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# Mentor-Teaching in the English Classroom

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# MENTOR-TEACHING IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

by

TIMOTHY R. BLUE

Under the Direction of Elizabeth Burmester

## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation is a rhetorical analysis of the theories and practices surrounding student-centered mentor-teaching. I examine textual representations of the teacher/student relationship as well as theories and practices involved in the discursive formation of teacher/student relationships, examining the intersection (or lack thereof) between the ways we as researchers talk about teacher/student relationship formation and the way(s) such relationships form in the “real world” of the English classroom.

This institutional critique of teacher/student relationships draws on the works of ancient rhetorical scholars like Quintilian and Socrates, and on the post-1980 scholarship of Robert Connors, Lad Tobin, bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Parker J. Palmer, Mike Rose, Wendy Bishop, Louise Rosenblatt, Jeffrey Berman, and Peter Elbow. These scholars have all provided helpful models for me as I have framed my own beliefs about the value of expressive writing, the usefulness of writing conferences, the need for teacher vulnerability as a model for students’ expressive writing, the appropriateness of various relational settings beyond the classroom, and

the ways grading/responding to student writing can either promote or inhibit a trusting student/teacher bond.

While all of these scholars have contributed to my own beliefs and ideas, I am merely identifying and classifying pedagogical movements; rather, I am synthesizing these movements' theories and practices in order to formulate an overall critique of the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches. I also draw heavily upon the theoretical underpinnings of psychoanalysis, feminism, reader-response criticism, and composition studies to weave together a synthesized working model of mutually beneficial teacher/student relationships as they pertain to the high school and college English classrooms.

Ultimately, I suggest my own contributions to the existing scholarship that will call for a mixture of both bolder pedagogical approaches and greater relational caution, depending upon the concept and the student(s) involved. I conclude with suggestions for utilizing teacher research to formulate new theories and practices for mentor-teaching in the English classroom.

**INDEX WORDS:** Composition pedagogy, Literature pedagogy, Reader response, Expressivism, Personal writing, Student-centered teaching, Teacher-student relationships, Mentor-teaching, Mentor, Mentoring

MENTOR-TEACHING IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

by

TIMOTHY R. BLUE

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2009

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MENTOR-TEACHING IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

by

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my students, without whom I would not have the unending drive to come up with new and more effective ways of relating to other individuals through my teaching. At its core, teaching is a human-to-human endeavor, and my teaching is motivated above all else by the relationships this career allows me, even encourages me, to pursue. My own life was changed by the spiritual applicability of the literature I read my junior year at Wake Forest University in a class called Faith and Imagination under the tutelage of Dr. Ralph Wood. While I am deeply grateful to Dr. Wood for teaching this class, my own teaching is driven by a wish that borders on anger that no teacher ever helped me make these connections before that time. I feel that I missed out on so many great learning opportunities in high school and college English classes because none of those teachers pushed me to see the deep intersections between the lessons of literature and my own reality. As such, my dissertation and my entire career are dedicated to helping students see these connections for their own lives, hopefully earlier than I did.

Additionally, I am dedicating this dissertation to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. In my view, the Trinitarian view of God demonstrates that God is, in effect, a living relationship amongst three parts. Thus, if we are created in His image, we are created for relationships. I believe that He put the passion inside of me for seeing lives changed through relational teaching, and without his calling in my life, I would never have had the drive to finish this degree or to press on with this demanding but rewarding career.

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Above all others, I am grateful to my family. I thank my wife, Ann Blue, for the endless hours of sacrifice she has made in making this degree a reality for me. Whether it was my physical absence at the library, my mental absence because I was thinking about some concept and how to integrate it into my research, my emotional absence when I was overwhelmed and drained to the point of near exhaustion, or any other form or absence I can't identify, she has been as patient as Job and as encouraging a wife as I could ask for. Thank you, my love! I also want to thank my daughter, Ellie Ruth, who was born during my PhD pursuit and who also sacrificed time with her daddy while he was working on this project. I adore you, and I hope you will have many mentor-teachers in your life!

Secondly, I want to thank my committee members, Beth Burmester, Marti Singer, Nancy Chase, and Jeff Berman, who have provided guidance and wisdom along the way in so many ways. You are all models of various aspects of mentor-teaching to me, and I guarantee you that I will carry on the torch of outstanding teaching you have passed off to me. I hope our interactions have only just begun!

Finally, I want to thank my parents, who have made this dream a reality through their funding. Thank you for valuing education and for believing in me despite all the twists and turns I have taken in figuring out just how to live out my desires for higher education. I hope I can provide the same encouragement and support for my children as you have for me.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR MENTOR-TEACHERS**

Dr. Fernandez was the worst professor I ever had. My freshman year of college I took two required semesters of Spanish from this odd little man. When I say little, I mean little. He stood maybe 5'4"; he reeked of cigarette smoke and would often leave class in the middle for a smoke; when he did show up for class, probably half of the time, he usually had on the same outfit he had worn the class before, and the class before that. One time, before an important exam, he failed to show up for office hours while ten or twelve of us waited outside his office. He would ask the same set of essay questions on every test, and he even allowed us to choose the same one out of the group to answer over and over again. He promised me midway through the semester that I would get an A because he knew I was a good student. In short, Dr. Fernandez didn't exactly require that his students aim for the stars.

Sometime in the middle of my second semester with Dr. Fernandez, he came to me quite distraught. He explained in his thick accent that he had been denied tenure for a second time, and he begged me to join forces with some of my classmates to help him appeal the school's decision. He wanted us to speak up for him, but the truth was that I agreed with the decision of the tenure committee.

But hold on. There's more to this story. Maybe, when examined from a different angle, Dr. Fernandez was the best professor I ever had. Maybe I should have gone to the committee and told them about the time that Dr. Fernandez took one of my classmates out for a steak dinner – nothing inappropriate – it just happened to be dinner time when Alan went to ask a few Spanish questions, so they went out to eat. Maybe I should have told them that, when I saw him on campus, he insisted that I use the familiar Spanish greeting rather than the formal one, implying that we were friends, not just teacher and student. Maybe I should have told the

committee about the time he invited us all over to his house for a Spanish themed fiesta – the only time in my academic career a professor has made such an invitation. Maybe I should have told them that, while his teaching skills needed some work, here was a man who cared about his students’ human concerns more than any other professor I would ever have as an undergraduate. Here was a man who was not so busy with scholarly concerns that he couldn’t take time for the students who supposedly were the reason the school existed. While I would never go so far as to say that this professor was a good Spanish teacher, maybe, just maybe, the world of academia needs more professors who imitate his unique and genuine love for his students.

If Gerald Graff is right in saying that “thinking pedagogically” means “seeing the assumptions of the university from the point of view of students instead of that of professors” (326), then perhaps Dr. Fernandez understood pedagogy quite well. He cared more about the real lives of his students than many of the teachers I have since encountered. He failed as a model of rigorous Spanish education, but he succeeded as a model of humaneness, thoughtfulness, and genuine concern for people. What saddens me is not that Dr. Fernandez was denied tenure, but rather that he is the only example I have of a professor who invited students over to his house for a class party or took students out to dinner just to talk. I can count many professors who were knowledgeable in their chosen fields, who were models of mental prowess, and who undoubtedly deserved the tenure they possessed. But what I really long for is an example of someone who was capable of mixing academic acumen with a Dr. Fernandez-style of concern for students’ real lives.

Modern educational mantras claim that a good education educates the whole person: body, mind, and spirit. Yet most professors maintain a “professional” distance, claiming that any non-classroom pursuit of students is inappropriate and even legally risky. In his

autobiographical book about teaching high school, Frank McCourt recalls an encounter with a former student on the streets of New York. Nervous about telling the student of his genuine fondness for him, McCourt tries to avoid saying anything authentic to the young man.

Eventually he relents and speaks from his heart. McCourt records this inner monologue:

Tell him, McCourt, tell him the truth. Tell him how he brightened your days, how you told your friends about him, what an original he was, how you admired his style, his good humor, his honesty, his courage, how you would have given your soul for a son like him. And tell him how beautiful he was and is in every way, how you loved him then and love him now. Tell him...I did, and he was speechless. (240)

Most of us fear such vulnerability so greatly that we overlook opportunities to tell students that we think highly of them, yet what good might come if we overcame this fear and treated more students the way Fernandez and McCourt demonstrate? What if we even went so far as to seek such opportunities?

In *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose details the influence of four mentors, all teachers. Rose says, “Those four men collectively gave me the best sort of liberal education...It transpired in backyards and on doorsteps and inside offices as well as in the classroom. I could smell their tobacco and see the nicks left by their razors...They lived their knowledge” (58). Jane Tompkins echoes this idea of allowing students into our razor-nicked lives when she recalls Mrs. Higgins, her third grade teacher, relaying a story about her young son bringing her a glass of orange juice while she was showering. Tompkins says the seemingly insignificant memory stands out “because it symbolizes something that was missing from education as I knew it: the reality of private life. Taking showers, having a naked body, drinking orange juice, being a member of a

family, needing to know that you are loved, needing to tell about it” (xv). When we open our lives to students both through honest conversation and invitations to interact beyond the classroom, we become what Quintilian called a “living voice” that “feeds the mind more nutritiously” than any book knowledge can (92-93). In the classroom, our students have heard the first peep of our living voices – they have heard our senses of humor; they have heard some of our politics; they have heard of our like or dislike of our families and/or our jobs, and other small details of everyday life. But this feint echo of our living voices quickly fades into obscurity after final grades have been handed out. Students go back to their dorm rooms and social functions, and we hole up in our offices to prepare for the next batch of students, too quick to dismiss the students who have just walked out of our lives, maybe forever.

We need to do a better job of recognizing those students who might want and need more from education than our teacherly personas will allow, for there are many who walk out of our classrooms semester after semester, quietly wishing for an older, wiser friend to help them navigate the complexities of their lives. In her 1998 ethnographic study of teenage culture, *A Tribe Apart*, Patricia Hersch notes that, “Nobody is paying much attention to individual adolescents, but everyone is hysterical about the aggregate” (12). She goes on to conclude that our lack of knowledge about what makes teenagers tick comes from the fact that we adults simply “aren’t there. Not just parents, but any adults” (19). Students sense an unwillingness on teachers’ parts to get involved with them on a personal level. One young man in Hersch’s study, Jonathan, says that the overall school environment causes students to “become dehumanized” (223) and that most teachers merely introduce themselves and their classes by saying, “Okay, you’re in Physics” and then jumping into the academic material (222). He longs for a human connection that makes the classroom more personally relevant. As such, Hersch’s call echoes

my own: We need to make ourselves available to young adults, and the classroom can be a perfect starting point for such an ongoing relationship.

While college and high school campuses do offer students the potential for adult guidance in the form of campus ministries, coaches and counseling services, many students will never interact with such guides. All students, however, will interact with plenty of professors. And while it is impossible for a teacher to mentor all his students, if each one would pursue handfuls of students each year, many thousands of young adults could leave high school and college with more than a sheet of paper, a bunch of friends, and enough knowledge to pave their next step. They could leave with maturity, direction, and the ability to apply the knowledge of the classroom to their everyday lives. Who knows, we might even find one or more of them by our deathbeds years later, as Morrie Schwartz found Mitch Albom, a reciprocal relationship of care and learning recounted in the best-selling book *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

This same kind of pedagogical relationship is defined by Gail Griffin in her memoir, *Calling: Teaching in the Mother Tongue*. In chapter 10, "Vocation," Gail Griffin distinguishes between *professing* and *teaching* as follows: "To profess is to speak; to teach is to speak to and with someone. To profess is an act; to teach, a relationship" (166). Those of us who agree with Griffin's distinction should consider the classroom as a starting point for potential mentoring relationships that might extend far beyond the classroom. Mentoring and teaching depend upon mutual relationships. Paulo Freire tells us, "The only effective instrument is a humanizing pedagogy in which the revolutionary leadership establishes a *permanent* relationship of dialogue with the oppressed" (68, emphasis mine). Though it seems far-fetched to consider American teenagers oppressed in the political and economic sense of Freire's audience, students frequently feel dehumanized by the bureaucracy of college. They do not know what classes to register for

or what groups to join. Some are too scared to do anything but go to class; they sit in their dorm rooms watching TV rather than risking the potential rejection implicit in trying to make new friends or figure out new systems. Thus, while their oppression is not of an economic or political nature, as Freire's book discusses, students do experience oppression on some level, even if it appears to be apathy, indifference, or withdrawal. Teachers can ameliorate some of this oppression.

In her unpublished dissertation on re-envisioning the metaphors we use for teacher-student relationships, Elizabeth Burmester notes that, "Mentoring is so often invisible, contained within the rubric of 'service,' and therefore neither recognized nor rewarded" (179). Unfortunately, the currency with which we buy advancement in our academic careers lies largely in publishing and virtually not at all in mentoring. As such, my call for increased intentionality in mentoring is not for the feint of heart. There may well be very real professional and personal sacrifices involved. Yet at the end of my life's work, I for one would rather be visited by the Mitch Alboms and Mike Roses of my own career than admiring stacks of academic "currency" (publications or citations) as reassurance that I have spent my professional life well. The influence of mentors extends for generations. In different ways, both Mike Rose and Mitch Albom have demonstrated that those who are mentored become mentors to others. Both Rose and Albom have accomplished mentorship through authorship, reaching not only students, but readers in the general public. So, while mentoring goes against the traditional grain of college education in many ways, it reaps rewards that cannot be quantified – perhaps that is the very reason institutions have been slow to recognize it as an essential facet of scholarship.

Our educational system seems to have lost the belief in an obligation to do more for our students than feed them information. If our job is merely to offer facts for students to learn, we

can keep a safe distance from our students' lives. But if we view education as a delving into not only the "what" questions but also the "why" questions behind the subjects we teach, then we have a more interpersonal job to do. But too many teachers have settled for the "what" questions as the whole of a proper education, and this makes mentoring seem disconnected from the purposes of the educational environment.

As an informal case study whether teacher-student mentoring relationships are valued, let's look for a moment at Harvard, our nation's oldest university. Here one might expect to find an institution driven by the pursuit of truth and meaning in the context of relationships between brilliant professors and brilliant students. After all, it proudly bears the word "Veritas," meaning truth, on its coat of arms. Not only that, but the school was specifically founded out of "dread [of] leav[ing] an illiterate Ministry to the Churches" ("The Early History"). In other words, the school's existence came about for the spiritually practical reason of educating ministers. Early attendees were taught in one-on-one relationships with professors in order that they could pursue truth via the wisdom of the ages. Indeed, how can one be an effective minister without a deep understanding of the history of the truth she espouses?

Today Harvard's mission statement mentions nothing about the pursuit of truth, and it makes little effort to tie the learning of the classroom to practical, post-college experience. In summary, it reads that community members will respect the dignity of others, be honest, conscientious and accountable for their behavior (Lewis). These are fine as social skills, but where is the mention of how exactly the classroom learning will be tied to the pursuit of truth or even how it will prepare them to be better engineers, doctors, or politicians? Even at a school that proudly displays its identity as a truth-seeking entity, there is no mention of not just respecting other people but understanding them, or not just being honest but understanding why

honesty is even valuable. As Claire Katz puts it, “Teachers no longer ask philosophical questions...The relationship...education has to ethics, politics, religion, metaphysics, epistemology, existentialism, authenticity and the good life has become less apparent” (7). Perhaps this lack of either questioning or connecting to ethics is because education programs and curricula, and even graduate courses on pedagogy in English departments, emphasize methods and content to the exclusion of texts or discussions touching on philosophy, history, or student points of view. Our courses tend to be taught in isolation, and even at our nation’s finest institutions, like Harvard, there doesn’t seem to be much effort to make education distinctly meaningful in the quest to “find oneself,” which, after all, is ultimately a quest for truth, and it’s precisely what young people are doing whether we help them or not.

With so few institutions and individual teachers seeking to guide students along this journey, students are left seeking to construct their identity based “on peer group figures who exemplify whatever qualities of daring or carelessness or brutality are currently admired” (Connors 146). It’s certainly not the case that adolescents don’t want to be guided; they simply see little purpose in the guidance that we are currently offering them. If we as educators truly want to have a prominent role in shaping young lives, we must step outside the box in which we find ourselves currently stuck. We must cast aside the notion that our course content is primary and students’ lives are secondary so we can boldly take the time to engage our students personally for long enough to figure out how these subjects we’re teaching them might actually be of some use in their identity quests. As Paulo Freire puts it, “We must abandon the educational goal of deposit making and replace it with the posing of the problems of men in their relations with the world” (qtd. in Spanos 16).

### **A New Term: Mentor-Teacher**

With all of this in mind, I am proposing a whole new definition of teaching within this dissertation. My view is that teachers need to make themselves available to students as mentors, both through the content of their classes and through the careful structuring of appropriate and healthy relationships over the course of a semester. My own bias toward the need for teachers and professors to connect personally to students comes from the six years of high school and college English classes I sat through before a teacher finally helped me see beyond the text to my own pursuit of meaning and truth in life. Literature seemed as unrelated to my life as the teachers and professors who taught it. Finally, in my junior year at Wake Forest University, Dr. Ralph Wood opened up the texts of Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy for me in a way that truly made sense. Not only that, but I could actually see the connection between these religiously inspired authors and my own desire to live a life of faith. Suddenly all those hidden meanings and metaphors I had spent so long rolling my eyes at came alive, and I saw that all literature had the same potential to open students' eyes as these authors had opened my own. I was inspired, but over time I also became angry that no one had helped me see the connection between the English classroom (or most any classroom for that matter) and my "real" life of friendship struggles, faith struggles, romance struggles, family struggles, and so on. Why had no teacher guided me to connect literature to my own life before this point? I suspect that many of them wanted to help me make this connection, but sadly, few accomplished the feat because the current system of higher education teaches educators to value propriety and publications over the people in their classrooms.

Donald Murray highlights this difficulty, saying, "To be a person is much more difficult than being an authority, or a phony, or a mass of sympathies" (qtd. in Tobin "Reading Our

Classrooms, Writing Our Selves” 136). Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner say that our methods for evaluating teachers for tenure and promotions are based on all the wrong things. They suggest, radically, that if a teacher can get one student to claim she loves the teacher, the teacher should be retained; if two students will say as much, the teacher deserves a raise (qtd. in Tobin “Reading Our Classrooms, Writing Our Selves” 137). Yet being liked or loved by students almost serves the opposite function. It causes raised eyebrows amongst other faculty members who seem to ask, “How does he compromise his teaching and authority to make the students so attached to him?” Or, “What does he do in his classes? Show movies, talk about fraternity parties, tell jokes?” A teacher who is loved by students must, it would seem, be doing something unprofessional to obtain this admiration. Those who are distant and removed from students are far less likely to be considered suspect than those who are loved, admired, and followed. We have not come very far, it would seem, from Socrates’s day, when he was executed for impiety because he was too personally involved with his protégés (okay, perhaps we have come a little ways since we do not execute teachers any longer – thankfully!).

The term “mentor,” in my mind, implies a mutual respect for the significance of the relationship. As Richard A. Schwartz and Kemp Williams have observed in an article that examines the predominant metaphors in education, “[T]hat instructors view themselves as mentors does not indicate how successful they are in that role or whether students experience the relationship analogously” (109). Here, to me, is the crux of the term “mentor-teacher.” Mentors earn the respect of their protégés, *and* those protégés acknowledge their desire and willingness to learn from the mentor. The teacher/student relationship does not become a mentor relationship simply because the teacher wants it to be one. No matter how much students may be respectful of their teachers, few of them attain a close enough relationship during a one semester

course to have a true mentoring relationship, complete with mutual understanding and respect. While respect may come in such a short time, a true understanding of each other takes much longer, and I think this is why the semester's assignments may well lay a foundation for future mentoring, but they do not constitute a full-fledged mentoring relationship in the sense that I am defining it. Thus, my call in this dissertation will be twofold: First, all teachers, but especially English teachers, need to be structuring their reading and writing assignments with their particular students' real life concerns in the forefront of their minds. Second, teachers need to recognize that some students need and want further interaction with older mentors beyond what the semester will allow. When these opportunities arise, we need to be ready to act as mentors to our former students.

In "20 Ways to Create Effective Mentoring Relationships," Suk-Hyang Lee offers the following tips for teachers to form mentoring relationships with students: "Share your...philosophy with each other...For the mentee: explore and cultivate your professional expectations [and...] Strike a balance...between providing advice...and listening...providing support...and empowering" (234, 239). Further helpful guidelines come from Cecilia Shore's 2005 article, "Toward Recognizing High-Quality Faculty Mentoring of Undergraduate Scholars." Shore suggest that building interpersonal respect/trust involves treating students as junior colleagues; providing an open environment where undergraduate opinions are welcome; listening patiently; being approachable and available; being frank and direct; giving timely feedback; being sensitive to how much guidance/structure different students need at different points in the project; showing your enthusiasm; practicing what you profess; and resisting the temptations of power. All of this advice stresses the mutuality of the mentor-teaching relationship. These relationships should begin in the interactions of the classroom and extend

beyond the semester's work when both student and teacher are willing and able to form such a bond. All the while, both parties should sustain a mutual respect, engage in an ongoing give-and-take dialogue, and resist power plays if these mentoring relationships are to be successful either in the short term or the long term.

### **Ancient Models of Mentor-Teaching**

What I am suggesting is not a new model for teaching, but rather a return to the old. Thousands of years after their lives have ended, classical pedagogues like Plato, Socrates, and Quintilian have much to offer us as we look for a definition of mentor-teaching. As I unpack some of the examples they provide, my own views on what these mentor-teaching relationships might look like will become clearer.

I begin at the end of Socrates' life when he offers his views on the role of teachers in as clear a way as I can imagine anyone doing. When Socrates is indicted for "criminal meddling" and "teach[ing] others to follow his example" (Plato "Defense" 5), he replies, "I owe a greater obedience to God than to you, and so long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop practicing philosophy and exhorting youth and elucidating the truth for everyone that I meet" (Plato "Defense" 15). This elucidation of truth seems to me to be the calling of every teacher. All of us, no matter our subjects, must teach our students to look beyond the surface matters at hand into the truth(s) that lie beneath, often hidden unless we look hard. The English teacher's job, then, is not just to expose students to Shakespeare and to teach them to write a five paragraph essay, but rather to probe alongside his students the applicable truths of Shakespeare for our world today and to help students find personally meaningful reasons for writing. Mentor-teaching looks beneath the "what questions" of the subject matter at hand and guides students

through an exploration of the “why questions” so they can apply the content of the classroom to their own personal journeys toward truth.

As Socrates approached his death, he makes an odd request:

I ask [those who condemned me] to grant me one favor. When my sons grow up, gentlemen, if you think that they are putting money or anything else before goodness, take your revenge by plaguing them as I plagued you; and if they fancy themselves for no reason, you must scold them just as I scolded you, for neglecting the important things and thinking that they are good for something when they are good for nothing...Now it is time that we were going. I to die and you to live, but which of us has the happier prospect is unknown to anyone but God. (Plato “Defense” 26)

Socrates, in other words, saw his role as teaching his students to value the truly important matters in life: wisdom, justice, virtue, and morality. His teaching was not about what seemed immediately valuable like how to acquire more income or how to be better at an isolated skill, but rather about what was valuable for a life well-lived in pursuit of lasting meaning and authentic truth. It seems to me that modern teachers should be seeking the same ends, yet the rewards we seek and the ways in which we reward our own students model the precise qualities Socrates raged against: shallow, hollow, short-sighted values.

Throughout his life, Socrates modeled the sort of mentor-teaching he espouses above from his deathbed. The first example of his ability to mentor-teach comes from his dialogue with the young man, Hippocrates. The story goes that one time Hippocrates arrives at Socrates’ doorstep eager to be introduced to Protagoras, a well-known Sophist. Socrates takes it upon himself to make sure Hippocrates knows exactly what he is seeking and how to evaluate whether

Hippocrates can offer it to him. Socrates questions Hippocrates as to who he would go to to be trained as a doctor (answer: the other Hippocrates) or as a sculptor (answer: Polyclitus or Phidias) because he knows these men to be experts in their fields and thus good teachers (not always the same thing, of course!). Socrates also challenges Hippocrates on his unexamined willingness to

spend both [his] own money and that of [his] friends as if [he] had already made up [his] mind that [he] must at all costs associate with this man” without “calling on the counsel of [his]...father or [his] brother or any of [them] who are [his] trusted friends on the question whether or not to entrust [his] soul to this stranger who has arrived among [them]. (Plato “Protagoras” 312)

Next, Socrates asks Hippocrates if he knows exactly what a Sophist is, and the two of them come to the conclusion that Hippocrates is fuzzy on the answer. Once they decide that a Sophist is a “merchant or peddler of the goods by which a soul is nourished (Plato “Protagoras” 312-313), Socrates warns Hippocrates that, just as another kind of merchant might sell one damaged goods, a Sophist might peddle goods that in fact damage rather than nourish one’s soul. Having identified the danger, Socrates humbly suggests the following:

Knowledge cannot be taken away in a parcel [to be examined for defects]. You go away having learned it and are benefited or harmed accordingly. So I suggest we give this matter some thought, not only by ourselves, but also with those who are older than we, for we are still rather young. (Plato “Protagoras” 313)

Socrates has done Hippocrates many of the favors a mentor-teacher ought to do for one in his charge, but this requires first and foremost that the protégé come to the mentor, meaning he must sense the mentor’s approachability. Socrates’ kindness and warmth can hardly be missed,

yet he knows that his pedagogical role, in this case, is one of challenger to the younger man's thinking. He does this without condemnation or indignation. He even lumps the two of them into the same boat as "young" people who have much to learn from their elders – a humble mentor indeed. Ironically, Hippocrates comes to Socrates in order to be taken to Protagorus to learn. Clearly, Socrates himself has plenty of the desired wisdom to pass along to Hippocrates, and he gently dispenses his wisdom as a mentor-teacher should.

In another mentoring relationship, Socrates demonstrates the primary importance of educating our students about deeply meaningful topics while keeping our classroom content knowledge as a mere avenue by which we arrive at discussions of even more important matters. The conversation to which I refer is one in which Socrates engages the young Phaedrus in a discussion of the relationship between love and rhetoric. Love is, of course, a topic of eternal weight, and that is where Socrates focuses the conversation; rhetoric must be taken seriously, as we should take our own course content seriously, but Socrates recognizes that rhetoric is only important if one uses it to connect with others' souls. Without this end in mind, just like teaching metaphors or writing styles or literary analysis is an empty practice unless they are connected to students' life concerns, rhetoric is also of little import when taught in isolation.

This is a key distinction that should be used in the classroom. It's fine to teach writing skills or mathematical formulas, but we need to teach students why such skills are valuable, and I think we must go beyond reasons like, "You'll need it to write good emails one day" or "You'll thank me when you get asked this question in a job interview." Those reasons students can see through as not ultimately important but only temporally valuable. If there is no ultimate meaning to what we teach, why teach it? Socrates, the ultimate student, notes that because he "can't as yet know [him]self," as the inscription at Delphi enjoins, and "so long as that ignorance remains

it seems...ridiculous to inquire into extraneous matters” (Plato “Phaedrus” 478). We as mentor-teachers need to follow Socrates’s lead by putting personally meaningful topics ahead of “extraneous matters.” What might education look like if self-knowledge was primary and English, math, science, and other academic skills or content knowledges were secondary? These important skills should not be neglected, as rhetoric was not neglected by Socrates, but should be taught as the means to self-knowledge rather than as the means to a “good” career or a means to accomplishing a single task. All teaching, in other words, from kindergarten through doctoral programs, should be aimed at students knowing themselves deeply.

Socrates might well have been writing in the year 2009 when he noted the following: “[T]he present-day authors of manuals of rhetoric...are cunning folk who...keep their knowledge [of the soul] out of sight” (Plato “Phaedrus” 517). If textbook writers even have a knowledge of the soul or a spiritual worldview to speak of, it would be deemed entirely inappropriate to include such knowledge in a textbook on public speaking or organic chemistry, would it not? Sadly, if teachers and textbook writers have wisdom to share with students, the mass-market system under which the modern educational system operates encourages, even demands, that broadly applicable skills must take precedence over wisdom or truth(s) about how to make a life for oneself. What might it look like if we saw education backwards, as did Socrates? He commented, “Since the function of oratory is in fact to influence men’s souls, the intending orator must know what types of soul there are” (Plato “Phaedrus” 517). I suspect Descartes would have echoed the usefulness of mathematics to students’ souls; I suspect Galileo would have shouted “amen” if Socrates switched the word “science” for “oratory.” I know for a fact that I heartily agree with Socrates’s idea as applied to the English classroom. If the end of teaching in an education for life, we must begin with the essence of our students’ lives; we must

begin educating them at their core and work our way outward, applying each discipline to that core: our students' souls.

Socrates was not alone in the ancient world with his views that teaching can and should include mentoring. The Roman scholar, Quintilian, comments at length on the need for teachers to serve as role models for their students, both in the classroom and beyond:

Let [the teacher] adopt, then, above all things, the feelings of a parent toward his pupils, and consider that he succeeds to the place of those by whom the children were entrusted to him. Let him neither have vices in himself, nor tolerate them in others...Let him discourse frequently on what is honorable and good, for the oftener he admonishes, the more seldom he will have to chastise...Let him speak much every day himself, for the edification of his pupils. Although he may point out to them, in their course of reading, plenty of examples for their imitation, yet the living voice, as it is called, feeds the mind more nutritiously – especially the voice of the teacher, whom his pupils, if they are but rightly instructed, both love and reverence. How much more readily we imitate those whom we like can scarcely be expressed. (92-93)

I might well be able to spend many careers unpacking the wise implications of these words for mentor-teachers. The key here is that Quintilian focuses on the character of the teacher, on what he calls the “living voice.” Quintilian would no doubt feel the same need to encourage today’s teachers in the examples they set for students. His view “that the principles of moral and honorable conduct [should not] be left to the philosophers” (6) rings true as advice for us in today’s educational realm, and even beyond. More adolescents than we currently admit want to become engaged *with* adults and peers in the study and exploration of moral education. Students

need adults other than their parents to act with “the feelings of a parent” toward them. They need people who work to rid themselves of “vices” and who work to help them do the same. Young people need older counselors who speak for their “edification” regularly. And most of all, they need “living voices” in their lives to serve as models whom they *want* to imitate. Wouldn’t it be a great improvement in our graduate training if more programs encouraged teachers to see themselves in this vital mentoring role?

Quintilian goes on to warn teachers against aiding students in their conformity to social norms. He encourages us to challenge popular notions of right and wrong living, saying,

[I]f custom be merely termed that which the greater number do, it will furnish a most dangerous rule, not only for language, but what is of greater importance, for life. For where is there so much virtue that what is right can please the majority?...I call custom in living the agreement of the good. (57)

Quintilian acknowledges a few unpopular notions here: First, he says that right and wrong do exist. Second, he warns us that popular beliefs/ideas do not equate to right or truthful thinking. Finally, Quintilian believes that the possibility of determining proper behavior also does exist. Quintilian, like Aristotle and Cicero before him, had no qualms about suggesting that we teach morality entwined with citizen duties and personal integrity, what they considered essential to happiness and living a good life. For Quintilian, morality had its place alongside English, math, Latin, and science: “Care is to be taken, above all things, that tender minds, which will imbibe deeply whatever has entered them while rude and ignorant of everything, may learn not only what is eloquent, but, still more, what is morally good” (64-65). He says also that it is our responsibility as teachers to model morality: “Let a master therefore be excellent in morals as well as in eloquence; one who, like Homer’s Phoenix, may teach his pupil at once to speak and

to act” (97). My call for mentor-teaching follows Quintilian’s principles by insisting that teachers structure both their classes and their lives in ways that model virtuous behavior and value wisdom over mere knowledge.

As one can see, I am not historically alone in suggesting that teaching include these non-academic elements. Two of the most respected pedagogical scholars in history, Socrates and Quintilian, believe that teaching includes mentoring, and I simply want to reiterate a number of their ancient contentions in a modern-day English classroom setting. Thankfully, many modern scholars seem to be hinting at similar suggestions as I will make. I now turn to some of their ideas.

### **Modern Examples of Mentor-Teaching**

Harvard professor Robert Coles tells the story of his meetings with Professor Miller, from Coles’s own college days in the 1940’s. Because Miller wanted to get to know his American literature students, he invited them to his Widener Library discussion group, where he hosted conversations on wide-ranging topics, giving students a chance to open up their minds outside of the restrictions of the classroom. Robert Coles was tutoring high school students from the city of Boston at the time, and he constantly had his eyes open for the ones who showed the potential to do college-level work, believing that he would be doing them an enormous favor by helping them get to college. He remembers one boy named Hank who wanted to follow in his father’s footsteps and be a carpenter. Hank was bright but was “uninterested in ‘going beyond high school,’” according to Coles (259). Though Hank liked to read, he had negative views of academic reading. One time he said, “I like to read a book and enjoy it, but in school they make it into a big deal, and it’s not fun anymore” (259). When Coles relayed this dialogue Professor

Miller, Miller did precisely what Socrates did with his mentees: He challenged Coles to see the situation from a different vantage point – one that only wisdom could have enabled.

Recognizing that Coles was viewing the need for higher education through the eyes of privilege, Miller challenged Coles' thinking, saying, "Hank may be a step ahead of us" (260). Years later, when Coles returned from his research in the rural south to visit Professor Miller, he was confused about how to synthesize what he was learning about racism with his views on the value of education. Miller said, "Why don't you make those children and their parents and their teachers your colleagues – better, your professors? Ask them what they think is important, really important, for you to know" (261).

In both scenarios Miller acts as a true mentor-teacher in much the same way as Socrates did toward his pupils. Miller helps Coles discover that both Hank and the southern African-American families he was working with, actually had something to teach them. Miller includes himself alongside Coles when speaking of what *they* could learn from Hank. Miller doesn't condescendingly accuse Coles of needing to learn from Hank. Instead, he includes himself as someone in the same boat of those who are biased to believe that education is the be-all-end-all of success in modern day America. He acts as both a peer and a mentor to Coles at the same time, making himself a true living voice. And because Miller used his own classroom as a springboard to find students who might want to be mentored, he had already established the necessary rapport with Coles to speak into his life in both situations. Miller's availability mixed with his wisdom created the possibility for some real personal growth to take place in Coles' life, and it all started because Miller was paying attention to his classroom students and looking for young men who were interested in personal growth.

A second modern-day example of mentor-teaching comes from Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, a book as much about creating ideal teacher-student relationships as it is about the rewards of life-long mentoring. In these pages, he reveals, "The teachers that fate...sent my way worked at making the humanities truly human" (48). He shares his experience with his high school English teacher and a group of peers all interested in writing: "[Jack] MacFarland [who] occasionally invited us to his apartment, and those visits became the high point of our apprenticeship: We'd clamp on our training wheels and drive to his salon" (35). He praises his Loyola University professor for a similar contribution: "Dr. Carothers [who] started his best work once class was over[, who] seemed to love the more informal contacts with those he taught, [for whom] teaching allowed him to fuse the joy he got from reading literature...with his deep pleasure in human community" (52-53). On these mentors, and others, Rose says,

Those...men collectively gave me the best sort of liberal education...It transpired in backyards and on doorsteps and inside offices as well as in the classroom. I could smell their tobacco and see the nicks left by their razors...They lived their knowledge. (58)

Because of the example set by these mentors, Rose was drawn to teaching for his own career.

He muses on the appeal of a career in teaching, saying,

Teaching...was a kind of romance...You wooed kids with [knowledge], invited a relationship of sorts, the terms of connection being [the subject you taught...]  
 Maybe nothing was 'intrinsically interesting.' Knowledge gained its meaning, at least initially, through a touch on the shoulder, through a conversation of the kind Jack MacFarland and Frank Carothers and the others used to have with their students. (102)

What better compliment to offer his mentors than to choose their profession? What better aspiration for mentor-teachers than to be the inspiration for young people to become teachers?

What tremendous good would it do our students if they knew of both our strengths and successes and our weaknesses and failures? How else can our profession prove truly significant in their lives? Notice that Mike Rose abandons his education (temporarily) when the knowledge becomes isolated and divorced from conversations with other human beings. Rose admits that “once [he] was in graduate school in intense, solitary encounter with [the tradition of Western thought], [he] abandoned it for other sources of nurturance and knowledge” (Rose 235-236). Despite having prestigious fellowship, and even despite contemplating a switch from English studies to what Rose thought would be the more practically useful psychological studies, Rose emotionally broke down at the end of his first year of graduate school because it had become merely academic and devoid of the personal connections that drew him to literature in the first place. He loathed spending his days jailed in the library, wolfing down knowledge *about* literature that he did not have the time or the energy to apply to his day in and day out relationship with the real world. The thought of spending his career in “the unending drive to find one more piece of intellectual property” (76) drove him to a pursuit of a way “to turn scholarship out onto human affairs” (77). His education had life only as long as it involved real life relationships and conversations. Eventually, working for the Teacher Corps in East L.A., Rose was able to rediscover the humanity of the humanities, but without the essential connection to real lives, he found the academic pursuit of literary knowledge to be empty. I couldn’t agree more.

Jeffrey Berman’s *Empathic Teaching* provides another extensive discussion of mentor-teaching. The book opens with a letter from Berman’s former student, Ben Gordon, who

recounts the 1990's as a decade "filled with loss, divorce, alcoholism, financial devastation, health trouble, depression, despair and near suicide" (2). Gordon ended up in a psychiatric hospital, but through the care and concern of doctors and family members was able to get back on his feet in a stable enough way that he finally took up his love for writing again. He sent Berman a copy of his first book because Berman's empathic approach to teaching had given Gordon a precursory glimpse of what it's like to be believed in and affirmed. When Gordon got his life straightened out, he remembered Berman as a source of encouragement in both his writing and his life. He remembered Berman for "a recognition of his worth as a person and the inspiration to develop his creative powers" (10).

Drawing on the lessons of his relationship with Ben, Berman articulates five practices teachers can enact to make a difference in their students' lives:

1. Affirming students by allowing them to pursue their own interests and express themselves freely.
2. Helping students personalize knowledge by making it relevant to their own lives.
3. Being friendly and accessible by minimizing the status difference between themselves and students.
4. Willingly sharing from their own life experiences, even when that means discussing things that do not normally find their way into college classrooms (such as when Berman shared the eulogy he had written for his wife after her death from cancer).
5. Remaining part of students' lives after the classes have ended. For example, through emails and phone calls, or simply through the student's vivid memory of the teacher and the class in his mind as he moves on. (13-14)

Berman encourages teachers to offer students an “education for life.” This includes “what Deborah Britzman calls ‘difficult knowledge,’ knowledge that arouses intense resistance in students, who must work through fears, prejudices, and doubts. An education for life involves, to use Daniel Goleman’s term, acquiring ‘emotional intelligence’ (15-16). Mentor-teachers would do well to aim to offer students this “education for life” by incorporating Berman’s suggestions into everything they do.

A true mentor-teacher, as demonstrated by Socrates, Professor Miller, and Berman, provides the context of an ongoing relationship, which includes praise, encouragement, support, questioning, and even reprimand and refusal. A mentor-teacher may start with affirmation, but as trust grows, she will move into the deeper stages of the relationship where inquiry and confrontation are vital for growth of the student and of the relationship. Many teachers encounter and engage their students through the comments they write in the margins of papers or through classroom dialogue, but few create an opportunity to deal with discord or a conflict of ideas from the security of an established relationship. This type of philosophical encounter will be far more helpful and meaningful if done by a professor who has demonstrated a consistent and lasting care for the student as a whole person.

So many of us enter the teaching profession because we want to see young people’s lives impacted and changed for the better. Students’ lives will be changed by our lives, and in order to accomplish this we must take the risks inherent in mentor-teaching, inviting students to be a part of our imperfect, messy lives. This sort of mentor-teaching will keep us accountable to serve as the kind of role model Socrates and Quintilian have called us to be.

## **The Unique Mentor-Teaching Opportunities of the English Classroom**

I now turn more specifically to the English class as a site of mentor-teaching, for I believe that, more than others, this required course offer teachers unique opportunities to become mentor-teachers. In his essay “Teaching and Learning as a Man,” Robert Connors observes, “The college years present young people with their most complex challenges of self-definition...Few of them have been encouraged by their culture to go beyond an immature stage of their development” (146). When thoughtfully designed, writing assignments present all English teachers, not only teachers of college freshmen, with one of the very best resources to help students navigate the difficult and complex young adult years. Reading these essays often opens doors into the students’ lives that are rarely opened in classroom or hallway dialogue. The piece of paper on which students often divulge alarming secrets seems to serve as a comfortable barrier between student and teacher, much like the screen between penitent and priest in a confessional booth. Once the words are on the paper, it is as if the student has enough distance from his or her mistakes to be able to hand them to a teacher for review. The confession has been made, lightening the conscience, but the students’ dignity remains in tact for the time being. Drug addictions, abuse, and sexual promiscuity are often revealed within the content of students’ essays, but teachers frequently gloss over personal revelations in order to “do their jobs” by instilling in the student better writing or literary analysis skills. A sentence like, “Because I had blacked out I didn’t even know the girl’s name that lay beside me in bed the next morning,” might receive a comment like, “Put a comma after the word ‘out’ and “avoid contractions.” When the content is edgy enough, perhaps a professor will offer a brief encouragement to see a professional counselor or talk to a trusted friend, but we are too often scared to risk *being* that counselor or friend. Connors asks, “If [English] teachers, who have more opportunity to see into

students' minds than most other teachers, do not take the responsibility to attempt mentoring, then who will?" (149). Through writing, students can and should explore their inner lives and articulate what they find. And through reading, students should evaluate and apply the lessons conveyed by literature to their own lives.

In his dialogue that explores the purpose of higher learning, Socrates noted that teachers should "set the works of good poets before [students...] and make them learn them by heart, poems containing much admonition and many stories, eulogies, and panegyrics of the good men of old, so that the child may be inspired to imitate them and long to be like them" (Plato "Protagoras" 322). Socrates justifies the reason to learn "writing" with the best logic I've encountered, when he instructs his pupil Phaedrus: "The only truly valuable way to write is to inscribe justice and beauty and goodness upon a soul" (Plato 476). Anyone learning rhetoric – indeed anyone educated – holds the responsibility not only to speak or write well, but also to know the difference between good and evil. This certainly holds true for modern teachers of composition who see the English course as a place for education in citizenship, civic rhetoric, or service learning. Socrates asks,

When a master of oratory, who is ignorant of good and evil, employs his power of persuasion on a community as ignorant as himself...by extolling evil as being really good, and when...he persuades them to do evil instead of good, what kind of crop do you think his oratory is likely to reap from the seed thus sown?

Phaedrus responds with understatement: "A pretty poor one" (Plato "Phaedrus" 505-506).

Following Socrates' principles, teachers of English Studies must not only teach students how to communicate, but also how to evaluate what they communicate, how to use their communication skills for the good of themselves and society. After all, says Socrates, we who speak or write are

dealing with people’s “soul[s...] for it is there that [we are] attempting to implant conviction” (Plato “Phaedrus” 516). Putting all of this together, then, Socrates says that the primary things we who teach students how to communicate with the world around them ought to teach regard the matters of the soul, or eternal matters. Seeing our profession as such will take our English classes from being mere academic requirements to being the loci of life change for college freshmen.

