

Teacher, Writer, Researcher

Insights from outstanding educators, creative writers, and activists!

Director's Corner

By Jason Courtmanche (SI 99)

It's easy for us to get bogged down in the minutiae of the teaching profession. Grading papers, entering data, writing reports. Trying to come up with accurate and meaningful comments on report cards—under a deadline. These details can so easily obscure the meaningful and rewarding work of guiding students to discover works of literature for the first time or of helping students to explore their ideas and identities in writing.

This newsletter is compiled mostly by undergraduate interns, usually advisees of mine who are going into teaching. This semester it was Kassidy and Jenna, both of whom will have English classrooms of their own in two and a half years. Sitting down with them for end-of-semester conferences was both enlightening and satisfying because they were both so energized and excited by the interviews they conducted for the newsletter.

Melissa's boundless energy for work with middle school writing tutors. Jon's passion for poetry and for his community college students. Cathy's post-retirement dedication to the profession. Kate's intrepid ambition. Vicky's remarkable success building a creative writing program and getting students published. Shirley's incredible efforts to build an enrichment program. Amy's, Eric's and Danielle's commitment to social justice work with students, teachers, and their communities. The Dodd Center's resources for teachers.

Kassidy and Jenna both remarked upon how inspiring these "rock star" teachers are, and how excited it made them to enter the profession. They are filled with myriad ideas for pathways their careers could take. And that's rewarding for me because I know that their internships—which have plenty of minutiae built into them—have succeeded the way they are supposed to. It's not just about giving a shout out to some great teachers (though the newsletter does that, too). It's about inspiring other teachers to be ambitious and dedicated and creative.

I always feel so privileged to know so many great teachers and often to be able to observe them at work. But most of you rarely have the opportunity to see others, or be seen yourselves. I'm glad the CWP's newsletter can provide some semblance of that opportunity.



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To Make a Donation to The Connecticut Writing Project-Storrs, Please Visit:

<https://cwp.uconn.edu/donate/>

The Connecticut Writing Project along with the UConn Writing Center hosted the 11th Annual Conference for Secondary School Writing Centers on Friday, September 21, 2018. The event took place from 9:00am to 12:00 noon in the Student Union Theatre. This celebration featured writing workshops, group work, and presentations of successful writing centers in schools around Connecticut.



Members of the UConn Writing Center with Students and teachers from E.O. Smith High School

Tom Deans, Director of the UConn Writing Center, kicked off the conference with a short speech to the representatives from the schools in attendance. He talked about active writing centers not just as a Connecticut-wide movement but a “national movement.” He encouraged schools to “listen and learn from each other and take what you learn back to your schools and writing centers.” Deans said the purpose of the conference is to have students present to other students their findings on successful writing centers. He also wanted to stress that from the beginning stages, “UConn has always supported [these schools].” Over 50 schools have participated in the conference over the years. Deans stated that this conference, and the number of writing centers in schools around Connecticut, is only growing. He hopes that UConn can help other colleges around Connecticut to develop writing centers and conferences like this one. In this way, secondary schools across the region can benefit from this kind of support from college communities.

The next part of the conference featured presentations from Mansfield Middle School, Tourtellotte Memorial High School, and Windham High School.

Mansfield Middle School’s writing center is called “The Write Space” and is led by Melissa Batulevitz, a literacy coach and Grade 7 literature teacher. This center even recruits sixth grade tutors. The Write Space had 18 tutors last year, some of which graduated, and now has 5 returning tutors. The Write Space has decided that their center will recruit tutors that are “student nominated,” as it pushes the theme of a student-led program. The Write Space features a “launch party” every year where students can come check out what the center is about, have fun, eat snacks, and work on their writing. The tutors say this helps make their writing center a safe, fun place to help students improve their writing. (cont. on next page)

The 11th Annual Conference for Secondary School Writing Centers Sponsored by UConn Writing Center, Connecticut Writing Project, and the University of Connecticut

By Jenna Massicotte, CWP Intern

The conference, which is held annually in the fall, is for secondary school teachers and students who are interested in developing and maintaining peer-led writing centers in their schools. These centers value writing across the curriculum, development, and peer tutoring, while also understanding writing as an interactive process.

Representatives from some schools have been attending this conference for the better part of a decade, while new faces join each year as well. Some attendees come from schools with flourishing writing centers, while others come looking for ideas of how to begin developing one in their school. The purpose of the conference is to have students and teachers work together and share ideas so that newer writing centers will become just as successful as the already established ones.



Students from Mansfield Middle School’s “The Write Space”



The final portion of the conference involved groups of teachers and students working with members from the UConn Writing Center in order to have students from different schools and grade levels work together to develop better tutoring methods to bring back to their prospective centers. Jacob from Hartford's Sports and Medical Sciences Academy stated that the most important thing for tutors to do is to "form a connection [with their tutees] and a mutual understanding of each other." Jonelle, the Assistant Director of UConn's Writing Center expressed that "It's a vulnerable thing to ask for help," for those students coming to their school's centers. Cindy Ouillette, Tourtellotte High School's Library Media Center Specialist followed up Jonelle's wise words by saying that the best thing she wants her tutors to learn is "how to empower other students with their own ideas." Yearly, the conference is a way for students to become better writers, programs to become stronger, and for communities to connect and share strengths and wisdom.

