

# TAPESTRY OF TALES

Stories of Self, Family, and Community  
Provide Rich Fabric for Learning



Northwest  
Regional  
Educational  
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Provide Rich Fabric for Learning

August 2005

Amy Stuczynski  
Joyce Riha Linik  
Rebecca Novick  
Jean Spraker  
Patti Tucci  
Debbie Ellis



Northwest  
Regional  
Educational  
Laboratory,  
Portland, OR



Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory  
101 S.W. Main Street, Suite 500  
Portland, Oregon 97204  
503-275-9500  
[www.nwrel.org](http://www.nwrel.org)  
[Info@nwrel.org](mailto:Info@nwrel.org)

Center for Classroom Teaching and Learning  
Kit Peixotto, Senior Program Director

Literacy and Language Development Unit  
Rebecca Novick, Unit Director

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or send an e-mail message to [tapestry@nwrel.org](mailto:tapestry@nwrel.org)

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# PREFACE

## Purpose

This resource guide provides information on how teachers from preschool through high school can use personal, family, and community stories to:

- Bring students' narrative voice into the classroom
- Enrich teaching and learning by tapping into students' knowledge, lives, families, culture, and community
- Engage and motivate students to write
- Reinforce reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking connections and competencies

This guide is divided into two main parts: a literature review and practitioner examples. The research and literature reviewed explore the topics of writing instruction and the importance of personal, family, and community stories. The practitioner examples describe projects teachers have implemented that use personal, family, and community stories. The examples draw on the insights and practices of teachers to show how schools in the messy, real world of the classroom are creating innovative and effective strategies to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student population.

## Rationale

The need to address writing skills is pervasive. In the Northwest states, fewer than 35 percent of students achieved proficiency on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing assessment in 2002. Motivated by concern within the education, business, and policymaking communities about the quality of student writing, the College Board established a blue-ribbon panel, the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges. Their April 2003 report, *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution*, calls for an increase in the amount of time and money devoted to student writing throughout the country, across grade levels and subject areas.

The report stresses the educational value of writing, explaining, "If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write" (p. 9). The commission argues that more professional development is needed to help teachers understand good writing and develop as writers themselves. Lacking any real understanding of what good writing looks like, teachers will be ill-equipped to teach it.

The literature review in this document begins by exploring the role of narrative as a way of understanding personal and other experiences (Bruner, 1983, 1986, 1996; McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996; Wells, 1986). Geertz (2000) explains that "it is not so

much a matter of providing something the child hasn't got as enabling something the child already has: the desire to make sense of self and others" (p. 192).

Researchers have found that an understanding of narrative has a powerful influence on school success. Children who tell and hear stories at home before the age of four are the most likely to learn to read easily and with interest once they get to school (Wells, 1986). Feagans and Appelbaum (1986) have concluded that "narrative ability is the single most important language ability for success in school" (p. 359).

Of course, the quality of students' writing also depends on their skill and craft. As the literature review illustrates, good writing demands higher order thinking skills (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003); immersion in literature (Bearse, 1992; Engel, 1997; Harwayne, 1992); attention to craft (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998); and authentic audiences (Ministry of Education, 1992; Shanahan, 1988).

## Design

This document is guided by the seven instructional principles proposed by Timothy Shanahan (National Reading Panel member and chair of the National Literacy Panel and the National Early Literacy Panel), based on his review of the research on reading-writing relationships (1988):

1. Teach both reading and writing
2. Introduce reading and writing from the earliest grades
3. Reflect the developmental nature of the reading-writing relationship
4. Make the reading-writing connection explicit
5. Emphasize content and process relations
6. Emphasize communication
7. Teach reading and writing in meaningful contexts

Shanahan (1988) writes, "Study after study highlights that reading and writing are so closely related that their curricular combination could have a positive outcome in terms of achievement or instructional efficiency. It should be obvious also, however, that reading and writing do not overlap sufficiently to permit complete reading and writing development through an instructional emphasis on one or the other. Unless children are provided an opportunity to write, they will not write as well as possible. Unless they learn to write, writing knowledge cannot be applied to reading development" (p. 637).

Practitioners and research experts participated as independent reviewers of the draft document and their recommendations were incorporated into the final document. Through workshop presentations of the material to regional audiences, formal and informal feedback was collected on quality, utility, and relevance. We believe that the document will support the goals of No Child Left Behind by supporting teachers in helping all students meet increasingly high standards of literacy.

## Applications

These materials are intended to encourage those involved in teaching reading and writing to engage in dialogue and reflection with colleagues, to know their students well, to examine their own experiences and beliefs, and to generate and seek answers to their own questions by collaborative study of research. The practitioner examples



reflect a wide variety of ideas. They are not intended to be used exactly as described, but to be adapted by teachers to fit their students and classroom environment.

The guide is intended as a resource for teachers to use as part of a comprehensive literacy program that includes (in the primary years) the five core areas identified by the National Reading Panel: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. As students develop their ability to read and write complex narrative and expository texts, the guide can supplement the existing literacy program.



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# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDEBOOK

**I**n an effort to make this a practical resource that will assist K–12 teachers and others in the education field, this publication links research with promising practices developed and implemented by innovative and committed teachers. Interviews with teachers, parents, and students; document study; and classroom observations have been used to gather information on the challenges and successes of elementary and secondary teachers in today's schools.

The practitioner examples are intended to share tried-and-true ideas and spark new ones. We strive to show a variety of strategies—some may be similar to activities you already do while others may stretch your thinking. They are not designed to be used exactly as described, but to be adapted by teachers to fit their students and classroom environment. Teachers are encouraged to take notes on their implementation of the strategies, documenting what went well and what could be improved in their adaptations.

The student samples show the wonderful range of writing that students produce. They are included to illustrate the kind of writing that students engaged in through these activities. Some of the work is excerpted, while other samples are displayed as completed. We have not edited the students' work.

Readers may want to examine the research studies on story and writing in more depth than is offered in the introduction. In addition, further study may be needed to implement some of the suggested strategies and practices and to explore additional ones. There is a wealth of resources available to teachers. In fact, the sheer number of relevant books is overwhelming. For this reason, the appendices that follow the main text include an annotated bibliography of selected resources for teachers, as well as an extensive bibliography of the references cited throughout the guidebook. To further aid in professional study, we have included handouts with study group discussion questions and summaries of relevant guiding research.

The use of frequent headings, sidebars, and bullets allows busy practitioners to quickly find information relevant to their questions and interests. The document is written so that practitioners need not read cover to cover but can pick and choose which sections are relevant to them. The materials are divided into these sections:

## **Tapestry of Tales: Shared Voices, Shared Memories, Shared Lives**

This portion of the book discusses the professional literature and practitioner findings related to:

- The importance of personal, family, and community stories to our lives and to our writing
- Reinforcing the reading-writing connection
- Developing and deepening writing competencies

Many of the quotes and examples are taken from the practitioner examples described in the next section.

## Practitioner Examples

The examples are organized into three grade levels: primary, intermediate, and middle/high school. However, we suggest that many of the strategies can be adapted to fit any grade level. Again, the strategies are not meant to be used exactly as described but to spark ideas that can be adapted to fit the teacher's individual context. At the end of each example is a section with a project outline, teacher contact information, and a list of a few of the many picture books or young adult titles that can spur rich conversations on themes related to the example project. These books may be helpful in introducing a similar project to students.

## Handouts

1. Professional Study Group Discussion Questions—Provides questions for each practitioner example
2. Children's and Young Adult Literature To Support Writing About Self, Family, and Community—Includes lists of literature that can be used to introduce and support writing
3. The Reading-Writing Relationship—Summarizes seven research-based instructional principles proposed by Timothy Shanahan, National Reading Panel member and chair of the National Literacy Panel and the National Early Literacy Panel
4. 13 Core Understandings About Learning To Read—Lists core understandings about learning to read proposed by Jane Braunger and Jan Lewis in their 1997 publication *Building a Knowledge Base in Reading*, as summarized by Deborah Davis and Jan Lewis in *Tips for Parents About Reading*

## Appendices

- A. Writers on Writing: Professional Resources—An annotated bibliography that includes descriptions of professional resources for teachers and other educators related to teaching writing and the use of personal, family, or community stories in the classroom
- B. Writing Project Web Sites—Provides an annotated list of writing project Web sites that offer examples and resources for planning and implementing a project that includes writing about self, family, and community
- C. Multicultural Web Sites—Offers an annotated list of multicultural Web sites with valuable information for teachers in our increasingly diverse society



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# TAPESTRY OF TALES: SHARED VOICES, SHARED MEMORIES, SHARED LIVES

## Introduction

*Remember only this one thing. The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away when they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves.*

—Badger in *Crow and Weasel* by Barry Lopez (1990, p. 48)

**T**his quote from *Crow and Weasel* succinctly sums up our beliefs about the importance of stories in our lives. Researchers agree that telling stories plays an important role in cultures across the world and throughout time. Gordon Wells (1986), professor of education at the University of California at Santa Cruz, concludes that “there has probably never been a human society in which people did not tell stories” (p. 194). Psychologist Jerome Bruner (1996) argues that telling stories about ourselves and others, to ourselves and others, is “the most natural and the earliest way in which we organize our experience and our knowledge” (p. 121).

Stories serve a myriad of functions in our lives. As children and adults, we tell stories to remember, persuade, inform, explain, entertain; to express who we are and what we believe; to make sense of our lives and our world; and to create a shared reality. According to Frank McCourt, author of the best selling book *Angela's Ashes*, confession is a form of storytelling:

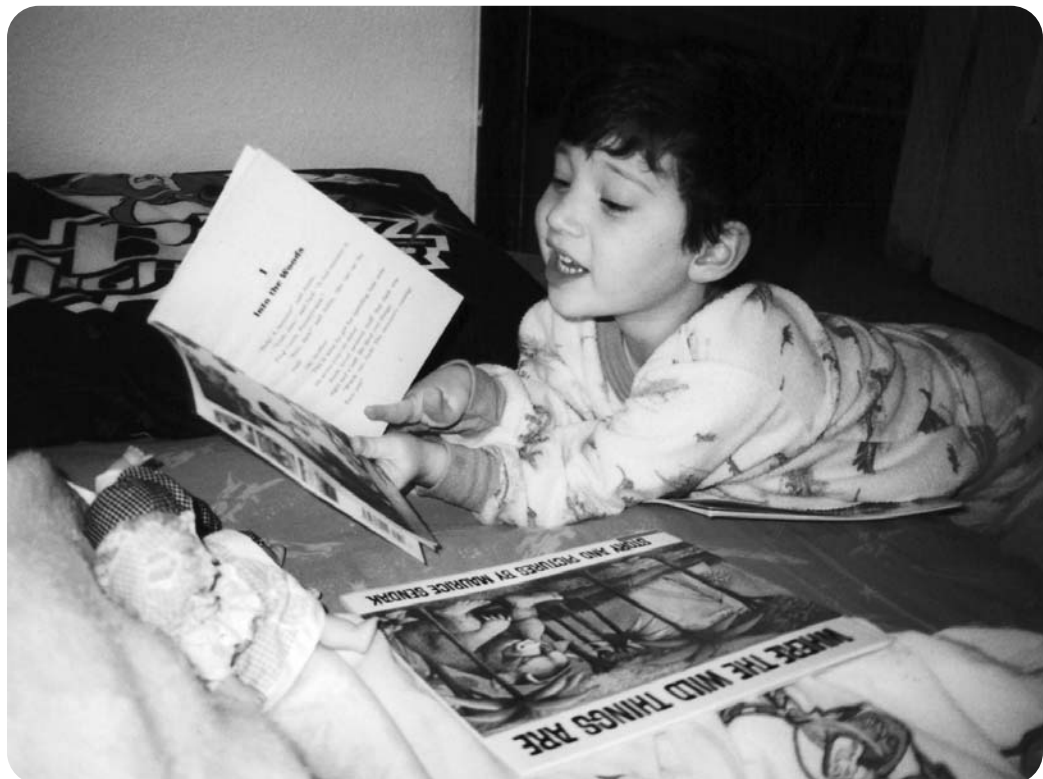
Little Catholics of my generation examined their consciences but didn't know they were engaged in a powerful autobiographical act. We scrutinized our lives for the good and the bad, especially for the bad. You didn't go to confession to

report on the good you had done, on your virtues. You went to seek forgiveness for your sins. And that was a form of writing. That is why so many of my generation remember so much and so vividly (2003, p. 11).

Narrative has even found its way into medical training. In 1996, at Columbia University Medical School, Dr. Rita Charon created Columbia's innovative program in narrative medicine. After a course on medicine and literature, she became convinced that being skilled in receiving and interpreting stories would improve doctors' abilities to gather and make sense of information that patients tell about themselves. Columbia, like a number of other medical schools, uses literature and storytelling to break down barriers between students and patients (Mangan, 2004). One recent Columbia graduate student, Marshall Kuremsky, changed his outlook on caring for a dying patient, an 87-year-old woman with end-stage lung disease:

Her granddaughter, not more than my age, was the only other person with her in the room. The striking thing was the granddaughter's continuous and gentle caressing of her grandmother's hand. In the twelve or so minutes we were in that room, not once did their hands separate. I was mesmerized. It's a crisp and beautiful moment like this that provides me with a reminder for why we do this. This patient is somebody's wife, mother, grandmother. ... There is a whole life, history, and story (Mangan, 2004, p. 3).

Sometimes stories, as Badger says, help us care for each other and ourselves.



## Stories in the Lives of Children

*The heart of the matter, what the learner learns, whatever the teacher teaches, is that human beings make sense of the world by telling stories about it—by using the narrative mode for constructing reality* (Geertz, 2000, p. 104).

Writer Barbara Hardy (1977) sums up the ubiquitous nature of stories in our lives: “We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and live by narrative” (p. 13). Not surprisingly, this seemingly universal attribute, like language itself, must be nurtured in rich language experiences—above all, hearing and participating in stories of all kinds. Gordon Wells (1986) studied children in Bristol, England, and found that youngsters under the age of four who told and heard stories at home were most likely to learn to read easily and with interest once they got to school:

There are many ways in which parents foster their children’s development in the early years, not least through the quality of their conversations with them. But what this study clearly demonstrates is that it is growing up in a literate environment, in which reading and writing are naturally occurring, daily activities, that gives children a particular advantage when they start their formal education. *And of all the activities that were characteristic of such homes, it was the sharing of stories that we found to be most important* (p. 194, emphasis added).

**Activities that require students to pay attention to and craft their own memories can be directed toward helping them become more thoughtful readers and writers in other contexts.**

Studies have shown that children can more easily remember facts when they are put into narrative form and developing a narrative of personal experience aids retention of that memory (Nelson, Walkenfeld, & Goldstein, 1996/1997). Researchers Feagans and Appelbaum (1986) have found that the ability to understand and paraphrase narratives appears to be a critically important skill for academic functioning for learning disabled children, and it may be much more important than the traditional building blocks of language skills such as vocabulary and syntax. They concluded that “*narrative ability is the single most important language ability for success in school*” (p. 359, emphasis added).

Because our life stories are stored in our minds as memories and images, Bruner (1996) contends that narrative plays a key role in self-formation through the construction of memories. He points out that we interpret and construct our life stories, not simply record them: an observation with which both writers of fiction and psychologists agree. Dan McAdams (2004), a professor of human development and social policy at Northwestern University, studies how people tell stories about their own lives:

My students and I collect these stories and analyze them as if they were works of literary fiction. Indeed, they are fiction, to a certain extent. People selectively remember the past and imagine their own futures to produce coherent narratives of the self that will provide their lives with some sense of unity and purpose. Stories give us our identities (p. B14).

In her novel *Caramelo*, Sandra Cisneros (2002) describes our efforts to tell stories from and about our lives. “To write is to ask questions. It doesn’t matter if the answers are true or *puro cuento*. After all and everything only the story is remembered, and the truth fades away like the pale blue ink on a cheap embroidery pattern.” Writer Mark Faust (2004) argues that students’ approach to narrative reading and writing benefits as they begin to conceive of their own life history as a composition through memory



that is subject to constant revision. “Activities that require students to pay attention to and craft their own memories can be directed toward helping them become more thoughtful readers and writers in other contexts” (p. 570).

### Beginnings

Anyone who has been around young children knows that they can be great storytellers. By the age of four, many children can tell complex stories about personal experiences, but storytelling begins much earlier. Researchers (including parents) have found that around the end of the second year, a “narrative sense of self” emerges (Stern, 1977). These narratives help to “get ordinary life under control” by anticipating the day’s events, sorting out the week’s routines, and recounting experiences, both real and imaginary. The musings of 28-month-old Emily illustrate this view:

Yellow buses. 1 2 3 4 days we have yellow buses, but not 5 4 5 4 5 have blue buses. I like ... these days we’re going to have the yellow buses, and the ... right now, it’s Thursday, and Friday, and S-, S- ... and Sunday, so it’s, um ... a yellow bus ... day. And on Friday and Sunday, it’s blue day, so I going on yellow and a blue. One day going on a yellow bus and one day going on a blue bus. ... On blue days, we just get blue. I can see yellow and I can see ... black (Stern, 1977, p. 67).

Emily’s soliloquies demonstrate that the habit of playing with words helps to sort one’s thoughts about the world; it also leads to creative use of language that employs rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, and imagery. When children attempt to recount an event, attentive listening and substantive questions from an adult encourage children to elaborate on the story, extending their thoughts beyond the “here and now,” and building vocabulary and abstract thinking (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). By participating in genuine conversations—discussing past events and shared experiences—adults and children are building a shared past: a past on which to build long-lasting relationships.

Combining fantasy and reality comes easily to toddlers, as this story related by the mother of two-and-a-half-year-old Sebastian demonstrates:

Yesterday Sebastian picked up one of my books and opened it and said, “Sit down, Mommy, I am going to tell you a story.” And then he started off: “Once upon a time there was a giant who drank his milk. And then his tummy hurt so he went home and threw up. And then he closed the door. And then he went on an airplane to visit his grandma.”

Many children enter school filled with poetic images and unique word usage and attuned to the different rhyming patterns of poetry. Egan (1987) reports that nursery school children are much more likely than older children to use a metaphor to complete this sentence: “He looks as gigantic as \_\_\_\_\_.” An example illustrates this tendency:

An eight-year-old surprised her teacher with this lead to a draft of a story: “A cheetah would make a sports car look like a turtle” (Graves, 1983, p. 3).

Author and teacher Vivian Paley (1990) provides this example from her preschool classroom:

“Hi Jason,” Samantha says. “You can be the rainbow baby. Joseph is the dad.”  
“I can’t. I have to go back outside.”

**Children tell stories to sort out thoughts and solve problems and concerns—emotional, cognitive, and social.**



“Why do you?”

“Because I’m running back and forth as fast as the sky and faster than the clouds” (p. 94).

In response to a teacher’s question, “What is a shadow?” children replied: “It’s night lying down. . . . Day is night time for the shadow” (Gallas, 1994, as cited in Wilson, 2000/2001, p. 98).

As these examples illustrate, children often use language to explain their world. Paley (1981) points out: “As soon as he learns a language well enough, and before he is told he cannot invent the world, he will explain everything. This ability to imagine the beginnings and ends of events is most highly developed during the kindergarten year” (p. 31). When schools encourage creative use of language, children’s imaginations continue to develop. A first-grader provided this explanation of why ladybugs are all female:

Once up a time there were ladybugs and man-bugs. But they were attacked by an army of ants. The man-bugs were very brave and fought back. But the ants were too strong, and the man-bugs all died defending their wives and children. To this day, there are only ladybugs.

A kindergartner gave this explanation for the recurrence of rainbows: “[There are] only one or two rainbows in the world. They come back, taking turns. Rainbows never wear out” (Billow, 1975, as cited in Wilson, 2000/2001, p. 97).

A six-year-old girl shared her ideas about a subject that for thousands of years has captured the imagination of people. Her mother tells the story:

This morning my daughters and I were watching the moon set, a gorgeous full orange moon sinking into a brightly-lit Pacific. My almost two-year-old daughter, who has a complete fascination with the moon, was speechless and had eyes as big as the moon itself. My six-year-old daughter, however, gave me her thoughts on the situation. “You see, Mom, the moon is really the sun at night, and the reason we can look at it so easily without hurting our eyes is that the stars take away the bright light and then it’s sprinkled all over the night sky.” “Wow, honey, that is some very creative thinking, let’s write that one down!” I told her. The moon slipped into the ocean, we made French toast, and then we wrote it in her journal (Novick, 1998, p. 150).

In her many years of working with young children, teacher and author Vivian Paley has capitalized on children’s unique capacity to listen to and tell stories, making it the core curriculum for young children. As Engel (1997) and Paley (1990) point out, children tell stories to sort out thoughts and solve problems and concerns—emotional, cognitive, and social. For young children, these concerns often focus on friendship, security, and fairness, as illustrated by the examples below. These reflections by four-year-old children in a child development center were dictated to their teacher:

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Emily,  
and it was a sad time for her because she fell down at school.  
Her mother and father were not at home  
and they never came to pick her up.

I’m so mad at Kagan. If you be in front of me, I’ll be in front of you. I didn’t like it when Kagan sat in front of me. I was there first. I was there before you.

As children grow older, and as they are immersed in stories, their own stories begin to reflect the structure, rhythms, and the content of the stories they hear. Fairy tales still retain their magic for children and adults, as teacher Lilia Doni points out, “They are appealing to both adults and children because they deal with love, life and death, loss, fairness. Everybody’s thinking about these big values.” In overcoming extreme circumstances, the fairy tale protagonist grows and matures, Doni explains. “This ‘test’ makes the character triumph or rejuvenate,” she says. “They change from poor to rich or from weak to strong. They change emotionally and psychologically” (see pp. 79–84)<sup>1</sup>.

This story, written by a seven-year-old, paints a picture of a strong independent heroine, who, despite paralyzing fear, can slay her own monsters!

#### The Spirit of Anadore

Once upon a time there was a land called Anadore. Now I will tell you a secret of Anadore. THERE WAS A MONSTER IN THAT LAND! And one day a little girl was walking. Her name was Shirley and she saw this great big shadow, and she was so scared she couldn’t move. And she knew it was the monster. So she forced her body to move, and she ran home and got a knife. Then she killed the monster. THE END (Gilbert, 1994, p. 134).

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1 Throughout this introductory section, we quote the practitioners whose classroom projects are highlighted in this document. Page numbers indicating where to locate their stories are included for quick reference.

## **NARRATIVE WRITING WORKS MAGIC IN THE ELD (ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT) CLASSROOM**

Using personal stories as the basis for their writing project, Lisa Ummel-Ingram's third-graders—who were learning English as a second language—created text, storyboards, and art that led to complete books. She writes:

My theory, and the impetus for the personal narrative writing project that this article describes, is that students are motivated to write when they are encouraged to write about their lives (p. 2).

My experience has been that narrative writing not only motivates students to write, but that this motivation is the key to progress in other types of writing (p. 2).

Reading aloud and sharing personal stories had always been an important part of the classroom but this book caused magic to happen (p. 3).

For the project, Ummel-Ingram and her students engaged in these activities:

- First, she read aloud the book *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born* by Jamie Lee Curtis.
- The children's assignment was to discover the story of the day or the night they were born.
- The next morning, the children were anxious to tell their stories. They traded stories and discussed the options of writing in English or Spanish.
- She asked students to break into groups of three and to share their stories with each other.
- She then explained they would write their stories, map them out on storyboards, and illustrate them with watercolors. Students knew that the end result would be their own published stories.
- They spent the next week writing.
- For resources, they used topical word lists with illustrations, Spanish/English dictionaries for children, favorite books, each other, and writing conferences with the teacher.
- Next they typed the stories: some students typed their own stories, although the teacher typed most of the stories with the children's help.
- They finished their stories during the next several weeks and mapped them on storyboards with a few words and a quick sketch. This process helped them make the transition from writing stories as a whole group and creating class books to writing individual books. The project served as a scaffold from group to individual writing.

As a result of the project:

- By asking questions about their birth, students made connections with parents.
- The children used art as a nonverbal way to convey stories.
- "The most important component of the project was the thrill students experienced as they became authors and heard their voices echo back their own stories" (p. 5).

One of the major challenges was the time it took. There were worries about how much should be corrected. "I knew what I knew: it had strengthened this group both as writers and as learners of English. ... [The project] resulted in a new willingness to write and to express themselves orally in English." The confidence continues. "As a result of telling their own stories, they truly experienced the inspiration and magic that took place as they recognized themselves as authors" (p. 6).

Source: Ummel-Ingram, L. (2004). Narrative writing works magic in the ELD classroom. *Quarterly of the National Writing Project*, 26(1), 3–6, 15. Retrieved December 6, 2004, from [www.writingproject.org/cs/nwpp/print/nwpr/1284](http://www.writingproject.org/cs/nwpp/print/nwpr/1284). Used with permission.



## Inviting Personal Narratives Into the Classroom

*We want them to see their lives are filled with stories and to learn the value of reflecting on these stories (Kurstedt & Koutras, 2000, p. 42).*

### The Early Years

As these examples show, in the early elementary years it is the child's narrative voice that must find its way into the classroom in order for students to gain confidence and competence in reading and writing. Vicki Spandel (1996) describes voice as the "writer coming through the writing. It is the heart and soul of writing, the magic, the wit, the feeling, the life and breath. ... At the primary level, voice is first noticeable in speaking, oral storytelling, and art" (p. 13). By building on these competencies, teachers can help children develop their writing voice as well.

Looking at, talking about, and reflecting on artwork also help children develop aesthetic sensitivity. They learn that art consists of symbols that communicate ideas, experiences, and feelings that can be shared (Honigman & Bhavnagri, 1998). In a thematic study of reading and great artists, second-graders in Jane Kolakowski's class listen to and read stories about artists' lives and work. In their projects, children develop and refine the visual senses and extend their understanding of story elements by first discussing and exploring paintings, and then imagining that they can enter a painting. One seven-year-old wrote (using developmental spelling) the following in response to the painting *Stafford Heights* by Carl Melchers:

I smell grain in the field. not that many houses are around. There are many trees. It is sunny and there is a dirt path. There's a field on a hill. It is bright outside the air is sweet the trees smell lik pinecones. There are no flowers here. My mouth waters when I tast sweet graps. You can not hear the birds singing. You can feel



a breeze. You can't see anyone outside. The wind plays tug-of-war with my hair (Kolakowski, 1995, p. 28).

Kolakowski comments that the insight and maturity expressed in the metaphor of the last sentence is brought out by the child's interaction with art:

The study verifies for me the research of Elliot Eisner (1992) in which he writes that the arts' contribution is its offer to everyone of an ability to feel and participate in the lives of others. Art is communication with oneself and others. Art unites the rational and the emotional. ... I want my students to feel, to dream, and to know that they have something to share with the world. This is the process that art study begins (p. 35).

### **“Writing Floats on a Sea of Talk” (Britton, 1970)**

**The most elaborate verbal stories and the most flexible manipulation of narrative time and space occurred, not in the texts themselves, but in the children's talk.**

Learning to communicate well in a number of symbol systems, including art and oral and written language, and learning to participate in the lives of others through these symbol systems, are critical competencies for both children and adults. Researcher Anne Dyson (1987) found in her studies of young children's collaborative story writing, “the most elaborate verbal stories and the most flexible manipulation of narrative time and space occurred, not in the texts themselves, but in the children's talk” (p. 415). Elementary teacher Merle Hom (2004) writes that she struggled with how to bring writing to life for her students. She was introduced to the writer's notebook while participating in the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University and that helped her to make writing relevant to her children's lives. She also found that sharing writing in a collaborative classroom is helpful for all students, and critical for some:

Several of my students also discovered that they like to write together in pairs or threes. They brainstorm together, agree on what to write, and then each one writes about the topic in their own writer's notebook. They say the activity doubles their ideas and that their best ideas come when writing together (p. 2).

First-grade teacher Nancy Csak (2002) found that the topics students told about during storytelling time were often the same ones they wrote about in their daily journals:

Children who previously claimed they couldn't think of anything to write would often light up when reminded that they could write down the story they told that morning. They began to see a stronger connection to writing as they realized that anything spoken could be written down (p. 496).

“Many educators have believed that personal storytelling can serve as an effective bridge into schooling and early literacy,” say researchers Miller and Mehler (1994, p. 39). The enduring popularity of “show and tell” is a testament to the power of sharing personal experiences in the primary classroom. In the article, “Sharing Lives: Reading, Writing, Talking, and Living in a First-grade Classroom,” the authors describe a classroom in which “narratives—personal and public, self-constructed and constructed by others—played a central role in the building of this community and in its continued life” (Galda, Bisplinghoff, Pellegrini, & Stahl, 1995, p. 335). By bringing their lives into the classroom through oral and written personal narratives, children were able to:



1. Connect their home lives to their school lives, blurring the distinction between home and school, and affirm the value and importance that the individual child had in the classroom
2. Find ways of getting to know each other and build their community
3. Offer ideas for the reading and writing they did in the classroom (Galda et al., 1995)

Children's stories provide valuable insight into what they think about and how they interpret their experiences. Also, stories are an area of strength for many young children, including those from backgrounds that do not offer many experiences with reading and writing. Geertz (2000) concludes, "It is not so much a matter of providing something the child hasn't got as enabling something the child already has: the desire to make sense of self and others ..." (p. 192). Teachers agree that children are interested in personal storytelling, participating frequently and avidly. Helping children and young adults to see their own experiences

and stories as valued and important can build students' confidence and competence in reading, writing, and critical thinking—competencies that are necessary for the higher level literacy skills needed in today's complex society.

Juneau elementary teacher Mimi Walker notes that writing about themselves and their environment "makes the work relevant. There's nothing more important to young children than themselves and what surrounds them. Writing about their own and their family's experiences validates them" and, when they see that other people think their work is important too, "that just makes the children feel great" (see pp. 71–78).

### Strategies for Young Learners

**Invented spelling.** Encouraging the use of invented or developmental spelling is a strategy that builds both phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge, and offers teachers a window into children's understanding of print/sound relationships (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). When children are able to express their thoughts while using their best phonetic spelling, they can focus on using language to communicate. Because thinking is, of course, crucial to good writing, both writing and thinking benefit when young children are encouraged to concentrate on the content of writing rather than the form or mechanics of writing (Sweet, 1993). In *Dancing with the Pen* (Ministry of Education, 1992), the authors explain: "Allowing children to attempt

spelling enables them to use vocabulary from their oral language which then flows on into their writing. Spelling is functional—it enables writers to express meaning. It is therefore, a tool for writing, not a barrier to the writing process” (p. 59).

**Language experience.** For young children, writing is often an arduous task. A young writer must be able to physically manipulate a pencil and reproduce print from memory in order to say what he or she has to say (Cooper, 1993). Although learning to write independently is an important goal in the primary years, dictating stories eliminates the necessity to learn everything at once; children’s emerging narrative voice can be temporarily freed from the constraints of the mechanics of writing. Dictating stories to an attentive adult can help children develop their storytelling ability and develop an understanding of how sound maps onto print.

In this approach, often referred to as the language experience approach (LEA), teachers act as scribes, writing children’s words as they dictate them, listening carefully for the narrative thread, and helping children clarify their thoughts. As these stories are reread by the author and his or her classmates, children begin to match the remembered words with the printed ones. Language experience activities integrate all aspects of literacy: speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and are particularly effective for children learning English as a second language.

When adults write down children’s stories as children tell them, children learn that:

- What I think I can say and discuss with others
- What I say can be written and shared with others
- What I write can be read by myself and others
- What we read can be thought about, shared, and discussed

In addition to writing original stories, students and teachers can share an experience, such as a visit to a museum or a beach. Together, they discuss the experience, and the teacher writes children’s observations and descriptions on the board or chart pack. After writing several sentences, the teacher asks the students to read what they have all just written together. It is easy to see how these activities help to build the classroom community, as well as literacy skills.

Language experience activities can be helpful for older students who struggle with writing. During a project that sought to incorporate the culture and language of the Native American students in Tulalip, Washington, teacher David Cort worked one-to-one with a student who was on an IEP and struggled with reading and writing. Cort and the student sat down together and thought through what the child had to say about the canoe journey, the focus of the project. “At first, he was very terse and couldn’t think of anything, but as we worked together he realized he really had a lot to say about his experience on the canoe journey and he was very excited about saying it,” says Cort.

Cort acted as his scribe, writing down the student’s dictated story. They talked about revision strategies while they worked, eventually reaching a point where the student felt very proud of his writing. Then the student selected photographs of the local area, put them into a slide show using Macromedia Flash software, and recorded himself reading the essay, which resulted in a polished presentation (see pp. 173–179).

Researcher Timothy Shanahan (1988) concludes:

LEA gives children the opportunity to see the process through which ideas are translated into text. It provides basic information about technical aspects of writing (e.g., spaces between words, directionality, what to do at the end of a line); it demonstrates the planning, drafting, and revision stages of writing; and it gives children valuable experience in the sustained monologue required in writing (p. 639).

### **FINDING TIME FOR LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE ACTIVITIES**

Recording children's stories, just as they dictate them, is time consuming. How does a busy teacher provide the individual attention that is needed for these language-rich activities? "It's easy," says Ellen Fischer, half-time kindergarten teacher and half-time Title I teacher at Hermon Hutchins Elementary School in Valdez, Alaska. "You put the older kids to work mentoring the younger kids. Everybody is learning together." The goals for the kindergartners are to hone emerging reading and writing skills, phonemic awareness, and phonics knowledge. "But the larger picture is that kindergarten is where children learn to love reading, to be ready for first grade, and be dying to become readers and writers," Fischer notes.

"For the older kids, we want reading to be a positive experience, something you share with people. It's fun and social. And in the process of helping the younger kids, they also are practicing their reading and writing skills." Older students come into the morning kindergarten class two to three times per week, working with children on reading, writing, phonics games, and spelling, providing the individualized attention and support that many five-year-olds need and appreciate.

It is with writing that the older kids have become invaluable, engaging in shared and interactive writing with their younger classmates, whose writing skills are just beginning to emerge. The older students enjoy coming in so much that they like to come in and help when they have free time. "At first I was afraid that the older kids might be stigmatized by coming into the kindergarten room," notes Fischer. "So we worked in the library. Then they asked, 'How come we can't come into your room? We thought you'd let us sit on the rug and take off our shoes.' It doesn't matter what grade you're in, we all like to share stories. And they take responsibility; they come to work."

Every day, the kindergartners write in their journal. This is a free-write time when they write on a subject of their choice. The only requirements are that they write something and illustrate it. Some children write using invented spelling. Others want to get the spelling correct and want help with that. Some want to dictate the story to the older children. The older students act as scribes, writing down what the kindergartners say, and pointing to the letters and words as they write. They pay careful attention to the story, asking for clarification, and often making suggestions: Often the older children draw and write in the journals, with the permission of the younger ones. "It's a good collaborative effort and we encourage all of these approaches," says Fischer.



## Helping Older Kids Find Their Voices

*Recall that when Peter Pan asks Wendy to return to Never Never Land with him, he gives as his reason that she could teach the Lost Boys there how to tell stories. If they knew how to tell them, the Lost Boys might be able to grow up (Bruner, 1996, p. 40).*

Bruner's observation about the Lost Boys points out the powerful nature of story-telling for the development of self. With encouragement from parents and teachers, children continue to use story to explore their lives in the upper elementary and middle and high school grades. Lucy Calkins (1994), founding director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, explains:

... During adolescence we have a special need to understand our lives, to find a plot line in the complexity of events, to see coordinates of continuity amid the discontinuity. During adolescence, youngsters construct a sense of personal identity. It is a time for trying on selves, for reflection, self-awareness, and self-definition. The adolescent learns to say, "This is my story" and "This is who I am." It is no surprise that some adolescents turn to writing with a particular fervor, filling endless pages of diaries, writing deep, meaningful poems, long, heartfelt letters, editorials, petitions, and posters (p. 158).

Connecting oral and written language can help older students as well as younger ones. In fifth-grade teacher Erin Ciccone's class, 30 minutes every morning are devoted to large-group talking and listening. She found:

The most effective method for capturing the elusive student voice is to let the students use their voices, literally, to tell stories before they write them. When students talk, they must find their voices in order to tell the story, and those voices find their way into writing, as well (Ciccone, 2001, p. 4).

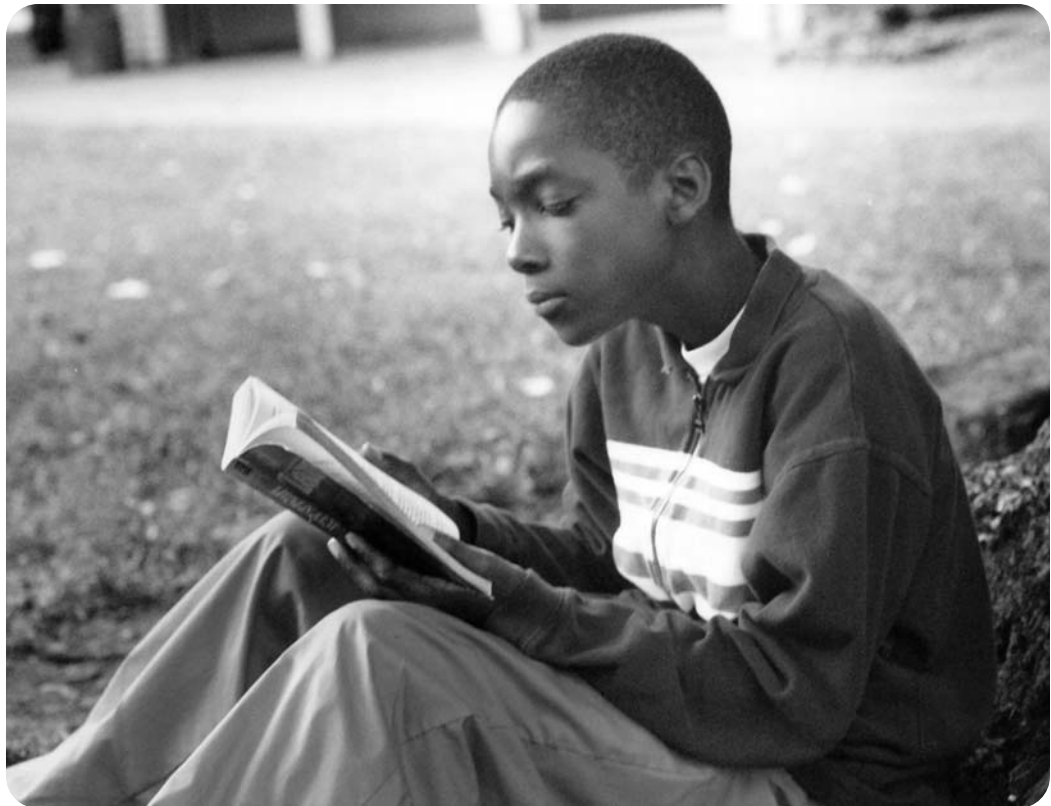
By talking to each other about their work, bouncing ideas off each other, and helping each other solve problems, children learn to consider the needs of their audience, to think critically, and to connect their concerns with academic learning (Dyson, 1987). At Open Meadow, an alternative school in Portland, Oregon, middle and high school students were asked to compare the two approaches—the written word versus the spoken—during a project in which they researched their school building's history.



"We talked a lot about writing something and the freedom that you have in giving an oral account," says instructor Elizabeth Jensen, "and how those are very different."

"For students, there's significantly more freedom in the spoken word than in the written word. And this population of at-risk students is a very oral population," Jensen says. "Having things written down or even having literature in the household or anything like that is a rarity. And the kids really identify with the ability to be able to tell a story. They're significantly better speakers than they are writers. But in making the connection between the two—which





was sort of the point of the project—they definitely developed their writing skills.” Jensen continues:

One of the most exciting developments from this project was the students’ sudden acknowledgment of their own voice as powerful and interesting. Many of these students have struggled with formal writing in the past and to be exposed to oral history was an opportunity for them to discover a different type of record, a way for them to combine their own voice and story with the writing process (see pp. 203–210).

Researchers and practitioners provide many examples of projects that encourage older students to reflect on literature, their own lives, and those of their classmates and family members, and to turn those reflections into writing:

- Researcher Shirley Brice Heath (1994) describes a writing project in a youth organization in an inner-city neighborhood, in which marginalized youth use stories as ways of testing theories about themselves and their relationships to each other and the world around them. Heath found that the “interplay of class discussion, small-group work, and individual writing and reading of stories prepares learners to move to the study of different types and uses of printed stories: news stories, fictional tales, traditional stories, or accounts of daily events” (p. 218).
- Middle school teacher Jessica Matthews-Burell (2003) notes that “middle-schoolers light up when they find windows not only into life, but their lives.” She describes a multifaceted heritage project, in which her group of culturally diverse eighth-grade students “discover the magic of traveling with authors into the nooks and crannies of their seminal experiences, write their own budding memoirs, consider their values and beliefs, and compare family members’ stories and values to their own” (p. 33).

- In the article, “In the Middle of the Middle: Seventh-Grade Girls’ Literacy and Identity Development,” authors Broughton and Fairbanks (2003) focused on the ways that early adolescents develop their identities in school contexts. They concluded that the girls were grateful for the occasions when they were allowed to share their ideas and their lives.
- In “Maniac Magee and Ragtime Tumpie: Children Negotiating Self and World through Reading and Writing,” McGinley and Kamberelis (1996) describe a year-long study of upper elementary students who were encouraged to read, write, and talk about personally and socially relevant subjects. In interviews with the students, “the most common uses of reading and writing reported by children were personal in nature”:
  - First, reading and writing often functioned as a means to envision and explore possible selves.
  - In addition, they functioned to describe and remember personal experiences or interests in their lives.
  - Third, they served to objectify and reflect on certain problematic emotions and circumstances related to important moral and ethical dilemmas in their lives.
  - Finally, children engaged in reading and writing to experience or participate in the storied lives and worlds of imaginary characters (p. 89).
- High school English teacher Erin Gruwell focused her curriculum for at-risk students on tolerance and social justice. Students read books like *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* and *Zlata’s Diary: A Child’s Life in Sarajevo* and drew parallels with their own lives in violence-ridden neighborhoods of Long Beach, California. They recorded their thoughts and feelings in diaries, eventually compiling their entries into a book, *The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them*. Gruwell explains, “I encouraged the [students] to use a pen as a means of revolution. Through their writing, they discovered they shared a common identity, which united them into a community that connected them, not separated them from the world” (Freedom Writers, 1999, p. 276).
- In *Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write About Their Search for Self*, 17-year-old author Sara Shandler solicited and compiled essays from teenage girls in a desire to give an insider’s perspective of the journey toward womanhood. “Invited to speak honestly, girls told treasured and hidden stories. They wrote to communicate, to heal themselves, and to help other girls. With intelligence, they reflected on the most important experiences in their lives,” she writes (1999, p. xv).

### So Many Reasons To Write

Of course, there are hundreds of reasons to write. We know that children have been writing for thousands of years, and for many of the same reasons children write today. For example, on a 4,000-year-old tablet in a museum in Iraq, there is a letter from a boy to his parents complaining that they don’t love him because they have not given him nice enough clothing (Goodheart, 2003).

Teacher and author Ralph Fletcher (1991) asked a group of students who had engaged in exploring personal narrative writing what other kinds of writing there are. They quickly created a long list of types of writing: mysteries, plays, poems, romances, science fiction, folktales, nature writing, how-to books, horror, real fiction, biography, letters, and sports. There is expository writing, persuasive writing, imaginative writing, and research. The list could go on and on. All of these kinds of writing are important and need a place in the school curriculum. But through the exploration of personal narrative, teachers see many benefits—to students, families, and schools:

- In *Walking Trees: Portraits of Teachers and Children in the Culture of Schools*, Fletcher (1991) writes that starting the year with writing personal narratives “fosters independence, allows children to make decisions and breathe authentically into the writing, juggle the elements of a story, and take advantage of the tension between what is in the student’s mind and what has been written down” (p. 38).
- We all have a need to tell our stories. Seeing value in our own story aids the development of self-identity and self-esteem. Narrative plays a key role in self-formation via the construction of memories (Bruner, 1996).
- Bringing students’ narrative voice into the classroom acknowledges their own voice as powerful and interesting (Elizabeth Jensen, Open Meadow Alternative School, Portland, Oregon [see pp. 203–210]).
- Shared stories can build classroom community and connect home and school lives (Galda et al., 1995; McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996; Buchoff, 1995).
- Wells (1986) studied children in Bristol, England, and found that youngsters under the age of four who told and heard stories at home were the most likely to learn to read easily and with interest once they got to school.
- Research has shown that by reading, listening, and telling stories, children become more confident, articulate speakers (Berk & Winsler, 1995).
- Researchers Feagans and Appelbaum (1986) concluded that “*narrative ability is the single most important language ability for success in school*” (p. 359, emphasis added).
- Activities that require students to pay attention to and craft their own memories can be directed toward helping them become more thoughtful readers and writers in other contexts (Faust, 2004).
- “Research has shown that ... reading, listening and telling stories ... lay[s] the foundation for storywriting endeavors” (Buchoff, 1995, p. 230).
- Personal narrative can be a stepping-stone or launching pad for other forms of writing (Fletcher, 1991). See also Cassandra Mastne, Chehalem Elementary School, Portland, Oregon, 2004 on pp. 17–18.

Teacher Linda Bausch (2003) speaks eloquently about the value of personal narrative in the classroom: “Our children need to know that their lives count. That their cultures count. That their literacies count. We must place value on who they are and where they come from and we must navigate the course, together, to where they are going” (p. 221). Including family stories in the literacy curriculum invites children to explore key elements of where they come from: customs, language, ethnicity, and culture.

## STORYTELLING AS A MEANS FOR LAUNCHING WRITING

Cassandra Mastne's fourth-grade classroom sits in a far corner of Chehalem Elementary School in Beaverton, Oregon. It is adjacent to the school library, but walled off with modular accordion-like partitions and lacks a real door. Hanging along one of the walls are several posters—hand-written lists—each with a different heading: relative stories, injury stories, animal stories, summer stories, and travel stories.

The posters were created during the first few weeks of the school year, when Mastne engaged her students in telling each other stories from their lives. About one-fourth of the children are English language learners. Mastne uses the activity to get students acquainted with each other, raise awareness of the elements of a good story, and encourage students' interest in writing.

### Developing Ideas

The process is relatively straightforward. Mastne begins each storytelling session by presenting a topic, such as "travel stories." She models for students, sharing a story from her own life. Mastne says that she was a little surprised at her students' detailed interest in hearing her tell a story about herself. For example, one student went home and related the story to his older brother, who had also had Mastne as a teacher. In school the next day, the student eagerly questioned her about the differences between the two versions of the story he and his brother had heard (she had condensed one version). Overall, she has found that "telling stories helps me to connect with my students."

After she has modeled telling a story, Mastne asks volunteers to come to the front of the room and tell their own stories on the topic of the day. Each story is given a title and listed, along with the teller's name, on a poster-sized sheet of paper. Students tell stories about family vacations where things go wrong (*Too Late for the Train* and *Lost Fishing*), trips to visit relatives (*Driving to Mexico* and *Christmas at Grandma's House*), and trips to amusement parks (*Rides*).

When Mastne saw that not all of her students were comfortable getting up in front of the class, resulting in the same students volunteering repeatedly, she modified her approach. She wanted each student to tell a story on at least one topic. So, she asked students to share their stories in groups of four. One student in the group served as a note-taker and recorded the title of each story, which was later added to the posters. She notes, "It helped them to get to know each other at the beginning of the year, and to get comfortable speaking in front of each other."

After students have had a few days to become familiar with the idea of telling stories, the class discusses what makes a good story. Mastne will dissect her own story, pointing out one of the story elements or craft techniques she used. Through this activity, students discuss elements like building character, using descriptive language, telling important details, beginning-middle-end structure, and audience enjoyment. Students begin to compliment each other on what they perceive as strong points of their peers' stories.

After a few weeks of this activity, "students are itching to write," Mastne says. This is when she introduces the "idea book," her adaptation of the writer's notebook, which students use for their writing. After students have chosen and decorated their idea books, they make a list of story ideas in the back of their books: ideas from stories they have told the class or were prompted by other students' stories. These ideas can then be used during students' free-writing time, which happens about twice a week.

Later in the fall, students will choose one piece from their idea books to take through the writing and publishing process. Students usually do not choose a personal story for this process—perhaps after spending several weeks on these stories, they're ready to move on—but the experience has given them an entry point into the world of writing, a place from which to launch.

### Publishing

Mastne's students engage in two rituals that give them the experience and insight that comes with being a published author. The first is the in-school publishing house, which helps students produce typed, bound books. The publishing house has been staffed for several years by a dedicated parent volunteer, Annie Bergan.

When students are ready to publish, they sign up for a 15- to 20-minute appointment with Bergan. During that time, Bergan works with the student to make some final edits, choose a font, and determine where to place the illustrations. Bergan types the story and lays it out as the student wishes. Each book is then given a typed, construction-paper cover, plastic binding, and "official" gold seal. Pictures of the authors have been a recent addition by the ELL teacher, Martin Martinez. One copy of the book goes to the school library. Another copy goes to the classroom and is later sent home with the author. The books become a favorite read among classmates.

At least once per semester, Mastne and the other two teachers in her fourth-grade team hold a publishing party. Three students from each class are selected to stand at the classroom podium and read aloud their published piece for an audience that includes parents and the principal.

As Lucy McCormick Calkins (1994) says, "Our children will regard themselves in a dramatically new light if they are published authors" (p. 268). Mastne has found that the selected students are really excited to read their work. "It was great to see their growth, because of the students who volunteered to read, I decided to pick those who were initially the shyest about their writing," she adds.

Following the large-group reading, students and parents gather in small groups where each student gets a chance to read his or her work and receive compliments from the other children and parents. "The publishing party celebrates a long process," says Mastne. In addition, parents are pleased to see students reading and talking about their writing.

## Family Stories

*Every child has a person whose story should be told, a person who has taught, cared-for, and loved them, a person whose influence and ability to inspire is truly heroic.* —Bill Starkey, counselor at Cherry Valley School, Polson, Montana

In the previous section, we explored how engaging students in stories about themselves motivates them to be stronger, more confident, and more engaged writers. Families and communities are vital threads in the fabric of students' lives, imaginations, and reasons to write. Asking parents to read their child's writings, tell their children stories and histories, or otherwise participate in developing a child's story seamlessly incorporates family involvement into the curriculum as well. When families are invited to share their stories, folktales, and culture, there are a number of benefits for children, families, and schools:

- Encouraging students to talk with family members about their cultural heritage shows respect and interest in students' diverse cultures, making students and families feel more connected to the school.
- Families are offered authentic, academically oriented ways of being involved in the school without themselves needing to be highly proficient in English or numerous academic subjects.



- Writing projects that illuminate diverse cultural traditions allow all students to share and learn from each other, while heightening respect and appreciation for diversity and improving school climate.

### **Motivating Kids**

Students' writing connects them to their families and communities in diverse and creative ways. Families can support and provide experiences for their children to write about, and they themselves can participate in the story process by being storytellers or audiences. Children love to listen to stories, sharing time and family history with the parent or grandparent who tells them. Listening to these stories, children learn the structure of narratives and the many ways of relating meaningful and engaging thoughts and events.

Middle school teacher Priscilla Kelly (1993) relates how allowing her students to tell their families' stories inspired not only their writing, but wide-ranging research projects:

The first time I assigned the biographies I envisioned students researching a notable person, probably someone unrelated to themselves. You can imagine my surprise when at least two-thirds of the class chose to write about members of their own families. I was horrified since each student presents a twenty-minute oral report about her biographical subject. How many grandmothers could we stand to hear about! How wrong I was. First, I was and continue to be amazed at the relatives that my students have. They come with stories that amaze, complete with documentation in old pictures, diaries, awards. I ask them to read at least one book that will familiarize them with the context of their subject's life" (p. 5).

What children can learn of history and themselves by talking to their families is beautifully evoked in Christopher Paul Curtis's afterword to his popular children's book,



*Bud, Not Buddy*, a story about a young boy making his way through Depression-era Michigan in search of his father. Curtis (1999) says:

Much of what I discovered about the depression I learned through research in books, which is a shame—I didn't take advantage of family history that surrounded me for many years. I'm afraid that when I was younger and my grandparents and parents would start to talk about their lives during the depression, my eyes would glaze over and I'd think, "Oh, no, not those boring tall tales again!" ... Now I feel a real sorrow when I think of all the knowledge, wisdom and stories that have been forever lost with the deaths of my grandparents" (p. 242).

He urges young people: "Go talk to Grandma and Grandpa, Mom and Dad and other relatives and friends. Discover and remember what they have to say about what they learned growing up. By keeping their stories alive, you make them, and yourself immortal" (p. 243).

### Engaging Families

Teachers can help their students embrace this advice by respecting the fundamental importance of family knowledge to the academic curriculum. One teacher asked her American history students to interview their parents about the civil rights movement when the class was studying that period. She then invited parents of diverse groups to share their experiences in class (Jackson, 1998, p. 62). Here we see the families not simply feeding and nurturing the students' growing sense of who and what they are, but evolving from "just family" into knowing experts in their children's eyes.

It can be a motivating experience when children make this realization. At Tulalip Elementary School located on the Tulalip Indian Reservation in Washington, teacher David Cort and his students engaged in a project that included connecting technology, literacy, art, and culture:

Kids love learning about the rich culture we have here at Tulalip. They feel pride; they see themselves as leaders. Culture motivates them to learn. For many of these kids, when they realize that their family and the canoe culture is something they can share in the classroom, that's when they realize they have powerful stories to tell that they are excited about telling (see pp. 173–179).

**Honoring families' heritage language.** Offering parents whose native language is not English the opportunity to participate in their child's education is yet another critical element in the potential for story projects in any classroom. Students build bridges between their classrooms and their home cultures, integrating all aspects of themselves into their education. Simultaneously, as their cultures are connected to their classwork, their fellow students gain knowledge of diverse cultures, languages, customs, histories, and experiences.

By positioning ethnic and cultural diversity as critical and respected realms of knowledge and experience, children's cultural differences are understood as strengths from which to build knowledge and skills, and they promote cross-cultural understanding among their classmates. Dyson and Genishi (1994) write: "By connecting to kids' cultures, one not only recognizes and honors the communities to which they belong; faith, cultural, ethnic, interest ... you also allow a community to be forged among the students in the class" (p. 5).



In Medford, Oregon, teacher JoAnna Lovato has developed a project with her seven- to -nine-year-old Latino students in which they read autobiographies, write their own and family stories, and create a colorful laminated paper “wheel” that carries the stories and images of their lives. “One of the beauties of this project,” she observes, “is that it fully embraced my students—their language, culture, and family traditions. They loved it because it was about them, and they all took great pride in their projects” (see pp. 65–70).

Similarly, fifth-grade teacher Stephanie Windham has found that her Family Story Book project has helped students improve their writing skills, learn about the genre of story writing, and—most important—develop a sense of pride about their own lives. The children at Atkinson Elementary School in Southeast Portland come from Latin America, the former Soviet Union, and countries such as China, Vietnam, and Pakistan. The project involved writing a story based on the stories told by their own families, as well as a poem on the theme “Where I Am From.” They then selected one piece to take through the revision and publishing process.

Through the project, Windham has found that family members, especially those unfamiliar with American schools, gain confidence and a better understanding of their child’s education. The father of a Russian student, in his struggling English, made a point to contact Windham after the project in order to tell her “it is good you teach this, having children come to ask their parents questions. You are teaching the right things” (see pp. 121–130).

Researchers have found that the most powerful form of parental involvement occurs when parents are actively engaged with their children in ways that enhance learning (Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998). Projects such as these offer ways for non-English speaking parents to participate in their children’s education, and motivate non-English speaking students to convey who they and their families are to the English-speaking community. Students learning English as a second language can interview family members in their home language and write their family stories in English, perhaps sharing the stories with classmates in two languages. Students have opportunities to read, write, and speak both their home language and English.

Students also may gain new insights into what makes a story. After observing her family’s storytelling habits and interviewing family members, a fifth-grader at a Portland, Oregon, school remarked:

I had to ask a lot of questions of my parents and I was surprised about how much I didn’t know. It was really interesting because I didn’t know that when my grandma talks, when my great-grandma talks, I didn’t realize that saying “I used

**Researchers have found that the most powerful form of parental involvement occurs when parents are actively engaged with their children in ways that enhance learning.**

to do that when I was your age” was considered a story. It was really interesting (see pp. 121–130).

By encouraging and providing opportunities for meaningful family involvement, teachers play a critical role in bridging home and school. In the small, rural town of Copper Center, Alaska, Tamara Van Wyhe, a secondary school English teacher, engages her students in creating an annual publication of poetry and prose that is shared with the community in a year-end celebration. Through the writings, Van Wyhe says she has developed a greater understanding of the strengths of her students’ families and how they support their children’s learning. She says this new knowledge has even changed the focus of her parent newsletter—moving away from “look what the school is doing for your child” to “thank you so much for all you are doing to help your child learn” (see pp. 183–191).

### **FAMILY STORIES**

Family stories encourage students to learn more about their heritage, to acquire and refine literacy skills, and to develop greater respect for the multicultural differences that make them unique.

Family stories are narratives in which the youngster or other relatives are the featured characters in simple home adventures of days gone by.

- Explore the theme of family stories through quality trade books that provide the catalyst for collecting, writing, and sharing narratives that are personally significant for children—their own life stories.
- Use prompts, such as: Tell me about something you did when you were little or got lost; describe your neighborhood or your favorite relative. Invite children to contribute their own suggestions.
- Share the stories aloud. Through retelling, children learn story structure and experiment with words. Record their words on audio or videotape. Younger children can dictate the stories.
- Preserve the stories through writing: Draft the narrative, revise the content, edit for spelling and grammar.
- Celebrate by having families come together to share their stories. Teachers can ask families to bring an item from home that has a family story behind it and share with others at the celebration.

Excerpts from Buchoff, R. (1995, November). Family stories. *Reading Teacher*, 49(3), 230–233. Reprinted with permission of the International Reading Association.

## Community Stories

*My developmental approach to children's literacy actually depends on layers of community, from classroom to family and friends, to extended family and church and townspeople, to the heritage and values these people bring to their lives and places. For children to be fully active learners, they must notice the ways literacy is part of community activity in all these settings, and they must explore ways they can participate* (Bangert & Brooke, 2003, p. 31).

Many teachers have found that telling stories and writing about self and family fit easily into their literacy curriculum. But, as teachers Sandy Bangert and Robert Brooke (2003) conclude in their book, *Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing*, engaging the community takes more work—but work that is well rewarded. In our highly mobile society, children—whether in urban or rural communities—may not always have a “sense of place.” Even children growing up in small, rural villages and towns where their relatives have lived for generations may not have a sense of pride in belonging to that area. Helping students to explore their community through reading, writing, and hands-on activities can build a sense of belonging to the school and community.

While engaging in a “real-life project,” students can develop their oral and written language skills; explore the use of technology, such as tape recorders and digital cameras; and bridge gaps between school and communities. Reading specialist Bernice Cullinan (1992) points out there is a reciprocal influence between reading and life experience: “Children use real life experiences to help them understand books, and books help them to understand real life” (p. 15).

**Children use real life experiences to help them understand books, and books help them to understand real life.**

**The importance of oral interviews.** Projects that reach out into the community often include interviewing members of the community. They might be grandparents who attended the school and can tell students about schooling when they were children. They might be nursing home residents who live nearby, who have stories to tell. In a multicultural community, students and teachers can learn about the cultures and languages that make up their school and community. For example, in places with Alaska Native and/or American Indians, there might be elders who have a wealth of knowledge to share about language and culture. Many teachers have found that when students interview community members, conduct research about their communities, and create books, calendars, and other products, there are many benefits to students, families, schools, and communities.

Oral interviews play a central role in the goal of making communities more education-centered, says Michael Umphrey, director of the Montana Heritage Project. The program is a community-centered, project-based learning initiative that's designed to help Montana students learn about their communities and their heritage. Students give back to the community by presenting their final projects as “gifts of scholarship.” Umphrey (2002) writes that a student in Libby, Montana, who had done oral interviews of community members, “said that she learned that every person is more fascinating than a novel—a wealth of stories—and all you need to do is ask questions and listen—really listen. The great adventure of learning had to do with exploring other minds, she said” (p. 2).

Even young children can learn the art of asking good questions and listening. In White Mountain, Alaska, first- and second-grade children visited community elders'



homes and interviewed them about their experiences, memories, and words of wisdom. They transcribed these interviews using documentation from their own notes, tape recordings, and/or memory, and selected excerpts to include in their publication (see pp. 95–104).

In the small, rural town of Springhill, Montana, students in a one-room schoolhouse created nine annotated note cards featuring local buildings—a barn, chicken coop, log cabin, and church. Each card includes a history of the building, put together from interviews with the owners and other community members. Teacher Linda Rice explains:

My goal was for students (ranging in age from 6 to 14) to look at their community in a different way. We drive by these buildings all the time. But once you've done the artwork and the investigation, you have a vested interest in that building. You have something to talk about, you have something to think about, and you have a connection to the community (see pp. 211–215).

Rice is also interested in using the cards as a starting point for writing a more comprehensive local history, expanding the project to include interviews with other community members who have knowledge of the history of their small town.

## Oral Histories

*The telling of oral histories is one of the most ancient of the arts and we feel that it is an art if done well. Through the centuries, it has provided not only entertainment, but has also been used to pass on traditions, community and cultural paradigms, and moral and ethical codes of conduct. Personal histories provide a golden thread of awareness in humans. They help us know, question, remember, and understand* (Sidwell, 1996).

Through oral interviews, students may gain an understanding of their own culture and community or of people very different from themselves. Penyak and Duray (1999) designed an oral history project and followed the work of middle-class students visiting rural areas of Mexico. The students experimented with different genre and narrative devices to explore the experiences and voices of the people they interviewed. Encountering, speaking with, and documenting people whose poverty and lack of education they never had to think about before became a critical juncture in their lives and in their writing.

Students asserted that interviewing had taught them to respect people from different cultures. Other students added that although people in the provinces should have the same rights and opportunities that they had, they should also try to understand what other citizens want, rather than impose belief systems on them (p. 71).

A number of oral history projects are profiled in this document. The projects described below took place in rural and—in some cases “remote” settings—with bilingual students:

- Project Fresa is an example of a project that provided elementary students with rich language and cultural experiences while exploring their own rural community. Two teachers from Mar Vista Elementary School in Oxnard, California, created a multimedia, cross-curricular project to help their predominantly Latino students under-

stand the relationship between their own lives and the strawberry crops that surround and sustain the local community. Project Fresa illustrates how a well-planned, collaborative, integrated project can provide a medium in which students and families may voice their daily realities (see pp. 159–171).

- In Clarks Point, Alaska, a determined teacher and a small group of middle school students produced a 40-plus page book and Web site, the first book about Clarks Point written by community members. This was an important milestone for this village of approximately 65 residents located on Nushagak Bay, which empties into the larger Bristol Bay. The middle schoolers who worked on the book learned many writing skills. They also discovered that the elders in their village have taught them important skills for surviving and thriving in their environment, skills the young adolescents hadn't valued before. The students found special meaning in their small village, and learned that they are part of something much, much larger—a community of interdependent and caring people (see pp. 235–242).
- In Aleknagik, Alaska, Yup'ik students interviewed elders for a history of the village and learned about subsistence, ceremonies, and other Yup'ik traditions. They studied the difference between stories about real events and myths or fables that are told as both entertainment and to “teach lessons about life.” They discovered why almost everyone in their school has both a Yup'ik and an English name. Their teacher, Brendan McGrath, learned along with them, discovering how writing provided a way for students to explore their own lives and to express their deep feelings (see pp. 243–250).

**All communities have so much to offer students. All students have to do is ask the right questions.**

While it is somewhat easier to use a sense of place to teach students in rural areas, projects can also thrive in urban communities. Teacher and consultant Pauline Hodges (2004) reminds us: “All communities have so much to offer students. All students have to do is ask the right questions” (p. 29). While researching the history of their school building and its former residents, at-risk teens at Open Meadow Alternative School in Portland, Oregon, developed many academic skills and a connection to their local community. Teacher Elizabeth Jensen says the project has also helped them “gain a sense that they can go forward and ... [open doors, make connections, and be successful] again in other places in their lives.”

One Open Meadow student said he liked the project “way better” than school projects he'd been forced to do in the past. “You know, there's always a project somebody doesn't want to do,” he says, “but this was one everybody wanted to do. We took a lot of time and were really serious about it. It was fun.” Additionally, he says he learned skills that will benefit him for years to come—how to work cooperatively in a group, how to conduct library research, how to prepare for an interview, how to speak publicly, and how to use technology to augment a presentation (see pp. 203–210).

## GETTING TO KNOW THE COMMUNITY, THE PARENTS, AND THE CHILDREN

Sometimes I tell my graduate students to imagine that they have just gotten word that they have to leave tomorrow to go teach in Eritrea, which they've never heard of. I ask them, What are you going to have to do in order to teach when you get there? And they go through a long list of things: the culture, the relationships between parents and children. They need to know the music, the literature, the stories and how people feel about them coming there, how people feel about Americans in general. Then I ask them, How would you find out? And they say they would live in the community. They would get an informant, a friend, somebody who could help them learn about it. They would go to the religious places, the shopping places, where people congregate.

And I ask, how much of this information do you know about the children you teach? I try to get folks to understand how knowing the community and knowing the parents and the children is connected to teaching. They know that, but yet they don't seem to carry it over into their world. I think we all really know somewhere deep inside that in order to teach people, we have to know who they are and how they feel about us.

Source: Delpit, L. (2000, June 5). [Forum participant]. In H. Kohl (Interviewer), School colors: The racial politics of public education. *Nation*, 270(22), 13–18. Retrieved December 9, 2004, from [www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20000605&s=forum](http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20000605&s=forum). Reprinted with permission from the June 5, 2000, issue of the *Nation*. For subscription information, call 1-800-333-8536. Portions of each week's *Nation* magazine can be accessed at [www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com).

## Building Intergenerational Relationships: Exploring the Past, Present, and Future

Many oral history projects involve interviewing older people in the community: They may know the history of the community and—having lived a long life—may have many interesting stories to tell. At Cherry Valley Elementary School, in Polson, Montana, children visited a local nursing home and began establishing relationships with one or more residents. Children then interviewed the residents, who frequently told stories about their lives. Younger children remembered as much as they could of these stories, while older children took notes or used tape recorders. They then wrote the stories and brought them back to the residents for editing. Once published, they took them back to the nursing home where they read the stories to the elderly residents. The project was met with enthusiasm from the staff at the nursing facility and the residents themselves. A social worker at the facility writes:

I have witnessed contacts between young and old, which can only be described as “touching.” Residents are able to hold a child’s hand or see a bright young smile. They look forward to these visits and are delighted by the children’s eagerness to please and entertain. These intergenerational exchanges are a benefit for both age groups. They nurture an understanding and acceptance of age difference (Novick, 2002, p. 25).

In Nikiski, Alaska, eighth-grade students assumed roles of historians, writers, scientists, and statisticians, working on projects ranging from recording oral histories and composing poetry to preparing scientific field reports and summarizing mathematical studies. An important part of the published document, titled *Away From Almost Everything Else: An Interdisciplinary Study of Nikiski*, was the relationships students developed with the elders in the community. “An important byproduct of these interviews was the generational interaction that cannot be achieved by field trips to the senior citizens’ center for Christmas carols. Here, the young and old were working

together, creating something real and important,” said teacher Scott Christian. “Time after time,” he adds, “the interviewees expressed how delightful it was to sit down and have a meaningful conversation with a teenager” (see pp. 227–233).

Students in another Alaska Native village also discovered the value of talking with community elders. White Mountain, Alaska, located 65 miles east of Nome, “is beyond rural,” says teacher Cheryl Pratt. “It’s downright remote.” The approximately 200 residents of this primarily Inupiat village practice subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering. Respect for elders is a strong part of the culture. But Pratt wanted to see the elders’ wisdom play a more central role in the school curriculum. She and the students decided to create a calendar with a picture of an elder for each month and a summary of the children’s interviews with the elders. “Our elders are our greatest resource,” Pratt writes in the introduction to the 2001 White Mountain Calendar. “They are the culture-bearers of our community.”

Further, she says: “Allowing young children to take part in the process of documenting Indigenous knowledge gives them the opportunity to develop their skills and options as professional researchers in their future especially for the documentation of their own people. It also allows both Alaska Native children and elders to experience education in the traditional way of learning. Elders are given a strong sense of purpose in their traditional role and students are able to learn much about their past, present and future.” (see pp. 95–104).

**Our elders are  
our greatest  
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community.**



## KNOW OUR ROOTS

The unincorporated town of Glenoma, with fewer than 1,000 residents, is located in the Cowlitz River valley in central Washington about 40 miles east of the Interstate-5 corridor. The community has been deeply affected by an economic downturn sparked by the closing of several lumber mills and a decline in tourism. More than half of the students became eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. “It became important to implement a program that was connected to the students’ future,” says district superintendent Rick Anthony (Lewis, 2001, p. 1). During the course of a decade, the school gradually built a focus on promoting youth entrepreneurship, contextual teaching, and service learning with assistance from a mini-REAL (Rural Entrepreneurship to Action Learning) grant.

The mini-REAL program, which lasted eight weeks each year, engaged students in building a model community within the school. Each of the school’s 100 students had a job and worked within the simulated community, which included a court system, bank, revenue department, various mall shops, post office, and recycling department. This experience not only provided a rich opportunity for service learning, but also helped students develop an interest in their local community and its history.

The classroom curriculum grew to build upon the mini-REAL experience’s focus on community. For several years, students in Linda Mettler’s second/third-grade and Janet Collier’s fifth-grade classes had created “life maps,” where students documented their personal history from birth to the present. The teachers expanded on this theme to include family history in the life maps. Then, Mettler and Collier had students learn about the history of their community through reading books, visiting local historical museums, and interviewing long-term residents. They aligned the project with state writing, communication, and social studies standards. The teachers also used it as an opportunity to put into practice what they were learning through professional development opportunities in technology integration and contextual teaching and learning.

### Learning About Local History From Senior Citizens

To prepare for their interviews with community members, students were trained in interviewing techniques. A reporter from the *East Lewis County Journal* visited the classes to give students pointers on nonverbal communication, questioning, and note taking. In the words of one student, “We learned to shake hands, make eye contact, and try to look interested in the person.” Students from the nearby high school then came to talk about their interviewing experiences and participate in mock interviews with the grade school students.

Students were given additional preparation through a field trip to the Lewis County Historical Museum, where they learned about the county’s history. This gave them a context for the information they would gain in interviews.

After sufficient practice, the students scheduled the interviews with senior citizens. They mailed between 30 and 40 invitations to people who had lived in the community for most of their life. About 16 people agreed to come to the school for an interview. Later, students interviewed elderly residents of the Morton Senior Center. On the interview day, many seniors arrived early and teachers hastily improvised a waiting area in the library. The visitors ended up staying after their interviews to visit and catch up with each other. Most of the guests hadn’t visited the school since they were enrolled as students, and they appreciated the opportunity to return and reconnect with others.

After the interviews, students used scanners and PowerPoint tools to create presentations that tied together their writings, observations, and pictures provided by the seniors. The project expanded into an after-school writing class where students used their interviews as the basis for more developed stories. A community business owner, who was also a skilled writer, volunteered



to assist with the project: helping the students expand on the most interesting aspects of their interviews and calling senior citizens with further questions as needed. Students worked through the writing process and used a rubric to assess each other's work. They compiled the stories into a student-published book featuring 16 senior citizens. The topics ranged from early May Day celebrations to Christmas parties, a women's basketball championship, and school experiences. One of the stories was published in the local newspaper.

### **Appreciating Generational Differences**

As they did their research, students were intrigued to learn that there used to be a Community Day in Glenoma, and they decided to revive the event. Mettler and Collier never intended to carry out such an event, but agreed to do so because of the students' excitement. Students chose to use the Community Day to celebrate the 70th birthday of the school building—another fact they uncovered in their research. Again, students wrote personal invitations to those who had been involved in their local history research. More than 100 parents, students, and senior citizens came to the school on a Saturday for a party featuring dancing and building tours. Students documented the event with photographs and videotapes.

Students used journals to reflect on their field trips, interviews, and the Community Day. The project gave students an opportunity to write in real contexts, practice interviewing skills, and use technology while meeting state academic standards in writing, communication, and social studies. The teachers report that previously unmotivated students became motivated because of the relevance of their schoolwork. They were motivated to learn about the history of their rural community and felt pride in it. Because many students do not have grandparents who live in the area, they benefited from the opportunity to learn about the lives of the elderly and to appreciate generational differences.

The senior citizens had an opportunity to meet the students and get to know them in a positive light—countering the negative stereotypes of youth in the media. They felt their knowledge and experience were valued by the teachers and students. As a result, the school improved its relationship with the major voters in the area.

Unfortunately, due to declining enrollment, Glenoma Elementary School was forced to close at the end of the 2003–2004 school year. The loss is surely felt by everyone in this small community. As Collier explains, “This makes it even more significant, I feel, that we were able to document some of the school's history with our Know Our Roots project.”

## **Connecting Reading and Writing**

*When learners see their own experiences as valid knowledge and use reading and writing for their own purposes, the journey toward literate behaviors is soundly under way (Dahl & Freppon, 1995).*

We have discussed how personal, family, and community stories can be vehicles for children and teachers to explore their lives and their worlds; to connect home, school, and community; to build intergenerational relationships; and to develop respect and appreciation for different cultures. Of course, how well-written the stories are depends on how well students have mastered the art and craft of writing.

