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Illinois Association of Teachers of English

IATE is a professional organization for teachers of English/language arts. IATE publishes the *Illinois English Bulletin* and the *IATE Newsletter* and hosts an annual fall conference. IATE is organized by districts throughout the state, each district having a district leader and providing local activities to members throughout the year.

IATE also maintains standing committees that address a number of professional interests and works with other professional organizations to further the interests of teachers. Composed of over 1,000 teachers throughout the state, IATE provides a working network for the exchange of teaching tips, current research, and professional development as well as enduring friendships.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

A LONG WAY TOGETHER II: INTRODUCTION TO THE *ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN* 106.2–3 (SPRING-SUMMER 2019)

JANICE WITHERSPOON NEULEIB

NCTE's website describes Nick Hook's *A Long Way Together*: "With a participant's seasoned insight and a historian's perspective, J. N. Hook has developed an engaging and accurate chronology of NCTE—from its inconspicuous birth in 1911 through its influential maturity in 1978." I remember reading Hook's book when I first joined IATE in 1974 and being amazed at his staying power in NCTE. As I write those words, I smile since I have spent the years since 1974 deeply involved with IATE, probably more deeply than Nick was with NCTE. These forty-five years have seen many changes and many challenges. What follows here is not at all a history but rather an autobiography of my years with IATE.

I was teaching high school at United Township in East Moline when I decided that I needed to take a year off and

earn an MA degree. My only knowledge of IATE came from my high school English literature teacher when I joined her as a faculty member at UT in 1966. She urged me to get involved with IATE. I did not follow up with any more than joining NCTE and IATE, but then I came to Illinois State University "just to get an MA and go back to teaching." The department encouraged me to stay on, and I quickly trundled off to the U of I to add a PhD to my credentials.

At the same time, two past presidents of IATE, my new colleagues, took me off to my first IATE conference. They also quickly encouraged me to join the executive committee. Needless to say, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. Before I knew it, I was chairing the Site Committee (deciding on the location of the each future year's conference), presenting at the conference, and becoming program chair—a position that would lead me to the presidency of the organization. If I had known how much work and responsibility I was taking on, I might have hesitated, but I was flattered to be asked and somewhat young and clueless.

The conference the year I served as program chair was held in Champaign–Urbana, and I remember little of it except for asking my former colleague, Gail Hawisher, to be the lead speaker. She kindly accepted and became a part of our honored series of prestigious presenters, a list that has continued to expand over the years. The conference went well, but a year or two later, the University of Illinois decided that it could no longer host and support IATE. The leadership decided to ask Illinois State to take on the support of the organization. They came to our chair (who also was my frequent co-author and co-presenter), Ron Fortune. He found a way to invite IATE to come to ISU as its home and to be supported here at ISU through a variety of financial mechanisms. I was too naïve about budgets in those days to understand what magic Ron

had worked. I know now that he moved many administrators and budgets to make it happen.

Not so long after that, the University of Illinois *Illinois English Bulletin* (the journal of IATE) editor resigned from his post. I took on the role of editor in 2004 and have continued for the last fifteen years. Over the years, we have done several special editions including conference presentation essay collections, graduate class essays with special editors, and National Writing Project Summer Institute essays. The journal has continued to engage teachers from all levels and feature many professional connections as contributors.

The titles of articles my colleagues and I (before I became editor) have published in the *Bulletin* over the years testify to the moods and modes of the times:

"What a University Writing Course Really Looks Like." *Illinois English Bulletin*, vol. 87, no. 2, 2000, pp. 13–31. With Claire Lamonica.

"Grammar Games: Words at Play." *Illinois English Bulletin*, vol. 87, no. 2, 2000, pp. 57–66. With Maurice Scharton.

"The First Nine Rooms: Computers and Writing at Illinois State University." *Illinois English Bulletin*, vol. 86, no. 2, 1999, pp. 4–10.

"Clyde S. Kilby, Gracious Scholar." *Illinois English Bulletin*, vol. 84, no. 2, 1997, pp. 15–20.

"Multiple Ways of Making Meaning: Using Music, Math, and Motion in Writing Workshops." *Illinois English Bulletin* vol. 83, no. 2, 1996, pp. 32–49.

Illinois English Bulletin ,vol. 79, no. 2, 1992. Guest editor.

"The Rhetorical Situation of the AP Writer." *Illinois English Bulletin*, vol. 78, no. 2, 1991, pp. 31–41. With Maurice Scharton.

"The Creative Process in Prose Fiction: Connecting Writing and Literary Studies (An Overview of the Project)." *Illinois English Bulletin*, vol. 76, no. 1, 1988, pp. 5–8. With Ron Fortune. Peer reviewed and adopted at an NCTE offering.

"Fantasy Literature: A Resource for the Unimaginative." *Illinois English Bulletin*, vol. 70, 1983, pp. 7–12.

"Sentence Combining as a Composition Technique." *Illinois English Bulletin*, vol. 66, 1978, pp. 1–7. With Irene Brosnahan.

Over the years, IATE has struggled but survived valiantly—sometimes facing personnel changes, financial challenges, and professional waves of a variety of sorts. We have, however, not only survived but thrived. This year's fall conference showed a particular revival of energy and enthusiasm with the amazingly organized and enthusiastic Carrie Thomas as program chair. The eagerness of presenters and participants promised an exciting future for IATE.

At last year's National Council of Teachers of English conference, I was saddened to learn that the federal government had not renewed the National Writing Project's funding for this current year. Thus this year, both NCTE and IATE local sites, such as the one here at Illinois State University, have found themselves without grant money from the Writing Project. Thus IATE and NCTE members had fewer opportunities to participate in summer institutes. That sad news made the IATE fall conference even more important to members.

Of course, the *Bulletin* will continue to serve all IATE members. Let me here add an informal call for papers (in addition to the regular invitation) and class outlines and plans. The *Bulletin* needs your writing even more than ever since the support for professional conferences is at an ebb nationally.

I congratulate you all on these decades together and encourage you to send your lesson plans, creative pieces, classroom descriptions, literary essays, and all other works that will speak to your fellow teachers in Illinois. We still have a long way to go together.

SERVICE-LEARNING SPACES: A RICH ENVIRONMENT FOR GROWTH AND UNDERSTANDING IN ENGLISH EDUCATION PROGRAMS

ELIZABETH A SCHURMAN

Service learning is currently a popular practice in education and one that I continue to find myself attracted to despite critiques about its value and limitations. While I agree that service learning can be a contentious pedagogy because of the risks involved, including tarnishing relationships with community partners or reifying stereotypical beliefs, I maintain that service learning projects can be invaluable for teacher education programs for both candidates and local schools. Specifically for my English education candidates, they have provided opportunities to build relationships with students and embody roles that they may not have otherwise in more traditional practicum experiences. These

types of projects have also proved to be beneficial for local organizations and schools because of the knowledge and skills the pre-service teachers bring to the endeavor. Most importantly, I have found that service learning projects can provide spaces for groups of students to get to know and learn from one another.

While I have found that service learning as a pedagogy does have merit, I want to be clear that the value rests on the careful and deliberate planning of the project in collaboration with those with whom one wants to work. In doing so, I have found three resources to be especially useful in providing standards, resources, and even networking opportunities for those interested in these types of projects. One of those organizations is Campus Compact, a coalition of over 1,000 colleges and universities committed to "building democracy through civic education and community development." Another is the National Youth Leadership Council, whose mission is "to create a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world, with young people, their schools, and communities through service-learning." Finally, Edutopia, a comprehensive website and online community created by the George Lucas Educational Foundation and dedicated to "innovative, replicable and evidence-based approaches to helping K–12 students learn better," provides several specific ideas and examples of projects that "boost civic engagement in students and help them to take initiative to strengthen their community." While standards for quality practice in service learning vary slightly depending on the context, in general, the following characteristics are often emphasized: (1) Meaningful service, (2) Link to the curriculum, (3) Reflection, (4) Collaborative and mutually beneficial partnerships, (5) Promotion of understanding of difference, and (6) Sufficient duration and intensity to meet specific outcomes.

The specific project I want to share is a collaborative book club project between a local high school English teacher and three English education students at a small Christian university located in the suburbs of Chicago. The idea for the project came out of a conversation with Mrs. Carlson (a pseudonym), a local high school teacher who has frequently worked with our English education students in the past. She was describing a challenge she has had with implementing book clubs into her junior interdisciplinary English and history class. She believed there was value in having her students study literature, history, and politics via book clubs, but she also felt like the book clubs never fully met their potential because the high school students often became disengaged with the topics and texts while she was meeting with the other groups. Her idea was that by having the college students each manage a group, it might maximize the benefits of book clubs in general and her students' engagement with the topics and issues specifically. For my English education students, I was interested in finding out how the experience would affect their understanding of curriculum, instruction, and students.

The Book Club Project

We decided that the English education students would commit to spending one hour on Tuesday mornings for the duration of ten weeks. They would lead two different book clubs: the first using historical fiction over World War II—the time period the students were studying—and the second on political perspectives. The English education students would first "pitch" their novels to the class and then lead their groups through the reading—creating a reading schedule, daily activities, and appropriate assignments and assessments along the way. Throughout this experience, the education students worked closely with Mrs. Carlson, who gave them quite a bit

of freedom in choosing activities and assessments, as well as with one another as they shared ideas that "worked" with their groups of students.

Data was collected at the completion of the ten-week project. I was also able to observe the book clubs in action during two of their sessions. Three English education students participated in all, and at the completion of the project, they wrote a reflection in response to prompts asking how the project influenced their perception of curriculum, instruction, and students. Then, they were interviewed about their experience responding to several of the same questions. For this specific project, data was note-coded using any type of qualitative data analysis software; however, the participants were able to speak into the themes and feedback throughout the process, and two of the three participants presented with me at the 2016 IATE conference. The four of us, including the classroom teacher, worked closely and collaboratively on that presentation and throughout the project, data collection, and interpretation. While the three candidates reported on several areas where they believed they grew as a result of the project, the most notable themes were in the areas of their knowledge of students, pedagogy, and teacher identity.

Learning Spaces

Knowledge of Students

One of themes that was most clearly apparent in the candidates' responses was how much they learned about each individual student with whom they worked. They specifically contrasted their experience with the service learning project with other practicum experiences they had completed. Karen noted that the project helped her to "become comfortable working closely with students consistently rather than simply observing or teaching a couple of lessons in a regular

field experience." Oftentimes in practicum experiences, candidates have little one-on-one interaction with students. They frequently observe, are oftentimes invited to help with group discussions or other activities, and usually teach a lesson or two. However, in these experiences, candidates mostly remain in a position of *learner* or *helper* rather than *leader*. When candidates do have leadership positions, they are often working in a whole-class setting. As helpers they may have occasional or brief opportunities to interact with students one-on-one, but they do not usually have the benefit of managing and connecting with the same small group of students for a longer duration of time. In general, they get to know a little bit about a lot of students rather than a lot about a few students.

As my students became more comfortable in their teaching spaces and with their group of students, they began to prioritize individual students' interests, knowledge, and contributions. Karen said that the project taught her "how much high school students enjoy talking about themselves and their life experiences," adding that her group "had several great discussions when we read through and discussed our book for the political stance literature circle concerning family, expectations, and worldviews." Another candidate noted the importance of implementing a project where every student's perspective and contribution is valued, stating, "Every student received individual attention and was able to have a voice in each group." Also considering the roles that students play in group discussions, Rebekah focused on the challenge of creating a more democratic environment where students are encouraged to participate and even lead discussions: "This project made me realize that is very easy to do most of the talking in teaching—it can take practice to know how and when to ask the right questions and let students

discuss and 'take control.'" *Knowing* how important it is to encourage students to participate and strategies for doing so was not something new for these candidates, but having the chance to practice it with real students week after week was. Their knowledge took on new life when applied to an authentic context.

