The Wall

by

JANE JUSKA

In 1989, Bay Area Writing Project consultant Jane Juska became a teacher-researcher, asking the question, "What happens when students who can't read and write like other kids are turned loose in a computer lab?" In this article she presents her findings. Juska is now an instructor and supervisor of student teachers at St. Marys College, Moraga, California.

"Do we have to write in here?"
"I hate to write."
"I'll read, but I won't write."

That's what I knew after teaching at-risk ninth-grade students for fifteen of my twenty-three years in the classroom. Lately, my district has come to call this class Developmental English, a change from what we used to call it, English 1C (two steps down from English 1 A). What do you call a classroom full of kids who read three to five years below grade level (when they read at all), and if given the choice to write, don't. Yet I do not think of my kids as developmental students. I do not think of them as readers and writers in utero, soon to be newborn scholars. I think of them as remedial, an out-of-fashion term, having been replaced by "marginal," "borderline," words like that. My kids are all of these, I suppose. But to me, a teacher of reading and writing, those words apply to the parts of their lives outside my jurisdiction. If we want to get picky, my kids are remediable, "capable of being remedied," according to the dictionary.

Nonetheless, "remedial" is what I call them, from habit, yes; because "remediable" is hard to say, yes; but mainly because the word "remedy" is what I'm after. And my kids, as writers, are in need of remedy for an illness that plagued them over the last ten of their fourteen years, an illness which has, during most of those years, caused them pain, suffering, and humiliation. It is an illness which grows worse with each passing year. My kids can't read and write like other kids, and because they can't, they are miserable; they are angry, sometimes violent. Most of them will not finish high school.

Writing cannot remain hidden for long. Once kids write, all mystery disappears. All games are over. All pretense is futile. And what appears on my students' papers day after day is ugly; and that ugliness is truly what separates their writing — and them — from the Regular kids. So my students try to hide their writing for as long as possible. They will tackle some pretty hard books just so they can carry them around, show them off. Not so their writing. Their writing stays stuffed in notebooks, if they continue to keep notebooks after the first few weeks, in their writing folders in the classroom, at least until their folders get "stolen." Often they disguise their writing. Sometimes it becomes origami, beautiful birds that sail across the room. Or it may turn into a sleek airplane, its nose cutting into the space somewhere above my head. Or it turns into a basketball, crumpled round, arcing into the wastepaper basket. Whatever the disguise, the one requirement is that it hide the writing. For that writing is a signal to everybody, certainly to my students, that they are different, that they are not Regular. Of course they resist writing; how much more evidence do they need to convince them of their own stupidity?
My students' writing, then, is short. There it is, the best of it, up on the wall. The handwriting is ugly, so there's not much of it. For, as everybody in high school knows, papers written by Regular kids are a page or two or even five. They are long! My students do not write in pages. They write in inches, or half-inches. Sometimes, with great effort on their parts and mine, they write as much as half a foot. We are all elated — until they get a look at the pages written by the Regular kids. Regular writing looks good; some of it is downright beautiful. The lines of the letters slant in the same direction and to the same degree; they don't wind all over the place. The o's and then a's close up: the l's swoop up: they don't twist this way and that. The letters are all the same size, except for the ones like capitals that should be bigger. And they go where they're supposed to, either right or below the line. Some of it looks even like teacher writing. Looking at those pages must be like hearing the Regular kids read aloud, only worse. For what is reading aloud but sound, short-lived sound? Writing is sound and sense and shape and thickness and time. Put together, the parts of writing say more about the writer than reading aloud ever could. "Don't put my paper on the wall!" No wonder.

Given all that, my writers don't spend much time writing, maybe ten minutes, including pre-writing. Ten minutes a day, on a good day fifteen with lots of "I'm done's" peppering the silence long before. "Did you use to write this long?" I ask them, hoping for a "No, it's your wonderfulness as a teacher which has inspired me to write these ten minutes." They say instead, "I used to write even longer in the fifth grade." Well, why not, I think. Here they are fourteen or older, and their handwriting looks like it did in the fifth grade. It looks ugly. It looks hopeless. Besides, getting these three inches down on paper has been painful. Writing hurts. The hand gets twisted into a deformed doughnut, a doughnut Winchells would toss out. The hand tenses. It resists. It calls out, "Stop this!" And to help, I have tried every method I have ever come across in any workshop I have ever attended.

