

# Field Notes

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## One Teacher's Discovery by Glenda Arant

Participation in the West Tennessee Writing Project and English 305 at UT Martin have convinced me of the importance of writing across the curriculum. Last Spring, I assigned my seventh grade readers to write an original composition which had been inspired by a brief news article. I read them the news item which had inspired Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and also the narrative poem "Bombing in Birmingham" and its corresponding news article. The students were instructed to select a news item which made them feel some type of emotion and to be able to summarize its main idea. Using the genre of his or her choice, each student was to write an original composition which was inspired by the news article. Chad's composition, entitled "Bring Our Boys Home," was a poetic response to an article about Senator Dole's petition to President Clinton to withdraw American troops from Somalia. Chad is not a poetic genius, so one might wonder what excited me about his composition. His poem expressed concern about American troops being sent to foreign ports without adequately being able to defend themselves, without a clear idea of their mission, and without knowing exactly whose leadership they were to follow—the United Nations or the United States. These issues were not in his news item; however Chad had heard them discussed in his Social Studies Class.

This past Fall, inspired by a mini-lesson from English 305, I presented the prompt "If I were..." as a lead for my students' journal entry. As one can see, the responses were wonderful and diversified. There was Lindsey's poetic prose:

If I were...a cat.

Cats don't go to school, unless it's training school.

They sleep as long as they want to,  
whenever they want to...  
and oh, what joy!

Cats get patted on the head.  
Cats get rubbed and loved on...and  
oh!

I would be so spoiled  
If I were a cat.

Alan's satirical whimsy: "If I were a wall, I'd be so 'bored' ...I'd be so smart, because I'd do nothing but sit and listen to the teacher..."

and Sarah's poignant statement: "If I were a Special Education teacher, I'd change things a lot. I'd be more sensitive to people. My brother is Autistic and I get carried away when people make fun of him..."

Writing across the curriculum—transfer of learning—experiential learning—this is what teaching is all about. Chad was able to comprehend the concepts that were discussed in his Social Studies class and apply them to a reading assignment. Sarah and Alan were experiencing difficulty writing complete sentences at the beginning of this school year, just six weeks prior to this assignment. They are not slow students, either of them, but this is their first experience at writing. They have not been encouraged in the past to write. Yet they can write—and write well. They make me feel successful as a teacher, but all I have done is allow them the opportunity to express themselves.

Learning should be enjoyable—for the teacher and the student. The teacher should be a participant in the game of learning—a player/coach—one who benefits just as much from "winning the game" as do the other members of the team. To Jesse Stuart, "playing the learning game" was the "thread that ran so true." This thread runs true because it is a principle of life. Teaching should be more than imparting knowledge—it should prepare the child/student for living a

*Continued on Page 6*

# Witness, Mirror, Safety Net: A Teacher Journal Partnership

by Joy Ritchie and Kerstin Van Dervoort

Although we don't quite know how we got started, we have thought and journaled about the importance of this journal partnership as witness, mirror, and safety net for our teaching.

## How to get started

We can't remember how we decided to be journal partners. It happened three years ago in a classroom-based collaborative teacher research group we were part of. We'd known each other vaguely for several years because some of Kerstin's students went on to be Joy's students and their praise (and flattery) for each of us had predisposed us to respect each other as teachers, at the very least.

In our classroom-based research group we all did "focused observations" of our classes. Each week we wrote a detailed account of an incident, moment, activity, or experience with a student in one of our classes. We began sharing our focused-observations during the second semester of our research group meeting. In addition to telling the story of a moment in our class or the story of one of our students, we reflected on what troubled or puzzled us about it, what we wanted to consider further, or why we found it interesting. Each week we exchanged these. But our journals quickly evolved to more complex documents. Often Joy included in her journal to Kerstin, excerpts from the journal she was writing to her students about the previous class; or the journal she wrote to Kerstin became at least a part of the journal she wrote to her students.

Kerstin's journal to Joy became a place where, rather than reporting a focused observation and reflecting on it, she would plan and talk on her computer with Joy as a witness, to what she wanted to accomplish next or to a description of her Contemporary

Literature class, and later those journals became drafts of an article she wrote for the Nebraska English/Language Arts Bulletin. But Kerstin's journals also made their way back to her students. Not only did Joy read and comment on them, but Kerstin asked her students to comment on them also. Kerstin learned from journaling that she could show drafts to her students and their margin notes gave her incredible feedback and helpful editing. So both of us began including our students in our observation of classes.

