

## One Size Never Fits All: Or What an English Teacher Wrote During Her Summer Vacation

by Gina Fournier  
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Writers like Jim Harrison, Joseph Epstein and Willa Cather have long known the damage English teachers can inflict on potential readers. In the late sixties at SUNY, before he gave up academics and focused on writing, Harrison began to contemplate the ultimate master's level writing program, which would include living both in the city and in the country, manual labor to clear the mind and intensive reading to feed it. Notice the absence of a central authority figure in this plan. Epstein comments in the introduction to *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, "Few things are more efficient at killing the taste for a certain kind of literature than being forced it in schools." Apparently, Cather refused to have her work anthologized in student editions for fear students would never read her again.

Of course writers never force readers, but unfortunately teachers tend to do so. "Reading has been forced upon us every since we were in preschool. Because of this most students dread to read outside of the classroom," explains Josh, one of my Eng 1510: Composition I students in metro Detroit.

I can't think of a worst indictment of my profession. Teachers turn off students to learning. Yes, aided by complacent parents and unresponsive institutions, but those problems require their own essays.

Signs indicating trouble abound. Downturns in newspaper publishing, stagnancy in book publishing and the cultural shift away from words toward images all align with Josh's testimony. According to the National Endowment for Arts (NEA) 2004 release "Reading at Risk" and the 2007 follow-up "To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence," there is a reading crisis in this country. Meanwhile, strangely enough, U.S. Census Bureau figures from 1940-2000 show huge gains in educational attainment. In 1940, under 1 in 20 adults 25 and older had earned a college diploma, while

in 2000 nearly 1 in 4 had, yet Americans are reading less and less plus reading skills are worsening, says the NEA, even among college graduates. A cable television commercial for Everest Institute, a college alternative specializing in certificate programs like medical billing, understands how to sell admissions, by promising hands on training over reading books. The organization's website relates, "You may have gone to high school cause you had to." The terms aren't quite literate, but clientele may not be too discriminating.

Asking every student in the classroom to read the same material is still the most popular approach used in English classes across all levels of study, the selections often chosen by committee and designed to somehow reach a substantial majority. As I write that sentence in mid July when I really should be doing something else like taking a break or updating my coursepacks, a wave of boredom pins me down; as a teacher I try very hard not to forget what it was like being a student.

Why such a large and devoted following for such a limited approach? In New Jersey this summer, *The Star-Ledger* reported that Butler High School picked a non classic, Kyle Maynard's memoir *No Excuses: The True Story of a Congenital Amputee Who Became a Champion in Wrestling and in Life*, which certainly sounds like an interesting story, for its summer reading program. "One book, one city" approaches began catching on about a decade ago, the paper explained, in the steps of school-wide requirements for incoming college freshmen and the ruling classroom mainstay: one size fits all reading assignments. But why did this most traditional of all approaches pick up steam amid ongoing failings in education, when all methods, even time-honored—perhaps especially time-honored—should be assessed afresh for worth? *U.S. A. Today* covered community colleges this July too, in "'Turning Point' Arrives as U.S. Community Colleges' Purview Grows." The down-side of the picture cited a California report regarding the state's 109 community colleges issued from the Legislative Analyst's Office. It discovered that teaching approaches "are not often aligned with students' learning styles," but are

teachers listening and responding? Though all indicators point to serious problems in reading and writing proficiency across many levels of education, few seem to question the central tie that binds most English instruction.

Meanwhile, average Americans in large numbers are stammering through literacy classes in their native language. Nationally, people are concerned. Recently, *The Tampa Tribune* added to this grim discussion with “Fewer Students Read Between the Lines,” which shared a sobering comment from Don Gaetz, a former county superintendent and current chairman of Florida’s Senate K-12 education committee: “The No. 1 problem in secondary education in our state and in the country is a decline in literacy in high school.” That same deficiency stays with students who enter community college, nearly half of all college undergraduates, according to *U.S.A .Today*, who often carry the extra burden of financially supporting themselves and dependents.

As a community college English instructor, I think the “one city, one book” approach is a big part of the problem and maybe I’m not alone. Alonso High School reading teacher Janelle MacLean was interviewed for the Tampa article and is an old friend of mine— but from dancing days circa *The Turning Point* not teaching days, so imagine my surprise running into her within an internet link supplied by my National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (wordy title?) weekly e-mail newsletter. Turns out she operates a special program sponsored by Scholastic, which allows her to tailor reading assignments to each student. READ 180 is a successful program, according to MacLean, but she’s concerned. Speaking on the phone, she pointed to SpringBoard, a new program in English Language Arts and Mathematics for grades 6-12 designed by College Board, which is set to hit Tampa schools in the fall, funded in part by the Bill and Melissa Gates Foundation. She fears the program will mean a loss of choice and fluidity in the classroom. We agreed, though the bad grammar is all mine and designed for emphasis. Pardon me if I sound frustrated, but if a program doesn’t include choice, it ain’t gonna work.

This past year, for its Great Michigan Read, the Michigan Humanities Council chose the reissue of Hemingway's *The Nick Adams Stories*, simply because the collection is set in the state—"a literary masterpiece literally made in Michigan." ("Imagine everyone in Michigan reading the same book. At the same time.") However, despite widespread use, one size fits all reading assignments apparently fail to turn students into life-long readers, or successful reading initiatives wouldn't be in such high demand.

I don't think I'm over-simplifying cause and effect here. Instead of learning to appreciate the world of words, common book approaches turn students away—away from reading, away from books, away from the power of their own minds. So *please*, let's rethink this thing. Especially with the internet's easy access to everything, uniform assignments help students avoid actual reading and writing, which are too often successfully replaced with skimming, summarizing, mimicking lectures, consulting Cliff and Spark notes, surfing, cheating and guessing, especially throughout high school and college. Shakespeare classes, online?

I'm very worried that we're working against ourselves here. Collectively over twelve to sixteen or so years, standardized reading and writing instruction demonstrate repeatedly why, after graduation, students might continue to "hate" reading and ignore newspapers, books, articles, poetry, plays, directions for Campbell's soup, road signs, tax forms, mortgage contracts, primarily due to a perceived lack of relation to their lives. Summer I semester, this past May and June, sitting in the back row, back corner, Tucker entitled his Composition I entrance essay, which asks students to compare their music listening and reading habits, "Music-Easy, Books-Hard." Meanwhile, his friend Garrett sitting next to him explained, "I do not like reading" because he can't "sit still for that long." Speaking for many of his peers, including his buddy from Central, Garrett believed at the beginning of class, "I feel that books are a waste of time." (University students take summer courses at community college looking for lower tuition and perhaps lower standards, too.) However, by the end of class, after choosing to read *The*

*Lizard King* by Jerry Hopkins about Doors' lead singer Jim Morrison, Garrett changed his mind. We later communicated by e-mail and he confirmed the earnest nature of his sentiments. Before, "I thought that no matter what I was reading, there had to be something else I could be doing with my time, like go outside or hang with friends. This all changed when I found a book that I actually liked." Describing just the growth I hope for in average students over a semester, he continued, "Of course I will never like reading the boring material like research and books for classes, but at least I will be able to find something interesting within the material and build on it." Students must first relate to reading on a personal level before they're willing and able to read productively and proficiently as adults—reading when they must and should, even though they may not want to.

I first heard word about what would happen when the world equated corn with oil two or three summers ago, standing in an Osceola County field, talking to a farmer. Go figure. But more to the point: go to the source. Those of us are interested in education and literacy should listen to writers—professionals and students alike—because both groups understand reading, though of course in distinct ways. In short, what this criticism means for the classroom is that reading and writing instruction should emphasize process—*how* to read and write— not content—that one book that will hopefully change the intellectual life of tenth, eleventh or twelfth graders for the better, which sounds so childish. Yet this critical juncture is where preventable mistakes are being made.

