Teaching the Neglected “R”
Teaching the Neglected “R”

Rethinking Writing Instruction in Secondary Classrooms

Edited by
Thomas Newkirk & Richard Kent

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH
In memory of
Donald M. Murray
1924–2006
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Looking Back to Look Forward</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thomas Newkirk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Thoughts on the Twenty-First Century Classroom: An Interview with Jeffrey D. Wilhelm</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>To Compose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Write Before Writing</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Donald M. Murray</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. The Writing Conference: Journeys into Not Knowing</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Terry A. Moher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Twenty-First Century Revision: A Novel Approach in Three Acts with Three Points of View</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Barry Lane</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Matthew’s Portfolio</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Richard Kent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. FAQ on Grading and Assessment</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thomas Newkirk and Richard Kent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Explorations in Genre</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. The School Essay: Tracking Movement of the Mind</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gretchen Bernabei</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. The Many Ways of Multigenre</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tom Romano</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Poetry Arrives</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maureen Barbieri</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11. Learning from Goldilocks: A Primer on Story Structure</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Monica Wood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
12. Writing and Reading from the Inside Out
   Nancie Atwell

IV  Digital Writing

13. Plugging in to Twenty-First Century Writers
    Sara Kajder
    Dave Boardman
15. Space to Imagine: Digital Storytelling
    Lisa C. Miller

V  Writing Beyond the Schools Walls

16. Composition as Community Action: Writing and Service-Learning
    Thomas Deans and Megan Marie
17. Preparing Students for Life After High School: An Interview Writing Project
    Jessica Singer
18. Writers Reading Local Places: Field Notes for Writing Outside the Classroom,
    or in the Classroom Under the Spell of Beyond
    Kim Stafford

VI  Teaching Difference

19. Teaching Writing to English Language Learners
    Danling Fu
20. Boys and Writing
    Michael Smith
21. Exchanging Writing and Difference
    Jabari Mahiri, Alexis Martin, and Kate Sullivan
22. Students with Special Needs
    Richard Kent

VII  Afterword

Writing 2.0: Developing Students’ Textual Intelligence
    Jim Burke
Preface

When we first met to discuss the possibilities of Teaching the Neglected “R,” we turned to well-established writing teachers whose scholarship and classroom practices had weathered the effects of educational tides. We also agreed that the collection would benefit from new voices in the field—teachers and writers whose practices reach well into this new century. To our good fortune, and yours, we landed both.

This new century welcomes a lively and far-reaching emphasis on writing and writing instruction. This awareness has even garnered support from our legislators in Washington, with the formation of a national commission. The Neglected “R,” the first report to Congress from The National Commission on Writing, presented bold facts and a road map into this new century with recommendations such as “[t]he amount of time students spend writing (and the scale of financial resources devoted to writing) should be at least doubled” (2003, 4). Further, the opening of the Commission’s executive summary asserts

American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts language and communication in their proper place in the classroom. Writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge. Although many models of effective ways to teach writing exist, both the teaching and practice of writing are increasingly shortchanged throughout the school and college years. Writing, always time-consuming for student and teacher, is today hard-pressed in the American classroom. Of the three “Rs,” writing is clearly the most neglected.

This book is the result of hundreds of email discussions, hours of conversations, and one memorable twenty-six-hour immersion at Rich’s home in the western mountains of Maine. Our book’s collaborators offered many lessons that fed our discussions and pushed us to examine our own teaching practices. Just as we were feeling truly challenged by this book, by the startling realities facing this century’s teachers, and by the examining and reexamining of our own practices and those of our collaborators (and perhaps feeling a bit ill equipped), our friend and mentor the late Don Murray reassured us with the opening words of his chapter, “One of the many gifts of the writing craft is that our apprenticeship never ends.”

You will finish reading this volume with questions and, we believe, many ideas. We have featured the authors’ biographies at the front of each chapter so that you will seek out their other works to help answer your questions and to fuel your imagination. And when you discover one of your own teaching practices that truly engages your students, we urge you to share your work with school colleagues, in a professional journal, or at a conference. As teachers, we gather strength by sharing our stories.