Berman’s modern-day scholarship reminds me of Socrates’s legacy for teaching writing. Citing George Orwell, who claimed in “Why I Write” to believe in four basic reasons for the human writing impulse, Berman adopts three of Orwell’s four, saying he feels compelled to write from a “historical impulse, [a] political purpose, [and with a] psychological intention.” He writes:

[I feel] a ‘historical impulse’ to understand my students’ lives, to teach them how to read and write so that they can tell their own stories. This historical impulse enables us to bear witness to suffering, memorializing those who are no longer here and preserving a record for posterity. My ‘political purpose’ is to push the world in a more empathic direction, a difficult goal to achieve in an age that privileges argumentative and oppositional speech over attentive listening. And my psychological intention is to show that literature can indeed be a healing force for writers and readers alike. (*Empathic* 373)

Like Socrates, Berman sees the complexities and nuances of human communication as the underlying motivation for teaching his students to write better. Specifically, he wants his students and himself to locate their understanding of themselves historically through the writing process. This can mean in a larger societal sense or in a personal sense, but either way, students

need to understand how their own history has shaped them to be the individual they are, and they need to know their own value in the histories of those around them. Secondly, writing can be politically motivated when approached from Berman's vantage point. This is not to say that through writing he and/or his students will reshape presidential elections, but rather that through writing, he and his students can have a positive impact on the overly-critical dialogical culture of our argumentative society. Finally, Berman's psychological intention is, like mine, to demonstrate the healing potential of both writing and reading. Students need to be given opportunities to heal and not only in their therapists' offices. Thoughtfully considered, the assignments in our classes can help them with these processes in deeply profound ways.

Both Socrates and Berman hold equally strong opinions on the value(s) of teaching literature as well as writing. To Protagoras, Socrates said, "In my view the most important part of a man's education is to become an authority on poetry. This means being able to criticize the good and bad points of a poem with understanding, to know how to distinguish them, and give one's reasons when asked" (Plato "Protagoras" 332). Literature deals with problems and resolutions reflecting and representing everyday realities, as well as allowing for empathy and insights into others' lives: relationship struggles, drug addictions, fears, religion, family tensions, quandaries about what to do with one's life are the very conflicts that draw people to read books. We want to see how others handle the situations with which we are faced, and we want to know that we are not alone in carrying our burdens. Those who ignore opportunities for discussing such issues, instead pointing out the author's diction or extended metaphors, are like those who go to the beach and merely comment on how salty the water tastes without savoring the majesty of the waves or the mystery of the ocean's depths. Literature has all the mystery and majesty of the ocean, and we have much to yet discover about its depths.

Scholarship for the new millennium, including calls for teaching critical thinking through reading and writing across the curriculum, are creating new conversations for changing the teacher/student dynamic as part of educational goals. For example, composition theorist, Beth Daniell, professor at Kennesaw State University, Georgia, asserts, “If the whole world consisted of literate, autonomous, critical, constructive people, capable of translating ideas into action, individually or collectively, the world would change” (151). In other words, we owe it to our students not to merely teach writing or literature as information to be learned in order to pass a test. Rather, we need to do the tougher task of teaching them the appropriate critical thinking by which human beings put the truths of literature into practice. The *application* of what we teach means everything; the information without the application means very little.

Once again, Berman echoes Daniell’s and my view about the life-changing capacity of literature, saying,

One of the best ways to achieve this... ‘education for life’ – is through ‘stories and dramas,’ in which students learn to ‘decode the sufferings of others’....And one of the best settings for discussions of empathy, compassion, and forgiveness is the college classroom, where students may be encouraged to explore vexing real-life issues. (*Empathic* 137)

He sees the value of the literature classroom as its inherent opportunity to lead students into discussions of life-altering issues and concepts. The very content of our courses, says Berman, necessitates that we engage our students in discussions of real-life significance and teach them human communication and connection.

One point of divergence in my own views from Berman’s should be noted here. The greatest difference between my idea of mentor-teaching and Berman’s lies in the extent and

duration of the teaching-learning relationships we seek to create. Berman defines mentoring relationships primarily within the classroom walls and course constructs. Berman states, “Teachers, regardless of the level on which they teach, say goodbye to their students at the end of the semester, and they are responsible ‘only’ for their students’ academic development. They generally see their students only for a semester or two, and they usually lose contact with them afterward” (*Empathic* 281). He wants the writing and the literature (the classroom contact points, in other words) to have their effects as the course marches along. I hope for the same things to happen, but I am additionally seeking to foster teaching-learning relationships with students that can extend beyond the literature or writing course as students continue their life education. Because I believe that students desire and need long-term mentors other than their parents, I want our classrooms to be a starting point for mentoring relationships that endure beyond graduation. I envision mentor relationships following the model of Morrie Schwartz and Mitch Albom, of Mike Rose and Jack MacFarland, where reciprocity and collaboration are the foundation for long-term growth and communication, as well as social and professional support.

Realistically, says Joseph Trimmer in *Narration as Knowledge*, “Persuasion in the sense of conversion is not likely in the few short weeks that we see students, but the *process* of change and reconsideration can surely be achieved, the dialectic entered into” (50). Mentor-teachers see their English classrooms in precisely this way – as places where the process of various conversions can be entered into between the mentor-teacher and any interested students. Who knows what those conversions will look like for our students? Some may see their families in new ways; some may abandon certain unhealthy behaviors or romantic relationships; some may question their views on education and financial success. Our purpose is to offer students a place where self-exploration is both welcomed and encouraged. Additionally, we should be available

as older, wiser resources to whom they can talk as they reconsider their senses of identity and their places in this world.

### **Methods and Methodology**

The methodology of this dissertation will make use of a rhetorical analysis. I will examine textual representations of the teacher/student relationship as well as theories and practices involved in the discursive formation of teacher/student relationships, examining along the way the intersection (or lack thereof) between the ways we as researchers talk about teacher/student relationship formation and the way(s) such relationships form in the “real world” of the English classroom. I will also draw heavily upon the theoretical underpinnings of both psychoanalytical studies and feminism, two concepts that deserve some discussion here as I frame my methodology more specifically.

Psychological approaches can be used in establishing mentor-teaching bonds, and the role of “psychology” should not be overlooked in any endeavor so highly personal as the teacher-student relationship. While it will become clear that I do not advocate teachers becoming their students’ therapists, I do believe that by studying the therapist/client relationship we can glean much practical experience and theoretical frameworks to apply to our mentor-teaching efforts. In “Reading Our Classrooms, Writing Our Selves,” Lad Tobin, a leading scholar on teaching both personal and process-oriented writing, cites sociologists Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner as suggesting that all teachers should be required to undergo psychotherapeutic training before entering the classroom (137). Elsewhere, Tobin encourages writing teachers to learn from the field of psychotherapy, claiming that, “it makes no sense to ignore lessons from the field in which the workings of the unconscious and the subtle dynamics of dyad relationships

have been carefully and systematically analyzed” (“Reading Student” 339). Just as baseball coaches can learn from football coaches because there are many similarities between coaching of all types, mentor-teachers can learn from psychologists who are constantly studying the inner workings of the one-on-one, highly personal, yet also mutual and professional, relationship of a counselor and client.

However, a word of caution is necessary to understand the inevitable power differential of students and teachers. The unequal nature of the teacher-student relationship may possibly encourage unhealthy idealization on both sides. Students might see teachers as “repositor[ies] of knowledge, wisdom, and experience. Similarly, teachers may idealize their students, seeing them as the embodiment of ideal beauty, innocence, and youth” (Berman *Empathic* 19). By applying Berman’s idea of the professor sharing from his own life, both his strengths and weaknesses, and by having students write about topics that engage their real-life conflicts and struggles, both teacher and student idealization can be prevented as both teachers and students come to know the realities of each other’s real lives. After all, we tend to only idealize those people whom we do not know well enough to be aware of their shortcomings and personal battles. This is not to say that sharing openly prevents this conflict from arising altogether. But in many cases it can help, especially if the honesty is consistent over the course of the semester rather than being parceled out sparingly from time to time. The more we become “real people” to our students, and vice versa, the less likely this unhealthy idealization becomes. A balance must be struck. Berman puts it this way: “Disclosing too much about one’s life may reveal egotism or exhibitionism, while disclosing too little may reveal guardedness or aloofness” (*Empathic* 29). Mentor-teachers need to strive for the right balance of self-revelation.

Berman also repeatedly warns would-be empathic teachers about transference and counter-transference. Different from the dangers of idealization, these Freudian terms mean basically that students will project their feelings about other authority figures, primarily parents, onto teachers (transference) and that teachers can transfer their own feelings towards their children or other people they care about onto their students (counter-transference) (20). Thus, empathic teachers need tremendous self-awareness, and they would be well-advised to set aside regular time for self-reflection regarding these issues. Every semester we teach students toward whom we find ourselves feeling overly positive and overly negative emotions. These can be dealt with professionally and healthfully but they must be brought to the forefront of our minds, and we must actively pursue an understanding of why we feel the way we do toward students (Berman *Empathic* 22). The danger of our “rescue fantasies” is the potential “of limiting students’ freedom to choose their own direction in life” – the exact opposite of what the empathic teacher should be aiming for (Berman *Empathic* 21). Clearly, this is also the opposite of what a mentor-teacher should strive for.

In 1979, a study was done on what made therapy successful. The outcome determined that the following criteria need to be met for successful therapy: Both the therapist and client were acting in good faith; the client believed the therapist understood the technique being used; the client liked the therapist and respected her; and the therapist had an ability to form and maintain an understanding relationship. The fascinating part of the study comes in the fact that English professors were chosen as the “control” therapists, and they were every bit as successful with their “patients” as the professional therapists. Why were English professors chosen? Because they use many of the same therapeutic skills in their classrooms that professional therapists use in their offices (Berman *Empathic* 25-26). These techniques, particularly active

listening and giving students space to reflect on their experiences and offer their own solutions to problems that arise, are what mentor-teachers can foreground in their pedagogies. Achieving this aim does not change the teacher's actions as much as it recognizes connections and relies on student-centered attitudes.

Beyond Freud, Berman has also learned much from Carl Rogers, a founder of the humanistic approach to psychology, which advocates a person-centered approach to psychotherapy, and has been used to influence student-centered education theories. As Berman notes,

Carl Rogers elevates empathy to the highest importance in psychotherapy. ...He believes that three conditions must be present for a growth-promoting educational climate. The first he calls realness, or genuineness in the facilitator. ...The second is...trust. ...And the third growth-promoting quality is empathic understanding. (Berman *Empathic* 98)

Rogers's belief was that the "main role of the therapist and teacher was to create the climate that fosters therapeutic and educational growth" (Berman *Empathic* 100). As in a vegetable garden, one cannot force growth from her students. She can only create an environment that offers students the best possible chance to grow. Such a classroom is necessarily student-centered, focused on the needs, emotions, and challenges of the particular group of students in the classroom that particular semester. Some environmental factors can remain consistent from semester to semester, but some need to change and shift with the needs of the individual group and/or individuals within those groups. Groups of adult learners will be different from groups of mostly boys which will be different from groups of mostly girls. Even these categories offer only broad generalizations of categories. Creating an environment where a particular group of

students can learn most effectively requires constant vigilance by mentor-teachers, and should take into account such variables as gender, age, and other life experiences and backgrounds. We must know not only the group dynamics but the individual students within the group, and we must adjust each semester, even every day, to the needs of the human beings we teach.

The key to understanding the relationship between psychology and mentor-teaching is actually to allow the writing and literature to provide the therapeutic element without our attempts to act as therapists from the lectern or in the conference. Berman says, “Only by not playing the role of therapist – that is, by not psychoanalyzing or diagnosing our students – can we unleash the healing power of reading and writing. ... They are the ones who interpret their own lives, and if they write about past breakdowns, they also write about recoveries. I do not rescue them; they rescue themselves” (*Empathic* 365). Mentor-teaching, in short, does *involve* therapeutic elements, but that does not mean it *aims* at therapy. Rather, it understands that therapy will be an inevitable *by-product* of this sort of teaching. We can learn some of the pitfalls and warning signs that therapists have studied and use them to our benefit as mentor-teachers, and we should. But we must always remember that we are not their therapists, and when we find ourselves aiming to play that role, we have stepped over an important boundary line – one we must constantly remain aware of if we hope to succeed as healthy and helpful mentor-teachers.

Another helpful body of research on the teacher-student dynamic comes from feminism. Feminists were among the first to see the need in English departments for a mentoring approach to teaching, and in this dissertation, feminist techniques intersect with mentor-teaching practices. Feminism sees the value of allowing people’s entire beings into the classroom: body, mind, and

spirit. The whole person approach to pedagogy, with an emphasis on feminist contributions, is found in bell hooks, who explains:

Feminist education for critical consciousness is rooted in the assumption that knowledge and critical thought done in the classroom should inform our habits of being and ways of living outside the classroom. Since so many of our early classes were taken almost exclusively by female students, it was easier for us to not be disembodied spirits in the classroom. Concurrently, it was expected that we would bring a quality of care and even “love” to our students. (194)

Mentor-teaching follows the same belief in this concept of an “education for critical consciousness.” Such educators, as previously discussed, see the content of the classroom, any classroom, as knowledge that should inform students’ lives beyond the classroom. Without this connection, students quickly become bored and disconnected, both of which qualities subvert the aims of mentor-teaching. Unlike early feminists, mentor-teachers may never have classrooms full of like-minded students with whom they can openly discuss the ways they hope to shape the world around them. But we can borrow from hooks and the feminists who believe that love is an appropriate objective of good teaching.

Wendy Bishop goes one step closer to establishing the link between feminism and mentor-teaching by actually claiming that feminist teaching involves an element of mentoring:

The questions we need to ask may be simple: whose cry do I hear, toward whom do I move, whose interest do I serve?...Neighborliness is not passive, it is active praxis. Feminist mentoring is not ideologically free; it is self-analytical and self-critical, based on belief, and premised on engaging ourselves to ask the right questions. (“Learning Our Own Ways” 140)

The concept of mentor-teaching also involves an active “neighborliness” that openly shares its ideologies with students. Teachers who agree with my assertions need to do a thorough and ongoing self-analysis in order that we may ask ourselves and our students questions that will lead all of us closer to self-knowledge and to an ability to influence the world around them positively.

As feminism has taken root within English Studies, particularly in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, many scholars have become bolder than in the patriarchal days of the past in using gendered paradigms and feminine symbols and models for new pedagogies. Gail Griffin has written an academic memoir and rhetorical treatise advocating teaching “in the mother tongue,” examining the nuances of teaching English with a feminist perspective. Citing Ursula Le Guin from her Bryn Mawr Commencement Address in 1986, Griffin notes the difference between the father tongue and the mother tongue: The father tongue distances itself from the other, forces “a gap between Man and the World.” It “is spoken from above. . . . No answer is expected, or heard.” The mother tongue, on the other hand, “is language not as mere communication but as relationship. . . . Its power is not in dividing but in binding, not in distancing but in uniting.” Students subconsciously know that they came to college to learn the father tongue. When the teacher speaks in the mother tongue, students are quick to think, ‘not serious, not important’” (168-169). The difference here is between a professor, one who tells, and a teacher, one who converses, leads, guides, and yes, mentors. The fatherly professor teaches in ways that highlight the distance between the student and the professor, being the one who has the information that will be parceled out knowingly when his subjects are ready for it and when he is ready to share it. The mentor teacher knows that she “will have to draw [her] authority from something other than [her] title” (170). Much like many mothers draw their authority with their children from the level of trust they gain through countless hours of dialogue and support,

feminist teachers model their own educational practices after the lessons learned from the support of a mother, not from the all-knowing lectures of a father.

Certainly not all who believe in a feminist model of education are women. David Bleich, a well-known reader response critic, believes our metaphor for teaching needs to shift from a fathering model, where knowledge is imparted in its final and “true” form from teacher to student, to a mothering model, where teachers “orient themselves as teachers around the needs of the students” (230). Citing Madeleine Grumet’s *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching*, Bleich calls for “continuing, carried-over relationships between students and teachers over long periods of time” (232). Like a feminist, a mentor-teacher not only welcomes but even at times pursues these carried over relationships of which Bleich speaks, for relationships are at the heart of feminist teaching, just as they are at the heart of mentor-teaching.

Throughout my discussion, my institutional critique of teacher/student relationships will not only draw from modern-day psychological and/or feminist approaches, but I will continue to draw on the works of ancient rhetorical scholars like Quintilian and Socrates. Additionally, I will include the post-1980 scholarship of Robert Connors, Lad Tobin, bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Parker J. Palmer, Mike Rose, Wendy Bishop, Louise Rosenblatt, Jeffrey Berman, and Peter Elbow. These scholars have all provided helpful models for me as I begin to frame my own beliefs about the value of literary reading and academic writing, the efficacy of conferences, the need for teacher vulnerability as a model for students’ expressive writing and interpretations of literature, the appropriateness of various relational settings beyond the classroom, and the ways grading/responding to student writing can either promote or inhibit a trusting student/teacher bond. While all of these scholars have contributed to my own beliefs and ideas, I will not merely be identifying and classifying pedagogical movements; rather, I will be synthesizing these

movements' theories and practices in order to formulate an overall critique of the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches. Ultimately, I will suggest my own contributions to the existing scholarship that will call for a mixture of bolder approaches and greater caution, depending upon the concept and the student(s) involved.

### **Outline of Chapters and Conclusions**

The over-arching premise of this dissertation is that college students need their professors to step into their lives beyond ordinary academic channels, to act as guides into maturity during students' high school and college years. The starting point for these relationships, ideally, is during the courses we teach, and mentoring can then continue throughout the late teenage years, gradually growing from a teacher/student relationship into a potentially lasting friendship. As an English teacher, I will focus specifically on the context of the late high school and early college English classrooms – both writing and literature. In chapter 2, I will look specifically into the composition aspect of the English course to examine pedagogical strategies that foster this course's ability to act as a starting point for such relationships. Here I will also examine the unique benefits of having students do personal writing as well as students' desires to connect with mentors through their writing. Finally, I will suggest some assignment ideas that foster a mentor-teaching approach in the composition classroom, and I will share some stories about how these relationships formed through writing can develop. In chapter 3, I will take a close look at how the literature classroom can be equally effective as a mentoring site. Specifically, I will address a need to return to the ideas of reader response theorists, the usefulness of teaching literature in a workshop format, the strategies we can use for teaching canonical literature when we have no other choice, and finally the desires of students to connect with literature if only we

will help them to do so. In chapter 4, I will offer a close examination of some of the pitfalls and concerns of which mentor/teachers should be well aware in order to avoid unhealthy emotional and/or legal consequences. This examination will include the various personas that we might adopt as English teachers, strategies for conferencing effectively with students, the benefits of self-revelation on the part of the teacher, and various grading strategies that pave the way to healthy mentoring interactions. Finally, in chapter 5 I will suggest that the best way to advance the aims of mentor-teaching is through teacher-research. I will offer the findings of my own teacher-research project on both mentoring relationships and students' feelings on what makes a class beneficial to their lives. I will conclude with some anecdotes both from my own teaching and from recent news events that reveal the need for more of us to take up the aims of mentor-teaching.

Because my own background includes teaching both high school and college, I am defining the young adults I speak of as those who fall in to the 16-20 age range – late high school and early college in other words. I intend to suggest ways for teachers of both high school and college students to forge and maintain ideal mentoring relationships with their students. Practical assignment ideas will be at the forefront of my conclusions as well as a bold call for teachers to step out of their comfort zones and actually pursue mentoring relationships with willing students. Serving as a personal model for the case I will make will be sample papers from my own teaching experiences that demonstrate the opportunities, not to mention some of the dangers, of mentor-teaching. At times, experiences from my ongoing friendships with various former students will be submitted for scrutiny as I examine the ways these relationships have formed at the successes and failures of my own attempts to be a mentor-teacher.

Ultimately, I am drawn to this dissertation topic for the same reason I have been drawn to teaching as a vocation: relationships. Throughout my ten year teaching career, I have witnessed countless examples of the relational power of teaching English. As a writing teacher, I have had many opportunities to obtain personal glimpses into students' lives as they explore their thoughts through writing, and I have stared at the ceiling in the middle of the night wondering how to move forward with these students. As a teacher of literature I have seen the power of the written word to both lull students to sleep and/or to change their entire outlook on life. I believe we have a profound responsibility to offer students the chance to learn from texts that engage their real life struggles in ways that they find interesting and motivational. And throughout all my teaching experiences, I have seen one fact stand out above all the rest: No matter how brilliant or skilled we are as teachers, our students' lives will mostly be changed through relationships with us, and despite our beliefs otherwise, they long for such relationships and welcome the teachers' invitations into their lives as friends.

At the end of the book *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom sums up perfectly my vision for the meaning of mentor-teaching. He says:

Have you ever really had a teacher? One who saw you as a raw but precious thing, a jewel that, with wisdom, could be polished to a proud shine? If you are lucky enough to find your way to such teachers, you will always find your way back. Sometimes it is only in your head. Sometimes it is right alongside their beds...[Our] class met on Tuesdays. No books were required. The subject was the meaning of life. It was taught from experience. The teaching goes on. (192)

My greatest hope is to see more people catch on to the life-changing, even world-changing, implications of Morrie Schwartz's version of mentor-teaching.

## CHAPTER 2: MENTOR-TEACHERS IN THE COMP CLASSROOM

In the college ranks, the Freshman Composition course has been a source of controversy since its inception, and this indicates a widespread consternation about how to teach writing. The confusion over what writing courses should be doing reached a zenith in the scholarship starting in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. The scholars most involved in those earlier discussions were Robert J. Connors and Susan Crowley, who argued for the total abolition of the Freshmen Writing course in favor of a “Writing Across the Curriculum” approach. Unfortunately, their perspectives have not eliminated the use of this course to teach writing, and many are still unclear of the purpose of this course. No one seems to quite know its clear purpose. Erika Lindemann and Gary Tate have gotten to the heart of why there is so much debate about what professors need to accomplish in the freshman English course: it’s a course that focuses on an activity, they say, rather than a body of knowledge (v). As such, since 1874, when the first example of the modern composition course was instituted at Harvard, scholars have debated what should be the content of the Freshman Composition class. Over the course of the past century, a variety of concepts have been used: current-traditional methods in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century stressed correctness and the usage of the “modes” of writing. Personal writing and/or expressivism became popular in the 1960’s, with scholars like Peter Elbow and Donald Murray at the helm, the core idea being that students will do their best writing and learning when writing about topics that relate them personally. Paulo Freire eventually proposed the idea of liberatory pedagogy as the focus of the writing course, meaning that students are captives of a sort to the “system” under which they have lived and been oppressed; the course can open their eyes to both their oppression and the ability to liberate themselves from it. More recently, building on the concept of students being shaped by external realities of which they are

unaware, scholars like Lester Faigley, James Berlin, and David Bartholomae see the course a place to teach students to identify and escape the social construction of their identities.

This ongoing and unending conversation has been updated by the 2006 *College English* symposium, edited by Indiana University English professor, John Schilb. The symposium examines the frank question, “What should college English be?” and contributors weigh in on questions ranging from why the college English course is worthwhile to whether the course should focus on close reading to ways of incorporating new technologies into the college English classroom. In particular, this symposium reveals the influence of recent scholars like Faigley, Bartholomae, and Berlin, who believe that we should be teaching English courses in ways that help students locate themselves socially and politically, in order that they may find their voices in the societal conversation about humanity’s purpose and direction. Specifically, Shirley Wilson Logan, of the University of Maryland, comments that, “Analyzing a range of arguments on an issue is an important first step toward influencing public policy” (108). She adds, “We must accept the truth that the linguistic and literary perspectives we promote are not value-free and expose the values embedded in our assumptions about what modes of expressions are proper or what texts have literary merit” (109). University of Arizona professor Thomas Miller adds his voice to this argument in an article called “What Should College English Be...Doing?” by saying, “Scholarly discussions come to matter when they enable teachers to articulate their institutional work in ways that have social value – to them, and sometimes to others...[Our discipline needs] new resources to connect with broader social needs” (151, 153). William H. Thelin, of the University of Akron, goes so far as to call for more politically-based assignments and discussions in our English classes, noting that, “The students [need to] acquire a more informed, global view of current events that allows them to contextualize their opinions and

observations” (147). As is quite clear from these comments, social-constructivist pedagogies rule the modern era of English teaching. In the minds of these scholars, our main goal as English teachers is to help students uncover the societal and political “values” that have shaped them into the value-laden, but unique, individuals that they presently are.

While my own biases toward a return to expressivist notions of teaching will become clear soon enough, I think it is worth commenting here on the currently widespread acceptance of the ideas of social-constructivism. As one who wants to get to know my students to teach them about Truth (while it might be more readily acceptable for me to say “truths,” I do actually believe there is such thing as Truth), I admire the social-constructivists’ bent toward enlightening their students. But these ideas can also be a dangerous reversion to nearly Puritanical notions of education when a teacher becomes overly intent on “liberating” students from various forms of oppression from which they do not necessarily want freedom. Social-constructivists and liberatory teachers have every right to help students see the unacknowledged tyranny of our modern political and social systems, but the ideal of mentor-teaching would only be met by these educators if they let the students discover for themselves that they are oppressed, not if they stand at the podium and demand that students open their stitched-shut eyes to the forms of oppression that the teacher finds most exasperating. We must not, in other words, turn our desires to help the students into opportunities to proselytize them under the auspices of doing them a favor. I fear that the predominance of social-constructivism, as evidenced by the 2006 symposium I refer to above, undermines the objectives of mentor-teaching by enabling teachers to put their own views and biases at the forefront of English education.

The *College English* symposium looks broadly at the questions surrounding the entire field of English studies, and the same murkiness of the notions of what we English teachers

ought to be doing can be seen clearly in the English sub-field of the Freshman Composition course as well. Sadly, many teachers and scholars have a negative view of the writing classes. Countless ideas exist as to how to reform the teaching of this sometimes laborious (for teachers and students) class. Take a look at what some have said about the course: Robin Varnum observes that the Freshman Composition course is too often viewed as a service course that teaches students to write so they can succeed in other classes (44); Ken Macrorie laments that the course[s are] usually taught by dumb, bored, and boring teachers (630); Toby Fulwiler ironically notes that teaching [writing courses] is often seen as the “worst chore in the university” and is staffed by grad students and part-timers, despite the fact that he sees it as the best course to teach (“Freshman Writing” 104); Sharon Crowley says that many professors alleviate their own guilt about not spending more personal time with students because they know the freshman writing teachers are forced to do so (165). The complexity of trying to teach this course effectively is that there are as many strategies for teaching writing as there are students who need to learn to write better. Not only that, but unlike courses in American History or Organic Chemistry, writing course content can vary widely and can be shaped to fit each teacher’s own interests, the students’ interests, or a mixture of both, so long as we ultimately improve students’ writing of course. The complexity of the task of teaching writing does not have to be a negative, though. Seen through a mentor-teaching lens, the writing course can become a perfect chance to get to know the individual students in our classrooms.

I am not alone in my positive view of this diamond-in-the-rough course. Victor Vitanza also sees the course with optimistic eyes, saying that writing is a “meta discipline,” informing the other classes students take, not the other way around (qtd. in Varnum 46). John Schilb believes that this course can and should become a key force in the diagnosis of the contemporary world

because of the insights it offers into students' ways of thinking and living (188). Wendy Bishop offers the profound "homeroom" metaphor for first-year college writing courses because it gives teachers a chance to connect uniquely with the freshmen who are thrown into the flux of the university and forced to brazen it out on their own ("Writing Is/And Therapy" 150). As mentor-teachers, teachers of writing should continually examine ways we can become personally helpful to our students as they undergo what Robert Connors calls one of the greatest periods of self-definition they will ever face ("Teaching and Learning" 146).

Writing courses offer a unique opportunity for teachers to enter into helpful relationships with students both because most freshmen are required to take them and because of writing's interpersonal nature. Lad Tobin sees clearly the mentor-teaching opportunity offered by such courses, suggesting "that establishing, monitoring, and maintaining productive relationships in the classroom would [not just] be *another* nice thing for us to accomplish if we could just find the time; [rather,] it is the *primary* thing we must do if we want to be successful writing teachers" (*Writing Relationships* 15, emphasis in original). "Commitment to engaged pedagogy," says bell hooks, "carries with it the willingness to be responsible, not to pretend that professors do not have the power to change the direction of our students' lives" (206). If one accepts my premises about the need for teacher-student mentoring, she will embrace the complexities and difficulties of these required courses and look at them as a chance to get to know students and, more importantly, to offer them chances to get to know themselves.

Gail Griffin acknowledges what many of us fear, that we are "inescapably Mom and Dad" (168). Because writing offers a safe interpersonal distance, and because human beings seem to need absolution from their burdens, we are bound to find ourselves knowing some of our writing students as a therapist or a parent might. Even without such revelations students often

use writing to invite teachers into their lives at some level; we should take them up on these offers and be willing open doors for them to explore their revelations further, either in classroom discussions and in our responses to their papers.

Paulo Freire sees this brand of teaching as “dialogical” in nature. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he asserts, “The dialogical character of education as the practice of freedom [begins when] the [teacher] asks herself or himself *what* she or he will dialogue with [the students] *about*” (93, emphasis in original). Though the content of our courses offers innumerable topic possibilities, teachers have not been trained to combine discussions about good writing with discussions about matters of the heart and soul – issues that encourage students to improve not only their sentence structure but also the foundation of their innermost person. Thankfully, not many teachers go so far as the former colleague of mine who expressly disallows controversial topics because he doesn’t want his own biases to get in the way of his grading and he does not want to become the students’ therapist. In this case, students are left writing persuasive papers about banal topics that mean little to them personally, or they write compare and contrast papers evaluating relatively insignificant matters such as their dorm room versus a friend’s. These topics have little connection to the people students are trying to become at this impressionable age. We need to be more forthright in our discussion of the potentialities of the writing classroom to help students “get real” with themselves and with us.

Along with Parker Palmer, author of *The Courage to Teach*, I feel that “what we teach will never “take” unless it connects with the inward, living core of our students’ lives” (31). Palmer goes on to mention the marvelous motto of an unnamed college. It says that education is, “The pursuit of truth in the company of friends” (90). This motto offers us both topical guidance (“the pursuit of truth”) and relational guidance (“in the company of friends”) for the context and

content of composition classes. Before advancing with this motto, I want to clarify my personal definition of truth, just for the record since it is such a vague and potentially touchy term. For me, truth is wisdom, knowledge, and insight about personally relevant and meaningful topics. In other words, Palmer's motto might be rephrased as follows: "College should offer students the chance to pursue wisdom, knowledge, and insight about personally relevant and meaningful topics while surrounded by trustworthy friends." Any composition course with teenage writers offers an ideal starting point for such pursuing the agenda of such a motto. Students want to ask the deep questions and to ponder their own values. All we need to do is open the door to bring those concerns into the writing classroom.

Most of our students are not as apathetic as we often accuse them of being. Palmer asks a probing question: "Is it possible that your students are not brain-dead? Is it possible that their classroom coma is induced by classroom conditions and that once they cross the threshold into another world, they return to life?" (42). Students have plenty they want to talk about. Their apathy in our classes might be our fault, not theirs, for failing to talk to them about the issues that are truly weighing on their confused hearts and minds. Jane Tompkins puts it this way:

Students [...*want*] to know themselves in the Socratic sense. But instead of giving them the means, or the incentive, our present system sidelines this hugely important phase of human development and relegates it to the dormitory.

Whoever wants to know herself is strictly on her own. (221, emphasis mine)

What we must do, then, is take students' natural questions and build our discussions around those topics. We must look into students' lives as Socrates did with Protagoras, as Mike Rose's four mentors did, as Morrie Schwartz did with Mitch Albom, all in an effort help them discern their own motives so they can see their decisions more clearly. Unfortunately, we have not been

equipped, enabled, or encouraged to act as guides to students. We must choose this responsibility for ourselves because our institutions will rarely insist we play such a role; on the contrary, some institutional policies even seem to discourage a guiding role from teacher to student. But if we do take on this responsibility of mentoring, it may be possible to spare students' some of the pain of difficult family relationships, heart-wrenching breakups, misguided sexual activity, drinking binges, or other regretful decisions. It may also be possible to guide students toward greater racial sensitivity, clearer theological viewpoints, or more grounded philosophical opinions. Is it possible that some of the current teenage culture of drug and alcohol abuse is our fault for not offering students healthy ways to examine their burning questions? Writing teachers should be probing students' great questions in the context of students' individual situations, but also helping them see how their personal issues and problems connect them to larger societies and to problems that cross history and cultures outside their own..

An important caveat belongs here: There is an enormous difference between letting students' concerns about truth lead the way and forcing our own agenda. Examining theologian Martin Buber's teaching philosophy, Aslaug Kristiansen says, "Buber [distinguishes] between propaganda and education. While the propagandist imposes himself, his opinion, and attitude on the other, the educator is a helper who believes that in every person what is right is established in a single and uniquely personal way" (222). Composition teachers should let the students' concerns lead the way, ensuring only that truth is evaluated in some relevant way – the truth about parties, dating, finding independence, getting the most out of the exciting teen years, and so on. Such discussions will offer a starting point for mentoring relationships. Yet for students to discuss truth(s) without the possibility of guidance from the professor means that the students'

“company of friends” will be limited to peers – a dangerous source when it is one’s only option. While not all students will choose to examine deeply meaningful topics nor will all of them want the teacher’s input, many will choose to “go deep” and will also be interested in the teacher’s thoughts both inside and outside of class.

With my core teaching philosophy of nudging students toward personally meaningful paper topics in place, I conclude this section with a thought from Mary Rose O’Reilly’s *The Peaceable Classroom*: “Good teaching *is*, in the classical sense, therapy: good teaching involves reweaving the spirit. (Bad teaching, by contrast, is soul murder.)” (qtd. in Bishop “Thoughts on Reweaving” 315). Since we as writing teachers have the autonomy to decide the content for discussion and writing, I suggest that we use our classes to help students “reweave their spirits.” The alternative, suggests O’Reilly, leaves students bored and uninterested, and it may well kill something in their souls. What follows will be a discussion of some of the practical and theoretical considerations composition teachers need to take into account as they seek to become mentor-teachers.

#### **Four Key Benefits of Student-Centered Writing Pedagogy**

Moving our writing pedagogy away from “safe” topics and toward what I call “mentoring” topics comes with at least four major benefits: practicality, self-knowledge, liberation, and healing. While these terms’ definitions will vary from teacher to teacher in what sorts of assignments they lead to, if a teacher keeps these four roles in mind, he will be a deeply effective and relevant writing teacher.

The first role of student-centered writing pedagogy is quite practical: it keeps the students engaged. Marti Singer has noted, “When I ask students what they would like to write about, they

invariably respond with subjects like abortion; physical abuse; drugs; relationships with parents, siblings, lovers, and people they work with” (74). Thomas Newkirk has added to this professional conversation by saying that as a writing program administrator, he has read thousands of anonymous evaluations, and he cannot remember one in which a student claimed that her privacy was violated by a teacher who demanded personal writing. On the contrary, Newkirk has read countless letters of thanks from students who have been given the opportunity to connect their classroom learning to their personal lives (*the performance* 19). While students need to be mentored and guided toward topics that will teach them to converse with others about issues that extend beyond their (often) small circles of experience, their unique interests should not be ignored. When we take the time to get to know our students, we might find that their interests provide great paper topics *and* opportunities to guide and mentor them.

A fictional example of the need to let students write about what genuinely interests them, but also the need to provide them with instruction in articulating their position, comes from the novel *Prep*, by Curtis Sittenfeld. Lee, a junior at an elite boarding school, is given the assignment to write an argument, choosing a topic they feel strongly about. Lee writes a disclaimer at the bottom of her paper on prayer in public schools that she could not think of anything she really cared about so she chose this by default. She thinks, of course, that this is the sort of topic that English teachers want students to write about. She chooses to be passive, instead of gaining agency to express her views or take a stance, largely because she feels like an outsider and does not trust her classmates, or the teacher, with her authentic self or her version of truth. Even so, she ultimately does seek the approval of the teacher, and desires to be conventional and do what she is supposed to do, so readers can understand that her disclaimer is a message trying to communicate to her teacher that she did indeed try to fulfill the assignment

requirements. Not only does her teacher, Ms. Moray misinterpret Lee's efforts, she misreads Lee as a person by jumping to the conclusions that Lee is willfully challenging her authority and mocking the assignment, but also that Lee is just like her peers but has refused their offers of friendship. As Ms. Moray confronts Lee after class about her detachment from the topic, Lee muses about all the things she does feel passionately about but can't write about in this English class – people's "posture or their inflection...the smell of the wind, the overhead lights in the math wing" (161-162).

We learn two things from this example. Students do not always have the confidence, or trust, to write what matters to them most. They need both an environment that inspires seriousness and trust, and they need explicit instruction in invention, or ways to consider and develop topics to write about. The instruction can come from reading model essays by other writers, through workshops, or in conversations with the teacher about their ideas throughout the writing process, none of which Lee receives from Ms. Moray. Second, teachers need to inquire into student's processes and experiences before reacting negatively to student writing. If Ms. Moray had asked Lee more about the circumstances surrounding her attempts to do the assignment, or offered her an opportunity to rewrite the essay after talking about ways to explore actual topics Lee might individually be interested in, Lee could have developed more trust in her teacher and been willing to take some risks as a writer. Instead, we see Lee reaching the conclusion that the teacher will never understand her real self, and that keeping that indifferent or detached attitude is the only safe way to survive the class.

The second reason for student-centered pedagogy is that students follow the Delphic Oracle's injunction to "know thyself." Donald Murray, in "All Writing is Autobiography," claims that every writing assignment is an opportunity for students to discover more about

themselves (qtd. in Bishop “Writing Is/And Therapy” 146). Psychologist D.W. Winnicott has put the same idea into psychological terms. Winnicott coined the terms “transitional space,” a place of spontaneous and creative play where people discover new aspects of themselves, and “transitional object,” a possession that helps us transition from overly self-absorbed to socially integrated (qtd. in Berman *Diaries* 230). Scholars like Jeffrey Berman have applied Winnicott’s concepts to the writing classroom by contending that the classroom can serve as a transitional space and the writing itself as a transitional object that guide students toward self-understanding, self-acceptance, and self-awareness (*Diaries* 233). Lad Tobin echoes similar concerns, calling the writing classroom a place where students can be helped to “negotiate the borderlands” between past and present, home and school, old ways of seeing themselves and new ways (“Car Wrecks” 168). The truth is quite plain: students want to talk about themselves, and by using student-centered pedagogical tools in the writing classroom, we become a part of their journey toward self-knowledge rather than one more person telling them to find themselves but giving them no idea of how to do that.

A recent demonstration of the misunderstandings between what students want from a writing classroom and what teachers want comes from Doug Hunt’s ethnographic study of a Freshman Composition class at The University of Missouri-Columbia entitled *Misunderstanding the Assignment: Teenage Students, College Writing, and the Pains of Growth*. A young man named Rob has been assigned a paper comparing and contrasting television versions of American families. The specific assignment is to “explore how this myth of the family is both perpetuated and challenged in two thematically connected television shows” (21). The shows Rob has been assigned are *Thea* and *One Day at a Time*. His first effort at the paper receives a 58% for his failure to logically organize his thoughts around a coherent, provable thesis. In the

conference with his teacher, Rachel, that follows, the two have a tense conversation about why Rob's paper is so poorly written, but while Rachel wants Rob to be more logical in his approach to demonstrating why the "morals" of *Thea* are better than the morals of *One Day at a Time*, Rob comes from a conservative Christian viewpoint that causes him to formulate views that are rather dualistic in nature. Both parties walk away from the conversation discouraged and feeling like they have not been heard. Rachel thinks that Rob must've had a "terrible education" or maybe even has a learning disability, but "she never considers the possibility that the two of them speak from opposite sides of a cultural divide as well as a developmental one" (104). Throughout *Misunderstanding the Assignment*, Rob is portrayed as a passionate young man who is deeply eager to both understand himself better and to express his cherished faith openly. His teacher, ironically, misunderstood *her* assignment to help her students know themselves better. She seems intent on having Rob know how to write more logically rather than allowing that to be a natural outcome of teaching Rob to express his self-knowledge more clearly. If we as mentor-teachers will seek to improve students' self-knowledge by both crafting thoughtful assignments (which Rachel did) and by allowing the students' attempts at self-understanding guide our teacher-student dialogues (which Rachel did not do), we will not only get better papers, but we will form better relationships with our students.

The next way that student-centered writing pedagogy can be useful is as a tool for students' liberation. bell hooks says that part of liberatory pedagogy involves conflict. We cannot always expect our students to immediately appreciate being challenged in their former assumptions about life, says hooks. She goes on to say that it takes time for students to understand that being confronted with new ideas is indeed part of being liberated from former biases and ignorance (42). Paulo Freire asks us to move away from our "banking" conception of

teaching, wherein we tell the students what knowledge they need to know for the test and they dutifully learn it, to a problem-posing, liberatory pedagogy, wherein we challenge students with new ways of seeing the world and the people around themselves. Students are confronted with new ideas of themselves, of sexuality, of religion, of success, and all in order to encourage them to truly think for themselves, to take ownership for their own lives and for the people in need around them. Student-centered pedagogy, in other words, does not always mean touchy-feely, I'm-okay-you're okay styles. Much like a doctor who inoculates a small child against a harmful disease by inflicting the pain of a shot upon the child, a liberatory teacher inflicts potentially painful ideas on the students' minds in the hope of saving the student from her own naivety, blindness, or willful ignorance.

Many educators struggle with the notion that we should help to liberate students from their personal struggles, believing that seeking "liberation" falls more in the realm of the therapist's duty than the teacher's. In *Persons in Process*, Anne Herrington and Marcia Curtis use ethnographic research on four students to help readers understand the healing potential of writing. Following these four students over the course of their tenure in college, Herrington and Curtis probe to determine whether the academic writing these students did helped them in their intrapersonal growth. The authors come to believe that students can use personal writing

to fashion and revise their self- and subject understandings. Having the occasion to do so during the transitional time of their first years in college seems particularly important as students attempt to locate themselves and what they know from their past in relation to new knowledge and new ways of thinking. [Often the only places students can do such self-exploration is] on the academy's margins – in general education or residence hall programs. (377-378)

Sadly, in Herrington's and Curtis's findings, opportunities for personal exploration appear to be entirely absent or at least not invited outside of the English department. If students are going to find liberation from their burdens, it might well be that we, their English teachers, are their only option.

Herrington and Curtis offer the example of a young woman, Rachel, who struggles with this idea despite having felt liberated herself by her own class-assigned writing. Rachel was a middle-class, local, Catholic girl from a local (Amherst, MA) suburb. As an adult child of an alcoholic, Rachel became interested in studying the way such an upbringing as hers impacted one's ability for emotional intimacy as an adult. She even ended up writing a senior honors paper in psychology on that topic (216-218). But despite her own "liberation" through writing, she remained uncomfortable with the revelations of other students when she worked as a TA for an Abnormal Psychology class. Rachel found herself deeply disturbed by the personal nature of many students' revelations, especially on papers that were intended to be research-oriented in nature. But she also understood that "it's almost counter-educational [to say] 'Don't write about this'" and thus came to see the value of students "stating their personal experience and connecting it with a classroom issue" (264-265). In other words, despite her discomfort with reading students' personal stories of needed liberation, she came to see the value in such a strong way that she overcame her own discomfort in favor of allowing students to write in this way. The conclusion of Rachel's personal and academic journey seems to be that we need not demand confessional or liberatory writing, but we should not prohibit it either. When students reveal too much, it opens the door for a mentoring conversation about boundaries, appropriateness, and the context of personal revelations. When they reveal little or nothing, we can and should allow them to save their liberation-quest for a time when they are more prepared to do the hard

emotional work. One way or the other, writing can bring personal liberation, and we as writing teachers have no choice but to decide how we will deal with students' personal needs for healthy sites to pursue liberation.

Finally, student-centered writing pedagogy can bring healing to students psychologically. Charles Anderson and Marian MacCurdy, co-editors of *Writing and Healing*, believe that the process of healing involves moving from a singular self to a socially integrated self and that the writing classroom can serve as the community in which this healing takes place (7). Marti Singer notes the consistencies in “therapeutic approaches to listening and some basic starting points for responding to the private stories our students share with us,” such as respecting students' possible anxieties in sharing their stories; accepting our own power to influence our students; knowing the avenues for recommending more formalized counseling to our students; and knowing the possible legal ramifications within our universities and states that may be helpful and/or problematic (74-75). Michelle Payne has written about essays in which students reveal sexual abuse and how those essays can and do serve to both free the students and to critique the patriarchal, authoritarian ideas that enable such abuse (153). Judith Harris notes that people who are in the process of healing from emotional scars need a safe community to join as they heal, and the writing classroom can serve as that community. In order to foster this communal ideal, she cites Jeffrey Berman's practice of reading students' journals aloud anonymously as a way of letting students know they are not alone. By hearing these revealing journals read aloud without the feared response of laughter or criticism, students become more free to examine their own pain and thus begin healing from it (182).

