



Teachers promote social action through writing

by Claudia Danielsen

A reoccurring question surfaces while participating in various book groups. “What is my job as a teacher?”

The members of our social action book group have primarily been teachers who work with expelled students in an alternative education program. We often wonder what our role is and how we should be serving or influencing our students. What is truly important?

Think back to the teachers you remember from your portfolio of schoolyard memories. Most likely you remember someone who inspired, encouraged or supported you. Somehow he or she made you care.

How has the world changed since you were a student and what should our priorities be now?

In *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*, Bill Bigelow states, “One of the most important aims of teaching is to promote students to empathize with other human beings.” Our book group wanted to focus on this issue within the context of social justice and utilize writing as the avenue for discussion and understanding perspectives. The books we read and discussed were *Stirring Up Justice: Writing and Reading to Change the World*, by Jessica Singer (2006) and *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*, by Linda Christensen (2000).

Linda Christensen’s book starts with building community within the classroom and moving outward. In order to accomplish this there are many examples of activities to implement that begin with the individual.

Our book group members were encouraged by the ideas suggested such

as Praise Poems. The poems help students take a look at themselves in non-traditional ways and praise their attributes or experiences. Student examples are shared and teaching strategies are offered as well as templates. The process begins with self and creating an atmosphere in the classroom that is safe and allows

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risks for students. Students are encouraged to share and listen for writing styles and voices in each other’s pieces.

We found when we started from an individual’s experience of injustice or a feeling of a situation being unfair; the student is then able to begin to empathize with others. The movement outward begins with perspectives of characters in books or history.

Poetry is an amazing genre to express how a character may feel or would feel given specific details. Both books give examples of lessons and student pieces that demonstrate this approach. Soon students are able to see similarities in individual’s positions on issues that are relevant to their world.

Jessica Singer’s book outlines and gives a realistic time line to imple-

ment a unit focusing on this subject. This process lends itself nicely to extending perspectives, asking questions and exploring the community. Both authors demonstrate clearly how students began developing an awareness of people and issues while forming opinions that could then be expressed in writing.

Our book group was grateful for time lines, handouts, specific lesson suggestions and student samples to help facilitate our own planning. Ideas and student work was shared during our discussions and a path toward our planning was paved.

We now have a variety of writing genres that will be displayed and showcased during our Writing Symposium that focuses on tolerance and diversity. Student voices can be heard and shared with others to encourage dialogue and empathy.

The development of self-awareness, feeling safe in the classroom, identifying with others and then looking at your own community seems to be a natural progression toward promoting Social Justice through writing.

Once students can communicate their ideas in writing then changes can occur. How will the students move forward from empathy and awareness to making changes? How can we help facilitate this process of transformation and advocacy?

Our students themselves always leave us with questions that can be part of a future book group or possibly answered.

Claudia Danielsen teaches at the San Joaquin County Office of Education one Biddick school. SI Fellow in 2005.

CATE pushes TC out of comfort zone

by Brandy DeAlba

CATE:

A GVWP Proverb

There is an American maxim: the squeaky wheel gets the oil. Its Chinese counterpart: The nail that stands out gets hammered down.

Which of these would hold true for a small town GVWP presenter heading down south to the big California Association of Teachers of English conference?

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Though I am an experienced elementary presenter, how would the middle school crowd respond to my ideas? Would they see my enthusiasm in my best practice as something worthwhile? Worthy of a little oil? Or would I return home with Stanley Hammer marks on my forehead?

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There is something about getting pushed out of your comfort zone to make you re-evaluate what you are doing.

I was asked (pushed) to present at the CATE conference this past February. I felt an odd sense of trepidation accepting this push. This is my first year teaching seventh grade. As of yet, I have not grown accustomed to the term “middle school teacher.” Though I am an experienced elementary presenter, how would the middle school crowd respond to my ideas? Would they see my enthusiasm in my best practice as something worthwhile? Worthy of a little oil? Or would I return home with Stanley hammer marks on my forehead?

