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This is a piece about language and how we evaluate the work of young writers as they learn to express themselves in writing. The authors' focus is on current reforms in writing assessment, including the brief life of the California Learning Assessment System (CLAS) writing portfolios, and how they rarely address the vibrant role of language—the work and play of words—in students' writing. Through audio taped interviews with two elementary and two middle school students and their teachers, as well as the written artifacts in the students' portfolios, we analyzed the patterns of the students' writing and the comments of teachers and peers on their work. In this article, language in writing is metaphorically compared to "the clay that makes the pot," emphasizing that young writers want to startle, want to engage readers with refreshing and surprising language—but few are provided the guidance for how to do it. The authors' central point is that writing revolves around criticism, but if the assessment stays on the surface and encourages word substitution over content revision, then the criticism may not be helpful in pushing the generative aspect of writing: the work of language.

"The Clay That Makes the Pot"—

The Loss of Language in Writing Assessment

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In 1993, American novelist Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. In her acceptance speech to the Swedish Academy, she wrote:

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The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience, it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie. . . . Be it grand or slender, burrowing, blasting or refusing to sanctify; whether it laughs out loud or is a cry without an alphabet, the choice word or the chosen silence, unmolested language surges toward knowledge, not its destruction. (1994, pp. 20-21)

For Morrison as well as for other accomplished writers, language is both craft and cry. It is thought, felt, written, spoken, and shaped to reveal and/or conceal who we are and what we mean. As we move toward meaning, we use both patterned and unpredictable language to capture life at its most playful and energetic or desperate and despairing. As Morrison tells us, "We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we *do* language. That may be the measure of our lives" (p. 22).

This is a piece about language and how we evaluate the work of children and adolescents as they learn to do language to express themselves in writing. Our stance here is one of challenge, although not in a confrontational way. Instead, the challenge mostly lies in our curiosity about how current reforms in writing assessment rarely address the vibrant role of language—the work and play of words—in children's writing. If, as Morrison (1994) says, language is the measure of our lives, why have we so neglected language in our rubrics, standards, and other systems of measurement?

In our own struggles to express our thoughts about the loss of language in writing assessment, we find ourselves supported and at times uplifted by the words of professional writers and critics. When they write about writing, the attention is less on structure or the components of character than on the language that accomplishes particular patterns or people. Consider an example from Rita Dove, the former Poet Laureate of the United States. In a *Washington Post* piece (Harrington, 1995) discussing her work, we are taken on a journey through the life of one poem, especially through the search for "language as idea and sensation at once: 'the clay that makes the pot'" (p. 14). This notion—that language is the stuff of which structure is made—is a driving force behind our work, our curiosity, and our questions, for we believe that teachers and researchers continually ask for literary pots from children without assessing the quality of the clay.

To set the stage for this essay, in the spring of 1994, we went on a road trip in San Diego, visiting four schools in 4 days. At each site, we interviewed a teacher and six of her students, asking them about the

creation of their CLAS (California Learning Assessment System) portfolios. Each teacher designated two high, middle, and low writers for us to interview, and together with the students, we pored over their portfolios. We asked a number of questions about the purposes and processes of their writing (Gearhart & Wolf, 1997) as well as how they learned to use resources, take risks, and think about language to accomplish social purposes. Although our original intention was to study the influence of CLAS on teachers and their students, through the course of the study, we became more interested in children's uses of language and the links to classroom writing. Thus, our argument here is less specifically tied to the CLAS reform effort and more connected with larger issues of language in writing instruction.

Of these 24 children, here we look closely at 4—2 boys and 2 girls, 2 young and 2 old, 2 high and 2 low—and reflect on the craft of their written language. We quite purposefully selected these 4 because they spoke to us with passion, curiosity, much uncertainty, and some anger about how they find or do not find the words for their writing. They were, in other words, intrigued by the quality of their clay.

THE RISK OF LANGUAGE

Language is such risky business. We try to pin it down, but it darts and veers away from us, slyly grinning from the corners, turning tail in the shadows. Where are the words that will explain and sustain us? Where will we find epiphanies of the ordinary, gifts of expression ripe with meaning? We hunt for them in both the lines we read and lives we lead. We wait and watch and then suddenly, if we are lucky, the words show up.

Yet, to make those words show up, a writer must first be a wordsmith, a lover of words, listening to their sounds, testing them against one another, rubbing them gently against the cheek of the work, or slapping them down on the page asking, "Do they fit?" Annie Dillard (1989) writes,

A well-known writer got collared by a university student who asked, "Do you think I could be a writer?"

"Well," the writer said, "I don't know. . . . Do you like sentences?"

The writer could see the student's amazement. Sentences? Do I like sentences? I am twenty years old and do I like sentences? If he had liked sentences, of course, he could begin, like a joyful painter I knew. I asked

him how he came to be a painter. He said, "I liked the smell of the paint."
(p. 70)

Yes. Once you like smell of the paint, the heat of the stage lights, the feel of the clay, the sound and fury of words that indeed do signify, then you can begin and perhaps even complete a moment of expression—although Dove (cited in Harrington, 1995) achingly reminds us, "A poem is never done. You just let it go" (p. 29). This completion, or letting go, comes when the words seem right.

Winner (1982) tells us that searching for the right words is integral to the creation of a literary text, for literature is marked by (a) the sound properties of words, (b) the weaving of words into metaphors, and (c) the structure of the text as a whole.¹ For example, in our opening quote, Morrison (1994) plays with the sound properties of her words through repetition and alliteration. She writes, "Be it grand or slender, burrowing, blasting or refusing to sanctify. . . . The choice word or chosen silence" (pp. 20-21). These words with repetitive phrasing and alliterative sounds create an aural continuity for the listener and reader. Indeed, the heavy use of commas and phrases in the quote enhances its spoken quality, its sermon sound.

As with sound, literature is marked by metaphor. Winner (1982) explains that metaphors are not only more frequent in literature than in real life, but they are also more novel. The pairing of two seemingly disparate things can, if effectively done, create a unique and fresh idea. The opening quote from Morrison (1994) uses a metaphoric device in personification to pair language with an animate being. Language is termed *vital* or alive; it has poise; it arcs; it laughs out loud. By animating language, it is given metaphoric life and therefore meaning beyond words as mere pragmatic tool. These words of comparison could have been replaced by a thousand others, yet Winner (1982) reminds us that successful metaphors depend on the asymmetrical relationship of the topic and the vehicle or the first and second object being compared. To say, for example, that writers are like potters implies that they artfully craft language into a final shaped piece. On the other hand, to say that potters are like writers suggests that potters work to make their expressive marks on the world, to write their messages in clay. Winner explains, "If topic and vehicle played symmetrical roles . . . such reversals ought not to alter meaning" (p. 257). And yet, of course, they do. Thus, the selection and placement of words in relationships serve to move a piece from the usual to the unique.

Finally, literature is marked by structure. Stories have recognizable grammars (e.g., Mandler & Johnson, 1977) that readers rely on to make their way through texts. Within the structure, certain words act as signals, flashing out subtle codes to guide readers toward particular genres and certain expectations. For example, the words "once upon a time" serve as a strong tip off of things to come—gallant heroes, fair maidens, and happily-ever-after endings. Vladimir Propp (1970) and others that followed (e.g., Zipes, 1991) have spoken at length about the typical functions and patterns that mark folk and fairy tales. Children's literature, in particular, is guided by a home-away-home pattern (Nodelman, 1996) in which young protagonists chafe at the boring or restrictive nature of their homes, venture away to experience the delights and dangers of Mr. McGregor's garden (Potter, 1902) or to tame wild things (Sendak, 1963), and then return home to find that mother's love, despite their disobedience, is unchanged. Children, even at a very young age, understand the way words work. They come to recognize the signals and structures that allow them to predict and participate in story. And there is no greater type of participation in story than writing one's own. Indeed, as children write their own stories, they appropriate, experiment, and imitate those structures and words used by professional writers (Wolf & Heath, 1998).

Wolf and Heath (1992) argue that "organizing principles and metarules . . . enable quick comprehension of one literary text and its extension into another" (p. 20). Yet, these rules do not come in tidy universal packages, but instead are influenced by individual and sociocultural reformulations. Readers transact with texts (Rosenblatt, 1978), creating their own interpretations out of the stuff of their own lives and textual experiences. As Winner (1982) suggests, "readers must both apprehend the structure of the text and attend to the pattern of their experience of the text" (p. 282). It is in apprehending, attending, and transacting with patterns of text that children begin to develop their own repertoire of writers' tools—they begin working their clay.

Still, Winner's emphasis on the sound properties of language, the use of tropes, and the structure of the piece negotiated between the author and the individual reader fails to take into account perhaps one of the most critical reasons for why we work so hard at finding the right words: Quite simply, we are wordsmiths because we have social work to do. That social work comes in many forms of text, both literary and expository. Thus, to use language to achieve social ends, we must learn to use language in powerful—even literary—ways. We have

things to say and people to say them to, and our choice of words and how they connect to one another will determine whether and how we are heard. Anne Dyson (1993), who is among the most eloquent advocates of this position, suggests, "In sum, learning to write involves figuring out how to manipulate the words on the page in order to accomplish particular kinds of social work" (p. 17).

Dyson's (1993) own social work is that of writing about children writing—how children play, work, and write together, draw, sing, and enact their words and worlds simultaneously. Her research centers on the "link between composing a text and composing a place for oneself in the social world" (p. 229). Dyson argues that as children develop, their writing becomes increasingly embedded (rather than disembedded) in social consequences. Children write to express their individual thoughts and feelings; to compliment, challenge, and cajole their peers; and to comment on the political and economic conditions of their lives as well (Dyson, 1997). When given the license and the support to do so, young people will write as adult authors do, although no doubt with their own purposes and genres (Daiute, 1993; Davinroy, 1997). They will bring the echoes of their community's conversations to enter into new dialogues with the world.

