And working at that writing showed the children very vividly first, that you could use language to say true things, important things; second, that what you wrote could affect other people, could make them think – it affected me; and third, that you could take time to work at your writing and learn to say things more clearly and vividly. But this can only happen when teacher and pupil – school and pupil, the system and the child – are *on the same side*, so to speak; when the relationship is more like writer and editor, or craftsman and apprentice, and when the aim is to produce something of true value, no matter how long it takes.

Phillip Pullman
Isis Speech, 2003

I. INTRODUCTION

A writer's understanding of the world develops from their deliberate exposure to every source available: research, literature, politics, ideologies, and personal experience. For authors, inspiration and materials are garnered from their own lives, as well as their knowledge of the larger community, and all write from their unique perspective. In high school English classes, where writing is taught, the craft is instead presented as a specialized skill and students are taught to write in an objective style stripped of the personal. Rather than enforcing this aspect of writing on high school students, a small change in the way writing is approached, a change that allows students to draw on all language resources, could make the subject more accessible and meaningful. In this scenario, literature and writers serve as the example and the audience, here students are taught to be *writers*.

All forms of writing strive to develop and communicate ideas, but curiosity and passion should not be left out of the equation when teaching students to write. In the high school setting, where students are first ready to write in-depth about subjects they care about, English class could be presented as a collaborative environment between student and teacher, where writing is a worthwhile endeavor and where the texts are not a hindrance, but rather an area of enjoyment and empowerment. In order to achieve this kind of writing experience in school, it is important to understand the way professional writers operate and bring the lessons they have to offer into the classroom. This study presents the advice authors have about their strategies and techniques for writing, as well as at what educators and educational material emphasize about teaching English,

then examines the differences and parallelisms in an effort to close the gap between the two systems and make the in-school writing experience more valuable and effective.

Based on my personal experience, as a student and a teacher, in successful classrooms and in weak ones, I have observed something of what works and what does not. Over the past three years, I was able to spend time assisting in English classes at my old high school, The Bishop's School in San Diego, California, volunteer at South Eugene High School, and spend last summer teaching at Phillips Academy, Andover in Massachusetts. In classrooms where there is a lack of interest in the material, where students are rushed through projects, where the teacher behaves solely as a critic rather then an advocate, and where students are not taken seriously as writers, when they are, in fact, facing the same struggles and difficulties that professional writers do, students simply do not care about the writing they produce. Without passion and interest, little can be achieved. The classrooms I have witnessed where the opposite was true were places of real education. In these classes, where students were taken seriously as participants in the writing process, they genuinely wanted to improve, and succeeded.

The high school classroom should be dominated by intrigue and when teaching writing, there is much to be said for inspiring student interest and involvement. In order to bring enthusiasm into the classroom, and foster student involvement, writing that overlaps with the students' lives must be increased, especially personal narrative writing. By encouraging students to become practicing writers themselves, they are far more likely to become invested in reading the works of other writers and, following from that, more interested in both literature and composition. By starting with writing, and using readings to give good, stimulating examples, these demonstrations, if

combined with sincere interest, can help students to become better writers, better readers, and following from that, more able to articulate (indeed to understand) their views of life.

In the school setting there has been the move toward argumentative, formal responses that follow a regimented formula of expository prose. This way of writing has been deemed a superior, more reliable means of communication in the academic realm. Yet adhering to the prescribed recipe for argumentative prose removes much of the influence the writer has on the way their ideas are presented; the formula strips away the personal perspective from which the idea originated, and thus detracts from the individual nature of any piece. It is difficult to achieve, while still assuring good communication, but striving for ingenuity allows authors and students to create writing that resonates with an audience outside the school environment. Objective pieces, problem solving articles, expository essays, and formal argumentation can all benefit from a writer's ability to craft compelling, experience-laden prose. Writing from personal experience is not an evolutionary precursor to academic essays, but instead an accomplishment of greater proportion, one that will benefit students both in and beyond the school setting. A personalized approach to the high school English curriculum also provides students with a unique opportunity for self-development, more so than is possible in any other subject. An incremental change in the way writing is taught at this level, by allowing for a focus on the individual, not only results in more capable students, but also in personal growth.

Getting students involved in writing a personal and meaningful way does not mean simply spicing up the five-paragraph essay, it means writing the way Joan Didion

does when she says, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.” Writing, especially writing about literature, is key to understanding our nature and how we relate to the word, how our morals and values compare to those of a larger society. In order to bring this *real* writing into the classroom in a way that allows students to put aside their fear of inscribing cold, hard textual analysis, there must be a supportive environment available for their benefit. Professional writers constantly stress the importance of their physical and mental situations while writing, and any writer should have such a space.

A supportive writing environment is a setting where the student, the writer, feels confident to try something new, to make mistakes, to see the struggle with writing happening around them and to join the fight. The high school English classroom can be such an environment; together, the use of literature and strategies on writing from experienced authors, allows students an opportunity to examine the writing process and gives them an apprenticeship in the field. Once they are interested in writing, the student should be encouraged to practice and practice, to write and write and keep writing, led by the teacher’s example and fueled by insights from their own experiences. This routine, however, is not widely promoted in schools where academic essays are turned in for immediate grading. In order to support student creativity and effort, a shift in the way writing is taught must take in place.

Student writers are not so different from their professional counterparts, and advice from the experts can be a valuable consideration in the high school classroom. Many authors comment on how much time it takes for them just to do a small amount of writing and how hard it is to find those sacred hours in a given day. They talk about

the demoralizing feeling of writer's block and what they do to stave it off. They emphasize the importance of writing every–single–day and about the settings in which they find it most favorable to accomplish this task. They stress the importance of emulating the styles of other writers who went before and the need to be aware, to notice the wonderful realities of the world so that they may write about them. Of course they never fail to mention the necessity of frequent revision with drafts and drafts, editors and more editors. Although these reflections from authors seem perfectly obvious in relation to their profession, the same issues face all writers, especially young student writers, but they are largely ignored in the English classroom. It is worth understanding what authors have to say about writing in order to highlight the differences between the teaching of writing and the practice of writing, and to strive to unite the classroom with the writing room.

In an effort to better to better understand the disparity between the experiences of the writing student and the professional writer, my research was conducted with the following question in mind: "What do writers have to say about writing that teachers, or educational materials on the subject, do not?" By studying the different kinds of texts, those about writing written by writers, and generally for writers, and those written with the educational community in mind, I have been able to identify what ideas are shared, which are different, and suggestions of how to bring the two approaches together. To help in this inquiry, I observed several high school English classrooms, and interviewed students at the The Bishop's School and South Eugene High School.

There is no question about the inefficacy of unmotivated students in classrooms lacking a rewarding challenge. I want to suggest a way to counteract this too-common

predicament so that intended teachers, such as myself, will have a different experience. After conducting research into both the writing profession and the teaching profession, I have developed an approach to teaching writing that is a combination of the two. I focus on authorial experience as a foundation for making a change in the way writing is taught at the high school level so that a natural derivative of the system is individual growth of the student. Using advice from multiple authors, I have discovered that their way of writing is closely aligned with a classroom based on the writing process. To make the issues clear and present my solution, I discuss, first, my concerns with the current school situation, and then detail a classroom writing process based on the way professional authors practice and compose.

II. Current Curricular Issues In the English Classroom

The problem with many English classes seems to be centered on the issue of student involvement. Students are being marginalized in their own classes due to unfamiliar material, testing, and a lack of creativity. The books that are being taught often bear only distant connections to the life of the modern student, and so many high school readers are simply uninterested in the texts. Because students are not connected with the material, there is little motivation for them to care about the text, or, with study guides so easy to come by on the Internet, there is little reason for them to even read it.

The combined lack of interest, and subsequent lack of familiarity with the actual text, results in class discussions that rarely disembark from reviewing plot summary to venture off into the *how* and *why*. As John Willinsky points out in his book *The*

Triumph of Literature, The Fate of Literacy, the repetitive lessons that simply decode plot details "fail to give any indication of how acts of literacy turn people's heads, subvert the hold of convention, wrestle with the sacred and profane" (5). The students then proceed to write essays with only the grade in mind and study their text guides before exams; there is no original thought or investment in the material.

There are always excuses as to why high school students show a lack of interest in improving their writing. Some people blame television, others feel there are simply too many students in the classroom to affect change, but these problems are extracurricular and not focused on what can be done as far as teaching is concerned. There are three main issues associated with teaching writing in high school English classrooms: the absence of engaging material, overly formulaic expectations for writing, and improper use of writing for evaluative purposes.