In the beginning of the demonstration, I began to prepare myself for the hammer welts. At first it was hard to pinpoint what was off. Everyone seemed to be paying attention and there were a lot of questions. Then I realized what was off: there was just one person asking all the questions.

It wasn't so much the questions that bothered me, but the suspicious or doubtful tone in which they were presented. My presenter experience kicked in and I told the participant that I would love to discuss her questions in depth after the demonstration, but due to the time limit, which was only 75 minutes, I must continue for the sake of the rest of the group. She acquiesced to my request and asked no further questions, nor did she stay afterwards to converse with me.

Though evaluations were great, I still had the sense that I just experienced my first heckler. Was this something I could look forward to on a regular basis from the middle school crowd?

That Sunday, I returned to the other end of the valley, comfortable, but not necessarily exuberant, the way I usually feel after a demonstration.

Two days into the work week I received a surprising email. My “heckler” had made contact.

Immediately I thought, “She butchered my best practice, it didn't pan out in her classroom, and now she is emailing me to tell me so.” To my relief, this was not the case.

She emailed me to tell me how wonderful the idea of using poetry to check for comprehension worked in her classroom. She said she had a “teachable moment” in her class, something she had not experienced for a very long time. A student actually wanted to come in after school so she could help him on his poetry piece. She thanked me for the demonstration and stated she was going to continue to look for ways to use poetry in her classroom.

My immediate sense of relief was

great. In a room full of 30 middle school teachers, I could not let one teacher go. I had felt frustrated that I could not meet her needs.

I guess it's the same in our classrooms; we are not truly satisfied unless we feel we have reached out to all our students. It is difficult to think of “the one that got away.”

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In the end, presenting to middle school teachers at CATE was no different from presenting in elementary classrooms back at home. After all, we teachers are a rare, wonderful breed of people, no matter our grade level or where we reside.

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Brandy DeAlba teaches seventh grade at Roosevelt School in Stockton. Brandy has been a TC with Great Valley Writing Project since 1999.

Participation in ETS workshop provides comfort

by Frances Chamberlain

When ETS (the Educational Testing Service) invited me to participate in the 2006 rangefinding workshop for the seventh grade Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) writing test, I was very excited. Standardized test scoring has always been something of a mystery to me, and I know it is to many other educators as well. Here was my chance to gain some insight.

My district works hard to ensure that our students learn the writing skills necessary for both the STAR writing test and life in general, so I was eager to learn as much as I could about the writing assessment process.

The goal of the workshop was to create a scoring scale for the STAR writing test by evaluating various writing samples and determining appropriate scores. For example, if the group determined that a particular writing sample should be scored a "1," actual test scorers would score a paper with the same characteristics as a "1."

To develop the scoring scale, the

group reviewed field test writing samples, scoring each sample as a 1, 2, 3, or 4. Each participant evaluated a great number of papers over the two-day period. After a testing representative recorded all the scores, lively discussions ensued that addressed many questions and issues on writing that educators face on a daily basis. Once discussions concluded, the group decided on final scores.

The discussions were very much the heart of the workshop, as they provided valuable insight into how the state, as a community of educators, evaluates its students' writing. Discussion topics ranged from general characteristics of writing genres to the scoring of English Language Learners (ELL). Questions also frequently arose regarding general scoring considerations. As expected, the group adopted a holistic scoring approach emphasizing overall writing quality.

I was so glad that ETS invited educators to contribute to the scoring process because our daily experiences in the classroom give us a

unique perspective on student writing. Many of the workshop participants were teachers, all equally devoted to creating a fair, consistent scoring system for our students. Knowing that teachers have a voice in the educational testing process is comforting.

For better or worse, testing is here to stay, so it is our collective responsibility to prepare our students for the challenge in a fair and thoughtful manner.