Along this same theme, candidates shared how much they learned about the importance of learning about students' "family, expectations, and experience." This is an area that we frequently discuss in teacher education classes, of how important it is to really know students' backgrounds and abilities, but candidates generally have limited opportunities before student teaching to actually do so. Two of the three candidates commented that the project "taught me a lot about cultural awareness." Another student discussed how her knowledge of students helped her to differentiate instruction appropriately, stating, "I tailored these questions at different levels in order to involve the entire group of students. I had to note the various levels of participation of the different students and find a way to even that out." As the candidates got to know the students better each week, they often discussed ideas for drawing in students based on their interests and abilities. By working with smaller groups, the candidates were able to be intentional and strategic with activities and discussion questions to try to get everyone to participate. Ellie talked about a situation with a specific student whom she tried to get to participate and the challenges he faced in doing so, recognizing that this will be something she will need to be attuned to in the future.

> A learning experience for me involved one of the students in my lit circle. [The teacher] told me that he had gradually been opening up more, but would never read aloud in class and was not quick to offer his insight in discussion. This

> student was drastically below grade level in reading and was embarrassed to do so in front of his peers. [The teacher] explained that he tended to mumble and act disinterested because he was embarrassed. He hesitated to offer answers in class at the risk of appearing less intelligent than his classmates. I know that is a reality for many students, but interacting with this student and hearing his perfectly valid and thoughtful remarks in discussion really drove the lesson home for me. I will definitely be watching out for students with similar circumstances as I move on to student teaching and then classroom teaching.

Pedagogy

A second theme that emerged from the candidates' reflections and in the interviews was related to pedagogy, specifically opportunities to bridge the gap between theory and practice. While candidates do have practicum hours throughout half of the program, these experiences often offer few opportunities to fully plan and implement a learning segment or unit. Instead, in practicum experiences, candidates may get to teach a handful of classes—some of which they have freedom in designing, others of which are determined by the classroom teacher. With the book club project, the candidates were able to plan the activities and assessments for the entire novel. The teacher also gave them the freedom to design the assessments and grade them. Ellie describes the value in this experience:

> I was just taking my General Methods and Assessment class that semester, and this was a chance for me to create an assignment using objectives and to also create a rubric using standards. (And then I got to grade the assignment submissions using the rubric!) I was able to see lots of exciting connections between my class and an actual teaching experience.

Karen also commented, "Being able to create discussion questions and activities for the students was very helpful for me." Rebekah noted the usefulness of planning the activities and assessments in preparing her for student teaching, commenting, "This was a wonderful first step towards my student teaching and teaching career. It went a long way in preparing me. As aforementioned, this was my first time creating and grading a real assignment."

In the interview, the education students also generally discussed the value in having the "freedom to fail" in regards to planning and figuring out "what worked and didn't work." The education students shared that they tried assignments and activities that they may have been more hesitant to try in a whole class setting because they were working with a smaller group of students and a group that they had gotten to know well so had an idea of how each member of the group would respond. A specific example of this was with Ellie, who tried one of the days to lead the discussion "off the cuff" and found that she did not have enough planned to fill the allotted time. She reflected later, "Having a written guide handy was a lifesaver." Like with their knowledge of students, the project helped the candidates to reframe their current understandings of pedagogy in the context of an actual classroom. It gave them an opportunity to test their knowledge, so to speak, and in a lower-risk environment.

Teacher Identity

Teacher identity is something those of us in teacher education often expect students to develop, and it's something we often address in theoretical and philosophical ways by having students write their teaching philosophies or support their strategies with theory. But candidates have few opportunities to reevaluate or revisit these constructs when they brush up against counter narratives in their lived teaching experiences.

What often happens in our own program is that students write a teaching philosophy during their freshmen year in the program, which is often idealistic. That teaching philosophy then contrasts starkly with their revised philosophies after the completion of their student teaching experience. By the time candidates graduate, they tend to have a more deeply rooted teaching philosophy and embodied teacher identity, but this is an area in general that is often underdeveloped in teacher education programs and one that is crucial to their future success and attrition in the field.

This is an area where candidates reported on their growth and one that I witnessed firsthand during observations at the site. During the first couple of sessions with the students, the candidates were more tentative in their leadership and implementation of activities; one student in particular shared the challenges she was having with keeping her students engaged the entire time; another struggled with what to do when students did not complete the assigned reading. My students shared with me how they organically formed a kind of support group, sharing ideas for how to get more students to participate in the discussion or assess student understanding. They became their own mini-learning community where they felt comfortable sharing challenges and victories in their groups.

The students also noticed that the project strengthened their confidence in the classroom and with students. Karen commented that project was "very helpful for me in developing my skills and confidence in a classroom setting." Ellie also referenced the benefit of the project in helping her to become more comfortable in her teaching space, stating, "The idea of actually teaching became much more tangible and even more exciting for me." Rebekah captures their responses well in regards to embodying the role of a teacher, stating "Mainly, I began seeing a high school more as my future than my past."

By the end of the project, I would have thought I was listening to experienced teachers talk about their profession. The candidates knew their students well, had a list of strategies that "work" within the context in which they were teaching, and were aware of their own strengths and challenges as future teachers. They also seemed more comfortable reaching out to ask for help from one another or other teachers when they needed it. The conversations were ones that I'm used to having with candidates once they are in the midst of their student teaching experience but not usually before that.

Conclusion

As has always been the case with service learning projects I have implemented to date, I found myself beyond pleased at how much my students had learned as a result of participating. I saw my students grow in meaningful ways that would continue to benefit them throughout the completion of their student teaching experience and into their first year of teaching. This is the reason why I remain committed to service learning work and encourage others to consider it. I have always found local middle and high school teachers and organizations that are happy to work with my students and have always found the experience to be valuable in ways that I had and hadn't expected it to be. These types of projects can strengthen students' knowledge and skills as they work towards future goals and aspirations, but they also can help show candidates how easy it can be to invest in their local schools and communities, which is something that I hope they carry with them into their own lives and classrooms.

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NARRATIVE-DRIVEN ASSESSMENT

DAVID HANSEN

This article looks to explore the concerns surrounding the functionality of student evaluations of their instructors and courses in higher education by putting Cultural Historical Activity Theory, cybertexts, research regarding decision-making skills, and game studies in conversation with one another. I will examine what statisticians and educational experts feel are weaknesses of the current standard quantitative evaluation models, and consider what aspects they feel are most useful in order to accurately form a meaningful dialogue between students and administration that gauges in-class experiences. Since these student evaluations are a genre of writing, I will consider their trajectory and examine where there are breakdowns between the intended purposes and what data is actually being collected.

By looking at how these texts move through the world, we will see how student assessments can be viewed as a

co-constructed pedagogical writing genre developed between a department's administration and the students involved with the evaluation. Administration asks linguistically focused questions to seek prescribed information in order to evaluate an instructor's performance, students send back primarily quantitative data, and administration constructs a final narrative of performance based on their interpretations of the received numeric information. This request for feedback from students in order to form a cohesive co-authored narrative parallels the mechanics involved with the evolution of tabletop role-playing games and conversations about assessment within game studies and media theory. These games began as numeric, quantitative sets of comparisons between two opposing forces and evolved to encompass a more linguistic-based qualitative assessment of characters and situations. This evolution came about as game players demanded more immersive and complex narratives that better reflected the nuances inherent in their characters. The evolution of game mechanics reflects the same changes many educational experts suggest for student assessments and suggests a potential new form of qualitative language-centered narrative as assessment. Based on these mechanics, I will offer a potential new form of student assessment which I call Narrative-Driven Assessment. It builds from the strengths of tabletop role-playing assessment structures and circumvents many of the issues raised concerning current higher education practices. This format will allow for the optional inclusion of a quantitative element should colleges still require it.

Starting in the 1980s, there has been debate over the effectiveness of quantitative student evaluations in determining instructor effectiveness. According to studies conducted separately by Peter A. Cohen and Kenneth A. Feldman there was evidence of "small-to-moderate correlations between SET

(Student Evaluation of Teaching) ratings and student achievement" (Uttl, Bob, et al.) and that quantitative assessments by students yielded valid data in determining the qualities of instructors and their classroom environments. However, new research published by Philip B. Stark and Richard Freishtat, faculty members of the statistics department at the University of California, Berkeley, was unable to replicate the data from those earlier studies and discovered that the "findings were an artifact of small sample-sized studies and publication bias" (Uttl, Bob, et al.). They state that the studies are too small and do not account for outside influences such as individual classes comprised of either high achieving students or ones populated with struggling students. They conclude that quantitative SETs "are a poor measure of teaching effectiveness" (Stark, Freishtat). In response to these findings several scholars (Uttl, Bob, et al., Lawrence, Stark, Freishtat) suggest a more dialogue-based, qualitative approach should be used to "provide information about why or how teachers may improve their practice" (Haefner). Additional scholars such as Adler and Proctor, Fenwick, Lyman, and Stivers add weight to this argument, each emphasizing that students need to feel that they are being actively and accurately listened to; otherwise, they disconnect from the communication process. Since language is already "an arbitrary connection between words and the ideas or things to which they refer" (Adler, 179), further encoding of meaning from symbolic language into a 1–5 numeric value can cause people to perceive an additional wall between themselves and their intended meanings, offering additional opportunities for miscommunication.

Looking at CHAT as shaped by Dr. Joyce Walker, we are given seven categories for consideration: Production, Representation, Distribution, Reception, Socialization, Activity, and Ecology (Walker 160). For the purposes of this essay I will be

limiting my scope to Production, Representation, Reception, Socialization and Activity in regards to SET as a genre. As Walker states, "Instead of an author/speaker and an audience, we can see a whole mob of people whose hands and brains and intentions and tools shape texts as they come into being and are used (that's Production, Distribution, and Reception)" (Walker 162) Looking at SET as a genre, we see how student evaluations are a combined effort between multiple parties. It begins with the Production of a list of baseline questions devised by a department in order to gain insight into an instructor and their course as seen through the experiences of their students. These forms are physically Distributed to students who take them and add content by answering proposed questions based on a 1–5 scale with an option of adding additional comments. This ties back to Reception where we can see "how the text is taken up and used by others" (Walker 162) in that they are not seeking answers but are instead providing them. These texts are then returned to the department where the replies are evaluated based on the numeric representations and whatever comments are included.

In exploring Activity, "the actual practices that people engage in as they create text" (Walker 161), we see an institution select and write out questions they feel are pertinent to assessing an instructor's classroom impressions. The main core of the activity begins when students take the text as given and essentially complete it by replying to the questions and filling in the scantron sheets. Once the Activity of responding is engaged, students then answer a series of focused questions, ones related to instructor assessment and also to course design, application, and personal assessment of their preparedness for the given material. This shifting of focus within a related, but not singularly focused series of questions places the SETs within the rage of texts called *ergodic*, which I

will return to and explore the parameters of shortly in order to explain why this may be a hindrance to the usefulness of this form of assessment.

When examining SETs in regards to Representation in CHAT terms, we can see how "all people involved in the life of a text can have different understandings about what the text is supposed to be and do," (Walker 161). Through this lens a potential disconnect may be seen between the institutions crafting the assessments and the students who complete them. Institutions are, purportedly, looking for a comprehensive assessment of an instructor and their course. Research conducted by Dr. Daniel Kahneman, an expert in psychology of judgement and behavioral economics, suggests students may instead be using the SETs to comment on their feelings of *that moment* rather than a means to deconstruct their teacher's skills across the semester. I will return to the importance of Dr. Kahneman's work briefly.

Returning now to CHAT, an additional level of Socialization is added into how "interactions and understandings between people and institutions can have incredibly strong shaping effects on what can actually be produced in a given moment in time" (Walker 161). The communication between an institution and its students gives the impression that the trajectory of the SETs allows for a meaningful discussion of strengths and weaknesses between institutions and students. However, the delay between the formulating of the questions by the school and the distribution to, interpretation by, and replies from the students can cause miscommunication.