## How do we keep going?

Both of us wrote and responded in the least amount of time possible, often at the very end of the day or very early in the morning. And we responded in the most telegraphic ways—by circling, underlining phrases or sentences, commenting briefly in the margins, asking questions like: "Can you tell me where to get that poem?" or "I can see how much conflict this is causing you." We promised each other that whatever we could manage, either in the way of a journal or a response, was just fine, and that it was more important we write something and know it would be read and appreciated than that we write or respond at great length.

But we also felt an obligation and a discipline not to come empty-handed, not to let each other down, and often at the end of each of our meetings we would help each other list our goals for the next week. Kerstin would say, "Okay, I'm going to write about 'guest adult listeners,' and I'll find you Mary Oliver's poem "Vultures." And Joy might say, "I'll write down the questions I asked my students to respond to last week; I'll bring you the Adrienne Rich essay and keep going with the stuff on conflict in my seminar."

After the seminar ended that spring, we promised to meet once a week during the summer to continue our writing and conversation. We met every Saturday morning from 6:30 until 8:00. Now, before you begin to think that we are crazy, not just disciplined, we should say that we live in the same

neighborhood, and that we met at the early hour so we could walk the mile and a half to the hot tub at Kerstin's mother's condominium. We carried coffee and cups along with our journals and pens in our backpacks. As we walked, our journal partnership became embedded in wider narratives of our lives as women, mothers, daughters, sisters, wives. Out conversations about teaching were surrounded by talk about our teenaged sons, our mothers, our gardens, and the birds and flowers we observed on our early-morning walk. In mid-October when the hot-tub was closed down for the season, we still walked to the Gas 'n Shop a few blocks away for coffee or, when it was too cold for that, we met on our way home from school, at a small neighborhood restaurant once a week or every other week as our schedules permitted.

## What do we accomplish?

Kerstin: "It's a way to see someone else's teaching. We 'see' another teacher teach by listening to stories teachers tell about what goes on in their classes. But, writing about our teaching and then having someone else read it is different from just talking about it. It changed what happened in our classes because it was easier to see what happened as 'data.' We could say, 'Well, here's another story I'll be able to reflect on with someone else to help me figure it out.' I find myself walking down the hall at school, beginning to frame a disastrous moment or a triumph in class into a journal entry."

Joy: "It's also a process of watching myself. When I read Kerstin's journals about her classes and she talks about questions she has or issues she's thinking about, although I'm 'observing' her teaching and thinking about teaching, I'm also really "observing" myself as a teacher. Kerstin's journals about her classes and her teaching, challenge me to think about what I'm doing in my classrooms. She and I are dealing with the same questions about writing and reading despite the difference in our courses and the ages of our students. Journaling with Kerstin grounds me in those very real questions, when the heady 'theory-

talk' of the university English department might pull me away from them or make me think they aren't theoretical—then they are."

Three metaphors have emerged in our conversations about the way journal narratives work to help us construct meaning about our teaching: the journal partnership is **witness, mirror, and safety net**. The stories we tell about our classrooms have allowed us to feel that we can watch another teacher, one whose teaching we respect, work through important issues of language learning in her classroom. She is also a witness to our plans, experiments, failures, and successes. Our journals also provide each of us with a mirror of our own beliefs, assumptions, and practices as teachers. When Kerstin writes about her questions about teaching writing, Joy not only sees into Kerstin's class, but she is also drawn to consider her own assumptions about writing instruction. The issues Kerstin raises about the diverse multicultural literature her students can choose to read in her contemporary literature classes provides Joy with ways to think about the Women's Literature class she's teaching on campus.

Our journal partnership also provides us a built-in safety net; a colleague who is not evaluating us, who does not even teach at the same level or in the same institution helps us see the broader assumptions and institutional constraints that shape our teaching, and she is there to support our on-going reflection and experimentation. We can take risks and change our teaching without just being concerned with whether "it works" or not, knowing that we have this means of thinking through the questions about language and literacy that we want to continue to examine. This shared witness, mirror, and safety net help us to continue to be challenged, invigorated, and exhilarated by this work we do.

