Using Protocols with Students in a Writing Workshop

Peggy Silva, New Hampshire

I am extraordinarily lucky to work with a small group of student writers every day in a room with schlumpfy old sofas and Barcaloungers. We operate in exactly the same way my adult writing group has for the past twelve years. We learn some new skills, we read short texts, we give and receive feedback, and sometimes we explore publishing options. Establishing a culture of writing is the most important aspect of this workshop. The first few days are often filled with awkward silences, but my first goal is to have everyone read a piece aloud. We need to hear each other’s voices, and I need to protect those fragile new voices from thoughtless or hurtful responses.

Furthermore, can be very vague and blunt, so I spend a lot of time establishing rules of how we will respond to each other, and I underline that I mean rules, not guidelines. My only absolute in this class is that we will follow a very strict protocol of giving feedback. My students liked that I had not taken much time to get to the meat of the story. They thought the title hooked the reader. They disagreed as to whether to widen the lens and to spend more time on my conclusion. They asked me to put in a couple of words that cemented the concept of place, and they wondered if I should—and then they criticized how they realized they had used that dreaded word—and the assumption that all Whites were members of the same club—and they wanted the word “club” to appear with quotation marks. When they finished I told them that I had held my breath as they read because I had never written anything like this piece and I wondered what readers would think of me as they read. Their reading and discussion had helped me learn from my own writing. I talked about someone using the word “should.” We talked about a simple change in phrasing, something like asking if I had considered introducing the concept of white privilege as a club. That took away the “should” and pushed my thinking, and how that subtle shift made a difference in the way I heard the feedback.

After modeling a feedback session, I turn them loose to listen to each other in small groups. I do not join these groups, not wanting my teacher voice to interfere with their own learning. I reserve that right to overhear them, and sometimes issue a time-out when I hear something that needs to be restated. In an early session, a student stated that the middle section of a peer’s writing was “boring,” and I asked the group to think about feedback that would be more actionable for the writer. They wrestled with it for a few minutes, and then were able to say that as readers the first few sentences provided good information and they were (continued on page 15)
Connections: the Journal of the National School Reform Faculty
Winter 2008

Students at the Center

Using Protocols with Students in a Writing Workshop
Peggy Silva, New Hampshire

I am extraordinarily lucky to work with a small group of student writers every day in a room with schlumpfy old sofas and Barcaloungers. We operate in exactly the same way my adult writing group has for the past twelve years. We learn some new skills, we read short texts, we give and receive feedback, and sometimes we explore publishing options. Establishing a culture of writing is the most important aspect of this workshop. The first few days are often filled with awkward silences, but my first goal is to have everyone read a piece aloud. We need to hear each other's writing voices, and I need to protect those fragile new voices from thoughtless or hurtful responses.

I have always had to make decisions about the rules and regulations that I establish for the workshop. My only absolute in this class is that we will follow a very strict protocol of giving feedback. When I hear something that needs to be interrupted, I do it. I am a white woman—and that one fact allows others to assume the DNA of my beliefs. No other markers are needed.

I entered a small mall food court restaurant at the same time as another woman. The hostess sat us at adjoining tables and the other woman asked me to keep an eye on her shopping bags while she used the restroom. When she returned we fell into that idle conversation of strangers. She was visiting her second home in Florida, here from Dallas for a few days of shopping and sailing. I was visiting Sarasota as a school consultant. Her sister was an educator, she said, and had recently returned to a middle school classroom. Her sister's story, she said, finally had a happy ending. She had once been the head of a strong federal pre-school program in the Southwest, but the Blacks had wanted the position for themselves, and had made her life hell--never saying 'good morning' as she passed them in the hall. Finally, she quit and let them have the job.

I had sent no signals that we were of the same mind. We were in a mall food court. I had on jeans shorts and a plain white tee shirt. The only thing we had in common at that moment was that we were sitting side by side and that we were both white. We had said nothing as a conversation of strangers. We were both white, upper-middle class teacher who lives in a Briogadoon of privilege. I am uber-aware of all that doesn't touch me in my daily teaching life. Or so I thought. Recently, however, I have been made aware of a starting gate I didn't even know I occupied. I am a white woman—and that one fact allows others to assume the DNA of my beliefs. No other markers are needed.

I occupied. I am a white woman—and that one fact allows others to assume the DNA of my beliefs. No other markers are needed.

I occupied. I am a white woman—and that one fact allows others to assume the DNA of my beliefs. No other markers are needed.

I entered a small mall food court restaurant at the same time as another woman. The hostess sat us at adjoining tables and the other woman asked me to keep an eye on her shopping bags while she used the restroom. When she returned we fell into that idle conversation of strangers. She was visiting her second home in Florida, here from Dallas for a few days of shopping and sailing. I was visiting Sarasota as a school consultant. Her sister was an educator, she said, and had recently returned to a middle school classroom. Her sister's story, she said, finally had a happy ending. She had once been the head of a strong federal pre-school program in the Southwest, but the Blacks had wanted the position for themselves, and had made her life hell--never saying 'good morning' as she passed them in the hall. Finally, she quit and let them have the job.

