Teaching Authentic Language Arts in a Test-Driven Era

Arthur T. Costigan

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Most pre-service education students are enthusiastic about the progressive, constructivist, and student-centered theory and practice advocated in many teacher education programs and by the National Council of Teachers of English. Yet, in actual day-to-day practice, teachers often have trouble thinking of ways in which such student-centered and constructivist practices in literacy instruction can be implemented in classrooms that are increasingly driven by high-stakes tests, increased accountability, and mandated and even "teacher-proof" scripted curricula. *Teaching Authentic Language Arts in a Test-Driven Era* provides a powerful and much-needed counterargument to the assumption that test-driven curricula preclude meaningful instruction and authentic student engagement within a Language Arts curriculum. Providing teachers with the theoretical stances and pedagogical tools to develop a Language Arts practice that can be personally rewarding as well as beneficial to students, *Teaching Authentic Language Arts in a Test-Driven Era* empowers teachers to be effective even within the confines of a testing- and accountability-driven curriculum.

Arthur T. Costigan is Assistant Professor of Education at Queens College, City University of New York.

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ARTHUR T. COSTIGAN

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To Rick

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Series Editor's Foreword

Arthur Costigan begins the first chapter of *Teaching Language Arts in a Test-Driven Era* by saying, "This book is about how to engage in best practices in Language Arts instruction in an educational era that is increasingly driven by high-stakes tests and increased accountability." Then, drawing on his decade-plus experience as a New York City teacher and another decade as a teacher educator, Costigan delivers on the promise—seeking to bridge what is too often seen as an unbridgeable divide between quality teaching and survival in this era of testing. Anyone looking for a stirring defense of the current high-stakes testing and accountability movements will be sorely disappointed in this volume. But equally anyone seeking yet another contribution to the growing volume of work given over to complaint about the current era of testing will also be disappointed. Costigan is no fan of tests. But, like them or not, teachers have to survive in schools that do a lot of testing of their students. Costigan's goal is not to complain but rather to help find ways to support teachers in surviving and, indeed, thriving in the current climate so that—even more importantly—their student can survive and thrive in interesting and deeply engaging experiences with writing and with literature that will help them, as students, connect with the excitement of learning *and equally* pass the tests they are mandated to pass to receive their diplomas and go on to further educational opportunities.

No field has been more at the forefront of the testing and accountability movement than English/Language Arts. Different states and the federal government test and call for more tests in many different areas. But everyone, it seems, tests students' basic ability

to read and write and understand literature. In one way, this focus makes absolute sense. As long as schooling in the United States remains focused on the ability to read and comprehend then ability in this area is foundational to success in every other field of academic endeavor and, conversely, problems in this area will quickly become problems in every aspect of school. But the importance of the issue does not answer that most basic question all teachers ask—"What works?" Costigan, however, does offer answers to that question. And he also frames the question in a larger discussion of "The Grammar of Politics" asking not only what will work but why our very discussion of language has become so politicized so that, for example, phonics and grammar are considered conservative and whole language is liberal. Indeed, this volume helps us and our students understand what it will take to survive in the middle of these debates.

In chapter 4 Costigan tells the stories of two teachers and uses them to help us understand the division between what is often quite artificial school-type writing—writing that is often specifically focused on test-prep—as opposed to "real world" or "authentic" writing. One of these teachers is committed to creative and sometimes quite messy approaches to engaging students in the process of writing. The second teacher is much more directive, teaching students how to write the kinds of essays that are expected in high-stakes tests. But the second teacher also notes that "the more she pushes her test preparation curriculum, the less interested the students seem to be, and their abilities have reached a plateau that she feels is unsatisfactory." It is clear from his telling of their different approaches which teaching style Costigan favors. His report on sharing these two teacher stories with his students in teacher preparation programs is troubling, however. Most of his students said of the first teacher's work "Well, this would be good if you have the extra time for creative writing in class, but we have to prepare the students for the state exams." At this point, Costigan has found a significant problem in contemporary teacher preparation. If those of us who educate teachers have created an atmosphere in our own classrooms where boring "drill and kill" instruction is what our students think is the only thing that will work with their students, we have created an institutional structure of almost guaranteed failure. Many people—certainly Costigan and myself—believe that drill and kill is actually a sure recipe for test failure. Who is going to learn something well enough to pass a test if they are bored out of their minds with the learning process? But, even more sobering, if the work of Costigan's second teacher is the only approach we are preparing our students to offer to their students then we are creating a situation in which, even if they pass the tests, a generation of young people are likely to hate literature . . . and history . . . and mathematics . . . and science, etc. because all of these subjects that can be so lively and so enriching in their lives have been presented to them in the most discouraging terms imaginable. And that, far more than any problems with high-stakes tests themselves, would represent an ultimate failure in American education.

In the end, Costigan's approach is clear. He says:

> I would like to point out, however, that the more involved students are with the real issues of contemporary society, the more their writing is likely to be rich, engaging, and, yes, even free from errors. I am not being naïve when I point out that doing real writing has a way of eliminating errors and making students pay attention to communicating the best way that they can, if only because they begin caring what they write, rather than adhering to imposed formulas.

This is so much more positive an approach than many offered today. It deserves our consideration and that of those future teachers who study with us.

Of course, every reader is going to find things in this volume with which to argue. Is Costigan, after all, being naïve? Is Costigan, in spite of himself, too focused on passing the tests? Will the average student in the average classroom respond with the enthusiasm for learning to write and read that Costigan describes? We can investigate these questions and ask our students to consider them. Nevertheless this volume provides a way to engage future English/Language Arts teachers in the most pressing and passionate debates of the field today while at the same time offering them some of the most practical and immediately useful ways to approach their teaching that one can imagine. I am pleased that this volume can take its place in Routledge's *Transforming Teaching* series.

James W. Fraser
Transforming Teaching Series Editor
Professor, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development
New York University

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Surviving and Thriving in a Test- and Accountability-Driven Culture

> We are recording the individual characteristics of every single member of the nation onto a little card . . . .We are proud that we can contribute to such a task, a task that provides the physician of our . . . body politic with the material [he needs] for his examination, so that our physician can determine whether, from the standpoint of the nation's health, the data thus arrived at correlate in a harmonious, that is, healthy, relationship—or whether diseased conditions must be cured by corrective interventions . . .
>
> —Quote about the use of an early computer by the Third Reich (US Holocaust Memorial Museum, www.ushmm.org)

Note on terms: This book uses the term 'Language Arts' throughout for the Language Arts and English curriculum typically found in middle and high schools, grades seven through twelve in the United States.

Listening to New Teachers

This book is about how to engage in best practices in Language Arts instruction in an educational era which is increasingly driven by high-stakes tests and increased accountability. For almost two decades, politicians, the media, the business community, and various educational foundations have maintained that there is something radically wrong with education in the United States and that teachers, schools, and students possess glaring deficits in their learning. In the past decade or so, the stakes have become high, particularly because of the way the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA),

entitled *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) (US Congress, 2001) has been implemented. Failing schools are put on warning or decertified if not enough students pass tests. New teachers are forced to teach in certain ways under high levels of supervision. Tenure is being denied and teachers are threatened with job loss because their students do not do well on tests. Of course the NCLB-driven test and accountability affects schools where students are poor, immigrant, non-native speakers, or of color, but it is fair to say that for all the testing and accountability movement one of the most important factors in teaching today (Costigan & Crocco, 2004; McNeil, 1988, 2000; Popham, 2001; Sacks, 1999; Thomas, 2005). The underperforming schools I have visited are now driven almost exclusively by a test preparation curriculum, frequently using scripted or "teacher-proof" curricula. And I know of schools in wealthy areas with high test scores, who are expected to achieve even higher scores by pushing their students to do more, faster. In the English and Language Arts curriculum in particular, these effects have been widespread as Language Arts, along with mathematics, is seen as the linchpin of student achievement.

This book comes out of my 13 years teaching in New York City public school, much of it just as the testing and accountability movement was beginning in earnest. It also comes from over ten years of work teaching and mentoring new English Language Arts teachers. In recent years, the preservice and beginning teachers have been asking me for help in how to negotiate a teaching practice that they see as personally and professionally rewarding and that is beneficial for their students. Even for experienced professionals, teaching is *always* a challenge, but it is even more so in this high-stakes era. The whole orientation of this book is that teachers, whether new or experienced, do not have to give up best practices in the Language Arts curriculum, they do not have to halt their organic, experiential, and reality-based development into the profession, and they do not have to teach in ways that they see as counterintuitive or even harmful for their students. The argument of this book is that "teaching for the test" is simply ineffective and counterproductive, but that an authentic reading and writing curriculum can be the best preparation for Language Arts tests.

Research into the effects of our NCLB-directed culture reveals a complicated situation (Rex & Nelson, 2004). Language Arts teachers typically find "the legislation confusing, the implementations baffling, and the effect on the practicing and pre-service teachers disheartening" (Fleischer & Fox, 2004, p. 99), often creating a feeling of being "lost at sea" (Kaufman *et al*., 2002; Zancanella & Noll, 2004). The temptation for us is to divide our time between a curriculum we see as the real stuff of reading and writing—the very reason we became Language Arts teachers—and a specifically test preparation curriculum that we do because we simply have to. Not only do we see test preparation as an intrusion into the authentic curriculum we feel we should be doing, most of us find the test preparation activities we actually do relatively ineffective. To new teachers in particular, things often seem dire, as they do more and more test preparation and see diminishing returns. The teachers I talk to feel their job is becoming unrewarding

and unwieldy, and their students become more disaffected as the influence of testing increases. The essential theme of this book is that it doesn't have to be this way.

Over a decade or so, I've interviewed hundreds of teachers, both alone and in groups, in an attempt to research and understand what leads them to thrive in teaching (Costigan, 2002, 2004, 2005a,b). Alone, and with fellow researcher Margaret Crocco, I've interviewed alternatively certified teachers as well as those in traditional teacher preparation programs (Costigan & Crocco, 2004; Crocco & Costigan, 2006). Here, I'd like to introduce you to just one, Michael. Like so many of my education students, he is a smart and talented new teacher. However, when he began teaching, he was given ninth grade classes who had done poorly on one single English Language Arts (ELA) test. He was forced to use a scripted program that the district had bought and mandated new teachers to use. In one conversation Michael articulates what so many new teachers have been telling me:

> The feeling in the school is that we, the teachers, all entered this profession for all the right reasons. I did not become a teacher for the money or the time off. I felt that I had something to offer young people and I would do my best to impart what knowledge I have accumulated over the years to them . . . . [Through earning a masters in education] I have been told that I am an expert in the field of education. Yet, I am treated as if I do not know how best to attend to the needs of my students. I am handed mandated curricula, as if I lacked the ability to assemble my own. I am told how to arrange the desks in my classroom. I am told how to tell my students to quiet down . . . I am told that I must have certain artifacts in my classroom. I am told how to structure my lessons. I am told how to comment on a student's paper. I am treated as if I were incapable of doing these things on my own.

Like most of the teachers I've interviewed over the years, Michael is not against accountability or standards. Far from it. Universally, teachers *want* accountability, both for themselves and their students. However, he does see the accountability system imposed on him as contrary to his view of teaching as an autobiographical and organic process of personal and professional growth:

> Teaching is not formulaic. There is not one way to teach. Assuming so is foolhardy . . . How are we supposed to teach students to develop their own voices or to think outside the box if we, the teaching community, are prohibited from doing just that? Teaching is an evolutionary process. Teachers develop over time, through exploring the craft, learning from one another and trying new and unique methods to get their ideas across. Teachers need to have that freedom to explore their craft. Without it they will become stagnant. There is no room for improving your craft if you are not given the opportunity to practice your craft in a way that you are comfortable with. Teachers need the freedom to be individuals.

In his first years from one to five administrators came into his room—several times every day!—to see that he complied with almost minute-by-minute teaching mandates. His room had to be organized a certain way, he had to lecture for ten minutes, give students silent reading for 50 minutes of an extended period. He had to teach "balanced literacy," a questionable, if official, approach of his district. Even his bulletin boards had to be kept updated with "perfect" samples of student writing.

After his second year of teaching, Michael was given tenure in the system. This means that he could refuse to teach the scripted program and that he could begin to experiment and develop his own teaching style. Fortunately for Michael, his administration quickly recognized his considerable talents and began giving him the autonomy he needed to teach well. You see, the administration recognized that, when left on his own, Michael did better than when he was closely supervised. Unfortunately, Michael's experience is all too rare. So many new and experienced teachers are not given the autonomy to survive and thrive. In his third year, Michael is enjoying teaching and plans to continue to do so for quite a while.

This book is an attempt to engender a conversation with you about how to thrive in a test- and accountability-driven neoconservative educational era. Before we begin the following chapters, which directly discuss the realities and of teaching today, and provide suggestions for best practices in an era of testing, let's look at some recent history of why things are as they are now, and how they got that way.

The Jury is Out

On August 5, 1981, under the provisions of Part D of the General Education Provisions Act (P.L. 90–247 as amended; 20 U.S.C. 1233 *et seq.*) and the Federal Advisory Committee Act (P.L. 92–463; 5 U.S.C. Appendix I), the National Commission on Excellence in Education was formed with the mandate, among others, "to review and synthesize the data and scholarly literature on the quality of learning and teaching in the nation's schools, colleges, and universities, both public and private, with special concern for the educational experience of teen-age youth" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, Appendix A). This resulted two years later in the publication of the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. This document was created at the height of the conservative political revival signified by then President Ronald Reagan (1981–1989). During this time, communism was still a threat, Japan's economy and educational system seemed to be eclipsing that of the United States, and a soon to be unified Europe appeared to continue to overshadow American education, particularly in math and science. The document is full of dire predictions about the thorough inadequacy of schooling in the United States. It reported that students chose to take easy electives, that teachers came from the least smart group of college graduates and were unprepared and unqualified to teach "rigorous" courses, and that, overall, too much time in school was wasted. In short, the document argues that the sheer mediocrity of education then found in the United States compromised our national economic health.

This document is important for its overall theoretical stance: Education is primarily for personal and national economic success. This relying on education to cure social ills and advance society is a curiously American phenomenon (Clark & Florio-Ruane, 2001) not found in other post-industrial countries. Contrary to the European tradition, in the United States, education is not necessarily a value in itself; it is valued as a means for social and economic success, both for individuals and for society as a whole (Johnson, 1995; Hofstadter, 1962).

It's fair to say that that document had almost no effect in most high schools in the mid-1980s and through most of the 1990s. Since then, the United States has had more economic ups than downs, we haven't fallen apart because our young people are mis- or under-educated, and Japan and a unified Europe have not displaced the financial and political hegemony of the United States. However, the thinking behind *A Nation at Risk* is more alive than ever. This document was both a symptom and a result of a neoconservative movement in politics and education which continues today. The logical extension of this type of thinking, which caused *A Nation at Risk*, resulted almost two decades later with *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). Under the impetus of the George W. Bush administration, there was finally muscle behind an education reform movement driven by politicians and educational foundations, who sought "scientific" educational reforms driven by testing and accountability.

Here I might digress to point out that test-driven reforms may likely continue in the United States *whoever* comes to power, be they liberals or conservatives. I interviewed teachers on a visit to England in 1996 and they were dismayed that their then liberal government did nothing to revoke the test-driven reforms of the conservative Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990). In the United States, there has been no uprising against the test-driven nature of reforms by political liberals, although there has been criticism of funding and implementation. Furthermore, overall, Americans are fairly comfortable with student testing as a means to improve schools (Johnson & Immerwahr, 1994). What almost everyone can agree on, however, is that reforms driven solely by student achievement on tests create innumerable and substantial problems.

Whereas *A Nation at Risk* was seen as a wake-up call, NCLB has had very real effects, both intentional and unintentional. On the surface, the law was received as a good thing. The US Department of Education explains it thus:

> *No Child Left Behind* is designed to change the culture of America's schools by closing the achievement gap, offering more flexibility, giving parents more options, and teaching students based on what works . . . Under the act's accountability provisions, states must describe how they will close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency. They must produce annual state and school district report cards that inform parents and communities about state and school progress. Schools that do not make progress must provide supplemental services, such as free tutoring or after-school assistance; take

> corrective actions; and, if still not making adequate yearly progress after five years, make dramatic changes to the way the school is run.
>
> (www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/index.html)

This seems reasonable and looks good. However, what the law and its supporters says it does, is not what has happened, and there have been very real intended and unintended effects for teachers and students (Crocco & Costigan, 2006). Many see the law as underfunded, punitive to communities which are poor, non-native English speaking, immigrant, or of color. The result in the schools I have visited and observed, both in wealthy and poor areas, is that they have been changed radically by this law and the increasing role of tests used to place students, evaluate and even license teachers, and permit or bar students from advancing or graduating. Although NCLB is long on accountability and testing, it is short on money provided for real change.

At best, the jury is out about these national reforms (Klein, 2006). Nationwide, gaps between Hispanics and African Americans on the one hand and Whites on the other are not narrowing, and even in some cases growing. The Educational Testing Service, the US Assistant Secretary of Education, and organizations such as The Education Trust and the Thomas B. Fordham foundation, among many other pro-NCLB and pro-testing reformers, acknowledge that poor and so-called minority students are doing very poorly, and that the so-called achievement gap is as at least as steadfast as ever (Dillon, 2006). In 2006, in my home state of New York, 228 high schools were identified as needing improvement, 11.31 percent are defined as Schools in Need of Improvement, and 12.79 percent of schools are labeled Schools Requiring Academic Progress (Woolf, 2006a; Golden, 2006). Although the law requires that a qualified teacher is in every school, this has not happened. In fact, there is a severe teacher shortage, which is actually a turnover—with close to 50 percent of new teachers leaving the profession or migrating to well funded districts within the first three years (Ingersoll, 2003a,b). Although states report that the majority of their teachers are "highly qualified," this is a highly optimistic interpretation of what is happening. Public school teachers in the nation's richest areas continue to be more qualified than those in the poorest despite the stated intent of NCLB. The US Department of Education reports that, in 39 states, the chances of finding teachers who know their subjects are better where parents' incomes are highest (King, 2006). To attract new teachers, many states are offering sign-on bonuses, quicker alternative routes to certification, and even subsidized housing. However, these enticements to recruit teachers do not translate into *retaining* those very same teachers.

When all else fails in comprehending a phenomenon, we look to where the money is. Reform which is driven by testing is seen as relatively inexpensive. Changing the conditions under which teachers work, giving them smaller classes, fewer outside classroom "building assignments" and non-teaching chores, and allowing time and providing opportunities for conferencing with each other and with their students, is very expensive. This has resulted in what Andy Hargreaves (2000) calls an "intensification" of teaching:

> First there is the implementation of simplified technological solutions to curriculum change that compensate teachers for their lack of time by providing them with prepackaged curricula rather than changing the basic conditions under which inadequate preparation time exists . . . Solutions to change and improvement focus on simplified translation of externally imposed expertise rather than on the complex evolution of internally developed and shared improvements.
>
> (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 119)

Of course testing is expensive, though less so than smaller classes, more resources, and better facilities. NCLB has been variously nicknamed the "No Corporation Left Behind" or the "No Dollar Left Behind" law. CNN (2006) reports that this law "has also benefited an industry of vendors, who collect public money and help schools meet the law's requirements. Revenues for products and services sold to public schools hit almost $22 billion in 2004–05." In New York City, I've seen this in "hard to staff" schools that use a scripted curriculum so costly—about $45 per novel unit per teacher—that few teachers are trained in its use, and administrators and teachers have to borrow or photocopy materials (Costigan, 2005a).

Because so much money is being made by testing companies, textbook publishers, and creators of scripted "teacher-proof lessons," there are growing signs of financial irregularities (Berger, 2006). A much awaited inspection of the federally sponsored Reading First found that "federal education officials may have steered the grant application process for the 1 billion a year initiative to see that particular reading programs, instructional approaches and particular teaching methodologies were favored" (Manzo, 2006). The NCLB law and its effects create a way of looking at schools that not only focuses on but thrives on failures. In short, the deficit model of education always maintains that students will never be up to what tests ask them to do, and it may be that the law is actually a step towards privatizing schooling, implementing vouchers, and destroying teachers' unions; in short, to turn education over to private corporations as we have seen recently with the governments' approach to natural disasters, war, and the "starve the beast" approach to Social Security (Moe & Bracey, 2006).

All this is certainly distressing, but the human cost of NCLB reforms has been enormous, particularly for poor, immigrant, and non-native English speaking students. *Teacher Magazine* (Wills, 2006) reports that, in 2005, half of public school students lived in the 19 states with exit exams, and by 2012, 70 percent of states will likely have exit exams. Recently, in California about 10 percent of the class of 2006 did not pass the state's high school exit exam in time for graduation, and half of these had completed all coursework except the exam. In all likelihood, high-stakes exit tests increase the numbers of students who do not graduate with high school diplomas that guarantee at least basic reading and math skills (Wills, 2006).

In my home of New York City, as in an increasing number of districts nationwide, the school system is directly run by the mayor and the chancellor, both from the business

world and having no teaching experience. The hidden assumption is that the business community can better manage education than the educational community itself. The *New York Sun* (Woolf, 2006b), a self-defined conservative paper, reports on what happened at a local school which had made "great strides" in test scores even when nearly every child was so poor that he or she qualified for a free lunch. The mayor visited the school in 2005 to tout the great gains his pro-testing reforms had made. The situation was different a year later:

> This was an event of significance, taking place as the campaign for Mr. Bloomberg's re-election was heating up. The announcement of the "historic gains" in reading scores was so powerful, that for all intents and purposes, it removed education as an issue that could be pursued by the mayor's Democratic opponents . . . It is unlikely that the mayor or Mr. Klein will return to PS 33 this year. That is because this school has now become a symbol of the reality of Children First, not really reform but rather a massive, unprecedented public relations effort with no real achievement behind it . . . Virtually all the gains of the previous year at PS 33 have been wiped about, according to the latest test scores released . . . While third-grade scores in the school rose by a respectable 4.8%, the results in the fourth and fifth grades were disastrous. Nearly 36% fewer fourth grade students passed this year than last year, while in the fifth grade the pass rate plummeted to 41.9% from 85%. So much for miracles.
>
> (Woolf, 2006b)

Unfortunately, the *Sun*, like much of the media, disparages what most Language Arts teachers value as best practices. If NCLB-directed testing is problematic in its reliance on testing and its underfunded implementation, still, most politicians, businesspeople, and those in the media favor lectures, memorization, testing, reading for "plot" and "theme," in short, learning as the acquisition of knowledge which is necessary for economic and social success in the United States today. *A Nation at Risk*, NCLB, and the whole neoconservative movement is against the best practices in Language Arts theory and practice you're likely to read about in the publications of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), or to encounter at the best schools of education in the country. The student-centered, constructivist, authentic learning and assessment most of us value, is simply seen by reformers as "making friends and playing in the park" rather than real learning (Woolf, 2006b).

However, the memorization-, fact-, skills and drills-, and testing-based curriculum which seems so commonsense to political and business-based educational reformers has many serious unintended effects. Of course, as we shall see in this book, poor kids suffer the most. It is they who get tested the most, it is they whose schools are under constant threat of decertification, and it is they who are taught by out-of-license or inexperienced teachers. However, consider for a moment what the testing- and accountability-based curriculum does to wealthy kids. They too experience schooling as a relentless

successions of tests to which is added the relentless "grade chase" (Mowrer, 1996) and attending numerous expensive and dubious test preparation tutoring programs, all to get in a succession of the "best" schools for future social and academic success. We've known since the 1960s that the best and brightest students are not necessarily the ones who do well in school, and those who do well in school primarily are good at working at unrewarding tasks, the purpose of which is not quite clear except to get into a good college and get a good job (Coleman, 1961). We also know that students who achieve high grades in classes and on tests don't necessarily know much about the material studied (Gardner, 1991), and have a frankly unrewarding experience (Johnson, Farkas, & Bers, 1997). A host of research indicates that, faced with a curriculum they cannot relate to, students in poor neighborhoods are simply more likely to drop out, and students in rich schools are likely to have little love of learning for its own sake, or to become cynical manipulators of an unfair system (Adelson & Douvan, 1966; Aldridge, 1969/1970; Bronfenbrenner, 1970; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000; Friedenberg, 1963; Golden, 2006; Goodman, 1956/1960; Henry, 1963; Kenniston, 1960/1965). I also need to mention that a test-driven curriculum produces so much anxiety that it encourages cheating, not only by students, but by teachers (Gootman, 2006; Levitt & Dubner, 2005; Popham, 2001). It is easy to blame anxious, confused, and overwhelmed teachers for not having the moral fiber to avoid tampering with the numbers, or giving illegal assistance to students, but the fact remains that most teachers and students think that tests are inherently unfair and that too much depends on any single test.

I am definitely *not* advocating cheating on tests. Not only is that unethical, you will end your career, and you can end in jail. However, this book argues that these distressing realities of our test-oriented curricula do not have to overwhelm what we Language Arts teachers know to be best practices in education. Contrary to the cold, impersonal, and so-called "scientific" test-based education reforms, we know that our curriculum is based on the humanities—the ineffable and essential things that makes us human. We studied English, Liberal Arts, and the Humanities because we know that reading and writing is about *people*, about human issues, the complex choices and decisions we make, and about encountering the big unsolvable issues of simply being humans on the planet earth. We read novels and write poems and watch plays because we are inextricably involved with simply being *human*. This is something that test-based reformers not only ignore, but devalue. It is not overly romantic or naïve to say that the relationship we establish with our students, and the learning communities we try to engender, is the heart and core of the Language Arts reading, writing, and speaking curriculum. This book is about how we *can* keep our integrity and our passion as Language Arts teaching in an era of test-based reforms and can continue to teach students by developing relationships with them (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Fried, 1995; Johnson, 2005; Liston & Garrison, 2004; Moore Johnson *et al*., 2004; Nieto, 2003).

About this Book

The above paragraphs are an attempt to clarify the issues that you, as a future or current Language Arts teacher, already have observed or experienced, as well as to show that you are not alone in your perceptions and concerns. The following chapters of this book are written not only to lend clarity about today's teaching situation, but to actively demonstrate theories and practices that can assist students to do well on tests. The central argument of each chapter is that a solely test preparation curriculum is, surprisingly, highly ineffective for preparing students to do tests well. Rather, best practices which encourage sound teaching and engaged learning are the best preparation for tests, that is *if* careful consideration is done about when to link authentic learning with the types of information and skills tests require. This book illustrates that "careful consideration."

Each of the book's chapters is arranged on certain themes that bear on the realities of teaching Language Arts today.

This chapter sets the stage for the book. Chapter 2, "Constructivist Controversies," sheds light on two conceptions of teaching that situate what Language Arts teachers attempt to do in contrast with testing. Chapter 3 discusses writing as a process and how authentic writing can be the best preparation for testing. Chapter 4 examines the reading curriculum and explains how various theories of reading enhance or diminish possibilities for enhancing student reading abilities. Chapter 5 explains the differences between symbolic assessment, the type used on tests, and authentic assessment, which arises out of actual student achievement. Chapter 6 advocates types of classroom theory and practices that do not appear to be of benefit for tests. It argues, on the contrary, that aesthetic education, drama, and exploratory talk are highly effective for engaging students and for preparing them for tests. Chapter 7 looks at social justice as the heart of why we became teachers and why we continue to teach. It links our notions of social justice with empowering students to understand and negotiate their way through social, cultural, and political realties. The final chapter, chapter 8, summarizes themes of this book particularly in light of the decision to become a teacher and to relate in meaningful ways with your students. It ends with some possibilities for an integrated or "intertextual" classroom. Each chapter begins with a Chapter Overview, which provides a summary of key themes addressed. Additionally, each chapter—such as this one—ends with a Thinking Things Through section to enhance open ended and thoughtful engagement with the theories and practices presented.

So, to the readers of this book, Welcome!

Thinking Things Through

As most "thinking things through" sections of this book, these suggested activities can be done alone, with a partner, or in a group, either verbally or in writing, either as a classroom activity with other preservice or new teachers, or as part of self reflection or a study group.

1. If you had to write a 100- to 150-word statement of your position on testing, what would you say? How would you incorporate the fact that most students in most states are tested in middle and high schools, not only for placement on a "level" or grade, but for exiting a grade or graduating middle or high school? How do you fit your theories of teaching and learning with the testing requirements of your school, district, or state?
2. How do your testing and curriculum experiences as a student compare with the experiences of the students you now teach or will soon teach? How did you create your beliefs about testing when you were a student, and how does this compare with what your students experience now? What resistances or concerns do you have about testing? How will this play out in your teaching?
3. How has testing infiltrated the school in which you are observing, or in which you are student teaching, or now teaching? Make a list of the specific demands testing places on (1) teachers and (2) students. How reasonable are these expectations? How can you meet them?
4. Interview three to five students about testing. What are their thoughts and feelings? How has testing helped or hindered their emotions and thoughts about schooling? How do they understand testing in light of schooling?
5. Write a poem (you can do this with others) about testing. Read the poem out loud. What does it tell you of your personal (or collective) understanding of testing? What are your feelings about testing? Do you wish to replicate these feelings in your own teaching?

two

Constructivist Controversies

Asking students to do a simple but artificial task is more difficult than asking them to do a complex but real task.

—Author

Process *is* content.

—Anonymous

When the horse dies, dismount!

—Cavalry saying

Overview

This chapter presents the basic dichotomy between two differing philosophies and practices of Language Arts instruction. One focus, the "commonsense," transmissive tradition or the "pipeline theory," stresses teaching and the presentation of information and learning as the accumulation of information and the exercising of discrete skills. Such a focus on the content area seems to many in education to be the only way to prepare students for standardized examinations and high-stakes tests. However, direct instruction and the "developmental lesson plan," focusing, as it does, on formulaic writing and plot- and theme-based reading, tends to alienate students from active engagement with reading and writing. Another stance, the uncommonsense (Mayher, 1990) or constructivist focus, centers on how students actively construct meaning for

themselves. This chapter argues that this progressive stance engages students with authentic reading and writing practices. Though dismissed by many who favor test-based reforms as overly subjective and non-rigorous, the student-centered curriculum actually values the content of the Language Arts curriculum and sees it as enhancing active student engagement with reading and writing.

Two Lesson Plans—Two Curricula

I have a hard task in this book in two ways. First, I must demonstrate that a student-centered approach is best practice in Language Arts curriculum. Not only that, secondly I need to show that classroom teaching that really engages students is the best preparation for student success on the tests they will encounter. A corollary of this is that a direct "teaching to the test" curriculum is not only ineffective, but likely to make students dislike reading and writing. It also creates a reading and writing situation in the classroom that looks nothing like reading and writing in the real world. Not only that, but a direct test preparation curriculum actually *decreases* student performance on high-stakes tests. When I started teaching, I taught as I was taught, as a traditional teacher, stressing the "high culture" of "great literature" through a New Critic approach of thematic analysis through "close reading" (Britzman, 1986; Mayher, 1990; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). However, over the years I became dissatisfied with this practice, which was simply ineffective in reaching my urban students. Over the years, I learned constructivist practices through a conversation I developed with other teachers, through reading current research, and through many books, scholarly articles, and workshops and presentations in organizations such as NCTE (www.NCTE.org). Unfortunately, this student-centered approach is not part of the educational discourse found in the media, or understood by politicians and test-based reformers, or by those who implement No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in local school districts. Student-centered constructivism is a *conversation*, a practice, not a set of rules that can be easily presented and apprehended (Britzman, 1991; Mayher, 1990). I believe that this approach engages students authentically with real reading and writing practices and, through that engagement, enhances their performance on the tests they are likely to encounter. My task in this book is to make some connection between the authentic or organic ways students learn to read and write, and the artificial or formulaic ways they need to do this on high-stakes tests.

To begin this conversation, I'd like to look at traditional so-called "direct instruction," or the "developmental lesson." This exists in many forms, but the elements usually remain the same nationwide (Cuban, 1984; Brown, 1993). When my education students ask me to show them how to write "the" lesson plan, this is usually what they mean. In 7–12 Language Arts classrooms, the developmental lesson plan, using the traditional methods of "talk and chalk" or "Socratic questioning," with its two objectives, aim, development, and applications sections, is designed so that the students "get" a work of art. The idea is that, if a teacher can have her students understand plot elements, poetic devices, and the "theme" or message of a work, not only has she done her job, but she has

prepared her students in the best way for the tests she is likely to encounter. However, I don't believe this is true.

It took me a long time of teaching—about five years—to abandon this approach. However, in my authoritarian school, I did use the mandated developmental lesson format. It was the only type of learning that the principal and administrators really understood. However, as I began to open myself to conversations with constructivist and student-centered practices, I "adapted" my lesson plans quite liberally when I closed my door! When I was observed, usually the administrator was happy with my class, as real learning was taking place, even if it was a deviation from the developmental lesson plan. Most school administrators act in good faith. They were once teachers themselves, and they know good teaching and deep student learning when they see it. However, as the developmental lesson has achieved such a canonical status in so many areas, and is incorrectly seen as a way to prepare students for tests, it's worth examining it right away. As you read it, consider if this is the best way to prepare a student for a test.

The Developmental Lesson Plan

- *Instructional Objectives (IOs)*. Typically there are two of these. Often confused with the "Aim," these are the goals or objectives of the lesson, what the students are to know at the end of the period.
- *Standards/Rubrics*. Common now, but unknown to me years ago, frequently there is a mandate to list state or other regulations which are addressed in a lesson.
- *Vocabulary*. The teacher may have to review necessary vocabulary words either used in the lesson or appearing in the readings.
- *Materials*. Any materials needed beyond the typical tools of the Language Arts classroom.
- *Modifications*. Classes may include students with exceptionalities. Teacher should allow for modification for students with specific needs.
- *Motivation*. This applies the lesson at the beginning to the students' particular interest. What in the students' lives relates to the IOs of the teacher? This is an attempt to move from the particular/concrete (students' experiences) to the general/abstract (information in the lesson). This could be a list made by students, a few sentences, or a verbal response by students. This should last only about three minutes.
- *Transition*. This is where the teacher attempts to "elicit the Aim." This is an attempt to link the Motivation to the Aim of the class. This is a tricky thing to do and sometimes fails.
- *Aim*. This is what the students perceive as the lesson's goal, what they should consciously take away from the lesson. The IOs are the teacher's goals; the Aim is the guiding question in the lesson for the students.
- *Development*. This is the "talk and chalk," lecture, or "direct instruction" of the class. Here the teacher imparts information. In literature classes this section would be the so-called "Socratic questioning," in which the teacher leads the students to

a particular predetermined interpretation of plot and theme of a section of the text that the class focuses on. For this type of questioning (when the teacher knows the answers she wants to elicit), the lesson plan should contain *Pivotal Questions* (PQ). These are three to five written questions to guide the teacher-led "discussion" from particular points in the text to a general understanding or interpretation. The lesson plan may also contain *Anticipated Outcomes* (AO) to these questions.

- *Medial Summary*. This is a brief question or two about "what we have learned so far," which wraps up the Development section and moves the class toward the more hands-on Application.
- *Application*. This is where the students work individually using techniques and information they have learned in the Development section. The students can work further on the passage presented, or apply techniques demonstrated in the Development to another related passage.
- *Summary*. The teacher might ask, "What did we learn today?" or "Who can answer the Aim?"
- *Homework*. A related assignment is given, or the Application is continued for reinforcement of concepts at home.

In most of my many years in traditional schools, I churned out two of these per day. In my locker I had hundreds and hundreds of printed outlines which I'd fill in before my first class. By my third year of teaching, it took me only about three minutes to write out these lessons so that administrators would approve. What I actually *did* in class was quite different. In oppressive schools, I know teachers who have their lesson plan in their drawers and pull it out when supervisors comes in to observe. I don't recommend this, but it is understandable. Let's look at a developmental lesson using *Richard Cory* by Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869–1935) (Robinson, 1937). Many teachers use this poem, and I suspect that the reason for this is that it is a "story," almost a ballad, and seems to have a clear message or theme—and is thus good for tests. The vast majority of lyric poems do not, of course, tell any story and, as uncomfortable and inexperienced as many of us are with poetry, such a poem seems fairly safe. As character-centered as it is, it also seems as if it might be a good preparation for a literature essay test, which often focus on a character and their "development" as in *the* "fate or personal choice" question.

Lesson Plan on "Richard Cory"

Richard Cory

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich – yes, richer than a king –
And admirably schooled in every grace;
In fine we thought that he was everything,
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

IOs. Students will be able to (SWBAT)

1. Define the elements of the image the author creates through the speaker of Richard Cory, with the contrasting resolution of the poem.
2. Explain in one paragraph how this poems enhances our understanding that "things are not always what they seem."

Modification

Gifted students will be asked enrichment questions about use of semicolon, comma and periods in the poem.

Vocabulary

1. *Content*: arrayed, favored, fluttered, grace, pavement.
2. *Form*: paragraph, stanza.

Standards

NCTE standards specifically addressed are 2, 3, 5 [state and local standards addressed are enumerated here].

Motivation

Q: "Do you think it is better to be rich than working class or poor? Why is that? Is it better to be talented, good looking, and well dressed than not? Why or why not? What do movies and TV tell us about these perceptions? Do you think this is always the case?"

Transition

Q: "If we were to read a poem about a rich/privileged person, what would you expect it to tell you?" AO: "That they led a better life than other people" Q: "So, now that we're going to read about Edward Arlington Robinson's wealthy Richard Cory, what questions could we ask about this type of a person?"

Aim

How does Edwin Arlington Robinson present a literary figure who is rich and/or privileged? Or, What does *Richard Cory* tell us about worldly success?

Development

Teacher reads the poem once out loud. Selected students each re-read each stanza for a second reading.

PIVOTAL QUESTIONS

1. What do the terms "He was a gentleman from sole to crown," "clean favored, and imperially slim," "always human when he talked," "glittered when he walked," and "admirably schooled in every grace" tell you about Richard Cory?
2. How do the lines "make us wish that we were in his place./So on we worked, and waited for the light,/And went without the meat, and cursed the bread" contrast Richard Cory with the speaker's, his community's, and possibly our experiences?
3. Explain how the last lines contrast with how the last lines come as a surprise to the way Richard Cory has been presented?
4. What is Robinson telling us about people who have apparent success in the world?

Medial summary

Who can explain what we understand about this poem so far?

Application

Write a one-paragraph explanation of why the trappings of worldly success may or not reveal a character's inner feelings. Be sure to relate *Richard Cory* to one other work of literature in which a character might in reality be different from what he or she seems. (You might want to review our discussion of Marc Antony and Brutus in *Julius Caesar* or Steinbeck's *The Pearl*, which you covered last year.)

Summary

"What did you learn today?" or "Answer the Aim" or "What do you think was the point of this poem (or today's lesson)?"

Homework

Write a second paragraph about Richard Cory comparing and contrasting his outer and inner state to another character you've encountered in our readings.

This developmental lesson is typical in that it is using a work of literature for preparation for a literature test. While you can make many criticisms of this lesson, you will notice that what is essentially missing here, is the intriguing and biggest question: *Why the heck* did *Richard Cory kill himself*? To a traditional teacher in a test-prep class, this open ended question seems idle speculation, if not a waste of time, and a digression from a simplified theme students need to "get" to do well on the inevitable essay test. It remains to be seen, given this lesson, how many students "get" Richard Cory "in their heads." What is essential to know is that this lesson does not treat this as a poem which is also a Work of Art which may present multiple interpretations other than the simplified

theme the teacher wants. Additionally, it is centered on teacher-talk by the "expert" who already knows "the" answers. In no sense is this a student-centered lesson, with the teacher acting as a coach or "enhancer." Though the brief Motivation does attempt to involve students' experiences, this is short and incidental, the sugar-coated pill.

Whether the students are academically able and have vested themselves into the schooling system, or they are disengaged and alienated from it, it is unlikely that this lesson is a good preparation for a literature test. Experience tells me that the students are unlikely to remember much of the lesson—even when information is reinforced by another lesson, a quiz the next day, teacher comments on the homework assignment, a continuing unit on writing "the" literature essay, or even in a review for a mid-term exam. If a student is able to access what she knows of Richard Cory, the presentation on a literature essay is likely to be impoverished, something like:

> In literature, outward appearances do not always reveal the inward reality. In Edward Arlington's poem Richard Cory, we see a rich, handsome well dressed man who kills himself . . .

There simply is nowhere for the poor essay writer to go from here. She's "got" a limited and impoverished theme, and there really is not too much more to be said. This lesson has missed all the real engagement with such a poem, the authentic open-ended questions which are the stuff of life:

- Why do people kill themselves?
- Why is our culture and the media so fixated on wealth and beauty?
- Why did Richard Cory kill himself? Was he depressed, gay, jilted in love, bankrupt, or was it accidental?
- If I were rich, how would it affect my life? Would it look like?
- Does money buy happiness?
- Should I be envious of people "who have it all"?
- Why do we side with the speaker who seems envious? What is it about society that makes us envious of others?
- Is it simply *fair* for there to be rich people, working-class people, and poor people? Is this due to luck, talent, accident—or is it designed by those in power?

If students are engaged in these real-life questions, they are more likely to do well on a limited test—and to remember Richard Cory, the man and the poem.

Student-Centered Approaches, Creating "Texts out of Texts"

Let's take a more aesthetic, student-centered, transactional, or reader response approach to these lessons. Borrowing Phil Anderson and Gregory Rubano's (1991) explanation of "verbal scales," we can notice that this poem can get "in the head" of students without direct analysis, explanation, or exploration. Imagine if the poem were presented with

students responding, at the end of each stanza, alone or in groups, to one or both of the following "bipolar scales":

How do you feel toward Richard Cory?

Dislike 1 2 3 4 5 Like

Admire (–) 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (+)

As Phil and Gregory point out,

> What can be intriguing in this exercise is that, whether a student begins by liking or disliking Cory, after the final stanza the response tends to shift significantly from the earlier "like–dislike" ratings and to move dramatically up or down the admiration scale. This technique need not be restricted to personal response; students could be asked, "How does the poet (or speaker or narrator) feel toward Richard Cory?" to produce similar movement on the scales. (Anderson & Rubano, 1991, p. 32)

They suggest that such scales could be used for longer work of literature such as tracing Hamlet on a "sane—insane" scale throughout the play.

Verbal scales are "unarticulated," that is, the poem gets "in the head" of students without overt explanation and analysis. This seems counterintuitive to those of us who have been taught to explain, explain, and explain every work of literature, or to analyze and describe, and to condense works of literature into short summative "themes." However, think for a moment how you got to work or school today. Probably at no time did you articulate or explain it to yourself. You knew how to get where you were going and you did it, without explication or analysis. In fact almost all of your thinking is "unarticulated." You know how to do innumerable things, but this usually does not involve analyzing and explaining—either to yourself or to others. Now think, for a moment, about explaining how you got to work or school today to someone else. This is a highly complex task involving analysis, explanation, and adapting all you know to your listener or audience. This is a great deal harder and much more work. However, you can still know how to get to work or school without ever explaining it. The developmental lesson, however, makes teachers and students focus on analyzing and explaining, types of knowing which are rare in daily life. I suggest, that you can create a curriculum about knowing, by experiencing and transacting with texts. Imagine if the lesson plan asked students, in writing or speaking, in pairs or small groups to do some of the following:

- Write a letter to Richard Cory, or to the speaker of the poem.
- Create a dialogue between the speaker and Richard Cory and yourself, or with the speaker, or the "fluttering pulses."
- Create an interior monologue of what is going on in Richard Cory's head—or the heads of others.
- Write a Townspeople or Townsperson poem based on *Richard Cory*.
- Come to a determination of why or why not Richard Cory deserved to die.

- Write a story of what people say at Richard Cory's funeral. Write a eulogy for him.
- Write a coroner's inquest about Richard Cory's death.

The possibilities can go on and on. Here's what "Bitter Townsperson Jack" is thinking:

> That Dick Cory, what a jerk. Walkin' down the street everyday like he own it. Those Cory's, always lordin' in over us, livin' in that big mansion high on that hill over town. They made their money in liquor and drugs, you know, and now they act so respectable. That Dick Cory is the worst of the lot, in his nice tan suit and big hat, acting like he's pure or something. When I'm eating my lousy black beans every night, and drinking that watery coffee, which is all I can afford, or when I'm lifting those heavy sacks down at the factory, boy don't I wish God would punish that son of a bitch. And now he has . . .

Certainly the above writer is likely to be somewhat prepared for the typical "character creates fate or fate creates character" literature exam essay.

Imagine if students wrote a dialogue or narrative of what happened before (or after) this poem, or created another dramatic episode out of this in prose of poetry, such as *Richard Cory at Home* or *Richard Cory gets His Hair Cut*:

> Richard Cory in the chair
> His hair exceedingly fine
> The scissors poised dagger-sharp
> Barber Johnson hates his guts
> [. . .]

(Here the judicious teacher could add a mini-lesson on commas, semicolons, or even when and where the dash is appropriate.) Students alone, in pairs, or groups could create a "found poem" out of ten or so lines, phrases, or words of the poem:

Poor Richard

(1–2–3–4) put a bullet through his head
                (1) gentleman
                        (1) sole (2) to (3) crown
        (4) clean favored
        (1–2–3–4) put a bullet through his head
                (4) always human
                        (3) admirably (2) schooled
                                (1–4) makes us wish
(1–2–3–4) put a bullet through his head
                (1) we (2) worked
                        (3) and (4)waited
                        (2–4) with-(1–3) out

(1–2–3–4) put a bullet through his head
(1–2–3) bullet through his head
(1–2) put a bullet
(1) through his (2) head
(4) bullet

Note that Robinson's last line has become a memorable refrain. The numbers refer to reading this poem as a "choral reading." Four or so students are assigned numbers and each reads what is assigned to her. All read the refrain, and different "numbers" read words, phrases, or lines alone or in various combinations. Students would spend time practicing how to read this poem in varying volume, tone, or inflection and present it to the "active listeners" in the class. (If you want to try this, start with Poe's *The Bells*, a natural).