In this section, we will look at what researchers say about writing, and how practitioners help their students develop a love of reading and writing and the ability to think critically and deeply. As Donald Graves (2004) says, “for most children personal

narrative is the easiest place to begin. Of course, there is more to writing than personal narrative: writing is, after all, a medium for learning how to think” (p. 90).

### Writing and Thinking

Anyone who has stared at a blank sheet of paper or computer screen, trying to conjure up a story, poem, essay, letter, or term paper, and anyone who has struggled to find just the right word, phrase, or the most effective organization, knows that writing is hard work. It requires deep thinking and rethinking, reading, rereading, and revising. It demands higher order thinking skills: analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, and interpreting (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003). Good writing not only requires deep thinking, it often *changes* our thinking, as this fifth-grader discovered when writing a family story based on the stories told by his family members:

We told a part of our life and Ms. Windham would say, ‘how do you feel about it?’ And, I think that was the hardest part, because sometimes you wouldn’t know how you felt about things until you wrote them down (see pp. 121–130).

Researcher John Gage (1986) would agree with that thoughtful student. Gage writes:

Writing is thinking made tangible, thinking that can be examined because it is on the page and not in the head invisibly floating around. Writing is thinking that can be stopped and tinkered with. It is a way of holding thought still enough to examine its structure, its flaws. *The road to clearer understanding of one’s thoughts is traveled on paper. It is through an attempt to find words for ourselves in which to express related ideas that we often discover what we think* (p. 24, emphasis added).

There is a consensus among researchers from many fields that writing enhances thinking and learning in many academic subjects. “Recent research into how writing supports conceptual understanding demonstrates improvement in students’ cognitive processing,



understanding, and writing and supports a variety of promising classroom approaches” (Yore et al., 2004, p. 350).

Just as it is important to connect oral and written language, good teachers know that connecting reading and writing in meaningful ways engages their students in deep thinking, and leads to improvements in both reading and writing. When children have opportunities to write their own stories, to read their own and other’s stories, and to write in response to reading, they are able to employ much of their knowledge of reading in meaningful and purposeful ways (Braunger & Lewis, 1997). Middle school teacher Linda Rief (2003) points out:

**Good writing not only requires deep thinking, it often changes our thinking.**

When students write, they are engaged in a recursive process of critical thinking: Have I said what I want to say, clearly and simply? Is this well organized in developing my ideas? Have I used the sharpest, tightest, most vivid language? Does my lead capture readers and take them where I intended? Does my writing make the reader think or feel or learn something (p. 9)?

According to Tierney and Shanahan (1991), numerous studies have shown that “writing led to improved reading achievement, reading led to better writing, and combined instruction led to improvement in both reading and writing” (p. 258). However, Shanahan (1988) cautions that “teachers should make the reading/writing connection explicit. If students don’t understand that reading or writing can be transferred then there is less possibility that it will transfer. Building the bridges is a vital teacher role” (p. 641).

In the following section, we will briefly discuss some of the ways that practitioners build bridges among reading, writing, and speaking to build children’s competence and confidence in all of these skills.

### **Immersion in Literature**

*The richer the repertoire of storytelling styles a child is exposed to, the more possibilities for that child to develop his or her own powerful narrative voice, one that reflects both his community, his family, and his inner life (Engel, 1997, p. 9).*

There is no doubt that children tend to be early and competent readers if they come from families who place a high value on literacy and who have a rich oral language vocabulary and extensive reading experience with storybooks. They come to school, in Fletcher’s words, “marinated” in literature. In the classroom, immersing children in exciting literature builds community and a deep and abiding love of stories and books. Literature can help bridge cultural differences by exposing children to other ways of seeing and experiencing the world, and by broadening children’s range of experiences. Harwayne (1992) advises, “If you want to attract children to the joys of writing workshop, you must prepare fertile ground: bathe, immerse, soak, drench your students in good literature” (p. 1).

“Buddy reading,” reading aloud, and independent reading are all critical to building this community of readers and writers (Kurstedt & Koutras, 2000). Jim Trelease (2001) has long been a champion for reading aloud, noting that children of all ages benefit from this enjoyable activity. Author Judy Richardson (2000) argues that reading aloud with adolescents makes the content come alive and make sense, and is just plain fun.



Trelease (2001) has also suggested that one very positive reading experience can create a reader, one “home run” book experience. For many years, researcher Stephen Krashen has been a staunch advocate for increased availability of high-quality books in classrooms and school libraries. He and his colleagues confirmed that Trelease’s idea of a “home run” book experience has merit. They found that half of all middle school children they interviewed agreed that there was one book that started them off reading (Ujiié & Krashen, 2002; Von Sprecken, Kim, & Krashen, 2000).

Because of the powerful relationship between free voluntary reading, or pleasure reading, and literacy development, classroom and school libraries should help bridge the gap between low-income and more advantaged students. As Krashen (1996) points out, libraries “can be an equalizer” (p. 4). One study found that children in classrooms with their own collections of literature read and looked at books 50 percent more often than children whose classrooms housed no such collections (Morrow, 1990).

**From reading to writing.** Stories of all kinds enrich children’s writing. Even young children spontaneously incorporate the rhythms, cadences, and language patterns of books they hear and read into their own writing. A study by Engel (1997) found that four-year-olds are quite attuned to the different types of rhyming patterns, formats, and metaphoric imagery of poetry. After listening to authors such as Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath, the children in her study were invited to dictate their own stories in response. In their stories, they incorporated the styles used by these authors. Similarly, a study by Bearse (1992) found that when third-grade children read and discussed fairy tales and then wrote their own stories, the children internalized the cadences, rhythms, and particular phrases characteristic of fairy tales.

A mother of a 12-year-old reports that when her oldest son was in second and third grade, “Aaron dearly loved Dr. Seuss and used to do a lot of writing in the same style/tone as Dr. Seuss, with lots of rhyme and some made-up words. These days he has taken to writing in a Lemony Snicket fashion (the author of numerous tongue-in-cheek horror stories referred to as “a series of unfortunate events”), especially when he has to make up sentences for his vocabulary words, a task he generally thinks of as boring.” Snicket is known for inserting unusual vocabulary words into the stories, and explaining the words with typical humor. Aaron used this style to write a definition for the word “acrid”:

As I was making my speech in front of the whole committee for drug abuse, an acrid smell came wafting out of the kitchen. It was the smell of lasagna gone bad. There is nothing I hate more then bad lasagna, especially when making a speech



in front of five thousand evil men all thinking about how to make me into chicken noodle soup.

With a large library of books with rich language available, children have many models of good writing that will find their way into their own writing. In *Wondrous Words*, Ray (1999) explains how she can't help students write well all by herself:

I need lots of help doing the teaching work, and I have found that help on the shelves of my library. ... Day after day as I teach writing to many different students, I let writers like Georgia Heard and Gary Paulsen and Cynthia Rylant and Jane Yolen help me do the important work of teaching students to write as well (p. 9).

The first time a book is read aloud, practitioners advise the reader to let children sense our delight in the story; let the language and rhythm of the story enchant and entice; give children time to get lost in the story, to identify with characters, to wonder what will happen next (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Kurstedt & Koutras, 2000). Listening to stories read aloud by an animated storyteller can inspire even the youngest child to write, as illustrated by second-grader Isaac's remarks in the following example. Isaac eloquently supports researchers' observations about the importance of "incubation" for good writing, when the writer needs to take a break from writing, and "schedule a solitary, idle time that follows a period of hard work" (Csikszentmihalyi & Sawyer, 1995, p. 347). Sometimes it's a good idea to just "sleep on it."

**When readers intentionally and deliberately study the craftsmanship of writers, they are, in Frank Smith's words, "reading like a writer."**

... if I'm in a bad mood, I don't want to write long stories ... I get good ideas when the teacher reads books. I think it's a good idea and I write about that stuff. I really feel good: I think about a story, like what I said when I go to bed. When authors go to sleep, they wake up in the morning and then they write about it (Isaac, in Freppon, 1997, p. 23).

The following example from a second-grade classroom that had been studying Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* illustrates how children incorporate the language patterns of literature into their own stories. The children were encouraged to use developmental spelling in first drafts and in their journals:

Chapter 1: Why do dogs chase CATS?

Once apan a time in a far away land thar was a yung cat and Tow kittins. One day a dog came. But in this ladn dogs don't chas cats thaey like cats. And the dog saw the kittins and wanted to play with them so he askt the yung cat. And He said NO! so the dog got mad and foght. So for now on they set a egsample for ether dogs.

Clearly this young writer has been immersed in this genre, and understands the style and structure enough so that he can make up his own "just so" story. When teachers and children together explore different genres (e.g., folktales, fantasy, historical fiction, nonfiction, first-person monologues, poetry, and third-person narration), teachers can help children attend to the linguistic features, vocabulary, and structures of written language. When readers intentionally and deliberately study the craftsmanship of writers, they are, in Frank Smith's words, "reading like a writer."



## USING LITERATURE TO INSPIRE “QUICKWRITES”

Tom Romano writes of middle school language arts teacher Linda Rief, who uses quickwrites to teach students to “launch their voices and outrun the inner censor.”

Using literature, she helps her students develop the habit of producing language on the page without much forethought or stress. For instance, in one activity, Rief shares with students Cynthia Rylant’s picture book, *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, letting them experience the rhythms of language as the narrator speaks of her childhood in the mountains, repeating the refrain, “When I was young.” She then asks students to begin a sentence with the words “When I was young” and to write rapidly for two or three minutes about their own memories and experiences. Invariably, students surprise themselves with phrases, sentences, and sometimes whole paragraphs of genuine strength—many a memorable detail, and argument with convincing reasons to back it up, or a linguistic ramble full of unique observations.

Rief leads her students in several quickwrites each week. Students take the quickwrites they find most interesting and shape them into longer, fully realized pieces of writing. Once they have words on the page, developing those words into longer pieces is not as intimidating as facing a blank sheet of paper. Rief contends that frequent quickwrites build student confidence, develop their written fluency, and bring out every student’s inner writer (p. 20).

Source: Romano, T. (2004, Oct.). The power of voice. *Educational Leadership*, 62(2), 20–23.

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## “Reading Like a Writer” in the Writer’s Workshop

Many teachers who teach writing draw heavily from the writing workshop model of Donald Graves (1983, 2003) and Lucy Calkins (1986, 1994). The three phases of the workshop provide a flexible structure for the writing lesson. Teachers Kurstedt and Koutras (2000) outline the structure they use with their upper elementary students:

- Mini-lesson—a short lesson that teaches a specific idea or strategy and often uses literature or student writing as models.
- Writing and conferring—students write and the teacher confers with students. Students may also confer with one another.
- Share—students share their writing with the class, in small groups or in pairs (p. 8).

What is important is that “students are writing in authentic ways on a regular basis,” advise Fletcher and Portalupi (1998, p. 7). Equally important is that lots of wonderful literature is available to explicitly teach the mini-lessons, with lots of rich conversations to bring the stories to life, and to connect the stories to children’s lives. Picture books can be used by both older and younger readers and writers to examine form and structure, style and voice. Benedict (1992) points out that picture books provide the reader or listener with a “concentrated opportunity to examine an individual author’s or illustrator’s work, compare the work of several authors, explore a genre, and sample the wide range of possibilities available to writers” (p. 34). Mini-lessons about a specific type of craft, such as creating a strong lead, writing with voice, or creating a dramatic scene can help focus students’ attention on the craft of writing.

“Imagine,” invite Fletcher and Portalupi in their book, *Craft Lessons: Teaching Writing K–8* (1998). They provide the inspiration for just that: 78 lessons, divided into three sections, for grades K–2, 3–4, and 5–8. Each mini-lesson teaches a particular craft lesson, with suggestions for literature. The authors’ premise is that in order for “young writers to make the most use out of the literature they read, teachers also need to use explicit language to address specific issues of craft” (p. 10).

Using this book, children can examine examples of adding details to drawing, describing a setting, describing a character, using surprising imagery, using repetition of a word or a line, using strong verbs, and many other tricks of the writing trade. “Here’s a simple way to think about nouns and verbs,” say Fletcher and Portalupi, “The nouns make the pictures, and the verbs make those pictures move” (p. 51). They point out that the popular black folk ballad *John Henry* by Julius Lester (1994), beautifully illustrated by Jerry Pinkney, is chock full of both exciting verbs and surprising imagery:

John Henry sang and he hammered and the air danced and the rainbow shimmered and the earth shook and rolled from the blows of the hammer. Finally it was quiet. Slowly the dust cleared.

Folks could not believe their eyes. The boulder was gone, in its place was the prettiest and straightest road they had ever seen. Not only had John Henry pulverized the boulder into pebbles, he had finished building the road.

In the distance where the new road connected to the main one, the road crew saw John Henry waving good-bye, a hammer on each shoulder, the rainbow draped around him like love.

Irresistible books like these have inspired many young writers to create their own stories. In their book, *Teaching Writing With Picture Books as Models*, teachers Kurstedt and Koutras (2000) demonstrate how they build dynamic lessons around picture books. They include lessons on many of the elements of “great writing,” including strong verbs, effective leads, dialogue, mood, voice, character, and memoir writing. Who can resist the



exuberant mood created by Libba Moore Gray in *My Mama Had a Dancing Heart*? “First,” point out Kurstedt and Koutras, “she creates an energy and sense of fun by making up hyphenated, alliterative words that make you want to get up and move: tip-tapping, song-singing, finger-snapping. She also alternates short and long sentences, with the short sentences literally commanding the reader to act—to bless the world and celebrate” (p. 62). Here is just one example from this delightful book:

My mama had a dancing heart  
and she shared that heart with me.

When a warm spring rain  
would come pinging on the windowpane,  
we’d kick off our shoes  
and out into the rain we’d go.

We’d dance  
a frog-hopping  
leaf-growing  
flower-opening  
hello spring ballet.

**Picture books can help eliminate the educational barriers that prevent less able students from finding appropriate texts from which to learn.**

It is easy to see why becoming familiar with the many excellent children’s book authors, including Kevin Henkes, Patricia Polacco, Robert McClosky, Eve Bunting, Cynthia Rylant, Charlotte Zolotow, Mem Fox, Eric Carle, Leo Lionni, and Maurice Sendak—to name just a few—can be an exciting adventure for adults, as well as children. In *Beyond Words: Picture Books for Older Readers and Writers*, Benedict and Carlisle (1992) explain how they use picture books for readers of all ages to:

- Examine genres, including:
  - historical fiction
  - legends
  - folktales
  - fantasy
  - poetry
- Introduce and complement a unit on science or history
- Study a variety of writing styles
- Teach reference and research skills to intermediate students
- Use as models in writing class, and to examine the linguistic features, vocabulary, and structures of writing

“Picture books can help eliminate the educational barriers that prevent less able students from finding appropriate texts from which to learn,” explains high school teacher David Ludlam (1992). Books such as Robert Coles’s *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, Dolores Johnson’s *Now Let Me Fly: The Story of a Slave Family*, Faith Ringgold’s *Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railway in the Sky*, and Floyd Cooper’s *Coming Home, from the Life of Langston Hughes* can help launch a study of African American history. *Coolies*, by Yin, *The Journey* by Shelia Hamanaka, and *The Lotus Seed* by Sherry Garland offer rich stories that illustrate the wide diversity of Asian American heritage. Robert McCloskey’s *One Morning in Maine*, *Make Way for Ducklings*, and *Time of Wonder*

provide many opportunities to learn about science. Author and fifth-grade teacher Lenore Carlisle (1992) concludes:

If we recognize the picture book as a legitimate art form and as a legitimate part of literature in general, then it seems only natural that we should return to the picture book genre as a place from which we will derive reason to be delighted, to be moved, to be amazed, or to feel any of the myriad emotions evoked in us by art and literature (p. 57).

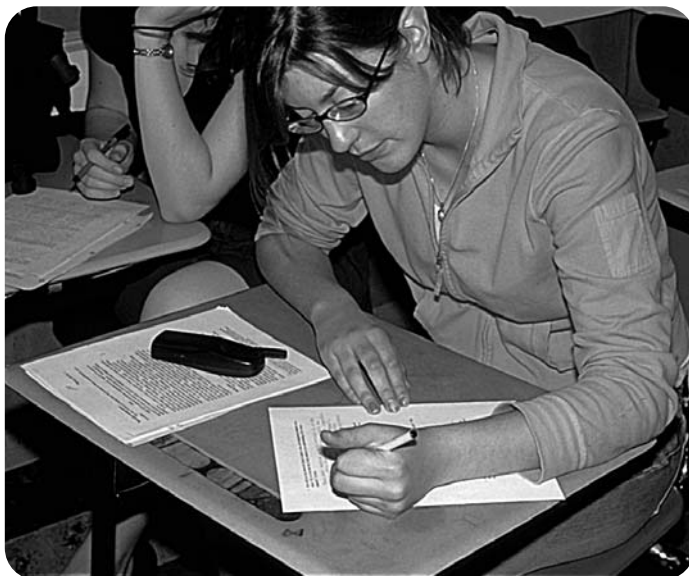
Clearly, picture books can be enjoyed by people of all ages, and studied for their engaging writing and art work. Fletcher and Portalupi (1998) point out that the length of the text in a picture book is “very much like the length of writing your students are asked to do. From this model, students can learn about the size and scope of plot and character development in a way that helps them shape their own stories” (p. 76–77). For older students, there is, of course, almost no end to the books that can also be used to teach craft lessons. Works by Sharon Creech, Francisco Jiménez, Kate DiCamillo, Lois Lowry, Christopher Paul Curtis, Gary Paulsen, Karen Hesse, Jerry Spinelli, and Esther Forbes make great “read-alouds,” keeping both teachers and students on the edge of their seats.

Many teachers use literature to introduce the concept of the writer’s notebook, which we discuss in the next section.

### Introducing the Writer’s Notebook

In *Lasting Impressions: Weaving Literature into the Writing Workshop*, Shelley Harwayne, former director of the New School in New York City, tells of a pivotal moment in her professional career as a teacher of teachers in the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. Her friend and colleague, Dorothy Barnhouse, “challenged us to take a good, hard look at the way we had invited young children to participate in writing workshops. She wondered why our students didn’t have a place to do imperfect writing, to gather seeds for writing, to collect the bits and pieces of their lives. Dorothy wondered aloud why our students weren’t keeping writer’s notebooks” (1992, p. 127).

Harwayne and the teachers in the Writing Project embraced the idea of a writer’s notebook, inviting their students to use their notebooks to develop their own unique



voice, to jot down observations, snatches of talk, questions, daydreams, memories. Later, some of these bits and pieces of imperfect writing, these “seeds,” can be developed into stories and poems. Harwayne found that an effective way of launching the writer’s notebook with her third-grade students was to create three stacks of carefully selected texts.

The first stack contains books about family stories. There are so many wonderful stories to choose from: *Going Home* by Eve Bunting, *Tell Me a Story, Mama* by Angela Johnson, *Grandfather’s Journey* by Alan Say, to name just a few. The second stack contains books about objects in our lives that become important to us.

Patricia Polacco's *The Keeping Quilt*, *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold, *Amelia's Road* by Linda Jacob Altman, and Ann Grifalconi's *Tiny's Hat* are some of the many children's books that evoke our own memories of important objects in our lives.

The final stack might include Cynthia Rylant's *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, *Dear Willie Rudd* by Libba Moore Gray, and *One Summer Night* by Eleanor Schick. According to Harwayne, they are all books that "prompt talk about memories that haunt us, those moments and images we'll never forget. 'Thirty, forty, fifty years from now,' I ask the children, 'what are the scenes that will linger in your mind's eye?'" (Harwayne, 1992, p. 128). After engaging the students in lively conversation, she introduces the writer's notebook as a place to record their thoughts, their memories, and observations.

Younger children, too, can enjoy a writer's notebook, although they may use it very differently than an older writer. Long before children can express themselves in writing with the sophistication of a third-grader, children are, in Durkin's words, "paper and pencil kids—they scribble, copy letters of the alphabet, and write the names of friends and family members" (cited in Dyson, 1982, p. 832). Many teachers have found that writing is the most popular beginning reading activity among preschoolers. Yet, by first grade, many children have lost their initial enthusiasm for writing. How can we help children become competent and enthusiastic writers? By letting them write, advises Donald Graves (1983). He describes a first-grade teacher who, on the first day of school, passed out hardcover books with blank pages and the children's names embossed on the covers:

She simply said, "You can write in these books." They all did ... in their fashion. They drew pictures, wrote their names, made columns of numbers. Some wrote phrases, made invented spellings, and several wrote in sentences. The important thing is they all believed they could write. No one said, "But I don't know how."

Before the year was out these twenty-five first-grade children composed 1,300 five-to-six page booklets and published 400 of the best in hardcover for their classmates to read. A third of these children used quotation marks accurately because they get them when they need them, when someone is talking on their pages. I struggled with quotation marks when I first taught them to my seventh grade English class (p. 4).

### **Keeping a Writer's Notebook**

What does a writer's notebook look like? It might be a small notebook with decorative pages; it could be plain or fancy, lined or unlined. "There's really no right answer for this except that your writer's notebook should reflect your personality," said Fletcher [in his children's book, *A Writer's Notebook* (1996, p. 5). In answer to the question, what should go in the notebook, Fletcher notes, "People are different. What dazzles one person might bore the next. The question is: what moves you? As a writer, you need to be able to answer that question. And take note of it. Whenever I hear a story that stirs something inside me, I take out my notebook and write" (p. 9).



Fletcher offers many ideas in his tiny guide for young writers and in workshops for teachers:

- “The goal of a writer is to be a sponge” (p. 45). Keep your eyes open and pay attention to little things that reveal important truths: hands, gestures, objects, anecdotes. Pay attention to your world. Wherever you are, at all hours of the day, try to drink in the world through your five senses, all of which are incredibly important tools for a writer. And when something strikes you that you want to remember, make time to scribble at least a quick description of it in your notebook.

Step one: Pay attention. Be ready. Keep senses peeled.

Step two: Write down what you notice before you forget.

Step three: Later, go back and reread your entry. See if you might want to write more about it (p. 44).

- Write down memories, family stories. John Updike says that “as we age, we leave behind us a litter of old selves.” Stories help to keep our memories alive (Fletcher, 2003).
- What do you wonder about? What’s on your mind when you wake up? What do you daydream about at lunch or on the bus? What questions haunt or nag at you at night during those last moments before your consciousness crumbles and you fall asleep? You can explore these questions in your writer’s notebook (Fletcher, 2003).
- Record snatches of talk. Keep your ears alert to the conversations of strangers wherever you are and pay attention to what strikes you (Fletcher, 1996, p. 59).
- Maybe the single most important lesson you can learn as a writer is to write small. Use your writer’s notebook to jot down the important little details you notice or hear about. These details make writing come alive (Fletcher, 1996, p. 23).
- Reread your writer’s notebook and look for places where you are using vague, general words: fun or cool, circle those words. Ask yourself: what are the details underneath these words? What little things will bring to life what I’m writing about? (Fletcher, 1996, p. 27).
- Boys, in particular, like to collect things. They like to keep artifacts—a pen that “died,” a feather. The notebook can be like a scrapbook (Fletcher, 2003).
- During the notebook conference, the emphasis is on gathering, on casting a wide net. You write from abundance. It takes 40 gallons of sap to make a gallon of syrup. The best lines out of the notebook end up in stories (Fletcher, 2003).

**A WRITER'S NOTEBOOK: MAKING WRITING COME ALIVE**

As I reflect on and analyze why Writer's Notebook (WNB) inspires my students to be more willing and accomplished writers, I see three things. First, it generates material for further writing. It is a practice field for writers to free up, sort, and clarify thoughts and ideas to form new insights and connections. The WNB becomes a place to live like a writer.

Second, it enhances the students' confidence and feelings of self-worth. Heterogeneous groups share as equals, with no sense of competition. The students do not have to get to the same destination; their interests and attitudes naturally take them to different places.

Third, writing and sharing helps to create a safe learning environment that, in turn, supports each student's writing. By nurturing each person's ideas, we contribute to the lives of others as well as our own. The seed planted by this seemingly simple show of respect and acceptance extends far beyond school and into adulthood.

Now, thanks to the WNB, this is what I hear my students say throughout the year: "I don't go anywhere without my WNB." "If there ever is a fire in my home and I can take only one thing, it will be my WNB." "It's so much fun; it gets me writing." "My WNB is my friend; I can tell it anything. I used to hate writing but now I write with a big smile on my face. I even have a poem published!"

My students are now able to grow a piece of writing by noticing, wondering, remembering, questioning, and yearning—thanks in large part to the Writer's Notebook.

Source: Hom, M. (2004). A writer's notebook: Making writing come alive. *Classroom Leadership*, 8(3), 7. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Retrieved December 3, 2004, from [www.ascd.org/publications/class\\_lead/200411/hom.html](http://www.ascd.org/publications/class_lead/200411/hom.html)

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**Getting started.** In the previous section, we highlighted one of Shelley Harwayne's strategies for introducing the writer's notebook. One of the ways Harwayne and good teachers help kids get started with telling and writing their personal, family, and community stories is to share stories from their own lives. When teachers share their own stories, children often see their teacher in a new light, as a person, like them, with a life outside the classroom. When teachers talk about their own childhood, children are often amazed to learn that their teacher had been a child like them. Michele McDondald, a former fourth-grade teacher at a predominantly Latino school in Pasco, Washington, describes a literacy activity that began with little student enthusiasm, but became a time of "reflection, sharing, and empathy":

Last year in my fourth-grade class I was working hard to integrate higher level thinking, connecting emotions and background experiences, and comprehension into my reading curriculum. I chose to use a book called *Maniac McGee* by Jerry Spinelli in a literature circle. I chose this book because of the content of the story. The story is about a boy who runs away from a very dysfunctional home. Throughout his adventures he encounters racial segregation in the town in which he lives, east vs. west (black vs. white). I introduced the book by describing the basic premise of the book. I began trying to elicit from the students any experiences they may have had with racism.

**When teachers share their own stories, children often see their teacher in a new light, as a person, like them, with a life outside the classroom.**

The discussion was lagging until I started talking about a movie that the book reminded me of. I shared the story line from the movie *The Outsiders* produced by Francis Ford Coppola from the book with the same title, written by S.E. Hinton. This happened to be one of my favorite movies as a child. I told the students about my running home from school as fast as I could to see the opening credits when it happened to be on HBO. They got a real kick out of hearing a personal story about their teacher. Once I described the story they began to come up with lots of examples. They shared about movies and stories they had seen or read, and about personal experiences. This really started the discussion off on the right foot (Novick, 2002).

Fourth-grade teacher Cassandra Mastne has also found that “telling stories helps me to connect with my students.” To start off her storytelling project with her students, Mastne tells them a story from her own life. This year, Mastne says that she was a little surprised at her students’ avid interest in hearing her tell a story about herself. For example, one student went home and related the story to his older brother, who previously had Mastne for a teacher. In school the next day, the student eagerly questioned her about the differences between the two tellings of the story he and his brother had heard: She had condensed one version (see pp. 17–18).

**Teacher as writer.** When teachers model their own storytelling and writing, children see their teacher as a writer and—like them—one who may not think of herself as an accomplished writer. As Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) advise:

Write with your students. This may be the most important strategy of all. Nothing creates a supportive writing tone as when you walk in the shoes of a writer yourself. When you take even a few minutes during the workshop for your own writing, you give kids something they rarely see—a real live adult actually writing! Even if writing isn’t your strongest suit, you can use your writing as a model for your students. At the same time, you send a powerful message: We’re all writers. We’re in this together (p. 26).



Scott Christian, an English teacher in the small village of Nikiski, Alaska, witnessed firsthand how motivating it can be for students to see their teacher sharing his thinking and writing. During the school year, he oversaw an interdisciplinary project that focused on the local community as a subject of inquiry. The idea of writing as a process was new to most of Christian’s students, who were well-practiced at filling in the blanks on worksheets but intimidated by the directive to analyze a rough draft and see how it could be improved. Because they were motivated to produce a quality publication, they saw the value of honing their work to create the best piece of writing possible.

Christian helped by modeling the process of writing. He subjected his own rough drafts—mistakes and all—to his students’ criticism and revised his work to make improvements. “If it’s OK for the teacher to make mistakes and do five revisions,” he says, the students decide, “it’s OK for me.” He adds, “There’s a very different environment

when teachers are writing—when teachers present themselves as writers and show kids the idiosyncratic nature of writing. It makes it more real and accessible” (see pp. 227–233).

### **The Writing Process**

Kurstedt and Koutras (2000) use a version of the writing process they learned while participating in the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. Students use an entry from their writer’s notebook to serve as their own writing prompts. The flexible process is outlined below:

**Finding a Seed**—Students choose something from their entries that they want to linger over, something meaningful they are willing to invest time in and develop into a finished piece.

**Nurturing a Seed**—Students explore their chosen seed idea, writing about the idea from several different angles and homing in on what they really want to say—finding the essence of the piece. Students may also explore the genre of the piece. Students are still writing in their writer’s notebooks during this stage.

**Drafting**—Students draft their pieces outside their writer’s notebook, drawing upon the entries they’ve written. The draft can be a compilation of entries from exploring the seed idea or an offshoot of one or more entries.

**Revision**—Students rework their pieces and revise them for content, style, and purpose.

**Editing**—Students polish their pieces. Finally, students correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

**Celebration**—Students share their work and make it public, by adding it to a class book, hanging it on a bulletin board, reading aloud to a group of peers or parents—the possibilities of celebrating writing abound (p. 9).

### **Writing With an Authentic Audience in Mind**

*When I write a book, it’s alive in my head, but it only really comes alive when it finds a life in someone else’s head. It’s the readers who make it special* (Brooks, 2004, p. 12).

There is no one writing process, Graves (2004) argues. Writers need to discover what works best for them in a variety of writing tasks (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003). Children of all ages can be encouraged to publish some of their work. New Zealand educators have noted that “where publication has not been part of the writing program, or has been treated in a casual manner, there has been a general lack of interest in writing” (Ministry of Education, 1992, p. 72). Children don’t write for benchmarks, notes Harwayne (2003). She suggests discussing with students:

Who might you give this to?  
Where might you send this?  
Who would benefit from reading this?  
How can you go public with this?  
How can this piece improve others’ lives?

Volunteers may need to be recruited to help with publishing. For years, children at Cherry Valley Elementary School in Polson, Montana, have been publishing their books, which are displayed in classrooms and the library as well as traveling home with children to be enjoyed by the whole family. It soon became clear that teachers could not keep up with the volume of books that were ready for publishing. An open, multipurpose room—staffed by volunteers—now serves as a publishing center, complete with several older computers, a couch, and a rug. Numerous parent and community volunteers do some of the typing and all of the binding and laminating; the room is always full of groups of children anxious to see their books become part of the school community.

Recently, their work has found a larger audience due to the number of parents who regularly bring children's published books to medical offices in Polson. Now, along with copies of *Field and Stream* and parenting magazines in doctors' and dentists' waiting rooms, local residents can find the latest student works and write their names and responses to the books on comment pages. In addition, children's books can be found in a local nursing facility.

**Motivation to revise.** When children know that their work will be read by real audiences, editing is seen as less of a chore. Revision—often not a favorite activity of children—may take on urgency. In a project in which children wrote a story based on interviews with their own families, some students revised their writing four to six times (see pp. 121–130). An eight-year-old explains:

You hurt your hand because it's writing and because when you get so into it, you like it more, more and more. Like you just buy a new video game and you're trying to learn how to play it and then you get really good at it. You get into it.

As students revise and edit their work, they gain proficiency in their skills as writers.



Teachers can remind students to think of their audience as they write. When students in Springhill, Montana, were designing note cards and writing descriptions of the historical buildings they drew, their teacher, Linda Rice, helped them keep their audience in mind. She asked the students: What would make your card unique to the purchaser? What would they want to know about the building? Does your picture and story show that? Students learned that they could help the reader to see more of the story by attending to details in their pictures and writings. By working on the drawings first, students created images that helped them produce descriptive language (see pp. 211–215).

In David Groth's fifth-grade classroom, celebrating good writing is an important part of the writing process. Sometimes the class collaboratively examines and celebrates a few "great" sentences in a student's writing. One



activity Groth uses to celebrate those great little sentences is called “great writing ... made better.” He types up 10 sentences from the students’ latest work and distributes them to the class. The class examines each sentence and discusses what they like about it and possible ways that it might be made even better. The activity may lead to a discussion of the use of metaphor and simile, sensory details, specific nouns, strong verbs, or the overuse of adjectives and adverbs. Groth notes, “I find that the kids whose sentences are discussed, their next piece of writing will grow because they feel good about themselves as a writer” (see pp. 151–158).

When students know that they will share their work with an audience, it makes sense to them to write in a way that is clear and engaging. In his work with high school students at Aberdeen, Washington, David McKay helped his students learn about theme, setting, characterization, using all their senses, repetition, indirect writing, and dialogue through reading aloud and drawing attention to the author’s craft. When it was time to begin writing their oral history about the *Thanksgiving Day Football Games*, McKay was amazed by the students’ dedication and the hours spent writing, editing, and revising. They built relationships with community members through their repeated interviews, sharing drafts and making corrections. They also gained an appreciation for their school and community history and enjoyed reading newspapers and annuals from nearly 100 years ago.

McKay feels the personal motivation related to the topic and to publishing makes all the difference in the quality of students’ work. Unpacking the boxes of newly printed books with their glossy, full-color covers and seeing the reaction of friends and family as they read them is a rewarding experience for the students. He comments, “Almost all of them rise to the challenge, and some go farther—they discover that they are writers and have something to offer other people. They are extremely proud to be published authors, and they learn a great deal about how writing can affect people’s lives” (see pp. 193–201).

**Banishing the “red pen.”** While writing the history of Clarks Point, in southwest Alaska, middle school teacher Doug Gray decided not to concentrate on conventions in the beginning. “All I wanted them to do was to write,” he says. He wanted students to become good at taking in information through interviews, document review, and observation. They were really ethnographers, Gray points out. After the content was clear, the class attended to skills: good sentence structure, transitions between paragraphs, punctuation, and grammar. Skills were built, but the “red pen” was banished. “When the kids would have something they would want us to take a look at, rather than taking out the red pen and marking it up, we would just look at the pieces they had and, anything that was unclear, we would ask a question about that,” Gray says. The idea was to keep the students motivated as writers, to help them structure their writing in ways that were logical, and to clarify ideas or support their points with some concrete examples that could help answer their readers’ questions.

Gray emphasizes that what he was after for his students was authentic learning. “This wasn’t necessarily for a grade—this was more a real-life project. A book about Clarks Point “was something that we could pass down,” Gray says, “it would be a written documentation of what life is like for us at Clarks Point” (see pp. 235–242).

“Authentic writing,” says teacher Debbie Rotkow (2003), “can be defined as writing that has its roots in topics and feelings the writer cares about” (p. 1). Projects like these give kids a reason to care.

**Authentic writing can be defined as writing that has its roots in topics and feelings the writer cares about.**

## Conclusion

*We are human beings not just in body and mind. We are also spirit and emotion. There are few things which speak as clearly as stories speak to the needed balance between all four of those components of human life (Bruchac, 1996).*

There are a number of themes that run through the professional literature and practitioner examples that we have discussed. We believe that projects that include telling and writing personal, family, and community stories have the potential to:

**Enhance thinking and learning.** Research studies provide consistent support for viewing writing as a powerful tool for the enhancement of thinking and learning, and for thinking deeply and critically about a subject. Clearly, good writing requires reading, rereading, revising, analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, and interpreting (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003). But good teachers know that while writing encourages deep thinking, it is even better when connected in meaningful ways to speaking, listening, reading, and viewing. Shanahan (2004) advises, “Having students write and rewrite about some aspect of a concept is valuable. Having them do this in the context of reading, interacting with peers, having presentations, trying to apply the information in a lab, viewing a videotape, comparing two articles, and so on, is much more powerful” (p. 69).

The most effective way for capturing the elusive student voice is to let the students use their voice, literally to tell stories before they write them down.

**Build on and expand students’ oral language, connecting oral and written language.** Many children enter school with a well-developed narrative sense of self, and love to tell their stories to anyone who will listen. Children’s stories provide valuable insight into what they think about and how they interpret their experiences; they are an area of strength for many children, including those from backgrounds that do not offer many experiences with reading and writing. In the early elementary years it is the child’s narrative voice that must find its way into the classroom in order for students to gain confidence and competence in reading and writing. Connecting oral and written language can help older students as well as younger ones. “The kids really identify with the ability to be able to tell a story,” explains Elizabeth Jensen, a teacher at Open Meadow Alternative School. “They’re significantly better speakers than they are writers. But in making the connection between the two—which was sort of the point of the project—they definitely developed their writing skills” (see pp. 203–210). Similarly, fifth-grade teacher Erin Ciccone (2001) found, “The most effective way for capturing the elusive student voice is to let the students use their voice, literally to tell stories before they write them down” (p. 4).

**Make reading-writing connections.** “Research is clear that writing and reading together engage learners in a greater variety of reasoning activities than when writing or reading are apart or when students are given a variety of other tasks to go along with reading” (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991, p. 272). All good writing involves reading and rereading, as students revise and edit their work to make the text clear to those who will read it. When children write about themselves, their families, and communities, they can draw on the vast collection of children’s books with family stories (Buchoff, 1995). They can read (and have read to them) biographies, poetry, oral histories, legends, nonfiction stories, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, books and oral histories about the history of the region, short stories, and previously published student work. In Lilia Doni’s class, children are immersed in reading fairy tales from all over the world as a way to celebrate their multicultural heritage and improve literacy

skills (see pp. 79–84). Picture books can be enjoyed by people of all ages and studied for their engaging writing and artwork. And reading aloud helps children of all ages get a sense of the rhythm and style of the language of a particular genre.

**Bring students' narrative voice into the classroom, helping students see that their own lives are filled with stories worth writing about.** Children of all ages, like adults, tell stories to organize their experiences; to make sense of their lives and their world; “to envision and explore possible selves” (McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996). They tell stories to sort out thoughts and solve problems and concerns—emotional, cognitive, and social. According to psychologists, seeing value in your own story aids the development of self-identity and self-esteem (Bruner, 1996). Steve Franzel, a teacher at Helen Gordon Child Development Center, explains, “Language becomes a way to support children’s power—their ability to deal with a peer, with conflict, with sad or scary feelings. Words empower them to express themselves—to handle life” (see pp. 53–58). When students’ narrative voices are invited into the classroom, they “acknowledge their own voice as powerful and interesting,” says Open Meadow teacher Elizabeth Jensen (see pp. 203–210).

**Build community in the classroom.** Sharing stories helps teachers to connect with children and children to connect with each other and their teacher. When teachers tell their own personal stories, it helps children to see their teacher as a person like them. Fourth-grade teacher Cassandra Mastne has found that telling stories about her life really helps her to connect with her students (see pp. 17–18). To develop, students need to learn about each others’ lives as well as reflect on their own, writes Linda Christensen (2000) in *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*. “When they hear personal stories, classmates become real instead of cardboard stereotypes: rich white girl, basketball-addicted [b]lack boy, brainy Asian. ... When students’ lives are taken off the margins and placed in the curriculum, they don’t feel the same need to put down someone else” (p. 7). Reading, writing, and sharing personal narratives can help children develop empathy, caring, and awareness of important social problems. Galda et

al. (1995) conclude their description of a first-grade teacher’s classroom: “Connecting to her students and insisting that they connect with each other through language, Betty helped them to develop themselves as literate beings” (p. 339).

**Help students and their families feel that their home lives are valued.** Building community in the classroom through sharing personal stories often blurs the distinctions between home and school. Through students’ stories, families are invited into the classroom community. Elementary school teacher Stephanie Windham found that writing family stories, “helps students see their families as a source of pride and comfort.” When families are invited to share their stories, folktales, and culture, they have authentic ways to participate in their children’s education, helping them to feel more



connected to the school. English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher Lilia Doni found that “by bringing the parents here and valuing them as experts, we cause the children to value them more and to see their importance. They feel pride in their cultural heritage” (see pp. 79–84).

**Encourage cultural awareness and respect.** Writing projects that illuminate diverse cultural traditions allow all students to share and learn from each other, while heightening respect and appreciation for diversity and improving school climate. In Stephanie Windham’s multicultural classroom, when students write their own stories and hear their classmates’ stories, they say that they gain a global perspective, as well as learn more about their own families’ histories and cultures (see pp. 121–130). Helping students to explore their community through reading, writing, and hands-on activities can build a sense of belonging to the school and community, a “sense of place.” In collecting information and writing a book about their small Alaskan village, teacher Doug Gray says, “The kids had a much better appreciation for Clarks Point. They weren’t so negative about Clarks Point being small and there’s nothing to do. They were able to now say, ‘it’s a small community, but there are things that we are able to do that nobody else in the world gets to do.’ Just that overall feeling about their village, that’s a great thing” (see pp. 235–242). Similarly, Tulalip Elementary teacher David Cort, found that his Native American students “love learning about the rich culture we have here. They feel pride, they see themselves as leaders. Culture motivates them to learn” (see pp. 173–179).

**Address the needs of English language learners.** Writing projects that build on and value children’s home language help students see that speaking a second language is not a deficit but an asset. “The stronger the literacy foundation they have in their first language,” says second-grade teacher JoAnna Lovato, “the more they will have to transfer over to English, as supported by research.” She adds: “Building a strong literacy foundation in my students’ first language helps ensure academic success and heightened self-esteem” (see pp. 65–70). In short, she argues, it helps them succeed in life. Lovato’s statement is supported by recent research. In a longitudinal study involving more than 700,000 students, Thomas and Collier (1997) found that the most successful bilingual programs helped ELL students develop full academic proficiency in both the first and second languages for six or more years. Only programs that lasted for this length of time succeeded in producing achievement rates on a par with those of native English speakers. In addition, the fewest dropouts came from these programs. Telling and writing personal, family, and community stories can build confidence in being able to communicate in two languages. For example, ESL teacher Lisa Ummel-Ingram (2004) writes about a project that used personal stories in her first-grade classroom. “The project resulted in a new willingness to write and to express themselves orally in English. The confidence continues. As a result of telling their own stories, they truly experienced the inspiration and magic that took place as they recognized themselves as authors” (p. 7).

**Provide a way to begin producing writing.** Personal narrative can give students an entry into the world of writing. In the project mentioned above, Ummel-Ingram found, “My experience has been that narrative writing not only motivates students to write, but that this motivation is the key to progress in other types of writing” (p. 2). In *Walking Trees: Portraits of Teachers and Children in the Culture of Schools*, Fletcher (1991) writes that starting the year with writing personal narratives “fosters independence,



allows children to make decisions and breathe authenticity into the writing, juggle the elements of a story, and take advantage of the tension between what is in the student's mind and what has been written down" (p. 38). Faust (2004) suggests that "activities that require students to pay attention to and craft their own memories can be directed toward helping them become more thoughtful readers and writers in other contexts" (p. 570). While Cassandra Mastne's fourth-graders begin the year with personal stories, when it is time to take one piece through the writing and publishing process, they usually choose another story from their "idea book." But the experience has given them an entry point into the world of writing—a place to launch from (see pp. 17–18).

**Engage and motivate students to write.** According to Wang and Guthrie (2004), intrinsic motivation involves engagement in an activity based on personal interest in the activity itself. As any teacher will affirm, intrinsic motivation and engagement are important for robust learning to occur. Yet, "the proportion of students who are not engaged or motivated by their school experiences grows at every grade level and reaches epidemic proportions in high school," say researchers Biancarosa and Snow (2004, p. 9). When students engage in authentic writing, defined by teacher Debbie Rotkow (2003) as "writing that has its roots in topics and feelings the writer cares about," they are motivated to write and to write well. "Students need real audiences for their writing," says Shanahan (1988, p. 644). Knowing that their work is for an audience gives kids an authentic reason to care about conventions, to care about revision. In a project that involved writing a book about the local community, Aberdeen teacher David McKay noted, "The students discover they are writers and have something to offer other people. They are extremely proud to be a published author and they learn a great deal about how writing can affect people's lives" (see pp. 193–201).

**Learn the craft of writing.** When readers intentionally and deliberately study the craftsmanship of writers, they are, in Frank Smith's words "reading like a writer." Students can be both immersed in high-quality reading material and deliberately study an author's craft. Picture books can be used by both older and younger readers and writers to examine form and structure, style and voice. Benedict (1992) points out that picture books provide the reader or listener with a "concentrated opportunity to examine an individual author's or illustrator's work, compare the work of several authors, explore a genre, and sample the wide range of possibilities available to writers" (p. 34). Mini-lessons about a specific type of craft, such as creating a strong lead, writing with voice, using strong verbs, or creating a dramatic scene can help focus students' attention on the craft of writing. In Springhill, Montana, teacher Linda Rice helped her students keep their audience in mind, as they created cards with text. Students learned that they could help the reader to see more of the story by attending to details in their pictures and writings. Similarly, Aberdeen High School teacher David McKay reads aloud to his students and





**As a result of telling their own stories, they truly experienced the inspiration and magic that took place as they recognized themselves as authors.**

studies the author's craft, examining the elements of fiction and nonfiction in their "natural habitat" (see pp. 193–201).

**Assist students to meet academic standards.** A major responsibility of teachers in a standards-based system is to map instructional practice onto a group of content and performance standards so that classroom experiences have a clear focus for students. Given the sheer number and complexity of the standards, teachers must make choices about the kinds of learning activities and assessments that maximize student learning and let students demonstrate the depth and breadth of their learning. Learning activities can be engaging and meaningful while at the same time contribute substantially to achievement of high standards. David McKay's students were able to develop the research skills used by historians, build expertise as writers (using the six traits of writing that form the basis of Washington standards), and bring a literary genre to life for themselves and their communities (see pp. 193–201). Teacher Lilia Doni found that by reading, writing, and listening to fairy tales or folktales from her students' countries of origin, they could learn about plot, setting, and characters: all of which are first-grade literacy benchmarks in Oregon (see pp. 79–84). Since there is often considerable overlap among the standards in core subjects, teachers may help students to meet standards in language arts, social studies, science, and other subjects in the same project, as Mimi Walker's students did with their study of bears and Scott Christian's students did with their interdisciplinary study of their community (see pp. 71–78 and pp. 227–233, respectively). (For Web sites on the standards of the Northwest states, see p. 300.)

### **Fundamental Belief in Children's Voices**

In the school stories that you will find in the next section, the projects range from remote villages in Alaska to a one-room schoolhouse in Springhill, Montana; inner-city Portland, Oregon; and strawberry fields in sunny Oxnard, California. Yet, despite differences in location, culture, language, and children's age, the projects have many similarities and reflect many of the themes identified above. Phrases like "a real-life project," "learning how writing can affect other people's lives," "learning about and feeling pride in their rich culture," "making a place where kids feel safe," all speak to students' need for authentic learning that validates who they are and where they are from: their families, culture, and language.

For ease of discussion, we have written about personal, family, and community stories as though they fall in these three neat categories. However, in the real world, projects tend to cross these arbitrary lines. Because we are all situated in our families and communities, our personal stories necessarily reflect where we are from, just as family and community stories include our personal voice. There is no linear line from writing about "me" to writing about my community. For this reason, we chose to group the stories in the following section according to the grades of the students who participated in the projects: a grouping that, of course, is familiar to teachers.

But it would be a mistake to pigeonhole the projects by grade. Many of the projects can be adapted for any age. For example, the Tree of Life project, originally designed with middle school kids in mind, was successfully adapted by JoAnna Lovato for her Latino second-graders, who were learning English as a second language. In short, in the messy, real world of teaching and learning, it is up to teachers to create and adapt projects that use stories to explore their students' and families' worlds, and to connect reading, writing, speaking, and listening in authentic ways.

And, as these school stories show, the projects do not have to be perfect. In fact, by the end of the projects, teachers are already thinking of ways to improve them. Rather than seeking an elusive perfection—a goal that often results in fear of failure—the schools you will read about have created a climate that supports risk-taking, experimentation, and continuous improvement. Teaching and learning are constantly evaluated by asking: “What went well, what didn’t, and what could be improved?”

What is central to these school projects is the belief, in Shanahan’s words, “that children are intelligent human beings whose voices must be given full expression. ... As teachers, we need to ask ourselves not only how can reading and writing be put together but how can reading and writing be combined to make children more powerful in their actual control and use of language” (1990, p. 14).

We believe that by participating in projects such as these, children will learn two critical lessons: Written language, like oral language, is best learned by doing things with words in the real world, and as J. Im and colleagues point out (2004), stories can change a person’s heart.

# PRACTITIONER EXAMPLES FROM PRIMARY GRADES

## **Doing Things With Words in the Real World**

Preschoolers Discover the Power of the Written Word

## **All About Me**

Beginning Writers Gain Confidence by Writing About Themselves

## **Riding la Alfombra Mágica**

ESL Students Explore Their Roots Through Writing

## **Bear Tales**

Alaska Students Share Stories About Their Furry Neighbors  
and Learn Literacy Skills in the Process

## **Happily Ever After**

Fairy Tales and Folktales Build Connections With Families

## **To Dream the Possible Dream**

Russian Students Learn About Their Community and Future Career Opportunities  
Through a Literacy Project

## **Connections in Time**

Students Involve Village Elders in a Community Calendar Project



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# DOING THINGS WITH WORDS IN THE REAL WORLD

## Preschoolers Discover the Power of the Written Word

Language becomes a way to support children's power—their ability to deal with a peer, with conflict, with sad or scary feelings. Words empower them to express themselves—to handle life.

*One day there was a sunshine. And the sunshine was unhappy. And why? Because no other suns didn't want to play with him and the sunshine said, "And I don't want to play with the other sunshines either." And she went to play with the sunshine.*

*Once upon a time there was a little girl named Emily, and it was a sad time for her because she fell down at school. Her mother and father were not at home and they never came to pick her up.*

*I'm so mad at Kagan. If you be in front of me, I'll be in front of you. I didn't like it when Kagan sat in front of me. I was there first. I was there before you.*

**T**he study of literacy from the child's point of view has highlighted the role that language plays in the everyday lives of children. Young children, it is clear, learn what language *is* through what language *does*. At Helen Gordon Child Development Center in Portland, Oregon, children are encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings verbally and in writing—in letters to friends and parents, in poems, and in stories. As illustrated by the stories above, children write about rejection, fears of abandonment, and injustice—supported by teachers who write children's dictated words just as they are spoken. As Steve Franzel, a teacher of three- through five-year-olds, explains, "Language becomes a way to support children's power—their ability to deal with a peer, with conflict, with sad or scary feelings. Words empower them to express themselves—to handle life."

During the last 20 years, we have learned a great deal about how children learn to read and write by studying the literacy development of children who come from homes





with rich oral and written language environments. In such homes, children's efforts at storytelling, reading, and writing are accepted with interest and enthusiasm and enhanced by adult questions and encouragement. Songs, nursery rhymes, and other forms of word play build phonemic awareness (the ability to hear the separate sounds in words) and encourage the creative use of language. When adults and older siblings read to themselves and out loud to infants and children, they demonstrate the importance of literacy, as well as its enjoyment (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

### **Creating a Supportive Literacy Environment**

Teachers at Helen Gordon have created an environment similar to the homes of children who seem to learn to read "naturally." Child-centered conversations, singing, poetry, pretend play, painting and drawing, story telling and writing, story dramatization, a print-rich environment, and reading stories provide the experiences that the children need to develop their imaginations, concept knowledge, vocabulary, narrative voice, and love of language. At the same time, these activities help children develop their letter-sound knowledge and begin to understand its use in reading and writing.

Built in 1928 by the Fruit and Flower Mission for children's programs, the brick building's large, comfortable rooms create a welcoming atmosphere with rocking chairs, couches, and braided rugs. Family groupings (multiage groups of two- and three-year-olds and three- to five-year-olds) add to the homelike feeling. As a visitor ascends the large, open stairway leading to the upstairs preschool classrooms, the illustrated messages that line the walls leave little doubt as to the universal nature of childhood concerns identified by teacher and author Vivian Paley (1990): friendship, security, and fairness. Children also use writing as occasions to play with words, as in this poem that appears to celebrate a ubiquitous childhood food:

**Frequently throughout the day, children use dictating and writing messages, poems, and stories to sort out their feelings and at times to come to terms with their own behavior.**

I love my putty daddy.  
I love my mommy and daddy.  
I love my peanut butter daddy. I have a haircut.  
I have a balloon up my nose. A peanut butter crayon up my nose.  
A peanut butter me. I have a crayon up my nose. I want a Disneyland ride **now**.  
Mickey Mouse I love.

A song of woe may turn into an alphabet song and an occasion to practice writing letters:

My head hurts and my neck hurts and I want my Mama. Steve's a big old pig.  
Hair-do Mama. And somebody ripped my crown. Jingle, jingle, hymer. Jingle,  
jingle ban bee. ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ—Next time won't you  
sing with me?

Children's stories, poems, and letters are displayed in classrooms and hallways, and kept in laminated books, which the children read to themselves and each other. Many of the four- and five-year-olds recognize their classmates' entries and have memorized them almost verbatim. Children often read their own messages to themselves after they are written, matching print to their remembered words. Several studies have found that children comprehend and make inferences better when reading child-authored texts than when reading other texts (Sampson, 1997). At Helen Gordon, the primary purpose of writing is to identify and express thoughts and feelings. Franzel explains:

I usually use writing as a means to a goal, to validate children's feelings about separation, to help resolve conflict—as crisis prevention. I hear someone screaming and I go over to help them use their words to express their needs and feelings. Then I ask the child, "Do you want to write it down, write a letter?"

The process is such an integral part of the day's activities that the children explain it to new adults in the classroom and expect them to take dictation, just as they might expect adults to tie their shoes. In the approach used at Helen Gordon—often referred to as language experience—teachers act as scribes: writing children's words as they dictate them; listening carefully for the narrative thread; and helping children clarify their thoughts.

## **Nurturing Emotional Literacy Through Language Experience**

Frequently throughout the day, children use dictating and writing messages, poems, and stories to sort out their feelings and at times to come to terms with their own behavior. For example, the following letter was written after four-year-old Tony watched his classmate Mark leave for the doctor to have stitches in his forehead, following an altercation involving a broom. As Tony thought about what to write to Mark, anger was replaced by a sense of responsibility:

I'm sorry Mark. I hit you with the broom. Why did you want to take my broom?  
I was just about to color with the chalk and you were trying to take my broom.  
I was coloring in 5 seconds. I wanted to give him a hug before he left.

Four-year-old Heidi expressed her complex thoughts on friendship and rejection in a prose poem written about and to her friend Olivia:

Olivia is a good friend.  
Sometimes she doesn't play with me.  
Today she said, "Don't follow me."  
I was upset.  
Then I was angry.  
Then I said, "Bad Olivia."  
Then I walked away.  
Just like Olivia

Read this note and then you will  
Find out about me  
And your friend Heidi.  
Love, Heidi  
To Olivia



Resolving conflict through negotiation and problem solving, and learning to imagine how others think and feel are critical competencies for all adults. Helping children to understand and assume responsibility for their behavior is at the center of this pre-school curriculum. In turn, staff members are responsible for providing a "secure and loving" environment that fosters connections among staff, children, and families. As teacher Amy Jacobson puts it, "the first thing is for children to feel valued, important, and loved."

Many of Helen Gordon's children spend more than 40 hours a week at the child development center; for such children, separating from parents may be a daily challenge. A number of strategies are used to ease the transition from home to the classroom. On the balcony adjacent to the classrooms, children have the opportunity to wave a last goodbye to a departing parent. For many children, explains Jacobson, "the transition from home to school is not complete until they are taken outside and they see Mom or Dad wave the last time from the sidewalk. Then they can say, 'Okay, they're gone.' In their minds, the transition has been made."

Feeling sad about separating from parents is a frequent topic of conversation among children. Teachers encourage children to write notes to their parents, an activity that has been part of the day at Helen Gordon for many years (see sidebar). According to director Ellie Justice, "It's been a really nice way for us to help children to have a place to put their feelings." Jacobson agrees:

We help children learn that words have meaning and can be used to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas both verbally and on paper. A lot of times children have trouble separating from their parents, feeling very sad. We help them write a letter, to express their feelings: "I miss my Mommy, I want my Mommy." We write their words exactly as they say them. If they say, "I hurt my knee," that's what we write. That's a validation of their feelings, their ideas.

It also helps them to connect the feelings they had in the morning when they said goodbye with how they feel at the end of the day. They can see, "Oh, yeah, I wrote that to you this morning, but then I did all these other things." And the child can see that they were able to part with the sad feelings and get past them.

These are some of the letters that children write to their parents:

I miss Mama  
and I wish I couldn't be at school.  
And I want to go trick-or-treat.  
And I love Mommy.  
And I want to go with my Papa to  
buy toys for me.  
I want my Mama to be a teacher.  
And naptime, I don't, I'm not sleepy.  
I feel like I want to be a princess.  
Right now  
I'm done.

Once upon a time there was an old fire truck. I want my daddy  
now, now, now, now, now now!  
And I want my daddy now, now, now, now,  
now, now, noooooow, noooooow!

Emotional development and literacy go hand in hand when schools and families provide opportunities for children to express their thoughts and feelings verbally and in writing/drawing; to read and discuss stories that offer rich opportunities to discuss emotions; and to understand how others think and feel.

## Project Outline

- Overall strategy: Children are encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings verbally and in writing—in letters to friends and parents, in poems, and in stories.
- In the approach used, often referred to as language experience, teachers and other adults in the classroom act as scribes: writing children's words as they dictate them; listening carefully for the narrative thread; and helping children clarify their thoughts.
- Children's dictated stories, poems, and letters are displayed in classrooms and hallways and kept in laminated books, which the children read to themselves and each other.
- Throughout the day, children use dictating and writing messages, poems, and stories to sort out their thoughts and feelings and, at times, to come to terms with their own behavior.

## Contact

Helen Gordon Child Development Center  
Ellie Justice, Director  
Will Parnell, Director  
1609 SW 12th Avenue  
Portland, Oregon 97201  
Phone: (503) 725-3092  
[www.hgcdc.pdx.edu](http://www.hgcdc.pdx.edu)

## Suggested Student Reading

Brown, M.W. (Author), & Hurd, C. (Illustrator). (1942). *The runaway bunny*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Brown, M.W. (Author), & Weisgard, L. (Illustrator). (1949). *The important book*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Carle, E. (1977). *The grouchy ladybug*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Fox, M. (Author), & Frazee, M. (Illustrator). (2000). *Harriet, you'll drive me wild*. New York, NY: Voyager Books.

Fox, M. (Author), & Lofts, P. (Illustrator). (1989). *Koala Lou*. New York, NY: Voyager Books.

Guarino, D. (Author), & Kellogg, S. (Illustrator). (1989). *Is your mama a llama?* New York, NY: Scholastic.

Johnson, C. (1983). *Harold and the purple crayon*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Joose, B. (Author), & Lavellee, B. (Illustrator). (1991). *Mama, do you love me?* San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books.

Penn, A. (Author), Harper, R.E., & Leak, N.M. (Illustrators). (1993). *The kissing hand*. Washington, DC: Children's Welfare League of America.

Sendak, M. (1988). *Where the wild things are*. New York, NY: HarperTrophy.

Viorst, J. (Author), & Cruz, R. (Illustrator). (1972). *Alexander and the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day*. New York, NY: Aladdin Paperbacks.



# ALL ABOUT ME

## Beginning Writers Gain Confidence by Writing About Themselves



In Julie Duford's multiage first- and second-grade classroom, students write a series of short personal narratives and put them together into a multimedia presentation using HyperStudio® software. The theme switches every other year between My Memory Book and All About Me. By writing their own scrapbook, in essence, students create a keepsake that celebrates who they are and can be enjoyed at home through the years. Students also work on academic standards in writing and technology, particularly those related to publishing in different formats, planning writing, and using conventions.

While students write about whatever they choose to during most of the year, Duford assigns the topics for students' essays in this project.

During about two-and-a-half months near the end of the year, students work on the project in their 90-minute language arts block: sometimes spending a little time each day, sometimes skipping a whole week. Each year, students write between four and seven short essays for the project. Topics may include:

- Pets
- Siblings
- Pastimes/hobbies
- A favorite thing to do
- When I was a baby
- Family
- Where I live
- Most memorable moment
- I'm proud of ...
- If I could change the world
- Friends

Duford teaches at Cherry Valley Elementary School in Polson, Montana. Located on the southern shores of Flathead Lake, and on the northern end of the Flathead Indian Reservation, the school serves a culturally and economically diverse student body. About 40 percent of the students are American Indian. In addition, increasing numbers of children come from families who live at or below the poverty line, with almost 60 percent qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch.

Teacher Modeling

Students quietly reread to themselves what they have written down, having learned an important—though often overlooked—skill that is essential to initiate the revision process.

As her class gathers around her on the rug, Duford asks, “How many of you have had your parents tell you a story lately from when you were little?” Only a few hands rise. This is one of the topics that will be included in this year’s project. Duford quietly reminds students that she has sent home a few notes about this, and encourages them to ask their parents to tell them a story that night. To give students an idea of what kinds of stories they might hear or ask about, Duford asks some of those who have already collected their story to share it with the class. Students talk about family adventures and things they used to say when they were toddlers.

Since most students haven’t yet gathered a story from when they were little, Duford switches gears to another topic for their memory book that students can write about today. She writes “most memorable moment” inside a circle on the chalkboard and asks students what that means. “Something you’ll remember for a very, very long time,” an attentive boy ventures. Together they discuss some examples of what a memorable moment could be: a trip, a visit with grandma, an experience with a pet. They note that the story could be happy or sad.

Getting ready to walk through an example, Duford draws a web of bubbles, asking, “What kinds of things are we going to want to know about when we recreate a story?” She labels each bubble with one of the “five W’s,” reminding students that this is a form of planning. She draws on the experience of one classmate, a story that the class has already heard. As a class, they note the specific information in the story, and where it would fit in the web. Then, Duford retells the story, speaking as if she were writing it, pointing to each bubble as she comes to it.

“Last year my family went whale watching at the San Juan Islands. It was memorable because I saw whales come out of the water so close to me that I could touch them. Whales are my favorite animal.”



When Duford finishes, she asks how many sentences it will take to write a story like this well, to which students reply “five or six.” Duford points out how she took care of four of the “W’s” in the first sentence, but that she would have the most to write about why the moment was memorable.

## Individual Writing

Explaining that she wants students to have a good start on the story before recess in 20 minutes, Duford directs the children to take a “silent six,” a six-minute period during which students quietly brainstorm what they want to write about and begin working in their draft books. Duford reminds students that they don’t have to draw the bubbles



in their notebooks—since they conducted that exercise as a class, they can just look at the example on the chalkboard. Thus, Duford helps them get a solid start, pushing them past extensive pre-writing exercises, beyond the blank page, and toward writing fluency.

After the “silent six,” students are free to quietly discuss what they are writing about, if they feel the need. Seated together at a table, two boys discover that they are writing about a similar

experience and compare stories. Other students quietly reread to themselves what they have written down, having learned an important—though often overlooked—skill that is essential to initiate the revision process (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998). Duford wanders about the room suggesting revisions to students who have completed a rough draft. It’s an active scene and everyone has at least a few sentences written down by recess.

Later, each student will have an editing conference with Duford where she will check conventions, make sure the student followed the plan, and perhaps make some suggestions for additional detail. She uses the 6+1 Trait® Writing rubric (from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory) to assess their writing. New lessons in punctuation and capitalization are also monitored through the use of a two-column list in the back of each student’s draft book, titled “I can/I am learning to ...” This chart helps remind students of things to look for before bringing their work to the teacher.

## Publishing With Technology

The writing “would be done anyway,” explains Duford, but the multimedia presentation extends the project. It gives students a chance to use their computer skills for a real purpose. Students use HyperStudio, a multimedia software that operates very

much like a Web page, to create a stack of cards on which pictures, sounds, and text are incorporated and hyperlinked together. Students are responsible for:

- Choosing the background patterns for each of their cards
- Choosing the colors of the hyperlink buttons
- Importing their scanned pictures from home to the proper cards or pages—which they then crop and frame

Each student spends about three hours of the total project time completing these tasks, navigating through the program with amazing speed. Duford sets up the four classroom computers—including her own—during independent work times and cycles the students through so that they each get a chance at the computer about twice per week. Duford types the text and imports it into each student's presentation. Since Duford teaches both first and second grades, she is able to link the student's two projects together at the end of the second year—illustrating the child's progress from one year to the next.

At the beginning of the project, Duford teaches two students how to use the technology. Those students then teach another pair of students, and so on, growing the corps of class technology specialists. This leaves Duford free to conference with students on their writing. It also helps that students are in her class for two years. "I hardly spend any time on classroom management because the first-graders just watch and follow the second-graders, who've already learned my system," says Duford. She elaborates on the student-led nature of the work:

When teaching this unit it is important that the students can work independently through various portions of it. All the work is done during our language arts block. During this time students work off a plan, which allows me to work with individual groups at their point of need. Without this type of arrangement in the classroom, some of the activities of this lesson will have to be modified to fit your teaching style.



Another possible component of the project is to record students' voices as they read their narratives. "It adds so much to be able to hear their voices, especially when you look back after a couple of years," says Duford. However, time constraints mean that sometimes this aspect is skipped over. In addition, Duford shares, "It requires a quiet room, but I like the students to be able to talk to each other about their writing."

When all the work is completed, family members are invited to attend a formal showing of the children's creations during the school day—just one more opportunity to bring families into the classroom. At the showing, each student introduces his or her project, begins the

computer presentation independently, and answers questions from parents and peers, as the “expert” in the area. Each presentation is burned onto a CD-ROM or a VHS video, which families can take home.

At the end of the project, Duford meets with each student and asks him or her to complete a self-assessment, identifying what went well, what could be improved, and what could be done differently next time. By evaluating and reflecting on their growth as a writer, students are exposed to another writing content standard. At the heart of all the learning that takes place during this project is the hope that by writing about their experiences, even at a very young age, students will see a purpose in writing.

## Student Writing Samples

### **Rocky My Cat** *by Kayla Duford*

My pet’s name is Rocky and he is a manx cat. He got his name because his nose looks like Rocky road ice cream, and he was also named after the fighter Rocky Balboa because he was so tuff. We saved him from being killed at the animal shelter. We have had Rocky for a year and a half. Rocky is black white and gray. He is very lazy and he fights with his brother and he is up to my shin. He is very soft and he has long hair. What I do not like is he keeps me awake at night because he kisses me all night long.

### **My Parents** *by Kayla Duford*

My parents names are Julie and Dave. They feed me very well, and they clean the house. They drive me to school so I don’t have to walk. They also take me on fun vacations. I think my mom snowmobiled and my dad worked before they had kids. I love them because they take care of me. Mom and dad love me because I am nice and I love them.

## Project Outline

- Teacher Julie Duford chooses which topics students will write about in their essays.
- Most topics are modeled first in front of the whole class. Duford demonstrates pre-writing or planning techniques, such as webbing.
- Students are given time to work individually to start their pieces. After they’ve begun, students can work with others, sharing their ideas and writing.
- Students reread their writing and check their “I can/I am learning to ...” lists in their draft books to do some initial editing before sharing their writing in a conference with the teacher.
- In the conference, Duford responds to their writing, emphasizing staying on topic, using details, and using conventions that are within reach for the child.
- At the same time that all this is going on, students are spending about 20 minutes a week working on their multimedia presentations. After Duford teaches the first set of students how to import their pictures and format each of the cards in a Hyper-Studio stack, the students are largely responsible for teaching others how to use the computers.



- Duford types students' essays into their presentations. Each student shares his or her presentation in a formal showing for parents and classmates.
- The project concludes with a student self-assessment.

## Contact

Julie Duford, Teacher  
Cherry Valley Elementary School  
111 4th Avenue East  
Polson, Montana 59860  
Phone: (406) 883-6333  
E-mail: [jduford@polson.k12.mt.us](mailto:jduford@polson.k12.mt.us)

## Suggested Student Reading

- Curtis, J.L. (Author), & Cornell, L. (Illustrator). (2000). *Tell me again about the night I was born*. New York, NY: Joanna Cotler Books.
- dePaola, T. (1979). *Oliver Button is a sissy*. New York, NY: Voyager Books.
- Fox, M. (Author), & Staub, L. (Illustrator). (1997). *Whoever you are*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.
- Gray, L.M. (Author), & Colon, R. (Illustrator). (1999). *My mama had a dancing heart*. New York, NY: Orchard Books.
- Hazen, B.S. (Author), & Hymen, T.S. (Illustrator). (1979). *Tight times*. New York, NY: Puffin Books.
- Herron, C. (Author), & Cepeda, J. (Illustrator). (1997). *Nappy hair*. New York, NY: Knopf Books.
- Hoban, R. (Author), & Hoban, L. (Illustrator). (1964). *A baby sister for Francis*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Johnson, A. (Author), & Soman, D. (Illustrator). (1989). *Tell me a story, Mama*. New York, NY: Orchard Books.
- Kraus, R. (Author), & Aruego, J. (Illustrator). (1971). *Leo, the late bloomer*. New York, NY: HarperTrophy.
- Polacco, P. (1998). *My rotten redheaded older brother*. New York, NY: Aladdin Books.

# RIDING LA ALFOMBRA MÁGICA

## ESL Students Explore Their Roots Through Writing

With legs crossed and arms loosely folded, 23 seven- to nine-year-olds settle on *la alfombra mágica*, ready to travel wherever teacher JoAnna Lovato might be steering them today. Their “magic carpet,” bright with primary colors, is always fueled up and ready to go. From the front of their classroom, these students journey through stories to places where their family roots run deep—countries like Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Colombia—and then back to this country where their lives now branch out.

The magic carpet seems the perfect imaginary transport for these children, all native Spanish speakers, who are part of Lovato’s bilingual class at Wilson Elementary in Medford, Oregon. One of her objectives is to teach these second- and third-graders



to read and write in their native language first, and then help them transfer these skills to English. This approach better enables them to one day become bilingual adults who have retained ties to their cultural heritage, attained fluency in two languages, and learned to successfully navigate U.S. culture.

Instead of seeing her students’ sociolinguistic background as a barrier to instruction, Lovato celebrates it and uses it to forward their education in not just one, but two, languages. “The stronger the literacy foundation they have in their first language,” says Lovato, “the more they will have to transfer over to English, as supported by research.” She adds: “Building a strong literacy

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foundation in my students' first language helps ensure academic success and heightened self-esteem." In short, she argues, it helps them succeed in life.

To engage her students, Lovato says she tries to employ "projects that are not only authentic, but culturally appropriate," making use of students' prior experiences as a springboard for learning. "Students are not blank slates," she says. "I find it so important to tap into what the students bring to the classroom."

One such project is called the Tree of Life. Lovato got the idea at the 2002 California Association of Bilingual Education conference. Educators and authors Yvonne Freeman, David Freeman, and Sandra Mercuri delivered a presentation on their book, *Closing the Achievement Gap: How to Reach Limited-Formal-Schooling and Long-Term English Learners*. The Tree of Life project, discussed in the book, invites students to explore their family trees, cultural traditions, and ultimately their own identities through writing. Although the project was originally intended for middle school students, Lovato decided to adapt it for her own second- and third-graders.

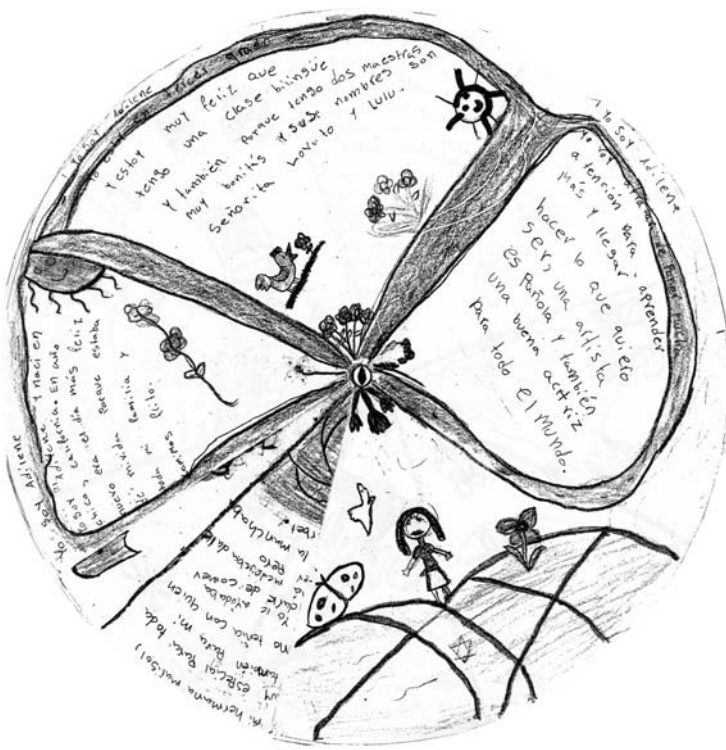
Earlier in the year, Lovato had engaged her students in a project where they read autobiographies by others with multicultural backgrounds—*Just Like Me: Stories and Self-Portraits by Fourteen Artists*, edited by Harriet Rohmer, and *Cuadros de Familia* ("family pictures") by Carmen Lomas Garza, for example—and watched Lovato model writing her own autobiography. They then immersed themselves in writing their own autobiographies and family stories, from rough drafts, through peer and teacher reviews, revisions, and ultimately to "publication."

