The Heart of Authenticity:
Shared Assessment in the Teacher Education Classroom

By Cynthia G. Unwin with Jody Caraher

Cynthia G. Unwin is a sixth grade teacher at Palo Alto Middle School in Killeen, Texas; Jody Caraher is involved with extensive volunteer work in Evans, Georgia. At the time this article was written, Unwin was an assistant professor in reading education and Caraher was a student in middle grades education, both at Augusta State University in Augusta, Georgia.

"Make sure you have a number two pencil on your desk. You will have exactly 50 minutes to complete this exam. You may begin." I stared at the multiple choice questions—the letters, theories, and endless educational acronyms mixing and muddying like pond water in the fatigued recesses of my mind. DRA, DRTA, Bloom, KWL, Piaget, SQ3R, whole language, skills—would the distinctions ever become clear or real for me? When would I ever use all of this jargon in the real world? How could I show what I did know with only a scantron sheet? These thoughts frequented my mind often during my undergraduate education in the early 1980s.

Now, as an education professor, I have watched "authentic assessment" permeate educational discussion as a more appropriate means by which to measure knowledge and capability. Portfolios, grading rubrics, developmental checklists, holistic writ-

ing evaluations, performance assessments, etc., have assumed more prominent places in our nation's schools, supplementing, and occasionally replacing, more traditional forms of assessment.

According to Grant Wiggins (1989), authentic assessments have four qualities: (1) They require that the student engage in creating a product that relates directly and authentically to the skill being taught. For example, students' writing is assessed through evaluation of real writing tasks, rather than through spelling tests, grammar exercises, or other decontextualized measures. (2) The standards for excellent performance are articulated clearly and specifically to students throughout the entire process. (3) Self-assessment is a critical component of the assessment process, as students reflect on their own performance as compared to the stated standards and modify their efforts in order to improve their performance. (4) Students present their work publicly and are expected to justify their decisions in front of other people.

Authentic assessment is thought to provide a broader window into the minds of students and create greater opportunity for students to participate in their own evaluative and learning processes. If truly actualized, authentic assessment is deeply embedded in teaching and learning: "...It is designed to provide the student with a genuine rather than a contrived learning experience that provides both the teacher and student with opportunities to learn what the student can do. The demonstration of learning occurs in a situation that requires the application and production of knowledge rather than the mere recognition or reproduction of correct answers" (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Falk, 1995, pp. 3-4). These types of assessments require that students actually perform certain learning tasks, thereby demonstrating their skill and understanding and their ability to apply what they have learned (McTighe, 1997). Performance assessments are those "which model real tasks, i.e., require the pupil to perform in the assessment what we wish them to learn in the classroom; usually they focus on higher levels of cognitive complexity" (Gipps, 1995, p. 275).

Authentic assessment is also thought to enhance the learning process, because the evaluation tools used fall naturally from daily classroom activities, rather than being separate, summative measures at the end of a learning unit. "This kind of assessment does not drive the curriculum; it grows out of the curriculum and is part and parcel of the curriculum.... Thumbing through a portfolio with a student or watching a student perform a task...adds a degree of intimacy that can be refreshing in an age of depersonalized appraisal" (Maeroff, 1991, pp. 274, 281). In other words, students learn as they create the assessment data, and authentic assessment allows the teacher to witness this learning as it happens.

Finally, forms of assessments that are authentic influence students affectively in positive ways. When students perceive activities as having personal and real-world relevance, they are more likely to feel positive about those activities and put effort into them. "What we assess sends a strong signal to students about what is important

for them to learn. When authentic performance tasks play a key role in teaching and assessing, students will know that we expect them to apply knowledge in ways valued in the world beyond the classroom" (McTighe, 1997, p. 9).

As a middle grades teacher, I found authentic assessment appealing because of its student-centeredness. Its implementation, however, was far from easy, because my evaluative experiences as a student were traditional: pencil and paper objective and/or essay tests, five-paragraph expository papers, and so on. For me, to evaluate authentically meant taking risks and constantly experimenting. I found similar challenges when teaching at the college level. Education students and professors were engaged in transition to authentic assessment, but still very accustomed to traditional evaluation methods.

