

## LIGHT A FIRE UNDER YOUR CHICKEN: REJUVENATING TEACHERS

A WTWP workshop for K-8 teachers on reading, writing, and portfolios

Date: Saturday, Feb. 22, 2003

Where: Camden Elementary School

Time: 8:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Cost: Pre-registration is \$15; after Feb. 14, registration is \$25

Inservice credit: Check with supervisors

### What is included in the day:

Featured opening speaker, with additional comments over lunch, will be Bonnie Sunstein, author of *The Portfolio Standard: How Students Can Show Us What They Know and Are Able To Do* and other books about reading, writing, and portfolios from Heinemann. In addition, teacher consultants of WTWP will lead concurrent sessions on reading and writing strategies. Also included: Heinemann publishers book sales; lunch, morning coffee; certificates of participation.

To pre-register, send the following information along with check to cover registration to the Office of Extended Campus and Continuing Education, 110 Gooch Hall, UT Martin, Martin, TN 38238. Information needed: your name, address, social security number, name of school where you are teaching. If your school will cover the cost of your registration also include the following information so ECCE may send invoice: contact person, name of school or system, and mailing address and telephone number of contact person.

West Tennessee Writing Project  
Department of English  
The University of Tennessee at Martin  
Martin, TN 38238



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# Field Notes

Vol. 11 No. 1

A newsletter of the West Tennessee Writing Project

Fall 2002

## The Writers and the World Book

**Lee Hudson,**  
*a WTWP  
Teacher  
Consultant,  
teaches fifth  
grade  
students at  
Dyersburg  
Intermediate  
School.*

In my parents' living room when I was growing up, a cabinet was by the front door. It was a plain wooden cabinet, not much taller than I was, and it was painted with layers of white paint so thick that it felt like you could press your fingernail through it. The cabinet had solid wooden doors with square wooden knobs that made a nice thunk when you pulled them. Inside were three wooden shelves full of books. On top of the books on the bottom shelf, my mother kept newspapers from Nixon's resignation, but the delicate newspapers were of no interest to me; I wasn't looking for them. I was after the other things in the cabinet—the encyclopedias.

I was itching to go to school like my older sisters, and our encyclopedias were the closest things I had to textbooks. They were all on the shelves in nice alphabetical order with brown spines that announced what letter they were. I read them with care and always returned them to their positions. My favorite one of all was the poetry book, one of a bunch of supplemental books that we would receive every year for our collection. The poetry book was my favorite because it was gorgeous. In it were photographs and illustrations of flowers and kids and animals plus short things to read. Looking at that book led me to look up poetry in the *P* encyclopedia, where I found even more pictures and more poems. If all the time could be added up, I must have spent days in front of that cabinet looking at those particular books and studying that poetry just like a real student.

When I see myself in my memory on the floor in our living room flipping through our books looking at poetry, I can't believe I am the same person after what poetry and I have been through. When I finally did get to elementary school, I don't think I ever wrote a poem, but I did get to keep reading them. In elementary school, poems were dispersed in our readers, and sometimes we got to read them out loud. I had always read them beforehand, though. I looked ahead for them.

After readers in elementary school, I don't remember much poetry in my literary diet. I had to memorize some of Emily Dickinson's work in Mrs. Thompson's freshman English class. She translated what the poem was supposed to say to us, and we memorized it for a reason she didn't explain. I remember that I was sitting at our dining room table struggling with one when my mother stopped by to ask me what I was doing and which poem I was learning. I told her that I was working on Dickinson's "I Never Saw a Moor," and my mother,

after years out of high school and three daughters, sat before me and rattled off that poem to perfection—amazing. I knew I would never have to do that, though; once for Mrs. Thompson's grade was enough. In my generation, we didn't have to memorize and remember.

In college, I was ready to become a teacher of poetry. I remember writing an acrostic poem in a teacher education class. I thought acrostics were the dumbest things ever. That type of poem wasn't in my *World Book* poetry edition, and I had no use for it. It was the only poem style I remember discussing in those classes. I left college a little disappointed, but I thought I could still handle teaching poetry. I figured that if I loved it so much, I could teach it with ease.

