

LSU Writing Project

Summer Institute Anthology

Summer 2015



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Table of Contents

Introduction to the Anthology	3
Dr. Margaret-Mary Sulentic Dowell , LSUWP Director	

Writing from the Heart

<i>Dear Moment</i> by Courtney Brown	4
<i>Morning Antics</i> by Beth Cox	5
<i>Vignettes from the Heart</i> by Fatima Daspit.....	6
<i>The Weight of Words</i> by Alice Garcia.....	8

Personal Narratives

<i>Damsel in Distress</i> by Danielle Butcher	10
<i>The Moment that Changed My Life</i> by Willette Butler	12
<i>The Egyptian Flu</i> by LaMonica Dixon.....	13
<i>A Change of Course</i> by Felicia Gathe.....	16
<i>A Lifelong Friendship</i> by Nakia Jackson	18
<i>Where Did He Go?</i> by Penny Kinchen.....	19
<i>Faithfully Persevering</i> by Amai Mokeba.....	21
<i>Here We Go Again</i> by Ashley Smith	24

Demo Lessons

Courtney Brown	<i>Getting to the Heart of the Matter: Building Foundations to Complex Writing Through Narrative Journaling</i>	26
Danielle Butcher	<i>Worth a Thousand Words: Developing an Argument from Visual Texts</i>	28
Jamie Hipp	<i>Arts Integration in Practice: Persuasive Writing Commercials</i>	33

Introduction to the Anthology

Whenever a previously unknown group of individuals comes together, there is the potential for discord. Philosophies can differ, viewpoints can be disparate, and the lived experiences of those individuals brought together may not be shared by all group members. Educators are a different breed; we tend to establish instant rapport and quickly bond over shared grade levels, mutual interests, what we are currently reading, and our passion for teaching and learning. In much the same way that a teacher works to establish rapport among her students and build a community, directing a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute demands the same willingness to negotiate and comprise, to listen and learn from one another in a shared space that nurtures and encourages growth and development.

In the early summer of 2015, sixteen educators came together to share expertise and build knowledge about writing practice. Based on the premise that teachers should be writers themselves and then teachers of writing, we came together for 10 days to explore the craft of writing and ourselves as writers. The 2015 Invitational Summer Institute was special in many ways – it was very organic – it included a school team – and it was comprised of educators from both private and public Louisiana schools. During the summer of 2015, educators from a first grade teacher to elementary educators to teachers who taught in middle school and high school, to an assistant principal and a principal, engaged in the writer life for a solid two weeks.

As a group, we explored writing, writing research, and shared writing best practice with fellow institute attendees. Through participation in the LSU WP, yet another leadership cadre of local teachers was developed who in turn, will act as writing experts and facilitators of writing at their schools and districts. We focused on the knowledge and expertise that existed in our group and extended that knowledge and expertise, drilling down to how that translates to students.

As a site of the National Writing Project <http://www.nwp.org/>, the LSU Writing Project's Invitational Summer Institute 2015 was a success. In these pages you will find writing from Institute attendees. Enjoy these pieces and the individuals they represent.

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Writing from the Heart

Dear Moment

Courtney Brown

GOOOODDDMMMOORRRNNNIIINNNGGGG!!!!

This is how I feel:

I feel like running in a field of green while releasing big bubbles at will into the air with large strokes like a happy child.

I feel like allowing those bubbles to float as high as they can bringing glee to all who see their effervescence.

I feel like closing my eyes and smiling at the sun as it smiles back at me with its radiant "Baton-Rouge" warmth. Although it's humid, the stickiness created by the moisture in the air doesn't bother me today because I'm here...

I'm aware...

I'm breathing in this moment...

This moment is mine...

I own it and I embrace it.

Let me love you, dear moment, ever fleeting you may be.

Let me hold and contain you, if only for a second, because you belong to me.

Let me enjoy this time, dear moment. Please don't leave so soon.

Let me breathe in joy as vision as I hum a happy tune.

Let me bask in transcendence, dear moment.

Let me grasp your hand

Let me have this moment, to ponder and to understand.

Let me walk with you, dear moment.

Let me take this feeling in.

Let me embed this memory, dear moment, forever and again.

Let me sense purpose, dear moment, in all I say and do.

Let me testify to others that they can experience you too.

Let me light each day with energy so positive it catches on.

Let me each day discover moments even when you, dear moment, are gone.

Morning Antics

Beth Cox

I lay in bed wide awake as my brain tumbled over and over thoughts about writing and what I would focus on this morning... Determined, I was, to make this Friday writing my best yet. I played the thoughts of my piece in my head and created a profound introduction. My topic was set, and my first sentence was arranged, so I decided at 4am that I had been awake long enough unable to resume my slumber. I arose from the bed and moved into the living room where I worked on submitting my narrative items to Dr. Barrera. Scanning and saving, uploading and posting, all was accomplished with plenty of time left for attending to my morning routines.

Shower, dress, tame this wild and crazy, curly mop on my head. Slap some make-up on, find shoes and socks, and prepare to leave. Remembering my son had to attend driver's education and my daughter unhappily agreed to take him, I proceeded to startle them all awake with singing and proclamations of love and admiration. Not surprisingly, they did not appreciate my sentiments so early in the morning. Gabe simply pulled the sheets tighter over his head, Jasmine said, "Don't bring that noise in here!" As for the dogs, well supposing I can read their minds from facial expressions, they were not at all amused by my early morning giddiness either. Almost certainly Tyson, the boxer, had several impolite words running through his big box head. Jenny, the corgi, lying belly up with stubby little legs pointing in the air, opened one eye as if to say, "What the hell you want, fool? Woman, have you lost your mind? Get out! Turn off the lights and shut down the noise!" Feeling very free from all of my writing this week, I laughed and joked and continued to sing and call out for everyone to join the day; after all, I had to be awake... why shouldn't they? They all slowly crawled from their beds grumpily, mumbling displeasure under their breath. As I left it was as though a sigh of relief filled the air that the quiet would return.

Jumping in my car, checking that I had all of my necessities for class, I remembered that my husband was going to help me get my car to the shop. We met up at Treads and Care. Mr. Butch greeted me with a smile and took care of making a list of the maintenance needed on my vehicle. With a grin from the friendly encounter, I jumped into my husband's enormous truck and he brought me to LSU. We encountered traffic, due to a wreck on the interstate, but we still managed to arrive fifteen minutes before class began. Navigating LSU's campus in "BRUTUS," the gigantic 2003 Ford Excursion was very entertaining for me, not so much for my husband.

Settling in and preparing to write, we reviewed the Facebook post for the previous day's summary and Melissa suggested we free write. Gladly I opened my file where I have collected my writings for the week to begin my daily ... *Writing from the Heart*. I was so prepared, as I had rolled my draft around in my brain for so long, while lying in bed, this morning. As my fingers hovered over the keyboard my mind was blank. The creative, interesting, wonderful story I had concocted while unable to sleep, in the wee hours of the morning, was gone! Gone! Frustrated, I began twirling through the thoughts and ideas that are up there, in my brain, in files sorted in some magical way I am sure, yet there was nothing! Yes, nothing! So writing about my wonderful, fun morning would just have to do.

Vignettes from the Heart

Fatima Daspit

Day 1 ~

When I was born, a little over five decades ago, I was very, very tiny. I was a premature baby. My parents did not think I would survive, so as devout Catholics, they decided to name me after Our Lady of Fatima. So, my father made a vow that if I would survive, he would read the Bible every day, would advise me to do the same and if he lost his ability to see, I would read the Bible to him.

By naming me Fatima, my parents handed me over to the Saint and I became one of Her daughters and would have Her protection for life. But, I must keep my part of the promise if I wish to receive Her blessings. My father kept his promise and read his Bible every day. I try to read mine every day, but still do not succeed at it. I do my best to read it often.

My father passed away a year ago and this promise was kept; I read the Bible to him often as he lay in a hospital bed for days. I have to find time and energy to read my Bible daily!



Our Lady of Fatima

Day 2 ~

When I park my car, I am usually cognizant of the fact that if I do not park it carefully, someone will surely park his or hers carelessly. Therefore, I find myself parking my car carefully. Still, when I got to it yesterday I noticed that someone had parked his/hers next to mine carelessly. Yes, my car got dented, big time dented. What does one have to do in order to prevent such accidents from happening? Park somewhere else? I did park somewhere else today.

When I get to my car today, what will I see? Will I spot another dent? Will these people have realized that they must be more careful when parking their cars? Sometimes, it feels as if all the careless people of the world park next to my car and refuse to be cautious when parking, especially if they are parking next to me. Please, don't put another dent on my car. Please!

Day 3 ~

When I stop for a moment in order to reflect on my journey as a foreign language teacher, I realize that foreign languages are not viewed as an important part of the curriculum and for this reason, programs are shrinking. Budget cuts here, budget cuts there. Where is the Latin program? Gone. The German? Gone. I would advocate for more emphasis on the importance of the study of foreign languages. But, why learn foreign languages, really? For the following reasons: (1) language empowers; (2) effective communication depends on the use of correct language code; (3) knowledge of languages fosters understanding of cultures; (4) culture and language are expressions of each other; (5) to succeed in the global community, one must understand its components, *i.e.*, culture, how to speak it, etc.

The learning of foreign languages ought to be as important here as it is around the world, if for no other reason than for national security purposes. In Brazil, a section of the university entrance exam includes showing

one's knowledge of foreign languages (English or Spanish) and one must pass that section of the exam before embarking on a college education.

