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In teachers and students we trust: Real education reform is a writer's workshop

Barry Lane

Discover Writing Company

A few years ago I was visiting a school and met a fourth grade teacher who was also the high school football coach. He was a large man who spoke with authority and passion for the rights of kids to read and write with choice. He bravely spoke out against the basal reading program used by the district and made his case that even literature based basal readers are not the same as kids just reading books of their own choice.

"I have a different way of teaching reading," he said. "We find great books, they read them, and then we talk about them." After his simple pronouncement another teacher at the school raised her hand to ask the billion dollar question, the question that is the foundation of the multi-billion dollar reading industry in America. "But how do you know they really read the book?" The large man did not miss a beat. He looked at the woman squarely in the eye and said, "I ask 'em." Then he went on to say that he was actually interested in teaching more than reading. He wanted to teach honesty as well.

This simple encounter got me thinking how many educational programs and initiatives are built on a fundamental distrust of students and teachers and an exaggerated trust of data and systems of education. The Gates Foundation's recent two billion dollar study has shown that a student's reading level can go up one and a half grade levels in a year under an effective teacher. This is a far greater influence than socio-economic background, class size, or even curriculum. I know what you are thinking. Why did the Gates Foundation spend two billion dollars to find out what you already know? Personally, I would have told them that for 20 dollars, but they don't trust teachers or fans of teachers like me—they only trust data, and therein lies the problem. If the Gates Foundation trusted teachers in the running of schools and not just data based on testing that often only measures a narrow range of educational abilities, they would have started with the

assumption that teachers are the greatest influence and then asked effective teachers what they needed to do their job better. Perhaps that two billion would have been spent to support schools, not the corporations and data gatherers who specialized in undermining them.

At a recent in-service a young first year teacher turned to me with a bewildered look on her face and asked, "I don't understand why they don't just ask US how to improve schools. It's like they think we classroom teachers know nothing."

I told her what I always say, "Education in America will only improve when teachers are given a seat at the management table." Gates Foundation may take another two billion dollars to get there. Their next study will shoot video of effective teachers and create a library resource for teachers to draw on. A step in the right direction, perhaps, but why don't we create teams of teacher researchers whose job it is to create schools of the future? The answer is quite simple: to give teachers the power to change schools would mean that billion dollar test companies and textbook companies would have to step aside and unchain the oars of education. They would have to acknowledge that the secret wish of the standards movement is to micromanage classrooms and understand that this approach is counterproductive to improving schools. In short, they would have to adopt the stance of a progressive teacher of writing.

Here are two of my cartoons from my latest book, *But How Do You Teach Writing: A Simple Guide for All Teachers*.

The first cartoon shows the schools I grew up in. "Write an essay about freedom for Monday," the teacher says. And if you notice the children are all chained to the oars. (See Cartoon #1)

