Reformers Proceed with Caution: Real Teachers Ahead

by ART PETERSON

Art Peterson, new Quarterly co-editor, has lent our journal his wit and his pen over the past 15 years. Before coming to The Quarterly, Peterson taught English in the San Francisco public schools for 30 years and served for 15 years as a Bay Area Writing Project teacher consultant. Here we reprint his 1986 thoughts on the complexity of “broad brush” educational reforms such as merit pay for teachers.

—PTL

First, let’s try a rule of thumb: The greater the distance between reformers and the object their concern, the less their chance of getting anything important done. Embrace with me this assumption and you’ll understand that consequentially education reforms can not be dictated from Washington, or even the state capital. But the experts have not learned this. They continue to choreograph educational panaceas to which real teachers, students, and parents cannot dance. It is easy, for instance, to insist on more homework for all kids if one does not pay much attention to actual homes and actual kids.

Nowhere are the deficiencies of the broad brush approach to educational reform more obvious than in the current discussion over merit pay for teachers. Because the merit pay advocates are not thinking about flesh and blood, warts and all teachers, they have no trouble lining up their paper doll teachers according to merit. But in real classrooms so many variables affect a teacher’s performance that there seems no fair way to determine which of us deserve more pay. We may as well draw straws.

As a lapsed advocate of more pay for the “best” teachers, my perception of this subject has not been altogether disinterested. It came down to this: I thought I was one of the best teachers, and I wanted more money. And also, after twenty-plus years, I wanted someone to say, at last, “You’re special.” But when the merit pay issue was thrust from the area of theoretical discussion onto the rostrum of public policy, I began to grow nervous. I wondered how I would fare when decisions were actually made about who was to get this extra cash and who wasn’t. Of course, I did believe I was special. Most teachers, like most lovers, think they are special. They just have no way to prove it. Yes, it’s true, other teachers asked for my dittos. And I had a collection of notes from students that said things like, “Dear Mr. Peterson, Thank you for being so patience.” I had even, once, published an article in Media and Methods. But I did not know how I would measure up against my colleagues. What, for instance, of the teacher down the hall? Although she has not had an idea in twenty years that did not come from the Teacher’s Guide to Warriner’s English Grammar and Composition, she always calls a parent the first time one of her students falls behind. The last time I called a parent was when I wanted to borrow three sleeping bags for a family camping trip. So which of us is the more deserving of merit recognition?

And consider my colleague who approaches trivial matters such as the distinction between “lay” and “lie” with the fervor of a medieval Scholastic debating how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. If her students fail to grasp this lesson during the regular 8 to 3:30 school hours, she will work with them after school until they GET IT. I would lay — or is it lie — down and die before I would spend much class time...
on such minuta. Yet there it is, right there in the District Curriculum Guide: “Students will choose cor-
rectly between the verbs ‘lay’ and ‘lie’ with 90% accuracy.” Score one round for my colleague.

And how do I, who must be dragged, kicking and screaming, to any meeting, professional or otherwise, measure up against my co-worker who, although he
is not quite sure what he will do Monday, cheerfully volunteers for the school district Short and Long Term
Goal Committee — and just about any other assembly
that solicits his “input?” How many points does he
gain for being part of the team? How many do I lose
for being professionally reclusive?

There are teachers who believe it is a big part of their
jobs to get to every PTA meeting, and there are teach-
ers who, because they refuse to move from the house
after a day of helping students decipher what hap-
pens in Hamlet, have never been to a PTA meeting.
There are teachers whose students learn to love learn-
ing even while these students do poorly on standard-
ized tests. Is there an evaluator out there judicious
enough to decide who, in these and other inﬁnitely
complex situations, is doing a better job than whom?