THE MATERIAL

Henry and Nicole, two eleventh graders at The Bishop's School had the same thing to say when asked what their favorite book was in high school English. They both preferred the literature that connected somehow to their lives. Nicole liked *The Awakening* best because "it was written in an interesting fashion and was relatable." Henry said, "I really enjoyed reading Ralph Waldo Emerson, especially his essay 'Self Reliance,' because it really made me think – not just about what it was saying, but about myself." What Henry and Nicole have to say is important; they found pieces of literature that resonated with their personal experience and those were their favorite readings, so far at least, in high school English. Meaningful texts lead to an enjoyable

experience in English class for these two students and, although rare, this aspect of the curriculum resonated with both of them.

Too often student interest is left out of the equation when determining school curriculum. For example, the *Reading/ Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools* states that "informational reading in the twelfth grade is focused on public documents (e.g. policy statements, speeches, debates, platforms)," and these documents "offer abundant opportunities for students to practice the analytic and evaluative skills described in this standard" (232). The guide goes on to give further explanations of grade level expectations for eleventh and twelfth graders, noting that they should be able to analyze "the philosophical, political, religious, ethical, and social influences that have shaped characters, plots, and themes" (233). It details that they should read eleven pages a day, but never once does it suggest that they should relate this material to their lives, that they should find some personal value in it, or even enjoy the way the words sound on their tongue. An anonymous ninth-grade student at South Eugene High School makes it clear that their problem with the English curriculum lies in the material. He says, "English class is ok; I really like to write. I don't really like to be forced to read a book I don't seem to like – I would rather read on my own." As author Philip Pullman writes, when describing an analogous situation with the standard British curriculum, "They don't seem to know that reading can also be enjoyed, because enjoyment just doesn't feature in the list of things you have to do" (Isis speech).

Enjoyment is not the only thing curricula forget, but meaning as well; architects of standardized educational programs do not seem to understand that reading is supposed to mean something *to* someone. Instead, high school courses tend to have

standardized tests in mind, not students. The California content standards handbook, mentioned before, champions the use of standardized testing for every aspect of teaching English. Tests are to be administered to decide if teachers should move forward with their instruction, if students are able to adequately complete independent assignments, if teaching should be accelerated for some students, or if students are not "achieving mastery" (260). The guide goes so far as to say, "It is virtually impossible to overstate the importance of using performance data as the basis for making well-informed adjustments to instruction" (259). This idea neglects any personal elements within the classroom and reduces the book to a resource only used to pass an exam.

Of course the idea of reading books in pursuit of knowledge is valid and worthwhile, but when Stevens and Musial say "Reading, not any one book, but the great books, enables one to acquire the worthwhile ideas of the human race, the ideas worth knowing on the most important and lasting subjects" (14), I think they are forgetting the value of human experience and the need to connect that experience with literature in order to make any "great book" relevant at all. And they fail to acknowledge the significance of taking pleasure in the exercise of reading and writing. Phillip Pullman reflects, "Any education that neglects this dimension of experience will be a dry and tactless diet with no nourishment in it. People – children especially – need this experience of delight" (Grave). When remembering the standout moments of my own education, the most intellectually stimulating are the same moments as those in which I found the most enjoyment and were the most meaningful.

Educational materials and state standards stress that skills, like the ability to "relate literary works and authors to major themes and issues of their eras," or "contrast

the major literary forms and characteristics of the major literary periods," are what high school graduates should take from their English courses (CA Standards, 233). Skills are stressed rather than accomplishments. But, as Pullman emphasizes about such dry and repetitive assignments, "That sort of thing would make you hate reading, and turn away from such a futile activity with disgust" (Isis). There is no joy or value to be found in exercises that ignore what writing is trying to do, reach an audience, and turns reading into a job. Such regulated requirements fail to incorporate what Henry and Nicole found most compelling about their favorite literature, that material which made them reflect on and better understand their own experience, and in which they found delight.

In the school setting, readings are often assigned in a way that such that students are only asked to decode the piece and retain the factual details. Literature, however, can be brought into students' lives so that it matters and is worthwhile, and this threshold can be crossed through the study and practice of writing. When students write, when they want to write, they are compelled to draw on the literary history that preceded them in order to see the way others did (and did well) what they are attempting now. Because students are so often presented with dull and lengthy readings that they must confront in the classroom in an evaluative situation, a number of students and aspiring writers shirk their studies of potentially helpful literature, and it is imperative that students learn to read for meaning.

Here is an example of what I mean. Pullman heard a young poet give a reading, which he found to be promising, but uninspired. After the presentation, Pullman asked the author what poetry he read and admired. The writer mentioned a few contemporary comic poets and that was all, but he also noted that he did not like the idea of actually

studying poetry because of his experience with it as "boring old-fashioned stuff" (Isis). Pullman was shocked. He reacted to the fact that the poet had turned away from the inheritance of his own craft. In his "Isis" speech, Pullman wrote, "This was what he could claim by right. This was the whole rich, teeming, living world he was heir to; he had a thousand years to draw on, and he knew nothing of it, because no one had helped him see it." So we must find a way to give young writers what they have been granted by the ages in a way that does not bore them, but rather presents the challenge of the unfamiliar. We must get students writing and encourage them with the well of experience stemming from those who tested their pen on the page, just as timidly, years before. But most importantly, the material brought into classrooms must matter to the students who are reading and writing about it so that they are offered the chance, the opportunity at least, to cherish and enjoy their literary studies.

THE EXPECTATIONS

The complaint most often heard about in-school writing has much to do with the way students are asked to write: typically they evaluate, explain, or critique in a pre-determined essay form. We are all familiar with the "five-paragraph essay" that calls for an introduction, three supporting paragraphs, and a conclusion. The idea of sitting down to write such a robotic assignment still elicits an internal groan. The assignments are so structured that the challenge of organizing original thought disappears, and the idea of bringing in any personal connections goes along the wayside too – there is no dedicated place for them in the rigid format. Student interest is of no concern here.

Stevens and Musial champion the critical essay in their text called *The Great Books*. They say that "structured communication is very important" and specifically that "writing gives it to us in a way discussion never will" (66). They determine that the critical essay is the form of choice because it is "questioning, reflective, and argumentative in intent and treatment" (72). It is certainly valuable for a student to write an argument about "what he believes is worthy of other mens' attention" (Stevens and Musial 72). At least it would be if the student was connected and attached to his argument, or if some personal statement was at stake. There is a difference between the formulaic five-paragraph essay and a critical essay of five paragraphs.

Student perceptions and concerns, however, have been completely removed from the standard academic essay that is written in the upper grades of high school. Bishop's School student, Lia, reinforces the fact that student intrigue diverges from their assignments when she says, "since I am writing mostly academic essays I do not have the opportunity to write about my life." Formal structure overrides student inquiry in their writing assignments and, although it does not have to be this way, the general assumption is that teaching students to write removed, structured, critical responses is the best preparation for life after high school that a school can offer. At the level of secondary education, there is so much emphasis placed on readying students for college, on teaching them to compose the essay that will get them through freshman composition class, but when this is the exclusive goal of high school writing, education as an end in itself is not being considered and the opportunity for student growth is at stake. There is value in being able to write paper accepted by the upper levels of academia, or for being able to write an official letter, or an editorial demanding change,

and so on, but being familiar with form should not come at the expense of content. These types of writing should also be addressed, but not before the student knows what it means to write for purpose, for understanding, and this requires that attention be given to the topics that each student finds most compelling.

Eleanor Kutz and Hephzibah Roskelly acknowledge the shift away from student motivated writing topics. They believe that "writing is seldom self-motivated and is seldom seen as a tool of inquiry and learning. And while teachers may begin to observe student processes and patterns in their writing behaviors, writing is almost never the subject of student inquiry" (161). Although teachers may notice surface level improvements, they are failing to do what Philip Pullman finds so rewarding about writing, "to take a risk and write something true and meaningful" (Isis). Instead students are simply getting better and better at adhering to the formulaic structure of an academic essay.

