

FIELDWORK

NOTES FROM EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING CLASSROOMS

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FROM THE SUMMIT TO THE CLASSROOM: CROSSING INVISIBLE BARRIERS

IN THIS ISSUE:

Professional Development

Guiding Question:

How do teachers apply new learning to classroom practice?

We Can Hear You Whistling

By Angela Jolliffe

Understanding How Students Read

By Michael Jones

Old Dogs and Their Tricks

By Millie King

Staff Ownership of On-Site Professional Development

By Roy Hansen and Deb Fordice

Finding the Missing Piece

By Tanya King

*T*hora Balk and Joanna Lewton, teachers at Capital City Charter School in Washington D.C., attended the Deaf Culture Summit in Boston last summer. The summit is both an introduction to the language and culture of the Deaf and a model for teaching and learning about different cultures in a school setting. Through projects and contact with Deaf adults and children, the summit models strategies for building expeditions centered on cultures.

Balk is a pre-kindergarten teacher, and Lewton is arts coordinator and drama teacher for the school. Both returned from the summit with new skills and sensitivity to help students at Capital City understand and appreciate differences. In an interview with the teachers, Fieldwork Editor Amy Mednick began by asking about their apprehensions, expectations, and goals going into the summit.

TB: One of my personal and professional goals was to learn about Deaf culture because I knew that in the fall I would have two student teachers from Gallaudet University in my classroom. I wanted to be able to support those students.

JL: I was very nervous about the summit. I honestly had no idea there was such a thing as Deaf culture. I had used American Sign Lan-



This tall ship, docked in the Boston Harbor, was sketched by Larry "Doc" Ranney, superintendent of San Juan #1 School District in Silverton, Colorado, at the Deaf Culture Summit held in Boston, Massachusetts last summer.

guage on stage before, but there was no back and forth communication, as I knew there would be at the summit. I actually was hoping to avoid the Deaf culture classes and just focus on sign language. In hindsight, this wish was really foolish because the focus on Deaf culture was so meaningful.

How did this attempt to immerse you in the world of Deaf people impact your outlook on

continued on page 2

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*From the Summit to the Classroom, continued
from page 1*

Deaf culture or on issues of differences across cultures?

JL: I am constantly trying to find a balance between using the tiny bit of knowledge I now have about Deaf culture with remembering that I cannot generalize about all Deaf people. As a teacher and a parent, I am always trying to let children know not to assume something about a person just because that person is Deaf (or Latino or Muslim or female, etc.). I have heard some of our middle school students say people assume something about them because they are African American teenagers. I then share with them anecdotes I heard at the summit—about how historically people have thought that Deaf people were retarded, slow, or incapable of living *normal* lives. Because of the summit I feel more comfortable discussing prejudice, racism, and assumptions about different groups of people.

What have you taken back to your school, your individual classroom, and your interaction with students around issues of diversity?

TB: One of the wonderful things about our school community is its diversity. Students are constantly interacting with others who are different from them, especially when it comes to racial or socioeconomic differences. I personally feel comfortable speaking to young children

about acknowledging, recognizing, and appreciating differences in our physical appearances, abilities, families, traditions, and lives. I think such experiences are incredibly important. I saw this at the Deaf Culture Summit as well. The summit would have been very different, of course, if we had only learned about Deaf culture and ASL without being around anyone who is Deaf. It's one thing to read and listen and another to be *in* it. We were definitely in it.

JL: My interest in sign language still drives a lot of what I do at school. I think ASL is a lyrical and expressive language and I believe that shared language can be a huge part of understanding a person or a culture.

In the classroom my students and I sign back and forth to each other. Students might sign to me that they are thirsty, tired, or sick. I might ask students to sit or be quieter. Students often sign to each other such phrases as "Please sit, I can't see," or "Thank You." I offer ASL/Deaf culture classes in our after-school program and my fourth-grade Shakespeare class is working on translating Shakespeare into ASL for a citywide performance festival.

