

# TEACHERS AND WRITERS COLLABORATIVE

newsletter

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## NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

As this school year comes to an end, we at Teachers and Writers Collaborative have mixed feelings about what we have been able to accomplish during the past twelve months. Certainly there is some sense of accomplishment. We have enabled a sizable group of writers to work directly with teachers and children in a number of public school classrooms and in Saturday classes, and the lives of these particular children have been enriched as a result. Drawing ideas from the writers' diaries of their classroom experiences and from the weekly teachers' seminars, we now have the beginnings of a number of potentially exciting curriculum units and resource materials; we also have a multi-talented group of people committed to the further development and testing of these ideas. Our newsletters, which have been distributed to more than 900 teachers, supervisors, and education specialists, have apparently been useful in stimulating and disseminating new ideas and in encouraging experimentation in the English classroom. Our pilot project in Baltimore, under the direction of Florence Howe (see report in this newsletter), has caught the imagination not only of the students and teachers involved, but of the school system's administrative staff as well.

As a result of these promising beginnings, we were looking forward to a truly productive second year in which the insights and preliminary exploration of this past year could be consolidated in a substantial body of teaching materials, and in which the idea of using both professional writers and college English students to teach in public elementary and secondary schools could be implemented on a wider basis throughout the country.

With these plans in mind, the Director devoted an enormous amount of time and energy to the business of seeking substantial financial support for the continuation and expansion of these activities. Although much interest was expressed in the Collaborative's aims and programs, and although we were encouraged to submit a joint proposal to the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, at this moment we still have no assurance that such support will in fact be forthcoming, or that if a grant is made, it will be commensurate with the needs of the project.

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Teachers and Writers Collaborative is a government funded project whose purpose is to involve teachers, children, and writers in the creation of an English curriculum that is relevant to the lives of the children in school today. All correspondence should be addressed to: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, Box 113, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York, 10027.

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Since our current support will end on June 30th, our preliminary sense of achievement and our confidence in the viability of the Collaborative's program are now intermixed with feelings of frustration. For if the various beginnings of what, with another year's work, might have resulted in valuable innovations in the development of English curriculum are allowed to end up in the trash basket, along with the wealth of human resources--teachers, writers, and school personnel--embodied in our correspondence files and on our "rolodex", then a large part of this year's effort will ultimately have gone to waste. If you would like to see the Collaborative continue next year and have found our materials useful in your own teaching, we suggest that you send a letter to this effect to Roger Stevens, Chairman, National Council of the Arts, Palace Theater Building, Broadway & 47th Street, New York City, as soon as possible. The Arts Council will be meeting in August, at which time they will decide whether or not to support Teachers and Writers Collaborative.

In September we will submit a comprehensive final report on the Collaborative's programs to the U.S. Office of Education. This report will be compiled from the materials collected and developed this year, including teachers' and writers' diaries and children's writing, as well as commentaries evaluating the program by various observers and participants.

If you would like to receive a copy of the Final Report and/or news of the Collaborative in the future, please let us know by post card, and be sure to include your September mailing address. All correspondence addressed to us during the summer should be clearly marked Box 113 to facilitate handling by the Teachers College mail office.

Although the Collaborative will not be functioning as such during the summer, our spirit will continue on. So great was the enthusiasm of the participants in the Saturday classes conducted by poet June Meyer during the year, that a plan to extend the program for one month in a country setting was conceived. Through the efforts of June Meyer and Terri Bush (a junior high school English teacher who has been attending the Saturday classes with her students), money was raised from private sources and a campsite obtained in Toronto, Ohio. Terri Bush will serve as Director, with college student volunteers as additional staff. Within the limits of its small budget, THE CAMP OF THE CHILDREN will provide a place where these children can "grow and continue to transmute their personal experience into creative material."

