

A Newsletter of The Texas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts

Nominee receives national award

By Michael Guevara, *Texas Voices* Editor

Shakespeare is out—at least he is in the Texas Prison System.

Shakespeare, along with an English teacher's dream list of authors and 11,850 books were banned from prisoners by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, which is where the [Texas Civil Rights Project](#) steps in.

With a mission to promote racial, social, and economic justice through education and litigation, The Texas Civil Rights Project, has received the National Intellectual Freedom Award from the National Council of Teachers of English.

TCTELA nominated the TCRP for its report "Banned Books in the Texas Prison System." The report revealed for the first time the list of books banned and allowed for prisoners. "TDCJ's book censorship is, frankly, bizarre," said Scott Medlock, Director of the Texas Civil Rights Project's Prisoners' Rights Program in an article on the project's website. "Certainly there are some books prisons could legitimately censor. TDCJ, however, allows prisoners to read some of those titles, while banning numerous important works of literature, history and politics."

TCTELA Past President Carol Revelle, who completed the nomination, noted in the application that "[t]he censorship report accuses the Texas Department of Criminal Justice of creating a broken system that was meant to provide protection inside prisons but now withholds relevant books from prisoners based on hard-to-qualify objections in violation of the Supreme Court ruling that allows publishers to 'communicate with [prisoners] who ... willing[ly] seek their point of view' (Turner v. Safley, 1987).

For Revelle, reading the report made the nomination something personal.

"I was astonished first by the quantity of books that were on the banned list, and then I was baffled by the senseless banning of books that are present on the shelves of

classroom libraries across the state," said Revelle.

But that wasn't all that bothered her.

"In addition, I was angered by the refusal of the state to share the list with the prisoners' families," added Revelle.

Revelle explained that family members would have to ship books to inmates without knowing whether they would make the cut.

According to TDJC, the purpose of banning books is to keep out titles that might "incite tensions" in the prison system.

"It's a matter of maintaining a safe environment," said TDJC spokesperson Michelle Lyons in an article on the TCRP website.

However Medlock counters that the criminal justice system arbitrarily bans books, including books by Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winners, as well as books by New York Times bestsellers, civil rights leaders and Ivy League professors.

"Literacy is probably the most important skill a prisoner can have when they are released from custody," said Medlock.

This kind of stance on literacy, along with TCRP's history, impressed Revelle in the nominating process.

"What struck me the most as I looked at this organization was the previous work of the Texas Civil Rights Project. They have a history of standing up for the voiceless: the blind who couldn't vote, undocumented victims of abuse, and the poor who cannot afford legal representation," said Revelle.

The NCTE/SLATE Intellectual Freedom award honors individuals, groups, or institutions that merit recognition for advancing the cause of intellectual freedom. NCTE honors affiliate level nominees and selects one national award winner each year.

TCRP is TCTELA's third national award winning nominee since 2007.

TCTELA nominee The Texas Freedom Network received the national award in 2009 for supporting the state's educators



With so much unknown about the new state assessment, many teachers are feeling a sense of panic. Kay Shurtleff works with teachers in Princeton ISD as they prepare to begin a new year of school.

STAAR-gazing can get out of hand

By Kay Shurtleff, VP for Membership and Affiliates

Change is hard. Even good change. Looking toward a new assessment system in Texas, it's almost overwhelmingly tempting to run about like Chicken Little shouting, "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" Teachers are frustrated by what they do know about the new assessment system and even more frustrated by what they cannot yet know about it. A better use of that Chicken Little energy, though, might be to examine what is known and plan rich learning experiences accordingly. While it might be tempting to react and panic, students are better served by teachers who take careful stock of the situation and plan accordingly.

Known: Students will be limited to 26 lines for each composition. **Pro-action:** Use mentor texts to show students examples of clear, concise writing. Take a beautifully constructed passage from a writer like Hemingway and admire it with students. Then make it verbose. Help students see how much stronger concise writing is than wordy or repetitive writing.

President's
Corner

Early mornings, challenges—must mean another new school year

By Martha Medlock, President

This time of the year is always bitter sweet.

I enjoy the fact that I can sleep in and not wake up at 5 am. I like the fact that I don't have to be ready to walk out the door at 7am. In fact, I can enjoy a cup of coffee while watching the *Today Show*. But something in me misses the routine and schedule of being in school.

I love the start of school. It is a new beginning. I think about how I want my classroom to be arranged, what the first week will look like, and who the kids are walking through my door. I think how I will challenge them and how they will challenge me. I love the fact that I have the opportunity to re-create parts of myself every year.

This school year brings a new wave of challenges for Texas teachers. The first one is the new state assessment STAAR. We have received updates from TEA for a couple of years but without the benefit of field testing.

In January at the TCTELA conference, Victoria Young will present two different sessions: one on the new test and the other on the end of course exams. Young will offer insight to the challenges our students face and our incoming freshman will need to master to graduate.