I have read some books on teaching remedial students how to write. My students and I have prewritten till the cows came home; we have clustered; we have mapped; we have listed; we have drawn pictures; we have discussed. Then, they have written. Then they have responded to each other's writing (no easy task since showing their writing becomes a part of their daily humiliation). "Here," they say to me, "you fix it! You're the teacher." And I have. I have asked questions on draft one that they answer in draft two. Over the years I have proofread miles and miles of their papers. They have copied and recopied and finally, when the paper is more mine than theirs, they are willing to let somebody see it, maybe. More than likely, however, they shove it quickly into their writing folders in case I might want to put it up on the wall. Because there is still a problem.

No matter if margins decorate both edges, no matter if spelling errors have vanished, one thing keeps that awful writing theirs: the handwriting. Or the printing. "Don't put my paper on the wall!" "But it's the best writing you've ever done!" "I said don't do it." Inside me, I agree with them. The writing, well, it looks not Regular.

So here I am — the English teacher who, with twenty-three years of experience, is certain to fix all this. That is what the kids think each September when they gather together once again (for they have been with each other, many of them, for more than ten years now). Maybe this year we will get to be normal. Maybe this time, maybe this person can help me.

But I do not help them very much. I do not because, after all this time, I do not know how.

All this I knew about remedial writing. But I had to admit I knew some important things about myself as a teacher. Twenty years ago I had taken a year off from the classroom to have a baby. When I returned, I made the request: "Please, no remedials." I'd had it with trying to discipline the undisciplinable, teach the unteachable. Five years later I agreed to try it again. This time the carrot the department chair dangled in front of my nose was different. This year the department had agreed to make room in its Regular classes for one or two more kids so that the remedial class could be kept at a maximum of twenty. That class size has lasted over the years and is, more than any real help I have been able to give, what has kept me a teacher of remedial English. I do not apologize for teaching under false pretenses, at least not to other teachers, for most of them will understand. But how do I explain to my students that their very fumness, one of the things that marks them as different, is what draws me to them each fall? How do I tell them that the fewer the kids the
fewer my failures? How can I tell them that the teacher who stands before them each September, the person they see as the one who maybe, this time, will help them, is in truth as much a victim as they? I can't.

What I knew finally came last spring when I learned that the following September our English Department would have a Computer Lab, or Room as I prefer to call it. I knew that in that room fifteen computers would sit ready for use. Under pressure from the department chair, along with urgings from several respected colleagues, I began that summer to learn to write on the computer. I loved it. If writing had become, almost overnight, half as much effort for me, if I had spent playing with revision and pouring forth screens of words, could my students, too, come to like their writing? Could this Computer Room hold the antidote for a poison that threatened to spread beyond me into an undeserving classroom?

Late August I drive to school and look at my enrollment: Developmental English: 15 students. Well, I say to myself, give it your best shot. If it's not now, it might be never.

September arrives, so does October, and the Computer Room is not ready: it has to be properly wired, stocked, etc., etc., and "All these things take time, Jane." For my part, no matter how loudly I protest, I am relieved, for I have learned to live with circumstances as they were. The future scares me. And so we cluster and write and draw and write and talk and write and read and write every day. And nothing has changed. The writing is short. It's ugly. But wait, one thing is different: in September, knowing what I intended to do, I began to keep a logbook in which I entered my feelings and observations about my second period class and myself as a teacher of computer writing or composing in the Eighties or whatever. I find that I am indeed apprehensive, but for the first September within memory I am interested. Hallelujah.

In a questionnaire designed by me, the kids tell me some of them have had previous computer experience, some as much as two years at their intermediate school, our feeder school. Not all the experiences were positive: Meredith informs me she got bad grades and will never write on the computer. Most of them tell me that they didn't really write (except for Tim who says, "I wrote my term paper on the computer"); they learned how to work the computer and "had to put together a notebook and stuff like that." Notebooks and learning how to work a computer are not two of my interests, but I am both disturbed and relieved: I won't find out how it is to teach real computer beginners; these kids are at least keyboard literate. On the other hand, we can get to real writing faster.

My original thought had been to take the kids in there and say, "Have at it." This is an idea I do not discard. But I write in my logbook after reading their questionnaires: "This is ironic. I don't know as much as they about computers, much less how to teach with them." Tim, who wrote his term paper last year on the computer, looks at me over his glasses in silent agreement.

The day before my second period students and I are scheduled for sure to go into that room, which has now assumed enormous and ominous proportions in my mind, I write in my log: "My research subjects are so badly behaved I wonder if research is possible or even if they are deserving of special attention." And, "My anger stands between the kids and me. I write this on its outer edge. Yesterday was the middle." Well, I am not bored.