James Pennebaker, professor at the University of Texas, has spent more than a decade researching the healing power of writing. His conclusions are clear: people experience

psychological, emotional, and even physical benefits from writing about pain, but only when they combine writing about both events *and* emotions. Neither those who merely describe the events nor those who merely vent receive the healing and growth of those who write about both aspects of their pain (qtd. in DeSalvo 20-21). This should encourage us as writing teachers that allowing students to write about their emotional scars does not mean allowing bad writing. On the contrary, many scholars contend that students do their best writing when the topic is deeply personal because they want to get it right. Thomas Newkirk believes that the healing element of personal writing comes from having it treated as normal (*the performance* 19-20). All of these authors warn us that refusing to read deeply personal essays is to read them in a very specific and harmful way. Whether or not we encourage them, these scholars say, we have an obligation to read them carefully and kindly when they appear. None of this desire to see students healed means we must offer them good grades simply because the writing is so personal. Jeffrey Berman has found that students do their best technical writing when writing about personal topics, and he finds great solace in the fact that, no matter how personally charged the essay may be, he as a writing teacher has an obligation to demand the best possible writing form and technique (*Empathic* 148). Ultimately, that's where the grade comes from, not from the depth of self-revelation or the amount of healing that takes place. Still, offering our students the chance to grow and heal on a personal level will only serve to deepen their interest in the class and in succeeding as writers.

All of the above reasons for allowing and even encouraging students to do personal writing should demonstrate that student-centered writing pedagogy is rigorous and richly varied in techniques, and shares the high standards of other pedagogies, while also allowing for relationships between teacher and student, student and other students, and student and texts. To

return to Herrington and Curtis's study, these researchers found that teachers function as selfobjects, a term coined by psychologist Heinz Kohut, in students' lives. Selfobjects are people, things, and events that help us create our definitions of ourselves and our roles in the world around us. Parents function as students' primary selfobject, but Herrington and Curtis have concluded that teachers follow as a close second (26-27). And that, to me, is why student-centered pedagogy is vital for secondary and post-secondary education. If we truly care about our students' souls, as bell hooks says we should, we will challenge our students and give them opportunities to examine themselves, even if it is painful for them in the short term.

### **Students' Voices: Calling for Mentors**

If we would listen, our students would tell us what they think and feel about writing and its value or lack thereof. At the University of Toronto, researcher Guy Allen has studied students' views on themselves as writers as they enter the university. Allen has found that over 95% of students have negative views of themselves as writers; more than 70% believe the primary reason for taking a writing course is to reduce mechanical and grammatical errors; and more than 65% believe they must keep themselves out of their writing. Yet strangely, these same students, almost unanimously, believe that writing is important and useful (259). Our students have strong opinions about what is and what is not useful to them from their classroom learning. They see writing as useful, but not in a personal sense, only a professional one. But writing education could be so much more than that. Richard Rodriguez, author of *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, remembers an epiphany he had in a writing class: "I sat there and sensed for the very first time some possibility of fellowship between a reader and a writer, a communication, never *intimate* like that I heard spoken words at home

convey, but nonetheless personal” (60, emphasis in original). But he goes on to comment on why this epiphany was so startling to him who had come to suspect that epiphanies were things that happened outside the confines of classrooms. He says,

The [school] campus has become a place for ‘making it’ rather than a place for those who, relatively speaking, ‘have it made’...In such [a place], before students who [are] so anxious and uncertain of their social advancement, the enlarging lessons of the humanities seemed an irrelevance. (157, 165)

Rodriguez is commenting on life in higher education as a minority, but his comments ring true for all of our students, I believe. Schooling is seen as being simply part of the rat race; if one wants to have a decent job and make a decent living, she must attend school. The aim certainly does not seem to be personal growth or development, as Rodriguez laments. On the contrary, the aim is often simply to “make it” through and to get the piece of paper at the end. That should not be the primary aim of education, though, as those of us who hope to see lives changed through the schooling process can attest.

As another, more personal illustration of the possible interpersonal connections that can be formed in the writing class, I add the following correspondence from a former student to Rodriguez’s concerns. My student wrote me the following email during a recent semester of Freshman Composition:

Mr. Blue, in my opinion, you act as more than just an English professor; you go far above and beyond that title. Your assignments and classes make your students really evaluate who they are as a person, not just a mindless writer. You urge us to share our ideas and opinions and make us feel that you’re really listening and that our input is truly appreciated. You’re not the least bit condescending; you don’t

hold your position of authority over us as most teachers do, and I think that sort of approach to teaching is the one that works. When you engage your students, you can capture their attention and get them interested. Once you've gotten them interested, they'll listen and actually want to get more involved... Maybe I'm the only student that you've affected, but in my opinion, it's quite an accomplishment to affect any student as you have me, especially in such a short span of time. For some reason, however, I doubt I'm the only one. You possess a true gift when it comes to teaching. I can't tell you how glad I am that you opted for what's in your heart instead of your pocket. You've gotten me to write with more than just words; you've gotten me to write with emotion, and I thank you deeply for that.

Sincerely, Joshua MacMurtry

First of all, let me say that I will die a happy man if I get only two or three letters like this in my teaching career, for they are rare. And I do not share this to promote myself as the be-all-end-all example of effective teaching. But I do strive to apply the principles I espouse in these pages, and I long to connect with all my students as I connected with Joshua. And to have connected with even one student in this way encourages me that mentor-teaching is the right track. I wish desperately that all teachers would measure their success by letters like this rather than by getting through all the material or achieving a certain success rate on the end-of-the-year standardized exam. As Rodriguez puts it, we need to make it our primary goal to make the "enlarging lessons of the humanities" relevant to students on a deeply personal level. That is true pedagogical success.

Our students will talk to us if we will let them know we'd like to listen. They will tell us which assignments they like and dislike and which ones resonate with their inner beings. Letters

like Joshua's are affirming, of course, but we also need to hear from those who are not as happy with the course content. To that end, I've been asking my students for middle-of-the-semester, anonymous course evaluations where they can tell me what they like and dislike about the course or about me personally. I demand that even the positive ones are anonymous because otherwise I might be able to deduce from whom the negative ones are coming. When I collect these, I usually find two or three constructively critical observations that make me think about something I'm doing or an assignment we're working on. While a teacher certainly cannot keep everyone happy, a vital aspect of mentor-teaching is hearing from our students. One way or another we need to design ways to get their honest feedback. Isn't that where student-centered teaching begins?

### **The Mentor-Teaching Influences of Lad Tobin and Wendy Bishop**

I would like now to delve deeper into two particular composition scholars who have influenced the concept of mentor-teaching greatly: Lad Tobin and Wendy Bishop. Specifically, they have helped formulate my beliefs on the unique and specific mentor-teaching opportunities within the composition classroom. Because their work is so foundational to my own thinking in regards to the composition class, they warrant deeper examination before I move further with my own ideas.

For a mentor-teacher, evaluating students can be tricky ground. On the one hand, you do not want to discourage students in their writing, especially if it is of a personal nature. But on the other hand, you still want to demand high-quality writing from your students. Both Tobin and Bishop have influenced my thinking about practical and theoretical ways to circumnavigate this mentor-teaching dilemma. The Freshman Composition class, says Tobin, has sadly become

a place where teachers bring their own political agendas which they somehow expect students to be able to regurgitate in impeccable prose despite all the natural issues of transition to college life they are facing. Tobin asks of teachers, How is it possible that we expect

adolescents, many away from home for the very first time, to move seamlessly from past to present, from parents and siblings and boyfriends and girlfriends and old familiar teachers to unfamiliarity and loneliness and homesickness[?] Even if I believed that they really did need to know right away about Foucault or syllogisms or socially constructed selves, I'd worry that until they cleared out at least a few of their earlier memories, fears, and fantasies, there just wouldn't be enough room left in their brains. ("Death, Disease, and Dysfunction" 34-35)

Wendy Bishop suggests that we look at this particular course as a "homeroom" ("Writing Is/And Therapy" 150) for college freshmen. Just like a homeroom class in middle school provides students with a "point person" for all their questions about which locker is theirs and how to get to the gym, the Freshman Writing teacher might well serve as a guide to many of the small (where is Jones Hall?) and large (how do I counter my loneliness now that I'm on my own?) matters that arise for new college students. As mentor-teachers, we should to be patient and wait for the right opportunities to have these "larger" conversations with our students, but by making ourselves available as homeroom teachers of sorts for the small matters, the more meaningful opportunities will not only come to us but our students will be much more likely to listen. Both Tobin and Bishop agree, though, that this particular course offers a unique chance to help students navigate the often painful course of transition from home to college.

The mentoring approach to teaching writing extends into practical matters like grading, too. In his introduction to *Reading Student Writing: Confessions, Meditations and Rants*, Lad

Tobin says that he finds it “almost physically painful” to read students’ papers for correctness, making notes in the margins, and writing a short paragraph at the end to justify the grade he gives it. Instead, he says, he has started reading for potential, rather than assessment, an idea initiated by the expressivist movement (9, 11). Seeing students’ writing in this way takes away the pressure for me to figure out how to tell the student how to fix all the technical mistakes. Tobin suggests instead that we read with optimism – looking for what’s good/great and letting our feedback consist of helping students accentuate the positive aspects of their writing. Wendy Bishop says we can serve more as writing tutors or mentors to students if we and another teacher agree to trade papers for grading (“Designing” 31).

While Tobin’s concept of grading asks for teachers to shift their mindset about reading students’ papers, Bishop’s idea offers a practical way to radically shift our perspective as we read our students’ papers. Too often, the “grading dance” between students and teachers is all about students trying to figure out each teacher’s pet peeves and idiosyncrasies so they can make the grade they want and move on to the next teacher without upsetting mom and dad. Yet this is so far from what a mentor-teacher wants. As such, Tobin’s idea of reading for potential rather than reading carefully enough to be able to justify our grade puts us on the students’ team rather than on the opposing team. We want them to take our advice because we know it would genuinely help them as writers, but instead they take our advice as if it were the law because they do not want a bad grade. And while Tobin’s idea offers a theoretical framework for thinking about our responses to papers, Bishop’s ideas offer practical ways to implement a mentor-teaching approach to grading. Trading papers with other teachers, once again, puts us on the students’ team, trying to serve as their coach as we strive toward the common goal of impressing the outside teacher. While one cannot accomplish mentor-teaching solely through his grading

methods, one can pursue ways of grading and responding to student writing that builds bridges rather than tearing them down as is too often the case in the us-vs.-them grading that many do. Grading my students' papers in this way puts me on their team, right where a mentor-teacher needs to be.

Turning now to a slightly different aspect of grading personal essays – the complications that come with determining grades on personal essays – Tobin's belief is that just because it might be difficult to fairly grade personal essays does not mean we should disregard them. He says, "If we are worried that our students might misunderstand the criteria for our grades of their personal writing, then we need to work harder to make those criteria clear" ("Misplaced Anxieties" 108). Again, just because this entails difficulty does not make it impossible to achieve. I tell my students all the time on personal narratives that they will not be graded or morally judged on their choice of content. Rather, they will be graded on how well they meet the measurable requirements we set together for the assignment – how well they satisfy the specific learning outcomes of the writing at hand, how well they incorporate ethos, pathos, and logos, and of course how well they follow the standard conventions of written language. The personal-ness of the assignment makes them interested in the writing and keeps them engaged, but this engagement does not guarantee good writing or a good grade. As Tobin puts it,

We...need to stop assuming that when students write about deeply personal issues they will necessarily be incapable of focusing on craft; many students are *most* willing and eager to search for just the right voice, syntax, and language when they are writing about a subject or from a subject position that really matters to them. ("Misplaced Anxieties" 111, emphasis in original)

Far too often, we look at teaching writing as an either/or proposition, in other words. We either help students become better technical writers or we help them delve into personal issues. But can't we do both? Tobin suggests that we can and should.

Another way Tobin and Bishop have shaped my responses to students' papers is by their openness about the therapeutic nature of what composition teachers do. In "Car Wrecks, Baseball Caps, and Man-to-Man Defense," Tobin says that we should not see students' overly simplistic conclusions as proof that they really are as shallow as we sometimes fear. Rather, we must probe for what's beneath the surface, for what is there on the paper but hasn't been fully brought to light by the student (163). Tobin says,

What...students give us in first draft personal narratives is just the manifest content, the starting point, the conventional story. Our job is to help them go further, by helping them to hear what they have not quite said, what is lurking in the background. And if we do not understand that culture or if we find it inherently dull or reprehensible, we will not be of much help in that process. (171)

Even still, we must be cautious not to take the student deeper than she is ready to delve. Tobin warns that, "Many students are not yet ready to deal with the ambiguity or unresolved tension that they themselves have identified, and these pat resolutions may provide them with a means of dealing (or not dealing) with problems that are simply too painful" (165). As mentor-teachers we must seek to sensitively balance our desire to see the students move beyond "pat" conclusions with our desire to see students grow into maturity by processing their pain on paper.

In another essay, "Replacing the Carrot with the Couch: Reading Psychotherapeutically," Tobin asks what we should do about the student who writes a deeply revealing paper about her father's alcoholism, but concludes the paper with a line like, "Now that Dad is sober, I realize

none of that [stuff dad failed to do because he was too busy drinking] matters anymore” (44). A student of mine recently wrote just such an essay about her parents’ fighting and ultimate divorce due to her father’s hidden (from her) drinking. She wrote of how he had attended extensive rehab the summer before and that thankfully he has not come home and relapsed like many alcoholics do. The cynic in me thought, “But it’s only been a few months; he has a long way to go.” But Tobin wisely observes that these gaps in student essays show that a student is not ready to confront some part of his or her problem or pain, and we must not reveal the obvious gap to them just because we can see it plainly. That would be like guiding a student through her mechanical mistakes and inconsistencies of voice and then tossing the paper aside and saying, “Now let’s get to work on that eating disorder” (46). I laugh out loud every time I reread this comment because of its absurdity, but critics of expressive writing seem to think that this is how we expressivists handle students’ papers. Speaking for myself, if anything, I do too little in the way of responding to the personal aspects of students’ papers. Despite my theoretical beliefs about our need to engage with students, I fear overstepping my bounds so greatly that I sometimes think I am writing in order to pep myself up to become more bold. When a student reveals something private, we might well be remiss by failing to acknowledge their trust. This does not mean assuming a role as an active counselor, but it does mean at least saying, “Thanks for your openness; please feel free to keep sharing about that struggle or that pain.” Or even something like, “I can understand your anxiety because I myself suffer from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.” Or, “My wife battled an eating disorder in high school, so let me know if you find yourself in need of someone to talk to about it. She’s very willing.” Going that far, but no farther, seems not only appropriate but responsible to me. As Tobin says, “I am tired of being defensive about something we ought to be proud of – the way our field, like psychotherapy, can

help people make sense and gain control of their personal as well as their public lives” (55). What Tobin has pointed out to me is the need to constantly balance our responses to student papers between pushing them toward maturity and pushing them over the edge.

Wendy Bishop acknowledges the overlap between teaching writing and being a therapist as well. Once, when Bishop found herself contemplating how to proceed with the knowledge that a student was feeling suicidal, a counseling-center doctor said to her, “You’d rather be sued for having intervened than for having not intervened, wouldn’t you?” (“Writing Is/And Therapy” 155). This doctor’s comment might be called the “Good Samaritan’s Quandary.” In the New Testament, the Good Samaritan is the only person who stops to help a dying Jewish man who was abandoned by the side of the road. As a side note, Jews and Samaritans hated each other fiercely. Others had passed the man, afraid to help, afraid to get involved because of the time it might take and because of the danger that the man was actually only pretending to be hurting so as to rob a would-be helper blind, perhaps even physically injuring him. So, the Samaritan risks himself at a number of levels: socially (what if a fellow Samaritan saw him?), physically (what if the man is a thief who is feigning injury?), and in terms of time lost. But didn’t those who passed by without helping lose much more than the Samaritan. They lost the chance to help another human being in genuine need. As Bishop learned through her dilemma, though the risk(s) of “getting involved” can be very real and threatening, the risks of staying uninvolved are far weightier given what such choices can do to one’s heart for his students over the course of a career. I, for one, would like to become more “risky” in the pursuit of helping struggling students find healthy outlets for their burdens.

Clearly, neither Bishop nor Tobin is advocating that mentor-teaching means actively seeking to “heal” students with our therapeutic powers. Rather, they suggest that there is a

natural overlap between teaching writing and doing therapy. Writing itself draws people because it is by its very nature therapeutic. Whether or not we ask our students for personal writing, we will be forced into situations where our role overlaps with that of a therapist. At the very least, then, we need to be ready for those occasions by thinking ahead about how we will handle them. And if we actively promote personal writing, we will find ourselves acting therapeutically regularly. While it is important that we not begin to see ourselves as therapists, both Tobin and Bishop offer helpful suggestions as to how we can navigate these tricky waters.

The final aspect of my teaching that has been shaped by the scholarship of these two is the idea of how to create the mentor-teaching persona I desire. How do I let my students know of my availability without crossing the boundary lines of appropriateness, in other words? When it comes to teacher/student relationships and the persona of writing teachers, both scholars have much advice. To begin with, Tobin cites Donald Murray, who believes that the heart of writing is one person communicating with another (“Reading Our Classrooms” 136). This simple definition profoundly reflects Tobin’s philosophies, and it accentuates the element of Tobin’s scholarship that so greatly appeals to me. He and I have both been drawn to teaching because of our compassion and desire for humanistic education. The fact that we have found composition rather than, say, economics, is no accident. We want our students to communicate with a human being, to be recognized and heard and understood. We want our students to grow and mature, reaching for their best selves. But this does not make the difficulties of crafting the right relationship with students go away. Tobin goes on to question a disturbing truth: Teachers who are hated by students are less suspicious to colleagues than teachers who are loved. Why not, asks Tobin, offer promotion to teachers based on how well or how many of their students claim to love that teacher? What happens instead is that we quietly wonder what that teacher does that

makes her so adored. Does she tell drinking stories in class? Show Saturday Night Live clips? Talk about football? (“Reading Our Classrooms” 137). Tobin cites a conversation he had with a social constructivist colleague who questioned his tactics as a teacher. She said that in her upbringing, trolling for intimacy was considered rude. Tobin, who grew up with a psychologist for a father, amusingly turned things around, saying, “In my family, *not* trolling for intimacy was considered rude” (“Prologue” 4). Tobin turns the tables here on the common perception that we teachers who ask for students to be real with us are the inconsiderate or even inappropriate ones. He suggests that the teachers who expressly forbid personal topics, not those who ask for them, are the inconsiderate ones. The implications of Tobin’s research are that we all know that students want and need mentor-teachers in their personal lives, but we turn a blind eye to this need because of our fear of awkward moments and befuddling situations.

Tobin examines this idea further in an essay called “Teaching with a Fake ID,” an article based on a department-wide survey Tobin took asking teachers if they ever felt, as he did, like fakes. A first-year teacher replied honestly that she struggled with the boundaries of her authority, having been trained by countless teachers that one’s real life should not be mixed with one’s educational goals as a teacher. Recently she had found herself sympathetically sharing in a female student’s inner conflict over anorexia. Sarah had battled the disease in high school and in the middle of sharing her own story with the suffering student she caught herself and stopped. She feared becoming “less authoritative, less directive, less ‘in charge,’ less neutral” (96). She goes on to talk about the difficulty of finding the right balance between authority and friend. While Tobin understands this dilemma, he suggests that we should be authentic with our students. He says this:

Let's assume you are a rather private person. You are not willing to tell your students that your cat died this morning; you do not want to hear about their dead cats. I think, however, that the best kind of teaching comes out of a willingness to stand in one's condition. The best teaching comes not out of dropping your feelings at the classroom door. You don't need to *talk* about being sad or happy; you just need to be present to your own inward life. It's an attitude of mind, a quality of attention. (Mary Rose O'Reilly qtd. in Tobin "Fear and Loathing" 84, emphasis in original)

Indeed, mentor-teaching means that we "stand in our condition" as human beings, acknowledging to our students our own realities. Sarah's struggle reminds me of the distance I felt from my teachers and professors. Besides the aforementioned Dr. Fernandez, the only other professor who took a personal interest in me did so because it was his job. My freshman advisor invited my advisement group to the opera with him and his wife. We had a great evening, but I did not walk away feeling "closer" to him as a person. I know that I, for one, would have been very receptive to a professor who took down the professional wall to let me see that there was an approachable human being behind the professional façade. I understand how difficult that is, but I believe more of us should join together to encourage the Sarah's of the teaching profession who are scared "to stand in their own condition" as human beings guiding other human beings.

I think Tobin would agree that the danger of being too distant and authoritative is far greater than that of being too friendly. By not keeping an open door to discuss the painful realities of an eating disorder, may well have cut off one of the most valuable avenues her student had for coping with the disease. Now, had the student come to Sarah's office three times a day, crying, venting, asking for help, then it would be time to become more authoritative and

direct the student to a trained therapist. But how can it possibly be harmful to connect with a student on a personal level about a traumatic experience? This year (2009) I have shared with one of my classes that I have battled OCD throughout my life. Given that there are thirteen of them from highly wealthy families at a demanding private school, I have no doubt that some of them can relate, at least in part, to my struggle. Yet not one of them has come crying to me as a counselor, nor has one of them demonstrated a decreased level of respect. They received the news with curiosity and kindness. I cannot guarantee that it improved my standing in their eyes, but I can guarantee that it did no harm at all. And who knows, maybe years from now when one of them is diagnosed with a similar problem they will know of at least one adult they can call or email to confide in. If that sort of teaching makes me un-authoritative, then so be it. As Tobin puts it, “we have a *better* chance of being fair, compassionate, rigorous, and empathetic if we acknowledge the difficulty of performing those roles and the inevitability that we’ll occasionally be unable to operate within them” (“Fake ID” 101, emphasis in original). Quite simply, we need to be honest with our students about who we are.

Wendy Bishop’s comments on the persona of mentor-teachers in their relationships with students have been equally impactful in my own teaching and research. She, too, has grappled personally with how to appropriately relate to students who inevitably reveal their personal battles with writing teachers. Bishop remembers an awkward moment with a student who continued writing long after the others had finished on the day before a break was to begin. The assignment was to come up with fifteen metaphoric descriptions of a person about whom the student had strong feelings. Recognizing he was the last one writing, the student apologized and said he wasn’t really anxious to get home because he parents were divorcing and it would be strange. Not sure how to respond, Bishop eventually offered perfunctory words of

encouragement and leaving the awkward situation behind a bit more quickly than she would have liked. (“Teaching Lives” 315-316). How many countless times have I done the same? But Bishop suggests, “Teachers should be telling about their emotional and spiritual lives” (“Teaching Lives” 316). Both Bishop and Tobin suggests that, by sharing these aspects of ourselves with our students and with other teachers, we might slowly get past the fear of intimacy with our students, the fear of connecting in a non-academic way, the fear of being a human being who can understand pain and relate to.

Bishop uses the metaphor of a midwife teacher, from Mary Field Belencky et al. in *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, who helps the student bring his own knowledge into the world rather than imparting knowledge into the piggy bank of students’ minds (“Learning Our Own Ways” 135). Seeing our relationships with/to our students in this way radically changes the way we relate to them both in class and beyond. The focus shifts from us to them, which is where all loving relationships begin. It’s Bishop’s version of the Golden Rule: Since we would like to have someone recognize the value of our knowledge and bring it out of us, we should do the same in our relationships with students. But this means we must become active studiers of our students’ realities. Bishop says,

Students’ lives impinge on their writing processes in serious ways that are seldom studied...Only a well-trained, invested, interested teacher has a hope of navigating the inter-related cognitive and affective territory of the classroom. Perhaps, only a teacher who comes to experience the confusions (collusion?) of avocation and vocation, teaching as a way to confirm and reconfirm, to weave and reweave, a life’s vision, an act of faithfulness. (“Teaching Lives” 314-315)

For those of us who see teaching as far more than an occupation, we must find ways to successfully integrate our real selves into our teaching selves. Otherwise, we will fail to connect personally with our students as we desire to do.

Bishop reminds us to remember that we do not “loom” nearly as large in our students’ lives as they do in ours. If we are lucky, as Bishop says she has been, and our lived lives become indistinct from our teaching lives, then our students define a huge percentage of our lives. Yet we must never assume that they find us as significant as we find them (“Students’ Stories” 191). Once again, this humble stance in the teacher/student relationship paves the way for good teaching during the semester as we put the students’ knowledge before our own, and it paves the way for the reality that many of our students will not be radically changed by our semester together. Recognizing these sometimes painful realities ultimately frees us up to let our students go on to new teachers, new friends, and new experiences. But inevitably, this humble stance will bring students back to us as well, like the aforementioned student who sought out Bishop to thank her for taking her seriously when she was so consumed with extremes during their semester together. Through my own versions of midwife teaching and by remembering the reality of my place in my students’ lives, Bishop has shaped my perspective on what a teaching life is all about.

Wendy Bishop, former Kellogg W. Hunt Distinguished Professor of English at Florida State University, passed away in 2003. But her writings continue to shape my own. I have corresponded with Lad Tobin, Associate Professor of English and former Director, First-Year Writing Program, at Boston College, and I intend to eagerly read his future research as he paves the path for teachers like me who want to follow in his footsteps, helping our students become the best versions of themselves that they can be. These two scholars have shaped my thinking in

both theoretical and practical ways, and their profound influences on my own teaching will be more than clear throughout this particular chapter and even the entire dissertation.

### **Composition Assignments: Moving from Theory to Practice**

I now shift gears from the theories of Tobin and Bishop into the practical realm of writing assignments that have fostered mentor-teaching in my own classroom. Providing actual assignments and observations from everyday teaching in my composition courses during a semester, I now want to demonstrate how to turn my argument for mentor-teaching into teacher praxis.

In composition classes, I begin each term with an assignment called the Personal Thesis Statement, in which students write a thesis statement as if they were going to write a paper defining who they are at their core. The students never actually write this paper, but I've toyed with the idea of building all the semester's assignments around this thesis statement, and I am encouraged to expand this concept based on the *This I Believe* curriculum based on the radio series by the same name sponsored by NPR. That curriculum, which has students write 400-500 word essays explaining their own belief system, has been more thoroughly developed than my own by Dottie Willis, a Kentucky public school teacher. As I develop my own assignment further in future years, I will build on Willis's thorough and helpful curriculum. But as it stands currently, I always start by sharing my own personal thesis statement in an effort to follow both Willis's and bell hooks's exhortations regarding self-revelation. Willis says:

Drafting a personal philosophy of life is difficult—even when writers have lived multiple decades, such as those who collaborated to design these literacy lessons.

I encourage teachers to attempt this thought-provoking assignment along with

your students to discover first-hand just how challenging this writing task really is! (3)

Hooks voices the same philosophy:

Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive. In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share...It is often productive if professors take the first risk. (21)

I agree with both women that, both academically and interpersonally, students will follow our “living voices.” We can tell them all day to be risky or uninhibited, but until they see us model the difficulties of putting personal thoughts on paper and the necessary vulnerability to share these thoughts, students are likely to remain in the same safe and distant role that years of education have taught them to play. So, here is the Personal Thesis that I share with them:

My life centers around relationships with my family, friends, and students. With a mixture of deep introspection leading to philosophical conversations, a religious belief that helping those in need is humankind’s deepest calling, and a desire to lighten the world around me with a hearty laugh now and then, I approach life with a belief that life without meaningful relationships is wasted.

If I were to go on and write the essay of my life, so to speak, I would of course spend it unpacking my personal thesis – talking about the important people, explaining my religious heritage, elaborating on my introspection and humor, and so on. This assignment offers opportunity for beginnings, both pedagogically and to establish the teaching-learning environment. Additionally, this rhetorical exercise sets the foundation for self-exploration. All

the concepts of writing solid thesis statements can be taught while also making students answer the question they already ask: Who exactly am I?

Once I have laid out my expectations, the students take their turns. I tell them I'm not after physical attributes or extracurricular talents. Much like the *This I Believe* curriculum, which encourages writers to "Make sure your story ties to the *essence* of your *daily life philosophy* and the shaping of your *beliefs*" (36, emphases mine), I'm seeking to know what makes them tick, what drives them to interact with their worlds in their unique way. Here are some examples from my 2008 students:

I feel that I am a very fun, happy, and outgoing person when the time is appropriate. But I am also able to become calm, quiet, and focused when I am facing the more important tasks of my life. I believe I am different from other people because I have an open attitude in every situation, and also because I am always determined to achieve a goal. Sports and academics do take up a big portion of my life, but I will try to always focus on my core relationships with my family, friends, and God. –Denise Wilsey

I live my life by five words that a wise man, Johnny Tsunami, once said. Those words were, "Go big or go home." I utilize these words by fully committing to anything I choose to do and not walk through it lazily, whether it be in sports, school, or personal relationships. I strive to be the best in everything I do, but I also make sure that I am able to relax, have fun, and make friends. –Wendy Ellis

I value my life around the relationships with my family, the happiness in my life, and the desire to travel the world the experience new places. I do not take life to seriously and I try to enjoy every day as much as I can keeping in mind that it may be the last. In the end I will measure my life in the love I have experienced and given, the places I have been, and in the moments that are priceless. –Howard Binion

I attempt not to change things, but to let the experiences in which I am involved in, whether it be volleyball or anything else, and learn about transform me into the person that God designed me to be. I believe the events that occur in my life and the people around me are all under one supreme plan and therefore I have nothing to worry about when I ponder the future. –Warren Smitt

I am a talkative, outgoing person once you get to know me and I enjoy giving advice to people. I sometimes tend to get distracted easily and it causes me to lose focus. I have a passion for running because it is my time to get away from everything and reflect upon my thoughts and feelings. My goal is to grow in my relationship with God and live according to his word everyday. – Edward Ramsey

My experience teaching this assignment, as I believe this series of student texts reveals, truly gets the students verbalizing their deepest values, but it also offers an opportunity to teach the thesis statement as a rhetorical act. We work for three or four class periods on really getting the

wording right so it encompasses as much of the person as a few sentences possibly can. I probe the students' intentions behind certain vague words, and I also have them offer each other suggestions. This process and collaborative activity helps me to get to know the students and it helps them to get to know each other. It could even offer a springboard for a full-length essay, for publication on the *This I Believe* segment on NPR, or even for the entire semester's assignments. Sample assignments might include:

- A persuasive letter to: a named individual they wish to explain to and exhort to their perspective of a belief, attitude, or issue; a named newspaper, expressing their opinion on a particular issue related to their beliefs, experience, or goals, which is then supported by an argument and evidence to persuade an audience of strangers; a letter they imagine someone who disagrees with them might write in response to their letter, followed by their rebuttal of the arguments set forth in the letter.
- Comparison and Contrast essay, examining their own values with: those expressed by another student; those expressed by an individual they identify as sharing similar beliefs or experiences as they do, such as a historical or public figure; those expressed by a character in a literary work or from mythology or folklore.
- A narrative or descriptive expository essay about the moment they came to understand a certain facet of their own character or identity, following the direction to "know thyself" that Socrates gave us.
- An analysis essay tracing the definitions and providing examples for some of the key terms and qualities they listed.

All of these assignments would accomplish the two main goals of the mentor-teacher in the writing classroom: teaching our students to become better writers and teaching them to pursue

self-understanding in the context of relationships. In all our assignments, we should seek both to teach the writing style we need to teach *and* to consider how students can know themselves better through such writing.

In the email I quoted earlier from a former student, I left out a paragraph that relates specifically to this particular assignment. I share it here because it encouraged me that this assignment is hitting its intended mark. Here is the paragraph from his email:

For me, most of your assignments became more than just meaningless papers to write (with the exception of the persuasive essay); they became personal evaluation that really forced me to pick apart who I am and help me begin to become the person I want to be. The assignment that really got me, however, was the personal thesis. This assignment really made me think about who I am as a person, pick apart every aspect, and try to jumble it all together into just a few words...I took the assignment seriously and the results were thorough and complete. I've always had immense difficulty writing exactly what I think or feel, but the personal thesis forced me to do just that for the first time. (MacMurtry)

Joshua's email stresses the three aspects of my job that I take most seriously. First, he admits that the assignment forced him to think about word choice and getting one's true thoughts into a thesis statement. Second, and more importantly in my estimation, he says he got to know himself better through the assignment. Finally, the assignment paved the way to a teacher-student relationship that made it okay for him to write me a letter like this at the semester's end. Rather than just keeping his thoughts to himself, we had forged a tight enough bond that he could express his feelings to me honestly, even acknowledging that he did not care for all the assignments equally. My goal with every student, starting with the Personal Thesis assignment,

is to get to know them well enough that our dialogue can be open and honest and mutually helpful.

### **Letter Writing between Teachers and Students**

A second type of writing assignment that fosters mentor-teaching involves letter writing between professor and student. While the art of letter writing goes back to Antiquity in Greece, *The Letter Book: Ideas for Teaching College English*, edited by University of Vermont professors Sue Dinitz and Toby Fulwiler, updates this ancient form of communication and provides the foundation for my own letter writing to my classes. The book highlights the relational aspect of letter writing – each letter is crafted for a specific occasion and for a specific reader. The goal historically was to both give information and to reveal oneself through one’s writing, thus delighting the reader and creating an ongoing discussion, shared history, and of course, a relationship sustained by and through writing. That is my goal as well. In *The Letter Book*, the English instructors at Vermont weigh in on using letters “to promote such things as classroom community, learning of content, experimental writing, and general literacy in...undergraduate and graduate classes” (vii). Dinitz and Fulwiler claim that letter writing assignments can take on nearly endless varieties, but that letter writing at its core is “as natural and easy as writing ever gets” (vii) and that “letters are a good and humanizing counter to the oft-requested objective voices of the academic world” (viii). My contention is similar: Mentor-teachers can foster an open dialogue between themselves and their classes through letter writing in at least two ways. First, each student’s voice gets heard. Too often in class, the quiet students, who may well have plenty to say, are effectively silenced by the out-spoken students. Letter writing helps to overcome this teaching dilemma. Second, students are often more

vulnerable and open when the safe “distance” of paper protects them from face-to-face vulnerability. Despite the fact that the teacher will see the letter at some point, the fact is that most human beings would rather be open with someone else in writing than face-to-face, at least initially. In my own personal life, I often begin the conflict resolution process with a loved one through a letter or an email. I, like my students, feel a greater freedom to express myself thoroughly and thoughtfully when I write a letter than when I am looking someone in the eye. For these reasons and others that are harder to quantify, I have adopted some of the philosophies and practices in Fulwiler’s and Dinitz’s book for my own classes.

While writing individual letters to individual students would take far too long, as Fulwiler suggests (65), I choose to write open letters to an entire class about common young adult issues or issues I see as particularly relevant to their group. Then I ask for their individual responses. I seek two objectives with this student-teacher interaction: to get them writing and to get them thinking about personally relevant topics. I post letters like the ones below periodically throughout the semester on our classroom “wiki,” an internet site that is readily updatable and which access is open to all those in our class, me included. I ask that students respond, also in letter format, on the same wiki page where I have written. Like mine, their letters are available for all to see. The first respondents inevitably end up responding to me directly, while later respondents end up commenting on the discussion topics brought up by those who beat them to the punch. I count these responses for a homework grade, and I keep the assignment informal intentionally because my aim is primarily to get them thinking about matters that I feel are important as they mature into adulthood. I have no desire to grade these letters as I would a formal paper because I want students to speak freely and to not write in fear of saying the wrong

thing or misplacing a comma. The discussion often spills into a class session, but once again, that is not my intention.

In their responses, I ask students to explicitly agree or disagree with me and then to build their case for whichever position they've chosen. If they disagree, they need to argue logically why I might be wrong; they need to critique the points I have overlooked; they need to discuss exceptions to my rules, and so on. As such, they learn to incorporate persuasive techniques into their writing; they learn to be constructively critical of someone who holds authority over them; and they learn to use logic and factual evidence to build a case for their own argument.

If they agree, they need to offer their own illustrative examples to demonstrate the points we agree upon; they need to go beyond what I've said and offer further reasons for valuing their roots; they need to compare and/or contrast their own home with another place they've visited or lived, and so on. They are told time and time again that the harder writing task is actually to agree with me because they will need to make it very evident that they are doing so out of conviction and not just out of a desire to agree with the teacher. The best responses, I tell them, will offer compare and contrast points of agreement and points of disagreement with my own views, proving to me that they have thoughtfully formed their own unique perspectives through the letter writing dialogue.

As the letter below demonstrates, my letters reveal my own personal philosophy(s) of life and seek to get the students thinking about their own views on life beyond the realm of the classroom:

Dear Students:

Last night I had dinner with a family whose daughter is a senior in high school. She's debating where to attend college and what to major in, and it came

up that she does not want to move back to Atlanta when she finishes college. I asked her why. “I’ve been here all my life; I want to experience something different and someplace new,” she said. I remember feeling that way too, but let me disillusion you for a moment – wherever you go, the same problems and struggles will exist. The people in Paris and in Philadelphia may have different accents and different fashions, but I believe human beings are pretty much the same the world over.

I remember driving to Chicago in the fall of 2000 to start graduate school. Euphoria swept over me as I traveled north for a fresh start. No more family dinner attended out of obligation; no more job that demanded too much of me; no more roommate that liked a different temperature in the house; no more over-commitment...Man was I wrong! Every frustration I had in Atlanta followed me to Chicago. It turned out that all my problems in Atlanta recreated themselves in Chicago under new disguises. I didn’t have a roommate to fight over temperature with, but I sure was lonely. And I didn’t have to feel attend those family dinners out of guilt, but I missed that familiarity. I didn’t have a job that demanded too much of me anymore, but I found out that I demanded a lot of myself – maybe even more than the job had demanded. I only stayed one semester before I came right back to Atlanta with a whole new perspective on home: there really is no place like it.

Here’s my point, guys: You only have one home, you only have one family, and you only have one place that you grew up. You can search the world over, but I know enough people that have looked far and wide and not one of

them has said to me, “I’ve found the perfect place.” Have your adventures; explore the world. But remember that you can never replace your roots. And while they come with a myriad of frustrations, they usually come with a lot more good than bad.

Sincerely, Mr. Blue

I find this particular topic important in our modern culture, where it is expected that most of us will wander around the country, or even the world, throughout our lifetimes without ever establishing deep roots or staying put in our hometown. According to one survey, more than 1 of 4 people between ages 25 and 29 moved between 2002 and 2003. Commenting on this number and other statistics that indicate the sharp rise in depression in modern-day America, Jean M. Twenge, author of *Generation Me* notes, “One of the strangest things about modern life is the expectation that we will stand alone, negotiating breakups, moves, divorces, and all manner of heartbreak that previous generations were careful to avoid” (114, 116). My privileged private school students are among the most likely ones to wander the world in search of their own meaning and identity, and thus, they are the most likely to suffer from the loneliness and depression that may follow as a result. My objective in the above letter is not to convince them not to go away to college or not to avoid living in new places. Rather, my objective is to help them think ahead about an issue that few young people ponder – where do they want to settle and why? I want to share with them the truth that new places are not always better than the old places, and new people are not always wiser or more entertaining than the old friends and family they left behind. I aim not to convince them to stay in Atlanta, Georgia, but rather to make them think about the deeper issues of contentment and unsettledness that lead many on wild goose chases around the world looking for something they already possessed in their own hometowns.

Another letter I've written addressed the topic of success, financial and otherwise:

Dear Students,

You've probably heard the phrase "Money doesn't buy happiness" many times by now, but do you really believe it? Almost everyone I know would tell you that they believe in the truth of that saying, yet many of those same people live their lives as if money does buy happiness.

Two college friends come to mind – one from Florida and one from New York. The one from Florida has always told me that he wants to make a lot of money at a young age so he can afford to do whatever he wants to later on in life. Right after college he was the kind of friend who (literally) would drive through the night to be at someone's wedding or to take advantage of a once-in-a-lifetime event. His first job out of college was in the financial field working for a major company that you would recognize. After a short time working there, he felt confined and trapped by a sense of futility, and he left to become a youth minister. Two years later, money was tight and he once again made a career change, this time going into business for himself as an entrepreneur.

Over the past six or eight years I have watched him slowly sink more and more into workaholism. He regularly puts in sixteen or eighteen hour days, at least six days a week. Each time we try to plan a get-together for our families, he ends up putting it off until he reaches whatever goal he feels he needs to reach at work gets accomplished. Our friendship is ebbing away slowly while he becomes more and more entrenched in his quest to attain financial success.

My other friend also joined a “mega firm” right out of college, but he has stayed with it for the past decade. He called me a few months ago at 9:00 p.m. I asked, “Are you just now leaving work?” He replied, “Yeah, I got off early tonight.” The sad thing is, he wasn’t making a joke. He and his new wife eat dinner together only a couple of times a week, and his dog lives most of its life in its crate, waiting for those few hours a day when his “parents” are home. This friend nearly always has his vacations interrupted by some work commitment. The guy who could barely stand to study for fifteen minutes at a time in college has grown accustomed to working non-stop.

I could go on and on with examples of friends who would tell you that money doesn’t buy happiness but who live their lives as if it does. They’ve gradually eased their way into a mindset that justifies all the sacrifices they’re making. They tell themselves that they need to provide a good standard of living for their families or that they want their kids to have what they never had or that they’ll accumulate enough money and then slow down. But I don’t think “enough” exists. The choices they’re making right now are shaping the sorts of fathers and husbands they’ll be in ten years. I hope that as you consider what you want out of life you’ll realize that no amount of money will replace the time with family and friends that my two friends are missing. You certainly need to make a living that puts food on the table and a roof over your head. Yet beyond that, why do we need so much money that we will give up so much just to have it? After all, you can’t take it with you when you die.

Sincerely, Mr. Blue

At my current school, where nearly every student carries an iPhone and drives a new car upon turning sixteen, students need to be confronted about their notions of wealth. While the term “entitlement” is thrown around a lot to describe the current teenage generation, this particular group certainly fits that bill in every way. My students seem to know that they are privileged but they don’t know what to do about it or how to process it or how to plan ahead so as not to perpetuate some of the unhealthy notions of the value of wealth that have been handed to them. They want to discuss this topic, and the letter format gives them a safe place to do so without fear of their parents reading what they write and with the sense of anonymity that comes from writing online. As with the letter about roots, this topic elicits a wide range of responses all the way from anger at me to complete sympathy with my attitudes, but one thing is sure: it always leads to passionate opinions and usually to very good writing because students want to speak effectively about topics where they have strong opinions.

The educational value of letter writing lies in students’ practicing at least two kinds of rhetorical invention at once: persuasive and compare/contrast. The mentoring value is twofold: First, the letters demand that students think proactively about the value of roots and familiarity. Second, the letters open up an interpersonal dialogue about issues that really matter. Assignments like this successfully de-center the teacher’s authority in a healthy way, demonstrating to students the teacher’s beliefs while allowing the students to agree and/or disagree via the safe distance of the written word. Unquestionably, working hard to navigate this initially tricky territory means that students and teachers can have an open dialogue about important life issues while also growing together as writers.

Overall, this exercise is an informal way for me to formulate meaningful relationships with students about matters that do not necessarily relate directly to their literary expertise. It

gets students writing, so it falls nicely under the heading of an English assignment, but more importantly I would categorize it as a mentor-teaching assignment disguised as an English assignment. These letters open discussions that I might never be able to get to through marginal comments on their standard papers or through classroom discussions where everyone's guard is a bit higher because they are physically facing the rest of the group. For me, this assignment is too new for me to have examples of the long-term effects of such a project, but I have little doubt that I will continue to incorporate letter writing and response throughout my teaching career.

