A Geography of Stories: Helping Secondary Students Come to Voice Through Readings, People, and Place

(an excerpt from Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing)

Phip Ross

When my grandpa and grandma were married in 1933 each of Gram’s five brothers gave them 20 bushels of corn. They held on to the corn hoping prices would rise, and finally sold the 100 bushels for $25, or just a quarter a bushel.

This is a story told to my father by his parents, and eventually told to me by him. It’s just one story, a footnote in family history. But it takes on critical importance when I use it to view the present and my future. My grandparents weathered that decade and raised three children on a farm in central Nebraska that would eventually help raise a handful of grandchildren as well. Looking back through another debilitating farm period in the 1980s, I see a half century of struggle that helped shape my past and influences my present. Because of the small slices of time I spent with my grandpa and my uncle on that farm, and because of my father’s face when the farm foreclosed, I know what that place meant to our family. I don’t look at the agricultural industry managed by nameless businessmen who abuse the land to make a buck, or an industry motivated only to grow bigger with heavier reliance on technology and hydrocarbon products. I’ve looked into the sepia toned photographs of family, heard the stories, and walked the beanfields with a hoe in hand. I understand this: Place influences identity.

Our places are part of who we are, shaping us with family, friends, bosses, pastors, and influencing us with landscapes of home, neighborhood, community, countryside. They teach us about who we are, but they also offer us lessons about the world, its civics, its politics, its geography, and its whimsical forces of nature and humanity. The more I understand about myself and my immediate place, the more I understand the outside world and the better I can interpret it. We grow outward, like a tree, increasing our growth rings from the tight center of “I,” which has a home, a town, a state, a country, a planet. From that center we reach out to understand the ever-expanding circles of experience. But first, we need to start in those places closest to our hearts.

In an old textbook found by author Jonathan Raban (1996) in an abandoned North Dakota schoolhouse, students of early America were told that if they were ever lost they should put their backs to a tree, sit down, and draw a map in the dirt of all the landmarks they’d seen. This would focus them on what they’d done, where they’d
Helping Secondary Students Come to Voice

been, and what they'd seen. It would pull them together. If they became frightened, they'd be overcome by 'the panic of the lost.' And it is that fear that kills in the wilderness, not accident or starvation. That advice holds a parable that teaches to contemporary writing instruction. There is a need to mark where we are, and where we've been, whether it's in the 'unsettled' wildernesses of previous centuries or our conquered frontiers of the twenty-first century. We can get lost in either place. In the last thirty years, teachers have made similar discoveries about students' need to mark their place.

Writing teacher Lucy Calkins writes: "There is no plotline in the bewildering complexity of our lives but that which we make and find for ourselves. By articulating experience, we reclaim it for ourselves. Writing allows us to turn the chaos into something beautiful, to frame selected moments in our lives, to uncover and to celebrate the organizing patterns of our existence." (3). Being lost can, of course, refer to both physical or mental states. And if we don't know where we've been, it's hard to become what we want to be. Writing the maps of home, parks, first jobs, and relationships evolves into higher thinking skills and complex language skills. And students become engaged.

Confronting the dilemma of parents who define success as leaving home and teachers who are used as the tool to obtain those tickets, I have attempted to shape a different definition of success that begins at home. Using my own experiences, I taught writing and learning as centered in "place," beginning with the self and moving outwards through concentric rings of family, community, region, history.

At my school, Waverly High, students come from six different population centers, plus the suburbs of Lincoln. It's the largest school district in the state, wrapping around the eastern edge of the state capital, and its communities confront an identity crisis brought on by suburban growth and bedroom economics. From farms to acresages, to towns and villages—the largest with a population of 1,500—my students begin by bringing a surprising diversity of ideas about place. Through writing they gain understanding about themselves and their world, and about how language can be used as a tool for this exploration and discovery. I share my stories. They are what I know. They are what I understand. This is my personal invitation for them to share their stories. It is a place to begin writing.

My plan to develop students' value and exploration of their places includes three main sources: (1) reading, (2) people, and (3) places. The readings selected question the value and influence of place, and include poems by Nebraska poets Don Welch, Ted Kooser, and William Kloefkorn and essays from Paul Gruchow. The people include successful businessfolk, artists, and farmers, who can show students that success can be found close to home. The places include assigned homework to visit neighborhoods, a cemetery, a farm, and a business district.