Then the teacher could take things even further. This poem could be presented kinesthetically and dramatically, with gesture, movement, and body position as discussed in chapter 7 (see Blank & Roberts, 1996). There is a host of reading, writing, speaking, and kinesthetic (movement) activities that can get this poem very much "in the head" of students. I call this *intertextuality*, that is, creating a text (yours, alone or with others) out of the text of a work of art or literature—for this works as well with paintings, sculpture, music, dance, and theater, as it does with texts on a page (Asher & Costigan, 2005). I argue that, when students create their own texts out of other works of art, they are very much able to get it "in the head" and make meaning of it in powerful ways. Ironically, the developmental lesson, with its emphasis on explaining, describing, and analyzing, doesn't really help students to do those very things it sets out to do. If the work of art, however, is "in the head" and "in the body" of students—as we will discuss in the chapter on aesthetic education—they are very much more likely to be able to engage in the secondary processes of analyzing, explaining, and describing what they are deeply thinking and feeling. Let's take a moment to look behind the curtain of these two lessons and approaches, and examine in more depth the two areas of focus in the Language Arts classroom (and others).

Content and Students

There are two main areas of focus in teaching. The first focus is firmly established in the vast majority of public and parochial schools in the United States today. The focus in most classrooms is on the *subject discipline* or *content area*. That is, teachers teach "Shakespeare," "essay writing," "spelling," or "poetry," any of the myriad areas which comprise the complex and vast "content" of the Language Arts curriculum. This is "curriculum as content." Teachers seek to develop an expertise in presenting the to students and assessing what they have learned. This focus is *commonsense*, to borrow a term from John Mayher (1990). This was the background I had, and the one you've probably experienced. This also is the only understanding of learning that can appear on tests.

A second area of focus is to focus on *student*s. No one just teaches the Language Arts curriculum, they teach individuals who all are unique and have distinct abilities, backgrounds, languages, cultures, families, the myriad factors that make people individuals. In this focus, teachers seek how to best engage students in the *process* of learning. This is "curriculum as process," that is, the process of the student's learning. New teachers quickly learn that their students control their teaching as much as the teachers themselves, and they quickly discover that their initial high ideals about teaching have to be radically modified to suit the students they are actually teaching (Costigan, 2004). Most of the novels, stories, and movies about new teachers coming of age are precisely about the adjustments they have to make in light of their flawed, talented, and highly idiosyncratic students who are very much individuals with all their personalities and potential.

Furthermore, even teachers who are given little curricular freedom, either by being made to teach "teacher-proof" scripted lessons, or by being given other curricular mandates, notice that students control not only *how* they teach, but *what* they teach. In my work with the New York City Teaching Fellows, a group of alternatively certified teachers teaching in "hard to staff" schools in poor, urban districts, I realized that the biggest challenge for them to teach students who were largely disengaged from schooling was to come up with a Language Arts curriculum that simply engaged students on their level of interest (Costigan, 2005a,b). One first year teacher came up with a journalism curriculum and had students create a newspaper simply because he had experience in journalism and this seemed to keep the students in their seats and interested. Another arrived at a fairy tale curriculum based on various interests of his students:

> So they weren't really interested in anything and were just acting crazy, so I remembered how interested I was in fairy tales and stories. So I devised a lesson where I would read to them. They all listened, drew pictures, and told their own stories. One girl especially came to life. It was clearly the tale of Cinderella in a Chinese version, and she had not said anything for weeks—and all of sudden she was jumping out of her seat and she said, "You know how I know that? 'Cause Cinderella is my favorite movie and I have it at home and I watch it all the time."
>
> (Costigan, 2004)

Of course it is far from the ideal to come up with a curriculum *ad lib* only because it engages students and minimizes misbehavior. We should teach various areas because we have truly assessed students and know what *should* be taught, rather than teaching what *can* be taught. However, teachers can't teach a curriculum to students who simply are not engaged by it. I remember the distress of Sister Monica in my fourth grade class, trying to teach French to the working-class sons and daughters of the largely underemployed former mill workers of Irish descent in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, in the 1960s. To the collective consciousness of that fourth grade, the French (of Canadian descent) were the enemies who went to that *other* parochial school down the street, the

French church, not the Irish church. Besides, all the French boys in the textbook wore shorts to school and carried unusual square knapsacks—this perceived effeminacy was simply unacceptable! We were *not* going to learn French. Although there is nothing edifying in this example, this type of resistance to the official curriculum by self-defined social groups of students is the norm, rather than the exception, in schooling, as Willis' classic study demonstrated (Willis, 1977).

Most teachers see both a student focus and a content focus as not only necessary, but essential. Teachers teach "content/subject matter," *and* they teach "students/individuals," and the central issue is to successfully address both areas of focus. For example, a teacher may have to balance Melissa's interests in karate with the fact that Melissa has to learn basic punctuation; or a teacher may have to design an enrichment program for David, who has just finished a Dickens novel on his own, when his fellow students are struggling with a much simpler text; or a teacher may have to figure out how to teach a poem by Robert Frost to an urban class of students who can't imagine what a "snowy wood" or a stone wall looks like (Mayher, 1990). I learned this early on in my career in a writing–editing assignment using a series of drawings of Picasso's increasingly abstract rendering of a bull. I began by asking what the first picture was—clearly a concrete and pictorial representation of something very much *a bull*. The students responded that it was a picture of a dog. I was flabbergasted. When I asked them about this startling interpretation, I discovered that only five out of 25 students had ever left the island of Manhattan, and none had ever been to a farm, or indeed any rural area—a stunning realization for me.

John Mayher (1990) relates his epiphany in student-centered teaching when he attempted to teach Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.* His Californian students who had never experienced a significant snowfall simply didn't "get" the poem (Mayher, 1990, p. 5). Of course from their reading, the movies, and TV, they *should* know about snow, and they *should* "get" this poem of high culture—direct experience with snowfall or not. But the fact is, they didn't. To his credit, and unlike many of us who forge on nevertheless, John Mayher had an "Aha!" moment and changed his approach, dropping his ingrained New Critic "high culture" concept of literature. Unfortunately, few of us do, and many of us change reluctantly. The curricular content drives most of us, and balancing students' needs, wants, interests, and abilities with the substance of the discipline is difficult tension in our practice. The idea is simple, the execution is hard.

I would like to argue that the reality is much more problematic than it seems. Teachers who successfully manage these two areas of focus—that is, most successful teachers—typically weight the scales on the side of the "subject" or "content area." The solution for many, if not most, teachers is to attempt to genuinely understand their students, and even care deeply for them, but the essential focus is on imparting the necessary information or content, which is increasingly driven by high-stakes tests. You will sometimes hear an extreme example when some teacher states, "I teach Shakespeare (or Science, Math, or History) and it doesn't matter if a student is black or white, male or

female, rich or poor, immigrant or native born, Shakespeare is *Shakespeare*." In point of fact, it *does* matter who your students are, just as, despite what you might have been told, there is no "objective" interpretation of a given Shakespeare play. However, given the nature of teaching in the United States, the large numbers of students per class, five or so 42-minute periods per day, two or three "preps" per day, non-teaching "building assignments" such as cafeteria and hallway monitoring, the pressure to "cover material," not to mention the prevalence of testing, teachers are almost forced to focus on content over students' interests and needs. Students are typically motivated by reiterating that the bitter pill of an off-putting curriculum will lead someday to greater financial and social success.

Thus, the commonsense, traditional, "transmissive" (passing on) classroom is what the majority of Americans experience. The teacher lectures, or "talks and chalks"—or in the case of Language Arts uses a form of "teacher talk," the so-called "Socratic method." Students answer teachers' questions with one- or two-word pre-existing "correct" (or not) answers. They copy facts and "information" into notebooks and pass them back on tests. Literature is reduced to "plot" and "theme," and essays are reduced to correct paragraphing and reduction of "grammatical" errors. This curriculum is value-less (Mayher, 1990); that is, it is as objective and neutral as possible. Students are treated as equally as possible, and social, cultural, and other differences are minimalized. The teacher may care deeply about his students, get to know them as individuals, even like and love them—which I advocate—but transmitting the curriculum is always the chief concern. Ideally, the focus for teachers in the curriculum-driven world is the noble goal of student-driven success so they can "be all that they can be," which usually means that as many as possible go to the best colleges possible, or are prepared for a good job.

You are probably asking, "What's wrong with this?" The answer is that there are very real, if unintended, negative effects in this curriculum. First of all, this type of curriculum creates little love of learning (Johnson & Immerwahr, 1994; Johnson, Farkas, & Bers, 1997), and is best suited for the 5–10 percent of students who can sit still for long enough until they get into college (Coleman, 1961). Learning is not geared to students' innate interests and concerns (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Additionally, learning in these classes does not really look like learning as it takes place in the real world—say learning how to drive a car, or to break up with a boyfriend, or to play chess, tune a guitar, shop for bargains, or be a savvy hospital patient. In the commonsense classroom, students compete with each other and their knowledge is not shared—that is called *cheating*. Students are deliberately arrayed on a bell curve between the clearly defined winners and losers. Most importantly, for Language Arts teachers, students are typically doing a type of reading and writing found only in schools and on tests. Success in this type of school is isolated from the values of the local community. Students who succeed in this environment are those who know how to sit still and be bored, in order that they get the rewards of college and a good career.

This was brought home to me during my doctoral research. Five fellow researchers and I asked education students in a core education class at a large urban university to draw a

time line of their learning history. The students were given very few parameters for this assignment, and most produced typical poster-sized time lines with pictures, figures, and short explanations. The students presented these, shared them, and discussed them. What we discovered that these learning histories presented almost no learning that occurred in school. We were surprised to discover that "learning how to write a poem," "appreciating Dickens," or "learning about the Harlem Renaissance," were almost totally absent from the time lines. Even representations of "influential teacher" or "mentor" and "bad teacher" were missing. Rather, "learning" to these education students was the stuff of life: learning that "my family is always there for me," learning to ice skate, learning about betrayal, learning how to deal with a car repair man, or learning what real fear is—all these were presented as instances of learning. In short, learning for these education students primarily occurred in life, with others, and not alone at a desk, in schoolrooms.

So, content- and subject-based learning is always problematic. Try as we might, hard as we want to believe, and however much we want the best for our students, traditional conceptions of education just aren't working for most students most of the time; and, for the small percentage of students for whom it is working, the result is little love of learning, and an unhealthy mixture of boredom (in classrooms) and anxiety (for tests). If you doubt me, ask yourself if this fits in with your educational history. Has your learning primarily taken place inside or outside of school? Has school been a place of engagement, or even joy? Has your schooling been, well, *schoolish*, or did learning in your classes look like, and prepare you for, life in the real world? If this is not enough, go online and check out dropout rates in your community or school district, or those nationwide. You'll be shocked. In New York City, 45 percent of students never graduate from high school at all (Costigan, 2000).

The second curricular focus, the students themselves, bears some explaining. Despite the many critics of the student-centered or constructivist approach, this focus does not devalue "content," far from it; it attempts to *situate* content in the actual processes students use. Grounded in the philosophy and experiments of John Dewey (1859–1952), this progressive, constructivist, or student-centered classroom would likely have work stations, or students would be facing each other for small and whole group discussions, not arranged in rows of desks (Dewey, 1900). Students typically would be working in groups on projects which combined math, science, reading, writing, and art. *Who* the students are matters a great deal: Their interests and perceptions are central. Students even negotiate democratically what they are to learn in a given semester. Learning looks like real life, that is, it is a collaborative or social act. Students could be researching their home communities, researching a local hospital or hardware store, and they would be engaged with speakers from various groups or the local community dealing with actual issues. They would be writing essays, stories, and letters to politicians that not only look like the real thing, but are used in real ways. There would be no tests, except for the inevitable mandated state exams, but students would present their growth in portfolios,

and they would be writing self-assessments, telling the teacher what they learned. And, yes, they would still be reading Shakespeare and Robert Frost. For graduation they would give a paper and a presentation to parents, educators and the local community as a celebration of their learning.

The above descriptions might be a bit confusing for you, particularly if you come, as most of us do (and as I did), from a traditional transmissive background. It also may seem highly idealistic and impractical. Additionally it initially seems that this curriculum is not a very good preparation for mandated tests. Furthermore, to "get" the constructivist way of schooling takes time and practice, to attune oneself to this practice and theory (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Kohn, 1993/1999, 1998, 1999, 2000; see also www.ncte.org/pubs). You may also think that the constructivist orientation is suitable for the early grades, perhaps through middle school, but know that "real" learning should look much like learning is in college. It took me many years to let go of my very traditional schooling learned in parochial schools and in a suit-and-tie boys' prep school! However, I moved on. My goal in my last years of high school teaching was to get the students to come into my class, go to their workstations (tables, not desks), and work on the curriculum they had negotiated with me. I would act as coach, and spend all of my time asking questions and rarely imparting information. If you think I am absolutely crazy in advocating this approach, you are not alone, as some of my former students can tell you. But, although I was never fully able to implement constructivist approaches in an NYC public school, I came very close. Students worked out the semester's curriculum with me, worked on projects, did self-assessments instead of exams, and I never even talked about tests unless I had to prepare them in a workshop for some state exam. Finally, I'd just like to point out the constructivist approach is much harder than the traditional one. Lecturing and zipping multiple choice tests through a Scantron is much easier than reading student portfolios and orchestrating a collaborative environment with teenagers who have never experienced it.

It is hard to underestimate the political, ideological, and practical gulf between fact-, test- and skill-driven testing advocates and constructivists. To the pro-testing community, this approach is not only foolhardy, but a disservice to children. Their response is typically nothing other than frank miscomprehension and contempt. Test advocates see this as a war:

> "Constructivists" are those who believe that learners "construct" knowledge in their own way from their own set of "found materials" in their memory. Most educators believe that there is something to the notion of constructivism . . . . "Radical constructivists" believe that this is the only proper, legitimate, durable, or acceptable form of instruction. They believe in "student centered" learning, construction as a complete replacement for instruction. They express outrage at any use of such traditional instruction methods as teacher lectures, memorization, review, drills and most structured forms of instruction.
>
> (Phelps, 2005, p. 25)

I leave you, the reader, to assess the validity of what Richard Phelps is saying, but I think he overstates the case to a degree. I certainly am not against the memorization of poems, for instance, nor am I against direct instruction (teacher lectures, "talk and chalk") in the academic four-paragraph essay found on tests, though for no more than five or ten minutes, please, and I even sometimes dictate information to my students. Nevertheless, he does articulate a philosophical gulf that is deeper than teachers might initially think. Test-based reforms in fact care little about students' engagement with learning, and, I argue, this is why they have been, and continue to be, relatively ineffective for the majority of students nationwide.

In Language Arts, I am happy to say, discontinuities between the content focus and the student focus are narrowing and fading. In my English Education program, I teach writing based on the same practice, theory, and key texts used by many English Departments in their writing curriculum. Anyone who has taken a writing workshop, or even an introductory freshman writing course, is likely (hopefully) to encounter practices similar to those advocated in English Education methods and curriculum courses. I was recently at a college-sponsored conference on how best to teach writing; an English Education colleague turned to me and said, "but what they're discussing—we've known that for years."

I also want to stress that many of those I have known who advocate a talk and chalk curriculum which uses "rigorous" tests are often very well intentioned. They honestly believe that by using lectures, memorization, and tests they are doing the best for their students. I was friends with a Language Arts teacher who used the most traditional methodologies in a very underperforming school. He took on his share of the lowest performing classes—"lowest" and "performing" being typical transmissive terms with which I am uncomfortable—and would spend his days at the board with spelling lists, punctuation rules, and "grammar." He'd carefully grade the fill-in-the-blank workbooks his students daily worked on. He'd even stand at the board and talk and chalk to a class of one or two students. "I'd rather teach one or two students than do nothing." I had to admire his dedication.

A Personal Account of Learning Authentic Reading

I was frankly unprepared for urban teaching when I began teaching high school at Erasmus Hall in Brooklyn many years ago. I arrived with a Master in the Art of Teaching (MAT) degree from a very fine program, but was unprepared for any number of commonsense traditions. On my first day of teaching, for instance, a supervisor opened the door to my room and peeked in for about 30 seconds. He then shouted, "Put your 'Aim' on the board!" and slammed the door shut. Somehow my very fine education had neglected to tell me what an "Aim" was. (As explained above, it's the question students are supposed to all be able to answer at the end of the class.) Among other discoveries, I found out that I had to prepare my students for the Regents Competency Tests (RCTs), on which students had to write "the" Persuasive Essay. These types of tests were then unknown in

most states but were a long tradition in New York City, and I was unfamiliar with them. In any event, I examined some old RCTs and began teaching students how to write persuasive essays. We brainstormed about some possible topics and settled on "school uniforms," then much in the media. The class was in a wonderful uproar of discussion. Many of the Jamaican students from the West Indies were *for* uniforms, as they saw them as a sign of pride as when family members in the old country were able to attend one of the best two private "colleges" (roughly high schools) in Kingston. Those born in the United States were vociferously *against* uniforms, particularly after I had described *my* version of the uniform they would be wearing—knee length grey skirts and knee socks for the girls, shiny leather policeman-type shoes (no sneakers!) and white shirts and ties for the boys. Some students actually thought I was serious and went to the Assistant Principal to complain. He was impressed with their engagement and put a nice letter in my file.

The students and I brainstormed, debated, drafted, composed, peer-edited, and revised our essays. During the process I suggested that we mold the essays into roughly five paragraphs. Elegance, rhetoric, logic, and persuasion were my goals. Proud of my work, I invited a fellow teacher, a colleague and unofficial mentor, into my class. Afterwards, she drew me aside and stated that I really needed to follow "the" four-paragraph persuasive essay, and that my liberality in composition might actually hurt the students' scores. Of course I quickly complied with the four-paragraph form (see chapter 3). I had been seduced into accepting "the" Persuasive Essay as normative, and out went elegance, rhetoric, logic, and persuasion, in favor of standardization, correctness, formula, and banality.

Fast forward to my fifth year of teaching at another school, and I had an epiphany or "Aha!" moment. Again, as a new transfer, and an unknown quantity, I was given the "worst" classes of "not on level" or "remedial" students. Sadly, it is the case that the teachers perceived as new or weak are given the most challenging classes. I taught "the" four-paragraph essay for several months. I provided handouts with four blank boxes in which to order the information. I discussed how to write "the introduction," "the two body paragraphs," and "the conclusion." I provide "starters" for each paragraph, such as "One reason for my opinion is . . ." "A second reason for my opinion is . . ." and "In conclusion . . . ." The results were dismal in the extreme. The students didn't *get* these simple concepts—much like students never seem to get a host of simple commonsense Language Arts concepts and terms.

Then it dawned on me what was going wrong. I was having the students do *fake* writing. This essay wasn't anything like writers did in the real world. The previous summer I had visited Hemingway's little loft in Key West where he wrote, and I had read the wonderful *With Hemingway* by his assistant and fellow writer and fisherman, Arnold Samuelson (1984), which detailed Hemingway's laborious and organic composition processes. I reflected on how I knew other real writers wrote, and I reflected on how I typically wrote outside of school. (I thought of Tennessee Williams, another Key Wester, much the worse for wear after the night before, drinking cup after cup of black coffee, and

writing and writing.) I was asking my students to do something artificial, unreal. No wonder they couldn't do well. Asking students to do a simple but artificial task is more difficult than asking them to do a complex but real task.

I've since come to use the less inflammatory terms of "formulaic" (school-based) and "authentic" (life-based) to describe ways of conceiving of teaching and learning in school. When we reflect on it, many of the things we teachers do are artificial and schoolish. They look very different from how real readers, writers, and speakers operate. I am sorry to say that it took me five years to come to this understanding. Many teachers engage in a tautology: They are fully engaged in doing schoolish things precisely because schooling demands schoolish things. We lecture, give homework, tests, and grades, precisely because that is what school *is*. We also fear that the students will get out of control if we stop doing schoolish things—after all, they too have a stake in the status quo. As intensified as traditional schoolishness is by our present test-driven culture, it doesn't have to be that way. The central argument of this book is that authentic reality-based learning is the best preparation for artificial assessment on tests. Artificial learning is simply not a good preparation for the tasks required on tests. Authentic learning is the best preparation for artificial assessment tools. I know this will be a hard sell for many teachers!

I want to be frank that the progressive, constructivist, or "learning in school as in life" student-centered focus has never caught on in an expansive way. Diane Ravitch (2000) goes so far as to say that the progressive movement has "failed." Yet I would argue here, as in other parts of this book, that the traditional movement has also failed, given the nation's dropout rates, stagnant test scores, and other dismal realities. There is little joy in schooling, little love of learning engendered, and school, for most of us, is a means to an end, and our school lives waver between boredom in classes and anxiety in test-taking. I also fail to believe that the 30 percent of high school students who don't graduate high school in four years are inherently stupid. Something else is obviously going on. Nevertheless, the pro-testing lobby is frankly on the side of the traditional, transmissive, commonsense approach to education, even though there is little evidence that this is working for most of the students most of the time. There are several underlying suppositions that they clearly advocate, and these are important to know. See how much you agree with each of them on a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 10 = strongly agree:

1. Learning is primarily about the accumulation of information.
2. Information equals knowledge.
3. Schooling's purpose is for the social and economic advancement of students.
4. Student enjoyment of reading and writing is not the primary purpose of education.
5. Learning by nature requires hard work and can often be painful.
6. Students don't want to learn and have to be forced to do so or they will waste time.

7. English and Math are the most important subjects. Science comes next, then History. Art and Music are relatively unimportant.
8. In education, as in life, there simply are winners, losers, and those in the middle.
9. Grades best represent student achievement.
10. Testing best represents academic achievement.

I give these statements very low scores. However, all test-based reformers, whether politicians, educational foundations, or suppliers of tests and test-based curricula, or teachers, strongly maintain the truth of these statements. If you *do* give these statements high scores of truthfulness, you're likely to agree with the following negative statements about student-centered constructivists (such as me):

- Student-centered learning is much, much too expensive to be practical. You'd need many more teachers, smaller classes, better school buildings, and ongoing support for teachers and students. This is simply impractical.
- Student-centered discovery takes too much time. Working on life- and reality-based projects is simply too slow. Students and teachers need to "cover the curriculum" as quickly and efficiently as possible.
- The student-centered curriculum is too "soft" and touchy-feely. Students don't need to feel good about their learning; they need to acquire facts and exercise skills (see Phelps, 2005, p. 283; see also National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

As discussed in this chapter, almost all Language Arts teachers want their students to love literature and writing. We certainly don't want to alienate our students; indeed, quite the opposite. We want our students to be as engaged with literature as we are. However, the content-, or fact- and skills-, based curriculum often does have the effect of running roughshod over students' innate interests at the expense of "getting" the information demanded by state and local standards, objectives, rubrics, and tests. Even if you do eventually side on the student-centered curriculum—as indeed I hope you do—then you are still faced with the types of objections I hear daily from my preservice and beginning teachers:

- But *They* won't let me!
- This doesn't prepare them for the state exams!
- The students will get out of control!
- The "bad" students will really act out. The "good" students won't tolerate this as it won't get them into college!
- This might work with the lower grades, but it's not "college-y" enough for my AP group.
- This could be a great enrichment or "extra" class, but this is not part of the "normal" Language Arts curriculum!

- If literature is not about analysis, explanation, and theme, what then *is* it about?
- This certainly doesn't look like real learning! English is serious stuff!
- Students' and teachers' "playing with" literature is disrespectful to authors and great literature.
- "Creative" and "fun" activities are *extras*, not a regular part of the curriculum!
- There's no time for this. The tests are coming up and I've got to cover the curriculum!
- I've got to teach a scripted lesson provided by the district! This doesn't fit in at all with it!
- My school is a "good" school. This doesn't look like real learning!
- My school is a "bad" school. This isn't the basics that my students really need!
- I'm a new teacher. I don't have tenure. This is appealing, but I'll wait to try it when I'm tenured.

All of these, and more, are valid and reasonable objections, and the following chapters of this book are designed to open a conversation with you about why authentic reading and writing practices not only prepare your students for tests, but engage your students with the things you loved so much that you wanted to share them by becoming a teacher.

Thinking Things Through

As a teacher, on a daily basis, you have to provide lessons. As discussed in this chapter, you can either provide a directive developmental lesson where you want students all to learn the same one or two pieces of information (objectives), or you can design a class which encourages student transactions with reading and engagement with personally meaningful writing. Here is an excerpt from Alice B. Toklas' famous *Cookbook* (1952/1986). Depending where you are in your own journey of becoming a teacher, here's something to try alone, with another student or teacher, or in a study group:

- Either in a direct instruction developmental lesson plan format, or using a student-centered constructivist approach, design a combined reading and writing lesson that uses the following text. What type of lesson allows your students best to engage with this text? Which lesson is the best preparation for the literature essay they will eventually have to take?

> The first victim was a lively carp brought to the kitchen in a covered basket from which nothing could escape. The fish man who sold me the carp said he had no time to kill, scale or clean it, nor would he tell me with which of these horrible necessities one began. It wasn't difficult to know which was the most repellent. So quickly to the murder and have it over with . . . . Should I not dispatch my first victim with a blow on the head from a heavy mallet?

> After an appraising glance at the lively fish it was evident he would escape attempts aimed at his head. A heavy sharp knife came to my mind as the classic, the perfect choice, so grasping, with my left hand well covered with a dishcloth, for the teeth might be short, the lower jaw of the carp, and the knife in my right, I carefully, deliberately found the base of its vertebral column and plunged the knife in. I let go and looked to see what happened. Horror of horrors. The carp was dead, killed, assassinated, murdered in the first, second and third degree. Limp, I fell into a chair, with my hands still unwashed reached for a cigarette, lighted it, and waited for the police to come and take me into custody. After a second cigarette my courage returned and I went to prepare poor Mr. Carp for the table. I scraped off the scales, cut off the fins, cut open the underside and emptied out a great deal of what I did not care to look at, thoroughly washed and dried the fish and put it aside while I prepared Carp Stuffed with Chestnuts.
>
> (Toklas, 1952/1986, pp. 37–38)

Here are a few ways to look at this passage from a student centered constructivist or traditional test preparation focus. Rate each on the following scale: 1 = constructivist, 10 = traditional.

1. What is the human issue that is facing the cook turned author? What internal challenges does she face? How can students write about a personal challenge before they even read the selection? What is the theme of the "human issues" unit in which this excerpt might be used? What types of student writing, journaling, or freewriting, can enhance students' transactions with this text? What types of guided conversations could be engendered by the teacher for students in literature circles? What types of poetry or prose narratives could be used to create an intertextual "text *on* text"?
2. In literature, as in life, people are faced with duties that are difficult and challenging, either from the perspective that they are physically challenging, or that they challenge a character's innate and personal resistances. From your reading discuss this text and one other text and discuss how both illustrate either a physical challenge to one's ability, or an innate and personal challenge.
3. Write a narrative or essay about "Horrible Necessities."
4. Provide two examples in this text that support the "horrible necessity" of the author's task.
5. Write on the following quote, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger"—Frederich Nietzsche.

three
Writing Theory and Practice

> Essay (2). A loose sally of the mind; an irregular and indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition.
>
> —Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary* (1755)

Overview

This chapter explains how test-based writing is a formulaic type of writing in contrast to the types of writing done in the real world. It defines the various types of essays found on Language Arts tests and demonstrates how an authentic writing agenda is the best test preparation for the types of essays found on examinations. A curriculum which is aimed only at essay-type artificial academic essays is highly ineffective as students do not have enough content to write about. Nor does a curriculum centered on "plot" and "theme" assist students to process literature deeply enough either for personal fulfillment or for writing test-based essays. This chapter focuses on how to create an authentic writing curriculum which meets the needs of high-stakes tests, both in the literature essay and in the "block" essay.

Two Writing Teachers

I'd like to introduce you to two writing teachers, both of whom have developed different approaches to writing. The first is Steve. Like so many new teachers, Steve is struggling

with classroom management and student control issues, as well as finding his way how best to teach reading and writing and prepare students for tests. Coming from a working-class background, Steve values schooling and sees it as a essential tool for his students to advance financial and socially in the United States today. However, Steve, now a second year teacher, worries about his students. He's aware of the very low passing rates of his students on tests, and the fact that fewer than 50 percent of his students are likely to graduate from his high school, located in an area of high poverty, public housing, and gang violence. Nevertheless, Steve is a talented and resourceful fellow. He has earned an MSEd from a program at a local college, he has had various jobs and life experiences, and he even works part time as an actor in off-off-Broadway theater. Nevertheless, discipline and control in his classes are a continuing challenge.

I've stayed in touch with Steve and recently received an email from him. He recalled a saying I used in a classroom discussion, namely, that "some teachers maintain that you have to get control of a class first, then teach. Others maintain that a good lesson is the best management tool of all." Steve recalled the discussion:

> Steve here,
>
> I remember a discussion on classroom management from one of your classes where you said, "The best classroom management device is a good lesson." On the day before Spring Break, I gave a creative writing assignment to all of my classes. They had to write a short story that included at least one of a list of quotations on a handout. Students could use more than one if they chose to. I couldn't believe the reaction from my "rowdy" class. "Can we start? Can we start?" was a question before I'd even finished clarifying instructions. The class was as quiet as a church for the rest of the period and now that we're back from [spring] break—where I'm giving them time to finish the stories—it's still the same way.
>
> Eureka moment? Just thought I'd share. Regards, Steve

Assignment

Your task for this assignment is to write a short story. The story can be about anything, but the "catch" is that you must incorporate at least one of the following choices below into the story. You may use more than one of the choices in your story. Stuck? Can't think of a way to begin? Try using one of the choices as the first sentence of your story and see where it takes you!

1. "Quick! Into the garbage pail!"
2. "I'm sorry, sir, but we are all out of broccoli." I knew he was lying.
3. We found the body. It was covered with egg shells, just as the psychic had predicted.
4. As he was standing on the street corner, something hit him on the shoulder.
5. "OWWWWWW!!!!!"

6 Suddenly I noticed that the pet store got quiet. Too quiet.
7 "You only have one more wish," said the leprechaun with a sinister grin, "choose wisely!"
8 She held her breath for what seemed like an eternity.
9 The clown had only seconds to act.
10 "Look! Up in the sky!"
11 It tasted metallic, like when you lick the side of a filing cabinet.

I found these writing "starters" – I avoid the word "prompts" – very funny and very engaging. In fact, my education students love to use them in their classes. Here's one of many sample responses:

> Suddenly the pet store got quiet, too quiet. The gerbils were silent, watchful. The cobra was curious. And the Yorkshire Terrier covered its eyes with its ears. Clarissa, the assistant in the blue smock stood still too, wondering what was up—a big question mark over her head.
>
> Outside, a car alarm echoed through the empty streets.
>
> I was reminded of the *Twilight Zone* episode—as if the world had ended.
>
> And then I heard the crunching sounds approaching, growing louder with each second . . ..

When my education students use Steve's "starters," as well as some of their own, they always have good results. When I called Steve to discuss his email to me, he explained that this writing assignment took four days and he was amazed at how thoroughly engrossed these "rowdy" and disengaged students were with this "creative" and "fun" assignment. I was, of course, very gratified at hearing this.

The terms "creative" and "fun" are *effects*, not causes. They occur because the students' lives, their autobiographical sense of self, are engaged. However, Steve now has a big problem. How can he take these student writings and assist them to craft these into authentic and effective stories, poems, or essays? What are these student creations to look like? What objectives or standards are to be given to the students so that they know they are writing the best that they can? And, of course, today the big question is how an assignment like this, even with good results and engaged students, is a beneficial preparation for the types of writing that tests demand of his students. Furthermore, even if Steve knows that his subsequent writing classes are preparation for test writing, how can he be sure his students are aware that the techniques they are using are of benefit on tests?

Before discussing Steve further, I'd like to introduce another teacher with a different approach to writing, Mary. Mary is in her mid-forties. A full-time high school teacher for a number of years, she left teaching to raise a family. Then, after ten years, she returned to school and received an MA in Creative Writing from an excellent program at a local college. After teaching part time in a community college, she wanted to return to full-time high school teaching. She was interviewed at a local charter school and was hired with the understanding that her background could help a number of failing students

to pass the state tests. Mary looked forward to this challenge and feels supported and valued by her school's administration and faculty.

Mary has come to believe that creative writing is not the best way to help her students. After all, the essay for the state test is formulaic, needing four paragraphs, an introduction which restates the question, two related but different body paragraphs making two related but separate points, and a conclusion paragraph restating it all. Mary's room is full of charts and posters saying things like:

> Say what you're going to say.
> Say it.
> Say what you just said.

On another wall, Mary has put up outlines of every type of academic essay she knows. Her charts contain the following:

Basic Essay

1. Introduction
2. Body
3. Conclusion

High School Essay

1. Introduction
2. Body A
3. Body B
4. Conclusion

College Prep Essay (Five Paragraph Theme)

1. Introduction
2. Body A
3. Body B
4. Body C
5. Conclusion

College Thesis

1. Introduction/Thesis statement
2. Body
    - a Main Point A
        - i Sub point A-1
        - ii Sub point A-2
    - b Main Point B
        - i Sub point B-1
        - ii Sub point B-2

c Main Point C
i Sub point C-1
ii Sub point C-2
3 Conclusion

The four-paragraph form is required for her students to earn a high school diploma. The college thesis is a year-long Senior Thesis project that Mary directs. The administration and Mary's colleagues are impressed with her work with students who have failed the state tests, but Mary is concerned that her passing rates are not improving greatly. Furthermore, the more she pushes her test preparation curriculum, the less interested the students seem to be, and their abilities have reached a plateau which she feels is unsatisfactory. Recently Mary looked at student writing assignments she had put on her bulletin board. She was bothered by the fact that, though they were neat and were paragraphed properly, the papers really didn't say anything at all.

I've introduced you to Steve and Mary, two teachers drawn from real life, because they illustrate two approaches to writing. I call these the organic or *process* approach and the formulaic or *content* approach. Steve is aware that writing is a process that stems from students' autobiographical interests. His instincts and his education coursework have empowered him to understand that students write best when they do what real writers do. Following Peter Elbow's work (1973), among many others, Steve sees writing as an organic and messy process, much like cooking. He knows about freewriting, producing multiple drafts, doing a great deal of ungraded or unedited "low-stakes writing," peer editing, writing discussion groups, and publishing student works in real ways through classroom-produced booklets. However, Steve just doesn't know if he can keep this up with 150 or so students a day and with all the attendant problems of teaching in a poor, under-resourced school. Besides, he asks, despite instilling a love of writing for its own sake, how does this prepare his students for tests? He believes that authentic writing practices—having students write as real writers do—certainly make his students better and more fluent writers, but he only suspects that this will help them on the mandated state essay test.

Mary, on the other hand, is well versed in creative writing, but she has come to the conclusion that these organic processes are dissimilar to writing highly formulaic and artificial essays "one off"—that is at one sitting without revision—on tests. Mary believes that writing skills are not necessarily transferable, and that her students who haven't done well on tests need specific instruction in the particular format of the test they will take. As there really is only one type of test-based essay (introduction, body, conclusion), and as this is really a test of paragraphing, her task is clear. However, her students just don't seem to be getting these simple concepts when they do sit down to write practice essays.

When I shared Steve and Mary's experiences with my education students who were preservice and new teachers, I was surprised that many of them favored Mary's approach. My students expressed that Steve's curriculum is very engaging; after all, who wouldn't

want to write using those "starters"? However, the education students were cautious, making comments such as, "Well, this would be good if you have the extra time for creative writing in class, but we have to prepare the students for the state exams"; "This type of writing is so different from academic writing that it won't help the students do well on essay tests"; "After all, this may be meaningful for the students and fun, but there is no room for it in the writing curriculum"; and "I'd love to do this as enrichment *after* my students have mastered the test essay format." And, of course, in the current era of accountability, there was at least one student who stated the inevitable, "Of course, this is great, but *They* won't let me."

There is a way, however, to have students engage in authentic writing through the actual process writers use, and to prepare them to produce the standardized and formulaic four-paragraph "block" essay found on tests. The rule I am advocating here, and throughout the book, is that test-based tasks come fairly easy after authentic learning has been engaged in. Test preparation is very hard *if* that is the only curriculum for test-based tasks. In regards to writing, it is easy to see that students who learn to write as real authors do are likely to do best on the type of essay found on tests. This might seem counterintuitive to you if your students continue to struggle with the four- or five-paragraph essay. However, the good thing for us is that, typically, students face only *one basic type of essay*, whether it be a literature essay, a persuasive essay, a report based on a journalistic essay, or a personal essay. First, let us look at what research tells us that a classroom rich in literature reading and writing might look like and discuss why this is the best preparation for the inevitable tests. You see, in an authentic Language Arts curriculum, reading and writing are naturally and inextricably linked.

Responding to Literature in Writing and Conversation

First, let us examine the most difficult and the most prevalent type of essay, the Literature Essay. The standard essay of this type typically asks students to compare two works of literature, which may be poems, but more typically are novels or short stories. Now, what makes a story a story and not an essay is that there are *characters* and there is *conflict*. That is, the character wants something and is faced with a challenge, from another person, from nature, or from within his or her very own person. This is a simplified, and some may say impoverished, understanding of stories, but as it is a necessary, if not sufficient, understanding of the elements of many stories, it points the way to what will be required on tests. Furthermore you can use a sort of template for your students to avoid the rambling stories they sometimes create:

Character's name:
What character wants, his or her goals:
Obstacle preventing character from attaining goal:
Crisis point (climax) of conflict:
Anticipated resolution of story:

In using this template, in writing, you might want to have your students begin the story *in medias res*, that is in the middle of things, with the conflict. This simple template can also be used in literature journals to chart the "history" of students' readings so that they have easy access to remembering a number of basic story elements for examinations. Of course, this simple outline should go hand in hand with personal responses.

Most Language Arts teachers, of course, became such because of a love of literature and we want our students to experience literature, to be engaged with it, or, to use Louise Rosenblatt's (1938/1983; 1978) term, to *transact* with it; we don't necessarily want our students to have simple and formulaic understandings. We want our students to have a relationship with literature, which is much more than is demanded on tests. However, students who have regular transactions with literature are better prepared to discuss the types of story conflicts demanded of tests.

One of the key ways we can fulfill our mission and prepare students for the inevitable writing on test-based essays is to enhance the relationships students are having with literature. As I suggest throughout this book, one key way is to make extensive use of literature journals and writing about literature, what I call intertextuality, or creating a personal text *out of* the text of a literary work of art. To enhance such transactions, even before I teach any work of literature, I ask students to write about their experience with a particular author, genre, or type of work. Here's some excerpts from student responses to Shakespeare:

> All we do is spend time on Shakespeare trying to figure out the language and translating it into modern English. I hate Shakespeare!
>
> Shakespeare is just ok. The best time that I had with it was when we got to act out scenes from *Macbeth* and the teacher filmed it. We watched the film after and criticized what we did. That was really fun.
>
> I find Shakespeare intimidating, but I have acclimated myself to it once I had Mr. Jones who's a good teacher. With him and some *Monarch Notes*, I could figure it out. I did much better when the teacher explained it and explicated the language. I don't know why we read so much Shakespeare and not other plays.
>
> In my sophomore year of high school, I remember reading *Julius Caesar*. The whole class loved the play. As an activity, my teacher had us create a court trial in relation to Caesar's murder. There were lawyers for both prosecutors and defense, and judge, a jury and witnesses . . . I thought this was an excellent activity.
>
> Some bad experiences I have had were in the eighth grade. We were reading *Romeo and Juliet* in the regular sit-down mode. This is when the teacher has the students read the play and then just go over the meaning. No activity was involved. I remember thinking how boring this was. To make matters worse, I would not understand what I was reading due to language difficulties.

All of these responses are typical of what a teacher might expect, and they show the problems facing us. The good thing is that these responses are *metacognitive* responses. This literally means thinking (cognition) beyond (meta). This means that the student reader is taking a step back in her writing and reflecting on her experiences. As such these types of reflection are the first and most important ways students open up a conversation about literature. What this type of writing does is to establish and firm up a relationship, even if it is a negative one, that the student are actually having with literature. Frank Smith calls it "joining the literacy club." As he explains:

> My argument [is] that children learn to read and write effectively only if they are admitted into a community of written language users, which I shall call the "literacy club" . . . Such a club has to be similar to the community of spoken language users to which infants are admitted almost from the moment of birth. The procedures are the same, and the benefits are the same—admission to the club rapidly results in becoming like established members in spoken language.
>
> (Smith, 1988, p.2)

Besides metacognitive writing about literature, I recommend that the Language Arts teachers directly write about their engagement with the texts they encounter. I teach having students write about, and write "on", literature on an almost daily basis. For specific reading selections, I recommend such starters as:

I like . . .
I don't like . . .
I notice . . .
I see . . .
I understand . . .
I don't understand . . .
I am confused by . . .
A question I have is . . .
A problem I notice is . . .
I think . . .
I feel . . .

You will note that the so-called negative responses are as important as positive ones. This goes against the intuition of many teachers. However, I maintain that if a student writes about how much he dislikes a passage, or is bothered by a character, or even writes about what he doesn't understand, that student is engaged. In literature, as in love, the opposite of engagement is not anger, questioning, or disagreement; it is apathy. If a student is bothered by a passage, or if she explains how confusing a passage is to her, she is at the same time engaged. Such negative responses are frequently the beginning of joining the literacy club; they open up the conversation and should not be ignored:

Everyone seems to like Atticus Finch [in Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird]. I don't. He's cold. He's damaged. He's not emotionally there for Scout. What really bothered me is that he sits alone in church.

I just don't get "So much depends" [by William Carlos Williams]. So, a red wheelbarrow is besides white chickens. Ok. Duh? What is it all supposed to mean? I don't like this poem. I don't see it is a poem.

I just don't understand anything about Hamlet.

When I first started to teach using readers' responses, I was scared by these types of written or spoken transactions. I appreciated that my students were beginning to be honest with me, but what to *do* with that honesty? Although I am still stymied by students' responses, I now see them as an opportunity to begin thinking about how to move students further. The first example above actually makes an astounding point that I had never realized. I had seen Atticus Finch as the proverbial "good guy," thinking perhaps of Gregory Peck's performance in the film of the same name. Far from being resistant to the book, this student is bringing in an important point about the complexity of his character. This is an interesting observation couched in negative terms. The second example, ironically, illustrates where I once was with image-based poetry, so that's perhaps why I was initially bothered by this statement. Now, I can see how I can assist this student to begin noticing things, to notice that the ordinary is extraordinary. I can think of several assignments I could use to move this and other students further, such as really looking hard at an object that we think so ordinary (a rock, a leaf, an empty soda can) but is quite extraordinary. Or I could have the students bring in a personal object (a watch, a doll, a baseball) and have them write and discuss why this object is so symbolic to them. Then we could write our "so much depends . . ." poems ourselves. The last statement I heard very frequently in my high school teaching. I used to sigh until I began questioning students, "Well, what is it you don't understand?" The answer could be, "nothing." I've stopped complaining, "But you can't say that you don't understand *anything*!" I now say something like, "OK, open your book to any page of Hamlet and find a line you completely don't understand." And then we'd begin talking or freewriting about why we didn't understand it, or write about what color we think the line is, or write a line in response to a line—anything to enhance the student's transaction with the text. I also point out that, when a student expresses boredom, it is not a genuine emotion; rather a statement of boredom is a cover for a student who is afraid of literature, feels inadequate as a reader, or is unable to make personal connections to the text he's trying to read.

Literature journals and reader response writing should be enhanced by classroom discussions. There has been a great deal of research into how Language Arts teachers teach literature, and the types of discussion in which the teacher is searching for correct answers based on plot and theme are substantially ineffective (Applebee, 1993). This is the temptation Language Arts teachers must work against—to center on plot events and

the summative "meaning," or theme, of a text. Although this is what tests frequently ask for, this is an impoverished understanding of how anyone reads texts and is unlikely to produce good test results. Encouraging authentic student transactions with reading does, however, allow students to do well on the types of summative statements that essay tests require. Responding to literature in writing immensely enhances students talking about literature.

Arthur Applebee (1996) points out that teachers frequently conceive of writing and reading literature as independent components of the English curriculum. In middle school some 58 percent, and in high school some 80 percent, of writing is writing about literature. They are de facto intertwined, but conceived of as separate elements of the curriculum (Applebee, 1993, p. 170). Research suggests that, when literature reading and writing about literature are intertwined (or intertextualized), students are more authentically engaged with the issues that literature presents—and thus better prepared to access this information for tests. Nancy Atwell suggests that the language-intensive classroom is a place where "Students work together on a unit of study, talk with their peers, listen for areas of agreement and mutual understandings, negotiate joint goals and plans, read resource materials, prepare written notes for personal use and for sharing with others, jointly draft a group paper, and prepare oral presentations to share their learning with their class or other audiences" (Atwell, undated).

Many researchers and educators advocate a workshop approach to literature, one that intertwines written student responses and student conversations that revolve around the big human issues, and that the reading process become a shared "text of meaning" that students create through collaboration (Blau, 2003; Langer, 1995, 2002; Probst, 1988). Many educators advocate "literature circles" in which students choose their own texts, discuss them in small groups (with the possibility of several different groups reading different books in the same classroom), meeting on a regular schedule, create various individual and collaborative writings about their reading, evaluate the processes of their group discussion, and present the results of their reading to other classmates.

It takes time and practice for teachers to discover how to generate student writing based on literature. A classroom rich in literature discussions and writings is neither automatic, nor easy. One essential element is for students to collaborate, not only verbally in literature circles, but in writing. There is no reason why a literature group can not produce a fine essay about "What's wrong with the character Hamlet," or Holden Caulfield, or about the guilt or innocence of Steve in Walter Dean Myers' *Monster*, or about the democratic world view expressed in Walt Whitman's poems. As part of this collaboration, students can design their own test questions as part of direct instruction by the teacher as part of the literature unit. Teachers should review the types of test essays students will encounter on state or local exams, but these come *after* students have engaged in a project and produced rich writing about the literature they are investigating. Furthermore, students should write about the test. Metacognition, or thinking about how we read and how we think about reading, is essential. Here's a poem one group of students composed about the literature essay they have to take:

I am the literature essay
I am not out to trick you or make you messy—
Two things you need to know,
Two characters makes you go,
And a two conflicts to center on
And something human they both show.

