The Future for Writers in the Schools

Navigating a Changing Educational Landscape

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As a writer-in-residence at Teachers & Writers Collaborative, I've taught poetry, fiction, and nonfiction writing in the New York City public schools for the past five years. Some days, it seems I've worked with students of every ethnicity, religion, psychological profile, and economic status from kindergarten to high school. To name just a few, I've taught Greek mythology and fiction writing to third-graders in Queens, the haiku of Matsuo Basho to autistic students in Brooklyn, Pablo Neruda's odes to emotionally disturbed boys in the South Bronx, and the art of writing the memoir to college-bound seniors at Murry Bergtraum High School in Manhattan. At first, being a writer-in-residence was just a teaching gig like any other, one that helped me make ends meet while I concentrated on my "art." But recently I realized that it has meant much more to me than that.

There is no question that it taught me how to teach. Not only did I have to know what, in the parlance of today, is referred to as the writer's toolbox of techniques—metaphor, rhythm, rhyme, description, character, plot—I had to be able to break each concept down to the fundamentals and communicate them clearly to students who sometimes were uncomfortable with the very concept of reading and writing. After reading the myth of Theseus with Reuben, a low-functioning autistic student who liked to take on the identities of fictional characters, and rewriting Gertrude Stein's nonsense poem "Tender Buttons" with Daryl, a troubled young man in the South Bronx who personified sadness as "a man in purple glasses," teaching writing to a class of undergraduate or graduate students feels effortless.

In her Teachers & Writers teaching diary (something all writers-in-residence at T&W are encouraged to keep), the poet Anne Sexton once wrote, "Teaching is listening. These classes, the life of them, will teach me." I've only just come to understand how teaching in the schools has shaped me as a writer. My classes, the life of them, taught me to observe and record. They educated me on the art of patience, a trait every writer must cultivate. They reminded me that writing—like learning—is not about knowing; it is about discovering. Most importantly, my classes gave me and my work a purpose and direction. Before I started, I was set on following the usual path—publish here, get a MFA there, secure a teaching position, write long poems about the changing

Selection of photos from Teachers & Writers Collaborative, Houston WITS, and the Log Cabin Literacy Center in Boise, Idaho. Photos by Paul Shaffer (*top left*), WITS Houston (*middle & bottom left*), and Teachers & Writers Collaborative (*top right & bottom right*).

seasons complete with flashes of open-mindedness and stock revelations. I thought very little about what I wrote or what value my writing could have to others.

But I don't want to sentimentalize my teaching experiences. The classroom-memoir/teaching-personal-essay can easily become a cliché: teaching writing to students in prison, in hospitals, in the projects. I've written such essays for this very magazine and in doing so my intentions were pure: I wanted to make sense of my experiences and feel that I'd had some effect. The danger of these memoirs and essays is that they tend to serve as badges of honor—"Look at how I've tried to make a difference"—and are often more about the person teaching than the students taught. Ultimately, they do not accurately reflect the range of services and expertise that we, as writers and teachers, can provide.

This does not make our role as writers-in-the-schools unimportant, but it does mean that it may be time to reassess what we actually do. It gives me pause to think that the students I teach today will one day grow up to be my fellow citizens. They need skills—academic, social, and personal—and I believe writers-in-the-schools programs can impart those skills. What role do we serve as writers-in-residence? And given that reading and writing skills among students of all ages across the country continue to decline, how have our roles as writers in the schools changed? Are we "teaching artists" who offer supplementary, extracurricular instruction or are we there to help fill in the gaps in the writing curriculum? The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, with its increased emphasis on testing and on mandated educational goals and penalties, has resulted in less time in the school day for the non-tested subjects, such as poetry and creative writing, that many writers-in-the-schools programs provide, but that are not easily assessed via standardized tests. In light of the frustrations and disappointments felt by teachers, administrators, and parents as a result of this, what are our responsibilities to the educational system and to society as a whole?

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To answer—or at least address—some of these questions, I consulted six writers-in-the-schools (WITS) programs across the country: Teachers & Writers Collaborative in New York City, the WITS program in Houston, The Log Cabin Literary Center in Boise, the Seattle Arts & Lectures WITS program in Seattle, the Oregon WITS program in Portland, and Hands on Stanzas in Chicago.

Teachers & Writers Collaborative has been sending writers into the schools for forty years. Founded in 1967 by educator Herbert Kohl, editor Robert Silvers and others, the organization was started in the hope that professional writers could contribute to the teaching of writing and literature in the schools. Its founding philosophy was grounded in the political and social attitudes of the late sixties. In many ways it was a response to the push for more math and science in the schools (think Sputnik and the Cold War) and a way for writers and editors, such as Phillip Lopate, June Jordan, Rosellen Brown, Grace Paley, Muriel Rukeyeser, Victor Hernández Cruz, Ron Padgett,

and Kenneth Koch to pass along their love of reading and writing. Over the years, the program has evolved to include a stronger emphasis on professional development, which enables teachers to learn how to use literature as a base from which to teach students the craft of writing, and to offer students from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to work with writers who have devoted part of their lives to their craft. Though it has served as a model for many organizations across the country, even T&W feels that it is time for a change. According to Program Director Jeffrey Rosales, writers-in-the-schools programs need to buoy the current language arts curriculum by reaffirming the importance of grammar and punctuation skills and focusing on how writing skills strengthen the analytical thinking processes necessary to be an informed citizen. "T&W's original goals have definitely been accomplished," Rosales says. "However, the challenge that both students and teachers face is that the system in New York City is largely failing to educate, motivate, or prepare for higher learning too many of its students. We will have to be flexible enough to step outside previously successful models and adapt to the changing needs and populations of the schools."