Readings

For Myself. I'm proud to be from Nebraska. But my eyes were opened to its powerful landscapes by a number of key texts. Ironically, two nonmidwestern writers wrote about experiences in Wyoming and North Dakota which moved me to a deeper appreciation of the land and my own people.

Kathleen Norris, who moved to the Midwest from urban life on the East Coast, claimed in Dakota: A Spiritual Geography that by choosing a simple existence she was able to focus on an "internal process of success that was particularly enhanced by the landscape. The Plains provided an unfathomable silence that has the power to re-form you" (15). Later, I returned to Nebraska author Willa Cather and felt more deeply what she articulated through her character Jim Burden, who "felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall" (322).

I had written before about the value of silence in my life. Norris, Cather, and Ehrlich helped me make a connection between silence and geographical emptiness. I wrote this in an essay: "But it is the enriching spaces of people and open sky that allow me to grow into the person I was meant to be. It's no coincidence it's on Nebraska soil beneath an open sky." My place fed me life as a child. I grew like a vine wrapping itself up and around the smooth trunk of home. This was a place where my hands sank into the wet cement of everybody's sidewalk, my initials became part of the bark of anybody's tree. It was where I found a place.

As we grow, we loosen the hold on our childhoods, but continue to be nourished by the places they gave us. As I read Norris and Ehrlich, I became more aware of what I have and where I've been. In short, I opened my eyes and saw beauty I wanted to share. . . .

For My Class. Through learning to value my place, I was eager to encourage my students to use writing as a tool for expressing thoughts about their places. In my sophomore writing workshop class, we each developed a portfolio of writing every month. During each portfolio period, I selected a series of readings for literature minilessons used once a week for half a class period. Reading was used to model form and structure and to stir ideas and their imaginations. I always began exploring a selection [read either as a class or in small groups] by asking each student to write a response to the reading in their notebooks and then discuss their responses. Their
Helping Secondary Students Come to Voice

responses often triggered discussion about form and content.

For one minilessons, we read and discussed a poem by Don Welch called "Advice from a Provincial" that confronts a common perception that there is nothing in Nebraska. Besides an example of imagery, the poem boasted of the author's pride in his state and confronted an outsider's perspective. It closes, "You'll never read it in a brochure, but the only worthwhile rivers / Are those which simplify lives" (1992, 40).

After identifying the sensory images in the poem, the structure, and discussing what they meant to us, we moved to another poem by Welch (1980). It was constructed as if written from a town newspaper, and it stitched together an impression of life in this town, referring to obituaries, sales, sports, and its prominent news coverage. We discussed what kind of impression of the town the writing gave. We viewed current Waverly newspapers as a unique starting point from which to write poetry that would provide a closer look at our community. Students selected lines that attracted them and rewrote them to fit a structure they chose, using line length, stanzas, and possibly rhyme. One stanza in a student poem, for example, read: "Robert Newsham thanks / Everybody who visited / Him in the hospital. / Clela Wagner / Appreciates the cards / And gifts on her birthday." Students read their poems and were asked to reflect about what the writing said about the community. A common sentiment, especially among the girls, was expressed by Crystal: "After looking at my poem, I would have to say that I would like to live in this town. It's a small town with a strong church community and people seem to care about each other. I would feel much better having a family in a town like this rather than a big one." Besides the language exercise, students had the opportunity to look at some of the pieces that make up their towns, to think about and define what community is to them. Often we absorb the salient views that suggest a less than desirable living environment in small towns.

We also read an essay, "Naming What We Love," from Gruchow in which Gruchow reflects on his own education in rural Minnesota and regrets not learning the value of his place. Despite a "first-rate" education, the absence of any lesson involving local history, biology, or culture was glaring. Only later did he learn that the beautiful meadow at the bottom of his family's pasture was remnant virgin prairie, that a National Book Award winner lived nearby, and that, in fact, the area was full of writers.

Crystal agreed with Gruchow, writing in her journal: "I agree with the author when he says that schools are indifferent to their surrounding. In eighth grade we did study Nebraska history, something that we've been taught since first or second grade, but why not study Waverly/Eagle history?" She not only demonstrated reading comprehension, but applied a key theme of the essay to her own life and generated an idea about what she wanted to learn.

Jasen arrived at a similar conclusion, but applied the idea to a more personal part of his life, his family, and his future plans. He reflected on this in his notebook in a free verse poem.

