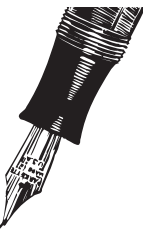


Field Notes



special edition

West Tennessee Writing Project Vol. 14 No. 3

Special Edition Celebrates Writing Retreat

Beginning in the fall of 2003, Teacher Consultants of the West Tennessee Writing Project have gathered for a weekend retreat near the banks of the Kentucky Lake at Paris Landing State Park Inn. Believe it or not, it is not the catfish or prime rib night that brings these teachers together each fall; it is the opportunity to write and enjoy the company of colleagues from across the state.

This annual Writing on Water (WOW) retreat has resulted in three anthologies of writing. Great examples of teachers' writing about their practice fill these anthologies. Every piece is outstanding and offers a window into classrooms across the state. This special edition of *Field Notes* has been compiled to celebrate the three years of writing and fellowship of the WOW retreat. In this issue, you will find the best of the best writing from the three WOW anthologies.

Selecting the best pieces of writing was not easy because of the quality of work submitted each year. After much deliberation, we were able to agree on two essays from each anthology. We hope that you enjoy opening the windows into these classrooms as much as we did, and that these selections might inspire you to write about your own practice. Most of all, we hope that you will see the tenets of WTWP reflected in this very special edition of *Field Notes*.

Sincerely,

The Best of the Best from the Writing on Water Retreat
Special Edition *Field Notes* Focal Team

Molly Coffman

English III and yearbook
Madison Academic Magnet High School
Jackson

Beth Halbert

11th grade English
Mt. Juliet High School

Andi Neihoff

7th grade language arts
St. Mary's School
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Angela Redden

8th grade literature
Dickson Middle School

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7th grade English
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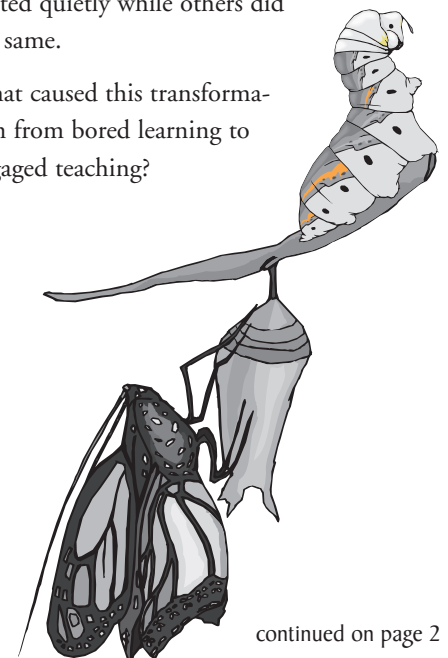
The Other Side of the Desk

Cherry Watts

She snapped her gum loudly, crossed her legs, and tossed her pageboy, brown hair. Her whole body language spoke of boredom and disenchantment. This college senior and long-time student sitting in my kindergarten practicum seminar was not engaged in the words I spoke, nor in the activities the class did.

In the kindergarten classroom a few weeks later, surrounded by eager, little 5 year-old bodies, she sat on the floor with them, reading a story with passionate expression, transformed. These rather unruly kindergarten students held their collective breaths to see where on the enormous floor map of their classroom their own desks were. They placed their desk symbol on the map and waited quietly while others did the same.

What caused this transformation from bored learning to engaged teaching?



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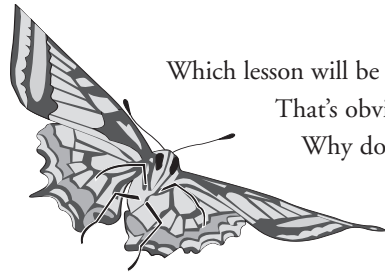
The caterpillar. The chrysalis. The butterfly.

Three weeks later across the miles in another kindergarten classroom, another practicum student was reading the life cycle of the butterfly to her children. She then had them lie, belly down on the carpet and crawl like caterpillars. They wiggled and wiggled and giggled and giggled. Then she said, “Now feel your body stiffen. You can’t move anything. You are wrapped up in a ball of yarn.” They stopped and their bodies tensed and nothing moved. She said, “The caterpillars fall asleep.” And they started snoring. The stage was set for movement. She said, “Now stick one arm and break through the yarn. And now another, and a leg.” When you have broken through the wall of yarn, you fly and fly around the room. And 20 five-year-old butterflies flew in rhythm to Mozart, some fast and some slow, and some tangled. They wanted to do it again.

When does learning stick to us, become ours? When do we begin to understand? How do those ah-ha’s happen—that light of understanding shining in the eyes and illuminating the face?

Could it be that the light of understanding comes to the learner when there is some place to hang that learning in thought? Some experience, some thought, some connection. Those 5 year-old little people were having experiences that meant something to them. It involved them—their bodies, their minds. It made sense to them because it connected their new learning to experiences they had. They wanted to learn.

Then their regular teacher comes back to them with the Saxon phonics lesson, already scripted so no teacher can “mess it up.” Their bright eyes dim, the pencils appear, and the omnipresent worksheet covers the desk.



Which lesson will be remembered?

That’s obvious. Or is it?

Why do we continue to use the worksheets?

One teacher explained, “I need some hard piece of evidence that the children have actually worked on the designated curriculum each day. I send that worksheet or that activity home with the student so that the parents know that we are doing serious work in our kindergarten class.” Do you think that the students will remember the worksheet learning? Does it relate to their lives? Where is the meaning?

On the first day of my seminar with pre-student-teaching college seniors, teacher

wannabees, I do an exercise with the students to give them the experience of

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what the difference between the worksheet and the hands-on activity might mean for them. I ask them to copy EXACTLY some picture that I draw on the board. It is an ugly picture, for I lack any artistic talent. I give them paper and tell them to draw. Then I criticize their efforts, making petty comments about the shape, size, or accuracy of their drawing. Did they color in the lines? In the middle of their drawing exercise, before I got to the “you didn’t get it right” stage, one of the senior professors sticks his head in the door (unplanned) and says, “This group really seems involved in the activity you have just given them. They are so quiet and working so intently.” I could not have planned his intrusion any better.