Revealing the truths of individual and community lives often stands behind an author's language. Toni Morrison (1987), for example, describes her purposes for writing *Beloved*:

If writing is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic. I suppose I could dispense with the last four if I were not so *deadly serious* about fidelity to the milieu out of which I write and in which my ancestors actually lived. Infidelity to that milieu—the absence of the interior life, the deliberate excising from the records that the slaves themselves told—is precisely the problem in the discourse that proceeded without us. How I gain access to that interior life is what drives me. (p. 111)

Discourse that proceeds without mystery and magic, without political purpose, without acknowledgment of the individual grace of human beings ultimately will fail to inform us about how to live our lives. Thus, authors such as Morrison use literary language in their quest for telling the truths of their communities. They have, as Dyson (1993) reminds us, social work to do, and their words reach out to explore and explain and uplift and lament the world in which we live. When authors choose words carefully, they do not leave us alone. Words come for the reader and make their marks.

Although the work of this very essay has neither the mystery and magic nor the social and political import of that of established authors, we too are working to explore and explain and uplift and lament a piece of the world—a piece in which language, for all its potential power, is diminished by assessment systems that either downplay or ignore it. As we now turn to issues of assessment, we will attempt to do some of our own social work and provide ideas for how communities of teachers and researchers in writing assessment can place a stronger emphasis on how language makes its mark on the world.

THE RISK OF ASSESSMENT

If language can be risky business, then assessment is even trickier. Anyone who has been involved in the assessment reform movement in the last decade knows that the virtual eruption of performance assessment in writing has been marked by controversy. The playing field is large and diverse, and each of the players—teachers, researchers, government officials, or students—brings individual insights, perspectives, and prejudices to the game (E. M. White, 1994). In an attempt to fit the large, round art of writing into the small square of affordable, reliable assessment, much of the recursive, exploratory, passionate, and purposeful nature of writing has been reshaped to cut corners. In particular, assessment rubrics often have sacrificed communication to convention and originality to organization (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994). In an effort to create tidy systems of assessment, writing inspired by social purpose or action is narrowed to tasks that only hint at authenticity. As Wiggins (1994) flatly states, "Writing always has consequences in the world; writing assessment almost never does" (p. 134).

Perhaps the most poignant part of this tale is that these rubrics diminish the role of language for young school-aged writers—the delicious, playful, energetic work with words that can capture emotion, spirit, intention, and insight. In one study that compared two writing rubrics (Gearhart, Herman, Novak, & Wolf, 1995), teachers bemoaned the failure of either rubric to capture the flash of language that engaged the reader with the writer. As one teacher commented, "There might be some idiosyncratic quality or some uniqueness about it, some originality that you can't really score" (p. 234). Along the same lines, Wiggins (1994) takes the National Assessment of Educational

Progress (NAEP) (1992) and other rubrics to task for very similar issues. With his usual directness, he writes, "The fact is that almost all writing assessments I have seen use rubrics that stress compliance with rules about writing as opposed to the real purpose of writing, namely, the power and insight of the words" (p. 132).

In our own reading of earlier national, state-, and districtwide rubrics, language, it seems, was the least of anyone's worries. Just a few short years ago, it was common to find rubrics that centered more on structure supported by specific, credible details and marked by crisp convention—features that seem more in line with directions for building a bicycle than an engaging narrative. As Carini (1994) explains,

A lot of talk about language and writing, and about language and writing assessment, stresses *efficient, correct, useful, standard* communication. This is also, of course, the dimension of language and writing that most readily lends itself to measurement. It is useful to be able to speak correctly and to be understood by others. But, there is to me a kind of grim determination about listening to people, children or adults, or reading what they write in order merely to measure utility, communicability and correctness. (p. 44)

When language is mentioned, the emphasis is brief, generic, and hinted at rather than handled.

Recently, however, we have moved from rubrics bereft of comment on stylistic features to some that attempt to include it. Consider the following two passages about language, one from a recent rubric at the top end of its scales and one describing the new standards for writing:

Communication: Careful crafting of choices in story structure, vocabulary, and symbolism (particularly figurative language) which show reader considerations on both explicit and implicit levels; judicious experimentation with a variety of stylistic forms (alliteration, word play, rhythm, etc.) which are often symbolic in nature and illuminate the other narrative elements. (*Writing What You Read*, 1994, Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing [CRESSST])

Standard 6: Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. Standard 9: Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across

cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles. Standard 12: Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information). (*Standards for the English Language Arts*, 1996, National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association)

Recognition and praise for language is also beginning to be felt in the world of research on writing assessment. Two cases, in particular, demonstrate the slow crawl of the shift but still offer hope for future movement. The first is a study by Maylath (1996) of 90 postsecondary writing instructors who were asked to rate texts that represented three versions of an essay: a Greco-Latinate version emphasizing abstract and specialist words, an Anglo-Saxon version emphasizing more ordinary words, and a blended version of the two. Of the original 90 instructors, 20 showed themselves to be particularly sensitive to vocabulary, and Maylath went on to analyze the reasoning behind their ratings. Surprisingly, although most instructors said that in their instruction they advocated Orwell's advice—"Never use a long word when a short one will do" (1950, cited in Maylath, 1996, p. 221)—they could still be swayed by the power of Greco-Latinate vocabulary in their assessments. Although most instructors in the study favored the blended text, there was an intriguing relationship between those who scored higher at the extremes and the number of years of experience they had at their jobs. The instructors who scored Greco-Latinate texts the highest were the least experienced writing instructors, whereas the most experienced seemed to favor the Anglo-Saxon texts.

Maylath (1996) argues that the least experienced instructors, who were more insecure in their knowledge of teaching writing, tended to uphold the prestigious language of the academy. One instructor argued that her students "all knew the rules to the academic vocabulary game: 'The idea is that if you use polysyllabic words—at least sprinkle them around in your text—you sound educated and different'" (Maylath, 1996, p. 240). The most experienced instructors, on the other hand, looked for language that did the job without puffery. As one instructor said, he looks for "authenticity in language and voice [and was] suspicious of inflated language, pseudoacademese" (p. 241). The key lesson here is that the more experience the writing instructor has, the more he or she may be able to recognize and perhaps even guide young writers toward the use of authentic rather than pseudo voice.

This attention to authentic voice is the crux of the second study—one conducted by Smitherman (1994) to discover how teacher raters for the NAEP have judged African American discourse patterns since the beginning of NAEP testing in 1969. Smitherman's emphasis on discourse rather than grammar is an important distinction because although African American students "used significantly more BEV [Black English Vernacular] grammar in speech than in writing" (p. 82), African American discourse patterns are more evenly distributed. Smitherman suggests that these discourse patterns include "rhythmic, dramatic, evocative language, . . . [the] use of proverbs, aphorisms, Biblical verses, . . . direct address-conversational tone, . . . ethnolinguistic idioms, . . . verbal inventiveness, unique nomenclature, [as well as] field dependency [marked by] involvement with and immersion in events and situations" (pp. 86-87). The key finding of the study is that experienced writing instructors in the 1980s as opposed to those in the sixties and seventies gave higher NAEP scores to "students who employed a black expressive discourse style . . . than those who did not" (p. 94). Smitherman concludes that experienced teachers and scorers are learning to increasingly credit young writers for using the language of their communities.

Still, the emphasis on experience cannot be overstated. The studies cited above show a hopeful movement toward authentic and vibrant language. Yet, this progression is less evident in schools today, even schools in districts and states that are heavily involved in complex reform of their assessment practices. For without clear definitions and experiences with the way words work and the work of words, new state assessments—especially those that only graze the surface of language with their generalized definitions—may not be able to support the work of children and their teachers.

METHOD

A Little Background

Let us now move closer to the children and teachers who are central to this piece and explore the context in which they learned to write. In collaboration with the California Department of Education, the Center for Performance Assessment of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) worked from 1992 to 1994 to develop a new standards-based,

classroom performance-based portfolio component for the California Learning Assessment System (CLAS). The aim was to supplement on-demand test scores with evidence drawn from classrooms. Working with state educators, ETS was developing a portfolio assessment system that could build on and support improved classroom practice while also providing trustworthy information about student performance. The approach that evolved focused on students' performance with respect to dimensions of learning, rather than on required kinds of work or standardized entries. The dimensions in a subject area were to be aligned with the instructional goals of the California State frameworks and to provide a vision of what students could achieve.

The CLAS dimensions of learning in language arts portfolios were twofold: (a) constructing meaning, in which students demonstrate their abilities to read, interpret, and integrate literary works while considering personal and cultural perspectives, and (b) composing and expressing ideas, in which students demonstrate their abilities to communicate across a range of purposes, genres, and audiences while using resources and effective language in process writing. Although there were various aspects of writing included in the CLAS dimensions, here we focus on the ways that students demonstrate "What in the assessment portfolio shows whether and how well the student . . . considers the effect of language . . . [and] uses effective language that is appropriate to audience and purpose [in writing]" (CLAS Dimensions of Learning in Language Arts, 4/94). The rubrics that were designed to capture and score effective language use appear in Table 1.

Although language was emphasized in the CLAS dimensions of learning and accompanying rubrics, the descriptions of how to go about creating effective language were quite generalized. For example, what is meant by "figurative language and lively description," and how does one teach children how to achieve it? Although the state was determined to use the CLAS assessments to spark curricular and instructional reform, McDonnell & Choisser (1997) point out:

One of the explicit goals of these assessments was to change teaching, and several decades of implementation research indicated that such change could not occur unless teachers were given sufficient training and the time needed to adapt new approaches to their classroom routines (Fullan, 1991; McLaughlin, 1990). Yet the average teacher . . . received very little professional development in preparation for the new assessments. (p. 21)

Table 1
Scoring Rubrics for Language

Exemplary	Constructing Meaning: Effect of Language			Composing and Expressing: Language Use			
	Accomplished	Developing	Beginning	Exemplary	Accomplished	Developing	Beginning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explores effects of literal and figurative language on meaning and presentation, often using specific examples 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discusses language effects on meaning and presentation, sometimes using specific examples 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies the effect of language with some use of examples 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on simple aspects of language effect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effectively uses persuasive and figurative language and lively description 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses some persuasive, figurative, or descriptive language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses language in a literal way with little creativity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses language that is sometimes vague, limited, imprecise or repetitive

This lack of training combined with the nebulous quality of the dimensions and rubrics themselves placed teachers in a precarious position when it came to teaching writing. Even teachers who were highly participatory in the CLAS development sessions often were stumped when asked about specific interpretations of what constituted effective language. They talked about showing writing and descriptive language but could not articulate details beyond these highly generalized descriptions.

