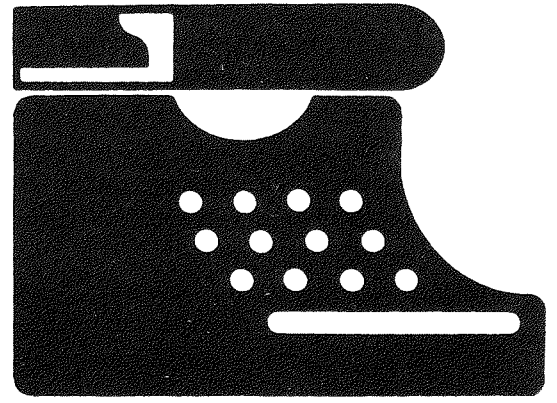


Teachers & Writers



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SPECIAL ISSUE

HOUSTON WRITERS IN THE SCHOOLS

Introduction

by Marvin Hoffman

WHEN I FIRST MOVED TO HOUSTON IN 1982, one of the few people I knew in that boom-city-about-to-go-bust was Phillip Lopate. His presence there had a great deal to do with my wife's decision to accept a job teaching at the University of Houston. During our three years together at Teachers & Writers Collaborative, from 1968 to 1971, I had come to think of Phillip as the consummate New Yorker, so I was astonished to learn toward the the end of our eleven-year sojourn in New Hampshire that Phillip had become a Texan. If he could make it in the Diaspora, so could we.

Although we were no longer working with writers-in-the-schools programs—Phillip was a university

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professor, I was a fulltime teacher of younger children—we reminisced together about T&W, surprised by its longevity and full of good feeling about the imprint it had left on our lives. Nothing like it existed in Houston. Local interest in student writing was limited. In many respects Houston is a fine place to live, but educational ideas that have taken hold elsewhere often arrive here only after journeys of what seem light years.

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Why not a writers-in-the-schools program here? Phillip and I knew what was required to start such a program, and the University of Houston's writing program could provide a pool of creative, eager, and destitute writers like those at Columbia who worked for T&W in its early years. We needed only the money, the institutional commitment, and the time from both of our schedules to devote to bringing the project to life.

For three years or so, we limped along with a handful of writers who worked at the local performing arts high school and in two suburban school districts looking for ways to "enrich" their curriculum. It was a desultory effort. Phillip and I met irregularly with the writers, who never numbered more than three or four at a time, to share what wisdom we had, and to hear about their successes and frustrations.

Several people have written us over the years for advice on how to get a similar program started in their schools, but I must confess that whatever catapulted us from our early tribulations to our current (relative) prosperity remains somewhat mysterious. In part, it was simply a matter of putting in the time. Phillip and I had both been on the scene long enough to have become visible and stable presences within the university and the school district. Our success was partially due to the efforts of a handful of strategically placed people who either believed in us or in the value and importance of writing. Beginning in 1985-86, the Houston Independent School District (HISD) allocated enough money to enable us to place eight additional writers in the district's magnet schools for gifted and talented students. Suddenly, with fifteen writers working, there was a critical mass of people involved. We could only begin to meet together regularly and to offer formal writing workshops to the teachers in whose classrooms we taught.

In the next (and current) stage, we have been the beneficiaries of a type of hysteria. Shocked by the results of national and statewide writing tests, the Why Johnny Can't Write folks have been desperate to try anything—even, God help us, writers themselves—to improve these scores. In 1987, HISD provided funds for six additional writers to work in schools scoring in the bottom five percent on the state proficiency tests. We made it clear that our job was not to prepare students for these tests. In a sense, we were after bigger game: long-term changes in fluency and in attitudes toward writing in the schools. But lo and behold, there have been some dramatic improvements in the test scores during our three-year tenure in these schools, and we have been faced with the pleasant dilemma of deciding how much credit we

should take for these gains. We'd like the recognition that our efforts deserve, but we don't want to promote the illusion that test improvement is our *raison d'être*.

Largely as a result of our success, we were flooded with requests from principals in low-income communities eligible for Chapter One federal funding. They wanted our writers to work in over forty schools, and we could not accommodate all of them. Our program has made great strides, however. We now have thirty-two writers in forty-three residencies. Many of the most serious and qualified writers in the Houston area are working with Writers In The Schools (WITS).

In mid-1989, we received a grant from the Houston Endowment to hire two half-time administrative staff people, and the University of Houston provided us with a permanent home in the English department as well as a variety of much-needed support services.

We're still a tiny blip on the radar screen in a school system with more than 180,000 students, but as T&W has proven, educational programs with energy and vision can have an impact entirely out of proportion to their actual size. As I travel through the city visiting our writers' classrooms, I take a secret pleasure in the thought that we have outposts everywhere—in neighborhoods hidden behind phalanxes of industrial warehouses, in neighborhoods that could be mistaken for Mexico City barrios, Louisiana bayou towns, tree-lined Iowa city streets, and inner-city Chicago. In all these unlikely places, there are extraordinary teachers and administrators hidden away, struggling and succeeding in spite of crushing obstacles. The high point of my month is the writing workshop I coordinate with a group of principals and school administrators in a largely Hispanic, industrial quarter of the city. They come to the sessions as fired up to write as I do, and leave determined to encourage their teachers to do the same with their students.

We've grown, but we're still a fledgling program. A lot of the work our writers are doing is derivative in the best sense. WITS is an adaptation of ideas developed at T&W. But new ideas are beginning to emerge here in Houston, as happens when you find creative people and then give them license to use that creativity. The three articles that follow are a sampling of these new ideas and directions. ●

COLLABORATIVE TEACHING

Writers & Visual Artists

by Victoria Jones

AS I WATCHED A PHOTOGRAPHER WORK with my writing students, I mourned my art. No more the need to coax and inspire. The photographer instead had to temper their enthusiasm, asking them not to begin snapping photos until she had finished her instructions. Her specific guidelines—"Shoot up at your subject to give the appearance of weightlessness"—seemed such welcome relief to the intangible writing process. The click of a button and POOF—realistic characters in intricately detailed settings, no revision required.