In their book about teaching writing at the middle and high school levels, Jim Blasingame and John H. Bushman emphasize that students "are given assignments that test their inherent writing abilities rather than given experiences in which they can move through the processes of writing. Students generally avoid writing because writing usually is separated from any experiences the students have had" (24). Because writing assignments are designed to test abilities and subject matter in the product-oriented form of an academic essay, it is difficult for students to relate to their own projects. As Blasingame and Bushman point out, in-school writing "is a means for finding out if the students have the knowledge of specific content rather then for encouraging them to write as a meaningful experience in which they can explore their understanding of

content" (24). Kutz and Roskelly write in their book called *The Unquiet Pedagogy* about the detrimental nature of the pressure surrounding formal academic essays. They reveal that,

> Two areas of emphasis in school-bases writing work against fluent processes and against thinking. One is the concern with error and the emphasis on correctness at the surface level of what is written. The other is the emphasis on "correct" structure – on format rather than forming. (174)

Students are more concerned with their essays being "right" than about the content of what they are saying or the larger purpose of the assignment.

Hayley Dickson, another eleventh grader at The Bishop's School, finds that she self-censors her ideas because she is so worried about correctness; her teacher reinforces this perception. Hayley says, "Writing papers for class makes me nervous because I definitely feel pressure to make them really good before I turn them in. Also, I feel like when I go in for help, my teacher will tell me what he wants me to write." Such anxiety often leads students to go to their teachers for guidance, too much guidance in the many cases like Hayley's, and can remove the student from their own project. Even if the material resonates with the students, they may veer away from their ideas in an effort to please the teacher according to his passions instead of their own. Blasingame and Bushman write that when a draft is "given to the teacher for correction," then "the draft and then the final paper often become the teacher's paper" (35). The teacher's position as evaluator makes such a transition natural, but problematic.

The common grading system, with the teacher as the evaluator, is the cause of much student anxiety and as such they do not focus their writing in an effort to produce something of value, but rather for a good grade. Kuntz and Roskelly believe that in

school most "writing is used primarily to evaluate what students have read and learned. And the student is writing to an examiner no matter what the 'assigned' audience might be" (160). The primary focus of writing projects does not focus on the craft itself, but rather the proof of academic diligence they contain. Bishop's School eleventh grader, Henry, sheds light on the expectations of assigned school writing. He says, "writing assignments are designed to test whether or not students are reading. Insight is welcome, just not personal insight." It is suggested that teachers are looking for understanding and perception, but solely as it relates to the homework assignment. Concern for their grades is also enough to keep students from straying too far away from the confinement of the teacher's expectations.

The Use of Writing

Sarah Beck acknowledges the tough position of the teacher's role as an evaluator. She writes,

> With respect to the literacy development, English teachers are caught in a paradox: they must encourage the development of students' individual voices and interpretive stance as writers and readers while at the same time ensuring that students are prepared to reproduce those textual forms, or genres, that serve as passports to the more privileged tiers of our society. (133)

Teachers must demand much from students in terms of both content and form, but they much achieve a careful balance because, as Hayley demonstrated, "the threat of evaluation has the ability to stunt all growth in writing" (McClay 87). Perhaps it is the mutual fear on the sides of both the student and the instructor of presenting the other with something unfamiliar; the teachers feels they are asking too much by brining a student's personal life into the classroom and the student is afraid that a foray away

from the usual critical response form will result in poor marks. Jill McClay ruminates on the dilemma of the teacher's place in the English classroom. She writes,

> we run the risk of forcing students into dead formulaic writing to make our evaluative roles easier: if I don't give you a chance to write about something you care about, I won't risk hurting you. I will, however, teach you that writing is a meaningless activity designed to demonstrate mastery of punctuation rather than communicate with humanity. (88)

Many students feel that writing has, indeed, gone in the direction of *exercise* rather than *meaningful activity* because of the evaluative role it has in their courses.

Eleventh-grader, Lia, says that she finds out "what my specific teacher likes and writes toward that style." And later she mentions that because of this "I sacrifice a little bit of my own personality." Her classmate, Hayley, says that assignments "almost never connect with the outside world or my life, usually the writing is focused only on the books." She goes on to explain how there is very little freedom in her class and she writes, "In school I definitely sacrifice creativity for grades." These students reflect the common perception of a high school writing classroom: that there are strict expectations in terms of the form and content of the academic essay, which often results in a tedious assignment lacking value. Focus is being placed on the acceptable essay-products through constant evaluation and not concentrated on the important aspect of helping students become better communicators of matters close to their hearts.

A necessary aspect of this failure is the lack of time given to revision. When I asked my sister how much revision she did for her school papers, Laura, also an eleventh grader at Bishop's, replied, "I do very little revising of my papers and rarely even read them over completely through after writing them." I can attest that she is an extremely diligent and motivated student; it is not the effort that is being withheld, but

instead the lack of time students are given to finish their assignments. About her papers Laura said, “I would revise and probably rewrite most of this year’s papers, but most of them were written in a hurry because I ran out of time.” Her classmate, Henry, echoes Laura’s claim when he says, “In my experience, not much time is put into the revision process. Schedules are often so hectic that teachers just want to move onto the next book. Therefore, we just spit out an essay and turn it in.” Although teachers ask students to proofread their work for spelling and grammar mistakes, it is rare that full revision is demanded or expected. And with modern spell-check, students don’t even have to read their papers through to have “proofread.”

Jim Blasingame and John Bushman also recognize the trend of revision-less writing in the school setting. They write, “Teachers frequently tell students to look over their writing before handing it in, and that is about the extent of revision for some students” (34). Proofreading, however, is not substantial enough revision. Revising a draft is much more like a partial rewrite than an exercise in copyediting. And it is during the process of re-considering a central idea or introductory paragraph for the second (or seventh) time that a student learns to improve their writing. Blasingame and Bushman agree; noting that students who take time to do a true revision “think through a piece of writing in order to revise the original into something better and thus become better writers” (35). Wish such cramped time restraints and high demand on a formulated, polished product, high school students aren’t given the opportunity to really learn from their own writing.

In-school writing is both practical and extremely worthwhile if treated with the

care it deserves. Kutz and Roskelly highlight the values of helping students put pen to paper when they say,

> Writing extends the process of thinking and making sense of the world and of communicating that sense to others. In writing, students express ideas that are important to them, tell stories they want to tell, speculate, solve problems, and discover questions. Writing can do things that oral language can't do, and that's one reason we emphasize it in the classroom. (171)

Student writing is capable of all of these important functions and yet so many high school teachers treat it with nonchalance. High school students are expected to know how to construct basic sentences and prove a point on paper, so teachers use their writing assignments to evaluate student knowledge of in-class content. Blasingame and Bushman note, "As a result, student writers see themselves as putting together a product to be handed into the teacher, and the writing is sterile with no personal feelings attached to it" (25). But school writing can be so much more – it has the potential to matter to students a great deal. When I was given the chance to write, to really write the way authors do, it was the single most meaningful part of my high school academic experience.

Philip Pullman promoted the idea of bringing teachers and students together in an effort to achieve a meaningful writing experience in his Isis speech in April 2003. He said,

> And working at that writing showed the children very vividly first, that you could use language to say true things, important things; second, that what you wrote could affect other people, could move them, could make them think – it affected me; and third, that you could take time to work at your writing and learn to say things more clearly and vividly. But this can only happen when teacher and pupil – school and pupil, the system and the child – are on the same side, so to speak; when the relationship is more like writer and editor, or craftsman and apprentice, and when the aim is not to pass a test but to produce something of true value, no matter how long it takes.

As an author and an educator, Pullman understands the need to give students the same advantages afforded professional writers, including the same advice, understanding, and respect. Most importantly, Pullman stresses, "Make this be the golden rule, the equivalent of the Hippocratic oath: *Everything we ask a child to do should be worth doing*" (Isis). Bringing the writing life into the high school classroom is at least one way to make English class authentic, valuable, and truly meaningful.

III. Writing To Care

If we are only going to ask students to do things worth doing, then we must understand why getting them writing is in any way valuable. The entire student writing process is important, and not just because they will become better communicators or more proficient students, though it will do that, but because writing and reading literature has the ability to give students significant understanding about themselves and the world. Like the writers they are becoming, putting words on paper changes a pupils view of their surroundings.

