ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS:
TOWARD LIFELONG LITERACY
AND A TRUE DIVERSITY

by Dixon S. Woodburn

Written as a reflection on several years of experience teaching in a middle school language arts classroom, this study diagnoses the main problems with current approaches to literacy at secondary levels and makes recommendations for the individual classroom teacher to overcome these problems. Literacy skills should be practiced in continuity across the curriculum and in everyday life, but too often remain isolated by grade level and set curricular units, reinforced by standardized testing. This study emphasizes the uniqueness of the middle school student age group, the possibilities of a language-rich learning environment, and the potential for a curriculum of understanding through doing to make literacy transferable between disciplines and rooted into students’ everyday lives. These approaches serve the desired outcome of providing accessible literacy to all students, encouraging lifelong learning and habits of self-reflection in the students’ pursuits for greater understanding of themselves and others in a diverse society.
THE ROLE OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS:
TOWARD LIFELONG LITERACY
AND A TRUE DIVERSITY

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Teaching
Department of English

by
Dixon Storm Woodburn
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2003

Advisor ____________________________________________

(Dr. Mary J. Fuller)

Reader ____________________________________________

(Dr. Diana A. Royer)
THE ROLE OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS:
TOWARD LIFELONG LITERACY
AND A TRUE DIVERSITY

Table of Contents

I. The Middle School Problem .................................................. 2
   • Acknowledging the Problem
   • Exploring the Problem
   • Tackling the Problem

II. The Middle School Student .................................................. 16
   • Taking my Students Seriously
   • Understanding What my Students Need
   • Meeting my Students’ Unique Needs
   • Promoting Diversity Among my Students
   • Finding a Starting Point for my Students
   • Examining myself for my Students’ Sakes

III. The Middle School Classroom ............................................. 36
     • Trust in the Classroom
     • Talk in the Classroom
     • Time in the Classroom
     • A Classroom Model of Time and Timing
     • The Risks of an Uncomfortable Classroom
     • The Self-Evaluating Classroom Setting

IV. The Middle School Curriculum ............................................ 63
    • A Confrontational Curriculum
• A Thematic Curriculum
• A Well-Planned Curriculum of Confusion
• A Broader, More Inclusive Curriculum

V. The Middle School Role ................................................................. 86
   • The Role of Evaluation in Middle School and Beyond
   • The Role Middle Schools Can Play in Defining Proficiency
   • The Re-visionary Role of the Middle School Teacher

Appendices ......................................................................................... 101

Works Cited ...................................................................................... 107
We are told there is a literacy crisis in the United States.

Nearing the end of the twentieth century, we have still not succeeded in educating a full literate citizenry, a goal that was articulated by our founding fathers and that motivated the creation of what is probably the most inclusive public education system in the world.

--Lauren B. Resnick
I. The Middle School Problem:

It was the year 1986 when cable television boxes sprouted at the end of many driveways in the rural Ohio neighborhood where I grew up. Already accustomed to my own weekly slate of TV watching (*The Cosby Show* through *Cheers* on Thursdays, for example), I never cared much what these additional channels offered, although I joined my younger siblings some evenings for Nick at Nite, or a Disney channel movie. MTV hadn’t monopolized adolescent viewership yet, and at first I thought of the round-the-clock music video offerings as just a visual component to radio-listening. I was never hooked by this culture as a sixteen-year-old, and I can tell my students now that I actually remember and possessed record players and cassette tapes, rabbit-ear antennas, and typewriters.

I trace the inspiration for my professional pursuits as a middle school language arts teacher back to 1982 and my own seventh-grade language arts teacher. I left Miss Schuller’s classroom with the sense that teaching and learning were fun because we read and we wrote, all of us. We laughed and learned together. We even made group decisions such as what books Miss Schuller would read aloud and how we might rewrite the endings. My memories of this time are indistinct-- I can recall but a few book titles and activities-- yet I still have powerful impressions of the experience. I can picture Miss Schuller reading aloud dramatically, her desk piled with our writing journals, my own pencil to paper in that journal, and the activity at the chalkboard and our clusters of desks. I do not remember boredom, busy work, or a workbook of any kind. They were there, but as supplemental materials. My experiences in this sort of a classroom became the backdrop for my own idea of what it would be like to teach English myself.

I remember Miss Schuller as an excellent teacher for her thirty-year career. I also know that she and many of her peers remember my generation, the students they taught in the early 1980’s, as “the last best.” Coincidentally, my husband’s high school teachers talk the same way, complaining that subsequent groups of students didn’t seem to care; they, teachers and students, could neither bond nor connect at the same level. Year after year it became clearer that students had changed in some way, their attitudes, their expectations, their brains. And while not less
intelligent by all accounts, they were certainly less attuned. “If anything,” a mentoring colleague of mine conceded, “they just don’t, won’t, or can’t listen as well as students used to” (Pettitt).

In the latter years of their careers, these experienced and innovative teachers had discovered what Jane Healy describes in her pioneering 1990 book *Endangered Minds: Why Our Children Don’t Think*. Throughout her study of the changing modern student, Healy interviewed numerous veteran teachers of young people who spoke over and over of students who were “likable, fun to be with, intuitive, and often amazingly self-aware, [who] seemed, nonetheless, harder to teach, less attuned to verbal material, both spoken and written” (13). I began my own teaching career in the early nineties, expecting to teach the sort of student I was, and my first students proved a rude awakening. I knew instinctively that the generational gap between my students and me was made wider by the distance between their 1990’s world and mine. The development of their brains and patterns of speech had been fostered by a new technological information age that I had barely witnessed in its emergence.

Dr. Healy makes a bold claim, confirmed and accepted in the past decade since the publication of *Endangered Minds*, of the dramatically “changing brains” among students today, due to the rapidly accelerating nature of communication, which is increasingly passive in nature as a result of its ease and convenience. The discrepancy between “traditional” education and the brains/needs of young learners today is clear to most teachers. And regardless of the explanation offered for this state of affairs, capable veteran teachers attest to “‘watering down,’” “‘modifying,’” and “‘walking through,’” material they have taught for years (Healy 14). This has subsequently raised the fear that we teachers of reading and writing may not know how to teach this new type of student to master skills and content, to process, rely upon, or even benefit from the learning that does take place.

Sadly, these fears settle on not only those of disenfranchised circumstances or those who forego a college degree, but also those filling our colleges. They have met basic skills required by state proficiency tests and have “tested” well. Yet in cross-disciplinary studies of college sophomores designed to test “transferable understanding”-- what remains when “the circumstances of testing are slightly altered”-- students repeatedly failed to demonstrate competency (Gardner 6). This inability of today’s college students, presumably the educated elite, to make real use of basic skills and acquired knowledge in multiple settings, is alarming.
The whole debate about “teaching to the test” seems out of place when “genuine understanding” has not been achieved, even among the most “literate” (Gardner 6). Instead, educators need to consider what sorts of learners we want to produce and what quality of learners we actually are producing. Having determined what we hope for, we need to ask whether the schools we have now and the teachers in them are capable of reassessing the students, resources, and even curricular standards if necessary, to meet the complex individual needs of our students within an increasingly complicated culture. Alongside these big questions, we need to consider more practically what the isolated, unsupported teacher can do to move in the right direction for his or her students, with the greater vision for improving the quality of learning one classroom at a time.

Acknowledging the Problem:

Consider the expectations of our public school system as described by Margaret Gallego and Sandra Hollingsworth in *What Counts as Literacy: Challenging the School Standard* for a “school-based conception of literacy” beyond the simple mastery of standard English:

Students who have mastered school literacy (as the ability to read and write standard English) are supposed to develop into a society of adult citizens who are “innovative, achievement oriented, productive, cosmopolitical, media and politically aware, more globally (nationally and internationally) and less locally-oriented, with more liberal and human social attitudes, less likely to commit a crime, and more likely to take education, and the rights and duties of citizenship, seriously.” (qtd. in Gallego and Hollingsworth 6)

Citing Harvey Graff from *The Literacy Myth*, Gallego and Hollingsworth explore various theories as to why “these claims have clearly not been achieved,” including the “hidden purpose” of a dominant social structure, or more innocently, the “sociopolitically determined standard [English] language bias” (7). This has not created a dominant class of super-thinkers who easily tap into the “communities of power” through a “simple mastery of school literacy”; and even those whose literacy leads to achievement do not necessarily reach lasting success (Gallego and Hollingsworth 7). To illustrate this point, Gallego and Hollingsworth cite the findings of a 1990 study analyzing the “failure of adolescent girls to maintain a personal sense of confidence and
self-knowledge because they become ‘too competent’ in conforming to a standard school literacy,” most likely sacrificing the ongoing critical, linking perspective demanded for sustained literacy (18).

It seems reasonable to wonder if the biggest hindrance to permanent accessible literacy lies with our definition of literacy itself, in other words, our expected manifestations of literacy. Possibly we educators have assumed that one standard, pre-approved, state-sponsored approach from kindergarten through twelfth grade should work, and have focused too much on aligning the curriculum with these standards. If our approach to the content we teach increasingly involves “watering down,” and if “modifying” has become an irreversible reality for most teachers (proven now by over a decade of testing and drilling), then we may need to reevaluate the curriculum, or what is considered standard content passed down to us culturally and packaged for our consumption in our textbooks. We may need to ask questions about “the ultimate purpose of literacy” beyond learning to read and write a standard language competently. For the educator and political activist Paolo Freire, “literacy instruction was the process through which students could come to reflect critically on the world and take action to transform oppressive conditions”—an individual, ongoing process of “reading the word” applied to “reading the world” (Gallego and Hollingsworth 8). The goal of education we may have lost sight of is foremost to reverse the ignorance that leads to oppression.

I try to apply this personally in my career as a middle school language arts teacher. To be able to define my goals, I must understand the needs of my students as well as the problems they face— the forces working counter to the goals of shrinking ignorance and promoting lasting, useful literacy. Out of concern for the realities confronting these budding adults in my classroom as well as their varied personal and even cultural literacies, I have a professional duty to engage in such inward and outward examinations of my actual objectives in the classroom. If I relinquish any personal responsibility in favor of assigning blame—on parents or the dominant culture—then I truly have no intention of becoming the better teacher described by Nancie Atwell at the start of In the Middle: one who is grounded “in the logic of learning and growing” (3). Logic asks that I recognize no one force is to blame for literacy’s failed vision. It also asks that I realize “schools, preschools, and day-care centers cannot slow the pace of adult life, alter changing family patterns, or eliminate media influences” by themselves, “nor can they ignore
these realities or the resulting differences in students” (Healy 278). Healy adds the important stipulation that “kids [of today] are no less intelligent than those of former years, but they don’t fit the same academic molds” and may even demonstrate “more potential for diversity of thought and contribution than those that came before,” which certainly seems true in my own experience (278). Logic says, therefore, that I take an ever-closer look at the students in my classroom and myself as a teacher who expects to reach them for the good of a future society.

Teachers feel there’s enough blame on the schools and would prefer to point fingers at a number of factors beyond their control: limited facilities, inadequate funding, overloaded classrooms, shortened class periods, and non-supportive communities. It seems that enough blame has been heaped upon the schools and teachers already, and it would be comforting to say that more of the burden rests in the homes, where a “diminished and degraded exposure” to language today due to passive entertainment and familial isolation, results in declining literacy and skills levels (Healy 86). I could even point to the length of summer vacations in the school calendar, which serves only to undermine the continuity of learning. Then of course there is the culture of cable TV, video games, and shopping malls, which comprises much of the world adolescents inhabit. Again, the blame is everywhere-- home, TV, day-care, schools. The “traditional sources of language exposure have ceded much of the neural real estate to television and the peer culture” (Healy 88). But, however obvious such root causes may be, diagnosing them does little good. Hectic schedules, dual-income families, commuter careers, and passive entertainment systems are here to stay, no doubt. Our task is not to analyze the root problems so much as to focus on the learning taking place within the middle schools where there are certainly real problems educators must own up to, beginning in the classroom.

**Exploring the Problem:**

Once I stopped blaming the students, their parents, our culture, or even my colleagues and superiors, and when I realized that I actually had capable and knowledgeable students in my classroom as well as the diverse materials we needed for effective learning, I began to adopt the reflective attitude that initiated real change for me professionally and my students intellectually. Using my classroom and myself as the starting point for initiating such long-reaching change, I have approached this project as an exploration for the benefit and improvement of the individual
classroom teacher by dwelling on the insights of respected educators and theorists and by reflecting on my own professional journey as well as that of my experienced colleague and friend, Ruth Pettitt. It is not within the scope of this study to ponder the root causes of our current situation beyond highlighting what is crucial for every teacher to acknowledge about literacy in this twenty-first century society. Recognizing for myself that a problem existed and does still--a growing gap between learning and teaching--and then determining to believe that this realization did not have to remain a problem marked the first step in my own professional growth and continuing journey.

If we take seriously the efforts of experts like Jane Healy, one of the foremost problems is of ideology. Middle schools have been slow to claim a unique status in the road toward literacy, too long serving as “holding tanks” between the elementary and secondary years, functioning as the rehearsal for high school where the “increasing conformity” of class changes and rigidly secondary-minded teachers minimize the unique abilities and needs of the adolescent (Atwell 36, 38). And if literacy levels drop-off in the middle years, then “the assumption [secondary] teachers often make is that early literacy instruction failed, that these students have weak decoding and word-level skills, and that specialized help is needed from someone who ‘knows how to teach reading’ in a way that helps build basic skills” (Greenleaf et al. 84). More remedial instruction seems the solution; more skills practice, more grilling, drilling, and testing; more teachers who can actually teach reading held accountable through test scores for the standardized performance of their students. Likewise, high school teachers grumble that if students arrive at high schools unable to explain the difference between “who” and “whom” or a participle and predicate, then our middle school teachers are falling down on the job. Somehow, it should be clear that this view of the whole process of literacy from kindergarten to grade twelve is not meeting the needs of our students today, or we would not be facing our current discouraging statistics and attendant testing hype and blaming games.

Passing the buck won’t solve any problems; we all need to take responsibility for that which is in our power to change. As a middle school teacher, I will focus on the middle school, specifically on what individual language arts teachers can hope to accomplish on their own. Much has been written by greater teachers than I, Nancie Atwell and Linda Rief topping my list, toward identifying an oversight in the system. The middle school years that should fall in the
middle of literacy for young people seem instead to mark the end for so many students. Often middle school students already read and think at the level they will maintain throughout adulthood, a reality I first confronted during the bewildering early years of my career. To teach reading for growth is a hard goal to achieve amid all the other challenges facing the middle school language arts teacher. Educator and lecturer Mark Forget has focused on the middle-school grades in his analysis of the Department of Education’s National Assessment of Education Progress results (NAEP), which indicate that although U. S. fourth graders “lead the world in the ability to read,” their counterparts in grades eight and through twelve reveal “a negative disparity” (10). Forget observes that middle school educators are failing to teach the reading strategies and to establish the inquisitive habits students need “to perform higher order thinking while they read,” and poses this convicting question: “Are we [educators] creating the conditions in our classrooms in which students are routinely enabled to analyze, apply, synthesize, and evaluate what they read?” (10). If not, we are risking much. It is consequently my hope that by examining classrooms in which literacy is alive through active learning and total immersion in language and life, I might construct a model that builds positively on the problems and potentials of our middle school language arts classrooms.

The first step in addressing the stalled literacy at the middle school level is for all classroom teachers first to rethink the definition and function of a middle school by taking a closer look at the students who fill its classrooms in addition to considering the curricular methods employed while “passing the time.” Schools have always served to fulfill an educational need for the surrounding community and larger society, and this reality should lead us to view the middle schools in the same way, seeking to tailor the curriculum and classrooms to the unique needs of the middle school student with the unique needs of our twenty-first century society in mind. It does not involve backing-up to basics for our underperforming “at risk” students; it seeks instead to meet students at their present level of proficiency and moves forward. We’ve been too long looking far backward instead of far forward. As a result, remedial courses have often absorbed precious district or grant funds that could be used for the promotion of literacy for all students.

My new “remedial” approach will resemble that of one west coast high school aggressively attempting to reverse the negative trends from the previous static middle school
years. Foundational to the requisite ninth grade Academic Literacy courses in this inner-city San Francisco high school is the *Reading Apprenticeship Model*, which stands in contrast to the remedial reading courses that only serve to undermine an infusive, holistic notion of literacy by concentrating on progressive basic skills alone. Teacher-researchers Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, and Mueller argue exhaustively that the multi-ethnic, “academically underperforming” ninth graders in this program are not weak, beginner readers; rather they are inexperienced (85). What is presented through this ninth grade prerequisite course as an alternative addresses the new “complex conception of literacy,” one that meets the “escalating literacy needs of adolescent readers in an increasingly complex communication age” (82-83). In fact, the apprenticeship approach assumes that remedial reading instruction is not the answer; that basic skills instruction during the early elementary years has not failed these students. What has failed them is the inability of the secondary curriculum to meet the constantly changing literacy needs of uniquely located individuals.

The authors and developers of the Academic Literacy Course implemented five years ago in Thurgood Marshall Academic High School-- “a school serving some of the poorest neighborhoods of San Francisco”-- “designed three units to focus on the role and use of reading in one’s personal, public, and academic worlds: *Reading Self and Society, Reading Media, and Reading History*” (Greenleaf et al. 93). The objectives state simply that this course taken by all ninth graders, college bound or not, academically challenged or not, would “increase students’ engagement, fluency, and competency in reading” by promoting “adolescents’ sense of agency and control of their own reading practices”-- through a frank discussion of reading and reading practices sparked by each “compelling” component of the three units (94). This endeavor presumes students as independent thinkers, the classroom as an active workshop, and a curriculum of practice and process.

More students than we think, not just from this inner-city west coast high school, “come from diverse backgrounds and do not often share the language or world experiences reflected in course curricula and texts” (Greenleaf et al. 85-86)-- beginning most starkly during the middle school years when teachers become more focused on content and less on skills. Certainly the emphasis on content is necessary for the changing literacy needs at this time, but forgetting to connect relevant content with deliberate skills practice at this crucial stage will only inhibit
adolescents from making the literacy leap “from learning to read to reading to learn” (Greenleaf et al. 83). What students need most at this level, according to the Reading Apprenticeship model, is a classroom structure and instructional framework designed to deliberately, daily “engage students in meaningful and complex literacy practices while demystifying these literacy practices” (89). The secondary student, classroom, and curriculum should each operate with the other in mind. Not only might this ideological framework redefine the roles of our secondary schools, beginning necessarily with the middle schools, but it should bring meaningful literacy within reach of the students we already hold captive. There is too much at stake not to consider the needs of these young people first and foremost.

Universal public education means that schools now educate every child. The demographic base is as broad as possible in many regions, and certainly the diversity is vast in every school whether or not that diversity is ethnically visible. I believe our schools have two choices at this point in history: to continue using the methods that may have better met the needs of a past, smaller group of those who sought schooling; or to make a pledge to offer an education that is currently “challenging and enriching, far more so than the implementation of the less ambitious education with which we have been saddled-- even in places where students are required to work on their assignments until the wee hours of the morning” (Gardner 19). So, “to achieve such a goal we-- especially we in the United States-- may need to rethink many of our most cherished assumptions about how we set our educational goals and go about achieving them,” starting with extending our cherished “cultural literacy” to one of shared “understandings” and practice (Gardner 19). Howard Gardner, in The Unschooled Mind, contrasts rote or “conventional performances” in the classroom with “performances of disciplinary (or genuine) understanding,” which occur, for example, “when literature students can provide a reasoned judgment concerning the respective merit of two poems whose authorship is unknown to them,” essentially making use of acquired knowledge in multiple settings and under variable circumstances (9).

**Tackling the Problem:**

How then do we get to this literate state with our students if we believe in the unique role middle schools face and the unique role they can play? What approach do we take? What next,
after we realize what sorts of constraints face us and what element of learners come to us? Something is clearly not happening in the middle school reading classrooms, something that could be happening in spite of demographics, funding, scheduling, the yearly calendar, or class structure and number-- something that could be changed by one teacher in one classroom at a time through a careful, self-interrogating examination of educational practices most likely contributing to the documented decline in reading abilities between fourth and eighth grades, essentially the middle school years. It also seems clear that the prevalent skills-based, standardizing curricular focus must eventually give way to pedagogical practices that consider the individual students in our classes within the framework of a wider world. The overriding, overarching consideration should be the world beyond our classroom walls. By widening our focus to include the future hopes we have for our diverse students and society as a heterogeneous whole, we may actually simplify the focus enough to embolden teachers to act. By seeing the result of education for our students as simple, a life of ongoing learning and negotiating, we see a new purpose of education that teaches toward a usable process of ongoing learning and negotiating rather than toward the acquisition of a sporadically-tapped bank of knowledge.

Reflecting concertedly on the uniqueness of middle school students and their world led educators such as Donald Graves, Nancie Atwell, and Linda Rief to abandon traditional skills-and-drills approaches in the 1970’s and 80’s for process approaches such as the reading and writing workshop framework. Reassessing the valid needs of their students prompted a drastic restructuring of classrooms and curriculum, with the higher purpose of producing literate young adults committed to the core concepts of ongoing literacy and lived diversity. I intend in this project to recommend a model suited to middle school language arts education based on what Robert Scholes terms a “curriculum of methods,” or process, in pursuit of these higher purposes. Lisa Delpit and bell hooks view this process as one that makes school finally “real,” pertinent, and accessible to all. Harvey Daniels and Mark Forget then bring students together in meaningful contact groups focused on relational knowing through problem-encountering and consensus-building. The ongoing exploration of the needs of our students in light of current conditions enables us to focus on what will benefit the students in these classrooms now.

The process of reflection primarily informs my approach, leading me to present case studies and research applicable to the methods and practices in my classroom. For the purposes
of empowering individual teachers into reflection and ongoing research, Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle, see the greatest potential for effecting the change necessary in our educational systems through creating a cadre of well-versed visionaries whose efforts for their primary focus-- their students, their classrooms, and their curriculum-- become the solid foundation for middle school reform so clearly needed for propagating the next openly diverse generation. As a researcher for the sake of my seventh grade students, I study the practices of my mentor Ruth Pettitt and widely respected authors and educators. I also study the insights of social scientists Jane Healy and Howard Gardner, whose exhaustive work into exposing the current hollow state of literacy has provided me with the solid insight I need to move forward with my students.

Recognizing, exploring, and tackling the problem involves embracing what is good and what is already there to work with in my classroom. By forgoing backward-looking blame and defeatism, I can begin to teach without worry of getting to the end of the textbook by May, or spending enough time on prepositions or run-on sentences. I certainly have not forgotten my curriculum, the February proficiency tests, or the “basic skills.” I definitely have not forsaken structure, discipline, and learning. I have actually opted to work even harder than ever to ensure that my students are working harder (not more) because they are participating in the construction of knowledge. They are thinking while they are doing because they know why. This is what I hope to make more clear in the major sections of my project. For the classroom teacher to begin to take on the greater goals for literacy, the students deserve firsthand consideration. The classroom setting becomes an active real-world site of complex problem-confrontation and collaborative meaning-making. Then the curriculum, one now of process designed THEMATICALLY around pertinent issues, serves to supply the habits of mind at a “use it or lose it” stage of development.

Ultimately, by teaching to a process of thinking, we may finally stop “teaching to the test” while actually really teaching to the broader test of life itself, by teaching to literacy, to choice, to empowerment, and by giving “all middle and high school students [what they] need . . . help acquiring and extending the complex comprehension processes that underlie skilled reading in the subject areas” (Gardner 86). What they need sounds idealistic at best and ill-defined at worst. Gardner concedes that “the gap between what passes for understanding
genuine understanding remains great” and the process of “what to do about it remains far from clear” (Gardner 6). Still, it is my belief that we can try. Too much is at stake not to. If we seek to establish and facilitate a middle school language arts classroom that Howard Gardner hopes will directly and daily confront the “misconceptions and stereotypes of traditional learning environments” in an attempt to foster learning tailored to the needs of the middle school students, the question “what is at stake” hinges on another question asked by Dr. Healy: “what is at risk” (266, 46)?

