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Karen Athan

## Teaching Writers in the Midst of NCLB

"I want this classroom to be a place of learning and silliness."

—Jessica, 4th Grade

Silliness is part of Jessica's world, but it's not part of any No Child Left Behind (NCLB) or state mandate. In Michigan's elementary school classrooms teachers greet students in September with the four-week preparatory dash to the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP), the summative measure of how students, teachers, and schools are performing on grade level content expectations (GLCEs). The heightened emphasis on testing may have led to some positive curricular changes: the ubiquitous "Apple" unit, prefabricated worksheets, and dioramas-as-comprehension instruction are extinct. In their place is an intense focus upon standards and expected student outcomes articulated over a K-12 time frame. According to Linda Darling-Hammond (2007), NCLB represents a "noble agenda" (p. 13) designed to address serious issues of equity and access in our national education system. Darling-Hammond believes NCLB initially threw a light on issues that plague low-income schools: overcrowding, poorly maintained facilities, along with the absence of important resources such as technology, highly qualified teachers, up-to-date textbooks and well-resourced libraries. Sadly, NCLB has not equalized resources for students. Instead it has resulted in limited federal funding now going to a multi-billion dollar testing industry that directs punitive measures against the neediest schools. Darling-Hammond also makes a strong case that testing is narrowing the curriculum to low-level, easily testable content. Testing, as a method for educational reform, thus appears to have become a runaway train propelled by for-profit enterprise. The train will not slow until there is a conscientious shift to designing tests to be putative, rather than punitive, measures of high-level learning.

What else seems to be missing in the suddenly changing power structures of education (eg. the war on teachers' unions), is the missing voice and power of our students. The top-down standards model simply does not acknowledge or respect student agency. Instead, it is an authoritarian model. Margaret Mead (1978) would have criticized standards-driven education. In studies of cultural transmission, Mead organizes cultures into three different models: (1) "Postfigurative," in which people do old work in old ways; (2) "Cofigurative," in which people do new work in traditional ways; and (3) "Prefigurative," in which people do new work, in new ways.

Mead believes that in cultures facing rapid change, survival may depend upon the ability to learn from younger generations. The world our students will inherit is a world changing rapidly due to the forces of globalization and technology. Yet, where is the educational prefigurative standards, the backwards legacy, that states students will explore new ways of doing new

things and educators will let them take the lead? In this article I will explore Mead's paradigm as a needed contrast to the top-down implications of standards and high-stakes testing.

### Disconnected Teaching: The Blind Men and the Elephant

In the Walled Lake Consolidated School District, the administration has harnessed technology-based data collection to write GLCE-based assessments for each grade level and subject area. Scores from these assessments are entered into an extensive database used by teachers, administrators, parents, and students. For the upper elementary grades, our teachers now administer no less than twenty-eight benchmark assessments during the course of the year. The well-intentioned purpose of requiring this many assessments is to increase instructional focus on the GLCEs, and to improve communication, documentation, and timely interventions for students. Since the MEAP was moved to October, my school year begins with an immediate, and intense focus on MEAP review along with all the baseline reading, writing, and mathematics assessments required

by my district. I have noticed that my teaching has changed as a result of these numerous assessments. Since I am always one or two weeks away

from assessing students with the next content-based test, it is easy to keep the GLCEs in mind and to work collaboratively in teaching the curriculum with other teachers at my grade level.

Yet, something besides the pace did not feel right. Last year, after looping with the same class, I began to notice signs that my students were not integrating their learning. In their writing, students were not transferring my instruction on grammar, spelling, topic development, and openings from one unit of study to the next. The rapid pacing and low level, easy-to-test content-based curriculum was my first suspect, but there was nothing I could do about that (short of mounting a personal insurrection against the U.S Department of Education). My second thought was that the lack of transfer had something to do with my students adopting a passive stance in learning. My third thought was that I was responsible for that. My final observation was that my students no longer loved writing. No longer were there cheers when I announced it was time to write. This concerned me not only because I love writing and have a desire to transmit that love to my students, but because I see writing as both a vehicle and a metaphor for thinking. Writing extends into every subject I teach and is the means by which I invite my students into a dialogue of ideas. After some unhappy self-reflection about how my teaching had changed, the parable of The Blind Mice and the Elephant and the issue of multiple, limited perspectives (Baker & Rich-

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mond, 2009) came to mind. In this story, seven blind mice interact with different parts of an elephant, each mouse proclaiming an incomplete and comical view of “elephantness.” I came to believe that my students were not falling in love with the elephant (writing), in its disconnected, disassociated version of the whole. I was taking my students through multiple hurdles in order to cover the easy-to-assess content without giving them enough time to explore process and connections. No wonder my students were becoming passive and unenthusiastic.

### Teaching “Enthusiasm”

“Students will...W.AT.05.01 be enthusiastic about writing and learning to write.”