### **Mentor-Teaching and Therapeutic Writing Assignments**

Writing assignments that facilitate mentoring dialogues between students and teachers provide teachers with endless chances for creativity. Certainly I do not claim that the assignments I have mentioned thus far are the only, or even the best, ways to get students communicating with teachers about genuinely important parts of their lives. What's important in my mind is not so much what assignments a teacher uses, but that each teacher who seeks mentoring opportunities continually strives to open up mentoring dialogues with every assignment. Many authors take the concept of mentoring students to an even deeper level of personal therapy in the belief that personal writing can not only facilitate teacher-student relationships but it can lead the way to intrapersonal healing from past wounds. Louise DeSalvo, in *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*, demonstrates the value of personal writing through an analysis of F. Scott Fitzgerald, who saw firsthand the power of the written word to confront his real life problems. Fitzgerald's mental breakdown at age thirty-nine, he claimed, came largely because he had been living inauthentically; he had been living by other people's values and not his own; and he had failed to nurture his writing talent as

thoroughly as it deserved. This left him with “no self” (96-97). Fitzgerald had pursued Gatsby-like wealth in order to impress his well-to-do friends, and he had neglected to keep processing his own beliefs and values through writing. DeSalvo notes that students face the same danger of inauthenticity, and reflective writing about real life topics such as money, work, family, and sex can be a starting point for helping students to avoid Fitzgerald’s mistakes. With this in mind, I now want to suggest some additional mentor-teaching writing projects that come from outside my own classroom.

One of the writing assignments DeSalvo suggests is to have students look into one of their favorite writer’s lives to discover why he wrote/writes. Was pain or trauma involved as the impetus? Did writing help him/her heal? Can you apply some of what you’ve learned to your own writing process? (66). The assignment is student-centered in many ways, not least of all by providing an opportunity to conduct primary research and acquire skill and practice in self-directed research and making choices about their interests in terms of types of authors and individual writers. It also connects the therapeutic nature of writing to the experience of suffering and dealing with pain in one’s life, as many writers are drawn to the profession for this very reason.

Another assignment idea of DeSalvo’s is to have students reflect upon self-care and sustainability, or the ways they take care of themselves. The writing explores the areas of their lives that need better care: Should they sleep more, eat better, exercise more, write more, read more, spend more time with friends, spend less time with certain people, pray more, meditate more...? How can they take better care of themselves than they are taking right now? (107). Students actively evaluate the health of their lives in writing. An assignment like this one not only teaches students to be self-reflective, but it opens a meta dialogue about how one decides

what are and what are not healthy ways to live one's life. Countless connections to the reckless behavior of teenagers can be made by opening up this topic of conversation.

In defending these controversial therapeutic writing assignments, DeSalvo cites psychotherapist Alice Miller who believes that people become suicidal not from trauma itself but from the inability to express and/or describe the trauma and its subsequent emotions" (167-168). DeSalvo criticizes the medical field, which has, "den[ied] us our complexity as human beings by seeing us as 'a case,' by reducing our wounded body stories into indecipherable markings on charts, graphs, and medical histories (that say nothing about our own personal histories" (183). In the same way that DeSalvo critiques the medical profession for its lack of humanity, I am critical of the field of education. By treating our students as a series of paragraphs, topic sentences, and grammatical mistakes, we have dehumanized them by "diagnosing" their errors and dismissing their minds and spirits.

Alexandra Robbins's ethnographic study of the culture of overachievement in America, called *The Overachievers*, highlights how reductive our nation has become in its evaluation of how educated our students are. Robbins recalls the 1983 report called *A Nation at Risk*, put out by the Reagan-era Department of Education. The report observes that there is a "rising tide of mediocrity" in our educational system based on our performance against other national superpowers. One critic of the report, Gerald W. Bracey, an educational expert, voiced my own opinion about this sort of reductive criticism well: "The members of the National Commission tightly yoked the nation's global competitiveness to how well our 13-year-olds bubbled in test answer sheets" (37-38). It seems that across the educational spectrum we are addicted to measurable results, and when it comes to writing, we simply cannot measure students' progress through standardized testing. Our educational experts may not like this fact because it makes it

harder to say we are actually improving, but nevertheless, our evaluation of our writing pedagogy should not be measured in any other way than on a person by person basis. Here's the question we should be asking: Are students growing as human beings through the writing they do in the classroom? If the answer to that is yes, then they will inevitably also be growing as writers.

Marian Mesrobian Macurdy, professor at Ithaca College and author of *The Mind's Eye: Image and Memory in Writing about Trauma*, has many therapeutically-minded mentor-teaching writing prompts that enlarge the notions of academic learning rather than reducing them to measurable test scores. She says,

My students in Personal Essay write a paper on their relationship to their physical bodies...a time their bodies worked really well, such as a great sports 'win,' or a time they didn't work all that well, or they could write about an illness or an accident when they first realized they were not immortal, or a time they felt really physically alive. (44)

She also has them:

- Write about a person who frightened you, hurt you, intimidated you, or forced or persuaded you to do something you didn't want to do. Describe the situation by showing a scene where the conflict took place.
- Write about someone who taught you something important about life.
- Write about someone who helped you once when you needed it.
- Write about the oddest person you ever met. (122-123) (See Appendix A for many more writing assignment ideas.)

Macurdy says that, while these prompts open the doors for students to write about either painful or joyful topics, seventy-five percent of students *choose* painful topics. The reason for this is that joyful memories have been seamlessly integrated into our psyches already. The painful memories have been isolated to a nonverbal part of the brain out of self-protection. Macurdy's goal is to have students focus on their traumatic images by describing them and incorporating them into narratives (123, 130). The longer we leave them there, unevaluated, the heavier they become. Eventually, we need to integrate our pain into our everyday inner self. And even if Macurdy's writing assignments do not provide administrators with the measurable writing improvements they think they want, she should forge ahead with assignments that offer students chances to heal and grow.

Thomas Newkirk, author of *the performance of self in student writing*, also encourages the use of narrative assignments that insist on self-evaluation. Newkirk says that this quality of positive self-evaluation centers around the "turn" from the specific/personal to the general/public. Writing that only looks inward becomes solipsistic, says Newkirk. But writing that turns from the inward to the outward can not only help the student doing the writing but also those who read it or listen to its message. Newkirk offers some sample mentor-teaching prompts from Coles and Vopat's *What Makes Writing Good*:

- What separates a child from an adult? (Janet Kotler)
- When was the last time you made an important choice in your life? (Irmscher)
- Choose a moment from your own experience or from that of someone you know in which a presumed limit was found not to exist. Describe the moment of discovery. (Robert Holland)

- I am asking you to write about a first or last experience. Since this is likely to be a memorable experience that has been of some consequence in your life, you will need to present it in the wider context of your life. (Sandra Schor)  
(22)

These assignments demand that students do deep, personal introspection if they are going to get anything out of the assignment at all, but Newkirk says we must not let students stop with only the personal; we must demand that they apply the lessons they have learned to a broader, social context. So, for example, after writing about a time when a student found that a limit did not exist, that student should discuss the broader implications about limits that do or do not exist in our society and what that is a good or bad thing. As Newkirk demonstrates, all personal writing assignments can lead out into broader analyses of cultural realities that so many current teachers want to do. Personal writing does not limit the teacher to only reading about traumatic events all semester. In fact, that sort of writing can cause students to become overly solipsistic. Rather, personal assignments need to be linked to familial or cultural or spiritual realities that help the student see herself in a broader, more humanizing context. When that is accomplished, the writing will be therapeutic in and of itself.

A number of articles, in fact, have taken teachers to task for requiring personal writing in recent years. In the February 17, 1993 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Susan Swartzlander, Diana Pace, and Virginia Lee Stamler contended that requiring students to write about their personal lives is “shockingly unprofessional” and even unethical (B1). Carra Leah Hood takes the same stance in “Lying in Writing or the Vicissitudes of Testimony,” claiming that teachers’ notions of what constitutes “personal enough” writing are mistaken. She believes that even banal, seemingly impersonal topics can lead students to personal revelations (1-2). She

also criticizes teachers for failing to realize that students “read” their assignments and their teachers in an effort to say what the teacher wants to hear, thus negating the so-called benefits of many personally revealing papers. They are, in other words, largely made up to satisfy the teacher. Specifically, she derides Jeffrey Berman’s reading of students’ essays in his book *Risky Writing*, believing that he makes the mistake of missing the therapeutic potential of “even the most quotidian practices,” like baking bread, as one student wrote about in Berman’s class. But Hood and the other trio of authors miss the point of therapeutic writing assignments grossly. The point is not for us to become students’ therapists, but to let the writing itself provide a sort of therapy. Additionally, just because some students may try to say what a teacher wants to hear in order to please the teacher does not negate the value of the assignment. No matter what assignments we construct, students will try to make the teacher happy through what they say. I had one student admit to writing a politically conservative paper about the War in Iraq because he believed that I held those same views. He was wrong, and it gave me an opportunity to address the idea of intellectual honesty with him. His failure to “read” me correctly led him to write a paper that had no authentic belief behind it, and thus it made the paper worse than it could have been. I told him I would far rather get an honest paper than one that tried to say what I wanted to hear, and I told him I thought the honest paper had much more potential for getting a high grade. Thus, even the dishonest paper led to a mentoring conversation about intellectual honesty. The whole experience served a potentially therapeutic role as the boy now had the chance to think about his own willingness to say what others want to hear rather than speaking honestly. I did not become the boy’s therapist, but the assignment still held potentially therapeutic merit.

In “Suture, Stigma, and the Pages that Heal,” Charles M. Anderson et al offer us some reminders as we assign writing that encourages personal introspection. The authors offer ways to assign therapeutic writing without stepping over our professional bounds. They say that, when working with student essays about their pain, we have to remember that we are working “with the symbols of woundedness but not with the wounds, with the meaning of pain but not with pain” (61). This vital distinction separates the writing teacher from the therapist that the authors above are concerned we are trying to become. We as writing teachers are not students’ therapists in a number of key ways. See, the therapist works with a person’s pain, using various techniques (perhaps even writing) to help a person sort out, lessen, understand, or deal with her pain. A writing teacher works to help students construct their written expression of their pain in the most useful, growth-producing way possible, but when the writing teacher attempts to involve himself in his students’ actual pain, he has gone too far. Though the distinction may seem gray and difficult to navigate, constant self-awareness and vigilant examination of our motives (which change with every student and every situation) can help us stay on the teacher’s side of this boundary line. Hood and Swartzlander et al seem to misunderstand the goals of personal writing assignments, just as they highlight the students who misunderstand our assignments’ intentions. Their concerns are legitimate, but that does not mean we should throw the baby out with the bathwater. Instead, we need to look for ways to navigate the murkiness of personal writing so that students understand what we really want from them and so that students have various options for what to write about. We cannot demand that students grow as human beings while taking our classes, but we can give them the opportunity to do so.

### **Stories of Composition’s Meaning in Students’ Lives**

How better to bring all of this together than to share a few stories of what writing can mean in students' real lives? As such, I will conclude this chapter with two examples from my own teaching history that demonstrate the usefulness of having students process real-life matters in the writing classroom. The first example of the way writing can be personally meaningful for students in need of a way to process the events and emotions of their lives comes from a few years back. Over the summer of 2005, I had heard the tragic news of a young woman who had been killed by being accidentally run over by a friend in his own driveway. The two were horsing around, and the inexperienced driver hit the gas instead of the brake and you can guess the rest of the story. What I couldn't have known at the time was that I would teach that young man's older sister just a few weeks after the incident. While I would never suggest that a student in Kelsey's situation should use my classroom to begin her healing process, Kelsey chose to do so. She wrote the following essay during our Personal Narrative segment of the semester:

If one looked at my date of birth, he or she may think I am still an adolescent, but on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2005 I finished growing up. An extremely painful event triggered the end of my childhood; my fifteen-year-old brother, Mitchell, died when an acquaintance of his, Christine, accidentally ran over him with her car. He died one hour later. I entered the hospital room and stared at my worst nightmare. On the cold metal table lay my little brother. His cheeks that had once appeared so pink were pale and yellow; his eyes had faded from bright blue to cold gray. On the ride home from the hospital I realized that my parents were out of town, and the responsibility of telling my nine-year-old brother fell to me. When he woke up the following morning I could barely get the words out. "Andrew, come sit with me." I said "Last night Mitch got in an accident and he

got hurt really badly. He's not coming home sweetie, he went to heaven." He didn't say a word, and five minutes later turned on the television. We held Mitchell's funeral four days after he died, on his sixteenth birthday.

The weeks to follow were terrible. My parents and brother could not stop crying, but I couldn't seem to cry at all. Instead, I became angry at God for taking my brother away from me, at my grandparents for not letting me talk to my parents after the doctor had informed us of our loss, at Christine for driving recklessly and putting my brother in danger, and at Mitchell for jumping on the hood of Christine's car just to have a few seconds of fun. Eventually my anger subsided as I realized that all the anger in the world would not bring my brother back. The floodgates finally opened and I allowed myself to cry. I cried so long and so hard that I could barely breathe for days. I experienced what my therapist called "tidal waves of grief." I encountered overwhelming sadness some days; those days that the waves hit. Other days I felt fine; those days the waves built up inside of me.

I can never risk my life again because if I died my family would lose what little will to live they have left. I have lost all longing for material possessions because all the money and possessions in the world can't give me the one thing that I want the most: my brother back. I have matured beyond my years by experiencing an unimaginable loss. I want to lecture everyone I hear talking about how high they got this weekend because they don't understand the risks they take. Do they think that a hit of acid is worth never seeing your family or friends again? Or that getting wasted at a party is worth dying? The things that once seemed

important to me, like whether or not I had enough Abercrombie clothes or who I dated are now trivial. Is wearing Abercrombie going to bring him back? No.

What leads me to think that I have reached adulthood? Unlike many of the people I go to school with, I have realized the consequences of reckless behavior. My brother's death occurred a few months ago, and I have not learned all of the lessons I will learn from this tragedy. But I have learned that adulthood is not turning eighteen; rather, it is realizing that not all of the risks we take are worth the consequences. As odd as it may seem, this realization made me feel the greatest feeling of achievement because, by suffering the loss of my brother and handling this tragedy the way I have, I have become an adult. (Gallavane)

Not only is Kelsey's writing of an excellent quality, but clearly it demonstrates that she has learned something vitally important through the tragedy of her brother's death. Here are Kelsey's own comments on the value of writing this paper:

Writing the essay about my brother's death did help me a lot to process everything that I had been through and that I am still going through. It helped me realize what I was learning from this experience and how it had changed who I am and who I am meant to be. It has also helped me to grasp that he isn't coming back. For a while I thought I was dreaming and that I would wake up and he would be there, but writing down how I felt about this situation made me realize that this is really happening. (Gallavane)

Kelsey's evaluation of the benefit of writing this paper makes clear that our students can learn personally relevant things in our classes while also doing some excellent academic writing. The writing itself offered both mentoring opportunities and therapeutic opportunities. Kelsey opened

the door for me to ask her how she was holding up and to talk with her about this situation. I did not demand that she write about a painful topic, but she chose to anyway because she needed a context in which to process this tragedy. Now that the door had been opened for me to be one of the people who walked alongside her through her pain, I gladly looked for chances to do that through a simple kind word or a caring question. Beyond the mentoring opportunities came therapeutic opportunities for Kelsey, and here, once again, the writing assignment did the work for me. I did not in any way try to make this assignment therapeutic for my students. I simply gave them a forum where they might choose to do some therapeutic writing. After that, the benefits of the writing process itself took over and did the healing work for me. A small step toward wholeness came through Kelsey's writing the paper. All I did was offer her the writing opportunity.

The second student that comes to mind is a young man named Nick. Nick had struggled mightily to pass my English class the first semester of our year-long class. Having never been a strong English student, Nick was used to the end-of-the-semester worry about whether he was above or below that magic line of passing and failing. I encouraged him to be in more regular contact with me second semester so he didn't find himself in the same situation again. Having offered countless students this same advice, and never having had one of them actually follow through on their promise to do so, I was shocked that Nick really did take the class much more seriously second semester. He maintained a high C average throughout the semester and even got excited about reading *Hamlet*.

The highlight of my year with Nick, though, came when I assigned their final paper of the year. I asked the students to write, quite simply, about what they had learned over the course of the year, not in English class, but in real life. I wanted them to process their senior year of high

school so as not to be mindlessly living unexamined lives. Now Nick, as you might imagine, was not one, even during his second semester revival, to write multiple drafts of papers, but this one caught his attention so much that he wrote two versions of the paper.

Nick was so excited by the chance to write about what he had learned this year that he wrote two papers – of his own accord. This is a student who accepts any grade higher than 70 because he does not want to put in the extra work unless it might mean failing a class not to do so. The first paper that follows is Nick’s original paper. The writing is decent, especially for Nick. Somewhat safe in its content and a good bit cliché, I was still please with this showing:

This year has been an interesting year full of memories and life lessons. I have learned a lot about myself and about different people. I have learned how my true friends really are and who are just fake. This year has just taught me a lot all around.

One of the main lessons I’ve learned is that “life’s a bitch”. No matter how many times you get knocked down I have to keep getting back up. I can not hide away from the punches of life I has to take them and then just keep moving forward. Don’t be a coward, and stand up for what I believe in. If I don’t want to drink then don’t drink. If I do not want to roll with a certain crowd anymore because they aren’t who they thought they were then find another crowd. If someone does not like me or care for me, I don’t sit around and mope about it. Get up and find people that do accept me and want to be with me. Those are two of the most enormous pieces of advice that I can give anyone. Life is going to knock people down, but it is the people who that get back up that survive. In the famous words of Allen Iverson, “only the strong survive”.

Another life lesson that I have learned not only in this year, but in high school all is that, God will never give me or put me in a situation that he or she can not handle or overcome. Along with that he will always give I a way out too. I've had some tough and dark times in my high school career, but God was there and right when I wanted to give up and I thought there was not an outlet, and that god had given up on me and let go, someone would just show up and change my whole view on life, and make me happy again. Even though I've learned this lesson many times in the past year, and the past four years, I still have trouble believing it and knowing what to do. The next lesson is do not waste time.

Do not let a minute go by and do not wish to grow up because it will happen soon enough. Life is going to fly by. I can not stop time it is impossible. I wish it was not, but it is. Spend time with the ones I love and also my friends. Do not waste my time lingering on some little argument or something stupid, because the time that I lets slip by because of something stupid is time I can not get back with that person again.

If I want something I should go after it and not sit around and ponder it forever, because the more I think about it the less likely he or she will do it. Take risks. Yes I might fail and will ask why I did this, and other times I will fall on my face and be embarrassed, but when the time comes and the risk I took was successful, it makes it all worth it. Live with no regrets. If you keep living in the past I will never live in the future and change what can happen. Everyone needs to move forward I can not change the past or what happened in it. If I live with asking, what if I would have done this different or what if I would have done that,

I will be a failure and a worrier. Don't be a worrier. Just roll with life and go with the flow. If I is always worrying and trying to plan out life, I will never get to relax and just enjoy what is happening.

These are many of the lessons that I have learned either through out this year or through out high school. If I could give I message to anyone, and they had to live by it, I would tell that person, do not judge on first notice give everyone an equal and fair chance , and don't make conclusions till I gets to know them. Don't judge a book by its cover basically. Also, everyone make mistakes, but if no I gives them a chance to change, then why should they change? These are the life lessons that are most important to me.

Clearly, this is not going to win Nick any awards either for writing style or for uniqueness of content, but still, for Nick, this was some decent writing. His job was done, and it was done well enough to get the assignment behind him with an acceptable grade (maybe a C or a C+) so he could be done with his senior English class. Then Nick shocked me when he came to me and asked if he could write a new paper because something had happened just that week that he wanted to write about. His second paper is an example of what a struggling English student can do when given a topic he finds meaningful. A number of errors can be found in this paper, but it may well be the best writing Nick's done all year. The writing is passionate and real; it's written from the heart without a doubt. Here is Nick's second paper:

When I originally received this assignment I immediately thought about myself and my own experiences, however I did not think about how I might have influenced other people. I do not know if this is what you are looking for with this assignment, but I just thought I needed to share this.

I was dating a girl, Samantha from [another school] for the past 8 months, and I know your thinking in your head what does this have to do with anything? Actually it has a lot to do with everything and who I have become. She is English and has a sister, Abbs and two brothers, JJ and Stew. Her mom is amazing and her dad well not the greatest guy but whose perfect. I know your thinking in your head get to the point already this is going no where, but just hold on for a second I promise there is a point. 9 months ago if you would have asked me if I would date Samantha for 8 months I would probably tell you your insane and need help, because I hated the girl, why you ask, because other people told me to. This brings us to my first lesson.

Never judge or make an opinion based on what somebody else says or thinks. I need to make my own decisions based on what I think of the person and what I have seen about them. This is the first lesson she taught me, and I also in return taught her the same lesson.

We broke up this past Tuesday, and it was my fault I messed up and started talking to some other girl and she found out. I was not that worried because I knew me and her would be best friends still no matter what. What I did not think about was the little 11 year old, Abbs.

I do not think I have ever felt worse in my life when I was [on a college visit] on Wednesday, and I picked up the phone and I could not understand a word Abbs was saying. My heart was crushed into a thousand little pieces because I hurt and crushed and 11 year old who looked up to me and saw me as more than her brothers. I would tuck her in a night, go to her soccer games, have water

fighters with her, and anything you can imagine. I was always there for her when she needed someone. I could be having the worst day ever and just a smile and knowing I cheered her up and that in return she loved me that could make my day.

I know this is probably not as detailed as you wanted or it might not even be what you wanted, but it's something *I needed to write about*. Late last night when I got back from Elon I received a note of Facebook from Sam, and it was about a full typed page. That's when it hit me. I do make a difference in this world I am part of something bigger than just myself. This girl told me how I have changed her as a person from being a partier 24/7 to not ever drinking or going to parties. Then she would say how she's so glad she met me and we were together, because not only her little sister, but her brother, Stew, whose a freshman looked up to me too. Knowing that I was able to impact so many people's lives in such a short time makes me wonder what I can do with all the time left in from of me. And with that I leave you this Quote, "Go confidently in the direction of your dreams! Live the life you've imagined." - Henry David Thoreau. (emphasis mine)

As with the first paper, the grammatical quality of Nick's writing leaves plenty of work to be done, but this second paper is so much more specific and insightful that I would consider it huge progress, both personally and academically. He even came to see writing as something he "needed" to do in order to process the realities of his 18-year-old life. In short, Nick got it! He understood (at last) that what I wanted was authentic self-evaluation, and he got so excited about the chance to really understand himself better that he voluntarily wrote far more than he had to. You can almost hear him apologizing throughout the second paper for it probably not being what

I, the English teacher, wanted, but he could not have been more wrong. It was precisely what I wanted – not because of its refined voice or its exemplary flow, but because of its demonstration of authentic reflection and personal growth. Nick and I are still in touch today, and I think a large part of our friendship has its roots in this paper. Nick trusted me enough to open up to me about his real struggles, and he saw that I cared about his personal growth even more than I cared about his academic growth.

While Kelsey and Nick wrote about drastically different events in their lives, they both, I believe, came to know themselves better through the writing process, and they both did a bit of personal healing as well. They both discovered what their painful experiences could teach them, and they both considered how they could make personal changes in their lives based on the painful lessons life had offered them. I can think of no better goal for our writing classes and assignments. The heart of mentor-teaching within the composition classroom is to see students' lives changed, in ways both big and small, by crafting our courses in such a way that students' concerns come first and our relationships with students create the necessary trust so their papers can reveal their true inner selves and heal by doing so. Far more than simply promoting good writing, which mentor-teaching certainly promotes, mentor-teachers in the composition classroom will promote student growth toward health and wholeness.

### **CHAPTER 3: MENTOR-TEACHING IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM**

In the previous chapter, I examined the nuances and methodologies for mentor-teaching in the Composition class. In this chapter, I will turn to the other facet of the English classroom as we know it: literature. After setting in place the background and theory of why the literature classroom offers equally strong mentoring opportunities as the composition classroom, I will offer some ideas for how we might put into practice the ideas of two scholars who have already paved the road for mentor-teaching through literature: Louise Rosenblatt and Sheridan Blau. That will lead me into a discussion of “canonical” texts and their applicability to a mentor-teaching context. Throughout these discussions, I will utilize actual student writing from my own teaching experiences that demonstrate students’ willingness to learn life-lessons from literature.

During a 2005 “Introduction to Literature” class, a young woman very honestly told me she felt that one is just as likely to learn life lessons from actual life experiences or even TV as one is from a difficult-to-understand piece of literature. Many of my students have said they feel this way, though this particular student was the most boisterous so far in my career. She seemed almost angry that English teachers thought “this literature stuff” was so valuable. She simply could not see the point of studying literature and felt exasperated that she was expected to study it year after year. Many students, I suspect, feel the same way, though they are not as bold in sharing their frustration. Teaching literature from a mentor-teaching stance, though, can help to bridge the perceived gaps between literature and students’ lives.

Teaching literature (as opposed to composition) comes with an equally meaningful opportunity to impact students’ real lives. After all, no great novelist wrote her masterpieces thinking how great the story would be as a classroom textbook for teaching Colonialist style or

Post-modern rhetorical methods. When an author writes a great text, he pours his beliefs and values into it – his social, political, spiritual...beliefs because he wants readers to examine, consider, and perhaps even adopt those beliefs. Yet the system we have been “raised” in as English teachers has subtly encouraged us to teach what can be tested, and that often means defaulting to facts about the text rather than its implications for our lives. Modernist technique, symbolism, and stream-of-consciousness style are fine aspects of literature to study, but only if they are closely linked to the potential impact on the students’ lives.

The hill we must climb in the literature classroom is steeper than that of the composition classroom when it comes to convincing certain bored students of the content’s relevance for their lives. Unlike learning writing skills, learning to decipher or decode literature is not obviously practical beyond the academic walls in its clear ability to gain one jobs and promotions. Years of trying to gain students’ interest in the literature we love can wear us down, and many spend the majority of their years as literature teachers focusing on the students who are naturally interested in the subject. Who can blame them? Most of us gravitate to people with similar interests. But if one adopts a mentor-teaching approach to the literature classroom, she might begin to see the uninterested students differently. Perhaps she will see the rolled eyes as a challenge to help that very eye-rolling student to have an “aha!” moment. If one has chosen to teach literature as a career, I need not convince him of the connection between literature and life, but I do hope to convince all would-be mentor-teachers not to abandon hope in the ability for literature to change lives, as it has changed mine, and, if you’re reading this, likely, yours.

Returning to the aforementioned student’s complaints about the uselessness of literature, I decided on a whim to allow this “off the subject” (or was it?!) discussion to lead us down an unplanned path. Standing in front of the classroom which had suddenly been overtaken by

complaints about the frivolity of studying literature, I decided to ask students to write about their “worst English classroom experiences.” Rather than trying to defend all of my English colleagues who had frustrated this student (and other students who chimed in), I wanted to turn this conversation into a productive, reflective writing opportunity. The assignment gave our classroom conversation a chance for extension beyond the bell; it also gave the students a chance to vent and to process their frustrations constructively; and it gave me a deeper glimpse of why they found the study of literature so exasperating. Here is what one young woman wrote:

A negative experience I’ve had in an English class was last year in American Lit when we read Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck. I must admit, I got summaries online for almost every single chapter of the book. That’s not to say that the book didn’t have potential: it was simply taught in such a way that made it an unpleasant experience. First of all, my teacher loaded us up with so much unnecessary historical knowledge surrounding the Great Depression that most of the class had trouble absorbing the literature. Also, we moved so quickly through the chapters that we were unable to discuss what the book meant to the average person; instead, we discussed the symbols Steinbeck was using, and how they kept recurring. This wouldn’t have been so bad, but our teacher never really explained how the symbols enhanced the literature, or how they helped Steinbeck get his message across. My feeling was that most of the students couldn’t relate to the book because of how it was taught. There was too much focus on the literature and not enough focus on how to get a message from it. My suggestion is to always focus on getting meaning from the story first, and then analyze the literary devices afterwards. If you do it the other way around, students don’t see

the meaning of the story, so they're not motivated to investigate it further, and they end up not getting anything from lessons on literary techniques. (Nelson)

What profound advice right out of the mouth of a 17-year-old girl! Her annoyance with previous literature classes came from the teacher's emphasis on facts over meaning, not, interestingly, on having to do the reading in the first place as we might suspect. Dierdre points out that tracing an author's use of symbolism can be a great teaching tool, but if it is the only aim of one's teaching, students will quickly dismiss the literature as irrelevant. She advises teachers to, "Focus on getting meaning from the story first, and then analyze the literary devices afterwards." If teachers of literature would see the importance of putting meaning first and literary technique second, we would spare ourselves endless heartache, and we would accomplish the goal that so many of us have set for ourselves: to change lives.

This student is not the first one to see the potential of literature in this way. In fact, she's in esteemed company. Henry Giroux, noted pedagogical and cultural critic, echoes these sentiments. In his 1999 article "Public Intellectuals and the Challenge of Children's Culture," Giroux states,

[M]ainstream educational discourse not only ignores the ideological nature of teaching and learning, it erases culture (i.e. literature and art) from the realm of the political by enshrining it either as purely aesthetic discourse or as a quasi-religious call to celebrate the "Great Books" and "Great Traditions" of what is termed Western Civilization. In both cases, any attempt to transform the nation's classrooms into transformative spaces where future citizens learn to critically engage other political and pedagogical sites outside the classroom are dismissed as irrelevant or unprofessional. (qtd. in Lorentzen 290, parentheses mine)

It is the “critical engagement” of the world beyond the classroom that interests me, and literature is the perfect and possibly even the primary door to such engagement. Literature, after all, is the recorded history of humankind’s struggles: politics, freedom, the meaning of life, the downfall of humankind, and anything and everything that has ever been rationally processed by a human mind for the purpose of its own betterment. But our educational obsession with standardized tests scores and measurable progress has forced many of us to abandon the meaningful personal quest that literature provides in favor of teaching in ways that diminish the un-measurable value of personal growth. As Claire Katz, professor of Philosophy and Women’s Studies at Texas A&M University, puts it in a 2001 journal article called “Teaching Our Children Well,” “Knowing oneself” appears to be a luxury not that we cannot afford, but that we are unwilling to purchase. Academic philosophy has separated the reading of the text from reading ourselves” (535). When we view literary education as an opportunity to teach students to “read themselves,” as Katz profoundly puts it, we open up the world of literature for our students in a new way. We give them the chance for self-reflection and personal growth that so many of them need and that so many of us set out to give them when our careers began. How differently might our students feel about literature studies if they saw each new novel as a chance to know more about themselves rather than as another mandatory list of facts that really only interest the teacher? As Katz suggests, we need to actively work toward reconnecting the reading of texts with the reading of ourselves.

Here’s the great news: Our job as mentor-teaching English educators is actually easier than our peers who teach other courses. Literature does the work of asking probing questions about life for us. All we need to do is approach each text with the aim of making these profound questions apparent, and the students will often do the rest. However, just as it is tempting to

teach and to learn history as a series of dates, names, and events rather than to teach it as a means of questioning critically our own heritage, the current of today's educational system makes it tempting to teach literature as a list of facts rather than as the starting point of an inner journey. Mentor-teaching wants to reverse this trend. Mentor-teaching encourages teachers to start by asking the questions raised by all great literature and to help students wrestle with their answers critically. Just as a history class *ought* to address questions like "Would I have participated in the Crusades?" "Could I have treated blacks so abominably as slave owners did?" or "What would have stopped me from using my power to uproot the Native Americans?" an English class must not merely demand that students know that Raymond Carver was a minimalist who died in 1988 or that the main characters' eat and apple and drink Scotch. The teacher must push the students deeper, down into the roots of the human struggle that Carver is portraying in his story, down to the bones of the story where questions arise like, "Where do I get my boundaries of right and wrong?" "Are humans merely civilized because we are usually supervised?" and "What causes us to always think other people must have it better than we do?" These questions, after all, are more likely to mirror why Carver wrote the story in the first place – so that such questions would be probed by readers. And while Carver's style is undoubtedly central to his message, I believe that he and other great writers would want the questions addressed first and the technique addressed in its secondary place, as a means of creating the all-important *meaning and application*.

With little guidance in how to apply the lessons of the literature classroom, too many students are left merely checking required courses off their lists while they drift from social event to social event looking for guidance in their personal quests for purpose and meaning. There is little question that most college students need a rudder of some sort. Consider some of

these statistics: The rate of depression has tripled in the ten-year period from 1987 to 1997, and young people are often the most susceptible to serious depression (Twenge 106); 17% of teens said they “seriously considered suicide in 2003” (Twenge 213) – that’s nearly one of every five people sitting in our classes; 85% of directors of university counseling centers have reported a recent “rise in the number of students with severe psychological problems” despite the fact that 63% of those same directors also report that their schools have failed to add further resources to help these students (Robbins 394). With statistics like these and the well-known fact that a majority of college students experiment with unhealthy levels of drinking and drugs, the question is where will they find the compass they so clearly need? Since many have not found it at home and few will ever find it in the college social atmosphere, teachers of literature should jump at the opportunity to open the doors of literature to the wandering souls in their classroom. This method requires going against the flow, without question. Creating paper topics and test questions to evaluate students’ performances becomes grayer rather than the black and white evaluative methods of multiple choice or fill-in-the-blank. But by taking the easy route in how we teach and test, we are furthering the unfortunate perception so many students already have: that literature has no relevance beyond the classroom. If that is truly the case, I tell my students, then we might well be wasting our time reading and evaluating literature, as my students seemed to suspect during our impromptu conversation. But! But this irrelevance is not the case, and those of us whose lives have been shaped by the profound impact of great literature need to be sounding a trumpet cry to our students to help them see what we see in these life-changing stories!

### **A Return to Louise Rosenblatt and Reader-Response Criticism**

If we can agree that literature has the power to change lives, we need to help one another conceptualize the place of most effective theories and practices for enacting this change in students' lives. Rather than reinvent the wheel, I want to turn our attention back to the past in the hopes of helping us see the value of what has been in front of our eyes for over a half a century. As such, I want to suggest a reclamation of the basic constructs of reader-response theory and, in particular, the theories of Louise Rosenblatt.

Reader-response criticism puts the primary focus of attention on the reader and her response/reaction to the work at hand. The value of reader-response criticism for mentor-teaching is in its complete student-centeredness. When the teacher interprets a text for the students from his own critical point of view, the majority of the students' interpretations are immediately thrown out the window. Only those students who come from a similar critical angle as the professor are in luck in seeing how the text has meaning for their own lives. But when the readers' (a.k.a. students') responses are the starting point for class discussions and questions, not only do all students suddenly have an active role, but all critical angles are also brought into play. If the teacher is a feminist who sees all literature through that lens, she need not fear that her "pet" perspective will no longer be brought to bear on the class discussions. In most modern classrooms, a student will bring up the feminist angle to which the teacher can add his knowledge. But not only will the feminist interpretation have a voice in a reader-response classroom; so will the Asian voice, the trans-gendered voice, the black voice, the masculine/jock voice, and so on. In this way, reader-response criticism offers teachers an inclusive meta-perspective from which to teach. Not only will students value the opportunity to have their

voices heard, but the teaching of all texts will be far more thorough than any one, inevitably biased, teacher could possibly attain.

Reader-response theory came to prominence in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Before scholars like Rosenblatt, Stanley Fish, and David Bleich began promoting this student-centered approach to reading, the text-centered ideas of New Criticism reigned as the primary method for interpreting literature. In an effort to get to the purest analysis of a text possible, the New Critics warned against the “affective” and “intentional” fallacies, claiming, respectively, that the effect a book had on a reader and/or the attempt to know an author’s intention in writing a poem or novel both led readers down erroneous roads. The New Critics worked with the text itself, focusing on “close reading” of the words on the page, ignoring as much as possible any outside intervention in the interpretation of a piece of literature. Reader-response criticism came to prominence in the 1960’s and 70’s largely as a reaction against the overly text-centered approach of the New Critics. These theorists wanted to bring the reader’s reaction back into play as the primary component for interpreting literature. The reader-response theories of Louise Rosenblatt, whose foundational work *Literature as Exploration*, was published in 1938, are so closely connected to the concepts of mentor-teaching that I have to work actively to prevent merely summarizing what she has already said. Nevertheless, I want to delve into her ideas and offer some suggestions for moving from theory into practice.

In my own experience, we have reverted from the student-centeredness of reader response back to the text-centeredness of New Criticism, or perhaps we never progressed beyond text-centeredness. Either way, text-centered approaches to teaching literature still reign. In the two institutions where I’ve taught, one a high school and one a college, on many occasions, I have heard teachers talk about having students do “close readings,” literally using this term, yet I

have never heard any teachers discuss how to get students applying literature to their own lives. When I have suggested as much in various conversations, the reaction is usually quick agreement, as if I've hit on something obvious, but personal application is certainly not at the forefront of what/how we teach English in 2009. New Criticism's idea that literature's meaning should be divorced from the day-to-day realities of students' lives still holds sway over the preferred methods of teaching English literature. As mentor-teachers, we need to encourage a return to the ideas of reader-response theory by looking more closely at the goals it sought and coming up with new ways for seeking those same, student-centered goals.

Rosenblatt sums up the value of literature this way: "Literature...can be viewed always as the expression of human beings who...are like us, seeking the basic human satisfactions, experiencing the beauties and rigors of the natural world, meeting or resisting the demands of the society about them, and striving to live by their vision of what is important and desirable in life" ("Towards a Cultural Approach" 53). The heart of reader-response criticism (and of mentor-teaching in the literature classroom) lies in seeing literature this way. Rosenblatt's definition leaves each reader open to finding her own vision for what is meaningful in life through the literature we read together. The mentor-teacher, using this approach, encourages each student to bring her own experience to the book at hand in order to refine her own vision of what life means. Reader-response teaching puts the mentor-teacher in a role of facilitator and students in the place of truth-seekers. The teacher does not stand in the front of the room telling students what to think; rather, he acts as a guide to help students discover what *they* think.

I constantly seek to help students discover how they can "strive to live by their vision of what is important and desirable in life" by having them probe to understand the application of the literature we read to their lives. At the beginning of the past school year, my students read

Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* in conjunction with the 2008 presidential election. I chose the text precisely because of its political nature and because I wanted to use it as a springboard to talk not only about the election at hand but also about the nature of politics in general. But before I had them start reading the novel, I had students write journal entries examining their own political viewpoints. My motivation for doing this sort of writing before reading the book came from a desire to give them a "ground zero" of sorts before being swayed by Willy Stark's charisma or becoming convinced of their own inability to change the system as Jack Burden is during most of the novel. Having students write about a key theme before beginning their reading facilitates Rosenblatt's suggestion of enabling students to understand their own views rather than just adopting those of the author and/or teacher. My objective was to get students to do plenty of *self*-examination while they were in the process of doing text-examination. So, I asked a number of fairly open-ended questions like, "Tell why you lean the way you do politically," and "Examine your own views on a specific politician or political issue and tell why you feel the way you do." The responses were tremendously varied, as you might imagine.

Students at both ends of the political spectrum spoke openly, despite the public nature of their comments since they were posted online for all to read. One very conservative boy took the opportunity to attack (then) candidate Barack Obama:

In 2006, Barack Obama stood before a microphone in a NBC interview and stated "The issues are never simple. One thing I'm proud of is that very rarely will you hear me simplify the issues." Fast forward two years to the Democratic National Convention and we see Senator completely contradicting himself. Simplifying the issues would be an understatement-Obama seems to take each individual issue

and state that it will disappear if he is elected president. Obama's campaign has become full of promises with no plans of action. Sure, Obama has spent time in Washington as a senator, but he has never held an executive position.

Furthermore, while a senator Obama NEVER wrote a piece of legislation that has really significantly changed America. Also, he has no foreign policy experience.

Sure, he "balanced" his ticket by selecting foreign-policy veteran Joe Biden as his running mate, but that doesn't make up for the fact that Obama has no personal experience. Why should this man who owes his whole campaign to one

captivating speech at the 2004 DNC get to become president? Its very simple,

Obama is not at all qualified to be president of the United States of America.

Notice how Edward writes quite persuasively, or at least passionately, because he has been allowed to express his own views. As Rosenblatt advises, Edward uses his writing to figure out his own "vision of what is important and desirable in life." And because Edward had expressed such clear opinions, I had many opportunities while teaching the book to return to Edward's ideas, asking him if Warren's writing had changed his understanding of how qualified one needs to be in order to get elected to a political office. Willy Stark, after all, realizes early on that qualifications mean little; how one presents himself to the public means virtually everything. So, because Edward had expressed his personal opinions, I now had the mentor-teaching opportunity to help him solidify or even change his views based on how his views interacted with Warren's views.

On the opposite side of the coin was the young woman who wants to literally become a hippy:

You might have figured out a little bit about my political beliefs from the *Mayor of Casterbridge* post. I'm one of those crazy liberals, right? The ones that your parents warn you about. But honestly, sometimes I just wish we didn't have to deal with politics because it's so divisive. Sure, it can be fun to argue sometimes, but I'd rather we just all live together in harmony. I guess I'm more utopian than liberal. What I really want to do is just go live on a hippie commune where we can just all love each other, grow food for Green Star Market, listen to the Beatles, practice yoga, and make our own clothes. (I haven't found one of those yet, though.) So maybe I'm communist. Last year I learned about Wicca for world religions, and I found that I agreed with one of their beliefs (but I am not Wiccan, so don't grow spreading that rumour): do whatever you want, as long as it doesn't harm others (people, animals, nature). Not that I live up to that that, but I try. That's why I believe in choice: for abortion, same-sex marriage, and drugs. That doesn't mean that I'm a slutty lesbian druggie. In fact, I'm none of those traits. But I don't think we should condemn anyone who is. And as for not harming others, I think that gun control helps that a little bit.

Though Lexi comes from the opposite perspective as Edward does, she too expresses her own growing vision of what is important and meaningful in this world, and she gave those on Edward's side (who were many given the conservative values of many families at the school) some points to ponder. She also gave me a platform from which to teach her as we read the book. As a mentor-teacher, I had the chance to ask her where one crosses the line from doing what one wants so long as it does not hurt others into Willy Stark's territory of deliberately harming some people so as to help himself. Willy, as a Populist, and Lexi, as a would-be hippy,

both want to make the world a better place, and by knowing Lexi's personal views on how this might be accomplished, I had a better grounding to know how to teach her in a mentoring way, both encouraging and challenging her views as we read *All the King's Men*.

These two "wiki posts" or journal entries represent the broad spectrum of political views that any teacher of teenagers will find. They also demonstrate the value of allowing students to take a topic and put their own personal spin on it. Had I asked students more explicitly to write about a political issue or an issue raised by Warren's book that I found important, they would be confined to saying "what the teacher wants to hear," or at least what they thought I would want to hear. But by allowing them to connect with the political nature of Warren's novel in their own way, I not only got to know the views of my students better, I also got some convincing and persuasive writing. Additionally, as you can imagine, I got some great fodder for class discussions as we began to actually read the political novel. Thus, Rosenblatt's suggestion to let students' views lead the way rather than leading the way with our own ideas or the author's ideas provides not only the motivation for excellent writing but also the groundwork for fascinating classroom dialogue and debate.

Rosenblatt's primary contribution to the field of reader response criticism is called the "transactional theory." As she puts it, "Our subject-matter as teachers of literature, then, is the transactions between readers and books" ("Acid Test" 63). Notice she does not say the meaning of the texts, but the transactions between the students and the texts. Both, in other words, are vital to the process of teaching literature. As with mentor-teaching, the transactional theory demands that teacher know both their students *and* the literature they teach. Traditional teaching has placed too much value on the literature, de-emphasizing the teacher's knowledge of the student. The transactional theory demands that we are scholars of literature and of students'

lives. Rosenblatt took her lead from two key schools of thought from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. First, she credits John Dewey and the Pragmatists for introducing her to the term “transaction,” the idea that each person is in a continual give-and-take relationship with the world around her (“Interview” xviii). Second, she credits Charles Sanders Peirce, the U.S. founder of semiology, with introducing her to the triadic concept of readers’ responses to literature (“The Transactional Theory” 3). Peirce added to Saussure’s dyadic relationship between the signifier and the signified, claiming there were actually three parts to the meaning of each word: the sign, the object, and the interpretant. The concepts led Rosenblatt to formulate the “transactional theory” of reading literature: the idea that when one reads a text, there is the text, the reader, and the transaction between the two all playing a part in the overall experience.

