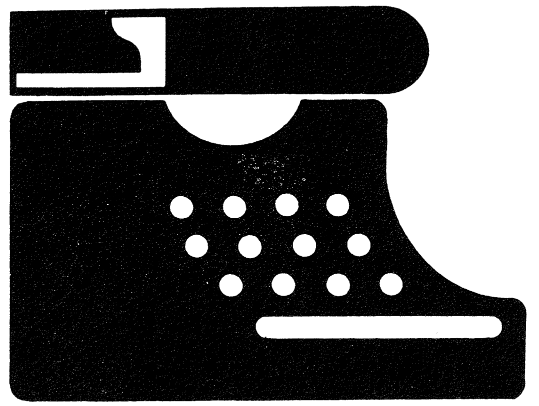
Teachers & Writers



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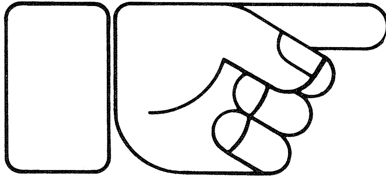
BULLETIN



Effective March 1, T&W's **new address:**

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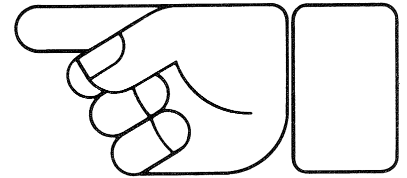

Hooking the Mind to the Hand

by Geof Hewitt

ORIGINAL WRITING DOES NOT FLOURISH WITHIN the normal bounds of teacher-student-parental expectation. By the time they have learned to print, most students have also mastered the control necessary to give teacher and parent pretty much what is expected. All too often, this means that poetry by students is the trite repetition of acceptable sentiments. Dull reading and dull to write!

A Climate for Poetry

Good poetry cannot happen without surprise. While source books are stimulating and often helpful, spontaneity and curiosity are the two most important ingredients of good teaching of writing. Like real people, students enjoy surprise. The teacher who simply cribs from prescribed guidebooks, finding "creative writing assignments" that have worked for

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other educators, denies the opportunity for spontaneity and reveals little curiosity.

In all grades of public school and college, the classroom ideally becomes a community of writers; the teacher's responsibility is to foster and be a part of this community, a task requiring restraint and tact. Most people want to communicate, but that desire is usually limited or repressed when they suspect the listener is not really interested in the communication. Good creative writing teachers ask themselves what they wish to learn from their students about their real and imagined lives, and then subtly make that curiosity known to the class, hoping they will be trusting enough to enter into the conspiracy of thought that writers offer to the attentive reader.

Developing this trust is no easy matter, especially in the schools, where the citizens have been told that for seven or eight hours a day certain of their favorite subjects are taboo. Sports talk is generally restricted to the halls, sex talk to the locker rooms, gossip to the cafeteria. In short, the student is conditioned to consider the classroom an area quite separate from real life—and while this attitude may be helpful to science and mathematics teachers whose concerns are factual, it is destructive to the humanities, and especially to the expressive arts.

After a depressing series of meetings with a group of sixth graders who attended my class voluntarily, I complained. "I thought, because you are coming to this class voluntarily, that you'd begin to develop as writers, and quickly abandon cliches and the old roses are red violets blue approach. But you continue to write stuff that is boring."

Then I hit on something. "So next week I want you to write something honest for me. And you may not sign your name. I want to know from each of you what it's like to be 10 or 11 or 12 years old today. I'll admit I'm curious because I remember my own sixth grade year and how I was just beginning to be aware of sex and politics and religion and a lot of important things that never got talked about in school. Your assignment is to write about *anything,* but you must do it with honesty and you may not sign your name. Understand that I won't, without your permission written on the paper, ever show that paper to anyone."

It was a desperation announcement, completely spontaneous, though nonetheless deeply felt. I had read enough poems about Santa and "How much I hate school!" and "The fat cat in the hat of the rat" to make me wanna puke. I just *knew* these young people had richer worlds than all that, and I managed, on that blessed day, to convince them I could be trusted to peek.

One day this boy I knew came up to me. He was older than me and went to a public school. I went to a Catholic school. He said to me, "Come here Penny. I have something really neat to show you."

Being only in second grade, I didn't expect anything, so I followed him. He took me to an alley and led me to an empty garage. He asked me if I had started my period and I said I didn't know what it was, and that they didn't teach that in school. He seemed to think that was funny and it was okay. He pulled down his pants and told me to do the same. I hadn't the slightest idea what was happening. He started getting closer to me. Then his sexual innercords went to work. Suddenly I got real scared. I ran and ran and ran. Whenever I saw him I quickly went inside.

At first, the teacher who lifts the academic bans may well be deluged with unoriginal, somewhat vulgar effusions, just as a thumb in the end of a garden hose, when removed, at first lets out a gigantic gush. Put the thumb back into the hose again, and, sure enough, more pressure builds. With luck and a refusal to be shocked, the teacher can endure, and the students, once the novelty fades, will know that, indeed, for the purposes of poetry, there is no realm of human thought that cannot be explored. The ending of imaginative repression is one of my primary goals in teaching poetry in the schools.

Thinking back to my own schooling, I remember poetry as the first and only subject that ever truly provoked me to thinking about issues and feelings *beyond* the limits of the established curriculum. This, I know now, is because "poetry" is an undefinable term. But one can define what it does: it requires that the writer strive to perfect accuracy of expression and perception. And it requires that the writer not be boring.

This probably accounts for the "weird" stories and poems many young writers come up with. The serious student recognizes early that—like English rhyme—certain Big Themes seemingly have been exhausted, used up, by the likes of Shakespeare over there and Whitman over here. For this reason, the imagination is often engaged and driven hard. I believe this is healthy and that it often leads the student to important discoveries about expression. It can also lead to shocking, embarrassing, and sometimes awful writing.

How Do You Like My Poem?

