Teacher-Researcher

Action Research Conducted by Teachers Participating
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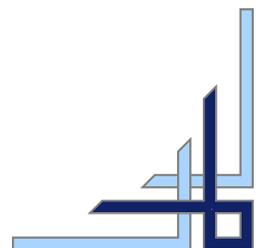Jane Cook, Stanton School, Norwich

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Introduction

Most Writing Project sites have to use their Teacher Leadership Grant funds to support their Summer Institute, and we did use some of the funds for that purpose, but because our Aetna Endowment is our principal source of funding for the Summer Institute, we don't really have to use the Teacher Leadership funds to run the SI, and thus we are able to be more creative with their use.

As in 2013-14, what we did in 2014-15 was award every teacher who attended the SI an action research mini-grant of about $300 to take their summer research and continue it during the school year. Each of the teachers was required to submit a proposal, a mid-year report, and a final report. Because the teachers had already devised research projects and had completed four weeks of research during the summer, they were able to hit the ground running with well-developed proposals in the fall.

Teachers bought books and attended conferences, presented their research to colleagues in their buildings and departments, used their research to design writing centers for their schools and build classroom libraries for their rooms, and a few were fortunate enough to have proposals drawn from their research accepted for presentation at local, regional, and national conferences, and in one case even at an international conference.

The final reports were edited by Graduate Assistant Director Michelle Resene and undergraduate intern Eric Miller and are presented here in this publication.

We hope the ideas contained herein will inspire other teachers.

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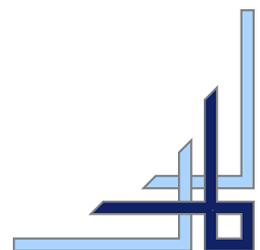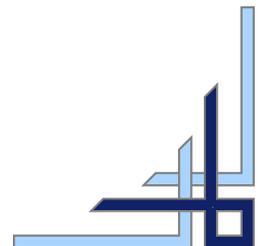Director, Connecticut Writing Project

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Creating a Classroom Culture of Love, Not Compliance
By Kate Butler

My first week it was apparent that I had a textbook "heterogeneous" classroom. The STAR results revealed (or, rather, confirmed—it's easy to spot the outliers) that my lowest student was reading at a 4th grade level; my highest, off the charts. He had literally maxed out, and the test wasn't sophisticated enough to challenge him sufficiently. After my initial flurry of questions, "Why aren't you in AP," "Do you ever feel challenged," "What did you read last year," I asked him what he liked to read. He responded, "I don't like reading. It's easy, but few things interest me." It was at this moment that I knew my biggest challenge as a rookie would be to find (and scrounge up the money to purchase) engaging, on-level texts.

My first unit was easy enough to differentiate for reading level: mythology. I gave the lowest tier of readers "Arachne and Minerva," a simple yet interesting tale, rife with conflict and action; the higher level readers got things like "The Shirt of Nessus" or "Mars and Venus". For unit two, every student read the same book: *The Kite Runner*. With complex themes and a Lexile measure of 840, an 8th grade level according to the Lexile Framework, though I think that could be contested, I thought it would be perfect for a whole class read. It would be accessible for the struggling readers (with help from myself and the interventionist), comfortable for the mid-level readers, and easy but interesting for the top tier. We met in Socratic circles every week, discussing mostly student and some teacher-generated questions. We analyzed Housseini's use of language and narrative techniques, and students used his writing as a model for their own personal essays. I thought I was killing it, but I soon discovered otherwise. I found that the struggling readers really struggled. I also found that many on-level students were not reading due to a low level of interest in the content. The novel was too far removed from their realities. It dealt too much with abstract concepts, situations, and emotions that might interest adults, but were only of interest to the most sophisticated and experienced of teens. As expected, the high-flyers crushed it. But one-third engagement isn't good enough; I wanted 100%.

In their literary analyses and *Kite Runner* double-entry journals, students had demonstrated their ability to make thoughtful assertions and use textual evidence to support their assertions, but when asked to expand their thinking with commentary, they struggled. This occurred for two reasons:

1) They didn't have a comprehensive understanding of what they were reading
2) They didn't know exactly what I expected when I said "write commentary."

Teaching students to identify and use narrative skills is easy, but when it comes to the "how" and "why," things get a bit muddy. I think this is because of the vague language we teachers somehow intrinsically understood as students and therefore use, that, or perhaps our teachers taught using non-common core language, which tends to be a bit more digestible for teens.

Before this unit, I had a vague sense of the importance of text selection. At the completion of this unit, I vibrated with the following realizations:

1) Lexile measures are not meaningless, but they are just one of a suite of text aspects I must consider when matching a student to a book.
2) Finding one book that truly engages every student is nearly impossible.
3) Differentiating for interest is just as important as differentiating for skill level and readiness. Just because a student is capable of reading a book at 98% accuracy does not mean that student will engage with the text.

"Choice and interest" became my new mantra. As the third unit of the year approached, I panicked. I thought, "How am I going to make this dystopian literature unit work with *1984, Brave New World*, and *Divergent*?" The high flyers will be sufficiently challenged, the struggling readers will sail through *Divergent*, but what about the oft-forgotten (at least I often forget them) average kids who seem to be the ones we can reach most easily, but who are also the most easily disappointed (or perhaps just the most vocal about their disappointments)? These were the ones who could have, but didn't, read *The Kite Runner*. I had to find something relatable, engaging, thought-provoking and accessible.

My librarian suggested *Feed*, a satirical M.T. Anderson novel: thematically complex enough to be challenging; stylistically simple enough to be accessible, and narrated by a technology-dependent teenaged boy, troubled by his inability to express himself to his brilliant young girlfriend. Exact dates are never provided, but readers can assume that *Feed* is set in an America consumed by consumerism, troubled with environmental decay, two or three-hundred years from now. Roughly 73% of Americans have computer chips in their heads, and these chips allow them 24-hour access to the "feednet," so people who have the chip don't really think independently.

I had actually been worrying about what I would do with the mini-grant, partly because I was already swimming in a sea of technology. I felt beyond spoiled and too embarrassed to ask any SI for ideas. Then when the principal announced a budget freeze during the faculty meeting as I was reading stellar reviews for *Feed*, I knew exactly where my $300 would go.

To plan my differentiated workshop unit, I used a combination of resources including *Falling in Love with Close Reading* and conversations with our reading interventionist, but most of my "research" was experiential. I learned about the importance of choice from undergraduate classes, but at first I was a little hesitant about real-life implementation. How could I be sure all my kids were reading? How could I hold them accountable? Then I thought back to *Kite Runner*—even with weekly discussions, reading quizzes, and writing assignments, many students skated through by reading *SparkNotes*.

No matter what model I follow, there will be kids who don't read, especially if they aren't interested in the content. The reading interventionist agreed, and nudged me into trying out the

workshop model with some anecdotal evidence of her own. I had mentioned to her that I would be using *Divergent*, and when she told her intervention group, they were uncharacteristically excited. One girl was so excited that she asked for it early and began reading it on her own, finishing it before I had time to introduce it to the class. She hadn't read any of *Kite Runner*. It was this single event that bolstered my confidence.

I bought a book on the workshop model with the mini-grant money, but after reading the first few pages, I realized it did not fit my needs. With my own money, I bought Cris Tovani's *So What Do They Really Know: Assessment that Informs Teaching and Learning*. I used it to develop a structure for my lessons and for the unit as a whole. I followed the workshop model lesson structure (warm-up, 10-15 minute lesson, 30-40 minutes of independent work, 5 minute closure/share session) throughout this unit. I would teach a skill (looking at connotations of words to determine an author's tone) or introduce a common thematic idea (conformity), students would discuss, identify, and analyze this in their own books, and then they would share out. In this year's schedule, I met with students 2-3 times a week, so Monday's class would be skill and practice, Wednesday would be reinforcement/re-teaching/writing/independent reading time, and Friday would consist of small group, student-run discussion and reflection. On discussion days I would flit about the classroom answering questions, asking more probing questions, clarifying confusing sections, etc.

Using tips from *Falling in Love with Close Reading*, I taught students reading strategies and skills as they tackled their novels. The book suggested using a popular song to introduce or reinforce critical reading skills. I've used music before, but only to teach the purposes and effects of rhetorical devices. This time, I did the same, but in addition to teaching rhetorical devices, I had students practice writing thoughtful commentary (something I'd failed to do before starting the *Kite Runner* unit). They would be responsible for creating three thought-provoking questions, keeping a double-entry journal for each section of reading, and using their preparation to propel group discussion.

Roberts suggests teaching students how to expand upon their thinking. They can all come up with an assertion about a character e.g. Alice is brave, but I think we can all agree that high school students should be beyond this. So, one thing I took from the book is that you get what you give. If you want specific, thoughtful writing, your instructions must be specific and thoughtful. Rather than asking students to elaborate on the idea that "Alice is brave"—which, as we all know, is too vague a directive—the book advises asking students to:

1) Use the exact word [they] mean. There's always a better, more descriptive word.
2) Use qualifying language to say more. Qualifying language includes answers to "when," "how," "for whom," "what kind," or "why."
3) Look for causes or effects, problems or solutions that are being expressed in the evidence. Often, these are more sophisticated ideas.

When I began teaching this way, students responded, and their commentary was, as one would expect, richer.

My classroom teaching has changed in two very noticeable ways: text selection and writing instruction. Text selection was obviously the most immediate and dramatic change. I've never been married to the idea of teaching the canon in the regular classroom, but now I have taken out a restraining order against it. I think there is absolutely a place for these books (AP and Honors high school classes and college courses), but I don't believe that that place is in the hands of every high school student, and especially not struggling or reluctant readers. I used to think that only the canon would stretch student thinking, but I couldn't have been more wrong. There are hundreds of beautifully written, prize-winning novels (Pulitzer included - I'm not just talking Nutmeg!) that are challenging, worthwhile, interesting, relatable, relevant, AND accessible. I have come to believe that required reading for high school students can and should satisfy all of those categories. If it doesn't, I fear that I run the risk of creating, or further contributing to, a culture of non-readers.

Unfortunately, I didn't have complete freedom in choosing my books for this coming year, but I will be able to teach a workshop unit at the end of the year using exclusively adolescent literature of my choosing. This thematic unit, dealing with identity formation, will include *Looking for Alaska, The Realm of Possibility*, and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Each of these books are challenging, worthwhile, interesting, relatable, relevant, AND accessible in their own right, and will allow me to differentiate for struggling, average, and exceptional readers.

Specificity is now the guiding principle of my writing instruction, especially for struggling students. This year, I began the year by teaching students to use the "assertion, evidence, commentary" format when writing about literature. After limited success with this model, I realized I wasn't being specific enough. Though I used models, held discussions, led students through pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing, I still wasn't getting what I wanted in terms of actual thinking. As soon as my asking became more exact, student writing changed. They were able to develop clearer, more thoughtful ideas.

My differentiated unit accidentally followed the scientific method. The "control" groups read *1984* and *Brave New World* - tried and true classics, but not necessarily relevant and accessible even for my advanced readers. The "experimental" groups read *Divergent* and *Feed*. One group in need of lots and lots of support read *The Hunger Games*. It was a special request from a student whose first language is Spanish, who later shocked me with her somewhat cliché but clear, well-organized, grammatically sound graduation speech (in September, she struggled to write complete sentences). Their experiences were as antithetic as Aldous Huxley and Veronica Roth.