The next activity is to take that piece of paper and make a paper airplane that flies. The student can consult anyone, work with someone else, design her own, or look through a book that I have. The room is

noisy and active, as everyone creates an airplane. Then we test them to see if they fly by having a flying contest to see whose goes the furthest. One airplane flies out the door into the hall.

Then we discuss what they learned from each exercise. They decide that the first activity was useless. No learning except that the teacher was petty and mean. The second activity, well, each person flew a plane, each person had a slightly different design (which we discussed), all used resources to create a learning that meant something unique to them.

But what did the other professor see? He thought he saw learning and involvement. What do teachers see when the class is performing the worksheet task? What do principals and curriculum supervisors looking in classrooms see? Are they seeing learning?

My seniors in teacher education have studied Piaget and Vygotsky in several different settings and can tell you something about constructivist theory. Constructivist theory holds that all students construct their own knowledge based on individual experiences. The meaning and understanding of any particular teaching experience impacts the learner in unique ways depending on present understanding of the world. The learning must be significant to the learner for it to hold meaning.

As learners and students they relate to this. They understand that they have been in courses whose content they do not recall. They remember those moments when a light flashed through their consciousness and a new understanding of some part of the world made them love learning.

To apply this knowledge to teaching, their new profession, they don’t get—until they get to the classroom.

It is apparent that just like in kindergarten, in training new teachers we need to have hooks to hang theoretical knowledge on. So much early teacher training is theoretical, philo-

It is very obvious that curriculum decisions have been taken out of the individual domain of the teacher...

sophical, and psychological. Observations of real teaching are still exercises of the outsider looking in. The students don't get the perspective of teaching until they actually have the experience of teaching. They don't have a place in their experience to hook the theory that they are learning, those everyday experiences of the day-to-day teacher.

One might assume that because young people have been students for the vast majority of their lives, they have an idea of the tasks and tribulations of teaching. They have had numerous teachers, with a variety of styles and expertise. They have been through all the different levels of schooling—kindergarten through college. They actually have the basis for research on education—having experienced so much of it first hand.

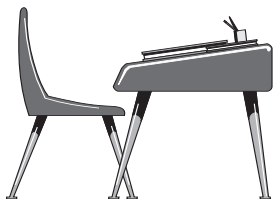
But getting the view from the other side of the desk, the perspective of teaching, is something brand new and a little scary.

In kindergarten practicum, pre-service teachers practice teaching before they get to student teaching. They start in a kindergarten classroom with a teacher who is obviously open to helping new people in the teaching profession. These teachers do not fit any mold and are in many different schools across West Tennessee. They apprentice one day a week for a semester. The first day they get to learn the names of the children and to observe how the classroom operates. The second week they teach a map/globe lesson. The third week they do a lesson that the cooperating teacher wants them to do and a graphing lesson. Then they branch out to circle time (variously called meeting board, calendar time), but generally a time when the entire kindergarten class reviews and celebrates what they know. Colors, the days of the week, the months, the weather (graphing whether it is sunny or rainy), counting (by ones, fives, 10s), learning letters and sounds, and finally by reading a

book. In the process the students sing and move and may have a leadership role. The practicum students lead these activities, getting the experience of "teaching." On the last day of their practicum, after 11 weeks of practicing, they have a Lead Teacher Day where they do all the teaching for the entire morning. This is hands-on experience.

The practicum works as a bridge from university classroom to student teaching—a transition which gives incremental experiences leading to full-time classroom teaching. My problem with this is that it comes at the

They don't have a place in their experience to hook the theory that they are learning, those everyday experiences of the day-to-day teacher.



end of their training for their profession and not closer to the beginning. It is possible to come to the end of the teacher education training only to discover that this is not what you had in mind. Would it not be more meaningful to have intermediate experiences, not just one lesson here and there, but longer, more involved experiences in the classroom? Wouldn't having those experiences help with theoretical understanding and applications?

When I go to observe my students, I cannot help but observe the classroom practice of the cooperating teacher. It is very obvious that curriculum decisions have been taken out of the individual domain of the teacher and that curriculum is being planned by district, state, and testing needs. In some of the schools, I see all the teachers teaching the same letter and sound and math concepts on the same day. The individual teachers mediate how that is done, but there is not much leeway on content. The choice of program is not based in constructivist theory. All the children are to learn the same things at the same time. In fact, all the children in a particular grade in all the schools in the district are supposed to learn the same thing. There are hundreds of worksheets involved with these programs.

The programs do not provide many hands-on learning experiences.

So what happens when a recently graduated teacher is hired? What happens to all the constructivist theory taught during the sophomore year? When the principal comes in to observe the classroom, what does that first-year teacher do?

Without the strength of truly understanding the meaning of learning theory and the opportunities to apply it—to test its strength, the novice teacher may succumb to the

numbing curriculum chosen by those who are only looking at test scores

and not tested learning theory.

Somewhere along the way, the theory behind learning disconnects from the practice of teaching. My teacher friends tell me that they don't even remember learning theory from their college days. This learning has become completely separate from what they find works for them in their schools. They learn teaching by doing—by looking at models of teaching—especially from their student teaching experience. Those models may be teaching excellence or teaching mediocrity. Their reference to learning theory is insignificant.

So, who actually cares whether or not students are learning if it *appears* that they are learning? Have we become more involved with those test scores, the appearance of learning than the actual learning itself? If the activity looks good, is it producing the desired results? By just going through the motions, have we disengaged and what does that mean for our learners?

By just going through the motions, have we disengaged and what does that mean for our learners?

The Other Side of the Desk

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My bored, brown-haired senior transformed in a few weeks. When queried, my nonchalant student at the beginning of the semester responded, "You know, when you sit in class, you learn. But when you teach students, then you apply everything that you have ever learned. It is a true hands-on experience. I really like it." Her transformation came in the active role she had to play, the thinking and planning and enactment of her teaching process. In developing her plans, she harkened back to her learning theory and applied active learning strategies to her students.

