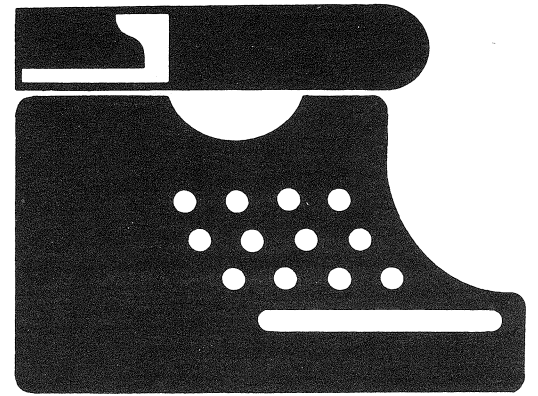


# Teachers & Writers



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## An Artist-in-Education Interview

by Cheryl Trobiani

William Kough is an artist who works in two-dimensional media. He has been an Artist-in-Residence for the National Endowment for the Arts in Scottsbluff, Nebraska and has taught visual art workshops for Teachers & Writers for the last five years. Like many New Yorkers, Bill is an emigrant from another place—Minnesota. He lives in a loft on the Bowery with his wife, artist Annie Hayes. The following discussion of the arts in education from an artist's point of view is excerpted from a two-hour interview Bill gave me one rainy afternoon in March.

*Cheryl:* Bill, you have been working as an artist in the schools for seven years now, in Nebraska and New York. Why do you feel it is important to have art in the public education curriculum?

*Bill:* Well, I think that art is a way of helping people lead a fuller life, whether they make works of art or not. It adds a dimension to one's life that seems important to me. Art is all around us. Every aspect of our life has to do with art in one way or another, whether it's the way we decorate our living environments or the things we like to look at for the fun of looking at them. More importantly, though, it has to do with feelings. Art is a way of manifesting and therefore confronting your feelings. Through art we can begin to feel the unity of the world and this, of course, is a way of coping with the chaos in the world. I think the value of art in education is that the lessons you can teach through it are so important for living. For example, open-ended problem solving is really the nature of life and art, isn't it? There's no one answer to all the problems that come up for us. Making art also has to do with

self-reliance: we have to go inside ourselves in order to solve all kinds of life problems in a creative way. Visual art has to do with the whole notion of making something and making it well using craftsmanship. If you don't have some experience making things you're sort of out of touch with much of the world. Not only do you not understand how things are made, but you usually can't work them.

*Cheryl:* You can't make the toaster work, or the coffee pot.  
*Bill:* Perhaps. Our economy is such that nobody trusts what people make any more. Many people have the attitude that the various items they buy won't last very long. Our sense of craftsmanship seems to be gone. And children aren't, I think, obtaining a sense of craftsmanship, particularly because they don't have any experience in making things.

*Cheryl:* Is having art in the classroom one way children can get in touch with themselves as craftspeople?

*Bill:* I think it's probably the only way—the only convenient way of doing it. If art isn't in the public schools in a formal sense, there's very little that the kids do all day long that has much to do with the whole idea of expressing themselves in a free and open-ended way. Public education is based on rote learning, generally.

*Cheryl:* What sort of approach do you take in the classroom? How do you usually initiate your interaction with the kids?

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CHERYL TROBIANI is a former Associate Director of Teachers & Writers Collaborative. She is also an editor and aspiring writer.

**Bill:** I usually like to do a large project because it has an impact on the school environment. The subject of the project usually isn't established until I see the kids and understand the conditions of the place I'm working in, what's needed in that particular school.

**Cheryl:** How much time do you usually have for your project?

**Bill:** I usually have from 10 to 20 weeks.

**Cheryl:** In the beginning, when you're not sure what the subject will be, what do you do to get them working?

**Bill:** We do a lot of preparatory drawings in order to orient them to thinking visually. We spend maybe two or three out of ten sessions doing all the planning and working out of what it is we're going to do, or even trying to decide together what it is we want to do. It's like making a hypothesis.

**Cheryl:** What kind of specific exercises do you do during that time?

**Bill:** I sometimes try to tie in with what they're doing in the classroom. For example, if I see that they've done a big unit studying the nature of the earth, we talk about one aspect of that unit—like rocks. Then we ask how we can do something different from a scientific study of rocks. What can we do to understand how rocks are important in our lives? Why is it that we like rocks? What can we do to make ourselves understand rocks better visually? Then we might go outside and collect rocks. We might bring them in and start piling them up in different ways. And we might find that we appreciate various aspects of rocks that are special—like some rocks are smooth, some seem to look like animals. Right then we've made a leap from something that they've treated in a scientific or in an academic way to something that becomes a lovely, loving thing they can appreciate. This may lead to making huge people out of rocks. Who knows? We may transform the material we have—which is rocks—into something else; or we may use the rocks as drawing models for making big drawings of buildings made out of rock.

**Cheryl:** You take something and try to bring it closer to them by making it a material with which to create something else?

**Bill:** Yes. For example, if they're studying human anatomy we might jump from that to studying each other's faces—how faces are constructed visually. We may carry it a step further and make people out of other objects. In one project I'm doing at the moment we're making a mural on each side of a stage—a big, canvas-like banner 8 feet long. On one side of the stage will be very naturalistic faces of children—faces done with fairly good observation. On the other side—we call them the "weird faces"—we've taken objects from around the classroom or things out of their own minds, archetypal images like wheels and light bulbs and boats and fish, and constructed other faces which, interestingly enough, end up looking just as naturalistic as the first faces. Because the children, in making the natural faces, began to understand the order and shape of each part of the face, they made the metaphorical jump and chose really appropriate objects for the various parts of the weird faces—you could hardly tell a fish from a nose!

**Cheryl:** I'm curious about how you are linking art with the curriculum.

**Bill:** I know it's very important to educators to link art with the curriculum, but it's less important to me. I don't worry about that too much, because I consider art itself a valid way of looking at the world. I believe that visual artists have a very special and important way of dealing with the world—at least as important as a scientist's or any other professional's.

