JOURNEY OF REDISCOVERY:

LESS CONTROL FOR MORE LEARNING

By

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Abstract

Good student evaluations are not always the measure of a successful class, and in spite of my consistently high student evaluations, I knew something had been lost in my classes. In an effort to revitalize my teaching, to increase both student participation and instructor satisfaction, I undertook an experiment in which I taught two sections of the same literature survey differently. One class was taught as I had, of recent years, been teaching: primarily lecture. The second class was decentralized: circled seating arrangement, all participants (including me) seated, and a required student literary response journal.

Change is much easier decided upon than implemented. Instructor discomfort when climbing out of teaching ruts can be strong enough to impede progress (temporarily) but is a sure sign of growth Although the decentralized classroom increases a sense of vulnerability, it also increases camaraderie. Class discussion can and does veer in unexpected directions but also leads to unanticipated insights and increased student involvement with the material. The instructor's job becomes more complicated because although there must be latitude for a range of responses, the class discussion must not be allowed to drift totally off topic. Thus, the instructor must have the restraint to allow students to express and defend their ideas, and must not rein in apparent misdirections too quickly. To do so would risk stifling student involvement and precluding significant new insights. One casualty of increased student participation in discussion is the amount of material that can be covered. The physical arrangement of a class in a circle encourages student discussion, but that decentralization is really more a function of attitude than of physical space.

An essential component of the successful discussion class is the student literary response journal. The journal encourages students to focus on and wrestle with the reading assignment. In the process they can hone their analytic skills, preview and practice articulating their ideas, generate ideas for formal essays, and receive private, non-threatening encouragement from the instructor.

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CHAPTER 1

PROLOGUE

The Rut of My Own Making

For what makes a habit bad is enslavement to old ruts.
John Dewey

My pedagogical enslavement to old ruts was achieved over two decades of teaching. My teaching habits were firmly rooted in the medium of my daily professional existence, and I was unaware of just how incredibly deep they had grown. My classroom performance had become so automatic that I was not actually thinking about what I was doing or why I was doing it. I had walked the same path for forty semesters while teaching introductory level English courses. The deep rut created by my unending trudge and tread had been worn so gradually that I had barely noticed the lack of illumination or the absence of growth in myself, though I could clearly see those problems in my students. I had fulfilled my teaching and advising responsibilities year after long academic year. I continued to receive very good student evaluations as my very worn professional path grew deeper and deeper, but I couldn't stifle my growing suspicion that my teaching had become quite linear and very predictable. I could easily glide from point A to point B; I knew quite well what had to be "covered" between those two points, and I was very good at making the journey, or so I thought. I had become a talking head, a teacher who was very adept at "telling" students what they should know and think about the literature I felt must be "covered" come hell or high water. And so my teaching career plodded along; I did "cover material" even when I had to fight my way to campus after the Maury River flooded the route to the campus, and even while the college drifted ever closer to the shoals of financial disaster.

I felt I knew the students I faced quite well even before I met them. I knew them to be a feckless group of young women who were far more interested in men and horses than in the great literature I asked them to experience. These girls aspiring to be independent women could study the prospects at fraternity parties at Washington & Jeff University or analyze the social gains and losses among those attending "Hops" at Virginia Military Institute, but they seemed oblivious to the power of the written word. My students were girls far more dedicated to equine quadrupeds with impressive blood lines than they were to literature. Their mothers and fathers supported their equestrian interests by forking over thousands of dollars so their daughters could continue to be competitive on the show circuit. Many students I came to know

at Mountain View College[1] (not its real name) seemed far more concerned with the conformation of horses in the show ring than with anything I could say in the classroom about composition or literature. I was resigned to playing my part in this academic tragedy, or comedy, depending on one's perspective, and collecting my check at the end of the month as I marched to my grave. I had grown old, and I was not yet gray. Teaching continued to be a very serious business for me, but I no longer associated teaching with adventure, pleasant anticipation and fun.

The First Steps of My Journey

To be playful and serious at the same time is possible, and it defines the ideal mental condition.
John Dewey

It had not always been this way. Decades ago on the shores of Lake Okeechobee, in a classroom at Clearlake High School, I experienced my first full year of teaching. I faced a fifty-five mile drive from the coast each morning. Gasoline sold for twenty-five cents a gallon at that time, so my VW Bug could be topped off for about $2.50; even my meager salary could cover fuel costs. I had been hired by the Palm Beach County School Board to teach migrant children in a federally funded program called "Learn and Earn." My classroom was actually a beautifully appointed trailer positioned behind the industrial arts building, the domain of a very large Italian shop teacher. Mr. Forelli, a man who crafted custom made Bowie knives to supplement his salary, would silence initially unruly students by reaching into the lower right drawer of his desk, placing his right hand around the grip of an eighteen inch long Bowie knife, slowly and deliberately raising the knife to eye level, then driving the shining blade about an inch into the center of his oak desk. He would then announce that he did not want any more talking out of turn in his class. Order usually prevailed in his classes.

That first year I felt very much on my own and very much out of my depth. My only teaching experience had been as a substitute during the previous year while I finished work on a B.A. at Florida Atlantic University. Just like Indiana Jones, I was winging it. I wrote my teaching script on a daily basis as I tried to establish and maintain a direction for the year. I not only did not know how to get from point A to point B; I didn't know where, or even if, those points existed. There was no good map to guide me during the year. The principal wanted order, and no more, from my students.

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[1]Mountain View College, Clearlake High School, and the people in this study are real places and people, but the names have all been changed to protect the students' privacy.

In and around that trailer I attempted to teach thirty children who were the sons and daughters of migrant agricultural workers. These people followed the ripening crops up and down the east coast in order to earn, at best, a subsistence wage. Most of my students came into the area near Lake Okeechobee in mid-October. One of the major goals established by the federal government for this program was to provide training that might provide these poor minority children with job options other than traveling with the changing seasons to harvest the crops. The trailer contained thousands of dollars worth of automotive testing equipment as well as a complete grocery check-out area with cash register and counter. I had a full-time aide, and we occasionally attempted to utilize some of this equipment, but I quickly realized my students needed to learn how to read as well as gain some basic math skills before they would have a fighting chance of leaving the fields.

Early in the year an experimental reading program was delivered to my trailer. The program provided for a pretest to be given to each student to determine the student's reading level. The reading levels were color coordinated with books of a matching color, and each student was told to select books, arranged throughout the classroom, which corresponded to his or her designated color. Students could stretch out on the carpeted floor of the trailer to read or could choose to sit at a desk. The idea was to let them get comfortable and have fun reading. After completing the book, they would take a brief written test, but I would also encourage them to talk about what they had read. In the course of these talks, I learned much about the individual students. Thus, they were developing reading as well as communication skills, and I was learning of a way of life about which I had known little. I was skeptical about the program's chances for success at first, but I reconsidered as I found myself sitting at my desk with students, engrossed in their chosen books, sprawled all over the floor of the carpeted trailer. It could be very quiet in the trailer, the only sound being the occasional turning of pages. I was amazed! My initial experiences with these children had given me ample evidence that their ability to focus on a specific task was very limited. However, because the books were interesting and not too long, the students could finish an assignment, receive positive reinforcement, and develop a sense of accomplishment. These students with limited attention spans were able to concentrate on a *manageable* project and *have fun* in the process.

For a while, math lessons were not going quite so well. Finally, I was inspired by my students' wet feet to develop one of our more successful math classes: one which required practical physical activity, teamwork, laughter, some frustration, and precise calculations. Every time it rained, our trailer became an island in the middle of a rather large pond; my students had to wade to the door and contend with wet shoes and feet for the rest of the day. It was clear that nothing was going to be done about this problem, so my students and I designed a boardwalk which led to our trailer from a point on the asphalt sidewalk which circled the main building of the school. The project seemed the perfect way to teach some math skills, and it took care of the problem of repeated flooding. After receiving the materials, we were able to build "The Learn and Earn Boardwalk" in about a week with tools we borrowed from Mr. Forelli in the industrial

arts department. We had great fun designing and building that boardwalk. It was surprising to me that so few of the students had ever held a hammer and saw. I can still see those small hands trying to cope with a pencil and tape measure as I asked them to measure pieces of lumber so we could begin cutting boards to nail to the underpinnings of our structure. Students' immediate physical involvement made planning, arithmetic, and learning to use carpenters' tools fun and interesting.

The classes were not all obviously academic. We also played a lot of basketball, and I even took them to the Barnum and Bailey Circus in Palm Beach as we approached the end of the year. I had heard a public service announcement on the radio which mentioned that a limited number of tickets would be provided for children in need, so I quickly secured thirty tickets for my students. Absenteeism was at an all time high the week before we were to head eastward to the circus. When the big day arrived, my students came to school looking like they were going on the road with a minstrel show. They had worked in the fields to earn extra money to buy new clothes as well as to have a bit of spending money while at the circus. To get us all there, I had signed out a school van which my aide filled with students and drove, and I packed the rest of the class into my VW bus. Hearts high, we rolled out of Clearlake for the hour long trip through the sugar cane fields to the spectacle in Palm Beach.

It was a bit awkward when we took our seats at the circus because my group looked more like a side show to the magnificent performances going on in the three rings directly in front of our wonderful seats rather than children "in need." Every color of the rainbow was represented in their new and flashy shirts, trousers and dresses just purchased for this occasion. Some of my students flashed twenty dollar bills when concessionaires came into our area hawking food and trinkets. However, as the explosive finale began, I glanced about and was surprised to see many of my students had fallen asleep. They were so exhausted from the previous week's work in preparation for this event that they ultimately failed to see the climax of "The Greatest Show on Earth." If they could fall asleep at a circus, it was little wonder that they would occasionally be too tired to pay attention effectively in class. Their circus attire was also evidence, though, that these children could work hard to achieve a goal they set for themselves.

On the Monday morning which followed our trip to the coast, I was summoned to the principal's office to explain why I had taken my students to the coast aboard a school van. The principal, who had the demeanor of Captain Queeg, was a man who moved into administration after teaching driver's education for twenty-five years. He ran a tight ship, and I had over stepped my bounds by assuming I could have access to "his" van. Never mind the fact that he had told me at the beginning of the year that I had all the rights and privileges AND responsibilities of a full-time faculty member even though I was "the guy in the trailer." Taking this field trip did not fit his vision of education for migrant children. It was clear that neither I nor my students were valued very highly. As he lectured me on the danger of taking "them" [my students] to a circus where they could embarrass the school in public, I felt frustrated and

resentful. While standing there, I realized I was getting a brief glimpse of the lowered expectations my students had been facing most of their lives.

I had received another summons to this man's lair earlier in the year as a result of an incident involving Paul, the only white student in my program. Paul had returned from a restroom break late, once again, and I could clearly see the outline of a pack of cigarettes in the pocket of his jeans. I told Paul to follow me out of the trailer, which he did; but when I asked him to surrender the cigarettes, he refused. When I again asked him to hand over the cigarettes, he took a swing at me. I placed him against the side of the trailer, removed the cigarettes from his pocket, and took him by the arm as we headed toward the vice-principal's office.

Mr. Hildebrand had been demoted from principal at a middle-school the previous year to vice-principal at the high school. Apparently, a black male teacher had spoken harshly to Hildebrand's daughter, a student in the black man's class, and Mr. Hildebrand's response was to take a swing at the teacher. Clearly, racial tensions were high at every level in the community. At any rate, Paul and I entered the outer "holding room" of Mr. Hildebrand's domain, and there I was greeted by Lucas, a black student who was in the LD program. He often got sent to Mr. Hildebrand. Lucas was a very flashy dresser, a fast talker, and clearly one of the smartest students in the school. I am convinced he elected to place *himself* in the LD program because he was bored in the regular courses, and the LD program gave him more latitude to move about as he wished and when he wished. For reasons which escape me, Lucas enjoyed my company. He liked to play tricks on the "Learn and Earn" folks. He even locked us in our trailer for over two hours one afternoon. I can still see him slapping his thighs and laughing in the shade of a giant oak tree near the trailer after we had finally been released by a young woman who had come to collect the day's list of those absent.

To cut to the chase, Paul continued to abuse me verbally as we waited to see Mr. Hildebrand. Lucas did not take kindly to Paul's disrespect, so when Paul bolted for the door, Lucas shouted, "I'll get him for you, Mr. Bedell!" Paul was moving north at a high rate of speed and Lucas was in hot pursuit, with me following close behind. Two thousand students pressed against the windows located on the west side of the high school, a high school which was still a powder keg of racial tension (40% black vs 60% white). Shouts from the audience conveyed the notion that Mr. Bedell was moving pretty fast for a white guy. Lucas tackled Paul within a hundred yards and within view of the central section of the high school's main building. Lucas landed one blow before I could grab his arm and pull him away from Paul. I then heard the voice of the principal. His lieutenants took control of Paul and Lucas. I was ordered to have a full report of "the incident" on his desk before I left campus. What Mr. Hildebrand saw was a challenge to authority, an instance of unruly, aggressive behavior. I saw that too, but I also saw in the incident a bond between two people of different races (Lucas and me) that was stronger than the oppressive racist environment.

This was the way I began my teaching career, among students who, against all odds, in the midst of more distractions than I knew then or can imagine now, were having what Dewey would call "serious fun," and I, confused, frustrated, and gratified, was having a great deal of fun seeing them learn, seeing them enjoy learning.

I think now of those dark faces and wonder what became of my students. I remember my frustration that they would often stop at a candy store on the way to school. I remember their bleeding gums and rotten teeth. I remember the two very thin girls who I later learned had sickle cell anemia, and I always see their faces whenever I see any footage of the human misery and tragedy in the Sudan.

A distinguished Virginia Tech professor often tells his students "We become what we love," and I came to love teaching during that long year in Clearlake, Florida. It was a year marked by experimentation and a huge amount of "OJT," but, by God, it was exciting. I made mistakes and often had to face the fact that some of my teaching strategies did not produce the progress I had hoped for, but even with all of the chaos and uncertainty, I will forever count my first year of teaching a success. I know I learned far more from my students than they learned from me because in the process of growing to love them, I came to love teaching. My chaotic but fruitful year in Clearlake initiated me into a teaching career. I loved the challenge, the uncertainties, the students, the successes (theirs and mine). With that beginning then, what brought me to the time of what can only be called calcification in Buena Vista, Virginia while teaching English at Mountain View College? What set of circumstances led to such a sad routine in my teaching? Where had all the fun gone? Why could I no longer be *playful and serious* at the same time as I tried to teach my classes? Would I ever be able to regain that "ideal mental condition" in the classroom?

A work of artifice

The bonsai tree
in the attractive pot
could have grown eighty feet tall
on the side of a mountain
till split by lightning.
But a gardener
carefully pruned it.
It is nine inches high.
Every day as he whittles back the branches
the gardener croons,
It is your nature
to be small and cozy,
domestic and weak;
how lucky, little tree,
to have a pot to grow in.
With living creatures
one must begin very early to dwarf their growth:
the bound feet,
the crippled brain,
the hair in curlers,
the hands you
love to touch.

Marge Piercy

Hobbled by Habit

'Present' activity is not a sharp narrow knife-blade in time. The present is complex containing within itself a multitude of habits and impulses. It is enduring, a course of action, a process including memory, observation and foresight, a pressure forward, a glance backward and a look outward. It is of moral moment because it marks a transition in the direction of breadth and clarity of action or in that of triviality and confusion.

John Dewey

John Dewey provided much of the initial impetus for my study. One of the required texts for a course I took at Virginia Tech in the fall of 1995 was Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct*. In it, Dewey says a great deal about how habits influence human action, and I had arrived at a point in my career where it seemed I was driven by habit. Given the fact that I believed that all of the students I faced were awash in bad habits, I decided I should take a very objective look at my own habits. I wanted to help my students more effectively, and to do so I would have to improve my own state of mind. In addition to Dewey, I had become interested in Lev Vygotsky and his zone of proximal development (ZPD). Could my bad habits have evolved because I had stopped trying to create a common ground for myself and my students, an area where we could come to terms in a mutual fashion with the material I felt should be covered? I had also read Louise Rosenblatt's *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* and I had begun to see that perhaps one of the bad habits I had acquired was the belief that my interpretation of a poem, story or play was the *only* proper interpretation that should be entertained in class; I began to see that I had little hope of creating a classroom ambience which would promote an effective ZPD if I would permit only one interpretation of the works my students and I were examining.

In essence, I began this study after doing a great deal of reflecting about the evolution of my teaching career. I had begun my career in a trailer on the campus of Clearlake High School with thirty students who were the children of migrant workers. My first year in teaching was frightening, massively challenging, and exhausting, but it was also exhilarating, rewarding, and successful because I was not burdened by entrenched teaching habits or presumptions about the students who sat before me. I spent most of my waking professional hours in a constantly evolving ZPD as we pursued activities in the trailer, as we planned for future events and as we played together on the basketball court. My "teaching" was a constant process of spontaneous and dynamic sharing of ideas and plans with my students. They learned some things from me, and I learned a great deal from them as I came to know them as individuals.

So the original purpose of my research, which I conducted at Mountain View College during the spring semester of 1996, was initially to try to understand how Dewey's views of human nature, Vygotsky's theories of the ZPD, and Rosenblatt's transactional theories of literary works could help me understand how to change the habits of my students, the very bad habits of my students, so I could once again experience the joy of teaching. Of course, in the

process, I would also be checking to see if it might be just possible that I might have developed any unfortunate habits myself.

Adding to the pathos and high emotion of the occasion of my research was the fact that our college, for a variety of reasons, including declining enrollments and skyrocketing expenses, was due to close its doors at the end of the spring semester in 1996. Desperation ruled each thought and each day. I was desperate to rediscover the joy of teaching through my research before I ended my twenty years of professional struggle at Mountain View College (to be read: I wanted to leave this chapter of my life on a high note of epiphany). The following year I would no longer be teaching at Mountain View College, but the immediate question was, did I want to continue teaching at all? Anywhere? I seemed to have lost the joy of teaching, and I didn't really think my students were leaning much even though most of them said they really enjoyed my classes.

Initially, I anticipated that the entire focus of my research would be to show how a seasoned teacher could effectively change the bad habits of students, and in so doing, how that teacher's views of his students in particular, and his view of his chosen profession in general, would magically improve when students could discover, could be made to see, that learning is indeed a glorious enterprise.

I knew this project was important because I was not alone in my discontent: I was in the midst of an epidemic of teacher burnout. Virtually every member of the faculty at Southern Virginia was jaded by the fecklessness of the vast majority of our students. One of my colleagues at that time compared our students to the primitives who inhabited the jungles of Borneo and New Guinea during WWII. Cargo planes flying north from Australia would crash into the jungle on occasion, much to the delight of the natives who would view the cargo as bounty from the gods. The natives soon devised dances which were thought to enhance their chances of finding yet another bird from the gods. My colleague believed our students resembled the "cargo cult"; these young "scholars" seemed to view the process that they, as students, must endure to acquire knowledge much as the natives dancing about fires viewed their obligations as they gyrated and prayed through the night hoping for a gift from the gods. Similarly, the acquisition of knowledge was an event, not a process, and it occurred through divine intervention. If our students danced through the night and said a few prayers, the answers might miraculously appear. As John Dewey would say, "This is magic; while it may be natural or spontaneous, it is not innocent. It obstructs intelligent study of operative conditions and wastes human desire and effort in futilities. We think that by feeling strongly enough about something, by wishing hard enough, we can get a desirable result..."(*HNC* 22).

Another colleague referred to our students as "the microwave generation." He claimed they no longer wanted to engage in the joy of solving mathematical problems. They simply wanted to place the problem in a computer, press a few buttons and, in a matter of seconds, be provided with the answer. My colleague asserted that the best we could hope to accomplish was to keep students in a holding pattern long enough to allow them to mature enough to eventually step up to the academic challenges they must face in order to earn a degree.

So my colleagues and I would hang our heads and wring our hands and damn whatever gods or fate had sent us such students. We continued to face "The Cargo Cult" and the "Microwave Generation." And we weren't the only ones lamenting. Mike Rose, in his book *Lives on the Boundary,* reports other educators seemed as depressed as we were and were offering the same complaints about their students that we were making about ours: "These are the truly illiterate among us...simple reading is beyond them...They have ceased to care about ideas...What we have here is a cultural illiteracy...They have abandoned the word..."(Rose 201). With my colleagues, I had heard and remembered but couldn't seem to act upon a statement made by one of the several teaching consultants who had visited our small campus over the years, consultants who were charged with the task of shaking us out of our depression and old teaching habits. "Teach the students who occupy your classroom; do not continue to fret about not being able to teach the students you would like to have in your classroom." That statement seems a rearticulation of John Dewey's admonition which continues to offer hope during my moments of professional depression. "We cannot undo the past; we can affect the future"(*The Later Works*, Vol. 7, p.307).

One prominent feature of Dewey's views, his approach to human nature, that always brings delight and hope is his exuberance and his faith in humanity. I often find the voice of celebration in his tone and message. "Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful. That things should be able to pass from the plane of external pushing and pulling to that of revealing themselves to man, and thereby to themselves; and that the fruit of communication should be participation, sharing, is a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales"(*Later Works*, Vol. I, p.132). Dewey views language as "the tool of tools," but I had reached a time in my teaching career when I believed most of my students would never learn, or even *want* to learn, how to better use and understand "the tool of tools." I wanted my teaching to produce the "fruit of communication," but this seemed an impossibility because my teaching no longer involved "participation," and certainly there was little "sharing" in the traditional approach to the classroom I had long since established as part of my professional comfort zone. The students were seated in evenly spaced rows of desks while I took up my position of command and authority before them; I stood behind my lectern from whence I delivered pearls of wisdom

which my students were expected to understand, appreciate, *and remember* lest they be punished with poor grades.

It was the best of times given I planned to discover how to change the bad habits of my students. It was the worst of times because once I changed their bad habits (and I was arrogant enough to believe I could), I would need to say good-bye to them as well as to the college because it would cease to exist. With the distance and reflection that the passage of time has provided and my research has required, I now see that it takes more than a wish, or even a great deal of conviction, to rediscover the joy which manifests itself when teaching and learning take place in a classroom. I would need to do more than simply change the arrangement of desks in my classroom while trying to assume a super-charged positive attitude in order to climb out of a very deep rut, and it would involve far more reflection and introspection than I ever imagined.

Dewey asserts,

> The essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response, not to particular acts except as, under special conditions, these express a way of behaving. Habit means special sensitiveness or accessibility to certain classes of stimuli, standing predilections and aversions, rather than bare recurrence of specific acts. It means will. (*HNC* 32).

My belief that my students would be averse to academic challenges fostered in me assumptions and guaranteed patterns of thinking which were prescriptions for disaster. A negative, polarizing dynamic blocked any hope for a change in negative habits.

With the arrival of a new semester, my colleagues and I were in the habit of gathering for a "pre-season" review of our syllabi, a peer evaluation of sorts. One of my colleagues actually composed a syllabus which was twenty-one pages in length. I was clearly not the only individual on our faculty who had grown weary. We all seemed to believe that a hefty syllabus, a syllabus loaded with excellent precepts, rules aplenty, and at least one listing of the instructor's "pet peeves," would clearly place the ball on the student's side of the net. It is quite clear now that this view of the classroom environment and the relationship we had with students was adversarial. The mind set was "It's us *against* them." The students were the ignorant, inert enemy who refused to listen to our wise and learned advice. The faculty, in essence, drew a line in the sand and dared the students to cross over it. We were all predisposed to punish our students when they proved once again they had no intention of paying attention to the details we, as their teachers, found so very important.

How ethical is it to assume such an attitude? I would often feel as if I were playing out the rope the student would use to hang herself. "...the assumption is that if a man is told to stand up straight, all that is further needed is wish and effort on his part, and the deed is done... It is implied that the means or effective conditions of the realization of a purpose exist independently of established habit and even that they may be set in motion in opposition to habit. It is wholly a matter of failure of purpose and desire"(Dewey, *HNC* 23). Dewey recognized that an individual cannot simply be ordered to assume a state of correctness.

One reason I was in a rut had to do with the massive assumptions my colleagues and I made about our students. We knew what we would face both in and out of the classroom. We held little hope in our hearts that we would see a pursuit of academic excellence manifested in the actions of our students. We planned to attempt to teach them once again, but we knew, *in advance*, that the same irresponsible behavior would be witnessed as we trudged through yet another long semester. We felt we were all experienced teachers, but we knew we would be dealing with people who were not "real" students. These young adults distrusted us. They did not realize our intentions were noble, even heroic, given the fact that almost to a person these students did not *want* to learn, did not want to listen to what we had to say.

Given the many assumptions both my colleagues and I made concerning students, it is a wonder that any teaching and learning took place in Durham Hall. What I wanted to do with my research was to find a new approach, or, perhaps, rediscover a previously successful teaching strategy which would cause my students to have greater success with the material I felt I needed to cover. John Dewey asserts, "Only the man whose habits are already good can know what the good is"(*HNC* 26). When I reflect upon the rut I was in, it is quite humbling, even frightening, to realize how much time I wasted on assumptions. I felt I had become very proficient as a teacher. I was in many ways moving through my days, my classes and conferences, on autopilot. Automaticity had taken over my actions. I had ceased to think deeply about pedagogical strategies which would allow me to truly connect with my students because I continually made the assumption that my efforts would be for naught, would be wasted because my students had ceased to find any joy and pleasure in learning something new. These sluggards would never stand up straight and, when I told them to do so, would undoubtedly deliberately choose to continue to slouch.

How could I get to the point where I could turn my back on all of the past and all of the assumptions which defined my mind set given the experiences I had had in abundance with students in a conventional lecture format and learn how to "affect the future"? If Dewey was correct when he stated that "Only the man whose habits are already good can know what the

good is"(*HNC* 26), it was clear that bad habits would need to be obliterated before I could affect the future in a positive fashion.