By applying CHAT towards the analysis of SETs as a genre one can began to see how SETs are not meeting those purposes. Reading the works of Kostecki (2012), Sannino Annalisa, et al. (2009), Van Oers et al. (2008), and Walker (2010), I have come to the conclusion that SETs are actually gathering

a heuristic answer rather than a target answer, one that is potentially overly simplistic and misleading (Kahneman 97). Returning back to Dr. Kahneman and his work on psychology of judgement and behavioral economics, a heuristic question is "a simple procedure that helps find adequate, though often imperfect, answers to difficult questions." An example Kahneman (2011) gives would be asking a target question of "How happy are you with your life?" and getting a heuristic response more in line with, "What is my mood right now?" In his book about perceptions and their influence on thinking processes, Kahneman points out that it is easier for a person to understand and report on their current mood rather than analyze their ongoing pattern of emotions over a period of time (Kahneman 98). In short, Kahneman finds people will often automatically make a simplified judgement and response to a question that requires more complex analysis. This is what is termed an act of substitution: "the operation of answering one question in place of another" (Kahneman, 97). In my analysis, this corresponds to the notion that students answering quantitative SETs may not be responding to the questions being asked but rather are giving a simpler 1–5 rating of their emotions about that teacher *at that moment* rather than a comprehensive critical analysis.

With this substitution of a heuristic answer for a target one in mind, it is probable that the intended Reception, "how a text is taken up and used by others" (Walker 160), of SET is at odds with its applied Socialization, i.e., when "people engage with texts, they are also (consciously and unconsciously) engaged in the practice of representing and transforming different kinds of social and cultural practices" (Walker 161). In addition to CHAT analysis of the trajectory of and interactions with the SETs, we must also look at how the structure and wording of the quantitative questions

allows for a "narrow frame" of aspects being looked for in an instructor. A "narrow frame" is "a sequence of two (or more) simple decisions, considered separately." In contrast, a more effective form of complex analysis is a "broad frame," which is "a single comprehensive decision with (four) options" (Kahneman 336). Having students attempt to answer a series of qualitative questions by using quantitative measures, a 1–5 rating model, narrows and oversimplfies the scope of inquiry, thus reducing the amount of pertinent and meaningful data accumulated for the original stated purpose (Stark and Freishtat, Kahneman). I suggest this impacts both the Reception as well as the Socialization of the SETs and alters their usefulness. In short, college departments are looking to understand the effectiveness of their teaching staff, a complex target question, and instead are getting a simplified, heuristic response from students about their intensity of feeling within a specific "narrow frame" of aspects of an instructor.

Returning to an earlier point, an additional factor in the loss of meaningful data is suggested in Dr. Espen Aarseth's study of cybertexts, their construction, and how they only gain meaning after a comprehensive evaluation at their completion. Dr. Aarseth, head of the Center for Computer Games Research at the IT University of Copenhagen, coins the term "ergodic," which "implies a situation in which a chain of events (a path, a sequence of actions, etc.) has been produced by the non-trivial efforts of one or more individuals or mechanisms" (Aarseth, 94). He gives an example of watching a soccer game and how it has no narrative value since it is being made up through interactions with a text (soccer as a genre) moment by moment. Only after the series of events has been completed can a reflective narrative be applied. His initial research focuses on early text-based online games, where questions are asked and responded to in a way that

makes complete sense at the time, but are interrupted by the next task and, consequently, the cohesive narrative flow is also disrupted. No true sense of the story can be achieved without an analysis of the completed text. While his research began with looking at online text-based games, he notes that his intent was "to get out from underneath a position even more than to reach one" (Aarseth 182), stating his theories have a life beyond cybertexts.

Revisiting the earlier soccer illustration, he comments on how sports commentators can create a narrative as they call the game, creating a salient assessment of the moment, but the narrative of the game itself cannot be comprehensive since the actions of the game as a whole are not completed. Any attempt by a commentator to construct a cohesive story would merely be a reflection of that moment in time and not the activity as a whole, much in line with Kahneman's research into Substitutions**:** "Even though stories might be told about it, a football (soccer) match is not in itself a story" (Aarseth, 94). Looking at SETs, we see an ergodic form of literature, "a chain of events…[that] has been produced by the non-trivial efforts of one or more individuals or mechanisms." A student completes a series of tasks by quantifying aspects of their instructors and their related courses. This process, Kahneman may argue, creates a heuristic narrow frame response which holds little pertinent data as per the statistical research of Stark and Freishtat.

Utilizing CHAT as a critical lens in conversation with the psychology of judgements, coupled with the SET's ergodic nature of breaking up the analytical process into essentially uniquely focused bits, we can see how aspects of these assessments are faulty. To overcome the issues inherent in the current construction of SETs as a genre of writing and assessment, I look now to parallel forms of co-constructed communication

for potential solutions. Since SETs are intended to be co-constructive narratives between a college and its students, as established through the lens of CHAT, we can look at the evolution of other media that also depends on similar Activities to find alternative frameworks for assessment.

Tabletop role-playing games provide one such assessment framework that is both qualitative and quantitative. This is hardly the first time that the concept of role-playing as an form of synchronous construction of narrative has been evaluated for an academic setting. Research done by scholars such as Chris Crawford, Aleksandra Krotoski, Fannie R. and George Shaftel, and John Thompson look at ways instructors can implement role-playing techniques into their classrooms. Their focus, however, is more about improvisational skills and seeing a situation from a new perspective. These techniques can be useful tools but do not fit into the scope of this research. Rather, I look to scrutinize the mechanics employed in the creation of a tabletop role-playing narrative and decipher how they are utilized to assess key character traits by a group of individuals.

The structure of a tabletop role-playing game is as follows: Any game typically consists of 3 or more individuals. One individual creates the scenarios players will encounter and crafts non-player characters that the players will meet along the way. This position is called various names, the most pertinent for this presentation are Dungeon Master or Storyteller. This individual controls the flow of the narrative, based on the feedback she receives from her players. She receives this feedback by asking questions such as what a player's character does, says, or what their ability scores are. As game designer Mark Rein-Hagen states, "It is a careful balance between narration and adjudication, between story and game. Sometimes you set the scene…but mostly

you must decide what occurs in reaction to the words and actions of the characters—as fairly and impartially as possible." (Rein-Hagen, 21)

Players, on the other hand, control only their created character and respond to the prompts given to them by the Dungeon Master/Storyteller. This back and forth flow of prompt and response shapes the narrative and must be agreed upon as being valid by both players and Storytellers. "To some extent [players] are also the Storyteller and may add ideas and elements to the story which the Storyteller may accept or reject as she sees fit" (Rein-Hagen 21). If one faction does not agree with the ongoing assessment, the game will stop and a meta-discussion about the chain of events will occur.

Most forms of tabletop RPGs, the earliest ones in particular, had the same ergodic breaks in narrative as SETs (Mackay) in that, in a game like *Dungeons and Dragons*, a Dungeon Master would set up a series of events and then ask for feedback or information from the players that would break up the story flow as the action would shift from first person narration to a third person dictation of actions, such as giving out quantitative information or dice rolling. To this end, scholars such as Byers and Francesco have noted the nature of the mechanics of tabletop role-playing games are ergodic in nature, just as the SETs, and offer the same challenges for crafting a cohesive baseline of events. "Put simply, games must be non-linear in order to leave room for free will and agency, whereas narratives must be linear in order to be meaningful" (Byres 5). I will shortly elaborate how many games evolved their mechanics in order to combat this specific obstacle.

Another overlap in pertinent qualities between SETs and role-playing mechanics is the characters' skill assessment, much in line with SETs assessment of instructor skills.

These are based on numeric representations of narrow framed aspects such as Strength or Dexterity (Mackay). Similarly, the Illinois State University SET asks students to assign a value to statements like "The instructor was prepared for class." This 1–5 rating mirrors the character creation sheets for role-playing games that ask players to assign a value to characters' attributes. For example, they may assign a character a Dexterity score of 18 on a 1–20 scale, meaning their character is considered to have superior skill in that area. The appreciable difference between a 16 and an 18, however, can be vague and unfocused, leading to a lack of cohesive understanding between players' perceptions and those of the Dungeon Master. As the games became more narrative driven and less concentrated on miniature-based combat simulation, the history of which has been researched and documented by scholars such as Byers, Crocco, Mackay, and Voorhees, game designers evolved the mechanics of their game systems to reflect more complex realities and offer players more agency over their options and opinions (Bowman, Byers and Crocco, Mackay, Rein-Hagen, Tynes).

As with SETs, role-playing narratives are constructed not by a single individual but by, to again quote Dr. Walker, "a whole mob of people whose hands and brains and intentions and tools shape texts as they come into being and are used" (Walker 162). In both scenarios, these group-formed texts begin with a single individual Producing a series of questions for others to reply to in order to construct a single narrative. The questions are Distributed to players, by paper in regards to SETs and through verbal interactions for role-playing games, and often involve the search for quantitative data pertaining to a character's various qualities. In role-playing games this can take the form of asking about a player character's dexterity or skill in firearms, while in the case of SETs aligns with

"Rate your instructor." Due to the Ecology of the role-playing scenario being verbal in nature rather than written, there can be more room for miscommunication as there is no concrete text to refer back to. This means that Activity of role-playing games rely on synchronous feedback to ensure the narrative does not become corrupted by misunderstandings and false impressions. SETs are asynchronous and while they have a specific text to refer back to, they do not have the benefit of an Ecology in which getting immediate clarification of assessments and statements is possible. Through these Socializations we can see how the SETs construct a narrative by engaging in ergodic question and answers that supplies the parts of the story but not a cohesive assessment of scenarios. In the case of SETs, that final cohesive critical assessment and narrative is supplied by the institution based on what they believe the students are communicating. With role-playing games that final assessment occurs at the end of a game where Storytellers and Players together review the actions of the night and solidify the unified narrative. This unification often takes the form of player journals where they write down their impressions of the gaming session, much in line with uptake journals assigned by many instructors for their English classes.

Mirroring the concept of wanting a broad frame to base a critical narrative off of (Kahneman), game designer Mark Rein-Hagen added additonal levels of skill assessment to the character builds. This change in assessment mechanics evolved the shared narrative experience partialy away from quantatative points-based assessment and included more descriptor terms to accompany each point of a quantatative assessment. Let us say that a character with a score of 3 in Security on a 1–5 scale would be considered "Compotent. Disable a house alarm," while a score of 4 would mean "Expert.

Crack open a safe" (Rein-Hagen 87). Each of these additional qualatative points of reference are made available for each skill in the game, thus allowing players and Storytellers a linguistic baseline for assessing quantitative delineations.

The full shift toward a purely qualitative assessment base was completed by game designers such as Tynes, creator of the game *Puppetland*, evolving the process started by Rein-Hagen, who concentrated on excluding ergodic interuptions to the narrative as much as possible and made the entire process one continuous sharing of perspective. This is achieved by having a player's characters being created not with a series of quantatative attributes but rather by selecting five words out of a proposed selection of thirty words that are positive, negative, or neutral, describing a character's most prominent features and are woven into the first person dialogue between the Storyteller and the player. During play these linguistic qualaties minimize ergodic breaks when shifting from first person narration to third person, as the data being asked for is linguistic in nature and is made part of the natural first person speaking patterns. A sample would be that rather than a Storyteller asking a player "What is your strength score?" he or she would instead say, "Mr. Puch walks up to you and is about to hit you. He is very STRONG." The Storyteller conveys to the player the attribute being addressed by clearly stressing the word, with the player replying, "You may try to punch me, Mr. Punch, but I am too DEXTERIOUS for you to hit me." The use of descriptor terms allows for a more continuous flow of ideas reducing the negative impact most ergodic texts encounter. If we replace the current ISU English department's 1–5 ratings with students choosing five descriptor terms from a preselected option of thirty, as seen in the *Puppetland* game mechanics, we keep student attention focused on one specific task and remove some of the issues

of disconnect inherent in ergotic texts that inhibits forming a comprehensive assessment.

In addition to these benefits, switching SETs to a nomenclature focused assessment creates, over time, a master list of terms most often applied to an instructor by their students, augmenting the often-skipped Optional Comments section at the end. This means the assessments would essentially perform a similar function as the comment section of the current SETs, offering a useful comprehensive look of not just the prechosen narrow attributes considered by the department administering the SETs, but aiding in the inclusion of additional observations. Should colleges be reluctant to drop the quantatative aspect of SETs, I propose that each word be assigned its own rating based on preference along the 1–5 or possibly a 1, 3, and 5 scale. These numbers would not be known to students, only to administration. This way the words can be rendered into a quantative final number should administration feel it necessary.