I was observing the other side of a collaborative project that I helped develop last year, in which students wrote about the subject they planned to photograph, to help them decide on important issues such as setting, lighting, and distance from subject. The process was then reversed, the photographs serving as inspiration for the writing.

In the planning stages I had no idea that the photographs would completely transform the class. With the distribution of twenty-five envelopes of prints came the father, just home from work, his sweaty belly protruding from his shirt; the smiling sister, her hair plastered to her head and cellophaned; bikinied fold-outs tacked above the older brother's bed. The students' lives, personal and exposed, covered the desktops, the floor, and the bulletin boards, and reemerged in stunning poems and stories—candid, urgent, and deeply important.

As Program Coordinator of Writers In The Schools (WITS) in Houston, I am excited to see that we are moving more in the direction of interartistic collaboration. While the panic over literacy has doubled the demand for our writers each of the last three years, it has hurt the visual arts. The number of art teachers has been cut back in Houston secondary and elementary schools. Yet I believe that the visual arts are central to increasing reading and writing skills, for they provide a form of communication that is more

accessible to students of all ages, especially non-English speakers, than printed or even spoken language.

Having organized and participated in various collaborative projects with visual artists, I feel that they are immensely rewarding for students, teachers, and visiting artists alike, though very tricky. With so many factors to consider, ranging from differences in the aesthetics and teaching styles of the two artists to anticipating student response in an unfamiliar medium, it is easy, in the enthusiasm of the exchange, to forget even the most basic and logical keys to success. A review of my own mistakes and successes may help to guide other writers and teachers interested in similar projects.

I began combining writing and the visual arts while working with children in museums. I wrote a series of 'children's guides to the exhibits, and led writing workshops in the galleries. I also brought reproductions of paintings and photographs into the classroom to motivate writing. Because I knew that visual images tickled children's imaginations, I took what at the time did not seem like a giant step forward: I planned a curriculum with a visual artist.

The "One + One" project grew out of an exhibition that involved collaborative projects between Houston-area writers and visual artists. The concept of combining the arts was extended to the schools by teaming writers with art teachers. A few months before the project was to begin, four writers and four teachers met for two sessions of two hours each. The organizers and participants in the "One + One" exhibit presented ideas on the relationships between art and literature, and how the combination of visual art and writing might help students express themselves. Finally, each writer/teacher pair met at least one more time to plan their curriculum.

One problem that affected the success of both the photography project I mentioned earlier and this one was that scheduled meetings between the writer (or artist) and the cooperating teacher occurred only before the project had begun. So much cannot be foreseen until the actual teaching begins, that frequent

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meetings between teacher and writer must continue throughout the project to guarantee the review of student work and the reassessment of our plans and ideas. Time and money, scarce in most schools, must be built into the program to insure a continuing exchange, so vital to success in the classroom.

I was fortunate to be paired with Eileen Callan, an experienced and gifted art teacher. We planned four projects for the fourteen weeks we would work together. It became apparent during the first few weeks that our goals were completely unrealistic. We pared down to the two projects we thought would be most successful, with less ambitious preparatory exercises to be completed in a single class period.

We also realized early on that my own schedule was a problem. The usual residency for a WITS writer consists of weekly visits to three English classes for fourteen or twenty-eight weeks. In this case, I was working in two English classes as well as Eileen's art class. We found that it took us at least one full class period to prime the kids for a project in writing *or* visual art; the week that separated our presentations erased any meaningful connection between the two. Had we realized this beforehand, we might have planned to meet twice a week, or, better still, lengthened the classes to two hours, but I was already locked into my schedule with the English teachers. Eileen met with the class every day, and could therefore finish up any project they'd started while I was there, but that made me miss some of the action. Another unfortunate logistical problem was that I ended up working in her sixth-grade class rather than with the more advanced seventh and eighth graders we had envisioned during our planning sessions.

During our first class together, Eileen and I decided to have the students concentrate on emotion, which we agreed was the source of our own work. I knew that if I walked in the first day and just asked them to write poems about emotions, I would have gotten twenty variations of "Roses are red" and "Sunshine makes me happy." Specific and unusual detail is always the first thing I focus on with my writing students. We spent the first two classes concentrating on the basics of descriptive writing.

Eileen began our third class by showing the students slides of self-portraits by famous painters and her former students. She led the class in a discussion of how the paintings made them feel, asking them to explain why. The students quickly moved from the obvious—the person's facial expression—to color, brushstroke, background, and proportion. I acted as scribe, compiling a widely varied collection of emotions on the board.

The slides segued beautifully into what I asked them to do in writing: choose one emotion and imagine it personified. With the visual images still clicking through their heads, the students wrote some of the best pieces I've had from this exercise.

Evil

1. Wears all black
2. Only wears tutus
3. Doesn't say the pledge
- ...
9. Parents are divorced
10. Lives with mother
-
17. Eyes pop out
18. 15 feet tall
19. Very short
20. Never takes baths
21. Smells good

—Katherine Sandlin, 6th grade

I especially like how this piece becomes increasingly perverse, in the end refusing to be understood.

Conceited is extremely wealthy. He wears a different suit every day.... Conceited has a high loud voice and walks with his head in the air....

—Anonymous, 6th grade

Depressed is a 13 year old boy who has a terrible burn on his left arm. In a car accident a fire was set in the engine. That was five years ago. He is in the eighth grade right now. Depressed is very lonely. He has only one friend but he is one of the nerds of the school and gets beat up by third graders.

—Greg Tijerina, 6th grade

In the art session that followed, we had the kids draw and paint their characters. It didn't work very well. As Eileen noted later: "The students were too new to the art class to have the proper background in painting.... They needed to do portraits before the painting project and have experience with the medium. Our project would have worked better with the older students." So we decided to approach the art project from another angle: focusing on the basic elements of color and line more in keeping with the students' abilities. Under this revised scheme, the art session would precede the more specific writing assignment.

