Singh Rathore

Let the ink flow down
your pen like a waterfall.
Let your imagination spill,
Let the words flow until they
turn to ice.

When the words cool,
and the paper freezes,
sing its words once more
to unfreeze the water,
and let your imagination
flow again.

See, writing is simple.

It is never wrong.
You just have to let
your thoughts flow
like a waterfall.

(Continued from p. 7)

of assignments such as: taking group selfies with captions using complex sentences with correct grammar and punctuation, interviewing a fellow student on the best place to get coffee, and travelling to the library to snap a picture of a book related to a theme we are discussing. Using the Instagram stories feature I can record 60-second video announcements with class reminders or test question sneak peeks.

Many other options are possible including: weekly photo challenges, 15-second video book talks, vocabulary illustrations, grammar practice, book club shares, MLA format exercises, essay supplement ideas, error correction, collage stories, and Caption That assignments.

When we explore ways to push past the boundaries of our classroom walls, we can employ social media to extend learning and foster community building.

Technology as Transformation

“Technology will never replace great teachers, but technology in the hands of great teachers is transformational.”

—George Couros

Nobody doubts the power of technology, but who would imagine that technology could transform education in such a significant way? It has been a long journey from teaching in outdoor classrooms without books or pens to walking into college classrooms fully equipped with technology and students with devices in their pockets. By integrating technology in ways that support analog and face-to-face learning environments, educators can increase student engagement, personalize the learning experience, and foster community.

This transformation is best epitomized by Sophia, one of my ESOL students. After eight weeks of silence in my class, she found her voice in an online interactive discussion where she announced, “This was my first time using VoiceThread, and I

really loved it because I can finally talk with all of you and tell you my ideas.”

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Cognition, Culture, and Multimodal Texts in Composition

Rodrigo Gomez, SDAWP 2017

“We are cups, constantly and quietly being filled. The trick is how to tip ourselves over and let the beautiful stuff out.”

—Ray Bradbury

Academia was an interesting place for me growing up. Looking back, I realize that my elementary school and middle school curriculum nurtured creativity and fostered the arts. I recall taking the stage as Mr. Mistoffelees from *Cats*, performing bits from *Shoeless Joe*, and singing carols during Christmas, with most of the song choices being modern pop adaptations of old classics, like N’Sync’s rendition of Robert Wells’ “The Christmas Song.” I always bought into the creativity and play. I enjoyed it.

High school was a different world altogether. A place devoid of color, except for the blue metal gates that surrounded the perimeter of the campus. It felt like stepping into a prison, complete with the sounds of metal clanking against metal and locks closing behind us. We all knew it was a necessary measure in a neighborhood where being cool meant ditching school, joining gangs, engaging in drug use, getting into trouble, causing fights, and shunning academic work.

The first two years went by in a flash of dull homework activities, stale lesson plans, and unengaging material. It was always the same: memorize *this* and regurgitate it back; learn *this* concept, but “no, sorry,” you don’t get to try the actual experiment; or, read these required books, but disregard the fact that their characters, settings, topics, and narratives are far removed from your

own experiences. The work was neither difficult nor challenging. Worse than that, it was not engaging, or it wasn’t made to feel engaging. And this was dangerous in a neighborhood where the streets called from every corner, always in the guise of friendly and familiar voices. It was like dancing a fine line between two worlds: one claiming that school was the place to attain knowledge—the ivory tower on the hill that would lead to eventual financial and social success; the other, discrediting such

I look back at it now and understand it as a different form of literacy that felt more real than what we were supposed to be studying at school.

academic pursuits as impractical or detached from reality—an unnecessary burden, given the rich well of experiences, information, and cultural and social skills that could be gained outside of the tower.

Of course, none of this is to say that I was disinterested in learning; I simply wasn’t interested in the material we were supposed to be learning, much of which I’ve since forgotten. I missed the creativity and play. So, I spent my junior and senior year getting by school with some street-smarts and devoting my time and my mind to more engaging pursuits. If I was going to spend my time reading about spaces and places that seemed like fantasy, I preferred to spend it in the world of *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *The Uncanny X-Men*—after all, I could relate to a smart, poor kid from Queens and to characters who reflected the struggle of feeling

out of place in a society that is not always accepting of diversity.