Although this is certainly not great poetry, the authors metacognitively have shown some understanding into some key elements of the standard literature essay. Furthermore, if most of the class's time is spent on genuine transactions with literature, the format and formula of test-based essays become the simple and clear matter they actually are.

At the beginning of this chapter I introduced you to two teachers. I think you will agree that Steve should continue to use his open-ended creative approach to writing with his "rowdy" class of students. To this he can add authentic engagement with literature. And Mary can come to realize that instruction in the format or formula of test-based essays is a simple matter, that is, *once* students have something to say on them after they have had genuine and authentic transactions with literature and in reading and writing groups. Both Steve and Mary are right—*to a degree*. Writing is an organic process, *and* it requires adherence to formulas and rules. A sonnet, a detective story, a science fiction novel, or a travel essay is usually both creative and limited by the rules of the genre used. The issue is how to balance form and content. Let us now look at the types of test-based essay which are out there and then discuss the human issues which are so central to writing well.

The Block Essay and the Chain Essay

When I have examined the writing found on tests nationwide, inevitably students are asked to write essays; not only that, but a particular *type* of essay. Unlike poems, stories, or plays, essays can be formulized to a high degree so that every test taker can make a stab at writing the exact same type of one. Again, all these forms of writing have rules and boundaries, but the essay can be formulized for tests in rigorous ways. Imagine, for instance, if a test asked students to write a detective story, a sonnet, a scene from a play, or a epic poem! Indeed, in the test-based essay, all test takers must be held accountable to the *same* essay template; allowing individual expression gets the test makers nowhere. Furthermore, as the makers of the SAT found out when they added an essay writing section to their test, a quick way of grading writing has to be found. The SAT gives its test graders only *three minutes* for each essay, much the same time experienced graders of state test essays take (College Board, 2006; Tamar, 2006).

Now, here is where our discussion of essay tests becomes counterintuitive to the values most Language Arts teachers have. Essay tests simply have to ignore three essential elements of writing teachers spend a great deal of time on: (1) the depth and profundity

of what is said, the essay's content; (2) the organic coherence, the elegance of expression, or the flow of ideas; (3) the mechanics of grammar, usage, punctuation, and spelling. At first, this seems the very opposite of what a writing test should measure. What an essay-based test *doesn't* look for goes against how we Language Arts teachers view the essence of good writing. However, the depth of the content is too time consuming and too subjective for a test grader to assess in any practical way. Similarly, elegance and form are subjective and have to be replaced by the hard and fast rules of the "block" essay. Think also, for a moment, how much time it would take for a test grader to redline and evaluate mechanical correctness, whether commas are used correctly, or whether a particular sentence is a run-on and another a fragment. It is not going too far to say that the writing demanded by essay tests must be substantially *mediocre*. All students have to produce the same type of essay, whether the writer be an expert, average, or poor writer. The result of this is that every test is a test *of* paragraphing first. Second, it is a test of *whether* the paragraphs are in the right order and have clear and appropriate "starters" so that the test taker makes it clear to the test grader that she knows what she's doing. Thus "My first reason is . . ." or "The second example is . . ." become essential for the body paragraphs. Almost all tests state something like, "Mechanics are to influence the overall grade to a degree. Only in cases where spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage inhibit meaning is the grade to be reduced." Thus, only the paragraph form is the essential and overriding factor of success on the test essay. Only paragraphing can be graded in three minutes.

I call the paragraph-bound essay the "block" essay because paragraphs function like building blocks. When I had to prepare my students for the persuasive essay on state exams, I used to provide them with legal-sized sheets of paper with empty boxes in them. In the box was a "starter" such as "My second point is . . ." or "In conclusion/therefore . . ." There is another type of essay, usually found on the college or graduate level. I call this the "chain" essay. It's longer, harder to write, and harder (and more expensive) to grade. This type of essay is an answer to a question such as:

Write a 1000 word essay on one of the following topic statements:

- Knowledge is what you have left after your education is finished.
- Experience is the deepest schooling, but it is the most (or least) effective way to learn.
- One hundred facts added to another hundred facts never result in true knowledge.
- Knowledge is essentially different from wisdom.

What the test taker has to do is keep himself going for the required number of words through a series of related paragraphs. Again, paragraph "starters" are important, such as, "For example . . .", "Another example . . .", "On the contrary . . .", "In addition . . .", "Moreover . . .", "Some say [or so-and-so says] . . .", "Another view maintains . . .", and so forth. These paragraph starters join the paragraphs together like the links on

a chain. Unlike the block essay, the important thing here is just to get the paragraphs to keep going in some sort of logical, rhetorical, or narrative sequence that makes the essay readable. This type of test essay, being time consuming for the test taker to write and for the test grader to assess, is not likely to be found on the middle or high school level. However, this is a type of essay you may want to practice with your college-bound students. All in all the chain and the block essay comprise just about every essay found on tests.

The block essay is found on 7–12 tests, whether they be Language Arts tests given to all students, or content-specific essays such as "the historical essay," or "the persuasive essay," or "explain two aspects of balancing quadratic equations." In Language Arts tests, these fall into two broad types. The first is the so-called "Literature Essay," which has several variations. The second is a sort of short answer about a passage, either an excerpt from a fictional story or a journalistic essay, which we will examine further on in this chapter. The literature essay, of course, is a major problem for many students and teachers. The test may or may not provide one story or novel excerpt, or it may have two texts present, or it may ask test takers to recall one or two texts from memory. What is important, whether or not texts are present in the test itself, is that students are required basically to do a comparison or a comparison and contrast type of task. Typically there is a unified theme that needs to be discussed in two separate works of literature. Invariably these involve human fate, human nature, humans encountering nature, or the effects of human effort and enterprise. The key term is "human." As genuine works of literature are all about the big unanswerable issues of human life, it is natural that the test essay would focus on these. The question then becomes focused on what type of Language Arts classroom enhances student performance on this type of literature essay.

The Human Curriculum

If you are to design your own literature essay question, I recommend the following template:

> In literature, as in life, people are faced with [cite human issue]. In a well developed essay, discuss two works of literature in which people [cite human issue].

It is easy to add the human issue to the above template:

- overwhelming circumstances which either destroy them or make them stronger;
- choices for good or evil which will change the course of their lives (or others' lives);
- being a victim of fate or learning to overcome fate.

It is fairly obvious that a student who has read widely and deeply would have little difficulty answering this question in the required four-paragraph format. The problem is

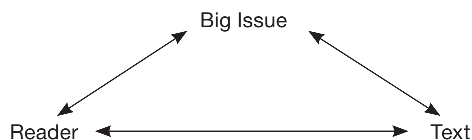
how to engender this in students, particularly in those who have already failed Language Arts tests, or who have been taught to fear and dislike reading or writing.

The general answer is to encourage authentic responses in students, both verbally and in writing, using texts that are accessible and relevant to students. Save *The Scarlet Letter* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* for later; there's no compelling reason your 16-year-olds should understand the guilt of adultery, or the hothouse of confused and unstable desires. Even novels you think should be accessible to your students might not be. *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Color Purple* were not necessarily accessible to my African American students from Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant—and why should they be; they were urban kids, not suburban or rural ones. One of the truest maxims is that we all should "Teach the students you have, not the students you think you have." Louise Rosenblatt (1938/1983) sees student engagement with the texts as the key to enhancing transactions with literature. You certainly *can* teach *The Scarlet Letter* to high school students who might be engaged by it; to some you *should* teach it if they are ready; however, there is no universal rule that you *must* teach it. The central problem I see in new teachers is attempting to teach the novels they were taught, the works they are told to teach, or the texts that are simply available in bookrooms. The biggest problem of all is caused by our feeling the need to teach literature in the commonsensical ways we have learned. That is, unfortunately, why so many teachers find themselves teaching *The Glass Menagerie*, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day", or *The Lottery*, simply because we have come to believe these are they types of things we should teach, rather than because we believe they will engage our students. Given all the excellent young adult and preadolescent literature being published today, there is no reason not to have students read novels that engage them.

In fact, you will find that, the more complex a novel or story, the harder it is to use it on a test. When I used to do literature circles, my students did read *Hamlet*, and even Dante's *Inferno* and Sheridan's *School for Scandal*, but we also read Walter Dean Myers' *Scorpions*, A. M. Homes' *Jack*, and Jack Gantos' *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*—all engaging, if very different texts. However, my students typically used the young adult novels for tests, as their characters, conflicts, and human issues simply worked the best. There is, after all, a problem with Hamlet's seeming insufficient motivation for his strange behavior, and no less a writer than T. S. Eliot (1922/1980) saw the play as flawed. It is hard to use *Hamlet* on a literature essay. I would certainly have difficulty using Dante's *Inferno* on a test that asked me about how a character struggled against another character, personal adversity, or nature. In fact, the test does not care if students write an essay about Joey Pigza overcoming his hyperactivity, or Jack coming to terms with the adults in his life who do not live up to his expectations. For better or worse, tests don't give extra points for taking on complex works of literature in literature essays. This is not to say that the young adult literature I've cited isn't literature or isn't complex. It is, however, more accessible for most students to use on tests. That's what young adult literature is designed to do, so let's have our students use it. Yet students who have engaged with complex works of literature will do better on them.

Once you have identified texts that are engaging and accessible and deal with human issues, then you want to encourage student transactions with those works. New teachers inevitably fall back on what they have learned in their college coursework, namely that whole class discussion with the teacher leading them by "Socratic" questions, which have predetermined fact-based answers, is the best way to approach a text. This, however, is the *hardest* thing you can do, even in senior AP classes in high school. To those of us who have spent time in college lecture halls and classrooms, this is counterintuitive; but it has been my experience, both personally and with new teachers, that a whole period dedicated to whole group question and answers is likely to be relatively ineffective. Even in college, I never have whole group discussion for more than ten minutes. Most students are far more comfortable *doing* something, namely talking in small groups with each other, or with writing. I maintain that we teachers have to earn our right to hold a whole class discussion, and I never do one without having students write or discuss issues in groups.

The next important suggestion I have is that there are two types of a transaction a reader is likely to have with literature. The first is the direct transaction I will explain in the next chapter on reading, the types of transactions we have when we read a book in an armchair, in bed late at night, or at the beach. The second type of transaction takes notice that what engages us with characters in books is the essentially human issues that we relate to. There is no reason to suppose that even the student who is most disengaged with schooling or who has been turned off to reading by her schooling *isn't* interested in issues of justice, fairness, equality, fate, punishment and rewards, love, friendship, betrayal, or issues with money, envy, greed, lust, religion, war, gender differences—all the big issues that fascinate us from the perspective of our very humanity. I call these the "Big Issues," the "Big Questions," or "The Way In" to the lesson. The Lincoln Center Institute for Arts Education, calls the center of each lesson the "Line of Inquiry." Whatever you call it, literature reading and writing begins to really engage students through these big issues, present in the texts read, and present in the lives of the student readers. It looks like this:



The big issue or line of inquiry could be such unanswerable questions as (1) "Do personal integrity, competence, and ability get rewarded in this world?"; (2) "Is evil usually punished or is it rewarded?"; (3) "Are our desires, hopes, and dreams good things, or do they lead us away from dealing with the real world?"; (4) "You basically can (or cannot) trust other people"; (5) "People generally get what they deserve"; or (6) "Are people basically good or basically evil?" Off hand, I can easily think of the following

works in order of the above questions: (1) Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*; (2) Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; (3) Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*; (4) Beverly Naidoo's *Web of Lies*; (5) Walter Dean Meyer's *Monster*; (6) Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* or any Shakespearian history or tragedy. I am sure you can come up with your own literary associations. I do remember fondly doing an American Studies unit and reading Jonathan Edwards' sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. I was amazed that my rather tough and streetwise students vociferously debated and actually cared whether we humans are basically good or evil. I arranged a visit for this class to a Colonial Dutch Reformed church nearby, and the minister was amazed when my group of city kids asked him with a surprising degree of intensity, "Do you *really* believe in predestination?" (He did.) And here's the biggest Big Question, or the Line of Inquiry of all lines of inquiry: "Isn't the ordinary really *extra*-ordinary?"—that is, once we really look at it. Isn't that what novels teach us about the extraordinariness of their otherwise ordinary characters? When you introduce conversations or writing about these issues, do not begin with the abstract version, begin with an anecdote:

- Here's a $20 bill. I'm going to put it on the floor and turn my back. What do you expect to happen? Why? So you're saying most people are dishonest? So, human nature is inclined towards evil?
- On the way to school today, I saw a person on the side of the road. I didn't have a cell phone, and I drove by thinking someone else would do something about this. How acceptable was my behavior? What was my duty? Do we have a duty toward other people? If so, what?
- Write about an injustice you experienced on the way to school today. Think back since you woke up this morning and write about something that you thought was unfair. Why do you think injustice and unfairness are such a part of life? Do you think life is basically fair or unfair?
- Think of a betrayal story. When were you betrayed by someone you trusted? Is this typical of what we experience in life? Can other people be trusted? Are most people trustworthy most of the time, or are they not trustworthy?
- Name one person in your life, family member, friend, fellow student, or worker who looks and acts ordinary, but is really extraordinary.

This is the type of open-ended "big issues" curriculum which can be added, using writing and discussion, as a central factor to students' engagement with literature.

A Human Issues Reading and Writing Unit

Here is a project I've worked on in an English teaching methods courses. In it I attempt to unify several strands of the reading and writing curriculum. I've focused on the middle school grades, as these tend to be somewhat ignored and because testing has more of an impact on students in these grades, but it also works for high school students.

Investigating the Complexities of the Adult World through Literature Circles

Theme or topic

Using literature circles in a unit about living in a more complex adult world.

Rationale

One of the key themes of young adult literature is that young people come to terms with adult life by realizing that people are more complicated and problematic than they believed as children. Characters in real life as in books reveal that the adults and the world they live in are neither totally good, nor totally evil, but that they are trying their best with their limited human faculties to survive and thrive in a complicated world. A significant theme of young adult (YA) novels is imperfectly and humanly learning to accept and overcome a personal challenge and realizing that this is entry into the flawed but hopeful world of adulthood. Additionally, this unit will address the literature essay by delineating personal challenges which are overcome, a theme likely to be found on the state exam.

Standards addressed

NCTE Standards specifically addressed [see Appendix A for NCTE standards]: 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12 [State, local, school, or departmental standards added here.]

Texts and sources:

Gantos, J. (1998). *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*. New York: HarperCollins. ISBN: 0-06-440833-7. In this text the protagonist, Joey, deals with his hyperactivity and with a problematic family.

Homes, A. M. (1990). *Jack*. New York: Vintage. ISBN: 0679732217. In this text, Jack deals with a father who is gay and learns about the complexities of adults and families he thought were ideal.

Myers, W. D. (1999). *Monster*. New York: HarperCollins. ISBN: 0064407314. In this text the protagonist is associated with a crime using multiple perspectives of a variety of texts, including scripts and autobiography. His guilt or innocence is left in question.

Naidoo, V. (2006). *Web of Lies*. New York: HarperCollins. ISBN: 0060760753. A young African immigrant and his sister face life in a poor urban area and are affected by gangs and other temptations which challenge their family structure.

Orr, W. (1999). *Peeling the Onion*. New York: Laurel Leaf. ISBN 0-440-22773-9. The protagonist is a talented athletic young woman whose life and relationships are turned upside down by a serious car accident.

Written assessments

For individual students:

1. A reflection paper comparing one's self to any character in the text provided. Theme of assignment: Discovering a more complex world.
2. Creation of a literature essay.
3. Daily literature log reflective and reader response writing.

For each literature circle group:

1. Mid-project and final written group progress report, process and content

2. Production of a one-page written description of a 15-minute presentation of one "big issue" present in the text. Presentation will involve having fellow students do an activity which illustrates issue present in book.
3. Daily group writing as indicated in the Overview (below).

Overview and anticipated schedule of daily lesson plans

1. *Monday.* Introduction to themes of unit. Reflective writing about our own self, family, and culture. Beginning of literature journal (to be done in class daily for the remainder of the unit) with "starters." As central activity, students in groups will list ten various "cultures" which influence them and their self-understanding (school, neighborhood, family, friends, and so forth). Discussion about the challenges facing self, group members, and other young people.
2. *Tuesday.* Introduction to literature circles. Teacher gives verbal preview of books and students self-select 4–5-member literature circle groups. Individual reflective writing and sharing about "my history as a reader." Students begin reading texts silently. In class and at home reflective writing using "starters."
3. *Wednesday.* Book discussion and journal writing. Teacher monitors groups. Group prepares outline or summary of discussion.
4. *Thursday.* Book discussion and journal writing. Students take assigned roles in group conversation (leader, recorder, questioner, observer, doubter, decider). Students prepare five-sentence summary of their discussion, process and content (discoveries).
5. *Friday.* Book discussion and journal writing. Each group reports on progress through collaborative writing about the book. Homework is to finish novel over the weekend. Teacher collects all student writing (both individual and group) to review and assess. Teacher may adjust group membership as needed.
6. *Monday.* Book discussion and journal writing in which students compare themselves with a character in the novel. Begin planning "issues" presentation of a problem facing a character in the book.
7. *Tuesday.* Research into "issue" present in the book. Teacher provides online computer or outside resources about issues. Students continue to plan presentations, which focus on an activity for the rest of the class based on the book. Guiding topic: Dealing with a complex world.
8. *Wednesday.* Presentation workshop. Written progress report (content and process) by group to teacher.
9. *Thursday.* Presentation workshop. Students compose written plan of presentation.
10. *Friday.* Presentation workshop. Students refine written plan of presentation. Students individually begin final reflective paper on "personal challenges" in self and the book.
11. *Monday.* Students give book presentations. Whole group processing or "unpacking" of presentations (no judgments!).

12 *Tuesday*. Students give book presentations. Collective group reflection due on group learning (content) and process. Literature logs due for teacher review and comments.

13 *Wednesday, Thursday*. Break from literature circles and other curriculum matters addressed. Students' individual reflection paper due. Time given in class for individual writing, if needed.

14 *Friday*. Test preparation workshop: The four-paragraph literature essay comparing book read and one other previously read book. For low test scoring students, two body paragraphs only will collaboratively be composed based on presentation, group, and individual writing. For high test scoring students, individuals will write all four paragraphs. Teacher gives ten minutes (no more!) direct instruction on Introduction—Body A—Body B—Conclusion format.

The above is, of course, only a sketch of possibilities for this type of unit, though I've included many activities to show you possibilities. You can edit and adapt as you see fit. Who the students are, their interests and abilities, what you're comfortable with as a teacher and what you want to achieve for these specific students are all essential factors in fleshing out this type of unit. There's a lot of multitasking and overlapping here, and these can be simplified according to the characteristics of the needs of a particular classroom. However, do note that there are some important variables that are essential: Basically these are the combination of (1) reading and written responses and (2) collaborative and individual activities in reading and writing. In this unit these are fleshed out by student group-selected texts of high interest, dealing with a human challenge and learning about characters who deal with their developing understanding the complexities of the adult world. The unit makes use of the various processes of group discussions and group writing, individual daily journal writing, and the creation of a student-generated paper, ongoing assessment and monitoring of group by the teacher, creation of a group project to present book and issue, and lack of teacher lecturing (except for ten-minute test-essay review), and at least twice students collectively reflect on process of group and content discussed. Notice also, that the test-essay preparation is one discrete lesson (I've even given the teacher and students two days off to relax and recoup their energies), which is part of an ongoing test essay preparation program that is given in discrete units, and only after authentic transactions in reading and writing. I never recommend that the test-based essay be any cumulative assignment. It should come *after* the students have completed the cumulative assignments.

Variations on the Literature Essay

The basic literature-based block essay found on state examinations is to take two works of literature (either from memory or from excerpts supplied on the test) and find similarities in the types of conflict facing primary characters. A much more difficult type of literature essay asks students to filter two texts through a "critical lens" or "controlling

idea." Usually these provide a quotation or saying that unifies two reading passages, such as: "We do not read novels for improvement or instruction" (Oliver Wendell Holmes quoted in New York State Regents, August 14, 2003; available at www.nysedregents.org/testing/hsregents.html); "Good people . . . are good because they've come to wisdom through failure" (William Saroyan quoted in Regents, June 19, 2003); or "All literature shows us the power of emotion. It is emotion, not reason, that motivates characters in literature (Duff Brenna paraphrased in Regents, January, 2003). I have used examples from the New York State Regents because this is a particularly acute example of this type of essay, but it does occur on other state tests. I think it is obvious that, however complex a task this is for test takers, students who have been engaged with the larger questions of human life would be able to do well on this type of test. It is also fairly obvious, I think, that students who have done much reader response writing in literature journals, and who have had rich small group and large group discussion as part of literature circles, and who have had specific instruction in this type of question after authentic reading practices, will do well on these tests. In the sample unit above, a teacher could organize the students' individual writing and group reflections (both verbal and in writing) on a critical quote, such as, "Things never change, our attitude towards them changes," or "The more we grow, the fewer easy answers there are about the world." What simply does not work—as the new teachers in my courses can tell you—is a curriculum directly focused on a "critical lens," which is simply a notion created by test makers and only somewhat related to what authentic and critical readers actually do.

A final type of written response to literature found on tests need not detain us very long. This is a short response to a passage which is a journalistic essay. Usually this is in conjunction with multiple choice questions. The Massachusetts MCAS, for instance, gave its 2005 test takers an article about the care of paint brushes. (I pass over any comment I could make about why they chose this passage.) The question asked the test takers to "Explain why the surface to be painted, paint type, and width of brush should be considered when choosing the best paintbrush for a particular paint project. Use relevant and specific information from the excerpt to support your answer" (MCAS, Grade 10, question 36, p. 123; available at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/2005/release/). These types of questions are really more like a multiple choice question than a written response. Usually they ask the reader to come up with two "supporting details" for a journalistic passage.

I would like to add one further essential component of test-based essays, which can be quite destructive to Language Arts teaching and learning. This is that, on test essays, frequently writers have to pretend to be someone they are not, to pretend to believe things they might not care about, and to write as if to convince an imagined audience. In the test-based essay you have to pretend you understand two works of literature in a certain way; in the persuasive essay, you have to pretend that you care about building a park in your neighborhood or banning cigarette smoking from sidewalks; and in the personal essay, you have to make sure that you were "influenced for the better by a person" in a clear and unambiguous way. This is highly inauthentic writing, which makes writing

much harder. However there is nothing inherently wrong, and much that is beneficial, in creating writing activities that see things from another's viewpoint. In fact, students' writing is stronger when they have to think from a different perspective. You may have noticed that a student who is decidedly anti-school uniforms writes with much more articulation about why students should wear uniforms than through his strong and unarticulated biases against uniforms. Additionally, unsure or novice writers who write about their own perspective usually leave out a great deal of detail because they do not link their thoughts with what they write on the page. You surely have noticed that unsure or novice writers write things such as, "My grandmother died a few years ago. I was very sad . . ." and then leave out any affect or much important information. The phenomenon is that they know what they are thinking but, because they are thinking it, they don't know how to communicate it on the page to the audience of a reader. Having students write a letter from a viewpoint other than the main character's, having students complete the unread ending of a story, or writing an essay from someone else's perspective is quite a good preparation for the types of writing occurring on tests. A student who can write a dialogue for *Hamlet*'s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or write a psychologist's report on Holden Caulfield, or write from the wolf's perspective in *Goldilocks*, or write a letter to Nurse Ratched by the newly freed Chief Bromden in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is likely to do well on the following types of essay questions:

- The local assemblyman is having a meeting to discuss whether to build *either* a community center *or* basketball courts in your local park. Write a letter to your assemblyman convincing him to build *either* a community center *or* basketball courts. Be sure to give two separate reasons supporting why you want a community center *or* basketball courts.
- Your health class has been studying the role of "health literacy" as an important factor in living a successful and balanced life. For a class project, you have decided to write a report about the importance health literacy for people in the United States today. In preparation for your report, you have read the web pages of the Surgeon General of the United States on health literacy, provided on the next two pages. Using this information, write an organized report about the importance of health literacy. Based on the reading provided, be sure to state two separate reasons why health literacy is important for people in the United States today.

It is quite clear that having students practice writing these essays time after time simply won't be effective, if the students are unable to transact with readings. Students who have been encouraged to transact with literature aesthetically—as I think the students in the Discovering Self unit above are doing—will be able to ferret out efferent facts from journalistic essay passages. Having assumed authentic roles as responders to literature, they will better be able to imagine themselves in the role of someone who has to convince a fictional audience on a persuasive essay.

Grammar on Tests in Editing Sections

As discussed in this chapter, grammar is, quite surprisingly, simply not much of a factor in any written test essay, whether it is the SAT or a seventh grade reading test. The term "grammar," however, is a bit slippery. As Constance Weaver (1979) points out, "grammar" can mean five or more things. To paraphrase, it can mean: sentence structure or "syntax"; usage, as in writing "good grammar"; the structural analysis of how words are put together; the mental structures and ways humans are hardwired in their heads to process language (Pinker, 1994; Smith, 2004); or various combinations of all of the above (Weaver, 1979, p. ix). What you will not find on most tests is Latin-based grammar with its concern for definitions of gerunds, participles, the subjunctive mood, or subordinate clauses. You may find usage issues on some tests, usage being the ability to recognize standard English. The test which makes the biggest use of knowledge of grammar (as usage, style, and mechanics) is the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) examination. The section of this test is a "Revising and Editing" section. The test creators write a supposed student essay with all sorts of errors. Each sentence is numbered. The artificially constructed student composition is followed by multiple choice questions asking what is incorrect in the related sentence in the composition. Anything is fair game, from simple verb tense endings to asking the students which of the four sentences is a better rewrite for the sentence in the artificial selection. The particular difficulty is that, true to the deficit model, any error is fair game. If this test were true to testing theory, each multiple choice question should have its choices based *either* on punctuation, *or* spelling, usage, or which sentence is "better," but on the TAKS, and tests like it, anything is fair game. Here's a version I composed which you can compare with the TAKS versions available online:

> Jose had to write a paper about an influential artist. He decided to write an essay about a famous musician who explored a different type of music . . .
> (1) The musician Sting has been a popular musician and singer for some time. (2) Recently, however, he had surprised many fans by turning to lute songs of the sixteenth century. (3) The lute is like a guitar, but softer and, more mellow. (4) In particular he created an album called which he said was a "a labor of love." (5) The song are melancholy, even sad, about losing one's love . . .

1. What changes, if any, should be made in sentence 2?
   - A Change however to therefore
   - B Delete had
   - C Capitalize Century
   - D Make no change
2. What change should be made in sentence 3?
   - A Change mellow to melow
   - B Delete the comma after and
   - C Change like to as
   - D Delete all commas in the sentence

This test is problematic because it conflates *editing* with *proofing*, two completely different tasks with completely different levels of importance. It equates correctness in mechanics with good writing. Language Arts teachers spend years stressing that good writing is about appropriateness of expression and how best to clearly say what you mean. A teacher could identify all the types of errors on such passages, such as subject–verb agreement, verb tenses, double negatives, or other stylistic issues, but such a curriculum is ineffective. I have observed many middle and high school classrooms, and I've been a teacher myself for many years, and I know it's extremely hard to stop various students from using double negatives, or to force them to add -ed to the third person singular past tense of verbs, or to make them add 's for the possessive. Research tells us that students who are engaged with various discourses—that is, they've joined the Standard American English Literacy Club—can shift with ease between discourses of family, neighborhood, and school. Almost all African American students knew the difference between "he be" and "he is," and many of my poor white native born students knew the difference between "I ain't" and "I'm not." My friend Rob knows all about double negatives, but he reverts to his working-class way of speaking when we talk casually. Many students, however, had not been *convinced* to use the discourse of so-called "standard" English. (I recommend having your students create a community dictionary of the language they use. It's great fun and a way to introduce the fact that there are various discourses. Recognizing their discourse might be a way to empower them to use standard English.) Many new teachers realize early on that reviewing verb tenses, apostrophes and subject–verb agreements for hours on end simply doesn't work. However, a student who can write from another person's perspective, or who writes a dialogue or a letter based on a character in a book, has entered into that way of speaking and thinking. Again, what I call intertextuality is the key to getting students to use the various discourses demanded for school success.

What Test-Based Essays Tell us about Writing

I would be remiss if I led you to believe that I see any of the formulaic test-based essays as beneficial in themselves. I discovered in my own teaching that these were artificial schoolish constructions that did not engage students. Bruce Pirie calls the block essay "mind forged manacles" (Pirie, 1997) and Arthur Applebee (1996) calls the whole apparatus of fact- and skills-based instruction "deadly traditions." This means that what actually ends up happening in test-driven classrooms is completely at odds with educators' and politicians' high-minded talk of lifelong learning and love of reading and writing. For too long, like so many teachers, I focused my classes on test preparation until I realized not only how ineffective, but how deadly was this type of instruction. Like many teachers, I thought that "creative"—or, better, "meaningful" or "student-centered"—writing should be left for the odd free Friday when students and teachers need a break. The temptation to give in to test preparation without the attendant student engagement with writing and reading is a strong one.

Here's a summary of what a traditional test-based curriculum leads us to believe about writing. You can rate them 1 to 10, 1 being "strongly disagree" and 10 being "strongly agree":

1. Writing is a difficult, unnatural process.
2. Writing has to be learned by being broken down into the basic "elements" of writing, such as introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion.
3. Writing is primarily about turning out a product.
4. The writing product should be as correct as possible. Good writing has, and good writers make, few errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, or usage.
5. Good writers usually can produce a draft "one-off," that is, at one sitting, as in answering an essay question on an examination, without revision, and with only perfunctory proofreading, if any.
6. There is a difference between "creative" writing and "formal"—or "academic"—writing.
7. "Creative" and "fun" writing does not prepare students for test writing.
8. Creative writing is "fun," but might be a waste of time because it doesn't help students get ahead in academic writing. In fact, "academic" writing is more important for students to learn than "creative" writing. Students should master academic writing before being allowed to do "creative" writing.
9. Writing on tests is harder than real writing. People who write well on tests in school are well prepared to do writing in general.
10. People who do well on writing tests are good writers in the real world of school, business, and industry.

How did you come out on these issues? Well, you might not be surprised to know that I don't agree with any of them. Writing in the real world is a process, a complex, time consuming, frustrating, and joyous one. Writing on test is about producing something artificially and not organically contrived, a formulaic approach. Here is what I have come to believe:

- Real or authentic writing is the best preparation for real writing as it is found in the real world.
- Real writing is the best preparation for the formulaic or artificial writing found on tests.
- Doing formulaic writing is a highly ineffective preparation for doing formulaic writing. It just doesn't work.
- Artificial or formulaic writing, if required, comes after writers engage in authentic writing practices.

The Value-Rich Curriculum and Authentic Writing

Real writers live in the real world. They write about social injustices, the time they first fell in love, the time they almost died, the time they were in the hospital, the time they "won." John Gaughan (2001) calls it "teaching in the contact zone," that is, where real issues collide, where there are no easy answers, where writers grapple with the real issues of contemporary society or, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the big issues humans have always struggled with. Gaughan advocates that English teachers center their curriculum around those issues that challenge assumptions and shape our identity, concepts such as sexism, prejudice, war, censorship, and even faith. In my experience, this seems to be too much for many Language Arts teachers. Most of us (and here I include myself) deal with racism or African American issues during a one-week unit during African American month. We tend to use texts we think are "safe," such as Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* or Langston Hugh's *A Dream Deferred*, to engender student writing. These are, of course, excellent texts, but they can easily be made much too "safe" and uncontroversial by teachers. Rarely do teachers take on the riskier aspects of the writing curriculum. Gay, lesbian, and transgendered themes almost never appear in the typical Language Arts classroom, nor do social inequity, social class, war, violence, peace, or gender issues typically appear as an integral and authentic part of the classrooms I regularly visit.

I would like to point out, however, that the more involved students are with the real issues of contemporary society, the more their writing is likely to be rich, engaging, and, yes, even free from errors. I am not being naïve when I point out that doing real writing has a way of eliminating errors and making students pay attention to communicating the best way that they can, if only because they begin caring what they write, rather than adhering to imposed formulas. The more engaged a student is with what she is writing about, the better that writing is apt to be. Playing it safe in writing assignments brings students closer to the formulaic or artificial writing they do on tests, and this does nothing to improve writing.

The most successful new teachers I know have their students research their homes, their families, and their communities. The students do research, read, interview, and observe things like the local bodega, a hospital waiting room, a church prayer group, or a playground. When new teachers try this, they are amazed at the results, both the quality of the content and the relative lack of mechanical errors. They report their students coming in early, staying late, or using lunch periods to work on their authentic research projects. Unfortunately, many new teachers report that they were not allowed to continue this curriculum because it did not appear to administrators to be the best preparation for the artificial writing demanded on tests. I say "appear," because, as I hope I'm convincing you, such writing is the best preparation for test writing, as we will explore in detail in chapter 7.

Many teachers advocate a "value-less" classroom. You frequently hear statements such as "I teach math (or science, or music). Math doesn't care whether you are Black

or White, male or female, rich or poor." Unfortunately, you can replace the word *math* with *Shakespeare* in the previous sentence, and this would be a typical expression used by many Language Arts teachers. The point of fact is that English, math, and science are value-rich curricula. It matters a great deal how your student views herself. It matters a great deal if a student of yours is poor, or homeless, or living in a different household every other night—as I found out many times teaching in New York City. It also makes a great deal of difference if your student is privileged and rich, and sees schooling and Language Arts only as a means to get into the best college. It matters also that students, from rich or poor communities, really *want* to communicate authentically in writing and deeply engage with various texts.

The value-less, test-prep, artificial essay-based curriculum maintains that all students are the same, that the subject discipline is somehow "neutral," and that teaching is only about passing on information and having students exercise appropriate skills, like putting their writing into box-like paragraphs, or summarizing in a sentence or two allied "themes" or messages of two works of literature. In the value-rich curriculum, *who* the student is, what is important to him, is the center of the curriculum. When you have students write about their families, their experiences, themselves, or the issues central to their lives, then the writing curriculum takes off and becomes very rich indeed. To support you, there are many fine books available; a good place to start is NCTE's web pages, and such NCTE journals as *Voices from the Middle* and *English Journal*. For a nominal fee education students can become a member of this terrific organization and have access to a great deal of material that follows. I would, however, like to point out a few pitfalls for the writing teacher.

No teacher is an expert on every aspect of the Language Arts curriculum; no one could be. The most essential point in starting an authentic writing curriculum is that even new teachers can begin to discover wider possibilities in teaching and learning. Many new teachers, for instance, feel inadequate about poetry, as they do about drama or creative writing. In most Language Arts classrooms that were focusing on poetry, I've witnessed lessons centered solely on "rhyme scheme," or "metaphor" and "simile," along with the ubiquitous "message" or "theme." I think teachers center on these issues because they are something that teachers *know*. Indeed, most of us favor one or two aspects of the Language Arts curriculum which we are comfortable with, probably because we had an influential teacher or a terrific college course. One teacher loves Shakespeare and feels terribly competent because of an excellent college class he took. Another is fond of creative writing, because she engaged in writing workshops in a well-known summer program. Another is an expert on the psychoanalytic interpretation of *The Catcher in the Rye*. All this is good, but it is not enough. Language Arts teachers, like all teachers, must become practitioners, not experts. We simply must enter into the various conversations about poetry, drama, the writing process, and the host of elements of the Language Arts curriculum.

Writing Poetry "on" Poetry: a Look at Intertextuality and Aesthetics

Returning to our poetry example, let me point out that neither rhyme scheme nor metaphor or simile has much to do with either enjoying or understanding poetry or writing it. Metaphor and simile are, of themselves, "no brainers." What could be simpler for a student to understand? But like *adverbs* and *adjectives*, or *plot* and *theme*, teachers continue to beat these literary devices into their students' heads, and the students never seem to get it, or, once getting it, quickly forget it. The simple reason for this is that, for example, metaphor and simile have little to do with poetry, just as plot and theme have little to do with a great novel.

Poetry is, of course, nearly indefinable. But we do know that it is primarily about images and about how words sound. One summer I realized this teaching an interminable one-and-one-half-hour "remedial" summer school English class in a non-air-conditioned school. Most students, when asked to write a poem, wrote a "rhyming essay." That is, in dreadful, forced rhymes, they attempt to explain something.

I love you so soon,
You remind me of the moon
So much I could swoon . . .

What to do, I wondered. Yet we can't blame students for not knowing better when so many teachers are uncomfortable with poetry. Based on my reading of Kenneth Koch's seminal works on writing poetry from poetry (1973, 1990) among others (Michaels, 1999; O'Connor, 2004), as well as taking as an undergraduate a terrific Writing of Poetry course—and out of sheer desperation in teaching three back-to-back one-and-a-half-hour summer school classes in a 95° classroom—I began teaching poetry writing by using the following template, which I subsequently refined. What I had previously experienced is that poetry is essentially an image-rich, musical type of language. I decided to center on images, having students use concrete words rather than the abstractions of rhyming essays which attempted to explain something. In fact, poems in the classroom, unless processed for tests, usually don't set out to explain *anything*. They make us *experience* it.

What I now do, is to have the class first choose an abstract word, such as "loneliness." We then fill in a chart which looks something like:

Loneliness tastes like . . .
Loneliness looks like . . .
Loneliness feels like . . .
Loneliness smells like . . . (this is a favorite of the students)
Loneliness sounds like . . .
Loneliness says, ". . .
I answer, ". . .
Oh, Loneliness . . . !

It takes some time to get the appropriate images, both to free up the students to be able to write images, and to limit them to the most appropriate images. By the way, the "Loneliness says, '. . .' " and "I answer, '. . .' " can also be a good lesson in the real use of the mechanics of the "punctuation before quotation" ("p" before "q") rule in American writing. And, if you really want to "go grammatical," the last line is the hortatory subjunctive.

The next step is to remove the words supplied by the teacher's template, such as "Loneliness feels like . . ." and to leave only the student's images. For the next step I have the students fold a piece of paper into eight or so vertical folds and move the lines about the page, make them "dance." Depending on the class we edit further, and come up with something like:

Loneliness

A piece of metal on the tongue
Silvery, sharp
Smooth, cold, absent
Silent as winter's day
with snow on the ground.
Muffled steps
You can't catch your breath
I am with you
Forever.

The point is that this *is* a poem because it does what a poem is supposed to do, create meaning through images and musical language.

I've given an outline of my poetry lesson because poetry—like Shakespeare, drama, and creative writing—may or may not be an area of competence for any given teacher. What knowing our weaknesses can do is prompt us to rely on a test preparation curriculum, for at least writing block essays and reading for plot and theme seem objective and sure. The point is that rather than continuing to teach from our limited strengths, and avoiding our many weaknesses, it is simply beneficial to admit that all of us must have curricular weaknesses, and that, given the quality of Language Arts materials out there, we can create classrooms where real writing is done, where real poems, and, yes, even real plays and stories are created. I argue that a student who can engage in a writing process such as the above can "get" the relatively artificial concepts of metaphor and simile or plot and theme better, and will do much better on writing tests. I would also argue that a student who can write a story or a play, with appropriate characters in conflict, can write a better test-based essay; and a student who can write an authentic poem can better answer multiple choice questions based on poetic reading passages.

Although I hope the poetry writing lesson works on its own, it is fairly easy to see that this can be used to interact intertextually with a story, novel or another poem, or with

the big human issues that so empower students to do well on tests. Instead of a loneliness poem, you could have students write a physical challenge poem, or an adolescent conflict poem, certainly things that will appear on a literature essay test. Reading works of literature engender dealing with real issues and thus encourage good writing. Good writing needs to be supported by reading rich literature. They are inextricably linked in the Language Arts curriculum. However, we can use writing to teach students about the necessary things needed to write, such as relating cause to effect, sequencing items in chronological or logical ways, being aware of an audience and its abilities and needs, or simply sharing something with other people through writing for the sheer joy of sharing information or teaching something new. There are many types of writing we can do which are not simply focused on tests, but which do develop students' skills in the art of writing, skills that are much more practical and based in actual writing than what is typically found on tests.

Thinking Things Through: a Recipe Unit

Imagine, for instance, the considerable thought and effort you or your students would have to put in to write a description of how to put on a coat or eat an éclair. (I actually did these writing activities in my class and did attempt to put on a coat and have a student eat an éclair according to the written directions, with very odd results.) We can have our students do authentic writing activities that will help them with other writing activities. I am not talking here about grammar lessons, or having students use workbooks; rather one type of good writing empowers student to do better on other types of writing. All good writing has elements in common, such as proper sequencing of facts or paragraphs, including sufficient but not extraneous words, and writing for a specific audience, among many other elements.

One of the best techniques I stumbled on was having students write recipes. When you reflect on it, writing a successful recipe is a complex activity. Writing a recipe encourages students to go back and forth in fairly elaborate rewriting, revising, and reconceptualizing processes as in, "Oh, I left out the fact that you have to turn on the oven first," or, "Do I have to mention specifically how to crack an egg?" This type of writing makes writers learn to be responsible for everything, to take nothing for granted, to see the interplay between the content of writing and the process. Indeed it allows students to engage in the highest level of writing, that of imagining an actual intended audience. Furthermore, a cook book can be easily published using an antique rexograph machine or a photocopier. As I wrote recipes with my students for over a decade, I felt pretty much alone and was unsure of how I'd explain this unit to supervisors, though I knew that my students were doing complex writing tasks. Imagine my delight when I read Frank McCourt's (2005) account of the seemingly crazy things he asked his students to write—including recipes. And need I mention that a writing curriculum always needs a reading curriculum to go along with it, just as a reading curriculum needs writing to enhance it? Food writing is an art itself. Years ago, I had my students read Pierre Franey's

"60 Minute Chef" column in the New York Times. We also read the "Murder in the Kitchen" chapter from Alice B. Toklas' famous *Cookbook*. The possibilities are limitless; students could write their own restaurant reviews and read the ones published in the media—this really is almost a journalistic art form. In fact, as I am writing this chapter, a fast food restaurant in New York City was all over the media about an outrageous rat infestation. Crowds of people and dozens of journalists with cameras in the now fashionable and very expensive Greenwich Village were lined up in the closed restaurant to look at all the rats scurrying about. Another teacher I know bases his mandatory test-based persuasive essay writing unit on an article about three young people finding a deep fried mouse in a bucket of fried chicken. Is this too much for a writing curriculum? I don't think so. How can any student not be interested in food—or rats? And how can writing recipes or restaurant reviews—even the local fast food emporium, school cafeteria, or local doughnut place could do—*not* help student organize facts logically for test-based essays? Yet, even given what students are asked to do on tests, such as answering questions and writing about paint brushes as in the MCAS example in this chapter, I am sure some teachers might not agree with me. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP) asks students to describe a very unusual day, design an educational TV show, or write a story about a special object. Here's several questions for you to think about before getting to the next chapter on how to assess students in the Language Arts classroom in light of the demands of high-stakes tests:

1. Would you as a teacher actually have your students write recipes? If this is appealing to you, why would you do it or not do it? If so, what benefits would your specific students get from this activity? If not, what do you think is more important to have your students spend their time on? If you did write recipes, how would you justify to administrators that your students were learning real skills? What NCTE or state standards would this activity meet?
2. Could you, and would you, design a test prep unit using restaurant reviews to teach elements such as supporting details, description, or the validity of a writer's opinions?
3. What other authentic and real-life writing activities can you think of that involve students with the whole writing process of brainstorming, thinking, planning, writing, rewriting, editing, proofing, and publishing? Furthermore, how would these real-life writing activities help your students prepare for the block test essay they are sure to encounter?
4. What types of writing questions are on the NEAP, and how could you design an authentic writing curriculum around these types of issues? See: http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/ITMRLS/portal.asp?type=search&subject=writing

four
Reading Theory and Practice

Reading is thinking.

—Frank Smith, *Understanding Reading* (2004, p. 191)

"Before it gets too late," she said as she got up, "I have a surprise for you. We are going to visit my friend, Horace Safrin, the writer." I was speechless, for I had never met a real writer before and I had no idea what one did in his presence. But, I understood that Madame Grossman planned for me this unique treat and I felt grateful.

—Elizabeth Dykman

Overview

This chapter presents how to teach reading and literature in light of the unique demands of tests. Tests require an approach to reading passages that is different from the types of reading most of us do in our homes for enjoyment, as well as from the types of academic reading usually required by schools. Certainly reading passages on tests are very different from the types of reading most Language Arts teachers want to encourage in their students. The answer is not to create a curriculum centered on reading for tests, because the more time a teacher spends on a test preparation curriculum, the less effective her teaching becomes. Rather, enhancing authentic practices in reading and literature makes students comfortable not only with the two basic types of reading (fact-based and aesthetic), but also with the specific ways students must read the specific

types of passages on tests (poetry, excerpts, and journalistic essays). This chapter also provides a larger framework for understanding the reading curriculum in which tests are situated, including whole language, phonics, and balanced literacy. This chapter also examines how "plot" and "theme" became a normative, if only moderately effective, approach to literature.

A Look at the Reading Curriculum and Reading Tests: Poetry and Prose

Every lesson any teacher gives is a reading lesson. In fact, teaching reading should not even be the sole obligation of Language Arts teachers. Many subject disciplines have, in fact, to teach *two* languages; for instance, how to read math questions and how to read the language of algebra or geometry. This "double language" or "double vocabulary" problem is the same for history, science, and almost all disciplines. Most teachers have to teach *both* how to read English and how to read the specific "language" or discourse of the content area, whether that is chemical formulas, quadratic equations, or how to analyze a historical text. In this light, it may seem that Language Arts teachers have it easy. We only have to teach English reading, and what we teach is essential for all subject areas. Additionally, most students read to some degree, and it seems that we only have to enhance what students already are doing.

