"Hellooooo! Hellooooo! ... mingle, mingle, mingle..." strange sounds emerged from Forman Classroom A during those two weeks last July. I had been looking forward to this for awhile; it was to be the first Literature Institute for Teachers held at the Rhode Island Writing Project, the first institute to focus directly on an exploration of the reading of texts. Here we would model an interactive classroom where reading and writing were mutually supportive and where we could consider ways to make reading a collaborative activity. It was not a brand new venture; I'd been involved in setting up the first such institute held at the South Coast Writing Project in Santa Barbara in 1987; but now it was twelve years later at a Writing Project site that I directed, and I was co-leading the institute with my husband, Don Roemer. Quite different circumstances, and in between were my twelve years as a college teacher and director of freshman writing programs. I wondered how much this summer would be a replication of that earlier one, and how much it would be different.

I remembered much that we had learned in Santa Barbara, and on occasion I had looked back to the article I wrote then for The Quarterly (January 1989) "Literate Cultures: Multi-voiced Classrooms." Trying to sum up what the summer had been, I asked then: "How could we teach the destabilized approaches of our discipline? What would be a pedagogy true to our current sense of what it means to know?" The questions remain real to me, but the voice is different. Like an adolescent boy's, my voice seems to have a different timbre, to emanate from a different space altogether. And while not many of my ideas about teaching literature have changed radically, the question of pleasure doesn't make even a brief appearance in my earlier essay.

Our first thoughts when we planned this Literature Institute were about recovering "the pleasure of the text." Walker Percy's essay on "The Loss of the Creature" gets at what we were after. There he shows us just how hard it is to discover what has already been formulated and appropriated for us in advance; we can no longer see the Grand Canyon for ourselves because it is obscured by the picture postcards and the tourist folders; the experience is obscured by its packaging. We wanted to experiment with ways to rescue literature from its packaging in classrooms. For years and years we had heard and read students complaining that the textual analyses of the classroom were tedious and boring, and that what, in fact, their experiences with studying literature had taught them was that anything they might feel or think about a text was most likely wrong.

In Santa Barbara at the LIT institute we had talked a good deal about how much easier it was to be collaborative and respectful of difference when we wrote than when we read. We were used to writing groups and the authority of the author to control her own text, but in reading texts, especially canonical ones, we were still involved in what Sheridan Blau then referred to as "rivalry for the same discursive space." On some level, we couldn't give up the feeling that one reading had to drive out another; we argued more easily than we collaborated. The piece I had written then for The Quarterly was largely an attack on the lecture format as a vehicle for teaching literature; it tried to establish multivoicalism, the play of many voices, as a more appropriate way to think about our efforts to make meaning of texts. I wished to promote the idea that dialogue was a more fruitful path to uncover what we do when we read and that recognizing this fact would help to develop readers who could more easily embrace dissonance and not always require the closure of consensus. Now it was twelve years later; what form would our dialogues take?

The real beginning was when, on the second day, we were joined by drama teacher Richard Weingartner of Wayland High School, Wayland, MA. That was when we began "helloooooing and mingling." Together we moved the furniture out of the room and made space for activity. We began with warm-up exercises for voice and movement. We clustered together in a mass; we worked in a circle; we ran around the room almost colliding; we called and shouted; we did tongue twisters all as a group. And something about the changed spatial relations, about moving close to one another, about coming out from behind desks, changed everything. We were never the same again.

The day progressed with some more traditional dramatic play. We did a storyboard - on long sheets of newsprint spread out on the floor. We did tableau of scenes from the story we were working with (Italo Calvino's "The Canary Prince"). We ad-libbed scenes from the story. Amazingly, nineteen teachers from middle schools and high schools across the state cavorted, improvised, declaimed, without the
Taking Out the Furniture, or What's Obvious: Lessons Learned in the Literature Institute for Teachers

slightest reticence or self-consciousness. Something about the changed space, the possibility of moving as a mass, the freeing of our bodies from the usual restrictions of the classroom got us going as a group in a way that nothing else could.

