

Part III



Writing Group Three: *Designing Writing Programs*



Re-envisioning the Writing Classroom

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A Classroom in Spring

“Order in the court! Order, please!” The judge pounds his gavel on the podium and waits for silence. “Mr. Foreman, has the jury reached a verdict?”

“Yes, we have your Honor. In the case *The State of Scotland vs. Macbeth*, we find the defendant, Macbeth, not guilty.”

Pandemonium breaks loose in the courtroom. A spectator leaps over a desk and assassinates Macbeth. Some are covering their mouths in astonishment. Others are clapping their hands. Some fall on the floor in laughter.

“Stop the video! Hurry! I want to watch before the bell rings! Hey! You can’t get up; we just killed you!”

They never cease to amaze me. Assassinate Macbeth?

My English class has just finished our unit on *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. To capture a feeling for the rhythm of Shakespeare, we have beat out the meter of Dr. Seuss’s *Green Eggs and Ham*, one side of the room trying to out-chant the other. Then we’ve beat out the rhythm of Shakespeare (or tried to). We have performed modern-day scenarios: someone has only one ticket to the best concert in town, and only you or your best friend can go; two of you are in line for a promotion and your ambitious wife suggests murder to solve the problem (*Shakespeare Set Free*). We have listened to the audiotapes, watched Polanski’s version of the movie (screaming in disgust at the witches), and vied for speaking parts. All that’s left is the unit test.

After an objective test consisting of multiple choice and true/false questions, I assign the essay part of the exam: Write a five-paragraph essay (with what is left of the ninety minute class) explaining who you think is the tragic character in *The Tragedy of Macbeth* and why. For prewriting, I play the cassette of Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons.” My vibrant actors slide back in their desks, moan, groan, lope across the room to sharpen a pencil, scratch something out on paper. Safe behind my desk, I grade yesterday’s vocabulary quizzes. *What am I doing? What else do I want from them? They have just written scripts, collaborated, revised, related the text to their own lives, performed, and now I want them to complete an objective test and a pre-formatted essay? What greater proof do I need of their understanding?* I am really hiding in shame behind those quizzes. *Prewriting is Vivaldi? What am I thinking?* My personal prewriting techniques

usually last for a period of days and include loading the dishwasher, calling my stepmother, walking two miles, cleaning the bathroom, and checking my email. How can someone who not only believes strongly in the power of the written word, but who also is a graduate student of professional writing, make such an assignment? The students are ripe for writing success and what am I doing about it? I quietly move to turn the cassette over in the tape player and slink back to my desk, hoping no one in the room will notice me.

I began my teaching career in 1995 at Campbell High School in Smyrna. Armed with twenty years of experience in the business world and a cum laude degree in English Education, I was ready to roll up my sleeves and get to work. My head was filled with educational philosophies and foggy memories of my high school's culture as I crossed over into the front lines of my classroom. My expectations demanded the rapt attention of all students, who were to gaze at me intently, while I regurgitated my wealth of knowledge—all for their benefit, of course. If any deviation from this behavior was detected, my head would spin as in *The Exorcist*, smoke would curl from my ears, and my eyes would blacken before they shot a death ray upon the perpetrator. By the end of the year, I had slammed my door one too many times, my students thought I was hilarious (not in a good way), and I was exhausted.

Some days, over the next two years, while standing at the front of the room, droning on, I would have a flashback to the time when I was sixteen, in my own high school English classroom, the young girl in the middle row, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. While I devoured the literature, I was also thinking of how I had to walk to work after school or wondering if I would have the courage to talk to Romeo tomorrow if I passed him in the hall. I was also thinking how comfortable I felt in that room, how my teacher acknowledged and accepted my quietness. I sensed her unspoken respect for me and mine for her increased.

