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STILL HOPEFUL AFTER ALL THESE YEARS: TEACHERS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

Kathleen Blake Yancey

I came to English teaching in the beginning of the 1970s, disillusioned with the war in Vietnam and with the Nixonian government, but idealistic about working with kids, confident about the power of English in the classroom, optimistic about the kind of society that could be wrought through well-designed education and devoted teachers. Like many of my generation, I believed that education could help us address our social problems as we sought to meet our academic goals, and I was eager to take my place in making the changes required by such a wide-ranging educational agenda. Put another way, I saw the teacher, and myself, as an agent of change.

What I discovered pretty quickly will come as no surprise to most teachers: change is more easily hoped for than achieved. The good news, however, may be that the situation in teaching is at last beginning to allow what I had hoped for twenty years ago and what I continue to work for today: an opportunity to make change. This opportunity has been shaped by several current trends, among them the teacher-researcher movement, the national educational reform movements, and the recognition that American education is in serious trouble. Pivotal in all these movements are teachers themselves, and it is the central role of teachers as agents of change that must be understood if we are to appreciate and use well this moment in time. The opportunity to make change is built upon five features: **authority, responsibility, connections, demonstration, and professionalism**. I will discuss each separately, and then together, in an effort to characterize the teaching of English today and the opportunity we are making our own.

One of the most important features in teaching practice centers on **authority** relationships, among them the relationship of the teacher to the curriculum. Historically, teachers have always exercised some measure of authority over the curriculum, but increasingly teachers are being awarded

leadership in this area. Granted, in many states, including my own, teacher authority over curriculum is still more a dream than a reality. As often as not, curriculum is set by the state's end-of-course tests, by administrators sequestered miles away from the teachers and the students, and by texts dictated by School Boards. But one of the benefits of the current reform movement is its commitment to teacher authority over curriculum. Along with site-based management, such authority is seen as instrumental to reforming education. Teachers both old and new have long held that they can design curriculum for their own students; that the texts and the classroom activities and the assessments ought to serve the needs of the students; and that part of the teacher's job is precisely this: to create the educational goals and curricula that will bring these variables into balance. Thus it is that when Irvine High School in southern California wanted to include new writers in the curriculum, they went to Sue Ellen Gold—a teacher—and gave her the authority to identify and include in the curriculum female and multi-cultural writers. Now the twentieth century literature course is becoming truly worldwide. Similarly, at Jefferson High School in Lafayette, Indiana, teachers came together not to plan someone else's senior composition course, but to design and then plan *their own*: before planning, to decide what such a course should do, how it should relate to the curriculum preceding it, and how to determine what students need to do later; then to plan it. In situations like these, teachers, not experts far away in a state capital or even next door in a research library, are assuming an appropriate authority, one through which they can balance all the variables in school: students, texts, learning, goals, and assessments.

A second change in authority relationships involves teachers and students and an over-riding goal of current education: helping the learner *learn how to learn*. This goal places the student-as-learner at the center of the educational agenda. Moreover, in order that we help the learner, the learner must help us. The assumption that we work together drives various current pedagogies, from collaborative learning to portfolio reflection. We work together with our students, not hierarchically as manager and laborer, but as partners. Thus it is, for example, that Writing Project leaders Jeff Sommers and Sam Watson advocate asking students what *they* think about their work—by way of a letter or a writer's memo accompanying each student essay. In other words, Watson and Sommers suggest that if we want to read a student's work fully and well, we have to have more than the student text; we need the student's gloss on the text. The assumption here is that we read

better when students help us understand what they think is going on in their writing and what is going on in that particular essay, as well as when they tell us what they wish they could have done differently. The teacher is no longer the sole expert or always the preferred reader here; she or he is in partnership with the student. This kind of reading, of course, marks a real change in our authority relationships, and this kind of change, in both authority and in accompanying pedagogies, is still in process, for many of us uncharted territory, even a bit frightening. But it marks a general dispersion or decentralization of authority within education, a decentralization based on the recognition that we work *together* toward a common good, in this case the good of helping students learn.