Instead, when I became a teacher, I never mentioned poetry to my students. The poetry that was in their readers was watered-down, and I would never think of forcing them to write something so impersonal as an acrostic. Besides, other teachers told me that poetry was a frill that was reserved for lesson plans after the T-Cap. No one asked if I was teaching poetry—not the administration, the students, or the parents—so I never taught it.

As a teacher over the first four years of my career, I had come to the conclusion that poetry was a waste of time. I never could figure out how to get my students started. I would say in my sing-y teacher voice, "Okay, everyone write a poem now!" They would just stare at me like I had just called their mothers bad names. I had lost all my interest in poetry anyway. I mean, who ever saw a professional on a lunch break sitting under a tree reading poems? Who ever heard of a well-respected businessperson writing poetry during free time? I was in the real world now, and I



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decided poetry was out of touch. I wiped it completely out of my curriculum, my lesson plans, and my classroom. That little girl that I once was had become the teacher who cared nothing for poetry anymore.

The summer of 2001 was my first experience with the West Tennessee Writing Project. As I entered the summer institute, I carried with me the opinion that poetry was useless and impossible to teach, but luckily, my opinion changed. As we discussed writing and poetry, I was interested to hear how other teachers actually did teach real poetry—not acrostics or other school-made poetry—and it worked. As I read Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle*, my attitude about poetry switched; real poetry did have a place in the classroom, and poetry was worth the time before, during, and after T-Cap. Students could love and write real poetry, translate poetry for themselves, make poetry from prose, remember poetry to enrich their lives, and express themselves through poetry, which wasn't as hokey as it sounded.

I went into a new school year that fall ready to give poetry a whirl. My class wrote memoirs first, and then we switched to poetry. At first, we struggled. I guided them to writing poetry and thought it would automatically take off. They thought all poetry had to rhyme and poems could not be "copied." As a result, our poems were immature and weak. We still stuck with it.

As we discussed and reflected on poetry after writing it for awhile, I discovered even more about it from my students than I had from the experts. We decided that the best poetry we read doesn't rhyme, and we made the rule that no poetry would rhyme until we, as authors, were ready. We went further than guided writing and looked at how to parody, not "copy," our favorite poets like Shel Silverstein and our favorite class library poetry books like *Laugheteria*. We studied real-life poetry forms like the tritina, haiku, and observation poetry. The results were amazing. The girl that studied the poetry supplement of the encyclopedia had students who wrote their own poetry that sang on the page. They gave their poetry as gifts for Christmas. They published their poetry by reading it out loud and hanging it in the hallway. They copied their poetry into their probes (students' personal collections of their finished writing). A few even entered their poems in writing contests and won.

Poetry is not a frill now in my writing classroom. Poetry is my writing classroom. My proof that students can love poetry is concrete. Just like my *World Book* and me, they read my poetry books so much, one of the books came apart. A student brought it to me, expecting me to be upset because I love my class library books so much. I had to hot glue the book back together. I didn't mind one bit.

On the last day of school last year, I sat back and looked at the kids who were about to leave, and I knew they had been changed over the course of the school year into smarter, more experienced people. I knew they were real writers who didn't need me to guide them to writing and tell them the value of real poetry anymore. They knew it.

As I sat at my table looking at the class, one of my most gifted writers approached my desk with paper in hand, looked me in the eye, and said, "You always said writing was a gift. I wrote you a poem."

"Is it going to make me cry?" I hate to cry in public, or anywhere else.

"No, or at least I don't think so."

She published her poem by reading it out loud to me, saying I wouldn't understand it unless she read it. Her poem was funny, smart, full of inside jokes, touching—and it rhymed. In the middle of her reading, I had crocodile tears on my shirt.

After she finished, all I could say through my tears was, "I have to leave the room!"

My experience with poetry had come full circle. My writers left me like no other group ever had, because they loved and wrote real poems. They discussed them and, boy, did they ever read them—just like the girl at the encyclopedia cabinet.

#### Author's Note

*My mother, who was around for Nixon and not the Hindenburg, was a value in the writing of this piece, as was Brianna, who always had mud on her lunchbox.*

## Fiction writing for teachers

Spring semester 2003, Margrethe Ahlschwede, director of WTWP, will offer a graduate seminar in fiction writing: "Surprise, Surprise: The Teacher is a Writer" to be taught in Jackson Monday nights at 5 p.m. beginning Jan. 6, 2003.