In every artistic endeavor, beginners should be freed of any notion of "failure." This means, at home, parents are responsible for not passing on their own defensive attitudes. (They should not say "Oh I can't sing!" for instance, because this implies judgment on the product, whereas it is the activity one is trying to share.) In school, it means the suspension of grading—at least of "creative" activities. The act of doing becomes the only reward or penalty.

Young people learn from their peers, and accept the criticisms of their peers, a lot more quickly than from their elders. The ideal classroom—remember, a community—is composed of a wide variety of people with a wide variety of opinions and experiences. The teacher's formidable task is to elicit their expression.

In elementary school, and even at the junior high level, children are not usually very interested in offering—or receiving—critiques of their work. Here, their greatest interest is in sharing the actual writing, without listening to—or dredging up—a critical response. For this reason, with groups of younger people, I think it is best for the teacher to read, without comment—or preferably have the students read, if they aren't too shy—selected responses to the "assignment." Students who wish more than the occasional comment and general approval will identify themselves.

But for the most part, the writing and the sharing of poems and stories is sufficient; most young people are not interested in revising, and this creates another sort of problem where the spontaneity of an enthusiastic student often means hurriedly scribbled "poetry" where polishing and refining have obviously played no part. First drafts are the play of writing; revision is the work. Let the students know this and decide for themselves at what grade level they're ready for the work.

By ninth or tenth grade, the class ought to be ready for group examination of certain student poems. The matter of obtaining peer criticism is best handled with the teacher acting as moderator and reading student work to the class without identifying the author, who always has the option to speak out in defense of the particular piece of writing.

Consider Other Words

During private conferences, the teacher should ask questions, not declaim. One of the most helpful approaches I know is to ask the young writer what alternatives have been considered. This is a process that questions how far the imagination has stretched during the act of creation. (Of course these are rational considerations of what is probably an irrational moment in human experience; when the imagination is extended one is not immersed in "considering the alternatives." The alternatives, during the highest moments, are irrelevant, but during later, less inspired moments, they might well be investigated to sharpen any piece of writing.) So, rather than saying "good" or "bad" in a conference, one might read the line aloud to the student and seek to learn what impulse and revisions brought the line to its present condition.

"Lo how lovely crows the wind in jest. . . ." Did the student intend all those "o" sounds in the beginning? How did she or he arrive at "crows" for a verb? Did the author consider alternatives to "lovely"? This approach is far more productive than assuming the judgmental tone with flat statements such as "I like all those sounds but the meaning escapes me." No one is an expert on what makes poems work or fail. It is only when someone assumes he possesses such knowledge that the textbooks are written, attitudes harden, and another generation is soured on literature.

One effective way to have students review their work with the possibility of revision is a technique I call "parts of speech criticism." The teacher can introduce it gradually, over a period of two or three weeks, by concentrating critical attention in the first week, for instance, on nouns.

"Okay, here we have a poem that begins: 'Oh yellow flower growing in the flower-pot.' Can you think of other nouns that might be more specific or more suggestive than these?" The teacher might pursue the question by having the class look carefully at the flower-pot: is it red clay or round or is it a milk carton? Would "daisy" be more specific than "flower"? Can the poem sustain a misrepresentation of the actual scene if that misrepresentation somehow adds imaginative interest to the whole?

Following this method, the teacher would, during the second week, focus the class's attention on adjectives. Applying adjective criticism to the line already quoted, we might question the necessity of "yellow," since "daisy" is often thought of as yellow. Is "flower" of "flower-pot" an adjective? Is it necessary? We experiment with the alternatives and suddenly see that the sound and feel of *the line* can change considerably.

Oh yellow daisy growing in the flower-pot.
Oh daisy growing in the pot.

Is "growing" an adjective? It modifies "daisy." Let's leave it out, too.

Oh daisy in the pot.

At this point it might be helpful to focus again on the nouns, to check what new possibilities are unveiled by our adjective "adjustments." This sort of revision can be playful: as soon as the *sense* of the noun is permitted to change, the poem takes on wholly new tonal qualities.

Oh daisy in the plot.
Oh daisy in the stew.
Oh ghost in the stew.
Oh ghost growing in the flower-pot.
Oh ghostly daisy.

The whole point of these exercises is to learn the alternatives, the unending and wholly unfathomable depth of imaginative possibility that lives in the language and thus in all who use language.

The same technique should be followed with all parts of speech, until every word in the poem has been considered.

This approach allows the teacher to assume a completely neutral posture. It does not concern itself directly with the "message" or content of the poem, which is that aspect the teacher should be most reluctant to criticize. Rather, it is derived from a specific critical stance that holds: the line is the basic unit of poetry; a poem must not use any more words than necessary; it is a lean expression where every word within the line unit has been chosen (or used) because it is the most appropriate word.

Advantages of this technique are that it helps the student develop an awareness of the parts of speech, that it can be employed by the author alone, and that it stretches the student's imagination during revision time.

Rhythms

Want to teach third graders about rhythm in poems? Why not teach the limerick? How? Do you explain the limerick as a five-line series of anapests with an AABBA rhyme scheme, or do you recite a couple of your favorites, then suggest that students try writing their own? It may just someday occur that one or two of those students will actually want to know the name of the limerick's meter, or consciously pay attention to the rhyme scheme.

Just as a song with a catchy tune is memorable or haunting, a poem whose meter and/or rhyme are right declares itself to the reader. One should remember, in humility, that Madison Avenue uses the same principles in its radio/TV work and the difference between poetry and jingles relies less on "talent" than on human sincerity. After all, many of Robert Frost's greatest poems can be sung to the tune of "Hernando's Hideaway." Whose words these are I think I know!

Hooking the Mind to the Hand

Many students are so intimidated by the thought of writing (is this because their spelling and grammar and legibility have been so often criticized?) that although the connection between mind and tongue works perfectly, it is immediately blocked between mind and hand. Communication works fine so long as it isn't being transcribed, but put a pencil in the hand and a tape over the mouth and the mind seems to backfire.