As for the results, they were what you might expect. *1984* was a flop. I will say no more about it. It hurts me. Though there was a small handful of extremely dedicated and bright students who read all of *Brave New World* and were able to discuss it intelligently with my guidance, they did

not have the sort of passionate, confident, imaginative conversations I overheard and facilitated in the *Feed* and *Divergent* groups. These students came prepared with thoughtful, well-developed commentary on individual passages, and questions that showed a true investment in the text, and a genuine desire to understand every layer. They had no trouble leading their own discussions, challenging each other's thinking, and expanding on each other's commentary. Many students enjoyed *Feed*—they were even spotted reading it in homeroom, although no one ever reads during homeroom (it's an unofficial social hour). One student who read *Divergent* said she really liked the whole unit—specifically, she liked "reading a book [she] picked at [her] own pace." I gave students a final due date and had each group create reading schedules. Some read 30 pages one week and 50 another, depending on their after-school load; some read 40 every week, but they were all finished by the final date. It was clear that the students in these groups read the entirety of the book.

More importantly, students came away with an appreciation for the novel and a true understanding of the purpose of social satire: to expose societal flaws and encourage readers to make changes to their lifestyles. When students were tasked with writing, performing, and filming their own SNL skits, unsurprisingly, both Feed groups had no trouble at all—they satirized Americans' over reliance on cell phones and cell phone apps, pointing out how some Americans allow their phones to do too much of their thinking for them, and how these devices paradoxically create shallow, rather than rich, social interactions. *The Hunger Games* group, perhaps pulling from Collins's satirical treatment of *Survivor* and our society's unbelievable obsession with the reality show, created a parody of *Teen Mom*, satirizing both the behavior of the characters and the fact that their interactions are scripted.

These groups carried over the momentum from the workshop unit into the culminating project, and what they were able to produce was both entertaining and impressive. With the introduction of the Common Core, the pendulum swung wildly toward the "skill and accessibility" end of the spectrum, and I felt that content and interest was often forgotten. Teaching this way doesn't create a culture of avid readers—it creates a culture of compliance. When I began to focus on creating a balance between rigor, interest, and authenticity, my classroom culture shifted completely, and I remembered why I became a teacher. A text is more than just a vehicle for teaching skills. It is a distillation of humanity; to forget this, to put skill and rigor above the human experience means certain death to student engagement, especially students who are teetering on the edge already.

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Technology in the Classroom
By Emily DeFord

In my initial inquiry during the Connecticut Writing Project's Summer Institute I wanted to address the use of technology in the classroom, particularly as it pertains to writing activities. As I prepared to finish up my last year of graduate school, I knew I would be placed in an internship set in a writing center at a local high school. This center in particular was primarily teacher-run, as compared to the student-run centers that are gaining in popularity. My initial research at the writing center showed that they relied mostly on good old fashioned pen and paper to help students with their writing; I hoped my research surrounding technology's implementation in the writing process would benefit the center and quite possibly show the director how it could be more technologically friendly. As a student enrolled in the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education's IB/M teaching program, I knew a variety of technological services were out there to help students improve their writing, and it was my goal as a CWP participant to find ones that might benefit my future writing center placement.

After completing my inquiry during the Summer Institute, I was able to purchase an iPad mini with the use of my mini grant. I hoped to use this device to help improve communication between teachers and students, and tutors and students, about student writing. When I arrived at my assigned writing center I was pleasantly surprised to find that all students in the ninth through eleventh grade had iPads given to them by the school for use in the classroom and at home. While talking with the director of the center, I learned that it wasn't the students who needed guidance in using the iPads for learning purposes, but rather the teachers (who each had iPads themselves). Throughout my year at my writing center placement, I worked alongside classroom teachers and students using iPad technology to share writing specific mini-lessons and workshops. Through the use of Google Apps, my colleagues and I were able to work directly with the students' writing and the teachers' responses to students' writing.

My research during the CWP's Summer Institute stressed how technology makes writing more accessible for students. Despite being someone who grew up in the age of technology, I have always been an advocate for good old-fashioned pen and paper. During my research, despite real world results from other teachers, I was skeptical about whether or not weaving technology into writing would really help improve students' writing abilities. However, through my writing center internship placement I discovered that technology makes writing much more accessible to the student population; students are much more fluent in a variety of technologies than their teachers are, which means the only hurdle to technology's seamless use in the classroom is the teacher. I discovered that technology is effectively used in the classroom when the teacher is comfortable with its use; students already know what they are doing, all the teacher needs to do is tap into that preexisting knowledge. Using technology, like Google apps and Google Classroom, makes writing so much more accessible to students because they can connect with writing on a familiar platform. They see writing as a little less daunting because it can be done using tools they have grown up using for recreational purposes. This ease of access offers them a baseline of confidence when approaching their writing, something many kids need.

In addition to allowing students to more easily get into writing, I have found that the use of technology in writing allows students to physically access their writing in more places. When students have their writing saved in Google apps, they can take that writing outside of the classroom with them regardless of whether or not they have handed it in to the teacher yet. This unlimited access means they can edit their

writing in many different settings, whether it is at home with their family, in study hall with their peers or other teachers, or even while sharing the document with fellow classmates in a virtual workshop; the use of Google apps allows students to discuss their work with more than just their classroom teacher. The apps available on the iPad also allow teachers to put their writing lessons and activities online so their students can access them even if they were not present for the class they were taught in. Overall I learned that my research did in fact coincide with the reality of the classroom; technology does in fact make writing more accessible for the students who have access to said technology.

My classroom teaching most definitely changed as a result of my research and classroom experience. While I tried to remain neutral while performing the research, I never had access to much technology in my initial teaching experiences and therefore was not convinced that it could change the writing process that drastically. One could say I was a fan of the old-fashion writing tools: pencil and paper. After purchasing the iPad and using it in the writing center, I found my teaching became much more informed and fast paced. I was able to look up writing terminology and techniques on the spot; I could model how to use certain programs in front of students without a confusing PowerPoint. Additionally I could connect with my colleagues about student work on a deeper level; the use of Google apps in the writing process allows the students' classroom teacher to comment directly on the piece, and as a writing center tutor, those comments paired with additional communication with the teachers helped me to understand the standards of each teacher.

My iPad allowed me to seamlessly enter into a space where technological use was preexisting and widely accepted. I had to catch up pretty quickly so I could best help the students with their assignments. At first it took some adjusting to use my iPad because it wasn't what I was used to doing; I spent all of my student teaching using a PC and projector on an as needed basis because I found it caused more lesson delays than not relying on it. However once I started using the iPad in the classroom I found that it only enhanced my teaching experience. It expanded my connection to the students and what we could do to improve their writing, and it opened my world of teaching and technology.

My research and the iPad I was able to purchase allowed me to show my students how to access their own writing on a familiar platform while also providing them access to every resource available online. While the majority of students knew how to use their own school-given iPads, there were many cases in which I needed to encourage their academic usage. I was able to teach students how to use technology they were familiar with for school purposes through modeling my own usage of the iPad. I believe many schools think that they can give students whatever technology and the students will know what to do with it. I found through my research and my real world practices that this is not always the case; kids are smart, but they still need guidance on how to use the resources they are given. I found that when teachers are given the same technology as the students, and either know how to use it or are taught how to effectively use it, that they can greatly impact student learning in a positive manner. By using the iPad along side my students, I was able to teach them how to use the technology to amplify their learning and take it into their own hands.

As I noticed my classroom teaching change over the course of the year, I noticed student-learning change as well. Students saw my colleagues and me seamlessly using our iPads and began to follow our lead; the more they saw us looking up information to support our writing and their writing on their iPads, the more they began to use the same research techniques. Overall student learning seemed to be positively

impacted when their teachers could naturally use the technology at hand; the more teachers' practices focused on writing positively improved, the more student learning was enriched by technology and the more students felt comfortable using their technological skills in an academic sense.

Utilizing Best Practices to Bolster the Role and Impact of the Secondary Writing Center
By Jason Efland

The Suffield High School Writing Center entered its second year of operation at the start of the 2014-15 school year. During the first year of operation, the writing center opened in January and serviced 52 students. I wanted to find a way to open our writing center earlier and to increase student traffic. In order to do this, I wanted to find a way to turn the writing center into a more permanent fixture within the school and to ultimately legitimize it as a critical institution. Further, perceptions of the writing center among the student population were not ideal. Students viewed it as a place where only "bad" writers went. By addressing these issues, it is my belief that students will view writing more as a process and ultimately, they will produce better quality papers.

To address this issue, I purchased a professional library on secondary school writing centers. I also attended the UCONN writing center outreach conference. The two primary resources used were the books, *The Successful High School Writing Center* and *Creating Student-Staffed Writing Centers*. These readings offered general research and articles on various topics about running and maintaining a writing center. Other books that proved useful were *Researching the Writing Center* and *A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One to One, The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*. Finally, I minimally used *Before and After the Tutorial: Writing Centers and Institutional Relationships* and *A Synthesis of Qualitative Studies of Writing Center Tutoring: 1983-2006*. Outside of readings, I had weekly meetings with my writing center co-director to discuss the status of the writing center. Finally, I met quarterly with my principal to discuss the direction I wanted to take the writing center.

From my research I learned that the work of the secondary school writing center director is never complete. My research validated the experiences I had encountered during my first year of operating the writing center. Communities are often resistant to student-run writing centers for a variety of reasons and without a steady public relations push, writing center session numbers can drop drastically. Richard Kent's *Creating Student-Staffed Writing Centers* proved most useful in this area. It illuminated how a director must take a proactive and aggressive approach to running a writing center. From this I learned that I needed to make the writing center more visible. To accomplish this, I established a meeting with my principal and our media center specialist to find a new home for the writing center in the media center. The writing center took over a conference table in a central location, and we were able to place signs designating it as the writing center. While this move was seen as a success, the research in Kent's guide emphasizes student autonomy.

While I thought a public space would be more beneficial, the student leaders had advocated for a private space that was not in the middle of the media center. In order to determine which was really best, I used the resources in the research as a guide and created an exit survey for our clients with more specific questions than we previously had. This resulted in overwhelming data

indicating that student writers thought the space was too loud; therefore, at my final meeting with my principal, I reviewed the data with him and he worked to secure a side room in the media center, which offered the privacy and quiet students desired.

The research also emphasized using students to advocate for writing center usage. Therefore, I invited teachers to invite tutors into their classrooms to talk about the writing center. This process continued throughout the year. To further the visibility, the research suggested bringing tutors into the classroom. After discussing this idea with the student leaders, we brainstormed ideas on how teachers could effectively use tutors to help students outside of the traditional writing center model.

Further, I used the research in the books to streamline our writing center tutor training. I wanted the training to be meaningful but I also wanted to make it more efficient so we could open sooner. The research provided ample sample strategies and tutor training exercises to prepare tutors to work with students in an effective manner.

Ultimately, from the research I learned that writing needs to be seen in the institution as a process. This is still an area I am grappling with, partly because it is a systemic problem; however, the research indicates that meaningful professional development is important to make change.

As a writing center director, my work has become much more involved in daily interactions with other teachers. I found it to be important to maintain regular communication. As a result, I began sending emails about writing instruction to the faculty. Not only that, but when I started having tutors interact with students in classrooms, I found that it was important for me to discuss with the teacher beforehand what they could expect. This in turn led to discussions about how they could use the writing center for various assignments.