My workshop participation was an important and enjoyable experience. The only real obstacle we teachers faced during our visit to Downtown Sacramento was finding a restaurant open past three in the afternoon. Groups of us waved at each other as we foraged for dinner. Luckily, we all found some food and returned home with full stomachs and a great sense of accomplishment.

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Frances Chamberlain teaches seventh grade at Wicklund School in Mountain House. Frances has been a Great Valley Writing Project TC since 2004.

EL programs lack necessary components

by Jose Aldaco

Many English Language Learners have become EL-Lifers. Within the State of California school districts, a great number of our English Language Learners have become EL-Lifers based on CELDT and/or CST scores.

Teachers need to put the following in place in order to more properly serve our ELL's: high expectations, modeling what is expected, checking for understanding of the objective/task, using academic language across the curriculum, providing structured practices and creating language objectives that reflect the standard be-

ing addressed in the lesson.

Year after year, the number of English Learners who qualify for reclassification is just a handful. They don't meet the requirements for reclassification set by districts that follow the guidelines set by the California Department of Education. At a recent Asilomar conference, California Department of Education officials described the five types of programs for English Language Arts (ELA) adoption. CDE explained that each ELA program has component materials for a 30-minute to one-hour segment of English Language Development (ELD) that will not meet the needs of our EL population,

as it does not address the ELD levels or ELD standards.

In many cases, school/districts believe that by teaching these "ELD components" of their state-adopted ELA curriculum, they are meeting the needs of these populations.

However, without the elements I previously listed and the continuous use of academic language in our schools and communities, English Learners will fail to move out of the EL-Lifer classification.

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Jose Aldaco is the principal of Waterford Middle School. Jose has been a TC with Great Valley Writing Project since 2003.

GVWP goes

by **Juliet Wahleithner**

Being passionate about the teaching of writing is part of what drew me to my involvement in Great Valley Writing Project. It's also what has fuelled my continued work over these past five years. And it's what I tried to emphasize more than anything else while meeting and educating legislators and their staff members in Washington, DC March 29.

The 197 National Writing Project sites are funded by the federal government. For several years NWP has been struck from the budget. Consequently, NWP holds its annual Spring meeting in Washington DC inviting representatives from each site to converge and hit the marble halls en masse.

Thursday began with a 7:30 a.m. rally session inside the Dirksen Senate Building. We all sat together in our finest – suits and heels for the women – eager to take on the day. Richard Sterling, NWP's executive director, and Mary Ann Smith, NWP's Government Affairs and Public Relations Director, reviewed our agenda for the day. We heard about what to do and what not to do from Ellin Nolan of Washington Partners and about the climate on "The Hill." (Our visit just happened to coincide with the signing of the Iraq War Bill.) We learned about the specifics of how the appropriations funding is used and the specific data about why NWP is an effective source of professional development from Mark St. John of Inverness Research Group. Finally, we were inspired by students from Baltimore's Dream Keepers program. With that, we were off.

Carol and I had four meetings scheduled for the day. For the first, we were part of the California delegation meeting with Senator Boxer's aide. The thing about these meetings is the necessity of being brief. Everyone in DC, it seems, is on a tight time schedule. This is especially true on the day of the Iraq War vote and

the day before the break for spring recess. Even more so when these two days coincide, as they did for us.

In the meeting with Boxer's aide, we each had two minutes to highlight some aspect of our site. In this meeting, I showcased a Power Point slide show highlighting GVWP's young writers and family literacy programs; Carol discussed the work done by

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our alternative education TCs Dena Crowe, Michelle Guzman and Claudia Danielsen. This meeting was more of a thank-you, as Senator Boxer has supported the NWP for the past decade.

Once this 20-minute meeting was over, Carol and I had a break before our 1:30 appointment with Representative Jerry McNerney's aide. Of course, making it to this meeting required a walk to buildings on the opposite side of Capitol Hill. We decided to make the walk even more scenic by visiting the Supreme Court building where we could both sightsee and have a working lunch in the building cafeteria amidst visiting school groups. I was madly editing the longer version PowerPoint I had prepared for the trip, making sure it provided the right photos to tug on the heartstrings and impressive statistics to show that we really do mean business.

