

Iowa Writing Project

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87 Questions and A Few Tentative Answers

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Abstract

“Writing, like life itself, is a voyage of discovery.”

Henry Miller

The article, “87 Questions and A Few Tentative Answers,” grew from journal entries the author recorded during her year as a Christa McAuliffe fellow. Throughout the year, Mapes read and wrote extensively, worked collaboratively with a fifth-grade teacher in implementing an interdisciplinary “Family Stories” project and shared learning with teachers in Iowa and surrounding states. This article examines issues, questions and answers which the author discovered during her McAuliffe year voyage.

87 Questions and A Few Tentative Answers

by Lola Mapes

7/1

Today is a new beginning - a beginning in the middle of the traditional year prompted by the Christa McAuliffe fellowship about which I was notified in April. And, as this year begins, I feel a sense of urgency, a feeling that there are so many things to do and places to go. Am afraid I'll run out of time.

Time! I need time to read. Within the past month I've purchased at least a dozen books, and in my eagerness to get at them, I've read tables of contents and scattered chapters - bits and pieces. I'm definitely going to schedule some *serious* reading time.

Time always seems to be short. But, how do I use it? Do I spend too much time crying about the lack of it, time I could spend to better advantage? A book I often return to is **Time and the Art of Living** by Robert Grudin. He mentions that "the extent to which we live from day to day, from week to week, intent on details and oblivious to larger presences is a gauge of our impoverishment in time." Grudin adds

We drive through long stretches of magnificent country, less with pleasure than anxiety and fatigue, and come away bearing only the jumbled images of stop signs, passing lanes and gas stations. Deprived of the continuum,

we lose not only the sole valid alternative to a present-centered existence but also the nourishing context which can give substance and value to the present itself.

7/5

So far I find the matters I ponder via the word processor a bit like those I write in the journal I keep in my purse. Ideas are splattered on the paper and are often simply chronological snippets with little attention to reflection. So, in addition to learning from books and people this year, I hope to find buried thinking as I explore ideas when writing ala computer. Undoubtedly, the entries will serve only as grist - bushels of bulk, drifts of chaff, but eventually I hope to reap a harvest with kernels of substance.

7/7

Was up at five - all ready to record yesterday on the computer disk - and I did so, complete with reflections and some slightly expanded thinking, but alas! CLINK-CLANK! BEEP! BEEP! And my words went down the computer drain. Right now I wonder why I ever elected to stray from the technology I had partially mastered. Everyone says the Macintosh is wonderful, magnificent, will do anything, everything - whatever needs to be done. If "frustration" were on one of those cute, pull-down menus, I'd drag it clear across the screen, then print my feelings in 72 point pitch.

7/9

....And, what obligation do we as teachers have when some of the edicts from on high dictate the way we should teach?.... when teaching practices are driven by textbooks, rigid schedules, and testing schemes?.... when, in fact, we know that very little learning happens when the teacher is on stage or when the teacher is the major decision-maker in the classroom?

Just this morning I found an article from **Interpreting Language Arts Research for the Teacher**. The article was from a publication written in the 70's. (That was 20+ years ago!) A few statements from these pages:

Students write best when they have something they deem valuable to say.

Writing chosen by students rather than assigned makes evaluation easier and more pleasant.

There is no research evidence that grammar as traditionally taught in school has any appreciable effect on the improvement of writing skill.

These are but three of the statements which I found that spoke to me. Why, then, if these findings were/are so conclusive, is change so difficult? Why do many teachers feel compelled to assign writing topics and genre? Why do they carve out a chunk of each year to "do" grammar? Actually, I think the very best way for people to start to believe some of the findings is to experience

them - just as happens in the IWP [Iowa Writing Project].

7/11

I'm a firm believer that asking questions and seeking answers are at the very core of learning. One of my favorite excerpts to consider and share when I'm talking with teachers is from Sue Hubbell's book, **A Country Year**. The subtitle of the book is "Living the Questions." Hubbell is a divorced woman who lives alone in the Ozarks and exists basically from her own hard work, and among other tasks, she raises bees. In the introduction of the book she makes a list of things she's learned from nature, then adds that she's learned "there are more questions than answers."

Is it because of tradition and training that we teachers ask and ask questions and questions? But, rather than "living the questions," we think them up (or maybe we *don't* think about the questions we ask) and then wait (or *do* we wait) for kids to give us the answers we expect. I'm sure that's *not* what Hubbell meant when she talks about "living the questions."

And, I'm thinking about the question Barb K. posed to me: "What do you worry about?" she asked. What *do* I worry about? As I'm living with that question, several others surface. Do I ask honest questions? friendly questions? or only testing questions? Is it okay occasionally to compromise completion so there's room for spontaneity and surprise? Do I schedule chunks of time kids can own - time

for them to question - time for them to seek and find answers to their questions? Perhaps I worry about whether or not I'm posing significant questions and seeking well-defined answers. I think I'll thank Barb for asking, "What do you worry about?"

Julie was over this p.m. and we talked and listened and listened and talked. Julie's an exemplary listener, and I learn from her every time we get together. She maintains there are just three questions we need to keep asking ourselves: 1) What do we do? 2) What do we do when we don't know? and, 3) What do we do when we don't know we don't know? I think the answer to the last question is to read, write, and find a colleague such as Julie. Then talk and listen.....

7/12

At breakfast this morning, Sharon gave me a copy of **Invitations** by Regie Routman. Routman's style is gentle and oh, so human. Her stories of teacher change are sprinkled with such phrases as, "I started off feeling overwhelmed and inadequate....." "What I had failed to take into consideration...." "In my struggle....." "I have slowly learned....." She mentions her hesitation about labeling her beliefs and practices as "whole language." I, too, think labels can be dangerous. Too often in education, I think we tend to label a group of kids - "at risk" or "learning disabled" - then try to "fix" them with a fragmented, prescriptive plan.

And, too often we "do" a program such as HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills), for example, with

little attention to "why?" We go through change motions without commitment and understanding. Thinking skills are taught from a series of exercises and questions during thirty minutes three days a week. And, is there cooperative learning *only* when we assign roles for each group member? It seems to me that perfectly good ideas/programs are ruined and become "stick-ons" because educators climb on a current bandwagon with little attention to why they're on the ride.