Day 4 ~

Planning for my personal narrative assignment was not a difficult task to achieve for me. This theme has surrounded me for decades, so it is only fitting that I would not grapple with what to write about. I chose to write about my experience living in the U.S. as a young adult. In this piece, I included my plan for the future as a professional and I also emphasized the importance of immersion for someone like me who wanted to learn English.

In my inquiry about the origin of the immersion method, I was led to engage in research to find when and where the first immersion program began outside and in the U.S.: These programs, in which foreign languages are used as the medium of instruction, were introduced in the United States in 1971, almost half a century ago, modeled upon the Canadian immersion programs pioneered in St.-Lambert, Quebec, in the mid-1960s as a way to prepare children to be proficient in both French and English. The introduction of these programs was prompted by a group of Anglophone parents concerned that the traditional French programs were not adequately preparing their children to be effective in the workforce where they would be expected to communicate in both French and English. With this idea in mind, a place for the implementation of immersion programs designed to teach the curriculum through a foreign language, beginning in the early grades was found in Culver City, California. (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010, p. 312).

The peer editing activity was very enlightening, as I was given positive feedback and acted upon it. My paper was read by two of my classmates and they made helpful comments for revision. The presentational part of it was one of my favorite parts of the project, especially because I hoped to make my point about whole language use and immersion. Overall, writing this piece brought good memories from the first time I lived in the U.S.

Day 5 ~

Sharing my personal narrative with the latest LSUWP cohorts brought back good memories about the importance of determination. In attempting to achieve a goal, no mountain is too high to climb if one has the drive and the work ethic necessary to achieve the goal one has set for oneself.

When I came to the U.S. for the first time, I did not know conversational English since my Brazilian English teacher's approach to teaching language was quiet archaic, *i.e.*, memorization, verb conjugation, and no dialogue. So, after learning to speak the target language, I became convinced that listening to the whole language was the best way to learn a foreign language. I decided to become an English teacher and use the immersion methodology.

Back in the U.S., my desire to continue teaching foreign languages did not cease and I became a teacher of Spanish and French. I've endorsed the immersion method for the teaching of foreign languages as my own experience testifies that it works!

The Weight of Words

Alice Garcia

Nadia was a lover of words. She devoured them with the fervor of a wild beast. She read, she wrote, but mostly she spoke. Nadia wasn't one to shy away from speaking her mind, though she went to great pains to do so in an eloquent and meaningful way. Speaking her mind didn't mean she had to put down someone else, and if these words happened to go against what was a widely held belief, she presented her side in as fair and diplomatic a way as possible.



“He began to silence Nadia more and more ...”
Quiet by cheynester (DeviantArt.com)

Like most women, Nadia met a man, and he was wonderful. He swept her off her feet and they were happy together. He seemed to appreciate the relationship that Nadia had with words, and he even went so far as to celebrate it. To him, Nadia was his wordsmith and he often introduced her as such.

But then things changed, as they often do in life and love. The man became an important man and in turn she became the wife of an important man. He began to silence Nadia more and more for fear that others would not appreciate what she had to say, what she might write, what she read. At first, Nadia held true to her nature and continued to let the words simply spill forth from her mind, but night after night this became a topic of tension in their home. She soon found that it was easier to be quiet. There were less arguments that way. She didn't have to worry about embarrassing her husband. She just stood and smiled, careful with what she said.

Several years passed in this manner, and a change came over Nadia. She began to get bigger, heavier, thicker. Her stomach was almost nearly in a constant state of pain. She seemed to be in a perpetual state of bloat even though she picked at what she ate explaining that she always felt full (though never sated.) Eventually the pain grew to the point that she spent most of her time in bed, doubled over, curled up in the fetal position. She was miserable. This was no way to live.

One morning, she pulled herself from her bed and shuffled to the bathroom where a large mirror perched over the his/her vanities. Nadia couldn't believe what she saw. Her skin was stretched and tight; she had simply blown-up like a Thanksgiving Day balloon. None of her clothes fit, nor her shoes. She just sat in her closet and cried. What had happened? She looked up towards the heavens and whispered, "What is wrong with me?" The tears poured down; they simply wouldn't stop. And through it all, her stomach ached.

Nadia pulled herself to her feet and made it to her backyard. No one was home it seemed because all was quiet. She stood there her swollen feet and legs pressed deep into the earth and opened her mouth to wail, but not a sound emerged. Nadia looked around puzzled. Had it really been that long since she had spoken actual words? Had it been that long since she had heard her voice at something more than a whisper?

"Hello?" she croaked. Her throat felt dry and tired.

"I'm here," she continued, the words painful to speak. She looked around at the nice house, the good neighborhood, the well-maintained yard.

"This isn't my life," she said confidence growing, her words feeling more familiar, her voice filling out. "I'm not this person. This isn't who I was meant to be. I'm not quiet, or docile. I'm strong and loud and I always have something to say." A smile came to her lips with that last declaration. Her cheeks felt rubbery and unreal, but at the same time, the pain in her stomach had lessened.

At that moment, she closed her eyes and just let the words fill her mind. She began speaking them as fast as they came and with each outpour of words, she felt lighter, freer, and the pain was continuing to decrease. Fueled with this reality, she began shouting, yelling; she let the words flow from every part of her body. There were more tears, there was spit, there was even a little blood. But in it all, it was her — 100% all of her.

Personal Narratives

Damsel in Distress

Danielle Butcher

I am a strong, independent woman, perhaps as a result of my childhood spent as a tomboy. My group of friends included one girl (also a tomboy) and several boys around my age who viewed me as one of the guys. Flirting was my older cousin's domain: She had the series of boyfriends. She had the gift of gab and love affair with teen romance novels. Whenever one of my boy friends met my cousin, he would ditch me to go sit with her as she rambled about God-knows-what and I was left going on adventures in the neighborhood by myself. Although by age 16 I had grown out of my awkward stage physically, I still believed myself unattractive to the opposite sex. When dealing with men, I relied on intelligence or humor for acceptance, not femininity. So it came as quite a shock to my feminist sensibilities when I found myself flirting my way out of a ticket and into complimentary vehicle maintenance.

It was a hot summer day in south Louisiana as I drove my black '86 Chevy Blazer down Causeway Blvd. It was one of those days where I felt good about myself--windows down, music playing, the whole stereotypical "teen girl driving scene." But my movie fantasy came to a screeching halt when the cop behind me flashed his lights and I had to pull into the Waffle House parking lot.



"A genuine Scarlett O'Hara" (screenshot, *Gone with the Wind*, 1939)

"Shit," I thought, angry at the possibility of besmirching my pristine driving record. I rolled down the window to talk to the middle-aged policeman. He leaned down and lowered his sunglasses. "Miss," he said, "Did you know your passenger side tail light is out?"

"No!" I gasped. "I had no idea. What do I do?"

Let me pause here to explain that no, I know nothing about vehicles other than how to get from point A to point B, so I was genuinely confused as to what to do with my tail light. But everything else from the moment I saw the policeman at my window was an act—a genuine Scarlett O'Hara, Southern belle performance that transmitted the message, "I am a helpless woman; please save me, you big, strong man!"

Where this sudden proficiency in "playing the girl" came from, I will never know, but Officer Macho Man seemed to revel in it. "Well, that's no trouble," he grinned in a Don't-you-worry-your-pretty-little-head kind of way. "Just take it in to a shop and they'll fix it for ya. I'm not gonna write you a ticket, but you need to get this taken care of before someone else pulls you over." He tapped the roof of my car and strolled back to his cruiser.

Well toss me a hoop skirt and fetch my smelling salts! I had the potential for devious flirtation after all! God, it was such a rush, conning this poor, unsuspecting man into doing what I wanted, and all I had to do was feed his ego with a smile. This moment, this was my awakening. Too long had I been the popcorn kernel that just rolled around the bottom of the bag while the rest blossomed into rich, buttery goodness! Now I had

discovered a whole new world of power at my disposal, and my flirty cousin who got all the attention – bless her heart – could bite me.

I waited for the policeman to leave first and then pulled out onto the highway (how awkward would it have been to have him behind me in traffic?). Plotting my next move in this game of feminine wiles, I crossed to the far left lane and turned onto a side street where a small mechanic shop was. I pulled into their driveway, unstuck my bare thighs from the black vinyl seats, and walked into the building.

“Um, I need a man.”

That got their attention real fast. Five mechanics, mostly older men but one or two in their early twenties, stopped what they were doing to look at me. I stood in the middle of the room, hands fidgeting, one foot tapping the floor behind the other, teeth worrying my lower lip. Oh, the tableau of a second rate teen novel!

“What can we do for you?” asked one of my would-be saviors.

My body gesticulated my agitation: I ran my hand through my hair, shifted onto one hip, tilted my head to the side, and generally made myself look the part of the little lost female. “I got pulled over because my right tail light is out, and I don’t know how to fix it!”

The men smiled and offered reassurances as they grabbed their tools and a spare light bulb. I showed them my car, which was nearly twenty years old at the time, and in a matter of minutes they had replaced my burnt out bulb with a new one. I gushed my thanks, and the mechanics laughed and bid my goodbye.

“But how much do I owe you?” I asked.

“Aw, don’t worry about it. You have a good day,” one said, and they went back inside.

As I slid behind the steering wheel and started the car, I couldn’t stop myself from a victorious squeal. It wasn’t just the free auto repair work or avoiding a traffic ticket, although those were both worthy accomplishments. I had become part of the elusive feminine world that I had resented since childhood. And although I remain a steadfast feminist who values intelligence and personality over sexual attractiveness, now I can at least appreciate the power of womanly persuasion ... and exercise it occasionally.