My favorite example of what English teachers should *not* do comes with my personal bias intact, operating in full force. A highly rated part-time instructor already on staff, I was not hired for a full-time position at this particular local community college (not even given an interview, which really unnerved me), so what follows is axe grinding but with a point. Here's who got a living wage and health care coverage instead: an overweight, cigarette smoking out of stater, who planned one semester's entry-level composition course around pornography. This stroke of brilliance, the kind of thing that gets David

Horowitz going (and blowing bad teaching issues way out of proportion), came from an individual who self-described the “foci” of his interest to be vaguely and sophomorically “everything” on the department website. At the time, a Michigan company formerly called Weyco was making national headlines regarding their new policy of not hiring cigarette smokers, which launched a debate about employer rights, such as the possible right not to hire people—due to prohibitive healthcare costs—who are both obese *and* willing to kill themselves with nicotine. Then as now, Michigan was ensconced in its post 9/11 economic woes. Community colleges were demanding more money from the state, for very good reasons, but this one didn’t feel the need to help out the state’s employment figures or tax base in return. Furthermore, the school is located within a city that is home to a large Arabic population, comprising a third of residents, including a disturbing number of female students who wear the hijab. (As a female, seeing even one figure under wraps evokes distress.) Such radically conservative students might feel very uncomfortable studying pornography and might avoid taking gender studies or sociology courses, where the subject might be better located. I don’t know what happen to the competition’s lesson plans because thankfully I split. Conventional wisdom turned out to be correct in my case. Very gratefully, I was hired full-time at a local community college across town, one other than three at which I taught part-time and learned the craft.

To make students analyze pornography within an entry level college writing course is of course wrongheaded. But to make students study *any* topic other than how to read and how to write in a course designed to cover process is wrongheaded. This example just happens to nicely blare “bad idea,” but the idea remains bad even when the subject matter sounds more presentable, even contemporary, like asking an entire program full of students to read and submerge themselves for entire semester into Lee and Bob Woodruff’s *In an Instant* or Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*, which has been done at my institution in the remedial program. I know because I hear about the titles when students who progress into Comp I talk about not reading the selections. Don’t misunderstand. Both books are fine reads, I’m

sure. I especially enjoyed Krakauer’s sidebar about father-son relations. This year, I found that students who picked Krakauer’s 1996 investigation and tried to compare it to Sean Penn’s 2007 film encountered a far greater challenge than they had anticipated. The point is that when students are inexperienced readers—inexperienced authentic readers—they are too often also inexperienced writers who have trouble developing an independent point. In the simplest term, one size fits all turns out students who can’t think for themselves.

Outside of the classroom for the last six years, the world has continued to fight and turn, some days more gracefully than others. Meanwhile, inside the classroom, I’ve learned to appreciate the necessity of diversity. Let student readers choose their own writers and the student’s regard for reading and writing is likely to flourish, or least develop more successfully than traditional teacher-centered models. Teaching students to make good decisions like successful corporate officers or business entrepreneurs must do is much more desirable than proffering assembly-line, book report-style regurgitation. A military veteran and single parent commented this summer, “Before this class it had been 5 years since my last English class and I had forgotten almost everything I had learned, even the fact that I like to read.”

Because my students collectively enliven a cacophony of personality and experience, the notion that one book will suit the needs of a substantial majority with the help of one person’s perspective—the teacher’s, mine—is absurd. Given the opportunity to choose, most of my students select worthwhile nonfiction reading and a substantial majority claim to actually consume their selections and improve their attitudes, even if only a little. A survey of choices made during the recently concluded brief summer semester reflects a panoply of tastes too rich to be contained in a single or even thirty-two flavors.

A budding philosopher read *Autobiography of a Spiritually Incorrect Mystic* starring a character called Osho, who led a flock, accumulated Rolls Royce vehicles and was arrested on immigration charges in Oregon in the 1980s. Osho's teachings on the joys of sex and laughter were later collected after his death by followers. The resulting selection is sure to never make even one recommended reading list, which is not to say that the student's time was necessarily wasted. A male who described being passed over routinely by his teachers throughout his entire educational career found solace in Keith Dorney's well-received football memoir *Black and Honolulu Blue*. A history major accustomed to academic treatises discovered the father and son basketball biography *Pistol: The Life of Pete Maravich* by Mark Kriegel and a more personal approach to his future field. David Sedaris and Chuck Palahniuk make many lives more endurable.

Got an obscure interest? No problem. Want to be a pilot? Talk to your dad and discover Robert Stanford Tuck. Disgruntled by your education? Gravitate toward *Lies My teacher Told Me* by James W. Loewen. Both liberals and conservatives check out Michael Moore, as the NCTE advises, "to determine what is 'real'" and "to make judgments about validity, objectivity, and bias." Memoirs are popular, with new reads continually popping up, such as Ashley Rhodes-Courter's *Three Little Words*, about foster care, and Daoud Hari's *The Translator: A Tribesman's Memoir of Darfur*.

This summer, students challenged themselves with Bell Hooks, Michael Korda's *Journey to a Revolution* about the little-discussed 1956 Hungary revolution, Zora Neal Hurston and *Freakonomics*. Like minds converged, as in Kevin Mitnick's *Art of Deception*, about a career in computer hacking. Going into health care instead? Atul Gawande's *Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance* filled the prescription perfectly. Forensics? Mary Roach's *Stiff*. Parent of an autistic child? Spiritual sensibilities? *Autism and the God Connection* by William Stillman. The usual child rearing problems? *Setting Limits with Your Strong Willed Child* by Robert J. Mackenzie. Recovering heroin addict? Jann S. Wenner and

Corey Seymor on Hunter S. Thompson. Ex-stripper trying to become a lawyer and/or media personality?  
Cupcake Brown. Trying to make sense of the world around you, in which black males are best represented in prison populations? *Punishment and Inequality in America* by Princeton Professor of Sociology Bruce Western, which is no doubt worthwhile reading (I'm putting it on my list), even though Taylor was one of few to report that he read only "a majority" of the book.

Patterns do emerge. Lately, each semester, a few female students have been drawn to Alice Sebold's *Lucky* and Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*. This past semester, at least two students closely related to Sebold's rape experience: one as a Bosnian war survivor who witnessed more evils than a person should be subjected to in a lifetime and the other as a rape victim who found the courage to tell her parents and report the crime to the police. So far, I've found that most readers don't come out of reading Kaysen as fans (students struggle to write a cohesive and clear review of a book that is neither), yet this semester the book was well-received by one young woman who had recently spent time in a mental institution and like Kaysen felt helped by it. A strong but reserved "A" student, Brittany shared her view that assigned reading is "very difficult." Clarifying her position about her past educational experiences, she added, "I am not saying that the books were bad." Instead, she has a problem with being told what to read.

It's just when somebody tells me I have to read a certain book & take notes on it then eventually write a paper, I find myself on sparknotes.com looking up chapter summaries. But this assignment was different. I got to choose a book that interest me & had no weekly schedule of reading dates. With *Girl, interrupted* I found myself staying up to all hours of the night reading it + re-reading. So yes, I actively read my book and enjoyed it.

Experience tells me that neither dictatorship nor uniformity is likely to hold the answer for addressing the nation's reading crisis. Sure, within each group a small number of students make

regrettable choices like Karrine Steffans' *Confessions of a Video Vixen* and Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called It*, the most popular book in southeastern Michigan followed closely by Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Books that lack ideas, analysis, art or craft wouldn't be my first choice for students, but I already know how to analyze selections. They don't, and people learn by doing. Overall, only a small number of individuals make poor selections each semester, which require readers to exercise their own critical thinking perhaps more than the author did, but at least writing about the material then becomes a challenging experience. Meanwhile, other students watch this scenario play out, perhaps becoming more confident in their own better decisions.

