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Deep Song

by Julie Patton

Once the fairies have created the right atmosphere, two rhythms are needed, the physical rhythm of the cradle or chair and the intellectual rhythm of the melody. The mother fits together these rhythms, one for the body and one for hearing, using various measures and silences. She blends them till she finds the very tone capable of enchanting the child. —Federico García Lorca, *Deep Song*

THE FOLLOWING PARAGRAPHS IN ITALICS ARE excerpts from my teaching diary, alternated with excerpts from a poem by Octavio Paz:

With the lights off, I turned the pages of Octavio Paz's book of poems to "San Ildefonso Nocturne," quietly briefing my students about free association. Then I began to read...

In my window, night
invents another night,
another space:
carnival convulsed
in a square yard of blackness....

...slowly tugging on the words and my memory of nursery school to merge them with the breath in the room, the late afternoon light on the smooth, polished floor of an old mansion. The room became an instrument for daydreams, soft voices, as the music quieted us toward sleep.

But I seldom fell asleep. In nursery school, I was always meditating on the sounds coming from a cello the length of the man who played it. There was something human about the cello's form and voice, the way it became an extension of the player-musician. The cello was a black woman with hands on her hips, a large doll humming a lullabye, the body of a headless woman with the face of the young man leaning over it, his arms alternatingly holding it, pulling sound through the warm body of wood, that of the instrument itself and the drawing room swaying with light colored leaves through leaded glass windows. I know how rooms change shape, swell with the sounds within them, how inanimate things walk and talk, and words and sounds connect time and space.

JULIE PATTON is a poet and visual artist who has taught in the schools for T&W since 1984, principally in Harlem and the South Bronx. Her most recent shows have been in Columbus and Cleveland, Ohio; her poems appear in the current issue of *Transfer*.

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Sign-seeds:
the night shoots them off
they rise,
bursting above,
fall
still burning
in a cone of shadow,
reappear,
rambling sparks,
syllable-clusters,
spinning flames
that scatter,
smithereens once more.
The city invents and erases them.
I am at the entrance to a tunnel.
These phrases puncture time.
Perhaps I am that which waits at the end of the tunnel.
I speak with eyes closed.
Someone
has planted
a forest of magnetic needles
in my eyelids,
someone
guides the thread of these words.

For me, the light in the classroom and the sounds of the poem became a single wave, a four-dimensional conversation between Octavio Paz, the students, myself, and my past. One of my fourth-grade students, Michael Spann, was inspired to write this poem:

Dark night, bright moon
Brightening stars
Little dipper, big dipper
Dark spilling stars
Different stars form a picture and
Love notes high up in the sky
Comets and meteors bursting through and
Around the moon
Dancing far off on Venus
The bright heated sun beats hot
The stars come to the open window
while I swiftly twist and turn
I'm knocked out
talking and walking in my sleep
I'm outside hungry and the night
wants me in bed
Cats and dogs look for food at midnight
While the homeless children
make a newspaper bed
I'm freezing in the cold
I'm drifting through and crashing into walls
Paper and plastic flying in my face
Schools are closed, germs in my stomach
My heart's beating fast
dreaming of the snow blizzard that happened last week
The snow forty feet high
while the red bullseye faces north
My footsteps take me to a sunny place
I'm confused. It opens my mind.
I look at my shadow
My blood is in love
It's flowing lights
I read a book
It was just me, myself and the grass
the wind blew wild and scattered the water
I got wet so I walked in front of
a mountain that was behind me,
the wild wind and the washing water

Teaching poetry *is* a poetic activity. It invites research, experimentation, creative play, and adventure. I constantly revise new goals, and set new tasks. No exercise or approach is ever set in stone; and at the end of each school year my enthusiasm for a job well done is often cut short by the changing demands and expectations that I place on myself, usually as a result of reviewing the anthologies my students produce. In fact all it seems to take is the act of passing out an anthology that I recently slaved over to have my head swimming with new resolutions for the coming school year.

Teaching poetry is a highly contextualized act that depends on our ability to maintain an open dialogue between the world and ourselves as writing teachers, and project ourselves into the work so that the writing workshops suit the specific needs of each learning environment as an extension of our poetic consciousness, and the interests of the children.

My most effective writing workshops involve a sympathetic understanding and approach to my own childhood, not adult formulas or models. Although I sometimes brought poems into the classroom to show the rich possibilities of poetic language, I was self-conscious about overwhelming my students with too much adult chatter. More importantly, I was concerned about the danger of students' imitating poems or conforming to their logic, form, or style as still-life models removed from the students' own lives.

I wanted to focus on the art of teaching poetry as it relates to ideas, wonder, astonishment, and discovery—and to encourage the students to explore their own ideas, write from their bodies, their centers, and to communicate their sense of intimacy and familiarity with the world. Besides, poetry is more than the printed word, and one doesn't have to depend on poems in order to inspire kids. Poetry, like science, is inquiry, a search for "truth," taking in the full measure of the world and naming or categorizing the things within it. All art is this quest, this questioning. The key thing is to ignite our children's curiosity. I had another motive as well—I wanted to get close to their creativity to explore the world as they articulate it. As Thoreau noted, our childhood dreams vanish from our memory because we fail to learn their language.

"How is it possible not to feel that there is communication between our solitude as a dreamer and the solitudes of childhood?" asked the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard. Solitude is a word on horseback riding into the distant sunset

while everything else races toward the 21st century. It's the lifejacket poets use to float in or dwell in their streams of consciousness.

What is solitude, and how does one find sufficient space for it among 35 students in the middle of the buzzing afternoon? The word *solitude* conjures up images of seclusion, isolation, and a nostalgia for the past. To me, it also evokes the seemingly anachronistic concerns of 19th-century writers mourning the loss of idyllic space to the industrial world. For Bachelard, the concept of solitude is the conquest or suspension of time, and more specifically, the writer's potential to abolish the distances between dreams, to compress or extend the literary imagination while retaining and preserving one's childhood as a deepening life resource. Rilke, too, inquired how we could imagine our lives to be anything more than we were able to imagine in a single childhood. Both Bachelard and Rilke draw attention to the possibilities of childhood as a source of wonder, and the need to grant it its true potential.

Childhood still has and needs its sacred and secret spaces. How can the poet/teacher create the space in the classroom for his or her students to weave together the real and the imaginary so that, in Bachelard's words,"the child knows the happiness of dreaming which will later be the happiness of the poet"?

This is not a pretentious goal if you consider that the poet is first of all committed to the gathering of language as an ongoing process that can not be measured by time or static words on a page. Language is much more than the saying of things, it is how we project and *mark* our being in the world.

Perhaps the ability to manipulate boundaries really belongs to the Greek goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, and her three daughters, the muses Aoede (song), Medete (meditation), and Mneme (memory). These figures provide the perfect backdrop on which to hang my thoughts and concerns about an approach to writing that enabled me to use poetry in the classroom in a fresh and exciting way.

One recent year, I stared at the pages of one of my student anthologies long enough to hear the energy of the classroom, the cacophony of voice, movement, and the light from expectant gazes swirling around and away from the inertia of the words on the pages to realize that my students had not really let go. Somewhere in their hands and limbs loosening up for summer flight was the verve, the run, the gesture of their own deep songs. Yet despite my ardent appeals to let go, some of the students were afraid to celebrate the dash and dare of their true verbal sophistication. I had not yet found a way to communicate to them that poetry is music. I had to find a more effective means to project my students past the walls that seem to separate the making of an image from the sound that props it up and intensifies its meaning, and to submerge them in...

