

# “Redefining Text, Redefined Me

by Belinda Foster

When it comes to my life as an educator, I admit freely that I walked into teaching with an unfair advantage. I was mentored by two Writing Project teachers and because of that I incorrectly assumed that all credential candidates are “raised” in the Writing Project. I incorrectly assumed that all credential candidates in English Language Arts knew they were writing teachers not grammar teachers. I also incorrectly assumed that everybody knew the difference.

In my fourth year of teaching I confessed to the mentors who had become two of my closest friends that I was considering leaving the profession. Their response to my confession was a simple one.

“It’s time for you to go to the Summer Institute.”

When I tell the people in my life, teachers, friends, and family that the writing project saved my career in education, those who aren’t involved in the writing project only sort of understand what that really means. The writing project saved me by empowering me, by recognizing and capitalizing on the things that made me “different” to succeed at a level I never thought I could. I spent the first four years of my career trying to be the teacher I thought I should be, the teacher I knew I was never going to be. The writing project and my involvement in it from that point on helped me become the teacher I actually was, the teacher my students had been waiting for me to be the whole time.

My role in the writing project, both with A3WP (Area 3 Writing Project) and CWP (California Writing Project), has evolved at the same rate as my role in my classroom. I know that this is a testament to the writing project itself. There is no other place where I am pushed to constantly look at and reflect upon my teaching practice from the stand point of inquiry. There is no other place where I am surrounded by educators who complain in order to achieve change, rather than complain for the sake of hearing their voice. There is nowhere else in the world where I am looked at as an expert in my field, looked at as the solution to the problem, looked at as the source of much needed change.

I am a TC (teacher consultant), a TL (technology liaison), and help facilitate ISAW (Improving Student Academic Writing). In the last few years I have been able to combine all these roles and dive headfirst into an idea that I gleaned from Rochelle Ramay, another TC and ISAW facilitator. I watched Rochelle convince a reluctant audience that a gym floor counted as text. At the time it was just an interesting concept but eventually it became the basis of the bulk of my writing project work, and the foundation for everything I did in my classroom: redefining text for a multi-modal world.

I am a firm believer that anything which contains meaning counts as text. As a result, when we can pull meaning from something, we are reading. When a process is required to create it, it counts as writing. By opening up the idea of “text” in this manner we free teachers and students to explore more widely the world as they experience it. This also

allows for more options in the student creation of culminating pieces.

When we expand our view of text in this manner, we celebrate and support a greater number of our student population on a regular basis. We acknowledge the ways in which our students are already reading and writing. We give them credit for their strengths and begin an important dialogue around the transfer of skills from one mode to another. We more effectively provide differentiation both in what students read, and in what students write. Most importantly, we more regularly allow our multitude of struggling students to take on the role of expert.

It is important to note that this work is quite personal for me. I was 28 years old before I was accurately diagnosed with and medicated for ADHD. I remember the day my Adderall started working; I was at a coffee shop attempting to grade papers away from the noise of my household. I brought thirty with me even though I anticipated grading fifteen at most in the three-hour period I typically spent on trips like these. I picked a table in the back, sat facing a wall, and turned on my mp3 player. Two hours later I finished the stack in front of me and couldn’t seem to find any more papers in my bag. I remember wondering if I forgot to bring the thirty I had planned on. I counted the stack of papers in front of me; I had graded all thirty. I couldn’t believe it. I counted the stack four times; there really were thirty papers. I decided that I must have graded them inaccurately. I re-graded five to check. I asked three people near me what time they had in case my watch had broken. I couldn’t accept the reality that I had graded an entire class of research papers in a little over two hours.

I remember looking at the stack, looking at my watch, looking at my empty bag, looking at the rubrics all neatly scored, and then crying in the middle of this very public coffee shop. I cried for ten minutes knowing that in this moment my life had changed dramatically. I was 28 years old, with a Bachelor’s degree, three teaching credentials and a Master’s degree. I had been teaching English for six years and yet, this very moment was the first time in those 28 years that I honestly believed I wasn’t stupid.