Authors recognize the influence writing has on their lives. Anne Lamott says writing "can get you to start paying attention, can help you soften, can wake you up" (13). Writer Annie Dillard embellishes Lamott's idea; she says, "We still and always want waking. We should amass half dressed in long lines like tribesman and shake gourds at each other to wake up; instead we watch television and miss the show" (73). Together, they believe a greater appreciation of the world can be gained by writing

about it. As members of society, we all desire this perception and can benefit from the connection. Lamott explains, "good writing is about telling the truth. We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are" (3). These two writers focus on what there is to gain: a heightened awareness of the world and greater insight into our own existence. High school students are fascinated by their growing understanding of the way the world works and should have the opportunity to write in a manner that connects them to their own lives. In fact, writers of all ages are curious to discover more about their existence; as André Aciman says, "I write to find out who I am" (3).

Writing about our world in an exploratory way is a far cry from content standards, which demand that "students should demonstrate full knowledge of the basic elements of discourse (e.g., audience) as well as more advanced literary devices, such as irony" (CA standards 233). The authors just mentioned are not talking about developing rhetorical skills in a detached setting, but instead, they are searching for elements of consequence and trying all types of ways to convey their ideas to others so that someone may "recognize his or her life and truth in what you say, in the pictures you have painted" (Lamott 225). The author Roxana Robinson explains why she writes when she says, "With each story—and by story I mean anything I write—I am trying to work something out for myself" (193). If students are allowed to take part in this inherently meaningful activity of self-understanding, they will feel they have learned and accomplished something.

Anne Lamott takes this idea about the significance and value of writing and extends it to reading. For the student, the connection may never have been made, but as Lamott writes," becoming a better writer is going to help you become a better reader,

and *that* is the real payoff" (10). This bettering takes place if students are engaged in improving their writing and then, "in their ardent analysis of one another's writing, become much better readers" (Wolitzer 268). Becoming a better reader is so prized because of what literature has to offer. Anne Lamott writes,

> Books help us understand who we are and how we are to behave. They show us what community and friendship mean; they show us how to live and how to die. They are full of all the things that you don't get in real life—wonderful, lyrical language, for instance, right off the bat, And quality of attention: we may notice amazing details during the course of a day but we rarely let ourselves stop and really pay attention. An author *makes* you notice, makes you pay attention, and this is a great gift. (15)

This gift is what is available to every student if presented with the opportunity to connect to writing, to the language and what it has to say. Teaching writing should be focused on the goal of making a class exactly that worthwhile.

Writing can illuminate reading in a new way, and the converse is also true; reading is so often the inspiration for writing. Author William Sontag confirms, "Reading usually precedes writing. And the impulse to write is almost always fired by reading" (226). The two dimensions of the English classroom—writing and reading—are symbiotic and must be treated as such. Instead of reading literature and writing response papers, where literature is the priority and writing serves to solely to examine texts more carefully, let the two support each other. And let writing happen first.

A connection with writing gives reading an entirely new perspective. Texts are no longer just about the plot line, or the meaning behind a moment of irony; a reading writer is aware of the way an author changed his or her tone between paragraphs and appreciates the choice of words used to make a sentence sing. A reading writer can

connect on a more intrinsic level because they understand the effort that went into choosing each word. Lamott writes,

> Becoming a writer can profoundly change your life as a reader. One reads with deeper appreciation and concentration, knowing how hard writing is, especially how hard it is to make it look effortless. You begin to read with a writer's eye. You focus in a new way. (233).

What Anne Lamott is touching on is the dramatic alteration in reading that occurs when, instead of rushing along to see what happens next, the reader is captured by a sentence that is so perfectly rendered, so beautiful and apt, that he or she must write it down in order to admire it later and emulate the style. There is a new pleasure to be found in the hunt for striking prose and soft poetry.

Writing gives students a more profound connection with reading and the connection can serve as a gateway for student involvement in both. Unfortunately, this transition does not happen in most high school English classrooms. Blasingame and Bushman observe,

> Too often students see no relationship between the writing products they read—such poems, narratives, short stories, novels, plays, essays, and various forms of nonfiction—and the writing products they create. They fail to think of themselves as writers faced with the same writing tasks—replete with the same challenges inherent in each genre—that the writers of the works they read faced. (68).

But students do face the same challenges, the same fears of inadequacy and frustration of an empty page, and they must be afforded the same respect provided to professionals when they face the identical, daunting task of writing something down with the hope that somebody else might find it valuable.

IV. Writing From Experience

The first challenge is finding something to write about, and after that, writing becomes about conveying a personal and important message in a compelling way. But first a topic. Anne Lamott is explicit about this point, she says, "Write about the things that are most important to you" (108). This may be a story from the past, but also a sentence that reverberated in a reading assignment, or an argument over a moral issue. As Lamott emphasizes, "To be a good writer you not only have to write a great deal but you have to care. You do not have to have a complicated moral philosophy. But a write always tries, I think, to be a part of the solution, to understand a little about life and pass it on" (107). Passion and knowledge have always been connected and student writing is no exception.

Somehow passion must be a part of the writing classroom, so that the writing students do matters to them and, fundamentally, to others. Blasigname and Bushman agree; they talk about the need for students to write about their experiences. They say,

> We have thought for many years that experience (ownership) is one of the factors in good writing. Students must write what they know or what they have learned through research. The evidence is quite clear that when writers write about their personal experience, or at least about knowledge they have secured, their writing is much better. (26)

Confidence and understanding of the topic allow students to move past the fear of being right (since it's *their* experience) and onto working at saying something that matters. It is vital that we allow students into their own writing or else we risk them "folding away their own dreams of 'being writers' as they write single-draft 'academic' essays for their own professors who, long ago, folded away similar dreams" (Bishop 67).

Authentic, personal writing can be done in the school setting and by expecting students to let their lives and knowledge influence their work, assignments can change from removed academic papers to a meaningful and worthwhile pursuit.

A course built around the ideal of authentic in-school writing demands goals larger than simply expecting student to demonstrate an understanding of the material. Objectives should look beyond the syllabus and seek to establish writing techniques for students to apply in multiple areas of their lives. Expectations, however, should be realistic and it is important to consider that "a course may only *begin* a process of writing change that may not be manifest until after a course has ended" (Bishop, 9). For this reason, in-class goals focus primarily on the practice or process of writing rather than a definitive product. Wendy Bishop suggests the following course objectives.

- Students will take responsibility for their own writing and view themselves as writers.
- Students will develop a more efficient and effective writing process.
- Students will learn to critique their own and other students' work, and participate supportively in peer writing groups.
- Students will develop flexible writing strategies which allow them to write in a variety of writing situations.
- Student writing will improve, and students will make fewer errors. (Bishop 9)

A concrete step in the writing process can be attributed to each of these goals. It helps students identify as writers, for example, if student work is published after completion. The prewriting and drafting part of the process will make the developmental stages more efficient and the language more effective. Giving and accepting critique, of their own drafts and those written by others, is beneficial for the reviewer's understanding of strong writing and necessary for the student receiving the revision. And experimentation, especially through the emulation of professional authors, encourages

the development of flexible and varied writing strategies. The writing process, combined with these course objectives, allows for a student experience that transcends the time spent in a high school English course.

V. The Writing Process

The purpose of establishing a writing process is to mirror realistic and professional methods, rather than propagating uninspired academic responses to assignments. The writing process is just that: a movement from one place to another, made possible by continuous, hard work. The result of this process is a meaningful body of student texts and the strategy is practice with lots of revision. To accomplish this, students must be given time so that their ideas develop, expand and change as their writing tightens and accrues style. This is the way authors write. And it's a struggle. About the method, Annie Dillard says, "you break your back and then and only then is it handed to you" (75). But this process turns out to be full of redemption. As Anne Lamott says, "the act of writing turns out to be its own reward" (xxiv). For the students, this way of writing is invaluable. Jill McClay explains, "it teaches them the power of writing – a power we can only learn by experiencing it. In this context, the quality of their writing is not as important as the struggle to express and craft ideas of importance" (84). Students are learning, and they need to make mistakes as they grow as writers.

Authors highlight their struggle and stress the need to keep writing even though all writers "will have days at the desk of frantic boredom, of angry hopelessness, of wanting to quit forever," but authors also know "there will be days when it feels like

they have caught and are riding a wave" (Lamott xxix). Anne Lamott goes on to say that most beginning writers expect to see brilliant metaphors drip from their pens immediately and feel frustrated when that doesn't happen. But she knows that, like her; they might achieve those reverberating sentences they so desire "if they just keep the faith and keep practicing. And they may even go from wanting to have written something to just wanting to be writing… because writing brings with it so much joy, so much challenge" (xxix). Lamott speaks from experience both as an author and as a workshop leader, guiding hopeful, aspiring writers, and she has witnessed the enjoyment writing can bring. High school students are rarely asked to struggle and practice as Lamott demands of herself and her apprentices. If they were, however, students would be granted the opportunity to achieve the great reward of being able to effectively and perhaps even beautifully, express ideas that matter.