The transactional theory fits perfectly with mentor-teaching approaches because it recognizes the value of all parties involved in the interpretation of literature: the reader and her personal history, the text, and the particular historical moment when the two come together. Here is where the mentor-teacher steps in. The transaction between the text and the reader will be unique based upon the time and place in which the book is read. Perhaps the student has just experienced a breakup or the divorce of his parents. Or perhaps the student needs direction for her future. The mentor-teacher offers his input into the transaction between the student and the text at this particular, unique historical moment.

A practical example of the transactional theory comes from a college level “Intro to Literature” class I taught at a local two-year college. After reading Guy de Maupassant’s “The Necklace,” I had my students evaluate their personal connections with the story. The story itself is about a woman whose lack of honesty about losing a necklace leads her to ruin her own life by trying to repay the debts incurred when buying a replacement necklace. As it turns out, the

original necklace was a fake, and had she merely been honest with its owner, her debt would have been forgiven without any payment whatsoever. When students encounter stories written in a different culture, a different era, and even a different language, they are quick to assume that a story has no relevance to themselves, but when pressed, they can find astute and meaningful applications to their own lives, as Rachel does below. Here is how this young woman applied the lesson of a disaster turning into a learning experience:

A personal experience that relates my life to the story “The Necklace” is one where a truly bad happening turns out to be a life changing experience, for the better. When my parents got divorced, I was too young to know the difference. I lived with my dad and my brother. My dad worked long hours, came home and cooked dinner, and sang us to sleep. It was really hard growing up without a mother to teach me about being a girl. Brushing my hair, painting my nails, and getting ready to leave the house were all tasks that I struggled to accomplish. When I was nearing seven years old, my dad met a woman named Susan. After a short period of time, my dad, my brother and I moved in with Susan and her son Dave. We all lived together, like the Brady Bunch, two different families merged together. Finally my dad and Susan got engaged and married. Susan, who I began referring to as Mom, was as close to a real mother as a step-mom could possibly be. She taught me things, helped me grow, involved me in her life, and really changed me into the person that I am today. To this day, my [step]mom is still a role model in my life and she has absolutely changed my life for the better. This experience shows that sometimes bad things, such as divorce, can change your life for the better. (Kowlan)

I've not studied Maupassant nearly enough to know if this student has taken from his story what he might have wanted, and I'm not even sure that I agree that this lesson is one of the morals of the story. But my desire, like most authors', is that my students not only learn to evaluate literature but that they learn to apply it based on their "transactions" with it. If they take something from a text that I fail to see in it, that only means they are free from dependence on my teacherly interpretation of the literature. In other words, it means they have had their own "transactions" with the text, transactions that are unique to their own situations and life experiences. Had Rita read this story three years earlier or three years later, she might have taken away something completely different, even completely unrelated to her stepmom. But at age 18, her writing above represents the transaction she had with this particular story, written centuries ago in a different culture and a different language. Here is literature at its finest, and all we have to do is to foster an environment where students can express their own take-aways based on their unique "transactions." The learning will take care of itself once we have created this type of environment. And even if my class does not inspire them to become lifelong readers of literature, it will at the very least get them thinking about matters that will impact their lives beyond the walls of current and future English classrooms.

Delving deeper into Rosenblatt's transactional theory, she says that all reading transactions fall somewhere along a continuum of "efferent" and "aesthetic" reading. Efferent reading is reading done for the sake of gleaning information, coming from the root word "effere," which means "to carry away." Aesthetic reading is reading done for the experience of sensations, feeling, and emotions that arise as we read various types of texts. The teacher's job, says Rosenblatt, is to help students find the right place along the continuum for their own best reading response. We must teach them when to read for information, when to read for effect,

and when to read for a mixture of the two. Rosenblatt's central belief is that no two people ever read the same book because each individual person brings his own lens to the table, and that lens is as unique as each person. She settled on the term transaction because it implies the value of both the reader and the text, not falling into the trap of being entirely text centered or entirely reader centered. Once again, this theory necessitates true mentor-teaching. Students need teachers who know them well enough to help them find the right stance on the continuum. A teacher who knows nothing personal about her students has little chance of serving the students' needs very well when a particular discussion topic arises from the literature at hand. But the mentor-teacher who knows that Bobby's mother has just remarried a man that Bobby doesn't care for will be particularly sensitive to the impact of Hamlet's situation with Claudius and his own mother.

In the fall of 2008, I was teaching the novel *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, to my AP English students. This gut-wrenching story of an escaped slave who kills her own daughter in order to prevent her from being re-enslaved tears at the heart of any reader with a pulse. One of the journals I asked my students to write posed the question, "What character do you relate to and why?" I offer the following two sample responses as examples of helping students to find the right stance on the efferent-aesthetic continuum. One student, Brianna, said this: "I love people and I would become a raving lunatic if I was never able to build relationships with other people. That is why Denver catches my attention so much. She scares me. Her character makes me realize what I could be without loved ones. It's truly frightening." Brianna's honest and raw emotion is something to be encouraged but also perhaps reigned in a bit. As a mentor-teacher, I now had the chance to help her take a response that might be focusing too much on the aesthetics of the story and turn it into a response that combines emotion and practicality. I looked for an

opportunity to ask Brianna and the class as a whole how we can balance our emotional responses to this gripping story with more measured, real-world applications from *Beloved*. While I do not know how successful I was at striking this balance, I wanted students to take visceral reactions like Brianna's and turn them into reminders to cherish our loved ones actively, maybe through notes of encouragement or extra "I love you's." In other words, I wanted to help them find a healthy stance on the continuum between efferent and aesthetic reading.

A second response to this question, from a female student named Anna, went a bit too far in the efferent direction, and here too was a chance to nudge a student in a new direction. Anna wrote,

I cannot help but become intrigued by *Beloved*. In the beginning of the novel, Sethe mentions that the baby, Beloved, died because her "throat [was] cut".

However, later on, a grown woman about nineteen or twenty years old also called Beloved appears into Sethe's life (Morrison 6). In addition, even though none of the members of 124 recognizes Beloved, apparently, Beloved is acquainted with Sethe and Denver many years ago. Due to some of the questions that Beloved inquires, Denver begins to become skeptic toward Beloved's true identity.

Although Beloved pretends that she is a stranger to Sethe and Denver, Denver notices the oddity in "the questions Beloved asked: 'where your diamonds?'...and most perplexing: Tell me your earrings" (Morrison 75).

Anna's "intrigue" might go too far in the efferent direction of reading. She uses a number of quotes, but by doing so almost sticks too much to the "facts" of the story without acknowledging the emotion that is wrenched out of readers as they experience the story. As such, I began to look for opportunities to see if Anna was experiencing the story on an emotional level as well as

on a factual level. I wanted to find out if she was able to get beyond the mere facts of the story into the feelings of the story. As with Brianna, I do not know if I succeeded in connecting with Anna in this way, and to be fair to both young ladies, I am only presenting a small portion of their journal entries here so I cannot claim that these submissions represent the sum total of their *Beloved* experiences. Nevertheless, reactions like these fall at the extreme ends of Rosenblatt's continuum, and therefore they need to be checked by mentor-teachers who prod students to consider the alternatives to their own responses. Reading other students' reactions can help to facilitate this process because students are required to consider that their own interpretation or reaction is not the only possible one. In my classes, I aim to help students find their own efferent/aesthetic stance both by having them read each other's responses and by having class discussions about what the class as a whole thinks of each other's journal entries. And while I cannot ever perfect the task of telling students how to respond to what they read, I can teach them to critically evaluate their reactions to literature so they are aware of the need to strike a balance between efferent and aesthetic reading.

Lest one think that Rosenblatt's ideas dismiss the value of rigorous, academic literary study in favor of solely asking students what they think about the literature, Rosenblatt says that by putting students' interests up front, we pave the way to more opportunities to teach literary history, terminology, and theory. She says that if the criterion for teaching remains

relevance to the nourishment of a personal sense of literature as a mode of experience...we can move happily on to historical and social approaches in their properly secondary place. For they will no longer lead away from the work of art, but feed back into the reader's heightened awareness of how it fits into the context he himself provides. ("Acid Test" 69)

I do not want to seem to suggest that our literature teaching should be so student-centered that students learn nothing of literary history and never read a little Shakespeare or Foucault. Rather, like Rosenblatt, I am suggesting that the starting point for good literature teaching should be the students' transactions with the literature – whether those are positive or negative. Then, if we start with the students' concerns and values, we will end up with opportunities to talk about socially constructed selves, Saussurian ideas of object relations, and Shakespearian conceits, but if those overly text/teacher-centered concepts are the starting point, we will lose students on day one – missing the chance to see their lives shaped by literary lessons as our own have been.

Rosenblatt concludes “The Acid Test in the Teaching of Literature” with some probing questions for would-be mentor-teachers seeking to use a reader response approach to their teaching:

Should not the process of reflection deal with such questions as: What happened, not simply in the story, but rather within me as I read the story? What things struck me forcibly? What were the ‘clues’ in the story that ‘added up’ to a meaning for me? What puzzled me? What meanings did others see in it – my classmates, my teacher, perhaps critics in published comments? Do they defend their interpretations by pointing to things in the story that I overlooked? Does this help me to see my blind spots? Or did they overlook some things that make my interpretation at least equally possible? How can I make this reflection the means of arriving at a more complete response to this and other works? (70)

Perhaps, given Rosenblatt's ideas, the first essay or journal a mentor-teacher should assign after reading a new work would be this one: How did this story impact you and what about it made it impactful on you in that way? From there we could move on to deeper philosophical readings or

to historical situations if time permitted. Even if it didn't, our students would at least have the chance to be honest about their connection with the books they read, and they would be doing personal introspection as they reviewed the literature. As such, the aims of mentor-teaching and reader response theory would both be met, and students' entire outlook on the value of literature for their day-to-day lives might be forever changed for the good – not a bad accomplishment in a semester's work!

### **Letting Students' Questions Lead the Way: The Literature Workshop**

One practical way that many literature scholars are following the lead of both reader response theorists and composition scholars is by seeing their classrooms more as workshops than as lecture halls. Though some find this daunting because, as Mary Segall says in “The Missing Voice in the Debate,” literature teachers have often been trained to be “experts” rather than “facilitators” (196). The “expert” stance is what has been modeled for us in our own schooling, and it can be quite unnerving to release control of the discussions in our classes. But our supposed expertise inhibits the goals of mentor-teaching. Toby Fulwiler defines lecturing as “giving long answers to questions nobody asked” (“Song” 320) in order to show off our prodigious expertise. I've shared this definition in my own classes this year to explain why I prefer not to lecture, and to a person, there is a knowing smile on their faces that tells me they have felt this way far too often. The way around the dilemma of wanting our students to learn without us lecturing them is through the “literature workshop,” a concept that puts reader response theory into daily use and is fully explained and demonstrated in Sheridan Blau's *The Literature Workshop*.

From a practical angle, Blau offers helpful reader response techniques in his concept of the “literature workshop.” His ideas apply composition’s concept of a workshop approach to the literature classroom. In a literature workshop,

The teacher’s expertise is called upon...in selecting texts and posing problems that represent promising opportunities for acquiring particular kinds of knowledge, as well as in offering commentaries, glosses, and reflections that supplement and frame the experience of the workshop in some larger conception of disciplinary knowledge in literature. (13)

The teacher’s job is not, in other words, to lecture and tell students how to read books/poems. The teacher is a guide, not an all-knowing master with all the answers. Literature’s beauty often lies in the many “right” answers that can be gleaned from it, and by taking on the persona of the one who knows these answers, many teachers convince students that they themselves will never be capable of meaningful reading without the help of an expert. Instead, following Rosenblatt’s lead, Blau implies that we need to help students see their own expertise and insight as equally valuable to our own. The connection between this approach and mentor-teaching should be hard to miss: By teaching literature in this way we walk alongside students in their journeys of understanding rather than standing above them dispensing black and white answers to life’s toughest questions.

Blau notes that lecturing actually teaches students to read their assignments in a cursory way (if at all) because the teacher can be counted on to explain it in class. But as mentor-teachers in a workshop classroom, we should let our students’ confusion lead the way rather than trying to overcome that confusion with our brilliant lecturing skills. He believes that “[T]he student who is confused is frequently the one who understands enough to see a problem, a

problem that less perceptive students have not yet noticed” (21). In a workshop classroom, the confused student need not sit in the back and hope his unasked question gets answered. Rather, her confusion becomes the very springboard from which the class grows. The other students, not the teacher, will help the confused student reach a more comfortable understanding of the difficult passage or text. In this model, the teacher spends his time selecting passages, breaking students into small groups, guiding the student-led, question-based discussions, and summarizing the knowledge brought to light by the students. The readers’ responses, in a very practical sense, are the content of the course.

A literature workshop is structured as follows: Students spend 3-5 minutes reading a passage on their own multiple times, making notes on problems, difficulties, and questions. Then in groups of three (Blau thinks this number is ideal) students try to solve the problems that have been raised by their readings and see if any new ones arise. Then the group comes back together and reports/discusses (7). In true reader-response fashion, the students’ voices come first, even ahead of the author’s. The author/text merely provides the platform from which students discuss what interests, confuses, intrigues, or excites them.

The problem with lecture-based classes where teachers spend the class period telling students what is interesting to them, inevitably delving into their appreciation (after many readings, usually!) of the nuanced literary elements that are present. But Blau adamantly denounces this type of classroom. As he puts it, “By asking students as they read to look for and analyze such elements as irony, theme, symbol, tone and so on, we erect a screen or alternate text ‘that stands between the literature students read and their own humanity’” (Scholes qtd. in Blau 102). These alternate texts become the content of virtually all literature courses.

An example of the hill we have to climb to reverse the lecturing trend in teaching comes from this past academic year (2008) in my AP English class. I had my high school seniors write an analysis of their own histories as readers, asking them to identify and discuss how they had become the readers that they are today. What has shaped their overall reading strategies, emotions, attitudes and so on? Since they are AP students at a private school, most of them naturally gravitate toward a natural propensity for studying literature. But one young woman's point of view really highlighted the disparity between the literature classroom and "fun" reading. After detailing her passion for the fantasy world of books, the aforementioned Brianna offered the following:

I have also become incredibly impatient regarding assigned school reading because I do not want to share my fantasy world with school. It makes me extraordinarily bitter. Yet I must press onwards I suppose. I believe that a good book can change a person's perspective on life in an instant...thus the more I read, the more I have the opportunity to grow as a person.

As Brianna's final sentence states, she is passionate about the potential of literature to change her life, but as her other comments demonstrate, she sees a disconnect between her reading for school and her reading for fun. I wish I could say that this year has changed Brianna's views because I brilliantly crafted workshop experiences that showed her how "fun" it can be to read for English class, but I can't. In fact, the opposite happened. I think this year only made the disconnect worse for Brianna. As an AP teacher, I focused my testing and essay assignments on mimicking the AP exam questions. Brianna's writing went from solid A-level work at the beginning of the year to low B and even C-level work by the end of the year. Her final paper received a C, and upon rereading it, Brianna agreed that it was a weak paper that, in her words,

“deserved an F.” As we talked through her frustration, she complained that she hated having to deny her natural voice in an effort to say what the AP readers would want to hear in a structure that would satisfy them. In other words, the “system” of how we teach and test had killed a part of her passion for reading and writing. She came into the class wary of classroom reading and she left the class having added wariness towards classroom writing.

I offer this story as an example of what we’re up against as we try to turn away from being teachers-as-masters to being teachers-as-guides. I structured the course Brianna took as a workshop classroom from day one. We sat in a circle – all on the same level. Students led the discussions most days with their own prepared thoughts and questions. We wandered off the subject, sometimes for entire periods. In short, I conducted a workshop class the best way I know how. And for many students, I think it worked successfully. They felt prepared for the exam, and many of them openly admitted to loving the books we read. So, I wasn’t a complete failure. But I did have a fine line to walk between teaching a workshop class and preparing them for the ultra-standardized AP English exam, perhaps the pinnacle of systematized measurement of students’ English knowledge. In Brianna’s case, the “system” won out over my efforts to conduct a class wherein students’ voices and opinions were not only heard but valued above all else. If we want to be mentor-teachers who conduct literature workshops, we have a steep hill to climb. Students are used to the system where they are told the answers in the teacher’s lectures, and many are convinced, despite their own intelligence, that they cannot be successful at figuring out how to say what the teacher(s) wants to hear. Like Brianna, their attempts to fit their responses to literature into an academic mold will lead them to a sense of frustration. Nevertheless, I am optimistic about the potential for Blau’s model to radically change both the way we teach and the way our students perceive the value of literature in their lives. Blau might

well be speaking of Brianna when he says, “[W]hat needs to be addressed to revitalize the teaching of literature is not so much theories about reading and literary discourse, but the culture of instruction” (18). Though I tried to change the culture of instruction in my own classroom, I was working against a much larger system than I can change in one academic year. It will be a beautiful day for students like Brianna when preparing for the AP English exam does not mean abandoning one’s unique but brilliant writing style in favor of saying what some unnamed English “master” wants to hear in order to give Brianna her 4 or 5 on the exam. By using Blau’s literature workshop as a practical way of moving the culture of instruction toward mentor-teaching, we might be able, collectively, to change said culture enough so that literature can be both fun and life-changing at the same time and even within the confines of an English class.

Teaching literature in a workshop format requires of the teacher a certain degree of humility on the part of the teacher, for she must lay aside her hard-earned knowledge and allow the students to lead the way. This humility, though, can and should serve as a mentoring model from which students can learn healthy approaches to reading and interpreting literature. Finding the right stance from which to teach literature may have radical consequences in our students’ lives, says Blau, for

English teachers may serve as the most reliable guides and models for all persons, whose private, civic, and professional lives (whether they want it this way or not) require constant negotiation with texts whose meanings are finally no less indeterminate or subject to multiple interpretations than any novel or poem in our literary canon. (78)

This is a high calling for English teachers! We are teaching students to negotiate the texts of their lives, says Blau, and that must not be done from a high perch but rather from a seat next to

the students. Far too often, Blau admonishes, the texts we choose to teach demonstrate precisely the opposite of this necessary humility. Difficult texts (which we happen to love) reinforce for students the disparity between the “brilliance” of the teacher and the “ignorance” of the student (13-14). In reality, the only difference between teacher and student has nothing to do with intelligence and everything to do with practice. Not only have we, the teachers, spent years (and money!) getting to know all there is to know about literary greats like Shakespeare, we were probably more naturally interested in the topic to begin with than the majority of our students. Thus, as Blau puts it, we must “monitor our own teaching practices to ensure that our instruction does not exaggerate the gap between what we are able to do and what our students are able to do as readers and interpreters of the texts we assign” (96). Whether it is from forgetfulness of what it is like to sit in the student’s place or whether it is from a lack of humility, we teachers are often reluctant to admit to our students that we aren’t smarter than them – just more interested and more willing to forge ahead when we are confused: “The difference between us and our students is that we have a much higher tolerance for failure” (30).

One of my brightest sophomores this year brings this point home. David is a young man who has virtually everything going for him. He has one of the top three GPA’s in his sophomore class; he is well-liked by his peers; he plays football; he volunteers; and he is unceasingly attentive and prepared for class. Yet even this diligent and respectful young man sees the text selections of most English classes as overly difficult and disconnected from his real life. Here are David’s own words when asked to discuss his history as a reader:

Generally, I enjoy reading because through it I learn many lessons that can help me for the rest of my life. My choice of books consist of not just thrilling turn-pagers, but also of ones that contain a little bit of meaning and deeper thought.

The reading in English class is a completely different story. Most of the time, I do not have an interest in the books I am reading for English.

When a young man as studious and willing to learn as David says that he has no interest in the books he has read for past English classes, something is wrong with our culture of instruction. Unlike most, David reads every word that gets assigned, whether he enjoys it or not. But despite his eager intellect, he still finds the reading uninteresting. I am certainly not blaming David's former English teachers as individuals for this problem. Like me, they have been told what to teach and are largely incapable of altering text selections no matter how much they may want to. College teachers probably have more say in what texts they choose, but even still, there is institutional pressure to teach the "classics" (more on those later). Whether it is because they have played too many video games and lack the attention span needed for reading Melville, or whether it is the fact that the classics just don't seem readily relevant to their 2009 lives, students find the classics uninteresting. Our task as mentor-teachers in a workshop setting is to find ways around this dilemma strategically. If we have no choice in what we teach, we must change the way that we teach to be more in line with Blau's ideas – letting students' questions and comments lead the discussion rather than lecturing students on all the subtle literary devices and historical background that students find so boring. If we actually get to choose what we teach, we need to make it one of our primary objectives to find texts that students will relate to. Not that our job is to entertain them. It's not! But it is our job to flatten the hurdles as much as possible so we give our students the best possible chance of connecting with literature. If we can't even get students like David interested, we still have a long way to go in becoming workshop-based mentor-teachers. As Blau notes, the life-changing potential of literature is too

significant to run the risk of turning our students off to this great resource forever. We owe it to them to find ways to help them connect with the lessons of literature.

If we want to connect the literature we teach to our students' lives, one practical, mentoring approach to teaching literature in a workshop format can be to share in students' struggles by doing assignments (not all, but some) alongside students, as Blau suggests (155). Rather than seeing only our most select work and thereby perpetuating the myth of our expertise and mastery, by showing students our first drafts, our confusion, and our struggles, we model for them what it's like to be a reader and/or a writer trudging through the thick mire of trying to gain an understanding of our own about what we're reading. For example, I often put a quote on the board before class and have students journal their response to the quote. I find that if I simply ask for thoughts about the quote, I usually have numerous volunteers for response, but if I ask students to *read* aloud what they've written, I rarely have any respondents. When there is a volunteer, he almost always prefaces his or her reading with a statement like, "This isn't very clear, but I'll read it anyway." Usually, it's surprisingly clear, but they, like me, are intimidated to read a first draft aloud for fear of seeming unintelligent. When I do this assignment alongside them, as I often do, I, too, am just as quick as they are to offer disclaimers before I read my work. As the teacher, I want my thoughts to be profound and perfectly expressed. But the humility of mentor-teaching that I'm referring to comes into play in the willingness to show students that we are not smarter than them or even better at this particular subject than them. We just happen to be a little further down the road of study and interest in the subject matter at hand. We as mentor-teachers must be humble enough to demonstrate our own difficulties in hopes that our students will feel encouraged rather than discouraged that this "literature thing" is worth their time.

In the spring of 2006, in a college-level “Introduction to Literature” class I taught, I tried this method out as extensively as I ever have ever. I designed a project called “The Research Short Story” in order to fulfill the college’s requirement that students write a research paper during this class. The task was for students (and me) to pick a short story author they enjoyed and to write a story that modeled itself on that author’s work. The research came into play in that, before writing, they had to thoroughly get to know and understand their author through research. They had to find four articles pertaining to either their particular author or the story itself, and they then synthesized this material in a two page summary of their knowledge. Additionally, they had to submit a typed page with various details that would be included in their stories, a summary of a second story, a rough draft, and a final draft (See appendix B for the full assignment). I tried to stay one full week ahead of them so they could see exactly what I wanted from them ahead of time.

At the end of the assignment, both the students and I had put in far more work than we would have for a traditional research paper, but there was a sense of satisfaction that was so strong it was almost palpable. I “published” the stories in a spiral bound “book” that I offered to students if they wanted to purchase one. A number of them did, even though they were \$13 a book! But the main reason I share this story is to say how much appreciation I gained for my own students, and, I think, they for me. The difficulty of writing a good story made me much more kind when it came time to grade – much kinder than I might have been if I were simply grading their stories without having tried to write my own (an imitation of Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” by the way). Attempting to weave in symbolism that conveyed spiritual rigidity, as most of O’Connor’s stories do, was far more trying than I suspected it would be. My biggest struggle was in trying to make the symbolism present without being overly

obvious or corny. The beauty of this struggle, though, was that I could share it openly with the class and talk to them as a peer about the difficulty of writing a creative story. I was, quite literally, their peer in this process, and though I cannot know quantitatively how much it improved my relationship to the class, I know it was significant. The students and I were “in it together,” and even though they said, to a person, that they put in far more effort than they had ever given to a paper, they all seemed satisfied with our newfound mutual appreciation for the authors we were imitating and, more importantly, for each other.

A more recent example of this sort of teaching comes from a recent 10<sup>th</sup> grade class wherein we were discussing Lucille Clifton’s “wishes for sons.” In the poem, Clifton goes through a rather graphic list of “wishes” for her sons – all of which have to do with the female menstrual cycle and its inherent difficulties. She concludes the poem with the line, “let them think they have accepted/ arrogance in the universe,/ then bring them to gynecologists/ not unlike themselves.” This line, originally, confused me, so I decided to ask the class to help me out. I said something to the effect of, “Now this isn’t a rhetorical question about this line’s meaning; I really don’t get it. Can you help me understand it?” Most of them dutifully looked down, possibly to try to help or possibly to avoid getting called on. Nevertheless, we forged ahead together and came to the conclusion that Clifton is saying both that gynecologists are unpleasantly arrogant and, in the 1950’s and 1960’s, when she would have needed a gynecologist, universally male. She is, in other words, wishing for her sons to know the experience of going to a gynecologist who cannot possibly understand the pains and embarrassments of being a female. There was no *Dead Poets’ Society* moment of appreciation about how much I had just changed students’ lives with my humble admission that I simply didn’t get the line. Honestly, there was very little difference in the demeanor of the students at

all, if there was any. Still, that's not exactly what I'm aiming for. I'm aiming for a deeper trust, and I hope that was accomplished in that few minutes of honesty. Perhaps next time a student is unclear, she will feel more comfortable expressing her uncertainty because I paved the way by expressing mine. As with other forms of mentor-teaching, though, the changes that we hope for in classroom dynamics take a lot of time and a lot of sustained dedication to such practices as Blau and I are suggesting. We will never solve all students' frustrations with English in one semester or even one year, but we can begin to establish trusting relationships that may, in some cases, lead to authentic life change in students.

After suggesting all of these and many more helpful theories and ideas for how to conduct a literature workshop, Blau concludes *The Literature Workshop* by highlighting the most important gift that we teachers of literature have to offer our students: the ability to "read" the world around them. As Blau states,

For if the world is a difficult text, with every event, conversation, and experience demanding careful reading, yielding multiple and competing interpretations, and subject to various sorts of criticism, then English teachers...are teaching students to read...all the texts of their lives...Disciplined instruction in literature, in other words, can powerfully influence our students' capacity to negotiate, interpret, and evaluate all the events of their lives, from the most ordinary to the most momentous. (205)

Literature classes, in other words, are not merely academic exercises. Rather, they are life-changing opportunities where students can learn to "negotiate, interpret, and evaluate" countless aspects of their lives. Sheridan Blau's advice serves as a helpful guide for anyone who wants to be a better mentor-teacher – the sort of teacher who keeps students thinking about how to apply

what they learned in English class long after the semester has ended. For my own part, I am grateful for Blau's advice because I believe in the power of literature to change others' lives as it has changed mine. I believe that the English classroom can and should be a positive place for both lovers of literature and lovers of math alike. Literature has life lessons to teach all of us. Unfortunately, the way literature is too-often taught needs some rescuing from "student indifference by [teachers] helping students see how it speaks to them as human beings rather than as test takers and technical analysts" (Scholes qtd. in Blau 102). The advice offered by Blau throughout *The Literature Workshop* can help any willing mentor-teacher rescue literature from the backburners of students' minds so students can appreciate the impact of great literature throughout their lives.

### **Canonical Literature and Mentor-Teaching**

Both Rosenblatt and Blau recognize that students' interests should be a vital component as we select the books we will read with them. Unfortunately, in high schools, most teachers have very little say in what they teach; it's just the luck of the draw for them, and they have to get creative in shaping their teaching of the chosen texts to the greatest benefit for their unique students. In colleges, the higher the level of course, the more autonomy the professor typically has in text selection, but at the lower level classes, many still lack the power to choose. Thus, they are stuck with "classic" texts chosen by administrators who do not seem to share the belief that students' interest levels are valuable for consideration. Previously, I have mentioned my frustration at the boredom many students express toward the canonical literature many of us are forced to teach, but nevertheless, we must deal with how to teach canonical works given that so many of us have no other choice. At my own high school, we have recently switched from a

very user-friendly but less academically rigorous textbook to the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*. My sophomore students are so intimidated by the sheer magnitude of the *Norton* that they simply will not give the authors inside of it a chance. They talk as if everything in the book was written by some boring author named Norton. The tiny print and the massive weight of the book convince students that literature must not be for them if it requires enjoying this sort of reading. The books we switched away from were hard-cover books with glossy pages and plenty of pictures and white space. While they certainly lacked the academic merit and breadth of material as the *Norton*, they at least sought to draw young readers into the pages.

In a perfect world, each teacher would uniquely select the best texts from all available literature for the particular students in her classroom. We, however, do not live in a perfect world. At the end of the day, mentor-teachers have to simply play with the hand they're dealt. If we are required to teach "canonical" or "classic" texts that happen to have little obvious merit for our students, we have to get creative in helping students make the connections. Because that's what so many teachers have to do, I want to focus now on some of the classic texts I have taught and how I have sought to shape them toward adolescent applicability. Before getting into that, I want to take a look at some of what previous scholars have to say about the issue of teaching the classics.

Louise Rosenblatt comments as follows on the classics' value:

[C]lassics must be viewed in the light of...the need to help our students acquire the habit of turning to literature for personal pleasure, broadened horizons, greater insight. That can come about only as we help them to relate to their literary experiences the life from which they turn...If the classics are to have value for us today, they must be proved meaningful for our present lives. ("Moderns" 107)

The goal, in other words, is not to abolish the classics from our teaching repertoires, but to demonstrate to students that they are “meaningful for [their] present lives.” The work required from teachers to demonstrate this value requires that we ourselves look at classics from a new angle, that of our students. Many of us, as English “nerds,” love classic literature for the beauty of the language or for the depth of the symbolism, but our standard level adolescents find symbolism as naturally exciting as they find asphalt. Ideally, our institutional culture will change enough that one day English department heads will select mandatory works based on their relevance to students’ lives. For now, we have to help students see the “pleasure” and “insight” of the works that have been chosen for us.

### **Mentor-Teaching and Classroom Discussions about Literature**

During a 2006 conversation about the pedagogical culture of testing knowledge over insight with my dissertation director, Dr. Elizabeth Burmester, she shared an experience from her high school days of reading Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. She remembered being asked on the test, “What does the ‘A’ stand for?” Notice the wording: Not “What does the ‘A’ symbolize?” but simply “What does it stand for?” The question’s focus on getting a specific, and “right,” answer is unfortunate for two reasons: First, it misses the opportunity to teach students to think in order to create a question that simply requires regurgitation of facts. Second, it misses the fact that high school students have little understanding or appreciation for the broader issues around infidelity. Dr. Burmester’s teacher, who was likely told he must teach this text, missed a mentor-teaching opportunity provided by a canonical work. Though the teacher’s job would have been harder had he asked, “What does the “A” symbolize?” because it would have required reading short answers or essays rather than grading a multiple choice question, he would have

encouraged the students to think about fidelity, hypocrisy, and the ways we turn each other into scapegoats. All of these issues, which are clearly brought up by the novel, are relevant for today's teenage culture if only we will ponder how to help students make the connections. Teachers could hold debates about whether authority figures, such as ministers, ought to be held to higher standards of morality than others. Countless real-world examples come to mind. For instance, Ted Haggard lost his position as the pastor of a mega church in Colorado just a couple of years ago because it was revealed that he had hired a male prostitute on a number of occasions. *The Scarlett Letter* might be much more interesting to students if they thought about how our society goes about punishing the characters involved in Haggard's case: namely, the male prostitute, Haggard himself, and Haggard's family. Teachers might ask whether we, symbolically, force such people to wear the letter "A" and, if so, what does that public shame look like? Had Dr. Burmester's teacher taught the novel with real-world, up-to-the-minute applicability, he would have been able to mentor-teach his students in a similar way as Hawthorne no doubt intended. But by teaching the book as a series of mundane facts about characters that lived in a culture to which none of us can even remotely relate, the teacher divorced this "classic" from any connection to students' lives and reinforced many of their beliefs that literature is basically irrelevant.

Another example of a classroom discussion centering around a "classic" comes from my teaching of *A Doll's House* to my seniors just a few weeks ago (2009). Like *The Scarlett Letter*, this piece of literature could easily be taught as a series of historical facts about Henrik Ibsen, feminism, or family dynamics through the ages. But the story offers so much that can be applied to students' lives right now. My students and I had a great conversation about two issues brought up at the end of the play. First we discussed the idea of "sacred duties," which Helmer

accuses Nora of neglecting when she plans to leave her family. I asked if there are such things as sacred duties, and if so are they different for men and women? Most agreed with Nora that our highest sacred duty is to ourselves. I was able to use these notions as a springboard into a discussion of postmodern values versus those of our parents and grandparents. Jean M. Twenge notes in *Generation Me* that our grandparents' generation placed the highest value on taking care of family and being loyal to those to whom we owed our lives and freedom. She goes on to say that the up-and-coming generations, those raised by Baby Boomers, "believe, with a conviction that approaches boredom because it is so undisputed, that the individual comes first (43). Ibsen, as it turns out, would have made a great postmodern philosopher based on his portrayal of Nora's duties in *A Doll's House*. During this classroom discussion, I asked the rhetorical question: "At what point in the evolution of a family does a parent have a responsibility to put his family's needs above her own?" We discussed various solutions to the dilemmas that people find themselves in every day of balancing a duty to oneself versus balancing a duty to ones' family. Some students were offended by the notion that a person might need to sacrifice personal happiness to serve his family, and some were offended by the notion that a person might consider abandoning her family to meet her own needs. We came to no tidy solutions, but that is evidence to me of challenging pedagogy. Undoubtedly, at least one of these young men or women will find themselves in a marriage like Nora's, and they need to think ahead of time about the right way to handle such a situation.

A second "real-life" discussion that arose from this play came when Nora tells Helmer that he has merely enjoyed the feeling of being *in love* with her, but he has never really *loved* her. So we debated whether there is a difference between "love" and being "in love," and we pondered whether the infatuation of being "in love" is supposed to last. Most who spoke up felt

clearly that it does not last and that it isn't supposed to, yet there are some who certainly want it to. One girl revealed some personal matters by telling about her parents and their recent fights and how she thinks they need to work harder to recreate the "spark" of being "in love." Another young woman from a traditional Indian heritage rebutted that she didn't think people needed to try to keep that spark because what comes after the infatuation of being "in love" is a deeper, more profound kind of love. People should let go of the infatuation of being "in love," in other words, and just move on to a richer form of love. As usual, my brain was hard at work trying to determine the right amount of my own opinion to interject and wondering when would be the time to do this. At the end, I encouraged them to ponder these matters attentively because I believe that much of our culture of divorce stems from the idea "in love-ness" lasts. From my own experience, I shared with them that this intense feeling inevitably goes away when the mystery and newness go away. I said that newness will always fade, no matter how many times one finds someone new to be in love with. That doesn't mean love is dead, but merely that love has transformed into something new, I observed.

No one came up after either of these discussions and told me his life had been radically altered and he would be leaving school to fulfill his sacred duties. But I certainly hope that some students were encouraged to think in new and challenging ways, perhaps pondering for the first time their views on marriage and divorce, or maybe examining whether a duty to oneself can ever become overly selfish. Lest one argue that this is too much time away from the details of the literature at hand, I would retort that my hunch is that Ibsen would have very much enjoyed our discussion. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, authors of literary works write because they have a message to share about humanity – our strengths, weaknesses, oversights,

blind spots, and so on. Reducing their works to a study of techniques or extended metaphors virtually eliminates our opportunity to mentor-teach in the literature classroom.

Returning to the world outside my own classroom once again, an additional “case study” in the ability of canonical literature to teach real-life lessons comes from some recent controversy over a movie version of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Tim Blake Nelson’s “*O*,” a modern day representation of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, caused quite a stir in high school administrative communities in late 1999, when it was set for release. I want to be clear up front that I am not suggesting that we teach *Othello* by only showing a movie version, but rather that mentor-teachers need to be open to the ways that movies can bring classical texts to life for students in a way that they readily relate to. This particular movie depiction of *Othello* tells the exact story, but sets it within a modern day high school. True to the text (a tragedy), nearly everyone dies at the end in a shooting rampage. To all of our horror, on April 20, 1999 the Columbine disaster brought school violence to the forefront of the nation’s attention, so Miramax, the film’s distribution and production company, dropped the controversial film for fear of seeming like they were promoting this sort of violence. The movie was eventually picked up and distributed, but not before a discussion arose of just how far educators were willing to go to make Shakespeare (and other academic disciplines) relevant to today’s students. Far from gratuitous violence, Nelson’s violent ending could have served to open students’ eyes to the destructive nature of anger and jealousy, but Miramax’s fear of bad publicity got in the way of its opportunity to open a dialogue about the lessons of classic literature.

Part of learning to read literature is learning to read the real-life, complex other people that surround us. Gregory M. Colón Semenza, in a 2005 *College Literature* article entitled, “Shakespeare after Columbine: Teen Violence in Tim Blake Nelson’s ‘O,’” examines the

pedagogical value of teaching *Othello* in the post-Columbine classroom as well as the engrained fears that keep us from dealing openly with difficult issues like violence with teenagers.

Semenza notes, in “O,” Odin fails to recognize Hugo’s bitterness toward him; thus, “[t]ension is built upon the audience’s awareness that either Odin’s or [his father’s] public recognition of Hugo would have been enough to heal his wounded pride” (Semenza 108). Knowing the characters of literature teaches students to read and understand not only their own lives but the complicated people surrounding them.

One magnificent scene seems to offer a meta-commentary on the usefulness of literature. It shows the main characters failing to pay attention during an English lecture on Shakespeare. After Hugo sarcastically says he thought Shakespeare was a movie writer, the teacher criticizes their inattentiveness to the valuable lessons of *Macbeth* (and perhaps metaphorically all the lessons of literature). Her demand that they “pay attention” turns out to be a prophetic warning that they need to open their eyes to the available truth in front of them, both in the class and in their lives (109-110). This teacher, in other words, sought to be a mentor-teacher by instructing her students that Shakespeare had application to their real lives (and deaths, in this case). Had these students heeded her warnings, they might have spared themselves the bloodbath that ensued.

Nelson’s film seems to do what Shakespeare wanted to do for the people of his time: “Rather than stressing the importance of the filmic equivalent of metrical analysis [...] the film implores its audience to read critically, to consider carefully the causes and the costs of teen violence” (Semenza 111). Too often teachers focus on such devices as Shakespeare’s brilliant iambic pentameter at the grave expense of the relevant life lessons he repeatedly offers. Many teachers would see it as catering to the entertainment “needs” of the students to show this movie,

for instance, when this movie would modernize *Othello* for students in a way that would give them a new appreciation for Shakespeare's story. We who see the value of mentor-teaching need to help our colleagues escape the mindset that helping students apply a classical text to their lives is equivalent to becoming entertainers rather than educators. On the contrary, helping students modernize a text so as to be able to apply it to their lives is the very essence of mentor-teaching when dealing with difficult classics. As Semenza says, "Shakespeare, we should not forget, also wrote movies" (117). He aimed for the masses with his valuable moral messages. Would he, then, object to us modernizing his tales for our modern-day masses? I think he would object far more stringently to the idea of us *not* modernizing his plays than to us modernizing them.

Virtually all classic literature contains an element of social commentary on the events of the day in which it was written. *Othello* foregrounds issues of race, revenge, and violence in his tragedy. Clearly, these issues are still relevant to modern teens. Just look at the ever-growing demonstrations of senseless violence in schools today. Semenza goes on to say that students' "ability to read deeply, analyze, and apply to their own lives the lessons of Shakespearean tragedy can do nothing less than help them stay alive" (3). When we put it so dramatically, we can see that we not only ought to help students connect with the lessons of canonical literature, we *must* help students connect, even if a particular work isn't our own favorite to teach. Students' lives may quite literally be at stake. And if Shakespeare doesn't catch their attention, then Salinger or Steinbeck or Melville just might if only we will actively aim to help them see the value for their daily realities. Regardless of which teacher or canonical author helps students make these connections, all literature teachers have the opportunity to guide students in the how-to of thoughtful, engaged reading, thereby potentially changing their students' approaches to complex life issues.

## Mentor-Teaching and Writing about Literature

The above has been a discussion of some ways we might structure our classroom discussions and debates about classical literature. What follows takes that concept one step further and examines how we can get students applying the lessons of literature through their writing. In my experience, once we start looking for ways to structure our tests and writing assignments with a mentoring approach in mind, the opportunities for reflective writing about the lessons of literature are endless. The first example I want to delve into builds on what I have just said about *Othello* to examine a recent test I gave of a similarly racially charged book, *A Raisin in the Sun*, by Lorraine Hansberry. First, some background on teaching students about race.

In *College English* (2006), Timothy Barnett's explores the mentor-teaching (though doesn't use that term of course) value of Frederick Douglass's and Richard Wright's work. Barnett examines the notion of reading and writing about pain as both pedagogically and personally useful for students. Barnett gets at the crux of the mentoring opportunity brought up by racially charged literature by noting that "scholars' [attempts to] ignore feelings of anger, guilt, and insecurity in our classes" may be a great disservice to our students. He encourages teachers to "consider the possibility that a critical education may require deep, and often painful, emotion on the part of both teachers and students if it is to lead to personal and social change" (364-365). His idea of a "critical education" that "may require...painful emotion" coincides directly with my aims as a mentor-teacher. If students are not learning to evaluate themselves and the world around them critically, we will never see their weaknesses or their inner realities, as mentors need to do. Both Douglass and Wright paint ugly pictures of the past and more recent realities of slavery and racism. If we follow Barnett's injunction not to avoid the painful emotions, we might have students write letters to people of different races telling them how their

own race impacts their daily life, or we might have students research the many racial inequalities in our economic or political systems, or we might have students act as observers in our very own dining halls as to the racial divisions on our campuses. By going down these roads, though, as Barnett notes, pain will be involved. Thus, it takes a brave mentor-teacher to tread into these murky waters alongside students. If we are going to succeed not merely as instructors but as mentors and authority figures, we will have to get a bit dirtier than we have in the past, nudging students away from mere “book knowledge” and even holding their hands as they pursue knowledge and wisdom about their own lives and beliefs.

In my sophomore American literature class, we have just finished studying Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. The story is set on the south side of Chicago sometime in the 1950’s. A black family, the Youngers, live together in a small apartment, but they have just received a \$10,000 check from their patriarch’s life insurance policy. The conflict of the play centers around the different ideas they all possess of how to use the money. Walter Lee, a man of about 30, wants to use it to open a liquor store and make lots of money to support the family. Beneatha, Walter Lee’s sister, a college-aged young woman, wants to use it for her education in becoming a doctor. Mama wants to use it to buy a house so the family can have more space. Numerous sub-plot lines emerge which I do not have space to convey here, but trying to discuss this story about a poor black family with wealthy white students has been a challenging opportunity for the mentor-teacher in me. The tensions and conflicts that have arisen in the class as some of my students have expressed not-so-subtle racial stereotypes provide a perfect platform for mentor-teaching. Conflict, as Barnett has noted, can pave the way to some real thinking on the students’ parts, if only they will engage.