In essence, much of what I experienced and what I was witnessing others experience was autocratic in nature; teachers and professors at all levels took primary responsibility for the events, outcomes, and evaluations in the classroom. Henry Giroux (1988) defines this teacher-as-authoritarian role as reflective of a conservative tradition of male-dominated Western culture, one that focuses only on the performance of the intellect as determined and evaluated by the teacher. Others, in an attempt to redefine and reshape "authority," have advocated feminist pedagogical principles, because patriarchal pedagogical structures deny women and others "the authority of their experiences, perspectives, emotions, and minds" (Friedman, 1985, p. 206). This "feminist pedagogy" has a variety of qualities, most consistently the following: student-centered instruction, decision-making, and evaluation; nonhierarchical classroom structures; empowerment of the individual; celebration of differences; collaboration between students; and full participation and engagement of all students (Brown, 1992).

Interestingly, the qualities of feminist pedagogy parallel and complement several other epistemologies: revisionist writing pedagogy (Brown, 1992; Jones, 1990), constructive-developmental pedagogy (Baxter Magolda, 1992), and, most closely, teaching grounded in democratic ideals. Maxine Greene (1978) asserts, "A new pedagogy is obviously required, one that will free persons to understand the ways in which each of them reaches out from his or her location to constitute a common continent, a common world. It might well be called a democratic pedagogy, since, in several respects, the object is to empower persons to enact democracy. To act upon democratic values, I believe, is to be responsive to consciously incarnated principles of freedom, justice, and regard for others" (pp. 70-71). Here again, the focus is placed upon the student as an individual, and equity rather than authority is central.

The roots of authentic assessment are grounded in these theoretical principles. Greene (1978) suggests that education of teachers must bring them "in touch with their own landscape" (p. 39). If the focus of teacher education is mastery of techniques or demonstration of "competencies," rather than critical, reflective thinking, teachers become, in Greene's words, "mere transmission belts" or

"clerks" (p. 38). Teachers must have opportunities to learn how to explore the world critically and find their place in it before they can challenge children to do so. The emphasis of authentic assessment on process *and* product and the value that authentic assessment places upon the individual create the ideal scenario in which to help teachers find their own landscapes.

As an education student, I would have appreciated the opportunity to be assessed authentically before attempting to implement it in my own classroom. Thus, one of my primary goals as a professor was to model what I wanted my students to eventually try in the classroom as teachers. Lucy M. Calkins (1995) articulates this "practice what we preach" philosophy effectively in *Writing Between the Lines*: "Minds-on teaching is something that happens deep within the self. If we teachers want to reform our methods of assessment..., it's important to realize that the place to begin is within ourselves.... 'Authentic assessment' cannot exist unless we, as teachers, inhabit and claim the process as our own" (p. 316).

During the fall of 1997, I was preparing to write five short answer/essay midterm questions for the students in my middle grades reading course. The students had read the first edition of *In the Middle* by Nancie Atwell (1987) for a prerequisite language course and were reading *Seeking Diversity* by Linda Rief (1992) as the required text for my course. Because much of our class discussion centered around readers' and writers' workshop, it seemed inappropriate to test students' knowledge about this approach with a traditional midterm. What if, as Atwell and Rief frequently urged, the students in my course totally immersed themselves in the reading/writing process in order to grow as readers and writers and become better teachers of literacy? What better way to truly apply and teach the concept of workshop teaching than to create a workshop environment for the students? With this in mind, I discussed the idea with the students in the class and gave them the following midterm, to be completed in about two weeks:

> Rief and Atwell both emphasize the need for effective reading and writing teachers to continue to evolve as readers and writers themselves. We find, however, that our busy schedules and priority lists allow little time for this type of growth. During the next week, your task is to rediscover yourself as a reader and writer, by immersing yourself in the following experiences:
>
> 1. Read something that you have been meaning to read for a long time and have never had the chance to. This could be a book of poems, an adult work of fiction, a young adult novel, a collection of picture books by a particular author, a biography, a professional book, etc. The choice is yours. Concentrate on becoming a reflective reader...what elements of the writer's style appeal to you? turn you off? How do you relate your personal life experiences to this piece of writing? What do your eyes and mind do as you read? Why do they do these things? What parts of the book touch you emotionally? Why?
>
> 2. Experiment with writing in a genre with which you are unfamiliar or uncomfortable. Perhaps take a stab at poetry, a short piece of fiction, a persuasive essay, an

autobiography, a picture book for children. Again, the choice is yours. Try to engage in all stages of the writing process as you do so, and reflect upon how you do this—linearly, cyclically, spirally? What succeeded in your writing? What frustrated you?