The final presentation was led by Windham High School who has had a successful writing center since 2011. Their writing center is called “The Write Idea” and their slogan is “Write Here, Write Now.” Tutors receive intense training in tutoring and writing brought to them by the UConn Writing Center. The Write Idea focuses on higher order concerns such as organization, development of ideas, and thesis statements. Further, The Write Idea has

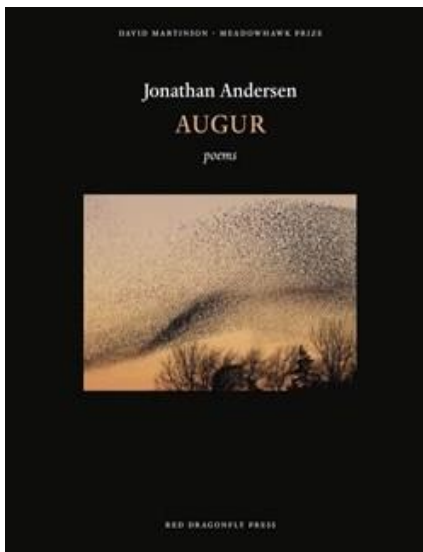


Jon Andersen's Pursuit of Poetry

By Kassidy Manness, CWP Intern

Gwendolyn Brooks, an American poet, once said that “poetry is life distilled.” This is something that Jon Andersen, professor at Quinebaug Valley Community College and published poet, finds to be the very reason why poetry is the form of writing he is most drawn to. As he has just published his second book of poetry, *Augur*, it is safe to assume that this kind of writing is his favorite and chosen way to express himself and his thoughts creatively and inspiringly, but this captivation by poetry goes deeper than just the genre. To Andersen, poetry’s draw comes from the “power of the poetic line, where every phrase, every word, is expected to be just right. The poem, even the ornate poem, is stripped down to what is most essential,” which is what makes him so drawn to poetic verse.

This desire to strip down to the essential and see the meaning behind something is carried throughout every poem in his new collection. The title itself comes from the augurs of ancient Rome who were tasked with reading the signs of the natural world to advise public acts. This is what Andersen wished for his poetry in this new book to do. He wanted to “try to read the signs and get clarity in very troubled and destabilized times. [Create] poems in which [he] tried to figure out, as Marvin Gaye meant the question, ‘What’s going on?’ [He] was looking for the meanings beneath the surface meanings.” An example of what this exactly looks like can be seen in his poem “One Man Band” which is also the oldest poem in the book as Andersen wrote the first version of this poem over twenty years ago. The poem is inspired by a one-man band performer who Andersen saw while on Church Street in Burlington, Vermont. The moment captured his attention and inspiration because Andersen was “struck by how this strange, carnivalesque performer was on one hand so uniquely individualist—one guy literally playing all the parts—but was on the other hand, powerfully collaborative in the way he brought together a group of total strangers whose collective joy and enthusiasm helped to create the scene.” His poems are about finding out what is happening behind an initial impression. In the case of “One Man Band,” it was not just a lone performer, but someone who was bringing strangers together.



When it comes to writing and publishing a book of poetry, Andersen has a lot of advice and insight as to what the process looks like and how satisfying it is when hard work comes together, bound and complete in a book. Something that Andersen admits to being difficult is compiling poems into a cohesive book as his individual poems often include a range of topics and inspirations. He does not want “the book just to be like a heap of poems that were dumped out of a wheelbarrow then scooped up and bound together.” So, when he starts thinking about putting together a new book, the main thing Andersen does is look back on what he has already created and see if any poems have connections that hold them together. This allows him to come up with an idea or theme for a book to follow and something to guide him as he edits and writes new poems to go into a collection.

Publishing any sort of writing is always a strenuous and difficult task. It is one every writer has to face and it is one that Andersen has gone through twice now, first with his book *Stomp and Sing* (2005) and recently with *Augur*. With that being said, Andersen has advice for anyone who wishes to publish a book of poetry: “Persist without obsessing. The point of publishing is to get the work out there, but for some writers the whole publication thing seems to take on a life of its own, as if publishing is *the* point. The poems are the point! Keep honing your craft and don’t let the publication goal change or distort your writing.”

It is also important to do research on publishing before you attempt to do so and understand that publishing, though related to writing, requires a very different kind of skill set than writing. Ultimately, according to Andersen, it is the writing that is important and the thing to keep your mind set on. It is this advice which has helped Andersen himself when he thinks he slips down that rabbit hole and loses sight of what he was initially aiming to do. (cont. on next page)

What also helps Andersen with his writing is the fact that he is currently a professor of English and was a high school teacher for twelve years prior to teaching at Quinebaug Valley Community College. When asked about how teaching influences his writing, Andersen replied, “Teaching is an intensely human practice, and just being around students who are working so hard and delving into the world of ideas and language is energizing and encouraging.” He also says that it works the other way around; while teaching helps his writing, his writing helps his teaching. The way he describes it, as a writer, he often feels frustrated when he comes up on his own limits as a poet. Constantly feeling this frustration allows him to be a more empathetic teacher who understands when his own students become frustrated when hitting their limits, either by reaching what they feel is the end of their writing ability or simply being unable to get past some writer’s block while working on an assignment. If it weren’t for his teaching, he would not be the writer he is today and if it weren’t for his writing he would not be the teacher he is today. It’s a kind of symbiotic relationship that showcases the important identity of “teacher as writer,” one which all English teachers and professors should strive to develop for themselves.

Catching up with Cathy Sosnowski and The Connecticut Council of Teachers of English

By Jenna Massicotte, CWP Intern

“Any time a door opens, I’ve got to walk through.”

Cathy Sosnowski had taught for thirty years before recently retiring. She began her career in the Glastonbury Public School system in 1981. Cathy has done some extensive work throughout her career and sees no stopping point any time soon. She has been an English teacher, an assistant principal, a director of curriculum, a department chair and most recently, the president for The Connecticut Council of Teachers of English (CT-CTE).

Cathy loves everything about teaching. She describes her students as “droopy plants dying of thirst” who need and want support and deserve an education worthy of them. Cathy expressed the challenge for teachers to enter the classroom and attempt to do right by each and every one of their students. The best part of teaching for Cathy is watching her students “grow in confidence and find their way in the world.”

The CT-CTE had been defunct for the better part of a decade since the early 2000’s when it was recently revived by Cathy and other educators in Connecticut. The organization’s mission is to promote improvement in teaching and provide support and professional development for teachers of all levels and years of service. Of the program, Cathy explains, “We are starting small, from nothing” and “We just want to provide a community for people to meet and discuss similar issues.” The biggest thing Cathy wants to stress is that the CT-CTE wants to “provide a level of support so teachers feel heard and understood in both their struggles as well as their successes.”

Cathy has noticed that some students “do not receive an equal education depending on where they live.” Therefore, she has decided to team up with the Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding. This way Cathy can work towards ensuring that each student has an adequate and equitable education no matter what. One of the direct issues that this ongoing battle brings up is “federal funding and changes that have a direct impact on teachers.” Cathy asks, “When we say quality education, what does this look like?” She suggests, “That’s the conversation we need to have.”



