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## Extending the Conversation

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### In Search of the Authentic English Classroom: Facing the Schoolishness of School

Anne Elrod Whitney

**A**s long as I've been in schools—as a student, a teacher, and now an English educator—I've struggled for authenticity. So much of what happens in school has always seemed . . . well, fake. Competing visions of the possibilities and purposes in the space we call school bring with them competing versions of what it would mean to do authentic work in language arts classrooms—that is, work that is in some way meaningful beyond the context of school. There's reading and writing as I've known them in my private life, and then there's reading and writing as they often look in schools, and while these sometimes complement one another, they also often conflict. Further, school is sometimes framed as a place for preparing, a place for becoming college and career ready (though what that readiness entails is not always specified). At times this approach positions school as an important space *within* the world of college and careers, envisioned perhaps as Dewey imagined it, as a safe place to try things, a space where real work of participation in society could be done but in which there was some protection from serious consequences of a misstep or two. Other times school gets characterized as a place apart, yes, but with a more negative connotation: on graduation students will enter the real world from which, it follows, school is quite separate (and thus unreal). Each of these views suggests different approaches to engaging students in literacy; what counts as authentic work in an English classroom depends in part on what kind of space you take the

classroom to be and how you see its relationship to the rest of the world. Thus each semester, when I meet a new group of English education undergraduates in my secondary language arts methods course, I find myself stretched between these various versions of what we're even there for—so stretched that I risk losing my bearings. In this article, I want to use some moments in my own uncomfortable history as a student as entry points to reflection on a problem I find at the heart of some of the more uncomfortable moments I've had in my practice as a teacher and teacher educator as well.

While visiting my parents last year, I unearthed a letter (see Figure 1), which I had written to my second-grade reading teacher in 1981 as an end-of-year reflection. My mother saved it in a box among good report cards, standardized test results, all my letters to Santa, truant notices from the high school, and every homemade Mother's Day card I ever gave her. Why she saved it and the through-her-eyes portrait of myself this box offered me is a matter worth its own essay.

Of course my first and strongest reaction to this letter is to cringe with embarrassment at the brattiness I read in almost every line of the letter, right down to the postscript. But after that feeling subsides, my memory offers two moments from that reading class, caught in time.

First I remember how, on special days, we went to the library to check out books—and I remember that library almost photographically. Shelves arranged in a U, from Easy nearest the K-1 area to Fic along the 2-3 side, to the squeaky swiveling stand of biographies (I read them all) to the Dewey Decimaled nonfiction along the interior wall. (My favorite: *The Book of Why We Get Sick and How We Get Well*. Author forgotten.) Cozy beanbags and a rocking chair shaped like a kangaroo waited in a quiet corner; *Cricket* and *Stone Soup* beckoned from the new-periodicals shelf. More than once, I lay down on my stomach between the stacks and took in the first few chapters of a new book right there on the floor.

I also remember how, back in the classroom, for what seemed like hours, we divided words into syllables: hold your flat hand under your chin while you say the word. Count the bumps of your chin against your hand. Make slash marks through the words. Listen to lots and lots of explanations of lots and lots of rules about how to know where the slash really goes. Check answers. Get plusses on all of them—or get minuses on all of them, pretty much depending on when you learned to read and how much you do it at home. Nobody ever seems to get better or worse at this, all year long.

These contrasting memories of reading class evoke for me both contrasting versions of what a language arts class can and should be *and* perhaps contrasting versions of myself that these different spaces evoked. In fact it was