Through the Tree of Life, Lovato saw an opportunity to reinforce earlier lessons and take learning a step further. During the project, each student creates a colorful laminated paper "wheel" that carries the stories and images of his or her life. Lovato compares these wheels, which are 11 inches in diameter, to the fruit borne on trees. "The tree serves as a common metaphor for life," she explains. "Each of us is like a tree, and what we encounter in life—our experiences and so forth—yields fruit."

## The Layers of the Wheel

Like life, each wheel is layered with multiple complexities. The top layer bears an illustration of a road, symbolic of each student's path through life, and includes a clear laminate triangular "window" which, when rotated, reveals slices of the layer beneath. Featured on the top layer is a three-stanza autobiographical poem written by the student. Each stanza of this poem begins with the words "Yo soy" ("I am") and the student's first name, and then continues on to respectively reveal stories of the student's past, present, and future. Among this group of bicultural students, similar themes often appear.

For example, in poems about the past, students who have immigrated often write about their lives before and after coming to the United States. Luís, for instance, writes about the poverty his family endured when he was a young child in Mexico. He tells how his father moved first to the United States to find work so that he could send money for food and clothing home to his wife and children. Sharing like histories is empowering for these kids, reports Lovato. In a mainstreamed classroom, they might not have the confidence to share these stories of struggle, but here they find their voice.



In poems about the present, many students focus on their school and teacher, as well as their wish to become bilingual. Already, it seems they grasp the value of being at home in both Latino and U.S. cultures.

In poems about the future, students reflect on their dreams and ambitions. Many plan to go to college, prompted not only by their teacher, but also by parents who see that education is the key to opportunity for their children. A girl named Ana writes: “All of my life, I am going to make good decisions. I am going to continue being a good student in school, so that I can go to the university. I want to study to be a doctor.”

The second wheel reveals stories of four significant events in the child’s life. Many focus on family—important for all children, but especially those of Latino her-

itage. Students write about holidays spent with extended families or the day a younger sibling was born. “When my sister Alejandra was born,” writes Erica, “it was a very special day for my whole family and also for me because before I didn’t have anyone to play with.”

Often, events center on religious holidays or celebrations. Students write about *Las Posadas*, the nine-day celebration leading up to Christmas, or about a sister’s *quinceañera*—a celebration marking a girl’s 15th birthday when she becomes a young woman in the eyes of her community. Students often write about visiting family in their or their parents’ home countries. María, for example, writes of a trip to Mexico to see her grandmother, who owns three dogs and sells sweets out of a little store in her home.

The final layer of the wheel, visible from the opposite side, includes written descriptions of four “artifacts” from the child’s life. These can include physical objects, such as a favorite gift, or more esoteric things, including advice passed down from an elder. Liliana writes: “My great grandfather gave me a chain [necklace] that had a picture of my great grandmother and me and my great grandfather. He gave me this chain in Mexico. I put it in the drawer where I put my clothes and there is where I left it in Guayameo, Mexico, in my favorite country.” María, on the other hand, sees her family members as “gifts from God.”

Throughout the layers of the wheel, illustrations highlight details of the student’s prose, resulting in a wheel that reflects the child’s life in words and pictures.

## The Writing

“Writing needs to be engaging, empowering, meaningful, and fun,” says Lovato. That this project measures up on Lovato’s scale is evident in the quality of student work. “Writing is such a powerful mode of expression,” she says. “[It] truly empowers students and heightens their levels of learning when given opportunities to go through the entire writing process—brainstorm, pre-draft, rough draft, peer conferences, revisions, teacher-student conferences, and final draft for publication.”

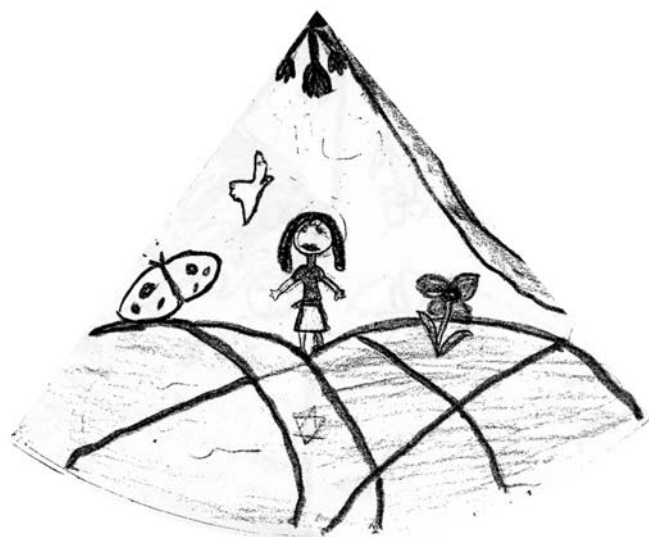
Lovato models each part of the project on a large easel at the front of the classroom, while her students gather on the magic carpet. “I model everything,” she says, noting the importance of showing her students that “we are all writers.” She also shows her students books that have been issued in second and third editions, evidence that even professional writers and editors go back to revise and improve their work.

Lovato also credits “*las características de la buena escritura*” (known more commonly as *The Traits of Effective Spanish Writing*), developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and tailored to the Spanish language by former NWREL assessment specialist Will Flores, as being useful in her approach to teaching writing. Flores “utilized rich Spanish language to describe each trait and also provided great ideas and many resources for writing in both areas of instruction and authentic assessment that I continuously use,” Lovato says. She displays the traits on a classroom wall and says, “These are a great reference and guide for my students—and myself—to read and use over and over. Further, the Spanish traits are *not* a translation [of NWREL’s 6+1 Trait® Writing model]. They were developed in Spanish for Spanish writing, and take into account the differences that exist in Spanish writing.”

Lovato makes a point not to correct too much in students’ writing, especially early in the process. “Fixating on grammar can create roadblocks” for students, she explains. The important thing is for them to learn to express themselves—to build on strengths and then go back and address the nits in revisions. A parallel can be drawn to helping these students learn to express themselves in their native language first and then weave in English, rather than force them to communicate in English at the outset where they will likely find the new language to be a barrier to expression.

“The writing process seems long at times,” Lovato says, “but it is well worth it. My students learn so much.”

At the end of the Tree of Life project, Lovato hangs the student wheels from a large construction paper tree in the breezeway outside the classroom during the school’s “Celebration of Learning” so that other students and visiting parents can enjoy and appreciate her students’ hard work. “One of the beauties of this project,” she observes, “is that it fully embraced my students—their language, culture, and family traditions. They loved it because it was about them, and they all took great pride in their projects.”





Of the year's work, Lovato says, "It was a huge success in that nearly half of my students were either not reading or writing—or were at the beginning stages—in any language at the beginning of the year." By the end of the year, she reports, all were reading and writing in their native language of Spanish, and most were reading and writing in English, as well. Of course, Lovato notes, reaching grade-level proficiency in English is a long process for English language learner (ELL) students, often taking some five to seven years. But she adds, "First language literacy is what opened the door, and truly makes all the difference."

## Project Outline

- Students read published autobiographies by others with multicultural backgrounds.
- Students observe the teacher writing her autobiography.
- Students engage in the process of writing their autobiographies and family stories, starting with rough drafts, progressing through peer and teacher reviews and revisions to "publication."
- Using information already gathered for the autobiography, each student composes an autobiographical poem consisting of three stanzas. Each stanza begins with the words "Yo soy" ("I am") and focuses respectively on past events, present events, and future dreams. Students copy these poems onto a "wheel" and create accompanying illustrations.
- Each student writes short descriptions of four significant events in his/her life and copies these onto a second wheel, adding accompanying illustrations.
- Each student writes about four "artifacts" from his/her life and copies these onto a third wheel along with accompanying illustrations.
- Through each phase of building wheels, students are engaged in a process of brainstorming, preparing pre- and rough drafts, participating in peer and teacher conferences, making revisions, and preparing final drafts for publication.
- Students also watch their teacher model each stage of the process.
- When final drafts are ready, student wheels are bound together representing the layers of each student's life.
- The wheels are displayed on a large construction paper tree in the breezeway outside the classroom during the school's parent visitation night so that the students' work can be recognized and appreciated by visiting parents and other students.

## Contact

JoAnna Lovato has changed schools:

JoAnna Lovato, Teacher  
Cornelius Elementary School  
200 North 14th Street  
Cornelius, Oregon 97113  
Phone: (503) 359-2500  
E-mail: JLovato@fgsd.k12.or.us

## Suggested Student Reading

- Altman, L.J. (Author), & Sanchez, E.O. (Illustrator). (1993). *Amelia's road*. New York, NY: Lee & Low Books.
- Bunting, E. (Author), & Diaz, D. (Illustrator). (1998). *Going home*. New York, NY: HarperTrophy.
- Cohn, D. (Author), & Delgado, F. (Illustrator). (2002). *¡Sí, se puede! Yes, we can! Janitor strike in L.A.* El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.
- Garza, C.L. (1990). *Family pictures/Cuadros de familia*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press.
- Garza, C.L. (1996). *In my family/En mi familia*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press.
- Gray, N. (Author), & Dupasquier, P. (Illustrator). (1988). *A country far away*. New York, NY: Orchard Books.
- Madrigal, A.H. (Author), & dePaola, T. (Illustrator). (1999). *Erandi's braids*. New York, NY: Puffin Books.
- Nye, N.S. (1995). *The tree is older than you are: A bilingual gathering of poems and stories from Mexico with paintings by Mexican artists*. New York, NY: Aladdin.
- Pérez, A.I. (Author), & Gonzalez, M.C. (Illustrator). (2000). *My very own room/ Mi propio cuartito*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press.
- Polacco, P. (1988). *The keeping quilt*. New York, NY: Aladdin Books.
- Rohmer, H. (Ed.). (1997). *Just like me: Stories and self-portraits by fourteen artists*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press.
- Soto, G. (Author), & Martinez, E. (Illustrator). (1993). *Too many tamales*. New York, NY: PaperStar Book.
- Stevens, J.R. (Author), & Arnold, J. (Illustrator). (1995). *Carlos and the cornfield/ Carlos y la milpa de maíz*. Flagstaff, AZ: Rising Moon.

# BEAR TALES

## Alaska Students Share Stories About Their Furry Neighbors and Learn Literacy Skills in the Process

When you live in a place like Juneau, Alaska, where bears are as common as, well, Starbucks in the lower 48, you're bound to collect a few stories about grizzly, growly encounters along life's path. Even if your life experience is but a wee five- or six-years long. So, when Riverbend School's Mimi Walker asks her kindergarten and first-grade students to share true bear stories in class, they never disappoint.

The subject of bears is a suggested theme for addressing state science standards, says Walker, who introduces the unit to her students by jointly creating a list of what the group currently knows about bears and what they might be curious about. "There's a lot of language there," the teacher says, "and I'm writing the words on a great big cutout drawing of a bear—this is what we already know; this is what we want to learn."

My favorite Alaskan bear is the  
Polar Bear because  
he is a good swimmer



Walker then asks her students to go home and collect true bear stories. "We are lucky to live in an area where bears live. Many of us are rich with bear stories," writes Walker in a note sent home with students. "Homework this week is to talk about real bear encounters that you, your family, or relatives have experienced. Help your child write down one of these stories to share in class."

This is a family assignment, explains Walker, since the process of talking with family members, listening to stories, and then recording a particularly memorable tale to share with their teacher and classmates provides all the basic building blocks for literacy.

**Writing about themselves and their environment makes the work relevant. There's nothing more important to young children than themselves and what surrounds them.**

"Some of the kids can write the story themselves," reports Walker. "Some of their families write it for them. But the language development and the literacy that comes out of it are very rich."

Kindergartner Jake's story recounts an oft-repeated family tale about how Jake's grandpa, Champion, and a friend made the mistake of leaving their guns behind at camp while on a fishing trip up the Taku River. When the pair decided to take a walk in the woods, they suddenly found themselves trapped between a mama grizzly and her two cubs. They narrowly averted disaster by scrambling up a couple of trees and waiting out mama bear's tantrum below. "She ran around in circles below Grandpa's tree," Jake's story goes, "snorting and digging dirt with her sharp claws." (Fortunately for grandpa, the bear was too big to climb the tree.) "Finally, the mama bear got her two cubs and left. Grandpa and his friend climbed out of the trees and ran back to their camp as fast as they could. They never walked in the woods without their guns again."

Often, the bear stories are firsthand accounts. "Children in the Juneau area *do* have real bear experiences," notes Walker. For example, a number of children's stories revolve around bears getting into garbage cans in their own or a neighbor's yard, a common local problem. "And one had a story where the bear actually got into the house and the family didn't know it until they got home and found things broken," Walker reports. The bear had left a rather smelly calling card behind so there would be no confusion regarding the identity of the perpetrator.

Students love sharing these stories, reports Walker. "They are fascinated with bears because that's what we have here. And they have had real life encounters with bears."

Writing about themselves and their environment "makes the work relevant," says Walker. "There's nothing more important to young children than themselves and what surrounds them. Writing about their own and their family's experiences validates them," and when they see that other people think their work is important, too, "that just makes the children feel great."

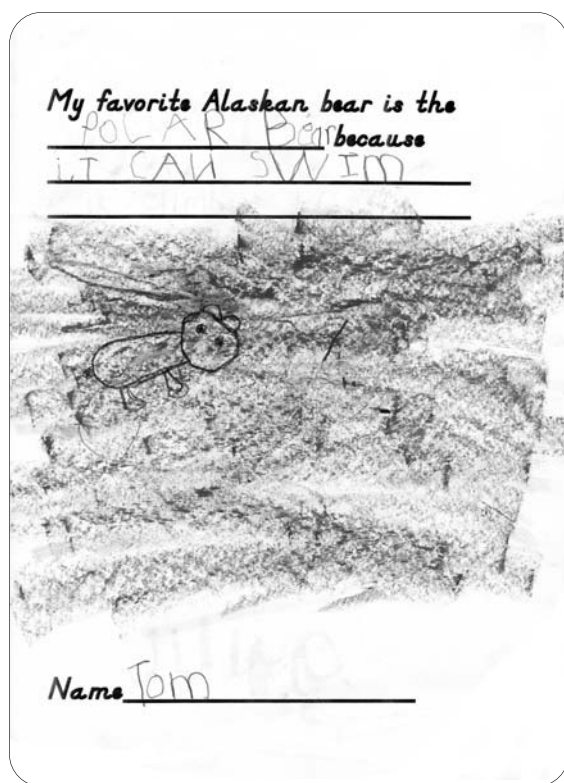
Walker says students' families often save their true bear stories. "I had a parent come in returning some books yesterday, and she still has her son's story from last year," says Walker. It's become a family treasure.

## Hands-On Learning

From the true bear stories, the students dive into an intensive three- to four-week study of bears.

"The way we go about learning is all hands-on," says Walker, who invites local experts into the classroom to share their knowledge and a range of natural artifacts with the students. "I bring in a Forest Service expert on bears," she says, "and he comes complete in his Forest Service uniform and brings things like a bear pelt and a paw with the claws, and he talks about bears," while letting the students examine his furry props. "That's just fascinating for the kids," observes Walker.

The teacher adds a bear skull she obtained from the Department of Fish and Wildlife, so the students can measure the cranium and compare the features of Alaska's three bear species: the polar bear, the black bear, and the grizzly/brown bear. (Grizzly and brown bears are the same species, but are known by different names based on the geo-



graphic areas they inhabit. Coastal bears are known as brown bears; inland bears are identified as grizzlies.)

Walker also sets up what she calls “literacy stations,” small activity centers around the room focused on practicing reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. Students visit these literacy stations three times a week for approximately 30–35 minutes to engage in independent and small-group learning.

One station provides warming trays and chunks of color crayons, along with black-line drawings of different kinds of bears. The students put the black-line drawings on the warming trays and create art by melting bits of wax onto the paper. “It’s real kinesthetic,” notes Walker, “and the kids stand there and talk about bears while they’re doing it so it’s a language-rich experience—and language development is the base of learning to read. Although it’s not high level, it’s really great for younger kids in class.”

Another station provides a writing center with blank books, ink stamps of bears, bear fact cards, and a variety of books on bears. “Students can stamp and draw and write

all about bears,” says Walker. “Maybe some of them are just writing the word ‘bear,’ but some of them are writing whole stories. A lot of the spin-offs from the homework assignment come into this center; they’ll just continue with their true bear stories.”

Across the room, students find an *Alaska’s Three Bears* booklet created by Walker, with a picture of one of the state’s bear species on each page. The students’ job is to identify the kind of bear pictured and color the bears. There is also room on each page for the students to add bear facts and text.

A “Research Alaska’s Bears” station provides a large chart with pictures of the state’s various kinds of bears, bear fact cards, and a range of nonfiction books. Students conduct research and then, in columns corresponding to the pictures of each bear, record a list of facts, noting similarities and differences. “This is pretty high level,” notes Walker. “They are learning to compare the bears—talk about how they’re the same and how they’re different.”

At the drama station, students hold up paddle puppets of the different kinds of bears and role-play using facts they have learned about their particular bear. For example, a child holding up the polar bear puppet might say, “I live where it’s really cold, and I love to eat seals and fish.”

Further stations include “Bear Animal Cards,” where students create their own bear fact cards; “Bear Games,” where students play games like word finds focused on bears; and a “Bear Art Center,” where students sculpt and later paint a clay bear, taking care to model their artwork on a specific Alaska species and explain what features of their creation are telltale—for instance, the large shoulder hump and long claws that denote a grizzly. “And they love to try and trick you,” Walker says with a giggle, “like black bears come in more colors than black, so they will make a black bear that’s brown. Or we have what’s called a ‘blue bear’—also a black bear—so they’ll make it blue instead of black.”



## Integrating Literature and Native Culture

Additionally, throughout the course of bear study, Walker reads “lots and lots of nonfiction bear books to the children,” as well as a few select pieces that are “fiction-oriented.” “Zoobooks, of course, are great,” she says, “and *Alaska’s Three Bears* by Shelley Gill and Shannon Cartwright is terrific, especially for us.” Other titles include: *Amazing Bears* by Theresa Greenaway, part of the Eyewitness Juniors series; *Bears* by Melvin and Gilda Berger; *Left Field Bear* by Jean Rogers; *Bear Animal Lore and Legend: American Indian Legends* retold by E.K. Caldwell; and *Out on the Ice in the Middle of the Bay* by Peter Cumming and Alice Priestley.

Walker also employs a range of interactive learning activities suggested in a book called *Bears* written by Robin Bernard and published by Scholastic.

“And then, of course, you have to have music,” Walker says. She creates a songbook with favorites including “The Bear Went Over the Mountain,” “Going on a Bear Hunt,” and “Bear Facts,” among others.

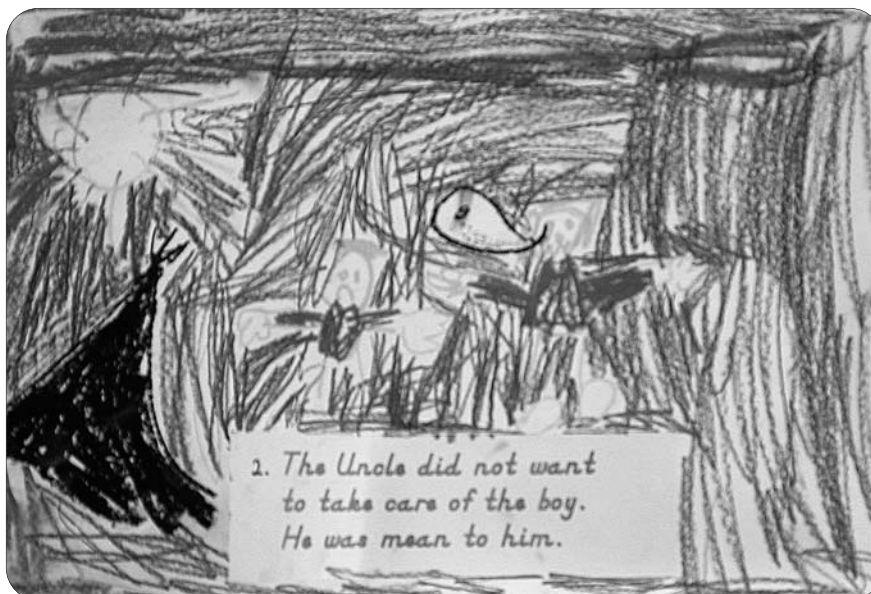
One of the highlights of the bear project is when Walker shares a Native American legend, “The Boy Who Lived With Bears.” Following the oral tradition of passing Native legends down from generation to generation, Walker tells the class the story of a boy who is led by his uncle to a cave in the forest and then is trapped inside. In the dark cave, a group of animals surrounds the frightened boy and offers to take care of him. One by one, the animals tell the boy how much fun he would have living with them. The rabbit, wolf, and other forest creatures make a case for themselves but in the end, the boy decides to live with the bears.

Walker says she tries to integrate Native culture—for example, North American Indian legends—into lessons whenever possible since there is a large Native population in the area. More than 50 percent of Riverbend School’s 350 students are minority students; of those, more than half are Alaska Native, primarily Tlingit. Walker’s class of approximately 22 students reflects that diversity.

After sharing the legend, Walker—again, in Native oral tradition—has the students repeat the legend in their own words. She records this retelling and then prints it out

sentence-by-sentence on large sheets of paper. These pages are illustrated by the students, working in pairs, and then bound together in book form to create a “published” account of the age-old legend. This “book” resides in the class library for the rest of the year.

The class then transforms the legend into a play, and students pick the roles they would like to act out—the boy, the uncle, or one of the animals. There are nearly limitless choices of animal characters and students get





excited about scripting their animal's lines. For example, Walker says, "A rabbit might say, 'You could eat fresh seeds and hop around the woods with me.' Or the wolf might say (and a couple of little boys usually like this), 'You can kill your prey and eat it.' You know, they're becoming aware of what a wolf might eat and how he or she eats it. 'And you can live in a den.' The bear makes it really fun, saying something like, 'You can eat fresh berries and run in the woods. And you can play with my cubs.'"

To enhance the performance, students make masks that help transform them into the animal characters they portray onstage. These masks, made with a plaster cast of each student's face, are

form-fitted and elaborately decorated with such materials as bright acrylic paint, feathers, and glitter. Walker, whose training is in the fine arts, believes strongly that the arts enhance the education experience, inspiring students to think creatively and find a range of positive ways to express themselves.

Music and dance provide other artistic modes of expression as students who may be too shy to choose a speaking role have the option of singing, dancing, or playing percussion instruments when the class play is presented to the community at a family potluck. "We learn a Native song and dance to perform with the play," says Walker. Additionally, students blend percussion instruments into the drama using the Orff method, a way of integrating literacy and music that Walker learned in a professional development course a few years back.

During the play and other activities, "students become aware of the audience," notes Walker, recognizing that different kinds of communication or writing are required to reach different audiences. One noteworthy example: While sharing bear stories, students expressed dismay over the problem of "garbage bears," bears that repeatedly get into trash cans in the community and sometimes end up being killed because of this behavior. "The kids were really concerned about the bears and wanted to do something to help," Walker says, so they decided to write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, sharing some of their ideas on how the community might go about saving the bears. For example, the students suggested that Juneau residents keep their garbage indoors until the morning of garbage collection or build sheds to house garbage cans. The students were thrilled when their letter was published in the *Juneau Empire* and hopeful that their ideas might make a difference for their furry friends. "That was one way of really involving the kids in community," notes their teacher.

## Employing Imagination

Walker wraps up the bear project with a week of imaginary bears. Students bring stuffed teddy bears from home, says Walker (who provides extras, just in case), "and they make name tags for their bears, and they measure them and graph them and weigh them and the whole bit. And then they write about their bears—where they got their bear and why they named it what they did."

In his teddy bear story, first-grader Ryan writes, "My Teddy Bear's name is Mr. Waffles. It is red. I got my bear from my mom. I love it."

To make the imaginary bear unit even more fun, students become bears themselves by donning ears they've made out of construction paper. The class then makes and bakes bear-shaped pastries out of bread dough. The project ends with the students staging a "teddy bear picnic" as bear-children and their teddies watch the movie of the same name, munching on tasty pastries all the while.

When all the crumbs have been swept up, Walker returns to her giant bear cutout to review what students have learned through the project.

Students are always a bit reluctant to leave their bear studies behind, Walker reports. "Oh, they could go on forever about their bear stories," the teacher says. "They never want to stop."

## Student Writing Samples

*The following letter, written as a group and with the teacher's help, was published in the "Letters to the Editor" section of the Juneau Empire.*

### **... for trash solutions**

We are Kingergarten/First Grade students in Mrs. Walker's class at Riverbend. We are learning about bears. We feel sad when bears have to be shot because they become garbage bears. We have some ideas to help solve the problem.

We think people should leave their garbage in their garage until the morning of Garbage Day. Sheds could be built around dumpsters. Garbage cans could be put in underground dumpsters. People could use bungee cords on their cans. The police could put radio collars on the garbage bears to know where they are. Fences could be built around garbage cans. Sensor lights could be put on dumpsters.

We hope Mayor Smith and her committee can help save the bears.

—Mrs. Walker's Class, Riverbend Elementary School

*This story was written by the class who dictated it to their teacher. She then printed a section on each page of a class "book." Students illustrated the pages of their book.*

### **The Boy Who Lived With Bears**

Once there was a boy whose Mother and Father died. He had to live with his uncle.

The Uncle did not want to take care of the boy. He was mean to him.

The uncle took the boy hunting, and made him look for animals in a cave.

The Uncle pushed a rock in front of the cave so the boy couldn't get out.

The boy sat down and began to cry. While he cried he sang a song.

He thought he heard someone singing back to him, and the voices were strange. They didn't sound like humans.

The stone was rolled away from the cave and there were lots of animals. "Do you need help they asked?"

The mole offered to adopt him, but the boy said no, I'm too big to go into your burrow.

The beaver offered to adopt him, but the boy said, no, I can't hold my breath under water.

The boy decided to be raised by the bears. Whenever the cubs scratched him, he grew long black hair.

There was a hunter in the forest. The bears ran through the forest and hid in a hollow log.

The hunter made a fire to smoke the bears out.

When the boy came out he saw his uncle. When he touched the boy, all his long black hair fell off.

The uncle told him how sorry he was, that his wife had just died, and he was angry and sad. When he ran back to set him free, he wasn't there.

So it was that the boy and his uncle came to live together happily. And they were friends to the bears for as long as they lived.

## Project Outline

- As a group, teacher and students make a list of what they know about bears and what they would like to learn.
- Students work with their families to collect and record true bear stories (homework).
- Students share their true bear stories in class.
- A community expert visits the classroom to talk about bears and provide hands-on learning experiences.
- Students visit literacy stations three times a week for 30–35 minutes.
- The teacher tells students the legend, “The Boy Who Lived With Bears,” and students repeat the legend to their teacher, who records their version on paper.
- The student version of the legend is broken up, sentence-by-sentence, on large pieces of paper and the students illustrate each page of what will become their “published” version of the legend. The resulting “book” will stay in the class library for the rest of the year.
- Students adapt the legend into a class play.
- Students learn a Native song and dance to perform with the play.
- The play, song, and dance are presented to the community at a family potluck.
- Students write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper to suggest ways to save local “garbage bears.”
- Students bring teddy bears to school and write stories about them. They also measure and weigh them, and graph the data.
- Students celebrate the end of the bear project by making teddy bears out of dough and eating them at a “teddy bear picnic.”
- Throughout the project, teacher and students read nonfiction and fiction books about bears.

## Contact

Mimi Walker, Teacher  
Riverbend Elementary School  
10014 Crazy Horse Drive  
Juneau, Alaska 99801  
Phone: (907) 463-1819  
E-mail: walkerm@jsd.k12.ak.us

## Suggested Student Reading

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- The Zoobooks Series is published by Wildlife Education, Ltd., 12233 Thatcher Court, Poway, CA 92064-6880; (858) 513-7600; e-mail [zoobooks@palmcoastd.com](mailto:zoobooks@palmcoastd.com); Web site [www.zoobooks.com](http://www.zoobooks.com).



# HAPPILY EVER AFTER

## Fairy Tales and Folktales Build Connections With Families

**R**umplestiltskin. Cinderella. The Three Little Pigs. Fairy tales are one of the most enduring of story forms. English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher Lilia Doni has observed firsthand the appeal of fairy tales for first-grade English language learners at Whitman Elementary School in Southeast Portland.

Doni's exploration of fairy tales was partially motivated by a desire to have her husband, a gifted storyteller, come to her classroom and tell stories. "He has a couple of fairy tales that he tells to my own kids and they just go crazy, they love it so much," she explains. Doni knew that there were plenty of things to be learned through a study of fairy tales, such as story form and structure. But she also thought about how she could involve parents and family members, one of her ongoing goals. "I'm always looking for ways to bring parents to the school in order to familiarize them with the curriculum of Portland Public Schools, and American schools in general," she says, explaining how many immigrant parents are used to very different styles of education in their countries of origin.

After some thoughtful planning, Doni came up with the idea to invite her students' parents to write down in their native language a fairy tale or folk story they've carried with them from their homeland. Mexico, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Vietnam, and the Philippines were all represented in the class. Students would be asked to rewrite the stories in English. Then, parent and child would be invited to present their story to the



rest of the class. As she developed her unit, she found herself leading her students on a worldwide literary adventure that not only met state benchmarks, but tapped the familial ties through which stories are transmitted from generation to generation.

## Studying Folklore and the Fairy Tale Genre

The students started by studying the construction and conventions of stories. First, they read the fables of beloved children's author Leo Lionni to learn not only about plot, setting, and character—first-grade literacy benchmarks in Oregon's statewide standards—but also to infer themes and conflicts. Next, they read “trickster” stories from Mexico, where most of the students' roots were. Then, the students delved into fairy tales.

“Fairy tales are classic literature that have stood the test of time for centuries,” says Doni, a native of Moldova who is conversant in Spanish and fluent in Romanian, Russian, French, and English. “They are appealing to both adults and children because they deal with love, life and death, loss, fairness. Everybody's thinking about these big values.”

In overcoming extreme circumstances, the fairy tale protagonist grows and matures, Doni explains. “This ‘test’ makes the character triumph or rejuvenate,” she says. “They change from poor to rich or from weak to strong. They change emotionally and psychologically.” Child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, argues in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* that fairy tales are not only expressions of our cultural heritage, but that they “represent in imaginative form what the process of healthy human development consists of ... (and) make great positive psychological contributions to the child's inner growth.”

Exploring the origins of fairy tales, Doni's students studied legendary storytellers and folklorists, such as the Brothers Grimm of Germany and Charles Perrault of France. They learned the elements of the fantasy genre—a long-ago setting, a heroine or hero, a villain (“bad guy,” beast, criminal), a problem and solution, and a “motif” or theme. They looked at five such motifs that appear in fairy tales: magical objects, wishes, trickery, separations, and transformations. Then they compared two stories.

Certain fairy tales cross cultures, popping up in different countries. The students explored one of the best-known of these international tales, about a wolf who tricks a family of baby goats into opening the door while their mother is out, whereupon he

gobbles them up. In the Grimms' version of *The Wolf and the Seven Little Goats*, the mother goat slices open the wolf's belly while he's sleeping, frees the (still living!) kids, and replaces them with big stones; when the wolf tries to drink, the stones drag him into the well where he drowns. In the Chinese version, the kids and their mother toss the wolf down the well. The Romanian version features just three goat kids, and the mother goat gets revenge by inviting the wolf to dinner and setting a booby trap that causes him to burn at the bottom of a pit.



Some key features of fairy tales—repetition and rhythm—are evident in the various versions of this tale. For example, the wolf’s plea, “Open the door, my children, your mother is home,” is repeated several times throughout the Chinese version. The Grimms’ version contains this verse: “What rumbles and tumbles / Inside of me. / I thought it was kids, / But it’s stones that they be.” These techniques are powerful vocabulary builders, Doni notes.

## Reaching Out to Families

**I’m always looking to connect the parents to their children and give them ways to support their children’s education.**

After sufficient preparation, Doni sent letters home to parents in their first language, asking them to share their favorite fairy tale or folktale and write it down in a “book” she had made of stapled sheets of paper. Students had their own “books” in which to write the story in English and illustrate it. Doni also asked the parents to present their story to the class.

“I’m always looking to connect the parents to their children and give them ways to support their children’s education,” Doni says. “By bringing the parents here and valuing them as experts, we cause the children to value them more and to see their importance. They feel pride in their cultural heritage.”

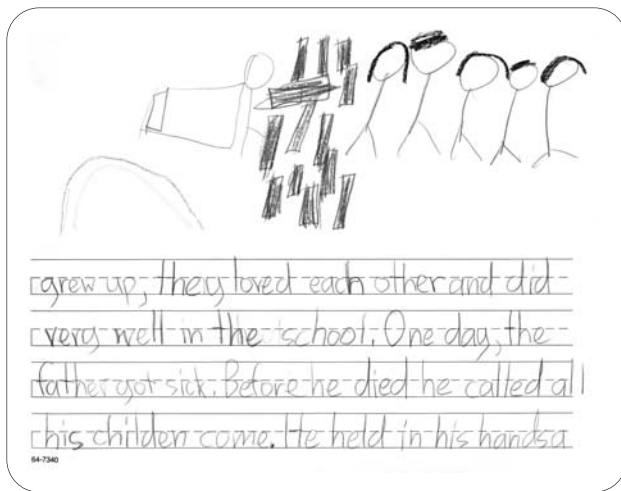
It took more effort to get some of the parents to participate than Doni expected, requiring letters, phone calls, and personal contacts (several of them in some cases). She was able to utilize one bilingual Spanish/English-speaking parent who was willing to contact the other Spanish-speaking families. The school’s pool of translators was also marshaled to make some of the contacts. Doni understood this effort was required in order to reach parents who have multiple obligations, may be unfamiliar with the American school system, or have had previous negative experiences at school.

Eventually, nearly every parent wrote down a story, and scheduled a time to come to the class to share it. Efforts were made by all parties to work around work schedules, and young children were invited to come along to alleviate child care issues.

## A Classroom Experience

Almost every day, for nearly two-and-a-half weeks, a different family visited the class. On one particular day, Lam Nguyen Le sat at the front of the classroom, her daughter Amy Ngoc Le standing at her side. Amy’s father was nearby, beaming with pride and keeping a wary eye on Amy’s two little sisters who were playing in the corner of the room. The first-graders listened attentively, taking notes as Mrs. Le read a traditional tale she had written down in her native Vietnamese in her handmade “book.” As the mother recited “A Bunch of Chopsticks,” about a dying father passing on a priceless lesson to his children, Amy translated each sentence, reading from the English version she had painstakingly illustrated in a handmade book of her own.

A long time ago, there is a farmer family have 5 kids. Unfortunately, his wife passed away early. He had to work hard to take care 5 kids. When they grew up, they loved each other and did very well in the school. One day, the father got sick. Before he died he called all his children come. He held in his hands a bunch of chopsticks and told them “you must to hold together look like a bunch of chopsticks if you separate you will befall.” The end



From the story, the students learned that family members, like chopsticks, are stronger when they stick together in a “bunch” than when they stand alone. It is a familiar story that Mrs. Le heard when she was a little girl in Vietnam.

The rest of the students were gathered around taking notes on clipboards. Listening closely to follow the storyline, they sketched drawings and jotted down words and phrases in the six boxes on their papers, forming a storyboard that summarized the story. Doni helped students identify the title of the story, main characters, and plot, which were written on chart pack paper and posted.

As part of their presentation, mother and daughter showed a two-foot-tall paper “heritage doll” that they had dressed in traditional garb using scrap paper and material, explaining the usefulness of the conical hat for warding off the hot sun and frequent tropical rains that pelt the jungles and rice paddies of the Southeast Asian nation. Pointing to Vietnam on a big world map, Mrs. Le taught the students the words for “hello,” “goodbye,” and “thank you.” Thus, students had an appropriate way to greet the parent and to thank her for coming. These terms were also written on chart pack paper and posted.

Little Amy Le’s pride in her mom was evident in her face as she listened to Lam Le read the story from her homeland. Explains Doni, “The children feel so proud of their parents, because they are the heroes.”

After nearly every family had visited the class, students prepared a readers’ theater performance of one of the folktales that was shared by a parent. As a culminating activity, parents and siblings were invited to the school to see the children perform. All the homemade books and heritage dolls that students had created over the course of the project were exhibited, as well as some of the storyboards students had used for note taking. The completed charts and posters were also on display. The principal and a district ESL coordinator attended. Refreshments were served, and there was much celebration and appreciation for the hard work and commitment of parents. Doni concluded with a short speech thanking the parents for teaching the children so much and for helping to show that speaking more than one language is not a problem but a strength. She gave each family a small photo album with one or two photos from the project and plenty of blank pages for future pictures from school.

## A New Future

The story project appears to have been valuable for students. District tests showed that three of Doni’s 12 first-grade ESL students made two years of progress in reading, entering the year just below grade level and leaving nearly two years above. All the children met grade-level targets.

The following school year, Doni continued to make changes to her curriculum and scaled down this particular project while keeping a focus on involving parents. She introduced the project to a new crop of second-graders by reading and acting out *The*

*Tale of the Turnip*, a Russian folktale from her own childhood. The class continued to talk about fairy and folktales as they read stories from around the world, especially from countries representing the students' origins. Doni explains that she discovered several folktales in second-grade readers that she found at an educational supplies store. These books provided opportunities to talk about spelling, comprehension, and literary analysis.

Once again, Doni encouraged the students to ask their parents to tell them a fairy tale or folktale. Eventually, every child brought back a hand-written book of some sort. Most books were in English, though for children whose English was so limited that they were hardly able to get anything down on paper, Doni asked them to write in their native language. Some children ended up making their own stories, but still followed the fairy tale conventions. For example, one student wrote of a princess who wished for a father, relating her own feelings about missing her father, Doni explains.

Again, parents became very interested in the project. As children proudly shared their books in class, Doni videotaped a few of the presentations and sent them home for parents to view. She has found videotapes to be one more powerful way to communicate with parents. After viewing the videotape of her son, one parent typed up a story of her grandfather that has been passed down through the family and then went on to write down additional stories about her family and post them on a Web site. It's this type of work—actively involving parents in their children's education and giving them a chance to publicly demonstrate their knowledge of culture, language, and literature—that Doni feels will lead to powerful lifelong learning for her students.

As she continues to find new ways to involve parents in sharing their stories with their children, Doni has found that her classroom has been transformed. "Parents are sharing how excited they are to talk and write about our projects. They are waiting for new projects. They opened their hearts to me. During 17 years of teaching experience I have never had such relationships with my students' parents, and that is the most rewarding."

**Adapted from:**

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## Project Outline

- Doni sent notes home requesting that parents write down a fairy tale, folktale, or family story from their childhood in the simple book of stapled blank pages she provided. Students were to write down the story in English and illustrate it in their own book.
- Students studied the folktale genre by reading and comparing stories from around the world, including from the students' heritage countries. They learned to identify main characters, plot, and theme. They learned about the features specific to fairy tales, and enjoyed their repetition and rhythm.



- Continued letters and calls were made to parents to encourage everyone's participation. Translators and other parents were used to make some of these contacts.
- Doni arranged for parents to come to the classroom and read their story aloud in their home language, while their child presented the story in English. The parent also shared some information about his or her home country—where it is, what the climate and geography are like—and taught the class to say some common greetings—hello, goodbye, and thank you—in the parent's home language.
- Students took notes on each of these stories by creating storyboards with words and illustrations.
- For a culminating celebration with all the families, the class read and acted out one of the stories.

## Contact

Lilia Doni is now teaching at a different school:

Lilia Doni, Teacher  
Rigler Elementary School  
5401 NE Prescott Street  
Portland, Oregon 97218  
E-mail: lilia@iinet.com

## Suggested Student Reading

Aardema, V. (Author), & Desimini, L. (Illustrator). (1997). *Anansi does the impossible! An Ashanti tale*. New York, NY: Aladdin.

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# TO DREAM THE POSSIBLE DREAM

## Russian Students Learn About Their Community and Future Career Opportunities Through a Literacy Project

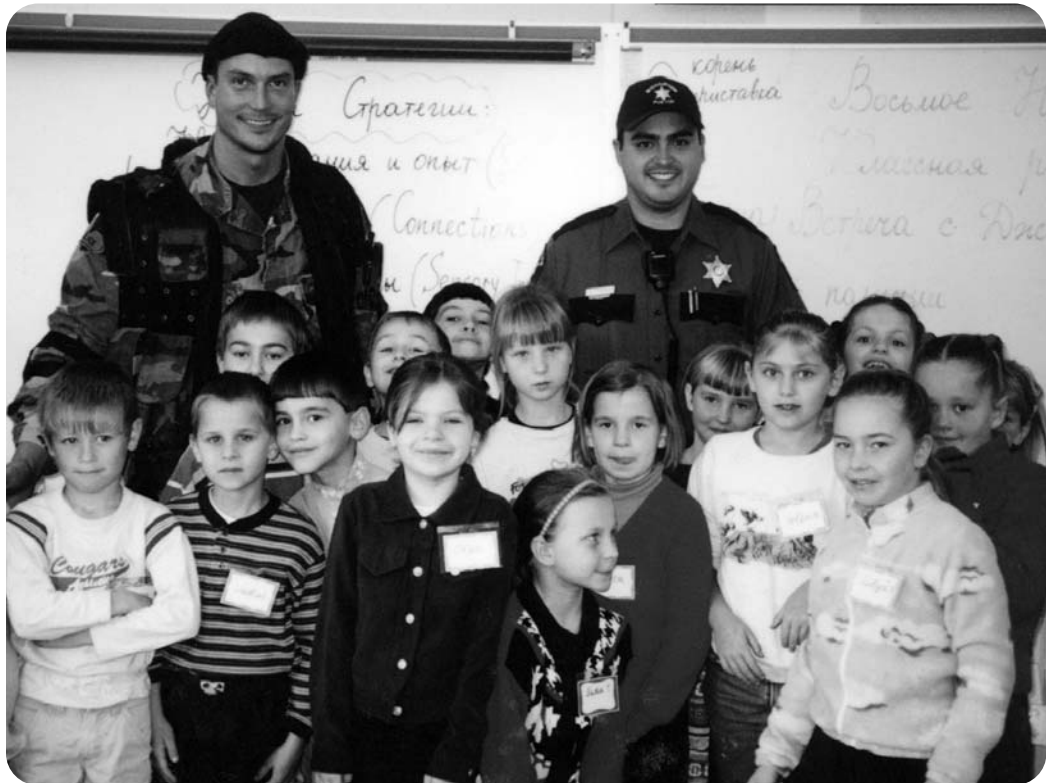
**W**hen Heritage Elementary teacher Mavjuda Rabimova asked her second-graders the age-old question—“What do you want to be when you grow up?”—their answers were troubling. It’s not that there was anything wrong with girls wanting to be housekeepers and boys wanting to work in construction. But Rabimova realized that her students’ choices were limited by their lack of exposure to other options.

“They knew really simple things,” says their teacher, because those were the only options available to many of their parents when they emigrated from Russia to the town of Woodburn, a rapidly developing agricultural community south of Portland,



Oregon. Language and sometimes educational barriers limited the parents’ employment options, and their children had little knowledge of other possibilities. “And I decided it was not enough,” Rabimova declares. “Why don’t kids dream about something really great, like to be a pilot or an artist? I want my kids to dream about very great occupations.”

Rabimova wanted to expose her students to a variety of occupations through literature—“interesting biographies” were at the top of the list. But, unfortunately, this was not an option. Books in their native



Russian language—and at the appropriate second-grade level—are hard to come by. Rabimova's students are one of two late-exit bilingual strands in the trilingual (English, Spanish, and Russian) school. With community and instructional support, Russian- and Spanish-speaking students are taught in their native languages to diminishing degrees as they progress from kindergarten through fifth grade.

In Rabimova's second-grade class, approximately 70 percent of instruction is still in Russian. While the students are building their English vocabulary through English Language Development (ELD) and other special classes (music, PE, library, and computer) with their English- and Spanish-speaking peers, the majority of Rabimova's students are not yet fluent enough to read the plethora of biographies for children that are written in English.

So Rabimova took on the task of developing curriculum to bring the world to her students, embarking on a trimester-long project that would help her students discover more about themselves, their families, and their community, as well as future career opportunities.

## Where I'm From

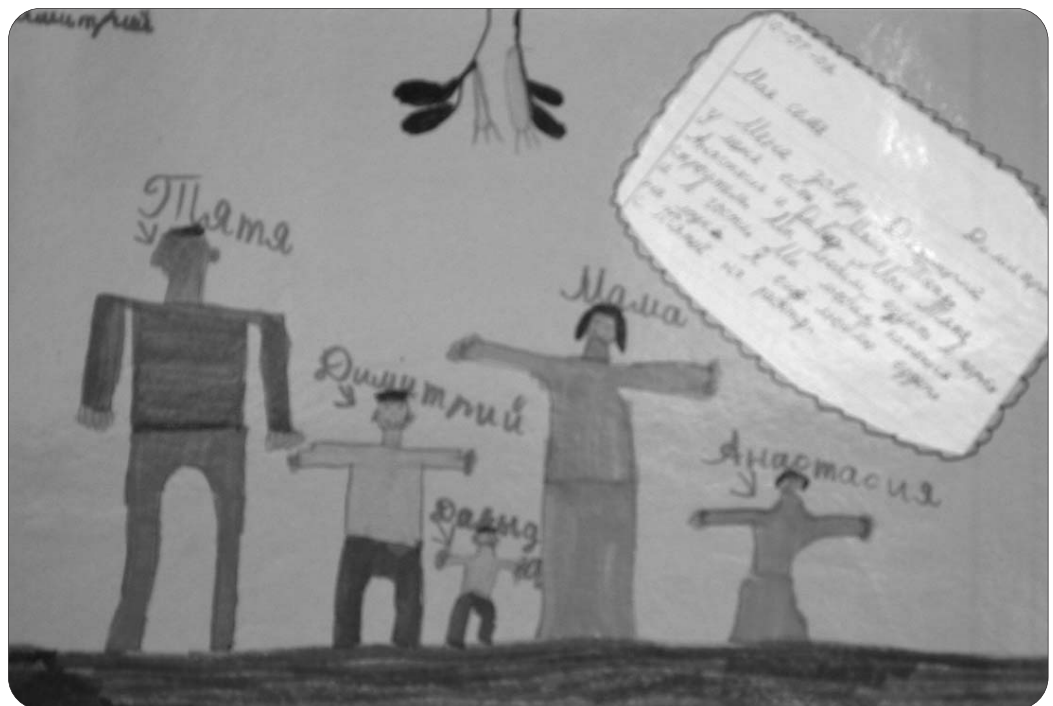
To kick off the project, Rabimova introduced her students to the concepts of autobiography and biography. To prepare to write in these genres, Rabimova led students in a class discussion of what facts and experiences would be interesting to learn about a person, whether talking about themselves or someone else. Students then generated a list of interview questions, including such queries as where a person was from, how they came to live in the United States, and what they enjoy doing with their time. Then, armed with their lists, they went home to interview family members and learn a bit more about their own heritage. They also took home a picture of a family tree with

blank spaces to fill in relatives' names and a "heritage form" where they could record hereditary features—for instance, blue eyes or brown hair—and other characteristics that may have been passed down, such as a creative spark or skill with numbers. One student, for example, reported that her brown eyes differed from her mother's, but they both shared a love of music.

The conversations that took place both in the classroom and in the students' homes were important steps on the path to literacy, says Rabimova. At the time of the project, Heritage Elementary had a schoolwide emphasis on oral language development. "Oral language is very important, not just when you are speaking," she explains. "When you have a real rich vocabulary in oral language, you can write very well because it is in your head. It is your knowledge. But when you have poor language, of course, your writing is not so great."

Students next began the task of recording their family histories, putting the stories they had heard into print. "And they went through all the writing process," says Rabimova, "drafting and rewriting and everything." In first drafts, Rabimova does not correct errors, preferring instead that the children learn to communicate their thoughts without inhibition. Later, when they are refining their work through peer and teacher reviews, they address errors in spelling and grammar.

The second-graders also took a stab at autobiographical writing when Rabimova asked them to recall and write about a "bright memory" from their own life experience. "Something that you remember very well, like it happened yesterday and why you remember it," she prompts. "Was it fun or sad, maybe? And what actually happened, where it happened, who was around—family, friends?" Rabimova modeled the exercise—designed by Heritage Elementary's second-grade teaching staff—by sharing the story of her own emigration from Russia to the United States seven years ago after civil war broke out in her native Tajikistan.



“One student wrote about a trip to California,” reports the teacher, “others about trips to distant lands or some very interesting book they read over the summer.”

Then, students gathered the autobiographical stories and family histories they had written, added pictures they had drawn of themselves and their family, and compiled the pieces into a laminated book or “family biography.”

## Where I Live

After helping students gain a firmer understanding of where they and their families had come from, Rabimova worked to expand their worldview from family to neighborhood to community, and to give them an idea of opportunities in their future.

“One of the key [state standards] questions was: As citizens of a culturally diverse democracy, how do we positively contribute to our world?” Rabimova shares. “We [teachers at the school] decided that’s really hard for them to understand. At this age, it’s much easier to understand from the small thing to the big picture. They are part of the family, and then part of neighborhood, and then larger community.”

So, to transition from family to community, Rabimova asked her second-graders to think and write about what “community” means. She then posed a series of problem-solving scenarios for groups of students to discuss and prepare written solutions. For example, one group was asked to resolve a fight that had broken out between friends; another group had to coordinate support for a sick neighbor; a third needed to throw a party. The students wrote descriptions of the scenarios and then penned letters to community members to organize mediation, care, and social event planning. The exercise gave students practice in oral and written communication skills, as well as problem solving.

Once students had begun to think about their community, Rabimova took the lesson from concept to reality. If she couldn’t find the appropriate written literature to support her lesson plan, she would bring oral literature into her classroom. “I decided to bring the community people into my classroom,” she says, “so they could share their stories with the students.”

“Interviews are the young people’s version of oral history, a research tool used in some high schools and colleges as well,” writes Paula Rogovin (1998) in her book, *Classroom*

*Interviews: A World of Learning*. “In each person are stories, songs and dances, joys and hardships, rituals and customs, skills and talents, life experiences, varying degrees of formal education, special recipes, and opinions that constitute the individual’s history and culture. ... What we can learn from interviews is often far beyond the reach of any textbook” (p. 22).







Rabimova approached parents and other Russian-speaking community members with interesting occupations and talents, asking if they would be willing to be interviewed by the students. Several agreed.

Students prepared by developing interview questions focusing on three areas: childhood, occupation, and hobbies or activities the visitors engaged in during their free time.

The first visitor was a poet, as well as a parent of one of the students. Rabimova says she wanted to start with someone familiar to her students to tap into their “schema” or “private knowledge.” During the interview, the poet shared a harrowing account of her emigration from Russia to the United States via a zigzagging path through Europe. The students could relate because many had heard similar stories while interviewing their parents and grandparents. Accessing this private knowledge helped students make connections and identify with the visitor, says Rabimova, and made the learning more concrete.

Of course, there were some kinks to iron out after the first interview, Rabimova says. Excited students were jumping back and forth from subject to subject and sometimes asking questions at the same time, making the interview a bit of a challenge for the visitor. It was clear the teacher would need to establish some basic rules on interview etiquette and the organization of interview questions.

Rabimova says she found Rogovin’s *Classroom Interviews* book helpful in planning and conducting the interviews. “We organized the rules based on that book. I just adjusted [it] to my own classroom,” she says. The book also contained many useful strategies for linking curriculum and community and for using interview material to address learning goals.

Additionally, Rabimova decided it would be helpful to brief interviewees beforehand to remind them to simplify their language for second-graders. “It’s not so easy for

them to talk to seven-year-old children, explaining, for example, their college experience,” Rabimova says, a subject foreign to most of her second-graders. Students had trouble grasping the fact that college students might live somewhere other than “home” and eat their meals somewhere other than their mother’s kitchen.

“We’re working with a unique population,” Rabimova notes. “When I started teaching seven years ago, I talked about the circus and the clowns, and I was really surprised that no one from my class knew what those were. And I found pictures from the library to present and explain. They don’t know about many things. They’ve never been to the museum or the children’s theatre. So many things are new to them.”

So, to make the interviews even more informative and engaging for the students, Rabimova asked each visitor to teach the students something—“maybe something about occupation, or maybe bring a favorite book or tell some poem or song,” the teacher explains.

When a local artist visited, he answered the students’ questions, sharing stories of his life, but also gave the students a two-hour hands-on art lesson, including tips on layout and the use of color. A visiting electrician not only talked about the benefits and dangers of his job, but popped off the cover of a light switch plate right there in the classroom to give the children a primer on electrical circuits. He then took the students outside to peek at the myriad tools in his truck, an experience that made quite an impression based on the open-mouthed stares of several little boys, in particular. A musician played compositions for the children on a piano keyboard and coached them on their performance for an upcoming school festival.

Rabimova extended the interviewee pool to add other members of the community who were fluent in Russian, including a policeman who had learned the language to better serve the community in which he worked and a library administrator who studied Russian in college and was responsible for building the local library’s Russian literature collection. During his visit, the policeman took the children out to see his squad car, explaining how certain features—like the built-in computer—assisted him in his work. He also shared a favorite poem from his childhood. The librarian talked about his job, but also about his love of aspects of Russian culture, such as the literature of Chekhov. And he invited them to the local library for a field trip, an offer they accepted.

It was an extremely positive experience for children to see not only Russian members of their community who had interesting talents and jobs, but also to meet others who valued the Russian people and culture enough to learn the language.

Each time an interviewee came to the classroom, Rabimova placed a display of useful vocabulary at the front of the room. This included terms associated with each visitor; for instance, the names of basic tools used by the electrician or the artist. More general terms like migration and immigration were also included. Rabimova says, “We talked about migration with animals moving from one area to another because of food and, then, about immigration,” a more challenging concept for students to understand. When the poet, artist, and musician were visiting, the list included terms such as “creativity.” While the interviews and classwork were conducted in Russian, Rabimova wrote the terms in both Russian and English to help her students broaden their vocabulary in both languages.

During each interview, students practiced taking notes, trying to capture “keywords” that would help them later recall the stories and information their visitors had shared. Rabimova modeled by jotting down keywords on big sheets of paper at the front of the class.

Rabimova supplemented this phase of the project by translating a handful of English books from the First Scholastic Biographies series—including the biographies of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr.—and sharing these translations with her students.

## Where I’m Going

After each interviewee had gone, students discussed the interview and their notes. It was interesting for them to discover that they had frequently written down different things than their peers. This led to discussions of point of view and interpretation. Students then went about the work of writing a biography about each of their visitors.

In these biographies, students followed the same basic writing process they used while composing their autobiographies: from rough draft, through peer and teacher reviews, to preparation of a final draft. Using writing time each day, the process took about a week per biography. Students also experimented with Venn diagrams, comparing and contrasting two of the occupations they learned about.

Because Rabimova wanted to encourage more complex and sustained writing, she gave her students the goal of writing a three-paragraph essay on each of the visitors. “I thought it would somehow help them connect what paragraphs mean because, before, they were jumping from one piece of information to another. And when you were reading it, it was really hard to follow. So I decided we needed to have some structure.” Rabimova modeled the three-paragraph approach for her students, following the three-section structure of the interviews (childhood, occupation, and free time activities).

Those who still found the three-paragraph form too difficult were allowed to focus on just one segment of the visit that interested them, notes Rabimova. She prompted them: “If you want to write whole biographies, that’s okay. If you want to write just about childhood, go ahead. Or just interesting facts. But always at the end, you have to write your own opinion about occupation.”



Rabimova wanted to know whether students were interested in pursuing any of the occupations they had been introduced to.

They were.

When the artist visited and reviewed the students’ work, “many of them decided, ‘I want to be an artist because it’s really cool. You are working the whole day with paints and everything,’” Rabimova reports. “And then when we brought the musician, some of them said, ‘Oh, I want to be a musician!’ And with the

electrician and the policeman, you can't believe, it was like one-and-one-half hours of laughing, the kids just wanting to touch them because it's interesting and they never saw these things so close. Etcetera, etcetera. Each time, we had kids who decided, 'I want to have this occupation.'"

Reading about these various occupations in books would not have had nearly the impact that meeting these people in person did, says Rabimova. "They have a real person in front of them. It makes the learning alive. They are having fun and learning at the same time."

At the end of the year, Rabimova helped students compile their essays and photos of their visitors into a class book to be displayed in the classroom.

The class also made a list of occupations to which they might aspire. "Oh my God, that was a big list!" exclaims Rabimova. "And then finally we said, now we can dream about these and it's possible. I want them to know from the beginning that it is possible in America. Everything is possible with education."

## **Student Writing Samples**

*The following writing samples were originally written in Russian and have been translated.*

### **A Childhood**

Ludmila Shevchuk was born at Russia, in the city of Ocher of Perm region. Her parents Vasily and Elisabet had six boys and four girls, and Ludmila was sixth child. Papa Vasily was working as a blacksmith, mama was working as a farmer. At the school Ludmila liked math and canto. When she was back from her school, her parents coerce her to herd goose. She did not like it. Because of it sometimes accidents were happened like once a car run over one of the goose. Ludmila wanted became a musician; even her dream did not come true. She lived at Austria. She noticed there that people did not have children but had many different dogs and cats. It was because people wanted to rest; children needed care.

I liked time we spend with Ludmila Shevchuk. It was wonderful when she played on piano keyboard. I liked to meet with Ludmila because she knew a lot about music.

### **Meeting with Zharkov**

Today we had a guest, Mr. Zharkov.

He is an electrician. He is boy, his eyes are brown. He studied in college. He has been working for eight years. He has a lot of tools. He puts electricity into new houses. He likes this job.

He has three children. In his free time he rides in his boat with his children. He likes to read psalms and scripture.

**Mr. Cherimnov**

Mr. Cherimnov visited us today. He studied at a school in Washington, and his favorite subject was mathematics. Then the whole family moved to Brazil. Mr. Cherimnov started working when he was 23. Mr. Cherimnov has been working for nine years. He is building houses. He plays golf and reads the bible. He doesn't want to leave because we have a Russian school. He speaks two languages. At the end of the week we took a picture and gave him flowers.

**Project Outline**

- Students prepared interview questions to explore their own and their family's heritage.
- Students interviewed family members and recorded their responses.
- Students composed family biographies, going through the process of drafting, reviewing with peers and teacher, and rewriting.
- Students wrote an autobiographical essay on a "bright memory" from their past.
- Students compiled autobiographical essays and family histories, along with artwork, into "published" family biographies.
- Students participated in "community" problem-solving scenarios, discussing and preparing written solutions.
- The teacher invited members of the community with interesting occupations to visit the classroom.
- Students prepared questions and interviewed the visitors.
- Students wrote biographies of guests and compiled these essays and photographs of the visitors into a class book for display.

**Contact**

Mavjuda Rabimova, Teacher  
Heritage Elementary School  
440 Parr Road  
Woodburn, Oregon 97071  
Phone: (503) 981-2850  
E-mail: [mrabimova@woodburn.k12.or.us](mailto:mrabimova@woodburn.k12.or.us)

**Suggested Student Reading**

Christensen, B. (2001). *Woody Guthrie, poet of the people*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Coles, R. (Author), & Ford, G. (Illustrator). (1995). *The story of Ruby Bridges*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Cooper, F. (1994). *Coming home: From the life of Langston Hughes*. New York, NY: Putnam & Grosset.

Garland, S. (Author), & Kiuchi, T. (Illustrator). (1993). *The lotus seed*. New York, NY: Voyager Books.



Johnson, D. (1993). *Now let me fly: The story of a slave family*. New York, NY: Aladdin Paperbacks.

Polacco, P. (1988). *The keeping quilt*. New York, NY: Aladdin Books.

Polacco, P. (1993). *The bee tree*. New York, NY: Putnam & Grosset.

Polacco, P. (1994). *Pink and Say*. New York, NY: Philomel Books.

Ryan, P.M. (Author), & Selznick, B. (Illustrator). (2002). *When Marian sang: The true recital of Marian Anderson, the voice of a century*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Schroeder, A. (Author), & Pinkney, J. (Illustrator). (2000). *Minty: A story of young Harriet Tubman*. New York, NY: Puffin Books.

Winter, Jonah. (Author), & Juan, A. (Illustrator). (2002). *Frida*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

# CONNECTIONS IN TIME

## Students Involve Village Elders in a Community Calendar Project



“You cannot just go to the store to buy the ingredients for *akutaq*. It is a favorite Native food and the rewards of eating it can only come after the work of hunting and fishing takes place. Today, Annie still uses all of the traditional pike, reindeer tallow and seal oil.” So write the first- and second-grade schoolchildren of White Mountain, Alaska, with the help of their teacher, Cheryl Pratt. They describe on a page, step-by-step, how one of the community elders, 87-year-old Annie Akuulaq Ashenfelter, taught them to make “Eskimo ice cream” one day. The recipe, passed down through generations and now recorded by the students, includes such details as how to work the reindeer tallow with one’s hands to be sure all the lumps are gone and to be sure to check the boiled fish for any remaining fragments of bone, lest they linger and get caught in someone’s throat.

A page later, the children printed the words of 85-year-old Wilson Quiliuq Shoogukwruk as he shared his stories of hunting and outdoor adventure. “I was only seven years old when I

**Our elders are our greatest resource. They are the culture bearers of our community.**

started going out with my father in the boat. He taught me how to hunt for whale. It was a skin boat and we went out hunting with four other men. We used guns and a harpoon with a bomb in it. When the harpoon was inside the whale, it would blow up. Whale hunting is dangerous,” he told the children. “When I was 16 years old I ran my dog team all the way from Point Hope to Barrow. ... Later, I became a reindeer herder. There were lots of reindeer, thousands of reindeer and we worked around Kivilina, Kotzebue, and Point Hope. For many years, a boat would come from Seattle to buy the meat and antlers. We herded with dog teams in the winter and walked in the summer. Sometimes we wouldn’t sleep for two days.”

Flip the page again and you’ll get a glimpse of the life of 82-year-old Percy Pachagan Agloinga, Sr. “It was after the seventh grade that I had to leave school to start trapping,” he told the children—“fox, mink, lynx, weasels, and marten, which brought the highest price. We trapped for the fur to trade for money.” When he was a bit older, Agloinga went to work in the gold mines, making sure rocks didn’t get caught in the slough. Later, he would hunt for seals—700- to 800-pound *oogruk*—with a dogsled over moving ice.

Seventy-eight-year-old Isaiah Piliiguq Oksoktaruk, whose story appears two pages later, also hunted seals during his lifetime. “Once the ice that I was on separated from the main ice,” he told the children. “My dogs swam across the opening and then climbed up onto the main ice and pulled me and the sled across.”

The stories of these elders—and eight others—were recorded as part of a school project organized by Pratt. Twelve in all, the stories grace the pages of a community calendar produced by White Mountain School’s seven primary-grade students in the first half of the 2000–2001 school year. Each page of the calendar includes a photo of one of the village elders along with a story and/or a bit of advice for the children. The calendar also includes the birthdays of all community residents, as well as significant area events such as salmonberry picking, crabbing, and hunting seasons for moose, wolf, and seal.



Pratt came up with the idea while working on her master's degree in curriculum design and instruction through the University of Alaska Fairbanks. As she pondered what project to implement in her White Mountain classroom that she could also analyze and report on for a university course, she remembered a calendar with pictures of village elders that she had seen years before. However, she wanted to take the concept a step further and include not just photos, but the words and wisdom of the elders. "I really enjoy working with the elders and truly believe that they should be an important part of the school or full education process," she says.

"Our elders are our greatest resource," Pratt writes in the introduction to the 2001 White Mountain calendar. "They are the culture bearers of our community. Elders have an important role as the ones who hold the knowledge and the traditions of the people. When they are willing to share this information with others, they help to strengthen the community."

The elders calendar seemed the perfect project on many levels. It would serve as an adaptable vehicle for teaching state, district, and cultural learning standards, as well as provide students and other community members with an enriching learning experience. Additionally, it would culminate in the development of both a useful tool and a valuable community resource.

## **Beyond Rural**

Located on the Seward Peninsula about 65 miles east of Nome, White Mountain is "beyond rural," says Pratt. "It's downright remote." Surrounded by densely forested hills and the icy Fish River, it is accessible only by airplane, boat (in summer), or snowmobile/dogsled (along the frozen river in winter). And sometimes, when the weather gets bad—as it does in a place where temperatures of -40 degrees and wind-chills of -100 degrees Fahrenheit are not uncommon—it is not accessible at all. The approximately 200 residents who live here are primarily Inupiaq and most come from families who have lived in the area for generations. White Mountain School serves around 55 students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

"There's still a lot of Native culture being practiced here," says Pratt. "A lot of subsistence hunting and fishing and gathering is still going on. And respect for elders is still a really strong part of the culture."

However, while elders were often invited to attend school programs or receive gifts made by students in the classroom, Pratt notes, "they weren't really invited to be a strong participant in the curriculum."

Pratt saw the calendar project as an opportunity to change that.

## **Reaching Out to Village Elders**

The process began with approaching the village's most senior elders and inviting them to participate in the calendar project. With Pratt's help, the students composed a letter to hand deliver to these elders, explaining their intent and asking the elders if they would be willing to share their time and wisdom with the children at a subsequent visit. The students also asked for permission to take a photo of each elder and to tape record each interview to ensure accuracy when they returned to the classroom to record the words of the elders on the calendar pages.

The letter included a list of potential interview questions—developed by the students during a period of time and with Pratt’s help—to be used as a guide:

- What do you remember your family teaching you that you feel was very important?
- What do you think is important for children to learn today?
- What are some of your fondest memories?
- Can you tell us about games you played as a child?
- What do you think is important for the people of our village to remember about your parents or grandparents?
- What do you want your grandchildren to remember about you?
- What is your favorite Native food and how do you prepare it?
- How did you travel when you were young and where did you go?
- What do you think is special about our village and the people who live here?
- What types of changes have you seen take place in our village during your lifetime?
- What is your favorite activity to do in or around the village?
- Can you tell us about an exciting or dangerous situation you’ve experienced out in the country?
- What is your happiest or saddest memory?
- What would you like to see happen in our village in the future?
- Can you share a story with us?

However, elders were told that they were free to discuss whatever they wanted. Or, if they preferred, they could use the time to teach the children how to do something, perhaps engage them in a Native tradition—as happened when Annie Ashenfelter taught the children to make akutaq.

Elders were also promised the chance to review their calendar pages prior to publication and ask for any changes they felt necessary.

Whenever students visited the elders, they took gifts—often homemade bread or pies, sometimes potholders or gloves—as a gesture of respect and thanks for the time the elders shared with them.

Though a couple of elders declined to participate, most were receptive—excited, even—to have the chance to share their time, stories, and wisdom with the children.

“It made me realize how much they *want* to do that,” says Pratt. “It really hit home for me when they started thanking us for letting them be a part of the project and showing their appreciation for the fact that we would come and visit and spend time with them when we felt that they were giving *us* a gift. I mean, it’s part of their culture for elders to be educators toward the young children, passing on traditions and knowledge. I think having a room full of young children really made them feel useful, or like they were able to participate in the students’ learning which is a traditional way of learning.”





When one elder preferred not to be tape recorded or have notes taken at his interview, the children employed another traditional mode of learning: the oral tradition. The students listened intently as Isaiah Piliiguq Oksoktaruk shared the stories of his life. Then they repeated these tales on their way back to school so that they could remember and accurately retell them, the way Native stories have been passed down through generations. Oksoktaruk's calendar page, recounting his adventures seal hunting and trapping—as well as his memories of being punished for speaking his Native language when he was a boy in school—shows that the children paid rapt attention when meeting with the elder.

During the course of the project, to enrich their study of Alaska Native culture and their understanding of their own heritage, students read a range of related literature. “Alaska has so many books about Native children and traditional stories. We tried to read one book every day as far as a culturally relevant Alaska book,” Pratt notes. Favorites included: *Arctic Hunter* by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith; *Dance on a Seal Skin* by Barbara Winslow and Terri Sloat; *Go Home, River* by James Magdanz; *This Place Is Cold* by Vicki Cobb and Barbara Lavallee; *The Eye of the Needle* by Teri Sloat and Betty Huffmon; *Aurora: A Tale of the Northern Lights* by Mindy Dwyer; *Eskimo Boy: Life in an Inupiaq Eskimo Village* by Russ Kendall; *The Girl Who Dreamed Only Geese and Other Tales of the Far North* told by Howard Norman; *Arctic Son* by Jean Craighead George; *Salmon Summer* by Bruce McMillan; *Nessa's Fish* by Nancy Luenn; *At the Mouth of the Luckiest River* by Arnold A. Griesse and Glo Coalson; and *Building an Igloo* by Ulli Steltzer; as well as the *Keepers of the Earth* series by Michael Caduto and Joseph Bruchac.

Because the project involved multiple visits to the elders to ask for their participation, to conduct interviews, and to get approvals on drafts and revised drafts of calendar pages, students created a checklist to keep track of what work had been done and what was still left to do. “They were a big part of the planning process,” says Pratt. “They took a lot of ownership in the project.”

## Addressing Standards and More

**When learning is integrated, standards across the curriculum are met in a way that makes sense to students.**

In the end, Pratt says, the project “addressed standards just up and down the list. It was incredible the amount of things the students learned, not only from the elders, but in their own maturity and growth and respecting their own culture and becoming more a part of the community. It became so much more than I had initially envisioned it to be. And the students, even now, still talk about some of the things the elders told them. They’ve retained that information surprisingly well.”

When the calendar was delivered, hot off the press, to homes throughout the village, everyone was excited: even those who’d been a bit tentative before. One elder, in particular, had reservations, but reluctantly agreed to participate, says Pratt. “And then, after the calendars were given out to everyone in the community and he saw the response to them, he was thrilled and ordered more so he could mail them off to family members that didn’t live here. He was really proud to be a part of it after he saw what it became.”

In a teacher resource manual Pratt wrote on how to involve elders in classroom projects (soon to be published and made available to Alaska educators through the University of Alaska Fairbanks), she says: “When learning is integrated, standards across the curriculum are met in a way that makes sense to students. Connections are made that teach students and teachers alike that learning does not have to be fragmented and compartmentalized. Children need to have the opportunity to see how all things are interrelated and the calendar project is a good way to cover a full spectrum of learning and involve the whole child while strengthening a sense of culture and community.”

Pratt summarizes: “When the project is finished it will serve as a useful tool for sharing information about the elders among the community and with others, a rich collection of oral history, proof of meeting learning standards, a means to honor the elders, and a sense of purpose for all involved.” Further, she says, “Allowing young children to take part in the process of documenting indigenous knowledge gives them the opportunity to develop their skills and options as professional researchers in their future especially for the documentation of their own people. It also allows both Alaska

Native children and elders to experience education in the traditional way of learning. Elders are given a strong sense of purpose in their traditional role, and students are able to learn much about their past, present, and future.”

That the calendar project has proven to be a meaningful and memorable vehicle for learning is evidenced by the fact that the children who participated in this project in 2000 are still moved by it today, some four years later. When one of the elders recently passed away, the children—now fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders—reminisced about their visits with Alfred Nutaginnan Apodruk and the stories he told them about his child-



hood—making skis from the slats of a wooden barrel, for example, or attending three-to four-day celebrations where people from neighboring villages gathered to share Native foods and compete in Eskimo dances (dances depicting animal characters and carrying spiritual significance).

“The students felt really lucky to have been able to spend that time with the elders,” observes Pratt.

This year, the same students were part of a group that worked together to write a Valentine’s Day poem for the elders, expressing their gratitude:

#### **HAPPY VALENTINE’S DAY**

We are grateful  
For your wisdom.

Your stories transport us  
To another time.  
Whenever we feel sad,  
Your stories heal our hearts.

The guidance you offer  
Is like a map.  
We use this map  
To find our way  
Through life.

Knowing you care  
For us  
Makes us feel  
As safe and warm  
As being inside  
On a rainy day.

The knowledge we have gained  
From listening to you,  
Helps us create harmony  
With the past and the future.

Love, the 4th, 5th, and 6th Grades  
White Mountain, AK  
February 2004

## Student Writing Samples

*Text from Isaiah Piliiguq Oksoktaruk's calendar page recounted by the students after listening to Oksoktaruk share his stories*

### **Isaiah "Piliiguq" Oksoktaruk**

10/10/1922

Children should go to school.

It is best that way.

Life is easier these days than before.

I've seen a lot of good times and bad times.

I was raised in White Mountain.

In the days when I went to school, we were punished for speaking our Native language.

They would hit us on the hands and make us stand in the corner for 45 minutes if we were caught. But when we got home we could speak our language all we wanted.

Some things are hard to talk about. Some things I don't want to think about.

I also have many good memories.

I've seen many changes.

We used to have to work very hard. These days there are machines that do most of the work. Going to camp was hard work. We pulled our boat up river with ropes. When it was too hard to keep going on one side of the river we would row across and try the other side.

I used to be a trapper to earn a living.

I had a dog team that took me around to all the traps.

When we got snow machines we could go out further and faster.

I hunted seals. This was dangerous sometimes. The ice is always moving. Once, the ice that I was on separated from the main ice. My dogs swam across the opening and then climbed up onto the main ice and pulled me and the sled across.

My wife Margaret and I had five boys and four girls, all raised in White Mountain.