We also began with the notion that we could closely match "process" and "objective." We soon found, however, that a looser fit between the writing and art projects was necessary. For instance, if we decided to focus on place, or setting, I might ask the students to write about a personal sanctuary, so they could see

how significant details both convey emotion and develop character. Eileen’s session, meanwhile, might involve drawing that same place from three perspectives (à la David Hockney). Thus, the art project would examine perspective and composition, also important skills for a writer, though not exactly the focus of the writing assignment. We found that different approaches enhanced the end-product, allowing for a complex exploration of a shared subject while avoiding redundancy—another problem we had not anticipated. When asked, “Why aren’t you drawing your object?” the students replied, “I already did that,” meaning that they’d already illustrated their ideas in writing. Having a new focus in each assignment helped keep the students engaged.

Once Eileen and I had learned these important lessons, our final project was a great success. We began with a class in which we discussed dreams—their power, their meanings. I asked the students to begin writing down their dreams, both new ones and old ones. Eileen showed slides of work by Magritte, Dali, and Ernst, outlining various techniques used to convey their subjects—unlikely combinations of objects, play with color and scale, and the tension created by realism mixed with the imagined. During one class we passed out Chagall prints and asked the students to write about the dream they saw in the painting. The assignment clicked for a boy who had not written anything; he kept writing the rest of the semester. His piece captures the feeling of *The Violinist* and tells a wonderful tale:

I think the picture is telling a story about a small town that was real quiet and lonely. It was like a ghost town in the middle of nowhere. If you were walking down a street in that town all you would hear is birds singing and whistling. Then one night a man came. He was wearing a long overcoat. He had on a hat, brown pants, and brown dress shoes. His face was green, but his hands were very pale white. But the first thing about him that I noticed was a violin he was holding. He started playing his beautiful music. The music was so wonderful that the people came out and started to dance. The town was filled with joy and happiness. They were so happy and uplifted that the town just started to float into *neverland*. They just floated and floated until they reached the moon.

Next, the kids did paintings using some of the surrealist techniques listed on the board during Eileen’s slide presentation.

Ten of the strongest pieces were exhibited in a downtown restaurant for our annual city-wide “Young Writer’s Reading.” The restaurant owners were so



interested in the work that they asked us if they could extend it another month, in place of the exhibition of works by local artists they had planned. Customer response to the show was both powerful and conflicting. In addition to praise, the restaurant received requests that the children’s work be taken down—it was too disturbing. Some people cling to the fantasy that childhood is pure bliss. In any case, the response to the show, both positive and negative, underscores the power of the students’ work. Eileen and I attribute the project’s success to the fact that the students spent eight class periods on their pieces, and could thus fully develop their work. The first piece below describes the unusual school we worked in, in which the gifted and talented students are in classrooms next to deaf and severely handicapped children. (The original paintings are in color. “2508” is the author’s locker number.)

2508
 opened
 smelly, dusty, books,
 screeching child in pain
 cold, scared, shivering
 arm, bumps
 walk in door
 sit
 chair, first row
 front
 lady, people, podium, talk
 write name, stick to me
 clock moves, very slowly
 people move, talk,
 explain why we’re here
 screeching child in pain.

—Katherine Sandlin, 6th grade



2508

The Bug and I

I woke up.
I saw my finger about to be eaten
By a little beige bug.

It was about to eat
My left index finger.
It had a large stretchy

Mouth with no teeth.
It looked slimy and soft.
I couldn't move or do anything.

All I could do was yell.
I was trying to
Get away from it but I couldn't.

The jaws were getting closer and closer.
My heart was beating rapidly.
I kept trying to get away but

I couldn't.
The insect was about to bite my finger off when
I woke up.

