

# Empowering Learners: Renewing our Practice

English Practice

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### **Enriching Community through Story: Strengthening Voice and Choice (2018 Call for Articles)**

In line with the BCTELA 2017 conference theme, *English Practice* invites you to submit teaching ideas, classroom inquiries and practice-focused research, reflective and critical narratives, poems, fiction and other arts-based renderings, as well as, book reviews for our upcoming issue.

Entitled *Enriching Community through Story: Strengthening Voice and Choice*, this issue opens a space for exploration and conversation around all that brings a sense of community to the learning and teaching of English Language Arts. Themes may include exploring story and ourselves, fostering community and engagement through connections, reading, and writing, considering gender identities, Indigenous perspectives, and inclusive practices. Guiding questions may include: What does community mean and look like for students? What role does story, language, literacy, and/or literature have in strengthening community? How do we nurture a sense community with our students? With our stories? How might we use stories, texts, and/or literature to help students understand themes of community and diversity? How do we support students to strengthen their voices?

#### **We have four sections to assist you in preparing and submitting your writing:**

- Teaching Ideas (classroom lessons and strategies)
- Investigating Our Practice (teacher inquiry)
- Salon (literary & arts-based pieces)
- Check This Out (book reviews)

Submissions can be emailed to:

[englishpracticejournal@gmail.com](mailto:englishpracticejournal@gmail.com)

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# Empowering Learners: Renewing our Practice

Welcome to our issue *Empowering Learners; Renewing our Practice* which connects directly with the BCTELA 2016 conference theme. In this issue, we invited educators to explore all that brings a sense of empowerment, vitality, and agency, and deeper purpose to learning and teaching of English Language Arts. More specifically we asked what empowerment means and looks like for students, the role of language, literacy, and/or literature in student empowerment, how educators nurture a sense of agency in their students, and how educators maintain their own vitality and feel empowered themselves.

We recognize that empowerment emerges from within and that, as educators, we have the capacity to support students to empower themselves – much in the way a row boat or canoe must be powered by the strength of the paddler. Although we cannot paddle for another person, as a community of learners and educators, we can share the paddling techniques and strategies that we have learned along the way. In this sense, our diversity is our strength.

In this issue, we learn about the powerful experience of writing in place and a resource that can help us to do this. We are invited to contemplate our role as writers and to engage with writing activities to strengthen our teaching strategies. We accompany an educator on his walk through the snow in Newfoundland while he ruminates on writing. We listen in on the words of wisdom and truth from a Raven to a much-loved daughter. Our imaginations are captured by the seeds of stories that might have been written if not for the existence of procrastination. We are invited to experience the transformation that occurs when we change our perspective to view our students as our teachers. We are offered strategies to incorporate Bloom's Taxonomy into our teaching and strengths-based assessment strategies. We learn about the kinds of learning opportunities that can emerge when we allow ourselves and our students to improvise and engage outside the confines of the classroom. And finally, we are introduced to an alternative resource for Health Education that invites educators to learn from the stories of their students.

We are also thrilled to welcome Don Blazeovich and Belinda Chi who will be joining our *English Practice* family.

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Christine Bridge

# Empowering learners in place: Writing across the curriculum

As a former high school English teacher, and more recently a doctoral student and teacher educator, I have become increasingly intrigued with the concept of “place” as a focal point for teaching and learning. In my role as teacher educator, my instructional practice has focused on literacy practices in secondary classrooms. I am fortunate to work with teacher candidates in a range of subject areas. Since our coursework is centered on reading and writing across the curriculum, and in particular, practices that support English Language Learners (ELL), I am continuously on the look out for ways to model and engage students in literacy strategies that are meaningful and germane to a cross-section of subject disciplines.

A focus on place provides an opportune fit for these objectives, particularly when looking at ways to embed writing across a range of subject areas. In my planning for this past spring term, I focused on exploring how place can be a catalyst for writing opportunities across the curriculum. Specifically, I investigated how a pedagogical approach to place – or place-based learning – might help teacher candidates design writing assignments that meaningfully address their own subject area learning objectives, in addition to target core reading and writing literacy objectives.

## Why place?

A focus on place – or place-based learning – is a pedagogical approach that is inherently multidisciplinary. David Sobel (2005) defines place-based learning (PBL) as a curricular and instructional approach designed to help students learn about their local places. It is an extension of environmental education that strives to develop strong communities and improve the quality of our environment by basing school curriculum within local communities. For many, the rationale for incorporating place-based strategies into the school curriculum is based on the premise that an attachment to one’s local place acts as a bridge to understanding global concerns (Somerville, 2010). With respect to fostering student awareness of environmental and sustainability issues, research suggests this connection and caring relationship is best started in one’s own backyard: “what’s important is that children have an opportunity to bond with the natural world, to learn to love it, before being asked to heal its wounds” (Sobel, 1996, p. 10). Place-based learning is often envisioned as activity that takes place in outdoor rural settings; however, this is not always the case. In a review of literature, Smith (2002) identifies five thematic patterns of how PBL is generally incorporated into educational settings:

1. **Cultural studies** - students use local cultural or historical phenomena as a guiding focus for their learning.
2. **Investigations in nature** - students observe wildlife, natural settings, conduct water-quality tests, or restore wetland areas.
3. **Addressing real-world problems** - students become involved in identifying, studying, and proposing possible solutions to community issues.
4. **Internships or entrepreneurial opportunities** - students explore local career opportunities and partner with businesses to expand their knowledge of economics.
5. **Immersion into community life** - students are engaged in decision-making activities and assume active roles as participants in local chambers of commerce, town meetings, or environmental protection agencies.

PBL offers students authentic and experiential learning experiences, and the benefits are well-documented. Developing a connection to and a sense of local place during childhood have been linked to environmentally responsible behaviors and social action in later adolescents and adults (Sobel, 1996; Chawla, 1998). Proponents argue a locally-focused, developmentally-appropriate curriculum in schools can lead to improvements in the health, intellectual abilities, and motivation of students; moreover, it can also help students feel a strong connection to the places where they live (Sobel, 1996, 2005).

In my experience, a focus on local places is not a difficult “sell” to the teacher candidates with whom I work. Given any number of local places (watersheds, farms, forests, urban ecosystems), and the five general themes outlined by Smith (2002), making connections to a variety of subject areas is generally not an issue. What proves difficult is finding the time, latitude, and opportunity to explore the possibilities of place given the demands of busy semesters and timetables. The other consideration is thinking about ways in which literacy instruction – particularly writing – can be incorporated into place-based strategies that also connect to the BC curriculum Big Ideas and Curricular Competencies in areas across the curriculum.

### **Why write?**

We learn as we write. Barnes (1976) argues the act of writing makes learning personally meaningful and creates what we might call “action knowledge” rather than “book knowledge.” When students write, they are in the act of processing their ideas. Writing forces them to focus on their learning and ideas to a greater degree as opposed to simply talking about them (Bainbridge & Heydon, 2017). Writing also provides a record of where learners have journeyed in their thinking. In asking students to write about their experiences in place, I am hopeful the “action knowledge” that results further enhances their experiences of learning in place.

### **Idea Bank (and Writing Buffet)**

Steve Peha (n.d.) urges teachers to consider writing assignments that are authentic and connected to real-world professional careers. In other words, writing activities should model the types of written expression that would be expected from professionals in their respective fields and/or disciplines. For example, a biologist might write lab reports, observations, letters, and journal entries that lead to the compilation of environmental impact reports for local agencies and policy stakeholders. An historian might write biographies or conduct interviews that lead to documentaries or provide historical annotations for the publication of historical documents.

The thought of embedding authentic writing experiences into learning experiences associated with PBL is intriguing – so much so, that during this past term, I tried a place-based writing activity with teacher candidates. My original plan was to engage the students in a series of place-based activities at various locations: the UBC Farm, a local wetland close to campus, and an art gallery on campus. Prior to visiting each location, teacher candidates would be provided with a writing design toolkit based on the work of Steve Peha, in collaboration with Jan Chappuis from the Central Kitsap School District in Washington State.

I found this toolkit while searching for practical strategies for implementing writing across the curriculum. My hope was that it would be a good fit for my prospective class activities, as well as something the teacher candidates could use in their future practice. The toolkit can be found in Steve Peha’s booklet, *Writing Across the Curriculum* – a wonderful resource that houses many ideas and suggestions for writing assignments. A link to the document is provided in the reference section.