The Moment That Changed My Life

Willette Butler

On a quiet Friday evening around 5:15 p.m. at an elementary school where I was employed as the school clerk. I was talking to my principal as we wrapped up our day. She walked by and asked me if I received my Praxis test results. I replied, "I checked them this morning, but I had not received them. She replied in her matter-of-fact voice, "Turn that computer on and check those scores." I proceeded to do it so nervously, my palms were moist and my hands were shaking tremendously. I was alone in a dimmed area praying as I continued to follow the directions of the website.



"I continued to pray and ask God to guide me ..."

Prayer changes things and my family always stressed the importance of prayers, especially when you need it most. When I arrived to the link to click my results, I took a deep breath and there they were. I received a passing score on my Praxis test. I thought to myself, "Wow, I have a passing score on the Praxis and this will allow me to have a secured job." I began to shout, cry and praise God for blessing me with one of my challenges. This proud moment changed my life, by making me more grateful and a fearless human-being.

When I received my test scores this moment taught me to be grateful in so many ways. I experienced an economic hardship during this difficult time. I wasn't able to treat myself to a fine steak at Ruth's Chris like I was accustomed to doing. I was laid off and rehired with a job that nearly cut my salary in half. I had to change the way I lived to be able to survive on these meager earnings. I continued to pray and ask God to guide me and strengthen me by not allowing my children to suffer during this difficult time. I never missed a beat providing for my family. I learned to appreciate the small things in life and to continue to wake up and be thankful for life and a job, whether it was the one I wanted or not.

I consider myself to be a brave individual who went through a storm, why? Because I had sleepless nights wondering, how long this pressure of not knowing will last. I had to work two jobs to make ends meet. That means I was never at home to tend to my daughter, who was sixteen at the time. I was afraid, but now I am fearless. It was troubling when I wasn't sure if I would be employed from one school year to the next. I felt I had wasted years attending college and had nothing to show for it. The economy was in turmoil and so was my life. The media was constantly reminding me of the high unemployment rate, focusing on the fraction of individuals with one and/or two degrees. I have accomplished this chapter in my life knowing I will have a more stable job and no longer have to agonize with fear.

I am proud to mention I have received my teaching certificate and, of course, twenty-two curious and loving students. I am a firm believer in never giving up. I will continue to fight for what I believe in, and working hard in order to better my life, as well as the young minds I teach. My beliefs are to implement the best practices in my classroom and to increase student achievement. This essential moment of me earning my teaching certificate has changed me abundantly. I am a fearless and grateful individual, because of my experiences and my challenges.

The Egyptian Flu

LaMonica Dixon

Beep, Beep, Beep! I heard the loud blaring of my alarm clock going off. It was the morning of May 22nd, 1995. I rushed to get out of the bed. I quickly ran into the bathroom and began to complete my morning routine. I had a sickening feeling, but I chose to ignore it. It would go away. I kept telling myself that. I just knew it would.

As the water ran in the bathroom, my mom called, "Are you ready, yet? We can't be late!"

I quietly said, "Yes ma'am, I'm coming." We were headed to the doctor. Mama had made an appointment a few months back. She said it was a wellness visit. I hadn't been to the doctor in a long time. I was barely ever sick. I felt there was no need for a doctor's visit. Needless to say, I was very reluctant about going. However, I was always very obedient and did what my mother told me to do. In most cases, anyway.

I sprinted to my room and threw on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. The jeans were a little tight around my waist, but that was from the stress of studying for 10th grade finals. I was eating more because I was worried about school, and I was snacking just because the food was there. I quickly dashed to the passenger side of the car where my mom was waiting for me.

The ride to the doctor's office was silent. I was listening to Tom Joyner on the radio and my mother seemed to be in her own thoughts. I was thinking about two things mainly. First, finals were on my mind because they were going to start this week. School was so important to me. I always wanted to do my best, but lately, I had been tired, irritable, and I just felt different. Then, I was thinking about my boyfriend, Corey. I thought about Corey because our relationship had become different. It wasn't like it was in the beginning. I started having regrets about having sex with him. We hadn't really done anything in a while. I thought maybe it was for the best. Maybe we should just be friends? I had a million other things I wanted to do with my life anyway. I had dreams of going to Spelman College in Atlanta. I wanted to become a rich doctor. I wanted to travel the world. I wanted to get married and have children, later in life.

As my thoughts became more intense, I realized we were at the doctor's office. The sun was shining brightly, and I remember that the birds were chirping rather loudly that morning. We walked into the clinic, signed in, and quietly waited for my name to be called. I really didn't want my mom coming with me to see the doctor, because I was 16. I thought I should go alone, but she wanted to come.

We waited for what seemed like an eternity. I was reading the Biology study guide I had brought along with me. I just had to pass that test! All this doctor's mess was starting to get on my last nerve. Not to mention, I was missing English class and the teacher was going over that study guide this morning.

"LaMonica Banks?"

I stood quickly as my name was called. My mother stood as well and we walked to the back with the nurse. The nurse introduced herself and asked me to step on the scale. Wow! I had gained five pounds in the last few months. I knew I had to cut back on the food, but it just didn't seem right. The nurse then took my height, temperature, and blood pressure. All of which were fine.

Then she asked me a powerful question. "When was the first day of your last period?"

I immediately became nervous. When was my last period? I hadn't had one in a while. It came to mind, and as I said "February" I knew that was a long time to be without a period. The nurse looked perplexed. My mother looked unbothered which was very strange to me. Maybe mama knew something I didn't.

The nurse silently led us to the room, and we waited for the doctor to enter. I was ashamed to look at my mother. She just sat there. I guess she could read my mind because she said nothing.

Finally, a short, silver-haired, white woman with silly looking glasses walked into the room. She said, "Well, hello little lady. How are you doing today?" She was overly friendly. It almost made me gag. She said, "Hello, My name is Nurse Darling. I'm a nurse practitioner. What brings you in today?"

I began to tell her that I was there for a wellness visit. As she listened, she read my chart.

She said, "I see here, you haven't had a cycle since February. Do you want to talk about that?"

"Did I want to talk about it? Hell no!" I thought to myself, especially not in front of my mother. We didn't have that type of relationship. I was extremely private, and I didn't want anyone, not even the nurse to know I had been having sex. I didn't want anyone to think poorly of me. I wasn't a bad girl. I just really, really liked Corey and to be honest I liked having sex with him. I wanted to stop, but it was so hard. My mind would say no, but my body would always fail me and say yes. I always felt bad and guilty about it after the deed was done. I was a church-going Catholic girl who was supposed to wait until marriage, but I had allowed the devil to pervert my thoughts and body. Now, there was no turning back.

I finally, spoke and said, "No I don't want to talk about it."

Nurse Darling was still very friendly and said, "Well, I'm going to send you to the bathroom and I want you to pee in the cup. We're going to find out what is going on."

Fear and anxiety started to seep in, but I did as I was told and came back to the room to wait. My mom was still just sitting there. She finally spoke. She asked, "What if you're pregnant?"

I couldn't believe she would ask me such nonsense. My answer was, "I'm not pregnant. I'm just under a lot of stress at school. That's why my period is late. But I really don't want to talk about any of that right now."

As I sat on the end of the doctor's table, there was a soft knock on the door. Nurse Darling walked through the door so cheery and happy, I knew it was going to be great news! I could feel the butterflies in my stomach. She said, "I have some news. You have the Egyptian flu. You're going to be a mummy!"

I was puzzled, "The Egyptian Flu? What's that? Is it curable?"

Nurse Darling just laughed and said, "No, sweetheart, you're pregnant."

"Pregnant?!" I exclaimed. I felt like a ton of bricks hit me.



"Quiara became the driving force for everything in my life."

African Mother and Baby by Tamara Adams

This was not the news I expected or wanted. What would I do with a baby? I was still in high school. I wasn't married. I still lived at home. I didn't even know if I liked Corey anymore. How would I take care of a baby and still go to school? I began to sob heavily. My mom, who had been sitting quietly in the corner came to my side and she and Nurse Darling began to hold and comfort me. I felt so many emotions. I felt sadness, guilt,

shame, embarrassment, and a loss of self-esteem.

It took a few minutes, but I finally calmed down. Nurse Darling explained that I was too far along to have a termination, and my only options were to have the baby, keep it, or to put it up for adoption. In a flash, I knew what my answer was. I knew I was going to keep the baby and raise it, and do the best that I could. I knew it would not be easy, but I knew I had to try. The baby didn't ask to be here, and now it was up to me to do what I had to do.

That moment forever changed the course of my life. My daughter, Quiara Nicole Collor was born on November 2, 1995. I was 16 years old and I was in the 11th grade. My parents never gave up on me or shunned me. My mom helped me in every way she could. Although, Corey and I did not stay together, he was always there for us and spent lots of time with Quiara throughout her life.

Quiara became the driving force for everything in my life. I was motivated to want the best not only for myself, but for her as well. I knew I wanted her to have everything I may not have had. I wanted her to be the best person she could be.

Quiara has been with me for all the major events in my life. We have literally "grown up" together. She was almost two when I graduated, on time, from high school in 1997. She was in attendance at my college commencement in 2002. She was six then, and she ran away from my mom, found my seat, hugged, kissed me, and told me she was proud of me. She was there when I graduated from my master's degree program in 2006. We have shared many wonderful memories together. We are more than mother and daughter. We are sisters, and I consider her to be one of my best friends.