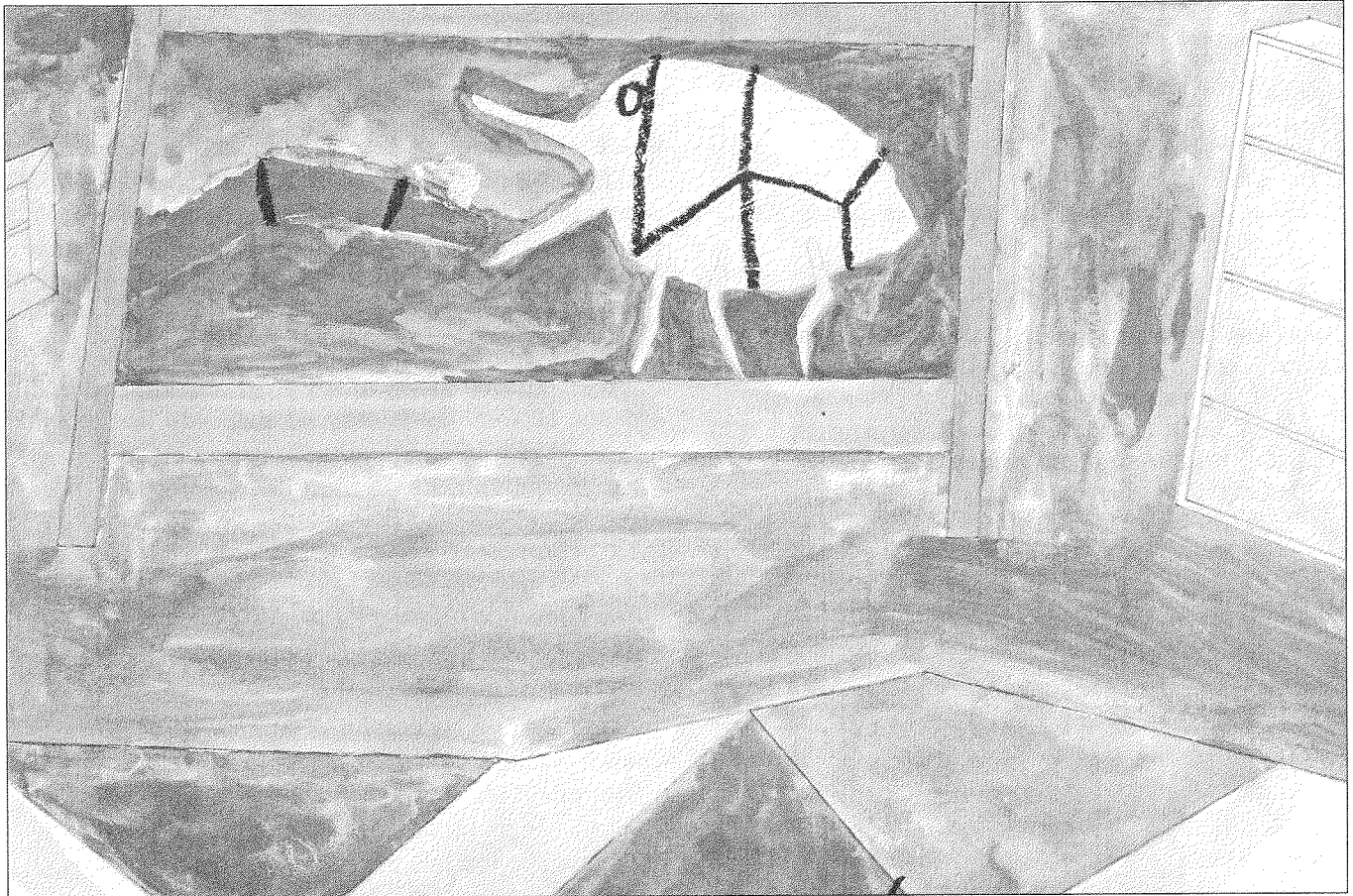
—Edwin Yau, 6th grade



The sessions I have described thus far are organized around a single theme—emotion, dream, self. However, as my work with artists continued I realized that one art form can connect with the other on a more physical, less cognitive level.

Shortly after my residency with Eileen Callan, I started an after-school writing workshop with seven kids, mostly fifth graders. We met at the home of Georgia McInnis, a painter and photographer whose son was in the group. We decided that the forty-five minutes between the kids' arrival from school and when I arrived would be enough time for her to conduct the art sessions.

In this workshop, I discovered that visual art can be a great help in getting the kids through that final, painful step in the writing process, revision. This group of kids was particularly difficult. Each of the four boys—all of whom were friends—recently had lost a parent, either to death or divorce. They were angry and combative, and I was quickly losing the urge to be understanding when I remembered an idea my friend Dennis Chavez, a writer and actor, had mentioned: a journey through the body. This might get them closer to the source of their emotional pain without others intruding. I began talking to them about anger, where they felt it most in their bodies, and the different ways

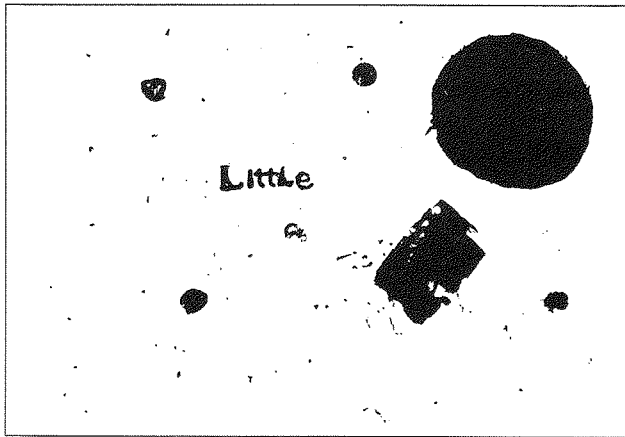


The Bug and I

sadness and disappointment manifest themselves physically. We played a game in which one of them walked into the room using everything but his or her voice to convey a specific emotion. We read the beginnings of fantasy novels involving journeys into other worlds (my favorite genre as a child): Milo through the Tollbooth, Alice through the Rabbit Hole, travel in the Time Machine. I asked them to find a way into their bodies and to look around in there. This assignment inspired them to write pages and pages, and the writing was so good that I encouraged them to revise their stories. They whined and complained, of course; although they were improving their stories,

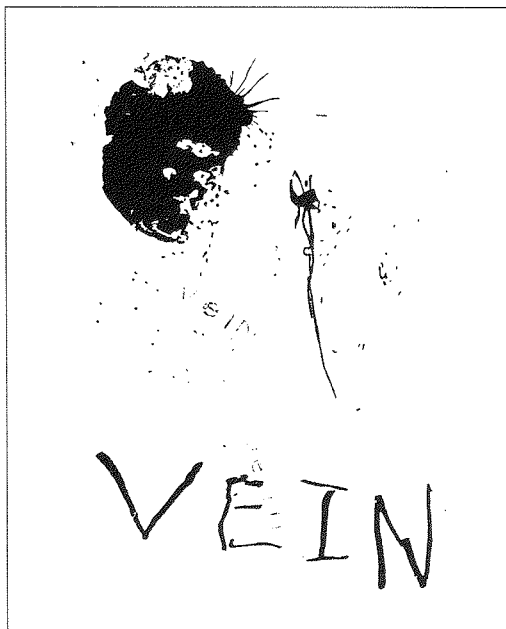
they desperately wanted to switch channels.

With a visual artist at my side, I could offer the students a break from their diligent efforts at revision without completely losing focus. Georgia provided ink, transparencies, and letters from a printing set. She asked them to think up one word that would represent their stories and then, using something other than a brush, paint a line, shape, or image in ink to accompany this word visually. She provided potato cubes, and the kids found their own sticks, leaves, and pencil erasers. With their finished artworks laid out in front of them, they returned to revising their stories with renewed enthusiasm.



...Now I'm on my tongue. Whoa! Where did that big rock come from? Oh! It's one of my tastebuds. This must be a sour tastebud. It has a sort of lemony odor. Whoa! Look at that! My gums against my teeth look like armadillos trying to burrow into the ground, pushing my teeth in the wrong direction. Maybe that's why I need braces....

—Emily Pipkin, 6th grade



...I am entering the Twilight body. I guess I'll go through my ears. Wow! Waxy! I wonder why they wax my ears. I just crashed into my tongue; it feels like bubble gum except it doesn't stick. I'm going down my throat now. I have bad breath. My throat looks like a tunnel except it goes up and down.