After spending about two weeks' worth of class time on the story, both reading it and watching the original movie version of it, the time came for the test, and I wanted to urge students to continue stepping outside of their small, safe bubble in order to learn from these characters who seem so far removed from themselves. As such, I asked that their short answer essays apply something from the novel to their own lives. The first short answer question was, "What is your favorite quote in the story and why? Explain what it means within the story and what it means to your own life. Be specific and use examples." A question like this one, in my mind, accomplishes both the traditional aims of an English teacher and the mentor-teaching aims as well. The traditional evaluation of literature comes from having them identify and contextualize a quote from the story, evaluating its importance within the book itself. The mentor-teaching aim comes from taking them to a more personal level of evaluation by having them apply the particular quote to their own lives. Below is an explication of one of the more insightful responses to this question.

A young man named Allen offered this response to the short answer prompt:

I...agree with the quote [‘Oh – so now it’s life. Money is life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life – now it’s money. I guess the world really do change’ (Hansberry 74)]. Money in almost every person’s life is life. People only care about materialistic things to make them happy instead of the true reason for happiness which is being free.

This comes from a young man who typifies the privileged notions of my upper-class private school. I once wandered into class a few minutes late to find Allen discussing openly his dilemma about what car to buy with his \$35,000 budget upon turning sixteen. In ways more subtle, also, Allen has demonstrated an attitude of entitlement and indifference to the literature

we've read. He sits in the back of class and either sleeps or tries to socialize with the other "cool" boys in the class. However, as his test response demonstrates, there seems to be a subtle change in this boy since he went on a mission trip to the Ukraine over Spring Break. He seems to have become more attentive in class and more eager to live up to his potential. In other words, he seems to not be leaning as much on daddy's money as the source of security in his life. His response on the test is somewhat vague, but it offers an entry point into a mentoring dialogue with this student. Allen seems to recognize that money is not the be-all-end-all source of happiness, as he once seemed to imply by his behavior. The story of *A Raisin in the Sun* offers Allen an opportunity to apply a very pertinent lesson to his own life. I do not know if he will work toward making money less a part of his own happiness, but the test question has at least exposed him to the possibility of learning this lesson.

In the second short answer question, "Who is your favorite character (or the one you understand the best) and why? What qualities does this person possess that you want to possess? How would you like to demonstrate these qualities in your own life?" this same young man returned to the topic of money. He says his favorite character is Walter because he "wants to provide for his family and have an interesting job that pays well." Applying that lesson to his own life, Allen says, "One day, I hope to be able to provide for my family better than Walter did...I want to have a positive attitude around my family instead of being emotional." Allen is referring here to Walter Lee's nearly bipolar attitudes during the play. When he gets what he wants (the money from Mama), he rides on cloud nine, but when he loses the money, he sinks into a deep state of instability and depression. On top of all that, Walter Lee struggles with a drinking problem throughout the story. Allen's answer on the test demonstrates that he has made a connection between Walter Lee's behavior and his own desires to become something more

stable for his own family. Because I have forced the students to look inside themselves as part of their answers on the test, I have gleaned a deeper knowledge about their personal goals and dreams, providing me with a myriad of mentor-teaching opportunities. I can now probe to determine what Allen means by having a “job that pays well.” Does that mean just meeting expenses? Or does it mean vacations to Europe and Porsches? Or does it mean something in between? As the son of a heart surgeon who has anything he could possibly want and more, Allen will need to consider that he may well have a warped notion of what being “paid well” means. I can also ask what the “positive attitude” he strives for would look like. How honest should a parent be with his emotions and feelings? Should he cover them up for the sake of his family or should he wear them on his sleeve? Because I have phrased my test questions in a way that draws out the personal, I now have an opportunity to delve a bit deeper into students’ comments. I need not be confrontational. Rather, a simple “can you think of an example?” or “Be more specific here” written in the margin will suffice to promote deeper thinking in some cases. In other cases, my relationship with the student may develop into one where I can explicitly challenge some of their assumptions about race, money, family, and so on.

Allen was not the only student whose answers gave me insight into their personalities. A classmate of Allen’s, Jeff, got a bit more personal in his answer to the “favorite character” question. After stating that Mama is his favorite character because she is idealistic and assertive in expressing her opinions about her children’s choices, Jeff comments, “I wish that I could be more idealistic and assertive with my life at home. If I were courageous like Mama, maybe I could sit down with my dad and share my opinion on influential people in his life. Maybe then, just as Mama did by buying a house, I could stop bad things from happening to our family.” Jeff has shared enough this year for me to know that his mom is not in the picture at all, and his dad

is a money-hungry womanizer. As a result, Jeff seems eager for adult role models because he knows his father's ways are not the ones he wants to emulate. Jeff's answer to the question opens the door for me to seek mentoring conversations with him. While these conversations have yet to happen, I am at least now aware that Jeff wants direction and advice. He wants to be brave enough to stand up to his father, and if the right opportunity presents itself, I might just be able to figuratively stand beside him as he grows emboldened to take this step forward. Even if I cannot do so, Jeff has been mentored to some extent by the literature we've read and its characters. He sees Mama as a role model of sorts, and maybe now he will begin looking for other literary role models. I know that I have found many characters in literature worth emulating, and my life has even been changed by a few "mentors" from the pages of books. Mentor-teaching in the literature classroom is both about seeking opportunities to know our students better personally, and about seeking to introduce them to characters that have something to teach them. But they will not always make these connections for themselves unless we ask them to do so as a part of the curriculum.

A final short answer question on the test asked this: "Is money a good thing or a bad thing in the context of this play? What are the effects of money on the people around you? Use specific examples and say if money does good or bad things to both the people in the play and the people you know in real life." One of the more mature and hard-working students I've ever taught, Wade, offered a beautiful, though somewhat sad, response to this question. Wade wrote, "My Dad works a lot so my family can have a good life. When working on a project he often doesn't come home for days. I like the lifestyle I live, but I would like to spend more time with my Dad. Money makes my Dad a workaholic." Not only might this be a cry for a mentor figure, but it provides another opportunity to help this young man consider how he might avoid the same

traps. He mentioned in another answer his admiration for Beneatha's desire to be a doctor, as he wants the same career for himself. I can now look for a chance to ask him whether he thinks his own extraordinary work ethic could turn into the same sort of workaholism he describes in his father. Even if this opportunity does not come up, I can now be aware that this young man needs and wants mentor figures in his life who demonstrate a better work-life balance than his father does. Not that I could ever replace his father, for whom I happen to have great respect, having known him for a number of years, but perhaps I could provide a different example of an adult male who is not so consumed with work that he neglects his family for days on end. Or perhaps I could look for future discussion topics that call into question how one might achieve a healthy balance between working hard and spending time with family. Or I could write Wade a note of encouragement either on his test or separately expressing my appreciation for his thoughtful answers and some encouragement to keep processing these important issues. Regardless of how I use this information, I need to use it to foster a more meaningful engagement with this student as our relationship moves beyond the teacher-student relationship into whatever it might become once the academic year is over. His answers, like the others', have given me an open door into his life that I now need to responsibly walk through.

### **Conclusions: Literature's Value for Mentor-Teachers**

Despite plenty of evidence to the contrary, our students are not nearly as lazy or uninterested in life as we often accuse them of being. They are very willing, in fact, to work hard and to pay attention to the written word. In the article "Grand Theft Education: Literacy in the Age of Video Games," Jane Avrich et al note that the very same students who will not read a fifteen page homework assignment will read 1,000 page, single-spaced, how-to essays to help

them unlock the codes of their favorite video games such as “Grand Theft Auto” and “Halo” (34). This same article goes on to demonstrate that students often find the *Harry Potter* novels far more entertaining than, say, *Huckleberry Finn*, even though both have plenty of childish fun within their pages. As noted earlier but worth repeating here, in *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer puts the same concept this way, “Is it possible that your students are not brain-dead? Is it possible that their classroom coma is induced by classroom conditions and that once they cross the threshold into another world, they return to life?” (42). Our students, in other words, are interested in something, but that something does not seem to be the content of our classes. So, we as teachers must ask ourselves how we can get students to apply some of their mental energy to doing thoughtful reading of literature. If we are willing to do a little extra mental work regarding how to help students connect their daily struggles and concerns to the stories we teach them, we will find our students far more engaged in our classes. Mentor-teaching demands both that we put the students’ concerns at the forefront of our class discussions about the literature we read, whether we have input in choosing these texts or not.

One possible starting point for deepening our connection with students can be allowing them to express their frustrations with “the classics” quite openly. Rosenblatt believes that students’ “frank expressions of boredom, or even vigorous rejection, are more valid starting points for learning than are docile attempts to feel ‘what the teacher wants’” (“Acid Test” 64). If we hope to connect with our students as mentor-teachers then we owe it to them to let them express boredom or frustration with the outdated literature we often teach in English classes. By listening to what they are telling us, we might gain some insight into how to better connect them to difficult literature. In situations where we are unable to select our own textbooks or reading assignments, we need to begin with the students’ real responses to the reading, not with our own

agendas for pointing out the subtle subtexts or extended metaphors that even we did not recognize until a third or fourth reading. As mentor-teachers in the vein of Rosenblatt's transactional theory, we must see the unique transactions taking place between the books we have assigned (for whatever reason) and our students' real concerns in life as the primary concern of our pedagogy.

An additional way we can be of help to students who find the classroom reading difficult and/or boring is to do enough outside reading of our own that we can select non-classroom books for various students' interests. Rosenblatt, once again, offers her practical wisdom:

[W]hatever may strike the spark of personal relevance can create conditions for leading the young reader into ever richer and more challenging literary experiences....[W]e need sufficient command of books to see their potentialities in this developmental process. Our main responsibility is to help the student to find the right book for growth. ("Acid Test" 67)

If this is the case, we as teachers of literature must be active readers so as to have an ongoing repertoire of texts to recommend to our students who come from different backgrounds and live in very different realities from one another. In the culture where many of us cannot choose our classroom texts, our first task is to spark students' interest in the texts we must teach, but a secondary task, and a vital one, is to be well-versed enough both in literary options and in our students' lives that we can point students in the direction of books that we know will interest them. Mentor-teaching demands that we take both parts of this task seriously if we sincerely want to see literature shape our students' lives.

I am reminded of a high school senior I taught named Andy Smart. Andy drove a truck and fished in bass tournaments in his free time. Meanwhile, he was a student in a distinctly

upper-middle-class school where BMWs were far more common than fishing poles. Was Andy to be expected to see Shakespeare in the same way as the many students who spent their summers poolside at the country club? While it may be unrealistic to give different reading assignments to every individual student, we must at least be willing to recognize the validity of their individual interpretations. And we must give them writing outlets to express their unique, varied, and personal interpretations of the literature based on their own transactions. At the end of the year I stumbled upon a Carl Hiassen murder mystery called *Double Whammy*. The story centered around a bass fishing tournament and, of course, a murder. As I was reading this book (for sheer pleasure as the year was winding down), I wondered if I might have stumbled onto a way to connect with Andy. All year long, I had felt like he was very cynical towards the books we had read in class: *Hamlet*, *Frankenstein*, and the short stories of Flannery O'Connor to name a few. Andy had grumbled and complained about how boring all of the reading was, and he seemed to throw all things academic out the window along with the preppy peers who frustrated this wildlife lover. Remembering Rosenblatt's advice to be looking for books that would connect with various students, I hoped I had stumbled onto some way to connect with Andy.

After enjoying the book myself, I passed it along to Andy at the school's graduation ceremony. When I gave him the book he had a genuine look of shock on his face, and after a brief conversation about why I thought he'd like the book, he said to me, "Let's stay in touch." Clearly, my gift had hit its mark by deepening a sense of personal connection between me and Andy. I don't know if he was shocked that such a book existed or that I cared enough to think of him, but maybe Andy will discover that there are more books in this world to learn from and enjoy than just the ones he was forced to read by teachers who had never experienced the joy of catching a big fish. The truth is that Andy has not stayed in touch with me, but maybe years

from now I will hear from him and he will tell me that I helped him see the pleasures and insights of reading through my gift. But once again, whether or not this ever happens isn't the point exactly. The point is that I found an opportunity to act as a mentor-teacher to this young man, and while I may not have changed his life as in my fantasy future conversation, I have done my part and extended a hand of friendship. What Andy does with that is now up to him.

Overall, my point in this chapter is this: Without real-life application, technical evaluations of literature are largely useless for our students who find video games and fraternity parties far more meaningful than our literature classes. Mentor-teaching in the literature classroom demands that we structure both our classrooms and our writing assignments around students' real needs as maturing young adults. Whether or not the young men and women involved in these discussions or papers ever think of these examples again, the goal of mentor-teaching is to give students a needed nudge to look for specific ways to apply literature to their own lives. We cannot ensure that our students make the best use of their knowledge any more than we can ensure that they brush their teeth each night. Still, we can rest easy knowing that we have given each student the opportunity to learn from the literature at hand if we have thoughtfully sought ways to open their eyes to the lessons of literature.

The approaches I have discussed in this chapter are merely the starting point for how mentor-teachers might utilize the unique opportunities of the literature classroom. Endless numbers of other ideas could be just as useful, if not more. My desire has not been to say that this is the way a mentor-teacher must teach literature. Rather, my desire has been to illustrate that literature offers untold numbers of avenues for meaningful discussions with students. Class discussions can be used to get them thinking while their papers can be places where they work out the deeply personal aspects of what they're learning. As always, some students will take

these chances and run with them to new heights as human beings, and some will be content to write barely-passing, unimaginative papers and wash their hands of us as soon as they have the chance. Our job is not to make them take the chances for personal growth, but rather to simply offer them these chances from a mentoring stance. The rest is up to them.

## CHAPTER 4: PERSONAS AND PRACTICES OF THE MENTOR-TEACHER

In previous chapters I have demonstrated the need for mentor-teaching in general, and its particular usefulness in the college English classroom, for teaching both composition and literature. In this chapter, I now consider the nuances of mentor-teaching applied to teacher/student relationships, and to the everyday realities of the vocation of teaching, extending beyond a particular content area. I begin by looking at the various “personas” a mentor-teacher might consider striving for: buddy, detached scholar, wise older brother/sister, cheerleading coach, and so on. The list of possible personas, or teaching personalities, is endless, really, but the personas I will address are some of the most common ones teachers strive to inhabit. From there I will move on to consider practical teaching issues like how much of our personal lives to reveal to the class through our teaching, how to structure conferences, and how to grade/evaluate in effective ways as mentor-teachers.

### Teaching Personas: Learning from Books and Movies

Mentor-teachers need to be aware (and cautious) of various personas as they seek to establish the right relationship with students. In the novel *White Noise*, by Don DeLillo, Jack Gladney carefully crafts his persona so as to be taken seriously as the founder of “Hitler Studies.” He changes his name from Jack to the more forceful sounding J.A.K., he gains weight to add heft to his physical appearance, and dons dark glasses with thick black frames (16-17). While DeLillo intends for the reader to see the satire in Professor Gladney’s overly intentional persona, all teachers need to consider how we come across to our students. We should think about what we wear, our tone of voice, our chosen classroom atmosphere, and our ability to relate to the particular students in our classrooms. Unlike Jack, our intentions should not be to

become the “false character[s]” that follow our personas around (17), but rather to be authentic personalities who choose the healthiest and most helpful ways to reach out to our students.

One entertaining and educational way to consider the role of persona in practice is to examine some of the ways various teachers in books and movies have tried to act as mentors to students. Books and movies usually portray either teachers that try too hard to be students’ friends – the “buddy” teacher – or teachers that hardly realize the presence of other human beings in their classrooms – the “detached scholar” teacher. As a buddy example, one might think of Mr. Freddy Shoop (Mark Harmon), the would-be English teacher, who usually teaches P.E. but gets cornered into teaching students who failed a writing test, in the 1987 movie *Summer School* (1987). Freddy looks and acts young; he talks so much like the students, and has such a careless attitude, that he seems to project that he’s not serious, and that rules don’t matter, so he immediately loses all respect and control the moment he walks through the classroom door. At the other end of the spectrum lies a stodgy, tweed-jacketed professor like Mr. McAllister (Leon Pownall) the Latin teacher in *Dead Poets Society* (1989), who stands in front of the class reciting conjugations of Latin verbs for the students to repeat without any attempt to connect to the individuals sitting before him. Or, even worse, the detached and arrogant Professor Robert Crawford (F. Murray Abraham) in *Finding Forrester* (2000), the head of the English department and writing contest judge, who sees students as cheats and liars, and his job is to punish them. Each of these depictions of teachers, from the ones who try too hard so much so that it becomes comical, to the rare one who gets it right without making the readers/viewers want to gag from overly dramatic cheesiness, can teach those of us who want to have a healthy mentor-teaching persona how to accomplish this difficult feat. Thus, I offer a journey through recent books and

movies in hopes of finding a healthy, balanced representation of mentor-teaching for which we might strive.

In the novel *Prep*, by Curtis Sittenfeld (2005), Ms. Moray, a newly minted and very young English teacher, drives across the country from Iowa to Alt, an elite northeastern boarding school, for her first job. She portrays the difficult struggle of a young teacher who longs to be liked (or at least looked up to) by her students but also respected as an authority figure. She struggles painfully to find the boundaries for herself and to set them for her students in Sophomore English. On the first day of class, before she appears, one of the students, Lee, has killed a bee that was bothering other students. The bee stings her palm before dying, and Lee feels a strong need to wash her hands, but her request is flatly rejected (120-121). Like many new teachers, Ms. Moray equates the “can I go to the bathroom?” question with the first battle in a war, the first chance to demonstrate that she will not be walked all over in matters big or small. But she fails to realize that sometimes requests to go to the bathroom spring from legitimate needs. Strike one against Ms. Moray the detached authority figure. Strike two comes when Ms. Moray demands that Lee, a student on scholarship, reads an essay aloud to the class, failing to recognize that Lee’s narrative, about writing in her father’s mattress store might embarrass her in front of peers who write in skiffs on Long Island Sound or nooks of their family mansions. Ms. Moray once again fails to see the hidden meaning behind Lee’s resistance, or hesitance, assuming instead that her authority is being tested and challenged, believing that failure means losing the respect and perhaps the control of the class (134-137).

Later, Ms. Moray overreacts to a class presentation on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* led by Darden, Aspeth and Dede, the students with the highest social status in the class. They choose to portray a scene from the novel that represents Uncle Tom as a

modern day pimp, with two slave women playing prostitutes. Many of the other students are confused, but rather than using the skit as a springboard for a discussion on any number of important topics (stereotypes, racism, appropriate school presentation material...), Ms. Moray once again asserts her authority with a heavy hand, shuts the presentation down, ostracizes the students, and demonstrates her extremely tenuous grasp on student/teacher relationships. Strike three for Ms. Moray the authoritarian.

Unfortunately for the pained students (and readers), Ms. Moray is not content to merely destroy herself as an authority figure. She also feels the need to ruin herself as a possible friend/mentor to the students, namely the main character, Lee. Her first misstep comes after making Lee read her essay aloud to her in private, after class. Hearing Lee's essay softens Ms. Moray's heart toward the student (why didn't she consider that there might be sensitive content beforehand?), so Ms. Moray winks at Lee and tells her to have "confidence" as Lee leaves the room (137). These acts not only demonstrate a rather trite approach to gaining students' respect, but they are so inconsistent with the authoritative Ms. Moray from only minutes earlier that they can only bring about a mixture of disdain and distrust in a student like Lee. Later, after reprimanding the "pimp" group project and basically scolding the entire class as one, Ms. Moray makes another misstep in her attempt to let her students know what a friend she can be. The day after the scolding she starts class with a cheer: "E-N-G-L-I-S-H!" But she fails to realize that, in the students' minds, there was little or no concern as to whether she "forgave" them for the inappropriate project; the important fact was that they, the students, had not forgiven her (144). Once again, this radical (and awkward!) shift in personality does nothing more than confuse the students and gray the lines about what relationship is possibly with this strange teacher, Ms. Moray.

The kiss of death to Ms. Moray's reputation with Lee (and with the reader) comes when she once again tries to balance one extreme response with another. After threatening to fail Lee in the course for her inability to come up with a persuasive topic that she truly believes in, Ms. Moray tries to make amends by meeting Lee on her turf and asking Lee to cut her hair...for a grade, no less! (164). Lee had previously discovered a talent for cutting hair, and she had become the campus barber of sorts, providing her with a much desired source of identity among the student body. She was "the girl who gave great haircuts," but Ms. Moray oversteps her bounds here by trying to act like a peer of Lee's rather than an authority figure. She might have done better to give Lee a second chance on the paper rather than by trying to meet her on her level in this awkward and borderline inappropriate way.

As a teacher who wrestles with balancing authoritativeness and friendliness, I regretfully empathize with Ms. Moray. Through her portrayal of Ms. Moray, the only teacher readers get to know or see in the classroom, Curtis Sittenfeld (a teacher herself at St. Albans boarding school, in Washington DC, when she wrote the novel) cuts right to the heart of a common teacherly struggle. Though Ms. Moray never acts quite as aloof as the Latin teacher in *Dead Poets Society* or say, the economics teacher in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, she nonetheless manages to place herself very near the extreme end of the "detached scholar" spectrum with other teachers who fail to recognize the humanity of their students. One would almost prefer if Ms. Moray would simply stay at this end of the spectrum, though, rather than oscillating back and forth between the detached, authoritative end and the "buddy" end, where Ms. Moray also tries to live. By going to such extremes in an attempt to find the middle ground, Ms. Moray thoroughly alienates herself from her students, cutting off the hope of attaining the mentor-teaching stance that she seems to desire.

A different example of a teacher caught between the buddy and the detached scholar ends of the spectrum is Dr. Frank Bryant, a washed-up poet, and thoroughly alcoholic University Lecturer in the drama *Educating Rita*, by Willy Russell (1980 and 1983). While Ms. Moray seesaws between the buddy and the detached scholar out of ignorance, Frank seesaws out of cynicism. His relationship with a hairdresser from Liverpool, England, named Susan White, but who prefers being called “Rita” after her favorite American author, Rita Mae Brown, highlights his broader struggle as a teacher: he sees through the façade that enamors Rita. She wants to “know the difference between Jane Austen an’ Tracy Austin” as “educated wom[e]n” do (13), but Frank sees more value in “go[ing] to the pub and drink[ing] pots of Guinness and talk[ing]” (24). When Rita asks the disillusioned Frank why he’s bothering to educate her when he is so negative about education, Frank freely admits that there are “a thousand things [he]’d rather do than teach” (16). The viewer sees in Frank a sense of meaninglessness in pursuing academic dreams. Standing at the other end of the spectrum of education from where Rita stands, Frank’s cynical comments to Rita illustrate the internal wrestling match he has with himself about education’s viability in “real life,” which he naively believes Rita is full of.

Because of his drinking problem and his lack of concern for his job, Frank’s struggles with teacher/student boundaries place both himself and his students in greater danger than Ms. Moray’s difficulties. He flat out makes a pass at Rita when he says that most of the thousand things he’d rather do than teach are “with” Rita (16). He gets so drunk in one class that he falls “off the rostrum twice,” yet rather than remorse, he says to “fuck” the students who reported him and that “it was the best lecture [he’s] ever given” (42). To top it off, he basically tells the now-educated Rita that her education has made her a monster by referring to himself as Mary Shelley, creator of the monster Frankenstein (48). Unlike Ms. Moray, whose boundary struggles lead her

to a number of painfully inadequate attempts to be a good teacher, Frank's job security and desire for self-destruction (42-43) virtually erase any healthy boundary lines that might have kept him behaving himself. Through the lack of external boundaries coupled with his complete disregard for any self-imposed boundaries that a good teacher might maintain, Frank drifts wherever his emotions and disillusionment take him, putting himself and his students in unpleasant and even treacherous situations.

Frank does still have moments of concern and clarity which lead him, at times, to try to do the right thing by Rita. When discussing Henrik Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt*, Frank guides Rita toward an understanding of connecting one thing to another when critiquing literature. When an exasperated Rita asks why he didn't just tell her to do so from the beginning, Frank says to her, "You'll have a much better understanding of something if you discover it in your own terms" (22). From Frank, Rita learns to write essays that fit the academic mold and she gains admission into the world of scholarship. Of her own accord, but still thanks to Frank's influence, Rita makes smart friends like Tiger and Trish, she changes her appearance and even tries to "talk properly" so as not to "discuss beautiful literature in an ugly voice" (40). Despite his internal conflict, Frank has given Rita what she wanted: a proper literary education. But despite this one "success," Frank spends the latter part of the play stumbling drunk through his daily life, fearing that he has taken someone with genuine uniqueness and turned her into yet another cloned, snobbish academic with nothing truly valuable to offer the world.

What Frank does not account for though, is Rita's ability to see through the academic façade for herself, now that she has reached the same plateau she once envied. Eventually she recognizes what Frank wanted to teach her all along: that Tiger is a "bit of a wanker" (51), that Trish's education hasn't prevented her from trying "to top herself" (50), and that education, in

short, doesn't solve life's problems, as Rita once seemed to think. So, despite Frank's self-mutilation for having "ruined" Rita, things turn out fairly well in the end, but no thanks to Frank's wise mentorship. Had he been clear-headed enough to offer Rita both wisdom and knowledge, rather than knowledge alone, Frank might have spared both himself and Rita some significant heartache.

Herein lies the difficulty of the teacher/student relationship. In a perfect scenario, the student would learn the exact lessons Rita eventually learns – that being a hairdresser and having babies doesn't have to doom one to a fruitless or mindless life – but she would learn them from a wise mentor rather than a drunken tutor. Rita comes to Frank in just the state of mind that many teachers long for: hungry, willing and eager. A healthier teacher than Frank would have been able to shape that enthusiasm while tempering it with the truth that knowledge alone does not hold the key to happiness. But Frank has in the past been so myopically focused on academic knowledge as the be-all end-all that he lives in the devastation of finding his success hollow and empty. Frank has both wisdom and knowledge to offer Rita, in other words, but he has not taken the time to come to healthy terms with his wisdom. Thus, he is not able to take the lead in the teacher/student relationship as he should. He is not the role model to help Susan White on the path to self-actualization or self-knowledge.

It might just be that Rita's marriage pays the price of Frank's inability to properly convey what he has learned. Maybe if he could have been something other than a stumbling and slurring guide, Frank would have had the respect and authority to tell Rita that the day might come when she would take pride in being a hair dresser and/or having a child, as she seems to at the end (51). Frank tries to tell her, but Rita has no reason to believe that Frank could teach her anything about real life. After all, his own real life is a mess. In short, Frank misses his chance to educate

Rita's whole person and therefore forces Rita to gain wisdom in the school of hard knocks rather than in his classroom, where she gained only book knowledge.

In the end, Frank gets a chance for a fresh start in Australia, and Rita learns the lesson Frank had wanted to teach her: that "knowing a load of quotes and empty phrases" means nothing without keeping that uniqueness that Frank wanted her to maintain (50). But even though all turns out well in the end, much can be gleaned from the lessons of this dysfunctional relationship about the balance between buddy and detached scholar. Rita, like Lee, has a talent for cutting hair. Much like the haircut Ms. Moray receives from Lee in her misguided attempt to "buddy up" to Lee, Frank's haircut represents his failure to be the right kind of teacher. Given at the sole initiative of Rita, Frank's haircut demonstrates that he has abdicated his responsibility as the leader in the relationship. In this scene, Rita takes charge, demanding lovingly that Frank get a haircut from her (52). While it shows that Rita remains true to her core self from the play's beginning, it also shows that Frank has lost the lead in their relationship. Rita basically mothers him and takes care of him because he needs it – not the situation one might've hoped for when the play began. In my re-imagined and idealistic ending, Frank's haircut would be the result of *his* request, not Rita's, and it would serve as a demonstration both that Rita remains true to herself *and* that Frank has guided her safely through the murky waters of learning to a place of both knowledge and the wisdom of self-acceptance. In this imagined scenario, Frank might have considered himself a successful mentor-teacher. As it is, though, Frank fails at such a role.

Serving as a far more ideal example of mentor-teaching, the Mel Gibson film, *The Man Without a Face* (1993) depicts a former classics teacher who, through his tragic deformity and painful past, seems to have found an ideal middle ground for teaching personas. It is the late 1960s, in a small island community in Maine, and Justin McLeod carries deep emotional and

physical wounds (a disfiguring facial burn) from a teacher/student relationship where he attempted to help a troubled teenager, but through the boy's recklessness and disregard, results in a fatal car accident and the loss of his position; he grieves for the loss of student's life, whom he felt responsible for, as well as the loss of his vocation. Thus, years later, used to his solitude, his wariness of the young Chuck Norstadt's desire to have him as a tutor is easily understood. Oddly enough, Justin's wariness sets the initial boundaries for their relationship. Chuck needs tutoring to apply for boarding school, but he also is looking for a father figure, and a man who can teach him how to grow up. When Chuck refuses to leave Justin alone, Justin initially insists that Chuck dig holes that seem to have no educational purpose and to write a paper that Chuck tries to get out of by plagiarizing. Through these assignments that Chuck sees as senseless, Justin tests Chuck's motivation, essentially asking Chuck to demonstrate that he genuinely wants Justin's help. Justin also wants to know that Chuck is willing to work for his own growth and the satisfaction of learning

Likewise, mentor-teachers must demand a demonstration of genuine interest on the part of their students. The many students who just want a decent grade and three or four credit hours on their transcripts cannot be avoided, and many of students who come through our classrooms will fall into that category. What teachers must guard against is trying to "get in good" with those students at the expense of the students like Chuck, who have a legitimate interest in what the teachers have to offer both through their classrooms and through their lives beyond the classroom. As one who desires to have an impact on my students both in fostering a love of literature and in establishing a friendship beyond the classroom, I am guilty of overlooking the students who are, like Chuck, genuinely interested in what I can teach them about literature and

life. It is all too easy to become so focused on being universally liked by our students that we overlook students who, like Chuck, want to be taught and even mentored.

One example might be my preoccupation with one young man's seeming dislike for me in my AP English class from this year, 2009. Throughout the first semester, I was constantly bothered by his disdainful sideways glances or open disagreement with points I would make. When I would try to establish a better rapport with this boy through after-school conversations in the halls, matters only seemed to deteriorate. My frustration mounted, and a few times we even had blatant conflict in the middle of class over his behavior. He was often guilty of talking while I was talking, but frankly, many students are guilty of this same thing. Yet when this boy talked over me, I took it personally and felt affronted that he didn't want to learn from me in any way. On the other hand, there were many students in the class who participated in healthy and thoughtful ways on whom I could have focused and should have focused. Nevertheless, my preoccupation with making this one student like me caused me to neglect other, more willing learners. Two other young men in the class regularly came to my office hours after school to talk about what we had been reading or just life in general. When they were in front of me without the distractions of the classroom, I was able to view them through a mentoring lens in hopes of establishing an ongoing friendship, but when we got back to class, I was always distracted by the one boy who seemed to dislike me more by the day. I regret that I did not shrug off the one student's disdain in favor of serving the other students who seemed more like Chuck in their interest in both the course and me.

Another important lesson can be learned through the names that "would-be mentors" for Chuck give themselves. Justin tells Chuck to call him "Sir," which Chuck does for the better part of the movie. This stands in direct contrast to two other men who seem at first glance to be

better candidates for Chuck's admiration. First there is "Professor Hartley," who becomes his mother's fourth husband. The first thing the professor, and soon-to-be stepfather, says to Chuck is, "Call me Karl. I don't need any of that imperialistic, post-Hegelian, authoritarian crap for my ego." Through Chuck's inner monologue, the viewer knows immediately that Karl's desire to meet Chuck on his level has met with disdain, not respect. This is confirmed by Chuck's own nickname for Karl, "the hairball." Chuck doesn't trust Karl and thinks he is fake, a judgment held up by other events in the movie. Later, the psychiatrist, Dr. Talbot, also tells Chuck to call him by his first name, Lionel, in a supposed attempt to gain the boy's trust so as to find out if he's been abused by Justin. Again, Justin sees right through this artificial attempt at leveling the playing field. The fact is Chuck doesn't want an equal playing field. He wants a mentor, a teacher, someone he can look up to for guidance and instruction. Chuck recognizes in Justin a man who doesn't pretend to be Chuck's buddy. Justin is comfortable with his position of authority, and therefore he becomes Chuck's buddy, but not through artificial means.

Justin also models for Chuck the sort of mature and moral behavior he hopes Chuck's education will produce in the younger man. Indeed, Justin demonstrates the very principles of honesty and integrity that he hopes Chuck will learn from their time together, even at the potential cost of this relationship. He is always aware of what is in the best interest of Chuck's well-being, and being trained in the classics, exemplifies the teachings of Plato and Quintilian. When Justin discovers that Chuck has kept their tutoring sessions a secret from his mother, Justin incredulously asks, "Why the blazes [haven't you told her]?!". When Chuck says it's because his mother would not allow him to come, one might expect Justin to find an internally logical excuse to let Chuck's white lie stand in order to preserve the relationship he's formed with Chuck. Instead, Justin tells the boy, "It's quite simple then, you can't come." As a mentor-teacher with

the highest level of integrity, he will not tolerate lies, deceit, or anything remotely unethical, no matter the personal cost he may have to pay.

Later, Justin resists the justification of unethical behavior after he has been instructed to avoid Chuck by the authorities. Chuck, himself unable to abide by this ruling, comes to see Justin, and during this final meeting, Justin reinforces the lessons he has taught Chuck over the summer – lessons that involve using reason to come to conclusions about the truth, a la Socrates. Justin also demonstrates his friendship toward Chuck by praising him for what a “good student” he has been and by giving him a fatherly hug at a time when Chuck needs such reassurance. Though Justin is angry at the authorities and their unwillingness to hear his side of the story, and though he bears visible pain at the inevitable loss of Chuck’s friendship, he takes the high road and insists on ethical behavior from both himself and his student. With pain in his voice, he tells Chuck, “I’m not allowed to talk to you.” When Chuck’s mother reports him missing and the chief of police shows up a minute later, Justin says, “You’d better go.” The underlying message to the impressionable young man is profound: Just because you do not agree with a decision or think it’s fair does not mean you can go against it.

In the end, it seems that Justin’s example pays off both as a teacher and as a personal role model for Chuck. The two never speak again during the movie, but Justin shows up four years later to see Chuck graduate from the military academy he helped him gain entrance to. The viewer is left with the sense that Chuck has become not only a capable student, but more importantly a mature young man with well-developed character. The movie might’ve had quite a different ending had Justin defied the authorities and remained in contact directly with Chuck. The impact such a decision could have had on Chuck’s long-term character would need a whole separate movie to explore.

Justin's presence at Chuck's graduation sets the final example of mentorship I'd like to explore. By no means can a classroom teacher with thousands of students through the years be expected to maintain contact with all of his students on an individual basis. Yet a teacher who wants to impact lives beyond the confines of the classroom needs to open himself to the possible impact such ongoing contact might have with a few students over the years. Justin's intense one-on-one relationship with Chuck coupled with the fact that he has no other students to tend to enables him to impact Chuck the person, not just Chuck the student. What started as a teacher/student relationship in a fairly traditional sense became a friendship and a father/son relationship of sorts, but this could not and would not have happened had Justin not been open to the possibility of an ongoing relationship that existed after the strict teacher/student time had ended.

In real life, too, I suspect that many more students have an interest in maintaining contact with former teachers than teachers might suspect. Young people hunger for someone other than their parents to look up to – someone who doesn't qualify as a peer, which they have plenty of, or a parent, which they are trying to separate from to forge their own independence and identity, but rather someone who can offer the wisdom of experience without the murky difficulties of parent/child communication. Two older men have filled this role in my life, and I'm a far better person for it. One of them pursued me after a brief meeting at a convention. The next time he came through Atlanta, he sought me out for coffee, and when he shared with me his own struggle with anxiety, I was able to open up to him about my own similar battles. At that moment, a lifelong friendship was formed, and he has been a source of strength and encouragement for me as I have worked through my own psychological battles. He even performed my wedding ceremony as he is an ordained minister. The other man is the father of one of my former

students. I originally sought him out for a career connection when I was considering leaving the teaching profession. After a few short conversations, we realized that we had plenty in common. We began meeting regularly to talk about everything from our faith to our vision for our lives to ways we could be better husbands. We continue to meet at least once a month, and Mike has been a Justin McLeod-like example for me just the sort of mentor I hope to be for many young men who cross my path.

Justin McLeod's example, and even those demonstrated by Ms. Moray, Frank Bryant, and countless other teachers in books and movies, offer teachers a chance to look inside their motives and their methods for teaching and mentoring in hopes of finding that difficult, tenuous balance between the buddy and the detached scholar. By looking at other teachers as both positive and negative role models, and by looking at ourselves in the mirror day after day as honestly as we can, we can gradually grow toward a healthy mentor-teaching persona with our students. We need to ask ourselves regularly about our relationships with our classes and our students. My own belief is that many teachers hide behind the belief that students are just lazy and unmotivated when in reality their own personas in class may have something to do with the (lack of) performance on the part of the students. I know of one teacher in my department who, when students are not participating, makes everyone stand up until they offer a constructive contribution to the class. I was casually talking with a young man about this practice, and he was not shy in admitting how much he hated this class because of policies like this one. I should note that this young man is seen as being somewhere near the pinnacle of our student body. He is bright, athletic, intelligent, and he serves as one of the ten male "Peer Leaders" who mentor freshmen throughout their senior year. He is, in other words, far from being the "lazy" or "unmotivated" type of student whose opinion should indeed be discounted. But so far as I know,

the teacher who maintains this policy has no way of finding out how his students feel about practices like this one. He could “look in the mirror” by asking students for evaluations of the class – anonymous ones are most helpful, I have found. Almost certainly, if students could evaluate his class anonymously, one of them would mention hating this particular policy and maybe even suggesting a more effective one.

“Looking ourselves in the mirror” can also be facilitated by maintaining ongoing relationships with former students. I am in regular dialogue with a number of former students, and I have learned a lot about my own teaching from their impromptu evaluations of the classes they took from me. They will randomly offer feedback like, “I hated that paper” or “That assignment was so much fun!” When comments like these get dropped into our conversations, I owe it to my current and future students to evaluate their merit. What made a particular assignment so painful? Do I need to change that assignment to be more like the one that students say is fun? Was the “fun” assignment too entertainment oriented? Do I need to make it less fun but also more meaningful? Are the two mutually exclusive? These questions and others that should be asked when our students give us feedback can lead us to become better mentor-teachers, but we have to ask ourselves some hard questions and be humble enough to change throughout our teaching careers. If mentoring is our priority, we are obligated to be willing to change and grow as our students provide feedback. And if mentoring is our priority, we need to find all the mentors we can for our own brand of teaching – older, wiser teachers or even book or movie characters who model good or bad teaching practices. When relationships are central to our teaching activities, as they should always be, we need all the role models we can get, fictional or otherwise. By scrutinizing what is right and what is wrong about our own classes

and those of other teachers, we can continually work toward the most effective mentor-teaching personas.

### **Self-Revelations and Mentor-Teaching**

I now turn away from creative depictions of teacher personas back to the real world where it can be much harder to craft the right relationship with students. The task of defining ourselves as mentor-teachers certainly goes beyond watching movies and trying to imitate our favorite fictitious teachers. We have to consider some of the everyday, practical ways that we can demonstrate to our students the sorts of teachers/people we are. One of the first orders of business for would-be mentor-teachers is to portray their authentic selves to the students from the front of the classroom. Far too often, we are so deeply concerned with not mixing our personal lives with our classroom lives that we fail to acknowledge our own humanity to our students. Opening up to our students promotes a collaborative relationship between teacher and student that cannot exist in a traditionally authoritarian classroom. In short, it fosters the mentoring we hope to achieve, and for mentor-teachers this must be the norm, not the exception.

Sondra Perl, author of the book chapter “Facing the Other: The Emergence of Ethics and Selfhood in a Cross-Cultural Writing Classroom,” understands the value of teacher openness. Perl faced the dilemma of how open to be with her students one summer while teaching in Austria. Perl, a Jew, harbored deep resentment and suspicion of her students that summer. Some of them were, after all, inevitably the descendants of Austrian Nazis. After holding her true feelings inside for a good while, she concluded that she must open up to the students if she hoped for them to be honest in their writing. “What was transformative for me was speaking out, giving voice to my concerns, not pretending to be someone who didn’t care or didn’t have

questions or was morally neutral,” says Perl (185). Perl speaks of “the courage it takes to reveal what is most deep and present in us...to give everyone the widest possible room to be a participant in a classroom where the teacher is also someone who can voice her concerns and questions” (183). As one might expect, Perl’s openness fostered a profound honesty among the entire group. Students were suddenly free to be real, even about their unattractive inner burdens. Such a classroom may well be the only environment where one can really learn anything of genuine substance. When our real selves are ignored, all students learn is how to go on playing the academic games that move them forward to the next level. They learn to suppress and hide rather than to discover and share.

Jane Tompkins voices similar ideas as Sondra Perl in her memoir *A Life in School*. Even as young as third grade, Tompkins recalls the importance of teacher openness. After relaying a story of her third grade teacher, Mrs. Higgins, telling her students how proud she was of her young son who had brought her a glass of orange juice while in the shower that morning, Tompkins elaborates,

I dwell on this incident because it symbolizes something that was missing from education as I knew it: the reality of private life. Taking showers, having a naked body, drinking orange juice, being a member of a family, needing to know that you are loved, needing to tell about it. (xv)

By sharing a simple facet of her morning, this teacher connected to Tompkins in a way that stuck with her long into her adult years. She had conjoined real life with the classroom by a simple story about orange juice. And it may well be that simple. The stories we tell our students need not be refined or even profound. We simply need to remove the barrier of “professional

distance” we have erected. A true professional shares her own reality in order that students feel freedom to do the same.

Mary Rose O’Reilly takes a different approach to addressing the need for teachers to be vulnerable with their students. O’Reilly confronts us on the fear of self-revelation that many of us have, saying,

Let’s assume you are a rather private person. You are not willing to tell your students that your cat died this morning; you do not want to hear about their dead cats. I think, however, that the best kind of teaching comes out of a willingness to stand in one’s condition. The best teaching comes not out of dropping your feelings at the classroom door. You don’t need to *talk* about being sad or happy; you just need to be present to your own inward life. It’s an attitude of mind, a quality of attention. (qtd. in Tobin “Fear and Loathing” 84, emphasis in original)

The willingness to “stand in our condition” is just the sort of vulnerability I’m suggesting. Announcing our every emotional burden to our students in a daily tirade may not be the answer to all of our teaching dilemmas, but acknowledging our authentic humanity personalizes the classroom and demonstrates a willingness to let down our facades.

Richard J. Murphy, Jr., author of the memoir *The Calculus of Intimacy: A Teaching Life*, sees the value of vulnerability as well. Murphy summarizes the performative nature of teaching this way:

Teaching is a live performance. Even with a script, it is mostly improvised. The simplest act is informed by a vast array of different, sometimes conflicting, concerns... Teaching is full of doubt, helplessness, and ignorance. There is no

learning it by heart. It is a personal act, new every time, essentially uncertain and thus every time creative. (53, 55)

Like O'Reilly, Murphy goes on to issue a warning against our desire "to remove uncertainty from the classroom [by] regiment[ing] teacher action with highly detailed curriculum guides and with checklists of good classroom practices" (49). By combining O'Reilly's warning with Murphy's performance metaphor, we come to a helpful mixture of ideas for mentor-teachers to consider when deciding how vulnerable to be. As both authors illustrate, if we want to ultimately serve as mentors to our students, the best place to begin an honest dialogue is in our very own classrooms. Each day provides opportunities for self-revelation, and while we should not turn the class into our own therapy session, we need to look for opportunities to acknowledge that we are learning as we go – both as teachers and, more importantly, as human beings.