Quiara is now 19 years old. She graduated from Baton Rouge Magnet High School in 2014. While at Baton Rouge High, she served as the SGA president and was voted Miss Baton Rouge High. She is multi-talented. She sings, acts, dances, and is a wonderful orator. She was also accepted into Spelman College, the school I wanted to attend. However, she chose to attend the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. She completed her first year, and will be a sophomore in August.

Quiara is more than what I could have dreamed of, and I am so proud of all of her accomplishments. Because of her, I am who I am today. I thank God for her life, and I am thankful He chose me to be her mother.

A Change of Course

Felicia Gathe

It was early Monday morning and I found myself sitting in the middle of my pediatrician's waiting room. This was a room that was inviting to a two year old but definitely not a seventeen year old high school senior. The walls were painted in bright primary colors of different zoo scenes and animals with toys everywhere but there perspective corners. I was surrounded by a bunch of babies, little people, and moms In my head I'm thinking, "I'm too old for this!" As I sat in my chair barely able to keep my head up, I suddenly didn't care where I was at this point. All I could do was lay my head on my mom's shoulder.

Finally I heard "Felicia Brumfield" called from the back. I managed to get up and walk to the back on my own. We sat in the exam room waiting for my doctor to arrive. Thoughts began to run through my mind as to what the doctor was going to say was wrong with me. What I didn't mention earlier is that I had been back and forth to the doctor since November. Each time I was diagnosed with a virus, prescribed some antibiotics, and sent home. Although I would begin feeling better, I still was not myself. I was an extremely active teen. I danced, played volleyball, and was always hanging out with friends. Slowly, sleeping began to trump all of those things, so we knew this was not just a virus and we needed answers fast.

Just then my seventeen year old mind reverted back to, "This is my spring break!" I can't be sick during spring break of my senior year. Just as I began thinking of the fun I would miss out on if I had to spend my whole spring break sick, the door slowly opened.

Dr. Bombet walked into the room. My eyes widened because this was not "my" Dr. Bombet. It was a different Dr. Bombet. The doctor that entered the room was Dr. Ronnie Bombet, Dr. Leon Bombet's nephew. He entered the room with a warm smile and kindest tone I had ever heard from a doctor. Dr. Leon was a very sweet man but his kindness came through in different manner. He was loud and abrasive but still a very sweet soul. Dr. Ronnie began explaining that Dr. Leon asked him to exam me to allow a fresh set of eyes to take a look at what was going on with me. Because he seemed so gentle, no one questioned him examining me. Besides we all wanted answers and hoped that he could give them to us.

After a quick routine checkup, Dr. Ronnie requested that I go to get some x-rays. "It sounds like she has pneumonia but chest x-rays will give us more information," he said. The sound of having x-rays were a little scary but I didn't have the energy to put up a fuss. We went to get the x-rays at the hospital down the street and then returned promptly for the results. Before we could get comfortable in the room, Dr. Ronnie came in with a strange look in his eyes that said more than his mouth was saying. It was a totally different look form when he entered the room earlier. He said he wanted more tests and that he had already checked me into the Lake. "Wait a minute," I thought. "I'm checking into the hospital," I asked my mom. She responded in a tone that I had not heard before, "Whatever will make you feel better." This was not sounding good and now my first day of spring break was ruined.

We checked into the hospital and I was immediately rushed to take a CAT Scan. Again the thoughts running through my mind said that none of this was making sense but since my mom was not putting up a fuss, neither did I. The scan led to an immediate biopsy. I was so out of it by this time I wasn't sure of what was going but when I woke up from the surgery, the room was full of family. I then realized that there was more going on than anyone would say but the mood in the room said this was far from over, and it was.

Finally Dr. Ronnie and Dr. Leon came to my room and cleared everyone out but my parents and I. They shared that they had the results of my test. Dr. Leon put his hand on my mom's shoulder and said, "I'm sorry to tell you this but Felicia has Hodgkins Disease. It's a form of CANCER." At that moment, the room fell quiet and all you could hear was the loud silence of tears streaming down everyone's face, including Dr. Leon's. That is everyone's face but mine.

At that moment I heard the word CANCER, but it never resonated that I had cancer. It was like they were speaking of someone I didn't know. I couldn't understand why everyone was so upset. They couldn't possibly be talking about me. All of a sudden, the voices in the room became muffled like the teacher on

Charlie Brown. People were talking but I couldn't hear the words. I sat back as one person after another burst through the hospital room door attacking me with these death grip hugs and ugly cries.



Felicia's angel medal

In all of the emotions of the moment, I never had a chance to respond. It was as if everyone was reacting for me. Time seemed to stop for a moment. When I finally got a chance to speak, in my seventeen year old mind, the first I asked Dr. Ronnie was, "Does this mean I'm going to lose my hair?" He smiled and all of a sudden the whole mood changed.

Once everyone saw that I wasn't defeated they transitioned from victim to survival mode. My doctors began discussing next steps and arranging to send me to St. Jude's Children Hospital for treatment because of their success rate with treating childhood cancers. It was about beginning a new normal—a normal that would include tons of doctors' visits, chemotherapy and radiation, along with drastic side effects. In a split second, I went from a carefree seventeen year old worried about missing spring break to beginning a battle for my life. This new normal would require a lot of loving support and faith in God's plan. But I knew that if it was a part of God's plan, he would provide what I needed to get it through it.

The journey was not easy and presented many challenges. The one thing that no one tells about fighting cancer is that you fight cancer for the rest of your life. It builds insecurities, fears, and anxieties that affect every aspect of your life. Every decision you make is an unconscious result of the cancer.

However, you realize in the midst of it all you become braver than you believed and stronger than you knew you could be.

A Lifelong Relationship

Nakia Jackson

I moved back to Baton Rouge, Louisiana from Austin, Texas as I was entering my junior year in high school; it was the fall of 1992. My father wanted me to attend Southern University Agricultural and Mechanical College. Since he is the most frugal person that I know, my moving back to Louisiana prior to finishing my senior year of high school was ALL centered on him not having to pay out-of-state tuition fees. At the time, little did I know.

Once I arrived in Baton Rouge, I was taken to the local high school to register for school. I can remember that day as if were yesterday. I had never seen ANYTHING like it before in my life. As we entered the gates at the entrance of the school, I can remember looking up at the tall iron bars on the gate wondering ... "Why does this school have burglar bars?" I never wondered about it again. As my family and I entered the front office to register, there were only two things that I could think of: Why don't they have regular electives? Where will I fit in here? I didn't know any of the students, with the exception of a few cousins. I was use to my middle school friends who became my high school friends at Round Rock High School. A lot of relationships were built and friendships formed at Round Rock High. We all knew each other very well. We had spent a lot of time together. It was rather difficult to leave all the friendships and memories behind. In that moment, I realized the importance of friendships, because at this point - I had none. I kept thinking, "How am I going to come into this setting and meet new people during my *almost* final year in high school?" IMPOSSIBLE, I thought. That was until I met Shaunda Lewis.

Shaunda Lewis was also a junior, and would be graduating in the Class of 1994 along with myself. I remember meeting Shaunda and noticing how tall she was. I was 5ft. 2inches and Shaunda seemed to be 6ft. easily. She walked and moved gracefully, like a swan on water. She was never in a hurry, but never late for class. She was calm as only the tall can be. Shaunda seemed so knowledgeable to me at the time because I knew nothing about the environment that I was in. I listened to every word that she said. I listened to her casually converse with others, I listened to her in class as she shared assignments with others, and I listened to 'the way' that she spoke. We didn't speak the same. She spoke more loosely, less conventional. At times, I wanted to talk just like her.

As each day passed, Shaunda and I grew closer. We did everything together. We even changed our school schedules so that most of our classes would be together. Before long, it was spring and graduation was approaching. We attended all of the junior high school events together - programs, dances, games, pictures, etc. Sometimes, we even dressed like twin sisters. I was so excited to have a friend like Shaunda.

Shaunda and I would each go on to college, get married, be each others' bridesmaids, become pregnant and have children (two each) whose birth dates were all days apart. We would talk daily, sharing in the details of each other's daily lives. She was my best friend.

As the years have gone by, twenty-three to be exact; I must admit that my relationship with Shaunda is the longest relationship that I've ever had. Our relationship has lasted longer than both of my marriages put together. Whenever we are out together, people ask, "Are you sisters?" We reply, "soul sisters." She knows me better than anyone, but mostly, she knows me better than I know myself. She reminds me of who I am, and who I am going to become. She is my rock! I call her "my round." She is my biggest supporter, and my loudest cheerleader, even when there is nothing to cheer about. Shaunda believes in me more than she believes in herself - and that means that she believes in me A LOT! She is a lifelong friend.

Where Did He Go?

Penny Kinchen

This is the story of a great man, a man who impacted many lives with his knowledge, his patience, and his sincerity. Archie McKnight was my grandfather; he was known to me as “Poppa,” and I to him as “PenDobber.” I grew up without a daddy, but I had Poppa, and although I shared him with my younger brother and ten cousins, I was his favorite. Of this I am sure.

Poppa worked in construction for 60 years; even though his formal schooling ended after sixth grade, he was a wise man from life experiences. He managed people and persuaded them to be their best. He treated people equally, and he despised cheating, stealing, and lying. With Poppa you always got a second chance, but after you used that one, you had better “tow a straight line.” He coached high school boys’ baseball until he was 80 years old, mowed his ten-acre property, grew thousands of tomatoes, and faithfully honored his wife of 60 years. Poppa loved living his life, and I loved being important to him.



“I feel his soft cotton T-shirt ...”