The adversarial stance my colleagues and I had assumed with students was certainly a very conspicuous component of the way we had dealt with students in the past. Our past relationships with students were shot through with a system of rewards and punishments. If they performed well, like trained seals, they would receive rewards in the form of good grades. They were obviously lazy individuals, so the only form of enticement we, their teachers, could conjure was to say, "Do it my way, and you will be rewarded; if you don't do it my way, your grade will suffer." Like Dewey's hypothetical disenchanted, we believed "...that nobody would do anything, or at least anything of use to others, without a prospect of some tangible reward" (Dewey, *HNC* 84). Unfortunately, I had not learned of his warning that

> beneath this false proposition there was another assumption still more monstrous, namely, that man exists naturally in a state of rest so that he requires some external force to set him in action... It is absurd to ask what induces a man to activity generally speaking. He is an active being and that is all there is to be said on that score.
>
> (*HNC* 84)

If I should assume, according to John Dewey, that my students were really active beings, I needed to find a way of allowing this state of natural activity to manifest itself. Could I now, after decades of teaching in a traditional manner, engineer a set of circumstances which would allow me to climb out of my rut? My teaching was ruled by habit and predictable balance from my own vantage point in a comfort zone of my own making, a zone distinguished by calcification and lack of passion. I was tired and frustrated because I felt what I was doing lacked meaning, value and significance. I needed to find desire and purpose as soon as possible. I needed to find a new balance by first searching for a process which would get me away from the assumptions and the arrogance created when I balanced all my teaching upon the twin beliefs that I knew all that I needed to know about my subject and also that I knew how best to convey what I thought was most important.

CHAPTER 2

THE PLAN

For the spring semester of 1996, in addition to speech and American Literature, I was scheduled to teach two sections of English 102: Introduction to Literature, one at 9:00 MWF and another at 1:00 MWF. I would use once again the latest edition of Laurence Perrine's *Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense*, which contained a hefty number of poems, short stories and plays along with the author's views of how best to go about the process of interpreting examples of literature found in these three genres. I was in the habit of using a large text for English 102 because I wanted to challenge the students with a wide range of poems, short stories, and plays, and Perrine's text contained many of my favorite pieces of literature. Perrine also spent considerable time distinguishing between mature readers and immature readers. Mature readers prefer to be challenged by interpretive literature (literature which "broadens, deepens and sharpens our awareness of life"[3]) while immature readers prefer the less challenging literature of escape (literature which is designed only to entertain [3]). Perrine equated escapist literature with junk food. A steady diet of junk food and escapist literature will weaken the body and mind. I wanted to set the students on an intellect-strengthening program to develop healthy minds.

In retrospect, I now think that subconsciously I chose Perrine because his approach to the study of literature attempted to make a clear distinction between the novice reader and the mature reader, and in that comparison I wanted my students to understand from the first day that I was a seasoned, mature reader while they were but fledglings who had better pay attention both to Perrine and to me if they were to have a chance of success in my course. I now see that this approach, this view, was really an extension of the adversarial relationship I established in my syllabus. "Listen to me, and do as I say, or you will fail this course."

Students in both sections of the course were second semester freshmen all in their late teen years. The class at 9:00 o'clock contained fifteen students, one male and fourteen females. The class at 1:00 o'clock contained fourteen students, two males and twelve females. I intended to give the same reading assignments and the same formal essay assignments in both classes.

9:00: THE USUAL ROWS AND LECTURES

My plan was to conduct the 9:00 o'clock class using my usual lecture format. The class would continue to be arranged in rows, and I would locate myself behind the lectern to present the material from a standing position. This was my "comfort zone" class in which I would, as usual, order my students to *do* the work and to listen intently to my sage comments.

1:00: CIRCLES AND JOURNALS AND WE'RE ALL STUDENTS

The 1:00 o'clock class would be my experimental class. I wanted to see if I could create more flexibility and spontaneity in the way my students responded to the subject matter as well as in the way I would deliver the material to the class. In this experimental class, I planned to obliterate the regimentation of rows by placing all desks in a circle. I would exchange the status of the lectern for an egalitarian seat in the circle with my students. I would also require each student in this experimental class to keep a literary response journal which I would collect at two week intervals. These journals were to be subjective and spontaneous written ruminations and reflections about the literature I would ask my students to read.

I adopted the notion of the circled seating in an effort to make the class more dynamic. I remembered that several years earlier, in a section of English 101, I had found it necessary to seat myself before a class which contained sixteen young women. I was not at all well. I believe I was in the process of being attacked by a flu bug, so I told my students I would try to make it through the entire class but to show some mercy. To my surprise, the class was one of the best of the semester; it was very relaxed and spontaneous. Students seemed more able, or more willing, to comment on issues being discussed. In addition, I had more recently become used to the circled classroom format while taking classes in my doctoral program at Virginia Tech. So, I decided to change the physical arrangement of the class to see if this seating format would not only serve to change student habits, but also to help me dig myself out of my own professional rut. By physically changing my perspective, would I change my perception of the students and their perception of me? I would, by sitting down, create more of an opportunity for a zone of proximal development to evolve. That was my hope, at least.

The plan to keep a journal was precipitated from two sources: A colleague had experienced great success the previous year with an English 102 class when she asked them to keep a journal. She said it really gave her a chance to see how each student grappled with the poems and stories she assigned, so she had inside information concerning their struggles with interpretation. I also had for years asked my students in English 101 to keep a personal journal. I would read only those entries which they permitted me to read, but this exercise gave me wonderful insight into their own lives as they moved through their freshman semester. I remember I was able to help several troubled souls as a result of reading about situations which caused them extreme stress. It now seems odd that it took me so long to consider the benefits of having the students keep a literary journal. Finally, though, I recognized that student journal writing might help me gain a better understanding of how they were approaching and responding to the literature I assigned. I had no idea how this would impact the way classes evolved, and I remember feeling I would create, perhaps, a problem for myself if students began to form solid opinions about the literature assigned before classes convened. What would become of my command of classes?

So my overall plan for the experimental class was to see if I could create a classroom ambiance which fostered participation. I did not want students to sit and occasionally answer questions. I wanted them to have more responsibility in class discussions, to ask and to challenge. I realized that if they were to change, I would have to change, so I was trying to break with the past and all the habits and entrenched notions I had acquired over the many semesters I had taught English classes at Southern Virginia College. I wanted to join my students literally on their level, eye to eye, and see if they could then give voice to individual responses to the literature we were about to study. I hoped this new approach would begin to return adventure, joy and fun to my teaching, but I was also filled with fear and trembling. The idea that I would allow my students, in the experimental class at any rate, to determine what would be stressed about the material would mean that I would need to face the necessity of surrender. A young colleague who had sat in on several of my classes told me that my teaching style seemed to be a blend of Garrison Keilor and George Patton. She was probably right; I needed to command my students. It was I who told them, however humorously or forcefully, where we were going and how we were going to get there. After twenty years I was not comfortable at the prospect of surrendering any control; I honestly felt students could not be trusted to find a promising direction for class discussion. But surrender I must since that was a major component of the experiment. I believed I was risking disaster, but I wanted to see if I could become less of a talking head and more of a participant in the class, and by so becoming, allow my students to become better participants. I wanted to see if I could become a part of the learning process rather than perceived as an instrument which merely downloaded information. I wanted to see if I could become a student in my own classroom because, after all, what is a teacher but a student grown old?

MY TEACHING RECORD: JOURNAL AND TAPE

This old teacher/student also planned to keep a teaching journal for my own edification as my research evolved. I would produce a running commentary of my reactions to and comparison of the conventional class which met at 9:00 and the experimental class which met at 1:00. If I was, in fact, headed for the rocks, I wanted to record the most interesting moments of the disaster as it unfolded before my eyes. My journal would provide the field notes which would present a running reaction to each day's teaching activities in both sections of English 102.

Finally, I decided to use a tape recorder to record what actually happened in the experimental class during the semester. I had considered using a video camera, but decided the audio tape would be sufficient. The video camera had been rather intrusive and disruptive in various classes I had taped in previous years.

CHAPTER 3

MY JOURNEY

Embarking: a slow beginning

There was certainly a fine irony to my first day of the research semester. There I was, beginning a new adventure, trying to discover how to recapture the serious fun of my earlier teaching experience, all set to try something new in an effort to change what I saw as my students' bad habits, and I was unable to begin the experiment. Yes, I had a plan: cover the same material in classes conducted differently and evaluate the effect of the differences. Teach one class as I had been teaching for years: students sitting in rows, I standing in front of the room lecturing. In the other, rearrange the seats so we, the students and I, are all in a circle; have students keep a reading journal; make an audio tape of the classes; and keep a journal myself. It seemed simple enough, but, incredibly, I couldn't begin.

At 9:00 on Wednesday, January 17, I stood before my first English 102 class of the semester, the class I intended to conduct in the conventional lecture format. I gazed out at the still sleepy faces of my audience and began my introduction to the course. The hour passed quickly: my performance was polished, and I was on autopilot. I "covered" the syllabus which I had presented on so many occasions in so many previous classes over the many years of my tenure at MVC. The students posed no questions for me; I expected none.

My second section of English 102 convened at 1:00. I stood before my second English 102 class of the semester, the class that would be the experimental class. I gazed out at the still-digesting-lunch students in my audience and began my introduction to the course. The hour passed quickly: my performance was polished, and I was on autopilot. I "covered" the syllabus which I had presented on so many occasions in so many previous classes over the many years of my tenure at MVC. The students posed no questions for me; I expected none.

Sound familiar?

Breaking old habits was definitely not easy. I had elected not to circle the experimental class the first day because I wanted to discuss the important sections of my syllabus, and I had not mustered the courage to change the format of the class. I knew I would need to get started with the new approach, but I was afraid that by circling the desks and sitting among the students I would not be able to make the important points as clearly as I needed to on the first day. What kind of message would such a relaxed initial approach send? I justified the slow start, the non-

start, of my experiment by telling myself I had a professional responsibility to ensure that my students understood what would be expected of them during the semester. My assumptions that my students would have weak academic ability and a lack of diligence when attending to class work had turned me into a control freak. I hadn't reached the hefty 21-page syllabus stage yet, but I intended to go over, slowly and carefully, all that I wanted them to know that first day. I convinced myself that I would not be able to cover the material appropriately if I appeared too relaxed. Relax on the first day? That would definitely be the wrong message for students who needed massive amounts of structure - and all of our teaching consultants had agreed, these students definitely needed structure.

Need I mention that the lecture format was the one with which I was most comfortable? I knew what I wanted to emphasize, I knew what had worked in the past, I knew how to begin developing the character that I would assume in the class: forceful, funny and, behind the transparent mask, friendly.

So, the first day of classes began in exactly the same way in both sections. But, at the next class meeting, finally, no excuses; it was time to begin the experiment.

On January 19 I lectured in the conventional class at 9:00. I began by offering vocabulary; I defined some terms we would be using in the discussion, and placed particular emphasis on the term "persona," its meaning and implications for critical reading. I then chose James Dickey's poem, "Hospital Window," to read aloud. The reading was followed by my interpretation of the poem and a discussion of the devices Dickey used to encourage that interpretation. I was letting them see what an experienced, astute reader would notice in the poem. I wanted them to appreciate what I was saying, but I did little to elicit their views of the poem. The students were all lined up in their desks looking rather sleepy as I stood behind the rostrum showering them with excellent analyses of the poem. I knew this role as well as I knew the poem. I had become a fine example of a talking head. This was my comfort zone, my familiar rut. Why give them a chance to ask questions? They didn't know enough to ask good questions; they neither understood nor cared for great literature.

As I stood before that group on that cold morning in January, I was really pleased with my delivery. I had done this so many times, I knew my part so well, that I was actually able to stand outside myself and listen to my every word. I knew and loved Dickey's poem. It was a part of my very soul, and I believed I had perfected a routine that would communicate my love for the work through the insights I offered and the enthusiasm of my delivery. When my young colleague had told me that my teaching persona was a cross between Garrison Keilor and George Patton, I had been flattered - and I still believe she intended her comment as a compliment. I had polished my character, had worked on my story-telling abilities (a la Garrison Keilor) and could call up at will a boisterous, blusterous George-C.-Scott-as-George-Patton persona when needed

for contrast and emphasis. I could entertain and offer information, but I didn't feel the challenge of others' ideas in class. Now that I have gained some distance on her assessment and have considered carefully what I was doing in class, I understand that probably I should not have been very proud of this persona, this role which was defined by control and command and was (unconsciously) designed to negate, or at least reduce, student involvement in my classes. I did like to control the direction of the class; I did not like surprises. I knew what I wanted to cover, and *I would* cover it in my own way and in the time I designated for coverage.

Relinquishing control was not really fun. In the afternoon class during the first session in the new circled seating arrangement, it felt odd to sit among my students. A large portion of my teaching persona was being surrendered, and I did not like the feeling one bit. I had spent years perfecting a style of teaching which gave me control, a style which I designed to match what I thought were the needs of my students, students I felt I knew well even before I met them. What could I have been thinking of to believe that progress could be achieved by actually sitting down with a group of novices? This was obviously going to lead to a massive waste of time. I did not believe I could direct the course of the discussion effectively from my seated position. I was not in balance. I was not centered. I was not having fun. After class I noted,

> I feel far more commanding in the lecture format. I don't like the seated format at 1:00. I am going slower in that class. There are students in the 1:00 class who seem more animated; I feel I need to be on my feet to 'dominate' the two males and the several gifted females in the class who like to talk. (Bedell journal 1/19)

It is now embarrassing to consider how obsessed I was from the outset about my need for dominance in the classroom. It all sounds so biological. Why was I so focused on maintaining my position as the head of the pack? Did my self-confidence depend totally on my passion for control and dominance? Was there some feature of my psychological make-up which dictated that in a classroom I must assume the position of the alpha wolf? I felt stressed and, at times, completely without direction. I was opening the entire class up to the possibility of making personal observations and pursuing discussions which would most probably be off track, which would take us away from the main points I wanted them to see. Wasn't it easier and more efficient to *tell* these people what the poem meant? Why waste time trying to claw our way to the light as a group? There simply was not enough time! I was definitely out of my comfort zone in the afternoon class.

tempus fugit

During the next several classes I continued to be pleased with the amount of material I was covering in the morning, traditional class, and uncomfortable in the afternoon, experimental class. I was constantly aware that and concerned that the afternoon class was not covering as

much material as the morning class. My plan had been to conduct the same class in different styles. By this I meant that I would go over the same amount of material in each class, but I would present the material differently. What I was finding was that I could not introduce, in the afternoon class, all of the insights I delivered with practiced ease in the morning class. This was my biggest, but far from my only worry.

Even as I recognized and worried about the fact that the afternoon class, without the benefit of my continuing lecture, was not covering as much material as the morning class, I was also noting in my journal that I needed to give the students more time to respond to questions:

> I will need to work on timing in the experimental class. I need to wait longer for them to answer the questions I pose because I think they want to answer the questions. However, I still see my role to be the one who both asks and answers the questions. This is not the way to gain acceptance by the group as a co-participant. I must begin to surrender command, and to do that, I must also surrender some time. (Bedell journal 1/22)

After the next class, I was still ill at ease about the afternoon class, and still worried about "coverage." Time was getting away from me; I wasn't in control, and with the sense of needing to use every precious minute of class time, it was very hard to maintain silence long enough to draw others into the discussion. This problem was not peculiar to me; others have been afflicted with the rush-on-without-student-response syndrome.

> There seems to be a general fear of indwelling. Speech rushes madly onward, as if to overcome the seeming perils of awkward silences. Public fluency seems to overwhelm the hesitancy of conscious self-reflection. Unless we slow down and begin listening to ourselves, we have no way of being in touch with our assumptions about things and thus becoming answerable for the actions we are taking. (Pradl 52)

I needed to give more thought and less voice to my ideas. If I wanted discussion, I had to be strong enough to create a silence for others to fill.

Fear for Focus

I always looked forward to the exercise I planned for the fifth class of this semester. The exercise was designed to show the importance of denotation and connotation and thereby to show that a poet (or any good writer) must have a thorough understanding of words and their

effects. I presented sections of ten poems with a word removed from each line. Students then selected what they believed was the right word from a list of words including many wrong options as well as the word the poet used in his poem. I told the class that if anyone missed more than three out of the ten, I would have that student removed from English 102; such poor performance would clearly indicate someone not yet ready for the challenges in the course. I was always amazed at how many of them fell for this line. I recorded the following for the 9:00 class:

> I once again billed the in-class exercise as a quiz which will determine the fate of each student in the class. All students seemed quite tense, but we had a very interesting and enjoyable time working through the exercise. (Bedell journal 1/26)

Looking back on it now, I suppose I *thought* the students found it enjoyable, but there were probably some for whom the initial tension, until they realized I was in my George Patton mode, was unpleasantly stressful. By the end of the second or third class, the students had always figured out that the blustery high passion that I regularly assumed was a facade, but I could keep them off balance with a dead-pan delivery of exaggerated statements, such as the announcement that the connotation quiz would determine whether they stayed in the class or not.

Everyone was laughing by the end of the period, but they had been paying very careful attention at the beginning of the period as they listened in preparation for what they thought was a very important quiz. Using the fear factor, I had gotten their attention and ensured that they would make a serious effort to think about the assignment.

I enjoyed my role in the lecture class on that day. I was a master of ceremonies of sorts. I enjoyed pointing out students' mistakes and enjoyed teasing them with the threat of expulsion from the ranks when they did so poorly on the "quiz." I had performed this class so many times before that I knew exactly what to expect, and I found it easy to dismiss all of the disappointment and frustration students felt at having more often than not selected the wrong word. I simply chalked it up as a learning process and an exercise in humility. And then of course, I managed to bring everyone around to a good mood by the end of the class.

So the morning class was a success: the fear factor focused students' attention; the humor reassured them and, by the end of the period, seemed to have defused possible negative reactions.

Working Together

In the experimental class at 1:00, the seating arrangement not only affected the student responses, it affected the assignment. Because it seemed so natural and easily accomplished, I allowed two minutes for collaboration before each student made a final individual decision on word choice for the lines of poetry. In the morning class, everyone had worked independently. I recorded the following for my reactions to the experimental class:

> I find the circled configuration a comfortable arrangement, but I no longer feel I have the control I have in the lecture format. I enjoyed the freedom to perform and dramatize anticipation of the correct answer and my fury when the incorrect answer was given by members of the lecture format class this morning. I don't feel I have that same freedom seated in the circle with my students. This is far more intimate. Perhaps I feel more of their pain when they discover they have chosen the wrong word. I simply do not have the control in this setting that I would like to have. The students feel far more free to talk, which is good, *I suppose*, but I don't have the time I need to cover as much material. We were arranged in the circular format, but two late arrivals came in and closed the circle to my right. It was surprising to me to experience how much this changed the feeling in the group. At any rate, I gave two minutes for collaboration, which they used well. I should have given them more time. I was surprised to see how many people took me seriously when I said this would determine whether they remained in class. Gale was angry because she said there was no way to prepare for the quiz - specifically - no way to know the word, <u>taper</u>, could mean a type of candle. Louise was quite angry about the word, <u>Cathay</u>. 'How was I to know that it meant "China"?' she protested. Perhaps the entire exercise was a deflation, but I wanted them to see how precise and refined a poet's choices actually are. *It is much easier in the lecture format to command the fun element of this exercise.*
>
> The 1:00 experimental group seemed to take the entire process more seriously. I handed out "Preludes" and asked for a paraphrase for Monday. I was rushed and didn't have time to read it to them. There are many fine people in the class. I feel I know them better already than the students in the 9:00 conventional lecture class. I feel less removed. It is amazing what sitting - how much things are changed by sitting down in a class. It is much less

> formal this way. People are far more charged to speak. Boy, did these folks get angry about wrong responses or what!?
>
> Another interesting feature of the seated format is that I am certainly learning the names of my students more quickly in the experimental class. In addition, I was thrilled to see that Kathleen is no longer in isolation - rooted to the window.
>
> (Bedell journal 1/26)

I certainly did not find the same pleasure with this exercise in the experimental class. My seated position did not lend itself as easily to all of my usual histrionics, and because I was in closer proximity to the students, I could actually feel their frustration to a greater extent. I was not only physically closer to the students, I had also started seeing them more as distinct individuals than I did the students in the morning class. I knew all their names (not true in the morning class), and I could not free myself of their anxiety as easily. Furthermore, even if I had been disinclined to empathize, I couldn't escape their anger. This experimental group was far more willing to express their negative reaction and to criticize me and the exercise. I felt challenged, perhaps even a bit threatened, by their spontaneity.

Not only was I seeing and feeling their reactions, I was closer to seeing the class from their perspective. I had a better sense of what they needed, and was less tied to my own plan for the day. For instance, the collaboration on the exercise was not something I had planned, but it worked so well that I have since incorporated and expanded collaborative work. However, I was not certain the time lost was worth the gain. I worried that the whole group was being denied assistance the earlier section had received: the afternoon class had not had time to hear the next poem read aloud. I believed hearing the poem would help them understand the lines better. Furthermore, while I wanted to think that the spontaneity demonstrated by students' willingness to blurt out responses was a good sign of a healthy and engaged class, my journal qualified my observation: "I *suppose* [this is a good quality to have demonstrated in/by a class]." I had a lingering suspicion that all of this new found freedom among the students was a great waste of time as well as a threat to my authority as their teacher even though (or perhaps in part *because*) I recognized that Louise and Gale had made a very good point when they complained about the assignment. I should *require* rather than merely allow the students to use a dictionary during the exercise. After all, this was the time to emphasize the importance of knowing what words mean, of not just selecting on the basis of a general idea or a blind guess. I was receiving good advice, if only I would heed it.

Of course, requiring dictionary use would use up even more class time than the collaborative effort I had allowed, and I had already recognized that I should have given more time

to the collaborative effort. Collaboration seemed quite natural as we all sat facing each other, and, as I reflected upon the experience after class, I was sorry I did not give them more time to continue in small groups. I short circuited the entire process because I wanted to get to the point at which I could present *my* comments about the poems. Giving the students more time meant giving me less time, and when I listened to the tapes, I was surprised at how much time ***I*** was taking. Although I thought I was encouraging discussion, it is clear to anyone reading the transcripts of that class that I was the one doing most of the talking. From the first class which was identical to the first class I had been delivering for years, through my worry over control and amount of material covered in more recent classes, it is clear that I was having considerable difficulty implementing the changes in my habits that my experiment required. I was having enormous difficulty acting upon my initial determination to keep my mouth shut so students could discover for themselves the beauty and power of the written word.

Straight Road to a Dead End:
THE MORNING CLASS

The next class meeting brought no joy for me in the lecture class at 9:00. Although I was not yet comfortable in the afternoon class, I could feel the habitual mind set of the last few years starting to drag me down.

> First class dragged. It was totally me carrying the paraphrase session on 'Preludes.' *There was no active learning going on in the room.* All students confessed to having had difficulty with the poem, but that was it. I carried the ball after that, and we also read 'The Fish' with little response coming from the class.
>
> (Bedell journal 1/29)

Internally, I was cultivating the idea that this group was simply filled with dead heads, but I was doing little to bring them alive. The way we were proceeding, the students could safely assume that I would tell them what they needed to know about the poem. They knew I would continue to hold my position as leader of the class, telling them what to think from my position of authority behind the rostrum. It was my class, and they would listen to what I had to say about the poem.

There is a trace of the complaint of the self-selected martyr in my observation that "I carried the ball." I anticipated carrying the ball even before I entered the classroom. I believed this group would not have the drive to actually study the poem and paraphrase it over the weekend; surely they would prefer to go to parties and sleep late instead. Consequently, on Monday morning I would need to accomplish the job myself.

This was my constant observation over the course of the entire semester in the morning class. I would lecture, generally lament in my journal that the students didn't seem particularly animated or engaged; then, in my journal entry for the afternoon class, I would bemoan my inability to cover as much material as I covered in the morning lecture class. I could see what was happening, but couldn't seem to take effective action. A later journal entry for the morning class had me recognizing that the solution to my monopolizing problem in the morning class could be to try to do more of what I was attempting in the afternoon class, but I felt that I shouldn't incorporate afternoon tactics in the morning because it would modify my control group. The entry was boringly familiar:

> Once again I felt very rushed as I practiced the fine art of performance as a talking head. Why do I feel I must cover as many poems as I am covering in this class? This class is not engaged because I am doing too much of the work for them...I find myself anticipating their failure before they fail. I should be more pro-active, and the irony is that the way I should be more pro-active is to become a co-participant, and by so doing, become more a part of the group and less a part of the role of talking head leader. I should remove myself from the picture as the dominant standing force in the dynamic and become a seated co-participant.
>
> (Bedell journal 2/12)

It is clear that I felt I was failing in my teaching duties in the 9:00 o'clock lecture class; I had begun to understand that my *performance* in class, my telling them what the poems should mean to them, was really teaching them very little about the poems. What I was doing as their teacher in the lecture class was not allowing my students to participate in the discovery process involved when great poetry is engaged. I was not allowing them to engage in an effective, meaningful way with the poems. No wonder the 9:00 o'clock class seemed bored: I seemed dedicated to showing them that I really knew a great deal about the poems. I wanted to show off my knowledge. This showmanship and egocentric talking head act that I staged represented what had become of my teaching. This was a brutal truth which I had to confront, and the remedy was increasingly obvious: the experiences I was having in the circled class at 1:00 o'clock were beginning to show me that I needed to create a ZPD in the classroom if I really wanted to engage my students in a meaningful fashion. That is to say, if I really wanted to teach these young adults about poetry, I had to be far more concerned about what *they* were thinking than I was about how well I could showcase my knowledge during class meetings. And I needed to start valuing what was happening in the morning class.