Certainly, Don and I had consciously planned to introduce drama early in the institute in order to offer the immediacy of textual enactments, embodiments. What I think we had underestimated was the pure power of the corporeal, the way moving and speaking (and taking out the furniture) changed our relationships in that group. Not only did we “get inside” the story “The Canary Prince,” we got to play together and be together in a way that restructured the classroom for us.

Our drama coach Richard had offered us the repeated phrase: “All shape has meaning.” He said it over and over again, as we staged our scenes and tried to capture in the most economical and clearest ways the significance of a moment or a relationship.

One of our final tableaux was the wedding scene: the prince and the princess marry and the wicked stepmother is denounced. Our bride demurely flipped her stepmother the finger, and suddenly our mantra had a very specific reference; “All shape has meaning,” we solemnly intoned. And we never said the words again without that referent. More than anything, that was what the institute taught us: the power of a group to build a community of meaning.

A day later we turned the classroom into a workshop with every conceivable kind of art material and building supplies. Participants had instructions to make some visual representation of one of the short texts we were considering or another text sufficiently well known to the group. They could work together or alone; they could make representational constructions or symbolic ones, but at the end of our experiments all would have a chance to explain what the relation was between the original text and their creation. Hugh worked alone on the floor, drafting; Barbara and John busily searched for photographs and kept exchanging scissors; Elizabeth plunged into a reverie of painting and construction, creating a moveable swimmer in a sea of language.

Don and I managed to work a photograph of our adored grandson into our representation of the Marquez’ story “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings.”

Don and I had approached this particular activity somewhat hesitantly. Don had asked that morning on the drive in if he could just be a spectator (and had been flatly turned down). We both feared one of those loose, collage-making time-wasters, a pleasant interlude but not very thoughtful or instructive. We were wrong. Again, just the change of activity, of physicality, of sharing in the room made a huge difference. Beyond that, we began to understand one another’s gifts and thought processes in the new ways. Gayle showed herself to have an uncanny ability to make interesting symbolic representations with the simplest means. For me, her stark eye and keyhole will forever be a part of any reading of “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Elizabeth was really an artist, creating beautiful, ingenious works right there in our midst, a wash of pastel shapes and lines of poetry buoyed on the waves of her beautifully rendered ocean.

Christina built intricacy into every choice of color and design and explained her thinking in detail; how the colorful petti-coat revealed the ambivalence of the otherwise demurely dressed heroine; how she stood at a window which marked her isolation from the world. We learned about texts and how our colleagues envisioned them; we learned about our colleagues and their particular styles of experiencing the world around them and of expressing themselves. But maybe most importantly, we violated the arrangements of the classroom; we came out from behind our desks and our classroom talk to be together in another way. Don’s discomfort with this form of expression was an interesting counterpoint to his obvious facility with language. Other people were fluent here in ways they could not be with words alone.

The images we created that day became part of the world we inhabited together in those two weeks. Each day new connections bound us together—Beth’s homemade scones and jam, for instance—but, perhaps most important to the culture we made together were the jokes we came to share, our private language. Our best joke became the title for our final anthology of writings: That’s Obvious.

How can I explain the joke? It’s one of those “you had to be there” experiences. At the least, it requires a little bit of background. Don and I met in graduate school; we’ve been talking about literature and teaching nonstop for thirty-five years, but we’ve never taught together. Each of us has spent roughly the same amount of time teaching college as we have teaching high school (about thirty years in the classroom for each of us by now) and we’ve both had some team-teaching experience, but the thought of teaching together was alternately exciting and frightening. We interrupt each other. We don’t always agree, and our
disagreements now have long histories and well-worn grooves. What would it be like? Mostly, it was great. We had fun; we felt exhilarated; and the group was part of it. But occasionally we bristled at each other, and the group was part of that too. At one moment I said something about a text and Don said, “But that’s obvious,” I stopped cold. “Do you know how that makes me feel?” It was one of those moments.

