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The Language Arts Classroom in the Nuclear Age

The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our mode of thinking, and thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe.

Albert Einstein

*Knowing is terrifying
Not knowing is terrifying
But not knowing is hopeless
And knowing may save us.*
9th grade student

We have developed the capacity to make all living things extinct within a matter of minutes. The advent of the nuclear arms race has eliminated the possibility of future winners in a war. We can no longer afford to resolve our conflicts with

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violence. Is it possible to acquire Einstein's mode of thinking which will enable our planet to survive? How can language arts teachers help students feel enough hope in the future to merit the hard work necessary to read and write effectively?

Language arts teachers can provide students with some of the tools necessary in the search for new modes of thinking. Essential elements of a classroom which empower students include: a teacher who models trust and respect, where opportunities are provided for students to feel ownership for work relevant to their lives, in situations which insure that cooperation is an integral part of the classroom structure; the development of critical as well as creative thinking, and risk taking implicit in constructive problem solving.

Leaders in language arts educational reform are currently outlining teaching processes that allow for development of new modes of thinking. Peter Elbow, director of the Writing Program at State University of New York, describes in *Writing with Power* a variety of freeing activities that expand the potential of young people's writing far beyond the tightly closed-ended analytic essay. Through dialogue writing Elbow asks his students to write as if inside another's head, forcing students to truly understand a potential opponent's perspective. For example, students might be asked to write a possible scenario between parent and student, only in first person from the parent's perspective. Another possibility would be to write a possible scene between President Reagan and the top Soviet leader, from each side's perspective. Elbow has his students practice "prejudice writing" where the student intentionally writes a loaded essay in which all the writer's

potential biases are exposed. Students practice writing in different voices for different audiences. One of the most essential lessons they learn is the art of revision. Students learn that revising and changing are necessary and critical parts of growth. Working in small response groups, students are constantly listening to each other's writing and learning how to articulate more clearly their needs as both readers and writers. As they write, they become more critical readers, readers who listen for and can examine the writer's voice and recognize the intended audience. This link between critical reading and writing can be transferred into an increased ability to critically examine diverse presentations of world affairs. Students will be better prepared to question the voice of the author, and the intended audience. Using these tools, the student can feel comfortable taking the risks involved in both examining their own perspective and the perspective of others, therefore enabling them to explore possible solutions to global problems.

University of New Hampshire's Donald Graves, a leading spokesperson for writing as a process, advocates both critical and creative thinking within the language arts classroom. Graves has conducted extensive studies of the writing process of young writers. Graves echoes the need for respect, ownership, cooperation and student's ability to take risks for the child's development as a writer and as a person. Under Graves' model students as young as six learn to revise

Graves echoes the need for respect, ownership, and cooperation.

their writing, listen and share cooperatively with each other. They are given the responsibility for selecting their own topics. Therefore the topics children write about are relevant to their lives. They are given enough class time every day to write and revise their work. The teacher confers one-on-one

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with the child, actively listening to the child read his/her work. The teacher asks questions which expand and challenge the student, without focusing on mechanics, until the ideas have had a chance to be played with thoroughly. Grades are only given on some of the work, allowing the student the freedom to experiment with new forms of writing without being penalized. The emphasis is on meaning and communications. The mechanics becomes a means of allowing the meaning to be more clearly shared with others. The student has ownership for his/her work and, therefore, is highly motivated to produce a quality product. Each child is respected and validated as their best writing reaches polished form and is published to be shared with others. They have taken risks and not been ridiculed for it. Instead they worked with others to refine, edit and strengthen their power as writers.

Methods such as Grave's foster a generation of fluent cooperative writers who have clear understanding of the creative process. We can hope they will be a generation capable of handling the complex problems of our nuclear age, capable of working cooperatively to create solutions.

There are countless ways in which language arts teachers can work to foster a new mode of thinking, a mode of thinking that can divert us from drifting towards the catastrophe Einstein warned of us 40 years ago. Elbow and Graves offer practical and immediate teaching strategies for nuclear age education in the language arts classroom. It is time to take the risks necessary to enable our students to be powerful enough as thinkers, writers and readers to take on the awesome task at hand - the search for a new mode of thinking that will bring our world out of the nuclear age, to an age where we are active participants in the creative process of peace.

Elbow, Peter, *Writing with Power*, Oxford University Press, 1981.

Graves, Donald, *Writing: Teachers & Children At Work*, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Heinemann Educational Books, 1983.

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