3. As you read and write, keep a reader's/writer's log with your reflections. Try to form connections between the two processes as you reflect. Then, at the end of your log, provide a self-evaluation of your reading and writing ability. What are your strengths and weaknesses as a reader and a writer? How would you grade yourself on your reader's/writer's log? Why?

When I presented the exam to the students, they seemed generally positive. A few had questions, perhaps testing me to see if their choice of reading material could truly be *their* choice. For example, one student asked my permission to read the book of Revelation from the Bible; she wasn't sure whether a religious choice would be "allowed." As the students began completing the requirements of the midterm, we discussed their progress, what books they had chosen, and how they liked them. Student response grew more encouraging with each passing class, yet nothing prepared me for what they handed in on the due date. (See Appendix for examples of student book choices.)

I decided to read the midterms without pen or pencil in hand, to form general impressions, and then make comments and assign grades later. What I discovered was that the students had handed me images and glimpses of who they were as human beings, imprints of their hearts so compelling that, on some, I was moved to tears. I found I could not put these papers down. Previously, evaluating student papers had always been arduous, involving numerous value judgments, corrections, and calculations. Reading these papers was like savoring the best chocolate, like exploring the minds and hearts of the most interesting characters in any novel.

Much of the student writing was in narrative form, particularly the journal writing, and I began to see the true potential of using this form of writing to engage students in deeper reflection about literature, the writing process, and teaching. Suzanne Rice (1993) emphasizes the value of learning through story and dialogue, a pedagogical technique suggestive of a feminist epistemology. She cites the work of Carol Witherell and Nel Noddings (1991), who claim that "stories give special voice to the feminine side of human experience—to the power of emotion, intuition, and relationships in human lives" (p. 4). They assert that "narrative capacity is the way each of us reorganizes, reassesses, realigns our life experience so that it is continually integrated into our present personal schema....The power of narrative is that it allows the individual to continually locate and relocate his or her own voice within a social and cultural context" (p. 263). Indeed, I witnessed this type of personal transformation occurring, as the students found ways to connect what they were reading and writing to their own life experiences and conflicts.

One student who grew up in an alcoholic home read *Adult Children of Alcoholics* (Woititz, 1990) and reflected on how the book helped begin the healing

process for her. Then, for the writing portion of her midterm, she wrote an account of finding her home in flames less than a year ago, concluding with:

> I crave a means with which I can escape the dreams of fire. I hope that by writing this chapter of my life, a few pounds will fall off my shoulders. It is such a heavy burden to carry the memories of the flames with me. For everyone else the flames have disappeared, but in my head they spiral around lost memories. I have become an obsessive worrier.... Although the flames of that terrible night in April have been doused, they burn within my soul.

She read this for the class, has used it as a springboard for student writing in her middle grades lab classroom, and has told me that, since writing the account, she has had no more dreams of the fire: "I'm proud of it.... I've come a long way. This is the most wonderful thing I've ever done. I can't believe I'm a writer. Now, I am. I know I am."

Another student read *Abe's Story* (Korn, 1995), a Holocaust novel written by a local survivor (now deceased) and edited by his son. In addition to her reflective journal comments about how this novel affected her, she responded to the book with poetry:

> "Beyond Pain"
>
> Laughter is measured by volume;
> Brains are measured by success.
> Few elements in life bring joy,
> But none seem to bring peacefulness.
>
> Tears wash away despair;
> Counterfeit smiles hide pain.
> How can one entertain happiness,
> When all they experience is rain?
>
> The young life of Abram Korn was filled with pain,
> One for the loss of his country, his pride, and his Jewish name.
> His dream of a new life held promise in a land across the sea;
> This land was one of hew hope, peace, and liberty.
>
> The grand lady welcomed him here—
> To this new America that he soon came to love so dear.
> The story of Abram Korn is bittersweet—
> From the small Jewish neighborhood to the narrow Augusta streets.
>
> Few elements in life bring joy—
> Like the tragic story of this young boy.
> This is one of trial, growth, and success.
> Beyond the pain, a deserving few find peacefulness.
>
> —Shelley Bowen, November, 1997

The author of this poem sent it to Abram Korn's son in his father's honor.

