



Class Discovers The Power of One Word

by Dora Robertson

Having just completed the Great Valley Writing Project Summer Institute in August, using the Word of the Day seemed indispensable. The power of a single word used to begin a discussion, to teach a lesson, to build relationships with students, to offer them a choice, and to ensure students develop as writers was a focus. The possibilities were virtually endless, and I decided that this would be a requirement at the start of the new school year.

Initially, when I introduced it to my students in the sixth-and-seventh-grades High Point class as a means of encouraging writing, all shoulders that had once been sitting tall, drooped. Backs slouched, and the sour look of disappointment virtually sucked the life out of the room. These students had assumed that I would give a prompt a day to which they would have to respond, and had automatically tuned out. How could I blame them?

Luckily, it didn't take long to convince them that this was their opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings, and emotions on paper. When they heard that they could write anything that came to mind on the subject, even if that meant going off course, their shoulders immediately straightened, and looks of excitement filled the room.

The first day was a race to see who could write the most. It was incredible! The echoing of graphite on paper, fierce concentration, and sheer engagement surrounded me

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The class listened.**

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as I stole a glance at my pupils and simultaneously tried to write with them. Talk about feeling accomplishment. The pride in each of their faces resounded throughout.

A domino effect of wanting to

read aloud followed. At first, much of the writing was not very personal, but of course, it didn't take long for the metamorphosis to take place. It actually began on the day that the class read one of Gary Soto's poems, in which a boy wrote a letter to his father working in Tulare, a message of time having passed without him.

On this day, I listened and the class listened as students poured their hearts out with testimonies of the realities of growing up without the presence of a father figure, or mother, and in some cases, both. Voluntarily, students shared their experiences, some tragic, others, utopia-like. They wanted someone to listen, to be heard. I listened. The class listened.

I feel that through the Word of the Day, my students are finding the confidence that they may have lacked before in expressing themselves in writing, in dealing with difficult situations, and in knowing that others share in their life experiences. As the days go by, my students are the ones that teach me valuable lessons on perseverance, hope, tolerance, love, and laughter.

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Dora Robertson teaches seventh and eighth grade at Waterford Elementary School where she has taught the GVWP migrant and EL Young Writers Camps since 2003.

Engaging Teachers Within the

by Janet Lenards

Entering into my second year of coaching fourth through eighth grade teachers at Sequoia Elementary school in Manteca, California, I felt optimistic about the growth the team of teachers had made the year before. They had moved beyond a fear of being observed into a community of teachers willing to share their teaching strategies with each other through grade level meetings and an open visitation practice. They had also gone beyond a superficial perusal of student data to an understanding of how that data should drive decisions on instruction in their classrooms. Together they discovered ways to maintain order while pulling small groups of students back to re-teach or front load the day's lesson.

During a recent grade level meeting I watched while teachers poured over state and district assessments, hungry to understand the greatest need of their current students. When we created visual posters by each grade, the entire staff could easily determine that reading comprehension was our greatest concern school-wide. It was at this point that the optimism I felt at the beginning of the year began to be tested. It is not enough that we realize our students are having difficulty in reading comprehension, we have to look at what we're doing and be willing to make some changes.

I started the process by formulating an Action Plan worksheet the teachers could use as a stepping stool to view what was working in their classrooms and what needed to be changed. We began our inquiry by discussing how reading comprehension strategies were taught in their

classrooms. Two very distinct narratives emerged.

With the veteran teachers, (the two- percent of teachers in grades 4th –8th who have taught more than five years), the strategies they used were so embedded in their practice that they were unaware of what they were doing. Yet their strategies were identifiable. While reading a story

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with the class, they would stop at appropriate places to predict, summarize and clarify the selection. They ignored the predetermined discussion questions in the teacher's edition and created questions on the spot based on their students' background and interests. The veteran teachers complained that the short excerpts in the anthology broke up rich literary works, which if studied in full, cre-

ated an enjoyment of reading. For instance, instead of reading all of Gary Paulson's *Hatchet* the students were given a brief excerpt that mangled the depth of despair Brian, the main character, felt and the sense of satisfaction the reader gained from the character's conquest of the brutal elements.

The new teachers, when asked how they approached reading comprehension in their classroom, referred to the instructions in the teacher's edition. Some teachers stopped at every point suggested in the teachers' edition to check their students' understanding of the text. Others, realizing this broke up the reading too often, picked and chose which questions they would ask.

The scripted lesson in the Houghton Mifflin teacher's edition meant they did not have to pre-read the selection and determine where their students might need clarification. The spots where their students would need clarification were predetermined for them.

