Notes from the Chalkboard

RUBRICS FOR RISK

by Mary Jane Peterson

Every teacher of senior English recognizes the symptoms of senior malaise: attendance grows intermittent, often with the imprimatur of the college visit, and even formerly diligent students ignore homework. Time in class seems empty of value once the last college application is mailed, to say nothing of when the first acceptance letter arrives. The students have been forced into the rigors of distance running. The winners are jubilant, their worth affirmed by acceptance at a college others would die for. The losers feel a premonition of death: The selves they have so laboriously constructed to appeal to their dream colleges have fractured and crumbled. The paradox of this competitive model is that although it rewards individual winners and losers, it is profoundly anti-individualistic. It puts a premium on conformity, on achievement within a narrow band and in a rigorous time frame. It devalues the irregular, meandering pace of real exploration.

For the last three years, I have made it my goal to assist these seniors in rediscovering their genuine selves. Beginning in May, they participate in a sequence of assignments called "End Time Matters." Central to the experience is an invitation to create an imaginative piece that involves experimentation and intellectual risk. I encourage them to mix genres, to devise new structures, to collaborate, and to incorporate other art forms in which they have some expertise. The assignment specifies that whatever they create "must have some unifying idea; some intentional (even if experimental) form or structure; and sensitive, imaginative, and precise language. It must have gone through several revisions and polishings. It must be of significant enough length to demonstrate a certain level of skill. It may combine several art forms, but words—text—must comprise the central portion of it." Students must each write a proposal (which includes an explanation of why the undertaking is a risky one), confer with me to design a rubric to evaluate the piece, and, as a final gift to the class, perform (in some fashion) a five-minute segment of their finished product in our black-box theater.

During the last month of school, class periods, which have been highly structured to meet the rigors of the AP curriculum, become a workshop in which students work at their own pace and in a style that suits their undertakings. Abandoning their "merely marking time" mode, seniors work hard to define a project worth their time and energy.

The wide variety of student responses to this assignment is gratifying. Just as rewarding is the students' avid experimentation with various literary techniques and structures they have been studying all year. Suraj, for example, used several of Tim O'Brien's strategies in *The Things They Carried* to explore the complexity of his Indian heritage. Erin experimented with narrative form to convey the shock she felt when the parent of a friend forbade his daughter to date someone of a different race. In "Footsteps," Alanna explored the trauma of a robbery in her home through the alternating and overlapping voices of her child self, her father, and the robber. Sophia wrote an experimental play dramatizing social themes she had culled from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale.* Sophia's project was so comprehensive that she didn't finish it until late in the summer, just before she left for college. This is not uncommon, so I have made completion negotiable.

One of the final requirements is that the writing must show evidence of polishing. Students must tell me *how* I should recognize this quality—a somewhat shaky enterprise, but a valuable exercise in distinctions for both of us. I do assign a grade both to the product and to the five-minute performance of it, but coming at the end of the year, these grades mean little to these departing seniors. The real "evaluation" is the applause and spoken tributes of classmates that come at the end of the five-minute performances.

The results are an extraordinary celebration of restored individuality and vitality. Students conceive themselves freshly when they risk stepping out of the well-hewn but by-now-familiar paths of the academic disciplines whose rules they have worked so hard to master. In a real sense, their academic success has been grounded in a system that prizes their ability to conform to the precepts of various disciplines, without too much emotional involvement. Several students have told me how they felt reconnected to the child self who wrote poetry avidly in third grade, but who went under cover as the demands of expository, linear, logical writing began to predominate. In reflecting on why his exploration of his Indian heritage would be risky, Suraj confessed, "I have never really given much thought to my own life, my roots and my general purpose as a person. I have always gone through the motions, writing papers that have not required a great deal of personal reflection."

