hen I stopped focusing on me and my methods and started observing students and their learning, I saw a gap yawning between us—between what I did as a language teacher and what they did as language learners” (Nancie Atwell, 1987, In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents, Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 4). This important realization Nancie Atwell made about her teaching and her students’ learning was one that had occurred to me in connection with my own experience with junior high students. Unfortunately, though, that realization had not carried over into my high school teaching when three years ago my colleague Melinda Putz and I were faced with creating a year-long course required for eleventh graders.

**CREATING A NEW COURSE**

Our charge was to integrate writing, speaking, listening, reading, and literature, which previously had been isolated in semester offerings; but as we blissfully began, we didn’t know that the traditional, non-student-centered course we were designing would fall flat. We hadn’t yet plunged into that “yawning gap” as we decided to use the American literature previously taught in an elective, college-prep course, American Thought and Language. This course was essentially a rapid survey of American literature from the colonial to the contemporary period—if we could get there in twenty weeks.

We chose our text carefully by using a readability formula and examining the length, variety, and multicultural representativeness of selections, as well as the levels of questions, graphics, visual artwork, learning resources, and presentation of material.

We were all set—or so we thought.

**THE FIRST TEST**

We began the semester with Native American and colonial literature. Students wrote reading responses, and we held class discussions. We thought everyone understood. We wrote what we thought was a fair test, which included some multiple choice and short answer questions created by the publisher and some short essay questions we had written ourselves. We gave the test.

What happened? Miserable results. We decided we must have lost our students somewhere between “The Walum Olum” of the Delawares and “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Even our best students didn’t earn their accustomed As. What were we going to do? What we did was back up and see where we had left our students; and thus began the long, sometimes painful journey to rethink what we want students to gain from English 11 and what our roles in their learning process should be.

**RETHINKING METHODS AND GOALS**

As we revisited our methods in dealing with this first unit of literature, we found that even though we were “covering” all the material, we were telling students what we thought they should know, and they saw little connection between the readings and their own lives. Often the students had gotten something out of the texts, but either it wasn’t what the multiple choice questions...
were asking, or they couldn’t understand the question being asked.

At this point, we discussed what exactly we wanted students to gain from their exploration of their country’s literature, and we decided what we wanted above all was for them to engage with the literature and to make their own meanings from the text, not relying on the teacher as the voice from above who passes on the definitive interpretation of a work. We wanted students to value reading and writing and to feel motivated to work on oral and written communication skills in the context of literature. We wanted them to develop their critical thinking skills and to make connections between the ideas, concerns, and themes of various periods. We weren’t interested in students memorizing discrete facts or dates. In essence, we were viewing our study of American literature holistically and personally.

Once we decided what our goals were, we knew that that first test we’d given didn’t reflect what we really wanted students to gain from their exploration of the literature. Thus we broadened our definition of test and began to design non-traditional assessments of various kinds for each major unit.

**BALANCING CONTROL**

After some experimentation, over the past two years, we have been trying various ways to strike a balance between total teacher control and total student control, to create a third space where powerful moments can happen as we explore our nation’s literature. We experiment with ways to help students connect their own stories with those they read, and we are working continually to make this course theirs—not ours.

We limit ourselves to choosing two pieces in each unit to read, respond to, and discuss together as a class (sometimes three if we just can’t help ourselves). Our criteria for teacher choice are pieces we’re pretty sure students wouldn’t choose themselves, ones with which they would have too much difficulty and frustration tackling without assistance, or pieces we feel reflect an important concept, concern, style, etc., of a particular period. After spending perhaps a week or less on our choices, we send students back to the remaining pieces from that period, usually asking them to read three more of their choice. (If we had more time and energy, we would bring in more supplementary texts, although we do try to include some already.) Both whole-class and individual pieces begin with personal response, and our methods of assessment (large and small) focus on the connection between the student, the literature, and life in general.

**ASSESSING IN ALTERNATIVE WAYS**

Following are some of the ways we have tried to assess students’ growth and learning in alternative, more authentic ways than traditional paper and pencil tests.

