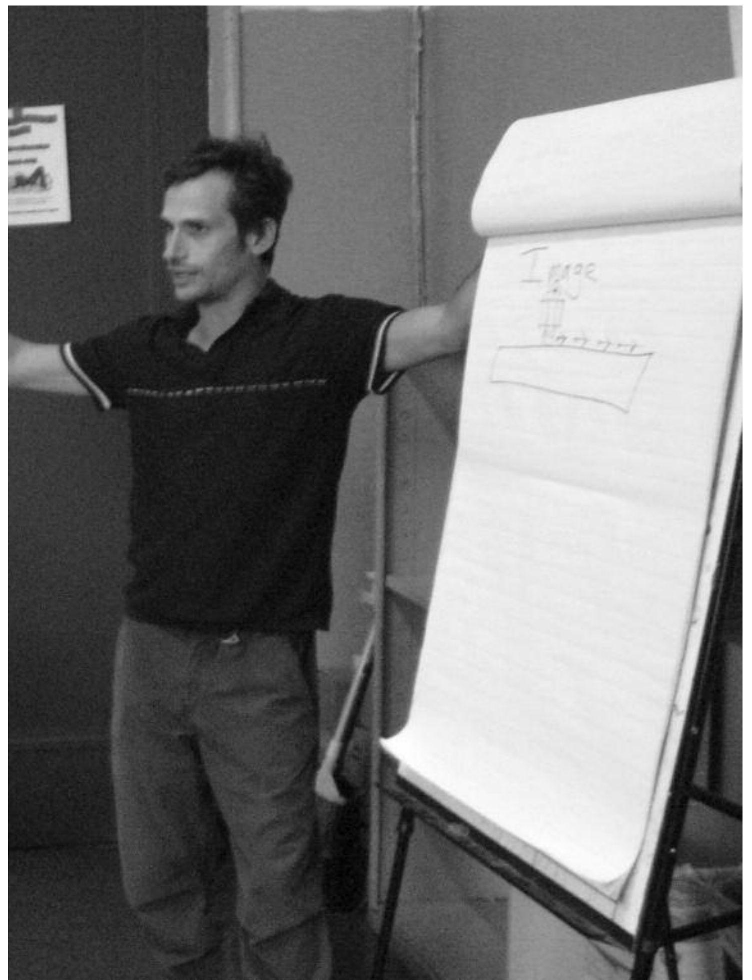
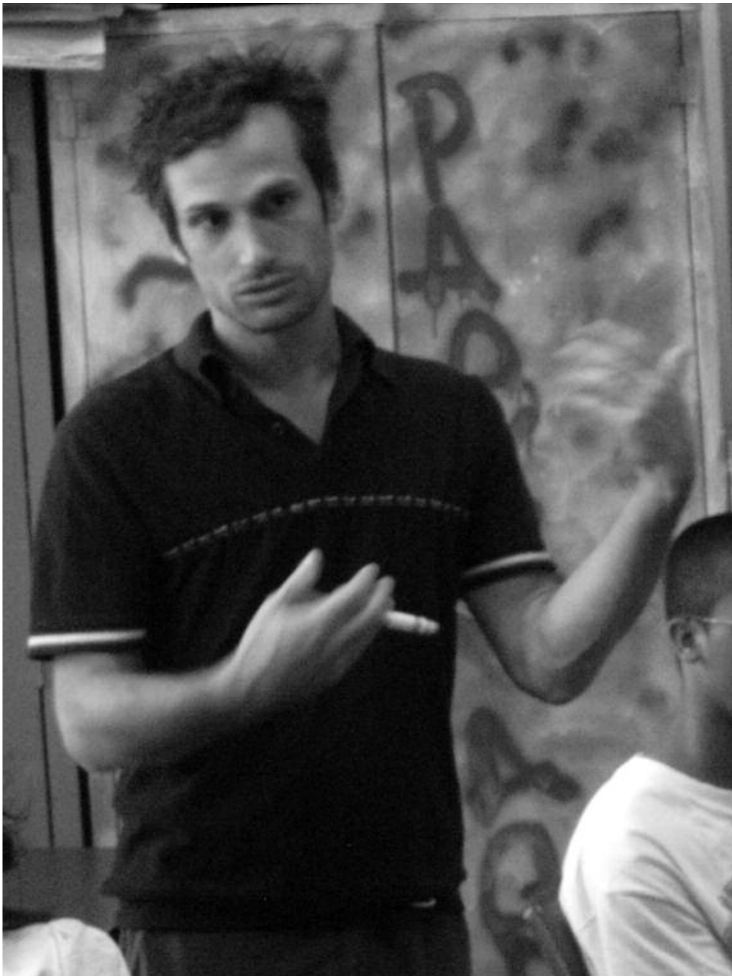
Image