It seems to me the difference between many programs and a whole language belief system is the emphasis on the teacher's role. Instead of being whole language teachers, we need to be teacher/learners - with the emphasis on *learner*. But, it's easy to say, "I'm a whole language teacher," or "I'm a learner" - phrases which are simply rhetorical. If we are learners, shouldn't we be asking ourselves, "What am I learning?" "How am I learning?"

Seems the best way for teachers to better understand this learner stance is to be involved in new learning. Right now, I'm learning a lot about the computer. I know I have to or I'll be miserable. (I'll see to it that I make myself miserable!) The motivation is mine, and therefore, I'll accept the responsibility. Just reading the thick manuals will not guarantee that I will know where and how to save my words so I'll be sure to find them tomorrow. I have to try and fail, then read and talk and try again. I'll probably need to call on

my computer tutor when I'm really stuck.

Am I allowing the kids in my classroom to have the time they need to learn by trying and failing, then for reading and talking and trying again? Do they sense that it's okay to *not* know? Do they see and rely on themselves as decision-makers? Are they as comfortable seeking help as I am in asking for help from others? Am I as patient as my computer tutor?

7/18

How many kids feel they're on a roller coaster ride? Are the uncertainties in the lives of those who bounce from mother's home to dad's home and back again some of the jerks on the roller coaster ride?

When Craig was about eight or nine, he said, "I feel crowded." Did he feel he was on a roller coaster ride then? Did I listen? What could I have done and what did I do to acknowledge, then remove some of the restrictions/activities which contributed to his crowdedness? And, if Craig felt that sensation and was able to articulate it then, in a home that I would like to think resembled as close to normal as possible - if, indeed Craig had that insight and vision, aren't there kids in my classroom who may feel they're on a roller coaster and/or caught in the "crowded web?"

7/23

After I agreed to conduct the workshops [one three-day workshop and a series of four workshops spaced throughout the year], I sensed

a momentary panic, so I called Linda. She reassured me and promised to call me so we could talk at length. I feel more comfortable now. The one method I want to avoid when talking with teachers and administrators is what Tina termed a "tap dance." The performance mode may motivate for the moment, but change will not occur unless the learners (teachers and principals) are members of the dance troupe.

I do feel more comfortable with extended periods of time for workshops. Too often, only one session is scheduled for two hours and the participants expect to find answers and collect handouts with recipes for classroom activities. Several times I've heard teachers say, "Just tell me what to do."

But, I don't know what any one teacher should do; and I certainly don't know what each teacher in a group of thirty needs to know or do. I do believe it's important that we each take a look at our own beliefs, not only as a starting point for making changes in our teaching, but more importantly as an ever-continuing practice which informs and guides the decisions we make in our classrooms. So, somehow I need to encourage teachers to investigate their own beliefs. Jerome Harste says, "Instruction, whether by default or design, is theoretically based."

Constance Weaver's book, **Reading Process and Practice**, contains several excerpts, interviews and questionnaires which prompt thinking about how kids learn to read. I think I'll use the DeFord Theoretical

Orientation to Reading Profile (TORP) to trigger the participants' thinking about their beliefs. Then, as they bring their opinions to small group discussions, the teachers will have the opportunity to explore further their own views of reading and reading instruction. In times past when I've used this agree/disagree format with lists of belief statements, the ensuing dialogue has been spirited.

Perhaps I'll ask teachers to generate their own belief statements *before* we look at DeFord's or Routman's. I guess what I plan will hinge on the time available for the session; however, I will try somehow to structure it so participants are actively involved with their own learning.

I think I will also use Regie Routman's "Stages in Becoming a Whole Language Teacher."

1. I can't do this. It's too hard, and I don't know enough.
2. Maybe if I find out about it, it's possible.
3. I'll do exactly what the experts say.
4. I'll adapt the experts' work to my own contexts.
5. I trust myself as an observer-teacher-learner-evaluator.

When I first read her statements I found it provocative to review my own learning; so, perhaps other teachers will reflect on where they have been, where they are now, and where they wish to go. I'd like to think I'm at Routman's fifth stage because the "observer-teacher-learner-evaluator" descriptors

challenge me to keep sorting through what I believe.

7/25

I spent a good chunk of time reading in **Composing A Life** by Mary Catherine Bateson, and as I read, I underlined much of the text and jotted many notes on the inside cover. The book's messages are significant to the teacher-me, but are delivered free of educationese - refreshingly provocative!

"The designs of our days vary," Bateson says. Oh, YES! But I guess I hadn't thought of my days as having varying designs. More often they are simply expanses of time with, *too* often, a superimposed schedule to predetermine the design. My sense of varied day-designs emerging seems smoother and calmer than when day-designs are plotted and planned by one designer. Have often said that I need to follow the rhythm of the room [classroom] rather than relying on a predetermined, marked and measured tempo. So, what's the relationship between evolving designs and rhythms?

Bateson speaks of "practicing improvisation." That phrase jolted me. I had, in my surface thinking, just assumed that musicians improvised naturally. But, before they can improvise, I know they usually have a knowledge of chord structure and scales, and probably more importantly, they have a feeling for the sounds and movement of the music. So improvisation is not as natural or as unplanned as it would initially appear to be.

Bateson says that "life is an improvisatory art." Shouldn't teaching be an improvisatory art? That view feels freeing to me. If my improvisation grows from the sounds and movements of the kids, then natural designs and the rhythm of the room will emerge and support their songs....melodies....choruses.

And the next statement I jotted is... "self-knowledge is empowering." There's that "power" word again. More and more often I find extensions of the word - "empowering," "depowering." And the "power" idea prods me to think about *power sources*. I'm not sure anyone can empower anyone else, just as I doubt that I nor anyone else can truly motivate another person. In times past I've muddled around with the idea that there are two kinds of motivation - external and internal. I've long maintained that as a teacher I may *think* I have the power to motivate, but, in reality, I can only provide external motivation. Oh, yes! I can create the living conditions in the classroom - time for kids to read and write and choose, time and structure for them to learn from each other, and the safety to make mistakes and try again. But, the doer/learner of whatever task will ultimately be the one who also is the motivator if learning "takes." Cambourne, in the schematic model of learning, notes that "Learners who lose the ability to make decisions are depowered."