Other students dabbled in fiction. One African-American woman wrote an excerpt from a young teenager's diary after reading and responding to a collection of Negro-American literature:

> Mommy get money for all of us. She should have kept the money she spent on the dress for Aunt Titi's wedding. Talking about she didn't want people feeling sorry for her, so she goes and blows a bunch of money on a dress she ain't gonna wear no where else. Her friend Elaine said to keep the tag on it and take it back. Mommy and her proud, poor self said she couldn't do that. In fact she said she deserved something nice after all she's been through. It's true. Mommy doesn't spend on herself. She puts us kids first. No one told her to marry up with that stank Bradford. Come to find out he's nearly a case for America's Most Wanted. He was doing stuff nobody but me thought he was capable of doing. I felt like he was a crook, from the first time she brought him home. Then he want to act like someone appointed Daddy of the Year. I had to tell him I got a Daddy and his name is Rick so don't even try to perpetrate!
>
> —Ingrid Petersen, November, 1997

About her reading and writing, Ingrid reflected, "I wrote my short story about a person of color. I did not identify her as such but the use of language I chose clearly signals she's of African-American heritage. I wrote of her present experiences. I feel each of the [African-American] short stories I read were written from one particular character's point of view. I tried to write in a manner that embraced a multitude of issues without actually defining what was at the heart of the issue."

Student response to the midterm experience was overwhelmingly positive. The students valued the opportunity to make choices and set the direction for their learning. In most cases, the students spent more time and certainly contributed more emotional investment to the project than they would have on a traditional examination. As they engaged in the process, they came to class enthusiastically, anxious to share the progress they had made thus far; and several shared their writing after completing the project as well.

One of the most difficult aspects of this process for me was the dilemma of assigning grades to the projects. As a classroom teacher, when I used the workshop approach with children, it was challenging to quantify each child's effort and writing progress and settle upon a grade. I felt similar frustration in this situation. Do I evaluate each person based on simple completion of the tasks outlined? How do I assess the amount of effort and "heart" each person put into his/her work? What about students' past experiences with taking risks as readers and writers and their current levels of expertise? Pat Belanoff (1991) elaborates on the "messiness" of evaluating writing: She asserts that writing teachers have difficulty agreeing on what constitutes good writing and whether individual pieces of writing meet those criteria. She points out that even the same evaluator reading the same piece of writing in two different sittings frequently evaluates it differently each time. And then, even if the evaluator could come to terms with grading or rating the piece, that

piece is but one representation of a student's ability:

> To what degree does a particular piece of writing represent a student's total ability? Are we assessing the student's ability or the quality of the piece of writing? In fact the only thing it's really possible to find out is if the particular piece of writing before us does or does not accomplish some particular purpose. Could the student duplicate the piece, do something else like it just as well again? And even if so, can writing tasks be so much alike that we can be sure that if a student does one he can do the other? (p. 57)

In evaluating this assignment, I had to decide whether what I was evaluating was actually the quality of the writing the students did or the *quality and depth of the thought* put into their experimentation with print. One of my goals for the students was that they would play with words and dabble with types of writing that were unfamiliar and perhaps even threatening. As Belanoff (1991) states,

> We want them to take risks, to try harder things which may make their writing look as though it's deteriorating depending on when we decide to look at it. We don't want them to write what they already know how to write; we want them to write something that pulls and stretches their skills—and that pulling and stretching can result in some pretty messy stuff. (p. 56)

All of these issues complicated the "authentic" assessment process for me and made objectivity an unrealistic (and perhaps even undesirable) goal. Ultimately, I placed the quality the of students' writing in the context of their quality of thought and effort and established a sort of "gestalt" impression in my mind of what that quality of thought would represent. With this impression providing the framework for my thoughts, I began to respond to the students' efforts.

My first evaluative decision was not to write on the students' work, because of the personal nature of their writing. Instead, I wrote separate responses to each midterm, specifically mentioning my own reactions to each student's writing as I read. For instance, one student wrote a poem about how she craved silence and space from the clamor of her husband and children, only to discover by the end of her poem that she would be lost without them. In my response, I reflected,

> Ah, how to describe how I connected with your poem when I read it! I, like you, love the quiet times in life when I can shut out the world and retreat. Oh, but how I also love my children, so much more than those moments of peace I grab now and then.... What a wonderful reminder of the truly important things in life.