As an adjunct with limited choice, in my first years teaching community college English I happily used Bedford/ St. Martin's *The Bedford Reader* and its less-sophisticated cousin, *Subjects and Strategies*, both of which I liked a great deal with their mix of canonical and more quirky pieces, but then I already love to read. Now, for Comp I, I use Catherine G. Latterell's cultural reader *Remix* (same publisher), which calls on a world of music that allows for hip-hop and file sharing. Nothing from traditional recommended reading lists here; more so the likes of *Salon* and *Wired* are well-represented. To balance group selections, students choose essays independently from a fresh variety that includes Diane Ackerman, David Brooks, Laura Bush, P. Diddy, Firoozeh Dumas, Malcolm Gladwell, Ira Glass, Barry Lopez, Steven Pinker, Jennifer L. Pozner, Katie Roiphe, and Sara Vowell, whose works are organized within themed-chapters such as Identity, Tradition, Romance and Technology. Nothing from the last millennium, so no E. B. White's "Once More to Lake" (1941), which has its place but not as mandatory reading within entry level college writing classes in America in 2008 *if* wanting students to actually read is a goal, and of course it should be.

When bored and pressed for time, students act like water trying to escape. They take the easiest way out. And who can blame them? In the February and March 2008 edition of the University

of Maryland's *Teaching and Learning News*, assistant director of the Center for Teaching Excellence Dave Eubank related a classroom experience that transpired in ENG 241: Introduction to the Novel. The article concerned a new technologically-based assessment tool, clickers, which bring, it seems (I look forward to trying them) a game show appeal to learning. Clickers are what the name implies. Each student holds one and pushes buttons in response to Powerpoint questions. This system of instruction provides an opportunity to poll student learning and cull anonymous results about teaching effectiveness, but Eubank's experiment revealed the elephant in the room: students easily avoid reading. "Our discussion of the fact that nearly 60% admitted to not completing the novel about which each student was required to write in her final paper was less than comfortable," he bravely relayed. Though the goal of the article was to promote the use of clickers outside of the sciences, Eubank admitted that answers to questions about how much of each novel students had actually read were "occasionally surprising and often disheartening." So, what should an English teacher do? Make students take lie detector tests and fail non readers?

Certainly, White's "Once More to the Lake" is worthwhile reading, but not something students can readily relate to, and I fear that's true about far too many selections entrenched in classrooms and forced upon students today. Uniform required reading operates like a sort of intellectual waterboarding-style torture using authors instead of liquid. If students make it all the way through the White's essay without losing focus, they encounter "the chill of death" and perhaps are engaged enough to reflect upon their own mortality, but in my experience most are unlikely to do so. Before the essay closes its thoughts about life passing from generation to generation, White's reminiscing has him editorializing about how "the unfamiliar nervous sound of the outboard motors" interrupted his reveries about the past. Unlike his son, who "loved our rented outboard," the father prefers the past and the "old one-cylinder engine with the heavy flywheel, how you could have it eating out of your hand if you got really close to it spiritually." New agey perhaps, but a long way from Silicon Valley. The average

student can't readily relate to dated, AARP reflections, or someone else's idea of a good time. It's a vicious circle; they don't read enough to empathize, yet empathy is learned through reading.

Frank McCourt's marvelous memoir *Teacher Man* gracefully shapes teaching's true grit. Over the course of the book, he calmly accepts his fate. McCort taught English in New York City public high schools for thirty years before making it big with his first memoir about growing up in Ireland, *Angela's Ashes*. Still, he mentions more than once that the young people in Greek drama murder the old people who get in their way. Of course, one of the many reasons to read is to recognize the difference between art and reality.

In teaching, separating good ideas from bad is important because ideas take so long to implement and, if institutionalized and they turn out to be bad, they take a very long time to undo. A few years back, *The Detroit Free Press* published a dandy profile, "Outboards Got Started in Detroit," about local inventor Cameron Waterman (great name, given his claim to fame), who utilized a Detroit boiler plant and the waters off Gross Ile to test his invention in 1905, after first hitting upon the idea for the outboard motor thanks to his participation in the rowing crew at Yale. (In short, according to Waterman, rowing "stinks.") Turns out, the Great Lake State is not only the once revered motor car capital of the world but also responsible for spawning a large boating industry. As a teacher, at first I thought, "*Here's a great unit waiting to be born! E.B. White, outboard motors, the Motor City, up north in the Great Lake State!*" Great in theory, perhaps, as students in southeastern Michigan should maybe be interested in these marvelous connections and the opportunity to discuss them in an invigorating college setting, but not in a classroom where I've got to teach writing process, including sentence, paragraph and essay structure, some awareness of the wide-range of approaches to writing essays, what I want in particular from student writers, as well as reading and research techniques, dreaded outlining in some form, how and why to use a dictionary, documentation techniques, the difference

between a subject and a noun, distinctions between summary and response, and more, to students from the inner city who are less likely to go up north as well as suburbanites who are more likely to return to familiar lakes for a week's stay. Want to talk about the time and energy it takes to teach revision to over a hundred college writers fall and winter semesters?

Composition instruction entails a very long list of hands-on how tos and practical concepts. Not E.B. White nor J. K. Rowling nor any single author is bound to magically deliver all those lessons to 27 diverse students who would rather privately surf the internet, listen to their ipods or play with their cellphones (one in the same yet?), who well know how to avoid reading as they have been doing so successfully for years, for many learning to also dread writing in the process.

**THE DISMAL STATE OF READING IN AMERICA.** According to the NEA data, nine year olds are more likely to read voluntarily than thirteen to seventeen years olds, a fact that surprises no one. Imagine a precocious pre-teen, curled up with Harry Potter. It's a scene one can imagine happening inside an elementary school free reading period or during summer vacation. Bob Wise of the Alliance for Excellent Education, a Washington-based think tank, told *The Tampa Tribune* that major problems occurred when middle and high school teachers neglected to teach reading, assuming incorrectly that those lessons were over. My understanding is the standardized tests of No Child Left Behind have only made matters worse. The students I work with in the metro-Detroit area have all come from high schools that serve a steady diet of standardized forced reading, on which students are gagging and choking and dying of boredom. Meanwhile, teenagers want to be social year-round, and they want to belong. Even if reading material relates to them personally, many would rather hang out with peers or electronics.

Comparatively, college students may be ripe for the picking, but NEA figures suggest colleges are not turning students into readers but rather colleges are turning students away from books. Citing

UCLA's *Your First College Year* and *College Senior Year* surveys, the NEA relates that reading for pleasure rates drop over the course of a college career. Turning to the National Survey of Student Engagement conducted by Indiana University, NEA comments, "If we accept that voluntary reading habits are central to a liberal arts education, then surely it is troubling to find that the majority of freshman and seniors alike read only 1-4 books for pleasure throughout the entire school year or they read no unassigned books at all."

But are students truly reading much of anything, assigned or otherwise? And what about after college? The NEA's information about the habits of all Americans suggests that serious reading is slipping away as a pastime. In 1982, 82% of college graduates were literary readers; by 2002, that percentage had fallen eighteen points to 67%.

We must ask: *Where are we headed?*

Dana Gioia, chairman of the NEA, describes the stakes in "To Read or Not to Read":

How does one summarize this disturbing story? As Americans, especially younger Americans, read less, they read less well. Because they read less well, they have lower levels of academic achievement. (The shameful fact that nearly one-third of American teenagers drop out of school is deeply connected to declining literacy and reading comprehension.) With lower levels of reading and writing ability, people do less well in the job market. Poor reading skills correlate heavily with lack of employment, lower wages, and fewer opportunities for advancement. Significantly worse reading skills are found among prisoners than in the general adult population. And deficient readers are less likely to become active in civic and cultural life, most notably in volunteerism and voting.

Meanwhile, my profession appears to be deeply involved in the business of ignoring the obvious. Recently a co-worker shared her philosophy. In essence, students don't have to like reading, they just have to do it. But the thing is, since many students don't like reading, pragmatically, they've simply found strategies for avoiding it. (For some, skimming is taught in high school.) I figure that I've worked with over two thousand students and seventy class groups to date. My candid conversations with students leave me absolutely convinced that vast numbers of students simply elect not to read more often than they do read, and for their actions they receive passing grades and diplomas. Possibly, this ease presents a false picture regarding the amount of work required to pass life successfully too. (Low standards certainly confused me.) In the July/August 2008 edition of *The Atlantic*, in "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" Nicholas Carr admits to having "troubles with reading" due to time spent zipping around online reading in short fragmented bits, and his "literary" friends agree. "The more they use the Web," Carr explains, "the more they have to fight to stay focused on long pieces of writing." If intellectuals and professional are skimming more and finding their reading skills diminished, of course busy college students who don't love reading are too.