I hear this loud thumping. I'm pretty sure it's my heart beating. I really need earplugs now because it's so loud. My heart looks like—looks—like—my ears just popped. Yow! This is too loud for me.

I can see my food being digested and it looks gross. I think I'll get out of here. Wow! Neat! I can see my blood veins. They look like purple spaghetti that goes on and on. Well I'm at my waist. Hmmm, tough choice. Should I go down my left or right leg...?

—Stuart Miller, 5th grade

I was excited to see the students' pictures, to discover a new aspect of their creative ability. Equally rewarding was the chance I got to explore visual art at closer range. One of the things I found most interesting was the artist's ability to choose the right materials from such a wide variety, a decision greatly affecting the final product. Georgia McInnis explained that the use of transparencies in the project above, rather than paper, allowed the words and shapes to float, as if in fluid (that was often the students' mode of transportation through their bodies).

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Each semester I lead a creative writing seminar for teachers who have WITS writers in their classroom. In one part of the workshop I ask each teacher to demonstrate a successful technique he or she uses to teach writing. Last year Ms. Harriet Ball, a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher, asked us to rise with her as she began her presentation. She told us she would show us how she teaches the rules of grammar and math that consistently give her kids trouble.

I feared we were moving way off focus and wasting precious time that might be used to inform us further about writing. However, Ms. Ball looked so unlike anyone else in the room that I didn't mind the chance to study her. Rows of rhinestones ran along the top of her glasses. Her long nails curved inward like claws, bright pink to match her shimmering blouse.

She picked up a piece of chalk and surprised us all by singing the words she wrote on the board in rap. When she had gone through the song once, she turned to face us and began dancing, her singing and dancing expressing the rules of grammar and math. She insisted that we move with her, and called on us at random to sing parts of the song until we were a room of people singing and dancing every rule on how singular words are made plural. I can still remember everything she taught us and how it felt.

"I guess this is my gift," Ms. Ball said when she'd finished. A gift it was, to entertain and teach at the

same time, and to compose words, music, and accompanying dance steps that stood on their own merits.

I think that most good teachers are entertainers in some sense of the word, and must be in order to compete with Nintendo and MTV. The slow and diligent process of writing seems increasingly at odds with our culture, power driven and microwaved, our attention spans strobed into quick blasts by commercial breaks.

Rather than retreat from these threats to our goals as writers and teachers, we can salvage whatever has

captivated our students' interests and use it to our advantage. Few of us are singers and songwriters; more likely, given our own restricted educations in one discipline or another, we have yet to discover our hidden abilities. The good news is that we need only to find someone working in another art form that interests us, and collaborate. For in making interdisciplinary connections for our students, we uncover not just their buried talents, but our own as well. ●

LA LLORONA: WHY DOES SHE WEEP? A Question of Identity for the Hispanic Child

by Claudio San Miguel

“ANY CREATIVE ACT IS FUNDAMENTALLY united with life, with language, with one’s own country...and with time past and present.” Nélica Piñón, in her essay “The Myth of Creation,” explores the notion that creation ultimately involves the immediacy of environment. “You cannot exclude the table, the bed, the battles, and the gestures of everyday existence.” Still, a certain quiet forgetfulness on the part of the Hispanic student is often the result of the dominance of one culture over another. This dominance often yokes the young Hispanic writer to images and gestures that he or she knows are common to the dominant culture. Certainly this dominance is not always intentional. This, however, does not mean we as educators and writers should not bear some responsibility in the preservation of any culture at risk (which is basically every culture).

Notably, *la llorona* (the weeping woman) has been chosen by some representatives of the Hispanic community as a metaphor for their current state of being. *La llorona* (a well-known legendary figure) is destined to roam the world crying, after murdering her own children. She represents the sense of limbo—a disconnectedness with the past as well as the future—familiar to the contemporary Hispanic. In the act of

violating her duty as a mother she has cut herself off from the past, from tradition. By throwing her children into the river she has stripped herself of a future.

The identity crisis symbolized by *la llorona* takes many forms, and affects even the youngest Hispanic child. In many of my classes, I have found Hispanic children who wish to be called by their anglicized names as opposed to their given names. At home Jorge is Jorge, but at school he is George. This is not to suggest that there is a systematic effort on the part of the school to alienate Hispanic students, but it does reveal the discomfort of the Hispanic student in a largely Anglo school system. What this discomfort can lead to is a sense on the part of the student of belonging to two worlds, two *separate* worlds. The exclusion of a large part of their lives inhibits a complete exploration of the imagination, *their* imagination.

The remedy does not lie merely in a self-conscious preservation of Hispanic culture by the Hispanic community. This sometimes leads to well-meaning, but infrequent, celebrations relegated solely to Cultural Awareness Weeks and Fiestas. The Hispanic children in our schools have strong views about life and family, as well as an awareness of their own cultural identity, but at first they need a little help trusting themselves enough to express that awareness. This is where we writing teachers come in. We cannot expect these young minds to initiate an open, creative exploration of themselves without an atmosphere of

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complete acceptance. We need to do more than just accept diverse or alien ideas; we need to cultivate the students' own expression of these diversities.

When different cultures meet, opportunities for misunderstanding abound. While working with fourth and fifth graders in Houston, I have sometimes been surprised (and amused) by the simple misunderstandings between sincerely interested teachers and equally earnest students. It is the students themselves who often turn out to be the most valuable guides into their own culture. The trick is to make them realize that they know things that others don't. What might you learn from them? Perhaps you will learn that when your Hispanic students seem to be constantly touching you they are in fact complimenting you, while at the same time protecting you from the evil eye (*mal de ojo*). By touching you they are taking back any inadvertent evil (envy, covetousness, etc.) that they may have felt upon admiring you. This was the case between one of the groups of students I worked with and their regular instructor. The teacher was upset by the students' behavior. Every time the teacher wore something new to class, or perhaps had her hair done over the weekend, her students (especially the girls) would touch her as she came by their desks or when she passed them in the hall. This was a very kind teacher, but the touching annoyed her to no end. What was an everyday courtesy for the children caused friction at school. But when the teacher finally understood, she was quite flattered.