Aoede.

Anyone who has spent five minutes with children can observe how they play with the poetic function, take pleasure in exploring sound by inventing words, repeating rhymes and raps for street play, doing double dutch, and even talking to dolls. The problem for me was how to communicate this same feeling of spontaneity and ease with language, a similar sense of poetry as activity, gesture, and flight, and the notion that both words and sounds carry poetic meaning. For instance, I felt that I could fascinate them with the fact that the rain rains, a house houses—these are things they can engage their senses and curiosity in. The river rivering in Langston Hughes's poem "I've Known Rivers" calls attention to the flowing wave of the refrain with a breathlessness that obscures specific words, but not the idea that a river is a phenomenon we can all immerse ourselves in—in speaking like water we "absorb the lesson of the stream." This is what I had to bring them to understand.

Although I often avoided using adult poems for reasons mentioned earlier in this essay, my thoughts were constantly focused on the memory of rooms that are still filled with the love of being read to. I became a writer in those rooms. The umbilicus of my writing hand is tied to those talking books and the impulse of reading. I can still hear the words that transported me through time and space, informing me that the world itself is a book.

When I did read adult poems to my students, I would read only parts of them, as sound bytes. I'd go through all kinds of linguistic gymnastics to blur the edges in order to leave as little of an aftertaste lingering in the air as possible. Kids are the real "quicker-picker-uppers": they can grab a sentence in mid-air and remind you of it days later ("But Ms. Patton, you said..."). Reading poems or parts of them as sound bytes sets a certain mood and sends the students floating.

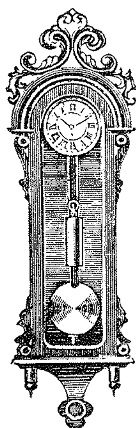
The following excerpt from my diary illustrates these concerns:

January, 1990. *In my own work, either visual or written, I usually begin by responding to an aural stimulus; it might be music, the sound of wind tempting tornadoes on a lake, or the sound of horseshoes on stone. I used to revel in the funereal march of tired limbs on their way to bed... Surely the tentative gathering of limbs against the body before settling them down was one of the great pauses that informed the lyric voice of the 19th century. No wonder they lamented the anonymous whir of the "horseless carriage," there was no breath to it, no rhythmic inhale or exhale.*

The inner ear holds things. We make reference to the ear as "having picked something up" or "catching" things as low to the ground as footsteps. It's almost as if the head has hands that it clasps to its sides like a catcher's mitt, either that or it doesn't have enough folds to store the world's secrets, so they spill to the point of overflowing, forcing the hand to deliver or the mouth to speak. The question is not just to stretch and fill the students' ears, but to compel them to sing.

They have to search for silence in a modern world hip-hopping to video games, the sound of broken bottles, even the name "tags" shouting for recognition from concrete walls—whatever, it's their world, and the flight of pigeons over rooftops, and the slow drag of buses still counts for something even if it's the only rhythm that moves words onto paper.

Rhythm is expectation. One wave follows another. We anticipate the lull between two seesawing notions of time, the



tick and the tock. Cradling is the place of repose between two rockers swinging back and forth. We are caressed, soothed, calmed toward our interior selves. Words sing, and the love of being read to is part of a primordial urge that connects us to deeper, more abiding rhythms—including the ocean rocking inside of us, the loud breathing and ticktocking shoes of nannies drawing us toward sleep....

Medete

...is the nanny, the muse turning out the lights so that we can retreat from the clamor and chaos of the world and the classroom.

On the one hand, meditation implies contemplation, reflection, concentration, focusing; on the other, release, dispersal, letting go. Both invite us to dwell. Medete's gesture provides dwelling space for eyes, ears, and the dreaming self at risk under glaring, harsh lights.

Denise Levertov asked, "Can I distinguish between dreams and writing—that is, between dream images and those that come into being when I am in a poem-making state?" The problem is how to accomplish this in a situation where the measuring stick is about how well one sits and pays attention. One can either meditate *on* something or *in* something. Poetry is meditation that blurs the edges into quiet openings, a locus that enables us to dwell on things and in things. It's about intervals, extending the lull, and the openings between consciousness, and drawing curtains so words can dream and reveal themselves.

It's the same solitude that Bachelard says poets bear witness to—"an aspiration to cross the line, go against the current, to rediscover the great calm lake where time rests from its flowing. And this lake is within us, like a primitive water, like the environment in which an immobile childhood continues to reside."

We recognize things because they exist within us, are a part of our being. Remembering is the act of pausing, the act of re-collecting. To remember is also to dwell:

Mneme

...is spinning threads in the center of the classroom. These threads are rays of light seeking anchor in the corners as a human voice vibrates across the smooth tops of desks, encouraging the children to pick up the beat with their pencils. Perhaps this 1, 2, 3 P.M. light has been distilled into the quick of all children who sat and still sit, collecting thoughts or escape routes home.

April, 1990. *Lately I've realized that light is one of the most powerful catalysts for evoking personal memory. I found myself trying to still everything in its immense silence, until I realized that light is kin to music. It too carries the rhythm of the world it encloses—the movement of the clouds, punctuating sun or moon, and boom! the deep pause between thunder and lightning. As the clock measured off the seconds between noon and the untangling of limbs from the metal bars of chairs and desks, we digested more than food and information, we took in the light and dwelled on it as it marched across the room dragging its colors through the windows, open or closed. We waited for it to fall full-face and lull us into daydreams. Sometimes in that atmosphere of hushed and restrained voices, it was the only rhythm that counted.*

Mneme makes memories with a cradle of light and song that sets us into deeper grooves. This particular cradle is a chisel-like tool rocking to and fro over a metal plate, preparing a ground for inking.

I was reminded of this as I sat in the back of a classroom listening to visiting writer Quincy Troupe talk a blue streak and raise black-consciousness poems from a remote past. It was history, but the language, like their own,was laced with familiar sounds. Stirred by his tongue, the children got on waves of light and sound and rode—straight into the fluorescent '60s.

Quincy was Mneme, a griot, transmitting words of the past until the students merged their voices with his, mirroring his rhythm and energy in return. The repetition was the perfect mnemonic device and at his suggestion they turned to him, his persona, lingo, and style, and the lingering sounds of '60s poems for the day's writing subject:

Quincy Troupe Soul Man of Cool. Cool, Cool, too cool,
jazz musician cool with vines hanging over his Quincy
Troupe too-cool shades with his jazzy jazzed clothes
and his too-cool motherland too-cool shoes. With his
too-cool spirit, and his too-cool soul, too-cool
too-cool wherever he goes
writing out his feelings with paper and pen
he's the coolest of all the too-cool men

—*Jenean Hamilton, 3rd grade*

In the 1960's, during the same decade that Don L. Lee penned "But He Was Cool or He Even Stopped for Green Lights" (one of the poems that inspired Jenean Hamilton's

poem), he also sang the blues about the increasing schism between "public schools or private schools in the A.M. and street schools and home schools in the P.M." Twenty-five years later, this clash of cultures and the cry for more relevancy and better learning conditions has grown louder.

In the 19th century, some writers expressed a growing anxiety about the intensification of solitude in the din of the expanding urban metropolis—the deafening roar of the crowd where there's no one to talk to but the machine. Nowadays, television sets, walkmen, Nintendo, video games, and boom-boxes are among children's closest companions. They think, write, and study to their persistent rhythms. In poem after poem, my students rage about the condition of the world and the disappearance of safe space. They no longer have the luxury of playing in the streets. They are banished to their rooms with their electronic companions. All the more reason to find ways to broaden their horizons, to expand the space of the paper and the world around them.