The second biggest challenge is the financial shortfall facing districts during the next two years. TCTELA will host its second annual advocacy day in March of 2012. Please look to our website and other electronic media for information. Join us and make your voice heard. Even though the legislature is not in session, we feel it's important to develop our relationship with our senators and representatives.

Just as teachers can reinvent themselves, TCTELA is also reinventing itself.

Visit the newly designed and much more user-friendly website www.tctela.org to see the new TCTELA logo that will be a part of the 2011 NCTE century conference in Chicago along with logos from affiliates nation-wide.

Electronic Communications Manager, Krista Eaton, has worked to keep the website current and will be sending out e-mail blasts to keep you better informed. You should receive two per month each month. You can also choose to receive updates via Facebook and Twitter.

In addition to these monthly updates, you should receive our quarterly newsletter. NCTE recently awarded *Texas Voices* an honorable mention award. Finally, as a member of TCTELA, you receive our award-winning journal, *English in Texas*. Our editors, Carol Bedard, Leigh Van Horn, and Kim Pinkerton have continued the quality Texas teachers have come to depend on. Our editors have created new venues for our students' voices to be heard. Check the website for details.

Knowing the financial crisis facing schools, your TCTELA board is keeping membership dues the same and offering a great conference at the same rate as last year. For a list of our current keynote speakers, check our website. TCTELA also secured great hotel rates at the Crowne Plaza in San Antonio, located on the northern part of the River Walk, and also negotiated good parking rates. You can register to attend our conference on-line as well as book your hotel room.

As I begin to miss the last few days of summer, I look forward to a new school year. Please join me in facing this year with a dose of optimism, a dash of excitement of what it will bring, and reinvent yourself.

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SLATE Update

State legislators free to visit classrooms; Murray sponsors literacy bill

By Valerie Taylor, SLATE Representative

This year the Texas Legislature faced difficult decisions, and the result of their work will affect Texas schoolchildren and those who serve them. To help legislators better understand the ways their decisions affect children, let's invite legislators into our classrooms this fall. They will not be in session but instead back in their home districts where they are listening to their constituents—including you and the children you teach.

Help your legislators conduct some primary research about the kinds of issues they consider while they are in session: class size, amount of funding for teachers and for materials, curricular and testing requirements, and so much more. I challenge you to invite them for a visit. To find the contact information for your legislators (Senator and Representative) go to www.fyi.legis.state.tx.us.

NCTE Tidbits

• LEARN Act

NCTE has posted the following call for action:

Senator Patty Murray (WA) has reintroduced the [Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation](#) (LEARN; S. 929) Act along with cosponsors Mark Begich (AK), Sherrod Brown (OH), AL Franken (MN), Jack Reed (RI), and Bernie Sanders (VT). This legislation is a comprehensive, pre- K through grade 12 bill that features writing and reading and offers alignment from early childhood across all grade levels and across all subject areas with support for state literacy plans and money to districts for their self-defined needs.

[Please take a moment to write your Senators \[Senator Cornyn and Senator Hutchison\] asking them to cosponsor S. 929.](#)

See the [Senate version of the legislation, S. 929.](#)

[Read a summary of the legislation.](#)

- National Day on Writing: October 20, 2011—How will you celebrate? Check out the details about how to get involved at <http://www.ncte.org/dayonwriting>.

State Representative Donna Howard sponsored the first TCTELA Advocacy Day at the State Capitol.

With legislators not currently in session, SLATE Representative Valerie Taylor encourages teachers to invite their elected officials into classrooms to see the work teachers are doing with students every school day.



National Gallery of Writing: a collection of all kinds of writing from people from all walks of life—people just like you. Submit your stories, poems, recipes, e-mails, blogs, even audio, video, and artwork. And tell us below what you did in your school, library, office, or community to commemorate the day!

- NCTE Position Statements on Policy: Check out NCTE's ideas on improving the ways policy is established in relation to literacy education: <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/2011edpolicyplatform>.

The main points of this document state that to advance literacy learning, we must:

- Use teaching teams as the basic unit for decision making at the local and district level.
- Provide for systematic professional development as an essential component of successful school reform.
- Define teacher effectiveness as professional practice...
- Support a comprehensive literacy policy as presently described in the Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation (LEARN) Act...
- Create a transition plan for accountability as we move away from ineffective policies that over-emphasize testing toward more effective practices that support student learning and school improvement. vfstaylor@sbcglobal.net

Gringotts Vault Board cuts budget; attendance crucial

By Alana Morris, Executive Secretary

The Texas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts has supported Texas literacy for close to half a century, winning numerous awards for its journal, newsletter, and advocacy work at the state and national levels. The board is committed to sustaining the incredible synergy created by TCTELA members, even during these difficult financial times.

