

A Different Measure

Catherine Barnett

Interviews

Nancy Larson Shapiro

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

In 1976, fresh from the Midwest, Nancy Larson joined the staff of the ten-year-old Teachers & Writers Collaborative and became its Director three years later. In the following interview, she offers insights gleaned from her 23-year tenure and reflects on the educational trends, writing movements, and visionary teachers that have had an impact on the Collaborative.

Catherine Barnett: Teachers & Writers Collaborative has survived almost four decades of educational and literary change. What accounts for its longevity?

Nancy Larson Shapiro: A lot of creative energy in the society coalesced in organizations that were founded in the '60s, and those that have survived—and there are many examples across the country—have managed to find ways to keep going. There are pragmatic and philosophic reasons for T&W's survival. Our publications program, for instance, gives us earned income that is totally unrestricted; it gives us a national identity; and it helps us get good ideas into the hands of teachers and writers, which is what we set out to do.

But we have also endured because of the writers who have defined our work. When we hire new writers I think of Grace Paley as a model for what we're seeking: someone who combines commitments to writing, to teaching, and to social activism.

The Collaborative was formed for many reasons, one of the most important being that educators and writers felt nobody was listening to kids and letting them write what they cared about. T&W writers are genuinely fascinated by what the kids have to say, in the same way that Picasso said, "I wish I could draw like a child." One of our writers, Greg Frazier, gave a presentation recently and said, "You know, I couldn't write a poem like this second grader wrote. This is just brilliant." The fascination with and appreciation of students' work remains a key element. If the Collaborative were to close tomorrow, I think it would be reinvented the next day because writers hunger for this work in their communities.

CB: Has T&W's mission significantly changed since its founding in 1967?

NLS: Well, I've always hated the words *mission* and *mission statement*—they reek of bureaucracy. But, interestingly, we still use the mission created by the people who founded the Collaborative, though we've expanded on some of the ideas. Consciously or unconsciously—I think it was some of both—the people who founded the organization created a tight ship. We still send writers into schools and the community and we continue to publish innovative materials on teaching writing. Most important, we continue to stress a genuine “collaboration” between teachers and writers in which there is a mutual respect for what each brings to the table.

Grace Paley talks about walking down the beach with Anne Sexton and hashing over a manifesto to define T&W. Because the founders and foremothers (as I'm fond of calling them)—Herb Kohl, Bob Silvers, Muriel Rukeyser, June Jordan, Paley, and Sexton—were writing a grant to the federal government, there had to be an evaluation component. They developed an ethnographic approach that involved having the writers themselves keep diaries of their teaching experiences, which I think was brilliant. It's the way it should be—the people who are doing the work should be reflecting on the work. It wasn't about doing things *to* people; it was about collaborating *with* people from different sectors of society.

CB: There seem to be two different attitudes towards writing in the schools: one that considers it to be a means of teaching children to articulate real issues in their lives and another that views it as a means to encourage imagination, a kind of art for art's sake. Do you consider these approaches to be mutually exclusive?

NLS: The idea of teaching expository writing and ignoring imaginative writing seems wrongheaded to me. Both are important: they overlap and inform each other.

I happen to be a sentimental person, and when I try to write about something that's important to me, I have to be careful that it's not gooey and sentimental and awful. Therefore I'm attracted to writing exercises like the ones created by Kenneth Koch, who said essentially “get out of your mired sentiments and try to do something that surprises you.”

Not all “exercises” are equal, however. I'm the first to dismiss silly assignments that lead nowhere. If you look in Kenneth's book *Wishes, Lies and Dreams*, you will find exercises that “open out” and that introduce elements of good writing. There are those who are disdainful of exercises, but I see connections between writing and dance. Dance classes begin with exercises at the bar to flex muscles and perfect technique. The exercises that Kenneth and many T&W writers use have a similar purpose—they are not usually focused on one muscle or idea, but do many things at once. I remember a talk in which Kenneth said of a certain exercise: “I asked them what they wished for, not what they were grateful for.” Note the nuance of that request—it's the difference between an open-ended exercise and one that narrows and closes down and prescribes what a child thinks he or she should say.