That essay speaks of a lot of truth. I personally know a lot of people who have left their home town just to find a "better place" not necessarily finding it. I don't think anyone in my close family has ever just up and left. . . . I myself have no plans to leave my home town. . . .

My home is a warm place not just in summer

when a thick blanket of white covers the ground

You look out and see miles of nothing, the ground is coarse and freshly plowed.

In the cool morning air, you can hear the livestock faintly cry in the back drop of the haze in the fall.

Not a car goes by for days but the sheep come and go with the time as it passes.

If a student develops a better appreciation of our community, I'm pleased, but it's my job to make sure they meet school district standards in reading and writing. I'm confident, however, that when students can read, reflect on concepts, and experiment with the language by trying different genres, they will meet these standards. Reading invites students to find themselves in the world and to challenge some of the conceptions that "rural" equals a dead-end road.

People

For Myself. At one time, I rarely wrote about the people in my life who were so strongly connected to me. I looked too far ahead of myself, looked past the people nearest to me. I look back now to a time I was drawn to write a character profile of my father, Bill Ross, in junior high. I drew him as best I could as a man who was humble, quiet, and a pleasure to be around whether in a suit or in his fishing gear. He taught me about the world often from the banks of ponds near the Platte River. In the early 1970s when I was a small boy, he'd come home from work, lie down, and watch the six o'clock news, and I'd sometimes lie on
top of him with my ear to his chest, listening to him breathe, oblivious to Vietnam, Watergate, and the OPEC oil crisis.

About that same time, my dad took a poetry class from Don Welch. Years later, I fumbled through his bedside table and found some of his writing. Pictures he drew with words struck a personal chord. He chose to frame moments of his distant past. One poem in particular struck me called “My Great Aunts,” which drew endearing pictures of Aunt Nell with “ample bosom and a throaty laugh / and pendulous triceps / that wobbled and bounced when she salted her / sweet corn.” Aunt Eunice “had thick legs and ankles that drooped / over her shoe tops, / but as a girl she could run up the cellar steps / with two buckets of coal / and light the kitchen stove with just one match.” His many poems shed light on what writing could be. It captured moments that deserved a kind of immortality to the heart with words that warranted the saving.

I began to get ideas of my own. People, events, patterns came to me. I returned to class with an idea I had to get down on paper. My mother’s father, “Papa” to me, was a larger-than-life presence. I had never written about him before.

In the Men’s Room

It’s here in the Elk’s Club men’s room I see them sometimes in cardigan sweaters thinking and standing while into urinals they drip, like ashes from half-smoked cigars they tap gingerly, and they teach me many lessons.

In them I see my Papa, Who wore his golf hat bill forward to

shield his nose already scarred from Golden Gloves and skin cancer.

I see in many of Papa’s men what they think music should be, swinging to Goodman, Basie or Ellington, while holding securely to their women. And they never let go.

From the back seat don’t they tap their grandsons on the Shoulder Warn them what driving and loving too fast can Do to a man, teaching all of us that big Baicks, like life itself, are for driving long distances very slow with two hands on the wheel.

Remembering Papa, how he looked, how he behaved, what he taught me is something I stay up at night worrying that I may forget. In the poem, I satisfy a need to capture a cross section of what he meant, linking him to places and connecting him to conversations and ideas. I wrote this poem for myself, not for an editor or an audience, but for a past I want to preserve for today.

For My Class. To bring to my student writers some type of experience that I Chase after, I sought people outside the classroom who could bring us a passion for learning, a value for writing, and a clear bearing to their places. By bringing local folks to class, my objective was to help students reflect on the here and now, and suspend the constant look to the future, whether it’s lunch, the next class, the end of the day, the next vacation, the next date.

Visitors in my classroom were invited to become students again. If their commitment could only be for a class period, then they participated by giving a “Place Talk” about how they were influenced by where they grew up and what they value most in that place. We concluded with a writing prompt and discussion. If commitment could be made for a longer period of time, the visitor was asked to participate in a literature minilesson and write and discuss the selection with the students. They were also invited by students to provide feedback for a draft of a writing project. I tried to make it a natural and informal part of the classroom, allowing both to grow together in regular classroom work.

