DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 758 CS 212 139

AUTHOR Hansbury, Tricia
TITLE A Journey with "Great Expectations": Charles Dickens Meets the Ninth Grade; A Teacher Researcher Discovers Life in Another Classroom. Report Series 2.4.
INSTITUTION Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature, Albany, NY.
SPONS AGENCY National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C.; Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 89
GRANT G008720278
NOTE 28p.; For other reports in this series, see CS 212 137-143.
AVAILABLE FROM Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature, School of Education, 1400 Washington Ave., ED B-9, University at Albany, State University of New York, Albany, NY 12222 ($4.00).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

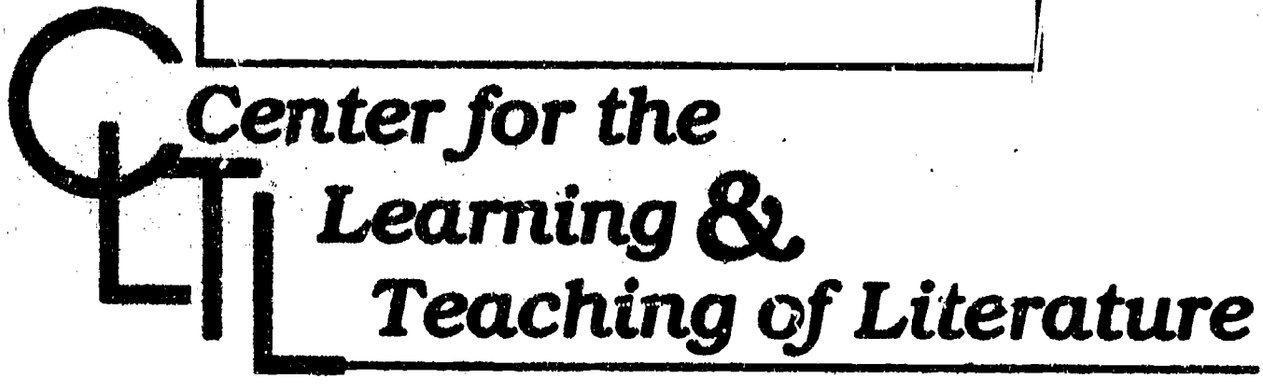
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Environment; Classroom Research; Classroom Techniques; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); Grade 9; High Schools; *Literature Appreciation; Qualitative Research; *Reader Text Relationship; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Behavior; *Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Models
IDENTIFIERS *Dickens (Charles); Great Expectations; Teacher Researchers

ABSTRACT

One of a series of six portraits of high school literature classrooms, this paper gives a detailed, evocative characterization of how one "master teacher" introduced, undertook, and guided the study of literature, focusing in particular on how the teacher interacted with students in the context of discussion of a literary work in class. The paper recounts how a teacher-researcher observed an instructional unit of literature by (1) conducting taped interviews with the teacher as well as with his students; (2) gathering lesson plans, study guidelines, and assignments related to the instructional units to be observed; and (3) making videotapes of the classes involved; and finally (4) writing a narrative account of what had been observed in the class and what its significance appeared to be. The paper describes a lively class of 13 rural ninth-graders in an encounter with Charles Dickens' "Great Expectations," and discusses the teacher's attempt to find a balance between a student-centered approach and a teacher's authority and view of a literary "classic." (SR)

A Journey with Great Expectations: Charles Dickens Meets the Ninth Grade; A Teacher Researcher Discovers Life in Another Classroom

Tricia Hansbury



University at Albany
State University of New York
School of Education
1400 Washington Avenue
Albany, New York 12222

A Journey with Great Expectations: Charles Dickens Meets the Ninth Grade; A Teacher Researcher Discovers Life in Another Classroom

Tricia Hansbury

Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature
University at Albany
State University of New York
1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, New York 12222

Report Series 2.4

1989

Preparation of this report was supported in part by grant number G008720278, which is cosponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI/ED), and by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of OERI/ED or NEA, and no official endorsement of either agency should be inferred.

Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature

The Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature is a research and development center located at the University at Albany, State University of New York. The Center was established in 1987 with funds from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, and from the National Endowment for the Arts. The Center's mission is to improve the teaching of content knowledge and critical-thinking strategies that contribute to literary understanding, particularly at the middle and high school levels.

Center-sponsored research falls into three broad areas: 1) surveys of current practice in the teaching of literature, including studies of both what is taught and how it is taught; 2) studies of alternative approaches to instruction and their effects on students' knowledge of literature and critical-thinking abilities; and 3) studies of alternative approaches to the assessment of literature achievement, including both classroom-based and larger-scale approaches to testing.

The Center also promotes good practice in the teaching of literature through conferences and seminars, through the development of computerized bibliographies on research and practice in the teaching of literature, and through publications that present the Center's own research and provide other resources for research and practice. To receive a list of current publications, please write to CLTL, School of Education, University at Albany, 1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222.

Preface

Overview

The following portrait of a high school literature classroom results from a year-long teacher-research project planned and implemented by a group of high school English teachers from districts in and around Albany, New York. This portrait is one of six produced during the first year of the project, each of which is available separately from the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature. The researchers are themselves all experienced professionals, regarded by colleagues, supervisors, and principals as outstanding literature instructors in their own right. Each of them undertook to observe an instructional unit of another English teacher considered to be equally accomplished in presenting literature to high school students. A unit was defined as the study of a novel, a play, or a sequence of short stories or poems over a period of four to five days. The intent was to compose detailed, evocative characterizations of what particular and well-regarded high school literature teachers actually do in their classrooms.

Each teacher-researcher chose a colleague whose experience and expertise were popularly thought to be exceptional. The researcher conducted taped interviews with the "master teacher," as well as with his or her students, gathered lesson plans, study guidelines, and assignments related to the instructional units to be observed, and made videotapes of the classes involved. Each researcher discussed and studied these materials with the teacher during the observation phase of the project and with the other researchers in the analysis phase. Throughout the study, the researchers also continually reviewed their evolving interpretations of materials with project coordinators. Finally, each wrote a narrative account of what she or he had seen and what its significance appeared to be, preparing the account through several drafts, until themes and details emerged that seemed to the members of the project team and to the master teacher to provide an authentic rendering of the classroom experience.