Will she be able to continue given the outside pressures?

A colleague of mine complained about a teacher who had gone through our program just a few years ago. She said, "That teacher knows how to put on a show. When our students come to observe her, she has wonderful centers and activities. But my students tell me that on a day-to-day basis, she does worksheets. She just puts on a show when she needs to." She simply did the curriculum as given to her by the scripted texts and worksheets. She knew how to do all the right things; she just didn't do them.

To give strength and understanding to budding teachers, giving them more developmental opportunities to test the theory and to make it part of their teaching seems natural. The practicum experience models what teaching should be. It just isn't enough. Those actual teaching experiences should begin right when the theory is taught. Having the hook to hang the theory on, those experiences of teaching will strengthen teaching practice. Teaching based on theory is powerful and lasting.

Cherry Watts teaches a variety of courses for pre-service teachers at the University of Tennessee at Martin.



The Sound of Music

Helen New

"Mom, I'm not going to take piano lessons this year."

"Yes, you are. You have a gift. You need to develop it."

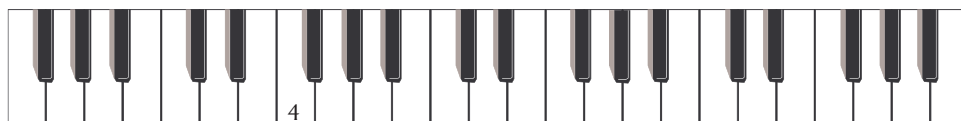
This was the conversation at my house every August as I was growing up. Years went by, and I continued with my piano lessons. I discovered that music would fit my every emotion. Playing the piano became an extension of myself, and something that is now a daily part of my life. Angry? I search for a Bartok piece with driving rhythms and dissonant chords. Happy? Haydn, Mozart, or Gershwin become my companions. If I want to escape to another world, I take my Frenchman, Debussy, with me. And if I want to whine? Chopin, always Chopin.

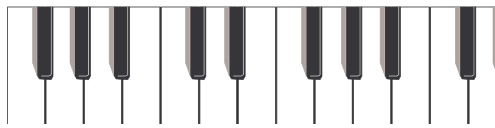
Sometimes the music is difficult, sometimes not. I can choose to share what I've learned with others or keep it just for my own enjoyment. I always face the challenge of finding the interpretation that balances what the composer intended with my own experiences and emotions. I plan, practice, and want to succeed, but what if I lose my place or miss an important cue? What if I make mistake after mistake until the entire melody is lost?

After over a decade of teaching piano privately, I returned to college and completed a degree to teach middle school students reading comprehension. Now, every August, I ponder the thought, "I'm not going to teach this year," and then I hear this inner voice, "Yes, you are. You have a gift. You need to develop it." I'm beginning to realize how closely my two careers, these two passions, align.

Now I'm listening for music in my classroom. I'm understanding that what is planned, practiced, and performed is an expression of my students and me. We work together to interpret what we read, searching for the balance of what the author intended and our own experiences and emotions.

I love the days when we create happy sounds. We find humor and surprise in what we read. We discover the hidden lines that we've not heard before, the small motives that bring depth and richness to what at first seemed just a simple melody. We catch the rhythm and move synchronously. Literature circles in the room actively discuss their stories and then ask when we can group again. Dustin writes in his reading response journal, "I finished my book today, and I would recommend it to almost anyone. It's my favorite book ever." Jeremy writes, "Franklin Dixon is a very good writer in my opinion because he leaves you hanging in suspense the whole time." Erica says as she leaves class, "Thank you for letting us do that today. It was fun!"





Bad English Ain't Always Bad Content Versus Grammar

Lana Warren

Other days are filled with dissonant chords and bizarre rhythms—days when we come in ill-prepared and unmotivated. We create a cacophony, “Why are we learning this?... What difference does it make if I can find the main idea?...How is it going to help me to be able to analyze a character’s personality?”

Some days we can find no rhythm at all. “I need a pencil... We were supposed to do what?...This is boring...I don’t like this story...I want out of this class...”

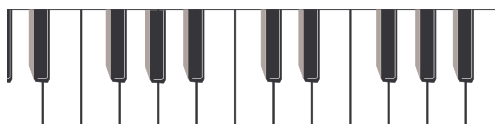
I am reminded from my piano music that dissonance and harmony serve unique purposes. Dissonance creates an emotional desire within the listener to move towards harmony. Dissonance demands change and brings energy

The right balance of dissonance and harmony makes a great work.

into a piece. Harmony, on the other hand, is pleasing to the ear and restful, but too much of it and the composer and audience are quickly bored. The right balance of dissonance and harmony make a great work.

So on those days in my classroom when my students and I lose our place, miss every important cue, and make far too many mistakes, I remember what I have learned with playing the piano. We’re practicing, and we’re going to make mistakes. Nevertheless, we must play to the end because I know that other days we will discover our rhythms and create our music. On those days, when we find the sound of music in what we do, we will have a performance that leaves us amazed and desiring to play an encore.

Helen New teaches seventh grade reading at Tigrett Middle School in Jackson, Tennessee.



Nobody in the real world worries about grammar as much as English teachers. We teach our students that if they don’t speak correctly, people out there in the real world will think they’re uneducated. Have English teachers ever set foot “out there in the real world?” Most of what I’ve seen and heard “out there in the real world” is straight from grammar hell.

The most interesting signs are splattered with random punctuation marks. A sign that says, “Neighborhood ‘Yard’ Sale,” hails people over for some real deals on sod, apparently. I also see incorrect spelling. A bright yellow poster taped to a fire hydrant says, “Wall-Mark can’t even beet these prices,” making me wonder if “Wal-Mark” can beat their spelling. And bad proof-reading skills are rampant. A giant wooden sign in the yard of a tiny run-down house screams, “This is the big on!” Not “big on” careful editing, are we?