I was impressed with the way the summit leaders made sure we saw many different points of view. Ron is a hearing person who has many Deaf friends, teaches a Deaf culture expedition in his school and is very comfortable signing.

continued on page 7

A CHILD'S EYE

When I returned from the summit, I began to teach my students some sign language (bathroom, water, feeling words, etc.). But this had not nearly as significant an impact as when our first student teacher from Gallaudet started to come to our classroom. He had an interpreter with him to verbally communicate what he was saying. One of my four-year-old children was fascinated with that relationship. She would ask many questions about what the interpreter was doing; one could almost see her mind opening up to this confusing new situation. When this child would talk to our student teacher, she would initially look at the interpreter, something we had expected.

With time, she was able to look more at the student teacher, but was still confused about the role of the interpreter. One day, this child said to the interpreter, "Stop it! I want to hear him talk!" The student teacher tried to once again explain, but without full satisfaction. Coincidentally, the interpreter left to use the restroom, and so our student teacher began to sign to the child. She watched him, confused, and when the interpreter returned, she got it. It clicked. It was not easy for her, but she had a better understanding for how some Deaf people communicate and what the role of the interpreter is. If we had read a book about it, or talked about it, would she have understood? Maybe. Will she ever forget now? Probably not.

—Thora Balk

UNDERSTANDING HOW STUDENTS READ

BY MICHAEL I. JONES

After 14 years in the classroom, not new and not a fixture, still optimistic, but harboring a pinch of skepticism, I went to the Expeditionary Learning Literacy Institute in Portland, Oregon. I hoped to learn more about reading, to go West, and to pick up a few credits in the process.

Once there I discovered a platform that made sense to me, like scratching that annoying itch. I discovered reading all over again. And, back at Florence High School in Florence, Wisconsin, I discovered a world of queries and experiences encircling my students' heads that ordinary worksheets would never touch. Not all of the reading strategies went smoothly for my ninth- and tenth-grade English classes, but I am still refining the lessons that are invaluable to me as a teacher and reader.

The strategy I use most often deals with schema (background knowledge). When the students read a new selection, I want to

know what they are thinking about or what they did not understand. I make it my goal to listen to them as they reflect on the text or take it apart. Later, I can scaffold upon these informal inquiries incorporating literary terms, character development, motifs, and assessments. I can not imagine going back to the same old handout on literary terms.

CODING THE TEXT

While at the literacy institute in Oregon, I learned how to identify and code all the miscellaneous thoughts swirling around in my brain, sparked by the text. My ninth- and tenth-grade students use text coding to keep track of their schema and connections they make to the text:

- ~ Text to Text (TT): associates one text to another
- ~ Text to World (TW): relates world events to the text
- ~ Text to Self (TS): identifies personal experiences of the reader to the text

Kristina, reading the first two pages of *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, makes a connection to the play "Our Town" by Thornton Wilder. She states that both settings occur in a small town where everyone knows everyone, including their business. Another student, Sami, makes a Text to World comment about Atticus, a character in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, being related to nearly everyone in town. Sami sees the connection to our small rural town where certain last names are so prolific, we wonder about marrying relatives. When students are reading a text, they have learned to write their responses on the handout in the margins or on sticky notes.

From the informal discussion, we drift into *thick* and *thin* inquiries. Thick questions are analytical, while thin queries are more comprehensive and literal. No matter how much I think students know or should know at this stage in their lives, I realize and respect where students are in their understanding. Two students do not know what being admitted to the

When such passionate conversations take place, students own their work and class takes on new meaning for them and me. I find students feel extremely significant when their hunches from the beginning lines of inquiry hold true to the end of the piece.

bar means. After explaining the bar examination, I soon realize how much courage those students have had to seek out what they do not know in front of their peers. At the same time, if they had continued on in a cloud of confusion, I wonder at what point their frustrations would have led them to put the book down. Therein lies the difference in teaching a text versus understanding how students read a text.


The culminating piece for me is when we have Socratic seminars, or circle time as the students have dubbed it. Seminars work well with short stories, especially handouts the students can write on or highlight. I tried Socratic seminars in my classes before I went to the Literacy Institute, but the discussion and questioning process was new for the students and the dialog suffered and so did the seminars.