This course may be used as part of the 18 hours of subject-matter specialty in the MS in Education offered through the UT Martin College of Education and Behavioral Studies. It also may count as points toward teacher recertification (check with supervisors of instruction) or as part of the "thirty above" the master's.

To register for English 696, Seminar in Language and Literature—Fiction Writing for More than Beginners—call the Office of Extended Campus and Continuing Education, 1.800.491.6445. Register early to be sure of space availability.

For information about admission to graduate studies at UT Martin, contact the Office of Graduate Studies, 309 Administration Building, UT Martin, 38238. 731.587.7012.

For information about the MS in Education, contact Dr. Bonnie Daniel, coordinator of graduate work, the College of Education and Behavioral Studies, 237 Gooch Hall, UT Martin, 38238, 731.587.7125.

## News of Teacher Consultants of WTWP

**Paula Cox**, WTWP associate director and previously 3rd grade teacher, now 5th grade teacher at Briarwood School, Camden, has been named one of two 2002 Milken Educator award recipients for Tennessee. Paula also was named 2003 Northwest Tennessee Teacher of the Year for grades K-4.

Two other Teacher Consultants of WTWP were named teacher of the year for their schools: **Betty Hicks**, Finley School; and **Ginny Franklin**, South Fulton Elementary.

## About WTWP

The West Tennessee Writing Project is a program of professional development for teachers, K-12, from all subject-matter areas. It seeks to improve writing and writing instruction in our schools

Headquartered in the Department of English at the University of Tennessee at Martin, WTWP is one of 160 sites of the National Writing Project and the only affiliate site in Tennessee of the National Writing Project.

The heart of WTWP is its annual invitational summer writing-reading institute for selected West Tennessee teachers, all subject-matter areas, all grades K-12, held on the UT Martin campus. The dates for next summer: June 9-July 3, 2003.

Why a writing project? Teachers participating in summer institutes report these gains for students: frequency of writing; variety of modes of writing; and for themselves as teachers: more effective ways of teaching students to read and to write; assessing reading and writing; publishing writing; working with parents.

WTWP is supported by grants from the National Writing Project of the University of California, Berkeley with matching funds from the University of Tennessee at Martin. Additional gift contributions support particular workshops and programs.

The director of WTWP is Margrethe Ahlschwede, Hardy M. Graham Distinguished Professor in English. Associate director is Paula Cox, 5th grade teacher at Camden's Briarwood School. Technology liaison for WTWP is Sheryl Alford, Dresden Middle School media specialist. The WTWP Advocacy Council also includes Molly Coffman, Jackson Central Merry High School; Diana Griffin, Dresden Elementary School; Beth Halbert, Mt. Juliet High School; Renee Cooper, 2nd grade, Camden Elementary; Doug Cook, chair, Visual and Theater Arts, UT Martin; and Kelli Ligon, art consultant to WTWP, K-5 art, Franklin.

Staff support to WTWP is provided by Lisa Pentecost, principal secretary in the Department of English, and Andrew Usery, senior accounting major from Franklin, WTWP staff accountant. Staff of UT Martin's University Relations write news releases and design publications. Paul Meek Library faculty and staff catalogue and house texts on reading and writing theory and practice. Administrators who make WTWP possible: Chancellor Nick Dunagan; Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Tom Rakes; College of Humanities and Fine Arts Dean Jerald Ogg; Department of English Chair Lynn Alexander.

For further information about workshops, the summer institute, and other programs of professional development write or call: West Tennessee Writing Project  
Department of English, UT Martin,  
Martin, TN 38238

tel: 731.587.7290 or 731.587.7300; FAX 731.587.7276  
or e-mail: wtwp@utm.edu

WTWP website: [www.utm.edu/wtwp](http://www.utm.edu/wtwp)  
National Writing Project site: [www.writingproject.org](http://www.writingproject.org)



*Field Notes* is mailed twice yearly to Teacher Consultants of WTWP and West Tennessee supervisors, principals, and additional educators. It is available online at [www.utm.edu/wtwp](http://www.utm.edu/wtwp)