Lincoln

It makes me think of Lincoln projects on a hot Saturday night
The Sun is beaming down on a hot black girl
The bareness of the brain is darkening
The system of life
Thinking about life made an old lady cry
Fire!
Among the kids of the world
Laying in bed listening to LL Cool Jay, momma said, knock you out
Profanity hitting the street and backfiring and hitting the black youth
jumping the trains, and jumping life
It's the tracks crying for your life
The heart is beating like the rhythm of a handshake
You're dying, you're killing
And now you're finished

—Lakesha Hawkins, 6th grade

As a poet teaching in the schools, I have waged an ongoing struggle with the ugliness and mediocrity fencing in most "inner-city kids." Knowing they lack the cool airy relief of gilded concert halls and lilac-filled museums—as well as a strong awareness of their own cultural heritage—the presumptuous and intervening poet has to depend on the portability of the human tongue to create an environment for Aoede to sing in, Medete to suspend or focus awareness in, and Mneme to re-collect.

On its most basic level, Lakesha's poem—like Michael Spann's—was the result of being fed-up. It was the last straw after the abandoned lot—the last offense in a succession of offenses that piled shoes on top of bottles, and years of indifference before entering the school door and climbing to a classroom that offered little aesthetic relief. I understand the importance of Beauty's Rooms or what the *Book of Changes* calls grace—Art, the world of adornment and ideas. So I decided to read my way out of the room, carrying the kids on my tongue. Aesthetics can be a means of survival. Can't afford an instrument? With tongue and cheek create a symphony. Outnoise the noise, moon-walk, make shoelaces double-talk and walls cry your name. Anything to outwit the enemies, mark territory. Urge a toy truck along the floorboards with the throttle of your throat, or write.

January, 1990. *When they removed the tall rows of plane trees from my street, my eyes burned to replace them. A few years later, the neighborhood was set on fire. By the end of the third night on the streets (better watch for an ignited house than remain in one), I started making my way into other spaces—Beauty's room was a lesson in abstract expression burning crimson in the midnight sky. I was 13. Reading and writing were a struggle against silence. Books and my mother's paintings communicated the possibilities of projecting the world onto other spaces. How does someone teach a child to claim art—the right to do so as a manifesto for their dangerous and frightening tomorrows? Giving them pencils and pens is one way of communicating the openness of the creative act as a territory they can seize for their own personal freedom and sense of flight without adult intervention. It's like putting down crumbs so they can eventually make their way toward a more whole, less fractured self. They need a poetic license for their whole lives.*

One day, Wonderful Worthington, one of my students at P.S. 157 in the South Bronx, came bouncing into the room proudly displaying a new badge. A hefty kid, he reminded me of the lion in *The Wizard of Oz* trumpeting his new badge of courage. The badge to behold was a "poetic license" that he'd been given by another visiting writer, and it did represent a kind of courage. The courage to make words bend to your will, stretch like Silly Putty, or fit like Erector Set pieces. This is a principal skill that many creative writers draw on, one that enabled Wonderful Worthington to take risks and come up with startling images:

When I wake up in the morning
I walk to school
Its sounds of terror bang on your wall
When I look at the water
The water kind of vanishes as the bird sings it back
Summer arises in the country
There are no sounds but yourself
A dog cries in the night
Then you find out the dangers of darkness
When I look out the window before supper
It's like a big black fat cat sleeping on my house
The night is a sound killer
When you wake up you feel like writing
But your fingers are froze
The paper is burning for words
I take a nap
I've just come from La-La Land
I didn't know
I thought I saw my mom cooking eggs on the bed
But that was one of La-La Land's tricks

—Wonderful Worthington, 6th grade

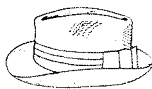
Freewriting and Free Association

"Art was a game, children assembled words that ended with the sound of a bell, then they shouted and wept their verses and put shoes on them." (From *The Dada Painters & Poets)*

As in Wonderful's poem, writing is alchemy, and the elixir is words—words potent enough to summon up other words. The metamorphosis that occurs in creative writing is revealed to my students through the process of freewriting, stream of consciousness writing, and free association.

In particular, the "game" of free association grew out of my frustration with children's creating short pieces within minutes, as if they had run out of ideas, while still running their mouths like babbling brooks. I could find no real reason for their brief gestation periods and the finality of the class period's period. I wanted them to fill their papers with the same breathless energy that they talk with. Now, to explain the concept of freewriting, I exaggerate by drawing an extremely ridiculous face on the board with a wavy stream pouring from its head. The drawing is so elementary that the children get a kick out of assuming the "stream of consciousness" is really hair, until I explain that it really represents their thinking, which, like water, seldom stops its natural flow and runs over and around things even in sleep when we dream. The visual reference is useful, and they comprehend consciousness very clearly when it's linked with being "knocked unconscious," or losing or gaining consciousness. Sometimes I explain the different levels of consciousness by comparing them to the levels of a house, the basement being the "subconscious," while I explain that this isn't the hierarchy that it appears to be, and in writing all levels flow into the same bubbling stream.

The key is to let them know it's okay to explore on paper the honest language of the speaking mind bouncing from one subject to another, and not to censor this process. This is where I take the opportunity to distinguish between creative writing and the rest of the writing they do all day, which is geared explicitly toward the two extreme poles of right and wrong. Freewriting, free association, and stream of consciousness writing reflect spontaneity, flight, abandon, the freedom to make dynamic connections, the dash of et cetera, the fact that we're more like flow-thru tea bags than individually wrapped lumps of clay. It's vital for children to feel comfortable exploring the richness of language, the magical, evocative, suggestive power of words—to feel literally rich with words and empowered by them, and at the same time exercise creative play with language.



Many avant-garde artists have been inspired by the work of children. The Dadaists and Surrealists invented techniques based on children's creative play. They drew words out of hats or cut them from newspapers and then arranged them according to their random fall. They stressed the occasional, circumstantial nature of poetry as "an activity of the mind," not its "immutable and static beauty," as Tristan Tzara put it.

The writing hand is not as fast as the mind. I implore the kids to "arrest" words that pop into their minds and put them on paper exactly as the words come to them. I tell them that each word is a "clue" to other words. Other times I tell them we're going to "meditate" on words, or go on an archeological dig.

Next I guide them through an exercise in free association. I ask them if their mother ever told them *not* to "associate" with a particular person or group. In my wilder moods—and depending on the time—I get rid of my Romper Room voice and have them do free association as a competition, quickly calling on someone, or a team of students, to see how fast they can come up with a word. When they discover that they have a real arsenal of words that they can cull from with confidence, they then battle it out and unearth the most intriguing associations.

I toss the first word off the top of my head and grab the first response. I accept all the different types of responses, just to illustrate that there is no right or wrong. I emphasize this point again and again. *Hat* might call up *head*, *black*, *sky*, *stars*, *man*, or *feet*—any connection is fine, the important thing is that they sense the connections and see it all in action. They understand that editing is usually a no-no, and struggle to go after their elusive first impressions.

After a few rounds, I begin to encourage sentences, full phrases—the possibilities of extending a word—"footsteps in the dark" might get "a man walking in a dark alley" or "a shadow on a wall."