Not much of interest caught my attention in the morning class. Slowly, however, I was beginning to realize the problems were not caused by the students alone. In hindsight I wonder if part of the problem with the morning class might have been that I was *expecting* the morning

class to be less exciting than the afternoon class; after all, the impetus for the study had been my frustration with the way classes had been going during the semesters immediately before this experiment. Also, not only might I have been, at some level, expecting little from the morning class, I was also truly hoping to find that the teaching and learning experiences could be improved - for the students as well as for me. Thus, I am now thinking that there may have been an unfortunate melding of assumptions which thwarted improvement in the morning class. On the one hand, I was expecting the class to be less challenging, and on the other I may have been hesitant to try out in the morning class successful practices from the afternoon class because I had the notion that the morning "control group" should be taught more or less as I had always taught. Thus, a month into the course I was recording my usual frustration, but also identifying my contribution to the morning malaise.

> Many people late. It's Valentine's Day, but my thoughts are not tempered by love. I was very crabby in class because many students arrived late. Barbs all around. I hurriedly made statements about 'Kubla Khan.' I said something about the creative process being discussed up to line 36 of the poem. I smashed through the rest of the class. Compared 'Dover Beach' to 'Dover Bitch' in a quick attempt to show them how allusion works. Only Richard has been by my office to speak with me. I anticipate most, if not all, students will do poorly in this class. I feel it is this resignation which is the enemy. Why do I not question what I'm doing? Why do I constantly indict the students? After all, Jennifer asked some fine questions today.
>
> (Bedell journal 2/12)

This frustration was a matter of habit with me. There had been many other Valentine's Days I had spent before students at the college, and those students were not focused on their studies either. It was all so very predictable. This anticipation of poor performance which was often confirmed by classroom inertia seemed an inevitable part of my professional existence as yet another semester progressed through yet another academic year. These students seemed more interested in mid-week dances and dates than they ever would be in literature. However, there was evidence in my journal of progress. The two plaintive questions in the journal suggesting that the problem may be within me were not empty rhetorical gestures. I wanted to recognize and make the most of what was good in the class. Jennifer *did* ask fine questions. One problem was figuring out how to encourage that sort of response more effectively in the conventional class. The idea of comparing my conventional with my experimental class was getting in the way of my willingness to innovate in the conventional class. However, at that time in the semester I was still having difficulty with innovation in the experimental class, and, as my

entry for that same day goes on to show, I was feeling strangely hampered by my notion of what this experiment was requiring of me. I thought that my physical location and physical actions were absolutely restricted by the parameters I had set to distinguish the classes. In other words, as the rest of the entry demonstrates, loving thoughts and floral bouquets were no more present in me that afternoon than in the morning on that Valentine's day.

> I sat in the circle and covered essentially the same material in this class as I quickly covered in the 9:00 o'clock lecture class. I am still lecturing from a seated position. I continued to do most of the talking. I sped through 'Kubla Khan.' I will undoubtedly do the same with 'Prufrock' on Friday. I am not happy with the way this is going. I felt I could not rise from my seat as that would negate the spirit of the co-participatory format. This thought seems ridiculous now. I should feel free to use the board no matter what seating format is used. I am still not comfortable with this set-up. Rising to use the board hardly constitutes a violation of some set of self-imposed rules which I seem to have in mind for my conduct in this experimental class. I believe I am covering too much poetry for this set-up to work. I must allow time for the class to ask more questions and to comment on the poems we are studying, but I am trying to cover so many poems that there is no time to examine a few in depth, which is what I want to do. We also covered 'Dover Beach' and then, to reveal how poets get added voltage by using allusion, we covered (I covered) Anthony Hill's poem, 'Dover Bitch.' (Bedell journal 2/12)

Prior to this day, I had known a few successful moments during the circled class, moments when the discussion was lively and I felt very close to my students. However, I couldn't seem to sustain that atmosphere of excitement and inquiry because I persisted in trying to say too much myself about far too many poems. I was not able to consistently incorporate what I was learning in the afternoon class into later afternoon classes; it should hardly be surprising then that the afternoon classes had little deliberate effect on the morning class. What was surprising though, was the fact that I was not following up on successes in the morning classes: why didn't I value Jennifer's questions?

I was successful in the morning class in keeping the class pretty much as my classes had been in prior semesters: I assigned a great deal of material and told the students what they should notice about it. I complained in my journal all semester about blasting through discussions (lectures) on the assigned reading, but the syllabus allowed little time for real discussion.

Adhering to my practice of many semesters, I was trying to do too much in too little time: I managed to ensure that my discontent continued.

Winding Road for a Gradual Ascent:
THE AFTERNOON CLASS

My experience with the afternoon class, the experimental class, was not a delightful chronicle of steady improvement accelerated occasionally by sudden leaps forward in understanding and involvement. However, in spite of the frustrations of my daily struggle to break the habits grown up over a teaching lifetime, in spite of students distracted by all the things that distract young people everywhere, in spite of the tension felt by both faculty and students as we faced the immanent closing of the school (which meant that faculty were looking for jobs and students were looking for schools), in spite of all this, - and partly, of course, because of all this - the afternoon class was a powerful learning experience. Changing my classroom presence and practices, recording my response in a journal, consciously studying student journals and transcripts of the classes, have had an effect almost as profound as my first year of teaching.

The old adage about the impossibility of teaching old dogs new tricks seemed, for a while, discouragingly accurate. As I've already mentioned, I couldn't even bring myself to begin the experimental class with the new seating arrangement. But life is change, and I did change, gradually and for the better.

Unexpected Views: "Preludes"

After the first day of the semester, I did finally rearrange the seats in the afternoon class and join the students in the circle, with unexpected results. I was of course pleased when the afternoon class was alive with student discussion, but as they presented and then argued their views, I was not always as sanguine as one might have supposed. It was unsettling when I realized that they were seeing more than or seeing differently from what I expected. Compounding my discomfort was my reaction when I saw that the students were holding on to their vision. Instead of being pleased when I saw students thinking for themselves, I was worried by what looked like stubborn turning in the wrong direction.

A selection from the transcript of an early experimental class will illustrate what I mean. The class began with a great deal of banter. Even though it was very early in the semester, the rapport established in this group was quite conspicuous. When we turned to a discussion of one of the assigned poems, the transcript yields several important observations about the class.

All righty - is everybody keeping a journal now? Journals!! - everybody? GOOD! All right, I suggested

that you take on none other than T.S. Eliot and "Preludes" - did that go pretty well?

Female: *"I loved that poem!"*

I: *"Did you?"*

She: *"Is T.S.Eliot the poet used for the basis of the play 'Cats' because I thought I recognized the following meaning: the poem made me think of the song in 'Cats,' and it sounded a lot like the poem, but it wasn't exactly like it either."*

I: "Yes"

[I ask someone to volunteer to read his or her paraphrase from a personal journal entry, and Sally obliges. I go on to ask if anyone has addressed the issue of the persona of Eliot's famous poem.]

Someone: *"Well he -"*

I: *"It's a he?"*

Sally: *"Yes, it's definitely a he."*

Another female voice: *"It's pretty obvious."*

I: *"Unless there is something really kinky or fishy going on, we've got a 'he' here. OK...where is he actually coming from and where is he going? Is this an urban or rural environment? 'Burnt out ends of smokey days' - must be urban, probably urban industrial, so he might be coming from a job - might be - and it's almost a maze like existence. He's going through little passageways and alleys to find the most direct way home. OK, what is a prelude first of all? Don't say a Japanese car."*

Jeff: *"It's a beginning."*

The discussion finally arrives at the third section of the poem after a female says, *"Like it's at nighttime you pull the shades down, you know, and it was the evening and the morning coffee is served when the shades open up. Like with the beer - down in the evening and in the morning coffee we go up with the shades."*

Jeff: *"It's almost like - I mean everybody is doing the same thing; (several students agree) it's like everybody is like a rat and they just go back and forth the same way everyday - go to work - go home."*

I: *"The word habitualization comes to mind. These people seem to be doing everything out of habit."* [I read the third section of the poem] *"Hardly a vision of loveliness, would you say?"*

Female: *"For sure!"*

I: *"I'm not looking down my nose on the situation; I'm just saying she seems to have forgotten something here. How did you handle this passage in your paraphrase? It's rather difficult. What's going on?"*

Sally: *"She is a prostitute."*

I [with surprise]: *"She is a prostitute?"*

Sally: *"Right! Like she's lying there on her back. She's like calling or thinking of loose thoughts, and like, you know..."* (laughter from the entire group).

I: *"Sally has identified this person as a prostitute. How many people are signing on to this line of thinking?"*

Female: *"At this point you don't really know, but you know that the woman is waiting, you know, waiting for a man to find the bed."*

Another female: *"It could be a lesbian."*

I: *"Well, I guess she could be a lesbian."*

Jimmy: *"Well, she does have soiled feet."*

Christy: *"Yes - 'a thousand sordid images...'"*

Jeff: *"She might be having nightmares."*

Jimmy [after he reads the passage about 'a thousand sordid images' aloud]: *"It's like your subconscious kinda - you know? These things flash through her mind - but..."*

Jeff: *"But if she is the guy's wife, maybe she is beginning to have fantasies about other things."*

Sally [defending her original interpretation as she refers to the section which mentions "the street"]:*"She has to be a prostitute!"*

I: *"Listen to what Jeff has to say here, Sally. She might just be fantasizing. Isn't that right?"*

Several female voices: *"Right!"*

I: *"OK - all of a sudden she is dreaming about perhaps wouldn't it be nice to be in Paris or someplace like that."*

Jeff: *"Well, but in the present too when somebody talks about like sitting there talking about a bunch of adjectives over and over - that's her - when it says 'when all the world came back and the light crept up between the shutters' can be like when morning came and she heard this crow and she came up and brought her back into reality - brought her back into the world - you know - so she went off into her daydreams in the middle of the night and now reality is back and she has to get up and do the same thing as everyone else"*

I: *"She has to get up and raise the shades."*

Sally: *"I'm going to defend my prostitution stance."*

I: *"Go ahead and defend your prostitution!* (The entire class erupts into laughter) *"Testify woman! Go ahead!"*

Jeff: *"Go ahead and say what you said on the street!"*

Sally: *"Well, because it's about her clasping her soles of feet and palms of both soiled hands. You know, like when you wash you match. You search for everything you can think of."*

Female: *"She's was walking the street."*

Jimmy: *"Oh, that's good. She has things tied in her hair to like make it curly and more attractive and things like that."*

I: *"Right. Who is there to see this, however?"*

Several students: *"The dude - the guy - the customer."*

Jimmy: *"It doesn't mention any customer!"*

Sally: *"In a way, it is the author. The author is the one who is the customer and the setting where they are - it talked about the masquerades and things like that so in a way the poem reads - I mean it sounds like slums in a city - 'muddy streets' - 'sawdust' - the beer...'"*

Female: *"Yes - the mud - the stale smell of beer - where ever they are it is not the upscale part of town."*

I: *"So, it's fallen into disrepair - all right - one thing is for sure though: there are certainly sexual images here as Sally has said. 'You lay upon your back and waited,' and it's not a spiritual union of two souls. It's more of an almost animalistic, mechanical operation, and that too has become jaded or deadened."*

Gale: *"My only problem with that is - I mean I get that it's a prostitute, but I didn't see her as waiting. She was just waiting for sleep to come. She's not waiting for her customer or husband that way. I can't think of it as anything but her just trying to find peace or just fall asleep."*

(Transcript 1/29)

This class was delightfully spirited, but I recall that at the time I was particularly concerned about Sally's interpretation of the poem. She was determined to cling to her view of the woman in this poem; the woman was without doubt, in Sally's mind, a prostitute. I had never seen that as a possibility. To me she had always been the persona's wife who had simply become a creature who was completely dominated by habitualization. She was a person ruled by habit. To suddenly see this person as a prostitute would skew the entire focus of the poem; that is to say, it would corrupt *my* interpretation, the interpretation I had fine tuned over the years during countless classes on Eliot's "Preludes." Now, in this circled, more open classroom environment, a classroom set up to foster and facilitate student participation, Sally, as well as many of her friends, boarded the prostitution band wagon, and surprisingly, I couldn't think of one bit of evidence from the poem that would allow me to demonstrate conclusively that the woman was *not* a prostitute. I did not like this situation at all. I was no longer in control of the class. Sure, I gave lip service to the idea that I wanted my students to express their own opinions, but now that they were doing so, I was not a happy camper. My vision of my position in the class, while I wanted to be accepted on their level in the circle, was being threatened. I held the degrees; they did not. I had the years of experience; they were fledglings at best, and now Sally, with her incredible view that prostitution was clearly present in this wonderful poem, really got to me. I felt I had to nip this in the bud, somehow. But how to do so without also stifling the progress we were making? Good things were happening. The

students were supportive of each other (e.g. Jeff urging Sally to share her idea); they were thinking about the material and they were defending their ideas.

We continued to discuss the fourth section of the poem; at "four and five and six o'clock" the workers were leaving work at staggered intervals to go home and experience "certain certainties."

Female student: *"Right, it could be stuffing the pipe, or, I mean, you know, sitting down and having a few beers or going out. I mean, everybody does pretty much the same thing each night, or I mean, even like brushing your teeth and going to bed; that's one of those certain certainties."*

I: *"Sure - certain certainties and reading the newspaper. We have seen the newspaper twice now mentioned in the poem. Where did we see the newspaper before?"*

Several students: *"In the first section in the vacant lot."*

I: *"Nothing is more stale than yesterday's news, and it is being blown out of the vacant lot around his feet, and now, that is one of the certain certainties that he experiences, today's news. The remarkable thing about today's news is that it is the same as what?"*

Jeff: *"Yesterday's."*

Gale: *"There is a certain part of him that is touched by the fact that there is a kind of beauty even in something as dismal and repeated and scary as the same night over and over again, and the fact that all these people, whether it's the prostitute or whoever, the fact that they have built rituals that they are sort of comforted by every single night. They have found comfort somehow."*

Jeff: *"They live in a dark world, and this is their only glimmer of hope that sustains these people."*

Gale: *"He is so moved by the fact that people have found comfort that he's moved by the fact that they are also suffering, infinitely suffering."*

I: *"'Infinitely suffering thing.' Ms. Hill, what is a fancy?"*

Christy: *"A fancy? I guess - you know - well - something venturing into thoughts, or..."*

I: *"Fleeting thoughts?"*

Christy:: *"Yes."*

I: *"Notice at the end of section one we have 'a lonely cab horse steams and stamps' - an auditory image* (I stamp the floor) *'and then the lighting of the lamps' - you have gas lamps in there as you said - and it's just a little bit of light in the darkness and that triggered my - my fancy of a glimmer."*

Jeff: *"To me that's what the four lines are saying to him; that the only glimmer - all he does is go to work - go home to eat dinner - go home to his wife. That's an everyday thing, and his thoughts and his dreams and his fantasies are all that he has."*

Even though I felt that much of the class was spent in trial and error requiring huge expenditures of time while some students offered what I thought were wild, off-the-wall interpretations, I remember thinking that Jeff and Gale were really getting the sense of the poem, and it was thrilling to sit in my place in the circle and listen to them present and defend their opinions about the poem. I was not having to tell them what the conclusion of the poem implied; they were "getting it" themselves, and the entire dynamic of the moment seemed so natural, so effortless. These were the moments I was hoping for: students excited and pushing themselves. But my vision was not quite realized. I had imagined they would travel to the precise destination I had in mind; in fact, some of them were stopping at overlooks I hadn't seen on the map. Perhaps I would need to find a way to sift through the many levels of complexity presented by a world class poet *with* my students and allow them to make some mistakes, which just might be corrected eventually by the dynamics of the student generated comments. Perhaps that was the key to making this approach work, but what massive restraint and effort it took on my part! I doubted at that point if I had the patience to allow this process to evolve in a natural fashion. It was much easier to tell them what the truth is, but perhaps it was more meaningful for them when they discovered it for themselves. Did I have the patience to make this new arrangement successful? I wanted it to be successful. I was obviously disgusted with the 9:00 o'clock class when they simply sat silently while I told them what Eliot was trying to have us experience in "Preludes." To hear a student reveal to the class what the poem meant to him or her was such a rush, especially, of course, when his or her opinion happened to coincide with my seasoned interpretation.

We went on to discuss the implications of the "ancient women gathering fuel" from the vacant lot, and noted that this was the second time in the poem that Eliot had used the image of

the vacant lot. Jeff observed that the women were finding something of use on a sterile lot, and then Sally returned to the discussion.

> *Well, it depends on how you see this poem. As I see it, she is a prostitute, so therefore both of them are gathering fuel in a vacant lot; they are both getting something that they need: She is getting whatever she needs so that is her field whatever it may be, and he is going to her for his field, whatever that may be, and so, you know, the vacant lots - they are two fields of their own.*

I was very happy with the way most of this class evolved, especially given the fact that the morning lecture class had engaged in absolutely no discussion. However, I vividly recall my annoyance that afternoon each time Sally would attempt to develop her view that the woman in the poem was a prostitute. I felt frustration because her view did not square with my view of the woman. I had read Eliot's poem so many times that "Preludes" had become an old friend. I felt very comfortable with the poem, and I enjoyed holding forth before students as I revealed my interpretation of the poem. I now see that Sally's view of the woman in the poem may have equal validity. At the time, though, I was very troubled not only that she held so insistently to her interpretation, but also that she could be starting her classmates on a major misunderstanding of the image. Why could I not hold my understanding of the poem and also be comfortable considering her interpretation which she did, after all, explain and support? I suppose I felt the need to present my view because I felt that my view was the seasoned view; however, Sally and I should be able to share and enjoy the same friend, a mutual friend, while holding differing views of that friend. Over time she might come to see the woman as the man's (the persona's) wife. In time, I might see that the woman could very well be a prostitute. Eliot, after all, was fascinated with ladies of the night even though he was also terrified of them. Eventually, considering together, we may expand our understanding and see in the ambiguous image of the woman a comment on the sterility of a marriage in which all is routine. If the circled co-participatory approach is successful, not only the students but also the instructor should learn and grow, benefitting from the varied responses.

If I wanted to create a classroom ambiance which facilitated participation from each student in that class, I had to be willing to allow each student to arrive at an understanding, his or her own understanding, of the poem. The Zone of Proximal Development would not function correctly if it was filled with "more experienced others" who were tyrants and dictators. I wanted to be a teacher, a mentor, a guide. My goal for Sally and all the rest of my students was to have them learn to recognize, evaluate and articulate their own opinions. My task was to encourage them to understand and consider the basis for their opinions. Sally was doing exactly what I claimed I wanted her to do. She was telling us what she thought and why she thought it. In the face of this apparent success, I was strangely frustrated.

Even with the frustration fostered by Sally's divergence from my dear, old interpretation of "Preludes," I was genuinely glad that the class had become so lively. I was beginning to grow more comfortable with the experimental class and the circled format which spawned such spontaneous charged interaction. Rather than rush into a succinct summing up of the poem, so that we could begin the next class with a new work, I concluded the class with,

> *I think you've done a remarkable job of diving into some of the major ideas presented in the poem. I'd like for it to perk a little longer. I'd like to start next time by making sure where you stand at this point in time concerning the ending. Is it a positive ending for you, or is it a sad ending, or does it just end on a neutral note? Is it nothing more than a statement that we are born, we do the best we can to live and try to understand what's going on, and then we die? I saw a bumper sticker recently, ...'Jesus is coming, look busy.'"*

I did not try to clear up the matter of what I then thought was the misguided identification of a woman as a prostitute; that was not my preferred view, but I didn't feel compelled to insist the image be seen my way. Nor did I wrap the poem up neatly for them with a sentence or two identifying a dominant theme. The students had been dealing with the individual sections of the poem; I would let them put it all together for themselves, rather than give them a pat summary statement.

Restricting the View: the tape recorder

My aim was an energized class encouraging students to think, to ask questions, to evaluate, but my habit of controlling the class manifested itself in a variety of ways. One of the most obvious and most counterproductive involved the tape recorder.

Although, or perhaps because, the students seemed relaxed and candid in the experimental class, I was strangely reluctant to tell them why I had elected to record our class sessions. I tried to evade the subject when Sally interrupted a discussion of images to ask,

> *"Mr. Bedell, I have a question. You have a microphone in our class. You, like, well - you have us miked here - bugged - the classroom is bugged! Why are you doing this?"*
>
> I: *"Don't worry about it. It's all right. Don't worry about it. Would you turn to page 576. I want to know the type of imagery you experience here. Ms. Hill*

– you forgot your book didn't you? We know this. Where is it?"

She: *"I thought we were going to read the handouts today, and I didn't even think to take it out of the room."*

I: *"OK – I had a young lady tell me at lunch the reason she wasn't in class this morning is because she pursued "Buns of Steel" last night, and then she continued with "Calves of Steel" and "Thighs of Steel," and she could not stand up this morning."* (Much laughter)

What surprises me now is that I felt the need to be coy or sneaky about the presence of the tape recorder. I believe I did not want them to know they were the subject of a research project because I believed that if they were aware of my project, their knowledge of my close scrutiny of their progress as a class would somehow skew my findings. However, I now think an explanation of my project would probably not have been a particularly startling revelation; the students certainly had to have been aware that there were significant differences between the classes. The experimental class was, in fact, doing more work than the conventional class. The experimental group was required to keep a literary journal, and several students seemed a bit frustrated that they were having to keep a journal when the morning class was not facing such a challenge. Given the strength of the grapevine on such a small campus, they knew the other class was simply sitting in rows facing a lecturer dispensing wisdom. The 1:00 group, on the other hand, had all students equally eligible to be the focal point, and some were, when I went to the board, physically inconvenienced. The classroom was rather small, and when I arranged the desks in a circle, I had to move about fifteen desks plus a large teacher's desk to the sides of the room. The limited area I had to operate in at the board was difficult to reach. Those students whose backs were toward the board at the front of the room had to twist and crane their necks to see what I was doing. I did not like this aspect of the circled classroom, and this difference in the seating arrangement certainly emphasized a difference in the classes.

I now believe I should have simply told them what was going on and gone on with my study. Evading the question about the tape recorder, though I could detect no obvious negative effect, might have suggested that I couldn't trust them with what I claimed was inconsequential information. If anything, refusing to explain may have made the tape recorder a larger presence than it would have been had the students known why it was there. Finally, I see that my response could have been another manifestation of my desire to control, to reinforce my image of one to whom others must look for knowledge.

Seeing the Signs: "Metaphors"

As I have admitted, my progress in the afternoon class was not steady. One day, to introduce the poem "To His Coy Mistress" I invoked Robin Williams in the movie Dead Poets' Society. Specifically, I referred to the scene where he was talking to his students in the hall outside the classroom as they gazed at the photos of students who had attended the school many decades earlier. He told his students to seize the day. Carpe diem: I was seizing the day and trying to stuff several weeks worth of insight into one class period. The occasion was the day after we had missed class because a heavy snowfall had prevented me from getting to campus.

I never welcome the prospect of canceling classes, but when I awoke to deep snow, with our long driveway under even deeper drifts, I had no choice but to cancel class. Two days later, I drove to the campus with great purpose: I would make up the lost time no matter what. Clearly, I hadn't yet grasped the near futility of "telling" rather than "discovering" the significance of the works we were reading.

> Blasted into discussion of Sylvia Plath's poem, "Metaphors." Only Samantha got to the point where she understood that the tenor of the poem is a pregnant woman. Many people seemed confused. We discussed "Cherrylog Road" and "The Fish" and how to form a thesis statement for a critical analysis paper dealing with one of the poems. The hour seemed rushed. We also reviewed "Traveling Through the Dark." (Bedell journal 2/5)

It is obvious why the hour seemed rushed. I stood before the morning group determined to cover all of the poems assigned for that day as well as all those which I had intended to cover during the class which had been canceled due to the heavy snow. Frustrated that only one student was able to fathom the meaning of Plath's poem, I was obviously still in my same old rut concerning the way I felt about these students, but it was becoming clear why I was in such a rut. I was throwing far too much material at them at a rate that would place pressure on graduate students. I was not giving them a chance to think about the material. I expected an almost instant understanding of the challenging poems I assigned.

My journal entry for the experimental class at 1:00 was far more positive.

> Many more people understood the 'I'm' in 'Metaphors' to be a pregnant woman. Many had written about this poem in their journals!!! We also had a fine discussion of 'Cherrylog Road' in the circled-up configuration. This class went along much better because the journals seem to be having an impact. This was a very impressive class. There was a great deal of engagement from

> people like Jeff who claimed he has had trouble with poetry in previous classes. (Bedell journal 2/5)

I remember feeling very up-beat after this class. Some students had understood before class that "Metaphors" describes a pregnant woman. Even so, there was much to talk about as we explored the aptness of the various images. They were delighted to discover that not only the images but also the lines (9) and syllables per line (9) were all announcing the speaker's condition. The students were enjoying the challenge, were feeling the pleasure of discovering complexity in the seemingly simple. They were enjoying the process and feeling proud of themselves. And I was very pleased with their progress.

Why did this class do so much better with this poem than the morning class? Three ingredients, essential for success, were present that day: journals, decentralized class discussion, and positive reinforcement.

First, the journals focused the students' attention on the reading assignment. I had asked them to write down their reactions to the poem in their journals before coming to class. Some had had fun doing so. In order to respond to the assignment, students had to read it. This meant that they were not looking at the material for the first time as they sat in class; they had already grappled with the presentation of ideas and images. The journal gave them time to reflect and to try out ideas; it gave them an investment in the class discussion. They had, in the privacy of the journal, offered opinions, noted unusual or interesting or troubling elements of the reading, and therefore, I believe, more students were willing, sometimes even eager, to speak.