**Research Projects**

Since our students are almost exclusively white and largely rural with little exposure to other cultures in American society (even though we have a large Chippewa population just 25 miles north of Ithaca), we begin our year with a research project. The project provides an immersion of sorts into the pre-colonial culture of six Native American tribes (the Delaware, Navajo, Iroquois, Pima, Chippewa, and Teton Sioux) from which we have literature selections in our text (Literature: The American Experience, 1994, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall). Students form groups and research a particular tribe, collecting information on ancestors (early migration to the Americas), society/culture (means of subsistence, housing, government, rituals, art, etc.), experience with the “white man,” relations with other tribes, and other information of interest to them. After researching for a couple of days, the groups decide how to combine their individual material into a group presentation that will paint a picture of the tribe for the rest of the class. The rest of the class has only read the pieces of literature in preparation for discussing them with the “expert” group as leaders.

Formats for presentations have included game/quiz shows, panel discussions, interview shows, and skits. One group researching the Pimas began its skit with a solo and chorus chant of a section of their tribe’s poem “From the Houses of Magic.” They then had an explorer arrive at camp and ask questions about the tribe’s way of life and history as a way for the students to present the information they had learned.

As teachers, we provide a project information sheet, forms for a dialectic research log, a presentation note-taking sheet on which the audience records important facts...
about the tribes and impressions about the literature (e.g., literary characteristics and memorable words, phrases, and images), and a self/group evaluation form for students to assess their own work before we evaluate.

**Advertising Flyers**

Following this look at the first Americans’ literature and culture, we read pieces from the rest of the “New Land” section, which includes explorer journals and Puritan literature. The unit assessment is the creation of a New World flyer and persuasive speech, the purpose of which is to “sell” the New World to seventeenth-century Europeans. A creative twist some students have chosen with success is to persuade inhabitants of the Old World to stay home and not venture into the colonies.

**Newspapers**

Upon the completion of our second unit on Revolutionary literature, we ask students to create a newspaper that demonstrates their understanding of literary pieces read. The newspaper may be single or multiple pages and must contain five articles, each based on a different piece of literature and handled in different ways as news, feature, opinion/editorial articles, factoids or advertising, and each including five quotations from the piece of literature.

We do mini-lessons on various kinds of articles found in newspapers and provide numerous examples from real papers as models. Although we don’t expect students, most of whom have not worked on the school newspaper or yearbook staffs, to exhibit perfect journalistic style in their writing, we are always pleased to see the quality and creativity that, armed with the evaluation rubric, they can muster for this assignment.

Students have citizens speak out on the question “What is an American?” with quotations from J. Hector St. Jean DeCrevecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, use these quotations from the same piece as the basis of a horoscope, or review DeCrevecoeur’s book in a column entitled “Letters from Who?” They write obituaries for Olaudah Equiano and include information about his experience on a slave ship or write a news story, reporting the conditions Equiano and other slaves endured. They construct Top Ten lists based, for example, on the Declaration of Independence (“Top Ten Reasons We Declared Independence”) or a “Dear Abby” column drawing on Abigail Adams’ “Letter to Her Daughter from the New White House.”

**The Transcendental Change Plan**

Half the assessment for the “Growing Nation/New England Renaissance” unit—the other half is an in-class essay on Romanticism—is a new project we tried last year, the Transcendental Change Plan. After studying excerpts from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Nature” and “Self-Reliance” and from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* and “Civil Disobedience,” students write a plan to change some school, local, state, national, or world problem about which they care deeply in some way.

As part of the plan, students:

1. describe the problem in at least 50 words, including why they feel it is significant;
2. propose a specific solution to the problem in one to three sentences;
3. list three print and/or human resources that would give useful information for designing and implementing the plan, explaining why each would be helpful;
4. list in complete statements at least five specific steps they would take to implement the plan in the order the tasks should be accomplished; and
5. write an explanation of at least 100 words to tell how Emerson and/or Thoreau would view their proposed plan, basing their explanation on what they know about Transcendentalism from the readings and citing at least two supporting quotes.

Topics of interest to our students and their resulting plans ran the gamut from the most narrow and particular ones related to the school community to national and international issues. A few examples of proposal ideas are: more recognition and pep assemblies for female athletes (this suggestion from a male athlete); creation of a fairer system for choosing student representatives for special activities; an earlier legal driving age for rural students; the use of cold fusion nuclear power for electricity.

In addition to the required parts of the project, we also offer extra credit if students can provide proof that they have taken steps to put their plan into action. One student submitted as evidence a letter she wrote and intended to send to Michigan Governor John Engler, expressing her views on the issue of assisted suicide, and another student provided a note from the principal to show
she had talked with him about her plan for making the athletic letters females receive as large as the ones males have always earned. Her idea was accepted, and real change occurred in our school as a result of this assignment.

