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Susan M. Katz

Leslie Richardson

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Games and Strategies for Teaching Invention

Susan M. Katz and Leslie Richardson

It has happened to everyone. You sit down at the desk with a blank piece of paper, and you can't think of anything to say. It's a frightening feeling, and it takes many years of experience to recognize that the fear will pass and the words will come once you find a way to start. All too often students get stuck at the fear stage and never discover their own potential as writers. As teachers of writing, we can help our students by introducing them to invention strategies.

This article will provide explicit examples of classroom activities, discussions, and student writing based on invention strategies. The source for this material was a three-week writing class for 15 seventh and eighth graders taught by Leslie Richardson on the campus of Skidmore College as part of Johns Hopkins University's summer program for academically talented youth. In addition to Leslie's experiences, this article is based on the observations of Susan Katz, who was conducting research funded through a grant from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, on the writing program for Johns Hopkins throughout the three-week session.

Planning the Course

Leslie believes that she can best help her students improve their writing by teaching them specific invention strategies to respond to curriculum-based writing assignments in any field,

as well as assignments where they are allowed to develop topics of their own choosing. In the following section, the authors will present narratives based on four specific activities for teaching invention strategies. These narratives have been reconstructed here based on Susan's field notes and audiotaped classroom discussions.

Inventing Themes For Assigned Topics

For each of the four activities for teaching invention, we will provide

- an introductory explanation of the goal of the activity,
- a narrative description of how the activity was presented to the students (from the point-of-view of the instructor, Leslie), and
- an analysis of what the students learned.

For the activities that led to specific assignments, we will also provide samples of actual student writing.

Activity 1: Boring Beginnings

In this activity, students were asked to think about unusual and interesting ways to begin a discussion of common subjects. As you read, notice how Leslie encouraged students to go beyond traditional openings by (1) asking them to talk first about "boring beginnings," (2) allowing them to sit in silence and think about the ques-

tions she raised, and (3) using what the students said to push the question further.

I began by asking the students if they'd ever had to write a paper about a topic the teacher had chosen for them. They all said "yes."

"Let's say you have to write about whales," I said. "What is the most boring sentence you can think of to start your paper?"

The students offered sentences, most of which focused on the whale's appearance, such as "The whale is the largest mammal in the world."

"Good," I said, "very predictable. I'm yawning." The class was pleased, but slightly uncomfortable with this strange response. I turned and drew a horizontal line on the chalkboard. "On a scale from ho-hum to exciting, 'the whale is the largest mammal in the world' would fall here." I made an "x" at the far left side of the line. "Now," I said, "let's try to move toward interesting. I still want the topics to be slightly boring—predictable, not above average—just 'standard.' Give me the kind of beginning to which a reader might sigh and say 'yea, so what else is new?'"

The students were stumped for a minute or two. "Well, what do you know about whales?" I asked.

"Even though some of them are big, they only eat little bitty green stuff," Pete said.

"Plankton," offered Judy.

"Yeah, plankton. And some whales are endangered."

I reminded the students that they could take any angle they wanted, as long as the papers showed that they had done research about whales.

"So I could write about whales being endangered," June said. "But I could make that interesting topic sound boring by saying, 'It sure is sad that whales are endangered.'"

"Exactly," I said.

The students came up with a few more boring sentences, and then there was a lull.

It seemed as though they'd bored themselves to sleep.

"Can you think of any exciting ways to start a paper about whales?" I asked.

More silence. "We've already thought up all the ways," said Carol.

A few students offered some less predictable but still awfully uninspiring beginnings. I told the students that the openings sounded better, but then I urged them to push ahead, to try to push past the expected answers that were set in their brains.

Then Tom sat up straight and said, "The salt water of the ocean splashes on the side of the ship. I stand behind a whaling gun, squinting into the infra-red scope. I aim for the whale's eye and then fire. Blood spurts everywhere. It's a hit!"

Several students said "Gross!" but then told Tom that his opening was good. I asked the students what they thought a paper that started like that would be about—what they would want to know after reading those first lines.

"I'd like to know why this guy you're pretending to be is so excited about killing the whale. It doesn't sound like this guy with the infra-red gun is an Eskimo who is going to eat the whale. It sounds like he just wants to kill," Marty said.

Tom replied, "I don't know why, but the Japanese have all this high-tech equipment, and even though they know the whales are endangered, they keep killing them. I saw it on T.V."