This game has many variations. The archeological dig yields dreamy possibilities that enable them to keep hunting, digging to take apart a word. It's like peeling bark from plane trees. Certain images invite wonder—*window* extends the vision, so does *night* with its depth—these words function as archetypes or fundamental concepts that reveal the mystery and magic inherent in them. It also depends on how you pronounce the words. Some words demand a whisper, and this in itself functions as a sign; sound carries meaning. For me, this process of free association and freewriting is not an end in itself, but rather a warm-up to the writing exercise whose title, "Deep Song," underscores my intention to tow them under and get them to flow. The following example illustrates how one

student in the Bronx has harnessed this free association skill to her advantage:

Summer blues roll away as I comb my hair
I feel like collecting seashells on a winter
night, to be the earliest one to smell
a rare flower to me is a gift,
I love the sound of a crackling fire, of a
crackling marshmallow, of a cracking peanut,
of a crackling star between the moon and sun.
A book holds many ideas which I might never think of.
I love to feel slivers and slivers of glue
when I'm angry, cotton is in a way like snow,
they're both soft and white, the candle burns
the rope and I fall into a scrumptious cherry pie,
the heart sticks out of my mouth and I hate it
so I cut my neck and it's the end of me
so I roam the earth in the body of a pale sad ghost
and make it happy for having me.

—*Cynthia Martinez, 6th grade*

Deep Song

Why not take advantage of students' ability to juggle words, images, and sounds at the same time? Motivated by my students' success with freewriting and mimicking sounds, along with my increased determination to allow my students to daydream, I found a more comfortable way to work with the deep song of poetry in the classroom. So one particularly ugly day when the garbage outside was piled higher than usual, I began meditating on my own past while preparing the students for the unusual exercise of listening to me read while they freewrote and free-associated at the same time. I turned off the lights, and a hush settled over the room. My voice and the Octavio Paz poem threaded through the room (I had chosen the Paz poem deliberately for its abstraction, complexity, and space). I read quietly and softly. I told them that the exercise would not be that much different from doing homework while watching TV or listening to M.C. Hammer, making mouth-noises and rapping, and jazzing math at the same time. After all, the students were already wired for it. I also warned them that I was going to start off slow and then go faster but that they should still free-associate the sounds and the words even if they did not understand their meaning or the meaning of the poem, but that they should not write down the words directly from the poem. I told them this would be like writing down whatever the TV says while they do their homework. I reminded them that their pieces should be their own visions, their responses, and that I just want ed to immerse them in the flow of words. I told them not to worry if my words became a blur and that forgetting my voice could even be a good sign. Let it become background music, something they could take off on. I told them "to get lost," and that it was fine to put their heads in the crook of their arms and rest. Deep Song is about the pleasure of sounds, of being read to in old Carnegie libraries on three-legged stools, about lullabyes behind closed curtains. And with the slow deliberation of my breath anchored to a past memory, I read and they journeyed.

The important thing about Deep Song is tone: you need to understand what it is you wish to accomplish, what mood you want to project. If you want a poem about a river, your tone should reflect that. Intent has everything to do with the success of this exercise, as does the confidence the kids place in you and your voice. You have to feel your way through the poem as you read, sensing when and where students are having trouble.

I stop if necessary to see what's happening with the kids. I often let go of my text in mid-stream to urge them on: "Come on, flow with the words, the stream of consciousness, it's night, the poet said 'night,' what do *you* see, feel, think, or imagine? What images or sounds does the word invite? Put yourself into it and go with the flow. See through the poem!"

One of the best things about merging the oral transmission of poetry with the process of writing is that it gives me the opportunity to emphasize the poem as an open structure, as if it has no real beginning or end. Endings and beginnings depend on our breath and attention span. You can read and reread a poem and go backwards and forwards, giving the students the chance to intervene, see through words, and fill in the blanks. I don't perform the poem the same way each time. The only thing that is consistent is my insistence that they interact with the poem.

To inspire confidence, I move around the room, choose a few of the best pieces, and read a few lines to the class to show how these students express their particular vision and take liberties with words. I also do this to gauge the students' reactions. It's a very sensitive exercise that demands delicate response, a gentle classroom environment, and a flexible teacher.

When I see that the students are responding, I continue reading. I repeat words and lines, pause, then continue, carefully pronouncing everything—even the intervals.

Deep Song reminds me of how the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky described the technique he used to compose poems. For him, rhythm was primordial, words secondary: "I walk along gesticulating and muttering—there are almost no words yet. I slow my pace in order not to impede this muttering, or else I mutter more quickly, in the rhythm of my steps. Rhythm is the basis of any poetry and passes through it like a din. Gradually one is able to make out single words in this din. Where this fundamental rhythm-din comes from remains unknown. For me it is every repetition of a sound, a noise, a rocking or any repetition of phenomena which I mark with sounds."

Deep Song is also about the joys of speech, of reading aloud. I enunciate and feel the roundness of vowels, *u* like a cup, *o* like a soft round ball. Reading aloud is a very pleasurable sensation; you "cradle" and engrave not only words but the beauty and the pleasure of the poet's sound in the students' ears until it all becomes a part of them (Mneme!).

For me, this exercise was a major breakthrough. I felt that I had finally made the classroom *my* room. The kids felt equally comfortable, and responded with some incredible poems. No two poems were alike, and I found myself waking up in the middle of the night, reading and rereading them, and marveling over the leaps of imagination they made. Michael Spann's poem underscored Michel Foucault's notion that "to read and to journey are one and the same." I imagine this is

what Michael did in response to Paz's opening line: "In my window night invents another space...." He grabbed the word *night* and invented a whole universe. When we read a poem from a book, it is possible to go back and forth within the poem. When we hear it read, the sounds and lines quickly evaporate into thin air, and we compensate for our lapses in memory and understanding by filling in the blanks. When we write poetry—grouping sounds into words, words into lines, and lines into poems—we use what Roman Jakobson called "elliptical perception." One word is potent enough to conjure up an entire poem. Tracy Marshall understood (and visualized) the word *night* differently than Michael Spann or the other students:

Like the silent nights are fun to listen to
Listen. And how stars are twinkling
And how fire flames on a warm night
See how the drummers play the drums
And people dance to music. Why
am I sleeping? Wake me! I want to hear
the beautiful African music
Help me, someone
I am awake.
Now it's time to tell my parents
what a beautiful nightmare I had
See how the waves
are floating?
I am a poet.
—Tracy Marshall, 4th grade

According to Jakobson's concept of elliptical perception, "the expressive power of language is distinguished by the interchangeability and mobility of words. Although the listener penetrates and enters the poem, it remains intact, and through its powers of revelation a re-creation is produced, not a double." Bachelard seconds this idea in a different way: he defines the imaginative power of words as "inductive magic." "In poetry words regain their potential for dual meanings. They attract one another and create relations which reverse the real and figurative poles. Images are 'lived,' 'experienced,' 're-imagined' in an act of consciousness which restores at once their timelessness and newness."

Ironically, one of the side benefits of the Deep Song exercise is the opportunity it gives students to learn big, mysterious words. Paz's poem is full of words and phrases that they have to penetrate with their imaginations, or understand simply by sound or context. Once they don't feel intimidated, they enjoy being privy to adult language. My students liked the apparent 'bigness' of *horizon* and *aquatic*, and hearing *geometries* in an unusual context.