Signs like these are awful, and they make us wonder why the lackadaisical grammarians of the world are so drawn to create large public signs to profess their shortcomings. I love these signs for their enthusiastic expression; I hate them for obvious reasons. They draw me in and force me to understand their meanings. They frustrate me to the point of fascination. I say “fascination” because I find myself going along my way repeating the offensive phrases again and again until I am in a hazy-eyed zombie-like state. I almost drove into a ditch once because of a blinking marquee advertising “duck cauls and fish lers”

While we English teachers see ourselves as the saviors of English expression, are we missing the real messages that are out there? How often do I “miss the message” when I’m talking to someone because I’m busy mentally bleeding on his words? How often do I let grammar goof-ups blur the point someone is making? Has my need for correct grammar handicapped my ability to comprehend things people say to me?

I once heard a student who was walking into my classroom say, “I just seen a fight.” Did I ask where the fight was? Did I want to know who was fighting? Did I rush into the hallway to put a stop to it? No. I said, “Saw. You saw a fight.” A student potentially got a black eye while I defended the King’s English.

At a banquet a few weeks ago, the general manager of the company my husband works for was giving a speech to announce the recipient of the company’s most prestigious award. He didn’t want to give away any clues about who won the award until the end, so he used the plural pronouns *they* and *them* to tell us about the person. “They get to work before the sun comes up. They work

until the sun sets. I’ve never seen them without a smile.” I still have no idea who received the honor because I quit listening.

My fear is that one day my husband will leave me a “Dear Jane” note, and I’ll be so hung up on his grammar and spelling that I won’t notice he’s left me.

This year I teach four honors English III classes and a freshman English class. My English I students are among the worst grammarians I’ve seen in a while, but I find their papers the most interesting to read. Every



time I stare, unmotivated, at the tall stack of papers I have to grade, I decide to grade my English I students' papers first. My English I students never fail to entertain me with their powerful expression, imagination, and interjections.

My freshman English papers are so expressive and fun that I almost overlook the "gonnas" and "wannas" as I fall face forward into their worlds. No matter what topic I assign, my ninth graders are sure to excite me. A topic for Halloween, "A time when you were scared," earned me Chris's story about a snake that got into his truck, Jon's story about an alligator attack when he lived in the everglades of East Florida, and Mandy's haunting story about a ghost man who frequently appears to her from out of nowhere.

I can't prove these tales are true, but they are certainly intriguing.

The stories my English I students write are so engaging that I overlook Samantha's random capitalization and Brandon's misspelling. I find myself catching the mistakes as an afterthought and hesitating even to mark them. This brings up tough questions: How do I grade them? How do I figure in their wonderful expressiveness and get across to them that their grammar has *got* to improve? How do I teach them grammar without squelching their imaginations?

Three weeks ago, I asked the class to help me write a list on the board. I said, "Tell me all the things we're not supposed to do when we write." They gave me a good list. The things I wanted them to know were on it: avoid a lot, avoid you, don't use ain't, use correct spelling, use correct pronoun/antecedent agreement, use correct subject/verb agreement. We later practiced editing incorrect sentences on the overhead projector. My students wanted to correct a few things that weren't wrong, but they generally knew what to do.

My hope is that improvement will come when they learn to slow down and check their work. I pray that they'll continue to write things that are interesting when they get the other stuff right. I guess my main wish is that they will not grow up to become lackadaisical grammarians turned sign makers.

Lana Warren teaches English I, English III, and journalism at Obion County Central High School in Troy, Tennessee.

The Pan Would Have Been a Great Teacher

Mark Yoder

Peter Pan would have made a great teacher. You see, all great teachers know how to fly, don't they? Well in my case, I haven't learned how to fly yet. I know how to get carried away, though. Does that count? In the words of Woody from *Toy Story*, "That's not flying; that's falling with style." If you've spent much time in the classroom, you've probably learned how to "fall with style."



Peter allows himself to be carried away with the lost boys. He doesn't design an adventure for the boys and then say, "Have it for me when you come to class tomorrow." He is part of the adventure, and loves the adventure even more than the lost boys. That's what they love about him. He gets carried away—he knows how to fly.

My own children, Lindsey and Nathan, love to play with me for the very same reason that the lost boys love to adventure with Peter Pan. I allow myself to be carried away with them. In fact, my mother-in-law tells my wife, "How can you leave the kids with him: he's just like one of them."

She's right. Just the other day, we spent an hour learning to climb the 300 year-old oak in the front yard. While up in the oak, we decided to build a tree fort. We shimmied down in search of the perfect tree for a fort. We found a huge sweet gum tree a few hundred yards from the house overlooking a soybean field.

The next morning, I woke Nathan, and we carried wood, nails, hammers, and saws. Jumping on the four-wheeler, we jockeyed our way over a couple of terraces to the tree and started building. "How are we gonna do it?" I asked Nathan.

"I don't know," he said shrugging his shoulders. It was almost dark by the time I finished tying in the plywood platform. Nathan had long since left me alone in the tree. I got carried away. Nathan came flying back, "You're the best, Daddy!" he said swinging from the herculean branch suspended above the fort.

"Isn't it cool?"

"Yeah!" he growls. "Maybe we can camp out up here."

"Let's do it!" I growl back.

This is the kind of flying I'd like to do in my classroom. I haven't learned to fly yet, but during our journal writing sessions in my English II class, I'm still writing when my students have long since left me in the fork of the star-leaved sweet gum tree, still hammering away. I look up and find a room of sophomores watching me. I stop. I'm not finished, but I must abandon it for a minute.

"OK," I say, "who wants to read theirs?"

"Read yours," they sing all at once but in different keys. So I read. It's a tinny sound to my own ears.

"Who's next?" I query.

Kevin begins to read, "I hate it when I interested in someone, and they ain't interested in me. They ain't interested



Falling with style

continued from page 6

because they don't say nothin' back to you. You just know when they always lookin' away when they talkin' to ya. Kinda over your shoulder, behind you at someone else."

My first response is, "His subject-verb agreement is terrible!" I stop myself. He's reading his writing to real critics, a room full of them. I squint and focus on his voice, and then I hear it. I hear the tears on the leaves of his notebook, not watery tears but real nonetheless. He's just shown us a snapshot of an everyday reminder that he's not good enough, that he's invisible, that no one is interested.