**Thematic Mobile**

A book report my daughter did in fifth grade gave me the idea for the assessment tool Melinda Putz and I use for Civil War era literature: the thematic mobile. For this project students think about how pieces they have read by Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson and other works related to the Civil War and concerns about oppression (an excerpt from Mary Chestnut's *Civil War*, Robert E. Lee's “Letter to His Son,” “The Gettysburg Address,” Chief Joseph’s “I Will Fight No More Forever” speech, “The Gettysburg Address,” Chief Joseph’s “I Will Fight No More Forever” speech, an excerpt from Frederick Douglass’ *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and two spirituals) could be related thematically. Students create a slogan (e.g., “Webs of Time—Life Awaiting Death,” “Sight and Insight,” “America, the Beating Heart”) or a symbol (e.g., a profile of a head with inset brain to symbolize inner consciousness, a map of the world to show a world context for American issues) as a way to unify the pieces of literature.

This slogan or symbol serves as the top of the mobile from which hang four separate parts: Dickinson, Whitman, Civil War pieces, and pieces dealing with oppression. Each part must list the author and title(s) of works read, three quotations from the literature that relate to the theme, and some visual component (color, shape, cut-out pictures, drawings, photos, and objects) that fit the pieces and the mobile's unifying idea. In addition, the student writes an accompanying explanation to tell what the slogan/symbol means, why he or she chose this as a way to unify the literature read, how it fits the time period, and how the quotations and visuals fit the theme. Evaluation is based on creativity, unity of elements, and completeness.

**Final Exam**

To complete their journey through the history of American literature, Melinda and I have created a final exam that is also an alternative to more traditional testing, and which is in keeping with the work we've been doing with students all year. We use a thematic time line that traces a common idea through all the major periods of American literature. The time line must include the theme, dates and names of each period, the authors and titles of two works of literature that depict the theme in a particular period, one quotation from each piece that relates to the theme, and an illustration for each period. In addition to creating the time line, students present their work in a five-minute presentation.

To prepare for this, we talk with students about:

1. how to prepare an introduction that grabs attention and explains why they chose a particular theme and why it is important, and that perhaps introduces the major approaches to the theme they will discuss in the speech;
2. how to construct a body that tells generally how the theme is expressed in the two chosen works for each period and, if possible, how the historical events of the period might have influenced the writers to deal with the theme in the manner they did; and
3. how to conclude effectively to put full closure on the theme they are trying to develop.

We find this kind of assessment tool to be a very effective way to challenge students. First, it helps make connections between the various literature they have been studying all year. Second, it encourages students not to view material as isolated and something to forget as soon as the test is taken. Most importantly, all students, regardless of their ability level, can find some kind of thread, no matter how literal, to link the various pieces in the body of literature they've studied. Also, since our text provides a section in the back which groups pieces by eleven general themes (e.g., "Individuals in Society," "Values and Beliefs"), students have a place to begin in trying to construct a unifying idea for the disparate time periods and pieces; and quite a few go beyond the book's suggested themes and create original statements.

The most interesting time line I've received had as its theme "The Evolution of the Exploring Spirit of America," and the student labeled each piece of literature according to some different slant on exploration (e.g., "exploration of creation" for early Native American literature and "exploration of experimental poetry" for e. e. cummings).

Time line formats, too, are nearly as varied as our students. Some students construct
the typical horizontal type while others are more innovative, making booklets of different sizes, flip charts, mobiles, vertical panels, or posters to develop their chosen themes. Both the time lines themselves and what students reveal in their oral presentations about their understanding of American literature from their year-long study provide further learning for all our students and us, their teachers. This kind of final exam is much more than a test; it is a positive capstone session that brings all elements together one last time before students move on.

CONCLUSION

Has transformation of our class been pain-free? No. This has been a radical change for our students, as well as for us. Evaluation instruments such as the ones I've described here challenge our students' definition of test and consequently frustrate them. We think, however, that that's all right because some level of frustration increases learning. To minimize the negative effects of frustration, we've built into the program a two-week “redo” period for all major projects and papers turned in on time so that learning doesn't stop even once the test is taken.

Three years ago, Melinda Putz and I believe, our students felt American literature was cold, dry, distant, and archaic—having little to do with their lives. In rethinking English 11, however, we believe we've made progress in closing the gap between our plans and the literature for the course and our students' lives. Our hope in changing the way we assess students' learning is to provide a framework, an atmosphere in which our students' internal and external worlds can mesh in some meaningful way with American literature, past and present.