The primary thesis . . . is that we are rearing a generation of “different brains” and that many students’ faltering academic skills-- at every socioeconomic level—reflect subtle but significant changes in their physical foundations for learning. These fundamental shifts put children in direct conflict with traditional academic standards and the methods by which they are usually conveyed. Particularly at risk are abilities for language-related learning (e.g., reading, writing, analytic reasoning, oral expression), sustained attention, and problem solving. (Healy 46; emphasis mine)

Focusing on what the students in my classroom risk missing out on if I choose not to take on our modern dilemma steers me toward a larger, all-encompassing approach to my students, classroom, and curriculum examined here. “Language-related learning” is the guiding principle, one rich in individual and corporate dialog, in diversity and community, and directed toward the idea of practicing theory and continually researching within the laboratory of my classroom. This kind of teacher-researcher engages in an ongoing “systematic and intentional inquiry” into their daily classroom experiences, which involves the asking and answering of questions arising from the conflicts between theory and practice, or the “discrepancies between what is intended and what occurs” (Cochran-Lytle and Smith 7, 14). The teacher-researchers engaged constantly in “critical reflection” are essentially “both users and generators of theory” (Cochran-Lytle and Smith 17) if we take bell hooks’ view of theory as rooted in the classroom practice rather than in traditionally limiting definitions. Teachers who research, journal, or collect their own data in some form, ask questions, and reflect on their findings in an ongoing accountable manner “practice theorizing without ever knowing/possessing the term” (hooks, Teaching 62). They
desire to do so based on a professional determination to create a classroom that engages in the problem-finding nature of theory and meaning-making aim of literacy.

Such teachers may find, as I did, that the conclusions drawn from my frustrations year after year spurred me to construct new theories and new practices that might facilitate the construction of knowledge among the students and myself, instead of my continuing the meaningless imparting of someone else’s knowledge, mine or that of another educational “expert.” I determined to root these new theories in actual circumstances and real-life problems facing each of my students and myself and the people we encountered through our work together “in an attempt to understand both the nature of our contemporary predicament and the means by which we might collectively engage in resistance that would transform our current reality” (hooks, Teaching 67). Further, I would focus my efforts on the practice of literacy in my classroom by studying which of these might most closely “intersect” with the theories my students and I choose to address (Cochran-Lytle and Smith 15). So much, in this context, would stop short of providing my middle school students with what they need most, the ability to think and to use language through reading, writing, and speaking in order “to solve complex and specific problems with ease” throughout their adult lives (Greenleaf et al. 82). This begins and ends, I believe during the one-time transitional middle school years. The transitional period of the middle school years opens a window of time in which this process can both begin and end, which means the middle school teachers can play a crucial role in determining their students’ literacy for life.

We as teachers at this level, especially teachers of something so foundational as reading, owe our students much more than any curriculum or mandatory course of study can outline. Our task should both exceed and determine this as we help our students find what Robert Scholes believes they need most from their academic studies at the secondary and post-secondary levels, “some guidance in learning how to understand their world and survive in it, and secondarily some ground for criticizing and trying to improve it” (Scholes, Rise 83). Our new model becomes theory in practice; our new role, to give the students credit for what they know instead of what they don’t know, and to see them as theorists ready to extend their knowledge into wisdom and power in our classrooms. Linda Rief’s findings as a language arts teacher seem to foreshadow Mark Forget’s regarding students coming out of their elementary classrooms, as
“they come into our middle school expecting to read and write”: “Most know how to find books and topics. Most know how to respond to each other’s writing and reading (Rief, Seeking 35). We take them from here, “enabling children to make the leap from learning to read to reading to learn” (Greenleaf et al. 82). The pursuit of literacy in a classroom reveals “genuine readers and writers bringing meaning to, and taking meaning from, their chosen texts” (Rief, Seeking 8). Ultimately, with the teacher’s careful guidance, they will be able to show the teacher how they can take over the job of challenging themselves and make new knowledge with what they are learning individually and corporately.

With the reality of a faltering literacy in our nation, with disconnected teachers and students who “sprint through the day, busy from beginning to end,” pressured as well by the demands of the standardized tests children will be required to take, Donald Graves argues that “true learning, learning that lasts, is a major casualty” (1). In this project, I intend to provide a model suited to the middle school student, based on this curriculum of theory in practice, and with the higher purpose of producing literate young adults committed to the concepts of personal growth and collective diversity. We live in a “plot-driven,” from television to textbooks (Graves 27). Literacy asks us to be mindful of the fact that there are real people behind these plots, and that we need to engage in a new approach to our students, classrooms, curriculum, and vision in our middle schools. What we risk is unthinkable, but what we stand to gain is immeasurable: diversity, wisdom, and power for real change and personal achievement.
II. The Middle School Student:

Two years ago I met Andy and formed a temporary first impression of this hostile, underachieving adolescent. Early in the school year I asked all my students to list ten high and low points in their short lives of twelve or thirteen years to then plot on a graph as a prewriting exercise. Andy insisted he had “nothing to write about,” good or bad. “What about a vacation? Aren’t those always high points?” I prompted. But Andy had never even traveled to Indiana, ten miles to the west. That much he reluctantly divulged to me within earshot of a few eavesdropping peers. Nowhere on this list did he ever choose to indicate his father was in prison, his mother had no car, nor did the family have a phone connection. His low points were sustained aggravations; his high points apparently unlike those proffered by me and other students during our brainstorming and “sharing” sessions (the year prior a favorite teacher had quietly given Andy the outgrown or cast-off clothes from his high school son).

Experience has shown me that seventh graders, more than the ninth and twelfth graders I previously taught, can continually inspire me with their unabashed enthusiasm to share experience and their eagerness to borrow those of another. The age is tenuous and the lived experiences newly quite diverse and preliminarily analyzed; their identities both “marginal” and mainstream, but generally frank and unapologetic. Whether real or imaginary, the beliefs this age group brings to the classroom are either unformed or unchallenged, which has increasingly informed the materials I choose to study with these students, regardless of any prescription given to me by the powers-that-be. And since I operate under the assumption that I have complete facilitative control in the classroom, I believe it is actually possible and productive to explore the concepts that might radically instruct current pedagogy.

Seven years of my ten years teaching I have spent with adolescents in the middle school language arts classroom. The kind of evolving teacher I have always aspired to be relies upon the sort of students that middle-schoolers are: restless, demanding, critical, questioning, and self-absorbed. Arguably, this has always been. This sort of student does not respond to the methods that work in the elementary or possibly secondary English and reading classrooms; middle schoolers truly fall “in the middle of literacy” (Atwell 3). In order to tap into their immense creative and literate potential, I have gradually let go of the idea that I am an expert with
something to “teach” in favor of the middle, common ground where I can learn from my students at the same time they learn from me and from one another. I let go, as did Nancie Atwell, of the notion that my job was to teach a curriculum rather than an individual (19). In other words, I realized that for many years I’d been teaching reading rather than readers because “literature” was my field, after all.

In the foreground of this exploration sit the students, who have always played the biggest role in what and how I choose to teach. The restless nature of my students (and my own) always kept me hunting for approaches to my precious lesson plans and units. In the face of failures, I assumed that I could eventually find the right pedagogical approach to the presentation of my material, missing the fact that might have made more progress if the approach had been directed to the students first. I was focused on the wrong “subject.” To know my students as individuals, to meet their needs as individuals, to recognize my own habits as a learner and transfer that understanding to a desire to understand the same in my students and start them on the same path of self-understanding, and to establish the first and foremost important component of a literate environment and curriculum-- that of a diverse and literate community-- becomes my new discipline. Who these middle school students are, how they learn, what they need, and what we as teachers owe them in this endeavor comprise the exploration of this section.

**Taking my Students Seriously:**

This new focus on the students in my classroom requires that I seek to know enough about these young people to understand why I have chosen to teach them. An accident? Considering I credit my own seventh grade language arts teacher Miss Schuller for my itch to return to the socially-engaging setting she fostered, I can hardly believe this was an accident. I saved more personal writings, remembered more assignments, and developed more friendships from that year, in that classroom than any other. I never felt as comfortable or as actively involved in learning in a classroom setting as I did then. In recent years, sitting in graduate-level classes that hinged on lively discussion and social contact among students, text, and ideas, I experienced that engagement again. Nancie Atwell, long-time eighth grade language arts teacher, continually provides me with a renewed perspective on the close, human interaction with learning that is intrinsic to the adolescent years. She urges educators to examine how they
learned best at all points in life. I recognized when I first allowed myself to reflect upon this that I have always craved the human interaction that surrounds authentic, invested learning when it is taking place. Middle school students look for the same things adults do in any situation—for “what really matters in life,” and do not “look at school as a place to [merely] get ready for what really matters in life” (Atwell 37; emphasis mine). Every middle school teacher can know that “social relationships matter in life” to adolescents in school and out, regardless of what educational experts believe or ignore. The middle schooler will make school what he or she needs (Atwell 37). This is life at present for these students. This is their adulthood, as far as they are concerned, and if they don’t learn socially and vocally, they may not learn. As an adult, I believe I can say the same for myself.

Adolescents, like adults, are “people who want to know” and should be treated as such (Atwell 25); otherwise, we’re wasting our time trying to educate them at all if we don’t believe this. Since “their sense of themselves, the world, and the relationship between the two is challenged every day” (Atwell 27), they should be asked to challenge it in return rather than to accept someone else’s reality for them. The containing and reigning-in that so many middle school teachers spend their days doing can give way to channeling and engaging if we all can give up on the idea of the middle years as a “holding tank” between the elementary and secondary grades, as only preparation for the “real deal” rather than as actual practice (Atwell 36). How many times did I cringe as I heard myself warn, “you’ll need to know this in high school!” I hope my students ignored that. They probably did, hearing for years the same about middle school from their former teachers. Why should these threats move them? If they need to know something so badly, they’ll hear it in high school, or college, or on the job. This rarely motivates anyone to learn long-term. Learning for the long haul is more likely to happen when students like what they are being asked to do. Learning is also more likely to happen when students can actively engage as learners, and when they are not engaged alone but are grouped so that as they interact they may learn from each other--and ultimately from the teacher as well (Atwell 38).

Especially for students like Andy, middle school should reflect “what really matters in life,” as well as what is realistic. Life is not “solitary, competitive” (Atwell 37); rather, learning is a conversation with and in the outside world. For Andy to lead a richer life during and beyond
his school years, he needs to enter into the dialog of life with its members. The social life is real life and motivates most learning in the adult community. A good teacher surely can “accept and build upon the realities of junior high kids” because of what’s at stake here— the ongoing quality of life and strength of our culture (Atwell 50). Yes, adolescents “want to know”— not what they’ll need in the short-run, but what speaks to them now and indefinitely as members of the human race. They really want to do something that matters now, not ten years from now. Middle school is not some training ground as far as they are concerned, and we in the educational system need to rethink the needs of our students.

Understanding What My Students Need:

So, who are they and how do they learn best? These seem like obvious questions any educator might ask of his or her students, yet I didn’t for a long time. Who are they? Social beings on the brink of adulthood. How do they learn best? As all social beings do. In his Making Middle Grades Matter seminars, Mark Forget asks the teachers in his audience to consider their own ongoing learning styles:

As good learners, we know from experience that when we discussed with someone else, we clarified subject matter, made connections among points of the subject matter that we might not have realized before, and mentally and verbally interacted with the ideas of our partners(s) in the discussion. (2)

I know from personal experience that I mull over a topic for countless hours compared to the time I actually spend writing or presenting. I talk with colleagues and with my husband; I plan and reorganize outlines. The majority of time I invest in any piece of writing or any lesson-plan is often characterized by a great deal of verbal and visual contact with the ideas at hand. Sensing the value of this, I am proposing in this project a classroom and curricular approach designed with the unique needs of adolescents in mind, one that revolves around natural human conversation and engaged collaboration, in which each independent action in the learning process is punctuated by verbal and visual activity and founded on immersion and experience. The formulation of the best classroom environment and curricular goals for today’s middle school student begins, logically, by asking myself a far-sighted question about the ultimate goal of literacy and what I have claimed I am about as a language arts teacher, for my students. More
specifically, I ask what I want them to be able to do, and where I want them to be by the end of
our journey together and beyond.

Certainly I hope my students will be able to read proficiently. For some of them, like
Andy for instance, they “don’t read,” “hate to read,” or “can’t read” (this, of their own
admission). I ask them to write honestly about their own reading styles and preferences at the
start of the year, generally after I feel I’ve reassured them as to my desire to work with them.
Mark Forget cites the Department of Education’s findings through NAEP again when describing
a proficient reader, who “should be able to ‘ . . . show an overall understanding of the text which
includes inferential as well as literal information’”; but the NAEP also has a description for the
“advanced” reader, who “should be able to ‘ . . . describe more abstract themes and ideas . . .
analyze . . . extend the information from the text by relating to their own experiences and to the
world . . .’” (Forget 10). The advanced student not only understands a text in question on a
literal and inferential level, but is also able “to perform higher order thinking while learning,” or
while reading and processing that text (10). Naturally, I want all of my students to read at the
“advanced level” by the end of the school year. Ideally, even at the start.

Notice, though, that the proficient student “should be able to”; and the advanced student
“should be able to.” I wonder if this can be measured and how. Certainly not on one standard
test. Obviously, tests of proficiency are not accurate or adequate tests of literacy. If in place of
such tests we could arrange for one-on-one interviews, portfolio reviews or the like to measure
literacy, our findings might be different. Certainly we would discover “multiple literacies,” and
definitely we would realize our focus is misdirected. Our students probably meet our general
standards of proficiency even if they cannot express that effectively on objective tests. What
they arguably are not able to do is use the knowledge acquired from the basic reading of a text
beyond the assigned objective. Like Jane Healy, I believe the human brains of all students are
“capable of acquiring knowledge,” but these brains hold a greater potential rarely tapped into and
definitely not measured adequately, if at all: the “potential for wisdom,” which “has its own
curriculum: conversation, thought, imagination, empathy, reflection. Youth who lack these
‘basics,’ who cannot ponder what they have learned, are poorly equipped to become managers of
the human enterprise in any era” (Healy 346). This takes far more time to measure-- a whole
year and beyond. This is by far the more worthwhile endeavor.
With a new notion of “basics” based on “conversation, thought, imagination, empathy, reflection,” the educational systems’ gaze must direct itself away from standardized basics and toward our “youth” themselves. The units of measure are the individuals here, and the only way to measure proficiency is through our efforts to advance their whole beings before their “basic” skills. There still must be a way to learn, however. There is, and it is terribly simple. Students should learn as they always have best, through relevance, desire, and motivation. In probing how children learn to read beyond the basics for depth of understanding, life-long educator John Holt begins with an examination of how children learn to speak: though “patient and persistent experiment; by trying many thousands of times to make sounds, syllables, and words,” through comparing sounds to those of the “expert” adults, by continually working to close that gap, and “above all, by being willing to do things wrong even while trying their best to do them right” (Holt, How 56). If teachers and schools were responsible for teaching speech in its infancy, John Holt asks provocatively what would happen and speculates “that most children, before they got very far, would become baffled, discouraged, humiliated, and fearful, and would quit trying to do what we asked them . . . . as so many of them do when the subject is reading” (57). The students in my classroom have proven their desire and motivation to learn something relevant to them already. I pick up here and teach them exactly what is worth learning in ways that are worth the effort in a language arts classroom.

What makes language worth learning is obviously the innate need and desire to communicate with people. But what makes literacy beyond the basics of language acquisition worth pursuing? What do we need to provide the middle school student in the language arts classroom in order to foster the new view of literacy as worthwhile, continued learning? Literacy isn’t something I should have to convince my students is worthwhile. They already know it, just as they knew language through speech was worthwhile; it is our job as teachers to make sure they don’t forget. Literacy as the ability to ask questions about our lives unceasingly and the desire to search out those answers indefinitely is really only an extension of a desire for language learning that I know all of my students have possessed from their infancies. I have only to find the single motivating factor and apply it toward the interaction and instruction that will take place in my classroom. And whatever that motivating factor turns out to be for my students and myself, I am certain it will begin with people: “bypass people and you bypass
learning” (Graves 2). This goes for the people I teach in my classroom as well as the material I teach to those people. Human contact affects everyone from birth to death. The living in-between now will be characterized by conflict and inconsistency, but I desire my students to find such living meaningful and worthwhile. I want to teach to this.

It is in the human condition that there is rarely a full resolution between points of view. We teach, however, as if information is static. But human beings are messy and unpredictable, as dangerous as they are delightful . . . To ignore our fellow human beings is to miss out on the greatest journey of all, that of becoming human ourselves. (Graves 5)

Learning that lasts occurs through a reacquaintance with people (Graves 6). People are the first forces that help us understand ourselves from the very first year of life, and our “task” as adults “is to lead [students] back to people” where they belong-- to create, develop, analyze and recognize characters beneath the action, hence, to lead adolescents approaching adulthood to see themselves in the present and “to construct themselves as human beings at the same time” (Graves 28, 29).

Meeting my Students’ Unique Needs:

What students need is learning connected to life. Mark Forget begins his MAX lesson framework with Motivation, followed by Acquisition and extension. The motivation phase aims at “guiding” students into a desire “to find out about course subject matter” through anticipation, which involves a probing and “building” of students’ prior or background knowledge in addition to the establishing of a purpose for reading (Forget 12, 15). When Donald Graves asked artist Juliette Hamelecourt why art is important to her, she replied simply, “I cannot separate it from my life” (71). Students ask every day (whether or not they do so aloud), “what does this have to do with me?” A phony answer about their futures may not stick, especially when middle school students are in the process-- at the age-- of constructing themselves NOW. By focusing on characters, authors, scientists, historical figures, and each other, we educators breathe life into the learning and hopefully help our students acquire multiple knowledges in the process of establishing habits of literacy growth. Forget’s “anticipation guides” actually anticipate the real problems that will be faced by the human
subjects of a text, and ask the students to use their own hard-won “multiple knowledges” prior to entering someone else’s world. In fact, students are asked to contribute to knowledge-building through prediction or “anticipation” in ways that may not seem overtly related to a text they may soon encounter. Such questions, which I will illustrate in action later, draw upon prior knowledge while testing such knowledge at the same time. *(See Figure #1)*

Donald Graves reminds me in *Bring Life into Learning* that I also need to focus on the needs of my students, to pursue their own literacy and acquire their own vision as makers of meaning akin to the people we will read about during the year. My students really need to be “youthful theorists,” in Gardner’s estimation:

> The ideas of [this] young child-- the youthful theorist-- are powerful and likely to remain alive throughout life. Only if these ideas are taken seriously, engaged, and eventually trimmed or transformed so that more developed and comprehensive conceptions can come to the fore-- only then does an education for understanding become possible. *(248)*

I owe my students the wisdom of my experience and the constancy of my efforts to replicate what is real-life and to redirect the focus of learning on how to live as much as how to learn. To teach as Georgia O’Keefe aspired is by showing rather than telling, by teaching students “a way of seeing” rather than a method of painting-- or reading or writing (Graves 72). This “way of seeing” is crucial in the process of pursuing literacy, and will require all the wisdom, expertise, and vigilance a teacher can make use of. It begins with a new approach to the students as individuals in our classroom, one that recognizes the deep uniqueness of each student and seeks “to nurture that uniqueness, not standardize my classroom” *(Rief, Seeking 8)*. The teacher’s role in modeling diversity is daily *and* deliberate.

Diversity asks educators to counteract the “increasing conformity” that begins in the middle school years, from class changes to discipline-centered courses. It asks us to educate ourselves in the classroom and out, to explore multiple intelligences, to draw-out various learning styles, and to overall shape a vision for learning through the language arts. In *Seeking Diversity*, Linda Rief envisions “how language arts can create great opportunities for all adolescents and for a society that needs them to grow up articulate, capable, and whole”-- essentially, literate *(xiii)*. In the words of Nancie Atwell, Rief’s book is “about how one teacher
draws on her experiences as a reader and a writer and her understanding of adolescence to build a literate future for her students” while trying to reverse the “volatile mismatch [that] exists between the organization and curriculum of middle grade schools and the intellectual and emotional needs of young adolescents” (Seeking xi). Adolescents need to be theorists engaging with ideas that are theirs, deeply part of who they are, not part of an assumed idea of who they should be. In this approach to students, the approach of engaging them as co-theorists, the teacher rejects “instant answers and quick fixes in favor of a slow growth model of teacher development that increases the likelihood . . . of success” for the students and the teacher, a commitment that asks for patience and deliberation (Rief, Seeking xii; emphasis mine).

As the mentoring theorist, the teacher’s efforts include “patiently establishing ties” with students, asking them repeatedly “‘what do you think?’” until they not only begin to answer questions, but begin to ask them (Rief, Seeking 9, 10). Adopting a term from educators like Donald Graves and Nancie Atwell, Rief nudges until “students’ ideas and wonderings and questions invite risks, taking them to the outer edges of what they know and what they can do” (10). First and foremost, to share what genuinely interests us as teachers, and to treat our students as adults, friends, and literary companions, is to invite them to dialog with us, to experience diversity and contribute to our understandings of ourselves within a larger world than this classroom. While I might ask my students to “anticipate” a reading by inviting them as equals into an imminent literary discussion, I have a long way to go to make my students feel comfortable and even able in this endeavor.

I tell my students my own stories of literacy, and I freely express my emotions to them. I tell them frankly that I cannot help crying during certain chapters of A Day No Pigs Would Die by Robert Newton Peck: “I’ve tried to read these chapters aloud and silently without crying,” I say, “but I haven’t yet; so when the time comes, I’ll try to explain to you why this is, but I may not know for sure myself. You can help me, I hope!” I tell them who I am and why I cry; I ask them to help me analyze this, and in the process, borrowing Linda Rief’s words, “I ask them to tell me who they are, what they think, and how they fit into this world” as well (Rief, Seeking 51). As does Rief, “I want them to ask the same questions of themselves and those around them. I am seeking diversity. I ask them to do the same” (Seeking 51). Rief has discovered, as have I, that middle school students have just begun to separate themselves from childhood and to sense
the adult drama in their own lives. Their desire to question, even challenge, is real at this stage, and what they need more than anything while these processes are still new to them is for us, the mentoring adults in their lives, to guide them in these self-interrogating practices that arise out of our daily acts of literacy.

My students observe that I am reflective in uniquely personal ways, motivated to cry by these passages for unexpected reasons, invisible to my students up to this point. It is necessary for me to tell them of my grandfather’s legacy, my sister’s death, and my irreplaceable childhood pet. “Do you think Rob’s father reminds me of my grandfather? Why?” I turn around and ask them. “Do you think the weasel and dog just remind me of my cat, or am I missing something?” Every year, I hear a new perspective on me from my very different students. So, every year around Veteran’s Day, in honor of my grandfather and personal hero, I pick up A Day No Pigs Would Die and begin to read. Incidentally, the book is a guaranteed success for my classroom, but not all of my colleagues have had the same experience. I make it powerful because it has spoken to me so and because I have grown to understand the unique age group I teach.

**Promoting Diversity Among my Students:**

At this point, it is critical that the teacher really understands this nature of diversity, before even considering the nature of classroom and curriculum. Diversity is loaded, and our understanding of it possibly too limited for the needs of our students. In reality, we say we are seeking diversity when we are really seeking sameness-- standardization. We pull out the diversity unit in the winter, perhaps just hoping that telling students about it is enough, just like telling them about grammar rules with no active context should sink in by a certain age. Students need to live diversity, speak it, hear it, and wallow in it! This idea extends deeper than multiple intelligences and learning styles or preferences. It involves more than perception. It requires wisdom that informs the goals for an entire year of learning, day by day.

Rief’s ideas for promoting the ongoing practice of diversity in the classroom include quoting student “experts” and theorists frequently along with authors and many other real people, creating life or “growth” charts, reading aloud, providing students opportunities to read aloud from “what they know” as authorities, and plenty of time to read and explore individually and collectively the possibilities for learning within our chosen reading materials. Rief asks students
toward the beginning of the year to fill out an “anecdotal card” indicating “one way you are like everyone else in this room” and “one way you are pretty sure you are different” (Seeking 38). From day one Rief establishes both the diversity of her classroom as well as the community-- a tricky balance to negotiate on a daily basis. It requires trust on the part of the students that you the teacher are committed to this, not just when the “diversity” unit rolls around in our textbooks (probably around February), but from the first day of class, and every day following. Rief seeks a broad theme to allow for immersion into reading, writing, and thinking, but also to answer to the needs and desires of students to explore themselves. Her unit on grandparents and the elderly allows for all of these, possibly because “adolescents and the elderly share similar identity crises,” and just as “teenagers are seeking independence and their own identity as they move away from the authority and control of their parents . . . . to figure out who they are and where they belong,” “the elderly face a similar identity crisis as they’re confronted with threats to their sense of self-esteem, their own adequacy” (Seeking 70). She has learned that adolescents can step out of their own self-centeredness when the pursuit allows them to interact with real people and issues of ultimate interest to every one of them.

