

# WRITEVOICE

Great Valley Writing Project - Digital Newsletter  
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# Fall 2015

## the contributors



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Brett Ashmun|*Inefficiency* |pg 20| Brett Ashmun is an ex-athlete trying to navigate his way through graduate school. He teaches first year composition at California State University, Stanislaus and feels very fortunate to have the opportunity to shape the lives of young adults. He is engaged to his best friend, and he loves walking his four-legged best friend every morning. Brett attended the Summer Institute this year.



Mafori Stanley Makgahlela|*A writer's awakening unrestrained* |pg 9| I am from South Africa and have taught eighth and ninth grades bilingual classes at Marobathota and Tshebela High Schools in Limpopo Province of South Africa. I am currently a Deputy Chief Education Specialist where among other things I am responsible for English First Additional Language teacher support in Limpopo Province. I like spending much of my free time with my family and will sometimes take time off to read, listen to music, and watch sports on TV. In 2015, I participated in the Summer Institute and have been recognized as a teacher consultant with the Great Valley Writing Project.



Maria Shreve |*Great Minds Think Alike at the GVWP Waterford Writing Academy*| pg 13| Maria Shreve teaches English 9 and Journalism at Hughson High School in Hughson, California. In addition to teaching writing, and writing about teaching writing, she enjoys memoir writing. Maria has had several articles published in California English, the professional journal of the California Association of Teachers of English, and is also the digital editor of Write Voice. Maria attended the GVWP Summer Institute in 2009.



Tonya Shuford| *Increasing Reading Comprehension: The Power of Incorporating a Teacher Read Aloud* |pg 1| Tonya Shuford is currently an instructional coach for the Sylvan Union School District in Modesto, CA. She has taught grades 1-5 for the past 23 years. Besides teaching, Tonya loves to spend time with her husband and two daughters. She is also a Girl Scout troop co-leader and an avid bunko player. Tonya attended the Great Valley Writing Project Summer Institute in 2015.



John Tivald|*Little New Teacher and the Big, Bad Administrator* |pg 4| John Tivald teaches Economics, AP Economics, and Algebra 1 at Riverbank High School. Before teaching at the high school, John helped design and launch the Adelante Continuation High School for Riverbank Unified. During his five years at Adelante, John taught the history courses, math courses, government, and economics. He also started the yearbook and was the advisor for all five years. During his spare time, John enjoys visiting his grandkids in Houston, Texas, his daughter in Lake Tahoe for a little skiing, and his son in Thousand Oaks.

# Increasing Reading Comprehension: *The Power of Incorporating A Teacher Read Aloud*

Tonya Shuford

*I had been warned about Mrs. Rouchon. She was strict and feared by many students. I wasn't sure whether I would like her or not. She was our reading teacher. I remember having her class right after lunch. She would start class by reading aloud from a novel of her choice. We were 7<sup>th</sup> graders, so that seemed strange because we were old enough to read on our own. I found myself looking forward to her class so that I could hear the next chapter of the current novel, much like the anticipation of the next episode of my favorite TV show. My favorite novel was Where the Red Fern Grows by Wilson Rawls. When Mrs. Rouchon read, she had the whole class enthralled. We listened intently while the words played out in our heads. We could picture the main character, Billy, as he earned money to buy his own coonhounds and we truly felt the bond that Billy had with his hounds. At the end of the story, every one of us experienced Billy's emotions and there was not one dry eye in the classroom. The profound effect of that particular book on all of us "tough" seventh graders stuck with me. When I became a teacher, I knew that reading aloud to my students would be an important part of my day because of that experience. I couldn't wait to read with passion, drama, and expression like my former teacher. I knew that reading aloud to students was necessary not just to expose students to a wide variety of books but also to teach them about the power of reading a book with flair.*

Teachers are always crunched for time. Our daily schedule is jam packed every day trying to fill the students' heads with all the knowledge they will need to master the grade level standards. Knowing that we are responsible for the success or failure of our students each year is a heavy burden.

Having so much to cover in so little time is at the forefront of our minds as we plan each lesson and incorporate those lessons into our daily schedule. Do we truly have time to read a favorite novel to our students every day? In looking at the California ELA standards, I believe that we do have time to read aloud to our students. Can't a read aloud be used to incorporate the reading, writing, listening, and speaking standards?

Teachers should be trusted to teach the standards in a variety of ways with a variety of sources. We should not be limited to the district's adopted ELA curriculum. I understand that school districts adopt and spend millions of dollars on specific published programs that have been carefully chosen. It stands to reason that the educators of the districts would use the program that was purchased; however, what if the students are not engaged? What if a teacher can teach the standards without using the published ELA program? Each class has a distinct personality. One size does not fit all. Teachers should be given the discretion to form their own ELA programs.

