

Field Notes - Volume 3, Number 2

West Tennessee Writing Project Spring 1996

In this issue:

- Letting Go of Perfection
by Marilyn Etheredge
- Teacher Center Connection
- Yes, I Teach the Gifted
by Ann Hatton
- A Teacher Like Mrs. Boyte
by Faye Hardin
- 22nd Annual English Teachers' Workshop, about WTWP, goals, contact information

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Letting Go of Perfection

by Marilyn Etheredge

I have found Shel Silverstein's books of poetry, *A Light in the Attic* and *Where the Side Walk Ends*, perfect for jump starting daily writing. Each morning a child sits in my rocking chair and reads two poems. Sometimes I echo the lines of the poem, other times the children echo the lines, and always we discuss and respond to the poem. Take "Squishy Touch" as an example:

Squishy Touch

Everything King Midas touched turned to gold, the lucky fellow.

Every single thing I touch, turns to raspberry Jello-0).

Today I touched the kitchen wall (squish)

I went and punched my brother Paul (splish)

I tried to fix my bike last week (sploosh)

And kissed my mother on the cheek (gloosh).

I got into my overshoes (sklush)

I tried to read the Evening News (smush),

I sat down in the easy chair (splush).
I tried to comb my wavy hair (slush).
I took a dive into the sea (glush)--
Would you like to shake hands me with (sklush)?

After reading the poem we review briefly the King Midas story, comparing his touch of gold to the touch of raspberry jello. We then begin our brainstorming. What magic touch would you like to have? Hands wave and minds soar into unlimited touches created by the children. After a few minutes of brainstorming, children are instructed to take only a few minutes to consider problems that might be involved with their new magic touch. I re-read the poem as the children ponder and listen for one final time before writing for five minutes in their journals.

As soon as the timer begins, I sit in a student's desk, pick up my journal and pen and write with the students. I am the first to read my "Magic Touch" response to the class. At first the controlling teacher in me was hesitant about this, believing I must be in control of the children, monitoring them at all times, walking around the room, tapping them on the shoulder. Much to my surprise and pleasure all heads remain bowed, pencils moved throughout the five minutes and an awesome silence and stillness surrounded the room only to be broken by groans and moans when the timer rang.

My goal in the next step is to encourage the students to write more at a later date by responding to their written work as they read it aloud to the class. As each student reads I respond with one positive comment and one "think about" comment. For example, "I really liked the way you described your character in this paragraph. I wonder what his home looks like. Could you add that to your story?" Or, "I really liked all the descriptive verbs you used in your writing. I wonder, did you use the correct verb tense throughout your story? Could you look over your paper and check your verb tense?" Invariably every child skims over their work checking for correct verb tense, some erasing and replacing, some placing a question mark to check later.

My philosophy is, published work is perfection. Students publish one article a week from their journals. Each day I lead a Writer's Response Camp with four children bringing their journals and pencils. I begin the group by explaining one rule of grammar, one concept of writing and reading and ask children to check their papers for these rules and ideas. Students and teacher read their favorite response to the group with the group responding with one thing they liked and one thing they wonder. The author stars or underlines the things they liked and writes the "wonder" comments at the top of their papers. Children then exchange papers for editing of punctuation, spelling, and complete sentences. After peer editing, children move to Writer's Corner to complete their first draft of edited work, placing work in the Homework Box for me to edit later in the day. After final teacher editing children publish their work the next day and enter it in their Writer's Folder.

Motivating, modeling, and encouraging students in writing proves to be the key to excellence not only in writing, but in thinking, self-esteem, and discovery. Responding to excellent authors allows children to find the part of the story or poem that spoke to them; not to the teacher. This provides ownership for the students and builds on individual values. Teacher and peer modeling provide reinforcement and taps into the creative well we have dammed up for too long.