I enjoy many things: all kinds of Native foods, visitors, speaking Inupiaq with my friend Maggie Olson from Golovin, singing and watching the sunlight circle around the sky and through my windows. I also enjoyed teaching the students at the school this year how to make ulus.

White Mountain is a good place to live. It's the best place to live.

### **Letter to elders inviting their participation in the calendar project**

November 7th, 2000

Dear Rosemary,

Hello! Our first and second grade class is putting together a very special project and we would like to invite you to be involved. We are making a 2001 White Mountain Elder's Calendar to be shared with our whole community.

For each month, we plan to include some "Words of Wisdom" from an Elder along with his or her picture. With your permission we would like to include you for the month of December.

If you would like to participate, we will come back to visit with you again this month. While we're together we would like to spend time talking to you about anything you'd like to share.

Also, with your permission, we'd like to use a tape recorder so we can listen to what was said again and type some things out for your calendar page.

Before anything is printed we will show you your page to see if you like it or if you want to change anything.

After the calendars are made, we would like to have one for each family in White Mountain.

We hope you will decide to share your words with us and be part of the 2001 White Mountain's Elder's Calendar.

*Quyanna,*

*John*

*Marlita*

*Ken Jr.*

*Shana*

*Esther*

*Tiffany*

*Vinny*

*Cheryl*

## **Project Outline**

- The teacher approached village leaders to get approval and guidance for the project.
- Students made a plan for the approach/design of the calendar.
- Students prepared an introductory letter, including sample interview questions, and brought gifts for village elders.
- Students visited elders to present gifts and the introductory letter asking for their participation in the project.
- Students returned to visit the elders and to document the interview and/or activity with photographs, tape recorders, and notes (with permission).
- Students returned to school to transcribe the documentation from notes, recording, and/or memory. They selected excerpts to appear in calendar pages.
- Students visited elders again to present drafts of calendar pages for approval.
- If changes were requested, students made revisions and, again, presented drafts to elders for approval.
- Students prepared the calendar for printing.
- The teacher secured funding from the village government to print calendars for the entire community.
- Finished calendars were presented to the community.

## **Contact**

Cheryl Pratt Silcox, Teacher  
White Mountain School  
PO Box 69  
White Mountain, Alaska 99784  
Phone: (907) 638-3041  
E-mail: [cpratt@wmo.bssd.org](mailto:cpratt@wmo.bssd.org)



## Suggested Student Reading

- Caduto, M.J., Bruchac, J. (Authors), Ka-Hon-Hes, & Wood, C. (Illustrators). (1988). *Keepers of the earth: Native American stories and environmental activities for children*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum.
- Cobb, V. (Author), & Lavalley, B. (Illustrator). (1989). *This place is cold*. New York, NY: Walker.
- Dwyer, M. (2000). *Aurora: A tale of the northern lights*. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Northwest Books.
- George, J.C. (Author), & Minor, W. (Illustrator). (1997). *Arctic son*. New York, NY: Hyperion Books for Children.
- Griese, A.A. (Author), & Coalson, G. (Illustrator). (1973). *At the mouth of the luckiest river*. New York, NY: Ty Crowell.
- Hoyt-Goldsmith, D. (Author), & Migdale, L. (Photographer). (1992). *Arctic hunter*. New York, NY: Holiday House.
- Kendall, R. (1992). *Eskimo boy: Life in an Inupiaq Eskimo village*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Luenn, N. (Author), & Waldman, N. (Illustrator). (1990). *Nessa's fish*. New York, NY: Atheneum.
- Magdanz, J. (Author), & Widom, D. (Illustrator). (1996). *Go home, river*. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Northwest Books.
- McMillan, B. (1998). *Salmon summer*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.
- Norman, H. (Author), Dillon, L., & Dillon, D. (Illustrators). (1997). *The girl who dreamed only geese and other tales of the Far North*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace.
- Sloat, T., & Huffmon, B. (2001). *The eye of the needle*. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Northwest Books.
- Steltzer, U. (1995). *Building an igloo*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.
- Winslow, B., & Sloat, T. (1995). *Dance on a sealskin*. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Northwest Books.

# PRACTITIONER EXAMPLES FROM INTERMEDIATE GRADES

## **“Where I’m From”**

Poetry That Shares Our Personal Worlds

- “I Am Yup’ik”: Poems From Kwethluk Village School
- Opening the Door to Parents: Poems From Blue Creek Sixth-Graders
- A Multicultural Classroom: Poems From Atkinson Elementary

## **The Family Stories Book**

Investigating the Stories Told in Students’ Families Leads to a Book Full of Treasures

## **The Family Heritage Museum**

Students Investigate Their Heritage and Honor Their Family Hero

## **Great-Grandma’s Footsteps**

Seeking Family Roots Inspires Students To Study Countries Around the World

## **Juggling With Words**

Students Write Biographies About Local Senior Citizens

## **Strawberry Fields Forever**

ESL Students Investigate the Crop That Sustains Their Community and Learn Academic and Life Skills in the Process

## **A Talking Book**

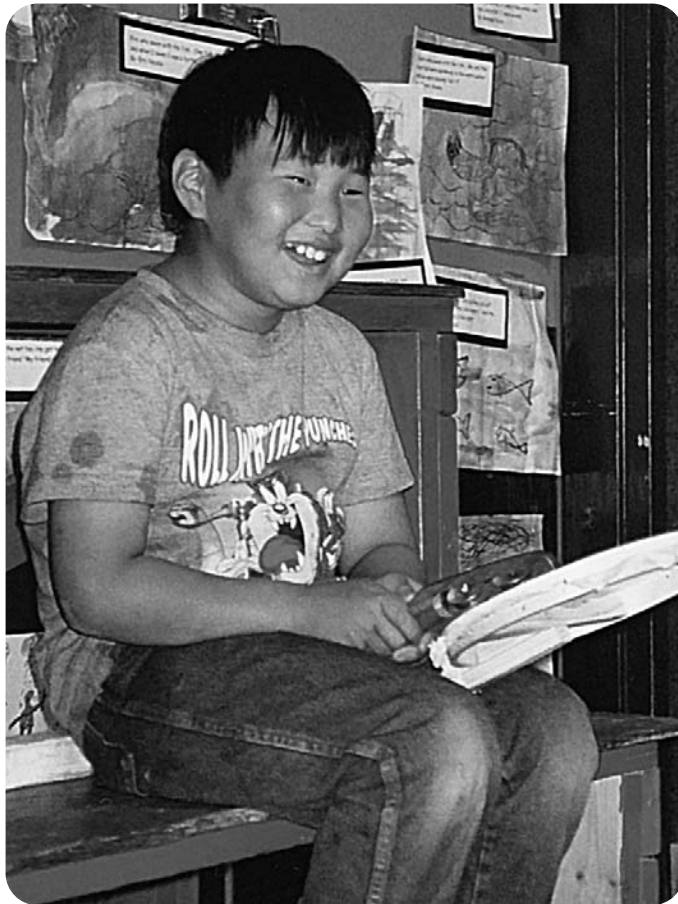
Using Technology, Students Share Their Culture Statewide



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# “WHERE I’M FROM”

## Poetry That Shares Our Personal Worlds



**G**eorge Ella Lyon’s poem titled, “Where I’m From,” evokes the telling details of the author’s life—memories, objects, and experiences that illustrate her background and what has shaped her. The repetition of the phrase “I am from” gives the poem rhythm and momentum. Read it a few times and you might find yourself evoking long-forgotten childhood images and developing your own poem as you drive down the highway or scrub in the shower.

Many teachers have been inspired to teach their students how to write poems patterned after Lyon’s. The activity allows children to reflect upon, write, and share their personal worlds in the classroom. As they conjure up the details of their lives, many students feel like a “real” writer for the first time. Five such teachers are described here, from three different environments—a village in Southwest Alaska; a community on the outskirts of Billings, Montana; and an urban neighborhood in Portland, Oregon.

## “I Am Yup’ik”: Poems From Kwethluk Village School

“We were looking for something a little bit more personal for the kids,” explained Kwethluk Village School teacher Beverly Chmielarczyk, speaking about the conceptualization that went into the summer school program. She and her colleagues realized that the students who were going to be in summer school, in grades 3–7, were already feeling rather disheartened by school. Teacher Kathleen McClurg agreed, “I wanted summer school to be a time when kids could celebrate who they are, and get back to believing in the joy of learning.”

Kwethluk School is located in a Yup’ik village of 760 residents and lies near the junction of the Kwethluk and Kuskokwim Rivers in the delta region of Western Alaska. Accessible only by plane, snow machine, or boat, the village is still largely governed by a subsistence lifestyle. The small school does not run a summer school every year—school funds are lacking and villagers are busy at fish camps—but this year’s program provided a unique opportunity for the teachers to try something different and make the program their own.

With the goal of creating a sense of belonging for students, they worked with Yup’ik teacher Dorothy Epchook to plan a program that built on students’ Yup’ik tradition, values, and knowledge. As they planned, they came across Linda Christensen’s book, *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*, and read about a process for teaching students to write a poem patterned after George Ella Lyon’s poem titled “Where I’m From.” They were excited about its potential to, in Christensen’s words, “invite the stories and voices of ... students into the classroom,” making them “feel significant and cared about.”

### Creating the Poem

Chmielarczyk and McClurg introduced the project to students in their respective classrooms by reading aloud George Ella Lyon’s poem and several poems modeled after it written by Christensen’s high school students. They copied these poems onto large sheets of paper posted so that they were visible to everyone in the class.

Next they spent a week brainstorming around some of the categories found in the poems. In their notebooks, students were asked to write down lists of “items found in your home, items found in your yard, sayings that you and your family use, celebrations that you go to, favorite foods, people important to you, and places you like to visit.” After brainstorming with the class, students were eager to form long lists on their own for each category. Students were encouraged to use both Yup’ik and English, especially because some words lack good translations between the two languages.

Sharing the lists became a source of joy in the classroom. “Especially the list of sayings,” notes McClurg. “It was hilarious to hear what they or their parents say at home. We were all cracking up with some of the things that they say.”

When it was time for students to write their poems, some were still struggling with what the poems were supposed to sound like. So Chmielarczyk and McClurg guided them through a skeleton poem structure, in which each stanza was devoted to one or two of the categories they had brainstormed lists around. For example:

I am from (names of three celebrations: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_),  
(names of four foods: \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_),  
(a celebration: \_\_\_\_\_) is where I’m from.

As they conjure up the details of their lives, many students feel like a “real” writer for the first time.



Students chose which words they wanted to put into each stanza. Given that most of the students were emerging or beginning-level writers and readers, the teachers felt that the template was the most effective way to get students’ language into print.

Later they made revisions to enhance the sound of the phrases and overall poem. But the teachers were careful about what they asked students to modify, realizing that sometimes they needed to recognize the students’ work and choices as being uniquely theirs.

The teachers recalled stories of students who had a hard time at the beginning of summer school, laying their heads down on their desks, or having emotional outbursts. But, once given some space and time to “bust out,” in Chmielarczyk’s words, they produced beautiful, touching poems. The visions created by “my cousin Kenny sharing icicles,” the smells conjured by “pizza rolls and moose soup,” and the laughter produced from “I am from my mom and dad saying ‘get off the phone!’” have been relished by students, families, and teachers. Chmielarczyk, who is not from Alaska but has taught at the school for eight years, comments, “When I leave here, I will leave with a packet of these poems because they’re some of the most beautiful writing that I’ve gotten from kids.”

Each poem closed with a common stanza which began, “I am Yup’ik.” Written by the teachers, it tied in with the theme of summer school, and was based on a poem about elders that students recited every afternoon titled “Powerful Words Never Die.”

Chmielarczyk explained, “We wanted them to be able to come right out and say, ‘I am Yup’ik and this is what that means.’”

### **“They Really Put Their Hearts Into It”**

Because of the focus on their Yup’ik culture, students became motivated to attend summer school. Some students stayed at fish camp every night, outside the village, and would make sure that their fathers gave them a ride back to the school early each



morning. McClurg comments, "You really saw kids pull together and support and encourage one another. ... It was such a different way of teaching and a different way of being with the kids."

Students made paper drums and had handwritten Yup'ik values on one side of the drums. In order to display the finished poems, Chmielarczyk and McClurg typed the poems and pasted them onto the other side of the paper drums, which were then laminated. These drums, along with several other projects and accomplishments from the summer, were displayed in the school gym for a last-day-of-school community feast. The poems were well-received. "When people came to the feast, it was just amazing to step back and observe," says McClurg. "Grandchildren holding a poem up and reading it to their grandmother, and seeing grandmothers wipe tears or laugh hysterically. Other people were running across the gym, grabbing someone and dragging them over, like 'you've got to see this.'"

Months later, the teachers have noticed that the drums are still hanging in houses, and several parents have commented on how much they treasure them. McClurg comments, "It was something that the kids could be proud of, but also that their family could acknowledge. They could see in the words and the language how much they mattered to their child, or what their home life means to their child. Just to look at their world through their child's eyes. Sometimes you don't always verbalize those things. That was something I thought was really extraordinary about the whole poem."

"They really put their hearts into it," says Chmielarczyk, reviewing the finished product. "There were some struggles, but in the end, I think they realized what their hard work meant. I feel like they really connected with the experience." It has been an experience that has stayed with the students through the year, in some cases leading to complete turn-arounds in students' attitudes and behavior, and comments from teachers who have noticed a difference in the students who participated in summer school. "It was very successful," says Yup'ik teacher Dorothy Epchook. "It really helped bring out the students' abilities. They did an outstanding job and I was proud of them. And they took pride in it. In the end, they realized what they could achieve with a little push."



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## Student Writing Samples

### **I Am** by Solomon Olick

I am from games, buckets,  
and our grass cutters  
Our maqivik and grass,  
a shed and busted sleds,  
a bed to sleep in is where I'm from.

I am from "Feed the dogs."  
and "Pack water!"  
From my Mom  
saying "Make a hole in the ground for stink heads."

I am from 4th of July, Slaviq,  
and uqiquq  
Egg rolls and pizza,  
tongue soup and pizza roll,  
Mask contest is where I'm from.

I am from my Mom's black duck cooking,  
Apa Jimmy's beaver soup,  
Nannie's walking,  
and my Dad's dogs.

I am from swimming at fish camp  
and ride around at Kwethluk Paingani.  
Feeding the dogs at our dog yard  
and hunting with my Dad and Senka at Three Step  
is where I'm from.

I am Yup'ik.  
I am from a huge family tree.  
I am from the people before me.  
I am from the powerful words of our elders.  
That's where I'm from.

### **I Am** by Maria Fisher

I am from rocking chairs, my sister's wedding roses,  
and junk food  
bikes and clotheslines,  
plants and a sled,  
drinking cups is where I'm from.

I am from "Good Bye." and "Can I follow?"  
and "Bless you." and "Can I visit?"  
From my Mom  
saying "Go to bed." and "It's time for school."

I am from Halloween, feasts,  
and 4th of July  
pizza and burritos,  
pizza rolls and moose soup,  
birthday parties is where I'm from.

I am from my Grandma Sophie's delicious food,  
Alexandra's baby,  
my Mom's laughing,  
and my Dad's boat riding.

I am from singing at Church  
and shopping at Bethel.  
Playing with her at Mary's house  
and buying stuff at Kwethluk Native Store  
is where I'm from.

I am Yup'ik.  
I am from a huge family tree.  
I am from the people before me.  
I am from the powerful words of our elders.  
That's where I'm from.

**I Am** by Adrian Sergie

I am from old guns, angel frames,  
and ornaments,  
axes and trees.  
Bicycles and water barrels,  
icons is where I'm from.

I am from "Natmun?"  
and "What's up?"  
From my Uncle Punky  
saying "Go play out."

I am from Fourth of July, Slaaviq,  
and New Years,  
bacon cheeseburgers and burritos,  
moose soup and akutaq.  
Christmas is where I'm from.

I am from my cousin Kenny sharing icycles,  
Ap'a Phillip's smile,  
cousin Tanya's cooking,  
and Grandma Mary's kindness.

I am from picnicking at Kwilaiq  
and cutting grass at fish camp.  
Swimming at Kukuuyaq's fish camp  
and buying candy at the Native Store  
is where I'm from.

I am Yup'ik.  
I am from a huge family tree.  
I am from the people before me.  
I am from the powerful words of our elders.  
That's where I'm from.

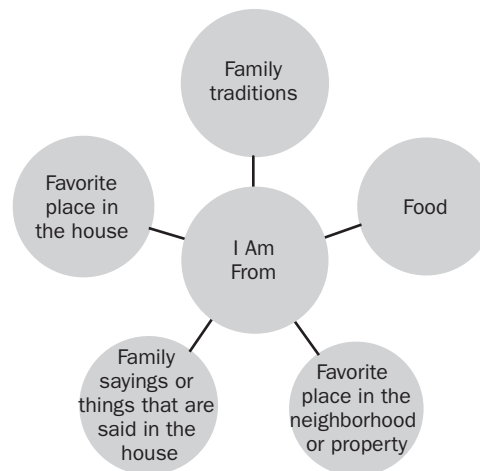
## Opening the Door to Parents: Poems From Blue Creek Sixth-Graders

**B**lue Creek is a small, independent school district located on the outskirts of Billings, Montana. Its school is supported by a small, tight-knit community, and serves students in kindergarten through sixth grade. Teacher Jennifer Tolton was new to the school when she introduced the “I Am From” writing project to her students in the fall of the year. She told them that it would be a way for everyone to introduce themselves to each other.

Tolton had recently written her own “I Am From” poem and had found it to be a cathartic experience after her mother’s death. She showed her poem to her students. “They really took a hold of and were interested in it,” she says.

They like hearing what I write as much as they like hearing what the other kids write. I think it’s interesting; it’s something that you hear in workshops, that you need to do the writing assignments that you’ve assigned with your kids. I had done that before, but, I really made sure that I wrote along with them and shared myself with them, too. I think that sort of modeling is important, not just for them learning how to write but also for gaining some sort of trust—we’re all learning how to do stuff all the time.

The class discussed the different things that Tolton had described in her poem. They built a web that identified the different categories that these items and events fit into: family traditions, food, family sayings, favorite place at home, and favorite place in the neighborhood or property. Then, students brainstormed around the topics in the web and shared their own ideas of what they could include in their poems.



Students were quickly able to name different things that fit into these categories, but thinking deeply about themselves didn’t come naturally to all students. When lines like “I am from X-box and video games” started popping up, Tolton encouraged kids to dig a little deeper. She explains:

I talked to them about things they did that were more personal and maybe not done by every other child in the world. It happens somewhat at every age, but in sixth grade they’re all into impressing one another. I tried to help them think about what’s truly them. You have to just keep yakking with them and encourage them to write what they think instead of what they think is clever.





Students worked on their poems during four writing periods, with Tolton helping kids fine-tune as needed. They typed them up and saved them in their own computer files. They experimented with the layout and font of their poems to make a nice presentation. The poems were then printed out and sent home to families. Tolton had originally planned on posting them in the classroom, but a few of the kids were uncomfortable with the idea. “They didn’t really want to advertise where they were from,” says Tolton.

One class period was spent with the students taking turns reading their poems to the whole class. “Lots of them were very inter-

ested in presenting them. The rest of the class very much enjoyed listening to the other kids present theirs. It was fun,” says Tolton.

### **A Relaxed Parent-Teacher Conference**

Being a new teacher in a school where most children spend their entire elementary careers, Tolton knew that it would take some time for parents to feel comfortable with her. As fall parent-teacher conferences approached, she thought the poems would be a nice thing to include in the portfolio of work she was preparing to share with parents.

It was really a good way to open discussion at parent-teacher conferences because it showed a side of the kids that the parents weren’t really aware of, things that were important to them. One set of parents was particularly funny, because their daughter—very smart, very delightful, they’re really wonderful parents and they do all these educational trips with their children—they read their child’s “I am from” poem and what was important to Kate was rolling down the hill in her backyard with her friends and stuff like that. And her mother says, “Well, you know there’s no mention of the trip to the Smithsonian this summer!” It was just so funny because I think that we all get so wrapped up with our lives and our jobs you don’t really have a chance to sit down and know what your kids are glomming onto.

The poems were well-received at the conferences. Later, Tolton learned that one household had even framed a copy of their child’s poem and given it to their grandparents as a Christmas gift. Speaking about the effect that sharing this type of work had on her relationships with parents, Tolton says, “I think it made a huge amount of difference. Plus, it made conversation with the parents really relaxed, because we were going over these funny things that the kids were interested in that surprised them.”

Each poem formed the basis of the student’s poetry portfolio—where Tolton kept selections of each child’s poetry written off and on throughout the year. Reflecting on the project in the spring, Tolton comments:

I think if I were to do it again I would be more careful in language placement and that sort of thing. Mostly, I was encouraging them to try to think harder

about their own feelings and their own lives and be more introspective. To really think about what they were writing and not just throw something together for an assignment.

Indeed, this writing project was more than just another assignment, as students and parents remembered and reread their poems throughout the year. Says Tolton:

So many things that you do that you work hard on don't go over very well or are immediately forgotten, but this is one that they have talked about off and on all year. It made a real lasting impression.

## Student Writing Samples

### **I Am From** by Daniel Becker

I am from my favorite football, my bed,  
And my seat at the table.  
My desk, my cat, and my brother  
is where I'm from.

I am from "another bad crop,"  
"take out the trash,"  
And "watch the muzzle of your gun."

I am from Uncle Doug's oyster stew, getting  
up at five on Christmas, parties at my grandparents  
is where I'm from.

I am from going hunting and getting  
deer with Dad, fishing trips, and having  
playful arguments with Mom.

I am from turnip 'n' tater 'n' beetroot deeper  
'n' ever pie, Mom's ribs and mashed potatoes,  
Dad's steak is where I'm from.

I am from mystery books, science fiction novels,  
and getting lost in a good book. Brian Jacques,  
Tom Clancy, and J.R.R. Tolkein.  
*The Hunt for Red October, The Hobbit,*  
And *The Legend of Luke*

### **I Am From** by Kit Parker

I am from tumbleweeds in the pastures  
Pets running around freely.  
Tall backyard pine trees is where I'm from

I am from "Close, but no cigar."  
And, "you're burning daylight!"  
Mom saying, "Did you feed the dogs yet?"

I am from days at the lake  
Walking with Mom in the park  
Playing with Kenna when we were little is where I'm from

I am from Halloween with my cousins in little bunny suits  
Hot summers with my grandparents  
And thanksgivings dinner with the whole Parker family relatives

I am from Dad's mango smoothies  
Macaroni and cheese with hotdogs  
And nightly family dinners is where I'm from

I am from block parties and lemonade stands  
Running through the sprinklers in bathing suits  
and racing neighbors on bikes and scooters

**I Am From** by Kai Yamamoto

I am from  
squeaky shoes on the basketball court,  
brown in my grandma's house,  
the scary feeling in the hills,  
people in robes at the cabin  
is where I'm from

I am from  
keylime pie so sour it makes you think  
your tastbuds will burst,  
mouth watering cherry cheesecake,  
crispy potstickers and sticky musubie

I am from  
voices of laughter from next door,  
helicopter leaves, and  
the sound of the lawnmower  
is where I'm from

I am from  
Mike Ching with lots of girl friends, and  
Aunty Melba, tall and skinny

I am from  
my blanket with holes in every spot,  
the piano with notes always being pounded,  
the smell of dogs in the laundry room  
is where I'm from

I am from  
loud shots of fireworks,  
the smell of burnt cinnamon rolls, and  
brightly colored eggs.

I am from  
people somewhere all the time the sound of the garage door  
my little puppy growling  
is where I'm from

## A Multicultural Classroom: Poems From Atkinson Elementary

Teacher Stephanie Windham put her own unique spin on the “I am from” poem idea. As a fifth-grade teacher at Atkinson Elementary school in Southeast Portland, Oregon, she has had students from many diverse backgrounds come through her classroom—including many students who are immigrants or whose parents are immigrants from Latin America, the former Soviet Union, or countries such as Vietnam, China, and Pakistan. In order to promote interaction among these children, she works to provide opportunities in the curriculum to allow them to share their experiences with each other.

Windham read about the “I am from” poem in Linda Christensen’s book. To introduce the idea to her students, she decided to have them write a class poem. Seated in their “community circle,” each child verbally shared something about where they were from. As one student explains, the exercise wasn’t easy:

We told a part of our life and Ms. Windham would say, “how do you feel about it?” And, I think that was the hardest part, because sometimes you wouldn’t know how you felt about things until you wrote them down.

With students’ appetites whetted, many were eager to go back to their desks and start writing their own poems.

Windham worked the poem into an existing project that she spent several weeks on every year—collecting and writing down family stories. Using handcraft techniques for bookbinding, students each created their own book, which contained an anthology of the class’ finished stories. She decided to give kids the option of choosing whether they wanted to take their family story or their “I am from” poem through the lengthy revision and editing process to be published in this homemade book. She explains:

I said, you know, I think that some of the kids who are really struggling with the writing process will be able to do this. Although I think that the poem writing is harder, the kids are under the impression that because it’s smaller they can do it. So, it was kind of a psych just to make them feel like they were part of the process. And it worked out OK. I think that some kids chose to do the poem thinking it’s shorter and I think they would have written better stories. But I wasn’t willing to fight with them over it. I let them choose.



Students read their poems aloud to the rest of the class several times. Windham uses “read-alouds” for several purposes: They allow students to practice their public speaking skills; receive peer ideas and feedback; and share a piece of their home life. Many students commented that they learned a lot about their own culture, as well as the culture of their classmates, by listening to these poems. This is precisely one of Windham’s aims—that through the sharing of these details, students’ perspectives are widened, and they become, in her words, “fuller people.”

## Student Writing Samples

### **Spicy Noodles** *by Andy*

I'm from a family of four,  
mom, dad, sister and me.  
They help me reach my goals,  
bringing me to school to learn,  
raising me to be smart.

I'm from a pear tree  
near my house  
ready to eat in the summer  
they're sweet and juicy  
sell for a high price in stores.

I'm from my number one winning bike  
it's as blue as the sky.  
It's been through lots of races.  
It goes as fast as a mad wolf.

I'm from my shiny silver car,  
it is as shiny as diamonds.  
It's as fast as a cheetah.

I'm from a big bowl of spicy noodles  
with dry chiles and peppers  
every bite I eat  
feels like eating fire.

### **Llamas to Alpacas** *by Jose*

I am from llamas to alpacas  
as soft as can be.  
When I touch them  
I have a warm feeling.  
I am also from skateboards and soccer  
mostly playing mid field  
kicking the ball ... GOAL!

I am from bikes and brothers,  
riding my bike all the way to  
Portland State University.

I am from video games,  
dogs and my other pets,  
chickens and birds.

I am from rice and beans, and other  
salvadorian food, mmm good.

I am from my family  
gathering for Thanksgiving dinner,  
ready to eat the good food,  
smashed potatoes, turkey gravy and bisquits.



I am from getting up each school day  
ready to go to school.  
School is where I’m from.

I am from getting in trouble at school, teachers  
saying stop chating  
also asking for my homework.

### **From Pine Trees** *by Martin*

I am from pine trees in my neighborhood.  
Take a deep breath  
They smell like my own private forest.

I am from my Dad’s sayings.  
His words are like commands  
from an officer in the army  
“clean your room”.

I am from lefsa,  
which taste like sweet candy  
well I eat it with my family  
on Christmas morning.

I am from church.  
Hearing the pastor preach  
is like hearing words  
of wisdom spoken to you.

I am from family get-togethers.  
Hearing my family talk  
sounds like  
they haven’t talked in years.

## **Project Outline**

- Teachers read aloud a model poem—either the poem by George Ella Lyon or one of their own.
- Students discuss the poem, noticing the different details written about in the poem. They brainstorm their own lists around these subjects. Through the sharing of lists, additional memories are recalled. Students also examine the use of the “I am from” refrain.
- Students draft their poems using the phrase “I am from,” and revise with varying levels of support. The writing may present opportunities to discuss the use of descriptive details, sensory images, or other features of poetry.
- The poems are published or posted and shared with other students, parents, and possibly the community.

## Contacts

Jennifer Tolton and Stephanie Windham have both changed schools:

Beverly Chmielarczyk, Teacher  
Kwethluk Community School  
Kwethluk, Alaska 99621  
Phone: (907) 757-6014

Jennifer Tolton, Teacher  
Canyon Creek School  
3139 Duck Creek Road  
Billings, Montana 59101  
E-mail: jftolton@hotmail.com

Stephanie Windham, Teacher  
Ball Elementary School  
4221 North Willis Boulevard  
Portland, Oregon 97203  
E-mail: swindham@pps.k12.or.us

## Suggested Student Reading

Aliki. (1998). *Marianthe's story: Painted words and spoken memories*. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.

Bedard, M. (Author), & McCully, E.A. (Illustrator). (1997). *The divide*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Bunting, E. (Author), & Shed, G. (Illustrator). (1995). *Dandelions*. New York, NY: Voyager Books.

Christensen, L. (2000). *Reading, writing, and rising up: Teaching about social justice and the power of the written word*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.

Curtis, C.P. (1999). *Bud, not Buddy*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

Hopkinson, D. (Author), & Ransome, J. (Illustrator). (1993). *Sweet Clara and the freedom quilt*. New York, NY: Dragonfly Books.

Lester, J. (Author), & Brown, R. (Illustrator). (1998). *From slave ship to freedom road*. New York, NY: Puffin.

Lyon, G.E. (1999). *Where I'm from: Where poems come from*. Spring, TX: Absey.

Myers, W.D. (1993). *Brown angels: An album in pictures and verse*. New York, NY: HarperTrophy.

Rylant, C. (Author), & Moser, B. (Illustrator). (1991). *Appalachia: The voices of sleeping birds*. New York, NY: Voyager Books.

Warren, A. (2001). *We rode the orphan trains*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

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# THE FAMILY STORIES BOOK

## Investigating the Stories Told in Students' Families Leads to a Book Full of Treasures



Stephanie Windham's class at Atkinson Elementary School in Southeast Portland, Oregon, has much to be proud of as they near the end of their Family Stories Book project. This year, the project involved her fifth-graders in writing a family story based on the stories told by their own families, as well as a poem about "Where I Am From," choosing one piece to take through the revision and publishing process. (see pp. 117–120 for more on Windham's poetry unit).

The project is rigorous. All the writing assignments during the year lead up to it. It demands more than most students have ever been asked to produce, says Windham. One student described her experience:

To me, writing is unlike anything else. It gives you a way to express your thoughts, feelings, and concerns. In this project, we had the opportunity to combine our writing skills with the information we learned about our families. ... When we first started, I felt like I had nothing to work with, and sometimes I even felt like giving up on the story. But I decided to continue because I wanted to accomplish as much as I could in my last year at Atkinson. This book took six weeks to make, and a frustrating six weeks it was. Rewriting and revising the same story over and over again made the story seem dull and boring. When we had the finished product, we realized that all the time and effort was worth it.

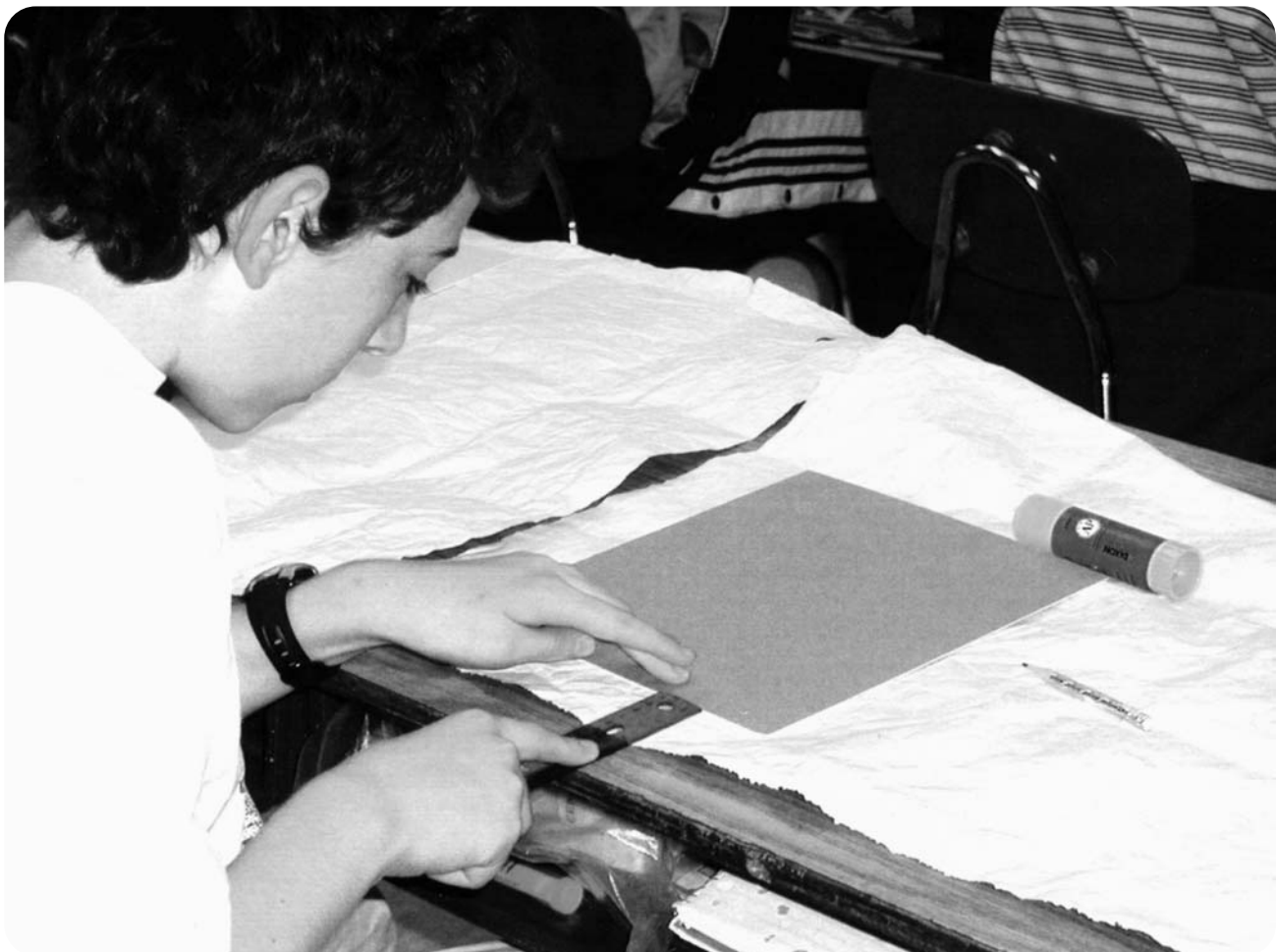
While improving their writing skills and learning about the genre of story writing, the students develop appreciation for their own lives. Windham explains that one of her

goals is to “help students see their families as a source of pride and comfort.” The students come from all over the globe, including Latin America, the former Soviet Union, and countries such as China, Vietnam, and Pakistan. By writing their own stories and hearing their classmates’ stories, students say that they gain a global perspective as well as learn more about their own families’ histories and cultures.

### **Building Classroom Community Through Stories**

Initially Windham’s goal was to find a way to get the students to interact with each other. She used to do an activity where students interviewed each other about the candy from their country of origin. One year, she had seven Vietnamese kids in her class, so they walked to a Vietnamese grocery store and the kids showed the class around and explained their candy to everyone. Windham says, “It was just beautiful, after that they were just more of a community—they saw this thing that they shared. I said to myself, I need more of these kinds of things to help them appreciate that they are in a class full of wonderful kids that have a lot to contribute to their views of the world.”

Making connections to geography and art, she later asked students to create maps showing where their family grew up and came from. Students were also asked to find an artifact at home that represented some aspect of their family and bring it to class and describe it. Oftentimes these artifacts were pieces of folk art—a quilt, a piece of jewelry, a picture. These activities led her to the idea for the Family Stories Book.



## Examining the Genre of Family Stories

While work on the Family Stories Book may not start until the spring, the anticipation and preparation begin in the first month of school. To immerse students in the genre, Windham shares copies of class books from the past few years, reading family stories written by former students. During the year, she also reads stories from the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series and other collections of short stories.

Students also look at stories from different cultures. In one lesson, Windham described the early difficulties Ji-li Jiang, the author of *Red Scarf Girl*, had in getting American editors to publish her books because they didn't understand the stories Jiang told. To illustrate this point, Windham retold an old Chinese story, familiar to many of the students, in which a father asks the sixth of his seven sons to choose one pear from a basket of seven. After deliberating for a long time, the son chooses the smallest pear. His father responds, "You are a good son and a good brother," and the story ends.

Windham questions the class, "The American editor said, 'So what?' What happened in the story?" The students think. "Is it an important story? Does it serve a purpose?" asks Windham.

Several students raise their hands. Windham calls on a girl who responds that the moral is to be nice to your siblings.

Windham responds that stories in some countries are told to help children get along in their families and in life, not necessarily to entertain. She asks students, "What was the American editor looking for?"

Students respond: action, adventure, and so on. Windham states that she is looking for a specific word, and writes it on an overhead: conflict. She asks students what that means, and several reply that it is a problem in the story that needs resolution. Windham asks, "Wasn't there a problem in the story?" She explains that the conflict is usually between two people or characters, but that this conflict was within the character, a concept that was difficult for the American editor to understand.

Students look at where they are getting their family stories. They observe their family's storytelling habits and think about the family stories they have heard over the years, taking notes on who in their family tells stories, who the stories are about, where the stories take place, and what happens in the stories. Stated one student:

I had to ask a lot of questions of my parents and I was surprised about how much I didn't know. It was really interesting because I didn't know that when my grandma talks, when my great-grandma talks, I didn't realize that saying "I used to do that when I was your age" was considered a story. It was really interesting.

While Windham's intent was to focus her students' attention on the positive and uplifting aspects of their family histories, she noticed that the students frequently concentrated on themes emphasizing hard times, about a family member who was killed, car accidents, or fights. While she recognizes these stories, she encourages students to think about how everyday experiences can be worth writing about. She reads stories describing memories from her own childhood, rich in emotion and sensory detail. She has seen how this technique helps students see strengths in their families:

**Windham encourages students to think about how everyday experiences can be worth writing about.**



My students can relate to these stories on so many levels: a child's point of view, loneliness, "when I'm big," treats, grandparents, sharing. I can see it in their faces and the discussion afterward is always full of positive statements about similar experiences in their own families.

## Writing and Revising

During writing time in the classroom, Windham and her students are able to learn from the school's resident professional writer, Chris Weber. Weber spends 45 minutes three to four times a week for most of the year helping students develop their writing skills. During the book project, he visits daily. In one lesson, Windham and Weber demonstrate interviewing techniques for the students. They discuss the difference between closed- and open-ended questions and effective note taking. Some students are encouraged to use tape recorders during the interview. Students are also encouraged to return to the interviewee after the initial interview to ask more detailed questions. When they've had sufficient preparation, students write a letter to a relative asking for specific interview times and form a list of questions.

Once the children have the raw material for their stories, they make outlines and write first drafts. Students are asked to write their family member's story in the first person. Windham has several reasons for this. Responding to areas where she sees students struggle, she feels that pushing students to use first person helps them take an idea or framework of a story and make it into a more complete narrative. She explains that this happens by filling in the details, giving the reader a reason to employ his/her senses, and developing a language that uses metaphor and simile. She further explains:

Writing and telling a story in first person helps students experience the story, instead of standing back watching it happen. We talk about the difference between being a participant or an observer—what details does the participant see that are sometimes missed by the observer. Through the act of "being there" students better understand the need for details and sensory descriptions. By becoming their grandmother or great uncle the student travels back in time, to another place, even another country. Then what they see must be conveyed to the reader.

There are several layers of revision that occur, each dependent on peer teamwork. Early in the year, Windham teaches students how to share their work, provide positive feedback, and maintain an atmosphere of trust. Laughing at or belittling someone is forbidden. Students work together to brainstorm ideas for stories and also participate in "group editing," where students trade papers more than once, so the editing does not fall to just a few students. They are encouraged to listen to the sound of the language as they read their pieces aloud. They revise, make presentations to the class for more peer editing, and revise again based on the comments of the class.

One read-aloud session focused on helping students write good titles for their stories. Windham and Weber shared examples of how some professional authors choose titles for their work based on key ideas or a specific word or phrase in the story. Each student stood at the front of the class and read their story. They were given directions to speak clearly and loudly, with a few students starting over a few times until they were more articulate. When a student finished, the class took a minute to jot down a few ideas for a title for the piece on strips of paper. Then they volunteered these titles aloud. Students glowed as they listened to the suggestions of their peers. At the end

of the session, the strips of paper were passed to the author of each story, and each student had about 30 ideas from which to develop a title.

As students make revisions, they are taught techniques for using all five senses in their writing, creating similes and metaphors, and crafting descriptive language. Windham also encourages them to dig deeper. “The challenge isn’t simply to write about the idea, but to dig down and write about feelings connected to it,” reminds Fletcher (2000, p. 18). As one student stated:

We told a part of our life and Ms. Windham would say, “How do you feel about it?” And, I think that was the hardest part, because sometimes you wouldn’t know how you felt about things until you wrote them down.

Some students revise their story four to six times. One student explains:

You hurt your hand because it’s writing and because when you get so into it, you like it more, more, and more. Like you just buy a new video game and you’re trying to learn how to play it and then you get really good at it. You get into it.

Windham does the next level of editing. She uses the categories established by the Oregon Statewide Writing Assessment guidelines to assess her students’ writing: ideas and content, organization, sentence fluency, conventions, voice, and word choice. Because the stories will be published, students need to pay attention to punctuation and spelling—which can be a special challenge for her English language learners. Windham has found that focusing on subject matter, on themes that excite her students’ imaginations and generate enthusiasm, circumvents the roadblocks caused by dread of writing and confusion over seemingly nonsense rules of grammar.

## Publishing and Celebrating

When the stories are completed, Windham assists students in publishing their stories into books using Chinese handcraft techniques for bookbinding. Students make the paper by hand. Then they use their rulers to measure the paper and apply it to two pieces of mat board for the front and back covers. They create a fly sheet and bind the book together with string. In the end, the student has his or her own book, an anthology of the class’ work, with each page containing a different story. In years when time and resources permit, students’ writings appear in two languages. When they take their book home at the end of the year, they also take home all of their rough drafts, providing evidence of the long writing process.

In all, the project is completed in about six weeks, working daily for 60 to 90 minutes. To succeed with a project of this scope and with class sizes ranging



from 25 to 32, it helps to have lots of support. Windham is fortunate to work in a school where the staff sees the value in this kind of assignment. One of her former principals, John Withers, was instrumental in helping her to get started. “He was always so supportive and would come to our classroom during our Family Stories Book project and tell the kids about his experiences visiting and living in different parts of the world. He saw himself as a member of the world community,” says Windham. Parents occasionally volunteer to help with typing stories, and Windham recruits her own family members to help with the many rounds of editing.

It is a powerful feeling to produce a work of art that creates a lasting impression not just for the students, but also for their families. Students’ families over the years have been extremely enthusiastic about the project. The project creates an element of excitement among family members. When Windham gets siblings of prior years’ pupils in her class, one of the first questions parents will ask is whether students are going to create the Family Stories Book again this year. The stories, often about a parent, grandparent, aunt, or uncle, become family treasures. Family members, especially those unfamiliar with U.S. schools, gain confidence and a better understanding of the education their child is getting. As an example, one father of a Russian student, in his struggling English, made a point to contact Windham after the project in order to tell her, “It is good you teach this, having children come to ask their parents questions. You are teaching the right things.”

The students are proud to have a finished product they have worked on for so long. They are excited about the information they have learned about their families and eager to share it with their peers. Windham says, “It may be a lot of work, but the kids really do treasure it. It’s one of those things where you spend the entire year trying to get the kids to remember all kinds of things like fractions—you cannot pick and choose what they will remember. But the [Family Stories Book] project is always remembered. It’s always something that the kids come back and say something to me about. It’s well worth all the work.”



On the last day of school, after desks and lockers are cleared out, Windham and her students have a pajama party with snacks and sleeping bags. One last time, they read to each other their stories and poems, this time without feedback or comments, explains Windham, "... it's just what it is."

## Student Writing Samples

### **Traveling by Bean Card** *by Cleo*

On my 9th birthday in 1940 my brothers friends family invited me to come to Aumsville, and pick beans to earn a little extra money. My mother gave me permission to go so the next Saturday my older brother took me to Aumsville to stay with his friends family.

The following Sunday there was no work, so me and the children of the family I was staying with played in the Millrace all day. The current was fairly fast so we flew down the millrace on innertubes.

Monday morning we went out to pick beans. We each got a cardboard "Bean Card". Every time you brought in a sack of beans you got a hole punch in your card. Each hole punch was worth 25 cents. At the end of the week you got your money. I worked hard all day but I became homesick.

The next day I was hungry so I ate a few raw beans. I got sick and threw up. I went back to the house where I was staying, lay on my bed and cried. The mother felt sorry for me. I told her I wanted to go home. She comforted me and said that I would feel better in the morning.

The next day I didn't feel any better at all. I told the Mother I was going to the bus station, so that I could find out how much a ticket was back home to Tillamook. The man at the Greyhound bus station said it would cost \$3.00. I went back to the mother and asked if I could borrow \$3.00 in return for my bean card which already had about \$3.00 worth of punches. I told her I needed the money so I could go back to Tillamook. She said that if I was really that homesick I could.

I purchased a ticket. The next day I was ready to go. The mother gave me a sack lunch to eat and I went off to the station to catch my bus. From Aumsville I traveled to Salem. I waited in Salem for two hours until my next bus came. I was very scared waiting in such a big bus station. My next bust took me to Rickreall I again got off and then caught a bus to Tillamook. Home, was a farm about 8 miles south of town. When I got to Tillamook I went into a shop that my neighbor, Mr. Procter worked in. He took me home. When I got home my mom was startled to see me. We sat down and I told her the whole story.

### **A Trip to the Beach** *by Karen*

One Saturday morning my brothers and sisters and I woke up to a bright day. The sun was shining, warming the early morning air. We got dressed and went to eat our breakfast, milk with bananas. Me and my brothers and sisters told our mom that we wanted to go to the beach. She said, "yes, but don't stay all day."

So we gathered our things and headed for the nearby sandy beach. On the way we said 'hello' to people. When we got to the beach we started playing soccer, then we all went into the water. Out of the corner of my eye I saw something, but I wasn't sure. For a minute I stood very still and got really scared. There had been

something under the water, something black with scales! I jumped out of the water and ran to my brothers and sisters. “What’s wrong,” they asked? As I told them about what I had seen, I started to cry. My sister hugged me, telling me not to worry. She even went over to check the water, but found nothing. I eased back into the water and we all started playing and having fun.

When it was time to go home we gathered all the stuff we had brought to the beach. Our parents were waiting for us, and I told them everything, especially about the thing that I’d seen.

Later when I was getting ready to go to bed, I thought about how surprising things just happen. I wonder what tomorrow will bring.

### **Long Journey to America** by Stephanie

*January 15, 1936*

I was seven years old when I heard sounds that no child should hear. Bombs fell from the sky over my home in Canton China. A loud boom followed by flames as each bomb hit a building. Firefighters scurried from place to place trying to put out the flames. Many people were badly injured. Some of their wounds so deep you could see their bones. People ran into the streets to plead for help from the ambulance racing by.

My mom pulled my hand and yelled “run!”. I ran beside her, with were my two sister and the sister of my sister-in-law. We stopped when we got to a bus station. There we watched and waited. The sun left the sky to the night. We could still see the flaming buildings in the distance. Finally a bus came. We got on with a lot of other people, all pushing and shoving.

The bus took us to the harbor. There we waited again, this time for a boat. The hours passed until we saw a shape far out to sea. At first it looked like a boat, but as it came closer I gasped at the size. This was no boat, it was a huge ship.

We all managed to stay together as the crowd on the harbor rushed and pushed to get on the ship. It was so crowded that we had to sleep on the floor. I felt like crying, but instead I swallowed my fear and tried to be brave.

The ship sailed to Sigon, Vietnam. We stayed there for many months, working and saving our money so that we could one day go to America. Even I worked too. I wanted to go to this great place. Besides, we had heard the civil war was coming to Vietnam.

It took may years of work in Vietnam. I became a young woman there. In 1946 I met and married a wonderful man. Later we had six children, all of which turned out to be helpful, caring and smart.

The year was 1979 when my new family and I boarded a ship to America. Now we live in Portland Oregon, happy and free.



## Project Outline

- To immerse students in the genre, their teacher shares copies of books completed by past students; reads aloud from short story collections, such as *Chicken Soup for the Soul*; and tells stories from different cultures.
- Students observe their family's storytelling habits and think about who in their family tells stories, who the stories are about, where they take place, and what happens in them.
- Students learn about interviewing techniques, develop interview questions, and write a letter to a relative asking for an interview so they can collect a story about that person.
- Students write and revise several drafts of their story, which is written in first person. Students edit each other's papers and read them aloud in front of the class for feedback.
- Students are taught techniques for using all five senses in their writing; creating similes and metaphors; crafting descriptive language; and digging deeper. They are encouraged to use these techniques in their writing.
- Windham does the final level of editing, typing the stories and handing them back to the students for their final review.
- Windham uses the categories established by the Oregon Statewide Writing Assessment guidelines to assess students' writing.
- Students are taught Chinese handcraft techniques for bookbinding. They each bind their own anthology of the class' work. The final product is read aloud one last time at a pajama party on the last day of school.

## Contact

Stephanie Windham has changed schools:

Stephanie Windham, Teacher  
Ball Elementary School  
4221 North Willis Boulevard  
Portland, Oregon 97203  
E-mail: [swindham@pps.k12.or.us](mailto:swindham@pps.k12.or.us)

## Suggested Student Reading

Bunting, E. (Author), & Peck, B. (Illustrator). (1988). *How many days to America? A Thanksgiving story*. New York, NY: Clarion Books.

Canfield, J., & Hansen, M.V. (Compilers). (1993). *Chicken soup for the soul: 101 stories to open the heart & rekindle the spirit*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications.

Fletcher, R. (1995). *Fig pudding*. New York, NY: Yearling Books.

Garland, S. (Author), & Kiuchi, T. (Illustrator). (1993). *The lotus seed*. New York, NY: Voyager Books.

Hamanaka, S. (1990). *The journey: Japanese Americans, racism, and renewal*. New York NY: Orchard Books.

Jiang, J. (1997). *Red scarf girl: A memoir of the cultural revolution*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Johnson, D. (1993). *Now let me fly: The story of a slave family*. New York, NY: Aladdin Paperbacks.

Nivola, C.A. (1997). *Elisabeth*. New York, NY: Farrar Straus Giroux.

Polacco, P. (1988). *The keeping quilt*. New York, NY: Aladdin Books.

Say, A. (1993). *Grandfather's journey*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

Warren, A. (2001). *We rode the orphan trains*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

Yin. (Author), & Soentpiet, C. (Illustrator). (2001). *Coolies*. New York, NY: Philomel Books.

# THE FAMILY HERITAGE MUSEUM

## Students Investigate Their Heritage and Honor Their Family Hero

*“Every child has a person whose story should be told, a person who has taught, cared-for, and loved them, a person whose influence and ability to inspire is truly heroic.” —Bill Starkey*

**L**ocated on the outskirts of the Flathead Indian Reservation and on the southern shores of Montana’s Flathead Lake, the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi, Cherry Valley Elementary School serves a culturally and economically

diverse student body. Increasing numbers of children come from families who live at or below the poverty line, with almost 60 percent qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. In addition, a student body in which more than 40 percent of the children are Native American challenges the predominantly white, middle class teaching staff to provide a school environment that reduces cultural discontinuities and builds on the strengths of all children. “Such shifts do not come easily,” says Principal Elaine Meeks. “They require research-based practices and strategies and an ability to articulate them clearly.”

While literacy is the “primary and most essential goal for all students,” the faculty





has defined literacy broadly, to include proficiency in not only the written and spoken word, but also in numeracy, the arts, and emotions. School personnel, parents, and the community share the responsibility to work together to provide a safe and nurturing environment for all students.

### **Nurturing Emotional Literacy Through Stories**

School psychologist and counselor Bill Starkey plays a key role in their efforts to connect social and emotional development with academic literacy. For Starkey, who spends 30–45 minutes per week in each classroom, it begins with storytelling. “Kids often tell stories about their families when we are working on problem solving and social skills. Kids love it, even in middle school.”

Frequently, he uses a puppet, affectionately named Mr. Moose. In fact, says Starkey, “I am actually known as Mr. Moose. They see me and ask, ‘How is Mr. Moose doing?’ It’s a nice way for kids to relate to me.” To begin a discussion about an important issue, Starkey often takes a predicament in the classroom—a conflict between two classmates, a bullying incident—and turns it into a Mr. Moose story. “Mr. Moose is not socially savvy,” explains Starkey. By letting Mr. Moose have the problem, the kids are free to help solve it. “They want to help their socially inept friend.” Children also tell stories about an issue that concerns them, and the group discusses it, with guidance from Starkey. Because this process begins in kindergarten, children gain confidence and fluency in listening to and telling stories.

### **Building a Learning Community Through Family History**

Based on a belief that effective learning requires the involvement and participation of families, there is a continuous focus at Cherry Valley on strengthening school-family partnerships, especially with families who have not traditionally been involved. Starkey looks for ways to support this goal, building on the work he already does with

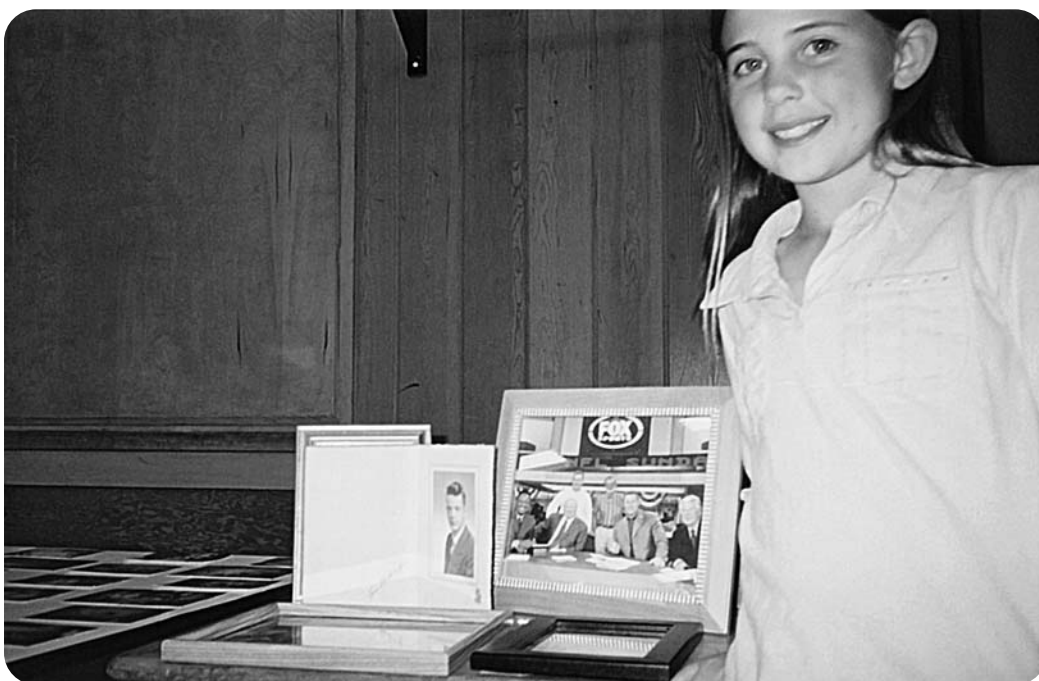
children and storytelling. “We want kids and their families to be connected to the school in a healthy way,” he says.

For the last six years, he has coordinated the participation of all fourth-grade students in a family heritage project. The project is an opportunity to put into practice the emotional literacy goals Cherry Valley has for its children. Explains Starkey, “I could go into the classroom and talk about self-esteem, but why talk about self-esteem when you can practice it?” The ideas for this project stemmed from two resources: the National Endowment for the Humanities initiative *My History Is America’s History*, and a book titled *At Home in Our Schools: A Guide to Schoolwide Activities That Build Community* (Child Development Project, 1994).

**I could go into the classroom and talk about self-esteem, but why talk about self-esteem when you can practice it?**

As the centerpiece of the project, children interview someone in their family who they admire, usually a parent or grandparent, and write about the person—their family hero—from the interview. Then students put together an exhibit featuring pictures and artifacts that are showcased at a family heritage museum located in the school cafeteria. “This is a way to celebrate all cultures in a way that is validating for everyone,” comments Starkey.

To plan the project, Starkey works with the classroom teachers during a portion of their grade-level planning time, which is one hour every other week. While Starkey develops the project outline, which is aligned with district life and career development standards, teachers play a large role in supporting the writing part of the project. Thus, the project provides a natural way for the counselor and the classroom teacher to work together on academic goals, as well as celebrate students’ families and their beautiful and diverse community.





## Beginning With a Movie

For kids to see the power of family stories, they launch the project by watching a scene in the movie *Amistad*, in which John Quincy Adams argues before the U.S. Supreme Court why the leader of a slave ship revolt deserves to be set free. Adams shares a story about how this man's tribe in Africa believes that in times of adversity they can summon the power of their ancestors and derive strength from them. Explaining how that's also a Native American tribal belief, Starkey notes:

It's a powerful oratory. Even though the kids are not usually focused on their own past, they begin to see that their parents and grandparents have helped form their personalities, their identities. They begin to take great pride in their families. Just like in the movie, they summon the support of their ancestors.

A segment from a second movie, *Secondhand Lions*, is also used. In the scene, Robert Duvall plays an eccentric uncle who imparts some advice on life to his nephew. Since one of the interview questions students frequently ask their family hero is regarding advice, the scene speaks to the special nature of such family wisdom. "As a counselor and psychologist," says Starkey, "I love that there's this multidisciplinary academic project, but for me the heart of it is just individuating that sense of who we are. I think this is a really healthy step toward that."

## Learning About Interviewing

After viewing and discussing the movie clips, the class talks about interviewing questions and techniques. They practice asking each other open-ended questions. They ask about family members, memories of historical events, childhood stories, people who affected them. "It's just a guide," explains Starkey, "they don't have to follow it; they are encouraged to ask additional questions that come up during the interview." As a group, they discuss how to ask personal questions in a respectful way and how to give the person being interviewed the option of not answering a particular question. Before students conduct the actual interview with their family hero, they practice interview-



ing teachers, the principal, and others in the school. During the interviews, they practice taking notes, rereading the notes before writing their story.

Throughout the project, notes are sent home explaining the project and what will happen each week. One letter tells parents, “While a little time-consuming, we hope you use the activities as a way to deepen your connection with your children, and ... [help your children learn about] their past and [nurture their] hopes for the future.”

What happens when a kid doesn’t pull an interview together? “You can’t count on all homework coming back,” Starkey says. “If they don’t have an interview with a family member, they still have the one they did with their teacher or other staff member. That way, no one is stigmatized.”

## Writing the Stories

Sometimes it’s difficult for students to turn their notes into a story. So Starkey breaks the questions into different categories. They might start with the person’s name and how his name was chosen; move onto the individual’s family, school, and adulthood; and end with their own feelings about the person. Each category can become a separate paragraph. Using the school’s mobile computer lab, students type the story and save it to the schoolwide server. Editing is also done on the computer, with Starkey’s help.

Students are also given the option of doing a second interview with a family member: this time focused on learning about an ancestor they have never met.

While Starkey spends a few of his class periods with students giving them time to work on writing their family hero story, classroom teachers give students additional work time during the daily 90-minute language arts block. The project fits well into the existing structure at the school. Students are accustomed to a self-directed language arts block, during which they budget their time among a number of reading, writing, and language tasks, while teachers work with small groups to provide instruction.

Teachers have also found that family stories are a natural way to get students interested in history. Students get excited when they sometimes discover that their classmates’ ancestors have had encounters with important people in history, such as Abraham Lincoln. At least one set of parents has brought their genealogy to the classroom in a spreadsheet. Students have also visited the Polson Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and discovered a library Web site with information about genealogy.

## Sharing With Families

The second part of the project is to prepare for the family heritage museum, for which each student will create a visual display and make a short oral presentation.

Parents come to class to model for the kids what the museum is going to look like. They bring in artifacts, past and present, from their family—objects that represent hobbies and interests, photo albums, items that have been passed on for generations. They talk about these objects, telling detailed stories. Starkey explains that he specifically tries to recruit the parents of kids who “maybe don’t get as much air time in their classroom to give them some status.” In addition, Starkey comments:

I think every time that white kids get to see Native American, empowered people, it’s a great way to break through cultural stereotypes. Unfortunately our school



system on this Indian reservation is almost exclusively white. That's one of the reasons why I love inviting Native American parents because there are tons of very inspirational parents and they'll come to our family activities, but they're not always given the spotlight, the stage to do so. It's just been a way to do it without having to be a big deal.

Naturally, some parents are rather shy about getting in front of a class of 25 or more 10-year-olds and the teacher. Starkey has learned to be persuasive. In the end the presentations are often enjoyed by the parents as well as by their children. After the few presentations arranged by Starkey, the class is told that they, too, can have their parents make a presentation, by inviting them and asking them to schedule a time with the classroom teacher.

Having seen a few models, students begin preparing for their exhibit. They complete family trees and illustrate maps showing where their ancestors and relatives came from. On poster paper, students tape or glue family photographs with captions. Parents comment that this part of the project often requires extensive help from them, though when they see the finished product they usually feel it was time well-spent.

Sometimes the project touches a nerve. There may be parents who are adopted themselves or who don't know one of their parents: It can bring up some upsetting issues. But Starkey, as the school counselor, sees these situations as a vehicle to talk about adoption, divorce, and single parenthood. He talks about the need to "let these kids talk about some of these things to validate who they are in a good way:"

Just try to destigmatize the whole thing. We're all dealt different decks of cards and it's just part of what makes us interesting people that we can overcome some of these. It's something we can't gloss over and pretend that it doesn't exist.

For some students, it is difficult or impossible to get the help of parents or family members for this project. Starkey explains that staff goes out of their way to give students flexibility and encourage them to make the project work for them, whatever that looks like. "It's not a finished product," says Starkey. "It's a work in progress for your whole life. It's a taste—a step in the door."

## Sharing With Classmates

Each of the three classrooms has its own day to present exhibits for the family heritage museum. The event begins with a potluck meal during lunchtime. Parents are invited to bring a dish from their heritage to share. A few years ago, the decision was made to hold the museum during the school day rather than in the evening. This has resulted in fewer parents being able to attend, but has increased the time available for students to make their presentations.

Students set up their exhibits on the cafeteria tables. They confidently introduce their families to their classmates and show off their displays of pictures, artifacts, maps, family trees, and hero stories. The school technology coordinator moves about the cafeteria with a camcorder and microphone, and tapes each student's three-minute presentation. Some students have note cards outlining their presentation, but others are more casual.

Students and teachers from the other two classrooms tour the museum, rotating between exhibits every five minutes, when a bell rings. To prepare for the event, Starkey and classroom teachers provide a lot of coaching to help kids be self-regulated learners/visitors to the museum. Students "sign in" to each exhibit that they visit and keep notes, recording an interesting fact or story from the presentation; noting the types of data presented; and evaluating the quality of the oral presentation—that is, did the child use kind words, talk clearly, and teach at least one thing. Children learn that at a museum, "people reach for and respond to different information." They are encouraged to be inquisitive, excited learners.

At the end of the day, classroom teachers lead a discussion about the event. "What did you get out of it?" they ask, encouraging students to share information. It's also an opportunity to talk about what makes a good presentation. Students complete a self-assessment, reflecting on their new knowledge and the experience of working on a long-term research project. Teachers figure the project into language arts and social studies grades.

For many children, the project provided an occasion to talk with grandparents, learning more about what life was like before TV and video games. Children are often surprised to find out one of their Native American classmates has ancestors who were royalty. They also celebrate the things they have in common. For example, many Native American students also have relatives from Europe. "That's a good thing," observes Starkey, "because, as on most reservations, there is a cultural divide. Helping to close that divide is a big part of my subversive agenda."

Even with all the school has done, parents initially may still feel uncomfortable or nervous when they come to the school. Sitting at a lunch table, they share stories about how they didn't sleep well the night before because they were worried about how their potluck dish would turn out. But by the end of the afternoon, as one parent stated, "After viewing the displays of all the kids, I had a newfound appreciation for who they are and how they have their unique personalities, strengths, and challenges." Parents commented on how the project made them reconnect with their own family heritage, and how they're glad their child got a taste of it while they were young.

Starkey notes that this project helps him build connections with children who've kept him at arm's length. By being given a voice to talk about who they are and where they

come from, the children seem to grow in their belief in themselves, pride in their families, and connection to school. Maybe, they've gathered inspiration from their ancestors.

## Student Writing Samples

### **My Hero, My Mom: Maria Laura Miserendino** *by Camila Suarez*

My name is Camila Suarez, and my hero is my mom, Laura Miserendino. She has two brothers, two sisters, and of course a mom and a dad. Her two brother's names are Eduardo Ernesto and Marcelo Javier. Her two sister's names are Mariana and Mercedes Natalia. Her mom is Maria Ester and her dad's name is Eduardo Salvador.

They always sat and ate lunch and dinner together but sometimes they used to have dinners at their friend's houses. Most of the time they ate at their dad's friend's farm.

She lived in many places as a child. She lived in Rio Cuarto, Indio Rico, El Chocon, Comodoro Rivadavia, Formosa and Clorinda. She had many friends in those places. Some of them were Alicia, Alejandra, Graciela, Franca and Elba.

When she was eleven, she and her brothers were mad at their mom for a silly thing. They ran away, for a few minutes, to a cave next to a nearby beach.

Mom was shy as a teenager, but still had lots of friends. She lived in Clorinda, Tucuman, Punta Alta, Coronel Corrego and Bahia Blanca. She was a very good student in high school.

Her first kiss was when she was 15 years old. Can you believe that? She finished high school when she was 16 and started college at 16, too. She went to college and studied biology to become a biologist. After a while she became a researcher at college and a professor of zoology when she was 21. She got married to Raul Suarez, my dad, when she was 23.

They had Ezequiel, my big brother. Then came me, and then came my little brother, Santiago.

The End.

### **My Heroine, My Mother: Wendy Dohn Clairmont** *by Sam Croft*

My name is Sam Croft. My hero is my mom, Wendy Dohn Clairmont.

She was named after "Wendy" from the children's classic, Peter Pan. Her nickname was "Wendy Wooper."

She has two older brothers and two sisters. Their names are Jane Clairmont, Steve Clairmont, Carol Phillips, and Jim Clairmont.

Her family said grace once in a while. When she was my age, she went to school and played only to come inside, eat dinner and go to bed.

She never had wanted to run away. She was the new kid in sixth grade. She moved from Dixon Agency to Polson.

When she was little, the first men landed on the moon, Elvis died and a rowdy rock music festival, Woodstock, was held in New York state.



She mostly enjoyed school activities like being with her friends and going to dances. She least liked having homework and tests.

She was 14 years old on her first date, but she now says that is too young. She now recommends that young people wait until they are in their mid-fifties before they complicate their lives.

Marie Gillespie was her best friend and they are still friends today. She married Dan Croft. She asked him out on a date. They went to the Sadie Hawkens dance. She has two kids and their names are Sam and Ben. Ben works at the airport, is married, and has two kids of his own. I'm in fourth grade, not married, and used to have a dog, but it died.

I picked her because she is very nice.

## Project Outline

- Students view and discuss some clips from movies that speak to the power of family stories and wisdom.
- Students learn about interviewing and practice their interview techniques with teachers and others in the school.
- Students interview their family hero and write a story about that person.
- Family members come to the classroom and tell stories about their family and heritage, to model what the family heritage museum could look like.
- Students prepare their exhibits for the family heritage museum. They create family trees, maps of where their family is from, and a poster of family pictures with captions.
- The family heritage museum begins with a potluck meal for families. Students from other classes visit the exhibits and listen to the oral presentations.

## Contact

Bill Starkey, School Counselor  
Cherry Valley Elementary School  
111 4th Avenue East  
Polson, Montana 59860  
Phone: (406) 883-6333  
E-mail: wstarkey@polson.k12.mt.us

## Suggested Student Reading

Aliki. (1979). *The two of them*. New York, NY: Mulberry Books.

Fletcher, R. (1995). *Fig pudding*. New York, NY: Yearling Books.

Garza, C.L. (1996). *In my family/En mi familia*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press.

Gray, L.M. (Author), & Colon, R. (Illustrator). (1999). *My mama had a dancing heart*. New York, NY: Orchard Books.

Johnson, A. (Author), & Soman, D. (Illustrator). (1989). *Tell me a story, Mama*. New York, NY: Orchard Books.

Lowry, L. (1998). *Looking back: A book of memories*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

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# GREAT-GRANDMA'S FOOTSTEPS

## Seeking Family Roots Inspires Students To Study Countries Around the World

For years, sixth-graders at Valdez, Alaska's, Hermon Hutchens Elementary School researched and wrote "country reports" as part of their state standards-based curriculum. When sixth-grade teacher Jan Michaud-Whalen arrived on the scene, she says she certainly saw the value of the project, but also says she found the

approach a bit, well, "boring." Students randomly picked a country—say, France or Turkey—and jotted down a series of facts to meet class requirements, but there was a lack of any real motivation or passion for the project.

"I wanted the students to have a reason to look at another country," says Michaud-Whalen, who came up with the idea of having the students research their family's country of origin. Instead of looking up random facts about strangers living halfway around the globe, she sent them on a quest to find out where each child's great- or great-great-grandpa and grandma grew up and how they or their offspring came to live in this remote and chilly village on the banks of Prince William Sound.

The result was a 10-week interdisciplinary project that bridged art, language arts, and social studies, as well as library and computer sciences. Michaud-Whalen and another Hermon Hutchens teacher, Barbara Bryson, developed a template for the unit during their participation in an intensive professional development program



called Alaska Reform in the Classroom through Technology (ARCTIC). This effort, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, helps teachers learn to weave technology into instruction in relevant and useful ways and to design effective learning environments that incorporate technology.

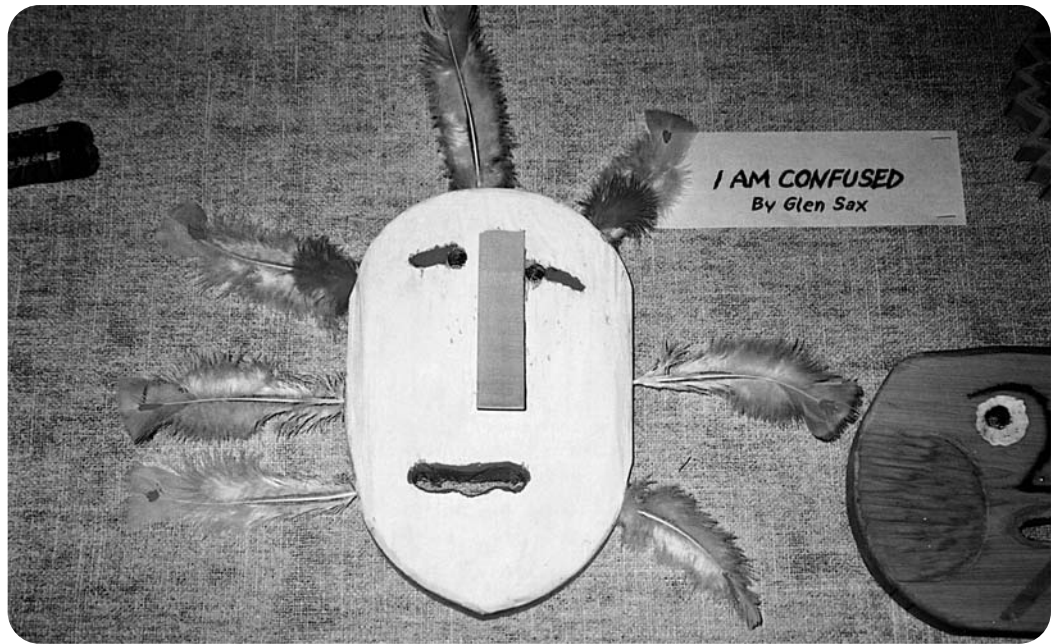
**The Project Template**

In their “Heritage Exposition” template, Michaud-Whalen and Bryson describe the project as follows: “This unit enables students to recount their family histories. The project includes family genealogy, stories written from family members’ perspectives, reflective writing, poetry, and works of art. In a culminating essay, students answer the essential question: ‘How do family histories and traditions contribute in making me the unique person I am?’ Students exhibit portfolios of their project work during a Heritage Exposition. Oral presentations accompany the event, and the celebration is enhanced with traditional family foods.”

The unit design template identifies specific state standards that are addressed through the project—for instance, a language arts standard that states, “Students will write and speak well to inform, to describe, to entertain, to persuade, and to clarify thinking in a variety of formats including technical communication.” The project includes a table of essential knowledge and skills gained through the student work (see below) and clear rubrics for guiding student assessment.

