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John S. Dinan

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Reaching Out: A Plea for Play in the English Classroom

John S. Dinan

Unfortunately, there were men in the new world of a sterner faith than these Maypole worshipers. Not far from Merry Mount was a settlement of Puritans, most dismal wretches, who said their prayers before daylight, and then wrought in the forest of the cornfield till evening made it prayer time again.

—Nathaniel Hawthorne
"The Maypole of Merry Mount"

A climber does not climb in order to reach the top; he reaches the top in order to climb. Poets do not write so that they will have poems; they seek to create poems so that they can write.

—Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
Optimal Experience

*So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.*

—Robert Frost
"Birches"

Some of you may recall the scene in Hawthorne's "The Maypole of Merry Mount" in which "grim Puritans" surround, infiltrate, and eventually send to the whipping post the light-hearted revelers of Merry Mount who dared to defy the implacable plan to turn New Eden into a "land of clouded visages, of hard toil, of sermon and psalm forever." In fact, you may recall the scene even if you never read the story! It has a familiar feel to it, doesn't it, filled as it is with the comforting images of the melodramas of our

youth: playful young-at-hearters at odds with serious, ultra-realistic adults, both trying in their own heartfelt ways to deal effectively with the wilderness of Real Life. For sure, the Merry Mount drama was played out during much of my own public school education. And these days, roles reversed to a larger degree than I care to admit, the battle is waged in my teaching life as well. Truth be told (with all "her matter-of-fact," Frost says), we language arts teachers deal with legitimate competing demands day in and day out.

Some of them are not very playful, but still important. (Thesis statements come to mind.) And all of us are pulled between the need to train our students for the forms and demands of the Real World and our desire to have them go into that world **protected** by a love of language and (to use Donald Murray's words) "a lifelong wonder of learning." And out there, hanging in the balance, is the subject of this issue of *LAJM*—the hard-to-reach student.

Broadening Our View

And who might that be? When we talk about "hard to reach" students, we usually are referring to the recalcitrant back-row dwellers (their spirits are in the back row even when the seating chart has them in front) who because they seem not to value what we try to engage them in (namely, language artistry) can—no matter what else goes on and goes well—nearly wreck our day with a mere shrug and eye-roll. And yes, this is a tough audience, to say the least. We need to get through to them, surely.

But I'd like to expand the class of Hard-To-Get. I want to include, among many like her, the daughter of a close friend of mine. In her earlier years this young woman, now a confirmed high-schooler, took great pride and joy in her writing. Now, however, following a pattern as common and saddening as a basal reader, she is seldom more than a highly competent cynic when it comes to writing. Her attitude: you do what you have to do to get a good grade, then you hope you never have to write again.

Such students don't ruin our days. Actually, they are easily dismissed. They'll do just fine no matter what, we note with relief. Still, someone, or something, needs to reach this young person, along with the stylized sloucher in the back row, to touch whatever string used to vibrate so effortlessly in her when she was younger. But it will not be easy. Having been to happier climes only to return to the thickening asphalt that paves the road to real-world success, she is very hard to reach indeed. The mercantile Puritans sitting on our shoulders make things even more difficult.

The Customer Mentality

Where I work, for example, the space surrounding my classroom often seems permeated by gray entities who have trouble accepting that the educational process is not a business or industrial process. They see the educational world through the somber lenses of their dominant, joyless metaphors, and would have us do the same. These are the "Bottom Line Boys" and the "Bang for the Buck Boys," recent mutations of our old nemeses — the "Back to Basics Boys." These are the educators and administrators who insist that we demean our students by treating them as "customers," consumers who need to be treated well because that is where the profits are. Such overseers tend to demean the seriousness of our classroom interplay—**our** work that is play for mortal stakes, to echo Frost's words—with their demands for accountability in the form of regular and quantifiable measures. They have not learned that "having" a language arts skill is not like "having" a specific production line skill. They have not learned that students' "skillfulness" is not a constant; instead, it varies with the job, and we teachers keep giving students harder jobs to do (if we dare). From the narrow perspective of the watchdogs, our job is to create a sequence of products that can be inspected every three years by a standardized test. From my perspective, on the other hand, our job is to collaborate with others to maintain a thoughtful, humane, and long-term process called "providing a language-arts education"—and to have faith in that process. It is ironic that these faith-bound Puritans (as I like to imagine them) cannot make the leap that every language-arts teacher ultimately has to make or face a lifetime of bemused contrition—the leap into accepting that teaching the English language arts is at its core **not** an act of industrial production, **nor** an act of commerce. It is, rather, much like parenting, an act of faith.