I very much enjoyed responding to the students' writing and reading experiences. Unfortunately, this still did not solve my quandary of how to assign grades to the project. I felt strongly about one thing. I could not, in good conscience, allow my judgment about each piece of writing to be the sole determining factor in assigning it a numeric evaluation. Belanoff (1991) recommends establishing a sense of community and collaborative decision-making as a means of deepening the

authenticity of assessment. She suggests student self-evaluation, ongoing conferencing, and collaborative grading with other writing teachers as ways to create this sense of community. The judgments made about writing are then both personal (on the part of the student and the teacher) and communal, because multiple viewpoints about a piece of writing are collected: "The more we engage in talk with students and colleagues about our reactions to texts, the more we're able to construct individual evaluations firmly embedded in our communities" (p. 64). Realistically, I could not ask my colleagues (none of whom co-taught with me) to assist in evaluating these midterm projects. I could, however, involve the students in self-evaluation and conferencing.

I decided that each student would have a private conference with me and come to a collaborative decision about their grade. It was fairly simple for me to ascertain whether the students had fulfilled all the written requirements of the exam (and there were, in fact, a few students who deleted certain sections). However, determining the quality of the writing and the level of effort that went into it depended much more on where the student had come from, and only the student could help me to determine this. These conferences were the most challenging part of the entire process, both for me and, I believe, each student. I was impressed, however, by each student's honesty about the level of effort and "heart" he/she had put into the midterm. I anticipated having occasional "mismatches" between a student's perception of his/her effort and my perception of his/her effort, but this did not occur. The students were generally frank with me about the parts of the assignment that intimidated them, or those parts that they put off doing until it was too late to accomplish what they had set out to do. For those students who did not complete every portion of the exam (usually because of misunderstanding of the requirements), the conference gave us the opportunity to clarify the required elements. They could then complete or revise that portion for additional credit. For those students who completed the entire exam to the fullest of their effort and ability, the conferences provided a forum through which we could discuss their growth as readers and writers and their own feelings about their reading and writing abilities.

After each discussion, I proposed a point value grade based on my perceptions and the student's comments, and he/she either concurred or disagreed. During one conference, I was leaning toward giving full credit to the student with whom I was talking; and she felt that, because readers and writers never really "get there," she shouldn't receive a perfect score. We settled upon a low A for her project. This type of honesty was surprising, and, frankly, quite refreshing.

As I indicated previously, there were no unresolvable mismatches between the students and myself in terms of what grade each should receive. However, because of the loose nature of this grading process, and because I myself tend to be detail- and number-oriented, I still feel uncomfortable with the total applicability of this grading system to future, similar experiences. This would hold particularly true if

I decide to expand upon this idea and model an entire college class and its assignments around the workshop concept. Both the written and oral interactions that I had with students were valuable, but not sufficient to address the issues of accountability, fairness, and ambiguity in grading.

In my graduate classes, I have experimented with allowing students to develop scoring rubrics for major presentations and assignments. They have created rubrics that are specific in their language and rigorous in their demand for quality. I feel that this approach has value in the undergraduate classroom as well, for a variety of reasons. First, the students have ownership of their own evaluative process in an even more extensive way. Secondly, if students write their own rubrics while in their teacher preparation classes, they will have greater understanding of how to use them in their future classrooms. Therefore, when implementing this workshop concept in the future, I intend to involve the students more fully in both deciding the requirements for the assignment(s) and in developing rubrics with which to evaluate them. The evaluative conference, then, would have a more specific set of criteria upon which to base discussion and assignment of grades, and student involvement in this process would invest them more deeply in the evaluative process.

In addition, I would further explore the possibilities of collaborating with colleagues teaching other courses. This project could be an ongoing, evolutionary exploration of reading and writing that could link very easily into learning experiences in other courses (The Teaching of Language Arts or Adolescent Literature, for instance). The type of collaborative evaluation that Belanoff (1991) recommends would then be more realistic and meaningful. The finished product could become part of a comprehensive portfolio evidencing each student's growth as a reader, writer, and future teacher.

To further capture other perspectives about this experience, a student from the class, Jody Caraher, contributed as a co-author to this article by sharing her specific experiences. In the following section, Jody first shares some of the philosophical background that she developed prior to entering my class, and then elaborates on how the reading and writing experiences she encountered while completing the project helped to solidify those ideas. She writes from the first person point of view, as I have, to better illustrate the personal evolution that took place as she grappled with the assignment.