Data Collection and Analysis

We interviewed the teacher and 6 students in each of four classrooms (Grades 2, 4, 7, and 8). Spanning urban, rural, and suburban settings, the target students were selected by their teachers to represent the diversity of ethnicities, gender, and language arts competencies (2 high, 2 medium, 2 low) at each school site. All 4 teachers were deeply engaged in the formative design of the CLAS/ETS portfolio assessment system: They had attended from one to three portfolio meetings over a span of 5 months, contributed to the development of the dimensions of learning and the assessment guides, offered ideas for building assessment portfolios in the classroom, and participated in the trial portfolio scoring session. All 4 teachers were selected by ETS as front-runners in their efforts to implement the emerging CLAS portfolio assessment project. Two teachers had sent their students' completed CLAS language arts portfolios to a trial scoring session prior to our visit, and the remaining two teachers were helping their students prepare CLAS portfolios at the time of our visit.

Our interviews addressed both general issues regarding teachers' and students' views of portfolio assessment as well as specific content derived from the version of the CLAS dimensions of learning in use at that time. Our questions were constructed following piloting with 2 elementary teachers and 6 students. In addition, at each of our final study sites, each of the 4 teachers interviewed for this report read through the student interview protocol with us and suggested occasional revisions appropriate for her students.

We transcribed all interviews from audiotape and made copies of each student's portfolio. Because the CLAS portfolio project was in its earliest formative phase and the four classrooms varied markedly in grade levels, student characteristics, and practices, we analyzed our data to produce preliminary frameworks for exploring what teachers and students understood of the CLAS dimensions of learning, and the

ways that their understandings mediated choices of writing for portfolio assessment.

Our analysis emulates Hunt's (1987) notion of reading with a writer's eye. He explains, "We can retrace a writer's steps by examining a series of drafts . . . but there is always guesswork. We would rather hear about the writing process directly from the writer" (p. 10). Thus, we combined formal criticism of the writing looking at the multiple drafts in the students' portfolios with attention to word choice, images, characters, and patterns, (e.g., Keesey, 1987) with reader response criticism attending to the transaction between the reader and the text, (e.g., Rosenblatt, 1991). We also incorporated the work of Faigley and Witte (1981) and Yagelski (1995), who discuss the revision strategies of writers and suggest that inexperienced writers often work on the surface-level issues such as convention and word choice, whereas more experienced writers work at the meaning level—reworking their pieces by adding, deleting, substituting, and consolidating larger sections of content.

But without adequate assistance, how does one get from the inexperienced skate on the surface of writing to the deeper exploration of language? In the following section, we will follow 4 highly diverse young writers as they work to meet the conflicting goals of writing to fulfill a teacher's directions and strike out on their own with risky words.

FINDINGS: ASSESSING THE CLAY OF FOUR YOUNG WRITERS

When John Updike (1984) accepted the National Book Critics Circle Award, he stated:

Professionalism in art has this difficulty: To be professional is to be dependable, to be dependable is to be predictable, and predictability is esthetically boring—an anti-virtue in a field where we hope to be astonished and startled and at some deep level refreshed. (p. 13)

As readers and researchers, we believe Updike's words capture the difficult dichotomy between the art of writing and the craft of assessment. Yet, assessment need not be characterized in calculating ways. In fact, new and hoped-for assessments have the potential to work as guides to instruction and as bridges between convention and creativity and between predictability and aesthetic surprise. This potential,

however, did not play out in the writing lives of the 4 children in this study. Instead, as Lucy, Jed, Nick, and Alinda² worked the clay of language in their writing, their creative efforts were bounded too often by relatively mundane assessment contexts. Here, we will explore how the younger elementary children, Lucy and Jed, attempted to find a voice in their work—voices that seldom were heard. And for the middle school youth, Nick and Alinda, we will probe their processes of revision and demonstrate how the advice from both teachers and peers tended to leave them stranded on the surface.

The Voice of Lucy: Devices That Create Meaning

Lucy, a fourth-grade European American child, met us in a small room just off of her school library. Unintimidated by our equipment, she leaned forward and spoke directly into the microphone and raised her eyebrows in curiosity over the small flashing lights of the machine. After we provided an explanation to her satisfaction, she sat back a tad, but her back never touched her chair. Instead, she sat ramrod straight or leaned slightly forward to pull various pieces from her portfolio. She was an enthusiastic writer, and she was happy to give us the lowdown on her work. As she talked, her animated voice shifted in style and accent depending on the piece of writing, and her freckled hands accompanied her rhythm, punctuating her points.

Lucy clearly explained the value of collecting her best pieces in the CLAS portfolio. "Our best pieces of writing showed . . . what we can do with writing to show our minds," she declared. Yet, as we will see, showing our minds to another through written language is not always easy for students who may be held close by the wrap of teacher-directed, mechanics-focused writing assignments. *Showing a mind* means creating and giving voice to that mind. Indeed, how a writer develops the right voice to show her mind is part of the art of literary language. Lucy developed many voices through her participation in the portfolio project—voices that were not remarked on (at least in writing) by her teacher and her peers but that she consciously created with her eyes wide open to the risky business of language.

Despite intense attention to mechanics, spelling, and handwriting as depicted in the classroom rubrics as well as teacher and peer commentary, Lucy's writing was both spunky and sophisticated. She used a number of writing devices to achieve voice—those stylistic choices that create the sound of a human perspective, the feeling of a real person talking to a reader, the sense that someone is communicat-

ing. Her teacher, Ms. Barton, said that she valued voice, and she felt that children were best able to capture its elusive nature when they were motivated by the social work of a piece of writing:

I think that writing to the audience [like the government of Belize in the Rain forest letter assignment] made them particularly motivated to do their best work. Because they really felt, it really was a very personal experience. . . . They were really motivated to write it in such a way as to really make the point . . . so I think writing to that audience made a difference in their quality.

In Ms. Barton's view, a real audience (such as the recipient of a letter) created a sense of feeling and of personal experience that helped children find and create voices for their messages.

Nevertheless, students had no opportunities to write to audiences of their own choosing. Each writing assignment in the portfolio had been framed, structured, given a sentence starter, and shaped in some concrete way by Ms. Barton. Her experience suggested this was the most effective way to get children to write: "Most of the assignments are teacher-directed . . . I have to admit they haven't had an opportunity to [write completely on their own]. . . . but we have problems with kids not knowing what to write . . . they want a topic. They actually want them." Although Ms. Barton observed increasing quality of writing with authentic, meaningful audiences, she felt students needed the teacher-provided topic to get started. Thus, to provide topics combined with a feel for authentic audiences, she assigned letter-writing projects. In Lucy's portfolio, there were four such letters. Indeed, it is within these letter-writing assignments that Lucy constructed some of her best written language experiments, trying to capture the voice of a real writer with a real purpose, writing to a real reader.

In our study of Lucy's writing, we see her experimenting with voice by using a number of devices including: repetition, pronoun shifts, inserting sentence fragments into a text of long sentences, and using vernacular speech. Yet, all of these devices went largely unnoticed by Ms. Barton and her peers in their evaluations. In fact, Lucy's most frequent comment from readers in the classroom called attention to her accurate spelling and neat handwriting. When comments did consider the art of writing, they focused mainly on the use of descriptive language, although even those comments tended to be undeveloped. In short, although Lucy used multiple language devices to

create voice, she received neither recognition for her language experiments nor encouragement to continue pushing the edges of her knowledge of language use.

But what did Lucy's underappreciated voice sound like? What did we, as an audience of researchers and writers, hear in her pieces? We will begin with repetition—a familiar and common device for creating emphasis. Lucy often repeated words or phrases in her writing and, consequently, generated a sense of urgency. One almost gets the feeling of a girl leaning forward in her chair (just like Lucy in our interview) trying to make the listener understand her earnestness and, simultaneously, her playfulness. In an assignment called "Friendly Letter," Ms. Barton asked students to write a letter to her and tell her something about themselves. In the final lines of the letter, Lucy broke the relatively stilted, formal voice of the beginning of her piece to say, "Don't put me with my friends. I talk, talk, and talk." Her shift to a more informal tone jolts the reader out the routine "My name is, I have a dog, a cat, and a baby sister." Her use of the imperative followed by the repeated "talk, talk, and talk" demands attention and causes us to "stop . . . momentarily [to] savor or reflect on the word" (Loch-Wouters, personal communication, May, 21, 1996). And her voice was heard. Although Ms. Barton made no written comment on the piece, she did obey the imperative and sat Lucy away from her friends to avoid the repetition that, however appreciated in writing, was not valued in class.

Another example of Lucy's use of repetition to create a sense of urgency appeared not in drafts nor even in the final version of a letter to the government of Belize calling for a halt to rain forest degradation; rather, it appeared in a less official writing form. On her Planning My Persuasive Letter worksheet, Lucy provided her response to Ms. Barton's prompt: "This will be my topic sentence." Lucy wrote, "At the rate the rain forest is going, in about eight years there will be zip, zero, nada, no rain forest." This sentence did not appear in the drafts or final copy. Although we did not ask Lucy why this sentence was not in her final version, we can imagine her sensitivity to the formal nature of a government letter. Yet, such a sentence, with its rich use of repetition of the idea of zero, packs all the language punch of urgency that accompanies a persuasive human voice calling for action and justice.