In designing authentic writing experiences, students are asked to select preferences from a range of roles, formats, audiences, purposes, and approaches. Peha describes these selections as an “*All-You-Can-Write Assignment Buffet Table*” (p. 23). Not unlike a dinner buffet, learners have a wide range of items from which they can create assignments to their own liking. My intent was to use Peha’s “writing buffet” template as a starting point, and have teacher candidates personalize it in accordance to their subject areas, and second, try designing and writing a few assignments to sample the process.

Below is an adaption of the “All-You-Can-Write Assignment Buffet Table” – a guide to creating authentic writing assignments in the classroom (Peha, n.d., p. 23).

Professional Role	Format	Audience	Purpose	Approach
<b>Select one</b> professional role from the list below and write from this perspective.	<b>Select one</b> format from the list below and present the final version in the selected format.	<b>Select one or more</b> from the list below and aim to write your piece to appeal to your primary audience(s).	<b>Select one or more</b> from the list below and work towards achieving this goal and primary purpose for your writing.	<b>Select several</b> from the list below to plan how you will go about achieving your purpose.
Sales & marketer Journalist Travel consultant Designer Politician Scientist Art critic Police investigator Historian Nutritionist Professional trainer Playwright Professional author Field expert in ...  (Add more authentic roles that relate to your subject area)	Marketing campaign Magazine article Travel brochure Manual Policy recommendation Environmental report Interview Textbook Report Personal journal Autobiography Short story Play  (Add more authentic formats that relate to your subject area)	Local community members Friends and family Local parent groups Professionals in your discipline Historical characters from other time periods Potential investors Public figures Judges or juries Visitors from other countries General public School boards  (Add more authentic audiences that relate to your subject area)	Inform Persuade Explain Tell a story Narrate Instruct Incite action  (Add more that relate to your subject area)	Analyze Argue Assess Apply Classify Compare / contrast Conclude Critique Defend Define Demonstrate Describe Estimate Evaluate Explain Interpret Investigate Justify Persuade Predict Propose Question Reflect

In creating a writing assignment, learners are asked to follow the directions for each category and piece together a writing plan. For my purposes, I also included the local place where the writing assignment would be based. Below are a few examples of how a potential final assignment might be drafted.

Subject area	Local place	Writing assignment (from the buffet)
Science	UBC Farm	You are a <b>biologist</b> who has been hired as a consultant to <b>inform</b> the <b>general public</b> about organic farming practices and <b>propose</b> a set of recommendations. You have been asked to create a <b>brochure</b> that highlights the practices, along with a set of recommendations. In creating your brochure, you will need to <b>describe</b> examples of organic farming. <b>Evaluate</b> and <b>reflect</b> on their effectiveness, and <b>propose</b> a list of recommendations.
English	Art Gallery	You are a <b>journalist</b> for a travel <b>magazine</b> who is writing about local art exhibits in your area. You have been hired to write an article on the current exhibition at the local gallery. You have been asked to <b>explain</b> and <b>evaluate</b> the exhibit, as well as <b>interview</b> local patrons regarding their thoughts on the exhibit.



My goal for these activities was to have learners build a bank of interdisciplinary writing ideas that lent itself to adaptation to multiple subject areas and PBL environments. Although my ambitious plan of completing three class trips before the end of term was never realized due to time constraints, we did spend a morning at UBC Farm, and the writing buffet did not disappoint. After an informative tour of the area, the teacher candidates made quick work of the buffet in adapting it to their own subject areas. The end results were exponentially better than I had hoped, both in terms of the creativity of the assignments that were imagined, as well as the number of professional roles that were added to the mix. For example, drama and music teachers added items related to musical productions and film: new professional roles included film scouts looking for location shoots and musical directors looking to build a repertoire of soundscapes.

In light of how much more rich and robust the writing buffet became once students started adding professional roles and formats, in the future, I would likely spend more time brainstorming with the group about potential ideas prior to visiting the location. Another ideal scenario, if time ever permitted, would be to have students create and post prospective writing assignments, then invite other members of the class to select one to write for themselves. In sum, the “*All-You-Can-Write Assignment Buffet Table*” proved to be hearty and resourceful for all of us seeking ways to empower learners to write about place. Feedback from the group was very positive, and I am confident this template will become a mainstay not only in my professional practice but also for the teacher candidates in their future teaching careers. To all those who might consider this as a resource for writing across the curriculum, dig in!

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Carl Leggo

# Fifty Questions for Writing Teachers

I have been teaching writing in school and university classrooms for more than thirty-six years. As a poet and professor of education, I am committed to supporting teachers and students in their writing in a wide range of discursive traditions. In more than thirty-six years of teaching, I have asked many questions, and I encourage teachers to ask many questions. While I have many questions, one question is always first: Am I a writer? Why or why not? In order to teach writing, I claim that teachers need to know themselves as writers. I do not mean that teachers need to be seeking publication of their writing, or that they call themselves poets, novelists, bloggers, scriptwriters, or essayists. I mean only that teachers of writing ought to be engaged with writing. In the same ways that they invite their students to write, teachers ought to commit themselves to writing. In the contemporary age of digital literacies and social media, writing has emerged as one of the most popular and prevalent ways we communicate with one another. More and more people are now writing. They might not always recognize themselves as writers, but they are engaged with writing in diverse ways. These are exciting times to be teachers of writing.

I offer the following fifty questions because they are questions I ask frequently. Of course, I ask many other questions, too. While I think the first question should be asked first and often, I do not ask these questions in any particular order. I ask the questions with the hope that I will continue to be imaginatively startled and innovatively unsettled in my practices of teaching writing. I don't understand writing as a formulaic exercise. Instead, I regard writing as an unending process of exploring, questing, drafting, experimenting, lingering, meandering, and hoping. In more than thirty-six years of teaching writing, I have responded to these questions in diverse and divergent ways, but instead of definitive answers, I now have more nuanced and complex understandings of the questions. As a consequence, I think I am both a better writer and a better writing teacher.

1. Am I a writer? Why or why not?
2. What experiences did I have with writing in school?
3. What are the reasons for writing?
4. Why do I teach writing?
5. Why do I want my students to write?
6. Do I encourage my students to regard themselves as writers?
7. Do I provide frequent opportunities for journals, reading diaries, learning logs, and blogs?
8. Do I provide frequent opportunities for freewriting, rough drafts, exploratory writing, and revising?
9. Do I encourage my students to write collaboratively?
10. Am I seeking a formula for success in my writing classes, or am I experimenting with multiple models, conceptions, and theories open to interrogation, criticism, and revision?
11. In my classroom am I actively creating an environment which motivates and nurtures the hard work of writing?
12. How does the design and ambience of my classroom affect the writing experiences of my students?
13. Am I constantly questioning my practice as a writing teacher?
14. Do I foster diverse writing experiences?

15. Do I regard creative writing as a luxury, far removed from the real world of objective, get-things-done prose?
16. Do I encourage my students to read widely in order to encounter an extensive range of writing models?
17. Do I read widely?
18. Do I perceive writing as fun and play?
19. Am I confident that I know what I am doing as a writing teacher?
20. What metaphors do I use for conceptualizing the experience of writing?
21. Am I overly concerned with spelling and punctuation?
22. Do students need to know the conventions before they can contravene the conventions?
23. What are the forces or dynamics that generate the writing process?
24. What are my favourite habits for writing? Where do I like to write?
25. What criteria do I use for determining what makes writing good or bad or mediocre?
26. Do I encourage peer editing?
27. Do I prefer to evaluate with a style sheet and a red pencil?
28. Am I patient with my students as they grow in their writing?
29. In responding to students' writing am I harsh in criticism or generous in praise?
30. How do I react to criticism of my writing?
31. How do my students react to criticism of their writing?
32. Why is the five-paragraph essay so popular in school and university classrooms?
33. Who has the right to evaluate? Can a person who never writes evaluate a writer?
34. What is good writing?
35. Do I encourage innovative voice, style, and structure?
36. Am I encouraging my students to take risks in their writing?
37. Do I expect all my students to follow the same writing process for all writing projects?
38. What criteria guide my choice of subjects for writing assignments?
39. Am I prepared for the emotional and psychological upheavals and crises that inevitably accompany the experience of transformation involved in writing?
40. Do my students perceive their writing as capable of changing the world?
41. Do I encourage my students to doubt and to interrogate?
42. Do I encourage my students to write texts that are full of desire for readers?
43. Do I encourage and nurture my students as authors with authority?
44. Do I perceive my students as subjects in process who require opportunities to compose themselves in language use?
45. What advice do I give my students about voice and writing?
46. Do I seek an authentic voice full of honesty and sincerity in my students' writing?
47. What is so terrible about making errors?
48. Who do I want my students to write for?
49. What are some ways to publish, perform, and disseminate students' writing?
50. Do we fear creativity? Why?