Cathy Sosnowski, President of the Connecticut Council of Teachers of English

There are a few issues in education today that Cathy would like to further explore. She, like many other great educators, believes in diversity and multiculturalism in the classroom as well as in the school's faculty and staff. She also finds that there is an inherent "sexism in education. If you're a female and want to hold a higher position in education, there's a bit of a glass ceiling." Teaching is a profession held widely by women, yet once positions like department heads, principals, administrators, and superintendents become available, these positions are filled, in majority, by men. Cathy points out that an unequal distribution of gender in the realm of the education profession perhaps deserves further investigation. Another concern of Cathy's is how much the role of technology should play in education, especially in online testing. Cathy wonders, "Are we measuring students' skills on using technology and the computer? Or are we ever actually getting an accurate representation of educational skills and comprehension?" Lastly, Cathy's biggest concern with education today reflects many other teacher's opinions as well. This is the discrepancy with standardized testing in general. To Cathy, "One size does not fit all." Each student is different, each school is different, and each town is different, so why would we use a *standardized* test?

Further, Cathy wants to remind people that "The classroom is the heart of every district. It's the most important place." Cathy believes in the words of Kyle Boswell, director of the Mattawan consolidated school writing center, who explains, "When I get caught up in the stress and pressure of the job, I sometimes forget how beautiful the profession is. The words, the ideas, the stories, the connections." Cathy continues, "We don't always know the impact we have on every student and how powerful it is to be a teacher." This is why Cathy decided that the CT-CTE was in dire need to be awoken from its slumber. The CT-CTE will provide professional development and support to English teachers and even more than this, Cathy stresses, "We want to provide a place for people to gather where it feels like family."

Cathy brings up an issue that many might not even recognize: "We grossly underestimate the level of exhaustion of young teachers." She knows that teachers "care for their students as much as their hearts possibly can,"

so it is only right that the CT-CTE provides what Cathy refers to as a personal learning network. New teachers need to find support, care for themselves, and keep learning at the same time. The CT-CTE wants to provide teachers with support and resources in order to make this easy to accomplish. Over the course of her career, Cathy has found that teaching "at times can be isolating." She wants young teachers to know that "It's a long race. Teaching is like a marathon. You need to be able to go the distance." Cathy wants young teachers to always remember that their students are the number one priority. She left me with this lesson: "Learning how to give 100% attention is a prime concern. People are more important than any paper or assignment you will give. Always put your students first."



Members and Teachers standing outside of the first CT-CTE conference: "Raising Civic Voices"

Cathy is retired from full-time teaching as a profession. But it is clear that she is still filled with so much wisdom and so many lessons to share for people who are willing to listen. For the future, Cathy will continue to teach at Central Connecticut State University part-time. She will work with the CT-CTE as her first priority, as long as she can, and as long as she knows she is benefiting teachers and making a change. She hopes one day to write a book. For Cathy, the most important lesson she has learned in life is this: "Any time a door opens, I've got to walk through."

The Connecticut Writing Project was started in 1982 in the English Department at the University of Connecticut. Its goal then was to improve the writing instruction of teachers at all levels of education and from all disciplines. Over 450 teachers have received Aetna Fellowships to attend CWP Summer Institutes and thousands more have benefitted from its professional development services in schools and its writing programs for students.

To help us continue to reach this goal you can [donate](#) at the UConn Foundation website. You can also support the Connecticut Writing project via the [National Writing Project](#). Thank you for your support!

Stepping Out of Your Comfort Zone: A Teacher's Adventure in Greenland and the Canadian High Arctic

By Cassidy Manness, CWP Intern

Teachers are role models for their students; they are meant to not only create a path for their students, but also to show them that that path is worth walking down. Thus, in order to be an effective teacher, one must do as they teach. This is something that Kate Craven, a teacher in Ashford, CT, lives by and professes to her students. As she says, "I ask my students to take risks and step outside of their comfort zones on a daily basis, but there are times where I fail to do the same." Since she noticed this discrepancy, she decided to put it right by applying to the Grosvenor Teacher Fellow Program sponsored by National Geographic in order to explore Greenland and the Canadian High Arctic. Craven says that she wanted to be an example for her students and that she wished to "further develop [her] sense of exploration and wonder, and to push [her]self well beyond [her] comfort zone by exploring a new place that [she] can share with [her] students."



Craven reading on a boat in Greenland

Applying for and receiving the Grosvenor Grant allowed Craven to embark on an adventure that provided her with many great experiences and taught her lessons which she could bring back to her students in Connecticut in order to inspire them to reach out of their comfort zones for amazing things. Upon arriving in the Arctic, the first thing that captured Craven's attention, and thus her ready-to-learn mind, was the varied terrain that she would be working off of and learning from for the next while. While flying into her destination, Craven saw the Greenland ice sheet; something that first appeared as a sheet of clouds but after noticing the crystal blue surrounding it, it became obvious to Craven that what she was seeing was not clouds but ice. Then, once arriving in Greenland and bussing to Kangerlussuaq, she noticed that the land was full of rocks that were covered in moss and low-growing plants. After finally arriving at the port where she would be staying, she saw land that was mostly comprised of dark rock and sand. To Craven the terrain of the Arctic "is a place of great contrasts—both brutal and beautiful, and at times it is a totally surreal place." It was seeing this varied terrain which gave her the first feeling of elation and anticipation as this was all just a glimpse of what was to come.

When deciding to embark on this journey, Craven thought about what exactly she wanted to learn and receive from the experience. As a self-proclaimed "life-long learner," she felt that it was important for her to really learn about the culture and the environment that she would be surrounded by daily as it is vital for her to connect to a wide range of cultures. Overall, she found Greenland to



Polar bear on the ice of Canadian High Arctic

be a land that was mixed with "the old and new." Not only does the terrain vary from place to place, but the way of life also does, especially between the cities and the more remote towns, which could only be accessed by dog-sled, boat, snowmobile, and occasionally by plane. The people that Craven encountered were, as she found, just people; some were friendly and talkative while others were more concerned with continuing on with their own days without any interruption. The culture was a mix of things she recognized, such as plastic flowers that littered some lands and looked like ones you could buy from a Dollar Tree here in Connecticut, while there were some parts which she had not encountered before, such as people eating seal meat or dropping everything the second they heard that a whale was near the shore in order to go hunt it. As she says, "It was a great mix of things that are so familiar but also very different."