The timing is right: These seniors want to see themselves as different people, ready to leave the constricting definitions of high school. The project encourages them to reveal a new self, made public in the final performance. Reflecting on the year, James said, "I have taken more out of this class than any other class I have ever participated in.... I have played a major role in a 'community' of courageous, challenging, and respectful students."

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Confronting the Impulse to Plagiarize

by Susanna Lang

When I was a senior in high school, my father arranged for me to attend some courses at the University of Connecticut, where he himself taught. I soon found myself in way over my head. After proofing my final paper on contemporary literary criticism, my mother asked me if the words I'd used were my own. I remember the shame I felt, because I had indeed copied, not knowing how to incorporate the undigested ideas into my argument.

My middle school students face much the same dilemma, and fall back on a similar strategy, hoping I will not notice. Sometimes they are not even embarrassed by their actions, because their previous teachers have actually encouraged them to copy. I remember visiting a first grade classroom in a model school. The room was everything you'd want to see in a primary class: bright, cheerful, books and student work everywhere. When the teacher showed off her students' projects on the planets, she explained that she had told them to copy the information verbatim from books. She believed that this was a first step towards learning how to do research, and that they would grow out of the practice later. Unfortunately, they often do not.

Of course, there are a number of other reasons why students plagiarize. Sometimes they do not know how to complete an assignment and do not feel comfortable asking for help for fear of being mocked by classmates or even by their teacher. Sometimes they understand an assignment, but lack faith in their own voices and imaginations. And some of my mostly immigrant students, many from small rural communities in Mexico and Central America, are used to drawing on rich oral traditions that, believing in collective wisdom, put less of a premium on the necessity of originality.

Why does it matter if students plagiarize? Sometimes original analysis from a high school kid, or original science from an eighth grader, seems too much to ask. But we can hope that, by imitating the processes used by grown-ups, our students will acquire habits of thought that they can use later, when they themselves are grown. And the truth is that they will not acquire these habits from copying. They will not make them their own; they will only put them on like dress-up clothes, and take them off quickly when the game is over.

While we can't expect original science or critical analysis from children who do not yet have the necessary knowledge base, we *can* expect original stories and poems. From a very young age, children tell themselves stories as they play. Their stories are modeled on narratives that have been read to them (or that they have seen on television), but they are not identical. And children see the world in metaphors: I remember my son in his high chair, holding up a cracker he'd partly eaten and announcing it was a sailboat. Somewhere along the way—as my son grows, I am watching to see when it happens and whether I can forestall it—children lose faith in their ability to create things that someone else will want to read or hear. In my experience, if I can only get my students to think of themselves as writers, they will return to telling their own stories and making their own imaginative leaps.

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As my most recent eighth grade class faced the need to begin research on their science fair projects, I decided that I had to teach them how *not* to copy. I gave them an article on volcanoes to read in a paperback book, which I encouraged them to write in. Together we read the article aloud and discussed which points were important enough to underline. As homework, they were to turn their underlines into notes, using bullets instead of complete sentences. Because I teach the same students for two years, these eighth graders had heard me insist on complete sentences for all of seventh grade, and when I said not to write in complete sentences, it was something new. They sat up and paid attention. The final stage of the assignment was to transform their notes into a poem, without referring back to the original article.

The combination of working from their own findings and the radical change of genre forced the students to depart from the model, and in the process, they learned to be more confident in identifying the important points in an expository article. Before this assignment, many of them would highlight the entire page, unable to skim for the central ideas. They also gained the courage to venture from their source material. It was just a question of self-confidence, like that scary moment when your parents take off the training wheels and expect you to balance on your own. In addition, they wrote some extraordinary poems—in their own words.

Volcano

As the wind blows
a volcano sleeps.
People love to have
picnics on me, and trees grow.

I wake
and I'm angry.
I hear kids playing and screaming on me.
BANG! BOOM! BANG!
Be gone, trees.
Stop playing by me, kids.

Hah, peace and quiet. Don't wake me up again.

— *Alex Desrochers*