These young teachers complained of the disconnect between the selection choices in the anthology and their students' lives. While reading about Michelle Quan the students were expected to identify with the obstacles she overcame in her life and the determination she exhibited in her quest for an Olympic gold medal. In a school where 75% of the students receive free and reduced lunch, the idea of competing for a gold medal, whether difficult or not, does not seem as big an obstacle as living out of the family car.

Yet still, these young teachers approached the text through the guided questions provided by the publisher. As a result their students became dis-

Houghton Mifflin Curriculum

engaged from the text and were unable to find the enjoyment that reading can bring.

The fear expressed by all teachers, even veteran teachers, was the fear of getting “caught” doing something other than the district-mandated reading program. Pacing schedules have been submitted which map out where a teacher will be in the teacher’s edition at any given day during the school year. The teachers feel confined to working within the prescribed curriculum, in a prescribed manner. But clearly it has not proven to be effective for the majority of our students.

If we are seeing reading comprehension scores drop each year, we need to look at what we are doing in the classroom. We know that in order to engage students we need to connect the new knowledge to their old knowledge. We also know that the content needs to be relevant in the eyes of the student. Why is it important to them that they be exposed to an athlete’s struggle for Olympic gold? How can we make that connection and prove its relevance to the struggles they face? We should be confident that we know our students better than the publishers do and approach the material at hand in a way that our students can access it. This requires adaptation. It doesn’t mean that we don’t teach the content prescribed by Houghton Mifflin, it means that we look at teaching it differently for our student population.

This approach is exactly the approach that the veteran teachers at our school do intuitively. They identify the concepts they are expected to teach their students, and then they adjust their pedagogy according to what life experiences their students

bring with them. New teachers at our school were getting sucked into the ease and convenience of having a curriculum that predicted the questions their students would ask about a reading selection and as they fell into the routine of asking prescribed

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In looking at the data it would have been easy for these teachers to dismiss low reading comprehension test scores on elements out of their control. They could have complained that their students do not have access to outside reading, that many read below grade level, or that they seem apathetic about the selections. Instead, because of the trust and respect the teachers have developed for each other, they were able to discuss their different approaches to the curriculum openly and honestly with each other and compare strategies.

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questions, their students became more and more disengaged in the reading.

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been easy for these teachers to dismiss low reading comprehension test scores on elements out of their control. They could have complained that their students do not have access to outside reading, that many read below grade level, or that they seem apathetic about the selections. Instead, because of the trust and respect the teachers have developed for each other, they were able to discuss their different approaches to the curriculum openly and honestly with each other and compare strategies.

As a literacy coach, I see my role as a facilitator in these discussions. It is a powerful thing to watch a group of teachers check their egos at the door and admit that they may be approaching the curriculum too passively. The new teachers began to see the scripted program as a suggestion of instructional strategies, a place to step off from in building their own pedagogy.

Through discussion, the teachers realized that the prescriptive presentation of material in their teachers’ edition, while employing good strategies, did not ask the questions their students needed to ponder in order to connect to the material. They needed to get engaged in their presentation of the material in order to begin to engage their students. It is a bold move for these new teachers to use their teacher’s editions as a guide for instruction rather than a script. Within a community of learners they will have the backing to explore this possibility.

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Janet Lenards works as a literacy coach at Sequoia Elementary School in Manteca. This is her first year working as a Teacher Consultant for the Great Valley Writing Project.

Family Writing Night Finds Success

by **Kathy Leles**

Put together four teachers, an outgoing administrator, a roomful of future writers and the backing of the Great Valley Writing Project and what do you get? It's Writing Night!

On October 3, 2006, Louis Bohn Elementary School held its Inaugural Writing Night – an evening where elementary school children of all ages, along with their parents, came together to learn the techniques of becoming talented writers from experienced teachers. But how did we come up with this idea?

It all began at the end of the 2005-2006 school year when Great Valley Writing Consultants Jane Baker and Mike Chivers wanted to get families together on one night to write. I hopped on board along with veteran teacher Kathy Trombino. As second to fifth grade teachers, we met and brainstormed how we could make this a fun and unique writing experience. What will participants write about? Will we need a PowerPoint? Do we need food? How about a raffle? Mmmmm, the questions. But we had the answers!

Using the best practice of fellow GVWP consultant Robin Alexander, participants would bring in a photo that depicted someone or something in action and create a six-room poem. If someone forgot a personal photo, pictures from magazines were readily available.

