

Molly Fanning and Brigid Schmidt

# Viva la Revolución: Transforming Teaching and Assessing Student Writing through Collaborative Inquiry

Considering how to better assess student writing, middle school teachers Molly Fanning and Brigid Schmidt revolutionize their conception of themselves as teachers. They challenge all educators to become what Henry A. Giroux calls *transformative intellectuals* by identifying as writers, practicing collaborative inquiry, and sharing their work with peer audiences.

**I**n today's climate of school reform, is there anyone who disagrees with the notion that no child should be left behind in terms of his or her education? This is a worthwhile goal. But what is the reality for students and teachers when the euphemistic packaging is pulled off the latest federal mandates? Grace Hall McEntee writes in "Diving with Whales: Five Reasons for Practitioners to Write for Publication," "If schools are to change for the better, teachers must use their stories to analyze their best practices and discover their core values. Schools do not change under the pressure of mandated rules and policies. Rather, schools change through a combination of forces from within and without. Changing that culture from within must begin with an awareness of our own stories and how they contribute to the culture of schooling" (23).

Here is our story. We are seventh-grade language arts teachers who have spent over two years collaborating on how to better assess student writing. We are fortunate. We teach in a supportive middle- to upper-class community, in a district that provides ample professional development, and in a middle school where student inquiry is expected and encouraged. In spite of our understanding the importance of authentic inquiry for our students, we only recently came to see the importance of inquiry in our growth as professionals. Through this discovery together we have also

realized we must have an integral voice in the current educational reform movement.

Henry A. Giroux, a social critic and educator, posits that often, even "[w]here teachers do enter the debate, they are the object of educational reforms that reduce them to the status of high-level technicians carrying out dictates and objectives decided by experts far removed from the everyday realities of classroom life" (121). Giroux challenges teachers to join the discussion of reform and to position ourselves as intellectuals and active participants in these public debates.

This article is a call to arms to our fellow educators for a revolution. When we began our collaboration, we unknowingly also began to help each other become what Giroux calls *transformative intellectuals*. Our inquiry began simply as two teachers struggling with how to deal with assessing students in ways that felt humane and fostered growth in student writing. We hope that the story of how we found our professional voices through this collaboration will inspire other teachers to take up Giroux's call. Look closely at your classroom realities. Examine your pedagogy. Find the "critical incident" (McEntee 24) that will instigate your inquiry. See your "teacher work as a form of intellectual labor" (Giroux 125). Find your professional voice and enter the public debate. Lasting and meaningful school reform must begin with those of us on the inside mobilizing the force of our combined wisdom about the best practices of our profession.

## In the Beginning

By the summer of 2004, we had been teaching for three years in the same middle school in upstate New York. That summer we embarked on a collaboration that would revolutionize our pedagogy and our sense

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of ourselves as professionals. Although we had shared ideas as colleagues, it took applying for the inaugural Summer Institute of the Capital District Writing Project (CDWP) for our professional collaboration to truly begin. The CDWP, a newly reestablished local site of the National Writing

Project (NWP), offered a space for teachers kindergarten through college and in all disciplines to see ourselves as writers and to talk, read, write, and reflect about the teaching of writing.

The intense four-week Summer Institute included three fundamental elements. First, each day we worked on our writing and shared it in a small writing group. This element emphasized the importance of teachers seeing ourselves as writers in the world to better help student writers. Second, we conducted inquiry on an issue dealing with writing. We formed study groups of people that shared the same interest. Study group members read and shared different texts, theorized and posed questions to think more deeply and, at the end of four weeks, presented our collaborative work to the other participants. The final element required each participant to do a demonstration lesson that showcased an aspect of our classroom writing instruction. In the supportive environment of our writing project colleagues, we reflected on and discussed the lessons, beginning to ask the questions that allowed us to closely examine our pedagogy.

Entering into the Summer Institute, we considered ourselves fortunate teachers. Even under our relatively ideal conditions, though, we often felt isolated. It was rare that our collegial department meetings ever led to talking about lessons, students' work, or pedagogy.