I don't want to draw attention to his pain for fear he might escape like a turtle when he realizes he's being watched. "Thanks, Kevin," I say, "write some more on this; I like your voice." He looks down at his paper and then back up at the other students to his left and then down again. It would be great to fly, but I'll settle for "falling with style" once in a while.

It is Peter's natural ability to get carried away that makes him one of the lost boys. His becoming one of them gives him credibility and trust. He is a child who plays the games they invent on their own. Invention, you know, is the kind of magic we lose when someone invents for us.

I wish I could invent the magic for my students, and that's the paradox; the moment I invent it for them, unless I'm lost in it with them, there is no magic. They don't fully trust me. So I bring in a topic; "How many of you have a scar?" Every hand goes up except one.

"Does it have to be a scar on my body?" Jennifer sheepishly asks.

"No, it can be anything that has marked you in some way." I think instantly of how intimate this activity could get, and I almost wince. "We don't have to read these aloud,"

I add. Everyone is already spilling ink on the leaves like the blood trails of wounded deer spotting the autumn leaves on the forest floor. After fifteen minutes, I'm lost with them writing about my scars. When we finish, every hand is up, including Jennifer's.

She begins, "I thought he loved me. He said he did, that God had made us for each other." She limps on, "He accused me the other day of cheating on him, and I saw him flirting with another girl. I have a scar, but no one can see it ... until I try to smile." Again I listen and can almost hear the blood splattering the leaves as she stumbles, searching for a cold stream to cool the arrows hanging from her heart.

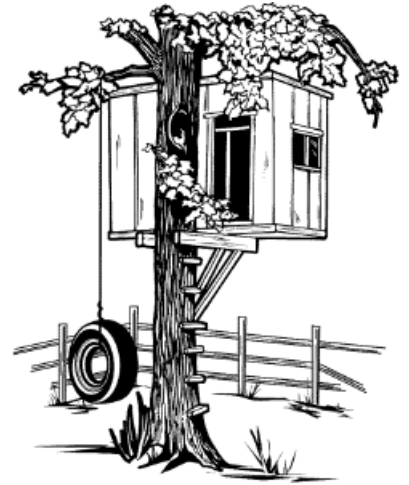
I allow myself to become one of the lost boys, to be carried away because I know the adventure will be worth it.

Peter would have been a great teacher. He even loves problems. They are nothing more than windows, places to take flight, places to chase shadows. "Always leave the window open," he says.

"But what about Captain Hook?" Wendy asks.

"Who, that ol' pirate; I ain't scared of him, Wendy!"

Peter has the kind of sense common to Neverland, not too wordy or highfalutin. "Just get the point across," he says. "Alright, settle down!" Peter challenges the lost boys to grow up but not too much. "Wendy's gonna read us a story." Wendy is Peter's overachiever and often grows frustrated with Peter's teaching style. She needs more structure but loves his lostness. He's "a traveler with no fixed plan, no intentions on arriving."

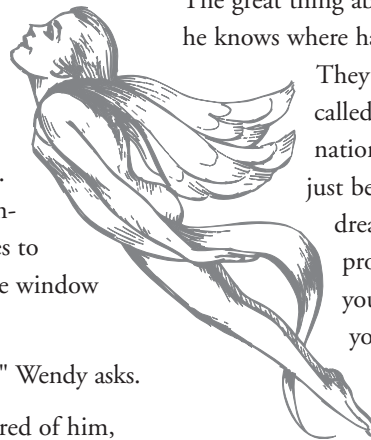


"How do you test that?" you ask.

Peter answers, "Let's try; come on, I got an idea. It might not work, but it will lead to another adventure."

The great thing about Peter's lessons is that he knows where happy thoughts come from.

They come from that place called Neverland, where imagination is pixy dust, that place just before waking, where your dreams come true, and every problem is a window, and in your lostness, you find where you belong.



Mark Yoder teaches eleventh-grade English and yearbook at Brighton High School in Brighton, Tennessee.



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Not As Easy As It Looks

Molly Coffman

"Good teaching is an act of hospitality toward the young, and hospitality is always an act that benefits the host even more than the guest" (Palmer 50).

When people talk about me, I would like to think that they would describe me as being "nice." Since I was a little girl, my mother has taught me to be nice. The golden rule has been a guiding principle in my life. I received citizenship awards in elementary school and was a "goody two shoes" in high school. But being a nice girl has always been a good thing ... until I started teaching.

One of the first pieces of advice I was given by a veteran teacher was the familiar "Don't smile until Christmas" adage. However, telling me not to smile is like telling a gossip to keep a secret; it goes against my very nature. In my early years of teaching, I would often vow to be meaner, to show the students that I meant business, to be hard. I figured if students think I'm "hard," then I must be doing my job.

Nevertheless, my vows were always broken. I am the nice teacher. I'm not bragging when I say this. In fact, being the nice teacher sometimes feels like a curse. It's something that I have often tried to keep secret from the other teachers, but I know that they know. I worry about what they say about me, if they think that I'm too nice, if they think I should be tougher, if they think I'm not pulling my own weight.

Recently a former student of mine told me of one of my junior's lamenting that I was hard. Momentarily, I felt a sense of pride billowing inside me like a marshmallow in a microwave. This feeling soon deflated, however, when the student went on to tell me her response. "Mrs. Coffman? She's not hard; her class was fun." In fact, I've had many

students tell me after leaving my class that I was easy. I translate this in my mind as being a failure.

Commonly, students will tell me, "Before I came into your class, all my English teachers hated my writing. I had never gotten a 90 on anything." Once again, doubts begin to race through my mind: Maybe I'm not picky enough. Maybe I need to give lower grades. Maybe I need to grade their writing "tougher" and mark all of their mistakes. I wonder, "Why? Why do people say I am the nice teacher?"

I've looked at the standards to make sure that I am doing what is expected of me. I monitor student understanding and achievement, and I know that students' writing ability and their confidence as writers increase throughout the course. I see students' responses to literature

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become more detailed and deeper. My students' standardized test scores are high, and they have reported gains in their English ACT scores after being in my class. So why am I the "nice" or "easy" teacher? I truly believe the answer lies in the environment of my classroom.