Bateson also mentions "continuity" and "discontinuity" several times. She notes that we are "guilty of holding to the continuity we have,

however profoundly it is flawed." My first impulse, is "OF COURSE!" Continuity is comfortable - continuity is already going and we don't have to think to keep it going. Continuity implies moving forward and isn't that what learning and growing are about? Yes, continuity is comfortable, but when we become too comfortable, we tend to coast. Continuity is comfortable so we coast.

But, if continuity is comfortable, what about discontinuity? That word kind of sticks in my mouth, and the "dis" prefix tends to color it with an uncomfortable feeling. "Dis" suggests "undo", or "opposite of" or "break away." Yet, Bateson reminds us that discontinuities such as career interruptions and/or business restructuring are realities; and one way to live and grow through the "broken assumptions of continuity is to affirm ourselves and our skills in a new environment" - thus, bridging discontinuities. In other words, it seems to me she is saying that discontinuities should be regarded, not as impediments to change, but as opportunities to explore the creative potential of interruptions and conflict - as a time to relearn skills and as starting points for new challenges and growth.

It seems that we in education are sometimes satisfied with holding on to continuity. We view new research and the directions it provides, not as change challenges along the way, but as discontinuities which stand in our way - discontinuities such as a different view of who's in control of learning

and/or a radical change in the ways time is allotted in our schedules. We need to “break away” and accept discontinuities as opportunities for growth and change.

8/2

The competition issue as it relates to education has always been bothersome to me. Yet, when I first started teaching more than thirty years ago, I put kids in the traditional three reading groups. But, no matter what I did to encourage all students and to de-emphasize the groups, I knew very well that kids in the “lower” groups were uncomfortable. I remember, with a shudder, some asking if they could move *up* to the next reading group. Perhaps I wasn’t thinking in terms of competition then, (perhaps I wasn’t even thinking) but the frightful fact was that placing kids in groups was placing them in a win/lose structure.

I’m certainly more comfortable with the structure of my classroom now as kids are allowed to make choices about the reading and writing they do. And, I keep working to develop a community of learners rather than little clumps of labeled learners. But now, as I’m reading Alfie Kohn’s book, **No Contest, The Case Against Competition**, I’ve been jolted to again reconsider my classroom practices. Am I subtly fostering competition in ways of which I may be unaware?

Kohn offers substantive research to dispel the myths that competition prods productivity and that superior performance requires competition. What about grades? What about

ITBS [Iowa Test of Basic Skills]? Kohn also explores the relationship of self-esteem and competition. He points out that the closer we look at competition, the more damaging it is. “Its effects are sometimes insidious; sometimes practically invisible, but almost always unhealthy,” he says.

Kohn maintains that competition is learned - that it’s not a given attribute of human nature. The “human nature” myth, as he refers to it, certainly challenged my thinking, and I’ll need to continue to rethink that section of the book.

But more importantly, I need to think about the effects of competition in the classroom. Kohn says that just as competition is learned, likewise, cooperation can be learned. I’m sure his observations about cooperation in the classroom have been affected by the cooperative learning research of David and Roger Johnson. But, beyond what the Johnsons have written, I need to seriously consider the implications of competition and cooperation in the classroom. What are ways in which cooperation can be taught? Or, can it be taught? How can I structure the time schedule so children have time to learn to cooperate by cooperating?

I can’t believe this book has been out since 1986 and I hadn’t found it. But, since I have, I’ve broadened my opinions about the competition issue. And, next year when parents come to school for conferences, I’ll put this book along with other significant reading material on the

“waiting-for-conference” reading table. I’ll also include a brief recommendation of the book in my newsletter. The blurb on the back of **No Contest** suggests that it should be “required reading for every parent, teacher, manager, and national leader.” I agree.

8/3

How can I communicate the mix of excitement and nervousness I know I will feel that day [the first day of a three-day workshop]? How can I tie this feeling with my teacher-past behavior? I certainly don’t want to dwell on it, but I need to relate a few select, sharp images - images which will invite the teachers and principals to sense my feelings. Hopefully, some or many of them will be feeling the same kind of tentative excitement. There, I kind of like the tentative excitement idea. Perhaps I can integrate that phrase.

What do I remember about my very first day of teaching school? I don’t recall that we had any before-school meetings. I do remember the smell of varnish and wax, and the tall ceilings and the thirty-six desks nailed to the floor in straight rows. I don’t remember anything about the textbooks or curriculum guides or schedule requirements. I remember the blue and white striped cotton dress which I wore the first day and how I had to repair it with safety pins because I pushed the merry-go-round and ripped the seam where the bodice and skirt were sewn together. And, I remember the night before the first day. I was up at least a dozen times during the night - afraid I would oversleep and be late for

school. I was reliving and re-feeling the same excitement and nervousness I had felt before all the first days I had gone to school as a student. But, now, after one year of classes at Iowa State Teachers College, I was a teacher, and I had grand and glorious plans of what I would teach those third and fourth graders in Menlo, Iowa. I don’t remember whether or not I even considered if I had the answers to teaching, but undoubtedly I thought I had them, because doesn’t everyone have the answers when he or she is eighteen?

8/5

Sometimes we become preoccupied with activities. So, the recurring question must always be, “why am I doing what I am doing?” I’ve gone from bible to bible, from expert to expert in finding my own way. My personal and professional beliefs embody the personal perspectives of all my gurus as well as those of my colleagues. Another question which keeps arising as I listen and learn is “Whose agenda?” Not only do we have to rethink our agendas in terms of what we’re learning, but we must also recognize and allow kids to set and follow their agendas. And, oh yes! We must contend with institutional agendas as touted by the “theys” lurking in the peripheries of education. Is one of our jobs, then, to be agenda jugglers?