Goals and Methods

The question directing the research was this: How do the best high school English teachers introduce, undertake, and guide the study of literature in their classrooms? Plainly, there are nettlesome prior questions lurking here: What does "best" mean? What are the criteria for excellence? Who gets to say so? What does "literature" entail? But the concern of the project was to find out what teachers who are perceived to be successful actually do, the ways in which they do it, and the explanations they may offer for their practices. The attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions that might underlie perceptions of excellence were not an immediate concern, although the portraits that finally emerged of good teachers in action certainly direct attention to what the normal criteria of successful literature instruction are thought to be at the present time. Nor was the theoretically vexed question of what constitutes literature an immediate issue, though the texts that various teachers chose for their classes represent statements about what literature is thought to include in the context of high school curricula today.

The master teachers of the study were selected simply by appeal to local knowledge: The researchers, all veteran educators in the Albany area, asked themselves and others which local

high school English teachers have the most established reputations in literature instruction according to colleagues, supervisors, and students. There was no a priori critique of these public perceptions; instead, taken at face value, they were regarded as reliable indicators of the current, commonsense understanding of what makes for quality of instruction. The literary text that formed the basis of class work in each instance was the choice of the teacher or program involved, reflecting, at least as far as the project was concerned, the normal, current sense of appropriate reading material for a particular grade level in Albany-area communities.

The research question was restricted to focus primarily on how a successful teacher interacts with students in the context of discussion of a literary work during class. Hence, less attention was directed to activities such as reading aloud or lecturing on background information, for instance, except insofar as they set up and conditioned opportunities for class discussion. Nor was much attention paid to those portions of class time devoted to routine business matters, "visiting" before and after class, or disciplinary and other regulatory actions, except, once again, to the extent that they might affect the character of discussion.

Naturally, the question "What constitutes 'discussion'?" and the related question "When is 'discussion' going on?" were persistent concerns, by no means easily dispatched. Initially, the researchers were prone to conceive discussion in their own favorite terms, which for one meant little or no teacher involvement, for another involvement but not direction, for still another, lecture or controlled questioning interspersed with student responses. Eventually, members of the research group agreed that discussion was properly whatever a particular master teacher said it was within his or her own classroom.

Researchers and teachers agreed in advance on the units of instruction that would be observed. During preclass interviews, each researcher asked about the reasons for choosing particular texts, what the teacher hoped to accomplish on each class day, what she or he expected of the students, and what assignments would support in-class work. The researcher also asked about the teacher's views of literature, literary study, and teaching. Following these interviews, arrangements were made to videotape classes in which discussion would be a primary activity and to observe but not to videotape other classes in which lecture, reading aloud, or other business would predominate (during these sessions researchers took notes only). Interestingly, no classes featured more time spent on lecture than on discussing the text: student involvement of one kind or another was a consistent feature of the six classrooms. After each class, another meeting enabled the researcher and teacher to review portions of videotape, go over written notes, and discuss perceptions (on both sides) of what happened and why. The research group believed it was important to richness of perception that the teachers have the fullest opportunity to react to the tapes, comment on their practices, explain them in any way that seemed valuable, and react to the impressions that the researcher had formed of class activities.

Since there was no intent to evaluate or critique instructional practices or to view them from some other stance of privileged objectivity, teachers felt free to be candid about what worked and what didn't. Since the researchers were high school teachers themselves, they were able to display the perceptual judgment tempered by generosity that frequently characterizes those who have "been there" and who understand the obligations but also the difficulties of

classroom work. The researchers knew the teachers as responsible professionals; the teachers trusted the researchers to tell their stories honestly.

The researchers and project coordinators spent considerable time exploring the epistemological and hermeneutic questions that surround practices of observing and writing about complex human settings. Everyone acknowledged the necessarily interpretive nature of classroom observation, the influence of a researcher's perspective, the impact of a camcorder's presence, location, focus, and movement on what is seen, the selectivity and slant of field notes, the necessary but simplifying reduction of experiential detail to judgments, characterizations, and conclusions--in general the interrelationship between observer and object observed as it is finally constituted in the textual record of some experience. The aim was to achieve what Clifford Geertz has called "thick description," a narrative rendering of classroom reality, its ambiguities all intact, not a model, statistical average, or other purified representation of "what happened." The teacher-researchers shared a pervasive self-consciousness about interpretation, a desire to offer richness of detail in place of clearcut generalities, a concern for discussing "readings" of the classroom with the largest possible number of people (the teacher and students involved as well as the other researchers and the coordinators of the project), a determination to write narratives about teachers' practices rather than conventional research reports, an emphasis on "storyteller," "theme," "plot," and "character," more typical of literary study than of empirical research. In this instance, researchers and teachers collaborated to create stories of classroom life: their viewpoints converge and diverge in intricate ways which the resulting narratives do not attempt to conceal. The researchers are narrators who do not seek to render themselves invisible in what they write, whose voices are distinctive and important to the meaningfulness of the stories. The teachers and students are characters who come to life according to the ways in which they have been conceived by the narrators. Each story is organized--has plot--according to the themes that emerged for each narrator over the course of observation and talk. Following is one teacher-researcher's narrative. The others are also available as Literature Center reports.