## Summer 2002 Institute Teachers

Pamela Warren  
Big Sandy School, 8th grade science  
Aimee Putman  
Dyersburg Intermediate, 3rd grade  
Nicole Claybrooks  
Milan Elementary, kindergarten  
Angela M. Redden  
Oakmont School, Dickson, 5th grade  
Doug Cook  
Visual and Theater Arts, UT Martin  
Virginia L. Franklin  
South Fulton Elementary, 5th grade  
Renee Cooper  
Camden Elementary, 2nd grade  
Deanna G. Smothers  
Camden Junior High, 6th grade

## Summer Institute Focal Team

Beth Halbert  
English, Mt. Juliet High School  
Molly Coffman  
English and yearbook, Jackson Central Merry High School  
Lana Warren  
English and yearbook, Obion County Central High School  
Lee Hudson  
Dyersburg Intermediate, 5th grade  
Margrethe Ahlschwede, Director  
West Tennessee Writing Project, UTM

## Summer Institute Residencies

Paula Cox  
Briarwood School, Camden, 5th grade  
Jane Robinson  
Milan Elementary, kindergarten  
Mary Lou Marks  
Camden Central High School, media



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# Before, During, and After: Reading in the High School Classroom

Beth Halbert,

*a WTWP Teacher Consultant, teaches students in English classes at Mt. Juliet High School.*

"Read this poem, Jeremy!"

"Everybody should read poem number 66."

"This reminds me of finding out about Santa Claus."

The students in my senior English class at Mt. Juliet High School were all hidden behind laptop computer screens. We were using wireless laptop computers to read poetry from United States Poet Laureate Billy Collins' *Poetry 180* website.

I had asked my students to read ten poems from the website and to complete a poetry log where they listed the title, author, and additional comments about the poems that they were reading. They would later use the information to return to their favorite poem and make it interactive by adding hyperlinks within the poem and writing a reader's response to accompany their interactive poem. My fear was that the students would simply list the poems without really reading them. Much to my surprise, though, that wasn't happening.

The students and I spent the entire ninety-minute class reading poetry silently, reading poems out loud to no one in particular, or reading poems out loud to each other. They were talking to each other about poetry, making connections and asking questions. It was a great day to be a teacher.

"Did you read last night?" Dustin asked Carmen.

"Yeah, I read it."

"Tell me what happened. I've got to pass that quiz today. I haven't passed one yet."

From the door where I was monitoring the bustling hallway, I overheard Carmen proceed to tell Dustin about the characters and plot in *Lord of the Flies*. It was obvious that she had read the assigned chapter and knew what sorts of questions would be on the reading quiz. It was just as obvious that Dustin had not read any of the chapter and would probably fail or barely pass the quiz based on the information that he was getting from Carmen.

After the quiz we began reading the next chapter in the novel. I asked for volunteers to read, and the same three students who always volunteered reluctantly raised their hands. I tried, without success, to draw the students into a discussion of what we were reading. Jeff raised his hand. I

silently thanked him for saving me.

"Is this part about Piggy's glasses breaking going to be on the quiz tomorrow?" he asked.

It was not a good day to be a teacher.

I have attended the West Tennessee Writing Project Summer Writing Institute for three years. I have left the institute every year with ideas for "tweaking" the way I teach. After my first year at the institute, I worked on the way I taught writing. I began to write with my students and read my writing aloud to them. We published our writing by reading it aloud and posting writing around the room and on bulletin boards. I realized that I didn't have to and shouldn't mark every error in a student's writing. Instead, we negotiated a rubric together as a class that I could use to assess their writing. I read their pieces as an interested reader rather than as a copyeditor. The next year I worked on the way that I taught poetry. We read poetry every day in my class.

Sometimes we read poetry from our British Literature textbook, but we also read poetry by William Stafford, Naomi Shihab Nye, Paul Janeczko, and Lois Marie Harrod. I let my students watch me do a "cold reading" of a poem, where I modeled how a reader draws meaning from a poem. I didn't give tests over poetry. Instead, the students and I wrote about our reactions to poems. We discovered together that there were many ways to read a poem and that it was all right and even wonderful if we all had different opinions as long as we could back them up with the text and articulate them to the rest of the class. When it came time to read a novel together as a class, though, I forgot everything that I had learned about teaching reading and writing. Everything that had worked so well to teach poetry and writing didn't transfer to the novel that we read at the end of the year. Why were the students so engaged when they read poetry in my classroom and not when we read a novel together?