The Common Core Standards document notes:

By emphasizing required achievements, the Standards leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed. Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards.

The standards document clearly states that teachers have the freedom to design their own ELA programs. Using mentor texts to read aloud to students would be a powerful tool for teachers to incorporate in the ELA curriculum.

*As Mrs. Rouchon read, many of us would lay our heads on our desks as we listened intently. Her expression and intensity pulled us in as we visualized Billy training his dogs Old Dan and Little Ann. Billy had finally captured a raccoon with a cleverly constructed trap by using tips from his grandfather. Billy used the coon pelt to persistently teach his coon dogs how to use their tracking instincts to tree raccoons. Little Ann was smarter than Old Dan, so Billy had to work patiently and diligently with him for months. I could hear the coonhounds' distinctive baying as they caught the scent of a raccoon. I could feel Billy's pride when his beloved dogs finally treed their first live raccoon. I was there; I was in the story with Billy, the raccoon, and his coondogs.*

A 1985 report, "Becoming a Nation of Readers," stated, "the read aloud was the single most important thing we could do for building the knowledge required for future success in reading." Even though the report is 30 years old, that statement still rings true today.

There are so many reasons why reading aloud to students is so important. One reason is that students need to hear fluent reading with expression.

According to the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, "only 48 percent of families below the poverty level read to their preschoolers each day, compared with 64 percent of families whose incomes were at or above the poverty level. Children from low-income families are also less likely to have exposure to print materials."

If so many of our students are not read to daily then teachers play an important part in helping students to develop a passion for reading.

*Old Dan and Little Ann barely escape injury and even death during their numerous hunting excursions. Billy and his dogs are developing a reputation in the region for being masterful coon hunters. Their extraordinary bond is unlike any other coon hunting team in the region. One momentous evening, Little Ann does not return home after a hunt. Billy follows her distinctive baying and finds that she has fallen through a hole in the ice on the river. Billy is desperate to save her as she clings to the edge of the ice hole but time is running out. Frantically, he begins to pray for her safety. He discovers that his lantern handle can be used as a hook for saving Little Ann when his lantern handle clatters to the ground during his prayer. He is certain that divine intervention has given him a means to save Little Ann. Billy saves Little Ann by attaching the handle to the end of a long stick, and his belief in the power of prayer grows.*

Children strengthen their comprehension skills when they can connect to what is being read. I had pets at home that meant a great deal to me. I could relate to Billy's desperation to save Little Ann because I would feel the same way if my dog were on the verge of death. My family also believed in the power of prayer. Faith in God was as important to me as it was to Billy. My personal connections to Billy's experiences strengthened my understanding of the story. Reading aloud to students gives them the opportunities to make connections to the story. It will also most likely prompt meaningful discussions with the students.

*Billy, Old Dan, and Little Ann are entered into a coon hunting competition by Billy's grandpa. Even though Billy is the youngest competitor, Billy's grandpa has faith in the trio. The day of the hunting competition finally arrives. Billy quickly realizes that his competition is fierce. To further complicate matters, the weather is frigid, blustery, and icy. To top it off, Billy's grandpa almost perishes in the wintry weather. These complications do not hinder Billy's dogs from winning two championship cups. Little Ann wins a cup for beauty, and both of the dogs win a cup for catching the most coons. I visualize the wintry woods and I cheer on Billy, Little Ann, and Old Dan. I am drawn into each exhilarating event during the competition, and I fear the loss of Billy's faithful grandpa. This is the most thrilling part of the novel, it is the climax, and I am on the edge of my seat. My imagination is better than any movie that I have ever seen.*

According to the article entitled, "Visualize, Teaching Readers to Create Pictures in Their Minds" by Danielle Mahoney, when we visualize during a story, "We are tapping into prior knowledge, making connections, inferring information, and paying attention to details. Characters are created in our minds and our own unique version of the story begins to play out in our imaginations, just like a movie." Visualization is a difficult skill to master if a child is struggling to decode the words. Reading aloud allows a child to practice visualizing text without the frustration of decoding text.

*Every one of us is sobbing. There is not a dry eye in the classroom as Mrs. Rouchon reads the last two chapters of Where the Red Fern Grows. We finally discover the meaning of the title as Billy loses his faith in God. In the end, his faith is restored thanks to the red fern. I won't divulge what brought us all to tears that day, but the depth of emotion that we all experienced stayed with us. I wouldn't be surprised if Mrs. Rouchon's read aloud choice inspired a love of reading in more than one student.*

The new common core standards have given teachers the freedom to use their professional judgment to develop a reading program that best meets the common core English Language Arts standards for their grade levels. Reading aloud is a powerful strategy to use with students. Instead of reading aloud only when time allows, teachers at every grade level should incorporate a read aloud every day as part of their ELA programs. A read aloud mentor text should be an integral part of reading programs beyond the primary grades. Everyone can benefit from a teacher that knows how to make literature come alive for her students.