Back in the spring of 2003, Tom consented to a phone interview with students in one of Rich’s doctoral seminars. The title of the course was “Coming to Know James Britton,
Theory and Practice.” Both of us had known Mr. Britton, the language and learning scholar from England. Tom’s dissertation featured Britton; Rich had studied in Mr. Britton’s final course at the Bread Loaf School of English.

Near the end of the conference call one of Rich’s students asked, “So, when it comes to writing instruction in the secondary classroom, what's the number one priority, Tom?”

A moment of silence and then a chuckle: “Have ’em write a lot.”

All of us, veteran teachers and fourth-year university interns alike, have felt besieged at times as writing teachers. Whether conferring with one reluctant writer or managing 185 wired teenagers a day as they create digital life stories in space-age programs, our lives as teachers of writing can be a chaotic adventure of people and their individual processes.

Tom’s response above may seem glib, but honestly, it gets to the heart of both of our teaching practices. We suggest that you take a step back and identify, in plain terms, your own central beliefs about writing and the teaching of writing. Start with yourself, your words, and your own writing process.

To help in your self-study, we offer the “NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing” from the Writing Study Group of the National Council of Teachers of English (2004):

1. Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers.
2. People learn to write by writing.
3. Writing is a process.
4. Writing is a tool for thinking.
5. Writing grows out of many different purposes.
6. Conventions of finished and edited texts are important to readers and therefore to writers.
7. Writing and reading are related.
8. Writing has a complex relationship to talk.
9. Literate practices are embedded in complicated social relationships.
10. Composing occurs in different modalities and technologies.
11. Assessment of writing involves complex, informed, human judgment.

We would like to add a twelfth belief to this list: that teaching writing—as difficult and time-consuming as it is—can reconnect us with the reasons we joined the profession. One reason, of course, is the special privilege of entering into the lives and passions of our students through their writing. In effect, we ask, “Well, what is it like?” and they respond, “It’s like this.” We have both been sustained, and humbled, by these extraordinary acts of trust.

Thomas Newkirk
University of New Hampshire
Rich Kent
University of Maine
Looking Back to Look Forward

Thomas Newkirk

Thomas Newkirk is director of the New Hampshire Literacy Institutes and professor of English at the University of New Hampshire. Before teaching at the university level he taught high school in Boston, and he continues to work with high school English teachers. He has written and edited numerous books and essays about literacy, including The Performance of Self in Student Writing, which won the David Russell Award from the National Council of Teachers of English. His most recent work is Misreading Masculinity, which was featured in a PBS production of Michael Thompson’s Raising Cain.

We are in a period of unprecedented technological change that calls into question traditional ways of teaching writing. A whole new set of skills will be needed for students competing globally in the “flat world” of the twenty-first century. And the traditional organization of school itself—grading, taking subjects, the schedule of the day—will need to be changed. The very nature of writing is being transformed at a breathless rate…

I had actually planned to start this introduction with something futuristic like this, some projection of the great changes, driven by new technologies that will fundamentally alter the way we teach writing. It is exciting, after all, to imagine the time we live in as a crucial turning point in educational history. But before I indulged, I thought it might be useful to look backward, to sample the ideas of educators in my shoes at the beginning of the twentieth century who were trying to chart a new direction for teaching writing in high schools. So I spent several hours in the basement of the University of New Hampshire library with the journal School Review, which began publication in 1893 out of the University of Chicago, then a driving force in progressive education (John Dewey was a regular contributor). What, I asked myself, were these writers arguing for? What were they arguing against? And how relevant were these arguments for teaching in classrooms today?

This historical excursion can help us to get our bearings, to quiet for a moment the noise of futuristic rhetoric; by looking backward we can begin to sort out those permanent principles...
of writing instruction that have held up for centuries and the ways in which these principles need to be adapted in contemporary education. As I read through the brittle, yellowed pages of School Review, I was struck by the common ground I shared with the writers, and by the similarity of the obstacles that writing teachers then and now must deal with. It occurred to me that the challenge of the twenty-first century is likely to resemble the challenge of the twentieth: to cut through the sheer curricular clutter that causes us to lose sight of the real goal of writing instruction—to truly engage students in purposeful acts of composing.

