Meeting the Challenges:

Stories from Today's Classrooms

Edited by Maureen Barbieri and Carol Tateishi

Portsmouth, NH
Heinemann, 1996.

Excerpt entitled “Things That Don’t Have to Do with English: The Hidden Agenda” by Nick D’Allessandro

Maureen Barbieri and Carol Tateishi had not been working long on NCTE’s Middle School Task Force of the Standards Project for English Language Arts when they realized there was a need for the book they have now edited, Meeting the Challenges: Stories from Today’s Classrooms (Heinemann, 1997).

They write, “Our work with the Task Force widened our understanding of the complexities faced by so many who are teaching today. The teachers we met were making language a rich part of their students’ lives, yet they did not recognize themselves, their students or their teaching contexts in the journal articles describing current theory and practice.”

Talking with these teachers and others, Barbieri and Tateishi were confirmed in their belief that today’s classrooms are “significantly different from those operating when we were in school.” They decided to compile a book that would bring to light the attempts of strong teachers eager to take on the challenges of these changing classrooms. “Writers for our book would be teachers who recognize their students’ strengths as well as their needs and who strive every day to find ways to build on these strengths.”

Nick D’Allessandro, whose contribution to Meeting the Challenges “Things That Don’t Have to Do with English: The Hidden Agenda” is reproduced here, shows us just how different today’s classroom can be compared with the Norman Rockwell version of school some of us think we remember.

D’Allessandro’s piece illustrates a belief in community shared by all contributors to Meeting the Challenge. Barbieri and Tateishi comment, “Without exception, the authors write of the absolute need of a classroom community — a shared sense of purpose; a commitment to the group as each person pulls from the others.” Also at the core of D’Allessandro’s piece is another assumption shared by most of the authors collected in this volume: school should be a place where students learn skills but also learn how to live. As the editors put it, “As we read these teachers’ stories, we come to understand that their work has less to do with teaching language arts than with inviting students to use their learning to understand their lives.”
My students don’t always use school the way they’re supposed to.

One morning, during what is officially designated as a writing period, I see Hector and Delia writing notes back and forth to each other. I watch for a while and then walk to their tables and read the note over Delia’s shoulder. Hector is reluctant to let me see it at first, but Delia reassures him, “Don’t worry, he won’t tell anybody.” They are having a conversation, on paper, about the senior prom in June, a gala dress-up affair which will be held in the garden of a neighborhood settlement house.

They are discussing which lucky girl Hector, the current eighth grade Romeo, will invite as his date. I pull up a chair and ask why they chose to write to each other. Hector responds, “We didn’t want to talk out loud. We did this because we didn’t want to get in trouble.” Since talking out loud and getting in trouble have never bothered these students before, and other students are talking aloud, I express mild skepticism and ask if they think this is an appropriate activity for English class. Hector says, “In a way we were working, and in a way we weren’t because it was about things that don’t have to do with English.” (My long established practice is that personal letters and notes are okay to write in class as long as the student makes a copy in the office and puts it in her folder, so the original text can accomplish its purpose. I’m not surprised that Hector doesn’t know this. He rarely writes.)

I press further and Delia admits, “We always do this — it’s more personal.” Hector adds, “We can have a private conversation without anyone knowing that we’re talking about.” Both students work (or don’t work) in groups of four and unless they whisper or go into a corner of our small room, they really cannot talk privately.

This goes some way toward explaining why Hector and Delia write to each other, but I think we can look for a deeper and more useful explanation. Anne Haas Dyson (1994) argues that we need to reconstruct the child writer in school. Children, she says, live in complex “networks of social and political relationships,” and have their own reasons for performing certain writing activities that may have nothing to do with official school purposes. She describes a typology of kinds of “social work” which children do in school and which we can observe in their writing and the uses to which they put it.

Hector and Delia are engaging in “social manipulation or regulation,” setting “some kinds of peer affiliations against others.” They are establishing that they are close friends, that they exchange confidences about other members of their social group, and that their business is so important that it must be conducted immediately, necessitating the note writing protocol.

Also operating is a classic junior high school social dynamic: in or-
nder for there to be an in-group, there must be an out-group. When I ask if anyone else would read their conversation, they agree, "only Tashana," a trusted friend of both students. This, of course, marks Tashana's social status. She is not much interested in boys yet, but she is a sensible, popular student who serves as the confidant of several of the more socially active students.