C. H. Knoblauch
Lil Brannon
The University at Albany
State University of New York

A Journey With Great Expectations: Charles Dickens Meets the Ninth Grade; A Teacher-Researcher Discovers Life in Another Classroom

Tricia Hansbury
Canajoharie High School

The Journey Begins: Embarkation and Departures

To enter Room 209 is to inhabit a wonderful kind of confusion. Desks fill the old room, desks that squeak under the pressure of 14-year-old bodies whose hands tap pencils, reach out to others, riffle notebooks--move, it seems, almost constantly. Boxes piled high in two corners balance precariously; folders spill over the teacher's desk in the back of the room. Plants trail across the sunny windowsill. Posters from Greek Myth cling with masking tape to an unused blackboard at the side of the room. Yes, the blackboards here are black, and the ceilings are high, unforgiving of every sound that escapes from the activity below.

Grace Whitman, the teacher who will allow me to invade her class for awhile with my questions and camera, stands at the front of this room exerting a calm presence in the midst of all this chaos. Grace has been teaching for about 25 years, 6 of them here in our small rural school district. It's more than experience that gives her authority here. As Cy Knoblauch said as we watched tapes of this class together, "She's the only point of calm in a room erupting around her." Her quiet and reassuring demeanor will, it turns out, be a major force in this room despite the overt energy of her students.

It might seem odd that after being a colleague of Grace for six years, we'd never really talked about teaching, other than sharing a quick morning laugh or groan over a story at the coffee machine; we'd never worked together on anything or chatted more than briefly about what happens in her room with students I would see in my own room two years later. And of course, I'd never been in the room to observe a class. As teachers, we tend to inhabit only our own rooms; we are not often given the opportunity and seldom are encouraged to explore other parts of the system. Stepping out of my own room and into the world of 209 gave me a new perspective on teaching, on students, and on myself as a teacher, a perspective that I wouldn't, couldn't have had otherwise. It's good to step out of those comfortable shoes every now and then. I wondered what would happen when I slipped back into those shoes-would my feet feel once again at home after wandering, or would the journey have changed me? And so, while I'm sitting in Room 209, on the first day of observing, surrounded by books and papers, desks, boxes, and kids, I have many questions and a few reservations, but mostly I'm curious to see how another teacher "does it."

This is the first day of a unit on Dickens' Great Expectations, and students are exhibiting that cautious eagerness I recognize from my own classes' reactions to a new task or unit of study. To introduce this particular book, Grace has planned several activities for her students. She wants to try to link the book with things they already know, and so she opens discussion by surveying students' experience with Dickens in general. They talk about other books they have read, and I'm impressed at the wide reading the class as a group represents. Such titles as Oliver Twist, A Tale of Two Cities, and A Christmas Carol are mentioned. They

express frustration over reading Dickens, which Grace has anticipated in our earlier discussion. I am interested in the candor of their responses: while about a third of them report enjoying Dickens, others seem less comfortable. Terri tells us: "I started to read Oliver Twist because I'd heard about it, but it's so hard to read and then it gets boring." Grace encourages her to say more, and she elaborates: "The way he writes, he's writing way back then, the way they talked back then, that's how he's writing it. It's hard for me to see through it." The word "boring" echoes around the room, in signs of agreement with her. Even those who enjoyed the books they had read found them "hard to read" and "boring." I'm thinking we're in for a fun time here. Grace neither encourages nor discourages these statements; it seems she is simply gathering as many responses from students as she can, letting each student who wants to, add something to the conversation.

Next Grace moves to a larger question: "What about Dickens and the work he has done? Is it still around? Is it still in our culture? Is it still seen and read? Are you familiar with Dickens in any other way?" Terri suggests that he wrote poems; several students respond, "No, that was Emily Dickinson." We laugh. Why, I wonder? Grace responds to her, too: "Not that I know of, not that I'm familiar with." Her tone is quiet and affirming of them, their ideas, their problems, their struggles. And despite all their energy, all the motion in this room, all the interaction between students, I can see that they are actively interested in this conversation. After the survey of books read, movies seen, Broadway plays produced, assemblies attended, and sixth grade plays performed, it is clear to all of us that Dickens is a familiar element of their academic lives. To increase that familiarity, Grace has brought a book on Dickens and she shows them pictures of 19th century England, pointing out the various styles of the artwork it contains. She seems to be saying, "This is the way educated people view things and speak about them; these are the ideas educated people discuss." I can't tell if the students have heard before or really understand such concepts as Romantic style or caricature, but it is clear that they accept this as a part of their English class.

Now if all this sounds calm and orderly--an ideal class of eager yet quiet students--think again. Think again about ninth grade. Eric turns to look at the camera. Turns away, looks again. Finally, instinct overcomes better judgment: he waves. Terri fixes her hair and smiles toward the camera before she launches into her speech on Oliver Twist. Sarah and Dennis exchange glances, chat. Tom turns constantly in his chair, taps his fingers, his feet. Sarah and Michelle reach out to each other and shake hands in agreement over a point. Only two boys sit almost motionless. They are in the two front seats, heads down, closest to Grace. I guess they hope they are invisible. I think maybe they are.

Besides drawing on their familiarity with Dickens, Grace wants to remind them of at least one way that this book is similar to others they've read together. One of the literary techniques which this class has focused on for the year is the writer's use of what Grace calls the "I-narrator"; the "I-narrator" is usually an older person who looks back on events from his life, viewing and judging them from a more mature perspective. To remind students of this technique, she reviews some of the ideas they have obviously discussed before while reading S.E. Hinton's The Outsiders together. She begins after reading aloud Dickens' first paragraph: "What do you know about the technique the author is using in this novel?" Again I notice the phrasing: she is encouraging them subtly. Boosting them. There are some things they know that will help them to read this probably difficult book. It won't be impossible, she assures them--not in words, but by the tone of her questions as she reminds them of what they already know:

Grace: What do you know about the technique the author is using in this novel?

Keith: First person.

Grace: First person narrator. What does that tell you, what can you come to feel about this? Some hints, some suggestions, of when the author uses this?

Eric: He wants you to be the character.

Michelle: He wants you to get into the character.

Grace: What else about using the I-narrator technique?

Dennis: You get better insight.

Grace: How so?

Dennis: His feelings can be described.

Grace: His feelings... What else, when you see as I-narrator? Patty?