With freshmen, we have had successful, mature dialog on short stories and the play *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man in the Moon Marigolds* by Paul Zindel. They wrestled with whether the characters are responsible or not for their own actions, including alcohol and child abuse. Much of the dialog came to life because the students were required to use TS, TW, and TT as they analyzed the text.

I enjoy watching the empowerment of students, especially freshmen who are so self-conscious they hardly ever take risks among their peers. We discussed the popular short story, “*The Most Dangerous Game*” by Richard Edward Connell, at length as students wrestled with Rainsford’s killing of General Zaroff. When such passionate conversations take place, students own their work and class takes on new meaning for them and me. I find students feel extremely significant when their hunches from the beginning lines of inquiry hold true to the end of the piece. At least they are curious enough to explore and seek out what happens and that spurs them to read further.

The use of text coding and seminars draws students into literacy through a new portal. We spend more meaningful time breaking down difficult passages rather than correcting a study guide. I am appreciative of how students relate to

literature through their own experiences. I too experience reading on a new plane and find myself taking more time to read so I can find connections and share them. Personally, I have not discussed texts more thoroughly.

So, I have put into practice some new strategies after 14 years in the profession because they make sense to me and I enjoy them. 

Michael I. Jones teaches English at Florence High School in Florence, Wisconsin.

MINI-LESSONS FROM THE LITERACY INSTITUTE

Mini-lessons—hmmm. It had been a long time since I really focused my lessons into the small neat increments of mini-lessons. Doses of learning. These felt good as we practiced using various reading strategies both independently and in small groups at the Expeditionary Learning Literacy Institute held in Annapolis last October. I could hold onto the little bits of learning and I imagined my children would be able to also. I liked reflection time after those small bits of learning as well. I was able to verbalize my own ideas and they became more solid. My words made my learning a reality.

Back at school, I learned a lot about asking my fifth-grade children what they learned from using the strategies taught during mini-lessons. At the end of most lessons now we create a chart or the students respond in their logs to the following prompt: What is the most important thing you learned today? How will it help you as a reader? After a recent mini-lesson about writing about our reading, I asked the students “How does writing about your reading help you as a reader?” I got these responses:

- ~ *As I read, the book tells me ideas to write down on paper.*
- ~ *I start to organize and review the story so that I can remember it.*
- ~ *It helps me to understand more clearly what I’m reading by asking questions and looking for questions.*
- ~ *I get the meaning of what the author is trying to tell me.*
- ~ *It keeps me focused on the book and makes me think while I read.*
- ~ *It is more fun being active while I read.*

My students and I have often taken time to reflect on learning, but now we have made it another essential part of our reading/language arts day. It is this reflective piece that helps them to verbalize what they are learning and why they are learning it. It also helps me to trust that they are becoming better readers.

**—Fifth-Grade Teacher Beth Novick
Greenbelt Elementary School in Greenbelt, Maryland**

OLD DOGS AND THEIR TRICKS

BY MILLIE KING

Well, well, well, so you actually can teach old dogs new tricks, or rather old dogs old tricks. Picture books of course are not a new phenomenon, but I must admit I have received a new revelation concerning them.

Never in a million years would I, a teacher of seventh- and eighth-grade students at Southwest School in Phoenix, Arizona, have ever thought that I would be incorporating picture books as part of my repertoire of instructional resources in my classroom. But after having attended a workshop on reading at an Expeditionary Learning Literacy Institute, picture books have revolutionized my instruction and my students' attitude toward reading.

I remember thinking back on the reasons why I had not wanted to attend the literacy institute in the first place. There would surely be things said and cutesy little things done that would bore me to tears. And after the workshop facilitator, Scott Dolquist, began by using of all things, a children's picture book, my fears had soon become fact.

I was about to turn my mind off and think about other things to make the time go faster.

But something strange happened to me that day. I became totally changed by a picture book. It was truly more engaging than a dry, formulaic text. The strikingly beautiful oil paintings drew me in and kept me there. And before very long I was totally immersed in workable reading strategies that used the picture book as the vehicle that would help me greatly in my classroom. I realized they are accessible to readers of every different learning style and grade level and that they cover an enormous range of topics, ideas, and issues.

