In the summer of 1985, my colleague Ed Osterman and I led a group of 25 New York City teachers to Theobald's Park College in Enfield, a town just north of London, to participate in an advanced New York City Writing Project summer institute. While that summer institute included many wonderful moments, what stands out in my memory almost ten years later are the visits we made to local schools. Infant-school children showed us their art and written work. High-school students welcomed us at their tables as they planned their writing and then worked on it with classmates. We had tea with the teachers and talked of portfolio examinations, student diversity, unions, and the progressive stance of the now-defunct Inner London Education Authority.

Sarah Freedman's book, *Exchanging Writing, Exchanging Cultures*, a cross-cultural analysis of the teaching of writing in Great Britain and the United States, brought those visits back to me in all their complexity. Focusing on teachers' interpretation and implementation of the theories that guide their teaching and learning, Freedman examines US classes and compares them to classes in the UK. Through this close looking, Freedman invites us to "imagine new possibilities" (p. 2) for our own schools and systems that encourage a "high-quality education" for all students.

*Exchanging Writing, Exchanging Cultures* presents the story of a year-long writing exchange (1987-1988) between the early adolescent classes of four British teachers in London and four American teachers in San Francisco's Bay Area. Although they never expressed it in this language, in Freedman's view the teachers share a commitment to teaching through social dialogue, a theory central to the work of Bakhtin, Vygotsky, and Wertsch.

Through her study Freedman finds that in spite of their theoretical alignment, the contextual differences across the two countries affect how theory is applied in practice. Through Carol and Fiona, Nancy and Peter, Ann and Gillian, and Bridget and Philippa, we learn how American and British teachers teach writing, and the ways in which their approaches to writing and learning relate to the policies and cultures of schooling in each country.

*Exchanging Writing, Exchanging Cultures* sets the stage carefully before introducing us to the various classrooms. Two early chapters deal with context. One chapter analyzes policy and curriculum in both countries, and is derived from national surveys which, in the US, involved quite a few Writing Project teachers. Another describes the communities, school buildings, and classrooms of the eight teachers. While Freedman describes some similarities in socio-
economic status and community character in the US and UK neighborhoods, at the same time she underlines the subtle differences between British and American classroom arrangements that hint at the nature of teaching and learning in those rooms.

In these chapters Freedman defines a fundamental difference in the teaching of writing within the US and UK. In the UK, teachers build curriculum from their understanding of students' development, while in the US teachers create innovative activities for the curriculum transportable to future groups of students. Teachers are enculturated into these views via the systems and policies of the two countries. In Britain, students stay with the same teachers for as many as five years, enabling teachers to know their students well and to plan their learning with a longitudinal view.

Fiona, for example, is confident that the personal writing her students do in the exchange year "will hold them in good stead when we go on next year to do more theoretical, more intellectual kinds of work" (p. 99). In the US, where middle- and high-school teachers change classes once or twice each year, such deep knowledge of students' development as people and as learners is far from the norm. At the beginning of each new year, secondary students in the US are unknown to their teachers. Freedman speculates that such a policy may lead to US teachers’ emphasis on curriculum — strategies and approaches (such as teaching the writing process) that provide a window on students’ thinking and support their writing in a general way no matter what they might have done the year before.

Freedman identifies other contrasts, some of which I’ll itemize here. In the UK, teachers continue to foster self-expression through imaginative writing in secondary schools, while in the US teachers emphasize writing that "force[s] students to think for themselves" (p. 30). Teachers in one UK case follow clear, prestigious career paths which, unlike job promotions in the US, keep them teaching. UK schools nurture students as persons through pastoral care and community connections rarely found in the US. While tracking prevails in the US, in British schools mixed-ability grouping is fairly common. Class size in the US is significantly greater than in the UK (Carol, for example, taught 37 students, while Fiona’s class had 25). Finally all British students must pass through the gate of the national examination system, which has no analog in the US yet.

The implications of these different approaches to schooling leap out of the stories of the four US/UK pairings which form the main section of the book.