I decided that I would spend my days in the virtual world afforded by video games—a space where I could still engage in play to nurture my creativity and challenge my mind. Some of the greatest cognitive stimulation I received came from devoting hours of play to *The Legend of Zelda*, riddled with puzzles, immersive narratives, and first-person decision-making that taught me the value of agency. I would eventually discover *World of Warcraft*, which takes everything to a whole new level by integrating its own in-game economy, a complex system of character building and playing, and a dense lore that pulls from classic texts.

Straying from the digital, I played Pokémon and Yu-Gi-Oh! cards with my best friends and we devoted time to strategizing and building card

“decks,” figuring out which cards beat which other cards and developing innovative ways to play.

Instead of reading or doing homework related to *The Great Gatsby* or *Heart of Darkness*, I would devote time to music and to studying the lyrics of rap and rock artists that depicted and reflected my own social experiences. These were modern poets discussing the social and cultural nuances of this age—the same way that Chaucer had done for his. I was learning about love, struggle, virtues and vices, fate, law, justice, and human nature from artists very likely influenced by the classics, yet these conversations felt inaccessible unless they were blaring through my speakers or my headphones. I look back at it now and understand it as a different form of literacy that felt more real than what we were supposed to be studying at school.

Hidden Intellectualism

It wasn't until my second year of college that I discovered an interest in more "academic" subjects. A few survey courses of British Literature, Mythology, and Arthurian Romance were enough to set my mind ablaze with interest. In elementary school, I had made a small replica of the sword from *The Sword in the Stone* for a history class, back when play was still the preferred mode of learning. Now, in college, I was being allowed to explore and draw connections between classic literary characters and those that I was most familiar with. I was asked to associate the myths of Ovid and Dante and the stories told by Chaucer to my everyday life—encouraged to draw connections between Arthur and Lancelot to the characters in the comics I read, or

Howard Gardner might say that I was in dire need of pedagogy that engaged more than one of my multiple intelligences.

even to the non-fictional music artists that were dominating East Coast and West Coast rap, or even popular sports rivalries. It was interesting—validating even—to find use for that prior knowledge.

I realize now that Dr. Alison Baker, my English literature professor and academic advisor at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, who shaped my own decision to become a teacher, was aware of what Gerald Graff calls looking through "academic eyes." In his essay, "Hidden Intellectualism," he talks about the way traditional academia has shunned street knowledge and the study of non-academic subjects because "we assume that it's possible to wax intellectual about Plato, Shakespeare, the French Revolution, and nuclear fission, but not about cars, dating, fashion, sports, TV, or video games" (Graff 61). The problem with this assumption, as Graff points out, is that "sports [like many anti-intellectual passions] ...are full of challenging arguments, debates, problems for analysis, and intricate statistics" (61)

that people care about. I was waxing poetic about comics, manga, music, movies, and stories from my cultural background. In Dr. Baker's own words, I was filling my "Vast Fund of General Information (VFOGI)" with valuable world knowledge that could help build connections to other concepts. In every single class I took with her—and I took *every* class with her that I could—she challenged me to *play* with these ideas and connections. I took the bait.

To my surprise, something else happened. I came to the realization that I was missing out on tons of literary references, and I became eager to fill them. I found myself going back to old lists of books I had previously ignored or found inaccessible, approaching them with questions. I did the same with lyrics I was already fa-

miliar with, but which I was able to see through new eyes. Still, for me, catching up involved more than just reading: I read Ovid's *Metamorphosis* as I played the video games *God of War* and *Spartan* to make sense of the characters I was engaging. I watched *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*—the great 90's television show with Kevin Sorbo—and took notes on depictions of gods and demi-gods. I listened to Thrive belting out songs about Icarus and Daedalus—considering the nuances of the band's decision to focus one song on a conversation between Icarus and Reason, and the other on Daedalus' internal dialogue before and after Icarus falls. I engaged with poetry because I enjoyed how its playful language engaged my analytical brain.