While this returns us to the issue of statistics, it would still craft a linguistic assessment acting in conjunction with the final section, much as Mark Rein-Hagen adopted in this 1–5 scale of skills. With this in mind, the final portion of the current SET should be renamed from *Optional Comments* to something more directive focused, such as *Final Comprehensive Assessment*. In this reimagined final stage, students would be given the instructions to "Review your experiences in this class from day one to now. Integrating your selected terms from above, please give a comprehensive assessment of your instructor. Afterwards, please create a comprehensive assessment of the course itself, again integrating the terms you have selected above." This brings the final section into alignment with the suggestions voiced by Haefner, that a more dialogue-based qualitative approach should be used to "provide information

about why or how teachers may improve their practice." This also supports Stark and Freishtat's comments that, despite the flaws in the quantitative SETs, "students are ideally situated to comment about *their experience* in the course, including factors that influence teaching effectiveness, such as the instructor's audibility, legibility, and availability outside class" (4). By reworking the often labeled *Optional Comments* section into a critical reflection of the information provided by the student in the first section of the SET, this fulfills the narrative trajectory as offered by Dr. Aarseth and his work on ergodic writing, in that true meaning is a finally achieved through an assessment of all of the component writing sections by the author, in this case the student. This refocused section would harken back to role-players' game journals, where they assess the game as a whole and are not just responding to a question that is likely to be substituted for a simpler one, such as their feelings at the specific moment in time. This successfully minimizes the potential loss of meaning between an institution/Storyteller and its students/players when constructing a meaningful co-authored assessment, much in line with the mechanisms that evolved in order to address concerns parallel to those inherent in other ergodic texts, such as role-playing games.

To conclude, my proposed Narrative-Driven Assessment responds to concerns about SETs by utilizing a linguistic-based pedogogical assessment form, which is based on the exploration of the mechanisms found in tabletop role-playing games; mechanisms that evolved in order to address concerns parallel to those inherent in ergodic texts, such as SETs, in forming a cohesive narrative text between groups of individuals and a single institutional focus.

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WHAT BECOMES POSSIBLE: TEACHING AS ADVOCACY AND A COLLABORATIVE ACT

COLLEEN KEEFE AND LAUREN LACY

What would an English language arts classroom look like if financial or curricular constraints weren't an issue? Or to put it another way, what becomes possible when we shift our focus on what we *don't* have or *can't* do to what we *can*? Many teachers today find themselves filling the role not just of educator but also the role of advocate—for their students *and* themselves. When teachers strive to be advocates for their students, the needs of their classroom change. Whatever the challenges a teacher might face as an advocate, we, as preservice teachers, challenge educators to focus on the resources they *do* have to become the best advocates for themselves and their students.

The call for teachers to be advocates for their students has long existed in teacher preparation programs and teaching standards. In fact, many people go into teaching for that very

reason; perhaps they remember a teacher who advocated for them or empowered them. Such advocacy is often on behalf of social justice, the call to seek fair and equitable treatment of students both inside and outside the classroom. When a teacher desires social justice, it is imperative to help students understand the world around them and teach them to advocate for themselves and question the systems of power in place. Ashley Boyd concisely addresses the ELA teacher's role in doing this in the preface of her book *Social Justice Literacies in the English Classroom: Teaching Practice in Action*:

> Our world is changing rapidly, and social, political, and environmental concerns affect every element of our daily lives. We must invite that world into our classrooms so that our students can understand, debate, and address it in innovative, thoughtful ways. It is thus our job, as English educators, to involve our students with texts that are both personal and political and to interact with those texts and contexts so as to make the world more inclusive and just. (xii)

As undergraduate teacher candidates in the largest secondary ELA teacher preparation program in the state of Illinois, we have studied and are committed to Boyd's charge to introduce texts that are both "personal and political" (xii). We want to be teachers who bring important issues of social injustice into our classrooms and highlight differences innate in all of us in the texts we select for students to read. Our teacher preparation classes at Illinois State University engage us in the active conversations surrounding the need for diverse texts in the classroom, texts that invite student connection and offer new perspectives. Most teachers have surely encountered the importance, and, at times, difficulty of text selection firsthand. Oftentimes, the texts that students are required to read are

not an accurate representation of their cultures or identities or they do not match the interests of students. Many of the canonical texts present in schools are difficult for modern learners to relate to. These texts are not always representative of the social issues present in our society, nor do they always empower students to have a voice and agency. If teachers aim to be advocates for change and want to set this example for students, shouldn't students be reading diverse texts that help facilitate conversations about complicated issues of social justice and equity and also represent the voices of those from marginalized groups? In this article, we will touch on the power of text selection, how teachers can be advocates for necessary changes regardless of resources, and how teacher candidates at Illinois State University (ISU) are hoping to, in a small way, assist ELA teachers in bringing these resources to students.

The Power of Text Selection

In our teacher preparation courses, we read many articles and books written by veteran teachers who have experienced student empowerment through diverse texts. For example, Linda Christensen writes about the power of diverse texts in her book *Teaching for Joy and Justice*. She writes, "As a teacher of language arts, I can choose texts that tell my students that they are alive, that they matter, that teach lessons about human connections, about building a civil society" (165). Beyond incorporating the interests of students, young adult texts that are representational of all groups—specifically marginalized ones—validate students' existence and experiences. In a society that lacks representation and voice from marginalized groups, what is a better place for students to be seen, heard, and felt than in an ELA classroom?

Mindful, effective teachers recognize the value, perhaps even the *necessity*, of consistent reflection; it is only through

reflection on their own work, their students' work, and the larger contexts of the school and neighboring community that teachers can ensure that their classrooms are meeting the needs of their students. Central to this reflection must be a constant evaluation of the texts brought into a classroom. The texts brought to the forefront for students *matter*, despite potential financial constraints or the disturbance of the status quo. The inclusion—or exclusion—of certain texts and representations is inherently political, as reflected by Randy Bomer: "No moment of teaching is an island entire of itself" (56). Every text a student reads and every discussion a student has is an opportunity to engage with a greater conversation and a broader community. As Paulo Friere states, "The basic question in school is how to not separate reading the word and reading the world" (20). ELA teachers often struggle with this question and recognize the need to keep classroom texts centered on the world around students while also working to bridge the gaps that exist within the different experiences students all over the world have.

A core component of the English education curriculum at ISU is understanding how text selection affects a socially just pedagogy. Socially just pedagogy in this sense refers to a pedagogy that not only acknowledges systems of oppression but seeks to work against these systems by helping students discern, study, and understand oppression themselves (Boyd 5). Boyd addresses the role of text selection in a socially just pedagogy when she writes, "What an English teacher and her students do with a text can be just as powerful and the text itself" (88). The empowerment from diverse texts does not just come from reading them; the activities, conversations, and interactions that follow reading are what have the greatest impact on students. Boyd also writes that the "mere inclusion of multicultural texts does not fully achieve

social justice—exposure does not equal critique" (65). Inviting students to explore differences and question the systems of power in place while bringing in texts that affirm their identities, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs is a step in the right direction towards a socially just ELA classroom that we, as preservice teachers, strive to have in the future.

While there have already been many initiatives made to increase diversity in classroom text sets, organizations such as We Need Diverse Books being one example, there are still many classrooms that do not include diverse texts. While some of this may be attributed to departmental and/or district requirements, we recognize that there are often financial constraints that teachers and schools face as well. Even teachers who want to bring in diverse texts and have plans for effectively teaching these texts need sufficient resources to do so.

What is the Representation Project? How can it Help?

In our teacher preparation program, we take a semester-long methods course about teaching literature. The final project for this course is to create a five-week unit plan. We have the freedom to choose our topic, guiding questions, assignments, and, most important to this conversation, the texts that the students would read. Many of us create units where we would teach modern and often newly published YA texts. We write rationales to defend our text selection and are required to think critically about the merit each text would have in our classroom within a specific school context. These unit plans are rewarding to create and a project that we talk about being excited to implement in our future classrooms. Yet, after spending more time in the field, we realized that while these are culturally responsive and sustaining units that incorporate diverse texts (reaching the

major goals and beliefs of our program), the reality of being able to implement a unit plan like this is often extremely difficult due to constraints from budgets or district/school curriculums. This realization prompted us to start talking about ways that we can advocate for these diverse texts in our future classrooms and how important it is that we do what we can to serve our larger ELA community. In short, we asked how we could help teachers have access to texts that their students need.

In order to accomplish this goal and support teachers who are advocating for change in their classrooms, the Illinois State University English Education Student Advisory Committee created The Representation Project. This project is an ongoing outreach initiative, a competitive grant program designed to bring class sets of a diverse book to Illinois high school English classrooms. Supporting the belief that teachers are advocates, this project allows for applicants to select any text that meets the needs of their students and of their curriculum. Because diverse texts engage and empower students, we believe that all educators should have equal access to these texts regardless of the resources that may be available to their schools and communities.

Applying for the Representation Project Grant

In order to be considered for this grant, teachers will submit an analysis of their current English curriculum, a description of the needs, identities, and cultures represented in their student body, and a rationale for the requested book with a focus on how this text will enrich representation by bringing to the classroom important issues of social justice and diversity. The students and faculty who serve on the English Education Student Advisory Committee at Illinois State University will select the winner(s) based on this application.

We are especially interested in learning from and offering support to teachers who have a social justice approach in their classrooms and have a curriculum that reflects the unique needs of their diverse learners. We will accept all applications, but because of our belief that all educators should have equal access to these texts regardless of resources available to them, special consideration will be given to underfunded schools in urban and rural settings.

Thinking Beyond the Representation Project

It is our hope that at least two Illinois classrooms will benefit from this grant program each year but, equally as important, we hope it will stimulate conversation. Kelly Burns, one of the developers of a theory of change called "sustainable teaching," says that while she sees teachers display courage through addressing a variety of challenges, new approaches for their well-being might be needed. In her words, "Even though they can be skilled allies for students amid these challenges, teachers themselves may not have the resources and habits of mind needed to sustain their own teaching practice and personal well-being" (Burns et al 46). Just like the advocacy of an individual, teaching in isolation is exhausting. Like the advocacy of a collective, teaching within the support of a community sustains. Though we have not yet formally joined the professional community of secondary ELA teachers in Illinois, we hope to offer support on behalf of this important work. We are eager to formally join this community of advocates soon and continue working in this collaborative field.

The Representation Project represents just one small way we hope to support teachers in Illinois, but as has long been true, teachers often need to find ways to support themselves. Even if a teacher applies to the Representation Project and is

not selected, we hope the process of imagining the impact that a new text could have galvanizes him or her into looking into other ways to acquire that text or achieve the results they hoped for without it. More importantly, we are reminded of the power of expanding definitions of "resources." Resources are not just a new classroom set of texts; resources can be the teacher next door who supports another's vision, the time taken to celebrate a small victory, an ally in the community who can approach issues in a new way, or even just an ongoing dedication to change. We hope that even teachers who are not considering applying for this grant are able to start to think of new ways to advocate for not only themselves but for their students. Above all, we hope that teachers—and aspiring teachers such as ourselves—imagine new ways to support each other and support socially just classrooms.

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FROM THE VAULT

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR RESPONSE TO STUDENT WRITING

JEN SCHUEMELFEDER SMITH

It's no secret that writing instructors spend entirely too much time grading papers. Stand in any school parking lot at the end of the day, and you can spot the English teacher by the essay-stuffed bags he or she is carrying. The irony of this is that, for all the work writing instructors put into responding to student work—some studies place the average at ten minutes per essay—we often find ourselves frustrated by a perceived lack of growth in our students' writing. How can this be?