"Maybe the people want ivory from the whales," said Maria.

The students began to discuss the topic, sharing information and disagreeing at times. They began to look forward to looking up the answers in order to answer questions and settle their disputes.

After a few minutes I interrupted them. "Back to first lines and paper topics. Tom, what will your paper be about if you start it the way you said earlier?"

"Why the Japanese hunt whales," Tom replied.

"Very exciting," I said, and made an "x" on the far right of the chalk line. "Now let's think of a completely new way to open a paper about whales. When we were trying to figure out why people kill whales—besides for their meat—someone said 'ivory.' What is so great about ivory? What do people do with it?"

After a moment of silence, I continued. "Sometimes ivory is carved," I explained, "and made into jewelry, like cameos. Have you ever heard the term 'tickling the ivories?'" That means playing the piano, because white piano keys used to be made of ivory. Also, some old silverware has ivory handles."

"Eskimos burned whale oil in lamps," Jim said.

"That's right. Other people used whale oil as well," I said. Then I told the class about ambergris, which is taken from sperm whales and used as a base for perfume. "What would be an interesting way to start your paper if you wanted to write about the products made from whales?" I asked.

Laura raised her hand. "Next time you sit down to a romantic dinner for two, consider this: there may be a third party in the room with you."

"What do you mean?" Maria asked.

"A whale would be in the room with you," Laura said, "if there was ivory on the silverware, or in your jewelry. Ambergris in your date's cologne. And maybe an oil lamp burning whale oil."

"People don't burn oil lamps today," objected Tom.

"True. I guess in the second sentence I could say something like, 'If you lived a hundred years ago, a whale was probably in the room.' How's that?" asked Laura.

"That would work," said Tom.

Through this discussion of boring and unusual opening sentences, the students began to

get an idea of new ways to approach familiar topics. They were enthusiastic about the ideas generated in their discussion—several of them were ready to head off to the library to write a paper on whales.

In this activity, which took place on the first day of class, Leslie's role as discussion leader was significant. However, she encouraged the students to participate and ask questions of one another, and by the end of the three-week course the students themselves were leading discussions. In other words, she effectively modeled the role of discussion leader and the students learned by example. In the next activity, Leslie more explicitly modeled a behavior she wanted them to emulate: bubble writing.

Activity 2: Bubble Writing

This activity introduces the students to a brainstorming technique that can be used for any topic. Notice how Leslie uses herself and genuine information about herself to model the specifics of the technique. Leslie's willingness to use her own experiences helps to show the students that she, too, has had to overcome writer's block and enhances the likelihood that they will accept her suggestions.

I began by asking the students if they could come up with three paper topics from one word. They responded with a chorus of "no way!"

"You can do it, and I'll prove it to you by showing you how easy it is," I told them.

To begin modeling the process of what I call "bubble writing," I asked the students to give me one word as a basis for my topics. Because I'd practiced the night before, and had reminded myself that there are no "wrong answers" in bubble writing, I was only a little apprehensive about letting my mind wander for an audience of teenagers. One student suggested the word "endure," so I wrote it in the middle of the board and drew a circle—a "bubble"—around it. For the next seven or eight minutes I concentrated on my task as students giggled and said "huh?"

When I'd written three chains of bubbles (see illustration), I turned to the class and said,

Bubblewriting Demonstration

"We, as a class, are going to get at least three different papers out of these bubbles."

"First," I told them, "let me explain what I was thinking as I wrote these words: Something I've had to 'endure' since I was seventeen is my car breaking down constantly. I have a very old car, a 1965 Mustang. My father is good with cars, and when I lived near him, he repaired mine. Through the years, because he's made me watch him and help him as he works on the Mustang, I've learned a lot about my own car. That's given me a sense of independence—I'm not totally at the mercy of auto mechanics now."

"After I wrote the 'independence' bubble, I got stuck, so I went back to the father bubble. Sometimes when my dad worked on my car he got frustrated and angry. He also smelled like gasoline."

"I got stuck here too, so I left the father topic and just thought about 'gasoline smell.' Then I wrote gas station, and then I remembered that often, when I'm buying gas, people

compliment my car. That gives me a sense of satisfaction, because that car is the result of my father's and my hard work."

After describing all the strings of "bubbles," I continued by asking, "Now what if I wanted to sell an article to a magazine? What publications do you think would be interested in whatever writing might come out of the bubble chain that started with my car?"

"*Popular Mechanics*," said Joe.