Wendy Bishop comments on the need for students to adopt professional writing process strategies. She equates students with writers when she says,

> Writers need time to explore their ideas, to push and challenge received thinking, to experience the many frustrations *and* rewards that professional writers experience. They need to write *often*, with support and feedback, in a variety of genres and styles. (47)

Such an authentic writing experience allows student writing to develop using the same method suggested and followed by authors: that of continual, *non-graded*, practice with time given for development and much revision. Like writers, students must work through ideas by thinking about the concepts seriously and also be given time for ideas to arrive and mature.

This writing system assumes student passion, or at least a willingness to dedicate a substantial amount of effort to the course. In many high school scenarios, this may be absent, but Blasingame and Bushman find that the interest follows the writing process naturally when students are given the opportunity to care about their work. They write about teachers who have changed their teaching methods to reflect the writing process and report that those teachers

> have found that student writers seem to have a clearer purpose in their writing with fewer errors. They believe that students have a much more caring attitude about the writing than they do. Teachers realize that in process writing, students start, stop, and start again; and they write about what interests them. (26)

It is worth noting that the writing process "also includes attention to the importance of experience" (Blasingame and Bushman, 26). The process itself is an experience, but the nature of a dedicated writing endeavor demands student experience be involved at some level. A lengthy and detailed project requires expertise of subject matter, at least. If students are invested on the level of subject matter because it is their personal experience or understanding, this interest may expand to all aspects of writing.

Writing from personal experience is not a developmentally premature style of writing, but rather a strong, passionate form used by all authors, even though it is sometimes perceived as underdeveloped because the style is not used at the upper levels of academia. When writing, authors draw on any and all material available to them, especially personal experience. Students should have access to this resource too; their writing does not need to be presented in a stripped down form. Asking students to take part in this kind of thorough and detailed learning is valuable in terms of their lives and academic experience. The writing process provides a solution for the three major issues

facing the high school writing classroom: students are engaged on a personal level with the material and the project, the actual writing allows for flexibility, and evaluation does not rest on a single product, but rather a commitment to the product over time. In the following section, I will elaborate on the writing process, its connection to the methods used by professional authors, and the benefits of applying this process in the high school English classroom.

The Pre-Writing Stage

The first part of the writing process involves moving ideas from the brain to the page; it's called pre-writing and once ideas are written down, they are always available. Pre-writing is about harnessing the ideas that make writing possible, the realities that we notice and deem worthy of contemplation. Several authors note that this phase of the writing process is necessary, that good writing must include aspects that strive to understand the human experience and connect to the larger world. Pre-writing is the author's tool used when establishing that connection. Annie Dillard demands that writers strive to thoroughly consider the world around them. She urges,

> Push it. Examine all things intensely and relentlessly. Probe and search each object in a piece of art. Do not leave it, do not course over it, as if it were understood, but instead follow it down until you see it in the mystery of its own specificity and strength. (78)

Her quest for understanding that takes place before she writes reverberates in her literature, in the richness and confidence of her prose. To write with a personal knowledge of the subject is to write from experience, and the importance of that cannot be overemphasized – especially in student writing.

Students do have experience, a base of knowledge, but like authors, they must seek to expand it. Author Annie Proulx says that when she is attentive to the world around her, she sees signs, "not direction signs but the others, the personal messages. We live in a world of signs" (189). The signs she speaks of are connections, links between people that can be found "all around us, in public restrooms, in phone booths, on rocks, stapled to telephone poles, stuck on lawns" (Proulx, 189). Taking the time to notice these intricacies of life and *writing them down* isn't a regular part of our daily activity and although it is a difficult habit to adopt, noticing and incorporating "fabulous realities" makes writing resonate.

Richard Ford commiserates with the struggle surrounding the constant need to pay attention when he says, "what seems hard about writing may not be what you think. For me what are testing are the requirements of writing that make a sustained and repeated acquaintance with the world an absolute necessity" (70). Succeeding at establishing a strong connection with the activity of the world, however, assures that the writing will make the communication leap from the author's pen to the reader's heart. Writing that is able to cross such a bridge is strong and true and meaningful – exactly what classroom writing should strive to be. Authors know what makes their writing worthy of attention from their peers and students should too. Asking students to reflect on the world and their experience allows for student growth and meaningful prose.

Pre-writing is a vague notion, but for the purpose of a high school classroom setting, it means keeping record and making notes about the fascinating eccentricities of the world. Authors research and seek to understand a topic fully before writing, so students should be given time to push, search, and examine. Compiling a resource from

which to write greatly eases student anxiety about writing and also assures more developed prose. Blasingame and Bushman emphasize the benefits of pre-writing in the English classroom. They write,

> Many times students bring to the writing process a negative attitude, almost a fear of writing. The prewriting component seems to help students understand the process and ease their fears and frustrations about writing. During this time, students being to realize that while writing may be hard work, it can be fun. (27)

The idea that pre-writing allows students to enjoy the experience of writing is essential. In this part of the process they make discoveries, find themselves excited by the connections and develop a greater appreciation for what happens around them. If this is their foundation, they cannot help but write from a position of genuine interest. Already a student moves from removed academic assignments to meaningful and personal communication.

KEEPING A WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

The next part of the writing process goes under many names: drafting, journaling, experimental writing, and, for some, it is still called prewriting. It is at this point where pen comes in contact with paper and ideas are let loose to fly freely across the page. This is where writing happens and interpretation comes later.

Authors comprehend the need to write freely everyday and educators have recognized the value also. Blasingame and Bushman say, "Journaling and experimental writing enables students to establish fluency in writing" (30). When students write in a journal every day they can test various writing styles, play with ideas, and experiment

with form until they find a characteristic voice of their own. It is also a place for emulation.

Many authors get into a routine with their journal that involves reading and writing every day. The act of copying admirable portions of text allows students of the craft to learn from the writers that preceded them. Author Mary Gordon uses the journal technique to get started with her writing every day. She explains the meditative way she moves from one journal to the next, reflecting on writing she likes, "copying in one's own delightful penmanship the marks of those who have gone before" (83). And what she copies is also an act of learning and understanding. She says, "Into the notebook I'm using for the fiction I'm writing, I copy paragraphs whose heft and cadence I can learn from" (82). She devotes herself to journal writing before composing to get her mind and body prepared for the work that follows. Besides the preparation journal writing provides, close understanding of technique and strategy are also beneficial results. Author Nicholas Delbanco, who teachings using emulation exercises, has seen "remarkable" results from his college students who use the tool and he writes, "To engage in imitation it to begin to understand what originality means" (43). Such a technique is rarely practiced in high school English, but when it is included as part of the curriculum, writing is no longer a task, but rather an opportunity.

Learning from author's tried and tested ways of writing is invaluable to the beginning writing student. The journal is a place to copy down meaningful and well-written paragraphs in an effort to comprehend the rhythm of good writing. A writer's journal should contain both emulations of admired sentences and paragraphs, first copied and then practiced in the student's own words, and reflections about the meaning

of such pieces. Of course, original student writing should also make up a large portion of the journal.

My eleventh grade English teacher, Mr. Steve Brown, was – and certainly still is – a great proponent of the writer's practice book. In a syllabus from the spring of 2004, he assures students that keeping a writing journal full of copied passages, emulations, and reflections, "Is one way to 'exercise' your language skills and so develop more awareness of how language works." He also recognizes that "Many of us unconsciously imitate writers we have read all the time; the practice of keeping a practice book makes this process a little more conscious and a little more systematic." Every day in Mr. Brown's class begins with journal writing of some form, and usually it involves copying and then emulating the author's style or writing a reflection on "fabulous realities," fascinating moments students recognize in the outside world and then write down. Outside of class, Mr. Brown asks that students continue similar work on their own. They must write a certain number of pages by hand and one receives high marks on the journal section if "you have worked diligently, respectfully, and with great attention to detail on these exercises."