At the beginning of each semester, I start my classes with a personal essay, which we call a literate life history, about their development as readers and writers. I guide the class in about 20-30 minutes of prewriting, allowing them unknowingly to generate pages of seed ideas for their essays. I read to them a sample literate life history and ask them to read through their prewriting, looking for a common thread that they could develop or for an idea that they would like to write more about.

As I travel around the room conferencing, I hear several students who have already focused their ideas and who excitedly tell me about the direction they're moving. Some students are wavering or are unsure about what they should write about. "Is it okay to write about stuff from outside of school?" they might ask.

"Sure, it is," I tell them. "Anything that relates with who you are as a reader or a writer."

And every year, I encounter several students who tell me with certainty that, even though they have several pages of prewriting notes, they have nothing to write about. These are the students I'm really excited about . . . the ones who before long will realize that, yes, they do have much to write. Yes, their personal lives are valuable in writing for school,

and yes, they can write a two- to three-page, typed essay without suffering too much trauma.

Kneeling beside one student's desk, I ask him to tell me about what he wrote during the prewriting time. "Oh, nothing really. I just started talking about how my mom would read those Berenstain Bear books to me when I was little."

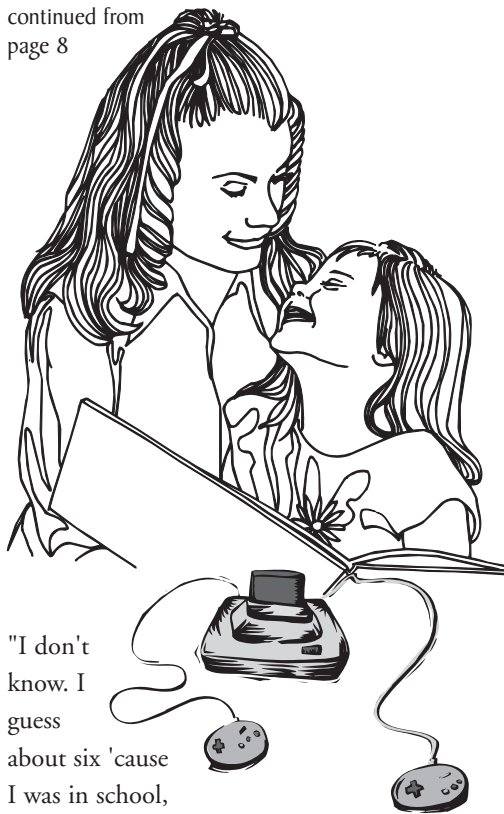
"Oh, yeah! I like those book, too," I reply. "Did your mom read to you every night?"

"Well, when I was real little she did, but then when I got older, she just sorta quit."

"And what did you like best about those times?"

"Um. I don't know. I guess how she would use different voices for the different bears, like a deep voice for the daddy bear and stuff."

"Yeah, I do that with my kids now. So how old were you when she stopped reading to you at night?"



"I don't know. I guess about six 'cause I was in school, but I was real little."

"Why do you think she stopped?"

"I guess cause I just got older and had other stuff to do, for school and stuff. Plus I just didn't like it as much anymore."

After the conversation continues a little longer, I look at him and say, "Wow, it sounds like you've got a really great idea."

"Huh?" He stares at me, confused.

"Yeah, I think that would be really interesting to hear about how you liked reading when you were young, but then school got in the way, and soon reading wasn't fun anymore. You can tell me about how you just read what you had to to get by in school, how you get away with that, and about how you'd rather play video games. That's fun. How are reading *Berenstain Bears* and playing video games alike?"

"Well, I guess they're both fun. I mean, when I was little, *Berenstain Bear* books were entertainment like video games are now."

"Okay, that's good. Think about that a little more, maybe write a little more on that and see what else you might come up with. What do you think will happen in the future, I mean as far as your reading or entertainment activities go?"

He formulates a hypothesis, and I tell him, "Good. Now, you've got a beginning, a middle, and an end—*Berenstain Bears*, video games, and then what you think will happen in the future. Try that out and see how it goes."

"Okay." He leans over his notebook and poises his pencil to begin writing again.

This is how each semester begins. We start off with writing, conferencing, response groups, and mini-lessons to establish a classroom community from day one. Some students are excited by the writing, some fearful, some shocked.

"I thought this was an English class, not a writing class," one student mused.

"I write more in here than I ever have before," others explain. I hear the murmuring in the halls about how much writing Mrs. Coffman wants us to do, but soon, those murmurings change. About two weeks into the semester, we sit in a circle and read excerpts from our literate life histories. Students laugh appreciatively. Students smile with a sense of accomplishment. Everyone turns in a two-page (or sometimes more), typed literate life history. It's a marvelous day in the life of an English teacher.

A community of writers has been born, and I try to maintain and foster this community throughout the rest of the semester. I laugh with students. Though I have a plan for the day, I still believe there is time for laughter. I appreciate students' senses of humor. I use myself as an example many times telling stories from my childhood to connect with a poem or a character in a novel or to relate to a frustration they're probably feeling. It's modeling.

I model for my students how to write an essay or how to respond to a poem. In the same way, I model how I work through writer's block or how I don't always know the answers to questions and how I deal with that. I tell them about my embarrassing moments, and I share with them my not-so-polished writing. I ask questions that I don't know the answer to, and I invite them to

share their questions, stories, embarrassing moments, and frustrations as well. In short, I want to model what learning is and my process for learning.

Of course, there are bumps in the road.

Students become frustrated, and occasionally they make comments that are inappropriate. Recently, the part of the inscription in a book given to me by a student for Christmas read, "I pushed and you pushed back. I tried to skate by, but you wouldn't let me. I still hate reading and writing, but I still love you." Not all students are converted to lovers of reading and writing, but I'd like to think that at least for a few months my students will experience reading and writing in a supportive, non-threatening environment. One mom told me that her son really liked my class, something I would not have guessed from his comments about writing and English class in general. Noticing my surprise, the mom told me the reason he liked my class was that I was "human." Comments like these lead me to believe that I may not realize what effect I have on my students. I also believe students do not realize how much they have developed in my class until they have moved on.