One visitor who became a regular participant in my sophomore English writing workshop lived in Nebraska her entire 87 years. Ina “Dolly” Smith was awarded “Outstanding Waverly Citizen” in 1990 for delivering Meals on Wheels every week. Dolly, a retired secretary and grandmother who wrote her life story for posterity, asked students to talk about community, their own perspective on its value, and their own experiences writing.

Dolly gave a history of her life growing up on a farm near Waverly and a ranch in Sherman County, frequently making references to local landmarks so kids could identify where she was talking about. She linked historical fact with personal anecdote. But her talk explored the value of writing, and she provided a practical example of someone who uses writing as a tool to remember and to keep precious what life is. “[Writing] might be something you want to remember, pass a note, or write a letter,” she began one day. “I brought a letter along today. I bet you can’t tell me what you had for dinner last year. I can tell you what I had for Christmas dinner 73 years ago in 1924 because my mother took the time to write it down.” She
Helping Secondary Students Come to Voice

went on to say how her mother documented the price per bushel of corn and wheat that year, how much was planted in each, and "a bit about what everybody was doing. [Her mother] said she hadn't missed a day of school in three years. [She] didn't know that."

Dolly challenged a mass media--supported concept of success from the beginning of her visit by saying she'd never claimed fame or fortune. But instead of making excuses, she gave students a taste of what a life lived well in a healthy community amounts to: a bounty of family, a network of friends, a driven educational pursuit, and an active volunteer ethic, often through sickness and financial challenges. Holding her memoir in her hands and smiling, she also brought a powerful message of literacy.

Student reaction to her supported the idea that they were engaged in learning about the community. Students asked questions like, "Where's the Swedish church you talked about?" They peered into the early history of the community and began to locate their place. Another student asked, "Have you ever seen snowstorms like this one?" Querying her about historical events in an effort to draw comparison on past and present events demonstrates an active inquiry. It also validated Dolly's credibility as a historical resource. When Dolly discussed her education, the mode of transportation, and the battle against diseases, the history and rapid change of the twentieth century became real and meaningful.

Many [students] began to reflect on their own community after listening to Dolly and how close she identifies her own history with that of her community's. As we grew to know Dolly better, I encouraged students to start identifying people around them in their communities. What emerged were stories of neighbors and colorful histories of people who had made strong impressions on them. Jasen reflected:

Morris Robinson was a strange old man. I never saw him without overalls or a seed hat. He lived 1.5 miles away and I never got the chance to really meet him. Every year he planted his fields early and his crops were always full of weeds but he made enough to keep his baby alive. He collected junk, or as he thought, antique farm machinery; the fence next to his house is still lined with the stuff for a quarter mile, he passed away about 11 months ago. I remember because it snowed that day.

Taking inventory of the Morris Robinsons of our own neighborhoods, people who lie at the periphery of our own lives, extends the awareness of our communities and who we are. Students like Jasen found they shared a neighborly history. They knew each other in a way that makes sharing home on a country road become influential. This illustrates what teacher Zenobia Barlow says is the idea that our "true identity" extends beyond ourselves: "Our geography, for example, radically influences how we behave, how we move through our days, and through our lives" (Jensen 2002, 8). Using writing as a tool to frame the people in our lives allows the writer to understand this.

Kamping Kronies

In the middle of the country, the midnight stars shine their reflection on a nearby pond.
The loud bellows of the frogs, Along with the crackling wood
In the campfire shows us that the Night could last forever.
A group of friends tells stories And jokes no one else can hear Except the late night wildlife.

A home away from reality and Problems. A place built by each of us That will always give us memories to last a lifetime.
It may not seem much to others, But to us,
Everything from the open cornfield To the barn wired fence is of value.

— Jamie Hix

People like Dolly, our readings, and my own attempts to model such risk taking helped provide an atmosphere that welcomed this writing. If student writers are arriving at their own topics, like the places that they value, they will be much more likely to land on that first footing of good writing that most would agree is truth.

Author and teacher Ken Macrorie defines this as making a connection between the things written about, the words used in the writing, and the author's experience in a world she knows well. Macrorie suggests we see this truth-telling in younger authors, but it is so much more difficult to find the honest voice in the maturing writers. It's hard to define, but as a writer you know when you're hitting at a truth, and as a reader you can sense the balance between emotion and fact that draws you into the story, ideas, and places.