What our businesslike adversaries seem to lack is a sense of ease with the emotional nature of the education process, especially the teaching of language arts. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi puts it, "The major impediments to literacy—and to learning in general—have little to do with the *logic* of packaging information; if anything, the

aesthetics of it are more important. This is because the obstacles that stand in the way of learning are primarily motivational, not cognitive in nature" (118-19). As a result of his research into the "flow experience" and the conditions which define it, Csikszentmihalyi advocates that we look inward rather than outward for the means to reach students of all kinds: "If educators, instead of treating literacy as a tool, focused on the rewards intrinsic to literacy, they might get students interested enough in exploring the various domains of learning for the sake of what they can find there"(125-26).

The Place of Intrinsic Motivation: Learning for the Sake of Learning

Intrigued by the willing immersion manifested by people who get "in the flow," ranging from the deep-reading youngster who blocks out the world (including us) during Silent Sustained Reading to hobbyists engaged in activities even as "painstakingly tedious as building a ship in a bottle or as exhausting and dangerous as climbing a Himalayan peak" (126), Csikszentmihalyi argues for the dominant role to be played by **intrinsic** motivation in literacy education. The conditions he identifies as prevailing in the "flow model" are "a matching of challenges and skills, clear goals, and immediate feedback, resulting in a deep concentration that prevents worry and the intrusion of unwanted thoughts into consciousness, and in a transcendence of the self" (131). Unfortunately, school is not often an environment where such intrinsic motivation can thrive. Taking his lead from Theresa Amabile's work on creativity, Csikszentmihalyi notes that "schools follow very closely Amabile's prescription of how to disrupt enjoyment. Formal education thrives on external controls, evaluation, competition, and self-consciousness. Yet as long as this is so, it will be difficult for children to be motivated to learn spontaneously for the sake of learning" (137).

How alien all this must sound to those for whom the classroom must be a microcosm, a place not to rehearse (a playful activity) for Real Life—but Real Life itself. Here's an early version of this prosaic perspective:

Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, Sir!

Some of you may recognize those words, the educational manifesto of one Thomas Gradgrind. Gradgrind is the owner and operator of a model school in nineteenth-century England who, along with his minion, Schoolmaster Mr. M'Choakumchild, is skewered by Charles Dickens in *Hard Times*. One of the most telling moments in the novel comes when Gradgrind, smug in his belief that he has stopped up all the wellsprings of play and imagination in his immediate world, passes by the tent of Sleary's Circus Troupe at the edge of town. It is a rich, chaotic, and exotic place. Not Gradgrind's kind of classroom at all. But lo and behold, who should he find peeping under the circus tent but his own son and daughter.

Dumbwithamazement, Mr. Gradgrind crossed to the spot where his family was thus disgraced, laid his hand upon each erring child, and said:

"Louisa!! Thomas!!"

Both rose, red and disconcerted. But, Louisa looked at her father with more boldness than Thomas did. Indeed, Thomas did not look at him, but gave himself up to be taken home like a machine.

"In the name of wonder, idleness, and folly!" said Mr. Gradgrind, leading each away by a hand; "what do you do here?"

"Wanted to see what it was like," returned Louisa, shortly.

"What it was like?"

"Yes, father."

There was an air of jaded sullenness in them both, and particularly in the girl: yet, struggling through the dissatisfaction of her face, there was a light with nothing to rest upon, a fire with nothing to burn, a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow, which brightened its expression.

"A starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow . . ." Keep that wonderful expression of the power of the Circus, the power of the spirit of Play, as we leap ahead in time to another child trying in another educational context to be full-filled:

*When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been swinging
them. . .
I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows—
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.*

Frost's young lad, swinging on his father's birches as he takes a detour on his way home to finish his chores, stands in stark contrast to the bowed children in M'Choakumchild's classroom. But at a deep level he and Gradgrind's children (when they are peeking under the circus tent, at least) most certainly **share** something, something that has not yet been choked out of them. We can call it the spirit of wonder, or the spirit of play.