—English Language Arts Grade Level Expectations  
Michigan Department of Education, 2010

How does one teach enthusiasm? As I informally queried colleagues about this, we inevitably agreed upon the same two factors. In our lives, we learned enthusiasm: (1) from teachers who were enthusiastic about their subject area, and (2) by engaging in the subject through collaborative, empowering, and personally relevant inquiry. This kind of teaching is not specific to the teaching of writing. I have learned to

### The writer’s notebook nudges students to become more active learners.

love mathematics from a father who inhabits a world of numbers. He issues constant, personal invitations to join him in this world. On every birthday, my father salutes me with a personal mathematical anecdote about my age. Some years I am prime, some years I am part of the Fibonacci sequence, or double that of the current Federal Interest rate, or half my grandmother’s age were-she-to-be-still alive. I recognize that these are rare gifts from the world of mathematics; ratios that may not be repeated for fifty years, a century, or ever.

The late physicist Richard Feynman (as cited in Gleick, 1993) also credited his father with involving him in inquiry of the physical world: an inquiry in which the young Feynman’s nascent observations of a brown-throated thrush would later lead to path integral formulations of quantum mechanics:

‘See that bird?’ Feynman’s father said. ‘It’s a Spencer’s warbler? (I knew he didn’t know the real name.)’ ‘Well, in Italian, it’s a Chutto Lapittida. In Portuguese, it’s a Bom da Peida. In Chinese it’s a Chung-Iong-tah, and in Japanese it’s a Katano Takeda. You can know the name of the bird in all the languages of the world, but when you’re finished, you’ll know absolutely nothing whatever about the bird. You’ll only know about humans in different places, and what they call the bird. So let’s look at the birds and see what it’s doing, that’s what counts?’ (p. 28)

But what about teaching writing? There is an extensive body of scholarly work that supports the notion of issuing a welcoming and collaborative invitation to children to explore writing through inquiry. Writing scholars such as Calkins, Fletcher, Atwell, Graves, and Kittle all extol the value of children experiencing what they refer to, poetically, as “The Writ-

erly Life” or “Living Like a Writer.” Fletcher (2001) was the one who authenticated my concern, the missing voice of the child in the current standards-driven climate, and gave me the vehicle for addressing it. In *The Writer’s Notebook*, Fletcher says:

Many of our students adopt a passive stance toward their learning. No wonder they do—curriculum often feels like a one-way conversation to these students. The writer’s notebook nudges students to become more active learners. It gives them a place to react to their world, to make that all-important personal connection. And the notebook provides a safe place—no grades, no one correcting their grammar...Our writers need to write for a specific purpose. But they will also grow by fooling around with ideas, words, images, phrases. I believe that this kind of language play is crucial. Unfortunately, it is being squeezed out of the school day by high-stakes tests and curriculum mandates. (p. 1)

We had Writer’s Notebooks in the classroom, but how was I using them? How mindful was I in using them to teach my students to value their personal connections, to take an active stance, to develop both the power of their voices and the desire to be in a two-way conversation with me? I dove deeper into the research on the Writer’s Notebook.

### Personal Relevance and Identity Work: Writer’s Notebooks and The Missing “I”

The beauty of Feynman’s father’s way of teaching is the welcoming and collaborative intention implied in his invitation to notice “what the birds do” (as cited in Gleick, 1993, p. 28). By taking the lead, young Feynman created intersections of personal relevance between the domain of study and himself. In writing instruction, the Writer’s Notebook is an analogous vehicle for creating intersections of relevance between the domain of writing and the identity of the child. The essayist and novelist Joan Didion (2008) points out that often the exploration of the “I” is frowned upon in normal social interactions: “We are brought up in the ethic that others, any others, all others, are by definition more interesting than ourselves; taught to be diffident, just this side of self-effacing” (p. 131). The Writer’s Notebook thus liberates students to explore the “I” without the usual conflicting politics. Writing scholars like Fletcher (1996) and Harwayne (1991) describe the Writer’s Notebook respectively as a tool for living and learning and living between the lines. Calkins (1994) uses the terms ‘rehearsal’ and ‘wide awakeness.’ She writes:

We can’t give children rich lives, but we can give them the lens to appreciate the richness that is already there in their lives. Notebooks validate a child’s existence. Notebooks say, ‘your thoughts, your noticing, your fleet of orange slices matter.’ (p. 35)

Adams (1990) says the rehearsal with the self strengthens identity and voice. Fletcher (2001) calls it an imperative in countering the top down, one-way conversation between curriculum and the child. I had an additional subversively teacher-based reason for pushing the Writer’s Notebook. Many

of my students' summers, evenings, and weekends were not filled with books, talk, rehearsals, and validations of literate identity. The Writer's Notebook was a way to incorporate literacy into their home lives. At the end of the year, I was thrilled when my students petitioned for new composition books to turn into summer Writing Notebooks.

### Notebooks with My Students

Writers rarely proceed through the writing process in a lockstep linear fashion, much like a person viewing an elephant for the first time wouldn't start at its trunk and work systematically back to its tail. After interviewing hundreds of writers in the famous *Paris Reviews*, columnist Malcolm Cowley (1959) concludes that each writer begins with meaning, but following that, the collective process is idiosyncratic. Keeping this idiosyncrasy and the goal of finding personal meaning in mind, I showed students my own notebook and the numerous ways in which I have experimented with gathering up the pieces of my world.