Of course, if only it were that simple! As you've surely experienced, teaching reading is very complicated and never easy. I tell the preservice and new teachers in my courses that every lesson should be part reading lesson—just as every lesson is a writing lesson—but, conversely, that every time we attempt to "teach" reading we encounter problems and complications. There is never any perfectly satisfactory way to teach any aspect of reading. In fact, every reading strategy we use, from trying to arrive at the plot of a short story (if we wish to do so), to reading the directions for a literature essay on a state exam, to having our students experience a poem—all these are inherently *imperfect*. We learned to speak quite easily just by being babies. Learning to read is a more complicated ongoing process for all of us.

In literature, teachers should read aloud to students, students should be allowed read silently, students should be encouraged to read aloud, and, of course, students should be encouraged to write in many different ways based on their reading. But none of these reading strategies is perfect, and you surely realize that, despite the best efforts of well intentioned and competent teachers, many students stubbornly refuse to read, dislike reading, or don't seem to read well at all. I know several successful bankers and business men and women who tell me they simply don't like to read. They've been taught to dislike reading in school. There are even teachers who are uncomfortable with their reading skills, because they've been taught this in school. Reading is *always* problematic. It's a complicated human activity, and I am sure you can provide your own story of a time in school that you felt inadequate, or successful, as a reader.

In fact, even the reading experts are divided between those who value phonics and spelling instruction (the building block approach), those who value whole language approaches (the organic approach), and those who value a combination of those two approaches (balanced literacy), as well as those who maintain that any combined balanced literature approach is ineffective (Smith, 2004). The reading curriculum, I'm sure you'll agree, is actually one of the most complicated aspects of being a Language Arts teacher.

Reading tests, of course, complicate this problem. If it is very difficult to teach our students to learn to enjoy reading, and to do it well, how much more difficult is it to teach them to do well on reading tests. Fortunately, reading tests and the reading selections found on Language Arts tests pretty much look the same nationwide and all work the same way. Additionally, reading tests do not ask for particularly deep and thoughtful "readings" on the part of student test takers—there simply is no time for this, either for those taking the test, or for graders, who must use multiple choice formats and computer scanners for the sake of efficiency. A Shakespearian sonnet, for instance, is frequently found on reading tests, but the types of things students have to know about how to read a sonnet do not involve any deep understanding or aesthetic appreciation of that art form. It is both a comfort and a challenge to reading teachers that reading tests demand *less* from students than the types of reading that occur in our classes. The multiple choice reading questions about a sonnet, like every poem found on reading tests, will tend to focus on the meaning of individual lines (translation), the supposed overall meaning of the poem (theme), or various literary devices (alliteration, rhyme scheme, paradox, and so forth). In the specific case of the sonnet, inevitably there will certainly be a question about the shift in tone or meaning from the "problem" in octave to the final "resolution" in the couplet which completes the sestet.

Most importantly, there are only two basic types of reading passages typically found on Language Arts tests. The first is poems, which have to be relatively obscure and, as we shall see, of a certain type, so the majority of test takers are unlikely to have read them and can "get" their meaning quickly and efficiently. The second, as described below, are journalistic essay-type reading passages. As we shall see, short stories and selections of novels, being literary works of art, are relatively inappropriate for the types of information required of reading tests.

Before discussing these prose reading questions, let's look at the type of poem which I found on a test reading section. It is an excerpt from Gwendolyn Brooks' (1917–2000) *Children of the Poor* (1949). Try to read this poem selection out loud, or, if you can't do that, read it what I call "silently out loud," as if you can hear yourself:

Life for my child is simple, and is good.
He knows his wish. Yes, but that is not all.
Because I know mine too.
And we both want joy of undeep and abiding things,
Like kicking over a chair or throwing blocks out of a window

Or tipping over an icebox pan
Or snatching down curtains or fingering an electric outlet
Or a journey or a friend or an illegal kiss.
No. There is more to it than that.
It is that he has never been afraid.
Rather, he reaches out and to the chair falls with a beautiful crash,
And the blocks fall, down on the people's heads,
And the water comes sloshing sloppily out across the floor.
And so forth.
Not that success, for him, is sure, infallible.
But never has he been afraid to reach.
His lesions are legion,
But reaching is his rule.

You will note that this is a fairly direct and unambiguous poem with a clear and direct focus, "my child." It is also a selection of a longer and more complex poem, but contains a sort of "story," focusing on almost a character who does things—similar to *Richard Cory*, discussed in chapter 2. In the above poem, only two words, "lesions" (bruises) and "legion" (many), are likely to cause a young reader any trouble, though "icebox" may require some explaining to twenty-first-century students. In writing this book and searching hundreds of poems for ones that might be suitable for tests, I realized that so many poems are so complex, have deep and open-ended meanings, and contain unusual or archaic vocabulary used in complex ways, that most poems are simply "untestable." Invariably, poems on reading tests must involve some kind of clear subject, usually a human being rather than an object in nature. You might also be interested that Brooks' poem occurred as a sample reading passage on the Content Specialty Test (CST) in English that teachers have to take in New York State for certification (Preparation Guide English CST, 2003, pp. 43–45) and has appeared on the New York State Comprehensive Examination in English (Regents); I am sure you will find it on other tests. As there is really only one type of Language Arts test, this poem is typical of what your students would experience on their middle or secondary examinations, either for placement in program or at the various transition or exiting points.

Typically, this particular test reading section limited the poem to two multiple choice questions. (Secondary reading tests, however, usually contain longer passages in prose or narrative or epic poems with as many as five or more multiple choice questions.) As with every reading test focusing on poetry, these questions are limited to two basic categories: poetic or literary devices, and the overall "theme" or a summarized "meaning-statement" of individual lines or of the entire poem. The first question on the CST asked about which line "best illustrates the poet's use of paradox" (p. 44). See if you can come up with the answer before you find what the test says it is, found at the end of this chapter.[1] The other question on the CST asks which of four statements describes a "significant theme" of the poem. Again, try to answer this on your own and

check your answer against the one at the end of the chapter.[2] We don't have to look at the correct answer, however, to see that asking this kind of question is problematic. How can one summarize what this poem *means*? Does it indicate something about the nature of childhood, the role of the adult or parent in guiding a child, the love of physical cause and effect in children so lacking in adults, the reality that life teaches adults to stifle their physical and intellectual explorations, literally "not to reach"; or is the poem about the learning of caution and fear of consequences so relevant to the adult world? All of these are valid interpretations to a degree, but none of them is quite sufficient, nor do they really match the didactic answer the CST provides. That is why we have poems and literature and why we go back to them again and again. They defy final explanations and, by their very nature, elicit open-ended and varied interpretations in readers (Greene, 1995a). Test makers, of necessity, have to choose one interpretation that they see as best and that all test takers can potentially "get." Given the nature of poems, any single interpretation is always inadequate to some degree. The same goes for any work of literature or art.

To these problems is added the fact that many teachers are uncomfortable with poetry. Many of us don't read it very often—other than teaching poems to our students—or we have not had a college course in the teaching of poetry or even the writing of it. This is not anyone's fault, except perhaps in the college curriculum itself. Those who are comfortable teaching poetry usually write poetry, have been part of a class or workshop in writing poetry, or have had a deep and focused course on poetry. More power to them! When my college program runs an elective in the writing of poetry, the course is packed with an incredible number of students hungry to explore poetry. Many are already writing poetry on their own, but most sincerely feel the need to explore an area in which they feel inadequate as new teachers. Indeed, I really didn't know what poetry really was until I signed up for an undergraduate elective with the Rhode Island poet Jane Lunin Perel.

I tell the student teachers and beginning teachers in my classes, that the best teaching takes place when we think of ourselves as learners investigating language *with* our students, rather than as teachers imposing our prior knowledge *on* our students. With poetry, becoming poetry writers and readers is essential. In reading poetry and understanding poetry, writing poems about poems, what I call *intertextuality*, is the best way of "getting" individual poems and becoming comfortable with them. Still, the existence of poems on reading sections of Language Arts tests reinforces a mechanical view of teaching poetry as if poems existed primarily to illustrate literary devices or to make a clear and unambiguous didactic point or theme, as the two CST answers show. Teaching these skills for these tests simply doesn't work well. However, I think you will agree that a student comfortable with poetry is more likely to "get" what is required by reading a poem on the test. But how, then, to do this?

The best ways to do this are through aesthetic practices and "intertextuality," a term and a concept we return to throughout this book. Many teachers have been taught to focus on the poem's meaning through analysis of the poem's *content*, and not on the

process of students' responses or transactions with this poem. We also have been taught, unfortunately, to almost fear poems as part of some untouchable "high culture" work of art (Mayher, 1990). Once we put these hesitations aside, however, we can open up possibilities for ourselves and our students to interact and transact with poems. Dare I say, we and our students need to feel free to *play* with poems. To some teachers this sounds heretical, but give it a try.

The first step, after locating poems that have been used on the tests for which you are preparing your students, is to alter texts. The basic way is for the teacher to provide alternate readings and to let the students argue about which text is the most effective. Of course this is work but, once done, it's in your repertory for the next group of the same type or level of students you teach. Phil Anderson and Greg Rubano (1991) suggest creating four versions of any given poem. Here's one of my versions of Gwendolyn Brooks' poem:

> Life for my child is simple, and is good.
> Not only does she know what she wants,
> As do I. That isn't all.
> I know my wishes too.
> Both of us want lots of fun and to do silly and destructive actions . . .
>
> [Here, depending on what you think is important in this poem, the Brooks examples could be simply reproduced word for word, or the images could be changed: "He throws the egg at the window," "He pulls her hair," "She pushes the spaghetti on the floor."]
>
> Unlike me,
> My child has never been made to be afraid
> Life for her is the learning of cause, of effect
> But she is not afraid to reach out, to try
> Despite the inevitable bumps, the bruises
> But she has learned to attempt, to reach—
> And reaching is the most important thing of all.

You can easily provide three or four versions of this poem, or of any relatively short poem, that is once you become freed from a "high culture" view of texts as somehow sacred and untouchable. By providing up to four versions of a relatively short poem, students begin understanding the types of choices in image and music poets make. Altered texts allow students to investigate differing rhymes and meters and to weigh and value the actual choices poets make. Poets themselves often constantly rewrite poems—think of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*—and different versions are published in their lifetimes. This is more common than we've been led to expect by our literature teachers (Anderson & Rubano, 1991). Additionally, poets rewrite and adapt poems of other poets. Think of Christopher Marlowe's *The Passionate Shepherd to his Love*:

> Come live with me and be my love,

And we will all the pleasures prove . . .

Or Walter Raleigh's *The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd*:

If all the world and love were young,
And truth in every shepherd's tongue . . .

Or John Donne's *The Bait*:

Come live with me, and be my love,
And we will some new pleasures prove . . .

Or Ben Jonson's *Come, My Celia*:

Come, my Celia, let us prove,
While we can, the sports of love . . .

Or a student's:

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the arguments do . . .

Such rewriting has many benefits. Students take ownership of poetry, interact with it, and become comfortable with it, and they then can see poetry reading and writing as a living and relevant means of human expression, and, of course become better able to do the more limited types of poetry reading demanded on tests.

Another way a teacher can alter texts is by leaving out words:

Life for the child is simple, and is _______.
He knows his wish. Yes, but that is not ____.
Because I know ______ too.
And we both want joy of undeep and _______ things,
Like kicking over a chair or _________________ of a window . . .

The last line, of course, is the one that keys the reader into supplying previous words. Of course, when students alter, revise, or rewrite poems, this can be a powerful way of becoming fluent with poems, in particular for the quick thinking they have to do with specific poems on tests. Here are some techniques, all of which are dependent on who are your particular students, and how specific poems are put together. A teacher could read a poem out loud, and have a student reconstruct it from memory. Or, half a poem could be presented and students could complete it. Or a teacher could remove every other line, or selected lines of a poem, and students could supply their own. Students can update a poem, as one of my students did with Marlow's poem.

A very effective technique of altering texts is for the poem to be cut up into slips of paper for each line, and students can rearrange lines and then compare their "poems" with the real thing. And I can point out how it is amazing how students thus recreate quite meaningful poems and get the essential meaning of the actual poem, and begin to see the images and hear the music of the poem. Here is one based on one of four groups

in a small class. For now, read the following arrangement out loud or "silently out loud" to yourself, ignoring for now the letters and numbers in the right hand column:

Life for my child is simple, and is good.	1	A	I
He knows his wish. Yes, but that is not all.	7	B	IV
Not that success, for him, is sure, infallible.	2	L	XII
But never has he been afraid to reach.	5	F	VIII
His lesions are legion,	17	N	II
Because I know mine too.	8	C	V
But reaching is his rule.	18	G	VIII
And the blocks fall, down on the people's heads,	11	I	X
And the water comes sloshing sloppily out across the floor.	15	J	XIII
And we both want joy of undeep and abiding things,	9	D	III
Like kicking over a chair or throwing blocks out of a window	10	O	XV
Or tipping over an icebox pan	14	P	XVI
Or snatching down curtains or fingering an electric outlet	4	Q	XI
Or a journey or a friend or an illegal kiss.	12	R	XVII
No. There is more to it than that.	6	M	XIV
It is that he has never been afraid.	16	E	VI
Rather, he reaches out and to the chair falls with a beautiful crash,	3	H	IX
And so forth.	13	K	XVIII

What are your impressions of this reconstruction? What choices did this group make in reassembling or altering the poem? In most classes in which I've used this poem, every group begins with the original first line, but the above example actually replicated the first two lines. There are several other paired original lines various groups reconstructed—just because they worked the best that way. Note also that students begin to understand, and to organize their altered text around stylistic and grammatical structures, such as the lines beginning with "Or" or "And." When you read the altered poem, I think you can see that this group worked together and began to understand how images and sounds worked together, and how the poet structured the poem. If you had to construct this poem in this way without having read the original, in all likelihood this poem would engender your deeper understanding of the original. I've included three other versions from this activity in the same class. Read separately in proper order the Arabic numbered, the alphabetized, and the Roman numbered versions, and see what you think and hear of each of the three groups' reconstructions. I suspect that any of these group compositions would aid individuals greatly in understanding not only this poem, but how poems work in general. Students who do this, or any of the text altering activities suggested in this chapter, report that they understand not only how individual poems work in image and music—that is, how they are put together and the choices a poet makes—but that it makes them more comfortable and more expert in "getting" poetry in general. An ideal poem to try poem line reconstruction is with

Dylan Thomas's (1914–1953) villanelle *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night* (1951), a poem likely to be found in most textbooks.

Most importantly, as Kenneth Koch (1973, 1990) has shown in his now classic work with young children, even those who are non-native speakers of English can "get" the essence of a poem—even difficult ones by authors such as John Donne. In other words, each poem has a unique approach, a unique way of "speaking," a unique discourse. Usually the first line or two set up what follows. Teachers and students can use this as a jumping point based on the way any particular poem approaches language. Both "Life for my child is *this and that* . . ." and "Come live with me and be my love/and we will all the *something* prove . . ." set up a discourse which can be imitated in any number of ways. In this way, a teacher could emphasize a "children of the rich" poem, or a "children of the city," or "children of my neighborhood":

Life for my little brother is not simple at all,
I worry about his getting to school.
About the streets with cans and litter
About the gangs on the streetcorner chillin'
About . . .

In the above sample, the framework the teacher provided is readily apparent. His middle school city students relied on his giving a sample, having for the first lines:

Life for_____ is not____ at all
I [feeling here] about [him/her] __________
About ________________________
About _________________________

And so forth. Indeed, the variations of a poem written intertexually "on" Brooks' poem are fairly limitless. A more suburban version:

Life for me is not simple at all.
There are choices to make about colleges to go,
About teams and squads and dressing right,
And eventually driving a nice car.
About tutoring, extra classes, and Kaplan . . .

The two beginnings of poems immediately above could have been written by students in a Language Arts class, but they weren't. They were written by student teachers, one in an urban district and one in a suburban district. Based on Brooks' poem they were attempting to "get in the head" of their students. It can be unfair and even dangerous to attempt to speak for anyone except oneself, but in this case, I think the students were trying to reflect on the realities of their students, and this is a good thing.

There are an increasing number of excellent texts which combine the reading of poetry with the writing of poetry, and a comprehensive set of intertextual techniques for this is beyond the scope of this book, not only because there is no room, but because

possibilities are as limitless as the developing practice of each Language Arts teacher. As I've indicated, the reading and writing of poetry is well worth the investment of a course in it, or participation in a workshop, or participation in a poetry reading and writing group—and why not start one in your school with like-minded teachers? However, I hope I have made the case that intertextuality is one of the most meaningful ways to invite students into the world of poetry.

I am sure you still are questioning how this helps your students prepare for the inevitable poetry reading selection on a reading test. First, poetry passages inevitably appear on tests. They are short and economical for test makers to design questions on, they illustrate the literary devices and predetermined "theme" statements that seem to meet the "objective" requirements of tests, and unknown poems are relatively easy to find. If, as I indicate, poetry reading questions are inevitably about (1) one or more literary devices and (2) theme, rather than *experiencing* the music- and image-rich poems themselves, the question remains of how do these aesthetic and intertextual activities help students on the poetry reading tests? The answer here, as suggested many other places in this book is, first, that literary works of art are not written for the sake of illustrating literary devices or "getting" a set point or theme. Indeed one can experience and "transact" with poems without ever knowing what *simile*, *assonance*, or *alliteration* are, or "what the poem is telling us about life." However, teaching literary devices comes (if at all) *after* students experience and transact with poems. The mistake so often made, not only by teachers, but by teachers of teachers, as well as in packaged or computerized test preparation courses, is not to understand that literary terms never work if students don't *first* experience and transact with poetry. Even then, literary terms are always less than the many layered meanings of the poems themselves.

In the Brooks poem, for instance, what literary device occurs in the line, "His lesions are legion," a line I found odd and challenging in my first few readings of the poem? I suppose it is *consonance*, *assonance*, or *alliteration*—or is it all three? Or is it *internal rhyme*? Forgetting for a moment about complicated literary terms, even drilling the very simple concepts of "metaphor" and "simile" into students' heads simply doesn't work, unless, that is, students are previously engaged with and transacting with real poems. If a student really is engaged with the way Robert Burns (1759–1796) personally addresses a louse crawling on a woman's bonnet in church in *To a Louse*, then she knows *apostrophe*. It doesn't work the other way around, just as you're probably now searching in your head for when some teacher "covered" apostrophe. (I actually had to look it up!) The same goes with the sonnet, typically by Shakespeare, likely to be found on reading questions. Familiarity with iambic pentameter and what I call the "twist" of the last couplet is necessary to know on a reading test. However, unless a student is engaged with sonnets and not made scared of their seeming obtuseness, then all talk of octave, sestet, and couplet won't make any sense to him at all. You can even have your students write sonnets, or an intertextual sonnet "on" a sonnet, as Kenneth Koch can show you. What better preparation to quickly get two to five questions found on a poetry reading sample?

The second concern of poetry-based reading test questions is *theme*, the ability of a student to quickly "get" what the poem "is about." I can only argue that giving students poems—even those used on previous tests—and focusing on somehow summarizing what the poem means in a sentence or two, simply doesn't work. It *can* work on tests, however, if students are deeply engaged with poems and are comfortable with them. I argue here and in other places in this book that no reader ever has to arrive at a theme to be thoroughly engaged with a work of art, but if we do have to deal with the concept of a summative theme then this is best done after a student is engaged with the work of art. Intertextuality is the best way to do this. I think if a teacher, along with his students, explored Gwendolyn Brooks' poem above in the various ways I've indicated, they would be well prepared to quickly discover a simplified meaning or theme asked on a reading test.

The Other Type of Reading Question: Prose

You may have questioned in the previous section why the emphasis on poetry. After all, poems are a particularly dense type of literature, which would seem inappropriate for reading tests, which seek to generate clear and correct answers. However, from the test maker's perspective, his options are few. The test maker must create questions using relatively short texts. Each question has to be answered quickly, and each sample text provided must generate only two to seven questions. More than five and fatigue begins to set in and students' abilities to answer correctly diminish. Furthermore, there is the "literature problem." Text makers can't use selections of literature which students are likely to encounter in their studies. There are two reasons for this, one more obvious than the other. First, students from wealthy districts are likely to have been exposed to a large number of texts of literature, whereas students in poor districts typically have to make do with fewer texts of authentic literature, read less literature in mandated test prep curricula, and are more likely to have inexperienced teachers or teachers teaching out of license (Crocco & Costigan, 2006). Even if all students in the United States had access to a wide variety of quality literature—a situation which is sadly far from the case—then there is the problem that some test takers are likely to have read a passage of a novel, short story, or essay and had an unfair advantage on any given reading test. Furthermore, most reading tests are composed by teachers or former teachers, and they are likely to share a literary repertory that is in danger of having already been taught to test takers. In addition, it is hard to locate selections from short stories and novels that simply make sense decontextualized from the larger work, though excerpts of fiction are used on quite a few tests. In reading, as in writing, as discussed in the previous chapter, the essay best serves the needs of the test. They are short, clear, and economical, and short selections can excerpted and still make sense to test takers.

However, there's a second, less obvious, and more complicated "literature problem." What if a student had read a text used on a particular test and had it presented in a

different way than the simple and clear answer demanded on tests? As we have seen with the Gwendolyn Brooks poem, there is always a problem that the main theme of a poem, which is obvious to test makers, might be different from what even an astute and practiced reader thinks. A former colleague of mine was a sail boat fanatic. He'd sailed boats since a child and had given lessons in high school and raced boats semi-professionally. When he encountered a reading passage about sailing boats, did he do better or worse than the ordinary non-sailing playing student? In fact, he thought the passage inadequate, too simple, and actually wrong in some ways, and he felt he might have not done well on that section. I think over-thinking or too much knowledge is an unacknowledged problem with all tests. Furthermore, it is the whole point of literature and works of art to have multiple meanings, deep meanings, and to bring up the big questions about humanity and human life. Not only do these unanswerable human issues just not test well, but the deeper and more thematically multi-layered a given piece of literature is, the harder it is to test because it does carry so many deep readings. What is any given passage from *Moby Dick* really about? What is the clear and unambiguous "message" of a selection of a short story by Hemingway?

The result of all these complications is that, other than a fairly clear and seemingly unambiguous poem, test takers are likely to encounter prose that is nonfiction, that is journalistic in nature, and that is likely to be unknown. Rarer, and occurring on tests designed for students in higher grades, are plot- and theme-based questions on excerpts of relatively unknown fiction passages. Journalistic essays which supply multiple choice questions for middle and secondary students, however, are readily available and can be found by test makers with relative ease for the two or three times per year (fall, spring, summer) that new tests have to be given. The CST test from which the Brook's poem came contained as prose samples a "folksy" speech by the former Texas governor Ann Richards, a paragraph on the benefits of speed limits, and an account from a "journalistic essay" about a performer doing encores. The same is true for prose reading passages occurring on reading tests your students are likely to encounter. Although some tests may ask test takers to evaluate essays supposedly written by other students (as in the lute-playing Sting passage in the previous chapter), and although short story excerpts are not unknown, in all likelihood the prose reading passages are journalistic accounts of adventures, aspects of different cultures, places, events, or interesting facts about the human situation. Test makers, to give them credit, are obviously trying to make these passages as interesting as possible. They realize that the test results simply are much more accurate if the passages are related to, and interesting to, the students who take them. When tests have more than one prose reading passage in them, frequently for a total of three, then these are attempted to be presented from the least to the most difficult, but all of the passages are typically journalistic essays. A recent phenomenon is for the prose passages to be accompanied by pictures, graphs, charts or other visual representations, and there might be questions about these as a nod to multiple literacies and intelligences (Gardner, 1991). Another factor in recent tests is an increasing nod to texts which are about multicultural issues. None of this is bad at all.

Here's a passage from Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation* (1990), a book about gender differences in thinking and talking. In using it, I am thinking like a test maker in using this reading sample because it is a nonfiction work in prose composed of selections which make clear points. Additionally, I think my readers and test takers (that's you, reader) will find it interesting because it's about gender issues. Who isn't interested in this topic? In this, it is similar to passages your students are likely to encounter:

Best Friends

> Once again, the seeds of women's and men's styles are shown in the ways they learn to use language while growing up. In our culture, most people, but especially women, look to their closest relationships as havens in a hostile world. The center of a little girl's social life is her best friend. Girls' friendships are made and maintained by telling secrets. For grown women too, the essence of friendship is talk, telling each other what they're thinking and feeling, and what happened that day: who was at the bus stop, who called, what they said, how that made them feel. When asked who their best friends are, most women name other women they talk to regularly. When asked the same question, most men will say it's their wives. After that, many men name other men with whom they do things such a play tennis or baseball (but never just sit and talk) or a chum from high school whom they haven't spoken to in a year.
>
> When Debbie Reynolds complained that Dick Van Dyke didn't tell her anything, and he protested that he did, both were right. She felt he didn't tell her anything because he didn't tell her the fleeting thoughts and feelings he experienced throughout the day—the kind of talk she would have with her best friend. He didn't tell her these things because to him they didn't seem like anything to tell. He told her anything that seemed important—anything he would tell his friends.
>
> Men and women often have very different ideas of what's important—and at what point "important" topics should be raised. A woman told me, with lingering incredulity, of a conversation with her boyfriend. Knowing he had seen his friend Oliver, she asked, "What's new with Oliver?" He replied, "Nothing." But later in the conversation it came out that Oliver and his girlfriend had decided to get married. "That's nothing?" the woman gasped in frustration and disbelief.
>
> (Tannen, 1990, pp. 79–80)

As essay selections such as these typically do not contain literary devices—after all journalistic essays are typically not *literature*—test makers arrange questions about explicit and then implicit information imparted by the text. The explicit questions might be about vocabulary words or phrases test takers should know, or at least recognize in

context. Here are the words I've identified in the order of difficulty for the New York City high school students I've taught. See if you have a different rating systems, or if you can identify other problematic words in the context of the passage:

(+) most difficult

1 chum
2 incredulity
3 havens
4 essence
5 gasped
6 lingering
7 raised
8 regularly

(–) least difficult

Of course the phrase, "lingering incredulity," like most combinations of words, is more difficult than the sum of the two words themselves, and is certainly fodder for a test question. Additionally, a question might be why the writer has put the word *important* in quotes. Then there are inevitably questions on what a passage such as this *implies* and what the reader should *infer*—two words you are likely to see on a vocabulary or reading test, just as you are likely to find some question about the words *connote* and *denote*. Such a question would revolve around what we can assume about Debbie Reynolds's relationship to Dick Van Dyke—and it is not at all a given that today's 7–12 grade test takers would know much at all about these performers. Hint: They were not married, but they did work together on a movie. Another type of question which is both explicit and implicit is to ask test takers to interpret which of several sentences are the "best" meaning of a sentence found in the passage:

> "After that, many men name other men with whom they do things such a play tennis or baseball (but never just sit and talk) or a chum from high school whom they haven't spoken to in a year." This could be best interpreted as:
>
> A Unlike women, men engage in more sports activities.
> B Unlike women, men see their friends less frequently.
> C Unlike women, men talk about facts, not feelings.
> D Unlike women, men have longer memories.

I am sure that C was the clearly the correct answer. However, the issue here, as with poetry selections, is how best to prepare students to do well on them. Although I do advocate short and discrete test prep units, constantly reviewing old tests has increasingly diminished returns the longer you have students engage in it. Answering multiple choice questions after a reading selection is simply not the way humans authentically go about reading in real life. We don't do this when reading at the beach, in armchairs, or late at

night in bed. My recommended approach, particularly with students who did not like to read, who tend not to read at home, who have had bad experiences reading in school, or who have been labeled (on tests) as "deficient" readers, was to provide essays found primarily in newspapers and popular and scientific journals. My favorite has been the *New York Times*, but there are a host of newspapers, journals, and periodicals that can serve as well, particularly as the internet has made so much available so easily. What I did do was create for myself a journalistic essay packet to be used for real sources of intertextual writing, such as having my students write an essay "on" an essay, or write a poem or letter "on" an essay. Some of these I still use are: an article on a local haunted house and its mysterious history (a corpse is said to be hidden there); the Stanly Steamer automobile and Jay Leno's collection of them; how wasps inject into tarantulas eggs that turn into live larvae, which eat them slowly alive from the inside out; brain differences between men and women and the ways they use language; the invasion of the vicious and nearly indestructible Asian snakehead fish into local waters (it can crawl and live for a time on land!); the "real" meaning of various tattoos. With my high school students, it was hard to go wrong with any of these journalistic essay topics. I know few adolescents or preadolescents that aren't interested in cars, haunted houses, gender differences, body modification, and the more colorful, if gory, aspects of nature. While writing this paragraph, I scanned the *New York Times* and found an article on a school district that plans to test their students for their weekend drinking, a food article entitled "Queens [the borough I teach in] Has Less Feta, More Jellyfish," an article about a former slave and the world's oldest person who died at the age of 114, and the fact that a public park with newly refurbished sports facilities on Randall's Island in the Bronx is financed by and will be used primarily by wealthy students from private schools in Manhattan.

Three points can be made. First, these are of high interest to every reader, even ones disengaged from reading. Second, they do reflect the types of essay selections found on most reading tests. Third, they all have to do with what John Gaughan (2001) calls "teaching in the contact zone." This means that most of these articles have to do with the big issues of human life, like ecology (snakeheads, wasps, and tarantulas), social justice (public playing fields reserved for the rich), technology (Stanly Steamers), social constructions (tattoos, men and women's brain differences), and demographics (Greek to Korean immigration, or feta cheese to sautéed jellyfish). In particular, for my students, most of whom lived in the city and rarely left their neighborhoods, I chose many articles about nature, as in the snakehead and wasp and tarantula essays. If it seems as if I am stretching these connections, remember that these human "big issues" are what a teacher most effectively constructs a unit about, and the articles themselves are illustrative to a degree of these issues. And these essays allow such connections. I had the brainstorm writing the above: Tattoos = Ishmael, snakeheads = *Silent Spring*, wasps and tarantulas = Iago and Othello, 114-year-old ex-slave = Allan Gurganus' (1990) *The Oldest Confederate Widow Tells All*. OK, these are *my* connections and may not be readily apparent to you. But you can make such connections, and so can your students, and, as we have seen in the previous chapter on writing, connections are what help students

on all Language Arts tests, whether reading or writing sections, where they will have to make connections between two separate texts through a "critical lens," as some tests require and we will examine below. A curriculum focused on human issues, the large unanswerable ones, can unite students' lives, their issues, journalism, literature, and the human condition. And these issues can only assist students to recognize the very limited types of fact-based questions found on tests. One of the best techniques is not only to have students analyze your multiple choice questions about tarantulas and wasps, or tattoos, but to have them compose their own multiple choice questions.

How to enhance students' performance on tests? There are numerous books that can help you discover reading circles, literature journals, intertextuality, reader response techniques, aesthetic education. Check out the pages of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Better still, join this organization. It's well worth the nominal price.

The power of effective teaching for tests lies, however, not in my giving you tips and gimmicks and prepackaged lessons. In my research into new teachers and their growth as teachers, I have found that prepackaged or scripted curricula, or even giving teachers pre-existing lesson plans, not only is ineffective, but actually harms the abilities of new teachers to develop their own teaching strategies and lessons (Crocco & Costigan, 2006). Surprisingly, even when new teachers are given prepackaged lessons with effective strategies and materials that that most educators would recognize as "best practices," new teachers still get confused about how to implement them because the lessons come "from the outside." New teachers need to develop organically. Although, in this chapter so far, I hope you found the strategies for reading helpful for your own practice, these won't get you far unless you understand some underlying reasons for what reading is and how it works. Many new teachers understandably want the practical, the "hands-on." Techniques and good teaching strategies *are* necessary, but considering the underlying factors that influence classroom reading is essential for you and other new teachers to be empowered. Once you grasp some basic understandings about reading, then you are empowered not only to come up with your own lessons, but to see better how these lessons prepare your students for tests.

Acts of Reading and Literature

Writing has one big advantage over reading. In writing, a person produces some*thing*, a text that is concrete, an object. Writers always "go public," that is publish their works. Even if a middle school student composes a journal at home for her eyes alone, or if another hands a paper into a teacher to be graded, it is still "published," or made public, to self or to others, in a very real sense. Readers, on the on the other hand, seem to be engaged in a private or internal conversation or, to use Louise Rosenblatt's term, a *transaction*, with the text (Clifford, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1938/1983, 1978, 2005). This is why, in the Language Arts classroom, a "three-legged stool" approach to reading is essential: (1) encouraging varied ways of student reading, from private to public, to

silent and out loud reading, or to listening to others and the teacher read; (2) sharing understandings about reading in literature circles or small groups; and (3) journaling and writing about reading. Although talking and writing about reading helps "firm up" transitory understandings, given the highly individual nature of a reader's engagement with a text, it is hard to teach students "how" to read in any generalized way. To many of us, it seems an organic process. Here's a short list of things that happen when I read:

- I get lost in the text. I am so engaged that the world is non-existent; I am non-conscious of it. I lose track of time, wake up, look at the clock and say, "Where did the time go?" This is what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996) calls *flow*.
- I struggle with a paragraph that I just can't seem to get, I read it over and over and it still doesn't sink in. I just can't get a focus on it, much less understand it, no matter how many times I "go over" it—as opposed to actually "reading" it.
- I'm given a book that is new to me. It is a type of book I've never read. I try to read it. I don't understand what it's about. It's English, but the author is having a conversation, using terms, concepts, or a discourse whose language I do not know. I don't "get" it.
- I read a story and am reminded of a time in my life. My eyes leave the page and my imagination takes over: "That reminds me of the time . . ." I am in a reverie, in my own imagined world, far from the text, rehearsing an autobiographical vignette or story.
- I picture the events taking place. I imagine the faces, the clothes, the surroundings only suggested to me on the page. I "fill in" with what I know. My mind goes cinematic with all the sounds, shapes, and colors.
- I wonder what is happening outside of the book. What happens after the story ends? What does this particular character do after she has left the scene? Why didn't the author follow that character? How did he end up?
- I am there "on the page," in the story, following it, anticipating what will happen next. I am reading a "page turner." I'm sorry to put the book down because now I have to do something else.

Reading is somewhat like driving a car, riding a bicycle, or taking a walk in the woods. Sometimes we pay acute attention. Sometimes we are startled when something jumps in front of us. But most of the time we are *non*-conscious, and not articulating or analyzing what we are reading as we are reading it. Reading tests, of course, complicate the matter a great deal because they ask for a correct response from students—usually "objective" plot- and theme-based information—when students, like all readers, are by nature inclined to have exactly the opposite responses, namely fluid, subjective, transitory, emotive, and non-analytical transactions with the text.

Following Harold Vine and Mark Faust's (1993) method of discovering how readers "situate" themselves. You can easily see how this happens. Take a poem unknown to you—Vine and Faust found one in the *New Yorker*—and read it once. Write your response. Cover that response, read the poem again and write below your first response.

Do this again for a third time reading and writing about the text. Write a final response to all your three written responses. Although this seems time consuming, it really is worth the 20 or 30 minutes it takes. What will happen is that you will chart the significant ways in which your reading changes each time, and the deeper understandings you engender as you go through this process. You can then compare your "readings" with those of other readers, or among your students. Here's a poem you can try it with, but this also can work with prose passages. It's written by a colleague of mine, Dave Iasevoli, a former teacher at a boys' prison in New York and current faculty member at my college:

Old Faithful

On Jane Street, an exhaust streams hot air.
The mutt shuns this patch of sidewalk where
a laundry room vents familiar gas
into the day. We pass a man I've seen around—
he stands before the escaping steam
this morning a bent knee as he cranes
a bettered sneaker foot against the vent.
The other hand clutches a coffee cup
and a box of Marlboro Lights. What's in the cart?
Books? Last week he stood before the Beat
bookstore reading Pound, and on a Sunday night
he slept beneath the restaurant trash
of Marionetta, a paperback
of Moby Dick, splayed next to his bag.
Damn cold this morning. The dog slinks past
on her way to sniff a pit bull.
We quicken our trot towards the river
as our dear reader lowers his sneaker.
Huddled into his hood now, he ponders
Carlos Williams' dear old woman, who
gives herself up to her bag of plums.
He submits his life to steam, the vapor
that smells of fabric softener.
He deeply felt the cold this dawn, still wet
from last night's pissing rain when he passed
out on a belly full of Gordon's
gin and pizza crusts. He lights a smoke
to breathe in Bounce and Tide and sulfur.

A wonderful poem, which I hope revealed several richer layers each time you read it. The above activity is useful in getting students comfortable with reading passages, and it should not be underestimated how much better students who are more comfortable

reading do on tests, something teachers can directly enhance. Once this is done, a teacher can review several possible themes which are present in the poem, but which, as always, are statements which are less than the actual reader's experience of the poem.

What is important to remember is that your students, however well they are performing in school or on tests, can and do read all the time. They surely know what it means when they read "Stop!" or "Entrance Fee $20.00," or "Red Socks lose again, 5–2." They have much more trouble with two types of reading they are likely to do in classrooms. Louise Rosenblatt (1978) makes the useful distinction between *efferent* reading (from the Latin *effere*, "to take away") and *aesthetic* reading, that is, transacting with a text. Efferent reading is reading for facts and information: what you do when you have to install a new computer, put a child's bicycle together, or follow a recipe on a box of cake mix. Aesthetic reading is when we engage or transact with a text (Rosenblatt, 1978), the type of reading you do in an armchair or on a bus, or like you did with Dave's poem, above. We will discuss aesthetic reading in more detail below, but these types of reading do overlap. Re-reading Julia Child's (1970) *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, or reading about early twentieth-century stamps, or reviewing a book of some complicated guitar fingerings, can be more of an aesthetic than an efferent act. What is essential in preparing students for tests is that these focus on efferent reading, as it is impossible to capture aesthetic responses on tests. However, as aesthetic reading is by its very nature deeper and more meaningful than efferent readings, it follows that students who do a lot of aesthetic reading do better on efferent fact-based tests.

There are a few other distinctions generic to reading tests. Historically there has been a gulf between the *reading* curriculum and the *literature* curriculum. The reading curriculum was, and is, based on teachers' enhancing good reading behaviors, and correcting reading "miscues." Whereas the reading curriculum usually takes place in the early grades—think of how you learned to read as an elementary schooler with books specifically designed to show you how to read—by the tenth grade or so, most teachers focus on the *literature* curriculum. These conceptions of reading behaviors and knowledge of an official canon of literature (Hirsch, 1988) have been supplanted in educational conversations by a focus on reading as a socially construed phenomenon. That is, good readers have joined a "club" (Smith, 1988, 2004) of people who are readers and who "have a conversation" with texts. Various readers belong to clubs that are conversant with various literary discourses, be it the novels of Stephen King, seventeenth-century British poets, or late twentieth-century African American novels. The idea behind the notion of a discourse is that various people are part a conversation, ways of not only speaking, but thinking about human issues as communicated in texts. For example, I am part of a baseball discourse, but I certainly am not part of a cricket discourse. I found out early on in my teaching that the discourses of my students from poor areas of New York City were often different from the discourses valued in school. The issue for all of us is how to bridge the gap. This disengagement isn't just a phenomenon in poor urban or rural districts. Students from wealthy communities, research tells us, are no more likely to love literature than those from poor ones (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider,

2000). Rather, they have just learned to go along with the discourse of schooling to get ahead. And, of course, there are many urban students from poor communities who have "joined the literacy club" (Smith, 1988).

Here's a way you can explore the notion of discourse in your classroom. Explain to your students that we all stand in various "circles." For instance, the teacher might say that he stands in the "teacher" circle, but also in the "parent" circle, the "piano playing" circle, the "old movie fan" circle, and so forth. The possibilities are endless. Have the students write their "circles" anonymously on three or five slips of paper. Put all the slips of paper in a hat and mix them up. Have students each pick out five random circles. Without commenting, and in a tone of respect, have students read the five anonymous and random slips of paper. Depending on the level of trust the teacher has engendered in the class, this can be a respectful way to begin a unit in which students explore one or several aspects of their personality in an autobiographical essay, or it can be a way to explore a character in a novel who is struggling to come to terms with a discourse or community. This works well as a way into almost all young adult novels in which a character is likely to be struggling with a physical, emotional, or intellectual challenge, a non-standard language, a family issue, a background that is different from the assumed majority, gender or sexual orientation, or any issue that involves growing into the complexities of the adult world.

Plot and Theme

What is important to remember is that there are basically three ways of looking at reading—the reading behavior curriculum (teacher as interventionist), the literature curriculum (teacher as passer-on of cultural artifacts), and the socially-construed discourse curriculum (teacher as enhancer of student engagement with reading) (Applebee, 1993). Unfortunately, these are only tangentially allied with what is being asked of students on a reading test. This is important to know because, as you probably have experienced through observing classrooms or in your own teaching, what you will likely be doing with much of your time in your classroom is not necessarily what is demanded of your students on the tests they take. Here we need to explore where plot and theme come from.

What, then, do language arts tests ask of readers? Consider the following types of questions:

- The theme of *Hamlet* is best expressed in which of the following terms . . .
- Holden Caulfield tells us the following about adolescence . . .
- In Blake's "Tyger, tyger, burning bright/In the forest of the night . . ." the tiger stands for which of the following . . . .
- In *The Night of the Iguana*, Tennessee Williams is trying to tell us . . .
- In Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, his relationship with his mother is best described as . . .

You probably find these questions very restricted in reflecting the deep engagement you might have had, or want your students to have, with these works. The fact remains, however, that you *do* find these questions commonsensical. The reason is the "plot and theme" way you've probably been taught to look at literature.

The reason for this type of approach to the "meaning" of any literary texts is the inevitable watering down, on the middle and high school level, of a way of looking at reading that is called New Criticism. To oversimplify for the sake of being concise, English as a subject discipline really only came into its own in the twentieth century when it began to overtake Greek and Latin as colleges moved from being the preserve of rich men of leisure to more democratic and practical places. Previous theories of English were limited, didactic, and hierarchical and went something like this: *Great men* [yes, the "men" is intentional] *have great thoughts and express those thoughts in writing to teach us things*. Obviously, this approach has some readily apparent problems. After all, *Hamlet* is a great work of art because it is *Hamlet*, more than the fact that a great man, about whom we know relatively little, wrote it. The New Critic approach was a corrective to this thinking and emphasized the meaning inherent in the text itself, interpreted in light of the traditions of others engaged with the text. The text itself is all. This approach is sometimes called the "close reading" approach in which individual readers, working, of course, in the tradition of other readers, come to texts to read deeper meanings. Who the author was, what was the historical context not only is unimportant, but actually can get in the way of understanding the text as it is. But to do close readings of texts requires time, practice, and some expertise, as I. A. Richards demonstrated in his seminal *Practical Criticism* (1929/1962).

What happened is that the New Critic approach became simplified and codified at the middle and high school levels by the mid-twentieth century. If a close reading was difficult and required practice, finding out the "elements" of plot and theme was something that could be done by almost all students. In fact, describing plot and articulating theme has become almost a universal and formulaic way of anlayzing texts, a sort of watered down close reading approach. Reading tests focus almost entirely on this way of interpreting texts simply because close readings, layered and multiple readings, and deep readings—the fact that literature often opens up deeper questions than it answers—are simply beyond the ability of any test to assess. Thus, reading tests demand a simplified "close reading" technique, as well as one that is far from valuing students' authentic, personal, and heartfelt reponses.

Building Block, Organic, and Balanced Literacy

Although an understanding of plot- and theme-based reading—as opposed to transactional reader response theories and practices—is necessary for teachers to know, the way in which teachers prepare students for reading tests relies on a few competing theories. Because of NCLB, teachers in districts where schools are labeled "failing," because of test results, typically will be made to teach in a certain way, or even given

prepackaged minute-by-minute scripted “teacher-proof” lessons as part of a curriculum almost solely devoted to test preparation (Costigan & Crocco, 2004; Costigan, 2005b). These are important because many test preparation packages and programs rely on a combination of three competing conceptual frameworks.

These are the whole language approach (what I call the organic approach), the phonics approach (what I call the building block approach) and a combination of the two (typically called “balanced literacy”). There are quite vociferous and even nasty verbal battles between advocates of these theories, in which whole language advocates not only dismiss the phonics people, but condemn them, and vice versa (Smith, 2004). Then there are those who maintain that teachers can combine both approaches (Weaver, 1988) and those who say this is not only useless but harmful (Smith, 2004).

In my teaching, I strongly advocate organic approaches to reading and writing. This means that I believe that people are simply language beings—reading and writing are essentially human activities (Chomsky, 1965; Lyons, 1970; Pinker, 1994). We *are* language. The teacher’s role is to enhance, guide, and empower students’ innate capabilities. The building block approach, on the other hand, believes that language is learned, largely by imitation and practice, from the smallest elements to the largest, from letters, to vowels and consonants, to phonemes (sound units of words), to words, to sentences, to paragraphs, to essays. Balanced literacy attempts to unite both approaches, realizing that reading is an organic process children simply are built to do in increasingly complex ways, but that specific or direct instruction in phonics, spelling, grammar, and punctuation are needed. Balanced literacy, however, tends to address the organic approach to language by formalizing it in ways that may not be beneficial. The new teachers I talk to are frequently mandated in their schools to spend hours and hours of their time trying to have students make “text-to-self,” and “text-to-text” connections. For a time I was confused by this until I realized that that the curriculum they were using had attempted to formalize reader response and transactional approaches by using these objectified terms. All sorts of things go on in a reader’s head, but their mandated reading curriculum maintains that, if students can be made to make “text to self” or “text to text” connections, then they are (1) engaging in reader response activities, and (2) better prepared for tests. I’ve researched this phenomenon for seven years, and, in fact, I can state with some trustworthiness that these two results rarely happen. However, it is easy to see why balanced literacy is so popular with textbook and test preparation companies, school districts, and administrators. It seems to have the best of both worlds.