The writing teacher should work to help the student construct this badly needed connection between mind and hand. I think the greatest gift we have to offer in the classroom is the

perception that the hand can carry on just as wildly as the tongue. To lead the student to that realization, the teacher may well have to encourage scribbling at enormously fast rates, without much thought, and certainly with little immediate concern for the traditional rules of composition.

The greatest inhibitors are those factors that slow down the process of expression. For this reason touch typing has been valuable for me, because I can type faster than I can write by hand. Any concern over the quality of the expression works, for me at least, as an inhibition. I advise students not to worry about what they're saying ("Is it any good? Does it make any sense?") until after the completion of that all-important first draft. Accept whatever writing tries to force itself out of your pen, work hard at finding out what it is you really want to say by writing as fast as you can, for as long as you can.

Develop a strong writing hand; practice—as in sports—is of the utmost importance. After the hand's exhausted and the pages are filled with a scribble that no one but you can decipher, put it away for as long as you can stand to be separate from it, then take it out and read it over, crossing out whatever portions bore you. Then try the "parts of speech substitution" method.

Because students don't stay students forever, it is important to encourage them to read and write outside of school. If reading and writing are not disassociated, at least in part, from school, the chances of the students' developing a natural and easy writing style are limited.

I like to stress the *experience* of writing as well as the product. Sometimes I tell students to "write a poem as you have never written before," asking them to differentiate between this suggestion and another, which says "write a poem like you have never written before." Involve the students in experimenting with new writing routines. If they are accustomed to writing first thing in the morning, suggest that they attempt a poem at midnight (setting the alarm clock if necessary). If they normally write with a typewriter, recommend a pen or pencil. If they sit behind a desk when they write, tell them to go for a walk and to carry a clipboard for jotting down the thoughts that occur to the rhythm of their footsteps.

The idea here is to demonstrate that the act of writing can and should be carried beyond the school's four walls, beyond the habits and practices already established. For all writers, variety of circumstance is important, and not until they have experimented can they know what routines are suited to them.

Stress that the student is not always going to be pleased with the results of this activity. Stress that many professional writers consider about 80 per cent of their writing drek, but that if the pen isn't moving, the other 20 per cent will never sit on a page, so it is necessary to do it, even when the results are disappointing.

And stress that the students are not required to show you everything they write—indeed, a certain amount of their writing will be properly too personal to share—and you have no right to require that they turn in their journals, which should neither be confused with diaries nor with pages of ennui maintained strictly for teacher approval. A journal is the first home of written ideas and word play, a record of where the mind and body have been, but not (like a diary) a blow-by-blow description of the author's life and loves. A journal is not a hallowed and neatly kept ledger of poetic thoughts, but a page-by-page jumble of developing poems, drawings, music, cartoons, shopping lists, and anything else that occurs in a creative mind. What is not too personal may be copied out of the journal and worked on, made neat, made correct, polished, refined, and handed in. But the teacher who requires that students hand in the journals themselves will be imposing a deathly inhibition on all but the most exhibitionistic.

We Are All Beginners

One challenge of teaching poetry is that it is such an unpopular form of literature. Another challenge for teachers is to demonstrate with their own beings how poetry affects their lives, becomes a part of their lives, and to lead young people to the knowledge that writing is one of the most valuable habits a person can develop.

And that teacher who, when it comes to creative writing, reminds the students of what Ezra Pound once said—"Make it new!"—can help to show that when it comes to poetry, we are all beginners. A visiting poet or the teacher are just as likely at any given moment to write mediocre verse as the students. When you "make it new" you are a pioneer.

Poetry, as well as being literary, and usually oral, is demonstrably graphic; in some cases, as in concrete poetry, the poem cannot be spoken, or sung, but merely taken in. For these reasons and others, any attempt to define "poetry" is bound to go on for too many words or fall short into pretension. Let's assume it cannot be defined except by example, in terms of what we write. ●

My First Metaphor

by Larry Zirlin

MY MOTHER TELLS THIS STORY, AND SHE'S told it several times. I was two years old, and while I'm surprised at how much I can recall from that age, I don't remember this particular incident.

I was running around in our kitchen. The furniture, the wallpaper, the appliances are all fairly clear to me, but what is sharpest in my memory is the juicer. It was a hand-operated model, all metal, painted white except for the black rubber sleeve on the handle and the chrome helmet which pushed down on the halved fruit. I loved to play with the juicer, moving the silver hemisphere through a three-quarters circle, back and forth. Thirty years later, E.T.'s head would rise and fall like my little man's shiny skull. But I understood the juicer was more than a toy—it was also the source of breakfast every morning.

To my mother this story is just another of the endless examples of how cute I was as a child. But I know it is my first metaphor. When, on maternal impulse, my mother picked me up and hugged me tightly, I said, "Why you squeeze me? I not an orange."

LARRY ZIRLIN is the author of *Awake for No Reason,* a book of poems published by CrossCountry Press. He is also a graphic designer and printer.

Profile

Jack Collom Poet and Teacher

WHAT KIND OF WRITER MAKES A GOOD TEACHER of writing? That question can be answered abstractly: a good writer/teacher likes people and talking about writing, is friendly and efficient, communicates a natural enthusiasm for and commitment to art, and is able to ride the ups and downs of freelancing.

The question can also be answered by example. The first example (of what we hope will be many) is Jack Collom, poet and teacher of poetry writing.

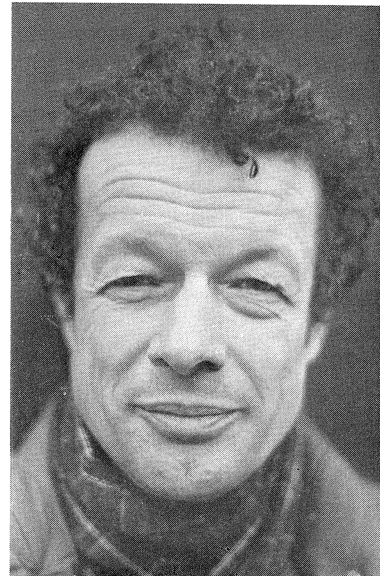
Jack was born in 1931 and grew up in Illinois and Colorado, spending a lot of his time in the woods. He has been a bird-watcher since the age of 11. He attended Colorado A&M College, switching majors in his senior year from Forestry to General Arts and Sciences (BS 1952). After graduation he enlisted in the Air Force, with tours of duty in the U.S., North Africa, and West Germany. It was in the Service, at the age of 22, that he met a painter, Tom Bartek. "Until then I had never met any kind of artist or writer and I knew nothing about poetry," Jack says. Not long afterward, in Libya, he wrote his first poem, "a miserable, awful, soppy poem about a romantic attachment." Suddenly, though, he sensed a different feeling about himself and his possibilities. He saw being a poet as "master of one's own fate. This pungent idealism drove me into being an artist, though I still knew absolutely nothing about art."