Patty: You understand his feelings.

Grace: You understand his opinion about something. What other book that we read this year used this same technique?

Keith: The Outsiders.

Grace: The Outsiders. And Bill, what about The Outsiders and the first person narrative technique?

Bill: The kids told the whole story through that.

Grace: The kids told the whole story through that...

Bill: Then he would make up a term paper about it.

Grace: He wound up making a term paper out of it. When the I-narrator tells you the story--

Terri: It's from his point of view, not anybody else's.

Tom: It's also a disadvantage--

Terri: It could be biased.

Grace: (To Tom) That was your point? (To Class) Okay, so we're getting that point of view. I'd like to start in by just reading some of this to you, and I'd like you to follow, and as I read, and if you get lost, I want you to let me know, but I want you to try to imagine Pip, what he looks like, what he's seeing, and how he's feeling.

During this introductory lesson, Grace spends quite a bit of time reading aloud the opening paragraphs of the novel. She had confessed in an earlier interview that she loved to read out loud to her students, and there is an important reason to do that. We had been talking about the kind of world our students inhabit. For one thing, she said it seems that it is much more visually oriented than in the past. Our students are used to having so many imaginative scenes fed to their eyes by the media in which we are engulfed. Worried that her students might not think to picture Pip or Miss Havisham or the myriad of wonderful Dickensian characters that fill this book, and so miss out on much of the pleasure of reading it, Grace had planned activities to encourage them to experience the book visually. She told me that she hoped that actually hearing Dickens' words phrase by phrase would enable students to picture the opening scene. She was worried that as inexperienced readers they might find themselves stumbling through Dickens' long sentences, forgetting to picture the scene he draws. So, in this first class, she reads the first paragraph out loud and asks students to describe the young Pip, as they see him. Again we see her quiet acceptance of their ideas, of their way of tackling the task. She tells them:

Grace: So just take a scrap sheet of paper for a moment, and tell me what you can about your picture of Pip at the moment that he is talking about himself here in the first paragraph.

Eric: Can we draw a picture?

Grace: Picture? Fine, draw a picture.

Sarah: What are we supposed to do?

Grace: A picture of Pip, with a verbal picture, or a real drawing.

Tom: Can I trace? [from the cover illustration]

Grace: But would that be a picture of the Pip we're seeing in paragraph one?

Tom: Well, I can take away the mustache and beard and all...

Grace: All right. You transpose it then.

Terri: Can it be a stick person?

Grace: Stick person is fine.

Tom: Might get a lot of description...

Dennis: Stick paragraph. Ha ha.

Grace: I think you'll have to tell me about your stick person if you draw a stick person.

The students work at this, and there is a real sense to me that they are eager and involved in this activity. They chat among themselves, joke with each other, but they work at the task. Soon, almost all the students seem ready to share what they've done. Although the descriptions they read were, to me, either a little dull ("young, skinny boy") or a little overdone (such as Terri's "shaggy blonde hair, gray eyes"--she's the dramatic one), students did seem to be forming a picture for themselves of some boy named Pip. Eric, the "class ham," says, "I picture him wearing one of those little hats," and shows his drawing to the class--and to the camera, of course. Again, I am amazed at what I'm seeing, at watching Grace successfully tread the fine line between ninth grade energy lapsed into pandemonium and ninth grade activity gently directed toward her task.

I wondered, at first, about the use of scrap paper for this task. Would it imply to students that what they are writing or drawing is only temporary, is less important than something written on "good" or "clean" paper? I was certainly not seeing that reaction in students. Does it imply instead that the work they are doing is not to be handed in and so is not for the teacher, but for themselves (and therefore most important)? Probably this latter reason is more clearly what students heard with these directions, for certainly they were intent at this activity and eager to share their ideas with others.

Next, and as Grace says later, "because pencils were in hand," she asks students to think of a time "when someone frightened or intimidated you." To encourage them (which by now I'm thinking is one thing this group does not need!), she shares with them a story of her own: "I remember that I enjoyed one Christmas carol immensely. It was the "First Snow Elf." I could just see it. I found out later it was the "First Noel." I thought is was the "First Snow Elf" because that made more sense to me. I could see a snow elf, but I couldn't see a Noel." Students want to talk right away, of course, and tell their own stories; they have to be directed to write them down "so we all have one." They write excitedly and exchange stories with each other until the group sharing begins.

They tell stories of nightmares they'd had, of being afraid to hang their hands over the edge of the bed at night, of monsters in dark closets. And then Sarah shares a slightly different story: "My father used to tell me that when you hit your parents, that when you die, your hand will grow out of the grave. He'd threaten to take us down to the cemetery and we'd see that hand grow out of the grave and they'd grab you." Her face tells me the power this story has over her, and when Grace asks her, "Did you believe him?" her quiet "yes" confirms that. If I'd wondered about it before, it's clear now that in this room people feel comfortable expressing

themselves without fear of ridicule. Dennis' tension-breaking joke, "She still believes it" is offered as a way to get back to the easy camaraderie of earlier moments, and is not derisive. Grace guides students to consider how they feel now about these experiences and I can see that she is tying their own lives and perspectives to Pip's: each is looking back at an earlier experience from a more mature perspective. Do the students make that connection, too?

Grace reads some more, and when there are a few minutes remaining, stops and asks students to jot down "on a scrap sheet of paper, what questions you have at this point, whether questions about what you read, or questions about what's going to happen, or questions about understanding." The questions they ask are mostly literal ones: "How did Pip's parents die? Did that guy escape from prison, or something? Does that man that's threatening Pip really have someone else with him or is he saying it just to scare him?" Grace answers some of these questions; others she redirects by asking another question so that students can answer. Finally she says, "Anything you didn't understand about this? Okay, so we got through one chapter. Several pages, and you say you comprehend. For tomorrow, chapters two and three. And again, have any questions you don't comprehend." The bell rings and students gather books. It has gone pretty much according to plan, but I think we both breathe a sigh of relief that the first class is over.