Encouraging ideas, thoughts, and writings of each other builds self-esteem, opens questions for further exploration, and promotes discovery for both teacher and students in their lives. The "Squishy Touch" response helped me understand the depression one child displayed over several weeks. Jake wrote:

"I've been thinking a lot lately about my aunt and her boyfriend. He died several weeks ago. My aunt is really upset. She's been trying to clean out all of his stuff. I'm going to get his guitar, his amplifier, and some of his tapes. It's a really neat electric guitar, but my

aunt is really sad and cries a lot. If I had a magic touch it would be one that made people come back to life. I'd rather have my aunt happy than any guitar."

Jake read his response to the class, choked on the last words, and spent the next few minutes with his head on his desk. Writing about pain is therapy. Jake didn't know about therapy. I doubt he even knew he was in pain until he began writing. From the structure of his response I think it just flowed from him onto the paper and was a discovery that enabled healing and perhaps closure for this ten-year-old child.

Last summer at the West Tennessee Writing Project intensive writing institute, I learned the difference between perfection and excellence. Perfection requires judgment, an automatic right or wrong. Excellence is simply being the best you can be and perhaps trying to improve yourself as you move through this mist called life. Perfection requires acceptance or rejection. Excellence involves only acceptance. Perfection means being the best. Excellence is being the best you can be. Perfection intones there is no room for improvement. Excellence allows us room to grow.

Marilyn Etheredge teaches 4th graders at Trenton Elementary School, Trenton.

Teacher Center Connection

With the help of Meredith Schultz, Newbern Elementary teacher, and '95 WTWP summer institute participant, WTWP has established a new working relationship with the Dyersburg/Dyer County Teacher Center.

July 9-10 at the Dyersburg/Dyer County Teacher Center, WTWP will conduct a two-day mini-version of the summer writing institute with teacher demonstrations, writing camp, and writing-response groups. This "mini-tute" is open to all teachers. Contact the Dyersburg/Dyer County Teacher Center to reserve your spot and watch for further information from the Teacher Center.

This fall, again at the Teacher Center and in cooperation with UT-Martin's Department of Continuing Education, WTWP will offer a 3-hour-credit version of the summer writing institute. "Seminar in Writing for Teachers" is available for undergraduate credit (English 496) to all teachers and available for graduate credit (English 696) to teachers who qualify for admission to UT-M graduate studies. English 496/696 will incorporate demonstrations by WTWP teacher consultants, reading about writing and teaching writing, writing camp, and writing response groups. The class will meet Thursday nights and some Saturday mornings starting after Labor Day and finishing before Thanksgiving.

For more information about the fall course look for the schedule of courses published by the UT-M Department of Continuing Education.

WTWP is grateful to Jeannie Larue, director of the Dyersburg/Dyer County Teacher Center, for welcoming these new cooperative ventures that extend the work of the West Tennessee Writing Project to more educators in West Tennessee, and to Meredith Schultz for seeing the possibilities of collaboration.

Reading and Writing Events Ahead

Aug. 10, 1996, UT-M English Department Workshop for Teachers, Boling University Center, UT-M Campus. See program and registration form in this issue.

Sept. 27-18, 1996, Tennessee Council of Teachers of English, Glenstone Lodge, Gatlinburg

Oct. 11-13, Southern Festival of Books, Legislative Plaza, Nashville

Nov. 21-24, National Council of Teachers of English, Chicago

We Publish, We Present

"Fresh Plowed Ground," by Kay Smith, 5th grade teacher Union City East Side Elementary, and WTWP teacher-consultant, appears in the 1995 Writers Ink.

Yes, I Teach the Gifted

by Ann Hatton

I love my job. I am a teacher, and my present assignment is as a teacher of the gifted grades five through eight. My subject matter is reading and creative writing. There's never a dull moment in the classroom and not only do I teach, but my students teach me.