....Sanctioned and unsanctioned learning? How can we sort what is what? What is unsanctioned learning? Wouldn’t it be better to sanction all school learning so kids do not waste time on the

unsanctioned? This point needs a lot more thinking about. (Never end a sentence with a preposition!)

8/7

A first grader once remarked, after the principal had been to observe the teacher for her tri-yearly evaluation: "How come you change voices when Mr. Madison visits in our room?" And, why do some teachers refer to themselves as Miss/Mrs./Mr. rather than I? For example, why does Teacher Smith say to her class, "Mrs. Smith wants you to get ready for recess"?

Do we pull forth our teacher voices, teacher mannerisms and teacher faces when we go into the classroom? Are we teachers first, then people; or, are we people first and then teachers? It seems to me we should be the latter.

8/17

An article in "Language Arts" also points to "partially grasped ideas and periods of confusion as a natural part of learning." That fits with Cambourne's condition - approximation. It seems to me that we teachers are not patient with approximation. Don't we need to make sincere, serious comments which let kids know we acknowledge approximation as an acceptable component of learning? Too often we focus on the deficits of kids, and somehow convey to them that deficits are unacceptable. That's one reason I often talk and act in a celebratory manner in the classroom with respect to mistakes kids make. Perhaps our attitudes toward mistakes are a result of our mental

models, those mental models I've been reading about in Senge's book. Perhaps?

9/1

Early this morning I read around in **The Fifth Discipline** by Peter Senge. Senge mentions "personal mastery" as one of the disciplines. I agree that each individual has a responsibility to be a learner if he or she is to be a productive team member in any learning organization. HOWEVER, I'm uncomfortable with the word "mastery." I don't really think any person ever *masters* any concept or skill. I wonder if a better phrase might be "personal achievement," or "personal proficiency" or "personal attainment." Senge maintains that individuals who practice the discipline of personal mastery experience gradual change within themselves and are always growing through "integrating reason and intuition, continually seeing more of our connectedness to the world; compassion and commitment to the whole." He reminds us that most adults have little sense of real vision. Rather, most focus on goals or objectives. I stopped for rethinking time when I read, "The ability to focus on ultimate intrinsic desires, not only on secondary goals, is a cornerstone of personal mastery....It is a process of continually focusing and refocusing on what one truly wants, on one's visions."

The word "re-focus" jumped out at me. I was reminded of the "re's" in Bateson's **Composing A Life**. It seems to me that "re" is one of the most critical prefixes related to learning because when we "RE" we

are practicing, in the broadest sense of the word. Rethink, research, review, revise, rewrite..... And, if and when any action is "RE'ED," then change and growth evolves. I guess it's probably important to think about the verbs to which the "re" is added. What happens if the "re" is placed as a prefix for a counter-productive verb? That's probably a dumb question, but as I'm vacuuming or walking, I'll broaden my thinking about the "re's."

9/4

Mildred was indeed upset after her meeting with the reading resource teachers. The district has a plan so we teachers can be accountable. The plan involves many checklists and tight guidelines for diagnosing kids' problems. It seems to me the emphasis is not on what kids CAN do, but rather on what they CAN'T do. It's kind of the "find and fix" mentality. I keep wondering for whom is the accountability. If it's for parents, it seems to me they would be more supportive if we teachers would focus on what their kids CAN do. We need not worry about most parents being aware of what their kids CAN'T do.

9/16

Lunch with Sally and JKP. JKP posed these questions: Is it our right to question? Is it our job to question? Two provocative questions. My first-impulse answer is a resounding YES! But, wait! Questioning is not always viewed as a **professional** behavior. What's a person to do?

10/8

[Open House] All evening parents and kids browsed in Barb's classroom. Barb set me up at the front table where I had the "Family Stories" information sheets and a few books for parents to browse through. [**Families Writing** by Peter Stillman, **Growing Up Writing** by Arlene Silberman, and **Family Tales, Family Wisdom** by Robert U. Akeret] It was a comfortable, satisfying evening with many kids stopping by to chat. Valerie, now in 8th grade, said she had decided to become a novelist. She added that she knew she couldn't count on that income immediately, so, in the meantime, she will be an English teacher. Kirsten brought me some of her writing about her dogs, Mindy and Maggie. She wrote poems and stories about her dogs last year, and the piece she's writing now seems, at a glance, to have sharper focus. Jason came by with his latest science fiction piece. He is continuing to work with the genre he wrote last year. Gina summarized in detail the story she's working on, and when I asked her where she got her ideas, she said it was from the read-and-retell story we worked on last year about "The Old House." I'm always surprised what kids hook on to. And, that incident reminds me that it is important to ask questions which prod kids' thinking about their writing and getting-ideas processes.

The parents seemed to be enthusiastic about the prospects of the "Family Stories" project. Mrs. D. said that her mother who lives in Kansas City had written a book about her (the mother's) life. Mrs. D.

hinted that perhaps she might be able to come to Clive to share her writing. Mrs. H., Eric's mother, said she had a copy of the ship's log when her ancestors had come to America. Perhaps her interest will, in turn, pique Eric's interest, and he will be a bit more willing to get genuinely and productively involved with some of the project. Gabe was there with his new step-dad, and he seemed uncomfortable. His step-dad seemed to be sincerely interested in Gabe's work, but Gabe acted embarrassed and didn't really want to talk in-depth about anything he had done.

10/11

Have been working on plans for the "Using Learning Logs to Build Personal Connections" session at Ft. Dodge next Monday. I'll share kids' writing from learning logs on transparencies and will take two buckets of kids' learning logs. I think I'll ask workshop participants to take a learning log as they come into the session. As teachers look through the kids' work, they will immediately become focused on the session topic. Their talk is usually animated as they share something a student has written. Oh, yes! Kids' voices are strong.

But, sometimes teachers say, "My kids don't like to write in learning logs because they did it last year." And, kids may groan when a teacher says, "Write for 15 minutes," or "Write one page." But, it seems to me that we teachers may be to blame if and when students acquire these attitudes.