"Do you think that I know enough about mechanics to write for that publication? What would I title my article?" I asked.

Joe was stuck. Then Maria bailed him out by saying "You could write something called 'Ten Repairs You Should Teach Your Teenager, so He or She Won't Be At Other People's Mercy.'"

"Good topic," I said. The students then named other mechanical/auto-oriented pub-

lications, and made similar topic suggestions.

"What if I wanted to write an article for *Seventeen*?" I asked.

The students were stumped for a minute or two. Then Carol raised her hand.

"You could write a little story, about a father and daughter bonding. Or you could give advice, and title it 'Why You Should Go Into the Garage.'"

"Why should you?" I asked.

"To get to be with your dad or whomever. And to learn."

Tom said "I have an idea for a magazine that you could write for—*Psychology Today*."

"What would she write for that?" Rob asked, crinkling his nose.

"I don't know," said Tom, "but I keep staring at that bubble satisfaction. Something to do with that."

Adam piped up finally. "You could write about getting a good feeling when you change your own tire or fix something on your car."

"Car Repair as Therapy," I suggested.

"Yes," Adam said, smiling.

In this activity, there was a lot more going on than simply showing students how to use a particular technique to generate topics. For one thing, by using herself as a model, describing her thought processes, and telling stories about her own life, Leslie demonstrated a safe environment for sharing thoughts and ideas. In addition, by focusing on topics for magazine articles, Leslie introduced the idea of audience in a way that was easily understood by her young students. "Audience" is a concept that is often difficult for writers to grasp, but most students can understand the differences in readers of different magazines.

This activity can be followed by more detailed discussions of the characteristics of the audiences for specific magazines, and how writing can be tailored to meet the needs of those audiences.

Then the lessons learned through these activities can be generalized to other, less obvious, audiences for other types of writing.

Activity 3: Stylistic Invention

This activity is based on Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style*, which presents the simple story of a man's encounter with rudeness on a bus. What makes this book unique is that Queneau tells the same story 99 times—in 99 different styles. As the book's translator tells us, "That Queneau *has* done this without boring the reader *at all*, is perhaps the most amazing thing about his book" (15). One of the reasons why these stories are not boring is that while some styles are exaggerations of familiar genres and forms (such as narrative, official letter, ode, passive), others are unfamiliar forms which have lost their meaning to many of us (such as litotes, synchysis, homeoptotes, apocope, and apheresis). A third category consists of strikingly imaginative "styles" that initially seem both unreasonable and impossible (such as zoological, gastronomical, olfactory).

By exposing students to some of this variety, Leslie opened a new world of invention which most of them had never considered. Notice that the writing assignment that followed this activity allowed students to use one of Queneau's styles or think of one of their own. The students' efforts are the best illustration of the success of this activity, so the brief description of Leslie's introduction of Queneau is followed by several student papers.

I made copies of fifteen of Queneau's versions of his story. The class and I spent about an hour before lunch reading and discussing the pieces, and the students were amused. They picked up some new information, such as the definition of the word "olfactory" and the form for an ode, and were impressed with the author's ability to create such diversity from a simple story.

After lunch we all came back to the classroom and I told the students that we were going to write our own stories. We'd all start with the same basic tale, but we'd re-write the story in different styles. Each student could pick a style from Queneau's examples

or make up a new one. I picked a topic my students all seemed to feel strongly about: the quality of their dining experiences at the school cafeteria. I wrote the following sketch on the board:

I walked into the cafeteria and saw Sue at the salad bar. I asked her how the food was today. She made a face. I went to get some Sprite, but the machine was empty. I sat down next to Sue and ate lunch.

Sue Story—Official Letter

To whom it may concern:

Wednesday of last week I entered the cafeteria with the preconceived notion to consume comestibles. When I arrived, however, I saw the person named Sue near the salad bar. I strode over to initiate an encounter with her. She communicated to me the fact that the salad was not worth the price that both she and I had paid.

I sat down beside Sue in order to maintain our conversation. I realize now as I reflect that Sue and I tried to procure a small amount of Sprite, but as would be assumed in such a shabby, unsanitary and utterly repulsive establishment, the machine had not been restocked.

The food I ate there was terrible (and I believe that the meat was uncooked and parasitic), the service was awful, the kitchen and salad bar were unsanitary, the machines were broken, and the entire building was filthy.

I hope that you will make what you will of this, and decide what you must do.