Some of the things I loved about Poppa are documented in photo albums, like the time he taught me how to bait a hook with a big, gushy worm, and when he rode my sleepy little self around the yard on his mower. Other pictures include his escorting me across the football field at my senior year’s homecoming game, and my college sweetheart asking Poppa if he could marry me. My favorite picture is of him walking me down the aisle at my wedding. Right before the extraordinary moment of entering the church, Poppa had tears in his eyes when he said me, “Are you sure about this? Because if you’re not, it’s okay. You can live with me forever, PenDobber.”

Other things about Poppa are more private because they are sheltered in my mind. I smell his Old Spice aftershave lotion, I feel his soft cotton t-shirt, and I hear his squeaky fiddle playing “Cotton-Eyed Joe.” I see his weather-worn hands, his frosty-white hair, and his quick grin. I remember his practical jokes and that he liked to sneak cookies to me when nobody was looking. At 9:00 pm every evening, he would whisper, “Let’s go see

what's in the freezer." That was his invitation to share a bowl of vanilla ice cream. Even as a married mother of three children, I loved to cuddle with my sweet Poppa in his big chair. He showed his affection for me with hugs and kisses, and Poppa always listened to me when I talked.

Poppa knew that when I was a little girl, I dreamed of being a television talk show host. During the summer of my ninth year, he bought a cassette recorder for me. Poppa and I took turns interviewing each other on my pretend show; that's when he invented Emerson Silkilllem from Hucky Puddle. As Emerson, Poppa spent hours telling stories into the microphone of my recorder and answering all my silly questions. My favorite was his response when I asked him, "What is your favorite food, Emerson?"

Emerson, aka Poppa, explained, "Road kill with grape jelly." Of course, we would erupt into fits of giggles while in the background my grandmother chastised him for "being gross!" I thought it was fabulous.

In 2001 Poppa started to change. At first, his forgetfulness and periodic physical weakness was timidly laughed away. He began losing things - his cap, his glasses, his hairbrush. He had to rest more often, and he wasn't as interested in the things I had to say as he had been before. I refused to admit that things were becoming different between us; I could not bear to face the reality of his sliding away from me. I traveled to visit him at his home 100 miles away every weekend, and I knew he would be sitting at his dining room table, watching for my car through the window. When my car pulled into his driveway, Poppa was on his feet and out the door before I parked.

One Friday evening I drove up, and he didn't get out of his chair. We played the "everything's okay" game all weekend. I painted an artificial smile on my face, and somehow my children knew to play quietly. I remember Poppa that weekend: he took a lot of naps in his chair, but he ate at the kitchen table with us, he watched the ball game on television with us, and he hugged and kissed us when we left. While driving back to Baton Rouge on Sunday afternoon, I cried in the car.

By the middle of the next week, Poppa was in the hospital. Of course, I figured his doctors would make everything better soon. What I didn't realize was that Poppa was suffering from a blood shortage to the brain because his vascular system had been damaged. He left the hospital, but he left with a label. He had vascular dementia.

At first I was relieved that Poppa was out of the hospital and back at home. That relief didn't last long. In a short time, Poppa got depressed and his personality grew very mellow. He became listless, refused to eat, couldn't sleep, and paced the floor constantly. His personal hygiene and private needs became a dilemma; therefore, it wasn't long before neither my grandmother nor any other family member could handle his care at home. Poppa was moved to a nursing home.

Some of the things that vascular dementia did to my family were obvious, like the fact that Poppa needed around-the-clock care to monitor his food intake and take care of his personal needs. It was also straining for him to be away from his home and my grandmother, his sweetheart. I was miserable being two hours away and unavailable to help. Visiting him was nerve-wracking because there was never complete privacy. My visits with Poppa were awkward and often interrupted by strangers. I was uncomfortable, and I know he was completely embarrassed.

Vascular dementia robbed me of my grandfather's final time on earth. Instead of being able to tell me his crazy Emerson Silkilllem stories, he sat in a wheelchair wrapped in a blanket and stared into space. Rather than remembering Poppa's last days with sweet sorrow, I secretly wish I had not seen him at all. I hated the smell of the nursing home and the loud, sickeningly sweet voices of the attendants. The sounds that the other nursing home residents made and the constant droning of distant televisions have become unforgettable memories of my last visits with Poppa.

For the Memorial Day weekend, 2002, I made the 100 mile trip again. Although I never spoke the words aloud, I knew the end of Poppa's life was near. When I arrived at the nursing home, Poppa was in a wheelchair, being pushed by a stranger into the "living" room. This room had less life in it than any room I had ever entered.

I approached him with anxious hope mixed with cautious reserve, and he gave me a polite glance. The ridiculously cheery nursing home attendant said something to him, certainly with good intentions, but she made matters worse by calling attention to Poppa's hopeless situation. It was the first time that it was clear to me that

Poppa had forgotten who I was.

I'll never forget the way I felt that day. I was a little girl with a broken heart. Poppa was so much more to me than a grandfather; he had been a surrogate father, a role model, a comforter, a protector. Vascular dementia had stolen the spark from the special relationship between me and my Poppa.

It only took nine months for my grandfather's illness to take his life. Vascular dementia subjected our family to its mystery and suffering; we didn't know from day to day how Poppa would respond to us. I fought confusion, being challenged to comfort a man who had always been my comforter. At the end, he did not return my affection or our conversation; Poppa was unaware of my presence except for one blessed exchange.

As I sat across from the frail, gray-skinned patriarch of my family, suddenly his eyes opened wide, and Poppa said to me with a big smile, "You're Penny!" As soon as the words left his lips, so did his smile. He withdrew back into the cocoon of his disease, yet he left me with the precious gift of his remembrance.

Poppa died 14 days later. I still cry.

Faithfully Persevering

Amai Mokeba

“There’s a beauty in being rejected...It teaches you to rely on God for everything.” (Ryleigh Magee).

As student teaching came to a close, my job search for a teaching position at a “good school” became intense. My mentor teacher, Ms. Henderson, was more than certain that I would receive a job easily. Being that I was student teaching with an extremely highly effective teacher, I too, was confident in myself. As days passed, I was continuously emailing principals and attending job fairs in efforts to get a phone call or an email back for an interview. With my faith strong, I was sure God would make a way, even when there seemed to be no way. One day, while I was teaching, in walks the principal and she says to me:

“Hey, I’ve submitted your name for a position open at La Salle Elementary.”

“Okay, great! Thanks so much!” I responded. I immediately became anxious.

“What school did she say?” asked Ms. Henderson.

“LaSalle Elementary.” I responded.

“Oh my gosh, that’s great! One of my good friends is the principal there, I will definitely put in a good word for you.”

At this point, I was certain that this job was mine. I went home and browsed the school website with confidence. Later that day, I received an email from the principal of LaSalle Elementary that said she would like to come in and observe me teaching a lesson. But, not only did she want to see me, she also wanted to observe the other two student teachers that were student teaching at the same school as me. The inquiring principal asked if we would come up with a one day schedule to come in and observe all three student teachers. I was very close with one of the student teachers, Jes’ca, being that we had several classes together prior to student teaching. Jes’ca and I decided to take matters into our own hands and make the schedule ourselves with little input from the remaining student teacher, who seemed to not be interested.

The schedule was made, and was quickly sent off to the principal. I did little preparation for the short notice, “big observation” because I was already prepared. While taking my college education courses, my instructors perceived me as a shy, studious student. When teaching at various schools near the university, my instructors, mentors and peers gave many compliments about my teaching styles, activities, and techniques. These compliments followed me through college as well as student teaching. My superstar mentor teacher while student teaching was very interested in my activities and techniques that I brought into her classroom and never hesitated to tell me that I did an, “excellent job today”. Being very humble, I accepted all of the compliments gracefully and still was eager to receive feedback from every lesson and was driven to learn as much as I could to become an effective educator. All of the praise, advice, and feedback given from the start of my education experience stuck with me. I felt as if I had a reputation of being “great” at every task and it was my duty to keep that up.

Now the day had come! It was observation day. The principal walked in and observed the math centers that I had prepared for my students. She greeted me with a smile and told me that my activities were great, asked a few questions, and said that she would be in touch. Confident, but anxious, I awaited an email from my “future boss”. The next day or so, the email that I had been waiting for, came. The principal from La Salle Elementary wanted to interview me. I was very excited, and so was my family and mentor teacher. But, not only did she want to interview me, she also wanted to interview my good friend, Jes’ca. “I hear y’all are going neck and neck for the teaching position” said the school clerk. “Yep, we’re going to have to duke it out” I replied. This battle of the student teachers became the talk of the school. I can remember my mentor teacher pulling the LaSalle principal (which was her good friend) to the side and telling her that she would highly recommend me for the position. Regardless of their friendship, I was confident that I would get this job. As with all things, I gave this interview to God and asked that if it was in his will that this job be granted to me.

Interview day came very quickly. I remember waiting patiently, praying in the very small office space. “Ms. Mokeba?” “Yes ma’am” I replied. “We’re ready for you!” said the principal. The interview was about 30 minutes and included myself and six other administrators and staff. The interview concluded with a tour around the school and the principal saying, “We will keep in touch with you and let you know what happens. Thank you so much”. I left that interview with my head held high. I knew I had rocked it! In the parking lot, was Jes’ca, who was awaiting her interview. With no hard feelings, I wished her good luck.