But it also became a pivotal moment for our summer. It became our way to focus on how we respond to one another’s comments, what we do with what other people say, what Sheridan had so much earlier named “rivalry for the same discursive space.” The ability to examine that moment, to have it there before us, open to inquiry, was the key to our summer’s success. It became a shorthand for us; people would say, “I know that’s obvious” … or “obviously” when they wanted to invoke the whole question of what one person takes for granted and another doesn’t, or what can be dismissed by someone else whose focus is different. It became our way of constantly reminding one another of the dangers in debate, the ways we might belittle or pass over the contribution of another. The joke led to others: the men bonding together to extravagantly praise one another’s sensitivities, people feeling free to challenge other people when they seemed to be too quick to absorb another’s comment into their own and to pass over the value of the initial statement. Over and over again, “obviously” had its resonance in that room, just as “all shape has meaning” had come to have special meaning just for us. When we talked about putting our last journal entries together in an informal collection, the title was obvious: it had to be.

In our work with texts we drew on many sources; one was a book by Kathleen McCormick, Gary Waller and Linda Flower called Reading Texts. Don and I have both used it in teaching, and we are particularly interested in the strategy it offers for considering the repertoire of a text in relation to the repertoire of a reader. While we all bring our own interests and understandings to our readings, the text itself also emerges from a complex web of literary and ideological understandings; it, too, has a repertoire. What the summer enacted for us was the way a class, or a group, builds its own repertoire together, how much what we read and say and do together shapes the readings we perform within the class.

Stories, experiences, habits of mind get shared in such a setting, and they become part of the shared text of the class. Long ago (or as I hear my three year old grandson saying, “a time ago”), I was very interested in the concept of intertextuality, the way one text rests on another, the way we read across the texts of our experience and our histories onto whatever new text we confront. Everything I said in 1989 I still believe: that a classroom is a place for interrogating the kinds of responses we have to texts, where those responses come from and how they can be elaborated, extended, refined by the interplay of the group and the differences within it. But in 1989 I didn’t leave much space for jokes. And now in 1999 it was the running jokes that knit our experience together, that created indelible imagery that would alter us as readers.

We know that writing is vivid and memorable when it provides us with sensory detail, when it creates memorable scenes for us. I think we fail to recognize how much the memorable scenes of the classroom are the primary sites for learning. Students remember the personal, the unusual, the emotionally charged: the day someone’s fly was open; the day the electricity went out; the argument that took place between two class members. They remember what is disruptive and what is personally affecting. What seems different to me in my response to the two institutes, divided by over ten years, is my own sense of how much of the work that occurred was extra-intellectual—occurred because of personal drama, physical embodiments, emotions in play, and our bemused ability to share these moments and turn them into humor that bound us together as a community.

I remember the opening of Donald McQuade’s Chair’s address at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1991: “I now know much better what I thought I had known before.” I feel in something of the same position. I knew a number of these things about reading and
Taking Out the Furniture, or What’s Obvious:
Lessons Learned in the Literature Institute for Teachers

communities, but I now know them from the inside, in a more direct, palpable way, through experience not just through intelllection.

Some years ago at one of our fall renewal meetings everyone was asked to write briefly about something he or she remembered from the summer institutes. I wrote about a presentation that a speaker had made that had stayed with me and been useful; everyone else in the room wrote about the feelings they had been part of the group. It was an instructive moment for me. It makes me remember that our families are knit together by those funny anecdotes that link us: when Don insisted on backing up into a tree and we began our vacation at the Cape with a shattered rear window; when we all got on Elizabeth’s inflatable swan and it sank; when the dog ate the afikomen for Passover and we couldn’t find it.

What I learned from this summer institute was how much the intertextuality of a classroom is dramatized by what happens in that room and how valuable it is to seize those moments and use them to bond the group and highlight the learning that is taking place. Developing our own language, our own set of jokes and memories makes us into a cohesive unit, and the way that we have read together becomes palpable and memorable through this set of memories.

