

Creating A Vision of Possibility

How student writing can nurture reflection and hope.

By Linda Christensen

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is an excerpt from Linda Christensen's new book, *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*, now available from Rethinking Schools. [Click here](#) for more information about the book and how to order it online.)

Over a decade ago, 25 seniors sat in my Contemporary Literature and Society class and discussed their futures. We had just celebrated Sheila's 18th birthday and prom and graduation could be viewed on the horizon. After blowing out her candles, Sheila said, "I am soooo happy to have made it to 18 without getting pregnant. I am the first woman in my family to graduate from high school. And the first woman to make it to 18 without a child." Several other students joined in with similar stories.

Sheila's story was not uncommon in my classrooms. Many of my students were the first in their family to graduate from high school. Many were the first to attend college. Some already had children.

Although my family situation differed in some respects from my students', there were similarities. I remember my fear that I would not graduate from high school. Mom left for work before I got up for school. She was too tired at night to ask about homework or even cook, much less initiate discussions about my future. I usually ate dinner at my older sister's home. Although I was the youngest child in my family, I was the first to attend college. My oldest sister joined me during my freshman year.

As a junior/senior English teacher, I understood the overwhelming sense of awe and fear that college can inspire. I attempted to give my students the help I needed when I was a high school senior.

THE CULTURE OF COLLEGE

For many students, there is no culture of college in the home. While most parents want their children to go to college, if they haven't gone themselves they might not know how to help their children prepare or apply. My student, Trisa, articulated this after we visited a more affluent high school in the suburbs. One of her "ahas" about the difference between our schools was summed up in her quote, "At West Linn, students didn't ask each other if they were attending college, they asked each other where they were going. Attending college was a given." In homes where no one has gone to college, the difference between if and where is a big one.

My mother supported my entrance into college, but we didn't have a clue how much money it really cost or how to apply. Mom had never set foot on a college campus, but she'd harbored the dream of becoming a teacher when she was younger. Either we didn't have college counseling in my high school or I wasn't perceived to be college "material," because no one at Eureka High helped me think about where I might want to attend. I did apply to several University of California campuses because I'd visited a friend's sister at Berkeley, and I pumped her for information. The University of California at Santa Barbara accepted me, but after the burning of the Bank of America in nearby Isla Vista and campus riots in '69, Mom thought Redwood Community College would be a better choice. Her thinking was, "A college is a college." My students struggled with similar problems. The choices overwhelmed them, and even the application fees seemed excessive.

One of my students who was the first member of her family to attend college said, "I don't know what changed for me this year. Now I get good grades. I want to do my work. I stay for academic clinic. I get my homework done." But I knew what had changed. One day during the previous summer while Natalie and her parents visited family in Seattle, her father drove her to the University of Washington, a beautiful campus. They ate lunch, toured the campus, and he spoke of his desire for her to attend a four-year college. Through that visit, Natalie's father helped her see college as a possibility.

RESISTANCE: IS COLLEGE THE ONLY OPTION?

Let me set the record straight: I don't think college is the only option for students. But most students will need post-secondary education to get a living wage job. A significant number of my students lacked the credits to be juniors or seniors when they entered my untracked classes; so when I started in on college, they rebelled. Justifiably so. They were sick of school, and they didn't want to study for the SATs or write college essays. But I believe it is essential to give students a vision of their lives after high school; in fact, it was crucial to their success in my class that they established an attainable goal and direction for their life after Jefferson. Without that vision and goal, it was too easy to sleep in, watch daytime soaps, and forget about homework.

How I talked with students about their future was crucial. On one occasion I spoke with my class about college and I inadvertently put down working-class jobs, "You don't want to push a broom or pump gas the rest of your life. That might be okay when you're young, but you don't want to make a career out of it."

Nyke got mad. "Hey, my dad owns a janitorial service. He pushes brooms, mops, and vacuum cleaners every night. That's how he puts the food on our table, and I don't see anything wrong with that." Nyke was right, and I felt ashamed. His words recalled the disparaging remarks some of my teachers made about jobs that required physical rather than mental labor. Thanks to Nyke, I remember both of our fathers and speak with students about the dignity of work.

I also talk about options. Most students harbor some kind of secret vision of their future, some spark from childhood or some current passion that they'd like to transform into their future work - whether it's becoming a hairstylist or working as an ecologist trying to save the salmon runs. For Angie, it was a love of animals that made her want to become a veterinarian. Teaonshae didn't want to go to a four-year college, but she cut and styled hair on her front porch every weekend and all summer long. Keith, who drew my wrath for the cartoon characters that disfigured my desks, wanted to be a graphic artist. Lurdes hoped to be a lawyer who helped immigrants. Yuliis doodled dress designs and aspired to become a fashion designer. And Nicole wanted to write plays that dealt with social issues.