The potential for engagement with literary texts through such a broad applicable theme begins with real human interaction through the interviews students conduct with their grandparents as they begin “to see learning as connected to situations beyond our classroom walls”; as they “listen to, think about, and interact with people outside the classroom about real issues”; and as they learn to develop real questions and follow a purposeful line of inquiry (Rief, Seeking 71).

Few opportunities exist in schools for students to gather information from primary sources. Students don’t realize that people often give them more useful information for writing than do books or encyclopedias. Not only is the information more valuable, but the process involved in using the gathered material is invaluable to students as writers . . . . Writers must think out their own arrangements of words, their own formats, and synthesize this information with their own perceptions. (Rief, Seeking 72)

When eighth grade teacher Ruth Pettitt directs her students to generate a list of questions they might ask their grandparents for a Memory Book project, she allows them a great deal of
individual freedom with one exception: everyone must ask what “one piece of advice” that older, wiser person would give to “younger people today” based on what they have learned over the course of a long adulthood, highlighting the ongoing reflection that should characterize a literate life (Pettitt). Had I asked my grandfather such a question when he was still living and I was still a teenager, I might have learned to reflect on my own life more often and more deeply. I can only surmise with regret, and make up for lost time now.

Even though the man is no longer living, I still ask how my grandfather’s experiences as an honored war veteran, construction foreman, and eighth grade dropout continue to impact me directly or indirectly through my energetic, driven father-- the psychologist and pastor, the businessman and husband/ father who raised me. Who am I as a result? This is the kind of pondering that allows us to accept the diversity of every individual and ponder life, wisdom, learning, humanity! The real definition of literacy, beyond “the ability to read and write,” is broader yet uniquely personal at the same: literacy is “extensive knowledge, experience, or culture,” which Leslie Turner Minarik suggests points to “individual power”; “it gives us voice. It gives us a chance at success and power. It gives us choices” (285). Shouldn’t this begin in our classrooms, voice and choice? I hope in the next section to describe this classroom in operation, but in the meantime, I would like to continue citing Minarik who also reminds me that “a teacher’s personal understanding of literacy directly impacts on the children’s development of literacy in the classroom” (286). We could measure literacy based on the ability to read and write or the “grade level” our readers perform at; or we could “go beyond standard school methods” to see ways that all of our students succeed in varying ways in a literate community. We first must “personally embrace such [multiple] literacies in order to draw upon them for instructional purposes” before our students fall helplessly into “the narrowly defined measure of school literacy” (Minarik 288). Only after doing that can we begin to construct a classroom and curriculum founded on individual “voice” and “choice,” aimed communally at the pursuit of growth in knowledge and wisdom. We leave out no one. No one is outside of the model, primarily because we all are to some degree approaching literacy with personal claims and personal conflicts.

By the middle grades students are acutely aware of whether they fit into the school definitions of literacy. In Ohio, they have taken the fourth and sixth grade state proficiency tests
and know which, if not all components they have failed by the end of the school year. They don’t see seventh grade as a chance for a new beginning; rather, they know where they fit and only look around for further proof of their exclusion or inclusion in this system. For many, this is defined by letter grades, by entry into “advanced track” courses in math, or by acceptance onto a team of some sort. Identity is forged, for some to remain fixed, throughout junior high and high school. Even for them this identity is temporal and artificial, based on what John Willinsky discovered through case studies among high school students-- what he refers to as and/but statements (6-7). Most English teachers fall right into this standardizing trap through start-of-the-year “Who I Am” autobiographical essays and poems; even the vacation narratives carry the loaded weight of cultural acceptability. With the very first homework assignment I give to my students I want to prevent the dichotomous, divisive responses found in Willinsky’s case studies, of physical descriptors first-- height, hair color, eyes, and body type-- then standard examples of the norm: athletic prowess, musical preferences, and clothing label boasts. “I’m this,” and “I’m that,” and so on. The but statements Willinsky recorded represent constructed realities for an isolated few students reflecting their inability to “fit” acceptable standards of our limiting society: I am black, but my parents adopted me; or I am Vietnamese, but I was born in New Jersey. A few of my students resist typecasting, enough to tell me “I am a skater, but I don’t dress like one,” or “I know I’m blond and I’m a cheerleader, but I’m really smart.” Even though these students find it necessary to first acknowledge they have been identified and categorized, their but statements reflect a readiness to explore Willinsky’s “larger world.”

Four years ago I startled Justin Groeber into a larger world with a new point of reference. Routine roll call on the first day of class: “Justin-- Gray-ber?” I ventured. “Yes!” he gasped. No teacher had pronounced his name right on the first attempt. “Well, I happen to know that o and e form a long a sound in German. Your family background is German, I guess.” He giggled briefly at the assumed joke, “No--,” then paused and just shrugged: “Dunno.” If he remembered or cared as much as it seemed he might, I knew he’d ask his parents that night what his last name meant, where it came from, and who he was-- an identity (or layer of identity) that he didn’t realize yet. He did, too, because that was the first assignment I gave to these students, a first step into “the relation of experience to discourse,” the location each student had “inherited” and its relation to the location as they might choose for themselves that year in our literary journey
Finding a Starting Point for my Students:

The first day “assignment” that I gave to Justin and his classmates argues that despite the latest positive trends in multicultural education, prejudices remain due to the resulting chronicle of division embodied in the new curricular materials (Willinsky 1). My initial goal then is neither to focus on individuality through difference, nor to transcend that difference, but to uncover alternative, particular histories which both challenge and intersect the standardizing educational system and larger society, while simultaneously exploring difference as an artificial, imposed legacy, which “continues to play a small but significant [skewed, I might add] part in what the young learn of the world” (Willinsky 4). I too want them to learn beyond the existence of difference— the inclusive and statements, and exclusive but statements they make about themselves, which I see over and over in their personal writings. I urge them instead to “[hold] education accountable” for their sense of history, beginning with the naming of themselves in categorical terms, or the start of questioning their supposedly diverse “multicultural” constructions and artificial sense of place (Willinsky 6). Our efforts toward closing the gap “between what passes for understanding and genuine understanding,” according to Howard Gardner, should at least begin with daily confrontations of the “misconceptions and stereotypes of traditional learning environments” (6). Asking “Who am I?” then may actually “[link] our various histories as indigenes, colonials, immigrants, expatriates, tourists, citizens, refugees, and displaced persons,” enabling fluid travel across and within societal boundaries (Willinsky 9).

I realized this from an assignment I had been given in a four-week Ohio Writing Project seminar course, which I adapted for my twelve and thirteen-year-old seventh grade students; they were as unprepared as I had been. I hoped to eliminate a basic myth with this assignment: that naming what I am, exactly, is impossible. But naming where I come from, why I am the one, that person sitting here today, and how I came to this location, is far more valuable. My students discovered personal histories and legacies, inclusive through their obvious distinctions. (See Figure #2) This project aims on a basic level at Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s “search for a larger
world” and a coalition of “something worked for, struggled towards” that eliminates the gaps in our educations-- the gaps not addressed even in the new multicultural curricula “between mainstream populations and those who are socioeconomically, ethnically, culturally, or linguistically outside of that mainstream” (Mohanty 84, Greenleaf et al. 84). For this reason, the students who might otherwise begin with physical descriptors to locate themselves, but conclude with a defense of their obvious “difference” are allowed to “come from” and “arrive to” a location as privileged and engaged as anyone else in the classroom. The class poem my students create by compiling several self-chosen lines of the individual “Where I’m From” poems into one poem places each of us within our “non-identical histories” side-by-side in the “expansive and expanding continent” (Mohanty 84, 88).

Teachers of all disciplines should be looking for inclusive “new entry points” into learning (Graves 49), which aims at reaching all students, in embracing all literacies, and should be hunting out those literacies that have been excluded. This seeks what Homi Bhaba refers to as the “disruptive moment” or disruptive text, that brings up problems, confusions, and questions for all of us, even the teacher, the keeper of James Gee’s “dominant discourse.” This is not mainstreaming or standardizing through “inviting in” on occasion only; rather the “ultimate purpose” is “personal empowerment and social transformation”-- “thoughtful critique as part of the ongoing processes of a democracy” (Gallego and Hollingsworth 8). Sameness is not even considered in this student-centered approach, even though that appears to be the subtle goal of multicultural education. Arguably, it alienates everyone by highlighting differences among those who are merely physically “other” and often silences those perceived outwardly to be part of the “dominant discourse” whether they are or not. For the teacher who approaches a multicultural curriculum aware of his or her own otherness, inadequacy and guilt reign; there seems to be no place from which to even teach to our differences. There is a place for everyone in the dominant discourse, however, regardless of a starting position; and the teacher can and should feel empowered to throw open the doors rather than only peeking timidly into a textbook.

Lisa Delpit writes to empower teachers in acquiring such a vision, to draw them out of the “powerlessness and paralysis” multi-cultural education has bestowed and onto “a path of commitment and action that not only frees teachers to teach what they know but to do so in a way that transforms and liberates their students” (Delpit, “Acquisition” 245). In several stories
Delpit relays through her own research of students from “nondominant, oppressed groups” or discourses, successful literate adults described their effective childhood teachers as committed and exemplary models of living literacy, adults who “‘held visions of us that we could not imagine for ourselves’” and who “set high standards and then carefully and explicitly instructed students in how to meet them” (“Acquisition” 245-246; emphasis mine). bell hooks writes of this in *Talking Back, Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* when she describes teachers like Miss Annie Mae Moore who taught passionately in spite of segregation’s limiting legacy and who “confronted our realities as black children daily” (49). The “oppositional world view” Miss Moore offered focused not on the stereotypes provided by the dominant white culture, but on the individual and on efforts “for wholeness, for unity of heart, mind, body, and spirit” that became a “legacy of liberatory pedagogy that demanded active resistance and rebellion against sexism racism” (hooks, *Talking* 49, 50). And while hooks honors her “pedagogical guardians” with instilling in her a sense of the power of intellect, she underscores the power teachers hold over their students-- power to shape for the wholeness of each individual or for the perpetuation of a divided society.

James Paul Gee’s dominant political-cultural entity, or “dominant discourse,” excludes so many students, white and non-white, from hooks’ “striving for wholeness,” or from full participation in our societal power structures, in interacting with our political, social, and economic structures with a full sense of personal agency and control. Delpit and hooks believe there is a way to teach that views all students in the same light, as equally unempowered and unknowingly held at bay-- by not overlooking their differences, but seeking to draw out other, less visible points of personal location. Our students may see the all-or-nothing, that they either fit into the dominant literacy or they don’t. Really, we all have greatness “in our blood” and are all setting about a literary journey to discover that. In fact, I will be uncovering it in the grandfather who dropped out of school after the eighth grade because he missed several months in the winter and fell embarrassingly behind. Busing was costly, and his bike inadequate. He would eventually find success and access to literacy through his war service and carpentry skills, and he would continue to access literacy through the newspaper and radio his entire life. Through him I can “discuss openly the injustices of allowing certain people to succeed, based not upon merit but upon which family they were born into, or which discourse they had access to as
children,” and I can relate his determination that my father was owed better; not just the local community college education, but an elite, private college halfway across the country (Delpit, “Acquisition” 248).

This was unfair! I rant to my students. My grandfather was denied an education because his parents couldn’t afford the transportation. My grandmother had to marry at seventeen because the daughter of a chauffeur couldn’t hope for much better than a working class dropout. Sharing our stories of indignation and inequity, we move on to talking about ways we each feel excluded, and ways “to cheat” by learning, as Delpit illustrates, to “bow before the master” of the dominant discourse, so to speak (“Acquisition” 250-251). And what will you really need to know to do this? I might ask my students. I swear to you, it won’t be the difference between who and whom or a participle and a predicate. You can learn to write and speak well without knowing those. I promise. If you do need to know them, I’ll let you know where to look and how to cheat. Together we will learn how to get around the system and beat the game. First, we can learn how to play the game, and then we can learn how to play it better. “That’s not fair” becomes the perfect teachable moment. No, it’s not fair at all, and something has to change. My teaching then focuses on those who have historically played a part in change, those who have “beat them at their own game!”-- Booker T. Washington or Ruby Bridges, Mildred Taylor or Gary Paulsen, Sandra Cisneros or Sherman Alexie. My grandfather and my mother. Even Andy. This is what we talk about; this is why I teach seventh graders.

Though I would like to claim total objectivity where my students are concerned, I cannot pretend to “see past” color or other outward differences among my seventh graders when these lived-with realities define deeply where they come from. Delpit writes again in her article “I Just Want to Be Myself: Discovering What Students Bring to School ‘In Their Blood’” of the struggle among oppressed minority groups to “maintain a sense of self in an institution designed to make you into someone else” by way of predetermined district “standards” as well as “big assumptions” on the part of teachers themselves (34-35). Quoting e. e. cummings, Delpit criticizes the work minorities are faced with in the educational system: “‘To be nobody-but yourself-- in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else-- means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting’” (qtd. in Delpit, “I Just” 35). This reality facing communities such as the African-American one is well
documented. Thanks to hooks, Delpit, and many other vocal men and women of color, the educational system has attempted to increase awareness overall among educators to these injustices. Where I think we are failing currently, as I believe bell hooks would also maintain, is with our consistency in applying the same “assumptions of inferiority and deviance about oppressed minorities” to all students (Delpit, “I Just” 36). After years of close self-examination, I can say with tentative confidence that I have confronted my own racist inclinations. Perhaps racism is no longer an issue among my generation of educators. Prejudice toward many of our students, however, flourishes unchecked.

Examining myself for my Students’ Sakes:

In the twenty-first century, we can begin to apply the same close-examinations to stereotypes across the board. As a teacher I must ask myself which students are not like me, and which don’t learn or live like I do. Who do I “write off,” in other words, based on economic background, family make-up, living conditions, or some other “inferiority” or “deviance”? I wonder if it is just as wrong to assume Native American children will not speak in class “because they’re just not like that, they’re very silent” as to assume that the home environments of my trailer court students automatically represents “differences interpreted as deficits” (Delpit, “I Just” 40-41). Our challenge as teachers is to “educate our children to the differing perspectives of our diverse population” without isolating any one group as the “other,” an object of curiosity and obvious separateness. Our goal is to reach deeper than mere exposure and educate in a way that highlights ALL of our individual differences and our collective experiences.

The teacher who “chooses” to teach a unit examining the World War II Japanese Internment Camps may want to approach the material with two outcomes in mind: informing and connecting. In all likelihood, little more will result among the students beyond sadness, wonder, or a little guilt (or anger, depending upon a student’s closeness to the topic). Should one or two students in the room actually manage to speak from personal or familial experience, that platform may inform the class and empower that student; but has exclusion of everyone else then taken place? Diane Fuss would say it has. Actually, there is more to do than this because each student does connect somewhere, at some point with one another and the text, in places and
spaces that don’t even answer to the “chosen” ideology (sometimes referred to banally in textbooks as theme). As a teacher, my role is to teach in a way that uses the knowledge found in books only as it “would enable us to focus clearly and succinctly, to look at ourselves, at the world around us, critically-- analytically-- to see ourselves first and foremost as striving for wholeness, for unity of heart, mind, body, and spirit” (hooks, Talking 49). My role becomes the facilitation of such readings, writings, and discussions, emphasizing the interrelatedness of all learners (including myself) to the subject matter, rather than the arbiter of inclusion and exclusion at the front of the classroom.

When reading aloud from Freak the Mighty by Rodman Philbrick about a thirteen-year-old boy crippled physically by a life-shortening genetic condition known as Morquio’s Syndrome, I might congratulated myself that I’ve pointed out and praised someone “other”: a handicapped teenager with super-intelligence. By reading Yolanda’s Genius aloud, I’ve taken out three birds with one multi-cultural stone. Yolanda is not only black, but smart and overweight. But if I haven’t invited my students into this world of unfairness, I’ve simply “celebrated” difference as if it were a birthday or holiday. Instead, I need to examine other problems. Kevin, or Freak’s, dad abandoned him and his mother after it was clear his son would be “different.” When my students and I do a little research, we learn that the defective gene most likely came from the father, a point not made in the novel. This is supremely unfair, and my students and I can relate in a multitude of unexamined ways to injustice. Yolanda’s father has died-- a policeman killed in the line of fire-- and her family is forced to move. Fair? What about my sister’s untimely death? My grandfather’s forced war service and separation from his new wife and infant son? Fair? Now we are all part of the dominant discourse. Now we can talk because it is what they want to do, to be adults, to be informed and world-wise. Now we can talk because I have demonstrated it is more than appropriate; it is learning.

In this classroom, all sorts of “ways of knowing” will be fair game, through interaction with people and the richness of knowledge we each bring into the classroom first, and second through a broadening notion of what makes up a literary text in a curriculum of process. By examining the desires and needs of my students, as well as my hopes for them on the way to literacy, it is my hope that I have established the intrinsic and imperative role of teacher as a self-reflective visionary. It is my hope that I have established a compelling reason to rethink literacy,
not as “an acquired ability that characterizes individuals” but as “the practice of literacy, the social conditions under which people actually engage in literate activities” (Resnick 28). Only when the classroom teacher recognizes this present-day “special responsibility to help all students achieve high levels of literacy” based on NAEP results or on Howard Gardner and Jane Healy’s findings, then a shift may take place that radically alters the nature of learning in our classrooms. Lauren Resnick explores this radical community:

The shift in perspective from personal skill to cultural practice carries with it implications for a changed view of teaching and instruction. If literacy is viewed as a bundle of skills, then education for literacy is most naturally seen as a matter of organizing effective lessons: that is, diagnosing skill strengths and deficits, providing appropriate exercises in developing skill strengths and deficits, providing appropriate exercises in developmentally felicitous sequences, motivating students to engage in these exercises, giving clear explanations and directions. But if literacy is viewed as a set of cultural practices, then education for literacy is more naturally seen as process of socialization, of induction into a community of literacy practicers. (28-29; emphasis mine)

This is the community of practicers that I will do my best to shape in the early weeks of each school year.
III. The Middle School Classroom:

Todd lived in a trailer with his mother and stepfather, siblings and stepsiblings, brothers and sisters-in-law, and a growing number of nieces and nephews. When his grandmother moved in, Todd lost his bed and slept in a chair before the TV nightly. Many days he stayed there—until the truant officer dragged his mother before a judge.

Brittany, while not yet ten-years-old, found her naked father dead from a heart attack. He hadn’t yet begun his shower, so the loud thud and subsequent silence from the bathroom worried this little girl, who on no occasions shared this experience aloud before the class but twice fled the room in recollective tears.

Amber hinted in a personal journal, but never entered it in a class discussion, the straightforward fact that she had no father. Never had (as far as she knew or cared), she had written.

The aim of language in the language arts classroom, whether voiced or heard, is one that allows us all, students and teacher, to be “‘in the know’” from a valued vantage point (Fuss 115). This is where the classroom teacher determines to approach literature as something new to know for all, and something with which we all likewise can equally connect on some level, not just those of us “in the know.” For Diana Fuss, shared experience either elevates to a platform or relegates to the sidelines. There must be a meeting place of some sort in the language arts classroom— not necessarily a common ground, but a “location of privilege” that silences no one for a time and moves everyone beyond the impossibility of hooks’ “rainbow coalition” within our schools (hooks, Teaching 82, 31). The teacher’s role in facilitating such a classroom can never be underestimated. In fact, it determines from the outset whether the classroom will open the “larger world” for examination and promote “critical distancing” as a method of thinking about ourselves and our fellow human beings (Willinsky 18). It sets up education itself as a “worthy object of inquiry,” with interrogation of how and what we all have learned up to this point at the center of the inquiry (18). From here, learning builds upon the past only as it promotes individual and collective literacy for the future benefit of everyone.

Without question, human contact is imperative in measuring competency in the world beyond school, so this is arguably what should be duplicated in the classroom on a basic level as
the first step toward making learning in the language arts classroom something that moves society forward rather than learning that looks to the past to justify its existence and further compartmentalization of our students in ways unsuited to the present culture. Such a great task begins with a rethinking of what we teach and the setting in which we teach it. I ask first, do I really teach language arts-- the art of using language effectively in reading, writing, thinking, and speaking-- in my classroom? If I determine to address the core of secondary education’s current illness and agree with Mark Forget, that “many middle school and high school students lack the ability to use communication skills effectively for the purpose of learning,” then this new focus on language should radically redefine my middle school classroom (2).

Communication begins with human interaction long before we learn to read or write, and “interaction between student and self, student and teacher, and among students, in the context of the subject area is critical in developing” the abilities to think critically and extend that thinking “beyond text” (Forget 3). Without the ability to extend thinking, possibly our secondary efforts beyond providing students with basic reading, writing, and computing skills (accomplished by the fourth grade) are wasted.

Something happened along the way to subsume language at the middle school level. At some point, literature and literacy became a teacher specialty, and the classroom turned into a passive, non-verbal place for most students. If instead we desire language to belong to our students as fully as it does to us teachers (which is the reason we really desired to teach in the first place), we can’t deny that now. We can’t exude literacy and just hope that it sinks in solidly enough to emerge in ten years’ time when our students finally burst onto the “real world” scene. Language and literacy do not belong to the teacher or to adults alone; being literate is willingly reading multiple texts of life, making sense of those texts, and choosing to absorb and dialog about them. How we view our students and what we teach our students in nine short months is incidental to the literary setting we foster in the middle school language arts classroom and beyond. In this classroom, I will tell my students in some way every day what they can expect in their language arts classroom. One day I may ask them to choose from their drafts the piece I might read and respond to. When the one student invariably asks why I grade with pencil, I can share my reasoning and respect for their valuable work. Another time they will learn that my feedback points ahead to their potential rather than their past errors, and over time our one-on-
one conversations allow for choice in goal-setting and academic growth. This is the classroom that mirrors our corporate world of difference and the diversely individual potential therein.

*This year we will communicate difference together,* I explain in these ways and many more. *We will read, write, and speak our diversity as one.* We will make progress from varied points in the same direction without ending up at the same place, since that would be impossible and boring. *We may meet on grounds of commonality now and then, but it will be for the common goal of experiencing diversity firsthand rather than viewing it distantly.* You will make the progress right for you as a unique individual and as a teenager. You will not make the progress that is right for me or anyone else. *I will do the same.* You will learn things you never knew before from everyone in this class. *I will learn things I never knew before.* I will give you the time and tools to do things you never knew you could do. *In addition, you will have more choices than you ever had before,* which will move you in the direction of adulthood. I will stay energetic, engaged, and informed this way, because I’ll learn from your choices what interests you and motivates you. *You can help me close the gap between a teenager and thirty-something.* Also, *you can help prepare me for my future job as a mother to a teenager (in a few years!).* Give me lots of information to work with this year. I’ll do the same for you.

**Trust in the Classroom:**

Because adolescents are emerging as autonomous adults, I endeavor year after year to find new ways of giving my students ownership of the learning process while providing the language-rich classroom structure, the deliberate materials, and the genuine personal inquisitiveness that should undergird a literate environment. If these nascent adults cannot begin to use their literacy in adult dialog and with adult freedom in my classroom, then I can expect a closing of the mind to literacy and its benefits to the individual student and the larger diverse society we all will live in for life. For me, this begins with a frank acknowledgement of the alternative personal and cultural literacies that motivate the students in my classroom. It begins not with wondering which students will resist my methods this year, but with convincing myself of Leslie Minarik’s assertion that all students “can focus, retain information, and master data”; all “are motivated” in some way; and “each in his or her own way [can be] successful in some
aspect of literacy” in my classroom (289). For too many years I was “failing them,” echoing Minarik’s own admission, with my teacher-oriented classroom and distant, dominant discourse:

I see now that I was failing them: (1) a teacher who had not yet learned to recognize success in other forms, (2) a structure that continued to be alien to them and which they did not need to access to survive in their life outside of school, (3) a curriculum that was not authentic, or motivating enough to hook them into practice and master, and (4) role models that had not shown them that the skills or tools they have used to master drawing, debating, and basketball could be applied to reading and writing within a classroom. (289)

We owe our students a classroom that seeks alternatives to the “dominant and societally destructive ideology” of literacy (Gallego and Hollingsworth 295). We owe our students a classroom that breaks barriers and eliminates hierarchies (not difference) through the daily practice of language rather than a careful ideologically constructed curriculum and calendar. We owe our students the wisdom of our teacherly expertise and self-reflection. We owe our students trust in ourselves to make this coalition a reality. Trust, I have to believe, will win them over eventually and invite them into a rich learning environment.