## **A writer's awakening unrestrained**

*Mafori Stanley Makgahlela*

*Inspired by one of Steven Biko's book titles, *I Write What I Like*, which reflects his conviction that black people in South Africa cannot be liberated until they unite to break their chains of servitude, I wrote this piece to call for liberation of the teachers of writing and students in a writing classroom.*

I write what I like, and I write it my way. For years writing was a challenge to me. On many occasions I did try to overcome it. Throughout time, my life was inundated with writing short and long pieces all for assessment. Never in my good life was I granted an opportunity to express my views. All my years of schooling were mercilessly tormented and harassed by insipid topics such as “*My Dog*,” “*My School*,” and “*The Journey I shall never forget*.” Yes, I did write senseless essays to impress my teachers. Let alone the bland style and diction I used in those essays to mesmerize them. They were impressed because I wrote and wrote within their set standards. And as a result, subjectivity became the order of the day, for words like “*achieved*,” “*excellent*,” “*brilliant*,” “*well done*,” and “*good work*” were all used to define my writing and directed to me as rewards. Shocking how I observed some of my teachers’ attempts to reproduce them in me. Of course, to create in me a surrogate, a stunt I fiercely rejected.

My task in this writing is not to object to excellent teaching. My purpose is not to advocate for anarchy in the classroom. My mission is not to lobby support for *laissez faire*, complacency, and mediocrity in the classroom. My glaring call is to liberate writing and its classroom teaching from prescriptive policies. I point at policies that undermine the intelligence of teachers in their trade in varying teaching contexts and learners as experts in their own learning. As a learner, my writing was always guided by curriculum policies that did not help to unleash the writer in me or rather teach me writing. Instead, they implanted fear and subservience which translates to a writer’s block in me and many writers out there and teachers of writing alike. I have never been freed to write outside statutes. To comply I did, but I have always challenged the status quo. I always vouched to be on the other side of the fence with passionate writers, writers for all, and writers for the people.

I want to profess that freedom of expression is a human right enshrined in every country's constitution. Chapter 2, Section 16 of the South African Constitution upholds Freedom of Expression which includes freedom of the press and academic freedom. This constitutional precept unmistakably liberates the teacher of writing and his or her students while also reaffirming the writer's position as a liberated soul. It is however, agonizing to realize how this right is violated by systems that are supposed to support it and ensure its implementation. Certainly, these freedoms' realization is delayed despite their significance in writing

What does it mean to be free? Limited freedom or absolute freedom? The choice is mine, I guess. I have to liberate myself and others from statutes, regulations, standards and rules. All these rules and standards are cobwebs made to catch small flies, but let wasps and hornets break through (Jonathan Swift: 1667 – 1745). From today going forward, I assume the strength of a wasp and a hornet and break through the laws. I write what I like, and I write it my way. My expressions must be representative of myself not certain standards. My views and style remains my copyright. This piece remains a memorandum to reclaim that copyright. The copyright long lost in my struggle against rules. My writing should be original and originality is not compliance to certain standards.

I pity my readers and audience. To read me and understand, they have to comply. Compliance in this case implies absolute immersion into my thoughts and ideas, absolute immersion into my style and diction. I am the one that writes not the reader. My quest for writing generates from within. I have to dictate to my readers what to read rather than ask them what to write and how to write it. Their only freedom is to read me the way they like and attach meaning to my writings their way. To follow my writings, readers must subject themselves to my authority, for I am the writer. My views and impressions are painted all over my writings not in their reading. This should not sound arrogant or offensive as I am the one with a story to tell. Writing represents my voice. It has always been difficult to talk in written letters while verbalizing them was just a walk in the park. I write what I like, and I write it my way. In that fashion, I reclaim autonomy.

*“Pardon me professor for not adhering to your standards?”*

For, your teachings did not do me any good. You have stolen my authenticity. You made me a hybrid. I cannot tell who I am anymore for my writing pleases only you and you alone. Allow me to unlearn what you have taught me so I can relearn who I am. Allow me to write what I like and write it my way for freedom of writing remains my quest. For how long do you intend to keep me captive to your disabling standards? The world of writing is vast and cannot be understood within your constricted rules. It needs limitless thinking to interpret, and that is the right of the writer. I am a writer, I write what I like, and I write it my way.

