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 pleasure 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 Semipalitinsk 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 "storytellers." Her mother "had a dramatic and vivid way of talking about people and things that had happened to 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:

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.
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, literate, 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 was25A, Shoreham, NY 11786.

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."