Two years later, honorably discharged, he met his brother-in-law, who turned out to be the independent—or, as it was called in those days, "underground"—filmmaker Stan Brackhage. "Unlike me (a late bloomer), Stan was a full-blown artist by the time he was 18, absolutely sure of himself as an artist." As such he was a model for Jack, who was to write poetry for eight years before meeting another poet! Meanwhile he was doing factory work, which he was to do for 20 years.

One of the strongest influences on his writing was reading Donald Allen's anthology, *The New American Poetry 1945-1960.* As for so many other poets who began publishing in the 1960's, this book was for Jack a marvelous introduction to most of the best nonacademic poets, many of whom were still relatively unknown. "The Allen anthology made me realize that in poetry you could do *anything.*" Jack himself began to publish his work, at first in fugitive but important little magazines in America and Europe, such as *Floating Bear, Joglars, The World,* and *Paris Review.* He also founded and edited (for 11 years) a little magazine of his own, named simply *the.* The most recent of his eight books is *The Fox,* published by United Artists (no relation to the film company).

He also began giving public readings of his work, at The Poetry Project (New York), Colorado University, Northeastern Illinois University, Creighton University, The Poetry Center (San Francisco), and many other places. To stand up for the first time in front of a group of people—many of them strangers—and say, in effect, "I'm a poet and here are my poems" takes courage. Poetry readings are good preparation for poets who are going to teach in the schools.

In the meantime Jack, working at the IBM plant in Boulder, had been going to school at night, receiving a BA in English at the University of Colorado in 1972 and an MA in 1974.



It was also in 1972 that Jack began working as a poet in the schools, at the invitation of the Colorado Council on the Arts. He had no background in education (other than having been a student) and he had never worked with children (other than being the father of four), but it was clear at the outset that he was right for the job. Over the next seven years he taught poetry in the schools in Colorado and Nebraska, with one full year as poet-in-residence for the Grand Island, Nebraska school system. He also taught adult writing workshops at the Criss-Cross School of Art and at the University of Colorado.

In 1980—the year he was awarded a Fellowship in Poetry by the National Endowment for the Arts Literature Program—he moved to New York, where he has taught poetry to children, in both the Poets in the Schools and the Teachers & Writers Collaborative programs. His article, "What I See in Children's Writing" (*Teachers & Writers* magazine, vol. 14, no. 2), provides a true poet's-eye view of the writing of children. What follows is a selection of Jack Collom's own poems, a true poet's-eye view of the world.

[—Editor]

self-portrait

whitish male, 6 foot 2, 175 pounds. age 49. brown
curly hair, no beard or mustache. star-shaped
tattoo on left forearm. lined forehead, baggy blue eyes,
thick lips. eyes like Chinese fried eggs, waxy ears,
healthy yellowish teeth, a "dogtooth" crooked on
left side. does not look at you as he talks to
you. voice like gray wind. smoker. fidgety hands.
freckles on upper back. shy, tense, energetic, passive.
holds blue belt in courage. expression like
aging idiot who has learned arithmetic. small towns and woods.
dresses poorly, likes deserts. long-trunked, soft-skinned. likes
to walk. radical puritan. has been known to
get drunk. watches birds, shoots pool. friendly with
his four children. mildly muscular. dislikes washing.
life as a working man but has remained a
spectator. likes rhythm. remote, excitable. speaks
German dialect, yodels hoarsely. throws left-handed. skinny
legs bedecked
with old footlocker scars. likes primitive blues.
has trouble thinking of things to say. writes
poetry. good health, bad cough. interested in love. always
on time.

•

vertical situation at pine cone falls

This is writ
where I sit,
squinty, thin,
looking around in
torn brown shirt,
stones, brush, dirt.
My daughter Sierra
frolics where a
small stream breaks
over boulders, takes
her fir-cones down
over the brown
sand & mossed
rock. They're tossed
into a dam
down, I am
sure, fifty feet
below my seat.
I am smoking.
She is poking.

•

rhythm

people only want you to surprise them certain ways

1-5-76

have you ever thought about
the miracle of talk?

walk down street

lady on porch

shouts through door

"ARE YOU IN THERE, EARL?"

•

I am an old grandfather who lives in a painting
it's a mediocre hunting scene on cloth
I feel funny being a conventional man
in these bizarre, sketchy illusions
without women
just a gun and a flop-eared dog
and poverty valley

•

song of greenland

Dr. Pearl stumbled thru the Northern Lights
into the icy laughter of the giant Arctic Alligator,
who chuckled, "I have little ones of my own!"
"Indeed," said Dr. Pearl, "I hope they are doing well."
The Alligator only smiled, thoughtlessly crunching
thereby both of Dr. Pearl's knees.
Dr. Pearl, rolling helplessly about
on the green & frosty shaking reptile tongue,
amidst the crackling sea of pure white bergs,
could only whistle as he wondered what
to do. Eater-of-Whiteness, for such was the
Alligator's name, was touched by some
memory, for he vomited as he grinned,
& Dr. Pearl went sailing in a green amoeba
onto a jagged cake of ice. Stunned, he
sprawled swastika-like long until the delicate
Arctic flowers began to sparkle up from him.
Yellow & red, & the bone-dry sun creaked
upward crumbs of degrees. A white rummaging
wolf chanced by as the cake began to break,
lured by the glitter of slop & Arctic flora,
knowing that only ice cannot be eaten,
dwelling in the skeleton of scarcity.
It licked away the awful heap of color &
discovered the colorless furs of Dr. Pearl.
Preserved by a miracle of cold & radiant
green absorption, Dr. Pearl groaned & mildly
jerked. The tongue of the "Lobo" massaged
with abstract purpose Pearl to a loose crisp
of the possible, the cake then crumpled apart
& both cascaded into an ocean crazed with gray.
They swam & swam as far as the eye can see.

