

From Poetry to Picture Books to Polemics: We Write. We Teach Writing.



T IS FOR **TIME** FOR **WRITING,** **PERSPECTIVE,** **TRANSACTION & TRANSFORMATION**

a 2014 NCTE Discussion
with Shelly Unsicker-Durham, M.Ed., NBCT
Oklahoma Writing Project Teacher/Consultant

In a panel discussion with Christine Aikens Wolfe, Denise Amos, Cheryl North, and Margaret Simon, participants will reflect on and discuss how Social Media, Time, Audience, Mentors, and Peer Support (**STAMP**) impact the writing we do for our classroom practices and the writing we do for ourselves. Shelly Unsicker-Durham will focus on the importance of making time for the kind of writing that makes literacy and learning meaningful.

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TIME

*The issue of time and energy for teachers is an important one. Teachers need time for planning, for individual work with students, for reflection, for team planning, for personal and professional reading, and for teacher research. I am firmly convinced that **until we reconceive and reallocate time to teachers and schools, we will not be able to make the changes necessary to improve learning for teachers or for students** (Wilhelm, 16).*

Despite current state educational policy that tends to encroach on time for authentic learning, I must carve out time to reflect on my classroom practice and time for my students to engage in meaningful reading and writing experiences. That mostly happens when I decide it's time to share our learning, our perspectives, and our ideas with an AUDIENCE. You may recognize this as PUBLISHING, a final and crucial step in any writing process. Following is a list of both formal and informal ways my students and I have made time to publish our learning, our perspectives, and our ideas through writing.

My Publication	Student Publication
<p>Personal Blog (Here I Am) – shared poetry, thoughts about my classroom practice, and updates of my experience while overcoming breast cancer</p> <p>Poetry – as gifts for friends and family</p> <p>Presentations – NCTE, Oklahoma Writing Project, District, School</p> <p>Social Media – prolific commentator on state and national policy, especially pertaining to public education</p> <p>Write-a-thons – a way to transact with friends, family, and former students, a way to transact in meaningful relationship</p> <p>~~~~~</p> <p>Classroom and Website – communicating with students and parents through agendas, handouts, PowerPoint presentations, and student blogs</p> <p>Modeling – steps of the writing process</p> <p>National Board Certification – Writing and reflecting on my classroom practice</p> <p>Thesis – Writer's Notebooks in an Eighth-Grade Classroom: Facilitating Student Writers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Author's Chair ● Elbow Buddies and Small Groups ● Student Exemplars ● Student Presentations ● Classroom Wall ● Classroom Anthology ● Poetry Wall – School-Wide ● School Poetry Anthology ● Literary Magazine: <i>Vivid</i> ● School Newspaper: <i>The Cub Prowler</i> ● Blogging with Ms. Durham ● Final Portfolios

Reflection: How do you share your writing? Student writing?

1. Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. "You Gotta BE the Book": Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents, 2nd ed. Urbana: NCTE. 2008. Print.

TIME for PERSPECTIVE: YOUR OWN and OTHERS'

Maturity entails, first, the recognition that you have a unique perspective and a view of the world that has value, and second, the recognition that there are different perspectives in the world and that these have value and are worth knowing about, too (Wilhelm, 49).



I first discovered the value of my unique perspective and experience while sitting in an AUTHOR'S CHAIR during the 2002 Oklahoma Writing Project Summer Institute. Creating both a PRESENTATION and a FINAL PORTFOLIO further extended the self-efficacy of my literacy and communication skills. This boost gave me the confidence to eventually apply for the 2004 NWP Professional Writing Retreat, to seek National Board Certification, and to earn a Master's Degree in English Education. Beginning with my own voice led me to connect with other voices and perspectives. Valuing my role as a classroom teacher and sharing that perspective did not come easily, but led me to finding and valuing the voices of others – others who have perspectives and experiences different from my own. Those others became my MENTORS: authors like Jeffrey Wilhelm, Nancie Atwell, Linda Rief, and Louise Rosenblatt; professional writing retreat fellows who exuded confidence as authors and doctoral candidates finishing dissertations; and colleagues as well as professors who share my love for teaching, reading, and writing. Students have also become my MENTORS, offering encouragement and advice when I struggle with my own writing, offering a place for me to study how literacy works and how to be a better teacher.