We cannot know if Lucy used repetition consciously to stop her reader, to create a space for reflection between the words and lines. However, we do know that this device appeared often enough in her

portfolio selections that it became a pattern signaling shifts in person, focus, and mood within pieces. Had this literary device been pointed out, explained, and explored with Lucy, perhaps it could later be consciously applied for purposeful ends. A classic example from literature would be E. B. White's (1952) *Charlotte's Web*, for E. B. White is noted for his effective use of repetition. For example, he describes the rat Templeton as having "no morals, no conscience, no scruples, no consideration, no decency, no milk of rodent kindness, no compunctions, no higher feeling, no friendliness, no anything" (p. 46). To show Lucy how published authors use techniques quite similar to her own might demonstrate the power of reiterating a point.

In addition to repetition, Lucy used other literary devices to create her own voice. In several pieces, her prose developed a rhythm that was disrupted when the beat shifted from long to short or from formal to personal. In Lucy's written work, these shifts seemed to signal a move from the school girl assignment writer to the real girl communicator. Again referring to the friendly letter assignment, Lucy began with a school voice—being certain to use complete, although simple, sentences and a somewhat distanced voice: "Mrs. Barton, I am good at sports. I am also shy." The short, subject-verb pattern is typical of fourth-grade writing. It is safe. It is clean. It is usually error free. However, the voice in the letter abruptly shifts to the imperative, belying Lucy's shy voice: "Don't put me with my friends," Lucy commanded in her letter. Gone is the shy, safe, rhythmic series of short sentences, replaced by a confident, compelling voice. If Ms. Barton's objective was to get to know a child through the friendly letter, what better way than to look for imaginative uses of language that break with didactic, predictable school writing?

In her essay "As I looked out the window," Lucy uses rhythm to lull the reader into a dream-like reverie of the scene outside her bedroom window. This assignment provided students with an opportunity to be descriptive. The language Lucy uses in this piece signals another shift in voice. She begins in a rather academic way, structuring the first three fourths of her piece with six full sentences. In fact, these sentences gently rock the reader with a rhythmic 10 to 11 words each—"The huge spiderweb outside my window glittered from the drops." But suddenly, "ding-a-ling!" the voice changes and awakens from sleep: "It was all a dream." The final three sentences are short, five words or less. Lucy's use of varied sentence length—long and lazy for a dream, short and curt for awake—has a very literary effect, almost onomatopoeic. The voice shift is completed through the vari-

ation of sentence length. A parallel example from E. B. White (1952) would be his famous description of children jumping from the hay loft to fly through the air on the barn swing. E. B. White used long, sweeping sentences separated by commas to mimic the forward and backward motion of the ride and then decreased his sentence length, bit by bit, to capture the slow down and eventual halt of the swing (see p. 69). Again, talking about this passage in relationship to Lucy's choices would have affirmed her work and perhaps pushed her into making these kinds of literary leaps more often.

In another piece, "My room is a mess," Lucy continued to work with interrupting devices. Here, Ms. Barton asked students to describe a messy room. Lucy twice interrupts the pattern of listing in threes such as "the piles of crumpled papers, socks, and toys" she does not want. Both interruptions use literary devices to show voice shifts. First, between two very long three-item lists, she inserts a sentence fragment that begins with *and*. The fragment literally messes up the rhythm of the prose, much as her room is a mess. Second, at the end of the piece, she directly addresses the description of the room to an omniscient reader. "Really!! I wish I had enough time [to clean my room]." Two of three peer reviewers commended Lucy only on her spelling. One said, "She showed lots of detail." Although her reviewers are correct—she did spell correctly and show a lot of detail—no one noted the interesting use of rhythm and pattern as a device for communicating meaning to the reader.

For Lucy, communicating meant continuously looking for ways to speak with her own voice, ways to make assignments her own. In the Persuasive Letter Packet, Ms. Barton provided a series of writing activities with which students would work through the writing process from planning and drafting to editing and writing a final copy. The letter drew on informative sources for facts to support a pro and con structure for the letter. At several points in the letter, Lucy shifts voices from information giving to direct plea. These shifts occur often with a sentence pattern beginning with *please* and followed by a direct request. She concludes her letter with a metaphor and plea: "Please, you must understand the rain forest's life is our life." Lucy's movement from fact to plea shows a growing awareness of voice shifts as a device to blend informative writing with more literary description.

One of Lucy's showcase pieces was a letter in which she took on the persona of a miner writing to his family. The miner's letter was the culminating writing activity for a long-term project of exploring Western mining through the characters of *By the Great Horn Spoon*

(Fleischman, 1988). The project included a double-entry journal, chapter summaries of the trade book, and the final letter. In her missive, Lucy again used language similar to that of more professional writers. For example, writers frequently distinguish their characters through the use of vernacular speech. Think, for example of E. B. White's (1952) stuttering goose; the laconic farm hand Lurvey; and the erudite, articulate Charlotte. The careful control of vocabulary, the addition or dropping of consonants, the slurring of vowels, and the emphasis on certain syllables are all devices for representing the voice of a character. Reader expectations for written speech allow such a device to successfully add to a character's personality. As Lucy noted in her interview: "My dad is from Texas, and my dad still has a Texas accent. . . . I figured out what the cowboys talked like . . . and I thought well, miners would've used basically the same language." Thus, in taking on the perspective of a miner who writes to urge his family to stay behind because the "diggings just ain't for women," Lucy uses vernacular speech to create an authentic voice for her character. In the letter, Lucy takes on the voice of the miner, Carlson, mimicking the dropped consonant of a cowboy Western dialect. *Diggings, jus', and comin'* all show Lucy's awareness of language and voice.

In her interview, she identified this letter as the piece of writing in which she took the greatest risks. "We had to write a miner's letter. That we were a miner and we were writing back to home. And I really thought that I did a good job on it because I used the same language . . . I used the language that a miner would've used." Lucy offers reasons for her choices of language that illustrate deliberate use of slang and self-conscious recognition of the place of women in the historic context. She notes that she took some risks in using the word *ain't*: "*ain't* . . . is basically a swear word . . . miners back then probably used a lot of swear words and stuff because they were in the diggings with all these other men, and they didn't have any wives to impress." As Lucy reflected on her writing process in the interview, she described almost a loss of self in the language—a loss of self often associated with the creative muse:

I just suddenly started writing in the terms of the miner. I wasn't trying to, but suddenly I started to. And up through the entire thing I went. And then halfway through, I'm like, uh oh; I don't know what Mrs. Barton thinks of this. What if she gives me a bad grade because I'm using improper English?

In her explanation, Lucy steps in and out of her piece, taking the voice of the miner and then of the student, addressing first the family and then the teacher, imagining and creating the voice of the miner himself through slang and historical detail and then turning back to the teacher and the worries of proper English in school. Ultimately, Lucy creates an authentic miner's voice through language choices that stand in stark contrast to the correct language of schooling.

All of the writing collected in this portfolio was teacher directed. Ms. Barton gave students assignments that varied in genre, although the main social work that was accomplished seemed to be to convince Ms. Barton that the work met the requirements and was descriptive and correct. There is no evidence that students had opportunities to use writing to serve their own purposes—to connect with one another or to address a family audience or a wider audience. Nor is there evidence that students had opportunities to explore writing as a tool for telling a story. The stories they told were pushed into pictures of crystal balls, into outlines of heads, and into formats of letters; they were squeezed into literal representations of text and information. Lost or absent are functions of writing to construct community and self.

This kind of control raises the question that if students are always given topics, will they learn that if they wait long enough, a teacher will give them one? Such a choice could certainly limit the way children see the functions of writing. For if the main function in school writing is to provide literal responses to text and to give the teacher something to grade, students are protected from the riskier aspects of writing—aspects that might include building social worlds, doing literary work to change those social worlds, or in the case of Lucy, learning the ways that language can give one another voice.

Children such as Lucy who make literary choices about language could use guidance and feedback about the devices they use to create voice in their work. Thus, we ask how a child might react if his or her writing would be shown to share literary characteristics with professional writers, such as the parallels we made between Lucy's language choices and those of E. B. White. We speculate that such a child might be motivated consciously to try out devices read in other books or to include such literary talk in his or her peer conferences. Without pointing out such strength in language use, however, we cannot know the effect on children's writing. Most important, without professional development in literary criticism and rubrics that help teachers do the

pointing, it would be difficult to see writing instruction as more than nuts and bolts.

The Voice of Jed: Seeing Through Writing

Jed, a Euro-American fourth grader, met us in the same room as the one where we interviewed Lucy, but his confidence was not as clear. He nervously eyed the flashing red on the recorder and played with the gold hoop in his ear. But when we admired it, he relaxed a bit and told us he was trying to convince his mom that he should get a second hole for his birthday. Although he spoke with animation about having double earrings, his enthusiasm died when we turned to his writing. For Jed, the work was arduous, and he showed little interest in reflecting on his portfolio—its contents and meanings.

Indeed, a quick look at the contents verified the very different experiences Lucy and Jed must have had with fourth-grade language arts in Ms. Barton's class. Jed's folder contained three running-record assessments that reported number of words read correctly, miscues, repetitions, and self-corrections. Several pages of spelling words taken from spelling errors on written work showed Jed's difficulty with spelling and no doubt acted as a reminder that his sheet of 65 words differed greatly from other children's of 12 or 15 words. Such lists suggest that correctness does count. In addition to running records and spelling papers, Jed's portfolio contained a number of the same written assignments as did Lucy's: a friendly letter, a "view from my window," a letter to Karana, a letter to the government of Belize, and the miner's letter. It was these written products that held our research interest. And in talking about writing with Jed, we found that his written voice was directly linked to two aspects of writing: choice of topic and having a concrete object to explore through writing.

However, notions of topic and description came up in discussing writing only after Jed had explained the importance of appearance and surface features of papers. Not surprising in a fourth grader, Jed focused a lot of energy on mechanics and correctness. When we asked if he thought he was a better writer than he was at the beginning of the year, he answered, "Yeah, I can write a lot neater. I'm using more details, and I put all the marks where they're supposed to be." This self-evaluation was corroborated by peer-reviews complimenting him on correct punctuation and good details as well as criticizing him for misspelled words. One peer affirmed the importance of surface

appearance with this comment: "When the person was writing it was very hard to read what the words said. At the beginning the person who wrote this wrote too light." That is it. Absent is any reference to content or language use.