10-31-79

the concommitant of
an animal head is
doing a little dance
as you go around the world
surely this is not just
the license of identity's disguise
surely this is
a soft touch
given long ago
returning to the body

when you love a baby
& it goes
20 years later it flows
back to your heart
because it knows

hollow-chested man
with black ape head
bobs & glitters out the door
of tom's tavern

•

mobility is the secret of my character,
my slight paunch a flowering of gentleness.
my poached-egg eyes contain the seed of wisdom.
my tantrums are keenly perceived emotional arabesques.
my compromises are selflessness making love to the world,
my rotten teeth the restraint of brutality.
my shaking hands are joie de vivre.
my meanness is pure light.
my obscurity tantalizes everyone.
my blackouts are part of the music of time.
my cowardice is a beautiful dance.
my blandness is the space approaching God.
my murders are mutations of the unicorn.
my poems are bits of ice on the warm plains.

•

the rabbit

The rabbit bobbed his pallid sunburst tail
and moved his heavy Asian head to see
        if he could spy
a juicy hawk to hack to bits with
kangaroo feet and feed his inscrutable
        children. Up in the sky
the bulging eyes saw sailing safely high
a light-winged bird, the mild red-shoulder
        with gracefully curving bill,
and lured it down by luminous eye and
racy flesh, then thumped it dead with pedal clubs and hunched
        home to the hill.

winter, the "New York Deli"

the snow angles westward
whereas last night it angled south
above all it falls down

the holidays have made me lose my mind
by now the snow is covering the ground
december's 'just around the corner'

the snow angles westward
but in the glass reflection it seems to angle eastward
the holidays have made me lose my mind

december's 'just around the corner'
& at its end the glittering-mirror time
by now the snow is covering the ground

above all it falls down
after I finish my coffee I'm going north
whereas last night I wound up driving west

but in my mind I might have been going eastward
the holidays have made me lose my mind
maybe in *enero* I should float to Yucatan

•

questions and answers

What did the man say when he got in cold water?
        The sun might be better.
What did the boy say when he forgot what one and one was?
        My act-out is bad.
What did the bald man say when he got a comb for his
        birthday?
        I'm not going along with it.
What time was it when the lady was weighing herself?
        Time to go to school.
What did the football player say when he caught the ball?
        The arms are strength, but the ball is a lot.
What would you call a cork flamed out?
        The side of a period.
What did the smile turn to?
        Tears of an eye.
How old must a boy be to be a father?
        One year old, but be a little patienter.
What would a picture be?
        A rather of a cane.
What does a book really tell you?
        A self.
What would a not place to be?
        Living in a forest.

(Poem dictated by Chris Collom, age 7) •

Blazing Palettes

A Pilot Computer Graphics Project

by Bill Kough

LAST YEAR I WAS INVITED TO TEACH COMPUTER graphics to children, in a program co-sponsored by Teachers & Writers Collaborative and the Alternate Media Center (AMC), a division of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts that concentrates on the expanded use of computers in telecommunications and art. Computer illiterate, I was given by AMC a crash course in computer graphics, using the Apple II Plus computer, and then asked to formulate and teach a course to fourth and fifth grade children at P.S. 3 in Manhattan.

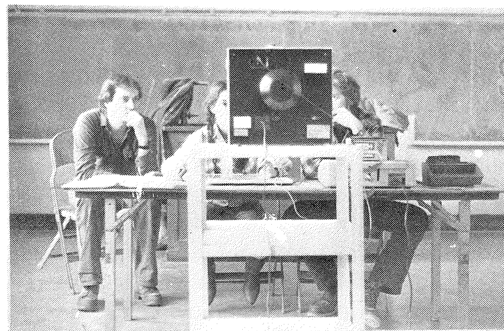
Originally I had doubted that the computer would be a meaningful tool in making art with children. My suspicion was based on years of experience with great numbers of children—some could not manipulate a pair of scissors and many clutched at the idea of making an image of anything. My preconceived idea of computer graphics was based on what I had seen of computer games: it seemed to me that computers were visually limited to geometric shapes and that, because of the influence of video games, children would find it hard to make original images. Those misgivings changed radically upon my first encounter with the computer. I had not realized that the computer had so many capabilities, merely the push of a button away.

The operation of the Apple computer is simple: you slide a program disc into the disc drive and turn on the computer. The drawing program is then automatically fed into the computer, which is then ready to accept your commands. The commands are given either by pushing a particular key (such as S for ''save'') on the keyboard, or by using a stylus attached to a special plastic tablet (approximately 18 x 24″) that is connected to the computer.

Along the top of this tablet is a series of small boxes that have written in them options for various colors, shapes, lines, textures, etc. So, for example, if you want to make the background of your picture blue you first push the stylus point against the box labeled ''background'' and then against the one with ''blue.'' A blue background then appears on the TV screen. If you want to draw a red line on this blue background, you push ''line'' and ''red,'' and then move the stylus across the surface of the tablet to make a corresponding red line appear on the blue background of the TV screen. (What you draw does not appear on the tablet.) Some of the commands afford you complex possibilities. ''Autofill,'' for example, allows you to choose a texture or a complex color mixture to fill in a shape. In order to erase part or all of the image—such as taking out the red line on the blue background—you push ''brush'' and ''blue'' and on the screen appears a pulsating shape (like the end of a brush) wherever the stylus touches the tablet. You then simply move the stylus (which corresponds to this pulsating brush shape) over the red line and it covers the red with blue.