Any person trying to write honestly and accurately soon finds he has already learned a hundred ways of writing falsely... As a child he spoke and wrote honestly most of the time, but when he reaches fifteen... pressures on his ego are greater. He reaches for impressive language; often it is pretentious and phony. He imitates the style of adults, who are often bad writers themselves. (Macrorie, 16)
When we write about people and places that we cherish, we are more apt to find an honest voice because we are more likely to choose words, sentences, and structure more carefully. We keep to this voice as we keep to the topic, and sometimes the stories tumble out from the pen. Abby O’Byrne’s experience in our study of place was like a release, a windfall of words. A quiet student more often seen hidden behind a paperback book than heard, she began to come to terms with a past that was throwing a long shadow over her present in an essay that she scratched out in an hour’s time. It came after I asked students to look at the word inheritance differently. “Think of what we carry with us that people pass on to us,” I suggested. “Besides money or material things, what are we given?” We discussed how Dolly will leave her family one day with a formal will, but there will be some things that she wrote about that have already been passed on to them. And perhaps to us? In a sense, it has to do with what we learn from each other.

**Inheritance: The Meaning of My Land** [excerpt]

I find it hard to put myself in my father's shoes. He got up every two hours in the winter to keep the cows alive and healthy. In the summer he was up and out of the house before dawn, not to come back until two in the morning, just so that he could get the wheat harvest in. He went through the physical pain of running a farm. I saw his blood, sweat and tears poured into that land. It is now three years after my father died and I had left the farm that I am able to understand why he went through the heartache that he refused to show, for his survival and mine.

I have many memories of the land I grew up on. The rolling hills of the pastures covered with straw-colored grass... or the ledge on the cliff that the hawks would nest in. The small brown ponds that would form when it rained. The endless summer days that I spent sitting in a tree looking at the land. Helping my father plant the garden. And when spring came, we would pluck and clean the chickens.

To the people of rural communities, land plays a very important part in everyday life. My land gives me strength and courage. Even though I'm all the way across the state of Nebraska and can't always be on or near my land, it still gives me strength.

—Abby O’Byrne

We are the only species on earth that can think and reflect about where it comes from. But I haven't found many people pursuing this endeavor as fervently as Abby did. She uses words as a scientist, and gathers her empirical evidence with vigor to reach a poetic conclusion.

**Places**

**For Myself.** We bounced and jiggled along what could have been about any of a thousand gravel roads, holding steadily to the green vinyl backs of the school bus seats. It was July and a group of teachers, an administrator, and a community member were taking a workshop together. Our hosts from Henderson made sure we knew it wasn’t just any country road, it was one of theirs. It had a route past neighbors’ farmhouses and by fields for which someone’s husband had provided insurance checks for hail damage that spring, had an early history of settlement of Mennonite families, and today played an important part in our destination. Oddly enough, our guide, Henderson second grade teacher Suzanne Ratzlaff, was leading us in the direction often needed for education—away from school. And it wasn’t uncommon for her to do, either. She brings her second-graders down this road, turning west, and finally north on a rarely driven road to a partly shaded spot along the Republican River.

We peeled our skin from the seats and stumbled into direct sunlight for our tour that began at rusted iron gates with “Farmer’s Valley Cemetery” overhead. Suzanne stopped to talk about local legends... and blizzard tragedies that broke families into remnants. She said the stories she’s gathered mingle into a fabric of history that leads to the present. In deep afternoon heat, we scattered beneath oak branches and around ponderosa pine to listen for some of these stories. Then we stumbled along the river’s high bank and looked over into the slow moving swirls of dirt-saturated water the color of milk chocolate. Here we got our biology lesson on flora and fauna from the principal, Ron Pauls. Whether identifying heath aster, wild indigo, or a burr oak, he spread out his knowledge of native grasses and trees like an abundant picnic blanket on which we could feast. As he defined a cycle of man and his influences on nature, I realize he and Suzanne were the exceptional; the educators who know the significance of place and pursued an understanding of their own communities, drawing on many disciplines to see ideas that transcend the provincial.