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**EJ FIFTEEN YEARS AGO**

**Personal Journals as Personal Therapies**

“Personal journals have become the perfect symptom of the self-centered age we live in. Tom Wolfe dubbed the 1970s the ‘Me Decade,’ and if the present trend continues, we can predict that the personal journal will join the panoply of other personal therapies thriving today. We forget that since Aristotle’s time, writing curricula have dealt with public forms of discourse for public purposes: writing to change minds, to take public stands, to work for needed social changes. Far too many teachers, I fear, have forgotten this and been lulled to sleep by the anesthetizing chants of the ‘me chorus’ in their students’ spiral notebooks.”


**JAEPOL CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS**

The journal of the NCTE Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning welcomes submissions for its winter 1997–1998 issue. The theme, Resistance and Rewards, focuses on non-traditional approaches to learning, language use, and teaching. Approaches should discuss beyond the traditionally defined cognitive domain and employ a variety of forms of inquiry. Conform submissions to APA Manual, Fourth edition, and send three copies of manuscript at maximum length 15–17 double-spaced pages. Include one self-addressed stamped manuscript-sized envelope and postage for two reviewer mailings. Send by **January 31, 1997** to Sharon Gibson-Groshon, Assistant Editor, Department of English, Towson State University, Towson, MD 21204; phone (410) 830-2838, e-mail gibson@midget.towson.edu.
Three by Diane Kendig

Teaching

English as a

Second Language

In our rented house in Nicaragua, we sit in the falling light, listening an hour, while his face, so angular by day, becomes a plateau. His story might be coming in to land, but we can't tell, can't hear where he's going, his voice so level and steady, we won't interrupt to turn on the light.

But it's not really a story, more a series of stills: the bludgeoned face of the drunk who'd hollered “Down with Somoza” at the Santo Domingo parade. Even at eight years old, scooped away by his parents, he knew the man would die of the beating, just as he knew, four years later, how his father's head would crash open if the rebels found the weapons they searched the house for. In between, he had lived under mattresses for days, looted miles away to find the water they'd lived without. Then years he lived in Cuba so his family had one less child to feed, returning home at age seventeen and no one recognizing him. His mother's face, seeing him, a mask of polite confusion. “What I am trying to tell you,” he says finally, “is that I had no youth. Can I say it, that way, in English, ‘I had no youth’?”

Paper Whites

My friend who studies seed catalogues warned me not to trust the photo of twelve tall spikes topped by white froth, redolent of lilies, but my grandmothers put geraniums and poinsettias to rest and resurrected them, forced tulips and daffodils on the kitchen table each spring. I thought I'd do as well if I'd concentrate on this one pot.

Then I opened my office door one Monday in February to a rush of subtropic air, remnant of the weekend and the cranky thermostat's rise to old heights. Eight thick green trunks stood at attention. In days, they rose and rose. One bloomed and rusted. Four chartreuse tumors formed as it all collapsed across my desk, reaching like sick garter snakes.

My friend calls it “forced too soon,” which, I gather, is like the child whose parents pressed his hands into a hot skillet, how he learned, unfairly, to handle the heat, like the student with AIDS who sits across from me, arms outstretched, looking into his open palms.
Rural Students

Nearly two decades later, they come on summer nights, their cows barely lowing, needing nothing till dawn and they still have their sixteen-year-old faces, their nicknames alongside the surnames in the gradebook. They have become oblivious of the teacher over their shoulders as they continue recording in their notebooks their parents’ divorces and remarriage, their fears of detention and pregnancy, all their trips to the mall: Cheryl dutifully describes the new maroon and white piqué with navy blue hearts and Tim makes up how he balled a busty 21-year-old whom he did not make up, nor the acid ubiquitous even in Elyria back then. All night, they write in their notebooks, recounting the lashes they ran from, the family counselling ensuing, their mother’s death and their foster mother’s chitlin recipe. They still have to cover going to tech school, the university branch, their father’s suicide during Thanksgiving vacation. They have to try to rescue their own marriages as they present engagements and gestations, but they find they must find a job in Norwalk, move into an apartment and quit missing the creek and the horse they said they’d never leave. Even their teacher wishes they could stop writing now, or at least, leave these stories to someone else, or at least, that the cows would break out into the neighbor’s pasture so the students would be called away from school and she could sleep.

Diane Kendig teaches writing at The University of Findlay in Ohio. Recently, she was a Fulbright lecturer in Nicaragua.