Having encouraged students to read and to begin thinking about the material before class, I then found myself contributing a second important element for the magic of enthusiastic class discussion. That second element was my (relative) silence - or at least my reduced overt participation. Rather than act as the authority with all the right answers, I relinquished some control and encouraged students to voice their ideas and explain how they had arrived at their readings. Whereas the morning class had claimed to find no clue to the riddle, the afternoon students were solving it on their own. But of course there was much more to grasp than the simple statement, "The speaker in the poem is pregnant." Our time in class, then, was spent not on my telling them what they should have seen and understood. Our time in class was devoted, in large measure, to discussing the appropriateness of the word choice, the images, and how they offered differing attitudes toward pregnancy in general and toward this pregnancy in particular. The time we spent in class was so productive because many students wanted to discuss the potency of the images they had talked about in their subjective reflections in their journals and because I was letting them take center stage: the students were offering ideas, supporting observations, and critiquing ideas. I didn't just sit silent all this time, but my comments and

questions were liberally laced with encouragement: praise for their journal entries and enthusiasm for their discussion.

The encouragement, the positive reinforcement I gave the students, was the third essential ingredient for this successful class. I am convinced that the praise that I gave each student for having given so much effort outside of class, specifically for the journal writing they had done, produced huge dividends then and for the rest of the semester. They saw that the journal, that is to say, the keeping of their own individual journals, was very important to me and that my pleasure in their presence and with the evolution of the class would be greatly enhanced by their engagement with their journal writing. The entire class was exciting, and I had the wonderful sense that I was actually engaged in teaching again. These students seemed to be enjoying the subject matter. I was not simply standing before them telling them what they should see and understand; I was sharing their joy of discovery. I was a part of the group. I was seated with them. I was in the ZPD with these young adults, and I was present when they allowed me to see they were having a ball sharing their understanding of Plath's poem. Was I a cheerleader? Definitely, I was operating as a cheerleader. In a way, I reacted as a cheerleader when I discovered they were doing with their journals what I had asked them to do, but as the discussion evolved, I had actually become a member of the group. I still was trying to lead too much, perhaps, but they were with me; together we admired what Plath had done.

Upon reflection, I understand that I was cheering for myself as much as I was cheering for my students that day. High expectations reinforced with praise and encouragement foster the realization of those expectations. Accomplishment promotes accomplishment, and the pleasure it brings is infectious. I was enjoying this class. I wanted them to do well because I wanted desperately to find a way out of my own rut. At this point I had begun to see that I would need to really get excited about what had become old material, great and wonderful old material, but very well known material. I was beginning to see that what is most important, at least for me, was to share the joy of great literature, and that meant the joy in finding its brilliance *together*, as a group, as a class, of which I was a part. I felt I was beginning to peer over the rim of my own deep teaching rut because I was starting to regain the joy of being present when my students discovered for themselves what I had long ago come to see. This meant moments of uncertainty for me in class when I could not safely predict the direction of the discussion, but the decentralization offered the thrill of discovery for the students as they expanded their understanding and for me as I witnessed their growth. "A normal perpetuation becomes a fact in the degree in which impulse is released and habit is plastic to the transforming touch of impulse. When customs are flexible and youth is educated as youth and not as premature adulthood, no nation grows old"(Dewey, *HNC* 73).

There were times in the circled group when events seemed uncontrolled, and I did not like that feeling at first. Age and habit had hardened me against such moments of plasticity.

"Habits embody attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions toward certain modes of action...Conscious inquiry occurs only when habitual ways of acting fail us"(Garrison, *Qualitative Thought and Context* 6). The customs in the circled group were defined by a sense of flexibility; I was starting to rediscover the key to good teaching: impulse and spontaneity describe the nature of youth. "Inquiry and deliberation occur only when the situation becomes uncontrolled by the action of prior habit, and hence coordination with the environment requires reconstruction"(Garrison, *QT&C* 20). I believe I had begun to see how the natural spontaneity of the experimental group could be used effectively to have my students begin to discover the beauty of the poems we were examining. The students had begun to make the poems their own, to take ownership, by writing down their personal reactions in their journals. I was encouraging them to share their insights, and they started encouraging each other. As Gordon Pradl has observed in *Literature for Democracy*,

> Democratic conversations in the literature classroom begin with students listening to themselves. Responses to poems we must remember, emanate from inside each reader. They do not come from what the reader is being told to think or feel. If, however, readers do not stand ready to hear these internal reactions, if they do not have ways of sanctioning the credibility of their own reactions, then talk about poems in the classroom becomes yet another round of hierarchical imposition. Thus, learning to read literature is, to a large extent learning to listen to the responses that a text calls up in us. Still, this too is a social act. In listening to ourselves we come to remember how much we depend on our relationships with other selves. (51)

The students were discovering for themselves. This class had begun to gain leverage, and I had begun to take the first steps out of my burned-out state of mind, out of my teaching rut.

Growing and Twining: Class Like Kudzu

We did not discuss all the assigned poems that day in the experimental class. In fact, we only discussed two. After we finished with Plath's "Metaphors," we moved on to a discussion of James Dickey's poem, "Cherrylog Road." That section of the class was at least as productive as the discussion of "Metaphors" had been. Not only did the students themselves raise multiple and significant ideas important to the poem, but the discussion allowed them to learn more about each other as individuals, to see the subjective nature of reality for all of us, and to develop for themselves the focus for a later writing assignment.

Jeff, the fellow who claimed he had always struggled with poetry, began the discussion:

"It reminds me a lot of a girl I know. Not the sexual imagery! Thanks Gale! Just staring me down."

Gale: *"You made love in a junkyard!?"*

Jeff: *"I said not in a sexual way! Not like the sexual imagery!"*

Another female: *"Whatever."*

Jeff: *"We used to - my father and I - he's unfortunately passed away - we used to fish and hike and hunt and everything on an abandoned racetrack, and there were a lot of these old cars that were just up in the bushes with stuffed springs just - well very much what this woman talks about. This reminds me of going over to my grandmother's. Thanks a lot you all."*

It was a testament to the rapport which was developing in this class, the experimental class, that Jeff felt confident enough to share an intimate memory from his own life. The junkyard setting in Dickey's poem evoked a special time Jeff had had with his father, and he was willing to risk some ribbing, which he in fact did endure, as a result of his willingness to share a moment of his own life with us. There was just no time, no easy opportunity, for this sort of personal revelation from the students in the 9:00 class. I was too busy lecturing, telling the students what I thought they should notice. "Cherrylog Road" is not about going to visit one's grandmother, nor about being with one's father, but hearing Jeff talk affectionately about those experiences was important. First, the other students (and I) were given information that allowed us to know a fellow human being more fully than we had. That is important: learning about ourselves and others. Second, we were all shown, or reminded, that reality is in large measure in the eye of the beholder. For Jeff, abandoned deteriorating cars had a positive association. This reaction certainly defused a notion, voiced in the lecture class, that a meeting in a junk yard seemed sordid. That of course, may be so, but it is not *necessarily* so. What one makes of the experience helps determine its quality; a final value is often ambiguous. And ambiguity, complexity, was inherent in "Cherrylog Road" as the discussion certainly demonstrated.

We continued to discuss various images presented by the poem, and Jeff continued to freely offer his views. Eventually we began to address Dickey's use of the kudzu vine in the poem.

"All right - now - there are so many images here. I could see Melinda saying 'Well, the most important image is the bootleg whiskey.' I could see Louise saying, 'Well, no, it's the stock cars for me. You know, life in the fast lane. Wild stock car race.' After all, what they are doing is wild - ah - pedal to the metal - no holds barred, and yet Kathleen might say,

'No, it's the kudzu. Kudzu is the key to understanding the poem.' She could make that statement. Anyone of those statements would be legitimate. Could be a possible thesis statement for this poem. Let us now think for a moment - dwell on this moment and this image of the kudzu vine. We said it grows over night at least two feet a night and probably more in some places."

Jeff (incredulous): *"Two feet?! Dear God - you could be covered up in one night. If you stretched out in the field, the kudzu could get you - little shop of horrors type of thing."*

I: *"I have a plant in my office that I love which reminds me of Dickey's use of the kudzu. I thought there were two telephone cords running around the edge of my office. I discovered them yesterday while looking for a book. I thought - My God, they did not cut these out. I started pulling on the cords, and twelve feet later it turned out it was a root system from my plant that had gone over the edge of its pot and grown around the whole office!* (Much laughter all around) *I was thinking about throwing them out the window and letting them come down the side of Durham Hall into the soil, but I figured Buildings and Grounds would not appreciate the gesture."*

A female student: *"Oh, you must start today, Mr. Bedell. Give your plant a chance."*

I: *"Tell me what the kudzu suggests to you."*

Sally: *"Wild!"*

I: *"All right - wild - good!"*

Jeff: *"But once it starts growing, it never stops."*

I: *"That's right! You can't stop it. You can't stop it. God knows you can't stop it!"*

A female student: *"But maybe that's not what he means concerning Doris [the female in the poem]. Maybe he doesn't mean she is wild."*

I: *"But it is clear the guy cannot be stopped, right?"*

Gale: *"No, she's different."*

I (with force): *"What do you mean she's different!?"*

A female student begins to respond, but Jeff interrupts her: *"You can't stop her either!"*

Gale: *"No, but she is different. I'm sorry - because the whole time it's his perspective and there's only one line in the poem that says what she has come there for."*

I: *"But-"*
Gale: *"She has come 'to seek parts owned by the sun.' She thinks what they are going to be doing is going to be owned by the sun. It's practically heaven."*

Jimmy: *"But at the end she goes back to do her own thing."*

Gale: "But what's she going to do? He's unstoppable. I mean, she doesn't have the same attitude about what they are doing as he does. She probably does think it's secret. He's the one that goes off and up and tears down with his motorcycle."

Jimmy: *"But at the end she goes back to do her own thing!"*

There were many separate discussions taking place in the classroom at this point. A casual observer might have perceived near bedlam, but in fact everyone was focused on the implication of the kudzu in the poem. My new self, trying to abandon the classroom order of the recent semesters, recognized the fertility in the apparent chaos. The students were discovering for themselves more than I would have been telling them in a lecture. Finally, one very loud female voice finally can be heard:

"I know! She can't do anything to stop the guy!"

Another female student: *"She didn't follow behind him. I mean...."*

Jimmy: *"I know! She didn't like say anything!"*

At this point it sounds like all twelve female students in the class want to be heard.

One voice heard above the rest: *"I know! 'They left by separate doors.' Don't you think if they didn't go out different doors she would just crawl after him?"*

Jeff: *"From his perspective he can't ride in reverse. He doesn't know exactly what she's feeling."*

Gale: *"I'm not saying he has to see things from her perspective, or that I think it's great he is so honest. I am just saying that she is not as wild and unstoppable as he is. She actually does - I mean - I don't think that they have the same drive."*

Jimmy: *"Just by her being there...."*

Jeff: *"She is risking everything..."*

Another female student: *"I think she wants to escape from her father."*

Jeff: *"But what she's risking!...."*

He is cut off by another female student: *"She actually thinks they are just meeting in the junkyard. She is not clear on just what he plans for her in the junkyard. The full time he doesn't say anything about 'seeks parts owned by the sun.' He says, you know, he just waits for her to get there. He's sweating. It's not the same thing."*

I: *"Would a young girl - would Doris Holbrook - under more - operating under more rules than the persona of this poem, sneak around like this?"*

Jimmy: *"Yes!"*

I: *"As a young lady - and you've probably experienced that too, haven't you? I mean, haven't you had more rules than - I remember..."*

Jeff: *"But what she's saying no matter what she's risking - she's risking getting beaten up by her father just to be with the persona."*

Gale: *"Why would it be to love him? He just wants to because he's got hormones; that's my only point. That's the one line when it's from her point of view. Everything else that tells us something is from his point of view, and his point of view is just physical."*

I: *"All right - is this a hormonal surge on the persona's part?"*

A female student: *"Well, I think 95% of the girls have the same surges."*

An uproar follows. Many voices join the chaos her statement creates.

Jeff shouts: *"Wicked!"*

The same female continues her explanation: *"I mean, girls can be just the same as guys. There is little difference!"*

Gale: *"I'm not saying it's girls and guys. I'm just saying Doris and James, I mean in this particular situation - that's the way I see it."*

Jeff: *"Younger and younger and younger!"*

Pandemonium ensues.

Lucille: *"I mean, when he says 'I hold her and hold her and hold her' - I mean...."*

Jeff: *"That's right! He didn't want to let her go!"*

Lucille: *"Yeah, he didn't want to let her go just because they left by separate doors didn't mean they didn't care about each other."*

I: *"That's right. She is not going to get on a motorcycle now and go roaring through town."*

Lucille: *"Right!"*

I: *"Because the father would certainly hear about that ride, right?"*

Another female student: *"Right!"*

I: *"Gale, I personally believe that she is just as unstoppable as he is."*

Jimmy: *"She might get whipped."*

I: *"That's right - big time. So she obviously wants to be there, doesn't she?"*

Gale: *"Yeah, I guess. I am not saying she is a victim. I am just saying they just have different attitudes about why they want to be there."*

I: *"OK, so you're not asserting that she has been raped or anything?"*

Gale: *"Oh no - not at all."*

The discussion continued to range and rage on about Doris Holbrook in the junkyard among the abandoned wrecks and kudzu as she met her motorcycle riding rebel boyfriend. The students themselves had introduced issues and interpretations that began to open the complexity of the poem, the complexity of the subject matter treated in the poem. They touched on gender issues, family relationships, freedom, deceit, choice, stereotypes, love, lust, growing up, independence, privacy, restrictions. Had I been trying to tell them that these ideas were related to the poem, there may have been some eye rolling and a few glances back at the page to see if what I had said might really be true. It would have been *my* discovery offered to them: not really all that important. As it was, these were *their* discoveries - important to them as readers and important to a full appreciation of the poem. It took a bit more time to allow them to make the discoveries, but the time was well worth it. They even introduced possibilities I hadn't considered: so what if I hadn't had time to tell them all I wanted to say? Working together, trading ideas, they had found plenty to discuss.

Discussion, of course, was not the sole objective for the class. Not only was I trying to develop their critical reading skills, among the course objectives was the improvement of their writing skills. They needed to know how to articulate their ideas clearly and develop them thoroughly. They had a paper to write and turn in, so we turned to preparing for the writing assignment. It had been my practice, which I continued in the 9:00 class, to discuss the assignment and then offer some suggested thesis statements. It was a pleasant surprise to find this afternoon class much more involved in this pre-writing period than I had anticipated. By asking questions, interrupting, and making suggestions, they robbed me of my chance to revert to the lecture format with which I had been comfortable. The result was that the class generated a possible thesis statement to be used for the analytical essay about the poem. Working together, they came up with the following thesis: "The most important image in James Dickey's poem, 'Cherrylog Road,' is clearly the kudzu vine because just like young love it grows explosively, cannot be stopped, and it clings."

I could not have done it better myself!

Two Kinds of Tired

This is how we learn best.

Christy

I remember leaving that classroom at 2:00 o'clock and heading upstairs for my office where I would write a few debriefing notes in my teaching journal. I was exhausted. I felt I had ceded control of the class, its direction, its progress, the students, everything; but I felt like the class had been very successful. I had even lost track of time during the class. What I did not lose track of was the excitement of the students as they explored ideas, it was overwhelming - and exhausting. I felt the wonderful tired which is the aftermath of excitement and discovery.

I had left class that morning exhausted as well, but for a different reason. I had once again carried the entire load during that class, and I was tired of trying to teach and entertain passive students. On the way to my office on the third floor of Durham Hall at 10:00 o'clock, I had muttered to myself that those students would never engage with the poems, the great poems, I placed before them. There had been no discussion in the lecture class. I told them what to think and why they should think as I commanded. Why on earth was I expecting spirited discussion when I barely gave them a chance to get a word in? The class was in a rut because I was in a rut.

The energy and excitement in the afternoon class was animating debate and discovery. Students had time to do some solitary preliminary thinking as they wrote their journal entries before class; then, when they came together in class for discussion, new ideas were sparked in the exchanges. I remember one student proudly telling me "I remember commenting in my journal that kudzu is going to continue to grow, and it's going to take over the junkyard." She was proud, and I was thrilled. Although I felt like the entire dynamic of the class had occasionally slipped out of control, nonetheless, I was quite pleased with the class. In fact, I was more than pleased. We were definitely doing something right! When the bell rang for the end of class, the students continued to talk; they still had much to say, - to each other and to me. The students had the freedom to engage in the class, and the respect for each other to listen to each others' opinions. Later, after another similar exciting and exhausting class in which the students got caught up in an animated and productive discussion of "The Lottery," Christy said to me, "talking and arguing, this is how we learn best."

Move On and Grow, or Die: "The Lottery"

Midsemester offered reinforcement for my efforts. I had two starkly different classes on the short story "The Lottery." Here is what appears in my teaching journal for the 9:00 o'clock lecture class: "Finished up 'Lottery' with idea that blind adherence to tradition blinds one to the possibility of making ethical decisions. Began 'Destructors.' Felt like I was scrambling to get through. Very little feedback from the students."(Bedell journal 3/1) Once again, it seems, I was

speaking to a captive audience, an audience not actively reaching for the ideas I placed in the air above them; they sat impassively in the evenly spaced rows while I stood talking behind the lectern. The class had been flat, once again; I had delivered my interpretation of "The Lottery" to an audience that seemed to have joined the living dead. It is a mystery, to this day, how there could have been so little reaction from those students to the story "The Lottery." One might suspect they had not read the story, but they had been warned of a reading quiz, and the class had done reasonably well on the quiz. Thus, the more distressing possibility: perhaps they had grown so used to being told what to think that they had given up trying to discover for themselves or to clarify for themselves what they thought. Perhaps they simply came to class knowing that I would fill the time.

The 1:00 o'clock class was different:

> There was much more feedback, much more interaction in this circled class. Many ideas about 'The Lottery' were voiced by students. I even got Lucille, Louise, and Susan into the conversation. Jeff was especially moved by the story. He apologized for saying so much, but he said, 'This story has really pushed my button.' The issue of whether the people could actually question their actions, or even wanted to, arose. Gale felt they could question their actions, but chose not to. Others, Jimmy especially, felt they were deadened to the implications of the dictates of traditional practices. Jeff felt the people reacted as they did because the human sacrifice was simply a part of their culture. They don't know why they are doing what they are doing. They simply believed they should continue observing the traditions which had been handed down to them through the years. Like individuals in India would condemn us for eating a cow. (Bedell journal 3/1)

I referred to students by name and action in my teaching journal. I felt far more connected with the students in the circled class even though this particular class did not always perform as well as I anticipated it would. Let me qualify this last statement: ***I*** often had not performed as well as I had planned in the circled class. In spite of my firmest resolve, I often found myself doing too much talking. I knew that was one of my failings, and I was working on it. Even though the dynamics had not always evolved as well as I had wanted them to in the experimental class, the fact that we all sat down together created a ZPD that generated excitement, mutual respect, and a sense of discovery that did not exist in the lecture class. Dewey, had he been able to sit in the circled class, would have seen many moments when impulse was "released and habit [was] plastic to the transforming touch of impulse"(*HNC* 73). These students knew that if I would just give them a moment or two, I really did want to hear what they had to say about the

stories we were reading. If I could just learn to throttle back and keep my mouth shut more often, I could enjoy many moments of explosive, impulsive, habit breaking, spontaneous, relevant observations from my students. I could sense excitement and spontaneity in the circle as the 1:00 o'clock class began.

"OK - I want to ask you a question to get things rolling today. What are the two types of literature we have available to read?"

Christy: *Whatever gets leftover is the bad stuff?*

I: *Thank you very much. That takes care of that. Moving right along - the bad stuff - To say it's bad is not really clear because - well, basically romances - what are Harlequin Romances?*

Gale: *Crap!*

I: *Crap! Thank you very much, Gale. And Perrine, rather than use the word <u>crap</u> uses the word.....*

A female student: *Escape literature.*

I: *And it's fun; it's fun just like eating junk food is fun sometimes, until you've had too much of it. But the literature we are studying.....*

Another student: *Interpretive!*

I: *Good! So, we are reading interpretative literature which will...?*

Christy: *Broaden, deepen and sharpen our life!*

I: *God almighty! Yes! Interpretive literature will broaden, deepen and sharpen our lives! I know for a fact that you are sitting here better people for having read 'The Lottery' and 'The Destructors.' You are better for it. You read 'The Destructors' didn't you?*

Jeff: *Yes sir, I did. I read the one about rape too.*

I (noticing Sally arranging herself in a peculiar way in her desk): *Do you want to assume the lotus position Ms. Yeckle?* (There is much laughter from the class)

Sally: *Mr. Bedell, I think that's highly inappropriate. I'd have to go to the red light district for that one.*

I: *The lotus position!? In the red light district?*

Jimmy: *That's a position for meditation, Sally.* (Many individual responses are heard all at once from the entire class and much laughter)

I: *Sally, you can't seem to break loose from the images you see in 'Preludes.' Let's face it!* (More laughter and individual discussion throughout the class as Sally collapses in laughter and falls toward Jimmy whose left side breaks her fall) *Take your hands off that man! Jimmy help her out.*

Jimmy: *It's not only sexual.* (Amplified laughter erupts once again)

Sally: *I guess I took too many religion classes.*

I: *OK – 'The Lottery' is obviously an example of interpretive literature. It requires a great deal of analysis, a great deal from us, and what did you learn from 'The Lottery,' Ms. Timmins [Susan]?*

Susan: *I did not learn anything.*

I: *Oh my God! Take thy beak from out my heart.*

Susan: *It was just too disturbing. I don't understand the brutality at the end.*

I: *I can understand why you had that reaction. I am sorry you had to see Tessie Hutchinson being murdered by her neighbors and friends.*

Christy: *I agree with Susan. It just doesn't make much sense why they would do that.* (Transcript 3/1)

The class was beginning well; this was the kind of rapport that makes teaching fun. The students were having fun, I was having fun, and we were beginning to focus on a very challenging short story. The students were off balance, but they felt comfortable in the class, so comfortable that they felt free to express frustration and even disgust with the assigned story. "Ideas emerge out of a background of need and affective disequilibrium"(Garrison - *Qualitative Thought and Context* 26). This story had created a splendid moment of dynamic disequilibrium. Now the moment was ripe for exploitation of this imbalance. If I could just resist the urge to bolt to a position of dominance from whence I would dispense my views and enlightened interpretation, perhaps these students could learn something for themselves as they fought to regain their balance. Receiving enough time to seek and find their own balance, they would show me how fruitful this new approach to teaching literature could be. Susan Timmins had obviously been touched by the story even though she was repulsed by its horrific ending. Susan was one of the most introverted members of the class; surely the entire class was struggling with the story if Susan was so off balance, so curious and willing to speak up. The students were eager to talk.

Well, it was a tradition, wasn't it Eileen? It was, and if you had been brought up here in Buena Vista and were exposed to this kind of lottery every year, chances are, well, that you too would have stoned Tessie.

Eileen: *No, I don't think I would ever murder a member of my community.*

I: *You wouldn't?*

Jeff: *If she were raised that way.... (?)*

I: *If she happened to be passing through, that is, if Eileen were passing through town in her Beamer, and you saw that, Tessie getting stoned to death, you would go for the Sheriff pretty fast, wouldn't you?*

Eileen: *Yes!*

I: *Of course you would.*

Jeff: *When you go to college, you go with preconceived ideas that everybody in this world does things the way they do it, so if you had been raised a certain way, you think that's the right custom and that nobody can persuade you from that. The lottery in that town was a tradition that they did. They couldn't remember why they were doing it. All they could remember is that they had to do it every year. They didn't even know why. They didn't know the right rituals to go through. They just knew they had to do it year after year after year.*

I: *Tradition is an extremely powerful force.*

Jeff: *The whole meaning to me – this is what Shirley Jackson was trying to say – was that people get locked into traditions, and they fail to see why they are doing them. That's what is so disturbing, and the lottery [the stoning], that's disturbing enough in itself, but they couldn't remember even why they were doing it.*

I: *So the theme of the story for you is the possible detrimental effects of being – of accepting tradition on a blind basis?*

Jeff: *Right. It's like prejudice to me. I mean you look at it. Someone is raised to hate someone of another color. They don't know why they do it; they just know they are supposed to do it.*

I: *So blind adherence to tradition can kill someone?*

Jeff: *Right.*

A female student: *Definitely!*

I: *There are good traditions too though, aren't there?*

A female student: *Christmas!*

I: *Christmas is an OK tradition. It's a little commercial.*

Jeff: *And even then, Mr. Bedell, you take someone from a country that's not of Christian faith that doesn't believe in Christmas and put them in a household. To them that's wrong.*

I: *Yes, and sometimes there can be a cultural clash. I heard on NPR a couple of years ago a story about how the Japanese were assimilating portions of our culture – the U.S. correspondent reporting this story rounded a corner in downtown Tokyo and was absolutely stopped in his tracks by what he saw hanging several stories up on the side of a major department store – that is from the side of the building. There was a huge Santa Claus crucified on a cross, so there is an example of some blurring of intentions and traditions.*

Jeff: *That would crack me up, Mr. Bedell.*

(Transcript 3/1)

The energy level in this class was extremely high. Even after I had summed up for them, had let them know that they were reaching conclusions that corresponded to what other, thoughtful readers had reached, even then they still wanted to discuss the story. They were still off balance. They were still disturbed. So much so that I thought it wise to deflect some of the tension with a bit of humor. I thought I had them where I wanted them; in fact, they were taking me where I had not anticipated going. The students in the experimental class had read the story and were still trying to process the horrific experience it presented. Jeff had gained so much confidence from the poetry section of the course that he was not at all timid about stepping up to the challenges of interpretive fiction. I respected the fact that he always read the assignments, thought about what he had read, and arrived at his own interpretation of the story before our class discussion. I had not seen this level of reflection in a student for many years. His analysis was right on target. "The whole meaning of the story for me [Jeff] - this is what Shirley Jackson was trying to say - was that people get locked into traditions, and they fail to see why they are doing them. That is what is so disturbing, and the lottery [the stoning], that's disturbing enough in itself, but they couldn't remember even why they were doing it." A fine analysis. I was a bit dismayed that he was so ready to defend the townspeople engaged in the apparently meaningless ritual; he was disturbed by the stoning but did not condemn the townsfolk because he felt they were guided, even driven, by blind adherence to this tradition which we, as outsiders, cannot

fathom as we have not been aculturated to the system that dictated the lottery. I managed to restrain my self and not leap in at once to point out that part of the point, implicit in what he himself had said, was that one *must* question; blind adherence to tradition is not a defense for wrong action. Instead I let the class work with the idea.