Visiting places around Nebraska rarely bores me, and in the context of my learning, I often try to make connections to my own life and those of students. Information I find valuable I attempt to work into my mind and mix with the things I know. In a sense, I try to own information that people in places
Helping Secondary Students Come to Voice

have taught me, and I tell my students that we possess so much more than material objects if we choose to use our minds and name what we desire. The names we choose suggest knowledge and understanding of our relationships to them and their place. Whether it’s towns, plants, or people, we lose potential understanding without a relationship begun by a name. Paul Gruchow’s essay “Naming What We Love” articulates the high degree of local illiteracy. He mourns the inability of a “weed inspector” to identify a common native plant. He laments over a group of high school students who cannot say what a cottonwood tree looks like. It is to our peril that we are faltering in the naming process. “It is perhaps the quintessentially human characteristic that we cannot know or love what we have not named,” Gruchow writes. “Names are the passwords to our hearts, and it is there, in the end, that we will find the room for a whole world” (1995, 130). Some would call this vocabulary, but in the context of this discussion, I’d suggest the main difference is cultural relevance.

I wrote one particular poem that emerged from a strong identification to place the week I went to Henderson. It had to do with the farm that had been in our family for three generations. My childhood was rich with memories of going to the farm, helping out some, riding horses, and hunting. It was a gathering place for a family that had spread from Florida to Arizona. Being in Henderson for that week of events opened my eyes to the treasure that was the farm, and I felt the loss of much more than just what my father had planned for an inheritance.

On Shearing Sheep and Other Farm Notes

Snug to the oily confines of this tall bag, This visitor from town listened to the even grind of the shears peel away the dirt-gray wool off the bony backs of the ewes. My grandpa, our family’s next to last Nebraska farmer Handled the shears, nicking a leg bone, to leave their Fresh white bodies speckled red. The ewes and yearlings must’ve felt clean and free, but fought like hell to avoid the buzzing sound.

My uncle let me try to lift a bale of hay, And I was relieved I could move it at first But shrank away after failing to flip it into afeed bunk. Driving a tractor was out Of the question, too. Sitting on the pickup’s tailgate with Tippy the farm dog amid empty beer cans was my spot.

When I hoed beans northwest of the sheep yards with my brother and sister and the cousins it felt like a privilege. Those dirt clod fights hurt and hunger often bit into my gut, but Grandpa always pulled up with a cooler of water and his soft laughter brought a kind of shade over us and that beanfield.

Still a boy, nobody mistook me for a farm hand. I was neither handy, nor did I know a lick about farming. But I liked being there, like Tippy chasing the truck out to check the wells at dusk, I knew I’d catch up . . .

I’ve been told by more than one person that at certain times I should write with details, write with less abstraction, be less obtuse.

This poem was an improvement for me not only because it was more direct, explicit, and clear, but also because it gave me a chance to place myself in among my family, many who knew what it was to farm, to work the land. It was a part of my heritage, and I never mourned the loss of the farm. But the poem allowed me to value what I learned there, to hang on to some of the memories, and to honor what it was to our family.

Places in our lives, sometimes the well-traveled places of family experiences, need to be rediscovered by the writer. Their landscapes offer us solid footing from which to write passionately. We know them well and can become more aware of the impression they make on us when we reflect on them in writing.

For My Class, I believe in allowing students to write about their places. Accomplishing this in the form of a field trip is always difficult logistically, especially with three classes (about seventy-five students) and only one teacher. I wanted them to take a look at places of importance to them that lay beyond the edge of their houses or neighborhoods. In gathering the histories and the present stories, each of them did a small research project over a local place. My Louisiana friend Lynne Vance introduced me to a similar project she does with her elementary students called a Travel Portfolio.

Students researched a place of interest in our school district for this portfolio. By selecting a location that they determined had some public appeal, students gathered information from a variety of sources. A local historian, Peggy Brown, who runs the local newspaper, brought in a number of artifacts she’s collected over the years. In essence, it’s her own Travel Portfolio, with photographs, books, and newspaper clippings. As an amusing angle, she and her sister have made a list called the Seven Wonders of Waverly. She
reviewed these in a class period, offering nuggets of historical sideshow stories, getting students' minds wet with her own curious energy. In a month's time, students dug up information that turned into expository reports, brochures, artwork in the form of a postcard, and "press releases" for the weekly newspaper to run throughout the year.

I worried some because the assignment differed from other work I usually assign. Focus is usually given to writing prompts that attempt to tap personal histories and places that they know intimately. Now, a subtle shift out into the world occurred. Topics for students became more of a challenge as they struggled to choose places that they identified with, that in some indirect way they own like their personal stories. They sought a connection. If they didn't pick a place of direct knowledge (like a park they visit, their mother's work place), they selected places that evoked in them a natural curiosity. Student-chosen topics elicited a diverse group of research projects, from racetracks to restaurants, to town parks and pools, to private residences and museums.