Your professional involvement is more important this year than perhaps ever before. The economic climate and budget cuts across the state threaten to affect the future of high quality professional development opportunities and other member benefits that build best practice in literacy instruction.

In June, the executive committee met to solidify TCTELA's budget for 2011-2012. After four hours of intense discussion and difficult decisions, the executive board arrived at a balanced budget based on speculative conference attendance for January 2012. Predicted attendance numbers are extremely conservative, but it is crucial that that TCTELA reaches its goal.

Building community, trust in classroom fields

By Krista Eaton, Electronic Communications Manager

“If you build it, they will come.”

In the movie, *Field of Dreams*, Kevin Costner, as Ray Kinsella, hears this message and interprets it to mean he should build a baseball field in the middle of his Iowa farm.

As teachers, building a culture of openness, discovery, and enthusiasm in the middle of your classrooms, generates priceless creativity, interest, and success from students to save and change the perception of education.

When setting up your classrooms this school year, remember that it involves more than mandatory curriculum coverage, strategic desk placement, and the posting of rules/procedures. In order to build a community, you might consider a mental floor plan.



Building a classroom that fits around students rather than trying to fit students to a system is just one suggestion to help teachers create a classroom environment that is diverse, accepting and enthusiastic.

In your classrooms, building a diversely accepting, trusting, and enthusiastic community can create an educational field of dreams and help connect students to learning.

If you build it, they will come! eatonk@ltidschools.org

Creating a Mental Floorplan

1. Teach students to pursue perfection. It isn't obtainable, but striving for it brings out the best in them.
2. Have fun! The class has to be able to laugh, and sometimes it's at your expense.
3. Get to know what is most important- that which motivates each one of your students.
4. Figure out strengths and weaknesses of your students and then design lessons to support their strengths and develop their weaknesses.
5. Openly communicate with parents so that they are involved, not intrusive.
6. Teaching is about relationships of trust. If you want to develop trust in your classroom, prove yourself trustworthy.
7. Surround yourself with great people, and don't concern yourself with who gets credit for the success.
8. Design a system for your students rather than trying to fit your students into a system.
9. Let your students know the worst mistake they can make is being afraid to make a mistake.
10. The real beauty of teaching is that it is contagious! Attitudes are picked up by students, and, if they are positive, they produce an undercurrent of energy that students want to be around.

Remember students have a variety of influences through their educational journey. As their teacher, you can provide educational endeavors with enthusiastic instruction that will engage not only their academic studies but also their real life connections.

In the movie, *Field of Dreams*, the Black Sox came and so did people from all over to watch a baseball game and help a son connect to his father.

Gringotts Vault conference attendance crucial

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Your organization needs every member's help in getting the word out about this year's conference in San Antonio.

The following were key changes made during the June budget meeting:

- \$10,000 in cuts were made in expenditures between the 2011 budget and the proposed 2012 budget;
- Committee funds were cut;
- Funds were left in the legislative committee and SLATE budgets as these committee's active involvement continues to be important for members and for advocacy in general;
- Funds were also left in the Membership and Affiliate Committee as TCTELA is continuing to support new affiliates in under-represented areas of the state;
- Another Austin board meeting was changed to be held via webinar to cut travel expenses. Only two meetings of five will be held in Austin;
- Restructured reimbursement structure for board members attending NCTE conference; and
- Conference budget for speakers was cut to match attendance patterns during the past several years for Sunday morning events. No matter how many national speakers are scheduled for Sunday, attendance remains the same. alana.morris@springbranchisd.com

Make first year worth repeating, not regretting

By Martha Medlock, President

As a first year teacher, you face an enormous challenge. Not only do you have to get to know the nuances of the faculty and staff and prepare your lesson plans to the specification your campus requires, you also have to decide on your classroom management style.

The first year I taught was one that showed me a lot about myself; and also one that I wish I could take back. I think most teachers wish they could take that first year back and do it all over again, or at least have the opportunity to apologize to all those kids. My fear of failing or looking stupid in front of the students clouded my sound judgment. I got into power struggles with students who challenged my authority and liberally applied lunch detention for ANY infraction. One student accumulated forty five days of lunch detention for chewing gum in one weeks' time. Crazy? Yes. Normal? Unfortunately...yes.

First year teachers tend to go to extremes: super strict or super slack. Neither choice is good. If you are too strict, you will end up with a first year like mine. If you are too nice, you will end up with a class lacking structure of any kind. Both options offer little control and even less teaching. The goal is to achieve a balance between the two. Be friendly, be kind, be strict, and be fair. So here is some advice from someone who has been teaching 16 years and has learned a lot about managing a successful classroom.

First, know that you have the credentials to teach, but you don't know everything. It is normal to fear not knowing the answer. After all, you are the teacher. However, it is better to admit you are fallible than try to fake it. Students will know; they have a sixth sense. It's okay to admit that you don't know the answer. It is better to model how to find the answer or challenge the class to find the answer. Teachers are human too and the pressure to be perfect is unrealistic.