I am ever your reliable, honest, and impartial servant,

Signed #S&?%!^(written by R. Felder Williams)

Sue Story—Belligerence

Did I walk into the cafeteria? Yes, but is it any of your business? I think not. And, furthermore, was I discussing the salad bar with Sue? Well, I really can't remember. I

mean, do you feel I should memorize every single detail of my life? Maybe I did, and I quite possibly didn't. But I'm not telling you, anyway.

I'm also not going to tell you of how Sue appealed to her usual disgusting nature by contorting her already unpleasing face. And if you'd like to know whether or not she sat beside me, you'll have to wait for my autobiography to be published. Is that what you're driving at?

Well, I guess nobody cares if I dehydrate, or they would have restocked the Sprite machine. You could say that I ate next. Yes, you can. Why are you following me? Can't I go anywhere without you on my back? . . . (written by Christian Tico)

Sue Story—Angry

It was in that dirty, smelly, breeding place for rats and mold some call a cafeteria that I ran into Sue at the salad bar. Sue, who is more than a little odd, had been removing the centers from the tomatoes. When confronted with the oddity in an inquisitive manner, she contorted her face into a grotesque mask and left for one of the incredibly uncomfortable seats. Sometimes I wonder why I hang around that girl. Now I was in a rather perturbed mood, being that I was eating mass-produced food that I am paying \$11.32 for a meal that I won't eat, in fear of a bacterial infection, and upon finding that I could not have my daily liquid lunch of Sprite, because the cretins who run the cafeteria had not bothered to refill it from breakfast. In disgust I grabbed a glass of generic brand Q orange soda, schlepped over to the seat across from Sue, faked a smile and forced down my orange soda over some rather depressing conversation of real food. (written by Adam Guglicciello)

Activity 4: Personal Perspective

The activity based on Queneau's styles gave the students an opportunity to think about the different perspectives that the writer can bring to a topic. In another activity, students were asked to create unique perspectives based on imagined personal experiences or situations. In conjunc-

tion with the activity, plans were made for a field trip to the gardens at Yaddo, an artists' colony in Saratoga, New York. As you read about this activity, notice how Leslie took advantage of another opportunity to suggest the value of collaboration as an inventional strategy.

The afternoon before we went to visit the Yaddo gardens I gave the students a short homework assignment:

"Make a list of three professions and three states of mind," I said. "And by states of mind I don't mean plain old 'happy, sad, mad.' Write something more interesting, like 'you've just been released from a hospital' or 'you've been fired from your job.'"

I had the students practice thinking up slightly complex states of mind for about ten minutes. "You can write down the ones you thought of in class," I told them as they filed out.

The next morning we all sat around the table and read our lists out loud. I told the students to listen carefully to other students' lists and jot down three professions and three points of view they liked best. The lists included typical professions (doctor, lawyer, teacher), but many less typical points of view, such as someone who has just become homeless, been released from prison, or lost his entire family in an accident. After everyone had finished reading his or her homework, I explained the Yaddo assignment.

"You're going to write some descriptions of the gardens. You can describe whatever you want—maybe you'll just want to write about one rose, or just the stairs. Maybe you'll want to write about a whole area—that's up to you. You'll write two different pieces, each about a page or two long, from two of the points of view you just jotted down. You've got six different points of view to choose from, right there in front of you—the ones you decided were your favorites. You can make yourself even more options if you combine a profession with a state of mind. For instance, you could write from the point of view of a race-car driver who has just been released from the hospital. Or a doctor who has been fired."

Again, actual student papers best describe the success of this activity. Here are three examples of student descriptions, written from the points of view of a criminal, a surgeon, and a fighter pilot:

Yaddo: Criminal

"Great. We're going to the Yaddo gardens. I hate that place." As I stepped onto the bus, these were my words. I figured I might as well make the best of the bus ride, so I stuck my N.W.A. tape into my walkman and listened to the sound of "F— tha Police" against my eardrums.

On the bus, I noticed that lots of the kids had nice watches, and one kid had a bulging pocket. Getting off the bus, I deftly reached in there and brought out a nice eelskin wallet which contained fifty dollars. Not bad.