I can now see that strategies I used before, during and after reading poetry could have worked with teaching the novel, too. First of all, before I asked my students to read poetry independently, I modeled reading strategies for them. Using what I had learned from Mary Lou Marks, a teacher consultant with the West Tennessee Writing Project, about doing a "cold reading" of a poem, I modeled asking questions, marking on the text, making connections, drawing inferences, and using background knowledge to read a poem.

The students saw that there wasn't anything about me as a teacher that made me intuitively know what a poem meant. They saw that I had to use the same strategies that they could use to read poetry.

I should have done the same thing with the novel that we read in class. The students needed to see what was invisible. They needed to see what my thinking process was as I read the novel. I needed to show them what Cris Tovani calls "access tools" like marking the text, using a double entry diary and thinking aloud. They needed to practice generating their own questions about the text rather than just learning to answer my questions about it.

Another thing that made the interactive poetry assignment successful was that the students were getting to choose the poems that they read. There were 180 poems on the Poetry 180 website. The students were scrolling through title after title and choosing to read the ones that appealed to them just like real readers do. The students had no choice, however, when it came to reading the novel. I chose the novel for them. I don't mean to insinuate here that I plan on giving my students a choice for every reading assignment, although that isn't such a bad thought. I'm just pointing out that I think that student choice was a big part of the success of the poetry lesson.

During the poetry lesson, the students were generating their own questions, talking to each other and writing about what they were reading. During the novel lesson, though, I was generating the questions, doing the majority of the talking and the only writing the students were doing was half-page journal entries that probably simply summarized the chapters. Using literature circles and having the students inkshd about connections that they were making with the text and generating their own questions and thoughts about what they were reading would have been so much more meaningful.

The main difference between the poetry lesson and the novel lesson, however, was in the assessment of the reading. I assessed the students' reading of the poems by reading what they wrote in response to the poem. I assessed the reading of the novel by giving the students reading quizzes.

Everything changed after I gave the students that first reading quiz. From then

*continued on page 5*

# Dresden Lions Roar Into Summer With Writing Camp

Karen Helgeson

*is the University Editor at UT-Martin.*

DRESDEN, Tenn. - A group of Dresden Elementary School (DES) students had a busy summer.

One traveled to Japan, another to the moon. One narrowly escaped a runaway rocket and another became an airline pilot, all with the encouragement of the Dresden Lions Writing Camp.

With a pen and pencil and a lot of imagination, 16 DES students proved that summer fun includes more than baseball games and swimming. The writing camp participants gathered every day at Dresden Elementary the first week in June to write stories and poems. At the end, their works were gathered together and published in a book to create a record of a week of hard work and fun.

"I like that it's fun and you get to write stories as long as you want," said participant Melissa Burkeen, now in fifth grade. "You get to use your imagination in any story. I like everything about writing camp."

WTWP Teacher Consultants Diana Griffin and Pam Cooper, both fourth grade teachers at DES, led the writing camp. "We hope the writing exercises will encourage students to write outside of camp," Diana said. "More and more, testing

involves writing. There's going to be a writing portion on the SAT, and our own tests include writing."

But writing is important beyond preparation for testing. "Personally, it's just important to express yourself through writing. The students enjoyed being able to use their imaginations to write the stories they wanted to write."

Dresden Lions Writing Camp, an invitational writing camp for students who were to enter the third, fourth and fifth grades fall 2002, was sponsored by DES in partnership with the West Tennessee Writing Project. Diana and Pam led students through writing techniques including response groups, pair share and daily focus lessons. They also helped the students type their writings in Microsoft Word.

Student Hannah Rachels, a rising fifth-grader, described a typical day at writing camp in her journal. "We get to listen to short, interesting books," she wrote. "We get to create stories, and design our own book. In the middle of it all we have snack time. Toward the end of the day we type our stories for the book."

Paige Oliver, third grade, particularly enjoyed the instructor-led writing exercises. "I think that the response group is what benefits me the most because after you have done the response group you add the things you want in your story

and then you will be ready to type it," she said.

In addition to writing stories and poems, students stretched their imaginations by designing a writing camp T-shirt and the cover for their bound book of works.