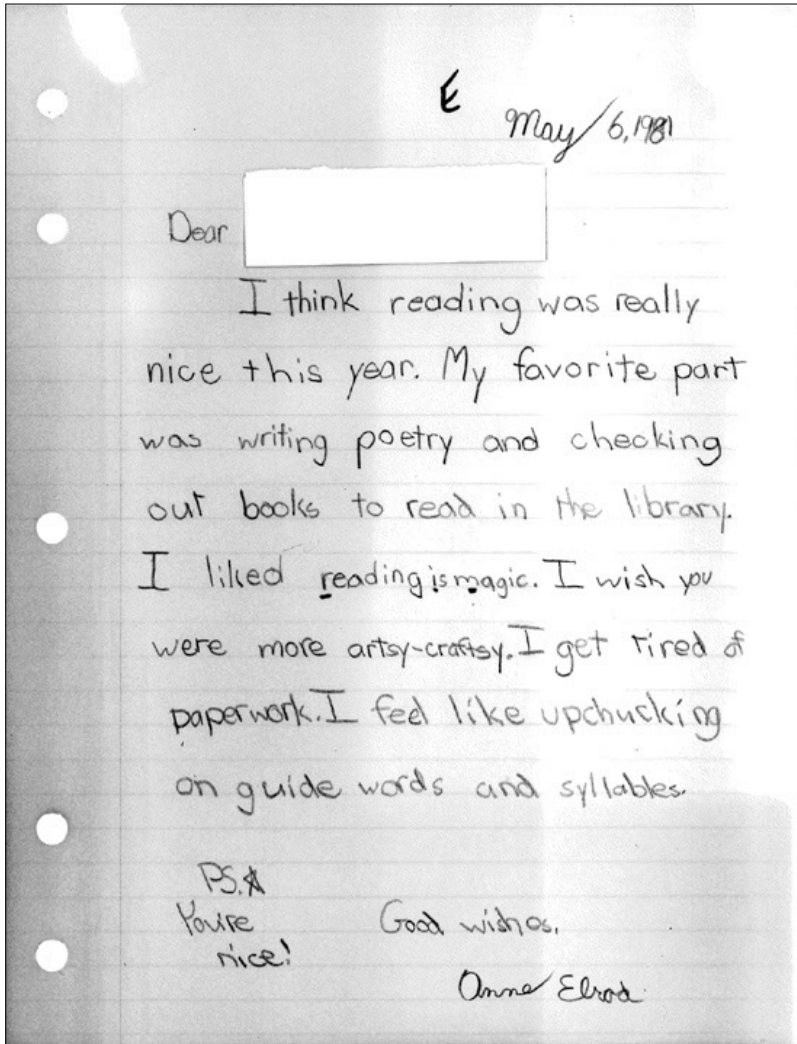


Figure 1

always hard for me to find a comfortable place to settle as a reader, writer, and teacher in school settings. Though I always loved reading and writing, I swore I'd never *ever* be a teacher. Reading was my favorite thing to do in childhood, perhaps dangerously so: I once crashed my bike because I was trying to read while riding, once knocked myself out when, while reading, I walked straight into a brick pole. So knowing this, and knowing that I am now a professor of English education, you might think I loved school and

especially English, right? Not exactly. I started out in elementary school as an eager student, and I got good grades all the way up until classes started incorporating homework. Then things changed. By 12th grade I was failing senior English, truant, and only barely headed for college. I turned in almost no out-of-class assignments in any course and spent more English class periods either at the fast-food joint down the road or hiding in my car (reading, in both places) than attending class. And even in college when I declared a major in English, the *one* thing I swore I would *not* do with that degree was teach. Never. There was no way I was setting foot in a school again, much less *work* in one. What I liked was reading and writing, not school. They were not the same.

It would be easy to blame the teachers I had, to say that they didn't engage me or, more arrogantly, that school didn't challenge me. However, that's not true. The teachers I had, almost without exception, were excellent. They were well-prepared, and they were experienced. They were fortunate to work in a well-resourced district with good support for professional development. By the time I entered high school in the late 1980s, many had worked with the National Writing Project, an organization with which I have also had close ties. My teachers from elementary to high school without exception offered opportunities for choice reading material at least some of the time, assigned texts from a range of traditions including young adult fiction and works by diverse authors. And I remember most of these teachers as smart, as caring—and as very encouraging to me in particular. My writing appeared in school newsletters and literary magazines. With the help of my language arts teachers in middle school, I won one of NCTE's Promising Young Writers awards, and I even won the school English Award. With teachers' encouragement I entered and won regional competitions in essay writing, spelling, even reading. So I could do "school stuff" if I had to.