Teachers have long employed formative assessment to gauge the extent to which students have mastered writing skills. We know, and best practice supports this, that formative assessment can help us guide students toward a deeper understanding of writing standards, while also

helping teachers correct any potential misunderstandings that students may have. Mantz Yorke, author of "Formative Assessment in Higher Education: Moves Towards Theory and the Enhancement of Pedagogic Practice," says that not only does formative assessment help students learn and appreciate the standards expected of them, but it also provides students guidance with revision, which leads to better finished products. While it cannot be argued that formative assessment is essential to helping students grow as writers, it is important to note Yorke's conclusion that "an important determinant of the effectiveness of formative assessment is the quality of the feedback received by learners" (482). Given Yorke's assertion that the quality of feedback is directly correlated to student growth, and considering that teachers' time is so limited, we must find more efficient and effective ways to provide students with the kind of formative feedback that will help them become better writers.

The most common mode of response to student writing is the teacher comment, wherein a teacher provides directed, written feedback on a draft of student writing. While the research of George Hillocks, as well as that of Maria Treglia of New York University, confirms that written comments are an effective mode of feedback for student writers, what teachers and scholars disagree upon is the extent to which the impact of comments on students' writing justifies the amount of time it takes to provide them (Hillocks 276; Treglia 69, 70). So, it's fair to conclude that the argument should not be whether teacher comments should be used as a mode of formative feedback; rather, we should be questioning *how* we comment.

In order to establish what effective comments look like, it may be helpful to first identify what ineffective comments look like. In a study of teacher comments, English professor Lois Matz Rosen found that most ineffective teacher

comments focused on the correctness of writing mechanics (62). The work of Dennis Searle and David Dillon, both of the University of Alberta, confirms this finding; they found that only a small number of teachers studied identified "feedback on content" as a main goal of their comments (238). Maria Treglia's work in this field cites University of Massachusetts professor Vivian Zamel, who found that teachers' feedback focused on "surface errors, [that teachers] viewed first drafts as fixed, made arbitrary corrections, [and] rarely offered strategies for revision" (68). Not only is this attention to mechanics and form at the expense of content ineffectual for student revision, but it also becomes a time consuming "error hunt" for teachers. Searle and Dillon found that "Almost all teachers tried to correct *all* mechanical errors," an incredibly time-consuming and not especially effective endeavor (236, emphasis added).

As for teachers who choose to focus on the content of student writing, research has found that the focus of comments is sometimes lost in the way teachers phrase them. Searle and Dillon found that when teachers do provide feedback on the content of student writing, these comments are often vague (236, 238). This problematic use of vague phrasing in teachers' comments may be attributed to teachers' philosophies of writing instruction that value form over content, or it could be that, as Searle and Dillon note, teachers' "major purpose is to praise or encourage students' efforts," and they fear that specific comments will hurt students' self-confidence as writers (237). Either way, vague or overly complimentary comments are not only time consuming for the teacher, but they're also not particularly helpful to the student.

Another problem associated with the phrasing of teacher comments lies in the *type* of comments teachers provide. Previous studies, such as those conducted by Dana Ferris of

the University of California Writing Program, have proven that teachers often make requests of students, but phrase them as imperative statements, rather than as interrogative requests (Ferris, et al., qtd. in Treglia 76). It is no wonder, then, that even when given questions to consider in their revision, when students revise, they often focus only on imperative statements. This is what they have been trained to do—to isolate the teacher's requests and to fulfill only those requests. This, of course, leads teachers to wonder why, when revising, students rarely go beyond what their teacher has suggested.

Other issues of problematic phrasing have to do with the types of requests teachers are making. For example, the research of Maria Treglia and Sue Ellen Williams found students most often misunderstood teachers' suggestions if the comments involved "challenging analytical skills" or "specialized language or jargon" (Treglia 78; Williams 5). Williams says, "Comments such as 'faulty parallelism,' 'tone,' or 'tr' for transition were misunderstood" (5). Given this evidence, one might conclude that the best comments are those that are specific and clearly phrased.

Perhaps one of the most important things to consider when trying to comment more efficiently is length. Earlier, I mentioned Daniels and Zemelman's remarks about how intensive marking on students' drafts is the norm for many teachers (206). In light of this, consider Hillocks' conclusion that "extended comments [require] nearly twice as much time as brief comments" and that "the overall [effectiveness] for brief comment papers is the same as that for extensive comment papers" (276; 275). There is such a thing as "too much feedback." Daniels and Zemelman note that "Intensively marked papers often give too much feedback. Students can't see through the mass of marks to notice the related sets of patterns of errors they need to work on. In our attempt to be

scrupulous, we overload the learner. [Extensive feedback] ends up being worse than no feedback at all" (211).

And let's not forget about the time it takes for the teacher to provide all of those extensive comments. Once a teacher has developed the habit of providing long comments on student writing, that teacher might begin to see each writing assignment as another stack of papers to mark, rather than as an opportunity to gauge and guide student learning. This may begin to limit the amount of work said teacher assigns, thus limiting students' opportunities to practice writing and to hone their skills (Daniels and Zemelman 212).

Research regarding effective teacher comments has found that the "error hunt," commenting with symbols or in code, and writing extended comments do not lead to better essays (Rosen 62). This leads us to ask: What *should* we be doing when providing comments? First, we must make some philosophical shifts in the way we approach writing instruction. The work of Rosen, along with that of Searle and Dillon, concludes that the focus of teachers' comments should be on *what* is being said, not *how* it is being said (Rosen 63). Rosen also encourages teachers to remember that copy editing is the role of the student, and that teachers should be seeing themselves more as coaches or helpers than as drill sergeants or error hunters (64).

So, in order to provide effective comments on student writing, teachers need to find a balance between content and mechanics, and then abandon the error hunt (Rosen 63; 67). Daniels and Zemelman suggest that "the best way to respond to student writing is to direct the author's attention to one or two related sets of problems at a time. Thus the student's attention can be steered unambiguously toward issues that stand out clearly and can be attended to" (212). Try reading students' formative drafts without a pen in your hand. Focus

on identifying a pattern in the student's writing, then provide a brief comment—a short sentence, or two, if it's a more abstract idea—about that pattern. As for length, remember the advice of Hillocks, who says "[I]f a choice must be made between providing extended comments and planning instructional activities, the decision should be for planning" (276).

So, the next time you collect a class's set of drafts, remind yourself of this: research conclusively supports shorter comments that are direct and specific. Remember, too, that you'll be cutting your workload while still supporting your students' development as writers.

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FROM THE VAULT

THE RIGHT QUESTIONS RESUSCITATE ANNOTATIONS

KIMBERLY MUSOLF

"Annotations": Whenever that dreaded "a" word leaves my mouth as we embark on a new journey with a text, the groans inevitably begin. Cries of "It slows me down," "It breaks my concentration," and, simply, "I *hate* taking notes when I read," echo throughout the room. As someone who loves to fill up the margins of my own books with musings and questions, I have struggled to foster that same appreciation in my students. So, I garnered their support; we became co-conspirators in the quest to find any system that works.

We made our way through the year trying out different methods. With *The Crucible*, we tried traditional annotations, underlining and writing comments in the margins. With *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, we tried a bookmark method.

Guided by specific categories, we kept a running commentary on the bookmark that traveled with us through the pages.

As we got ready to start *The Great Gatsby*, I was reading Jim Burke's *What's the Big Idea? Question-Driven Units to Motivate Reading, Writing, and Thinking*. Although the bookmark method had worked for more students, half the class was still struggling with how useful their annotations were. In his introduction, Burke explores the "art of teaching questions" where students use factual, inductive, and analytical questions to "develop an independence of mind—an intellectual facility that serves them well whether reading or writing, researching or presenting, evaluating or analyzing, comparing or contrasting" (12). His handout explaining these three types of questions was just the resource we needed for our next style of annotations. We discussed the three types of questions, practiced some examples, and then set off, armed with a new appreciation for using the text to generate intriguing, relevant questions. At the end of each chapter, students were required to write one factual question, one inductive question, and one analytical question. As they read, they simply underlined or placed a question mark next to the passages they believed would lend themselves to those kinds of inquiries.

The true success of this process for me and the worth of this method for the students became obvious during a fishbowl discussion. We split the class in half, placing eleven students in the center and eleven students in the outer circle. Using an altered version of the group observer, a Johnson and Johnson cooperative learning strategy, each person on the outside was paired up with one person in the middle. Outside observers filled out half sheets of paper, keeping tally marks for the following social and academic behaviors: asked a question, commented or answered, asked a follow-up question, offered support/encouragement, and directed

group behavior or actions. On the bottom of the sheet, students gave feedback with a more thorough explanation: (1) Give one specific comment about how your partner succeeded in today's discussion and (2) Give one constructive area to improve on for next time. As typical fishbowl etiquette dictates, those on the inside discussed and those on the outside silently observed.

In previous discussions of this nature, I supplied backup questions on a PowerPoint slide in case the "fish" needed help keeping the discussion going. Inevitably, they always ended up falling back on my questions. Although I wasn't taking part in the dialogue, my voice was still leading the content. This time, however, was different. Thanks to Burke's question method, the discussion was completely theirs. Students moved quickly through their factual questions and spent the rest of the time debating and discussing their inductive and analytical queries. They flipped through their books to find quotes and backed up their opinions with thoughtful evidence and warrants. Students volleyed ideas back and forth, laughing and disagreeing in ways that didn't happen when my questions directed the conversation.

Students asked a multitude of questions, including the following: "How are Gatsby and Tom similar?" "Revenge is an evil thing. Do you believe it was right for Wilson to go after Gatsby?" "Daisy says she loved both Tom and Gatsby. Is it possible to love more than one person?" "Why did Wilson shoot himself after he killed Gatsby?" "How has Gatsby changed since the beginning of the book?"

Observing and tallying the group as a whole, I couldn't write fast enough! They were insightful, engaged, and passionate. They owned the material as they flipped through their books. I had margin fillers after all! I am willing to risk sounding cheesy by saying that this discussion was magical.

The last seven minutes of class were reserved for observer shout-outs. The observers addressed their partner byname and told them how they had succeeded. We only shared the positive out loud, and the result was an earnest, polite, and uplifting culmination to the day. The comments students shared included, "Great job listening and paying attention. You added on to people's comments and supported your answers," and "Your questions were good. Asking what Tom would do if Daisy and Gatsby actually got together started a good conversation."

As we finished *The Great Gatsby*, we discussed the various annotation strategies we had used throughout the year. Students commented how easy it was for them to discuss using their own questions and how, for the first time, they knew how they were going to use their annotations, so they didn't see them as a waste of time.

As this year comes to a close, our class discussions and students' written work have become more meaningful and rich. I am positive that they are armed with purposeful annotation strategies. I have high hopes that in the years to come, they will find themselves filling up the margins of their texts with zeal and leading conversations with meaningful questions.

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FROM THE VAULT

ELIMINATING PARTICIPATION GRADES

STEPHEN HELLER

When I began my teaching career twenty years ago, I routinely included a participation grade. Whether I was unsure of my own rapport with students, or I was uncertain in terms of my expectations from curriculum, the participation grade acted as a type of buffer against any errors in the multivaried relationship between teacher and student. Such a grade not only rewarded students who were willing to volunteer their attention and responses in a public domain, this score also validated my own presence in front of the classroom. Indeed, I often felt that the participation was an academic thank you note to students for being more conscious in my classroom.

As I moved through my teaching career and my confidence grew in terms of expectations of my students and their performance, I began to focus more energy on how to improve

students' participation, as I was increasingly dissatisfied with *some* students participating, but not *all*. At this time I also began to question whether the participation grade actually impacted student performance. I remember one student who, when she found out her participation grade was a "C," raised her hand the next day to volunteer a response in class. After that, she returned to her silent demeanor. And I also began to appreciate that genetically and culturally, some students are more prone to participate than others.

If the grade itself, then, was limited in terms of getting students to participate, I began exploring other teaching methods that would invite all students to participate. Enter Harvey Daniels, whose work with literary circles offered an accessible roadmap for students to bring their insights to the discussion table. Critics of this movement, which marked much of my work in the 1990s, cited a relatively inauthentic approach to the literary tasks—whether it's reading or writing—and that when we engage in the conversation, we do more than focus on vocabulary, or one key passage, both examples of the literary circle model.