My group of children also experimented with special effects programs that enabled them to rotate or shrink images, change colors of existing images, and electronically manipulate their images in other ways.

The most difficult aspect of this project was the development of a curriculum that would give the children an understanding of the computer as an image-making tool and at the same time provide them with meaningful assignments based on visual problems. Being an artist and not a computer specialist, my emphasis was on making meaningful and beautiful images. As a teacher I was curious to see how traditional drawing and painting projects would look when executed on the computer.



David Harkins, Zoe Altman, and Bill Kough

In order to emphasize this comparison between the old and the new, I taught lessons in sculpture, drawing, collage, and printmaking, and related them to art projects on the computer. For example, we did straw sculptures (by nature very geometric) and at the same time explored simple geometric design possibilities on the computer. Also, we drew our own faces from life on clear acetate and attached the drawings to the TV screen, which served as a kind of electronic tracing paper: we used the tablet to color in areas of the face, enlarge or reduce features, add hats, etc. This fusion of the traditional and the electronic gave the final computer images a warmer, less calculated look.

The computer allows the user to work out visual ideas, to try various possibilities, to change the image freely: the image can be ''saved'' at any stage of its development, and then changed, without the fear of losing the earlier version. The user can always go back to the stage just before the image was ''ruined.'' This electronic safety net, combined with traditional artistic methods, encouraged the children to go

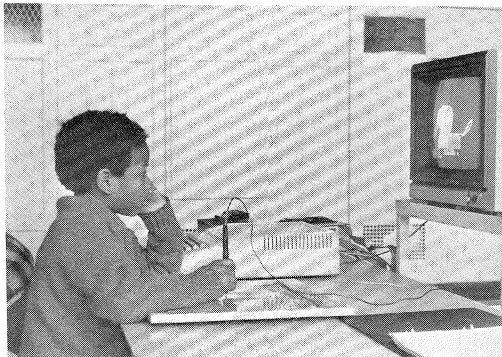
Artist BILL KOUGH is currently working with writer Dale Worsley on a special T&W computer art and writing project for P.S. 140 and P.S. 146 in the Bronx. We hope to report on this and other T&W computer projects, partially supported by a grant from the Atari Institute for Action Research.

farther than they might have. P.S. 3 principal John Melser commented, "I had expected good results in terms of involvement and increased awareness of graphic elements in design, but I had not dreamed we'd get anything like what's happening. The students are drawing at a quite different level of sophistication."

Perhaps it would be helpful at this point if I outline step by step what happened in this 15-day curriculum. I was teaching traditional art to two classes, and out of these the teachers selected 15 children (about half boys and half girls) to do additional work on the computer. I worked with each student individually for 20 minutes each day. To enable the child to concentrate on the visual and technical problems and not have to worry about where to start or what to draw, I defined the subject matter of five of the six projects.

Project 1: We each drew a robot on the computer, using geometric shapes and straight lines. In the classroom we made huge hanging sculptures from drinking straws.

Project 2: On the computer we made drawings of our hands. Then we colored in the hands, using autofill (short for "automatic fill-in" of an enclosed area, I guess). In the classroom we drew hands and collaged the windows with colored translucent paper to turn them into "stained glass" windows.



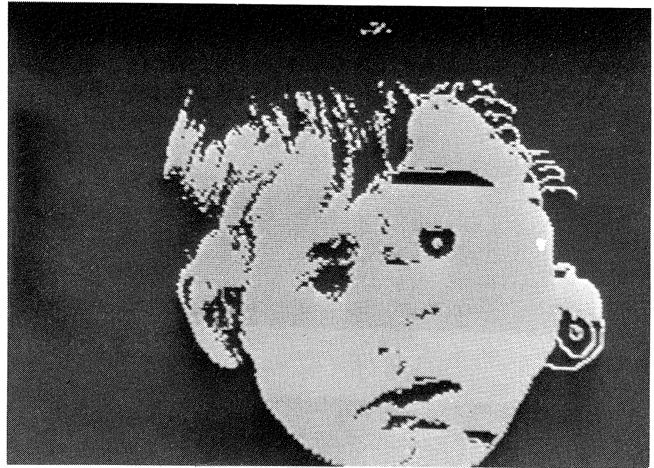
Derek Gibson at work

Project 3: Digitized portraits of each child were made by attaching a video camera to the computer. The subject sits still for 10 seconds while the computer scans the video image of the student's face, and prints it in high contrast on the TV screen. The image can then be saved by pushing the return key on the computer keyboard. The students used these images as a starting point for further manipulations and alterations. In the classroom we concentrated on figure drawing.

Project 4: Imaginary animals. We combined different animal parts to make a new animal and then added details in color. This was done in the regular classroom with traditional etching materials and in the computer sessions using the electronic tablet. I pointed out the relationship between printmaking and TV, how 500 years ago the print helped develop mass communication by making the same image available to everyone, just as TV does now.

Project 5: We drew self-portraits from life and attached them to the TV screen, as described earlier.

Project 6: The final project was of the students' own conception, and involved the making of a series of sequential images that became animated when they were seen one after the other. One girl had a caterpillar change into a butterfly, one boy showed a man rolling a boulder off a cliff and onto a bird's nest, and other children showed a girl skipping rope, a man in a room putting on masks, a worm emerging from an apple, etc.



Self Portrait by Jonathan Penington

Each week I gave the children a printout of their images and eventually they were able to see nearly all their work on "Applebytes" (a community service bulletin board program on Manhattan Cable TV), produced by AMC. AMC also provided all technical materials and assistance for the school computer project. AMC's David Harkins was ever-present during the sessions, so that very little time was lost due to technical problems or breakdowns.

Only one child out of the 15 showed resistance to the project. He was a bright, scientifically oriented kid who continued to feel frustrated by what he considered his lack of artistic skills. None of the children was intimidated by the technology. On the contrary, they adapted quickly and concentrated on their work to an astounding degree. The absorption they showed was similar to that of TV hypnosis, but was different in that the children had control of what was happening on the screen, not vice versa.