My writings paint the picture of the story of my life. The life the world has never seen. I write about the roads I have travelled, where none of my readers has ever treaded. I write about mountains that I have traversed in my solitude life. This is the story of my life not your life. I have seen gullies and trenches, hills and hillocks, and they all make up my life. The stretch of the earth from the east to the west and from the north to the south is only known by me for I have followed that route once upon my lifetime. Allow my writing juices to flow for I have stories to tell. There is neither east nor west, for when you think you are in the east you find yourself in the west. East becomes west and west becomes east. North becomes south and south becomes north. I am a writer, I write what I like, and I write it my way.

*“Have you ever heard of a writer’s block, professor?”*

Yeah, that is when your principles of writing begin to manifest in the mind of a writer. That is when the custodians of writing standards invade the mind of a writer. That is when the writer wrestles his or her way out of captivity which never gets so simple. Your doctrines are like cancer for they invade the mind of a writer and cripple him or her to death. Your doctrines have claimed superiority over many potential writers. It is surprising how you unchained public speakers whom in their speeches verbalize the same letters writers use. Allow me to write, for I am a writer. I write what I like, and I write it my way.

The time has come to liberate all writers in captivity, and that time is now. I have seen journalists write in their language and style. All they write is propaganda and fabrication,



yet it is called journalese, the language of journalism loaded with unjust messages for consumption by compromised masses. I have seen lawyers' writings. They use convoluted language, yet it is recognized and called legalese, the language used in the courts for malicious gains and to perpetuate inequality between the flies and the wasps. To give testimony, factual and empirical evidence, to my writing read the extract from a lawyer's writing below:

*"Due to the fact that the defendant was indisposed and felt in no way able to attend the hearing, and the plaintiff proved intractable and in no mood for concessions the court came to the conclusion that it would be in the interest of both parties to adjourn the case until an unforeseeable date."*

This is typical of convoluted standards that promote and protect convoluted writing and language use. Was it really difficult to say?

*"As Mrs. X could not attend because she was ill, and Mr. Z was being difficult, nobody could decide when the case could be heard."*

No, not really. The purpose was to be as unclear as possible and harvest on the misconceptions and illiteracies of the weak and poor and thus ditch the matter for a reward in the cover of darkness that evening.

Allow me to write my way and call it free writing, for I am not regulated by any standard. I write what I like, and I write it my way. Orthodoxy should give way to practical innovative approaches towards the teaching of writing and writing reform for writing is an art.

I write what I like, and I write it my way.

***I am out! Salute!***

## Building Writers at the Fox Road Elementary Writing Club Nereyda Alcazar

I had been involved with the Great Valley Writing Project on several occasions: The Migrant Education Summer Writing Academy in Ceres; the River Island Demonstration Lab; and assisting with an After School Writing Club at my site, Fox Road Elementary in Hughson. So when Maria Shreve asked me to be part of a Writing Club at Fox Road, specifically for migrant students, I did not hesitate. For one reason, I had worked with Maria with the After School Program students two years before, and I knew what to expect - great teaching and ways to incorporate writing into learning. Another reason was that some of those students were in my class at that time, and some of the other students I had in my class the previous year.



The anticipation grew as January 12th approached. We received the migrant list of students who would qualify for this class from Araceli Rodriguez, the Supportive Services Liaison. As I sent the invitation letters to the parents in the Wednesday folders two weeks before the start of the Writing Club, a thought entered my mind: Who would come for two hours after a long day of school on a Monday to learn about writing for twelve weeks? The results were impressive. On the first day, ten out of the nineteen students attended. After a few phone calls to parents, we had a full class the rest of the sessions.

Our first class began with the students writing the Word of the Day, which I had been taught by TC Brandy De Alba prior to teaching the Summer Writing Academy. With the permission of my principal, Carrie Duckart, students were able to use our school site's Chromebooks for their writing, and the WOTD the topics ranged from "favorite food" to "pet peeves." These were topics that students could relate to, were able to write a great deal about, and were eager to share.



We used the topic of hunting for an opinion piece because most students have a strong opinion on that issue. To activate prior knowledge, I showed a video on bear hunting, which portrayed hunting in a positive light. Maria read the children's novel *The Magic Finger* by Roald Dahl, which was from an anti-hunting perspective. After discussing both sides of the issue, we divided students into "for hunting" and "against hunting sides," and Maria and I each took a group. Students enthusiastically wrote about the topic, but what really surprised me was that it sparked an interest in writing with Alejandro, which I had not seen all year in my own classroom.