<b>Know</b>	<b>Do</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• There are important events and traditions in family histories that make each family unique</li><li>• History has many perspectives</li><li>• Six traits of writing</li><li>• Structure of an essay</li><li>• Structures of poetry</li><li>• Internet search techniques</li><li>• Interview skills</li><li>• Research strategies</li><li>• Artistic composition</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Write two family stories</li><li>• Use a digital camera</li><li>• Use PowerPoint or iMovie</li><li>• Access family records using primary sources, public records, museum, and Web sites</li><li>• Write an essay</li><li>• Write a poem</li><li>• Create artwork about family</li><li>• Use a scanner</li></ul>

Additionally, the template includes what Michaud-Whalen and Bryson call a “tic-tac-toe” board of project assignments. Students are required to complete five assignments starting with tracing and diagramming their family trees, and then moving across the tic-tac-toe board vertically or diagonally as they complete other assignments under the “heritage” umbrella. These include such options as engaging in written correspondence with grandparents or great-grandparents; interviewing multiple generations of their family; writing and presenting their family stories; and creating artwork based on a specific family story, among others. All students are required to complete the culminating project essay.



## Countries of Origin

To start the project, Michaud-Whalen asked her students to follow their family lineage into the past and ferret out one of their countries of origin. The task involved interviewing family members and charting their family trees.

As Alaskan villages go, Valdez is a relative newcomer with a history dating back to the 1890s when prospectors flocked to Alaska in search of gold and established a camp on the site. A more recent influx came in the 1970s when people arrived to help build the Alaskan pipeline. (Valdez is situated at the terminus of the pipeline.) The majority of Hermon Hutchens students are Caucasian, and many families moved to the area in recent decades. The students found ties all around the world, says Michaud-Whalen. “We had all the European nations represented. We had Russia. We had Ireland.”

Even Native American students found ties to other countries in their lineage, reports Michaud-Whalen. “They found there was Irish blood or German blood. Or, up here, there’s quite a bit of Russian blood from when the Russians came over and first occupied the area. So nobody was just one thing, like pure Native American,” the teacher says.

“I think students were surprised to find that you didn’t just come from one country. You can’t say, I’m just Irish, because we started digging and probably came up with eight or nine countries,” says the teacher.

And, once students focused on one of those countries, “they loved learning about the flags of their country or the shape of it,” says the teacher. “Sometimes there was a real ‘Aha!’ experience with, ‘Oh, this is why we celebrate [a holiday] like this, because it came from this particular country,’ and it had never been explained to the kids. And sometimes, the parents didn’t even know that. So that was a good connection.”



## Family Stories

When students approached family members to fill out their family trees and identify countries of origin, they weren't just searching for names, places, and dates: They also went digging for stories.

"They were asked to try for nine interviews with as many generations of the family as possible," says Michaud-Whalen. They had to develop three of these interviews—preferably with parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, if possible—and record their stories. To assist them in their investigation, students developed an interview form with a list of questions, including such queries as, "Where and when were you born, where have you lived, and what jobs have you had?" They also asked, "What is a favorite family story about your childhood?" and "What do you remember about your childhood, especially when you were in sixth grade?"

"Often," the teacher reports, "family members would write only one or two sentences on the interview form, so I kept a phone card by our class telephone, and we made a zillion calls to grandparents and aunts/uncles."

And the kids hit pay dirt.

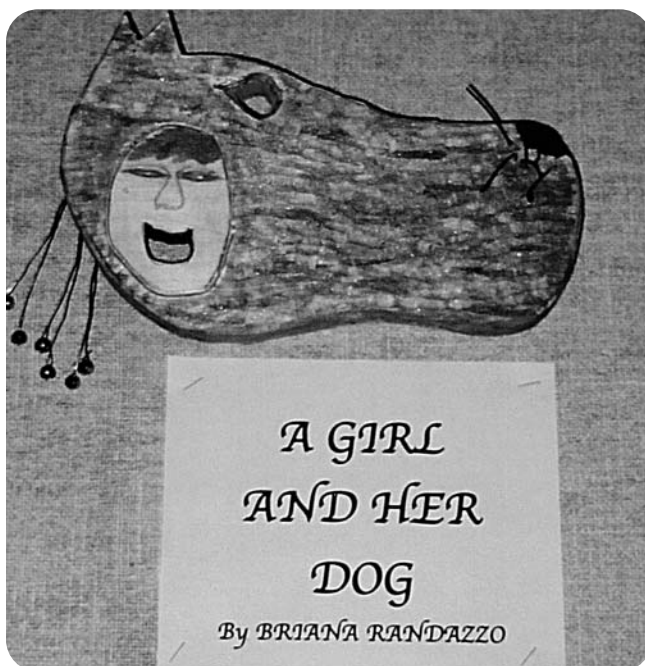
"We dug up lots of stories that neither the students nor their parents had ever heard," reports the teacher. "One story that was wonderful was a boy found out that his great-uncle, during World War II, parachuted into France and there was a family of farmers that hid him for six months. And the family used the parachute—the white parachute—to make the daughter's wedding dress for somebody she was marrying in the village. And then they finally smuggled him out," shares Michaud-Whalen. "But nobody in the family knew that story. It hadn't been passed on."

"And some of the Alaskan families' stories .... There was one where the mother was Alaska Native and was way up somewhere at a fish camp and the men were supposed to come and get them at a certain time. And the men didn't come and they didn't come and they didn't come. And the women got some lathes and fashioned a raft and put the little kids and the old women on the raft and started down the river. You know, just

tremendous survival stories of people that just, well, figured it out and did it."

Students recorded these stories, often in both third- and first-person narratives, and included them in a growing portfolio of their heritage project work.

They also used their research to write poems comparing their lives with those of their parents or grandparents. "We read a variety of two-voice poems in the fall," says Michaud-Whalen, including those written by Paul Fleischman in his books *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* and *I am Phoenix: Poems for Two Voices*. "When we got interviews finished, we used them to make Venn diagrams of similarities and differences of the students' sixth-grade time and the parents' and the grandparents' sixth-grade time. We used the Venns to create two-voice poems."



In one, student Alex Christensen records the similarities and differences between his father's sixth-grade experience and his own:

Me	Dad
I'm in 6th Grade In Alaska	I'm in 6th Grade In Louisiana
It is too Cold	It is too Hot
The weather is Always the same School is so Fun	The weather is Always the same School is so Boring
Math Reading Social Studies Science Language Arts	Math Reading Social Studies Science Language Arts
It can be fun	It can be fun
PE Recess Lunch Computer	PE Recess Lunch Computer
Sign Language and Woodshop	
It's so cool	It's not cool
I wear Whatever I want at school	I wear Uniforms at school

## Masks

Students had opportunities to create artwork related to the project. Many students made posters based on their family history, incorporating photographs, maps, and other graphics. Others created paintings or sculptures. Michaud-Whalen also guided students through the process of making plaster-cast masks which the pupils then decorated with paints and symbols to represent their family. These art projects always included an element of writing, notes Michaud-Whalen, usually about the meaning of the artwork and the process of creating it.

Last year, the mask-making exercise became a project in itself due to a rare opportunity. Kathleen Carlo, a Native Athabaskan artist, was employed by a neighboring school district to engage students in mask making. The neighboring district included many small isolated villages—more isolated than Valdez, which is accessible by road unlike many of the surrounding villages. Because the surrounding villages lacked a

gathering space for children to meet and work on their masks, Michaud-Whalen saw an opportunity for a trade. "I was 'queen' of the school woodshop in Valdez," she says, "so we worked out a deal where I said, 'You can use my woodshop if my students can participate in the project too.'" It was a winning solution for everyone.

Under Carlo's tutelage, students studied a range of Native masks via a slide show and then began the process of carving their own masks out of balsa wood. The students spent two days carving the wood into the desired shapes, then drilling out holes for eyes and sawing openings for mouths. They then decorated their masks with feathers, beads, and diluted acrylic paint which mimicked the squashed berry and boiled bark stains used by indigenous people. When their weeklong workshop with Carlo had ended and their masks were finished, the students displayed their creations in the hall.

Michaud-Whalen augmented the learning by asking students to write poetry about the experience. "I had the students first write down the materials they used to make their mask," says the teacher, then "go back and get descriptive—no, not just red and yellow paint, but fiery red and tulip yellow. Then, feelings and thoughts as they created; then, using the senses, to describe the process; and, finally, when you see your mask, how do you feel? End with the mask's title."

In his mask poem, Colin Irish writes:

I built my mask of  
wood  
and feathers,  
and earthy greens and forest red dyes,  
and copper tacks

I created it of  
my feelings  
and my family  
and friends  
and thoughts of getting up in the morning

I could feel the wood and the saw  
I could see the bumpy wood turn smooth  
it's like magic  
I can hear Kathleen the master teacher giving orders and advice

I smell the wood  
and the cold wet paint  
and the oil  
and the sawdust

When I see my mask on the wall  
I feel proud  
and powerful  
and protected  
and I can feel the smooth,  
rough,  
and sleek bumpy texture into the face

My mask's name is Wake-up Call

## Related Reading

Throughout the heritage project, Michaud-Whalen tried to incorporate related reading material for the students. Of course, the children read information on their countries of origin, both in reference books and on the Web. “And in our regular reading lit book, there was a series of stories about kids from different countries,” notes Michaud-Whalen.

Additionally, the teacher supplemented with books on similar themes, including *Bat 6* by Virginia Euwer Wolff, a book about conflicts that arise when a Japanese American girl joins a girls’ baseball team in the postwar era, and *A Jar of Dreams* by Yoshika Uchida, the story of a Japanese family who immigrates to California and faces racial prejudice in the 1930s.

“And we read some Native American books, some of which tied into a unit on survival,” the teacher adds. During the mask-making endeavor, students read *They Put on Masks*, a book by Byrd Baylor and Jerry Ingram about Native American masks from across the United States.

## Final Essay, Portfolios, and Presentation

All students were required to write the final essay about family histories and traditions contributing to students becoming the unique people they are.

“At first, they didn’t get it,” says Michaud-Whalen. “So we talked about our own heritage. How we always celebrate our holiday in this way. Or I’m good at woodworking and my grandpa was too, so this is heritage. Example: One boy wrote about how his father was good with mechanical things and his grandfather was good with wood and he saw that in himself, too. Some girls wrote about baking. But also, one girl wrote about math and how her grandmother worked as a bookkeeper, and she was good in math too.”

In the end, “each student had a three-hole binder with a table of contents of 22 items,” says Michaud-Whalen. “They also made PowerPoint presentations burned onto a CD for each of them to put with their binder.”

“At conference time, the students each presented their unit to their parents,” explains Michaud-Whalen. “It was very good.”

And the project culminated with a public exposition of the students’ work.

“Everybody had to choose one or two things that they were really proud of and present it,” explains Michaud-Whalen. “So every kid got up and presented—usually, it involved their mask, but they also had to present either a poem or writing or something else they had done, maybe the poster they had made about their country.”

The exposition “didn’t come off quite the way we wanted it to,” admits Michaud-Whalen, “because toward the end of the year things got so hectic. People were flying in all directions, so it wasn’t as big an event as we had hoped. But we had a few families that came and were really excited about it.”

The smaller turnout didn’t dull the students’ enthusiasm for their work.

Personal connections made the work relevant, says the teacher, and that motivated the students. “They get so excited because it’s personal. You know, it isn’t just, oh, we have

**They get so excited because it’s personal. You know, it isn’t just, oh, we have to find out the products of this country, what do they import, what do they export. This was trying to find out where great-grandma lived and trying to get a picture of what her life was like.**

to find out the products of this country, what do they import, what do they export. You know, that's dry and boring stuff," says Michaud-Whalen. "This was trying to find out where great-grandma lived and trying to get a picture of what her life was like. It made it more personal."

## Student Writing Samples

### **Family Story** *by Paul Topkok*

Aunt Beda looked at Grandma Jessie and said, "Where's Moses?"

They were worried. Moses was their brother who ran the mail boat up and down the Koyuk River. He was supposed to pick up everybody on the way to Dime Landing, three days ago.

Aunt Beda and Grandma Jessie decided they would make a raft in the morning. Ooyan, their mother, would float in the raft with the younger children, Grandma Thelma, Florence, Alfred and Bing. It was 1934 in Northwest Alaska and the Eskimos had to prepare their food for winter. It was at their fish camp when Aunt Beda and Grandma Jessie made their decision to make a raft to get to berry camp. The older children Holger, Irene, Ruthe and June ran and walked along the shoreline with the husky dogs. They traveled this way for two days until Uncle Moses caught up with them.

### **Escape from Vietnam** *by Toan Nguyen*

A long time ago in the years around 1975 Vietnam's south side was protected during the war by the Americans. The north side had been taken over by Communist. On April 30, 1975 the war ended and the south had lost. People thought that the communist would take over the south side so they tried to escape Vietnam before the year end. It was difficult to escape because the boats they used were small and used for fishing. The places people escaped to were either Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, or Singapore. Those countries wanted to help so they made camps for the refugees and got sponsored by the third country.

My mom's family happened to be a few of those refugees. They escaped in early 1976 with my mom, her two brothers, and her 9 month old sister, Kim. They arrived in Malaysia first but the camps weren't set up yet so they left on their boats and ended up in Indonesia after two weeks and got to stay there for 6 months. That was when they got sponsored by the French government and moved. They have lived in France every since, but my mom left and moved from France when she was old enough to the U.S.



## Project Outline

- Students interview family members, diagramming family trees and collecting family stories.
- Students record family stories in narrative form.
- Students select and complete assignments from the “heritage tic-tac-toe template.” These include such options as:
  - Writing and receiving letters to and from a grandparent or great-grandparent
  - Interviewing multiple generations of their family
  - Scanning photos representing three generations of the family and writing photo descriptions
  - Creating Venn diagrams comparing and contrasting lives of three different generations
  - Researching events in their country of origin at the time of the family’s emigration and writing an essay
  - Creating a poster based on a family story, using photographs, maps, and other graphics
  - Writing a poem or song about their family
  - Writing and presenting a story about their family (can use PowerPoint or iMovie)
  - Creating artwork tied to their family
- Students write an essay responding to the question: How do family history and its traditions contribute to making me the unique person I am?
- Students assemble their work in a portfolio.
- Students present their portfolio to parents at parent conferences.
- Students present selected pieces of work to the public at the Heritage Exposition.

## Contact

Jan Michaud-Whalen, Teacher  
Hermon Hutchens Elementary School  
PO Box 627  
Valdez, Alaska 99686  
Phone: (907) 835-4728  
E-mail: jan\_michaud@valdez.cc

## Suggested Student Reading

Baylor, B. (Author), & Ingram, J. (Illustrator). (1974). *They put on masks*. New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons.

Fleischman, P. (1989). *I am phoenix: Poems for two voices*. New York, NY: HarperTrophy.

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- Say, A. (1993). *Grandfather's journey*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.
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# JUGGLING WITH WORDS

## Students Write Biographies About Local Senior Citizens

**F**ifth-grade students in David Groth's classroom usually begin the day by writing. It helps everyone ease into the day, including Groth, who often writes along with his students. Groth strives to provide opportunities for students to use real experiences as a vehicle for writing. He says that he and the other teachers at Sorensen Elementary School in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, work to illustrate that writing "isn't a monstrous chore but something that can lead toward satisfying communication and sharing." This is illustrated by a variety of projects ranging from a description of a class tour of the boiler room, to the creation of big books for the kindergarten, to the annual play written and produced by the class. Recently, students reached into the experiences and life stories of community members through a project titled Our Treasured Senior Citizens.

Nearly every year, Groth has given students an assignment to write a piece about a person who is important to them. Usually students write about a parent, grandparent,

coach, or even a teacher. This year, he decided to do a fresh take on the activity, and came up with the idea to interview senior citizens from the community and write their biographies.

Groth wanted the biographies to be nicely published with a comb binding and color pictures. To help with the purchase of supplies, including a digital camera, Groth wrote and received a small grant from the school district's foundation, EXCEL.

A parent volunteer wrote the names of 34 seniors that she thought would be good for the project. Those on the list came





**I think the best thing I do as a teacher, my favorite thing about what I do, is my relationship with the kids.**

from a range of backgrounds and experiences, including a former New York dance instructor, the school custodian, a World War II veteran, even Groth's mother-in-law. The term "senior" was used liberally, "from a fifth-grade perspective," laughed Groth, given that some on the list were as young as 41 years old.

Groth mailed an invitation letter to these seniors, and 16 replied that they were willing and able to participate. To prepare for the project, the class worked on their interviewing and questioning skills. They developed questions that inquired about birthplace, school days, career, and family. They wrote questions asking what life was like when the seniors were in fifth grade, their hobbies, heroes, memorable life experiences, and travels. They also planned to ask the seniors for advice about life.

A few days before the seniors were to be interviewed, a practice interview was arranged. Two students interviewed a woman from the EXCEL grant committee, Betty Cheeley, and reported to the class. The test run turned out to be very useful. Everyone realized how hard it would be to take notes and ask questions at the same time. Cheeley counseled the students not to be afraid to stop their interviewee and ask, "Would you repeat that?" or "Could you talk more slowly?" She also reassured them that they were asking good questions and that she enjoyed talking to them.

A schedule was established where the seniors would come to the school on three consecutive Thursdays. At the first meeting, students conducted their interviews and took pictures of their subjects. The seniors also brought their own pictures, which were scanned into the computer. At the second meeting, the seniors reviewed the draft biographies, and students asked follow-up questions. The third meeting was a celebration where the students presented the seniors with their biographies.

Students gathered stories from Ruthie Johnson, who worked her way through high school so she could pay for room and board, and went on to work for U.S. Senator James McClure for 24 years; Bud Kirchoff, who was a prisoner of war for three-and-a-half years in World War II; and John Centa, a tireless supporter of Self-Help for the Hard of Hearing, a nonprofit organization for people with hearing loss. They listened to Helen Centa, who talked about her travels to Tanzania, China, Australia, and Europe; Jim Towles, a retired district judge who said his greatest achievement is his 63-year marriage; and Bob Allen, who suggested to the kids that they stay in school and treat other people the way they want to be treated.

After listening to these stories, students took their interview notes and, either individually or in two- or three-person teams, began to write.

## **Setting the Stage: Creating a Risk-Taking Environment That Supports Real Writing**

To promote authentic writing, a safe, risk-taking classroom environment is needed, according to Ralph Fletcher (2003) and a number of other educators. This is something that David Groth has made a priority. He comments:

I think the foundation for everything, if they're going to take risks in their writing, is to make this a place where they feel safe. I think the best thing I do as a

teacher, my favorite thing about what I do, is my relationship with the kids. They believe that I care about them and they feel safe here. They know that I enjoy laughing. They know that I value them, their uniqueness.

While there are many ways to nurture this type of environment, juggling has helped to bridge the distance among students in Groth's classroom. Groth is a juggling enthusiast and shares that passion with his students. Enter his classroom during their 10-minute morning break and you may find children practicing their three-ball cascade, bean bag steal, or club passing as Groth roams the classroom juggling with the students and teaching them new tricks. By sharing this activity, Groth has stumbled onto something significant—his own unique way of relating to kids and building classroom community. He notes:

Almost all of the kids in the class are into juggling, so we have this playful challenge we share. It happens to be real visible, unlike writing. It's funny how it's competitive but cooperative at the same time. The kids know who the best jugglers are in the classroom. But they're really good about encouraging everyone. I can put the weakest juggler in front of the class, and they'll clap raucously for that person. They understand on some level that it's about effort and making progress and trying to have fun with it. I think that that transfers to our other work, and a wonderful sense of community comes out of that.

Groth treats his students as writers and works to celebrate their writing in frequent, small ways. He credits his experience attending a summer institute of the Northwest Inland Writing Project (an affiliate of the National Writing Project) for helping him do this. In what he described as "one intense month," writing project participants each write an article and a poem, experiencing the writing process as their students might. He says:

From the word go they treat you like writers; not like 'we're here to talk about writing' but 'we are writers.' These teachers ... their self-concepts and their confidence changed. It did that for me. That's the first time I took myself seriously as a writer. So I try to do that with my kids. I think we are better at that with the first- and second-graders—'yea, you are all authors.' Then we get to fifth grade and, well, you don't quite write well enough to be an author. It's really easy with first- and second-graders to celebrate their effort, but in upper elementary grades the kids are supposed to have a more polished product before we celebrate. We are less likely to celebrate an incredible two sentences in a piece. We need to celebrate.

One activity Groth uses to celebrate those great little sentences is an activity called Great Writing ... Made Better. He types up 10 sentences from the students' latest work and distributes them to the class. The class examines each sentence and discusses what they like about it and possible ways that it might be made even better. The activity may lead to a discussion of





the use of metaphor and simile, sensory details, specific nouns, strong verbs, or the overuse of adjectives and adverbs. Groth notes, “I find that the kids whose sentences are discussed, their next piece of writing will grow because they feel good about themselves as a writer.”

## Responding to Students’ Writing

As they work on their drafts, Groth confers with each student. He strives to help each child learn one thing from every piece they write, guided by Donald Graves’s (1983) analogy of a golf teacher who watches a golfer hit balls for 10 minutes, and then simply tells him to try it again but keep his head down—not, keep his head down, tuck his right shoulder in, and move his foot. In the same way, Groth says:

There aren’t many people who can learn five things from each piece of writing. If I can respond to a child’s paper and they can learn one thing from it, that’s monstrous because from many of the papers students aren’t going to learn anything. Not only is it discouraging, but it’s a waste of time to identify every error in a piece of writing.

Groth develops his lessons based on common problems that appear in students’ writing. Later, he’s able to help students apply these lessons.

Most satisfying for me is to follow the kids. We’ve done a lot with verbs, so right now I’m in a good position to point out strong verbs in their writing. It will start really sinking in for them. And, I’m in a position to suggest better verbs, and most of the kids are going to understand why I’m suggesting them. Looking for problems in their writing and making lessons out of that is going to be much more effective.

## Publishing and Celebrating

After two weeks of interviewing, writing, sharing, revisiting, and conferring, the students were ready to publish their biographies. Using the handful of classroom computers, students typed their stories. They wrote captions for the photos they had scanned in and learned how to size them and insert them so that the text flowed around them. They made a cover that featured a digital photo of the student author with his or her senior interviewee. Two color copies of each book were made and bound, one for the school and one for the senior.

Groth notes, “It energizes me when the kids are excited.” And the students have definitely been energized. Kelsey noted on her author’s page at the end of her biography:

Kelsey likes school and loved doing the senior citizen project. She loved being with Anna Mae Dlouhy because her life was so exciting. Kelsey thinks that the rafting trip was the most exciting thing Anna Mae told. When she told her, she was listening so intensely that she forgot to write notes about the rafting trip. She had a great time and will always remember the time with Anna Mae Dlouhy.

At their last meeting, the students and the seniors gathered in a circle in the gym to share their stories. A local newspaper reporter attended and interviewed students and seniors for a story she wrote for the *Idaho Spokesman-Review*. Illustrating the intergenerational bonds that were formed, the seniors commented that they felt good about

what the kids were learning and the quality of their writing; the students shared how they enjoyed getting to know their subjects. Groth thanked everyone for their participation, commenting on how the project exceeded his expectations. And in the true style of Groth's class, the event concluded with a juggling show.



## Student Writing Samples

**Mark Weadick** by *Dace' Whiteley*  
and *Sarah Bruch*

... When we asked him who his heroes were, he thought deeply, making sure he didn't miss anyone. He said that one of his heroes was Bill Wassmuth. Wassmuth was a human rights activist and a man of integrity. He also said that another hero was Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa was a nun who set up a community center. To him, anyone who shows integrity and honesty and who are willing to stand up for what they believe in are his heroes.

If you want to hear a more wild side of this forester, listen up! He once had some kind of freaky policeman flat top hairdo that went terribly wrong! In it he looked ... Dashing? No, that's not it. Ugly? Nope, not that either. Totally weird? Yep, right on target!

Overall, he's a really great guy, who thinks everyone should stand up for what they believe in. He told his children, "At the very least, when you leave home, don't lie, don't cheat, and don't steal." (And some advice from Dace', "Don't eat strained beets, they give you an upset stomach.")

Even though Mark has done all these amazing things in his life, the most amazing thing to him was watching his son, Joe, being born. This was special because Joe was his only child that he got to see being born.

Like we said in the beginning, we interviewed a very interesting man, Mark Weadick!

**Bennie's Life** by *Dimitri Christo-Dionne* and *Ricky Boss*

Have you ever wondered what life was like in the 1930's? Well, if you do want to know, keep reading and you will find that and many other things that Bennie has done in her life.

Bennie grew up in Mountain View, California. She lived there with one sister, whose name is Trudy. In fifth grade Bennie still lived in Mountain View, California. There were two grades in each classroom through elementary school. The cool thing was she got to stay with the same friends from first grade all the way through high school. Her favorite subject at school was arithmetic. She wasn't a very good speller ... at all.

Bennie went to school for 16 years, which is including college. She went to Pacific Union 7th Day Adventist College. She went there because she wanted to get into a nursing course and they had one.

When Bennie grew up she had to make a living off of her husband, Ray. She couldn't make any money because Ray was a doctor and Bennie worked for him, the money would get back to Ray eventually.

When Bennie worked at the hospital one of her favorite things about her work was being around a lot of people. Her least favorite thing about her work was when she had to give shots to little kids, because she didn't want to hurt them. (We don't blame her.) ...

**The Life of Anna Mae Dlouhy: A story about a woman who has many adventures ...** *by Kelsey Cordes-Snyder*

Anna Mae Dlouhy was born in Virginia, Minnesota and has one brother. When in 5th grade Anna Mae liked school and loved going to the farm.

Anna Mae graduated from high school in 1945 and made a living as an office manager of a department store. What Anna Mae loved about her job was that she worked and helped people, but she disliked having to work on Saturdays.

In 1947 (two years later), Anna Mae moved to Spokane, Washington and worked for Brown and Taylor's as a bookkeeper.

In 1951 Anna Mae was married to Bill Dlouhy and since he was in the Air Force he was transferred to Roswell, New Mexico where their three sons were born: David, Darrel and Duane. Anna Mae and Bill lived there for fifteen years. Then they moved to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho where Anna Mae's husband retired.

... One of Anna Mae's most memorable life experiences was when she went rafting with her family on the Moyie River with three other groups. The guide of the rafting trip said, "If I say jump then jump out of the raft!" So Anna Mae and her family went on the rafting trip and after awhile they came to a dam and the guide said, "Jump!" So everyone jumped, except for Anna Mae. She stayed in the raft. Luckily, Anna Mae went around the dam and the rest of her family and the three groups came out of the Moyie River without being hurt and Anna Mae and her family ended up being on the Eleven O'clock News ...

## Project Outline

- David Groth applied for and received a small grant from the school district's foundation to help with the purchase of materials and supplies, including a digital camera.
- A parent volunteer brainstormed and wrote a list of names of senior citizens who she thought would be good for the kids to interview.
- Groth wrote and mailed the invitations to the seniors. About half replied that they were available to participate.
- Students developed interview questions and practiced their skills. A "test run" interview with the district foundation director helped students understand the difficulty of taking notes during the interview and ways they could address this by asking the interviewer to repeat something or slow down.
- A schedule was set up where the seniors came to the school for three consecutive Thursdays. At the first meeting, students conducted their interviews, working either individually or in two- or three-person teams.

- At the second meeting, students shared the first draft of their biography with the senior for review and follow-up questions.
- Students typed their biographies and inserted seniors' photos that they had scanned. They created a cover that featured a digital photo of themselves with their subjects. Two color copies of each biography were printed and bound with a comb binding: one copy was given to the senior and one was kept for the school library.
- At the last meeting, students presented the seniors with their biographies.

## Contact

David Groth, Teacher  
Sorensen Elementary School  
9th and Coeur d'Alene  
Coeur d'Alene, Idaho 83814  
E-mail: [dgroth@sd271.k12.id.us](mailto:dgroth@sd271.k12.id.us) or [idahojuggler@adelphia.net](mailto:idahojuggler@adelphia.net)

## Suggested Student Reading

- Aliki. (1979). *The two of them*. New York, NY: Mulberry Books.
- Fox, M. (Author), & Vivas, J. (Illustrator). (1985). *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*. Brooklyn, NY: Kane/Miller.
- Howard, E.F. (Author), & Ransome, J. (Illustrator). (1991). *Aunt Flossie's hats (and crab cakes later)*. New York, NY: Clarion Books.
- Kesselman, W. (Author), & Cooney, B., (Illustrator). (1980). *Emma*. New York, NY: Dragonfly Books.
- Laminack, L.L. (Author), & Soentpiet, C. (Illustrator). (2004). *Saturdays and tea cakes*. Atlanta, GA: Peachtree.
- Lindbergh, R. (Author), & Carter, A. (Illustrator). (2003). *My hippie grandmother*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Martin, B. Jr., & Archambault, J. (Authors), & Rand, T. (Illustrator). (1966). *Knots on a counting rope*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.
- Polacco, P. (1992). *Mrs. Katz and Tush*. New York, NY: Dell Picture Books.
- Polacco, P. (1998). *Chicken Sunday*. New York, NY: Paperstar Book.
- Rylant, C. (Author), & Brown, K. (Illustrator). (1996). *The old woman who named things*. New York, NY: Voyager Books.
- Yolen, J. (Author), & Cooper, F. (Illustrator). (1997). *Miz Berlin walks*. New York, NY: Puffin Books.





# STRAWBERRY FIELDS FOREVER

## ESL Students Investigate the Crop That Sustains Their Community and Learn Academic and Life Skills in the Process

Between the frothy blue expanse of the Pacific Ocean and the stony gray rise of the Santa Monica Mountains lies a patchwork quilt of velvety greens and earthy browns: the orchards and fields of the Oxnard Plain. Fertile topsoil, adequate water, and a long, warm growing season have made the area a prime spot for agriculture. Nineteenth-century settlers grew large crops of lima beans and barley here. Sugar beets became big business for early 20th-century farmers when the local Oxnard family built a processing plant in the center of the beet fields and convinced the railroad to come to town to ship the processed beets out. In more recent decades, large corporate farms have turned to high-profit crops such as strawberries, adding another layer of agricultural history—and colorful accents of garnet red—to the area's rich fabric.

So when Mar Vista Elementary School teachers Amada Irma Perez and Michelle Singer set out to develop a collaborative project that would have real-world meaning and resonance for their respective third- and fifth-grade students, they didn't have to

look far for inspiration. The school is surrounded by strawberry fields, and nearly all the students—mostly immigrants from Mexico—have parents (and, oftentimes, extended family members as well) who work in the berry fields. Quite simply, says Perez, “the culture of the school is strawberries.”

What better subject matter could there be than something affecting the students and their families so universally and so personally, that could also be rolled out for study in numerous curricular areas. Students, who were asked to vote on a range of possible



project topics (“so they would have a sense of ownership,” says Perez), agreed. Project Fresa (“strawberry” in Spanish) was born.

The project came about as part of Perez’s and Singer’s work in a professional development course in the 1999–2000 school year. The two bilingual teachers were selected as a team to participate in the California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE) Telementor Project, a joint venture between the Center for Language Minority Education and Research (CLMER) and California State University, Long Beach. The goal of the course was to develop an educational technology project based on a theoretical framework of five specific elements covered in training: standards-based education, critical pedagogy, language acquisition development, antiracist/antibiased education, and community learning theory (see sidebar for more information on these elements).

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROJECT FRESA

The theoretical framework for the project, as described by Perez and Singer on the project Web site ([www.clmer.csulb.edu/gln/fresa/index.html](http://www.clmer.csulb.edu/gln/fresa/index.html)):

**Anti-Racism:** In a different way of looking at established practices, teachers and students begin to examine the status quo and see that it is unjust. Students conduct research and question unfair practices. They have the opportunity to challenge those injustices and ask companies and experts why the situation is as it is. They participate in social action, such as sending e-mail messages to strawberry growers and farms, writing letters, and talking to community activists. Through these experiences, students come to understand that they have the right to ask questions and, ultimately, that they have the power to change society. When their consciousness is raised as to the types of people that work in the fields and why they work there, they can question, gain a new respect for the workers, or make a conscious choice to break the cycle of racism.

**Community Learning Theory:** New connections are established between students, parents, and the community. The family is viewed as an encyclopedia, a well-respected resource that is full of knowledge. The knowledge gained is made public and shared in a community of learners. The lives of their families is a subject worthy of study, research, poetry, math, etc. Through these experiences, their existence and efforts become validated. The bond between the students, their parents, and the school is strengthened. Parents are seen as a fountain of knowledge. The learning comes from each other, not solely what is in textbooks or currently on the Internet. The learning is what is created every day.

**Critical Pedagogy:** This pedagogy honors the children’s lives. Their collective experiences have not been previously examined in the elementary school classroom. Discussing their realities opens the way to transformation because of dialogue and reflection. Students take social action that will lead to positive changes. Dialogue, questioning, interviews, and graphs are examples.

**Language Acquisition Development:** Listening, speaking, reading, and writing, using all skills in Spanish and English, ensures participation by all. Students can communicate in one language with their parents, analyze and present information gained in another. Language is used for a purpose while developing vocabulary, grammar, and research and technology skills. All students have equal access and opportunities to actively participate in the project no matter their language, ability, age, or fluency level.

**Curriculum Content Standards:** The project incorporates many of the Ocean View School District Language Arts Standards that were adopted from the California Language Arts Content Standards. Listed below are:

**Reading Comprehension:**

- Discern main ideas and concepts presented in texts, identifying and assessing evidence that supports those ideas.
- Draw inferences, conclusions, or generalizations about text and support them with textual evidence and prior knowledge.

**Writing Applications:**

- Write research reports about key ideas, issues, or events that frame questions which direct the investigation; establish a controlling idea/topic; develop the topic with simple facts, details, examples, and explanations.
- Write persuasive letters or compositions that state a clear position in support of a proposal; support a position with relevant evidence; address reader concerns.

**Listening and Speaking:**

- Ask questions that seek information not already discussed.
- Make inferences or draw conclusions based on an oral report.
- Analyze media as sources for information, entertainment, persuasion, interpretation of events, and transmission of culture.

The result was a multimedia, cross-curricular anthology about the relationship of the strawberry crops, which surround and sustain the local community and economy, to the students' lives. As part of the project, students prepared questions and conducted interviews with family members who worked in the fields; collected, graphed, and analyzed data; researched the industry via the Internet and other printed sources; wrote journal entries, quick writes, poems, and letters; analyzed issues related to audience in communication with family, industry representatives, and legislators; and engaged in social action. Throughout the project, they shared the work with their schoolmates, their families, and then the global community via technology. The latter resulted in the children making connections with students in other agricultural regions of the world with whom they exchanged information and engaged in dialogue about the similarities and differences in their lives.

The project provided the children with rich language and cultural experiences, helped them to improve oral and written communication skills in both English and Spanish, and gave them the opportunity to examine and express their thoughts and feelings surrounding their daily reality. Additionally, the students gained knowledge and skills in other academic areas, including math, social studies, geography, art, and the use of technology.

## What We Know, What We Want To Learn

Their work began with a teacher-facilitated discussion of what the students already knew about strawberries and the local industry, and what they wanted to learn during their course of study. Many, for instance, had observed that their parents worked long hours in the fields. In a journal entry, Eliana wrote, "Every day, my mom used to get up at 4:00 a.m., make her lunch, and go to work. When she got home I would already be

asleep.” Some had observed that their family members suffered from frequent headaches and backaches. And most were aware that farm workers were not highly paid.

The students’ curiosity led them to prepare a list of interview questions for their family members including:

- How many hours do you work?
- Do you like working in the fields?
- Why do you get headaches and back pain?
- How many years have you worked in the fields?
- How much money do they pay per box?
- Why do you work in the fields?

Some interviewees were hesitant to participate at first, reports Singer: “They wanted to know why were we asking these questions now and what would the answers be used for. But, once they understood the why and the purpose of the project, they were OK with it.”

Their answers were often eye-opening for the students. The children learned, for instance, how difficult the work truly was—that the workers spent long days hunched over picking berries in the blazing sun, and it was this constant stooping that led to chronic back injuries. Frequent headaches were due not only to prolonged exposure to the sun, but also to dangerous pesticides such as methyl bromide, one of the most toxic chemicals used in agriculture today. Additionally, students learned that working conditions were frequently poor. Oftentimes, there were no restroom facilities or extremely poor ones, no access to running water, and rarely even a place to eat lunch. And, indeed, the pay was very low.

Students gained “awareness about their lives,” says Perez. “It opened up communication with their families; they talked about things that are never spoken about.”

“I don’t think the parents had really talked about their work before,” adds Singer, “because the students came back learning so much about their parents and about their families. They hadn’t had these conversations and I think one of the reasons was that

it wasn’t something that was really valued. But, here, it was something that we were putting on the Internet and sharing with classes in the school and around the world, and it was becoming part of the curriculum. So now it was valued. It validated the parents and allowed them to have conversations with their children that they wouldn’t necessarily have otherwise had.”

Students conducted further research on the Internet, accessing sites on labor rights including the United Farm Workers and industry giants Dole and Driscoll, among others. They consulted a variety of printed resources, from encyclopedias to industry brochures. Addi-



tionally, guest speakers, including several parents and Cesar Hernandez of the California Rural Assistance League, made presentations to the students.

Many students realized for the first time how hard their parents were working so that they might have other opportunities. Says Singer: “One of the things I talked about with my fifth-graders, especially the ones who might easily be led into gangs and that terrible cycle of things down the road, was how hard their parents were working and how much they were sacrificing so that their kids could have a better life. For a lot of these kids, it was an ‘Aha!’ to them, to realize that their parents are supporting their education so that they won’t have to work in the strawberry fields if they don’t want to. Not that working in the strawberry fields is a bad thing. It’s just that, if you don’t want to work with your body and your hands and your back aching, you can work with your mind. There are other opportunities.”

## Writing

Throughout the project, students recorded information and observations in journal entries and quick writes. In his journal, Miguel writes: “I learned from Cesar Hernandez’s presentation that the poison farm workers use in strawberries are dangerous. I also learned that farm workers get paid \$8,500 in a year. Some bathrooms in the fields don’t even have toilet paper.” In a quick write, Berenice says, “My grandpa used to work in the strawberry fields. ... He worked there for 32 years because he never went to school.”

Students also wrote poems to express their thoughts and feelings. These poems run the gamut from positive views of the heart-shaped berries they have known and loved all their lives, to negative discoveries about the dangers their families face working in the fields:

Fields,  
Seeds, Soil  
Growing, Picking, Eating,  
Our Fields, Our History  
Strawberries  
—Victorico

Plastic  
Enormous, clear  
Covering, helping cleaning  
Help keeps germs off  
Plastic  
—Vanessa

Fertilizer  
poisonous, dangerous  
killing, helping, growing  
medicine that’s good and bad  
Fertilizer  
—Maribel

Strawberries  
juicy, red  
eating, planting, grabbing  
they are good to eat  
Strawberries  
—Jose



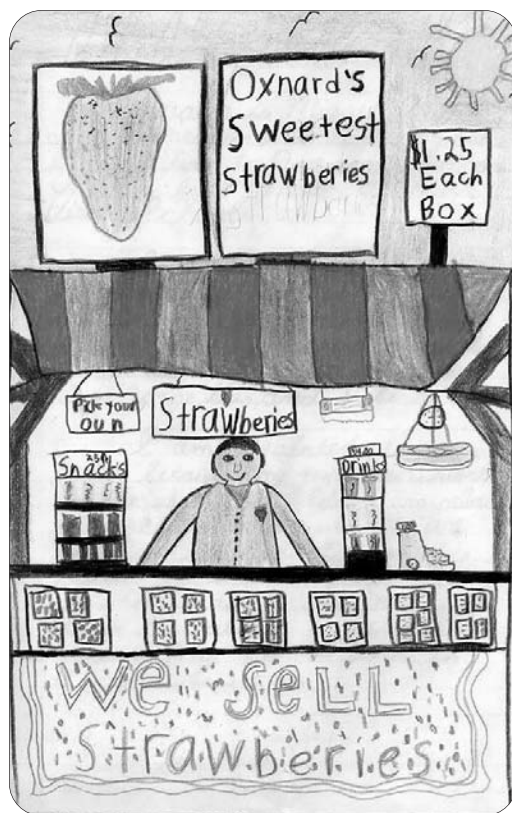
## Collaboration and Social Action

While third- and fifth-graders did much of their research and work in their respective classrooms, they also worked collaboratively as “buddies” throughout the project, meeting at least once a week for 30 to 60 minutes and sometimes before school as well. During this collaborative time, the older students served as peer mentors to the younger children, helping them with some of the more complex aspects of the project: for example, graphing and analyzing the data they had collected in their family interviews. This included selecting the appropriate representation—for instance, bar graph or pie chart—to display data regarding such information as how many hours per day workers spent in the fields and how much they were paid per box of berries.

As a group, students recorded their observations about working conditions on big sheets of butcher paper and discussed what they could do with the information they had gathered.

The discussion included a comparison of their own working environment at school—where they had access to clean bathrooms, running water, and a comfortable lunch room—to that of their parents, and “they were just shocked,” says Singer. “They were like, ‘Hey, I’m only 10 years old and I have a better working environment than my mom who’s 30?’”

“And they looked at labor rights,” adds Singer, “and they noticed that the laws for migrant workers were different. In school, they could see that there were certain rights that teachers had. They were saying, ‘Hey, you get a lunch, you get a recess, you have so many working hours that are set.’ And then they looked at rights for migrant workers and they were like, ‘Well, why is it different for migrant workers than it is for everybody else?’” In the end, “they said, ‘You know, this isn’t right. And maybe there’s something we can do about it.’ It was a real call to action for them.”

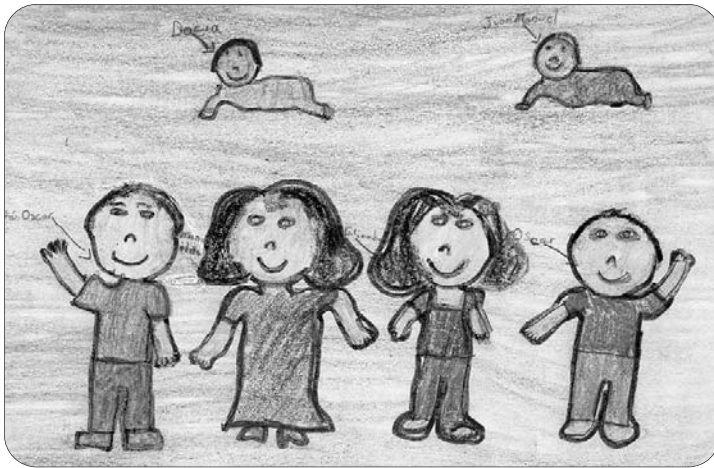


In their fifth-grade curriculum, students had been studying American history and the democratic process. “They learned that elected officials can take action on a community’s behalf,” Singer says, “whether it be a congressman or a senator or a local city council person or somebody all the way up to the governor, that they have the power to assist the community in whatever it is that they need.”

The fifth-graders decided to write to California Governor Gray Davis and to owners of the corporate strawberry farms to ask why working conditions were so poor and why dangerous pesticides were being used. And they asked for help in improving the situation.

Governor Davis responded with a letter thanking them for sharing their views and promising that their ideas would receive consideration.

The kids were “ecstatic” he had responded, says Singer. “They were excited by the official seal and his signature—I mean this was a big deal that he actually responded. But after the initial excitement wore off, once the entertainment or celebrity-status value of it deflated, and they started analyzing it, they were like,



‘Well, he didn’t ask us any more questions; he didn’t set forth a plan of what he was going to do; there’s nothing specific in here. He really didn’t take us seriously.’” In Adilene’s journal, she wrote, “He thought it was just a joke.”

“The students were upset,” observes Singer. “There were 30 students that wrote pretty solid letters to him about a problem in our neighborhood and they didn’t feel, after analyzing the letter, that he was going to do anything about it.”

Singer saw the situation as an opportunity for further social studies learning. “So I talked about, well, that’s the beauty of the democratic process. This is someone we elected so, in the future, you can choose, based upon somebody’s action, you can choose to vote them back into office or you can choose not to. You choose somebody who will address your concerns. We were able to connect it to the Boston Tea Party, the ‘no taxation without representation’ where the people weren’t getting a voice. Well, if your voice is not being heard, you can choose to vote for somebody that will hear your concerns.”

Responses from the corporate farm owners were also less than satisfactory. It took months and repeated e-mails to get a reply, reports Singer. When they finally received an envelope from a public relations representative, it was filled with colorful stickers and glossy brochures—what the students came to see as “propaganda,” says the teacher—as well as a letter which essentially dismissed the students’ concerns. “It was very defensive,” observes Perez, and the students were disappointed.

Still, students did get a sense of empowerment in learning there were ways to confront abuse and injustice—by writing letters, organizing people, voting, and by simply sharing their reality with others via the Internet.

And, Perez adds, students learned that not everybody is dissatisfied with the status quo. Despite difficult working conditions and low pay, “some of the parents said that they loved working in the fields,” says Perez. “They said they loved being outside with nature, they loved smelling the freshness of the air and feeling the sunlight on their bodies. It was almost romanticized. And that was surprising to us. But that was really good for the kids to know.”

Perez says efforts were made throughout the project to be respectful of all involved: “We wanted them not to ever feel that working in the fields was a bad thing or that their parents were doing something menial. And I remember one third-grader who—even after the research—said, when he grew up, he wanted to work in the fields; he wanted to drive a tractor like his father. His father loved his work and he wanted to do the same thing. He thought it was the coolest thing to drive around on a tractor in the fields. And I thought that was just beautiful. ... And it showed that farm work had not become a bad thing to do or a sad thing to do, but that there are different jobs, and they had a choice of whether they wanted to do that or not. After the research, most of the kids realized they could make a choice—maybe their parents didn’t have that choice, but they could make a choice and it had to do with education.”

“Something else fantastic” came out of the project as well, notes Perez. When parents visited the school for an open house, they huddled around the classroom computer where a slide show was flashing digital photos of the children and their work on the project. “They were very excited,” says Perez, “and started inquiring how could they buy a computer. They knew that a computer was very important for their children, to further their education. So they were trying to figure out how to buy a computer in payments.” Many of these parents realize that education and access to technology are the keys to giving their children other options in life, says Perez.

The project also inspired parents to visit the library with their children, some for the very first time. “I showed one of my students how to find the graphs and charts on the Internet that we had done in our math class,” says Singer. “After school, the girl went home, got her grandfather, and took him to the public library to show him the chart on the Internet and his place on it. (He is the person listed on the graph as having worked in the field the most years—35, to be exact!)

“In all his years, this man had never set foot in a library before,” says Singer, and now here he was using a computer and accessing the Internet to find himself represented there. “It really honored his life’s work and what he sacrificed for his kids,” says the teacher. “This is one of the things that we hoped would come from this project ... that people would do things they normally would not do ... that they would value things they did not value before.”

## Global Connections

Through their Web research, the students and their families discovered some interesting facts: For instance, Oxnard strawberries are served at Wimbledon in England each year and the best and biggest strawberries—some the size of apples—are shipped to Japan and Germany. Additionally, strawberries are grown in every state of the United States, and many places on this continent and abroad claim to be the strawberry capital of the world. (Oxnard also lays claim to this title.)



**What a connection! Where they had no connection with India before, all of a sudden, they're connected by the very crops that they work.**

Mar Vista students connected with some of these rivals through their participation in a global learning network sponsored by CLMER. On the center's Web site ([www.clmer.csulb.edu/gln/](http://www.clmer.csulb.edu/gln/)), Project Fresa is featured alongside other notable educational technology projects with the objective of connecting classrooms in different parts of the world working on like projects. The idea is to make learning more meaningful by helping children make real connections in the real world.

It was through this network that Oxnard students connected with a classroom in Puerto Rico where students were engaged in a similar project investigating the local coffee industry. Students found there were many similarities between the industries, including poor pay and less than ideal working conditions for farm workers.

Mar Vista students also forged a bond with students in a region of India where strawberries are grown. Via e-mail, the students exchanged information and photos, and then explored the similarities and differences between the two strawberry industries. What they learned was that, while the crops required similar care and the work was equally challenging in both locales, there were many differences. For instance, children often work in the fields in India, whereas adults are the primary workers in California; strawberry farms in India are small and independently owned, a distinct difference from the sprawling fields and corporate giants of California's agricultural scene; and Indian farm workers dress much fancier for work than their California counterparts.

The students enjoyed this exchange of information but really bonded when they discovered that the Indian farmers' starter plants—the initial plants used to start and grow the crop—came from Oxnard. “The kids were just blown away,” says Perez. “What a connection! Where they had no connection with India before, all of a sudden, they're connected by the very crops that they work.”

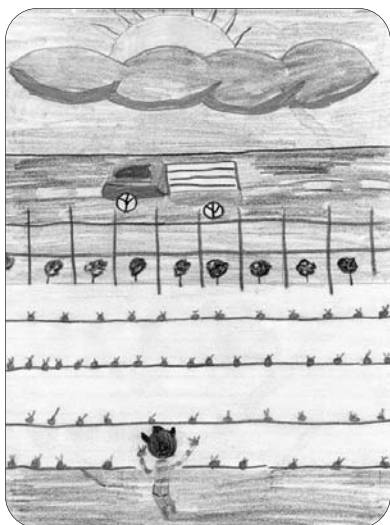
## Real Learning at the Deepest Level

It's important to note, says Singer, that all the project work was done in two classrooms with one computer each. “I had one computer and Amada had one computer,” the teacher says, “and so a lot of kids would come before school to do research, or after school or at lunch or at recess. Or some of them would say, ‘I really want to keep looking at the Driscoll site; if I finish my work early, can I have computer time?’ It was a motivating factor for them to be on task and to complete their work and their homework, because they knew that if they didn't, they weren't going to have access to the computer and that was precious.”

But the key motivation was the connection to the students' own lives. “You're talking about Berenice's grandfather and Adilene's mother,” says Singer. “You're talking about a personal connection. And when they learned that they could have a voice and they could fight [injustice] and that people had to listen to them and respond to what they had to say about what was happening to their mom or grandfather or uncle or brother, it really changed a lot for them.”

Students gained “a new sense of place value. Students' parents' work is now viewed with a new understanding and respect,” says Perez. The teacher adds: “You know, children are not just a bunch of empty cans to be filled by whatever the school district or the society thinks it's important to know, but to recognize that every student has





knowledge already, that every family—no matter how humble they are, no matter where they come from—has history and knowledge, and it's a matter of sharing that knowledge with each other and honoring that knowledge and the collective knowledge that makes [learning] truly happen."

"These students—after interviewing their parents—found out that what their parents had to say was important, and was worth studying, and worth graphing, and worth analyzing," says Perez. "It gave [the new knowledge] worth, made it real, made it important. And so they felt that their families were important—like, maybe at one point they didn't feel like that—but as they transferred the information that the parents had inside them to paper, and then from paper to computer, and then shared it with the world, it became important. It's not just graphs in a book about information that's not important to them. It was real learning at the very deepest level."

Says Singer, "It's about connecting school to home, seeing that their parents' experience is valued enough to be a part of their education and that their parents are just as honored as authors whose work we read in books."

## Student Writing Samples

### Quick Writes

My aunt covers her face because there is a lot of fertilizers and chemicals. She has been working for 20 years. But she retired because she was tired of working there. —*Silvia*

What I learned is that my brother works ten hours a day. My brother said that he likes to work in the field. They pay him \$1.45 for a box. He starts at 7 a.m. and stops at 5 p.m. They cover their faces so they don't burn them. —*Adrian*

My grandpa used to work in the strawberry fields ... He worked there for 32 years because he never went to school. —*Berenice*

### Journals

I am related to strawberries because my whole family has worked in the strawberry fields. Every day, my mom used to get up at 4:00 a.m., make her lunch and go to work. When she got home I would already be asleep. My two aunts also worked in the strawberry fields. When they would get home they were very tired. It was really hard for them because they would have to stand up all day. —*Eliana*

I learned from Cesar Hernandez's presentation that the poison farm workers use in strawberries are dangerous. I also learned that farm workers get paid \$8,500 in a year. Some bathrooms in the fields don't even have toilet paper. —*Miguel*

... If our parents touch the poison and then touch us we could get sick. —*Rafael*

There's different ways pesticides can get into your body. One of the ways is by sweating. Another way is by breathing it. It can even get inside your eyes. A different way is if you don't clean and wash strawberries before you eat them. These are the various ways pesticides can get into your body. —*Veronica*



## Letters

*January 21, 2000*

Honorable Gray Davis  
Governor  
State Capitol Building  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Honorable Gray Davis,

Hello! My name is Cirilo. I am a fifth grade student and I am ten years old. I attend Mar Vista Elementary School, located in Oxnard, California. I am writing to you because I am concerned about pesticides.

I am concerned about pesticides because the people that work in fields might get sick. When the workers inhale the pesticides they can get rashes and cancer. It's not fair to the workers that they can get sick from doing their job.

As a result, the pesticides are very unsafe because it is poisonous to the workers that use it.

Sincerely,  
*Cirilo*

*January 21, 2000*

Honorable Gray Davis  
Governor  
State Capitol Building  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Honorable Gray Davis,

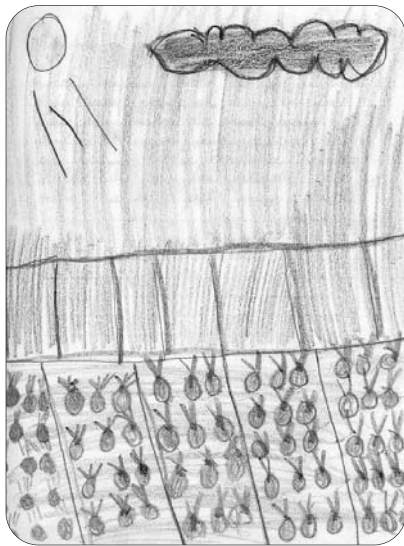
Hello! My name is Nayeli. I am a fifth grade student and I am 10 years old. I attend Mar Vista Elementary School, located in Oxnard, California. I am writing to you because I am concerned about pesticides.

I am concerned about pesticide because it is very dangerous for many people. Pesticides affect the area I live in. I am also worried about pesticides because the strawberry fields are near my school. I am interested in knowing what you can do to protect my family from the dangers of pesticides.

Consequently, I believe that pesticides are hazardous to people. I encourage you to do something about it. For example, tell the companies to use less pesticides. I look forward to hearing from you as soon as possible.

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter. I would appreciate if you could do something about pesticides. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,  
*Nayeli*



## Reflections

Mexican people work in strawberry fields because they never went to school. They also work to earn money and afford their family with food and clothes. Some of the Mexican people came to get a job because where they lived they didn't have one.

I am glad we did Project Fresa because we learned important things. If [we] didn't learn about strawberries we wouldn't been able to make this book. Making this book meant to alot because I learn good things.

When Lolita Echeveria came to class I learned alot of things. Lolita was showing us how [to] write a letter to the governor. If Lolita didn't [show] us how to make a letter we wouldn't been able to tell him about the pesticides.

—Alfredo

## Project Outline

- The teacher facilitated a discussion with the students on what they knew about the subject of strawberries in their local community and what they wanted to learn.
- Students prepared a list of questions and interviewed family and other community members about their experiences working in the strawberry fields.
- Students shared an oral presentation of their findings.
- Students conducted research through encyclopedias, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet.
- Students did “quick writes” on experiences related to the occupation of farm worker and to the geographical area.
- Students kept journals throughout the project, recording their observations and learning.
- Students wrote poetry and made drawings and paintings related to the project.
- Students participated in ongoing dialogue with students and teachers and with partner classes around the world.
- Students made observations about problems confronting strawberry farm workers and wrote letters and e-mails to influential people to take action toward correcting problems.
- Students practiced math skills by studying farm worker salaries, wages, and benefits; examining farm owner expenses and profits; looking at revenue generated from strawberries for city, county, state, country, and global economies; collecting, organizing, and analyzing data; and presenting information gained.
- Students learned geography by charting and mapping places where Oxnard strawberries have been shipped, and then comparing how much strawberries sell for in those locales.

- Students gained technology skills by using tape recorders for interviews; digital cameras and video cameras for documentation; the Internet for research; e-mail and AlphaSmarts for global networking; Web publishing and word processing software for writing activities; and a scanner for student artwork and photographs.
- Students reviewed their “what we know/what we want to know” lists from the start of the project and shared what they learned.

## Contacts

Amada Irma Perez has retired from teaching and become a published children's book author, and Michelle Singer has become vice principal in another school district:

Amada Irma Perez  
Phone: (805) 642-7940  
E-mail: ramadaz@aol.com

Michelle Singer  
Phone: (805) 641-5491  
E-mail: msinger@vtusd.k12.ca.us

## Suggested Student Reading

Altman, L.J. (Author), & Sanchez, E.O. (Illustrator). (1993). *Amelia's road*. New York, NY: Lee & Low Books.

Atkin, S.B. (1993). *Voices from the fields: Children of migrant farmworkers tell their stories*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.

Bunting, E. (Author), & Diaz, D. (Illustrator). (1998). *Going home*. New York, NY: HarperTrophy.

Bunting, E. (Author), & Himler, R. (Illustrator). (1997). *A day's work*. New York, NY: Clarion Books.

Cohn, D. (Author), & Delgado, F. (Illustrator). (2002). *¡Sí, se puede! Yes, we can! Janitor strike in L.A.* El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.

Jiménez, F. (1997). *The circuit: Stories from the life of a migrant child*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

Krull, K. (Author), & Morales, Y. (Illustrator). (2003). *Harvesting hope: The story of Cesar Chavez*. New York, NY: Harcourt.

Madrigal, A.H. (Author), & dePaola, T. (Illustrator). (1999). *Erandi's braids*. New York, NY: Puffin Books.

Ryan, P.M. (2002). *Esperanza rising*. Troy, MI: Blue Sky Press.

Stevens, J.R. (Author), & Arnold, J. (Illustrator). (1995). *Carlos and the cornfield/ Carlos y la milpa de maíz*. Flagstaff, AZ: Rising Moon.



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# A TALKING BOOK

## Using Technology, Students Share Their Culture Statewide

**T**ulalip Elementary School is located on the Tulalip Indian Reservation, which lies on the shores of Puget Sound about 40 miles north of Seattle. The area is home to approximately 3,600 enrolled members of the Tulalip Tribes, which are made up of a number of smaller Puget Sound tribes, including the Snohomish, Snoqualmie, Skagit, Suiattle, Samish, and Stillaguamish. The school sits on a bay overlooking Whidbey Island, with the Olympic Mountains rising in the distance to the west. With a student body that is about 70 percent Native American, the school strives to implement a challenging curriculum that values the rich local culture.



For teacher David Cort, this includes connecting technology, literacy, art, and culture to projects that allow for active learning, serve real purposes, and meet state standards. He does this primarily by having students read and listen to traditional Tulalip stories and related texts, and using technology to present these stories. As the school's technology coordinator, he has taught his students to make several interactive story books on CD-ROM—digital books that are read on a computer screen.

Cort became interested in the culture of the Tulalip area when he arrived in the Pacific Northwest from California. By working with community members and tribal elders, including Upper Skagit elder Vi Hilbert, he learned Lushootseed, the first language spoken by Native people in the Puget Sound. According to a number of researchers (Demmert, 2001;



Yazzie, 2000), Native language and culture are important factors in Native American children's acquisition of knowledge and academic achievement. "Kids love learning about the rich culture we have here at Tulalip," says Cort. "They feel pride; they see themselves as leaders. Culture motivates them to learn."

## Creating the *Uncle Jerry's Canoe* CD-ROM

The CD-ROMs created by Cort's students allow computer users to read a story on their computer screen and listen to it being told. Through the click of a mouse, the user flips through the pages of this "digital" or "interactive" book. Much like watching a DVD or using a Web site, the format also allows students to put additional "features" onto the CD-ROM. For example, they may include a few pages about the author or storyteller.

One of the goals behind the CD-ROM interactive books has been to create an exciting reading resource for children to use at home. Because the Tulalip Tribes have given each family in the community a computer, the digital books can be used by young children at home to provide unique literacy and technology experiences, as well as show family members the skills children are learning in school. Because the children do not see themselves in commonly available books and media, the CD-ROMs also fill a gap in the materials available to them.

Earlier CD-ROMs created by the students were based on traditional Tulalip stories. Students would study the story and create animated illustrations to accompany it, drawing on the techniques of traditional Tulalip artists. One of the students' most recent projects was built around the children's book *Uncle Jerry's Canoe*, written by Nan McNutt and illustrated by Shaun Peterson. The story is about Jerry Jones, a master canoe carver of the Tulalip Tribes; it describes a canoe ride with Jones and his grandchildren. Cort was interested in working with the story because he had two of Jerry Jones's grandchildren in his classes.<sup>2</sup>

Cort asked the two grandchildren, Johnathan and Chambray, to be the leaders of the project. He made sure the students talked with Jerry Jones and sought his input for the project. "We want to make sure that students are being guided by their elders and parents, so they have permission from their families for any cultural content that they bring to the classroom," he says. Jones encouraged his grandchildren to share what they knew about the canoe journey, an important annual cultural event in which adults and youth of many Northwest coastal tribes paddle seafaring canoes to visit a host tribe. When they arrive, there is a cultural and spiritual gathering based on traditional practices that includes ceremonies, songs, dances, storytelling, honorings, and feasts. Many Tulalip students and their family members are involved in the canoe culture and get together regularly to practice the canoe family songs and dances.

At the beginning of the year, Cort met with Johnathan and Chambray to outline the project. They thought about the features they wanted to include in their CD-ROM.

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<sup>2</sup> *Uncle Jerry's Canoe* is one of several books that form the backbone of the Northwest Native American Reading Curriculum, a curriculum designed by Evergreen State College and the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to link literacy and language development with relevant and engaging subject matter for Native American students. The idea to create the CD-ROM was facilitated through a conversation Cort had with Evergreen's Magda Costantino. Cort mentioned that he had two of Jones's grandchildren in his classes. Through their discussion they concluded a CD-ROM project around the book would make a nice contribution to the reading curriculum.



They knew they would have the story *Uncle Jerry's Canoe* reproduced on the computer and users could read it by mouse-clicking through the pages on the screen. The user would also be able to click on the words to listen to the story. For this feature, the students used an audio editing program to record their voices as they read the story aloud.

The students also knew that they wanted to include background information about the canoe culture, as well as some fun games. They brainstormed ideas for different things to include. They decided to distribute these features throughout the story, so that on each page the user could click on a button that said “learn!” to discover some background information presented through text and video. Another button that said “play!” allowed users to try their hand at the games.

Cort sat down at a computer and typed as Johnathan and Chambray dictated the scripts for short video segments containing background information and their personal experiences with the canoe culture. They also wrote a script for the introduction of the CD-ROM, where the students introduced the story and explained how to navigate through the talking book. Once the scripts were completed, Cort used a digital video camera to record the students as they presented the information, and then added these segments to the CD-ROM.

## Writing About Their Culture

For the background information segments, accessed by clicking on the multiple “learn!” buttons in the CD-ROM interactive book, Johnathan and Chambray included other students from their classes who were involved with the canoe family. Students participated in the acting, filming, audio recording, and audio editing. They were particularly interested in sharing their own experiences and connections to the content of the book. Students were given different options for sharing their stories. Some prepared oral interviews while others shared a piece written with varied levels of support from their teacher. This individuality allowed the emphasis to be placed on sharing something that was important and meaningful to the student in a way that they could share it. Here are some examples of the work students engaged in:

- Cort worked one-to-one with a student who was on an IEP and struggled with reading and writing. Cort and the student sat down together and thought through what the child had to say about the canoe journey. “At first, he was very terse and couldn’t think of anything, but as we worked together he realized he really had a lot to say about his experience on the canoe journey and he was very excited about saying it,” recalls Cort. Cort acted as his scribe, writing down the student’s dictated story. They talked about revision strategies while they worked, eventually reaching a point where the student felt very proud of his writing. Then the student selected photographs of the local area, put them into a slide show using Macromedia Flash software, and recorded himself reading the essay, which resulted in a polished presentation.

- A third-grader volunteered to write an essay about her great-grandfather, who is a carver. She interviewed family members and wrote her essay at home under the guidance of her parents. Her mother came in after school one day with a number of works of art the great-grandfather had carved. The student used a digital camera to photograph the carvings and then Cort used a digital video camera to tape the student sharing the essay that she had written. Her great-grandfather was honored and pleased with the results, even getting a little teary-eyed, the student confided.
- A fourth-grade student independently wrote a series of essays about what it was like to be part of the canoe family—describing the regalia and dances, and providing an account of the canoe family's recent performance in Korea. At first, the essays were used as the basis for a videotape interview, but the student didn't like the way she looked on videotape. Consequently, the essays were turned into an audio presentation so the computer user could read the essays along with the student narrator.

“For many of these kids, when they realize that their family and the canoe culture is something they can share in the classroom, that's when they realize they have powerful stories to tell that they are excited about telling,” shares Cort. Because the students are eager to share this part of their life with their peers, the resulting writing is information-rich, with detailed images and a strong sense of voice. These students have also spent time reading and studying traditional Puget Sound stories, examining features such as repetition and circular figures and the unique worldview these stories offer. Some of these elements are visible in *Uncle Jerry's Canoe* and find their way into the stories students write.

## Polishing the Product

One special aspect of the interactive book is the music that can be heard by clicking on a button. The Tulalip canoe family gave their permission to use a number of songs they had recorded. Since Johnathan plays drum with the canoe family and Chambray dances to a number of the songs, this was one feature that the students felt was very



**It really takes a one-on-one effort to help a student with special needs tell his story. It takes a bit of time, but I think it's well worth it.**

important. It has also become a feature that draws in other students. Cort explains, “When our students come into the lab, they’re all wearing their headphones so I can’t hear the music, but I’ll hear kids all around the room, one by one, starting to sing along with these songs that they’re listening to, and it’s amazing.”

Initially, Cort thought the project would be fairly quick, with a few games and some cultural background. But the interest in the project grew and grew, until eventually most students in the school were participating in some way. In their weekly computer classes, younger students helped to develop graphics for the games, and older students worked on some of the game programming and navigation elements. Using multimedia software like Flash, the games ask the user to unscramble words, match words, or catch the words that begin or end with a certain letter. Students’ enthusiasm for the project is apparent as they show visitors the witty animation and sounds they have created with the software. Though many of these tasks were complex, Cort reports that students were motivated to learn how to do them, even reading computer manuals to figure out their questions.

In addition, the school principal allocated part of Cort’s weekly schedule of technology classes to allow time to work with small groups of students. “It really takes a one-on-one effort to help a student with special needs tell his story. It takes a bit of time, but I think it’s well worth it. If I were in the classroom it would be more challenging, but I think teachers have all sorts of ways that they’re able to carve out time to work one-on-one with students. I think that would still be an important part of doing these projects,” says Cort.

This time, the students had an even wider audience for their work—1,000 copies were made of the CD-ROM and it was distributed around the state with Washington state’s Northwest Native American K–3 Reading Curriculum.

Students feel that they have accomplished something really special. They’re proud to be able to share their culture, using literacy, art, and technology skills. Some students have completed a piece of writing that has celebrated who they are and informed, excited, and moved others. As Cort explains, “It’s a way for them to learn Washington state’s Essential Learnings in a cultural context that’s meaningful and exciting for them.”

## Student Writing Samples

### **Hike to the Canoes** by R.J.

We were at Quinault and we were walking down to Ozette along the Ozette trail. Nikki said to me, “Do you want to go on a 3-mile hike?” A hike sounded like fun, and 3 miles on a trail didn’t seem that long. So I said, “Let’s go.”

At first we hiked off quickly. We were chatting about the canoes. We were reading signs along the trail that taught us interesting facts. We passed giant cedar trees, some standing and some fallen over. But, as we walked on hour after hour, we began getting tired. We stopped and pulled out some energy bars, but even that didn’t help. Our feet were starting to feel heavier. We felt hot under the sun, and my hair was all wet. The sweat even began to soak through my hat. I wondered, could we get through this trail quicker? I thought we would never reach the canoes.

Then after 3 hours, we came to a cliff and looked out. We saw the bluish, greenish water splashing below us. We saw the canoes coming, the paddlers turning them around to come in. We decided to go down and say hi to the paddlers. We hurried down the cliff to the water and began to help them get the canoes in. I felt so happy to get there!

**Regalia** by *Tanika*

We have red or black dresses. If we have a black dress, we wear a red cap or shawl, and if we have a red dress, we wear a black cape or shawl.

We have our own designs. On my dress, I have a cougar, some other people have faces, and my auntie has people paddling a canoe all the way around her regalia. I like her designs because she can draw really well!

My grandma and the other women singers wear vests with black skirts. My grandpa wears a vest. Eddie wears a cedar skirt with a headband.

In Korea, the first place we performed had lots and lots of lights. There were lights in front of us, on the side and in back of us. When we were performing, I was in the back, and I was looking out at everybody's regalia. The regalia was shining because of all the lights, and I thought it looked very pretty. I looked at my grandpa, and he was drumming. My grandma was singing with her rattle, and their vests were shining.

**Canoe Journey** by *Johnathan*

The canoe journey was fun last year. There were things to see, smell, taste, hear and touch.

I saw singers from different tribes and I saw canoe paddlers. The singers wore red and black clothing decorated with eagles. They stood in a curving line and the men held up their drums while the women were dancing. I know that the other tribes were different because they didn't sing the same songs.

I smelled a lot of cedar there. People carved rattles and drums. The kind of cedar we carve with is Alder cedar. It smells kind of sweet and good.

I ate a lot of food there like hot dogs, hamburgers and corndogs. The hamburgers tasted good, the hotdogs were better, and corndogs were the best.

I heard a lot of stuff like rattles, singing and drums. The drums were the loudest. The loudest drum in our family was my grandpa's! The rattles sounded like rattle-snakes.

I touched drums and rattles, even my grandpa's canoes. My grandpas canoes were hard—you should feel it. They are smooth, to go through the water better but when you touch the paint outside, the wood feels a little bumpy under the paint.

I had fun on the canoe journey last summer. I got to use all of my senses as I learned more about canoes and my culture. I hope I can go on it again next summer!



## Project Outline

The use of technology is a key feature of this project and one that makes it appealing and engaging to students. But even without the production of the CD-ROM, there are many other elements of this writing project:

- Students read the book *Uncle Jerry's Canoe* and reflected on their own personal connections with the story.
- Students wrote their stories, some independently and others with the help of the teacher.
- For resources and information, some students interviewed family members.
- Students chose how they wanted to present their stories, orally or in writing. Some students presented their information in a question-and-answer interview format.
- Since the stories were published in a public format, students revised and edited their stories, paying attention to conventions and spelling. Some student work included storytelling techniques such as the artful use of repetition, found in traditional Puget Sound stories.
- Some students used photos of settings or artifacts to illustrate their stories. Either the student or the teacher typed the story.

## Contact

David Cort, Teacher  
 Tulalip Elementary School  
 7730 36th Avenue NW  
 Marysville, Washington 98271  
 E-mail: David\_Cort@msvl.k12.wa.us  
 Web site: [www.msvl.k12.wa.us/elementary/tulalip/home.asp](http://www.msvl.k12.wa.us/elementary/tulalip/home.asp)

## Suggested Student Reading

Bruchac, J., London, J. (Authors), & Locker, T. (Illustrator). (1992). *Thirteen moons on a turtle's back: A Native American year of moons*. New York, NY: Putnam & Grosset.

Hirschfelder, A., & Singer, B.R. (1992). *Rising voices: Writings of young Native Americans*. New York, NY: Ivy Books.

Hirschi, R. (Author), & Bergum, C.R. (Illustrator). (1992). *Seya's song*. Seattle, WA: Sasquatch Books.

Hubbard, J. (Ed.). (1994). *Shooting back from the reservation: A photographic view of life by Native American youth*. New York, NY: New Press.

King, S. (Author), & Whipple, C. (Photographer). (1993). *Shannon: An Ojibway dancer*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner.

McMillan, B. (1998). *Salmon summer*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

McNutt, N. (Author), & Peterson, S. (Illustrator). (2002). *Uncle Jerry's canoe*. Olympia, WA: Washington State Higher Education Coordinating Board.



# PRACTITIONER EXAMPLES FROM MIDDLE SCHOOL/ HIGH SCHOOL

## **“I Am a Poet!”**

Transforming Students Into Writers in a Small Alaska School

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# “I AM A POET!”

## Transforming Students Into Writers in a Small Alaska School

“I write because it is something I must do. Writing is as important to me as eating and sleeping.” This is how Tamara Van Wyhe describes her view of writing in the latest anthology of her students’ work, *Amongst the Dreams of Heroes: Poetry and Prose from Our Point of View IV*.

She goes on to say, “The challenge of English teachers everywhere is to spark students’ desires to write both poetry and prose. Even if we aren’t able to make words as necessary as oxygen, we at least hope to present writing as a tolerable activity: one necessary to communication in a civilized society, and certainly one that can entertain when the circumstances are right.”

There’s no doubt that Van Wyhe exceeds this challenge with her junior and senior high school students at Kenny Lake School, a rural K–12 school in Copper Center, Alaska. The evidence is in their masterful writing, published annually in a unique compilation that is both meaningful to the students and provides a place to apply skills required as part of the language arts standards for the state of Alaska.

Copper Center, nestled in the union of the Copper River and Klutina River, is about 200 miles northeast of Anchorage. With a population of just under 400, the city hosts many tourists who come there to visit Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve—America’s largest national park. The scenery is so dramatic that the students, both Alaska Native and Caucasian, have plenty of inspiration to draw from when writing.

At Kenny Lake School, reading and writing are so important that it’s nearly impossible to escape the written word. From kindergarten to 12th grade, students are immersed in language—reading books and writing. In addition to regular classroom activities,





teachers display student writing in the hall, post great quotes in the restrooms, and have links to writing-specific Web sites on their classroom Web pages. The students arrange “magnetic poetry” tiles into poems during lunch, post their work to online poetry sites, enter writing contests, and compile collections of their writing.