The images created in this pilot program are remarkably fresh, various, and open (it's a shame they can't be reproduced here in their really vibrant colors). In setting up the program I felt that it was crucial to give each child his or her own private time on the computer and that each be taught individually, without influencing each other. Only after the images were made did they see each other's work. This simple way of organizing the sessions, along with combining traditional art techniques and the computer, helped produce the exceptional results of this project.

Computer Equipment Used in This Project

Hardware

- *Apple II Plus computer and disc drive*
- *Color TV monitor*
- *Apple Graphics Tablet*
- *Video camera, for digitized portraits*
- *DS-65 card* (The Micro Works), *for digitized images*
- *Epson 80 F/T printer with graphtrax*

Software

- *Apple Graphics Tablet Program* (Apple)
- *The Complete Graphics System* (Penguin Software)

The Morning After

by June Gould

I can't come out and play with you. . . my daddy died last night. I didn't open the door. I probably should have stepped out into the backyard and explained it all to my friend Jill. . . but I couldn't. Jill looked doubtfully through the screen door. Her stubby Cocker Spaniel pulled impatiently at his new, stiff leather leash. "But my mom sent me over to play," Jill said. "You said you wanted to see my new puppy." I looked at Jill from inside the kitchen, through the screen door. I wasn't upset. I just didn't want to open the door.

—Donna Skolnick
Reading and Writing Specialist, Elementary School
Westport, Ct.

LAST YEAR I TAUGHT AN IN-SERVICE WRITING course for teachers. Every week all year I met for two hours with teachers from elementary and secondary schools in the Fairfield County, Connecticut area as well as from South Salem, New York. Most of the teachers had to teach writing, but had not taken previous writing courses, nor had they written for their own pleasure or publication. Working on a doctoral degree in Teaching Creative Writing at the Union for Experimenting Colleges, I had discovered that my own writing had become more detailed and emotional when, prior to writing poetry or short stories, I had primed the pump with my own childhood memories. I thought an in-service course that used childhood memories as a starting point for writing would help teachers tap into the dramatic, accessible, and *free* curriculum resource guide for endless pre-writing activities that memory is.

I emphasize three techniques when I teach writing to teachers. I use relaxation exercises (for heightened sensory awareness), self-selection from memories of childhood experiences, and peer editing (with participants who know how to ask questions and listen constructively rather than criticize and analyze).

It's important for teachers to develop their own in-service courses so they can experience what it feels like to do pre-writing, drafting, and revising. Research in teaching writing has shown that the most effective writing teachers are those who have written and then commented on their own writing process. These teachers can identify with the joy and struggle their students must go through to write well. This identification leads to more effective teaching.

In the part of my course devoted to writing from memories, I divide up each session into seven phases. In phase one I use a 10-minute relaxing/centering meditation exercise. Teachers sit in a semicircle with their eyes closed. I tell them to listen carefully to the sounds within our classroom, then to those of the adjoining corridor, then to the ones outdoors, and finally to an imaginary spot at the edge of our school. At each change of setting in the exercise I ask the teachers to visualize the shape, color, texture, smell, and tastes that they associate with the sounds. Although this exercise is not directly related to childhood memories, it does pave the way for sensory awareness to detail, setting, point of view, and the world of the imagination.

In phase two I ask the teachers to remember something specific from their past. I ask them to remember with all of their senses. Then I suggest that teachers randomly pair off and interview each other about the recalled childhood memory. For example, Jim Wheeler remembered a beloved child's army jacket he had worn when he was about six years old. Judy Luster remembered a jar of pennies her grandfather had given her. They said these memories had "popped" into their heads when I had asked them, right after the sensory relaxation exercise, to go back into their memories. Jim asked Judy all about the pennies: "Where are they now? Did you play with them? What were your fantasies regarding the pennies? Where did you keep them?" Then Judy asked Jim all about his army jacket: "What kind of games did you play when you wore it? Where did you think it disappeared to? Why do you think you felt so good when you wore it?" These mutual interviews lasted about 20 minutes. They were helpful because they enlarged and enriched the initial memory.

In phase three the teachers wrote about the memory. They moved into cozy corners and private spaces, and then wrote for 30 minutes. The form they chose to write in—poem, letter, short story, vignette or dialogue—was entirely up to them. They understood that they didn't have to finish their piece in this half hour, and that they could complete and revise their work during the week between sessions.

Here are some selections from the first-draft, in-class pieces.

JUNE GOULD is a poet and adjunct professor in Fairfield University's Graduate School of Education, where she founded the Early Childhood Degree. She also founded and edited *First Teacher* and is a workshop leader for the International Women's Writing Guild.

The Jacket

The house was white and the back porch was grey and small, with a white railing around it. And you had to pass sideways. A screen door that banged out the rhythm of in and out. . . in and out. . . in, in. . . out. . . out. . . out. . . in. The sound of in is always different than the sound of out. I was there.

Gone is much of that day, but not the fact that on that day I had not forgotten to grab the jacket off the door knob as I dashed for the back seat of the car. How grand it was—that jacket. Khaki with dark brown belt and brass buttons and the cap with a brim that went with it.

—Jim Wheeler
Staples High School,
Westport, Ct.

Grandfather's Pennies

Dear Pennies,
Where are you? I've looked everywhere I can think of and I still can't find you. I was sure I'd put you in the bottom drawer of my desk and tucked you way in the back, but I can't find you. Please turn up!
Love, Judy

Dear Judy,
We were comfortable in the desk and we felt safe. Occasionally one of your sisters would look at us but they always left us alone. We don't know that you'll ever get this letter, but we miss you and we love you.
Love, Pennies

Dear Pennies,
I looked again in the drawer. You still weren't there! I keep hoping that I'm wrong and you haven't really gone. I worry that I did something wrong and that's why you've disappeared. I love you so much. You're the only thing that I can touch in order to touch grandpa. Mom and Daddy tell me how wonderful he was and to me you are that love. Where are you? I haven't cried yet. I hope you're just misplaced.
Love, Judy

Dear Judy,
We're so close to you, just down the block. Little Jimmie took us. He didn't know we're special. He thinks we're just money. We're so worried. Life isn't good for us anymore. We're sad to tell you that he's taking us and buying candy and comic books. We know that it's only a matter of time before we too will be gone. We're scared. Hurry and find us.
Love, Pennies

—Judy Luster
Staples High School
Westport, Ct.