According to educator (and former fifth-grade teacher) John Holt, “the true size of the task” confronting a teacher at the start of the year is not organization or even authority, but it is trust. The successful student has a confidence and trust that undergird a certain expectation that he or she can “make sense out of things sooner or later” (Holt, Learning 155). And because the successful student is “resourceful” and “patient,” the classroom atmosphere must allow for practice and provide the support for experimentation (Holt, Learning 155). The literate student knows how to experiment and who to consult, and the workings of this language arts classroom support such efforts. At the start of the year, a teacher’s focus must be trust, the same “comfort, reassurance, and security” that we human beings have always craved “just in order to get started on this adventure” (Holt Learning 3). Trust is the groundwork before basic reading skills or grade-level assessments. Ultimately, it does not really take much time for students to acquire the actual skills that they will need to further their capabilities as readers. It does take time at the start of the year to establish the trust because there is often such a lack of it already established in school. Holt characterizes educator and reformer Paolo Freire’s method as “politically radical”
in that, before the Brazilian army drove him out of the country, “he began by talking with these peasants about the conditions and problems of their lives (this was what the army didn’t like), and then showed them how to write and read the words that came up most in their talk,” something he discovered took only about thirty hours of instruction per individual because of the trust established through personalization (Holt, *Learning* 5). This is the same personal concern a mentor has for his or her apprentice. Both sense the investment; both see something to be gained.

As the mentoring adult to an apprentice, I attempt to set this tone of trust on the first day of school. My students successfully find their seats, and I then learn their names, asking for correct pronunciations and joking at my feeble efforts while I shuffle them around the room, allowing no one to hide or feel isolated. Next, I pick up a book and read one of my favorite leads, the prologue from high school English teacher Edward Bloor’s first novel, *Tangerine*. Before the first class ends, the students have heard my voice, experienced well-crafted English, viewed some of my personal writings on the overhead, and toured the language-rich room with me. Their homework assignment is to find one book-- any book-- and to return to class the next day with it. They may opt to read it eventually or choose another from my shelves, but not before they learn how very different my approach to the reading classroom will be this year and not before they hear about my grandfather and hero, my sister’s brief life, and my deep motivations for teaching this subject; not before they hear about a student in my very first class of my first year of teaching seventh graders, Lupe-- a young woman who cared for her younger siblings when their drug-addicted mother abandoned them, who wrote and wrote for me that year even when I did not return the effort; not before they learn that I teach because I learn more and more each year from my students about what matters most in life:

> I’ve learned that they trust me as a teacher, as a writer, as a reader, and as a human being when I’m reading, writing, and speaking about those things that matter to me . . . . I’ve learned that students learn the most when they are reading, writing, and speaking about those things that matter to them. (Rief, “Staying” 10)

Convincing students that we really care about the words we are using should be easy because we entered the profession for this reason first. If any of us forget that, our students will “know if we are sharing words with them more out of duty than out of love, more to cover curriculum than to
really sigh with them over words” (Ray 79). This classroom that can now begin with trust will soon flourish through talk.

**Talk in the Classroom:**

Probing in this project for how students learn to read for long-range depth of understanding begins with an examination of how we all learn to speak, John Holt would maintain: through such “patient and persistent experiment; by trying many thousands of times to make sounds, syllables, and words”; and by comparing as small children the sounds we make to the sounds of the “experts” around us in order to close that gap, and “above all, by being willing to do things wrong even while trying [our] best to do them right” (Holt, *How* 56). If we “experts” who claim to want to teach children can do so “naturally and unaffectedly,” by modeling “patient and persistent” experimentation with language ourselves, we essentially recreate the partnership that reflects our earliest learning. Just as we encourage children to learn to speak “by letting them be around when we talk to other people,” we can facilitate discussions surrounding literary texts in much the same way (Holt, *How* 58). In this case, the dialog modeled is between the teacher and the writer/poet of a text. This is the dialog students should hear and take part in without concern for mistakes, just as my four-year-old daughter is unruffled (and therefore uncorrected) when she substitutes *taught* for *taught*. Later I will casually model the correct past tense form of *teach*, and she will invariably alter her patterns as well. More importantly, she will probably learn more in the meantime because I have not dampened her desire to experiment through needless correction:

> A child’s understanding of the world is uncertain and tentative. If we question him too much or too sharply, we are more likely to weaken that understanding than strengthen it. His understanding will grow faster if we can make ourselves have faith in it and leave it alone. (Holt, *How* 66)

And in the meantime, model it.

School, and by extension the classroom, is really a rehearsing place. I know that my daughter is rehearsing. She isn’t yet writing a job cover letter or filling out a college application. As parents *and* teachers, we hope that “if we speak well, and they hear us, they will soon speak as we do” and correct themselves (Holt, *How* 72). Learning to speak any language requires
“bold and risky leaps” into someone else’s world and comfort zone, yet the self-consciousness that small children lack is present at the middle school years. But it is tenuous, so the teacher must be interested, interested enough to listen, wait, and try very hard to understand (Holt, *How 67*). Students make assumptions that are “reasonable” for their age and developmental stage. We teachers should “meet such ‘mistakes,’ not with a curt correction, but with understanding and courtesy” (Holt, *How 79*). Why should that change when students enter school?

Talking is a form of experimentation— with language and with understanding. Mistakes are important. They are to be built upon rather than shot down; they are to be remembered, cataloged, and timed. Once in a while the teacher can bring up such “goals,” can steer and “nudge,” and can showcase his or her own thinking processes and areas of growth. The teacher must dialog with the students, the literature, the writers behind it, the teacher’s own writing, with social issues, and with personal growth. This dialog is not necessarily confident and expert, however. I dialog this way with my students because it reflects a process, the points in my own journey: *This is what I used to think. This is where I am now.* What will become clear to my students, I hope, is that they have embarked on a journey of learning, and I am one of their guides. They have to trust me to guide (or to keep the car running, as Nancie Atwell would say); but I have to trust them as well. I have to give directions at times, and I must be willing to allow my students to steer at all moments. This trust will build over time as students begin to talk knowing that I listen, believing me when I tell them that I am learning from them at the same time they are learning from me. We will talk, and I will listen, believing as Linda Rief does that “the craft of teaching is inextricably tied to the craft of listening to our kids and acting on what they tell us” (Rief, “Staying” 9).

The classroom my students learn in will follow a workshop model, more recently referred to as an apprenticeship model. “The heart” of both approaches “as a mode of learning is coached practice in actual tasks of production, with decreasing degrees of support from the master or more advanced colleagues” (Resnick 29). Harvey Daniels will speak of this in getting Literature Circles discussion groups up and running early in the year according to a decreasingly rigid set of duties or “roles.” Such pedagogical programs, according to Resnick, “attempt to establish communities of literate practice in which children can participate under special forms of guidance,” “try to make usually hidden metal processes overt,” and “encourage student
observation and commentary” (29). Further, approaches modeled on an apprenticeship framework “allow skills to build up bit by bit, yet permit participation in meaningful work even for the relatively unskilled, often as a result of sharing the tasks among several participants” (29). Before the term apprenticeship was applied to the collaborative learning taking place in many language arts programs, Nancie Atwell described the workshop setting as one that allows for the “individuals’ rigorous pursuit of their own ideas” (Atwell 41). Here, Atwell attests, students can participate “in adult reality” through meaningful talk, and can “count on time” to write, and think-- to follow through with all steps necessary to the thinking/learning process (41, 59). In the workshop, where apprentice and master labor together, all tools needed for this are at the students’ disposal, setting the stage for “experimentation, decision-making, and ownership” (Atwell 64). The ultimate goal is that students will be able to do it on their own, becoming their own masters (Atwell 70). The value of natural talk and sustained time is intrinsic, and ownership of the meaning-making, crucial.

For this reason, we language arts teachers must consider first how to arrange classrooms in such a way that allows us to observe learning and to take part in it as well. The pedagogical approach should place learning into the students’ hands for success to result. They won’t really learn otherwise. The activities of the beginning of the year must establish the tone through, paradoxically, a *routine of independence*. Based on the unique qualities of adolescent learners, I’ve also discovered, as Atwell has, that “the workshop approach is exactly right for them” (41). Primarily this is because they do not have to leave their personal lives at the door most days, and they are also asked to assume the responsibilities of adults while enjoying the pleasures of learning that adults enjoy in the society of others and the independence of their own minds. Learning through talk replicates the most challenging sorts of learning that we engage in, and it certainly suits the needs of adolescents whose worlds are expanding at the point their brains become more rule-oriented and more likely to abandon intuition and common sense for a hasty--too-often faulty or inappropriate--application of their previous knowledge (Gardner 107). Mark Forget’s classroom approach, designed around talk at each stage of the reading process, aims at rooting out such inconsistencies in order to counteract the rule-oriented adult habits of mind that “look for rules and strive for quantification” rather than for understanding and meaning from complexity and inconsistency (Gardner 108).
The teacher’s role as language guide is to work unceasingly in promoting an environment of spontaneity within a routine of predictability in order to ensure that students have the room to push the limits of their comfortable literal leanings. In this fluid setting, there can be no artificial units, just learning themes arising from the movements of life. I will listen to the rhythms of their lives and our world. I will try their suggestions as they try mine. This doesn’t mean I walk into class without a lesson plan and allow chaos to reign. It means I labor to make clear and consistent my expectations for behavior. It means my lesson plans are driven by short-range needs, acknowledging that multiple paths of learning lead to the same ultimate destination of literacy. And these routes are as varied as the students in my classroom from year to year. As a result, I might be tempted to give-in to the fear of disorder and discontinuity; but, in fact, I will actually “be ‘so damned organized’” in this endeavor that I can pursue real leads and foremost “concentrate on the students: Who are they? What do they know? How have they come to know that? How can I help them become better readers, writers, and learners?” (Rief, Seeking 33).

The classroom must exist “to serve students’ own purposes” by inviting them to pursue the disjunctures in their thinking. Here, teachers recognize and use the “ripe to be hooked moment” (Atwell 48); then, they nudge students to develop habits and strategies for thinking that welcome, not intimidate. The sort of talk I expect will result from these promptings may take time, the scariest imperative of all.

**Time in the Classroom:**

Each year I teach, the periods, weeks, and quarters feel shorter. Either I have more to say, or the interruptions to my instructional time increase. Increasingly I overhear teachers bemoan the impossibilities of balancing growing curricular expectations with the realities of time and the disruptions caused by holidays, assemblies, field trips, sick days or snow days, and grading periods. In this atmosphere, time is as important as trust and talk, yet the school calendar works counter to continuity from day one and the teacher bears the burden of reevaluating time for the sake of maximum learning. Time in the classroom should be the time to read or write and to keep going no matter what (or when) the interruption. Students can decide to abandon a book or a draft, or they can keep reading to understand more fully “what the author is talking about,” to see if it all “falls into place”-- hopefully, with the habit begun at
school apart from the usual distractions of home (Rief, Seeking 7). The pursuit of literacy in a classroom reveals “genuine readers and writers bringing meaning to, and taking meaning from, their chosen texts” (Rief, Seeking 8). Ultimately, with the teacher’s careful guidance, they will be able to show the teacher how they can take over the job of challenging themselves and make new knowledge with what they are learning individually and corporately. This is not easy in light of circumstances we cannot control; nor does it “just happen” once we have pinpointed the need. As I intend to illustrate, our students will need time to readjust to such learning, and the teacher will definitely need the time to experiment with—time to jump in, to doubt, to question, and to reevaluate the balance of actual minutes to subject matter in literacy growth.

Linda Rief’s stages of growth as a language arts teacher progressed over the course of several years from having her students answering questions at the end of selections out of the literature anthology to requiring reading without responses, independent at-home reading summed up with book projects, oral in-class book sharing, a flood of daily letters from her 125 students, reader’s logs combined with small-group and whole-class discussions, and her latest as of the publication of Seeking Diversity: reader’s-writer’s logs plus small-group and whole-class discussions (Rief 53). My growth from 1992 to 2002 resembled Linda Rief’s with a few exceptions. Namely, there were years when I may have taken backward steps. Definitely I tried a number of approaches that I abandoned, not realizing that only parts of my approach were flawed, the aspects that seemed to gobble time purposelessly or that represented someone else’s guaranteed methods, which didn’t “feel right” to me. I was not yet able to “skillfully adapt the particular methods that [made] sense to [me] until they fit my theories, classroom, teaching load, and schedule” (Rief, Seeking xii). No, I was “blaming the methods or [my] students when things [didn’t] work out as I expected” (Seeking xii). Rief’s “slow growth model” was not for me. The open-ended pioneer model was not for me. Apparently those presenters at the National Middle School Conference (NMSC) who first introduced me to Harvey Daniels’ Literature Circles discussion model didn’t have to teach my seventh grade students. I’d stick with a more shortsighted model that ended with neatly timed wrap-ups. A compromise model. Students would choose books, and I’d assign end-of-the-chapter questions or reflective essays and book projects, with an occasional day of sharing (mostly me). I might even read aloud from some of the books off of my shelves, but I wouldn’t ask the students to do the same. Not yet.
When Linda Rief was in the midst of her early growth, she realized her students were “doing little in the way of reacting or responding to reading as writers” beyond the impromptu class discussion. She turned to Nancie Atwell’s chapter from *In the Middle* about her students writing letters to her and each other about their writing. Rief’s insightful conclusion after “jumping right in” reveals her determination to grow: “This wasn’t working exactly the way Atwell did it” (*Seeking* 54).

I still liked the way her students responded to their reading and the way she responded to them. They connected books to their lives, to their writing, and to each other. I wanted that to happen, but needed to organize it in a different way, a way that fit my classroom and me. (Rief, *Seeking* 54)

And after a year spent trying to forget I’d ever heard Harvey Daniels’ name, after close-mindedly resisting a student-centered approach and the chaos I had glimpsed, I determined to make progress in a different direction during my second year. I started small by controlling each step of the process through modeling-- a big step for me for which the credit goes primarily to Tom Romano and *Clearing the Way*. Modeling as Romano and Rief would see it, however, accomplishes what simple demonstrations or explanations of an assignment cannot do. Through modeling, the teacher essentially becomes another student, sharing and grappling with the processes of thought and action that attend any activity. The immediate differences I observed in my students after approaching my own writing so honestly intoxicated me, and I pursued modeling and dialoguing about the writing process, still resistant (I might add) to the ways I might apply it to reading instruction.

Several years back, colleague of mine affiliated with the Ohio Writing Project (OWP) at Miami University knew I had experimented with literature circles and asked if I would co-present the concept with her to a large group of teachers. I agreed, secretly knowing that my “experience” amounted to failure. That was all it took to set me straight -- one hour of “faking it” before a room full of fellow-teachers, each seeking similar insights or epiphanies. Fortunately, one eager middle school teacher recommended me *Freak the Mighty* that day: “You must read this book-- it would work perfectly for literature circles!” So, challenged and overwhelmingly guilt-ridden, I left for a week-long ocean vacation with that novel and a clipboard and my pride; and that week I sunned by the Atlantic while charting a “flawless”
literature circles unit. As a result, I would glimpse what I had been expecting to happen in my classroom two years earlier, “magic” due to careful study, preparation, and enthusiasm. I loved this novel instantly and was eager myself to dig in. I was no longer mining required pieces from a textbook, expecting literature circles to magically make interesting what was boring to me and would always be so to my students. And the flaws— they were so much easier to address now.

This time, the planning was focused and deliberate, yet my expectations much more open. I’m not teaching this novel, now. I am facilitating learning through this novel. There will be no tests and quizzes, and only minor penalties for students who are unprepared with their reading. In fact, the whole purpose should never be to overwhelm, so the portions assigned will be manageable, with ample class time to prepare for discussion. I will read aloud alternating chapters in order to inspire renewed interest and infuse life into the literature. This is not a test. If one chapter is a little unclear, I have found we will soon be back on the same page when I read aloud. Knowing how seventh graders still long to be read aloud to, knowing how they stare at me transfixed when I read dramatically as if I were a movie screen or TV, I now know how to draw my wayward students back into our class novel. And talk will come naturally when we all feel less overwhelmed or intimidated, leading fluidly into writing because of the student-directed nature of this talk. I won’t tell the students what to value most in their readings, and I will not let any experts tell me what the students I know best should value. This is the final stage of growth for me, as it was for Linda Rief. The students learn to steer. I’m along for an exciting ride making sure the machine stays well oiled, creatively jump-starting when necessary. By making the time to reflect and plot and plan, I was finally teaching reading rather than literature.

In this student-centered (learner-centered) classroom, the teacher’s role shifts from expert in literature and explication/analysis to expert in “time and careful orchestration” (Graves 116). It may be “slow going at first,” according to Graves and Atwell, but “talk, like exploratory writing, helps students get familiar with new information,” and it takes time (Fletcher and Portalupi 11). This talk will lead to exploratory writing eventually, bringing the whole of language together seamlessly, naturally, and purposefully. Students will read, talk about what they want to say, and write with the goal of “teaching me what [they] learned today” (Fletcher and Portalupi 11). If I had to pick one manifestation of language that is most intrinsic to effecting learning among adolescents, it would be that which is most ignored in middle schools
due to the overly-active nature of the students: talk. There is a purpose for talk that schools have ignored. If there is talk, it is often tested talk, talk that involves a right or wrong answer to be immediately affirmed, corrected, or redirected, before moving on. And talk takes time both for the teacher who choreographs and for the student who generally needs practice.

Time had a limited place in my own educational experiences when it came to talk, or classroom discussions. Talk was always systematic and timed, not exploratory. Considering the reasons why human beings learn to talk at all, I see that this was misguided. If talking is only teacher prompted and directed, it likely resembles quizzing. In this environment, students naturally come to see learning as the antithesis of “figuring out how things work”; rather it is “getting and giving answers that please grownups” (Holt, How 65). This is not how we learned to speak as children. The testing was something we did on our own, ideally with patient adults presiding. And why are teachers so concerned about the right answers right away? Why must we address every little issue of right and wrong at this point? Wasn’t there a time when my parents allowed me to experiment with language, knowing as I know about my daughter that she will eventually pronounce the th in think instead of her delightful fink? What if I was to crush the voices in my room during literature circle discussions because I overheard misconceptions being shared, narrow views tendered, or simplistic conclusions drawn? They are twelve years old, after all. Thinking that is “bold and powerful,” though reflective of half-truths or one-dimensional reasoning, is still worthwhile. There is a time and place for correction, and there certainly is a time and place for rehearsing “bold and powerful thinking” (Holt 72). There is timing.

A Classroom Model of Time and Timing:

With the natural “need to talk,” Harvey Daniels frames a flexible approach to the organization of a classroom around reading materials. Forgoing “densely packed pages of artificial school-made text” in favor of “whole, real books,” Daniels’ model allows students to read without interruption; and to “get good at it” (11). Holt and Daniels affirm through decades of research that “kids who read on their own, who read books they have chosen for themselves, become the strongest readers” (Daniels 10-11; Holt/ Under 86-7). Furthermore, students can react to their reading as they do in real life to the movies and television shows they view, who
can “express, effuse, emote, think, and weigh during and after reading” on the road that is off limits in too many classrooms from “responding to analyzing and evaluating” (Daniels 9). What “well-structured” literature circles do is “simply re-create a basic, natural, and comfortable human structure for interacting around books and ideas,” and (I am convinced) safely promote diversity in discussion (14). As students explore ideas together, ideas of interest to themselves, they tend toward points of agreement. The groups are small and the viewpoints more evidently diverse than when discussion takes place among the whole class. With rotating “roles,” or parts to play, no one is able to silence another. And eventually, the silenced and the silencer must play a role in making meaning. Notice how in Daniels’ “current definition” of literature circles, the students must rely on one another equally, not on someone more powerful or better informed:

Literature circles are small, temporary discussion groups who have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. While reading each group-determined portion of the text (either in or outside of class), each member prepares to take specific responsibilities in the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with the notes needed to help perform that job. The circles have regular meetings, with discussion roles rotating each session. When they finish a book, the circle members plan a way to share highlights of their reading with the wider community; then they trade members with other finishing groups, select more reading, and move into a new cycle. Once readers can successfully conduct their own wide-ranging, self-sustaining discussions, formal discussion roles may be dropped. (13)

The teacher’s role in this process is to ensure success. My seventh graders come to my classroom unaccustomed to this sort of learning and may nervously attempt to goof-off at first, as they have come to expect when assigned group work. *Someone in the group will pick up the slack, right?* Eventually they learn that digressions are encouraged as part of the “spirit of playfulness and fun” that should guide (Daniels 27). I actually learned over the years that not only did I have to train my students to have fun, but I had to reassure them that they could talk--naturally. *And, I had to make sure these homework and reading-resistant adolescents knew exactly how to plan their role, receiving ample support from me at first. I learned to offer them time; and I learned second not to give-up, threaten, or punish. Instead, I sat down with one group*
to ask what might have stalled their discussion and led to one problem or another. *How can I help? What can I clarify about the reading and this process?* This was my new job: I modeled and reassured, I conferred and asked genuine questions. *Relax,* I said. *Learning doesn’t always involve the right answers. It can take time, and it can be fun!*

As I have shared with countless frustrated teachers, many of whom have abandoned the literature circle ship, my secret is really patience and persistence. *This will work,* I have told myself. *It has to.* I have simply to follow Rief’s example and tailor the concept to my students, my classroom, and myself. This determination ultimately led to a revised three-day rather than the recommended two-day discussion schedule. With circles set-up to meet every third day now, an absence or forgotten role sheet does not derail one group. In fact, I have learned to provide ample class time every day in preparation for group discussions, allowing the most hesitant or resistant students time to encounter the reading, collaborate with their friends, and confer with me openly. Should a student miss class on the discussion day, the challenging part of my job kicks in, when I prepare a role sheet with little warning and delight and relax one or two groups by joining them with questions or illustrations of my own. The discussion is not a quiz, and the role sheets accumulate in a portfolio stored in the classroom until each student is satisfied with its contents. In fact, the key to my unintentional success with literature circles arises from my age-appropriate decision to keep all materials in the classroom. When there is already plenty to allow my students to take home with them-- independent reading books and writing drafts-- it is reasonable that I keep my thumb on work that is so crucial to the implementation of a collaborative process for the success of my students and classroom. After all, Daniels’ own subtitle indicates this is for the student-centered classroom. They must first experience success in order to take part fully. I cannot set them up for failure.

Literature circles might be termed a cooperative or a collaborative approach to class discussions-- just as long as it is clearly “open-ended and student-centered” (Daniels 10). The spirit of literature circles relies heavily on choice, as much as possible when it comes to materials, and crucially when it comes to discussion topics. Leads are generated by everyone in the classroom, and the teacher pursues those leads, hunting down materials, offering choices, and again keeping the machine well-oiled and running. When a teacher can commit to the theory behind this approach, the atmosphere will quickly resemble life. Will the students “understand”
everything they read when we allow them to “make the meaning,” their meaning, together? In the words of one Chicago-area high school English teacher, success isn’t measured in “complete understanding of the text”; rather it is measured in the success of a community of learners working together through issues. Thus, in this “atmosphere in the classroom [there is] an attitude that we’re all kind of ‘rummaging’ around for meaning together” (Daniels 17). This is the stuff of life-- making meaning together for life, bringing our diversity to discussion circles for life. Practicing learning becomes the classroom method because we are practicing life and are living diversity in the same classroom and on the same planet.

Three of my students meet after reading a selection from my classroom bookshelves. The plot of this chapter is incidental, but the connections are telling. Cody, whose stories about the beatings he endures from big brother Colin make the two female members of his group cringe and moan, chooses to dwell upon the light-hearted story Emily shared of once eating a tick that she thought was a raisin. The subsequent pandemonium set off in her house is something Cody wants to be a part of, and he creates a sarcastic dialog between the mother and a poison control operator in identification with Emily’s family life. Emily explores Shawna’s story of a fugitive uncle borrowing the family’s one couch for a few days until the police catch up with him. She explores Shawna’s feelings of tense closeness in this unknown two-bedroom apartment setting where police might suddenly begin banging at the door. And Shawna? She relates to the beatings poor Cody endures, though now she is actually bigger than her older stepbrother. The power struggle has shifted, and she analyzes Cody’s silent, patient plotting. Colin’s day of reckoning will come. Regardless of which student prepared the connector role for that meeting, all contributed and identified uniquely to that discussion and one another. (See Figure #3)

There are so many “ways of knowing,” and the authority of experience is one; empathy is possibly another. In between, there is “yearning” (“even this yearning is a way to know,” bell hooks insists), and that is the point at which I stop and strategize. The traditional approach to literature, no matter the diversity of topics and authors presented, is to inform, instill, and in a sense speak from one hierarchy while deconstructing another. We all connect to the experiences of one another, those individuals seated beside us in the classroom as well as the characters in literature. There are no similarities and contrasts to be drawn, rather there are connections. My students read self-chosen materials, meet in circles, and share their personal connections, which
range from insights of a recent movie to borrowed family experiences and personal memories. They write about each other’s connections, thus responding to and affirming shared experience. No experience is more essential than another, Diana Fuss would have us see. Therefore, we need to speak from knowledge of everyone’s experiences if the goal is to inform so as to draw in, not exclude.