Politics play a big part on campus, as in greater life, adding unfortunate complications to the mix. When I arrived, I discovered that adjuncts and their students were forced to deal with (or perhaps pay for only to ignore) a dull textbook, which I could not read and sought to replace immediately. However, doing so on probation as a new full-time hire meant risking tenure and contradicting all advice given to me. Yes, over one book. All voices inside and outside the institution, even the most progressive and dedicated, urged personal protection and counseled me to wait until "after"—after I achieved union protection, which I now thankfully enjoy, though the advice was right on. Trust me, I've paid for my insubordination. When I said, in effect, this textbook sucks, some of my peers evidently heard, "You suck." Jennifer Haberling, a Baldwin Middle School English teacher and the 2008-2009 Michigan Teacher of the Year, as awarded by the Michigan Education Association, told the association's

newsletter that she felt embarrassed by the honor and that she enjoys collaborating with her peers. Here's what I think: First off, good English teachers don't have much time for collaboration with peers (way too many students!), and secondly my guess is that being singled out among your immediate and statewide peers as the best teacher in the state may actually cause some discomfort, as some of those peers deemed less talented by default are bound to feel jealousy and act out any number of insidious ways. Young children and Shakespeare can tell you: teachers are human and not necessarily nice people.

I'm not trying to agitate. Waiting until I was safe among peers would have meant facing far too many deserving students— approximately a thousand individuals over three years—with my hands tied, holding inadequate materials. And since something I call "The Honesty System" is my number one tool for fighting plagiarism (though it's imperfect), I had to tell each group that first year as a full-timer, "Your pricey required reading sucks, I'm sorry," then launch a discussion about textbooks to give student's a voice and let them know I feel their pain. It's terribly upsetting when you must ask people to spend forty to over a hundred bucks on a lousy textbook you don't even respect, but this sort of thing happens all the time. It's too bad, too, because students could use that money to buy a few novels, some poetry and a collection of essays or two they might get more out of in the long run. The way teachers use (or, as in the case of adjuncts and other department members not given a choice, *don't use*) assigned texts influences student attitudes toward reading and book purchasing, for better or for worse. Each semester, savvy students with tight budgets ask, their enthusiasm long ago dampened, "Will you actually use *Remix?*" Based on experience, some have a hard time believing my reply. Forced to read *Lord of the Flies* one too many times (he claims four times in five years), Leroy struck back:

I chose to boycott the book report and formed the mentality that reading just isn't for me. I never looked back after that moment I would fight teachers tooth and nail in a desperate plea not to

read. The teachers however would fight me off and make me do work. I would turn in half assed reports based on what they said the day before and the teachers would just push me along.

**GET YOUR READ ON.** Since composition courses ask students to write nonfiction essays, I help students find their own nonfiction book to augment *Remix*. Even better, as one of my students put it, I help folks get their read on. Guiding groups of students as they make their selections is a nonstop thrill-ride in the amusement park of everyday life. Don't worry. In class, I counsel students who've picked up the cliché not to describe their book as a "rollercoaster ride."

However, I do want to purposely mix metaphors for a screaming neon effect because I so want people to see what I see. Teaching composition in a free reading environment lets me spend valuable time in a garden of humanity, infinitely more rich than the jungle of coneflowers, coreopsis, the potted hibiscus we winter inside that needs transplanting, tons of black-eyed susans, some overpowering a small group of stinky Asiatic (?) lilies, rose of sharon, purple liatris, cultivated wild daisies (yes, preserved this late in the season due to deadheading), gladiolas, butterfly bush, yarrow, tiger lilies, a few tropical New Guinea impatiens and their annual friends begonia and coleus mixed into the perennials for ongoing color, amid the miniature old-fashioned Hollyhocks transplanted from Chris Allen's grandmother's house that do not attract ants, a few rather sickly white, orange and fuchsia dahlias I bought down the street (never again; Chris Allen's mom never liked that place, I'm told), magenta rose, pink rose, Russian sage, some struggling bergamot (bad location), sunflowers, some planted by birds, so located directly under the feeder beneath the apple tree, scented wild geranium, a weak strain of re-seeded cleome from last summer (*welcome!*), late planted but still appreciated cosmos, and even some lingering spring pansies all blooming in our yard and attracting monarch and swallowtail butterflies.

New arrivals in Comp I and Comp II are adults who have reached the end of the road, their last required English classes *ever*. Imagine. Teaching literacy to grown-ups, I get to hang out among a non-

stop gusher of individuals who each act in very interesting ways as they commandeer their individual projects and also mix with one another. Of course, no two students or groups are exactly alike. Though I want to savor every last nano-second of my time off from teaching and related obligations, I am very much looking forward to classes this fall during the November election, when I plan to utterly withhold my views, or at least try, until the second week of November. During break time or in small groups while working in class, students naturally fall into conversation and are encouraged to consider it a kind of warm-up for writing. It would seem odd if I didn't join in. I usually gauge class by class, semester by semester, how much editorializing to share but have overall learn to limit comments and let my behavior do the talking for me.

(BTW. Don't be too jealous of teachers on so called "summer vacation." It's really the only time for assessment, major updates to lesson plans and preparations for the new school year, though it sure is nice staying home. ☺)

*Some of my findings:*

1. ***After a lifetime of forced reading, students need help learning how to choose reading material, which is a reasonable byproduct of assembly-line treatment.*** Once teachers stop telling students what to read, students often stop reading (or stop approximating). Too often, metro Detroit high school graduates don't know how to find books to read on their own. They don't have an accurate idea about the available range of material, and they don't know what they enjoy.

Fitted with narrow, rigid views of the world of books—one at a time, single file—students don't automatically understand the difference between fictional literature and nonfiction stories, or the difference between "novels" and "memoirs" in particular. Of course, they're not alone. James Frey and Oprah help get this conversation going. And thanks to Augusten Burroughs, of course, for keeping it alive. For some students, keeping "autobiography" and "biography" straight is challenging like keeping

“me” and “I” under control, maybe not to the same degree, but all equally repulsive. Some have never tried commentary and find they like it (or hate it); others learn to love (or hate) true life stories.

Students don’t necessarily know how to navigate the world of information, in person or online. The chance of falling into a discussion about the differences between Dewey Decimal and the Library of Congress systems of classification is remote in any busy classroom, yet bookstores organize differently from the town and school library, which may organize differently from one another, adding yet another layer of distance. The mere act of going to a library or bookstore overwhelms students at the bottom, who are likely to take the most time making a selection. Librarians have been typecast as mousy and boring, making them difficult to approach, especially for the unsure. To the unfamiliar, searching for books at a bookstore can be a nightmare, especially if the student makes the oft repeated rookie mistake: asking for a “nonfiction book” without narrowing focus. A tired clerk may snap back with sarcasm.

One thing that amazes me among many is the fact that many students are not much more tech savvy than I am, and they certainly aren’t automatically information and media savvy, either. Online, the distinction between amazon.com customer reviews, a short blurb from *Booklist* and long scrolls of blog entries blurs for a steady stream of students, who can’t necessarily identify the NBC peacock. Thankfully, as a full-timer, most of the time I can snag a classroom with computers to help facilitate the process of teaching all the processes necessary to reading, writing and thinking today. (At our campus, adjuncts and their many students go without choice *and* computers.) Learning how to look up the key to pronunciation in a print dictionary is important, especially if the power goes out. Otherwise, the dictionary is online now complete with actual pronunciation of “taciturn” (soft “c”).