My Own High School Years

I attended Chamblee High School in Atlanta, Georgia, between the years of 1968 and 1972. My English teacher became my professional model for what a teacher should be. She is the person who made me want to be a teacher. Now, when I search my memories, I remember teacher-centered instruction. We read *A Separate Peace* and the next day she told us what those chapters meant. We read *The Scarlet Letter* and the next day she told us what those chapters meant. We read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Native Son*. I hung on every word she said. Sometimes her interpretation was

exactly what I had thought. Other times it wasn't. Although, at the time, the interpretation was acceptable to me, I wonder now if it was acceptable to the other members of the class. I never questioned it.

We had to memorize twenty vocabulary words a week and write a sentence using the words correctly in context. I remember writing a research paper on *The Great Gatsby*. I also remember reading the novel ten years later to understand what I had read. And I remember a "special senior class" where we just read – read – read. That's all we did. I adored my teacher and hung on every word she said. When I was insecure and unsure of my response to a piece of literature, she validated my thinking, or cleared a concept for me, or opened a new avenue of thinking.

Why did I adore every word she said about literature? Because she validated what I thought about the texts. I needed to hear that from her—*she was the teacher, right?* And because I sensed she respected me as a person; she respected everyone in the class. The presentation was not a condescending exposition of information being offered to us. It was a sharing. And she managed the class with a wry sense of humor that kept those out of line, in line.

My 21st-Century Classroom

In my third and fourth years of teaching, I began to see my students as who they were, not who I wanted them to be or who I had been in high school. I also began to see the "me" under all my self-imposed teacher expectations. I was developing my teaching philosophy based on the adolescent and a sense of self. I could see where my responsibility was. I wanted to help my students develop goals and discover the power of their minds. I wanted to help prepare them to become confident, successful, functioning members of society. So how was I going to accomplish that? How was I going to remake my teaching to teach all the students, not just the Leslies?

The answer was given to me as a gift. After three years of teaching, I was encouraged by my undergraduate methods teacher, Dr. Sarah Robbins, to begin thinking about graduate school and the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project, a National Writing Project site. I became a fellow in the summer of 1998. During that summer I began to visualize how I wanted my classroom to be. With Sarah's and my colleagues' encouragement, my teaching philosophy began to take form, based on three theories of teaching writing.

The first is the theory of community, where the writer is viewed as a member of a group who has common goals and abilities. Each member of the group brings his or her own literacy history to the class. These literacies include family, neighborhood, school, community and ethnic group. My classroom is

a community (culture) of its own, composed of all these diverse literacies, and I want each student to take ownership in that culture. The classroom becomes its own community with its own literacy. We begin by writing, illustrating, and sharing our first memories of reading and writing. We develop personal maps that bring us to the present, where we can move forward as one group. The classroom becomes a non-threatening place of learning, a haven.

The second theory that shapes my philosophy is the theory of expressivism. While I believe in the concept of my classroom as one community, I also want each student to feel that he or she is unique. I believe in the use of journal responses and personal narratives to develop a strong sense of self that will carry over into adulthood. Both of these types of writing, while promoting self-discovery, also build confidence in writing, no matter what type of literacy background a student brings to the classroom. Journals and personal narratives can also be the bridge between a student's life and the literature of the curriculum. This bridge engages the student and demonstrates the universality of good literature.

The third theory to shape my teaching philosophy is the traditional classical theory. While the security of a classroom community promotes ownership in learning and expressivism promotes self-discovery and value, without the ability to think critically the student will not be able to function successfully in the adult world. The use of logic and rational thought is a necessary skill, whether one needs to manage a family, to understand the workings of a cash register, or to write a business plan. Developing an argument, determining an audience, researching for evidence and arranging support for that argument in a logical manner develop a thought process that will ensure future success.