The second thing you want to do is determine your non-negotiables. For example, I want all my students to have the opportunity to learn. Therefore, one of my non-negotiables is not to interrupt that learning by talking or otherwise causing a disruption. I give a verbal redirection and if that doesn't stop the behavior, I remove the student from the room until I can visit with him/her one-on-one. My other non-

negotiables are my classroom is a safe zone (no bullying), students respect themselves and others, and students work to their ability. Once you have established what your non-negotiables are, you need to apply these consistently and fairly. You will gain the respect from your students and your classroom will be a healthy learning environment.

Thirdly, work smarter and not harder. One of the best tips I got from a book is the concept of Alpha Numbers. Teachers have their own organizational tricks, but this one can be easily used by anyone. As soon as your roster is finalized (wait about a week for all schedule changes to get processed), give each student an Alpha Number. This first student on your roster is number one (so on and so forth) until everyone has a number. Collect all work in alpha order. This allows you to know who is turning in work and who isn't. Students can no longer claim they "turned it in" and the "teacher must have lost it." Collecting the work in this manner eliminates this excuse. The other thing this procedure does is allow you to record your grades quickly since you don't have to scroll up and down your grade book to match the work to the student. The last thing this procedure does is save time when collecting work. Students know the order of numbers, so students can anticipate when their number will be called.

One last suggestion: I think it's important to greet your students at the door every day and invite them into your classroom. This establishes a welcoming tone as well as giving you an opportunity to make contact with each and every student. I shake students hand as they come to class. This is an important skill for any young person to learn. What about the germs? My answer is a good supply of liquid hand sanitizer for you and the kids.

It is important to be friendly, but you are not their friend. You may be the only safe adult in a young person's life. Establish your rules from day one and apply them consistently and fairly. Your students should see you as a professional but also as a person. Share parts of your life with them, and they will do the same. Learn from your mistakes and model what that looks like. Students will respect you if you show them respect too. marthamedlock@austin.rr.com

Believe it—working with teen writers not easy

By Carol Reville, Past President

"Promise me you won't trust any expert who tells you that teaching the complexities of thinking through an idea in writing to teenagers will be easy and follow a perfectly controlled structure. I've never met those teenagers" (Kittle 83).

Let's get real about teaching writing to adolescents. It's hard. Penny Kittle's book *Write Beside Them* presents a realistic description of what it means to be a great writing teacher.

Complete with mistakes and messes, Kittle reveals her craft. Through well chosen narratives, she brings us to her classroom

to see how she writes beside her students, and in the process, she writes beside each of us that plan writing workshops that meet the needs of the unique students we are assigned each year.

Presented in a respectful and honest voice, Kittle provides foundational advice for organizing a quality writing workshop, including a daily schedule, her seven principles, and even a script of how she starts her writing workshop at the beginning of the year. Experienced writing workshop teachers will benefit from the student

examples, the conferencing notes, and her honest account of her students' work.

A good writing teacher needs powerful strategies to encourage reluctant adolescents to own their writing. Kittle shares how she uses writer's notebooks, quick writes, reading connections, mini lessons, professional models, conferring, response groups, story boards, genre studies, and multi-genre projects to create a successful experience for her students. In addition, she responds clearly to the tough topics of motivation and mechanics.

Cisneros foundation promotes art, brings writers together

By Michael Guevara, *Texas Voices* Editor



Renowned writer Sandra Cisneros and *Texas Voices* Editor Michael Guevara take a moment to visit at the Macondista reading at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio. Cisneros was a featured speaker at the 2005 TCTELA conference in San Antonio.

Rich tones of conjunto music squeezed from an accordion, bejeweled and sparkling from the early evening sun still shining in through the cathedral-shaped windows, filled the room. Gritas of “Ai-hay” and “Orale” rang out from the crowd as the acoustic guitar and cello chimed in on “Cielito Lindo.” All around the room in Providence Hall on the campus of Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio, more and more people filed into to fill the rows of folding chairs.

It could have been any fiesta or just some random music festival that brought out such a lively group on a still steamy Thursday night, but this room had an altogether different feel and an altogether different audience brought together by one singularly overwhelming persona, one singularly overwhelming character. Although you would never know from watching her that the people in the room had come because of her, that she was the buzz in the room. While eyes, ears, and hearts tuned to the front of the room she casually lounged on sofa off to the side applying mascara and receiving air kisses from cheek to cheek as admirer and friend alike basked in the aura of Sandra Cisneros.

Admittedly, I hold a certain affinity for Sandra Cisneros ever since she had accepted my invitation to speak at the TCTELA conference some six years ago. This woman whose writing is celebrated by cities and taught in classrooms across the country had graciously waived her speaking fee and donated the meager-by-comparison honorarium to the outreach project we had selected for that year. I had shown up this evening simply to be in her presence again.