BUILDING SCHEMA THROUGH PICTURE BOOKS

One strategy that I have found particularly successful in using the picture book as the vehicle has been in building schema, which is the background knowledge and experience that each of us brings to our reading. This strategy has proven to be very successful with my students because now they are grasping what reading is for and are learning strategies of how to connect the text to their own lives. A whole new world has opened up to them through a renewed sense of enjoyment, inquiry, and wonder that reading brings.

Even the very reluctant readers and oral discussion participants are now reading aloud and are engaging in discussions without much prompting. My students are now making connections between the text and their personal experiences, between the text and other texts and between the text and world issues, events, or concerns of society at large. I have seen a real change in attitudes toward reading. It truly has sharpened and enhanced their understanding of the content because they are reading and listening


A whole new world has opened up to them through a renewed sense of enjoyment, inquiry, and wonder that reading brings. Even the very reluctant readers and oral discussion participants are now reading aloud and are engaging in discussions without much prompting.

with a more focused purpose.

I have taught the strategy for teaching schema by first modeling it for my students. I read the book aloud the first time without any interruption. The second time I read it aloud, pausing whenever I can make a connection with the text by sharing what the text reminds me of in my own life experiences. At that point, I say that I have made a text-to-self connection. If the text reminds me of another text, article, or story, I say that I have made a text-to-text connection. And, if the text reminds me of an issue, event, or concern in our society, or world at large, I then say that I have made a text-to-world connection. After I model it for them, I then give them opportunities for guided and independent practice.

I am sure you are reading this and saying to yourself, “Yes, but what about the older student, the reluctant reader, or the second language learner?” My school is a K-8 elementary school with a diverse cultural and socio-economical population and some varying educational needs. My classroom has a population comprised of English language learners, mildly mentally challenged learners, and mildly to severely learning disabled students. The key is choosing powerful, well-written picture books with sophisticated content for older students. Choose colorful books that have beautiful pictures complementing the text, and that have great topics, ideas, and issues that stimulate discussion for the reluctant readers.

For second language learners, choose picture books that are rich in their culture and experiences. This way they connect that text to their own lives and activate their prior knowledge, which helps to make their culture valued in their new culture.

Now, about those old dogs and those new tricks—those may not be new tricks—just new ways to look at old approaches! And about those old dogs . . . well, I cannot help you with that. Now, you are barking up the wrong tree! 


Millie King teaches seventh- and eighth-grade Special Education Resource classes at Southwest School in Phoenix, Arizona.

*From the Summit to the Classroom, continued
from page 2*

Karen Glickman is an educator and advocate who was born Deaf. Tony Toledo is a (hearing) professional storyteller who fell in love with a Deaf woman. The professional interpreters also shared different perspectives such as what it is like to be a hearing person immersed in a Deaf world. We would have come away with something so different if we'd only had one person leading us.

TB: There was something so unique about the environment at the summit. It was okay to feel awkward; it was okay to be afraid. But we were also expected to step out of our comfort zones. I was not comfortable meeting with Karen about my final project. I was afraid that I would offend her by accidentally looking at the interpreter, asking too many questions, or not enough. It was not a requirement, but I wanted to do it. Karen's openness definitely helped me feel more comfortable, and I think hearing Ron talk openly about some of his awkward moments made me safe enough to get over my fear. I think one of the many things I have taken back to my teaching is an even greater sense of how important it is to communicate to your students your awkward experiences and mistakes and how you handled them. I think part of overcoming your fears is recognizing them. If we just tell children, “You should not think that way,” we are not helping them better understand themselves or others.

What teaching strategies have you taken back to the classroom?

TB: I fell in love with teaching in a way I had not before. To help prepare us for our final project, Ron showed us many examples of excellent work. I have always been taught that the process is so much more important than the final product (especially when working with young children). But he showed me that the final product is important, too. And he showed us how he helps his students to produce an incredible final product. He completely opened my eyes to a new way of thinking. 