The AUTHOR'S CHAIR is where I begin with my students. It is where they discover their voices. After guiding them through daily QUICKWRITES, and elbow-partner / small-group sharing, I prod and coax until each one has taken a turn in the AUTHOR'S CHAIR. This strategy changed everything about how I teach and how I see my students. Most importantly, the Author's Chair changed how my students see themselves.



Kevin. As my classroom practice transformed, I watched this young man experience his own transformation. Kevin came to me one morning with a black spiral notebook, slightly smaller than the standard 8½ by 11 inches. He had taken home an idea from an assigned journal entry and written about it the night before. Then he had written a second piece to help him sort through something that had been bothering him. The bell for class to begin was about to ring, but Kevin had said, *“Look at what I wrote last night.”* Standing in front of me with both excitement and hesitation, Kevin showed me the pages in his notebook and the two poems he had written. Clearly, it was important that I honor this request.

I read through the lines and the emotion. It was personal and raw and I sensed that Kevin needed more than a cursory reader – he needed to be affirmed. Without critiquing the spelling or the grammar, I looked eye to eye with Kevin and said, “Omigosh, Kevin, *you* are a poet. Are you going to share this in the Author's Chair?” I recognized Kevin's need to express himself and to be seen. In that brief moment of reflecting back to Kevin what he had written, as well as the possibility of what he could become, I became a witness to a transformative moment. Kevin began to see himself as a poet.

Kevin had found a safe place to jot down his thoughts, emotions, and experiences – a safe place to experiment with his literacies and to try out seeing himself as a poet. He also found the confidence and courage to share his writing in the Author's Chair.



Diane. Diane wrote “Why I Am” in April of her freshman year for Writing Art Club literary magazine. That poem is

testimony to her transformation. When I first met Diane, it was three years after Kevin sat in my classroom. I had teamed up with a special education teacher. We took six of her English lab students and placed them smack dab in the middle of my regular English classroom. Our intent was more than inclusion – we wanted to learn from one another. I would share what I knew about writing, reading, and literacy, while my co-teacher would teach me about scaffolding those with special needs and learning disabilities. Among her six students sat Diane.

Keeping quietly to herself, Diane often looked like that deer caught in the headlights. Like Kevin, an inner life ran deep within her spirit. And, like Kevin, her quickwrites flowed poetically with sensory details and raw emotion. However, Diane’s writing posed a special challenge for me, at least in the beginning. When she approached me with her writing – “*Look what I wrote, Ms. Unsicker*” – I could not read what she’d written. It wasn’t her handwriting that caused my confusion. It was her spelling. Very much like a student in the primary grades, many of her words looked like inventive spelling. I could have asked her what each word was, but class was beginning and there really wasn’t time. Nor did I want to put her off; she held the same expression of hope and trepidation that I’d seen in Kevin’s eyes and the eyes of other students just discovering the power of their own writing.

So I tested Diane and our new relationship as teacher and student. Smiling, I encouraged, “Why don’t you read this in the Author’s Chair?” Hesitantly, she made her way across the classroom. I had no idea how this would all turn out, but could sense that she’d written something important, something that needed to be shared. When Diane read aloud from her journal, a black and white marbled composition book, she did so without stumbling over the words I could not read. They flowed beautifully. And when she finished, her classmates applauded. She kept that journal with her every day.

Reflection: How do you nurture your student’s unique voices?

WHY I AM

by Diane

YOU ASK ME WHY I AM A WRITER
AN ARTIST
AND WHY I AM INSPIRED.
MY MIND HAS TWO SIDES.
ONE YOU CAN SEE
EVERY
SINGLE
DAY
BY MY ACTIONS.
THE WAY I TALK AND WHAT I LIKE.
THE OTHER SIDE STAYS HIDDEN INSIDE.
MY EYES, LIKE THE WINDOW OF THE HOUSE.
YOU SEE THINGS MOVING ABOUT.
SOMETHING OTHER THAN WHAT YOU HAVE COME TO KNOW TO
BE ME.
SOMETHING YOU CAN ONLY SEE ON PAPER. ON PAPER. ON PAPER
THE
THING THAT HIDES INSIDE COMES OUT.
THE PAPER AND INK. THE SOMETHING INSIDE THAT NO ONE SEES
IS ALWAYS THERE.
THIS IS WHY I AM AN ARTIST.
THIS IS WHY I AM A WRITER.
THIS IS WHY I AM WHAT I AM.

TIME for TRANSACTION AND TRANSFORMATION

*Literature, if read transactionally and creatively, may have the effect of transforming us as readers and as people. Transformative **reading** begins where the **reader** currently is, and works from there (Wilhelm, 51).*

If I shift the subject from literature to literacy, the words might read, “[**Literacy**], if [**approached**] transactionally and creatively, may have the effect of transforming us as [**learners**] and as people. Transformative [**literacy**] begins where the [**learner**] currently is, and works from there.” Making meaning from the text that connects with student experience is a transactional skill and strategy that the current standards and assessment movement often overlooks. However, I cannot ignore this foundational wisdom. In an attempt to engage students in meaningful literacy, I modeled making connections with significant quotes and asked my students to do the same. What follows is a student exemplar from my initial modeling and handout (see appendix) created to guide subsequent transactions.

Student Exemplar

Connecting with Willy in Sharon Draper’s Out of My Mind

by Marcy, 7th Grade

““Hey, Claire!’ Molly said, twisting her arms above her head and bending her body so it looked crooked” (94). This reminds me of my cousin, Josh. He has Down Syndrome and people are always making fun of him. They laugh at him because of the way he speaks and looks. There are a lot of people who are like Claire and Molly. My cousin experiences them almost every day. I feel bad for him. I just want to trade places with him. The author of Out of My Mind wants us to know that everyone is different and they just want to feel love. Everyone is the same in many ways. Even if we don’t realize it. When people make fun of each other, it might make that person feel bad.

Reflection: How do you facilitate transactional and transformative literacy?

LITERARY CONNECTION PARAGRAPH

First Last Name → Shelly Durham
Assignment → Literary Connection Paragraph
Date → 10/24/2014

TITLE → Out of My Mind – Connecting with Melody & Maria

SIGNIFICANT QUOTE

“Maria got up and started dancing! She clapped loudly, never quite on the beat, but to a

rhythm that was all her own” (96). This reminds me of a line I’ve often heard quoted: “He marches

(PG#) to the rhythm of a different drummer.” Both expressions seem to celebrate our differences. I like

that because for much of my life, when I seemed to be out of step with the “norm,” I felt

ashamed to be different. What I’ve been learning for 52 years now, is to be comfortable with

what makes me different, but more than that – to embrace those differences. It hasn’t been easy.

Shame can create a lot of negative energy like anxiety and it zaps you of the positive energy it

takes to learn and be creative. I think this may be a message or theme that Sharon Draper wants

her readers to understand. When we perceive of a *normal* that must be reached by all, we create

a system that rejects others or makes “outcasts” (99). Seeing the kids from Room H-5 through

Melody’s eyes makes me want to do a better job of seeing those who are often made outcasts in

our own school.

CONNECTION

SO WHAT?!

- 1) **SIGNIFICANT QUOTE.** Begin with a short passage that seems important or reminds you of something you’ve noticed in your own life or somewhere else.
- 2) **CONNECTION.** Make a connection: Text to Self, Text to World, Text to Text. Or make a non-connection. “This is *not* like me because...”
- 3) **SO WHAT?!** How does your connection add meaning to the text? What message or theme could the author be trying to get across to the reader? What have you learned about the character? Or what prediction can you make based on your connection?
- 4) **WORK CITED.** Use MLA Style to cite your source, the text you are writing about.

Work Cited

Draper, Sharon. Out of my Mind. New York: Anthem. 2010. Print ← MEDIUM (PRINT, EBOOK)

AUTHOR LAST. FIRST → Shelly Unsicker-Durham

TITLE →

CITY: PUBLISHER →

©YEAR →

LITERARY CONNECTION PARAGRAPH

Instructions: First, read your current BFP for thirty minutes. Then write a Literary Connection Paragraph like the example on the back. Notice the labeled parts of the example and carefully read the boxed explanation for each label. Pay attention to the punctuation of the MLA Citation, as you write your own.

HEADING

TITLE

PARAGRAPH BODY

Work Cited

WORK CITED

AUTHOR

LAST, FIRST

TITLE

CITY:

PUBLISHER

©YEAR

MEDIUM

(PRINT, EBOOK)

Shelly Unsicker-Durham

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