Kerstin Van Dervoort teaches at Southeast High School in Lincoln, Nebraska. Joy Ritchie teaches in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln English Department. Kerstin and Joy will be presenters for a day at the '95 WTWP summer institute.

#### Publications by Teacher Consultants of WTWP:

\* "A Fit of Pique," essay, and "Drip-Dry," a poem, both by Gloria Howell, kindergarten teacher, Hillcrest Elementary, Troy, in *Writer's Ink*, 1994.

\* "Surviving Hardships: A Child's Recollections," an essay by Nancy Hamilton, English teacher, Obion County Central High School, Troy, in *Writer's Ink*, 1994.

## Summer 1993 Participants in the West Tennessee Writing Project

Adell Dew-Union City High  
Ann Cheatham-Union City Central Elementary  
Ann Kemp-Union City Central Elementary  
Betty Young-Dyer County High  
Bob Cowser-UT Martin, Dept. of English  
Carolyn Stark-Dyer County High  
Glenda Arant-Martin Junior High  
Jean A Little-Martin-Westview  
Kim Oliver Hawks-Margaret Newton  
Elementary  
Lockey Bowen-Grad. Assistant, UT Martin  
School of Education  
Mary Ellen Cowser-UT Martin, Dept. of  
English  
Nancy Hamilton-Obion County Central High  
Phyllis M. Cooper-Bruceton Central High  
Rita Paschall-Henry County Chapt. I  
Rhonda McLaughlin-Holice Powell School  
Rosemary Tillman-Dyer County High  
Rufus Moore-Peabody High  
Sherri Greer-Social Studies Ed. Graduate  
Sherry P. McBride-Holice Powell School  
Shirley Newman-Grove Middle School

## Dates To Remember

\*September 29-30, TN Council of Teachers of English, Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza, Memphis. For more information, contact Carolyn Phipps, Executive Director, TCTE, 7091 Crestridge, Memphis, TN 38119

\*October 13-15 Southern Festival of Books, Nashville.

\*November 16-19 National Council of Teachers of English, San Diego, CA

For further information about WTWP call:  
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(901) 587-7300; Michael Poore, Co-Director (901)  
587-7126, Editor of Field Notes, Laura J. Caton.

## Journals-The Neatest Thing by Lyn Weatherly

"I have a surprise for you today," I announced to my first grade class.

"What?" twenty little voices sang in chorus.

"We get to start writing in our very own journals today!"

"What's a journal?" Sara wondered.

And so began our day on the first of November, 1994. In the discussion that followed I explained that journals were places for people to write their very own thoughts and ideas. I said some people write poems or stories in their journals, some people gather data, and sometimes people record things they have done and how they feel about things.

"Do you want to know something really neat about journals?" I asked.

Eager faces nodded.

"Journals are documents of history! Remember when we were learning about the Pilgrims who came over on the Mayflower and Sara wondered how we knew all these things? We learned many of those facts about their trip because some people kept journals. In their journals they recorded names, dates, and events. Those journals were very important to them and they were very careful to keep them safe. We STILL have some of those journals from long ago!"

Appropriate oohs and ahhs were heard around the room.

"A lot of the information we read today about that trip that happened so long ago comes from the journals those people kept. Isn't that neat?"

Agreement that that was "neat" shone in bright eyes.

"But do you want to know what's really neat?"

More nods. (My class is so accommodating!)

"You'll get to take your journal home at the end of the year and keep it in a safe place too! Just imagine! Maybe twenty or thirty years from now you'll be up in the attic with you son or daughter and you'll come across this very journal! You'll get to open it up and remember things you did way back in first grade, and share them with your very own children!

"Wow!" they exclaimed in wonder. They really were getting revved up. They wanted those new journals I was holding in my hands. But I wasn't through yet.

"Do you know what the neatest thing is?" I asked.

They didn't.

"The neatest thing is that we get to write in our journals every single day for 10 whole minutes!"

They were astounded.

"And no one will tell us what to write! We can write anything we want!"

More astonishment.

"But the neatest thing is that we get to SHARE our writing if we want to. But we don't HAVE to. Can you believe it?"

They couldn't.

"And guess what," I continued, "we don't have to

worry about spelling. We just get to spell the sounds we hear. Isn't that neat?"

They thought it was neat.

"But the VERY NEATEST thing is that I will read your journals every night and write a note about your writing RIGHT IN YOUR JOURNAL!"