Helping students articulate these dreams not only pushed them to write college or scholarship essays, it helped them create goals for themselves that pulled them out of bed or off the couch and into my classroom.

CREATING THE DESIRE: BRINGING BACK FORMER STUDENTS

Like most public schools, Jefferson opened its doors in September before college students made their way back across the country or down the street. I took advantage of that and invited my former students in for a talk. Usually I created a panel that included students who attended local, Black, community, small and large colleges all over the country. I wanted my current students to listen to Jefferson graduates talk about their experiences.

While they did talk about classes, cost, grades, scholarships, they also talked about campus food, football

games, marching bands, campus traditions, bugs, heat, homesickness, and what they wished they would have taken care of when they were juniors and seniors. Olivia, who had a full ride at a state college, talked about how she tried to spend an hour a day in the library during her senior year finding scholarships. She also encouraged all students to visit the campus prior to attending: "I didn't know I would smell manure all day and hear cows and pigs all night." Harold agreed. "Until I went to college, I'd never been some place that didn't have sidewalks." And Sekou talked about the opening traditions at Morehouse College in Atlanta that both welcomed him and made him feel a part of a rich history.

Laughter ricocheted off the walls of C-12 on these days as students shared their experiences. Because these panels had become a tradition, many of my former students called me and volunteered to come back and talk once they were "grown." But more than laughter and sharing, my former students created the sense of possibility and desire in my current students. They had known Harold when he blocked the stairs between B floor and C floor. In fact, they'd known Harold when he claimed to be a gang member at middle school. If Harold or Tony or Renee could go to college, so could they.

CAMPUS VISITS

Billie Letts, in her novel *Where the Heart Is*, captured my fears and doubts when she described the main character's first day at college: "Nova Lee had never been on a college campus before and she was sure everyone who saw her knew it. She tried to look like she belonged there, but she didn't figure she was fooling anyone."

I too was awestruck, but if I hadn't visited Claythel Burke at University of California at Berkeley, I may not have overcome my fear that I didn't belong. I decided to take my students on field trips to local college campuses hoping to create a hunger for those green spaces, those ivy-covered walls, for an education. I wanted them to see themselves on a campus - just as Natalie's father had when he took her to visit the University of Washington.

But I wanted more than a walk around campus. I wanted students to attend a class so they could see that the "academy" was not out of their reach. Two of the most successful attempts to bring my students to a campus happened because of my college professor friends. Tony Wolk, an English professor at Portland State University, agreed to teach my students a writing lesson on campus. When we arrived, he passed out chocolate chip cookies he'd baked for them and treated them to an outstanding lesson using dreams as an entry to a piece of writing.

Once, when I had a grant to support my vision, I took students to the University of Oregon - a two-hour bus ride away - where they met with my Writing Project mentor, Nat Teich, and some former Jefferson students who attended the university. Nat's class focused on metaphors in poetry. Students connected. They knew they belonged. This was their strong suit. He had also arranged tours around the campus.

WHY WOULD THEY WANT TO KNOW ABOUT ME?

When faced with sample college essay forms asking them to write about significant life events, my students balked. Few of them believed that they had done anything worth writing about or that someone else would want to read. Sure, I loved their stories and poems, but I taught at Jefferson. Why would a college admission officer want to read about their lives? They hadn't traveled or earned straight A's. They were sure that their lives were not significant enough to write about. As soon as I asked them to list significant experiences or accomplishments, I could feel the whine rising up across the room, even before Ayanna raised her hand. "Ms. Christensen, I haven't done anything. I haven't gotten good grades. I never went

anywhere. I haven't accomplished anything."

Ayana had barely finished before Ted headed for me with his head down and tilted, the way he carried it when he had his "I can't do this" frown on. And Terressa was a pile of hair and fumes under Rosa Parks' poster.

Getting these students to write college essays acknowledging their skills was like steelhead fishing in the Columbia: no fish. They didn't see their incredible resilience, their ability to see through people's agendas, to spot phonies within seconds. They discounted the richness of their lives, the stories they had heard growing up, their grandmothers' wisdom. They didn't count the gifts they brought daily to my life. Why should they? In a society that prizes money and all it can buy - expensive clothes, cars, homes, high SAT scores, travel to foreign countries - many of my students didn't measure up in the traditional sense, but they had the skills our society sorely needs: compassion, heart, the ability to see through lies and deception, as well as the skill to wrestle anything to the ground.