Negotiating Winding Paths: Students' needs, Teachers' needs

Grace's goals for this lesson are to establish a literary and cultural context in which to read Dickens: to help students identify with Pip, both as narrator and young child; to help them overcome some problems with Dickens' style; and to engage students so that they'll want to read further. These goals seem to have been met. They are closely linked with her goals for this ninth grade honors course in general. First, she wants student to be aware of their values, and that choices they make are determined by and reflective of their values. She believes that Pip's journey from innocence to experience is a wonderful vehicle for exploring those ideas. She says, "the basic story of the book is the person, the I-narrator, telling the reader what he has learned, how he changed, and how his original perceptions at the beginning were changed by the end of the novel." Second, she wants to introduce the idea of the Literary Classic, as something that "lasts through time and lasts through rereading....You can read it again at different stages of your life and find new things in it." She says a classic "can be read and understood and meaningful to different people at different times."

She wants them to see the cultural value of such works as well: "That this is part of information that people have and that obviously other people consider it worthy and perhaps they will find it worthy, too. It's something that has some meaning in today's life." And she adds, "I want them to appreciate the book, and I use the word 'appreciation' as distinctive from liking. I don't expect everybody to like the same thing." She helps students understand her point about classics by asking them to think about judging a cake-baking contest. Earlier in the year, they have "talked about opinion and the difference between opinion and taste...and used the analogy of the contest: If you're judging and anybody can enter any kind of cakes, how do you as a judge, who have personal preferences and real dislikes, how can you judge a cake? I tell them I hate coconut so if you bring in a coconut cake, is the cake automatically going to rise, and would that be fair? Would that be a fair way of judging or can I--and we actually list some criteria on the board by which we can judge a cake. And we can apply that...in literature."

It's obvious that Grace likes this book; and I think she wants her student to like it, too. What I don't know is whether students can appreciate a book the first time through; I'm not even sure I know what "appreciate" means. The books that each of us chooses to teach reflect several things, not the least of which is probably a personal bias towards the book. As Grace puts it, in selecting novels, "One of my priorities is if I can stand to reread these books. And as I told my students, I not only can stand to reread them, but if they're really good books, as I reread it, I really discover something new in it myself and that's what a good book is all about. Because it's like having a friend, you can discover something about the person, in getting better acquainted." Just as we are eager for others in our lives to like our special friends, I think we want our students to like the books we choose for them to read. But often I've discovered that when two special friends from different paths meet, there isn't the immediate relationship we hope for. A context needs first to be developed, experiences and stories have to be shared and "reread" together. So what will happen for these kids the first time through this book?

A few other comments about this first class. Lil Brannon has often said to us that as teachers we get what we ask for. It may be that by establishing at the outset that Dickens' works are difficult to read, and can be, in the students' words, boring, that no matter how encouraging Grace is, no matter how many ways she helps them to read, the theme has been established for some student that this book is going to be a problem. So many times we are confronted by this issue: How do we want our students to read literature? Are we there as another reader or as the expert interpreter? What status does that afford the book in question and our own role in the classroom? In this class today, Grace emerged as the one who will guide students through the book and the one who knows about the book. When, at the end of class, students raise questions, they are asked to do so with the implication (and hope, I think) that there won't or shouldn't be too many questions. This is to prove to them that they can understand this book; it is to build their confidence and to encourage them. But will it also indirectly cut off speculation and inquiry? I decide that's something I will try to look for while I am in this room.

Another question is raised for me by this first lesson. How do we choose works which will appeal to students as well as challenge them? How can we make canonical works accessible? Grace, like many of us, states that in her class students are central. It doesn't take too many minutes in that room before any visitor discovers just what she means by that: Grace really responds to her students as fellow humans. Their personal and academic struggles and triumphs are valued here. Sarah felt comfortable sharing an embarrassing and maybe troubling story; Eric's need for attention is recognized and met. This atmosphere has no doubt been developed as a result of Grace's willingness to be seen as human herself, as shown by the "Snow Elf" anecdote. However, balanced against that warmth and student-centeredness are several other factors operating in this room, creating a tension that will surface at various points in our experience together. One is the fact of the literary classic--which Grace describes as "part of our culture," and "an art form." She sees literature as "a jumping off place. It gives us a way of looking at life, our environment, and everybody else's environment, in a frozen artistic presentation. We appreciate the art but come to see the larger world." How often, though, is that "larger world"--its concerns and values--not a part of our students' world or even our own? By validating one world, do we necessarily exclude others? As a product of a particular culture, the literary canon sanctions very specific values, in this case, those of a late-nineteenth-century white male. And so, what does it mean to say that Pip makes a "right or wrong" choice? These seem to me to be questions students will have to struggle with in their understanding of this book.

A parallel issue is introduced when I consider the choices a teacher must make once she has declared her classes to be student-oriented, as Grace has declared. As we watched the tape of the discussion about a narrator's personal bias (excerpted above), she told me she had been worried that she was leading students too much: "You know, the technique of accepting answers, but I'm looking for a particular answer. Who's going to score with that answer? Am I just as happy with an answer if it's not the one I'm looking for?" It's a conflict, for her, between the student-centeredness which she values and her immediate goal of providing a context within which her students could read and understand the book. A tension exists between students' needs and the teacher's needs.

Still another issue is raised when we think about interpretation of the book: students' interpretations and the teacher's interpretation. The reason Grace chose to teach this particular "classic" is because she sees the book as the story of Pip's journey to moral maturity and his acceptance of particular values, which accords with her goals for the entire course. As she put it, "We recognize that there are other ways to read this book, but we [the teachers] have to decide how to do it."