**Cheryl:** How is the artist's way of approaching the world different from the scientist's?

**Bill:** Well, if you get into pure science it probably isn't all that different, because that's also a creative process. It's an open-ended, problem-solving process that in the beginning has no answers and is made up of trial and error. You make mistakes, you change them, and you respond to what you're doing. A lot of people think that art is just inspiration and that artists don't look at what they've done and decide, "No, I don't like that red there," and take it out and change it to green. Or "I don't like that shape. Let's make it longer or narrower." In a sense that's intellectualizing what you're doing but you're reaching the decisions based on how it makes you feel—your intuition. So art is an intuitive process, like pure science. Art is both very technical and very intuitive. If you don't have the facility, for example, the ability with your hands to work with materials and if you don't understand certain kinds of processes that you're using to make something, it won't work and you won't get the results that you want.

**Cheryl:** It's really important to understand the mechanics of what you're doing.

**Bill:** I think it is. That's one of the lessons I'm teaching. I teach kids to work with materials in what I consider to be a respectful, proper way. When you use a brush you respect the brush and take care of it, and that's an important aspect of your making a picture. But then you try to do things with the brush which go beyond what you think the brush can do. You use it in unusual ways, and that in a sense is respecting it also. You're interacting with the brush, and when you interact with it the result seems to be much more involved. It's like a back and forth dialogue between you and the materials.

**Cheryl:** Are you also trying to teach them the problem-solving that you mentioned as part of the artistic process?

**Bill:** Yes. I teach them that art has to do with solving a problem that has no single answer. You set up a certain idea or direction—a visual idea that you want to pursue—and then whatever happens happens, and you manipulate as you go.

**Cheryl:** So you are really having them work as artists?

**Bill:** I try to. I try to have them work as I work. Many of them have a fear of making mistakes, but mistakes are often good. In fact, sometimes I purposely use the mistakes children make because I want them to understand that mistakes may be a little message—an intuitive message that comes out through your fingers, saying maybe this is the way it should be done instead of thinking this is the *wrong* way to do it. When artists work they usually generate more materials or ideas to work from than they ultimately end up using in a piece. When painting with kids, I tell them to freely block in all colors in the beginning and then make decisions about what to keep and what to cover up with other colors. Kids frequently "edit" themselves too early—they inhibit the creative flow.

**Cheryl:** It sounds like you are trying to change stereotyped attitudes about art. You probably wouldn't consider drawing pictures of turkeys at Thanksgiving to be learning art?

**Bill:** Right! Exactly! I don't believe in this formula approach where you have all the results looking alike. That's generally what one sees in public education, and that's what many teachers consider to be art. It sounds like a harsh indictment, but I think it's true. It's great that *some* schools don't have that kind of attitude towards making things, but a lot of schools use art to teach conformity. I've seen some teachers who were more talented than others in involving their children

in projects concerning art or art-like projects relating to the curriculum. But I don't necessarily think those are art either. I don't think making a miniature volcano, for example, is necessarily a work of art.

*Cheryl:* No. Because you're more concerned with open-ended problem-solving. You see that as art.

*Bill:* Yes. I mean I think that art is a totally non-functional thing. A work of art is just a work of art. What I teach is strictly fine art. I try to deal with visual ideas for their own sake.

*Cheryl:* You don't want art to be merely an extension of the curriculum?

*Bill:* No. I don't want to focus on extending the curriculum, even though I might start with a curriculum idea.

*Cheryl:* But you translate the curriculum material into an artistic idea?

*Bill:* Yes. And then we work with that artistic idea and try to develop it just along visual lines and not worry about any kind of academic or other associations with it.



*Cheryl:* So your approach is that art for *itself* is just as important as any other subject and should be taught as a subject.

*Bill:* Yes. And I think in the old days that's the way it was approached too. I went to a school where art was a subject you learned. It wasn't given nearly the weight other subjects were given, but it was given as much weight as gym was. I go into a school now where it's all purely academic, and I don't think they're producing real well-rounded people there.

*Cheryl:* Why not?

*Bill:* Because I don't think these children are going to be able to spend their lives in any kind of *enjoyable* way. I mean what are they going to *do*? They don't learn about the possibilities of the world, what the world has to offer, all those exciting aspects of it—self-expression, visual sensations, or other physical sensations. Why just turn off their physicalness or their senses and just learn rote, memorized approaches to problems?

*Cheryl:* A lot of people wouldn't say they *wanted* kids to turn off their senses, but they'd say art isn't something the schools need to deal with. Kids can learn these kinds of things outside. Let their parents teach them about art. We don't want to spend money on this.

*Bill:* I understand that. Of course then there's the question of whether they really learn to read or whether it doesn't just happen. Kids have to feel comfortable to learn, but schools are often pretty bleak places to learn in. When a school has

some programs of enrichment the children really identify with the school. They feel comfortable there, because there's a break from the stress of the very difficult process of learning to read.

*Cheryl:* Have you worked in any schools or neighborhoods that you felt were particularly successful for kids?

*Bill:* I think always those schools that have enrichment programs are more successful than those that don't. I've been in schools in New York where there's nothing there—the desks are all lined up, the books are open, and that's *it*—no gym, no outside recreation, barely lunch. But then I've been in a neighborhood in the South Bronx where the school offers a haven for children. It's an exciting place to go. It has all kinds of interesting things that make them curious, and they respond to that—their reading scores go up. I was brought in to add to the enrichment of the school that had the lowest reading scores in the city. I'm not saying that *my* program alone brought up their reading scores, but it was part of this very exciting school environment with things happening that had never happened there before. And the reading scores went up 28% in one year.

*Cheryl:* That program was due to the principal's efforts, wasn't it?

*Bill:* Yes. He believes that the children should be given an incredible amount of attention and lots of very involving things to do, things that are new to their experiences and may be even more difficult than one would think they could do. He has the feeling that by doing exciting and engaging things they will be interested in coming to school and learning other, more academic things. It seems to work.

*Cheryl:* The kids become what we *believe* they can become.

*Bill:* Yes. And they *did*.

*Cheryl:* How do you assess what the students are learning in your program? How do you tell if they're learning what you're trying to teach them?