The story of Carol (US) and Fiona (UK) introduces a central concept in the book’s analysis of the teaching of writing: the degree to which teachers “exchange responsibilities” (p. 80) with students. Many of us would find Fiona’s British approach very casual; she broaches the idea of writing autobiographies in a conversation with her form one class (roughly 6th grade), who agree that it sounds like an interesting assignment. Then she and the class discuss various topics they might include in their autobiographies and, in the words of student Farah, they “take it from there what should be put down. We could ask about it and talk about it and find yourself finding out more topics to write about” (p. 88).

Many of Carol’s students, on the other hand, while also brainstorming lists of possible topics, interpret the assignment more rigidly, writing from the list of topics rather than using them as inspirations for their own new ideas for approaching the task. Freedman is not sure why so many students in Carol’s class viewed the assignment in a way that Carol did not, but we can speculate that listed topics on the board had been fairly typical in their education to that point, and that students had always been expected to follow them.

The story of Nancy (US) and Peter (UK), who teach the equivalent of 7th and 8th graders, shows the difference in the two teachers’ goals for their students, and reinforces the points made in the previous piece. Peter illustrates the lack of identity UK teachers have with particular approaches; he attends two weeks of a BAWP Summer Institute and is surprised by the focus on teachers’ proposed inservice demonstrations. “They all seemed to be program models as to ... how you take it from me and ... use it in your classroom ... I couldn’t do that ‘cause I don’t offer a program,” he says (p. 103). Peter also rejects the notion that his class is learner-centered. He equates this designation with “individualized,” and believed instead in the central role of interpersonal exchanges in fostering an intellectual community among his
students. Peter asks himself, “What context can I provide that will enhance [students’] language development and provide options for the whole range of writing?” (p. 103).

Freedman writes that Peter and Nancy had different goals for the exchange, although both taught mixed-ability classes. Nancy focused on social relations with the UK kids, while Peter’s interest was in the academic opportunities presented by the exchange. In part because of the difference in goals, there were major differences in students’ writing. The UK students wrote lengthy academic pieces crafted over time while the US students wrote more frequent, short, personal pieces. The difference in the length of the writing was most pronounced in this exchange; for their autobiography and short story projects combined, Freedman calculates that the UK students produced 17,041 words while US students produced 2,668. Even accounting for discourse variations between the two countries (those who have spent time in Britain know that gardeners can speak extemporaneously for a half-hour on the radio about varieties of tomatoes), the difference in the amount of student work and level of academic expectation is disturbing.

Ashley, a student in Nancy’s class, speculates on why the British students can write such long papers: “It seemed like they write for themselves, like other kids and us, more than they write for the teacher …” (p. 118). Freedman contextualizes the short frequent pieces in Nancy’s class within the condensed writing inadvertently promoted by California curriculum guidelines (which Nancy helped to write) and by the California Assessment Program, which stresses variety in writing “at the inevitable expense of sustained work” (p. 124).

The two final exchanges paired teachers of older students in the US and the UK (grades 8 and 9). UK teachers Gillian and Philippa taught students preparing for the national exams. US teachers Ann and Bridget taught students designated as low ability. At the beginning of Ann and Gillian’s exchange, the comparison between the two groups of student writers is stark. Ann’s students write formulaic letters with little variation, suggesting that Ann’s class is the first in which many of them have been asked to write extensively. UK students are “bored” by the US letters.

As the year progresses, it becomes more difficult for Gillian to integrate the examination writing into the exchange and in the end she is unable to devote much time to nurturing it. The US students get much less from the UK students than they send.

Ann seems to be the teacher who benefited most from the project. At the end of the exchange, inspired by the experience, she asks for the same students for a second year. By the end of the exchange, Ann’s students are taking more responsibility, some students are beginning to see how they might revise or elaborate their work, but most still have a long way to go.