Yet with all this encouragement and all this recognition, from teachers who were good at what they did and who wanted to see me do well, somehow I just didn't care when it came to what actually went on in the classroom. I liked winning contests, but these activities seemed entirely separate from my real life as a writer and a reader. I did read all the assigned books, usually a day or two after they were handed out in class, but my participation tended to stop there. Occasionally in class, discussion about a book would suck me in and I'd make comments—but this rarely translated into me completing any assigned work or turning anything in for points after seventh or eighth grade.

I now work with preservice language arts teachers. So many of the students who enroll in my methods class loved school; most every student

at this university earned good grades in high school, otherwise they would not even have been accepted here. Many of them choose careers in teaching English because they hope to give to others what they themselves received as a student in language arts classes—assignments that inspired, or teachers who inspired. These are feelings I didn't share, and even now I find myself feeling awfully . . . unlikely as an English educator. When I was a student, school seemed to me profoundly uninspired, at least not half as inspiring as *actual* life and the reading and writing I might do there. It was this feeling that kept me from wanting to be a teacher: I felt in my years as a student that school was a fake place and that I'd rather have been doing something real (and in this feeling lies evidence of my conviction that school was something unreal).

Thus when, from time to time, I use memories like these as starting points for talking with my preservice students, for example, by engaging in the same kinds of remembering and reflecting I invite them to do in a literacy narrative or statement of professional vision, tension arises for me. I see in my own school memories, and my problems in working with the super-students who take my classes in English education, illustrations of a central tension that underlies teaching. It is the same problematic situation that faced Miss Black as she planned instruction for my second-grade class, alternating class time between library visits and counting syllables. This tension was the problem that stopped me from wanting to teach to begin with, the biggest problem I faced as a teacher in the high school classroom, and the problem that stands now between my college education students and me. It is that schools are, well, schoolish. What we do in classrooms takes on a schoolish flavor with its own dynamics and motivations. The dynamics and motivations of school reading and school writing are often distinct from the dynamics and motivations surrounding reading and writing in other settings. For my entire teaching career I seem to have been doing little but trying to bring those closer together.

It is tension with the schoolishness of school, for instance, that makes it so fraught for me to teach reading and writing in a classroom setting. Literacies—some of them, anyway—can be deeply meaningful to people in their private lives. It can feel invasive, even violating, to bring into the classroom the literacies that students practice in the world outside of school—representing oneself on Facebook, or staying up all night devouring the new Harry Potter, or journaling about one's private life—to the classroom, even when we have good reasons to do so. While we bring literacy experiences such as these into classrooms precisely to bring the skills and interests kids use

outside of school to bear on their academic literacies, we also run the risk of bringing academic literacies to bear on the others in a way that taints the flavor of those activities for students.

I remember, for example, bringing the Monty Python film *The Holy Grail* into a senior English classroom, both to draw attention to the idealized nature of the other Arthurian texts we had been reading and to introduce satire as a genre. This was a film I loved—and I had been one of those high

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school and college kids who watched the movie endlessly, memorizing whole bits of the text and recounting them with friends until we were laughing too hard to speak. Students in my class were either like me in this or, astoundingly, they had never heard of the film. Well, to the experience of this text I am sorry to say I added a distinctly schoolish facet—a study guide. Now, to my credit, the study guide did

not ask basic comprehension questions about plot and characters, instead calling for students to note funny moments and then, in a separate column, to note why it was so funny and how it linked to the other texts we had read. But nonetheless, I chose to mediate students' experience with this film—the film I had loved in my pajamas in the dorm, or in friends' rec rooms—with a handout. A handout worth 20 points.