STAFF OWNERSHIP OF ON-SITE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: *A RECIPE FOR LASTING CHANGE*

BY ROY HANSEN AND DEB FORDICE

Summits and Outward Bound courses beg stories, presentations, and write-ups. They are thrilling, rigorous, and life changing. Even a few staff members attending these courses can inspire schoolwide change. But the on-site component of Expeditionary Learning professional development, the ongoing relationship between a school designer and a school, is what likely transforms the spark of summits and Outward Bound courses into lasting change at Expeditionary Learning schools. In this article, Roy Hansen, principal of Fulton Intermediate School in Dubuque, Iowa, and school designer Deb Fordice share practices that have worked at Fulton over the past three years.

Kurt Hahn's quote summarizes what Fulton's leadership believe we need for success: "Outward Bound can ignite, that is all. It is for others to keep the flame alive." When Fulton started working with Expeditionary Learning three years ago, we believed the whole staff needed to have ownership of our school reform process. We used our existing leadership team (which included six teachers, three parents, and the principal) to spearhead our school reform process. The team had traditionally monitored the school improvement plan and had taken responsibility for collecting data regarding student achievement. Now the leadership team also facilitates our school's on-site staff development program.

As school designer, Deb interviewed each staff member to determine the staff's perceptions on what was needed to achieve our current school goals: improving student literacy, citizenship, and collaboration with parents. As principal, Roy made sure that everything we planned or did answered two questions, "How does this help us achieve our school goals?" and "How does this activity translate to the classroom?" As a leadership team, Deb led us through any initiatives or activities meant for the entire staff. This developed a broader base of leadership during

the full staff development sessions. We drew in students because we wanted them to understand the underlying foundation (the design principles) of our school reform process. The students and staff would build our community initiatives and quality work initiatives upon this foundation. All staff members did skits for the students, and then each classroom of students did skits for the entire school. Later, several students became involved as models in staff development sessions on writing rubrics and peer critique.

Many of our regular staff meetings are geared toward issues relating to school improvement, and discussions are frequently led by our school action teams or by individual staff members. As a follow-up to a literacy institute, sixth-grade teacher Carol Duehr and Information Media Specialist Jill Atencio led the introduction to a yearlong study of *Strategies That Work* by Anne Goudvis and Stephanie Harvey (Stenhouse, 2000). Leadership team members acted as facilitators of small groups as we discussed each chapter. The small group structure, led by staff members, encouraged high levels of participation and sharing of classroom success stories directly related to the comprehension strategies.

RUBRICS ON SCHOOL GOALS

When planning the first summer institute, the leadership team allotted an hour and a half for the staff to write a rubric on meeting school goals through expeditions. At the institute, teachers immediately connected with the importance of the rubric. They took more time than the leadership team had anticipated, but both the process and the product were extremely productive due to the depth of the discussion. At the end of two half-day sessions, we had developed four separate rubrics, directly related to the school goals of improving reading, writing, citizenship, and parental/guardian involvement. For each goal, small groups brainstormed a list of solid, meaningful instructional practices that could be embedded within the expeditions to support the goal. We created lists for each school goal as each group shared their ideas. Then we broke each list into three or four different categories. For example, the Rubric for Improving Reading Through Expeditions had four categories: use of explicit and implicit instructional strategies, using literature in the expedition, use of brain-based practices to address learning styles, and answering guiding questions for the expedition through literature. Then we wrote descriptors for beginning, developing, and quality levels of implementation for each of the categories. We assigned points to those levels so that we could collect quantitative as well as qualitative data on how well the expeditions addressed school goals before and after we revised each expedition.


Even though the process of creating the rubrics was time-consuming and laborious, it was well worth the effort for many reasons. Most importantly, it developed strong staff ownership in the school goals, and gave them a structure to plan, revise, and evaluate expeditions. Had we just given the staff a set of rubrics, they would not have had the deep discussions about what makes for good reading and writing instruction, citizenship development, and parental involvement. Furthermore, the rubrics focus teaching teams' reflections on specific improvements within the expeditions, affirming their profes-

sional growth as they see consistent movement toward the quality column of the rubrics. Using the rubrics as a guide, teachers make specific plans for improving their expeditions, all the while knowing their strategies relate directly to the school goals for student achievement.