A main goal of Craven's journey was to be able to bring back things that would help enrich her own students in Connecticut. She would walk around Greenland taking pictures of playgrounds or parks or fields in order to be able to show her students how they would play if they lived in Greenland. The playgrounds and soccer fields were similar, but sometimes swings or tires or other structures to play

on could be found right on top of rocks, which was something different than what we have in Connecticut. The similarity she saw from this was the fact that the children wanted to play no matter the location or weather, just as it is here in the States.

After staying in Greenland, Craven headed to the Canadian High Arctic to explore and learn more. She learned about science, geology, biology, and how the climate is changing today. She also learned how to recognize Thule sites, how to safely collect plants on the tundra, and how to calculate which ice was safe for the ship to break through and which ice would sink it. At the same time that she was learning all of this, she pleasantly discovered that there were so many hands-on activities she could take back to her students: “It was a strange and wonderful thing: to go so far away from home only to realize how much exploration you can do in your own backyard.”

When thinking about what exactly she wanted to teach her students when she returned to Connecticut, Craven said, “The biggest thing I hope to pass on to my students—bigger than any content I hope to teach them this year—is how important it is to make sure that everyone has a voice and a seat at the table. Everyone—including them—has something to contribute to the world around us.” To her, as a teacher, it is incredibly important to influence and show students how beneficial and incredible it can be to not only listen to others, but to also be open enough to suspend and question your own perspectives and biases in order to understand where people come from and possibly even adapt your point of view to something new after listening to another person. This is something that, though almost impossible to accomplish in one year of school, can be beneficial to students and can aid them throughout the rest of their lives. It is something that they can learn if every teacher they have teaches by example and shows them how to do this in the classroom every day. It is something Craven knows she will be doing each day that she teaches.



Craven in front of the ship she lived on

Craven’s experience in Greenland and the Arctic has not only shifted her own goals as a teacher when influencing and guiding students, but has also changed the way in which she runs her classroom. After her trip, Craven found she “feels more confident in doing hands on learning experiences with [her] students, in taking risks, and helping them see themselves as explorers.” It helps her students to be more engaged in the class and also gives them more confidence in stepping out of their own comfort zones. Hearing about her own stories and adventures in a different place and culture always captivates and holds the attention of all of her students which in turn allows them the opportunity to learn and follow by the example she has set.



Craven looking out on the Canadian High Arctic

Craven says that the main thing that she thinks about when she goes over the stupendous and informative journey she had the opportunity to experience is that she is so grateful to have been shown “that someone out there believes in what we do as teachers. They believe in our ability to bring amazing learning experiences to our students. They believe that we are doing everything in our power to teach our students.” Teaching is a hard job more often than not. There is much to do in usually little time and teachers always feel as if they can be doing better but also feel like they do not have all the resources in order to do so. This adventure showed Craven that teaching can be fulfilling and informative in so many different ways and that there are many people out there that think that what teachers do is inspiring and beneficial. Craven says it is best when teachers “let go of any fear and try new things that may have amazing benefits for [their] students.” She also advises teachers to think about the words of Kathy Sullivan, Astronaut and Director of NOAA under President Obama, who had this advice for

students: “Don’t ever doubt that you belong where you are, don’t ever doubt that you’re allowed to be interested in something, don’t ever doubt that it is legitimate. It’s okay for you to want to try something, do something, ask something, be something. If any voice inside your head is trying to tell you that you can’t ask that or say that: YES YOU CAN. And you should. You belong here and the world needs your talents.”

Binge Watching Winter on Mute: Poems by Victoria Nordlund, **the 2016 NEATE New England Poet of the Year**

By Jenna Massicotte, CWP Intern



Victoria Nordlund, Poet and Teacher

Victoria Nordlund has been teaching for 29 years at Rockville High School in Vernon. One of Victoria's biggest passions for teaching comes in the form of her creative writing classes. In these classes she can convince her students to "take that risk." What is most important to her as a teacher is developing a growth mindset in her students, insuring that they will try and continue to try in their writing just like she does. Victoria has been writing poetry her whole life, but did not begin to truly take it seriously until about five years ago.

In my conversation with Victoria, she told me that she "loves writing about family," but what is most interesting about Victoria is that she likes to "write about ugly things and making them beautiful." This is most notable in her poem ["How to Write Poetry"](#) published in *Amaryllis*, a blog by Poetry Swindon. In this poem, she describes the process of writing by starting to "peel off the skin, / expose the muscle and fat," and goes further instructing, "remove eyeballs and ears" but "keep the tongue in place." These phrases are "not pretty" in the words of Victoria.

Yet, she explains that writing is about "picking apart your memories." Victoria explains that she is "drawn to the grotesque" and the macabre, but suggests, "It's not a bad thing to view the world using that lens."

For Victoria, poetry and writing are her ways "to make sense of the world." She says that with poetry, she "can look back at a time in life" and "understand [her]self better." Victoria wants to model this for her student writers as well. She claims that writing about "what you have gone through" can "create a cathartic community in the classroom." She wants her students to understand that they cannot be afraid to "use their own voice" and more importantly, "sing their own song."

Victoria's students find her classroom community safe and very important to them. They say that "Mrs. Nordlund is a person you can turn to" and someone who "knows how to show that she cares." And above all, her students say, "She is our favorite teacher." It is clear that Victoria is a valuable resource for her students.

After all, Victoria has developed a long list of accomplishments. She runs a yearly Halloween Writers Retreat for Students and teaches a Young Adult English Methods class at UConn. Her students are often winners of Scholastic awards such as the 2017 Scholastic Art and Writing Award. Victoria's creative writing class wins more awards on a state and national level than any other private, arts, or public school in Connecticut. Many of her students go off to become writers and teachers.