**Carl Leggo** is a poet and professor in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at UBC. He has published seventeen books of poetry and scholarship, always with a focus on creativity, the arts, and education.



Carl Leggo

# Twenty-Six Ruminations on Writing While Snowshoeing in Newfoundland

## Pre-amble

On March 9, 2017, I flew from Richmond, British Columbia to Deer Lake, Newfoundland to visit family. I left rain-soaked spring days on the west coast of Canada to revel in snowy winter days on the east coast of Canada. The next morning I hiked on snowshoes on trails behind my sister-in-law and brother-in-law's house in Corner Brook, the town where I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, the town I still call home, at least one of my homes. I have hiked these trails for many years. During the two weeks I was in Newfoundland, I hiked the trails every morning, and because I am a writer and a teacher of writing, I often thought about writing while I snowshoed—the processes, challenges, and joys of writing—and how snowshoeing and writing both involve ambling encounters with the alphabet. Like writing, every hike on these winter trails is both familiar and unfamiliar.

a

Snowshoeing is a process. I prepare with the proper clothes. I strap on my snowshoes. Soon, I realize I have overdressed or underdressed. I take off some clothes or I walk faster. In spite of all my experience and preparation, I must remain open to surprises.

b

As I stamp the snow with shuffling rectangles, I realize so much of my writing is an illegible hodgepodge of signals signifying little.

c

The blank page is like a Newfoundland field filled with snow. The blank page is expansive. Even if I use large margins and double space, the typical blank page of eight and one half inches by eleven and one-half inches can hold at least one thousand alphabetic squiggles. That is an expansive challenge.

d

Under a blue sky today I hiked in snow that sparkled with countless glints of light. If the glints had been diamonds, I would have filled my pockets. Light on snow can only be enjoyed. Light on snow invites me to be inquisitive, not acquisitive. I am on a journey filled with possibilities for sights and insights.

e

Some days when I snowshoe, I follow the trails of other snowshoers and even snowmobilers. I follow in their traces, and I am glad they have laid down a path for hiking. I honour those who have gone before by remembering them.

f

Yesterday I snowshoed after more snow had recently fallen. I was alone. There were no tracks of other snowshoers. But I finally noticed that I was not alone. I saw the tracks of rabbits and birds and perhaps a coyote. The trails I walk daily are home to many creatures. They are daily writing their poems in the snow, too.

g

When I snowshoed on Monday, I saw the paths carved by dogs who did not follow the straight lines of their human partners. The dogs meandered up and down banks of snow and around trees and back and forth across the trails. I began following the meandering paths of the dogs, but I could not keep up very long. Meandering requires a surplus of wild energy.

h

Last Wednesday the snow blew, cold, hard, sharp, like I was leaning into the harsh words of many critics I have heard over the years. You'll never be a writer! Your writing is loose. You write clichés of the heart. This writing is too personal, too political, too pedestrian, too poetic, too hackneyed, too experimental. The snow blew, cold, hard, sharp.

i

After snowshoeing every day for more than a week, I feel weary like I need a nap. Writing can wear me out, too.

j

As I hike on snowshoes I dream of spelling the whole alphabet in the snow, but by the letter J, I run out of energy and walk the linear line from here to there, more lazy than ludic.

k

A few days ago I was snowshoeing when an eagle flew across my path. I had no idea where the eagle came from or where the eagle was going. Like a fleeting thought the eagle will always be elusive. I must be ready to acknowledge the elusive.

l

This morning's hike is wrapped in winter's windy whispers like a cacophony of murmurs, secrets, warnings, and gossip. Enough stories to fire the heart. Enough stories to stop the heart.

m

Last week snow swirled around me with enough fury to render me almost blind. I could see almost nothing more than an arm's length away. I pushed through the snow and followed the few familiar landmarks I remembered. Full of fear, I ambled on.

n

I stare at the blank page like a snowy field. The whiteness blinds and intimidates and disorients like a blizzard that conceals all landmarks and reduces visibility to zero. I stare at the blank page, and I do not know how to begin, where to turn, what to do. I am lost.

o

In my words how can I echo the silence of snow falling? How do I evoke the ineffable, the ephemeral, the inexpressible in my poetry?

p

The snow sweeps up in undulating waves and sensual contours and voluptuous curves with the precise flourishes of the MacLean Method of cursive writing.

q

The snow reminds me of the blank page, but the page is not blank; the page is never blank. Instead it is scribbled over and over by all the writers who have gone before me, as it will continue to be scribbled by all the writers presently writing and all the writers who will write after me.

r

Like snow, writing is a palimpsest with many layers and traces. If you listen carefully, you might hear the past.

s

As I snowshoe, I see the shapes of the alphabet in the alders, aspens, poplar, and birch. While the letter Y is especially popular, the bare branches hold countless shapes like memories.

t

When I snowshoe, I often both plod and plot. I must begin and I must continue, one step after the other, one squiggle after the other, until the blank page is filled or I grow weary or I run out of squiggles.

u

Years ago I learned that I not only see light, but I also hear light dancing with both ancient and new rhythms.

v

While snowshoeing this morning, I was mesmerized by the blue sky, the sun on the snow like beaded silk, the shadows of bare branches stretched out like thin fingers scratching poetry in the snow.

w

Snowshoeing does not encourage quickness. I need to honour the rhythms of the body's iamb, an unstressed foot and a stressed foot, repeated and represented in raising one snowshoe while the other remains firmly connected to the earth.

x

Unlike rain's penchant for percussion, snow falls silently. How do we honour writing that speaks in a quiet, contemplative voice, full of wonder and mystery, a voice that holds the holy and sacred?

y

I am occupied with the way snow erases yesterday's stories like an Etch A Sketch which can be turned upside down and shaken to obliterate all the lines and permutations of past images. While snowshoeing I am held firm and secure in the present, even if I only understand a little about anything.

z

Why do I snowshoe? Why do I write? I am seeking adventure and fun. While snowshoeing and writing, I learn to slow down and attend to the world around me. I become more intimate with myself and with myself in relation to others. Snowshoeing and writing are both ways of ruminating and remembering and rejoicing.

**Carl Leggo** is a poet and professor in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at UBC. He has published seventeen books of poetry and scholarship, always with a focus on creativity, the arts, and education.



Matthew Brown

# For Annie: when she's able

On December 5, 2014, in Whitehorse, Yukon, Chris McNeill lost his battle with cancer. He was a much loved and admired grade eight English teacher at FH Collins Secondary School. A more caring and dedicated educator you could not find. He died young, not even fifty, leaving behind his wife Heidi and a daughter named Annie, who would have been seven at the time of his death. I was particularly sad for Annie, who was so young to lose a father who loved her so deeply and who fought so hard to stay with her. The day before his death, I saw a large Raven sitting atop an old car in the Superstore Parking lot. That image became the basis for this poem, which was read at Chris's Celebration of Life at our school.


**For Annie: when she's able.**

*Thursday December 4, 2014 4:30pm*

In the parking lot gloom of the Superstore  
I had to stop  
and become very still,  
heart, breath, soul  
all of me  
perfectly quiet.

There, on the snow covered roof  
of an old rusted red car  
a large and mighty raven sat,  
weather-worn and disheveled  
wings slightly askew  
neck feathers slightly ruffled  
as though it had just returned  
from some long night of misadventure  
in the high mountain passes  
where the storms and the gales  
can blow one so swiftly off course  
that home seems like such a far-away thing  
more bless-ed than breath.

And it knew it was in trouble, this Raven;  
Knew it was in trouble  
with the little pretty eyed girl  
in a faded blue parka



with white fur trim  
who stood in front of the car,  
hands around her waist,  
hugging herself tightly  
and looking at the bird with a frozen expression  
intent and silent.

*And I thought to myself: How can one listen and scream at the same time?*

It seemed to me,  
that their gazes were so solidly locked  
so permanently fixed upon the other  
that nothing in this universe,  
or this parking lot  
was allowed to exist,  
or intrude  
upon this private moment  
of perfect grace.

And yet, in spite of myself, I felt my hand reaching into my pocket for my cellphone...

The bird looked somewhat angry  
nesting there, in its exhaustion,  
or maybe it was sadness I saw,  
in its cloudy eyes,  
or defiance, or remorse,  
some mixture  
in that bird's disposition;  
as though circumstance did not allow  
for one gently expressed emotion at a time

the little girl  
on the other hand,  
looked like all little girls do,  
when immersed in a childhood world,  
where stuffed bears and misbehaving bunnies  
do something bad,  
and must answer for it;

*Listen to me now,* pleaded the Raven.