In various classes this year, I have shared about my life-long struggle with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, my emotional struggle to break away from my family in choosing a wife who was not immediately accepted by my parents, my beliefs about marriage being hard work rather than a fairy tale, and much more. Sometimes the students ask questions, like the student who challenged me on my views on marriage, claiming that she believed one could have the feeling of being "in love" forever if only she chose the right partner. And sometimes the students look, frankly, bored by my life stories. Regardless of their reactions, I am seeking something very specific by revealing these personal details: I want them to see me as a human being, not as just a computerized teacher. I want them to know that I struggle through my own life as they struggle through their. I want them to feel free to come talk to me about their own family struggles, or their battles with psychological matters. In short, I want to make myself available as a mentor. The more we open our own lives to the scrutiny of our students, the more

we will create a classroom culture of openness and trust. However, the more we remain reticent to share our own struggles and joys, the more we will create a classroom culture of self-protection and privacy. If we want our students to be open with us, we must lead the way.

Pulitzer Prize winning memoir writer Frank McCourt recalls the liberation he felt when he decided, after years of “performing” and “pretending,” to be honest with his high school English students: “At Stuyvesant I decide to admit it when I didn’t have answers...I’m hazy on Transcendentalism...I used to know the meaning of condign but now it escapes me...I’m sorry, I couldn’t finish *The Faerie Queen*” (Mccourt 203). How freeing it is to tell our students honestly, “I don’t know” or “I don’t like this author either,” or “I hate my first drafts too,” or even, “I’ve had a terrible morning and I don’t want to be here!” Our honest vulnerability with students opens their eyes to our genuine humanity and thus paves the way toward mentoring relationships. I am reminded of a simple example of this vulnerability that fostered a skeptical student’s trust in me last year. Someone asked the definition of a word I could not define. I started trying to think of something intelligently ambiguous to say when I decided to just be honest. I sheepishly opened up the dictionary and read the definition aloud. The quiet, skeptical girl who never said much spoke up: “Mr. Blue, I’m glad you did that. Most teachers pretend they know all the answers even when we know they don’t.” What relief I felt that she spoke up for I feared initially that I had just lost all credibility as an English scholar. On the contrary, I had gained some.

Unfortunately, I am often guilty of putting on a façade, too. I am also reminded of a recent failure along these lines. During the persuasive essay unit, I had (of course) encouraged students to choose topics about which they had strong opinions: The war in Iraq, abortion, the driving age, etc. While these topics may get old to teachers, eighteen and nineteen-year-old

students remain highly invested in such discussions, and we should give them the opportunity to write their views. After a student-to-student debate on the issues, a student asked for my thoughts. I told her I'd give her the answers after they had written the essays – I didn't want anyone to try to say what they thought I wanted to hear. As the days passed, I kept thinking of how to tell the students of my own opinions, though I didn't want to. I didn't want to be subject to scrutiny or rejection, though I had asked them to risk becoming such subjects. Shamefully, I never answered the student's question. I let the whole class down in this. I had a chance to offer the counsel of someone who is neither peer nor parent, but I withheld my thoughts out of fear. Such fear must be overcome so that we can forge honest relationships with students. Maybe if I had shared my opinions, someone in the class would have been challenged in his own views to either reconsider his stance or even to alter it. Maybe if I had shared my views, we would have gotten "off the subject" for awhile and had a great discussion about abortion or the war in Iraq that would have helped students to verbalize their own outlooks. But I will never know because I missed this mentor-teaching moment in order to protect myself from discomfort. If we take these risks, we might come across students who prove our fears valid by finding our beliefs and ideals silly; but if we ask them to reveal their own opinions and beliefs yet are unwilling to follow suit, we merely perpetuate unhealthy power relationships that have brought us to the present place, where the classroom is divorced from real concerns.

Jeffrey Berman has put self-revelation into practice in a very tangible and profoundly brave way. During an Expository Writing course Berman was teaching as his wife lay on her death bed, he decided to read the eulogy he was writing to his class. Many of his students, naturally, did not even know his wife was sick, but Berman decided to act as a true mentor to his students both by reading his most personal writing, and by sharing his deepest feelings with his

writing students. As Berman tearfully read of his passionate love for his dying wife, the classroom was filled with silence and stifled sobs of emotion. But Berman did not just read his piece and leave it at that. Because Berman was aware that many of his students would be taken off guard by such a display of vulnerability, he decided to give them a chance to respond to him in an optional paper. He asked them,

Did you think that it was appropriate for me to read the eulogy to you? How did you feel when you heard me read it? Was it painful to hear? *Too* painful? Did I disclose too much of my private life to you? Did the eulogy change your impression of me? Would your response to the eulogy have been different if you read it instead of hearing me read it? Do you think that my reading of the eulogy will change your feelings about the course? If so, how? To what extent did hearing the eulogy encourage you to reflect upon relatives' or friends' deaths?

(118)

Berman's students' responses demonstrated the value of this sort of self-revelation, proving that self-disclosure leads students to feel more comfortable dealing with their own personal battles through the means provided by the classroom. Here are some of Berman's students' comments:

- "I appreciated your reading of the eulogy; I now find it much easier to share my sensitive disclosures with you."
- "Thank you for being so candid, you have taught me more about life in this one class than I have learned throughout my time in college. It is your own self-disclosures and honesty that make such an experience possible. Thank you."
- "I think that it was a good idea for you to read the eulogy. This is one of the few times that a professor of mine had done exactly what he/she asks of her students."

You opened yourself up to your class. I feel that there is even more trust among the class, and perhaps now people will disclose more in their essays and not feel apprehensive about doing so.”

Clearly, Berman has accomplished what I consider to be the goal of self-revelation: He has opened the door for his students to share their own personal struggles in writing, and at the very least, these three students now feel more comfortable sharing their own concerns with Berman. The third student even goes so far as to say that she thinks Berman has created a sense of “trust among the class.” When someone shares something so intimate as what Berman shared, it would be hard for any student to “out-do” his self-revelation through his or her own writing or comments. Thus, Berman has done his part to create a classroom where any and all writing topics are allowed and even encouraged. Berman gives students the chance to share their discomfort, and because he has modeled openness, the students know their own openness is quite welcomed. One student summed up the impact of Berman’s bravery this way:

I think your reading of this eulogy to our class is the most brave and courageous act I have ever seen. Your passion for your family and your work has inspired me to write about things in this class that I have never divulged to anyone. And for that, I thank you. Thank you. (137)

For my own part, I want to echo this “thank you” to Jeffrey Berman for modeling a level of bravery in teaching that frees me to imitate him. Like the child who is the first one brave enough to jump off the high dive, showing everyone else that the results are quite thrilling, Berman has taken the leap that I intend to model as I shape my own version of mentor-teaching.

To conclude my thoughts on teacher-vulnerability, I turn to the powerful words of Parker Palmer. Palmer goes so far as to call distant teachers bad teachers: “Bad teachers distance

themselves...from their students...Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness” (11). Palmer categorizes academia as “a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract” (12). I think he’s absolutely right, but I cannot figure out why this is the case when so many of us went into this job for its relational opportunities. If we teachers want our students to be vulnerable with us, or even if we want to allow vulnerability without encouraging it or requiring it, we need to lead the way by demonstrating that we feel joy, anxiety, sorrow, grief, and love just like they do. We need to model for them both the vocabulary of emotions and the healthy expression of them. We will not get very far in our relationships with students by remaining cold and distant, seeming like robots who live in their offices and grade papers for fun. If the semesters we spend together with our students are to serve as the beginning of mentoring relationships that might extend beyond the semester, we must take the first step by demonstrating to students that it is okay to bring our real selves to this class and to this relationship.

### **Conferencing and Mentor-Teaching**

A more individualistic sort of relational challenge for the mentor-teacher is the student/teacher conference, an aspect of teaching that applies to teachers of all disciplines, at all levels. Radical, engaging, provocative pedagogy, the sort I have been advocating throughout this dissertation, will inevitably lead to conferences of a uniquely interpersonal nature. We must consider how our relationships in one-on-one or small group settings can be most beneficially structured. Let me start this discussion with two examples from my own collegiate experience.

The first set of conferences took place during my freshman year at a private liberal arts college. Eager to excel and impress, I would finish papers a few days early and take them to my

British Literature professor for review. He would skim the paper and point out two or three places where I needed more textual proof or greater clarity, and the conference would last less than ten minutes. The whole time I would be left standing in the doorway, feeling that I had imposed an annoying burden on this busy professor, even though I came during his office hours. I would go back to my room, make the suggested changes, and still get a B on the paper – the same grade I always got on English papers until late in college. I probably visited that professor four or five times over the course of the semester, and not once did he ask me even a simple question like how I was enjoying his course or college as a whole. He failed to see my implied desire to interact with him and with the literature, and he offered perfunctory, technical advice that did not even meet the goal of improving my grades.

Had the first professor followed the second professor's example, perhaps I would have discovered my love for English as a freshmen and skipped the Business major that has proven itself a detour for a would-be English professor. The second professor taught a poetry course in the spring of my senior year. Despite the fact that the class consisted of nearly 100 people, he would schedule small group conferences, trying to meet with everyone over the course of the semester. We sat in his office and he asked us questions about ourselves: where we were from, what we were majoring in, what we were planning to do after college, and so on. He engaged us as human beings and acknowledged that we weren't just names on his roster. This nearly retired professor already had a building named after him on the campus, so he certainly had an excuse to rest on his laurels. Yet I suspect it was largely this acknowledgement of students as human beings that took him to the top of the academic echelons.

These two examples from my own experience likely ring true for most of us. Unfortunately, the latter examples are in too short a supply, and that's why they stand out so

distinctly. If our goal in class is to lay the foundation for meaningful dialogue with students, for genuine conversation and reflection, “we need to consider how our relationship to the whole class – whatever that relationship may be – supports or interferes with the one-to-one relationships we are trying to establish” (Tobin *Writing Relationships* 86). If class discussions and paper assignments begin meaningful discussions, conferences should be considered an extension site for those discussions. Thus, we should create a conference environment that sets students at ease.

Jane Tompkins suggests that meeting in coffee shops or a campus “hangout” rather than one’s office “make[s] possible a looser, less predictable conversation than is possible in an office or a classroom or a cafeteria...The environment alters the nature of our interchange. Topics can come up that might not in a different setting” (196-197). While technological advancements have made possible a super-streamlined conversation between teacher and student (email, online discussions, etc.), the benefits of face-to-face interaction in a non-authoritative setting are an immeasurably beneficial aspect of a humanizing pedagogy. During a doctoral course I took last summer, my dissertation director, Beth Burmester, held her office hours in a local diner. I went to meet with her twice, once alongside another student and once just the two of us. Such an environment enabled a freer dialogue and encouraged a sense of ease. But these types of relaxed conversations need not only take place when a student comes to one’s office hours. What keeps us as teachers from initiating conferences with a small group of students over lunch? bell hooks demonstrates the value of non-office, office hours as follows:

Throughout my teaching career, I have found it helpful to meet with each student in my classes, if only briefly. Rather than sitting in my office for hours waiting

for individual students to choose to meet or for problems to arise, I have preferred to schedule lunches with students. (204)

Intentionally creating encounters with students that foster a sense of trust and openness will help to alter students' perceptions of institutionally-generated power dynamics and inapplicable academic content. By meeting with students in this casual way, we once again lay the groundwork for further mentoring. If our only mentoring of students takes place in academic advising sessions, we deprive them of needed adult guidance and friendship, and we deprive ourselves a large part of the richness of the academic life – a life that should be communal, that should emphasize the shared struggles and joys of being human.

When connecting with students in this manner, professors must keep in mind that students aren't likely to have been approached or invited by a professor in this way before. This highlights the need to invite students to lunch in groups and in public places. Indeed, one-on-one or private meals could be perilous ground, and the implications of such meetings should be carefully considered so as not to create any undue suspicion. What I am suggesting is that traditional conferences are not always the way to go. Such conferences, held in the professor's office during her rigid office hours merely reinforce a power dynamic that reinforces the teacher-as-all-knowing-master model. While students are familiar and comfortable with this model, the way we structure conferences can serve to break down the generational and authoritarian boundaries between teachers and students.

Conferencing with students may well require the most vigilance for teachers to set the right tone in their relationships with students. Undoubtedly, many inappropriate attachments take root in the privacy of a one-on-one conference, yet as with anything, the negative potential of this environment means there is also a tremendous positive potential. Two case studies that

serve as illustrations of the value of conferences take us back into the world of fiction. May Sarton's *The Small Room* and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* both offer tremendous wisdom about the difficulties of structuring our conferences in helpful ways.

*The Small Room* takes its title from the very idea that true teaching takes place in the “small room,” or in the one-on-one conference. Lucy Winter, a young teacher right out of school, comes to her new job firmly holding onto the belief in strict boundaries between students and teachers. When she asks Hallie Summerson, a seasoned teacher, her beliefs on these relationships, Summerson replies wisely that in theory she thinks they are dangerous, but in reality they are inevitable. Later, when Pippa Brentwood insists on seeking Lucy Winter out for personal advice about family struggles, Lucy resists the conversation at first but soon realizes that by the very nature of her profession, she cannot stay uninvolved – it is simply not an option.

One of the key conflicts in the novel arises over whether or not to bring a psychologist on staff to help the students with their personal problems. Ironically, the stodgy, blue-blooded veteran Carryl Cope represents my own belief about such matters better than the progressive young faculty members who want the “shrink” on board. Cope says that for a teacher to merely teach her subject and leave the personal stuff to the psychiatrist is “abdicating” our responsibility to teach the whole person. Cope acknowledges her own failures in her relationship with the brilliant Jane Seaman, who plagiarizes an essay on *The Iliad*, seemingly hoping to get caught as a cry for relief from the pressures of being the star student. Indeed, true teaching is done in the “small room,” or conference, rather than in the classroom, and I for one agree with Carryl Cope that, while we are not our students' therapist, we can and do play a therapeutic role in their maturation and emotional development whether we like it or not. We need to see our conferences with students as not merely an obligation but an opportunity for a far deeper level of

teaching than we can possibly do in the “large room.” The novel highlights a disturbing trend in education – the separation of our students’ psychological and spiritual needs from the classroom. Many of the key players in the story want to hire a campus psychologist because they sense the depth of their students’ inner needs, and while there are certainly some problems that teachers must not get into with students, we have gotten too far away from true personal pedagogy. The one-on-one conference, as *The Small Room* suggests, can and should be a site for mentor-teaching. Failing to see the conference in this way may well amount to abdicating part of our calling as educators.

Another novel that highlights the dark side of the student/teacher is *The Catcher in the Rye*. But it can be instructive to us as well as we ponder how to structure healthy conferences with our students. In the book, the young and disillusioned Holden Caulfield gets kicked out of yet another school and two former teachers miss tremendous opportunities to make a serious impact on his life. Holden has two teachers who have taken an interest in him: Mr. Spencer and Mr. Antolini. Mr. Spencer is the sickly old man who wears a bathrobe and smells of Vicks nose drops. He invites Holden to his house and probes to find out Holden’s “feelings” about being kicked out; he flatly asks him why he doesn’t seem to care about his education. Clearly, he has invited Holden and other students over other times as well because of a story Holden relays about a Navajo blanket Mr. Spencer had shown him at one time. But his attempts to connect with Holden do not serve the purpose of helping Holden shape up. On the contrary, Holden is anxious to get out of the man’s creepy house, and Holden sees Mr. Spencer as a “phony,” just like virtually all authority figures in his life. But I don’t think it’s Spencer’s age that keeps him from relating well to Holden; rather, it’s both his choice of where to conduct this conference of sorts as well as his institutional outlook on things.

To begin with, having a student over to one's house comes fraught with countless pitfalls. Holden is immediately anxious to get out of Mr. Spencer's house because it feels foreign and musty to him. As a young idealist, the last thing Holden needs is to be forced into a physical space that reminds him of all he is cynical about. For a young man who wants to escape the feeling that he is dying from overexposure to the same-old same-old, the last place Mr. Spencer should have chosen to meet with Holden is in his house, where he and his wife seem (to Holden) to be awaiting an imminent death in their coffin-like home.

Not only does Mr. Spencer choose a bad physical location, but he also makes a grave mistake in deciding how to approach his conversation with Holden. He jumps right in and defends the "established" way of doing things by reading Holden his lousy answers on his recent history (Spencer's class) exam. He asks Holden, "Do you feel absolutely no concern for your future, boy?" When Holden says he doesn't feel too much concern, Mr. Spencer says, "You will, boy. You will when it's too late" (14). But Mr. Spencer fails to meet Holden where Holden is: in a place of skepticism about the promising future everyone tells him he should be eager to pursue. Because Holden does not buy into the future that all his private school teachers and his parents are selling him, he feels ostracized by Mr. Spencer who merely echoes the cacophony of voices telling Holden that he *should* want the worldly, adult things he sees no use for. Later in the book, Holden tells his younger sister Phoebe that even though Mr. Spencer was nice, he was a "phony," Holden's catch-all word for people who lack originality and fail to see the silliness of the game that life is (168). In his choice of conference location and his choice of how to structure the conversation with Holden, Mr. Spencer ostracizes this young man who needs a trusted guide, and he teaches us that we need to carefully consider both the locations of and the content of our conferences. Conferences hold enormous potential for fostering trust and

openness between students and teachers, but they also hold a similarly powerful potential for harming our relationships. By being careful in our selection of locations and conversations topics, we can alleviate some of the damage that well-intentioned professors like Mr. Spencer do in their attempts to conference with students.

The other teacher who “conferences” with Holden is Mr. Antolini, a former English teacher of Holden’s who now teaches at NYU. He has the advantage of being much younger than Mr. Spencer and thus more likely to be able to relate to Holden, and he offers Holden the kindness of letting him stay at his place when Holden has nowhere else to go. His home is much more up-to-date, and when Holden arrives, Mr. Antolini and his wife are winding down from a party they have hosted. The house is messy, and Mr. Antolini is a bit drunk, but Holden feels much more at home in this environment than in Mr. Spencer’s home. When Holden arrives, he seems to think he has found an adult who can relate to his situation. Mr. Antolini tries to help by delving deeply into Holden’s current behavior and telling Holden that he is “riding for some kind of terrible, terrible fall” (186). He goes on trying to warn Holden about becoming too cynical and hating everyone and everything. Eventually he gives Holden a piece of paper with a quote from psychoanalyst Wilhelm Stekel on it saying, “The mark of an immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one” (188). Despite the fact that Holden is being lectured to some degree by someone who seems to be taking “the establishment’s” side, Mr. Antolini seems at this point to be connecting with Holden to some degree. Mr. Antolini has done the things that a mentor-teacher should do, and he has maintained a healthy boundary line between himself and Holden. Unfortunately, whether because Mr. Antolini is drunk or because he has been hiding his motives all along, he proceeds to destroy any of the good he has done for Holden as the evening progresses.

First, Mr. Antolini, like Mr. Spencer, gives Holden the party line about education. When Holden expresses disgust about a boy who got a D in a Public Speaking class for making too many digressions in his speeches, Mr. Antolini defends the teacher's notion that one should stay on the point when speaking (184). With some discernment, Mr. Antolini might have realized that now was not the time for giving Holden the party line. Holden just needed someone to listen and to acknowledge the merit of his frustrations. Mr. Antolini might have considered either keeping his mouth shut or saying something like, "It would be good if teachers allowed for more digressions in some instances. I'm sorry they haven't but I will certainly work on that in my own classroom." Holden needed affirmation, not a pat answer that he had heard a thousand times. Second, and far more relationally damaging, Mr. Antolini sits next to Holden while Holden sleeps and pets him on the head. Holden wakes up, freaks out, and leaves in a flurry of nervous anxiety, assuming that Mr. Antolini had sexual motivations for touching him (192-193). One assumes that Holden and Mr. Antolini's relationship has ended...and if the touch was indeed sexual, the relationship should certainly be over. If, however, Holden's reaction is an overreaction to a simple gesture of affection, we can still read this passage with sadness – sadness that no adult has ever shown Holden healthy affection that would help him to interpret Mr. Antolini's touch as one of friendship, not something sexual. One way or the other, this touch marks the end of this potentially vital mentoring relationship. And once again, we can learn much about how not to structure our conferences through Mr. Antolini's example. Like Spencer, he needed to carefully consider the implications of having a student into his home. Maybe he should have put Holden up in a nearby hotel and met with him over breakfast or lunch so as to promote a more helpful outcome. And if he wanted to show his affection for Holden, he should certainly not have done so after a night of drinking when Holden had drifted off to sleep.

A fatherly hug or a hand on the shoulder would have had much better chances of success in showing Holden that he cared while keeping teacher/student boundary lines in their proper place.

So, the great news is that the two authority figures in Holden's life that he respects enough to listen to are teachers. Yet neither teacher expresses any empathy for Holden's disgust with the establishment, as represented by the numerous schools Holden has failed out of. These teachers need not affirm everything Holden disdains to meet him where he is. First and foremost they should do more listening before they offer Holden advice. They need to hear what is at the heart of Holden's frustrations. Even if they think they have his frustrations figured out from the beginning, Holden needs to feel listened to, yet neither teacher gives him this sense of having been truly heard. Second, they need to frame their advice to Holden in a more sympathetic way, perhaps by talking about their own frustrations with the establishment or by sharing a struggle they went through at Holden's age. But neither teacher meets Holden half way by admitting to sharing some of his irritation with the ways of the world. Finally, they need to take more care about the physical environment in which they are meeting with Holden. Both teachers are very much on their own turf. How might things have been different if they had met at Holden's favorite restaurant or coffee shop? This would have leveled the playing field a bit, not to mention eliminating the possibility of Mr. Antolini's (possibly) inappropriate behavior. The physical space where students and teachers meet needs to be a neutral place where neither party has an "advantage" over the other that might lead to misunderstandings or misbehavior.

Both these stories and the real-world research of the aforementioned scholars demonstrate that the conference can (and will!) make or break the relationship between students and teachers. Those who desire a mentoring relationship with students must be especially careful not to fall into some of the traps surrounding the content or location of conferencing

illustrated by Holden Caulfield's mentors, but that does not mean we should avoid conferences so as to remain safe. Mentor-teaching is not safe teaching, but that does not mean it is irresponsible teaching. By considering carefully the location and the content of our conferences, we can use this vital time to greatly enhance the mentoring nature of our student/teacher relationships.

### **Evaluation, Grading, and Mentor-Teaching**

Much like conferences, mentor-teachers need to consider how their grading practices are impacting their relationships with students. In courses where we are asking students to analyze and write about personal experiences, we must remain constantly aware of the danger of giving students negative comments and/or bad grades on papers that are very personal to them.

Evaluation is a critical element within mentor-teaching because of the demands of assessment put on teachers by institutions, the role of grades in student life, and the desire to practice a pedagogy that treats students fairly and respects their work and authorship holistically. Of course, we cannot give everyone A's either, so we must ponder the healthiest ways to foster mentor-teaching relationships through our evaluation and grading methods. A story from my own experience as a student provides a starting point.

In a class called *Literature Pedagogy* at a local university, I handed in a paper that asked for a response to any essay in *When Writing Teachers Teach Literature*, by Art Young and Toby Fulwiler. I was to discuss how I might use the essay's proposed methods in my own teaching. I chose Peter Elbow's article "Breathing Life into the Text" and discussed my idea for a creative research paper wherein students research an author and then imitate him/her by writing a story in his style (see both chapter 3 and the December 2006 issue of *Teaching English in the Two-Year*

*College* for more on that). The professor's responses to my ideas were few in number, but they left me with a sour taste in my mouth.

First, when I commented that students “fail to engage in ... discussions [of literature] either because of intimidation or disinterest,” he noted that I had used the word “disinterested” when I needed to use the word “uninterested.” His words were precisely as follows: “disinterest ≠ uninterested – look it up.” I went to Webster's dictionary after reading his first comment and the definitions of “disinterested” were as follows: 1. A lack of personal interest. 2. Lack of interest or concern; indifference. Still confused, I emailed the professor who clarified that the word should be used to describe the sort of interest a judge should have in a case she or he oversees – an interest that is unbiased, not a lack of concern or interest in the issue at hand. Fine and good...but I still took issue with the way the matter was addressed. To make this point seems to me to be mere grammatical snobbery and elitism. Any speaker of English would know, just as my professor did, what I meant by the word “disinterest.” Even Webster allows my particular usage of the word, albeit as a second choice. But if a teacher is going to point something like this out, it seems to me that it should be done by saying something like this, “While what you mean is clear, the best word here is ‘uninterested’ because ‘disinterested,’ in its original form, does not actually mean the same thing. Come see me, or look it up, for further clarification.” To tell a student he or she got it wrong and tersely command the student to “look it up” belittles the student unnecessarily and reinforces what many students already feel – that we English teachers are more concerned with grammatical nuances than with the substance of students' thoughts, beliefs, ideas, and even their lives.

The second comment was a response to my theory that imitation of well-known authors can and should lead students toward a development of their own styles. He wrote, “This isn't

exactly new. Imitation has been a teaching method since the dawn of time.” The assignment wasn’t to create something “new” nor had I claimed that I had a new idea. I was openly agreeing with Elbow’s theories and putting them into practice by offering my students a creative alternative to traditional research papers. The only point of a comment like my professor’s was to put me in my place, to let me know, just in case I thought I was really clever, that not only had I not come up with something original, but I had come up with something completely unoriginal, something so unoriginal that it has always existed. But perhaps this idea, which has existed since the dawn of time, is a good one *for the very reason* that it has existed since the dawn of time. Why not, as a teacher, write the comment something like this: “Great idea! In fact, you’re in good company as the greatest teachers for all of history have used imitation as a teaching technique”? I’d have felt much more encouraged by such feedback while still being told the same thing by my instructor: that my idea was an ancient one.

I’m not suggesting that we quit correcting students’ grammatical or technical mistakes. We should indeed correct our students when they use the language in a way that will harm them in future communication – maybe costing them jobs or promotions or the like. But we need to consider both what we say and how we say it when responding to our students. Tilly Warnock, in “Language and Literature as ‘Equipment for Living’: Revision as a Life Skill,” says it well:

[A] problem with the idea of teaching revision as a life skill in a school context may also emerge if we as teacher take our positions and ourselves too seriously, and shift from teacher to experts, whose persuasive authority rests on empirical facts and truths rather than rhetoric, and forget that teacher is an art of persuasion. When we shift from being people who learn in order to teach to people who have already learned, we no longer model learning and adapting what works in one

context to new situations: We are no longer teaching writing and revision, and we have become ‘rotten with perfection,’ [to quote Kenneth Burke] (51).

Had the above professor adopted the more humble stance of a fellow learner rather than coming off as “rotten with perfection,” I would have learned far more from his guidance than I did. He missed a chance to really educate me because he positioned himself, through his written feedback, as the master who has it all figured out. Mentor-teachers must work hard to avoid this stance as they try to correct students without crushing the positive aspects of their writing at the same time.

Even world-renowned novelist Leo Tolstoy suggested how much damage can be done to students when teachers focus on mechanics rather than content. In “Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us? Or are We to Learn to Write from Them?” Tolstoy claims the following idea as his most important principle in teaching writing: “When looking through a pupil’s composition, never make any remarks to him about the cleanliness of the copy-book, nor about penmanship, nor orthography, nor, above all, about the structure of the sentences and about logic” (79). Yet for many of us English teachers, those things are *all* we comment on. Nearly every semester, many students tell me what bad writers they are before I have seen one sentence of their writing. After years of the type of correction against which Tolstoy advises us, young men and women have become convinced that they cannot write well because teachers have only taken the time to comment on the poor parts of their writing, not the many positive elements. No wonder students quickly become discouraged about their writing potential.

Perhaps I’m just too sensitive, but many of our high school students certainly share in my sensitivity to our written and spoken comments. As one of those teachers who entered the field because I felt entirely inadequate in so many of my high school and college classes, I am indeed

very sensitive to the old guard teaching style that places more emphasis on commas than on character. What we write on papers either builds students up or tears them down. Sometimes, we will step on toes no matter how hard we try not to, but I for one would encourage all of us to do at least two things: First, we should phrase our criticisms constructively, finding an encouraging way to phrase a corrective suggestion. Second, we should take care to decipher between our own pet peeves in language usage and mistakes that genuinely hinder our students' ability to communicate in writing. Harping on our pet peeves may well serve to convince students that what we English teachers have to offer is nothing more than criticism, causing them to run from the English classroom and its countless opportunities for sharing meaningful knowledge with our students.

In *Persons in Process*, one of the four students followed by Herrington and Curtis is a young man who begins the book with the name Lawrence and ends it with the name Steven. Lawrence/Steven came to college amidst a raging struggle to find his identity. He came out of the closet as a freshman and felt the need to demonstrate his sexuality rather flamboyantly, but by the end of the book, he had become comfortable in his own skin, largely through the writing he had done while in college. However, not all the writing he did was met with the kindness it should have been. Herrington and Curtis relay the story of a very hurtful comment a professor wrote in response to a paper that Lawrence wrote responding to the book of Job in the Bible. The professor wrote, "It seems you are over reacting to *Job*, as though some prior scar-tissue prohibits objective reading. You like 'pleasant' absolutes. Isn't that a little silly?" (186). These comments so entirely demean the writer that they nearly feel made up in order to typify an insensitive arrogant professor. The professor's response criticized Lawrence's strong reaction

against the idea in *Job* that good behavior earns people heaven while bad behavior earns people hell – a notion that virtually everyone finds disheartening at some level.

Here was a chance for a professor to allow and enable a student to deepen his understanding of God, the afterlife, and his own relationship to those things, yet for three sentences in a row, the professor shakes his authoritative finger at a struggling student with seemingly no other purpose than to belittle. First, he tells Lawrence/Steven that he is overreacting, a sure way to put someone on the defensive. Next, he pokes that finger into Lawrence/Steven's "scar-tissue" and tells him he lacks objectivity – not only insulting the writer's ability to read the "right" way, but also taking a personal stab (no pun intended) at past (scar-t)issues that the professor knows nothing about and has no business mocking. Finally, he flat out calls Lawrence/Steven's interpretation "silly." I can think of no less useful way to help students apply the context of the classroom to the contexts of their lives. Wouldn't a comment like, "I'd like to see you continue probing your feelings here. I sense that this topic has strong personal implications for you and your views of God and the absolute. See if you can get at the heart of your responses to *Job* so you can write more and more objectively as you revise, but certainly do not give up on your subjective responses either – they are far more important in the long run than your grade in this class," have been much more compassionate while conveying the same discomfort with Lawrence/Steven's subjectivity? To critique a student's writing as not in line with the goals of the paper is one thing, but to criticize the person himself is perhaps the most effective way to distance oneself from his students, convincing them once and for all that the academy does not mix with the personal in any way, shape, or form.

Herrington and Curtis offer wise words about how we should think about our written responses to students. They say we should offer

responses that provide a mirror to their strengths, trusted mentoring through their weaknesses, and, perhaps above all else, confirmation that they are indeed, as Wordsworth said of the poet, ‘a man speaking to men’...or, as Heinz Kohut said...of the healthy self, ‘a human among humans’. (207)

As mentor-teachers we must affirm our students where they succeed and try to motivate them where they fail. Many ideas of how to accomplish this exist, but regardless of our own chosen approach, we must remember that every word we say or write to a student has the potential for both tremendous harm and for tremendous good. Clearly, we should aim for the latter every time our mouths open or our pens touch the paper’s margins.

Many scholars are addressing the issue of how to respond to student writing in constructive ways in their own research. Anne Greenhalgh encourages us to shift our comments on students’ papers from “interpretive” to “interruptive.” In other words, we should quit telling students what they’ve communicated (interpretive) and start interrupting them as we probe for deeper, more specific meaning (404). Judith Harris says we should do “soft grading,” offering a running commentary in the margin of students’ papers by using pictures and check marks to show approval or disapproval (214). Wendy Bishop suggests trading papers with another teacher who will assign grades. This puts the classroom teacher in the true role of an advisor/writing mentor who serves to help his students prepare their work for some reader other than himself – a more realistic version of writing mentoring than helping students and then being the grader of what they produce (“Designing” 31). In the 1970’s Barrett John Mandel wrote an article called “Teaching Without Judging,” in which he proposed that we grade on the quantity of students’ work rather than on the quality, mandating only how much they produce. He believes that the activity of writing itself produces the learning (630). David Bleich, author of *Know and Tell: A*

*Writing Pedagogy of Genre, Disclosure, and Membership*, suggests that rather than measuring students papers with grades, we simply engage in a process of describing the writing to the student over the course of the semester/year. Description would be a semester/year long process that would acknowledge both the teacher's and the student's ups and downs, strengths and weaknesses, and would "encourage mutuality in the relationships between teachers and students" (8, 216). Here the idea is that by telling students what they have communicated rather than grading what they have communicated, they not only become more aware of their writing abilities, but they are not threatened by penalties for their inadequacies. Instead, they are honestly told of them but given the chance to remedy them as their writing progresses.

Louise DeSalvo, author of *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*, offers perhaps the most practically useful guidelines for responding to students' writing. DeSalvo offers the following guidance for teachers in responding to students' writing:

1. Be a caring presence.
2. Tell the writer what he has communicated.
3. Tell the writer what you like (not *that* you like or dislike) in the writing.
4. Point out any "holes" in the story.
5. Tell the writer where you would like to hear more.
6. Share what you have observed about the writer's strength and survival skills.
7. Help the writer see patterns, both in the writing and in her life. (211-212)

DeSalvo's belief, like my own, is that, "Our educational system too often fails to communicate that language is a living system of endless creation. Rather many students experience language as a system of menacing, mysterious, and fixed rules" (284). In other words, we pretend that the

rules of the English language are fixed and obvious if only the lazy students would take the time to learn them. But it's simply not true, and by following DeSalvo's guidelines, we acknowledge the flexibility of language usage and, more importantly, the value of the student who is using the language. All of these practically-minded scholars recognize that, as student-centered writing teachers, we must consider the power we hold as evaluators and work to use that power toward the most effective, health-producing ends possible.

Let's be honest: Shakespeare would have as much trouble reading our modern literature as our students have reading Shakespeare because the language has evolved so much. We need to admit to our students that all of the rules of good language use are subject to change, and we need not be afraid to tell them that certain things we harp on are simply our own opinions and/or pet peeves. It is not wrong to start sentences with "it is" (notice my little humor in this sentence, please!), but many of us prefer students to work a bit harder than such a construction makes them work. Using "I" in writing is also not wrong, though many of our students seem to think it is akin to cheating or stealing. The beauty of our chosen subject is that it is not mathematical and fixed. It is changeable and changing, just as we human being are. And in the spirit of vulnerability, we should not be afraid to tell our students as much.

In Bel Kaufman's novel *Up the Down Staircase*, English teacher Sylvia Barrett asks a question that many of us can relate to: "How do I correct [these essays]? What do I correct? Spelling? Punctuation? The inarticulate loneliness between the lines? I don't know where to start or whether to laugh or cry" (qtd. in Berman 74). What a profound and beautiful articulation of my point about the importance of our responses to students' writing. The easiest solution is to focus on the spelling and punctuation because such things are black and white, right or wrong. In short, that's the easy way out when correcting papers. We justify our focus on such things by

claiming that we cripple our students by not teaching them proper punctuation, syntax, or spelling. But do we not cripple them in a far worse manner by not commenting on the “inarticulate loneliness between the lines”? Many successful and well-adjusted people forget where commas belong, and they get by in life just fine. But the cries for help, the human weariness, the struggles that our students’ papers so often display need our comments, our reactions, our responses. Our students need for us to reach beyond our corrective and/or editing personas and to touch them as humans – as friends, as parents, as therapists, as peers...as mentors. Failure to connect with our students in this way turns us into mere machines who evaluate other machines: “This is right, this is wrong...You get an A, you get a C.” To be mentor-teachers, we must remember that we are responding to human beings, not to computer-generated words on a page. Seeing our evaluation this way will serve us well as we aim to foster ongoing mentoring relationships with students.

### **Despite Our Best Intentions**

The story “Dr. Jack-O’-Lantern,” by Robert Yates, deals with younger children than I am discussing here, but it provides a sadly beautiful metaphor for how difficult the task of connecting with some students can be, despite our best intentions. Yates tells the story of Miss Price and her attempt to embrace Vincent Sabella, a lonely, hurting, foster child in a classroom full of well-to-do elementary students. Vincent cannot fit in and the students look for reasons to ostracize him. In an effort to fit in he tells tall and obviously false tales about what he does over the weekend, at one point mistakenly saying he saw the movie Dr. Jack-O’-Lantern and Mr. Hide, rather than *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, a movie the students knew to be gory and inappropriate for their age. He also says he and his dad were chased by the cops and shot at.

One day in desperation, he writes all the curse words he knows on a brick wall outside the classroom. He must stay behind, but Miss Price sees that he is just trying to fit in and takes a very gentle approach with him. Some boys who are eager to see how much trouble he gets into wait for him outside of the school and ask what happened. He lies to them and makes his punishment sound brutal, but when Miss Price shows him kindness soon thereafter, they know he is lying. He then becomes even more of an outcast, having barely missed his one chance to fit in. The story ends with him drawing on the same wall a naked picture of Miss Price with all the curse words he knows coming from her mouth.

This story breaks my heart because it is so easy to see through the misery of Vincent and the good-heartedness of Miss Price. Despite her efforts at kindness, she actually makes things worse for Vincent because the students see her favoring him and that increases his different-ness. Vincent wants to fit in and he tries what so many misguided young people try – being bad to get attention. Perhaps the sad lesson of this story is that no matter how well-intentioned we may be about helping our students, there will be times when their personal demons win out over us in the war for friendship. But this doesn't make Miss Price's efforts in vain. She took the risk of reaching out to a student and cannot be faulted for failing to do so in a way that "took." The true failure would have been in not reaching out to him, as the true failure for us would be in failing to take some of the risks I suggest in this chapter. While the story of Vincent and Miss Price ends badly, one suspects that an adult Vincent might look back and realize that Miss Price treated him kindly and that he should've been content with her kindness rather than seeking his peers'.

While our older students would not be likely to act out in Vincent's childish way, the dynamics of social posturing do not change much from childhood into adolescence and even into

adulthood, so the story remains relevant. The point is that some of our students have more going on emotionally, psychologically, and personally than we can hope to overcome in one semester or academic year, no matter how hard we try. Our efforts to reach out may even be met with open disdain or anger, as in Vincent's case, but we should still persist. Rather than using this example of kindness-gone-wrong to say that teachers should stay away from students' personal problems, mentor-teachers should take away a different lesson: We must ponder carefully our teaching practices both inside and outside of the classroom so that we give our mentor-teaching efforts the greatest possibility for success. As we consider the most effective ways to take our teaching beyond the classroom to a place of impact on our students' lives, we will inevitably fail from time to time, but all great endeavors involve some failure along the way. The important thing is to learn from each failure and turn it into part of our own journey toward our own version of excellent mentor-teaching.

The risk of failing to get involved is that our former students will suffer quietly in their adult lives, wishing they knew who to turn to when they face a divorce or a career decision. We will never know that they wish we were available, and they may not even actively think that thought, but that does not change the fact that we could do them enormous good by pondering how we might make use of some of these practices to facilitate mentoring relationships with students. And we must remember that the ultimate goal of all of the ideas I've expressed in this chapter is to find ways of letting students know that we are available and that we care about them as human beings much more than we do as English students. Morrie Schwarz accomplished this with Mitch Albom, and the result has been a changed life on Albom's part. I hope to be so lucky as to be someone's Morrie Schwarz someday.

## CHAPTER 5: A CALL TO ACTION

In my final chapter, I issue a call to action for mentor-teachers of all subject matters, but especially, of course, for English teachers at the high school and college levels. After explaining why teacher research provides the perfect overlap between our scholarly needs to be active researchers and our personal needs to serve as mentors, I will offer some conclusions about mentor-teaching from my own teacher research. Finally, as a conclusion to my arguments as a whole, I will turn to some stories from my own teaching career and from recent news events that demonstrate why young people need teachers to act as mentors, both in the classroom and beyond.

### **Teacher Research: The Ideal Scholarly Approach for Mentor-Teaching**

The benefit of teacher-research is that it accomplishes two of the primary goals of the mentor-teacher. Teacher-research marries theory to practice, enabling us to accomplish both our professional needs to produce scholarly research *and* our practical needs to meet our students' needs in the classroom. If many of us want to keep our jobs, we need to produce scholarship; if we want to change our students' lives, we need to marry that scholarship to their concerns as best we can. Simply defined, teacher research takes place when teachers do research on their own classrooms: their students, the classroom environment, relationships among the people in the room, ideal learning environments, best teaching practices, and so on. Most credit Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* (1976) with formalizing the concept of teacher research in Composition Studies. In her ground-breaking book, she analyzed over 4,000 writing placement exams and identified remarkably consistent categories of error as well as suggesting teaching methods for helping students overcome these errors. But for the usage of the actual

term, Ruth Ray first used the actual words “teacher research” in her 1993 book, *The Practice of Theory: Teacher Research in Composition*, and identified its purpose “in bringing about change – in the teacher, the student, the school system, the teaching profession, the field of study, and the practice of research – *from within the classroom*” (183 emphasis in original). Traditional research, even ethnography which allows for more personal experience and reflection, relies on an outside researcher who observes classroom dynamics and practices, then generates “objective” and generalized theories about what classroom practices work, and sometimes about teacher and student attitudes or experiences, but always from the third-person interpretation. This kind of research and sponsored educational studies is often aimed at effecting changes in broader educational policies – a worthy goal, but not as locally useful as teacher research. Teacher research places a greater emphasis on the local environment of an individual school or classroom and on the relationships therein because of the belief that effective changes cannot be globalized or generalized. Rather, research will bear the most fruit when individual teachers research their own classrooms to generate theories based on their experience and self-assessment of how to best teach their own students, and how those students learn best. Teacher research becomes both a form of scholarly inquiry, and an aspect of professional development, according to Marion McLean and Marian Mohr, in their *Teacher-Researchers at Work*, published by The National Writing Project in 1999.

In “Developing Principles for Practitioner Research,” Dick Allwright, a prominent researcher on childhood language development, notes that teacher research describes “a relationship of identity between the people being investigated and the people doing the investigation” (357). For mentor-teachers, this “relationship of identity” between our students and ourselves is precisely what we’re after. Without a focus on the interaction between specific

students, specific teachers, and specific schools, research will inevitably fail to bring about the suggested advances in educational models. Because mentor-teaching cannot be effective unless we become very intentional and specific in our knowledge of our unique teaching situations, mentor-teachers have a mandate to become experts on researching our own classrooms.

Allwright's vision of a "relationship of identity" cannot be created by generalized research on generalized students. Mentor-teachers will not be effective unless they know the Bobs, Susies, and Jerrys of their very own classrooms.

The personalizing and humanizing teacher researcher views both the teacher and her students as ongoing learners – the students learning, in our context, to write and to analyze literature, and the teacher learning how to teach writing and literature. The teacher who becomes static in his approaches to teaching students will cease to connect with the realities of his students' struggles and concerns. Education specialists, Anthony Clarke and Gaalen Erickson describe this ongoing, never-ending research as follows:

Teacher research involves classroom teachers in a cycle of inquiry, reflection, and action. In this cycle, teachers question common practice, approach problems from new perspectives, consider research and evidence to propose new solutions, implement these solutions, and evaluate the results, starting the cycle anew.

(Lewison qtd. in Clark and Erickson 3)

The cycle of inquiry, reflection, and action is never-ending for mentor-teachers. We need to constantly be asking ourselves what strategies are working, what strategies need tweaking, and what strategies are subverting our desires to form ongoing personal relationships with our students. Simplifying this same concept, Ardra Cole and Gary Knowles put the main objective

of teacher research this way: “Through systematic reflection...teachers...continue to learn to teach and teach to learn” (2).

Here’s one example of what this might look like. I always ask my students to include a paragraph in their literary analysis papers about the application of some part of the literature to their own personal lives. My objective is to help them connect the lessons of literature to their day-to-day struggles, but I need to consider that this might not be happening. Thus, I need to design a research question that enables the students to help me become more efficient in meeting this goal. One way to get this feedback would be to ask for anonymous evaluations of this practice – ask the students, under the safety of anonymity, to tell me if this mandatory section of their papers is indeed enabling to make connections they would not otherwise make. Perhaps this demand of mine is inhibiting their writing by taking them out of “literary analysis” mode into “personal writing” mode. Or perhaps it is having its intended effect. One way or the other, these are the types of research questions that will foster the type of teaching we want to accomplish. Without such research, we may never have any real evidence as to whether our objectives are hitting or missing their marks.