The staff revised the rubrics during the summer institute after our second year of implementation. The teachers changed some of the wording to make it easier to assess how well the goals were being addressed. They also decided to raise the standards on a few of the rubric categories, finding the first year that in some cases they had not allowed much room for growth because they had not demanded enough of themselves and their team. During the next summer institute, we will most likely revise the rubrics again to ensure their continued effectiveness as a tool for school improvement.

ONGOING PLANNING

For ongoing expedition work, teams meet with Deb for a full day of planning once per trimester. They review their improvement plans for their expeditions, using the school goal rubrics as their guide. When revising an expedition, teachers use the rubrics as the primary tool for planning specific strategies that will address the areas of reading, writing, citizenship, and parental involvement at a deeper level.

When the entire staff works together to set goals and develop specific strategies, the school improvement process has a much greater chance of being successful. School-based, on-site staff development with Expeditionary Learning helps us grow together as professionals grounded in a common vision. 

Roy Hansen is principal of Fulton Intermediate School in Dubuque, Iowa and Deb Fordice is a school designer based in the Midwest.

Note: For examples of Fulton's rubric, please see our website.

Had we just given the staff a set of rubrics, they would not have had the deep discussions about what makes for good reading and writing instruction, citizenship development, and parental involvement.

We Can Hear You Whistling, continued from page 3

to change an attitude, a practice, or a school.

Through both on-site and off-site professional development, Expeditionary Learning seeks to provide experiences for educators that combine the best of this active pedagogy and intellectual rigor. No Expeditionary Learning experience is intended to be a prescriptive, episodic event that ends with the final debrief and clean up. Its intent is to provide the knowledge, skills, thinking, experimentation, and support needed to understand and implement the design in our schools. But its most important component takes place after the session is over; what will the learner do as a result of this experience?

Off-site offerings such as conferences, summits, institutes, Outward Bound educator courses and site seminars provide opportunities away from school to connect teachers, principals, parents, or other school/district staff throughout our network. The offerings immerse participants in a culture of inquiry. They share ideas, learn by doing and continually reflect, while deepening their knowledge of new content and instructional practices. Off-site experiences promote *working as crew, not passengers* as we learn within the group to foster accountability, promote community and build friendships.

The regular and focused attention of on-site professional development supports the goals, challenges, and action steps established to improve teaching and learning at each school. With the support of a school designer and other Expeditionary Learning faculty, this paying attention insures that limited staff development time and resources are not perceived as token additions or sporadic events. In planning these sessions, it is imperative that we look to the play within the play—the ways each aspect of the ongoing professional development work will scaffold and connect to something else. Although the specific content, timing, and focus of these sessions may differ a bit from school to school, the *doing* part provides an internal constancy throughout the Expedition-

Professional development is best when it immerses participants in active learning and thoughtful reflection—pushing them to roll up their sleeves and muddle with something a bit, while putting on the thinking caps of learners.

ary Learning network. As such, the work and doing of this paying attention means many things. Foremost, it means that we will be active, participatory learners who will open our minds and hearts to new ideas and challenges. Secondly, it means we will structure these experiences to engage ourselves in a sort of intellectual Outward Bound course that builds knowledge, skills, and character while getting the job done. It means taking risks, challenging old assumptions, and making our struggles more public, knowing that the end result will prove that what we do is in the best interests of our students and ourselves.

We often hear or read the Outward Bound community speak of doing the *impossible*. People connected to Expeditionary Learning really need to believe this to stay committed to achieve this ultimate vision for their school. Feedback from learners who participate in our professional development work tell us that we are on to something. People are learning, thinking, and doing the hard work of changing schools through a commitment to their professional learning. Some even tell us that they are whistling. ✂

Angela Jolliffe is field director for the Northeast and Southeast regions of Expeditionary Learning.

FINDING THE MISSING PIECE

BY TANYA KING

I signed up for this trip to Colorado without knowing what it was going to do for my teaching or me. I figured Outward Bound would be an adventure if anything. It was a four-hour drive from Grand Junction to the Gates of Lodore. There was a nervous chatter of strangers trying to break the ice as we drove off into the unknown.