But the girl was insistent:

"It's ok to be angry or sad," she says,  
but never go to bed mad..."

*I have so very much to tell you,* replied the Raven,  
*and so little time for telling,*

But the girl would have none of it:

“Just say that you’re sorry, and you  
won’t do it again, and  
know that I will love you, for more than forever...”

*I know that, said the Raven, its heart breaking,  
just a little bit more,*

*But now you must listen very carefully!  
The world,  
is a beautiful place.*

*It has an infinite capacity for kindness,*

*You can see it in the way a scary old house will leave a nook or cranny for spring swallows to have their babies;  
or the way a beautiful flower will suddenly grow in the hottest, driest, hardest place,  
or the way a friend will wrap her arms around you,  
knowing without being told,  
that your tears are about to flow.*

*you can see it each morning when the sun rises and warms the earth  
sweeping away all the nightmares and the monsters;  
you can feel it each evening, when mother tucks you into bed  
and tells you she loves you like no one else in this world will ever love you -  
aside from me.*

“But I don’t understand!” said the pretty eyed girl.

“Your words  
are way, way too big for me!”

*But someday they won’t be, answered the Raven. Someday, you will be bigger than these words.  
Trust me.*

The little girl looked unconvinced. But the Raven pressed on:

And I must tell you as well,  
as kind as this world can be,  
as big, blue, and beautiful as it can be,  
it can also sometimes, be very sad.

“Like now,” whispered the little girl.

Yes, replied the Raven.

*Just  
like  
now.*

*Sometimes, continued the Raven,  
this world will tell you one thing,  
and then do something altogether different;  
Sometimes, this world,  
will do things that seem unfair and just plain wrong.*



“Like now?”

Yes, replied the Raven.

*just  
like  
now*

*And sometimes, this world  
will tempt you  
with gifts and expectations and opportunities  
that will fill your heart with joy  
but, in the end, turn out to be nothing more than*

*little  
broken  
hearts.*

*scattered on your bedroom floor.*

*and what will you do then?* asked the Raven.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I’m just a little girl. What shall I do?”

*Well, then you will laugh!* replied the Raven.

“Why?”

*Because you have a super power.*

And what super power could I possibly have?” asked the little girl.

And here the Raven seemed to steady itself  
straighten up  
and with some new found strength  
declared:

*Me!*  
  
in a voice  
so powerful,

and so certain,  
and so bursting with love,  
that even the Gods  
upon their marble thrones  
shuddered,  
and quaked,  
bowed their heads  
in shame  
at the folly they had done.

And the little girl suddenly felt her new super power  
and began to shiver,  
as though this new thing  
were a thousand points of brilliant light  
fiery eyes  
thrown down by heaven's hand  
that embraced her very soul,  
coursed through her blood  
laid a thousand angelic kisses upon her cheek  
wrapped her little broken heart  
in layers upon layers  
of sparkling, golden threads  
kiln fired  
in certainty of love  
that it seemed to me,  
the twilight gloom of this parking lot  
was blasted into a shimmering crystal palace

*Know that I am always behind you,* continued the Raven.  
applauding all that you've done!

*Know that I am always beside you  
urging you onward,*


*filling your lungs with the breath  
that is my breath;*

*And know that I am always in front of you*

*sweeping aside all doubt and insecurity  
swooping you up in my strong feathered wings  
as you collapse into the arms of triumph.*

*Always!*

The Raven flapped its wings once, as though testing itself  
for flight.



*Soon I will be of the air  
upon the winds  
soaring  
lofting  
over high mountain passes  
sweeping low and fast  
over steep river valleys  
where the waters run deep and swift  
like blue sapphire,  
exulting  
rejoicing  
In every thing you do!*

*And know this one last thing to be absolutely true, said the Raven,*

*that I will leave tiny pieces of me everywhere  
for you to find in the most unexpected places...*

*“Like a game! exclaimed the girl, now with the brightest of smiles on her face.*

*Like clues to a sacred bond, between you and me,  
that can never be broken, no matter how far it is stretched, or tested  
Not even if I circled the earth a thousand times  
this bond would only pull tighter  
and bring you closer to me!*

*I felt my hand let go of my cell phone then.*

*no need for proof  
of this sparkling memory palace  
that the bird and the girl had built  
together.*

*No need for distraction.*

*I was told once:  
that if you stare at a mountain,  
for even a while,  
then look away, look back,  
it will have changed.*

*But  
stare with intent,  
with appreciation  
at this same mountain,  
for even just a little while,  
then it will change you.*

*And so intent was I  
upon this Raven,*



that I did not see  
the young girl's mother  
take her daughter's hand.

And then so quickly  
The Raven  
hoisted itself into the air  
on powerful wings  
found a current,  
lofted itself  
higher and higher,  
over the rooftops  
till it pierced the low cloud banks  
like an arrow shot straight and true  
through the very heart of sadness  
into eternal sunlight.

And the mother  
hugged her daughter tightly  
kissed the top of her head and  
whispered something in her ear  
that made the young girl smile

And as they walked away,

A perfect expression of love,

I thought,

or I imagined

but I believe to this day:

that I saw

in the little girl's hand

a long sleek black feather.

**Matthew Brown** is an English and Drama teacher, living, working, and writing in Whitehorse, Yukon since 1998. Prior to this, he worked in the Northwest Territories and in Nunavut.

Shahin Mohammadi

# Stories I am going to write one day when I stop procrastinating.

Picture this.

A house in the middle of whatever city's suburbia.

A fence.

A yard.

A sedan parked in the driveway.

The people living in that house lead ordinary lives. They come and go like the phases of the moon and think nothing of it.

Life is normal.

ZOOM OUT.

PAN LEFT.

ZOOM IN.

Now picture a small, creepy house in the middle of nowhere. Completely empty except for a clock on the wall, and a single chair in the living room where a man named Neil is strapped to the chair, wires everywhere, the ends of which are connected to a breaker and his body.

Now here's the twist.

The light switches in our normal house are connected to the breaker in the creepy one so that every time the lights are turned OFF in the normal house, the person strapped to the chair gets a constant, electric shock. The shock only turns OFF when the lights are turned ON at the normal house.

Our victim gets shocked periodically throughout the day based on who is home. Who is going to work? Who goes to school?

He hates it when they go to sleep and at night he screams repeatedly for them to "WAKE UP!"

Neil starts to develop a relationship with the people in the normal house.

Who they are. What their habits are like.

He starts to hate it when they are away for long periods of time. Vacations are a dreaded concept.

He starts to assign them names, imagines what their lives might be like, and creates this world in his imagination fuelled only by the shocks he receives.

He does not want his life to end this way...

This is a story I would write if I could only stop procrastinating.

I put things off like I get paid to do it.

I am so efficient at not doing something that the act of not doing something actually starts to look like I am doing something. If I wanted to I could have written a book by now full of short stories because I have a thousand ideas like...

Picture this.

A detective, Carl, is getting home from another long day on the beat. He places his hat on the coatrack, walks over to the fridge, opens a can of beer, and turns on the television.

His life has become stale.

Every day the same routine as he watches people being arrested, released, fined, and some who are never found.

He starts to drift off as the voice from the 11 o'clock news starts to turn into white noise.

He is dreaming of a morning where he does not have to wake up.

“WAKE UP!”

He hears the words being shouted into his ear as he is startled awake.

On the news is a picture of a missing man. He looks into the man's eyes and the lights begin to flicker in his apartment. The whole room starts shaking and the television freezes on the image of the man's face. Carl knows that something strange is happening that he cannot explain. The lights are now flickering violently. The shaking has increased to the point where Carl feels as if he needs to crawl under something sturdy. He bolts for the kitchen table, steadying himself on the walls and falls to his knees. In the midst of his panic, Carl looks at the closet at the end of the hall and sees a light shining through all of its cracks. He doesn't know why but he is drawn to it. Slowly he crawls to the closet door but cannot stand in the ferociously shaking house. Somehow he reaches the copper doorknob and swings the door open. The house suddenly becomes as still as morning fog when he looks inside to find...

See?

That is a story I could sell if only I could sit down and write the darn thing!

Coming up with a good idea and not following through is like planting a thousand trees and watering them with mustard. Or like finally asking the person you like out on a date, and taking them out to the local gas station.

It does not make sense!

And the worst part is that I had you!

I had me too until I decided that checking Facebook was a better use of my time.

This story could be out there making people feel things like excitement and fear.  
Or mostly confusion.  
But instead, it stays here.  
On this page.  
With all of you just staring at it like a naked in a dream moment.

A reminder that to wait is to remain motionless against the chaotic currents of life.

Now picture this.