As the night began, participants trickled in and were greeted by Maria Leles to sign in, fill out a raffle ticket, complete a fun survey and find another person who shared their answers.

Once completed, the night of writing began.

Jane Baker introduced everyone and also welcomed GVWP Director Carol Minner. I shared my 6-room

poem and Kathy Trombino read a short story in English and Spanish.

Before we knew it, there were over 60 adults and children gathered in the library, and we were ready to introduce the assignment and get them writing. With the help of Mike Chivers and a beautifully detailed Powerpoint presentation, Jane read the directions of each “box” and Mike’s daughter Julia translated them into Spanish.

By the end of the evening, children of all ages were ready to share their work, and we were amazed at the quality of work we heard! Stories of ballerinas, fishermen, musicians, ocean life and the importance of family were just some of the topics – all written from just one photograph!

Many thanks go out to Principal Charles Hill for his support, attendance and kind words; Kathy Trombino and Carol Minner for the wonderful books raffled off; our Parent Teacher Organization who were in charge of snacks and getting Jamba Juice to our event; and Jeremy Walton for photographing the event. We also thank the GVWP for their support and willingness to publish the work from this evening’s event. Most importantly, we thank everyone for allowing us to share the love of writing and look forward to another writing night at Bohn Elementary School.

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**She walks down the street
in her beautiful dress**

Dressed for all to see

**The day is cold, but
she feels warm inside**

**The sounds all around her
make her want to dance**

Shall I dance to the music?

I feel happy to be here

I feel beautiful!

I feel beautiful!

I feel beautiful!

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**Written by the
Marquez Family
Christina, Jessica and Natalie
Bohn Elementary School**

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Kathy Leles teaches fifth grade at Bohn Elementary School in Tracy. She attended 2006 Summer Institute.

My Father the Transporter

TC's Work With Her Father Leads to Teaching

by **Alejandra Ledesma**

Since I was in fourth grade, my dad has been a busdriver. He likes his job. He takes students to school, as well as other places.

As I grew, he occasionally asked me to help correct a citation he had to write for an unruly child. He sat down with a Spanish/English dictionary and wrote the citation. When he finished, he gave it to me to proofread. I remember how each time I looked over the work, the vocabulary struck me because he used such a wide range of words. After I made a few changes, discussion followed as I explained the changes I made. He rewrote, and returned his draft to me so I could check it one more time. After explaining each revision, he was satisfied and sat down to write the final draft.

I think of where I am today and come to the realization that I started teaching as a child. Not to a younger sibling, but to my dad. The irony is that my dad was the first to try to discourage me from becoming a teacher. My dad was not just a bus driver. He was also the afternoon janitor at school. When I first told my father I wanted to be a teacher, his response was, "No mija, teachers work too much. It's not an easy job."

I knew becoming a teacher was frustrating for him, but being his daughter, I did not pay much mind. My mom, on the other hand, encouraged me to enter the teaching profession. "It's the best job." She said, "You get to have the weekends and summer off and the same vacation days as your children." I knew this was not true, but why burst

her bubble?

My dad looked at her with an incredulous look in his brown eyes; then, went on to tell me how he would be working at 7 p.m., and teachers were still working. He also saw them carry work home. Then there were those days when he arrived to prep his bus in the mornings and he noticed teachers already at work! And worst of all were the weekend calls from the security company

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alerting my dad that the alarm had been set off, only to find when he arrived, that the culprit had been a teacher who needed to work in his or her room and did not know the security code.

Now, after a few years of teaching, I know what my dad was talking about. Teaching is a difficult job. As a bilingual teacher, I often face the challenges of not having resources in the language students need. My bilingual team and I suffer when we need to teach a concept without materials. We find ourselves borrowing pages from English books and copying them for our students.

When so much time is spent worrying about reading and vocabulary, what happens to the time for writing? It is cut to almost *nada*.

Recently, I was a part of a book study with my second grade team. We studied the *6 + 1 Traits of Writing* by Ruth Culham searching for any "aha's!" to our writing problem. We read a chapter a week, and met at one of our houses to discuss that chapter and any ideas we could use in our bilingual classrooms. It was a great experience sharing perspectives with my colleagues. We discussed the great mini-lessons the Culham book offered, and adapted the ideas to implement them with our students.

Each writing trait had a song written to the tune of a well-known children's song. After each chapter I asked myself, "O.K. Now what? How can I use these great ideas and songs in class with my students?" The answer followed quickly enough. TRANSLATE!