Did Cody, Emily, and Shawna all complete the reading assigned? I think they did in different ways, maybe not through the assigned written notes, but no one hesitated to speak up about their own “hard-won truths” (Romano 109). Did they do this because they were worried about a quiz or an on-the-spot question fired from me to the students diverting their eyes to the floor? If the reading materials these students have chosen were related to previous areas of class interest, if I have established trust and motivation through my explanations of the choice and our class prior-knowledge, and if I have allowed talk to progress naturally, I will see results, but not before investing time. I get the students and readers that I get, and I can’t reverse the clock for them. If reading has not been fun, my slower methods may shock and confuse. In fact, not only do these students talk without fear of the clock or my immediate evaluation, they know their role in the final grade is major. They write the exam, so to speak, while filling out role sheets that remain in their portfolios until the unit completion. This may not sink in until the process has been carried out once, but ultimately the self-evaluation stage results in some sort of improved performance by everyone because the resulting goals are concrete and specific instead of vague. To “study harder” or “read better” has no bearing. Pride and excellence are not reflections of someone else’s expectations. Over time, they will belong to the students.

To guide students as Mary Mercer Krogness does with her seventh and eighth graders, mostly African American boys and girls, toward “gain[ing] a fresh vision of what constitutes excellence,” learning arises from the comments and observations of students who feel free to express themselves in a setting that “values” rather than “evaluates” (63, 58). The work in this “laboratory” is student-steered and fun. Krogness views her position as that of guide, assisting her students in the development of this “fresh vision . . . one that is broader than school’s usual definition (doing well on tests), which usually excludes them” (63)-- a simple view, with results that surprise Krogness year after year:

By actively engaging my students-- immersing them-- in many and varied
language experiences that apply to their lives, yet lead them forward, I aim to stretch their perception of what learning and academic accomplishment really are. From my perspective, the magic moments-- when kids use the language surprisingly, when they ask remarkable questions, or offer insights-- equal excellence. (63)

Choosing the film medium to “hook” her students, Krogness envisioned a collaborative project that could guide both her curriculum as it would “weave talking, listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing-- all of the language arts into a splendid fabric” as well as structure her classroom, by allowing her “the opportunity to help [students] learn how to work together peaceably and productively” (63). This is language in action and life in action, a classroom in which the teacher “engineers” various aspects of group work and leading students to ask questions of their work and make artistic decisions together, each time “developing a system of values and standards of excellence” that include all students (65). And language-learning? Enjoyable. Powerful. As a body, the students in Krogness’ language arts class ultimately viewed the work of that year as the culmination of a joint vision arrived at through “authentic” knowing and the purposeful use of real language. If knowledge is power, it is most powerful found together.

Did this unit take the entire school year? Was this all these middle school students worked on? No; their efforts led naturally into related novels and poetry, even a family folklore project that offered Krogness and her students “an opportunity to conduct taped interviews of [their] relatives and get in touch with [their] own histories” (Krogness 62). And in this seamless way, learning seems less rushed, more fluid and purposeful, and definitely both “fun” and “satisfying” as it should be (Krogness 62). One reason why Krogness’ students actually informed her one day that her class was “too easy” was simply because they rarely experienced the pressure of having to read “so many pages of book every night” followed too quickly by book reports and tests. Krogness had obviously established trust with her students, based on not doing “what the rest of the English classes do,” and had set up a classroom around the intrinsic need to explore language together without the looming deadlines-- to “just do improv, read, write, talk, and have fun” (60).
And if this process *seems* to take more time, teachers would do well to remember what Donald Graves points out, that the often-overlooked work of an artist in a studio is the time spent thinking, exploring, or “problem finding”:

> Although problem solving is important, it does not place the same demand on the child’s thinking as problem finding. It is the blank page, the empty canvas, the workbench with tools and materials ready for work . . . that require children to begin to *see differently*, to recognize a problem to be solved or an idea to be expressed. (79)

In this workshop setting, “children need large amounts of time to experiment without interruption. They need time to waste. It is up to us who have gone before them to point to the significance of their choices, to expect more. We provide the studio/laboratory for learning,” and they work with all the materials offered to them by an unlimiting overseer (Graves 82).

> Trust, talk, and time. The latter must never be underestimated, and the benefits to literacy result from thoughtful choices allowed by experimentation, the result of self-construction (Graves 16, 82). Awareness of self-- of motivations and longings and actions-- represent the processes of becoming human (Graves 1-5, 12). Not only do adolescents still “need to observe and wonder,” as their elementary heirs, “they also need to encounter adults who are passionately engaged in their work. This is the kind of human encouragement that jump-starts learning” (Graves 112). With smaller chunks of working time, students are likely to be less involved, according to Donald Graves, who has observed that “for every transition, there is the wasted time of taking down one learning activity and setting up another,” while “the child who plays for long periods of time is the child who will also be emotionally engaged in learning at school”-- especially if he or she can “initiate” as that child has been accustomed to doing when it comes to play time and socializing (114). A classroom structured around play might seem only to promote the waste of precious instructional time, but out of that “spirit of fun and playfulness” that Harvey Daniels finds central to literature circles’ success arise problems to answer and ideas to explore further. Such a learning-centered, life-centered classroom motivates me to keep teaching.

**The Risks of an Uncomfortable Classroom:**
Of late, the short-sighted solution posed to the problem of declining test-scores and failing literacy rates is to pick up the pace by cramming more into existing class periods, favoring learning that Graves would say is too teacher-initiated to work. More grilling and drilling is approved and encouraged by paraprofessionals the world-over, regardless of the reality that “excessive stimulation to enhance development is unproven and risky” and “violates the fundamental rule: A healthy brain stimulates itself by active interaction with what it finds challenging and interesting in its environment” (Healy 82). Jane Healy points to a different classroom pace that considers “the environments that we provide for children, the stimuli with which we encourage them to interact, and the ways in which we demonstrate for them the uses of a human mind-- these are the means at our command for shaping both their brains and our cultural future” (Healy 82). Surely as English teachers, we know that language “shapes culture” and thinking, and has for centuries when there was nothing else by way of print or visual media:

The verbal path in which a society soaks its children arranges their synapses and their intellects; it helps them learn to reason, reflect, and respond to the world. The brain is ravenous for language stimulation in early childhood but becomes increasingly resistant to change when the zero hour of puberty arrives . . . . ultimately [affecting] abilities to think abstractly, plan ahead and defer gratification, control attention, and perform higher-order analysis and problem-solving-- the very skills so much at issue in American schools today. (Healy 86)

Could this be the opposite of what we have been led to believe for decades?

I now believe there is more at stake than the intellectual capacities of our young people as they develop into thinking and acting adults. The best and brightest often do little to effect real change in the world and actually do quite a bit to further individual ends and dig into entrenched ideologies, perpetuating not diversity but difference-- even prejudice. As varied groups of people in Cincinnati, Ohio, presently attempt to dialog on common ground about the future of their families and communities, they meet with setbacks and encounter ideological roadblocks to change. What the black and white communities cannot change are the past events that culminated in downtown riots following a fatal police shooting of an unarmed black youth. But what has happened in the two years since is a certain step in the right direction through the establishment of a dynamic “contact zone” for dialog, negotiation, analysis, and change.
Agendas are not hidden in this setting, and honesty attempts to reign above all. This is not a comfortable place on any given day, according to Cincinnati-area high school English teacher, John Gaughan; but it looks like the world should look, and it nudges young people out of their black and white comfort zones, inviting them into the gray world where open dialog is constant and the wisdom that comes of open questioning and debate develops at an early, habit-forming age (5).

This classroom asks that we be a little uncomfortable with our beliefs and actions, even those we know to be right at a given moment: my grandfather facing the human enemy during war; my mother forgiving a father who never asked for forgiveness; my own awareness of living conditions around the world after a ten-day humanitarian trip to Honduras; my constantly changing views on abortion and the death penalty have even come up in the past. Always, I can share that my religious faith is secure, and my responsibilities to family and neighbors are constant. My feelings of what exactly this means, however, changes constantly. Students may not like what I have to say, and I may not like what they have to say. John Gaughan writes of the imperativeness of keeping them talking, thinking, and writing— at all times processing by asking themselves questions arising from our work as a class and by answering those questions based on knowledge and participation in a community. Gaughan does not leave out any student, no matter the viewpoint expressed. He asks further questions, carefully, of all students. All of us can consider the same questions that just one may need to consider, regardless of our past experiences.

I still fear the biggest danger in this exploratory classroom is that someone will be left out and that difference or privilege will take over. Discussion must take place in a safe, truly collaborative setting, but the key to collaboration is true collaboration. It mirrors adult realities and involves problem-finding together. It cannot take place in isolation and cannot be an artificial classroom conversation between teacher and student, one asking questions and the other offering opinions and spouting impressions. Teaching to what is most problematic about life, for all of us, begins with what prior knowledge everyone has, then turns that on its ear and forces students and teacher to work together toward a consensus of some tenuous sort. Rather than relying upon pedagogical methods and materials that illustrate diversity of practice without the practice itself, to teach to what may trouble us offers everyone the satisfaction of experiencing
firsthand our “cross-cultural commonality,” one we have all “worked for, struggled toward” (Mohanty 84).

Mark Forget’s MAX lesson framework isolates the most important “lifelong learning skills” to be practiced over and over, that of “using prediction as a means of developing purposes for engaging in reading” as in life; and “reading critically to clarify interpretation of [a] text” (5). And while I will examine these further in chapter four, that is the critical reading as it applies to a chosen curriculum, the first goal must take place in an experimental, collaborative workshop setting. In addition to the traditional teacher-preview of an assigned text designed to capture student attention and pique interest, Forget extends the preview into prediction with the goal of furthering this interest and initiating the process of critical, collaborative thinking prior to the actual reading. The skill of predicting might be practiced individually at first, a written response to the teacher’s question, or practiced through the use of prediction guides constructed carefully in advance by the teacher to raise awareness of the problems this text might address. This problem-solving component I have said I will address in the following section; the group-nature of the predictions is my focus here.

In Forget’s model, every independent activity is balanced immediately with a group effort. Ruth Pettitt’s students share their decisions after completing a prediction guide, in this case prior to reading an autobiographical article regarding the addictions of nicotine products entitled “Chewed Up.” (See Figure #1) When students are not in agreement, Mrs. Pettitt encourages them to explain why. Some students opt to change their predictions, and some adhere stubbornly to predictions such as “many smokers quit because of the risk of cancer associated with it,” citing experiential reasons: “my mom used to smoke, but she quit.” Most powerful will be the discussion that ensues following the critical reading step, after students have found out from the article that “each year, only about five percent of those who make a serious attempt to quit succeed” (Bissell 140). The “intellectual ownership” in the text comes of this cooperative repetition during which students finally work together to “achieve a classroom consensus” and “are able to support their beliefs either through direct reference to the text or through their interpretation of specific text” (Forget 6). I am aware of the ways I have constructed my own meaning, in my marriage, and as a mother and friend and daughter and educator. For my personal convictions, I believe I can point to experience-- that of my
grandparents, parents, siblings, colleagues; and the knowledge that I can point to from reading, observing, and practicing:

Effective pedagogy often centers around the opportunity to try out principles or formulas in a variety of circumstances, in an effort to determine where they remain appropriate; in an exploration of the domains of real life to which the formalisms pertain; and in a consideration of how best to yoke intuitive and experiential understandings to the formal algorithm. Asking students to make predictions or to consider extreme or limited cases often engages their interest and helps them to see the power and limits of the procedures in question. (Gardner 233)

The goal is to bring remoteness near by creating a setting in which students practice and view and critique. It replaces stereotypes with “an appreciation of the complexity of the artistic process and the ensemble of roles it entails” (Gardner 239). At some point, every student will be confronted with a misconception, some easy to adhere to stubbornly, and some to postpone for critical review.

The Self-Evaluating Classroom Setting:

The diverse approach to communal problem-solving should extend into assignments that are created with multiple audiences in mind—self, students, parents, and teacher, and at times, the wider world. Tom Romano’s multigenre approach to writing contributes to making a classroom community safe for everyone through the pursuit of our great differences; at the same time, to “sharpen sight” through the use of language, and subsequently “to communicate hard-won truth” to ourselves and one another (Romano 98, 109). The portfolio approach of many educators drives at ownership and the personal investments that encourage independence and thus maximize retention of literary knowledge and practice. Howard Gardner sees the classroom “culture” under a portfolio approach as fronted by two conceptions, all too typically reserved for certain disciplines or isolated units: that of incremental domain projects and cumulative process portfolios. Domain projects are “extended curricular sequences based upon a concept or practice that is central to a discipline” in which “students encounter [a] central practice in a number of different ways and have ample opportunities to assume the stances of producing, perceiving, and
reflection” (Gardner 239). Foundational to domain projects is the concept of apprenticeship, characterized by student reflection leading to increasing levels of competence (239-240). The traditional *portfolio*, or “process-folio,” represents a student’s accumulated “best work” and reflects the goals of our culture, “where some degree of creativity or individuality or ‘ownership’ is sought” (240). As Gardner points out, mastery is rarely the goal because it in itself precludes the creative *process*. The goal of life-long literacy is the constant self-reflective journey that leads to active participation in life.

One completely unique characteristic of the portfolio as I see it lies in its ongoing nature. I have opted primarily to use domain-style portfolios for various long-range projects in which I see the most potential for growth resting with the students’ participation in goal setting and evaluating. Ruth Pettitt first envisioned the portfolio in this way, as an ongoing method of self-evaluation for the student, providing them with ownership in their literacy growth. Her hope was to see these portfolios as year-long, multi-genre, cross-disciplinary efforts culminating in semesterly student-led conferences that would over time overshadow and invalidate the traditional report card. For many teachers in the Talawanda Middle School language arts department, the portfolio concept sounded difficult to manage, which led to the separate idea of a collective process portfolio that would contain only the “best” written work from sixth, seventh, and eighth grade and result in end-of-the-year reflective letters only. Collective portfolios combined with process portfolios in many ways can be truly reflective of lifelong literacy because they carry over from one year to the next, bridging the students’ documented growth.

Because of the rigid divisions assigned to grade levels in my places of employment (right down to the cloistered grade-level wings), most of my students do not sense their academic growth in the same ways they may sense physical growth and physical movement from one wing down the hall to the next. When my students see skills development from sixth grade by looking at items in their ongoing portfolios from that year, they begin to view their growth as readers and writers as if they were looking back on old yearbook pictures. Asking them to write an assessment of their growth over the course of a year since the conclusion of sixth grade is not difficult, partly because my students have already practiced this sort of reflective writing. In fact, the progress that is most evident in their increased sophistication in writing and book selections amazes many of them who believed “we just talked and wrote all year.” For this
reason, I take this process seriously throughout the year even if my students do not appear to at
first, and I surprise them in May by handing back many items they had “forgotten about”-- final
drafts of poems, illustrated life maps, reading record sheets, and story boards from hypertext
computer projects. I often wish I could play a larger role in the assessments that take place the
following year, when the students are more acutely aware of the sort of intellectual growth one
year can bring through this process, and when Ruth Pettitt and her eighth grade colleagues of all
disciplines involve students and parents in a final open-house portfolio presentation and
reflection.

Portfolios theoretically encourage such productive activity because goals set by the
students guide that year’s learning. The more the students own the process, the more genuine
that productive activity, leading to an understanding of the craft, is. This might mean a general
disregard for grades over goals, Gardner hints, and a forgoing of critical feedback for “strategic
feedback.” Also, it demands the interest of a “master” who demonstrates, monitors, aids,
attends, maintains, challenges, and steps back bit by bit. It might also require a commitment to
collaboration and recognition of multiple expertises in the classroom. Yes, this is the hope. And
while “the focus is on process rather than on product” (Gardner 243), which really is the ultimate
goal of education, students reap the rewards that come of the unlimited freedom to exhaust a
topic of their choosing. Romano’s multigenre approach to writing opens unlimited doors to
learning, provides endless opportunities for thinking, and mirrors life by recognizing the
blending of genres that represents our own reading and writing on a daily basis. The doors it
opens for the teacher to teach his or her craft and present a wide array of approaches to language
almost ensure a classroom will operate under the apprenticeship model and reassure students that
their classroom will not allow them to remain in their disconnected comfort zones. The contact
zone, instead, offers them options. It in no way limits the horizons of our brightest and refuses to
overlook our marginalized.

The students in our classroom have different needs. One may need time. One may need
attention. One may need trust. One may crave talk. Offer it all! Can we do it that? Not if we
follow many curriculum standards imposed on us. Yes, if we can narrow those standards down
to one page of “minimum requirements” and adopt a curriculum description that is broad enough
to encompass the goals of literacy and simple enough to free teachers to teach and students to
learn. Katie Wood Ray describes the middle school writing curriculum she aided in developing for P.S. 7 in the Bronx as one that covers “everything we can imagine teaching students [that] can and should help them grow in one or more of these ways” across grade levels, a curriculum applicable even to Talawanda Middle School in southwestern Ohio (213). (See Figure #4) Ray’s curriculum hasn’t left out the student or the teacher; neither has it placed the spirit of standardized tests between them. The classroom community is the understood, ongoing test. The focus on time and growth are evident here, with the farsighted goal of preparing for the future by practicing in the present:

**Over Time in a Writing Workshop,**

*We Hope to See Students Developing . . .*

- a sense of self as writers and personal writing processes that work for them;
- ways of reading the world like writers, collecting ideas with variety, volume, and thoughtfulness;
- a sense of thoughtful, deliberate purpose about their work as writers, and a willingness to linger with those purposes;
- as members of a responsive, literate community;
- ways of reading texts like writers, developing a sense of craft and genre in writing;
- a sense of audience and an understanding of how to prepare writing to go into the world. (Ray 213)

In a student-centered, self-reflective, language-immersed classroom, what are the students working *with?* How might a curriculum aiming beyond tests and designed around lifelong literacy look? And what approaches to these materials, the texts and classroom discussions and writing assignments will facilitate Forget’s extended, analytical thinking and further hooks’ dreams of “transformative pedagogy rooted in a respect for multiculturalism” (hooks, *Teaching* 40)? What students need most at this level, remember, according to the Reading Apprenticeship model, is a classroom structure and instructional framework designed to deliberately, daily “engage students in meaningful and complex literacy practices while *demystifying* these literacy practices” (Greenleaf et al. 89). This demystification will guide the
curriculum by making it a process much like Ray outlined, one that engages and edifies and insists on participation in literacy.
IV. The Middle School Curriculum:

Chad is reading the Civil War historical narrative *Soldier’s Heart* by Gary Paulsen, and he writes thoughtfully of the realities Paulsen describes by telling the story of an actual enlisted man in the Union army. Chad knows from his own research that the person in this book survived the war, but lived only into early adulthood— all in all, leading an unexceptional life. The soldier, a Minnesotan only a few years older than Chad, witnessed the carnage of war, the horrors of dying, and the fate-worse-than-death: of living through it all. This excerpt from Chad’s reading log shows him locating himself, however briefly, in the soldier’s perspective:

*In the woods behind my house my dad cleared an area for target practice.*

*Usually my brother and I are goofing around out there together, but sometimes I practice alone. Once I set up a piece of scrap plywood against a tree and shot it dead-center. I thought I’d drive a hole straight through it, but it shattered.*

*Splinters and spikes of wood flew everywhere. What if that had been a person? I could never do that to anyone, and I never want to fight in a war.*

When I stop at Kathy’s table, I can tell that she and two other students are talking about the significance of “tomatoes” in Dwight Okita’s poem “In Response to Executive Order 9066.” Kathy, exasperated at what she deems to be feeble efforts at sense-making on her part, turns to me as I eavesdrop.

“What’s the deal with tomatoes?”

“Good question. It’s one of the first questions I asked, too. What have you been discussing so far?”

“Well, we just keep talking about tomatoes. They’re red, juicy, smooth, versatile; it’s hard to decide if they’re vegetables or sweet like fruit; they need tender-loving-care . . . are we on the right track?”

“I don’t know,” I say honestly. “You’re doing something that isn’t supposed to have a simple answer because you’re discussing the symbolism, or deeper meaning, of an image the poet used. I can’t tell you because I change my mind every time I read this!” Funny. I hadn’t asked the students to focus on anything beyond their own questions. Those questions led this group and others to an in-depth discussion of the symbolism in this poem. The conversation
continued, according to instructions I’d carefully given to the various groups, with me sitting down briefly and speculating as well. I even tell about my husband’s garden in which he grows nothing but tomatoes, spending two months watering, fertilizing, and training the plants before we reap even a single fruit. When Kathy writes her own poem, she chooses to experiment with symbolism herself while exploring the dissolution of a childhood friendship. She isn’t the only one to experiment in this way.

We did not hurry through this poem. In “teaching” it, I decided to follow a method I first heard described to an auditorium full of teachers by John Gaughan during a 1997 summer Ohio Writing Project workshop. Gaughan urged us to direct students to read and reread a poem (in class) with their own questions in mind, zeroing-in on points of confusion or conflict rather than points of understanding. This method seemed ponderous to me at first, yet it forced students to immerse themselves into the language of a poem—exactly what a poem asks of us. I rarely bothered to teach poetry before encountering Gaughan’s process, preferring to defer the dreaded poetry unit until the end of the year. Then I looked for poems in the textbook that I “understood,” attended by questions that seemed easy and accessible to students. Albert Somers wonders whether teachers feel like they can’t approach serious discussions of literature until they understand it first, cautioning that if they do “understand” the text, their interpretation may be either a standard, inherited party line or their own highly subjective response, to which teachers are apparently entitled but students are not (91).

When I began to teach poetry in my classroom in earnest the following year, I also began asking myself what I was attempting to do. Assuage my guilt? Abide by my course of study at last? Appease the eighth grade teachers who would inherit these students? At first—yes, yes, and yes. Teaching seventh graders to do what I instinctively knew they should be starting to do in junior high involved moving from “going beyond a single explanation or a literal reading” of accepted texts to an exploratory approach toward multiple texts that asks the student-theorist to “come up with the best among several alternative explanatory schemes, given the amount of time and evidence available to the analyst” (Gardner 173). The “evidence” isn’t one standard, canonical, correct analysis that standard curricular objectives expect middle school students to recognize or at least to observe so that they “fit” into a lifeless, disconnected literacy mold by they time they reach high school. If we don’t teach in this way, then I have to wonder what I do
teach in reading classes at the middle school level. Do I only teach terms and facts, right and wrong? Do I teach so that my students learn that the world beyond school is easily viewed in terms of right, wrong, cut, and dry? What about “reasoning, inference, problem solving, prediction, expression, abstract thought, concept formation, and classification”—skills that should, with enough drilling, produce critical thinkers, right (Smith 47)? Frank Smith had reason to believe otherwise, and I agree that we are about doing something greater and doing it in ways that recognize our students’ proficiencies rather than deficiencies (48). We first are teaching ideas, practices, and long-term transferable understanding that sticks to our students’ already existent abilities to reason, infer, predict, so as to create a society of “thoughtful, committed citizens” in a complex world (Gaughan 11). Nothing short of a radical re-envisioning of our secondary English curriculum will accomplish this.