The writing camp could not have succeeded without the support of DES principal Michael Laughrey.

"He's wonderful," said Diana. "He made sure that we had everything we needed, including materials, time, money, computers and the food for snacks. The kids know him and he knows the kids." Laughrey took his support one step further as he participated with the campers in an end-of-the-week reading of their book.

The Dresden Lions Writing Camp was partially supported by a Weakley County Education Foundation Grant, given through the Weakley County Chamber of Commerce.

## Note

*This story is an adaptation of the news release Karen Helgeson prepared for media outlets in June.*

# Before, During, and After (Cont. from page 4)

on the focus was on the quizzes and the tests and what's going to be on them rather than having a conversation about the book.

In an article from *Phi Delta Kappan* about what effective reading instructors do and don't do, Richard L. Allington said, "When assigned a story to read and questions to answer at the end, children who have developed the appropriate strategy to use while reading can respond correctly, but those who have not developed it cannot. And these latter children cannot acquire the strategy from the end-of-story questions" (744). The same was true for my reading quizzes. The questions on the quiz weren't going to teach the students any reading strategies. At the most, it would tell me who didn't know the reading strategies, but it wasn't going to teach them.

Cris Tovani suggests that teachers should, "Examine your current teaching methods and avoid pressures to cover content. Try to sidestep the temptation to feed your students information. Don't reduce

the opportunities your students have to read because they are having difficulty. Teach them the strategies that will help them read the assigned material, and assign interesting, accessible text" (21).

These are the mistakes that I made. I was more concerned about covering content than I was about helping the struggling readers. When they struggled I told them what they needed to know rather than letting them discover for themselves. "Oh, you didn't understand what happened to Simon when he came down from the mountain? Let me explain it to you." The more they struggled, the less I asked them to read on their own.

Mary Lou Marks told me one summer that she had once heard someone say that English teachers should not try to help students become literary scholars. They should try to help them become literate people. I was teaching my students *Lord of the Flies* but not reading. I was not helping them to become more literate people. In order to help my students become more literate people, I have to model reading strate-

gies, give more choices of reading material, offer more opportunities for student led discussions and change the way I assess reading. And I can't do these things so that my students can pass a test but so that they can talk about what they've read and remember what they've read so that they can use it again.

## Works Cited

Allington, Richard L. "What I've Learned About Effective Reading Instruction." *Phi Delta Kappan*, June (2002): 740-747.

Tovani, Cris. *I Read It, But I Don't Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers, 2000.

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/>

# From the Professional Bookshelf

Mary Lou Marks,

*a WTWP Teacher Consultant, is media specialist at Camden Central High School.*

**Teaching Grammar in Context** by **Constance Weaver (Heinemann, 1996)** ISBN 0-86709-375-7

Constance Weaver knows linguistics and grammar and finds the study of these disciplines fascinating. She also knows 70 years of research studies, most of which show what every language arts teacher knows deep down: students can practice grammar drills in isolation and do worksheets until the cows come home without becoming better writers. What may be surprising is her assertion that this kind of drill in isolation is also poor preparation for standardized test taking. This book, despite its dry title, is a fascinating look at the way we learn language and develop as writers, gaining fluency first, then growing toward clarity and finally taking aim at the moving target called "correctness." For example, is it correct to start a sentence with "and" or "but"? Most of us would say no, but Weaver cites a study showing that "in the expository writing of professionals, sentences began with a coordinating conjunction (most commonly *but* or *and*) 8.75 percent of the time" (76). I checked it out in a *Time* magazine article. It's true. I also spotted two deliberate, and very effective, sentence fragments. What's the conscientious language arts teacher to do?

Weaver argues that we should reconsider what counts as error and move away from a transmission oriented model of instruction in which learners are expected to master parts of decontextualized tasks. Citing the work of Routman, Calkins, Graves, et.al., she advocates a more transactional, cognitively based learning model involving both reading and writing workshops. In other words, kids will be better readers and writers if we guide them in doing what real readers and writers do.