2. **Many students write vaguely about books at the beginning of the semester, without naming any books or authors, because they have not established literary relationships.** Institutionalized students know few books and even fewer authors specifically by name. If specifics are shared, I may scan *To Kill A Mockingbird* referenced by title within student testimonials, but I'm less likely to spy Harper Lee next to her book. I regularly hear a very few big names like Stephen King and Dean Koontz, but very rarely encounter a literary writer. And just about never an idiosyncratic choice. The last ones I can recall are punk musician Henry Rollins and media observer Chuck Klosterman. Even the best prepared students like Erin are likely to have "always hated" reading despite parental efforts (paying tuition for an upscale all-girl Catholic high school) until they find their own favorites. Even though Erin discovered two novels she likes, *Nappily Married* and *Nappily Ever After* by Trisha R. Thomas, the nonfiction book assignment "was challenging initially" because she could not find anything she wanted to read, meaning she didn't know where to look. However, she "eventually realized that I love music and have started to love reading and decided to pick a book that related to the two," so Erin read *Divided Soul: The Life of Marvin Gaye* by David Ritz and raved about it.
  
3. **Coming into college, too many students cite Dr. Seuss and Dave Pelzer as their main literary influences.** The frequency with which I read about *Green Eggs and Ham* and *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* as most memorable and favorite books, particularly absent more substantive and mature corollaries, is remarkable and disconcerting. A Harry Potter tale is often the last book read. Amir elected to dual-enroll as a junior in high school and an entry-level college student in Comp I. He mentioned loving books when he was a "little boy," naming Clifford, Arthur and Dr. Seuss, but now that he's older, he allowed, "I still like to read books every once and a while," in other words, the J. K. Rowlings' series. Now, as a teenager, for Amir books must be "descriptive and have many scenes in the book where there is action in the books that just sucks me and makes me feel like I am involved in the story taking place. An

example would be if the author said, ‘He stalked his enemy like a hungry predator ready to attack with his shiny silver dagger in his enormous hands.’” During the last class meeting, the student congratulated himself and thanked me for an experience more challenging than high school, where he ‘wrote down’ to please the teachers. Amir certainly seemed to enjoy a sense of mastery over babyish course work.

4. ***There are many reason why students don’t read: they have little clue about what to read, lack confidence in their skills, haven’t the time, feel no inclination, miss a sense of mastery, but many react well to a strong nudge.*** Unfortunately, students don’t necessarily grow up in homes with books or know reading mentors. It takes time and practice to get beyond *James and the Giant Peach*, *The Indian in the Cupboard* and *Are You There God? It’s Me Margaret*, no matter who you are, which makes the plight of the unwilling even more challenging. Tabitha entitled her entrance essay “The Love of Music vs. the Agony of Reading.” She recognizes the value in reading but simply doesn’t want to bother:

For some indulging in a 300 page book, is like escaping to a deserted island. However, for me personally, being handed a 300 page book and being told to read it is pure agony. Every now and then, I will find a book that looks interesting to me and be able to finish it in a maximum of 3 days. Although, if I am being handed a book by my professor, then told that if I do not read the book I will fail the class, I become that much more inclined to not read the book.

To her credit, though her friend stopped attending class, Tabitha hung in there. Despite troubles curbing her cellphone addiction, she wrote a nice book review and finished the class. Likewise, John, who was a little edgy perhaps because he quit heroin and cigarettes simultaneously, admitted in his course evaluation, which he signed, “I have a new found like towards reading. Not love don’t get ahead of yourself.” Turns out, he hadn’t realized that making personal connections with books and writers was okay: “I always thought I was reading wrong.”

5. **Reading material choices are critical.** *Remix* understands the central tenet of literacy instruction: the need to relate. Amy is extremely uncomfortable in groups. Her therapist even called me about the student's performance in class, which did suffer due to social inhibitions. (I thought the therapist's action was great, a network of service providers networking). In her entrance essay Amy wrote, "I like stories where the characters have challenges and problems that I can relate to." However, in her exit essay she recognized that changes might occur in personality and reading habits as a person matures: "Today I like the band Silverpun Pickups and to read books that can relate to my problems, such as *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, but in the future that can all change." She continued, "Going from fairy tale books to a woman suffering with OCD is a big change. Just to think what I will be reading later on in my life." At the end of the semester, she connected reading to her major, architecture, and described a move from *Cosmo* to *Architectural Digest* and *Designing Homes*. In her entrance essay, she said she didn't like popular musician Eminem just because he's popular. His music "does not appeal to me because of the way it sounds." By her exit essay, this painfully shy young woman looked forward to reading professional texts and the future when she can see herself liking jazz.

Clint read *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffith because books are a "reflection of character" and his white family adopted an African American little sister. He wasn't thrilled when I urged him to research the science and commentary surrounding Griffith's unusual experiment (about which there appears to be less written than I'd like), but it's okay for students be a little uncomfortable. The main thing is that students must build and maintain a personal connection to reading and writing in order to take the next steps, reading (and writing) outside of their interests' increasingly more challenging material.

6. ***Even students at the bottom show personal growth when individuals are encouraged to find***

***themselves as readers and writers.*** Students who don't consider themselves readers often recognize reading as something they might do when they mature, at some point later in life. But does later ever come?

Jack, dead set against reading, became at least hopeful he may someday change his attitude. Meanwhile, he said he pretty much finished the difficult text he chose, a 19<sup>th</sup> century treatise by Sir Benjamin Thompson, or Count Rumford as he's known by followers. I thought the kid was full of blarney until I left his e-mail and went to Wikipedia and Amazon. Turns out Jack's dad is a chimney sweep, Jack is set to take over the family business, and the Count had some important things to say about the nature of heat, which remain true today. If not an honest accounting, at least the student made up a great story. Paulus from Poland elected to read a few books during the semester, nothing I would approve of, but nevertheless he gave them credit for spurring personal growth and helping him with his goal: learning English and earning a college degree in the U.S. A student who had troubling buckling down but was capable, Marge maintained she "can't stand the quietness and the calmness of a library for more than a minute." She admittedly disdains reading, walks "straight to the C.D. and music isle" and refuses to "acknowledge any books" when her brother makes her go to Borders. By the end of the course, after reading *Kabul Beauty School*, she was still a stubborn reader at best, but she had mellowed a tad, perhaps just to please for a better grade but her testimony suggests limited improvement in attitude. She still claimed to "strongly dislike reading" because "my mind gets overwhelmed with all the words and it makes me exhausted." No huge turn-around there. Marge still became "very aggravated and annoyed" with the pace of reading. "Why sit through an hour of reading a book," she questioned, "when the author could have just summarized it in one complete sentence?" Yet she closed: "Sometimes I think that if there were no books, what kind of education and knowledge would I have? Probably none."

7. ***When students increase their appreciation for reading, they learn to become better writers.*** In a free reading environment, opportunity and growth extend to student essays, where students also choose topic and point. Personal narrations this summer threaded more one-of-a-kind squares into the quilt. Students opened up and told their stories about anorexia, Serbian pride, and finally attending school at age eleven and having a voice as a female in America. (I like excitement, but I'm still actively thankful that the female Bosnian by mixed-marriage who escaped after the war and the proud male Serb born in the suburbs enrolled in different sections.) What to do when a wilderness adventure goes wrong at the top of the mountain, two reckless bicycle rides, the fear of flying, and going for broke on the streets of Miami, the budding philosopher's tale, which included statistics from *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, a good deal of partying and some worthwhile reflections:

I went back to Detroit with no doubts that things would turn around if I make them. Instead of stirring in my problems like sugar dissolving in water, I picked myself up and made some changes. I enrolled back into school, moved back home, and got one stable job. I had so much new found determination and drive. And it was all because of one seemingly irresponsible poorly thought out decisions [leaving town on borrowed cash]. I went for broke and came out wealthy.

This constant outpouring of one-of-a-kind student creations is fecund, not sterilized, and would wither if overly restricted. If I didn't encourage Tom to be honest about his passions—hating English classes and loving water—he might not have written about the joys of scuba diving told with Mr. Limpet-like day dreams of killing sharks and impressing the ladies. His second essay on the power of water then grew out of the first and was influenced by the Greek sirens and the horribly tragic drowning death of a high school classmate Memorial Day weekend. Had I not encouraged individuals to explore

their own worlds, Tom's classmates may have held back about bad parenting, good parenting, alcoholism, how to handle a lemon law vehicle, depression and alienation.