The most notable of the changes I implemented as writing center director was the creation of a new room for the writing center. Because of the data we presented, it became evident that a separate room was needed. This will enable me to work with our tutors to create a welcoming environment for our writers. Doing this will further enable us to create a writing center that is a central fixture of the school's infrastructure. This has also led us to discuss with our principal the creation of a writing center course. Working with the literature, we are preparing a proposal for the 2016-17 school year to incorporate a writing center training course. This will provide us with the necessary resources and time to work with student tutors to prepare them to work with peers. The model is self-sustaining, as students trained through this course will be better equipped to help students in following years. Rather than going through training again, they will only need a refresher. This in turn will allow us to open as early as possible.

We provided more services to the school this year because teachers took advantage of our "Rent-a-coach" program. Student coaches worked within classrooms to facilitate small group

sessions while the teacher worked individually with other students. This afforded teachers and students the opportunity to see the value of the writing center as a useful tool for teaching writing.

As a classroom teacher, I found that my work with the new writing center initiatives encouraged me to focus more on writing as a process. I tried to model for my students and colleagues the significance of writing through revisions. This meant that I had less instructional time for content because I had to provide more time in class to writing.

While our numbers increased, I did find that writing center usage could be higher and that misperceptions still exist. Working with my co-director, we decided that we should work with a small group of student leaders to remedy this. We recruited several sophomores who exemplified the initiative we sought from a leadership group. We believe that by working with these young students, they will be able to motivate the other coaches to work on commercials to highlight the writing center.

This year the writing center usage increased by 56%. Further, we increased the spectrum of teachers who utilized the writing center. The increase of usage served as an important factor when discussing the future of the writing center with my building principal. Touted as the only intervention for our students, the data suggests that the writing center is benefiting not only our writers but our coaches.

To measure student growth, I worked with a junior American Studies teacher. During junior year, social studies students write a 5 to 7 page research paper. Many students struggle with this assignment; however, by working closely with this teacher, we were able to track student progress. We worked aggressively to encourage students to visit the writing center. Out of 47 students, 35 of his juniors visited the writing center with their rough draft. He offered an extension to any student who utilized the writing center. This further encouraged students to view writing as a process. Of the 35 students who visited the writing center, all writers showed a growth of one to two grade points on their final draft. This is compared to the 12 students who did not utilize the writing center. Of that group, 7 students showed growth of a letter grade on their final draft while the other five showed minimal to no growth. This data is encouraging as it highlights the usefulness of having a peer review an essay. It further highlights the need for students to revise essays.

Further, in our exit surveys, a majority of students indicated that they found the writing center to be helpful. They left comments indicating that working with a peer was more useful than working with a teacher. While data does not exist for those students, it is important to note that they participated in a critical component of the writing process and that they were required to reflect on their own writing. More can still be done, however. For example, I have found that freshman English and social studies students are not using the center as much as social studies

juniors. We will need to find ways to incorporate the underclassmen more so that they can benefit from the writing center.

Outside of the writers, I have noticed that because tutors receive a generous level of autonomy, they have become more competent and outgoing leaders in the building. Our writing center student leaders scheduled meetings with our principal to discuss issues and ideas about the writing center with him. The initiative they showed was genuine and indicates the level of confidence and self-advocacy they have developed. Further, student tutors regularly discuss the writing center with their classroom teachers to advocate for its use. When asked what they receive from working as a tutor, overwhelmingly, the tutors respond with confidence and better writing skills.

As the Suffield High writing center continues to grow, the research garnered from the mini-grant will serve as focal point. It provides the evidence needed to pursue our goals of becoming a more inclusive and integral part of the community. While we have made improvements from our opening year, it is encouraging to think of where we will be able to take the writing center as we establish our own room and eventually a designated course.

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Creative Writing in Social Studies the Newest Educational Tool
By Ethan Fortuna

Classroom Challenge

The classroom problem that I wanted to address was how to incorporate more varied types of writing, such as creative writing rather than the traditional analytical writing, into a history or social studies classroom. In the new age of Common Core and the recent state standards, which are pushing for more writing across the curriculum, this topic is very important. In a traditional history/social studies classroom, analytical writing has been the primary type of writing used to assess the subject knowledge and understanding of students. However, this type of writing is very rigid and can take years of practice to perfect. In order to better understand student performance more quickly in this new era of teaching, types of writing that are more well known to students, i.e. creative writing which they have practiced for years in other classes, need to be molded for use in the history and social studies classroom.

Addressing the Challenge

In an effort to see what new and innovative ways people are seeking to teach history and social studies, in all ways, not just exclusively linked to creative writing, I used my three hundred dollars in mini-grant money in order to purchase a membership to the National Council for the Social Studies and to purchase a ticket to the yearly NCSS Conference, which was held in Boston in November of 2014. At this conference I was overwhelmed by the many different organizations centered on helping to improve the teaching of history and social studies. There were small private organizations such as the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation, large universities such as the University of Virginia, Corporations such as Scholastic, and even representatives of national governments such as the German Embassy. Each of the over one hundred companies and organizations in attendance either had samples of their materials or were giving out complete copies of their materials.

Research Findings

In the course of poring over the materials I gathered from my trip to Boston at the NCSS Conference, as well as speaking with the many people running booths and attending the conference, I found that the field of history and social studies did not seem to be wholly embracing the idea that I had about using creative writing adapted from other academic disciplines in order to make history and social studies more accessible to students. Rather, the field seems to be pulling more in the direction of bringing more resources into the classroom for the purpose of doing historical research. These resources are also designed to be more interactive so as to be more engaging with students. For example, Ancestry.com is running a new database for use in schools so students can research the family trees of historically significant people and families, as well as their own personal family trees.

This seems to be paired with a new twist on the classic history classroom standby, the document based question (or DBQ). I found many groups and people focusing on the revamping of the traditional DBQ so as to get a better sense of student learning. Traditionally a DBQ was simply a historically important document with a big idea question attached to it and the student was left to try and delve into the depths of the document and use the question as a guide. However, the new idea being put forward is that the DBQ can be used in the class more efficiently as a mini-Q. What this means is that rather than giving a student a whole document with a large overarching question, a segment of a document, or a shorter document is given to the student with either one specific question or a series of questions that can serve as a more accurate guide to the student. On the whole these two trends seem to be beneficial to enhanced student learning because the coupling of better access to relevant sources with a more targeted use of document based questions can better help students learn the main points that a curriculum is attempting to show them. However, from what I have gathered, the specific use of creative writing in the classroom is not a common practice at this point.

Impact on Teaching

During this past school year I, unfortunately, did not spend much time in the classroom. I was teaching as a long term substitute teacher at Somers High School for about six weeks from late March until the middle of May. This meant that I was not really able to modify my teaching style toward the new information I had learned through my research. By the time I had gotten up to speed on what the class did know and therefore, needed to know, as well as caught them up to where they should have been in the curriculum at that point in the year, my time at Somers High School was nearly done. However, when I have a classroom of my own someday in the future, I plan on attempting to implement many things I learned from my research, as well as use many of the resources I gathered from the vendors who attended the NCSS conference in Boston.

For example, as a part of the curriculum of both seventh grade geography classes and ninth grade world history classes, world religions are required learning. Finding accurate information that is engaging to students who are often dismissive of foreign concepts can be challenging. However, there were many religious groups that were both giving out materials to aide in the teaching of their religions and also providing further access to resources online. In addition to the content focused materials, most of the vendors at the conference were giving out materials that included examples of the mini-Q and how to use them effectively in the classroom. This appears to be the new major push in the industry, so I feel these examples will be an invaluable resource in the years to come. However, I wanted to focus on the use of creative writing in the social studies classroom, and due to the lack of widespread use of it, I will simply have to experiment with it on my own to see what types of creative writing can be most effective.

Impact on Student Learning

As I said earlier, during this past school year I, unfortunately, did not spend much time in the classroom. Due to this small sample size, I cannot say how much my research changed the way students learned or if it had any impact, positive or negative, on student learning. It is my assumption however, that given a classroom, and an appropriate amount of time to bring these new methods and resources to bear, that student learning would change and, ultimately, be improved.

Teaching Creative Writing in the High School English Classroom
By Kim Kraner

Classroom Challenge

In my six years of teaching in a high-performing suburban high school district, I have noticed a distinct reluctance by teachers to assign papers that require students to write creatively. Most assignments are intended to encourage analysis and some synthesis, but very few are designed to encourage creativity. I wondered whether the scarcity of creative writing assignments was based in best practices for language arts pedagogy, or if it was due to other factors. One issue might be that creative work is difficult to assess. I decided that an examination of the latest cognitive research might indicate whether creative writing, assigned along with other types of writing, was a worthwhile use of time and effort; if in fact students would benefit from developing creative thinking skills through assignments that required more imagination. I wanted to review the research concerning how best to implement these types of assignments and assess them at the secondary level.

In response to what I perceived as an opportunity to improve my pedagogy, I worked with Elizabeth Simison and Ethan Fortuna during the 2014 Connecticut Writing Project Summer Institute in an effort to define the rationale for incorporating more creative writing and to discover the best practices for assigning more creative writing in the English classroom. In order to be a more effective instructor, I also wished to hone my own creative writing skills. Like most professionals, my writing practice tends to be utilitarian, consisting of persuasive writing in my former career as a business writer, academic reports like this for my M.Ed., and now assignments and other teaching materials that are informational and persuasive, as well as a bit creative.

Ultimately, my long-term goals were to include more creative writing assignments in my English classes, to develop my own creative writing, and finally to create the curriculum for a semester-long high school creative writing course at my high school. This last step is now in the works, as I have proposed the course to the Curriculum and Instruction Committee in my school district.

Addressing the Challenge

My mini-grant funds were used towards tuition for a graduate-level course at UConn, The Poetics of Space, a poetry-writing workshop taught by poet and essayist V. Penelope Pelizzon. This workshop was designed so that, over the 14 weeks of the semester, the eight participants would read multiple texts of poetry and poetic theory, all of which somehow considered the concepts of space, literal or figurative. Each student was responsible for leading the class in discussion of the weeks' readings at least once. Students were divided into two groups, and each group took a turn submitting original poems to the class every other week. The rest of the class read the submitted poems in advance of class and prepared verbal and written feedback. All students were required to give a brief presentation on a contemporary print or digital poetry journal for consideration of all for reading and submission. We also all reviewed and submitted for publication a book review of a new poetry collection published in the past two years, and presented our book and thoughts to the class. The final project was the submission of a portfolio of six original written and revised poems.

Major texts for the course included the following:

- Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*
- Susan Brind Morrow's *The Names of Things*
- Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*
- Tomas Transtromer's *Baltics* (trans. Sam Charters)
- Anne Winters's *The Displaced of Capital*
- Federico Garcia Lorca's *Poet in New York* (ed. & trans. Christopher Maurer)
- Eric McHenry's *Potscrubber Lullabies*
- Susan Stewart's *Red Rover*
- Susan Stewart's *On Longings*
- Alice Notley's *The Descent of Allette.*

These were supplemented by a variety of materials, poems and articles.