But this was a different kind of night. This night was not officially about her. Tonight she would share the stage with other writers, writers she had brought together.

And the room was filled with them.

What started off as a workshop for writers gathered around Cisneros’s kitchen table in 1998 has grown into a writing workshop that serves more than 150 participants in 23 states. For the past 15 years, the **Macondo Foundation** has organized and hosted a workshop for professional writers who work in underserved communities.

And the writers who come.

In this year’s quinceanera workshop, as Cisneros called it, writers with the most impressive of credentials came to hone their craft.

In the workshop were writers with MFAs and Ph.Ds. There were novelists and poets, award-winning children’s authors. There were creative writing professors, writers whose work had been published in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The New York Times Magazine*. There was a finalist for a Breadloaf Writer’s Conference award, a

graduate of the prestigious Iowa Writer’s Workshop, a slam poet—and all of them came to get better at what they do.

At the end of the week-long workshop and after the warm-up of traditional Mexican music, the writers gathered for “La Luz (The Light): 2011 Macondista Reading, so named because Cisneros believes that art is needed to bring out the light in dark times and that we are living in dark times.

In three-minute intervals, writers shared highlights and excerpts from the work they created, revised, or polished during the workshop. The writers shared poetry, personal essays, children’s books, short stories, and even the introductions to novels.

Like the music before, the words that came from the writers filled the room with richness, flavor, and luz. michaelmguevara@gmail.com

working with teen writers not easy

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A high quality teacher can overcome barriers to student learning. This book, written specifically for high school English teachers that want to move beyond the canon and grammar exercises to create real readers and writers, provides a stunningly clear blueprint for a rigorous writing workshop.

Beautifully written, Kittle clearly practices what she preaches to her students regarding revision. Each page demonstrates writing that is well-crafted, organized and engaging. The short chapters followed by student narratives allow teachers to share Kittle’s experiences and “write beside” their own students. carolrevellweb.com

nominee receives national award

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and working to be sure their voices were heard when the State Board of Education chose to ignore the voices of teachers in adopting new English Language Arts standards.

In 2007, TCTELA nominated national award winner Kimberly Horne of Austin, Texas. Horne created a senior English curriculum that included Annie Proulx’s novel *Brokeback Mountain* and successfully defended a challenge to the novel from parents who threatened to pull a \$3 million pledge to the school if the book was not removed from the curriculum.

This year’s awards will be presented in November at the national convention in Chicago.

Tricking out instructions for a new generation

By Katrina Gonzales, President Elect

Amidst the cacophony that was my weekend in Dallas, I recognized, once more, the importance of weaving technology into our English language arts song. Hosted in the same hotel where my family stayed this sweltering August weekend were a Young Dancers' Competition, a Mary Kay conference, and the 2011 QuakeCon. The first two were familiar to me. I knew nothing about the last—QuakeCon.

With a gathering of more than 3,000 attendees, QuakeCon was by far the largest group in the hotel, and, perhaps, the most colorful, even overshadowing the costumed young dancing girls and the business women with distinctive pink feathers tucked into their perfectly-smoothed coifs.

The mostly teen and young adult QuakeCon attendees stood out above the others with their enthusiastic chatter about software, programming, and BYOC (Bring Your Own Computer). They were more than willing to engage in a conversation about their “tricked out” computers, the competition, and how many energy drinks they would need to stay awake for the entire weekend.

Curiosity pulled me into the registration line where I completed a form, quickly thought of a “handle,” and stretched out my almost 49-year old arm to have a bright orange QuakeCon 2011 bracelet snapped around my wrist.

I traipsed into the darkened exhibitor hall, not quite knowing what I might encounter. An announcer on a stage gave away freebies related to gaming. In the center of the hall stood an exhibit of the newest game to come out from a particular company. At least six people waited in each line to play.

Other vendors sold shirts, gaming gear, and energy drinks. I made my way around the hall, much like I do when I attend TCTELA or NCTE, thanking the exhibitor for a bookmark or an Avatar sticker in this case. Eventually, I found a cavernous hall, darkened as well, with tables and computers set up throughout—close to 800 to be precise. In front of each computer was an attendee playing games against other attendees, totally engrossed in the task at hand. The hum of computers and clicking keyboards created something akin to music. I stood and watched, fascinated by the creativity and the engagement of these teenagers.

While I don't condone playing computer games exclusively, I do think that this experience further cemented my belief that, as educators, we need to maximize opportunities for bringing technology into our classrooms in ways that might



Jennifer Lilly, president of the Concho Valley Teachers of English Association, discusses “cool tools” for the classroom in her presentation on using Prezi, Animoto, and Glogster in the classroom.

replicate some of the technological activities students enjoy outside of school. Troy Hicks' book, *The Digital Writing Workshop*, provides a framework for understanding how to bring technology into the writing workshop.