During our CDWP experience, we found a way to move past the isolation. Energized, we were eager to bring this new way of talking and thinking about our teaching back to our school and class-

rooms. In true recursive fashion, this new focus led to our collaborative inquiry into a topic of mutual concern: assessing student writing. That inquiry then led us to collaborate on another demonstration lesson, which we presented to our writing project colleagues during our mid-year retreat for the CDWP. Presenting our work, in turn, helped us to realize the importance of sharing that work with an audience of our peers. This process has resulted in presenting at professional workshops at the local, state, and national levels and in writing this article.

## Molly Speaks of Teaching in Isolation

I had been successfully using the writing workshop model with students. Throughout the year, students were doing a lot of writing—and I was doing a lot of grading. I knew that assessment was not my strong suit. I wondered if grades should indicate students' individual progress instead of points they had managed to earn. My writing rubrics had always had a set of criteria, vaguely explained, and a point system: 4 excellent, 3 good, 2 average, and 1 poor. Each year I suffered through grading this way. I second-guessed my decisions about assigning a 3 rather than a 4; I was heartbroken after adding up the points for a certain student who had worked hard but whose score ended up being a failing grade. Many times, if I didn't feel that the grade was accurate, I would go back and find places to add points back in. I knew this was not a valid way to assess students' work, but I had never come across a better system.

My grading also caused me to agonize over those A students who were earning such grades with their eyes (and minds) closed. They were the talented writers and the ones I feared weren't getting as much from my class as they should be. Using the writing process to produce a piece of writing was something they were comfortable with and accomplished usually without a problem. I knew that I somehow needed to build into my units of study aspects that would help them stretch their abilities as writers. But I knew I would have to come up with a way to do this without giving them extra work that not everyone in the class was responsible for. This seemed an impossible task.

And what about students *writing about their writing*? I knew the benefits of reflecting on one's work and using that to strengthen learning.

Students answered two reflection questions about their process and work at the end of each unit, but I was usually disappointed that their answers hadn't seemed to cause them to think deeply about themselves as writers. I envisioned having them reflect, using more-specific questions that addressed each individual unit but also had them make connections between units. But who was I kidding? Wouldn't this mean more papers to grade? And wouldn't that just mean more angst over my flawed grading system? I trudged on, hoping that no one would catch on that I wasn't sure of what I was doing when it came to assessment.

### Brigid Speaks of Teaching in Isolation

As a parent, I have watched my four children struggle over the years with the age-old question, "What does this teacher want me to do to get the A?" On the other hand, sometimes they were disinclined to try to figure out what a teacher wanted them to produce. If they liked an assignment, they did it; if they thought it was "busy work," no amount of cajoling, nagging, disciplining, or threatening from me could motivate them to just play the game and do the assignment. I have in my files at school a folder of lessons and assignments that I have stolen from my kids' teachers. Other than relying on a gut feeling, I never asked myself what made the difference between an assignment that tortured our entire family and an assignment that seemed worthy to add to my repertoire as a teacher.

Returning to school as a nontraditional student several years ago brought those assignment and grade issues home in a different way. Now my kids had to listen to me ranting about unfair professors and unfair grades. As an almost-forty-year-old undergraduate, I was initially miffed that the writing course I took my first semester was graded Pass/Fail. I look back on that course now and realize how deeply it influenced me. It released me from the pressure to produce work that would get me my A and gave me the freedom to take risks and explore my writing process. I try to keep this insight firmly in mind when dealing with students. That freedom not only helped me grow as a writer but also helped prepare me to take risks in future classes. This course is still a model I use for the ways in which the instructor offered feedback on

our writing, how she set up writing groups for peer feedback, and the many ways she structured the course to help us engage in our writing.

The values I hold from my multiple perspectives have helped set a pattern for my teaching: I share my writing to model how I expect students to share their writing. We talk about writing as a process and I let them know that parts of that process are hard for me. We write daily in class and I expect students to use their writers' notebooks regularly outside of class. Sadly, though, students quickly learn that I am ambivalent at best about having to grade their work—and it takes forever for me to return their papers. Like teachers at all grade levels, I have struggled with the issues of fairness and validity and how to justify a grade. I have used point systems and rubrics and that cursed "gut feeling" but often had the nagging sense that if anyone looked too closely at my system, the lack of a system is what would be seen. Although I could see that some students took the effort seriously while others didn't, I was left with the uneasy task of evaluating students' writing *products* because the idea of assessing their writing *process* was too complicated. Even if we'd had an "author's celebration" where students read their work aloud for an audience of their peers, students still turned in a product to an audience of me. I evaluated and marked their writing with a letter indicating how "good" the product seemed to me. But based on what criteria? Quite often I wondered if there was enough of a connection between what I taught in class, what I wanted students to produce, and how I assessed their work.