Jeff: *They are only wrong, traditions, are only wrong in the eyes of the ones not taking part in it.*

Several students wish to protest; several students are trying to voice opinions.

Jimmy: *I think, for anyone, the lottery would be wrong, more so for an outsider because their objective would seem totally insane.*

I: *It should be wrong.*

Jimmy: *Sure it should be wrong! But - but to the people....*

Jeff: *Mr. Hutchinson didn't see it as wrong.*

Jimmy: *But it's not!*

Jeff: *Mr. Hutchinson didn't see it was wrong; the only one who saw it as wrong was Tessie once she realized....*

Jimmy: *The fact that it is wrong is not up to them to decide because they don't think it's wrong because they do it every year, but the objective or moral....*

Gale: *Just because you've never had a Christmas doesn't mean it's wrong. It's someone else's tradition. I mean, some traditions are just wrong, and some are just fine.*

Jeff: *But I'm saying what makes - what gives anybody the right to say what's right and what's wrong? Well, I mean in ancient biblical times, Christians were persecuted by non-Christians, and now - I mean non-Christians think that was cool. Christians think that was horrifying.*

I: *We were talking about prostitutes earlier when we started class, and Jesus figured into that. There was a prostitute, and what were they going to do to the prostitute? They were going to stone her to death, just like Tessie was stoned to death. Who stood in front of the prostitute to protect her?* (Many students answer in unison) *That's exactly right, Jesus, and he said what?* (Many versions are offered all at once by many students) *'Let he who hath not sinned cast the first stone.'* (There is an eruption of laughter) *All right! What did Jimmy say?*

Jimmy: *A stone flies out from the crowd, and Jesus says, 'Mother'!!*

I: *Jimmy, you need to see your analyst.*

"To be playful and serious at the same time is possible, and it defines the ideal mental condition"(John Dewey). I remember this class so well because of its playful, casual, and natural evolution. Students were moved by the brutality of Shirley Jackson's story, and they were trying to figure out for themselves what they thought. How could such a brutal story be placed in a text which was supposed to contain elevated examples of interpretive literature? My role in this class was much closer to what I wanted it to be, what I thought I should be; I wanted to be a facilitator, a catalyst, a point guard whose function was, ideally, to keep the action, the ball, moving toward the goal, an individual who passed off quickly to keep the momentum moving toward victory, toward understanding. I was not lecturing. I was a member of the group, a vested, accepted, bonafide member of the class. I was not insisting on an exclusive reading (my reading and only my reading), but I did try to shepherd them toward ideas I thought appropriate for exploration.

They were regaining their equilibrium on their own, and the thrill, the rush I experienced as I participated in the play (was allowed to participate) as I easily transitioned between the role of a group member who had the confidence and license to voice my opinion when it seemed appropriate and then back to my role as a member of the audience, was exciting. I could see that I did not have to be a talking head. I was learning how to trust my students, have enough faith in them and give them the time they needed to find the answers for themselves. My reward would be far more than just climbing out of the rut I had created for myself over the years; I could witness the joy a student experiences when s/he has developed the self-confidence to voice and defend a carefully thought out opinion. We traveled the road of discovery together, moving from consideration of theme to consideration of mechanics, of the artistry involved when a writer achieves an effect.

I: *I would like to know how Shirley Jackson makes this story believable – how does she make us buy into the story? How does she lull us into a certain sense of ...*

Christy: *It's so normal at first and then – and then..."*

Gale: *It seems so believable. They had the same way of talking and carrying on with their lives the way they did.*

I: *That's right. When Mr. Summers – they say of him that he does the square dances, the teen club dances and meetings, and the Halloween program, and one feature of a society that is extremely important is how young people are formed and focused. You all scare me to death. I mean, if you didn't channel your energies in a positive way, God knows what you would do. Why, you'd be out pillaging the land, but here's Mr. Summers trying to guide the young people of this particular community in a positive way. You think of Halloween and little ghosts and goblins out and apple dunking and all that and the lottery used to be far more involved. There used to be a chant and it took on the level or importance of a worship ceremony.*

Jeff: *Now, if that were the case, you wouldn't be quite as appalled.* I agree, and Jeff continues; *"If they were, you know, if the box were like a holy relic, and it was brought out, and it was kept in a special place, and they did the chant, and they did everything they were supposed to do, it wouldn't be nearly as gruesome.*

I: *But it says here "The box was put away sometimes one place, sometimes another...."*

Jeff: *Right!*

I: *"The rest of the year, the box was put away, sometimes one place, sometimes another; it had spent one year in Mr. Graves's barn and another year underfoot in*

the post office, and sometimes it was set on a shelf in the Martin grocery and left there.

Gale: *It doesn't matter. It was like something you could see and not associate with the lottery, with the stoning. It is totally unimportant to these people.*

I: *Now there's the problem, right? - because - well, we've always done this. They don't want to change the black box, change it in any way, repair its cracks, but we have always done this, so they are pulled into...*

Jeff: *The box is falling apart, and no one sees that they should make a new box; no one seems to take the time to do it.*

I: *They don't want to take the time, but there is also that tie to tradition.*

Jeff: *But then - yet they're not afraid.* I agree and Jeff continues. *I'm sorry, Mr. Bedell. 'The Lottery' really struck a chord with me.*

I: *Struck a chord with you?*

Jeff: *Yeah - really - I mean, it's really like...*

There is a pause,

I: *Why are you sorry? I'm happy it struck a chord.*

Jeff: *I thought I might say...*

Jimmy (breaking the tension): *Oh, shut-up.*

Jeff: *Yeah.*

I: *That's fine - that's fine.*

Sally: *Another thing - she didn't get into detail about what people looked like or anything like that. It's just their voices. It was just their ideas as*

though it made it difficult to identify the point. I mean, I think the first time that I ever read it I kind of got like a little bit suckered in.

I: *Sure you are. We all are.*

Sally: *Yeah, you're like 'OH!' You know?*

Another female student: *Yeah, I thought someone would win a tractor.*

Jeff: *I thought they were going to win something too.*

Sally: *Yeah, you wanted to be like over-joyed for them.*

Jimmy: *It gets creepy all of a sudden.*

Sally: *I knew that like the little boys were picking up rocks. I knew like we had it, like....*

I: *Yes, you have the feeling that something is not quite right here.*

Sally: *Yeah, something is not quite right, but at the same time you're like, Oh, OK, there, what I found was that everything was so general there was no specific references to anything.*

The way the students in the circled class were responding to the story delighted and amazed me. They were probing the details of the story. Jeff was so upset at one point that he was apologizing to me for the degree and depth of his responses to the story. Sally performed beautifully as she pointed out one of the most important components of the story: Shirley Jackson portrayed the townspeople in a general fashion, and Sally made the connection of that generality to the theme of the short story. Jackson did not want us to see particular traits of characters in the story because the people in the town were meant to represent humanity as a whole. I was not lecturing during this meeting of the experimental class. The students were moving forward as they bounced ideas off their classmates. This was what I was searching for. I was not certain exactly why impulse flourished during this particular hour, but I was certain all of the spontaneity had something to do with my concerted effort to try to keep my involvement to

a minimum. John Dewey tells us that you simply cannot order a person to have correct posture. A person must first experience for himself what good posture feels like. "Only the man whose habits are already good can know what the good is"(Dewey, *HNC* 26). The students in the circled class were beginning to stand on their own: they were using and strengthening their mental muscles; they were breaking free of the restraints of passivity; these students were educating themselves; they were standing taller, feeling their way, defending their own views, speaking with greater ease. Why? Because I was getting out of their way, letting them make their own excursions of discovery. I didn't nag them to stand up straight; I gave them room to stretch and improve their own posture themselves. This was the way I wanted all of my classes to go.

I am presenting the following long excerpt from the tapes because it offers, I believe, a clear example of the way the classes should go; it offers an example of the new paradigm being used to greatest advantage.

> *"Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon." What did you think then?* (There is a rather long pause. I am learning not to rush to answer my own questions.) *"Was that one thing that was off putting to you when Old Man Warner said* (I try to project the persona of an old man) *'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon'?"*
>
> Heather: *Don't they think – I mean, I guess it's like a good luck charm or whatever.*
>
> I: *That's right!*
>
> Heather: *It's kind of the moral of the story, isn't it?*
>
> I: *Oh, you mean that if you sacrifice somebody in the community, that it's not automatic that your crops are going to grow?*
>
> *Heather: Right."*
>
> I: *Yes, yes, but again, it is a traditional practice that we've always done. It's so ingrained in our society that we've got to keep doing it without question, and it's self-affirming. Old Man Warner says, 'Seventy-seventh lottery, seventy-seventh time.' and what he's thinking is 'I have survived this lottery seventy-seven times. It has to be right because I survived so many times.'*

Christy: *Well, even in the story they are showing how it starts from the youngest age all the way up to old age. These people were raised with this tradition. You know, we say 'NO.' If I were there, I would question everyone's actions. I would ask why, but here little Davie, Tessie's own child, is going to stone his mother at a very young age. He is taught that this is OK. That addresses the question of whether this action is right or wrong. These people are taught from the very beginning that the lottery is right; it is proper to conduct the lottery. That's the first thing they know. It's like going to any other tribe or any other culture. We look at what is done, and they might eat their dead or something, that to them is a sign of, you know, that is a tradition for them, and we are appalled by that, but they are raised by that. That is what they feel is right, but these kids are learning from a young age. They are taught from the community; 'You're a good boy. You go...'*

Heather: *They are looking out and saying, 'Look at what we are supposed to do.'*

Gale: *Not necessarily because just the black box issue – the fact that they are ignoring it all year long means that they don't want to deal with it.*

Jeff: *No, they're going to have the black box out during the lottery.*

Gale: *No, but they could – it's not that hard to like look into it and – they could reinforce their condition. They could say – yell – scream back the chant...*

(Many people are speaking at once. Many people have become agitated.)

Jeff (heard over the din): *That's right! That's it! They don't even know why they have the tradition.* (Many people continue to talk.)

Gale: *But, if they really wanted to hold on to it, they could do something; they could, you know, they could ask someone or try to figure out what it is - try to remember everything about the ceremony. They don't deal with the box because they are just, because I think they're kind of hoping it will go away.*

Jeff: *It goes back more than seventy-seven years. It goes back more than anyone can remember.*

Gale: *But do they ask the question, if what I want to know is in the past....*

Christy: *They are dealing - they are questioning; they are asking that question why and no one wants to ask that question. They've been taught from the beginning never to ask why.*

(Many students seem agitated, frustrated, confused, off balance.)

I: *Lilly, do you have something to say. You seem to be getting upset. I can tell.*

Lilly: No. (She laughs to release some tension.)

I: *No, go ahead. Vent it.*

Lilly: *No, like, does it say they couldn't ask why they are doing what they do?*

I: *No, it didn't say that they couldn't. No, because the lady in the crowd says they are thinking - they said they had done away with the lottery or are thinking about doing away with it over in the next town, and Old Man Warner instantly says, 'Nothing but trouble in that! Next thing you know we will be back to living in caves and eating stewed chickweeds and acorns.' You know he is the conservative in the community. NO! You can't change that!*

Jeff: *Well, it's a game. It's a beginning. The little boy is running around picking up rocks. Nobody said anything about childhood, you know, when it's*

snowing, everybody is hoarding snowballs over here, have a big snowball fight; it's a game for them at a young age, and that's what they want. They want them to see the system as a child. They want the system introduced as early as possible. They want them to see the fun in it. The fun and everybody is out of school, you know, this is a community activity, and as they get older, their parents start to instill in them - just like all good parents do - they instill in them a long way - you know - you don't instantly give your little boy a - you know - teach him to do something and expect him to do it perfectly the first time, or even know why he's doing it. You know, you get him set in his ways, and he gets older, you start instilling in him; this is why or whatever they can't say this to their kids - why they're doing it, but they just want to instill in them at a young age that it's a habit that they have to follow because their forefathers did and your father before so....

I: *This is part of our society - this is part of our traditional practice. Yes, it is sick; you and I know that, but they are not questioning it; it is so ingrained that they don't even know how to question it.*

Jeff: *Mr. Bedell, I personally don't look at it as being sick because, not that I want to defend stoning a friend to death, but because of....*

A female student: *I'm very glad you said that, Jeff.*

Jeff: *...because so many times different societies around the world - we become appalled at what goes on, say in Africa because we don't see that everyday, but they look at us, you know, people in India look at us eating cow and become appalled that we could actually eat this god; they become appalled, so why do you all become appalled at reading this story? This is what Shirley Jackson was doing. She did it for a reason; she was making you see something for a reason.*

I: *OK Jeff, what did she make you see?*

Jeff: *If you look at it, you know, the getting caught up in tradition, and if you look at it from all this disgusting, you know, I would never take part in that, then you're missing entirely what she's trying to say to you.*

I: *I agree with you, Jeff.*

Jeff: *You have to look at it from, you know, if I was there and I'd been raised up in that culture, I'd be throwing the stone too. That's when you can grasp, I think, what she is trying to say.*

Jimmy: *I think too, part of the town's defense for Old man – what's that crotchety old man's name?*

A voice: *Warner.*

Jimmy: *Warner – if you came up to him and said 'What do you think you are doing?' He can turn around and say, 'We're a peaceful town. We have no crime. Once you sacrifice somebody sort of thing, you know. Look where you come from. You've got gangs running around out there in your city, and here we are a peaceful town. We all love each other. It's nothing personal. It's just what we do. It's just a fact of life for us.*

A female student: *I think getting stoned is a little personal!*

Jimmy: *Well, yeah, it's a little personal, but it has value though.*

The female student: *What human being has the right to decide whether another human being is to live or die? That's not their decision to make.*

Once again many students try to enter the discussion all at once. Finally one female student can be heard to say, *That's what the lottery is, because it is tradition or whatever.*

I: *The lottery decides.....*

Another female student: *I don't understand; I mean obviously you're attacking it as a way to conduct community business. If you have a problem with it, you can leave.*

Christy: *Tessie didn't have a problem with it until she pulled the slip of paper with the black dot on it. That's not how the lottery should be.* (Many people agree with Christy. Many people are talking.)

Jeff: *She even forgot; she was doing dishes; her dishes were more - were more important than this lottery at that time, and then when it dawned on her, all of a sudden, OH!, she rushes to her husband's side because she thinks she is not going to die today.*

I: *That's right, because we all believe we're not going to be the one to die today.*

Jeff: *She shoves her husband into the center of the ring to pull the slip for the family; 'Oh go on, go get your ticket.'*

I (with a country twang): *Git on in there, Bill!*

(Several students mock my attempt at a country accent.)

Jeff: *And that's the thing, I mean, Yeah...*

A female student: *When I first read the lottery, I didn't think it was an old sacrifice thing growing season or whatever. I thought it was more like what Jimmy was saying; that other types of crime that go on all year; it is just sort of human nature, and once a year they get it all out and kill somebody - stone them to death - get their little violent thing done, and the rest of the year...."*

Jeff: *I don't think it's a violent thing though!*

The female student (incredulous): *"What!? Stoning someone to death!?*

(Much tension relief laughter can be heard.)

Jeff: *The lottery is not violent. It is something that they want to do; they want to do it just as quickly as possible to get it over with. They're not getting pleasure or enjoyment from it.*

(Many voices can be heard. This is a heated discussion. Jeff feels Mrs. Delacroix says repeatedly that things should be hurried along in the lottery to get it over with, and I remind him that Mr. Summers is the one who wants to hurry along. Many students concur.)

A female voice: *It's NOT a violent thing; its like an every year thing. You kill someone today - Oh well.*

Jeff: *'Let me go back to my dishes.' That's what Tessie would be saying if she had not been the one selected to die.*

I *I know somebody in this community who, when December rolls around, he goes to his hall closet, the hall coat closet, gets out a box which contains this silly little artificial Christmas tree; he flips a switch, and the tree pops up with lights already attached. It is fully decorated right from the box. He plugs it in, and there it is. The holiday season has started. He is not a practicing Christian. He just gets his tree, and I think if I asked him why he always sets up his tree, he would respond, 'Well, it's December 1; I'm just doing it.' The whole idea of, you know, the Charlie Brown Christmas, that's one of the most magnificent cartoons, isn't it, when he tells us what Christmas is all about. This old man with the artificial tree - don't misunderstand me - I'm not trying to say he's a fool for functioning like a robot with his tree in December. He doesn't know what the Christmas tree means anymore, and that's scary.*

Lilly: *So why do we bring a tree into the house? What's that all about?*

I: *I think it harkens back to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight - bringing greenness, nature into the hall and rebirth of nature which is soon to come. It's an intertwining of pagan ritual and Christian ceremony. It is that greenery will soon re-emerge as a celebration of life, and we have come to associate that ceremony with Jesus and His resurrection.*

I was beginning to experience my own professional resurrection as a result of this particular class. I had almost given up hope that I would experience once again a class where students would be totally engaged with the material I had assigned. Certainly the class I had held that morning, the 9:00 class on that same day, confirmed all the negative feelings and opinions I harbored concerning the young adults I was expected to teach. The afternoon experimental class bordered, for me, on the miraculous. We had spent about the same amount of time on the story in each class, but there was a tremendous difference in the way the material was addressed in each class. I told the lecture class what they should know about "The Lottery"; the experimental class told *me* what was on their minds. The individuals in the experimental class told each other their opinions and reacted to the validity of those opinions. I was amazed. These students were beginning to find their own voices as they confronted great literature.

I was seated with my students in the circle, which I now viewed as a ZPD, and I did not feel that I needed to dominate the way the discussion unfolded. The point I had planned to make, eventually, about the story, was revealed very early in the class by a student who had come to his conclusion before arriving for our class. However, what would have been the conclusion of the discussion in the morning class became the starting point in the afternoon class. I didn't blast on to another discussion (lecture) about another story; I could not have done so even if I had tried. The students were too involved in the story to let it go. They debated the significance of events and ideas. I did not agree with all that they said, but I didn't leap in to push them to my view. As I listened, I recognized in the story and in their discussion lessons directly applicable to me.

Like the people of the town, I needed to continually question what I was doing. I did not agree with some of my students who suggested that what happened to Tessie was the result of blind chance. If she had questioned, if she had realized "it's not right!" earlier, before the stones were about to fly, she might have been able to initiate change that would save her and everyone else from a plodding repetition of empty but destructive activity. I had recognized that what I had been doing was not right, and I was trying to change. Every class was not perfect, and I was sometimes ill at ease even as I was successfully changing my deadening habits, but I was questioning my behavior and changing my attitude. In the short story, there is the suggestion that the lottery was once associated with a process to encourage fertility: "Lottery in June, corn

be heavy soon." The practices I was trying to move away from had also once been associated with fertility. Years ago, I found exercises and assumed public personae, assumed images, that seemed to interest and motivate my students. When I saw that they were effective, I would repeat them in succeeding semesters. Eventually, I filled up my classes with segments of what had once worked, and I was leaving no time for current students to make the learning experience their own. Fortunately, unlike Tessie, I began questioning before the stones were directed at my head, and I could see that I was traveling in the right direction to cultivate more fertile fields.

The Right Wrong Direction: "Rape Fantasies"

All of my students survived spring break, but it was clear that they had not all spent their time with textbooks in hand. That is not a particularly unusual omission over spring breaks, but it was still disheartening. I felt very much like the character in Dr. Seuss' story "Green Eggs and Ham." I knew they would like this material if they would only give it a try. Alas, even the afternoon class, for which I had high hopes, arrived unprepared.

> Major disappointment. Jeff was the ONLY person to have read both stories. This is supposed to be my best class! These people are adrift. Sally had the effrontery to deliver a pile of recommendation forms she wants me to complete for her. How can she request this number of recommendations while she refuses to do the work I assign? Jeff did not like 'Rape Fantasies.' Gender issues clouded his thinking. He did, however, admire 'The Swimmer.' I do not know what I am going to do with these people. It must be me. It's got to be some problem with me. It's the way I have structured the class. I must ask them to do more work. I am obviously not challenging them in the correct way. Challenge - Control - I wanted to begin the class with a collaborative exercise, but they had not read the work. Where am I going wrong? (Bedell journal 3/18)

A low moment indeed, but not entirely inexplicable. In addition to the usual spring break distractions faced by college students away from campus and the routine of classes, our students were trying to plan for the next academic year. Basically, they were having to go through the college selection process all over again. This was our last semester at MVC; desperation was taking its toll. Students (and faculty) were preparing applications to other colleges and were not attending to current academic business as well as they should. Sally was a case in point. She had obviously spent the break preparing applications to continue her education next year. I, nonetheless, was frustrated that she had the temerity to ask me for recommendations on the day when she had not done the reading for class.

In the morning class I tried to carry the hour among a group that had not read the assignment. "Perhaps two people out of fifteen read the stories I assigned for today. I tried to generate a discussion about 'Rape Fantasies" and 'The Swimmer' and managed to take up nearly an hour doing it, but it seemed like idle prattle."(Bedell journal, 3/18) My entry for the afternoon class (above) is longer but not more positive. However, the class actually did have its moments of success.

> *Now, in 'Rape Fantasies' I was going to have you discuss the character of Estelle with a partner, but since so few of you read it, we cannot do the exercise. I am surprised, shocked, and hurt that you have not read the assignment. We are not talking about a great deal of reading here. God help you. Now Jeff, you don't like the story?*
>
> Jeff: *No sir, I do not like this story.*
>
> I: *I would like to have a reason why. I hate to pick on you, but you have a valid opinion.*
>
> Jeff: *Well, for me, I think it's written very well; however, it is written through the eyes of a woman and.....*
>
> A female student: *You have a problem with that, Jeff?"*
>
> Jeff: *Well, for me, I don't say it's man bashing by any means, but it was just hard for me to put myself in that situation with this woman. It was hard for me to visualize what she was driving at.*
>
> I: *OK.*
>
> Jeff: *And it was very hard for me as a man to feel and to understand exactly what she was feeling.*
>
> I: *So it's a gender issue with you?*
>
> Jeff: *Right.*

I: *OK, Louise, you read most of it, and did you like the story, or did you not like the story?*

Louise: *I did like it; well, I'm not saying I didn't like it; it just seems like rape would be horrible, and Estelle doesn't think it's horrible.*

I: *She seems to think that rape is no big deal. She seems to trivialize it. Is that what concerns you? Are you bothered by her attitude toward rape?*

Louise: *Well, I mean, she was saying stuff like a guy comes through her window and has a cold or something like that, and he is pretending to be a tough guy.*

I (reading): "'*I'm going do rabe you.*'" (There is laughter as Atwood has given us the would-be rapist's pronunciation of the word *rape* as it would be pronounced by a person with a stopped-up nose.)

Louise: *And he comes in, comes in and they start talking about bad things that happen. It's weird.*

I: *OK, Sandra, did you find the story to be weird?*

Sandra: *Well, the way the character, Christie, puts it, you actually, or she actually seems to enjoy this fantasy, and that seems a little scary to me. If I were having one of these, so called, 'fantasies,' I'd be thinking about where I am going to kick him and how hard, not if I was going to enjoy it or not."*

One feature of this class which did go well, I believe, was that I was able to draw some of the more introverted students into the discussion. Louise and Sandra did not often respond to questions I posed in class nor did they enter the discussions which developed in the circled class, but both of these students were offering helpful comments. Also, I was able to resist the urge to blast into my own interpretation of the story by rushing to the conclusion and providing a neat, pre-digested interpretation of the story for all assembled. Rather than offer an interpretation at this point, I read a few passages from the story, not only to emphasize the observations and questions already posed, but to also give those students who had not read the work the information needed to form their own opinions. One of the women in the story imagines a

Tarzan-like rapist who travels up and down the outside of her apartment building by rope. The female character in the story is watching TV in her housecoat one night when this fellow swings into her life. Jeff can't keep quiet.

