

## **THIS AND THAT: The Classroom**

In the early eighties Benny was a sixth grade student in a New York State Literary Center (<http://www.nyslc.org/>) program on Ancient Greece that integrated ancient Greek literature in English translation, as the inspiration for student writing, with the school's Social Studies curriculum on Ancient Greece. It was a two-month residency with sixth grades in two schools. I invited poet, Greek translator, and Harvard professor, Robert Fitzgerald (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-fitzgerald>) to work with me for two days. We were reading his translation of *The Odyssey*.

The day Robert Fitzgerald arrived, a student in the first class asked him how he became interested in Greek. He replied it was when his sixth grade teacher wrote two Greek words on the blackboard. The Greek words in English meant "horse river" or "river horse," the English equivalent of hippopotamus. He wrote the words on the blackboard.

Benny copied the words on a piece of paper. The teacher said, "Benny is taking down what is on the board in Greek. He doesn't know Greek." Robert Fitzgerald replied, "No one told him that." He concluded the class by reading aloud from *The Odyssey*, Book One, in Greek.

Following his two days in the schools a *New York Times* reporter asked him what the difference was between a sixth grade classroom and Harvard. "None," he replied. "A classroom is a classroom."

In the early nineties a fourth grader asked me, "How do you spell dealer, like in drug dealer?" The girl sat at a table on the left in the back of the room. I asked her why she wanted to know. "There is no place I like to go," she said. "There are drug dealers outside the apartment and inside my mother hits me." She had a round scar on her forehead. Later the teacher told me her mother had burned her with a cigarette lighter.

She was tiny, fragile, and such delicate features. She was labeled "learning disabled." "I am in fourth grade, in a special place in fourth grade," she wrote. D E A L E R.

As an artist educator, Teaching Artist, and Executive Director of an arts education organization I work in classrooms. I teach. I have worked with all levels of students from second grade to

graduate school. I have reported cases of child abuse, gleaned from writing handed in to me. A student, a thirteen year old, wrote she learned she was H.I.V. positive when she found out she was pregnant. For a while I placed a drawing given to me by a young man whose father was arrested for murder on my refrigerator. I worked with his brother, also.

In the nineties I had an eight year old tell me, "My life is too sad to write about." She did not write; she sat and watched me. On the last day I was in her classroom, I wrote, "My life is too sad to write about" on the top of her paper. I suggested I would write a line and she would write a line. She wrote, "This never happened before and I do not want to tell nobody." After several more lines from each of us, she wrote, "My father did something really bad." She was in the room when her father murdered someone.

I think about the classrooms I have been in. I think about what I will do in the classroom with the incarcerated youth I am working with this week. Whose writing will I use to motivate and inspire these young men? What are their writing and their language arts skills telling me they need?

I have never talked down to a student. What is a classroom but honesty and curiosity, a place of learning, an apprenticeship for living in a very real world.

I learn from the young people with whom I work. What I learn expands my reading list, what I listen to, and my assignments. It renews and revitalizes my commitment to the classroom. This is the age where the internet, schoolhouse shootings, Facebook, Twitter, unemployment, single mothers, absent fathers, mental illness, drugs, alcohol, violence, twenty-four hours news, bullying are part of our culture. Education is the news. I am interested in how young people interact with the complex of information that is our lives today.

I have found reading and writing are dynamic experiences when they augment and sustain communication among students and teachers. Reading and writing contribute to a classroom community.

A question. There are no right or wrong answers. This is not a test. Questions integrating the students' experiences and interests offer the challenge and flexibility to embed the basic skills of literacy in contemporary and meaningful societal problems. This offers us who work in classrooms the opportunity to become students of our students, to reflect on what is important to

our students, what our students are listening to, seeing, thinking, and learning outside of the classroom.

When there is so much emphasis on testing today where is there space for the imagination, for original thought? How does this speak to how we value a young person as an active, critical participant in our world? How do we validate young people's perceptions of the world?

My best education for teaching has consisted of being in schools, coming to know and respect all children, responding to what I observe.

Toni Morrison once stated she wrote *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* because they were books she wanted to read. No one had written them, so she wrote them. In the late eighties the New York State Literary Center began to publish the books I wanted to read. No one had published them, so the New York State Literary (<http://www.nyslc.org/publications.htm>) published them. Beginning in 2000 we produced CD's (<http://www.nyslc.org/cds.htm>). I have now edited and published six hundred books of the writing of young people and produced thirty-two CD's.

I first tried video by renting a camcorder and taking it with me to the Clash of The Titans ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clash\\_of\\_the\\_Titans\\_\(tour\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clash_of_the_Titans_(tour))) concert at Darien Lake. I arrived at the concert two hours early, turned on the camcorder and began to interview anyone who would talk to me in the parking lot. The parking lot was a sea of Anthrax, Megadeth, and Slayer t-shirts. The mood was festive; everyone wanted to talk about his favorite band.

The lens of the camcorder surprised me. I didn't need a book to tell me when to zoom, when to pan. It was as if everything I had ever watched was with me. People wanted to know if I was with a TV. station. Several young men commented on my age. I asked them about education. I told them I was planning to use the footage with teachers. I asked questions about school, about what they thought was important, about what they thought was important for a teacher to know. I kept the camcorder running, and I listened. What stayed with me from all of the responses from the mostly white, young male audience was the way they perceived themselves to be stereotyped dumb-kid, not worth much by the school establishment, by what they thought the heavy metal t-shirt, long hair look said. One group of young men spoke with me for over half an hour. When we finished I thanked them and asked why they were willing to give me so much time. "Maybe we can make it better for a little metal head coming up."

In 1992, following a pilot project at an alternative high school, the New York State Literary Center established The Communication Project (<http://www.nyslc.org/tcp1.htm>), a reconception of what is taught to youth with severe learning, behavioral, social, and emotional needs. In the mid-nineties The Communication Project expanded to residential placement and juvenile detention sites, day treatment programs, and long-term suspension programs. My research continues and continues to encompass how literature, writing, history, and communication are taught to a population referred to as high risk or beyond risk.

I am a writer writing who is also an educator; the roles have been blurred until they are now indistinguishable. My work with students reflects my own reading. My bookshelves continuously expand. In the early nineties I choose a hip-hop aesthetic: a willingness to confront social issues and humor. I recycle what I read, see, listen to, selecting and combining poetry, non-fiction, and fiction. I mix styles, critics, poets, novelists, musicians. I take apart work eclectically to create new work. In short my method is like the dj who chooses to speak by sampling.

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