I put these theories to work during my fourth year of teaching. We became a community that laughed, cried, and even danced together. Occasionally, when the class's enthusiasm bordered on the rowdy side, I would ask my students if they wanted to see me in my role from *The Exorcist*, but they never did. They just wanted to hear the story of the bad old days when I had demanded all eyes to stare with rigid compliance upon me while my students moved only in the choreographed steps I read from my lesson plans. One reason our classroom culture became successful is that I believe so strongly in the power of community. That passion was transferred to the students, and it became their passion too. So with this environment ripe for collaborating and writing and editing and revising, did we? *Not exactly*. While I was now able to articulate my philosophy of teaching, something was still missing from my belief system. I understood the process of establishing a writing community. I felt strongly the power of the written word. But did I really believe it for

my classroom, and did I guide my students to write with an understanding of their own links to a belief system of their own?

I put in a call to Stella Ross. Stella was in charge of the high school language arts curriculum in Cobb County. When I called her, in 911 mode, I was looking for teacher models in the county who have created successful classroom writing communities. Stella immediately recommended four teachers and agreed to help me arrange for professional development time to observe these potential mentors at work. I selected two, based on their teaching settings and demographic similarities to my high school. Stella couldn't have been more intuitive. One teacher exemplifies my philosophy of community and expressivism. The other is a true model of the traditional classical model.

Lisa's Classroom

Three miles down the road from my Campbell High classroom, off Windy Hill Road, Osborne's tardy bell is ringing for Lisa Cherry's second period Honors American Literature class. As the students settle in their seats, Lisa is standing by the front door, paper in hand, and begins to speak as the last bell rings.

"I've got twenty-five questions for review for *The Great Gatsby* test tomorrow. Extra credit for every one you get right. Somebody keep score." Lisa reads the questions and the class calls out the answers. No one is writing them down. Everyone is engaged. "How many points is that now, fifteen? Good. Okay. If you don't get this one you're retarded!" Everyone laughs and Lisa continues to call out questions. "I don't even know this one," Lisa remarks before one question. During the review, Lisa is interrupted once by a knock at the door, which she handles as she continues to fire off questions and field answers. She never breaks her rhythm. She does look back at me and casually remarks, "I get interrupted about sixty times a period."

Lisa moves on to the next assignment. The day before, the students had received a list of writing topics for *The Great Gatsby*. Today their assignment is to write for one hour, from a topic chosen from the list, a five paragraph essay, double-spaced, in rough draft form.

"Everyone settle down. Let's get to work. You've got one hour. You can use the computers at the back of the room if you want." Because Lisa is yearbook sponsor, her students have the benefit of seven computers at the back of the class. Several students move back to the computers, as a girl and a boy settle at Lisa's desk; one girl climbs onto the counter top that lines the outside wall

of the room. One boy pulls a stool up to the same counter and writes as he looks out the window at the falling rain.

"Who has questions? I'll help you get started with the first paragraph. Take a book from the shelf if you need it."

Lisa hasn't stopped moving since class began. "Mrs. Cherry, I need your assistance," comes a request from the other side of the room. Several hands are raised and Lisa moves to help them. After talking with several students individually, providing ideas and encouragement for beginning paragraphs, Lisa moves to the first row of students and begins to stop at each desk.

"How are you doing? Let's see what you have here. Good. Why don't you. . . ?" Over the next forty-five minutes, Lisa works her way to each student's desk. "Who haven't I talked with yet?" She keeps moving. Once I hear her say, "that's cool" as she reads a draft.

Students are teasing each other and sharing thoughts; "Hey, what do you think of this line? Where is it in the book where . . . ?"

Lisa then announces, "I'm going to stop taking questions now. I want you to stop talking and write quietly." She comes by my desk and tells me she really does like a quiet classroom when they are writing. "*Really*," she says.

Students continue to raise their hands and Lisa continues to move to help them. "I've lied. I said I'd stop taking questions." But she doesn't. She is moving and helping, nonstop. "They are not afraid of me," she quips as she goes by my desk.

One student turns around and says to me, "She's so nice." When Lisa positions herself against one counter top, the students come to her.

As the hour ends, students bring her their rough drafts for approval. "Oooh! Listen to this sentence everyone!" Lisa reads aloud a sentence from someone's essay.