I often go back to Fulwiler's book [**The Journal Book**] to rethink my thinking about journalling. Fulwiler says, "Every time you ask students to write in class, do something active and deliberate with what they've written." ACTIVE....DELIBERATE.... These two considerations as accompaniments for using learning logs in the classroom have helped me lift journalling above a time-filler exercise or an isolated record. I make sure there's time for students to share their entries, and sharing validates the notion that "what you have to say is important." Of course, sharing is an option, but it can be facilitated in a variety of ways. Share with a partner. Share with a small group. Share with the whole group. Exchange journals and give time for other kids to respond in writing. Ask kids for permission to type their entries and include them in a "Journal Jottings" publication. AND....the teacher must, in my opinion, regularly collect and respond in writing to the ideas in the learning logs.

And, I think it's important, too, for kids to be given time to go back and read what they've written. Such questions as "What surprised you?" or "What have you learned?" or "What did you find that you'd like to write more about?" prompts kids to assess their learning. Theirs is personal and sanctioned learning.

Since I've been keeping a journal regularly, I better understand the legitimacy of the writing in learning logs, and I think it's important for kids to recognize learning-log writing as *real* writing.

10/21

Spent my day at the Hoyt Sherman auditorium nodding agreement with Jim Trelease's messages. My in-purse journal is crammed with notes and quotes reflecting Trelease's wise words.

...But, part of the streamlining has been by using worksheets. We've gone worksheet overboard....1000 worksheets per year, averages 6 per day. Kids think the worksheet is reading. What you are fed is what you consume.

...Story is the central focus of the human condition. Keep trying to reconstruct stories to understand. No one dreams non-fiction. Stories from books give kids an outline on which they can hang their stories.

...Oh, yes. There are some parts of learning that are boring.... the value of spring training.... But, in some classrooms spring training becomes an all-year season.

...If you like worksheets, you're going to love to read the phonebook for the plot.

...Teachers aren't reading research - only 20% of teachers read professional literature. (Tragic, if true!) And, if it *is* true, wouldn't it be a good idea to offer a series of staff development sessions during which teachers were given time to read and discuss professional literature?

10/23

I've found that asking authentic questions - those for which I'm not sure of the answer - is a more

engaging, meaningful pursuit than sticking with the questions at the end of the chapters. I'm just as comfortable, probably even more so, asking young readers a question about books they are reading when I haven't read the book. Of course, it does take careful listening to ask that type of authentic question - especially if you as the question-asker are trying to clarify a point the reader has made. Besides, if I haven't read the book, I am less apt to interject my opinion or my understanding. The moment a teacher interacts in such a manner, the teacher may be taking over, and often the kids receive the implied message that their thinking or ideas are of little value.

10/26

Only the learner can accurately assess learning. It may be different at first to articulate what and how, but, of course, growing in articulateness is something the learner will discover as yet another benchmark of learning.

10/28

Denny Taylor jolted me with her statement that "literacy is not always liberating." I didn't know that I didn't know that. And her statement set me to thinking about my practices related to those kids whom I've often referred to as "reluctant learners." Undoubtedly those are the ones we and the systems (educational and societal) have failed. I sensed Taylor's passion - her caring for people. And, I should write her a letter.

More Taylor: Working with kids means finding what they like to do.

Learning outside of school is not, in many cases, transferred. We need less coercion and more elaboration. Often all we do is administer a LONG list of tests....and, what do those tests REALLY tell us?

11/1

The first storm of the season is growling, romping, rampaging. Deluges of cold rain soaked the city yesterday. Temperatures flirted near freezing - serving up the warning of "STAY OFF THE STREETS!" Overnight the wind whistled into the winter party. And I snuggled in and read some Stafford - knowing full well that the party would last into tomorrow.

11/4

....What age is "old?" Why do you think so - three reasons? [in the classroom, learning log prompt]

Kids mentioned several different ages from 40 to 50 to 80. Scott mentioned that the life expectancy for men was over 80 years. Haley wrote that some people say, "Life begins at 40," and she thought that 80 was old. Several people wrote that a certain age was "over the hill." Neither Eric nor Leslie gave an age; rather they talked about whether or not people were active, what they did every day (such as lying in bed and doing nothing) and based their comments on those reasons. I guess I would have to agree with those two, because I find that my definition keeps changing as I get older. Probably when I was 10 or 11, I would have said 60 was old. But, now that I'm in my sixth decade, I've changed my tune. I think I might change my

definition to go along with what Haley said. Life begins at ??? (whatever age you are)! Then if people have that attitude and outlook, there won't be many OLD people!

....Morgan shared a ghost poem she was writing. She said she was having a little bit of trouble with the rhyme in the middle of the poem, but she's going to work with it. I know how she feels about rhyme. I can usually start out pretty well with a rhyming poem, but then I run out of rhyming words which make sense with the message I'm trying to convey.

11/5

....Well! This is the second copy of today's entry. Somewhere in the innards of this mighty Macintosh is my first copy. Rather than spend anymore time searching, I'm simply re-writing. I have a call into Kimber, my computer tutor. Maybe she can help!

11/8

The kids started the day with small groups sharing portions of the book, **How Does It Feel To Be Old?** Their insights were provocative. As they were working in their small groups, there was a serious buzz. They talked and listened and respected what others said. Their observations were sharp and each group called attention, not only to details in the illustrations, but also their interpretations. "She wore fancy clothes when she went on vacation. She must have been rich even when she was little."

Talked with Kari about her Nancy Drew book. Kari is definitely a serious reader. She said she had tired of the "Babysitter" books, but now she couldn't get enough of Nancy Drew. She knew about the "old" and "new" Nancy Drew books. She recognized the predictability of the plot and then added, "Maybe I'll get tired of these stories, too."

11/21

...[at the NCTE convention] The first session I went to was by Lucy Calkins. She has certainly changed since I first was under her tutelage. She talked about territories we rework. She quoted Donald Murray who says, "Writing is rooted in the swamps," then posed the question, "What do we want to explore?"