What Is Writing/What Is English

By the time these articles were being written, English had become established as a subject, though reformers still often had to argue against the classical focus on Latin and claims that classical languages were superior at instilling “mental discipline.” But, as Samuel Thurber writes in 1894, “He who to-day claims a large place for English in a course of secondary studies finds himself wholly in harmony with the spirit of the times” (468). Writing a little more than a generation after the end of the Civil War, Thurber argued that instruction in English contributes to the formation of an American identity—“the aim of secondary English is to bring the individual mind into the closest possible touch and sympathy with the national mind” (471). This sense of national identity (and by extension racial identity) necessitated a focus on written expression in English and an Anglo-American canon of literature. The debate about what constituted “English” was also active (for example, Speech Communication broke off from English in the early twentieth century to become its own subject). Yet it is clear from these articles that writing was considered the central activity of the English class, or at the very least co-equal with reading literature; in fact, one of the major functions of reading literature was to provide models for writing. Adams Sherman Hill used English as almost synonymous with writing in his 1885 essay “English in the Schools,” which appeared in Harper’s Magazine.

If there is a key word for these educators it was habit, used in a similar way to fluency in contemporary instruction. In his widely read psychology text, William James devoted an entire chapter to habit, which he saw as essential to mental and character formation:

The more of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers will be set free for their proper work. There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision. (1961, 11–12)

F. A. Barbour built his pedagogy around this concept in his 1898 essay. He quotes F. W. Newman, the brother of Cardinal Newman: “No one will write well who has made a study of such matters when he sits down to write. All must previously have become an ingrained habit, perhaps without his being aware of it” (500). Writing instruction that focused on grammar, rules, and usage was worse than ineffective—it actually created a self-consciousness that interfered with writing.

Young people do not learn to write well by trying to apply rules of any text-book to their writing, but unconsciously rather. Good writing, like good speech, must become a matter of habit, a sort of second nature; it is to be acquired only by having good models in reading; by long continued practice upon subjects that interest the writer; and finally by the kindly, encouraging, and authoritative criticism of an efficient corps of teachers. (502)
Yet one senses that this stripped down conception of writing instruction faced considerable obstacles in its day (as it does in ours).

One obstacle was a college examination system that turned the writing class into test preparation; teachers lost their sense of agency and choice as they bent their instruction to “the dictation of authority” as represented in “the examination machinery.” Many of the examination prompts—as well as traditional writing topics—frequently required young writers to comment on moral issues, leading to a “falseness of tone” as they attempted to philosophize on these issues. Barbour notes that they typically began by stating that “such and such a virtue” was “one of the greatest blessings we enjoy.” He goes on to claim that effective, engaged writing can only come when students can choose topics relevant to their lives and interests:

If ever any spontaneity, freshness, life, power are to find their way into written pages of our high-school boys and girls, it will be when they write on subjects in which they take a natural and lively interest, subjects suggested by their investigations, their imagination, their reading,—subjects, finally, on which they have grown more or less eager to express their thoughts. (503)

Louise Bacorn similarly notes that engagement can only occur when the writer owns the writing situation:

When the student is the originator and owner of the situation, then it is his to deal with as he likes; it is his child, he naturally has the most tender and enduring interest in it. (1901, 299)

Or this from Adams Sherman Hill:

To the extent that a young writer works with a purpose to say something of his own, what he writes will have freshness, and will inspire interest in his subject and in him. To the extent that he fails to put himself into his work, he becomes what is known as a hack writer, a mere beast of burden, who serves as the common carrier for the thoughts of other men. (1885, 132)

Barbour quotes the great turn-of-the-century nature writer John Burroughs on the absolute importance of the emotional connection between writer and topic: “I must feel the thing first, and then I can say it; I must love the subject upon which I write, it must adhere to me, and for the time being become a part of me” (509).