Frequently, the same students who term my class "easy" also confirm that they learned a great deal. "I sure am glad you taught us about literary criticism," one senior told me. "It's really coming in handy this year, and if

I use myself as an example many times telling stories from my childhood to connect with a poem or a character in a novel or to relate to a frustration they're probably feeling.

you hadn't shown me, I'd be lost." Even now, I sometimes struggle with being

the "nice" teacher, but as I reflect on my pedagogy and on my students' growth, I decide that when people talk about me I still want them to describe me as "nice." It's who I am, and it is what works for me in my classroom.

Parker Palmer wrote in his book, *The Courage to Teach*, "To become a better teacher, I must

Searching For the Authentic Self: Where Do I Fit in My Teaching?

Nancy Warden

Neatly printed inside the cover of my teaching journal is the question, “What does today say about my teaching, about my students, and about learning?”

Each time I take up my journal to write, I reflect for a moment on this, the single hardest question I’ve ever asked myself. This threefold question looms ominous because it holds me accountable for myself and my classroom. Lately I have been agonizing over “What does today say about my teaching?” This area concerns me greatly because I want to be authentic with both my students and myself. I want my quirky, off-beat personality to shine through. I want to share my love of literature and learning and my enthusiasm for writing with my students. Most of all I want to know where my quest for *me-ness* fits with my students and my role as a teacher.

With regard to the question of authenticity of myself in my teaching, I find that I am not alone in my struggle. In *The Courage To Teach*, Parker Palmer devotes the entire first chapter, “The Heart of a Teacher,” to exploring the concept and oftentimes conflict of teaching and the true self. Here he boldly states, “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (10). Palmer then goes on to explain that his effectiveness as a teacher is directly related to his ability to know and trust his selfhood and to expose the vulnerability that comes with sharing the true self with others. Through his research he uncovers what we as former students all know: the most mesmerizing and effective teachers are those for whom teaching serves not so much as a career but as an extension of their personalities. When I look back on my most dynamic teachers, as Palmer

requests of his students, I see in my mind teachers who not only knew and loved the subject matter, but passed that love along to their students. How I want to be that teacher! My greatest stumbling block to true authenticity comes in exposing the vulnerability that leaves one open to the criticism of others. However, my students are proving themselves worthy teachers as they open up and share their vulnerability with me.

During the first six weeks, we cover the familiar, friendly letter. In an attempt to get my students thinking as well as writing, I had them write to me. I held an open invitation for them to talk about seventh grade by asking, “What are some things that are going well? What are some things that aren’t going well? What would you like to see done differently?”

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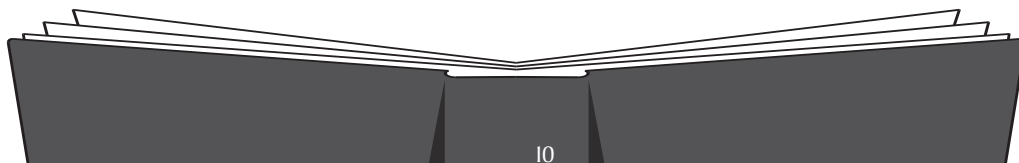
While the scope of the letter was to cover their experiences as seventh graders thus far, the invitation was open for them to discuss my class in particular. After collecting the letters, I excitedly sat down to read them, curious to see what my students had to say.

The third letter into my first period stack finds Clint writing, “I don’t know what’s going on, but it seems like ever since we got back from horseshow break, all the teachers have turned against me. I want to do good in school. I want to make good grades. I don’t want to be like my brother who failed the 7th grade twice and is locked up. I want to go to college. I want to see the look on my parents’ faces when I do it. Miss Warden, please help me.” After reading Clint’s letter, I felt a sinking

feeling in my stomach because all I could hear was my voice reprimanding Clint what felt like incessantly for things like talking too loudly, tapping his pencil, and fidgeting in his desk. All I could think was, “I am not going to have this child thinking we are all against him.”

When responding to the letters, I thanked Clint for his honesty and for sharing his fears and opinions and promised to help him. At the end of the week, I wrote a note to his mom, complimenting his improvements and noting that we had gotten off on the wrong foot. His mother responded with a full page letter thanking me for my note and for caring. She stated that she’d seen him excel in classes where he liked the teacher, as he said he liked me, and fail when he didn’t because he felt she just didn’t care about him. Aside from the feel-good warm fuzzies it gave me, those letters touched me because at last I felt like I had made a difference. While this story sounds like sunshine and butterflies, don’t become disillusioned. Clint is still a normal thirteen year-old, an average student with a D in my class last six weeks. He does well on homework and classwork but struggles on tests, and writing will prove another challenge. He still gets scolded for talking too loudly or acting silly in the halls on the way back from lunch, but he’s trying. In the classroom, he’s engaged, raising his hand five to ten times each class period to ask and answer questions. He tells me things, sharing fragments of his life with me. We have made a connection.

Palmer points out that less than spectacular teachers have made themselves so by distancing themselves from their students. As I enter my second year of teaching, I feel grateful each day that I have been afforded this opportunity to start over. Unfortunately, last year I felt unable to be my true self, based





open wide and bright. He's talking, laughing, playing, and being a typical seventh grader. However, sit Tyler in a seat with a book in front of him, and a metamorphosis takes place, turning him into a lackadaisical, less-than-average student. One, who after football season has ended, suddenly decided that grades don't matter and that in essence the school year is over.