Inside the closet, Carl sees a swirling hole on the wall. Its movement is mesmerising and perfectly silent. Carl does not know that is happening but knows that something is calling to him. He looks back at his apartment, a symbol of the static life he has grown to hate. He looks into the churning hole and decides that he will not wait to die a meaningless life. Instead, he stands up and jumps through...

...Neil is barely conscious as it is the middle of the night and the shock is constant and merciless. The sweat pouring down his face is the only source of hydration he has. He is so, so close to giving up.

But at that moment something remarkable happens.

...Neil screams at the top of his lungs "WAKE UP!" and, as if out of his imagination, he feels all the electricity surging through him empty out onto the wall. He opens his eyes and sees a spinning hole in the cement wall of the house. A moment later a shadow appears. A figure of a man stumbling through the gate he has just created. The man falls into the room and looks around...

...Carl is confused, but years of being on the force have trained his instincts enough to know that he needs to move fast. He takes in as much information as he can and in the darkness, he sees a man strapped to a chair of some sort. He knows this is the reason he is here...

...Neil feels arms lift him up out of the chair and he opens his eyes. He looks at Carl through tear-filled eyeballs and there is a smile on his face when he says "I brought you here." Carl steps back through the spinning hole and the two of them are back in his apartment. They fall to the floor and the wormhole shuts behind them...

Neil looks over at Carl and says, "You *saved* me".

Carl looks back and Neil and says, "*You* saved me"

I look at both characters in my mind and say, "You saved me."

**Shahin Mohammadi** is an improviser/actor/poet/teacher/paper folder who currently resides in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. He dived into the world of spoken word several years ago and since then has performed in several cities across Canada. He has also written for the literary magazine *Oratorialis* and competed nationally at the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word as part of the Victoria, BC Slam team. Shahin is currently working in high school as an educational assistant, and as a performing artist in the city of Whitehorse.



Shahin Mohammadi

# Ability

She's 14 years old but she has the mental capacity of a 7-year-old.

Now, I've heard that a 7-year-old is not half a 14-year-old,  
But if I were half the person she is I'd be a fortunate man.

See she can laugh at anything and has a smile like a crescent moon, but her confidence is waning because she doesn't have any friends.

See on top of the attention difficulties and social anxiety, she has a problem reading people.

So I teach her to read faces.

I tell her that a smile means "happy," and that a frown means "sad," and your eyes opened wide could mean "scared" or "surprised," or that when you slant your head and look deeply at someone it means "worried."

She stops me there, says she knows that one. It's the same look her parents give her, give me, sitting around the table in my office looking for hope in my answers.

"Will she ever understand money? What about university? What are our options?"

She says she hasn't seen the happy face in a long time.

...

My oldest student comes in during the evenings to work through his malposition. He knows that learning comes with repetition but he is 59 years old and sees 60 in a premonition. His thoughts subject to ignition, take the form of sweltering migraines that affect his cognition.

See on top of the brain injury, and OCD tendencies, he has a problem processing social situations so...

He looks through me

He looks through me

He looks through me and says that he's never been on a date with a woman, he's never held a job, and is hoping for a medical miracle.

He says that he knows that normal people have problems too, but he wants those problems. He deserves our problems.

...

She's 12 years old and acts just her age.

She's funnier than me, and would describe her taste in comedy as "toilet humour"

See along with the A.D.D's and the ICANTREAD's, she has a problem understanding symbols.

Don't get me wrong she can write her name, but it might as well spell out HELPME because to her it's all the same. I tell her that the letters in her name stand for something,

That she stands for something.

And I find myself staring at a wall of doubt in their faces. These people. These breathing people have dreams.

I want to tell them that I'm trying to understand.

That you have a disability because others have the inability to see your true abilities. You are a fire untamed. You cannot, will not, be extinguished.

Maybe a little acknowledgement of their existence, a celebration of their persistence, all the work that goes in behind the scenes of a bloated educational system, torn at the seams, in a reoccurring theme of students swimming upstream in pursuit of their dreams.

There are no words that can comfort those who fear the dark at night, especially if the words elicit pity.

They don't need pity; they will wait till the morning and keep trying.

I am 29 years old and have always been able to read and write. Math was never my thing but I can tell the difference between a dime and a quarter. I find it hard to keep track of all my friends, and working a steady job I complain about getting up in the morning.

But then they walk into my classroom. Birds with wings weighed down by anvils.

They remind me to smile. They treat me like an old friend. They choose their words wisely. Every day I watch in awe as they refuse to accept their sentence and they keep moving forward even at a crawl, and I wonder why they call me the teacher.

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Chelsea Kelly-McNally and Matthew Brown

# All the Cafeteria's a Stage

Witch Elf #1: *When shall we three meet again?  
In blizzard, flurries, or in freezing rain?*

**A note on the play:** Titled “A Very Shakespearian Christmas Tale,” the script essentially weaves together the plots of “Hamlet,” “Romeo and Juliet,” “Macbeth,” (and a bit of Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” for seasoning) and sets the action at the North Pole - with tragic, star crossed elves and voracious zombies. Long story short: Santa Claus is murdered by his brother. Brother marries Mrs. Claus. Ghost of Santa Claus whines to his son. Young Omelet Elf is out for vengeance...

The play was narrated by William Shakespeare and his muse - William’s imagination brought to life as a separate and distinct character - secretly out to sabotage his greatest production. *You sorta had to be there...*

For all its absurdity, complex language, and convolution of scene structure and blocking (and in spite of space and resource limitations), it was a hit. And a best practice.

*Matthew says:*


A couple of weeks before opening night, December, 2016, while rehearsing an original play at F.H. Collins Secondary School in Whitehorse, co-directed by Chelsea Kelly-McNally and myself, I experienced a visual epiphany, in which images stalled in mid-chaos, Matrix-like, enough time for me to soak in the following fragments:

Keona, a grade 11 First Nations student from a small outlying community, and probably every female cast member’s secret crush, thugged out in his “Uncle Claus” gansta outfit, looking longingly through the transparent gym walls at his basketball crew, who, like Jock Sirens pleading to Odysseus, are begging him to drop this thespian nonsense and join in on the three-on-three tournament. The agony of indecision is written across his face. And yet he stays put.

As though to reflect the inner suffering of Keona, Sean Wilkinson, Socials teacher and our *Ghost Of Santa Claus*, dressed in a scorched and blackened Santa suit, (from roasting his chestnuts in eternal fire) bellows out a truly tormented “Ho...Ho...Ho!”

On the floor, at my feet, Selena, grade 8, is thrashing about. She is a superbly talented, frenetic waif of a kid and the queen of the blue-haired photobomb, with two impossible roles. She is practicing her death spasms - screams and gesticulations, protracted death: a comic book character come to life, all frizzle and frazzle, like the road-runner pasted to the windshield of a Mac truck.

On the back risers stands Grade 12 student Loughran, our William Shakespeare, exquisitely talented, flamboyant,



a proud leader of the gay community, dressed in some strange alchemy of 16th and 21st century garb. He's got a foot up on a step, knee pointed out in that archaic theatrical style, and he's brandishing a wine goblet and hurtling a flurry of angry words at his *muse*, played by Ashley, who squeaks and chirps words back at him with equal ferocity. It is a verbal battle of epic proportions, a complex dance of tricky dialogue to the death, between a writer and his own imagination personified - and they're nailing it.

To the right of Loughran and Ashley, two teachers, Stephanie and John Main, struggle to practice their lines, as their toddler, Gavin, dashes in out of the scene, clutching at their knees, begging for attention, hogging the spotlight. Trust me, if I could have controlled his stage blocking, I would have used him, but the little guy's intent on making his own random entrances and exits...

Upstage right, beside a giant column painted to resemble a candy cane, stands Tess, grade 12, dressed in rags, playing with a skull in an imaginary snowbank. She's draped in elfin rags and plays two difficult roles. An extraordinary talent, a master at memorizing complex lines, and reciting them with clarity, emotion, and eloquence. One would never know that in the real world she struggles with a pronounced stutter, an affliction that vanishes the second her character speaks. Alongside her, brandishing a candy cane dagger, Mercedes, grade 10, falls seamlessly into one of her many over-the-top Hamlet-inspired monologues - her words reverberate about the space and shake us like a cannonade.

The French contingent hovers nearby: Zack, grade 12, dressed in woodsmen couture, plays heavily accented straight man to the madness of his Juliet; Daphne, our French Language Monitor, and third witch, practices her cauldron scene with grade 9 student, Emi and grade 8 student Isabelle.

Centre stage, two curmudgeonly elves, played by Lisa and Lizzy, spit insults at each other, threatening knees and noggins - two young girls playing two ancient feuding fathers has never been more ludicrous, or hilarious. They are destined to steal the show.