We arrived early at the Cannon Building and found McNerney's

office where we continued to prep. While sitting on a large window ledge at the end of a hallway, we practiced our final draft presentation. Finally, it was time. This meeting was my biggest source of fear for the whole trip. For the Boxer meeting, I was not in charge. My meeting later in the day was with a staff member whom I had met and connected with last year. This meeting, however, was uncharted territory. We walked into the office and looked around. Immediately, my anxiety was dispelled as I peaked into the staff members' office and caught site of one of my former students. She exclaimed, "What are you doing here?" and rushed out to give me a hug. As we were chatting, arrangements were made and next thing I knew, Carol and I were being ushered into Representative McNerney's office, with Congressman McNerney! Suddenly, I felt my anxiety flooding back. Thank goodness Carol was with me.

Here I have to back up a bit. Weeks before this visit, I had contacted aides and schedulers to request meetings with Congressional members and their education aides. However, I knew the chances of actually meeting with the Congressmen were somewhere between slim and none. Thus, I just assumed we'd be meeting with McNerney's aide, Theresa Frison, a Linden native. Obviously, I again saw the problem with making assumptions.

As we walked in his office, Congressman McNerney was beginning his Greek salad. We assured him he could continue eating while we talked, and so he brought it with him as we sat at his round conference table. Quickly, we tried to educate him about the Great Valley Writing Project -- how we operate, what we do, why we're important, who we serve - all without taking a breath. He ate his salad and asked a few questions while Theresa took copious notes. At the end of the meeting, he seemed positive about the work of GVWP, but there were no promises of his

to Washington

signature on the Dear Colleague letter. This would require follow-up phone calls.

As we left the office, Carol and I split up: she was off to join the California delegation with Senator Feinstein's aide; I was headed to meet with Congressman Cardoza's aide, of this I was sure, for another thank you visit since he had already signed. Nevertheless, going solo caused me another bit of anxiety.

When I walked into this office, it buzzed with all the excitement of the day. Beth, whom I had met last year, came out to greet me and asked if I minded if we just sat on the couch in

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the waiting area. Somehow, this was exactly the level of comfort I needed. Her familiar face, the comfort of the couch, and the knowledge that it was a thank you visit all combined to

make me feel like I was just chatting with a friend while sharing a slideshow about the work of GVWP, a very familiar feeling!

My three 20-minute visits over, I was off to meet Carol to celebrate. After changing into more reasonable clothes we convened again with our NWP colleagues at the Smithsonian Postal Museum for the Celebration Reception. It's here that TCs again connect and share the good news of the day. I found BAWP TC Keith Brown and Carrie Usui from UCLA and began strategizing how California teachers can advocate for CWP.

Friday, the final day of the meeting, was a time of learning and rejuvenation for our work at home. We met as a large group to first share success stories from our meetings. Our keynote speaker, Patricia Lambert-Stock inspired us with her research analyzing the NWP model of the workshop demonstration. Following this were two round table sessions on a variety of topics from "Closing the Achievement Gap" to "Communicating the Work of Your Site."

The meeting concluded with a final sharing of successes and closing remarks.

Attending this meeting each year has added another dimension to my work with GVWP and to my work as an educator, especially in this era of No Child Left Behind. I feel a responsibility to communicate not just the work of GVWP, but to also provide a face for these congressional aides to remember when they hear about the work of teachers. I want them to understand that we are working to effectively educate students to the best of our abilities with the resources we have. And I want them to know especially that, as GVWP TCs, we are passionate about the teaching of writing.

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Juliet Wahleithner is an English Language Arts Curriculum Coach in Lodi Unified. She serves as the Communications Coordinator for GVWP.