A Student's Perspective

As a student pursuing my degree in Middle Grades Education, I hope to become a highly effective teacher who can inspire and empower young adolescents to learn. Through my studies, I have fine-tuned my philosophy about how to teach, how kids learn, and how to maintain a rich classroom learning environment. I have also become a lifelong learner.

In my teaching language arts class, the prerequisite to this course, we read the first edition of Nancie Atwell's book, *In the Middle* (1987). Her description of her eighth grade reading/writing workshop astounded me. It was remarkably unlike any language arts class I had ever experienced or imagined. Atwell expects her students to engage in sustained reading and writing every day. Her classroom is arranged for the convenience of young readers and writers. Her focus is student-centered and based on the belief that anyone can learn to read and write well.

Atwell speaks of teachers as learners and talks of the many things she has learned from her students. Her statement, "My students taught me that they love to read" (Atwell, 1987, p. 21), was surprising to me. I have met so many people, young and old, who have expressed a general dislike of reading and, especially, writing. How could her students be different? Is it true what Atwell says—that anyone can learn to read and write well? Atwell states, "The ability to read for pleasure and personal meaning, like writing ability, is not a gift or talent. It comes with the freedom to choose, and with time to exercise that freedom" (p. 21). Over time, reading and writing become habits of mind. This news is exciting, especially to a prospective middle school language arts teacher.

In my teaching of reading class, we delved further into implementing the reading/writing workshop by reading Linda Rief's *Seeking Diversity*. Rief states that this book is about what her students have taught her. Rief characterizes herself as first and foremost a learner. She constantly asks herself: What works for learners? What doesn't work? Rief (1992) states that, "Each year I let go of more and more, and the students take more and more responsibility for their own learning" (p. 3). She writes with her students and she reads with them. She models her own process as a learner.

In my teaching of reading class, we were immersed in reading and writing, trying to synthesize the information in Rief's book. The question arose: How could we now, as students, take the information from Atwell and Rief and use it to successfully implement a reading and writing workshop later, in our classrooms? During class discussions, several students confessed to feeling insecure about their own reading and writing abilities. Some of us were burdened with past negative writing experiences that had shattered our confidence or destroyed our pleasure in exploring various forms of writing. Most of us plowed through our studies during our leisure time, leaving little time for reading novels for pleasure.

As midterm approached, our professor consulted with us about what sort of assignment would be most meaningful. We agreed that it was essential for us to become engaged in the reading and writing process, just as we will expect our students to. We needed to experience the gratification of reading something of personal choice and writing on our own topics. We recognized that we could truly understand the reading and writing process only by being immersed in it. Furthermore, to become effective teachers, we must understand the writing process from the student's perspective.

While mulling over the assignment and attempting to make my own reading and writing choices, I had to face up to the fact that, throughout my life, I have given poetry a bum rap. I have chosen not to expose myself to it, and have difficulty imagining that I could write good poetry. I decided that my midterm assignment had to be about poetry. I scanned shelves at home, libraries, and bookstores and came up with six sources representing a wide sampling of poetry.

I decided to approach my poetry books with the mind of a sixth grader. I was going to have unadulterated fun with it. I started with *Where The Sidewalk Ends*, by Shel Silverstein (1974), and moved on to *Poetry From A to Z : A Guide for Young Writers*, compiled by Paul B. Janeczko (1994). The latter book contains examples of numerous kinds of poetry and lots of inspirational quotes that encourage the reader to take a stab at writing poetry. I found a quote by Virginia Heard to be particularly reassuring:

> I write first drafts with only the good angel on my shoulder, the voice that approves of everything I write. This voice doesn't ask questions like, "Is this good? Is this a poem? Are you a poet?" I keep that voice at a distance, letting only the good angel whisper to me: "Trust yourself." You can't worry a poem into existence. (p. 25)

Writers must remember to listen to the good angel whenever they are writing a rough draft. The important thing is to trust oneself and let one's ideas flow freely onto paper. Rief (1992) said she did a lot of bad writing to get to the good writing, and she read examples of her bad writing to her students. All students need to know that every writer produces some bad writing.