My frustration with just this kind of activity, born of my lifelong discomfort with the schoolishness of school—and the way people seemed always to ignore it—explains a lot of why I did finally go into teaching English after I swore I'd never teach: I held on to a hope that English class could be real, a room in which everyone learned to love reading and writing and in which good readers and writers came to do those things more skillfully and meaningfully. I hoped for a classroom in which we could all forget we were in school for a moment and just read, just write. I know now that we are never “just” reading or writing, that these are layered and variable activities, but what I was working from was a sense of my out-of-school reading being somehow simpler and yet richer for not having been interfered with by a teacher and classmates. I perceived the distinct features of in-school reading—features such as reading or writing a text in common with others at the same time, modifying one's pace through a text or a composing process to match that of others for the purposes of discussion, and producing reports about what one has read or written—as unreal, like shady facsimiles of the purer (to me) act of reading on my own.

But part of me must have known, even in the second grade, that you can't escape or ignore your context. What did I ask Miss Black for? “Artsy-

craftsy” activities. Dioramas, posters, or make-your-own filmstrips about what we read. I actually enjoyed doing these kinds of things as a student, and as a teacher I have assigned plenty of “artsy-craftsy” projects of my own, but they also seem to me no more real than guide words and syllables. Even when we language arts teachers do better than dioramas, engaging students in real work for the world outside the school—say, collecting oral histories in the manner of *Foxfire*, or developing websites for local businesses, or writing and producing a play for the community to attend—even when we do work for authentic non-school purposes, we are also doing it in schools, and to pretend that we aren’t is foolish.

This is also not to say that I don’t think we ever can or should mediate texts for students in schoolish ways. For Miss Black, doing what she thought was right for the struggling readers made her class wrong for me at times, but I do think it was her responsibility as a second-grade reading teacher, as it was mine as a high school English teacher, to offer students real tools they can use in approaching a text. I coached kids in reading strategies such as predicting or gisting, I taught students about prefixes and suffixes as a means of improving vocabulary, and I offer the preservice teachers I work with now instruction in doing the same. I had good reasons for devising that handout to guide my high school students in analyzing the Monty Python film in a different way than they would have on the couch at home, too. Moves like these help students gain access to texts, making it easier for them to love reading as I did, and yet for other students they also get between the student and the text, or more accurately between the student and the act of reading, in ways that hurt. What’s more authentic? If I want to make reading in my class more like reading at home, then surely I should be taking them to the library and not practicing dividing words into syllables—on my belly in the library, I’d never count a syllable. Yet this is what school sometimes does to reading. And it seems to me that the reason we gather people into classes called “reading” or “language arts” rather than just turning everyone loose to lie on their stomachs or walk into poles or relax in their cars is precisely so that we can step away from the practices themselves for a moment and become self-conscious about those practices. We gain control over and become better users of that which we can at least momentarily hold up to the light; school offers a safe place to do this with our literacies.

As I have moved into teacher education, and have become more and more engaged in trying to nurture teachers in leadership and as participants in the politics that surround and shape their work, I have thus also begun to make peace with the schoolishness of school and of language arts teaching, and even to claim it as a special opportunity. Schools exist to do a mix of jobs

for our society, depending on whose vision you accept: to sort people out or to unite them, to prepare workers or to prepare citizens, to perpetuate socioeconomic divisions or to provoke their rearrangement. These aims overlap, compete, and are not all benign. I think that by rejecting the schoolishness of school, or even ignoring it, I unwittingly kept myself from committing to my own vision of schools and instead ceded my voice to others, not all benign.

I've come instead to embrace a vision of schools as both learning places and being places—contexts for experience (being) in and of themselves even as they look outward to future experience (learning). In other words, for a long time I saw school as an impoverished context when compared to the so-called real world, and I sought to make my classroom as real—that is, un-school-like—as possible (and failed). Now, however, I see the world of the classroom as just as real as the one outside. The classroom is simply a place, one place among the many in which we learn and be. Yet it is a special place in that our main task together in the classroom is to attend to learning—not just to learn but to *attend* to learning, to understand how we learn, and get good at it, and talk about it, perhaps differently than we might other places. I might read Harry Potter with a flashlight under the covers at home; at school it makes sense to talk about *how* I read Harry Potter under the covers or anywhere. Language arts class, in particular, is a place where we try to understand our literacy, get better awareness of it and control of it, and get good at literacy learning. This seems to me an interesting place and full of potential—yet I and many of us have tended either to pretend it is not so or to reach outside the classroom walls for creative assignments (often good ones) to make it more authentic. Take for example the assignment, in an American literature class, of making a colonial American newspaper, perhaps with articles on the arrival of the latest ships from England, editorials about oppressive taxes, and weather reports predicting long, hungry winters. We might assign something like this on the grounds that the newspaper is a more authentic genre than some other—that is, we can find newspapers in the world outside school. And in producing their newspaper, students will find themselves engaging in some real and rewarding tasks, e.g., synthesizing material from a range of texts about colonial life, analyzing news articles as models, putting themselves in the shoes of colonists, better understanding, in turn, a novel set in colonial times—yet we seem to forget that this “more authentic” assignment is as fake as any other. We are not living in colonial times, students are not colonial printers, and there are no colonial readers for our paper.

