

David Andrew Stoler

Creative Writing and Social Studies

The Linden Middle School, Queens, NY

Seventh Grade

Residency Day 1

It's more than a little thrill passing the street sign that abuts 1s192Q. Every time I read the words "Run DMC JMJ Way" it reminds me to be a little more positive than I generally feel after the epic commute to Hollis, Queens. Who knows what one of the students in my classes is going to accomplish? Such history on the corner is a crystal-clear restatement of our mission in these schools: to give access to an art that can and will propel students outward and upward who might not otherwise have had the chance.

Still, the commute is long, it's early, and it's cold out. And, I've got my reservations heading into this residency. Planning hasn't been particularly easy. The challenge here is to come up with a syllabus that engages the students in the time period (colonial life and the American Revolution), without necessarily relying on tons of source data from those years exactly. I should say that that is the challenge *for me*, as the poetry of that era doesn't thrill me. I studied 18th Century verse in college, and it was a snooze-fest then; if I try to pretend to be excited about it now, I know from experience the students will see through that before I get a full sentence out.

The primary documents from that era are a little more compelling—journals, letters from George Washington, the laws the British were passing at the time—there are things to work with, though I wouldn't say it's easy in any way: most of the docs are archaic enough to make tough reading even for me.

Still, I've come up with a (fairly standard) plan: to let the kids create characters for themselves from that time period, and then attack regular writing exercises—that I know will help their writing in easy-to-access, clear, compelling ways—from the perspectives of those characters. I'll alternate weeks looking

at the primary docs with exercises from poetry I find more... exciting... in an effort to engage them on both levels, the writing embracing both the technique of modern creative writing and a deeper understanding of the time and place they're studying in social studies.

In class one, Ms. Aquila's class, it goes very, very well. After talking about the residency and the project, we discuss what Queens was like back in 1750, and the students are right on it: we draw a list on the board of the kinds of people who were living and working in Queens back then. The kids are rowdy, a little skeptical of me, and some of course try to test my limits—but this is absolutely standard operating procedure for a residency's first day.

I'm in for some nice surprises: the kids let their imaginations really run wild, and in some unexpected ways. For example, even though we hadn't talked about it before, a couple of kids (independently from one another) decide they want to be animals from the 1750s and fill out their entire sheets giving the characteristics of animals (What do you most fear: hunters coming for me and my family). At one group table, two of the students decide to be runaway slaves, one decides to be a bounty hunter in search of them, and the fourth decides to be the first black girl to ever go to school in Queens. Great, great stuff.

Residency Day 2

Today's residency day was like the exact mirror opposite of last week's, and I'm kind of stunned by it. Seriously, anything good or bad that happened last week, the exact opposite happened this one.

Having said what I said about 18th Century lit, I decided to bring in a more modern poem today that sticks with the themes of 1750s America and work from there. I chose Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing," a poem I've taught in one other residency that was linked to social studies, and one that I do with my college students all the time. The poem is basically a list of working people, and nearly none of it wouldn't fit right in with the 1700s, though it was

written more than a century later.

My first class last week was my best: Ms. Aquila's seventh-graders were keen, rambunctious, curious... Today, however... Ms. Aquila wasn't there. And we all know what that means: I had a lot more trouble controlling the class without the strength of their fine teacher (and without any real threat of repercussions for behavioral issues), and found the class nearly only rambunctious.

It was tough. Still, a few of the students still did great work: after a discussion of Whitman's poem, I had them imagine they were waking up and going through their days as the characters they invented last week. What sounds did they hear? What were the things going on around them? Who and what did they see? They were to structure these observations as a simple list, following Whitman's form. Some of their responses were exuberant and compelling—one of the students, who had made himself into a mountain lion roaming the countryside, woke to the sounds of hunters in the woods, for example—and those who did the work did some great things.

This reminds me of something I have learned over and over as a teacher, but have kind of forgotten recently and need to relearn: *absorption* vs. *reflection*. One of the key mistakes teachers (and people) make over and over again is to react to the behavior being thrown at them and then to reflect that behavior back.