WRITING THE ESSAY

"All the college will know about you are numbers: your Social Security number, grade point average, and test scores. You need to make them see you as an individual," I told my students. "This is your chance to tell your story, to jump up off the page and let them know what they'd be missing if they didn't let you attend their school or give you money to attend school."

Typically, we work through two pieces - a special person essay and an incident that shaped them - otherwise known as the "aha" moment essay. After reading through numerous college and scholarship applications, I found these two were anchors my students could use. I called them the interview suit or the basic black dress. They wrote and honed two of the essays and then changed them if they needed to answer a slightly different question.

SIGNIFICANT PERSON ESSAY

Sometimes I didn't even say we were writing a college essay, because it sent students into immediate panic and anxiety. Their vision of a college essay is a list of their achievements: paragraph after boring paragraph of accomplishments. Instead we'd just write the piece as part of another unit we were working on.

The easiest essay to tuck in without their knowledge was the special person essay. For example, when we read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, we discussed how Janie's grandmother influenced her, then we wrote an essay about someone who was important in our lives. When we studied the Abolitionists during Literature and U.S. History, we talked about "moral ancestors" - people who weren't related to us, but whose social conscience and engagement set a standard we wanted to live by - and we wrote about them. Around Thanksgiving, we wrote essays about people we're thankful we have in our lives. Later, students could dig these pieces out of their portfolios to clean up as a college essay.

But sometimes I hit the essay straight on - usually by busting their stereotypes of a college essay. We'd read "Granny's" by Alyss Dixon, an essay that helped buy her a ticket into Yale. Or we'd read "Brenda," by Neena Marks, who landed a spot at New York University. Typically students say, "That's not a college essay. You can't write about ants and urine when you're trying to get into college." Students needed to see that they didn't need to make themselves sound like Dick and Jane from the old first-grade readers. They needed to sound like themselves, to share the world that they come from.

I began by asking students to make a list of people who had influenced them. They may or may not have known this person. It could have been a coach, a parent, a grandparent, a person in their church or summer camp, a person they admired, but didn't know - a moral ancestor. Next to the person's name, they wrote how the person touched them, why they were important. We shared the lists to percolate ideas for each other.

Once they'd chosen a person, we did a series of quick-writes. First, I asked students to describe this person: "Tell me what they look like, let us hear him/her talk, give you advice. Brainstorm details about the person: Do they wear an apron? Smell like Old Spice? Run their hands through their hair? Push their glasses up on their nose?" I usually did a visualization at this point as it helped students dive into the piece and retrieve memories.

For the next quick-write, I asked them to describe an incident with the person that illustrates why the person influenced them. I gave them an example of Ray Cetina, my principal at Grant Elementary School in Eureka, who created a science club that met at seven in the morning and invited all students to attend. For Mr. Cetina, we were all "Talented and Gifted." We all deserved special programs. His sense of equality and expectation shaped my life as a student and a teacher.

Sometimes, obviously, students wrote about people they hadn't met. I asked them, "What has this person accomplished that makes you admire them? Be specific. Not 'they are great and courageous,' but she fought cancer, he helped get kids off the street, she was the first woman tap dancer to make it big. Go into detail. You will need to cut back later, but get it all down now."

Then I brought it back home. "From this person's accomplishments what did you learn that you will take with you into your future? In other words, tie this person's achievements to your future goals."

The quick-writes were a jumble - like pieces for a quilt that needed a unifying pattern to hold them together. I told students, "Read back over your quick-writes and think like a storyteller - get down scenes, dialogue, make the person come alive. Play with each part. Write fast. Be bold. Keep all drafts - even the ugly ones, they might have a line or two that can be saved. Fit this all together once you get all of the details. Write first. Piece later. If you get stuck, look back at the student models for a way out."

THE "AHA" OR INCIDENT ESSAY

The second essay was much more difficult to write and explain, partly because it asked students who hadn't even lived two decades to inventory their lives and then scrutinize them for a moment where they had a vision of the possible. This paper was like a heat-seeking device, finding the student's heart: What matters? What's important? Why? What might they want to spend their lives doing? When was the moment they knew that?

I changed my major three times during college - from math to marine biology to literature. And after I graduated I started a master's program in Medieval Literature, switched to law school, and ended up a teacher. So I know that the flash of illumination I had in fourth grade when my chicken died and I dissected it did not turn out to shine a light on my future career. But learning to find and define those moments that shape us can make us see our gifts and our potential.