A second area of change involves what is often thought of as the counterpart of authority: **responsibility**. If we teachers are beginning to exert authority over what happens in the classroom, we also have to assume responsibility for what happens there. This means that neither the tests nor the texts should drive the class, but that student need should, and that we are responsible for defining that need and for creating ways of meeting it. If we look at the most interesting changes and opportunities in English education—from whole language to multi-cultural education to portfolios—we see teachers initiating change, assuming responsibility for new ways of working in the classroom, and working with new ways of informing others—teachers, parents, administrators and School Board members—about why these changes are needed, about how they work, and about how they can be assessed. In Gastonia, North Carolina, for instance, a single high school teacher, Sallie Griffen, sets out to make a difference: she sees the need to change the teaching of writing; she invites teachers in to address her colleagues and to work with them; and they in turn make their case for change to the administration. In Lafayette, Indiana, the curriculum designed for senior composition cannot be implemented well without certain physical amenities: round tables, additional computers, comfortable seating, shelving for portfolios. The teachers go to the administration, explain why a round table does matter, explain that students need to work together, to write together, to share their drafts—overall, to show that if they are to become what Dan Kirby calls “studio teachers,” teachers grounded in a workshop methodology, they need to have a studio to work in, a real place to write and read and share and re-write, not a traditional classroom with its fixed desks, its narrow, rigid seats, and its message that everyone should be quiet and do his or her own work. The new curriculum requires new configurations. In other

words, as teachers see the need, they create the rationale, they make the case. In a word, they lead.

A third area of change is in an area that I'll loosely title **connections**, and this too plays itself out in several ways. Teachers today, for example, see connections among the topics in their own classes—hence, the popularity of the whole language movement reuniting the language arts of reading, speaking, writing, and listening. Hence, too, the popularity of the “cross-genre” writing and reading projects advocated by Robert Probst, Tom Romano, and Ken Macrorie. Perhaps as important, teachers today seek connections between what they do in their classes and what happens in students’ lives as well as between what they do in their classes and what students do in other classes. Connecting English with other subjects in school as well as with students’ personal lives is, again, a cornerstone of reform in education, and it helps to ensure that students see the relationship between what we ask of them and what is asked of them elsewhere.

Teachers are also making three other kinds of connections: among students in different classes and grades; among students and parents and schools; and among themselves, within schools, of course, but also beyond them. It is becoming commonplace, for instance, for students in one grade to work with students in another, not just for tutoring purposes, but also for cross-grade sharing. Teachers are also inviting parents to become active participants in their children’s reading and writing. At Klondike Elementary School in Indiana, for example, children first share their portfolios with children in other grades, and then with their parents. The children read and respond to their peers’ writing, and then the parents do the same—read and respond. Then both sets of responses become part of the students’ portfolios of writing. At Oviedo High School in Florida, parents of high school students participate with their children in a Family Write Night, when writers compose, share, and celebrate their writing together. Through such events our curriculum becomes more accessible to parents as we connect with them and through our sharing invite them to join our community of learners.

Teachers also connect with each other in multiple ways. Middle school teachers, for example, often team together; many of the school re-structuring efforts in fact are built on the notion of teaming, of teachers working regularly and systematically with other teachers. Middle school language arts teachers in Benton County, Indiana, have been team-teaching for years, bringing in new teachers gently, drawing upon the new teachers’ fresh ideas as the “old”

teachers help their newer colleagues acclimate to the school and meet the students. When we do connect with each other, particularly at forums like the National Council of Teachers of English and Indiana Teachers of Writing—where we come together as teachers—we see in new ways; we see what we *share*. Whole language, for instance, can be viewed from a wider perspective than it is often accorded. It isn't focused solely on the primary learner; it has applications for the whole learner at any level: middle, secondary, even collegiate, as recent presentations at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (e. g., "Whole Language Sounds Interesting, but I Teach Freshman English") made clear. Similarly, literature needn't be "saved" for secondary students; readers of all ages love it.