"Why don't you read one of my sentences?" someone else calls out.

"Well, bring it here. Let's see what you've got." And so they hover around her like bees on honey until the end of class. "If you're finished with your draft leave it with me, or you can bring it in tomorrow."

Roger's Classroom

"My hand is history; my palm is literature," croons Roger Hines as he begins his lesson on literary criticism. It's fourth block at Oakwood High School, three miles northeast of Osborne, and his audience of eight males and three "diamonds in the rough" listen respectfully. "Three diamonds in the rough, Ms. Walker," Roger reiterates softly. Their composition notebooks are

open, ready for note-taking. They have just completed a seven-question quiz on last night's reading of "Dover Beach." Quizzes have been traded, graded, and passed "all the way to the left" for Roger to collect and record.

Roger passes out three pages of handwritten notes on literary criticism and begins his lecture with an example of how texts can be corrupted over time. He begins to sing part of a Sunday school hymn, "At the cross...." His performance is short-lived though, stopped by his own, and the class's, laughter. "Note that the original word 'worm' has been replaced by the word 'sinner.' A prerequisite to criticism is to have authentic text. The text of this hymn is no longer authentic. We have to ask ourselves, what is the authentic text, or the text which the author intended, and how has it been 'corrupted?'"

Roger calls on Joey, the first student in the first row, to read aloud parts one and two of the first page of the handout. Joey, with baseball hat on backwards, takes a brief glance back toward me, where I sit next to Roger's desk, and begins to read confidently. Joey had been a student in my Brit. Lit. class for a period of about two days at the beginning of the school year.

"Thank you, I'd like to hear more from you in a second," nods Roger, as Joey completes his reading. Roger then calls on the second person in the first row, a young girl, to continue reading. The class completes reading the handout in this fashion, with Roger making comments at the end of each section. "I don't want you thinking like me, I just want you thinking." Then he calls on the next person in "line."

"I'm going to take you on a short walk through a dense forest," says Roger. He divides them into four groups, assigns a leader for each group, and asks them to take out their homework questions on "Dover Beach." As a group, they are to check and confirm their answers and identify the line number where they found the answer. The room quietly changes from five neat rows into four neat circles of desks. The students are comfortable yet industrious as they work. Roger moves from group to group, informing each leader that he will be responsible for sharing certain answers with the class. The class works quietly for ten minutes. There is only one interruption, a knock at the door.

Roger graciously opens the door to an administrator who asks if she can briefly poll the class. She wants to make sure they have all received their personal invitations to the upcoming senior breakfast. One student raises his hand and says he doesn't have one. "Greg, we must make sure that you get your invitation," Roger asserts with concern. "Have you checked with your first block teacher? He should have passed them out this morning. Don't worry. We'll make sure we straighten this out."

The administrator leaves with a smile, and Roger, the traditional Southern gentleman, after a reassuring nod to Greg, leads a review of the homework

questions, calling on each leader for their answers, then thanking them for their contributions. One girl remarks, "After we talk about the poem I understand it. I didn't when I was reading it last night."

Roger then turns on the overhead, where he has previously written three word pairs, elucidation (facts), interpretation (claims), and evaluation (opinions).

"Who would like to come to the overhead and complete this chart for 'Dover Beach'?" Roger asks. There is a moment of silence. "Now, we are all in this together," Roger coaxes with a smile. "Who would like to give it a try?" Another moment of silence, then Joey raises his hand (*I'm so proud of him*). He moves to the overhead, and slowly completes the chart, as Roger offers suggestions and reassurances. "Good, Joey. Thank you. Now who else would like to try?" A girl volunteers without hesitation and goes confidently to the overhead where the procedure is repeated. Roger offers encouragement as she works.