In order to pursue my personal writing, I joined a group of like-minded teacher-writers who were interested in meeting monthly to discuss our work. This collaboration and their inputs have had a remarkable impact on my writing practice and intellectual life. As every writer knows, accountability and deadlines are very helpful, and I find that sharing my rough drafts and ideas with these peers has allowed me to consider the writing process in new ways and to continue to develop as a creative writer myself. With the same goal in mind, I attended two Teacher-as-Writer retreats sponsored by the Connecticut Writing Project at Storrs: one a day of writing held on the UConn campus and the other a weekend-long retreat held at the Wisdom House in Litchfield, CT. Each of these events inspired me to write a new piece, which are both in revision stages at this point.

I have continued my graduate coursework in an Independent Study this summer with Professor Pelizzon. For this fourteen-week course, I will be reading books from contemporary, established and emerging female poets and writing another six original poems.

Research Findings

The research we conducted over the course of the summer institute confirmed the value of creative thinking and writing in terms of cognitive research. We learned that the revised Bloom's Taxonomy places creation at the very top of the hierarchy of thinking skills, which means that students will develop as critical thinkers to their highest potential by working to synthesize and create in their writing (Krathwohl). We also discovered practical strategies, such as performance-based and contract grading, to assess this type of writing, which helps overcome a very real obstacle for teachers.

My work as a new poet over the course of this year confirmed certain expectations and yielded some unexpected discoveries. First, as I expected, writing poetry is difficult—but extremely satisfying intellectually and emotionally. Like no other intellectual pursuit, creative writing requires one to consider new narratives, new ways of thinking and being. As Bachelard writes, "Art, then, is an increase of life, a sort of competition of surprises that stimulates our consciousness and keeps it from becoming somnolent" (xxxiii). Sharing my work with other poets was both excruciating and exhilarating, which was in part unexpected. Looking ahead, my development as a poet and writer has only begun. In my coursework and on my own, I continue

to write creative prose and poetry, meeting once a month with my writing group to discuss our work.

The other development was the new awareness of my role as a teacher-writer. As Penny Kittle writes in her book *Write Beside Them*:

> I now believe that you can't teach writing well unless you write yourself….I believe you can't tell kids how to write; you have to show them what writers do…. the instruction has to come during the process of creating the piece, not in polishing the product, or nothing changes. I believe you have to be a writer, no matter how stumbling and unformed that process is for you; it's essential to your work as a teacher of writing… You are the most important writer in the room. (8)

I understand as never before how the writer feels as he or she starts writing. As I make my rounds in the classroom and students are brainstorming and generating ideas, I can address the concerns that the writer is likely to have as never before.

The other finding I have is a new appreciation for the vulnerability of the writer when sharing or publishing work. Sharing my own writing with students is not easy, but I believe it is essential to become the mentor that I want to be for my student writers. I also continue to look for means through which students can share their own work with less risk and embarrassment, whether through online sharing with just a few classmates or sharing in small groups.

Shift in Classroom Teaching

As I entered the 2014-2015 school year, I informed students that I was currently engaged in a study of literature and creative writing. I knew from Kittle that it was important to be a teacher-writer in order to inspire students to write themselves. As the advisor of the AHS Writing Center, which I initiated during my first year of teaching, I shared some of my work with writing tutors. I also established a relationship with the high school's literary magazine, so as to encourage creative writers to share their work during after-school writing center hours as well. The other result of this was a cross-pollination of sorts, in which I shared the work of literary magazine writers with my regular English classes. These relationships were intentionally created so as to encourage the development of a community of writers. As students move on to undergraduate careers, I will have to reinitiate these relationships.

Another new development this academic year was the availability of a Google Chromebook cart for my classroom. I had already been asking students to use Google docs for peer review, with the addition of the Chromebooks we could begin to work on assignments in the classroom and extend peer review to the students' homework. This worked exceptionally well in engaging my students at all levels, but I found that seniors at the college preparatory level worked more enthusiastically on creative assignments than any other, and we usually started these in the classroom on the Chromebooks.

I assigned writing tasks this year that were specifically inspired by my research. For example, I asked all seniors to write their college essays for class. The college essay would fall into the category of creative non-fiction, for the most part. In order to prepare for this, we read exemplar essays and discussed the goals and required topics of the common application. College

applications are fraught with anxiety, and this assignment was certainly loaded with implications for my students, but some thanked me for including it—parents did as well. I also created an assignment in which seniors were asked to write a short story that included magical realism during our study of *Reservation Blues*, a magical realist novel by Sherman Alexie.

Another assignment that grew from my work as a teacher-writer was a short dramatic piece in the Southern Gothic style, which included elements of the grotesque, hauntings, literal or figurative, and a surprising twist at the end that reveals some kind of corruption. This was assigned to my seniors after our study of Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Finally, I assigned a free choice creative piece to senior classes, which allowed them to choose the genre (poetry, prose, drama) and included three to four drafts, a final revised piece, and a reflection. My AP/ECE seniors were asked to write a sonnet, using the conventional form or breaking it, for artistic purposes. All of these assignments included writing and revision in a true workshop format, with peer review taking place either in class or online.

With the experiences from this year in mind, I plan to implement additional assignments in the coming school year that also require synthesis or creation. For example, my reading in *English Journal* turned up a fascinating assignment. Teacher Jason Wirtz writes about asking students to write an alternative research paper that he terms, the "Embedded Research Paper." For this, students choose a topic about which they are passionate, perhaps from a list of five, and then write a miniature traditional research report. The ultimate goal is to use this information to write a short story in which they could "embed the research seamlessly"; that is, students would create an original short story in which the "research played an important role" (Wirtz 25). Wirtz offers students an exemplar text, a short story by Anthony Doerr (author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *All the Light We Cannot See*), "The Shell Collector," which includes information about shells that is pivotal to the plot. This assignment teaches important research skills, creative writing skills, and is differentiated according to student interest, which serves to engage students.

Another worthy experiment in complementing literature study with creative writing is documented by teachers Erica DiMarzio and Ryan Dippre, who cite the authors of *Inside Out*, Kirby and Liner, when they write, "Writing is social and is best taught in a collaborative and community setting" (25), as I found in my poetry writing workshop and from the helpful comments of my peers. In creating their unit, they worked with the goal of creating an anthology of teenage writing, reviewed and edited by students. Of course, their idea of the anthology is ideal in creating the authentic experience of publishing one's writing that Calkins celebrates in her seminal work about the writing workshop, *The Art of Teaching Writing*.

I am also in the planning stages for a creative writing elective course to be offered during the 2016-2017 academic year. At this time, I plan to use Janet Burroway's book *The Elements of Craft* as the primary text for this course. Another teacher-writer, Danielle Pieratti, poet and English teacher at South Windsor High School, has recommended this text to me. Burroway's text is useful because she organizes the first half of the book by devices: image, voice, character, story and dialogue. The second half is organized by genre: fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and drama. Most helpful is that Burroway includes high-quality exemplar texts in a variety of genres.

Impact on Student Learning:

My students enjoyed class—and writing—more when they were engaged in creative work. No other assignments generated the same level of interest or enthusiasm. Even when students were initially stymied in terms of a subject on which to write, I was able to draw on my knowledge of their interests, garnered from the knowledge I had of them as people and by teaching through relationship, in order to suggest suitable topics or avenues to pursue.

The results of their efforts on these assignments varied. The best results were at times from the surprisingly quiet or inattentive student who had a rich inner life. One of these was a girl who wrote song lyrics and performed in her free time, who wrote a powerful short story employing magical realism about a girl losing her mother, yet still experiencing her mother's love through a dress. Another student, a senior who was occasionally reluctant to participate in class, wrote a humorous piece for this assignment about his golf club, which began speaking to him and got him thrown out of a tournament.

The sonnets students wrote also varied in quality, but, as I know, poetry is notoriously difficult to write well. My students expounded on the usual topics: stress, moving, and high school drama. Some did unusually well, such as a boy who wrote about his experiences as the son of a foreign diplomat who moved almost every year. Others were less successful, but again, students were engaged and interested in sharing their poems with their classmates. Several enthusiastically read their poems aloud to the entire class.

With results that are promising in terms of student engagement, I will continue to incorporate creative writing assignments into my teaching, including even shorter response pieces and the longer alternative research paper/short story. I also believe that the creative writing elective I have just proposed will help me to modify and include creative writing in my regular English classes. I will continue to hone my practice so that I best meet the needs of the students in front of me.

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Integrating Blended Learning and Modern Short Stories into the Middle School Classroom
By Ruth Macijauskas

Classroom Challenge

For five years I've taught a middle school reading/writing workshop and have enjoyed helping the students connect what they are reading to what they are writing and the other way around. One of the reading challenges I've found is how to get the ideal reading material (book, short story, poem, etc.) into the hand of each unique student. And one of the writing challenges I've found is how to get the ideal mentor text (narrative, argument, informative, etc.) into the hand of each unique student.

Too often curriculum writers choose a mentor text and expect teachers to make it work for the entire class despite ability levels. I know being able to grapple without grumble (develop your grit) is a worthy skill to teach students, and whole class texts are a great way to work on those skills. Still, with such a plethora of reading materials published in all genres every year, it should be easy to get that ideal reading material and/or mentor text into that unique student's hand. It should be easy—but it's not.

It's not easy for a number of reasons: money for resources, storage space in the classroom, and lack of time. This lack of time plagues me: time to read or at least peruse through the yearly avalanche of young adult literature rushing into classroom and school libraries and filling up list after newly published list — and time to have that conference with that unique student about texts rushing forth from said avalanche. I've been so buried, so bogged down with keeping up with the curriculum, I feel as if I can barely dig myself out let alone help each student reach his or her reading/writing potential.

So I decided to confront this challenge one genre at a time. I'd start with narrative, and I'd both embrace and release time.

Addressing the Challenge

During this project to become a better middle school reading and writing teacher of narrative, I embraced time by enrolling in an independent study of current short story anthologies at the University of Connecticut during the spring semester of 2015. For this study I read, analyzed, and catalogued ten "current" (published in the last ten or fifteen years) short story anthologies. As you can imagine, this took a lot of time. But it was worth it. Most of my previous study of short stories completed in my undergraduate coursework in English centered on stories with reading levels too difficult for many of my middle school students (i.e. Poe, Fitzgerald, Chopin, and even London). These newer anthologies are written at reading levels more appropriate for today's middle-schoolers. I read stories about teens with disabilities, identity struggle stories,

hunting stories, which were near and dear to me as a Maine native, and even some boxing short stories, although none of any real merit. For a complete list of the collections I read, please see the works cited page. My goal was to have in my repertoire enough titles so that I could instantly match a student with a story that is of high interest, in that student's zone of proximal development, well written and an "appropriate" mentor text. Of course this was easier said than done.

Most reading/writing workshop teachers will admit to constantly running out of time to conference with students about texts. I've tried methods such as having the students give book talks while others sit with a "Books I'd Like to Read" list open, ready to write down titles that sound interesting. I've invited other staff including the principal to give such book talks. Most students enjoyed listening to and giving these talks. The talks were also great to help them develop public speaking skills. And if I had more classroom time, much more classroom time, I'd continue doing them. But I don't have the time, which leads me to my next set of readings: books about blended learning.

Blended learning—the mixing of traditional classroom practices with new online practices such as flipped classroom—is new to me. But I have to learn it and learn it fast as I've been selected to pilot a team to adopt this style, perfect it, and then potentially run professional development for the rest of the staff. In the blended learning techniques, I think I've found a way to release time. I say "think" because I have yet to try out these methods but will do so at the start of next year.