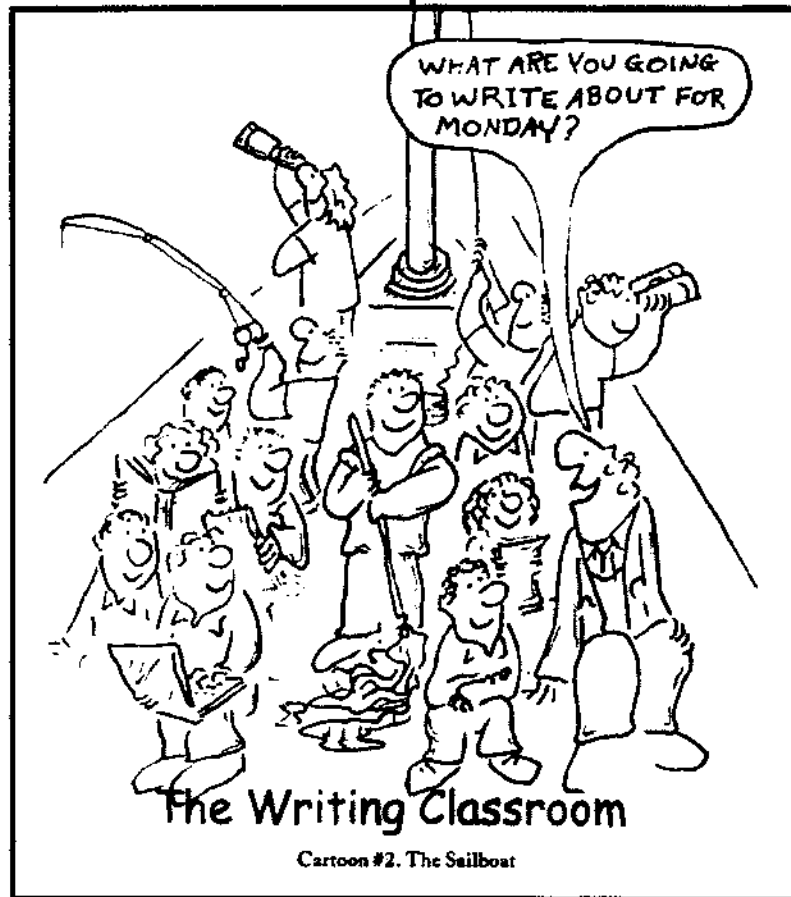
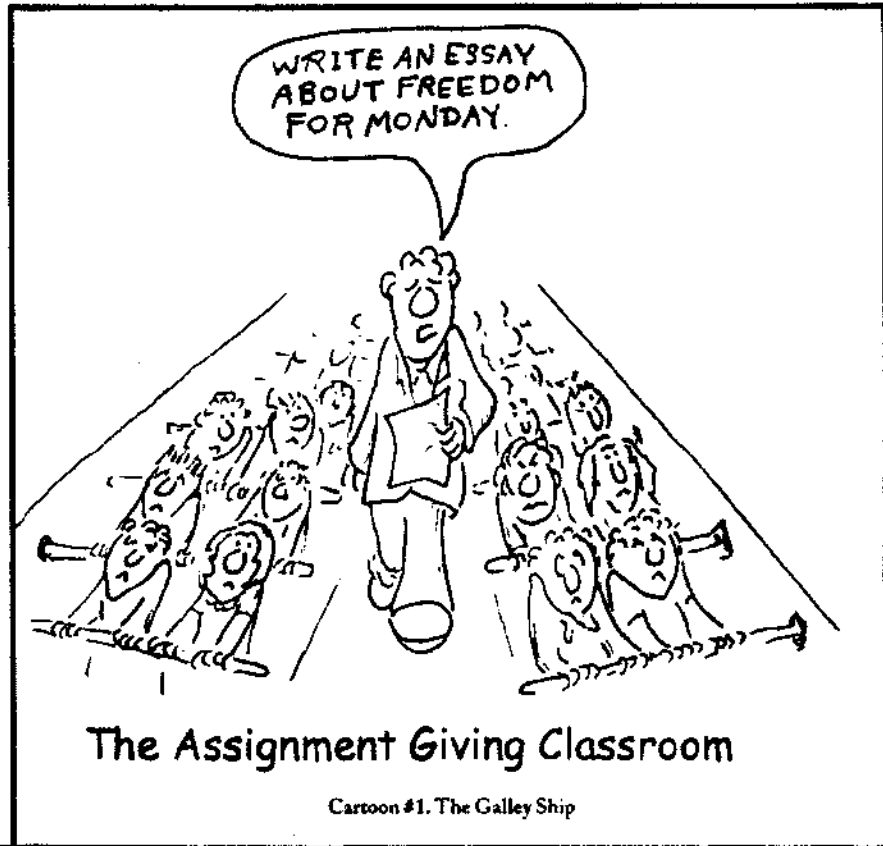
In the second illustration the teacher asks, "What are you going to write about for Monday?" On this boat all the children are doing different things. They are full of wonder and curiosity. They don't have to write about

freedom; they are living it. (See Cartoon #2)

When we teach writing well it is no longer a subject like math or science or social studies. It is a core skill, like thinking, and it is something we can do in all subjects.

We learn to trust our student's ability to find subjects and model our own sense of ourselves as a writer. Once at a workshop a teacher said to me that she doesn't write with her students because she is a bit insecure about her own writing. What is the best thing you can share with them but your own insecurity. When I was in school writing was taught in the manner of the next cartoon. Imagine a pottery class where the teacher just walks around with a perfect vase saying helpful things like, "Close." (See Cartoon #3)

When we write with our students and share our failures, we teach them that it is acceptable to



fail and learn from that failure. When we learn to trust in ourselves as writers who fail and succeed, we simultaneously learn to trust our students' ability to make choices and find subjects to write about. Writing becomes a tool for discovery and learning because we are no longer trapped by our need to encapsulate ideas perfectly. Writing is more of a shovel, less of a picture frame. Writing is a dynamic tool for learning, not a static template for enclosing our thoughts.

Educational reformers could learn a lot from the best writing teachers. If education reform were run more like a writer's workshop, everyone would be a trusted member of the class and have a seat at the table. Teacher and student choice and creativity would be the norm, not something that is seen as a liability to a data driven program. Ideas would flow freely and be evaluated for their success or failure by each other's reaction, not by data collectors working for other outside interests with a stake in the results. Student success would be a common goal that grows out of repeated failure and support, not a benchmark of perfection used to keep schools continually failing. Schools and children would thrive



Cartoon #3. The Pottery

because their true voices would be heard and real reform would grow out of this re-flowering of democracy.

American schools will be transformed only when we realize these truths. Till then we must endure more meaningless studies that undermine schools and hurt students and teachers even as they proclaim their good intentions. When all teachers take action like that football coach and 4th grade teacher, we will transform schools through the inevitable power of our own common sense. Until then we are all chained to the oars trying to compose our essay about freedom for Monday. It is your job as a writing teacher to unchain your students' minds from the mediocrity of a failing school system and open their minds to greater possibilities in the larger world. Mahatma Gandhi proclaimed, "You must be the change you want to see in the world." This is the only standard public school teachers need to live by.



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