Bringing the writer's notebook, with a focus on practice, into the high school English classroom varies from the typical product oriented approach and instead allows the writing process to take precedent. The practice of working diligently in a journal moves the ideas from prewriting into equally exciting, well-composed sentences and paragraphs. Students can try different approaches and be proud of discovering the one that works. Author Stephen King asserts that by practicing writing paragraphs, "words stand a chance of becoming more than mere words" (129). He goes on to emphasize

the importance of a well constructed paragraph saying, "You must learn to use it well if you are to write well. What this means is lots of practice; you have to learn the beat" (129). The writer's notebook allows for this kind of rhythmic learning to take place.

Authors stress over and over again the value of practice, simply practicing the art of putting words together in a way that successfully communicates an idea. Anne Lamott says, "So much about writing is about sitting down and doing it every day, and so much of it is about getting into the custom of taking in everything that comes along, seeing it all as grist for the mill" (151). Author William Saroyan echoes her statement when he says,

> How do you write? You write, man, you write, that's how and you do it the way the old English walnut tree puts for leaf and fruit every year in the thousands… If you practice an art faithfully, it will make you wise, and most writers can use a little wising up. (210)

So many people believe that writing cannot be taught, and if that is the case, then surely those people believe that an art can be practiced and that practice can make a person better, sometimes even really good. Following the advice of these authors that practiced and seceded, it must be realized that, like other things in life, continual practice yields impressive results. Giving students time, both in and out of the classroom, to practice writing can only help them grow in their confidence and fluency.

Another vital element of the writer's journal is the way that it allows for mistakes to be made. So much of school-based writing is about achieving perfection in pursuit of an ideal final product. Instead, the very nature of journaling is the opposite, it demands that students try, fail, and try again using different approaches. Author Anne Lamott says, "So go ahead and make big scrawls and mistakes. Use up lots of paper.

Perfectionism is a mean, frozen form of idealism, while messes are an artist's true friend" (32). She champions the value of practice and the fact that practice inherently involves trial and error, so in the same breath, she continues with, "what people somehow (inadvertently, I'm sure) forgot to mention when we were children was that we need to make messes in order to find out who we are and why we are here – and, by extension, what we're supposed to be writing" (32). The journal gives students the opportunity to make huge mistakes and discover what they can do with their writing. It is an exciting and rewarding process.

According to the author Nicholas Delbanco,

> No one presumes to give a dance recital without having first mastered the rudiments of dance, to perform Mozart before playing scales or to enter a weight lifting contest without first hoisting weights. Yet because we're been reading since the age of five, we blithely assume we can read; because we scrawled our signature when we were six, we glibly aspire to write. (47)

High schools seem to think that students know all there is to know about writing after they leave the cocoon of elementary school book reports and the formula centered middle school writing years. While high school students may be adept at placing words next to words to get to the four-page requirement, they are not achieving the standards that thoroughly practiced writing can reach. They can compose, but they cannot *write*.

Blasingame and Bushman have noticed this difference between writing styles in the classroom and realized the value of continual practice. They believe in experimentation where "students are given the freedom to write whatever is important to them at the time without concern for grammatical correctness" (31). According to these two researchers, such an experience liberates the students in the same way it

liberates authors: it allows them to connect to their writing, understand their message, make mistakes and get better. They write,

> Students see a chance to personalize their writing; they begin to see that they do have something to say. It is a time to experiment with structure as well as content. Also, perhaps most important of all, it enables students to write frequently, a necessity if fluency is to be achieved. (32)

Even at the most basic level, journaling does an important thing: it gets students writing. At a more advanced level, students are able to grow in confidence and ability as they establish themselves as writers. Such an activity touches on several of Wendy Bishop's objectives as students take responsibility for their writing and ideas, develop strategies, and become more effective communicators. Most importantly, students are engaged in the activity and, since journals are not graded for content, they are not under the constant threat of evaluation.

THE WRITING PROJECT

Besides journal work, students work toward larger, more long-term projects. Writing can be done in short drills, such as those author Anne Bernays uses, which focus "on isolated elements of the craft, like dialogue, plot, point of view, characterization, revision, language" (25). These can be done separately or used to work toward a larger, more meditative piece. The reason for quick, focused exercises is because "about half the students battle is learning basic skills, while the other half involves tapping into imagination, memory and a singular view of life and the world, a view no one else shares until you put it into words" (Bernays 25). Accomplishing such a lofty task can be nerve racking, but students are able to handle small portions at a

time. By asking them to formulate sections that are strong on their own, a larger piece naturally follows.

I will not focus on the subject of classroom writing here because it will vary so greatly from course to course, but I do want to emphasize that any writing assignment, be it a response to literature or a personal reflection, should connect to student experience. In this way, and only in this way, may students be asked to commit themselves to a formidable writing project in a way that matters and is worth doing. Here is a brief example of a meaningful project similar to the one Mr. Brown gave his class last September. After reading *The Things They Carried*, by Tim O'Brien, and after students have already emulated and reflected in their journals, a larger project may be proposed. The project would involve researching a particular aspect of the Vietnam War, interviewing and reflecting on the interview with a participant (or non-participant, as the case may be), establishing and understanding any personal or family connections, and bringing another piece (or pieces) of literature (poetry, prose or song) into the larger work.

An assignment like this one takes time…and lots of notes. The journal becomes an essential part of such a project. Students must be given opportunities in-class to work on the writing, in addition to what they do at home. But by breaking down a project into reasonable portions over a decent amount of time, small, short pieces can emerge that mean a lot to both the writer and his audience, be it the class, family, school, or larger community. For this type of assignment, grading is as much focused on the effort put into the project and the improvement demonstrated as it is on the success of the piece, but this will be discussed in more detail later. Again, this is only

an example, but it does connect to the larger ideas of establishing a link between student and material, allowing for authentic and meaningful work, and avoiding evaluation anxiety by focusing on the process.

Revision

Writing projects like this one rely heavily on the idea of revision and writing conferences, an essential part of the writing process. Students are expected to go through several revisions as they develop their writing assignments, which involve meeting to discuss their writing with peers and their teacher. The revision that takes place is not only proofreading, rather it involves serious consideration concerning the purpose of the piece and how well it is communicated. All authors face the challenge of critique—and students must too, but instead of being faced with the judgment of a grade at this stage in the writing process, students should be given help and advice from all angles. This critical aspect of the process demands that students and teachers be on the same side, the student as the apprentice, the teacher as willing editor.

Contrary to the current expectations facing high school writing students, that they turn in magically illuminating single-draft essays, authors always, *always,* write multiple versions before deciding on a final draft; students should be given the same opportunity. Anne Lamott writes about her enthusiasm for revision, saying, "the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts" (22). It's comforting for students to know that "All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts" (Lamott, 21). Furthermore, she emphasizes that the perfectionism demanded by so many academic situations is an

inherently adverse to a writer's goals. She says, "Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life and it is the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft" (28). As writers know, drafts must be written, mistakes must be made, and the world must keep on turning regardless.

It is difficult for students to feel at ease with the idea of making mistakes and trying new styles when they are being graded on the final product they produce. A classroom in which drafts are expected, even demanded, helps to alleviate such anxiety when a student knows that even the completion of multiple drafts is highly regarded. Wendy Bishop adds that

> In a draft-oriented classroom, student drafts become familiar. By the time a teacher reads a mid- or –end-of-semester portfolio, he is looking at well known student work and making a holistic judgment about writing quality and writing improvement. (30).

Not only should the students feel relieved, but also teachers should feel more comfortable about the idea of grading both process and product.

Another anxiety-relieving aspect is all the help students can expect to receive from the teacher and their peers. The peer writing group or writing partner is a natural part of the professional writing environment and, when brought into the classroom, equally as important. Students provide helpful suggestions to one another and also, "Learning to critique other students' work helps a writer learn to step back from his own work and evaluate it" (Bishop 11). Most importantly, however, all writers "need attention. They need someone to respond to their work as honestly as possible but

without being abusive or diminishing" (Lamott 155), and peer writing partners can provide this individual critique.

Writing partners exchange drafts and provide comments they believe will be helpful to the writer in exchange for the same effort in return. The critique should highlight both what dies and doesn't work, give suggestions about areas than can be cut or where more is needed, and discuss ways to make the writing stronger (Lamott 163). Pointing out problem areas *and* well-written areas allow a writer to understand what aspects of their writing communicate best to others. It also helps if the reviewer can explain what they were thinking or feeling when they arrived at one of these highlighted sections and talk with the writer about the intention of the text to see if writer and reader are in agreement. When participating in this sort of discussion, it is important to remember that "Responders must not tell the writer what words they would use but must let the writer find out on his or her own" (Blasingame and Bushman 54). Another essential part of the conference is to establish what the piece of writing, as a whole, is about and discuss how well the author conveyed that message. In a multiple-draft classroom, a student writer has the opportunity to conference with peers several times and work with one another's writing until they are confident that the writing is strong and a clear purpose is established. And all this is done in "a non-threatening environment in which to explore and take risks" (Bishop 11).