D-Day minus 1: Again my log — "Control may be a problem. Kids are so hairy in the classroom will they behave with computers ... I have decided and told them that they are to choose one piece from their writing folders they like well enough to put on the computer. They are to save the piece and print." Am I crazy?

Wednesday, November 12: D-Day — Here is where I describe in detail what happened. Here is where I show how each kid picked up his disk, went quietly to his pre-assigned computer, and face aglow with pride in his work, bent at once to the task ahead. Or here is where I show how the kids picked up their disks and boomeranged them into the air, slashing windows and passing faculty. Here is where I show them inserting pencils into disk drives, ripping surge protectors from their outlets, spray-painting over the letters on the computer keys.

But I can't remember. My log, scribbled in before we go, records my tenseness: "We are going. Am I nervous?" And, after school, this bland entry: "All went well. Everybody put a piece of writing into the computer and saved. Tomorrow we print."
Somehow I think a miracle happened in there, and as with most miracles, the details get hazy. I can tell you, though, that as I began to regain consciousness in the ensuing weeks, Scenario Number One was common. Scenario Number Two never happened.

Next day I leap into class. I am so glad to see them and to tell them how wonderful they were/are/will be forever and ever. So I tell them, and then I show them my logbook. I read a couple of entries. They are pleased and want to know, “So who’re you researching besides us?” “Just us,” I say. They beam and turn willingly to writing about how they felt yesterday high-teching it through the Eighties.

Sam writes: “When I started writing on the computers I noticed that it took less time and what I really like about it is that you can change things or move them to where you want to have them. The printing was kind of hard but when it did print it was really fast.” (Sam is a good speller.)

Tai writes: “The computer did make a lot of difference because it help me on the spelling, and leaned things. And its a lot of fund…”

From Mark: “I think computers help your writing because you can change a letter, word, centered, or a whole paragraph without messing it up.”

Ernie: “It was a killer, but I don’t think computers will help my handwriting. The computer did it all.”

Lest I forget, Tim reminds me: “I’m not so happy about that word processor because I was told it was a very neat program. I don’t think they told the truth. I like Apple Works a lot better and would recommend it too.”

And, finally John: “My writing is better.”

I am feeling good. Every single response from every single kid (Tim excepted) is positive. The trick, I decide, is not to let them go without an idea of what they’re going to write. And I give each student a grade at the end of each class based on how quickly they get to work and how long they stay at it. Everybody, excluding John, gets an A every time we go to the Computer Room. John has trouble getting to class on time; he does not get an A.

Shortly after Triumph Number One, we collect ideas of what to write about. They enter these into the computer in case they were at a loss for writing ideas. So far — and I write this in April — they have not been at a loss and rarely refer to their lists.

I wonder about prewriting. The list is prewriting, of course, but what about clustering and mapping and drawing and all this stuff? I decide to try this: We cluster a word for our usual five minutes, then take the cluster to the room and the students write from it. After this exercise, we talk about the cluster. Kids don’t think it helped much; they’re pretty sure they could’ve composed immediately on the computer. From what I have seen of their “spontaneous” composition, I am inclined to agree. They resent being tied to their clusters, and their writing soon veers off into topics of their choice: track meets, parties, and friends. The connection between prewriting and composing on the computer remains unanswered, at least by me and my gang of fifteen.

Some of my other questions, however, do get answered. Would the time spent on composing increase? Would the computer increase fluency? The answer to both: a resounding yes.

I begin to time them, to record the minutes they spend writing. Our daily handwritten exercises in September and October lasted five to ten minutes. In the Computer Room, writing time increases to twenty minutes or more. Sometimes, it is the end of the fifty-five-minute period when I call out, “Time to save!” or “Time to print!” that causes the end of their composing.

In January, I ask them to count the number of words in the longest piece they wrote by hand, then to count the number of words in the longest piece they have written on the computer. They do this willingly because they know the results: they will do well. Juriey’s longest handwritten piece contains fifty-five words. In January his computer piece contains 228 words. Mark, who wrote fifty-five words in September, wrote 364 in January using the computer.

They also counted the number of words in their first computer pieces, begun in November. They did this because most of them had lost or thrown away their handwritten pieces. Again, the increase is remarkable — in Lidia’s case from 51 to 156, in Tai’s case from
fifty-five to 154. Tim refused to count his words, covering as they did several pages of printout.