The next day, while student teaching, every 30 minutes I would walk over to the computer and check my email to see if the principal had made a decision. Hours had passed, then, right after lunch, I logged on to the computer and saw that I had an email from the principal at La Salle. I clicked the email to open it and the first words read, “I regret to inform you that I will not be hiring you.....” I didn’t even read the rest of the email. Completely embarrassed and confused, I quickly logged off the computer before Ms. Henderson saw that I had been rejected. I immediately batted my eyes to stop the tears from flowing. I was at a loss for words. I felt as if I had let my family down, my mentors down, myself down, and someone else had defeated me. I had no idea how I was going to break the news to Ms. Henderson, so I didn’t until the next day.



“I felt as though I were not ‘good enough.’”

African American Woman by Brandy Kayzakian-Rowe

When I broke the news to her, she too was confused; “There’s no way. They must have got the names mixed up.” “I really want to call her and see what happened. I’m so sorry.” “No, I’m sorry.” I said. “I can’t believe this, I just feel like I let you down.” Ms. Henderson explained to me that she had no idea what happened, but she was certain that I would find something else. Everyone at school was congratulating Jes’ca for getting the teaching position at La Salle. Although I was happy for her, I couldn’t help but be embarrassed because I felt as though I had lost the battle. All of my hard work, compliments from mentors, supervisors, evaluators, peers, had all been put to waste. I felt as though I was not “good enough”. That week I was very emotional and lost hope. “How can someone who I know that I am better than get the job over me?” Is what I kept asking myself. I had to “shake back”. There was no way that I would let someone else get a job over me when I have nothing. For two evenings straight, I researched schools, emailed principals from various parishes, and contacted administrators that I had done work for in the past hoping to find a way. I never once thought to question God, but I was close. I was very confused, frustrated, embarrassed, and upset, but I knew that God had done this for a reason. I prayed that if this job was in His will that God will grant it to me, but the job clearly was not for me. I solely needed to trust in him and know that he would make a way. I began to thank God for the circumstances, although they were difficult, and asked that God would lead me in the right direction.

Looking back, student teaching was the best experience of my life. I learned, and worked harder than I had ever had before. I initially thought that I would not be able to survive student teaching because my mentor teacher set very high expectations, was firm, and prepared a week in advance, but I persevered. On the last

day of student teaching, as I was telling the students, “goodbye”, Ms. Henderson told me that I did an incredible job that semester. She told me that I exceeded her expectations and that I was the best student teacher that she had ever had. Tears immediately began to flow from my eyes. Ms. Henderson is a very firm, strict, highly effective educator. It takes a lot for her to say those things about anybody, which seriously touched my heart.

As I was leaving school, I got a call from the Asst. Principal of Audubon Elementary who was interested in hiring me for a teaching position. The interview came quickly and I was soon hired. While teaching at Audubon for my first semester, I learned many things that I had never learned before. Because I kept in touch with many of my close friends from college, I was able to share some teaching strategies and techniques with them. I especially kept in touch with my good friend, Jes’ca at LaSalle. Towards the end of the semester Jes’ca informed me that her position at LaSalle will no longer be available for her the following year. Jes’ca was very upset and was worried that she would not have a job. I quickly thought of options for her and told her of a position available at my school. Soon after, she contacted the administration, was interviewed, and hired. I was very excited to have my student teaching partner on board with me, but I couldn’t help but think, “that could have been me.” The tables have turned! Initially, I was upset that I did not get the position at LaSalle because I felt I had been rejected, but it was not the place for me. Sometimes what we think is our plan is not God’s plan. Being rejected taught me to rely on God in all things.

Here We Go Again

Ashley Smith

It was nearing the end of my 4th grade year at Most Blessed Sacrament Catholic School. I was sitting in Mrs. Bourgoyne's class when suddenly the School Counselor's voice came over the intercom.

"Ms. Bourgoyne, can you send Ashley Smith to my office?" she asked.

"Sure", Mrs. Bourgoyne answered back.

Then I hear the rest of the class "Ohhhhh!" my stomach drops, my heart races and I turn 20 shades of red. Nobody likes hearing his or her name getting called to the office, especially me, even though I frequently had attention on me from being silly or talking to the people sitting next to me. In my head I start thinking of what she could possibly want to talk to me about. A big change was about to happen that would turn my whole world upside down.

I walk into the front office and they lead me to the Guidance Counselors office. She asks how my year has gone so far and then asks if I know any students in 3rd grade. I ramble off a handful of students that I know in the grade below me and she writes them down. The whole time still wondering, "What is this all about? Why is she asking me things? Did I do something wrong?" After speaking with the Guidance Counselor, I walk back to my classroom confused and spend the remainder of the day thinking about the conversation we had.

I get home that evening and my parents ask the typical "How was your day?" question. I answer them and explain how I spent some time talking to the guidance counselor and how she was asking me questions about who I knew in the grade below me. At this point, my mom and dad obviously had known what was going on and couldn't hold it back anymore. They sat me down and had a long talk about how I "wasn't ready" (whatever that means) for 5th grade and I would need to spend another year in 4th grade. They explain that I am one of the youngest in the whole grade and I was struggling with my grades being a C, D student for a couple of years. What? How can that be? Is this really happening? I was furious with them! All these questions blurt out of me as I took the defense to what they were telling me. I remember telling my parents I hate them and I cannot believe they were doing this to me.

I shout to them, "You're ruining my life!"

I see their faces as they drop, feeling guilty and thinking they were making the wrong decision. At the time I didn't know I have ADHD and they were against getting me tested so young.

As the school year ends and I keep this a secret from all my friends. I feel I cannot tell them because this was way too embarrassing and I do not want them to tease me during the time we still have together. Summer comes and goes and I am able to enjoy some quality time with the now "5th graders" such as, sleepovers, birthday parties and playing games before the new school year sneaks up on me. Totally not ready for the first day, mom asks "Ready for your first day?". I shoot her a look of pure evil. Seriously? How could I be ready? Ready to be humiliated? This is not what I wanted to do. I do not look or speak to her the remainder of the car ride.

We pull up to the carpool line and I get out of the car with attitude and against my will. As I am walking to my "new" 4th grade class knowing I will have a familiar teacher with unfamiliar students, I keep thinking, "How am I going to do this? These kids are going to know. They will think I am stupid!" I walk into the classroom and wait for the other students to arrive. As they come in, I look around the room avoiding making eye contact with any of them to avoid this extremely awkward situation that is about to happen. Everyone arrives and Mrs. Procell, my homeroom teacher *this* year, makes us introduce ourselves to each other. "Great", I think sarcastically.

The introductions happen and I unconfidently say, "Hi, my name is Ashley". As I look around the room, I notice the students looking at me like I have antlers growing out of my head. They know. I know exactly what they were thinking "Wasn't she in 4th grade already? We have seen her before." Everyone else introduces themselves and Mrs. Procell begins the morning with Religion class.

Mrs. Procell asks “Ashley, will you go get the candle since you know what to do already?”

My heart starts pounding. I am so embarrassed. How dare she call me out in front of my whole class? Here comes the 20 shades of red again. I do what she asks and lead the class in the morning routine, unwillingly. Finally, that painful morning routine is over and I sit back in my seat. The day went on like normal and I keep to myself, avoiding talking to anyone.

Days turned into weeks and weeks into months and eventually the school year gets easier. I was starting to get over the embarrassment and come out of my shell again since I was always a friendly person. I was talking to other classmates and joking around just like I did with my previous classmates, the big bad 5th graders now. Now, I made a whole new group of friends and that was pretty exciting, not only for myself but my parents as well.

Sadly, I only stayed in touch with a few of the friends from the grade above me. Not many people teased me but there were a few students that didn't talk to me because of the situation. I kept moving grades with my new classmates all the way through high school and left with friends I maybe would not have had if this whole situation never happened. The years pass and I forgive and apologize to my parents for the way I reacted to their thought out decision. I also realized that my parents just wanted me to succeed, which involved taking a step back in order to move forward. Although this was painful at the time it has made me who I am today and has allowed me to form life long friendships with “new friends” from 4th grade.

Demo Lessons

Getting to the Heart of the Matter: Building Foundations to Complex Writing Through Narrative Journaling

Courtney Brown

Students can use narrative writing to provide a foundation for more complex writing responses. “Narrative writing enables students to develop a command of sequence and detail that is essential to the argumentative and informative writing emphasized in later grades” (Alberti, 2012, p. 25). According to research, narrative writing undergirds more difficult and critical responses to literature of various genres across grade levels.

With the rise of Common Core State Standards, which “emphasize using evidence from texts to present careful analyses, well-defended claims, and clear information,” students and teachers have primarily focused on standardized test preparation towards this ideal in recent years (Alberti, 2012, p. 25). Writing from this perspective requires students to read deeply with evaluative and analytical consideration of complex texts that necessitates more than just prior knowledge alone. “Quality text-based questions, unlike low-level search and find questions, require close reading and deep understanding of the text” (Alberti, 2012, p. 25).

Although evidence based, argumentative, expository and informational writing have been privileged in the age of Common Core, “the standards also require narrative writing throughout the grades. Narrative writing enables students to develop a command of sequence and detail that is essential to the argumentative and informative writing emphasized in

later grades” (Alberti, 2012, p.25). The fourth grade Common Core standard related to narrative writing (W.4.3) says that students will “write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequence” (“English Language Arts Standards,” 2015). Successful attainment of the aforementioned is essential to sound narrative writing and becomes the foundation to other types and genres of writing.

The theoretical approach that supports a foundation for this demo lesson is the socio-cultural theory. Lave & Wenger (1991) indicate that all learning is situated and cannot be viewed as isolated, static, or linear. Thus, the collaboration occurring between all participants in the classroom’s community of practice is important in the implementation of the narrative journals. Research “embraces the core sociocultural assumption that knowledge ultimately resides in the context of its use, in the practices of knowledge communities, in which case, learning involves meaningful participation in the practices that characterize a community” (Hickey & Zuiker, 2005, p. 278). This continuous negotiation and renegotiation of identities and meaning between teachers and students occurs in feedback loops through discourse, revision, and editing during the writing process. The students are affecting the teacher, the teacher is affecting the students, and the students are affecting one another.