Many participants were not familiar with the experience of writing poems but grew to love writing poetry. Monica was one student who found it easy and enjoyable. Her favorite poem was the "10 Things to Love About Me" poem. When we moved on to Diamante poems Galilea, a resource student, became frustrated and began to cry, saying, "I can't write poems." Her friend, turned to a page in her notebook, pointed out the "10 Things to Love About Me" poem, and said, "Yes, you can, you did right there." With a little help, she was able to write her poem. I recalled that she was the same way in my class, and that she would cry when the work became too difficult. One thing was clear – she was smarter than she realized. There definitely were challenges throughout the 12 weeks. In addition to most of the students being English learners, along with Galilea, we had another resource student and a special day student.

Fox Road children are not shy, and the Author's Chair was a popular part of the class. It was common to hear, "I'll go first!" from three or four students at the same time. Some days we did not have enough time to include all our volunteers at the end of our session.

The Writing Club was an unforgettable experience, but what made it even more special is that I found that it helped my two students pass the Smarter Balance end of the year assessment - and that I will remember throughout my teaching career.



## Little New Teacher and the Big, Bad Administrator (A fractured fairytale by John Tivald)

Once upon a time there was a new teacher, who loved to dress in red polka dot skirts with a pearl necklace, and was so excited about setting up her new classroom and welcoming her new adorable students. She was ready for her new career and couldn't wipe that giant smile off her face. She also had a basketful of ideas and tools for teaching. Ideas she had accumulated from her childhood experiences but mostly from her college days collaborating with other want-to-be elementary, multi-subject teachers. Her basket was full with so many sweet ideas like stories and videos and manipulatives. It had colorful blocks and pencils and markers, all wrapped up in loads of multicolored paper. So as the day approached to set up her room, she spent the evening making sure her basket was complete with all the magic needed to transform her room into that wonderful space inviting to all those little boys and girls. The next day as she carried her basket from the parking lot to her new room, the Principal stopped her to ask what was in her lovely basket. "Why it is full of all the magic stuff that I have received from my friends, and family, and professors, and peers that will help all my students learn the wonders of the world and all that it has to offer."

"Well, that sounds wonderful," said her principal, "may I see?"

"Of course," said the new teacher as she excitedly set down the basket on the ground to begin breaking out all the colorful tools. "I really don't have much time to see all of that, so how about I come by your room a little later today and see what you have?"

"That would be wonderful for I am so excited to get to my room and begin decorating it for my special students and get all my tools in their proper places so I am ready to teach. I will see you later," she responded.

After a few hours of moving furniture, decorating walls, writing on the board, and lots of singing with joy, the principal showed up to the room, walked in like a hurricane and, with big eyes, and said, "My, what colorful decorations you have on the wall. My, what wonderful books you have on the book shelves. My, what interesting manipulative corners you have supplied."

"Yes, Boss. All this is for my students to step into the wonder and awe of learning about our big world."

"Honey, what are you doing? Where are your test preparation materials? Where is your objective of the day? Where is your script to direct those little cheeks in the seats? You will not have time for all this creative malarkey."

As the smile quickly faded from her face, the new teacher replied, "I am sorry, but I learned so many new ways to teach my students. I was so excited to share my own excitement for learning with my students. I thought I was hired to use my skills and tools to teach the children and engage them in learning, not to prepare them to take a test?"

"That is the typical new teacher delusion," he responded. "Don't let it get you down, you will soon see that teaching is like a career in acting, and all you need to do is follow the script. The NCLB directors have provided all you need so that all your students will succeed. You will be fine. And right now we are not sure about the new Common Core, but its tests are equally important. Leave your trite decorations up, but get out your materials and start memorizing." And with that he turned around and slammed

the door as he exited the room. And so the young new teacher slumped down in her chair, turned on her computer, opened her textbooks, and began re-teaching herself to follow the script, without the smile.

It's not his fault, she thought. The big bad administrator is only following the law. I guess I have to as well. Now what will I do with my wonderful basket of colorful tools and ideas?

## **Great Minds Think Alike at the GVWP Waterford Writing Academy**

Maria Shreve

Pardon the cliché, but great minds do think alike. Just whose great minds might I be referring to? Why, Deb Farrell's and mine.

When GVWP co-director Carol Minner asked me if I would be interested in working with Debbie Farrell at the GVWP Writing Academy in Waterford over the summer, I was thrilled because Deb and I became friends at the Summer Institute in 2009. We'd kept in touch for the first few years, but we hadn't spoken recently. Since then she had retired from teaching elementary school in Lathrop after mainly teaching in the primary grades, and I went from teaching middle school to high school. In terms of our teaching experience, we were at opposite sides of the spectrum, but in the true spirit of GVWP TC's, that disparity didn't matter. We clicked.