“Remember that what you have is a neurological condition. It is genetically transmitted. It is caused by biology, by how your brain is wired. It is not a disease of the will, nor a moral failing, not some kind of neurosis. It is not caused by a weakness in character, nor by a failure to mature. It’s cure is not to be found in the power of the will, not in punishment, nor in sacrifice, nor in pain. Always remember this. Try as they might, many people with ADHD have great trouble accepting the syndrome as being rooted in biology rather than weakness of character.” - *Driven to Distraction*, Hallowell and Ratey.

I spent my entire schooling without this crucial piece of information. As a result my experience was a frustrating one. As a kid I was plagued with issues I felt made me a bad student and a bad kid, the bulk of which I worked really hard to hide at all costs. My clothes constantly bothered

my skin, I never really figured out how to write in cursive, I had speech issues, and I could read well out loud but had trouble understanding what I read.

I remember crying a lot because I couldn't do things in the way the other kids could. I remember being the kid who loved math but couldn't pass the five-minute multiplication test, the kid who watched the number of kids who took the test dwindle slowly down to just me. I remember walking to the principal's office, the last fifth grader in the school still taking it.

I remember ripping up my homework, frustrated by the impossible task of cursive. My head was filled with hundreds of stories, and yet my fingers just couldn't maneuver the pencil well enough to prove it.

I remember being talked at, not talked to. I remember vague instructions; I remember being hovered upon and constantly interrupted at times when I was finally getting somewhere.

Even though I am 32 years old, have a couple of degrees, and a handful of credentials, I know that I will never ever fully let go of being that kid.

I have to admit that on the flip side, I was lucky. I had a mother who recognized not what I had, but instead what I needed to be successful. When my elementary school pushed for Special Ed, she fought for GATE. When printing was no longer acceptable for final drafts, she secretly made deals with me. I rewrote half into cursive, and she forged the other half. On the days when I felt least capable, she would bring out the art supplies, let me take something apart and put it back together, let me dissect a squid and tell her all the parts, anything she could to remind me that sometimes people at school just don't know how to ask.

My mother gave me my example and yet in my first four years as a teacher, my classroom looked a lot like the classrooms I struggled in

while growing up. The writing project gave me permission, permission to lead by her example, permission to stop worrying about what anyone else thought my students needed, permission to start giving them what I knew they needed.

In how many ways can I ask my students to demonstrate what they know and how they know it? In how many ways can I support the ways in which my students are innately smart and prevent the very real issues of self-esteem, and self-confidence that plague students like me for a lifetime?

I made the decision to toss a traditional idea of writing and reading out of the window. I told my students they were writers. I told my students they were readers. And when they used whining and complaining techniques to mask the same uneasiness that I have masked my whole life, I asked them to trust me. I promised them I wouldn't take them anywhere I didn't think they could go. I promised them I wouldn't take them anywhere I wouldn't go myself. I asked them to trust me and to believe in me until they could believe in themselves.

And then I pushed them. I pushed them with photographs, advertisements, and songs with and without lyrics. I pushed them with recipes, music videos, and each other's clothing. I pushed them with art, sports plays, and diagrams for engines and random machines. I pushed them with graphic novels, comic strips and the occasional cartoon. I pushed them with non-fiction and fiction of all shapes and sizes. I pushed them, and the truth is I pushed me too. But, every time students discovered they were experts in a certain kind of text – students who often are not regularly seen as experts – I promised them that their ability to deconstruct that text could be applied to any other kind of text. I promised them that their ability to create that kind of text could be applied to any other kind they need to create.

I know that my students walked away from my classroom believing themselves to be readers and writers. I know that at some point in the year they no longer relied on my belief in them and instead relied on the belief they had in themselves. When I watched a student storyboard, instead of outline or mind map before a timed essay I knew we had been successful. When students made reference to a painting, song or defensive football tactic as a legitimate argument in a research paper, I knew we been successful. When students were routinely given passes to my classroom after having lost someone close to them from illness, accident, or violence to sit in the back of my room to write, I knew we had been successful.

I still think a lot about that little kid who so desperately wanted to be good at something bubble-able in school. I think about that little kid and wish someone like me had been her teacher somewhere along the way.

### About the Author:

Belinda Foster has been involved in the Writing Project since 1999. She spent ten years as an English Language Arts teacher at Grant Union High School in Sacramento and is currently employed as the Secondary EdTech Coordinator with Twin Rivers Unified School District.



Shown here: *Babushka* (11" x 14", graphite/charcoal, by Stan Prokopenko