Victoria's work has been published in Pank Magazine and she was also the 2016 New England Association of Teachers Poet of The Year. Victoria has taken first place in the Connecticut Writing Project's Teacher-Consultant Poetry Contest and is also a 2018 Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee. This great acclaim makes it no surprise that Victoria has just successfully published a book of poetry with Mainstreet Rag Publishing. Her book, *Binge Watching Winter on Mute*, "takes you through a year of grief." Victoria was reluctant to divulge too many details, citing "It's all new, this is a whole new experience." In the book, Victoria further explores the "idea of making that which is ugly seem beautiful."

Victoria has been most inspired by "poets that aren't afraid" and who are "in your face" with a "raw view of the world." She said she is drawn to poets and writers that have a "strong voice coming through the page." Victoria believes that poets and writers "have a lot of influence in the world," and that we all should collectively "use our voices more." She tells her students that if there is one thing to get out of her class it is that "your words have power." The only thing to do is to "keep trying" and in Victoria's own words, "take that risk."



Victoria and her students in her Creative Writing class

Deliberating with Amy Nocton, Founder of *The Democratic Dialogue Project* at E.O. Smith High School

By Jenna Massicotte, CWP Intern

Amy Nocton has been teaching for 25 years and is currently a Spanish teacher at E.O. Smith High School in Mansfield, Connecticut. In addition to her high school teaching, Amy is an adjunct professor at UConn teaching English composition for the Non-Native Speaker. Amy has also previously taught Early College Experience Courses at E.O. Smith, specifically Spanish courses so that students are already two steps ahead of the game once they enter college with two years of a foreign language already done. She also participated in the Connecticut Writing Project Summer Institute in 2014.



Students and Community Members deliberate at last year's conference

Amy Nocton has been working very hard to give her students a platform “to write for audiences beyond the classroom.” Her students have participated in Letters about Literature, a writing contest sponsored by the Library of Congress, and have had their writing published in *The Connecticut Student Writers* magazine published by the CWP. Amy has also worked quite a bit with performing arts and theatre. She and her students were “fortunate enough to work with Gracia Morales, a playwright from Spain,” who wrote the play *NN12*. Teaching English to English Language Learners at UConn has taught Amy “a great deal about [her student’s] cultures and educational experiences.” She states, “I have so much courage for these students.” In her youth, Amy spent a year studying at La Facolta di Magistero at L’Universita di

Firenze and she knows “how daunting it can be to live and study far from home.”

In the last two years, Amy has received a grant from the Dodd Center at UConn to host a *Democratic Dialogue*, a program created by E.O. Smith High School to create a yearly public deliberation forum. Amy states that the “program developed out of a desire to work on creating a means through which students and staff could discuss difficult or controversial topics in a civil, thoughtful, deliberate manner.” For the project, E.O. Smith High School was recognized as part of the Red, White, and Blue Schools initiative. This initiative aims to promote civic involvement in students of all ages. These schools are encouraged to develop civics programs that are both innovative and informative.

Students in Amy Nocton’s Dialogue are able to discuss race and gender issues in society and participate in forums and symposiums for further discussion. By modeling the use of dialogue in deliberation, students can address issues of critical concern to their broader community. This provides opportunities to work on leadership skills and helps students find their voice. Some students have been lucky enough to work with Dr. Glenn Mitoma, Assistant Professor of Human Rights and Education and director of the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center at UConn. With Dr. Mitoma, students researched the history of indigenous peoples, land rights and slavery in the Mansfield area. Another three of Amy’s students have joined the local NAACP. This year students will work with Eleiza Braun, the Independent Campaign and Development Consultant, and Amy herself in the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation Conference’s community forum on the Mission of Education in 21st Century Schools.



E.O. Smith High School’s Democratic Dialogue about Mental Health 2018

Essentially, by taking the initiative to earn the grant from the Dodd Center and through the creation of the Democratic Dialogue, Amy has built an environment for the “community and the school to come together for discussions that will lead to change.” It is clear that Amy is very invested in educating her students on current issues and allowing them to build their own educated opinions about the world they are growing into. Amy wants to use the

Dialogue as a way to “move forward through compromise and create meaningful, positive changes,” while discussing “race and gender issues in today’s society.” Part of the Democratic Dialogue’s mission is to see education as a collaborative, rather than an institutionalized, process. By reimagining education, schools can benefit individuals in a more holistic way through democratic dialogue and discourse.

The 2018 yearly forum was held in June on the topic of Mental Health and Wellness. The members believe that in this day and age students are held to an immense standard of change and pressure about social media, college costs, political and economic climates, school shootings, police violence, changing societal and familial structures, and the development of one’s own personal identity. For this reason,

young people are extremely susceptible to stress, isolation, depression and anxiety. This brings up the need for discussing the importance of training and providing resources on how to handle these issues. There is one simple fact that The *Democratic Dialogue* needs the community to understand: a community coming together to deliberate on issues creates a better solution than singular leaders choosing alone. Communities come together in acts of passion and awareness that deserve a voice, and this is what the *Democratic Dialogue* offers.

For more info on the Democratic Dialogue Project:
https://www.eosmith.org/programs/democratic_dialogue_project

An Interview with Neag’s New Director of English Education, Danielle Filipiak

By Kassidy Manness, CWP Intern

“There is a real connection between whether or not a young person feels seen and heard and their decision to act agentively in the world around them.”

At the start of this academic year, a new addition was brought onto the staff of the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut. Danielle Filipiak became the new director of the English Education department and I was able to speak with her about what led to her coming to UConn and the hopes she has for the program.

What were you doing before coming to work in Neag at UConn?

Before coming to UConn, I served as Curriculum Director for Cyphers for Justice, a youth and teacher development program housed at the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. CFJ apprentices New York City high school youth, incarcerated youth, and teachers as critical researchers through the use of spoken word, hip hop, digital literacies and critical social research methods. I was also finishing up my dissertation, which looked at the literacy and socialization practices that middle school youth used while engaged in a school-wide Youth Participatory Action Research class. Finally, I was working as a literacy coach with some brilliant teachers in the South Bronx, really thinking about how to provide students with robust opportunities to engage in transformative projects in English classrooms.