To teach in this way, however, posed logistical problems that were also discussed in journal articles. The very first article in the first issue of English Journal, published in 1912, was titled “Can Good Composition Teaching Be Done Under the Current Conditions?” The first word, the first sentence, the first paragraph of the article was the single word, No. The sheer number of students to be taught by the English teacher meant that this intimate personal form of instruction placed a huge burden on English teachers. Seventy years later, Ted Sizer would write his classic, Horace’s Compromise, to describe exactly this dilemma.

I could continue to quote from these century-old articles, but I hope by now my point has been made. The basic principles of effective writing instruction were clearly articulated long before Don Murray or Peter Elbow began describing the writing process; in fact, Quintilian had them right when he was teaching the children of Roman emperors. I’ll wager that the major challenge of twenty-first century writing instruction will be similar to the challenge of twentieth-century writing instruction or first-century writing instruction—that is, to resist the forces that pull us away from genuinely helping students...
to engage in writing. The teaching of writing is difficult because there are so many institutional, commercial, and political forces that pull teachers away from the work that needs to be done. These can be as trivial as the fire codes that prohibited Rich from putting posters on the walls and from hanging student-made mobiles from the ceiling (I mean, has there ever been a case of a cinderblock-and-linoleum school set on fire by posters?).

**Normal Schooling**

For all the focus on reform of schools, I still believe there is an image of “normal schooling” that is implanted in the minds of administrators, parents, and the general public. In my second year of teaching in a terribly deprived urban school in Boston’s Roxbury district, I worked hard to find books that students could and would read—and I had some success. One day a group of students (thankfully not mine) started a small riot, pounding on lockers and yelling for students to leave the building. My class of tenth graders was reading, actually reading, Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. As the pounding and yelling continued, they kept at it—a wonderful tribute, I thought, to them, to Steinbeck, and to me. Suddenly, the headmaster, frustrated by his inability to halt the riot, poked his head in my door and said, “Mr. Newkirk, will you begin *teaching*!”

I’ve thought about that moment often. What my headmaster saw in that moment did not match an image of instruction that he took as normal. To fit that image I would have needed to be at the front of the classroom talking, passing on information that students would be held responsible for; it would lead to a test that would create grades. Students would be listening and taking notes. At times in this school, the teaching was almost a parody of this model: the head of the history department put notes on the board, which students copied, then on Friday he gave an open notebook test for which students copied their notes to answer the test questions. But this double-copying passed as instruction because it looked like teaching.

Technology and the Internet do not automatically work to alter this expectation for normal education; in fact, technology can reinforce it. For example, schools are increasingly purchasing software that enables teachers to post grades so that they can be accessible to parents. Parents using these systems will expect to see, for each subject, a string of numerical or letter grades, lots of them. Systems like this, however well-intended, may work against teachers who want to engage a student in long-term writing projects, who want to use narrative forms of evaluation, or who want to delay the grading of writing until the student has produced a body of work. Good writing teachers will try to finesse these expectations, I’m sure, but my point is that the system itself is built on the model of normal schooling.

Educational products can also reinforce the gravitational draw toward normal schooling. Indeed, the textbook is often seen as the center of a curriculum—which is viewed as a march through the textbook. To teach a writing class, it follows that you need a writing textbook, often with worksheets, a handbook, a spelling program, a vocabulary program, a book of writing prompts, and at the higher levels, a reader. These products, in turn, shape instruction; they promise to lift the burden of planning from the teacher’s shoulders, they are created by experts (so they say), and they provide an orderly pattern of work and assessment. Not coincidentally, they are also turn a profit for commercial publishers. Yet it has always seemed to me that the content of writing is minimal; the major goals could be written on the back of an envelope, and unless someone is selling envelopes,
the writing class should not be a big commercial market. The tools (that is, the materials) can easily become the masters.