When Jed did speak of writing in more substantive ways, he revealed that topic was central to how he felt about his writing, and we were able to elicit more careful conversation about choosing words in the creation of voice. Jed pointed to two pieces in his portfolio that he was willing to call *good* or *interesting*: a "view from my window" essay and a letter to the government of Belize concerning the destruction of the rain forest. About the window essay and letter writing assignments, Jed noted, "You still had a topic you had to write about, but it still seemed like I got to write whatever I want." In similar positive language, Jed explained that writing the letter to the government of Belize allowed him to "be myself a little." He said, "It was like I'm writing to a big company, and it's like, why would they listen to a little kid . . . I had to make it real, like a grown-up would say it." Jed told us he enjoyed letter writing, perhaps because it provided a greater sense of authenticity than did his other classroom writing activities. Indeed, in both the real letter to Belize and the more artificial letter to Karana, the female protagonist in *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (O'Dell, 1960), Jed took some risks with language that did not appear in his other writing.

In the letter to the Belize government, Jed begins in a rather formulaic way—outlining facts from classroom research activities: "If you keep cutting down the rain forest there won't be as much oxygen because trees give us oxygen." The facts and dispassionate presentation do indeed sound "like a grown-up would say it." Yet, the final line of the letter lets Jed's own kid voice come through: "Please cut down less trees because in 8 years I want to see the rain forest." The plea and personal effect shift the voice from encyclopedic to one of more personal and emotional impact.

Similarly, in his letter to Karana of the *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, Jed's voice takes a personal turn as he relates Karana's brother's death to his own experience: "I know how you feel because I have had close friends that died too. I had animals that I really liked, and they died too." Jed's paper has some feedback from the teacher—two circled misspelled words, including the word *feel*, and this comment in the margin, "Your letter was meant to cheer Karana and to give her advice." The comment suggests that Jed's sharing of his experience

would not serve to comfort Karana and that somehow his response to the assignment was inappropriate. However, response to literature is often of a personal nature, we empathize and we transact with characters as a way to explore their and our own experiences (Rosenblatt, 1991). Here, we see Jed's choice to show compassion through personal sharing and his use of personalized language. Jed noted that the letter assignments allowed him to make choices within topics, and these choices seemed to lead to greater individual engagement and greater effort to expand his social world through writing.

The window essay shows similar personal engagement and voice. Jed described this piece as his favorite.

When I look out my windo in my bedroom windo, I saw a big building. I opened my widow and got out boncklers and look thogh them and it was big, big house. I ask my mom what it was and she said it was a mansion, it had flowers and plants around the house. It had a redish black roof. It had three trees shaped as animals there was a elephant with plastic tusk. There was a rino and a dinsor. the house was tanish coler.

The end

This piece is full of colorful description: the trees shaped as animals, the reddish and tannish hues. Indeed, rather than offer a catalogue of details as is often the case with young children's descriptive writing assignments, this piece has an almost dream-like quality as we follow the view through the binoculars into a world of dinosaurs and elephants with plastic tusks. In his self-evaluation of this piece, Jed hints at how he is able to engage with some writing more than others: "I like writing about it, and I like the story." In short, Jed liked this topic. He felt free to express himself within the constraints of the teacher-devised assignment. Hidden in the language of this piece is a level of detail that belies the low writer, as he was designated by his teacher. Indeed, detail and description allowed Jed to see the picture through his writing. Being able to see his object also allowed Jed to enjoy his writing task.

Jed found voice for his writing through concrete description. He noted in his interview that topics that did not interest him were hard to write because "I just had a lot of things going through my mind and I was kind of daydreaming 'cause I was all bored. . . . [Ms. Barton says], you guys gotta write this, and I like go, okay and then whatever, I just saw in my mind, then I just wrote it down." Jed did explain,

however, that when the topic interested him, when he felt he had some opportunity to be himself in his writing, he preferred to write pictures:

I like writing on something I looked at—the window or when I was riding my bike. I like writing about what I saw because I could describe if I saw a big tractor, I could describe what colors it is, what kind of wheels, what it is doing. And it's a lot funner to do.

Indeed, when Jed had opportunities to describe concrete scenes and objects, his writing seemed fuller, more lively; it gave a greater sense of engagement.

Jed's comments raise questions about what would happen if teachers were to interview their students more often about their topic choices and preferences in writing styles. Experts in writing (e.g., Atwell, 1987) are consistent in their emphasis on the need for young writers to choose their own topics. Indeed, Graves (1994) suggests that when writers "choose topics [they] know something about . . . [they can] write with authority" (p. 13). In addition, writing is often bound by inclinations toward certain genres and styles—some children like to write stories, some like writing reports, some like writing dialogue, others prefer action, and some, such as Jed, want to describe what they can see, either in reality or in the mind's eye. Although teachers need to encourage their students to expand beyond their particular preferences, children often can do so with more success if they begin with their strengths.

Lucy and Jed both teach us the language possibilities that ensue from engaging and meaningful topics for children. However, freedom to select interesting topics is only one way to generate interesting language in children's writing. Another way is to read our children's work carefully and to listen when they tell us what they like to do. For Lucy, no one commented on her use of repetition, rhythm shifts, or experiments with vernacular language. For Jed, no one commented on or noticed the qualitative differences in his writing when describing concrete scenes and objects. In both cases, we might ask how these students could have grown as users of written language had they received critical feedback on the content and substance of their writing—rather than telescopic attention to mechanics, correctness, and even neatness. Helping children see what they can do can lead them to work toward things they cannot yet do. But without careful assessment of their strengths, how can we hope to help them revise their language for greater social action?

Revising Nick: Slouching Toward Revision

Nick was a lanky, seventh-grade Anglo boy with hair falling over his eyes, who met with us slouched in the library of his rural/suburban school. Talking to Nick was difficult, at best—he was revealing in a random sort of way, elusive, and not eager to please. He slumped back in his chair or hunched over his portfolio, talking about his pieces with cool detachment. He had little faith in process writing, in his teacher's advice, and in the CLAS assessment system for evaluating his writing as a whole. When we asked him if he used classroom criteria or the CLAS dimensions of learning to help shape his revisions, he replied, "I usually just write. I don't even know most of the dimensions of learning. I'm supposed to, but I don't. I just write. It doesn't turn out too bad."

Nick's teacher, Ms. Donner, suggested a rather different scene of her students' engagement with both the dimensions of learning and revision. She admitted that "at this age, they're just tooth and nail. They just struggle against revision. They like it the way it is the first time." However, she felt that setting up a carefully constructed peer-response system that centered on meaning helped her students "look at their writing much more." The system was designed for each student to meet with at least two peers and to have them read and discuss a particular piece. Ultimately, the peers supplied short written criticisms to summarize their comments. Then, the student provided a written reply to Ms. Donner to explain what part of the peer advice he or she planned to follow or ignore and why. The system was straightforward and put into practice throughout the school year; the going, however, was hard. Too often, the criticism centered on convention—as Ms. Donner explained, "If they see a lot of problems with spelling, and errors with convention, then they are so distracted that they can't see the meaning anymore." Still, she explained that she reiterated the focus on meaning in numerous talks with her class as well as in her own assessment of their work. In explaining one assignment to us, she said:

With this, I told them the dilemma I saw in a lot of portfolios when I was with CLAS [in professional meetings], and that is at this age, it's very difficult for them to make substantive changes. And I said I want you to be different; I want you to really focus on making changes that are better, instead of just changes. So I gave them thirty points. And what they had to do is say exactly what they changed. And some of them said, "I changed the word 'frog' to 'toad' in paragraph two. And

I spelled 'their' correctly." And those were okay. But I was looking for—I told them that I was looking for more. They know what "showing writing" is. So that they were supposed to include more showing writing. If they did that, then they got close to thirty points. If they didn't do as much showing writing or didn't take advantage of what other students said, then I didn't award anything.

Ms. Donner felt that as a whole, her students had become quite expert with revision and that they understood the difference between "what is thoughtful [and] what's not thoughtful" in terms of reworking their writing and responding to others' pieces. Still, throughout her interview, Ms. Donner explained that she asked her students to be gentle with each other, and she modeled this by putting student work up on the overhead for discussion, suggesting that students were "pretty comfortable with it as long as they know it's not gonna be criticized."

The emphasis on a kinder, gentler criticism sometimes left Nick struggling with what to do.

In a typical example from his portfolio, Nick included a warm-up piece of short writing as evidence of his growth as a writer. He wrote a detailed description of a walk in the rain, and his first draft was followed by two peer responses:

It was great you dont need to changed any-thing [sic]. I liked the part where you said the long tree branches looked liked arms.

I don't think you need to change any thing. It was a very put together story. I really liked it.

The peer responses contained no real criticism; there was no specific advice for Nick to follow and, with the exception of the comment on the image of the tree, the positive comments were fairly general. Still, Nick knew that there were strong expectations for revision from his teacher. Therefore, in his letter to Ms. Donner, he made a half-hearted promise of revision using terminology that he knew was highly valued in the class: "In my warm up I will try to use more *expressive words* (italics added). Other than that I don't think I need to change anything else."

True to his word, his final copy did not veer substantively from the earlier draft. The two versions are joined below with the earlier writing in crossed-out lines and the revisions in italics above the changes:

The tree looked dead. Its branches seemed to reach out for me like
fleshless
 long *bony* arms. As I walk toward the tree a limb blows by me—its coral
When
 like bark rips open the skin on my arm. *As* the wind blew I could hear
reeds nearby
 the faint whistle of the ~~nearby reeds~~. The smell of a once great forest
naked *tears*
 haunted the ~~bare~~ land. It started to rain. The tiny ~~droplets~~ of the water
 from the sky trickled down my face into my mouth. The droplets
 refreshed my thirst. I laid down covering myself with leaves to try to
rested
 keep myself warm. *Haid* my head on the trunk of the tree and fell asleep.