My research has lead me to conclude that balanced literacy is simply too much to handle in the first confusing and overwhelming years of teaching. When new teachers are forced to use balanced literacy programs with minute-by-minute scripts and under high levels of supervision with threats of financial and professional sanctions, the organic processes by which teachers learn their profession are destroyed, and this may actually be a factor in why new teachers leave teaching or migrate to the suburbs where there is more autonomy and personal satisfaction (Costigan, 2002, 2005a,b; Crocco & Costigan, 2006; Ingersoll, 2003a). As we have seen in chapter 1, with Michael’s experiences as

a new teacher, more experienced teachers, those in their third year of teaching and beyond, have come to understand how to teach reading in a personally rewarding way, which they see as beneficial for their students. If they are given mandates, they know that they can do better on their own, and they override or subvert them (Crocco & Costigan, 2006).

Reading and Essay Questions

All this discussion of plot, theme, and reading theory leads us to the essential problem with reading tests. These are an example of what Jerome Bruner (1971, 1992) sees as an overarching problem in the way we think today, namely that *information equals meaning*. Many educators would argue that "meaning" is more about the process of making meaning, rather than assembling facts. You can add one plus one, endlessly, and you will never get the concept of "ten" or "one hundred." The engagement with texts, our transaction with them, is essential—that, indeed is the reason we read anything. We seldom read just for information, that is, except in school. The fact-based focus of tests, however, is essential not only in answering multiple choice questions, but in the short answer and longer essay questions increasingly found on reading tests.

We have discussed the literature essay in the previous chapter. However, here it is important to remember that the structured essay is likely to ask the test taker something about one work's "literary elements," "literary techniques," "controlling idea," "critical lens," "main idea," "theme," "text-to-text" or "text-to-self" connections. You can search most books on literary criticism and never see these terms, either from a reader response transactional perspective or from a New Critic close reading perspective (Eagleton, 1983/1996). Many tests even directly ask, or come very close to asking, students to identify the "author's intent," something the New Critics had abandoned by the 1920s. Tests must maintain that there are some kind of "facts" or "information" *there* in the work of literature, and that this information can be ascertained by readers. There are, of course, facts in any work of literature, but these are always secondary to our engagement with the work itself—indeed I read the *New York Times* more for aesthetic engagement and enjoyment than just to add more facts to what I know. Newspapers present ongoing conversations about issues, rather than just new facts. What tests do is to take this even a step further and to maintain that the meaning of any work of literature is best expressed in some kind of statement of fact. This is always problematic as any given statement is correct only to a degree.

The situation, however, is far from hopeless, particularly in the case of students recalling works of literature (usually two) in order to answer an essay-based reading question. If your students have been engaged in aesthetic practices such as intertextuality—creating texts out of texts, or texts "on" texts—and if they have been discussing and writing about their responses with works of literature, then they are likely to do well on the fact-, theme-, and plot-based questions found on tests. Again, as a teacher, you should provide discrete and focused practice sessions in the form and structure and how to

of taking reading tests, just as you should review the so-called elements of literature, such as theme, characterization, structure, point of view, symbolism, supporting detail, irony, and figurative language. But these terms, so tangential to authentic engagement with works of literature, are applied after you have encouraged your students to become engaged with literature.

Let me give you a final example. I think if you've been thoroughly engaged with Dave Iasevoli's poem, *Old Faithful*, above, you could then find instances of poetic devices and even get a sort of point (theme) being made. I don't think you have to find a point in this poem. As an aesthetic practitioner and reader, I don't *want* to get a final point or message from this poem—that is simply an impoverished way of doing poetry—I want to savor the poem again. The poem is its own point. However, if you had to, you could. What would be a very poor thing to do is to *begin* by using this wonderful poem as an illustration of literary devices or to summarize its "message." That would be a terrible thing to do, wouldn't it?

Thinking Things Through

Below is a selection from a short story from a friend of mine. It is about her experiences as a child growing up in Communist Poland. As discussed in this chapter, this excerpt can be approached two ways: first, as a text that you can become engaged with aesthetically; second, as a type of passage that can occur on a reading test. Multiple choice questions usually revolve around journalistic essays, but some tests do use short stories and novel excerpts. Essays are usually focused on two works of literature, both remembered, both given as samples, or one given as a sample and one remembered. At the end of the short story excerpt, I've given my multiple choice questions. No multiple choice question is perfect, even on tests claming to be valid, and many multiple choice questions are problematic. In addition you will see I've included my short answer and longer essay questions for you to review and discuss. I patterned the essay question on the New York State Regents which is one of the more complicated writing tasks on state examinations. Of course, I welcome you to also make up your own test questions, and to evaluate the "validity" of mine. However, the essential rule remains: *Test-based writing must be done* after *authentic reading and writing has been engaged in, and it must be presented consciously as a test prep curriculum different from authentic reading and writing practices.*

Excerpts from Early Spring

Elizabeth Dykman

> During the first year with Madame Grossman, I learned how to tolerate her but never in a million years did I manage to like her. It would have been impossible to predict the events that followed, so when one day after class Madame Grossman stopped me from leaving the class, I was unprepared for the encounter.

“Frania, do you have some time this evening?” she asked. I turned all red and quickly tried to swallow the excess saliva in my mouth.

“Yes—Madame—Grossman,” I answered, unable to refuse her.

“Excellent. Then you can come to my place. I say, around six, for a light supper. Take down my address: Piotrkowska 72, Apartment 6. It’s on the third floor.”

Go to her place! Images of torture multiplied in my head. The rest of the day in school flew by me like a blink in my eye. I was reminded by the last bell that the school day was over and that the worst wasn’t behind me but in front of me . . . I knew that I would have the most difficult day of my life.

On that fateful evening the building #72 was of no interest to me, as I slowly climbed to the third floor. With my heart beating like a grandfather clock, I entered Madame Grossman’s home, where I was formally greeted and my coat was removed. I was then ushered to the salon, a very clean, Spartan looking room, with a table in the center already set up for two. Madame Grossman wore her daily brown suit but now removed her jacket. How odd, I thought, she doesn’t wear an apron like my Mon, a linen towel pinned to her skirt . . . .

“Frania, I hope you don’t mind. I didn’t have time to cook something special.” Her voice sounded much softer than I expected.

“It’s alright,” I answered, but she didn’t hear me.

“What did you say?” she enquired.

“It doesn’t matter,” I tried a little louder, moving closer in the direction of the kitchen.

Madam Grossman emerged from the kitchen carrying the steaming dishes.

“It’s only American potatoes (red salad potatoes), with fresh sour cream and dill,” she announced. To reassure her, I quickly obliged: “I really like it, as it isn’t boiled chicken.”

In spite of the fact that I genuinely liked the meal, I felt a lump in my throat and was unable to eat much. Madame Grossman must have sensed my uneasiness, for she was not nagging me to eat on. Instead, she moved my plate to the side and asked:

“How are you getting on in school?” I was greatly relieved that she understood my predicament and I even managed to smile, when I said:

“I guess, it’s O.K.”

“And what are your favorite subjects?” she inquired.

The standard question, I thought, and answered in my well-rehearsed voice, “History, geometry and literature.”

“You must like books. What kind of books do you like to read?”

I cheered up a bit, I liked talking about books.

"I'm reading," I started, "*The Three Musketeers*. I really like it. As soon as D'Artagnan arrives on his yellow horse at the Meung Inn, the fun begins, and never lets up . . . It's just wonderful . . ." Finally, I got so carried away with my enthusiasm for books, that I gave away to Madame Grossman, a total stranger, my secret weapon.

"I really like to read books by categories," I explained very seriously. "I just finished the 'fairy tales and legends', and *The Three Musketeers* is my first book in 'the adventures'." She now listened to me in silence and I saw Madame Grossman as I never did before. I knew that no one would ever believe me but her face relaxed, her "ridges" mellowed and her eyes felt watery and soft. Her large yet gentle hands rested on the table with her fingers intertwined. Madame Grossman looked at her watch and collected the dishes.

"Before it gets too late," she said as she got up, "I have a surprise for you. We are going to visit my friend, Horace Safrin, the writer." I was speechless, for I had never met a real writer before and I had no idea what one did in his presence. But, I understood that Madame Grossman planned for me this unique treat and I felt grateful. With some difficulty, I managed to say:

"Thank you, Madame Grossman."

I. Multiple Choice Section

1. I was then ushered to the salon, a very clean, Spartan looking room . . .

   In the above sentence, which is the most likely meaning of the word "Spartan"?

   A Serious
   B Colorful
   C Simple
   D Decorated

2. Frania's account most likely is telling us that Madame Grossman is:

   A A good teacher
   B A distant relative
   C A true friend
   D A complete stranger

3. From the passage we can deduce that Frania
   A has been having difficulty in school
   B loves history, geometry and literature
   C is a short story writer
   D has been having trouble at home

4. Which of these best supports the fact that Frania is nervous?

A To reassure her, I quickly obliged: "I really like it, as it isn't boiled chicken."
B Finally, I got so carried away with my enthusiasm for books, that I gave away to Madame Grossman, a total stranger, my secret weapon . . .
C In spite of the fact that I genuinely liked the meal, I felt a lump in my throat and was unable to eat much . . .
D I was speechless, for I had never met a real writer before and I had no idea what one did in his presence.

5. Which of the following best describes how Frania feels about visiting Horace Safrin's home?

   A Afraid
   B Nervous
   C Excited
   D Bored
   E None of the above

6. Which best expresses the theme of this passage?

   A You can't judge a book by its cover
   B Anyone can learn to read books
   C It is good to meet well-known authors
   D Things turn out different than expected

7. Which best expresses Frania's understanding of Madame Grossman by the end of the passage?

   A She is formidable but caring and interested
   B She is formidable, but knowledgeable in literature
   C She is happy and interested in young writers
   D She is not a good cook, but she is curious

II. Short answer

How does Frania show her interest in reading and literature in the story? Be sure to provide two examples from the excerpt.

III. Essay

Write a unified essay using the critical lens of "True learning is really about rethinking what we already know." Be sure to refer to two texts, Early Spring and another work you have covered in class. Using evidence from these two texts, describe your critical lens [or controlling idea, theme, or text-to-text connections] about what these authors tell you about learning as type of

relearning, rethinking, or reassessment of what we already know. Be sure to identify any specific literary elements or techniques to convey that idea.

Be sure to:

- Use *Early Spring* and one other text (short story, poem, essay, or novel).
- Use *one* example of specific and relevant evidence from *each* text.
- Show the each author uses specific literally elements (for example: themes, characterization, structure, point of view) or techniques (for example: symbolism, detail, irony, figurative language) to convey the controlling idea [or critical lenses, or main idea, or theme, or text-to-text connections].
- Organize the ideas in your essay in a logical and coherent manner.
- Use appropriate language that communicates your ideas effectively
- Follow the conventions of standard English.

And here's the question I really want to ask: Respond in any way to the sheer gorgeousness of Elizabeth Dykman's story.

Answers to CST test questions

1 The first question on the CST asked about which line "best illustrates the poet's use of paradox" (p. 44). The answer given is, "Rather, he reaches out and to the chair falls with a beautiful crash."

2 The other question on the CST asks which of four statements describe a "significant theme" of the poem. Here is the correct answer: "Children should be supported in their willingness to take risks and defy social conventions as they seek to express themselves freely."

five

Symbolic Assessment and Authentic Assessment

Rubric: **1 a:** an authoritative rule; *especially***:** a rule for conduct of a liturgical service **b** (1)**:** **NAME, TITLE**; *specifically***:** the title of a statute (2)**:** something under which a thing is classed**:** **CATEGORY** <the sensations falling under the general *rubric*, "pressure" . . .

—Merriam-Webster Online
(www.m-w.com/dictionary/rubric)

Overview

This chapter outlines the various issues involved with assessing students in the Language Arts classroom. It highlights the differences between symbolic assessment, or grading, and another more thorough and comprehensive type of assessment called "authentic assessment," which seeks to assist students in improving their learning through specific types of feedback (Zessoules & Gardner, 1991). Authentic assessment even encompasses the possibility of students assessing themselves through portfolios and self-assessments. This chapter explains that grades are, of necessity, a limited means of assessment and evaluation, and that judging students by grades is not the same as understanding them. Labeling students does not necessarily provide them with the means to improve. To effect true student assessment and preparation for assessment on tests, this chapter advocates techniques of assessment from mastery learning, as well as defining test-based standards, objective or rubrics in light of best practices in reading and writing instruction.

Authentic and Symbolic Assessment

Let us begin our discussion of grades and assessment by looking at a symbol you are very familiar with. This is the eight-sided red sign with the word “Stop!” on it. Invariably, if you are driving a car, you will move your right foot from the accelerator to the brake pedal when you see it. As you stop the car you will probably look in either direction before proceeding. However, there is an essential difference between the sign and the actions you take. This is because the sign (the signifier) is never the same as the reality (the signified). The sign and the act of stopping a car at an intersection are arguably both important, but we could philosophically argue about which is more essential: an actual person stopping one particular car at one necessary moment, or the imparting of information that all drivers should stop the car before proceeding. However, it seems clear that the sign can never be more important than, and can no more than be equal to, the reality that it represents. Yet, unfortunately, in this imperfect world, the symbol frequently ends up being more important than the reality it signifies. If you think of the act of burning the American flag, you have a good illustration of just how important signs are. The sign has become the reality, and it is very hard for any of us to define exactly what it is that the flag specifically represents. You may adamantly maintain that people have the right to burn the flag whenever they choose to; or you may view this as an act that should be prohibited and punished by law. What none of us can deny is that for many people the flag has become both the symbol and the reality it is supposed only to represent, even if they cannot articulate what exactly the flag does represent. Wars continue to be fought over religious, cultural, or national symbols, and a glance at the daily papers or an internet news site will show that for many people, sadly, the symbol becomes very much more important than the reality.

I am beginning this chapter with the discussion of symbols because it is a good way to begin looking at grades. Grades are essentially *symbols*, no more, no less. However, as you surely know, grades are immensely powerful symbols. For many of us the symbol of a letter or a number become much more important than the reality itself. For many of us the grade *is* the reality. We really can’t blame anyone for this situation as so much is dependent on grades. Advancement to the next level of schooling, being admitted to college, receiving awards, fellowships and grants, and even a student’s future success seem all to hang on grades. As any college-bound student or their families can tell you, grades *are* the reality. You probably can’t get ahead in life today without good grades. This has been brought home to me in my college teaching. Not a semester goes by when at least one person doesn’t complain about his or her grade, asking how to raise an A-minus to an A. This is a distinction that seems minute to me but is important to the student. If you are teaching, you’ve surely experienced similar examples of the “grade chase” (Mowrer, 1996). I don’t blame my students for this, because grades are so important, and I go out of my way, as almost all teachers do, to “justify the grade” and to try to see that the symbol is a valid and trustworthy representation of the knowledge the student has. I think it fair to say that, overall, in the United States today the symbol of

the grade has become more important in our minds than any learning that it represents. Teachers may be good or bad, or it may or may not be important to know algebra and verb tenses, or long-term deep learning or short-term rote memorization may take place, but ultimately one's academic future is determined by grades.

Grades are thus what I call *symbolic assessment*. They are symbols of achievement or learning. Teachers constantly struggle with ways to link the symbol accurately and trustworthily to the reality of students' learning. However, have you noticed that teachers in their lounges, or over a cup of coffee or a beer after work, or formally in faculty meetings, or informally at social gatherings, endlessly discuss grades and grading policies? Hours can be spent discussing the benefits of "dropping the lowest quiz grade," or "how much 'weight' should be given to grades on homework," or whether to use a bell curve or not. The permutations of grading strategies is nearly endless. They are also, inevitably, unsatisfactory. So, too, do states endlessly adjust the types of difficulties in their examinations, or raise or lower the appropriate passing grades, all because different groups of students perform differently on them semester to semester. Politicians, educators, the media, and the public, are fascinated also with the yearly SAT or state exam results, or whether this year's crop of students do better or worse than past years. Grading is a symbolic machine that requires continual adjustment and high maintenance.

I have come to conclude that every conversation about grades is at the same time fascinating to educators, and ultimately unsatisfactory and non-determinative. As the saying goes, no matter how you stir the pot, the soup remains the same. This is precisely because grades are symbols and not the reality itself. There are many teachers, I am sure, who argue otherwise, but then they always go on endlessly trying to prove the validity and trustworthiness of another refinement of the grading mechanism—thus proving the very point that symbols are always a problematic representation of the reality. In contrast to symbolic assessment, there is *authentic assessment*. I need to make two prefacing comments about authentic assessment before I describe and define it. First of all, authentic assessment is favored by almost everyone who values a student-centered, constructivist focus in education. If a teacher values her students' transactions with reading, and if she emphasizes writing as a process, and exploratory talk in her classes, then she is more likely to use authentic assessment, though this may occur in conjunction with symbolic grading. Second, I need to point out that authentic assessment is condemned in most harsh terms by those who advocate testing. Tests and grades go hand in hand, along with all the talk of medians, means, and averages. Educational reformers who are test-focused see authentic assessment as "soft," or touchy-feely, or unscientific, and they maintain there is even a battle between test and symbolic assessment advocates and constructivists who value authentic assessment (Phelps, 2005).

Most of us in the United States today have had extensive experiences of symbolic assessment. Indeed our academic lives have been ruled by it. But what then, is authentic assessment? All of us have experienced this also, but, typically, less frequently and more informally. Consider the following scenarios:

1. A teacher meets with a student (or two or three high school students) off campus in a coffee shop. They talk about the students' ambitions and goals. As part of this, they review short stories they wrote (or college application essays, or their performance on their state's high-stakes exit exam). The teacher gives support and feedback, points out what their writing is achieving now, and gives direct instruction on how to improve it.
2. A middle school teacher calls students up to her desk every two weeks on a Friday. She reviews the portfolio of the bi-weekly unit about writing literature essays. The teacher reviews the students' ongoing literature response journal, and reviews the five drafts of the essay that arises out of this journal. The teacher tells the student what she sees, asks questions about the student's writing, and provides specific feedback on how to improve. Ultimately the teacher will give a grade, but only on the final paper.
3. A teacher writes each student a note about their *Hamlet* essays. To each student she gives feedback and directions.
4. A teacher marks every grammatical, spelling, or punctuation error on a student's essay in red pen.
5. A teacher makes marginal notes on a student's appear. The teacher limits himself to only two types of comments: Noticings (!) and Questions (?). At the end of the paper, the teacher writes a few sentences about his reaction to the paper and writes "Good work. B+."
6. A teacher writes "Excellent" on the top of a paper.
7. A teacher writes "Excellent: A+" on the top of the paper.
8. A teacher writes just "A+" on the top of the paper.

You'll notice that, the closer a teacher goes to what we call *authentic assessment*, the harder the job is, but the more beneficial and meaningful it is for students. Authentic assessment can be defined as direct feedback to the learner about what he has done and his progress in any given learning situation. Furthermore, authentic assessment doesn't only "place" the student in some schema of what he should know or do, but it opens up avenues for the student to do better, showing him the way to progress. As an activity, you can rate the above scenarios from 10 = most authentic to 1 = most symbolic.

I am sure you have rated scenario 1 as the most authentic. It is also, need I point out, certainly the most impractical given teachers' schedules, two different classes spread over five periods a day, five days a week, teaching up to 150 and even 175 students. This is why teachers have come to rely on symbols. A grade consisting of a number, a letter, or a check-plus or check-minus, is seemingly an efficient way of giving students feedback on their learning. However, as you can see, the more a teacher uses *symbolic assessment*, the easier it is, but the less helpful for students—after all what does "A+" or "Excellent!" tell the student without some authentic feedback supporting what that symbol means and why it is appropriate in this particular case? Some educators even argue that giving praise and high grades are as damaging as giving low grades because they replace the

intrinsic rewards young people find in reading and writing with an all-consuming chase for the *extrinsic* good grades as the end in themselves at the expense or real learning (Kohn, 1993/1999; Mowrer, 1996). I think some kind of explanation about how this all came about will set the stage for our discussion of how to do authentic assessment in an academic world increasingly driven by the symbols students earn on tests.

A Very Brief History of Assessment

Why, then, do we have this problematic dichotomy between two radically different approaches to assessment? I believe it comes from some very definite decisions made long ago. As my colleague Phil Anderson points out, the reason schools look so complicated and function in such complicated and often strange ways is that, once a policy is implemented, it never is taken out or allowed to pass away. "Once in, never out" seems to be what happens in all curricular and administrative decisions. Let me summarize what happened. Back in the early twentieth century, politicians and educators were faced with an increasing number of students in schools. Not only had immigration given so many more children, school was seen as a way to naturalize and Americanize these foreign-born children. Furthermore, throughout the twentieth century, all young people were remaining longer and longer in school. The answer was the so-called "factory model" of schooling to process the increasingly massive numbers of students. This was an intentional choice, a type of early twentieth-century educational reform. By World War II, a high school diploma seemed necessary, by the 1960s a college degree was seemingly required for professional advancement, and today many professionals (like teachers) have to remain in school long after college for postgraduate study. More than anything else, I argue, the factory model of schooling has created the content-area driven types of schools (most of which look like factories still) that we have today, with students continuing to move on an academic assembly line from Social Studies to Math to English, like a Model-T Ford once did from getting its engine put in to a totally different worker in a totally different place who tightened the bolts on its wheels. Even if computer technology and robotics are added to the process of building cars (or of educating students), the assembly line still works the same way (Karier, 1967/1986; Kliebard, 1995).

When you think of it, there is no inherent or compelling reason why History should be different from English (as historians are writers) or why Math should be different from Science (as scientists use an enormous amount of math). Course subjects, grades, and many of the elements of contemporary schooling were choices made by reformers years ago. Social Studies, by the way, is a contrived subject area, which is why you don't see it taught at the university level. I argue that these distinctions are inherently illogical (Costigan, 2003) and that the preeminence of assessment by grading comes from the sheer need to assess and evaluate massive numbers of students with that hallmark of the "efficiency movement" of the early twentieth century. Interludes of the progressive movement, in the 1920s and 1960s, have made relatively few inroads into the overall ways

in which teachers teach or schools function (Ravitch, 2000). As the student-centered progressivism of the 1960s died away and as the neoconservative movement emerged with the presidency of Ronald Reagan (1981–1989), and with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the argument was made that schools in the United States were essentially un-rigorous and failing. As we have seen in chapter 1, this type of deficit thinking resulted nearly two decades later with the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) (US Congress, 2001), and the jury is still out on how effective this reform has been. Yet, it is important to reiterate that, while politicians, educators and the public argue about how well it has been implemented, few challenge the idea that grades earned on tests are the essential means of creating and assessing student learning and school effectiveness. When we speak of a student's or a school's *performance* we are using a term used by efficiency experts in the early twentieth century who went into factories and businesses to show owners how to make workers work faster and with less wasted movement. What cannot be denied is that the neoconservative reform movement has linked school reform, student performance, and teacher effectiveness almost totally to the symbolic assessment system of grades linked to tests. The result is the current reality that students are evaluated by high-stakes tests, and frequently one test given in the fourth, eighth, or twelfth grade can determine a students' academic future.

I'll leave the discussion up to you whether this situation has actually increased dropout rates and decreased graduation rates, or how this has affected the ways in which teachers and students have to approach the Language Arts curriculum. My research, which is the cause for this book, has been that overwhelmingly a reform movement that assesses student learning solely by grades received on tests has seriously damaged teachers' autonomy and is a leading cause for teacher migration from poor areas to the wealthier districts, and even teacher dissatisfaction and exodus from the profession (Crocco & Costigan, 2006; Ingersoll 2003a,b). The problem for today's teachers is not only how to teach and assess students authentically, but also how to meet the ever increasing demands for our students to earn good grades on high-stakes tests.

Formal Assessment and Student Learning

A theory and practice in education called "mastery learning" came about in the era when educators wanted to avoid thinking of intelligence as a quantity such as IQ or "g", the so-called intelligence factor (Hernstein & Murray, 1994). Rather, social scientists began to see different people taking different amounts of *time* to master similar tasks. Applied to academics, this idea meant that every student should be able to get an A and master the material, but this might take different students varying amounts of time to do so. This type of approach has been superseded in most educators' minds by a theory of multiple intelligences, namely that IQ isn't a quality or "g," but that we all possess differing types of intelligence: musical, interpersonal, kinesthetic, logical, visual, aural, and so forth (Gardner, 1991). However, seeing intelligence as a *time value* was, in its day,

a needed corrective to thinking of intelligence or academic ability as fixed, and we can appropriate some techniques from this conception of learning. Mastery learning also avoids an inherent danger in symbolic assessment, namely that teachers are tempted to work from the deficit model, in which all students fall short in various ways and to various degrees from the standards or rubrics in an idealized "exemplary essay." In this technique, students are held accountable for the discrete and clearly defined things they can do, not the innumerable things they can't. Here's Greg's mastery learning sheet for an assignment:

Literature Essay Assessment Sheet

	Standard (or Rubric)	Accomplished
1	Four paragraphs	__X_____
2	Each paragraph indented one inch (thumb rule)	__X_____
3	Successful use of semicolon three times	________
4	Two separate pieces of literature in two body paragraphs	__X_____
5	One character discussed in each body paragraph	__X_____
6	Concluding paragraph beginning with "Therefore . . ."	__X_____
7	No more than three spelling errors	________
8	Name and proper heading on paper	________
9	Both novels have titles and authors clearly identified	__X_____
10	Overall impression	__X_____
	Grade to date	70

Comments: Teddy, I think you've really improved on this literature essay. You've made great strides and you've managed to incorporate the essentials of two pieces of literature which are clearly identified. Your paragraphing is excellent. There are a few minor things you can fix, such as adding semicolons, correcting spelling errors, and adding a proper heading. Your writing support group can help you with this or you can come to see me on our conference day. Please resubmit for a higher grade. You can get 100 on this!

Obviously the teacher, Greg, is preparing his students for a generic literature essay found on an upcoming examination. Some of his standards are specific to the exam, as in paragraphing, and some are particular only to his class, such as using the semicolon. Greg has assessed his students and created this template for his particular situation. He has had to leave out hundreds of issues, such as run-on sentences, the double negative, or the apostrophe used for the possessive (as opposed to a verb contraction), and he has focused on what his students need to master right now. The rest can come in time. Most importantly, students gets points for what they actually do, not for what they can't yet do. The standards are clear, every student can achieve them, and the teacher provides supportive comments to assist the student in revision if she wants a better grade.

There is certainly much that is beneficial in being as clear as possible about what you want your students to focus on in reference to the test they will soon take. The point is

that we teachers need the courage of our convictions, and if we think, with good reason, that something is important, then we need to be honest with our students. This includes things from simply putting proper "starters" on test-based paragraphs, to properly using the semicolon if called for in the state rubrics. For Greg, it is obviously important that his students begin the concluding paragraph with "Therefore . . ." We assume that this will help Greg's students get better grades on the state exit exam for which he is preparing them, even if most of us don't really conclude essays with "Therefore." Notice also the seemingly minor "one inch (thumb rule)": indenting each paragraph from first joint to tip of thumb. Greg knows that test-based essays are almost exclusively a test of paragraphing, so he wants his students to be sure to indent and provides this mnemonic device.

The important point is each and every student now knows how to improve, and Teddy now knows how he can get a 100 if he wants. Of course these standards shift over the course of a semester, and get more subtle and refined as Greg continues to help his students develop discrete elements of writing well both authentically and for the upcoming test. I argue that the Standards Sheet as presented above empowers Teddy and his classmates, and that the demands of the test-based essay have been made more manageable. Good teaching is about deciding what not to teach as much as it is deciding what is important to teach your particular group of students at any given point. You will also notice that this chart is almost infinitely variable. This assessment format can be adapted for various assignments like portfolios, self-assessments, test-based essays, or even poetry. For middle school students who don't like to write, I might use a chart with only five basic standards or rubrics to make them comfortable and empowered.

Responding to Student Writing Authentically

Those of us from a constructivist, student-centered orientation do not necessarily value grading student writing with symbols. This is a radical thought for many teachers, and my English Education program had to justify in great detail to convince a national certifying agency (NCATE) that we could give students valuable feedback on their writing and assess them properly without using grading symbols. I argue that detailed comments, in margins, and a short paragraph somewhere on the student's paper should provide information on what the writer has actually done in light of specific improvements that she can make. This can be done for authentic writing and for artificial test-based essay writing. I have come to understand the following as essential:

1. What is "there" in the paper; what does the teacher/reader "see" that the student is doing? (It is interesting for us writers to realize that what we think we have written is not necessarily what our readers "see" or "get" out of our texts.)
2. What does the teacher/reader see that is unclear, what questions does the teacher/reader have?
3. Specific suggestions for improvement for the next draft.

These three objectives seem commonsensical, and they are; but they are not necessarily easy in the execution. Here's a particularly complex paragraph of comments used for a student who was researching his community, a type of unit examined in more detail in chapter 7. Can you notice what types of feedback the teacher is giving?

> Juan, I really enjoyed your paper. Researching your local bodega and seeing it not just as a store, but as a community center is very interesting. I'm not from your neighborhood, so I'm learning a great deal. I am concerned that this is a safe place for you, but things seem to be alright and your parents approve of this project, so do keep me informed if anything troubling comes up. You do a great job in classifying the people in the store as "regulars" and "customers," noting that regulars can be customers, but not the other way around. You note that the regulars have a personal way of speaking, using jokes and humor as a sort of social lubrication. I particularly liked the story of the woman who didn't know what "manteca" was and thought it was butter and came back to complain. I suggest that you continue this work. One more visit should be enough for you to confirm all you've been finding in your four previous visits to the store. Be sure to write up this observation as we described. I think you need to work on your supporting literature. Your local library can provide you with some information about the demographics of the area which you can then incorporate into your paper. The city also has a very detailed website.

Here is another assessment about a student's short story:

> Melissa, I liked your story and it's a very detailed draft, almost in the final stages. I was engaged by the problem facing your alter ego "Jeannine" with her problem of whether to go away to college or stay with her family because of the many needs there are at home. This certainly is a significant conflict and is at the heart of your story. What is missing is a crisis point, a climax, where Jeannine faces her family and their demands. I think if you write this, you will find your story being more directed and even shorter and more concise. I look forward to learning what Jeannine's decision is—or if you'll leave that up in the air. You might want to begin the story with the beginning of the climax, in the heat of things—what we call *in medias res*—then develop the story up to the climax, and then quickly bring the story to a resolution.

Though these types of comments do get easier with practice, they are always quite a bit of work, and most teachers will find themselves providing simpler comments on the vast majority of papers. There is also "low-stakes" writing, which doesn't have to be assessed either through teachers' comments, or with symbols, or at all. There is nothing wrong with student doing perfectly private freewriting or journal entries which are not seen by the teacher. Still, teachers' written comments in some form should be a part of all major writing projects, and indeed the more so the higher are the stakes in completing

the assignment, but students become more comfortable and more fluent and writing when they write for themselves as well as to share.

Note also what the above comments are *not* doing. They are not judging. Once a judgment is made, event with an "excellent!' or the symbolic grade of "A," all conversation about development for the activity is finished. Yet, by telling a student what you, the teacher, "see" in the draft very much does help the writer, because it frequently happens that readers "read" or see different things from what the writer intended. At best, this lets the writer know if he is communicating clearly, or how to say what he wants more effectively. Note also the essential importance of providing *specific* suggestions for improvement. If the teacher wanted to add a form of symbolic assessment, and as these are nearly complete drafts, the teacher could provide a standards chart, as above, or he could simply assign a symbol of 4 = target, 3 = acceptable, 2 = emerging, or 1 = unacceptable. What we don't want to do is to provide any symbol without explaining specifically why that symbol was given.

I need to reiterate that teachers' comments need to go in the margins and at the end of the paper. They need to be ongoing as the teacher reads the paper as it goes through various drafts, and summative comments need to go at the end, as the student will someday return to this type of assignment. Notice that I am wary of adding judgments or grades as much as possible in the above response protocols. A judgment is not an explanation. If you do want to judge, or if you are required to, as so many teachers are, I suggest it is the *last* thing you should do—and you should always give students the chance for improvement. Producing a piece of writing should be like playing the piano or pitching a game of baseball. The next time you do it you should know how to try to do even better. Again, authentic assessment is a great deal of work. It is an art that has to be practiced, especially with your Language Arts colleagues. I advocate that the mastery learning standards chart be used primarily for tests. When students write poems, plays, stories, and authentic essays, they deserve the utmost attention from other students and the teacher. This involves written and spoken comments. However, Barry Raebeck (2002) and many others do see ways of combining authentic teacher responses with grades. I suggest that charts, rubrics, and grades should be reserved for formulaic text-based writing, but you may find yourself disagreeing with this suggestion and use mastery learning for authentic student writing.

I also suggest that students not only read, but comment about each other's papers. Peer editing (that is revision, not mere proof reading), however, is a complicated activity for many students. Students have to practice how to read and comment on each other's work, just as teachers do. One basic rule I use is that students never actually comment on each other's papers, but on a separate sheet. Whereas peer proofing a text can be done right before students hand in their papers, peer editing is an art which you develop with your class from semester to semester. I usually provide students with a sheet for peer editing ("I see . . . , I notice . . . , A question I have is . . ." and so forth as discussed in chapter 3 on writing). I do not allow students to judge each other—often the first thing they want to do—and I always have a students' paper peer edited by at least two, and

usually three, other students as expertise in critical reading can vary. As with teachers' comments, specific suggestions for improvement are always a part of this process.

Students Assess Themselves: Portfolios and Self-Assessments

Portfolios and self-assessments are primary tools of assessing the constructivist or student-centered Language Arts classes, but there is nothing in them that inherently prohibits giving grades on occasion. Portfolios are borrowed from the art world. Just as an artist carries around representative samples of what he can do—drawings in various media, photographs of paintings, etchings, studies, and so forth—so the Language Arts portfolio is a representative sample of what the students has done and how he has progressed in the class. The teacher has to make some initial and ongoing decisions about this. Should the portfolio contain all the individual student's work? Probably not, but the student should save all of her work in a folder (not the portfolio) in case she wants to include it. Should it contain ephemera such as emails to her support group members? It depends. Should the teacher provide a chart to be filled out for all the materials that should be in the portfolio by the end of the term, and should the teacher provide specific instruction about what constitutes an "A" or "B" level portfolio? The answer again is, it depends. When I was a high school teacher, as I do today in college teaching, I went the full student-centered route. Students construct their own "Record of Assignment Sheet" in which they provided me with an index or map of what their portfolio contains. Thus, one student could include three drafts for her short story, and another could include five. Should the students create, as a separate assignment, a guide, map, or index to their own portfolio? Again, it depends. I usually require this to assist me in understanding the portfolio—just as a road map is helpful in negotiating foreign territory. As your class relies on such socially-based learning as literature circles, writing support groups, peer editors and writing partners, should students include metacognitive (going beyond, writing beyond) reflections on their progress and working democratically with other students in groups? Again, it depends, but I find this helpful for both the students and me a few times during a project or in the context of a unit. Certainly an essay about the inevitable problems and successes with group interaction and group learning should be included in every portfolio.

You surely are aware of portfolios as they are used in most schools. I am describing them here, however, because in our test-driven era I have seen them frequently abused. I've seen schools where portfolios are supposed to contain only perfect student writing. This is absolutely wrong. Portfolios show the learner's progress, and multiple drafts, imperfect though they be, are signs of progress. Only on a test is a student asked to write "one off," at one sitting and without multiple drafts and the opportunity to revise. I have also, unfortunately, seen portfolios used punitively. In several schools my former students have to turn in students' portfolios each week so that the assistant principal can

review them to see that the teacher is conducting a proper test preparation curriculum. Again, this is a frank abuse of the rationale and implementation of portfolios. There is no best practice in education that can not be misapplied to such a degree that it ends up doing the opposite of what was intended.

What does matter is that the portfolio is reflective of an individual's learning, progress, and achievement. There is much to be recommended in organizing the semester or year around units in which the students actually produce something, like a story, a play, a collection of poems or essays, and there is certainly room in a portfolio for a student to "prove" her achievements on a test-based essay or even the multiple choice reading section of a Language Arts test. Again, I recommend a discrete unit specifically about these tests as the best preparation, and then only after an authentic reading or writing unit. As students engage in authentic reading and writing processes such as literature response journals and essays, they then can be molded into the restrictions, rules, and formulae of tests. Indeed, there is nothing against one section of the portfolio having evidence of learning about the form and content of multiple choice tests or the "block" essay. Students can even include tests they have themselves created in this format, and they can include metacognitive or reflective writing about the tests they will take.

A self-assessment, put briefly, is where the students tell you, the teacher, what they have learned, and how they have grown. When I did this in a very student-centered constructivist teacher education program at New York University, called Inquiries into Teaching and Learning, my co-teachers and I avoided all prescriptive "telling about" what this self-assessment was to be, thus encouraging student initiative and creativity. We spent much time, however, using exploratory talk with our education students discussing possibilities for this paper. One technique we used was to put a large human-sized paper cutout of a person (sort of like at a crime scene!) and have students write on it possibilities for the Self-Assessment. Of course the NYU students were generally highly motivated and, of course, wanted that symbolic "A," so our job was to get them thinking more deeply about their learning and their growth. And, because we taught in a team-taught departmental course that was highly progressive, we had the collective power and luxury to avoid talk of grading. One instructor even told a student who was very concerned about getting the all-important "A," "Look, I'll give you an A for the class. Now let's talk about what you *really* want to learn."

This isn't likely to happen in a middle or secondary school where students have almost no choices in which classes to attend. However, you can have a very interesting discussion about grades and grading. Just tell the students you're thinking of giving everyone an "A" and see how the conversation quickly moves from "Alright!" to, "But that's not fair because some people don't do their work and will still get an 'A'." I pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, no conversation about symbolic grades is ever fully satisfactory; these conversations always not only don't resolve the matter, but bring more problems, contingencies, complications, and exceptions to the rules. These conversations are always inconclusive. However, a meaningful possibility is to ask students to create their own grading systems, often called rubrics. In the standards sheet illustrated above,

I typically ask students to come up with their own standards. They are always harder on themselves than I would have been.

Self-Assessment and Rubrics

It is possible to attach objectives, standards, or rubrics—relatively interchangeable words—to the self-assessment. These predetermined discrete units of knowledge or skills stem from the overall objectives of the teacher, the school, the district, but they increasingly come from the high-stakes tests. They are the specific facts and skills that are supposed to be discrete elements of any larger learning task. (The frequent use of the word "task," rather than the word "activity," illustrates much about the test-based conception of learning.) The idea here is that any learning task is made up of smaller blocks of learning, and that by adding the blocks together the student can complete the whole learning task. Thus, the "block" essay can be built up by the discrete units of introduction, body, and paragraph, and the student has learned to write. Reading can be built up by understanding related plot elements, or a character's conflict, or text-to-text or text-to-self connections, or the "theme," and the student has learned to read. I am sure you agree with me that this is a highly unsatisfactory way of looking at learning. Nevertheless, once students do authentically read and write, there is nothing essentially wrong with being specific about what is required of any given reading or writing activity. The "standards" sheet, described above, can also be called a rubrics sheet or an objective sheet if the state or local system calls for the use of this term.

I digress to point out that the term "rubric," now popular in New York State among several others, comes from the Latin word *ruber* (red) and originally referred to the ritual actions a priest had to perform. These ritual actions were non-negotiable; if he missed one of them, the ritual would be invalid and he'd have to start all over again. The words he had to say were in *black* letters, and, of course, he had to say every word exactly. The fact that this term is used by test-based reformers reveals much about their conception of learning, which emphasizes standardization rather than exploration and creativity. Rubrics demand that students learn what the teacher already knows, master the same learning elements in the same way and at the same pace, and that reading and writing can be "broken down" by the teacher into discrete units to then be assembled by the student to create learning. There is no possibility that the students might learn something more or something different from what the teacher knows—one of the hallmarks of constructivist classrooms.

There is a more healthy way to approach rubrics, however. Here are some guidelines for students for their self-assessment. I believe they can be labeled as rubrics if these are required.

1 What have I learned about Language Arts this semester, particularly in reading, writing, and speaking? What specific assignments reveal and celebrate my achievements?

2 How have I grown as a learner? What have I learned about myself as a learner? What have I learned about the processes of my own learning? What were my “Aha!” moments or “breeze-bys,” or resistances and challenges?
3 What have I learned about other people, about working cooperatively with my fellow students? What have I learned about people in the world, about democratic practices, about assisting others with their learning?
4 What have I learned about myself? How have I integrated the literature I’ve been engaged with in the classroom activities, the assignments given, and my own personal growth?

If necessary, you can integrate with the above, or add as a separate section:

5 What strategies have I learned about the upcoming test I will take in January/June? What evidence do I have that I am familiar with the form and content of the state test? How can I succeed on this test? What test taking competencies have I mastered, and what are those I need to learn?

If we do have to give tests, we should be as explicit as we can about what those tests require of our students. This is the only ethical thing to do. The challenge for us is threefold: (1) not to let a test prep curriculum dominate our instruction; (2) to provide specific and focused times, such as one or two five-day units to have our students practice sample tests, analyze the form of the test, create their own tests, and understand the limited content knowledge required on these tests; (3) to do this *after* authentic reading and writing activities have been completed. The difficulty for most teachers is that, counter to this last point, they create two separate curriculums which never touch. This, unfortunately, is not very effective (Applebee, 1993, chapter 9).

You can use authentic assessment modalities to assist students on tests. In fact, because authentic assessment allows for deeper thinking, tests can be included in them. Any learning that is seen as authentic to students can be “rubricated” by teachers and taught to students. There’s a reason for this. Based on some ideas of Linda Darling-Hammond and Jon Snyder (2000), among many others (see Mayher, 1990), here’s what authentic assessment and symbolic assessment each looks like so that you can compare which you think is the more effective means of enhancing student learning:

Authentic assessment:

1 uses portfolios and self-assessment to provide understanding of student growth;
2 is student oriented;
3 values actual processes and products of students;
4 raises student and teacher consciousness of students’ shifting processes, decisions, perspectives, and ways of thinking;
5 enables teachers and students to view learning as long term;
6 is ongoing and developmental, and can be continued in life and in the real world;

7. provides support for various benchmarks of learning by including, for example, projects engaged in and represented in portfolios;
8. connects thinking and doing, particularly in the creation of student-generated products;
9. provides multiple lenses and many sources of evidence of learning;
10. shares assessment between teachers and students, making teaching and learning a negotiated, democratic act.

Symbolic assessment:

1. uses symbols generated by testing of formulaic conceptions of reading and writing;
2. is teacher oriented;
3. does not value student processes; devalues products of learning by reducing them to symbols;
4. does not reveal to teacher and student any shifts and developments in learning and thinking;
5. views learning as short term; once the test is over, learning is forgotten;
6. provides one-time feedback, which is not concerned with ongoing and developmental learning processes, and it is different from learning in the real world;
7. provides a symbolic view of learning which may or may not represent actual student thought processes and projects;
8. is disconnected from a student's actual thinking and performance;
9. provides a single interpretation from one source with no direct assessment of learning processes;
10. does not share assessment between teachers and students, making teaching authoritarian and learning passive.

I hope you agree that much authentic assessment is simply a better way to helping students become versatile writers and deep readers. However, overlapping and layering test-based assessment demands within the context of authentic practices is not automatic. Let's look not at combining these practices, but at understanding, by working them through, that rubrics, standards, and testing are already a part of our teaching practice.

Rubrics, Standards, Objectives, and Testing

There is much emerging educational research that demonstrates that a testing and grade-based accountability-driven academic culture severely disrupts how new teachers organically "grow into" becoming good teachers (Costigan & Crocco, 2004). New teachers struggle to develop a curriculum that is personally and professionally rewarding and is seen as beneficial for their particular students. This type of learning to

teach is personal and situational, and is a multilayered and organic process. The test- and accountability-driven reform movement, on the other hand, relies on enforcing correct "teaching behaviors" and standardized "student outcomes" based on rubrics. This causes a conflict in new teachers whereby they feel that they must abandon authentic practices, which are personalized and contextualized, for a test-preparation curriculum, which is depersonalized and homogenized. This situation is increasingly growing more intense, as jobs, tenure, and promotions are now directly related to test scores and adherence to standardized teaching mandates. Getting as many students as possible to get good grades on tests is fast becoming the driving force in many classrooms (Crocco & Costigan, 2006; Smagorinsky, *et al*., 2004). However, simply holding our breath and hanging on until things change is not enough to survive with our integrity intact, and of course this does nothing to help us learn to teach well (Smagorinsky, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002). The preponderance of, and overemphasis on, objectives and rubrics, seem to many teachers to cut away at the deep, multilayered, individual, human, and wonderfully messy thing we call "learning," and it makes us pay attention to teaching and learning as cold, hard, objectified, depersonalized, standardized, homogenized, rules, a relatively ineffective and unpleasant conception of teaching and learning.

However, there are ways not only to survive, but to thrive. Standards, rubrics, assessments, and testing essentially work in exactly the same ways through the country. I need to reiterate that all Language Arts tests look the same and work the same whether given to middle school, high school, or college students, or to teachers seeking state certification. As we have seen in previous chapters, reading passages and the "block" essay all work the same on any given Language Arts test. If you go on the websites of state exams that your students will take, you will see that the standards, objectives, and rubrics are not only extensive and ambitious, but basically reasonable, even if there seem to be too many of them. Every state test wants students to demonstrate that they write coherently and read with competence. There are always problems for teachers in preparing their students for tests, and there are always problems when students take tests, but there is no essential problem with the objectives, standards, and rubrics that tests are supposed to represent.

For every student you have, you could devise hundreds of learning objectives. Coming up with "should" is an easy task; there are an infinite number of skills your students need, and even the best students need assistance to improve in reading, writing, and speaking. The same is true for test makers, who are often teachers or have been teachers like yourself. It is not hard at all for them to articulate objectives about which students should demonstrate mastery. However, getting the tests themselves to *reflect* such mastery is a very hard thing to do. In the research I conducted for this book, I discovered that there is always a gulf between the stated objective of Language Arts tests and the types of things they actually test. Most state websites have pages and pages of stated objectives, but practice tests may be few in number or nonexistent. When closely examined, however, the stated ambitious objectives, focusing on genres, multicultural and women's literature, and the ability to read critically and write coherently, are not

necessarily reflected on the tests themselves, which, as we have seen, overwhelmingly centered on plot and theme, literary devices, efferent or fact-based reading, and comparing and contrasting two characters in well-known works of fiction.

