Homage to the California Writing Project
by Marek Breiger

This is my thirteenth year of teaching high school English and teaching what used to be called “Composition,” which, I think, is just another name for creative writing.

The Bay Area Writing Project, which is part of the California Writing Project, allowed me—at almost the very beginning of my career—to teach writing in a way that was honest, and that did not compromise my principles.

The summer I enrolled in B.A.W.P. at U.C. Berkeley had been the summer after a nightmare year of teaching writing courses. I had taught composition classes with 41 and then 43 students while also teaching two American Literature and one Honors 11 grade English class, and the composition classes were filled with students who had significant problems in terms of organization, syntax, and motivation.

My superiors had a simple solution: the traditional five-paragraph essay. Each paragraph would have a word count, and the thesis would always appear as the final sentence of the introduction. Topic sentences were mandated as the first sentence of each body paragraph. The students were never to use the first or second person. Writing an essay about imaginative literature was also discouraged. Fiction, it was explained to me, should be separated from non-fiction.

I was in a quandary. I had an M.A. in English with a concentration in Creative Writing from San Francisco State. The program had been founded by the great novelist, Van Tilburg Clark, who had written The Ox-Bow Incident and who also, for the first fifteen years of his career, had been a dedicated high school English teacher. Clark had been proud of San Francisco State’s connection with high schools and community colleges. He hoped that graduates in Creative Writing would be teaching English with Creative Writing components to non-elite students in high schools and junior colleges. Instead, aspiring writers like me were given no credit for our publications or ideas about teaching writing. It was seen as naïve even to think that the “average” student could write creatively.

The Bay Area Writing Project restored my faith in the road I wanted to travel as a teacher of writing and as a writer. This in a time before Creative Non Fiction became a part of the graduate programs in Creative Writing, B.A.W.P and the California Writing Project was all about using nonfiction in a creative way.

The simple “Saturation Report” is an example. I have had students write saturation reports since my introduction to the genre that summer in Berkeley. The sense of organization, the paragraphing in a Saturation Report emerges from the assignment. Students sit at a café or a park or a McDonald’s and simply take notes, dividing the notes into subtopics of sight, smell, sound, and (for me) association and memory. They turn their notes into coherent paragraphs that describe a specific place. The result may be a five-paragraph essay but it will also be a five-paragraph prose poem and the thesis, which can come in the introduction or conclusion, is just as valid as a thesis placed at the end of what is often a robotic introduction.

The Project also gave examples of using topic sentences creatively: a handout of an essay written by novelist and poet Robert Penn Warren began with the sentence: “You have seen him a thousand times.” The remainder of the essay describes a country farmer in a way that can be adapted to the student writer’s viewpoint and that teaches repetition in a way that communicates more than a desire to write a passing paper. Warren writes: “You have seen him standing on the street corner on Saturday afternoon in the little county-seat town. He wears blue jean pants, or overalls washed to a pastel blue, like the color of the sky after a shower in spring…” (“The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger”) Over the years I have had students write mini-essays using the starter sentence “You have seen him (or her) a thousand times” about personalities as different as Madonna, George W. Bush, President Obama, Hillary Clinton and Michael Jackson or the teacher next door. If one wishes to teach the value of a topic sentence a single paragraph with the opening “You have seen him (or her) a thousand times” will do the trick.

The Project also helped me see peer editing as a possibility. The editing we were taught focused on a small number of possible hints rather than corrections. The peer editor would examine verbs and suggest possible changes that made the verbs more pictorial. Adjectives could be examined for exactness. Adjectives viewed for their specificity. An important part of the peer edit would be simply a reaction to the piece: was it interesting? Could it be added to? What was confusing? The teacher was after a finished product and an essay with promise could rate a rewrite instead of a rebuke. It would be up to the student, however, to be the final proofreader.

That summer that I enrolled in B.A.W.P, we also used Studs Terkel’s Working as a model on how to deal with oral histories. The interview process is only the first step in an editing process that teaches selection of details and narrative transition choices. Parts of a non-fiction monologue can be turned into a poem or a non-fiction short story. And subjects for oral history can be
and should be members of the school and adult community, a good lesson in face to face relationships in the present fantasy era of Facebook where kids have the illusion of a friendship based not on shared experiences but on false bravado.

Luckily, what I learned the summer of the Project, was not rejected by my high school. The Writing Project, in the earliest 1980s, had enormous credibility. Soon after, in 1986, Robert Atwan began to edit "Best American Essays" and non-fiction once again became as respected as the short story. I have taught numerous writing classes in high school and community college and my own writing deserted the short story for the essay, for creative nonfiction.

Yet the fight is far from over. Grossly overcrowded classrooms are back and too many writing teachers do not think much of their students’ capacity for writing. Timed essays, by their nature, value speed over creativity and many of us are loath to let students use the first person or personal experience even in a part of an essay dealing with imaginative literature. Are students even allowed to view the essays they have written for SAT II? What is the point of a twenty-five minute time limit? How many students will discover Studs Terkel’s interviews on the internet?

The California Writing Project, without neglecting the importance of structure and coherence, used models by professional writers to teach student writers and trusted in the ability of students to read and write creative nonfiction. I enrolled in the Project in the summer of 1982 and I have been grateful ever since. Even in this time of budget cutbacks, publishing in booklet form, individual best paragraphs of description as a class set, another California Writing Project innovation, will honor those students who have learned to try to use language as a painter uses colors in the attempt to convey our shared passage, as students and teachers, through not just school—but through the mysteries of time.

About the Author:
Marek Breiger teaches English at Irvington High School in Fremont, California. Besides his thirty-nine appearances in California English, his essays, poems and short stories have been included in five major anthologies dealing with the American west including Where Coyotes Howl and The Wind Blows Free, University of Nevada press

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