In her final interview, Grace expressed disappointment that, as she saw it, students had not come to terms with Pip's progress in that way. In their final essays, those who chose to talk about him were, as she put it, "hard on Pip." They had not really come to the understanding that Pip, before the ending of the novel, is thoroughly changed." She cites Pip's support of Magwitch at the end: that he goes to see him in prison, goes with him to court and "he never congratulated himself on it....He focuses on Magwitch instead of on his own feelings. He does those things which he thinks will give Magwitch peace. He tells him his daughter is still alive, but he doesn't tell Estella that her father is a convict." She felt that possibly the reasons students weren't as receptive to this reading is that they have focused more on the romantic interest between Pip and Estella. "It's a natural response for young people. So I simply, in closing, pointed it out. They all knew that's what happened, but to say, 'Look ook what he did. Remember the scene with Joe, when Joe comes to visit him? Compare this scene with that.' Probably the next time I teach this, I will want to do something to highlight that scene." The contrast of those two scenes--Pip's embarrassed reactions to Joe, and later to Magwitch--are crucial to Grace's interpretation of this book. Students, having different interests and experiences, will have, naturally, different readings.

The atmosphere which Grace has so successfully created is one in which students' feelings are central. During one interview she shared a story with me which I could tell was important to her as an example of that fact: When she first began teaching in this district, the book Ordinary People was a part of the ninth grade honors curriculum. After teaching it the first time, she asked her freshmen if they thought it was appropriate for a ninth grade class to read. She told me that the majority of them expressed the belief that they were too young to read it, though it was a worthwhile novel, it would be more appropriate for older students. She hasn't taught the book to freshmen since, and assigns it to her juniors now. The authority which students have in this room, then, is emotionally rather than intellectually grounded; Grace listens to and values their opinions on the format of the class and their responses to her choice of texts; however, it seemed to me that they were not authorized interpreters of those texts. If meaning-making is an activity to which we all incline, then certainly each reader will find a way to make sense of a particular text. When that interpretive activity is not validated in the classroom, students will find a way to claim as their own some part of their experience with the

text.

For this class, that became a crucial issue about a week later. The day before, students had presented dramatic readings of several scenes from the book, an activity Grace planned in order to help them hear more clearly the voices of Dickens' characters and so have a better understanding of them. At the beginning of the next class, she asks them to write for a few minutes about their reactions to the previous day's class. This activity was not something we had discussed in the interview before class, so I wondered what had prompted her change in plans.

She told me later that her decision had been based on the fact that "it was the first time I'd done this (the dramatic readings) and I was feeling a bit of--is there a better way, and how they were perceiving it, and I think I do a great deal of thinking I know what they're thinking and not being sure, and I thought, well, let's just find out what they're thinking. Maybe we can come up with some ways of working with this that could be helpful."

After she asks students to write about the previous class, Grace puts two questions on the board for them to think about: 1) What did you learn from yesterday's class? 2) What suggestions do you have to improve the effectiveness of the class? She wants them to focus on the use of oral readings and dramatic interpretations as a way of understanding characters. Several students were quick to suggest, good naturedly, that what they had learned was "Eric likes to hog the camera" and Grace responds to that with, "leaving personalities aside, just write it down."

When all have had some time to think and to write, Grace asks Patty to begin. Patty is a quiet girl, usually doesn't volunteer, and yet when I interviewed her later, I found her to be far from a reluctant student. She enjoys reading, loves Stephen King's novels, has read on her own quite a few classics, and is particularly fond of Jane Eyre. She also has definite opinions about the class. Her response at this moment demonstrates that: "I think we should slow down on the reading." This response, of course, is not an answer to the question Grace believes she has posed. Instead, Patty has read the question in a way that fits her own needs as a student. She has interpreted. By doing so, she has created an opening for others to claim their authority as students if not as interpreters. I wait to see if they will. Grace's response to Patty is consistent with her usual method, which I have seen her use throughout my visits: she says, "All right. You want to slow down. Okay, Patty."

She repeats what the student has said, and calls on another. I am wondering what she is thinking. Kathy, another very quiet girl, replies, "I don't really have anything," but when Grace presses her a little, she responds that she felt that hearing the character speak, reading it aloud, was helpful in understanding or getting to know that character. It seems that with this response we might be back on Grace's track, but I'm wondering what Kathy is really thinking. Eric adds his own perspective, having been one of the students who read the day before: "The passages are very long-winded. There's a lot of commas, so it's a lot of ideas in one sentence." He adds, "I was trying to read up to the climax at the end of the sentence, but it would just be a comma." At this point, as usual, Grace does not seem to privilege any one answer over another. She accepts what each student says, but I can see that she is trying to guide them towards her topic; she asks Eric to tell what he has learned from that reading experience. But Jeff is next to speak: "I go along with what Patty says. I don't think we should have to read so many pages a night." And at this point I can see that there is beginning to be a struggle in this room. It

might not even be consciously a power struggle, but it is clear that some students want to discuss the experience of studying this book, in general, and they do not want--for now, at least--to address the specific questions Grace has raised.

Jeff: I go along with what Patty says. I don't think we should have to read so many pages a night.

Grace: You're not talking about yesterday's lesson; you're talking about reading assignments, right?

Jeff: It's hard, because once you fall behind, you just get farther and farther behind.

Grace: That's true, it really is, and you have to keep up--

Sarah: It's hard to read a lot.

Keith: You get...that night I was sick...

Grace: It's hard. It is difficult, in a long involved novel.

Sarah: Can't we do just one chapter a night?

Grace: I'm sympathetic to that thought. I know it is a great deal of reading. We have over five hundred pages, and I think some thirty-odd chapters, but if we did that one chapter a night--

Dennis: In three nights, we've read 180 pages.

Grace: Yes, I really am planning on about thirty pages a night.

Dennis: More than that...

Grace: I think you'll find, Dennis, that it averages about thirty pages a night...Jeff?

Jeff: I think if you gave a period each week, just for reading, then people could keep up. Or half a period.

Grace: Okay, some more reading time in class. Okay. I'm taking this into...I do realize that this is a problem, that the reading is heavy, and that you may need some class time to do it to keep up. I have given you some class time and will do that

more.