Sometimes I stop and explain the word, depending on the appropriateness of breaking the rhythm, other times I can feed in the definition in such a way as to make it become a part of the reading. I've even casually thumbed through a dictionary while hesitating on a phrase, like a broken record, hammering the words into their subconsciouses. I encourage them to make use of the word. Tell them it's theirs. To my surprise, they remember and use the words weeks later, confidently claiming another word for their growing word bank. The quick comprehension is due to the fact that they hear the word in a context that intensifies its meaning. Sometimes the reverse happens and the students latch onto sounds in much the same way that Mayakovsky did and turn them into whatever word intuitively occurs to them—hence the odd use of "bonding" and "cope" in the following poem.

I was so perplexed by their seemingly complicated presence in the midst of such a serene poem that I asked the author what she meant. All she knew was that they occured to her and felt right. I pointed to the word *coup*, and when I asked her to pronounce it, she uttered "cope," but I present it as she wrote it.

Shadows
I see brown, blue and purple birds on my wall in Autumn
It is morning, the wind blows through my window
as it touches my foot
Across my window there are colors as the sun touches my hand
Down the block there's a yard with bonding children
as they coup
My apartment is shapeless, my bed is
red as the sky in morning at the break of dawn
There's one window, a girl in there
watching the moon and the stars
She's blind, she's only feeling
the moon and the stars
—Katrina, 3rd grade

The following poem by Ladia is interesting in the same way, but I had a feeling she was stuck on the letter *a:*

God is my ruler, he guides me every day
No matter where I stand
I'm having a good day
Along my way the trees are blossoming
I see light in my eyes
Every night at prayer my childish soul accepts his
promises to me
I am abyssed on the solid ground
I let God accost my mind first
While I'm on the ground
God is in an acropolis in Heaven looking down
Whatever your problem, adduce it to God
The girl is coy, she doesn't know my God
God adds adornment to this earth
I toddle across.
No angels in America
God keeps them everyday while ablaze
is with the devil
Choices are made by people, decisions by God
I can't wait to see the loud scenery of Heaven
The girl will be free when she's knocking on heaven's door
—Ladia Lindsay, 4th grade

Ladia was a fascinating and eager writer who churned out strange, almost Nietzschean pieces whenever Chris Edgar and I encountered her, which was unfortunately only three times. Chris and I shared a residency at P.S. 157 in the Bronx, where he was also teaching Russian to a fourth-grade class. We decided to put in an appearance in a new classroom. The first week I opened up the writing workshop with the free association/Deep Song exercise. The next week I returned with Chris without having informed him of what had taken place. He introduced a lesson by discussing the Chinese poet Li Po.

After reading a poem or two, he was overwhelmed by a handful of students begging him to read their completed poems. They had been writing all the while he was talking, assuming that this was what we expected of them. One student borrowed the line "you will die of poems."

Cold night with blue moon and
a homeless person thinking about
his love, a bird flying in the sky
and can you come back?

A big tree in an empty space
and smile to an image
I cut 10 bricks and can't succeed

I find a friend with a China hat
and tell him how he looks
and say he is skinny
and tell him
he will die of poems

—Tyson Joye, 4th grade

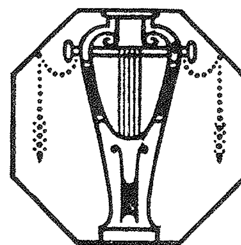
•

In his essay "How to Make Verse" Mayakovsky called for the "constant restocking of the storehouses, the granaries of your mind with all kinds of words, necessary, expressive, rare, invented, manufactured and others." The warp and weave of language contains layers of voices, sounds, and meaning whose texture is built up through time. Consciously or not, the poet/teacher is involved with this fabric of memory—and its various associations with time and space—because of his or her concern with the act of releasing and intervening in what is latent. Memory is a thread we can unravel and wind. The poet/teacher encourages the child to make use of this reservoir, to recall, recollect, and remember. The poet/teacher is the demiurge, the conjurer, the midwife helping the child to deliver.

"Intervention" is the word that comes to mind when I think of the poet in the school. The poet intervenes—in the primary sense of the word—between teachers and students, inside and outside, using consonants and vowels as if they were small hands lifting the dingy green walls until the room rises to accommodate the students' new potential—wide as the books the poet has devoured and the other poets he or she speaks for. Then and only then can the child (and the child that persists in the poet) wander in and out of Imagination's rooms freely venting the clutter of feelings, sounds, and ideas circulating in a cloud of chalk dust, pencil shavings, and institutional air.

"Presumptuous" is the other word that comes to mind when I think about teaching poetry in the schools. The poet/teacher wants a part of himself or herself (or what he or she has to impart) to stay with the students forever—even if it's only to add the word "poetry" to their vocabulary, or impress them with Pablo Neruda, Mayakovsky, Li Po, Don L. Lee, or with a visit by an established contemporary poet like Quincy Troupe.

Despite the disorder and chaos of the world and some of our schools, it's possible to mesmerize a classroom. Erase it and replace it with poetry until the classroom sits in one's mouth and you row away with the rudder and oar of your tongue, until you arrive where the poet left off—a thousand words ago on an archipelago of motionless childhoods playing



musical chairs with words. Aoede was there with her lyre, and so was Mnemosyne, mother of all lyric voices.

Mnemosyne is the mother of the muses romancing her children—all children—to sleep. The poet is the nanny, mother, wet nurse, or maid carrying on the tradition of the ballad, the song, or lullabye. She is the griot, the dark cello that I remember from my childhood. As Lorca said, "Let us not forget that the cradle song is invented by women whose children are a burden. Naturally the women can't help singing to them of their own...blues, love sonnets, the rain outside the window, and silent refrains."

Deep Song is more than a *how-to* exercise. It is also an acknowledgment of the possibilities of childhood and poetic solitude.

A soft melody sings in the voice
of my ear
I'm all by myself in a lonely room
The light touches the sight of my eyes
My feelings are shattered like a black hole that's left behind
The wind blows through the window, it surrounds me with its touch
as it dances with my hair
My heart whispers to me in a quiet voice
It said, "There's something in you that's blocking the sunlight,
keep on holding to your strength, tight."
I did not have an answer to dread
My soul was crumbled like rice and bread
My soul is weak, my soul is weak

—Armead Moody, 5th grade

Running body, my body, your body
a messed up room in
a house as small as quarters
forever the room goes
like the silk dress
fingerprints in the rain
the wind lives with the women
Hot hands
A black hill
and some big and small trees
The hill goes and the tree stays
Stone rocks hit the girl
Don't worry
the wind goes
the people get cut
born to break a leaf
light eating
light raising me
light runs home light is on time
time is light
I kiss light
kiss me