Working with gifted students has made me realize that they have special needs which must be addressed. You see, there's a false rumor among teachers and the community that gifted students already know everything within their grade assignment and if they don't they should. After all they are gifted! Frequently I hear the remarks. "You're in the gifted class. You should know the answer to that question." Or, "You're a Probe student. Why don't you have your homework? I certainly thought you would know the answer to this question, after all you're in Probe (our gifted program)." Students are just as cruel. Their remarks include, "Oh you think you're smart just because you're in Probe. Nerd. Smarty Pants. I beat you on the last test. What happened to you Mr. A student?"

Most people are not aware of the frustration and tension that statements like these create for gifted students. The student is very much aware. The old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me," does not apply. Words do hurt children. Situations like these mentioned support the theory that gifted students have special needs. By not meeting these needs, emotional scars are imprinted on the child's psyche never to be forgotten.

Why is gifted under the umbrella of special education? I can tell you why. Special education programs are designed for students with exceptional need, and gifted students meet this criteria. These gifted students have needs ranging from dealing with insensitive cruel remarks, social acceptance, academic weaknesses, how to juggle all the expectations of others including parents and teachers when they are identified, and where to channel their abilities. Special education is designed to meet these needs in a smaller class setting for the students. I know what some of you are thinking. You believe special education should be for everyone. I agree, but that's another essay for another time.

In my classroom students are allowed to express their views, foster higher level thinking skills, learn subject matter presented, move at a fast pace, and just be themselves. Oh, they compete with each other but on friendly terms. All of my students don't make A's. They receive the average of the work they have done in the classroom. Students can create and learn when they are allowed the opportunity to respond in a non-threatening environment.

I have learned from my students that they have a tremendous bountiful gift for our society. Yet their contributions will only be plentiful when as a society we respect their potential

abilities and nurture their educational growth. Yes, I teach the gifted, and make no apology for doing so!

Ann Hatton teaches fifth through eighth grade reading and English at Caywood City School in Lexington.

A Teacher Like Mrs. Boyte

by Faye Hardin

I gave up my ambitions in the legal profession for teaching. I was twelve at the time, and Mrs. Boyte was my sixth grade teacher. Unlike my previous teachers she was able to see beyond my family's lack of financial standing in the community. She didn't patronize me, she wasn't overly attentive, she just treated me the same way she did the other kids.

She was young, energetic, and wore saddle oxfords. I do not remember one single thing she taught that year; I just remember she played with us at recess, treated us all with respect, and loved us. From that time on I wanted only to finish school, go to college (I was the only person in my family ever to attend college), and be a teacher like Mrs. Boyte.

And I have tried to do just that for thirty-one years now. I have never seen anything but students in my classroom: I don't see color, gender, or social standing. Sometimes, I don't even see the ragged blue jeans we're supposed to report to the office! What I do see are young people who are often insecure as I was. They may even have all the economic extras I didn't and still be insecure about something else. Many times they just need encouragement or structure which more and more parents have less and less time to provide.

I am known as a good disciplinarian in my system: students are aware that I expect consistency and attentiveness. In return they receive my best as a teacher as well as my concern for them as individuals. One of the things I'm looking forward to as we go to block scheduling is smaller classes with more time each day to assess individual needs.

Like Mrs. Boyte I do not talk down to my students. I try to provide an atmosphere where students know I expect their best effort without my babying them. As seniors in high school some of them are already parents, and most are working at least part time. But they also know they can talk to me about minor or major problems, from prom dates to career choices. I'm considered "hard" but fair by my former and current students. Alumni visit or write to say how much easier college or even a job has been because of my expectations of them. The most gratifying response I receive, however, occurs when I see a student who had a 59 first semester make a 92 second semester because even though he tests poorly I have assured him that he can graduate with an extra effort. Jerry believe me!

Am I ready to retire? Not as long as there are Jerry's who still have faith in themselves and in me. Besides, we're just now getting the kinks smoothed out in our city-country consolidation; and, as I mentioned earlier, we will be on a block schedule. We don't all have computers in our classrooms yet, but the state is working to make that a reality very soon. Finally, I'm too excited about an old means of encouragement I rediscovered this

summer to quit now: writing. The West Tennessee Writing Project with its whole language approach has provided the freedom and pedagogy I needed to be reminded of the importance of individuality. I want to provide an even richer writing experience for next year's class and for the one after that and...