There are other aspects of normal schooling I could mention. The concept of coverage can prevent in-depth work on writing projects. I recently reviewed my own state’s standards and came across this objective for sixth-grade social studies (bear in mind that this is one of many for that one subject):

Demonstrate a basic understanding of the origin, development, and distinctive characteristics of major ancient, classical, and agrarian civilizations including: Mesopotamian, Ancient Hebrew, Egyptian, Nubian (Kush), Greek, Roman, Gupta Indian, Han Chinese, Islamic, Byzantine, Olmec, Mayan, Aztec, and Incan Civilizations. (New Hampshire State Frameworks, Social Studies, 18)

This list verges on parody, but it reflects the tendency of learning objectives to proliferate; after all, they are usually committee documents that reflect the varied priorities of committee members. But the effect on instruction can be a compulsion to rush, to move on; rather than focusing the energy of instruction, curricular lists like this one only disperse it.

Writing instruction—and instruction in general—also suffers from the pernicious confusion of standards with standardization. The thinking goes something like this: if every teacher is doing the same thing, there is an equality in the educational product because students in every class are getting the same thing. In a fuzzy way, it is all about fairness. To be sure, some agreement about goals makes sense. One of my daughter’s middle school teachers, for example, once admitted that he was not good at teaching writing, so he didn’t do it. I could barely keep from asking, “You can make that choice?” But a healthy—and I would argue—a fair system allows teachers to use their passions, temperaments, and particular skills to create writing programs that they own. A fair system is one in which every teacher is working to his or her top potential, even if that instruction varies—as it will—from class to class. The argument about choice in writing can be applied to teaching. We can paraphrase Adams Sherman Hill: to the extent that teachers fail to put themselves into their work, they become beasts of burden, who serve as common carriers for the plans of others.

My point in all this is not that good writing instruction cannot be accomplished in secondary schools—it can. The chapters in this book show it can be done. But I want to suggest that there are deeply conservative trends in public schooling, that exist at an almost instinctive level (in images as I’ve argued), that can work against thoughtful writing instruction. It has been said that if a physician from 1900 visited a modern-day hospital, he would be stunned by the changes; but if an English teacher from 1900 visited a school today, he or she would feel strangely at home. It is naïve to imagine that these conservative forces will magically disappear in the twenty-first century, or that technology itself will make them obsolete. As Larry Cuban and David Tyack point out in their splendid book, Tinkering Toward Utopia, the twentieth century saw immense technological change—radio, television, movies, the telephone, the slide projector—all of which failed to transform the dominance of normal schooling.

**Dealing with Failure**

This book provides close-up looks at wonderful innovations in writing instruction: it shows how we might introduce new genres of writing like digital storytelling; it shows how writing can enter the community through service learning; it helps us imagine how we can reimagine what the essay is; it offers guidance for teaching students whose first language is not English; it
revisits the writing conference and components of the writing process; and much more. Collectively these chapters demonstrate that there is more to teaching than normal schooling and the inevitable five-paragraph theme on what a wonderful man Atticus Finch is.

I'd like to end this introduction with a topic we don't address—failure and the temperament teachers need to deal with it. Failure, it seems to me, is such an integral part of teaching that it's simply dishonest to pretend it doesn't exist, or that it doesn't have the potential to sap the confidence of teachers.

There's a story about the outstanding professional golfer, Ben Crenshaw, who would sometimes play with the varsity golfers at his alma mater, the University of Texas. Both Crenshaw and his UT partner bogeyed one hole, each missing a short putt for par. On the way to the next hole, the varsity golfer said, “I hope you don’t mind my asking, but what’s the difference between your game and mine?”

Crenshaw paused, then answered, “You know that bogey you just had. Is that bothering you?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Well, it’s not bothering me. That’s the difference.”

Crenshaw was not saying that the bogey didn’t matter to him, only that he could process this small failure without feeling discouragement or frustration that would carry on to the next hole. He could make a technical adjustment, if need be, but emotionally he remained on an even keel.

Failure is an integral part of teaching. It happens to some degree, every day, every class—a discussion that falls flat, workshop groups that don’t stay on task, the student with great writing potential who doesn’t try no matter what we do, the lesson that works wonderfully in second period but bombs in sixth period. When I began teaching in 1970, in an inner city Boston school, I was woefully underprepared, and failure was about all I experienced. I know in the pit of my stomach what it feels to try to maintain a sense of being a teacher in the face of unremitting difficulty. I know how easy it is to fall into a deadly cycle—failure leads to discouragement which leads to more failure, and perhaps ultimately to emotional disengagement, to going through the motions. Sadly, it happens.