John has lost everything but his computer-generated reviews of Gone With the Wind (three of them). Parwana says to me, “Well, Mrs. Juska, you must have lost everything because I can’t find my writing.”

Sam becomes a puzzle. The number of words he wrote actually decreased. By half. Sam used to write beyond inches, sometimes almost a page. Now, he hardly ever prints out anything, and when he does, it is disappointing — short or unfinished or scattered with x’s and o’s or all three. I could blame this regression on what I know have been serious problems in Sam’s home; but what I think, looking again at Sam’s handwritten pieces, is that Sam likes his handwriting; it has probably been some cause for pride over the years, and the computer has taken that away from him. (I show this part of my paper to Sam who reads it and says grimly, “Sounds about right.”) The real problem, though, is that I have neglected Sam as long as he has been “busy” at the computer, pretending that he will, one of these days, print out something as substantial as his old pieces. So far he hasn’t. What cheers me is that Sam is the only real pretending I have had to do. I contrast that to past pretending when any kind of measurement of progress threatened the fantasy I had constructed in order to get up in the morning.

Then there’s Jesse: Jesse arrived at our school some time in December and swore that of course he knew computers just like everybody else. He did not; he did not know the keyboard, where to turn the machine on, what to do. But he and I both knew his handwriting was just about unreadable. So, a little like Sam, we pretended. We pretended that he would do just fine. Every computer day Jesse hunted and picked over the keyboard, he played around with the machine, and gradually began to write a piece about his skateboard. His writing did get longer; he did spend more time composing. But he can’t claim the improvement the rest of the class can. That’s O.K. It may be that Jesse has come the farthest of all, and without being shackled to a computer manual or to exercises designated by the teacher to teach Computer Operations. Every computer day he earned his A. Not long ago he began what would become six lines of writing with this sentence: “Skating is like dyeing.” Not bad.

So—are their papers ready for the wall? They look good all printed and margined. Until you look closely, until you check out the spelling and the punctuation, until you finally have to face the fact that it’s more than handwriting that keeps their writing from being Regular. It’s correctness, or rather it’s lack of correctness. Shall we try it? Shall we go Beyond Fluency into the uncharted and dangerous territory of Revision? Why not? It’s March, the longest, the deadest, the ugliest, the cruelest month of the year. Let’s wake it up.

I ask them questions about revision: Do they like to do it? “No.” When they want to make a paper better, what do they do? “Correct spelling, punctuation, and so on.” Whom do they ask for help? “Teacher.” What is the hardest part about revising? “Thinking of what could be better.”

I have assigned them to writing groups of three or four other students, students they have written to me they wouldn’t mind showing their stuff to. They choose, once again, a piece of their writing, this time writing they have done with the aid of the computer, writing they like well enough to do more work on. Now, unlike September, they have copies for everybody, eventually, that is. Not everybody is ready with his copies at the same time. So what happens is that the writing groups fall apart. Whenever a kid is ready with his or her printouts, he or she joins a group at one of the work tables. Some kids are bothered by this: “This isn’t my group!” wails Parwana. But most never seem to notice. I wonder why. Is it that their more Regular-looking writing makes them less chary about showing their stuff? I don’t know. I didn’t ask them. I just like what’s happening. Hands off, I think.

After a modeling session led by me, they sit at tables and write on each other’s copies what they like and what they want to know more about. They are ready to revise — on the computer. I move to a table where Juray’s group has written down four or five things they want to know more about. This is what I hear:

**Jurey:** Well, I’ll just add this stuff at the end when I do my revising.

**Mario:** No, man, you can’t! You got ta fit it in as you go along!

**Jurey:** (with a frown) That takes too long. I don’t want to type that whole thing again.
Maria: Hey, man, you don’t have to! You just move that little flicker thing wherever you want, and type the stuff, like right in the middle, and the computer will fix it all up!

Jurey: (brightening) Oh, O.K.

Resisting the urge to hug them both, I skip to record this conversation in my log. Then it hits me. I haven’t told anyone how to revise, that is, how to insert, how to delete, how to move stuff around. In fact, I have never tried that myself with this program. The bell rings. Saved.

The day before Spring vacation arrives, and we are tired. It is our fifth month here on our once-a-week-computer-day schedule. That makes it only twenty days? Has to be more; we have accomplished lots. But I want to know about this revision. Some kids have started to revise; other have not. I am determined that today everybody will revise. They are angry. “Hey, look, it’s too old!” says Mark. John: “If I don’t get this idea for my novel down, I’ll just forget it.” And blessed Jurey: “Aw come on, you guys, this won’t take long.”