A Confrontational Curriculum:

High school English teacher John Gaughan’s desire is to “reinvent” English by basing a curriculum around the classroom “contact zone,” tailored first to the student, and next toward the community of learners. This is a reversal of the top-down canonical approach that Robert Scholes and Chandra Mohanty argue is tied too closely to institutionalized power. An “institutionalized canon” is “unexaminnable and unchallengeable”; a contact zone curriculum, however, would operate under a “canon of methods” through which a text and its readers “address the same problem” (Scholes, Rise 111, 119). This canon rejects what Scholes refers to as the “Story of English” as a survey narrative, and yet reclaims history through its proximity to the reader’s present reality. It seeks to connect reader and text directly to one another--even reader to reader and text to text--and to breathe life into the language of human experience past and present. At the heart is language and the loftiest goal any curriculum can undertake:

We stand, I believe, for something far deeper than our particular curricular or institutional settings. We stand for whatever dignity this language can afford the human beings who find expression in and through it. We stand, above all, for sharing the powers and pleasures of this language with one another and with all those who seek our guidance in attaining those powers and pleasure. (Scholes, Rise 72)
Scholes is confident that all English teachers would agree with him on this score. They must. With that in mind, curriculum, as it plays out through text, belongs in the teachers’ hands.

Such a radical rethinking of our secondary and post-secondary English curriculum considers students first, and the classroom second, as Katie Wood Ray outlined in a curriculum of practice for a seventh and eighth grade language arts program. It must eventually draw in texts, with an honest explanation to our students as to why we will be reading together this year and how we will be dealing with these texts together. I, the teacher, am convinced there is power to be found in the act of reading words on a page, and a hunger to do so out of our desire “to eliminate irrelevancies and close the circle of meaning [in our lives] as tightly as we can” (Scholes, Protocols 49). My students should hear from me that the real function of reading is deeper and more personal than their scores on a test or even their future competitiveness in a modern marketplace. It is a “method” of living even now that doesn’t ask us to think this way or that. It only asks us to think. It is an intertextual process that ties together the strings of our lives, actions, and histories as we “read the book of ourselves in the texts in front of us, and . . . bring the text home, into our thoughts and lives (Scholes, Protocols 6). This will happen or reading will not really take place. Therefore, it is my duty to choose wisely and teach well, to facilitate the maximum interaction and thinking with a text through the holistic use of language.

To understand how this curriculum might look, I must shift my focus from the personalities of my students and the physical space of my classroom to the process I want to see in action among the real people within that seventh grade classroom. I must also have a clear idea of the goal beyond my classroom, even beyond the classrooms of grades eight through twelve. Chad and Kathy are two of those individuals who were knowledge-building through a process that involved an extension of their classroom learning beyond our “curriculum.” It involved reflection, analysis, and value-making. It asked for contact with the text and its ideas, contact that resulted in the kind of thinking that may actually move our society forward because it results in acquired knowledge manifested as wisdom. My goal is greater than the curricular course of study I encountered and dismissed long ago, because it views the personal purposes of education beyond the impersonal measurements of a test. In Frank Smith’s estimation, “critical thinking is a disposition rather than a skill, a tendency to behave in a particular way on particular occasions” (49). That “way” can be defined by heedlessness and narrow-mindedness or by
“readiness to consider alternative explanations, not taking anything for granted” except the fullest understanding possible of any situation (Smith 50).

I believe, as do Gaughan, Rief, and others, “that education can save society,” an objective education may realize more fully when students learn to think forward broadly rather than backward narrowly (Gaughan 137). For too many students, the thinking is backward upon knowledge acquired and relied upon by the onset of adolescence. In middle school, the time is ripe for pushing students to think forward, but too often teachers like John Gaughan find that students have formulated the “initial assumptions” that will end up lasting for life (33). That by itself is not so egregious. I can point to many values I acquired as a child that I hold firmly to. I do not, I hope, hold to them blindly, uninformed as to the alternatives. I do not hold to them one-dimensionally either, for they are part of a daily act of self-construction that adjusts itself to all new knowledge I acquire through my contact with language.

The self my young adult students have constructed is firmly set too often and directs new learning into a one-dimensional acceptance or rejection rather than a multi-dimensional approach that will continually readjust to “reflect our interactions with people different from ourselves” for a lifetime (Gaughan 30). I have found that I cannot ask students ages twelve to eighteen to adhere less simplistically to complex issues facing us regardless of the proximity: war, prejudice, sexism, morality. I can always, daily if I choose, model the process of challenging my own assumptions. I can also turn the tables and ask that they act as teacher/adult and challenge mine. How many conversations I have had with students over the drinking and voting ages, I cannot recall. In every case, however, the array of knowledge laid out before us all left nothing to ignorance. Assumptions from this point on would at least reflect a willful choice.

During the act of discussing issues and ideas, the teacher and students alike bring their own reading processes to the table. Collaboration as part of the process or practice of a curriculum-in-motion should be central as a result. As the master student, a teacher apprentices his or her students in this self-interrogating process continually, since “the aim of Reading Apprenticeship,” as described by the course instructors at Thurgood Marshall High School, “is to help students become better readers of a variety of texts by making the teacher’s discipline-based reading processes and knowledge visible to the students” (Greenleaf et al. 89). Once again, the teacher as facilitator integrates the features of apprenticeship into the daily routine and the
curriculum. In order to make the “practices” of literacy “visible” and accessible to students, the teacher “demystifies” daily through modeling and facilitation of constant student-to-student and teacher-to-student collaboration:

The aim of Reading Apprenticeship is to help students become better readers of a variety of texts by making the teacher’s discipline-based reading processes and knowledge visible to students; by making the students’ reading processes and the social contexts, strategies, knowledge, and understandings they bring to the task of making sense of subject-matter texts visible to the teacher and to one another; by helping students gain insight into their own reading processes; and by helping them acquire a repertoire of problem-solving strategies with the varied texts of the academic discipline. In other words, how we read and why we read in the ways we do become part of the curriculum, accompanying what we read in subject-matter classes. (Greenleaf et al. 89)

This does not become part of a one-month proficiency test crash course, a once-weekly test preparation when the standard work is set aside. It presumes an atmosphere of constant integration, second nature to the self-interrogating teacher and the collaborative classroom.

If I’ve successfully made my case for a curriculum of practice or theory, it should be clear that there is no agenda to a curriculum of methods or process because it focuses first on thinking and secondarily on text. It does not seek to shake cherished beliefs to the core. That will happen if it is needed (ideally). Instead, it promotes thinking outside the borders of childhood comfort zones as an acknowledged part of early adult development. The habit of thinking out of the box, so to speak, should produce a reflective, compassionate, while-still-diverse society. Indoctrination, inculcation-- all move in the impossible direction of sameness, bell hooks would warn. Agendas are transparent to students anyhow, and they are certainly ineffective without continuity and commitment from the educator. A true rainbow society must adhere to one articulated goal of education (as I’ve been led to believe), so the reinvention of English aims at “creating thoughtful, committed citizens” by forays daily into the “contact zone”-- a human curriculum that opens minds and modes of communication, where difference meets on a common ground and makes meaning, acquires knowledge, and effects change.
Process looks for pedagogical approaches that force examination within and beyond the comfort zone borders—examination born of problems and conflict with ourselves and one another. Texts are important to consider when looking for real conflicts to study, but the methods of interacting with those texts to maximize their potential for thinking and understanding over absorbing and accepting must share the stage. Katie Wood Ray’s broad curriculum actually places the emphasis on practice and outcome for this reason. A text means nothing out of context with our own conflicts. It also does nothing without frequent opportunities for critical thinking engagement. In this chapter I want to focus not so much on texts as on approaches to intertextuality, though not nearly to the exhaustive degree Gaughan is able to in *Reinventing English* (with no fewer than 41 teaching strategies!). I will zero-in briefly on an approach that teaches to neglected areas of pedagogy and practice in many English classrooms through the genres of nonfiction and poetry, and the continued practice of prediction and collaboration. This asks that the teacher adopt the method of teaching to what is overlooked, undervalued, even feared. It asks the teacher to truly enter the contact zone professionally as well as personally.

Theorist-educators like Frank Smith or Mary Mercer Krogness approach curriculum through “enterprises” rather than “programs,” offering their students daily opportunities for critical-thinking in practice through meaningful ongoing projects along the lines of creating newspapers, writing and performing operas, building sheds, even producing movies (Krogness 64-65; Smith 61). The commitment on the part of individualized teachers to abandon the “bland diet of worksheets and end-of-chapter questions” in favor of “imaginative intellectual engagement” requires knowledgeable, imaginative initiators who seek to change their educational programs little by little—not their poor students (Graves, *Literacy* 57). Yet, if I find myself unable to change these curricular programs and mandates, I must work on myself first, as a professional. My “first commitment,” according to Donald Graves, is “one that requires me to know my subject better than before,” a commitment that led me into an English rather than education graduate program. I will be able to approach my colleagues, administrators, and school board members with compelling insights because “I will have studied [my field] in greater depth and now decide which elements of curriculum must be deleted and which will be kept” (Graves 119). This does not mean I know the English canon like the back of my hand. It
does mean that I am well-trained in theory and broadly informed about literature. More
importantly, it means I view my field as dynamic rather than static, and the texts of decades past
as not established in their meaning and usefulness. Instead, these texts are renewed year after
year as they are used to “help students to understand their current cultural situation--- just as they
help their teachers (who, of course, continue to be students)” (Scholes, *Rise* 126). Broad training
with forays into depth: this is theory in action.

The process of pursuing literacy is not going to be achieved by my imparting of
knowledge with the expectations of my students absorbing, cataloging, and retaining until there
arise a need for that disconnected information at some future date. I want them to confront a
poem, or any text, as they might someday confront life. Otherwise, the most I can expect (or
what I hoped for in the past) is that one percent of the materials I covered during a year would
enrich each student in a tiny way, or spark a future interest in each. That was a small comfort,
and it was delusional. Is it really good enough to blindly adhere to my curriculum with the small
hope that a few of my students may see the value to turning off the TV and picking up a book?
Am I endeavoring day after day just to provide them with an alternate hobby after a long day of
work years from now, or the inclination to read now and then to their own children? This is
wonderful, but it is isolationist and passive. I want awareness turning into action and knowledge
into wisdom. The education of these young people isn’t finished at a graduation ceremony,
neither was the control for education passed from one set of hands (the experts) to another (the
graduate) on this day. Instead, the seamless process of literacy has extended from grade school
to the secondary grades and beyond, a series of critical thinking “enterprises” and “process-
folios.”

Even during my first year of teaching, I would have said that I wanted my students to feel
empowered by language and the written word, to control their own destinies because of the doors
open to them as proficient communicators. Power in the hands of literate adults logically begins
and settles-in during childhood, which would imply a power in the hands of learners. I am
fascinated by Robert Scholes’ thorough examination of the term “canon” as applied toward a
body of English texts. The curricular canon relies upon “a common theme” of “power” (Scholes,
*Rise* 105). The curricular canons we teachers have inherited often go largely unquestioned and
unrecognized as a system “imposed for purposes of control” (Smith 61). Rather than a canon of
texts or a program of skills controlling our classrooms, “coherence” defines Scholes’ transcendent approach. A “canon of methods,” rather than texts (which are secondary), allows that “texts speak to one another” and connects works that “address the same problem, that work in the same medium” (Scholes, *Rise* 119). I do not advocate abandoning *The Call of the Wild* or *Huckleberry Finn* if those texts speak in some way to our students and their human condition; I do, however, argue along with Scholes that these “classic” texts must be studied “as the means to an end of greater mastery of cultural processes by the students themselves” (*Rise* 126). In this way, a canon of methods might logically translate to a canon of *theme* in the middle school language arts classroom, which elevates the process of choosing all texts around engaging contemporary ideas and current conditions.

**A Thematic Curriculum:**

Thematic units in John Gaughan’s classroom interest and engage students in a process of “clashing and grappling” that takes place because the students are contending with complicated issues in contexts such as prejudice, war, sexism, sexuality, censorship, and faith (Gaughan 33). These issues will and do affect these students daily. They know it and actually get to talk about it every day. The texts they read draw in countless figures present and past into the contact zone, and more importantly, the students themselves are part of the discussion with text and one another. Linda Rief’s “general theme of relationships, generational and cultural” holds her to texts that encourage students to “think about, and interact with people outside the classroom about real issues” (*Seeking* 61, 71). One project “immerses students in reading, writing, and thinking about the elderly and about grandparents,” many of whom I have discovered listen better and spend more quality fun time with them than their own parents can do (Rief, *Seeking* 70). Rief has discovered that teenagers and the elderly actually “face a similar identity crisis as they’re confronted with threats to their sense of self-esteem” through their limited or loss-of control and independence in direct disproportion to desire and perceived ability (*Seeking* 70). The literature Rief is able to draw from spans multiple genres and time periods. Humanity and common ground become the theme even though a wealth of diverse experiences will emerge. While Rief’s students are reading, they are doing everything else as well. They are researching,
interviewing, sharing, exploring, writing, and examining good writing (Rief, Seeking 74-5). This is life work.

Theme-guiding curricula appeals because of its focus on real people with real problems across text and time. Mary Mercer Krogness’ urban students confronted alcoholism, drug use, and teenage pregnancy head-on through a year-long multimedia “enterprise”-- the theme: U-turns people make in life. Multi-genre projects are an extension of theme and their similar exploration of “alternative” texts and genres. Donald Graves’ two front, multigenre strategies base a curriculum on personal passion and important skills. Allowing theme to guide the choosing of texts and process of interacting with them through discussion and writing reveals a curriculum in action. It builds on what students already know (Graves, Literacy 81), allows all learners to “value your ignorance” (82), breaks down “compartmentalized thinking” (89), points out the power of the human voice (91), creates characters (92), uses anecdotes, tells stories (98), integrates personal experience (99), goes beyond what to so what (101), breaks rules, and blurs genres (105). The first guiding principle focuses on people, the second on problems. This certainly covers the real world and addresses the needs of our society-- better dealings with each other and our societal problems, right? Focusing on people before events or dates begins the process of learning to see through the eyes of others while encouraging students to ask questions about the people behind events. A focus on problems before solutions highlights a way of seeing first, the heart of problem-solving. Students uncover problems, experience research firsthand, and in the process of learning, they see knowledge as something that is “just around the corner” (Graves 94). A teacher has only to provide the time and blank canvas, so to speak, and to possess the eagerness to seize upon every teachable moment.

Nonfiction can be an effective tool for facilitating this process, in attempting to uncover a theme while offering real people and real problems as a springboard for conversations in critical thinking. Not only do seventh graders have a preliminary relationship with the genre in the reading classroom, they are quicker to recognize real-life connections. A reading taken from newspapers, magazines, and periodicals such as Reader’s Digest is “clearly part of the adult world, and therefore attractive, as well. It is serious. It has real information in it” (Holt, Learning 12). The approach is everything, however. When I stumbled across an excerpt from Yoshiko Uchida’s autobiographical account of her Japanese-American family’s World War II
internment, I knew the historical setting would be new and titillating to an easily-bored age group. “The Bracelet” could do little more than tales of Nazi concentration camps do beyond horrify in a distancing “look how far we’ve come” discussion. I could ask my students to absorb and remember but could not count on it unless I asked something of them in return, something that would connect them to the real people and very universal problems in this “story.” Our literature circle approach led to a great-deal of talking about Ruri’s non-prejudiced friend Laurie and our own unconditional friendships, as well as bold likening of some geographical moves we all had made. Laurie’s parents were separated temporarily of necessity, and many students who could not relate to moves or similar friendships could take their own places on the discussion platform for a time.

The problems we uncovered led to discussions of what really matters most in life, which could have easily become our theme for the remainder of the year. I asked students to draw the bare “apartment” or stall each family lived in, littered with the few belongings they could pack in one suitcase. Ruri had little to cherish but a bracelet from Laurie. I asked my students to share “what one item you would cherish most if, like Ruri, you were sent to this camp.” We must talk history, immediately dealing with the reality that they cannot take with them a television, computer, or phone of any kind. We first brainstorm together what cannot go into our suitcases, some disagreeing and maybe some doggedly determining to research the availability of their item. But the non-electronic objects? I couldn’t have guessed what I’d hear in many cases, and often students laughed at one another while many changed their minds over and over. And how would you best remember your friend? With a picture? Would that do it? The possibilities for bringing real people and real problems into this curriculum through this text are endless. The meager worksheet I supplied only helped me to begin the thinking and lead me to formulate many of the questions that I myself could not easily answer without referring both to the text and to the knowledge and insight of everyone in that classroom. (See Figure #6)

I might pause to add that what should easily ensue at this point is a classroom metacognitive “conversation about the thinking processes teachers and students are engaged in as they read”-- “what constitutes reading in specific academic disciplines and how they [students and teacher] are going about it” (Greenleaf et al. 92). Admittedly, a teacher may find the task difficult initially, that of reflecting on the mental and physical processes of reading. Then to
translate adult literacy, by this point possibly second nature, into verbal conversation starters and written reflections may require the honest wrestling of an adolescent. As a “partnership of expertise,” the teacher and student contribute powerfully to the conversation in their own ways, the teacher as subject-grounded expert and the students as uniquely “self-aware” and “confused” at the same time (Greenleaf et al. 92). Adolescents are certainly knowledgeable and experienced in their own personal literacies. In that way they stand as equals beside the teacher. But in the end, the power balance favors the subject-versed teacher unless that teacher possesses a little of the same self-awareness (absorption, perhaps) and confusion.

A Well-Planned Curriculum of Confusion:

To say that I want a classroom curriculum revolving around confusion sounds absurd. But in actuality, I do. I want to abandon texts as soon as I think I’ve got them figured out and move on to those I don’t. In that way, the materials I present to my students might “reach across classroom barriers and break down the distinction between teachers and students” in order that I might actually model daily the processes of a critical thinker defined by “challenge, skeptical reflection, suspended assent, the consideration of alternatives,” and confusion (Smith 60, 62). Where I find I am most in-tune with myself as a reader is with the genre of poetry. I am confused. I am aware of my reading strategies and can model textual confrontation and problem-solving genuinely. Confusion won’t be acceptable just because I say so or tell an amusing little story about myself as a middle school student decades past. It will be “cool” because I demonstrate my own confusion genuinely, because I make clear to my students that in this area I certainly don’t have the answers. In fact, I myself have been forced to use the Academic Literacy strategies of “reciprocal teaching”—questioning, summarizing, clarifying, and predicting Greenleaf et al. 96)—without skipping one because I’ve “read this before” or because I possess a teacher’s manual. In fact, I still don’t know what the “deal” is with those tomatoes.

The potential for critical thinking that poetry offers us is immense. Donald Graves believes poetry offers “both the writer and reader a different view of life” through the ordering of words and lines and the unique combinations of sound and sense” (Exploring 3). This is not a safe genre as many others are, and it won’t be useful quartered off. Plunging into life is useful every day, though no one said such confrontations were easy. After confronting my own fears of
poetry, I now view it as an accessible genre, easy to retype and copy, easy to manipulate or memorize, able to be absorbed and mulled over. In its complexity and density, it forces me to do what Frank Smith and John Holt demand in order to turn from passive to critical learning and to abandon immediately “fake, directed conversation” (Holt, How 82). I have no choice and cannot “hide the fact that this [is] a game about which [we] know everything and [they] know nothing” (Holt, How 90). I am clearly not comfortable as a teacher being “confronted by what [I] do not know,” and like my students I would actually try to “protect” myself by “saying that it is not worth knowing” (Holt, How 91). Especially by adolescence, “we tend to divide up the world of facts and ideas into two classes, things we know, and things we don’t know, and we assume that any particular fact moves instantly from ‘unknown’ to ‘known’” (Holt, How 97). But what if poetry is something none of us know? What if we aren’t supposed to “know” it after the first read? What if poetry has to be dealt with communally and “understanding” arrived at corporately?

Poetry allows for the integration and facilitation of Gardner’s “general approach” for allowing students the “ample opportunities” needed “to develop richer and more rounded views of the subject” studied in order to counter the “deeply held prejudices, stereotypes, and simplifications” students have developed through gut and lay knowledge (236-7). Poetry can “involve students as deeply as possible in the central problems of a discipline” so that they are able to learn beyond simple summarizations or single characterizations. At the same time, it can provide the genre for teachers to demonstrate “that the materials they [students] encounter in a humanities course . . . are not drawn from a world apart”; that “the scholars doing the writing or carrying out the research are also human beings, for all their specialized training in the discipline” (Gardner 237). Finally, poetry offers a wealth of accessible “subject matter that can be related to the students’ own lives and can engage students in activities affording them the opportunity to try a hand at various roles” (that of poet and writer, for example)-- “larger roles” that the teacher leads students to through challenging their assumptions, by revealing larger-than-life real people, and by posing “puzzles” about the ideas in literary texts (Gardner 237, 238). It is one feared, overlooked, undervalued, and oft-dismissed genre that has the potential to challenge educators into recalling the confusion of being a student.
Robert Scholes argues that English teachers at the secondary and college levels have “lost sight” of the craft of teaching poetry and hence of the potential it offers for “private pleasures” and “public powers”-- two elements that draw individuals into literacy to begin with (Craft 6). He insists that “our methods of studying and teaching poetry for the past half-century are very much to blame for this condition,” possibly by failing to recognize its connection to the rising information culture (Craft 6). We’ve approached poetry as oppositional art rather than connective art-- what all art should be. Poetry has for too long been presented as “high art” (unlike “sitcoms, quiz shows, fanzines”), and sneaks into the best classrooms and curricula to remind students of their distance from literature and its connection to their lives (Scholes, Craft 11). “Poetry anxiety is real,” Scholes acknowledges, and I believe it is a valuable genre to reintroduce because of its “memorability and brevity,” and its compact power to “make important contributions to our lives as individuals and to the life of our language and society” (Scholes, Craft 6). Most of us at the middle school level choose not to teach poetry-- not really. Even if the unit appears, we do not teach it. And we miss transitions. We miss immersion. We miss countless “new or untried directions” on the “path to mindful living and continued learning” (Graves 16). We miss one hundred or more ways to demonstrate literacy and facilitate critical thinking.

By defining literacy as the awareness of language’s usefulness in life-situations, even unfamiliar situations, I want my students to practice awareness of their language processes as they read, write, speak, and think. This will happen if I can foster this awareness day after day, with no pressure to uncover the “right” answer. I don’t simply throw a poem out there with no plan, hoping a brilliant discussion will ensue to shed light on this poem for me. Students still need guidance and nudging, not in the direction of the right answer, but in the direction of the problem-making and consensus-building. In this student-centered, learner-centered classroom, the teacher’s role shifts from expert in literature and explication/analysis to expert in “time and careful orchestration” (Graves 116). It is “slow going at first” because it involves conquering so many fears and opening so many “cans of worms,” but the planning is tantamount. Even then, the planning changes. Some poems may be read for the listening pleasure; some to see “where it takes us.” But others are intended for dialog and debate, and this won’t just happen within the unpredictable seventh grade classroom. The conversation is impossible to direct and shouldn’t
be, but training is involved to allow the students to carry the weight. Training may take an entire quarter. Role-playing and modeling takes time, but it is often fun and certainly worthwhile.

The teacher still has a deliberate role behind the scenes, for the questions asked of a poem take far more time to craft now. They are not taken from any textbook or other expert, for they are designed not to lead students to a standard interpretation. So even if the teacher could provide the interpretation, why? To what end? Not for real understanding. Not to win a game of Jeopardy or Trivial Pursuit, or even to produce students who can take comfort in their static “expertise.” Understanding differs from interpretation in that it “involves a mastery of the productive practices in a domain or discipline, coupled with the capacity to adopt different stances toward the work, among them the stances of audience member, critic, performer, and maker” (Gardner 239). The student is at once “experimenter, theorist, and critic,” a view that is “remote from the conception of the artist held by the young child and by many adults as well,” one that stereotypically considers “the artist a special person, born with unique talents, who sits alone in a garret waiting for inspiration” (Gardner 239). Even informed English teachers assume there must be one interpretation, and that intelligent readers with access to literacy modes can uncover it. Teachers may be at fault here for teaching in such a way as to let on that they know the answer. They have been driving or scripting discussions rather than facilitating them genuinely. Deliberate planning comes in the form of crafted questioning and problem-posing. Genuine questions will reflect the reading teacher’s individual and subject-area interests and concerns as well as the knowledge of her students’ interests and concerns. Ideally, they highlight our shared confusions.

As part of a graduate workshop that followed poet laureate Billie Collins’ visit to Miami University, I decided to approach the capstone poetry project with the goal of conquering my biggest fear and, secondarily, my students’ fears— that of not “getting it.” I aimed to master this fear (not to master poetry itself) in order to truly foster thinking about poetry. To do this, I had to work with poems that I was not familiar or comfortable with. So, I borrowed a textbook from Ruth Pettitt’s shelves, flipped through it, and chose what piqued me only. The first step was to leave behind the teacher edition text; the second step was to type-up these poems to get them out of the book, away from other influences. This typing was a discovery in itself. The contact through typing added to my emerging understanding. Then, as I began to stare at each of the ten
poems, and as questions began to occur to me that I would ask my students-- only because I’d
ask them of myself or of an “expert”-- I began to wonder what theories and models I was
drawing upon to develop these questions. *How do I approach a poem prior to presenting it to
my students for reading and discussion?* The three-point plan with a total of ten sub-strategies
totals what I uncovered.