While the educator/reader needs to have experience with writing workshop, Hicks provides simple guidelines for bringing technology into the writing workshop. Hicks attests, “that if we engage students in real writing tasks and we use technology in such a way that it complements their innate need to find purposes and audiences for their work, we can have them engaged in a digital writing process that focuses first on the writer, then on the writing, and lastly on the technology.”

Hicks provides easy-to-follow instructions regarding a variety of activities to help teachers maximize what naturally occurs in writing workshop but with digital tools. Using blogs and wikis as student writing portfolios becomes even more powerful when one considers the permanence of the type of writing conferences that can occur. Add to this the collaborative nature of students commenting on others' pieces, and this begins to emulate what teens do with technology outside of the classroom. In addition to the instructions that Hicks provides, he leads the reader to websites and pages that showcase examples from the field.

The Digital Writing Workshop by Troy Hicks provides teachers, or digital immigrants, many tools to engage and to enable the digital natives in our English language arts classrooms.

While I don't plan to “trick out” my computer anytime soon like the QuakeCon attendees, I certainly can bring a bit of the outside digital world into my writing workshop song. katrina.gonzales@scisd.net

Book offers practical techniques; yields effective, positive results

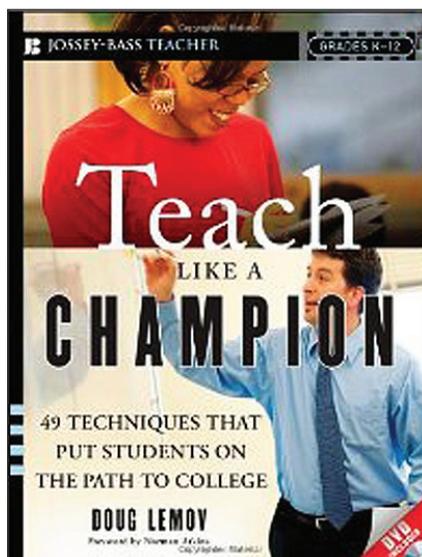
By Julie Schweers, Recording Secretary

“Many of the techniques you will read about in this book may at first seem mundane, unremarkable, even disappointing.” Doug Lemov admits that the techniques he presents in his book are not revolutionary ideas and may even seem a little gimmicky. However, Lemov masterfully presents simple, effective ideas that all teachers can incorporate in their classrooms without spending an inordinate amount of time or money. Lemov credits a dozen or so teachers, who he claims are champions in the field, with informing his field notes that became this book. He refers to these champions frequently while presenting each technique.

Lemov acknowledges at the beginning of the book that while the techniques he presents should be implemented with discretion, he claims that incorporating all or some of them will yield practical and effective classroom results. Lemov explains each technique in great detail, and even highlights the key idea in a separate box. A DVD comes with the book that includes videos showcasing champion teachers using each technique.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part entitled, “Teach Like a Champion: The Essential Techniques,” consists of nine chapters: “Setting High Academic Expectations,” “Planning that Ensures Academic Achievement,” “Structuring and Delivering Your Lessons,” “Engaging Students in Your Lessons,” “Creating a Strong Classroom Culture,” “Setting and Maintaining High Behavioral Expectations,” “Building Character and Trust,” “Improving Your Pacing: Additional Techniques for Creating a Positive Rhythm in the Classroom,” and “Challenging Students to Think Critically: Additional Techniques for Questioning and Responding to Students.” The second part, “Helping Students Get the Most Out of Reading: Critical Skills and Techniques,” focuses on reading and how every teacher can and must be a reading teacher.

While there are some techniques that might give a veteran teacher pause, most are



useful and can be executed easily. Some of the strategies include *No Opt Out*, *Stretch It*, *Without Apology*, *Pepper*, and *Change the Pace*. With *No Opt Out*, students are not allowed to respond to a question with, “I don’t know.” This technique can be used in four different formats. First, the teacher provides the answer and then asks the student to repeat it. Second, another student provides the answer and the initial student repeats it. Third, the teacher provides a cue and the student uses it to answer. Finally, another student provides a cue and the initial student has to find the answer. In all of these situations, the student who doesn’t know the answer is not allowed to opt out of giving an answer. Hence, the student will become responsible for an answer, will eventually stop opting for, “I don’t know,” and will learn that complacency in the classroom is unacceptable.

Lemov believes that learning does not end with the right answer. *Stretch It* is when a teacher responds to a student who has the right answer with more questions. This technique works two-fold. It shows the teacher if a student has mastered the material presented, and it pushes a student ahead by applying the student’s knowledge in a new way.

Without Apology helps teachers prevent themselves from apologizing for teaching

worthy materials. *Pepper* is a fast-paced, unpredictable review of the fundamentals, and is a great warm-up activity. And, *Change the Pace* uses a variety of activities to teach objectives and move through each activity in a smooth and seamless manner.

There are many more specific, concrete, actionable techniques (44 to be exact) in this book that makes reading *Teach Like a Champion* worthy of any teacher’s time. The book offers practical, easy-to-use techniques that have depth and focus. Teachers will find the sensible techniques Lemov offers in his book, if incorporated correctly and consistently, will yield a great return.

STAAR-gazing

continued from page 1

Chicken Little Approach: Limit all writing that students do to one page assignments.

Known: The STAAR prompts will be scaffolded and will contain four parts--READ..., THINK ABOUT..., WRITE..., BE SURE TO....

Pro-action: give students tools to enable them to think through a prompt. Give them interesting things to read and look at what will stir a reaction. Ask them to brainstorm their thoughts about it with their classmates. Then ask them to crystallize their thoughts into words on a page. **Chicken Little Approach:** Repeatedly give students practice tests so they will be comfortable with the format of the test.

Known: The STAAR writing rubrics have the categories Organization and Progression, Development of Ideas, and Use of Language/Conventions.

Pro-action: Using resources like Penny Kittle, Jim Burke, Gretchen Bernabei, writing projects, and other quality staff development to teach the craft of writing. Use the language of the rubrics and the TEKS to talk about, model, and notice qualities of effective writing. **Chicken Little Approach:** Grade every single piece of writing using the STAAR rubric.

As educators know all too well, the easy and seemingly obvious approach is not always the best approach. When those around you are speculative, panicky, and frenzied, it’s difficult not to be swept along. But as the state approaches a new day in assessment, help each other remember that the sky isn’t falling, but there are definitely STAARS.

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Moving beyond humphs to transform teaching

By Michael Guevara, *Texas Voices* Editor

School years begin pretty much the same way everywhere for teachers—with huzzah and humph!

At the traditional fresh-from-summer-vacation, first-of-the-year faculty meeting, where tables of donuts, muffins, and breakfast tacos (this is Texas) await just before pleas and platitudes about this year's wellness campaign, the huzzahs begin.

Reports from the newly married, announcements of the newly birthed, congratulations for major purchases, and highlights of summer travel fill the room. Camaraderie abounds and then the power points begin.

From the mouths of sage administrators and the hallowed halls of central office come the goals, the agenda, the roadmap for this year in education—and from around the room come the humphs!

It's not difficult to picture them: Those teachers who have mentally, if not also physically, crossed their arms and dug in their heels in defiance. They have seen it all in education. They have survived every new edict, permutation, and program thrown at them, and this year's plan offers them nothing new.

Teachers, it seems, don't change, at least that is the finding of Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley in their study, "The Persistence of Presentism."

Hargreaves and Shirley drew on the seminal research conducted by Dan Lortie in his study, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*. In the 1975 study, Lortie identified that "the culture of public school teaching was characterized by three overlapping and mutually reinforcing 'orientations' that impeded educational improvement."

Lortie identified these orientations as presentism, conservatism, and individualism.

Presentism, according to Lortie "referred to the overwhelming pressures of schools that kept teachers locked into short-term perspectives and unable or unwilling to envision or plan collaboratively for long-term, systemic change."

Looking to the arm-crossed teachers, conservatism "referenced teachers' mistrust of reform initiatives and their loyalty to established classroom practices that worked

for them regardless of research findings or pupil learning outcomes."

And in an age of 360 observations, walkthroughs, and professional learning communities, individualism "was manifested in teachers' preferences for working alone without the intrusion of colleagues or administrators in their own 'cellular' classrooms."

While Lortie's study from the '70s may seem dated, Hargreaves and Shirley also reviewed the findings of Cohn and Kottkamp from their 1993 study that found teachers' situations had not improved. In fact, the study found that teachers experienced "increased vulnerability and decreased status and that the emphasis on standards and accountability that grew out of the *A Nation at Risk* report "contradicted teachers' sense of their ethical obligations to attend to the social and emotional aspects of learning."

In relation to Lortie's study, Cohn and Kottkamp found that presentism, conservatism, and individualism had grown in their power to shape teachers' workplace culture rather than diminish with time.

According to Hargreaves and Shirley, the studies by Lortie and by Cohn and Kottkamp have provided important information in relation to school improvement efforts. The orientations of conservatism and individualism have been addressed through ideas such as collaborative coaching and learning models as well as professional learning communities; however, "there have been few or no parallel efforts to deal with presentism.

In their study, Hargreaves and Shirley investigated a school reform network or more than 300 secondary schools in England entitled Raising Achievement Transforming Learning. The study in England has bearing on teachers in the states because, according to the authors, "by the mid-1990s, the standardization juggernaut was reaching full speed in the United Kingdom, the United States, and many parts of Canada and Australia."