I can't help but wonder what is it that has made my experiences here so different? Why is it that I have developed a solid working relationship with one student, while the other maintains his impenetrable fortress of stoicism? Is it because Clint simply needs more? Is it because he possesses a greater need or desire for adult approval, while Tyler's needs for approval and acceptance are met by his strong social standing with his peers? The one question that keeps resurfacing in my weary brain is, "Is it me?" I can't help but wonder if I was able to make that connection with Clint based upon my ability to be myself as I reacted instinctively

His actions convey irritation at having been disturbed and irritation at the fact that we expect something from him.

to his cry for help, giving his feelings consideration and merit; something I've come to realize not all teachers do. I didn't have to change modes or think or plan how to respond. I just did it. Even though Clint is not immune to my rules or chiding, he doesn't react negatively. Tyler, on the other hand, automatically forces me to unconsciously switch into aggressive teacher mode through his reaction to the expectations I place upon him as a student in my classroom. My dilemma is how do I reach out to him, too? How do I share my authentic self with this student whose actions invoke the desire to remove all evidence of vulnerability?

Much of my difficulty at being myself in my teaching comes

from the vulnerability that Palmer discusses. This fear goes back to my childhood, high school, and even college days where I struggled with issues of confidence in myself, my abilities, and my worth. Even now it is hard to break down these barriers that I erected over all those years to keep myself safe and share myself with my students; because they may see that I don't know it all, that I don't have it all together. In fact, I've so perfected my skills of deception that last year, a co-worker marveled at the fact that I seemed so confident and laid back. In actuality, I was much less than confident because on the inside I was struggling with issues of inadequacy as a professional. Thankfully, I have found solace in Palmer's comments that as teachers we all must address this never-ending struggle as each year we again open ourselves up to those feelings of vulnerability with each new group of students who grace our doorways. From the beginning of this essay to its completion some weeks later, I have taken great comfort in the fact that I now know I am not alone in my quest for selfness in the classroom. From Palmer's text to conversations with my most trusted colleagues, I have come to the understanding that, at the end of the day, I must refer back to that question in my teaching journal and submit myself to its incessant probing. By inwardly addressing my difficulty with vulnerability, I can outwardly strive to portray myself as the authentic me in my classroom. It is only when I push the nagging voice that screams, "Be yourself!" to the back of my mind that I disservice not only myself but also my students.

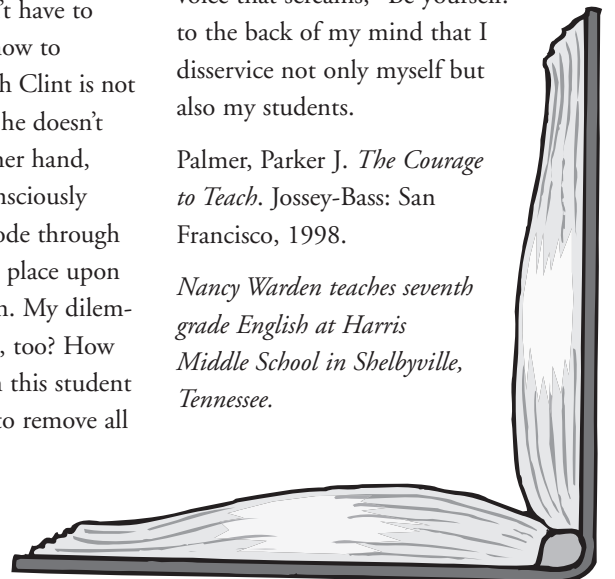
Palmer, Parker J. *The Courage to Teach*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 1998.

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upon the personalities and behaviors of my students. Rather than passing on my love of writing, many days I felt like a glorified babysitter as I struggled to manage discipline while throwing in a bit of grammar and writing here and there. In the midst of it all, I was miserable because I was not enjoying myself, and I was not enjoying myself because I was not being my true self. Before school resumed in the fall, I promised myself that I was not going to repeat last year by molding myself into someone I am not. However, in spite of my best intentions, I find myself at a distance from some of my students, students who in all honesty need an authentic adult in their lives.

Tyler sits in the first seat of the first row over by the computers, an optimal place for learning, no craning to see the boards or reach the trashcan or the cup of pencils sitting on my desk. However, Tyler slouches in his seat, his hand supporting the seemingly unbearable weight of his head, eyes often closed or drawn into mere slits through which he evaluates the room with sleepy disinterest. When asked to sit up or even worse when the sanctity of his pre-lunch slumber is broken, he tends to become not so much angry as irritated. His actions convey irritation at having been disturbed and irritation at the fact that we expect something from him. Interestingly, in the halls, at dances, and especially on the football field, Tyler comes alive. The slouch is gone, replaced with a confident stride and a borderline arrogant swagger. The eyes are



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nurture a sense of self that both does and does not depend on the responses of others—and that is a true paradox" (73). Balancing the two sides of this paradox is at the heart of my dilemma, but as Palmer says, the reflection that results from this dilemma makes me a better teacher, and this benefits us all.

Palmer, Parker J. *The Courage to Teach*.
Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 1998.

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About WTWP

The West Tennessee Writing Project is a program of professional development for K-12 teachers that seeks to improve writing and writing instruction in our schools. WTWP became one of the now 190 sites of the National Writing Project with the initial grant award in 1993.

WTWP is housed in the Department of English in the College of Humanities and Fine Arts at the University of Tennessee at Martin.

WTWP's guiding principles:

- Student writing will improve as writing instruction improves.
- Writing teachers should be writers themselves.
- The best teacher of a teacher is another teacher.

Teachers of WTWP—Writing Teachers/Writing People—believe everyone can write; create classrooms as safe places for students to read, write, and learn; respect standards as inherent in pedagogy; value assessment in many forms; honor students, colleagues, parents and administrators as partners in school success.

The heart of WTWP is its annual invitational summer institute for K-12 teachers held at UT Martin. Teachers who participate in a summer invitational institute become Teacher Consultants of WTWP. Their students write often during school and in a wide variety of genres. Students become better readers of their own writing, able to think more critically about what to say, how to say it, and who to say it to. With more opportunities to write and to write in a variety of ways, students become more fluent readers and writers in school and for their own personal growth.

WTWP is supported by grants from the National Writing Project with matching funds from the University of Tennessee at Martin and additional support for particular programs from area schools and systems.

To learn more about the West Tennessee Writing Project and its programs of professional development for educators contact:

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