### Molly Discovers Our Critical Incident

On a sunny winter morning during our 2005 mid-year CDWP day retreat, we sat among our colleagues to discuss a book chapter we had read. "Grading on Merit and Achievement: Where Quality Meets Quantity" by Stephen Adkison and Stephen Tchudi begins with a humorous but thought-provoking look at teachers on trial for grading inequities, a nightmare to which any teacher can relate. Adkison and Tchudi lead their readers from this opening scene to a provocative statement: "There are many good reasons *not* to grade student writing, ranging from the psychological to the pedagogical" (193; italics in original).

Adkison and Tchudi lay out their theory and method of assessing students over the course of a semester-long college writing class. The conversations around this chapter were energetic and rich with the possibilities that we all saw in the ideas presented by the authors, namely that an “‘achievement grading’ . . . approach awards higher grades to the students who complete a wider range of work or who go into ideas and topics in greater depth than their peers” (194).

While the rest of the group was talking, my mind raced as I wondered what this form of assessment would look like in my classroom. Could this solve my dilemma with a point-based rubric? How would this allow me to challenge students who weren't getting all they could from my class? I started to sketch out my next writing unit, trying to incorporate Adkison and Tchudi's idea of focusing not merely on one product but on the process as well. Was it possible to create a unit that would lead not simply to one final draft of writing but rather to several different pieces?

Establishing Achievement Grading Standards (AGS) meant that I would not only have to clearly define each possible letter grade, but I would also have to revise rubrics. The painful four-point rubrics would no longer do. I would need to clearly explain each of the criteria and explain what it would look like for students to exceed, meet, or not meet expectations. In imagining new rubrics, I thought of how

I would be able to give students credit for all the hard work, such as conferencing, that I had them doing along the way to that finished piece of writing. I knew that the new model would also allow me to build in components that would not only challenge all students but also ask them to be more reflective. Lastly, I wanted to give them credit for attempting to get their work published, whether by putting it up on a school bulletin

board or sending it to a magazine.

As I showed Brigid my ideas, she confirmed that I was on to something and she immediately started thinking of how it would look in her class-

room. She was currently involved in an interdisciplinary unit where she had been left to oversee the writing of a “science essay.” Using Achievement Grading Standards offered a way to give students credit for all elements of the project rather than focusing solely on an essay.

## Embarking on Our Collaboration

In completing our Summer Institute together, we had managed to break down the barriers that existed between us within our department. Through the tenets of the National Writing Project, we learned the value of sharing our work and of investigating educational issues by reading, writing, and thinking together. At our next department meeting when the initial conversation turned to the amount of grading we had to do, we quickly jumped in, not with horror stories of mountains of paperwork, but rather with our knowledge about how we were now dealing with it. We shared examples of our AGS rubrics (see figs. 1 and 2) and discussed with our fellow seventh-grade language arts teachers the wonders and warts of our new writing assessments. In sharing our work, we didn't proclaim that it was *the* solution to our grading nightmare, but we reflected on what had worked and the ways we needed to revise lessons and rubrics before our next assignments. It was one of the rare department meetings we left feeling energized. We went off to our respective classrooms with work to do. And now we had an audience besides students to consider.

We took our revised ideas back to the students, incorporating the importance of reflection on process and making this aspect just as important as the unit product. We continued to seek ways to deepen students' understanding of the context in which they were producing their writing pieces. Writing workshops already offered “places” for students to publish their work. We knew the value of students' going public with their work for an authentic audience. But our collaboration was helping us to see this as a priority rather than an afterthought.

## Going Public

Going public has led to profound changes. Even in isolation, we were already committed to creating spaces for students to write freely and authentically.

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**FIGURE 1.** Realistic Short Story Achievement Grading Standards

Below are the possible grades for this project and the criteria needed to earn each grade.

**75% (C):** Student has completed the writing process to produce a realistic short story. Based on the rubric, the student has met a majority of the criteria sufficiently.

**80% (B-):** Student has completed the writing process to produce a realistic short story. Based on the rubric, the student has met and exceeded a majority of the criteria.