As we saw in chapter 4 on writing, the excerpt from Gwendolyn Brooks' poem *The Children of the Poor* is a fairly straightforward poem. The students whom I have taught it to, as well as my education students who use it in their own classrooms, find it a fine poem to engage student transactions, and to discuss a several "big issues" centering on childhood, or the different experiences and different ideas cultural and socioeconomic groups have about childhood and child rearing. Additionally, this poem has appeared on the English Regents exam which all students must pass in New York State, and on the Content Specialty Test for English teachers to get their state certification, and is a typical reading selection candidate for any Language Arts test. All this is perfectly reasonable, but it is quite another thing for test makers to claim that questions about this poem meet any of the following stated objectives linked to it:

> Objective 0022. [Teaching candidates must demonstrate that they] understand significant themes, characteristics, trends, writers, and works in American literature from the colonial period to the present, including the literary contributions of women, members of ethnic minorities, and figures identified with particular regions.
>
> (Content Specialty Test, p. 44)

Now, if this, or any test, linked the passage with Gwendolyn Brooks' perceptions as an African American author, or asked if the poem's attitude about children was culturally or socioeconomically based, or if the poem represented a particular genre of multicultural poetry, the stated test objectives would be met. However, the test doesn't do this at all. It focuses on literary devices and a "theme" of the poem which is universal and has nothing to do with cultural values of the stated objectives. In fact none of the questions address the title of the poem and its implications, namely that there is something unique and different about "the children of the poor."

Through a fairly exhaustive review of Language Arts test given to 7–12 students today, I have noted that consistently the test objectives are typically more ambitious than the test questions themselves. This is actually *less* of a problem for teachers that at first seems, and this situation can be viewed as actually empowering. Many of the preservice and beginning teachers I teach are afraid of standards, testing, and rubrics. These seem to be very intimidating things. Yet, in reality, they are not. Most are commonsensical and—this is most important—they can be included on just about any unit or lesson plan you devise. This is not necessarily a cynical act. Most objectives don't vary from state to state, nor are most of them bad in any crucial way. I ask my education students to include NCTE and state objectives on the unit and lesson plans they devise in my Language Arts methods classes. Not only is this not very hard, I agree wholeheartedly with NCTE's standards:

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound–letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

(www.ncte.org/about/over/standards)

You think on your own about which of these are the most important, or which values you will most likely to engender in your teaching.

Although no one lesson unit can include every standard, each lesson should include several of them. I've even devised a scheme whereby I turn these objectives into a rubric by rating them as objectives that are (1) targeted by the lesson, (2) included in the lesson, and (3) related to the lesson. For instance, in a reading lesson focusing on a contemporary poem by a Latina author, objective 9 would be a possible target of the lesson, objective 5 would be certainly included if the teacher used reader response writing and literature journals, and objective 10 would be related to the lesson, particularly if the class contained non-native speakers of English.

Of course, every teacher should have clear objectives and be able to explain to parents, to the school administration, and to the students exactly why she has chosen each specific objective in each and every lesson. This is simply part of our professional practice. (Imagine a lesson that addressed none of the NCTE objectives!) However, we don't necessarily have to go so far as to provide rubrics for every lesson we teach or every activity we have students do. Yet, increasingly you (and I) are asked to provide detailed rationales and objectives in the form of rubrics for our courses and our individual lessons. The point I am making is that this is not hard to do. Standards, objectives, and rubrics, as prescriptions for teachers and students, are easy to think up and, if provided by NCTE, or state or national agencies, surprisingly easy for us to include in our lessons.

There are dangers in the current educational era of reform driven by high-stakes testing and teacher and student accountability. Many teachers, particularly those teaching in areas of poverty with schools that are "hard to staff" or "high priority" (Quartz, *et al*., 2004) or in danger of being closed because of low test scores, feel overwhelmed by having to meet mandated imposed standards. This is *not* to say that teachers want to avoid standards and be free from accountability. Far from it. We know that standards and accountability are the hallmarks of good teaching. However, it is hard to overestimate the *external* pressures that new teachers are now under—far more than when I started teaching many years ago. Research tells us clearly that the result is an "intensification" of teachers' professional lives (Hargreaves, 2000), which creates high levels of dissatisfaction, which results in a massive turnover of new teachers (Hubermann, 1993; Ingersoll, 2003a; Levin, 2003). To most new teachers, imposed and standardized testing and accountability structures, rather than individualized and personalized ones, go against the human factors that have been missing in the current test-driven reform movement (Johnson, 2005). The cumulative effect is that test-driven reforms force many teachers to neglect the personal, autobiographical, and relational

factors that allow them to thrive, and create confusion, anxiety, and distress (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Fried, 1995; Liston & Garrison, 2004; Moore Johnson, *et al*., 2004; Nieto, 2003). As to these external pressures: Some of us merely tolerate them; others of us subvert them; only very small minority of teachers embrace the standardization and homogenization of test-driven reforms.

However, we don't have to lose either our personal or our professional integrity. We do not have to be hypocrites by going against what we know is right, nor do we have to tolerate the indefensible. By providing a quality instruction, and by consistently teaching and assessing in better ways than tests do—that is, having richer learning objectives than those that are mandated—we are preparing our students in the best way possible. As we have discussed, there is no shortage of "shoulds" your students ought to know. The strategy I advocate throughout this book is not to separate assessment and learning as two separate things, but to use assessment as part of the learning process itself. We call this authentic assessment. If you want, or if you must, learning can be broken down into rubrics that can be summarized as symbols (numbers or letters) on tests. But, as you know, this is secondary, or even tertiary, and comes after you have provided rich opportunities for students growth in reading and writing. Rubrics and symbolic assessment can only be meaningful after authentic teaching and authentic assessment.

Thinking Things Through

Below are several situations based on real teachers. Think them through, alone or with fellow teachers or students. You can also use them to write about in a reflective or teaching journal.

- Nadine is a teacher with over 20 years' experience who grades the persuasive essay on state exams more quickly than anyone else. Rarely are her grades different from the second required reader's. When asked about such speed and accuracy, she answers, "You know, it's really simple. I actually can 'sniff out' the papers like this: The first paragraph has to just repeat the question word for word. The last sentence of the first paragraph should read, 'My opinion is . . .' If this sentence is left out, the paper can't get the highest grade. The second and third 'body' paragraphs must begin, 'My first reason is,' and 'My second reason is . . .' And the fourth paragraph should begin with something like, 'In conclusion . . .' or 'Therefore . . .' Then I scan a sentence or two to see if they're acceptable grammatically. Then I know the grade. If they have all the elements but have some grammatical errors, then they get a lower passing grade. It's simple."

Given Nadine's statements, think for a moment, or freewrite for a moment, or discuss with another preservice or beginning teacher what you think about Nadine's theory and practice. Or write a letter to her from your viewpoint as another professional. If you were part of a collegial and self-directed Language Arts faculty, would you want Nadine as a colleague? How would you or your Language Arts department best prepare

students for Nadine's way of assessing test-based essays? To what degree would you want to imitate her practice? Besides this efficiency, in what other curricular areas would you want Nadine to have expertise?

- Juan is a new teacher in a school that the local community sees as a "good school" (Lightfoot, 1983). He has been using authentic assessment, using portfolios of student work, and assesses by student-written self-assessments. The only grades he gives are on the final assignment in each unit (a short story, an essay about poetry, or other writing assignment). He does not give grades on everyday homeworks or drafts, substituting many written comments on the majority of students' high-stakes writing assignments. Unfortunately, there has been a bit of a rebellion. His students and their families have complained that they don't get enough high grades, something they are used to, and that Juan's practice goes against, as one parent put it, "what teachers are supposed to do." The principal calls Juan in to discuss this and recommends that he immediately start putting numbers and letters on all assignments to keep everybody happy. He also recommends that Juan to write a statement about his "unusual" assessment system and send it home to parents so that on open school evenings they have a mutual ground to begin discussions about grading.

How should Juan respond to the principal? Should he begin providing symbols on almost every assignment? If he does this, will it be at the expense of using extensive teacher comments and student portfolios? What type of assessment letter should Juan write to his students and their parents? As an activity, why not write your own Assessment Statement for your present or future students.

- The test-driven reforms of NCLB have affected schools in poor communities the most, and many high performing, typically wealthier, districts are exempt from tests because their students do well on them. Research suggests, however, that the situation for "good" students in "good" schools is also problematic. Consider, for a moment, the situation of the top student in the United States today who knows the overriding importance of good grades to get into the best colleges and achieve later economic and social success. Furthermore, these good grades have to be bound up with a host of allied behaviors and attitudes which may or may not be personally rewarding. The top student has to comply (or seem to comply) with almost all that that teachers, administrators, parents, councilors, and coaches demand of her. She has to take courses that are "hard," like AP courses, and do an almost overwhelming amount of homework. Additionally she has to be involved in various extracurricular and community activities, such as playing a musical instrument, being on several sports teams, and volunteering in a local soup kitchen or other charity. Through all of this, in school and in the community, she has to exhibit a pleasant, tractable, and well adjusted demeanor. The top student has to look and behave like one.

Do you believe that there is a sort of "top student" syndrome as described above? If so, what does it look like, and how does your understanding vary from the above description? How do various behaviors, attitudes, and values arise out of the need to get good grades? As symbolic assessment is of overwhelming importance to define who are the best students, do you think that these symbols have achieved an importance far beyond what is learned? Are the top students the smartest, and are they the ones who can read, write, speak, and listen the best? Are students who are non-cooperative, disruptive, or disengaged from schooling less intelligent or less worthy to go to college? How do the behaviors of achieving "top" students who are cooperative, compliant and engaged with school structures help them to learn deeply and to develop a rich personal life?

- What type of assessment do you favor, or will you favor, in your teaching? Probably you want to engage in a variety of authentic and symbolic assessment systems. What is your assessment philosophy and practice? How will what you actually do vary from what you would like to do given the culture of the school you are in, the need for good grades as perceived by parents, students, and administrators, or the realities of testing? How far, if at all, will your ideals about assessment fit in with what you can actually do?

six

Aesthetic Education

> To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of "meanings." It is to turn the world into *this* world. ("This world"! As if there were any other.) The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have.
>
> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (2001)

Overview

This chapter explains that learning in life comes essentially from our senses and our direct experiences. In contrast, school learning almost exclusively involves analysis or explanation of pre-existing ideas and little direct experience of them. However, analysis without first being grounded in the way people actually learn results in a lack of deep and long-term learning. Contrary to what we may have been led to believe from our own schooling, an "analysis only" curriculum not only is a weak type of learning, it disaffects students from the Language Arts (or any) curriculum, and simply is an ineffective preparation for tests. This chapter unites several sense-based and multilayered ways of teaching explored in previous chapters: authentic writing and reading processes, intertextuality, and transactional reading theory. To these it adds a more direct exploration of aesthetic education and introduces the use of unarticulated responses, exploratory talk (Barnes, 1993), and kinesthetic movement in drama. These are all different but related terms, which are an orientation to creating classrooms that work in ways preadolescents and adolescents actually learn.

Aesthetic Knowledge

I want you to consider for a moment how you got to work or school today. Between the time you left your house or apartment and the time you were seated at your desk, you engaged in an almost countless number of complicated actions that allowed you to safely and successfully get where you were going. For me, this entails negotiating New York City's subways with a host of unwritten rules such as how to swipe the MetroCard, how to enter and exit trains without bumping into other people, how to read a newspaper in a crowded car, and, most importantly, when to look and not to make eye contact with other riders. Driving a car to work is perhaps even more complex, involving an incredible number of decisions and actions to get safely to one's destination without harm to oneself or others. I am bringing up these examples not only to point out how incredibly complicated are even the simplest daily things we do, but to point out that probably at no time in your journey to work or school were you analyzing, or explaining or articulating what you were doing, even to yourself. (Even though they mean the same thing, for reasons described below, from here on, I am going to use the word "articulate" for "explain.") You *knew* how to get to work or school, you actually did it, but at no time did you consciously analyze it; that is, unless you perceived some new phenomenon and had to include some new information, like a closed freeway exit or a newly reorganized subway line.

Now think for a moment if you had to articulate to another person how you got to work so that she could come to visit you. Giving directions is something that is *added* to what you do almost unconsciously and without analysis. To give directions, you not only have to analyze and articulate, but you have to be aware of your listeners and make your directions comprehensible. And, if you have ever been on the receiving end of getting directions, you know that "getting" someone else's information is very hard. I frequently switch off my mind when someone gives me directions or articulates something in a way that I just can't apprehend. I'm sure you've experienced this yourself, particularly if you operate out of a visual type of intelligence, and the person giving advice works primarily through the sounds of words (Gardner, 1991).

These distinctions are important for understanding teaching and learning. Getting to work is a type of knowledge that occurs in the real world. Similarly, if you play a musical instrument or play softball, you certainly have a great deal of knowledge in how to produce music or throw the ball to first base; however, if you try to analyze these actions while doing them, you quickly become flustered and make mistakes. A great deal of thinking goes into playing a Mozart sonata on the piano, or playing first base, but thinking about it, analyzing what you are doing, or articulating what you are doing, are the last things you want to do to successfully perform these actions. You analyze *after* you've learned how to do the actions. The maxim about the centipede is very true; it only stumbles when it thinks about what all those legs are doing.

School-based knowledge, however, typically works completely differently from life-based knowledge. In classrooms, students are required mainly to analyze, or to

articulate things, not to *do* things. In the Language Arts classroom, students are almost universally taught that literature is not to be experienced, but analyzed and articulated, typically by "getting" the message or theme of the work. I reiterate a point I've made before in this book: How you read a book in an armchair at home, on the beach, or late at night in bed, is essentially different from how you probably were asked to read books in Language Arts classes. The way you think and feel about Hamlet's antics, the *way* they mean to you, is quite different from analyzing (or justifying) and articulating (or explaining) his actions.

I am bringing all of this up to introduce the idea of aesthetic education. I see aesthetic education as linked to what teachers do when they are engaged in authentic writing practices and when readers' intertextual transactions with works of literature are encouraged (Asher & Costigan, 2005), all of which have been discussed in prior chapters of this book. At its heart, aesthetic education acknowledges that learning takes place *through the senses*. To paraphrase August Boal, *Before all else we see and listen, and only through the senses do we come to understanding* (Boal, 1995). I would add taste, smell, touch, and bodily sensation to this mix. If you've ever had a memory excited by a smell or taste, you'll know what I mean. Analyzing, articulating, and describing what we know comes *after* knowing it, and, in fact, is much less enjoyable. Yet, schools typically emphasize analysis without first having students experience.

Before going on, I need to point out four important points to move this discussion forward. First of all, so overwhelming is our analytical understanding of school-based knowledge that to challenge it seems almost heresy. Test-based reformers see sense-based or life-based learning as particularly childish, ineffective, and much too expensive (Phelps, 2005). Tests are all about analysis and articulation. Because of the years we've spent in schooling, we ask ourselves, "If learning is not all about analysis and articulation, what then is it about?" All of us have commonsense understandings of schooling and we tend to replicate as teachers what we have observed teachers doing when we were students, and research indicates that these commonplace understandings may "wash out" to a degree what we have more recently learned about best practices in teaching and learning (Lortie, 1975; Britzman, 1986; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). However, the curriculum which probably you experienced, as I certainly did, de-emphasizes experience so much that the knowledge is not grounded, does not enter our long-term memories, and is forgotten after the test. A second important point is that, once you do see that an overemphasis on analysis ungrounded in experience is a serious problem, then it is not either your or my fault. We didn't do anything wrong. Education in the United States is overwhelmingly analytical, and it becomes more so as students progress steadily from kindergarten toward college and graduate school. You and I have a prejudice instilled in us that sensory learning is "soft" and just not the stuff of "real" learning, that is, like academic learning at the university level. In the United States, despite a centuries-long tradition of progressivism, we've been taught a fact- and skills-based curriculum, and analysis and explanation are simply how most schools continue to work (Ravitch, 2000). My third point is that the current state of affairs of

a test- and accountability-driven academic world has only made emphasis on analysis and articulation worse. As such, it is only a refinement of a trend in education that sees the meaning in literature in summative statement and that sees reading as basically an efferential, or fact-based, activity. In other words, seeing student learning as only their ability to analyze and articulate, rather than to experience and do, is exacerbated by the explanatory focus of tests.

A fourth point needs to be made. You don't have to experience *everything* to know it. Nature, fortunately for us, has provided other means of knowing. I am not a painter, a composer, or a writer, but I can certainly experience Monet's *Water Lilies*, a Mozart symphony, or Joyce's *Ulysses*, and these experiences can be enhanced. This enhancing is what we mean by the aesthetic education experience. Let me give an example from outside of schooling. I can never directly experience the Civil War, but I can join various groups of people whose idea of a great three-day weekend is to dress up in Civil War uniforms and re-enact famous battles, getting great satisfaction from living in small tents on muddy ground, wearing itchy wool clothing, and running around shooting guns and pretending, as best they can, they are reliving the experiences of men and women back in the 1860s. These people not only know about that era, they are trying to relive it, to experience it aesthetically, to read about it, and to talk about it with others—that is, through the senses. Although many of us can't quite share their interest, and some may disparage this type of aesthetic experience, we can understand it because we've done the same—and called it "play." For those of us from traditional schooling backgrounds, this doesn't look like learning at all. However, as critical as you might be about this type of experiential learning, compare it with reading a textbook chapter and providing two reasons for the Civil War on a standardized essay test. There are hundreds of other such self-interest groups. Star Trek aficionados, steam train experts, players of Renaissance shawms, lutes, and sackbuts, and chess devotees—the list is endless. People are learning all the time. They are learning *and* experiencing, and this learning is very different from that which typically occurs in schools. In fact, as I discovered in my doctoral research, school learning is far from the most important learning people do in their lives. School learning gets us into good schools and into good jobs, but the real enjoyable learning takes place outside of it (Costigan, 2000).

How to enhance sensory understanding is how I define aesthetic education, a largely ignored (but increasingly important) part of the educational conversation. When I have spoken in this book of *intertextuality*, and when I have given specific examples of how to enhance student reading and writing, I have also given you an opening into the theory and practice of aesthetic education. However, I need to acknowledge that so strong is our background in analyzing, describing, and articulating, that even the terms "sensory understanding," or "aesthetic education" may seem to lack rigor, or be "soft," or to undermine the "real" curriculum. To open our discussion of aesthetic education, consider the following scenarios:

- A class is given postcards of the sculptures of Isamu Noguchi (www.noguchi.org) in preparation for a trip to his museum in Long Island City, New York. The students are faced with smooth and rough sculptures made out of large pieces of stone. They are non-representational. In the back of many students' minds is "Hey, this isn't art. These are just rocks someone chipped at." The teacher asks the students to do guided freewriting, to keep the pens moving. Students write about what they see, then about what is around and behind the sculpture, they write about what the sculpture is saying to them, what they say to the sculpture, and they end by asking questions. Volunteers share their freewriting. Then, in pairs, they write and share poems about the sculptures:

  1. I am the anger of chaos
     approaching a smooth
     slab. It is so solid, it seems to
     understand. Now it says, "I eat."
  2. Open hole, whole—the universe is in there
     and it looks back at me, this universe
     So small that I've gotten so big
  3. Serpent coiled, ready to
     attack. The primitive urge in me
     now polished,
     so smooth

- A teacher brings in photographs she has cut out from magazines. Each photograph features a person or a group of human beings. In addition to describing what is there, the teacher asks the students to write about what is happening outside the photograph, what happened before, and after, the photograph. What is on the person's mind?—create an internal monologue.
- A group of students are in a museum arranged around a photograph of two African American men fooling around after work in a bar room in the 1960s. The men are dancing to a once popular song called "Kung Fu Fighting" as they had been photographed by Milton Rogovin (1909–present), who focused on poor and working-class people in Buffalo. Maryanne, a student, writes in her journal, "Steve James [Lincoln Center Institute (LCI) Teaching Artist] proceeded to ask us a series of open-ended questions . . . very basic at first. 'What shapes do you see when you look at this picture?' By starting out with this basic inquiry, it was possible for anyone in the class to answer regardless of whether or not they had an extensive background in the visual arts. Gradually, Steve's questions progressed into questions that were a little more of a challenge to answer . . . 'Do you think that the artist posed the two men in the photograph?' The feedback for this question took me a little more time to process and articulate; the answer to the question was neither black nor white. I was forced to think outside the lines,

[saying to myself,] 'I was not present when the photograph was taken . . . how can I possibly know the answer?' Steve forced me to enter into the world of the photograph and dance with the two men inside, even moving my body in the picture's poses. In essence, I was now the artist and it was not only acceptable to color outside the lines, it was encouraged. Subsequently, our class created an entire story behind the image of the two men dancing."

- A so-designated "remedial" ninth grade English class writes a poem, "I am the comma . . ." and designs a piece of movement to reflect the poems.
- A middle school teacher cuts up Dylan Thomas' *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night*. Groups of students rearrange the poem into the form they desire. The class discusses what they have produced, what they "saw" in the lines and the thinking behind their decisions. The teacher is surprised that the recreated poems all "get" what the poem is about. The students then compare their poems with Thomas' original version.
- College students do warmup exercises by using gesture and motion to wordlessly demonstrate how they are feeling that particular day. The students walk around the space of the room, paying attention to how they move their bodies collectively in space. Next the LCI Teaching Artist, Holly Fairbank, has pairs of students to "move towards" and "move against" each other in various ways. The group discusses all the possible ways people move towards and against each other: anger, seduction, love, exasperation, boredom, curiosity. The students then attend a music and performance of Argentinean tango, called "Tango Roots." In the next class, the students "unpack" the initial activity and the performance by discussing how humans in writing and reading discuss the multifaceted ways people move toward and move against each other and how this can lead to reading and writing in the class.
- In the first class of a Shakespeare unit the teacher presents *Macbeth* not by having students read it sequentially line by line. He gets the students in groups to find five to ten words that stand out—any words located in the text. He then asks the students to create a "found poem" using only those words. Each group then decides how to read each poem chorally, that is, out loud with each member taking different lines, words or syllables. As an activity you can assign parts of the following to different readers.

Maggot-pies!
When the hurlyburly's done,
Unmannerly breached with gore—
All hail, Macbeth!
"Why should I play the Roman fool
and die
on my own sword?"

Boundless intemperance

in nature

is tyranny.

Maggot-pies!

There are some who would disparage a type of "found poem" such as this as being non-analytical. There are others who would find a choral reading too time consuming when a teacher can seemingly more easily point out important themes in the work. It has been my experience, however, that found poems always do get at some essence of the play they come from. In particular with Shakespeare's penchant for recurring motives, it's hard not to come up with a poem that expresses the play. Here I think the found poem's composers rather nicely present the result of Macbeth's "boundless intemperance." Furthermore, this is just one of five found poems composed in one class. Most importantly these students really came to love Shakespeare's use of language. A year later, one of them told me how much he remembered the "maggot pies" poem he'd created from *Macbeth*.

There is very little analysis going on in all of the above these scenarios, but there is, I hope you will agree, much learning taking place. In each of these scenarios, the teacher has attempted to open up possibilities for an open-ended exploration of a work of art. There is a great deal of describing and presenting, but there is very little overt analysis and direct articulation, and certainly no reduction of meaning to statements of plot, theme, and literary device. It is the nature of a work of art—and literature is a work of art—that you can describe it in detail and experience it deeply, but not necessarily need to summarize it. Besides intertextuality, another term, borrowed from my former mentors Phil Anderson and Greg Rubano (1991), is "unarticulated response." This was a concept it took me quite some time to work out as I instinctively based my teaching on the "articulated" or analytical way I had thought the only option based on my own schooling. The above responses are "unarticulated" because the students are manipulating texts, creating texts out of texts, creating texts based *on* other texts. The students are learning, but they are not analyzing and articulating, nor are they required to give summative statements. Their learning is coming from doing, seeing, hearing, moving, all the sense-based ways humans basically learn things in the real world. This may be a difficult concept to work out in your practice (it certainly was for me), so please bear with me for a moment as I attempt to articulate further.

I am not against analyzing works of literature and coming to summative (but tentative) statements. This is what we do when we visit a museum or got to a play or a movie. We talk with another human being about what the work of art means to us. We test our interpretation against another by asking, "So, how did you like the movie?" However, it could be argued that all analysis of works of literature is a diminution of the work itself. In our post movie discussion, we are not analyzing the movie under discussion, we are re-experiencing it with another. As Susan Sontag maintains in her famous essay, *Against Interpretation*, "getting," summarizing, interpreting, or quantifying a work of

literature is simply the worst thing you can do. Arriving at a summative "theme" or "message" of a Mozart symphony, or Monet's *Water Lilies*, or James Joyce's *Ulysses* is a frank injustice to the work of art itself. These are processes we engage in, not products we can quantify. As Maxine Greene articulates:

> I have been emphasizing the fact that the work [of art] or the performance can only emerge as an aesthetic object or event in encounters with some human consciousness. Works of Art do not reveal themselves automatically, you see. I have suggested that they have to be achieved. And they are most likely to be achieved by those who know how to notice, how to actively perceive.
>
> (Greene, 2001, p.15, emphasis added)

Knowing how to notice, to *achieve*, or to "*actively* perceive," is not easy for teachers and students. It is an ongoing practice once we recognize that this is a natural and effective approach to enhancing learning. What both life and works of art and works of literature encourage us to do is to create what Jerome Bruner (1992) calls "acts of meaning."

Actually you do "acts of meaning" all the time. If you went, for instance, to see Monet's *Lilies* with one or two friends, you might have a quiet conversation in front of the painting, "Look at this . . .", "Did you notice . . .", "This painting makes me think of . . .", "It makes me feel . . ." In a conversation later over coffee you would probably continue to discuss, or make meaning of, the paintings you saw. This process would probably be highly valuable to you. In fact it is almost impossible *not* to have a conversation about a work of art with the friends with whom you share it. This conversation is typically open ended. You probably would never come to a conclusion and say, "Monet's *Water Lilies* mean *this* . . ." and stop there. Your conversation would be exploratory, tentative, for it is the precise nature of a work of art to open up more possibilities, to raise more questions. This is why you want to return again to the *Water Lilies*, or why when you are next in New York, Chicago, or Paris, you go to them again to experience deeper, ponder more, and get deeper questions.

If you read the last chapters of Frank McCourt's (2005) *Teacher Man*, you will see that, by the end of his teaching career, he was engaged fully in aesthetic teaching practices. He writes of himself in the third person:

> Adolescents don't always want to be set afloat on seas of speculation and uncertainly. It satisfies them to know that Tirana is the capital of Albania. They don't like it when Mr. McCourt says, Why was Hamlet mean to his mother, or why didn't he kill the king when he had the chance? It's all right to spend the rest of the period going round and round discussing this, but you'd like to know the answer before the goddamn bell rings. Not with McCourt, man. He's asking questions, throwing out suggestions, causing confusion, and you know the warning bell is about to ring and you get this feeling in your gut. Come on, come on, what's the answer? and he keeps saying, What do you

> think? What do you think? and the bell rings and you're out in the hallway knowing nothing and you look at the other kids from the class pointing to their heads and wondering where this guy is coming from.
>
> (McCourt, 2005, p. 200)

But they were learning very much in his class, as I know as I've talked to some of McCourt's former students. This learning is just different from the fact-based test curriculum. In the following pages Frank McCourt pulls back the curtain about what he was doing. Having students write and read recipes, discuss *Little Bo Peep*, write about what goes on in their families, and read texts to the strum of guitars and other musical instruments was McCourt's discovery of aesthetic education. But is this learning? Perhaps it is the deepest learning. As Maxine Greene explains:

> It is not, however, the function of the teacher to come into the classroom with reassuring answers or guarantees of any kind. More often then not, novels and great plays *comfort me with ambiguities*, with mysteries, with roads moving off into the darkness, even as they make me feel a consciousness of widened possibility.
>
> (Greene, 2001, p. 166, emphasis added)

I've italicized four words because this quote greets me when I enter my college building and I've struggled with it for some time. Ambiguities are better than fixed answers? Ambiguities *comfort*? This view of teaching and learning is exactly opposite to the "getting it" curriculum so many of us are used to, or the type of curriculum seemingly required for performance on tests, which so frequently results in learning that does not involve the senses, that is not meaningful (except to get grades on tests), is quickly forgotten, and does nothing to enhance our engagement with works of art. I would be remiss if I didn't explain that, not only are aesthetic approaches new to you and probably to your school administrators, parents, and your students, they are an art that needs practicing. You can't "get" intertextuality, aesthetic education, or unarticulated responses just by reading about them; you have to practice them.

Here are my attempts to link the "unarticulated" scenarios described above with the analytical or "articulated" needs of the types of tests found in 7–12 classrooms:

- *Isamu Noguchi's sculptures.* How are reading and responding in writing to these sculpture the same as responding to written texts on a page? What do your poems reveal about human themes that are found in literature? Make a list of these themes and think about which two you might use on the state's Language Arts test.
- *A teacher brings in photographs she has cut out from magazines.* Link the story that you have created about your picture to something you have read in this or another class. Write about this in your Literature Journal. What human concerns did you focus on in your picture, and in your story? How is this linked with anything you have read? We will chart our "human interest issues" tomorrow

on the blackboard, the day after we will write about the human issue you have focused on. Eventually we will turn this into a four paragraph essay.

- *Milton Rogovin (1909–present), photographs of poor and working-class people.* Let's write for about ten minutes about what happened in our museum visit with Steve James. As Rogovin has been called a photographer of "the forgotten ones," what do his pictures seem to tell you about these people? What do they tell you about life in the United States? Rogovin was called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and was called "Buffalo's number one Red." How does this change or modify your understanding of the artist? Here is a short biography [contextual information] and a time line of his life. Design five to ten questions you'd like to know about Rogovin or his work. What is the biggest question, the most important question, you now have about this work of art. Tomorrow we will turn these questions into multiple choice questions based on the biography, and we will design an essay on Social Justice in the United States, relating Rogovin's vision with our own.
- *A middle school teacher cuts up Dylan Thomas'* Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night. Today we're going to write about death. We've all experienced death in some way. I'd like you to write about an incident when you experienced death. You do not have to get too personal if you don't want. If writing about your personal experience with death is upsetting to you, write about an experience with death of someone whom you know. Tomorrow we're going to read another work of literature about death, and we'll compare it with what Dylan Thomas is telling you, and with what you're telling yourself about death. After writing about this, in writing groups we'll turn our ideas into a three-paragraph essay about death, and we'll design some multiple choice questions about the readings according to the "correct–almost correct–almost wrong–wrong" format we discussed.
- *College students process the Argentinean tango by moving towards and moving against.* As people who will soon be teaching, how could we use similar experiences to ours by getting the "big" ideas of human attraction and revulsion and the many ways these are played out in literature and works of art. How could we design a thematic unit in our middle or high school classrooms around "moving towards" and "moving against"? After creating an experience of making meaning for our students, how could we taper this curriculum to the inevitable test essay which asks about these human instincts? How could we bring our students to understand that we can be attracted to and repulsed by the same thing and that our instincts and feelings are more complex than we would like? I believe that my instant impression of someone—which I quickly forget—is usually the most correct one I have about a person. Is this true?

Once learning has happened by student experience and engagement with works of art, it then can be articulated on tests.

Eating your lunch today seems to be a simple matter, though it is quite complicated if you ever attempted to articulate it—how you hold a hamburger and get it to your mouth, how to deal with that pesky slippery mayonnaise-covered tomato, how to wipe your mouth with a totally inadequate and flimsy paper napkin, is complicated. I used to have my students describe how to put on a coat, and then I'd follow their instructions using my coat. It's nearly impossible to do. The reason is that articulation is the *result* of knowing. This creates a more insidious problem for teachers and students: Articulation is not knowing itself. Articulation never equals knowing. In fact anyone can memorize something for a test without really knowing it. This is why student always forget information after the test. Imagine if all you did was to analyze, memorize, and articulate how to eat a hamburger. Not only is this hard to do, it's an exceedingly weak version of knowing how to do the real thing, and you're very likely quite soon to forget how to articulate it, not only because the directions are complicated, but you don't get the reward of enjoying the hamburger itself. This is why it's hard to remember how *assonance* differs from *alliteration* and *consonance*, and why any number of your students simply can't get the difference between an adjective and an adverb. People who *know* and *do* can articulate. People who—always with great difficulty—can articulate what has been articulated to them, are not prepared at all to *do*.

A Word About (Pre)Adolescent Thinking and Schooling

The result of the era of neoconservative text-based reforms since the 1980s is that that there has been little interest in, and little research conducted into, the thoughts and feelings of the preadolescents and adolescents who are our students (Gaines, 1990). The few sociologist who have researched this group of people have discovered some interesting things. Adolescents are indeed interested in a host of things and are quite the opposite of being averse to learning. Researchers Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Reed Larson (1984) explain:

> The most intrinsically rewarding leisure activities turn out to be the ones that are highly structured activities in which teenagers can use their skills within an organized framework. Art, hobbies, and sports allow students to pursue definite goals that are freely chosen . . . . It is striking that the three most intrinsically motivated activities are not free and spontaneous, but involve external rules and challenges . . . . Art, music, and sports require going beyond the egocentric, impulsive activities of childhood; they demand discipline and engage adolescents in cultural systems, but unlike the activities imposed by school or job, they are undertaken willingly . . . . Thus it is not primarily passive, hedonistic activities that are seizing adolescents' attention. Nowhere did the data [of their research] indicate that sex, drugs, or random talk motivated these students most. Rather it is things like sports, hobbies, and music that they really wish to do.
>
> (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984, pp. 95–96).

Even a brief reflection will reveal that school learning is the opposite of the types of learning students not only find meaningful, but the types of learning they *can* do. The current testing culture intensifies the inherent artificialness of schooling:

> Tests are reputedly the most dreaded and dismal part of a student's existence; students' lack of enjoyment and desire to be doing something else when taking tests confirms this. No other activity, however, quite compares to formal assessments in terms of their perceived importance and the high degree of challenge and concentration they provide. It begins to appear, then, that students find school activities either challenging or enjoyable, but not both.
>
> (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000, p. 147)

We may *want* our 7–12 students to be different beings than they are. We may *think* that they should learn differently than they do. But they don't. They can't. They continue to learn, as we all do, not in school-based analysis, but in rich aesthetic ways based on the senses. During each of my college classes, I have my education students interview real students. They are always amazed at the interest adolescents have in the things they know and care about deeply. Talking to students about their interests quickly disabuses us of the deficit model that maintains there is a large body of ignorant and innately uninterested students. Yet this deficit models is what drives test-driven reforms. It may be not the vast majority of students who are defective, but the ways in which an overly-analytical schooling engages them.

This has direct implications for our teaching, and, I think, deeply encourages us to continue to enhance authentic and aesthetic learning in our students. Furthermore, the fact that we are living in a test-driven era doesn't mean this was universal. Way back in 1899, John Dewey was speaking before parents and others interested in his University of Chicago Elementary School (Dewey, 1900). He began his lecture by telling the story of what happened when he went to school supply stores to buy furniture for his school. One perceptive salesman finally told him, "I am afraid we have not what you want. You want something at which the children may *work*; these are all for *listening*" (Dewey, 1900, p. 32; emphasis added). Dewey conceived of teaching and learning as *doing.* Most schools, he explained, are not places where students *live*; the focus is not on the child, but on textbooks, and the attendant fact-based memorization they require (Dewey, 1900, p. 35). The shift he advocated well over a century ago was nothing less than a Copernican revolution: "In this case the child becomes the sun about which the appliances of education revolve; he is the center about which they are organized" (Dewey, 1900, p. 35). He was careful to articulate to parents a central point that many have misunderstood about Dewey. He was not advocating a neo-Romantic "anything goes," or "let children learn and do as they want" curriculum. Rather, "children's natural artistic and expressive instincts must not be indulged"; learning must not be accidental, but guided through "criticism, question, and suggestion" (Dewey, 1900, p. 41, 1902, 1938).

Based on Dewey's work, the central tenet of today's constructivism is that "A thought is not a thought unless it is one's own" (Dewey, 1900, p. 50) and that it is in our nature that we construct thoughts built on our prior understanding. Schools often treat knowledge as isolated monadic facts floating alone, separate and disengaged from each other. It doesn't matter if you got 100 percent on your Shakespeare test, there is no *direct* relevance between that test and doing well on your Virginia Woolf test, math bears little relationship to science, and history is different from the writing curriculum. As Howard Gardner (1991) among many others points out, it is schools that go against the way children and adolescents actually think. He points out the irony that, even if you are a firm pro-testing traditionalist, doing well in school and on tests simply doesn't mean that you have learned much:

> I contend that even when school appears to be successful . . . it typically fails to achieve its most important missions. Evidence for this startling claim comes from a by-now overwhelming body of educational research that has been assembled over the last decades . . . . [E]ven students who have been well-trained and who exhibit all the overt signs of success—faithful attendance at good schools, high grades and highest scores, accolades from their teachers—typically do not display an adequate understanding of the material and concepts with which they have been working.
>
> (Gardner, 1991, p. 3)

In short, if you do well on a test on Shakespeare, you're not necessarily likely to understand much about Shakespeare. Way back in the early 1960s, sociologist James Coleman, among many others, discovered that the best students weren't necessarily the brightest. They had learned, however, how to be bored, to work at unrewarding tasks, the implications of which they were unsure of except to get ahead (Coleman, 1961). Furthermore schooling may actually replicate social inequities. Particularly as schools are more test-based, some students acquiesce to the rules and thrive, and from one half to 30 percent drop out either physically or mentally. The classic study of this was Willis' (1977) *Learning to Labour*, in which he saw that working-class students in England actually worked against and subverted their educations to keep their sense of autonomy and personhood. But there are other things schooling does even to good students. Donald Mowrer (1996) points out that the most insidious thing students learn is to engage in a "grade chase" in schools where real competency is often ignored and everyone is satisfied by a symbol which has replaced reality. Ira Shor (1992) demonstrates that schooling disempowers students, forcing them into unreal games such as "just getting by" and "playing dumb":

> "Playing dumb" is a response to a school culture that offers on the whole a negative experience of education. Generally speaking, mass education presents students with undemocratic authority, passive learning and teacher-talk, depressant practices, dull texts and standardized testing, bland curricula, and shabby facilities in many districts.

Of course, schools often also force teachers into all sorts of behavior, all under the big umbrella of authoritarianism. Overall, we are reduced to "controlling," and "managing" students in the constant battle between teachers' wills and student resistance. We are forced into "reading the riot act" and "having the last word" (Shor, 1992, p. 156). In fact, sadly, one of the hallmarks of schools in the United States is the antagonism and mistrust between all stakeholders, such as between the following groups: administrators–teachers, parent–school, parent–teacher, teacher–student, student–student (Ingersoll, 2003a).

Aesthetic practices, allied as they are with reader response or transactional theories of reading, the writing process, and intertextuality, offer an appealing, if sometimes misunderstood, alternative. This is where learning takes place in a lively, engaged, democratic, and meaningful way. Definitions of constructivism, aesthetic practices, and the like vary because they are not theories of "how to teach" behaviors, but attitudes, approaches, or *orientations* to a theory of knowledge and language acquisition (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Mayher, 1990). They see learning as empowering students to be "world makers" or "world remakers" (Bruner, 1992). Eleanor Duckworth (1987) articulates how this works:

> If a person has some knowledge at his disposal, he can try to make sense of new experiences and new information related to it. He fits it into what he has. By knowledge I do not mean verbal summaries of somebody else's knowledge. I am not urging textbooks and lectures. I mean a person's own repertoire of thoughts, actions, connections, predications, and feelings. Some of these may have as their source something read or heard. But the individual has done the work of putting them together for himself or herself, and they give rise to new ways to put them together.
>
> (Duckworth, 1987, p. 13)

In other words, authentic and life-based learning takes place when learners negotiate (Flower, 1994) their meanings, based on prior understandings, in contact and conversation with their teacher and other students. They are responsible not only for *what* they learn, but for understanding *how* they learn, the processes of learning. This is not about summarizing or articulating someone else's thoughts, nor is it about making easy and quick consensus about what things mean (Bruner, 1971). It is how we can engage with knowledge and how our prior understanding leads to new understandings. Here are some hallmarks of constructivist classrooms:

- The curriculum is based on investigating big issues or primary concepts or themes—such as freedom, social justice, peace, democracy, and the like.
- Learning is based on where the individual students are *now*, what they know, how they came to their present understanding. Students' individual points of view and personal values are important and have an internal and autobiographical logic, even if they at first appear inadequate, prejudiced, or ill-formed to more sophisticated readers and writers.

- Students learn by interacting with each other, sharing knowledge, teaching each other, and democratically negotiating new understandings.
- The teacher is a coach, mentor, or guide. The teacher challenges and steers students to new understanding, and assists students to new points of view, understandings, and overcoming resistances to new learning.
- The process of teaching and learning is primary; the focus is not just on the content or information learned. Teachers and students are reflective and metacognitive practitioners who always take a step back from their learning and uncover the processes of growth (Hotzler, 2005; see Mayher, 1990).

This is an ambitious approach to learning, and, yes, it is hardly universal in most 7–12 classrooms in the United States. Let's look at what a constructivist unit might look like in doing a Shakespeare play—always a challenge.

Personality and Power: A Macbeth and Media Unit

Purpose: This unit is to use intertextual meaning making through kinesthetic activities, and aesthetic reading and writing practices, to explore two related themes in Macbeth using current political controversies in the media.

Goals: (1) Students will produce a paper on a human issue which emerges from the play under the broad heading of "power and personality" focusing on such ideas as authority and its use and misuse, the influence of peers and loved ones on personal decision making, and the role individuals can take or should take in creating their own destiny. Students will be able to relate this issue to two specific examples in the play and one example drawn from real life or print and visual media. Other unanticipated themes may arise from the students' transaction with this work and contemporary news media. (2) Students will collaboratively create a presentation of a scene from a play they have composed which centers on a conflict between a protagonist and his or her desire to improve himself socially, politically, or economically and an antagonist which is a person, nature, or fate. The play will be about a fictionalized real character (politician, business person, or other figure of power taken from the media) who is struggling with how to advance in the world. Optional for test preparation: (3) In a two-day post-unit session, each student will produce a five-paragraph theme about "personality and power" comparing these issues in *Macbeth* with real-life instances drawn from the media and our discussions of local politics.

Activities: (1) Reading of *Macbeth* using found poems, kinesthetic presentation, literature journaling, focused literature circle discussions, silent reading, and reading of play by teacher. Students will write daily in their literature response journals and share with each other. Additionally students will read for three days about several real-life local and national figures, such as politicians, whose controversies are discussed in the news media. (2) Writing will

be primarily reader response journals (low stakes), and a final paper (high stakes) which will be five days of the writing process (prewriting, writing, editing, revision, proofing, publishing). (3) Kinesthetic warmups will be used on most days and poetry, dialogues, and issues will be presented with sound and movement, in pairs and in group choral readings. Planned are a short found poem based on *Macbeth*, a composed dialogue between two contemporary political figures, a rewritten dialogue from a scene supposedly "missing" from the play, and creation of an interior monologue for a minor or major character.

Assessment: Collection of literature journal in middle and end of unit, creation of final paper (with standards sheet), group presentation of composed play scene, daily group work and writing collected frequently.

To teach such a unit requires a certain repertory of activities. Certainly the kinesthetic activities—different, by the way from the academic discipline of *kinesiology*—require some preparation which I've discussed below. But you really need the resources of books about how to get your students moving so that they can lead to presentations. The Lincoln Center Institute is expanding nationwide and they can assist you (www.lincolncenter.org) in discovering this powerful way of investigation among many others. I think, however, that you will see that this unit, as multilayered as it is, contains elements that you can try, even if only on a daily basis. It involves students interest in power, the realities of the political world, and the power issues presented in *Macbeth*. Try the found poem from random words of the play. It works.

Relating Different Theories and Practices

Constructivism, aesthetic education, intertextuality, transactional reading, and the writing process are not all synonymous. However each of these terms provides a window into the same type of classroom theory and practice. They all are unified by having the hallmarks of basing learning on the "text" of the student, who she is, what life experiences and prior knowledge she brings to the classroom. The Lincoln Center Institute articulates that Aesthetic Education has several hallmarks. In working with them, I have come to the conclusion that how one transacts with a literary work of literature is no different than with works of art whether they be aural (music, drama, storytelling), or visual (photograph, painting, sculpture), or kinesthetic (dance and drama) (Asher & Costigan, 2005). Based on my colleagues' and my ongoing collaboration with the Lincoln Center Institute, the following are what we see as some hallmarks of Aesthetic Education (see Hotzler, 2005):

- Selection of a work of art for study that is rich with possibilities for exploration. This means that the work of art literature is of recognized and longstanding value by the arts community and can engender deep meaning making processes.

- Collaborative use of exploratory talk about many possible way of investigating and approaching the study of works of art (Barnes, 1993). Encouragement of multiple perspectives.
- Creation of a focus, "way in," "line of inquiry," generative question(s), or thematic lens about a "big issue" the work of literature encourages.
- Use of a facilitated workshop methodology before (prereading), during (transaction) and after (metacognition), which uses someone engaged in aesthetic education practices.
- Heightened consciousness of when, where, and how to include contextual (fact-based) or background information, as well as being aware of when to withhold contextual information.
- Student-centered active inquiry-based learning which values student's prior knowledge, engages her as a participant, and makes connections to her life. Visiting and revisiting the work of art several times to engender new or deeper understandings.
- Use of metacognitive processes, of "opening the curtain" to thinking and feeling processes of students, using social interaction and negotiation of meanings (Flower, 1994).
- Creating student comfort and competence in talking about works of art.