Research Findings

From my study of the short story collections, I learned that I have so much more reading to do! There are many collections of short stories published that I never knew about, and they keep coming. More multicultural short stories are next on my own list of "books I'd like to read." We have such a wide variety of students in our school that having stories written in all different settings and cultures is a must.

I learned the most, however, from my research on blended learning techniques. I'm most definitely not yet a teacher who uses technology to its potential. My Smartboard is often just a glorified white board. I knew technology was an area of weakness which is why I threw my name in the hat for the blended learning pilot team next year. I'm going to either swim or sink, and thanks to the blended learning books I purchased during the last week of school, I think I'll swim, maybe not like an Olympian, but I'll stay afloat.

One new thinking process I have is that my students would be better served if I moved the book talks online to save time. I can still talk about books. My school adopted Schoology last year which we all use, so I could easily begin a discussion and have students post titles they've read and enjoyed. This will enable all students the chance to "participate without worrying about

taking notes because there [will be] an electronic transcript of the conversation that can be easily accessed for future reference" (Tucker 21). Still, this is middle school, and middle schoolers like to be entertained. I'm learning that a teacher can find plenty of entertainment through technology if only she looks.

For instance, sites such as Glogster allow students to make a collage of books or short stories they've enjoyed. This collage would serve as a "book talk." Teachers could even assign collages to be based around theme, imagery, strong openings—the possibilities are endless. If I can get the funding, I'll probably have students play around with Pixton next year and make comic strips featuring main characters in books or short stories they've read. Maybe the bubbles will include characters telling students why to read those texts. What student, especially a girl, wouldn't be enticed to read *Johnny Tremain* if another student created his dynamite "fake" Facebook page by using Myfakewall? Maybe that wouldn't do it for everybody, but it would have for me at that age.

My absolute favorite technology tool I learned about is Babberize.com where students can upload any picture and make it talk. I think this will be one of my favorite tools to get the right book into the right hand. Students could have a character from the book do the book talk, or SpongeBob, or a toilet, anything that catches their attention.

I hope, through these blended learning techniques I can avoid the constant "Miss, I need a book suggestion" during the school day and the never-ending emails of the same tune. As much as I'd like to match texts for all 120 of them every time each finishes reading something, it simply is not possible. But what I now know is possible is more communication between students. The principal can still talk about her favorite books; but instead of coming into the classroom, she might record herself, or make a collage, or have our mascot talk about books on Babberize, which would be an admittedly difficult feat since we are "The Hurricanes", but stranger things have happened.

Impact on Teaching

My reading workshop changed in that I found myself using more short stories than in the past, especially with unmotivated readers. It's not as daunting for a student to read a story. Unlike a book, the end is always in sight. I experienced much success with the short stories. I found that sometimes, if a story was of high interest, students would make the effort to read at the high end or above their zone of proximal development. For instance, one baseball player who was a reluctant reader, read "Season's End" by Walter Dean Myers from *The Color of Absence*, a story above his ZPD. I gave him a lens through which to read this story: "Coming of Age." We'd read and discussed many stories under this umbrella including those I'd read for this project such as "Black Holes and Basketball Sneakers" by Lori Aurelia Williams from *13:Thirteen Stories That Capture the Agony and Ecstasy of Being Thirteen* that's about a young man who gets caught up in a gang so that he can afford the sneakers to fit in; and "Smoking Lessons" by Patricia McCormick

from *This Is Push: New Stories from the Edge* about a girl also trying to fit in, but in this case, in an expensive private school.

The young baseball player in my class read this story and was able to figure out, even though I'd tricked him, that "Season's End" was not a coming of age story. As a matter of fact, it was the opposite of a coming of age story because it was about a baseball player who realizes that he's passed his peak. I hope next year to be able to reach more students like this young ball player and much more often. I have confidence I will be able to with the use of the new technology.

I plan to continue my study of short stories so that I can keep up this success. I am keeping a log of story titles that would make excellent mentor texts for everything from characterization, to irony, to symbolism. This will eventually all be cross referenced so that if a student prefers a certain author, or a certain topic, or a certain genre, it will be quick and easy to get the right text in that student's hand. This task, of course, will never be completed.

Impact on Student Learning

This was the first year that I've seen narrative tested. It never was for the Connecticut Mastery Test, but that's not the case for the Smarter Balanced test. Students had to write openings or closings to narratives using narrative techniques such as dialogue and various methods of characterization such as through actions or thoughts.

Being exposed to more short stories certainly helped students to prepare for that test. But much more importantly, students were excited about writing, and they were winning contests. Five of them received honorable mention at the Connecticut Writing Project's annual student writers contest. One won a national contest, and many found their voice for the first time. I believe that having a large number of mentor short stories from which to choose contributed greatly to these successes. As all good teachers know, "choice is essential to effective learning," and I was better able to provide that choice due to my extensive reading of the short stories (Tucker 6).

Next year, with students able to use the blended learning online tools to discuss and recommend texts, this success will continue and surely grow.

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Going Beyond the Research Paper in Secondary Classrooms
By Lauren Midgette

Being a new teacher is daunting; being a new teacher with five different classes to plan is absolutely terrifying. I tried with all my might to make each class engaging, but after completing my first year, I felt like one class in particular had suffered: Research Techniques. In this semester course, my students were introduced to the research process, writing a formal paper, and revising their work multiple times. We followed the basic format: research question, source cards, note cards, outline, paper. Within this format were mini-lessons on in-text citations, paraphrasing, etc. The kids got bored quickly, I got bored quickly, and overall, it was not a class that students looked forward to attending.

When applying to the CWP, I had this class in mind. I can make narrative writing fun, but how can I do the same for research writing? I felt like I failed my students, and I couldn't go another year without trying to revise a pretty monotonous curriculum. With the approval of my administration, I was going to revise the Research Techniques curriculum over the summer for implementation the following year. I promised to make it not only more engaging, but also aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for writing.

I began this process by discussing possible research topics with my partner in the CWP. My partner wanted to focus more on narrative writing, and at first, I thought that it wasn't possible for these two topics to mesh. I was determined to make it work and continued to research a bridge which I found: using narrative writing to strengthen research and application skills. I discussed this idea with Jason Courtmanche, leader of the Summer Institute, and he led me to the book *The Reading Writing Connection* by Carol Booth Olsen. This text turned out to be extremely useful and introduced two of the three staple papers for the new curriculum.

After the CWP, I attended the Connecticut Reading Association Conference in Cromwell. Two sessions in particular furthered my thinking when it came to research writing, and I also purchased the text *Teaching Interpretation: Using Text-Based Evidence to Construct Meaning* by Sonja Cherry-Paul and Dana Johansen. After discussing this new type of research with my colleagues, they pointed me in the direction of the new EngageNY curriculum. This provided me with step-by-step lesson plans to help students organize their thoughts and set up their paper before even beginning to write.

In the book *The Reading Writing Connection* by Carol Booth Olsen, she highlights how the research process needs to be vetted completely before expecting students to be able to apply their research, and that application in a narrative fashion is the highest demonstration of comprehension. By using three forms of application during the Research Writing course, students would be able to accomplish three steps of Bloom's Taxonomy: knowledge, application, and synthesis. Through this reading, I also realized there was a piece of the course missing: creating new material. Many of my students believe that research papers are just about

regurgitation of quotes, but by using the narrative paper as a final evaluation, it tests student abilities to use their researching skills to tell a story.

Another issue that the sessions at the conference addressed along with the text *Teaching Interpretation: Using Text-Based Evidence to Construct Meaning* was changing the unfortunately commonplace occurrence of copy-and-paste quotes without analysis. My students did not realize how to take the information they found and connect it to their thesis, which made for weak research papers and many times, plagiarism. Asking them the right questions while conducting research helps them to evaluate the strongest pieces of evidence as they go, ridding their papers of weak evidence and thoroughly explaining how each piece relates to each other and the thesis. The EngageNY curriculum provided a perfect structure, and my students had no difficulties making this transition.

After conducting this research of my own, my Research Techniques curriculum has changed to fit this model and include best practices. There are three main research papers students have to complete: i-Search, traditional, and autobiographical. The i-Search paper requires students to write three pieces: a brief narrative that includes what they already know about the topic and why they are interested, what they learned, and a reflection about the research process. Beginning with this paper allowed me to differentiate my instruction. The students who were already familiar with writing research papers were able to dig deeper into research while students who were new to this process or needed added support had mini-lessons on reliable sources, how to paraphrase, etc. My advanced students chose research questions that could be argued, like global warming, while my less advanced students began small and researched possible career choices and colleges. All of my students enjoyed being able to write a research paper from a personal perspective, and I think allowing them to connect with why we research at the beginning of the course drove them to become better research writers throughout.

The second main paper focused on a traditional setup. Students began with a research question and completed a pre-search document from EngageNY. After analyzing how each source connected to the questions, students were able to develop a thesis and three specific inquiry questions that would guide their paper and result in further explaining how they developed this thesis. The next step was documenting their sources and gathering evidence, which was done in the EngageNY templates for Source and Note Cards. One essential difference between the note cards I had used previously and the new note cards was that for each quote, students had to identify which inquiry question it was connected to, allowing them to weed out any weak or unimportant quotes. Every step had them connecting back to their thesis, which many of my students did not do without the prompting.

The way my students revised their papers when they conferenced with me also changed. In previous courses, I would ask students where they got certain information or how it connected to their thesis, and some were unable to understand the conclusion I was leading them towards: there was little, if any, connection. These conferences happened when the first draft of the paper

was written; creating an outline was a choice. I never meant to lead students down a rocky road, but I never preferred to write an outline in high school. The piece I was missing as a teacher was that I had been outlining throughout my school career and was able to do so in my head, where my students had much less exposure to outlines and needed the structure.

 In the new course, creating an outline was required, and the first conferences began before the first draft. By scheduling conferences here, I was able to see where students were getting confused and individually guide them through the outline with examples. The outline tool, EngageNY, forced students to think further about their evidence and analyze the connection/significance, which set them up beautifully for doing the same in their papers.

Some of my students understood the concept right away and were able to revise their actual papers multiple times, where others had more difficulty with the research process and only revised their final paper once. I used to think that the finished product was the most important assessment, and although it is important, I now realize how significant each and every piece of the research process is in order to write a polished paper.

Before this curriculum overhaul, the final assessment for this course was a traditional research paper. This is where students got bored, and quite frankly, I did, too. If they had shown their skills in previous papers, why was I asking them to do so again? Olsen suggests a different kind of research paper, one that focuses on the research process but allows students to create new material in a narrative fashion. This kind of assignment tests many skills: the ability to ask the right questions, research material that is relevant, create meaning, and also write from a different perspective. When I pitched this assessment to my students, they were excited! After I explained the amount of work it would take to create something unique like I described, they were still excited! Writing a diary entry or chapter of an autobiography gave their research a clearer purpose, and they could pick any person they were interested in learning about.

There was new life in my classroom; students were discussing possible "characters," different stages of life, and this was all before Day 1! Olsen scaffolds the paper lesson-by-lesson, and we began by reading an example paper from Olsen's text. We highlighted when we thought the author used research and came up with questions she must have asked herself in order to find that information. We determined that there were three "big ideas" students would need to understand in order to write a diary entry: time period events and context; geographical location (weather, language, etc.); and character traits and background. As a final example, I gave students different chapters from the "Dear America" series to inspire them, and then I set them free.