Now, when school reform is more and more shaped by standardized testing and the insistence upon explicit expectations reiterated over and over again from every bulletin board and in every sort of rubric, it seems important to remember how human teaching and learning are, how much they occur because we have shared experiences. Learning to become a more accomplished and more sensitive reader is about extending one’s empathy and capacity for experience. It is through experiences and shared moments of insight that we grow. New ideas are important, but the route to change is, as the National Writing Project has always understood, through social interactions that make ideas palpable.

Over the last years I think I have come to understand in ways that I didn’t fully grasp initially just how important the social part of discourse is. I don’t just mean rhetorical situation or cultural context, or even the power of eating and chatting with peers; I mean the intricate, crosshatched designs of consciousness and how our interactions with one another and with the world around us (every kind of text that there is) shape and reshape our understandings. Here is an excerpt from one of Don’s journals, the morning of July 22, 1999:

*The Kennedy episode keeps running in the background, like my RealPlayer G2 Plus program, activated by other programs when sound is required. When I was thinking last night about my visual project for today’s class, I immediately went to the sea—Moby Dick (not really possible — too big, too white) and then my favorite, Billy Budd wrapped in his hammock, weighted with shot, and dropped into the ocean. And even as I write about it, Benjamin Britten’s operatic adaptation sounds in my ear as the thematic sea music, undulating, serves as score for Captain Vere’s intonation of Melville’s description of the moment—“And the sea foul… croaked requiem… and the ship sailed on.” So of course today’s burial at sea resounds with these associations and I’m sad, quietly, deeply sad, for so much more than the death of one who, after all, was only an extraordinarily handsome rich young man who published a marginal political journal. But he’s more, because we read him as more, and I read him as more in my own way — Billy Budd becomes Kennedy, vice versa, and the music plays on.*

Don is a pretty complex reader, but so are we all. The frame may not be Melville and Britten for all of us, but there are always frames through which all our new understandings are filtered. And these frames are nothing less than our lives, our experiences, the things that have meaning for us and in which we have a stake. Having a chance to
look at these individual differences respectfully allows us to learn about texts and reading, as well as about ourselves and one another. We had a space for those two weeks where Don's thoughts and everyone else's had equal opportunity. We didn't spend time judging or scoring our responses; we just enjoyed and profited from them all. And because we worked in many modes: acting and drawing, playing music, collaborating in any number of ways, we weren't overly intimidated by someone's clear gifts in one direction. Different people showed us different things.

For me, the gift of this summer, like so many Writing Project experiences, has been to move from theoretical understanding to enactment, to see and feel something happening rather than just to conceptualize it. Taking out the furniture was palpable - it allowed us to move around, come out from behind the desks, even collide. As I reflect on the modulations of my own voice, I see again what it means to take out some of the furniture and to move into a space where language is simpler and where words are only one of the ways we communicate and share.

References
Marjorie Roemer is director of the Rhode Island Writing Project.

NWP’s latest contribution to successful classroom practice:  
**Teacher-Researchers at Work**, a new book by Marion MacLean and Marian Mohr.

Here's a book that shows the way for any aspiring teacher researcher and provides an essential resource for those who lead teacher research groups. This is a volume that belongs in every teacher-training institution library and in the teacher resource center of every school district.

The authors themselves are teacher-researchers and understand the pitfalls and the dedication that are part of the process, as well as the joy of completing a classroom research project.

I wish this volume had been available when I began my own journey as a teacher researcher.

—Bob Tierney, coauthor with Anne Worthing of *Two Studies of Writing in High School Science.*

Teacher-Researchers at Work is an invaluable guide through the often perplexing and anxiety-ridden process of teacher research. It takes its text from the works and practices of teacher-researchers themselves. It is honest, thorough, encouraging and intelligent.

—Jane Juska, teacher research leader and winner of The Education Writers of America Award for best article in an educational journal.

For ordering and pricing information, please call the National Writing Project at 510-642-0963.