Nick's surface revisions are all what Faigley and Witte (1981) call "substitutions [that] trade words or longer units that represent the same concept" (p. 403), and it was a pattern that held throughout the rest of his portfolio work. For two of the six rewordings in this short piece, he addressed the issue of more expressive words by revising places in which he repeated himself. For example, in his earlier draft, he *had* repeated *droplets* twice, and he substituted one of these for *tears*. In another example, he underlined the use of *as* that began two sentences and later substituted one of these with *when*. His other four substitutions simply reversed words (e.g., "reeds nearby") or provided synonyms that did not seem to move the piece to a more expressive plane (e.g., *naked* for *bare*).

Still, Nick's revisions worked well for him in his final evaluation. For each of the 10-point categories on revision, which included (a) responses: helpful, appropriate; (b) notes to teacher; and (c) evidence of content revision, Nick got the full 10 points. Ms. Donner's only written comment was the tabulation of the total points and the word *Outstanding!*

When we consider Nick's portfolio and the prototypical comments made by both peers and his teacher, we are struck by the fact that feedback can sometimes miss the point. In a written reflection on this piece, Nick wrote, "The day I got this warm-up I was kind of mad and I was able to write a lot about it," and it does seem that his mood seeped into the piece. His description of the loss of a once great forest marked by a single tree that looked dead—a tree that reaches out to do harm—paints a bleak landscape with little relief from cold and thirst. Still, there are problems with the piece. The first-person protagonist in Nick's story "rips open the skin on [his] arm," yet has no

reaction and makes no emotional comment about it. Indeed, the protagonist seems to be suspended in a surreal setting with little insight into his intentions and motivations. Where he is going, what he is up to, what he feels, besides the physical pleasures and discomforts of nature, are unknown to the reader. Yet, no one—neither his peers nor his teacher—commented on character development. It is as if the central mission to writing was just to get the job done. Although Nick was certainly doing some showing writing, it was also shadow writing with little substance. In other words, his writing accomplished little in the social world of his classroom other than to get him a rare good grade (although this is not to be diminished). The writing was an exercise, as was much of the writing in his portfolio—an exercise that seemed to have little connection to real communication. Indeed, Nick told us, "Usually I don't have a chance to really put in how much I want to write. . . . I just get done with it and leave. Because it seems like when I try to do my best, then somebody doesn't like it. So I just go ahead and do what I'm supposed to do and just get it turned in."

Nick's resignation seems directly tied to assignments that are quite distanced from what he wants to do and assessments that he cannot understand. Although Nick did well in this assignment, most of his grades were low. He rushed through most pieces ("I didn't get too high of a grade on this because I just hurried through it"), and he was angry that his completed pieces were not displayed in the classroom ("Mine didn't get put up"). Although he found his peers' comments somewhat helpful, he was annoyed by the classroom atmosphere, which allowed him little choice in his writing. As he explained, "I don't see why we have to do this portfolio and this grade. People that haven't done it turn out just fine, so I don't know why we're doing it." School was the place for one kind of writing, and home was a place for another. Like many other youths we interviewed, Nick did a fair amount of writing at home: "I have a lot of stories at home. I wrote them all myself, and I just did them for fun. My family thinks it's like really cool. They think I'm like really exceptional."

Nick himself was interested in revision, but the limits of time as well as the limited criticism often left him on his own. However, when he looked at this piece in our interview, he was intrigued by how he could change the piece to make it more engaging:

Interviewer: Every writer has their own challenges, things that they feel like they need to work on. What do you think you need to work on in your writing?

Nick: Sometimes I'll write something and think it's good. But when I—couple minutes later, after it's like, you can't change it anymore, you go back and look. You start seeing a whole bunch of stuff that you could fix.

Interviewer: Like what? Give me an example.

Nick: Like, let's see. "I could hear the faint whistle of the reeds nearby." I would have said, "As the frigid wind blew against them," or something like that.

Interviewer: And why would you choose to do that?

Nick: Because it kind of makes it a little—well, right now, it's a little boring to me.

Interviewer: And so you would add words that would do what?

Nick: To make it more exciting.

But making the writing exciting often got him into trouble in school. In our interview discussion, for example, he showed us the first draft, the peer responses, and the final copy of a piece he did on the story of *Beowulf*. In one section of his assignment, he took on the perspective of the literary character, Unferth, who insults the famous *Beowulf* at a feast. Nick chose to write in the first person: "This stupid *Beowulf* thinks he can kill Grendal. What's that noise? I hope it's not Grendal! Oh, my gosh! It's Grendal!" However, a peer reminded him that the assignment called for writing in the third person, not first, and Nick decided to oblige. In his response to Ms. Donner, he wrote, "I am going to tell what Unferth was saying about *Beowulf* and I am going to make it more third person." His revision lacked the life of his earlier draft, for he ended up writing, "Unferth is telling lies about *Beowulf* because he thinks *Beowulf* is evil."

Although he was fairly compliant in his revisions, when we talked to him about a time when he "took a risk in writing [or] tried out an idea," he pointed to his first draft:

Nick: Like that one. [Ms. Donner] doesn't like us to use words like *stupid* and just other slang words.

Interviewer: Why not?

Nick: I don't know. I think it kind of adds to the excitement of a story. . . . Like, I mean, if you just took out *stupid*, it kind of ruins it.

Interviewer: So then, [when] you try and take a risk in school, you feel like that doesn't work?

Nick: No.

Interviewer: And what kind of risks would you want to be able to take if you could?

Nick: Well, I try to go out of the rules. And there's guidelines, and sometimes if you like to go just somewhere else—just to make it better—you get marked down for it.

Interviewer: In what way? Can you give me an example?

Nick: Like in the third person . . . it kind of takes away from what you're writing.

Interviewer: So, using the third person [here] distances you too much? . . . And you want to write in the first person?

Nick: Yeah. [In the first draft] I made up what he was thinking because in the book, it never said what people were thinking, just what they said. . . . I just kind of tried to put myself in the story.

Although Nick was interested in going outside the rules for writing, the classroom atmosphere kept him well within bounds. When he did revise, he explicitly followed the advice of peers or his teacher, eliminating words such as *stupid*, switching back to the third-person voice that met the assignment requirements, and substituting synonyms. In his substitutions, he often looked for big words in his work ("I like *convincing*. I could have just said *telling*, [but] *convincing* sounds better"). But whatever substitution he used, the revision was not necessarily convincing.

In the preface to his portfolio, Nick began with the following opening: "My learning is a space between heaven and hell. When I don't understand or am overflowing with homework, it is torturing. This is hell. When I know what we are doing or don't have any homework, it is rewarding. This is heaven." The writing in his portfolio does seem to exist in a kind of purgatory—a way station that has the trappings of one thing, but is in reality another. It is thick with multiple drafts, peer responses, rubrics based on dimensions of learning, reflections on writing, and so forth—all the basic elements of a quality writing process document. Yet, the final payoff is thin. And, it may be the case that in spite of all the effort, the documentation, the focus on thoughtful response, it is too thin to support Nick's move to another level of language in his writing.

Revising Alinda: Searching for the Right Words

From the more rural surroundings of Nick's school, we now move to the heart of urban San Diego to discuss the work of another writer and reviser, Alinda. She was an eighth-grade Filipino girl who spoke with us quietly, hands neatly folded on the desk in an empty classroom

of her large urban school. In our interview, she was quiet and seemed to choose her words carefully—for unlike Nick, Alinda was a writer with a reputation to uphold. Her teacher had shown off her portfolio at a language arts convention, and she regularly received high praise from her teachers. Also unlike Nick, who questioned the portfolio, Alinda felt as if her portfolio held her “best and proudest work that really show[ed] evidence of [her] talent in writing.” Furthermore, whereas Nick prefaced his portfolio with a learning stance “somewhere between heaven and hell,” Alinda joyfully welcomed her readers:

Welcome to my literary domain. If you are curious about my identity, let me introduce myself. At the up-most peak of middle school, I am an eighth grader and my “moniker” is officially Alinda Alvarez, and yes your guess is correct, I am a girl, though I do not quite bear the lush beauty and curves of preferable “chicks.”

Alinda was like Nick in her search for big words, but her revisions were predominately centered on substituting straightforward language with more dazzling and sophisticated vocabulary. In her preface, for example, she crossed out “My name is” and later wrote “my ‘moniker’ is officially,” and the rest of this introductory essay is filled with similar substitutions.

Alinda’s entire portfolio, in fact, was most remarkable in her extensive rewriting. Her work was often typed and always heavily reworked. Individual words and phrases were crossed out with recommended changes penned in her neat hand above and below lines as well as in the margins. Other comments, however, were not written in standard English, but in code—lined boxes, triangles, and other shapes of meaning that only she could decipher. In her longer pieces, whole sections were cut—marked with large Xs and often accompanied by curt, capitalized instructions: “REPLACE THIS PAGE W/NEW VERSION.” Her teacher, Ms. Cris, often stressed the importance of revision and told us, “At the beginning of the year, they’ll hear me say really ridiculous things like, you’ll never write anything once. You’ll always write it more than once. You’re never done.” Still, she found Alinda’s revision to be highly unusual in her class and often inexplicable, although she welcomed her exploratory spirit:

[Alinda] actually totally reconstructs ideas. Just heavily—it’s the essence of what I consider revision to be, which is reshaping ideas, representing things in an appropriate way. Something down here that

representing things in an appropriate way. Something down here that I haven’t quite figured out is she’s obviously got some coding system, and I don’t know why. She’s an interesting person. But she writes in this weird—I have no idea what that is. It was here; it wasn’t for me. So you’ll have to ask her about what that is.

When we asked, Alinda explained, “I didn’t want anyone peeking in. . . . Some people might say some critical stuff that might just hurt my feelings. So I wrote in shorthand, in code.”