Roger then asks the students what they thought of their second homework assignment: the reading of "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?" by Thomas Hardy. Several students raise their hands to offer their opinions. Comments and opinions are accepted respectfully. He then presents the following examples of optimism and pessimism to be recorded in their composition notebooks:

Optimism

Glad

Positive

Half full

Thorn bushes have roses

Pessimism

Sad

Negative

Half empty

Rose bushes have thorns

There are only ten minutes left in the class. Roger asks the students to end the day by writing a journal entry. Because it is the end of the year, he wants the class to reflect on school life and to project where they will be in the next two to three years. Someone asks, "How long does it have to be?"

"Try for at least one page. Just start writing down your thoughts." They write for a few minutes.

"I see we've run out of time. You'll have to complete this for homework. I'll give you a sentence starter—'As the session comes to a close. . .'"

Summer Learning for the Teacher

The semester came to a close and the year ended. The summer was filled with The Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project's Advanced Writing Institute

and a graduate class, Composition Pedagogy for High School and College Teachers. Now I was able to put the names of theorists to my philosophy of education. David Bartholomae sees the writer as a member of a group of writers who have common goals and abilities—a *community*. Peter Elbow views the writer as a unique individual, concerned with self-discovery instead of communicating—*expressivism*. Edward Corbett views the writer as an orator of argument or persuasion, concerned with effective presentation and credibility—*traditional classical*.

My participation in the advanced writing group and the study of past and current theories of composition in the composition pedagogy course helped me see more clearly the strands in Lisa's and Roger's classrooms and what I wanted to take away from them. The experience also showed me that I already had some of those strands in place.

In reflection, I see that, while I didn't believe it at the time, my class had become a writing community. I didn't see a performance of *Macbeth* as a valid, tangible or credible means of measuring understanding. I didn't see it as writing. I see it now. Writing is a tangible, touchable thing. And while it doesn't have to be in the form of a five-paragraph essay, it is a valid means of creating, communicating and assessing. *What more could I have asked for with Macbeth?* I look back and see parts of Lisa's expressive community and parts of Roger's tradition in my classroom. I also see parts of me. Not the me that gazed at my high school English teacher with rapt attention, but the growing me that shares a writing community with my students.

I couldn't wait for the school year to begin.

So it did, and armed with a strengthened belief in the writing community, I faced three classes of ninth graders. Fall semester moved quickly. While respecting the diversity of each student, we had become a community with its own literacy. We had shared literacy histories and responded to literature in personal journals. During one writing assignment in the ninth grade honors class, a five-paragraph essay on a character's development in *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, I drew upon what I had observed in Lisa's classroom. I moved from student to student, providing assistance, suggestions, and praise. During another assignment, a four-paragraph essay analyzing figures of speech and imagery in "The Raven," I used a more traditional approach: group work assisted by overheads and outlines.

But it wasn't until the end of the semester that I was inspired by a lesson that kept me awake one night as it developed in my mind. I couldn't wait to share a new reading and writing experience I envisioned, inspired by a graduate class I was taking at Kennesaw. I was enrolled in Dr. Sarah Robbins's class, Multicultural Perspectives in Literature. We were reading

The House on Mango Street, *Letters from Rifka*, *Zlata's Diary*, and *A Farewell to Manzanar*. Through discussion, writing and technology searches, we were devising ways to teach these texts in our classrooms. I found particular interest in *The House on Mango Street*.

Would this book appeal to one class of twenty-three students, comprised of seven African-Americans, eleven Caucasians (one from Bosnia), four Hispanics, and one Asian living in a transient, urban environment? Can my students relate the writing of Sandra Cisneros to their lives? Can they write about a memory of home? Could they prove to me, through writing, that there is a universality that cuts across all cultures? Can the places where they have lived, and where they live now, reflect the beauty of their lives, not only in imagery and style, but also in their memories? Do I have a strong enough commitment to the power of writing to give this assignment?