Daniels's work, however, resided in the larger tradition of the Socratic Seminar. Arthur Applebee's *Curriculum as Conversation* (1996) announced that we actually make meaning out of our reading and writing through our conversation. Like the Great Books program, modeled at St. John's in Santa Fe or Notre Dame's own Great Books program, the smaller group discussion finds the greatest returns in terms of student engagement. My own classrooms have featured configurations that aspire to these small group discussions, and students will work within these groups for several weeks at a time. Much of the research on authentic inquiry (McCann, et. al., 2006) also encourages these small groups, especially if we diversify the activities to incorporate more open-ended questions.

Not every student, however, has the same initiative to operate within a small group; further, questions persist about whether or not a small group will actually get the essential ideas of a text. The first time I worked with small groups was with tenth graders and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Each day the students came into the class with a question about the reading, as well as a passage that they wanted to share. At first, I was delighted that every student was speaking, and that they felt free to ask each other questions that would never have come out in the larger class. It was especially gratifying when these questions were at the plot level; so often we assume that kids come into our classes ready to think and discuss the bigger thoughts. Still, the students went through this entire unit without once making reference to the trial scene. Their questions remained focused on Scout, Jem, and Dill. And when I interjected with questions or guidance about this seemingly separate part of the text, the room returned to its uncomfortable silence.

As my teaching career evolved, I began to realize that the participation grade had very little to do with what the student was actually getting from the class. Indeed, the participation grade itself had only ever been about me. But if I could create a classroom whereby participation was the process, not the product, then the participation grade would have more meaning. That said, there would never by a label of "participation" under the report card; rather, the activities themselves would reveal the actual process. In so doing, a particular writing or reading score reflects as much about their participation as their end result.

This past spring my freshman honors students completed a movie trailer for the book *A Tale of Two Cities*. The energy during the creation of this project was palpable—unprecedented in my work as a teacher. For their final

writing assignment, students wrote on what their particular trailer purported to accomplish in terms of Dickens's use of contrasts. They were also to identify how their particular role—acting, editing, etc.—helped contribute to the contrasts and overall effect. There was no participation grade, per se, because participation was a *minimum*, a base line expectation.

What about the bread and butter of an English classroom, however? Rarely, if ever, do we get to make movie trailers, and far more common is the experience of having to read text and come in the next day and do something with that text. If I commit to the idea of not having participation grade, but *every* student participating every day, what are some activities that keep everyone involved? Below are a few that I've employed over the years:

a. Choral reading. Students turn to their neighbor, and they read aloud a passage from the text. They take turns with new paragraphs, new speakers, etc. While they read, they note a specified task, such as author tone or mood. While the room does sound like a big echo chamber, students remain surprisingly on task.

b. Pair, share, all's fair. Once kids have turned to their neighbors and addressed a particularly difficult passage or task, I start calling on kids randomly. Usually I begin at the front of the row and work my way down. If a student doesn't have an answer, even having discussed the idea with a classmate, I respectfully thank him, ask for forgiveness for putting him on the spot, and move on to the next student. Critics of this cringe when students are called upon without their hands up. My philosophy is that every student needs to be heard from—before the whole class—at least once every day.

c. Writing every day. Whether it's out of class or in class, and whether it's their own questions or ones I may begin the class with, if students have their own thoughts on a piece of paper, it gives them something to respond to in class. If students are able to annotate their own texts, this activity works nicely in conjunction with any reading task, for students gain experience in directly interacting with text through the written word.

d. Small group work: students compose higher order thinking skills questions. Citing the text, students write questions that do more than 'tread water' or stay in the same place, but determine a greater degree of depth, per my modeling of what these questions look and sound like. Students take turns serving as the 'leader' of their group on this section of the text, and their challenge is to sustain the discussion for 15–20 minutes. What helps, I have found, is to tell students I am not interested in a 'performance,' so there is no need to speak up just when I happen to be monitoring this particular group. Besides, I already know who likes to talk.

e. Drop off the lowest grade of a similar task. For instance, if students are writing questions every day, and their earliest versions of questions are weaker, these are dropped, as students are demonstrating growth in a particular skill.

While many students do reach meaning through the spoken word, it is also the written word that reflects the synthesized thought process. What is common to all of the activities described here is the development of a risk-taking climate. How we foster students' willingness to interpret

and analyze text—without losing sight of the academic tradition that has canonized this text—is a challenging task, and if it happens, it's because the teacher has created this through a blend of activities and lessons that inculcate a level of academic rigor. I again return to one of my first years of teaching, when we were reading *Huck Finn*, and I invited my students to understand what 'slang' was by writing in their journals all the slang they could think of, and then they would share these in class. It was the only time in my career where students swore freely, and I often look at that moment with sadness. Not so much that I regret my students swearing in class—and I'm sure they have long forgotten that—but because that was the only way that I felt I could relate to students. And why did I feel that? Because I was far more atypical as a student then many of my students were (I was someone who was 'made for school'), and I didn't want to come across as someone who was condescending, or somehow disappointed that they were different from me.

Looking back, I did a greater disservice to them, and was even more patronizing, by not modeling for them the very academic principles that I aspired to as a student.

Therefore, the participation grade cannot be that salve that recognizes students' attempt to meet us in academic nirvana. Rather, it must be a process that expects students to understand the tradition that they are part of. Even when students are filming a movie trailer, if they are not understanding how Dickens uses contrasts, and they see no reason why a character lives or dies, then the assignment has been nothing more than an excuse to play with a movie camera under the pretext of an English classroom.

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FROM THE VAULT

IN MEOW-DIAS RES: OR, WHEN THE MULTICULTURAL DIALOGUE INCLUDES FUR, FEATHERS, OR SCALES: AN INTRODUCTORY EXPLORATION INTO ANTHROPOLINGUISM IN ADOLESCENT LITERATURE

VICKY GILPIN

An animal's eyes have the power to speak a great language.

—Martin Buber

I don't like small birds. They hop around so merrily outside my window, looking so innocent. But I know that secretly, they're watching my every move and plotting to beat me over the head with a large steel pipe and take my shoe.

—Jack Handy

"'Were you ever instructed by a wise and eloquent man? Remember then, were not the words that made your blood run cold, that brought the blood to your cheeks, that made you tremble or delighted you,—did they not sound to you as old as yourself? …It is God in you that responds to God without, or affirms his own words trembling on the lips of another.' This quotation, made in Emerson's October 27, 1831, journal entry, demonstrates a connectedness among all human beings, regardless of religious affiliation, particularly in light of the tenets of the transcendentalist movement, which regarded an oversoul as…"

…a non-moving clock. Someone has obviously designed a non-moving clock for this room. Some joke. I wonder if they'll tell us when it's time to eat. One would think that with all of the developments of humankind, somebody would get around to making comfortable folding chairs. One would also think that the same someone would make sturdier, but still perfectly socially conscious biodegradable-and-recycled disposable coffee cups. Maybe I can work out a mathematical formula that will allow me to compute how much time passes by how damp my program gets from the coffee oozing from my cup's semi-permeable bottom…yeah, and if I can extricate this guy's elbow from my ribs, I'll be set for life.

I'll just glance down at my watch…don't want to look bored; it isn't the presenter's fault that I didn't discover my bike had a flat until this morning, so I didn't get breakfast. I'll just do a quick glance to see how long I've got until the break. If I just pretend to adjust these damp papers, I can move my sleeve enough to…argh! She saw me! Great. Just great. She's probably someone with whom I'll want to collaborate or have review my next book, and now she thinks I'm bored and looking at my watch. Maybe if I look extra-attentive for the rest of the presentation…how long *is* this thing?…she'll

forget about the watch-glance *that didn't even work*. Back straight, eyes forward, interested gaze.

This room is so humid; I really would just like to get some air. Don't yawn. Don't yawn. Don't yawn. Don't make that face that shows that you're yawning but trying to hide it. Grip your jaw, don't make the face, don't make the face, don't…she saw me make the face. I can just tell. She's got that "caught you" look that teachers get. They don't have to say anything, just…the look. Hers is sort of a whole-body look of irritation, from the sharply dismissive spark in her eyes, the disdainful prick of her ears, and the bristling of her glossy red fur.

"…even Homer registered the importance of the human-animal connection. Although entirely unnecessary for plot momentum, the story of Argus in *The Odyssey* allowed the hero one last moment of sentiment—not concerning his wife or his son—about his neglected but loyal dog who waited twenty years to see his master before breathing his last. The human-animal bond transcended familial ties in that moment. Even Levinas tells of how a stray dog, Bobby, allowed him to recover his sense of humanity during the Holocaust, when his captors tried to strip him of that humanity. In popular literature, the inclusion of animals is a common element in many stories aimed at varying demographics. In fact, one of the original incarnations of the "cozy mystery" subgenre was determined by whether the needle-pointing, quilting, or teashop-owning amateur sleuth owned a cat.

"However, animals continue to be featured the most strongly in children's and adolescent literature. In many of these works, the animals are characters as fully realized as any human depictions. Some of the most engaging animal characters present a unique melding of traditionally human and animal traits. However, I propose that literary animals

with these characteristics do not merely represent a desire for humans to understand the Other, nor do they represent Ittner's narcissistic perspective that entirely removes the concept of the animal. Animals who speak function on multiple symbolic levels, but thorough scholarship necessitates an awareness of how these characters are perceived and affect young readers: as animals. In addition, although an analysis of how adolescents in the thrall of the emotional, psychological, and physical shift of puberty may be drawn to fully anthropomorphized characters such as werewolves and other shape-shifters, as Schell notes, dedication to universal themes necessitates an initial exploration of the allure of animal characters with milder aspects of personification, primarily that of speech, specifically verbal interactions with humans. Therefore—"

"Um, excuse me?"

While craning her bristling neck to see who had dared interrupt her careful, though slightly pedantic, oration, the speaker shuffled her notes with her paws. She evened the already precise bottom edges by smacking them against the podium and said, "Well, this isn't really the question and answer part, but that will be—"

"No, I don't understand." A barn owl flew up to perch on the back of a folding chair and continued, "How can you not address shape-shifting? And if you aren't going to mention shape-shifting or werewolves, how can you call this a speech about anthropomorphism? And—"

"Yeah, what about Kafka? We've got to talk about Kafka. I mean, not only were people turning into bugs, he also had a story in a synagogue with—"

"Even though the Maximum Ride series isn't 'shifting,' the animal as Other perspective is important there—"

"Oh, c'mon," sneered a badger, "the whole 'animal as

Other' thing is just so overplayed! Why don't you get into Buber's I-and-Thou stuff while you're at it."

"So you're talking about talking animals," started a turtle, "but they have to be talking to humans? What about—"

"That leaves out a lot of good books!" a Collie toward the front yapped impatiently. "What about the Warriors series? What about the Redwall series?"

A tweed-colored hare added her piece from where she was hunkered next to the water fountain: "What about *Watership Down*? How can we not talk about *Watership Down*? That's a momentous work!"

"Forget *Watership Down*; Tad Williams's *Tailchaser's Song* never gets mentioned," rumbled a large orange tomcat. "*Watership Down* is practically in the freakin' canon. Let's talk about *Tailchaser's Song*—"

"*Tailchaser's Song* would never have been written if it weren't for *Watership Down*—"

A fluffy black guinea pig started jumping up and down, "What about talking animals in commercials; I love the turtles and the talking gecko. Those are great!" He immediately fell off his chair and started running in circles on the floor, his whee-ting incomprehensible to everyone.

"—and what about Levinas?" squawked a parrot with brilliant crimson plumage. "Is it true that he struggled with recognizing the previously mentioned dog, Bobby, as a Kantian because he didn't see a dog as having a 'face' due to the dog's lack of a human language? Doesn't that negate the very gift that Levinas recognized? Can we discuss Steeves's analysis of philosophers who refuse to recognize the *dasein* of animals?"

"—how are you defining adolescent literature? Do the characters have to be teenagers or what?"

"Yeah, and about lunch—"

"QUIET!"