Too often, she says, we try to take the mystery out of life. She cited the elaborate adult-planned playgrounds where there are ramps, rooms, platforms and hiding niches branching from the main pathways of the play equipment. She challenged us to create our own adventures instead of planning others' adventures. She said we should grow up composing expeditions. (Perhaps that's what I'm doing this year!)

Calkins used the words "inventors," "dreamers," and "initiators" as synonyms for learners. She suggested that we need to linger instead of running, running, running....

11/24

[at the NCTE convention] Attended a packed session with Jane Hansen

and Don Graves reporting on their research about portfolios. Jotted only a few notes in my in-purse journal....

....Kids should have the complete choice as to what should be included in the portfolios. There are many literacy activities outside of school, and it's important to recognize these happenings as legitimate learning. So, perhaps a piano recital program might be in the portfolio....or a birthday card a child made for his dad. (Certainly a broadened view of a portfolio.) Again, kids must do the choosing. We must have a long-term view of it. We may not always be pleased with kids' choices.

....Beware of anyone who mandates portfolios if he or she doesn't keep a portfolio.

....Recommended that teachers keep and share their own portfolios.

....Write about each item that goes in the portfolio. Choosing what to put in and why is the REAL evaluation process.

....We crave certainty at any price. We want comparison to know if we're winning. We are urged to produce standardization. Keep the portfolio ideas fresh. We crave destination too soon.

As usual, Don Graves challenged my thinking, and his comment, "We crave destination too soon," reminds me of one of his quotes which I share with teachers:

I've gradually come to trust questions that lurk in the shadows and make me

wonder about children and the issues that surround their learning. I say gradually because I'm the type who enjoys a straight-ahead task whether in writing, teaching or research. I state my objective, lay out the procedures and plunge ahead to completion. High activity and determined purpose, however, tend to make me look for preconceived answers to my questions.

I'm beginning to slow down and keep the solution to my problems open longer.

12/3

Have been spending quite a bit of time in class talking about phrasing "good" questions. We've been referring to them as boring or trigger questions. Art Costa cites as one characteristic of intelligent behavior the habit of questioning and problem posing. That seems like such a logical characteristic if we in fact are looking to learn. The family stories unit is a good place to emphasize and study the art of questioning as the kids create interview questions. If we believe that we do indeed learn from others, it seems that learning will be accommodated in direct proportion to the kind and quality of questions which are asked. One thing the kids learned early is that if a question can be answered "yes" or "no", it is probably a boring question.

This questioning skill is important because too often we as teachers ask 1) questions which can be answered "yes" or "no," or, 2) questions for

which we already know the answer - or at least our opinionated answers. All this question talk has been good for me.

12/10

Here I am at the Country Kitchen in Pella. As usual, I couldn't wait to get home to read the teachers' [from Ottumwa] comments about today's inservice session, so I'll drink coffee, read comments and jot a few notes.

[teacher comments]

"I especially liked the talk about celebrations. It is encouraging to hear that teachers are really excited about their personal successes because of their students' successes. These are ALL-WIN situations."

"I looked through the bucket of learning logs. [the kids' logs] Good to see first hand. Spending time with them gave me some ideas to try next week."

"Just ideas in general to push me farther in the whole language direction. So many things to think about and try. Augh! Where to begin? I guess the main point is to begin and go from there."

I sensed more enthusiasm and confidence in the teachers' comments after this session. Many mentioned the value of seeing kids' work. Kind of reinforces my beliefs about the importance of listening to kids so we can learn from them.

But, oops! Here's one I need to ponder. *"Theory yuck! I need ideas."*

Brief and to the point! And I tried to blend theory with practices, but obviously I wasn't successful according to this person. I wonder what the reaction would have been if I had asked for a response to Jerome Harste's statement, "Instruction, whether by default or design, is theoretically based"?

12/19

The car was dead this morning and Franklyn was gone tuning a piano. I panicked and called school. Soon Mildred came after me. When I got to class I observed from afar.

Eric looked away from his reading three times within that many minutes. His eyes were up and down, and I wonder if the book he has is too hard, or if perhaps he has other concerns on his mind. Barb told me it is rumored that his parents are separated and, if so, that burden is probably on his mind.

1/13

Back to school and the feeling that the kids are the spark plugs that drive me came through once again. I spent part of independent reading, reading **Cracker Jackson** - a gentle introduction to child abuse. Will need to include it in the "Family Stories" bibliography.

Had a long conference with Jason about his hockey story. He has made progress on it and the notion of ownership as it's related to interest and involvement was evident. But,

once again, how much? how far? does one push for what I deem as needed improvement for clarity. I need to remember (and act accordingly) that Jason is the primary decision-maker.

1/20

Neil seemed to be having a hard time getting started, so I asked him to read what he had written about cars. I really don't know much about them, so it was easy to ask honest questions - the answers from which I could learn a lot. I was surprised that some radio-controlled cars cost from \$100 to \$500. When I asked Neil about what made them cost so much, he explained that the materials from which they were made helped determine the cost. I mentioned that there were probably many people who, like me, didn't know much about cars, and that perhaps he might want to add some of that information. He was busy cutting, pasting and writing during the rest of class.

1/25

I need to incorporate some of what I'm learning in Barb's class to share with the teachers. I've done a better job of listening and following the student's lead since I've been working in her classroom. Is it because I have an afternoon to think about what has happened? Am I less frazzled by the schedule? I'm not sure what makes the difference, but I do feel less pressure and do not feel so guilty taking the time to listen to kids. Many times in the past, in the pressure of time (my excuse), I've tended to slough off the personal stories kids have to tell.

2/11

A sense of commitment and urgency as the kids are preparing for their sharing sessions with others at Clive and their parents. As I watch them work, I'm once again faced with the question as to how much of the work at school should/needs to be driven by assignment. The work the kids are doing now is driven by assignments they have given themselves.

I interviewed four kids this morning - kind of an open-ended talk session. I visited with Amber, Stephanie, Mat and Nick.

Amber and her dad had gone back to the library after her initial visit with a small group of classmates. That kind of parental involvement speaks of a benefit that can't be measured. Stephanie said she likes to talk to old people because "they know everything." That's an astute observation, but, I wonder, in practice, how many kids "live" this belief. Perhaps projects like this will help to break down some age barriers and, in turn, support intergenerational understanding.