Atwell emphasizes that writing is thinking. I felt with my midterm project that my writing crystallized my thinking. Converting my thoughts into written words awakened me to a sense of how I really felt about certain things. Writing advances thinking and may catapult a person into action. For example, I was reading about Carl Sandburg and how he responded when asked by a famous reporter what he thought was the worst word in the English language. Sandburg said the worst word was "exclusive," because "when you are exclusive you shut people out of your mind and heart" (Bolin, 1995, p. 7). This inspired me to write a poem concerning our nine-year-old daughter, who has special needs, and the battle we face every day over her isolation:

> Exclusion...
> Doors slammed shut. Hard
> Barriers built of prejudice giving form
> To a solitary world
> Of inescapable isolation.
>
> You are different.
> Shut you out!
> You can weep
> A thousand white tears streaming.
> How will they know?

Following the completion of this project, the issue of our daughter's isolation continued to gnaw at my conscience. The words to my poem resonated in my mind and I wrestled with the emotional intensity of my thoughts. This compelled me to confront the complicated issue of exclusion once again, and thoroughly examine how our daughter might be included more with her regular peers.

By the following week, our daughter was riding the neighborhood bus to school instead of the special education bus she had been riding with other "special needs" kids. This move yielded positive results. Our daughter always found a welcome place to sit, she was greeted with smiles, and was generally treated very kindly. She successfully joined her neighborhood peers on the school bus, and it wasn't long before she joined a neighborhood Brownie troop, as well. These actions steadied her on a course toward greater inclusion, and she is less isolated now. Reading and writing jolted this issue to life in my conscious mind, and served as a catalyst for actions that opened our lives to new possibilities.

This reading and writing project was a rewarding and valuable educational experience. Because I made my own reading and writing choices, my mind was free to search, bend, and grow in ways that were personally meaningful. I examined my tastes and talents as a reader and writer. I rediscovered poetry and gained an appreciation of the beauty of its form through my own expression. I identified weaknesses I possess as a reader and writer and gleaned a greater respect for really good writing. I also produced some good writing.

This assignment required me to be honest, reflective, and candid about myself as an evolving reader and writer, and my writing was extremely personal in nature. When evaluating my paper, my professor could have covered it with comments and corrections, assigned a grade, and then handed it back to me. I haven't met a serious writer yet who doesn't harbor a memory of a teacher who "bled" all over a piece of work of which the writer was initially proud. Such an experience can be devastating and may destroy the tender emergence of a budding writer. My professor responded to my writing personally, expressing how my thoughts affected her, using encouraging words that reflected back to me the pride I felt over my writing. This strengthened my identity as a writer and my resolve to continue perfecting the craft of writing.

During the conference with my professor, we discussed my work and collaboratively assigned my grade. I was able to share my thoughts about the assignment, and I was honest with my professor in assessing my performance: I had put considerable effort into my midterm project and felt I had earned an "A." Had I felt I had created a "B" project, or "C" project, or worse, I believe I would have, perhaps shamefully, admitted the fact. Knowing that I would ultimately confront my professor and admit to some level of performance was undoubtedly a motivating factor in creating quality work. This motivation is clearly lacking in a conventional setting, where students frequently receive their graded assignments without even making eye contact with the instructor.

We had planned as a class to share our writing with each other and to seek the response of our peers. Some students were able to do so, but we fell victim to time constraints, and this activity was cut short. It would have been beneficial to experience the writer's workshop for several more weeks. We needed to continue immersing ourselves in reading and writing, exploring different genres and strengthening our workshop skills. Additional experience would further boost much-needed confidence in our own abilities, when, as teachers, we are faced with the formidable task of implementing a reading and writing workshop in our classrooms.

Linda Darling-Hammond, Jacqueline Ancess, and Beverly Falk (1995) state, "It is the action around assessment—the discussions, meetings, revisions, arguments, and opportunities to continually create new directions for teaching, learning, curriculum, and assessment—that ultimately have consequence. The 'things' of assessment are essentially useful as dynamic supports for reflection and action, rather than as static products with value in and of themselves" (p. 18). The reading and writing workshop experience launched me to higher levels of self-discovery and understanding of the world around me. I am finding my own landscape. Experiencing truly authentic assessment has strengthened my resolve and empowered me with the knowledge and confidence to implement it in my classroom. There is no turning back. I must provide experiences and assessments that inspire and nurture lifelong learning and enable my students to discover their own landscapes.