Faye Hardin is a Senior English teacher at North Side High School in Jackson.

22nd Annual English Teachers' Workshop

Twenty-second Annual English Teachers' Workshop

TAPPING THE WELLSPRING: FRESH IDEAS FOR LANGUAGE ARTS AND ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

Saturday, August 10, 1996 Boling University Center Fee \$25

9:00-9:30 a.m. Registration, coffee and Danish rolls--lobby of the University Center; browsing in the UTM bookstore

9:30-10:45 Concurrent Sessions

"Please Let Me: Write and Revise!--at the Computer?" Kay Smith, 5th grade, East Side Elementary, Union City, and teacher-consultant of West Tennessee Writing Project Humanities Building Computer Lab, Room 117 Humanities

"Potpourri Characters: Creating Characters for Deeper Understanding," Angie Watson, high school English and drama, Big Sandy School, and teacher-consultant of West Tennessee Writing Project

Room 204

"Writing Through Reading: Children Building Friendships with Authors," Sherry McBride, K-3, Holice Powell Elementary, Fowlkes, and teacher-consultant of West Tennessee Writing Project

Room 206

"Tribal Yet Inclusive: Reading Multi and Cross-Cultural Literature," Philip Effiong, UTM Department of English

Room 208

10:45-11:00 Break

11:00-12:15 Concurrent Sessions

"A Is for Apple: Back to the Basics," Martha Freeman, kindergarten, Martin Primary, teacher-consultant of West Tennessee Writing Project

Room 206

"Poetry as No Big Deal," Mary Lou Marks, librarian, Camden Central High School, and co-director, West Tennessee Writing Project

Room 204

"Technology and Creativity in the Classroom," Glenn Everett, UTM Department of English and trainer for technology coordinators, project ConnecTen

Room 208

12:30-1:30 Luncheon--lemon pepper chicken, green beans, wild and long grain rice, mixed green salad, chocolate cheesecake--Room 201-202-203

1:45-3:15 Concurrent Sessions

"The Evaluation Process: To Bleed (Red Ink) or Not To Bleed", Glenda Arant, 7th grade math and language arts, Martin Junior High School, and co-director, West Tennessee Writing Project

Room 206

"Student Ownership in the TQM Classroom," Rosemary Tillman, senior English, Dyer County High School and teacher-consultant of West Tennessee Writing Project

Room 208

Approved for Optional Day of Inservice

This workshop has been approved by supervisors of instruction as an optional day of inservice for teachers in these school districts: Bradford; Bruceton-Hollow Rock Special; Carroll Academy; Crockett County; Dyer County; Hardeman County; Henderson County; Henry County; Humboldt City System; Huntingdon Special; Lake County; McKenzie; Obion County; South Carroll Special; Tipton County; Trenton Special; Weakley County; and West Carroll Special.

NOTE: INCLUDE STANDARD REGISTRATION FORM FROM CONTINUING EDUCATION

About WTWP

The West Tennessee Writing Project is in its fourth year as an affiliate site of the National Writing Project, University of California, Berkeley. Located in the Department of English at UT-Martin, WTWP is supported by grants from NWP with matching funds from The University of Tennessee at Martin. Additional funds come from Union City Schools, and to support the summer '96 WTWP institute, a 1995-96 Title II Eisenhower Professional Development Grant administered by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission.

The Director of WTWP is Margrethe Ahlschwede, assistant professor of English at UT-M. Co-directors are Mary Lou Marks, librarian at Camden Central High School, and Glenda Arant, 7th grade math and language arts teachers, Martin Junior High School.

For more information about inservice programs for your school, the July mini writing institute and the three-hour credit course in writing at the Dyersburg/Dyer County Teacher Center this fall, or other aspects of the West Tennessee Writing Project, contact: Margrethe Ahlschwede (mar-GRAY-da ALL-swede)

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