I had sent no signals that we were of the same mind. We were in a mall food court. I had on jeans shorts and a plain white tee shirt. The only thing we had in common at that moment was that we were sitting side by side and that we were both white. We had said nothing as a conversation of strangers. We were both white, upper-middle class teacher who lives in a Briogadoon of privilege. I am uber-aware of all that doesn't touch me in my daily teaching life. Or so I thought. Recently, however, I have been made aware of a starting gate I didn't even know I occupied. I am a white woman—and that one fact allows others to assume the DNA of my beliefs. No other markers are needed.

I entered a small mall food court restaurant at the same time as another woman. The hostess sat us at adjoining tables and the other woman asked me to keep an eye on her shopping bags while she used the restroom. When she returned we fell into that idle conversation of strangers. She was visiting her second home in Florida, here from Dallas for a few days of shopping and sailing. I was visiting Sarasota as a school consultant. Her sister was an educator, she said, and had recently returned to a middle school classroom. Her sister's story, she said, finally had a happy ending. She had once been the head of a strong federal pre-school program in the Southwest, but the Blacks had wanted the position for themselves, and had made her life hell--never saying 'good morning' as she passed them in the hall. Finally, she quit and let them have the job.

I had sent no signals that we were of the same mind. We were in a mall food court. I had on jeans shorts and a plain white tee shirt. The only thing we had in common at that moment was that we were sitting side by side and that we were both white. We had said nothing as a conversation of strangers. We were both white, upper-middle class teacher who lives in a Briogadoon of privilege. I am uber-aware of all that doesn't touch me in my daily teaching life. Or so I thought. Recently, however, I have been made aware of a starting gate I didn't even know I occupied. I am a white woman—and that one fact allows others to assume the DNA of my beliefs. No other markers are needed.
A s we prepare to come together for the 12th Annual NSRF Winter Meeting in Tampa Bay, Florida this December, we want to provide you with a brief snapshot of the work of the Florida Center of Activity. We were very fortunate to have gotten an early start with the work of the NSRF in 1995 and by the time funding for NSRF Coaches training ran out, we had built a small cadre of trained coaches working in a cluster of schools. To this day, most of these individuals are still actively engaged in CFG work—work that, in a multitude of ways, has transformed our personal and professional lives.

Like many other “Centers” of Activity, we formed from a network of colleagues who strongly believed in a new way of working and learning together that had not yet been embraced by the prevailing culture of our district. Indeed, some saw us as a band of subversives whose methods were so radical that our true motives had to be suspect. Still, like Jim Collins’ Hedgehog in Good to Great, we remained focused on our “one big thing.” With the support of key individuals in the district—our “embedded champions,” we grew in numbers.

Five years ago, we had the good fortune to meet Don Pemberton, Director of the Lastinger Center for Learning of the College of Education at the University of Florida, at a Lucent Learning Center for Learning of the College of Education Workshop, my presence as teacher fades as we engage each other in thoughtful and challenging conversations in the nation—will be of help to the writer than the word “boring.”

They could see immediately that that was more to understand the writer’s point of view. As readers, they did not ready to move on. As readers, they did not need the second and third paragraphs of this piece to understand the writer’s point of view. They could see immediately that that was more helpful to the writer than the word “boring.” After the first two weeks of Writing Workshop, my presence as teacher fades as we become fellow writers striving to improve our work.

We are especially proud of the fact that we actively seek to work with under-resourced schools and communities. Although Linda and I primarily focus on training coaches and providing follow-up support, the work of the Lastinger Center actively seeks partnerships with organizations that provide a wide array of critical services for the students. For example, at present, the Lastinger Center, together with Collier County Public Schools, The Education Foundation of Collier County, the Naples Children and Education Foundation, the Immokalee Foundation, and the Community Foundation of Collier County, are collaborating in a broad effort to improve student achievement and child well-being in Collier County. This effort is multidimensional and includes intensive work in Immokalee elementary schools, an executive doctoral program for district administrators, improved access to health and dental care for low-income children, and increasing the availability of quality preschool education for Immokalee children.

Immokalee is one of the poorest communities in the nation, with close to 40% of its population living below the poverty line. Since 1997, the Work of the Florida Center of Activity is profound ly satisfying for all of us. It is also intense and difficult work fraught with disappointment and constant struggle. Indeed, all of us in the NSRF know something about how hard it is to do authentic work in real contexts. That is the one thing that separates us from so many others who have joined the collaboration handwaving in recent years.

And for those of you reading this at the 12th Annual NSRF Winter Meeting, all of us here at the Florida Center of Activity welcome you to Florida! We know that as we engage each other in thoughtsgiving, challenging conversations, we will all be smarter, stronger, and more courageous than we were when we arrived.

For more information about the work of the NSRF Center of Activity visit www.coe.ufl.edu/centers/lastinger/index.html Pedro Bermudez may be contacted at pbermudez@dadeschools.net and Linda Emm at lemm@dadeschools.net