Frequently I take my students to a museum to read unfamiliar works of art. We begin by asking, "What do you see?" This takes some time, because, when you think about it, most of the time we really don't "see" much at all as this goes against how we effectively get through the day. We then might draw a representation of the work of literature and ask what we focused on. We might draw a pictorial representation, do freewriting, journaling, or poetry writing, or even place ourselves physically as if in some aspect of the work of art.

Some readers of this book might be a bit apprehensive about these approaches as they may seem odd, counterintuitive to the way you were taught, or simply not allowed by stakeholders such as students, families, or school administrators, who may see them very far from a test-focused curriculum. This is perfectly natural. Let's refine several theories and practices that might allow you to get a better handle on some possibilities for your classroom.

A Word About Intertextuality and Aesthetic Education

I've used the term "intertextuality" quite freely in this book. It comes, actually, from a concept of the poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in the 1960s (Sutherland, 2006; Irwin, 2004). For our purpose, intertextuality is creating meaning out of a text by creating other texts. A "text," as the original definition indicates, can be a poem, novel or selection of a novel, essay, or any other word/print text. It can also be a painting, a piece of music, a dramatic presentation, a photograph, a piece of sculpture.

Several points need to be made. The first and most essential one is that, if I have students draw a representation of a photograph, I am not having them create *art*. This is not an art class and I am not an art teacher. When a student is resistant to drawing because of a bad experience in an art class, sadly a frequent occurrence, I articulate that what we are doing has nothing to do with creating art; we are engaged in a visual transaction with a work of art. When Holly Fairbank had my class (and me) form into partners and move "with" and "against" each other, we were transacting with part of the essence of the presentation of the history of the Argentinean tango; we were certainly not engaging in that art form. One of the reasons I visit the Noguchi Museum (www.noguchi.org) or other installations of nonrepresentational art is that it forces students to look behind the question of "is this really art?" or the easy and simple meanings we might wrongly think are presented in representational art. Recently at the Noguchi, Dr. Rikki Asher, the director of our Art Education program, began by asking students open-ended questions about what they see when viewing a large polished pink rectangle with an empty center (*The Void*, 1970); she asks them to look closer, or move their bodies to represent the sculpture, or to view others from one side or the other. She asks them to write phrases that come to mind, or to create metaphors about the work of art to enhance their transaction with it. The students soon find they have no need for their resistances of the "but is this really art?" question. This question gets them nowhere. However, there is the possibility that someone will ask, "But can *anything* can become a work of art, can anything can become a text if we want it to?" The answer is basically "yes." Good teachers always draw students out into realizing that the ordinary—a rock, a block of the neighborhood, a school cafeteria, a family member, or one's own self—is extraordinary, as we will see in the next chapter. However, the one thing the aesthetic practices and intertextuality do is to make us better appreciate art and differentiate it from the simple constructions of our daily lives. As Maxine Green (1995a,b) points out many times, the hallmark of aesthetic practice is an increased appreciation of the sheer difficulty in the act of creating art, and the importance of learning how to pay attention to it. For example, I have friends who take me to hear authentic and quality Irish music. Frankly, I was resistant to this. I just heard the dum-de-dum-dum rhythms and it all sounded the same. Thorough conversations with my friends, and by listening more to it, I came to a more nuanced understanding. Although I am nowhere near understanding the nuances and turns of instrumental phrases that they do, I am coming to see it as a rich form of musical art. My transactions with it are enhanced. It's even making me smarter and more perceptive with time. There is no difference between what I am doing with this type of music and what we and our students are doing with works of literature (Asher & Costigan, 2005).

Two of my former mentors discuss the theory and practice of how to enhance aesthetic reading and response (Anderson & Rubano, 1991). In the second half of the book they present a number of ways students can engage with tests, both with experiential and sense-based unarticulated responses and with articulated responses based on these experiences. Some of their suggestions are unique and some are known in various

Language Arts conversations. Giving full credit to the work they did in their book over a decade ago, I'd like to build on some of their suggestions as well as other suggestion that are going on now in aesthetic education. You will see that the suggestions below are only that, *suggestions*. The idea is not so much to give you tricks and gimmicks for your lessons, but to get you into a certain intertextual way of thinking starting in your teaching *tomorrow*. They all involve altering texts, that is, changing, rearranging, adding, or subtracting from the text of a work of literature, or creating a text out of a text.

- Write a poem about a character in a novel.
- Create a story out of a story, or a poem on a poem.
- Rearrange the disarranged lines of an essay or a poem so that it "means" a certain way you want.
- Finish a story or novel before you've read the ending, or write an alternative ending to one you have read.
- Rewrite a story from another character's point of view. Write a letter to a character, or write letters, email, text messages from character to character.
- Reduce an essay to a poem, an advertisement, a radio jingle, or a song.
- Rewrite an essay, poem, or story from the opposite point of view.
- Take a word, phrase, sentence, or line from a prose or poetic text. Use that line to create another text out of it.
- Find what you think is the essence of the poem and create a poem out of it (Koch, 1973, 1990). Do the same with a story or essay. Write a "Do not go gentle" poem, a "So much depends" poem, a "Modest Proposal" essay, or a "Lottery" small town story.
- Rewrite a scene of a play. Write a soliloquy of what is going on in a character's head. Turn Macbeth into a mayor or school principal. Write a Rosencrantz and Guildenstern dialogue. Write a contemporary balcony scene from a *Romeo and Julie*t play.
- Take any of the above and, with a partner, express this in movement—with or without sound.
- Do all of the above with a visual work of art (you can simply bring in postcards from an art museum; try representational and nonrepresentational art).

I think that immediately starting with these intertextual techniques, all of which combine a little of aesthetic education, transactional reading, and process writing, will lead you to a larger and more extended focus on creating a classroom where your text is what is going on in your students' heads, rather than memorizing literary terms and summarizing a two-sentence theme. I can think of no other way to engender the types of learning that can then be used on tests. Doing these activities, the texts of plays, stories, poems, and other art forms get very much "in the head" in ways that are authentic, deep and longstanding, and that then can be articulated on formulaic text-based essay, or can lead to clearer analysis of reading passages on tests.

Presentations, Kinesthetic Movement, and Drama

Just about every intertextual or aesthetic activity can involve voice and movement and can be presented in dramatic ways. This is a particularly rich aesthetic or sense-based way to enhance learning. One of the most interesting presentations I ever saw was by a community college professor whose specialty was teaching organic chemistry to students who weren't likely to do well with it. She demonstrated her approach by having a group of 20 or so teachers put red sticky dots with an "O" on our foreheads. On each of our index fingers were green sticky dots with an "H" on each. We formed a group by linking each of our finger green dots to two other people's forehead red dots. A big circle of about 25 people were now curiously interlinked. The professor announced, "Congratulations, you've just made a water molecule. Now let's heat things up. I want you to take a jump. Again. Now," she told us, "keep jumping as high and hard as you can." Then she added, as we could not longer continue to make contact, "Congratulations, you've just become steam."

She then led us to a much more complicated molecule and then she articulated how she got her non-performing students to learn organic chemistry. Students' test scores rose dramatically, though, she reported, the exam proctors were at first confused by a number of student waving fingers in the air, pointing fingers to parts of their bodies, and contorting themselves in their chairs. Sometimes another subject discipline demonstrates to us what we might not realize because of overfamiliarity with our own. Students remember things "in the body" better than they remember things through analysis. If you think of our "driving a car to get to work" example at the beginning of this chapter, much of your knowledge was "in the body"; that is, you just felt your way without analytical thought. It is unusual, when you think of it, that classrooms ignore the most powerful senses of memory and recall: body movement—and smell and taste, I might add.

The problem for us is that, if we haven't done this, we have trouble conceptualizing that this even *can* be done. Let me go deeper now into the kinesthetic aspect of the *Macbeth* Person and Power unit described above. I have students find "interesting words or phrases" anywhere in Macbeth—before they have read it. In groups they assemble these words into "found poems." After warming up in a circle with activities such as can be found in Blank & Roberts (1996), we "move" these poems with our bodies. With more practiced students we use a three-count and create living sculptures. Each member of a group of four or five students (and I the professor) take turns reciting their part of the poem, entering the circle—the dramatic space we have intentionalized—and striking a pose. The next student enters, and poses his body in relation to the first. And so it continues. The living sculpture is held for several seconds, and we exit the circle in the reverse order, saying the same line.

This might sound a bit unusual to you, to say the least, but I can assure you that my students get the "theme" of *Macbeth* in their head very firmly, just as I "got" H_2O in its liquid and gaseous forms. I cannot, in this book, go further into describing the

astounding learning that takes place when we use our bodies and create dramatic presentations in the classroom. This, as I said, has to be practiced, and you will have to discover this with the assistance of others, but it can be a practice with which you can become conversant. And to the various statements I hear that these activities won't work with troublemakers, those below grade level, remedial students, advanced place or college-bound students, or young or older students, I say, "Test it out. Try it." Perhaps the reason your students are not doing well is that they are disadvantaged by being prohibited from using their bodies and bodily intelligence in the classroom. Boys just aren't good at sitting and listening for seven hours a day. And girls don't do too well without verbally exploring human relationships.

I do have some warnings. I banish several words from my classes when we do presentations. The first is "acting out." No, we do *presentations*. Acting is an art. I am not an acting teacher, nor am I a teacher of theater. In fact, just about the worst thing you can do as a Language Arts teacher is to have your students "act out" a scene from *Macbeth* as some kind of reward on a Friday after your class has finished analyzing the play. They most certainly will "act out," but in ways you don't want. What we can do is to assist our students in presenting learning using voice and movement. This, in itself, takes time and practice, but it is not acting, directing, or performing, what we call theater arts. I believe that every Language Arts teacher should have at least one, and preferably more than one, course on drama and theater, but, alas, no curriculum committee has yet agreed with me. You are probably like me in that I had scant preparation learning how to move, to speak, and to listen, and to actively observe. We can correct this, however. Most of us know little about, or are uncomfortable with, having our students out of their chairs and *doing* and presenting. But this is not an excuse not to try it. If you haven't begun this educational conversation, I can assure you, once you begin, you'll never stop.

Exploratory Talk

I have left talk of "talk" to the end of this chapter for a reason. Many teachers think that it is the easiest and most typical thing they can and should do in the classroom. Classrooms, the majority of us think, is all about *talk*. This is deadly wrong. In fact, I constantly tell my education students—to their slight irritation—that "whole group talk is the most difficult thing you can do in the classroom." They sometimes don't believe me until they begin teaching. It took me many long years of teaching to realize that most college lectures I attended were boring and uninformative, and that it was foolhardy to replicate this in my high school teaching. Preteens and teenagers just aren't beings who were made to sit still for a 42-minute period, not to mention six or more hours a day. The good thing about not teaching college is that most middle and secondary students haven't yet learned to be bored. When they are, they do *act out*. We get instant feedback when our lessons aren't working, a benefit to becoming a good teacher when you think of it.

Most classroom talk—the so called "talk and chalk," or "Socratic method"—is only moderately useful. After five to ten minutes of this, most students disengage themselves and use their active minds in more entertaining ways than listening to a teacher describe Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, or how Polonius' murder advances the plot of *Hamlet* and the characterization of the character by that name. I have several basic rules for myself about talking in my classroom:

1 Whole group talk is the hardest thing a teacher can ever do in the classroom.
2 Limit teacher-centered talk, teacher whole group questioning or discussion, or "talking and chalking" to five minutes, or ten minutes maximum—and time this with your watch.
3 Never lecture unless a student asks you a specific and relevant piece of contextual information they need to know, and then stop after five minutes—and time this with a watch.
4 In whole group talk ask twice as many questions as you make declarative statements.

And most importantly:

5 Earn the right to have a whole group discussion by first having students in groups, in pairs, or individually do a related reading or writing activity.
6 Always, always, let a student have the last word.

Most teacher talk in classrooms is the teacher asking quick questions with one-word or so predetermined answers. Students either articulate knowledge which really isn't deep knowledge, or play the silent game because they can't figure out what answer the teacher wants, or, worst of all, they try to show off and think they have learned something.

Eleanor Duckworth (1987) speaks of the virtues of not knowing. This seems counterintuitive in that teachers should be the one person who does "know" in a classroom. But think of it this way: All the big questions—and big questions are one of the hallmarks of constructivist practice—don't have easy answers. In fact they can't be answered at all. As Eleanor Duckworth puts it, "The virtues involved in not knowing are the ones that really count in the long run. What you do about what you don't know is, in the final analysis, what determines what you will ultimately know" (Duckworth, 1987, p. 68). The exploratory curriculum—discussed in all the examples above—is the best preparation for articulating what you know on a test.

Thinking Things Through

I have covered a lot of ground in this chapter from several different but related theories and practices. Here are a few activities to consider.

1 Here's the words of a student after an aesthetic "reading" experience at the Noguchi Museum. What questions do you want to ask this student? Would you

like to replicate this type of experience? What are the resources in your area for this type of activity?

> I was not happy at first. However, when Rikki (Asher) began to engage many of us by her open ended questions, like "what do you see?" "What does this remind you of?" And when we did the activities like writing descriptive words on cards and moving our bodies to present the sculpture, then the wheels began turning and I began to focus more and more on the details. As I started to observe and visualize things, my experience and ideas and use of language began to flow.
>
> (See *The Sun at Noon*, 1969, at www.noguchi.org)

2 Read *A Nation at Risk*, or selections of it, and discuss with a fellow education student or teacher what presuppositions it makes about both students and learning. How does this compare with your understanding of students? Are preadolescents and adolescents already natural born learners who have to be directed and guided, or are they by nature resistant to all learning? How does the theory of teaching and learning in this book contrast with the recommendations in this chapter? What are the overall assumptions of this committee about the nature of school learning?

3 Make a list or write a paragraph about your expertise in the area of the arts. Do you see "reading" a non-print work of art as the same process as reading print on the page? If not, how are these different? How do your students define art? What do they listen to, look at; how do they experience art? How can you bring this into the classroom and use it to build upon? How can you use your local arts resources to bring arts and intertextuality into your classroom?

4 Given the theories and practices discussed in this chapter, how can you enlighten your colleague, parents, students, or school administrators into these approaches and orientations to teaching and learning, which they might not have yet experienced? What resources can you bring in to open conversations in this area: this chapter, The Lincoln Center Institute for Arts Education, (www.lcinstitute.org), or the resources of local museums and arts organizations?

5 Do you think all types of art are equal, or is there a hierarchy? If there is a hierarchy, can you articulate it? (Note that if you asked a Renaissance Italian he might rank painting and sculpture as first; to someone in the court of Louis XIV it would probably be dance.) There seems to be a hierarchy of disciplines in schools in the United States today. In our test-driven era, Language Arts and Math come first, and art and music come last. Dance barely exists. Why do you think this hierarchy exists? What does this say about societal values, or about educational values?

seven
Teaching Social Justice in a Test-Driven Era

The great majority are *predestined* never to rise at all.

—Ross Finney, 1928, p. 180; see Kliebard, 1995, p. 95

Overview

This chapter focuses on the reasons most of us chose to teach: creating wider opportunities for our students, enhancing their access to academic, cultural, and economic resources for their advancement. These may seem idealistic goals, but these issues are, in fact, a reason most teachers choose to teach and why they continue to teach, often in difficult situations. Yet teaching is not just about enabling students' personal success. Creating a curriculum that enhances students' understanding of social systems and cultural phenomena ultimately empowers them not only to live fuller lives, but to address injustices and inequities in society. The test-driven reform movement, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with individual success (at the expense of others) and does not address any understanding of social systems or cultural phenomena. The testing movement advocates a depersonalized and decontextualized curriculum, ignoring students' experience of cultural, linguistic, social, economic, and geographic inequities. This chapter advocates a curriculum that unites authentic learning and preparation for tests, through a specific social justice curriculum that enables students to critically examine local cultural, social, and economic systems.

Inequities and Social Justice

In our daily rush to provide a seemingly endless succession of lessons, the larger issues of why we choose to teach often get placed aside. I would like to suggest to you, however, that social justice is at the heart of the matter. When you look at it, the reason you became a teacher is to help people, to make the world a better place, and to address social inequities by giving your students some kind of intellectual advantage in the world. This might seem a bit idealistic, and it may seem to have little to do with the reading or writing lesson you are planning to give tomorrow. Nevertheless, in ten years of conducting educational research, I have come to realize that social justice issues are precisely why we wanted to become teachers (Costigan, 2004). Indeed, the educational research community at large is coming to realize that there is an overriding "why" people become teachers, and that is to nurture and open up new possibilities for young people (Cochran-Smith, 2004). We do not become teachers for summers off or a shortened work day; we become teachers because of a vision and a vocation to enable and empower our students. At the same time, the NCLB-inspired testing movement has as its purpose the elimination of educational, social, and economic inequities. Although we may have serious reservations about the way the law is implemented, we do agree with the purpose of NCLB, which is to address the fact that the United States remains a place of serious economic, cultural, and academic inequities which should be minimized or eliminated. I suggest in this chapter that one of the ways to prepare students for tests and to fulfill our obligation towards social justice can be the heart of our teaching. By assisting our students to look at their local communities, or the issues that affect them, or various systems in which they operate, we can create an authentic curriculum which engages our students. And precisely because it is authentic learning, it can be a very effective means for test preparation.

You are well aware that your school is funded by the local community, and that the wealth and resources of this community affect the quality of the schools in which you teach (Johnson, *et al*., 2004). In the state of New Jersey, to take one example, local yearly funding ranged from $7,426 to $33,805 per pupil (Hu & Fessenden, 2007). Such disparities are typical nationwide. Because we are the only post-industrial country that funds schools locally and not nationally, with only a few exceptions wealthy areas provide a host of educational resources that poor districts do not. These communities tend to have good schools, qualified teachers, clean and well equipped facilities, and students who are prepared to learn. Margaret Crocco and I describe schools in poor areas as follows:

> Far too frequently . . . teachers work in crumbling buildings, often under poor leadership, and for less money than in most suburban school districts. To obtain their jobs they have to navigate a complicated bureaucratic licensure, certification, and hiring maze. Many teach in classrooms that do not have adequate teaching materials. Individuals working in high schools often teach

> upwards of 175 students a day. Over the last few years, many of New York City's teachers have also seen the small degree of autonomy they once had for creating curriculum and pedagogy undermined by high-stakes testing and its attendant technologies . . . . English Language Arts teachers often face scripted lessons that minutely prescribe pedagogical moves, desk and chair arrangement, curriculum materials, and modes of bulletin board and classroom "artifacts" display. Taken together, such measures have created a great deal of dissatisfaction among the new teachers we have interviewed over the last several years.
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> (Crocco & Costigan, 2006)

There are, of course, very good schools in poor areas (Meier, 1995), and I've visited many schools in wealthy suburbs in which I'd never want to teach. And, of course, wealth distribution is always evolving, defying easy analysis. Currently, formerly poor areas of the cities are being gentrified, and older suburbs are becoming areas of poverty as the middle and business classes migrate to the "exurbs." Immigration today is no longer primarily to cities, but to suburban and even rural areas.

This is a situation of which you are well aware, but it is a complicated one. Let me make several points. First of all, as our schools reflect the communities in which they operate, the basic inequities of schooling in the United States today are always on the periphery of our thoughts simply because we have to proceed with the demanding business of our daily teaching. Second, for many of us, it is a vocation to teach in "hard to staff" and underfunded schools containing students who are poor, of color, non-native speakers or recent immigrants (Weiner, 2006). I spent ten rather happy years teaching in two such schools, even with the broken windows and flooded toilets, dirty hallways and classrooms, and erratic heat still provided by coal! I didn't *want* to teach at the top public schools in New York City with their attendant pressures to provide high powered test- and grade-driven instruction. Others do, and that's their vocation (McCourt, 2005). I *liked* my Dominican and Puerto Rican students. I found them engaging and fun, and I wouldn't change having taught them, and having learned from them, for anything. However, regardless of where we choose to teach, we are all experiencing in one way or another the basic inequities in schooling that reflect the overall situation in the United States today.

A third point to make about teaching for social justice is that the contemporary test-driven reform movement states that it is very much against these educational and social inequities. It sees testing and increased accountability *precisely* as the way to make educational and social improvements. Although many teachers and educational researchers hold that NCLB has had many negative effects, the very purpose of that piece of legislation was to significantly reduce educational and social inequities. I think the reform movement of which NCLB is a part goes about this in a very wrong way, but the law itself was a frank acknowledgment of educational inequities and an attempt at

change. I have to assume that most test-based reformers are well-intentioned, though others maintain that this movement is half-hearted or even cynical (Crocco & Costigan, 2006).

My experiences and education research has led me to the conclusion that social justice is the reason that most of us become teachers at all. I know teachers in middle schools in wealthy areas that are very concerned about what our contemporary consumer culture is doing to women's self image and esteem, as well as the over-sexualization of secondary, middle, and even elementary school children in the media and popular culture. I know teachers attempting to overcome homophobia, and others who are engaged in conversations with working-class students about their biases against college. I know of a headmistress in a pre-kindergarten of very privileged children of an extremely wealthy community who is concerned about the enormous stress to achieve academically (even before kindergarten) and the effects of their families' relentless striving for them to get into a succession of the "best" schools. And I know many teachers struggling with poor and marginalized students in poor urban areas who are disengaged from schooling and likely to drop out. I find all this quite heartening. Indeed, such concerns can be the heart of the Language Arts curriculum.

Early on in my research, I came to understand that most teachers enter the profession for noble ideals, and that this, far from being something to be ashamed of, is one of the unacknowledged wonders of our profession. I've come to understand that the relationships new teachers forge with their students, as well as their desire to understand and help them, are the essential factor in wanting to teach and remaining in the profession (Costigan, 2005a,b). There are *some* teachers who enter the profession so that they can get home at 3:00 to greet their children after school. There are others who teach for summers off and paid vacations. In my experience, these are exceedingly rare, and those who enter for these reasons don't last very long. If you examine your personal desire to teach, or to continue teaching, at its very heart is probably your desire to create a more just and equitable world, at lest for your students. We call this teaching for social justice.

However, as well-intentioned as it may be, the test-based reform movement does not take human relationships or the very personhood of teachers and students into account. The increasingly vocal criticism of NCLB reforms is that they have been implemented in spite of, not in dialogue with, teachers, parents, students, and other stakeholders. It is not an exaggeration to say that, in the test-driven reform era, *who* teachers, students, and their families are, *what* are the concerns of the local community, and *how* students actually learn, are not only irrelevant factors but dangerous ones. Students are seen as homogenized, teaching becomes standardized, and testing replaces authentic learning. In short, teachers, students, and their schools are reduced to the symbol of a percentage point. This outlook stands in stark contrast to what we in the educational research community—and by being a preservice or beginning teacher this means *you*—is that the human factors of teaching and learning are missing in many conversations about

educational reform (Johnson, 2005). It is quite accurate to say that test-based reforms ignore and devalue the personal, autobiographical, and relational factors that allow teachers to thrive (Fried, 1995; Liston & Garrison, 2004; Moore Johnson, *et al*., 2004; Nieto, 2003).

But what are we teachers to do about this? In our daily struggle to come up with lessons, to find activities that engage our students, social inequities are frequently relegated to the periphery of our vision, and focusing on inequity and justice seems actually to hinder the basics of the curriculum we feel we need to impart. And, for almost all of us, preparing our students for tests seems to further reduce our ability to assist our students to move from their personal, local, and cultural world views to larger understandings of the society and culture in which we live. Our desire to empower our students through enhancing a broader vision of society seems to be almost eliminated by our need to enhance student performance on tests. There are ways, however, of maintaining our integrity and preparing our students for tests. At the heart of this is to have our students research their local communities or a phenomenon that interests them as a way of empowering our students themselves. Let's look at one way of doing this—with a few variations.

Reality and Research

The term "research," to many of us, is a threatening word. It certainly was for me in my final position teaching at a magnet school whose theme was business and economics. As the principal knew I was a doctoral candidate doing research, I was "asked" to take over a year-long senior thesis project that was a hallmark of their program. The principal and I knew that I was doing him a favor because the "senior thesis" year had been both unpleasant and frankly a mess, both for the teachers in change and for the students. Naturally, the students didn't like doing extra work beyond their regular coursework, and they didn't like the term "research" at all. I didn't blame them. The teachers who ran the program had encountered great resistance by the students to this program. The students typically waited until a week or a day or two before it was due to write it, and copied much information from the internet. What I did was not due to any particular genius on my part, but due to my growing understanding of what other researchers had achieved.

The first thing I threw out was the term "thesis statement," which is what a student *might* end up with after she's done research, not a concept she begins with. Our students, like us teachers, have a resolute and uniquely human problem when they begin with abstractions. Rather, we began with a question that bothered us, something in the real world. I asked the students to begin thinking about and investigating something that bothered them, something in the real world. The only parameters were that students had to choose to do primarily quantitative (surveys or questionnaires), qualitative (observations and interviews), or text-based (print or media) research. Students were

to investigate anything that was of interest to them. One student, Donald, for instance, sent out surveys to all the teachers at the high school and found out that teachers, as a whole, do not believe in UFOs and tend to be dismissive of those who do believe in them. (Four percent of teachers in the school, by the way, *did* believe in UFOs!) Another student, Andrew, interviewed six teenagers in his neighborhood to find out their views on marijuana use. Maria, using texts found in libraries and on the internet, researched the use of weapons in World War II. Andrew, by the way, found out that the teenagers could not articulate why they smoked marijuana, except to say that it was "cool." Andrew concluded that they simply smoked to "get high," that is, for the enjoyable feeling. He saw no influence to smoke due to peer pressure—a finding which countered the theme of the school's anti-drug drive. Maria concluded that the airplane and radar were the two most significant "weapons" used in World War II. Of course Andrew and Maria's conclusions can be debated, but the essential fact remains that I could have an intelligent conversation with them *because* they knew enough to have such a conversation. I began to see Andrew as a budding sociologist, and Maria as a budding historian.

The research project took a full year, and during the two semesters the students engaged in the processes of research that actual researchers do. In the beginning of October, students were given a handbook detailing when various pieces of the research project were due. We spent the fall semester doing the research, and the spring semester writing the research. Following the research protocols discussed in various texts (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Ely *et al*., 1991, 1997) we participated in research seminars, which occurred every week or so in a special session during their Language Arts period. We spent much of the fall in freewriting and brainstorming activities so that we could begin by creating a "statement of interest," in which students wrote about the places, people, and issues that interested them. This process took several weeks, and I soon realized that students would need close monitoring. The process of doing research was alien to their school experiences, so we designated Thursdays as our "research day" when we would work on and share our projects. Here was the schema of the final paper we were working towards. It follows the basic format of research papers in educational journals:

1 Introduction
   a. Statement of personal interest (and personal bias)
   b. Statement of why this is of general interest to students, teachers, parents, or the public
   c. Three to five research questions that the researcher would like answered
2 Literature review
   Seminal texts that inform the researcher about the topic of investigation
3 Methodology
   The specifics of what is done, the who, what, where, when, why, how; the demographics of the participants or the place studied
4 Data analysis or Findings
   Three to five significant findings or themes the researcher has learned

5. Discussion
   Researcher gets freely to discuss the importance of his findings
6. Metacognition
   Reflection on the process of both conducting and writing research

Although I don't find formal and detailed outlines helpful before writing, this schema provided a clear guide for the students and me to follow as we engaged in the complex and multilayered process of research and writing.

I soon realized that the students' interests, though varied, were vague. Clarissa, for instance, wanted to study the GAP clothing store, but she was unsure what she wanted to find out. Her high interest in GAP clothing was not focused enough to develop research questions. Stephan, with all the interest in cars of a 16-year-old, desperately wanted to research the BMW automobile, but he found that his pure and joyous aesthetic appreciation of the car made it impossible for him to know exactly what it was that he wanted to find out. The students could not grasp that research was a piece of writing that would find out something new; the students implicitly believed that writing only "explained things" already known. We quickly added a new rule to for our writing: *If everybody knows it, why write about it?* Ultimately the process of doing research was an evolution in the students' understanding of what research could be, and what research can do. It is the process of turning the ordinary into the extraordinary.

I also found that allowing the students to write about people, places, and things that were of high interest to them actually hindered them from the distance and "objectivity" needed to conduct research. The novice researchers needed a great deal of writing to discover an issue or a phenomenon that was interesting to them, but, at the same time, was not so familiar that they could not investigate it with a researcher's eyes. This lead to an activity I call "take out research." By virtue of living in New York, every student had access to a relatively inexpensive restaurant where people can eat, but which exists primarily for orders by phone and home delivery. These places are rich in human interaction. By making three observations in these places, and by writing it up, the students realized that these places were unique human systems of interaction. Observing in these places allowed the students to see that the ordinary was very much extraordinary, and to free themselves from the many prior suppositions and judgments we all have.

The most helpful exercise was sending the students out in twos (during their lunch period when they could leave the building) to observe literally anything—a local park, a couple talking on a corner, a library, or a hot dog vender. They then came back to class and separately "wrote up" what they had observed. They then compared their observations with their partner's. They learned that two people "see" things differently, and have different ways of paying attention. Another assignment was to have the students observe something (a person, place, or thing) on two or three separate occasions to realize that they had missed much important information on their first and second observation. The students enjoyed the observations, and they discovered that ordinarily they did not "see"

a great many things in their daily lives. The subway ride they took each morning, and the grocery store they visited regularly, became quite a different and more extraordinarily rich experience when they actively observed them. Clarissa, for instance, found it a rich experience to stand in the GAP and actually notice the interactions between customers and clerks, and then between the clerks themselves. The clerks acted quite differently among themselves than with the customers. Students enjoyed using a "double entry journal" where their observations were on the left side of the page, and their "observer comments" – judgments, feelings, personal viewpoints – were on the right.

The research project contradicted the students' experience of what writing is supposed to do. The reason for this, I found, was that students typically thought of the research topic as a school-type report that would show the teacher that they had acquired sufficient pre-existing facts about some phenomenon that the teacher already knew and that they could arrange them according to some formula. It was difficult for the students to understand that it is the purpose of research to discover *new* things, and come up with *original* ideas about a phenomenon, even things their teachers don't know. The students had difficulty understanding that they would, as researchers, eventually know *more* about their subjects of inquiry than I, the so-called expert. The students' transactions with reality, not their summations of it, became all important. Yet, through weekly feedback and through reflective or metacognitive writing called "analytic memoranda," student began to realize that they were learning a great deal by going out to the real world and observing and talking to people (interviewing).

Derrick, for instance, became an expert about Starbuck's. By observing a worker in the coffee store, Derrick learned all the employee code words for all the variations of coffee drinks served, which ones are the best sellers, and the strict rules of arranging pastry in a glass case so that the few remaining pastries left by closing time still look appealing to the customer. He learned that the business of coffee selling is serious stuff with a rule book, close employee monitoring, and complex and exacting standards. He learned that the relaxing and laid-back tone of a gourmet coffee store is a carefully constructed phenomenon, including the color scheme and the décor, and that the company is even traded on the stock market.

Early in the research, to focus the students, I had them write a "statement of interest" and a "statement of bias," to discuss their opinions, beliefs, and prejudices about their topics. The ordinary, for them, was just ordinary, not the extraordinary thing it becomes when it is examined closely. Furthermore, the students did not initially realize that they even had biases, or "a slant" or "a take" on a topic. "Bias" for them was a bad word; and for Marie the GAP store was just the GAP store she thought she knew all about. She had to learn that the GAP was a carefully constructed phenomenon, a *system* with specific rules and goals, and that even where and how merchandise was displayed was important and carefully controlled. Andrew, the young man studying attitudes towards marijuana use, had difficulty facing up to his own ambivalent beliefs about marijuana use. He had to learn that his judgment that habitual marijuana smokers were "losers" was, in fact, a bias. I attempted to help the students understand that we all have biases and that these

are not necessarily bad or incorrect things. I explained that my bias was for everyone to get an "A" on the project, a good bias for me to have, even if some students inevitably don't get one. Philip was able eventually to see that the term "loser" was a bias, even if he ultimately maintained that it was a trustworthy (or valid) judgment.

Because many students were resistant to any writing at all, in all of these prewriting, freewriting and brainstorming activities it was stressed that students could maintain their privacy, and only had to share their writing if they wished. The eventual "draft," however, the statement of interest and bias, was to be "public writing" that would be part of their final research paper. Typically the students became generous in sharing their prewritings and their thoughts. Students found it enlightening that they could "own up" to the truth of their opinion, and slowly they came to realize that they do not know a "pure" object of research, but that, as one student put it, "You know, teacher, there are twenty-five of you in this room because that's how many people deal with you here." Any subject of research is known imperfectly by any one person. Additionally, we spent significant time on safety issues, that is, not allowing students to pursue topics that were dangerous or unhealthy, and using disguised names to protect the anonymity of their participants. Parental consent, an absolute necessity, was readily given for the project.

Getting the students to arrive at from three to five "research questions" was time consuming. Indeed it should be. Most of my semester-long participation in a dissertation proposal seminar was spent revising my research questions. Eventually, however, my students negotiated workable projects. Nicholas, an articulate and critical young man, not unnaturally was concerned with "quality of life issues" in the high school. He had difficulty in understanding that allowing students to complain on a questionnaire was not finding out anything new. The cafeteria was small, the gym inadequate, the elevators in the 12-story building malfunctioning—just as everybody always complained; so what? Nicholas solved the problem by engaging in a multifaceted approach, using interviews and questionnaires. I usually encouraged students to choose either qualitative, quantitative, or text-based research to keep things simple (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), but Nicholas seemed to need to try several approaches. What Nicholas eventually focused on was the fact that "quality of life" really was defined by the students primarily on *those factors that affected their mental and social well-being*. He eventually discovered that the school system took no official interest in the happiness, satisfaction, or even the thoughts and opinions of the students, and there was no Department of Education office, program, or agency that sought to understand how the vast majority of the students felt or thought about anything. What to do about the school's physical inadequacies became a discussion on social justice and empowerment.

After the students had written their "statement of interest and bias," and had focused enough to articulate clear research questions, the students wrote their "methodology." In other words, students were actually writing the final paper as they progressed—it was a process of continual "morphing" an outline into the final paper. Whereas their methodology section originally explained what they wanted to *do* in their research, that section would later be revised to explain in the final draft what it was that they *did*. As

students were engaged in their research, I had them keep what I called a "research journal" where they kept the data as they accumulated it. Students learned that, depending on the type of research engaged in, the research journal would look different, that a researcher gathering data from questionnaires recorded data differently from someone observing a church prayer group and recording her impressions. The journals produced discrete and significant themes. Jose organized his data analysis of an ice cream parlor around (1) the physical store "opening up," "packing down the ice cream," "balancing the register," (2) "Jose's positive story," (3) "Anita's negative story," and (4) "dealing with customers."

The students also had to write a "literature review." They had to find ten "texts" that discussed their field of interest. Some of the richest learning took place when we discussed how one goes to the library, or on the internet, and searches for information using key words. Marisa, for instance, was researching the demographics of a large department store in the city. Initially she was frustrated that she could only find one website for this store, yet she eventually discovered that "related literature" could include books about economics and retail, as well as websites about other stores who served a differing population from the one she studied. Marisa also learned that the information generated by the store she was studying was "slanted" to present the store in as good a light as possible. Marisa interviewed two representatives of the store, and was savvy enough to know that she was receiving the store's "party line." Ultimately Marisa learned that each department store in the city intentionally attracts a different population of consumers. And I learned that the store she studied has as its clientele predominantly white, middle-class people who commute to the city and that fewer than 2 percent of its shoppers come from the city's large Asian population, among many other facts.

Henry also found the literature review an enlightening experience. Henry was the only senior one year who chose to do an experiment: He did a taste test between name brand foods, which could be purchased at ordinary supermarkets, and "no name" brands. Henry initially could not understand how a review of literature was necessary. He saw all his information as coming from his experiment. I arranged for Henry to speak to a friend of mine who was a PhD candidate in economics, and Henry soon realized that the food business is a large, focused industry which generates enormous income. Henry was astounded that food is truly marketed like other merchandise. Henry now understands that the name and the label of a product is at least as important as, and often more important than, what that package contains. He has discovered that the people he studied cannot tell the difference between name brand foods and their no-name counterparts. Henry also began following the fortunes of a company called ConAgra, a publicly owned company which owns Hunt's, Peter Pan, and Orville Redenbacher, among many others (check out the progress of CAG on the New York Stock Exchange).

I was continually amazed by their discoveries. Edgar discovered that 20 percent of students smoked cigarettes, but (like the study of marijuana use) that they could provide no rationale for it other than its being "cool." Justin, known around school as a troublemaker, had done little work until late in the research project. He interviewed the principal twice and found out that the principal viewed himself as conforming to

the typical expectations people have about principals. He was amazed not only that the principal was happy to speak with him, but that the principal has been a "good boy" all his life, and who had "followed all the rules." Being such a conformist was something Justin did not think possible. Chris and Ralph did a joint qualitative–quantitative research project in which they discovered that they were interested in students' attitudes towards wrestling. Chris discovered that the overwhelming majority of students were well aware that professional wrestling on TV was "entertainment and not sports." Still, they discovered that on Monday night "professional wrestling" is more popular among senior males than football – a fact which surprised them and me. Lance was a student whom I was worried about. He was transferred to my school because he was taunted because he was gay. When I was assured of his physical and emotional safety, we designed a quantitative study. Through surveys he discovered that "people in this school are not as homophobic as I thought." He discovered that most students say they do not care if someone is homosexual or not, they just don't want to hear about it, or have it "pushed on them"—although what this exactly means is not made clear in his study.

I was surprised that the students found such rich data. One of the keys to this was that "finding people's attitudes *about*" an issue makes it much more interesting, than just finding out about the issue itself and stopping there. By the time they wrote their final metacognitive piece of the project, however, they had reversed their initial dislike of the concept of "research," most had a very positive experience. Even those who encountered problems—such as being told they could no longer observe in a local restaurant—found that the problems themselves became part of their research. Here's a few student comments about the project:

- I have found that not many people know as much about dolphins as they claim to. They were asked to rate their knowledge on a scale of 1–10, then take a test and match up their results. What I found was very interesting. They didn't know as much as they thought they did. I liked doing this research project.
- My research project was about how diabetes affects people. My project was a qualitative research because I interviewed two people that have been diagnosed with diabetes . . . . I was very surprised at how diabetes has similar effects on people's self-esteem about life. Both of the people I interviewed were depressed because of that fact that they need to take medicine to survive. I really enjoyed my project and found it very useful because I'm at high risk of becoming a diabetic.
- My research project is on people's thoughts on domestic violence. I got the idea to write about this topic because one of our neighbors and close friend to my mother was getting physically abused by her husband. Everybody knew what was going on, but quite didn't have the heart to interfere with the couple's relationship and believed that they would work it out. Her husband, in my opinion, is a good man; he says "hello" and we sometimes talk about music and sports.

- I interviewed five people working as cooks. Two working adults, one college student, and two high school students.
- The nature of my research paper is based on how people use computers . . . So far, I've handed out surveys. I found out that about 67% of people use their computers [primarily] to go on the internet.
- I learned that close to 90% of African American students at this school frequently experience being observed or followed in local stores.

I am happy that I spent my last two years as a public high school conducting the Senior Research Project, and it was one of the most enjoyable experiences I've had as a teacher. But it also was incredibly demanding. The whole project had to be "crafted" by addressing students' resistances with clear deadlines, lots of reading of journals and drafts, and providing lots of feedback, and lots of talking to student to get them on track, to narrow their field of investigation, or to develop clear and doable methods of data gathering, far in excess of the one "course release" I received to do the project. Still, if I returned to teaching high school, I'd immediately start doing it again—just as I now do in a Research Seminar with new teachers perusing their MSEd.

Before I demonstrate how such a project can be an effective means for a preparation for tests *and* a means for student empowerment, let's look at a versions you can try on a smaller scale. Then I will link this type of project with increasing student achievement on tests.

Roberta's Two-Week Research Unit

This research project can be replicated on a much smaller level in the typical Language Arts classroom. You may not wish to enter into a year-long commitment as I did, and you are certainly justified in trying this out in a significantly abbreviated way. As long as you keep some basic elements of the research project, in particular getting students to look to see that their ordinary world is, in fact, quite *extra*ordinary, you can try this for one lesson, a short three-day lesson, or a week or two-week unit. Begin slowly and try it out. If you are teaching tomorrow, have the students observe some aspect of the school (entrance way, cafeteria, gymnasium, English Office, and so forth) and then freewrite about it. Or have students interview each other (or a teacher) about their feelings about the school, or about testing, or about their experiences. I think you will be surprised at the interesting things they notice and how the ordinary and the commonplace becomes the extraordinary. Once you begin by having your researcher-students find out a person's attitudes toward, or thoughts and feelings about, a phenomenon, you have made them qualitative researchers. I can tell you that, when I have seen teachers doing this type of life-based research, the results are almost always rich. Indeed, I recommend that *every* 7–12 Language Arts course integrate authentic research into it. I think the benefits are clear: Students are authentically engaged with what interests them in the real world, their learning and investigations are structured and guided, they learn how to do library

research and read texts for information, and they do a great deal of both low-stakes and high-stakes writing, from exploratory freewriting to the final draft. Reading about the phenomena under investigation becomes not a chore, but a meaningful necessity.

One of my former students, Roberta, has made research a normative part of her classroom teaching. For ninth graders, her two-week unit was titled "Community: People and Place." Her schedule typically is as follows. Note the numbered Research Journal Entries (RJE).

- Monday. Introduction to research, both elements and agenda. Freewriting of "statement of interest." Students in pairs observe something in school for ten minutes (dean's office, cafeteria, main office, nurse's office, Corridor B-1, and so forth). Students return and separately write up observations for five minuets, then compare observations (RJE-1). General discussion about what was learned from observations. Homework: Observe place in neighborhood (supermarket, bodega, store, local library, and so forth); no note taking—freewrite after observation (RJE-2).
- Tuesday. Students compare homework. Formation of research support groups. Introduction to unit schedule. Forming research questions through a "wonderings" freewrite about local people, place, community (RJE-3). Homework: Interview a family member for 10–20 minutes (time yourself). No note taking. Write it up afterwards (RJE-4).
- Wednesday. Students compare homework assignment in support groups. Freewriting about research topic. Chart clear methodology in writing: who, what, where, when, why, how. Whole class discussion of anticipated successes and problems with methodology in conducting research.
- Thursday. Text research in the computer lab. Technology teacher gives overview of internet research. Each student locates two articles about their topic. Homework: Conduct observation of local place to be researched (RJE-5).
- Friday. Sharing written observations to date in support groups, with verbal summation to whole class. Short metacognitive written progress report (RJE-5). Students write up draft of literature review based on two works found previous day.
- Weekend. Homework 1: Students go to library and find two more texts (books, newspaper articles, journals) relevant to topic. Students write brief account of (1) what they did, (2) successes, (3) challenges (RJE-6a). Homework 2: Observation of local place or people to be observed (RJE-6b).
- Monday. Students share homework. Students interview each other and write it up afterwards (RJE-7). Whole class discussion about whom to interview for their project. Note: Some students might not be able to, or want to, interview. They can do another observation instead. This is done for homework (RJE-8).

- Tuesday. Teacher reviews elements of research paper. Students begin writing draft of paper in support groups. Homework, finish draft of paper. Students may conduct another interview or observation as needed.
- Wednesday. Writing final draft through peer editing in support groups. Whole class discussion about challenges in finishing this project.
- Thursday. Research presentations, "What I did and what I've found."
- Friday. Research presentations continue. Whole group discussion of remaining tasks for weekend. Possible reflective writing about presentations (RJE-9).
- Weekend. Students conduct final observation or interview to "check" the trustworthiness. Finish paper.
- Monday. Students share papers, either in support groups or to whole class. Metacognitive writing about process and content of research project (RJE-10). Teacher collects (1) final paper, (2) research journal, (3) any supporting material collected.
- Post-unit test preparation curriculum. *Using the Introduction, Data Analysis (body) and Discussion (conclusion) of your research paper, compose a five-paragraph thesis essay as required on the state's exam. Be sure to state clearly the point you want to make about the phenomena you studied in the last sentence of the introduction (thesis statement), discuss three separate points in three separate body paragraphs, and state any conclusions you have made (restate the thesis statement) in the conclusion. Remember, your thesis statement can always be argued; however, it is valid (trustworthy) because you've proved the right to your opinion.* [Note: This could also be done in pairs or in a several day-long group project; and, of course, the research paper could be adapted for a three or four paragraph "block" essay, as required. The formulaic essay must come after, and out of, the final research paper and not itself be the final assignment.]

This is a unit that is full of activity and multilayered, but it is not essentially complicated and it is eminently workable for Roberta and her students. There is a lot going on, and a lot of writing; however, none of the Research Journal Entries involve more than ten minutes of observation or interviewing followed by five minutes of writing which is basically freewriting. I also add that, until you try it, you will not experience the very real benefits of writing *after* an observation and not taking notes, which will distract you from really *observing*. I suggest you try both of these strategies and you will find that you will develop more acute skills in observing and interviewing and your Research Journal Entries will be far richer. Furthermore, the unit can be easily simplified to discrete observation activities for a teacher to experiment with, or it can be extended to a project spread over a month, a marking period, or even a year as I did. It can be the sole focus of a unit, though I don't recommend more than three weeks of any one unit for the typical 7–12 class; or it can be an extended project that is ongoing and concurrent with other units. One or two days per week, for instance, could be dedicated to this project.

This gives some breathing room for students to reflect and to renegotiate the project as it develops and changes over time, an essential factor in authentic research.