Jeff: *These are not so much rape fantasies as they are just fantasies!*

I: *That's right. They are sexual fantasies. OK, good point, and Estelle comes into the operation on page 166 and we are introduced to her 'Mr. Clean' fantasy and then on 167 she talks about a guy whose zipper gets stuck, and she feels sorry for him. Then we have the kung fu expert, and Estelle tells him he 'would be raping a corpse' as she pretends to be suffering from a terminal illness.* (I finish by reading the last few lines of the story which reveal so much about Estelle.) *'I know it happens* [women are raped]*, but I just don't understand it...'*

Sally: *She has no first hand experience, you know; nothing has happened to her.*

I: *All right, I know that many of you had to deal with the computer virus around here recently. It shut down all of the computers, didn't it? I remember telling my wife that I just didn't understand how somebody could do such a thing. I don't understand how someone would get so much pleasure out of making so much trouble for other people. Why do these people do such things?*

Jeff: *Someone who writes a virus thinks they can't be caught.*

After many people offer opinions, I say, *"OK, but I still don't understand why somebody would do that."*

Jimmy: *Like whoever wanted that power, you just can't comprehend why; you can't understand physical violence like that can be enjoyable in any way. You just can't comprehend who would want to. You can't even comprehend the mental, you know, whatever goes through the person's mind.*

I: *You are right, Jimmy. I cannot. Now what does Estelle's comment say about her character?*

Jimmy: *Estelle is very sane, in a way; she has these fantasies which everyone else has, but the fact that she cannot comprehend why someone would do this – I don't think she can comprehend what it would be like to be raped or anything like that.*

I: *No, she cannot.*

Jimmy: *She has a great deal of heart. She is not a vicious person.*

I: *No, she is kind hearted; she's always been that way. Jeff, you still don't like the story?*

Jeff: *Well, I mean, it's not that I hated it, or I dislike it, you know. I think it's well written, and I could understand how it could make a statement about her life, but I personally, you know, didn't enjoy it. It's not one like 'The Lottery' or 'The Swimmer.' They are stories that years from now I will go back and enjoy reading again, or six months from now enjoy reading them again. 'Rape Fantasies' is just not....*

I: *One observation you made about the word 'fantasy' is very interesting. No one really seems to get hurt in here, and she can't understand rape and the fantasy part of it. It's almost as if these people are to be pitied, but there are rapists who – ah – they certainly maim and kill psychologically if they don't actually kill the person they attack.*

Jeff: *And that's probably their goal.*

I: *That is their goal, and it's a power play, right? And that's where they get their thrills. The point is if you told this in any other way, if you told the story from the omniscient stance or limited omniscient or objective point of view, it just would not be the story it is. Someone would be telling us what to*

think about Estelle. With the first person narration, we have to figure out for ourselves what kind of person she is. It couldn't be told any other way. We learn about Estelle through the first person, through her own words, and her sensibilities come out best using the first person.

Everyone, I believe, finally came to see that Atwood defined the loneliness of her characters through their romantic day dreams of sexual adventure. These women were not really imagining the actual hideous, aggressive, violation of rape; they were hoping for romance. And Estelle, well, kind Estelle was looking for connection, someone to take care of, to nurture. Through the first person narration, through listening to Estelle herself, the reader could discover her loneliness and her generosity.

Fortunately, I had not allowed my disappointment in the student's lack of preparation to dictate how the class would evolve. The circled class sustained itself by using the knowledge of the few students who did read the assignment coupled with a resolution from the instructor to press ahead no matter the odds. I read key passages which gave the class enough material to begin considering the issues in the story. The imbalance of dynamic disequilibrium saved the day. My journal entry had ended with the question, "Where am I going wrong?" After reviewing the transcript, I now see that I did some things correctly. I did not condemn the class for having failed to read the assignment. I asked some rather good questions after jump-starting a discussion. I fought the urge to dominate the class through lecture. I praised correct answers and thoughtful responses. I did not simply indict my students and doom the discussion by allowing negative emotion to triumph. At this point in the year, I was beginning to make some progress in my fight to regain the joy I once felt in the classroom. As I began lifting myself out of my rut, my students, at least in the circled, experimental class, were exhibiting some pleasure in studying world class literature. I wanted to think the students would read assignments for the pure of joy of the experience. However, I realized daily reading quizzes were a necessary encouragement, or threat, to induce students, who might otherwise yield to other temptations, to read the material we would be discussing.

Backtracking: "Paul's Case"

Even when driving the interstate, it is rare to make a journey with no turns or cloverleaves. I found this tendency to wander off the main road, to pause for refueling, to occasionally travel the same road twice, was certainly typical of my journey back to inspiration and enthusiasm. In my quest to relax control in my classroom, I found that I had to learn the same lessons more than once. For instance:

I remember sitting in my office after a class on "Paul's Case" and thinking "here is where the danger lies in this approach to teaching novices." What had happened was this: I had lectured on "Hills Like White Elephants" and "Paul's Case" in the 9:00 o'clock class. I knew these stories so well I could give such lectures at the drop of a hat, so I waxed eloquent about the vivid imagery presented in each story, and there was, as usual, virtually no discussion from the class. Alas, in spite of some of my positive experiences earlier, the temptation of familiarity was too great: I tried to deliver the lecture in the experimental class. The main difference, at first, was that I was in a seated position. However, this class did become more involved - more involved than I really wanted them to be. I became quite frustrated because they seemed to latch on to a "wrong" view, and then wouldn't give it up; it entered into every subsequent observation. "Evans, Spencer, and Hill said the character of Paul is gay; hence, everything in the story can be explained entirely from that standpoint." (Bedell journal 3/20) They proposed that view of Paul, and then all of the important imagery I wanted them to notice concerning the cut flowers and how cut flowers represent Paul's condition in life, indeed represent Paul himself, was simply not important for these students. They seized on the notion that the central character was homosexual; then, in my opinion, they became blind to many interesting and significant components of the story. I couldn't order them to see it my way, and they were off and running with their ideas. I was indeed frustrated. However, after time to reflect, I realized three important precepts.

First, I needed to be more open to interpretations which were, in my initial view anyway, off the chart. I had been pleased in the past with class discussion, but these discussions usually led students to discoveries I was hoping they would make. Earlier in the semester, I had been taken aback when Sally insisted on considering a character in Eliot's "Preludes" a prostitute, and I had been especially concerned when she seemed to be leading her classmates toward this "wrong" reading. Now I found myself resisting student discoveries again. In spite of the private pep talks I had given myself, I wasn't really open enough to student conclusions. Although I was trying to give up the overt posture of the controlling class leader, I had quietly substituted for myself, without really examining it, a model of myself as shepherd, herding my flock toward *my* vision. This realization lead to my second.

It was myopic of me to assume that my students would be blind to what I had, for some time, seen in a work. When discussing a work, I had to, of course, support my ideas, explain how I - and they - could arrive at my conclusions. The discussion had to be thorough so they could understand the basis for my conclusions and so I could model the process of supporting ideas for others who might disagree. The objective was and is for students to understand how words can affect their reactions, and that they must understand and explain their own ideas. To accomplish this objective, there must be time for students to identify, articulate and support their own ideas. So, when the students try to shift the focus of a discussion, that does not mean they don't see my point. Nor, when they argue the significance of their ideas, does it mean they cannot or do

not understand the points I have been trying to make. When they discuss and support their ideas, they are developing their intellectual muscles, a development which is the goal of education. My task is not to ensure that the students remember precisely my ideas; my task is to help them challenge and develop their own ideas. For a while, I seemed to have lost sight of that.

Finally, my third point: less is more. The courses I taught were survey courses, so I had for many years subscribed to the belief that I must present a large quantity of literature. What if one of my students were to hear but not understand an allusion to Frost's "The Road Not Taken"? What if one of my students, if asked, could not name a single short story written by William Faulkner? My reputation would be on the line, so I needed to cram as much into their brain as possible. Of course I knew that I wanted to teach them to appreciate great literature; I also wanted to teach them how to think, to discover, to develop, and to argue their own ideas. There was so much to do, and no time to waste in class, and since I knew most if not all of the answers, then the most efficient use of time would be for me to tell the students what they needed to know. At last, I now see that a more fruitful approach is to spend more time on fewer works. I want my students to see and understand my ideas, but I now see that I need to listen more carefully and respond to *their* ideas, and that will take some time. The co-participatory approach is dependent for success upon considerable give-and-take, and I simply was not providing the time for this dynamic to work. I was not allowing enough class time for fermentation to occur. That's exactly where I was going wrong in this process. I see that now.

New Territory: imbalance regained

I also see that I need to challenge myself with new material in the reading assignments. One of the most successful classes of the semester was a discussion of a story I had only recently read and with which I was not yet comfortable.

I occupied the morning class with a lecture on "Say Yes," by Tobias Wolff. This short story which begins with a married couple washing and drying dishes at the kitchen sink was new to me. The wife asks the husband if he would have married her had she been black; the rest of the story is the subsequent discussion. The ending is particularly challenging as a resolution is not presented explicitly. The morning students were passive members of the usual guided tour of what I thought they needed to notice, but the afternoon class was an adventure of discovery. This was one of the most successful classes of the term, and an important cause of the success was my uncertainty about the work. I was not comfortable with the story; I knew I did not have all of the answers, so I looked to my students for help. The hour flew by very quickly because there was a very active zone of proximal development in operation with my students sometimes acting as the knowledgeable other. My own ideas about the story were still unsettled; I still had questions I hadn't completely answered, so I did not try to force my own views of "Say Yes"

upon them. I was more interested in and less threatened by the students' ideas. This particular class moved along well because I was searching for resolution and understanding as much as my students were. The discussions created by the class were the result of co-participation and collective problem solving. The animated class made me realize that I should include newer stories in my list of assignments, stories I have not yet made my own, in order to foster a class which is more focused on questions, questions I am not ready to answer.

By the end of the semester I had not only resolved to include more unfamiliar (for me) material, but also to include fewer selections. The need to do so was forcefully impressed upon me when I considered the insanity of planning to read and discuss six plays (*Oedipus Rex, Othello, The Cherry Orchard, The Sandbox, Arms and the Man,* and *Death of a Salesman*) in the final four weeks of the semester. By trying to cover too much in too little time, I was not providing a real opportunity for the students to engage with the material, and by assigning only works I had "made my own" over the years, I was making it harder for me to join in the play and excitement of discovery.

The End of This Road: discoveries

I learned a great deal that semester about how I wanted to teach, about how to pull myself out of the deep rut I had created in my professional existence, about how to regain the joy of teaching. Encouraging and allowing time for students to ask and answer questions about the work we were studying, restraining my urge to maintain tight control of the direction of the class, these are the techniques I am using to create a classroom atmosphere in which students are galvanized by the joy of discovery. The joy of discovery is what great teaching and learning is all about, and it is what should be the focus of each class I conduct. I want the focus to be on student involvement with and commitment to the material we are discussing. When the focus became my performance, my lecture, my entertaining song and dance, I know I short changed my students. The challenge is in finding ways to assure that the students will get involved. Sitting in a circle with my students gave me a visual, physical reminder that I wanted to move away from the old paradigm, but sitting in a circle was not the solution. What I finally rediscovered was the importance of respecting my students, my traveling companions, enough to let them be responsible for searching their own reactions to find the treasures nestled among the pages we were reading.

I think of the many times I have helped my wife hide Easter eggs on Easter Eve. I remember the many Easter mornings I have been roused from deep slumber by "she who must be obeyed" to be told to fire up the video camera or to fetch the 35mm camera in order to capture the moments of discovery when our sons find the empty egg cartons left by the Easter Bunny, cartons which they will soon fill with the eggs the Bunny hid during the wee hours. When roused from sleep on such occasions, I usually mutter something profane about this pagan ceremony,

but I always rise. It is sometimes a struggle to keep silent during the search. I know where the eggs are located because I am not only father and resident photographer, I am also the bearded bunny who hides eggs at 2:00 in the morning. Occasionally, but with decreasing frequency as the children became older and more experienced, I would try to unobtrusively offer a gentle hint about the location of a too-well-hidden egg. The true joy of the event is being able to see the faces of my children as they discover the brightly colored eggs for themselves, the eggs which the gentle hands decorated the day before. They were in search of their own handiwork on Easter mornings and were thrilled with their discoveries.

And so it is in the ZPD as a seasoned teacher watches with joy as students go in search of the wonderful experiences and ideas within great literature. The ideas are there to be discovered, but a good teacher will not hover too closely over a young person or point too soon to the truth because that would rob the student of the joy of personal discovery, would steal from the child the glorious moment when s/he seizes the idea or experience and makes it her own, placing another beautiful egg in her basket.

ON READING POEMS TO A SENIOR CLASS AT SOUTH HIGH

Before
I opened my mouth
I noticed them sitting there
as orderly as frozen fish
in a package.

Slowly water began to fill the room
though I did not notice it
till it reached
my ears

and then I heard the sounds
of fish in an aquarium
and I knew that though I had
tried to drown them
with my words
that they had only opened up
like gills for them
and let me in.

Together we swam around the room
like thirty tails whacking words
till the bell rang
puncturing
a hole in the door

where we all leaked out

They went to another class
I suppose and I home
where Queen Elizabeth
my cat met me
and licked my fins
till they were hands again.

D.C Berry

CHAPTER 4

STUDENT JOURNALS: notes on their voyage

"I always say more and say it better..."
Jeff

Making time for student discovery in class is especially valuable when students have been considering the material before arriving in class. Asking my students to keep a literary journal eventually became the single most influential and most important difference between the conventional class and the circled class. Sitting down with my students did eventually provide a more relaxed atmosphere in the experimental class. The circled format seemed to create an expectation for greater student involvement, more discussion, and as I became better able to quietly guide rather than forcefully direct class activity, important student involvement did indeed increase. However, I did not sit down and proclaim that I had through decree and action created a ZPD. As I have explained, relinquishing obvious control was not always easy, especially at the beginning of the semester. I wanted more class discussion, but I also worried that we wouldn't "cover" the material and the students wouldn't "get" what they needed to know. The journals the students kept not only gave me the courage to go on with my experiment but were essential to its success. The journal created another form of the ZPD that worked in harmony with the seated format and almost forced me to yield time for real student participation in class discussions.

I first began to see the power and confidence a student gains from keeping a literary journal on February 5. My teaching journal indicates that the students in the 9:00 o'clock lecture class (students in this class were not required to keep a literary journal) had little or no understanding of Sylvia Plath's poem, "Metaphors." "Blasted into a discussion of 'Metaphors.' Samantha was the only student who was finally able to understand that the tenor of the poem is a pregnant woman. Many people seemed confused." (Bedell journal 2/5)

That entry is in sharp contrast to my entry for the 1:00 class the same day:

> Many people understood who and what the "I'm" refers to in "Metaphors." Just about everyone understood that the "I'm" is a pregnant woman. Many students told me they had written about this issue in their journals!!...this class moved along much better than the 9:00 o'clock lecture class because the journal seems to be having an impact. This was a very impressive class. There was a great deal of engagement with the material, even from students like

Jeff who claims he has had trouble with poetry in previous classes.
(Bedell journal 2/5)

At this point in the semester I had not yet collected the student journals for review. Because the performance and engagement of the circled class was so superior to what I had faced that morning in the traditional lecture class, I was anxious to see for myself what the students in the experimental, circled class had recorded after reading "Metaphors." Would I really be able to find evidence that requiring them to record subjective comments in a literary journal was contributing to the stark contrast between these two sections of English 102?

I collected the journals for the first time on 9 February. I remember carrying all fourteen student journals to my desk at home. Jimmy's collection of entries was the first in the stack, and it was his journal that quickly provided the answer to my question. He had made lengthy comments about "Preludes," "Kubla Khan," "Traveling Through The Dark," and "The Second Coming," but curiosity forced me to read first the entry he had made for "Metaphors." I remember feeling a bit like a parent who has stumbled upon the private journal of a son or daughter. Uninvited, I would never read my own child's private, written thoughts, but I knew my students had given me permission to read their journals. Strangely, I still felt I was reading words which were quite personal, very private, intensely intimate. I believe I experienced an emotion akin to what a surgeon must feel as s/he stands with scalpel in hand over a patient's exposed chest or brain case. I was about to peer inside the mind of one of my students. What I discovered delighted and amazed me.

Wrestling Meaning

Using printed letters which reminded me very much of my own first son's print, Jimmy recorded on February 4, the day before class, the following:

I just read over this poem [Metaphors] for the second time ever & I can honestly say that I have no idea what it means. Every line seems completely different from the other. Sylvia speaks of syllables and elephants, houses, and melons, what is she talking about?

After reading the poem for the fourth time, I began putting the many nouns together in hopes of finding a common denominator. Riddle, elephant, house, melon, stage, cow are most of them and except for stage and riddle, I am beginning to see a pattern. The other nouns bring images of large, round, and heavy things to mind. But that is as much progress as I have made. I am closer to answering the question of who 'I'm' is, but I don't know in what way.

> The seventh time over the poem and feeling a little discouraged, my eye trips over the line 'I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.' I realize that perhaps 'a stage' is not a large platform that people stand on but maybe it is a 'process of development' as my dictionary puts it. Now I am feeling quite proud of myself; I know the answer is staring me in the face. I hope going just a few more times over the poem will yield something.
>
> I think I have solved old Sylvia's riddle; she is pregnant. Or rather 'I'm' represents pregnancy itself. 'A cow in calf' along with 'I've eaten a bag of green apples' set me off to the idea. Once I thought of pregnancy and read the poem over again, all the pieces seemed to fit. Nine syllables = 9 months, a ponderous house = a large pregnant woman & my favorite, 'yeasty risings = the growth of the fetus.
>
> I am fairly confident of my conclusion. Let's hope the rest of the class agrees. (Jimmy's journal 2/4)

I was stunned! I was thrilled that Jimmy had taken the time to really work at understanding this wonderful poem, had taken the time to ask essential questions about the poet's strategy and word choice. Reading Jimmy's entry produced an epiphany. For years I had made the assumption that students simply did not have the critical ability or the experience with life to ferret out for themselves the meaning of the experiences and the significance of the images presented in a poem like "Metaphors." Yet there I sat with Jimmy's journal in hand, a journal which clearly and emphatically presented evidence to the contrary. My students could wrestle meaning from these poems by themselves! How hardened, how arrogant I had become over the years. How deep my rut had become. I was elated: Jimmy had earned victory for himself with Plath's poem; he had figured it out on his own. I also felt embarrassed for having permitted myself to drift into lazy and injurious assumptions. I had looked out and seen young people in my classes; I had gradually come to assume they were immature, inexperienced, and incapable of appropriate growth unless I told them where to go, how to get there, and how fast to proceed. Sylvia Plath's poem had placed Jimmy in a position of imbalance, and because he was intrigued by the challenge, he was able to regain his balance on his own. How proud I was of him for his tenacity, and how amazed I was by the implications of his performance!

When a student comes to the circle of learners as prepared as Jimmy was after his wonderful personal effort with Plath's poem, the ZPD will evolve as an extremely energized meeting place for all assembled. We spent very little time during the circled, experimental class on February 5 trying to determine the tenor of "Metaphors." Most of the students had already determined for themselves that the "I" in the poem was a pregnant woman. What we moved on to discuss was Plath's skill in her artfully constructed poem. I did not tell them what they

should see; we all shared our praise and appreciation for what the poet had prepared for us. We were sharing ideas and opinions about the poem in a ZPD that was made possible because my students had devoted considerable thought to the work and had written their thoughts down in their journals before we gathered for our class. Because they had focused so completely on the poem before we began, the intensity and quality of the teaching and learning was very high. Instead of wrestling with a cold-sounding assignment to "analyze a poem," they were busily exchanging ideas and insights, appreciating, and, of course, in the process, doing a fine job of analyzing the poem.

Wrestling and Failing

Of course, not all entries, especially at first, revealed the sort of success that Jimmy had achieved. For example, one entry was as brief as, "Mr. Bedell, For the life of me, I cannot figure it out. I have no idea what it could be." (Kathleen's journal 2/1) This simple announcement of failure was undeveloped; there was no attempt to show any effort toward discovery. It was as though the writer thought there had to be a developed answer or surrender, so she surrendered.

Mike Rose has asserted that "failure marks the place where education begins." One revelation of the success of failure can be seen in two entries Sally made for this same assignment. Before class she, like Kathleen, was stumped:

> OK, I am racking my brain here, Mr. Bedell! I have no clue who the 'I'm' in Plath's 'Metaphors' is. I am trying desperately to see relationships. 'Riddle, elephant, house, melon, stage, cow'; they are big? Can be opened? No! Because that doesn't combine them all. The meaning behind 'syllables, tendrils, fruit, ivory, timbers, loaf's yeasty rising, money, purse, and train.' Frighteningly enough I am lost - L - O - S - T. This keeps me wondering so much!! Help!" (Sally's journal 2/1)

In this entry we can see that the writer actually has not admitted defeat. Even though she was L-O-S-T, she had thought about the details and continued wondering. I can imagine her, in odd moments during the day, wondering about the images - images she would be more likely to remember since she had written them down. In any case, her next journal entry illustrated the pleasure that accompanies victory reached on the shoulders of defeat. Instead of dealing only with the next assignment, Sally's entry after the class in which we discussed "Metaphors" turned back to that class. "All right Mr. Bedell - talking through it helped. I figured it out. It describes pregnancy. Sylvia Plath is saying 'I am pregnant.'" (Sally's journal 2/4) Sally went on to analyze the poem line by line. This was wonderful: a student was so excited that on her own initiative she used her journal to clarify for herself, perhaps to show off for herself (as well as for me?), her grasp of this work that had earlier left her lost.

Reading these journals was really teaching me a lot. I found myself giving silent cheers for each personal victory as I reviewed these entries over weekends at home, and I would always write marginal and end comments of praise and encouragement.

Modeling for Success

In her follow up entry for "Metaphors," Sally was doing for herself a version of what I did for the class with Jimmy's entry copied above. On the day I returned the journals, I read Jimmy's entry for "Metaphors" as an example of a superb entry. I did not tell the class who had written it, but I did assure them it was a classmate. Reading Jimmy's entry of course allowed him to feel proud of his accomplishment, but I had other reasons for reading it.

From reading the journals, I had formed the impression that some students found the assignment intimidating. These students seemed to believe, in spite of all that I had said, that I wanted them to compose a formal response, a polished essay, each time they made an entry in their journals. They had specific written instructions for the journal (see appendix), but some couldn't seem to believe that I wanted them to relax and record their subjective reflections about the works we were studying. So, one point I wanted to make was that their entries were to record their responses; I was not asking for carefully crafted literary criticism.

Perhaps the more important result of sharing student journal writing was that I could demonstrate both that the critical reading strategies I was urging them to adopt did work and that one of their classmates met with success when he employed them. Reading Jimmy's journal was an excellent method of reinforcing the need for perseverance and precision. Understanding a poem may require several readings, and the reader must consider the specific details of what is said. In other words, this was an opportunity for me to present again the same reading strategies that I had been offering earlier, but the messenger (Jimmy's journal entry) was new.

Developing Ideas

The journal not only offered time for students to reflect on writers' strategies, it also provided a forum for reflection about writers' ideas. The journals offered evidence aplenty that students were reacting to the substance as well as the form of what they were reading.

Several of the stories I assigned caused a great deal of imbalance to occur in students' reflections, and in those moments of reflection and deep consideration the members of the circled, experimental class could see how influential great literature could be - and I saw how engaged these young people were. The class during which we discussed Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" was one of the best classes I have ever experienced. When I began reading my students'

entries for this short story, I understood why each student had been so troubled, so energized during that particular class.

Christy made the following statements in her journal:

> I found this story [The Lottery] very disturbing because it is very real in today's society. Not so much the actual ideal [sic] of stoning a person but the thinking and reason behind the stoning. The people in this story have no idea why they hold a lottery or why they stone the victim. They simply do it because they have always done it. If you stopped and asked any one of those people the purpose of the lottery or how or why it began, I think that no one could give you an answer. That's what scared me. We are supposed to be at the top of the food chain; we are supposed to be the intelligent, problem solving humans, but we all follow along and often never think to ask "Why"? Why do we do this? Who says that this is right or that we have to do this? A very good example of the human race following along blindly would be the Holocaust. Hitler controlled and led so many people into doing hideous things. How many of those people asked the question, Why? Is this right? Science tries to tell us that we are independent individuals, but we are really a herd species. We follow each other around and don't like to upset the group by disagreeing or not following along. It's always easier to be a part of something than not and then be annihilated for it. In the end of the story not only did her friends and neighbors stone Tessie, but also her family. Now that's sick and twisted. I don't believe that they even comprehend what they are doing! They are taking life away. They are murdering a loved one, and they don't even realize it. They have no guilt because they don't feel that they have a choice. It's a lottery and to them it's a fact of life. They have no control or choice over it and so they don't feel that it is their fault or that they are held accountable for her death. When the woman handed Tessie's son, Davy, a rock, they just killed the conscience of that child. That moment taught the child that it was okay and that this was simply the way it was. He is too young to know better and now he will never learn and will never ask why or wonder if it is right. It is our nature to conform and something of this nature can and has happened. We have to learn to always ask the question why? Do we have to? How come? Who says? Is it right? Without these questions we will be exactly like the people in "The Lottery." (Christy's journal 3/1)

What a magnificent entry! Not only did Christy present her views in a very direct fashion, she was so moved by Jackson's story that she is driven to *developing* her response so that she could relieve the stress that the story has caused her.

Rehearsing

During that class on "The Lottery," Christy entered the discussion on several occasions with very strong opinions. After reviewing her journal entry it was easy to see why she was able to make so many excellent observations during class. She had already thought hard about the story before arriving to discuss it in class. She had, in fact, recorded the reasons for her disturbed feelings about the experience Jackson gave the reader. Writing about her reaction, trying to make sense of the story, Christy had already tried to think through her own uncomfortable feelings. Much of her attempt to take meaning from the story had occurred before she came to class. What a tremendous advantage for her, and what a wonderful strategy for a teacher to follow! I was not placed in a position of having to tell her what she should think; she had begun to work that out for herself. Reading the story gave her an emotional reaction; writing her journal allowed for an intellectual reaction.