Like all children, Hispanic students will write freely and honestly when they feel that what they say has a value or a purpose. More than one student has told me: "It's just paper. No one cares what I have to say." To show students that they know things other people don't know, I sometimes ask them to teach their teachers about such things as the *mal de ojo*, *el cu-cuy*¹, *la lechuza*², and *la llorona*, or perhaps to describe a *quinceañera* (a coming-of-age celebration on a girl's fifteenth birthday). They first explain these beliefs, legends, and customs orally, then they write them down. Getting their stories on paper is important, for it makes them permanent, and allows them to be passed on. To get them to go beyond the simple preservation of the tale, however, I ask them to include themselves in it, either as a narrator or as a participant, as well as the circumstances in which they have heard the tale retold. This serves several

¹ The Mexican-American equivalent of a bogeyman, often used as a light threat to children.

² A large, gray owl (usually described as having red or human eyes), considered the form witches take when travelling.

purposes. First, it allows a personal involvement beyond that of a cultural historian. While the family is an important subject for all children, in Hispanic culture it plays an extraordinarily vital role, and Hispanic students will include their family, community, and friends in their tales, often without realizing it. A Hispanic child's family extends to grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins, as well as *padrinos y madrinas* (godfathers and godmothers). These relatives are not relegated to seasonal visits, but rather have a real, daily presence in the lives of Hispanic children. Once you have been invited into this rich, close, warm world of people and images, endless possible subjects for writing emerge. Once the students feel they really can write about anything, they will. This atmosphere of acceptance is invaluable to any writing workshop or class.

Several of the following student poems reveal not only a sense of bi-culturalism, but also an amazing sense of real life and drama. Some even have a sense of humor about it all, as in this first sample (the lines in Spanish translate as "If you don't eat your carrots, the *cu-cuy* will come to eat you"):

El Cu-Cuy

When I was a little baby like
about 2 years old my mom would tell me,
"Si no te comes la zanahoria va
venir el cu-cuy y te va a comer."

I would eat my carrots because the scary
man would scare me. She would tell
me that every time I didn't want
to do something. Like wake up, come
in the house, take a shower, or go to
sleep. She was good at that. She was
also good in making us do our chores
around the house. On Halloween that
would scare me the most because
I would see ghosts and monsters. I bet
the *cu-cuy* is very famous. I also bet
he has printed his feet on a star at
Hollywood.

—Lorena De Anda

As you can see, Lorena is not merely recounting a legend, but is quite self-consciously showing how her mother used *el cu-cuy* to chastise her. Not only does she blend the two languages, but she also has some fun uniting her two cultures with the comical image of the *cu-cuy* in Hollywood.

The Baby Crying

One day my grandma was
asleep. My aunt told me to put
my cousin to sleep. I took him
to my room. He started to cry and

cry! I wonder why! He cries because
there is a ceiling fan on the wall.
And its shadow scares him.
He thinks that it will come up
to him.

But sometimes when I like
to play with him I take him to
my room and I say *cu-cuy! cu-cuy!*
and then he starts to hold me.
And then I act like I am going
to cover both of us but I only
cover him and he falls asleep.
—Hilda Rodriguez

Hilda takes another approach to the same mythical creature. If Hilda's is not quite as humorous as Lorena's, it certainly has charm, and the image of the ceiling fan is so fresh and honest.

As I have said, once the students are comfortable with you and with writing, special things can happen. To complete this kind of environment, the writer/teacher must be directly involved. This includes telling your own tales, writing your own poems and stories, and letting your students help you with your own work. I've found that the personal experiences I relate from my own life have a direct and positive effect on my students. One such story involves myself, my sister Lupe, and my mother. Lupe has always worn her hair very long, hanging freely to her waist. Her hair draws endless attention to her, yet this came with a certain price to pay. Whenever she went out in public, she was sure to fall ill on her arrival home, a victim of *el ojo*. My mother would take a hen's egg, crack it, and pour the whole, raw yolk into a shallow bowl of water. Then, taking candles, she shut herself and my sister behind closed doors. Curious, I often eavesdropped. Prayers, prayers were all I heard. My other sister, Genevieve, had informed me that the bowl spent the night under Lupe's bed. But this was not all. The next morning, without exception, I would find that bowl waiting for me in the kitchen. If a red ring had formed around the yolk it meant that the evil had been averted. Of the six brothers in my family, it was *my* job to dig a hole in the backyard and bury the egg. The hard part was that I wasn't supposed to let the yolk break. Once, my dog observed me burying the egg. As soon as I'd finished, he dug it up. I ran inside to see if this had any dire effects on my sister—maybe her hair had fallen out. I liked to scare myself.

The story strikes a chord with my Hispanic students. They can come up with many entertaining variations on this particular ritual from their own

experience. And of course, it's always interesting for students to hear adults talk about their childhoods. I also read stories by other Hispanic writers that are similar to my own experiences growing up in San Antonio. Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* is quite useful in that Hispanic students can relate directly to the essence of her stories, if not to the exact experiences she describes. I have found that this free exchange of experiences opens up the students to their own.

Ruben, one student I worked with, was particularly macho. He was the tallest, strongest, fastest, toughest boy in the fifth grade. And although he was quite personable, he was not what could be called an ambitious student. Imagine his teacher's surprise, as well as his principal's, when he showed them the following poem.

My Hamster

Once I had a hamster. When I woke up
in the morning to pet him he
was dead. So I picked him
up by his feet and took him
outside and buried him and
the next day when I dug
him up there were ants all over
him. So I washed him off and
put him in a shoe box and the
next day when I dug him up
he was clean. And every day
I dig him up and clean him.
But now I forgot where I
buried him.

—Ruben

Its movement is superb. I can't help but feel that its use of repetition reflects (at least indirectly) the sense of ritual so important to Hispanic culture. Ruben's poem reveals as much about how adults cope with death—the cyclical rituals we often need to follow in order to accept the finality of a sudden separation—as it reveals how a young boy copes with the loss of a pet.