We got into the question of questions. They said they thought it was "pretty hard" to write/ask trigger questions; however, they said they thought a lot more about the kinds of questions they asked. Mat pointed out that he's heard a lot of interview questions during the Olympic interviews, and that some of them were kind of dumb..."How did you feel when you received the gold medal?" I guess I agree with him, but, once again, the issue of asking good questions arises. They also

talked about the Mike Tyson trial and interviews. Amber said, "It seems like all rich people are innocent and all poor people are guilty."

2/13

Such a busy and exciting day. When the original idea for this project came to mind over a year ago, I never envisioned exactly how it would turn out. Of course, had I KNOWN how it would have evolved, that would have been contrary to what I say I believe about following the kids' agendas and the rhythm of the room.

What I have noticed is that, given time, "good" things happen. But often we are so hung up on our agendas, that time is not given for a community to develop - time for me to learn from kids, time for kids to learn from themselves and others, time for a community to develop. The importance of community is mentioned over and over in the professional literature, but often it serves only as rhetoric, with little attention to the conditions necessary for a community to develop.

But, wait! Perhaps I'm guilty of touting "community" without really thinking about what my "teacher" responsibilities are if the kids' feelings of safety and belonging are nurtured - if all kids are to become actively-involved, respected learners in the classroom community.

Probably the teacher behaviors I've had to work hardest to change are giving up some control and refo-

cusing my agenda so kids can be involved in setting their agendas. But, it isn't easy to let go, step back and give students center stage. It takes courage, patience and practice. I used to be perfectly happy and confident when I orchestrated the activities, chose books the kids should read - when I assigned all the writing topics as well as the format for reports, autobiographies, rhyming and unrhyming poetry - on and on. Oh, yes! I *was* careful to ask open-ended, thought-provoking questions. But, I don't think I even considered encouraging kids to be question-askers. There just wasn't enough time in the schedule.

So, not only have I had to give up assignment-type control, but I've also had to seriously consider the ways I control time. I still believe in the importance of predictability in a classroom learning environment, but now the time-predictability means scheduling generous amounts of time when kids can be question-askers and answer-seekers - when they can be individual, collaborative, even negotiating decision-makers. They need plenty of room to construct their own meaning. And it's essential that they know there is not one *right* meaning.

But, a community will not grow if there isn't structure. Don Graves reminds me that classrooms need careful structuring so kids can function more independently; and I *am* responsible for structuring time so kids are allowed to become the center of their own learning. Graves also points out that there are

occasions when the teacher gives directives. He says, "the more choices children have, the more they need to understand the limits of their choices. Choice without limits places children in one of the most difficult behavioral prisons." It seems to me that a community is defined by boundaries and shaped by structure.

I've also had to abandon my belief that my classroom has to be quiet. Jim D. says that kids must have access, not only to a choice of materials, but also to others and their ideas. And when kids are allowed and encouraged to talk about ideas and issues, the classroom won't be pin-drop quiet. Sometimes when particularly shy children or those who lack confidence in themselves are reluctant to join in, I encourage them to read an excerpt from their learning logs, or I may ask them to recommend books they've read to another student. It seems to me there are dozens of opportunities every day when I can encourage kids to help and support each other. So, instead of one teacher and twenty-eight students, the classroom is the residence of twenty-nine teacher/learners. As the figure-head teacher, my priority is my own learning, both in and out of the classroom. I read, write and talk *with* the kids, not at them. And because I'm learning with them, I respect them as fellow learners. I'm aware of what each knows, *can* do and is able to offer others in the class. As I show respect for and trust in all kids, these feelings are contagious and the classroom community will be nurtured.

I'm also reminded of a community-related question attributed to Mary Ellen Giacobbe - a question I continue to ask myself: "What am I doing that kids can/should be doing?" For years I spent hours alphabetizing, by author, the 300+ books in the classroom library. And, after a couple of weeks, the books were "unalphabetized."

But, several years ago, I unpacked the books from their summer-boxed homes and piled them on all the kids' desks. Their job was to alphabetize, by authors, the library books. The job took about an hour a day for more than a week. (I was uncomfortable with the time it was taking, but I stuck with the plan.) After the kids had arranged the books on the shelves, they claimed responsibility for making sure the books weren't "unalphabetized." The students "owned" the library system.

Despite this success story, I continue to discover tasks I'm doing that kids can do. So, I need to keep living with Giacobbe's question, as well as the questions about control, time, choice, access, ownership....I need to remember that a community doesn't just happen after two or six or nine weeks. Rather, the sense of community is a feeling which grows and expands, much the same way my learning evolves. And, as I accept my teacher responsibilities as a member of the community, I need ongoing courage, patience and practice.

2/15

It is with a tinge of regret that my time in Barb's classroom is over. It's amazing to me that the time extended three weeks over the original schedule. And, once again, I'm struck by how comfortable it was to allow the time to extend. Much credit must go to Barb for this; she was willing and comfortable for the project to go on. I'm sure I've written before, but the observation bears repeating: We in education need to be less concerned by rigid schedules and more concerned with who and what happens within time frames.

I was reading just the other day about someone describing his encounters with American history as he was "taught" it at several levels in his schooling. He said something to the effect that each year his teachers seemed to run out of time when they got to the last 50-100 years of history. Then, he pointed out that many important, world-changing events have occurred recently - the fall of the Berlin wall, the crumble of Communism, etc. So, what happens as history years keep piling up and teachers continue to follow the book and run out of time? It seems to me that perhaps we should start where we are and move backwards through history.

2/26

I completed **Walking Trees** by Ralph Fletcher. It is the account of a writer and educational consultant who worked under the tutelage of Lucy Calkins in classrooms of the New York City schools. My emotions ran the gamut from amused to angry to

sympathetic. The message certainly emphasizes the idea that kids of all backgrounds should be offered the opportunities to try to make sense of their lives through writing. I did get the feeling that occasionally the author might think he had some answers, but at other times I felt his uncertainty about what to do given the teachers and principals in the schools in which he worked. I sensed the same diversities that are present in any classroom or in any faculty in any school. Only the setting was different, but the sameness - the parallels - gave me food for thinking a different way from yet another perspective about writing and learning and teaching.