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T&W Director Amy Swauger says that in addition to adapting, writer-in-the-schools programs need to make it clear that they can help answer the increased demand for accountability. "The work we do in the schools clearly promotes student achievement," she says, "and we need to make sure that schools understand this. Teachers as well as students perform better when they are excited by and engaged with their work. Writers in the schools can bring this passion, along with writing expertise, to the classroom."

Veteran T&W Writers-in-Residence Marv Hoffman and Phillip Lopate started the WITS program in Houston in 1983. It was founded on the belief that every individual has a unique story and that a writer is the most skilled professional to help a student find creative ways to tell that story. Director Robin Reagler pointed out that Houston WITS has been able to capitalize on the twenty-year trend in favor of standardized testing by documenting the Houston WITS program's effect. An analysis of the passing rates on the fourth-grade writing test found that students enrolled in WITS programs in Houston outperformed their non-WITS counterparts by three points in 2002–2003 and 2003–2004. When I asked her who benefits most from the Houston WITS program—teachers, students, or the writers themselves—she said matter-of-factly, "The students. The other benefits are by-products. Our focus is always the individual student—all 18,000 of them." The Houston WITS program is also the lead organization of the WITS Alliance, a national group of WITS programs, including T&W. The goal of the WITS alliance, formerly the Arts Apprenticeship Initiative (funded by the National Endowment for the Arts), is to support writers-in-the-schools programs in developing more effective methods of professional development and providing literacy programs to the widest possible range of children.

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The Log Cabin Literary Center in Boise, Idaho, was launched in 1996 with support from the NEA Arts Apprenticeship Initiative and former T&W Director Nancy Larson Shapiro. What makes The Cabin, as it is known, unique is its geographic range. It offers programs within a 350-mile radius, including a summer writing program, a subscription series, adult workshops, and readings by emerging writers. When I asked Paul Shaffer, the executive and artistic director, about the future of WITS programs he replied, "The world asks questions of us every day that are not reducible to yes or no, or even to multiple choice formats. To truly educate is to teach a child to think. Writing teaches students to think. Nothing does it better. Steinbeck said, 'A man can't think muddled and write clear.'" Shaffer went on to say that he truly believes WITS programs could serve as the antidote to the testing mentality that has taken hold.

Seattle Arts & Lectures, a reading series that brings well-known writers to Seattle to speak to audiences about their lives in reading and writing, started a WITS program in 1994. Like many WITS programs, Seattle Arts & Lectures is as much about exposing students to new forms of writing and ways of living as it is to developing the craft of writing. The program sends local writers into the schools to model their lives as writers and inspire students to discover and develop as writers. Over the past decade, it has reached nearly 50,000 students and 800 teachers. Program Director Rebecca Hoog says that she believes the program has become a core component of education. "As we return to schools year after year," she said, "we are able to have an impact on the culture of entire departments."

The WITS program in Oregon began in Portland in 1996. With support from the Houston and Seattle Arts & Lectures WITS programs, it set out to support Oregon writers by providing income and meaningful employment, as well as to bring up the next generation of writers by working closely with students in the schools. Program Director John Morrison said that despite the challenges presented by the NCLB Act, the Oregon WITS program continues to set ambitious goals for the future. "We won't achieve our goals until every student has had a meaningful exchange with a working writer that has helped the student discover the value of his or her voice, and until every teacher who would like to invite us into the classroom has had the opportunity," Morrison said. "That, or until we are a nation of poets." In addition to fostering a sense of literary tradition in each school, the Oregon WITS program also offers students one-on-one mentor relationships with local writers, writing workshops for teachers, and one-day visits by touring authors such as Alice Walker, Maxine Hong Kingston and Jimmy Santiago Baca.

One of the newest WITS programs in the country is Hands on Stanzas, a poets-in-residence program started in 2001 by The Poetry Center in Chicago. Like the writers and educators who founded T&W, board members from The Poetry Center

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decided they wanted to strengthen the poetry curriculum in the Chicago public schools. They sought to teach children to read, write, discuss, and present poetry, with equal emphasis on each of these four criteria. The program started small—with one or two residencies—and reached its peak last year with sixty-six residencies. Since its inception, 10,000 students have been through the program. Lisa Buscani, executive director of Hands on Stanzas, says that the current emphasis on standardized testing does not lessen the impact WITS programs can have. "Education has gone through similarly Spartan times," she said. "It makes it hard for programs to grow, but I truly believe if the program or service is strong enough, schools will move heaven and earth to bring it in."

Although speaking with members of these organizations didn't enable me to come to any easy conclusions about the future of writers-in-residence in the schools, it did help refocus the questions: Are we following outdated models? Should we reexamine whether grammar and punctuation—writing's most fundamental tools—should be a part of our focus? Can we conduct research that demonstrates the impact our work has on students' reading and writing skills? WITS organizations have been struggling with these questions, but perhaps it is time for writers to play a more integrative role.

In 1861, before writing *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy founded a three-room schoolhouse on his estate at Yasnaya Polyana. He had become disillusioned with the literary world and felt that writing fiction was silly as long as the masses could not read his stories. He took it upon himself to teach them. Though Tolstoy closed his school just two years after he started it, he believed "the need of education lies in every man" and that this in itself eliminated the question, What is the goal? Education is the goal. Writers-in-the-schools programs grew out of the conviction that writers can make a unique contribution to the teaching of writing, and I believe we can. The growth of WITS programs across the country in the last forty years testifies to their success. As these programs continue to evolve and adapt to the challenges faced by today's students and teachers, we, as writers, need to be active participants in this process, open to as broad as possible an understanding of what the writer as teacher has to offer. ■