**PLAN-- to get students talking**
- √ Leave out the agenda *and* terminology.
- √ Encourage gut reactions and digressions.
- √ Give them plenty of time to read and react.
- √ Ask students to draw upon their own lives.
- √ Enable them to make choices and choose sides.

**PURPOSE-- to get the students thinking**
- √ Allow them to disagree.
- √ Force them to debate and negotiate.
- √ Draw upon their expertise and creativity.
- √ Ask them to rely upon outside knowledge.
- √ Make constant contemporary connections.

**PRIORITY-- to get out of the way!**
- √ Be prepared with questions, *not* answers.
- √ Be ready and eager to learn, *not* teach.

Thus, while spending a full day studying “In Response to Executive Order 9066,” this approach
might lead me to ask my students a question about the significance of tomatoes, or I might ask
questions designed to make my students think about the nature of prejudice or friendship. *Who
is the female speaker in this poem and what do you know about her? What signs do you see in
this poem that the female speaker is an American? Do you and your best friend share more
similarities than differences? What are they? What were the speaker and Denise’s common
interests? Their differences?* Depending on the leading of students like Kathy, these are
questions I have asked and that we have attempted to answer.

The questions I have learned to ask through my study of poetry zero in on problems I
encounter with the poem and with the issues I believe it might be raising. This confusion I
experience actually makes such questions easy, which in turn enables me to construct similar questions with fiction and non-fiction prose. This is not so easy since the significance and meaning of those texts often seems evident to me. I must actually force myself to extend the ideas of a text. For example, reading in “Chewed Up” about the author’s lapse as a smokeless tobacco user following the September 11 terrorist attacks, I might think at first to ask students why the author did this. After more reflection, I might approach this situation more problematically by asking the students, as Mrs. Pettitt did in her anticipation guide, whether “it is understandable if people need to smoke, ‘dip,’ or do whatever makes them feel better if there is a major crisis.” (See Figure #1) Even though athletes are never mentioned in this article, Mrs. Pettitt has asked students to consider as well if “It is wise to follow the actions of professional athletes because their bodies are in good enough shape to play sports for a living.” Students may infer on their own, or through collaboration, that baseball players typically or stereotypically chew tobacco. Underlying assumptions may be challenged as one student asserts all baseball players chew, while another guesses that most are just chewing gum now, and another shares a story from Sports Illustrated about one player who quit when a friend contracted cancer of the mouth.

Mrs. Pettitt’s students interact with one another at various stages in the reading process, before encountering the text and after having made initial commitments to the anticipation-guide statements. Also, at any time in the process they can justify their reasoning or recommit. After committing to predictions in writing, after conferring with peers and revising those predictions, after reading to acquire knowledge and gather proof, the collaborative groups will need to arrive at some written “consensus” before discussing this reading and its various issues with the whole class. This encounter with textual knowledge doesn’t end up on a quiz or test, but it becomes the subject for serious appropriation based upon prior knowledge and previous assumptions, and refined through encounters with the knowledge and experiential convictions of others. The destinations of this knowledge are as unlimited as “it is also through such practice in higher order thinking that students develop the skills and abilities to perform these tasks on their own as independent life-long learners” (Forget 12). Their collaborative knowledge-building presumes the importance of engagement with language on all fronts in order to “know our minds” with skeptical, reflective conviction. Mrs. Pettitt’s efforts behind the scenes evidently consume more
time and thought than an overly prescriptive textbook-based curriculum demands, since her
questions require reflective time spent alone with the text, and the implementation of her
discussion/collaboration model in the classroom requires her to model and facilitate carefully.
Group discussions in her classroom should not degenerate into gossip sessions because the
routine is predictable and the outcomes for discussion clear at each stage.

Mrs. Pettitt may have a hidden agenda-- a skill or strategy to zero in on. These relevant
strategies are put to use naturally through her well-crafted questions, and they emerge naturally
from practice and extension “beyond the text.” Such extension “beyond the text . . . might
include debate, discussion, writing, reorganizing, or otherwise manipulating the ideas that were
confronted in the reading,” which includes on the part of the students “application-level thinking
as to how what they have learned might work in the real world or under other circumstances”
(Forget 12). Skills and strategies practiced reflect concepts such as “reasoning, inference,
problem solving, prediction, and expression, abstract thought, concept formation and
classification,” all of which fall into place in a critical-thinking atmosphere because students are
allowed to access the skills John Holt points out they’ve had since childhood. This seems to be
the hinge for Gardner, Healy, Smith, and countless pioneering teacher-researchers on the
“application-level thinking” that students need to spend ample time practicing.

Frank Smith insists that new skills will not shed light on areas of darkness, but practice
applying higher order thinking skills when it is useful, sensible, and relevant will maximize the
general skills and abilities adolescents already possess (Smith 54-55). An “evaluation of the
author’s underlying intent” is one common practice that directs students to “develop real
understandings about new content” (Forget 12). If, however, a discussion about “underlying
intent” is to extend into lasting, usable knowledge, then it must actually extend into “new
content.” The author of “Chewed-Up” may want young people to think hard about media
representations and glamorization, which is why tobacco adds never feature cancer or
emphysema victims. Ideally, we will apply such examinations to the portrayal of athletes in
commercials and the outrageous salaries they command or their behavior off the court, field, or
arena. This extension will lead to an examination of our society with, I hope, a consideration of
some need for change, Frank Smith’s definition being “skeptical reflection” regarding accepted
cultural productions with Krogness’ dream that her students translate their knowledge into power for consensual, corporate change (Smith 67).

A Broader, More Inclusive Curriculum:

No curriculum should limit the potential our students have, so we educators look for ways to activate the curriculum in directions meaningful to our students, allowing them to use English as Scholes sees it being used: to “help them prepare for unknown conditions” (Rise 154). We need to be able to glimpse through our curriculum what we are trying to produce-- competent readers and writers, “producers and consumers of the various texts they will encounter” in our classroom and beyond, and “tolerant, skeptical” thinkers who above all else are “interested in the truthfulness of a text and in the pleasure it may offer” (Scholes, Rise 154). What else could I want? Still, I can’t just blindly hope for this. I need to see it in action, and a “broader” curriculum might allow for this. Leslie Minarik imagines “a rather substantial broadening of what is allowed as curriculum and a total overhaul of the assessment process” along with “broader opportunities for students to react to writing, with multiple ways in which students could choose to present their discoveries” (290). Instead of breadth through current, pertinent non-fiction works or through daily unhurried ventures into poetry, we typically encounter complexity as “more and more curriculum is specifically mandated, [and] as less and less time is allowed for teachers to present to students what is interesting or important to them,” and students to their teachers, families, and peers (Minarik 290).

Complexity rarely allows for immersion. It is too hurried, too superficial. Breadth, on the other hand, does not appear of paper to cover “enough,” but it actually allows for real plunges into language in order to offer each student something that might speak to him or her. As a language arts teacher, Tom Romano is “most concerned with students’ development in using language,” and therefore students must experience it richly, densely, not complexly (91). He offers poetry as a short-cut in this process:

I want people to get better and better at it. Living with poetry can help that happen. Poetry is a place of precision and imagination in language. The genre requires visual thinking and exercises our capacity to synthesize, analyze, construct meaning, and feel emotion-- a marvelous combination of cognition and
affect. Poetry asks that we live metaphor, connect, associate, and experience epiphany. Poetry makes us focus. (Romano 91)

Further, if the purpose of curriculum is to confront life and deal with it, or to “sharpen sight” through the use of language and subsequently “to communicate hard-won truth,” then the goal of curriculum should be to draw in, not drive away-- to foster the “habit and discipline,” by meeting a need and providing one at the same time (Romano 98, 109, 95). Breadth in what we read and what choices we offer for writing will draw in more students. All students, I hope.

When approaching reading through writing, “there is a different kind of intentional and deliberate reading that writers can learn to do in order to grow in their knowledge of the craft of writing”; and “reading like a writer” forces this “deliberation” and “intention” (Ray 15). The ultimate goal attempts to “put into words” what cannot be done so easily-- about our lives, living and learning. It is based on a process of growth that mirrors life. It operates on Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence Theory, as well as the whole language approach, but does not allow learning styles or sensory experiences to be relegated to units. The “world of writing” is too expansive to compartmentalize, and certainly “goes far beyond testing” (Romano 42). A thematic, enterprise approach to reading leads to the multi-genre approach to writing, which recognizes the “multitudes” of language: “fiction and restaurant menus, sonnets and graffiti, recipes and dissertations, love letters and legal documents,” which often mix and blend (Romano 42). The multigenre approach to writing, like the thematic approach to reading, assumes that real learning comes from immersion, even exhaustion of one idea from multiple angles, some that tap into our unique learning styles and others that stretch us into growth. This process takes time and relies heavily on the expertise of the teacher over the textbooks to raise problems of real concern, recognize teachable tangents, and all the while facilitate the maximum interaction with language and one another.

Summarizing Frank Smith’s “learning theory development” as presented in Joining the Literacy Club, Katie Wood Ray focuses on Smith’s insistence that students acquire knowledge most usefully and effectively when it is knowledge they can use immediately. In this case, students enter the world of meaning makers as “part of ‘the club of writers,’” a group they feel associated with thanks to the efforts of a teacher who “‘recruits’” the experts or “craftspeople” in the field of literature (Ray 15). The teacher’s tantamount role here isn’t to teach students how to
“learn vicariously from their reading” so much as to help students uncover the materials that make this natural process effective and pleasurable enough to try out (Ray 15). I want to apply Ray’s and Romano’s multigenre approach to personal writing at the secondary and collegiate level to the whole-language curricular approach of a language arts classroom; “I want more than exposure; I want immersion. I want students to travel the territory of a concept, to get to know its geography,” and to put it into action (Romano 43).

To do this requires a switch from prescriptive to descriptive teaching, as Ray describes the “shift in thinking” that will promote actual understanding of what we read. The descriptive approach is based on an analysis of language rather than an assessment and asks why and how before what. What type of sentence is this; what part of speech, part of the sentence, and so on, are questions I used to ask when I prescribed and controlled the discussion of language “far away from the beautiful texts those prescriptions were meant to help create (Ray 20). Now I want to know why this sentence is effective: which words, phrases, organizational structures, and techniques? Unlike focusing on the subject matter of good writing alone, actually describing that writing “requires you to get words into your classroom that let you talk easily about what you are seeing in texts” (Ray 21). This digs in; it doesn’t soar above. It isn’t high art; it is down and dirty work. In the fullest sense, we are really using words as they come up naturally, unforced. Material selection must be deliberate, too, “showing off . . . rich interesting language when read aloud” (Ray 78). I choose a book for my students because it will really appeal to them and because the language is “stunning, rereadable, read-aloudable” (Ray 79). I assume they may want to emulate its style and eventually to exercise its ideas.

The first question to ask about a piece of writing is simple but foundational: “I wonder where the author got the idea for this piece of writing?”—“a question that should be central” to reading-like-writers, making “thinking ‘behind the text’ to be a habit of mind for students” (Ray 106). Albert Somers’ first question of a poem is a simple one as well, but one that asks the students to do the same thinking: who is the speaker, he asks, and what do you think is going on here? (94). Asking what the poem means or whether students “liked it” are broad and dangerous questions. The students are in or out of the conversation right away. Chad and Kathy essentially inferred the author’s intent, later appropriating it into meaning for themselves through various writing assignments. They accessed knowledge, not the picky terminology for that knowledge.
Learners ultimately are doers of a craft, acquiring its practical, usable knowledge. This is the reason writing should play an inseparable role, so that “thinking about where a text came from and how the writer went about writing it is something that can become a natural part of their reading like writers, teaching them every time they read for the rest of their lives” (Ray 109). Further, organized inquiry into the writing practices of an author represents “a line of thinking that is characteristic of studying the craft of anything, not just writing” (Ray 135). We notice, talk, theorize, name, connect, and envision. This “line of thinking” is “a way of learning in the world that is much bigger than just learning better ways to write (135). Students should be writers and readers in the language arts classroom as they should be researchers and historians in the social studies classroom-- doers and users.

All along, even while taking my backward steps as a teacher, I instinctively knew that “the focus is on process rather than on product” in a usable curriculum (Gardner 243). At the close of each of my first few years of teaching I had no idea if I’d taught any thing of lasting consequence, so I feebly pleaded on the last day of school: someday, please read to your children; keep the stories you wrote this year to pass on to your descendants-- please don’t throw them away!; and go to the library at least once this summer, and pick out a good book! I had no confidence in the curriculum or in 180 days of effort on my part. What I had been teaching amounted to, in Atwell’s words, “a curriculum [that] puts limits on learning”—as I would argue does the traditional textbook approach of “lit crit.”, insisting first on what the proficient student must learn before the how of lasting learning (21). I had to make a last-ditch effort at lasting results for my seventh graders, so the piece of advice I gave was actually one of process. It had nothing to do with the what -- remember never to dangle your modifiers! It had everything to do with how-- visit the library, subscribe to a newspaper, read to your children!

My recent goals in the classroom have been to bring in what I have left out: to read aloud to the students purely for their listening pleasure; to share a piece they can follow along with, without getting lost or worried about note-taking; to let them read silently from materials they choose; to do this with genres not always included by a trusted teacher (just a faceless textbook publisher); and to include them as readers, authors, and theorists daily. My growing understanding of the function of reading in my life will justify the importance of literacy and should determine the theme I give to an instructional year as well as the choice of pedagogical
approaches to all instructional materials I decide to use. I have constructed myself through
language and reading from my earliest memories and can point to *Anne of Green Gables* as the
very book responsible for shaping my budding ideas at age eleven years of the adult life I would
someday lead. Robert Scholes views reading as “a constructive activity” through which we as
readers write onto our lives through our experiences with a text, an activity that never takes place
in isolated places (my classroom) or at isolated times (the seventh grade year).

Reading is not just a matter of standing safely outside texts, where their power
cannot reach us. It is a matter of entering, of passing through the looking glass
and seeing ourselves on the other side . . . . We cannot start ourselves over as
blank pages but must go on writing the texts of ourselves from where we find
ourselves to be. (Scholes, *Protocols* 27, 49)

Tragically, the current middle school curriculum may interrupt this literacy process. It is one I
hope middle schools nationwide will determine to radically and revolutionarily reverse.
V. The Middle School Role:

During the pilot years for Academic Literacy in San Francisco’s Thurgood Marshall High School, teacher researchers and collaborators interviewed selected students throughout their ninth grade year and beyond, chronicling the firsthand feedback that enabled the authors of this study to assess “the degree to which students were appropriating the reading practices available to them in the instructional setting . . . as a dynamic assessment of students’ problem-solving during reading” as well as independent long-term understanding (Greenleaf et al. 98). It was hoped the interviews might “point to aspects of academic reading tasks and texts . . . that helped or hindered students as they engaged in reading, helping [to] improve the course” for all future students; but what the interviews accomplished for these select few students in the first years of the pilot course was to force the sort of honest self-reflection about learning that characterizes literacy through carefully-crafted questions aimed at evaluating “the impact of the course on their learning and preparation for other courses, about its utility in their lives, and about their lives as readers” (98). Literacy that aims beyond the classroom will simultaneously promote the habit of self-reflection and habitual interrogation alongside the interaction with text; it will ensure the pilot program is always that-- a worthwhile, ongoing experiment. Hopefully, the Academic Literacy course in this high school will never outgrow the research stage as new, uniquely demanding ninth graders arrive each fall.

This case-study approach on the part of students and teacher is one Ruth Pettitt has taken over the course of her thirty-three-year career, journaling to herself about what she is learning through a new pedagogical approach (as well as about how she perceives her students are profiting), and periodically requiring her students to complete self and unit evaluations in writing. Each year initiates a pilot program, in this sense, and the role self-evaluation plays is intrinsic to the likelihood of both teacher and student benefiting long-term. Mrs. Pettitt’s own habits of reflection extend into her pedagogical methods, as she models to her students and asks them to reflect as well. In the fall of 2002, one of Mrs. Pettitt’s eighth grade students reflected on the progress she had witnessed in a few short months studying another pedagogical strategy piloted by Mrs. Pettitt in her own classroom-- Mark Forget’s reading strategy framework of motivation through prediction, acquisition through careful reading, and extension through
consensus-building team efforts. More importantly, this student figured out what aspects of her own literacy invite her to continue growing as a reader and student:

*I have learned that I am a slow reader. It takes me time to read. I will read a sentence or paragraph and just think about what they are doing. I read fast when I enjoy the book. It makes me want to read more and more. Then I want to get to the end to see what happens. That’s why I like mysyrs [sic], the endings are what I read for.* (Pettitt)

Another student ponders and pinpoints his functional, transferable literacy:

*Recently I have learned a lot about myself as a reader. I have noticed that by reading confusing parts several times I can remember it and understand it. I’ve also learned that if I briefly summarize the recent events in my head I can also remember detailed parts better.* (Pettitt)

Student self-reflection and recognition punctuates the MAX literacy model, aiming for heightened comprehension through an awareness of the processes readers go through and the written and oral communication/comprehension of those processes. In a classroom established as a site of self-examination and accepted as a place of positive, individual growth, students learn what works for them as learners and can use these strategies even as they continue to access their literacy practices. Knowing what works and communicating this with a teacher initiates the process of extension for Mrs. Pettitt’s students beyond this one classroom. Many recently admitted excitedly to using the same reading and note-taking strategies that they had developed with Mrs. Pettitt and their classmates in other classes like science and social studies after having analyzed their own needs through this self-assessment (Pettitt). When “what the teacher wants,” in this case, is for the most effective individual learning to take place in all settings rather than expecting “correct” answers for one isolated outcome, then all evaluation is more meaningful. Evaluation itself takes on real meaning when it represents ongoing growth and usable language strategies.

**The Role of Evaluation in Middle School and Beyond:**

Before a teacher can begin to address the complicated issues of evaluating for grade-giving, he or she must communicate an established objective. In determining the end goal, or the
end evaluation served during a grading period and beyond, the grade-giver listens constantly to
the student in this classroom and weighs all areas of growth and strength. Howard Gardner
refers to periodic “strategic feedback” during the process of literacy growth, feedback that
establishes growth as ongoing and rejects grades as set assessments (241). The unit portfolio
concept, in this way, asks students to effect change in themselves “rather than to wait for change
to be imposed from the outside (or to believe that change cannot occur at all) and to accept the
possibility that assessment may be the burden not of the teacher primarily but of the learner”
(Gardner 243). Students well acquainted with a portfolio system (the implementation of which
Gardner insists takes three to five years for teachers and students to adjust to comfortably), can
even feel empowered to abandon or eliminate work that they don’t see potential for or can keep a
less satisfying test or writing sample to build new goals around. Since the goal of life-long
literacy should be the constant self-reflective journey that leads to the redirection and
redefinition central to active participation in life, the function evaluation serves is simply to
encourage further self-reflection, self-assessment, and individual growth. In this way our
sensitive students need not allow one test grade, one unsatisfying writing attempt, or one
uninteresting book-- later one unfulfilling career choice or one destructive relationship-- to
represent an inflexible evaluation of the individual.

Mary Mercer Krogness aptly points out the root of the word evaluate, which is to value
(58). When I pause to evaluate my own life-- prompted by a conversation, my own reading
pursuits, or possibly a movie I’ve seen-- I am reassessing what I value and how I choose to
redirect my priorities to reflect those values. So, like Krogness, I hope daily to “set out to show
my students that above all, I value them; I accept them unconditionally” along with their “fresh
insights in literature” or “their cautious or even fleeting understanding of a novel we are reading”
(58). I want them to value their own literate practices and to continue thinking and critiquing
courageously. For this reason, I see my immediate goal as a middle school teacher in helping my
students build what Krogness refers to as “stamina for learning” and in placing the “high
premium” of learning on the practice of excellence rather than on the results of excellence, in
this way establishing learning as active (and therefore satisfying), and evaluation as ongoing
rather than conclusive (Krogness 63). By the end of the first grading period, my students should
know what grades to expect as a result of periodic evaluative conferences. Then, they will be
able to assess for themselves (as Nancie Atwell’s students do), in written terms and through verbal communications, the exact point at which they will continue their growth as goal-setting learners in a successive grading quarter. It is a habit I hope becomes part of their literate lives, not a practice belonging to our teachers and schools. Literacy that asks my students to embrace all components of a language-rich life except the language of personal assessment and evaluation seems like someone else’s literacy. Collaborative evaluation is not isolated to the first and last week of a quarter, but it presumes an atmosphere of constant integration, second nature to the self-interrogating teacher and the collaborative classroom. Perhaps most importantly, it envisions the immediate and distant future of each student.

A new look at the outcome of education should extend beyond limiting destinations: high school, college, the career. Not the grade, not the diploma, not the job, but an outcome of process and living. Proficiency need still be the goal along the way; middle schools owe that to the high schools, colleges, and workplaces. What proficiency looks like, however, needs a great deal of discussion. What it looks like and where it should lead concerns this exploration. We educators have made the mistake, quite possibly, of looking at the test score, the grades, the career-- the outcome, in other words, when measuring proficiency. We have subsequently defined excellence, a term I would like to shift the focus toward because it implies process, as any measurable (mostly non-transferable) outcome. John Gaughan questions whether our schools and educational leaders need to reexamine current definitions of proficiency and excellence, asking whether the visible marks of intelligence or brightness should really still signify our standard and whether those students who demonstrate such are really our best. Gaughan considers this when he quotes Nel Noddings in reference to whether our brightest students are really our best, asking not whether they are more well-written, well-spoken, or well-informed, but whether they are “more compassionate, more generous, more open, less judgmental, less acquisitive, and wiser” than our less advanced students by standard educational criteria (qtd. in Gaughan 6). The outcome is not easily measured when the focus of proficiency becomes practice rather than end-product. If the focus is on life and living, however, on interpersonal relationships and problem solving, on initiative and flexibility and fearlessness, then excellence looks different. It also looks possible and pursuable. Arguably, power has been handed to our best and brightest because of their recordable performances, their ability to “get it
right” on paper or in an interview. Knowing the right answer versus knowing the multidimensional complexities of every question asked depend upon the person being asked, and it depends upon our definition of excellence and the practice of proficiency, or literacy.

Possibly the proficient student knows too much, whereas the confused student thinks more and ultimately knows more. Confusion as a starting point for learning can be agreed upon readily, but the act of problem solving as an outcome rather than a step along the way may seem contestable. I’ve often asked why “getting it right” at this grade level so important, wondering if that isn’t what high school is for. Couldn’t we middle school educators begin to insist that our classrooms be the training ground, the carefully guarded fort where the field exercise is more important than the all-or-nothing mission? As a middle school teacher, I want to focus on confusion in life and problem-solving through language. I want to focus on familiarity with the problem, teaching them to navigate toward solutions rather than uncovering the right answer for them. I want to send students from my classroom willing and able to explore ideas presented in all aspects of text through language, and ready to delve into the more technical aspects of the language they have begun to see as powerful forces for change. The commitment to literacy must be in place by high school, I am convinced-- a commitment to the process rather than the outcome. Out of it must grow a sense of unfinished business and further potential for excellence. If it is already something to have or not by the middle years-- “I can or can’t do this,” “I am or am not that”-- high school is actually unnecessary for a vast number of young people. This cannot be.

**The Role Middle Schools Can Play in Defining Proficiency:**

A commitment to excellence and to ongoing literacy is a commitment to language, listening, speaking, reading, and writing-- to seeing, hearing, feeling, and doing every day with extended opportunities to try it out at all levels of exploration and engagement. The questions fired should be constant and the applications should be immediate, according to Healy (298); then the outcome should be evaluated as the process itself. So in the seventh grade language arts classroom, I am nudging students to initiate a commitment that counters the “diminished and degraded exposure” to language today due to passive entertainment and familial isolation, which have in turn resulted in declining literacy and skills levels. Exposure to and participation in
meaningful language that extends beyond plot discussions (resembling the basic conversations at all levels among adolescents), “enables us to converse with others, with the written word, and with our own minds” without which the “results are inevitable: declining literacy, falling text scores, faltering or circuitous oral expression, ineptitude with the written word that extends from elementary schools into the incoming ranks of professionals” (Healy 86). Again, the blame rests nearly everywhere-- home, TV, day-care, schools. But if our reality is, as I have previously indicated, that the “traditional sources of language exposure have ceded much of the neural real estate to television and the peer culture,” it’s what we all have created through participation (Healy 88). It’s an animal of our doing. Hectic schedules, dual-income families, commuter careers, and passive entertainment systems are likely here to stay. At least, I haven’t yet set my television by the curb.