And then there are the zombie elves, led enthusiastically by our Library Assistant, Jessica, and Socials and French teacher, Hugo, practicing their opening scene: a dance of elfin slaughter, to a digitalized version of Trans Siberian Orchestra's Heavy Metal "Carol Of The Bells." Scary stuff.

But computerized music has a deadly rival, for backstage, from the music room, come the sounds of a live orchestra, lofting over us like a brassy discordant ice fog. The school's student band - led by teacher Tristan Fox, a man of infinite patience and genuine love for his craft - is warming up with a few classic Christmas carols. This would eventually become the awesome festive pre-show performance and final ingredient in this magnificent stew.

And the list goes on. Twenty-three cast members. Five technical crew (including one grade 8 kid who appeared sometime during the process and magically became our lighting control technician), a complete high school band - and anyone who had to walk through us, or over us, or in the end, couldn't ignore us, and was hauled, most willingly, into the act.

*Chelsea says:*

And what a magnificent stew it was!

When Matt first suggested we create an X-mas Play Club together in order to direct students and staff in performing one of his original scripts, I wasn't 100% sold. It was a tantalizing idea, and the school has been yearning for more arts and culture within its walls for some time. However, I wasn't sure if it would fly. I had doubts about the willingness of students to devote their limited time to an after-school club that did not include credits or grades, fundraising for prom or potential scholarships. Such is the reality of kids these days: they are busy; they have so



much on their plates. Student and staff participation was going to rely solely on the simple love of theatre or the desire to try something new.

When we walked into a student-packed classroom for our introductory Thursday lunch-hour Play Club meeting, my apprehension began to diminish. However, having worked with hormonally-driven adolescents for the majority of my adult life, and knowing how much time and dedication a full-blown theatrical performance demands, I was still wary.

Surprisingly, auditions and casting were completed with very little teen drama. After-school Monday, Tuesday, and Friday rehearsals were agreed upon quite uneventfully, with the few cast members who had to miss one day a week agreeing to make up for this by arranging practices with others on their own time. Early on, two cast members dropped out, but they were quickly replaced by newcomers who were intent on joining our thespian crew.

We have no theatre, or stage, or drama room in our new school. So, we held all rehearsals, as well as performed our play, in the front lobby/cafeteria across from a transparent gymnasium. This was my greatest concern. How could we possibly transform our school atrium into a stage, wings and audience? How were we going to persuade our cast to perform their run-throughs while students wandered past, while sports teams practiced across from them, while adults from user groups, or those picking up their children, strolled in and out of the front doors right next to them? The answer was simple and eloquent. Matt and I changed *concern* to *challenge*. Part of the process would be to identify with the cast, all the obstacles before us, and work together to solve each issue with a spirit of enthusiasm and innovation. The constant element of chaos became something to be embraced - fertile ground for group problem-solving and creative thinking.

This “MacGyver-like” attitude had an immediate impact upon our school community. The student actors became comfortable and confident working within their surroundings. School staff became curious and quite intrigued by what was blossoming before them. Many offered assistance. Many became part of the production. Later, some onlookers and student audience members expressed that this was their first exposure to live theatrical rehearsal and performance. This only reinforced the necessity of bringing more arts and culture into the mainstream school system, while also helping us realize that the impact of this play radiated far beyond our Drama Club crew.

Nevertheless, this was not my epiphany. I *do* remember the inspirational moment Matt describes of Keona fighting athletic temptation amidst a tapestry of colourful, theatrical organized chaos, and I probably always will. But my epiphany happened a little earlier, maybe because I had been so much more uncertain from the very beginning, and, therefore, needed it.

It occurred when I realized our *Very Shakespearean Christmas Tale* performance contained two dance interludes. Imagining Matt developing and demonstrating the choreography for dance routines was like visualizing cats attempting synchronized swimming. So, I assumed this duty fell upon my shoulders. After listening to the songs and brainstorming various ideas, even practicing a few moves at home, I felt relatively competent. However, when the first musical moment presented itself during a practice, our lead, Loughran, stepped forward before I could say a word. He took charge with confidence, prepared dance moves, excellent examples and, most importantly, patience. And, his fellow cast members gave him the utmost respect, listening to and following his direction. Matt and I were able to put up our feet and watch as Loughran, a grade 12 student, took the reins.

Matt and I had been on overdrive for weeks, meeting our teaching expectations while collaborating, coordinating and directing play rehearsals and prop designs. Then unexpectedly, it was like we were put on pause, while all continued on around us. The surrounding voices, sounds of shuffling feet and rhythmic beats blended, becoming muffled, almost muted, as though I were underwater. No multitasking, note-taking or directing. I could simply observe, appreciate, enjoy. It was in the calm of this serendipitous hiatus that it sunk in.

*The moment when those you have been teaching take on the leadership role successfully on their own is the moment when you know you have truly succeeded as a teacher.*

Here was one of the most diverse groups of students we had ever worked with and they were united as a team, directing, teaching and cooperating with each other. An openly gay grade 12 student was universally accepted by his peers as a leader and choreographer. And the tough, super jock was more than willing to take dance advice from him. The inexperienced were attempting the unfamiliar with encouragement from their cast members. And the beat-deaf young man with two left feet was convinced by the crew that his uncoordinated steps only suited the character he played that much more, and therefore, he was willing to continue taking part.

This was a smorgasbord of students and they were treating each other as equals, working together in harmonious cohesion. It was beautiful, enlightening and inspiring! This crew was destined for greatness! It was inevitable that this performance and experience would be an incredibly entertaining extravaganza!

Providing a theatrical opportunity for students and watching all their hard work evolve into a successful production are not the only rewards received from such an experience. Students become involved. They find a niche. They conquer fears while becoming aware of their strengths. And they learn. They learn without realizing they are learning. They enjoy learning and even seek it out. They develop passion and curiosity. I caught a grade 8 girl reading Hamlet just so she could better understand the plot of our play and the roles within it. One of the students, who struggles with focusing in class and follows a strict IEP, excelled as a member of our technical crew and was able to work independently, as well as teach other students how to operate some of the equipment - even memorizing many of the characters' lines and acting as a stand-in when cast members were absent. Only a couple weeks before the big production, I was shocked to learn that one of our most humorous actors was struggling with an anxiety disorder and was blown away by the success she was having while trying to conquer such an obstacle.

This Drama Club also provided an opportunity for unlikely friendships to develop. One of my favourite examples involves an incredibly talented young lady who quite candidly admitted to me that, regretfully, she did not have many friends in her grade 8 classes. I knew this was likely because she was ahead of her time in maturity, an old soul if you will, with an exhilarating enthusiasm to squash teen angst and apathy like a bug, and, for the average grade 8er, this could possibly feel a little intimidating. I realized, of course, this information may not comfort a 13-year-old, so I couldn't wait to share the comments three grade 11 cast members made about her. I tried to quote them as closely as possible. "She's amazing!" "Yeah, so talented!" "She's the kind of person everyone would want to have as a friend!" While relaying this information, a look of elated amazement washed over this grade 8 girl's face. "Really? Wow!" It seemed to spark a new confidence in her, which continues to be evident every time we pass in the hallways. Just one of many refreshing reminders of the importance of providing cross-grade, combined course, experiential, genuine, real-life opportunities within our schools, and, hopefully, drive us to incorporate this form of meaningful learning more regularly into our daily routines.

*Matthew says:*

It's difficult in the standard classroom, in an environment that most kids associate with boredom, requirement, and the agony of the clock's slow silent mockery, to teach the concepts of empathy, tolerance, cooperation, the love of language, the power and potential in risk-taking, the value of problem solving - essentially, the foundational elements of "critical thinking" - in a way that is visceral, impactful and demonstrable.

But not in this space...

As Chelsea mentioned, we have no theatrical space to call our own. We have nearly zero resources. And yet: we've got the whole world on this stage, or rather, *cafeteria floor*: we've got student representation from grades eight through twelve, from different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds; we've got the shy and the extraverted;

the jocks and the bookworms; the poets and the academics, the troubled and the carefree; we've got teachers, teaching assistants, library staff, even kids from programs outside of FH Collins. And everyone's here, not because it's a required course or for extra credit. We are all here because of a love of theatre and a knowledge that art can occur in any space, so long as you treat chaos and confusion as a "beautiful mess." That's the secret: turn obstacles into opportunities for learning, for triumph. That's what kids do naturally.