Too many people set up unnecessary dichotomies between writing that comes from real life and writing that emerges from that vague place we call imagination or unconscious or whatever. In the late '70s, Kenneth's book was at the center of a debate between our writers. One writer, who primarily wrote diaries, was very interested in children's actual experiences—in their autobiographies, not in “imaginary things.” She was debating Jack Collom, whose exercises are often similar to Kenneth's. At one point Jack simply said, “I defy you to write a sentence that isn't autobiographical.”

Often in an educational environment, but especially when asking students to express themselves artistically, writers and educators confront moments when students make statements that come from a place that we might call the unconscious. I don't want our writers to

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talk about the unconscious to kids. I think artists understand that you can't be direct about many subjects that are important or difficult. You often have to help children sneak up on their thoughts or feelings. As Grace Paley once said to me: "You write to find out what you didn't know you knew."

CB: How would you describe the "standards movement," and how does it coincide or clash with T&W's aims?

NLS: The standards movement is in one sense a response to systemic failures, particularly in our urban schools. In the best light, it is an effort to say that *all* kids can learn and that we need concrete evidence of that learning. However, generally speaking, "standards" have had negative repercussions in the schools, partly because of the way they've been implemented. Instead of engaging teachers in developing true standards, they have been mandated from above.

T&W is not linked to the standards movement. That being said, you have to remember we *do* have standards with regard to the art of writing. We have a sense of when kids have understood; we have a sense of when they're writing well; we also have a sense of when we have to push them a little further. T&W writers measure their students' writing in at least three ways: against what they believe the child can stretch to do; against the writing of other students of the same age; and against the whole repertoire of literature the writer has read. Those may sound like high standards, but I'm delighted to have writers come in year after year with student work they find astounding based on those very standards.

Ironically, the increased use of "authentic" tests has encouraged schools to look to Teachers & Writers for help. Because schools have turned away from multiple choice and true/false tests and brought in more essay exams, there's a greater need to help kids feel comfortable

and fluid with their writing, which is very much what T&W does.

CB: Have you felt pressure to respond to the current obsession with standards?

NLS: We know how our language has been bastardized. People use the word "standards," for example, when they're talking about something low, and minimal. A recent article in *The New York Times* pointed out that testmakers were using bowdlerized literature in test questions. For example, they took out references to Jews in Isaac Bashevis Singer's work. Then kids were expected to write essays about the excerpt when the very things that made the literary passage meaningful had been removed. When you hear stories like this, you throw up your hands and say: How can educators do this and then talk about standards?

I think T&W has always been a little cynical and savvy; we've always had more fun with these words. I remember vividly in the mid-'70s when there was a "Back to Basics" movement. We decided that there couldn't be anything more basic than writing a good poem or a good story. Adalberto Ortiz was our designer then and for our book catalogue he drew a cord with a big plug at the end, with the headline: "Plug into the basics." Sometimes you just have to look at the *words* that are being used, sit back, and say: Let's not let someone else co-opt this, let's not be pulled into the rhetoric of the day, either from the left or the right. T&W is on the side of education that is about inspiring kids, not about setting up hurdles to defeat them.

Back in the 1980s (and still today), there were people in the arts community who felt there needed to be testing in the arts. I remember a heated conversation with a woman who advocated such testing. I said: "You know if you start testing, some kids are going to fail, because there are always going to be people who fail for some reason (not always having to do with what's *on* the test)." The woman screamed at me, "I want kids to fail art! I want them to fail! I want them to take it seriously!" I

ended the conversation there. In education, as in society, people can come up with paradigms that totally distort the idea of “value.” “We get what we pay for” or “it’s only what’s tested that counts” are two ideas that dominate and limit the discussion of what is good or useful or important—in education and in life.

CB: How have the major pedagogical movements or conflicts affected the way writing has been taught? How would you describe these movements and the related tensions?

NLS: Education is a somewhat schizophrenic profession. Over the years I have come to see that it’s a little bit like parenting a child—you want to provide structure and inspiration for that child to be creative. You want the child to go his or her way, but you don’t want the child to go too far into a chaotic or destructive situation. Teachers face these concerns, too, only they’ve got 30 kids in front of them. Some of those kids need time and effort on a particular task and some of them need just to sail in their own inspired direction. And when you take this discussion of one child and you multiply it by the millions of students there are in the country, it’s hard to believe that there isn’t more sympathy for flexible and diverse approaches to teaching. Instead, sides are often drawn and educators are pulled in one way or another as the pendulum of mandates swings.