Well, by now the first graders were at such a fever pitch of excitement that I couldn't get the journals distributed quickly enough.

Almost three months have passed since that "neat" day when we started journal writing, and I have learned so many things as the first graders wrote and shared their journals. I have seen that first graders can write, and that they have things to write about. I have seen incredible leaps in student writing. Notice Matt's entry of 11/1/94. Matt's writing demonstrates that he can write wonderful sentences full of insight, imagination, and interesting information way before he has begun to use vowels in his writing.

*RE (We) Voot (used) Too HV (have)*

*20 KIS (kids) in R (our) Room*

*BAT (but) 1 AV (of) DAMA (them)*

*MOOD (moved) A (a) RA (way) Noow (Now)*

*WE HV (have) 19 KIS (kids) IN*

*R (our) KAS (class). I hv (have) A dog*

*HS (his) nam is TADE (Teddy)*

Matt's entry of 1/18/95 shows his rapid progression. Matt is now using vowels, some end punctuation, and lower case letters in his writing.

*I Gat a Soop (Super) Nontendo (Nintendo) for*

*Crismas. I aso (also) gat a*

*tlasop (telescope) for Crismis. in*

*kindrgrdin I lad (learned) Hor (how) too*

*mak latrs (letters) in too (into)*

*mak (make) latrs (letters) into atr (other) thin (things).*

Watching the children's progression has helped me gain new understandings about how children learn and is documentation for the value of the whole language approach that I use in my classroom. That's neat.

My students love journal writing so much that for Christmas I made each student two journals to use at home, "My Home Journal" and "My Family Journal." Parents, and students, and in some cases, siblings, are writing together at home. On the first day back from Christmas vacation Myra ran up to me clutching her home journal in her hand.

"Look at what I wrote in my journal at home!" she shouted. "Can I share it during share time?" Now THAT's really the neatest thing!

Lyn Weatherly teaches at Fox Hill Elementary in Kansas City, and participated in the WTWP summer 1994 writing institute.



*One Teacher's Discovery Continued...*

quality life. Just as the successful coach employs several game strategies to get the maximum potential from each of his players (and consequently his team), an effective teacher must be willing to attempt various instructional strategies to get the most potential from her students. I believe that I now have the resources, knowledge, skills, experience—all that is necessary to be that player/coach, that cheerleader, that facilitator of learning to assist my students in the game of living, learning, and loving. This philosophy is aptly summarized in a poster which hangs in Gooch Hall at UT Martin:

Good teaching  
is  
loving and listening  
sharing and supporting.  
It is being  
passionately human.

Glenda Arant teaches at Martin Junior High and is a teacher-consultant of WTWP.

**August 12, 1995 Teacher's  
Workshop Approved for Optional  
Day Of Inservice**

**Districts approved for optional day of inservice to attend the English Teachers' Workshop:** Bruceton-Hollow Rock Special; Crockett County; Dyersburg City; Fayette County; Hardeman County; Hardin County; Haywood County; Humboldt City System; Huntingdon Special; Lake County; Lauderdale County; McKenzie Special; Obion County; South Carroll Special; Tipton County; Trenton Special; Weakely County; and West Carroll

Summer 1994  
Participants in the  
West Tennessee Writing  
Project

Gloria Howell-Hillerest Elementary  
Marcia Coleman-West Carroll Primary  
Karen Pendergrass-McKenzie Junior High  
Gale C. Moy-E.A. Harrold Elementary  
Mary Jo Connell-Sharon Elementary  
Kathryn Cassetty-South Fulton Middle  
Penny Childrey-Lara Kendall Elementary  
Clay Barger-Huntingdon High  
Paulette T. Moody-Henry County High  
Suzanne Edwards-Dyersburg High  
Nancy Scott-Lake County High  
Sandy Simpson-Lake Road Elementary  
Beth Walker-UT Martin, Department  
of English  
Phyllis Brasher-Greenfield School  
Jill Mechal Kirk Barnett-Briarwood School  
Nancy Hamilton-Obion County Central High  
Glenda Arant-Martin Jr. High  
Jo Kathryn Maddox-Union City Middle  
Paula Martin-Secondary Science Education  
Athalia Donaldson-Martin Primay  
Jan Searcy-East Side Elementary  
Suzanne Powers-East Side Elementary



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