Weaver is also intensely interested in the social aspects of language use in a stratified society. Her discussion of certain errors as status markers is enlightening. What is surprising is how few types of errors reach that status. Not that Weaver takes issues of correctness lightly. In fact, she is acutely aware of the social implications of correct usage. As a result, she advocates moving away from the transmission mode of instruction, which "adds up to a failure-oriented model, ferreting out students' weaknesses and preparing them to take their place in a stratified

society" and moving instead toward a transactional mode that "adds up to a success-oriented model, emphasizing students' strengths and preparing them to be the best they can be in a stratified society" (149).

The appendices and a companion volume (*Lessons to Share*, Heinemann, 1998) are rich with teaching ideas and student samples that illustrate Weaver's pedagogy.

## BRIEFLY NOTED

**Cohesive Writing** by **Carol Jago (Heinemann, 2002)** ISBN 0-86709-531-8

This slim (119 pages) volume is packed with ideas to help students write with focus and clarity. Jago anchors her writing instruction in four core beliefs:

1. In order to learn to write, one must write.
2. Authentic tasks and topics generate the most cohesive student writing.
3. Students need both supportive and critical feedback.
4. There is no cohesive writing without revision.

While she offers no silver bullets, no instant answers for English teachers' nagging questions, she does offer a variety of useful tools for engaging students in work that results in improved writing. Jago offers a brief overview of current pedagogy, but by page nine she is describing how she models and uses the Question Paper to help her students write authentically about literature. She includes graphic organizers, student samples and rubrics for a variety of activities. This is a user-friendly book. It's also a model for teachers interested in writing about their own practice. There is nothing preachy or high-handed about it. It is honest, insightful, and down to earth.

**Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men** **Michael W. Smith and Jeffery D. Wilhelm (Heinemann, 2002)** ISBN 0-86709-509-1

What does it take to get boys in our schools developing their reading and writing potential? How much are we willing to tweak the curriculum to make it happen? Smith and Wilhelm studied, through interviews, questionnaires, and reading logs, the attitudes and experiences of 49 male students in grades 7 – 12. The boys represented a variety of school settings and a range of achievement levels. The authors' findings offer both encouragement and challenge. Most of these young men were accomplished in an out-of-school activity. At the same time, most found their school English classes to be irrelevant. The effort to engage young men

like these in school literacy is a challenge many teachers face. This book gives us an effective tool to work with. It also has the best title of the year.

## Successful Mini-Grant Applicants

Congratulations to these Teacher Consultants of the West Tennessee Writing Project, successful applicants for \$100 WTWP mini-grants for 2002-2003. The teachers, schools, and projects:

**Renee Cooper**, 2nd grade, Camden Elementary, an after-school reading and writing club for first and second grade students.

**Nicole Claybrooks**, kindergarten, Milan Elementary, a program of professional reading for teachers.

**Lana Taylor Warren**, English and yearbook, Obion County Central High School, the second anthology to be produced by the after-school writing club.

**Paula Cox**, 5th grade, Briarwood School, Camden, an after-school literacy club for 4th and 5th grade students.

**Sheryl Alford**, media specialist, Dresden Middle School, professional development specifically related to facilitating writing clubs.

**Molly Coffman**, English and yearbook, Jackson Central Merry High School, particularly to communicate with parents, a class website.

**Lee Hudson**, Dyersburg Intermediate School, an internship at Nancie Atwell's Center for Teaching and Learning.

**Pam Cooper** and **Diana Griffin**, 4th grade Dresden Elementary, second year, invitational youth writing camp.

A second year of mini-grants will be available to WTWP Teacher Consultants, by applications with procedures announced on the WTWP listserv spring 2003.

# Kid Watching: A Teaching Expedition

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As they file in one by one equipped with the tools they will need—pencils, paper, clear backpacks—I study them and try to get a feel for what kind of students they are going to be. They, too, size me up as they pass. Some give an approving nod; others look nervous as if they are unsure of what to expect. At 5'3" I am not a menacing presence, but I remember having the same sort of apprehension on my first day.

When it is time for the day to begin, I start by introducing myself. I try to alleviate any undue stress they may be having about what I am going to expect from them, yet I try to establish, in a firm tone, the rules we will follow. They seem okay with what they have learned about me so I turn the tables toward them. They speak in words and body language.

I become very aware that I am the odd person out. Most of these kids have been going to school together since kindergarten, and to a third grader, that's a long time. They get a new teacher each year they move up, but they always have the same classmates, give or take one or two. Bonds have been carefully forming over time, ripening into solid friendships. As they share stories of summer escapades, I try to absorb it all and a funny thing begins to happen.