I hope the feasibility of a research unit is clear. Nevertheless, it has been my experience that many teachers are reluctant to try it because they are required to teach a mandated curriculum, or the need to cover grammar, spelling, usage, the sonnet, or a host of any other elements of the curriculum seems to override larger issues. I think, however, that this unit encompasses any curriculum that may be required of any teacher and, as it is an authentic curriculum, it can encompass all of the elements we are required to teach. Grammar, spelling, use of logic, coherence of paragraphing, making a convincing argument all can be included in this unit as discrete lessons which will be relevant to students. In fact, the semicolon, or the use of paragraph "starters" such as "moreover," "therefore," or "in addition," or any issue of the mechanics of writing, becomes meaningful precisely because the students see them as necessary tools for a project in which they have invested themselves. After all, there is a reason that the issues of writing and mechanics are relevant, and that is that this unit engages students on a basic level, that of social justice in investigating a phenomenon that interests them.

A unit like this is of great importance because there are any number of ways in which young people may be victimized by the various structures of contemporary culture. They are bombarded by advertisements, the media, and corporate cultures, which affect their self-esteem, their personal understanding, or how they should invest their time, money, emotions, and intellect. This unit opens up the opportunity for young people to understand the systems which influence their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. A research unit focusing on the local community, or on a phenomenon which affects them, not only is good Language Arts teaching, but opens a conversation between you and them about ways in which contemporary culture victimizes people, as well as offering possibilities for understanding and empowerment. Knowing how merchandise is retailed, how food is arranged for sale, how sneakers, clothing, or status items are directly marketed to young people, how school systems are organized and managed, or how smoking becomes "cool," among a host of important issues, are not just topics which are excellent preparation for a persuasive essay or a "critical lens" essay, but are avenues to encourage students to investigate how they are part of larger economic, social, and cultural systems. Doing authentic research assists young people on their way to becoming critical thinkers as they journey to adulthood in an increasingly complex world.

Authentic Research and Test Objectives

Here's what *A Nation at Risk* says about the Language Arts curriculum:

> The teaching of English in high school should equip graduates to: (a) comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and use what they read; (b) write well-organized, effective papers; (c) listen effectively and discuss ideas intelligently; and (d)

> know our literary heritage and how it enhances imagination and ethical understanding, and how it relates to the customs, ideas, and values of today's life and culture.
>
> (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p.70)

This paragraph, like much of *A Nation*, can easily be criticized for its lack of specificity. After all, what essentially is "our literary heritage"? Who gets to define this? Is it some canon of classics, the "great books" curriculum (Hirsch, 1988), or does it include contemporary young adult literature or multicultural essays, gay and lesbian fiction, or works of literature in translation? Does "our" literary heritage include cinema, various media, or non-print works of art? Furthermore, even if these terms are defined and explained, I still wonder why "imagination and ethical understating" are two specific related things, among a host of others, that need to be "enhanced." Indeed, much of our imagination is quite often unethical. In fact, what is, "enhancement," or "ethical understanding"? What do these terms mean? And what specifically are the "values of today's life and culture"?

However, a parsing of *A Nation* doesn't get us very far. The good news is that from a positive viewpoint, this paragraph, or indeed any selection from any reform document, really doesn't seem to ask for anything that Language Arts teachers would find problematic, and indeed contains much that can be construed as a positive. As we have seen in this book, it is relatively easy to come up with prescriptive objectives or standards for students; the lists of "shoulds" we can compose for students is almost limitless. However, it is very difficult for tests to reflect those ambitious standards. I think doing a research unit with your students—after all only one aspect of the many things you will be doing with your students—really fulfills objectives "a," "b," and "c"; and it could include "d," as "ethical understanding" could be the students' analysis of related texts and their coming to their own understanding of complicated issues and social phenomena. Additionally, if I had wanted, my researchers in the Senior Research Project could have fairly easily written a four-paragraph "block" essay—certainly at the end of a year's work—just as Roberta adds a day or two to her "Community: People and Place" unit and has her students produce the state tests' required five-paragraph theme. This works much better than just teaching the five-paragraph theme endlessly, and with diminishing returns because the students just don't have anything meaningful to write about. Again, I need to repeat that the culminating formal writing and final assessment document for the research project to be assessed should never be a test-based type of essay. I strongly maintain this should be the research paper itself. I do think however, that once a student has written an authentic research paper then they can fairly easily reformat it to the formula required by the type of test on an essay as part of a brief and added unit of instruction. The general rule remains the same: Students who have had rich learning experiences can then articulate those experiences on test essays; students who only analyze and explain, without doing, just don't do well in articulating these on tests.

Ultimately, what authentic research can do in your classroom, from a theoretical and historical perspective, is to create a curriculum more in line with John Dewey's experiential learning, or "bringing the outside world into the classroom," into a school system which is increasingly ruled by testing and standardized curricula (Dewey, 1900, 1902, 1929/1958, 1938). Yet, there is much more that is important. All of our students, whether they are rich or poor, urban, suburban, or rural, male or female, are victimized by a host of structures in our society. Social inequities are legion, whether it be the hopelessly idealized physical view of being a woman (and, increasingly, a man), a culture that silences and marginalized queer or questioning youth, or the basic advantages, cultural literacies, and proximity to structures of power that wealthy adolescents have that poor ones do not. The list of potential injustices and inequities our student face are almost limitless. I think that a research unit can open up possibilities for our young people to begin to view critically the structures under which they work and live. Focusing on social justice, perhaps one of the biggest "big questions," can allow teachers to create rich intertextual and aesthetic activities that greatly enhance student learning. And, after all, teaching for social justice and the empowerment of young people is the reason we chose to become teachers in the first place.

Thinking Things Through

Think about these questions, either alone, with another student or teacher, or in a discussion group.

1. Would you design and implement a research unit with your students? Why or why not? What are the benefits and resistances you have as a teacher towards this type of learning? If you do "go the research route," what would your unit look like?
2. Do you feel that a research unit is better for some types of students rather than others? Would those students who have been defined as "not on grade level," or who are unsuccessful test takers, benefit from this type of activity; or would those who have been defined as "advanced" in some way do better; or is such an activity a benefit for all students? Would this best be a middle school, ninth grade, or senior activity, or would it "work" in all grades?
3. How would you justify this type of unit to administrators, students, or parents? In schools where raising student test scores is a priority, how would you explain the benefits of your unit? What is the theoretical grounding of such a unit?
4. If you believe that this type of life-based learning is ineffective and if you favor a direct teaching of test elements, what justification can you make for your belief in a primarily test preparation curriculum? Can you specifically explain how your test preparation curriculum prepares students for those very same tests, or increases student learning, or creates a love of reading and writing in your students?

5 In 100–150 words, write a narrative description of your ideas for a research unit for your particular students. What will this look like? What will the students research: family, school, some aspect of the local community, a big or human issue, a topic found in the Language Arts curriculum, or something else?
6 A body of research has shown that "the typical candidate for teacher education in the United States and Canada is a White, Anglo-Saxon, lower- or middle-class female who has grown up in a suburban or rural area. She is monolingual in English, has traveled very little beyond a 100-mile radius of her home, and has attended a local college or university close to her home. She hopes to teach average, middle-class children in a community similar to the one in which she grew up" (Wideen, *et al*., 1998, p. 141). In contrast, rural, suburban, and urban areas are experiencing an increasing immigration and an increasingly diverse body of students (Costigan & Crocco, 2004). How can you include the languages, cultures, and families of your increasingly diverse students in a research project involving home, family, or culture?
7 The sociologist Ross Finney's quote at the beginning of this chapter appears to contradict what we in the United States understand as the purpose of schooling, which is not only to gain knowledge, but to increase our chances for social and economic advancement. Yet, as you know, schooling remains a different experience for students from different linguistic, geographic, economic, or cultural backgrounds. One theory is that schools actually replicate society. In reality, how true is Finney's quote in today's schooling? Or, in today's society?

eight
Teaching Language Arts in a Test-Driven Era

> There was once a miserly man who had a mouse in his house. He set a trap, but to save money, he put only a picture of cheese in it. In the morning he awoke. In the trap was a paper mouse.
>
> —Portuguese story

A Curriculum of Relationships

One of the basic principles of this book is that the Language Arts curriculum is primarily about relationships. Students best learn to read, write, and speak when they are personally engaged with, and can relate to, essentially human issues. As you have probably noticed, despite all your efforts, neither you nor your students can relate in any meaningful way with tests, nor do you or your students relate in any vital way to the types of information and skills they demand (Wheelock, Bebell, & Haney, 2000). Tests care about "performance," a favorite word of the testing community, not about authentic and deep human thoughts and feelings. The authentic Language Arts curriculum, on the other hand, seeks to enhance student engagement—their *relationship*, if you will—with reading, writing, and speaking simply because these are the ways we ponder the big issues of being human and by which we attempt to understand the world.

In reading, to follow the ideas of Louise Rosenblatt, the efferent or fact-based reading demanded on tests is impoverished. Rather, students can be only engaged by aesthetic transactions that they have with works of literature (Clifford, 1990; Rosenblatt,

1938/1983, 1978). In turn, this is similar to enhancing learning through the senses, what we call aesthetic education, or what I have come to call, with Rikki Asher, *aesthetic reading* (Asher & Costigan, 2005). Drama, kinesthetic presentations, and manipulating texts are essential ways to enhance student engagement and to create opportunities for learning. As we have seen, this is a student-centered development in understanding of the curriculum that John Dewey was talking about over a century ago, in which students actively construct knowledge: what we call *constructivism* (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Dewey, 1900).

In writing, this book has advocated authentic practices in which students engage in process similar to those writers use in the real world, including the messy processes of multiple drafts, sharing with peers, and publishing writings in real ways. Students who can write authentic stories, poems, and essays are well equipped to reformat them for the four- or five-paragraph "block" essay. Most importantly, this book has presented the reading and writing curriculum as inextricably linked. When students create texts out of texts, or texts on texts—what I have called intertextuality—then there is authentic engagement and real learning.

Throughout this book, I have suggested that that a test preparation curriculum not only is disengaging and disheartening, but actually creates diminishing student performance on tests—the very opposite of what such a curriculum sets out to do. Similarly, the common strategy of a dual curriculum of separate test preparation lessons and authentic reading and writing activities is relatively ineffective (Applebee, 1993, 1996). Rather, I have argued, authentic student engagement with works of art can be adapted for specific and discrete test preparation lessons, *after* authentic learning has taken place. In short, reading for plot elements to "get" a predetermined theme for use on a literature essay just doesn't work well. Nor does reviewing the elements of the "block" essay, and writing four- or five-paragraph essays endlessly, do much more than alienate students and actually reduce their ability to write for tests. However, once students "get" a work of literature aesthetically, then they can adapt that information in the reduced forms demanded on tests.

An image that helps me sort out a test-focused curriculum and an authentic one is to imagine two hall or bedroom closets side by side. Both closets are empty of everything except a number of wire hangers. In the first closet, you open the door and see a row of hangers hung neatly in rows, evenly spaced, not touching one another. In the second, there is a mass of hangers all mixed up in a huge ball, bursting out so that the door can't be closed. If you touch one hanger in the first closet, it might jangle against the next hanger or two, but soon all movement quickly stops. In the second closet, if you touch one hanger, it immediately sends a jangling or a trembling through the whole mass of intertwined hangers. Every hanger is interconnected to a degree.

The first closet represents the kind of knowledge needed for tests; that is, each unit of knowledge that is tested stands alone, unrelated to the next bit of information. Of course, there are some people who do better on tests than others, and there are some students who are willing to spend hours (and who have the time and money) to prepare

and practice for tests, whereas others do not. However, regardless of your willingness to prepare for tests, the likelihood of your remembering how *alliteration* differs from *consonance* is unlikely to help you remember two "themes" of texts in which there is "a main character who unwittingly creates his or her own fate," and this is unlikely to help you find spelling errors, or to decide which of five multiple choice statements is the correct "theme" of a poem.

The isolated nature of test-based knowledge recently came home to me when I listened to a complaint of an English major who had just taken a test for an English survey course in which she had to identify the author of various short reading selections. She was pleased that she did well on this, even though anxiety-ridden hours looking at highlighted passages had to be spent preparing for this. However, she wondered how this activity enlarged her overall understanding of literacy, or how to read better or with deeper comprehension. In addition, she questioned how this would help her with other aspects of really knowing English well enough to earn her MA. I have to agree with her doubts about the value of this test-based task. Similarly, many of my education students still spend (or are mandated to spend) many hours on spelling lists with their students. To many people, teachers or not, spelling seem just to be the commonsense thing that Language Arts teachers focus on. However, even those who maintain spelling is an important element of the curriculum—something I don't agree with—are still left with what doing well on a spelling test has to do with either writing well or enhancing engagement with written works of literature. Learning to recognize the authorship of passages, or knowing spelling lists, among any number of test-based tasks, is a discrete skill, having little to do with anything other than themselves. The same goes with what is required of Language Arts tests, whether in multiple choice reading comprehension questions, or in the four- or five-paragraph literature essay. Doing well on these discrete tasks has little to do with anything else. In short, a test preparation curriculum seems to force us into teaching a succession of isolated tasks that have little relationship to one another. And, even if one set of test-based information or one discrete skill is important, it is nevertheless quickly forgotten after the test.

The closet full of jumbled hangers is my image for the constructivist curriculum. Young people know a whole host of things that are important to them, and these might not necessarily be the types of information and skills asked for in school. As I discovered in my own doctoral research, even for future teachers, the most important instances of learning are not necessarily in school, but in their relationships to other people (Costigan, 2000). There are very many middle schoolers who are avid readers, many high schoolers keep diaries, and most students are interested in games, music, and athletic and intellectual challenges. Yet it can often be the case that these messy, layered, and overlapping types of learning are not enhanced in the orderly progression of "covering the material" in the test-based classroom. On the contrary, all the theories and practices advocated in this book are an attempt to link the "text" of the student with the "text" of Hamlet's problems, or the "text" of a personal essay. Although reader response criticism, transactional theory, process writing, and aesthetic education are all

separate conversations within the academic community, they are all related. I borrow the term "intertextuality" to explain the necessity that the engagement with the various texts in our classrooms (of self, of family and community, of other students, of human issues, of reading and writing) be enhanced. The problem with intertextuality is that it is a *practice*, not a set of lessons you can follow. The benefit of intertextuality is that, once a teacher begins to understand it, it opens an almost limitless number of possibilities for lessons.

What I have learned through my many years of teaching is, when in doubt, begin with the text of the students in the classes you actually have. The resistance, for both you and me, comes from the need to "cover the material," increasingly, for high-stakes tests, unrelated to the needs and perceptions of the actual students we have to engage with writing and reading. What I have learned, however, is that when I have shortcut the engagement of students' lives with the texts of literature, when I have made students write in formulaic, disengaged, and depersonalized ways, and when I have lectured or pushed analysis by focusing on students "getting" my predetermined answers, the results have been dismal. Presenting a work of literature, or asking for a particular type of writing, simply doesn't work well unless the teacher makes the connection between the "text" of the student's lives and the elements of the curriculum. As I have indicated in this book, there are big human issues in every student's life, and these can be engaged with the big issues in works of literature or in writing. In my own high school teaching, for instance, my otherwise wonderful presentation of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, replete with pictures and diagrams, never worked. It simply is not automatic that my students care about this, even though I do, and even though they *should*. For a year I shared a room with a music teacher. I was frankly envious of her at the beginning of the semester. Music was something innately interesting to students, I thought. What I discovered was that her students could be as bored with jazz, Beethoven, or variations on "Amazing Grace," as they could be with *To Kill a Mockingbird* or writing their own scene from a play. The connections with the "text" of the lived lives of any student needs to be enhanced in every subject discipline. Of course this is not automatic, nor is it easy, but it is a practice we can develop. Let's look at one lesson using various texts in the classroom, one in which many wire hangers were touching each other.

Maria's Tin Can Lesson

The importance of intertextual connections was illustrated to me recently in what could have been an ordinary presentation to other student teachers of how to teach young adult literature. Maria, a talented middle school student teacher, wanted to present the issues of a character, Joey Pigza, the hyperactive young man in Jack Gantos' (1998) *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*. Maria came into class with empty tin cans, blank labels, colored markers, and glue. We students were asked to create "labels" in drawing and writing. The labels were to be how we viewed ourselves as well as how other people might "label" us. The other students and I loved this activity and we readily shared our

labels. The class learned that one of us was a cook, another a mother, another a musician, another a tennis coach, and so forth. Maria then put us into small groups to each read different selections from the book where Joey is labeled in various ways, either by us, the readers, or by another character in the book. This led to a discussion of whether or not labeling was a good thing to do, both in our lives and in school. We discussed whether the labels we had for ourselves were the ones others had, and several students related personal experiences of being labeled in school with a disability, or as smart, or a troublemaker, or a teacher's pet. Some students pointed out that labels can hurt students, as labeling students is not the same as addressing their needs. (What, after all, does "dyslexic" mean, except to state that a person has trouble reading?) We then read another passage and Maria asked us to consider the resolution of the book: Was Joey's diagnosis and medical intervention with drugs a good thing, a true resolution to the issues in the story, or was it a sort of *deus ex machina*, or a copout? We left the class with open-ended questions about how we approach students who are different, and armed with a contextual question a student brought up: Why are so many boys now labeled hyperactive and receiving drugs to cope with school? What does it say about schooling when you have to drug an increasing number of students so that they can comply with the behaviors required of schooling? A few students did question the "maturity" of having advanced placement high schoolers create labels for tin cans. However, when I tried to collect the cans at the end of class, thinking of a display in my office, everyone took their cans home.

Now Maria is a talented young teacher, but there is nothing magical about this lesson. It occurred not because Maria was privy to techniques unknown to others in the education class, but because she entered into a conversation with the notion of intertextuality. There are some who might disparage the tin can labeling as childish or too easy, a characteristic criticism by test proponents about constructivist classrooms. But if Maria had not assisted us to "get" the big human unanswerable issue of *labeling*, by others and by oneself, and if we had just analyzed the book, we would not necessarily have internalized and really understood the issue. Certainly if I had to take the New York State middle school English Language Test tomorrow, *labeling* might be a topic for my literature essay. And, now that I have the idea of "labeling" in my head through the senses, I am much more prepared to see it in other works of literature. Thus, this open-ended human problem is internalized much more than if Maria had just reviewed the book's plot events with us to arrive at an inadequate theme of what the book is about. Maria "got" intertextuality first, *then* she arrived at her lesson. A book of recipes for interesting and effective lessons, on the other hand, I don't think, would ever have assisted Maria to arrive at the notion of intertextuality.

The Text of Teachers

However much test makers, politicians, and the media claim that tests are necessary and beneficial for education reform, the fact remains that these have very real negative

effects. Although you are well aware of the problems a test-driven curriculum presents to students, I need to point out that how you deal with testing is a major factor in where you choose to teach, whether you leave one school position for another one, and whether you choose to leave the profession. Research into teacher retention shows that loss of autonomy and lack of personal control not only is an overriding reality in schools in the United States, but it is now the overriding factor in teacher satisfaction today, and leads many to leave the profession or avoid teaching in troubled schools and poor communities (Costigan & Crocco, 2004; Ingersoll, 2003a). Test-based reformers, as I have indicated, care little whether or not teachers or students are happy. This simply is not a part of their conversation (Phelps, 2005). If you believe, as test-based reformers do, that there is a massive defect in education, in students, and in teachers, then satisfaction becomes a liability, and the pain of effort becomes a virtue (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). As you know, testing is all about the extrinsic rewards (for some) of getting ahead or into the best college; it does not concern itself with the intrinsic rewards (for all) of reading and writing, or thinking about the big overarching human issues. However, I am gratified to notice that the educational research community itself is beginning to recognize that the relationships teachers have with their students are the overriding factor in why people become teachers and choose to remain in teaching, even in troubled schools. It is the personal, autobiographical, and relational factors that allow teachers to thrive, and to graft the teaching profession on to the rewarding ways we seek to live our lives (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Crocco & Costigan, 2006; Fried, 1995; Liston & Garrison, 2004; Moore Johnson *et al*., 2004; Nieto, 2003).

Recently this came home to me with a second year teacher, Wendy. Like so many teachers, Wendy comes from a background that values education. Her love of literature, and her love of an intellectual life, was essential to her taking the leap to teach. However, she now finds herself in a troubled school in a poor urban community with many disengaged students and overworked and underpaid families. She is struggling to relate to students from very different backgrounds than hers. In short, she cannot understand how her students can be do disengaged from schooling and from her attempts to teach meaningful things. In particular, "rudeness" is a concept she sees in too many of her students.

> One boy in my eighth grade class said, "Why do we have to learn this stuff? The ELA (English Language Arts exam) is over! We shouldn't even have to go to school anymore!" As I stared at him in shock that he could dare say such a thing, I wondered, what do they think school is? I responded that school is not just a place to prepare for an exam. The exam is just two days of the year. The rest of the year is about learning new skills and concepts. He then retaliated with an angry, "But why? What's the point?" I almost could not think of an answer to this question. I was too dumbfounded by the fact that he had actually asked me why we had to learn again, and what was the point, and how could he even say those rude remarks out loud in front of the class . . . In retrospect, did he think that his questions were perfectly acceptable?

As an educational researcher, I was astounded that this student was the first incident in many years of research when a student had basically concluded that "school *is* the test" or that "learning *equal*s the test." As a struggling new teacher, Wendy of course, saw this differently. She saw this as a challenge to authority, a student's individual resistance to deeper learning beyond mere testing, and as a behavior and a problem of respect. I am not saying that students should be allowed to be rude, but that there is more to this students' rudeness than just an improper outburst in itself.

You see, for all of us, there seems to be only two basic responses to student disengagement, bad behavior, lack of effort or lack of skills, or even rebellion. First, the teacher can blame herself. There is something in *her* teaching that *she* is not doing that would engage her students. Second, the teacher can focus on the student's (or students') deficiencies: Why are *they* not up to the task, what can he do to bring *them* up to the attitudes, behaviors, skills, and knowledge necessary for school (and life) success? Both perspectives are important. If longstanding and unresolved, it is easy to see how either response can lead to teacher burnout and a decision to leave teaching (Huberman, 1993; Levin, 2003).

As part of a research project similar to the one described in the previous chapter, Wendy began talking to her students, investigating her students' thought processes and feelings about schools and schooling. She is discovering that students are neither ignorant nor uninformed. Even if their attitudes and behaviors are resistant, unproductive, and even destructive, they have an inherent logic. Indeed, if you look at any novel or movie about teaching (and there are many), it is really about a teacher coming to understand the realities of his students, not just to accept students as they are, but to build on the complex beliefs and experiences that those students have had. This is a good thing to do, and it is the only thing than can save a troubled teaching career or problematic professional situation. Testing, of course, with its emphasis and standardization and homogenization, works against teachers personally relating to students, but the essential fact remains that if any learning is to take place, the teacher must understand the very situatedness of the lives of her students.

There is, however, a third way of looking at this situation, our students, and ourselves as teachers, one that goes beyond only looking at what teachers can do, or how they understand their students in order to educate them. This understanding is that we are a part of a *system* that values and allows certain types of beliefs and behaviors, and devalues and prohibits or punishes others. Only on reflection did Wendy come to realize that this was not just an act of rudeness on the part of her student, but an inherently *logical* response to a system imposed on her and her students. Her student was angry because, for him, the rules were unfairly changed. If a student is taught that a test preparation curriculum is, in essence, what schooling is really all about—and this is certainly true in Wendy's school—and if that student puts up with this unrewarding curriculum and acquiesces to it, then it seem inherently unfair to change the rules and demand another type of learning after mastery for the test is accomplished.

Of course, like Wendy, we know this is a terribly impoverished understanding of what schooling and education are about. We did not become Language Arts teachers to prepare students for tests. For most of us, this is merely tolerated and we do test preparation begrudgingly (Rex & Nelson, 2004). Yet, to students who are disengaged from schooling, and who do not necessarily appreciate works of literature and writing in the rich and engaged ways we do, it is easy to see that testing can *become* the curriculum. The same temptation is for testing to overtake what we do as teachers. Even if we devote a day or two per week or unit for specific test preparation and do the other curriculum we see as authentic on other days, then we are in the position of Wendy's student. We have acquiesced to the system of testing and accountability. The challenge for us is to do the authentic curriculum first and foremost and to graft the requirements of testing on to it as the secondary or tertiary phenomenon it really is. I do not think this is acquiescing to the contemporary testing culture. I think this is empowering us to continue to do what we know is best for our students as an act of empowerment.

As I have indicated many times in this book, this is also true of successful students. Good students don't get into college by appreciating *Macbeth* and writing good short stories, they do so by knowing how to appropriate *Macbeth* for a test and use their short story writing ability for a powerful anecdote for a college application essay. I am not attempting to be cynical here, but, as we have explored in this book, in our contemporary culture, what education *does*—that is, what it can provide—has become, unfortunately, more important that what education *is*. The challenge for Wendy and her discontented student, as well as the challenge for us as teachers, is to reverse and counteract what the testing culture tells us, to maintain the rich humanness of ourselves and the curriculum within the context of a system that can make us work against our best educational interests.

In this book I've outlined what I think are the central areas of the Language Arts curriculum, and I have tried to provide some insight into how testing specifically creates challenges for us, and I hope I've encouraged thinking about other strategies that we can use. I do not think I am being overly optimistic when I state that I believe we can overcome our contemporary test-driven culture. I do not pretend that this is easy for either me or you. Teaching, in and of itself, is complex, difficult, and frustrating, as well as being rewarding and even joyous work. However, as much as I believe in accountability for students and teachers, the types of accountability imposed by tests continue to be in every way a very real challenge with no easy answers. But there are answers which lie in our continued development of best practices that are inherently relational, between teachers and students, and between students and the curriculum.

Let's then finally look at two teachers who are trying to combine an authentic curriculum and preparation for a test. These teachers are "real" in the sense that they are based on many teachers I have observed for many years, a strategy educators sometimes use to explain their the findings of their longstanding research (Grant, 1988; Sizer, 1984). Like yours, their teaching is complex, and like all of us, they are faced with maintaining their professional integrity, meeting the needs of their students, and preparing them for

tests. How they balance these complex and intertwined factors ultimately leads to the professional satisfaction that will enable them to continue teaching (Levin, 2003).

Two Teachers, Two Classrooms

The bell rings as you are getting seated in Dave's classroom ready to observe this experienced teacher. Into the classroom run groups of loud, talkative, and energetic students. Dave welcomes them at the door, and, after a short "community meeting" to address any problems, the students go to work stations around the edges of the room. Each table has four or five students working on various projects. Group One is working on a letter to the mayor about the condition of the school and problems with the urban school system in general. Group Two is reading up on the gentrification of a formerly rundown section of downtown and the displacement of poor and working-class people living there. Group Three is writing an essay comparing Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* with their investigation of local supermarkets' meat departments through interviews and observation. Group Four is creating a map of the city comparing income (in colors), immigrant status (in raised sections), and home language (by push pins). Group Five is analyzing the results of a survey given to students in the cafeteria about the issues and concerns of students, particularly with reference to the benefits and challenges they face on a daily basis and how they are served or not served by the school. Dave is going around the room, talking to different groups and making suggestions. About 20 minutes into a 45-minute class, he announces, "You all should work on your group progress report, it's due at the end of the period. Remember, today and tomorrow you finish planning your presentations. By the end of class tomorrow, I'll want an outline of your 15-minute presentations with specific mention of the activity you will have us do—remember these start next week. We'll also work on writing out individual research papers next week." For the last few minutes of class, students write in their "What have I learned today" journals.

Jenna's class is quite different. The students rush in her class and take their seats as she welcomes them at the door. There's a "Do Now" on the board, and the students immediately begin by making a list of five things they find "wrong" and five things they find "right" with the school. The students are very much engaged in this, but they are overwhelmingly critical of the school. Jenna then calls on volunteers and non-volunteers to read their lists. While doing so, she creates a "cognitive map" on the board, by linking students' issues in circles attached by lines: physical building, teachers, crowding, cafeteria food, sports, unsatisfactory classrooms. The left or "negative" side of the board has many more than the right or "positive side." Jenna then asks the students whom they should complain to, and by what means. With some prodding by Jenna, the class decides that the principal and the mayor are the ones to which they should complain. Jenna writes the "Aim" on the board: "How do we write a structured 'letter of complaint' to the mayor or the principal about two separate aspects of a problem with our school?" After a quick review of the elements of the "body" of a letter of complaint (stating two

separate aspects of the problem), each student begins writing "the letter of complaint." Jenna concludes the class by asking a few students, "What did you learn today?" or "Answer the 'Aim'." Just before the bell rings, she tells the students to complete the letter for homework, adding the elements previously discussed in class (asking a specific question, thanking the recipient), and bring it in tomorrow so that they can add the "inside address," "outside address," "greeting," and "conclusion."

I think both of these are essentially sound lessons. However, I think you will agree that in most public schools in the United States you'd find Jenna's lesson more typical, even though we can argue that a "letter of complaint" might be a bit antiquated in these days of emails. Dave's "Researching Social (In)Equity in Our Community" curriculum would probably be found in a school where resources are greater, where classes are smaller, and where teachers are given autonomy. Jenna's discrete "letter of complaint" lesson is likely to be found in a large public school, with students who have to be prepared to write a letter or a persuasive essay on a test with two "facts" in two body paragraphs. The education students I've taught, most of whom will be teaching in underfunded and under-resourced urban schools, find Dave's classroom a bit too idealistic. After all, the culture of the local schools we know contains large numbers of students who have not been engaged by schooling, who do not do well on the state examinations, and who have been forced to undergo a test-driven curriculum devoid of personal engagement with literature or authentic writing. My education students from wealthier districts see Dave's class, and focusing an entire grading period on investigating an essential human issue, as a possibility. They see that his curriculum has more possibilities for deep student engagement than a series of discrete test-based individual lessons. Nationwide, however, with the increasing demands of testing and accountability, it seems as if new teachers are almost forced into Jenna's model.

On a personal note, I add that I was never able to implement Dave's curriculum completely in my 13 years of teaching in New York City schools. I didn't have basic resources, such as work tables, my own classroom, or an extended period needed for a workshop-based curriculum. However, I did come quite close to this. My students were engaged in projects that produced *something*, and they had to present their learning to the rest of the class. It was often the case that various small groups of students were working on different but related issues, or reading different but related texts, such as plays or young adult novels. We even had a college prep "reading the classics" unit for college-bound juniors. My goal was for students to investigate an area of the curriculum, such as poetry, drama, or the writing of authentic essays, based on big human issues, such as "Is life fair?" or "Justice and being a teenager." As our fall semester extended over the winter recess until the last week of January and testing, I did give two short test preparation units, one in November, and one refresher unit in January before the end of the term. However, I never used the test preparation as the summative activity. I didn't want the students to see testing as the goal of the course. Learning is so much more than that! Was I successful? To a large degree, I think so. However, my classes were not without ineffective lessons, mistakes, a tendency to lecture and analyze, and a

tendency to think that real learning was when students "got" my predetermined ideas. I would also like to report that my last lesson as a high school teacher fell flat and simply didn't work. I am quite happy that my high school teaching career ended that way. The students still enjoyed my courses overall, and making mistakes is something we teachers should never be ashamed of. Mistakes are a sign of our learning.

What We Can Do

There is every likelihood that we teachers will be dealing with testing and test-based accountability for some time, so this book cannot have the final word about how to deal with this culture. The demands of testing vary not only from state to state, but from district to district and school to school; and, as my research indicates, it is required to be implemented in different classrooms in different ways even within the same school. In the schools I have studied, some teachers have test-based materials, other teachers have to make their own. Some teachers in a given school are made to do scripted, "teacher-proof" lessons, others are not. Some receive test-based training in the school or district, others are left on their own. Part of the reason for this is that the schools I observe in the city are underfunded, under-resourced, and overcrowded. Another reason is that there is an exodus of new teachers to higher performing schools where testing does not have to dominate their instruction to the great degree that it does in "high priority" schools, so that the schools I observe have a revolving door of well intentioned, but novice, teachers (Quartz *et al.*, 2004).

It is up to you, the reader of this book, to take whatever elements you choose of the theories and practices illustrated in this book, and to move them further through your own practice. Furthermore, this book is intended to open a conversation with teachers whose teaching lives have been highly affected by testing. I see the conversation about authentic teaching and learning and testing as an ongoing one among all practitioners and stakeholders. Although some of this book is my ideas, or based on my experiences, much of it comes from my participation in various educational conversations, found in books by the best educational publishers, in the educational research community, and in the publications—both journals and books—of the National Council of Teachers of English. As in my classes, I want you to have the last word.

So that I don't have the final word about how to maintain our integrity in a test- and accountability-driven academic world, here's an Every(wo)man Drama Unit you can try, borrow from, or consider for your own practice. I am including it because it might engender a conversation better than me summarizing any more theory and practice in light of testing. I think this might be more enjoyable to ponder than any more analysis of teaching and learning on my part. Furthermore, this unit brings in many of the theories and practices discussed in this book, from the use of bodily movement, to intertextuality, to small group work. I think this unit very nicely prepares students for the next test they will inevitably face, and it presents rather traditional dramatic elements. When I did this unit, students begged to be taken to the auditorium to present it.

An Every(wo)man Drama Unit: A "Pilgrim's Progress" for Modern Times

Unit Description. As conflict is the heart of most stories, it can be used for framing a story as well as for drama. In this unit, through various freewriting and other writing activities, students create what is a typical "every(wo)man" teenager or protagonist. Twenty-five students in five groups each then research five separate geographical locations (in New York I used the five boroughs; you can use any various locations in your community, city, or state) and situate the every(wo)man character in each with a specific conflict with an antagonist who is another person or a natural or manmade phenomenon. While students are writing this play there are many opportunities for contextual readings: rereading the climax of a play already studied, handouts from plays, contemporary young adult (YA) novels or plays, or even selections from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678/1954). In this unit, Every(wo)man lands at LaGuardia Airport in Queens, has an experience, and then moves by subway or bus to the next borough for the next of the five scenes that make up this collaboratively written play.

Rationale. (1) A significant lack in the Language Arts curriculum is that students are not regularly presented with deep understandings of drama or dramatic possibilities. Drama typically is presented as a type of reading lesson. This unit uses drama as writing and involves students in speaking, another neglected aspect of the curriculum, and in the voice, tone, and movement so necessary to understanding the dramatic experience. This lesson also reviews basic elements of stories and drama, and encourages students to make these elements present through kinesthetic and verbal activities. Additionally this unit addresses kinesthetic movement, a very much neglected aspect of the curriculum. Students, for their part, have little understanding of the intentionality of movement within dramatic spaces (Boal, 1995). (2) For testing, this unit prepares students with an understanding of basic elements of stories and drama and basic terms required on the state examination. The term "teenager" can be adapted to mean "middle school student."

Vocabulary terms. "Agon" (struggle or conflict), "protagonist," "antagonist" (nature, other, self), "rising action," "falling action," "resolution" or "denouement."

Day one. Reading: Short newspaper account of problem of teenager today. Writing: Students freewrite about "being a teenager today." Volunteers share freewriting in whole group. In small groups, students come up with lists of attributes of a teenager similar to themselves. Teacher then distributes short reading from print media about a contemporary teenage issue. The class in small or whole group discusses the most important issues facing teenagers today. Homework: Short paragraph about one teenage issue.

Day two. Reading: Students compare homeworks in small groups. Writing: Students compose a version of an "everyman" or "everywoman" typical teenager based on students' home and community cultures by writing a "background sketch" of that character. Kinesthetic movement: Warmup activities in large circle (see Blank & Roberts, 1996, for ideas) and presentation of seven-word "found poem" based on background writing representing a typical teenager.

Day three. Teacher introduces basic elements of drama and the nature of conflict as central. The conflict can be longstanding, but it must come to a climax. Safety issues discussed: No physical contact allowed, no physical violence presented, no physical fighting, even symbolically. Conflict must be situational, not sensational; must be related to common conflicts teenagers experience on a daily basis, with other teenagers, or in a local community. Reading: Students are to begin reading *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* by Paul Zindel (1970/1995). This is "low-stakes" reading, and students will only share their reading briefly in groups during unit. The play will be specifically addressed in a subsequent reading unit. If the play is unavailable in the bookroom, five young adult novels could be substituted, again as low-stakes reading to be followed by a formal reading unit, or the teacher could use a succession of handouts about teenage issues drawn from the media. Students will write reflections on this (these) reading(s) in their literature logs (this has been covered in earlier classes). Writing: Students create a climax for their everyman or everywoman, having her face a situation in one of five local communities. Situation must reflect an issue in that local community. There will be five different conflict-climaxes in five different communities. Kinesthetic movement: Warmup activities and presenting in pairs a "30-second conflict" based on their experiences of themselves or other teenagers.

Day four. Reading: Students read the "climax" from a play they have recently read (for example, Hamlet's final dual). In whole class discussion or in groups, they discuss what physical movements and bodily stances can best present the words. Writing: Students begin writing their scene situated in a particular neighborhood, community or location with specific issues. Kinesthetic movement: After warming up, students are given words of emotion (love, hate, friendship) on slips of paper. First alone and then in pairs, students present these words, first without the word, then with the word, then in pairs in a two-word dialogue. Particular emphasis is on what is done with the hands, feet, and bodies, and that this matches the tone and expression of the words. The teacher might have the students first practice this in a circle, with the students' backs to the center as they might be a bit shy at first. Homework: Response to Zindel or YA novel.

Day five. Reading: Students share their ongoing literature journal and discuss how this might be presented in a 15-second kinesthetic activity. Writing: Students continue to write their scenes. If time, teacher allows students to present no more than one minute of their every(wo)man scene. Kinesthetic movement: After warming up the students wordlessly present the conflict in their young adult reading. The do not "act out" this; rather, they must *present* the scene as a group in three discrete and separate movements or tableaux with teacher asking students to hold each movement for three seconds and move slowly to the next. Teacher and whole class then process what they have observed in this activity. Students continue to write in their literature logs.

Day six. Writing Workshop. Teacher reviews format of drama. Students will briefly share their literature logs in small groups. Reading: Students read a section of a play or a handout and review format of play writing (using minimal directions or explanation, and using colon for dialogue). Students continue collaboratively writing their collective

scenes. Kinesthetic movement: Warmups such as "passing a slap or handshake with feeling," or "metamorphosis," that is, creating an object in space (heavy rock, ball, butterfly, candy bar) and passing it on to the next person who changes it.

Day seven. Reading: Students peer-edit drafts of scene of play by sharing drafts among groups. Writing: Students share their plays so far with another group for feedback, questions, and suggestions (not criticism!) on how to progress with their scene (peer editing has been covered earlier in the semester). Kinesthetic movement: Warmups and activities to enhance understanding that bodily movement is key to drama as much as words. Creating a picture of a situation without words.

Day eight. Whole group discussion of scenes. Students share scenes and an appointed "director" from each group meet separately as a breakout group to discuss how to put the scene together in a coherent way, getting the every(wo)man protagonist from one location to another. Teacher reviews elements of drama. Writing: Students have to write a short prose narrative of the rising action, and falling action. Only the climax will be written in play format. Kinesthetic movement: Warmup and presentation of last two lines of scene.

Day nine. Final practicing in separate groups. Teacher goes around to offer suggestions and assistance. Presentations may begin. Writing: Metacognitive writing on process of creating drama so far.

Day ten. Presentation of entire Every(wo)man play.

Day eleven. Processing and "unpacking" presentations. Line of inquiry: "What have we learned about drama and ourselves?"

Possible subsequent unit: Zindel play reading or young adult novel unit, or short stories dealing with temptation and challenge, or, if it is appropriate, selections from Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress*.

Possible subsequent test-based unit: Depending on the state exam students will be taking, this drama unit can be linked to authentic essay writing or to the types demanded on tests. First, students could create a four-paragraph literature essay comparing and contrasting two conflicts young people experience as presented in two texts of young adult or preadolescent literature. Second, the students could compare and contrast the conflicts and challenges they experience to those of a work of literature. Or, third, this essay could be a more personal or autobiographical "block" or "chain" essay (see chapter 3) about "challenges to today's teenagers," or writing through a "critical lens" statement such as this paraphrase from an essay of Aldous Huxley (1933): "Experience is not what happens to a person; it is what that person does with what happens to him or her."

The last time I did the Every(wo)man Play, my students had a young African American woman, Shamika, landing at LaGuardia airport in Queens, NY, and was attempting to get back to her family in the Highbridge section of the Bronx. Unfortunately, the cab driver and she had difficulty communicating and she ended up in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, a Polish immigrant neighborhood a number of my students were from. In a restaurant, the son of the owners and a waiter, Pavel, explained the menu to her. Quite

naturally, they began talking about school and schooling. Shamika and Pavel had very different experiences of, and expectations about, schooling. Pavel, a recent immigrant, saw schooling in the United States as an opportunity for economic advancement. He had his sights on a major university, a degree in finance or business, and an eventual job as a trader on the stock exchange. (The school I taught in was in the Wall Street area and focused on business and finance, so this was a natural.) Shamika, on the other hand, had experienced the rather depressing overcrowded schools of her neighborhood, and saw schooling not as a means for opportunity but as a type of institutional racism and societal neglect to be overcome. Her dialogue with Pavel was rather heated, but they promised to remain friends, and she was off to further adventures in Manhattan (the club scene), Staten Island (the projects), and back home (reconciliation with her family).

There are those who might disparage this type of unit as non-rigorous. I think it certainly reflects the idea of a medieval mystery play, with five challenges or conflicts rather than Everyman confronting seven vices, or a John Bunyan character going on his way to personal salvation. I think the dialogue students created between Shamika and Pavel is a good preparation for the type of persuasive essay found on tests, and the temptations of the club scene in Manhattan certainly are fodder for any essay about choice "challenges to personal growth." The question remains, however, if we don't create a classroom in rich intertextual exchanges about human issues, what do we then have? I think the "paper mouse" story at the beginning of this chapter illustrates this nicely.

Some Final Thoughts

This book is born out of listening and talking to teachers who are struggling with a decontextualized and dehumanized curriculum that testing seems to require. This is a serious problem for all of us in two ways: First, it hinders the relationships we need to foster with young people, relationships that are at the heart of finding meaning in the profession of teaching. Second, testing seems to hinder authentic teaching and learning and seems to demand a fact- and skills-based curriculum. These are the temptations that you and I experience on a daily basis. Yet I hope I have opened up a further conversation among us about how to survive and thrive given these realities. However, the seriousness of this educational and political reality must not be underestimated, nor can we underestimate the importance of our mission to continue to advocate authentic teaching and learning particularly in light of continued reforms based on testing and evaluation based on the accumulation of numbers. As I write these final words to this book, a commission appointed by Margaret Spellings, the United States Secretary of Education, who is also one of the authors of NCLB, continues to seek more and more elaborate testing for all college students (who are seen as having become increasingly academically deficient over the years). In other words, the testing culture has moved up, from the fourth grade to college, and we can unfortunately envision a future when even

doctoral candidates will have to comply by memorizing prepackaged knowledge on some exam sponsored by the state and created by bureaucrats. In addition, these test-based reformers are now advocating the creation of a central database that has recorded every student's educational record, academic performance, and financial aid information, and which will "track" people from kindergarten to their "employment outcomes" (Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2006; Seery, 2006). This is terrifying to me because it so ignores and neglects the very essence of what education should be. It neglects the types of relationships between teachers and students, and between students and the curriculum, that create meaningful learning and healthy schools. However, it should not surprise any of us that these depersonalized, decontextualized, and frankly inhumane techniques are advocated. It is no different from what educational reformers were doing in the 1920s and 1930s, then with a United States designed keypunch computer, and now with more sophisticated devices (see beginning of chapter 1).

What the test-based reformers do not realize, but you and I *do*, is that relentless testing as the be-all and end-all of education, that is doing more of the same, faster, and harder, just doesn't work. An inauthentic or artificial curriculum just doesn't engender real learning, just as in the joke at the beginning of this chapter. We know a big secret that politicians, the media, and test-based reformers don't. For true, deep, and long-lasting real educational reforms, the contemporary culture of the United States has to spend the time and the money for real reforms that are expensive, defy easy answers, and need to involve all stakeholders in a conversation. With the commitment of politicians and the media to test-based reforms, it is not a given that these authentic reforms will happen. In the meantime, we Language Arts teachers can continue to communicate with each other, and with our students, their families, and our administrators and politicians, about those best practices that create meaningful learning for our students, and with those practices that keep us professionally involved, engage our students in meaningful ways, and best demonstrate authentic and reality-based learning.

Thinking Things Through

1. The above drama unit is challenging, particularly as many students have been led to think that "acting out" is a Friday free for all after a play has been covered in class. Additionally many adolescents may confuse simple violence with the deeper conflicts they face as young people. A further difficulty is that this unit requires use of movement in class, something most teachers have little experience with it. You will either attempt this unit or not. What reason do you have for your decision? What is appealing about this unit, or what causes you hesitation?
2. Make a list of elements in reading and writing which you see as beneficial in both Dave and Jenna, above. What elements do you see as beneficial to include in your own practice, and which are less than effective? Once you make a list, you can rate them on a scale of one to ten, if you wish.

3. This chapter makes the case that teaching is more than learning to teach well, or even relating to students—though these are essential. Rather, teaching is negotiating our way through the structures of schooling, which increasingly include testing. In your own teaching, or in the teaching you have observed, what structures can you identify that influence for better or worse possibilities for teaching? What are the institutional expectations that you, other teachers, and students have to negotiate? What are the expectations of the local community, of your school, or of students and their families that help or hinder your or other's teaching? What are the "testing structures" that you or other teachers have to operate within?
4. As several researchers have pointed out, school and their districts possess, depending on how you count them, four or five types of capital, resources, or assets (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speiglman, 2004; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). As an activity, review your school or district according to the five following fundamentals: (1) *Human capital* means access to talented and knowledgeable people who can assist us. (2) *Social capital* is the level of cohesion, trust, cooperation, and shared beliefs and values of a school (Grant, 1988). (3) *Physical capital* refers not only to the physical surroundings and the materials and resources that are available, but most importantly for teachers to *time*. (4) *Cultural capital* is the proximity people have to resources and power structures. To these I add (5) *discourse capital*, which is the set of attitudes, values, and "discourses," or ways of speaking and thinking, that allow one to have access to important resources. Given the reality of these resources, how fair are the demands on you to prepare your students to do well on tests?

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