From hard experience, from mistakes I have made, and from my work with teachers over almost three decades, I’ve come to some conclusions about ways of processing failure. One of the tendencies of late middle age (besides always forgetting where you parked your car) is the perpetual feeling that you have advice to give—which is what I will do.

**Failure is inevitable** There is simply no way that everything will work as planned, even for the most effective teacher. In this regard, it is important to have a realistic idea of what success looks like. It is a trap to imagine the successful teacher as profoundly charismatic, almost from another planet. Their students are never bored, never stare out the window, never digress to talk about what they saw on TV the night before. The writing of these students is not only better than that of your students; the students in these classes write better than you do. It’s a little like the teenage girl who feels bad about herself because she can’t look like the models in the slick magazines she buys. Well, the model doesn’t even look like the model; photographs, as we know, are digitally enhanced. She’s a fantasy, and often an unhealthy one.

When I have visited the classes of excellent teachers, I am struck by the small things that make up this excellence—the exact pacing, the sense of having a clear purpose for the
class, the appropriate and interesting selection of examples, the precision of explanations, and often a kind of slowness that creates a comfort level. Like most skillful performances, there is an economy, a lack of clutter. The teaching is thoughtful but not magical. It is crucial for all teachers, and particularly beginning teachers, to spend time in these classes; otherwise it is so easy to imagine these successful teachers as perfection itself.

**Process failure in a technical way**  One of my favorite quotes is by Marvin Minsky, an MIT innovator in cognitive science and artificial intelligence. He writes:

> Thinking is a process, and if your thinking does something you don't want it to, you should be able to say something microscopic and analytic about it, and not something enveloping and evaluating about yourself as a learner. The important thing in refining your thought is to try to depersonalize your interior; it may be all right to deal with other people in a vague global way—by having ‘attitudes’ toward them, but it is devastating if this is the way you deal with yourself. (Quoted in Bernstein 1981, 122)

This advice applies as well to teaching as it does to thinking. When something doesn’t work in teaching, there is, for most people, an inevitable sense of emotional disappointment. But the sooner we “depersonalize the interior” and think about the problem in a “microscopic and analytic way,” the sooner we learn from the experience and perhaps make changes. What exactly went wrong? Were the instructions unclear? Was the timing off? Did I rush things? Why was James so distracted today? Should students have come to response groups with something written? Or was it just an off day for everyone (we all have them)? This kind of problem-solving can draw us away from the kind of self-accusatory thinking—doubting your ability to teach—that can be so painful and debilitating.

**Cherish small victories**  In my first year of teaching, I sometimes staggered out of the building at the end of a day feeling completely spent. Nothing had prepared me for this kind of fatigue. On some days I’d reward myself with a hot fudge sundae at Brigham’s and try to review the day. “Something must have gone right,” I would try to tell myself. And usually something did—maybe one reluctant student who seemed a little more willing to work, the ninth graders who liked it when I read *Manchild in the Promised Land*, the journal one of my ninth graders, Keith Fields, kept on his own and let me read (I still have a copy of it). It kept me going.

It may be that our view of success is distorted by the movies. I know that in the early 1970s there were all those films where a teacher would meet a resistant class, and triumphantly, totally win them over. This may happen, but my guess is that excellence usually has a different look. It consists of the accumulation of small victories and the ability of the teacher to recognize and celebrate them.

**You need a team**  As teachers we can close our doors and try to deal with the complexities of teaching on our own. But this solitude can be punishing. My wise brother once explained to me his philosophy of coping with the emotional demand of his complex life; he established a nationwide company from scratch, had disagreements with the IRS that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, suffered a painful divorce, and like most members of our family, was subject to bouts of depression. The secret, he said, is that everyone needs a team. “It’s like NASCAR. You have to have all these people behind you that you count on. You just can’t do it by yourself. It’s too hard, too complex. There’s no great virtue in toughing it out.”
Seeking help and offering help should be part of the natural fabric of social groups because self-sufficiency is a myth. Teaching is just too demanding to go it alone.