—Terrence Martin, 3rd grade

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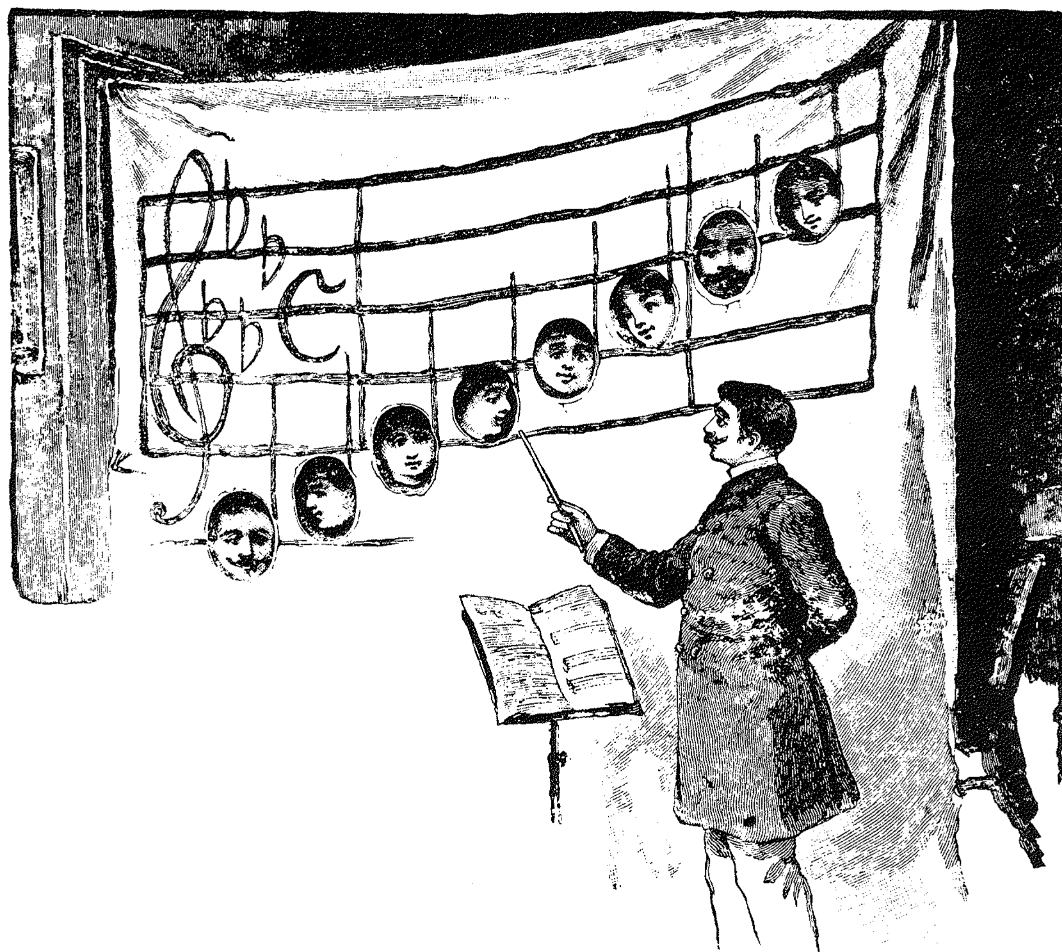

The Angst of Accountability in Arts Education

by Drew Gitomer

The following is excerpted from a paper presented at the Conference for Assessment in Music, Art, and Dance Education held at Teachers College on November 9, 1990.

If you ask your mother for one fried egg for breakfast
and
she gives you two fried eggs and you eat both of them,
who is better in arithmetic, you or your mother?
—Carl Sandburg, "Arithmetic"

DISCOURSE ABOUT EDUCATION IS FILLED WITH inquiries that have no single, cut-and-dried answer: which is the better program? How does my state compare with neighboring ones? Is this a "good" school district? Is my child "above average"? What works? Today, arts education finds itself right in the middle of these quandaries because, like it or not, accountability is in the air, and we need to make sense of what it all means for us and our students. A large part of this making sense is that we must reject the simple, one-to-one, mythical correspondences that are so often used to justify educational decisions.

Accountability is often presented as if it were the cod-liver oil of education, something distasteful we have to tolerate in order to benefit the whole body. Yet it is a central issue in the debate over what position the arts should have in our schools. P. Lehman and R. Sinatra felt that "evaluation is the key component in establishing legitimacy for arts curricula,"[1] and Eliot Eisner agreed that one of the reasons for the arts' second-class status in the schools is that "the arts are not formally assessed and do little to promote the student's academic upward mobility."[2] So, the reasoning goes, if policymakers are going to pay attention to the arts, if they are going to provide time and resources in the school day for art, then we have to give them some statistics to demonstrate the worth of doing so.

If only it were so simple. Educational funding decisions aren't always based on the demonstrated worth of a program. Decisions are influenced by values that are not likely to be altered significantly by "solid" accountability data: for instance, it is unlikely that Jesse Helms would have changed his stance if he had learned that Robert Mapplethorpe scored an 800 on the National Photography Exam.

There really are compelling reasons for having accountability systems, but we mustn't fool ourselves by believing that we satisfy accountability concerns simply because we administer a test. Too often, people see testing as the only method to evaluate students. And some critics of education have come out strongly against testing, as John Holt does:

> Almost all educators feel that testing is a necessary part of education.... At best, testing does more harm than good; at worst, it hinders, distorts, and corrupts the learning process....
>
> To the public—and to ourselves—we teachers say that we test children to find out what they have learned, so that we can better know how to help them to learn more. This is about 95 percent untrue. There are two main reasons that we test children: the first is to threaten them into doing what we want done, and the second is to give us a basis for handing out rewards and penalties on which the educational system—like all coercive systems—must operate. The threat of a test makes students do their assignments; the outcome of the test enables us to reward those who seem to do it best.
>
> It seems clear that the greater the threat posed by a test, the less it can measure, far less encourage, learning. One of the most obvious reasons is that whenever a student knows he is being judged by the results of tests, he turns his attention from the material to the tester. What is paramount is not the course or its meaning to the student, but whatever is in the tester's mind.
>
> If a test is a duel with an enemy who is out to do you in, any and all means of outwitting him are legitimate.... If a teacher is being judged by his students' performance on a standardized test, he joins forces with the children to outwit the common enemy by whatever means he can.[3]

Lee Cronbach, one of the leaders in educational evaluation, agrees: "A demand for accountability is a sign of pathology in the political system."[4] In fact, evidence suggests that minimum competency tests at the state level have—at best—no effect on student performance, while adversely affecting teachers' attitudes.

If accountability has had a detrimental influence on general education, what might be its role in the arts? Fears abound. Malcolm Ross claims that it is wrong to treat all school subjects alike, and that the arts—the "soft core" of the curriculum—need to be approached differently than math or science: "The survival of the arts actually depends not upon successfully accommodating the demands of the prudes, but in resisting them effectively and asserting on the contrary our

DREW GITOMER is a Senior Research Scientist at Educational Testing Service, and co-directs the Arts Propel project. A version of this article will appear in *Visual Arts Research*.

primary commitment to passion and sensuality."[5] Ed Lawrence, voicing his fears of standardization, warns that "the inertia of a standard that prunes every tree to the dimensions of a utility pole will, with the same determination, core the heart out of the human personality."[6]

Recognizing the axiom that "if it is to be tested, it will be taught," Karen Hamblen worries that advocates of testing, in their haste to make the arts the same as other subjects, will devise tests that examine student understanding of discrete, segregated pieces of knowledge rather than the integrated, applied understanding of a field that is essential not only to the arts, but all educational disciplines.[7] I might add that major professional organizations in all fields, including math and science (the National Science Teachers Association, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, for instance), are trying desperately to reform their assessment techniques to ward off the negative effects limited views of testing have had on practice.

Concerns about the consequences of standardized tests are legitimate, and we ignore them at our own peril. The negative effects of testing are wide-reaching; testing affects what is taught and how. Testing influences the attitudes of teachers and students alike, and infects the school environment. We are shirking our responsibility as educators when we ignore the very real, though often unintended, side effects of standardized tests.

By now, I trust that no one reading this article is expecting me to hawk the next, new and improved, officially sanctioned and validated arts accountability test. Though I have no doubt that I could sell a few, elsewhere if not here, I'd rather entertain some general ideas about what arts accountability might look like, keeping in mind the obvious though often overlooked premise that testing should always be in the interests of the children tested. I'd like to divide my discussion into two parts: first, I will say why accountability is good for reasons beyond its perceived political expediency; second, I will outline some of the major features I believe necessary for an accountability system.