This situated framework, as one of the foundational influences of narrative writing on student ability to write to more complex tasks, cannot be deconstructed without the presence of the following truth as presented by researchers Sulzby & Teale (1984). Nothing is learned in isolation; thus, nothing should be taught in isolation. Oral reading fluency, vocabulary, writing, and comprehension all develop simultaneously. This article substantiates the claim that teachers have done a disservice to students through the teaching of writing in ELA alone. It is the responsibility of the science, math, and social studies teachers as well to use oral reading fluency, content vocabulary, comprehension, and writing to fully embed learning.

The narrative writing journal is an important tool that can be used across content areas to prepare students for more complex writing. However, a fundamental ingredient for students to fully engage the writing process in any genre is motivation. In their book, *What Really Matters About Writing*, Cunningham & Cunningham (2010) offer research which indicates the need to reduce extrinsic motivation in order to increase

intrinsic motivation. Over time, students must turn their motivation inward to maintain success. In a general sense, students can be expected to learn and engage narrative writing if their teachers expect that learning of them. Positive beliefs lead to positive student achievement and negative expectations yield decreased student performance (Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968).

In the demo lesson, students will be given a choice board of journal stems and quotes covering the expanse of an entire week. At the beginning of each day (class period for multiple classes), students will choose a quote or writing stem to journal write for seven minutes. Students will then have time to partner up for the purposes of collaboration and will make observations about entries using the COW (compliment, observation, wonder) method. Afterward, selected student pairs will share out portions of their journal entries.

Narrative journaling at the beginning of each language period daily will produce a foundation for, and confidence in deconstructing more difficult text. Additionally, the constant collaboration will create a safe writing community which is necessary for task completion as the year progresses. Finally, students who consistently use narrative journal writing build stamina to write longer compositions over time.

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Worth a Thousand Words: Developing an Argument from Visual Texts

Danielle Butcher

Introduction

At the beginning of each school year, I assign a diagnostic argumentative essay to my ninth and tenth grade students. And every year I watch as, without fail, these young people stare at the essay prompt and textual passage in front of them in utter bewilderment. I explain, "This is a diagnostic essay that is due tomorrow at the beginning of class. This means the grade will not count for or against you; I simply need to see where you are in terms of your writing." A collective sigh of relief emanates from the huddled masses: they are thankful they will not be judged just yet.

In this paper, I explore how Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine's *Visual Thinking Strategies* (2014), based on Housen's *Theory of Aesthetic Development* (1999) aid in the development of an academic argument in the secondary English classroom. Because many students lack the confidence to compose an argument based on text, this method establishes analytic and argumentative skills through an engaging conversation about a picture. They then construct their verbal analysis into the three components of an argument paragraph (assertion, evidence, inference), thus proving to the students that they have the ability to succeed on an argumentative essay. In addition to the development of the basic argument, I discuss how *Visual Thinking Strategies* build into Geneva Gay's concept of the culturally responsive classroom (2010), Howard Gardner's *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983), and Louise Rosenblatt's *Transactional Theory* (1978), and how *Visual Thinking Strategies* can springboard into cross-curricular learning.

Rationale

Perhaps it is no surprise that many adolescents fear the written word. Academic essays inspire self-recrimination, as anything beyond the casual language of text messages, social media posts, and emojis becomes a criticism of the student's sense of worth. Too many children in the American public education system are lacking in basic reading comprehension, and for many students, writing is the most difficult skill they will ever learn (Graham and Harris, in press). In the secondary classroom, students must demonstrate not only an ability to decode and comprehend literature, but also to compose argumentative pieces based on their comprehension of textual passages. The *Common Core State Standards* (2015), which drive elementary and secondary instruction and assessment, require these reading/writing critical-thinking skills to be transferable into literacy across the curriculum, from fiction to non-fiction and from verbal to visual texts.

But what is the link between verbal literacy and visual literacy? Visual literacy, according to Philip Yenawine (1997), is "the ability to find meaning in imagery. It involves a set of skills ranging from simple identification (naming what one sees) to complex interpretation on contextual, metaphoric and philosophical levels. Many aspects of cognition are called upon, such as personal association, questioning, speculating, analyzing, fact-finding, and categorizing" (p. 845). Just as all written texts measure at different Lexile levels, visual texts also represent a wide range of complexity. For example, the picture of the hamburger meal at your nearest fast food establishment is a simple message: pick this number and you get this food. But contrast this image with political propaganda or any of the works hanging in an art museum, and you will find visual texts of varying interpretive levels that are worthy of analysis.

Because adolescents spend over seven hours each day engaging in visual media such as streaming videos, playing online games, and browsing photo-based social apps like Instagram and Snapchat (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010), they are generally confident in their ability to interact with images. Yenawine (2014) explains, "The kids' experience discussing images gives them skills necessary to approach unfamiliar territory in a variety of lessons with enthusiasm and confidence" (p. 41). And because of the plethora of emotions, personal experiences, and real-world connections an image can invoke, visual texts offer what written texts cannot: a lesson that students will find instantly accessible and personally meaningful.

In the 1970s, art education theorist and researcher Abigail Housen developed the theory of Aesthetic Development, which explains the stages that viewers use to understand works of art (Housen, 1999). This theory established the foundation for the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) curriculum, which promotes visual literacy and critical thinking. The benefits of VTS are far-reaching. These strategies support many theoretical frameworks, including multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010), and the Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978). In addition, images can be analyzed in all subjects and used to springboard academic discussions. For example, an Earth science class could examine a satellite image of the Mississippi River delta, explain what is happening physically, provide evidence from the image to prove their statement, and explain the science behind their explanation. Visuals also provide English language learners with the opportunity to practice language acquisition through stimulating discussion while developing an argument about the text. English language learners (ELL) students could examine a culturally relevant image and explain its meaning using English while using descriptive words to pull evidence from the picture. Ultimately, these analytic interpretations encourage collaborative learning, critiquing, public speaking, and individual initiative, and they can inspire many extension lessons or projects based on the image analysis.

In the Classroom

The Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) method can be employed and adapted to practically any classroom and purpose. For the purpose of this article, we will outline the lesson as if it were in an on-level secondary English classroom. VTS can be done in short mini-lesson format as well as a multi-class period project. To introduce the VTS process, however, it might be best to devote one full class period, and then revisit the strategies throughout the year in different scenarios.



Is the cat going up or down the stairs? (Leopold, 2015)

At the beginning of class, introduce the lesson objective so students will understand what measurable outcome they should achieve and how it connects to overarching standards, themes, or essential questions. One effective technique is to relate the objective (developing an argument) to viral images in popular culture (blue dress/white dress controversy, is the cat going up or down the stairs, etc.) as a way of making the concept personally meaningful to adolescents. For many students, popular culture *is* their culture—it is how they establish interpersonal relationships and make sense of the world around them. Integrating popular culture builds a “community among diverse learners” and is an “essential element of culturally responsive teaching” (Gay, 2002, p. 110).

Modeling/Guided Practice

Move into the lesson through a modified Gradual Release Model (Fisher and Frey, 2014): combine focused instruction with guided instruction to capture student interest. Communication styles among the youth of today, particularly those of color, tend towards “active, participatory, dialectic, and multimodal” means (Gay, 2002, p. 111). Involving the students actively in the learning process using reciprocal communication creates an atmosphere of “culturally responsive caring” in which all learners feel safe and valued (Gay, 2002, p. 109).

Begin by projecting an artwork for student consideration. If you do not have access to technology, provide copies of the image for the students. For this lesson, we will examine *Tamalada* by Carmen Lomas Garza.



Tamalada by Carmen Lomas Garza (1990)

Instruct the students to examine the image for up to five minutes and list their observations. At this point, students are thinking in the Accountive Stage of Aesthetic Development, wherein they make “concrete observations about the work of art that are woven into a narrative” (Housen, 1999, p. 7). However, in the time that students take to peruse the image, they bring their personal values and judgments to the process, so their observations will begin with simple details such as “blue wall” or “14 people” and move towards appraising language like “pretty dresses” and “messy kitchen.” This is the Constructive Stage of Aesthetic Development, in which viewers begin to assess the picture through the lens of their own cultural perceptions (Housen, 1999, p. 8). In this stage, students undergo a process that Rosenblatt (1978) describes in her Transactional Theory in which they “make meaning ... of a new situation or transaction, by applying, reorganizing, revising, or extending elements drawn from, selected from, our personal linguistic-experiential reservoir” (p. 3). Visual texts trigger these mental and emotional processes, all of which occur in the brief span of five minutes.

After the students complete and share their observations, the teacher should initiate the verbal analysis, which is the Interpretive Stage of Aesthetic Development. In the Interpretive Stage, “viewers seek a personal encounter with a work of art,” (Housen, 1999, p. 9). Teachers facilitate the transition into the Interpretive Stage through the following questions, “What is going on in this picture?” and “What do you see that makes you say that?” (Housen, 1999, p. 14). If students do not know where to begin, model the process for them. For example:

“What is going on in this picture? Let’s look. Notice the man and the little girl standing in the door? They are a father and daughter who have just arrived to visit their family. What do I see that makes me say that? The man is holding the little girl’s hands and they are standing in the doorway off to the side while the family is already gathered in the room.” Be sure to point to the corresponding areas of the image. As students answer, the teacher should write their statements on the board. After the students reach a stopping point, explain that they have just composed the foundational elements of an argument: they made an assertion by answering the question, “What is going on in this picture?” and supported it with evidence by answering, “What do you see that makes you say that?”