Lost

She threw herself down on the white chenille bedspread. Briefly she thought of how the bumps would mark her cheeks if she didn't turn down the spread, but dismissed the fussy thoughts with the warmth of the first tears.

She held it in so long, for hours really, since the moment she had discovered the brown velvet hat was missing in New York City, to the moment when she collapsed on the bed in her suburban room. She had arrived finally after running through the cold city streets, into the noisy bustle of Grand Central Station, then onto the overheated train, then out again into the darkened parking lot coldness, then into the back seat of the family car where she found herself squished between her father's fellow commuters, Mr. Reynolds and Mr. McCarthy.

—Mary Winsky
Junior High School
South Salem, N.Y.

Petoskey

Oh Petoskey, oh Petoskey
Spinning in lady's petticoats
Twirling in foamy mountain caps
Dipping in the chill of night liquid
Singing in the tides of diesel boats and driftwood
Shining in the magnifying glass of the sea

Oh Petoskey, oh Petoskey
Drying like vapor on the beach
Hiding your luster
Fading into nothing but grey, grey
Gulping for air like a dying fish

Petoskey, dressed in flannel underwear, do you only sing
when wet?
Oh Petoskey,
Circles of white cells spinning over your body
Grey turtle shell on your back
Where do you sing your songs?
Deep, deep in the cold prickly sands
Lodging, sinking, heaved up again in the waves of melody
Dancing to ancient tunes only mermaids understand

Bubbles of trout
Moans of barges
Whispers of dead seamen
Fishtails tickle your shoulder
Sand grinds your back
Seaweed gently rocks you to sleep.

—Holly Church
Elementary & Secondary Writing Specialist
Westport, Ct.

After writing, teachers returned to the semicircle for the first part of the fourth phase of our writing workshop: reading aloud and responding to the writing in supportive and nonjudgmental ways. I tell them to pretend that the writing they hear is their own rather than someone else's. They identify with the writer and say, "When I wrote this piece I felt," or "I thought," or "I remembered." "When I wrote the letters to my pennies," Holly Church said, "I felt that the real loss was my grandfather and not my pennies." "When I wrote about the Michigan Petoskey rock," Mary Winsky said, "I felt as though the rock came alive in the water the way you, Holly, must have come alive in the water during your summers at Lake Michigan."

These comments stimulated more memories for the teachers. Identifying with each other helped them to continue writing and reading their writing without inhibition and fear of early negative criticism.

In the second part of this fourth phase the teachers retold, as if it were their own, the story they had heard. They embellished the story in their own words. For example, Donna Skolnick said, "I lost my pennies, but I've always collected things. I have all my drawings on the wall in my apartment, and I save all my diaries in the bottom of my bureau drawer." In this phase I want to help teachers open up to all the possibilities in their memory writing. So often teachers think of editing as paring away, but I think that an early concern with paring down often constricts the beginning writer.

Embellishment helps writers create more detail, and it also helps them begin to "make up" a little world around their memory. This "making up" is the beginning of fiction writing.

I encourage teachers to develop their own writing curriculum. I ask them to take 10 minutes during this fifth phase to give themselves more writing assignments based on memory. Jim Wheeler developed his own list of future writing assignments: *ways of getting in & out of trouble, first girl friend, learning to ride a bike, moving, memories of the war, 4H, the broken wrist, smoking corn silk, where to hide, the day the plane landed in the wheat field.*

In the sixth phase, the teachers took turns remembering aloud some images from past sessions. "I remember the pennies being separated and used for candy and comic books," "I can see you standing at the door with the screen separating you from your friend when your father died," "I can see the Petoskey rock looking like grey flannel," "I can hear the sound of the robin outside the window and the short thin shape it makes as it chirps." Recalling past images helps to carry the thread of the previous session into the present. It also helps to reinforce the best writing. Everyone tended to remember the richest, most detailed, action-packed writing.

Teachers who take the opportunity to write during an in-service course like ours find that they are more effective writing teachers on "the morning after" their own writing experience.

The seventh and last phase was the most important outcome of our course. In it the teachers evaluated the course, telling what was useful to them as teachers as well as fledgling writers. They discussed what parts of our course they had used in their own classrooms and how it had worked. In the course evaluation Judy Luster wrote, "I can identify with the kids and their interests because I can remember what interested me as a child. Also I know how hard it is to say what I mean in writing. I've struggled myself, so now I can help kids through the hard parts of their writing. I can help them feel the satisfaction I feel when I write what I envision, and others can see what I see and appreciate it." Mary Winsky modeled the work in her classroom on our sessions. "My writing improved," she said, "because I wasn't working in a vacuum. At first I was afraid to reveal myself as an insecure child. Many of my memories were not so pleasant, but when I realized that I would get support from the group and that I didn't have to censor my memories and my feelings, I just let go and opened up."

Donna Skolnick's writing students revise now because they feel identified with their experiences and their writing. Donna "prized the impetus to revise that the course encouraged. I myself revise now because I want my work to be polished and perfect, not because someone tells me something is wrong with it. Right after my first draft though, I am not ready for criticism and changing ideas, but a few days or even a week later, I look at my work and know just where to polish it. I want my work to glisten because it's about me, and I want it to be as close to my vision of the memory as possible."

I was delighted by the outcome of this course because, as a writer and teacher of writing, I found I could develop teachers' writing the same way I had developed my own, by using my own style and interests. I'm currently working on a series of poems about my childhood in Brooklyn. Right now I can smell the hot pastrami sandwiches at the local deli in my old neighborhood. I can see the soot settling on the windowsill in our canary-yellow kitchen. My mother is calling me into the kitchen to eat her homemade chicken soup, and that's only the beginning.

●

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