It is amazing what can happen when you allow students the freedom to help themselves and others. Together as a class, they decided their research questions should deal with some kind of narrative aspect about an important time in their person's life. The example they gave was "How was Cleopatra feeling when she died?" When I asked them why they framed their research questions this way, they explained that if they only asked how she died, research would be easy

and they wouldn't be able to write a diary entry. I was already proud with this step, and I didn't think I could be happier until they decided that each "big idea" we established early should be a specific inquiry question. They were using the tools I gave them, modifying them to fit their needs, and were doing it without my help.

I watched as students completed their note cards, analysis tools, and outlines, and that is where they asked for help. Now, mind you, it wasn't in the normal, "Miss, I don't get this!" fashion. As a group, they determined that before they began their diary entries, they wanted to review their outlines with me and revise according to my feedback. They were not helpless; they were seeing the power in having conversations about their writing. I was stunned by the amount of research my students were conducting and how exact their evidence was. Everything I wanted them to learn about the research process was demonstrated, and it wasn't in just another drill-and-kill exercise.

As a result of my time in the CWP, the conference they helped me attend, and the books they guided me to, the Research Techniques class is aligned to the CCSS, has interesting assignments that scaffold the research process, and is more than just sitting on a computer typing for no other purpose than to copy and paste quotes for a three-page minimum assessment. The i-Search paper engages the reader by "setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters" (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.A). The traditional research paper requires students to "write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content" (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2). And finally, the narrative paper gives research a purpose and allows students to "write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences" (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3).

Compared to courses my first year, these students completed more papers, conferenced with me more frequently, and took ownership of their learning as demonstrated through their final assessment. They not only mastered the research process, but they got comfortable using different tools for multiple purposes. They used their skills to create a short piece of fiction that tested their abilities to synthesize information and fiction writing. They say numbers are not everything, and even if the average paper grades did not surpass the scores my previous classes earned, I was confident as a teacher that my students benefitted from this course using qualitative data. Luckily for them (and me), their quantitative data matched their hard work, and the average paper grades went from a C- (71%) to a B- (83%). My ELLs were able to get the individualization they needed in the conferences, and average grades for ELLs went from a D+ (67%) to a C (76%). My students were learning, using their learning to fit different purposes, and were proud of the work they were doing. After two years, teaching is still daunting, but thanks to the Connecticut Writing Project and the resources and development they gave me access to, I am confident that my classes are fun, engaging, and challenging for all students.

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Metaphor, Literacy and the Writing Process
By Amy Nocton and Danielle Pieratti

We chose to work together because we both speak languages other than English, and because we wished to develop teaching techniques that would tap into our shared interests while encouraging students to become more flexible and creative in their own use of language. More specifically, because we both love poetry, we were interested in looking at how to use poetry to inspire students to think critically about language in both their reading and writing. Our initial research revealed a dearth of materials surrounding the use of poetry to teach students close reading and develop literacy. Not surprisingly, resources for second language acquisition and poetry as an instrument for learning were equally scarce. Indeed, much of the recent writing we uncovered on poetry and curriculum critiqued the Common Core's apparent rejection of poetry, rather than offering best practices for aligning poetry instruction with the new standards. Since we both teach at the secondary level and are being required to implement lessons that are Common Core-aligned, we decided to use our research to explore how we might fit poetry into our classrooms in meaningful ways.

Our initial inspiration came from Jon Andersen, poet and instructor at Quinebaug Community College, who presented a mini-lesson during one of the first days of the Connecticut Writing Project at Storrs Summer Institute. Jon mentioned how he often uses poetry as a break from other, longer readings. He shared with us how the succinct nature of poetry allows him and his students to step away from prose briefly and explore language in different ways. We were intrigued by this non-threatening approach to poetry and thought to base our research on the notion of "poetry breaks." We spent time researching and polishing a presentation on poetry and metaphor to present to our peers in the summer institute. We also presented at two additional conferences (the Connecticut Organization of Language Teachers conference in Waterbury, CT in October and the Literacy Essentials Conference at Central Connecticut State University in March) that we attended together, and Amy presented a spin-off of her individual research at one conference on language instruction in Florence, Italy (ICT for Language Learning) and at the First Year Writing Conference at the University of Connecticut in Storrs, CT, in March. In addition to attending the aforementioned conferences, we each attended workshops given by other teachers. Our research and presentations were well received. We presented our workshop a third time at the orientation day of the 2015 CWP Summer Institute at Storrs. A list of our resources appears at the end of this report.

AMY: As I worked on the project I was struck by how little research there is in the field about using literature, specifically poetry, with second language learners. Most of what I found was based on teaching English language learners in the mainstream classroom, which, of course, differs from how L2 learners experience language in the classroom because the English language learner spends the entire school day immersed in English while the second language learner may spend anywhere from 10 minutes to roughly 90 minutes (depending on the schedule). Even the work by Hanauer and "his followers" dealt largely with English language learners as L2 learners,

but abroad, in Japan, for example. I did find one study by Gabriela Zapata who wrote specifically about Midwestern college students studying Spanish, but even this is a different scenario than high school students. Danielle and I may eventually work together now to write an article on our findings and practice during the academic year for the *Language Educator* published by the American Council of Foreign Language Teachers.

While I had been familiar with the idea of the writing process conceptually prior to participating in the summer institute, I left with an understanding of the power of writer response groups and reader response groups and I implemented a writing workshop in my classroom as well as had my students break out into reader response groups with great frequency. In fact, one of my students noted on her final evaluation for me how valuable it was for her to solicit feedback from her peers to help her improve her writing and how much she enjoyed having me look at drafts of her work with specific questions in mind to guide my feedback. This same student added that she loved the act of working with her peers to tease out the meanings of readings to then teach me. She said that the act of having to teach the teacher what she and her classmates saw in the text was very empowering and helped her to gain confidence as a reader.

DANIELLE: Through our research on metaphor and close reading I learned that the study of poetry develops cognition in a variety of meaningful ways that support the Common Core Standards. While many have lamented the apparent decline of poetic study in today's ELA classrooms, the truth is that poetry offers teachers many valuable opportunities to meet rigorous standards for craft and close reading in a time-efficient manner, because it condenses the reading challenges of lengthier texts. Furthermore, by learning to analyze metaphor, students develop skills they can transfer to a wide variety of close reading demands--understanding tone, word choice, subtext, symbolism, narrative, and even syntax and form. And students that gain confidence in reading and writing metaphor are more equipped to apply divergent thinking to other reading and writing challenges. Finally, I learned that metaphor plays a vital role in everyday language use and in the ways humans make meaning and construct narratives about our lives. This understanding helps me demystify metaphor both for myself and for my students.

The collaborative research and presentation process was also a profound learning experience for me. I had never done this kind of intense academic work with a partner, and despite my initial anxieties I found the results of our collaboration to be much more successful than anything I could have achieved alone. I learned a great deal about how the skills that I teach might apply in a second-language classroom, and found a number of commonalities between foreign language acquisition and acquiring literacy in one's native language. While attending conferences with Amy I also had opportunities to hear several presentations on literacy and the Common Core that I've gone on to apply to my teaching.

Impact on Classroom

AMY: The readings required for the CWP summer institute certainly reinforced the individual research I was doing and, while I had already taken some steps to increase the amount of reading and writing in my novice Spanish and Italian classrooms, the summer institute work certainly led to actually requiring my students to read and write more at all levels. I felt empowered to teach grammatical and linguistic concepts in context, using both poetry and prose, and I chose texts to challenge my students. My remedial Spanish III students read "El hombre" by José Sanchéz Boudy and "Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos" by Jorge Luis Borges in Spanish, and "The Best Shod" by Luisa Valenzuela and "The Night Face Up" by Julio Cortázar and responded enthusiastically to all of the stories. We read them together in class, but later students were asked to compare the stories in writing to works they had read for other classes or for pleasure and many were able to draw solid comparisons and contrasts to works such as *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury and Ellie Weisel's *Night*. I presented my Spanish II students with an excerpt from Fedérico García Lorca's "Romance sonámbulo" and they tackled it with gusto, while I smiled thinking about the naysayers in my department claiming that authentic texts were just too challenging for novice level learners. These same students read "Oda a una manzana" by Pablo Neruda when we were studying a unit on food and Julio Cortázar's difficult "Axolotl" to look at the use of the preterit and imperfect tenses in context.

I found I was more comfortable letting students tease out meaning in poems and short stories and dissect the sentences for grammatical structures and linguistic devices. I have always encouraged students to be thinking about cognates as they read, and I did this with much greater focus this year as we looked at words and syntax in context. With the lower level students, I focused more on skimming quickly for cognates and other familiar words to ease their initial discomfort with authentic texts. Whenever possible, too, I would find newspaper and journal articles in the target language for the students to study. There were also poetry breaks, though not as many as I might have liked, and I will continue to work on this for next year. I brought in works in both Spanish and English and allowed students to just have a little time to savor the language and the elasticity of poetry as we paused what we had been doing briefly.

An exciting development from the work that I did on poetry last semester was a partnership with an eighth grade classroom at Mansfield Middle School. Mrs. Rochelle Marcus shared some of the poetry her students wrote for a slam poetry unit and my RHAM High School Spanish V Honors/ECE/AP students translated several pieces into Spanish and then recorded them. The ultimate goal is to then post the collected work to a student blog. The RHAM students praised the work of the MMS students and loved the activity. In the fall, a number of RHAM art students will translate the work into images to further the look at language and creativity.

Lastly, I also learned that I was more comfortable letting go of some of the information that I once had felt was crucial for students to hear from me. While I did go back to some concepts that we may have glossed over while looking at certain texts, I found that I had a clearer sense of

what it was I felt were the most important long lasting impressions I wanted students to have of a text and, if that meant letting go of some of the minutia I had once held dear, I did. As a result, I believe that students finished each text excited to have experienced it and not happy that it was now a thing of their past never to be looked at again. I had two students with two different books tell me that they later purchased their own copies of the books so that they could reread them at some point. Another student mentioned that she was very happy that we didn't overdo it when discussing any one book and that helped the class to move at pleasant clip.

DANIELLE: The fall after the Summer Institute, I was determined to bring more poetry into my classes. I started by implementing "Poetry Fridays"--an idea a colleague of mine came up with to read a poem to each of her classes every Friday. This practice is similar to Jon Andersen's poetry break, because it requires little time, and although student responses vary, they generally welcome it as a deviation from ordinary class activity. After a few weeks, I worked on choosing poems that connected to each class's primary text, and I would occasionally take a moment to explain the connection to students, or ask a few questions to have them tease it out. In my AP class, I began to incorporate poetry in an even more purposeful way, and made the decision to include poems as required texts for each of our units, despite the course's emphasis on nonfiction. Students also had the option to imitate a poem as part of their first assignment for the year.

I also have continued to modify my approach to teaching close reading, particularly because my understanding of metaphor has evolved. I used to think of metaphor as one device that we teach among many, but now I prioritize it as a fundamental building block that can help students acquire a wide range of divergent thinking skills. My sense is that metaphor and figurative language require us to make precisely the kinds of conceptual leaps that build cognition, creativity, and problem solving. Since completing this research for the summer institute, I find myself not only examining more written metaphors in the classroom, but also searching for more ways to force students to make and then describe connections between texts.