Whereas in my experience we tend to ignore this central fact, why can't we position it at the *center* of the activity? That is, anytime we craft reading



and writing opportunities for students—even setting up nonschool audiences for students and engaging them in literate practices that resonate in communities of practice outside of schools—we are still doing it within the context of school. To ignore this is to render even the most thoughtfully developed activity just as fake as any other. Instead, I ask that we not only devise ways for students to write in less schoolish forms and for less schoolish audiences, but that we also attend to how those activities are yet occurring in school, and thus are special for being situated in the context of the classroom. I ask that we engage students directly and self-consciously in both the nonschool context for an assignment and the school context. So, for example, when reading the historical novel and composing the newspaper for the period, we would position students as richly as possible within the rhetorical situation of the colonial printer, making decisions about such things as what colonial readers would need to know and what issues would warrant articles in that milieu. However, we would also attend to how, in the present moment, we are a group of people sitting around reading the same novel at the same time; what opportunities does this afford us that reading it alone on the beach might not? How can we as a class make use of those opportunities to become more thoughtful and flexible readers? Students, who are the ones expected to learn from the classroom situation after all, can be active participants in unpacking what their classroom situation actually *is* and what opportunities and challenges it offers.

Would teaching like this, language arts classes in which I'd been asked to look self-consciously at the purposes of language arts, what it means to learn and the differences between school contexts and other contexts, been any more engaging to the second-grade me, who read every biography in the library but felt like upchucking much of the rest of the time? Or the high school me, who read every novel but never wrote the papers, who would submit poems to the literary magazine but preferred reading alone in the car to discussing literature in class? I'm not sure. The reasons I withdrew as I did are more complicated than that and extend well beyond what was happening in school. I do know, however, that thinking about how and why we read and write, in school and out, fascinates me now and fascinated me then. Questions of reading and writing processes—how texts are made, what they do to people, how texts work differently in different contexts, and how school literacies do and don't link up to other literacy contexts—are what finally brought me to teaching as a career after I'd sworn I'd never teach. Such questions are what motivated me, as a high school student, to come

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after school to work on the literary magazine even on days I had skipped English class itself. And questions about what reading and writing mean to people—the identities we take up or the identities we reject in and through texts—are what brought me to English education and the research I do in writing.

I like to think that some honest talk about just what we were trying to do in third-period English would have interested me even in high school. The activities in which I was asked to engage seemed to me pointless. I'm *not* in colonial times, so why write this colonial newspaper article? I'm *not* a literary critic, so why write this essay on *Hamlet*? When I read a novel at home I don't have to make notes, so why annotate this text now? I see now that the teachers usually did have smart points behind each of those activities, points that I now see as important and therefore interesting. But I don't remember us talking about what those points might be beyond the refrain, common in the suburban, college-prep-oriented schools I attended, that activities were needed for college—or simply needed for “practice,” without ever specifying what we were practicing for. One teacher in particular did make a tremendous effort to offer rationales for what we were doing, explaining that “you need to write this research paper so that you'll know how to do research and so that you'll be able to express yourself in research