Whether we recognize it or not, students construct their own social world in the classroom. I have always been uncomfortable with the idea that school is a place for children where the normal rules and concerns of daily life do not apply, which is often a normative assumption of the culture of school. Of course, as an institution serving a large number of people like, say, a prison or a mental hospital, school must be managed according to rules and conventions. But too many schools are places where a student in early adolescence, who is used to making important decisions in his normal life, can go through a whole day without making a single independent decision about what he reads or writes or learns in the classroom. Refusal to do what is expected begins to seem like a real choice. Once, when I was explaining to the class that some parents had complained about our individualized reading program and wanted the whole class reading "classics" together (whatever that meant, as a parent survey we took later revealed), Carlos, an angry, self-conscious reader, complained, "They say they want us to learn to make our own decisions, and then they won't let us make any."

Many of my students are used to leading lives of a degree of inde-
pendence some of us would find astonishing. Our school community is Hell's Kitchen, on the West Side of Manhattan, the area between the Hudson River docks and Times Square. The neighborhood, which the real estate agents have begun to call 'Clinton,' is slowly changing from its tumultuous nineteenth-century past when it was populated by stevedores, criminals, prostitutes and transient sailors, but the tenements are still settled by new immigrants as well as descendants of the original families. Although our school, a small one of four seventh and eighth grade classes and an ESL group of children from Latin America, South America, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, India and China, was planned as a magnet for the whole district, parents in the community began to use it as their local middle school. Our students are almost all defined as "at risk;" we have no entrance requirements and we accept children who cannot function in other district schools.

Our children come to school already knowing that they are marginalized members of society. They go to movies and watch television voraciously and feed on all the false and true images of life in America. They walk to Times Square and see shining high-rise office buildings and tourist hotels going up daily, and come back to a school that is a few rooms on the top floor of a 100-year-old building. They know that other schools provide their students with computer rooms, science labs, libraries and dance studios, while they do without.

Their families, whether birth or alternative, often show a history of stress; poverty, crime and prison, drugs, physical and sexual abuse, neglect, teenage pregnancy, and AIDS are not unusual problems. Some students work for hours after school, and even take time off from school to work, because they have to help their families. Others go right home to shop and cook and clean for younger siblings or ill relatives, or to negotiate a non-English speaking parent through the world. Many of our children carry a load of responsibility that seems too heavy for such young shoulders. Every teacher is on suicide watch.

Veronica didn't come home last night, do we know where she is? Jamel's father beat him again. Raquel is crying and won't tell anyone what's wrong. Calvin's mother didn't feed him, can he have an extra breakfast? Andre is high. Wendy is having an asthma attack, we need to call an ambulance. Do those look like bruises on Shirley's face?

School functions as a safe place for our children, with its structure and regularity, but also a controlled and controlling place, where curriculum and governance are determined without their say. They are reluctant writers. Many of them have failed in the official school discourses of subject area writing and English themes, or they have been provided with inappropriate and outworn models. Getting some of my students just to put pen to paper can take months when the usual reward systems of middle-class life simply do not apply.

My students have their own lives, full and demanding ones, that they do not necessarily check at the schoolhouse door, and when they are presented with an opportunity
to bring those lives into the classroom in ways that are meaningful to them, they work it.

I always plan several periods in my English class as The Writing Workshop. I see it so clearly: children writing quietly, drafting and revising their work, others sharing in small conferences, all of us coming together at the end for a group read. Mini-lessons and our reading will serve as appropriate genre models. Occasional pieces can be private, but pieces will be shared, so please keep that in mind as you write.

---

**Can I use curses? Can I write about somebody in the class or teachers? Can I write a letter to my mother in Ecuador? Can I write something and not let anybody read it?...Well, uh, yes.**

---

I lay out this plan to them and then the questions begin: Can I use curses? Can I write about somebody in the class or teachers? Can I write a letter to my mother in Ecuador? Can I write something and not let anybody read it? Do you swear that nobody else can go in our folders?

Well, uh, yes.

For some of my students, this is unparalleled freedom in a classroom and they immediately begin to use it for their own purposes. They ignore the structure I would like to see in place, substitute their own idiosyncratic conventions and work out their own agendas which have no relation to what they're supposed to do in school. The first time a student rushes in on a reading day and says, "Can I write, it's really important?" the schedule goes too. One rule that does remain is that I read almost everything. That's my job as the teacher, I explain, and necessary for assessment and evaluation (we negotiate the criteria later). Students learn to trust, and they usually enjoy conferences with me — they like the notice of their work, and that they have their teacher's undivided attention. They may or may not follow my suggestions for revision, depending on the intention of the piece.