Professionally, we connect with all teachers, including pre-service prospective teachers, in a community of practicing teachers. Prospective teachers like those at Lock Haven University in Pennsylvania, for instance, routinely work with teachers and students in a variety of settings years before they student teach. In Charlotte, North Carolina, prospective student teachers also work with students in multiple ways and multiple settings—again often several semesters before they student teach—conducting one-on-one tutoring with high school students, guiding a group of middle school students working to develop a student literary magazine, and acting as mentors for high-risk students. As informal apprentices, our prospective colleagues become a part of us "naturally" as they learn about schools and as the students benefit from them. Likewise, teachers already practicing in both universities and schools join as partners in projects as diverse as the National Writing Project sites and as programmatic as the ETS and Harvard-sponsored Arts PROPEL program in Pittsburgh, where teachers and researchers work together to link curriculum with assessment for learning: conceptualizing, implementing, and assessing in an ideal context of sharing that is fruitful for both. Taken together, these multiple connections, which are found much more frequently today than in the past, mean that it's harder than ever for the teacher to be isolated, for the teacher to nod assent then close the door and do what he or she will. And there is less reason than ever for him or her to want to do so.

If teachers are assuming authority and responsibility as they work together, they also must **demonstrate** that what they do matters by showing how it helps students learn. Accordingly, demonstrating what we do becomes more important than ever. Like good writers, teachers are learning not just

to tell, but also to *show*: to show student progress, to show student achievement, and to distinguish between the two. New ways of documenting this growth and achievement are being refined continually, as indicated by portfolio programs in place in Vermont and California. In these programs, student writing is sampled from within the classroom on topics over which the student exerts some authority. Rather than a numerical test score suggesting achievement, *the writing itself tells the tale*. The pieces of writing may be scaled on a developmental rubric; they may include commentary by the teacher and other students; or they may contain commentary by parents who have been invited to participate in the communication by responding to the writing. In all cases, it is a showing that is, in Grant Wiggins' terms, "authentic"—genuine in purpose and for the purpose of learning as well as for assessment.

Assessment is also beginning to play a larger and different role beyond the classroom—for graduation requirements, for example. The state of Pennsylvania, for one, has just mandated that in order to graduate, students must show accomplishment not by completing courses, but by demonstrating that they have learned. In other words, the completion of course work is being distinguished and separated from demonstration of learning; the first alone will no longer suffice. How Pennsylvania's initiative will turn out isn't clear, but like the portfolio movement it speaks to the national move away from substitutes for achievement and toward demonstration, toward a showing of the accomplishment itself.

Showing, of course, isn't as easy as telling. It's messy, and it calls for new ways of observing, describing, and recording the learner's learning and achievements, new ways of reporting to and for ourselves and our students—"reporting in," Catharine Lucas calls it—before we "report out" to others. Fortunately, researchers and teachers like Nancie Atwell and Denny Taylor have given us a head start, and more are sure to follow. Showing may mean that we learn in new ways ourselves. But we are again taking the lead, translating what we do with students into a language and form that the public can understand. As we do this, we also educate members of the public and help them to understand more about their children's learning and to encourage them to expect more than a single number as evidence of learning.

During the educational changes of the last twenty years, the prevailing wisdom initially was that if teachers were paid more, education would be reformed. As is all too apparent now, teacher pay is only one of a constellation

of issues tied to educational reform that would lead to increased **profession-
alism**. Teachers should earn a professional salary, it's true, but without the authority to create change and the responsibility for implementing it, teachers become little more than better-paid puppets carrying out someone else's agenda, performing in another's play. Within the current reform movement, however, teachers are writing the scripts, re-structuring their own schools, creating and investigating their own research, improving education through their own professional organizations, giving workshops for their colleagues, creating new ways for schools and communities to work together. In sum, teacher activity has destroyed the old pattern of teaching. No longer do teachers plan on leisurely summers: the school year may be 10 months, but a teacher's job is 12.

Samuel Johnson said about marriage that it is a triumph of hope over experience, and I've often thought of teaching in the same way. In spite of 20 years of experience (and occasionally because of it), I'm still hopeful. Politically, the situation today may not always invite teacher activism, but it at least permits a wider, fuller range of teacher response, a response that in turn shapes the educational text. Practically, what this means is that teachers are taking the lead: designing and implementing curriculum; creating new structures to organize it and their students; showing what actually takes place in a classroom and making explicit the connections between classroom learning and assessment; and working together in multiple partnerships to create new and overlapping communities that are learning-friendly. We have some authority now, and we welcome the inter-relationships, we show what we are doing, and we do so to our own professional benefit.

The conditions for change are in place; perhaps, finally, we can indeed become agents of that change.

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