No reformer has visited my friend Lanny’s classroom.
Lanny is a chorus teacher, and if you were to hear his
students sing you would grant him his merit pay on
the spot, if he wanted it. But Lanny also teaches
English, and in his English classes he throws out the
assigned curriculum and teaches his obsession:
Josephine Baker, the Black American chanteuse who
took Paris by storm in the 1920s. However, Lanny
wants his students to know that Baker was more than
a Folies Bergères star. Lanny’s students are required
to write reports on Josephine Baker. You would not
suppose this would be an assignment that would
impress favorably the merit pay evaluators, but that
would be before you saw the students’ reports. These
kids write prose that proves their teacher’s enthusiasm
for his favorite subject is contagious. They really
care about Josephine Baker and the Lost Generation,
Josephine Baker and the French Resistance, Josephine
Baker’s Fight against Racism. Few of us are able to
move our students to write with such passion about
anything or anybody. But still, sixty reports on
Josephine Baker each semester? It seems a little quirky
to qualify for merit pay, even if Lanny is a great chorus
teacher.

There are millions of us like Lanny: individuals, more
artist than scientist, even when we teach science. We
may not deserve to get merit pay, but neither do we
deserve not to get it. This is a paradox that washes
over the architects of reform who are focusing on
designing new educational friezes and cornices while
they neglect the foundation. Those of us close to the
foundation know that there is one educational reform
which must precede all others: Teachers must have
the opportunity to control their professional lives.
Compared with this fundamental change, merit pay,
and the rest of the band-aid reforms, shrivel.

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**Afterword**

Okay. Let’s start with a quiz.

The main idea of this article is:

A. Teachers who use Warriner’s Handbook are not as hip and cool as the author.

B. If you think about the complexities of merit pay long enough you will get a headache.

C. Much of the debate over education reform is dominated by people who don’t know what they are talking about.

I have a vice-principal acquaintance who would assure you that “A” would be my answer. This fellow, who must barely have squeaked through the reading comprehension section of the teachers’ certification exam, read this piece, then wrote me a note asking, “Why do you ﬁnd it necessary to publish an article attacking those who teach skills at the very time the community is demanding standards?” Huh?

Many readers will probably pick “B.” Indeed, I was trying to demonstrate that the issue of merit pay is far more complicated than cocktail party commentators acknowledge.

But my own answer would be “C.” For 30 years I have been listening to a steady and increasing buzz of white noise from people who, like the

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third grade. He agreed with his older brother that he doesn't like to write either. When I asked him if he read what his teacher writes on his papers he looked puzzled, turned to my wife and asked if he did. I rephrased the question. "Is there anything you look for when you get papers back from your teacher?"

He shook his head yes immediately, "When she writes something good." Funny, that's what his parents look for in his papers, too.

Lucy Calkins has written that teachers should write to "the writer behind the writing." That's an image I can work with. Look past the errors to the person and say what they need to hear in order to write better next time. It's not so much what I have to say about a student's paper as it is what is the student ready to hear. The problem is, for many students they don't want to hear anything from us except that they are done.

I look up and see Andy coming out of his room with his essay in hand. "Dad, I'm done." I wonder...

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inhabitants of Plato's cave, are in a position to only make out the shadow of a real or (ideal) classroom. Principals, professors and politicians are ready with simplistic advice and thoughtless mandates. I am struggling to help a student articulate an idea while faceless but important people lobby to require that I teach a performance-based something-or-other.

The truth is, however, that I find these reformer cooks, with their generally ill-conceived recipes, less dangerous than irritating. Without the involvement of teachers, educational tinkerers will not be able to do good, but neither will they do much harm. Teachers will pretty much ignore what they are not part of.

So real reform must begin with teachers, and in turn, teachers must take responsibility for affecting change.

While I am a little embarrassed by this elevated rhetoric, my belief in the centrality of teacher control over reform explains my own involvement now as National Writing Project Editor for The Quarterly. For me, the core idea of the Writing Project is teachers teaching teachers. The Quarterly should be, in part, a space in which we who know what really happens in school, can advance our ideas. Those closest to a situation are the ones who best understand it and the ones most capable of altering it for the better. This—dare I say—is a solidly conservative idea, one that has been around even longer than Warriner's Handbook.

Correction: In the Fall, 1994 issue, Cynthia Roy was mistakenly omitted from the byline of the Connections article, "Teacher Researchers Together: Delving into the Teacher Research Process." The byline should read, Sarah Warshauer Freedman, with Elizabeth Radin Simons and Cynthia Roy, and New Orleans M-Class Teachers Karen Alford, Reginald Galley, Sarah Herring, Doris Williams Smith, Elena Valenti, and Patricia Ward.