Image



CHANGING THE STAKES

Recreating the Playbook

Teaching Essay Writing at Harlem's Frederick Douglass Academy

DAVID ANDREW STOLER

Kristin Breen runs her Advanced Placement English class at the Frederick Douglass Academy (FDA) in Harlem the way your favorite high school English teacher did: embracing sternness and wit in equal parts, Breen treats her students with the respect of a good college workshop instructor, and in turn expects college-level work from them. When they stray—which, being seniors, they do—Ms. Breen's main recourse is a look known to turn the most confident FDA senior into the equivalent of a New Jersey deer during hunting season.

Unfortunately, I know the power of this look first-hand, directed as it was toward me during my first day as a teaching-artist at FDA. Teachers & Writers Collaborative had been drafted by FDA's principal and driving force, Dr. Gregory Hodge, to provide the students with something common at wealthier suburban schools but sorely lacking in schools in at-risk neighborhoods: individualized help with college application essays.

With both a quality school leadership and a strong, connected teacher already in place, the FDA residency seemed like a plum: teaching motivated kids to infuse their essays with creative writing in a rigorous academic environment, supplemented by two periods of one-on-one conferencing to help the students with their specific essays. Happily, I began teaching there as I often do: using Joe Brainard's "I Remember" for idea generation and a lesson on detailed imagery.

As the FDA seniors got to work on their "I Remember" poems I glanced at Ms. Breen—and was frozen in place by "the look." Soon enough, Ms. Breen asked if we could "talk."

No sweat—strong teachers wanting to direct a residency is fairly standard. Typically, they'll ask a teaching artist to tweak the syllabus to better complement what is already being done in class, to address certain student needs, etc.

But Ms. Breen had something far different to say. The seniors, she told me, were under a lot of pressure to get their essays done. Their applications were due, they didn't have much time, and learning simply to be better writers wasn't going to be as useful to them at that point as it perhaps was to my past classes. Was there a way I could spend all of my time helping the students individually, instead of spending class time on lessons and exercises?

So, wait—she wanted me to abandon my playbook completely? I had been contracted to teach what I knew best—and what I knew best how to teach: exercises to

__David Andrew Stoler__ is a writer and T&W teaching artist living in New York City. He can be reached at dstoler@gmail.com.

Paul untangles umpteen almost purple aardvarks, even though quixotic mats

make students better writers and open them up to the liberation of voice that I found the most satisfying aspect of creative writing. And she was asking me to abandon my decade-plus of experience on my very first day?

But during my first round of one-on-one conferences with students, it quickly became clear why: they were desperate for a different kind of guidance when it came to their essays. After six years of writing lessons focused almost solely on the standard five-paragraph essay form, the students' writing had become formulaic and often stilted and derivative. There was little in any essay to differentiate one student from another; their personal statements were anything but personal. Worse, many of the students, when faced with essay questions for which there were no clear answers, had no idea how even to start. And if they did have a creative idea or something they felt passionate about that didn't fit into the five-paragraph format… forget it.

They had two months to get these things done—applications were due. So together we outlined how their essays might go. Conferences were spent going over standard essay formats other than the five-paragraph form, then figuring out which form might work best for each application question. There was a lot of work to do, and soon all question of what I might have to offer the students was gone: I was a creative writer, and what they needed, and quickly, was to learn to break out of their student boxes and become creative writers, too.

There was a lot of work to do, and soon all question of what I might have to offer the students was gone: I was a creative writer, and what they needed, and quickly, was to learn to break out of their student boxes and become creative writers, too.