Of course, such writing group strategies do have drawbacks. Training students to be peer editors takes time and they may be reluctant to assume such a role (Bishop 16). Those who are overzealous in their critique must be reigned in and learn, in the wise words of Anne Lamott, that "you don't always have to chop with the sword of

truth. You can point with it, too" (156). If students are uncomfortable with their partners, or a partner is unreliable, writing groups can, and will, fail. They are a waste of time if not all members are equally involved. In order to prevent this kind of disaster teachers need to remain highly involved with each of the groups or pairs. They must be vigilant and aware of what is happening in an effort to hold students accountable for their participation. Over time, however, Wendy Bishop points out that most writing partners "develop a strong group identity and sense of shared community" (21) where students hold one another responsible.

Teachers act as a resource for peer writing groups, but are also heavily involved with the individual students through teacher writing conferences. Such meetings aren't comprehensive, "but rather interactions designed to address problems or obstacles a student-writer is faced with mid-process and must resolve or overcome in order to move forward" (Blasingame and Bushman 56). Teachers, who must be experienced with writing, are able to draw on their experience and serve as knowledgeable resources for students. In the drafting stage of the writing process, teachers do not occupy the position of evaluator, but instead are editors and reviewers fully invested in helping students improve their writing. Requiring teacher-conferences mid-process provides the teacher a window in which to interact directly with student writing, rather than merely commenting on, or after, the fact. In Mr. Brown's class, for example, students are expected to meet with him for a writing conference at least once during the course of each project, but multiple visits are welcomed and rewarded. As he writes in his Spring 2004 syllabus, "I will evaluate you on your participation in and attention to the writing process" (3). The journal work, peer, and teacher conferences display the amount

attention given to the process. Teachers must keep in mind, however, that their voice carries definite weight and need to be careful not to make a student's paper their own. They must know how to interact with different students so that this doesn't happen and stress the fact that all the suggestions they make really are suggestions and not requirements.

All authors go through the difficult, lengthy, and sometimes frustrating act of revision. About her writing, Joyce Carol Oates says, "My method is one of continuous revision" (171). And author Susan Sontag enjoys the rewriting portion of the process after she has taken care of the "formidable" task of writing. She calls revision "the warm part when you already have something to work with, upgrade, edit" (224). For authors, as if should be for students, the act of revising is not merely proofreading, but rather facing the piece as a work in progress that has the opportunity to get better and better through meticulous reconsideration. Revision is when the effort is poured in and work gets done after the long period with blank pages to fill has passed. It is time to ask the question, "if I can get it to this point the first go-around, without too much struggle, could it be better still?" (Sontag 224).

Many students get to this question, but because of time constraints or indifference, they ignore the obvious answer—yes. If teachers encourage their students to view their writing not as assignments, but as meaningful projects, and give them the time and consideration needed to make them so, a different attitude might emerge. Blasingame and Bushman write that teachers should

> Emphasize to students that writing is an artform, something of beauty, something worthy of admiration. Teachers must convey to students that writing is worth the time it takes to do it well. The underlying assumption here is that if

> students care about their subjects and audiences—if they make their own choices and achieve ownership—they will care about writing and, subsequently, about revising. (35).

Focusing on student revision is key in the English classroom, but it is also a worthwhile ability that extends to all other subjects as well.

PUBLICATION

When a writer is satisfied with their piece and ready to call it finished, the natural step forward is publication. They have worked hard to craft a piece and now they get to share. Anne Lamott calls publication "the acknowledgement from the community that you did your writing right. You acquire a rank you never lose" (215). And she goes on to say, "that knowledge does bring you a quiet joy" (215). Authors seek an opportunity to be published their whole lives, yet working toward publication is not usually a part of what happens in school. Quickly completed academic essays are not something most students would want to publish anyway. The writing discussed in this paper, however, and by that I mean meaningful, crafted, and carefully revised work, deserves the recognition of publication—even on some small scale.

The act of working toward publication in general asks for a more devoted effort from the student, one they want to give if a wider audience of others will be reading their writing. Blasingame and Bushman note, "Certainly one way to help students see the importance of their writing is to publish it in some form" (35). With publication, students are able to witness the ability their words have to affect others and influence an audience. Wendy Bishop is very interested in connecting her students to audiences outside of the class. She wants students to "work on papers that relate to other lasses

ore real life concerns" and then "reinforce the reality of such audiences" through publication (12). In her class, "students will be encouraged to publish in the school newspaper or mail letters written about subjects of concern to them; that is, every opportunity for publishing student work formally or informally will be encouraged" (12). Students may seek publication through in-class writing collections, displayed online and in print, school literary magazines, the school newspaper, as mentioned, as well as local, state, and national publications. Besides recognized media outlets, there are several national literary magazines specifically for young people that target student writers. The reason for going to such lengths to help students display their work to others is in part to reward students for their investment, but also because, as one recently-published teacher realized, "recognition is a very important part of the writing process" (McClay 84).

Assessment: The Writing Portfolio

The final stage of the in-school writing process is evaluation. I have put off the topic until now because I want to emphasize what can be achieved in student writing without it. Still, high school students need grades on their report cards and although publication should encourage a dedicated writing effort, grades are, most likely, a more realistic motivator. Student assessment should not rely solely on the completed final product, though of course that is a key factor, so I will examine the portfolio as an alternate method of evaluation. The portfolio showcases process, improvement, and product in addition to promoting student responsibility so that "evaluation goals match class goals" (Bishop 25). The portfolio, in conjunction with the level of participation in

peer and teacher writing conferences, creates a grading procedure that supports a student's genuine effort to improve their writing.

By the time they reach high school, students are well versed in the idea that graded work is important work and anything eels is unnecessary. When evaluation signals so much, it denotes important aspects of a course for students. To put it bluntly, when "writing is not evaluated, it is not important to students" (McClay 87). Evaluation, however, does not necessarily mean writing needs to be graded. The writing process described in this paper is evaluated all the way through, but not given a grade until the end of a prescribed term. Evaluation happens on a variety of levels several times in the process; with each paper, the student writer is receiving considerable, valuable, oral and written commentary from class peers, tutors, friends, and teacher" (Bishop 27). This type of process assessment removes the teacher from the strict role of evaluator and they can be seen as a proponent of writing, a resource for students. Sarah Beck reminds us that the purpose of assessment is "to show what progress students have made in becoming fully literature writers, readers, and speakers" not to show "what schools have accomplished with their instruction" (143). A writing portfolio is an explicit way of emphasizing to students that the teacher is focused on their progress and not school rankings. Wendy Bishop writes,

> In this classroom, the teacher works as both advocate *and* evaluator, helping writers select and represent work for end of semester evaluation in the portfolio. And when student work is "published" in this manner, writers can take pride in their own maturity of expression. (25)

The portfolio portion of the assessment is where the student displays the evidence of their progress ad reflects o their improvement. It includes their writer's

journal, all drafts – including peer comments, and final versions of their pieces. Of course teachers can adapt this model, for example, by asking students to showcase what they believe is their best work, with an explanation about why they chose it and what makes it so strong. In addition to these portions of the portfolio, a student should be asked to write a letter of self evaluation and reflection including, but not limited to, what they did well, what they can continue to work on, and how well they achieved their goals.

The goal setting aspect of the portfolio is a result of student teacher conferences throughout the course where teachers design "individual goals *for* and *with* each individual students" so that they become more adept at evaluating their own writing. (Beck 143). Asking students to work toward their own goals and evaluate their portfolio places the students in a position where they are held accountable for their own learning. This takes a weight off the teacher's shoulders who, in a standardized testing environment, "carry a majority of that burden (Bushweller, 1997)" (Blasingame and Bushman 99). Moreover, instead of basing student achievement on their success in a conventional standardized test that bears no resemblance to what they have been learning, the portfolio evaluation method allows teachers to be informed by every aspect of their learning: their discussion, participation, effort and writing (Beck 133).