I felt strongly that Cisneros's text would build a bridge between the written word and the students in my classroom. Marianna told me every day she was leaving for Mexico (home) and didn't know if she would be back. Mama said she would be. Seventeen-year-old Joey, monitored by his parole officer, succeeded every day in pushing all my buttons until I snapped and sent him out of the room. Rachel sat sweetly and quietly, acquiescing to every demand of my lesson plan. Christi asked every day, "Was I good today, Ms. Walker?" Joel showed up late, on the rare days he came to school, with a tank top and tattoo, slamming the door to announce his entrance and flipping his long hair as he begged to go to the counselor's office. Que squirmed in his seat, uncomfortable in a literature class because he was also in a basic reading and writing class.

My Thursday plan was to read as many vignettes as forty-five minutes allowed and have the students respond to them in a double-entry journal. Patsy Hamby, a colleague in graduate school at Kennesaw had reported success with this strategy, and I thought this would be a non-threatening way to have the students relate the literature to their lives. Prentice Hall's *Writer's Companion: High School* describes this type of journal as "a give-and-take-with the literature...that can help you think and feel more deeply about what you are reading" (105).

After reading the first vignette, "The House on Mango Street," I modeled a journal entry on the board:

Quotation

windows so small you'd think they
were holding their breath

Response

Can windows hold their
breath? An example of
personification.

That's all I asked of them for forty-five minutes. The first several vignettes were fine, but then things started to change.

"When do we get out of here?"

"Can we turn on some music?"

"This is stupid."

"You can't control your class, Ms. Walker."

"Can I go to the bathroom?"

I was starting to break. With twenty minutes left in the class, Cisneros and I had lost them. I was so excited this morning when I came to school, so excited to share this book with the class, and they hated it. I was really starting to crumble. In fact, I was starting to cry, but I thought, I am going to read to them until the bell rings. I read, and I walked up and down the aisles as I did. It sounds melodramatic now, but I was reading "Darius and the Clouds," and it *really* was making me cry. But I wasn't going to stop. So I read and they listened and they were still and they looked at each other because they thought I was crying. But I didn't. I just kept on reading about the clouds "like pillows" (Cisneros 33), and then they wrote, and then the bell rang.

On Friday I was mad. *What is it about this text that makes you squirmy and antsy and bored? So bored you throw your head back on the desk behind you as you slump in your seat. You can't sit for forty-five minutes and have someone read to you and then write about it?*

"For the next hour, after completing this outline, you are going to write a rough draft, imitating the style of Sandra Cisneros. There is to be no talking, only writing, and I expect 500 words, no less!"

"Five hundred words?"

"Five hundred words is nothing. Look at 250." I showed them the first several paragraphs of Cisneros's first vignette. "This is 250 words."

"You're just mad because of yesterday, Ms. Walker."

God, they're smart. Yes, I was, but it was the anger that gave me the strength to hold on to and go forward with a writing lesson I felt so strongly about. I wasn't backing down. I didn't, and they wrote. I gave the ones that didn't finish the weekend to complete their rough drafts. It was painful to watch as they painstakingly counted every word.

"I've only written 250 words, Ms. Walker."

"That's because you've been sleeping for twenty minutes, Joey. Sit up and keep writing."

He did. They all did, and the results were beautiful. I learned from the experience that Rachel doesn't know what cumulus clouds are. I learned that the main reason some students move is because "the house is falling apart and not worth putting money into," or so a parent says. I learned divorce makes

for lots of moves and that David misses California. Christi won't go back to her first house because the memories of her grandmother are too painful. I learned that the loss of a young friendship because of a move hurts.

I believe the resistance I received from the beginning was actually due to a connection with the text my students sensed with the reading of the first vignette. A need for a sense of place is a common value that cuts across all cultures. This connection cut into the culture of my classroom and opened a place that was threatening to move into. It was also threatening to ask my students to write about something personal, when they are used to regurgitating the formulaic three-pronged thesis (painful enough in itself).