Students began writing to, for and about each other. Personal relations became a major subject. Noel, an eighth-grader who divided his time between his father in Greece and his mother in New York, was in love with the school diva, the beautiful Crystal. He used several writing periods to draft, share, revise and edit a letter to her. He shared the draft with his closest friends, and the process of writing became part of the social dynamic as one friend told another, "Noel is writing a letter to Crystal." What would it say? How would she respond? Who else would get to read it?

Dear Crystal,

I know we've had our differences, but that was in the past and now we're in the present, so the past is behind us. What I'm really trying to say is that I miss you and I can't stand being without you, in other words, I'm miserable without you. And the reason I'm like this is that I never thought I'd find someone to love. Now you're the only one I want in my life. I guess that's why you're always on my mind.

Noel had reacted to rumors of Crystal's interest in another boy but as he learned, in possibly the most important lesson — for him — of that day or week or month:

*Acting like a kid made me lose you. Losing you was a mistake and everybody learns from mistakes and I learned from mine. When you were with me you made me feel so happy because you were always there for me. But when we separated I felt I was empty like I lost a special part of myself.*

Crystal, from all reports, was pleased with the letter and since Noel was an ace basketball player as well as writer, love letters became an acceptable genre for boys as well as girls.

Priscilla, the seventh grade diva-in-waiting, was the object of quite a different kind of letter after she wrote to Hector to announce their breakup. Hector's letter was a joint effort with Calvin, one of the best writers in the class. Hector replied, when I asked him, that he was writing because Priscilla wanted a response to her letter. "We worked on it together," Hector said. "We thought it was a good time to do it because you said, 'Write what's on your mind.' We discussed it before, because it was how I really felt. We wrote the first draft and a second to make it neat." Priscilla's writing ability came in for criticism in Hector's letter back:

Dear Priscilla,

You know that the letter "you" wrote, you know you didn't write
it all by yourself. It was all bullshit! BULLSHIT! You think you can make me jealous by writing some shit about some other guys. If I had anything to do with playing, I played you ever since the second time we went out. And by the way, Friday didn’t mean anything to me, it was like a nightmare kissing you.

Hector concluded with,

Next time you have something to say to me, don’t send any of your friends to write it for you, because I know you can’t write like that, you BITCH!!!

P.S: I don’t love you.

This letter was also the talk of the room for several periods. Students were already taking sides, and Hector and Calvin made sure everyone knew what they were doing while they worked on the letter. When the letter was presented to Priscilla in the hallway by a friend, a planned public event, she crumpled it without reading it and threw it in the garbage. “Tell him I’m not interested in anything he has to say,” she told her girl friends. Hector had never spent as much time and effort on any writing during the year. But the letter became an important part of his social discourse because he had both the opportunity and the reason to write it, and its significance was obviously not lost on Priscilla.

Students used writing time to discharge anger that was too personal or inappropriate for public expression. When Luz, a moody eighth grader, was laughed at for her misreading of a word, she refused to read aloud anymore, put her head down and began writing furiously in her notebook:

I hate this stupid class. Every time I make a mistake, the rest of the class laughs at me. I hate them, it’s not my fault that I am a slow reader. People are just so stupid, I am so mad at them mad at the people in my class - just because they read faster than me they think they’re better than anyone but the more they think they’re better, the less of a person they are because I’m so pissed off.” Man it’s not fair. All of this just makes me cry. I’m so upset. People are just so rude and “unmokenches.”

Ass holes
All of them
Ass holes

I’m just so pissed off, man I have never in my life met such Assholes, especially Hector
Tiffany
Calvin
etc...

I read Luz’s piece over her shoulder while she was writing, and I asked her later, when she was calmer, why she dealt with the situation by writing rather than acting out, her usual response to stress. She said, “I wanted to leave, and I wanted to hit Calvin. I wanted to put them in their place. Writing was the fastest way to get the anger out.” Of course, it wasn’t, but her reasoning reveals a developing sense of herself as part of a community and an evaluation of the possible consequences of her behavior. “I wanted to storm out of the room, but it would make people talk more. If I had a fight or argument, it would make me more upset. Writing is the way I want to express myself without making a show.” Luz, in retrospect, seemed pleased with herself for having found a way to deal with her feelings constructively, and she continued to use writing time in class to explore her often troubled relationships with friends and family.

I could not help thinking that David’s piece was a way of telling us that something was wrong and he needed help, not a classroom exercise in poetic form.