As I'm sure many of us do, I often think about, and worry for, the state of our art. Not our art as poets and writers—more people are reading and writing today than in our planet's history, after all—but our art as writers who teach. As many of us have found out fairly quickly in the present economy, we are not exactly considered indispensable parts of the standard curriculum—and yet even before the current recession our arts-in-education programs were being slashed because of No Child Left Behind and the new focus on testing, rubrics, and school accountability. It has been, in short, a demoralizing time for the teaching writer.

But if I have wondered what we might do to change that, a clear example emerged at FDA. Over the course of the next few terms I worked with Vicky Rodriquez, another wonderful teacher at FDA, to figure out just how to maximize the effectiveness of a T&W residency there. With first-term juniors facing less time pressure, we did a few general explorations into personal voice and experience, then worked on how we might fuse those experiences into one solid, original essay. Second-term juniors needed to focus on completing the four essays Dr. Hodge requires them to finish before graduating—essays that look an awful lot like those required for the Common Application, a catch-all college application that most of the students would be filling out soon enough. With those two steps done by their senior years, the students then had the tools they had been lacking to create dynamic application essays.

In essence, what Ms. Rodriguez and I did was work to combine the goals of Teachers & Writers teaching artists with those of the school in a way that resulted in a brand new curriculum: one particularly suited to the needs of the FDA student. We created a rubric to judge how successfully a student applied creative concepts within their essays, and we held the students accountable for multiple drafts of those essays. The results were clear and measurable, and the writing of each new essay was of a quality leaps and bounds over the previous one. Ms. Breen had students she knew were in need of triage; with Ms. Rodriguez we could figure out how to keep the emergency room clear.

It sounds like an obvious idea—to not simply focus our teaching lessons on the current curriculum of the school, but to recreate them with each school to fit its needs. To take No Child Left Behind and the current vogue for rubrics, accountability, and statistical verification of effect and begin to integrate them into what we as creative writers bring to a school. To, in fact, accept a changing role—from providing primary content to providing complementary content—in the educational system and make it work to our students' benefits.

But the reactions to that idea by teaching artists have been visceral, and in a way I wouldn't have expected. I remember, for example, how strong the negative reactions were to just the word "rubric" at the conferences for teaching artists in New York I attended each summer. And I see the resistance from some of the teaching artists in my own organization when asked to create syllabi and document their work so that schools can see a tiered approach to what we do—in short, when we are asked to quantify our worth.

I wonder if our reaction doesn't actually have more to do with us, with where we find value, than it does with what is being asked of us by the schools and the economy. From the early days of T&W, one of the organization's core values was that creative writing has its own worth; to say this was no longer enough would be to question our very reason for being. After all, if we need to prove the value of our craft in terms outside of it—in terms of reading comprehension and math skills—doesn't that imply those other things in fact have a higher value?

Which is an implication writers fight against every day, having made the choice to toil with the word while those around us get wealthy—or, at least, have health insurance—having committed ourselves to an art that is both difficult and, generally, poorly compensated. One can understand why these new demands to accommodate the current educational environment might rankle us.

But I would suggest that our value is secure: We are writers, and that is essential to who we are. But we are also teachers, and every word we say in the classroom is infused with both of those things—every lesson, even were we to teach math, is infused with the specific colored light that flows through us and out of us. So that when we teach FDA students something other than the ode or five-sense poem, every ode we've ever written is going to be in there, too. Or: if there is no essay without a compelling lede, we also know there is no compelling lede without good, detailed, sensory imagery and a knowledge of the finer points of empathic writing.

We are writers, and that is essential to who we are. But we are also teachers, and every word we say in the classroom is infused with both of those things.

In other words: whatever it takes. Let's give rubrics to any principal or teacher who needs them to get us in that classroom and show kids what makes an essay we can feel. Yes, we are writers, and we are teachers, and now we have to give up what's at stake for us and teach these kids to write, too. Based on what's at stake for them—and at FDA it ain't, let's admit, writing a good sestina. It's getting into college, getting out of extremely tough neighborhoods, getting to a point where, if they find they share our creative impulse, they, too, can communicate through art, as we do.