A big thrust of my work in all of these projects was centered on lovingly engaging the rich community literacies that historically marginalized young people bring with them into educational spaces and thinking about how to hold space for them to thrive. Prior to my work in New York City, I was a middle and high school English teacher in Detroit, MI for nearly a decade. It was there that I catalyzed my commitment to exploring the revolutionary potential of literacy, realizing that what we include or don’t include in our English classrooms contributes to the ways in which students broker identities, which in turn shapes the ways in which they navigate the sociopolitical realities happening in school, at home, or in their community. There is a real connection between whether or not a young person feels seen and heard and their decision to act agentively in the world around them.



What are you planning on doing in Neag? What are your hopes and ideas for your new position?

Right now, I am so happy to be working alongside such extraordinary colleagues, each of whom is pursuing timely questions and innovative research. I look forward to working with several of them as I reimagine and, in some cases, restructure the English Education program. My vision for this new position is to pursue opportunities for research, teaching, and service that explore the rich and dynamic literacy practices of communities.

In this vein, one idea that I am hoping to get off the ground is a Youth Research and Community Literacy internship that could be piloted with our 5th year IB/M students. I'm hoping to partner with a school that is interested in Youth-Led Participatory Action Research and run a summer institute for teachers that prepares them to do that work. Then, we could offer some of our MA students the chance to serve as researchers and collaborators in that space. I think it would be a wonderful opportunity for our students to really see what an intergenerational, youth development program looks like from both a pedagogical and design perspective. These kinds of collaborative, intergenerational engagements with communities are the kinds of projects that I plan to take up here in Neag.

As it relates to my larger research agenda, I have three central areas that I am currently focusing on:

- A. Literacy and English Education in Plural Contexts
- B. Civic Learning and Critical Digital Literacies
- C. Practitioner Inquiry in Youth Participatory Action Research

Is there anything about the program that you would particularly want to change or enhance?

Lucky for me, I've got a strong foundation to build from; our program is already pretty outstanding and full of both innovative and caring instructors as well as curious, thoughtful teacher candidates. In the months ahead, I'm going to be spending some time talking with colleagues about how we can build upon this strong foundation by thinking even more intentionally about three core areas in our English Education program: 1) our education of emergent bilinguals, 2) infusing meaningful and critical engagements with media and technology, and 3) culturally sustaining pedagogical stances.

As it currently stands, we have a rapidly shifting demographic, nationally and even globally. That means that we have to teach in ways that support plurality. We also live in a world where young people are using digital media tools in all sorts of interesting and innovative ways—to create content, to amass movements, to document stories. This means we also have to teach in ways that encourage imagination and ingenuity. But these alone aren't enough. Above all else, we have to maintain a steadfast, unapologetic commitment to creating spaces where dignity is affirmed— the dignity of the young people in front of us as well as the dignity of human beings across the planet. We can't talk about technology without also talking about who gets to innovate and imagine in school spaces and who doesn't. About who has access to digital media tools and who doesn't. We can't talk about plurality without unpacking who is rendered invisible in public discourse and who is painted as recognizable, sensible, significant. These are issues of equity, yes— but equity begins with this concept of dignity. An equitable English Education is one concerned with preserving, upholding, and nourishing dignity.

Cast in such a light, English Education has the potential to direct our country toward its best self. It's just that powerful. For a healthy democracy to thrive—and arguably at this moment we might say survive—it is urgent that young people interact with adults who model pedagogical stances that reflect standards of basic humanity and compassion. How can we ask students to navigate today's political climate with a sense of criticality, or to view their neighbor with empathy, if we don't enact pedagogies that reflect the fullness of who is in front of us? The books we choose, the version of English we sanction as acceptable, whom we deem as expert writers or readers, ways that we invite students to share their voices and perspectives—all accumulate into a powerful force that mediates how young people see themselves and who they believe they might become. I want our program to prepare teachers to design experiences that tap into that force, to shape humanizing and powerful experiences with literacy that reflect back to students the best that they can be, affirming the best of what is already within them. (cont. on next page)

What made you want to teach? What made you want to become a director of an education program at a university?

While I was teaching in Detroit, working in the same city where I grew up and attended grade school, I spent a lot of time thinking about how I could create systems of change in schools. This is what fueled my interest in teaching, its potential for transformation and as a catalyst for change. On the micro level, I remember hacking the English curriculum to reflect the identities of the students

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I was teaching and inviting community leaders and teaching artists to facilitate workshops. And at the macro level, I worked relentlessly as a teacher-organizer and even sat on a school board for some time, just wanting to find any way I could to influence the larger conversation about the kinds of schools we wanted to create for young people—especially those who had been overlooked and disregarded. Eventually I found the NWP through a summer institute and it was here that I think I really found my teacher voice. It was the first time I was offered platform to share my ideas and be engaged at the national level with advocacy work, first through my involvement with the Urban Sites Network as part of their leadership team and later as a writer and thinking partner around the Connected Learning framework.

“I feel at home.”

In regards to my new role as the director of English Education here at Neag, I feel at home. Being housed in a school of education is a real gift in that it allows me to leverage the experiences I’ve accumulated across 15 years to create a robust and dynamic program that really prepares educators to teach English powerfully. Did I enter my career with the intention to direct an education program? Like many professors in my position, I most assuredly did not. But what I can say in looking back is that it makes all the sense in the world that I have found myself here at Neag. Steve Jobs once mentioned that we aren’t able to connect the dots forward, but we can trace them backward. Only now can I see that I have been preparing for this job for as long as I’ve been in education.

Eric Maroney: Professor by day, Civil Rights Activist by Night

By Jenna Massicotte, CWP Intern



Maroney and student Samir Mahmud. Photo © Mary E. O’Leary/Hearst Connecticut Media

Eric Maroney has recently been hired as a first semester college professor at Goodwin College. He previously worked for nine years as a teacher in the New Haven Public School System. Maroney understands that “everything is a process.” What he likes most about teaching is that “When you interact, you create something new.” He is especially interested how learning in students changes over time.

Specifically, he attempts to teach students to have a growth mindset, and enjoys watching their own schemas expand and develop as they gain knowledge every day in the classroom.