The fox stared at the audience. Finally, the shouted questions, murmurs, and side conversations settled down. She inhaled noisily through her clenched teeth as she looked at the ceiling for guidance. "Males, females, and neuters, I respect your opinions and questions. This is only one presentation in the conference. I know you're all hungry, tired, and are excited to be attending sessions for the next several days. This is a presentation, not a book club. I cannot talk about everything or we'd be stuck in this room, with no food, forever. Does everyone understand?"

After a moment of stony silence from both sides of the podium, a grasshopper chirped, and the ensuing laughter broke the mood.

"Great," she continued, "The question about shape-shifting is an appropriate one. I'm not including it because it is almost too obvious for this group. Of course, humans want to be animals, and, of course, they most often express that desire when their bodies seem the most out of their control. The word 'anthropomorphism' still applies, as my focus is on animals who talk, and we all know animals can't talk, right?" She chuckled as the crowd tittered, purred, wagged, and otherwise expressed appreciation for that line. "I suppose 'anthropoliguistic' might be a better term. As far as what 'adolescent literature' means for this, I'm working from a fairly broad definition of adolescent, so the boundaries are really anything aimed toward the young, like folk and fairytales, or literature with a youthful protagonist. I am also including a few where an untried quester dominates, perhaps someone youthful in experience in some way. May I continue?"

I heard squeaking as everyone attempted to make folding chairs more comfortable and, in at least one case,

accidentally crowded a rodent. The Labrador next to me nudged me and said, "Hey, maybe we will be able to get this thing on the road, after all, huh?"

I nodded as I rearranged my sodden papers and tried to emit signals of attentiveness from every fiber of my being when the presenter continued talking.

"Obviously, the works of philosophers who examine the connection between language and identity become important when exploring animal characters who talk. For centuries, philosophers from Aristotle and Plato to Kant, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and others have debated how language separates humans from nonhuman animals and whether that separation is important. Some state that animals have no higher thought because they do not have language. Others express that human-created language or writing should not be the sole determiners of communication, and humans cannot know the extent of animal communication. In fact, Atterton, among others, chided Levinas for not elevating his philosophy to transcend what Atterton viewed as human chauvinism or anthropocentrism. These analysts and philosophers, such as Finklestein and Gentry, assert that all animals may be capable of reason and communication that may not be evident by human criteria or recognized by the human hegemony. Several theorists, such as Cavell et al., stress that using communication as evidence of reason, consciousness, or even a soul are illogical and arbitrary distinctions based on a human sense of entitlement focused on comparisons rather than meaningful criteria. They note that human language does not have the perspective or the grammar necessary for an exploration of nonverbal or other methods of communication. Therefore, many authors of literature provide human-recognizable voices for animal characters and bypass the debate about animal communication to focus directly on

what animals might say to humans if humans did have the capacity to understand them. McKinley's beautiful retelling of the Sleeping Beauty tale in *Spindle's End* incorporates communication with animals as a primary plot device and theme; the book emphasizes that the issue is not that animals do not talk and reason, but that humans do not know the language of animals, which consists of smell, gestures, physical presentation, and verbal elements.

"Perhaps because of the ongoing quest to determine the connection between the animal and human mind, or because young people may find lessons more easily taught by a friendly rabbit, for example, than another adult authority figure, talking animals are prevalent in youth literature. In literature written for older readers, animal characters and talking animal characters do not entirely disappear. Adolescent readers may continue to respond to conditioning from early fairy tales with helpful talking animals, or the continued prevalence of talking animals may occur for other reasons, such as the detailed depictions of multi-faceted animal characters in modern literature. In addition, although animals are often metaphors for slaves, laborers, women, or other oppressed groups, Cosslett and others emphasize that an analysis of the animals as representatives of animals is necessary, as children's literature has the freedom to use more whimsy than adult literature when exploring connections between humans and animals. The rich details aimed specifically at a youthful audience represents one of many reasons *Animal Farm* does not fit with today's focus. Nevertheless—"

The Labrador next to me jabbed me in the rib cage… again. "She's a bit long-winded isn't she? I mean, get to the point already. You're kicking in an open door, you know?"

Doing my best to continue feigning fixated interest on the fox who kept looking at me like I was the "bad kid," I

gave an almost imperceptible, and certainly noncommittal, combination of a nod and a shrug designed to rebuff any further attempts at conversation.

—but this guy was a Lab…not to be species-ist, but they're pretty persistent.

"I mean, we know that kids and teenagers read books with talking animals in them. Animals are great, duh. Now, tell us something we don't know."

I did the whole shrug-nod combo and tried not to look like I was having a spasm, so he settled more comfortably into my ribs to continue listening to the eagle-eyed fox at the front of the room.

"Adolescent literature depicts speaking animals to the reader or human protagonist through a variety of roles or spheres of action, to use Propp's term. Familiar situations include animals needing assistance from the human, assisting the human, or presenting a danger to the human. Situations that may be less familiar for readers include depictions of animals as simultaneously great and horrifyingly 'other' or portray animals as equals.

"For many readers, an animal in need of assistance from humans presents a familiar role. Whether being fed, let outside, or taken to the vet, animals in everyday situations require assistance from humans. Therefore, books may position animals in these roles in order to present a familiar relationship for the reader. However, in some books, the assistance supplied by the human extends far beyond setting out the kibble."

A few dogs' ears perked up with the word "kibble," but they immediately returned their attention to the speaker with the realization that no kibble was forthcoming.

"In fact, by using this, the most familiar role of animal dependence upon humans, many authors accentuate the

distance between animals and the reader/protagonists. The authors create this distance by necessitating the salvation of an entire world, usually from another human. This situation sets the humans apart from the animals; it also emphasizes that humans are the most dangerous enemy to the worlds and the animals in them. In Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice has to save the dumbfounded and confounded creatures of Wonderland from a humanlike Queen. Although the story depicts Alice's tale of growing up and the author's bittersweet homage to female youth, the work contains subthemes of animals primarily as foolish creatures needing rescued from their own arbitrary natures by an intervening human. In Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, only sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, humans, may save Narnia. Although many of the creatures are proactive in their salvation from the White Witch, a human-appearing being, empowerment does not occur without the human intervention. Even in Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, Lyra and Will, as well as other assorted humans, must save all of the worlds, a task not even angels may achieve alone. Although the works place humans and animals into familiar roles for a reader's easiest accessibility, the situations emphasizing 'human as savior' do not encourage transcendence beyond current human-animal relations and may, in fact, encourage human feelings of superiority, dominance, or entitlement with regard to animals.

"Many animal characters fulfill the role of Propp's sphere of helper action. They provide assistance and often act as a tool or augment the powers of the protagonist. Acting as helpers creates another easy entry-level into animal's roles in the tales, as animals in everyday society also provide assistance. The three dogs in Andersen's "The Tinderbox" demonstrate the most basic formula of animals assisting humans: they have a function, and they complete that function.

In fact, the only word they speak is a barked "Hurrah!" at the end, and one may argue whether or not any of the humans in the story was cognizant of the content beyond the emotion of that utterance. Other helper animals give assistance that is more elaborate. The beavers in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and the spider family in Pat O'Shea's *The Hounds of the Morrigan* serve similar purposes: they provide a recuperation point for the youthful protagonists, guidance to the next part of the journey, and information about the land in which the children have found themselves. Many stories depict animals as helpers by presenting animals as magical familiars for other characters. These animals usually help the human characters focus their powers, or they provide information about magic for the humans. Examples of these can be found in Levitt's *Dog Days*, where not all magic users are lucky enough to befriend a familiar, and *Spindle's End*, where familiars connect with fairies as signs of a rite of passage. Usually, in books with animals as helpers, humans do not perceive the animals as mere utilitarian tools or methods to a goal; instead, the animals are valued for their individual characteristics as well as for the help they provide.

"Sadly, another common and familiar role for animals fits into Propp's sphere of villainous behavior. Animals often represent a danger to humans in the physical world, so children may easily accept that they represent a danger or hindrance in the literary one. Often, the animals acting as the danger are under the control of a far more dangerous human. In addition, the choices of villainous animals usually support species-ist stereotypes. For example, wolves are often maligned in literature."

At this, a wolf sitting in the front row sagely nodded its head, and assenting growls could be heard throughout the room. A small gray kitten behind the wolf also nodded sagely, which took some skill, and I wondered briefly when

kittens had been portrayed as evil stereotypes of villainous behavior. Then a larger cat cuffed the kitten onto the floor, and I realized the kitten had merely been mocking her elders.

"In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, wolves are some of the most obvious of the White Witch's lackeys. Of course, wolves could be considered scary for children because so many stories emphasize their dangerous aspects and they embody the fierce side of the more familiar domesticated dogs. Shelob, the giant spider in Tolkien's *The Return of the King*, feeds upon childhood fears of spiders and, while well-crafted and certainly scary, depicts an almost plebian threat when compared to the various richly depicted fantastic or otherworldly elements of that saga. Some books attempt to rectify stereotypes against certain animals, such as *His Dark Materials*' depiction of the mulefa's reverence for snakes. Another instance occurs when Aragog, an Acromantula, gives Harry and Ron information in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, but any anti-species-ist strides made with that conversation were eradicated when his children attacked Hogwarts on the side of the Death Eaters in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. However, in some cases, having a mass of bugs, rather than something seemingly innocuous *or* fantastic, represent danger, as with Ygramul in Ende's *The Neverending Story*, adds verisimilitude to a rite of passage tale.

"Obviously, no one would suggest that children be encouraged to prance into potentially dangerous situations without regard to their safety or with the naïve hope that all of the forest creatures are their friends, as the exceptionally pro-animal *Spindle's End* might have one believe. A wary respect for venom, fangs, and claws promotes health and longevity for children and for animals. Although children can benefit from reminders that animals possess dangerous characteristics, continued emphasis in children's literature

that spiders are 'scary' or snakes are 'evil' promotes unfair negative species-ism. If children are trained to dislike an animal without getting to know that individual animal, what is to keep them from making similar judgments about humans based on the colors of their skins, their religions, or their countries of origin?"

"Hear, hear," agreed a garter snake stretched along a bookshelf.

"Absolutely, and if I may interject?" asked a Holstein cow looking down at the notes between her hooves.

The fox looked at the blurry clock and said, "Briefly," before lapping at the bowl of water next to her on the podium.

"Well," the cow continued, "I think it is also important to note that some books may not just suggest, but actually blatantly *encourage* stereotypes. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the Beaver rhapsodizes about not trusting creatures that are part human or appear to be human, even though several partially human creatures are on the 'good' side. When Edmund says something like 'you can't always believe what Fauns say,' the reader is expected to realize that he is under the White Witch's control, but when the Beaver, a 'good' animal uses stereotypes, children may think it is ok to stereotype, as long as the stereotype is true or is about 'bad' people."

"That is a valid point." The fox continued, "In that book, when Lucy says that the 'good' animals hate the White Witch, she clearly indicates a demarcation between 'good' and 'bad' animals beyond individual choices. In addition, while querying whether to follow the Robin, when Peter says, 'I'm sure a robin wouldn't be on the wrong side,' he indicates that just by knowing the species, he can attribute a positive stereotype. Positive stereotypes can be just as dangerous as negative ones. Certainly, we have all known animals who defied a stereotype, positive or negative.

"Beyond the basic distinctions of whether the human and animal relationship involves assistance or danger, some books depict roles that seem to combine a dichotomy of various characteristics. These representations of talking animals combine the danger of the villains with the stereotypical otherness of animals. In general, these 'great and powerful' depictions are not your grandma's pussycats."

The fox paused briefly to nod an apology at a big-eyed elderly female wolf who was clacking her teeth against a knitting needle and an enormous tabby next to her who bore more than a little similarity to a ragged sofa cushion.