One of the longest pieces in Alinda’s portfolio was a story of high school love entitled, “Wishes Do Come True.” The protagonist of the piece is a young and stunningly beautiful girl (presumably a “lush chick”) named Ajia who is the wealthy, although much ignored, daughter of successful Hollywood parents. In the beginning of the romance, Ajia decides to leave private school and attend a local public high school. She tells her governess, Anne, that “even though it’s dangerous, it will be fun,” and she is motivated by a desire to “act like a regular human being.” Her governess agrees, and they arrive at school in a black stretch limo to the astonishment of the kids hanging out at the entrance. The following passage with its revisions comes just as Ajia is about to step out of the car:

Inside the vehicle, pandemonium was spreading. Pressed back against the cushions of the seats, Ajia’s heart was ~~pounding~~ and her ~~her heart’s frantic pounding~~ silky shirt vibrated with its ~~pulsing~~.
 “Ohhh nooo!” she moaned despairingly. “Anne! What’ll I do?”
 They’re staring at me!”

Her governess turned to face her. ~~Ajia could see her eyes~~ twinkling with an odd mischief. “Well. This is part of life,

~~she started curtly,~~
 Ajia,” “People will be like this when they see limos. It’s ~~a natural thing~~. phenomenal.

“Your parents had to face all those publicity stuff, too, ~~you know, but~~ and in time, they got used to it all. Only, it took up all of their time.

Well, how do the movie stars say it?” ~~And with a dramatic sweep~~
 Her voice dropped to a whimsical overdramatical tone,
 of her arm, she breathlessly said, “Our public awaits us!”

Ajia chuckled, momentarily forgot her doom, and with a ~~shoved~~ of the door ~~broke her way to life~~. *open and clambered out. Out of habit, she resumed her arrogant posture.*

Although Alinda is revising more than words here, her changes still essentially preserve the original meaning. Some new information is added (e.g., "They're staring at us"), but these are changes in what Faigley and Witte (1981) would call the *microstructure*, which do not "affect a summary of a text" (p. 405). Even when she replaces the somewhat nebulous phrase, "broke her way to life," with more insight into a character who in the face of her fear "resumed her arrogant posture," the content is not substantially changed. Ajia is still more a fantasy figure than a regular human being. In fact, more often than not, Alinda's revisions took away from the real life of the story. Her penchant for sophisticated vocabulary stripped the life out of her writing, replacing real characterization with pseudo personalities.

For example, as the story progresses, Ajia meets Pat, a high school boy who instantly and predictably falls for her and considers whether his unkempt appearance will attract her:

Of course he couldn't suddenly change now. Imagine him, the criminal who shoplifted, who got high off of drugs, who drank weekly suddenly transformed into a schoolie. He could just picture the scene. Replacing all his vulgar clothing with . . . decent ones, mainly pants that didn't dangle so close to his butt crack [with] a white shirt and neck tie.

Frankly, the notion made him nauseous. *I don't want to look like a freakin nerd! My image! What would people say about that?* Thinking about even consenting about doing it was impossible. . . . To change his appearance, he'd have to change his life, and that was too much of a price to pay.

In this section, we begin to get a strong feel for a kid who's considering the balance of his image against the heart of a girl. We too can picture the scene—a kid with a real rep—a hard drinker, a druggie, a vulgar dresser who decides that trading in butt crack pants for a shirt and tie is too great a price to pay. The words are straightforward, with few adjectives and no verbs strained beyond their capacity. The mental dialogue is authentic and compelling as we begin to see the social forces that might be driving this kid. Yet, this section was entirely eliminated—lined through with black pen—and Alinda later replaced it with the following conversation between Ajia and Pat:

Diffidently, Ajia shifted her perception and fell upon something, the smudge on Pat's flawed shoes.

Even though she did it out of awkwardness, her unintentional offense grazed at his confidence. He was suddenly vigilant about his demeanor. His hair to the very suedes she looked upon were unworthy in her sight.

The passage is fraught with awkward phrasing and, most important, we lose the character of Pat. Where there was once a fairly captivating kid with his own style both in clothing and language, there is now an individual with "grazed confidence" who is "vigilant about his demeanor." He seems stiff and unreal, a parody of who he once was, dressed up in new-fangled language, which is a poor substitution for his more notorious but more convincing image.

In fact, the images created in this entire piece are in contrast with Faigley and Witte's (1981) discussion of revision as a process by which students learn to "distance themselves from what they have written, to get them to *see it again*, then revise" (p. 411). At no point in Alinda's portfolio do either the teacher or her peers suggest a way to see it again, to return to other aspects of the writing process such as planning and reviewing. Instead, we see Alinda in love with the romance, unable to sufficiently distance herself from stereotypical formula fiction to revise in ways that might have more impact in the world.

Still, Alinda's affection for complex construction is a quality that distinguished her as a writer, and it was certainly one that garnered attention, although not always helpful advice. Her peers had no idea what to do with her writing and in peer conferences, they expressed their frustration. According to Alinda, they said things such as, "Oh my gosh, I can't read this. Look at the words Alinda, they're big. Use some little words once in awhile." Although Ms. Cris validated Alinda's love of language, she also felt helpless in the face of it:

I think that investigating language for the sake of its beauty and its usefulness is something that [the students] don't get a lot of, beyond these are your vocabulary words; let's memorize them; now I want to see them in a story. It just doesn't work. [Alinda], for instance, uses a thesaurus. She plays with a thesaurus and she gets kind of humorous at times because she doesn't do it well. You have to smile and say, the whole meaning here has been destroyed because you chose that word. But I don't do that to her, because she'll know. She'll know. She'll save her stuff and she'll know, and she'll smile some day when she sees it. She's—she's self-taught. She doesn't need me.

Thus, for the most part, Alinda was left to her own devices—revising, experimenting with language, pressing words into awkward action. And her teacher was content to let her discover her difficulties—her humorous destruction of meaning—on her own, convinced that one day Alinda would come to recognize what she does not do well and know, without assistance, how to fix it.

Alinda's case reminds us of the results of Maylath's (1996) study, implying that teachers who have less experience with writing tend to value the Greco-Latinate words that are sprinkled into a text for effect. For example, in one description of the setting of a novel, Alinda wrote:

It all happened in a far-off place—Europe. Isolated from all cognitive human civilization was an eloquent Indian temple implanted in the heart of a slum town of dilapidated barracks. Demure penitentiaries for the dorms, equipped with everything to fit the scene. Pallets, mats, edicts, drudgery. All the pauperism you could ever ask for.

Her teacher's response to this setting was, "Quite a vivid picture!" handwritten in the margins of Alinda's typed work. The teacher later provided a formal evaluation, which gave Alinda 45 out of 45 possible points and included the closing comment, "Outstandingly written. Did you have fun with your adjectives?" followed by a smiley face.

The focus on vocabulary as a stand-in for more evocative and authentic writing was borne out in Alinda's lifetime experience. Just like the students in Maylath's (1996) study who recognized the power of the two-dollar word over their university writing instructors, Alinda felt that adults in her world would value her more as a writer if she used big words. In discussing a piece that was sent with her portfolio to national raters, Alinda commented, "This wasn't really meant for a kid to read. It was sort of meant for an adult to read. So I used higher vocabulary then, and I didn't edit out those big words. 'Cause I wanted to impress adults by how I express myself using these big words." Still, the driving force behind Alinda's use of higher vocabulary was not just recognition from adults; she also worked for self-satisfaction—the feeling of pleasure when the words seemed right:

It's like usually as I'm writing, sometimes I have to look for words, and other times I can sort of feel it coming and I know that the word is right. I might come across lists of words as what I might fill in for this normal word. And I'll look at one and I'll think, okay, that feels right, I'll put

that in instead. And so—it sort of comes by feeling. I might not all this time know the exact definition of it, but then sometimes I'll think of the word and I think this seems like the right word and I'll put it in. And later on I'll check it out, and mark Xs for sort of running parallels of the exact definition.

In our interview, Alinda made it very clear that writing was her passion. She wrote more than any other youth we met and was working on a novel at home. She received much recognition and had a reputation for being an accomplished writer, even if few of her peers could comprehend her work. She was intrigued by the feel of language, the weight of words.

Yet, as she thumbed through her thesaurus or searched the dictionary for "running parallels of the exact definition," she often chose the heftier word instead of something more direct. And the simple yet classic writing point not to use a long word in lieu of a short one was rarely offered, except by peers whom she and her teacher both ignored. For example, in a peer criticism of one piece, a student wrote: "I didn't quite understand the lead you wrote. . . . Your vocabulary is high-class [but] what you can do to improve your lead is make me understand it." Alinda was upset by the remark and wrote in response, "I had expected the comments to be very complimentary but to my surprise, it was half and half. I had a confused critique that offended me." Rather than directly address the issue, her teacher wrote the following next to Alinda's lament: "Thank goodness for critical peers whose openness we value," followed again by a smiley face.

Because her teacher was the authority and an adult, Alinda preferred to bask in her encouraging remarks rather than attend to the tougher advice of her peers. In a reflection on one of her portfolio pieces, she wrote:

In return to my written work in this article, I also appreciate [my teacher's] generous comments that she jotted in the margins. Because of this, it was made known unto me that someone at the adult maturity level could appreciate my efforts to put my emotion into words. It is an asset of mine that I adore.

Yet, because Alinda received little criticism, she continued to experiment with word choice, scanning the thesaurus for intriguing vocabulary and applying it with a vengeance.

In a piece that she included in her portfolio to demonstrate her growth as a writer, she described a scene of an adopted child eating breakfast cereal (Muesli) and watching his new brothers eating their eggs and sausage while his foster parents served them:

Implanted pointedly before him was a prosaic receptacle of Muesli, a repast of vapid grains. Just past the pivoting, kitchen doors was the dining room where a cluster of bonded siblings masticated themselves with a savoring feast of sausage and eggs. Not in seclusion, but with their forebears tending to them, the two deficient curators who were proxies for the ones he no longer had.