For me, the story of Bridget (US) and Philippa (UK) was, in many ways, the most compelling one. It addresses the ways in which issues of race and class can be examined and reflected upon by students and teachers. Bridget’s class, designated low ability, was two-thirds students of African descent; Philippa’s mixed-ability class, one-third. In the introductory letters that comprised the first exchange, Geya, one of Bridget’s students, writes: “You know I would like to ask you something now if I am kind of making you angry then I apologize but I would like to know if you have any black people out there. The reason I am asking is because I only see the other color on TV [that comes from England] and I was just curious” (p. 170).

Freedman writes that this question launched at least one “profound discussion” in Philippa’s class, and provided the foundation for the close connection between the black students in the two classes. Philippa notes that the desire to communicate between these student groups was so strong that it almost undermined the exchange. She says, “And the whole thing for my class came down to talk. ‘We want to talk with these kids’” (p. 185).

Bridget’s low-ability students flourished in the exchange, ultimately sending papers written as part of their first attempt to read Shakespeare, and gradually assuming more control of the curriculum. Philippa’s class, on the other hand, suffered a bit. The white kids — a class majority — felt alienated from the exchange. There were early questions from many of the British students about why they had been paired with such “thick” kids, and the entire class felt the pressure of the examinations, which, in the end, limited their participation in the exchange and, as in Gillian’s class, narrowed the types of writing they produced.
The examinations cast a shadow over the classrooms of Gillian and Philippa, even in its most progressive form — portfolios of real classroom work which demonstrated students' abilities and achievements at the culmination of their high school career. (Freedman reports that this mode of examination has been the victim of a backlash since the time of the exchange, with opponents arguing that variation in the portfolios and the potential for teacher interference in the work will lead to an erosion of national standards which can only be maintained by having all students sit for an examination.)

As the stories of the exchange indicate, teachers of examination classes approached preparing for the portfolios with enormous seriousness and dedication, but felt unequal to the task of fully participating in the exchange while doing so. In Gillian's and Philippa's classes, the exchange, meant to flourish in a friendly, exploratory climate, gradually lost momentum as students and teachers tuned their writing for the more distant judging audience of examiners. As the year wore on, neither teacher could find a way to combine audiences — to make the exchange writing "fit" the examination.

We can make one ironic observation, then, from the British example: while British schools are structured to support student development, to promote intellectual classroom communities, and to foster close learning relationships between teacher and students, the culmination of UK students' education is the pressured preparation for an examination which contradicts the ethos of the lower forms and sorts students in ways that abruptly curtail the development of many of them. Since only 20% of British high school students go on to college (and relatively few working-class students in that 20%), the examinations are serious business indeed. Education designed to nurture human capacity is incompatible with such an evaluation system.

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While Freedman justifiably lauds British education for much of the book, in her critique of the national examination she warns educators and policy-makers back home about the impact on teaching and learning such examination-based reforms can have: "The path to curriculum reform through a system of high-stakes national exams is tempting, but its benefits remain elusive."

"What the US teachers saw in the classrooms of their British counterparts convinced them that this kind of high-stakes national examination and its associated curriculum would ultimately inhibit their students' thinking and experimenting, confine their imaginations, and limit their writing development" (p. 208).

I haven't stopped talking about this book since I began reading it. I've applied its insights into US and UK education to the established schools I know and those which many of us in New York City are now trying to create. New York's small-schools and restructuring movements are designing new schools faster than there is space to house them. As in other parts of the country, we have an unprecedented opportunity to shape education: to develop curriculum and structures that embody a particular view of the child as learner and person, promote teacher collaboration, connect with students' home communities, and set challenging academic expectations for all learners.

In her stories of classrooms, Freedman demonstrates that all teachers are shaped to a significant degree by educational structures and policies. As many of us around the country begin to play important roles in local and national reform movements, we need to interrogate existing and proposed policies — such as national examinations — to uncover their implications for teaching and learning, and to add our voices to calls for institutional support for the conditions we know to be critical in developing the unique and rich capacities of all our students.

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