



📅 40th Anniversary

T&W In The Beginning

Excerpts from *Journal of a Living Experiment*

HERBERT KOHL AND PHILLIP LOPATE

Excerpts from *Journal of a Living Experiment: A Documentary History of the First Ten Years of Teachers & Writers Collaborative*. Edited with commentary by Phillip Lopate (New York: Teachers & Writers, 1979).

From the introduction by Phillip Lopate

Teachers & Writers is, first of all, the original organization to have sent poets, novelists, and other artists into the schools on a regular basis. It came out of a series of meetings in 1966–67 among writers whose awakened social conscience about the plight of the schools—particularly ghetto schools—compelled them to become involved and to take action in some way. Because they were writers they addressed themselves initially to what they saw as disastrous shortcomings in the English curriculum; but their concern for language and the ways that schools traditionally choked off students’ creative, alive, use of language was only a metaphorical starting point for larger concerns about educational tracking and racial and social injustices that seemed to be taking place in the schools. The writers’ (and later, the other artists’) idea was that by going into the schools, they could both lend support to the students’ “authentic” voices and cultures, while taking students further through professional guidance in art-making activities—at the same time helping to bring about a more enjoyable, unrepressed school environment.

The twistings and turnings of that idea, through every conceivable barrier and self-doubt, is one way of looking at the history of Teachers & Writers. This is—for me—a book about “activists,” . . . people who wanted to do something and—though not without discomfit—did it. Are still doing it.

Excerpts from an interview by Phillip Lopate with T&W founding director Herbert Kohl on the beginnings of Teachers & Writers Collaborative

Kohl: I was . . . walking around like a madman with the kids’ writing. I was carrying it around. I’d saved every scrap of paper. I would grab people in the street and read it to them! In fact that’s exactly how I got a contract for *36 Children* (New York: New American Library, 1967): I once grabbed ahold of Phyllis Seidel, who had gone to college with me, and who was now an editor at New American Library. I was reading it to

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her and to Nelson Aldrich (editor of *Harper's*) and all of these people who I went to Harvard with. I would just read the stuff compulsively and show it to people.

So Nelson Aldrich came over to me one day . . . and he said, "Herb, I'd like you to come to this series of meetings that are going on at Columbia. And bring the kids' writing."

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Kohl: [At the Columbia meeting] I . . . said that if writers have anything to offer, they should work directly with the kids in the classroom and they should work with teachers who are doing something. And listen to the teachers. And that it should be a "collaborative operation." I guess the point that I kept hitting over and over again is that there should be some equity between the writers and the teachers and the kids.

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I felt like a real crazy and very isolated and lonely because . . . I would read the stuff the kids had written, and other than a few people I knew, most didn't believe it was of any value. . . . And here were these writers, a large number of whom were extremely interested, and saw in the kids' writing and language what I saw in it. And what a lot of other people didn't. They had genuine interest in the work.

Lopate: You finally found your audience.

Kohl: Yeah. Muriel [Rukeyser] was really listening, Denise [Levertov] and all these other people were weighing the language, and that's—that's kind of wonderful.

At the Hunting Conference, where Teachers & Writers was established

Kohl: The environment was bristling, primarily because we had these teachers, all of whom wanted to read the writings of their kids. All of them wanted to make known what they were doing, and to communicate their work, and were also, really, crying for help.

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I had set it up so that the teachers presented their students' materials, talked about their work. And then the writers and the teachers socialized. And since I'm both a teacher and a writer, I became this crazy bridge-person. I was totally caught up in what I was learning from the writers, talking to them and helping my own work, all throughout the evening. And in the day I could keep it going so that the teachers' input was there: I mean, I could get the teachers to talk, and to understand that there was an audience that was receptive and serious, that it wasn't just another one of them [sic] things where they were going to be laughed at or forgotten.


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On the teaching diaries and T&W publications

Kohl: “My idea was simply that if you get writers writing about teaching, you’ll learn something new. Out of those diaries I was hoping I would learn an enormous amount, because knowing the way writers are, if they have to put something down, they’re going to think about it. . . . Those who are committed to it are going to be passionate about it. And that’s what the newsletter came out of. We would take these things, and take the materials produced by the kids, and compile them, then distribute them to a wider audience.

On the Teachers & Writers Seminar

Lopate: Do you want to explain the function of the seminar? It’s always seemed to me to have been the concrete way of putting into practice the idea of teachers and writers collaborating.

Kohl: The function of the seminar was to take the writers, as many as we could, and the teachers they were working with . . . and learn something out of all the work that was going on between them in the classroom. . . . My feeling was that out of this could come a whole way of approaching the business of language with kids. In order to do this we couldn’t deal with one-shot things, and we couldn’t deal with individual, particular instances, but we had to get down and talk about what happened, what didn’t happen, what works and doesn’t work; and we also had to talk about how that related to everything else that goes on in the classroom. And how that could be worked up into a program . . . [and] translated into fundamental change in a classroom with kids. So what I was doing was trying to draw out from the writers what it is that they saw and perceived and felt and could add. From the teachers I was really trying to get some greater commitment, not just to the writer or to Teachers & Writers Collaborative, but to teaching writing themselves, and to writing themselves. And actually it went beyond that: it was a commitment to a different view of the kids. 

Herbert Kohl is author of a score of books, including 36 Children, Growing Minds, I Won’t Learn From You, and She Would Not Be Moved: How We Tell the Story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He is founding director of Teachers & Writers Collaborative.

Phillip Lopate is the editor of The Art of the Personal Essay; and the author of Bachelorhood, Against Joie de Vivre, and Being with Children, which is about his experiences as a teaching artist with Teachers & Writers Collaborative. Lopate is a professor at Hofstra University.