Then, another miracle: Mark, whose handwriting is illegible, who handwrites in quarter-inches but who gets A’s in Mechanical Drawing, rises, crosses to the board, and draws a diagram (in 3-D) of the keyboard and the monitor. Speaking slowly, pointing at different areas of his diagram, Mark shows everybody how to delete and add. I watch with special interest.

The night before I have proofed their papers. Yes, this is work the kids could do in their groups, some of it at least. But lordamercy, there comes a time when a paper, any paper, has to get done! The wall is naked! This proofing, though, is different for me. I can read the words; there are no smudges, no wrinkles; the letters are all the right size; I need not guess at what the kids probably meant. I zoom through the stack, no headache forming as I do, retaining the enamel on my teeth. I have inked in verb endings, basic spelling corrections, words omitted, leaving errors in syntax and diction for their tenth grade teacher.

John goes right to work, and, paying absolutely no attention to my marks on his paper, rewrites his Gone With the Wind review (Number Four) making it “even more better than it ever was, Mrs. Juska. Believe me.”

The rest of the kids, however, whip through their corrections and within ten minutes at the most, have a printout of an “error-free” piece of writing. It looks good — to me, too.

“I’ve got a new idea,” says Tim. “I’m going to try to cluster on the computer. Can I try that next time?” Yes, Tim, you certainly may. And John, your novel — how terrific next time will be. What I really say is, “O.K., let’s print! It’s vacation.”

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What I have learned follows:

1. Composing on the computer increased fluency as I have measured fluency. The number of words kids wrote on the computer climbed steadily and reached an increase of as much as 400%.

2. The amount of time spent composing increased when kids used computers. Our handwritten exercises, pre-computer, lasted at the most ten minutes. With computers, the time spent writing rose almost immediately to twenty minutes and continued to increase. A corollary to this finding is that the class, the students, were more orderly. Almost without exception, they moved quickly to the writing task before them and stayed with it throughout the period.

3. Computer copy was more legible than their handwritten pieces. As obvious as this may seem, the result is not so readily apparent. The result is that both students and teacher look on the writing with greater respect. Hope rises; revision is likely.

4. Students liked their writing done on computers better than they did their handwritten pieces. In a post-computer questionnaire of the twelve students present on May 6, eleven students said they liked the writing they had done on the computer, one no response. “It’s neat,” “It’s longer,” “I think more,” they answered. Eight students said either that they didn’t like the writing they had done by hand or that it was “O.K.” Two liked their handwriting, one of those a student new to written English, the other Sam.

5. Pre-writing was still valuable. While I abandoned our daily clustering, seven of the twelve students wrote on their post-computer questionnaire that they wished we still clustered: “It makes ideas you
don't expect," said James. The other five students were adamant in their dislike of clustering, though their reasons do not appear in their answers on the questionnaire.

6. The computer does not teach writing. I learned that the teacher must still be responsible for leading students into the discovery of ideas, images, and new language. The trick, I believe, is timing. Kids need lots of time to play with the computer, to write what comes out of their heads. Too much direction from the teacher too early on could make writing once again a chore. On the other hand, at some point, their writing must go beyond its initial stages into something worth revising.

7. The chances of having an orderly, business-like classroom, one in which students get to the business at hand, one in which they stay on task for extended periods of time, increased with the aid of computers. A certain amount of fooling around with the computer did, and probably must, occur at the beginning of each student's acquaintanceship with the computer. Thus, screens and printouts covered with designs and nonsense configurations are to be expected. Often, this represented the kids getting to know the keyboard. Sometimes it was the students' own prewriting. I was not concerned because it did not continue into the year.

8. Revision of computer writing was more likely than of handwritten pieces. Students realized quickly the ease of making changes with the computer. The necessity for copying over disappeared. However, the computer does not teach revision. Students continued to see revision as putting in periods, correcting spelling, and making paragraphs. Not unless the teacher has taught students to find sentences and words that are good, that are savable; not until students learn to ask questions of writing — "What does the person look like?" "What did these people say to each other?" "Did it rain during the track meet?" "How did you feel about your friend?" — will real revision begin. Thus, modeling, constant shoring up of writing groups, insistence on substantive changes remain the teacher's obligation. What the computer did was to make students more agreeable to making major changes. "Oh, no! not another copying!" became "Yeah, I can do that."