After seeing Van Wyhe’s classroom with all the posters on the walls, portfolios on shelves, student work hanging from the ceiling, and hundreds of books in her classroom library, it is clear why she says, “There is NO white space around here because I want my students to be surrounded by and immersed in words.” Her students read many kinds of literature from a wide variety of writers. Some of her favorites include Mary Oliver, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, and William Carlos Williams. Through reading and research, her students develop their own favorites.

### Modeling After the Greats

“Charles Dickens learned to write novels by imitating great authors,” writes Van Wyhe, who is a big proponent of starting with models. She embraces the idea of reading like a writer—being immersed in the various genres and studying the way authors write. “In my class, we do a great deal of imitation—we closely study the style of writers we read in our literature books, in novels, and in newspapers,” she says. “We never look only at a story; we always look at the writing in

tandem with the story it tells, and try to make sense of how that style helps to tell the story. In short, we talk a whole lot about writing; then we write a whole lot.”

After spending a summer at the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College in Vermont, Van Wyhe began to use an approach she calls “shadowing,” where students write poems that are like “shadows” of the poems read—similar in shape and structure, yet unique in detail. Van Wyhe explains, “We always begin with a strong model, tear it apart, and figure out how the author put it together with words, punctuation, and sentence length. Then the students attempt to write a similar poem using their own ideas and experiences.” Van Wyhe uses this strategy for all writing assignments including short stories, essays, poetry, vignettes, and nonfiction pieces.

“It’s not plagiarizing. It’s learning!” Van Wyhe exclaims. “Kids need models they can keep at their fingertips as they write. In time, they develop their own styles. By the time they graduate, most of our students have developed tremendous writing voices of their own. These voices often have hints of the writing the kids love—Tim O’Brien, Mary Oliver, Alice Walker, Cynthia Rylant—whatever style really fits them.”

### Writing Inside and Out

Although the students write both in and out of class, they nearly always begin in class. Van Wyhe believes that, just as in real life, writers need time to write if they are to think of themselves as writers. “Authors don’t merely talk about writing, or plan their writing, or review drafts of someone else’s writing ... they take the time to write on a regular basis,” Van Wyhe explains. “That is the basis of my teaching philosophy—spending a great deal of time in class each week really writing.”

Van Wyhe typically starts a writing class by asking students to free write or respond to a prompt, quote, piece of art, or poem. Writing in class gives Van Wyhe the opportunity to work with individual students during that critical drafting stage when they are developing ideas. She says, “I target kids who struggle with their writing because I want to make sure they have a good beginning on paper.” Frequently, students are asked to finish the writing as a homework assignment. But, because all students began the piece in class, everyone has the same structure and a start for that piece of work.

Twice each year, Van Wyhe and her students go outside the walls of the school to write. They take a 10-minute hike on a rustic trail behind the school to a bluff overlooking the Tonsina River across from the Chugach Mountains and Mt. Blackburn (a spectacular peak in the Wrangell Mountain range). The walk through the woods sets the tone for “bluff writing” as students and teacher alike observe the changing colors, the depth of the snow, the birds making a spring return, or an eagle flying overhead. By the time the students emerge in the clearing overlooking the river, they are silent and in the mood to write. Perched on the edge of the dramatic bluff, the class spends at least half of their 100-minute block writing.

## Starting With Poetry

Van Wyhe feels that using poetry as a starting point for writing is especially effective. Because many poems are short, she and her students can read, discuss, and analyze the structure of a poem in about 10 minutes. Then students are given another 10 minutes to start their own poems. Some use much of this time to brainstorm. Others finish a draft of their poem. Either way, everyone ends the writing session with at least a few lines on paper.

Often the class will have longer writing sessions, especially in the computer lab. Beginning last year, “Wednesday Fiction” was initiated in all the high school English classes. At the beginning of Wednesday’s class, Van Wyhe presents students with a prompt, often from Bonni Goldberg’s *Room to Write*. They then get 30 minutes to write: non-stop. The only requirement is that they write for the full 30 minutes. At the end of each quarter, the students choose one of their favorite pieces of Wednesday Fiction to turn into a final draft and publish. They also select a piece to submit to the *Anchorage Daily News* writing contest in the spring, and include a piece of Wednesday Fiction in their writing portfolios at year’s end.

Van Wyhe explains, “So much attention is on nonfiction in content classes that this focus on fiction writing is not only fun, but it also shows students a completely new world of writing. The students really love this activity and want to write. The fluency they develop carries over into their academic writing, resulting in much greater elaboration and development of ideas. Sentence fluency and word choice also improve greatly as a result of this weekly opportunity to write.”

## Sharing Work With Others

“No matter what,” Van Wyhe states, “my students read their own writing aloud during every single class period. Whenever we write, regardless of what the writing is, we share.” Sometimes she asks them to share little bits of their writing they are particularly proud of—strong lines, effective introductions, thesis statements, conclusions,

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examples of alliteration or consonance, similes and metaphors, or sentences that are particularly fluent. Other times, she asks for volunteers to read entire pieces.

Van Wyhe feels that much of a student’s comfort in sharing is in the way sharing is presented. “In our classroom, reading their work aloud is an opportunity to share a bit of themselves, and that is very important. I, too, share my writing with students on a regular basis. They know that I expect them to share their writing and that it’s part of membership in our writing community, so they get used to volunteering or sharing their work when asked. Our students are very supportive of each other and praise each other often.”

“I have had teachers from other schools/places argue that this strategy would never work in their classrooms; however, I feel that when writing is viewed as a highly valued act in a classroom that thinks of itself as a ‘writing community,’ students will become comfortable sharing their work. Other teachers report great success after they make the shift from ‘students reading their assignments aloud’ to ‘sharing in a writing community,’” Van Wyhe states. “So much of it is semantics and psychological, but if the language helps students to feel competent and comfortable as writers in my classroom, then I’ll do and say whatever I must to maintain that feeling.”

Another strategy Van Wyhe employs to help her students feel more comfortable with sharing their work is to help them identify well-written portions of the literature they review. “Through reading and annotating poems on a weekly basis, they learn that identifying ‘good’ writing is a matter of opinion and they can’t be wrong,” she explains. Van Wyhe has found that regardless of what kind of writer a student might be, he or she can pick out a favorite line in a poem or an especially strong image in a short story. “This strategy carries over to sharing his own writing,” Van Wyhe states. “When I ask students to choose a favorite or strong line from their own text, they can’t fall back on the argument that there is ‘nothing good’ within their own work. They know, from experience, that every piece of writing has something good about it.”

## Getting To Know Her Students

With only about 120 students at Kenny Lake School, the teachers get to know their students well. Van Wyhe tries to learn as much as she can about all of her students in order to teach and support them in the most effective ways. She has also worked hard to create a safe learning environment where students can use their experiences to better understand themselves and their relationship to the world—encouraging them to use that as a basis for their writing. She adds, “Students know that I want them to reveal their true selves in their writing—who they really are, not what others want them to be or might see them as. They know I value their honest voices, so they write very openly.”

Because Van Wyhe has taken the time to build trusting relationships, students feel comfortable writing their personal stories. One such story, from the poem “Broken House,” describes with rich symbolism the relationship between a young woman and her mother. The reader can picture the strife, hear the sounds of their struggle, and feel the author’s pain over the destruction that was caused.

**Broken House** by Tonia Goodlataw

We took apart the house, section  
 By section, hating how easy it was  
 To break, how quickly everything fell down.  
 The breaking of the key became  
 The breaking of the door, which made  
 The frame crumble to the floor.  
 We tried to patch it back together,  
 But what was broken could not be fixed.  
 We held nothing but heartache  
 In our slivered hands. We did this as  
 The boys watched and learned,  
 Watching every action turn into  
 A reaction. We let them holler  
 While we ripped and shredded,  
 Putting each piece in a secret closet,  
 Just letting it pile up. While  
 Everyone looked away, my mom and  
 I sat and watched everything shatter, a  
 Family now was broken.

One way Van Wyhe gets to know her students is through “Where I’m From” poems. Van Wyhe starts with the poem “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon. They read the poem, annotate, and discuss it. Then they analyze each line to discover the specifics the author included (where she played, what foods she associated with growing up, expressions her family used). After the analysis, the students have a much clearer guide for creating unique poems—based on such personal experiences that they couldn’t have been written by anyone else, including a sibling.

Often, at the beginning of a new school year, Van Wyhe uses this as an introductory writing assignment for all of her English classes. Van Wyhe explains, “It is such a safe way to experience poetry. Plus, it requires so much thought about what really matters in one’s life and what the things are that have truly shaped the students into the individuals they have become.” Some of the resulting poems are humorous, some are about a specific place or event, but nearly all richly illustrate the students’ lives. In one such poem (see example on pp. 189–190), a student vividly contrasts his past to the life he now lives with his second family.

## Building Relationships and Community

Van Wyhe has found that writing can help build relationships and community: between herself and her students; students and their families; and the school and community. She has also found that getting to know her students leads to getting to know their families. Much of what is written in school records about students and their families involves the things that may affect student performance and often focuses on negatives. Through her students’ writings, Van Wyhe has developed a greater understanding of the strengths of their families and how they support their children’s learning. This new knowledge has even changed the focus of her parent newsletter—

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moving away from “look what the school is doing for your child” to “thank you for all you are doing to help your child learn.”

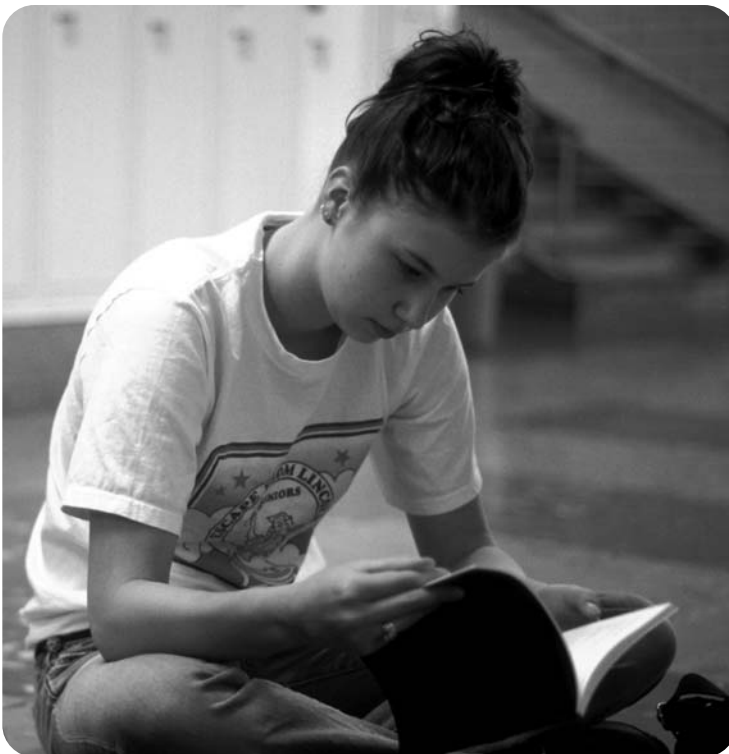
“In my classroom, we write a lot about how family, culture, and community influence who we are because the rural Alaskan environment shapes students in such powerful ways,” Van Wyhe explains. After reading *The Education of Little Tree* by Forest Carter, the students do a series of activities requiring them to create personal timelines and write about learning experiences that occurred outside school. The students think deeply about what they learn from others, often realizing that those “others” are usually family members (typically parents or grandparents), elders, or other community members ... all people they don’t typically associate with “book learning.” Always looking for ways to include parents and community members, Van Wyhe shares writing with the community through the anthology that is published annually. Students from all grades submit favorite pieces they have written throughout the year. Then a student committee chooses pieces for inclusion, edits the writing, and designs the layout and cover. Along with putting on a one-act play and performing a concert, students read poems from the book during the annual Arts Night—one of the most popular school events. Many community members purchase a copy of the anthology during Arts Night and have students autograph their work. The PTA shows how proud they are of the students’ accomplishments by sponsoring the project and ensuring that each “published author” gets a copy of the anthology.

## Student Success

Van Wyhe believes making education, especially language arts, real and meaningful to the students makes a significant difference. She writes, “Fortunately, education at our school remains focused on real learning; this involves real writing. From kindergarten through the 12th grade, students are immersed in language, books, and writing. Students learn to embrace words, to feel confident with text, to understand what it means

to write. And this is, I believe, why Kenny Lake School students fare extraordinarily well on the standardized tests that measure their proficiency and progress.”

On a more personal note, Van Wyhe has learned what this type of focus does for her students, individually. In Kenny Lake’s fourth anthology, Van Wyhe writes, “If, as Robert Frost suggested, being a poet ‘is a condition, not a profession,’ then I believe it is important to encourage students to try their hands at writing verse. If being a poet is ‘a condition’ that allows one to capture experience and make sense of life, then it seems to me all students should graduate with a full understanding of the benefits of this learned ‘condition.’ It is my sincere hope that all the student writers at Kenny Lake School will leave this place suffering





from the wonderful condition known as ‘being a poet,’ regardless of what it is they are writing.”

“I am a Poet!” Those four simple words—not a question, nor a hesitant statement, but a declaration—appear in one 11th-grade student’s journal. It serves as a testament to Van Wyhe’s teaching and the fact that this student—and undoubtedly countless more—have caught the “condition” of being a poet. By recounting memories, tears of pain, shouts of joy, Kenny Lake students capture their experiences and make sense of life.

## Student Writing Samples

### **Avalanche** by Edward Lambert

I come down  
Out of the freezing sky  
Landing in soft white layers  
Building myself  
With each new soft white fall  
I sit upon my rocky throne  
Forever  
Waiting for some careless being  
To unleash my unimaginable power  
And go crashing down  
With the force  
To break trees  
As though they were toothpicks  
I speed down  
As aloud and as fast  
As a freight train  
Full of life  
And energy  
But in the end  
I settle  
As sweet and as beautiful  
As a silent painless death.  
In a plume  
Of soft white dust  
I come to rest  
But only after I consume  
All in my path.

### **Where I’m From** by Wyatt M. LaFromboise

I’m from a poor house  
And a wealthy home.  
My room is full of snow machine pictures  
Of good times and hard times I’ve had  
I’m from two very different lifestyles  
I’m from a black hole; I then saw the light  
That was my way out  
I’m from a rough and tough place where  
I think no other kid has gone

I'm from a place I don't ever want to  
Remember again  
I'm from a hard working place to an easy working place  
I'm from a place where the radio is on every morning,  
Tuned to the same channel and *Caribou Clatters*  
I'm from getting up every morning  
To the smell of bacon and eggs  
I'm from where I get up go to school come home to work on airplanes  
I'm from where I don't have any pictures in my photograph album  
Because I'm sick of looking at all the bad time with the first home  
I know I'm happy because Larry and Alice took me in  
They love me and treat me dearly  
I come from where I can't ask for any more  
Larry and Alice, thank you for taking me in.

## Project Outline

- Van Wyhe ensures that students have the opportunity to read and write on a regular basis—surrounding them with language and words at every opportunity.
- Students are immersed in a variety of literature and study the way authors write.
- Students read published poetry, discuss it, annotate it, write about it, and then write a poem similar in form and voice to the poem they read.
- Writing begins in the classroom to ensure that students have a firm understanding of the assigned task and a “good start” to the homework.
- The process starts with poetry (which can be analyzed in a short amount of time) and then progresses to longer pieces once the students have perfected their poems.
- Van Wyhe makes sure all students take the opportunity to share their work with the others in their writing community—and, more important, shares her own work as well.
- Van Wyhe creates a safe learning environment where students feel encouraged to use their own experiences as a basis for their writing.
- Student writing is used as a basis for building relationships.
- Student work is published in a yearly anthology.

## Contact

Tamara Van Wyhe, Teacher  
Kenny Lake School  
HC 60, Box 224  
Copper Center, Alaska 99573  
Phone: (907) 822-3870  
E-mail: [tamara\\_vanwyhe@breadnet.middlebury.edu](mailto:tamara_vanwyhe@breadnet.middlebury.edu)  
Web site: <http://kennylakeschool.com/vanwyhehome/index.htm>

## Suggested Student Reading

Carter, F. (1976). *The education of Little Tree*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

Goldberg, B. (1996). *Room to write: Daily invitations to a writer's life*. New York, NY: G.P. Putman's Sons.

Greenfield, E. (Author), Dillon, L., & Dillon, D. (Illustrators). (1986). *Honey, I love and other poems*. New York, NY: HarperTrophy.

Kenny Lake School. (2003). *Amongst the dreams of heroes: Poetry and prose from our point of view IV*. Copper Center, AK: Author.

Lyon, G.E. (1999). *Where I'm from: Where poems come from*. Spring, TX: Absey.

McCloskey, R. (1976). *One morning in Maine*. New York, NY: Puffin Books.

McCloskey, R. (1977). *Time of wonder*. New York, NY: Puffin Books.

McLerren, A. (Author), & Cooney, B. (Illustrator). (1991). *Roxaboxen*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Pallotta, J. (Author), & Biedrzycki, D. (Illustrator). (2004). *Dory story*. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge.



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# ESSAYS THAT HONOR

## High School Students Publish Local Bestsellers

In 1999, Aberdeen High School English teacher David McKay was looking for an engaging assignment that would motivate his students to write high-quality papers. While some of his students did excellent work, many were doing just enough to get by. He wanted to find a project that would inspire them to do their best work—to create a formal document that adhered to demanding publishing parameters. He thought writing a professional publication for an authentic audience might create the needed inspiration. So, he decided to have them research, write, publish, and sell a book about the local Thanksgiving Day football games.



If you asked anybody from Hoquiam or Aberdeen, Washington, the score of “the ball game” the year they graduated from high school they could tell you immediately. The football game played between these two high school rivals nearly every Thanksgiving Day between 1906 and 1973 was extremely important to the community. Most of the roughly 20,000 people in the two cities, located about 100 miles southwest of Seattle, knew of the intense rivalry and many had fond memories of their participation in the many school events and community rituals associated with the game.

The students interviewed parents, family members, and other members of the community who graduated from either of the two high schools between 1906 and 1973. When students discovered they did not have enough information from the very early days of the Thanksgiving Day games, they visited an assisted-living facility



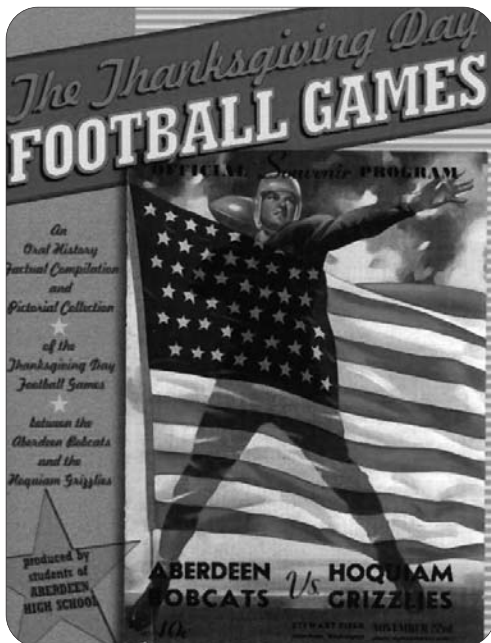
and a local restaurant to collect stories from some of the longtime residents of the community. People were excited to tell the students about their days as a player on the field, a cheerleader on the sidelines, or a fan in the stands. In the end, the students recorded and transcribed interviews with 120 individuals (Aberdeen High School, 2000):

- Susie Vordahl remembered how, after the noon game, her family would sit around a huge table for Thanksgiving dinner. The table was divided into two parts: one side for Aberdeen, where her mom was born, and one side for Hoquiam, where her dad was born. The winning side would get to dish up first. The whole family would relive the game, arguing back and forth, but by the end of dinner, all was forgotten until the next Thanksgiving.
- LaMont Shillinger talked about moving to Aberdeen in 1966 as an advisor for the *Ocean Breeze* newspaper. He was shocked by the hysteria surrounding the game. What was normally an eight- to 10-page paper became at least 26 pages the day before the game, printed in the colors of the school—blue and gold. Shillinger couldn't imagine how they would come up with enough advertising to pay for the paper, but every business in town bought ads.
- Cathy Shapansky recalled the pep rallies, bonfires, and vandalism that occurred the week before the games. Women wore giant chrysanthemums dyed in their school colors with either an "A" or an "H" on them; wishbones with ribbons tied around them were also popular. She also talked about the excitement in the air as people came home specifically to attend the sold-out game, like a giant reunion.

Inspired by the stories they had collected, the students did library research, double-checking facts and figures on coaches, game scores, and team rosters by reviewing old annuals, programs, and newspapers. These newspapers, which printed special sections on the Wednesdays before the games, inspired the students to create scrapbook pages of team photos, headlines, and articles to include in the book.

All of McKay's students participated in collecting the stories and research, with one junior English class working as the editing team that compiled the documents into a book worthy of publication. McKay was amazed at the dedication of the students and the hours they spent writing, editing, and revising. Students built relationships with community members through their repeated interviews, sharing drafts, and making corrections. They also gained an appreciation for their school and community history and enjoyed reading newspapers and annuals from nearly 100 years ago.

When the writing and compiling were completed, McKay found a short-run publishing company 50 miles away that created a professional cover and soft binding, and printed their book titled *The Thanksgiving Day Football Games: An Oral History, Factual Compilation, and Pictorial Collection of the Thanksgiving Day Football Games Between the Aberdeen Bobcats and the Hoquiam Grizzlies*. The books were sold at the school, drug store, restaurant, museums, and gift shops. Within two months, community members bought all 1,000 copies. While McKay had secured a



loan to pay for the book's printing costs, the books sold so quickly he did not even have to take out the loan.

Because of the enormous demand, there was a second printing of 500 books, which again sold out. In all, revenues from the sale of the books doubled the amount it cost to print them. The additional money was put in the general Associated Student Body fund, and was used to pay for subsequent publications. In 2002, students solicited submissions from community members passing down bits of wisdom through stories, poems, essays, and one-liners, and edited them into *The Grays Harbor County Book of Wisdom*. Students have also written five editions of *Lutefisk for the Bobcat Soul*, including the following titles:

- *Phoenix Edition* (2002) in which students wrote personal essays about overcoming adversity
- *Your Mama's Edition: Personal Essays About Mothers, and Those With Motherly Qualities, Who Have Changed Our Lives for the Better* (2003)
- *Who's Your Daddy? Edition: Personal Essays About Fathers, and Those With Fatherly Qualities, Who Have Changed Our Lives for the Better* (2004)

## Preparing for the Book Project: Reading Like a Writer

The curriculum plan for the series of books follows McKay's regular pattern for the year: Each genre is studied by reading in the genre, discussing the elements of the genre, and then writing in the genre. McKay pushes students from the beginning by doing the publishing project in the first few months of the school year. Later in the year he has a lever—he knows what the students are capable of.

To prepare for the *Lutefisk* project, McKay teaches students about the elements of non-fiction and exposes them to the short story genre. This includes reading short stories aloud; examining the elements of nonfiction in their “natural habitat,” as McKay describes it; and discussing the writer's craft. McKay explains that he wants students to understand why books affect a person, and the read-aloud is his primary means for accomplishing that.

When he first started these book projects, he read nonfiction stories from the textbook aloud. But the stories tended to be longer than what he expected students to write. So he started reading aloud from the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series because the format was similar to what students were being asked to write. After a couple editions of the *Lutefisk* series were published, he had a wealth of stories written and published by former students in previous years. The added benefit of using these stories was that students often knew the author and, in McKay's opinion, they were often better written. In the 50-minute class period outlined here, McKay reads aloud two stories by former students.

McKay explains he's going to read aloud the short story “Pa” by Malloree Barnes. He reminds students he's trying to show the elements of nonfiction in their natural habitat. The students have a handout with definitions of the elements of nonfiction. They review the definitions of theme and character, including five methods of indirect characterization: speech, appearance, thoughts, feelings, and actions. As they go over the methods of indirect characterization, McKay starts

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making connections between these nonfiction elements and good writing, stating, “Most readers do not want to read, ‘He is nice. He is mean.’ They want to determine whether a character is nice or mean for themselves. I hope you do this in your writing.”

McKay reads the story. In it, the author talks about dealing with the surprise death of her grandfather, who she greatly admired and enjoyed spending time with. The students are to write down notes about the theme and indirect characterization of Pa. After giving the students a few minutes to complete their notes and discuss them with a peer, if needed, McKay leads a discussion of their findings.

The students answer that the theme is to tell people how much you love them. McKay points out that the theme is not stated directly for the reader. “Good authors give the gift of theme. Readers like to figure it out for themselves,” he states.

As students bring up examples of characterization, McKay makes connections, points out the significance of certain sentences, and asks questions such as, “What does that detail say about Pa, what quality does he possess, what’s he feeling?” The class notes that there is nothing about appearance in the story. McKay says there’s nothing wrong with that, but it’s a missed opportunity: “One sentence, six to 15 words about Pa’s appearance, could’ve added so much.” Another student, citing the private thoughts of the character, quotes a sentence from the story, “He was so easy to look up to.” McKay enthusiastically responds, “Yes, and isn’t that a great short sentence!”

Next McKay reads “Grandpa and Me” by Joanna Bern. A similar story, it talks about a day when the writer’s grandfather had a heart attack while they were playing together on his farm. McKay asks students to look for the elements of setting—including what it reveals about the background, conflict, character, and mood. Students are also to look for how the five senses are employed and for characterization.

After reading the story, McKay asks students about examples of the use of the five senses. He says, “Student authors focus almost entirely on sight. Good authors will use all of their senses.” This leads students to think about additional sensory details that the author could have included, especially in the part of the story that focuses on grandma’s cooking. “You don’t have to go crazy, but a few details can add a lot,” suggests McKay.

McKay draws attention to the repetition in the story—the author mentions how she was still holding her grandpa’s hand four or five times in the story. “See how cool that is? What does that tell us about the character?” he asks.

Turning to the characterization of the grandmother, McKay asks, “What did grandma do that showed a cool characteristic about her?” Students respond that the grandma called 911 immediately upon seeing grandpa collapse in the backyard, rather than running outside to see what was the matter and then running back in to make the call. “This really happened,” McKay states, “but it reads like a short story with the suspense and plot turns. The story didn’t say, ‘Grandma was smart.’ Indirect writing is much more thoughtful towards the reader.”

Looking at the speech of the characters, McKay comments that dialogue can be “so cool” in nonfiction. He tells students that they don’t have to use dialogue in

their stories, but that if they do, it can be “awesome.” “It’s only a sentence,” he says, “Readers appreciate specific details. Student writers’ number one flaw is that they lack detail.” He tells students that the reader doesn’t expect the dialogue to be perfect, but as accurate as possible, and that they can still use quotation marks.

In the final minutes of the class, McKay challenges students to create a book that’s even better than last year’s. He asks students to start thinking about who they want to write about: who they want to honor in a book that’s not just another English assignment. “It’s permanent! It’s forever!” he reminds them.

## Fighting Writer’s Block and Sharing With Peers

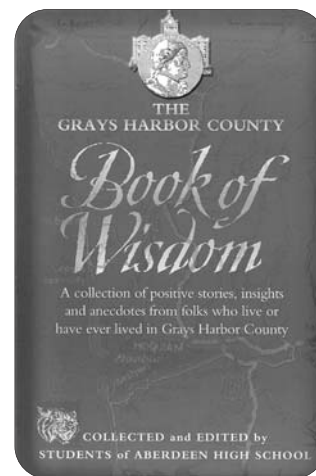
Students are given roughly two class periods per week, for several weeks, to draft their essays. Early in the process, McKay invites students to share their rough drafts with the class. There are no grades—the primary purpose at this point is to help students who are stuck or facing writer’s block. McKay is sensitive to the fact that students may be struggling in deciding who and what to write about. To get the sharing started, he reads his own rough draft, written about his father, and explains that he spent about a half-hour in front of the computer before he was able to write something down. Ralph Fletcher (1993) encourages teachers to be “imperfect mentors”—to share their writing with their students, especially the false starts or the writing that doesn’t work. By hearing about the struggles of their teachers, students are more likely to feel safe taking risks and to produce richer, more powerful writing.

As the class listens to the volunteer student reader, their task is to jot down words, phrases, or ideas that illustrate the six traits of writing (ideas and content, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions), that are the foundation of the state standards and assessments. Students then compliment the reader/author, backing up their praise with evidence based on the six traits.

For example, after one brave student—Jan—reads her story, another student replies, “I liked the way you paint a picture when talking about your parents not getting along: It sounded like my parents.”

McKay thanks the student for the compliment, and comments on Jan’s word choice and organization. He tells Jan, “The reader can relate to your story because you have given a hook he can understand.”

This is the main discourse pattern for the session—a student offers a compliment, McKay congratulates him or her on the excellent comment, and then he ties it to a quality of good writing.



## A Published Product

When the due date arrives, students hand in one package with the following:

- Prewrite (usually a web)—for one grade
- Rough draft with corrections—for two grades
- Final essay, with a copy e-mailed or on a diskette—for one grade

- Signed permission slips from a parent/guardian and the subject of the essay, in order for the piece to be published
- A photo to be published with the essay

McKay uses the six traits to assess students' writing and does a final edit before the essays are assembled for the publisher. He explains that most essays are almost free from errors when he receives them: "Compared to other English papers I get, these are *heaven!* They understand that the stakes are high. Because publishing is permanent, accuracy and correctness are extremely important."

As a way of providing additional models for students, McKay invites all school staff and students' parents to contribute an essay to the book. While only a few do, McKay notes that it is the first time to his knowledge that such a book—with student, school staff, and parent contributions—has ever been published.

He feels the topic of the book and the fact that it is published make all the difference in the quality of students' work and their personal motivation. Unpacking the boxes of newly printed books with their glossy, full-color covers, and seeing the reaction of friends and family as they read them is a rewarding experience for the students. He comments, "Almost all of them rise to the challenge, and some go farther—they discover that they are writers and have something to offer other people. They are extremely proud to be published authors, and they learn a great deal about how writing can affect people's lives."

## Student Writing Samples

*From Lutfisk for the Bobcat Soul: Who's Your Daddy? Edition*

### **Grandpa** by Jordan Gakin

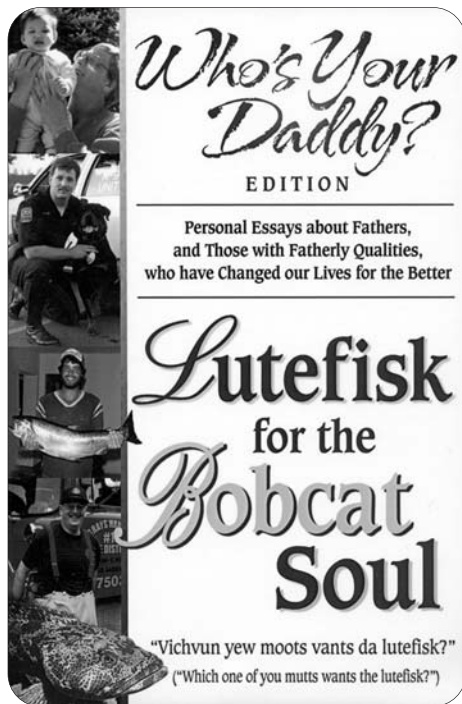
**They are extremely proud to be published authors, and they learn a great deal about how writing can affect people's lives.**

I remember many things about my Grandpa. I remember the penned off area in their backyard where I played when I was smaller (my mother called it baby jail), the weekends at their trailer in Shelton on Mason Lake, and at every sporting event he ever came to. I could hear his deep bass voice shouting out, "C'mon Schwartz," this being his nickname for me. I have many great memories with my grandpa, and I will have many more, because even at 73, he is alive and kicking.

Some of the best memories that I have happened when our family went down to my grandparents' house, just outside of Arizona in a little town called Earp. My grandpa said it was named after Wyatt Earp, but I had other ideas. While we were down there, my Grandpa took us everywhere. We went down to Quartzite to visit the flea markets where he finds all his gizmos and gadgets, we went to the sand dunes to play for the afternoon, we even went to the Hoover Dam for a day; but my favorite trip was the hike he took us on across the desert. He was constantly bragging to us about how he would hike out in the desert and out to these huge hills and back, so my cousins and I decided to go with him.

He woke us up at six in the morning. He was already wearing his hiking boots, his favorite flannel jacket (although all his flannel jackets look the same) and his hat. That hat was well worn atop his shiny, bald head. The hat was made of straw and it had a feather sticking out of the band around it. He wore it everywhere down there, only taking it off at night.





When we were all dressed and ready, we started out. It was a nice morning, not cold, but not yet warm and the sky was just turning blue as the sun came over the horizon. Before we actually got out into the desert, we had to cross the road, and then we had to walk out across the flats for about 10 minutes. You could smell the sand and plant life in the air, the sweet smell caressing your senses. As we walked along, he showed us the path where the water ran through in the summer making a wide deep trench. He told us the different names of the cacti and even some animal tracks that he could pick out, like roadrunners and lizards.

Climbing up a hill a little while later and reaching the flat top, we looked out and saw his favorite desert animal, the burrows. He proceeded to tell us stories of how the burrows would sneak into the park where he lived and eat the plants in gardens. We saw many packs of them down there, and you could always smell them from a great distance away.

The sun was high in the sky, making it a clear blue when we finally reached our destination. It was a high hill, and on top, where we had settled, there were many piles of white rocks. My

Grandpa told us to make our own pile and we set out making it. Gathering loose rocks, we piled them up and made the biggest pile out there. When we were finished, we stood there and looked around. On all the other hills around us there were piles of rocks. We stayed up there for a little while longer before we headed back down the hill on our way home. On the trek back we all discussed the details of our small journey that we were going to tell our parents. Reaching the front porch of the house, I dropped off a nice collection of rocks I had gathered, and then we all thanked and hugged grandpa before going inside for lunch.

I will never forget our trip down to Earp. We had lots of fun and many small adventures, and my Grandpa was always ready to join in on the fun and excitement. I still can't wait until the next time we head down south with him and my grandmother, and then we might go out once again and see if our pile of rocks is still out there.

### **Wakeboarding with Dad** by Rachel Akerlund

It was the middle of July, and as usual my family was at our cabin on Lost Lake. It's a beautiful lake surrounded by evergreen trees and waterfront property. I have many special memories there including the first time I learned how to swim to the first time I drove a seadoo. The memory that stands out in my mind the most is the time my dad learned how to wakeboard.

It was early and the cool air nipped at my nose as my little sister and I crawled out of the tent to climb the stairs to the cabin. Everyone else was already walking down to the dock, so Alie and I got our wetsuits on and joined my mom, dad, little brother and older sister. It was a beautiful, sunny morning and the water was smoother than glass. I was excited to get going.

My dad was going to slalom ski so he went first. As he got in the water, he cracked off a joke about how cold it was. It isn't surprising because my dad was always joking around. He was even voted class clown in high school. It's a quality I

really admire because he always seems to have something funny to say no matter the situation.

As the morning commenced, he got in the water and signaled my mom that he was ready. He got his balance and signaled to my mom to gently increase the speed until he was up and out of the water. It was cool watching him water ski as he cut through the wake with a wall of water behind him. A couple of laps later his run ended and he let go of the rope, cruising to a stop where he sank into the water.

My little sister, Alie, went next. She put the wakeboard on her feet and got into the water. Mom pulled the rope tight. Alie let her know she was ready then mom gave her a little pull and Alie popped up like a daisy. You see, this was the procedure for my mom, sisters, and I but my dad had tried to wakeboard before and all he ended up with was a ruptured eardrum. Of course, my dad had a solution to every problem, so he bought earplugs! It sort of became a joke about dad and his bright orange earplugs. He knew how much we all loved it so he decided to joke along with us and try to wakeboard anyway.

I gave him tips as he slid off the platform into the water about how to “let the boat pull you up” and “just relax.” He got up the first time and was completely out of control! It was hilarious to see this big man with orange earplugs look so helpless. Nevertheless, he made it around the perimeter of the lake without falling once.

My dad is becoming a pretty good wake boarder. In fact, he can almost get two feet of air and he’s learned how to ride switch (when the other leg is forward) which is actually really tricky. But he still wears his orange earplugs.

I felt so proud, I mean what other dad wakeboards, watches the Simpson’s, and referee’s basketball games for fun? Yet he still manages to be described by some of my friends as tall and intimidating at first, then a big goofball once they got to know him. I can’t even count the number of times he’s embarrassed me, and I know he does it on purpose but I wouldn’t want it any other way.

## Project Outline

- McKay chooses a topic that he thinks will be marketable to the community and will hold students’ interest. He explains that he doesn’t leave this decision to the kids, because he doesn’t want them to disengage from the project if their favorite topic isn’t chosen.
- Students study the short story genre and the elements of nonfiction. McKay reads several stories aloud, including those written by former students, and kids pick out the elements of nonfiction they hear in the stories.
- Students are given a few class periods to work on their drafts. McKay asks a few volunteers to read their drafts aloud to the class, to set an example for students who are struggling with what to write about. Students also practice finding examples in each other’s writing of the six traits, the rubric by which students are scored in the state writing assessment.
- Students hand in their pre-write, their draft with revisions marked, and their final essay. The essay is also handed in to McKay on disk or via e-mail, so that he can compile the essays for the book publisher. He does a final edit of the essays.

## Contact

To our deep sorrow, David McKay passed away in December 2003. Copies of the student-written books can be obtained by contacting:

Sherrie Green  
Aberdeen High School  
414 North I Street  
Aberdeen, Washington 98520  
Phone: (360) 538-2052

## Suggested Student Reading

Canfield, J., & Hansen, M.V. (Compilers). (1993). *Chicken soup for the soul: 101 stories to open the heart & rekindle the spirit*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications.

Carroll, R. (1997). *Sugar in the raw: Voices of young black girls in America*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

Creech, A. (1996). *Walk two moons*. New York, NY: HarperTrophy.

Desetta, A., & Wolin, S. (Eds.). (2000). *The struggle to be strong: True stories by teens about overcoming tough times*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

Franco, B. (Ed.). (2000). *You hear me? Poems and writing by teenage boys*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

Freedom Writers (with Gruwell, E.). (1999). *The freedom writers diary: How a teacher and 150 teens used writing to change themselves and the world around them*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Gray, L.M. (Author), & Colon, R. (Illustrator). (1999). *My mama had a dancing heart*. New York, NY: Orchard Books.

Grifalconi, A. (1999). *Tiny's hat*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Mastoon, A. (Photographer). (1997). *The shared heart: Portraits and stories celebrating lesbian, gay, and bisexual young people*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Rylant, C. (1992). *Missing May*. New York, NY: Yearling.

Shandler, S. (1999). *Ophelia speaks: Adolescent girls write about their search for self*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.



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# THE HOUSE THAT SIMON BUILT

## Students Investigate the History of a North Portland Mansion

Old houses have stories to tell. Just ask a handful of students at Open Meadow Alternative School in North Portland, Oregon. When the school purchased an 80-year-old, Queen Anne-style mansion in a neighborhood known as St. Johns and started conducting classes there, students were naturally curious about the building's former inhabitants. Truth be told, they suspected a couple of them might still be roaming about, making their otherworldly presence known by the squeak of a floorboard, an eerie scuffling from the attic, or the tap-tap-tapping of a loose shutter.

Poised on a bluff overlooking the Willamette River, with multifaceted gables and a soaring turret, "the house just seemed like it *should* be haunted," says 17-year-old Damian, a junior at the school.



Not one to resist the power of a good ghost story or an opportunity for learning, Open Meadow teacher Elizabeth Jensen decided to engage a group of nine high school students in a project researching the building's history and former residents. "The building has such a rich history and the kids were just naturally intrigued by it," the instructor says. As a relative newcomer to Open Meadow herself, having joined the staff in 2001, Jensen was also interested to learn the story behind such remarkable school digs. Remarkable, yes, but not unusual considering the school in question.

For nearly three-and-a-half decades, Open Meadow Alternative School (OMAS) has been serving at-risk youth in North Portland: first as a



**Connecting with the community gives them some ownership and a sense of empowerment, and helping them open doors in the community gives them the sense that they can go forward and do that again in other places in their life.**

drop-in after-school program and then as an alternative middle and high school. OMAS is committed to helping teens who have experienced difficulties in the public school system find the attention and support they need to succeed in school and in life. School staff members fulfill that commitment through a variety of small, relationship-based programs that emphasize personal responsibility, academics, and service to the community. This includes a program called “Corps Restoring the Urban Environment,” (CRUE) through which students are engaged in community-based projects outside school two days a week and coursework in an OMAS classroom the other three days. Emphasis is given to developing a positive work ethic and marketable job skills, as well as a healthful lifestyle and respect for others.

As part of its tailored, community-centered approach, the school resists the institutional look and feel that characterizes many other educational facilities. Instead, the school occupies a handful of buildings scattered throughout residential areas of North Portland. “Open Meadow has a huge commitment to our neighborhood,” notes Jensen. “We’re not in a business district; our locations are always in neighborhoods.”

The school acquired the St. Johns mansion in 1991 after a rehabilitation center failed—after just two years of ownership—to make a go of it there. Before that, the house had been in the possession of only two families: the Bensons and the Chaneyes.

Armed with this basic information from Open Meadow files, Jensen, a CRUE instructor during the 2003–2004 school year, sent her students on a quest for history.

The objective of the project was “to help students develop their writing skills,” says Jensen, “but also, in keeping with the CRUE mission, to get the kids out in the community and feel connected with the community where they go to school.”

“Connecting with the community gives them some ownership and a sense of empowerment,” explains Jensen, “and helping them open doors in the community gives them the sense that they can go forward and do that again in other places in their life. So we’re trying to expose them to things that they might not normally encounter in their life and then, in doing that, show them that it’s possible to do amazing things and be successful.”

This is important for any student, but especially for these particular students. Of the more than 200 youngsters served through Open Meadow’s various programs, more than 75 percent qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. “We’re dealing with an extremely culturally diverse group of students and a lot of students in poverty,” notes Jensen.

## Research

To kick off the project, Jensen’s students headed for local libraries, first to Portland’s main Multnomah County Library and then to the smaller, neighborhood St. Johns Library. “We dug through archives,” says Jensen, “and students got to handle some really neat old maps and books connected to the St. Johns area.”

“The students read excerpts from the *St. Johns Review*, *St. Johns Heritage* (the St. Johns Heritage Association publication), and the original press release/publication for the opening of the St. Johns Bridge,” notes Jensen. “They used sources from the Oregon Historical Society; Multnomah County Library archives and special collections; the St. Johns Library special collections; and the *Oregonian* [newspaper] archives.”

Through their research, students discovered that the house was built between 1910 and 1912 at the behest of Simon Benson, a Portland logging magnate and philanthropist. Benson had the house constructed as a wedding present for his son Amos and Amos's new wife.

Benson was not an unfamiliar name to students who'd passed by the posh Benson Hotel when traipsing through downtown Portland, and they soon learned the connection was no coincidence. Simon Benson was the man behind the building of this upscale hotel. He was also responsible for installing the unique "bubblers" (drinking fountains) that grace Portland's old downtown area.

Students also learned that Simon Benson's own house was still standing; in fact, just a few years before, it was restored and moved to the Portland State University campus, where it now serves as an alumni center. Students jumped at the opportunity to visit the Simon Benson House, where university archivists opened their files to the students for further study.

"All research, appointments with archivists, etcetera, were initiated by the students," notes Jensen. Students acted as project managers and "had to learn to communicate on a professional level with people they wouldn't normally mix with."

As students looked for references to Benson's son, they discovered that Amos followed his father into the lumber business and experienced success there. However, his personal life wasn't as rosy. "We learned he had a drinking problem," says Damian, "and his marriage ended in divorce after about 10 years." At that point, Amos moved to California and the house—with most of its contents—went on the market.

In 1920, Edmund Hall Chaney bought the house "lock, stock, and barrel," reports Jensen.

Chaney moved in with his wife, Leona, and children—eventually, there would be 11 in all, three from Chaney's first marriage (his first wife passed away) and eight more born to Leona.

To learn more about the Chaney family, Jensen's students went right to the source. Because the family had occupied the house for more than 60 years and some of the Chaney children had maintained contact with subsequent owners of the structure, including administrators of Open Meadow, students decided to interview some of the surviving, now-adult Chaney "children" to collect and record their stories about growing up in the house. The students would begin by interviewing the youngest of the Chaney's, Sabra Chaney Meyers, who—conveniently—lives next door to her former family home. They would then invite Meyers's siblings to join them for a group interview.

## Biographies and Oral Histories

During this phase of the project, Jensen led the students in a study of biographies and oral histories spanning the "life" of the house: from listening to and reading the transcripts of PBS-produced oral histories of Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers during the 1930s to reading biographical essays written by current-day students. Books read by the class included: *Record and Remember: Tracing your Roots Through Oral History* by Ellen Robinson Epstein; *Hooligans or Rebels? An Oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth 1889–1939* by Stephen Humphries; *River Pigs and Cayuses: Oral Histories from the Pacific Northwest* by Ron Strickland; and *Crews:*



*Gang Members Talk to Maria Hinojosa*  
by Maria Hinojosa and German Perez.

The idea, says Jensen, was to help students get a broad perspective of history during this time span and to get a flavor for how people tell their stories.

Students were then asked to compare the two approaches: the written word versus the spoken word. “We talked a lot about writing something and the freedom that you have in giving an oral account,” says Jensen, “and how those are very different.”

Not surprisingly, the students identified more with the oral histories.

“For students, there’s significantly more freedom in the spoken word than in the written word. And this population of at-risk students is a very oral population. Having things written down or even having literature in the household or anything like that is a rarity,” Jensen says. “And the kids really identify with the ability to be able to tell a story. They’re significantly better speakers than they are writers. But in making the connection between the two—which was sort of the point of the project—they definitely developed their writing skills.”

Jensen reports that some of the students were a bit nervous about meeting the first Chaney: “They were concerned about meeting Sabra Chaney Meyers for the first time as I told them she was an older woman. (It was also their first interview.) They thought she would be difficult to communicate with and worried that they would find nothing in common. When she entered the room, one student in his nervousness said, ‘Boy, you sure are beautiful. Elizabeth told us you would be old!’ When they found out that she had been a cheerleader at Roosevelt High School (a school that many of them have attended), the ice was broken and conversation flowed.”

The students took turns asking Meyers questions they had prepared in advance. Questions focused on factual details of the house’s history and on their own curiosity about what it was like to grow up in such an amazing place.

Meyers entertained them with stories of family Christmases in the house and of summer wiener roasts in the yard. Students learned that generations of St. Johns-area teens had enjoyed visiting the Benson/Chaney house and grounds long before it became a school since—with its spacious rooms and expansive lawn—it was an ideal site for parties and dances.

When Meyers returned with her siblings, Henry and Frances, as well as Frances’s husband, Virgil Kemper, the students “felt much more relaxed and confident, and spent significantly more time worrying about how to be proper hosts,” says Jensen. They asked such things as, “Should we offer them hot tea?”

During the exchange, the students’ hunger for stories was well-sated.

In a report she composed after the meeting, a junior named Ricci-Joan wrote: “Mr. Chaney made a living by selling cedar logs to Japan, however the business faltered

One of the most exciting developments from this project was the students' sudden acknowledgment of their own voice as powerful and interesting.

when war broke out between Japan and China in 1938. Shortly after, his business failed and Edmund Chaney died of a heart attack. The older brothers and sisters got jobs and started to pay bills after their Dad died. It was a terrible, terrible struggle.”

To keep the house, the Chaney children picked up whatever jobs they could find. One worked as a shop clerk. Another worked for a time in a foundry. Others mowed lawns for bits of change. During World War II, when many men left their jobs to serve in the military overseas, Henry said he was lucky to land a job in a plywood factory and, at 16 years old, make “a man’s wage.”

The stories didn’t stop there. Students learned of the family’s devastation when Edmund, the eldest brother, was killed in an accident at the father’s logging mill in 1931; he had been a college student at the time. The second son, Worth, served as an officer during World War II and, at the end of the war, received surrender terms from a German faction. Three other brothers also served in war efforts, some during World War II and others during the Korean War.

There were lighter tales as well. The Chaney’s recalled visits from their father’s Japanese business partner who would bring exotic treats for the children—lychee fruit, nuts, and ginger. And they remembered that the best place to tuck oneself during a game of hide-and-seek was in the corner of the third-floor ballroom where a child could easily crawl back into the eaves of the structure.

As to whether the house was haunted, the Chaney’s had “differing opinions.”

“The youngest child, Sabra Chaney Meyers, was very adamant that there had never been a ghost in the house,” says Jensen. “She and her sister disagree on that point. So the students egged them on into an argument about whether or not there’s a ghost.”

Frances’s husband, Virgil, backed his wife in the debate, telling the students about a time when construction work was being done in the attic and a thick layer of sawdust had blanketed the floor. Apparently, the next morning, footprints could be seen leading out into the middle of the floor, but none leading back.

The students were thrilled, says Jensen. “They definitely wanted to be able to report that there was a ghost in the house.”

And they did.

Students wrote individual reports about the history of the house from when it was built until the present day, including basic factual information about former residents, anecdotes about the Bensons and the Chaney’s, and even the occasional ghost story. They presented these reports in class and then submitted the portions they considered best for possible inclusion in a final group report. As a class, they reviewed the individual submissions and created a single narrative to tell the house’s story.

## Public Presentation

The project culminated with a public presentation of the report. Community members, including everyone the students had contacted during the course of their research (librarians, archivists, and Chaney family members), were invited to attend the event. One by one, the students got up to speak in front of the crowd and share a portion of the Benson/Chaney mansion’s story. The presentation included a PowerPoint slide

show prepared by the students, including digital photos they'd taken throughout the project.

"One of the most exciting developments from this project was the students' sudden acknowledgment of their own voice as powerful and interesting. Many of these students have struggled with formal writing in the past and to be exposed to oral history was an opportunity for them to discover a different type of record, a way for them to combine their own voice and story with the writing process," says Jensen.

Jensen says the presentation was a crucial part of the project. "These are high-stakes presentations with a lot of strange faces. The students get up and speak in front of these people, and they leave feeling proud and confident with a strong sense that they've accomplished something worthwhile."

Damian says he liked the project "way better" than school projects he'd been forced to do in the past. "You know, there's always a project somebody doesn't want to do," he says, "but this was one *everybody* wanted to do. We took a lot of time and were really serious about it. It was fun." Additionally, he says he learned skills that will benefit him for years to come: how to work cooperatively in a group; how to conduct library research; how to prepare for an interview; how to speak publicly; and how to use technology to augment a presentation. Damian says that he's become more confident about both writing and public speaking since the Benson/Chaney mansion project.

As for ghost stories, the rumors still fly. Damian says some of his peers are convinced the house is haunted by the unhappy ghost of Amos Benson. But Damian says he feels safe at the house and that leads him to believe a friendlier spirit may be in residence, perhaps that of Edmund Chaney, who came home to look after his children.

Who knows, perhaps he is looking after the youth that gather there even today.

## Student Writing Samples

*Excerpts from the group student report on the history of the Benson/Chaney mansion*

Simon Benson was born in Norway in 1851. He was one of seven kids. His real name was Simon Iverson until he and his family came to the States and changed it to Benson. He had to work for the things he wanted, so at the age of 16 he went to work as a farmhand, and also in logging camps and saw mills. When he was 24 he had enough money to open a store. It did well until it burned down three years later. He was 27 years old, broke, and had a wife and a kid that needed caring for. Things began to look up when he heard about all the timber in the Northwest. With all of his experience working in the woods in Wisconsin he decided to get all the money he could together and move his family to Portland, Oregon in 1880.

Benson is remembered for what he did for the city of Portland and is quoted as saying "No one has the right to die and not leave something to the public and for the public good." For me, he is remembered even more for building the Chaney house for his son Amos and daughter-in-law Ethel.

—Brandon

For all the years I have been in school, I've been used to going to a place that looks like an actual school, at least until I started here at Open Meadow. Open



Meadow is in a beautiful mansion that overlooks the Willamette river and this place has a lot of history to it.

—*Felishia*

Mr. Chaney made a living by selling cedar logs to Japan, however the business faltered when war broke out between Japan and China in 1938. Shortly after, his business failed and Edmund Chaney died of a heart attack. The older brothers and sisters got jobs and started to pay bills after their Dad died. It was a terrible, terrible struggle. The Chaney's weren't rich with money, but rich with love. On Friday nights they would have parties and just spend time with the whole family. From the 1930's to the 1950's nearly every class at the high school recognized the Chaney family home as the site of summer wiener roasts in the yard and teen-age dances in the ballroom.

—*Ricci-Joan*

The Chaney family lived here for around 60 years until their mother Leona Chaney moved out in 1986. The children sold the house to JED Inc. for around a half a million dollars. JED Inc. opened a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center in early 1987, but it didn't work out and was only here for a short time. The house was finally sold on April 1, 1991 to Open Meadow Alternative Schools.

We spoke to four of the remaining Chaney family members and we asked them how they felt about their old house being a school now. Their response was that they are thankful that it is a school and that is raising future citizens for our country. They couldn't think of a better use for their house.

—*Damian*

## Project Outline

- Students started by gathering information on the house from the archives of the current owner of the building, Open Meadow Alternative School.
- Students conducted research on the neighborhood, house, and resident families at county and neighborhood libraries.
- Students read biographies and researched oral histories spanning the “life” of the building, from listening to PBS-produced oral histories of WPA workers to reading biographical essays written by current-day students. This gave them a broad perspective of history during this time span and helped them get a flavor for how people tell their stories.
- Students compared written and oral histories.
- Students prepared to interview former residents of the house, composing lists of possible questions and scheduling appointments with interviewees.
- Students interviewed former residents of the house (Chaney family members) and documented the exchange with audio and video recorders and digital cameras.
- Students transcribed the interviews and then prepared a written report chronicling the history of the building and its residents.
- Students prepared and delivered a public presentation, which included a computer-generated slide show, to the community.

## Contact

Elizabeth Jensen, Middle School Program Director  
Open Meadow Alternative School  
7621 North Wabash Avenue  
Portland, Oregon 97217  
Phone: (503) 978-0809  
E-mail: elizabethj@openmeadow.org

## Suggested Student Reading

- Andrews-Goebel, N. (2002). *The pot that Juan built*. New York, NY: Lee & Low Books.
- Cisneros, S. (1991). *The house on Mango Street*. New York, NY: Vintage.
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# YOU COULD WRITE FOR HALLMARK

## Students Draw and Write About Historic Buildings

**T**he note card shows Levi and Teri's pen-and-ink drawing of the gambrel-roofed barn, a silo standing tall next to it. A cow grazes in front while a bird sits on a fence. The back of the card reads:

The big white barn by the Springhill Church was built in 1923 by a man named John W. Walton. In the old days it was used as a place to hitch up workhorses. Today, the owner, Bill Wright, uses it for storing farm things from the old days and also it is used for a horse and cow. The eight sided silo was used to store sunflower silage. The barn is a very old landmark with a lot of history.

The card goes on to explain the story behind the cow pictured on the front of the card:

Ten year old Hamburger never left for the butcher, because he's claustrophobic. Now he stands around in the sun with his buddy, Sundown, the horse, hoping and waiting for his cattle herd to return, fearing to go into the Wright's barn.

The authors of this delightful card are students at a one-room schoolhouse in a rural area near Bozeman, Montana. Springhill School averages 12 students per year from first to eighth grade and is served by one teacher, Linda Rice. Situated to the west of the Bridger Mountains, it's a tightly knit community—where volunteer labor built the fire station and recently renovated the school to add a library.



## Beginning With Art

**We drive by these buildings all the time. But once you've done the artwork and the investigation, you have a vested interest in that building.**

The project started with modest intentions as a drawing lesson to be accompanied by some related writing. In the end, eight other cards with similar designs were crafted, printed, packaged, and sold to raise money for the school's art program. Printed on natural-colored card stock, students used colored pencils and markers on bits and pieces of each illustration to add a touch of color—giving each card a sophisticated, unique look—while they explored the effects produced by different media and perfected their techniques.

The art program at Springhill School has been pieced together by Rice using various grants to fund four or five visiting artists per year. Several years ago Rice met local artist Jerolyn Dirks, who occasionally stopped by the school to pick up her friend's children. The two became acquainted and soon Dirks was teaching the students to use pen and ink, acrylics, pastels, and chalk. Dirks suggested that students draw and research the interesting old buildings in the neighborhood, and Rice agreed it was a good idea. Rice explains, "My goal was for students to look at their community in a different way. We drive by these buildings all the time. But once you've done the artwork and the investigation, you have a vested interest in that building. You have something to talk about, you have something to think about, and you have a connection to the community."

On a fall day, students walked to a nearby intersection where several of these interesting buildings are located: a barn, chicken coop, log cabin, and church. Some of the structures are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Students used their skills to draw the buildings from different perspectives. They were encouraged to illustrate different looks or feelings of the buildings, based on their close observation of details. To create the drawing of the school building, each student added something that they observed to a collective drawing.

## Investigations Into History

When the drawings were complete, parents who volunteered in the classroom noticed them and started requesting copies. Seeing this interest, Dirks suggested that the class package the drawings and sell them as art cards, an enterprise she was involved in with her own artwork. With this goal in mind, the class chose drawings for the card selection and then worked in multiage pairs to research the history of each property and write a piece about it to go on the back of the card. Along the way, they addressed content standards related to Montana history, community awareness, nonfiction writing, and research. Rice knew from the start of the project that she wanted students to write about the buildings, but "once we realized we had something marketable, we became really serious about the writing," she says. "We got very interested in how informative we can be in a small space."

Students prepared to interview the owner of each building. The older students were responsible for writing interview questions. To guide students' thinking, Rice asked some of the following questions: What do we want to learn about the building? What could the owner tell us about the building? What is special about this building? Why is that building there; how did it get there; why does it look the way it does; and what purpose has it served in the past?



Students used the school telephone to call each building owner and request an in-person or over-the-phone interview. For students who were uncomfortable with eye-to-eye contact, the phone was “a saving grace,” says Rice. Other students were eager to do the interview in person and get a chance to see the building up close.

What caught Rice by surprise was that sometimes the owner hadn’t been in possession of the property for very long and did not know much about the building. So, students had to search for a source, “to be a detective to find out where that information comes from,” in Rice’s words. The students’ interest was

contagious—owners frequently became more curious when they realized how little they knew about local history. As they conducted their research, students found that most of their information—the community’s history—came from elderly residents. They discussed the implications of this—how their source is getting narrower as people get older and older and little of the history has been written down.

Students collected a range of local history and legend. For example, they learned that many barns in the area were built by people who were working their way across the country, moving to the West Coast to become shipbuilders. They got to go inside a log cabin the size of a toolshed and discovered that many years ago it had been used as a residence by two Norwegian bachelor farmers—giving students a surprising look at living conditions of the past. They also learned the scoop behind the huge Hereford steer, nicknamed “Hamburger” by the community, who resided in front of Wright’s barn and refused to get on the truck bound for the butcher.

## Writing Something Marketable

Once students had gathered the information they needed, their first task was to write it up in a few paragraphs. Then the focus shifted to condensing the information so that it fit on the back of a card—an exercise in determining what is most important and what they wanted to say about the building. As Rice explains, “They went from having no information to having enough information to having too much information, and tearing it down to just the basics to put on the card.” The challenge of presenting information precisely is well understood by anyone who has been forced to cut something they have written.

By working on the drawings first, students created images that helped them produce descriptive language (Phillips, 2000). As they worked on making revisions, Rice helped her students keep their audience in mind. She asked the students: What would make your card unique to the purchaser? What would they want to know about the building? Does your picture and story show that? Students learned that they could help the reader to see more of the story by attending to details in their pictures and



The challenge of presenting information precisely is well understood by anyone who has been forced to cut something they have written.

### THE BIG BARN

by Levi and Teri

The big white barn by the Springhill Church was built in 1923 by a man named John W. Walton. In the old days it was used as a place to hitch up workhorses. Today, the owner, Bill Wright, uses it for storing farm things from the old days and also it is used for a horse and a cow. The eight sided silo was used to store sunflower silage. The barn is a very old landmark with a lot of history.

Ten year old Hamburger never left for the butcher, because he's claustrophobic. Now he stands around in the sun with his buddy, Sundown, the horse, hoping and waiting for his cattle herd to return, fearing to go into the Wright's barn.

Levi and Teri are students at rural district 20 in Springhill Montana. This one room school house, established in 1886, averages 12 students from 1st to 8th grade.

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6020 Springhill Community Rd.  
Belgrade, MT 59714

Note cards also available at [www.jerolyndirks.com](http://www.jerolyndirks.com)

writings. In the final product, students used facts and figures gained through their research blended with the amusing stories and imaginative writing appropriate for a greeting card. This lent a “feeling of antiquity, like it could come out of a one-room school,” in Rice’s words.

On the business side, students were involved in determining how much to charge for the cards, how to display them, and where to sell them. Parents typed students’ words into the computer for printing, took the cards to the printer, and helped with distributing the cards. People were also able to purchase cards through the school or through artist Dirks’s Web site. All proceeds went to the purchase of materials for the art program.

The cards were snatched up quickly. “The community really enjoyed them,” comments Rice. Impressed with the students’ work, community members have requested new editions featuring their own favorite local buildings, demonstrating again the multiple ways that students’ work can contribute to their community.

## Project Outline

- Students drew unique, historical local buildings, using pen and ink. Attention was paid to capturing the details of the scene and conveying its mood.
- Students, working in multiage pairs, requested and scheduled interviews with building owners. Rice assigned older children the task of developing interview questions.
- If the building owners did not have enough information about their property, students investigated to find someone else who did. They found that the elderly in their community frequently knew the historical background they were seeking.

- Students made decisions about what information they wanted to include on the back of the note card. They worked on revisions to both their writing and their drawings.
- Parents helped with producing the card: scanning in pictures, typing student writing, and bringing the cards to the printer.
- A possible extension: Rice has talked about using the cards as a starting point for writing a more comprehensive local history.

## Contact

Linda Rice, Supervising Teacher  
Springhill Community School  
6020 Springhill Community Road  
Belgrade, Montana 59714  
E-mail: brice@mcn.net

## Suggested Student Reading

Grifalconi, A. (1986). *The village of round and square houses*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.

Hartman, G. (Author), & Stevenson, H. (Illustrator). (1991). *As the crow flies: A first book of maps*. New York, NY: Aladdin.

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# WINDS OF CHANGE

## Through the Montana Heritage Project, Students Preserve the Past and Prepare for the Future

**T**he wind races down from the Crazies and rushes through the Musselshell Valley like a wild stallion trampling everything in its path. It's amazing that the Moore family's old sheep shed is still standing. The tempest shrieks through the gaps in the structure and rattles the loose weather-whittled boards. Inside, a small group of students hopes the noise won't obscure the voices of the two men who have brought them here; one pupil tests a tape recorder to be sure their storytelling will be preserved.

The Moores settled this homestead, southwest of a town called Two Dot, near the end of the Civil War. Fearing the postwar wrath of the Yankees, the southern family's matriarch headed west with her two youngest children before the conflict ended.

When her two older sons were released from the Confederate Army, they too went west. Miraculously, they managed to track their mother and siblings down in Montana by word of mouth. In time, the family was able to procure this piece of land at the base of the Crazy Mountains and, through toil and sweat, establish a ranch that is still in operation to this day.

On this blustery afternoon, the fourth and fifth generations of the Montana clan, P.J. "Jim" Moore III and his son, Steve, are sharing their family's story with four Harlowton High School students and their English teacher, Nancy Widdicombe.





To bring the history to life, the Moores have brought the group—equipped with paper, pens, lists of prepared questions, cameras, audio and video recorders—to the site of the original homestead, to the cavernous sheep shed where their ancestors cared for their flock more than a century ago.

This ranch is one of only a handful left in the area, explains Widdicombe, “the last bastion of old family-owned ranches around the state.” Her students know that if these stories aren’t recorded now, they will be lost forever, marked only by the ruins of a few wooden structures scattered across the countryside. So they headed out into the community to discover the stories of three of the area’s historic ranches—each in operation for more than a century and run by descendants of the original homesteaders—and record them for future generations.

This educational endeavor is just one of many around the state that are part of the Montana Heritage Project, a nine-year-old effort focused on community-centered teaching. Instead of poring through facts or abstract concepts in textbooks, students take part in academic learning in their local environment. Motivation increases dramatically because students feel a connection to what they’re studying.

“Getting kids excited about the adventure of scholarship is what it’s all about,” says Heritage director Michael Umphrey. “Classes without real-world application are much like football teams that have practices, but never play games.” Here, “kids get to be participants instead of spectators, and that generates the kind of energy one sees at athletic events,” he says.



## Connecting With Community History

When schools and communities collaborate to “gather, preserve, and present local knowledge,” a Heritage document reports, several things happen:

- Students’ educational experience is enhanced
- The school gains high-quality teaching materials
- Students are engaged with their families, neighborhoods, and communities
- The curriculum is infused with a service ethic
- Students and teachers find sound educational uses for powerful technologies

Related academic materials take on new significance for kids. In Harlowton, for instance, to prepare for the historic ranch study, students devoured nonfiction books about the history of the region. Titles included *Undaunted Courage*, an account of the Lewis and Clark expedition written by Steven Ambrose; *The Buffalo Hunters*, a history of the Indian tribes and living legends of the Old West by Mari Sandoz; *Soldiers Falling Into Camp*, a Native American perspective of the battles at Rosebud and Little Big Horn by Robert Kammen, Joe Marshall, Frederick Lefthand, and Joseph Marshall; and *All But the Waltz*, a collection of essays about life on the Montana plains in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Mary Clearman Blew.

Widdicombe says she tries to pick books that will not only give students a sense of history, but also set a tone for interviews and student writing. Of the ranch project selections, she says, “What I was trying to bring was a sense of history and that things were not always as they are now. So, when students read about a fur trapper who came through 100 years ago or somebody who ranched and farmed here 50 years ago or a different perspective of history, I think that they start seeing history as being up close, personal, and very individual. I mean, you can’t change a date, but I think that they understand from reading that kind of thing that the world is seen in many different ways.” This sense of subjective history is often borne out in the interviews conducted by the students as interviewees share varying perspectives of the world and life events.

Each year, Widdicombe’s senior English class focuses on a different subject of historical interest in the community. In addition to the historic family ranch project, Widdicombe’s pupils have studied histories of the local railroad industry and of nearby Hutterite religious colonies, as well as the legacy of Montana millionaire and philanthropist Charles M. Bair. In addition to recording the stories of area residents connected to each subject, students also tackle related issues that require higher levels of thinking. For instance, while working on the ranch project, students compared research and included thoughts in their essays about what it has taken to keep these historic ranches in operation over such a long span of time when so many family ranches have failed to make a go of it, and what the future holds for ranchers in the area. With the railroad project, students analyzed the repercussions to both individuals and the community when the Milwaukee Railroad shut down operations in this small town 25 years ago, and considered what it takes to “stay alive” in a small rural community.

Despite a different focus of study each year, the project is laid out essentially the same. In teams of four, students visit their contacts and take turns playing the roles of interviewer, “soundman” (with tape recorder), photographer, and videographer. Students then return to the classroom to edit the material they have collected and create PowerPoint and Web presentations of their research.

## Meeting Educational Goals

Numerous educational goals are addressed as students learn to seek out information, assess and evaluate data, draw conclusions, and record their findings. And, speaking of the ranch project, Widdicombe says, the interview process taught students the skill of “listening—*really* listening,” which encouraged the ranchers to “share *amazingly* truthful bits” of their history.

“The families realized how much the students already knew, which showed true interest and dedication,” says Widdicombe. At the same time, “the students were impressed” with the ranchers’ devotion to the land, commitment to hard work, and flexibility in times of challenge. The material the students gathered was so rich that they decided to publish it in a book titled *Images of the Upper Musselshell Valley*.

The book includes a historical overview of the Upper Musselshell Valley; detailed maps of the area; the histories of the Voldseth, Martin, and Moore family ranches; an essay considering the future of agriculture in the region; graphics of the three ranches’ cattle brands; a description of the project video which included interviews with the ranch families; and a bibliography of sources consulted while writing the ranch histories (including some family histories written by members of the ranching families). Photographs interspersed throughout include historical images, as well as recent pictures of both ranchers and students. The students wrote all copy for the publication and handled all the graphics. The result is impressively professional.

And, as it turns out, some of the students have set off on professional career paths explored while working on the project. “Probably one of the best examples is Dallas,” says Widdicombe, “who was so excited about making movies” during the project that “now, he’s doing really exciting things in computers at Bozeman (Montana State University)—computer graphics and genius computer things.” Another student, Krystal, who worked on the railroad history and contributed numerous photos to the resulting book, *Sights and Sounds of the Musselshell Valley*, is hoping to be a professional photographer one day. The project “showed her things that she could do with photography out of the ordinary of what she would have had in a typical high school photography class,” says the teacher.

“There are dozens of reasons” this kind of community project is valuable, says Widdicombe, “not the least of which is making children responsible and ensuring that they know how to communicate with people and the importance of correct quoting and all of the writing things. But to me, it is about using their palettes, their intelligences, and showing them that just because they can’t do one thing, there is another way that they can be successful. The reason I set up the project the way I do is because we have students who are just brilliant on computers; we have students that are just wonderful photographers; we have students that love people; and so there’s something for everybody. And they all have to do things, too, that they don’t really want to do. But overall they walk out of this with huge ownership and they are so proud of their accomplishments.”

The Harlowton projects are just a few of many across the state, each unique to its place and history, and each as engaging as the last. Throughout Montana, Heritage students have helped libraries and museums build oral history collections and add to historic photo archives. They have performed data collection for Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and engaged in field archaeology for the Bureau of Land Management. They



have compiled histories of local organizations and helped nominate significant buildings for the National Register of Historic Places.

“Oh, there’s so much to do,” Widdicombe says excitedly, explaining how easy it has been to find ways to extend the projects as the years go by. This year, Harlowton students will be studying the local river and water issues in the region. “We’re going to go with a Forest Service person and a hydrologist and the Natural Resources Department, and we’re going to walk the river,” says Widdicombe. “And we’re going to look at how we are tied to the river and the importance of that.”

## Presenting the Work

Public presentation of the work, reports Umphrey, is a key component of Heritage projects. Students in Harlowton, for example, unveiled their ranch research first to the community at a school reception, and then to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., where a copy of their book now resides.

When students see that adults take the work seriously and believe it should be preserved in archives, they take the work seriously, too. “It’s a conversion experience,” says Umphrey. “They see their families, classrooms, and neighborhoods not just as an environment in which they pursue their individual desires, but as communities of which they are members.”

It is this outcome that makes the project as much about the future as the past. “If small rural communities are to survive,” Umphrey asserts, “they need young people who care about them, who know something of their history, and who care about their future.” Realistically, “a lot of these kids won’t stay” because they won’t be able to find local employment, “but they’re committed to the idea of community, and will take that with them wherever they go.”

## Student Writing Samples

*Excerpts from Images of the Upper Musselshell Valley*

### **Martin Ranches (excerpted)** by Mariah, Brett, Lindsay, and Dallas

Sometime ago on a day underneath the clouds of a never ending sky, George Donald (G.D.) Martin answered adventure's invitation to seek out the unknown. At the age of sixteen after only three years of schooling, G.D. left his Missouri home with the exhilaration of adventure in his young heart. Walking a seven year journey over the land between Nevada and his home state, George early took on the role of a man and worked until chance stopped him in a small Utah town. Taking hold of his young spontaneity, G.D.'s fate landed him on a freighter headed for the pinnacle of the "old west": Montana. Taking scattered jobs, George first found employment at Copperopolis and Castle before he made the change destined for him—to work under the authority of Perry Moore on the Moore ranch. His chief job was taking care of sheep and he receive his pay in livestock. George slowly saved enough to buy the homestead located on Big Elk Creek.

Big Elk Creek had a long history in itself and the addition of yet a new owner, only made the history of the old place richer. A trickling brook gave its name to the ranch and to a small town much the size of today's Two Dot. In the town of Big Elk existed a stage stop, one of the many located every twenty-five miles, that attributed to the town's small, but "classy" population.

Shortly before acquiring the expanse of Big Elk, G.D. joined with the "Montgomery Boys," who provided the money for the purchase, while G.D. provided the livestock for the complete purchase of the land mass. After the Montgomery Brothers bought out the 28,000-acre expanse of G.D.'s which adjoined the present site of Two Dot, George decided to return home to Missouri for a visit. During his homecoming, G.D. fell in love and married Miss Cora Ayers in Humansville, Missouri. Returning to Montana with their first son Wayne in arms, the drive and draw of the land again led George back to Big Elk, where he was able to buy the ranch once and for all with some back wages from an old partner and friend, Harvey Pound ...

### **Agriculture in the Future** by John

Agriculture is a vital part of each and everyone's life. Agricultural practices have been a part of civilization since early peoples learned to harvest crops and tame primal animals. Agriculture has always been a fast growing field, growing not in small steps, but in leaps and bounds. Farming and ranching has changed drastically in the last 100 years. Many things considered essential to the survival of the ranch are no longer considered as an intricate part of the operation. One of the largest changes is the conversion from horse and manpower to using tractors and machinery to do the work. This transition was tough for many ranchers, but altered agriculture forever. No longer would man have to rely on animals and laborers to toil in the harness and field. Agriculture had primarily revolved around horse and manpower for eons; within one hundred years, all of that was part of the past.