Now I find myself doing what my father used to do. I sit down and translate the material I want to use in class. Not just in math and language arts, but in other subjects where the materials are scarce. Every once in a while, I call my dad and read to him what I translated to get his opinion.

Sometimes he tells me, "Look for another job. You're working too much." I just smile and tell him he is the one who led me to where I am.

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Alejandra Ledesma is a bilingual teacher. She teaches second grade at South West Park School in Tracy. This is her first year working as a Teacher Consultant for the Great Valley Writing Project.

Looking for a Signature Move:

by Jan McCutcheon

The entrance writing prompt seemed simple enough: “Write about someone you know and admire.”

Student (S): What does admire mean?

Teacher (T): Someone you look up to; someone you want to be like.

S: I don’t know anyone like that.

T: What about your dad? (S: No.)

Your brother? (S: No.) Your Uncle?

(S: No.) Umm...Your friend? (S:

No.) Your friend’s dad? (S: No.) His

uncle? (S: No.) His brother? (S: No.)

How about a teacher? (S: No.)

S: I don’t know who to write about.

Wait! Can I write about 2Pac?

T: Well, he’s been dead for a while, so I doubt whether you know him.

S: What about The Undertaker, then?

He’s dead but he can still wrestle.

T: Oh. Well, do you actually know him?

S: Yeah! He’s on Friday Night Smack Down. Eddie Guerrero died too, but he doesn’t wrestle any more.

T: Sooooo...do you want to go with The Undertaker, then? (I had already given up on the “know” part of the constraint.)

S: Okay, but what should I write?

T: First, write “The person I admire is The Undertaker, and this is why.” Then tell some things you admire about him. Can you think of why you like him more than another wrestler?

S: He can still wrestle, even though he’s dead.

T: Okay, that’s one thing. Now, what’s another think you like about him?

S: That’s all I like.

I should have stopped there, but

noooo.

T: Does he usually win his wrestling matches?

S: No.

T: Well then, is there another wrestler you like?

S: Rey Mysterio...

T: Okay! Good! So, does he usually win?

S: Yeah.

T: Okay, so that’s one thing you like about him, right?

S: Yeah.

T: What else?

S: He does the 619.

This sounded intriguing.

T: Okay! So that’s another reason you can give in your writing. Do you want to be like him?

S: I don’t know...

T: Uh, do you want to wrestle?

S: I guess.

T: Do you want to do the 619?

S: No.

T: Why not?

S: That’s his Signature Move. No one else can do it.

And this was only one student. There would be 53 more with writer’s block.

Oh. And add one teacher.

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It was my first year at this school, whose student body consisted mostly of EL and free lunch students. There was heavy gang involvement in the neighborhood.

Finding a person they admired never seemed to be a problem for students at my former school, whose population was predominantly middle-class. In fact, those students often had problems narrowing down their hero list to just one person.

I had transferred to this school on

purpose, in order to live my passion for helping at-risk kids build self-esteem by learning that they could read and write, and that people cared enough to help them figure out how to do it.

I could see that I needed to do some research, so I went home and tuned in to Friday Night Smack Down. Bare Chests. Wide belts with grotesquely large and ornate buckles. Red Speedos. American flag shirts. Devoted females standing by their men. Masks. Tattoos. Dramatic announcers. Metal folding chairs for finishing off the loser. Elaborate scenarios as precursors to each gymnastically-choreographed match.

The Undertaker marched out, flanked by pall-bearers in black suits. His hair was long and stringy (they say it still grows after death). His face was wickedly ugly. There was a lot of smoke—and then out rolled his hearse to the sound of an organ dirge.

“Huh.” I thought.

As my student had foretold, The Undertaker did lose this match. But he was soon replaced with other almost as colorful contenders and their soap operas. It became clear to me, as I watched match after match, that these WWE guys were onto something: Drama. Mystery. Conflict.

About an hour into the show, out he came—Rey Mysterio. His mask contained a large cut out cross above his eyes. The tattoo across his belly declared that he was a proud citizen of Mexico. And I’ve got to admit that his “619” was one seriously clever maneuver.

Well, if that’s what he needed to

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Differentiating the Standards

by Robin Hawks Alexander

We celebrate growth. Honor diversity. Encourage individuality. Applaud effort. Then we wrap it all up in identical boxes called standardized testing and expect all children to reach the same academic levels. Something is wrong with this picture. All children CAN learn. All children CAN succeed. These beliefs touch my soul, drive my teaching. We are working with young individuals at different academic, economic, and emotional levels. We need to differentiate teaching strategies to reach all students. We also need to differentiate - NOT LOWER - but differentiate time/grade level expectations of goal attainment for some individual students.