**85% (B):** Student has completed the writing process to produce a realistic short story. Based on the rubric, the student has met a majority of the criteria sufficiently. The student has also adequately completed/answered the Essay Response question.

**90% (A-):** Student has completed the writing process to produce a realistic short story. Based on the rubric, the student has met and exceeded a majority of the criteria. The student has also adequately completed/answered the Essay Response question.

**95% (A):** Student has completed the writing process to produce a realistic short story. Based on the rubric, the student has met a majority of the criteria sufficiently. The student has also adequately completed/answered the Essay Response question. Lastly, the student has made an earnest attempt to get his or her story published and has participated in a peer response group administered by Ms. Hull.

**100% (A+):** Student has completed the writing process to produce a realistic short story. Based on the rubric, the student has met and exceeded a majority of the criteria. The student has also adequately completed/answered the Essay Response question. Lastly, the student has made an earnest attempt to get his or her story published and has participated in a peer response group administered by Ms. Hull.

We were already sharing our teaching stories, but we now began to create space for our stories to evolve, as McEntee challenges: “teachers must now use their stories for a new purpose—school reform” (23).

CDWP continued to offer a venue for sharing our work with our colleagues as we developed AGS in our classrooms. A year after we began to collaborate, we presented our work at the 2006 mid-year CDWP day retreat. We shared our inquiry into assessing student writing and demonstrated how our classroom practices could be incorporated into a professional development workshop. We walked the audience through our process of creating and revising units of study by incorporating AGS as our framework (see fig. 1), and we shared handouts and examples of student work. Peers gave helpful feedback on our assessments and our presentation.

The following year, several opportunities to present our work supported our collaboration and inquiry. Each time, we revised and improved how we assess student writing. As our confidence grew, we felt ready to apply for a professional weekend writing retreat offered by the Hudson Valley Writing Project. Writing a professional article was not something we had previously imagined for ourselves, but our vision of what we had to offer our peers had changed dramatically. While hashing out

our article that weekend, several key revisions occurred. The main focus of our article shifted from the work of assessing student writing to the impact our collaboration has had on both our pedagogy and on our sense of ourselves as professionals. Struggling through our writing process, we experienced the fundamental importance of the context in which we were writing our article—having a specific audience in mind from the beginning helped us clarify our purpose as we wrote. The firsthand experience of writing within this context helped us envision the way we spoke to students about audience and purpose and the ways we then restructured our writing workshops and assessments.

Muddling through the writing process helped us gain a deeper understanding of the interrelationship of decisions about topic, genre, audience, and purpose. They could not be decided independently of each other. In the AGS, to earn a grade above a 90 percent, students were required to attempt to publish their writing piece. We had always offered a variety of ways for publication but through our writing, we rediscovered that thinking about audience needed to be at the forefront of students’ writing process as well. We again gave students options for publication, but now we did that during the first week of the unit rather than at the end.