How TCs can advocate for GVWP

- write a thank you note to a legislator who signed the Dear Colleague letter (Congressmen McNerney and Cardoza and Senators Boxer and Feinstein) and send with student artwork
- send a sample copy of a family literacy book or young writer anthology
- invite a legislator or a member of his/her office staff to a young writer event or family literacy event
- inform local newspapers of family literacy and young writing events
- work to cultivate a relationship with small-town newspapers
- invite school board members to writing/literacy programs at school sites

I thought the bleeding had stopped

by Janet Lenards

“...when we grade papers, we must ensure that a student essay rife with errors is returned with those errors clearly identified. The paper should bleed” (Jago 4).

I have seen Carol Jago’s name in every issue of *California English* I have read. As the director of the California Reading and Literature Project and the editor of CATE’s magazine *California English*, Jago has earned my respect. I was shocked, then, to read in her opening pages of *Papers, Papers Papers* that she unashamedly bleeds red ink on students’ drafts when she is correcting them.

This is an issue I have been taking a stand on for the past year. I have questioned whether we overwhelm our students to the point of paralysis when we identify every error they make in a paper. Don’t they become frustrated that their ideas are not heard in their writing? Isn’t the core of the writing the development of strong ideas within a solidly organized structure? I had come to the conclusion that conventions mat-

tered, but helping the student communicate and develop their ideas came first. How can a student pick through all the red ink indicating spelling and punctuation errors and find the enthusiasm to care about rewriting a poorly developed conclusion? Yet Jago defends her practice by saying that students need to develop good habits in their writing. She chooses six mistakes in grammar that should always be identified: subject – verb agreement, spelling, run-on and fragmented sentences, there, their, they’re, its and it’s and capitalization (2). While grading she is able to identify these errors quickly and focus her attention on the paper’s content. Jago acknowledges that content development is the primary focus but she does not let these basic errors go unnoted.

These six errors in grammar are common across the grade levels. When I read her list I recognize the same culprits that ran amok in my students’ writing. At the 7th and 8th grade level when I chose my battles I focused on run-on and fragmented sentences. I could pass over a spelling or punctuation error, but basic sentence structure errors earned a quick mark in the margins. In further considering Jago’s position I realize that perhaps the amount of basic errors we should tolerate changes with

the grade level that we are teaching. Those same basic errors that we overlook when a student is an emerging writer, in grades 4-8 or an ELD student for instance, may be acceptable, whereas by the time a student reaches high school the errors should no longer be tolerated. Is a high school student more capable of seeing a paper covered with red ink and still have the heart to pick up their pen and revise? I don’t know. But I think Jago is right, if we want to help them improve in the writing that will define their success outside of school high school, students need to know how far behind they are in these basic conventional standards.

For me, I will continue to encourage my students to develop their ideas in the infant stages of their writing. I will try to instill in them the excitement that comes from writing a good story. I’m not advocating the practice of ignoring conventions in the emerging writer, but I believe it has to stand in the back of the line and wait its turn patiently until the students are ready to make their words flow like the good writers they read and admire.

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Janet Lenards works as a Writing Coach at Sequoia Elementary in Manteca. This is her first year as a TC with GVWP.

Karinne Gordon publishes article

Karinne Gordon, a 2005 Summer Institute fellow, was recently published in the Winter/Spring 2007 issue of *Ohio Journal of English Language Arts*.

In the article, “Personal Voice in Academic Writing”, Gordon discusses how the practice of banishing personal pronouns from academic

writing can stunt student growth as writers. It addresses three common myths about the use of personal pronouns (1. The SAT essay must be written in formal, “objective” language, 2. College English professors and style manuals ban the use of personal pronouns in academic writing, and 3. Use of the first person is unac-

ceptable in the hard sciences) and offers advice on how to teach students to use personal pronouns appropriately and judiciously in their writing to develop a more natural “voice.”

A copy of this issue can be ordered from the Ohio Council of Teachers of English at www.octela.org.

In Print, the Great Valley Writing Project newsletter, is edited by Juliet Wahleithner. Comments or concerns can be directed to juliet@wahleithner.com.