"I wish I had a black box to put my nightmares in; I'd throw it out the window and never see them again," Chelsea wrote, to which she added the comic comeback, "I really hate writing about my life because it always turns out sounding like a PSA on the timid and suicidal." Don't worry about Chelsea. Instead, support her with access to well-funded community colleges, tuition grants, affordable student loans, health care coverage and meaningful internships. "I like to believe," she dared, "that I am not the kind of teenager that has finally had enough and says to 'hell with it all' and plunges myself over the Golden Gate Bridge because to state it simply, I have always thought that those kids just needed a bit of attention and they'd get it by any means necessary, in life or self inflicted death." Not incidentally, because writing is psychology, the student, whose brother died when she was young, hopes to pursue a career in forensic medicine.

Exhausted? Wait! There's much, much, much more! Even this small taste from one abbreviated semester is nowhere near a satisfactory survey yet.

I've been hearing about autism a lot lately. In the fall, one woman was inspired to write due to her young son's poor health, which she believes was entirely preventable, and in the winter another parent countered with a strong argument for childhood vaccinations. This summer delivered another variation or two on the topic, along with a disappointing surprise. In her personal narration "The Perfect Miracle," Isabel explained, "Sometimes unexpected things happen to our plan making it harder for people to deal. Keeping an open mind and enjoying what we have is what I learned from what happened to our son." Later, within her book review of *Autism and the God Connection*, Isabel had a reason to utilize personal narration. However, in "Guidebook to Holland," she plagiarized Emily Perl Kingsley's poem "Welcome to Holland," which I didn't discover until after grades had been given.

During class, I asked the student about the metaphor. She said she borrowed it from an unnamed friend, to whom she gave credit, yet when I later checked the lines presented are without a doubt Perl Kingsley's.

I don't know why the student chose to lie. Perhaps my direct question caught her off guard and she panicked. Perhaps she had used up all her courage already that day dealing with her son. I believe English was not the woman's first language. Her idea was good; she could have used the metaphor fairly by simply giving credit to whom it was due, but integrating outside sources is a concept students don't necessarily understand especially since very few read newspapers or serious magazines. Without her name of course (none of the names presented here are real and the writing is presented in its unadulterated form), I may use Isabel's work and story as an example to help other students more honestly approach their own work without sacrificing creativity—even if the creativity is someone else's.

Teaching means learning for me too. There is simply no way I could have guessed by looking at this mature individual, who attended nearly every class and listened attentively, though she was quiet, that she would try to pull off an intellectual heist, which she may not have thought was such a big deal, considering her own big picture. Still, I would never attempt this lesson plan in an online course, which I don't choose to teach for numerous reasons, for one because other cheaters do drop physical hints and reveal themselves through observable behavior. From the students' perspective, however, it's easy to steal something you don't respect. I catch maybe one to five acts of plagiarism of varying degrees each semester and of course don't know how many I miss.

Otherwise, students are innocent until proven guilty. And they write about some very heavy stuff, often with a surprisingly deft touch, such as a young mother's tale of attempting to make plans but making God laugh instead, a phrase she picked up from her mother—now there's a trustworthy source, right?— delicately referring to unplanned pregnancy, parenthood and marriage. But mothers and

fathers aren't automatically trustworthy. One student wrote about finally learning to stop bailing her mother out of financial quandaries and another didn't blame her mother for taking off and leaving teenagers to fend for themselves.

This time around was not usual. Student writers shared stories about the death of friend and sexual abuse, but also lighter yarns of first tattoos and perfect days, as well as a smattering of the usual car accident tales of terror. (Unsolicited advice: think before you give your teenager a car.) Stripping one's way through college, a decision which the student regrets: "The embarrassment would not be the best thing, because perhaps one of my high school male teachers would walk-in." How to survive a stay in jail, romantic rejection, overcoming ESL barriers, dolma, adoption, selling weed to pay for medical bills, learning to smoke pot responsibly, bad decisions, young fatherhood, and choosing a lunch table in high school, influenced by Emily White's selection in *Remix*, "High School's Secret Life."

I think reading and writing matter. I've never held a more fulfilling job, and I've had tons of them. Ideally, to lead a strong tomorrow, students can benefit from practice today composing original creations. No matter a person's talent level, authentic writing is demanding and exercises an individual's work ethic.

While personal narration begins the semester, the book review caps it off, putting all our lessons about process to the test. Uniform book reports, which demand little actual thinking and no originality, are easier, said Tom, the scuba diver. "It was difficult to add the commentary and personal opinions without using me, I or you in the paper," he wrote of the book review. "The other assignments seemed to be telling stories and this one seemed to be reviewing someone else's. I think the first step was the easiest and this one by far the hardest," he explained, "even after actually reading the book." Yet in his review, he competently wrote, "For people wanting to be pilots, Robert Tuck is the type of man anyone could idolize." Though he didn't provide detailed documentation or talk about the author of *Fly for Your*

*Life: Robert Stanford Tuck*, Larry Forrester, the student did build his capacity for analysis and empathy: “Crashing in midair into another plane would be terrifying.”

My course design parallel’s my main writing direction to students: pick a point and stick to it, beginning, middle and end. The exit essay serves as a final exam. The directions ask students to return to their initial comparison and re-analyze their personal reading and music listening habits. For students, it’s a last shot at making a good impression before final grades are calculated. For me, it’s an opportunity to check for growth in skills and attitude when compared side-by-side with the entrance essay and the rest of the work in a student’s portfolio. Budding beautifully, Olivia played the role of a writer more comfortably than she had all semester, a difficult one during which her car was stolen from the school parking garage, something that happens once every four years, according to campus police. Inspired by my mention of Virginia Woolf’s “Death of a Moth,” Olivia wrote, “I watched as the spider just seemed to flow on a tiny web. It was at that moment that I realized that reading and music most both flow smoothly,” she discovered, meaning they both must be well constructed. Her final essay reviewed “structure,” the composing process, audience awareness. “Writers write and then they revise and keep revising again and again until the finished piece is as smooth as the spider coming down the web. In the end,” she related, “the writing will be something that the readers will want to read.” Well put. And good news! Olivia just e-mailed me to say hi, thanks and that her brothers bought her a new used Taurus better than the old one.

When students take both Comp I and Comp II within this free learning environment, the opportunity for growth expands. Comp I’s continuation, Composition II- ENG 1520, is all about research and writing argumentatively. At this level, the nonfiction book assignment ideally helps students write a research paper. The book and book review supplement research and provide additional, authentic Works Cited page listings. Though my nonfiction book review’s design has grown over the years into a

successful centerpiece, it remains fluid. I made a note recently: “If your author is being held captive in the Colombian jungle by the FARC, make sure to mention that fact in your book review.” Winter semester, in Comp II Marguerite did mention Ingrid Bettancourt’s capture while reviewing her memoirs, but the student could have stressed the politician’s ongoing ordeal more prominently. Maybe if she had more time and fewer responsibilities as a parent, she might have realized this shortcoming. Not helping matters, I read one line out of zillion too quickly in the first draft of Marguerite’s paper and thereby missed a teaching and learning opportunity. As is, despite my shortcomings, the student writer did many things very well, like integrate news and opinion from *The New York Times*. She simply showed room for further growth surrounding the inclusion of closely related news events, which is natural, especially during the span of a single semester. Like musicians and athletes, writers need practice and time in order to develop.

