

A Portrait of Two Writing Teachers

In their classrooms, quietly and without a lot of fanfare, the two teachers profiled here, and many others like them, are passing on their love of language—and making a difference in their students' lives that will last a lifetime.

At Shoreham-Wading River High School in Shoreham, New York, Audre Allison and Florence Mondry are English teachers who have placed writing at the center of their curriculums. Their names are not household words in education, but they are important figures because they exemplify thoughtful teaching. Each is in her fourteenth year of teaching. Allison has taught in two suburban schools; Mondry, in New York City and in two suburban schools. Although highly individualistic, they are bound by pedagogical commonalities.

Kindred Spirits

In many ways Audre Allison and Florence Mondry are kindred spirits. They admire many of the same authors and books, and both view the English classroom as a noncompetitive place in which serious ideas and thoughts are examined and in which very hard, fulfilling work is done. But their personal histories are quite different.

Born in St. Louis, Audre Allison grew up during the depression and World War II, a middle-class midwestern American. From the "sound of my mother's voice reading to me" to her older sister's "reading our encyclopedia to me," her childhood was filled with memories of language. Very early she learned to keep a diary, as her witty, literary, much-admired Aunt Janet, a teacher, did.

Allison read and wrote for the plea-

sure of it and also to meet "a lot of characters who felt the way I did." For Allison, writing became a way of knowing herself and gaining control of her world: "I would always write if I had problems, if I felt sad or angry—and sometimes I'd write in the dark."

Florence Mondry was born in another place and time, in Semipalatinsk in the Soviet Union just as World War II ended. She spent part of her early childhood in a Displaced Persons Camp in war-ruined Germany and then moved to Israel, where she lived until her family emigrated to the United States, when she was 12. Mondry remembers her parents as "story tellers." Her mother "had a dramatic and vivid way of talking about people and things that had happened to

Photograph by Mark F. Goldberg



With different histories but a similar zeal for reading and writing, Audre Allison and Florence Mondry (left and right in center of photo) both find the classroom to be an excellent vehicle for conveying their enthusiasm to others.

her... My father's way of telling stories was through songs."

For Mondry, the child of Holocaust survivors, reading took her "beyond the sordidness of what's everyday and what is real—what I consider sordid because of what my family has gone through... Language could show us the better part of us. There's something about words, their nuances, that has a power over me." To Mondry, writers could point out the good, the sensible, the beautiful in experience, and she gave her deepest respect to "people who can capture that meaning."

Two Paths Cross

Coming from two very different backgrounds yet sharing a similar love of language, Allison and Mondry crossed paths as teachers in the Shoreham-Wading River School District. Both also participated in the National Writing Project—Allison in 1979, and Mondry in 1982—led by Professors Sondra Perl and Richard Sterling of the City University of New York. That initial training inspired both teachers to take additional inservice courses, later teaching workshops and courses themselves and presenting at local and national conferences.

The Writing Project intensified their drive to place composition at the center of their work, to give students more responsibility, and to foster collaborative learning. They explain the project's impact on their teaching:

Mondry: The main difference between the way I taught seven years ago and the way I teach now is that I'm not always there in the middle directing or talking at students, but I'm more and more taking a coaching approach... I'm there, I'm directing, yes, but I allow my kids to do more exploring.

Allison: [The Writing Project] taught me to trust myself and look at myself as a model because I am someone who writes well and who loves to write and who reads voraciously and has always loved to read. [The project] taught me to look at my own processes and to invite kids to look at what they do.

Serious Writers at Work

To walk into either teacher's classroom today is to enter a serious workshop. Students share ideas and writing in groups; brainstorm composing possibilities; read aloud; have whole-group and small-group discussions of literature, language, or writing; and prepare pieces for publication in in-house pamphlets or magazines, local newspapers, magazines devoted to student writing, and the high school's own literary magazine. The atmosphere is natural, task-oriented, literary, and highly engaging.

At the center of everything that Allison and Mondry and their students do is the ever-present *reading log*. When she distributes the notebooks to her students on the first day of school, Mondry tells them, "It's a place you can write anything you want about literature." The logs, of course, take time to develop; at first, she and her students write responses together and share them.

After several years of using the logs, Allison says she noticed that many of the best entries in her own and students' logs "began with 'I,' so I made a list of beginnings of sentences and called them 'invitations.'" Using such invitations as "I noticed..." "I was surprised..." "I can't really understand..." or "I was reminded of..." has helped many teachers get their students interested in reading logs. Sometimes Allison begins the log experience with a "short story that is a little confusing because then students get to see lots of surprising interpretations; it forces them to dig for things."

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Over time, the reading logs become students' personal reading (and intellectual) records. Once students have kept them for a month or two, they become the bases for class discussion and the starting points for informal and formal essays. The entries free them, explains Allison, "to blurt out tentative statements because you need information from all angles to understand a story... [Students learn that] discomfort is a real friend because it means you are about to take this intellectual leap... about to do something [you] haven't done before." Sometimes she worries about structure in her writing-centered classroom: "You want to give enough freedom so that writing really will happen, and you have to recognize it doesn't always happen the same for everyone. But you don't want anyone to take advantage of that freedom."

Mondry adds that the logs "make kids feel that literature is something they can interpret and respond to in an intelligent way. It's not just the domain of the teacher." She wants her students to develop confidence in their ability to control experience through writing and to extract meaning from reading: "Kids have something to say... It might not be said in the most graceful way, but I know that what they have to say has meaning to them, and I try to understand that meaning."

The reading log brings students to the center of their own learning, yet the teacher remains important. Allison emphasizes, "I'm one of the readers in the class, and they know I'm an experienced reader... They don't want to miss something important." Mondry occasionally uses her log to direct students to something she wants to stress: "Point of view, as an example, might need more emphasis. I define the term, and then I mention kids' responses that have some bearing on point of view."

Both teachers have watched their students develop the ability to write longer, more thoughtful entries. According to Mondry, you can't "see it immediately or even within a month or two," but over time. The students also learn to make responsible decisions about what to include in the essays that grow out of their logs. They become confident that "the writer is the capable person to decide what to include" (Allison); eventually, they come to understand that "the final answer is in them" (Mondry).

The value of the reading logs, which may fill two notebooks by the end of a year, is even more evident two or three years after a student has graduated, when he or she comes back to visit the teacher, log in hand. As Mondry expressed, "It becomes a precious document to them," a serious intellectual record and springboard, for years to come.

Passing the Torch

These two kindred spirits have in common classrooms that convey no immediate flash to a visitor. However, a 10-minute visit raises the questions, "What's going on here? Why am I captivated?" A one-period visit provokes a visitor to say, "This is extraordinary. I must return." And four or five visits bring admiring comments: "This is powerful. Students are deeply involved, the teacher plays a strong role, but the student is dominant. This is what I sometimes read about but very rarely see." □

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