Students like Luz seemed to enjoy using what they called “curses” or “file language.” (File I think, comes from a combination of ‘foul’ and ‘vile,’ both standard parent/teacher expressions for language that many of us find offensive). I could see that it empowered students in some way to use language in their writing that had no place in the official school discourses. Although I have had occasional complaints about this policy, it has always seemed to me arbitrary and hypocritical to deny students use of the same words they hear in movies and on the street constantly, on prime time television in their own homes, and that they use in their own spoken language. This becomes one more part of their real lives that they must leave at the schoolhouse door, but language is not the same as a box cutter, beeper, baseball cap or gum.

We discuss both the effectiveness and the limitations of such language, and the situations where it would
and would not be appropriate. Of course, not every student uses it in every piece; it remains an option of expressive language in certain modes of writing and for particular purposes, just as it is for real writers and real people.

Our school has no budget line for a guidance counselor, and family problems frequently worked their way into students' writing. David, a tiny, furious boy whose mother was rumored in the neighborhood to be a bruja, wrote:

Goodbye

Why did you leave me
Why couldn't you stay
For at least one more hour or maybe a day
I had a couple of tears in my eye
I didn't even have a chance to say
Goodbye
I bursted to cry as soon as you were dead
As soon as I saw you on top of the bed.
I felt your heart it did not beat
I got so mad I stomped my feet
I yelled Mommy Mommy she is dead
Mommy, found on top of the bed.

He said, when he showed it to me and I asked him where he got the idea, "I heard on the news that somebody was murdered and the first three lines just popped into my head. I just continued it because it made sense." David showed it to one friend "because I wanted him to tell me if it was good," but the smirk on his face suggested that he was not unaware of his poem's shock value. I asked David if he would share his poem with anyone else. He said he would show it to the school's director, a frequent family mediator, "because she might be interested," and I could not help thinking that David's piece was a way of telling us that something was wrong and he needed help, not a classroom exercise in poetic form.

Students also negotiated complex problems of sexual identity in their writing by using different points of view. Delia and Joann, best friends, with a shared history of sexual abuse, wrote a series of fictional letters to each other (what their high school teacher will call an epistolary story) as lesbian lovers.

Dear Lisa,
I understand that you don't want me cause you are the kind of girl who wants to be free and have everyone, and I am none of that.
All I ever did was care for you and I'm sorry if that was wrong for me to do.
P.S. I still love you even if you don't.
P.S.S. Hope we are friends.
Your friend,
Paco

Lisa's reply:

Yo,
Baby
I can't say I love u anymore because LaToya's so good she practically sweeps me off my feet. I'm sorry for what I put you through, but you must move on.
Love never again,
Lisa
P.S. LaToya's a much better lover...

The letters cover the span of two years and after the accusations and recriminations, the former lovers reconcile as friends.

This project was a secret. The girls worked by themselves and shared their drafts only with me. I knew I was supposed to be shocked, but since I have always included a selection of gay and lesbian positive adolescent novels in the class library, I was only a little surprised. When I asked, as I always do, why they wrote the piece, they said that they wanted to see what it felt like to be lesbians and this was a way to do it. They would not discuss it further.

All of this writing is fine, colleagues allow, students expressing themselves and all that, but what are they learning? I think that they are learning a lot, but very little of it shows up on standardized tests (except for the State Preliminary Competency Test in Writing, which we treat as a set of writing tasks, each with its own rules and conventions, performed for a particular audience and political purpose). The primary work of adolescence is becoming a person, negotiating an identity between the self and the community. Students know this and are actively engaged in the process every waking moment. School, with its institutional purpose of socialization into a community of shared knowledge and represented experience, and its lack of opportunity for individual decision-making, can become peripheral to what a student perceives as his real life.

Young people need to understand their place in the world. They need to reflect on and imagine their own lives. This is the hidden agenda that they all bring into the classroom. They can be supported in using school structures to accomplish this task of their own making.

continued on p. 32
The Hidden Agenda

(continued from p. 25)

Students want to do well at it. They want to do their best if they have a real purpose. When they decide that a piece of writing is important to them, for a myriad of private and public reasons, they work until the writing does what they want it or need it to do. In the process, they experiment with form, refer to genre models, consider audience, discuss with peers, draft, revise and selectively share their work. They often require privacy, as we all do, and I allow it. I do not always agree with their intentions or effects, and everything is not permitted, but their choices are respected.

I sometimes wish we could put together a school publication with clever poems and nice stories that the Parents' Association and the District Office would approve. But my students have a different vision of what writing is for. By showing me how school can be a place to realize that vision, they have transformed mine.

Nick D'Alessandro, a teacher consultant for the New York City Writing Project, is a school director for the New York City public schools.