Portfolios themselves are instruments of learning and serve multiple purposes. In the very act of "compiling a writing portfolio, student writers learn that revision is a long-term, recursive process" (Bishop 25). This becomes apparent to students because portfolios "show process as well as product, they create a collection of work, they are useful to review instruction, and—maybe most important—they show a student's grown

over time" (Blasingame and Bushman 99). Students emerge with a concrete collection that displays the work they put into the course in a form that represents the entire writing process from journaling, experimentation, and drafting to revision and final draft. Responsibility and improvement are highlighted elements by the request that they display *all* their work, and even the evaluation becomes a worthwhile aspect of the writing process by the reflective nature of the portfolio.

The drawback to the portfolio evaluation system is they amount of time it takes for teachers to review all parts of the project when faced with a large number of students. Hopefully a teacher is accustomed to the contents of the portfolio through conferences and drafts, but responding to a body of work in a way that respects the enormous effort students have put in is going to require a substantial amount of time. Wendy Bishop explains the process of evaluating a portfolio,

> For each student, a teacher will read the portfolio drafts carefully, review other portfolio materials briefly, and respond a.) to the portfolio as a whole and, b.) if used, to the writers letter of self evaluation. (27)

Bishop also notes that she responds to her students "in writing" (10).

If responding this way, a teacher must dedicate a considerable amount of time to evaluation and they could use some advice. Bishop suggests "designing a one-page response sheet" (28). In that way, a teacher could organize their response and reply briefly to categories such as "an overall response to writing development," "suggestions for improvement," a response to the self-evaluation, and a grade "with a few sentence explanation" (Bishop 28). Also, by collecting portfolios a few weeks before the term ends, teachers have more time for reading and students are not feeling too much pressure from other classes. During the time left, students may "be refining their 'best'

essay for the outside reader, preparing and 'publishing' a photocopied 'class book' of peer chosen and edited writing from each student, and so on" (Bishop 31). Teachers can also choose to schedule end of term conferences with their students and hand portfolios back in a staggered way (Bishop 31). There's no doubt that an evaluation method of this sort requires great attention from the teacher, but students deserve this respect after putting forth such an effort themselves.

VI. The Role of The Teacher

Asking students to take part in the writing process means that teachers take a more attentive role in the classroom. It helps if teachers see themselves as fellow writers, learning with the students, albeit with more experience. By writing alongside students, teachers are able to lead by example and gain credibility. McClay explains, "Teachers are encouraged to consider themselves as writers who 'live between the lines' (Caulkins, 1991) and who model such a writerly life for their students, creating a celebratory writing community in their classrooms" (82-83). Student anxiety is reduced when they can relate to their teacher not solely as a detached assignment-giver and evaluator, but instead as a writer like them, a learner like them. Wendy Bishop expects teachers to be "seen as a coach or resource for students" in a classroom focused on developing the writing process.

For a teacher to be a valuable writing coach and an experienced resource, he or she needs to practice writing; they need to understand the craft they champion. McClay clarifies, "Teachers need to develop their voices in teaching as well as in writing in

order to help children develop *their* voices in writing" (83). Doing so makes the classroom writing experience more authentic in every way: teachers and students are emulating, to some degree, a professional writing workshop. Moreover, teachers remain connected to the difficulties facing their students as they write, and both parties maintain a respect for the effort each are putting in.

Respect is crucial in all teaching situations, but especially in a writing workshop scenario where the focus is placed on putting in the time and effort to create something of value. Anne Lamott recognizes the importance of balance in the relationship between writer and responder. She says, "I don't think you have time to waste not writing because you are afraid you won't be good enough at it, and I don't think you have time to waste on someone who does not respond with kindness and respect" (170). Writers, teachers and students in this case, need encouragement "to keep their hand moving across the page" (Lamott 171) and this comes in the form of treating each other with the seriousness and consideration granted professionals.

Maintaining a professional writing environment also requires upholding high standards. Teachers should demand extraordinary results. Even professional writers sometimes "aspire to an art of no mistakes, a low aspiration" (West 255), so teachers must provide an environment where mistakes are not only acceptable, but an expected part of the writing process as students strive to create noteworthy work. With high expectations and leading by example, the teacher's role becomes one of coach and mentor working with the students and pushing them to do their best, just as professional writer would expect from their dedicated editor. High school English students are beginning writers, but by asking them to assume the role of professionals, and treating

them as such, teachers can create authentic writing environment where serious work takes place.

VII. Conclusion

It is clear that a better understanding of the writers' writing process illuminates the complexities of the endeavor in a way that can improve upon established teaching techniques. An awareness of the professional process helps us understand what students need in their writing, which is, most notably, a lot of time, supportive coaching, and encouragement. Students should be granted the opportunity to proceed in the writing process in the same way authors do, starting with pre-writing and journaling, moving on to drafting, then revising, with writing-conferences conducted with their peer editors and teacher advisors, and finishing by preparing a work for publication. If the effort is treated with this level of attention, students will be able to see themselves as writers and not view in-school writing as a series of assignments, but rather opportunities to practice and perform. Students are then able to take responsibility for their writing, become invested in their projects, and focus on improving their abilities as a craftsman, rather than spend their time dwelling on the eventual evaluation.

The way writing is taught in high schools now is driven by the concern teachers have about making sure students succeed on standardized exams or preparing them for university-level writing classes. Teachers try to move through large amounts of material at a fast pace, demanding frequent formulaic responses, which are treated in such a way that students are more rewarded by the grade than the substance of the

writing they produce. The topics are often remote, the exercises are canned, and students are not compelled by any part of their encounter with language and literature.

The writing process, however, as described by authors and educational researchers, allows for a classroom writing experience that promotes the development of the individual voice. Learning from the professionals makes it clear that writing is not practiced outside of the classroom the way it is taught within. The anxiety for authors is about substance and style, rather than amount of material covered and grades. They learn by practicing and by taking the time to get it right, to communicate their ideas clearly and effectively.

Phillip Pullman explains that writing is not just a skill, a quick response, but an entire method, learned the way one learns to fish at night. He talks about the hugeness of the sea and the fear that exists in setting out on it in a little boat for the first time in the dark. He goes on to talk about all the things that might discourage forever the inexperienced fisherman, like a sudden change in weather, the appearance of an unknown sea creature, or the lack of a bite at the other end of the line. But he also talks about the growth of the night fisherman, how he can learn to cast where the best fish are and discover subtle tricks to bring fish to the bait. This is how we learn to write, he argues, with patience, and practice, and seriousness, and the guidance of previous fishermen. We cannot neglect any portion of this process, especially learning from the experts. By bringing the writing process into the classroom, we enable students to learn to fish with the guidance of experienced fisherman, rather than sending them to sea alone. Not to do so seems perverse; we owe it to students to teach them to write in a way where they can succeed.

Because high school students must also be prepared with the body of knowledge necessary for participation in life beyond the campus, and for some, the academic world of the University, there are, of course, limitations and performance requirements for the high school classroom, but increasing students' passion, about a crucial subject that many seem to be letting pass by the wayside, seems vitally important. As John Willinsky writes, "With many students, [English class] is, after all, the first and sometimes the last time such a literary experience takes place, if it takes place at all," (1). This literary experience is crucial for the high school student – and not only for academic reasons.

Writing matters on an intensely personal level and there are definite rewards for practicing the craft. As Kurt Vonnegut explains, "The primary benefit of practicing any art, whether well or badly, is that it enables one's soul to grow" (224). Anne Lamott reinforces this statement when she talks about the results of working hard to accomplish a meaningful piece of writing. She reflects on her own experience when she gives this piece of wisdom to beginning writers,

> You are going to have to give and give and give, or there's no reason for you to be writing. You have to give from the deepest part of yourself, and you are going to have to go on giving, and the giving is going to have to be its own reward. There is no cosmic importance to getting something published, but there is in learning to be a giver. (203)

As an accomplished writer, she perceives the difficulties and frustrations that lie in the path of achieving a meaningful result, but she is also aware of the fact that the product is not the most important consequence. For the high school student, simply learning the art of working through the stages of a valuable composition process, helped by peers and advisors, while they assist others at the same time, is a worthwhile experience. It is

a valuable educational experience, and a valuable life experience as well. If everything we ask a student to do in the writing classroom is something worth doing, something that improves their capabilities and understanding, then the purpose of writing in the high school English class transcends academia and can be a worthwhile aspect of the students' world, which, after all, is the purpose of school in the first place.

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