3/9

...Does ? ? ? a chemist's formula - ingredients - percentages - really tell us about ice cream? about vanilla ice cream as an intermission in a hot, humid day or a long walk in the searing sun?

Does ? ? ? a chart of half notes and quarter notes of various tonal vibrations sum up Bach's Brandenburg concertos or Mozart's minuets or Sousa's marches?

4/15

In the evening, Mildred and I went to our second poetry class. A fellow from Drake was the visiting professor. He has had some poetry published; however, it seems to me, his approach to poetry is defensive. He spoke of how to get kids interested in poetry with gimmicks and games.

If games are played,
There well may be winners
and losers,
And poets don't stack up that
way.

He mentioned that most kids and adults are intimidated by poetry. Perhaps that is true, but if we/they are intimidated, shouldn't we work on getting unintimidated, and isn't the best way to get unintimidated to get meaningfully involved in writing poetry? I was, and still am to a degree, intimidated by artists creating oil paintings. So, I went to a class. Instead of the instructor telling us about artists and techniques, or reminding us that only a few ever produce great works of art, she encouraged us to see the shades and subtleties of colors. Then, when I asked, she helped me blend cadmium red, zinc white and cobalt blue to create hues for the fringed edge of the pansies I was painting. As I bridged the purples from palette to canvas, I dabbed and brushed and looked again and again, always experimenting with shading and shapes until I was satisfied. Yes, I'm a less intimidated artist but not because of gimmicks or games.

4/30

Oops! My last writing was 4/27. When I let but a day or two go by and don't write specifics, I lose them, and each day blurs into another, with few remnants to remember what shapes my day.

I did read again in Graves' book, **Build A Literate Classroom**. And, I was once again struck by the simple, no-nonsense suggestions he reminds

me of. More and more I'm convinced that I need to take even a slower pace when I'm beginning a year. Involve the kids in setting up the space. Involve them in questions to be answered. Listen! Listen! Listen! and give them time. Too often, I think, I worry about getting "stuff" done expediently, and I'm only allowing kids to be involved at the surface level.

There's a parallel there, I think, with site-based decision making. Are we as teachers actually allowed to make substantive decisions, or are they only surface decisions which will not, in fact, trigger any changes? Both issues seem to be grounded in the issue of trust. Do I trust the kids to make decisions? Can I live with their decisions? Likewise, do the administrators and board trust and allow teachers to make significant decisions?

5/18

Late this afternoon I went to the Community Center where about 100 teachers were gathered to hear Don Graves. He talked about questions, and that talk is empowering to me - one who at times becomes obsessed with questions, one who feels a kind of safety with questions. He challenged us to ask ourselves "What's it for?" about anything we do in the classroom. He also posed the question, "How do we help people tell their stories?"

6/1

Just a month left of my official year off, and I'm thinking of the final report. How do I summarize a year's worth of learning? No true-false or

multiple choice test will measure it. And, do I even know what I've learned?

I do know the Macintosh is more Lola-friendly, and stored in its hard disk are family stories plans, annotated bibliographies, workshop agendas, teachers' belief statements, transparency and handout masters, correspondence and kids' writing. But, the most important document for me is this journal. I print it day by day and often go back to read many or a few pages. Yesterday I read all 500+ pages. Often I was interrupted by questions - my tentativeness on paper. Actually, I prefer the word "tentativity" (the spell check clanked a warning about the spelling of that word) to describe my states of thinking and doing. The "tivity" part of the word reminds me of activity. Activity reminds me of something happening, so "tentativity" implies doing something with permission for changing the direction or the way in which that something is or can be done. In my opinion, "tentativity" is a healthy state, and I'm comfortable with questions as long as I find a few tentative answers.

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Lola Mapes has taught at Clive elementary School in the West Des Moines Community School district for twenty-eight years. Presently, she is a fourth-grade teacher at Clive. Mapes also has teaching experience at all grade levels in Des Moines, El Paso, Texas and Exira, Iowa where she taught high school English.

During the summer of 1986, Mapes participated in Level I of the Iowa Writing Project. She has also participated in the IWP Level II project as well as the journaling seminar.

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The Iowa Youth Writing Project (IYWP) is a volunteer-powered writing and literacy outreach organization that aims to empower and inspire K-12 youth throughout Eastern Iowa using language arts and creative thinking. Housed in the University of Iowa's Magid Center for Undergraduate Writing, the IYWP provides one-of-a-kind writing, publishing, and creative learning opportunities to Iowa's children and teens, with an emphasis on marginalized youth. The International Writing Program. Since 1967, over 1,500 writers from more than 150 countries have been in residence at the University of Iowa. Learn More. COURSES. The IWP Digital Learning Program offers English-language courses centered around the theme of creative writing. Learn. RESIDENCY. International Writing Program 100 Shambaugh House The University of Iowa Iowa City IA 52242-2020 USA tel: +1 319-335-0128 Campus address: 100 SHSE Street address: 430 N. Clinton St. +1 319-335-0128. iwp@uiowa.edu. Iowa Writing Project Sheila Benson, Co-Director, sheila.benson@uni.edu 319-273-2285. Jeremy Schraffenberger, Co-Director, jeremy.schraffenberger@uni.edu 319-273-3879. Brooke Wonders, Co-Director, brooke.wonders@uni.edu 319-273-2821. University of Northern Iowa 1005 Bartlett Hall Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0502. Created in 1977, the Iowa Writing Project (IWP) offers professional growth opportunities for Iowa teachers and advocates exemplary teaching of writing and use of writing for learning in Iowa schools. The Iowa Youth Writing Project (IYWP) is an arts outreach organization based at the University of Iowa that empowers, inspires, and engages K-12 youth throughout the state using language arts and creative thinking. Online course registration opens April 1st for Finding Your Voice: The Art of the College Application Essay.