Many states, California included, have adopted research-based/standards-aligned curriculum such as Houghton Mifflin and Open Court reading and language arts programs. These materials are to be used in the teaching of fluency, comprehension, mechanics, convention, and critical-thinking skills and provide the facilitator/educator directions on best practices to attain these goals. Each has the honorable goal of student and educator success. Curriculum frameworks are the blueprints for implementing the content standards adopted by the State Board of Education (SBE). Frameworks are developed by the Curriculum Development and Supplemental Materials Commission, which also reviews and recommends textbooks and other instructional materials to be adopted by the SBE. Unfortunately, these academic Standards seem to be

a one-size-fit-all.

In a cookie-cutter world, one test, one scoring level, would be a valid representation growth towards the

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proficient or advanced levels. In a cookie-cutter world, all children would have the same learning styles, pacing, and outcomes. Using one curriculum for all would work in a cookie-cutter world, where our children would all fit into the same size and style of academic box. Thank goodness, though, that our children are individuals. Each has different needs, desires, interests, and learning styles. Each child contains the desire to learn and be successful. We need

to encourage this. The Teach For America Organization states: To succeed in the difficult contexts where the achievement gap festers, teachers have to be strong “backwards planners,” starting every endeavor, from individual lessons to grand, year-long calendars, with the key questions: “Where are my students now versus where I want them to be”, and “What is the best possible use of time to move them forward?” The highly successful teachers infuse their goal-driven efficiency into every aspect of instruction and classroom management. (www.teachforamerica.org)

The Standards are not going away. I do believe, however, that they are not the end-all for the students. A song from the 1960s keeps running through my mind:

“Little Boxes”

by Malvina Reynolds

Little boxes on the hillside, Little boxes made of ticky-tacky

Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes all the same

And the people in the houses all went to the university

Where they were put in boxes and they came out all the same

And they all have pretty children and the children go to school

And the children go to summer camp and then to the university

Where they are put in boxes and they come out all the same.

As stated earlier, the California State Academic Standards are here to stay. Janet Hurt states in her book *Taming the Standards* “Regardless of whether we agree or not, we are employed to use the standards - so

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be able to clean everyone's clock, then I needed one too—a Signature Move.

According to Tom Fox, director of the Northern California Writing Project, "If students don't understand what writing is for, what it does, and how it can enrich their lives, then learning to write the perfect three-sentence paragraph will be meaningless motion, disenfranchising the exact students we wish to engage.

"Teachers, parents, and policy-makers are looking for ways to engage those students for whom school is foreign, uncomfortable, or a place of sure failure. How can we transform writing instruction from a gate

that keeps students out to a gateway for success?"

The concept of exigency, a sense of urgency, a compelling reason for doing something, is his solution. For example, learning how to write a resume would be an urgent need for a student who wanted to apply for a job, so he would welcome the chance to learn that genre—right away.

Then how does a teacher develop a sense of exigency in a fourth grade boy? Maybe by employing a Signature Move, i.e., trying to discover what makes him excited and then playing to it.

"But who has time (or energy) to forage for every student's on-but-ton? This was just one out of 54 kids,

for heaven's sake," I stressed to my GVWP coach.

She reminded me of the tale about the little boy who walked along the beach after a storm picking up starfish from the sand and throwing them back into the surf. "What a waste of time!" said an onlooker. "You're not saving enough to make a difference."

"It sure made a difference to that one!" said the boy.

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Jan McCutcheon teaches reading intervention to fourth through sixth grade students at Sequoia Elementary School in Manteca. She was selected as an SI 2006 Summer Fellow.

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use them as a tool to go beyond and design a curriculum that is rich with opportunities for your student." She also advises in her book that we must look beyond the standards and ask ourselves "Why is this standard important for students to learn and how can I, as the teacher, see beyond the discrete content or skill to find a deeper meaning to guide students to higher levels? Teachers not only have the right to improve their standards, they have a responsibility to find a deeper meaning in standards by using their common sense and professional judgment to sprinkle the standards with connectors, purpose, and relevance."

All children can learn. All children can be successful. The standards can serve as a map to guide us in raising

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the levels and expectations for our students. Let us not, however, use them to put our children into identical categories, but let them be one of the tools to guide us in teaching and creating life-long lovers of learning.

Differentiate instruction. Differentiate attainment of proficiency for students who may need a different time-line to move them forward. Take our children out of the little boxes and help set them on their individualized path to proficiency and success.

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