Although I've been involved in many GVWP endeavors over the years, including the Ripon Demo Lab and after school writing clubs in Hughson, this was my first time working at a summer Writing Academy for migrant students. Deb, on the other hand, had worked at the Writing Academy for several years and knew most of the students. Deb and I were to work with approximately 20 fourth through sixth graders for three weeks – and here's the kicker – from 8 until 2. Yes, until 2 p.m., during the summer. We began an introductory notebook cover activity and then the initial writing assessment. From there, Deb and I decided to focus on writing in the mornings and to try to keep the afternoons lighter with trips to the computer lab, reading, and art activities.



In order to prepare students for writing narratives, we decided to focus on compound sentences. Enter Jeff Anderson, author of *Everyday Editing*, and promoter of the FANBOYS. In the past, I've used the cartoon versions on the FANBOYS from his website ([thewriteguy.net](http://thewriteguy.net)), on brightly-colored laminated paper to teach FANBOYS [for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so] to both my ninth graders and the fourth and fifth graders at the Writing Club. Typically, I hold them up and explain what is on the cartoon versions (“AND, The Matchmaker, Connects two ideas that go together” or “YET, But's Evil Twin Brother, Connects two ideas that go against each other”) and students would

practice writing compound sentences in their notebooks, sharing with partners, and then sharing with the class. But, Deb threw a curve ball, and as I explained each of the FANBOYS, she called various students up, had them hold the colorful signs, and called on students to come up with compound sentences. As students verbalized sentences, I wrote the sentences on chart paper, and a student put each complete sentence on the bulletin board. It was an amazing lesson, very little of it which was planned. Deb and I just seemed to play off each other and to intuitively know what do next.

The next morning, as I was finishing up my Cheerios, I came up with an idea to extend the compound sentence lesson and texted Deb: “Just thought of human compound sentences. We can pass out sentence strips – FANBOYS and independent clauses - and have the kids put them together. They can stand up in the front of the class holding them up as a complete sentence.” Keep in mind, I’ve never used sentence strips in my life, but that was one of the buzz words that Deb had been tossing around. She responded, “Good idea,” and while the kids were working on a starter, we made sentence strips from chart paper. Deb came up with the idea of having the girls write the first part of the compound sentence, and the boys write the second part. In the meantime, we put the FANBOYS on bright colored pieces of paper. As students finished their sentences, we called up a girl with the first part of the sentence, a boy with the second part of a sentence, and asked students which FANBOY made the most sense to use. The student, who happened to have that FANBOY, would stand right in the middle of the human sentence. Students found that sometimes more than one FANBOY would work, and we discussed the nuances of each – “yet” and “but” show contrast, “for” is more formal, and “nor” is plain tricky.



On another morning we approached an additional way to use the comma which would come in handy writing narratives – by using AAWWUBBIS sentences which are sentences that begin with After, Although, As, When, While, Until, Before, Because, If, and Since. This activity also came from Anderson’s book, and we used his idea of writing an “If I Had a Million Dollars” song. At this point, we had access to the class computer and projector, so we were able to find the Karaoke version of the song which had the lyrics, listen to the music – and, of course, sing along. I’ve done this activity before, and one of the perks is we find out just how generous and giving children can be. Juan Diego Zaragosa wrote:

If I had a million dollars, I would buy a mansion for my family  
If I had a million dollars, I would by my mom new silver Jetta  
If I had a million dollars, I would buy my mom a ticket to Hawaii...

As students finished their songs, Deb, a talented singer who is part of a singing quartet called “The Sensations” and I, admittedly more of a lack of sensation when it comes to singing, sang the kids’ “If I Had a Million Dollars” songs as they completed

them. We tried to get the kids to come up and sing, but the class of 20 chatterboxes, suddenly became very shy.

At that point, we thought students were ready for their narratives, and they began a tried and true lesson – taking a gallery walk while observing and discussing the Harris Burdick illustrations - which ultimately inspire students to write creepy, suspenseful stories. Here is one such ending to Armando Hernandez’ story:

She went home that night, but she didn't listen. She didn't know she wasn't going to wake up next morning. Then at 1:00 am, the book magically opened to reveal a sprouting plant with a bloody ghost. The next thing that was emitted was a terrifying hiss. I had warned her. She was never seen again. The book still remains out there in the city of Waterford.....

Eric Zaragosa, who made himself very comfortable as he was writing his first draft, wrote:

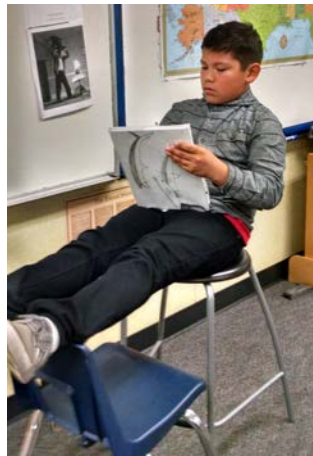
“Should I come out or not?” Eric thought to himself.