Final Thoughts

Classroom landscapes are changing, some for the better, some for the worse. Test score accountability, in particular, is compelling many teachers in public schools to take backward steps from democratic pedagogy into autocratic modes of information transmission. The "powers that be" are demanding that administrators, teachers, and students "prove" that learning has occurred in ways that can be measured quantitatively. Unfortunately, quantitative accountability tends to reduce student learning to acquisition and transmission of isolated bits of knowledge. Teacher educators and future teachers have the opportunity (and the responsibility) to change this landscape. We have the potential to impact the landscape of education in profound ways through practice of authentic teaching, learning, and assessing. The roots of reform germinate within our own belief systems and ways of knowing and learning. Greene (1978) eloquently proposes that, in order to foster democratic values and authentic learning in our classroom landscapes, "self-reflectiveness be encouraged, that teacher educators and their students be stimulated to think about their own thinking and reflect upon their own reflecting. This seems to be inherently liberating and likely to invigorate their teaching and their advocacy" (p. 61).

How is self-reflectiveness encouraged? We believe that all students need to be engaged in activities rooted in authenticity that help them *become* writers, mathematicians, scientist, or teachers. According to Linda Darling-Hammond (1996),

teacher education reformers are beginning to recognize that prospective teachers, like their students, learn by doing: "As teacher educators, beginning teachers, and experienced teachers work together on real problems of practice in learner-centered settings, they can begin to develop a collective knowledge base and a common set of understandings about practice" (p. 5). This is what happened to us as a result of this immersion in the workshop experience. Students learned readers' and writers' workshop by reading about it, discussing it, and actually doing it. In this process, we identified and grappled with the many challenges involved in implementing authentic experiences and assessments. The most central challenge, for both professor and students, involved deepening our response to our own writing, others' writing, and ultimately, ourselves.

Darling-Hammond (1996) asserts that teachers must "understand learners and their learning as deeply as they comprehend their subjects" (p. 4). This is the essence of authentic assessment. Teachers need to develop a capacity to analyze and respond to what is happening in their classrooms and in the lives of their students. In order to do this, teachers need to develop productive relationships with their students. Skillful teachers in settings where they know their students well make the greatest difference in what children learn.

This premise rings true at the college level as well. This reading, writing, and responding experience deepened our relationships at many levels. Students came to know students in new ways, the professor-student role was completely transformed, and new relationships were born. In particular, the relationship between the two of us as co-authors evolved as a result of further exploration into and reflection about this class experience. We have talked, composed, talked some more, revised, gnashed our teeth in frustration, talked some more, researched, and revised some more. In this seemingly endless process, we have emerged not only as friends, but as better collaborators, better writers, and more knowledgeable, articulate, and passionate teachers.

Robert J. Tierney (1998) states,

> To be both accountable and empowered, readers and writers need to be both reflective and pragmatic. To do so, readers and writers need to be inquirers—researching their own selves, considering the consequences of their efforts, and evaluating the implications, worth, and ongoing usefulness of what they are doing or have done. Teachers can facilitate such reflection by encouraging students to keep traces of what they do, by suggesting they pursue ways to depict their journey...and by setting aside time to contemplate their progress and efforts. These reflections can serve as conversation starters—conversations about what they are doing and planning to do and what they did and have learned. (p. 375)

Indeed, learning is a journey, for students of all ages. Teacher education must help each teacher to first find his/her own landscape, and then develop the confidence to bring others into this landscape. The most powerful teachers are those for whom learning is an exciting and continuous opportunity, for both themselves

and the children they inspire. These teachers are not just receptacles and transmitters of information; they can *act* upon this knowledge in ways firmly grounded in personal belief and conviction. The most powerful assessment, therefore, is that which empowers, encourages, and strengthens learners, particularly those who will be tomorrow's teachers. It is through our example as teacher educators that our students will learn to someday empower, encourage, and strengthen the children in their care.

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Appendix

Samples of Student Book Choices

Abe's Story, by Abram Korn
Adult Children of Alcoholics, by J. Woititz
An Anthology of American Negro Literature, by Sylvester Watkins
The Bible (the book of Revelation)
Bridge to Terabithia, by Katherine Paterson
Carl Sandburg: Poetry for Young People, selected by F. Bolin
Cold Sassy Tree, by Olive Ann Burns
The Count of Monte Cristo, by Alexandre Dumas
The Diary of Anne Frank, by Anne Frank
Jane Eyre, by Charlotte Bronte
A Thousand Acres, by Jane Smiley
Poems by Robert Frost, selected by William Pritchard
Superfudge, by Judy Blume
Where the Sidewalk Ends, by Shel Silverstein