"The depiction of animals as both great and fearsome creates another entry point into the works for young readers. Many young people do not have a deep connection with animals and regard them firmly as Other; some animal characters fulfill that role with the aid of supernatural abilities. Creating a balance of power and danger without allowing the character to become a villain requires a deft hand on the part of the author. These characters often act as guides, mentors, or catalysts of deus ex machina for the questing young protagonist. Obviously, Aslan represents a major symbol in Lewis's allegory beyond his physical appearance as a lion, but the reactions the children have when other characters mention his name demonstrates Aslan's combined characteristics of greatness and terror. In Garth Nix's Abhorsen Trilogy, the Disreputable Dog, a creature of ancient magic, represents unwieldy and untrustworthy magic contained in the shape of a large black dog; the character maintains the disguise of a large canine companion in most cases, but the wariness of the human characters toward the dog remind the reader of animal Otherness. In Nick O'Donohoe's Crossroads series, the Gryphon's combination of teacher, philosopher, and executioner exemplifies the balance between power and danger.

Finally, Carroll's Cheshire Cat, although appearing to be helpful, presents another example of the Great and Terrible Other. His vaguely threat-tinged lines that do nothing to reassure Alice and his skill of gradual disappearance have haunted enough young readers for the Cheshire Cat to be uniquely memorable in a mob of strange characters. Potentially symbolic of self-acceptance or even revelry of self, the Cheshire Cat can represent an elusive ideal for which Alice must aim, rather than an animal providing assistance.

"What one might assume would be the utopian view of human and animal relationships occurs in the books that present animals as equals with humans. Although the animals in Mercedes Lackey's Vows and Honor trilogy and Jane Lindskold's Firekeeper series often assist their human companions, these series emphatically demonstrate that the animals who speak to the protagonists are equal to humans; in these examples and many series like these, the animal characters bluntly tell the humans to respect their equality. In *His Dark Materials*, when Mary's self-talk upgrades the mulefa from 'creatures' to 'people' and to 'friends,' readers gain a different perspective from which to view animals. Granted, characters continue to judge the equality of the Panserbjorn and mulefa by human standards of identity such as language, fire, and society, but these depictions still encourage speculation about animals as equals, in some way, to humans. Gould emphasizes that popular literature for children and adults presents 'an emergent phenomenon: a species egalitarianism pointing towards a future in which multiculturalism may acquire new meanings.' Viewing animals as equals may encourage children to develop greater or different relationships with animals. For example, literature that promotes animals as equal inhabitants of this or any depicted world encourages ethical and moral behavior toward animals not because of

their benefit to human beings, but because of their position as fellow creatures alongside human beings. In addition, the animal characters depicted as equal to humans are emphatically not humans: Iofur Raknison from *His Dark Materials* demonstrates the danger when animals think of themselves as human instead of relishing in their own existence.

"One might assume that viewing animals as fellow creatures represents the goal or epitome of a pro-animal agenda within literature with anthropolinguistic elements. However, Diamond asserts that humans must see animals as the same as them before they can see animals as equals. This assertion allows scholars to transition to the representation of dæmons as animals in *His Dark Materials*.

"*His Dark Materials* demonstrates various metaphysical themes that call for intense scrutiny and discussion, but the work also develops the idea of animals as self to transcend symbolism and equality to further a goal that has little to do with literary symbolism and everything to do with the perception of the crafted representation of the symbols themselves. Obviously, the dæmons can represent the soul, a person's character, and incipient sexual awareness. Much debate has occurred over the centuries about what aspects make one human or what element represents the essence of humanity. Olson's biological approach to identity supports Pullman's body-soul-spirit concept of identity and existence; he asserts that humans can only exist so long as their bodies exist. The inherent knowledge of the connection between body and soul existence explains why people in Lyra's world are so suspicious of witches, whose familiars could travel far distances without their bodies. This representation goes beyond the animal as an equal 'Other' because 'to the young child, there is no gap between his soul and that of animals' (Hall 220). In his discussion of Pythagoras's and Empedocles's ideas

of reincarnation and soul transmigration, Osborne notes that 'if each animal possesses a fully human soul, each can be treated as a moral agent' (49). Although that sentiment may provoke multiple discussions about animals, rights, self-reliance, responsibilities, and consequences, the ideas of animals possessing human souls, as mirrors of humans possessing animal-appearing ones in Lyra's world, creates further inroads to the idea of talking animals in adolescent literature existing to promote a perception of animals at a level beyond equality.

"The richly described dæmons in *His Dark Materials* serve many literary and symbolic purposes connected to identity and growing up. However, one must not forget that dæmons, the humans' souls, are depicted as animals. Even though Pullman emphasizes the difference between 'real' animals and dæmons, his careful attention to detail ensures that readers will equate the characters' dæmon-selves as not only part of their human-selves but also as the animals which they portray. The imagery used when describing dæmons ensures that readers will not only want to have a dæmon, they will also want to touch one.

"Pantalaimon does not merely represent Lyra; he is Lyra. When someone touches a dæmon inappropriately or mistreats a dæmon, the abuse melds human as well as animal maltreatment, providing the opportunity for greater, more complex, resonance with the readers. Tony Makarious, sans Ratter, represents the obscenity of intercision; the profane nature of the process re-emerges when Mrs. Coulter compares the post-procedure dæmon to a 'wonderful pet' (210). After getting to know Pantalaimon for an entire book, young readers will echo Lyra's offense at the suggestion that Pan be turned into nothing more than a pet. In addition, those readers with pets and with knowledge of their personalities and peccadilloes cannot

help comparing their pets favorably to the whole dæmons as opposed to those dæmons of intercised adults like the nurses. Although *His Dark Materials* bursts with gripping moments, when Will and Lyra leave their dæmons on the shore as they travel by boat to the Land of the Dead, readers immersed in the world of the story cannot help feeling their agony; I will admit: I cannot read that section, even for research purposes, without tears pricking my eyes. Lyra's exclamation, 'But he *is* me!' (754) reminds the reader that the bravely pathetic animal waiting on the shore exemplifies not a mere companion or even fellow creature, but Lyra herself."

The attendees of the presentation seemed crouched closer together, remembering the moment of Lyra's prophecied, but necessary, betrayal of Pantalaimon. A Beagle flopped his head over the back of one of his pups; the puppy had been sleeping the whole time. I realized I didn't mind the Labrador pushed into my side quite so much as I had. The fox shook herself and continued:

"By pondering animals as representations of self beyond mere symbolic referents, one can see how adolescent literature can present ethical or animal-conscious concepts beyond the idea of using animals as familiar or safe gateways into the realm of the story. Psychologists have used the idea of animals as self for years in the animal attribution story-telling technique proposed by Arad. Exploring the potentiality of animals as self allows one to delve more deeply into the youthful reader's position. Some children manifest animals as imaginary friends; they are aware these figures are creations, but Hoff noted that they also see the animal-friends as extensions of or reflections of themselves. An element of Lewis's craft in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* occurs when Edmund scribbles on the face of the stone lion he believes to be Aslan. The disrespect evident in this petty gesture can resonate

along multiple levels for readers. Not only is it indicative of Edmund's continued submission to the temptation of pointless vindictiveness, much like a schoolyard bully, Ascione notes the act also echoes other common cruelties malicious children have toward animals. Therefore, young people may simultaneously see themselves in the stead of the helpless lion as well as understanding, on a subconscious level, the innate wrongness of taking advantage of others.

"In 1899, the publication of Sarah Eddy's *Friends and Helpers* represented the first American book with animal characters designed to prevent cruelty to animals. By creating a connection between humans and animals as equals or as the same, authors plant seeds within children that may encourage ethical behavior toward animals in adults. Previous language concerning ethical behavior toward animals has often been about what the animal can do for humans. Because humans generally equate reasoning with verbal human communication, depictions of speaking animals in adolescent literature encourages new perceptions of animals. Elevating animals to a different mental level may decrease cruelty to humans and animals; perceiving animals as fellow creatures rather than tools, responsibilities, or nuisances may alter the way one views the relationship between humans and animals. For some children, their minds can encompass the horror of hurting an animal because they are already sensitive to their connection to animals; the children would find Bentham's 1789 question of 'do they suffer?' absurd in its obviousness. For these young people, imagining the perpetration of horrific acts toward humans may be beyond their grasps, so creating a correlation between humans and animals through literature might serve to increase humanitarian behavior as well as validate positive behavior toward animals. According to Ascione, for other children, animals as well as other people are not categorized as

'real' in their minds; for them, equating animals not just with equals or fellow creatures but with *self* might be the strategy to encourage ethical behavior toward animals and humans."

The fox paused to lap some more water and pawed through her notes. The stillness in the room had an expectant note, as though everyone wanted to add something to the conversation, but no one appeared to be feigning attention, and it seemed I might have escaped the "bad kid" identification. She took a deep breath and continued, "Therefore, do we agree that the root of all so-called animal-fantasy, particularly that featuring anthropomorphic, or, rather, non-shifting-verbally personified animals as major characters, works to encourage ethical behavior such as veganism?"

Some of the carnivores in the crowd looked skeptical.

"Cavell explores whether humans have a type of 'soul-blindness' in regard to the treatment of animals. Literature with speaking animals as characters, particularly with speaking animals as equals or representatives of the self may gently encourage young people to become aware of that potential blindness. Perhaps not all books promote an agenda of veganism, but many promote ethical awareness through a presentation of animal communication. In many stories, the rules of the world creates a natural distinction between animals to be eaten and animals to be talked to, as evidenced most strikingly when the children in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* eat fish with the beaver couple. This begs the question of whether the children tried to speak to the fish before eating it or if they regarded certain food animals as inferior. In Allende's *City of the Beasts*, a character remarks that a person catches fish so easily because 'he asks the fish's permission and explains that he has to kill it out of necessity. Afterward he thanks it for offering its life so that we can live…. It understands because that fish has eaten other fish; now it is its turn to be eaten.

That's how it goes…' (245). Therefore, these and other books directly challenge the reader to not only consider his or her actions toward animals and humans in some far distant future; they challenge the reader to consider his or her actions toward animals and humans forever.

"Of course, each piece of literature has its own agenda, and often, the talking animal merely represents a point of view, a way to promote dialogue, or some other plot-driving character. However, the existence of talking animals does resonate with many children and can work toward positive agendas. Some works provide a bittersweet, ephemeral gift because of the reality of the oft-debated communication barrier. For many young people absorbed by a particular kind of story, the saddest moment occurs when the wisdom of the companion animal shifts to nothing more than occult, seemingly-senseless meowing, chirping, or barking."

Barking.

Barking.

Clapping.

People started gathering papers and, in one case, knitting needles. Startled by shifting movement on my right, I noticed a soft Labrador gaze in a furless face. "Hey! Time for lunch! Let's try to get some feeling back in our legs before getting herded off to another room, whaddaya say? …Um, do you know that your papers are covered in coffee?"

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From the Vault features celebrated and relevant articles from past issues of the Illinois English Bulletin *and the* IATE Newsletter. *This article was originally published in the* Illinois English Bulletin *Summer 2010, vol. 97, no. 3.*

In addition to teaching in the Long-Vanderburg scholar program and other courses at Millikin University, Dr. Vicky Gilpin teaches composition, literature, speech, and drama full-time at Cerro Gordo High School. After earning her doctorate, Vicky acquired a second master's degree through Harvard University Extension School, where she also received the Thomas Small Prize and continues to act as a TF for online courses. Some publications include "Fangs in the Cornfields: Teaching Vampire Literature to Nontraditional Students in the Composition Classroom" in The Vampire Goes to College: Essays on Teaching the Vampire, *"Oppression and Repression by any Other Name: Modern Relevancy of Wilde's 'Lady Windermere's Fan' for LGBT Youth" and "'Don't Be Mashed Potatoes': Taking, Making, and Complicating Opportunities (a.k.a. 'Not a Speech of Commencement, but One of Continuation')."*

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Book reviews, poetry, black-and-white photographs, and line drawings are also welcome.

When you are ready to share your work with your colleagues across the state, please consult the submission guidelines on page 94. We look forward to hearing from you. If you have questions or suggestions for the editor, please

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(See page 96 for the editor's contact information.)

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- Attached to an e-mail message addressed to the editor, send an additional copy of the manuscript in an MS Word or PDF attachment. See below for manuscript formatting guidelines and information you should include in your e-mail message.

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COVER LETTER: The "Cover Letter" field must include:

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- Student's grade level at time piece was written
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