**SEEKING THAT CONNECTION.** *Students need direct engagement; literacy must be presented as a way of life.* The goal is to find books and authors one loves, what I refer to as building a stable of authors. After finding and holding true love, putting up with more mundane reading becomes easier. But to reach that point, individuals need guided opportunities for discovering their own passions. Liam eloquently described his yearning for a literary connection:

As a reader I have never been able to truly connect with an author. Most people, when they are *really* reading a book, they zone in on the story. I always picture reading like jumping into warp speed in star trek, the words get bigger as they rush at your face with a blur of lines until, wham! You’re stuck in the story. Feeling as though you’ve just been dropped onto a new planet, I picture myself looking around, getting my bearing and then moving into scene like a camera man recording a movie, there, but not interrupting. I’ve never experienced that feeling; never seen the lines blur and hit me right in the face. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve read my fair share of

books. In school, I floated through the classics [at a very exclusive prep academy] like, *Beloved*, *1984*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Color Purple*, *The Great Gatsby*, all of these stories that I've read, and enjoyed, but I never really felt like I was experiencing the story. People like the experience, good readers, and people who do it often, can look at a story and really see it. I was in an Avis car rental shop about two weeks ago, and while I was standing in line, waiting, I noticed a woman reading her book in the corner. Sitting all alone, she had no idea of the world around her, and as I'm watching her frivolously turn the pages, while trying to focus my eyes on the title of her story to get a glimpse into her imagination, she burst into tears. In the middle of this overly public building, in front of an entire line of people, she just started sobbing as if no one else was around. That is the type of emotion that people who really read want, it's the connection that they are looking for.

The student was likely influenced by an interview with Chuck Palahniuk that I play in class, thanks to NPR, in which the author makes clear the reason for his success. In books like *Fight Club*, he moves people to feel something extreme, even if it's shock or repulsion. Otherwise, without that excitement, "Reading is something I do for school," Liam resigned. "I plow through the words and try to focus on every little detail in hopes of finding that connection. It hasn't come yet, but I'm sure it will, one day I'll find that connection, and who knows, maybe I'll turn off my stereo."

*To address educational shortcomings, why don't we listen to students more? Where are the books, articles, documentaries, investigative reports and even reality television shows revealing what students think about the state education and the reading crisis? They have so much to tell and teach me quite a bit. For those inside the profession who prefer data collection, why not look at actual reading rates and track student attitudes within English classes?*

***Encourage students to exercise self agency and they will learn to teach themselves.*** Not drastically, she cautioned, but Molly's outlook about reading changed for the better—even though the Summer I semester is condensed into two demanding months—because she couldn't stop reading *Lucky*. "Relate" is again the key word, repeatedly used by students. Part of an unsettled group reminiscent of *The Breakfast Club*, Molly explained, "I can relate" to Sebold's story "because I too had been sexually abused and I know exactly how she was feeling." After including U.S. Department of Justice crime statistics from the 2000 report "Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement: Victim, Incident and Offender Characteristics" in her book review, Molly analyzed:

When I was sexually abused, I was a teenager. I would have been part of that statistic [of young people who are afraid to speak out]. I believe that the majority of teenagers don't say or do anything because people rarely believe them and then start to look at you differently. Sebold was also a teenager, but unlike myself and the majority of other rape victims she did prosecute.

Directions regarding the book review purposefully adapt to circumstance. Most students are cautioned against appearing in their own essays, unless they have a valid reason for doing so. Molly explained in hers:

After reading this book, I decided that I want to fight my rapist because maybe in doing so I will move past all my pain and problems. This book also helped me get some ideas of how I can deal with all of my thoughts and feelings. I did end up starting a journal after reading this book and I finally told my parents and I am taking a course of action to fight my abuse. I believe that if I would not have read this book, I wouldn't have had the courage to tell my parents about what I had gone through. But, I also wouldn't have had the bravery to file reports against the rapist either. So I believe that this book really does help the readers get by after they have been raped.

***Learning often involves discomfort, if not some pain, but also brings satisfaction and joy.***

However, risks exist. Once students open up, they may come undone. Although I'm not a trained counselor, I sometimes feel compelled by a sense of responsibility to ask someone if they are suicidal or if they have been sexually abused. Community college students live complicated lives and sometimes worry me but most show resilience. Early in the semester, Chelsea's resolve and writing were less developed, when she cared about "what is going on in others heads" and spent "the better part of my time wondering just that." At the end of the semester, in her practice journal she revisited these thoughts and revised them, exhibiting much greater self-confidence. Although she finds her life depressing, she clearly stated that she does not contemplate suicide: "I don't think that way, I have this life for a reason. That reason is unclear to me right now but I won't let anybody else define me while I try to figure it out."

***Although laziness is one by-product of our push-button society, students still appreciate a challenge and fresh learning methods.*** With steady command, Chelsea called *Stiff* "greatly disgusting and not for the squeamish." Perhaps explicating herself and the world, she wrote that the book "gives readers a cynical way of looking at the morbid inevitable fate for all that is death." Likewise, John, the young person trying to turn his life around— a colorful young man with much energy to burn— used metaphor in his exit essay like a pro. Like many of his peers, he improved his attitude, if only a little, and believed that reading might fit better into his life when he gets older.

Music is my wife and books moved up from being by my ex girlfriend from middle school to being my ex girlfriend from high school. The like for books has increased and I feel that with time my like for books will turn into a love. But for now bump that music.

Rather than relying on an outside source, the student refueled himself. "I did read my book," he replied, later adding, "Hunter S. Thompson is one of my heroes so I felt it was my job to give him a good paper."

I don't know for sure that students are being honest, but they sound earnest. Peter and I didn't really hit it off, nor did he feel comfortable among the students in his group. During pre-class chit-chat, he and I had a tussle over politics, which became so lively we each had to take a time out. However, to the student's credit, he took our full exchange to heart, decided to go to work and accomplished much. He expounded, taking on a professional tone:

As I sit here typing my last essay for English 1510, I can look back and the growth of not only me but my reading selection. I do not have a lot of free time but if I did I am sure that I would read books outside of my college courses more often. I see reading as a vital aspect to becoming a great historian. Being able to bridge the generation gap through writing might be the most important tool in education. . . . Writing and reading are necessary tools to communicate not only with the present but also the future. Without books we would not know where we have been, yet most important we would not know where we are going.

***Highlighting the connection between music and reading, and 'keeping things real,' as one student commented years ago, works.*** If a person loves favorite song lyrics, he or she can learn to love the written word. Sitting among his peers at the top of the class, Peter's writing is impressive and supportive from where I sit.

The valuable lesson that I will take with me from this class about reading is that simply by reading anyone can draw new conclusions and look at different aspects of life that they may have never thought of before. This is a valuable lesson for me because I am studying to be a history teacher. Historians have to keep an open mind about other peoples perspectives . . . Now for the first time in my life I actually see the connection between my love for books and music.

The difference? Peter explained, “Unlike my classes at Western, I had the opportunity to actually read a book of my choosing and not just skim through a random book and look for answers to my questions for my research papers.” The implication is clear: skimming doesn’t allow for meaningful absorption of the material.

**Teachers make mistakes.** I am very confident but realize my classroom isn’t perfect. As a teacher, I know that I’ve inflicted some damage and probably more than I realize, regrettably, since my motto mimics the Hippocratic Oath.

It’s a rare student that says something strongly pro-reading outright in her entrance essay like, “Music cannot grab a hold of my attention the way books do.” To Patty, a fan of Anne Rice’s *The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty*, at the beginning of the course music was no more than the “flavor of the month.” Unfortunately, Patty’s exit exam revealed regression, at least within the confines of the semester. By the end of class, she wasn’t “overly enthusiastic about either” reading or music. Unlike Brittany, she didn’t like *Girl, Interrupted*, preferred the film version, and titled her book review “Girl Idiotic.” Between my class and Kaysen’s book, together we deflated the student’s enthusiasm. Kaysen’s memoir “could have been greatly improved,” Patty criticized forcefully, “if it had been written from an adult’s perspective that is aware of the writing process, rather than an adolescent, who is still learning,” which sounds close to an idea we discussed in class, about the need to reflect and analyze one’s own story for the benefit of readers. She called the book “difficult to follow” and cites similar views from *Entertainment Weekly* and *Time*. Her criticism went into overdrive, particularly in her final revision, where she labeled the book a “waste of time” and gave it an “F.” Patty hated *Girl, Interrupted* so much, she read the book twice just to make sure.

**Students spend so much time in school. Why repeat the same lesson over and over?** Listen, repeat. Listen, repeat. Listen to what I say, all of you repeat. Reminds me of step aerobics, which I

detest. No matter the variation, it's just step up, step down, step up, step down, step up, step down, over and over. There's no way to get ahead, no new territory to conquer.