Part of this team is, of course, one’s immediate family, but we need professional friends as well. Recent studies of friendship patterns in the United States show that we are less likely these days to have close friends outside the family as compared to previous generations. Beginning teachers often feel there is an awkward age gap that separates them from experienced teachers (older teachers also can feel that awkwardness). I believe that efforts to bridge that awkwardness pay off; it is important for beginning teachers to enter the social life of the school, attending baby showers, retirement dinners, attending conferences with experienced teachers, and participating in the wonderful writing project sites across the country.

I can’t say that I followed this advice when I began teaching, maybe through a combination of arrogance and shyness, but there was one older man, Tom Giachetto, a mechanical drawing teacher, who reached out to me. He lived on the North Shore and his route home took him close to my apartment on Beacon Hill. As we weaved through traffic on Storrow Drive, we’d talk about students we had in common. I had such a difficult time reading student behavior, determining what was disruptive—what I should let go, what I should laugh at—and he helped me sort things out. “He’s really a good kid. He just gets frustrated easily—you have to get to him fast.” This was the kind of advice I needed desperately. We came to the spot where Storrow Drive met Charles Street, and he stopped to let me off (at the absolutely most dangerous stopping point in Boston). Each ride was a great lesson about teaching, and the funny thing is, I don’t even think he was aware that he was teaching. He was just giving me a ride home.

Since coming to New Hampshire in 1977, I have regularly hiked Mt. Chocorua, a stunning mountain on the southern edge of the Whites. As I approach the trailheads on Route 16, I pass the summer home of William James, the great American psychologist and a leading proponent of pragmatism. From that home he had a wonderful view of the mountain and could easily walk out his front door to the same trails that I hike—Piper, Hammond, Liberty. I like the idea of walking the same ground that he walked a century ago, and I continue to be inspired by the vision of knowing what he and other American pragmatists developed in the latter part of the twentieth century. Much of this introduction is right out of their playbook.

Rich and I were even tempted to begin this collection with an epigram from one of James’ most famous students, Gertrude Stein: “There ain’t no answer. There ain’t gonna be any answer. There never has been an answer. That’s the answer.” The pragmatists rejected the belief in permanent truths, in big ideologies, in dogma and tradition, in top-down mandates that presumed to dictate behavior in particular situations. All of these had to be put to the test of actual experience. It’s a restless philosophy—we never arrive, we’re always moving. There “ain’t no answer” that we can accept once and for all. Pragmatism requires of us all an alertness to the situations we are in and a willingness to change. James expressed this view indelibly in a letter he wrote on June 7, 1899:

I am against bigness and greatness in all their forms, and with the invisible and molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, stealing in through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water…The bigger the unit you deal with, the hollower, the more brutal, the more mendacious is the life displayed. So I am against all big organizations as such, national ones first and foremost; against all big successes
and big results; and in favor of the eternal forces of truth which always work in the individual
and immediately unsuccessful ways, underdogs always, till history comes, after they are long
dead, and puts them on the top. (Quoted in Menand 2001, 372)

Bigness is even more a force in education today. Big reforms. Big textbooks. Big research. Big
business. Yet I suspect real, lasting change will occur on a small scale, in the “crannies” of
the educational system, in the micro-experiments of the teaching day. That, I suspect, will
be the challenge of the twenty-first century.

Works Cited

Hopkins, Edwin. 1912. “Can Good Composition Teaching Be Done Under the Current Conditions?”
English Journal 1: 1.
Press.
and Giroux.
works/k-126.htm.
Thurber, Samuel. 1894. “English in Secondary Schools: Some Considerations as to Its Aims and Its
Thank you for sampling this resource.

For more information or to purchase, please visit Heinemann by clicking the link below:


Use of this material is solely for individual, noncommercial use and is for informational purposes only.