Zelda Dana Wirtschafter

BALTIMORE PROJECT

Early in the spring of 1968, Goucher College and the Baltimore City Public Schools agreed to cooperate with Teachers and Writers Collaborative in sponsoring a ten-week pilot project using undergraduate English students to develop and teach a curriculum unit on contemporary poetry. Under the direction of Florence Howe, Assistant Professor of English at Goucher, and with the close cooperation and assistance of L. Earl Wellemeyer, Supervisor of English for the Baltimore City Public Schools, and Dr. Elsa Graser, Specialist in English for the school system, twelve Goucher undergraduates travelled twice weekly to Mergenthaler Vocational Technical High School in Baltimore where they conducted one-hour poetry sessions with the students in two 10th-grade English classes. Each undergraduate worked individually with a subgroup of approximately six boys. The groups were observed periodically by the boys' regular English teachers and by the two supervisors from the Baltimore school system. About half-way through the project's ten weeks, Henry Braun, a poet who lives in Philadelphia and teaches at Temple University, also met with the two classes involved in the project, to read and discuss poetry.

Preliminary Report on the Undergraduate Pilot Project in Teaching and Curriculum Development

by Florence Howe

The project had two broad goals: first, to discover whether their own engagement in "teaching" is a valuable means of increasing the ability of college students to read and write poetry; second, to discover whether college students may valuably assist in the improvement of high school English. In the early stages of the project, the possibility of two other desirable side effects occurring became apparent: 1) to introduce potential teachers to the problems and the scene of teaching even before formal education courses--in order to make those studies more meaningful and less simply theoretical; and 2) to attract to the teaching of English "creative" students who might not ordinarily be thinking about such a career.

Only one of the twelve undergraduates had had previous teaching experience. One other student, a junior, had had several education courses. The rest were, to begin with, more interested in poetry than in teaching. All of them had written some poetry; several of them were accomplished or talented poets. They were responsible for the initial selection of poems and, to a very large degree, they were autonomous in arranging their own curriculum.

The undergraduates, teachers, and school supervisors met on Tuesday evenings for a multi-purpose workshop. Sometimes these sessions focussed on the discussion of poems that not all members of the group felt comfortable about. Hence, one workshop established the usefulness of David Henderson's "Documentary on Airplane Glue"; another rejected Ferlinghetti's "eternity" poem. Other workshops allowed for ongoing evaluation and planning. Poems selected for use included the following: "The Red Wheelbarrow", "Complete Destruction", and "This Is Just To Say", by William Carlos Williams; "Thought" and "Last Night I Drove A Car" by Gregory Corso; "Buick" by Karl Shapiro; "We Real Cool" by Gwendolyn Brooks; "grasshopper" and "my sweet old etcetera" by e.e. cummings; "Poet" by William Jay Smith; "Out, Out" and "Fire and Ice" by Robert Frost; "The Pennycandystore" by Lawrence Ferlinghetti; "Insects" by William Coakley, and "The Broken Field Run" by Andrea Friedman (Goucher student).

The sixty-three tenth-grade boys were average and below average students in auto mechanics, industrial electronics, and baking. At the start, as one might expect, they expressed some enthusiasm about the "pretty girls," but chiefly negative attitudes toward poetry. Their regular English teachers agreed to participate in the project, although one of them admitted that she, too, was afraid of poetry, and the other expressed skepticism about interesting "these boys" in poetry. By the fifth week, however, it became clear that not only were the boys interested and involved in reading and discussing the contemporary poems brought into class by the Goucher students, but many were ready to try writing poetry themselves.

In the fall, following some evaluations which will be written this summer, we plan to meet again to organize a trial curriculum unit from the materials we have gathered. In the fall, also, there will be available a more detailed report of the project as a whole. For the moment, then, what follows are some excerpts from the undergraduates' diaries and some poems written by their tenth-graders.

From the diaries of Goucher undergraduates:

April 25. First class. We sat down in our corner of the big room and the five guys sized me up--they told me that Miss W. had told them to "be good boys and try to learn a little poetry!"...We began by talking about poetry. The first few comments were combinations of "pshaw and guffaw" attitudes. D. said, "We're auto mechanics, what do you/they expect us to do, recite poetry when we're under a hood?" Others laughed at this, agreed...

Suzanne Plumb

April 25. F. announced almost immediately that he hates poetry. J., very quiet, shy, sat apart from the others....He dislikes poetry--he was quite frank. Towards the middle of the period we went around the circle and each one of them explained what his former experience with poetry was. I couldn't believe how little poetry they'd been exposed to....

Judeth Mensh

May 2. The boys decided to read "Complete Destruction." M. said it reminded him of mean things he used to do when he was a kid. They all agreed that they had taken pleasure in watching things die. It made them feel as if they had some type of power over smaller things. R. said that the poem was sad. When asked why, he said that "nothing was left." It seems that the general consensus was that everything would eventually die no matter what it was--there was always something bigger than you that would quickly cut off your existence without any qualms. Like when they were kids and killed ants. M. asked if he could read "Insects." He said it had the same idea. D. said that it's a natural feeling to kill something that was small. We got on to a discussion of wars and the killing of innocent children. It seems that the boys agreed that a soldier must have no emotions within him when he bombs a city or he wouldn't bomb all the little kids. However, T. said that he didn't feel bad about killing ants that were smaller than he. In fact, he thought that it was sort of fun when he was a kid and played with ants--boxing them in and planning attacks. Boys said that we all must have some hate (I wrongly supplied sadistic) qualities.

Joan Josephson

May 16. I handed out the football poem....I read it, stressing stresses and running lines together where meter sounds best....When I looked up, everyone looked impressed and the boy with the tie was really turned on, though he didn't say anything. L., begrudgingly, "Yeah, it's got a good beat, but the beat falls down in places...."

Now the silent, slow-looking guy spoke up. "I think it's not about a football game, I think it's about going through life--you know, every man tries to get by the obstacles in life." I was stunned. I never thought of it that way. But it works so well that if I hadn't written the poem--I didn't tell them I had--I would've thought I had missed a whole dimension of it. Of course, in the end it doesn't work--the poem is too mock heroic to be truly symbolic--but it does reveal a metaphysical mind in that boy. C.: "What're you talking about? It says here pigskin, goal post, halfback, how can it be about something else besides football?" L. snickers. Silent boy looks unconvinced by C's argument, but decides not to defend himself. I do. "You mean that it is about football but also applies to life in general, on another level?" "Yes," he nods vigorously and goes on to elaborate about pushing through obstacles....

Andrea Friedman

May 16. Joe explained the program to James Jackson, new person: "We're an experiment to see if these people can make us like poetry. The best thing about it is that we don't have to sit around all day, waving our hands. If we have something to say, we just say it out.". I then handed out "This Is Just to Say"....James said it wasn't a poem. Joe told him to stick around awhile, he'd give up that idea in a hurry.

We discussed lack of continuous lines and punctuation--in notes they had left at home. They themselves found the dilemma of its not being a regular note, and not being a poem either. They decided it was a poem written for fun, that the guy figured maybe if he left a screwy note, the person wouldn't be so angry.

I asked the guys what they meant by that. Joe illustrated with a shop incident. I asked if he could write a similar note for his shop teacher. This is what he came up with--I wrote on the blackboard as he spoke:

This is just to say  
That I used  
The drill press  
Without permission

And I broke  
The chuck

I'm sorry  
But it was  
A lot of  
Fun.

Joe said it'd be worth the \$30 to replace the chuck if he could leave a note like that one!

Deborah Stone

May 21. Another good question I came up with today is, If you had the author right here, what would you want to ask him? This makes the kids think about their own questions and gets to the real misunderstandings they have, and it is one of the best ways going to really get at what a poem means....

Patricia Suttles

May 21. Today I said we were going to write and everyone looked apprehensive. So I said, Don't you want to? They seemed to want to but also to pretend that they didn't. This idea was conveyed mainly by mutterings which weren't intelligible but I could get the tone. I said, I don't know whether you have the same inhibitions that I do about writing, but I'll tell you the "rights" I need, in case you do also. First of all, no one ever has to show anything until he's ready, if at all. There won't be any time when I'll say, okay, now you must show what you've written. If you need more time, you can take this home and work on it, or never show it at all. Then I threw my dictionary into the center of the circle and said, "common dictionary." And I passed around some paper for anyone who wanted it. I took some and started to write. After a few minutes I looked up and two more were writing. After a while longer everyone was writing....I continued writing and tried not to look around too much. Every once in a while someone would make a comment; then we'd return to our writing....At one point, B. asked if they had to be neat. I said no. They all sighed. Then R. said, some words are misspelled here, and I said, that's okay, I'll fix them when I type them. They couldn't quite believe that, but the thing they really couldn't believe was that they

didn't have to hand them in unless they wanted to....as they went out, B., S., and R. gave me their poems to mimeograph.

Ellen Bass

June 13. (final session)....The discussion started off with direct reference to Henry Braun. Jim, who is usually so reticent and non-participant, said that he noticed that Braun was constantly aware of things, that he "never stopped thinking about things." He said that he thought it was because Braun had such perceptivity, or awareness of things, that he was a poet. He brought in the example of writing a poem about a teacher--something we all have experienced, he said, but that Braun had put it down in such a way that it got across to other people, and got the experience down just right. Jim made some comment to the effect that the reason poets write poems is to get across some of what they see and feel so strongly - (I hope I am doing him justice!). Dwight made the statement that anyone was a poet who had "something to express - a feeling or a thought about something - and who did it in such a way that it communicates something to others."

I was kind of on an ecstatic plane by this time, for it was one of the few times that Jim has been part of the group enough for Dwight to respond to him, and I gather that they don't get on that well...but the boys were so absorbed in what they were saying about poets that they suspended all their usual personal inhibitions for the sake of the discussion....(they) were talking about poets and poetry with such perceptivity and clarity, and listening to each others' comments and continuing from there in such a way that today I can say that this whole project has been a total success--not only in terms of group dynamics, but in giving them a sense of what poetry is and how it relates to their lives...When I think of our beginning session, when they said poetry was "sissy stuff" and had nothing to do with grease under an engine hood-!!!!

Suzanne Plumb

Poems by the 10th-grade vocational students:

It (the tire) was filled with air.

Joined were the valve stem  
and pump hose  
The pressure was turned on and  
After my almost vain struggles  
Inflation became a part of the tire when  
Bang!  
To burst, it seemed,  
Was its ambition  
As if to laugh at me.

--Richard D. Johnson

Drugs!

liquids

solids

gases

Excel in zooming minds to unknown worlds!

Like miniature spaceships in disguise!

a trip,

a return, and

Eternal doom for some people upstairs.

--Richard D. Johnson

### SUN

Sun is not fire

or star

But a Glob of Life

Together with space it lives alone

It creates Life

Destroys Life

Turns it old

Till the day it turns to a dusty cold

--Pat Yarosh

### THE MAN

THE MAN WHO NEVER CAME BACK

DIED/ FLEW HIGH

IN THE SKY/

NEVER TO BE

SEEN.

BUT YET IN-THE-HIGH

MOUNTAINS

HE IS STILL HEARD

AS HE IS PERCHED

ON HIS ROOST.

--Lennie Splain

### Excerpt from diary of the cooperating teacher:

...Concerning the poems themselves I feel that the fact that some of the students have made attempts at writing their own poems and also expressed considerable interest in the various types of poetry to which the girls exposed them is evidence that they have profited from the project....The attempt at putting together a teacher's manual and student poetry anthology based on the workshop is an excellent idea. I think it will prove to be one of the most profitable results of the entire project.

Miss Antoinette Worsham