I hear words, faint at first, escaping from behind what they are saying aloud, "We went to see my grandma this summer"—I am a troublemaker. "My sister and I stayed at the babysitter's a lot and played"—I am lonely. "I just moved here for now, we'll be leaving in a few months"—I want to stay in one place and belong somewhere. "We went to Florida, and Kentucky, and I played ball a lot and we went to some museums"—I am confident and always the best, always.

The background noise is growing louder, echoing off the white, concrete walls and glossy floor tiles. I hear, clearly, the words they are saying for everyone. But, I also hear the muffled ones they do not want me to hear. Or do they? Perhaps I, as the teacher, have been given this amazing gift and they know it, sense it, and are reaching out to me to hear their voices. Not an everyday speaking voice, but a different voice—a quieter one that wants to be heard, needs to be heard, but rarely is.

I listen as they label themselves and their peers. He's the smart one. She's the pretty one. Those are the good kids. She is

the slow one. I can't imagine starting a new year with so much already decided for us. So I tell them that the great thing about the beginning of a new year is that you get to start all over. They think about this for a moment, and I wait for them to let it sink in. I figure that by saying this aloud, it will wipe our slates clean. I am wrong. It may not seem like it has been long enough for them to get attached to their roles in this group, but they have.

It reminded me of the old Mickey Mouse Club shows where the stars would come out, big smiles on their faces with a look of enthusiasm, wearing sweaters that clearly stated who they were. These kids had found a part to play and whether it was the lead role of popular, smart kid or underachiever, they had settled for it, acting accordingly and wearing their "club" sweaters proudly. I was not prepared for this level of preconception. I wanted to help, but I didn't know how.

I struggled that first six weeks, allowing them to continue to hide behind their false identities. It was at the end of that grading period that I saw how deeply engrained these notions had become. While giving out a test, the class asked if I could tell how many had gotten a perfect score. I said there was one person who had received a 100%. In unison they responded, "It was Chris." Not one child believed it could be his or her paper I was holding. I decided from that day on it was my responsibility to help them see their potential. Mind you it was not in my job description when I was hired; but like so many things omitted from what a teacher's job entails, it was vital because that group of kids needed it.

We took baby steps by finding something we were good at, talking about what we had experienced success in, and setting individual goals that were attainable. It didn't happen in a day. It was slow, gradual and repetitious. I felt sometimes that we spent too much time talking about it, and I didn't know if it was helping.

I had said over and over again that grades were not indicators of what kind of people we were or what we were capable of, but that they did have a purpose in the school. They allowed us to see how much someone had learned. The class was not convinced, and when they asked about grades after a test, I reluctantly agreed to tell them how many people had made A's and B's. It was near the end of the year, and throughout our time together, I had seen the numbers of "good" grades rise, so that was a positive. It was on this day that I realized things had changed. When I announced there were several A's, I waited, expecting to hear the usual

calling out of "smart kid" names. Not only did I not hear them saying names, I saw them looking around with it-could-be-me expressions.

I had mixed emotions as the year came to a close. I was concerned that there was too much of an emphasis on grades and that they were still using this as a way to gauge their worth. It is only now that I see that it was a big step for my students. Sure, they measured their success in letters in that instance, but through that they began to see what could happen if they gave up their roles and allowed themselves a chance to be someone they wanted to be.

After reading Parker Palmer, I see what took place in my classroom this past year in a new light. He says, "We can speak to the teacher within our students only when we are on speaking terms with the teacher within ourselves" (31). I may not have gotten all the way through my teacher's manual, but I listened to what my students were really saying. We made gains that conventional methods of evaluation cannot measure.

My experience in the WTWP Summer 2002 institute was inspirational. As I look ahead to this year, there are so many things I am anxious to do in a new way. I want to take a different approach to how I teach the curriculum, how I set up the room, how I deal with paperwork, and what goes into our portfolios. But, there is one thing I am not going to change. We will be checking our sweaters at the door with the option to get them back at the end of the year. If there is anyone who wants to take me up on the offer, my hope is that they will discover it no longer fits the person they have become.

## Works Cited

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