And it never gets a positive result. Instead of reflecting, and as difficult and as uninstinctual as it can be, a much more constructive reaction to this is absorption. Basically taking whatever the students are throwing at you, like a sponge, and not reflecting it back to them. You say you're bad? Okay. I don't care about all that. Give me your best. We're here to do something else.

Residency Day 3

And there you go, things go better today. I used the absorption technique throughout the day, over and over. When someone wasn't working, was mouthing off or whatever, I'd kneel down with them and start asking them questions about their writing. I didn't reflect the negativity—I absorbed it without ignoring it, and recentered focus, one student at a time, on what I was there for.

The results were great. All three classes got through their work, and all three were, to varying degrees, "into it." They weren't *easy*, but they all, every one of them, at least tried. Truthfully, that's all I can ask.

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Residency Day 4

The lesson we did today was an old standard of mine: discussing sensory details by looking at Nikki Giovanni's poem "Knoxville, Tennessee." The poem is a great list of her memories of growing up in the South, but it has a twist at the end.

Though ostensibly about Tennessee, the last two lines change the meaning to make the poem actually about New York: about *missing* home, a compare and contrast, instead of just a simple memory poem.

What I thought was, given that the students wrote about coming to the colonies last week, this would be an opportunity to, 1) give them something a bit easier to swallow than 18th-Century verse, 2) learn a very clear writing technique (sensory detail), and, 3) relate that modern verse and technique to the characters they have created in a way that deepens their understanding of both the Colonists and character creation.

So that was the plan: to have them inhabit their characters and write nostalgic, missing poems. It went well with Ms. Aquila's class: there were some great

surprises and passion during the reading, particularly in a poem by Deshawn, a pensive student who I can never really get a grasp on, which read:

There's never a place
where you can feel safe
everything you touch
is guarded by this almost
invisible presence
like something is not there
but you can feel it

when you taste something
you feel good about tasting
something you know
or trying something new
like squash or eggplant

when or if you tried these things
for the first time
nobody would like it
but only people who are used
to eating it
who have recognition of this food

down south
if you have never been
how could you be!

I thought his take was so interesting, the way he linked a certain spirituality to his character's nostalgia, and so clearly rooted the nostalgia in his fear of his new place.

Residency Day 10

During the school's Presidents' Week break, I brought home all the student folders and starting searching for poems for the anthology. On one hand, this isn't the greatest task—nine or ten poems, 75 or so kids, it's a lot of material to look through and then type up. But there are some unexpected pleasures in the tedium: surprises in poems you hadn't seen before, a sense that more got accomplished by students you weren't sure were getting

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it, etc.

And that's definitely what happened here: although, as usual, there were a small number of students who really hadn't gotten a single thing done, the great majority of them had at least one nice poem for the book. So I typed those, printed them, and went in to school for day ten.

What's nice about this day is that, really, nearly every student has forgotten that they've actually been working on something, and now suddenly they get to see the first iteration of their words in print. They are palpably proud of themselves, and they understand that they are a part of something serious and wonderful. It's a great realization, and a calmer one than the one that takes place later at the anthology celebration.

It's also a huge motivator for those students who haven't been motivated throughout the course. They see what their classmates have gotten, and they see a blank page or just a couple of words under the byline for their own, and they get it. This is their last shot. Students who receive these blank pages never fail to get on board now, which is always a relief. ☺

David Andrew Stoler was born in Troy, New York, and had pretty excellent writing teachers there, who he has surely disappointed. After collecting an incredibly remunerative BA in poetry from Brown University, he became a New York Times Fellow in Fiction at New York University's MFA program. His last short story was nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and his latest film is currently in post-production from Disba Theater and Longstocking Productions. He teaches creative writing for Teachers & Writers Collaborative, and for Berkeley College in Manhattan.

To see the worksheets and other supplemental material used in David Andrew Stoler's workshops, please visit us online at twc.org/magazine/.