Terri: It's hard to read in class.

Grace: Yes, some of you find it difficult to read in class.

Sarah: I can't read in class.

Grace: That's a problem. You decide to socialize, it interferes.

Sarah: It's hard with people around you.

Grace: But can we focus, and I'm hearing what you're saying, and I realize that it's a problem, but can we focus just on what we were doing yesterday. Now let me be very candid with you, that this was the first time that I have worked this out or had a class do a dramatization, and I'm eager to learn, if it is helpful to you, and if it is, can it be made into something better. So that's what I want to focus on right now. Let's go back to that rather than the general problems of reading this particular novel, and the lengths of the assignments. Terri.

Terri: I think it would be a lot easier to read a certain number of chapters a night if it was just written normally, but he writes it so weird, it's--

Grace: And Eric pointed this out, also, but can we get away from that problem right now and just talk about the dramatization we were doing, and the use of acting it ou . Sarah.

Sarah: It's good to dramatize it out. You put yourself in the character's position and you try to feel the way they do so you're reading more what they're saying.

Grace: All right.

Stacey: It's easier, and you make it better if someone's doing it, so you can think about it and understand it.

Grace: All right. You're saying, then, you felt that

just doing the one scene that we did, that it helps in understanding characters: did I hear that correctly? Any others? Yes...

These students are not abrasive nor are they being antagonistic. They obviously feel comfortable voicing their dissatisfaction and frustration with the reading assignments. Grace throughout is calm, unruffled, hears their comments, and gently but finally, firmly guides them back to her topic. Several girls comply by adding comments such as Sarah's (above) and Terri's comment that "I think it's easier for us to enjoy the book if you do a dramatization, the mood of the people doing it, helps."

I'm feeling conflicting thoughts at watching and reflecting on this experience. First, I'm wondering about these compliant responses. I don't know these students well enough to determine why they have turned to the teacher's topic. Do they decide to say what they think Grace wants to hear? Or are they sincere in their conclusions that the activity was helpful and just needed to express frustration with a long, complicated novel and now feel ready again to get down to business? On the other hand, I recognize the students' complaints. I've heard them from my own students; I've said similar things during my own academic career. A long novel is difficult to tackle as a group. Yet I recognize, also, Grace's belief in having students read good literature and I understand her desire that they experience what we are calling here, "The Classics." It is difficult to find a way to assign lengthy books in a manner that incorporates students' reading ability and teacher's purpose. Grace engaged students in this conversation for the purpose of helping her plan for other classes: what commitment would they have to that particular goal? So, for them, what has been accomplished by this discussion? They've aired their frustration, Grace has clarified her reasons for doing the readings in the first place, and perhaps students' comments will influence future assignments or discussions.

Stopping to Talk Along the Way: The Nature of Literary Discussion

When several students have finished talking about the benefits of reading out loud, Grace goes on to her second question: "How about some suggestions for improvement?" I know she is referring to yesterday's class. I think they do, too. Michelle comments:

Michelle: I don't know how anybody feels, but I do not like picking apart a book. We could spend an entire period on just one page, thinking about pulling apart what Pip thought and everything, and it just makes the book a lot less enjoyable.

Grace: You just want to read it and--

Michelle: No, we can discuss it, but taking it apart and examining it, makes it, it just loses something.

Sarah: It's like...It's not a lab.

Grace: Putting it under the microscope.

Keith: Yeah, that's true, because it gets sort of boring

after a while. I read it, and I understood it then, but why do we have to go over it?

Eric: Now, I can see, if somebody doesn't understand something, then discuss it; otherwise, there's no need...to keep the whole class...

Grace: All right, that some of you understand and want to get on with it, and others find it helps in understanding. Steve, anything you want to add?

Steve: I just don't care for the book. I thin it's boring.

Grace: You're not pleased with the book.

Steve: And doing it over and over again, just makes it, just doesn't help.

Grace: Bill?

Bill: I don't have anything to add...the book just isn't...

Grace: I know you have something, Keith, about the way you're feeling about this.

Keith: I just think if different groups did the same scene, then it would get different interpretations.

Grace: Different groups doing the same scenes...Dennis, you're going like this (shakes head, no)?

Dennis: I don't think you should do the same scene over.

Keith: I don't mean do--

Dennis: --not discuss in such detail...

Grace: That it's enough. All right. I hear you, and we'll see what we can do about it, but for today, let's go on, precisely the way we were, and just read these scenes, and talk about them as much as we need to. We'll try to keep some of these things in mind. So let's go on with group three...

Again, these students are not being hostile, just simply commenting honestly on their reactions. This is, they know, a room where students' thoughts and feelings are listened to and valued. Their comments during this part of the discussion, however, reflect very individual needs. Each speaker has a sense of what should happen during discussion of a book, but each one has a view at least slightly different from anyone else's. Some need the plot explained to them; others find that boring. When I interviewed several students later, this view became even clearer. When I asked Keith what he had been thinking during the discussion which evolved during my third visit, he said, "It's nice to just read a book and not analyze it. That way you can get your own ideas. Somebody else's ideas sometimes tend to cloud your own, but then sometimes you totally miss the whole concept of the book. Then it would be better to discuss, but analyzing it in real detail, it does get boring to pick it apart." He also said he wanted to talk about "different ideas" but not the plot: "I read the book, was reading it, and I really don't want to go through it again [in class]." When I talked to Michelle, her strongest objection was that, "I personally don't like being assigned a book and being told you have to read this many pages a night. I don't like that, but basically we thought the book was boring." Despite her (self-appointed) role as class spokesperson, I think she may have been right about the way students were feeling, at least in the second part of her statement. Keith summarized his reaction this way: "It was sort of on-and-off boring. A couple chapters I wanted to skip and then it picked up again. I was not disappointed in the end, which is what I guess it boils down to most." He had previously read A Tale of Two Cities and evaluated both as "awfully soap-opera-type things and I don't know if they're really believable. I mean, the characters and stuff are believable, somewhat, but I don't know if the stories are. A lot of coincidences involved in both of them."