We are in the midst of another phase, the transition to computers and high precision machinery, which will ultimately become an integrated part of agriculture in the future. The image of farming and ranching has changed from the man holding the pitchfork to the man with the GPS unit. These innovations have cut down on manual labor and time, which is always a big factor in any operation. Such innovations do, however, cost more money. Modern haying equipment has revolutionized how ranchers put up and feed hay. Ranchers can now put up ten times as much hay, in

a fraction of the time it used to take. They can now have more breathing room with that excess of hay. With more hay, livestock no longer has to winter on the open range, trying to forage for food. Producers can receive a better price for their livestock, which weighs more because they had the opportunity to feed more hay.

Another field already shaping agriculture's future is biotechnology. Biotechnology has been practiced for centuries, ever since the first agriculturalist brewed beer or fermented wine or when the first piece of cheese was made, or the first loaf of bread was baked with yeast. These are all forms of biotechnology; we are just now expanding our knowledge of it. Through biotechnology, farmers are offered genetically modified products dealing with natural enemies and hindrances. Genetically modified seeds have given farmers the opportunity to raise crops resistant to some pests that have been a hindrance for centuries. Modified crops such as Roundup-Ready Soybeans can be sprayed with a herbicide, eradicating harmful weeds and undesirable plants, leaving the soybeans intact. On a note closer to home, geneticists have developed a modified species of wheat having solid stalks, eliminating the wheat's main insect pest (the sawfly) from laying its young in the stalks, which eventually causes the wheat to "lodge" over, making it impossible to pick up the wheat with a combine. The technology is out there for the ranchers to utilize, but none of it comes cheap. The technology will become part of the agriculture ... but will we become dependent on it? The option is ultimately left to the rancher.

Each of the ranches we have the privilege to interview has remained in the hands of the same family for one hundred years, some much longer. Some things change as time marches on, and most things will. And yet there are a few, so very few, that do not change. Each of these ranches are unique in this way; each of the families are unique in this way. They have witnessed the long days when farmers sowed the seeds and coaxed them from the soil, later harvesting the life-giving grain with nothing but the sweat on their brow and a little luck. They have withstood the unimaginable technological growth in agriculture in the early 1900s that made agriculture rely on machinery, rather than horses and manual labor. Each ranch will live on to see many more changes, to face the future. They will overcome each new challenge with the same determination and skill their forefathers had. They will each live on to write new chapters in the history of their families, and the history of all they touch, tucked away in the heart of Montana.

### **Reflections on an Interview** *by Erin, BreAnna, Adam, and Tiffany*

The interaction we had with the Moore family was more than just an interview—it was improvised questions answered by stories within stories. The past was brought forth in a manner where every aspect of the Moore's history came to life in front of us. Instead of a second hand relay of historical information, we actually felt a part of the past. Jim Moore, who was around for much of the time covered in our essay, made us feel and understand the past. We really became a part of Montana history when we were taken on a tour of their ranch. We saw the buffalo jump of which we spoke, we were actually within the upper Musselshell Valley, and we were able to visit the original Moore establishments built in 1873. Being able to touch and see and smell the things which were inscribed within our pages created an easier way for us to create a more flowing paper, and a more living history.

The history of Montana ranches is a very in-depth, interesting topic, but it seems to be widely forgotten. Children of this day and age have been taught of other things besides their heritage. What we have done in our English class has brought



a new vision of what is involved within the past. We feel the Montana Heritage Project gives our generation a chance and an educational way to learn of Montana's history. It is not only students who become involved with this project, but also the families we interview. Jim and Steve were more than grateful to share with us their knowledge of their families' history. They not only gave us the view of their family's past, but gave us the knowledge of the life which was experienced in the early days of settling in Montana.

Interacting with such memories and strong family ties of the Moores was a touching and astonishing experience. To be able to learn of such historic and "tattered" stories is an experience only felt by those involved with this project. We are lucky in having a teacher so involved and enthused by history and its attributes.

Because of this opportunity, we not only became more aware of the past, but we also learned more about people. Spending such time sharing deep family bonds with the Moores gave us a greater appreciation for all involved within family. The hardship implicated in the late 1800s and early 1900s really tested the strength of family. The Moores are a prime example of what a strong family is. The family has lived through the most drastic changes of recent times and continues to strengthen. Not only did the Moores hold the ranch through depression and poverty, they held on to each other, which had the effect of creating one of the oldest family ranches in Montana today.

Most of the schools involved in the Montana Heritage Project are heavily involved with actual people with ties to the past. We are creating a book, which will bring into existence an open passage to the remnants of the days long gone. Such interaction and involvement with people makes understanding and reflecting upon all aspects of the past possible. This is an experience we feel all students should be introduced to. They gain a better sense of history, heritage, and family. We believe this project will keep Montana's history alive throughout the years to follow, as long as this project grows in size along with history. We are hoping the Montana Heritage Project continues to be highly thought of and brings everyone within the state more informed about Montana and its past.

## Project Outline

- Students researched their family tree, documenting at least three generations and choosing a family symbol. They then explained the significance of that symbol in writing.
- Students chose a photo with at least one figure in the image and wrote a description/analysis of the photo.
- Students read books related to the project (and chosen by the teacher) and analyzed both style and content.
- After the instructor made initial contacts with local ranching families, students followed up by contacting them to schedule interviews.
- Students prepared for the interviews by doing some preliminary research and creating lists of possible interview questions.
- Students visited ranchers and conducted interviews, documenting the event with cameras, and audio and video recorders.

- Students returned to class to edit the gathered material and create PowerPoint and Web presentations of their work.
- Students wrote histories of the ranching families, as well as other introductory material and essays for inclusion in a project book.
- Students designed and created all the graphics for the book, using computer software.
- Students planned an evening reception and invited community members to attend as they presented their work. Every student had a speaking part in the presentation.

## Contact

Nancy Widdicombe, Teacher  
 Harlowton High School  
 304 Division  
 Harlowton, Montana 59036  
 Phone: (406) 632-4324  
 E-mail: nwiddicombe@yahoo.com  
 Web site: www.edheritage.org

## Suggested Student Reading

Ambrose, S.E. (1997). *Undaunted courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson and the opening of the American West*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Bedard, M. (Author), & McCully, E.A. (Illustrator). (1997). *The divide*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

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# THE ROOTS OF NIKISKI

## Alaskan Students Discover Their Heritage and Leave a Legacy of Their Own

**H**ere in Nikiski, Alaska, on the northeastern edge of the Kenai Peninsula, blankets of evergreen drape the hillsides, frothy waves slap against the rocky shore, gulls and raptors dance overhead. Across the Cook Inlet, the mountains of the Alaska Range can be seen raising their snowcapped heads to the sun. It's easy to see the allure, to understand why early homesteaders were willing to face wild animals, arctic winters, and the absence of any creature comforts to settle here.



When Nikiski's first homesteaders came to this area in the 1950s, there was little more than a tire-track road winding through the wilderness. Early residents had to carve out their own roadways and then had to clear the land and fell spruce to build cabins. Many made do with trailers, tents, and lean-tos until they could get more permanent structures over their heads, which often meant enduring brutal winter weather with temperatures far below zero. The coldest year on the peninsula Sally Ernst can remember, the mercury dropped to 40 below.

Once you had a cabin, life still wasn't easy. There were no phones, no electricity, no indoor plumbing. And keeping food on the table through the dark days of winter was a challenge. If you were smart, says Donnis Thompson, you managed to squirrel away some potatoes and cabbage, and, if you were lucky,



maybe shoot a moose or two. Early on, there weren't even stores for buying groceries in the summer, says Margaret Wirz, whose family came here to fish for the canneries when she was a child. Supplies—including 50-gallon barrels of gas and cases of canned and packaged foods—were trucked in along the beach. The same truck would then be filled with fish to head back to the canneries.

These stories would likely be lost if not for a recent eighth-grade project at Nikiski Middle School. The interdisciplinary project—bridging social studies, language arts, science, and math—focused on the local community as a subject of inquiry. The effort, aligned with state and district learning goals, involved weaving writing throughout the curriculum and including action research as part of the writing process. Students assumed the roles of historians, writers, scientists, and statisticians, working on projects ranging from recording oral histories and composing poetry to preparing scientific field reports and summarizing mathematical studies. The culmination of the project was a 70-page book written by the students for and about the community: *Away From Almost Everything Else: An Interdisciplinary Study of Nikiski*.

The community seemed like the ideal subject for the interdisciplinary study, says Scott Christian, the English teacher who oversaw the project. For starters, students didn't know much about the history of their community. And while all took part in outdoor activities, most had never stopped to ponder the natural treasures that surrounded them. Many of the students had lived in Alaska all their life, and what they saw as teens was a small, rural town in the middle of nowhere where nothing much was happening. "The students had a real chip on their shoulders," says Christian, now the director of the Professional Development Center at the University of Alaska Southeast in Juneau. "Students thought that places like California and New York were cool, but where they lived was boring."

Teachers saw the community study as an opportunity for students to learn about the heritage of their unique town and gain some appreciation for the environment in which they lived. Because teachers had already been engaged in an effort to create a community of learners, they saw a prime opportunity in a project that would involve community members, young and old, in a joint effort to preserve a bit of Nikiski's heritage.

## Collecting Oral Histories

The first part of the project involved preserving the oral histories of notable residents. Many students sought out original homesteaders, often a grandparent or neighbor. Interview topics included such subjects as reasons for moving to Alaska, including jobs, love, and adventure; the challenges of early homesteading; natural events affecting the area, such as the devastating earthquake of 1964, blizzards, and drought; and shifting employment opportunities, including the shift from commercial fishing in the early days to oil drilling and production in more recent times. Additionally, as eighth-grader Mario noted while recording the oral history of an early homesteader, "Almost any sourdough in Alaska has one or two bear stories to tell." This claim is borne out in numerous accounts of interactions with "brownies," as well as confrontations with



**An important byproduct of these interviews was the generational interaction that cannot be achieved by field trips to the senior citizens' center for Christmas carols. Here, the young and old were working together, creating something real and important.**

other four-footed species, including porcupines hiding in outhouses, squirrels invading cabins, and stubborn moose blocking trails. Students were as happy to hear and record these stories as their elders were to share them.

“An important byproduct of these interviews was the generational interaction that cannot be achieved by field trips to the senior citizens' center for Christmas carols. Here, the young and old were working together, creating something real and important,” Christian writes in *Writing to Make a Difference: Classroom Projects for Community Change*, a book he coedited with Chris Benson. “Time after time,” he adds, “the interviewees expressed how delightful it was to sit down and have a meaningful conversation with a teenager.” Christian asserts that, despite negative reports in the media, “teens today are capable of complex, sophisticated work of high quality.” To help them achieve this, he says teachers must employ practices “such as cooperative learning, authentic assessment, integrated technology, and interdisciplinary teaching.”

While writing was integral to the study of all subject areas, language arts were front and center during the second part of the project when the environment became the inspiration for poetry. Students first studied works by several poets, including Robert Frost and e.e. cummings. Then they took a field trip to nearby Bishop Creek, a salmon-rich waterway that winds through a heavily wooded area and feeds into the Cook Inlet. They spent time observing the natural wonders and scribbling ideas for their own poems. They then returned to school for a monthlong process of writing, engaging in peer and teacher reviews, and editing multiple drafts.

The idea of writing as a process was new to most of Christian's students who were well practiced at filling in the blanks on worksheets, but intimidated by the directive to analyze a rough draft and see how it could be improved. Because they were motivated to produce a quality publication, they saw the value of honing their work to create the best piece of writing possible.

Christian helped by modeling the process of writing. He subjected his own rough drafts—mistakes and all—to his students' criticism, and revised his work to make improvements. “If it's OK for the teacher to make mistakes and do five revisions,” he says, the students decide “it's OK for me.” He adds: “There's a very different environment when teachers are writing—when teachers present themselves as writers and show kids the idiosyncratic nature of writing. It makes it more real and accessible.”

## Exploring Poetry and Scientific Writing

Poetry turned out to be a perfect medium for these teens. “Their school identity is what happens in middle school. They really decide who they're going to be,” Christian observes. “Poetry is a way to process what they're thinking and feeling.” He adds: “One way or another, they'll express themselves. This is a positive, directed way to do it.”

At Bishop Creek, “kids picked up images and connected them to their lives,” Christian says. “That was thrilling to see.” Jessica, for example, saw two bald eagles perched in a tree and compared them to herself and her mother, using the metaphor as an opportunity to explore this relationship. When Jason saw trees' roots exposed and dangling over the creek bank “grasping for life, wishing to be on rich soil,” he compared this natural erosion of the environment to the process of human life where, he writes, people move “closer and closer to death / And those who grow on the edge / Will fall early.”

A number of students found a voice through the process, and some even found peer acceptance. At the outset, “Jason did not see himself as a writer,” Christian says. “He was very quiet and saw himself as an outsider.” There was a real transformation when classmates expressed how impressed they were with his poem, telling him, “You’re like Shakespeare.” Christian recalls, “That was his entry into the eighth-grade group.”

Writing scientific field reports turned out to be more of a challenge for students. Because these reports were factual and objective—describing the step-by-step process by which they collected samples of plant life from a two-by-two-foot plot of land at Bishop Creek and then catalogued and identified the species—students had to learn to write in what seemed another language entirely. “It was hard for kids,” says Christian, compared to the first-person narratives of the oral histories and the emotive, imagistic language of poetry. “It’s like using a different part of your brain,” he says, “writing in a new voice, to a new audience.” Summarizing statistical data for the math portion of the project—including a quantitative analysis of plant samples collected in an assigned plot—was similarly vexing. But students rose to the challenge and created a body of work in which both teachers and students could take pride.

## The Value of Authentic Work

Clearly, the Nikiski project reinforces the value of authentic work for engaging students. “I don’t think kids are used to doing sophisticated, complex, professional work in school,” says Christian. Through projects like this, students are motivated to learn because they have a real purpose. He adds: “Middle school students can smell B.S. a mile away. Their mantra at this age is, ‘Why are we doing this?’” They want to know what value an assignment has in the real world. The Nikiski project, which provided the community with the first written history of the area, gave them a job with real-world value. The book was not only distributed among the students and their families, but was also made available for sale to the public via the local post office and bookstore. No doubt, it will serve as a valuable resource for generations to come.

A photo of a snowy cabin accompanies a young writer’s poem in *Away From Almost Everything Else*.



Christian reports that the publication of *Away From Almost Everything Else* was “a great way to celebrate student work,” as well as an effective motivator that “helped them take their work to another level.”

Equally important, the project helped these teens gain a sense of pride in their community. The process helped them to see that “there was real history right here,” Christian says, “and that where they lived was pretty cool after all.”

## Student Writing Samples

*Excerpts from Away From Almost Everything Else: An Interdisciplinary Study of Nikiski*

### **Donnis Thompson (Excerpted)** by Mario

By this time, the Thompsons were thinking, we’d better get a good piece of homesteading land before somebody else does. So they hiked out, flew out, etc. looking for a piece of land that fit there certain specifications. “Homesteading was very difficult”, mentions Donnis. “It was very expensive; there were old Borough Land Management Laws, the very same the government used in the Oklahoma land rush, just shipped up to Alaska, which wasn’t suitable at all for Alaska ...” Another homesteading trail was that it wasn’t downtown anywhere. Homesteaders either built there own road or walked, since roads were nonexistent. Talk to anybody who has built a home nowadays. They’ll tell you its no picnic, but building twenty miles away from civilization is much, much more difficult. Plus, the lumber wasn’t manufactured for them. Build a house now, you have nice straight pieces of cedar, or some other tree grown just for building. Homesteaders had to clear out their land (that was one of the law’s requirements) and use the spruce trees for building, which meant cutting them the right size, shaving off the bark, and mantling them together. One other vital factor, besides building was, you had to live and eat.

It’s all very well to say you can raise potatoes, and you can, and you can raise cabbage, and you can, and maybe you can get a moose, and you can, but think of things we use in are daily life: orange juice, soap, cereal, bread. You had to have some kind of heat. And, if they weren’t burning something other than wood, they had to have propane. It was very, very difficult. In many instances the husband would have to go away to work like fishing in Cook Inlet, Bristol Bay, construction and other things like that.

The rules for Homesteading were to live in exclusion of a home any where else six months out of the year, clear such and such acres, and in three years they’d have some one come out to inspect the homestead to tell you if you met the requirements. Money was very scarce. Most people tried to grow potatoes to eat the sell, but the problems about this was that it was pretty hard to grow potatoes near a homestead that was about the size of a large sled. In the fall, many of the potatoes would rot. Why, I even knew someone who kept their’s under their bed so they wouldn’t rot. When you went to town to sell them it was pretty hard to sell to other people who were doing the exact same thing, trying to sell their potatoes.

**Erosion** *by Jason*

Walking down the beach, I realize,  
As the trees pulled out from the hills,  
Erosion has conquered them flawlessly,  
Their roots hang out tightly, yet limp,  
Grasping for life, wishing to be on the rich soil,  
We slowly move closer and closer to death,  
And those who grow on the edge,  
Will fall early.

## Project Outline

### Phase One: Oral Histories

- Students studied examples of oral histories.
- Students sought out longtime area residents to schedule interviews.
- Each student prepared a list of 20 questions to guide the interviews.
- Students conducted and tape recorded interviews.
- Using notes and tape recordings, students wrote five- to seven-page reports/oral histories. These reports were to include three parts: an introduction, a question-and-answer section, and a conclusion.
- Students participated in peer and teacher reviews and revised these oral histories multiple times to create a final draft for publication.

### Phase Two: Poetry

- Students studied poetry, including works by Robert Frost and e.e. cummings, as well as poetry written by the previous year's students.
- For inspiration, students took a field trip to a nearby wilderness area to observe the natural surroundings and capture some of the images by taking notes.
- Students returned to the classroom to write poems.
- During the following weeks, students engaged in peer and teacher reviews and edited multiple drafts of their poems.

### Phase Three: Scientific Writing

- The students studied scientific writing, analyzing how it differed from other writing styles.
- Working in groups, students collected samples of plant life from a two-by-two-foot plot of land in a nearby wilderness area.
- Students catalogued and identified the plant species.
- Students prepared scientific reports of their findings.

## Contact

Scott Christian has moved:

Scott Christian, Director  
Alaska Distance Education and Technology Consortium  
University of Alaska  
Hendrickson Annex 106  
11120 Glacier Highway  
Juneau, Alaska 99801  
Phone: (907) 465-8744  
E-mail: [scott.christian@uas.alaska.edu](mailto:scott.christian@uas.alaska.edu)  
Web site: <http://adetc.alaska.edu/index.cfm>

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# BIG LEARNING IN A SMALL COMMUNITY

## Yup'ik Students Discover Important Things About Where They Are From Through Writing

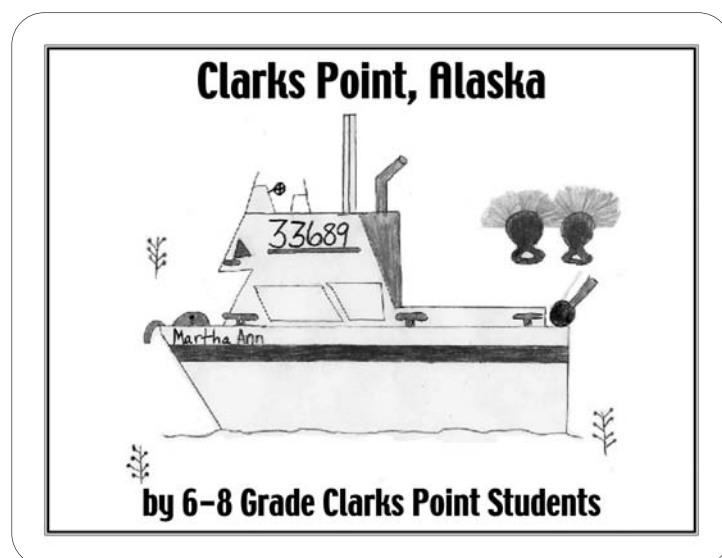


**T**he vastness of the Alaska landscape can overwhelm a person, even make one wonder if an individual matters in the larger scheme of things. But, that's certainly not the case when you talk with teacher Doug Gray about what he and a group of eight middle school students accomplished during a yearlong writing project at Clarks Point School in Southwest Alaska. His students produced a Web site and 40-plus-page book, the first written about Clarks Point by community members. This was an important milestone for the 65 residents of this village, located on Nushagak Bay, which empties into the larger Bristol Bay.

The middle schoolers who worked on the book learned many writing skills along the way. They also discovered that the elders in their village have taught them important skills for surviving and thriving in their environment, skills the young adolescents hadn't valued before. The students found special meaning in their small village, and learned that they are part of something much, much larger—a community of interdependent and caring people.

### The Setting for This Story

As the students' book, *Clarks Point, Alaska*, points out, "Clarks Point has a lot of history in Bristol Bay ... and started out as a fishing camp for the Yup'ik people." A fish cannery operated by the Nushagak Packing Company was located there in 1888. It was during that period that the community received its name, after John W. Clark, who owned the village store and was a fur trader on the Nushagak River.



The village population grew during summer when canning operations were in high gear. By the 1960s, Clarks Point had more than 130 residents. But, commercial fishing became less profitable in local waters over time; the cannery closed and the village population declined.

In 2003, the students documented 65 local residents and listed only a small number of paying jobs that the village supports—a postmaster, a teacher/principal, a couple of social workers, a police officer, and several village clerks. While villagers do take advantage of modern technology, the traditional Yup'ik way of life is based on hunting, fishing, and

gathering native berries. It makes sense that these subsistence skills are important for Clarks Point families to teach their children.

Clarks Point School serves grades K–8 with close to 20 students in three classrooms. All the middle schoolers (sixth through eighth grades) had Gray as principal/teacher over this project's duration, during the 2000–2001 and 2001–2002 school years. Gray has a master's degree in special education and a strong interest in writing. During a portion of the second year of the project, he was assisted by then-student teacher Brendan McGrath.

When Gray arrived at Clarks Point School he targeted writing as a skill area that needed improvement. “My first year out there,” he recalls, “I noticed that writing was something that we really did need to work on. The kids were pretty strong in math, pretty good in reading, but writing seemed to be a struggle.” The students do not come from homes where book literacy is high and, while English is the students' first language, they speak what Gray and other Alaska educators call “village English”: that is, a regional English variant that incorporates vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical structures from the students' Yup'ik heritage language. During Gray's tenure at Clarks Point, the school was actively working on improving student academic performance and receiving schoolwide improvement assistance from the Alaska Educational Resource Center (SERRC), a nonprofit headquartered in Anchorage that provides exemplary practices assistance to districts and schools throughout Alaska.

## How the Book Project Began

It was SERRC's assistance that ignited the spark for the Clarks Point middle school book project. Marty Rutherford, a contractor through the SERRC High-Performance Learning Community School Reform group, worked with schools in Gray's district to help develop plans for improvement. Rutherford was affiliated with the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College in Vermont. She encouraged Gray and his students to apply for a small grant for a book project that could serve several purposes: improve students' writing; engage them more in school by making it more relevant; and provide them with academic skills that would help them succeed in high school once they left their community's K–8 school.

**This wasn't necessarily for a grade—this was more a real-life project.**

"I shared with her my concerns about what we could do to get writing going," Gray recalls. "She talked about the value of writing about place and the importance of students being able to write from their own experience. ... [W]e went back and forth a little bit and came up with the notion of the kids writing about Clarks Point itself. There was no documented history of Clarks Point. We thought this would be a great way to get the kids involved. We knew we had the resources there because we were living in the setting. We felt it would be a good way for us to get the kids [involved in writing]. We knew we would have enough information and that they would be familiar enough with what we wanted them to write. ... Rutherford happened to know of the Write to Change Foundation and it started from there."

Rutherford had steered Gray to funding available through the Literacy and Community Service Networks program of the Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Policy Affairs at Clemson University, in Clemson, South Carolina. This national program promotes school literacy projects incorporating action research, writing, and public service and learning through which students and teachers are advocates for their communities. Despite the fact that the program was thousands of miles away from Alaska, the Clarks Point project concept still seemed to fit: Gray decided to enlist his students in the adventure and hard work of writing a grant proposal to the South Carolina foundation.

## A Real-World Writing Experience

Gray emphasizes that what he was after for his students was authentic learning. He and Rutherford felt that writing a grant proposal to the foundation would be a good life experience itself for the students. "This wasn't necessarily for a grade—this was more a real-life project. We were going to go through the whole process, and one way people do work is they work through grants." In addition, a book about Clarks Point "was something that we could pass down," Gray says. "It would be a written documentation of what life is like for us at Clarks Point."

Such an experience, if successful, could also give the students a tangible sense of accomplishment, some "real-life" validation. "The students could say that they helped write a grant, received a grant, and then completed the project that the grant outlined," reports Gray.

The grant application requirements for the Write to Change Foundation were not complicated and, to assist the students, Gray set up an outline that helped structure the students' thinking and proposal writing. The application didn't have to be shaped in a particular way. "We had to develop an outline of what we wanted to include in the proposal," said Gray, and "the kids put some time and effort into thinking about what they wanted to write about [in the book]." Gray proudly states, "The kids did most of the writing for the proposal itself."

The grant application was written during spring 2000; by fall 2001, Clarks Point School had \$250 in hand to help its students with their community book project. The grant didn't include money for equipment, but was used to purchase supplies and incidentals, such as video- and audiotapes, printer cartridges, and paper. The school already had some tape recorders, video and digital cameras, Internet access, a scanner, computers, and printers.

## The Book as a Research and Writing Process

With their grant proposal outline as their jumping-off point, the students got going. While Gray monitored and provided advice during the process, the students decided how they would cover what needed to get done. The class determined which students would work on each chapter, with two students per chapter. The students brainstormed what subtopics might be included in each chapter and tried to figure out how they would collect and develop the content they needed. The students identified the village council and tribal council members they wanted to interview and found out what types of information were available in the village office. The project brainstorming and planning took place during about one month's time.

Gray and his student teacher worked with the students on interviewing techniques and helped guide the students as they developed the questions they would use during their fact gathering. Information was obtained by interviews with family and community members; research in the school library or on the Internet in the computer lab; and through documents and photos from the village office, elders, and family members. During the data-gathering process, students also took digital photos.

Some students were stronger writers, to be sure, and other students were better at interviewing and photography or story layout. Gray let the students play to their strengths, but they all became involved in the writing process. After their interviews, they listened to their tapes and looked at their notes. They began typing up what they'd heard and worked to organize the various subtopics for their chapter into text that had some logical order.

Rutherford agreed to act as a reader for the students' early drafts. Students sent drafts via e-mail and she'd write back with questions she had as a reader, asking students what they'd meant by a particular sentence or getting them to clarify points so someone unfamiliar with their community and lifeways could understand what they were talking about. Gray did the same thing.

Neither Gray nor Rutherford worried particularly about the students' grammar, punctuation, or spelling at this point. "When the kids would have something they would want us to take a look at, rather than taking out the red pen and marking it up, we would just look at the pieces they had and, anything that was unclear, we would ask a question about that," Gray says. The idea was to keep the students motivated as writers, to help them structure their writing in ways that were logical, and to clarify ideas or support their points with some concrete examples that could help answer their readers' questions.

As another means of improving their writing, student pairs would switch drafts with other students to get feedback. This was something they'd already learned in prior writing lessons at school. Clarks Point teachers had previously used the 6+1 Trait® Writing model and its scoring rubric with these students. Gray had his middle school students continue to use the traits, which include ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. Thus, students strengthened their ability to identify problem areas in their drafts and to address readers' questions and problems more effectively.

Along the way, Gray found that it was appropriate to introduce what he calls "mini-lessons" about writing. Many of the students were having problems with transitions in





their writing. So, they spent some time as a class considering what words or phrases could help a specific draft be less choppy and flow better into a new idea or section. These conversations helped students both in their own writing and in responding to fellow students' writing.

The writing process wasn't rigid and the content changed along the way. For

instance, the original outline didn't include treatment of how Clarks Point had come to have an upper and lower portion. The students learned from interviewing a village elder that flooding made the lower village uninhabitable at times and how more and more villagers gradually moved to a higher location. Many adults in the village knew this history, but it predated the students' lifetimes. Discovering why Clarks Point had its particular layout was a real "Aha!" moment for the students, Gray says, and they felt strongly they wanted to include this discovery in their book.

The work on the book project ebbed and flowed during the school year. After an intense two-week period of interviewing and information gathering, Gray felt the students needed to take a break and the class went back to other parts of the curriculum. During that time, however, the class would talk about their book project, reflecting on what they had done so far and how they were going to proceed. This was useful "digestion" time. The book's creation lasted until the last day of school. "While we were cleaning up and everything, we were actually going through the book one more time to make sure that everything made sense and that we weren't seeing any grave errors," said Gray.

## Some Reflections About the Community Book Writing Project

In a school that was designated "in need of improvement," the outcome of improved student writing on standardized assessments was on Gray's mind. However, he didn't dwell on "teaching to the test." The class covered many research and writing skills during the creation of the book and Web site. Through the project, students cultivated research skills by observing and gathering information with digital photography, tape-recorded interviews, and books and Web resources. Writing skills included developing an outline, finding a focus in writing, understanding sentence structure, and writing paragraphs. They also sharpened other process skills: revising, editing drafts in a group, and self-reflection about the process of writing itself through metawriting.

After eighth grade, Clarks Point students go on to Mount Edgecumbe High School, a statewide boarding school in Sitka. Mount Edgecumbe is a much larger school and a number of the Clarks Point students who enroll there find it overwhelming and too difficult. Gray reports that it is common for students from Clarks Point to drop out after the first semester.



**They were able to now say, 'It's a small community, but there are things that we are able to do that nobody else in the world gets to do.'**

While he doesn't give sole credit to the writing project, Gray says that the four students from Clarks Point who worked on the book and then went on Mt. Edgecumbe were still there in May—and they were talking about schooling in a positive way. When he asked those students about writing, they said they were doing fine, and that “the teacher there says our stuff is good, we're usually right where we're supposed to be.”

Beyond increasing the students' competency as writers, another one of Gray's major goals was to allow students to go through an entire writing process to create a product. “We wanted them to be able to go from beginning to end ... to go through the process of what it is to write and rewrite something and to edit and re-edit something.” However, as Gray says, “This was not an easy project. It took a

lot of time, energy, and a lot of coaxing. It wasn't until the very end ... that they were able to feel pretty good about what they had done.” Once Gray felt that the class had everything there, he printed out a couple of drafts on the colored printer, bound them, and shared them with the students.

The students were pleased with what they had accomplished. They produced a very readable 44-page text with a bibliography in a two-column layout. There is student artwork on the cover and skillful placement of color photographs of community buildings, activities, and inhabitants throughout the text. Students weren't the only ones pleased; community members were impressed as well. Gray had a number of villagers ask for their own copies. He remarks, “This isn't something that's going to go in the back of the students' portfolios and never be seen again.”

Also, Gray concludes, “The kids had a much better appreciation for Clarks Point. They weren't so negative about Clarks Point being small and there's nothing to do. They were able to now say, 'It's a small community, but there are things that we are able to do that nobody else in the world gets to do.' Just that overall feeling about their village, that's a great thing.”

## Student Writing Samples

*Excerpts from the student publication Clarks Point, Alaska*

### History (Excerpted)

A major flood occurred at Clark's Point in 1929. This wrecked peoples homes and transportation. A past community member explained about how she dealt with major floods. Before her husband left for war she had him build an emergency house against the bluff so when it would flood they would go to that house and wait for the tide to go back out. She also talked about one flood being so bad that the whole village had to climb the bluff and camp for one night. When she went to her house it was damaged and her smoke house and drying rack had washed away. The people from Manakotak paid her way over and gave her a place to stay. When she returned back to Clark's Point the state gave her \$300.00 dollars in food.

In 1966 the Clark's Point Village council started to talk about moving the village up to the hill. It was not until 1982 that construction was started on the hill. It took about two years for everyone to settle in the new village.

### **Subsistence (Excerpted)**

Subsistence means going out hunting for my family and preparing for the long months ahead.

—Clarks Point student

Subsistence to me is a valued tradition that has been passed on from generation to generation. It is practiced by my family and its what sustains us through the long winters and helps us to live a healthy lifestyle.

—Community member

... Subsistence is so important to the Yup'ik people because we have to live off the land. We have to hunt the animals, we have to pick berries, and we have to fish. When we live off the land it helps us learn more about our culture. Since there are no stores around we really depend on our land. We live a subsistence life we make our culture grow!

### **Recipe for Akutaq (Eskimo ice cream)**

We like to make Eskimo ice cream called 'akutaq.' This is different than Ben and Jerry's ice cream.

Akutaq supplies:

1–2 quarts any kind of berries

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup Crisco

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup (to taste) sugar

1. Take a spoon full of Crisco and put it into a big bowl.
2. Then you mix up the Crisco with a spoon until it is fluffy and smooth. You might need to add a little water to make it fluffy.
3. Then you add some sugar to the Crisco and stir it up.

Next you add your berries and mix it up with the Crisco and sugar. Chill and enjoy. Bon appetite.

## **Project Outline**

A student-produced community book is the core feature of this effort to improve student writing and engagement in school. Major features of the project included:

- Students were involved in writing a grant to fund a real-world book project.
- Students conducted research by multiple methods (interviews, photography, gathering community documents, reading books, locating information on the Web).
- Students wrote sections of text, mostly in pairs, using a writing workshop method involving peer critiques of drafts; additionally, an adult from outside the community provided reader response via e-mail.
- The class worked on final editing and book production together.

- The final publication was distributed to each student and to members of the community; a PDF version was also posted on the Web.

To extend learning from this writing project, the teacher says he would:

- Have his students serve as mentors to another school that might take on a similar project for the first time.
- Give students an opportunity to write about some of the rich topics they didn't get to explore in depth in their community book. Another book just about fishing would have great potential, for instance.

## Contact

Doug Gray has moved to Massachusetts:

Doug Gray, Special Education Chair

John Glenn Middle School

10 McMahon Road

Bedford, Massachusetts 01730

E-mail: [Doug\\_Gray@bedford.k12.ma.us](mailto:Doug_Gray@bedford.k12.ma.us)

Web site for *Clarks Point, Alaska* student book:

[www.strom.clemson.edu/teams/literacy/clarkspoint.pdf](http://www.strom.clemson.edu/teams/literacy/clarkspoint.pdf)

## Suggested Student Reading

Griese, A.A. (Author), & Coalson, G. (Illustrator). (1978). *The wind is not a river*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press.

Hubbard, J. (Ed.). (1994). *Shooting back from the reservation: A photographic view of life by Native American youth*. New York, NY: New Press.

King, S. (Author), & Whipple, C. (Photographer). (1993). *Shannon: An Ojibway dancer*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner.

Lobo, S. (Ed.). (2002). *Urban voices: The Bay Area American Indian community*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.

McMillan, B. (1998). *Salmon summer*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

Rylant, C. (Author), & Demini, L. (Illustrator). (2002). *Tulip sees America*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Taylor, M.D. (1991). *Roll of thunder, hear my cry*. New York, NY: Puffin Books.

Yolen, J. (Author), & Shannon, D. (Illustrator). (1996). *Encounter*. New York, NY: Voyager Books.

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# DESCRIBING ALEKNAGIK

## Middle Schoolers Write a Book About Life in Their Alaskan Village

Middle school students at the PK–8 Aleknagik School in Aleknagik, a small village in southwestern Alaska, created a book about their community during the 2003–2004 school year. Aleknagik middle-level teacher Brendan McGrath did his student teaching in the same district the year before with Doug Gray at Clarks Point School. McGrath helped guide the student writing process at Clarks Point and witnessed the benefits—both academic and personal—that producing a book afforded the Clarks Point students (see pp. 235–242). When McGrath began to teach his own group of a dozen fifth- through eighth-graders at Aleknagik, he realized he needed to help them improve as writers, too. Although it would be a big undertaking, a book project could serve as a way to motivate Aleknagik’s students to improve their writing skills.

Aleknagik is about 40 miles northwest of Clarks Point along the shores of Lake Aleknagik. The Wood River flows south from the lake to Dillingham, the region’s commercial center of about 2,500 people, and then out into Bristol Bay. Unlike Clarks Point, where travel in and out is mostly by small airplane, a road covers the 30-mile distance from Aleknagik to Dillingham. Aleknagik is still fairly isolated and Dillingham itself is about 450 miles from Anchorage. Aleknagik School serves many community functions for the village’s approximately 220 residents since the building is the largest gathering space. The school building, constructed in 1983 along the tree-lined north shore of the lake, includes three classrooms, a library, and a gym/cafeteria. McGrath is one of three teachers instructing the village’s 34 students.

The student population at Aleknagik School is 100 percent Yup’ik. The local economy is primarily subsistence, and 80 percent of Aleknagik’s students receive free or



**The Aleknagik project took a much more personal approach. Freed from the task of creating a more research-based publication, the students felt liberated.**

reduced-price meals. Aleknagik students speak “village English.” As McGrath indicates, “Most of the parents are bilingual, with English as a ‘learning language.’ ... The kids are learning English from parents who are in a learning stage.” Given this, it made sense for McGrath to set an instructional goal of helping the students to improve their English vocabulary. The school’s eighth-grade reading scores—75 percent of the state benchmark in 2000—were not that far below other Alaska schools, but there was room for growth. An emphasis on vocabulary through writing could contribute to improving student performance in reading.

McGrath saw from classroom writing samples that his current class needed to improve word choice to make their written school assignments more interesting and engaging for readers—and for the students themselves. His goal was to have students incorporate more varied, descriptive words in their writing. A book project about their community could give them ample opportunity to grow in these ways.

McGrath started out the school year working with his students on the 6+1 Trait® Writing model, already a part of the district’s curriculum. He devised some shorter writing assignments so his students could apply their knowledge of the traits. He had his students critique the shorter drafts using rubrics organized around the traits. This was a good foundation for the students before they attempted the longer book assignment, which began in earnest after the midyear winter break.

## Changing Course

As a model and inspiration for his students, McGrath shared the Clarks Point students’ community book, as well as a book about Togiak, another village in the area. “They know some of those kids. They see each other in sporting events or over the summer fishing at camp,” McGrath noted. “Seeing those kids’ pictures in the [Clarks Point] book had a big impact.” After that, his students excitedly brainstormed answers to a key question: What is it that Aleknagik can share? McGrath recalled, “I couldn’t believe the amount of information they were spilling out to me. ... We filled up our whole chart board with ... ideas and, basically, took all those ideas and tried to organize them into chapter headings. They came up with six topical headings they wished to write about in their book: history/geography, community, subsistence, transportation, Yup’ik lore, and religion.”

McGrath emphasized that the concept Aleknagik students eventually developed for their publication, *The Aleknagik Way: Alaskan Style*, wasn’t an historical accounting of the village or an ethnography—although the students addressed the traditional topics of each, such as early settlers in the village, the local economy, and Yup’ik traditions and lore. Like anthropologists, the students interviewed community members, gathering information and Aleknagik stories. But, McGrath said, “Clarks Point was more of a research-based book. They wrote it in kind of a ‘research-y’ way. We started out that way ... doing interviews and trying to dig up old literature that we could find and use ... for information. But, it was so difficult to do and that was all new stuff. They’d never done it before, so I couldn’t get them to write. I kind of changed my mind, my idea, halfway through it. I said, ‘Let’s just write from our own personal experiences.’”

Thus, the Aleknagik project took a much more personal approach. Freed from the task of creating a more research-based publication, the students felt liberated. “That really induced them to write—and write more,” said McGrath. “We went and inter-

viewed people from the village and gained what resources we could, and then we discussed: ‘What do we want to write about here? What do we want to talk about?’” Under McGrath’s continuing direction, the students wrote descriptions, personal accounts, and stories, which they integrated with some of the information they’d gleaned from reading and interviews.

McGrath assigned pairs of students to each of the six chapters. (At the time the project started, there were 12 students in the class; two more came into the class later and so some pairs grew into small writing groups.) The students working on various topics all found different people to interview in the community.

## ***The Aleknagik Way***

First among the chapters in *The Aleknagik Way* is the “History/Geography” section, which reveals how the community got its name. “Aleknagik means ‘wrong way home’ in Yup’ik,” the students report. They then go on to recount a humorous anecdote that explains “fishermen would go up the wrong river, the Wood River, instead of going to the Nushagak River ... because of the fog and high tide fisherman [sic] could get lost and then come to Aleknagik and yell, ‘Aleknagik.’”

In the “Community” section, students describe the layout of their village and the physical setting, including uninhabited islands in Aleknagik Lake. They also recount the various ways they commute to school: “Getting to school is different than most other places. In winter our school bus is a snowmobile with a sled attached to the back. It is made of aluminum and it carries about eleven students. ... In the springtime it is warmer and ... we use the school boat to go to the South Shore to pick up those students. The boat is an eighteen-foot flat bottom boat that can hold ten people depending on their size.” They go on to describe Aleknagik’s various buildings, including the Mission fishing lodge where Hollywood stars Sylvester Stallone and William Shatner stayed one summer, giving Aleknagik a toehold claim to Hollywood fame.

In the “Subsistence” chapter, students describe the lifestyle of villagers. Here, they tapped into their interviews to include other villagers’ voices. James Andrews told the students “‘subsistence is gathering food for the winter.’ That is what subsistence means to him.” The students write on, offering a detailed description of Andrews’s process for butchering a wolverine: “When he catches a wolverine he brings it home

### ***The Aleknagik Way: Alaskan Style***



***By: 5-8<sup>th</sup> Grade Aleknagik School Students***



and lets it sit out overnight and then he skins it. After he skins it he gets the mop bucket and fills it with hot water and he uses laundry soap to clean it, after he cleans it he brings it outside then hangs it to dry. After he does that he cleans up his mess with soap and Clorox.” The students also wrote about the process of fishing through ice in the winter: “We don’t use big fishing poles like in the summer. We use a foot long stick with two one and a half inch nails at the ends of the sticks and fishing line that is twirled around the nails.”

The students pepper their descriptions of these processes with more short anecdotes that breathe life into the telling of how something is done. Here’s the description of ice fishing: “This winter I went fishing with my family. We drove with our snow machine to a good fishing place called The Point. We drove across the frozen lake. ... We saw a couple of holes that other people made. We got our fishing rods ready. We got a shiny fishing lure that was about two and a half inches long to attract the fish ... then we put the line down into the

water to about three to four arm lengths deep. We fished for a couple of hours but did not catch anything. As the Sun started to go down we started to catch them one right after another. It was really fun.”

As the book progresses, students discuss the seasonal round of life in Aleknagik and how the natural world signals the changing of the seasons: “Spring is a busy season. The snow starts to melt and the weather starts to change. The birds and the animals start to come back to Aleknagik. During this season we hunt for seals, walrus, beluga whale, ducks, geese, fish, squirrels, caribou, and clams.” Through their descriptive writing, the reader senses their observational skills and their wonder and appreciation for the natural phenomena around them: “The northern lights are beautiful red, green, purple, and pink colors that you see in the winter night. On a clear night these colors appear to dance with the sky.”

The students also describe other Yup’ik traditions and lore in the chapter dedicated to this topic, repeating the types of stories their parents and grandparents still tell. They learned that some stories are true retellings of actual incidents, while others are myths and fables told for both entertainment and to “teach you lessons about life.” The students explain that almost everyone in their school has both a Yup’ik and an English name, and they tell how this naming tradition began. As one student contribution to the book says, “When the missionary named us, he first gave our father a name. He used his Eskimo name for his last name. My father’s Eskimo name was Paluktak. So when the missionary named him, he translated his Eskimo name and gave him ‘Beaver’ for his last name. The missionaries named fathers in 1918.”

## Using the Personal Voice

In addition to traditions and lore, the students described village ceremonies. Writing became a way for one of the girls to recount and help process a tragic personal experience. In the section describing community ceremonies, the student wrote about the funeral arrangements for her mother, who died in a plane crash during the period when the book was being written: “The day I found out my mother died my family and I had to be alone from the community. This is the way the Russian Orthodox Church members are supposed to grieve. The community is supposed to first respect the family by leaving them alone and then the next day go to the families’ house and support them. Since the church was not big enough to hold the 415 people who came, we used the school gym. This is the biggest building in our community. During this time the community was secured together by this loss and for a time everyone was supportive and kind to each other.” A poem the girl wrote for class about her loss also fit appropriately into this section of the book, providing special meaning and poignancy:

### **Lost** by Katherine Andrew

She is gone,  
I’m all alone,  
What do I do,  
Who can I run to,  
I hope my dad,  
No he is mad,  
Maybe my brother,  
I might be a bother,  
I feel lost,  
I need her most.

McGrath realized how writing was an important, expressive vehicle for his students, especially this young Yup’ik teen at a critical time in her life. “Getting them to share their feelings and be open is a hard thing for them. It’s a cultural thing. You hear that from anyone who’s from there; it’s difficult to share those things. The girl who wrote about her mother’s death and the poem that she put in there ... that’s someone who’s not going to talk about that. [Writing] is her way to express her feelings ... she’s using that to express her feelings.” The Aleknagik students were not only gathering information and making observations, but telling about their world, sharing their experiences in it, and gaining a voice through their writing.

## Feedback and Reflection

“They’re proud of what they did, but getting them to admit it is difficult,” McGrath noted. Throughout the writing process, student groups turned in drafts that McGrath e-mailed to various “outside readers.” Doug Gray at Clarks Point School was one of the adult readers providing feedback. McGrath’s writing friends and fellow teachers in Alaska, California, and distant Vermont also gave input. It was interesting to watch the students’ responses to their readers’ comments. “Whenever I’d get feedback, I’d read



that to them,” McGrath recalled. “They liked hearing that, you could tell. Some of it was personalized; it would mention specific parts and the writing that the reader liked. The kids ... when you’d mention the part that they’d written, you’d see their heads lift and a little grin go on.”

McGrath has thought of ways to replicate the book writing project in the future, continuing to make it relevant to his students’ lives. “I’ve already been thinking of doing this project over again. How can we expand? Maybe we can do a book on birds of the area, or the animals ... we could do personal stories and mix it in with some researched content. They all have experiences with animals here.” He’s also thought about what to change next time around. “I’d try to make the editing a little more pleasant, break it up a bit more.” He asked the students for input about the grind of editing and they said, “Maybe we could make the editing a competition, see how many mistakes a group could find or comments they could make” on others’ sections. He would also increase the number of student illustrations in a second book project and integrate them into the process of creating the book.

McGrath said that he’d save more of the students’ drafts to include in the district-required student portfolios. It’s difficult to include the group book as individual work in student portfolios, he noted. Due to the amount of time the book took, the students only had two other writing products to contribute to their portfolios for the year. Including drafts in the portfolios would show how a student’s writing progressed from draft to final product. “I would save every edit, every piece they give you.” He knows the final result shows what the students produced, but not how much they learned about the writing process itself. He did have the students include their written reflections about the book project, which they produced at the project’s end. The students were able to reflect on the writing process and what makes writing better. McGrath saw their improved capacity for metacognition as another very important learning outcome from this project that will help students in their next writing project and beyond.<sup>3</sup>

## Student Writing Samples

*Excerpts from The Aleknagik Way: Alaskan Style*

### **Community (Excerpted)**

Getting to school is different than most other places. In winter our school bus is a snowmobile with a sled attached to the back. It is made of aluminum and it carries about eleven students. It has to cross the frozen lake to get the students on the South Shore. When the snow melts we start to use the 4-wheeler with a trailer that is hooked up to the back. The trailer is made of aluminum and has four wheels. It has no top and two bench seats and can hold around eleven students. In the springtime it is warmer and not as safe to ride the snowmachines on the ice because it is breaking up. Instead we use the school boat to go to the South Shore to pick up those students. The boat is an eighteen-foot flat bottom

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<sup>3</sup> Aleknagik students continue to share their writing and their book. In arranging for a school trip to Washington, D.C., in April 2005, the school contacted the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian and asked if they would like the middle school students to deliver a copy of *The Aleknagik Way: Alaskan Style*. The museum accepted the offer and organized an event for the public during which the students recited poetry, told stories about their lives and culture, and read from their book.



boat that can hold ten people depending on their size. This is about a five–seven minute trip to get to the South Shore.

### **Spring (Excerpted)**

When I was five years old I never listen to my cousin Rachel or my sister. I was running around screaming by the lake and they said a brown bear would come and eat me alive if I kept screaming. I just laughed at what they said and just ran and screamed while playing in the water. A half an hour later the dogs started to bark at something. Then I looked at the dogs and they where barking at a big and dirty brown bear. It was getting dark out and I got so scared when I saw the large bear. Then I saw my other cousin Stacy flashing a light at me.

She yelled to me, “Come in fast! So you will not get eaten!”

I yelled, “I’m too scared to run!”

Then I heard piercing gun shot and I closed my eyes. Then I saw my two cousins Kelly and Aaron. Kelly ran and grabbed me by the waist with one arm. It felt like a big hard gust of wind went out of me. He ran me up to my grandma’s house and they said that I could not play outside anymore without anyone watching me.

### **Project Outline**

- Students started the book project midyear. The students had some background knowledge of the traits of good writing from instruction in the 6+1 Trait® Writing model. An instructional goal of the book project was to improve students’ abilities in descriptive writing.
- The students looked at other student-produced books from nearby schools as possible models and for content inspiration.
- The class brainstormed ideas for the book’s overall focus and for chapter topics.
- Students conducted preliminary book and Web-based research and interviewed some adult community members.
- Students found it challenging to incorporate outside sources. This impeded the students’ progress, prompting the teacher to redefine the assignment to draw more from students’ personal experience. The research they had conducted was good background knowledge.
- Students worked in pairs to draft chapters.
- Students e-mailed draft chapters to outside readers.
- Students made substantive revisions to their drafts based on this feedback and then edited for conventions as a class.
- Students took photos and drew illustrations to complement their text.
- The printed book was assembled and posted on the Web.

## Contact

Brendan McGrath, Teacher  
Aleknagik School  
Southwest Regional School District  
PO Box 84  
Aleknagik, Alaska 99555  
Phone: (907) 842-5681  
E-mail: bmcgrath@swrsd.org  
Web site for *The Aleknagik Way: Alaskan Style* student book:  
[www.strom.clemson.edu/teams/literacy/aleknagik.pdf](http://www.strom.clemson.edu/teams/literacy/aleknagik.pdf)

## Suggested Student Reading

- Blue Cloud, P. (1995). *Clans of many nations: Selected poems, 1964–1994*. Buffalo, NY: White Pine Press.
- Brown, T. (Profilier), & Carol, R. (Photographer). (1998). *Children of the midnight sun: Young native voices of Alaska*. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Northwest Books.
- Lewis, P.O. (2001). *Storm boy*. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.
- Luenn, N. (Author), & Waldman, N. (Illustrator). (1994). *Nessa's story*. New York, NY: Atheneum.
- McCloskey, R. (1977). *Time of wonder*. New York, NY: Puffin Books.
- Nicolai, M. (Author), & Rubin, D. (Illustrator). (1998). *Kitaaq goes ice fishing*. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Northwest Books.
- Paulsen, G. (Author), & Paulsen, R.W. (Illustrator). (1993). *Dogteam*. New York, NY: Dragonfly Books.
- Rylant, C. (Author), & Moser, B. (Illustrator). (1991). *Appalachia: The voices of sleeping birds*. New York, NY: Voyager Books.
- Sloat, T. (Author/Illustrator), & Huffman, B. (Author). (2004). *Berry magic*. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Northwest Books.
- TallMountain, M. (Author), & Fejes, C. (Illustrator). (1990). *The light on the tent wall: A bridging*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California at Los Angeles.

# REDISCOVERING COYOTE AND RAVEN

## The Ancient Art of Spirit Masks Moves Into the Digital Age

**A**round campfires, generations of masked dancers have reenacted legends of a long-ago world. They've told stories of Coyote the trickster and of clever Raven, fabled to have stolen the sun and brought light to the skies. Today, one small-town school in the Alaskan wilderness is bridging these tales of the ancients with modern technology as students take the study of spirit masks high tech.



At Tri-Valley School in Healy, Alaska, near the northeast edge of Denali National Park, middle school students are researching animal symbolism on the Web, designing three-dimensional masks with computer graphics programs, and making and editing digital movies of their mask-making endeavors. Along the way, they learn about differences in world cultures, practice their writing skills, and gain exposure to the fine arts.

This 10- to 11-week interdisciplinary project is the brainchild of Tri-Valley technology teacher Sheila Craig. She came up with the idea after participating in an intensive professional development program called ARCTIC (Alaska Reform in the Classroom through Technology Integration and Collaboration) four years ago. This effort, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, helps teachers learn to weave technology into instruction in relevant and useful ways and to design effective learning environments that incorporate technology.

"ARCTIC introduced me to project-based teaching and made me think about using technology tools in a different way,"

Craig says. “I used to teach a computer applications course,” where technology skills were separated from other academic disciplines. “Now,” she says, “I teach academic content using technology as a tool” to support learning.

The difference for students is clear. Craig reports that lessons are “more meaningful and more relevant” to them—“things make a lot more sense.” In short, she says, “It’s a more holistic way of learning.”

### **Appreciating Different Cultures**

During the ARCTIC training, Craig spent a semester team teaching in Columbus, Ohio, with another participant, Marilyn McKinley, a fine arts specialist. Because Craig’s school had no art teacher, McKinley helped her develop the spirit mask unit and figure out how to integrate art with technology.



The state's ethnic diversity—which includes people of Inupiat, Yup'ik, Alutiiq, Athabaskan, Tlinkit, and Tsimshian heritage—motivated Craig as well. She hoped to give her mostly white students a deeper appreciation for these rich and varied cultures. “It's important,” she says, “that kids appreciate people whose ideas are different than their own.”

During the project, Craig's students study masks and animal symbolism in indigenous cultures around the world using a variety of books and the Internet as resources. This includes using Web sites to build a database of 10 masks from different locations around the globe. Craig then asks students to write an essay on their favorites, sharing the symbolism and/or stories behind the masks and making comparisons.

**The difference for students is clear. Lessons are more meaningful and more relevant to them—things make a lot more sense.**

In their essays, students examine values and beliefs regarding such issues as the passage of time, treatment of the elderly, and child-rearing practices. This process of comparing cultures leads the students to higher levels of thinking and, frequently, very animated discussions in the classroom, Craig reports. In the end, students tend to discover that they identify with elements of many of the cultures studied and that “we are this melting pot,” says their teacher.

The exploration eventually brings students to the study of Northwest Coast and Yup'ik spirit masks, used for telling stories about daily life, such as the hunt. They were also employed for teaching lessons through cautionary tales, not unlike such European American classics as “The Tortoise and the Hare” and “The Ant and the Grasshopper.”

Resources Craig's students found especially helpful during this part of the project include *The Living Tradition of Yup'ik Masks: Agayuliyararput, Our Way of Making Prayer* by Ann Fienup-Riordan; *Mythic Beings: Spirit Art of the Northwest Coast* and *Spirit Faces: Contemporary Masks of the Northwest Coast*, both by Gary Wyatt; and a variety of Web sites. Students also read Native legends recorded in *The Raven and the Totem: Traditional Alaska Native Myths and Tales* by John Smelcer.

Additionally, Craig says, “We talked about people who were good at telling stories and the elements that made their stories compelling. We discussed the importance of transformation in a story and read Alaskan myths and legends looking to identify the transformation.”

## Choosing Spirit Animals

Next, students choose an animal that intrigues them—their “spirit animal”—one whose characteristics and qualities they admire, feel they possess, or hope to develop. They then design their spirit animal mask on the computer, and follow up by building a three-dimensional plaster version. Additionally, students write a personal essay about their spirit animal and why they made this choice, as well as a one-page description of their mask to contribute to an electronic class “book.”

Sam, an eighth-grader, is moved by Native legends of Raven. In his essay, he writes that he has chosen the raven because it is intelligent and sometimes tricky, and also because it is “a leader,” a trait he hopes to attain. His mask, painted black with highlights of blue, features a prominent orange beak. At each temple he incorporates a traditional Native American element by attaching a feather on a beaded leather string.



Another student, Jessie, selects the clever and discreet fox as her inspiration. To mimic the texture of fur on her mask, she attaches red and white feathers.

Craig also asks the students to write a myth explaining “why their spirit animal developed a particular trait or physical attribute. For example, why did the lynx have a short tail? Why is the otter such a good swimmer? How did the porcupine get quills?” The resulting stories were very imaginative, Craig reports, and “some students wrote myths that taught a lesson.”

## Documenting Learning

Throughout the project, students keep an online journal documenting the learning process. Craig asks her pupils to write in the journal daily and respond to occasional prompts. For example, the teacher instructs students to include two specific entries reflecting on the physical process of making their masks, commenting in particular on their thoughts “pre-masking and post-masking.”

Before the process of plaster casting begins (pre-masking), Craig says she asks them to “write a journal entry telling me what they thought it would feel like to have the mask made on their face. ... What would it feel like to sit still for so long while someone else casts a mask on their face? How will it feel as it dries? When their eyes are covered, they won’t be able to see. How important is trust in this experience?”

After the casting step is completed (post-masking), Craig asks students to describe their experience. “The students came up with descriptive analogies,” the teacher reports. “One student wrote that the wet plaster felt like her dog licking her face, while another said it was more like a wet slug crawling down his cheek. A girl who was very nervous about having the mask made on her face told me it was a very calming experience for her. She said the plaster was warm and soothing. She was able to relax by imagining herself in another place—riding her horse through a beautiful pasture.”

Throughout the mask-making process, students work collaboratively, documenting the experience with digital photographs and videos, and helping each other with technical challenges. They then create their own iMovies and multimedia HyperStudio stacks. Finally, they present their work to their classmates.

A number of state standards are braided into project goals. For example, students:

- Gain an understanding of the historical and contemporary role of the arts, both inside and outside Alaska
- Use technology to explore ideas, solve problems, and derive meaning
- Organize and use information to create a product
- Apply elements of effective writing and speaking
- Learn to create and perform in the arts

## Connecting With Masks

All students seem to love the topic because they have had some experience or connection to masks, says Craig, “whether it was a hockey goalie mask, drama mask, or Halloween mask.” They also made “personal connections” because “the writing was more about themselves and their learning, rather than something abstract or unfamiliar.” And, despite the fact that most of the students are Caucasian, they found they shared

**All students seem to love the topic because they have had some experience or connection to masks, whether it was a hockey goalie mask, drama mask, or Halloween mask.**



common values and practices with the Yup'ik culture. "For example," says Craig, "most of the families in our small interior community rely on some form of subsistence hunting to put food on the table. That connection helped them understand the significance of the spirit animal and importance of conservation for future generations."

Additionally, the project reaches students who might otherwise be left behind, notes Craig. It has been especially effective with troubled and learning disabled students. "Adults sometimes have misconceptions that these students won't be successful at technology," the teacher says,

"but that isn't the case." Often, in fact, "they pick it up and blow people away. Technology is one area where kids who don't experience success in other areas can experience success."

"This unit could easily be altered to match available technology resources," Craig adds. "My students are fortunate that our community and school board highly support technology integration. However, technology is just a teaching and learning tool. If I didn't have the tools, I would have still taught the unit and changed the products. Instead of an iMovie, perhaps students could create a dance for their spirit masks, written a play, or focused more on the art of good storytelling."

The students in Craig's multiage class voice disappointment that the mask project comes around only once in their middle school years. But she is working to develop other projects that are equally "exciting and inspirational and motivating." In fact, Tri-Valley School now provides common prep time for teachers precisely so they can collaborate on this kind of interdisciplinary project—an owlsh gesture, to be sure.

## Student Writing Samples

### **My Mask Making Experience** *by Courtney*

Last week we made masks and it was one of the coolest experiences of my life. First we had to pick who would do a certain job. There were five jobs altogether; artist, project manager, photographer, videographer and the person being masked. The first job I had was project manager. As project manager you have to make sure that you get everything ready and that the masking is running smoothly. You also have to help the artist out. Next I was photographer and that job was a whole lot easier. All you have to do is take some good pictures of the group working on different parts of the mask and download the pictures to the computer. After that I was video person. It was almost the same as photographer but you use a digital video camera. Then finally I got to get masked. I thought that was the most exciting thing that happened in my life. My final job was artist but it was kind of like being masked except the plaster is on your hands instead of your face.

First I thought it would be cold, dark and slimy because that is what it looked like when I watched the first person get masked. When the mask was made on me, it felt so funny; either like a dog licking my face, a frog on my face or a snake slithering across my face. Any of these descriptions would fit because it was so slimy. Then when it was drying, it started to crust up and get cold, and it felt like noodles. I thought I was getting mummified.

I really liked this project and think what we should do it again. This was a great experience, but it is a bummer that I will be in high school next year and not get to do it again. I wish that I could have done this before. I am glad that Mrs. Craig picked this subject to do this year and that I had a chance to do this.

### **My Spirit Mask (Raven)** *by Sam*

I picked the raven as my spirit mask animal. The reason I picked the raven is because it is a clever bird. It is also very fun to watch. They like to horse around and eat. I also like it because it is pretty big as far as birds go, so they don't get pushed around much, they're kind of king of the hill.

The raven is known in native Alaskan cultures as a smart bird that is a trickster. They mean a lot to the native Alaskans and play a big role in the stories they tell each other. The raven is a leader because it has the qualities to get people to do what it wants even if it sometimes tricks them. I want to be a leader but I don't think I would trick people to get them to do things I want them to do.

### **My Spirit Animal (Reindeer)**

*by Laura*

The spirit animal that I picked was the reindeer. The reindeer's characteristics are gentleness, sensitivity and peace. I decided to choose this animal because most of my friends say that I am very gentle and I am kind of sensitive about things that people say and do. I hope that I am gentle because I don't want to be a person who hurts everyone. I think that the characteristics of this animal fit it very good just by the way that it walks. It looks gentle and when you see one you can feel the gentleness of it. I don't really see sensitivity in a reindeer because I just don't really see how a reindeer could possibly be sensitive about anything. I selected this animal because I thought that it would be a challenge to make a mask of it, but it actually wasn't that hard.

On my reindeer mask, I am putting a couple of snow flakes on the antlers because the reindeer tend to go through harsh winters. They are almost always walking through the snow on the ground and walking through falling snow. I am putting a star on the nose because the reindeer walk through the night when there are stars out in the sky. Another symbol is pilot wings because reindeer appear to fly when they leap. I think it would be neat to be able to fly.



**A Few Favorite Masks (Excerpted)** *by Kendra*

In computer class, my classmates and I have been doing a little research on some masks. Below are a few of my favorites that I have learned about, and have found interesting, eye catching, and just fun designs. I hope you will enjoy them just as I have.

Kitsune symbolizes a fox. It is made out of leather, and was carefully hand painted. The background color is red; the nose, the outline of the eyes, and half of the outline of the ears that precedes down to make eyebrows are black; and the inside of the ears, the whiskers, the area around the nose, mouth, and the forehead are white. The reason I picked this mask, was because foxes are very clever, sly, a trickster, and wise, but has a wary spirit (according to Japanese lore), making this animal one of my favorites. The bright colors, the design, and the way the whiskers curl was particularly eye catching to me. Cheryl Mandus (the artist) made the mask, to represent Kumadori, a traditional design from the Japanese theaters of the Noh and Kabuki. Since the design is Japanese, and for what it was used for was a theater show, it is very popular among lots of people interested in Oriental art. To me, the mask gives a peaceful feeling.

**Why the Wolves have Stuck up Ears** *by Nicola*

One day wolf was wandering around his territory just watching all the animals going around doing what ever they had to do. He saw Squirrel, Fox, Bear, Lynx and others. He said hello to all of them and asked them about their day and things like that.

Then he saw an eagle. He watched it for a while and when it started to fly off he decided to follow it. It took him out of his territory and up the hills and down the hills and through the forest and around and around and around until he was on a rather big hill with a small calm river below it.

He decided that the eagle was a magnificent creature and he wanted to be able to fly too, so he tried to flap his ears up and down. It worked a little, but the wolf decided it was good enough, so he jumped.

He fell off the hill and into the stream but hadn't gotten hurt too much. He had fallen so fast that his ears would not lay flat and that is why a wolf's ears stick up.

**Project Outline**

- Students study masks and animal symbolism in indigenous cultures around the world.
- Using the Internet, students create a database of 10 masks from different cultures.
- Students write essays on their favorite masks, sharing the symbolism and/or stories behind the masks and making comparisons.
- Students narrow their study, concentrating on spirit masks of the Northwest Coast and Yup'ik Native cultures, consulting various books and Web sites as resources.
- Students also read Native legends surrounding animals and Native culture, noting the construction of these tales and the use of animal symbolism throughout.
- Students choose spirit animals that possess characteristics or qualities they admire, feel they possess, or hope to develop.

- Students design masks of their spirit animals using the computer and then build three-dimensional versions.
- Students write essays about why they chose their particular spirit animals and write myths about how their spirit animal came to possess certain characteristics or traits.
- Students also write one-page descriptions of their physical masks and what they represent for inclusion in an electronic class “book.”
- Throughout the project, students write in online journals, responding to teacher prompts and documenting their learning.
- Students document the mask-making experience with digital photographs and videos, then create their own iMovies and multimedia HyperStudio stacks.
- Finally, students present their work to their classmates.

## Contact

Sheila Craig, Teacher  
Tri-Valley School  
PO Box 400  
Healy, Alaska 99743  
Phone: (907) 683-2267  
E-mail: [scraig@dbbsd.org](mailto:scraig@dbbsd.org)

## Suggested Student Reading

- Baylor, B. (Author), & Ingram, J. (Illustrator). (1974). *They put on masks*. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Cohlene, T. (Author), & Reasoner, C. (Illustrator). (1990). *Ka-ha-si and the loon*. Vero Beach, FL: Watermill Press.
- Dabovich, L. (1997). *The polar bear son: An Inuit tale*. New York, NY: Clarion Books.
- DeArmond, D. (1996). *Tales from the four winds of the north: Alaska Native folktales*. Juneau, AK: LapCat.
- Fienup-Riordan, A. (1996). *The living tradition of Yup'ik masks: Agayuliyararput = Our way of making prayer*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Hall, A. (2002). *The stolen sun: A story of native Alaska*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Books for Young Readers.
- Lopez, B. (Author), & Pohrt, T. (Illustrator). (1990). *Crow and weasel*. New York, NY: Farrar Straus Giroux.
- Smelcer, J. (Ed.). (1992). *The raven and the totem: Traditional Alaska Native myths and tales*. Anchorage, AK: Salmon Run Press.
- Wyatt, G. (1999). *Mythic beings: Spirit art of the Northwest coast*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Wyatt, G. (1999). *Spirit faces: Contemporary masks of the Northwest coast*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.



# HANDOUTS

**Handout 1**

Professional Study Group Discussion Questions

**Handout 2**

Children's and Young Adult Literature To Support Writing About Self, Family, and Community

**Handout 3**

The Reading-Writing Relationship: Seven Instructional Principles

**Handout 4**

13 Core Understandings About Learning To Read



# PROFESSIONAL STUDY GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Following are some questions that teachers or other practitioners may wish to consider as they read the practitioner examples. The questions are designed to help practitioners consider how they could adapt the examples described herein to their own context.

## **Doing Things With Words in the Real World** (p. 53)

1. Researcher Reid Lyon described how some children who come from highly literate environments learn to read and write, “almost as if by magic.” Describe some of the characteristics of this environment. How can schools recreate the conditions of literate households?
2. How can teachers find time to integrate language experience activities into their curriculum?
3. How can we create more opportunities for rich discussion with children?
4. Teacher Steve Franzel says that “language becomes a way to support children’s power.” Similarly, researcher Timothy Shanahan suggests that “as teachers, we need to ask ourselves not only how can reading and writing be put together but how can reading and writing be combined to make children more powerful in their actual control and use of language.” How, as a faculty, can you address these two questions?

## **All About Me** (p. 59)

1. Teacher and author Ralph Fletcher states that students’ rereading what they have written is a critical strategy for the revision of writing. What are some ways that you can maximize the effectiveness of this strategy?
2. Technology plays an important role in this project. Could the project be effective without the use of computer technology? How?
3. What supports would you need to engage in a project like this, including the use of technology?
4. What are some ways that you could include families in this project?

### **Riding la Alfombra Mágica** (p. 65)

1. JoAnna Lovato states, “Building a strong literacy foundation in my students’ first language helps ensure academic success and heightened self-esteem.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? How can learning a first language well support academic achievement?
2. How does your school support home language and culture? How do you build on the knowledge and experiences that children bring to school?
3. How does Lovato help her students “find their voice?”
4. Lovato modeled writing her own biography. How do you model writing for your students?

### **Bear Tales** (p. 71)

1. Mimi Walker says that “the process of talking with family members, listening to stories, and then recording a particularly memorable tale to share with their teacher and classmates provides all the basic building blocks for literacy.” What does she mean by that? Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. What local animal might you use for a similar project? How would you choose it? What books about the animal would you use?
3. Walker makes extensive use of centers for this project. What centers would you set up? What preparation would you need to do to help students use the centers appropriately and effectively?
4. Walker uses music and art throughout the project. How would you include music and art in an adaptation of the project?

### **Happily Ever After** (p. 79)

1. How does Lilia Doni support both the child’s home language and English?
2. How could you adapt this project for a monolingual classroom?
3. How do fairy tales weave connections between generations and cultures?
4. What are some of your favorite fairy tales? Why?
5. What fairy tales would you and your students choose? How would you decide?

### **To Dream the Possible Dream** (p. 85)

1. In order to help her young students “dream about very great occupations,” Mavjuda Rabimova developed curriculum to bring the world to her students. In what ways do you help students learn more about their community and the opportunities that might be available to them when they enter the work world?
2. Rabimova says the conversations that took place in the classroom and in the students’ homes were important steps on the path to literacy. What opportunities do you provide that facilitate such conversations about family history?
3. Rabimova used a variety of strategies to enhance children’s oral language. What strategies do you use?

4. In order for their Russian and Latino students to become literate in two languages, the faculty at Heritage Elementary has developed two late-exit bilingual strands. In schools where many languages are spoken, such an approach is not always possible. What strategies can be used to promote students' bilingual competency?

### **Connections in Time** (p. 95)

1. How are elders/seniors in your community invited to participate in the curriculum?
2. Cheryl Pratt says that the project serves as an adaptable vehicle for teaching state, district, and cultural learning standards. How can such a project help to meet these standards?
3. Pratt also says, "When learning is integrated, standards across the curriculum are met in a way that makes sense to children. Connections are made that teach students and teachers alike that learning does not have to be fragmented and compartmentalized." Discuss.
4. In adapting the project to your community, what would be your first steps?

### **"Where I'm From"** (p. 107)

1. As her first step, teacher Jennifer Tolton wrote her own "I Am From" poem and shared it with students and colleagues. Upon listening to the poem, her students got a glimpse of their teacher as a "real human being," and her co-workers expressed that they learned new things about her. How would you share your own "I Am From" poem with your students or colleagues?
2. What do students learn about writing from the model poem? As a teacher, how can you facilitate that learning?
3. Classrooms from three different environments are described here. Each took a slightly different approach to the writing, sharing, and publishing of the poems. What would this project look like in your setting?
4. Tolton shared students' poems in parent-teacher conferences and found that this sharing helped her build relationships with parents. How would this work in your school?

### **The Family Stories Book** (p. 121)

1. Stephanie Windham's students study the genre of family stories, looking at the way that stories are told in their own families and among different cultures. What is the value of this approach?
2. Windham shares that while students frequently write about themes emphasizing hard times, her intent is to focus her students' attention on the positive and uplifting aspects of their family histories. What do students learn by focusing on the positive aspects of their family stories and how everyday experiences can be worth writing about?
3. Windham's students engage in a lengthy writing process for this project, with most students making four to six revisions to their work. Given that students usually



dislike revising, how do you think Windham is able to maintain students' efforts through this task?

4. Brainstorm nontraditional ways that you can publish students' work. What methods would work in your environment?

### **The Family Heritage Museum** (p. 131)

1. School counselor Bill Starkey focuses on connecting students with people who are different from them—across grades, generations, and cultures. How can you work this aspect of connection into your curriculum?
2. Through projects like the Family Heritage Museum, Starkey plays a key role in the school's efforts to connect social and emotional development with academic literacy. How could you combine efforts with similar supports or resources in your school?
3. Starkey uses storytelling to help children solve conflicts and build relationships. What are the benefits of this approach? How can this approach be integrated into your classroom?

### **Great-Grandma's Footsteps** (p. 141)

1. Jan Michaud-Whalen built on an existing project to make it more relevant and motivating for students by focusing the writing on personal and family stories. What projects already in place in your school could you build on and expand to include a more personal approach?
2. This project was an interdisciplinary one that bridged art, language arts, and social studies, as well as library and computer sciences. How would you coordinate a similar project at your school?
3. Michaud-Whalen says that the art projects always include an element of writing. How would you include writing in your art projects?

### **Juggling With Words** (p. 151)

1. Why is classroom environment important to the teaching of writing? How can you create a risk-taking environment in your classroom?
2. In this class, two students did a practice interview with an adult volunteer and reported their experience to the class. The practice session turned out to be very useful for preparing the students. What are some of the ways that you could prepare students to interview adults?
3. Who in your community would you invite to participate in a biography-writing project?

### **Strawberry Fields Forever** (p. 159)

1. What agricultural crops, industries, or businesses in your area affect your students' families? What would it take to use them to build a project similar to Fresa?
2. A cross-cultural aspect to this project emerged as a result of researching strawberry growing in other parts of the world. How might you tie a project to an area(s) of the world with similar agricultural crops, industries, or businesses?