Fresh out of high school, quiet but committed, Julie is a rare student to name a piece of canonical literature in her writing, Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*. For her nonfiction book, Julie chose a biography of Audrey Hepburn, *Enchantment: The Life of Audrey Hepburn* by Donald Spoto. "I actually read my nonfiction book selection," she stated like most others, but what started out as an easy read soon reached rocky ground. "Then it hit me," she remembered, "the boring middle section of the book. I literally had to force myself to continue reading." Through trial and error, Julie learned about the shortcomings of an impersonal biography. As a fan (and an engineering major), she pledged to check out Hepburn's autobiography, a move she couldn't see at the start of the project. Still, she held no grudges, calling the book review assignment "more enjoyable than others" due to choice: "It was my choice and my fault the book wasn't great." In class, we discussed vetting, but Julie was hard on herself. She added that it was "nice not having to answer questions or do a worksheet after every chapter, as was the case in all my high school English classes." Despite the boring middle section, she claimed, "This experience reading was one of my better experiences."

Julie is a success story, but she is also a rare result. For her, reading is "thrilling" and "fresh." Making good sense of Comp I, she analyzed, "People who lack the time to indulge in a novel look to music to fulfill their emotional satisfaction." She elaborated about her first college semester, "The only problem I came across is that college textbooks take up most of my reading time. Although, I take pleasure in learning new material from textbooks, they provide facts, and no personal insights." Calling herself an "avid textbook reader," the student named one in her writing (perhaps the first to do so that I've witnessed), *The Biology of Life* by Peter Raven. Of it she said, "Since reading the book I can explain anything about the life cycles of any types of plants including angiosperms, gymnosperms,

tracheophytes, seedless tracheophytes, bryophytes, hepatophytes, lycophytes, and psilphytes. I can also inform anyone on all the types of animal phylums including, but not limited to, cnidaria, arthropoda, nematode, annelid, and chordate. This information on the essence of human life came from reading a textbook.” Trust no other truth: the joy of reading is local.

***The one-book-fits-all tradition has dominated for too long.*** The common book approach, practiced by well-meaning teachers and organizations across the country, including the NEA and its version, “The Big Read,” is far too limited in scope to be successful in a plural society, like a one industry town lacks diversity and therefore strength. (“Imagine everyone in Michigan foreclosing on their homes. *At the same time.*”) The Michigan Humanities Council event, The Great Michigan Read, looks like a good idea on the cover—whatever might urge people to read more is perhaps worth a try—but covers can be deceiving.

Writers Jim Harrison, Tom McGuane and Richard Ford appeared together for a chat to close The Great Michigan Read July 10 at Michigan State University, where they all spent time. The evening filled with anecdotes and an over-capacity crowd marked a truly great day for reading. However, none of the lauded guests warmed to a question posed to each about favorite books, and for obvious reasons. All this emphasis on ONE AUTHOR AT A TIME means two of the three would have to go, sort of a battle of the scribes, who in this case are otherwise friendly. Ford responded that he didn’t have one favorite. McGuane quickly produced a long list beginning with *Don Quixote* and said he had “lots” of favorites. Book tastes change in a person over time, Harrison explained. *Finnegan’s Wake* moved him when he was younger and impressionable, but now he has difficulty with James Joyce’s language.

I hope the Michigan Humanities Council event was recorded. Students need to hear writers talking about a world of reading. Realizing that English teachers and other professionals prefer and dislike various literary styles makes students feel more comfortable with their own preferences and

dislikes. Confession: I recently realized that I brought home a third copy of *Wuthering Heights*, which I have tried but cannot seem to read.

What's important is not some mistaken notion of the one "best" book for all students, but rather finding an array of books that will form a field of personal favorites over a lifetime. The goal is to find multiple books that will affect us each individually, to ideally make us all better humans together.

~\*~

*Disclaimer:* Yes, for personal as well as professional reasons I have always adored the Steeley Dan song about never going back to my old school. I've got an attitude and *lots* of stories. There's a post it note on my desk at home, somewhere in the pile, reminding me to kick off the semester with Pink Floyd's *The Wall*:

We don't need no education

We don't need no thought control

No dark sarcasm in the classroom

Teachers leave them kids alone

Some ideas are better left alone, but my lesson plans are always in a state of slow growth, since one person multi-media events take much more time to create than old-fashioned lectures. Mine are prone to constant fine-tuning and pruning. The presentation currently includes, thanks to Youtube and the collection of media and technology departments on campus, Aretha Franklin singing "Think!" from *The Blues Brothers* and Disney's 1937 *Snow White and the Seven Dwarf* ("Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it's off to work we go!"). As well, in Comp II the first act of *Crash*, which is excellent for introducing the concepts of stereotypes and logical fallacies, among others. To get rid of any dead weight, including scam artists, for the betterment of the whole about a third of the way through entry level courses, I like to run what I

refer to as the “community college” scene from the film version of *Fight Club*, accompanied by a reading, which well defines “dark sarcasm.”

To create my lesson plans, I’ve pretty much had to ignore just about every traditional approach I was raised on including mandatory midterms, multiple choice tests, and long lectures. Thanks to Professor Stewart at California State University Northridge, as an English instructor I’ve kept reading out loud together and the injection of my own passion for reading as instructor. From The Boston School of Adult Education and Cathy Slater Spence (I hope I’ve recalled her name correctly), as well Jim Krusoe at Santa Monica Community College before her (both costing just 50 bucks a class), I learned more about writing and teaching writing than I did in any of my graduate school seminars (which cost a whopping 900 bucks a class). There are many reasons for this imbalance, including my own shortcomings. Education is an art and a daily grind. But I learned the basics of writing and research no better than I did in seventh grade, thanks very much to Mrs. Gardella at St. Mike’s, who didn’t get mad when future English teacher Barb Johnston and I respectfully called her Mrs. Gorilla because we liked the word play and she didn’t want to squelch our interest. She actually looked more like a tropical bird.

Reviewing my own education, as a writing teacher and a writer what stands out most is the glaring absence of instruction regarding how to, particularly how to actually write that damn paper and how to become a life-long reader, so I try to provide my students all the things I didn’t get, just like a hopeful parent. As I write this essay, an old student’s new girlfriend, who I met at dinner at that yummy thai food place across the street from campus, is e-mailing me for direction about her summer writing class at the community college closest to MSU. She says, repeatedly, the teacher is only talking about himself and handing out low grades. I simply report these details, which sound perfectly familiar.

Forgive me if I sound pedantic, impatient or obnoxiously impassioned. I do realize that most teachers are good people who try and that institutions change slowly, but one-size fits all reading

assignments and the worse culprit of all, mindless regurgitation, must be dethroned. “I learned that writing is whatever you make it,” one student commented anonymously, coining her own term, probably without realizing she did so, but maybe not. “Writing isn’t just a recitement and regurgitated answer to what a teacher wants you to think, feel, and believe. Personal analysis is everything.” Over-adherence to the one book method kicks students out of the learning process, which is not good.

In the near future, thanks to academic freedom, I plan to adapt my methods. I may use my E.B White lesson plan in a contemporary lit course as a means to catapult students into the world of fiction. Showing a collage of old film footage with people taking lake vacations—before the motor car, during world wars, after we dropped the bomb, in Technicolor, wearing funny clothes—people looking through the years basically just like those of us in class, though we would laugh anyway. Like sound, images help tremendously. Not incidentally, I went once more to the lake just last week. Born and raised in the area, somewhere there’s some incredibly embarrassing sixteen millimeter footage restored on video tape that Eric in the Media department can probably transfer to DVD for me to use in the classroom, featuring a still chubby much younger me jumping in a lake and running up sand dunes.

(Pause. Insert the sound of a loon calling its mate.)

But no matter how riveting a visual and auditory presentation I may put on, eventually I must ask students to “take out their books and open to page . . .” Afterwards, though, after reading and talking our way through a required essay or short story together, I can free bored minds, instructing them to strike out on their own.

(Cue crickets.)