FIGURE 2. Revised Rubric

Criteria	Criteria Met and Exceeded	Criteria Sufficiently Met	Criteria Are Not Sufficiently Met
<b>Title of Short Story</b>	Author has created a title that connects to the element of change and piques the reader's interest.	Author has created an appropriate title that is not connected to the element of change.	Author has not created a title.
<b>Element of Character</b>	Author has crafted a realistic character who changes on the inside and who is developed in the story using show don't tell.	Author has created a character who changes on the inside but whose characterization is done more directly (tell) than indirectly (show).	Author has characters who only change on the outside, not the inside.
<b>Element of Setting</b>	Author has used show don't tell to make the settings clear to the reader. Story contains realistic people and events and takes place in the present.	Author has directly stated the setting throughout the story and may have certain elements that are not realistic.	Author has not clearly crafted setting of story.
<b>Element of Plot</b>	A sequence of main events leads the main character to change. A scene shows how the character has changed. Author has used metaphor to demonstrate this change.	A sequence of main events leads the main character to change and a scene that shows how the character has changed on the inside.	Story has a sequence of events but does not lead to a change in a character.
<b>Element of Movement through Time</b>	Time passes in hours, days, weeks, or years. Author has used transitions of time or place to clearly show that time is moving.	Time passes in hours, days, weeks or years. Author has used some transitions of time or place but moving of time is not always clear.	Few transitions are used; it's unclear when time has moved.
<b>Element of Change</b>	Author has crafted a realistic character and plot that lead to an internal change in how a character thinks, feels, and so on. Author has made a clear attempt to empathize with readers.	Author has created a character who changes on the inside but does not attempt to clearly demonstrate the change in the action of the story.	Author has characters who only change on the outside, not the inside.
<b>Narration of Story</b>	Story is told in either first or third person the entire way through the story. Narration is written in the past tense. Dialogue is written in the present tense.	Narration is told mostly in either first or third person. Narration is almost entirely in the past tense with some errors. If dialogue is used, it is written in the present tense.	Narration shifts in and out of first and third person and past and present tense.
<b>Vocabulary</b>	Author has underlined three or more vocabulary words that he or she has chosen to include and that is relevant to the plot and/or change.	Author has underlined at least one vocabulary word that he or she has chosen and that is relevant to the plot and/or change.	Author has not included any relevant vocabulary.
<b>Capitalization, Organization, Punctuation, Spelling (COPS)</b>	The writing demonstrates control of the conventions/rules of English. There are few, if any, errors and none that interfere with comprehension. COPS are essentially correct.	The writing demonstrates some control of the conventions/rules of English. There are some errors that make it difficult to read but don't interfere with comprehension. There are some COPS errors.	Many COPS errors exist that make it difficult to read and comprehend.

We had given our presentation on AGS at workshops hosted by our local Teacher Center, at an inservice workshop at a local school, and even to our language arts department. In the fall of 2006 we presented at NYSEC, our state English conference, and at the NCTE Annual Convention in Nashville. We continued to pursue the idea that our work, much like students' writing, needed to have an audience. Fostering our collaboration has pushed us to go further in our reflection and work as teachers. As our confidence as professionals has grown, it has helped us create spaces in our classrooms for students to be confident, thoughtful, critical thinkers and writers. Opening our classroom doors to the outside world has revolutionized our approach to teaching.

### Conclusion: The Revolution Continues

Our revolution began quietly in that summer of 2004. It eventually led to seeing ourselves as professionals in surprising new ways. This, in turn, has revolutionized the conditions we create for students as we help them "become citizens who have the knowledge and courage to struggle in order to make despair unconvincing and hope practical" (Giroux 128). In our classrooms now, teachers and students together assume the role of "transformative intellectuals." We know how easy it is for any of us involved in education to fall into despair. The frustrations are plentiful and run deep. Yet, we must realize that for a multiplicity of problems facing educators there are also a multiplicity of answers, and the answers lie in

each of us and in the collective wisdom that comes from the *inside* of education.

We came to understand that the story of our critical incident was incidental. It was the collaboration that occurred around this idea that was so vital. The more we saw our work as intellectual labor, the better we were able to create conditions for students to see their work as intellectual labor. "[T]eachers must take active responsibility for raising serious questions about what they teach, how they are to teach, and what the larger goals are for which they are striving" (Giroux 126). What questions tug at the edges of your pedagogy? What is your critical incident? Find a partner. Do the messy, hard work together of talking, thinking, writing, and delving into a critical incident that you and your students face. Re-vision the purpose of teaching and make room for that messy, hard work in your classrooms. Open yourself to your students, your classroom to your colleagues, your students to their world.

And *viva la revolución!*

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**Molly Fanning** is a teacher at Farnsworth Middle School in Guilderland, New York, and is also a member of the leadership team of the Capital District Writing Project. *email*: [fanningm@guilderlandschools.org](mailto:fanningm@guilderlandschools.org). **Brigid Schmidt** teaches language arts at Farnsworth Middle School. She is also a teacher-consultant on the leadership team for the Capital District Writing Project. *email*: [schmidtbr@guilderlandschools.org](mailto:schmidtbr@guilderlandschools.org).

### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

LISA STORM FINK, RWT

Fanning and Schmidt grapple with assessing writing. One assessment approach is detailed in "Peer Review: Narrative." Instead of asking untrained students to give feedback to a peer's draft during response groups, teach them the PQP technique. PQP—Praise—Question—Polish—requires group members (usually two to five per group) to take a turn reading their drafts aloud as the other students follow along with copies. The responders then react to the piece by writing comments on the PQP form. [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=122](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=122)