Although I was frightened too, the experiences of the previous year—reflecting on my own teaching practices, observing successful teachers of writing in the community, participating in The Advanced Writing Institute, and continuing graduate classes at Kennesaw in the Master of Arts in Professional Writing program—have given me the courage to stick to my convictions to establish a writing community in my classroom. I think I'm making progress. For now, I'm quite reluctant to return the essays to my students. They are too precious.

Reflection

I've read The House on Mango Street with a number of classes in the years since I first drafted this essay. Fortunately, my classroom's become a more comfortable community: the room is more clearly "our" space instead of just "mine," and, as a result, students are more comfortable and productive as writers. What's different? What have I learned? And how did my writing group and the inquiry community for this project support that learning?

First of all, I've learned that I have to recognize the particular needs of each class; there is no formula. Just as Andy had to rethink his instructional strategy for the Writing Project site's summer writing groups and Vicki had to rethink hers for the grade school classroom, I have to adapt my strategies each semester. Working with Andy and Vicki provided confirmation of a valuable understanding that had been developing very slowly in my pedagogy: I must constantly rethink, reflect, and refine my teaching of writing. The writing situation is going to be different for each classroom because the dynamics and personality of each classroom is different. And that's okay. In fact, when Andy, Vicki, and I first got together to try to work as a writing group, we found the challenge especially difficult since one thing we were aiming to collaborate on was reflecting on our working processes.

Fortunately, we also found that getting to know each other personally helped our writing group function better. After we spent some time together socially, we could get down to the harder work of collaborating on our pieces. Then, we realized we did have the common bond available to all writers—the challenge of writing itself.

*These days, I share that realization with my students.. I have a basic structure in place that includes writing all of the following essays: one personal narrative, one literary analysis, one comparison/contrast paper, and one persuasive essay. I often use *The House on Mango Street* as the vehicle for the personal narrative. But one semester it didn't work that way. By the time we got to reading *The House on Mango Street*, it was late in the year, and I didn't see any time available for the essay, so we used the novel as a tool to recognize themes and figurative language. The class had already written a personal artifact essay, so I felt okay leaving the *Mango Street* writing assignment out. Yet in another semester, we not only wrote the *Mango* essay, but after reading the "Hips" vignette about jumping rope, we went outside to emulate the scene. This activity happened in only a single class, because one of the students brought in a jump rope. Watching one 6'5" basketball player unabashedly attempt to double Dutch will remain one of my fondest teaching memories.*

I've also learned over the years that the number of students, time of day, and gender makeup will determine the dynamics and personality of a class. My classes usually average thirty students. If it is first block, they are usually quiet. If it is third, they are hungry, then sleepy. But a leader usually emerges, either someone with strong verbal skills who likes to share his or her writing, or someone with a personality that wins the class over.

The patience and adaptability that I can now take into my classroom came out of my own experience in my writing group. There I learned to be flexible, to open up to the diversity and transience of writing with a group. The benefits continue to spill over into the classroom. And I'm having a lot more fun with my teaching.

*I'm also having more fun as a writer. I've had two essays published in professional publications growing out of curriculum development projects sponsored by our National Writing Project site. In "Making the Classroom Our Place," an essay in *Writing Our Communities*, I share a lesson I use in ways similar to, yet different from, my past approach of linking a reading of "Darius and the Clouds" to personal writing. I describe how my students now create personal history maps—highly visual texts that would also be at home in Vicki's classroom and that are modeled on the illustrations in the children's book *My Place*. I explain how this activity leads us to a sense of our classroom as a community with many histories, a community that can become "our place" through collaborative reading and writing. In my essay for *Writing America*, I revisit a field trip that built on*

*and generated community research, and I emphasize ways that collaborating with my students enriched my teaching. The confidence to try these teaching experiments came, in large part, from participating in inquiry communities like the one behind this book. And the ability to **write** about my experiences grew from the support of writing groups. One important lesson writing groups have taught me is this: I should have confidence in myself because I am a good writer. And I'm much better when I write with colleagues.*

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