Multiple Intelligences & Multimodality

It took some time for me to realize why it was that traditional texts alone were not as engaging to me. I didn't know how to explore them—how to

truly *play* with them. My young, hyperactive mind also needed a different form of stimulation: pages filled with thousands of words could never compete with the kinesthetic experience of pressing buttons and having my actions realized on the screen, especially when I was immersed in the storyline of whatever game I was playing. Howard Gardner might say that I was in dire need of pedagogy that engaged more than one of my multiple intelligences.

As it turns out, Gardner highlights eight forms of intelligence, each pertaining to different types of skills, abilities, and affinities. (Visit multipleintelligencesoasis.org/ for information about the multiple intelligences identified by Gardner.)

This awareness of different forms of intelligence makes it all the more important to consider how to engage students at various levels. We need to consider which students may not benefit from our pedagogical decisions. When the classroom is filled with a diverse body of students with a diverse variety of intelligences, equitable teaching demands that we shape our pedagogy to help students learn in the most effective ways possible. The other much less desirable option is to continue to alienate students who cannot learn from archaic teaching methods and whose attention will go elsewhere.

As teachers, we also should be aware of the power that culture plays in the classroom since it is the "software" that helps each of us develop schema for understanding and making sense of our experiences in the world (Hammond 25). The schema that we create ultimately shapes our behavior in the classroom and serves as part of a larger social construct. My schema, as a high school student, told me to check out of the classroom, where I found no validation for my preferred modes of intelligence. Another student's schema might make them work terribly with a group of partners, or vice versa. Ultimately, cultural awareness of this kind makes us conscious of the different challenges different stu-

dents face and help us to understand the much larger socio-political forces that shape learning.

In addition, we must consider the young age at which humans begin to interact with technology these days, as well as the heavy influence it plays in our everyday lives. Doing so makes it absolutely clear that engaging students at multiple levels of cognition is vital if we are going to ensure literacy skills for today and for the future. This is where multimodal texts shine.

According to the *Curriculum & Leadership Journal*, a text is defined as multimodal when it combines at least two of the following semiotic systems out of a total of five:

1. *Linguistic*: comprising aspects such as vocabulary, generic structure, and the grammar of oral and written language.
2. *Visual*: comprising aspects such as color, vectors, and viewpoint in still and moving images.
3. *Audio*: comprising aspects such as volume, pitch and rhythm of music, and sound effects.
4. *Gestural*: comprising aspects such as movement, speed, and stillness in facial expression and body language.
5. *Spatial*: comprising aspects such as proximity, direction, position of layout, and organization of objects in space.

While traditional text focuses on the linguistic system, graphic novels engage both the linguistic and the visual, thus providing another avenue for students to learn. Audio books, podcasts, and music will engage the linguistic and audio. Movies and video clips will engage the linguistic, visual, and audio systems. Video games engage all five semiotic systems.

Of course, I have yet to experience a class where video games are used as a primary text, which may be

partly due to the fact that some still see video games as a form of entertainment that deters from true academic pursuits, at best; perhaps people buy into the arguments that claim video games lead to increased social violence or see no connection to classroom curriculum. However, it's interesting to consider the types of cognitive development that would be possible if teachers used the full gamut of multimodal texts. What if we taught our students to see video games through "academic eyes?" Couldn't it lead to stronger reading and writing that comes from a place of genuine interest? After all, You-

There are visuals and colors and arguments to extract; there are rich themes to explore and interesting references to larger social narratives.

Tube is filled with authors who devote their time and energy to producing high-level analysis of the games they play without expecting a grade. They analyze because they are curious enough to *play* with multimodal texts that mean something to them.

Perhaps Graff is right in asserting that students "would be more prone to take on intellectual identities if we encouraged them to do so at first on subjects that interest them rather than ones that interest us" (61). For me, video games were a powerful bridge into more classic forms of literacy and learning, and I bring that awareness with me into the classroom as I try to validate the different types of knowledge that students bring into the classroom—whatever fills their VFOGI.

Theory in Practice

The first day of my transfer-level English course always brings the most wonderful reactions from students who are shocked to learn they will be reading a graphic novel as a primary text. I mean, there are more images than text. Comments vary between a cautious, "Oh, wow, I've never read a comic before," and an

excited: "Really? We're reading a comic book!"