After two weeks passed, Eric moved slowly to the door.

He was thinking, “I hope it is not there...”

Eric was starving. He silently went downstairs, moving slowly, to get some food and water. When Eric sat down to eat, he saw the rug move again!

Eric screamed, “Oh no, it’s moving again!!!” Eric ran upstairs to his room, but the door was locked.....

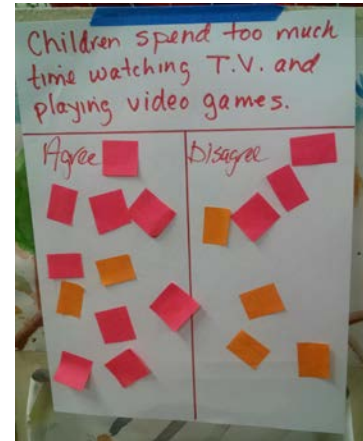


After the narratives, we spent the mornings working on opinion pieces, since their pre-assessment was an opinion piece and their post-assessment would also be one. Their practice topics included “Should students be required to have good grades to get a driver’s license?” “Should girls be able to play on boys’ sports teams?” “Should there be changes in the cafeteria?” Initially, we gave them quite a bit of support by modeling brainstorming arguments, narrowing the arguments down to a smaller amount, distinguishing an argument from a supporting detail, and organizing the arguments and supporting details in a manner to help them structure their writing. We also spent time discussing the pros and cons of the first three issues with them. By the third topic they had minimal help from us, and by the time they reached the last practice prompt on changes in the cafeteria, they were on their own and ready to take the final assessment the next day.

Back to those long, long two-hour afternoons. That first week, I pulled a play of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* out of my bag of tricks that I had used years before when I taught sixth grade, as well as in my 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade strategic classes. I expressed concern to Deb that it might be a little too difficult for students to read aloud because it came from a sixth grade textbook, but because she had worked with many of the students previously, she chose students who she knew would be able to read that particular part. The kids loved it – who could not enjoy giggling over the fate of Augustus Glop, being shocked by the fate of Violet Beauregard (“Violet, you’re turning violet), and singing to the clever, insightful songs of the Oompa Loompas. It was a sad day when we finished the play, but by the time we finished, students had generated enough writing to make almost daily visits to the computer lab in the afternoon.

Deb explained that in past years, she had Mini Corp students helping out, although we didn’t have them this year. However, it worked out that my 17-year-old daughter Carissa had finished coaching at the GVWP Ripon Demo Lab and said that would come in and help us out. Carissa had also helped in the two years that I taught the Writing Club in Hughson. Since we just finished the post-assessment and only had a couple of days left, we wanted to do something to get them out of their seats and interacting with each other. My mind went back to

*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and I wondered if I could do a teacherly tweak on an activity that I do with my ninth grade students before we read *Romeo and Juliet*. The activity is another type of gallery walk in which I put signs up with statements such as “It’s okay to hate another family because your parents do” or “Suicide is an honorable way to die.” Students rotate around the eight stations, put a sticker indicating “agree” or “disagree” on it, and discuss various issues that are pertinent to understanding the play before they even read it. After the gallery walk, they go back to their seats and write about the issues. While Deb was working with students on their idiom books, Carissa and I came up with issues from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, such as “Children spend too much time watching TV and video games” and “Greed is a problem in the world today.” While students were walking through the stations, they talked to each other, as well as to Deb, Carissa, and me about the issues. Students then returned to their desks and wrote a short opinion piece in their notebooks about the issue that they felt the most strongly about.



For our last hurrah, we decided that we were going to have the kids design their own candy bar wrapper, along with either an advertising slogan or jingle. Carissa made a mentor piece which was a Peppermint Bark candy bar called “Sleigh Ride.” She wrote “Limited Time Only” on the top. She first asked students why she did that, and students responded “because you can only get it and Christmas” and “so people will run out and buy it.” Carissa’s jingle was very close to the actual Sleigh Ride song, and Deb and I explained that it’s okay to borrow from other places. “I come up with my best titles that way,” I explained.

We divided the kids in pairs, and they came up with creations such as “Shark Bites,” along with the slogan of “You’re going to bite off more than you can chew” and



“Chocolate Jamz,” along with the slogan of “Jam out with Chocolate Jamz.” We projected the pictures on the Elmo, which made their creations larger than life. The kids explained their product, why people would buy it, and their slogan.

Looking back on the three weeks, I realize not everything went as planned, but that we had many successes. I texted Deb to ask her what she liked best, and she responded, “The Harris Burdick ‘walk around’ was my favorite...allowing the kids to interact with each other about the pictures and discussing what they think is happening...very insightful.” With that said, two great minds do think alike.