Why Then Accountability?

An account is a "statement as to the discharge of responsibilities generally; answering for conduct. To account for is to give an explanation" (*OED*). It also means "to give reasons, to assign causes, to explain" (*Webster's*). Few would quarrel with the idea that a public school system most definitely is responsible for educating children, and for providing evidence of its "conduct" in a public way. Likewise, the public has a fundamental right to participate in discussions aimed at understanding why a school system conducts its business as it does, and what students are actually learning.

The problem surfaces, of course, when we attempt to be accountable by assigning a single number (or percentile) to designate the success or failure of a state, a school, a teacher, or a student. Test scores—often used as a substitute for accountability—are but one piece of evidence in the accountability process, and an extremely overweighted one at that. We wouldn't consider dermatologists better than oncologists because fewer of their patients die, and we wouldn't say that Toni Morrison is a lesser writer than Harold Robbins because she hasn't written or sold as many books. And we wouldn't know very much about the Silverado Bank just by looking at a year-end profit/loss figure. The point is that when we reduce a highly complex system to a single, limited, and arbitrary measure, we are being irresponsible, not accountable.

So accountability should be a complete, public audit that samples and examines performance throughout a school system, and does so in a way that respects the complexity of that performance. It should assess both "what went right" and "what went wrong." Finally, real accountability isn't something that is *done* to students and teachers. It is a process that a system engages in to examine itself and should include everyone involved, from legislators and superintendents to students.

Evaluators often claim their accountability systems are "scientific." An accountability system should be scientific, but in the true sense of the term. Scientists are fully accountable to each other, because science is an inherently public activity. Scientists publish in journals, detailing methodology and reporting results in support of a theoretical conclusion. Other scientists challenge or add to that research. Some conduct new experiments, while others examine the original data on which previous results and conclusions were based. It is wholly scientific to question whether a set of data can be interpreted differently.

Scientific practice carries another lesson for accountability as well. Because scientists consider absolute truth a myth, they are continually posing new questions and developing new methods to understand the world a little bit better. Not every question is useful and not every method is successful, but scientists clearly recognize that stasis is deadly.

Unfortunately, traditional accountability efforts in education have been the antithesis of real science. The process has been distinctly non-public. The public often never sees the data on which evaluators base their reports, and the reports themselves are often so clouded by abstractions that they are inaccessible to anyone outside the "inner circle." Students, teachers, schools, districts, states, and even countries are ranked on the basis of single figures or percentiles. The only thing the public learns is that Central High scored at the 40th percentile in reading. Yet no one examines the bases for those measures, the methodology is not described or defended, and the data often do not support the conclusions. Nevertheless, such poor practice determines significant policy decisions all the time.

So what's to do? We need to start by clarifying what factors are really critical to the success of an arts education program, and what we really want to find out from the accountability process. And we ought to ask questions we really care about and want answers to, not questions for which we have predetermined answers.

Deciding What to Look for in an Accountability System

While I make no claim about the precise nature and goals of an arts education program, it is only fair to inform you of my particular biases. I share with Howard Gardner, Suzanne Langer, and others the idea that we use a different type of intelligence in the arts than in math, for instance, and that a familiarity with different disciplines enables different "types of knowing." A well-rounded, responsible educational system should help students develop multiple ways to understand and interact with the world, and should appreciate the "different intelligences" involved in the arts.

I find it limiting, however, to think of the arts and arts education in strictly cognitive terms. The arts have an affective, spiritual, and motivating aspect as well. Maxine Greene argues that:

> If involvement in the arts and humanities has the potential for provoking full attention to life and its requirements, we need to devise ways of integrating them into what we teach at all levels of the educational enterprise; we need to do so consciously, with a clear perception of what it means to enable people to pay, from their own distinctive vantage points, "full attention to life."[8]

Rudolf Arnheim takes a similar stance:

> Art goes beyond the making of pictures and statues, symphonies and dances; and art education should go beyond the classes in which these crafts are taught. Art is the quality that makes the difference between merely witnessing or performing things and being touched by them, shaken by them, changed by the forces inherent in everything we give and receive.
>
> Art education, then, means making sure that such living awareness results when people paint pictures and play music, and also when they study biology or economics, take a job, fall in love, witness birth and death. Today there is a danger that many persons spend many more years than ever as well-equipped mammals, busy with metabolism and reproduction, but without using their one chance of experiencing what it means to be alive. It is the task of teachers and artists to see to it that the chance is not missed.[9]

Both Greene and Arnheim also argue that the great strength of the arts lies in their power to provide unique ways of looking at the world.

What else might one expect in a good arts program? For one thing, we'd like kids to engage in genuine problem solving within a domain. For the studio class, it's important that students experience what artists do: working on one's own. Artists make choices, apply their skills and knowledge, and evaluate their own progress. A curriculum in which the teacher makes all the decisions and judgments does not reflect artistic practice. In an art history course, we could engage students in the type of analysis art historians actually do. Simply memorizing the names of artists, paintings, and dates isn't good enough. The last thing students need is more little pieces of inert knowledge. It is only when students have a sense of where things fit—how and when they can apply the facts they've learned—that we can say they are really learning.

I could point out other things that ought to be central to an arts education program, but the main point is that as an educational system evaluates itself, it must be clear what its priorities are, and it is paramount that any analysis address those priorities. In a successful accountability system, priorities change with analysis; inevitably, different school systems and different levels within those school systems will establish different educational priorities. Educators should value diversity, particularly in the arts; mandating all systems to be accountable does *not* suggest the necessity of a national curriculum.

So far, I have discussed accountability only insofar as it affects students, but accountability should be a much broader concept. Teachers also need to be accountable, and they must make public their decisions regarding curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation. They ought to be accountable for student learning, but on terms that make sense in the classroom, as well as to the educational community at large. If students in a given school system are doing poorly, accountability questions should focus on what an individual teacher can do to improve his or her students' performance. And by the same token, teachers should play a central role in how their students are evaluated.

We must consider school administrators as well, for they are perhaps the focal point in an accountability system. School administrators must cooperate directly with everyone from legislators to students in order to make a school system accountable in the best sense. School administrators must work with teachers and artists to develop curricula and teaching methods that work. They must monitor continuously what goes on in the schools, perhaps with the aid of an evaluation team, so that corrections can be made in midstream. They must decide what changes are necessary, and promptly marshal the resources to make those changes.

Finally, we need to consider the educational goals of the community at large. How are parents and businesses supporting arts education? What role do local artists play in developing an arts education program?

Seeking Evidence

Since the arts are so different from math or science, and the benefits of an arts education are not easy to gauge, how do we assess student learning in such classes? How do we ensure that students gain "the full attention to life" that Maxine Greene speaks of, that will improve their learning skills across the board? At the same time, we have to be careful that the arts are not justified simply because they are "handmaidens" to other subject areas. They are important not only because they make children better readers, but because they help children read *differently,* and we need evidence to this effect.

Where might we look for evidence of student learning in the arts? First we need a sense of the student as he or she enters the school system, to use as a benchmark. Then we need to take time to see what we recognize in that individual's work. We can ask students for evidence of their thinking about (and within) an artistic domain, as well as an evaluation of their own work. We might inquire about students' feelings towards art and themselves as artists. Students might include examples of their own work as evidence. Student portfolios

should play a vital role in the evaluation process. Portfolios can include drafts, sketches, students' own written reflections about the evolution of a given piece, interviews between teacher and student or between two students, journals, or anything else relevant to a student's artistic development.