Before joining the Goodwin College faculty, Maroney was also a curriculum specialist in New Haven Public Schools, where he helped to coauthor common core standards and redesign curriculum while providing and addressing teacher

inquiries as best as he could. He found that the most challenging thing about being a curriculum specialist is “creating the most ideal outcome and giving teachers and students the most freedom possible in their own classroom.” Maroney finds authoritative positions to be a strange concept because his own expertise comes from collaboration with and support from the school community.

At Goodwin College, Professor Maroney has been working in the First Year Studies department. He explains that “We work with students who come to college who aren’t necessarily equipped to succeed in college.” Maroney wants to work on building up these student’s skill sets to help them thrive in college settings and also to close the achievement gap these students experience. The First Year Studies department has a “facilitative partnership with New Haven Public Schools” which helps students who need extra support transitioning from high school to college.

Maroney explained that teaching in magnet schools is wildly different than teaching at the college level. He finds that there is an “artificially imposed hierarchy in high schools” that is not found in college systems. College departments and classrooms seem to foster a more collaborative learning environment between students and professors, rather than the more traditional learning process in which teaching is predominantly done by the teachers, and learning by the students often found in high schools. In his experience, Maroney had really begun to know families, siblings, and the community in the New Haven School System and admits that he does “miss those close relationships.” However, Maroney knew that working at the college level was an

important opportunity, as he says, “Sometimes you have to explore and see what’s out there.”

Maroney is a proud member of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in Connecticut. He says the federation “provides protection, academic freedom, and a political body” for teachers in the state. He says the Federation is a way to provide a voice for teachers and “advance working people’s interests.” And most of all, “AFT is a way for us to advocate together for teachers and students.” The AFT comes together to learn how to best benefit students and teachers alike. For his students, Maroney believes, “My working conditions are your learning conditions.”

Maroney has been a longtime activist in his community. Since he was in college he has made it his mission to support causes such as providing aid to those affected by Hurricane Katrina, or working for the Obama campaign during the former president’s first election, or helping those being liberated from Palestine. More recently, Maroney has been helping students and families in his community who are currently being affected by immigration laws. Maroney began volunteering with Unidad Latina en Acción (ULA), an organization of immigrants defending labor, civil, and human rights in New Haven, CT when a former student learned his mother, Salma Sikander, was to be deported. Nelson Pinos was also a New Haven resident at risk of deportation. Maroney got ULA and AFT to work together to speak about the struggles of working-class immigrant families like the Pinos’ and Sikander’s. Due in part to the work of Maroney and these organizations, each of these individuals were granted temporary stay so they could continue working on keeping their families together. Maroney wants his students and others to “understand the struggles of our undocumented people, and that they come from loving and beautiful families just like anyone else. These families do not deserve to be ripped apart.”

Maroney has taken part in numerous rallies outside of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement building in Hartford for his community in New Haven. To Eric, “It’s all about drawing attention to their cases. We have to push ourselves out of the shadows.” People participated in a food fast outside of the ICE building where nurses and medical staff were on hand. This put pressure on politicians and officials to get involved in these cases and reconsider granting longer stay to these people and keeping their families together.

“My working conditions are
your learning conditions.”

Maroney claims, “The same forces that restrict the rights of undocumented workers are the same ones coming after [teachers] as unionized workers.” Maroney is referencing the decline of public education due to large transfers of wealth and support to the wealthiest communities in the country, while financial support could help disenfranchised communities and their students. Maroney believes that programs like “No Child Left Behind” and “Race to the Top” have created “sustained periods of disinvestment” and have kept communities “in precarious conditions with no support.” Essentially, Maroney believes that “If one creates a harder path to equality, it becomes easier to exploit these disenfranchised” communities, and thus, “it becomes harder to mobilize,” to fight for what is right.

Growing up, Maroney was fascinated by figures like Leon Trotsky who believed in “the responsibility of people to stand up against injustice, and anyone experiencing it.” Simply stated, a bedrock principle of the American Labor Movement is that individuals who band together will always achieve more than they will alone. This is why Maroney fights. He understands that together, people are stronger and can fight against injustice, hate, and discrimination.

Unsurprisingly, then, Maroney said that the single most important thing a teacher can do for their students is “present quality instruction.” Teachers have “an ongoing opportunity to help young people challenge themselves to do things they couldn’t previously do or to challenge their beliefs.” Eric says, “We hold onto our perspectives, and have a hard time changing our views.” But education gives us a safe space to think about these perspectives, where they come from, and how they are formed and how to think differently about them. We are living in a time where in the words of Maroney, “There are decades where nothing happens, and years where decades happen.” We are living in a time where so much change is happening very quickly. We must be sure we are keeping up as people, rather than staying stuck in the past. This is education’s duty.

Words do matter. Writing is a great way to argue. But is in the classroom, as well as at demonstrations and protests, where learning happens. In the classroom, ideas are formed to change the world. But once you get outside, Maroney says, “There is no organizational apparatus to move it forward.” Only people can do this. And for this reason, the pen is not mightier than the sword, “People are mightier than the sword.”

Shirley Cowles on The Importance of Enrichment: A New Program at Granby Memorial Middle School

By Cassidy Manness, CWP Intern

This year at Granby Memorial Middle School there is a new program being implemented that is centered around enrichment learning and teaching. The person behind this program, who is building and developing this model from scratch, is Shirley Cowles. Cowles is working at Granby Memorial under the title of Enrichment Coach and Teacher, spending half of her time with 6th-8th grade students and the other half working with other teachers at the school. The program is based on the [Schoolwide Enrichment Model \(SEM\)](#) developed by The Renzulli Center for Creativity. While the teachers Cowles works

with focus on learning more about the program through SEM, she works with the students around enrichment teaching and learning as well. As described by Cowles, this looks like, “student work [that] focuses on creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, investigations of real-world problems, literary analysis, and creative writing.”

In addition to this enrichment-based approach to learning and teaching, there are two other aspects of the program that make it unique and experimental. During both the fall and spring, for the span of six weeks, there will be the implementation and oversight of student-driven enrichment clusters facilitated by teachers and organized based on both the teacher’s and student’s interests. Then, there will also be a parent program that invites parents in as guest speakers to discuss areas of their own interest with students.