## Inefficiency

Brett Ashmun

“I’ll be a son of a bitch!”

“What’s wrong?” Annie nervously asked.

My morning actually started out great. I woke up at six a.m. in a good mood (a rarity) and took my dog, Rivers, outside, fed her, and made coffee all before six fifteen. As I drank my coffee, I watched Annie run around getting ready: shower, blow dry her hair, get her clothes out of the dryer, and yell at me for staring as she puts those clothes on. Once I remembered it was my day and time to water, I decided to take my coffee out to the front yard. I turned on my sprinklers and sat and watched as my once brown grass, slowly turned green. Since my hair was sticking out in every direction, I figured I should go back inside to finish my coffee and listen to the latest seven day forecast that revealed several more 100 degree days.

Without *my* disruptions, Annie got ready in time, and I walked her out the door.

That’s when I saw it, a “Notice of Violation” from the City of Modesto. The *violation*: Sprinkler needs adjustment. The next *violation*, \$150, then \$250, and then \$500.

The city employee “Nicole” only had a ten-minute window to place the notice on my door. That’s what pissed me off. Why hadn’t she talked to me? Why didn’t she communicate the warning, ask questions?

As I walked Annie out to her car, I realized that the business, streamlined, efficient procedure that Nicole was following is exactly what is wrong with our education system, especially when it comes to writing.

Nicole didn’t know that my dad and I had adjusted those sprinklers on five different evenings.

She didn’t know the white birch trees are dying.

She didn’t know I was in a great mood drinking coffee ten feet away in the living room.

She didn’t know that I almost let my lawn die because I’m sick of the city’s restrictions.

She didn’t know that I installed a new sprinkler because the one I replaced actually was wasting water.

She didn’t know because she didn’t ask. She didn’t communicate. She was doing her job. She was being efficient. She was following procedure.

In our writing classrooms, we must fight against the institutional efficiency that

permeates the American culture. In order to push back against such a callous style of teaching, we must create and nurture a classroom culture that is caring, cyclical, restorative, and reflective.

If I didn't promote such a culture in my classroom, I would never have known that Anthony, Lisa, and Monica are first generation college students because I wouldn't have the time to ask.

If I didn't promote such a culture in my classroom, I wouldn't have made it a priority to hold one-to-one writing conferences, and I would have missed the opportunity to have a student and teacher "Aha" moment with Jessica. Until she and I sat down and talked, I was banging my head against my desk trying to figure out why Jessica kept writing run-ons even after I explained, in class and on her papers, how to avoid writing run-on sentences. During our conference together, I kept my teacher wall up, "I do like the point you are making, but how can we make this sound a little better?" And she kept her student wall up, "Oh, I see what you are saying. I will add a bit more to the end." She stood up and started to pack her things. Finally, I decided to let my wall down in hopes she would do the same, "Jessica, before you leave, I have a question. In each of your paragraphs, you end with a run-on sentence. Why is that?" Continuing to pack her things, she explained, "Because my high school English teacher said that every paragraph needs to have five sentences." I smiled widely, "That is great! Well, it isn't great, but it is great. Let me tell you why." I explained that there are not a set number of sentences for a paragraph. The more we discussed it, the more she smiled and looked a little embarrassed. Once she realized that our talk has led her to more command of her writing, she grew excited to write more. Jessica's writing improved and I stopped getting headaches from banging my head against my desk.

If I didn't promote such a culture in my classroom, Jason wouldn't have asked to talk in the hallway before class. He would never had told me that he missed a whole week's worth of class because he had to go to court for driving under the influence. He wouldn't have asked my opinion. We wouldn't have had a hallway talk about responsibility and learning from mistakes. Jason may have never heard the opinion of a strong and respected male figure.

If I didn't promote such a culture in my classroom, I wouldn't have known that Beth's girlfriend took her life and now Beth was showing signs of doing the same. I wouldn't have had the time to contact Beth after her third absence to arrange a meeting so I could speak with her. I wouldn't have had the time to walk her to the counseling office. If I didn't slow down, there is a good chance the email I received from her would have been the opposite of the one I received: "Excuse the late reply. I'm doing fine, just trying to get through. Thanks for checking up, I miss all of you guys."

If I were worried about streamlining my classroom, I wouldn't have had the time to learn about the lives of my students in order to provide a supportive education. I wouldn't have known what my students needed if I didn't push back against efficiency.

If I allowed the business culture of efficiency that saturates our society to enter my writing classroom, I wouldn't have known.

If you allow efficiency to take precedence over students and place priority on programs over humans, you will not know.



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