This process of clarification that the journal recorded also served as a rehearsal for class discussion. When students come to class already having considered the significance of the material they were to have read, the class discussion can go farther quicker. Of course, one does not have to make a journal assignment in order to have students think about the material, but I am convinced the journal certainly encourages reflection. All too often students pass eyes over a page and tell themselves they have read it. Reading involves one mind communicating with another mind; an experienced reader thinks about what he has read. The journal encourages inexperienced readers to form the habit of reflection.

Would Christy have been as ready for class without having made journal entries about "The Lottery"? I know the story would have still affected her strongly, but I do not believe she would have been as ready to engage so actively in discussion if she had not, in a sense, rehearsed in her journal what she wanted to say. Through the journal she had a chance to get her act together. Writing her thoughts down the night before was a preparation, a rehearsal, for her oral participation in class.

From Reader Response to Formal Essay

The journals gave me a view of my students that I could not have gotten in any other way, and because of this new perspective I was able to see the great potential all of my students possessed. I began to respect these young adults because they were committed to doing a good job in the course; they were so honest and direct as they wrote in their journals. How could I not respect the time and effort they devoted to trying to come to grips with the often frightening and frustrating experiences which were presented in the challenging works we were reading?

The journal promoted more and deeper reflection about the literature we were studying, and journal writing also produced an ever evolving record of spontaneous thoughts which proved most helpful to students as they began to think about producing thesis statements for their formal writing assignments in the course. Louise provides a case in point.

Louise was among the more introverted students in the class, and she told me on several occasions that she had never done very well in English because she could "never think on an abstract level," and that seemed to be necessary for success with literature. She was very worried about writing a formal, graded essay, and had just about convinced herself that she would never do better than an F. Nonetheless, she wanted very much to write a paper on William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" because she said the story was so overwhelming to her. She simply could not understand why Miss Emily would do something as gross as sleeping with the body of her dead lover. She made several entries in her journal in an effort to come to grips with the horror she experienced as she read the story. Her second journal entry about "A Rose for Emily" showed Louise's continuing struggle to make sense of such a bizarre woman.

> Emily has lost reality, and does not want to face it. She will not accept the passage of time, so when Homer dies, she keeps his clothes out as though he will awaken from sleep and put them on. She does not face the fact that he is dead. She tries to stop time by locking herself in her house for months and years. She ages, becomes fat, pale, and yellowish. She dies and she becomes a monument only looked upon for her house, her belongings, and her lack of realizing reality. She has become odd and hard to understand. Why would she want to live such a miserable and fake life? (Out of reality) I believe that she is in some kind of deep depression state or something. (Louise's journal 3/2)

Louise continued to be perplexed by Emily's sad state of affairs, and her next journal entry expressed her continued frustration with Emily.

> This story continues to depress me. It shows how this woman lost something that meant a lot to her, and she could not get over it. From then on her life was miserable, broken, torn apart. She lived each second, minute, hour, month and year trying to stop the passage of time. She was unable to see reality in life and therefore wasted her life to depression and died with her reality unfound. Her need of help, and independence was lost, never having been found. (Louise's journal 3/5)

I was able to schedule the film version of "A Rose for Emily," and Louise's next entry presents her amplified appreciation for Emily's situation:

> After watching the movie in class today, I was able to recognize how distasteful, sick, and disgusting this lady was. How would anyone

> stand the smell of a dead body and the noise of flies. This woman not only could not face reality, but she had a serious psychological problem. She also had no mother; she was, however, close to her father. When she lost him, she lost her only sense of love, and that explains why she could not face reality and wanted to stop the passage of time. The watch on the chain signifies the passage of lost time. (Louise's journal 3/8)

The journal continued with additional observations about Emily, a woman who poisoned her lover then lived with his corpse. The entry concluded with, "This story really disturbed me, and it was very hard to deal with. It's so unbelievable!" Of course, what Louise meant was not, "I do not believe this could happen." She was appalled and disgusted by the story, but she did not dismiss it with an "I won't think about the story any more because it is so unbelievable." Instead, she felt that in Emily's bizarre behavior there was a truth about human nature, a truth Louise was trying to identify and understand.

Louise was so frustrated by the story that she told me she *needed* to write an essay about Miss Emily. She wanted to come to a better understanding of the story so she could be more comfortable with it, and she thought writing the essay would help her reach that goal. The problem was, she simply did not know where to begin.

In her journal, Louise had pointed to several interesting issues in the story, so when she scheduled a conference with me, I suggested she bring her journal. As we sat at my desk reviewing the comments she had made about Miss Emily in her journal, I pointed out several interesting observations she had recorded about the character of Miss Emily, any one of which could lead to an excellent thesis statement. She simply needed to imagine someone asking her what she meant about any one of her observations. For instance, she had said that Emily was described as "a tradition" and "a monument." How was she a tradition? She was a monument paying tribute to what? Louise had also pointed to the possible significance of the hidden watch which ticked away behind Miss Emily's waistband. Could the fact that time was placed out of sight have any significance? Louise claimed that Miss Emily demonstrated a serious psychological problem. What was the nature of the problem? What might have been the cause? Louise's journal provided the spring board for our discussion of Miss Emily, and it was a revelation for Louise to see that she already had done much of the work needed to compose a preliminary thesis statement. She began to understand that a good thesis statement comes from answering questions someone might raise about the literature being studied, and she saw that she had, in fact, already posed several excellent questions about Miss Emily and had begun answering them in her journal. She left my office filled with confidence in her own ability to write the essay, and the confidence she exhibited was the direct result of being able to recognize what she had already accomplished as pre-writing in her journal.

What a wonderful teaching tool a journal can be! When a teacher can help a hesitant student - or any student for that matter - see that the journal, the student's own writing, contains significant insights which can be the basis for further discussion, what a satisfying experience that is for both student and teacher. Louise's journal was the foundation for an extremely productive student conference. I was not placed in the position, as had often been the case, of having to compose a thesis for the student. Louise was able to see that she had already suggested several excellent thesis statements herself as she tried to make sense of Faulkner's story. Writing about her initial, spontaneous responses to the story amounted to very fruitful pre-writing for a later, more formal analytical and argumentative essay.

Drawing Out the Hesitant

Louise was one of the students I had worried most about during the first few weeks of class. She often seemed over her head and was very reluctant to enter class discussions even when we were discussing "A Rose for Emily," the story which she found so troubling. She simply did not seem to have enough confidence in herself to talk about her responses to the literature we were reading and discussing. However, the day we discussed "Rape Fantasies," we were only a few moments into the discussion when I could see that Louise was disagreeing strongly but silently with what was being said. Trying once more to encourage her participation, I asked for her ideas. Her initial comments served as the catalyst for that very successful class. Her journal entry about "Rape Fantasies" clearly showed why she was able to speak forcefully for the first time in the semester.

> I was shocked and astonished by this short story. I find it hard to believe that these women had such fantasies, but yet silly fantasies on an attempt of rape. When society today describes rape, we describe it as an illegal act of violence against someone who turns out to be a victim in an innocent but painful mind-shocking attack from someone who is completely sick in the head. Why would anyone want to fantasize about a harmful act of rape? (Louise's journal 3/17)

Louise was able to muster the courage necessary to voice her opinion of Atwood's short story to initiate class discussion because she had first found her voice by writing her emotional and intellectual response to "Rape Fantasies" prior to class in her literary journal. Having thought through the reasons for her reaction while in the process of writing down her reflections, she was able to gain the confidence to express her deeply held opinions in front of the class. I was very proud of her. I knew she could enter the discussion because she had already formulated her views beautifully in her journal. Ann L. Brown states in *The Advancement of Learning*, "It is a common belief that higher thought is an internalized dialogue. To foster this we create the active exchange and reciprocity of dialogue in our classroom, which are intentionally designed to foster interpretive communities"(10). Louise had engaged in internalized dialogue before our class

on Atwood's provocative short story, so she was able to express with confidence her views in front of our interpretive, circled community.

Every class is going to have its talkers and its silent observers. As the semester progressed, most of the more introverted students in that afternoon class began to blossom and add themselves to the bouquet of our class discussion. Jimmy, who claimed he had not ever done well in English, delighted in his own performance, and sometimes, in the heat of enthusiasm while making a point, would be on the verge of dominating the discussion. The fact that he did have such interesting insights made his contributions significant, but I tried to ensure that everyone had a chance to participate.

Cultivating Quiet Growth

In spite of my efforts to restrain some of the more ebullient and foster the more retiring of my students, not everyone grew comfortable with class discussion. Kathleen tried to remain resolutely mute throughout the semester, and if it hadn't been for the journal, I would probably not have appreciated how much her critical skills had grown. Just as she did very little talking, at the beginning of the semester she tried to do very little writing. Her entire entry for the day we discussed "Metaphors" consisted of two sentences: "Mr. Bedell, for the life of me, I cannot figure it out. I have no idea what it could be." (Kathleen's journal 2/1) That's it: she had said what she had to say, and she planned to do no more.

Writing in the margin of her journal, I encouraged her to compose more complete responses, to express her feelings, her reactions to the literature more fully. Gradually, that's exactly what she began to do. I was delighted when her journal entries began to lengthen as she apparently became more comfortable with the class and as she saw that I was really interested in how she reacted to the stories. During the 18 March class, when we discussed Margaret Atwood's short story, "Rape Fantasies." Kathleen did not say much during the class, but she listened intently. Her journal reveals just how far she had come since declaring defeat after reading "Metaphors."

> This story is strange. As soon as I read the title, I knew this was going to be a very interesting story. How can people think about being raped? Rape can hurt you so much, so how can you think about being hurt? When Greta tells her fantasy, that's all it is, a fantasy. She does not make it sound like she is being raped. I think this is her dream man and this is her way of romance. Estelle sounds like a funny person, but she also sounds a little strange. In her fantasies she never gets raped; instead she ends up having a conversation with them. In the end of the story it shows Estelle is a kind hearted person. Just as Estelle I don't understand why people rape each other. In the dictionary rape is defined as a 'seizing by violence, carnal knowledge of a woman against her will.'

None of the women's fantasies have been violent or against their will. The women are not even fighting the men off.

Fantasy is defined as a fanciful artistic production.' The women's fantasies are just productions of what they want. This story is not concerned with rape. (Kathleen's journal 3/17)

This was, compared to her "Metaphors" entry, an astonishing growth. Louise's ability to articulate her perplexity and outrage in her journal had helped propel her into class discussion. Kathleen, on the other hand, would never, through the end of the semester, be lured into willing participation in class discussion. Yet her critical thinking skills, her ability to analyze her own responses, were maturing wonderfully. In this entry she registered perplexity, but she also speculated and evaluated and her conclusions were dead-on accurate: Greta's vision *is* romance; Estelle *is* funny and kind-hearted; and the story is *not* about rape!

Kathleen's journal not only told me she was quite prepared for our class; it also allowed me to develop a rapport with her as my student. Her journal allowed us to enter a more private ZPD together. If she chose to remain quiet in class, that was fine because I could travel another avenue with her to make certain she did engage the literature. Her journal had other entries which were just as perceptive, just as on target as her entry for "Rape Fantasies." My comments were always directed to encouragement and praise, and by semester's end, I knew Kathleen much better than I would have had I not had the opportunity to read her journal. This very quiet student received individual attention and very specific encouragement which I would not have been able to provide without the journal. She never did become an eager talker, but, through the journal, I witnessed a remarkable improvement in her analytic and writing skills.

Thinking Critically

The journal was effective not only in encouraging confidence in the timid and quiet; it was also effective in encouraging restraint and discipline in the more exuberant. Jeff was one of the most aggressive and vocal students I have ever known. He would always voice his opinions during class. He was not obnoxious, and he was well liked, but when he had something to say, he would say it. Jeff became more and more enthusiastic about our class as the semester advanced, and his observations about details in the works were often helpful. His journal was an invaluable source of examples with which I would reinforce for him the need to examine and support his generalizations. For instance, Ernest Hemingway's very short story, "Hills Like White Elephants," is presented in "dramatic" or "objective" point of view. That is, we are simply given dialogue and a description of physical action; there is no characterization or interpretation in the narrative. This is a challenging story; the reader is never explicitly told that the couple is discussing an abortion, and the narrative never actually says what either person is

thinking. For someone who hadn't quite grasped either the precise subject of the discussion (an abortion) or the speakers' different emotions (the woman wants the relationship to continue and grow; for the man it is already over), Jeff made a fine start at analyzing the story.

> What in the hell? Mr. Bedell, I hope that you can shed some light on this story. What is Hemingway striving for? How does this broaden and sharpen my understanding of life? Is this truly a good story or only is good because Hemingway wrote it? I do not know. What I know without a shadow of a doubt is that the two main characters love and care for one another. The woman is about to have some kind of operation that she thinks will make him love her again. She doesn't care about the pain or what might happen to herself.
>
> What she cares about is him. It is all about what the man wants. Hemingway gives us two very perplexing yet interesting characters. Whatever they are trying to do to save their lives is not going to work. She doesn't hear him anywhere, and he just doesn't care what she is saying. Though they love each other very much. It would take much more than a simple operation to save it. (Jeff's journal,)

Jeff asked some good questions about Hemingway's frustrating story, and had done some excellent thinking about it. He really did understand the big picture, "Whatever they are trying to do to save their lives is not going to work." Jeff was absolutely right. However, he hadn't quite put all the pieces together. Sometimes in the heat of the class discussion students do not clearly focus on what other people are saying, and that was sometimes true for Jeff. However, when, in his journal, I asked him to try to support his two statements "What I know without a shadow of a doubt is that the two main characters love and care for one another," and "they love each other very much," he could, removed from the classroom, reconsider his generalizations. By way of encouragement I also pointed out that he had already seemed to recognize that the generalizations were not quite accurate, since he had observed that "she [wants to] make him love her again." The journal allowed me to guide Jeff toward more careful analysis. The journal also gave me the pleasure of seeing just how close Jeff had come on his own to full understanding as he read the story and as he thought about it on his own before we discussed it in class.

Something for Everyone

My students did not fully realize how important their journals were for me. They restored my faith in their desire and ability to learn and helped teach me again what at the beginning of my career I knew instinctively: a teacher works with his students, encouraging their

curiosity and helping them recognize and evaluate their own and others' ideas. A teacher's goals for his students are not those of a drill instructor who seeks to produce carefully defined physical responses; one cannot order another to learn. Reading my students' journals reminded me that these students, like most of us, were curious, responsive to encouragement, and willing to take interpretative chances when they could relax and not be worried about a graded evaluation of a writing assignment's organization, development, mechanical proficiency *and* substance. Student journals were essential both to my revitalization as a teacher and to my students' growth as perceptive individuals.

The students themselves placed a great importance on the journals. They spent a great deal of time writing in a journal which counted for very little in the numerical computation of their final grade. Although I told them their final journal grade would be factored in with the quiz grades for the entire semester, and that combination would comprise only ten percent of the total grade, they still continued to write extensive observations in their journals about their response to the literature we were studying, and they continued to be totally interested in my responses to their inner dialogue. Each and every one of the students in the circled class was totally focused on my comments when I handed back the journals. I had to wait two or three minutes to begin class on the days I handed back the journals. My brief comments were the focus of such intense interest that once, when I tried to hold off handing the journals back until the end of class, the students were on the verge of riot. So, I capitulated and returned the journals at the beginning of the period, glad that the students were so curious about my responses to their writing. Jeff, who spent a great deal of time on his journal writing, once said , "Mr Bedell, I always say more and say it better in the journal than I do in a formal paper."

His comment often comes back to me: "I always say more and say it better in the journal." The journals created confidence in each student by allowing each person to seek and find his or her own voice to demonstrate an evolving command of the material. It was a safe way to grapple with the challenging material because mistakes did not result in a low grade. This vehicle for discovery and experimentation was fun because it allowed risk-free chance-taking but also produced penalty-free evaluation through my comments. The journal fostered trust and a mutual respect. I think the students became quite interested in testing their views in this way; they were sharing with me a possible interpretation of the literature, *their* interpretations of the literature, and when I did not react negatively with a red pen, but rather encouraged and praised their attempts to make the literature their own, we were both amply rewarded. The journals offered freedom for my students; an immense space waited for them to explore and transcribe their discoveries, to strengthen their ability to evaluate and communicate those discoveries. Their journals offered me encouragement as a teacher as I read the record of their growth.

CHAPTER 5

REFLECTIONS

As I enter what will most likely be the last decade of my teaching career, if that is in fact what Providence will grant, my goal is to work with what I have learned and create valuable educational experiences for my students. I had arrived at a pivotal moment as I began the spring semester at MVC in 1996. Had that experimental class not finally evolved into an exciting adventure for me, I would now be traveling down an altogether different road which would have led me away from education. I am glad that is the road not taken. The succeeding years have been challenging and interesting and I believe worthwhile for my students as well as for me.

Although I am no longer teaching literature classes, what I learned (rediscovered) in that spring semester afternoon literature class is invigorating my composition classes.

The journey of discovery was not easy for me. The reality I faced at MVC was sobering. I had become isolated from students because I developed a hubris which caused habit to flourish, insight to dim, and assumption to solidify. I knew I had to change what happened in my classroom, but it was a very long and difficult journey from the starting point of recognizing the need for change to the goal of accepting and effectively implementing that change. However, I regained a very precious commodity as a result of all my efforts. I have regained my courage to enter a classroom with a sense of adventure. The gray beard and receding hairline not withstanding, I actually find myself getting excited about classes again because while I have a general game plan, it is my students who will form and focus what is important to them as we engage our minds. Learning with my students has made me young again. I can attest that "Teaching literature democratically requires balancing a rough plan with an ongoing improvised conversation--no plan and it's all confusion, all plan an it's a straightjacket." (Pradl 130)

The nineteenth century critic Matthew Arnold in "The Functions of Criticism at the Present Time," warned of the dangers of complacency and urged critics (all thoughtful people) to "learn and propagate the best that has been thought and said" in order to create a climate of ideas which will contribute to the improvement of society. My idea in the literature survey course was to expose the students to as much as possible so the students could develop standards of their own by which to judge ideas and reactions. My objective was to make the students read as many works as possible. If I were teaching that course now, I would assign fewer works, and spend more class time with students discussing each work, thereby allowing familiarity to foster affection. Comfort with and respect for one work could encourage reading of other works, and would equip the readers with evaluation skills for life-long learning. Life-long learning: my experience has certainly shown me how essential that is, and how difficult, sometimes, it can be

to recognize that the process has stopped, to realize how much has broken down once one huddles within the comfortable, predictable grooves of a rut. During my journey toward renewal I had euphoric moments followed by deep discouragement. Often, I would think I was breaking out of the rut when in reality I was simply reactivating parts of me that had rusted from disuse. Getting those parts in working order was the first step, getting them to work together to break out of the confining walls of habit was more difficult than I had thought it would be.

The wonder is that I did achieve the needed breakthrough. For one thing, I was trying to enhance the learning experience in an atmosphere of doom and gloom among faculty both dazed from repeated warnings that the financial collapse of the school was inevitable and frustrated by students with weak, and from year to year declining, academic preparation. Further, the students were quite distracted not only by the usual interests of young people, but also by the need to plan for the next academic year. Finally, I think at times I inadvertently thwarted my own goal of improved learning experiences for my students. I was so dedicated to the idea that I had a control and an experimental group and that these classes would be taught with different methods, that I consciously tried not to incorporate changes in the morning class because I wanted to keep it as it had always been. I suppose that is good scientific methodology, but in practice it meant that I wasn't trying to improve that class. Further, as I kept recording in my journal my reaction to the lecture class, I may have been reinforcing my unproductive negative attitude toward that class.

One could argue that the "improvements" in the afternoon, experimental class were not such wonderful improvements since, at the end of the semester, the grades for the two classes were not significantly different. To this charge I respond that I don't think a difference of final grades is necessarily the appropriate measure of the success of the experimental class. In the first place, the tests may not have adequately evaluated the type of engagement that grew out of the afternoon experience. Second, and related to the first point, there was a significant difference in attitude in the two classes; the afternoon class developed a much more positive attitude toward the process of reading and discussing as well as toward themselves. Third, I found the afternoon class more challenging and invigorating because there were times when I was uncomfortably off balance, challenged by new ideas, and excited by the growing confidence of my students. Therefore, from my standpoint the experimental class was a success because 1) the students seemed to be more engaged in and excited by the learning process, 2) I really knew the students' work well, so I understood (even though I may have been disappointed by) the reasons why the students earned the grades they did, and 3) since I was perplexed by the similar grades in each class, I have been thinking much more about what I am trying to evaluate in my assignments and how I am evaluating. I believe the students in the afternoon class acquired some necessary skills useful for lifelong learning, and I believe they were acquiring the confidence to pursue new ideas and test old ones independently. I *know* that I am a better teacher for the experience.

I have recovered sufficient patience to take the time to listen to students once again. I now set aside huge chunks of time to listen to their views during the many conferences I conduct with each individual during each semester, and I listen to their ideas more attentively in class. Learning to articulate ideas, responding to others' ideas, improving reactions and communication, these are exciting group activities.

> Language is always individually internalized in transactions with the environment at a particular time under particular social and cultural circumstances. Each individual, whether speaker listener, writer, or reader, brings to the transaction a personal linguistic-experiential reservoir, the residue of past transactions in life and language...'Meaning' emerges from the reverberations of all these factors, personal and social, upon one another.
>
> (Rosenblatt, *RTP* 182)

I need to listen to the ideas and the words students select to convey their ideas if I want to help them learn to learn and help myself broaden my own understanding.

I have also regained an awareness of the perseverance required by any noble enterprise. I think of my own youth, much of which was spent with a twelve foot oar (sweep) in my hands manning the stroke position on an eight oared racing shell and later as a long distance runner, and I realize once again the race has value for the participant who persists and does his best to rise to the challenges he is fortunate enough to face. The students were and are my challenge, and they are a challenge I welcome. Yes, students are distracted by concerns beyond the classroom, but that is true of every endeavor in life. I remind myself daily of how it was to be a novice student; I do not have to travel that far back in time to remember the many daunting moments of personal imbalance I experienced as I stepped up to the challenges created during seven years of graduate study at Virginia Tech. The problem I had been facing at MVC was not simply the students, but my own inertia. I was sacrificing their intellectual and spiritual growth as well as my own potential to improve as a teacher as I circled and circled deeper and deeper into the rut I had carved for myself by treading the same ground in the same fashion year after year after predictable year. There was no joy, no fun, in this approach to teaching, only the cold comfort of routine.

I now see my burnout was directly related to my cynical response to the apparent lack of ability displayed by my students. I performed for my audience, but I didn't expect much from them. I was on automatic pilot, and I was not having any fun. I was not making any attempt to tap into the energy of youth, its plasticity and potential. I was guided by my entrenched habits, by a flight plan which was chiseled in stone, a flight plan that had evolved over time and then had become calcified. My actions were driven by a subtle goal: I would preserve my way of doing things - my way of conducting *my* classes. There was no sense of adventure in my classroom.

Students were not making any meaning of their own because I was not allowing them to have the freedom to do so.

> When [a] preemptory way of talking prevails in classroom discussions of literature, power and control are at issue, not equal access. If the goal is to keep building toward mutuality, then as teachers, we will reject winner-take-all approaches to whatever controversy arises....No one would have to yield to the dominant voice or voices in order to avoid the risk of ending up alone. Everyone works to weave reciprocally dependent spaces that thrive on the riches of harmony and counterpoint--we fill the score together. (Pradl 47)

I wanted to see greater participation, more active learning, but I was concerned about maintaining control. I was very concerned about the need to "cover" what I felt had to be covered in the brief span of a semester. "As teachers one of our greatest fears is losing control of the classroom. Thus it's easier to speak and question rather than listen. For if we listen, we think that students will just talk about their own interests and leave the lesson behind"(Pradl 67). This was my greatest concern. I did not want to lose my sense of direction by losing control of the class. I worried that the void created by my unwillingness to crack the whip would be perceived as an inability to teach, which had become, quite frankly, simply a process of downloading my own knowledge and my own opinions of the many great works of literature I assigned.

However, once I was able to relax my control, I began to see my students in a new light. As a result of reading their journals regularly, I began to understand and respect how each of them attempted to reflect upon and grapple with the literature we were reading. I saw how they reasoned through passages and how they responded emotionally to the ideas and images in the literature. I was able to draw on this understanding during our class discussions. Even the introverted in the group could be coaxed out of silence because, having already read and responded to their ideas in their journals, I knew they had some interesting views to share with the class. I began to have more confidence in my students' ability to make meaning.

I have come to see that the new energy and delight I have found in my most recent teaching experiences have emerged as a result of doing away with sweeping negative assumptions about my students' potential for academic growth and their commitment to academic excellence. My assumptions are now based upon the conviction that each student in each of my classes has the ability to create and experience a personal transaction with the material we are reading and that s/he will be able to give voice to his or her understanding of the work when we gather to create new meaning as a group.

> This conception of *constructive thinking* encourages us to face the fury and unpredictability of emotion, which by the nature of things will always initially appear out of control and therefore uncontrollable--living life in the uncertainty lane. But that's the promise of democracy. Vulnerability. Trust. Improvisation. Everything seems turned on its head when as teacher I'm preparing myself to listen, not to act as if I know in advance. (Pradl 92)

I am certain that students find it easier to imagine an interested reader for their essays when those essays grow out of class discussions where divergent viewpoints are aired.

