

# Turn & Talk



## Two Heinemann authors meet up to talk it out



Harvey “Smokey” Daniels  
and Kristi Mraz  
with Ellin Oliver Keene

This is Heinemann’s fortieth anniversary. As part of the celebration, we are introducing a new feature series, “Turn & Talk: Two Heinemann authors meet up to talk it out.” In this series, we will convene two writers, one from the earlier generation of Heinemann authors and the other representing our newest cohort of authors, for conversations on a variety of topics. An excerpt of our first exchange, between Harvey “Smokey” Daniels and Kristi Mraz, is presented here, and the complete transcript is featured on our landing page. Join author and editor Ellin Oliver Keene as she moderates this timely discussion that explores the source of writer identity, the challenges of teaching during unsettled times, equity issues in schools, and more.

Additional “Turn & Talk” conversations, facilitated by Ellin, will be published on the Heinemann blog throughout Heinemann’s fortieth year, enabling our readers to immerse themselves in the most critical topics in education around the world from the perspectives of two deeply respected authors with very different backgrounds.



## Ellin:

*In all of the identities that you have as parents and partners and spouses and professional developers and teachers, how did you develop a writing identity? How did you come to be writers, to feel like writers? What influenced your development as writers?*

## Kristi:

I grew up in Western New York outside Rochester, and the schools were early adopters of writer's workshop. My first memory of writing is third grade. In a writer's workshop, I wrote a story called "Look What I Found," which was about a chicken bone I found in an archaeological experiment. I remember



our teacher bound it in wallpaper and put a hard cover on it, and I was like "Nailed it, nailed it."

I really thought of myself as a writer in elementary school, and then in middle school and high school—nothing. College—nothing. I lost it a little. I always wanted to revisit that part of me, but it was only in the past five years that I've reacquainted myself with that feeling.

## Smokey:

My story is so different. I went to school in the '50s, so writing workshop didn't exist. Elementary writing was just penmanship, worksheets, and a report on a state that you didn't care about in fourth grade! Literacy instruction was mostly about reading, and when we moved on to high school, it was teachers lecturing us about what great books meant.

So, I fell in love with writing in spite of school. I played around with writing as a kid, wrote notes, cartoons, and little neighborhood newspapers, and later comical scandal sheets for my friends.

Then I went to journalism school at Northwestern. I wanted to be an investigative reporter, but journalism school was just who/what/where/when. Classes were very rigid, and there was no creativity in it. I transferred immediately to creative writing in the English department. Looking back, I would call myself a naive and slavish Hemingway imitator, basically. But I won lots of awards and scholarships and that gave me a great boost as a writer.

## Kristi:

I have always used writing as a way out of mental turmoil and questions. It's like an untangling process. Because of my love of creative writing, I feel like I'm coming from a slightly different angle; trying to write professionally in that way was a hot mess. I learned to write through feedback and practice . . . lots of practice.



## Ellin:

*No matter what your political views, it feels like we are in an unsettled time in education as well. When adults are unsettled, distracted, fearful, or angry, those emotions can filter out to the children. I worry that those feelings are manifesting in our teaching, affecting our kids. What can teachers do to keep our focus on the kids while assuming roles of advocates and active citizens?*

## Smokey:

When you teach, when you're with kids for 180 days a year, something always is happening: a class pet dies, a fire in the neighborhood, someone's grandma passes away. These things happen and come through the door with the kids, so we've always had to figure out how to deal with unsettledness as maybe just part of the human condition.

Our job as teachers isn't to make it seem like the world is completely safe and happy all the time, but to have the skills to confront trouble when it comes and to learn about it and to have agency and power.

## Kristi:

It's my responsibility along with everything else. I didn't get hired to have no filter. My job is to make kids feel like they can make a better world and so that's what I'm trying to do.



*Ellin:*

I worked in many districts serving primarily children of color and teachers were mostly white. I'd love your thoughts about how, as a nation—not at the school level or individual classroom level, but as a nation—we should approach this issue. What needs to change to not only attract people of color into teaching, but help them feel comfortable enough to stay? What can educators do to address this dilemma?

*Smokey:*

When I was a young teacher in the Chicago Public Schools, so many of my colleagues were people of color. Now, young black and Hispanic folks can choose from a wider variety of careers than were open to them in the past. We have to address this “minority teacher flight” through our professional organizations like NEA, AFT, NCTE, and ILA.

*Kristi:*

I think one thing to name straight off the bat is that we're three white people having this conversation, which is the problem. So if I am the one at the table, I need to amplify other voices, other people who are doing really smart work around this like Val Brown, Christopher Emdin, Cornelius Minor, and organizations like Border Crossers. Read them! We talk about picture books being windows, mirrors, and sliding doors, but professional books have to be that, too.

*Ellin:*

Back to the questions: Why do teachers of color leave in such huge numbers? What can we do to help stem that tide? And where does it start?



you from?” People shorten or mispronounce her name. Addressing it starts with facing those issues as issues of race.

*Smokey:*

Yeah, for \$35,000 a year or less.

*Kristi:*

Teachers are in a position where it can feel like we're powerless. We can feel powerless about curriculum, powerless over school decisions. Power is a huge issue in the teaching profession.

*Smokey:*

I think teachers of color rightly worry about whether they will be seriously respected and listened to in school systems. To make



teaching more attractive, faculties need to do the deep identity and empathy work that creates real trust and community. There is a blueprint for this in Sara Ahmed's book, *Being the Change*. And teachers need to do this same work with kids.

*Kristi:*

One of the trickiest things about teaching is that there's a caregiving aspect to it. The only parenting advice that I follow is that the best predictor of who your kid will be is who you are. I've taken that as a mission statement to be a better person.

*Ellin:*

We are fortunate to work in a professional community. We meet at conferences, we attend and provide professional development, and we engage in extraordinary conversation with other educators. We are lucky, but I wonder if our professional lives sometimes become an echo chamber. What's the balance between collaborating with like-minded colleagues and engaging in conversations with those who have a different point of view?

*Kristi:*

I've been trying to follow people in my social media who are saying very different things than I often see in my feed. I just try to sit and learn. I'm working hard to make sure I'm hearing a variety of points of view about things.

*Smokey:*

I learned a helpful mental practice from literacy author Peter Elbow, who wrote about playing “the believing game” versus





playing “the doubting game.” This means you intentionally try believing in an alien idea at first, instead of immediately rejecting it. So often, when someone is coming from the opposite side of an issue, we automatically begin by doubting. Soon, everything that comes out of his or her mouth is not worth consideration, it’s wrong, and we tune out. I’ve often found that purposefully playing the believing game helps to open my ears so I can really weigh others’ views. Of course, some ideas are so contrary to our deepest beliefs it’s impossible to put yourself into that the opposing mindset.

### Ellin:

*All of these questions are very complex with no easy answers. The people who should be asking the big questions are the people who are working with the kids. What questions do you think educators around the country should be asking of their administrators, of their community members, of each other? What questions should we be asking ourselves at this juncture?*

### Smokey:

Are we really extending the progressive education tradition, or are we turning back on it? I see a lot of signs in our publications, in our culture, in our research, that suggest to me that we’re going backward.



### Kristi:

I don’t know that we do enough around our belief systems. What do we believe? And then how can I back my belief up with classroom evidence and curriculum evidence? What do we believe about kids? What do we believe about teaching and learning?

### Smokey:

One of America’s school traditions is developmental, student-centered, discovery-based education. A competing model is often called the coverage, skills, or textbook approach. These paradigms have battled with each other for over a century, and if you’ve taught as long as I have, you’ve experienced some of those ups and downs. If people believe that kids basically tend toward the good and they’re perfectible creatures that have within them capacity for empathy and compassion, then you’re going to promote a very different kind of school system than if you believe that young people always tend toward wickedness and need strict control.

### Kristi:

There’s a saying, something like, “The world is good and worth fighting for. I believe in the second half.” That’s a good summary of me at this moment. I don’t feel the world is all good, but it’s worth fighting for, and that’s what we’re doing in our classrooms.

### Ellin:

*So, it’s been great to meet up and talk with you both today. This is my last question. It’s Heinemann’s fortieth anniversary this year. I’m curious what Heinemann has meant to you as writers, readers, and professionals—what’s the influence been over the years?*

### Kristi:

Well, I’m a product of Heinemann to a certain extent since I had writer’s workshop in my classroom as a kid. My mom was a teacher, and when I joined the teaching profession, she gave me her first edition of Lucy Calkins’ *The Art of Teaching Writing*.

### Smokey:

I wrote my first Heinemann book in the mid ’80s, and so I’ve been publishing there for more than thirty years. It’s been my professional home base in so many ways. Just the other day, I got out the Heinemann “mother text”—Donald Graves’ *Writing: Teachers & Children at Work*. I started reading the first page, and it’s just, oh man, this is so amazing. He was writing breakthrough stuff back then, but it feels so fresh and valuable to us even today.

**Kristi Mraz** teaches kindergarten in the New York City public schools. In addition to writing and teaching, she consults in schools across the country



and as far away as Taiwan. She primarily supports teachers in early literacy, play, and inquiry-based learning. On the off chance she has free time, you’ll find Kristi reading on a couch in Brooklyn with her husband, and baby Harry. You can follow all of her adventures on twitter @MrazKristine or on her blog at kristimraz.com.

**Harvey “Smokey” Daniels** has been a city and suburban classroom teacher and a college professor, and now works as a national consultant and author on literacy education. Smokey works with elementary and secondary teachers throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe, offering demonstration lessons, workshops, and consulting, with a special focus on creating, sustaining, and renewing student-centered inquiries and discussions of all kinds. Smokey shows colleagues how to simultaneously build students’ reading strategies, balance their reading diets, and strengthen the social skills they need to become genuine lifelong readers.