Infinite Games: The Spirit of Play

Please be clear that I am not talking about mere "game" metaphors here. Or if I am, I am thinking more of what James Carse calls the "infinite game" in his nifty little book called *Finite Games and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*. Carse talks about games in his book, obviously; but he might as well be talking about English teachers. "There are at least two kinds of games," he says. "One could be called finite, the other infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite one for the purpose of continuing the play" (3). The infinite spirit of play has long since gone out of most of our games, and it's harder and harder to keep it going in our classrooms. Back in the Nixon era, when the metaphors of business and sports first began to coil around us, common questions were "What's our game plan?" and "Is such-and-such a 'team player'?" Such metaphors trivialize life by making it manageable in ways that I hope are antithetical to the educational process we all believe in. And

yet, as Ray Lawson says in the Fall, 1992 issue of the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*:

Students have become masters at the game of making points—as if making points is learning. In a competitive society where high scores are so important, parents and teachers should not be appalled that the students have learned to play the game. The game is easier than thinking beyond the memorization of information as evidence of the 'mastery' of important concepts and skills (48)

As Lawson suggests, the biggest problem with finite game metaphors—and I'd widen the indictment to include business and industrial metaphors as well—is that their spirits dwell not in English Departments but in Accounting Departments. This reminds me of another favorite quotation, this one from John Fowles, a playful sort of guy:

Means-oriented societies, for whom the game is the game. Ends-oriented societies, for whom the game is winning. In the first if one is happy, then one is successful; in the second, one cannot be happy unless one is successful. The whole tendency of evolution and history suggests that man must become means-oriented if he is to survive. (196)

Traverse Bay Writing Workshop: Professional Play

Finding the means (as well as the will) to become means-oriented is our major challenge, of course. For a model, I look to a scene far different from that given by the ever-balanced Hawthorne. My inspiration comes from a scene that is familiar to several *LJMJ* readers because they played a part in it. The location was Traverse City in June, the specific setting was the campus of Northwestern Michigan College, and the event was the Traverse Bay Writing Workshop for Teachers, which ran its course between 1986 and 1992. The workshop was not so much a scripted "event" as (to evoke the Spirit of the 60s for a moment) a "happening." There were schedules and rules, to be sure, but what drove the workshop was not the plans of its organizers but the spirit of its participants.

People came to the Traverse Bay workshop not to work, but to escape, to take a break from

the world of considerations—as well as from the often pedestrian writing **of** that world. They came to **play** for awhile—play with their writing, play with other writers, and through play to be and become writers. The environment came as close as anything I've seen in the education world to what Johann Huizinga calls a “play-sphere. . . a sphere of activity with a disposition all its own” (8). It was a disposition that disposed people to be writers. How come? Four reasons. First, the rules were minimal and flexible. Second, the temporal and spatial boundaries demarcated and insulated this space from the so-called Real World, giving it “high walls of psychic insulation” (Peckham 313). Third, this writing environment was free from what play theorist Roger Callois calls “fatal consequences” (7); as such, it was an adult version of the safe and consummately playful environment Brian Cambourne discusses in *The Whole Story* when talking about that miracle and model of language arts learning: learning to speak.* Finally, and perhaps best of all, this play sphere called the Traverse Bay Writing Workshop had the advantage of providing its participating language-players with (again using Callois' words) the “conditions of pure equality” denied them in real life (19).

Anyone who has gone through the conversion experience of a Writing Project workshop (or any good writing group, for that matter) will immediately recognize this description of the Traverse Bay workshop. The model works in part because, in Janet Emig's words, “To write is to be transformed as a teacher of writing.” But it is not just **what** is done, but **how** it's done that usually distinguishes Writing Project workshops from, say, most writing “courses” we take. Being writers is important to that process, of course, but it is more than just doing it yourself; it is doing it in a certain way, with a certain spirit. That spirit is the play spirit. Here's the upshot: every year Traverse Bay's participants, most of whom were teachers like us, left the campus absolutely determined to get a bit more of the play spirit into their own classrooms back in the real, workaday world. I was one of them. I still am. But it's difficult. There are a lot of Puritans in them there woods!