The best classes I experienced were those classes in which I talked less and listened more. When I became a witness to students who were in the process of making meaning, I knew that's when learning was taking place because the students were creating the moment as they gave voice to their own views of the truth. Was I in control of the class? No, I was not, but I was a member of the group. I was in the Zone of Proximal Development - the Zone of Rebellion - the Zone of Learning and Meaning - and I was not certain where or when or even if closure would be achieved concerning the issues being aired, but what I experienced was fun - serious fun, and it was glorious when I would hear the bell ring and rather than witness a stampede, I would see frustration on the faces of the students in the circled class because many would still want to make a point. On several occasions conversations and heated exchanges continued into the hall and out the front door of Durham Hall. Who among the crowd had the correct view of each poem, short story or play?

I too was finding a confidence I had lost somewhere in the many classes of English 102 which I had taught for two decades at MVC. When my faith in my students' ability to understand the literature we were studying was restored, and when I gave my students the freedom to voice their opinions in a circled class setting, teaching became fun once again. I could not simply order myself to relax in the first few classes anymore than I could order my students to be more responsive and more engaged in that particular experimental setting. We had to seek and gain an understanding of the new strategy by learning to trust in each other's abilities, intentions, and strategies. I agree with Christy: "This is the way we learn best."

When I began my teaching career, I was blindly courageous. I didn't know enough not to be brave. "Premature visions and planning blind you to possibilities." When I was with the Learn and Earn children in Clearlake, every moment of every day was an adventure. Planning, if it did take place, was spontaneous. I got to know those kids very well because much of what we did was actually play. We laughed together, traveled to the circus together, built boardwalks together - we had a good time, and we had good times planning good times in a spontaneous way. To an outside observer what my students and I did together might well have seemed like chaotic activity. I visited other Learn and Earn programs in Fort Lauderdale one day and was humbled

by the order and control I witnessed in those classrooms. The children were quiet and seemed cowed. There was extensive regimentation in every other trailer I saw, and I thought to myself, "Now these teachers really have it all together." I have since changed my mind. Perhaps those teachers were trying to hold on to what they knew as they tried to work with "underachieving" migrant children. The classrooms seemed lifeless; I saw no excitement as students labored over their worksheets. The carefully controlled orderly classroom is no longer my model. Students and teachers alike need to be free to take chances, to try something whose outcome is not completely predictable. Errors will be made; discoveries will be made. Fun should be had by student and teacher, and spontaneity and the attendant chaos must be not just permitted but nurtured. There will be false starts and confusion, growth and recognition of complexity: learning. That's where the fun is!

CHAPTER 6

CONTINUING THE ADVENTURE

Because I was able to rediscover the challenge and joy in teaching that inspired me many years ago at Clearlake High School, I accepted a position with the Department of English and Fine Arts at The Virginia Military Institute beginning in the fall of 1996. The environment at Mountain View College had been chaotic: the mission, the administrators, the rules were churning and changing and spinning out of control. The environment at VMI was highly structured and strongly resistant to sudden - or even gradual - change. Whereas most colleges try to welcome freshmen and aid their transition from high school to college, VMI boasts of the obstacles to academic excellence it constructs for the freshman year.

The VMI adversative system of initiation has been defined by Alan Farrell, Dean of the Faculty, as "on the good side of a narrow but distinguishable line separating needless cruelty and silliness from a sustained and systematic application of stress designed to exact from these cadets the best inside them and to inoculate them against fear, fatigue, frustration and indecision in time to come." (*The Roanoke Times,* August 1998*)* This definition was to explain a remark by the Superintendent in the aftermath of the court decision that VMI must admit women: "Virginia Military Institute conceded to the will of the U.S. Supreme Court and admitted women with a promise from Superintendent Josiah Bunting III that they would be treated the same as the men who had endured the rat line before them -- 'badly'."

I was feeling a bit off balance as I moved from the chaotic environment of MVC, which had been, until two years before its end, all female, to the regimentation of VMI, a school fighting its hardest to remain all male. Facing that unique audience (terrified "rats" who were then completely consumed by the horrors of the infamous VMI rat line), I elected not to circle the desks. Too much was new to both my students and me to muster the courage to take such a step at that point in my transition and theirs. Those poor teenagers were in the process of losing themselves, their personal identity, to the rigors of "the line." They were being told when and what to think, yelled at by upperclassmen, and physically stressed daily. For their sakes, I thought it wise to find a small patch of steady ground for myself in this very strange environment before I launched any personal paradigms for change.

Soon, I began to feel more comfortable and tried to be more spontaneous in my classes, to have more plans that were open-ended. I learned how to use the stress and tension the cadets float on to my advantage by occasionally taking on the persona of a complete authoritarian. As when I was at Mountain View College, the students became adept at reading my facade. The semester went well: I thought I had established a good rapport with my classes, and the cadets had responded with interest and effort to the assignments. Each student did not become an

exemplar of academic excellence, but most did seem interested in stretching their minds and improving their skills.

The next semester I decided that I needed to push the envelope, as they say at VMI. Surrendering some control to the class at Mountain View College had not been easy, but it had enabled me to regain my enthusiasm for and commitment to teaching. How would cadets respond to circling their ranks and confronting each other at eye level? I decided to find out with my after lunch group - the cadets I met at 1300 hours. It would be a sort of repetition of my experiment at MVC; I would try circled seating in one class, rows in the others. An important difference was that I did not feel I would be working with a control group which should remain unaffected by what happened in the experimental group, and I definitely had no intention of conducting straight lecture in a control class. I would do what seemed best in each class, but I would change the seating in one class to see if I noticed a difference.

The cadets in the afternoon class were uncomfortable and perplexed: what was this circle business? I had anticipated a learning curve, a period of time during which adjustment to the new paradigm would take place, and I was right. At first they were not eager to voice personal opinions, and their first brush with keeping a literary response journal fell flat. However, I was finding it easier to resist the temptation to fill silences; I could allow long pauses as I posed questions that required independent thought, and cadet participation in discussions increased. I noticed this student participation in all classes; it was not limited to the class seated in a circle. I found I was interested in what the students had to say, and I was interested in the students themselves. I held conferences with all of my students, and that one-on-one contact was very effective in helping students organize and develop their writing assignments. However, what I found made the most difference in my response to the students was the literary journal.

As I mentioned, the journal assignment fell flat at the beginning of the semester. A few dismissive comments about the reading, or no entries at all, characterized the early pages. However, when they saw that I read the journals and commented in them, the entries became longer and more thoughtful. One result was that I had a much better sense of the cadets as individuals early in the semester, but the other important result was that the students were better prepared for their writing assignments. If the individual student had not himself identified his thesis, I was much better able to help him develop one because I had some idea of what he had found interesting or provocative in the reading. This phenomenon was forcefully demonstrated one long day when I had spent hours holding individual conferences. Most of the individuals with whom I spoke seemed brain dead. Rats are always quite tired, but they seemed especially weary on this conference day. Not one individual had a proposed thesis for his next paper, and that had been the assignment: bring a thesis and tentative outline to the conference for discussion. I was quite tired myself and very frustrated. I could just imagine what the next stack of essays would hold for me. No one seemed willing or able to produce a workable thesis. I was becoming

very anxious about the lack of critical thinking being done by this group of students. I began to suspect that they saw the easiest path as claiming desperation and asking me to give them a workable thesis.

Glancing at the conference sign-up sheet, I saw that my first customer from the circled class was due to step through my door, and step he did. Mr. Turner presented himself, and the first words out of his mouth were, "I certainly enjoyed reading 'The Swimmer,' Mr. Bedell. Would you please tell me if you think this thesis will sustain a 750 word essay'?" Meanwhile, he was handing me a sheet of paper upon which was his typed thesis statement. He wanted to discuss what he termed the "liquid imagery" in John Cheever's short story. I sat speechless for a few seconds. "Mr. Turner, this is very impressive. Tell me, have you made an entry in your journal which concerns 'The Swimmer'?" "Several Sir - I just find the story fascinating. There are so many ways to go with it. I am also interested in the Greek mythology Cheever alludes to, but I realize that's another issue."

And so it went with the members of the circled class. Early in the semester I found that I would look forward to the 1300 class. Sometimes we seemed to be sitting on my back deck exchanging views about the poems, stories and plays we studied. We did not always see eye to eye. One engineering major had one of the most literal minds I have ever encountered. For him the universe is a linear phenomenon, and it should be filled with well constructed bridges made of cement and steel. This lad was simply not willing to accept that Neddy Merrill, the protagonist of "The Swimmer," could have pushed so many personal failings out of the brutal reality he was having to face on a daily basis. What a wonderful discussion Cadet Rolph's concrete opinions and unbending disgust for Neddy Merrill created both in class and in conference. I learned once again that serious fun - significant happiness - will evolve when room for discourse is created. And that room is not dependent upon space in the center of a circled seating arrangement. What I have learned is that there is comfortable room for discussion when the instructor suggests the location and dimensions of the room then allows his silence to create the space which the rest of the class furnishes with the ideas they have been fashioning themselves. The journal can function as the workshop in which students work on their ideas, shaping, reinforcing, and sometimes discarding their ideas.

I have now completed seven successful semesters of teaching at VMI, and
The information I could relate concerning the rat line, the honor system and just how "badly" freshmen are treated at VMI would fill volumes. Suffice it to say VMI is a very interesting and challenging place to teach, and all of the discoveries I made about how to change student habits and how to lift myself out of my own burned out rut as a teacher have been brought to bear as I continue my transition to a successful professional existence at VMI.

Did the research I conducted at Mountain View College influence my teaching at VMI? Has that research allowed me to regain my professional footing? In two words -- yes indeed; even at a college where the superintendent expects freshmen to be treated "badly," I have survived, even thrived, because I learned something about students, myself, burnout, ruts, and the importance of the courage to change, to challenge, and to listen. In sum, I came to appreciate Horace Mann's admonition that "a teacher who is attempting to teach without inspiring the pupil with the desire to learn is hammering on cold iron."

Each class at VMI begins with the "section marcher," the highest ranking cadet in the class, calling roll as soon as the bell rings. He then places his hat (his cover) on his head, calls all assembled to attention, strides with great purpose to the front of the room, salutes me and announces the status of the class ("All Present!" or the number and names of those absent). All members of the class remain standing until they hear me say "Seats!" Cadets take this formality very seriously, and I found myself conforming with ease to this very military beginning of each class.

However, VMI is still part of the world, and in spite of all its regimentation, there is still no way to command learning. In addition to all the obstacles found at any school, VMI's ratline is a definite hindrance to academic activities. Rats are always exhausted and usually starving. They are a very difficult audience because they often have to fight to remain conscious, and if the class is devoted to passive listening, they drift off. So my strategy has been to heat them with inspiration before I start to pound the iron. Dynamic disequilibrium is one weapon I have come to use as a deterrent to lethargy and sleep. I establish a ZPD as soon as I can in each class, but I will invariably first establish a "zone of rebellion."

In that highly structured environment, I now try to engage them in debate from the first class. For instance, this past semester I began the rat (freshman) sections with an account of a high school student who, with the help of a psychologist, conducted an experiment that apparently demonstrated the negative consequences of extended exposure to loud rock music. Three groups of rats (actually I believe the student used mice, but I elected to change the rodent used for obvious reasons) had to negotiate a maze. The control group of rats listened to no music, and, after some practice, was able to make it through the maze in ten minutes. The next group of rats listened to the music of Mozart for an extended period of time, and this group ultimately could make it through the maze in eight minutes. The last group of rats was bombarded with the sounds of the heavy metal band "Anthrax," and this last group of rats could not find their way to the end of the maze. They became totally disoriented and could not even sniff the air to find their mates. They simply found themselves in the middle of the maze unable to go forward or even to get back to the starting point. Tragically, many of the "heavy metal" rats attacked, killed, and ate members of their group.

After reading this article to the cadets, I told them they should stop listening to heavy metal music as it was obviously doing serious damage to their bodies and minds. Continued listening would obviously lead to disorientation and failure - even death. Their reactions were very predictable. Several cadets, including one young woman, defended heavy metal music as an art form. There I was, the old, overweight gray beard playing my role as conservative, unhip, uncool teacher and the young rebels rose to take the bait. No one was asleep. No one was thinking of the pain in his or her muscles made weary from excessive physical training (a.k.a. "sweat parties"). No one was thinking of the hunger in his or her belly. They were attacking my comments and the enormity I had discovered in the newspaper. I was attacking their music. The conclusion of the study was an outrage! They were defending the music; they were engaged. I was preparing to hammer on hot iron. This was serious but playful fun.

What I attempt to do at the very beginning of my classes is to start having some fun. As they protested my views. I simply held the article above my head and shouted, "How can you refute these scientific findings?! If you want to wind up wandering about in a disoriented state unable to sniff the air for guidance, unable to either assist a brother rat or seek his or her help, BE MY GUEST!! Go ahead and continue listening to the soothing sounds of Anthrax!" It was fun to take issue with "their" music, and they had fun challenging my opinions. The long term gains were tremendous. They discovered from the get-go that they could enter heated discussions whenever intellect and emotion dictated they do so. As I stood before them waving a "scientific" study in their faces, they saw also that more than gut reaction would be needed to defend an opinion. To argue they would need to consider facts: what are the facts and what do the facts suggest? Furthermore, they were debating a study which had won a high school student many awards and recognition from individuals and organizations including the U.S. Navy and the CIA. They (my students) were not too young to have opinions, to do significant work, to be taken seriously. So my students saw from the first day that I was not going to be a "talking head."

Planning for Freedom

The uneducated man, according to the 19th century poet, literary critic, philosopher, and theologian S.T. Coleridge, is concerned with facts. The educated man, he observed, is concerned with the relations among the facts. The ability to see these relations, the connections among things, is what I hope to encourage in my students, and what I am enjoying anew in myself. I find that as my students are stretching, growing, strengthening themselves, I am stretching, growing, as well. I don't have all the answers to all the questions I pose, and each class does not end with a predetermined conclusion, but that does not mean that class-time is a general, unplanned trading of unexamined opinions. Freewheeling discussion is often fun, but it is part of the very serious process of learning to identify and evaluate ideas and to develop well reasoned and carefully documented arguments.

Devising assignments which generate interest, engagement, and enthusiasm is very time-consuming, but the rewards can be great when students begin intellectually pushing themselves and each other. This pushing occurs in the excitement of exploring, discovering, and disagreeing. Therefore, when suggesting writing topics in composition classes, I offer questions that allow students to build upon class reading assignments and discussions and/or upon subjects clearly related directly to the lives of my students. For instance, last semester we read and discussed several articles concerning First Amendment rights and how the law deals with "hate speech." I posed the question, "Would it be possible to conduct the rat line with a strictly enforced policy governing hate speech?" This topic generated a great deal of interest as well as some very interesting essays. For the second essay I combined their on-going brutal experiences in the rat line and Plato's "Myth of the Cave."

> Are you presently in a cave as you attempt to survive the rat line? Are more and more restrictive straps being attached to you each day which further limit and hinder your ability to view reality objectively, or is the rat line actually a pathway which will lead you to the upper world? Imagine yourself sitting at your kitchen table in your home. You have escaped the rat line for the day, and your family has asked you for an account of your experiences thus far at VMI. Your views will be based either upon a belief that the rat line is a Platonic Cave, or the rat line should be seen as a representation of an upper world.

Once again we had a great deal of discussion as students wrestled with ideas: they considered the facts of the essays they had read, the facts of their own experience, and the theory of what they were undergoing and why. Ultimately several fine essays were produced by cadets in each of my classes.

As one of the crusty, old professors in our department is fond of saying, "He who tooteth not his own horn finds same not tooted." I have been evaluated by my students at VMI for each semester I have taught at the Institute. For each of those semesters I have earned higher marks in each category of assessment than the mean for marks received by all other professors from all other disciplines, and I have also been above the mean in every category when compared to all of my colleagues in the Department of English and Fine Arts as well. I have worked very hard to earn the marks I have received. For instance, instructors are required to have at least three formal, scheduled conferences with each student during each semester. I often have as many as eight conferences with each of my students, and I often return to campus in the evening to accommodate spaces for conference times as my students, my rats, all have very full and strict

schedules and hence, are always pressed for time. They appreciate the extra time I provide for our one-on-one discussions which we have before the final draft of each major paper is due.

I mention my success in the area of student evaluation not to brag but rather to show that what I learned in my research at Mountain View College, and what I have learned in my doctoral program at Virginia Tech continues to yield major dividends as I continue to step up to the many teaching challenges I face at VMI. When I left Mountain View College, I really did not know if I would continue to teach; however, as a fine professor at Tech often says, "We become what we love"; I love to teach. I had lost contact with a well of spiritual vitality as I faced the last semester of teaching at MVC. The program at Virginia Tech and the research I have done have shown me how to go about tapping that vitality once again, and much of this process has to do with developing a clear sense of the ZPD for myself as well as for my students.

The first in-class writing exercise I devised for rats at the beginning of the spring semester 1999 clearly demonstrated that I am in this adventure with them because I want to know who they are and what they are thinking. The second day of class I presented an in-class writing assignment which required students to answer three questions: 1) Why did you choose VMI as the place to continue your education? 2) What is the worst experience you have had in education? 3) What is the best experience you have had in education? I read each response over the weekend and made many notes in the margins of each submission (I either asked questions and/or responded in a positive fashion to their comments) and returned their papers on Monday. I then took considerable time discussing what I had learned from my reading of their submissions using the board to show the range of responses I had received. Together we used that information to discover any common theme present in the data.

What I discovered in my initial examination of their responses was that these cadets were looking for a challenge as well as discipline and camaraderie. On the whole, the responses indicate my classes were full of idealistic young people. They wanted to attend a college where loyalty, honesty, honor and integrity are considered necessary components of daily existence. They wanted to be good and they wanted intellectual challenge. Many students confessed that while in high school they had breezed through in a walk not doing any homework, and yet they had graduated with a 3.2 GPA or better. They claimed they did not want anything to be handed to them in college. They wanted a serious challenge. One rat said he earned a 3.4 his senior year in high school, but he was much prouder of the 2.2 he had earned for the fall term at VMI because he had to pull out all the stops to stay above a 2.0. Many cadets confessed to being party animals, and they knew, as one fellow put it, "I would have all the booze, drugs, and sex I wanted if I attended any other college, so I chose VMI because I knew I would not be allowed to party myself to failure." Many also mentioned the tradition and history of the Institute as deciding factors in their selection. All of the pomp and circumstance of this very unique place was important to them even before they arrived.

The worst experiences provided some shocking revelations for me. I knew teachers who had been worn down over the years by the strain of the daily challenge; I knew such teachers, and I had been among them. But what I learned from my students' accounts was that teaching burnout is pervasive and perhaps more severe than I had known. I read of a seventh grade math teacher who lost his tempter and threw his chair into the wall of the classroom and ultimately experienced a nervous breakdown; a German instructor who threw his entire desk against the wall; an English teacher who was so burned out that she would simply make an assignment and then place her head on her desk and go to sleep; another English teacher who was never prepared for class. Imagining the unhappiness of those teachers is painful; contemplating the lost opportunities for their students is even worse. Some of the most interesting responses, however, were those which discussed the best experiences my new students had ever had in education.

One student said his best teacher in high school taught chemistry in such a way that she entertained her students. Her teaching was so memorable that the student, while she did take notes, remembered the material presented in class even without them. Another student discussed a history teacher who "...made me think of why things occurred - made us think for ourselves - not be forced to think the way other people made history out to be." Another student mentioned an AP history teacher whose class was "...great because he incorporated humor and facts that most people don't know into his teaching." Yet another student mentioned an eighth grade science teacher who looked like Einstein, and "...he made learning fun and easy." Another cadet "...had a teacher in the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades who had the ability of making the driest material in Biology, anatomy and psychology appear fun. He had amazing wit and could bring humor to virtually everything. He had a knack for making things funny, and that made me pay attention better, which has in turn allowed me to remember the information even to this day."

The words *humor* and *fun* emerged time and time again when my students were telling me about their best and most memorable experiences in education. John Dewey is correct; "To be playful and serious at the same time is possible, and it defines the ideal mental condition."

As we discussed their responses to the three questions, I could see they were very interested in discovering the many common threads which ran through the responses. The iron was heating. When I handed the papers back at the end of the period, I was struck by the attention each cadet gave to my responses. Normally students are passionate to move to their next class as soon as the bell has sounded, but they remained seated reading attentively the comments I made in response to their first writing assignment of the semester. Before leaving, one cadet came to me and said, "This is why I chose VMI. You care enough about what you are doing to take the time to learn some things about us before we actually start this course." We were beginning another challenging semester of serious fun at VMI.

APPENDIX A
Keeping a Literary Response Journal

You are required to keep a literary response journal for this course. At the end of every two week period, I will collect and read the entries you make in your journal. Your dedication to this task will comprise a portion of your quiz average. Your journal grade will be based primarily on the number of entries you have made during each two week period. Ten entries will earn an A; eight will earn a B; six will earn a C. Please don't even think about dropping below a C.

Your journal writing will reflect an attempt to become more intimately acquainted with the poems, short stories and plays we will study this semester. I am interested in virtually any observation you make about the literature we read. In writing to respond to literature, we attempt to open ourselves to it, allowing the work to stimulate our feelings and our thoughts. It is an initial, exploratory writing that enables us to record our impressions both intellectual and emotional. Our writing toward a preliminary understanding of any literary work should be free enough to allow us to discover our feelings, explore our thoughts, and reflect on the connections between them. You might consider your journal entries as a form of focused free writing in which you allow your response to the subject to develop without knowing beforehand just what that response will be or what form it will take.

Above all else, your journal entries should be spontaneous. Comments you make should be subjective; they should reflect whatever you are feeling about your reactions to the literature we study. If you like a particular poem or some portion of it, what do you like and why do you like it? If you react negatively to a piece of literature, attempt to indicate why you dislike what you have read. Reflect upon your reactions. For instance, you might be confused initially about your positive reaction to death as it is portrayed in the poem, "The Hospital Window." Your comments should reflect your confusion. Eventually you may, through your written observations, discover that your reaction occurred because James Dickey fills the poem with very positive and powerful religious imagery.

Your journal should be an informal dialogue with yourself about literature we read in this course. I will be interested in your reflections; I will be very interested in the questions you ask and the observations you make. Do not worry about making profound statements in your journal. Present honest reflection, honest and immediate reaction. Ask questions frequently. Write them in your journal. Comment freely about a word or phrase which touches you. Allow your thoughts, your reactions, to flow freely onto the page. As the Nike advertisement urges--"Just do it." React--Respond - Make this literature yours. Show me that you are engaged with and moved by what we are studying.

There are many different ways of keeping a literary journal. Here are some ideas that may help to get your started:

1. After you read a work, jot down several questions that come to mind. Then choose one question and explore it more fully.

2. List the emotions (anger, pity, envy, admiration, astonishment and so on) the work evoked. Then explain the reasons you think you felt these emotions.

3. Copy one sentence, one line or one phrase that struck you as especially beautiful, ugly, puzzling, enlightening or interesting. Then discuss how and why the sentence, line or phrase evoked this response.

4. Write a letter to the author asking questions or making observations about the work.

5. Write a letter to one of the characters (or to the speaker in a poem) describing your response to a choice or decision s/he made.

6. Explain why you could - or could not - identify with a particular character or situation in the work.

7. Jot down your initial impression of a work. Then reread and write another entry describing new or changed impressions.

The great thing about responding to literature is that there are no absolute answers. A response is a beginning point. You read a work through, keeping your mind and spirit open, and then jot down what you thought and felt as you read it. An initial response might include any of the following:

A question about the meaning of a word or sentence, the choice of a word, the reason why a particular character appears in the work, the reason the author chose to begin or end as s/he did.

A comment on what you think the work is about and why you are interested or not interested in that idea.

An observation about a particular description, or line, or sentence to which you had a strong reaction (you liked it; you disliked it; it made you angry, happy, sad, puzzled, uncomfortable).

A connection between this work and something else you have read, experienced or observed in your own life.

Remember that a response is a place to begin. Just as we often change our first impressions of a person or situation, readers often revise initial responses to a work of literature.

Keep up with the daily reading assignments, and commit yourself to reacting to what you read by making an entry in your literary response journal as soon as you finish a reading assignment. Once you establish this habit of responding to the literature you read by making entries in your journal, you will soon discover greater meaning in the poems, stories and plays assigned for this semester, and you will also discover a great deal about yourself in the process. Good luck.

APPENDIX B

Permission to Quote from Student Journals and Class Audio Tapes

I hereby grant permission for Robert I. Bedell, my instructor for English 102 at Southern Virginia College during the spring semester 1996, to use my literary response journal, which I kept as a component of the course requirements in his course, as he completes research for his doctorate at Virginia Tech. In addition, he has my permission to use any comments made on any of the audio-tapes he made of several of our classes as he writes his dissertation. I understand that a pseudonym or code number will be used in place of my name, and I understand Mr. Bedell will delete or alter identifying information to assure confidentiality. The only people who will have access to information he will use will be Mr. Bedell and those who serve on his doctoral committee: Professors Carico, Kelly, Garrison, Magliaro, and Nespor. I understand that Dr. Jan Nespor is the Director of Research Approval in the College of Education at Virginia Tech, and he will file my consent form in keeping with the research policies of the College of Education at Virginia Tech. Dr. Nespor can be reached at (540) 231-8327.

By signing below I am indicating that I have read this document and willingly grant permission for Robert I. Bedell to use my literary response journal and the audio-tapes as he completes his research.

_____ _____

Your Signature Date

_____

Researcher's Signature

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Teaching Experience:

1996 - present **Virginia Military Institute**
Freshman Composition EN101, EN102
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1986 - present **Virginia Military Institute** (Summer Program)
College Orientation Workshop: program for minority and at-risk young men. Designed and taught the communication component.

1976 - 1996 **Southern Virginia College**
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Freshman Composition Eng101, Eng102, Eng102Honors
American Literature Survey Eng211, Eng212
British Literature Survey Eng201, Eng202
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English Department
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