*Bill:* If we successfully complete, say, a large work of art (such as a mural) that in itself is an "evaluation" of what I've been trying to accomplish. That is, the kids would never have had an end product if they hadn't gone through the steps in the creative process. When I return to a school for three or four years I find that children can work more efficiently (we can often do twice as much), and they can *visualize* what will happen when they initially face an artistic problem—that is, they know they're capable of solving the problem and that their ideas will be transformed into something tangible.

*Cheryl:* You seem to feel a real commitment to giving children a living example of artistic values.

*Bill:* Yes. You can't do this without a commitment. I don't feel like I'm training future artists or anything. I just believe in the benefits of having art in the schools. I believe in all the things that happen to children *because* of their experiences with art. I believe it makes them happier and more fulfilled. People see an artist as being this "wild" person. What's ironic is that to be an artist takes incredibly hard work and dedication. It takes many of those stiff, puritan values, you know. It's a very contemplative life-style, more contemplative than people think. I think it's beneficial to everyone to have people doing art, because it sets a tone and an attitude towards living that makes people, hopefully, tuned in to the world, tuned in to the possibilities of what they see and how they feel. That's what artists are concerned about. So when children have examples of people who are trying to lead that kind of life, I think it's good for society. ●

# Writing Creative “Facts”

by James Whitten

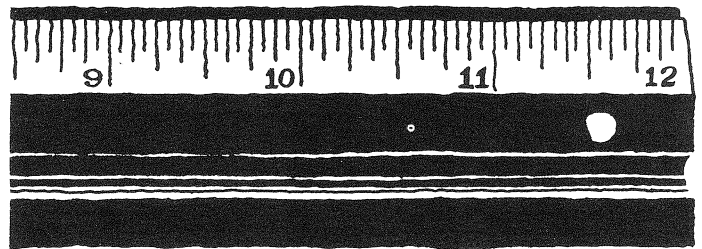
When students are well prepared and are given a place to start, they write with a greater degree of confidence. As aids to beginning, we often use methods that exhilarate the children and produce interesting results; but after they have experienced writing, we should use these beginning pieces to help them understand the disciplines of the method. I don't intend to say that the work produced by teaching various “recipes” is not at all creative, but rather that such recipes often given the false impression that there are formulas for writing creatively and personally. We should help students understand that approaches to writing are not cure-alls and that “recipe writings” are only examples to show them the internal process by which a writer observes and chooses details to write about. We want to teach children that these methods and exercises are merely stepping-stones to their own unique perspectives. Keeping the above thoughts in mind, I am going to outline another method to help students through the beginning phases of writing that will also show them the vital relationship between observation and creation.

Science and art have shown us that observation is the creator's friend. Natural and scientific laws are discovered by people who create theories through observing details. Artists, from ancient drawings on cave walls to contemporary works, have constantly supplied us with the details of their environment. Some artists have even shown us how observation can also be introspection. For example, Pablo Picasso *imagined* the details for “Guernica,” the 1937 painting in which he depicted the saturation bombing by the German Air Force of the Basque town that names the piece.

*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* has among its meanings for the word *creation*: “the act of bringing the world into ordered existence.” Given this definition, creation symbolizes an ongoing result as we struggle and very often succeed in putting things into an order we can appreciate. We usually organize without thinking about it. In this exercise, we will ask our students to put their observations in order. This will require them to think about a natural order of progression—a beginning, a middle, and an end. It will require character, conflict, and relationship.

We have all learned a great deal through observation. We constantly list details mentally, choosing those that best help us adapt to and interact with our surroundings. This same filtering and isolation of facts can be used to begin the creative writing process. An exercise that requires pre-work in sense-memory can help students collect enough facts to begin writing. Hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch are detail collectors which students should be encouraged to sharpen and pay attention to. Any exercise for the five senses will prepare

them for the writing work to be done, but I've found exercises based in drama to be particularly helpful because they can bring the intuitive sense into play as well. Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theater* (Northwestern University Press) is a good source for theater games and exercises which can help you in sense-memory work. I suggest that you spend a full session on sense exercises; but although games and exercises such as “Taste and Smell,” “Mirror,” and “Tug-of-War” (imaginary rope) are fun to play, students should understand that observation is the skill you are trying to bring into focus.



When sufficient time has been spent on sense-memory skills, make three columns on the blackboard under these headings:

- Column A: OBJECTIVE FACTS (Details I see)
- Column B: INTERPRETIVE FACTS (What I think the facts mean)
- Column C: CREATIVE FACT (A song, story, or poem showing my feelings about the observation)

If you are working with young writers or older, inexperienced writers, you might want to use the subtitles I've provided in parentheses.

The *objective facts* in Column A are facts given without intentional personal distortions: people, objects, and situations as they exist. At this level, the writing attempts only to communicate and not to convey prejudice or feeling. The *interpretive facts* in Column B are details which we must put into perspective. In this section we attempt to explain each item from the first column in a human context. We are searching for order and working for form by filling out the objective facts with creative explanations. As we make decisions about our listed facts, personal feelings and opinions begin to appear in our writing—we draw conclusions. This is a skill to develop, because being able to deduce different lines of reasoning from a single set of circumstances will provide us with options. Under Column B we are allowed to create any explanation that can be supported by the list of objective facts in Column A. The *creative facts* in Column C are expressions of opinion, emotion, and imagination. We construct the circumstances of the collected objective facts and our interpretive explanation into a song, story, or poem from our own perspective. An unfeeling list is not acceptable; the writing should now have color, character, and, especially, emotion.

At this point, a practical application of the principles involved and a guided tour through the process may be helpful. You

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JAMES WHITTEN is a dramatist and performer who conducts writing workshops for Teachers & Writers Collaborative. He also does performances and workshops for Hospital Audiences in New York City. His plays have been produced in Baltimore and New York.

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may want to develop your own, but I've given you the following example.

**A. Objective fact**

1. It's morning.
2. In a grocery store.
3. A woman and a young girl enter holding hands.
4. They speak with each other and laugh from time to time.
5. The woman wears an overcoat, a hat, makeup, and heels and carries a briefcase.
6. The girl wears a hooded jacket, pants, a scarf, and boots and carries a knapsack.
7. The child takes a long moment to choose a snack food.
8. The woman looks at her watch and hurries the child verbally.

This list of objective facts contains the basics necessary for creative writing. Elements such as character, relationship, and conflict are waiting to be developed. We must study our cold facts for the explanations contained within them. We must try to write simple descriptions in the sequence they were noticed and take care in compiling this list, because it is the working model for our final composition.

**B. Interpretive fact**

1. A fashionable woman. Well-groomed. Stylish briefcase. Obviously on her way to take care of business. A working mother.
2. A well-dressed youngster. Her knapsack, from the shapes outlined, seems to contain books. She seems well cared for. Obviously on her way to school.
3. They seem comfortable with each other. This could very well be a part of their morning ritual, a ceremony they perform each day to extend their last few moments together.
4. The little girl deposits herself in front of the snack display and takes her time deciding which treat fits her mood. There is not a large selection, so she spaces her thinking with laughter, conversation, and eye contact with her mother.
5. The mother is a willing participant in this game of sham difficulties. She plays her part well, giving the appropriate response when it is called for. She craves the extra time also.
6. The woman acknowledges her responsibility by watching the time. There are appointments to be kept. At the proper moment, she urges the child to choose.
7. The mother and child value their time together. Like most families, they each have their separate duties and responsibilities and cannot find enough time to satisfy their equally demanding love.
8. This mother and child really like each other.

In this section, some facts may look suspiciously objective, but we should remember that this particular list is only part of the structure of the story I am beginning to write. I am looking for a logical line of resolution and am free to go as far as my imagination will allow as long as my conclusions are supported by the objective facts I've collected. I must use common sense and some logic even if I am writing a fantasy.

In the example you present as an introduction to this exercise, I suggest that you use as many facts as you can. Your students are not likely to list as many things as they think of, so encourage them to write as many items as they can.

What I have called the "creative fact," the development of the details into creative writing, is at the same time the distortion and the beautification of the objective fact. In Column C

we are no longer making a list. We will make judgments about the details we have observed and embellish them to create a scenario. We should be trying to express "voice" through what we write.

**C. Creative fact**

Mother and child  
cling  
to morning's final moments;

the little one stalls,  
and steals  
her extra time with  
infectious laughter.

tentatively,  
she dares a glance  
at the shadow crossing  
her mother's smile as,

"Hurry darling,  
Mama's  
running late."

I must emphasize that whether the student's writing is "good" or "bad" does not matter to me. My focus has been on helping children find a place to begin writing. Exploring their personal experiences will help them to write if we make the moments in their lives important enough for them to observe.

*Rewrite and development* could be Column D. At this point we should consider the creative fact we've written and look for ways to improve it. Our initial poem, song, or story may be sketchy, but we must remember that it was only a beginning. Now the scope of the work can be expanded: aspects such as mood, time, space, and climax can be introduced. This is a good time to remember that although we've written something, the work may not be complete if we don't seek ways to improve upon the draft that this method has provided us. We will use our imaginative, intuitive, and technical writing skills on our creative-fact outline to try to achieve the perfect order for our observations. We have created many options in the writing we've already done; our final piece can contain any combination of these elements that will help make our writing clearer.

In the following examples, three seventh-grade students from Edward W. Stitt Junior High School in New York City observed details in an environment and expressed their relationships to those details through these "creative facts."

Everyone is snow-ball fighting;  
hitting each other,  
snow-ball shaping,  
falling in the snow,  
moving away from each other,  
running, running, running!

—Robert Velazquez

Earmuffs, hats, boots, and gloves.  
Temperature dropping.  
Keeping warm with heavy garments.  
Going to school,  
going to work,  
trying to defeat the  
COLD!

—Patrice Shears

Sometimes a piece of writing will exceed the lists in significance:

The snow is very white;  
like  
the people downtown.

—Wesley Jenkins

Normally, as situations unfold we form quick decisions and opinions that produce almost instantaneous personal distortions. With this four-part method, I ask students to stop at and isolate steps of a creative process which usually takes place at

a more rapid pace in the writer's mind.

I feel a satisfaction in helping students discover that they have something to write about and believe that when we teach an approach to writing we should also help students find a reason to write, because proper motivation will produce creative writing that is more focused and defined. During the course of this exercise, we should try to broaden our students' idea of poetry and creative writing. We should teach them that poetry is not ancient linen to be hidden away in a language "closet" but that it is as contemporary and vibrant as the way they live. ●

## Teaching Poetry en Dos Languages

by Shelley Messing

**D**URING A SPRING 1980 RESIDENCY AT IS 206 IN the Bronx, I began to develop a syllabus for teaching Spanish poetry to bilingual elementary school students. In this article I will share some of my approaches and suggest poems which can be used to inspire discussion and creative writing in bilingual classes.

When I started the ten-session residency I was aware of two potential stumbling blocks. The first was that I was coming into a new school in late April, that less responsive time of year when teachers and students alike are smitten with warm weather, late-in-the-school-year inertia. I was no exception to this mood. I had already finished residencies in two other schools and was tired of most of the exercises I had been using. Recognizing my fatigue, I was able to turn the second potential stumbling block—my limited familiarity with a bilingual population—into a challenging teaching experience for me and my students. I decided to create a new bilingual poetry syllabus.

Although I had studied Spanish in high school and had recently refreshed my speaking abilities when I visited Spain, I had always been afraid of teaching those Spanish-speaking poets I liked because I was afraid they were too difficult for younger students. To really do justice to their poems, I thought, they needed to be heard in their native language. I didn't feel confident that my poor Spanish pronunciation would allow the children to hear the rhythms, sounds, and nuances of the language. Yet I have always tried to teach children that poetry comes out of our own lives and is a natural part of our language. It seemed important to affirm the

sounds that most of these children hear in their homes, by sharing with them the rich heritage of Spanish and Latin American poetry.

I thought the solution to this problem might be to involve the children and, if possible, their teacher in my own learning process—to have them teach me Spanish as I taught them about poetry. With these thoughts in mind I immersed myself in Spanish poetry, intending to find a series of poems I hadn't taught before which might inspire powerful writing. I tried these poems out on two of the three classes I worked with. Ms. Campos's bilingual 6–8 class provided the real challenge in this situation because her students were probably more recent immigrants to this country and therefore closer to their native Spanish language than they were to English. Mr. Feinberg's 5–1 class became more a control group. Although most of his children came from Spanish speaking homes, they were all fluent in English. I used the same syllabus for both classes, but we focused on the bilingual aspects of the lessons more in Ms. Campos's than in Mr. Feinberg's class, where the children could already write easily in English.

### Methodology

I explained right away my hope that as I taught both classes something about poetry and helped them develop as writers, they would help me improve my Spanish pronunciation and comprehension. Over the ten sessions I brought in six poems, each in both Spanish and English. We began by reading a poem twice in Spanish. In 6–8, Ms. Campos, whose first language was Spanish, often read the poem first. This satisfied my desire for the children to hear the poem read with proper inflections. In Mr. Feinberg's class, each time I selected a different person to read first. Then I read the poem in Spanish. The children would stop me whenever I made a mistake and correct me. As you might guess, I was corrected quite a bit in the beginning.

Next, we read the poem twice in English. In Ms. Campos's class, in particular, I encouraged those students who did not feel comfortable reading English to volunteer. Sometimes we

SHELLEY MESSING's poetry has appeared in *Jewish Currents*, *Women: A Journal of Liberation*, *Home Planet News*, and other small press magazines. "Dialectics," her first story, was recently published in *Moving Out*. She co-produces "Writer's Block," a monthly poetry magazine for WBAI radio in New York City and teaches creative writing workshops for Teachers & Writers Collaborative.

divided the English reading into stanzas so that the task would not seem so overwhelming. It also gave more people a chance to read each day. I worried that the children who were bilingual might focus on their deficiencies in English instead of recognizing how much potential they had for mastering two languages and understanding two cultures. Since they were already fluent in Spanish I wanted them to realize that they were in the middle of a process and that with practice and time they would soon speak their second language with as much ease as the first. That was one reason why I let them hear me struggle through the Spanish readings. It took away some of their own embarrassment over mispronunciations and allowed them to see another person (and a teacher) grappling with an as yet unfamiliar language. It was a way for all of us to learn that we could share our skills with one another. I encouraged the children in Ms. Campos's class to correct each other. It was very moving to watch these children work together. There never seemed to be a sense of superiority/inferiority attached to criticism. We were engaged in a mutual growth process. These issues were not as important in Mr. Feinberg's class, where the main problem was overcrowding (there were 39 or more students in this class).

After reading the poem in Spanish and English, we discussed it in detail. We began by listing words or lines that confused us, then broadened our discussion to the poem as a whole. Our focus would switch back and forth between the structure and the content of each poem. The weight I gave to either discussion depended upon the poem and what I hoped to accomplish in each writing exercise.

I depended upon the bilingual students a great deal when we compared the poem in Spanish to its English translation. We talked about what often gets lost in translation—sound, rhythm—and they were the ones to show me examples of Spanish lines where the sounds were clearly richer and filled with greater meaning.

At this point I would introduce the writing exercise. In Mr. Feinberg's class, everyone wrote in English. I gave the children in Ms. Campos's class a choice. They could write initially in whichever language they felt more comfortable. However, I also explained that if they chose to write in Spanish we would have to translate their poem into English afterwards, so that I could understand it. Ms. Campos proved to be an invaluable help throughout the class. She would sit down with each child writing in Spanish and with me, and the three of us would translate the poem. I would also go around the room and try to work with those students who, despite their difficulties with English, were trying to write entirely in English. The children sat in groups of six or eight at rectangular tables and, invariably, one child was able to translate Spanish phrases into English, while another used the dictionary to look up hard to spell words or to verify definitions. The children worked as a team. This was less the case in Mr. Feinberg's class, where the children tended to work individually and did not rely on each other as much for help. Those children were a useful group to try the same poems out on. Many of them had a facility with language, so I could see which poems inspired creative responses without the additional problems of language difficulties.

## The Syllabus

### Lesson 1: "Sueños" ("Dreams") by Nicanor Parra

I began with the poem "Sueños" by the Chilean poet Nicanor Parra because I thought it would be the easiest poem

to encourage reading out loud and a written response. "Sueños" is a list poem describing many bizarre, surreal dreams. The poem has elements of surprise and repetition (each line begins with, "I dream of. . ."). We discussed the value of each of these elements as writing devices. Then each person in the class was able to read one line out loud. I asked the children to try and translate the poem before turning it over to the English side, simply because we had recently had a discussion about the difficulties of translation. Most of the class began to glance at the English side after attempting to translate a line or two. (This exercise would probably have worked better if I had posed it as a "mis-translation exercise" with a group of children unfamiliar with Spanish. Then they would have had more freedom to create their own meaning for the poem.) From there, I asked them to write about any strange dream they could remember. Everyone wrote, but the responses seemed to lack a certain depth that I try to encourage in writing. I would hesitate to use this lesson again unless I came up with a more structured exercise. I had chosen not to ask them to use the same repetition scheme that Parra used because it seemed too facile and limiting.



### Lesson 2: "Nadie" ("Nobody") by Nicanor Parra

#### NADIE

*No se puede dormir  
Alguien anda moviendo las cortinas.  
Me levanto. No hay nadie.  
Probablemente rayos de la luna.*

*Mañana hay que levantarse temprano  
Y no se puede conciliar el sueño:  
Parece que alguien golpeará a la puerta.*

*Me levanto de nuevo.  
Abro de par en par:  
El aire me da de lleno en la cara  
Pero la calle está completamente vacía.*

*Solo se ven las hileras de álamos  
Que se mueven al ritmo del viento.*

*Ahora sí que hay que quedarse dormido.  
Sorbo la última gota de vino  
Que todavía reluce en la copa  
Acomodo las sábanas  
Y doy una última mirada al reloj  
Pero oigo sollozos de mujer  
Abandonada por delitos de amor  
En el momento de cerrar los ojos.*

*Esta vez no me voy a levantar.  
Estoy exhausto de tanto sollozo.  
Ahora cesan todos los ruidos.  
Sólo se oyen las olas del mar  
Como si fueran los pasos de alguien  
Que se acerca a nuestra choza desmantelada  
Y no termina nunca de llegar.*

## NOBODY

I can't get to sleep  
Someone is making the curtains move.  
I get up. There's nobody there.  
Probably the moonlight.

Tomorrow I have to get up early.  
And I can't get to sleep:  
I have the feeling someone's knocking at the door.

I get up again.  
I throw it wide open:  
The air hits me full in the face.  
But the streets are completely empty.

All I can see are the rows of poplars  
Swaying in the wind's rhythm.

This time I've got to stay asleep.  
I gulp the last drop of wine  
Still glittering in the glass.  
I straighten the sheets.  
I give a last glance at the clock  
But I hear the sobs of a woman  
Just as I close my eyes.

This time I'm not going to get up.  
I'm exhausted from so much sobbing.  
Now all the noise stops.  
I hear only the waves of the sea  
As if they were the steps of someone  
Who comes toward our dilapidated cottage  
And never stops coming.

Luckily, I discovered another Nicanor Parra poem which I consider to be a real teaching gem. "Nadie" describes the difficulties the poet has falling asleep one night; he talks about the noises that keep him awake. In each class we talked about the night noises in the Bronx and how they differ from those that Parra described hearing in Chile. I asked the children to write their own poems detailing what causes them to be sleepless at times. The poems were great! They were very specific. They wrote about the sounds of disco, of rap records, and of Spanish music; about mice scratching; about partying in their buildings, around their blocks, and in nearby parks; about street and family arguments. This lesson, with its concentration on sounds, allowed me to stress the importance of details and of specificity in a new way.

## WHAT I HEAR AT NIGHT

The radio playing Spanish music  
My mother snoring  
The dog barking  
A lady screaming at her cat  
The person next door crying  
A person whistling  
The wind going through the trees  
—Nicole Estemera, 5th grade

I hear the sound  
of the water  
from the sink  
and fights  
outside  
and bikes and cars  
stopping after they go real fast  
like a screech  
and the steps  
from people walking

Once  
I was awake and  
I heard the steps  
of someone coming  
into my room  
it was my father  
he scared me  
he was checking to see  
if I was asleep  
—Jacqueline Miranda, 6th grade

## Lesson 3: "Sorpresa" ("Surprise") by Federico García Lorca

### SURPRISE

The dead man lay in the street  
with a knife in his chest.  
No one knew who he was. How  
the streetlamp trembled!  
Madre.  
How the little streetlamp trembled!  
Between the night and the morning. No one  
could lean over his eyes open on raw air.  
How come  
this dead man lies in the street, what?  
with a knife in his chest, and that no  
one should know who he was?  
—Federico García Lorca

### SORPRESA

Muerto se quedó en la calle  
con un puñal en el pecho.  
No lo conocía nadie.  
Como temblaba el farol!  
Madre,  
¡Cómo temblaba el farolito  
de la calle!  
Era madrugada. Nadie  
pudo asomarse a sus ojos  
abiertos al duro aire.  
Que muerto se quedó en la calle  
que con un puñal en el pecho  
y que no lo conocía nadie.  
—Federico García Lorca

Robin Messing (another poet who works for the Collaborative) and I were having a discussion about the prevalence of violence in our daily lives, as well as in the larger context of our society. I said that I wanted to find a way to discuss violence with my classes and that I wanted to find an approach that would encourage students to write about violence from a personal perspective. Robin loaned me a collection of Lorca's poems that had been translated with great care and skill by the poet Paul Blackburn. She suggested I look at the poem "Sorpresa,"



which describes the strangeness the poet experiences after viewing the dead body of an anonymous man lying in the street with a knife through his chest.

I brought the poem into my classes and initiated a discussion about global violence. In both classes we talked about the events in Atlanta and about the recent death of Northern Ireland hunger striker/political prisoner Bobby Sands. The radically different responses of both classes to these topics paralleled the levels of the poems which were later written. In Mr. Feinberg's class the children were largely apathetic and disinterested in the topic. I was not completely surprised by this because I had already begun to see that having 39 or more children in a classroom creates a situation where a teacher spends a great deal of time simply trying to get the children to listen to her or to each other. It was obvious from the earlier writing these students had handed in that they were bright, energetic, and opinionated. However, when I asked them to describe incidents of violence which they had witnessed, there were only a few people who wrote empathetically about the topic.

Again, there was great contrast in Ms. Campos's class. We had a highly sophisticated discussion about racism, prejudice, and poverty. Their poems were vivid and full of emotion.

One day in my building  
this old man was going down the stairs  
and this guy took all his money  
and threw him down the stairs.  
A lady seen him.  
She called the cops.  
They were checking the roof  
when my mother heard people running.  
She came downstairs and  
the ABC News was there.  
—José Sanchez, 6th grade

Muerto se quedo en la cama  
porque murio de un ataque al corazón.  
Murio a la madrugada.  
La policia se lo llevó  
y lo enterraron.  
Mi tio se murio en Navidad.

(translation)  
They found him dead in bed  
because he died of a heart attack.  
He died at dawn.  
The police came and took him  
and he was buried.  
My uncle died on Christmas.  
—Rubin Rodriguez, 6th grade

#### THE PERSON ON THE STREET

When I see you walk the street  
I just have to look away.  
Just watching you I can see  
you really need a home  
with heat, food, and love,  
and can't keep on going this way,  
just a woman on the street.  
—Tanya Brown, 5th grade

Ayer murio  
Un pobre hombre que no sabía  
Donde vivia.  
La vida era tan agría que  
No sabía donde ir.  
Yo oido que en El Salvador  
Ha muerto mucha gente,  
Personas inocentes  
Que no tienen culpa.  
Así es la vida.  
Yo espero que no continúe.

(translation)

Yesterday, a poor man died  
Who didn't know where to go.  
Life had treated him bitterly  
So he didn't know what to do.  
I have heard  
That many people have been killed  
In El Salvador,  
Innocent people  
Who were not to blame.  
Such is life!  
I hope it does not continue.

#### Lesson 4: "Canción de Jinete" (Song of the Horseback Rider") by Federico García Lorca

SONG OF THE HORSEBACK RIDER  
Córdoba. Remote  
and alone.

Black pony, big moon,  
olives in my saddlebag.  
Although I know all the roads,  
I will never arrive at Córdoba.

Over the plain, over the wind,  
black pony, moon red.  
Death is looking at me  
down from the towers of Córdoba.

Ai! this road is long!  
Ai! my valorous pony!  
Ai! that Death awaits me  
before I come to Córdoba!

Córdoba. Remote  
and alone.

CANCIÓN DE JINETE  
Córdoba.  
Le jana y sola.

Jaca negra, luna grande,  
y aceitunas en mi alforja.  
Aunque sepa los caminos  
yo nunca llegaré a Córdoba.

Por el llano, por el viento,  
jaca negra, luna roja,  
La muerte me está mirando  
desde las torres de Córdoba.

¡Ay qué camino tan largo!  
¡Ay mi jaca valerosa!

Rose Maria Ortega's poem about El Salvador managed to discuss political violence through a strong personal image:

¡Ay que la muerte me espera,  
antes de llegar a Córdoba!

Córdoba.  
Le jana y sola.

I also used the Blackburn translation for “Canción de Jinete.” This poem describes a man’s journey to a place he hears he will never arrive at. It is a very lyrical poem, one which both classes agreed sounded better in Spanish than in English. I used the poem to teach repetition as a means of structuring in writing. In “Canción de Jinete,” the beginning phrase, “Córdoba. Remote/and alone” is repeated at the end of the poem, like a refrain. I asked each class to think of the first time they were traveling to a place and what they imagined that place to be like. Then I asked them to think about how that compared to their actual first impression of that place. I told them to start their poems with the name of the place they were writing about, and to add two details immediately following the name which described their feelings about that place. The center of the poem would describe the place in more detail, and the ending would mirror the poem’s beginning.

As a teaching device, the use of repetition here seemed more open-ended than in a poem like “Sueños.” It was important for me to learn that even though I had placed a particular demand on the style of each person’s poem, it hadn’t stifled the desire to write, and the poems that were written did not seem like “formula poems.”

Empire State Building. Big Windows.  
You can see everything.  
Waiting for the elevator,  
going up for a short time,  
I saw through the window  
small things, like the Twin Towers.  
I saw people from the window.  
They looked like ants and mice walking.  
Empire State Building. Big windows.  
You can see everything.  
—Diana Travieso, 6th grade

#### AMERICA

New York. Industrialized  
and polluted.

The plane is traveling  
And I start thinking:  
What is it going to look like?  
How are the people going to speak?

I imagine, in a thinking sort of way,  
That the streets are spotless  
And the garbage is in a neatly kept can.  
The people are speaking with an English accent.

Although I speak the same language  
I thought they’d speak differently.

And yet, I held all these questions.  
I started joking away.  
But in my mind  
I felt sad  
Because some of my family was behind.

New York. Industrialized  
and polluted.  
—Kim Tranquada, 5th grade

#### Lessons 5 and 6: “Oda a la Tormenta” (“Ode to the Storm”) and “Oda al Traje” (“Ode to the Clothes”) by Pablo Neruda

Encouraged by the positive response the children had to structure, I decided to teach two odes by Neruda. After discussing the definition of an ode, we read each poem. Ms. Campos warned me that the “Ode to the Storm” might be too long and difficult for her class, but I gambled and asked her to read the whole poem out loud for them. They loved the poem’s rich imagery, as did Mr. Feinberg’s class. “Ode to the Clothes” is shorter and simpler to understand. I asked each class to suggest possible subjects for odes and I wrote a list of them on the board.

I decided that it would be fun to write a collaborative ode in each class before encouraging individual responses. We selected one object from the list, went around the room, and came up with group odes:

#### ODE TO FOOD

Food, you taste nasty, especially liver  
You make me fat  
Sometimes you give me a stomach ache  
But when I’m weary, you give me energy  
Sometimes you don’t fill me up  
Sometimes I get mad at you  
because you make my teeth fall out  
when you’re too hard  
You taste good too—  
like barbecue spareribs, candy yams,  
sweet potato pie, chicken, pizza,  
corn, and Chinese food  
Food, you keep me alive  
—Class Collaboration, 5th grade

#### ODE TO A BED

I love you bed  
I sleep comfortably in you  
You feel soft  
I want to squeeze you to death  
You never stay naked  
You always look so pretty wearing sheets  
You help me fall asleep  
You let me be with my pillow  
Sometimes you’re too soft  
Sometimes you’re too weak  
And I feel uncomfortable  
When I leave you I feel sorry  
My terrific bed  
I love you  
—Class Collaboration, 6th grade

After we applauded our collaborative efforts I asked everyone to choose an object from the list and write their own ode to it. There were odes to smelly socks, odes to pillows, odes to litter, and odes to nature. One of the funniest odes was Beatrice Moore’s “Ode to Panties”:

#### ODE TO PANTIES

Panties, you keep me nice and comfortable  
Sometimes you stink, so I change you.  
You make my butt feel good.  
Panties, you are better  
than men’s underwear. They are white  
and have no designs.

Panties have daisies and flowers.  
I like new panties. They are cold  
and make both your sides feel good.

That was as far as I got in ten sessions. I hope to return to my search for more poems and poets. In particular, I felt the lack of women poets and would welcome suggestions.

Teaching, if it is to be successful as well as sustaining, must be about reciprocity. I believe that my work at IS 206B was satisfying for a number of reasons. It allowed me to build speaking skills in Spanish and to become a student at the same time that I was growing as a teacher. It allowed the children to be successful in writing and understanding poetry because the textures of the Spanish-language poems we used were more resonant with their familiar culture. Our discussions of translation forced all of us to concentrate on sound, rhythm, and precision in language in a very immediate way. It pleased me

that Ms. Campos became fully involved in the project. She played an enthusiastic role as translator, reader, and poetry lover. But it seems to me that the most important thing that happened was the unusual way in which some children were able to move back and forth between the two languages and to work together in small non-hierarchical, non-competitive groups with the common goals of overcoming deficiencies and learning to become better writers and speakers of English.

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# LETTERS

Dear T&W,

Congratulations on your new format, a very positive change. Karen Randle's article was a delight! I am looking forward to your next issue.

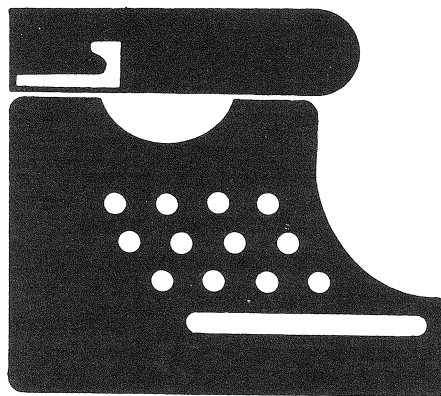
Caroline C. Wolf  
Barrow, Alaska

Dear T&W,

Loved Bill Bernhardt's "Letter from China." Hope there will be more. Much other good stuff in issue. Re tape recorders in classrooms ("Read to Write," Vol. 13, No. 2), when I taught in private school, making much less money than anyone in public schools then or now, when I needed something for the classroom I bought it out of my own pocket. You can get workable cassette recorders for under forty dollars, and from discount houses you can probably get them cheaper than that. No excuse for not doing it.

What would the schools say, what would T&W say, if a child asked, "Why do we have to do all this writing in school, anyway?" I am a compulsive writer; when ideas pop into my head, I have to write them down. Is this a good thing? (I think so, but I'm not sure I could explain why.) Do many grads from our educational system feel this way? I doubt it. Do children who write in T&W classes do much writing outside of them? Does it ever become part of their life, not just school life? If not, could, should, something be done, and if so, what?

John Holt  
Boston, Massachusetts



#### A Note to Our Readers

We want to let you know that after 12 years with Teachers & Writers, as a writer and Publications Director, Miguel Ortiz is leaving our staff for a new career in computer programming. His imprint remains, though, in the many books and magazines we send throughout the country. We wish him the very best.

Beginning in September, our new Publications Director will be Ron Padgett. He is issuing a standing invitation to you readers: Please feel free to send in your ideas for articles, comments, and suggestions during the summer.

# BOOKS

*Role Playing in the Curriculum.* By Fannie R. Shaftel and George Shaftel. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1982. 347 pages.

## Review by Judith Binder

**F**IRST ENCOUNTERED ROLE playing several years ago in a psychodrama group. What I observed was a painful acting out of personal conflicts and powerful emotions. In the process, the participants poured out their insides. The leader made no attempt to mop up the spilled guts before he went on to set up another situation. I was horrified. The second time I was confronted with role playing was by a sixth grade teacher in whose class I was artist-in-residence. She seemed threatened by the improvisational acting games I was teaching. Instead, she wanted me to teach role playing. I resisted her suggestion. "Role playing is not acting," I said. "And it's certainly not art." I was appalled!

In *Role Playing in the Curriculum*, Fannie Shaftel and George Shaftel confirm my opinion that role playing is neither acting nor art. However, this book, which presents role playing as a tool for classroom teachers and guidance counselors, is well worth consideration for giving students a way of exploring life situations. The Shaftels distinguish their form of role playing or *sociodrama* from psychodrama, which, they stress, should only be conducted by a trained professional. Role playing, as presented by the Shaftels, "provides the opportunity to explore spontaneous improvisation and carefully guided discussion, typical group problem situations in which individuals are helped to become sensitive to the feelings of the people involved." It helps people develop problem solving skills and learn to make conscious choices in crucial situations. The authors also suggest ways that role playing can be used in the specific subject areas of social studies and language arts.

*Role Playing* is divided into three sections. The first, "Theory and

Methodology," is dry and confusing. Although the theoretical material in the first four chapters is worth knowing, it is a chore to read; the authors do not write as well as they instruct. With the instruction in Chapter 5, "Role Playing: the Process," however, the book begins to sparkle. Their instructions in Chapters 5 through 9 are detailed and uncomplicated, which is not to say the techniques are simple. On the contrary, role playing is a complex process which the authors have simplified for us, making room for the deeper layers that will come with practice of the method. This "how to" part is by far the most useful, the most readable, and, for me, the only justification for the book. The extensive suggestions for teaching include examples of classroom situations, actual scripts from enactments by students in different grades, and stories for enactment. Role playing is not an objective subject like grammar or mathematics; rather it is a group process leading to a resolution of a problem. There are therefore no hard and fast facts to teach but techniques for the teacher to work with in leading groups of students through the process. These techniques are reiterated many times in different chapters and teachers'

questions are answered.

Part 2, "Preparing Teachers to Lead Role Playing," explains training sessions for teachers, with strategies for learning to lead role playing in several situations: informal groups, one-day workshops, longer workshops, and the formal course. Once again, the directions are clear and easy to follow. Part 3, "Curriculum Materials for Role Playing," is a collection of stories grouped under the headings Moral Development, Social Studies, Interpersonal and Intergroup Relations, and Guidance and Language Arts. While the stories are simplistic and are certainly not literature, they are useful as models for inventing problem stories with one's own class. There is also an extensive bibliography for those who wish to do further research on the subject.

*Role Playing in the Curriculum* is an updated version of *Role Playing for Social Values*, published in 1967. For me, the social values presented tended to get in the way of the excellent techniques outlined for the role playing process. However, the book is definitely an excellent resource for its presentation of the process as a creative and exciting way to explore problems.

JUDITH BINDER's plays have been produced by many theaters and television stations on the West Coast. Recently she has been conducting writing workshops in New York City for Teachers & Writers Collaborative.

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