In addition to varied genre (notes, summaries, poems, quick writes, expositions, and stories), my Writer's Notebook also includes taped-in starter ideas: photos, quotations, and pictures I have drawn. I also showed students that I value my notebook—explaining how I hold and care for it. I also showed them how I was taught to return recursively to it and talk back to myself by writing in different colored ink.

It was easy to launch the Writer's Notebook during field trips through the school grounds, or by viewing carefully selected photographs. I explicitly taught students how to slow down and notice the details they needed to incorporate in their writing. On the first trip, we focused on the senses. On the second, we collected snippets of dialogue. Standing outside the gym, we gathered up the sounds of basketballs, the squeak of shoes, the shouts of exhilaration, disappointment, and encouragement. When some students tried out these details later in sports stories I commented on their authentic use of the Writer's Notebook. I saw that they were connecting the metaphorical elephant parts to the whole.

After we returned from our observations, students reread their journals (a recursive moment), underlined a gift (a single line) from their observations of the world, and participated in a quick share. The following are some unedited samples from students:

"So long, do do, whispers the shoes on the floor."

"I can find rest in the wind howling like a missing pese is gone from there hart."

Several students wrote, "There are ants in the hall." I made sure to demonstrate my appreciation for student-driven contexts by taking the class back to observe the small, linear city of ants marching outside the girls' bathroom. By valuing what they valued, I invited their meaning into the collaborative conversation that was making its way to print.

### More Identity Work: Community, Agency, and Attribution Theory

In addition to building individual identity, continuing research indicated that it was also important to build a col-

lective identity in the classroom (Smith, 1997). One of my steps toward integrating content, collaborative processes, and relevance (in order to put the metaphorical "elephant" back together), was reinstating town meetings in the classroom. Town meetings are short (10-15 minute) weekly conversations about what is and what isn't going well in our classroom.

At the beginning of the year, the conversation will be tentative. It takes time to develop trust and community. The use of anonymous notes, which I read aloud, empowers the students and validates their thinking. I am especially mindful to praise their "problem posing" (Freire, 2000, p. 79). Problem posing requires a higher level of critical

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awareness than problem solving, and it complements Mead's (1978) new ways of doing new work paradigm.

Since I believe student agency had been lost in my teaching, I looked for ways to push the two-way conversation into deeper levels with activities designed to create agency. Students do not make the automatic connection between their efforts and subsequent achievement, something the attribution theorists call an "internal locus of control" (Lefcourt, 1976, p. 19). According to these theorists, understanding the connection between effort and achievement is critical to success and may explain some of the pervasive problems that occur from generational poverty—a problem that afflicts many of my students. To facilitate this connection, I passed out index cards and asked my students to write down a single, achievable goal for themselves. At the end of two weeks, I pass the cards back and ask them to respond to their goal: Did they make it? Was it too easy, just right, or too hard? Did they need additional help? What is their new goal? Over the course of the year, students shifted from vague goals like: "I want to be rich and famous" to the still nebulous "I want to write better" to "I want to add more dialogue to my writing."

In order to participate in the twenty-first century, students need to learn and engage in practices that make their agency visible to themselves. These are some examples from my classroom. One enterprising student decided she wanted to extend her audience, so she offered up her writing journal and a collection of blank sticky notes for responders during our independent reading time. Another student turned her composition book upside down and began using the back to organize her copy changes. We collectively explored electronic compositions, and after teaching my students the basics, they proceeded to teach me new ways to use the technology. One day during this collaborative exploration, I got the Freire (2000) instinct to pose my own problem. Fed up with limited wall space and the tedium of creating anchor charts, I directed the students to write minilessons in their Writer's Notebooks for reference. In a later town meeting,

the students taught me to refine my thinking about anchor charts. Students wanted to get rid of some charts, but also to construct one on conjunctions to help them with run-on sentences. Not surprisingly, students began to use both the Writer's Notebook and the charts without my direction.

One of the most surprisingly helpful (and silly) suggestions from a student was to give the paper collection bucket a name. After the bucket became "Bob," students began to comply with (and actually enjoy) my directives to "Give your papers to Bob." I no longer had to fend off the students who want me to read their paper NOW, nor did I have to search for papers crumpled into tiny wads hidden in the dark, sticky recesses of desks.

### Conclusion

The two-way conversation of town meetings, personal goal setting, and the exploration of identity through the vehicle of the Writer's Notebook were critical to re-establishing student empowerment and engagement in my classroom. As my students moved from passive to active stances with respect to writing, I found I could increase the pace of instruction to match the standards. By the end of the year, the "learning and silliness" that Jessica had wished for on her first day of fourth grade was apparent. Students were again cheering when I announced it was writing time. And another identity had begun to form in the classroom . . . teacher and students, eyes open, were circumnavigating an entire elephant together.

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