One classic example of this was the tension around the teaching of reading, known as the “reading wars.” The Whole Language people on one side said kids can grasp meaning—they can read whole passages in chunks. On the other side, the phonics people said kids first need to learn “word attack” skills. The two philosophies shouldn’t have been separated. Good early childhood teachers always say, “I do some of both, I use both approaches.” But these edu-

cational strategies became ridiculously politicized, with Whole Language considered “left,” and phonics, “right.” Some states even passed laws mandating the teaching of phonics; thus bypassing the judgments of teachers who were closest to the kids and could best determine their needs. Usually when politics enters education, it’s the teachers who lose (control and respect).

CB: In an essay in the T&W book *Educating the Imagination*, Jeff Morley tracks down several of his elementary school classmates to ask them, fourteen years later, what it meant to them to have a T&W artist—in their case it was Kenneth Koch—teach them writing. Morley himself seems to be a wonderful example of what you hope might happen in the classroom and after. He’s now an editor for the *Washington Post*. How many stories like this do you hear?

NLS: We hear all kinds of wonderful stories. We have a letter from an old student of Kenneth Koch’s, for example, who became an astrophysicist. She talks about how writing poetry in the fifth grade gave her the confidence to go on and become a scientist. Jeff Morley contacted a classmate, a welfare mother at the time, who cherished the memory of writing a poem when she was in fifth grade. She had a sense of herself as someone who was creative. That’s part of what you want to give fifth graders to carry with them.

Jeff Morley became a writer, but we don’t measure our successes by how many students turn pro. Gary Lenhart, who used to write our proposals, said what we do at T&W is similar to what happens in Little League programs. Little League programs are not evaluated by the number of major league ballplayers they produce. It’s just not the point of Little League. We’re not necessarily trying to create professional writers: we’re trying to give kids a sense of their possibilities and of their abilities.

CB: How do you measure T&W's success?

NLS: We've taken a narrative rather than a quantitative approach to assessing our work. Teachers & Writers is a program about artists; it's about writers who teach writing, often in idiosyncratic ways, because their teaching is based on the way they themselves approach their writing. So I refer to *Teachers & Writers Magazine* and the 60 books we've published, where the artists reflect on their work: How do they see what they give the children? How do they see the children's work reflecting that? How do they see children's writing growing or changing or not growing? We also evaluate our work by how useful it is to other teachers and writers. We've got publication sales and praise from teachers and writers to indicate our successes.

The "scientific" model of assessment—often associated with medicine—does not work well in education. You can't give one group of kids some fabulous program and then another group of kids no such program and say that the program accounts for some difference you measure between the two groups. There is just no way to account for the myriad of variables—the students' parents, their neighborhoods, their prior experiences, etc. Teachers & Writers has neither the resources nor the inclination to do those kinds of research projects.

CB: Ten years ago, at the 25th anniversary panel, Lewis Hyde asked about what he called the ethical function of the imagination. He wondered whether the imagination is "moral, amoral, or immoral." What do you think?

NLS: There have been movements to bring "values" or ethics or moral training explicitly into education. Those efforts seem like "tag-ons" to me.

The best way to help kids confront moral issues is to invite them to be part of a community that reads and discusses serious literature from a variety of cultures and perspectives. T&W writers bring in lots of different literature for kids to talk about. Essentially the writers are helping these kids shape their approach to a world that has an aesthetic dimension. The writers are not honing kids' tastes; they are giving them the opportunity to develop their *own* tastes. Writers are not telling kids *what* to think; they're giving kids many choices. Kids don't read one poem; they read many poems by a variety of poets—from the classics to new voices, from dead white men to poets of color.

And here's the key: the kid's talk about what they see and understand in those poems *and* they write their own poems. This is a complicated process. The imagination needs to be engaged and challenged: it doesn't just leap into one's life full-blown, moral or immoral.

We're not trying to create little art critics; rather we're trying to help children become articulate about what they prefer and why they prefer it, about what touches them and gives their life meaning. This is not something we do in this society very often. In many ways, imaginative writing—and I'm thinking in particular of poetry—is still a peripheral art in this country. The wonderful thing of course is that nobody at T&W feels they're doing peripheral work. We feel in fact that we're working at the heart and soul of the culture.