9. Writer frustration did not disappear with the computer. Some of that frustration, however, was directed toward the computer rather than at the teacher. What I will do next year is buy, or have the kids buy, their own disks. Sharing disks with other students in the school is a bother. Fortunately, Bank Street Writer includes a password which, when used, prohibits anyone but the keeper of the password from calling up writing. But that also means that the writer must never forget his password or all his writing is lost. In addition, the message on the screen, "Disk Full," increased writer-frustration. Still, the load lightened when kids had a computer to swear at.

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We are not, in the end, as hopeless as I had thought. Of the fifteen students who began the year with me, ten have scored high enough on the ninth-grade writing test to move, next year, into Regular English. I do not know if the computer caused this success; I do attribute much of their new-found confidence to their work with the computers. Unlike past years, this year's class wrote more on the ninth-grade writing sample. So off they go, no crutches, looking for all the world — and writing — just like everybody else.

Today, May 1, I preface our computer day with, "In two weeks I want a piece from each of you I can put on the wall. It can be a piece you've already written or revised, or it can be a brand new one that you start today. Your piece will go up on the wall along with the writing from my other classes."

"No problem," says Jesse.
Afterword

I would like to tell you about what didn’t get published, the outtakes of “The Wall.” They took a lot of time and were, I thought, what the piece needed to make it real research. They were a chart and a graph. All the research I had ever looked at had at least one chart and one graph, and I wanted mine to have those things, too. I didn’t want anybody saying, “Oh here’s another teacher pretending to be smart but where are the charts and graphs?”

The chart I have to describe it in words because they probably won’t print the actual chart this time, either) showed the kids’ progress over time. On the left, going down, were the kids’ names. Across (too bad you can’t actually see this), were the days of the week. So it was like a grid, kind of. In the little squares were the numbers of words each kid had written on the computer each day of the week. There was no disputing, when you looked at that chart, that everybody had made progress in writing more words.

But the chart did more than that: It showed my class, my kids. There they were—or rather weren’t. Now that I think of it, that was probably why it didn’t get printed in The Quarterly. The problem, I now realize, is that the chart was full of holes; that is, not all of the little squares were filled in; in fact, nobody except Rob had a number for every day. So the chart looked like one of those connect the dots things which makes a surprise picture. Why did it look like that? Because everybody was absent half the time, though never all at once! Everybody had lousy attendance except Rob, who, though genuinely sick, dragged his symptoms, all of them noisy, to class every single day, which is probably why his progress was the least steady of anybody’s. So I think my chart, which is to say my research, was too full of holes for the people at The Quarterly.

The other outtake concerns a graph. In this one, the kids’ names were on the bottom, horizontal across the page. It was going to be a bar graph. So from each kid’s name a bar was going to rise up, like a skyscraper, and that bar would show his or her progress in words written on the computer. And, if that weren’t plenty, at the top would be the Percent Increase — Real Statistics! Given both a Chart and a Graph with Statistics, not even the hardest-nosed researchers in the land could dispute the purity of what lay before them. The only problem was that I didn’t know how to figure out the percentages: if Jury wrote 12 words a day at the beginning and 250 words a day at the end, what percentage increase was that? Did I subtract 12 from 250 and divide; and if I did, what went into what?

So one day, while in my local bank to cover an upcoming overdraft, I whipped out my kids’ numbers which I just happened to be carrying in my tote bag. “Can you help me?” I asked the teller. And I told her my problem. She looked back and, with all the dignity of late adolescence, collected my papers and said, “Be back in a minute.” I could see her in the glass office conferring with a superior officer who looked at her and at me and came right out of her office to say, “As I understand it, you want to figure some percentages, right?” “Right,” I said. “Well,” she said, “if you will step over here, I’ll see what we can do,” and pointed to a chair near the door. She came out from behind the counter, my data in hand, and approached the desk in the middle of the bank where an even more superior officer sat. They whispered into each other’s ear. Then the seated woman — woman #3 I like to remember her — smiled at me, nodded, and picked up the phone. After some minutes, during which she smiled at me and into the phone, she hung up and said, “We think you divide the big number into the little one.”

That sounded good to me, so that’s what I did. The percents my kids had increased were impressive, I thought, and so did they. But maybe somebody at The Quarterly ran a check and decided the little number should go into the big one. So they just went with words which are better than graphs anyway.

As you can see, there’s more to research than what ends up on the page, like it makes you think. What I am thinking now is that being a teacher-researcher in class with kids is like being in a Robert Altman movie where nobody knows for sure what’s going on or what anything means until you look at the whole picture. Even then, you gotta wonder.