Here were four months of the most valuable and fun cross-curricular education I had ever experienced. Completely organic. A diverse community, springing up from a twisted and nonsensical script. Here were four months spent learning from each other, about each other, supporting one another, building friendships, acquiring skills, breaking down barriers and stereotypes. Four months of *best practice*, amidst the chaos and confusion of thrice-weekly play practice. This was a damn good time. An extremely valuable time. And unlike most other programs at school, no one really wanted it to end.

My epiphany: *If only the rest of my teaching day was like this...*



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Rachel Reynolds

# Success in Senior English Through Bloom's Taxonomy

*"I would there were no age between ten and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancients, stealing, fighting." (Shakespeare, A Winter's Tale)*

As Shakespeare evidences, as early as the 16th century the teenage years have been beheld as an age often fraught with volatility, apathy, and defiance. This in between age where increased responsibility and expectations unite in a precarious dance with rules and limitations often results in youth meriting such labels as "unmotivated" and "noncompliant." If the teenage years have always been taxing, and capricious behavior is not specific to just today's generation, I began to wonder, why are so many of my senior students struggling for success within the education system? Perhaps along with the challenges today's learners face just by being teenagers, they are also being challenged by having to navigate through an education system that is not representative of the society in which they live and not designed for their optimal success. As a senior English teacher with 11 years' experience, I recognized that to expect 100% engagement from all my students all the time was unrealistic, but I still wondered if I could be doing more. Was I adequately preparing them for their futures? Was I providing enough support for them to become not only more knowledgeable, but also more self-aware, competent, and adaptable? It was these questions that caused me to stop and reflect upon my current instructional strategies to see if perhaps there was more that I could be doing in order to be more responsive to my students' needs.

Although I've always been a very passionate teacher who puts in a lot of time trying to create interesting and innovative lessons that will engage and motivate my students, I was still using a lot of the one size fits all type of assignments. Upon reflection, I realized that even my students with a history of academic success, who could probably navigate through the halls of learning virtually on their own, were not as successful as they could be. I decided that if I wanted to encourage greater success for all, I needed to revise and redesign my instruction to offer more choice and more room for creativity. I wanted my instruction to better reflect our changing society where people are not only rewarded for their ability to work together as a team but were also recognized for their individuality and creativity. I also hoped redesigning would provide my students with more practice in important 21st century skills, such as: self-awareness, responsibility, critical thinking, and problem solving. In addition, I wanted to integrate more technology into my instruction because although many were proficient in snapchat and group chatting, I was sure there was a lot more that they needed to know. I was confident that by implementing these changes more of my students would have the opportunity to be successful. Finally, I wanted to make changes to my evaluation and assessment practices. I knew it was time to 'make the call' and let go of the traditional 'deficit model' rubrics that I had been using. Instead, I wanted my students to receive assessment and feedback that highlighted what they 'could do' rather than what they 'couldn't do.' Positive assessment rather than negative assessment was something I hoped would motivate all students and help them feel more confident thereby allowing them to become more successful.

Something else that was important to me was that my students take more ownership of their learning in order



for them to become more self-aware and responsible not only for their success but also sometimes their lack of success. As their teacher, I wanted to “let go of the illusion of control and become a facilitator of learning not a guardian of knowledge” (Crockett, Jukes, & Churches, 2011, p. 14). With this in mind, I decided to introduce my students to *Bloom’s Taxonomy* (1956) and *Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy* (1990). As a class, we discussed that Benjamin Bloom was an educational psychologist who believed that learning was accomplished while working through a continuum or framework of thinking and learning. We discussed his original framework levels of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, and the reasons that it became revised to remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. I emphasized to the students what lower order thinking skills looked like compared to higher order thinking skills, and the importance of striving to use the higher order thinking skills in order to achieve true learning. My goal was to get the students to think about their thinking and learning as a way to get them to become more self-aware.

### **My Implementation**

In order to promote engagement, I showed a few Youtube videos to teach the background of Bloom’s theory, and the students especially enjoyed “Bloom’s According to the Big Bang Theory.” From here I redesigned my short story unit to incorporate Bloom’s learning levels. One of the first lessons I implemented was having the students work in small groups to create questions for each of the learning levels based on a short story. After creating their questions, I had the groups switch up and evaluate another group’s questions. Finally, the students switched questions with yet another group, and this time they answered the other group’s questions. The students then completed several individual assignments of choice continuing to practice working through Bloom’s learning levels. At the end of this unit the feedback I received from the students reflected their growing ability to recognize the different levels of learning. Their ability to understand what constitutes effective learning helped them to start to think more critically about their own thinking and learning. This “shifts the responsibility of learning from the teacher, where it has traditionally been, to the learners where it belongs” (Crockett, et al., 2011, p. 2). I then had the students complete the following Challenged Novel of Choice Project.

### **English 12 – Challenged Novel of Choice Project**

Unit Big Ideas: (1) The exploration of texts deepens our understanding of diverse complex ideas about identity, others, and the world (2) Questioning what we hear, read, and view contributes to our ability to be educated and engaged citizens.

Goals for Competency:

1. Think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts
2. Construct meaningful personal connections between self, text, and world
3. Respond to text in personal, creative, and critical ways
4. Reflect on and assess texts to improve their clarity, effectiveness, and impact according to purpose, audience, and message

Censorship Introductory Think/Pair/Share Assignment

- What does it mean to “censor”? What is the definition of “censorship”?
- What are some of the reasons why people support censorship?
- What are some of the reasons why people oppose censorship?
- What about other applications besides books? Advertising censorship? Websites? The news? Other people’s ideas?

### **English 12 Challenged Novel Unit Using Bloom’s Taxonomy**

It was Oscar Wilde who stated that, “the books that the world calls immoral are the books that show the world its own shame.” His words are definitely worth considering because as hard as it is for some of us to believe, literature is still being censored in Canada today. Book censorship exists all over the world, and books have been banned, censored, or challenged for hundreds of years. This assignment challenges students to read and explore

a challenged book and determine for themselves if they feel it should be censored. By reading a challenged novel, students are reaching out into the world and extending their own understanding and acceptance.

**Focus Questions:** Why has this novel been banned, challenged or censored? Who has challenged it and why? Do you agree with this censorship? Why or why not?

### **Written Component [From student handout]**

Based on the novel and its themes, language, ideas, etc., the students' assignment was to create a three-paragraph personal response (approximately 2 typed, double-spaced pages).

**Paragraph 1:** Bloom's levels 1 and 2 Remembering and Understanding (Focus: What does the novel say?) Explain why the novel was censored, banned, or challenged. Also, provide a basic overview of the content of the novel: plot, characters, setting, and main themes. What is it about? What are the main events and ideas?

**Paragraph 2:** Bloom's levels 3 and 4 Applying and Analyzing (Focus: What does it mean?) Apply what you know about literary terms and provide some interpretive discussion of the novel. Integrate ideas with the content of the novel. How does the author organize the novel? What literary techniques (characterization, setting, plot events, conflicts, mood, tone, diction, foreshadowing, point of view, symbolism) do they use, and how effective are these techniques?

**Paragraph 3:** Bloom's level 5 Evaluating (Focus: What do you think?) Take a stance about the censorship of the novel. In your view does it deserve to be banned? Evaluate and make judgements about aspects of the novel and the author's purpose (themes) and perspective on the subject material. What is the author saying about life, society, and human behavior? Do you agree? Focus on personal reactions and opinions related to the banning or censoring of the novel. Be sure to use specific evidence and examples from the novel. You might also mention connections with other novels or films that have also been censored, or synthesize information from other sources to discuss your novel.

### **Assessment Ideas**

Use the following competencies and focus on the strengths of the student's work: understanding, analysis, and evaluation; and word choice and style; structure and conventions.

### **Creative Presentation Component (Bloom's Taxonomy Level 6) [From student handout]**

Students were given a choice of the following options:

1. **Sequel (creative writing option):** This option requires you to create a sequel to your novel in a stand-alone paragraph of approximately 125 to 150 words. What has happened since the original novel ended? Have any of the characters, setting, or conflicts changed? How is the idea of censorship still in play in this new setting?
2. **New Perspective (creative writing option):** Choose a pivotal plot event and rewrite it from a different (new) character's perspective. This option requires you to write a stand-alone paragraph of approximately 125 to 150 words. Carry through the main censored concepts and themes in your paragraph.
3. **Genre Transformation (creative writing or artwork):** Choose a scene or pivotal plot event from the novel and recreate it in a different genre. What would the novel be like if it were a science fiction story? Or a fantasy? Carry through the main censored concepts and themes from the original novel. You can choose to produce this in a stand-alone paragraph of approximately 125 to 150 words, or you may choose to create a model or a piece of artwork to portray your ideas. If you choose the model or artwork, remember to include a brief paragraph of explanation.
4. **Artwork:** Create a portrait of a character from the novel reflecting the emotions and personality of your chosen

character. Include a brief paragraph describing your art work and the connection to the novel's censorship, as well as a quotation from which the project was inspired.