When Andrew Kaufman wrote about his love for theater, the authenticity of his voice, the depth of his experience on and behind the stage came across:

"I love acting. I love putting on costumes and becoming creatures I am not. I love my skin sweating as bright lights send heat soaking through my body. I love getting to know my cast, watching the drama behind the drama. I love the quick change, the black out, the dry ice and stage combat! I love cranky stage managers and quiet co-stars. I love watching ego-stricken actors fall into decline while a new face emerges from the shadows. I love the monster special effects that steal the show, and that oh-so-precious moment when you, the actor, send the audience head over heels with laughter. I love the call sheet with my name on it, and the director who calls to say I'm perfect for the part. I love the shows that I wish would go on forever, and even the ones I can't stand till they're over.

I love sitting backstage, exhausted from the matinee, and knowing in another two hours I'll go out there and do it again. I love to play the bad guy, and I love getting that killer role I've always wanted. Hell, I love it when they toss a spear in my hand and say, "Go stand in the corner." I love classical and contemporary, tragedy and comedy, romance and swashbuckling! I live for the moment when I run on stage for curtain call, and the applause gets just a little bit louder. I love the smooth feeling of steady memorization, and those intense moments when something unexpected happens, like an actor not showing up two minutes before curtain, so the stage hands have to make a split second decision because, damn it, man, the show MUST go on."

To get students started on this piece, we once again began by reading student essays. They saw the range of illuminating moments that Jefferson graduates described from Dyan Watson's playing saxophone in Japan ([click here](#) to read this essay) to Chetan Patel, who attends University of Chicago, learning about his heritage. The model essays explored the sweep of possibilities.

Before we read the essays, I asked students to imagine they were members of the admissions committee at a college. We played through scenarios: Who would they want on their campus? Would diversity be important? Would it be an asset? Would they only let in people who could afford it? Were they looking for valedictorians? What other skills would they look for? Would they want people who spoke one language? The same language?

I wanted students to question the way things are, to create a sense of possibility. In some countries post-secondary education is a right. Students and their families are not forced to mortgage their homes and their futures to attend college. How would that change admissions?

After this preparation, I told them to jot notes on what they learned about each student as they read their essays. What did the piece make clear about the student that their GPA and SAT scores might not? Would this be a person they'd want on their campus? Why or why not? What skills would this student bring to the school that might not be traditionally prized?

Students began to see how the essays made the writer come alive through their stories. I made the point that they could write a résumé that lists their achievements, but only through story and essay could they give the admissions committee a ticket into their lives.

Rather than a recitation of facts, I wanted students to create the scene, so we could see them on the street, in the room, onstage. I used a visualization to push them into the scene. I asked them to remember a particular moment or to freeze one frame of an incident. Where are they? What does it look like? Smell like? Who else is there? What are they saying? When they opened their eyes, I asked them to capture the scene. Chelsea Hendrichs wrote:

"If I came to see you, I'd ask for my money back! I've paid. Give me something to watch! If you're

going to dance, dance." The tiny, dark woman says over the banging of the piano. We all laugh, but I take what she says and store it away. Her words make me push myself harder. I am the fairy queen. I am Juliet. I start to lose myself in this character that I have created for her. I imitate her gracefulness that I know dazzled audiences, though she's never told me. I watch her and I see where I hope to get. I want to be beautiful and powerful at the same time. I want people to want to watch me dance.

Eric Mashia opened his essay with a scene from a middle school classroom:

I was in Mrs. Klein's seventh grade English class. We sat in a circle telling what we wanted to be when we grew up. I remember Sara said, "I want to be a police officer." Good luck I thought. If she saw someone fighting, she would run the other direction. Then there was Nathan who hoped to become a professional football player. If he could make it being four-foot seven and weighing less than one hundred pounds then the saying, "You can become whatever you want to" really is true. But then came my turn. I said, "I want to be the next Montel Williams, a male Oprah Winfrey."

As middle schoolers we were into the newest news. Who was going with Demetria or Lameka, and who just got beat up in the fight yesterday. My quest for scooping news led me to write for my school newspaper at Jefferson High School.

Teaonshae started her essay with a scene of her doing hair on the front porch of her house. Ayanna opened with a story about a teacher who believed in her as a way of edging into an essay about wanting to become a teacher herself.

Writing college essays was not easy - not only because students still needed work on their writing skills but, more importantly, because some students needed to discover there was room at the "academy" or the institutions of higher education for them. Their frustration was more often about the distance between what they thought colleges want and their assessment of their lives.

Certainly, not all of my students attended post-secondary institutions. Many started, dropped out, started over. And one unit - even with college visits, panels of graduates, and college essays - cannot overcome the gap between the class differences between those who wonder where they will go to college and those who wonder if they will go to college. The long tongue of the road towards equality is neither certain nor easy, but as teachers we must continue to travel it.

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