Impact on Student Learning

AMY: Students at the upper level, Spanish V Honors/UConn Early College Experience/Advanced Placement, reported the greatest satisfaction with improvement in their reading and writing. In May I asked students to bring in drafts and final copies of work from September and the work they had done since the fall. I distinctly remember one student exclaiming in May, "Wow, Señora! Look how many fewer errors I made grammatically in my last papers compared to those I was making in the fall! My writing has gotten so much better!" When I admired her progress, I asked if others saw the same dramatic results, and all agreed that, yes, they did see marked improvement. What is interesting to me is that I spent significantly less time on "drill and kill" grammar exercises this year with the Spanish V's and students spent much more time writing and posting their writing to a blog. The public venue of their work made them strive to create more and more polished, sophisticated work. The novice learners,

too, showed improvement in their reading and writing. Students were less daunted by pieces in the target language as the year progressed, more so than usual, and more willing to redact their work in significant ways as opposed to just fixing grammatical errors. I found I was much better at offering constructive criticism to students, and having continued to work in a writer's workshop with my own peers, definitely contributed to this skill.

I was the only non-English or Social Studies teacher allowed to work tutoring students in the writing lab, and I gained a following of loyal students who celebrated improved grades in writing due to the feedback they were receiving from me. Students learned to be more critical of their own work and to revise their work in deeper ways. One of the students who became one of my regulars at the writing lab received an honorable mention for her writing in the Connecticut Young Writers magazine. The piece she submitted was one that she had worked on with me for her English class.

Finally, since I was writing along with my students, my students became bolder in their feedback for me. Their feedback became more direct and specific. While some of them had been timid about criticizing my work in the fall, many were thrilled to see me work their suggestions into my writing, and they became better at offering constructive criticism as a result.

DANIELLE: The changes I saw in my classes were subtle this year, as I was out for almost five months on maternity leave. I do feel, however, that my 11th grade college level World Literature students have benefitted as I've continued to rethink and refine how I teach close reading. The Common Core standards place emphasis on sophisticated skills involving identification of tone and writer's intent through close reading of craft, and we focused heavily on these in our Shakespeare unit. I feel metaphor offers a plausible entry point for teaching all of those skills, and my students benefitted from learning to examine and analyze the metaphors in the soliloquies in Hamlet. I also feel that increased practice in the close reading of small units of text made my students better at selecting and incorporating quoted material into their own writing this year, because they read more carefully and understood more fully how just a few words can convey a great deal of powerful information.

My AP students were with me only for a few months in the fall, but I was pleased with how quickly they acquired a basic understanding of poetic devices and were able to apply their skills to make observations about the poems we discussed in class. One of these was Carl Sandburg's poem, "Languages," which is a series of metaphors describing the nature of languages and how they migrate and evolve. The poem provided many opportunities for us to both reflect on the content of our unit and to analyze the specific language of the poem. One of the most successful activities we did asked students to work in teams to generalize about each of the poem's essential metaphors by drawing on them to complete the phrase, "Language is..." Although each team worked with a different metaphor, students struggled to come up with original descriptors, and initially there was much overlap in the words they chose; many students chose general terms such as "changing," or "evolving," for example. As we revised together, however, students

recognized how by attending more closely to the metaphors they could describe the writer's work with greater specificity, accuracy, and substance, by choosing words such as uncontrollable, transitory, fleeting, or vulnerable. In a course on writing, this exercise not only makes students better readers, but also points out the importance of well-chosen diction in one's own work.

Ultimately, I think my students will continue to improve as I continue to experiment with ways to increase their fluency with metaphor. For example, I hope to try having students write metaphors of their own to demonstrate understanding. I also would like to work more with visual metaphor as a way to stretch students' critical thinking. And I would like to incorporate more poetry writing into my classes. Last year, a number of my AP students wrote successful poems imitating the Sandburg work that we discussed in class. And in 2015-2016, I'll be teaching a course in contemporary poetry that will give me even more chances to apply our research on metaphor and cognition to my practice.

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Writing as a Method for Gauging Understanding of Concepts
By Bob Pirrie

As a science teacher, my main concern is with promoting writing as a means to better understanding of the concepts I teach. In the past I have focused mainly on the writing of lab reports, but also on helping students write clear concise answers to questions asked on informal lab sheets, tests, and other written assignments. This year, however, I began exploring the idea that writing can help at an earlier stage of the learning process. If to write is to know, as the wise sage said, then the first ideas my students begin to form about the topics we address might be better internalized through writing about them immediately, rather than waiting for assignments that assume the understanding has already been gained. One might say that the traditional process of taking notes serves this purpose, but aside from the equally traditional method of checking notes, I wanted to see if my students were truly *getting* the ideas presented, not just writing down the stuff I write on the board. This is especially critical in my main subject area, chemistry, as chemistry is an abstract and difficult topic in general--but the problem is compounded for me by my firm belief that the value in chemistry is not in the formulas and reactions alone, but the philosophical ideas that form the basis for the history of thought on matter. If I want my students to have a deeper experience by looking at that material, it is only fair that I make sure they are fully supported in their efforts to understand that material. In summary, I wanted to know if writing about complex information and ideas from as early in the learning process as possible would help in creating a deeper and longer lasting level of understanding for that material.

To this end, I began to look for writing programs or workshops that dealt directly with this question. I have spent a great deal of effort and time addressing with my colleagues in the English department of my school other aspects of what I'll call "writing to know." In a sense, I have been working my way backwards through the stages of learning with the help I've received, starting with writing better test questions and ending (before this year) with creating effective in-class writing prompts as a gage of learning. It was a colleague in my own department, however, who forwarded to me an email about the Collins Writing Program, which offers training in implementing a five-tiered writing program meant to enhance student's thinking through writing, while supporting the professional's need to meet state and federal standards while covering necessary content and skills. After writing to colleagues in the East Hartford school system to ask if they recommended the program, I attended a workshop on April 8th entitled, "Meeting the Challenge of State & National Literacy Standards with Collins Writing."

Levels three four and five in the Collins Program are for more polished assignments--for instance, level three, which might be used for a 2-page opinion piece on an article read by the student, focuses on second drafts and targeted error correction. I was more interested in type one and type two assignments. The type one assignment is a brainstorming session--written responses are brief, timed, not corrected for mechanics, and focus on immediate ideas and questions generated by a set of material. I appreciated that the prompts that went with this type got at my main focus--creating deeper, longer lasting connections--by asking the students to be honest in assessing their own understanding of concepts. In the handbook given to all participants, *Improving Student Performance*, pages 7 to 9 suggest such prompts as "When I teach this unit on _____ to next year's class, what do you think I could do to make it better?" (Collins, 8). This sort of question, on the face of it, would seem like a fairly obvious question for a thoughtful teacher to ask, and I have done so in the past. The new thinking for me here is the

idea that I might incorporate such questioning on a far more frequent basis, to monitor student understanding more effectively.

Type two assignments are similar, but perhaps even more valuable for my purposes, as they ask for creative and/or evaluative assessments on the part of the students. For example, one prompt asks "Tell three reasons why _____ can't or doesn't work. Explain." (Collins, 16). Again, I think an effort to include such questions on a more regular basis nudges me in a direction that I have been heading anyway—that writing during *all* aspects of learning will help in solidifying for the student that deeper level of thought I look for. Perhaps the best way to describe the impact on my teaching is that it solidifies for *me* the need to go deeper as well by including more of this sort of questioning, and perhaps less assumption that heads nodding up and down is a 100% reliable measure of whether the students "got the point." In fact, it is recommended by the program that level two type assignments serve very well as brief low stakes quizzes, and that frequent use of them creates something called the testing or retrieval practice effect, which, as is mentioned in a Sunday *New York Times* opinion piece by Henry Roediger II, "makes the learning stronger and embeds it more securely in memory" (Para. 4). It should be noted here that the assignments being suggested are not all-or-nothing end-of-unit summative assessments—they are frequent check-ins for which one might expect students skepticism at first, but which are really meant to be no anxiety helpers to guide students in their work with the material in a course.

I cannot say as of yet that I have implemented any specific recommendations from the Collins course, but being a new Teacher Consultant with the Connecticut Writing Project has caused me to adjust my practice in a number of ways which, I think, would only be enhanced by application of some of the methods Collins espouses. The largest change I have made is in using a review method involving questioning that looks for a deeper level of understanding of material prior to summative assessments. I have for the past several years asked review questions of a deeper nature, but this year I have coupled these questions with a Socratic method of discussion, aided by the program Socrativ. Socrativ allows for as low stakes questioning as possible—votes on questions are recorded anonymously. After discussing in groups and then answering a multiple-choice question on a given topic, students were then allowed to discuss further and re-vote on the correct answer.

At this point, I then asked students to write a one-paragraph response to a deeper follow-up question on why they chose the answer they did. For example, after asking a question about conduction of electricity through a salt solution, I asked for a written response to the question, "On the last slide, the reason the light bulb lights is because the ions carry electrons from one wire to the other. Is this statement true or false? Explain in one paragraph of 4 sentences. Be ready to defend your answer." These paragraphs were graded on the spot for completeness of thought (they were easily inspected during a tour of the room), and then formed the basis for a discussion in which clarifications on the topic were supplied both by me and the other students. The change I expect to make next year is in using this method, both with and without the Socratic approach, by creating prompts guided by some of the type one and type two questions the Collins program suggests, and by introducing such questions earlier in the learning process. This questioning style, which will always emphasize the need for written responses, can even be used to gauge prior knowledge.

 The immediate results from this approach to developing deeper understanding are hard to tease out of the normal data stream. More information is needed—especially because my purpose in

the future is to try, as related above, to create better understanding by using this approach as early as possible in a given unit of study. Nevertheless, I can report that anecdotally, student answers to questions on tests after using the Socratic method described above have shown a greater attempt to explain concepts and topics at a higher DOK level. Students also reported feeling more comfortable with the topics asked and began to specifically ask for Socratic reviews, stating that they felt better prepared afterwards. I do need to throw in the caveat that some of the later topics in chemistry do not necessarily require a Socratic approach, as they are more skill based, so I would prefer to try these methods at the beginning of the new school year and gather evidence from that earlier point.

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Humanization in an Age of Standardization
By Elizabeth Simison

Classroom Challenge

My research with Kim Kraner and Ethan Fortuna during the 2014 Connecticut Writing Project Summer Institute titled "Creative Writing: Not Just For Hipsters" focused on the concept of creativity; more specifically, it honed in on how to incorporate creative writing in a classroom that is focusing more and more on non-fiction texts and writing. In *Newsweek's* "The Creativity Crisis," Po Bronson stated that "Creativity has always been prized in American society, but it's never really been understood," and with that in mind, I wanted to address a two-fold challenge: finding a way to restructure my senior English classes using the writing process, rather than the content, as the core, and starting to figure out ways for students to write academically while tapping into their creativity. The first part of the challenge was necessary because without structuring enough time over the course of the year to focus on the writing process, the second part of the challenge would be impossible.