It is my conviction that schools actually can address this widespread problem and have hours with which to do it without adding impossibly to the wordy curricula teachers are currently buried under. Teaching to such a curriculum strikes many teachers as fragmentary, and the results among inexperienced or uninformed educators can be as choppy. If teachers “are not given (or do not choose to take) sufficient time to cover a topic in depth,” it is often because “there is simply more to learn than there is time available. Without associations with meaning, however, items from a list don’t stick well to memory” (Healy 319). Where to begin reconnecting students to learning is in our thinking as teachers, in a return to the simplicity of conversation rather than the comfort of preaching from our bible. Instead of teaching, we will be training.

To do this, teachers will have to talk less at students. Students will have to do less busy work thrown back at teachers. Teachers should begin to train students to talk, better and purposefully. They should also train students how to listen and model the same. If students today “just don’t listen,” we teachers may not be saying anything worth listening to or about; and if we are not modeling such listening, then we clearly are not giving our students the opportunities and strategies to say anything worthwhile. Listening that “serves understanding and memory” is an active mental process that deserves equality with other focuses on language in our classrooms (Healy 96). A “success-oriented,” collaborative classroom places emphasis “on the types of cooperation and communication that will be needed in an ‘information age’”--
talking and listening-- and promises to “[counteract] some of the social isolation experienced by children without old-fashioned neighborhood play experiences” or family-united work, and to “[build] on oral language skills by teaching structured ways of talking together about what is being learned” (Healy 283).

Literacy must absorb these into the process of language now as teachers look constantly for ways to engage, to apply critical thinking to the realities of our current culture and provide “associations with meaning” through every “text.” Television, Healy insists, is the first place to start so as not to relinquish learning to someone without our children’s best interests in mind (320). TV and computers are, in effect, “‘the new curriculum’” and should be part of an expansion of “what counts as text” proposed by Gallego and Hollingsworth (296). We are “‘myopically obsessed with print literacies’” when our students are not. In other words, educators must be researchers and “broaden their research and include their [computer and visual literacies’] constructive uses” (Healy 321).

Robert Scholes proposes that his university colleagues view the entire world as a text, beginning with “‘the new curriculum’” of the twenty-first century (Protocols 1). I can recall my shame one Monday morning in late January when I allowed conversation to “degenerate” into a chat session about the Super Bowl commercials that had aired the day before. In actuality, the true waste of instructional time resulted not from the subject matter, but from my own lack of preparation. I had planned to ask students to write about their weekends, including any Super Bowl parties they might have attended that year or years past, when I could have recorded commercials during the game for critical review and reflective writing the next day. These students had plenty to say that demanded channeling into analytical directions. In fact, that was the year a Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Less Traveled” made an appearance in what my students voted “the weirdest commercial.” If ever there was a text adults and adolescents alike read every day, it is the commercial. What a teachable moment I missed!

With so many ideas and so much knowledge swirling around my students daily through the instant nature of technology, our students are not lacking for knowledge. They are lacking in the abilities to link ideas and act upon learning. These skills are not acquired through head-cramming or spoon-feeding our passive recipients, certainly not now when that is really what happens already outside of school before the TV and computer. Healy maintains that “ignoring
the reality” means “missing the vision,” the opportunity to “enrich young brains with the real ‘basics’-- language and thought” (Healy 281). Schools have always been about making up for a lack in society and the home, really. It sounds defeatist to many educators, but schools need to provide exactly what most students may not be getting enough of outside of school by truly engaging them in learning through the massive amounts of knowledge they already possess. Options such as year-round school calendars or extended days, block schedules, or looping teams of teachers may provide schools with structures that offer instructional continuity and allow for immersion. All have been documented and hailed for their successes. In the final analysis, the individual classroom teacher makes these models work. Regardless of the innovative school policy, “if what children get in school is ineffective or even damaging, simply adding more of the same will only exacerbate the problems” (Healy 282; emphasis mine). Changing the way students are taught rests with the teachers, and “more of the same” can refer to more drilling and more testing in shorter blocks of time as well as longer blocks throughout the year. My suggestions are directed to the classroom teachers for no other reason than my own empowered experiences in the midst of great isolation and confusion.

As a major characteristic of teachers who do “more” without doing “more of the same,” reflection about the needs of her students prompted by Nancie Atwell’s In the Middle emboldened Ruth Pettitt midway through her career to embrace the same challenge that Atwell had (Pettitt). Were it not for reflection, for confronting honestly the limits to her comfort zone, Mrs. Pettitt knew she might easily have reverted to what had “worked” for years. If I had reflected sooner on the perceived failure of literature circles in my classroom that troubling year, I might have realized, like Atwell, that nothing touted as failure-proof can work without “all the hard thinking involved” (16). Only Atwell’s conviction that students can always learn better and she can teach better gave her the courage and determination to continue with bold models such as the reading/writing workshop structure. In 1986 Mrs. Pettitt wrote of her frustrations in trying to implement Atwell’s and Graves’ workshop approach to reading and writing, pondering the aspects that needed more thinking and researching:

I am frustrated with a few students who can’t seem to get with writing workshop. Maybe I haven’t given enough structure. I know that I’ll change things next year and do more with free writing at the beginning of the year so they’ll be more in
the habit of doing it. I don’t really know how to structure journal writing. I feel that it’s important, but I don’t really see how I can give the time to it. (Pettitt)

If we truly have our students in mind, we as teachers will risk our comfortable routines and predictable preparations to do more and think harder. This sort of teacher is one like Ruth Pettitt, who after thirty-three years of teaching does not foresee a suitable year to retire. There is too much left to try-out and see-through. Following Linda Rief’s professional slow growth model, Mrs. Pettitt is still conducting research because year after year she decides the results are inconclusive. Like Atwell and Rief she is always slightly discontent and ever-willing to experiment. She learns of something exciting, something that sounds exactly right for her students, and she jumps in. She may not “get it right” the first time, but that reality is central to her reflection and research.

Nancie Atwell pondered Donald Graves’ workshop approach to reading and writing for several years before she “gathered [her] courage” one day in March and approached her students with the workshop concept, finding out in less than three months that her eighth-graders “did have ideas for wiring” and that in-school writing could provide a natural way to solve problems and see the world” (Atwell 11). “This wasn’t Camelot,” Atwell admits now, but “it was genuine and it was happening in my own eighth grade classroom” (11). Resisting the temptation to put off what she had a hunch was best for her students as learners and young adults, Atwell let go of the curriculum that she had possessively “tended and taught” for too long. Ruth Pettitt also continued to journal her frustrations after doing the same, realizing that she would need to do more than “add” this approach to an existing curriculum. Instead, she would need to overhaul the language arts program entirely with the needs of her students in mind:

I am getting frustrated with the amount of time it takes to do all of this writing workshop stuff. I feel like I’m teaching my first year all over again. I am very excited about the progress each person is making. The writing is going well for quantity and quality. The results are so terrific . . . . This program encourages students of all abilities to do their best, and most students have been rewarded with good grades. If I can only manage my day, I’d be happier with the program all the way around. This is making the difference for me! (Pettitt; emphasis mine)
The teachers our students need are teachers willing to take radical steps and steadily pursue reflective growth. Over time, the teacher researcher informs his or her colleagues, administrators, students, and communities of such efforts and the findings of their varied research methods. This example may lead to the growth of a community of such risk-takers and a collective commitment to site-level reforming steps. Most schools cannot fathom the annual reinvention that takes place in Mrs. Pettitt’s classroom and many such teachers’ classrooms, and have not determined to approach school or curricular development in the same way.

I have focused my attention primarily on the classroom and on my deep belief in the “potential of teacher research to help in the reform of schooling,” as “research by teachers represents a distinctive way of knowing about teaching and learning that will alter-- not just add to-- what we know in the field” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 6, 85). The larger national debate about school reform often represents no more than a “tinkering” with existing “structural rearrangements” that are often innovative and many times necessary, but are not alone or even primarily “sufficient to realize the potential of teacher research as a legitimate and unique form of knowledge generation and a profound means of professional growth that can radically alter teaching and learning” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 85, 103). A one-day inservice with a few interactive brainstorming sessions won’t suffice. Neither will a terminal Master’s degree and sporadic, disconnected continuing education courses. I envision collaborative “knowledge-generating” rather than knowledge acquiring by communities of researchers producing ongoing research that over time “influences broader school policies regarding curriculum, assessment, school organization, and home-school linkages,” all of which amount to “more than tinkering with or reinforcing existing structures” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 103). A teacher like Ruth Pettitt has made professional innovation part of her job, and devotes additional efforts through independent research and personal integrity toward drawing her colleagues into the same way of knowing.

I do not have guaranteed solutions and fail-safe pedagogical methods to offer. But it seems appropriate to suggest a way of re-envisioning my field and profession, the approach we take to our students, classrooms, and curriculum, as well as the outcomes we expect from each. I believe that creating collaborative research communities could increase the base of knowledge considerably. Local efforts already in place in Southwest Ohio through Miami University’s Ohio
Writing Project, and collaborative mentorships between Miami University English professor Mary Fuller and eighth grade teacher Ruth Pettitt, as well as among their students suggest great potential for this approach. The opportunities now afforded us through technology-- with email, listservs, and bulletin boards as vehicles to expand the network of discussion-- should facilitate the creation of learning communities between different age groups and institutions with maximal flexibility and adaptability. I wonder if it is time for our secondary schools and our universities to stop assuming or giving in to what the other wants and begin a face-to-face conversation for the benefit of all students.

The Re-visionary Role of the Middle School Teacher:

Our middle schools need more teachers who possess the boldness to jump in. Dipping and wading won’t cut it. Courageous educators start over rather than jump start. They rebuild rather than revise. In fact, after three years of floundering, reflecting, researching, restructuring, and collaborating, Ruth Pettitt and her colleagues literally rebuilt their program from the ground up. A newly-constructed middle school provided the natural opportunity to start over, with upgraded classroom materials (tables, not desks), shelves of trade books instead of textbooks, and a two-period whole language arts block replacing separate reading and English periods. This overhaul duplicates the “zero-based curriculum” approach advocated by administrator Gerald W. Bracey of Cherry Creek, Colorado Schools, who contends that standardized proficiency tests have ruined our ideas of teaching and have instead promoted “‘decontextualized, fragmentary bits of knowledge’” (Healy 273). We now must (but don’t know how to, as a result) undo this problem. Bracey speculates that a zero-based curriculum approach may now be the only option left to schools-- to “start from scratch and justify everything you let back in,” and at the very least to “rethink old approaches that are frankly damaging to all children, and particularly to the children of disadvantage, the most vulnerable of all” (Healy 273). Starting over by “offering attainable academic goals and good teaching to reach them” considers the needs of our students and society by considering both the strengths and realities of the present culture; this is the school’s “primary role in social service” (Healy 282).
Starting over sometimes means letting go, as Nancie Atwell learned, not of control or composure, but of power. If she couldn’t “justify everything” convincingly to herself, she let it go. Middle schools, junior high schools, and their teachers play a unique role as the visionaries behind a technological revolution, “a position of great importance . . . if we are willing to change our discipline so as to occupy this position” (Scholes, *Rise* 85). By “letting go of the Story of English as our main preoccupation,” Scholes determines, and by “giving up our role as exegetes of quasi-religious texts” as well as our cherished roles as arbiters of grammar rules and bestowers of authoritative grades, we may open the doors of language and literature to all students equally (85). On the other hand, this new position “also means giving up any claim to be revolutionary opponents of ‘the system.’ We are in it and of it, and we had better admit this to ourselves and others, just to clear the air” (Scholes, *Rise* 85). We don’t forget everything we as English teachers have learned, Scholes insists. Instead, we “put our learning to use” and begin to tear down English elitism in favor of a classless approach (85). Language should be accessible to all, not the exclusive preserve of the educated minority. Educators should work on behalf of all potential learners, to open as many access points into the dominant discourse as they can.

If an overhaul of the system is a luxury not afforded to all teachers, or one too easily discounted by others as a fad, the first-step attitude of deconstruction results in teachers who will “infuse the entire curriculum with creative as well as critical thinking,” and who will be the “good models of imaginative intellectual engagement” that our students need (Healy 317). What counts as revolutionary teaching leaves out the dictator and draws in the entire community over time. The patient, consistently innovative teacher like Ruth Pettitt who brings her research before her colleagues and students, administrators and parents, school board members and community leaders, follows a slow growth model that wins converts over time and surmounts the latest fad skepticisms. Alliances usually reflect common goals and carry a history-- of respect for ideas and interests. The alliances developed among many teacher-researchers who are similarly committed to steady ongoing professional growth represent the most hopeful site of change beyond the classroom, and this revolution will follow a steady, focused course.

The system that alienates, separates, and drives away many students is the system that depersonalizes, compartmentalizes, and hurries learning. This system threatens to isolate our
students and cut them off not only from those around them, but from their own potential for “widened perspectives, a broader range of mental skills, and a great deal of open-ended imagination to come up with solutions to the world’s big problems” (Healy 335). If, as Healy suggests, we believe enough in our students’ potential for acquiring the technical knowledge for a future world, we should believe more in their potential for acquiring the wisdom to use that knowledge fully and equitably (346). Potential counts for little without the curriculum of “conversation, thought, imagination, empathy, [and] reflection” that attend wisdom; and “youth who lack these ‘basics,’ who cannot ponder what they have learned, are poorly equipped to become managers of the human enterprise in any era (Healy 346). I have established that a curriculum of wisdom not only promotes commonality through diversity, but it also fosters the retention of knowledge through its immediate practice and present relevance. I have approached literacy as the pursuit of learning through active inquiry that cannot be satiated without the active use of language and study. The inseparable nature of learning and life is what I hope to teach to, making the union more and more impossible to sever, and realizing that our interaction with written texts “can and should answer to social and ethical concerns . . . . remaining incomplete unless and until it is absorbed and transformed in the thoughts and deeds of readers” (Scholes/Protocols x). This is wisdom only the whole-hearted pursuit of literacy can produce.

As we rethink the role of middle schools we first rethink the purpose of mandated education in the middle schools and disregard the goals of proficiency in favor of new definition for academic excellence that excludes no one. The process of problem-solving is one students will carry with them throughout life, and to foster this we turn to a new focus of excellence in learning. For Krogness, “the magic moments-- when kids use the language surprisingly, when they ask remarkable questions, or offer insights-- equal excellence (63). How we educators view our students, classrooms, and curriculum, will either obstruct or encourage our students’ “growing ability to be prime movers in the classroom rather than empty receptacles who passively sit waiting for the teacher to fill them up,” as well as influencing “their decision to take charge of their own learning and therefore their lives” (Krogness 63) (emphasis mine). If academic excellence does not include our students, does not “embrace their talents, intelligences, and their courage to take hold of life,” it follows that literacy also does not include them (Krogness 63). Prime movers know how literacy can work for them; they have experienced
confidence and success in using and appropriating the written or spoken word, and they believe in their abilities to use language to effect real change in their lives and the world. Deliberate and wise in their literacy, they seek excellence and nothing less.

I dream that middle schools may first witness this excellence, at an age when students will become aware of their power and hopeful in its blossoming possibilities. How might all people’s lives be different if schools adopted a less isolated, homogeneous approach to literacy (defined here as simply “communication/comprehension”)-- one that operated with the triple goals for all students “to live successfully in the dominant society,” “to live successfully in minority communities and cultures,” and “to live successfully in chosen and personal identities” (Gallego and Hollingsworth 1, 21)? These middle schools will look very different across the country, and this central question asked by Gallego and Hollingsworth (posed to their contributors), points beyond basic proficiency, a foundational given:

Our own answer is that we imagine all students would become proficient at standard or school literacy. Students at school would also have a better sense of identity-- culturally, communally, and personally. The combination of those factors would result in adults who have opportunities to choose their careers and life paths from fully informed places. (Gallego and Hollingsworth 21)

And when students from these classrooms become teachers, “the relational understanding that might follow years of school where differences were not only tolerated but celebrated could lead to a more just and peaceful world” (Gallego and Hollingsworth 21). Not only do these eventual adults know what they intend for themselves-- excellence-- and how to courageously pursue such-- wisdom; they might expect and encourage the same in those around them.

Best-selling author Po Bronson interviewed hundreds of people for his book *What Should I Do with My Life?* in his attempt to understand how and why people who have asked this title question can act to effect satisfying change in their lives. At a point in his life when Bronson asked himself the same question, the author discovered the commonalities among many others who had done the same. These people knew exactly what they feared about remaking themselves yet felt powerful enough to effect change. The fears might have involved merely writing resumes or composing cover letters; it may also have required research and interpersonal initiative from little understanding. In every case, however, the first requirement was a belief or
attitude about change as being natural and worthwhile. Talents could still be discovered, uncovered, or developed and did not have to be part of an inborn set of innate abilities. A second significant characteristic of these “prime movers” emerged in the people surrounding them-- the friends they chose, the advisors they sought out, and in many cases the language, written or spoken, that they surrounded themselves with. All in some ways resonated their own aspirations for change by example or attitude.

Literacy as an attitude and habit emerge from our surroundings. Certainly this is true when educators insist that literacy formation begins in the home. The students in my classroom cannot yet know what they will be, and their interests at this point in their young lives are the start of many. We might even read from Po Bronson’s book in my classroom now, at the same time sharing personal stories of such “coming from” and “going to” to reinforce literacy as comprehension of and communication about the process of life. Identities are never set, and certainly not during the adolescent years when schools and educators and parents allow and often encourage such limiting superficialities. Adulthood may not be far off, but it is a big place, where time and opportunity abound to those who see themselves as language able, as effective learners and communicators, as actively literate. They need a teacher, classroom, and curriculum that allow them to pursue the same growth now that literacy hopes for them later; otherwise adulthood might be an empty, unchanging landscape. This means they choose the literature and literary lives to surround themselves with now, as they also choose the problems to grapple with that will familiarize them with life-time problem-recognition capabilities and problem-solving efforts, and finally choose the language outlets for making sense of all of this. In the end, I simply want my students to ask always, “what should I do with my life?” and seek always to surround themselves, in all forms of language and text, with others who do the same.
Figure #1: Anticipation Guide

Name ____________________
Date ____________________
Class ____________________

“Chewed Up”

Before reading: In the space to the left of each statement, place a check mark (√) if you agree or think the statement is true.

During or after reading: Add new check marks or cross through those about which you have changed your mind. Keep in mind that this is not like the traditional “worksheet.” You may have to put on your thinking caps and “read between the lines.” Use the space under each statement to note the page, column, and paragraph(s) where you found information to support your thinking.

______ 1. Characterization is used only by authors of fiction.

______ 2. There is more nicotine in two packs of cigarettes than in one tin of smokeless tobacco.

______ 3. Finding out information about a character through actions and dialog is possible even when the character is telling the story.

______ 4. Addictions like using smokeless tobacco can be cured by taking medication because they are biological in nature.

______ 5. General information in television commercials is and always has been trustworthy.

______ 6. More than 70% of cases of oral cancer are attributed to tobacco use.

______ 7. Many smokers quit because of the risk of cancer associated with it.

______ 8. It is wise to follow the actions of professional athletes because their bodies are in good enough shape to play sports for a living.

______ 9. It is understandable if people need to smoke, “dip,” or do whatever makes them feel better if there is a major crisis.
WHERE I'M FROM

Dixon S. Woodburn

I come from longing.
I come from Bible belts and Baptist guilt,
From Ozark isolation
    to the Chesapeake
    teeming with life.
I am from tangled willow trees,
From wood-slabbed Missouri farms
    and wheat-gold Kansas fields.

I come from strains of Beethoven and Rachmaninoff,
Violin strings meeting my dusty, resined bow.
The cherry grand piano
    that was my mother’s escape
    and my self-expression.
I am from the pages of Austen and Bronte and Dickens,
    beside milk-glass lamps
    and billowed white eyelet.

I am from Ohio straight lines
    and cloud mountains.
I am from the dead mice of a hunter cat,
A wooden cross over the pet’s grave.
I come from needles and bobbins
    and lace-collared calico;
A Franklin stove, black on brick hearth,
    where children gathered
    at yarn-full, book-stacked baskets
    when our mother read aloud.

I am from German noses and piano-long fingers,
    from lily-white Southern women, lithe and sedate
    and carpenter men, balding and barrel-chested.
I am from the infant sister I can't recall
    and the father who saw himself in me,
From preachers and proper speech,
Show-offs and silent-types.
I come from strong coffee,
    bright kitchens,
    grease-spitting chicken,
    and creamy cheese cinnamon rolls.

I come from the secret stories
    of wrinkled pictures
    and private wars--
Empty wombs, and one vacant voice.
I come from remembrances
    and restless dreams;
I am not from here or now.
    I am from Longing.
**Figure #3:**
Connector Role Sheet

**Connector**

Name  
__________________________________________________________

Group  
__________________________________________________________

Book  
__________________________________________________________

Assignment p. _____ to p. ____

**Connector:** Your job is to find connections between the book your group is reading and the world outside. This means connecting the reading to your own life, to happenings at school or in the community, to similar events at other times and places, to other people or problems that you are reminded of. You might also see connections between this book and other writings on the same topic, or by the same author. There are no right answers here-- whatever the reading connects you with/to is worth sharing!

**Have you ever. . . ?**

1.  
__________________________________________________________

2.  
__________________________________________________________

3.  
__________________________________________________________

4.  
__________________________________________________________

5.  
__________________________________________________________
Seventh Grade Minimum Requirements
(Revised September 2000)

Students will read daily.
Students will write reading responses weekly.
Students will complete two book projects per quarter.
Teachers will evaluate journals at least twice each quarter.
Students will write a minimum of three or more original draft pages per week or complete
24 pages of independent writing per quarter.
Students will publish one or two pieces quarterly: may use a variety of media/technology
(i.e. computer processing, HyperStudio, etc.)
Students will pretest/teach the required seventh grade spelling words
Teachers will emphasize spelling and listening skills throughout the year.
Teachers will teach English skill lessons at least two times per week.
Students will practice reading testing strategies through Test Ready or other materials.
Teachers will instruct vocabulary and nonfiction reading through Test Ready or other
materials.

Homework:
Students will read at home or outside of class daily.
(recommended 20 minutes or 20 pages)
Students will write at home or outside of class to meet requirements.
(first draft or independent writing)
Dear Sirs:
Of course I’ll come. I’ve packed my galoshes and three packets of tomato seeds. Janet calls them ‘love apples.’ My father says where we’re going they won’t grow.

I am a fourteen-year-old girl with bad spelling and a messy room. If it helps any, I will tell you I have always felt funny using chopsticks and my favorite food is hot dogs.

My best friend is a white girl named Denise--we look at boys together. She sat in front of me all through grade school because of our names: O’Conner, Ozawa. I know the back of Denise’s head very well. I tell her she’s going bald. She tells me I copy on tests. We’re best friends.

I saw Denise today in Geography class. She was sitting on the other side of the room. “You’re trying to start a war,” she said, “giving secrets away to the Enemy. Why can’t you keep your big mouth shut?” I didn’t know what to say.

I gave her a packet of tomato seeds and asked her to plant them for me, told her when the first tomato ripens to miss me.
**The Bracelet**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Detective</th>
<th>Discussion Director</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>WORD:</strong> ____________</td>
<td><strong>Cause:</strong> Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>definition:</td>
<td>Effect: The FBI . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentence:</td>
<td><strong>Cause:</strong> Keiko told Ruri it was time to leave with Mrs. Simpson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WORD:</strong> ____________</td>
<td>Effect: Ruri . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>definition:</td>
<td><strong>Cause:</strong> Ruri lost her bracelet and looked for it until she left.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentence:</td>
<td>Effect: Mama . . .</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Connector**

Write about a connection you have with Ruri, whether it involves a friend like Laurie, a cherished possession you lost, or a move you didn't want to make.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

**Illustrator**

In the space below, draw the family's "apartment" and describe on the lines the specific details you included.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Figure #6: Literature Circles Grid
Works Cited


Graves, Donald H. *Bring Life into Learning: Create a Lasting Literacy.* Portsmouth:


