

FORUM

NEWSLETTER OF THE COMMITTEE ON CONTINGENT, ADJUNCT, AND PART-TIME FACULTY (CAP)

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CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION

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From the Editor

Janice Albert

Nearly everywhere we look, businesses are getting rid of employees. In California, where I live, many state-owned recreational properties are under the management of a private company based in Delaware. Instead of the career park service employee checking you in at the lodge or guiding you about the trails, a “civilian” works the front desk and, chances are, you will be taking a self-guided nature walk.

Closer to home, if you work at a college or university, the odds are that your bookstore is now run by a private company. The clerks are no longer on the college payroll. Whatever their needs are, they are no longer the school’s responsibility.

The many proposals for school vouchers are said to offer “choice,” but my hunch is that they are appealing for financial reasons. A public school teacher is essentially a public employee. Raises, benefits, pension plans—these encumber the state and become part of the tax burden. Teachers at private and parochial schools, on the other hand, draw their pay from another source, and must articulate their needs to someone other than the legislature. Vouchers will cause the nation’s teen and preteen student population to slide like a glacier right off the map of public responsibility, carrying away the need to fund teachers, libraries, and new buildings as they go.

Because readers of *FORUM* are members of NCTE and generally aware of the adjunct situation in higher education, they already know certain economic facts—the reality of the differences in pay and benefits for contingent (temporary) faculty over tenured faculty. Our fight against the effects of our present two-tiered professional structure is impeded by our lack of unity as a profession. Especially, we are

About Forum

Forum is published twice a year by the Committee on Contingent, Adjunct, and Part-Time Faculty (CAP) of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. As editor, I welcome you to submit news items, book reviews, editorials, and/or articles related to non-tenure-track faculty in college English or composition courses. Submissions for the fall issue should be received no later than May 1; for the winter issue, the deadline is September 1. Note: Submissions will not be returned.

Submit your work electronically via e-mail or an e-mail attachment. Address your work to jmalbert2002@earthlink.net and put the words "Forum article" somewhere in your subject line. Submissions should include the following information:

- your name
- your title(s)
- your institution(s)
- home address and phone number; institutional address(es) and phone number(s)
- if applicable, venue(s) where submission was published or presented previously

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riddled by class distinctions, status questions, and the need to see other teachers as our inferiors.

Take this quiz. Go back two paragraphs to the opening clause, "Because readers of *FORUM* are members of NCTE" What was your first thought? My guess is that some readers disliked being called members of NCTE—wanting to identify themselves only as members of CCCC. It rankles some college teachers to be grouped with El-Hi teachers. It irritates many four-year college teachers to be grouped with two-year college faculty. It insults some university faculty to be called *teachers* at all, rather than *professors*.

The divisions within our profession based on class and imagined advantage are harmful to our cause. If we do not want to be "second class" faculty because we are lecturers or adjuncts, then we ought to be able to see the disadvantage of creating a status structure within our profession based on the age and preparation of the students we meet.

United we stand, we impress, we persuade. Faculty who can cross institutional boundaries are needed for the leadership they can provide. In this issue of *FORUM*, we feature several such faculty—all one-time high school teachers who have followed interesting career paths. May you enjoy and be inspired by their stories.

From the Co-chair

Laurie Delaney

Hello, I'm Laurie Delaney, Co-chair of the Contingent Adjunct and Part-time Faculty Committee. I'm currently in my fifth year of a full-time non-tenure-track position on a regional campus. Before working full-time, I worked as a part-timer for almost ten years. At one point, I taught nine classes on five campuses and worked part-time as a writing tutor. I have been active in faculty labor issues since I was an undergraduate. In addition to my work on CAP, I serve on the executive committee of the non-tenure-track collective bargaining unit (the first of its kind) of the Kent State University Chapter of AAUP. At last year's CCCC meeting, I presented on a panel, "Professional Transformations: Organizing to Convert Part-time or Non-tenure-track Faculty to Full-time or Tenure-track Appointments." Anthony Scott, also a speaker on the panel, began the discussion on professionalization. My Co-chair, James McDonald, and I would like to continue that discussion at the Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Special Interest Group at the 2004 Conference in San Antonio.

Part-time faculty are a diverse group. Some teach multiple classes, sometimes at several different institutions, in order to make a living. Some teach a class or two for supplemental income because they and/or their spouse or partner have another job that serves as the primary source of income. Some teach occasionally for the fun of it, claiming they would volunteer if they weren't paid because they love to teach. Some see part-time teaching as a job; others see it as a career. Others see it as a stepping-stone in their career development while still others see it as a hobby. Some of these teachers see themselves as workers and identify with the working class; others perceive themselves as white-collar professionals. Some part-timers are happy in their positions; others feel they are treated badly and want to see their working conditions improved. These differences in circumstances and attitudes make it difficult to organize part-time faculty. Part of the challenge is whether or not part-timers and non-tenure-track faculty should seek to present themselves as professionals. What are the benefits and costs of such a presentation? What are the problems of professionalization, and how can they be overcome? Can being seen as professionals make part-time and non-tenure-track faculty visible, or will such a view make them even less visible?

Part-time and non-tenure-track faculty's primary responsibility is teaching. Sometimes these faculty are evaluated. Often they are not evaluated, or they are not an active part of the evaluation process. Although some are encouraged to be scholars and to perform service, many are not. Some choose to do so (often with little or no institutional support); others have no desire to do so. Many institutions

expect their faculty to keep current in their field of study, yet they don't see the teaching of writing as a discipline that evolves (if they see composition studies as a discipline at all). Rarely do they provide opportunities for faculty development, especially for teachers of first-year students. Professional organizations like CCCC offer some support, including issuing position statements and offering some funding for attending the Conference. CCCC is one of only a few professional organizations with such a strong focus on teaching. Despite CCCC's commitment to teachers and teaching, many part-time and non-tenure-track faculty see the work presented at CCCCs and in *CCC* as alienating and far removed from their actual classroom experiences.

Becoming involved in their departments and institutions presents another dilemma for these faculty for several reasons. They are rarely if ever offered compensation for the extra work of serving on committees or participating in academic governance. One option is to be unrepresented, which leads to being overlooked and marginalized. The other option is to work for no pay. This sets a precedent for grossly undervaluing the services of these dedicated teachers. Many times those who do get involved have a volunteer attitude and are not strong advocates for faculty by addressing touchy issues such as wages and working conditions. Often part-timers who serve are very active, sometimes at more than one institution or at more than one level (institutional, state, regional, and/or national). Such advocates tend to burn out quickly, lasting a few years, making slight progress on issues that often take decades to fully address. In positions with such a high attrition rate, it is difficult to get a large and dedicated pool of faculty to serve. Often when an active teacher stops being an activist, there is no institutional memory, and new activists must start from scratch.

These are only a few of the many issues surrounding the professionalization of part-time and non-tenure-track faculty. We hope you will join us at the SIG in San Antonio to continue this discussion.

Being Open to Opportunity

Sallyanne Fitzgerald

As frequently happens in college English departments, several faculty members were talking about what led them to teaching. Surprisingly, three of the four of us had started as high school English teachers. We discovered that each of us had benefited from that experience and thought we had learned as much about teaching there as we had learned anywhere else. Like the others, my original plans were to spend my entire career teaching high school English.

In the sixth grade, I had decided that I wanted to be an English teacher because I was good at diagramming sentences. My reasons altered slightly when, in the seventh grade, I became enamored of my English teacher who read the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" to the class. I realized that if I studied English in college, I could read more of such literature. So, I entered the university with the goal of becoming a high school English teacher. My vision did not change even when, in my senior year, my Spanish professor offered to nominate me for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, making the idea of graduate school a possibility. I did not receive the fellowship, and because none of the schools to which I applied offered enough funding for me to attend, I decided to accept the high school position where I had completed my internship and to take graduate courses simultaneously.

In interviews over the years, I have never been comfortable with the typical question, "What do you plan to be doing in ten years?" My career is more the result of changing my goals as my life situation changed than it is the result of any careful planning. I have changed goals to cope with unplanned challenges, as well as to accept unexpected opportunities.

After a year and a half of high school teaching, I took maternity leave to have my first child. The day I was leaving, the high school counselor asked when I planned to return, and I told him I was going to be a "stay-at-home Mom." However, that decision was going to change when I realized how much I missed the classroom. In fact, the clue that something was very wrong came when I found myself dreaming up plots for the soap operas I was watching while nursing my daughter. So I went back to graduate school with the goal of studying the literature I loved and eventually returning to the high school classroom.

Fate intervened when my husband was laid off as an aerospace worker and began to look for a new job. We moved to California where I continued my graduate study. As soon as I finished my master's degree, I began looking for work and realized that with two small children, I could not teach in a high school. First, no part-time jobs were available, and second, I would have to take additional courses to be certified in a state where I had not received my undergraduate degree. Of course, I thought about trying for a part-time position at my university, but the English department chair told me they would not hire me part-time because I had not been a teaching assistant for them. I even went back to the university to take a class in Teaching English as a Second Language because I thought jobs were opening in that field. As I was complaining about my fate to a friend from graduate school, she offered to ask the community college professor for whom she was reading papers if he would take me as a reader because she could no longer read for him. I was desperate to earn some money without having to pay a babysitter and jumped at the chance.

This was my introduction to the community college. I had no idea what the students were like or what the curriculum required. Growing up in Florida before the advent of the two-year institution, I didn't even know anyone who had attended a community college. In spite of my lack of knowledge or experience, the professor was very patient with me and let me offer suggestions for grades as well as mark the papers for grammar. By reading his assignments, I gained insight into both what students were expected to do and what skill level they brought to the work.

Two years later, when my third child was born, I realized that I needed to look for additional income, and this time I thought about the community college. Nothing was offered to me until I approached the professor for whom I was a reader. His wife was chair of the English Department at another school, and on his word, she offered me a class.

At last, I thought, I have a real teaching position again! But the second semester, when my class was cancelled for low enrollment, I sank into a major depression because it seemed as if my world had ended. Things turned around in the fall when they offered me classes again. That was the beginning of a wonderful experience. The college allowed me to write a class in Terror Fiction, actually mostly Victorian literature, which had been my graduate emphasis, and then they allowed me to teach it. Surely, no other part-timer has been so lucky as I was!

After a few years at that community college, I had a student whose mother was a history faculty member at another two-year college. I asked to use her mother's name as a way to introduce myself in a cover letter, and based on that letter, I was offered two classes at a second community college. Now, with four classes, I could pay the babysitter and teach during the day instead of only at night. I thought my career was on a roll when suddenly my husband was offered his dream job in Missouri. I cried every day for months about moving, but the move was actually the one that catapulted me into the next level of my career. Based on my California community college experience, the St. Louis Community College offered me classes on two different campuses over the next years. I continued with them when I began full-time university teaching and only dropped the community college classes when I became a university administrator. Before I had accepted my full-time university position, I was offered a high school position again, but by now my goals had changed: I wanted to teach in higher education.

Over the years, I moved from being a non-tenure-track, university lecturer to a coordinator, assistant director, director, and acting associate vice chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Missouri–St. Louis where I finished my doctorate. I loved each of my jobs, even as I moved farther and farther away from my original goal. Then, suddenly, my husband was laid off from another aerospace company as the economy took a downturn. The next job he got was back in California, and so I started looking for a position, too. He moved, and then nine

months later, I was offered an English Department chair's position at a California community college. It was my dream job: a chance to work closely with colleagues on curriculum, to make a difference by hiring excellent faculty, and to help establish a writing center with peer tutors. How fortunate I felt to be back in a California community college and to be chairing as well as teaching there!

For nine and a half years, I looked forward to going to work. I had a chance to work with dedicated faculty who were in the forefront of creating a curriculum based on current theory and research. Even when all the administrators were fired and allowed to reapply for new positions, I loved the school and the students. My new, expanded position opened new curricular areas and responsibilities to me and prepared me for seeking the vice president's position where I find myself today.

My current position is a long way from what I imagined as a sixth grader or even as a beginning part-time community college teacher. However, it brings together all the things I have wanted to do: impact curriculum, work for student success, hire excellent faculty, make a difference in an educational institution. Maybe I will return to the classroom, which is really my abiding love, in the final days of my career.

Currently, Napa Valley College Vice President of Instruction Sallyanne H. Fitzgerald, Ed.D., has taught at 5 different community colleges in two states, a Midwestern university, and a Florida high school, but she has yet to be tenured. She has been an active member of NCTE both at the local and national levels, currently serving as the California representative to the Two-Year College English Association. Her publications have been primarily in basic writing and writing centers; her most recent article appears in the upcoming Journal of Basic Writing.

Teaching: A Lifelong Seminar

Heidi Ramirez

During the last semester of graduate school, I remember a prickly conversation that ensued between my professor and a fellow student regarding the subject of teaching. In this seminar on the Renaissance, our professor prefaced the oral presentations with the idea that we would be teaching each other about Shakespeare's contemporaries. "God, no," one graduate student responded. "I never want to be a teacher." The professor firmly answered, "Well, today you are." The student continued, "I'm not in this program to be a teacher." During this student's presentation of "Ford's Tragic Perspective," (*Tis a Pity She's a Whore*), I could not help but consider his refusal of teaching. Not that his comment was typical, but it made me think of the reverse reaction—why I *did* in fact want to

teach. After four years of working in major corporations, I was here in the master's program to challenge myself and challenge others; that is why I considered teaching.

Several of my fellow graduate students revealed that they were in the program to improve their skills as writers and poets, or to land jobs as technical writers, which was a hot career choice at the time. I dreamed of making ends meet as a freelance writer. I was clearly not alone in knowing it was time to make a decision on a career path. Broke and needing a job, I decided to pursue what I considered to be an opportunity—substitute teaching—which I could do while I pursued a job at a community college. This positioning gave me a sense of relief (since I had made a decision to do something) and confidence because substituting at a high school would allow me to assess how I liked this age group. It would also give me a chance to see if teaching high school was a viable alternative to becoming a college instructor.

Two days after I dropped off the initial application at San Jose's district office, I got a call from a principal at a San Jose high school. The job was not for substituting; it was a temporary position teaching two classes already in mid-semester. The principal saw my master's degree in literature as an asset, and after the interview, he offered me a job assignment to teach sophomore and senior English. The sophomore class was currently reading *Lord of the Flies* and the senior class was just about to begin *Hamlet*—the high school canon certainly hadn't changed much. This would be a semester on the classics, which certainly spoke to my degree in literature, but I was not sold a big PR story about the opportunity of teaching literature and the human experience to young minds. The principal told me that there was gang activity in the neighborhood, and that many of the students here were from broken homes and some had problems with drug abuse.

I spent the next four years in that school. Teaching full time and working on a single-subject credential took up my entire life. Besides lesson planning, I spent time learning about psychology and discipline. I also spent several hours a week communicating with parents, either affirming good progress or inquiring about students I had never seen. However, underneath this hectic pace of teaching, I began to see and learn about the humorous and down-to-earth personalities of my students. They were beginning to open up to me as their teacher. Even my apathetic seniors became disgusted and annoyed with Hamlet for dumping Ophelia!

When I finished completing my single-subject credential, I moved up the pay scale to a master's degree + 30 units. The new salary was good, and so were the benefits. Additionally, my district offered monthly workshops on such topics as promoting interactive ideas for teaching Shakespeare, grading shortcuts, writing seminars, and using class management tools. I took advantage of them all.

So, what happened? Why did I leave high school to teach at a two-year college? I began to think of teaching at college because I *could*. After all, that had been my

initial plan, and a master's degree—the minimum required to teach at the two-year college level in California—gave me that option. After four years of teaching high school, I was eager for a new dimension in my career even beyond my participation on WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) committees, English Institutes, and programs like AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination). I renewed my MLA membership and read two-year college publications to connect with teaching strategies in composition. Thus armed, I began another round of community college applications.

When I received the position at Hartnell College in Salinas, I asked the dean what helped me get the job. He informed me that my full-time position at the high school level for several years impressed him. He himself had been a high school teacher and the president of our college actually got his start in education as a junior high school teacher. Additionally, since many of the students going to a two-year college are coming from high school, he felt my extensive experience working with that age group would be valuable.

Starting my career at the high school level gave me the opportunity to become familiar with interactive and cooperative learning environments, which have been a great asset to my teaching in a two-year college. I also developed strategies for fundraising and securing itineraries for field trips from my high school experience. I took freshmen to Cannery Row, juniors and seniors to the Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Oregon, and two busloads of high school seniors to see the art gallery in The Palace of The Legion of Honor in San Francisco. I arranged for my College Reading and Composition class (English 1B) to see *Zoot Suit* at El Teatro Campesino in San Juan Bautista, which was, for many of my students, their first experience with seeing a play. I have also taken students from my Steinbeck class on a tour of the Steinbeck House in Salinas and am now in the process of arranging a bus tour through Corral de Tierra, the setting of *The Pastures of Heaven*. This passion for field trips has worked nicely into my teaching pursuits at Hartnell College because I am always looking for opportunities for my students to make a connection outside of the classroom.

At Hartnell College, I teach a full-time load, do research for my Steinbeck class, and participate in other professional organizations. Happily, the nature of a college schedule and its more independent students gives me more time for my own professional growth as well. Still, I believe my years of teaching high school served as a great foundation for my career in education, and I recommend it as a starting place for others who want more than part-time work at a community college. Ultimately, when the opportunity to take another professional step came my way, I was grateful for the experience. High school may not be for everyone, but it was for me.

Heidi Correa Ramirez is a full-time English instructor at Hartnell College in Salinas. She currently serves as Region III Co-director for ECCTYC (English Council of California Two-Year Colleges) and served as the ECCTYC 2003 Conference Program Chair. She received her master's degree in literature from San Jose State University and completed her undergraduate work at U.C. Berkeley.

Teaching the Captive Audience: Grammar and Composition behind Bars

Kathleen Brooks

Twenty-six years of teaching English grammar, 24 at the same high school, in the same room, from the same textbook. I needed a challenge. So, having previously taught an evening class of composition at Lima Technical College in Lima, Ohio, I applied to the University of Findlay in Findlay, Ohio: full-time? part-time? Who knew? The Dean promptly called. "I want to hire you full-time but there is no opening." Would I consider, he asked, teaching part-time at Lima Correctional Institute, a men's medium security prison about 30 minutes from home? Whoa! A prison?

But I signed on, deciding to try a Monday/Wednesday routine—Remedial Writing, a non-credit course, and College Writing, for credit—same two classes twice a week. On campus in Findlay, I received the textbooks and a generic syllabus with guidelines and requirements for the course. My job was exactly as it would have been had I been teaching the classes on campus: teach them to write sentences, and then teach them to write abstract, comparison–contrast, and persuasive essays as well as a documented essay.

Before the term started, I attended an orientation at the prison with the on-site director. Five new teachers (two women and three men) signed in, showed their badges, and walked through metal detectors plus 11 locked gates and doors to the relatively spartan but complete education wing: 20 small classrooms as well as a larger lecture room, many of them air-conditioned, laid out like a plus sign; a computer lab that accommodated 20 students; and, everywhere, signs that warned the student-inmate what behavior was and was not "out of place" for him. Women were given a fairly simple dress code: no open-toed shoes, no sleeveless outfits, no provocative clothing.

That first night of class, with my fresh syllabus tucked into my briefcase, I had the usual apprehension of beginning a new class. After meeting the Monday/Wednesday staff, typically 65% male, ten of us began the walk to our classrooms; I'll admit I was a little overwhelmed.

My room, directly across from the director's office, had a window air conditioner and two picture windows that faced the hall through which the guard on

duty observed without disturbing the class. I took one look at the 25 students of my first of two classes and realized they were more frightened than I was. I inhaled and began what I knew how to do: teach English. I discussed the course and my expectations, answered questions, and then assigned the in-class writing of letters of introduction. The inmates hesitantly wrote of the only things they knew well—their life in prison, their families, their hopes for life post-release. I did not ask them to read their writing aloud; opening up on paper had been difficult enough. I met the second class, remedial students, and asked for a sample of their writing as well. And so began a second career that I maintain yet today.

These students are more complex than those on the university campus. When an essay is due that they have not begun, or when they can't concentrate in class, they revert to behavior that I recognize from middle school because they have no foundation in normal academic behavior. For some, attendance at high school was governed by the court truant officer; some never graduated, just recently completing their GED. They don't have the opportunity to learn good study skills by imitation for they are limited by their surroundings. And my rules for classroom management are superseded by the prison rules: tardiness to class is not a problem, sleeping in class is not allowed, challenging the teacher's authority is not an option; hence, students do not argue about grades. They do, however, have the option of filing a written request for an explanation.

Over the years, people have asked many of the same questions over and over. I have no doubt that readers here have similar questions in their minds, so below, I offer the answers to a unique set of FAQs:

- The students in the college program must meet certain standards to enroll. Many of the stipulations center around their past behavior in the prison. Some enroll because they want an education; some enroll because the university classes will look good when they go before the parole board. Either way, the students still must answer to the rules of the program and will be dismissed for any challenge to the teacher's authority.
- I do not have office hours for I have no office; besides, we arrive in the wing five minutes before class; we walk out of the compound when everyone is finished with classes. To compensate, I run periodic classes of what I call "writing workshops" in which they work on the most recent writing assignment and ask questions.
- My safety has never been an issue. I rarely know what crimes have been committed, though some do volunteer the information.
- Like other college freshmen, writing is very painful. They have the same questions as my day students about the comma; they still can't write an introduction; they still begin a conclusion "in conclusion." They just have a

different list of personal problems, most generating from being in prison while life “outside” goes on for the rest of their families.

- I have noticed that they use present tense to convey wish fulfillment as well as memories. One writes “[On Saturday], I enjoy barbecuing, catching up on the latest sports scores, or watching the latest released movie video.” His writing leaps over the temporary time in prison. This same student, later in the essay, talks of walking through the park or catching a fish in that same present tense. Another writes that “[he] listens to music in his car, on his stereo,” and still another talks about the economy crunch in raising a family. He writes of “buy[ing] lots of chicken and hot dogs.” Each has the ability to mentally move from the physical present to live in a different reality.

In spite of this, there is always the reminder that these guys are in prison. Students will miss class because of solitary confinement (affectionately called “The Hole”) or for court appearances. Classes can be canceled or shortened by a lock-down or emergency count. The teacher must be flexible.

The textbook generates some awkward moments because the exercises and writings present the not-so-subtle sentences about criminals and the criminal mind, but they do open the class to discussion. In one unit on the logic fallacy, they read, “Those who favor gun control just want to take all guns away from responsible citizens and put them in the hands of criminals”; “Don’t join those crazy liberals in support of the American Civil Liberties Union. They want all criminals to go free”; “If we allow the government to register handguns, next it will register hunting rifles; then it will prohibit all citizen ownership of guns, thereby creating a police state or a world in which only criminals have guns.” Yes, the arguments are illogical, but the thought is still in print. And in a sample student essay entitled “Death,” the student writes, “And the only way to change the suffering of the law abiders is to get rid of the law breakers. The death penalty is the price a free society pays to stay free.” “Do these publishers know we are using these books here at LCI?” I am asked. I remind these students that they are a fact of life and cannot be ignored in the “real” world. Honesty is indeed the best policy with these students.

The job has not been without its humorous moments:

- With my schedule of full-time teaching as well as this part-time job, I tend to forget things. I always have at least one student offer to go get *whatever* from my van.
- The sign on one padlocked area: “All ladders must be signed out.”
- When I try to define plagiarism, one student says, “I know what plagiarism is. It’s like forgery. You can get five years for it.”

- I congratulate a student: “You know, you’ve finally got it.” “Well, I should,” he answered, “I’ve had 15 years to work on it!”
- I say passionately, “Think before you write.” One voice responds, “If we could think before we acted, we wouldn’t be here.”

My immediate boss on campus has never visited the prison; I’m not sure why. The English department, though, is very supportive, and I receive all the papers and information that I need. Also, in accordance with the teaching contract, students complete the usual end-of-term evaluation of me as do on-campus students. Lack of resources is the biggest problem I find in teaching at the prison. The library is limited, although students can request books from the campus library. I do have to provide more handouts because student use of the Internet is restricted. However, the university print shop will copy and collate on request.

I am paid the same per semester hour as on-campus instructors, but I receive an extra \$1100 per term for teaching at the prison. The University of Findlay also provides mileage reimbursement.

The classroom discussions are strong and thoughtful and challenge my thought process. I value the friendships I have made with the prison university staff who share a common interest and have bonded as a special group. I’ve never regretted signing that first contract.

Kathleen Brooks received her B.A. from Edgecliff College in Cincinnati (now part of Xavier University) and earned her master’s in literature from Bowling Green State University. She has taught high school English since 1970 and still enjoys the students, but she finds the paperwork and testing from the state of Ohio take time away from activities more closely related to education.

Book Review

Teacher: The One Who Made the Difference

by Mark Edmundson, Vintage, 2003

Reviewed by Janice Albert

In *Teacher*, Mark Edmundson brings to life his senior year of high school, his last year as “a thug” looking forward to a nothing job, maybe working as a trash collector for the city. He is tight with his crowd of going-nowhere buddies, young men sleepwalking through life who do no homework and never read a book on their own time. His counselor puts him into a class where he meets “The One Who Made the Difference,” the teacher of the book’s title: Frank Lears. More than 30 years later, writing as a professor of literature at the University of Virginia,

Edmundson tells us what happened to him that changed his vision about himself and the adult he might become.

Edmundson's writing about education is some of the most engaging to be had, although the competition in this area is not our national pride. In 1997, his article in *Harper's* magazine ("On the Uses of a Liberal Education: As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students") analyzed in detail the nature of student-faculty relations in America's colleges and universities. He records the consumer mentality of modern college students, their lack of engagement, their lack of passion. Protected by a shield of irony, they hold everything and everyone at a distance. Whereas other generations of professors might have feared being labeled radical, Communist, or simply ill-prepared, Edmundson asserts that today's professors are motivated broadly not to offend or disturb their clients, the students who will be asked to evaluate them at the end of each semester.

How curious, then, that Frank Lears, the high school exemplar, is described as relying heavily on irony to get himself through the days and weeks of spitballs, student naps, verbal aggression, and passive silence that greet his attempts to get his students to think. He is Socrates working to get the attention of Athenian youth. Edmundson presents high school life in terms of the classics: the Greek warrior culture against the philosophic tradition. His descriptions of the athletes on the field are visceral and celebratory, brutally charged with his knowledge of Homer.

There is a temptation to read this book for advice about how to be a good teacher, but reducing the book to a series of object lessons and good ideas would be a disservice. Edmundson points out that the times themselves, the late 60s, were times of ferment. The shock of challenge and of change was felt through simple acts, such as moving the chairs into a circle or letting students sit where they wanted. Circle seating was revolutionary; nowadays it is commonplace, almost obligatory.

Lears took away the textbook and gave the students actual books to read, books that he paid for himself! Among these was the novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), introduced late in the school year, along with *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), though I don't think Edmundson is suggesting that these particular works are the key to successful teaching now, in the twenty-first century.

His list prompts us to pose our own question—if we were choosing books for our own students, books that would speak to their condition, what would they be? Is there a novel whose situation would draw them in? *The Twenty-Fifth Hour*? *The Virgin Suicides*? Among nonfiction texts, what would one offer today's kids? Maybe *The Prince* by Machiavelli. Is there a literary underground at all? Where would we go to look for one?

The lesson to be taken from *Teacher* is that Lears, being a reader himself, knew of books that spoke to him and his contemporaries, and he boldly offered them to the recalcitrant class of seniors at Medford High School. Edmundson does not

claim that every student in the class was transformed into a reader by these books, but that he was. Yet, his transformation is breathtaking:

I read in a rage that so much that was palpably my business had been kept from me. It's like finding that the post office has for years been syphoning away packet after packet of the most engrossing letters—some of them approaching love letters, no less—some of them addressed personally to me.... For the first time I could remember, I was no longer lonely, for I had found many, many compeers in relative weirdness."

Another aspect of Edmundson's epiphany has to do with his family background. He was close to his father, a man who supported his family by means of a desk job at Raytheon—a job he had worked his way up to. Unschooling himself, he was nonetheless an avid newspaper reader. Edmundson writes that his senior year experience can be described as transferring his allegiance from his father to a new role model—the teacher, Frank Lears. Reading was the link they shared, but Lears was able to give the act meaning for the boy. It's interesting how many other "fathers" people this memoir—including the coaches who drill the football team.

I found myself wondering how this would work for a young woman. Where do girls get their images of themselves as readers, thinkers, and questioners? Growing up and growing away from one's mother happens all the time, but do modern young women see this as finding a new mother? If we were choosing books for female students, books that explore the world of contemporary young women, what would these books be? Are Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison absolutely the last living word on our modern condition?

Edmundson underscores the point that Lears was effective because he wanted the students to think for themselves, and so, when they spoke, he listened. It is the effect of being listened to that Edmundson credits with turning him into a real student. Thus, responsiveness to students is a major theme of his. In an editorial published in *The New York Times* (September 9, 2003), he addresses the problem of plagiarism. Arguing that cheating is encouraged by a system of teaching that elevates analysis and detachment, Edmundson proposes that teachers work to help students relate their reading to their own lives. "You cannot buy your own opinion from someone else. If professors asked students not only for analysis, but also for personal, reasoned responses, they would, I trust, get fewer purloined papers. Students would be more inclined to believe that the work had to be theirs—and that what they had to say actually mattered."

Career teachers looking for lessons from Edmundson's account of this teacher will stumble over this fact: Lears's year at Medford High was his one and only. After 1969–70, he went back to school and took on another career altogether. On the other hand, adjuncts and part-timers can take hope—one encounter can make all the difference to a student. One course can change a life.

Get Involved with the NCTE Writing Initiative

The NCTE Writing Initiative is a public service campaign to support sound practices in the teaching of writing across all disciplines, to increase policymakers' and the public's knowledge about the teaching of writing, and to make available professional development for schools and educators. Here are five easy ways that you can get involved:

1. Sample or sign up for the NCTE Writing Initiative CoLEARN (free through December). This year-long online teacher inquiry learning program is designed to help you explore your own practices as a writer and as a teacher of writing, and to look closely at student writing development. To find out more, go to <http://www.ncte.org/profdev/online/colearnwi>
2. Exchange ideas and get resources you can use to draft a school or district-wide writing policy. Sound writing policies support consistent, research-based practices in the teaching of writing, and establish a framework for student achievement. To see what other states and schools are doing, or to download guidelines to help your school or district get started with policy/plan development, please visit the NCTE Writing Initiative homepage at <http://www.ncte.org/prog/writing>.
3. Access a handy summary of what research tells us about writers and writing at various scholastic levels by visiting the "What Research Says about Writing" pages at <http://www.ncte.org/prog/writing/research>. Each document may be downloaded in brochure format and shared with parents, administrators, policy makers, or teachers in other disciplines to help them understand some of the main themes in current research about writing.
4. Review books, articles, and resources that NCTE can make available to help you grow professionally as a teacher of writing by visiting the NCTE Writing Resources Network throughout the year at <http://www.ncte.org/prog/writing/resources>.
5. Find out how you can arrange for nationally recognized speakers on topics in writing to work with teachers in your school or district through the NCTE Consulting Network: <http://www.ncte.org/profdev/onsite/consult/about/109320.htm>. Here are a few of the writing topics that NCTE-affiliated consultants are prepared to discuss:
 - Writing as Tool for Thinking and Learning
 - Improving the Quality of Every Student's Writing
 - Assessing Writing to Support and Account for Learning
 - Parents and Others as Partners in Students' Literacy Learning
 - Building a Successful Schoolwide Writing Program