Two unique facets of teacher research set it apart from traditional research as being both more practical and more locally effective in specific classroom contexts: its immediate integration with practice and its ongoing nature. In the English classroom, teacher research enables teachers to learn the nuances of their own students’ writing and reading skills and struggles in order to make use of both global and local teaching methods for the ultimate benefit of their particular students’ abilities and concerns. In my example from above, teacher research would enable me to refine my literary analysis assignments based on what my students have to say about the current method’s efficacy. Because this sort of research acknowledges the

individuality of each teacher and each student, it is vital to the future of mentor-teaching and thus to my own future as a teacher and scholar. I view every test, essay, and homework assignment as informal teacher research as I strive to understand how to best serve my particular students. And as my scholarly work increases, I intend to start nearly all of my writing with teacher research in the hope of taking lessons from my own classroom and applying them both locally and more broadly in order to help others become better mentor-teachers.

### **Where Is Teacher Research Most Useful?**

In “Going Public,” Peter Mortensen, Director of Rhetoric at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, looks at Mike Rose’s 1989 work, *Lives on the Boundary*, as a model for all teacher researchers in the English classroom. Mortensen uses Rose’s teacher research as an example to demonstrate that we all have teaching tools, ideas, and resources that have worked well for us in our particular situations, and he encourages readers to share those tools with others who face similar situations as our own. This sharing of knowledge is an important part of mentor-teaching in at least two ways: First, it forces us to actually do research on our own classrooms in a structured and systematic way – an act that can only strengthen our self-awareness as mentor-teachers. Second, it demands that we share our knowledge with other English teachers in an act of teacher-to-teacher mentoring. Mortensen admits, “Few of us will write a book like Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary*, but many of us are capable of sharing disciplinary knowledge with local audiences concerned about literacy” (195). Mortensen’s encouragement here is for teacher researchers to use their newfound knowledge in ways that help other teachers who might be in a similar teaching situation. Even if we never achieve Rose’s fame, our knowledge can be useful to our peers. Rose sought to share his knowledge with the

small group of teachers who would relate to his findings, but his book became a mainstream hit because it struck a chord with teachers and students at all levels and in all situations. Our research may or may not have the same end result, but even helping a few teachers who work in the same building as we do to relate better to their own students is worthwhile.

In an article called “Why Do Teacher Research?” Ian Mitchell proposes that teacher research can be not only fruitful for my mentor-teaching goals but also the related goal of teachers mentoring each other. Mitchell says, “Teacher research...should not be disconnected from issues of professional development of at least some of the teacher’s school colleagues” (199). Mitchell’s suggestion, essentially, is that we make the process of researching our own classrooms *and* sharing those findings locally a part of our required professional development standards. Most of us have experienced the relief of finding a colleague with a similar problem, or, better yet, a solution to a problem that we also face. If doing teacher research were given higher priority, and sharing it was mandatory, teachers would undoubtedly find a greater sense of autonomy, greater collegiality with their teaching peers, and greater leaps forward in their students’ educational achievements.

An example of this from my own experience comes from the project I’ve previously discussed that I call “The Personal Thesis Statement.” The assignment asks students (at the beginning of the year’s writing assignments) to define themselves in a few sentences. They are to get as close to the core of what makes them uniquely who they are as they possibly can. Students find this self-defining task both enjoyable and meaningful, and as such, I have shared the idea with other teachers in my department who have re-envisioned similar projects for their own grade-levels. Teachers of younger students have made it more of a creative project, encouraging some degree of artistic representation along with the thesis statements. Teachers of

older students have had students expand on the statements to write entire papers based around these theses. The basic concept is that we as mentor-teachers need not only seek to mentor our students but we can mentor each other, too. Even teachers with more years of experience than we have can be mentored by us, in a sense, as we share creative strategies for getting the most meaningful work out of our students.

Teacher research, in simpler terms, is an ongoing, unending *conversation* between teachers and students and between teachers and teachers. Just as we tell our students that a piece of writing is never finished – “it’s just due” – our research and conversation about our research never ends either. Like our students, we are composing the future of our profession, continually writing and rewriting rough drafts which will need further revision as we grow as teachers and as human beings. Teacher research in the field of composition offers tremendous promise to see the profession changed from the inside of the classroom out.

### **Conclusions from My Own Teacher-Research on Mentor-Teaching**

As I have been writing my dissertation, I thought I should do a bit of teacher research myself in order to test some of my primary premises in this paper. As such, I have recently polled my high school sophomores and seniors about two primary topics of this project: First, I questioned them about their own mentors – who are they? What makes them mentors? And so on. Second, I polled them about the specific classes they have taken that have impacted their lives beyond the walls of the classroom. I assigned the upcoming questions for them to answer as a homework grade in the hope of gaining specific feedback as to whether or not my ideas of mentor-teaching matched their ideas. I gave them multiple options for how to present me with the information. They could email it to me privately, post it on our class “wiki” page where

anyone could read it, or hand in a hard copy. I asked that any of them who were willing would give me written permission to quote them by simply writing (and signing/dating) at the bottom of the page: "I give Tim Blue permission to quote the above in his doctoral dissertation." The questions are as follows:

Mentoring Questions:

1. How would you define the word mentor?
2. Do you have a mentor(s)? Who?
3. How did this relationship begin?
4. What do you expect from this person?
5. Do you consider any teachers (current or former) mentors?
6. Do you wish adults other than your parents made themselves more available to you as mentors? Or are adults too intrusive in your lives?

Teen Culture Questions:

1. List the top three concerns that weigh on your mind right now.
2. What percentage of the time do the things you learn in school help you in real life situations?
3. What is the most impactful class you've ever taken for your real life? Why?

I do not have the space to include a comprehensive list of my students' answers, but I have included some of the more insightful feedback I received, particularly relating to question number five from the mentoring list and question number three on the teen culture list of questions. I offer what follows as both an example of the practicality of teacher research and as reinforcement of the ideas I have been presenting throughout this dissertation regarding mentor-

teaching. Here is a sampling of what my students had to say and how I plan to use the information as I revise my own teaching strategies for the future.

### **Students' Views on Mentors' Roles**

Perhaps the most profound definition of a mentor I have ever seen came from a quiet senior named Ryan, who rarely speaks in class. He said, “[A mentor is someone] whose hindsight can become your foresight.” Throughout my dissertation, I have been trying to say precisely what Ryan says so succinctly: Our students need adults who will share from their own mistakes in order that the younger mentee can learn and grow without the pain of making those mistakes. Another senior, a young woman named Laura expresses a similar definition of mentoring: “I'm very glad that I have all the adults in my life that I do. I don't have everything together and it's nice to have mentors around to encourage you and give you honest advice. The only reason I'm getting through this year is because of adults I'm close to outside of school. It's nice to know that I have support close by if I need it.” Laura elaborates on Ryan's pithy definition. She refers indirectly to the difficulties she has had this year with an overbearing father who has very set ideas about where she should attend college. But she also notes that she is grateful to have other adults in her life who provide a counter-balance to her father's dominance. The end result has been a bit of a compromise on where Laura will go to school. She's escaping her father's overly-watchful eye by going north for college, but she is not going to the expensive, private school she dreamed of. One thing seems clear: If Laura had no one to talk to other than her father, she might not be bold enough to make the break from him that many of her mentors have encouraged her to make.

The feedback I received also demonstrated that young people want mentors to share from their own lives in order to free them up to be open. Sadly, one of my tenth graders does not feel that teachers make good mentors because most of them refuse to be “real” with students. He observes,

For someone to be a mentor to me, they have to give me wisdom or teach me something that I will use and want to learn, so not many teachers have been mentors to me...I don't feel like I ever will [have teachers as mentors] because I can't say whatever I want around them and be myself. Most teachers are too serious.

In chapter 3 I discussed at length the need for teachers to share from their own personal lives in order to connect with students, and Colin clearly expresses that he does not feel his teachers have done this. Colin's points seem to be that this vulnerability need extends beyond the serious matters, on which I focused, to light-hearted matters as well. He wants to be able to be himself with teachers and they have failed to foster an environment where he feels comfortable doing this. Colin's point reinforces my idea that we need to laugh with our students, to let them tell us stories that are off the subject, to show them funny YouTube videos just for the heck of it, and so on. Students want to see our humanity, and we should welcome chances to show it to them.

Another tenth grade boy expresses a similar desire to hear from his mentors rather than just talking about himself. Jeff admires his uncle Greg, who “has an actual conversation instead of an interrogation. He shares things in his life too and doesn't treat my sister and me like we are babies.” Like Colin, Jeff wants to know that his mentors are real people, not automatons who only want to dispense advice after listening to the answers to their probing questions. Jeff also comments on his desire to be treated like an adult. Maybe the top quality of mentoring is the

ability to make the younger person feel like a friend and not simply a mentee. Most of us do not want to feel like someone's project. We want to feel that they are genuinely interested in a give-and-take relationship where both parties offer help to the other party. Summing up Colin's and Jeff's comments, then, young people want to be heard, but they also want to hear from us. They want to know what makes us laugh and what makes us cry. In short, they want to know what makes us human.

A final quality that young people desire in their mentors is a fairly obvious one: the willingness to spend time. How can we be mentors without this quality? Indeed, we cannot, so we need to be willing to invest time that goes above and beyond what our jobs require of us. One of my senior girls puts it this way: "I do think that an important quality a mentor of teenagers...[is] the desire to actually spend time with the teen they are mentoring. It is kind of ironic that most adults find teenagers an annoyance considering how fondly most adults look back upon their youth." Kate highlights an irony that mentor-teachers need to take to heart. We must work actively to demonstrate that teenagers are not annoying to us; rather, they are fascinating and lovable and worth spending time with. We will not get very far in our efforts at mentor teaching if we find it annoying to spend extra time around teenagers. While their antics and immaturity can be trying, we need to walk through this time of transition with them if we hope to maintain mentoring relationships into their adulthoods. Another senior boy hits on the concept of time, too:

Mr. Kennerly is the only current teacher I really think of as a mentor because I spend so much time with him out of school. Back in 9th grade, Mr. Heiskell was a mentor because he really wanted to get to know my group of friends and we

ended up spending a lot of time with him after school hours, and we learned a lot from what he had to say to us.

Andrew is lucky to have two teachers on the list of men he considers mentors, and their distinguishing characteristic is the willingness to spend time with students beyond the classroom. In my own teaching, this investment of time has become much more difficult as I have gotten married and had a child. The demands on my time that supersede my desire to mentor young people have grown tremendously from when I was an energetic, single, young teacher. Nevertheless, my desire to mentor my students has remained, and I have had to get both more creative and more intentional in how I spend this extra time with students. At my school, the seniors are allowed to go off campus for lunch, so I have tried to carve out regular times to take some of them to local restaurants for lunch. Virtually never do these lunches turn into earth-shattering discussions where I know a “mentoring moment” is taking place, but virtually always does this small investment of extra time change the nature of that particular relationship. The students are more eager to stop by my room to chit-chat after these lunches, and they seem much more willing to answer my questions about their girlfriends or home lives more honestly and thoroughly. With my former students who have graduated, I have carved out this extra time by having coffee on the weekends or over summer break, by writing them hand-written letters, and by simply emailing or texting them to say hello. I see all of these small investments of time as building blocks for ongoing relationships. Sometimes the relationship forms quickly and remains vital and active, and sometimes the relationship never gets off the ground. But like the young people above have commented, I have little hope of forming mentoring relationships without this investment of extra time.

### **Students' Views on What Makes a Class Meaningful**

The second aspect of my own teacher research project had to do with the question, “What makes an academic class meaningful to you?” This question elicited more opinionated answers from the students because, while not everyone feels like he has a mentor, every one of my students has taken plenty of academic classes. By far the most common expression from students was that a class needs to have “real life application” in order to be meaningful in their lives. This should come as no surprise since most of us can remember wondering, or even asking aloud, “When are we ever going to use this in real life?” My contention has been throughout this dissertation that if the classroom content is divorced from real life, our students will tune us out very quickly. We have to work actively to make these real life connections for our students and, more importantly, to help them make them for themselves. As you will see from my research, they want this and they respond well to it.

Two of my 10<sup>th</sup> graders remembered an 8<sup>th</sup> grade Bible class as meaningful because the teacher, Bill Bufton, allowed them to get off the subject and discuss “real life.” One boy, Alex said this: “The most impactful class that I have ever taken is eighth grade Bible. With Bill Bufton at the helm, our all boys’ class soared through discussions about Bible topics as well as real world topics. The man was brilliant in his thought and taught everyone a thing or two about life.” Notice that Alex does not say his teacher was “brilliant because he knew the Bible so well.” He says he was brilliant because he “taught everyone a thing or two about life.” Without getting into a technical discussion of brilliance, I would like to comment here that we in academia might need to start recognizing a different sort of brilliance than has been recognized historically. Academic brilliance too often entails a depth of book knowledge without the necessary ability to apply that knowledge to real life. Perhaps the most brilliant scholars should be seen as those

who can connect the material of their scholarly pursuits to the everyday lives of their students or readers. That seems to be Alex's definition of brilliance, and I agree.

Another young woman also mentioned Bill Bufton's teaching ability:

I took a class in 8th grade with Mr. Bufton, that was a Bible class. Instead of sticking with the curriculum, he allowed us to ask questions about the bible that we really wanted to know and actually cared about. We were not bored with the same old lectures every day and didn't dread the class like a lot of other classes we were taking. (Stanford)

I have left in McKenzie's misspellings and grammatical mistakes intentionally because they highlight the important truth (to me) that one need not be academically gifted to learn valuable lessons in school. My own belief is that if more (English) teachers connect with McKenzie as Mr. Bufton did, she might become more interested in learning how to spell "curriculum" correctly or how to avoid the comma splice of her first sentence. Too often, though, we English teachers focus on those errors up front and never get around to establishing the sort of relationship that might make someone like McKenzie more interested in becoming a skilled writer.

Returning to Bill Bufton's connection with his students, for a moment. One might think that a topic like the Bible would naturally lead to real life connections, but this is not the case, unfortunately. Many of my students, all of whom are required to take multiple Bible classes throughout their Wesleyan tenure, complain of how boring their Bible classes are and of how certain teachers never allow them to get off the subject in order to discuss a certain passage's relevance to their lives. They plow through the material, committing what one seminary professor once called the "sin" of boring students with the greatest story in the world. Bill

Bufton clearly succeeded in connecting the Bible to students' lives, and no matter what our subject matter is we should aim to follow his lead.

Lest one of my readers say that Bible is an easy place to connect the content of the classroom to students' lives, I submit that it was not only Mr. Bufton who succeeded in making this connection. One sophomore girl noted her Latin teacher's ability to foster these connections: "Latin II [has been meaningful], because I love the people in my class and we talk about real life issues. Also, Mr. Cooper has taught me lots of life lessons that I will always remember." If, as Holly says, Mr. Cooper can connect a "dead language" to the necessary life lessons that teenagers need to learn, then none of us are without excuse. I remember teaching math for two years and the challenges it presented in making these connections to students' lives. I was teaching at a children's home in north Georgia. Our students were the boys and girls who lived on the campus because their family situations had grown so dire that they needed a new home. Many of them were multiple years behind in school, and all of them had serious emotional issues they were working through with our staff counselors. I was chosen to teach math because they already had an English teacher lined up, but since I wanted to work with this population, I agreed to give math a shot. I think my most successful attempt to connect math to these students' life concerns came from a budgeting project we did. I allotted each of them an imaginary income of \$1600 a month – a realistic amount for kids who were highly unlikely to finish high school statistically speaking. I had them research on the internet how much apartments and car payments and groceries would cost and then create a budget. They were shocked to learn how little money this actually was, especially when they originally wanted to buy Porsches and live in mansions with their "huge" income. I do not have any longitudinal information as to how this changed any of my students' lives, but I do know that they were more

engaged in that unit than in any other unit. And I do know that they were made aware of real world financial problems that traditional math teaching would not have alerted them to. Because of their engagement and their newfound awareness, I believe the project was a success, and I am of course aiming to convince others that when we strive to connect the materials we teach in class with students' real lives, we have a far greater chance of success in impacting lives than when we fail to make these connections. This connection should be at the forefront of our planning and our mentor-teaching no matter how difficult it may be to open students' eyes to the meaning of our courses for their day-to-day lives.

I am pleased to report additionally that my own aims at mentor-teaching by helping students connect to the English classroom are apparently hitting their mark as well. Many of my students, in responding to the question about classroom engagement, affirmed that my English classes are meeting this need for them. A young man named Turner commented, "In English I get to express opinions and try to tell people views and ways of looking at the world that I would otherwise be unable to do." Turner indeed likes to "tell people" his views, and he has a sharp intellect that should indeed be heard. But Turner needs to work on how he presents his views so they are not so threatening to the other students and so they do not shut him out immediately because of his tone of voice and/or body language of condescension. Having this comment from Turner to build on allows me to address some of these self-presentation issues with him, which is another benefit of teacher research. If we want to know our students better by researching them then our research can become a platform not only for publication but for dialogue with these very same students about the material they have contributed to our research.

Another sophomore boy, named Ryan McClanahan, says, "I like Mr. Blue's English Class because we talk and read about situations and ideas that can still be used today." Ryan's

final comment about “ideas that can still be used today” imply that he is seeing connections between the literature we read from past centuries and decades to his 2009 situation. Too often, it seems to me, teachers who are naturally interested in their own historical subject matter simply assume that the students will find it interesting too. But to many of our students – the ones who are not naturally gifted in our subject matter, most likely – the connections between the past and the present are not obvious. The connection between Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” and their own dating and social dilemmas will not be made at all unless we help them along this path by explicitly asking the question: “What does Emerson’s ‘transparent eyeball’ have to do with you?” When we do ask such a question, the students are forced to ponder the connection for a few minutes, even if they do not come to any clear conclusions about a personal connection. Our job as mentor-teachers is to present them with opportunities to make these connections. What they do with the opportunities is up to them, but the presentation of opportunities is up to us.

Sadly, I have certainly not helped all students in a mentoring way. One young man, who happens to be the son of one of my closest friends said this: “I don’t think I have ever taken a class that has had an impact on my real life. Most applications from school are taken from social experiences outside of the classroom.” William has sat in the front row of my class all year, listening to my probing demands for them to connect what we’re reading to his life concerns, but he has yet to see any personal value in what he has learned. I’m not sure if this is a failure on my part or on his (or both), but I offer this example in a similar vein as the Richard Yates story from the end of chapter 3: No matter how good our intentions and no matter how hard we try, some of our students will not be “mentored” by us. When this year began, I hope to be a mentor to this particular young man more than any other student in my class. His father, who is 20 years older than me, is one of my own aforementioned mentors, and I could think of nothing more poetic

than to “pay it forward” to his son. But William and I have failed to connect, even having open conflict at points. The insecure part of me even wonders if William’s answer to this question was meant as a direct affront – effectively saying, “Mr. Blue, you have not mentored me as you wanted to – ha!” But in my less cynical moments, I think that William is simply not ready to hear what I have tried to say to him. I think he has very fixed views about the purposes of school, and no matter how hard I try, he will not allow me into his own personal views and beliefs. Maybe someday he will look back at some of the questions I have posed and find them more helpful or meaningful, or maybe he never will. But my responsibility as a mentor-teacher is to facilitate the connections between literature/writing and real life. Beyond that, I cannot overcome certain intrapersonal obstacles that I cannot see or understand.

Apart from the need for “real life application,” students seem to value courses that challenge them to consider what they believe about a myriad of issues. This, too, reinforced what I already believed about what students want from us as mentor-teachers. Young people are actively processing endless input from sources ranging from parents to pastors to television to music. All of these influences are, at some level, telling them what to believe, what truths to cling to and which ones to shun, what philosophies to incorporate into their lives and which ones to ignore. Teachers can and should be one of the voices speaking into students’ lives, challenging them to consider all the various values and beliefs worth building their lives around.

Two of my female AP English students voice their desires to be challenged in their core beliefs beautifully. Both see English classes as central to this belief-building exercise. Rachael says it this way:

English classes have always had the biggest impact on me because I have been introduced to so many different ideas and perspectives through novels, poetry, etc.

No other classes harbor the kinds of discussions that English classes do because there is always room for interpretation. You are allowed to build your own ideas.

What Rachael points out is that English teachers can and should encourage students to build their own interpretations of literature through writing and classroom discussion. Though some students prefer the black and white answers of math, Rachael likes the open-endedness of literature, and she values the chance to shape her own views through the resources of the English classroom. Mentor-teachers need not force one certain belief system down the throats of students; rather, they once again should see their role as providing students with a meaningful opportunity – one that can be life-altering if thoughtfully approached.

One of Rachael's classmates, Anne Elizabeth, expresses this idea even more explicitly:

Probably AP English [is the one of the more meaningful classes I have taken], and I'm not just saying that, and Government Honors. It has nothing to do with the English curriculum, but it has to do with the debates that we have in class. In both English and Government this year, we have been having political debates, debates about what we believe, and other discussions. Those have really helped me decide what I believe and how to back it up, and have helped me in being sure of my opinions and willing to tell them to others. It made me aware of the need to know what I believe, about religion, about government, and about other things, which is very useful for the future.

She explicitly points out that she wants her classes to prod her thinking about religion, politics, and more. As I have noted earlier, I have been guilty many times of hiding behind my own fears of stepping over the boundary lines of kids' lives and therefore not encouraging the sort of debate that Anne Elizabeth longs for. This year, because the environment in which I teach

encourages this sort of teaching, I have been very bold in challenging students' views on everything from religion to politics to family values, but when it comes to other teaching venues where such discussion is not so openly valued, I still struggle with how to push these debates along without proselytizing students with my own belief system. Here again, literature can do this work for us if only we will let it. Literature raises important questions about beliefs, and by carefully selecting literature that brings up the views and values that we hold dear, we can be nearly sure that the discussions we want to happen will happen. Carefully worded questions like, "What are this character's values and why does she hold them so dear?" can bring certain students' own views to the forefront of the discussion, therefore challenging other students to examine their views as well. We can ask students to write response essays about which characters they identify with or which ones they dislike, and by evaluating the fictitious characters' beliefs, students will necessarily need to examine their own. If they fail to do so, we can ask them explicitly to make this leap. Simply asking them to examine their own views is very different than telling them what to believe, but the fear of doing the latter too openly keeps too many of us from doing the former. As Anne Elizabeth and Rachael make clear, students want their beliefs challenged within the classroom, and by being thoughtful and conscientious, we can offer this challenge without forcing our own beliefs on unwitting students.

The above examples have certainly served my own aims of confirming how valuable mentoring and course applicability are to students. Had the answers come out differently, I might need to reconsider many of the concepts or premises I have put forth in the past 200 pages, but I feel affirmed to move ahead with my teaching style. And this is what teacher research can do for us – confirm that our strategies and ideas are working. If they are not working, they can highlight the weaknesses therein and give us direction as to how we might need to change our

practices. Overall, though, what is most important is that we as mentor-teachers see ourselves as researchers in our own classrooms for the ultimate benefit of our students. If our aim is to do the best possible job of connecting what we teach with the people we teach, teacher research is our avenue to success.

### **The Real-Life Impact of Mentor-Teaching**

I want to conclude this dissertation by drawing some conclusions for the future from stories from the past. Both from the journal of stories I keep about successes and failures in my own classes and from public stories of teenage problems, I have drawn conclusions as to the ultimate value of mentor-teaching. These are stories about the value of the teacher-student relationship right from the mouths and actions of our students. Relationships, as I have been arguing, are central to teaching, and to ignore the real concerns of the people for whom our careers exist is to ignore the opportunity to turn our jobs into something nearly sacred, into a true vocation rather than just the source of our paychecks. Having watched the news about our teenagers unfold over the past decade, and having taught teenagers in environments ranging from high school to college and from public school to private school, I have found an unsurprising truth: Most students just want someone to listen to them and to care about them beyond their schoolwork.

Jon Krakauer's bestselling nonfiction book (later turned into a major Hollywood motion picture) *Into the Wild* (1996), offers the cautionary tale of Chris McCandless, a bright young man who graduated from Emory University in 1990 with a 3.72 GPA, having been editor of the student newspaper, *The Emory Wheel*. Chris turned down a Phi Beta Kappa nomination in the belief that "titles and honors are irrelevant" (20). Clearly Chris was a successful student to

others, but he was unhappy and restless, seeking meaning in his life beyond the materialism his peers and family expected. Chris chooses to wander the country, changing his name to Alexander Supertramp, rejecting his past, his possessions, and seeking to get to the root of what it meant to be a human being. He separated himself from his family and his former friends in hopes of breaking life down to its most essential elements in a way reminiscent of Thoreau. He celebrated Jack London as “King” on a carved piece of wood found in the bus where his life came to an end (9), and inscribed “All Hail the Dominant Primordial Beast! / And Captain Ahab Too!” on the inside wall of the same bus (38). This quest to get back to life’s basics eventually led Chris to the wilderness of Alaska where he sought to live without modern conveniences. The story ends in tragedy when Chris fails to make it through his first winter, and his emaciated, dead body is found by hikers shortly thereafter.

I wonder what might have become of Chris if one of his professors had spotted his deep quest to understand life. What if that teacher had helped Chris explore his questions in a more constructive way? What if that teacher had pointed Chris to some helpful books or even to a therapist? What if that teacher had helped Chris talk productively to his parents about his desire to reject their well-to-do lifestyle instead of abandoning them without telling them his whereabouts? Chris seemed to be open to the idea of a mentor in that he reached out through a long letter to an eighty-one year old man named Ronald Franz, from whom Chris hitched a ride from California to Colorado. The two bonded over conversation about life’s meaning, and Chris pursued a relationship, though sporadically, by writing letters and asking for responses from Franz (47-48, 57-58). Now, there is no question that Chris McCandless was extreme in his quest for meaning and truth, but maybe if he had some wise guidance to direct his quest, his life would have been written as a celebration, a challenge to the norms of society, rather than as a tragedy.

In the end, one of Chris's final journal entries concludes that "happiness [is] only real when shared" (189). Chris did not want to be separated from the vital human connection as this quote indicates, but no one reached out to him to offer a listening ear or some wise guidance. What if an English teacher had assigned papers that encourage students to examine their own inner realities as part of the assignments. Surely one of these papers would have revealed Chris's radical ideas, and the teacher might have gently pursued Chris to help him revise his overly-radical rejection of societal life. He needed someone wise to take him under her wing and to offer him such important truths about human happiness without the risk and ultimate damage he did to himself and his family, and a mentor-teacher (in any class, not just English) could have been looking for an opportunity to help a hurting young man out of his existential dilemmas. I am not suggesting that Chris's teachers bear all the blame for his death, or even very much of it. But I do think there is a small slice of blame that all teachers have to bear when any young person seems to drive himself off of the proverbial cliff from a lack of mentoring guidance.

Robert J. Connors, in a 1996 *College English* article, "Teaching and Learning as a Man," suggests that young men like Chris need brave older men who will reach into their lives. Connors boldly asks of male educators, "Do male teachers have enough confidence in themselves as men...to accept the responsibility of teaching younger men, and the burden of being models of manhood for their students?" (151). Connors elaborates,

Male intellectuals have been listening to the feminist critique of patriarchy for a long time now, and the result is that we distrust ourselves and our own worth as men; we distrust our own abilities to mentor younger men...Traditionally only men have had the power to bestow manhood on other men, but [...today's] young men must do it for themselves, because for them trustworthy elders are hard to

come by...I have talked with few young men of college age who think their fathers are good role models or who want to be like them. In fact the majority of young men have no adult figures in their lives after whom they wish to pattern themselves, and no way that seems satisfying to fit themselves into the adult world...[D]o male teachers have enough confidence in themselves as men really to accept the responsibility of teaching younger men, and the burden of being models of manhood for their students? (144-146, 151)

Chris McCandless is just the sort of young man who might have benefited from a brave male teacher who appropriately sought to earn Chris's trust. He needed a "model of manhood" that demonstrated something other than capitalistic bravado, as Chris seemed to become cynical of by watching his own father and other Emory fathers. We will never know, but Chris might have taken a very different path had he found a model of manhood who demonstrated values that Chris found meaningful enough to pursue with his idealism and boldness.

Connors's observations do not only hold true for male mentor-teachers, but for all would-be mentor-teachers. Young men and young women will open up to adults in time, but if we want inside of their sometimes sturdy fortresses, we will need to be persistent and creative in our pursuits of these young, often confused human beings. There is absolutely nothing magic about how to spend this time. Just yesterday I saw a former tennis coach of mine who at a local restaurant with all of his high-level tennis players. Every Saturday after they practice, they go out to eat or go to the mall and just spend time together. I was struck by the rapport he clearly had with these young people. There was trust and admiration written all over their interactions with this coach. To gain this, all Gary had to do was to demonstrate his willingness to spend some of his free time with them. The rest came naturally. This holds true for teachers, too. One

merely needs a little bit of discernment to know what is and what is not an appropriate way to spend this extra time. Other than that, all it takes is the simple willingness to spend one's time with these young people. They may not beg for it verbally, but their behavior begs for it. We are simply not listening.

### **What Students Are Telling Us, If We Will Only Listen**

Thankfully, not all of our students are crying for our attention so dramatically as Chris McCandless was. Still, the quiet, kind students who will never end their own lives (even accidentally) have advice for mentor-teachers if we will listen to their silent pleas. A few years ago, I began keeping a running list of examples of students telling me what was important to them, usually without even trying to tell me that. My conclusions are far from earth-shattering, but they reiterate in a quieter way that young people of all personality types and all social circles are expressing desires that share much in common with one another. The following two stories are offered as evidence that our students want to apply the lessons of our classes to their personal lives, but they have been trained throughout their educational careers to keep their personal lives out of the classroom.

I begin with a story from 2007, when, near the year's end, a student of mine was failing my senior English class because of his own laziness. He was highly capable of A-level work, but rarely turned papers in on time or did the required assignments. Long after the due date for the major research paper that counted over 20% of his grade, when I had begun to beg for some semblance of a paper because I knew what a zero would do to his already-hurting average, Luke came to me and told me he could talk for hours about how the O'Connor story relates to his own life, but he felt like that stuff was not appropriate in a formal paper. My first instinct was to

agree, based on my own history with writing in school, since I still struggle with overcoming those traditional demands. My initial response was: “Keep the personal stuff to a minimum; that does not belong in formal writing.” But then I thought about it more and realized how much that goes against my whole teaching philosophy. Here was a struggling student telling me that he had tons to say, but that it was not the kind of thing literature teachers usually accepted. If only, said Luke, I could write a paper about the stories’ application to my own life, I would have plenty to say. I wish I could say that this conversation turned the year around for Luke, but it was too late in the semester for that, and the paper was already too late to give it much credit. But oh how I wish this conversation had taken place much earlier, not just in the semester, but in Luke’s education. As a high school senior, he was thoroughly convinced that his personal opinions had no place in formal writing, and that perspective may never be changed despite my feeble efforts in that passing conversation.

Had more English teachers allowed or even encouraged Luke to include all the personal writing he was willing to include, perhaps he would have felt more excited by the prospects of taking college writing courses that would allow him to do more self-examination. As it stood and stands, though, Luke’s views on writing English papers are that they have little to offer him personally. Thus, why would he subject himself to more writing assignments than are required of him in the mandatory classes? If English writing had more to do with Luke’s personal belief system and values, maybe he would have sought out college English classes rather than running from them as I know he did. It will take many of us exclaiming loudly the value of including the personal in our assignments and papers, but wouldn’t it be great if one day in the future students had had so many mentor-teachers that they looked forward to the personal lessons they always learned in English classes?

Luke has not been my only student who expressed a sense that English assignments never value the personal application. Another example comes from a college-level “Writing in Response to Literature” class I taught in 2006. A young woman named Kelly raised her hand one day and openly acknowledged feeling trepidation toward poetry because, though she saw the “real life” meanings in poetry, she had been trained to say what the teacher wanted to hear in her former English classes. She had learned from middle and high school English teachers that finding the breaks in iambic pentameter is more valuable than finding a quote that convinces one to end a bad relationship. I am reminded here of my own experience with a religion professor at Wake Forest. He blatantly told us that, when taking tests, we should remember that his opinion was ultimately the one that mattered and that we should bias our answers to repeat what he had said in class. Few teachers are as direct in saying this as he was, but many imply as much by the way they grade their tests and essays, testing only what they have taught, not asking students what they have learned.

In *Teach With Your Heart*, a memoir by Erin Gruwell about her first year teaching and subsequent experience with a group of her students who are now the nationally acclaimed Freedom Writers, she cuts to the heart of this testing dilemma, saying, “I believed that Salinger hadn’t written *The Catcher in the Rye* so that a student could mark in “Holden wore a red cap” on the answer key” (33). She goes on to say that these tests that supposedly level the playing field for students do the exact opposite, privileging memorizable facts over students’ ability to integrate knowledge into their own lives. Asking students like Luke and Kelly *what they have learned and how they will apply it* makes assessment much less black and white, but it would change the face of education if every teacher would switch to this method of assessment. The change I am suggesting needs to extend far beyond high school and college English teaching all

the way down to elementary school. Even though many upper level English teachers are now getting more personal and creative in their assessment strategies, by the time students get to high school and college they have been taught through years of standardized tests and self-indulgent teachers that education is one long test that has to be passed by regurgitating what teachers want to hear. I am calling for more mentor-teachers at all age levels to take this torch and run with it. The whole system needs to change so students like Luke and Kelly do not have so much trouble believing that a teacher might actually want to hear their personal thoughts rather than just hearing what said teacher has expressed in class.

Stories like Luke's, Kelly's, and the many other I have offered throughout this dissertation lead me to this conclusion: Students are willing to be impacted by us and by our classes, but they do not feel that very many of us use the mentor-teaching opportunities of our classrooms. Students do not want us to back off; they want us to pursue. They do not want to know more about MLA formatting; they want to know more about Chaucer's application to their friendships and family problems. Students are shouting their desires loud and clear, sometimes dramatically, and sometimes through the mundane side comments they make. We are simply not listening very carefully at all. And if we are having trouble hearing what they are saying, perhaps we are listening with the wrong ears or to the wrong voices. Perhaps we have bought too deeply into the biases of education that tell us we must keep our distance from students and avoid overstepping our bounds. Perhaps we have forgotten what inspired us about the field of education, and English education in particular, in the first place – the chance to change lives. What I have discovered is that when I start looking for examples of what students want from adults, I find them asking us to be just the sort of teacher I have proposed we should be: mentor-teachers.

With this in mind, I am issuing a call for further research into what students have to say about what they want from us. We need to design research projects that delve into all the various facets of the English classroom – writing, reading, oratory, even grammar – in order to determine the most effective ways to connect with students through these assignments. We need to ask students what they want out of us on these assignments. What kinds of assignments inspire you to do your best work? What kinds of marginal comments make you want to keep writing rather than to quit writing forever as soon as you get the chance? What teachers’ personas make you want to open up to that teacher, and how can those who don’t naturally have that persona become more helpful to you? What sort of reading assignments make you want to read more, not less? How can teachers help you make connections between difficult literature and your own life? These questions and others demonstrate to students that we care about them, that we are in this career for them. One way or another, we need to get past an us-versus-them mentality and into an us-alongside-them mentality as teachers and as researchers. I believe that our students want to learn and that they are eminently teachable when we teach them in the right ways. We as researchers need to ask questions that will help us discover the “right ways” so we can effect changes in policy and in our own classrooms that will serve students’ needs better than we are currently doing.

I do not claim that my beliefs have originated with me. I stand on the shoulders of scholars both more experienced and wiser than I will ever be. In “A Witness to Public Education,” Robert Coles cuts right to the heart of my own beliefs:

All our recent knowledge notwithstanding – all our educational techniques, newly acquired and touted (neurobiology, ‘social engineering,’ and important technological breakthroughs) – the way to the waywardness of the children I meet

in our public schools is, finally, through their minds and hearts: they can be stirred and touched by teachers and athletic coaches and counselors and school nurses – by us grown-ups who are part of the world of children, and are able to offer various talents and skills to these young fellow-citizens so much in need of them. Come the next century, that will still be what will spare many of our country's youth one or another kind of educational, social, psychological perdition: the human connection. (267-268)

While my contentions extend far beyond the public school students of which Coles is speaking, I think the evidence is abundant that “the human connection” should be put at the center of the classroom once again. As such, mentor-teaching is a call for all teachers at all levels, not just to English teachers and professors, though that is where I plan to apply these principles in my own career.

A final story that has been widely circulated on the internet expresses the ultimate value of mentor-teaching: A young man is walking down the beach and comes upon thousands and thousands of starfish which have been “beached.” Out of the water, they will dry out and die, and the boy recognizes that many already have. He begins tossing them back into the water and saving their lives. An older man walks by and inquires as to why the boy is wasting his time when he cannot possibly save all the starfish, suggesting that his actions simply “do not matter” in the grand scheme of the problem. The boy looks at a starfish and tosses it into the ocean and says, “It matters to this one.” Like the boy, we cannot save all of the students who need our help and guidance, but we must not be lulled into thinking that the government or our school's administration will come up with a sweeping solution to the problems either. The solution starts in our own classrooms, in our one-on-one dialogues with our individual students. Perhaps it

even starts before that; perhaps the solution starts with a change of heart in us as teachers, as we begin once again to see the act of teaching as a life-changing, eternally meaningful act. Whether we mentor hundreds of students or just one, it will indeed matter to each individual student, and that is reason enough to get started as mentor-teachers.

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## **APPENDIX A: WRITING ASSIGNMENT IDEAS**

Below are some writing assignment ideas I've come across in my research that seem to foster the sort of mentor-teaching approach I advocate in this dissertation. They are in no particular order, nor are they anywhere near exhaustive as to what's out there, but they might provide some interesting groundwork for developing great relationships through writing assignments.

**Allen, Guy. "Language, Power, and Consciousness: A Writing Experiment at the University of Toronto." *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice*. Ed. Charles M. Anderson and Marian M. MacCurdy. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2000.**

- Write an argumentative piece, and address a specific difference you have with someone in your life right now (263-264).

**Bishop, Wendy. "Teaching 'Grammar for Writers' in a Process Workshop Classroom." *Teaching Lives: Essays and Stories*. Logan, Utah: Utah State UP, 1997.**

- Write an email/memo to your future boss doing one of the following: asking for a raise, requesting time off during a busy season to take part in a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, or questioning a policy.
- Write a note of encouragement to a friend who has gone through a divorce recently.
- Write a white paper summary of a book on a subject you like.
- Keep a journal multiple times a week – completion grade only. No rules other than that you do it.

**Bishop: “What We (Might) Write About When We Write (Autobiographical) Nonfiction.”*****Teaching Lives: Essays and Stories.* Logan, Utah: Utah State UP, 1997.**

- “Write about names, nicknames, given names, imagined names, personas, naming others, naming yourself, place names” (266).
- “Write about architectures, houses you’ve loved or hated, places you’ve built, cities, human-made forms and figures, space within and without, materials, meanings” (267).
- “Write about scars,” mental, emotional, spiritual, or physical scars (268).
- “Write about your inner worlds – illness, death, healing, dreams, wishes, lies, religions, values” (268).
- “Write about ancestors – real, imaginary, black sheep, genealogies, present realities, absences, presences” (269).
- “Write about decisions, windows, chances, turns” (269).
- “Write about habits, hobbies, obsessions and fetishes” (270).
- “Write about gender” (270).
- “Write about travel – local and distant, returning and remaining, insiders and outsiders, landscapes and people, how you see a culture and how you’re seen” (271).
- “Write about taboos” (271).
- “Write about family” (272).
- “Write about your writing” (273).

**Blue, Tim: Visual Essay Class Paper:**

## Options

1. Turn a photo of yourself into the person you've always wanted to be.
2. Turn a photo of yourself into the person you fear becoming.
3. Turn an ad photo from your favorite brand into a more realistic portrayal of reality.
4. Create a collage of pictures with clear unity that takes a stand for or against the advertising methods of our culture.
5. Create an ad that puts a realistic-looking person into one of the ads we've looked at this semester.

Accompanying the visual piece you submit, please hand in a one page, typed, double-spaced explanation of the argument you are making with the picture. Your picture and your written explanation should demonstrate an obvious link; one should not contradict the other, in other words. You will be graded on the clarity of the visual piece, the coherence of the written piece, and the relationship between the two submissions. The visual piece will count as 75% of this project and the written piece 25%.

## APPENDIX B: STORY WRITING AND RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT

Below is a summary of an assignment I tried with my high school seniors in 2006. Also included are some of the handouts for the assignment. These students were enrolled in a Joint Enrollment program between their high school and the two-year college where I was working at the time. I expanded on the concept in an article entitled “A Creative Approach to the Research Paper: Combining Creative Writing with Academic Research” in the December 2006 edition of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*.

### **The assignment:**

You will pick an author we’ve read up to this point and write a *story in his style, using his methods/themes/ideas*. You will be judged primarily on the process you use and the depth of thought you give to the project, not on your creative ability alone...so don’t panic if you don’t think you’re the “creative type.”

I am going to do this project alongside of you and share my progress with you as we go. My story will be in the style of Flannery O’Connor. It will be set in a suburban Atlanta high school and will involve a teacher who pridefully (like the Grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find”) believes he teaches the most important class in the world, but in reality he will be blind to the fact that he completely fails to make any difference in his students’ lives. At the end of the story he will have a moment of revelation (like O’Connor’s moments of redemption) where he understands for the first time that perfect grammar and a big vocabulary aren’t nearly as important as offering students valuable lessons for real life...things they can use outside of the classroom in other words. This is as far as I’ve gotten so far, but I’m excited to see where the story goes.

Your first step is to start with what you already know about...being a high school senior who has certain hobbies, interests, worries, struggles, etc. This should be the beginning point for your story and it should help you figure out the character you want to portray, the setting you will use, and so on.

Next you should figure out which author you want to imitate. Quite simply, which story have you enjoyed the most and why? You don't need to write exactly like the author has written, but you need to clearly incorporate the author's style and ideas. If you choose Carver, for example, you will need to use a minimalist style and allow dialogue to convey most of your meaning. You will also need to incorporate one of his ideas, such as the idea that humans are only civil when they are supervised or the idea of living someone else's life...

This project will also include a good bit of research on the author you are imitating and her style. Once you choose the author you will imitate, you will need to read another of her stories that we have not read in class to get a better feel for their writing. You will also need to research who this author was as a person: what made them write the things they wrote?

**Items Due:**

1. Typed page listing: the *author* you will imitate, a detailed *summary* of a second (outside of class) story by that author, and your *basic story idea* (a paragraph giving the main ideas of your story).
2. Detailed answers to "Story Details" questions (typed on a separate sheet!).
3. Rough draft.
4. One to two page summary (typed, double-spaced, MLA style) of the articles you've researched that uses your research to tell how you are imitating this author. This should

include at least one citation from each of your four academic sources and a works cited page.

5. Story – 2000 word minimum.
  - a. Your story must contain:
    - i. Two symbolic character names
    - ii. Two other pieces of clear symbolism
    - iii. Clear imitation of your chosen author's style
    - iv. Clear imitation of your chosen author's idea(s)
    - v. A setting that is familiar to you
    - vi. A moral

**Story details:**

1. Style (What author will you imitate? What aspects of their style will you imitate? Is there a formal name for this style?).
2. Symbolism you will use (at least 2 recurring, meaningful symbols). Setting (this should be somewhere very familiar, preferably your own school).
3. Moral of your story (It's important to know your point before you begin).
4. Ending of your story (It's also important to know your ending before you begin. Everything should be leading up to that ending).
5. Main characters' names (at least 2 must have clear but not corny symbolism).
6. Main characters' personalities.
7. Overall plot of your story.