Addressing the Challenge

My mini-grant funds were used to purchase new books, renew my NCTE membership, and to attend the National Writing Project's Annual Meeting and the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention in Washington, D.C. last November. The books I purchased were:

- *This Time It's Personal: Teaching Academic Writing through Creative Nonfiction* by John S. O'Connor
- *On Writing Well* by William Zinsser
- *Minds Made for Stories: How We Really Read and Write Informational and Persuasive Texts* by Thomas Newkirk
- *Thinking, Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman
- *Multimodal Composition: A Critical Sourcebook* by Claire Lutkewitte
- *What Is "College-Level" Writing? Volume 2: Assignments, Readings, and Student Writing Samples* by Patrick Sullivan
- A one year subscription to *College English*
- A one year subscription to the *English Journal*

Something that especially stood out to me was how narrow so many English assignments are, and have been in the past, when I think back to my experiences as a student in the secondary classroom. In *This Time it's Personal,* Sheridan Blau commented that "the narrowness of assignments in many English classes is a problem since the form becomes so fixed for many students as a model for writing that they can't imagine how to think about any topic they might write about through any other frame," and this extends so far as to impact how students write about their own experiences (175). What I want to do is reawaken that imagination.

Research Findings

I was fortunate enough to attend NCTE in Washington, D.C. in November. While there, I attended sessions that addressed college-level writing, and others that dealt with creative writing more specifically. I attended the college-level writing sessions because I currently have all senior

classes, and I'm still working on creating a college-level environment. I attended the NCTE Author Strand—What Is College-Level Writing? An update and symposium that featured Patrick Sullivan, the editor of *What Is "College-Level" Writing? (2006) and What Is "College-Level" Writing? Volume 2: Assignments, Readings, and Student Writing Samples*, one of the books I ordered as part of this mini-grant. I also attended a session titled "Valuing Story: Creative Nonfiction and College Composition" which explored ways in which "the pervasive power of story can be utilized within writing classrooms by instructors and students" (Gaiser). This reinforced Newkirk's philosophy that the stories we compose can often serve as the foundation for composition courses. It also echoed the idea of valuing students at an individual level.

As far as my reading is concerned, I started with *This Time It's Personal: Teaching Academic Writing through Creative Nonfiction* by John S. O'Connor. Although there is an abundance of current journal articles on teaching academic writing and creative non-fiction, I thought this book was unique...and it was *exactly* what I was looking for. The chapters that stood out to me the most were "Making a Living: Writing Memoir," "Off the Beaten Path: Exploratory Essays," and "What Did You Learn in School Today?: Reflections on Education." One thing that resonated with me in the chapter on exploratory essays was a comment made about thesis-argument essays, and the fact that they "limit the interpersonal dimension of classrooms," and "the projected audience members become not co-inquirers or even neutral attendants, but critical opponents" (175). In order for any classroom to function as a community of learners, it makes sense to structure writing assignments that allow students to tackle any number of issues.

I moved on to *Minds Made for Stories* and *really, really* enjoyed it. The concept of everything being a narrative of some sort was fascinating: "We are caught in time, we experience our lives as a movement through time, and we tell stories to give shape and meaning to this passage. That is the human condition." (Newkirk 5) and when I thought about it, it made a helluva lot of sense. Reading this book also led me to purchase Siddhartha Mukherjee's *The Emperor of all Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*, which I had been meaning to do for years. I've only started to read it at this point, but it's an example I want to be able to discuss in my classes when I pose the idea of narrative being a driving force in composition. Chapter 7: "Can An Argument Be a Story," also causes some new thinking to emerge on my part. It also gives me some research to stand on if I'm ever questioned about my assignments: "arguments often take narrative form because all important decisions and debates are located in time (115), and "any attempt to separate narrative and argument, evidence and story, is seriously flawed, ignoring the time-bound (and emotional) nature of human decisions" (106).

I wasn't really able to commit as strongly to the other purchases I made because it was an exceptionally busy year for me. I plan on continuing my readings during the summer of 2015 when I am afforded more time.

Shift in Classroom Teaching

My classroom teaching changed drastically. I shifted from more genre-based units to thematic-based units, which, I acknowledge, is something that could have been done without putting the writing process at the foundation of the class. Doing so allowed me to start each unit with an element of creative nonfiction (students thought of it as a mini-memoir) that connected to the units: Truth and Deceit, Authority, Morality, Corruption, Love and Longing, Education and Identity, respectively. These mini-memoirs were shared with the whole class and acted as

available resources—we called them case studies—when students went to write their larger papers. As John S. O'Connor states, "If our students have a stake in the subjects of our courses, they will more fully invest themselves in their inquiry" (219). Furthermore, in my classroom I also pose this quote by Flannery O'Connor before my students start to write:

> The fact is that anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days. If you can't make something out of a little experience, you probably won't be able to make it out of a lot. The writer's business is to contemplate experience, not to be merged in it.

Writing these bits and pieces of creative nonfiction along the way supported that investment and the interrelation of their experiences, the scholarly articles we read, and the literature in which content from the scholarly articles was evident. By the time they sat down to start writing their drafts, they had more than enough content and feedback with regard to their project statements to alleviate the initial stress of writing a paper.

My classroom teaching also changed with a more concrete use of reader response groups. Students were put into groups at the start of the year and those groups continued through the first two major assignments. I did shift the groups around for the third assignment and let students choose their own groups for the fourth assignment (which is probably something I won't be doing again. It was a positive experience for the higher-performing students, but more detrimental to the lower-performing, less motivated students because the feedback they received wasn't as valuable/valued).

Lastly, my classroom teaching changed based on the feedback I received from the students after each paper. Once I got to know my students, I was able to have candid conversations about how the class was going overall, as well as receiving feedback on some of the smaller activities/writing tasks. As I will mention later, the cover letters also drove what I did in the classroom; if several students commented on a similar incident (i.e. not spending enough time flushing out a scholarly article), I was more mindful of the same task in the next unit.

Impact on Student Learning

On the most basic level, it was clear that my seniors enjoyed the class more than students had in previous years. The impact on student learning as a result of identifying my two initial challenges has been immeasurable. Much of this is seen as a result of cover letters. Because of mandating them for all drafts, I have hard evidence of not only what the students began to do differently, but also of the fact that they were thinking metacognitively about their work. To extend John S. O'Connor's statement that "Students can sense whether we value them as individuals," I also noticed that students valued each other more, both through the creative non-fiction, and the reader response groups.

Overall, although there was growth made in their writing, reading, thinking, and learning, I think the most growth was made in the writing and thinking camps. Looking at their final cover letters for the fourth major assignment, I found evidence of the students' growth as writers. I think they became more invested in the process of inquiry as a result of creative writing and not being mandated to stick to a five-paragraph thesis-driven essay. They have also warmed up to the idea of drafting and looking at their papers as works in progress. They know that the goal of writing

is to enter into a conversation that has started long before they put pen to paper, and then exit that conversation gracefully knowing that it will continue long into the future. O'Connor muses on teaching at the end of *This Time It's Personal* when he says "Our art is always a work in progress- never ending, unreachable, and utterly worthwhile," but I think it can apply to the work of students, too, in that making progress is always worthwhile.

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Biographies

Kathleen Butler is a language arts teacher at CREC's Medical Professions and Teacher Preparation Academy. She believes that if she can help students to write well—ideally, very well—everything else will fall into place.

Emily DeFord earned a BA in English as well as a BS in Secondary Education a the University of Connecticut, as well as a MA in Education. She is currently working towards her Yoga Teacher Certification to best expand her teaching practice. She is a Teacher Consultant for the National Writing Project. Emily is currently working to connect Yoga with literature and poetry through well placed readings during the classes she teaches.

Jason Efland is currently teaching social studies at Suffield High School. He also serves as the co-director for Suffield's student-led writing center. He hopes that through the writing center he can help foster a strong commitment to writing as a process in his school.

Ethan Fortuna is a certified history teacher in the State of Connecticut. He was born and raised in Stafford, Connecticut. He is an avid mountain climber, and is currently doing work as a map editor for the USGS and serving as a tour leader for the Connecticut State Capitol Building.

Kim Kraner teaches English at Avon High School. She has also advised the Avon High School Writing Center for the past six years in an effort to foster a writing culture and encourage conversations about writing at all skill levels.

Ruth Macijauskas is currently teaching language arts in the 7th grade at Two Rivers Magnet Middle School. For the past five years she has taught 8th grade in the same school, and for eight years before that, she taught in the credit recovery adult education program at East Hartford High School. Last year, under the direction and guidance of Dr. Tom Deans, Dr. Jason Courtmanche, and graduate students from the UCONN Writing Center, she and a social studies colleague, David Jones, opened River Writers, a student-led writing center which was a huge success. She and David are looking forward to joining the student tutors in another great year of writing, reflecting, tutoring, encouraging and writing some more!

Lauren Midgette teaches an amazing group of students at Bulkeley High School in Hartford, and she focuses on using writing as a vehicle for positive change.

Amy Nocton teaches Spanish and Italian at RHAM High School and adjuncts teaching English composition for non-native speakers at the University of Connecticut. She holds advanced degrees in International Affairs (UConn), Secondary Education (UHart), and Spanish Literature (Middlebury College). She has been teaching secondary education for twenty-two years. During the 2013-2014 academic year, she began blogging with her UConn Early College Experience students and discovered that the blog *Perdidos en sus pensamientos Lost in His, Her, Your, Their*

Thoughts has been a useful tool for teaching writing in a second language (https://theunnamedspanishblog.wordpress.com/). While exploring the art of blogging with students, she met Colette Bennett, who is an excellent resource and mentor. In November 2014, Amy and Colette presented a paper at an international ICT conference on teaching languages in Florence, Italy based on her experiences with blogging in the second language classroom.

During the 2014-2015 academic year, she also presented with another colleague, Danielle Pieratti, at two conferences on using metaphor to teach critical thinking in English and foreign languages. In November 2015, she will be returning to Florence Italy to present at the ICT conference on teaching languages with her friend, Rochelle Marcus, who teaches at Mansfield Middle School in Mansfield, CT. They will be sharing information on a project involving spoken word poetry, translation, visual arts and digital media.

Amy travels almost annually with students, and is lucky to be part of an annual sister-school exchange program with Córdoba, Spain. She lives in Storrs, CT with her brilliant professor husband, Jason Courtmanche, and their two quirky, spirited children, Cormac and Elsa.

Danielle Pieratti teaches English at South Windsor High School. Her first book, *Fugitives*, was selected by Kim Addonizio for the Idaho Prize in poetry, and will be published by Lost Horse Press in 2016. She completed the CWP summer institute in 2014.

Bob Pirrie is a science teacher at E. O. Smith High School in Storrs, CT. He isn't sure exactly when he got interested in writing, but has a vague memory of reading Anne Lamott's *Bird By Bird* one summer in a cabin on an island off the coast of Maine. His work owes a great deal to the continued enthusiasm and support of his writing group—Jason, Amy, Kim, Danielle and Jay. He is currently working (and working) on a longer piece about a guy wandering through the Nevada desert. His wife Jen, son Casey, and his three cats are a source of inspiration and strength.

Elizabeth Ellen Simison is a tenth-year English teacher at Bacon Academy in Colchester, CT and an adjunct for the First Year Writing Program at the University of Connecticut. She enjoys the ocean, black Labradors and Irish gingers (especially the one she married). She soldiered through (and survived) the 2014 Summer Institute of the Connecticut Writing Project with ten other brave souls and is a better person for it. As an added bonus, she now feels confident that she will survive the upcoming Zombie Apocalypse, whenever that may be. She loves to read for pleasure when she has the time, but more often finds herself buried in essays of the academic and creative nature written by teenagers.