Rediscovering the Passion to Teach

By Diane Scollay

"If you have a strategy to share at the district's writing conference, please fill out this form and return it to..." Without hesitation, I dropped the invitation into the trash can and thought no more about it. What special or unique idea did I have about writing anyway?

After 13 years of teaching, I considered myself a good teacher. After all, I could still rhapsodize about literature with the best of them. But my rhapsodies were starting to sound flat, even to me. For the most part, the writing topics I assigned were classic English teacher topics that called for my students to analyze literature. But when my students asked me what they could do to make their writing better, my advice could be boiled down to "do it again," and "try harder next time." A growing sense of dissatisfaction was taking hold somewhere deep inside me, like a muffled voice warning of some undefined danger. The kids and I were not connecting like we used to. And I had 17 more years until retirement.

My teaching dissatisfaction was serious enough that I went to an employment agency to consider another job. The woman interviewing me acknowledged that I had good verbal skills and offered me a job prospect that sounded exciting to her. "You know, honey, here's an idea for you. You could get a job with Campbell's Soup. What you do is you go to supermarkets and see that your product has the right shelf space. Like you would say to the manager, "We need more space on the third shelf for our chicken noodle soup."" For a moment I tried to conjure up a picture of myself doing that. The picture would not come.

Around this same time my school district received a large amount of federal dollars for professional development programs because of a court-mandated desegregation plan. One program available to teachers was the Missouri Writing Project. One friend in particular kept urging me to participate. After I finished my master's program she stepped up her campaign to get me to devote four weeks of my summer to writing. She warned me that I had to give a demonstration, but she quickly added "You can do it on what you know about sentence combining." I applied and was accepted.

During the four weeks at the summer institute, I learned much from the coordinators, the other writing project Fellows, and the readings. I discovered an approach to writing that actually paralleled my own. Talking to myself before I began writing, multiple drafts, and sharing my writing with others were called "prewriting," "revision," and "peer response." And, in learning the language of the institute, I not only found understanding about my own writing, I found a way to teach.

Even though I enjoyed the institute, I dreaded giving my demonstration. Before my presentation, I assured my colleagues that mine was going to be short—30 minutes tops. I had dutifully prepared a handout that synthesized my review of the research on sentence combining as well as the explanation of my own variation using this strategy with my kids. I planned to ask the teachers to practice combining a few sentences and that would be that.

When it came time for my presentation, I worried I would forget the few words I planned to say. But within minutes of starting, fear turned into enthusiasm. The teachers listened intently. Heads nodded in agreement; friendly smiles encouraged me. They asked questions that made me dig deep into my knowledge and experience. I shared classroom stories and examples of my kids' writing and a rationale for why I thought sentence combining had helped them improve their "syntactic fluency." Teachers wrote down what I was saying.

My 30-minute presentation lasted 90. During that presentation, I found something in myself I didn't know was there. When I finished, they applauded—not polite, obligatory applause, but warm, appreciative applause. Their notes of congratulations pledged to me that they would use sentence combining as a strategy in their teaching. Based on that presentation, I was soon asked to give others.

That was 1983. Since then I have taught more than 1,000 teachers about writing process and even became a director of a National Writing Project site. Not bad for someone who just a year before attending a writing project summer institute didn't think she had a thing to say to anyone about anything.

The Face of a Question
By Andrew Flaherty

Miguel slouches in the comer
and searches the room
with his Cuban eyes
thinking that his drawing
of the devil has gone undetected.

Dessie collects things but Shakespeare
is not one of them, simply because
she is sure that his words are incomparable
to Russian authors I have not heard of.

Sinh and Sahn are not related and yet
their writing looks the same, with S's in predictable places that I am
unable to help correct.

Roberto is amazing, stringing words across
the page consistently, but late, every day.

And yet the face of a question is
without race, it cannot
be predicted as it looks down,
then up, before curving around to
say through tears or smiles of frustration,
"I don't understand."