### Assessment Ideas

The written options can use similar competencies as the previous written component and the creative representation can draw upon the following competencies: meaning (creative connections) and written explanations and connections. Once again, the emphasis should be upon what the student has successfully achieved.

### Oral Presentation Component (Bloom's Taxonomy All Levels)

**Focus Questions:** Why has this novel been banned, challenged, or censored? Who has challenged it and why? Do you agree with this censorship? Why or why not?

As a final component to this assignment, students were asked to present their novel to the class in an oral (or video) format where they addressed the focus questions. This oral component fulfilled the speaking and presenting provincial outcomes for English 12. They were permitted to use the aid of visuals and technology and to work with a partner if they had chosen the same novel or a novel with similar censorship issues. Their oral presentations was to be organized as follows:

- Brief overview of novel
- Who has challenged it and why
- Reflections and evaluations – do you agree with the censorship/why or why not? You will be expected to offer specific and thoughtful reasons and evidence.

### Assessment Ideas

Use the following competencies and focus on the strengths of the student's work: presenting (eye contact, body language, voice, and expression) and meaning (informative, addressed and connected with the focus question).

### Further Implementation (Technology):

My next step was to add more technology to my instruction. In 2008, Andrew Churches, a middle school teacher from New Zealand, once again revised Bloom's Taxonomy to better reflect current society by including the integration of technology.

**Figure 3:** Churches' Revisions of Bloom's Taxonomy (Summarized from Bloom's and IC Tools)

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Level One Remembering</b></p> <p><b>Skills:</b> <i>listing, recognizing, describing, identifying, naming, locating, finding, retrieving</i></p> <p>*Technology skills: Bullet pointing (digital format of listing), digital highlighting, bookmarking or favourite-ing (marking websites, resources, or files for later use, social networking – Facebook, basic searching or googling (in its simplest form of entering a key word or phrase)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Level Two Understanding</b></p> <p><b>Skills:</b> <i>interpreting, summarizing, inferring, paraphrasing, classifying, comparing, explaining</i></p> <p>*Technology skills: Advanced or Boolean searching (refining searches), online tools – mind mapping, graphics, basic blogging, tagging digital classification (organizing and structuring beyond simple listing), posting, commenting and annotating, threaded discussions</p>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Level Three Applying</b></p> <p><b>Skills:</b> <i>Implementing, executing, using, carrying out</i></p> <p>*Technology Skills: Presenting – power point etc., screen captures, podcasts, game simulations, uploading sharing and editing</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Level Four Analyzing</b></p> <p><b>Skills:</b> <i>Comparing, organizing, deconstructing, integrating</i></p> <p>*Technology Skills: Charting, linking, surveying, online graphing and representing through spreadsheets, relationship mind mapping, reporting, and presenting</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Level Five Evaluating</b></p> <p><b>Skills:</b> <i>Critiquing, judging, testing, checking, experimenting, hypothesizing</i></p> <p>*Technology Skills: Posting (structured and constructed posts to blogs, discussion boards, or threaded discussions), blogging (on the constructive and reflective level), collaborating and networking, conferencing, presenting</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Level Six Creating</b></p> <p><b>Skills:</b> <i>Constructing, designing, producing, inventing, devising, making</i></p> <p>*Technology Skills: Movie and film making, animation, digital storytelling, presenting, video casting, pod casting, publishing in media or digital form – related to video blogging, creating or building mash-ups, game making, recording original songs</p>

One of the first additions of technology into my classroom instruction was to assign an Instagram assignment to a novel unit we were working on. I asked the students to find a quote that described a setting from the novel and to find a real time outdoor picture that illustrated this quote. I then asked them to analyze the importance of this ‘setting’ to the overall plot and theme. Once they found their picture, they ‘tagged’ me in it, and I in turn ‘liked’ it to let them know I’d viewed it. This lesson was an instant hit with almost all of my students, and the results I received were amazing.

Another example of how I integrated technology into my instruction was by implementing a *Minecraft for Education* unit with my Communications 11 class. Minecraft for Education is an open world game that promotes student choice, creativity, collaboration, problem solving, and advancement of technological skills. The platform is engaging and promotes motivation within the classroom. Working through the Bloom’s Taxonomy levels using technology was the goal of this unit.

The students took control of their learning by choosing an important aspect from their novel of choice that they wanted to represent. They completed this assignment by sharing their digital representation with their peers. This unit had students working through all the levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy practicing critical thinking, problem solving, creating and designing, presenting, and collaborating. This unit encouraged success for all, as collaboration, individuality and creativity were encouraged and recognized. I assessed this unit with an Assessment Map which the students and I created together.

**Big Idea:** Can students demonstrate understanding of an aspect of a literary text by creating, collaborating, and presenting using Minecraft?

Assessment for this unit included the following lesson goals and skills:

- Create a virtual representation to demonstrate comprehension of a literary work;
- Collaboration and building community
- Communicate ideas through composing and presenting



With all of the student success that resulted from the above strategies, I knew that moving away from traditional instruction and deficit model assessment was key. Traditional literacies in themselves are no longer enough (Crockett, et al., 2011), and it is essential that as educators we move forward by offering more choice and encouraging more creativity. It is also important to offer students more opportunities to practice the important 21st century skills that today's employers are looking for. By empowering students to take ownership of their learning and be responsible for who they are and where they will be going, we as educators can help all of our students be more successful.

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Stephanie Mervyn

# Pondering ‘The Perfect High’: Addressing drug literacy through poetry

As a secondary school teacher and English Language Arts department lead, I am always on the look out for new ideas and resources that both engage my students and help to further support their learning, health and wellbeing.

Like many adults, I suspect, my ‘drug ed’ experience was not terribly helpful – indeed it shut down rather than opened up conversation and more meaningful learning opportunities. As an early career teacher, I vowed I’d take a more progressive approach and was delighted when I discovered the *iMinds* ([www.iminds.ca](http://www.iminds.ca)) cross-curricular learning resources produced for BC teachers by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC. Impressed by what I saw, and the evidence base behind their approach to drug literacy<sup>1</sup>, I decided to try out a few of the learning activities with my English Language Arts students.

“The Perfect High”<sup>2</sup> is an *iMinds* learning activity based on a poem of the same name by Shel Silverstein. The poem provides insight into the human experience with substance use, not to mention offers intriguing fodder for deep reflection, engaging conversation and inquiry. As I read Silverstein’s poem to my Grade 11 Communications class of 20 boys and five girls, they sat quietly—they were captivated. I used the questions provided in the lesson to help generate discussion and deeper learning. They included:

- What does he mean by the word “high”? What is your understanding of “the perfect high”?
- What are some other ways of experiencing that “high”? Can we get high by dancing, or listening to music? How about laughing? Or running?
- Have you ever done something that made you experience the “perfect high”?
- What did Baba Fats mean when he said “Son, if you would seek the perfect high--find it in yourself.”

I learned a lot from my students and they learned from each other. At the end, there was consensus that the perfect high is something within yourself and it is what it means to you. They also agreed that the poem is about soul-searching and the depth of our lives. In writing short reflections afterwards, most chose to write about what their perfect high was. Some wrote fictional stories about smoking something. Others shared a time where they got high on marijuana and reflected that it was not a part of their lives anymore and that they had found life more fulfilling when they weren’t high. I found it quite cool that my students were able to reflect on their previous experiences and the lessons they learned themselves from those experiences. It confirmed there are benefits to creating a safe and caring classroom culture that is open to honest conversation.

<sup>1</sup>For a complete look at the drug literacy competencies, as defined by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC, see: <http://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/carbc/assets/docs/iminds/hs-pp-drug-curriculum.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup>“The Perfect High” lesson is online at <http://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/carbc/assets/docs/iminds/drug-perfect-high.pdf>.

**Stephanie Mervyn** is a grade 8-12 Physical Health Education and English teacher and English Department Head at Stanley Humphries Secondary School in Castlegar. A passionate supporter of a whole child approach to learning, Stephanie works to integrate health literacy into her classroom and school-based efforts, including within her English Language Arts related classes.



# Voices Visible Announcement

Remember to encourage your students to submit to Voices Visible, our student writing journal!

Please remind your students to keep their best poetry and prose to enter the BC student writing contest. No charge to enter for students of BCTELA members; winners receive a copy of the published student writing journal. Watch for posters in March, 2018 and a deadline in early May, 2018.





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