There are rewards in every profession, and these are some of them. The following poem recounts a common experience for young people:

I Colored My Grandfather's Feet with a Marker

When I was little I
pretended that I was
my mother. I used to
wear my mother's highheels,
and hats, jewelry, and
makeup because I wanted
to be big like my mother.

When I used my mother's
highheels, hats, jewelry
and makeup I used
to go to the living
room and my mother
would laugh at me.
Then I used to get
a marker and paint
all my face.
I had to take a
bath because I was
all dirty and painted
with marker and makeup. Then I
was clean with my
bed time cloth. I went
and got a marker.
I went to my grandfather's
room, he was asleep.
So I got a marker
and painted his feet. He got
mad at me. Then I
went to my mom
and went to sleep.

—Blanka Ybarbo

Blanka meant to be funny, but she did not expect to learn a new trick of her own. Until she read the

poem aloud in class she did not recognize the off-rhymes she had used in the last six lines of the poem. Still, the rhyming added extra fun to a poem she meant to be funny. The lesson was not geared to rhyme; she used it on her own.

Students like to write stories and narrative poems. This seems natural enough to me. Like all students, Hispanic students sometimes write pieces that have the potential to be routine. By the same token, their being bi-cultural can add welcome color to the narrative, and what is commonplace to them can be quite interesting to a different audience.

Hispanic students are not so different in their concerns or experiences than other students. Still, they may *feel* that they are. This is what we have to help them overcome. *We* know that good literature transcends time and culture. *We* know that we all have the same emotions. Students will learn this too. I like to think that the poems I have included here have value to writers other than those working with Hispanic students. Perhaps when enough Hispanic writers are comfortable with their two cultures, and enough Hispanic writers have written well, and enough Hispanic writers are widely read, then we will be able to say *la llorona* weeps no more.



“You’ve Got to Put Yourself in It”

The Voice in Poetry

by Lorenzo Thomas

FIRST AND ALWAYS, POETRY IS THE HUMAN voice. Singing, one hopes, is not limited to Matthew Arnold’s “confused alarms of struggle and flight,” but expands into shouts of joy and kennings of delight. Because it is song, poetry simply cannot be understood unless it is heard aloud.

The voice of poetry is special in that it is not the voice of ordinary speech; it is distinguished by formality, showiness, or something that is argued about as “inspiration.” Poetry has a voice that lingers.

This is ancient history.

There were afternoons when a truck rolled slowly down the block, a bell chiming clang-clang clang-clang. That was the local knife and scissors sharpening man. Another truck was announced by a strange voice bellowing “WAH-te may-LEE!” Those days, two weeks before everything in America was shrink-wrapped and presented in late-night television offerings of limited supply, were in New York City in the early 1950s and are recalled for me in a poem written by Fenton Johnson forty years earlier.

Fenton Johnson was a Black poet and an early contributor to Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry* magazine in Chicago. Like Carl Sandburg and others, Johnson was interested in discovering the poetry of the American vernacular, and his poem, “A Negro Peddler’s Song,” recalls the street vendors whose cries are also recorded in the opening scenes of Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. One stanza reads:

Good lady,
I have corn and beets
Onions, too, and leeks,
And also sweet potat-y

Fenton Johnson’s three-stanza poem “means” very little on paper. At least there is nothing to semiotize, deconstruct, or otherwise hermeneutically flush babes with bathwater. The poem on paper is only a score, a recording of the elements of something that only really

exists as a *sound*.

If “A Negro Peddler’s Song” is properly recited or read aloud, it is *performed*, and thus serves as a good introduction to any attempt to offer a definition of poetry. At Houston’s Langston Elementary School, I read the poem with as much of the watermelon man of my childhood as I could recapture. The poem sets fifth graders rattling in their seats and by the third stanza they sing along on “sweet potat-yyyyyyyyyy!” Teachers across the hall stuck their heads out their doors—which is *exactly what the poem is supposed to make people do!* It is the human voice singing, language that, not merely by its pumped-up volume, demands attention.

“I started singing when I started peddling; that was in 1932,” New York street vendor Clyde “Kingfish” Smith told WPA Federal Writers Project researchers M.C. Hatch and Herbert Halpert. “There were quite a few peddlers and somebody has to have something extra to attract attention.”

“On the street,” Smith said, “whatever comes to mind I say it, if you think it will be good. The main idea is when I got something I want to put over I just find something to rhyme with it. And the main requirement for that is mood. You gotta be in the mood. You’ve got to feel it.”¹

Such street peddlers might have vanished today, but their art is carried on by people like Mattress Mac. He’s the ubiquitous and annoying guy who screams from every Houston television set that “Gallery Furniture saves you MONEY!”

When I look at Clyde Smith’s explanation of his songs, I don’t think this is a shoddy way to introduce the most sublime of all the arts. My experiences, both in big cities and tiny rural towns as a kind of “traveling poetry salesman,” have convinced me that poetry remains a mystification only to those who somehow have been taught that it exists solely in thick books with small print. When read aloud, almost any page of those books

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¹ *First Person America*, edited by Ann Banks (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), pp. 237, 239. Banks’s marvelous book contains eighty oral life histories collected during the 1930s by the WPA Federal Writers Project. A series of dramatizations of some of the interviews was produced by Joan Micklin Silver for National Public Radio.

recreates a magic that makes people's eyes blaze with a light that, I hate to admit, I have never been able to describe adequately. This is true at all age levels.

Robert Patterson, in *On Literacy*, notes that college freshmen are "bored by literature and wary of traditional poetry." He believes that rock music appeals "by reviving, in the context of new electronic media, the primal appeal of lyric poetry."² When I hear that students respond to Springsteen and not Shelley, I suspect that it is because many teachers have not asked them to really *listen* to Shelley.

Walt Whitman's powerful denunciation of slavery in "I Sing the Body Electric" is enhanced when one is able to *hear* the excitement of the slave-auction crowd and the hand punctuating the words with raps on the podium:

Gentlemen look on this wonder,
Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be
high enough for it,
For it the globe lay preparing quintillions of years
without one animal or plant,
For it the revolving cycles truly and steadily roll'd.