When we reached Yaddo, a smile crept over my face. I still hated the place, because nature sucks, but it was huge, so everyone would be spread out, which meant I could pick a few more pockets. But my hopes were downed when we were told that we were only allowed in the Italian garden. That meant too many people in too small an area. I couldn't pickpocket anyone and get away with it! I got mad, and my anger worsened by this incident: the sign at the front of the garden said the fountain in the center of the garden had fish in it. When I looked in there and didn't see any fish, I seized a tadpole that dwelt there and flung it into the bushes. I like fish, and I hate signs that give you wrong information.

After the tadpole incident, I calmed down a little. I just sat by the side of the fountain and waited until it was time to go. (written by Jay Rangan)

Yaddo: Profession

Being a full-time surgeon, I don't really get out much. And "inhaling" the full beauty of nature has never seemed to be within my grasp. But as I entered this magnificent park which God has blessed the earth with, I began to realize how much I had been missing out on, and how I had wasted fifteen

years of my life near the operating table, both night and day.

From the time I first walked through Yaddo's gates, wide open to welcome me, it felt inviting. Just like asking the nurse to hand me over the sterilized scalpel so that I could proceed to bear it upon the top of yet another head and make the incision and pull apart the skin to reveal the soft, warm, pinkish flesh: the fruit of anatomy.

And the ever-so-fragrant roses scattered among the deep-green tufts and bushes did too remind me of my profession. Almost like clots of blood smeared onto the lavender cloth lying beneath the patient's head as I pierce it with my "weapon" of trade.

The fountain, dominant over most of the park's celestial beauty, brings back the memory of the constant washing of my white, synthetic-rubber "gauntlets" as I persist to release them of any cytoplasmic matter that may have accidentally fallen upon their soft, flexible skin.

And as I look out toward the horizon, I see the silhouettes of abominable green giants befall my eyes. I briefly reminisce about the felt-robed M.D.'s which seem to be constantly hovering about me in a vicious circle as I attempt to save the patient.

I believe that coming here for the day has really helped me to relax and get off thinking about my job (even though I ended up doing the exact opposite). And I think that coming back a second time will be even more fulfilling. (written by Christian Tico)

Yaddo: Fighter Pilot

Just out of jet flight training, and a two day leave before I get stationed somewhere out on the endless briny, on a carrier—probably in the Pacific; wait, how the hell do I know; could be anywhere: know the saying—anytime, anywhere, ready for duty. Can't believe I'm going out to this lousy garden on my leave, could be anywhere in New York; Soho, Brooklyn, and I'm taking a day trip to a writer's colony somewhere in the Adirondacks, doctor says it'll be good for my nerves, quiet and calm after pulling G's and

going mach 2 out in the desert, but I hope I won't meet any writers, they make me sick; creativity and communing with their souls—what an act—should be out doing something useful, not slacking off. . . .

Walk into the garden, weird how the gravel crunches, sounds just like desert sand under our boots as we tramp back from the runway after another successful maneuver, looking hot and suave as hell, but sweating buckets with our hearts in our feet—another day done. The trees, huge forest green pines stretching ever skyward, if I could see them from above I bet they'd look like the desert scrub we fly over, but they're too alive, too green and lush—need to be starved a bit. Yeah, but flying over at mach 1 or 2, what difference does it make. All sorta looks the same. This stone granite bench feels cold and hard under my butt, like the bench outside my officer's room I look at a graceful, beautiful white rose; but that isn't what I think when I see it. With its petals open, they form an ever-tightening spiral, like an unavoidable, unbreakable spin, me going down, down, the hot white desert sand spiraling up fast at me, getting lost in it, getting dizzy, my R.I.O. getting hyper, screaming, "Break it, break it, do something!" Wow, lost it for a second, that was scary, must be losing it, thinking a rose was a spin. Look at what a nice fountain, with a pool around it . . . (written by Samantha Keena)

The Value of Inventional Strategies

Leslie covered a variety of inventional strategies hoping that each student would find at least one that would assist him or her. In an interview, Leslie said,

I hope that the students I've taught now have the tools, the thinking processes, to enliven whatever seemingly dull assignment they face. I want the students to be able to make just about any subject interesting to themselves, and to have fun researching and writing.

This teacher recognizes that many students, particularly gifted students, often have to find ways to "entertain themselves, to keep themselves stimulated." Her goal is to help the students entertain themselves by turning assigned

tasks into interesting and challenging opportunities for growth and development.

By helping students appreciate the different stages of the writing process, lessons in invention show them how to improve their written product regardless of topic. By introducing them to a variety of inventional strategies, teachers provide students with tools that will help with whatever

kind of writing they choose or need to do throughout their lives.

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