Realistically, a student could get through the entirety of *Daytripper*, a graphic novel penned and illustrated by Brazilian twin brothers Fabio Moon and Gabriel Ba, in approximately one hour. However, there is deeper meaning to be found within the pages of that text. There are visuals and colors and arguments to extract; there are rich themes to explore and interesting references to larger social narratives. For example, the novel forces the reader to consider what the relationship be-

tween a father and a son should be, or what it means to live in the shadow of your father's achievements, or even what it means to be a writer.

I've consistently used *Daytripper* because of its relatability to students. My initial reluctance to experiment with the genre changed the minute I heard students exclaim: "*Daytripper* is seriously my favorite novel now. I've read it like ten times!" and "I totally recommended the book to my friend." Other novels I've found successful in the classroom are *V for Vendetta*, *Persepolis*, *Mouse*, *Stitches*, and *Fun Home*, each of which came with its own challenges and nuances.

I should clarify that having success with these novels implies that students walked away having read every page of the graphic novel—some multiple times over. Within the very same classroom, students did not always engage with the traditional non-fiction assigned for the course, but every single one of them read the graphic novel. After all, it's a deceptive medium—but one that is, to use Mary Ehrenworth's words, "accessible, engaging, and complex." Graphic novels feel accessible because of

their low word count, and they are engaging because the subject matter is relatable. However, their power comes from their complexity, with the addition of a visual medium to complement an already rich textual narrative, it asks readers to consider cues they are already familiar with, including the use of color, the power of facial expressions, and the use of borders (gutters) to develop sequence and structure.

Additionally, to engage them in different ways, I have my students work with art (classic, digital, physical graffiti), videos (TED, StoryCorps, YouTube clips, Netflix productions), audio (music, audio books, podcasts), and performance (slam poetry, plays) along with traditional text and poetry. I take every opportunity I can to infuse my classroom with texts that come from different contexts, cultural backgrounds, and ideological perspectives. I vary what they encounter and how they engage with it. Perhaps the best part of using web-based media and elements of pop-culture to engage students in thinking and writing is that students

I take every opportunity I can to infuse my classroom with texts that come from different contexts, cultural backgrounds, and ideological perspectives.

walk in with opinions and ideas that they can then develop into sound, rational arguments with good development and organic structure.

Meeting Them Where They Are

Of course, if the goal is to generate students with high-level analysis and complex ideas, multimodal texts in the world of streaming are ideal. I'll specifically focus on Netflix because it is the streaming service most mentioned by students and because they have produced (or at least provide access to) a wide range of literary texts for the 21st Century—a meeting ground between classic discussions and modern characters. Consider the following dialogue be-

tween two characters on Marvel's *Daredevil* (Season 2). The conversation takes place between Frank Castle, the Punisher, and Daredevil himself, the first defending his approach to crime-fighting to the other:

“Yeah, what do you do? What do you do? You act like it's a playground. You beat up the bullies with your fists. You throw 'em in jail, everybody calls you a hero, right? And then a month, a week, a day later, they're back on the streets doing the same goddamn thing.”

“Yeah, so you just put 'em in the morgue.”

“You're goddamn right, I do.”

Although it takes place between two non-conventional heroes, at its core is a deep conversation about morality and ethics—about two clashing ideologies and two possible approaches to the same ongoing problem. This is the type of conversation about life, justice, and civic duty you might expect to take place between philosophers or classic figures of dialectic,

like Socrates or the Sophists, but instead it takes place between two fictional heroes that most students, whether they are fans of comics or not, have seen on Netflix.

Analyzing this dialogue is a powerful moment for students because they can approach the task as a low-stakes writing activity—they're only discussing the words of cartoon characters, after all. However, the conversation itself is high-stakes: it forces students to consider whether they side with the Punisher, who considers Daredevil a half-measure, because his method ultimately leads to repeat offenses; or Daredevil, who believes that people deserve a second chance and so considers the

Punisher's approach much too drastic—not to mention that it's against the law. The critical questions arise: Would you beat up the bullies, like Daredevil, or put them down for good like the Punisher? And what social or cultural values are ultimately reflected in your response?