3. This story has a strong social justice focus. For example, in their research on strawberry growing, the students discovered that working conditions are often poor. As a result of this discovery, students wrote letters to the governor of California and to the owners of the corporate berry farms. How might you incorporate this focus into a classroom project using an issue(s) in your community?
4. Even after talking to their parents and discovering hardships of working in the strawberry fields, many of the students found that their families were not dissatisfied with their jobs. The teachers reported that some parents "... loved being outside with nature, they loved smelling the freshness of the air and feeling the sunlight on their bodies. It was almost romanticized. And that was surprising to us. But that was really good for the kids to know." This project was respectful of the work done by the students' families, which is an important aspect of any social justice issue. Discuss the idea of respectfulness when considering your own project.
5. On page 160 is an outline of the theoretical framework the teachers used for this project and the curriculum content standards that were met. Consider how your project could meet the standards in your district and integrate these theoretical elements.
6. Family involvement was one of the wonderful things to emerge in this project. Students were encouraged to talk to their families for a rich source of information, and the families responded. The teacher notes, "The project also inspired parents to visit the library with their children, some for the very first time." How could you integrate the knowledge of your students' families into your classroom project?

### **A Talking Book** (p. 173)

1. How can you integrate authentic technology experiences with writing in your classroom?
2. David Cort found ways to individualize the project for the students involved, allowing them to contribute to the project in different ways. He stated that for some students, "it really takes a one-on-one effort." How can you find ways to individualize learning experiences for students?
3. This teacher was fortunate to be in a situation that allowed him periods of time to work on projects with students individually or in small groups. What supports could you use to allow you to spend more time working with children individually or in small groups?
4. Cort states, "Kids love learning about the rich culture we have here at Tulalip. They feel pride; they see themselves as leaders. Culture motivates them to learn." What are the cultures in your classroom? What do you know about them, and how can you bring aspects of them into the classroom?

### **"I Am a Poet!"** (p. 183)

1. Van Wyhe uses an approach she calls "shadowing" to help students learn to read like writers. What are some ways that you help your students learn the writer's craft?
2. Students spend a great deal of class time writing. How do you find time in your busy classes to make time for writing?

3. Van Wyhe explains that students developed fluency in writing fiction that carried over into their academic writing. As a teacher, how can you facilitate this carryover?
4. Van Wyhe stresses that she works hard to create a safe learning environment, encouraging students to use their own experiences as a basis for their writing. What are some ways that you can create such an environment?

### **Essays That Honor** (p. 193)

1. David McKay reads to his students in the genre that he wants them to write in. He uses these “read alouds” as opportunities to discuss the writer’s craft. How can you help students to “read like a writer”?
2. Why is publication an important part of teaching writing?
3. What are the benefits and pitfalls of encouraging students to share their writing with the class? How do you structure an environment that is conducive to sharing writing?

### **The House That Simon Built** (p. 203)

1. Elizabeth Jensen notes, “Connecting with the community gives [the students] some ownership and a sense of empowerment ... [it] gives them the sense that they can go forward and do that again in other places in their life.” What kinds of community connections could be integrated into your curriculum?
2. All buildings and community places have a history. Think about how a project could be developed around history in your community.
3. Jensen’s students studied biographies and oral histories in preparation for the project, and were asked to compare the written word versus the spoken word. Her students identified more with the oral histories. Jensen notes, “... there’s significantly more freedom in the spoken word than in the written word. And this population of at-risk students is a very oral population.” Contemplate how you might connect written and oral language skills in your project.

### **You Could Write for Hallmark** (p. 211)

1. Linda Rice explains, “My goal was for students to look at their community in a different way. ... Once you’ve done the artwork and the investigation, you have a vested interest in that building. You have something to talk about, you have something to think about, and you have a connection to the community.” What are some important places in your community that students could investigate?
2. In this project, students learned artistic concepts, researched local history, and practiced writing concisely, among other things. What benefits are there to integrating art, research, and writing? What supports might you use to integrate art into a research and writing project?
3. Rice states, “Once we realized we had something marketable, we became really serious about the writing.” How can you create writing experiences where students have an authentic audience?

**Winds of Change** (p. 217)

1. This story focuses on the history of a rural area; however, virtually every town and city in the West has gone through great changes during the last 100 years or so. Think about neighborhoods, towns, and cities in your area that could lend themselves to historical research by your students.
2. Nancy Widdicombe comments that this project was valuable in allowing all her students to feel successful. She notes, "... it is about using [the students'] palettes, their intelligences, and showing them that just because they can't do one thing, there is another way that they can be successful." When planning your own project, think how you might structure it so all students have responsibilities and also work to their strengths.
3. Why would a public presentation of such a project be valuable to the students and to the community?

**The Roots of Nikiski** (p. 227)

1. The project described in this story is an interdisciplinary one, incorporating social studies, language arts, science, and math. How could you bring a similar approach to your project?
2. For this project, Scott Christian asked his students to explore a topic through both poetry and scientific writing. What would be the benefit of such an approach? How could you explore a topic through different genres of writing?
3. How did Christian generate student interest in the project when they "had a real chip on their shoulders?"
4. A significant point in this story, and others in this collection, is that the teacher participated in the project along with the students. Christian writes, "There's a very different environment when teachers are writing—when teachers present themselves as writers and show kids the idiosyncratic nature of writing. It makes it more real and accessible." Christian modeled his own writing process and exposed his rough drafts to his students' critique. He then modeled the revision process, making suggested corrections. Thinking of your own project with your students, what would a similar process look like? How would your students respond to your participation? How could you facilitate their understanding of the "idiosyncratic" nature of writing?

**Big Learning in a Small Community** (p. 235)

1. The idea for funding for this project came from a consultant who worked with Doug Gray and the school district. Part of the project involved having the students write a grant proposal. What would be the value of this type of authentic writing experience for your students? What outside resources can you tap into at your school?
2. Gray is quoted as saying, "When the kids would have something they would want us to take a look at, rather than taking out the red pen and marking it up, we would just look at the pieces they had and, anything that was unclear, we would ask a question about that." Gray didn't want to discourage his students' writing by being too critical, and instead used these opportunities to introduce mini-lessons. What

are the benefits and pitfalls of this approach and how might your own students respond to it?

3. Think about the pacing of such a large project. Gray talks about the ebb and flow of the work throughout the school year and the usefulness of the ebb time for “digestion” of all that had come before. Discuss how this organic process allowed this huge project to be broken into manageable pieces.
4. A salient point of this story—and of *Tapestry of Tales* in general—is that actively involving students in their learning, through their own surroundings and experiences, is powerful. In fact, this project was a contributing factor in keeping four Clarks Point students enrolled through their first year of high school at a boarding school hundreds of miles away. While this is a dramatic example, why do you think these experiences have such a strong effect on students’ future learning?

### **Describing Aleknagik (p. 243)**

1. How did Brandon McGrath believe that an emphasis on vocabulary through writing could contribute to improving student performance in reading? How can you use writing to improve vocabulary and reading performance?
2. McGrath and his students came up with six topical headings to write about in their book. What topics do you think you and your students might come up with in your community? How would you arrive at these topics?
3. McGrath and his students benefited from the help of an outside reader. What resources could you use for this kind of support?
4. By the end of the project, McGrath was already thinking of ways to expand the project. How might you expand such a project?

### **Rediscovering Coyote and Raven (p. 251)**

1. The project described in this story grew out of a collaboration between two teachers participating in a technology training program. Brainstorm how you might collaborate with another teacher in your school to integrate technology in a thematic unit.
2. Most of the students in this school come from cultures that differ from those in the surrounding area, but the teachers used the cultural diversity of their area to plan their project. Sheila Craig writes, “It’s important that kids appreciate people whose ideas are different than their own.” How might you use the cultural diversity of your area to plan a project?
3. These students kept an online journal documenting their learning process. Discuss how you could recreate this process for your students, whether or not technology is available to your classroom.
4. Craig notes that, “Technology is one area where kids who don’t experience success in other areas can experience success.” She was speaking specifically about troubled and learning disabled students. When planning the process of your own project, consider how all your students can participate successfully.



# CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE TO SUPPORT WRITING ABOUT SELF, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY

Reading aloud and discussing stories are some of the best ways for children to build vocabulary and conceptual knowledge, enhance memory, imagination, attention span, listening, and comprehension skills. Listed below are some of the many picture books and young adult literature that can spur rich conversations about such themes as intergenerational relationships, friendship, overcoming adversity, journeys, loss, courage, and celebration. These books can inspire students to talk about and write their own stories.

## Family Stories

Bruchac, J. (Author), & Watling, J. (Illustrator). (1998). *The arrow over the door*. New York, NY: Dial Books for Young Readers.

Bunting, E. (Author), & Diaz, D. (Illustrator). (1998). *Going home*. New York, NY: HarperTrophy.

Bunting, E. (Author), & Himler, R. (Illustrator). (1997). *A day's work*. New York, NY: Clarion Books.

Bunting, E. (Author), & Peck, B. (Illustrator). (1988). *How many days to America? A Thanksgiving story*. New York, NY: Clarion Books.

Cooper, F. (1994). *Coming home: From the life of Langston Hughes*. New York, NY: Putnam & Grosset.

Curtis, J.L. (Author), & Cornell, L. (Illustrator). (2000). *Tell me again about the night I was born*. New York, NY: Joanna Cotler Books.

Cushman, K. (2003). *Rodzina*. New York, NY: Clarion Books.

dePaola, T. (1973). *Nana upstairs & Nana downstairs*. New York, NY: Puffin Books.

Fletcher, R. (1995). *Fig pudding*. New York, NY: Yearling Books.

Houston, G. (Author), & Lamb, S.C. (Illustrator). (1992). *My great-aunt Arizona*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Jiménez, F. (1997). *The circuit: Stories from the life of a migrant child*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

Johnson, A. (Author), & Soman, D. (Illustrator). (1989). *Tell me a story, Mama*. New York, NY: Orchard Books.

Johnson, D. (1993). *Now let me fly: The story of a slave family*. New York, NY: Aladdin Paperbacks.

Kay, V. (Author), & Stark, K. (Illustrator). (2003). *Orphan train*. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Luenn, N. (Author), & Waldman, N. (Illustrator). (1990). *Nessa's fish*. New York, NY: Atheneum.

Luenn, N. (Author), & Waldman, N. (Illustrator). (1994). *Nessa's story*. New York, NY: Atheneum.

Martin, B. Jr., Archambault, J. (Authors), & Rand, T. (Illustrator). (1966). *Knots on a counting rope*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.

Miller, W. (Author), Van Wright, C., & Hu, Y. (Illustrators). (1994). *Zora Hurston and the chinaberry tree*. New York, NY: Lee & Low Books.

Mochizuki, K. (Author), & Lee, D. (Illustrator). (1993). *Baseball saved us*. New York, NY: Lee & Low Books.

Polacco, P. (1998). *My rotten redheaded older brother*. New York, NY: Aladdin Books.

Rylant, C. (1992). *Missing May*. New York, NY: Yearling.

Say, A. (1993). *Grandfather's journey*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

Warren, A. (2001). *We rode the orphan trains*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

## Important Objects in Our Lives and Their Stories

Altman, L.J. (Author), & Sanchez, E.O. (Illustrator). (1993). *Amelia's road*. New York, NY: Lee & Low Books.

Cha, D. (Author), Cha, C., & Cha, N.T. (Stitchers). (1996). *Dia's story cloth*. New York, NY: Lee & Low Books.

Fox, M. (Author), & Vivas, J. (Illustrator). (1985). *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*. Brooklyn, NY: Kane/Miller.

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Grifalconi, A. (1999). *Tiny's hat*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

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# THE READING-WRITING RELATIONSHIP

## Seven Instructional Principles

**T**imothy Shanahan, a National Reading Panel member and chair of the National Literacy Panel and the National Early Literacy Panel, concluded that there have been so many studies showing that writing improves learning that it appears to be a closed question, not generating much attention from researchers. He proposed seven instructional principles regarding the reading/writing connection, based on his review of the research on reading-writing relationships (1988). They are paraphrased below:

### **1. Teach Both Reading and Writing**

Study after study highlights that reading and writing are so closely related that their curricular combination could have a positive outcome in terms of achievement or instructional efficiency. It should be obvious, however, that reading and writing do not overlap sufficiently to permit complete reading and writing development through an instructional emphasis on one or the other. Unless children are provided an opportunity to write, they will not write as well as possible. Unless they learn to write, writing knowledge cannot be applied to reading development (p. 637).

### **2. Introduce Reading and Writing From the Earliest Grades**

Writing permits children to experiment with and to organize or consolidate their literacy knowledge. Writing can provide an important vantage from which to develop insights about written language. Any delay in introducing either reading or writing reduces the possibility of using one to understand the other (pp. 638–639).

### **3. Instruction Should Reflect the Developmental Nature of the Reading-Writing Relationship**

At each reading level, teachers need to consider what the major goals of reading and writing instruction are for the children with whom they work (p. 640).

### **4. Make the Reading-Writing Connection Explicit**

To improve the possibility of transfer, instruction should encourage students to recognize the similarity of reading and writing. Substantial effort should be made to ensure that children think about reading and writing relationships (p. 641).

### **5. Instruction Should Emphasize Content and Process Relations**

Most research on reading and writing has emphasized the sharing of product knowledge. Here, product relations include phonemic awareness, word structures, word meanings, sentence structures, cohesion, and passage organization. However, reading and writing undoubtedly share process knowledge as well. Process knowledge refers to strategies and procedures for solving problems or for carrying out complex activities. There has been less research focus on process relations, but the available studies indicate that there is a sharing of thinking operations or problem-solving strategies across reading and writing (pp. 641–643).

### **6. Emphasize Communication**

An effective reader is a critical reader. Critical reading requires consideration of an author's intentions and an evaluation of the accuracy and quality of a text. Similarly, the effective writer considers the needs of an audience. Thus, good readers think about writers and good writers think about readers. Students need real audiences for their writing, and these audiences can be provided in many ways (pp. 643–644).

### **7. Teach Reading and Writing in Meaningful Contexts**

To ensure that children gain the maximum benefit from reading-writing connections, it is necessary to provide a wide range of literacy experiences. Students need to be encouraged to read and write in a variety of situations for a variety of reasons (p. 645).

All of these principles speak to the complexity of learning to read and write and of the need to make the connections between reading and writing explicit and relevant to students, from the first days of kindergarten throughout the school years.



# 13 CORE UNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT LEARNING TO READ

**I**n *Building a Knowledge Base in Reading* (1997), authors Jane Braunger and Jan Lewis synthesize key findings from research on learning to read. The 13 core understandings, with sample classroom applications, provide a framework for understanding reading as a complex, cognitive, meaning-making activity (Davis & Lewis, 1997, p. 6–7).

1. **Reading is a construction of meaning from written text. It involves thinking and the reader's feelings.** Reading requires the use of many different tools—"sounding out" (phonics), sight words, context clues, knowledge of language patterns, and comprehension strategies. The reader's feelings about what she is reading (is it interesting?) and the situation (is she comfortable, threatened, or embarrassed?) also affect reading development.
2. **Background knowledge and prior experience are critical to the reading process.** As we read, we base our understanding on what we already know. For example: Two children read a book about zoo animals. One child has recently visited the zoo and has read other books about the zoo, and the other has not. Which child will understand more?
3. **Social interaction is essential to learning to read.** As with many things we learn how to do, we tend to learn from others who have already mastered the skill or task. The same is true for reading. Children need to see others reading; they need to hear stories read, ask questions, and talk about what they read—at school and at home. Just like all forms of language, reading requires interaction among people.
4. **Reading and writing develop together.** Reading and writing are connected. Encouraging children to write at all ages (even when it just looks like scribbling) can help them read better and see the connections between reading and writing.
5. **Reading involves complex thinking.** Reading is a problem-solving activity. It involves thinking at different levels—from getting the gist to being able to compare what is read in one text with another and to apply what is read in new readings.
6. **The environment or surroundings at home and school should be filled with many experiences in reading and writing.** Access to many different kinds of reading and writing materials—library books, magazines, newspapers—and supportive adults all make a huge difference in learning to read. Children need to see adults reading so it seems important.

7. **Children must be interested and motivated to learn to read.** It is important for children to be able to select materials to read that are interesting to them on topics they care about and can relate to.
8. **Children's understandings of print are not the same as adults' understandings.** Children view the world through their own eyes, not adults'. As adults support children in learning reading skills, it is important to adjust expectations to children's levels. Initially children become aware that print carries a message; they gradually realize that groups of letters stand for certain sounds, and that print matches spoken words. What children understand is affected by developmental level and prior knowledge.
9. **Children develop phonemic awareness and knowledge of phonics through lots of opportunities and experiences.** Phonemic awareness (the ability to hear separate speech sounds within words) and phonics (the connections between letters and sounds) are very important to learning to read. Many children will learn these skills as they are read to, and as they practice writing, sing repetitive songs, and work with the alphabet. Other children learn these skills best with explicit instruction.
10. **Children need to learn many different reading strategies.** Readers need to be taught how to pay attention to certain things—letter-sound relationships, context clues, and word patterns—depending on the type of text. Readers also need to learn how to self-monitor for comprehension.
11. **Children learn best when teachers use a variety of strategies to teach reading.** There's no evidence that there's one best way to teach reading. Rather, teachers must have a variety of ways to meet children's needs such as reading aloud, shared and independent reading, and guided reading practice.
12. **Children need the opportunity to read, read, read.** The more children read—at school and at home—the better they get at it. One of the best ways to practice is for kids to read books and other materials they choose.
13. **Monitoring and assessing how children are reading is important to their success as readers.** Children's mistakes in reading can tell a lot about how well children are doing. Listening to a child read, asking questions, and observing are ways teachers assess progress regularly. Standardized tests provide another way of measuring children's progress compared with other students. Other tests show how well students are achieving compared to grade-level standards (for example, at fourth, seventh, and 10th grades). This type of assessment can give parents and teachers valuable information so that if a child is not performing at a particular level, help can be given to get the child "back on track."

# APPENDICES

## **Appendix A**

Writers on Writing: Professional Resources

## **Appendix B**

Writing Project Web Sites

## **Appendix C**

Multicultural Web Sites



# WRITERS ON WRITING: PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES

## Annotated Bibliography

Study teams increase opportunities for teachers to read and discuss research and to share ideas, strategies, concerns, and students. In addition to sharing expertise, book groups provide opportunities for teachers to explore children's and professional literature, "contributing to the rich, literate environment of classrooms" (National Council of Teachers of English, 1997). Following are some of the many professional development resources available for educators.

**Allen, J. (1999).** *Words, words, words: Teaching vocabulary in grades 4–12*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Allen's book gives strategies for teaching vocabulary without resorting to word lists, worksheets, and dictionaries—all of which, Allen notes, don't work to increase students' vocabulary. Allen noticed that students began to pick up the words and phrases she used in the classroom; she realized that one way to get her students to learn new vocabulary was to use words in meaningful ways in classroom interactions. Allen structures her lessons to activate students' background knowledge and build concept knowledge. She does this with extensive reading and explicit strategy instruction. And, there is considerable research to back her up. The book includes extensive appendices on research, resources, and graphic organizers for classroom use.

Janet Allen is an international consultant recognized for her literacy work with at-risk students. She taught high school reading and English in Maine for 20 years before she relocated to Florida to teach English and reading education courses at the University of Central Florida.

**Bauman, J.F., & Kame'enui, E.J. (Eds.). (2004).** *Vocabulary instruction: Research to practice*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

This book of research-based approaches to building students' vocabulary is divided into three parts. Part I, "Teaching Specific Vocabulary," discusses explicit instruction on individual words, including integrating "read-alouds" with specific explanations of individual words to boost vocabulary in the primary grades. Part II, "Teaching Vocabulary-Learning Strategies," contains a chapter in which Robert Marzano outlines a developing vision of vocabulary instruction that includes wide reading and direct instruction. The goal is to encourage students



to refine their understanding of word meanings via linguistic and nonlinguistic components. Part III, “Teaching Vocabulary Through Word Consciousness and Language Play,” contains three chapters: Each one outlines fun, instructional word games to engage kids’ natural language curiosity.

James F. Baumann is a professor in the Department of Reading Education at the University of Georgia. Edward J. Kameñui is a professor and director of the Institute for the Development of Educational Achievement in the College of Education, University of Oregon. He was recently appointed to the position of commissioner for special education research within the Institute of Education Sciences in the U.S. Department of Education.

**Benedict, S., & Carlisle, L. (Eds.). (1992). *Beyond words: Picture books for older readers and writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.**

Each chapter of this book tells how teachers have successfully used picture books in upper elementary and middle grades. Some teachers stumbled on the usefulness and popularity of picture books with older readers in their classrooms; others built lesson plans around them. But, they all acknowledge the power of picture books to spark strong interest in reading; to build background knowledge; to model the type of texts that children are likely to write; and to elicit thoughtful discussion and speculation.

Susan Benedict has taught elementary school and college writing courses. She has an Ed.D. in reading and writing from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Lenore Carlisle has taught preschool, high school English, and English as a Second Language, as well as courses at the college level. She has a doctorate in reading/writing and is a faculty member at the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

**Biancarosa, G., & Snow, C.E. (2004). *Reading next—A vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy: A report from Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.**

This report outlines expected future literacy requirements for all students and delineates 15 elements of effective adolescent literacy programs. These elements, drawn from research- and practice-based knowledge, could be especially useful when developing or reviewing a schoolwide literacy plan. The authors advocate that funding, research, policymaking, and education communities approach intervention with the dual purposes of affecting immediate change for students and building the field’s knowledge base. The report can be downloaded in its entirety at [www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org).

Gina Biancarosa is an advanced doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Catherine Snow is Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

**Bomer, R., & Bomer, K. (2001). *For a better world: Reading and writing for social action*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.**

The Bomers advocate an approach to reading and writing that connects students’ lives to the larger world around them. Their goal is to help teachers prepare students to involve themselves in a participatory democracy—where citizens have

the capacity not only to make informed decisions, but also to critically participate in public debate on important issues. To this end, they believe teachers have four complementary and interconnected responsibilities: teaching for social action; teaching the language of democratic classrooms; introducing the practice of cultural critique; and conducting themselves as political agents. The authors present a curriculum that “invites students to read with important social ideas in mind and write with the purpose of making the world a better place.”

Randy Bomer is an education professor at the University of Texas at Austin and was co-director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. He is currently president-elect of the National Council of Teachers of English. Katherine Bomer has taught in elementary classrooms and worked for more than a decade at the Reading and Writing Project. Currently, she is an educational consultant and is at work on a book about writing memoirs in grades 4–12.

**Braunger, J., & Lewis, J. (1997).** *Building a knowledge base in reading*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

This monograph is a synthesis of research regarding the reading process and instructional environment in the elementary grades. Included in the synthesis is information regarding promising practices to use with children from immigrant, language-minority, and low-income backgrounds. Detailed information is organized around 13 core understandings about learning to read, and each understanding is supported with research findings and sample classroom applications. Readers who want to delve further into any area can access more than 40 pages of bibliographic references, organized by topic.

Jane Braunger is a senior research associate with the Strategic Literacy Initiative (SLI) at WestEd, where she conducts research on professional development in literacy among middle and high school teachers. Jan Lewis is currently an associate professor in the School of Education at Pacific Lutheran University.

**Brown, C.S. (1988).** *Like it was: A complete guide to writing oral history*. New York, NY: Teachers & Writers Collaborative.

This book is exactly what its subtitle says it is. It covers everything from using a tape recorder to conducting and transcribing an interview to writing final pieces of varying lengths, including short essays and full-length biographies. Practical tips for each stage of the planning, recording, and writing processes abound in this book. The final chapter is devoted to the nuts and bolts of using oral history in the classroom. If you want just one book on how to do oral history, this is the book to get.

Cynthia Stokes Brown has a Ph.D. in History of Education from Johns Hopkins University and is a former associate professor of education at Dominican College. Other publications include the American Book Award-winning *Ready from Within*, an oral biography of teacher and civil rights activist, Septima Clark.

**Calkins, L.M. (1994).** *The art of teaching writing* (Rev. ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Calkins writes passionately about working with children and their writing. Using examples from elementary age and adolescent writers, she illustrates how to

conduct writing workshops in the classroom. Virtually every page includes an anecdote about interactions with young writers: The stories demonstrate that the ability to listen attentively and ask appropriate questions can lead children into meaningful and purposeful writing. Calkins believes the most important reason that people write is to make sense of their world and that children are just as willing and capable of this as adults. Her enthusiasm is palpable.

Lucy McCormick Calkins is the founding director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University and serves as Professor of Curriculum and Teaching there.

**Calkins, L.M., & Harwayne, S. (1987). *The writing workshop: A world of difference*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.**

This book was written to accompany the professional development video of the same name, but it is also structured to stand alone. Included at the end of the book is a transcript of the video and more than 50 pages of workshop materials. Each chapter takes on a different aspect of conducting a writing workshop, including topics for discussion and activities for staff development. Both new and experienced teachers will find “many new ideas on purposeful writing, ways to provide diverse audiences for student writers, and methods for helping students flesh out their writing through rehearsal and research.”

See page 292 for author information about Shelley Harwayne.

**Carr, J.C. (1999). *A child went forth: Reflective teaching with young readers and writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.**

Carr has written a very practical and passionate book, chronicling in great detail the last two years she taught at a diverse Southern California elementary school. By using lots of anecdotes, examples of student work, student conversations, and reflections on her own teaching, she draws a picture of her daily classroom interactions with her students. What makes this book unique is that Carr articulates her thought processes while she’s working with her students. Teachers will find this book invaluable in defining the meaning of reflective practice.

Janine Chappell Carr was an elementary school teacher for 13 years in California and Oregon and has worked with individual schools and districts on their early literacy projects.

**Christensen, L. (2000). *Reading, writing, and rising up: Teaching about social justice and the power of the written word*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.**

*Reading, Writing, and Rising Up* is a collection of Christensen’s insights, experiences, lesson plans, and teaching strategies from her 22 years teaching English in a working-class, multiethnic, urban high school. Focusing her curriculum on social justice, Christensen exposes her students to the literature of George Ella Lyon, Martín Espada, Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, Pablo Neruda, Lucille Clifton, Alice Walker, and many others to provide examples of writing that questions and empowers. She uses student responses to this literature, as well as her students’ own writing, to illustrate how well this approach to critical thinking works in her classroom.

Linda Christensen is a co-director of the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis & Clark College, a language arts coordinator for Portland Public Schools, and a *Rethinking Schools* editor. She also taught at Jefferson High School in Portland, Oregon, for 22 years. It was that experience that led her to write *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*.

**Culham, R. (2004).** *Using picture books to teach writing with the traits*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Each of the traits in the 6+1 Trait® Writing model (ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation) has its own chapter in this book, along with an annotated list of books illustrating that trait and detailed lesson plans on how to use some of the titles. Culham has collected these lesson plans from her own teaching experience and from elementary, middle, and high school teachers across the country. This is a very practical and easy-to-use book that teachers can run with.

Ruth Culham is the president of the Writing Traits Company and former assessment program unit manager at Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Oregon.

**Delpit, L., & Dowdy, J.K. (Eds.). (2002).** *The skin that we speak*. New York, NY: The New Press.

The essays collected in this book are about attitudes toward language and education. The authors advocate the view that when a child's nonstandard home language is acknowledged, the teaching of the standard language empowers them. Divided into three parts, part one includes two personal essays chronicling the writers' struggles with language, identity, and status. The essays in part two look at the consequences language attitudes can have in the classroom. Included are instructional strategies/suggestions for acknowledging students' home languages and, at the same time, helping them acquire standard English. Part three looks at the language teachers use in the classroom. The essays in this section highlight the need for teachers to examine their own attitudes about language use—to cultivate the ability to listen to themselves through other people's ears. Each essay asks readers to approach attitudes about language from a new direction.

Lisa Delpit is the author of *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. She is currently a professor in the Department of Leadership and Policy Studies in the College of Education at Florida International University. Joanne Kilgour Dowdy is a graduate of Juilliard and uses her drama training to prepare teachers for the literacy classroom. She is an associate professor of adolescent and young adult education in the Department of Teaching, Leadership, and Curriculum Studies at Kent State University.

**Dyson, A.H., & Genishi, C. (Eds.). (1994).** *The need for story: Cultural diversity in classroom and community*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

The essays in this edited book—written by Maxine Green, Jerome Bruner, Geneva Smitherman, and Courtney Cazden, to name a few—explore the ways students and teachers read and write stories together to make sense of their cultural environments inside and outside the classroom. These essays illustrate how storytelling has “the potential for forging new relationships, including local, classroom ‘cultures’ in which individuals are interconnected and new ‘we’s’

formed.” A descriptive example of this idea is found in the essay written by Vivian Gussin Paley. She eloquently relates her experience writing and reading an evolving story to her kindergarten class. Paley unfolds her story in response to her students’ reaction to it, and in the process, is able to engage three African American girls in a way that allows them to share aspects of their lives with their class. The transformative power of story is not limited to the classroom. Carol Heller’s essay tells how one “marginal” neighborhood in San Francisco is transforming itself from the inside out with the help of a group of women taking part in a writing workshop and telling their stories of the streets. All these essays illustrate the powerful connections that are made through storytelling.

Anne Haas Dyson is a professor of teacher education at Michigan State University. Her areas of expertise include cultural studies, diverse learners/educational equity, literacy development, and early childhood. Celia Genishi is a professor of education in the Curriculum and Teaching Department at Teachers College, Columbia University.

**Finn, P.J. (1999). *Literacy with an attitude: Educating working-class children in their own self-interest*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.**

Finn illustrates how working-class students receive a “domesticating” education using research done by Jean Anyon. Anyon studied fifth-grade classrooms in five public elementary schools in diverse neighborhoods in New Jersey. She found curriculum and teacher/student interactions in the classroom differed according to the socioeconomic status of the students. For example, knowledge in the “executive elite” elementary school was academic and rigorous. Rationality and logic were modeled as the basis for correct and ethical thinking. In contrast, knowledge in the “working-class” elementary school was presented as a string of facts disconnected from a wider context and from the lives and experiences of the students. Basic skill instruction was the norm, and creativity was devalued. As Finn writes, their education “is appropriate preparation for wage labor—labor that is mechanical and routine.” Finn offers the pedagogy advocated by Paulo Freire, in which literacy is tied to grassroots activism and social justice, as an anecdote to this type of education. This approach, termed “liberating education,” brings the lives and experiences of the students into the classroom. Research shows how students become engaged in learning when their backgrounds and experiences are acknowledged and valued. This book, together with *Savage Inequalities* by Jonathon Kozol, is a strong indictment of the continuing class structure of American education.

Patrick J. Finn is an associate professor emeritus in the Department of Learning and Instruction at State University of New York at Buffalo. His previous publications include *Helping Children Learn To Read* and *Helping Children Learn Language Arts*.

**Fletcher, R. (1991). *Walking trees: Portraits of teachers and children in the culture of schools*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.**

*Walking Trees* is Fletcher’s very personal memoir of the year he spent in New York City schools, working with teachers on how to teach writing. His descriptions of the schools and students are deeply moving. Fletcher writes quite honestly about



his own insecurities and reactions to the teachers, students, and their schools. This is a poignant book about the way schools work and sometimes don't.

Ralph Fletcher conducts workshops and writes books for kids and writing teachers. For more information, visit [www.ralphfletcher.com](http://www.ralphfletcher.com).

**Fletcher, R. (1996).** *A writer's notebook: Unlocking the writer within you*. New York, NY: Avon Books.

This book is deceptive. It's small—pocket sized, really—and short, but it's also full of great ideas and examples to get just about anyone writing. Fletcher explains how to keep and use a writer's notebook. He does this by explaining what kinds of information writers choose to keep in their notebooks, and by giving lots of examples from all kinds of writers—professional writers, teachers and, most important, kids. This book could inspire even the most reluctant writer to give it a try.

See above for author information about Ralph Fletcher.

**Fletcher, R., & Portalupi, J. (1998).** *Craft lessons: Teaching writing K–8*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Fletcher and Portalupi visualize the writing process as going from conception to craft to correction. Too often, they believe, teachers work on the beginning and the end without really helping students explore the middle. This book is meant to help teachers talk about and expand the craft of writing with their students. To that end, Fletcher and Portalupi have collected dozens of mini-lessons to teach the craft of writing and have conveniently arranged them by grade level: K–2, 3–4, 5–8. Examples of these lessons include: “Adding Setting to a Scene,” “Describing a Character Through Gesture,” “Flashback/Time Transitions,” “The Repeating Line,” and “Internal Conflict.” Each lesson lists the children's book used (some stories are included in the appendix) and includes a discussion section and detailed teaching tips. Using children's literature to explore craft, the authors stress the importance of reading and rereading these stories. Rereading allows students to read like writers—to explore the “how” of crafting a story—so they are able to internalize the ideas to use in their own writing.

Joann Portalupi taught elementary school and was a staff developer for the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. With Ralph Fletcher, she works with teachers in institutes and workshops around the world.

**Graves, D.H. (1983).** *Writing: Teachers & children at work*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Graves's book is full of practical information about working effectively with children and their writing. He points out that the twin crafts of teaching and writing can't be separated, and uses classroom observations and experiences to illustrate effective instruction techniques. Graves gets down to the nitty-gritty of writing instruction—from penmanship to publishing and everything in between.

Donald Graves has been involved in writing research for two decades. He has been a teacher, school principal, language supervisor, education director, and a director of language in bilingual, ESL, and special programs. He is currently professor emeritus at the University of New Hampshire.

Harwayne, S. (1992). *Lasting impressions: Weaving literature into the writing workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Harwayne describes how one New York City elementary school uses literature in the writing workshop during the course of the year. Using stories from the classroom and lots of student writing samples, she shows how an early immersion in good literature translates into rich student writing. The book is divided into two parts. The first section shares how teachers help students value listening and talking about good literature, preparing students to write. One strategy is to understand literature as a source of topics for children's writing. This is accomplished by reading and rereading various genres as a group, discussing them, and then having the children record their thoughts, feelings, and stories in their writer's notebooks. Harwayne also stresses the importance of using literature to build a classroom community; to inspire in children a view of reading and writing as "lifetime pleasures"; and to help them discover "the important issues in their own lives". The second part of the book concentrates on the quality of students' writing and helping students to look at their own literary techniques and genres in comparison to the literature they read. The book also contains practical examples of using literature (with specific book titles given) within the writing workshop structure of conferences, mini-lessons, author studies, and reading response groups.

Shelley Harwayne has been affiliated with the New York City public schools for more than 30 years as a teacher, administrator, and staff developer. She was also a co-director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project and founding principal of the Manhattan New School.

Heard, G. (1999). *Awakening the heart: Exploring poetry in elementary and middle school*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

*Awakening the Heart* is a small book that's packed with ideas for setting up poetry centers and crafting lessons that create a classroom environment favorable to writing, reading, and thinking about poetry. Heard offers clear ideas and suggestions for building the type of classroom—physically, socially, and emotionally—that encourages students to explore poetry through their senses and emotions, and with an ear for the music of language. And, of course, she shares with her readers many examples of student poetry that have been nurtured in just such a classroom.

Georgia Heard has published books on teaching poetry in elementary classrooms as well as a book of poetry for young children. For seven years, Heard worked with New York City teachers as part of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project.

Kurstedt, R., & Koutras, M. (2000). *Teaching writing with picture books as models: Lessons and strategies for using the power of picture books to teach the elements of great writing in the upper grades*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Kurstedt and Koutras write that "the texts children write are more likely to resemble the texts of picture books than longer books composed of extended chapters." As such, they are perfect models for older children's writing efforts. The authors use the writing workshop in their classroom, and each chapter of their book—organized by craft—gives examples of student writing, snippets of

instructional talk between teacher and student(s), and sample lessons. Also included at the beginning of each chapter is a list of picture books that illustrate the chapter topic. The book includes an extensive bibliography of recommended picture books and professional titles.

Rosanne Kurstedt and Maria Koutras taught at a small elementary school in Manhattan's District 2. They also worked as staff developers and conducted workshops on writing for their school and district.

**Logan, J. (1997). *Teaching stories*. New York, NY: Kodansha International.**

This book is a collection of stories from Judy Logan's long career as a middle school teacher. But, this isn't a typical book about a teacher in a classroom. Logan is a master storyteller and regularly uses stories in her teaching. For instance, after being told about an incident where one of her students was caught stealing, Logan introduced a writing lesson using stealing stories as examples for students to write about their own "stealing" experiences. She makes great use of the "teachable moment," saying "yes" to her students much more often than she says "no." As a result, she builds trusting relationships, and her students begin to see themselves as active participants in their education and as capable, confident individuals. The stories collected in this book are intensely personal ones about the lives of her students inside and outside her classroom and her relationships with them. They are poignant, tragic, funny, ironic, frustrating, and real.

Judy Logan is an educational consultant and curriculum developer. She taught middle school English and social studies classes in San Francisco for 31 years, and has consulted with the national SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) program and the Minnesota SEED program for more than 12 years.

**Lyon, G.E. (1999). *Where I'm from: Where poems come from*. Spring, TX: Absey.**

George Ella Lyon reminds us that poetry "was invented to carry crucial things through space and time" and that rhythm and descriptive language are meant to convey and invoke sensual memories and images. In this book, Lyon beautifully illustrates how the choice of descriptive words and purposeful use of the sounds of language can turn the everyday into the poetic. Included are many of Lyon's own poems and poetry she has "found" in the everyday world and the conversations of others. This book will inspire readers to think about everyday sights, sounds, smells, and feelings in new ways.

Born and raised in Kentucky, George Ella Lyon is an award-winning writer of poetry, picture books, and novels for young readers.

**Morgan, B., & Odom, D. (2005). *Writing through the tween years: Supporting writers, grades 3–6*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.**

This book was written by frustrated teachers: Teachers who had, in response to testing pressure, reluctantly moved to teaching to the test, which resulted in stagnant writing scores, student boredom, and teacher discouragement. As a result, they got together to revise their writing curriculum. They returned to what they knew worked and adapted the writer's workshop to accommodate the assessments their students needed to take. The book is full of practical suggestions, not only for the writer's workshop, but for general classroom management as well.

Bruce Morgan has been an elementary teacher in Colorado for 25 years and was a Cornerstone National Literacy Reform Project literacy consultant from 2001 to 2004. Deb Odom has taught fourth through eighth grades for more than 25 years. She is the author of *The True Spirit of Christmas* and *Heart of the Rockies*, an environmental education curriculum for Rocky Mountain National Park.

Ray, K.W. (1999). *Wondrous words: Writers and writing in the elementary classroom*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

This is a book about how children learn to write from their reading. Drawing from her classroom experiences and her own evolving knowledge about teaching writing to young people, Ray suggests that teachers need the help of writers—specifically, writers of good children’s literature—to teach writing to their students. Ray outlines and explains three concepts she believes to be important in teaching writing: what it means to read like a writer; an understanding that writing is individual, not unique; and the difference between a descriptive and a prescriptive approach to teaching writing. Ray uses children’s literature to illustrate each of these concepts. The book is full of examples from Ray’s classroom interactions showing all the hopes and fears, frustrations and triumphs as she and her students travel together on the road to powerful writing.

Katie Wood Ray is a former associate professor at Western Carolina University and now is a full-time writer/researcher of teaching writing. Her professional background includes elementary and middle school teaching experience and two years as a staff developer at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project.

Richardson, J.S. (2000). *Read it aloud! Using literature in the secondary content classroom*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Richardson loves to read and wants to pass along her enthusiasm in the classroom. To do this, she advocates the use of “read-alouds” in the secondary classroom to model expressive, enthusiastic reading and to build interest in content areas. Research shows the connections between out-of-school reading activities and reading achievement; reading aloud is one way to foster wide reading in students. The book lists principles for choosing good read-aloud selections. Each chapter concentrates on a different content area and offers excerpts and activities for classroom use. An appendix lists potential read-aloud choices by content area.

Judy Richardson is a professor in the School of Education, Department of Teaching and Learning at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her research interests are content-area reading, English as a Second Language, and electronic literacy.

Rogovin, P. (1998). *Classroom interviews: A world of learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

“It’s the fabric made of many histories woven together that supports inclusive and content-rich learning,” says Rogovin as she describes how classroom interviews of parents and other community members form the backbone of her curriculum. With examples, she explains how she serves as interpreter and editor during the interview, making sure that children understand the information, selecting concepts for special emphasis, and helping the children interact and take notes. Based on the interviews, students write books that are later used for guided reading and sent home to become part of a homemade book library. Rogovin shows

how she plans her curriculum so that connections are made to literature, science, social studies, and art. She also shares her strategies for communicating with parents. While Rogovin teaches first grade, her techniques can be adapted for upper elementary and middle grades.

Paula Rogovin has taught in New York City public schools for more than 28 years and is currently a first-grade teacher at the Manhattan New School.

**Tiedt, I.M. (2000). *Teaching with picture books in the middle school*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.**

Tiedt makes a strong case for using picture books in middle school classrooms. She believes they can stimulate student writing; present provocative topics that stimulate thinking; teach grammar and style; explain interesting information about different cultures; and expose students to varied literary genres. The book chapters are organized by ideas for use in the classroom, and include sample lesson plans and an extensive bibliography of children's and professional books.

Iris McClellan Tiedt is dean of education emerita from Minnesota State University at Moorhead, Minnesota.

**Trelease, J. (1985). *The read-aloud handbook* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Penguin Books.**

Trelease has written a book about a subject in which he is not only knowledgeable, but also passionate. Directed primarily at parents, Trelease uses anecdotes peppered with research facts to convey the importance of reading aloud to children starting at an early age. He writes, "One does not need to read a two-hundred-page book in order to read aloud to children. It's not that complicated." But, what is gained from reading this book is the enthusiasm and experience of those who read to children: parents, teachers, volunteers, and Trelease himself. Included are do's and don'ts of effective "read-alouds" and a list of books organized by book type, including recommendations on age-appropriateness. Trelease also discusses aspects of the culture that compete for read-aloud time, such as television and video games. But, the key idea of this book is instilling a love of reading at a young age. As Trelease movingly states, "What you make a child love and desire is more important than what you make him learn."

Jim Trelease worked for 20 years as an artist and journalist before the release of the first edition of the *Read-Aloud Handbook*. A sixth edition of the book is expected to be released in 2006. For more information about Trelease and reading aloud, visit his Web site at [www.trelease-on-reading.com](http://www.trelease-on-reading.com).





# WRITING PROJECT WEB SITES

There is a wealth of online information for teachers and students that can support writing projects using personal, family, and community stories. Here, we include some of our favorites under three categories: teaching writing; oral history; and resources for using technology and accessing historical documents. Also included are Web sites that explain the academic content standards of five Northwest states.

## Teaching Writing

### National Writing Project

The National Writing Project (NWP), through its professional development model, offers leadership programs and research to help teachers help their students become proficient writers and learners. Resources available online include the NWP newsletter, the *Voice*, and professional journal, the *Quarterly*.

[www.writingproject.org](http://www.writingproject.org)

### The MiddleWeb Reading/Writing Project

This project started as a discussion between the MiddleWeb daily discussion group and visitors to their Web site on issues of struggling middle-grade readers. Juli Kendall, a literacy teacher/coach in Long Beach, California, moderated the discussion and kept a weekly journal of her own work with fifth-graders who were held back after they failed to meet the district's minimum reading requirement for promotion to sixth grade. Topics include introducing the writer's notebook, connecting reading and writing, and assessment.

[www.middleweb.com/mw/workshop/R\\_W\\_Project.html](http://www.middleweb.com/mw/workshop/R_W_Project.html)

### Ralph Fletcher

Fletcher's Web site is full of information about his books, seminars, and core beliefs about writing. It also has a section for young writers about the process of writing and using a writer's notebook.

[www.ralphfletcher.com](http://www.ralphfletcher.com)

### Myths, Folktales, and Fairy Tales

This site provides information on learning about and writing myths, folktales, and fairy tales. Some of the children's authors featured on this site include Jon Scieszka, Alma Flor Ada, and Jane Yolen. Also featured are step-by-step instructions for children to write their own stories and a place for those stories to be published online.

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/mff/index.htm>

### Northwest Education Magazine: "Focus on Writing"

This issue features several ideas and examples from around the Northwest of projects that encourage students to write about their lives, their families, and their communities. It also includes a special section on the 6+1 Trait® Writing assessment model.

[www.nwrel.org/nwedu/08-02/index.asp](http://www.nwrel.org/nwedu/08-02/index.asp)

**Local History and Family Stories: Carol Hurst's Children's Literature Site**

This site describes a number of children's trade books that are useful for introducing a study of family stories or local history. The site also includes a number of collections of books and activities about other subjects, themes, and professional topics.

[www.carolhurst.com/subjects/history/local.html](http://www.carolhurst.com/subjects/history/local.html)

**CARTS (Cultural Arts Resource for Teachers and Students)**

City Lore is a cultural organization dedicated to the documentation, presentation, and preservation of America's living cultural heritage. CARTS is City Lore's program to promote folk culture study in schools. Among the many resources available on this site are links to cultural and folklife Web sites across the country and articles of interest to K–12 educators about topics such as writing across the curriculum, interviewing skills, place-based education, and engaging diversity. Also check out CARTS' sister sites, [www.placematters.net](http://www.placematters.net) and [www.peoplespoetry.org](http://www.peoplespoetry.org).

[www.carts.org](http://www.carts.org)

**Learner.org: Annenberg/CPB Professional Development Programming**

This site features video programming that can be viewed for free online (via broadband connection) or through purchased videotapes. Topics include middle school and high school writing workshops and connecting artifacts to literature.

[www.learner.org](http://www.learner.org)

**Arctic Observations: A Student Writing Project**

This writing project grew out of a partnership between Northwest Arctic Borough School District in Kotzebue, Alaska, and the U.S. National Park Service. It was designed to improve student writing skills by relating student experiences in the Arctic. Two volumes of student work, along with student and teacher tools, can be accessed on this site.

[www.arcticobs.org](http://www.arcticobs.org)

## **Oral History and Biography Projects**

**Ten Questions for Planning an Oral History Project**

This site contains some things to consider to ensure that your project will run smoothly and produce results that will inspire you and your students.

[www.learnnc.org/Index.nsf/doc/oh-questions0406-1?OpenDocument](http://www.learnnc.org/Index.nsf/doc/oh-questions0406-1?OpenDocument)

**Montana Heritage Project**

This site includes teacher resources on teaching oral history and researching community history. The Montana Heritage Project is dedicated to teaching young people to think clearly and deeply about the world they face. Students are asked to explore their community: its place in national and world events; its relationship to the natural environment; and its cultural heritage as expressed in traditions and celebrations, literature and arts, economic practices, responses to crises, and everyday life.

[www.edheritage.org](http://www.edheritage.org)

**Project Fresa**

This project was designed by fifth-grade teacher Michelle Singer and third-grade teacher Amada Irma H. Perez when they were at Mar Vista Elementary School in Oxnard, California. Students created a multimedia, cross-curricular anthology about the impact of local strawberry crops on the community, environment, and economy.

Students interviewed family members and local government officials and used graphs, charts, letters, journals, and poetry to share their findings.

*[www.clmer.csulb.edu/gln/fresa/index.html](http://www.clmer.csulb.edu/gln/fresa/index.html)*

### **Telling Lives, Teaching Lives: History and Biography Links**

This site contains links to various American history sites, some with extensive information. The links to the Smithsonian sites are particularly fertile ground for student research and data gathering.

*[www.bozeman.k12.mt.us/history/telling/docs/links.html](http://www.bozeman.k12.mt.us/history/telling/docs/links.html)*

### **Telling Their Stories: Oral History of the Holocaust**

On this site one can read, watch, and listen to interviews of Holocaust survivors conducted by San Francisco high school students. It includes a project description and resources for students and teachers.

*[www.tellingstories.org](http://www.tellingstories.org)*

## **Technology Use and Historical Documents**

### **Library of Congress, American Memory Collection: The Learning Page**

This site contains access to many primary sources, including historical documents, photographs, maps, film, and audio recordings. It includes lesson plans for teachers of all grades, listed by theme, topic, discipline, or era. Topics include immigration/migration, journeys west, links to the past, and port of entry.

*<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/learn/>*

### **LitSite Alaska**

This site features narratives illustrating many aspects of cultural life in Alaska. Stories share how reading and writing have become part of family life; memories of what life used to be like; storytelling by people of Alaska; and personal reflections sharing how reading and writing have enriched lives. Lesson plans are included.

*<http://litsite.alaska.edu>*

### **Oregon Historical Society—Portraits of Oregon Project**

This project is the result of a collaboration between the Oregon Historical Society Folklife Program and the Oregon State Extension Service 4-H program. Youth members and club leaders from 4-H clubs in five counties worked with folklife program personnel to learn interview techniques, fieldwork strategies, basic photography, sound recording, oral history collecting, and video editing and production. These projects resulted in a collection of folk traditions, customs, festivals, and arts unique to each area of Oregon. Each project is included on this Web site and features a community profile, photo gallery, and video documentary.

*[www.ohs.org/education/folklife/Portraits-of-Oregon.cfm](http://www.ohs.org/education/folklife/Portraits-of-Oregon.cfm)*

### **Center for History and New Media (CHNM)**

CHNM uses digital media and computer technology to present and preserve historical information. Projects include World History Matters, which helps teachers and their students locate, analyze, and learn from online primary sources; Echo: Exploring and Collecting History Online, which collects, organizes, and preserves digital materials in the history of science, technology, and industry; and three Teaching American History projects in collaboration with Virginia public school districts. CHNM has developed a

popular set of free digital tools for historians and teachers, including Web Scrapbook, Scribe, and Poll Builder.

<http://chnm.gmu.edu>

### **Center for Digital Storytelling**

The Center for Digital Storytelling is a nonprofit project development, training, and research organization dedicated to assisting people in using digital media to tell meaningful stories from their lives. The center's focus is on developing large-scale projects for community, educational, and business institutions using the methods and principles built around the Digital Storytelling Workshop. It also offers workshops for organizations and individuals, and provides a clearinghouse of information about resources on storytelling and new media.

[www.storycenter.org](http://www.storycenter.org)

### **Canoes on the Web**

This Web site was conceived to complement *Canoes on Puget Sound: A Curriculum Model for Culture-Based Academic Studies* developed by Nan McNutt and supported by Washington MESA (Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement). Features include an online writer's workshop where students in virtual writing groups help each other revise, edit, and publish writing about historical photos. There is also a comprehensive photo essay of one classroom's trip to observe Tulalip canoe carver Jerry Jones at work.

<http://canoes.engr.washington.edu/notebook/>

## **Standards Documents for Northwest States**

### **Alaska**

This page provides access to the *Alaska Student Standards Booklet*, which contains content and performance standards for core subject areas plus Alaska Cultural Standards. Other items of interest to educators include grade-level expectations (GLEs), alternate performance standards for special populations, ELL proficiency standards, and Alaska standards for culturally responsive schools.

[www.eed.state.ak.us/standards/](http://www.eed.state.ak.us/standards/)

### **Idaho**

This URL leads to the site map page that contains curriculum guides and power standards for mathematics and reading by grade level. The page also contains educator resources that include sample ISAT test items in reading and math by grade level and ISAT vocabulary matched to RIT scores for reading and math.

[www.sde.state.id.us/dept/docs/standards/SiteMap.htm](http://www.sde.state.id.us/dept/docs/standards/SiteMap.htm)

### **Montana**

This site provides access to content and performance standards in the arts, career and vocational-technical education, media literacy, and the core subject areas. Educators may also view grade-level expectations for benchmark grades (3, 8, 10) and graduation standards for mathematics and reading. An interesting feature is the standards-at-a-glance integration charts. These charts show the "implicit" and "explicit" overlaps in standards across content areas.

[www.opi.state.mt.us/standards/](http://www.opi.state.mt.us/standards/)



**Oregon**

This is the Teaching and Learning section of the Oregon Department of Education site. Clicking on Standards leads to a list of subjects that can be searched by grade level: English language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, health, arts, careers, physical education, and ELL. Educators can then locate grade-level expectations that help students meet a specific standard. The grade-level expectations can also be examined at benchmark levels for core subjects for grades 3, 5, 8, and 10.

[www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=51](http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=51)

**Washington**

This page contains a chart that identifies content areas for which standards are fully developed, as well as the grade-level expectations (GLEs) currently available online. In the GLE online pages, educators can locate specific classroom activities that support student achievement of a particular standard, obtain ideas for classroom-based assessment, and identify GLEs that are eligible for the WASL.

[www.k12.wa.us/curriculum/instruct/ealr\\_gle.aspx](http://www.k12.wa.us/curriculum/instruct/ealr_gle.aspx)



# MULTICULTURAL WEB SITES

The following Web sites include information, instructional plans, and literature that will help teachers bring cultural connections into the curriculum. Incorporating cross-cultural materials and perspectives into the classroom can promote students' self-image; enhance relationships with teachers and peers; and lead to a more meaningful learning experience, inviting all children into the learning community.

## General Multicultural Sites: Curriculum and Materials

### Arts Edge: John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts

The Teaching Materials section will be especially useful for teachers. There are teaching units that include African American arts and culture, Mexican culture, African contributions to American music (jazz, swing, etc.), and the geography of China. There are also biographical units on Marian Anderson, Harriet Tubman, Native American heroes, and more. Instructional components are divided by grade level (K–2, 3–5, 6–8, 9–12) with some units that span all grade levels.

<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org>

### Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) at the University of California at Santa Cruz

This site provides many resources for understanding issues and learning about best practices in multicultural education.

[www.crede.ucsc.edu](http://www.crede.ucsc.edu)

### Electronic Magazine of Multicultural Education

An online magazine for scholars, practitioners, and students of multicultural education, it is theme-oriented with each issue containing articles, instructional ideas, reviews of children's and young adult literature, professional books, videos, and links.

[www.eastern.edu/publications/emme/](http://www.eastern.edu/publications/emme/)

### The Global Schoolhouse

This is a highly interactive site with lots of activities developed for teachers to use with K–8 students. Through participation in the global schoolhouse, students have an opportunity to learn about the world and communicate with children from other countries or other parts of the United States.

[www.gsn.org](http://www.gsn.org)

### Multicultural Pavilion

The Teacher's Corner is particularly useful for gaining background, conceptualizing ideas about multicultural education, and developing lesson plans that integrate these ideas into various subjects. There are also reviews of multicultural literature suitable for K–12 students.

[www.edchange.org/multicultural/](http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/)

**Scholastic: Where Children Love To Learn and Learn To Grow**

This commercial site includes a teacher section with lesson plans, activities, lists of books, articles that provide information on selecting multicultural materials, and issues related to diversity in the classroom. The advantage of the site is that it can be used easily by even young children.

[www.scholastic.com](http://www.scholastic.com)

**Multicultural Literature Sites****Examining Multicultural Picture Books for the Early Childhood Classroom: Possibilities and Pitfalls**

This article, written by Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese, provides information about the importance of multicultural literature in developing aesthetic and psychosocial values. The authors also present suggestions for selecting multicultural materials and offer concrete examples to illustrate their points.

<http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v3n2/mendoza.html>

**Children's Multicultural Literary Resources: Brown Like Me**

The site was developed by a mother for her daughter and other children like her, so that they could read and enjoy literature about children who looked like them. This site would be appropriate for both teachers and parents who are interested in providing a broad spectrum of literature for their children.

<http://members.aol.com/mcsing29/index.htm>

**Cynthia Leitich Smith: Children's Literature Resources**

This site not only has a wealth of resources but is very colorful and fun to use. Cynthia Leitich Smith is an author of children's books (*Indian Shoes*, *Jingle Dancer*, and *Rain Is Not My Indian Name*) who uses her knowledge of writing and her cultural background to create quality literature and a Web site that brings in other authors, other cultures, and other ways of thinking.

[www.cynthialeitichsmith.com](http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com)

**Fifty Multicultural Books Every Child Should Know**

The Cooperative Children's Book Center has put together a multicultural book list that includes titles for preschool through grade three. Each selection identifies the ethnic groups portrayed in the text.

[www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/books/detailListBooks.asp?idBookLists=42](http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/books/detailListBooks.asp?idBookLists=42)

**Happily Ever After**

This site presents many versions of the fairy tale *Cinderella*. A thematic unit, the multicultural Cinderella, is an interesting way to integrate various cultures into a primary classroom.

[www.hehd.clemson.edu/CurrInst/Kaminski/indexK.htm](http://www.hehd.clemson.edu/CurrInst/Kaminski/indexK.htm)

**Orbis Pictus Nonfiction Awards**

This Web page, on the National Council of Teachers of English site, lists the 2004 award winners for the best in children's nonfiction. This page also contains a link to an article about the award winners that includes an annotated bibliography of each one.

[www.ncte.org/elem/awards/orbispictus/115475.htm](http://www.ncte.org/elem/awards/orbispictus/115475.htm)

### Story Arts

Created and maintained by Heather Forest, an author and storyteller, the material is oriented to teachers. However, parents will also enjoy the storytelling selections and ideas for helping kids to be effective storytellers. Forest has selected many delightful tales from different cultures that she has retold for English-speaking children.

[www.storyarts.org](http://www.storyarts.org)

### Vandergrift's Children's Literature Page

"An acquaintance with and understanding of literacy characteristics is one of the first ways a young child has of making sense of what it is to be human," begins the description of this site from Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. On this comprehensive site, you will find information on cookbooks, sharing literature, fairy tales, author biographies, and American history. There are selections of literature from African American, Asian American, and Hispanic American culture.

[www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/ChildrenLit/index.html](http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/ChildrenLit/index.html)

## Specific Cultures

### American Indian and Alaska Native

#### Alaska Small Press Catalog

The books and videos offered for sale on this site cover a range of topics related to Alaska Native peoples, languages, cultures, and lore. Included are biographies, ethnographies, histories, and mythologies from Athabaskan, Inupiat, Yup'ik, Gwich'in, Tlingit, Haida, Inuit, Aleut, and Alutiiq cultures. Many of the books are bilingual.

[www.xyz.net/~wizard/aknativ.htm](http://www.xyz.net/~wizard/aknativ.htm)

#### Oyate

Oyate, the Dakota word for people, is a Native organization "working to see that our lives and our stories are portrayed honestly, and so that all people will know our stories belong to us." This site includes bibliographies of books by and about Native Americans and Alaska Natives that are appropriate for children and young adults. Each review includes bibliographic data, a summary of the story, and recommendations for the age and grade level of the reader. Also on the site is a list of books that have been written about Native American culture and history that Oyate considers to be either offensive or inaccurate or both. Books for young children include picture books, books without words, and chapter books.

[www.oyate.org/aboutus.html](http://www.oyate.org/aboutus.html)

#### Alaska Native Knowledge Network

This site is a terrific resource for educators in the Northwest region and beyond. There are four major headings that can be used to navigate the site: Native Pathways to Education, Alaska Native Center Cultural Resources, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and Indigenous Education Worldwide. The downloadable Culturally Responsive Science Curriculum, while specific to Alaska Native towns and villages, can be generalized to fit many other geographic areas. All instructional plans are divided by grade level: K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. Plans include standards for subject matter, Alaska cultural standards, materials and media, objectives, and teacher and student references.

[www.ankn.uaf.edu](http://www.ankn.uaf.edu)



**Native American Indian Resources**

This site contains more than 300 pages of resources for educators and parents of children, K–12. Resources include maps, Native stories, art, astronomy, food, health, and book reviews. The book reviews are not only rated on the quality of the writing but on the accurate portrayal of Native American peoples. In addition to bibliographic data, reviewers summarize each story so that readers can get the flavor of the text and identify its recommended grade or age level.

*[www.kstrom.net/isk/mainmenu.html](http://www.kstrom.net/isk/mainmenu.html)*

**Indigenous Australia**

This site explores the dreaming or dream time stories of Australian aboriginal people. The 20 stories, listed with the title and narrator, each have a glossary to assist in pronunciation of indigenous language. Quicktime is necessary to use the audio and video aspects of the site. Young children will enjoy both listening to and viewing narrators as they offer their peoples' sacred stories that explain how the world and all life came into being.

*[www.dreamtime.net.au/dreaming/index.htm](http://www.dreamtime.net.au/dreaming/index.htm)*

**Raven Feathers and the Wind**

This is the Web site of Anchorage storyteller Jack Dalton, who performs and presents at school workshops.

*[www.ravenfeathers.com](http://www.ravenfeathers.com)*

**Hispanic****Multi-Cultural Children's Literature**

This Web site has extensive links to many multicultural sites for children. The link for Hispanic and Latino themed sites includes the home pages of Pat Mora and Gary Soto.

*<http://frankrogers.home.mindspring.com/multi.html>*

**Barahona Center**

This Web site provides information, including annotated bibliographies in both Spanish and English, about recommended books in Spanish for children and adolescents. More than 6,000 books from around the world are in the database, selected because of their quality of art and writing, presentation of material, and appeal to the intended audience.

*[www.csusm.edu/csb/english/](http://www.csusm.edu/csb/english/)*

**Muslim****Muslim Family Web Site**

The mission of the Muslim Family Web site is to help promote good quality Islamic books, primarily by Muslim authors. The site includes annotated lists of books categorized for pre-K and kindergarten, lower elementary, upper elementary, and junior high and up.

*<http://azkiah.tripod.com/Childrenscatalog.htm>*

**The World of Arab and Muslim Children in Children's Books**

This site provides annotated book lists—fiction, nonfiction, and folklore—for younger and older children. Books represent a wide range of Arab countries, including Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Pakistan, and Algeria. In addition, resources for books about Arab and Muslim cultures are listed.

*<http://web6.duc.auburn.edu/academic/education/eft/lechner/arabbooks.pdf>*

## Asian American

### Powerful Asian American Images Revealed in Picture Books

Asian Americans have been concerned about the absence of realistic images of their lives and information about their contributions to American culture. This list provides teachers and parents with picture books that depict Asian Americans accurately.

[www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/ChildrenLit/asian.html](http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/ChildrenLit/asian.html)

## African American

### African American Bibliography: Books for Children

Part of the Internet School Library Media Center, this site provides selected annotated bibliographies of books that deal with the black experience. Most annotations are reprinted from the Library of Congress. Categories of bibliographies include folktales, biography, general nonfiction, poetry, drama, and socially and culturally conscious fiction.

<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/mulafro.htm>

### Powerful African American Images Revealed in Picture Books

In the introduction to this site, which is part of the Vandergrift's Children's Literature page ([www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/ChildrenLit/index.html](http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/ChildrenLit/index.html)), Vandergrift writes: "All children deserve to see positive images of children like themselves in the books they read. For the youngest children who 'read' pictures as adults share text, illustrations can have a powerful influence on their perceptions of the world. Strong visual images of those similar to themselves, their friends, and their families are life-affirming and can encourage children to reach beyond the boundaries of their immediate life experiences and consider a multitude of possibilities for their futures." The books listed on this site represent a sampling of picture books that provide realistic, positive images of African American children.

[www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/ChildrenLit/afro.html](http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/ChildrenLit/afro.html)

## Russian

### Russian Children's Books in English

The books listed on this site have previously been available only in Russia. Printed in Moscow and carefully translated into English by native speakers, they "feature the best nursery rhymes, folktales, and classics written and illustrated especially for children" by such notable authors as Tolstoy and Chekhov.

[www.natashascafe.com/html/book.html](http://www.natashascafe.com/html/book.html)



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# More Literacy and 6+1 Trait® Learning Products From the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

Visit NWREL's entire collection of research-based publications at [www.nwrel.org/comm/catalog/](http://www.nwrel.org/comm/catalog/)

## **Tapestry of Tales: Stories of Self, Family, and Community Provide Rich Fabric for Learning**

**Member** (Item #VL001) **\$24.75** plus shipping

**Nonmember** (Item #L001) **\$27.40** plus shipping

## **Many Paths to Literacy: Language, Literature, and Learning in the Primary Classroom**

Research has confirmed that the experiences many parents and early childhood educators provide in the home and classroom promote language development and early literacy. This guidebook encourages reading and writing instructors to engage in dialogue and reflection with colleagues, examine their own experiences, and collaboratively study research. (2002; 240 pp.)

**Member** (Item #VC110) **\$20.80** plus shipping

**Nonmember** (Item #C110) **\$22.95** plus shipping

## **Sharing the Wisdom of Practice: Schools That Optimize Literacy Learning for All Children**

This book takes an in-depth look at the beliefs and practices of four schools that have created a collaborative learning community based on caring and support, high expectations (with the resources to meet them), and multiple opportunities for meaningful participation. (2002; 114 pp.)

**Member** (Item #VC112) **\$14.55** plus shipping

**Nonmember** (Item #C112) **\$16.05** plus shipping

## **NEW! Seeing With New Eyes** (sixth edition)

Based on NWREL's 6+1 Trait® Writing model, this guidebook helps teachers use the traits of good writing as a framework for instruction and scoring of prewriters as well as competent ones. While the main audience for the publication is teachers of kindergarten through second-grade students, the model can also be used effectively for older youngsters in special education and limited English proficiency classes. Among the changes to the sixth edition are new scoring guides geared to giving effective feedback on a wide range of student work samples. (2005; 318 pp.)

**Member** (Item #VE028) **\$22.75** plus shipping

**Nonmember** (Item #E028) **\$24.95** plus shipping

## **NEW! Wee Can Write™: Using 6+1 Trait® Writing Strategies With Renowned Children's Literature**

Use the 6+1 Trait® model to develop young writers with *Wee Can Write™*. Developed for kindergarten teachers but applicable through first grade, this book features a comprehensive set of seasonal lesson plans built around popular children's books and using the 6+1 TRAIT model it features:

- Short instructional scripts for each story as well as each focus trait within the story
- Bright, cheerful, easy-to-use design with helpful color coding so that the teacher can easily determine which parts of the text are meant for directions to students, lesson materials, or examples (2005; 150 pp.)

**Member** (Item #VE009) **\$22.00** plus shipping

**Nonmember** (Item #E009) **\$24.40** plus shipping

## **Picture Books** (sixth edition)

The latest edition of this perennial favorite contains an additional 150 annotations of picture books published between 1998 and 2004. The new annotations include many books suitable for use with young adult readers and listeners, indicated with a "YA" coding. As in the past, the descriptions are arranged by trait. Each of the traits has sample lesson plans for immediate classroom use, including the recently added "Presentation" trait.

**Member** (Item #VE013) **\$16.75** plus shipping

**Nonmember** (Item #E013) **\$18.45** plus shipping

## **6+1 Trait® Writing magnets**

Ensure student comprehension of the 6+1 TRAIT Writing model with these colorful teaching aids. Designed to magnetically adhere to dry-erase type markerboards, each trait is featured on its own 7½ by 11-inch magnet with an icon that visually represents the trait's function. The magnets' large size means even students in the back of the classroom can clearly see and understand each trait. Teachers can use these magnets as a lecture/teaching aid to introduce and reinforce the purpose of each trait and how it contributes to good writing.

**Member** (Item #VE029) **\$20.50** plus shipping

**Nonmember** (Item #E029) **\$22.00** plus shipping

## **6+1 Trait® Writing assessment self-inking stamp**

NWREL's newest stamp features all 6+1 traits in a convenient, self-inking format. This stamp is a great way to easily and cost-effectively record scores on student papers. (4 by 2 inches)

**Member** (Item #VXE06) **\$16.50** plus shipping

**Nonmember** (Item #XE06) **\$17.95** plus shipping

## **6+1 Trait® Writing: A Model That Works [video set]**

This comprehensive video set provides tools and instruction to implement the 6+1 TRAIT Writing Assessment Model in grades two through 12 and beyond. This professional, eight-tape set includes an introduction to the powerful model, seven trait-specific videotapes, and a *Facilitator's Guide*. Each eight-minute trait-specific video:

- Clearly defines one trait
- Summarizes the characteristics of the traits
- Describes how good use of the trait looks
- Explains scoring criteria illustrated with examples of actual student writing
- Provides practice scoring opportunities
- Offers insights from teachers using the model

The *Facilitator's Guide* reinforces and supplements the video series with scoring guides, samples of scored student writing, and instructions on how to optimize use of the videos. (2003; 144 pp.)

**Member** (Item #VE080) **\$388.00** plus \$12.99 shipping

**Nonmember** (Item #E080) **\$400.00** plus \$12.99 shipping



# Literacy and 6+1 Trait® Writing Trainings Available From the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

NWREL brings its expertise to your school or district through a wide range of on-site trainings. Among the programs available are:

## **Tapestry of Tales: When Readers Write**

Workshops are available to support the use of *Tapestry of Tales* in the classroom. The workshops focus on engaging and motivating students to write; enriching teaching and learning by tapping into students' knowledge, lives, families, culture, and community; and reinforcing reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking connections and competencies. Multicultural children's and young adult literature is used to explore strategies that connect storytelling to story writing. Topics include writing about self and the personal world; diaries, journals, poetry, family stories, and community stories; responding to literature; author study to develop writing styles; writers on writing; reading-writing workshop; selecting books for instruction; and assessment.

Workshops, lasting from a half-day to multiple days, will be tailored to meet participant goals. For information, contact NWREL at 1-800-547-6339.

## **6+1 Trait® Writing Assessment: Introductory Institute**

In this three-day introductory workshop, educators will gain practical strategies to help K–12 students use the 6+1 TRAIT model to become skillful, confident writers. The institute helps participants:

- Evaluate students' papers using clearly defined scoring rubrics that examine traits such as ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation
- Align the writing assessment process with instruction to build a seamless system
- Examine and use the "Beginning Writers" scoring guide (primary, K–3)

For additional information on this workshop and other writing and 6+1 TRAIT trainings (described below), visit [www.nwrel.org/assessment/trainings.php](http://www.nwrel.org/assessment/trainings.php)

## **6+1 Trait® Writing Assessment for Trainers**

A three-day advanced Training of Trainers Institute for those who wish to conduct their own in-district training workshops. Previous training in the 6+1 TRAIT model is required.

## **Integrating 6+1 Trait® Writing Assessment and Instruction**

In this two-day advanced workshop, participants will use knowledge of the model to link assessment and instruction, particularly for expository and persuasive writing in grades 3–12. The training highlights practical lessons that help students identify quality writing, manage their own writing process, and become confident writers. (Prerequisite: 6+1 TRAIT introductory course).

## **6+1 Trait® Spanish Writing Institute: Los Criterios de la Escritura Eficaz en Español**

Educators attending this two-day workshop will learn to:

- Accurately and reliably assess Spanish writing using the Spanish trait model
- Utilize a common language and vision for discussing quality Spanish training
- Understand how work on Spanish writing can improve student learning in English and other academic content areas

## **Effective Course Design: Using Assessment To Align Instruction With Standards**

This institute will step teachers through NWREL's six-stage Teaching-Learning Cycle on how to (re)design and deliver a course using a standards-based approach. The workshop centers on NWREL's Improving Student Learning Through Integrated Assessment and Instruction manual. It employs a "backwards design" process: unit learning targets are defined first; assessments that align to those learning targets are selected; and finally, an instructional plan is written to help students be successful in meeting the learning targets.

## **Wee Can Write™**

In this half-day workshop, participants will learn about the 6+1 Trait® Writing model through activities that are flexible, creative, and take no more than three to five minutes to prepare. Activities aimed at the beginning writer are provided for each of the traits, using renowned children's literature titles found in your classroom collection or library. Explore listening, speaking, reading, and artistic ideas that integrate daily writing experiences in journals, interactive writing, and class books.

For information regarding other NWREL trainings, services, and products, visit [www.nwrel.org](http://www.nwrel.org) or call 1-800-547-6339.

# NWREL Marketing Office Order Form

Fax this form (for credit card and purchase orders) to: (503) 275-0458

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VLO01	Tapestry of Tales SAMPLE	3	\$ 24.75	\$ 74.25

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Item #	Title	Quantity	Price	Subtotal
VE080	6+1 Trait® video set (member price)		\$ 388.00	
E080	6+1 Trait® video set (nonmember price)		\$ 400.00	

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## **More About NWREL**

### **Mission**

The mission of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) is to improve educational results for children, youth, and adults by providing research and development assistance in delivering equitable, high-quality educational programs. A private, nonprofit corporation, NWREL provides research and development assistance to education, government, community agencies, business, and labor. NWREL ([www.nwrel.org](http://www.nwrel.org)) is part of a national network of 10 Regional Educational Laboratories ([www.relnetwork.org](http://www.relnetwork.org)) funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (IES). NWREL's primary service area is the Northwest region of Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. Now in its fourth decade, NWREL reaffirms the belief that strong public schools, strong communities, strong families, and strong children make a strong nation. We further believe that every student must have equal access to high-quality education and the opportunity to succeed, and that strong schools ensure equity and excellence for all students.

### **Priorities for Educational Improvement**

Focusing on priority educational needs in the region, NWREL is organized into four major centers of expertise to conduct long-term research and development and technical assistance activities: Center for Classroom Teaching and Learning; Center for School, Family, and Community; Center for School and District Improvement; and Center for Research, Evaluation, and Assessment.

### **Information and Resources**

Numerous resources for educators, policymakers, parents, and the public are made available by NWREL. These resources include events, such as conferences, workshops, and other activities; and products and publications, such as the Laboratory magazine and newsletters.

### **Services From Expert Staff**

Our staff of more than 200 includes professional employees with doctorates from leading universities. Graduate majors include education, mathematics, science, business, languages, human development, journalism, law, library science, and foreign studies, among others.





**Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory**

101 SW Main Street, Suite 500

Portland, OR 97204-3213

503-275-9500

[www.nwrel.org](http://www.nwrel.org)

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