We began with an activity, to get to know each other and our fearless leaders. Everything they taught us with patience, waiting till everyone was successful. If you have never been in a canyon, the beauty of the environment is absolutely breath taking. Imagine 1000-foot red canyon walls, carved by time and nature, and you a small piece of that environment.

Rafting down the Green River, with the threat of the boat flipping and losing all of our supplies, built a community of teamwork and support. Our boat crews were our service groups. We cooked meals, set up our groover (a portable toilet), and carried supplies. We combined all of our efforts to provide a service for the park rangers in pulling out a weed that was pushing out all of the native plants along the river. In our large group or in our small group teamwork and community was the key.

Halfway through our trip we had a solo night. Dave, our fearless leader, led each of us to an isolated location for a night of solitude and reflection. I reflected on my uncertainties of being a teacher, how this next year could be better, or rather different than the past year. That night I experienced

things that are difficult to put into words. The best way I can think to say it was “I found myself!”

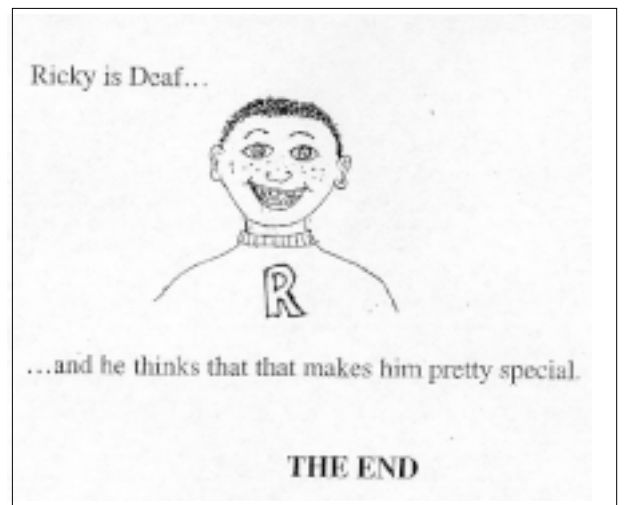
The very next morning my crewmates urged me to captain the boat (an experience some of us less-experienced rafters were dreading). As we floated down the river, we were propelled by our individual strength but followed the flow of the river. I could not force the river to do anything, but I could navigate the boat to take me where I wanted to go. I did not realize it at the time, but this was my big Aha!

Time flew quickly in those short days and I grew to see my crew as my family. The last evening we all cried, touched by the experience of meeting and getting to know each other. We connected on a level that I have never connected with anyone before.

Even as it ended and I boarded the plane home, I still wondered what this experience had to do with teaching? Did I learn anything? Then it hit me. I realized that the river with its own flow was like that of life and teaching. I could go back to Seattle and be the kind of teacher that lets

*continued on next
page*

This is a page from “Ricky is Deaf,” a children’s story written at the Deaf Culture Summit last summer by Christopher Providence, of Edmunson Heights Elementary School in Baltimore, Maryland, and illustrated by Dorothy Shapland, a teacher at Renaissance Charter School in Parker, Colorado.



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*Finding the Missing Piece, continued from
page 11*


the river take my students and me away or I could captain the boat. In teaching you can try to fight the flow of the classroom as you may have tried to fight the river, or you can guide your students in the direction you want them to go.

I left Colorado a different person and a different teacher. Not only did I find myself, but also the missing piece to my teaching. This school year, my attitude and approach are different. I involve my students in 85 percent of the decision-making, simply guiding them with my words and actions in the direction I want to travel.

In the beginning of the year, I told my students, "Right now we are strangers, but the journey we are embarking on will make us all a family. We will all become a part of the river. It is my responsibility to

*In teaching you can try to
fight the flow of the class-
room as you may have tried
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rection you want them to go.*

guide you, but we all will have to work harder than we have before in our lives."

Now, halfway through the year, with my students and the experiences we have shared, I understand more clearly what I learned on my trip to Colorado. 

*Tanya King teaches fourth and fifth grade at
Greenwood Elementary School in Seattle,
Washington.*

For more teacher tools
related to this issue,
visit our website at
www.elob.org/publications/webarchive/v11n2tt.html.