Hargreaves and Shirley thought it also important to note that Lortie's study did not, as many teachers would like to, "view a phenomenon such as presentism to be the manifestation of draconian administrators

or Machiavellian policy makers." According to Lortie, presentism grew from the psychic rewards of teaching, which teachers perceive as scarce, erratic, and unpredictable because they are subject to the "ebb and flow" of student response, are uncertain about future rewards, and this doubt makes the teachers unwilling to sacrifice present opportunities for future possibilities.

Additionally, Hargreaves and Shirley recognize that "time has always been a tyranny for public school teachers" and that "the demands on teachers to organize, lead, and react to the vagaries and vicissitudes of large groups of energetic children gathered together in one place meant that teachers had few opportunities for long-term planning to develop cultures of inquiry and instructional modification that might enhance the quality of learning for all children."

Unfortunately, results from the study showed little change in the orientation of presentism among teachers.

The study found that even "professionally inclusive and well-designed projects that offer collaborative opportunities and incentives to engage with long-range and short-term improvement can fail to eliminate presentism."

Additionally, the study noted that contemporary efforts to effect educational change are "embedded in a sea of social, economic, and cultural conditions that persistently pull people back to, and endlessly immerse them in short-term orientations."

But hope exists.

Teachers must emerge from their classrooms and seek quality professional development, and, in these days of new assessments and budget constraints, resist the peddlers of promise. Teachers must throw open the doors of their classrooms to parents, administrators, legislators, and even other teachers.

At the end of their article, the authors remind readers of the words of Emile Durkheim who charged teachers to remember that schools prepare students for the future, and then they challenge teachers to take care of today with an eye toward tomorrow that includes an "inclusive and inspiring vision and language of educational improvement that connects the learning of individuals to the lives of their communities and their future societies."

Using mentor text in genre study

By P. Tim Martindell, VP-elect for Membership and Affiliates

With the changing landscape of English instruction and assessment in Texas, comes the need for models for teaching to the genre based Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) adopted in 2009. Gone are the days of the “What I did over summer vacation” essay. Beginning in fourth grade, students will now be expected to be proficient writers of at least two different genres, including expository mode with increasing levels of sophistication in seventh grade, English I, and English II.

Dr. John O’Flahavan of the University of Maryland advocates the Consume, Critique, Produce (CCP) method for building student competency in genre specific writing.

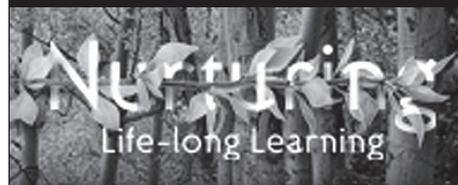
This three step process integrates reading and writing instruction and begins by exposing students to mentor texts from a variety of sources that exemplify the characteristics of the chosen genre. The teacher guides the students through the exemplar texts while fostering their ability to skillfully identify characteristics of and “consume” the genre.

Websites such as www.tweentribune.com and www.npr.org, magazines such as TIME and Newsweek, and the local newspaper provide relevant, timely examples of short, topical essays. Additional high interest level essays (with audio) can be found at the Engines of Our Ingenuity website (www.uh.edu/engines/) and on the websites for National Public Radio’s “This American Life” and “StoryCorps” programs.

Next, the students learn to “critique” the texts they have read. As the students become proficient in recognizing specific genres and their characteristics, teachers begin scaffolding critique by discussing specific organizational patterns, literary technique, and writer’s craft that exemplify the genre. Teachers guide students to compare and contrast specific examples and encourage student discussion on how authors choose specific form and genre for their intended message and audience. Teachers work with students to establish criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of mentor text – and ultimately to guide and evaluate their own writing.

Finally, the students are ready to “produce” examples of the specific genre studied. Although there are no formulas for writing in specific genres, teachers should use mentor text to guide students through organizational patterns and techniques specific to particular genres of writing. Process writing, which includes brainstorming, initial organization and drafting, as well as peer collaboration, will allow the students to try their hands at some of the author’s craft and technique earlier identified and critiqued. ptmwriter@aol.com

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CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Publication: *English in Texas*, Volume 42.1 (Spring /Summer 2012)

Theme: Nurturing Life Long Learning

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Call for Manuscripts: The TCTELA annual conference theme is Nurturing Life-Long Learning. We encourage you to consider the ways that you engage your students in reading, writing, thinking, speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing their thoughts and ideas in ways that help them to consider themselves as members of and contributors to literacy communities in your classroom and beyond.

Call for Student Writing: With the theme directed to Nurturing Life-Long Learning, share with us a piece that illustrates a hobby, an idea, or an activity that you plan to pursue for many years. For example, maybe you are a stamp collector and could write a piece about the history of some of the most interesting stamps you have learned about, or perhaps you are an avid fan of an author and want to share the knowledge you gain from reading his/her books. Learning takes many forms and happens in many places. Share your experiences with us!