When her peers rightfully characterized her work as confusing, Alinda reflected from time to time that perhaps she could include "more down-to-Earth vocabulary." Yet, because her teacher consistently lauded her work—once giving her a 10 on a scale of 1 to 3—she continued in the same vein, and the result was a middle school Mrs. Malaprop. Rather than work toward meaning, she revised her work away from it, treading the water of language, constantly stirring up words but rarely moving ahead.

DISCUSSION

In a preface to a new edition of her modern classic, Joan Didion (1992) writes:

"Slouching Towards Bethlehem" is also the title of one piece in the book, and that piece, which derived from some time spent in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, was for me both the most imperative of all these pieces to write and the only one that made me despondent after it was printed. It was the first time I had dealt directly and flatly with the evidence of atomization, the proof that things fall apart: I went to San Francisco because I had not been able to work in some months, had been paralyzed by the conviction that writing was an irrelevant act, that the world as I had understood it no longer existed. If I was to work again at all, it would be necessary for me to come to terms with disorder. That was why the piece was important to me. And after it was printed I saw that, however directly and flatly I thought I had said it, I had failed to get through to many of the people who read and even liked the piece. . . . I suppose almost everyone who writes is afflicted some of the time by the suspicion that nobody out there is listening, but it seemed

to me then (perhaps because the piece was important to me) that I had never gotten a feedback so universally beside the point. (pp. xiii-xiv)

Didion's classic book and essay went on to win universal acclaim, despite the fact that a good part of the criticism entirely missed the point—the point not being that Didion was "talking about a handful of children wearing mandalas on their foreheads" (p. xiv)—hippies of the sixties; the point, instead, being the much larger discussion of children desperately trying to "create a community in a social vacuum" (p. 122). In discussing these children, Didion writes:

They feed back exactly what is given them. Because they do not believe in words, their only proficient vocabulary is in the society's platitudes. As it happens I am still committed to the idea that the ability to think for one's self depends upon one's mastery of the language,³ and I am not optimistic about children who will settle. . . . They are sixteen, fifteen, fourteen years old, younger all the time, an army of children waiting to be given the words. (p. 123)

We take Didion's words as a metaphor for looking at how two elementary and two middle school youth are learning to use the words they are given to write. In this piece, we have considered whether Lucy, Jed, Nick, and Alinda "feed back exactly what is given them" or if they struggle against the stated rules and rubrics to create voice as well as pen revisions to make their meaning in the world. It is our opinion that each child managed to strike his or her own balance. The boys (who both were designated as low writers) seemed to push—sometimes hesitantly and sometimes with more defiance—against the boundaries of their classroom systems, whereas the girls (who were both high writers) appeared persistent in their play with language but were not as effective as they might have been if given more guidance.

In terms of revision, we have been aided by the work of researchers who have studied the processes entailed in rewriting. For example, Faigley and Witte (1981) suggest that for highly experienced writers, much of the surface revision is done in the head before putting pen to paper, which may account for why the most expert writers in their study (who were professional journalists and novelists) demonstrated few apparent surface changes but made a number of revisions focused on meaning. On the other hand, "the inexperienced writers' changes were overwhelmingly Surface Changes [while] only 12% of [their] . . . revisions were Meaning Changes" (Faigley & Witte, 1981,

p. 407). More important than the number of changes or even the kind of changes, however, is the fact that changes inexperienced writers make often fail to substantially improve their writing.

Almost two decades ago, Sommers (1980) wrote about the revisions of inexperienced college students, suggesting that "These revision strategies are teacher-based, directed towards a teacher-reader who expects compliance with rules. . . . At best the students see their writing altogether passively" (p. 383). More recently, Yagelski (1995) echoed the same observation after studying high school writers working in an ostensibly writing process classroom. Notwithstanding the process-oriented practices of the class, such as peer editing and multiple drafts, he explained that "students' revision strategies may grow out of relatively narrow conceptions of revision—and of writing more generally—that encourage a focus on matters of style and correctness" (p. 232). Such a focus does not help students use language to get to the heart of communication or social work.

Similarly, Nick's and Alinda's writing process classrooms—which held all the outward markers of process—still encouraged their young writers to work on the surface. Yagelski (1995) suggests that new process-oriented "approaches must do more than give teachers strategies that might simply be adapted to existing—and perhaps contradictory—beliefs about writing and teaching writing" (pp. 233-234). This is a critical point, for if we return to the Didion (1992) quote that opened this section and apply it to Alinda and Nick, it is possible to see that however directly and flatly writing process experts feel they are conveying their messages, they may be failing to really reach people who admire and even want to emulate their suggested practices. The same is true for assessment. Writing revolves around criticism, but if the assessment stays on the surface and encourages word substitution over content revision, then the criticism may be more universally beside the point than on the mark of the generative work of writing.

In terms of voice, we have been inspired by attempts to capture and credit written language in an already well-established area of evaluation, that of literary criticism and the awarding of literary prizes. Just as writing process proponents in the past have offered advice about writing based on what real writers do as they write (e.g., Atwell, 1987; Graves, 1983), we believe that the assessment of children's writing would be enhanced if researchers and teachers would pay closer attention to what literary critics and award committees do when they

evaluate the prose and poetry of adults. No matter what problems, controversies, and personal convictions sway or fail to persuade award committee members, the evaluative criteria—unlike rubrics designed to judge children's writing—focus on language both for the art of the wording and the social action that results. When Toni Morrison won her Nobel Prize for literature, the Swedish academy commended her as one "who, in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality" (Dedication cited in Morrison, 1994, p. 5)—a comment centered more on Morrison's wisdom with words than on anything else. Indeed, words about words are the essence of her acceptance speech when she tells us that real "word-work is sublime . . . because it is generative" (p. 220).

The thing that literary language does best is hark back to its own words, writing words that reverberate off one another, creating sounds that are images and remembrances at once. A word or phrase carefully placed in the beginning repeats itself later and thus works as both foreshadowing and symbol. An image reappears to light the way. Lists capture, clarify, and qualify a time, place, or situation. And interruptions make the reader stop—and think. As Alter (1989) explains, "accumulated images, themes, and actual verbal formulations of literary tradition become charged particles in the mind of the writer (and 'mind' is surely more than what is conscious and intentional) and of the reader" (p. 46). Furthermore, he writes:

If any purposeful ordering of language implies some intention of communication, literature is remarkable for its densely layered communication, its capacity to open up multifarious connections and multiple interpretations to the recipient of the communication, and for the pleasure it produces in making the instrument of communication a satisfying aesthetic object—or more precisely, the pleasure it gives us as we experience the nice interplay between the verbal aesthetic form and the complex meanings conveyed. It is on these grounds that it is valued as literature. (p. 28)

Students like Lucy and Jed do work to create satisfying aesthetic objects with their writing, using both sound devices and dream-like description to conjure vivid images. However, the fact that their teachers and peers rarely commented on their linguistic play (much less its similarity to the play of professional writers) left them like voices crying in the wilderness—they were not heard.

Even if we think of the voices of Nick and Alinda, we worry about the emptiness in which they write. Nick, who writes of empty spaces and dead trees, cannot create charged particles in the mind of the writer or the reader because his piece carries no emotion and no character intention or motivation. And Alinda, flexing her voice beyond the capacity of the words she selects, writes as much nonsense as sense. She works the clay of her writing, over and over again, shaping and reshaping, but because she works at the denotative rather than the connotative level of language, with the heat of firing, the piece is doomed to fall apart.

In Toni Morrison's (1994) acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, she tells the story of a blind, wise, African American griot who is approached by skeptical and curious children who challenge the woman to answer the following: "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead" (p. 10). The woman thinks long and hard about the question before responding, "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands." In the subsequent unfolding of this wonderfully metaphorical tale, Morrison makes the griot a writer and the bird becomes language, "Being a writer, she thinks of language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency—as an act with consequences" (p. 13).

Designing assessments for children's writing is also an act with consequences. If the assessments crafted on national, state, district, school, and/or classroom levels are set within rigid boundaries or with overgeneralized terms, what are teachers and children to make of them? How will they learn to see and hear language as living rather than dead? How will they move beyond their skepticism of the power of language to a place of curiosity about how to make their words and worlds more meaningful? Still, unlike Morrison's (1994) griot, we cannot leave the answers solely to children, for griots are meant to be guides who both retain and share "knowledge about a group's history and the role of individual[s] . . . in its development" (Harris, 1993, p. 57). As teachers and researchers, we must work to push the boundaries of assessment to a place that will allow us to evaluate as well as critically celebrate the art of children's writing. And ultimately, the work is in our hands.

NOTES

1. A caveat to Winner's (1982) focus on literary text as well as our own is that attention to sound properties of words, metaphors, and structures is not limited to literature. Writers, regardless of their chosen genre, work language to deliver their message, whether that message be pragmatic or more aesthetic in nature. For example, in a year-long study of 23 adolescents writing their school newspaper, Davinroy (1998) found frequent examples of Winner's (1982) categories of literary language in all journalistic genres, including news articles, sports features, and even weather reports. Furthermore, these youth writers talked about their conscious choices to include, sometimes prominently, literary tropes, figures, and structures in their nonfiction and expository writing as a way to make their pieces more engaging to their reading audience.

2. The names of all teachers and students are pseudonyms.

3. Didion (1992) is limited by her tendency to foreground spoken and written language over other modes of communication and thought. Yet, her stance is one that is historically common and includes such language luminaries as Saussure, Halliday, and Vygotsky. As Witte (1992) carefully explains "studying the production and use of 'writing' from a perspective that privileges spoken or written linguistic systems of meaning-making and ignores other systems of meaning-making can hardly yield a comprehensive or a culturally viable understanding of 'writing' or 'text'" (p. 240). In this article, we believe that we are equally guilty of perhaps too high a regard for written symbols, but we are partially limited by the kind of data we collected (predominately written texts in the portfolios and spoken interviews). Although it may not make up for the fact of our linguistic emphasis here, one of us has written extensively of the value of other modes of meaning making (Wolf, 1994, 1995; Wolf, Edmiston, & Enciso, 1997).

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