In this head the all-baffling brain,
In it and below it the makings of heroes.

Whitman's brutal and ironic parody of the slave auctioneer's spiel is intended to make us ashamed. The poem is direct and effective, and it is in the sound as much as the choice of words that we find Whitman's power stored.

Fifth graders do not need to know everything about Whitman's "a man's body at auction" yet; they are not college sophomores. But they will listen to and appreciate sophisticated poetry and can recognize that it shares the same basic source as the street vendor's improvisation. In *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*, Kenneth Koch recalls reading Wallace Stevens's "Bantams among Pine Woods" to his elementary school poets. "It is a little hard to believe at first," he writes, "that a ten-year-old child who might not be able to say one thing about Stevens's poetry could catch and reproduce its music in an original way."³ What Koch describes here is the reason why poetry is needed in the classroom and is linked to the great puzzle we call literacy.

All of us learn by translating alphabetic signs into sound. We are rewarded when we can *look* at BAT and *say* "bat!" We also learn that there is a dimension of

specificity to these alphabetic signs that is missing from other glyphs. Consider, for example, the Batman logo that looks as much like an open mouth with badly spaced teeth as it does anything else.

The problem is that as soon as we have taken the magic step of reading, we are taught to read BAT and not to say it. In the next lesson we are thumped for merely moving our lips—even though the sound "bat" is not uttered. To be told later that a poem on a page is a score for reading aloud seems, for many students (especially college-age ones), an unhappy undoing of progress made by pain. Fluent reading and writing is impossible, however, if one cannot relate as easily to signs on paper as one can to audible words. When a young child knows that the words he or she writes are the sounds in and of his or her own voice, that child will write fluently.

"Degree of literacy," Koch writes, "certainly makes a difference in the child's ability to write easily and confidently, but it does not form his imagination." The WITS project at Langston Elementary School in Houston is supported by the federal Chapter One program for students who test below grade level, and that is one of the reasons I emphasize reading aloud.

Annie Love's third-grade class daily confronts the mechanical problems of *writing*, even though they read rather well. My suggestions of writing exercises bring responses that indicate how central the issue of mechanics is to them.

"What is an *anniversary*?" I asked one afternoon. Then I explained what a memoir was to the students, and asked them to write their own. What were you doing on this very day exactly seven years ago? What did you want to be doing? Sedrick wrote a poem:

Today is the seventh anniversary
of the day
I first learned to walk
and talk. My first words
were Mama Daddy
My first time when I had
my birthday I was one year old
That is when I started my life

Other students wrote three- or four-page narratives. Many of their stories focused on school. Maria's story began:

My Self

When it was Feb. 2, 1983 I was one year old. I couldn't go to school. I wanted to go to school but I drew small little crooked circles. But it was still fun. I also liked to write my name. I have to come to school every day....

² Robert Patterson, *On Literacy: the Politics of the Word from Homer to the Age of Rock* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 203-204.

³ Kenneth Koch, *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry* (New York: Vintage Books/Chelsea House, 1970).

Maria's memoir expresses great pride in her current skills.

The skills of literacy are not taken lightly in the third grade and, because I ask my students to read their poems and stories aloud, the children are proud to demonstrate their growing proficiency. Pamela, a shy child, unsure how others will react to the thoughts she has expressed in her poem, pauses and frowns and places her fingertip on the word—a mime of the process of learning to read. “What’s the matter,” taunts an impatient little boy, “can’t read your own writing?” The third graders are being taught cursive script and so value highly the craft of inscribing words legibly in the new style. The boy is well aware that penmanship is not Pamela’s problem; he has other reasons to tease her.

Reading aloud does present problems. Among third graders, however, there is not a great deal of concern about poetic profundity. No one really minds being silly; but, interestingly enough, unexpected perception or sensitivity is appreciated by the teacher and the class. Tensions like Pamela’s can usually be alleviated with a smile or whispered encouragement.

There are two direct benefits that come from asking students to read their own work. Reading aloud suggests to slower students—those who have the most difficulty with the mechanics of spelling and cursive penmanship, sweating out each page with a hovering teacher—that

what one has written can be of interest and even delight to other people. In other words, there is a reward for this activity.

Reading aloud eliminates the immediate problems of spelling and punctuation. Asking children to read their own poems validates writing as a direct form of personal expression, just as reading all the poems at the end of the hour marks a successful writing session. Later, the students can rewrite their pieces with spelling and punctuation closely considered. But the evocation of the poem is an important act. *Imagination has been recorded on paper and the recording has been played back in the writer’s voice.*

No one who has had these experiences needs convincing, but Kenneth Koch stated beautifully and precisely why poetry belongs in these classrooms. These students, he writes, “may have had a distant respect for poetry before, but now it belongs to them.” Children who get to read their work aloud, especially children from homes where the spoken word is highly valued, know that poetry is the human voice. And lest anyone think that they are impressed merely by volume and dramatic gesture, I must let you know that it was by unanimous assent that Ms. Ivory Jackson’s fifth-grade class accepted David’s bright definition of poetry: “A few words with a big thought,” David said. ●

PLUGS



Science and Technology in Fact and Fiction: A Guide to Children’s Books and its more advanced companion *Science and Technology in Fact and Fiction: A Guide to Young Adult Books* by DayAnn M. Kennedy, Stella S. Spangler, and Mary Vanderwerf (R.R. Bowker, 1990; \$35 each, hardcover) are excellent guides containing comprehensive reviews and useful evaluations. Teachers and parents should keep them close at hand to direct interested children to the best material in any area of science and technology.

The 1990-91 edition of *The AWP Official Guide to Writing Programs* is a 232-page detailed description of 328 writing programs and has information on 129 writers’ conferences, colonies, and centers in the US and Canada. Single copies are \$10.95 from either Dustbooks, Box 100, Paradise, CA 95967 or the Associated Writing Programs, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA 23229-0079 (tel. 804/683-3839).