This project represented students' beginning with people and places near to them, from family and home, and now on to community areas. Through writing, they began to engage the personal life that has a relationship with the public one. This relationship will play an increasingly important role in their lives. I observed student writers moving from a more personal, memoir type of writing, out into a more public, even civic-minded style of writing. This movement occurred when students combined personal interest and strengths with a broader view of "personal." Instead of home as a place defined by the edge of a yard or within certain walls, behind a specific door, home was viewed as a broader geographic area.

Janelle visited an area landmark that has a history dating back to the county's formation. She interviewed the current owners of the large residence, who were restoring the home, and reviewed the documents they had put together. She learned the estate was built around 1870 with the materials from John Fitzgerald's brickyard fifty miles away. She began her essay with enthusiasm and hadn't seen in her before when doing other research projects. . . .

Janelle discovered that Fitzgerald obtained about 35,000 acres of land from the government for helping build the Burlington Railroad. "In one area, you could travel eight miles and still be on his land," she wrote. The residence had horses and a racetrack that is now used as farmland, but you can still see the indentations where the track used to be. Janelle . . . had obviously worked extremely hard on every step of the project, gathering information on site and shooting her own photos to writing her report and directions and the brochure. She learned about how the Midwest was settled in the nineteenth century by railroad expansion. At the same time, she discovered a community dynamic: There are people who work hard to preserve the past. And she herself helped by gaining this knowledge, writing about it, sharing it with her peers, and publishing it in the area newspaper.

In another project, Steve not only gathered an extensive amount of information, but connected to the significance of the material he found. Researching an annual event called Camp Creek Threshers, he claimed the old farm machinery collected and exhibited for thirty-thousand people in the summer has preserved "our heritage." He not only identified specific machinery and defined heritage in his essay, he claimed it as part of his heritage. He took ownership of what he watched and heard, and he testified to its purpose:

The words have found within its own roots the foundation of what it took to settle the Nebraska prairie soil. The idea of area residents has developed the dreams of preserving our heritage. They have gathered and collected the machinery that man's backbreaking hours of work were sacrificed in order to till the ground we now live on and call Waverly. These men who truly know where and how our heritage developed have given us a timeless gift. A precious gift that we too should discover and preserve.

Steve labeled this community effort a "precious gift" too valuable to disregard. The underlying assumption, despite the use of we, is that he, himself, understood the "precious" quality of Camp Creek and was given a purpose to pass this information on to his peers. His conclusion suggests that (1) we have a heritage, (2) it's worth seeing and meaningful, and (3) it's part of who we are . . .

**Conclusion**

Students follow their own routes of growing outward. Articulating stories, meeting people, reading local authors, and visiting places of our communities encourage a shaping of education they find valuable. It begins with "I" and leads to "we." Some take longer, dwelling in what they may feel is the safety of home, lingering there while others move on.

After reading the children's story If You're Not from the Prairie (Bouchard 1995), we discussed all the different ways the authors represented the uniqueness of living on the Plains and how some people might not understand what it is like to live here. I asked

continued on page 37
Helping Secondary Students Come to Voice

continued from page 27

students to provide three different finishes to that phrase. Lisa shrugged her shoulders in frustration. “But I’m not from the Plains; I’m from the city,” she said. I drew a shoddy map of North America on the board, put an X approximately where Nebraska is, and asked, “Is that about where you and I live?” She nodded. “We live in a giant pasture that huge herds of buffalo grazed. Today, we are surrounded by farmland and pasture.” In a bigger picture of things, I was telling her, she lives on the prairie. She gave it a try, looking at where and how her experience was influenced by this foreign idea of prairie: “If you’re not from the prairie...you don’t know the cornfields, all in a row. They run on and on, and you can run for miles and it’s easy to get lost...you can’t play hide and go seek, at least not the way it’s supposed to be played...the kind that can take hours.”

It appears she found herself in a cornfield playing, perhaps, with her brothers, being amazed at the expanse of agriculture that takes place in so much of the state. She moved out from a previous boundary of “I, the city girl” into a slightly broader definition. She is more aware of where she lives, slightly more open to topics that might touch her life in ways less direct than she previously thought—a ring of growth visible in the process.

References


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