Collaborative Learning

Now that students have completed the lesson with the teacher’s guidance, students should have the chance to explore a different image on their own. In shoulder partners or groups—any collaborative learning strategy that works for your community of learners—students will choose an image from ones provided by the teacher. This is the opportunity for truly culturally responsive pedagogy. As Geneva Gay (2002) explains, “Culture is deeply embedded in any teaching; therefore, teaching ethnically diverse students has to be *multiculturalized*. A useful way to think about operationalizing this idea in the act of teaching is matching instructional techniques to the learning styles of diverse students” (p. 112). If you offer students a *choice* (and be sure your options are adaptable to diverse groups), then they will gravitate to the picture that resonates with them. Pictures can be placed at intervals around the room, they can be in a pile that students bring back to their tables, or they can be posted online

Next, follow the same procedure as in the modeling/guided instruction activity. The difference, however, is that students are now writing their responses instead of just speaking them. The method looks like this:

1. In their groups, students will list observations about the image.
2. On the group poster, students will write three pairs of assertions and evidence by answering the VTS essential questions, “What is happening in this image?” and “What do you see that makes you say that?”
3. After the time limit is called, students will share their image and their findings with the class.

Again, the implementation of this method can be modified for different age groups, cognitive levels, and individual needs as long as the two essential questions are answered.

Gardner’s (1983) multiple intelligences manifest in the VTS method. The writing itself supports linguistic intelligence, viewing the artwork promotes spatial intelligence, the deductive process (answering what is going on in the image) supports the logical-mathematical intelligence, and the student interaction with the visual text and classmates fosters the personal intelligences. If teachers wish to embrace all the multiple intelligences, they could play music (musical intelligence) to enhance the students’ conceptualization of the image. Teachers could also involve movement in the analysis (bodily-kinesthetic intelligence) by posting artwork on the walls so students can walk around the room or use sculptures so students can manipulate them in their hands.

Independent Practice/Extension Lessons

The Independent Practice portion of the Guided Release Model (Fisher and Frey, 2014) could be an individualized continuation of the procedures in the Guided Practice and Collaborative Learning steps. However, the brief analysis resulting from VTS could also serve as a springboard to other types of writing. Some ideas include the following:

- Narrative writing: Compose a story, fairy tale, song, poem, memoir, play, anecdote, or myth about the character(s) in the image or the event(s) portrayed in the image.
- Informative writing: Research the image and report on its history; explain how this image relates to another field (science, history, etc.).
- Argumentative writing: Beyond arguing the meaning of the image, students could compose a review of whether the artwork is “good.”

Consider the element of choice in the extension assignment. Allowing students to choose their summative piece is a way to establish a culturally responsive classroom.

Evaluation

During the Guided Instruction, conduct formative, informal assessments based on class discussion regarding the interpretation of image. Are students able to determine what is going on in the picture? Can students support their assertion with evidence from the picture?

The summative, formal assessment could stem from the Collaborative Learning activity. Using the students' posters, assess whether the groups composed an assertion and supported it with evidence. Speaking and listening could also be included in the assessment, as students must present their findings to the class. The Collaborative Learning phase could also be a formative assessment, while the extension assignment could serve as the summative assessment. Teachers should mold the activities and assessments to best reflect the students' learning levels.

Conclusion

Implementing Visual Thinking Strategies into the classroom is more than a one-shot lesson. While many teachers would dismiss VTS as irrelevant to their course because it was originally developed as a means of analyzing visual art, Visual Thinking Strategies are in reality an engaging tool for all grade levels and all subjects. To be sure, the purpose of VTS does not have to relate to understanding art; rather, it can be to develop higher order critical thinking skills through scaffolding and spiraling techniques. As evidenced in this article, VTS can develop a student's comfort level with argumentative thinking and writing in the secondary English classroom. Furthermore, VTS can be modified to apply to every subject, including science and math, and can enhance the learning in these subjects through real-world application.

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Arts Integration in Practice: Persuasive Writing Commercials

Jamie Hipp

America's public elementary and secondary schools are accustomed to budget cuts. School administrators are regularly faced with difficult decisions regarding staffing and course offerings in response to decreased funding. Content knowledge of the various art forms is not assessed on PARCC or End of Course tests, thus, arts programs are often the first to be discontinued from students' curricula. Writing prowess, however, is tested often. This article aims to underscore the importance of maintaining arts in schools through integration with the writing curriculum and to demonstrate the natural fit between the two content areas.

Theoretical Framework

An abundant body of research shows the magnitude of both high and low socio-economic status (SES) students' arts program involvement. Dr. James Catterall, UCLA Professor Emeritus, is a prominent arts researcher, specializing in arts integration (AI). His recent compilation of four US Department of Education studies compares the lowest SES quartile students that were highly involved in arts programs to the same SES students with low arts involvement (Catterall et al., 2012). The results are staggering. Students who engaged in arts programs demonstrated higher test scores (science and writing), higher GPAs, and were more likely to graduate from high school and earn a bachelor's degree. Additionally, student data indicated higher voter registration as well as volunteerism percentages as compared to their low-arts involvement counterparts. Catterall's findings underscore the research of Dr. Edgar Dale (1969). Dale's Cone of Learning indicates that students retain/remember a considerably larger percentage of what they do, as opposed to what they simply see or hear. In spite of research-based confirmation that arts in schools contribute to a multitude of student improvements and achievements, the lack of both time and funding do not facilitate arts programs in many districts. Enter arts integration...

The Kennedy Center, a leader of AI lesson planning and professional development, defines AI as, "An approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both" (The Kennedy Center, 2015). Essentially, the arts are united with an academic subject, such as English and are taught synchronously. AI lessons are taught primarily by a classroom teacher who has had collaborative opportunities with artists from various arts disciplines.

Between the Common Core State Standards, testing, lesson planning, field trips, and the horde of other required duties, many classroom teachers believe that AI lessons are simply not feasible. AI is strongly rooted in the seminal research of Dr. Howard Gardner. In his Multiple Intelligences Theory, Gardner (1983) details that intelligence is not one dimensional, measured by I.Q. alone, but has a variety of facets. Over the last thirty years, many educators have become proficient in differentiated, MI teaching strategies to reach a variety of students who excel in different ways. As it is purely a *strategy* utilized to teach to multiple intelligences, AI serves as a natural fit with any lesson plan and curriculum.

Most ELA teachers are familiar with AI through teaching Reader's Theatre alongside the elements of fiction and oral fluency. Math teachers utilize the visual arts when teaching geometry lessons. Elementary science teachers encourage students to demonstrate the life cycle of an animal or insect through dance. Many students choose historical figures from Social Studies and imitate said characters for in-class plays. Often, teachers familiar with planning arts-integrated lessons find writing to be the most difficult content area to address through integration, as there are few examples of AI lessons for this discipline.

According to LSU Writing Project participants, most students are first exposed to narrative writing. Informational and persuasive writing are introduced later, often to student discontent since it is unfamiliar and, seemingly, more difficult. Features of persuasive writing include repetition, slogans, testimony, detailed descriptions, emotive language, and varied sentence structure. Similarly, these features are all apparent in

television and radio commercials with advertisements, creating opportunities to integrate theatre/dramatic arts with persuasive writing during instructional time.

Arts-Integrated Lesson

Prior to beginning the lesson, teachers should review persuasive writing standards. This will aid students in connecting the activity to their prior knowledge base. In keeping with the best practice of student choice, teachers should create lists of various products to be advertised in student commercials. Students will choose the medium (radio, TV, etc.) as well as the product to advertise. Teachers should also employ technology to present videos of numerous advertisements and commercials so students can clearly identify and discuss persuasive text features. In keeping with Lev Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (1962), students work in groups of three to five on a persuasive commercial-writing activity, applying as many persuasive features as possible to their work. Based on the number of students in each group and teacher expectations, this activity can be timed. The teacher should also allow time for students to orally rehearse their writing for performance.

Before the performance-based assessment, teachers and students should review the dramatic/theatrical components of this AI lesson, such as performer etiquette (speaking loud enough to be heard or 'projection,' and vocal expression) as well as audience etiquette (listening intently, applause when finished). Additionally, students may make a rubric for performer/audience etiquette as well as the aforementioned persuasive text features. As students perform their persuasive writing as a radio or TV commercial, students in the audience analyze and assess for text features and performance process. Following the performances, student groups can also self-assess their success with both the writing and dramatic components of this AI lesson for closure. Through self-evaluation, students are engaged in the highest level of Bloom's Taxonomy, an educational outcome framework (Bloom, 1956).

This lesson reaches the following facets: linguistic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and, if performing a television commercial, bodily/kinesthetic. Students work interpersonally but create their own ideas in thinking (intrapersonal). Writing challenges students' linguistic proficiency. Groups choosing to perform a television commercial involving movement are utilizing their bodily/kinesthetic intelligence to tell the story.

All teachers should use Gardner's MI to guide their instruction. With an increased variety of learning styles in every classroom, the differentiation offered within MI lessons ensures all students have equal opportunities to learn. In the current educational climate of frequent testing, the arts are not always permissible as stand-alone subjects but can increase student motivation and achievement when integrated into the core curriculum classroom. The writing process is habitually taught using systematic inflexible strategies which can lead to student discouragement. The arts serve as an encouraging entry-point to improve student writing.

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