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paper form.” I appreciated and still appreciate her making the case; it's way better than “you need to do this because it's worth 200 points.” But I challenge her and myself to get behind that even more: Where does “research paper form” come from? What are the

cousins of the “research paper” that live and breathe outside of school? How is writing a report on a U.S. state for an audience of one person who has read hundreds of state reports over the years different from writing about a U.S. state for someone new to the United States who actually does not know what states we have and how they differ? If pressed, I can think of good reasons to write state reports, and even good reasons to write them for an audience of a single teacher. But it's unlikely that I'll access those reasons, and convert them into real engagement in the task, without some scaffolded inquiry into the situation. We have to at least admit that there's no such thing as a “state report” outside of school before we can get anyone to write one meaningfully inside school. We have to at least admit that the purpose of counting syllables is to draw our attention to something *about* reading that will help us do it more skillfully; it's not actually reading. We can make school more real by first admitting to its “schoolishness” and then making what we can of that.

For these reasons, my undergraduate teacher education courses have turned more and more toward unpacking the purposes, challenges, and nuances of English language arts instruction. That is, I want teacher candidates to analyze, be critical of, and capitalize on the classroom context in ways that benefit their students both in and beyond the classroom. This affects, for example, the way I ask critical literacy questions, asking teacher candidates to make explicit and then examine the many competing versions of the purposes of English held by the many different parties with a stake in kids' literacy. Or it affects the way I address issues such as audience and how students are positioned as authors; while I still advocate an approach to teaching writing in which students compose for audiences outside school, I also work with teacher candidates to help students navigate their double positioning both as authors and as students, along with the challenges those positions and their politics can pose for student writers. Or it affects the way I handle issues in literature instruction such as the canon or censorship: where I once framed these primarily as professional issues for teachers, I now try to frame them as issues to teach *about* and to teach *with*—as conversations to engage in with students of all ages.

My students and I still bring in and demonstrate classroom activities, experiment with reading and writing strategies, and design lessons and units, as you're likely to find in most any English methods course. But whereas I used to ask after a demonstration, "OK, how might you use this in your classroom? When would you use it and why?" I now ask questions more like "What is the point of this activity? If you use this, what version of the purposes of English are you enacting? How would students be doing this differently were they *not* in a classroom? How can you attend to that in the way you do the lesson? How can you use the advantages of the classroom to unpack this reading/writing situation with your students?" And most importantly, I ask, "How will we frame this for students? And what are *their* purposes for undertaking this activity?" The differences between those two sets of questions are at times subtle, but for me they represent a marked difference in attention to the whole context that surrounds any single teaching act. I used to think I could teach reading strategies in Week 8, maybe revision and editing strategies in Week 10, and broader ideas about classroom organization, community, and context in Week 12. Now I find myself in Week 12 every week.

I think Miss Black would laugh to know that I am now in English education. Thinking as I now do, I am perhaps most impressed that she asked us what we thought of her class at all. I see in the letter-writing assignment an opportunity (missed, I'm afraid—we never discussed the letters) to look head-on together at the schoolishness of school, what we were doing in a

language arts class and what we might be expected to take from it. In my head I am always writing her back: Dear Miss Black, This essay is my letter. You really were nice. I'm sorry I was such a know-it-all. Good wishes, Anne.

**Anne Whitney** is assistant professor in the department of Curriculum and Instruction at the Pennsylvania State University. Her research addresses writing, professional development, and the voices of teachers.

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## **2012 Call for CEL Award for Exemplary Leadership**

This award is given annually to an NCTE member who is an outstanding English language arts educator and leader. Please nominate an exceptional leader who has had an impact on the profession through one or more of the following: (1) work that has focused on exceptional teaching and/or leadership practices (e.g., building an effective department, grade level, or building team; developing curricula or processes for practicing English language arts educators; or mentoring); (2) contributions to the profession through involvement at both the local and national levels; (3) publications that have had a major impact.

Your award nominee submission must include a nomination letter, the nominee's curriculum vitae, and no more than three additional letters of support from various colleagues. Send by **February 1, 2012, to: Wanda Porter, 47 Puukani Place, Kailua, HI 96754**; or to [wandrport@hawaiiintel.net](mailto:wandrport@hawaiiintel.net) (subject: CEL Exemplary Leader).

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