This conversation can become a place for the kind of inquiry, writing, and exploring that we want our students to engage with. What makes it even more powerful is that it focuses on the superhero genre that our students are well-versed in when they walk into the classroom.

And if superheroes aren't their cup of tea, or yours, streaming offers a wide range of choices that can lead to the same types of questions and critical thinking: will Walter White, science-teacher turned criminal in *Breaking Bad*, pay for what he's done or ultimately escape his fate? Should Captain America sign a registration with the government that goes against his values of freedom? What are your best chances of surviving in *The Walking Dead*? Should fertile women be forced to procreate as “Handmaidens” as we see in *The Handmaid's Tale* and lose their own identities in a society without children? Who do you want to sit on the Iron Throne? Or, who has the best claim? Not to mention all the documentaries that can be found on streaming services.

For students more interested in meta-analysis or the influence of the show on in the socio-political sphere, the questions can be expanded to relate to American corporate culture and gender dynamics in society: can Wonder Woman save the sinking ship of DC Extended Universe filmmaking? Or, why were the women portrayed in Marvel or DC movies paid less than their male counterparts? Each of the twelve episodes of *Black Mirror* contains poignant, critical social commentary that is sure to have students drawing connections to the world they inhabit and understand, especially as they consider our own technological developments with the release of “retina

scanning” on cell phones and mobile devices.

When I think about meeting our students where they already are outside of the classroom—on streaming programming, playing video games, working out, or working—I recall the element of play that I so missed from my days in elementary school. A possible solution is to engage what they carry in their VFOGI already, so that we can begin to see “writing that is fun, passionate, and joyful, and reflects what matters to each student” (Fletcher 40).

The best thing about tapping into these “non-academic” pursuits is that it can produce writing of a high caliber that contains high order thinking and analysis. Consider the title of a student paper I received last semester after introducing my students to James Paul Gee’s complex definition of discourses: “The Evolution of Snoop Dogg’s Discourse: From Young Pup to Old Hound.”

Although at first this student struggled to understand the concept, when he was able to draw a tangible connection to a rapper he was very familiar with, something clicked. It turns out he had already devoted much of his time to analyzing lyrics and looking at shifts in both language and demeanor. What he produced was excellent writing that was creative and interesting. He was already looking at Snoop Dogg through “academic eyes”—all I had to do was nudge him in the right direction.

Closing Thoughts

When I look back at my own academic path, I see a lot of discrepancy between the expectations that I had regarding school and the reality I encountered in the classroom. I disengaged because the traditional canon held no relevance to me; it didn’t speak to my culture or my interests...at least not until much later, when I was ready to engage with it.

Still, I can see that my literacy and cognitive development came from

other sources. I can see that in our incessant discussions of favorite characters, movies, sports teams, music, and socio-cultural experiences, my friends and I were producing sharp, sociologically acute analyses about things that mattered to us. It seems that like Graff, I too was “practicing being an intellectual before I knew that was what I wanted to be” (62).

Teaching writing is no simple task. Teaching writing that is engaging and which truly resonates with students is even harder. Regardless, as educators our task is to find the best possible ways to engage students and to get them to see writing as a recursive and rewarding process that can reflect the knowledge and experiences they bring into the classroom.

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Dialogue

Call for Manuscripts Spring 2018 Issue

Submission Deadline: March 1, 2018

If teachers are to own the means of production, we must dream of a profession where we give ourselves permission to center our aspirations and expertise for our students.

—Jose Vilson
From “What Does It Mean To Own The Teaching Profession?”

Manuscripts should consider but not be limited to the following questions:

- What writing strategies do you use to facilitate the emergence of an authentic community of learners?
- In what ways do writing practices and service learning in your classroom enhance students’ literacy, problem-solving, strategic, and conceptual understanding?
- How do you enable students to interact with a text so they understand parallels between their lives and the lives of the people they are reading about?

Dialogue values experiential knowledge and would love to receive reflective pieces written by educators and students. We encourage you to submit your stories, experiences, and strategies. We are especially seeking voices from K-6 educators. Please submit!

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

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