When asked about the motivation behind developing this program, Cowles explained, “I am able to advocate for all students around enrichment teaching and learning. I strongly believe that preparing students for success, not only in school, but in life, is at the heart of this philosophy of education. It’s powerful. I believe in it wholeheartedly. It can be transformative.” She also elaborated on the fact that her new position is a great combination of all her past experiences. It allows for her to really use all that she learned while working on her two degrees at the University of Connecticut, as well as what she has experienced and learned from attending multiple writer’s workshops throughout New England. This is also the first time that Cowles feels she can incorporate the importance of creativity in education which she had learned from working as the Director of School-Based Programs at the Bushnell Center.



Cowles feels that there are many reasons why more schools and teachers should embrace enrichment teaching and learning. It is helpful to the students, as it assists them to not only understand their own learning styles and preferences, but also helps to reveal their passions. As for the teachers, Cowles explained, “When teachers embrace the notion of enrichment teaching and learning, offer student choice, pay attention to student learning styles and preferences, you are rewarded at the end of the day, knowing that what you do matters.” One of her main goals in leading this program is to inspire more educators to incorporate this approach in their classrooms. She thinks that this program also reaches far beyond the classroom as it also helps parents gain insight into their children’s education and the way their children learn. Further, it brings the community together as it emphasizes the importance of inviting guest speakers from the town to speak to parents, teachers, and students.

From this experience so far, Cowles can speak a lot to how facilitating this program has affected her own beliefs and perceptions about teaching: “I have come to realize that teaching is a lifestyle, teaching is hard work, and teaching can be transformative. Most importantly, teachers should work to make connections with their students and provide them with a comfortable atmosphere to find both successes and failures and how to navigate both with grace and understanding.” This program offers a variety of benefits and in the end, it leaves the teacher feeling rewarded as they know that they have helped their students take ownership over their own learning.

UConn Archives New Home for Maurice Sendak Collection

By Jenna Massicotte, CWP Intern

Maurice Sendak is famously known for his illustrations in the children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*, published in 1963. Sendak was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1928 during the Great Depression and many of his family members as he grew up were greatly affected by the Holocaust. As a young child he had health problems and was often confined to his bed. Between his own health issues and his growing awareness of death, he often felt as though he needed some sort of escape from reality. This led to a growing love for illustration and drawing, especially after watching famous Disney films like *Fantasia*, which also eludes reality in the way that Sendak desired.

Some of his other famous works include designing window displays for the toy store FAO Schwarz. Sendak's illustrations were first published in a book called *Atomics for the Millions* by Maxwell Leigh Eidinoff. While he began his career as an illustrator, it was not long before Sendak began to write his own children's books as well. He gained national acclaim writing and illustrating his most famous book, *Where the Wild Things Are*. The book is known for its illustrations of fanged and goofy monsters and their eerie yet whimsical appearance.



Preliminary drawing for Else Holmelund Minarik, *Little Bear's Visit* (New York Harper & Row, 1970), 21:3, Maurice Sendak Collection. Archives & Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.



Preliminary drawing for Maurice Sendak, *In The Night Kitchen* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 21:3, Maurice Sendak Collection. Archives & Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries

A half-century after it was published, the *School Library Journal* decided to identify Sendak's book as a top picture book. Sendak's characters are often deemed subversive, especially the protagonist of *Where the Wild Things Are* who does not always display model behavior. However, Sendak beautifully expresses the way children employ their wild and limitless imaginations in attempts escape from the regular world and dream of the fantastic and the sublime. Sendak has an incredible ability to display the true childhood experience that many children can relate to, and every adult can find their way back to.

Maurice Sendak spent much of his later years living in Danbury, Connecticut, where he died in 2012. He was known for guest lecturing at UConn and received an honorary doctorate from the University. The New York Times called Sendak "The most important children's book artist of the 20th century" and noted that his books displayed the "dark, terrifying, and hauntingly beautiful recesses of the human psyche." There are few people who have not grown up reading his books, and imagining with the same fervor that he did. We truly are lucky to have been able to experience the worlds he created for us in his books and illustrations.

The University of Connecticut's very own Dodd Center is proud to announce their acquisition of the Maurice Sendak

collection which was approved by UConn's Board of Trustees in February of 2018. The collection will be held in the Department of Archives and Special Collections and is supported by the Maurice Sendak Foundation. Lynn Caponera, the president of the Maurice Sendak Foundation has said that "[Sendak] had profound admiration for UConn's dedication to the art of the book, in its collections and its teachings." This is clear to see, being that UConn holds one of the largest collections of children's literature in the Northeast and aims to insure the preservation of the art of the best works created for children. The Sendak collection features over 800 monographs written and illustrated by Maurice himself. The Sendak collection includes 115



Preliminary drawing for Maurice Sendak, *Outside Over There* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 24.5, Maurice Sendak Collection. Archives & Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

pieces of regalia such as promotional toys, games, animals and other items that relate to Sendak's stories and characters. The majority of his works on display are first edition.

This collection has already attracted many students and staff at UConn from English undergraduates, to Creative Writers, to Art and Art History majors, to the students and staff of the Neag School of Education, and Psychology majors. The collection has been utilized by many visiting scholars and graduate students as well. This collection provides scholars, lovers of art, lovers of reading, and those with an incredible imagination a chance to bask in the world of fantasy that Maurice Sendak was a master of creating.

Announcing the 2019 Connecticut Student Writers Contest

The Connecticut Writing Project (CWP) sponsors *Connecticut Student Writers*, a magazine established in 1987 by the CWP to honor excellence in writing by students from kindergarten through high school. The highlight of the publication process is the Student Recognition Night, a celebration hosted by the CWP on the UConn campus.

The magazine provides an arena for Connecticut students to present their original work in poetry or prose. The *CSW* provides validation of authorship from kindergarten through high school, as well as provides an opportunity for some students to present their work before a live audience. Through the *CSW* pages, Connecticut students recognize the importance of writing in their lives. For some, writing for the *CSW* offers the stepping stone for further literary endeavors.

Please encourage student writers to submit! [Electronic Submissions](#) are preferred, but [hard copies](#) are also acceptable. Before submitting, please review the Connecticut Writing Project's privacy policy which you can find [here](#).