How is a teacher to manage all of this? According to Boiarisky, the time has come for a review of the curriculum. Do we need to teach all the aspects of literature? Can we reduce the time spent on various texts? Where is there overlap and redundancy in our materials? With careful revision, she argues, there is room for the study of workplace English along with more traditional texts. The final chapter presents a case for collaboration across disciplines to integrate the curriculum, interweaving disciplines in meaningful and effective ways. Pushing even further, she calls for collaboration not only with students and other teachers, but also with members of business and industry.

In short, The Art of Workplace English is a book whose time has come. Although the chapter on technology is less successful than the rest, providing little that is new in the discussion since the subject is quickly dated, in general the book offers a sound approach to preparing students for the world they will enter after they leave school. It will be directly helpful to high school teachers and community college teachers, but it also has much to say to those of us who are working with college prep and college students. After all, everybody is in the workplace sooner or later.

In early July, eighteen Redwood Writing Project fellows read Frank Smith's latest book, The Book of Learning and Forgetting. Exhausted by the battle against simplistic notions of education that seem to dominate current public discourse, we were unanimously recharged reading the views of a cognitive psychologist.

Smith characterizes the Classic view of learning as one that is effortless, continual, independent of rewards and punishments, a social activity, unpremeditated, vicarious, and never forgotten. He contrasts this with what he calls "The Official Theory," which views learning as hard work, occasional, dependent on rewards and punishment, individualistic, intentional, and easily forgotten. Classic Learning is growth; the Official Theory is memorization.

Though learning is often viewed by parents, lawmakers, administrators, and yes, teachers, as primarily an intellectual activity, Smith views learning through a more Vygotskian lens, that "you learn from the company you keep." Parents demonstrate that they know this by their concern for their children's peer group. He has "never heard a parent say, 'I'm not worried about the gang my son goes with — he's a slow learner.'"

Smith refers to communities of influential people as "clubs." Unless we experience severe childhood trauma, we all join the spoken language club. Throughout our lives, we readily identify with and continually learn from members of the other clubs to which we are welcomed. "We become who we are from the company we keep and from the company we shun or which shuns us." Smith challenges us to question why some students are shunned from the written language club, and reflects on the historical roots of public education's role as club admissions officer.

The industrial revolution brought production-driven, efficiency-oriented schools based on the
model of “the mightiest fighting machine in Europe, the Prussian army.” We still use terms from that era: we “recruit” teachers, give a “battery” of tests, teach word “attack” skills, “drill” students, and fight the Literacy “War.” This student-as-manufactured-good model set the stage for a new official theory about human learning. Rather than turn to anthropology, literature, or even farming, all of which had well-established theories of learning and/or nurturing (but lacked the “identifiable, easily quantifiable unit”), education turned to psychology. Smith’s career-long dispute with behaviorists is evident in his depiction of scientists in lab coats with stopwatches, and his discussion of Ebbinghaus’s experimentation with nonsense syllables and the resulting learning curve. Two major problems face one who relies too heavily on the Ebbinghaus work to form a theory of learning: the theory is entirely based on learning nonsense, and the learning curve is coupled with a corresponding, upside-down, mirror-image forgetting curve.

Smith compares the conflict between Classical Learning and the Official Theory of Learning and Forgetting to that between clinical and behavioral psychologists. “Aspects of psychology that could be counted and measured in some way became ‘scientific’ and academically respectable, while the rest was regarded as dubious and subjective, relegated to realms of ‘clinical’ or ‘abnormal’ psychology. In education, matters involving human emotions have become the province of ‘special education.’ Students whose feelings interfere with their learning are regarded as ‘handicapped’ or ‘at risk.’”

We read Smith with mixed feelings. The Book of Learning and Forgetting is an excellent piece of persuasive writing. Most of what he says hits home, but, as teachers in “the system,” we’re required to follow mandates that we may not agree with, and certainly do not fit into the Classical view of learning. How can we persevere in this ambiguous world? Surprisingly, Smith doesn’t insist that the only solution is a complete overhaul of the system, but suggests small steps teachers can take to improve the situation. The final section, “Repairing the Damage,” provides this direction. We recommend you read this thought-provoking book, and help us repair the damage.

Happy Problems

—continued from page 4

hearing the buzz of another’s words, and being reminded that here, too, lies freedom. And classical music is not immune to such surprise. I once dozed fitfully through an entire live cantata, enjoying the lyric lines I half-heard, only to learn during the applause that the entire text had been in German -- the lines I “heard” in English I had invented: “Turnaround and share my sleep.” I had to feverishly try to write down the lines I got “wrong,” because they belonged to me.

These minor examples point me in the direction of more profound “error” and greater magnitude of resulting discovery. As a child, for example, I apparently got several family stories wrong, lived with my own versions for forty years, and now stand in rich possession of personal myth: Jesus called my own relatives to fish a Nebraska lake during a great storm.

I like that. And Uncle Miley, was he really struck by lightning after returning home on Valentine’s Day from three years on the road? History happened. I write what I know, because my knowing is shaped by creative selection. “Error” may be the small door to the great realm: how we might live.

I realize now that another name for my father’s “happy problems” is the “negative capability” of Keats, that ability to be “in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (Keats’ letter to his brothers George and Tom, December 21, 1817). To not know, to be troubled, but not to anguish over this trouble — in fact, to relish it — this is the good luck of happy problems.

So go forth, embrace your happy problems of invention and creation. Mystery and difficulty are your greatest fortune.

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