Creating Playful Classrooms

When things go well, though, my students can—as I myself did at Traverse Bay—take advantage of the insulation provided by the playful classrooms; they are able at such times to begin to do what Frost's young man does when he takes a break from being a team player and becomes a higher order of player, one who effects change rather than aligns with the *status quo*:

*One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them...*

How might we encourage such adventures to occur? Most of you already know; teachers who read journals such as this always find ways to close their doors for awhile against the chilly breezes of skill-building and task-mastery in order to sneak some pleasure into their writing classrooms. Look for the fun stuff you do—and do more of it. Have faith in it. (I routinely ask the practicing teachers in my English Education classes at Central Michigan University to discuss writing assignments that they have considered most successful. About 80 percent describe an activity suffused with the play spirit.) Be as open as possible to activities in which voice manipulation and other forms of language play are considered to be worthy goals in and of themselves, not just means to a practical end. Role-playing, both good and deliberately bad, is always fun. So too is “mystery writing,” in which writers use details only to lay down the clues to a thesis that others must figure out. Such activities put the writer in charge, make them feel **like** writers.

Indeed, if there's one piece of advice I am trying to give to myself more than others in this regard, it is to return the personal essay to its rightful place in my writing curriculum by embracing what is sometimes called “creative non-fiction,” a fourth genre that covers all manner of non-fiction personal essays, including disjunctive renderings such as the collage essay. This genre returns the writer to the center of the process as both subject and object, discoverer and crafter, thereby increasing the writer's sense of the authenticity of the writing activity. Authen-

tivity is, after all, a subjective concept; it will be defined (as will “authentic writing”) by our students, not by us. And when they do decide, it will be determined far less by whether the audience is “real world” or not, or whether the genre is recognizable as one that exists beyond the school walls, than on their level of willing engagement in the process—a factor that cuts across all genres and audiences.

There is a world of difference between focusing on what **might** be said rather than on what **must** be said. Might does not make right in the kind of tentative, playful writing world I’d like to have my students take recess in. But it sure does give the writer power, power that may prevent the decline of these “lines of straighter darker trees” Frost writes of, victims of ice storms:

*They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed
So low for long, they never right themselves*

Which brings us back to those icy, unyielding Puritans I conjured at the beginning of this essay. No one can doubt the good intentions of the Puritans at Merry Mount. And armed with those good intentions they paved a particular kind of road for Puritans and Merry Mounters alike. It is the well-traveled path that we must send our students down. Eventually, I suppose. But not always. If only for brief moments of respite from a practical but joyless curriculum that I helped create, I want to occasionally give my students a break from the world of “considerations” Frost speaks of in “Birches,” a world

*Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig’s having lashed across it open.*

Just for awhile, I want to find the means to resist the growing pressures I feel to knuckle down to the nits and the grits of a language arts education designed to fashion skilled products able to succeed in the so-called real worlds of

commerce or college. Just for the heaven of it, I want to reach my students, whether eager or disaffected, by letting them stop being team players for awhile and instead inviting them to be higher players who **themselves** do the reaching, not for the brass ring but **for** themselves:

*He learned all there was
To learn about not launching out too soon
And so not carrying the tree away
Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.*

A going and a returning. No one—and this is what many do not understand—suggests that the play continue forever, least of all Robert Frost. Play teaches us how to work—how to **be** when we work. Frost assures us that our play, along with our work done in a playful spirit, is not an end in itself, unconnected with the world of considerations, but rather a going and a returning—a going that has within it the power to transform and a returning that has within it the impulse for another climb and another launch. He says:

*May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth’s the right place for love:
I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.*

Play will not make all the difference. But it is worth the risk.

* Note: Based upon the nearly-universal praise for Cambourne offered by classroom teachers to whom I have introduced his literacy model over the past several years, I strongly recommend Cambourne’s three “Principles of Engagement” as an excellent place to begin when trying to figure out how to create classroom conditions that encourage students including hard-to-reach ones to “have a go”—Cambourne is an Aussie—at this literacy thing: (1) Students are convinced that

they are actually “potential doers or performers” of the language art being asked of them; (2) students believe that engaging the target language “will further the purposes of their lives”—a quality not limited to practical concerns; and (3) students “can engage and try to emulate without fear of physical or psychological hurt if their attempts are not fully correct” (“Toward”187). Cambourne wisely notes that “helping learners to make these decisions constitutes the artistic dimensions of teaching. It is difficult for teachers who dislike children”(187).

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About the Author

John S. Dinan, a former president of the MCTE, teaches writing and English Education at Central Michigan University and works at West Intermediate School as a Professional Development Schools Coordinator.