In addition to portfolios, there are other places we might look for evidence of student learning. For example, performances of the school band or dance company and exhibitions of student art provide equally good proof of a student's artistic development. And yes, in certain cases we can administer an old-fashioned test.

So there are many sources to draw upon. The habitual problem is that one of them tends to dominate—we evaluate a school's music program solely on the basis of its band's performance, or an interdisciplinary arts program only by a rise or fall in reading scores. Over-reliance on one type of evaluation then serves to skew practice in ways that are damaging to the organic nature of arts education.

Teachers can have their own portfolios too, that might tell us about lesson development, the student assessment process, and the health of the classroom environment. We can also interview teachers about any of these issues. But we must remember that we cannot expect teachers to involve children in a great deal of creative problem solving if standardized test scores are what we look at to determine whether or not they deserve a raise.

Likewise, there are many places we can look to find evidence of quality in school administration. For example, we can examine the nature and frequency of professional development activities like in-service meetings. We can look at how school administrators communicate expectations and accomplishments to teachers, and to other audiences in the community, both formally and informally. We can also study the role a school administration plays in curricular decisionmaking.

Making Judgments

Finally, we need to look closely at how we judge the evidence of a school system's performance. First, accountability needs to be an informed, democratic process in which all the various stakeholders in education participate. Accountability is not simply a checklist of yes-no decisions about a set of educational goals. We should not have a tally to decide who's been naughty and nice. Second, the process of making judgments, in itself, should serve to increase understanding throughout a school system. As evaluator Michael Patton notes, the nature of implemented policy really determines the effectiveness of evaluation data.[10]

Accountability has not always been considered a shared, public enterprise. Many educators, such as Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia University in the early part of this century, have held views on accountability that are exclusively top-down:

> I should as soon think of talking about the democratization of appendicitis as to speak of the democratization of the schools.... If we can secure appointment of those taking actions by a responsible and conspicuous officer, we can hold him if we choose severely responsible, and commend him for the good and punish him for the bad. The advantage is that we have somebody whom we can get at. The great difficulty is that we don't get at them often enough.[11]

Over time, we have demonstrated impressively our ability to assign blame, but without reforming the educational system. If education is to succeed, we have to build trust among all parties involved. Accountability that does not have blame as its *raison d'être* will develop trust as well as responsibility among everyone concerned.

I've already alluded to those I believe should be involved in the accountability process. At the least, I would include students, teachers, parents, school administrators, artists, evaluators, and policymakers. Each of these constituencies should have the right to ask questions of any other group, as well as the obligation to be forthcoming to all educational partners. In addition, each group needs to develop its own methods, so it can judge its own actions.

An accountability system that addresses the needs and concerns of all its constituencies is necessarily relativistic. Our efforts will not result in objective truths. As P. Johnston notes, "The search for 'objectivity' in psychometrics has been a search for tools that will provide facts untouched by human minds." He is realistic when he says that "we are stuck with interpretations, so we might as well get used to it and make the most of it."[12] Nelson Goodman talks about the "many ways the world is," recognizing that there are many true descriptions of the world. We must accept the realization that "none of these different descriptions is *exclusively* true, since others are also true. None of them tells us *the* way the world is, but each of them tells us *a* way the world is."[13]

In spirit, an accountability system must allow for the diversity of its arts education program. Public inspection and discussion is necessary at all levels of the system. Stakeholders need to talk to each other so that they can agree on common goals and standards, and most of all, so each can understand what the other is talking about. We desperately need to create a common language to overcome the alienation between branches of education. If people understand what is expected of them and how they will be judged, then many of the threats posed by accountability become moot. We can develop a common language through the process of public assessment. When teachers and students evaluate student work together in an art class, students begin to share in a common language by which artistic accomplishment is considered. They are in fact learning much of the substance of the particular artistic discipline. And as they make judgments about their own artistic process, they are acting as artistic thinkers, not simply as students taking an art class and getting a grade.

When we look at student work closely, though, we are not only assessing their achievement. We can get a much better idea of how our curricular goals mesh with the needs, interests, and accomplishments of our students. Did students focus on what we hoped they would? If not, what were the fortuitous outcomes, and what things would we want to change next time? This type of evaluative process helps to articulate expectations and dimensions of performance for

everyone involved—the same goes for assessing the work of teachers and administrators.

Parents should work closely with the schools to promote and encourage student learning. They too have a fundamental right to participate in their child's education, to ask questions, and to expect thoughtful answers. Parent participation is a great asset to any school system, and vital to the accountability process. Responsive schools could ask parents to share certain educational responsibilities. Again, we can evaluate progress and effect change only when we develop a *collective* articulation of educational goals.

Likewise, school administrators must engage in dialogue with what traditionally has been called the "accountability audience," the public and policymakers. For too long, school administrators have abdicated their responsibility to explain clearly the goals of their school systems, and the ways the schools are trying to meet those goals. We too readily accept the premise that the unnamed "they" can only be satisfied by "hard" numbers that are comparable, tangible, and "scientific." They're none of these, of course. Rather, a shared understanding leads to assessment that is more perceptive, central, and informative to everyone involved.

It is up to educators to begin sharing with legislators and with the public what really goes on in the schools. We need to take a more active and positive role in defining how schools, and particularly arts education programs, are considered. We should *expect* that policymakers will understand the most important issues in education, or at least call on those who do to act as advisors. In turn, policymakers have the obligation to communicate their concerns. If we don't provide any more information to policymakers than reified test scores, then we cannot expect them to make informed, well-reasoned decisions, and we have only ourselves to blame. It is up to us to change the tenor of conversation so that public reckonings are consistent with our vision of arts education.

But, the skeptics will argue, the power brokers won't accept this new type of accountability system. They need numbers, and not too many of them. Well, the fact of the matter is that the accountability process is being radically restructured in many parts of the country. Connecticut, California, and Vermont are among the states that have begun using student portfolios. Teacher portfolios are being used in a number of places as well. Evaluations are made by classroom teachers on-site, not at the state capital. Is everything worked out? Of course not. But processes are in place whereby a collective community is defining (and redefining) goals and standards of accountability. Participants are looking at aspects of performance that make sense to them. These states are creating a dynamic system that allows for diversity and disagreement. Without such dynamism, a healthy accountability system cannot develop. The Heisenberg principle, developed in physics, states that systems are *materially* influenced by the act of observation. Large and powerful educational institutions in states such as California are not only recognizing this principle, they have decided to take advantage of it.

Arts educators should take notice. Accountability begins by asking the most difficult questions, questions such as What are we about? What do we value? What do we want students to learn? What would lead us to believe that we are moving in the right direction? These questions are certainly not answered by naming "the four subject areas we want kids to be exposed to." By taking a vigorous role in the debate on accountability, arts educators have much to gain, for they can create an accountability that really meets their needs, and at the same time enhances the uniqueness of the arts.

I am asking for educational accountability that is more responsible than it has been. We cannot get around fulfilling our educational responsibilities simply by meeting some test requirements. Whether one is a student, teacher, or school superintendent, it is much easier to toss around a test score to justify or excuse performance than it is fully to represent it. The model I ask for is one that can create an internal motivation for improvement, a much more powerful force for genuine, positive change than any mandated from above.

Notes

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