Michelle told me that she had actually read less than half of the book but relied on class discussion to help her do as well on the final test as she did. She felt no qualms about reading "Cliffs Notes" to get her through the unit quizzes and as a source of ideas to bring up in class. She contributed frequently during discussion, even--apparently--when he had not read the assignment: "I'd sit there and listen to the discussion for awhile and then maybe I'd have an opinion on what they were saying." She told me that she wished more students would talk in class: "I think we should get graded on how much we participate in class because it is important that people get into it and state their feelings. They might be sitting there thinking something in their head they would like to say that no one else may think about, but they just won't say it." Grace, too, believes active participation is important; it is worth ten percent of a student's grade each quarter.

Patty, however, was more reluctant to talk in class except, as she told me, "when I absolutely do not understand something, or if I see a point that wasn't mentioned, that I doubt needed to be mentioned." Grace would call on her and others to elicit more participation in the discussions, and she often had interesting and thoughtful responses, a demonstration of her own quiet participation. Patty read the entire book, told me she enjoyed it, and was planning to read A Tale of Two Cities next, but she found some of the class discussions to be repetitious. She justified that by adding, "A lot of the kids don't understand something and before you take the test, you've got to understand the book. And of course you have to see things that you wouldn't ordinarily see when you're reading a book. You could read a book and you know what it is, and you know what happens in it, but not understand exactly what the author was telling you. So that's probably what--but we go over it so many times, everything is just repetition and it gets boring. It makes the book like you don't want to read it." She was well aware, as were most of these very school-wise kinds, that the test was important. That's one

message they have certainly received in their years of schooling. It was important to her to be clear about what exactly the test would be. She said, "The teacher knows the material on the test and she tries to get us to talk about it by prompting us to say things and she tries to discuss what's on the test and make us understand that without telling us. Then we get the test and it's the same thing--we all know what it is then."

Ironic, then, is Grace's comment about planning for class discussion: "A lot of the time, as the class develops, they have questions, there are things that just happen, and I go with that. If the students take it someplace that I hadn't thought about going, and it's maybe a more interesting place than I've been before, I feel let's go." That's part of the student-centeredness of this class. But it's interesting to juxtapose that thought with some from Patty's interview.

Q: When there is discussion in class, what kind of problems do you have or frustration?

A: Not seeing the point that she wants to make. She'll start talking about something, and we'll add something else, and then she'll go off on that, what we've added, and she won't go to her point.

Q: Why, do you think?

A: Because maybe she sees that we don't understand something else, but it doesn't tie in and ends up confusing you.

This mix of viewpoints is a fact of classroom life. As teachers we are caught in the middle of it, balancing more or less precariously on some days. The balance is tipped when conflicting needs arise between readers--between teacher and student, or between teacher-as-facilitator and teacher-as-evaluator. For Grace, who says, "Maybe a classic can't be read; it has to be reread," the dilemma takes the form of continually reminding herself that this is the first time these students have read this book. It is an ironic comment in light of the definition of a classic as a work that stands up to rereading. How, then, can we help students read as well as possible in this first reading? To try to address the problem raised by this question, Grace says that for her, a major emphasis of discussion is on the plot, to ensure that everyone understands who's who and what is happening. The other major emphasis is on character--on "really getting into the character"--in order to understand and appreciate the choices, decisions, and actions of that character. That seems easy except for one complication: because of what they felt to be impossibly long reading assignments, and facing the problem of getting behind, many students resorted to "Cliff's Notes" to keep up enough to pass the quizzes that they took after discussing various sections of the book. Aware of the situation, Grace explains to me, "What I asked them to do is not to belittle themselves. Read the stuff first, and then go back and read your "Cliff's Notes." But human beings being what they are, I'm sure they've read on, some of them, through the "Cliff's Notes," to the end of the story, which also, if they're reading for plot, is going to kill the story. So that is a problem."

It is a problem, and it seems that no matter how we try to solve it or avoid it, still another one surfaces. If the emphasis is going to be on plot, why not read "Cliff's Notes"? Then students could go on with the rereading that, according to some definitions, is the

touchstone of a classic. But then, what effect would that have on the very experience of reading? Grace values that for itself: at one point in the first class I visited she asked students to take care not to reveal the plot to others if they'd read ahead. There is something to be gained from going through the experience of this book, of being drawn in by the narrator Pip to make some of the same mistakes in judgment that young Pip makes. Reading the book is a way of enacting it, of proving it, of learning, eventually, as Pip does, not to jump to conclusions. We want to offer the best literary experience to each of our students of varying needs, levels of maturity, motivation, understanding and confidence, but what is this "best literary experience?" It will be something different for each reader, fostering a kind of personal growth. The dilemma, of course, is in trying to satisfy each and all of the conflicting demands of these young readers, and therefore enable them to that growing. If we decide that we want our students to read literature that is very different from what they've experienced before, that contains complexity of sentence structure and plot, as well as a picture of a world foreign to their own experience, we need to find a way to help them through it and with that, we are back again to the question of the status of both the text and the teacher; we are left to decide the amount of guidance we should offer and the form it will take. Those decisions will be related to the teacher's perception of literature. Is literature as Grace describes it, a "jumping off place for ideas?" Or is it instead a cultural artifact? Perhaps a record of the human (or British, or American) experience? Or maybe a guide to right behavior and "universal values?" I think I saw elements of all these views operating in Grace's classroom. Or, is literature something else?

A teacher's answer to these questions will shape the structure of class discussion. Grace's students (at least, the ones with whom I talked), all of them products of nine years of schooling, believe that there probably is a correct way to read any book; they value their own ideas but will repress or subvert them in class to conform to whatever they believe the teacher wants. Michelle told me that often she and Patty and Keith would discuss the books they were studying, but that they didn't often bring the ideas from those conversations into class. Actually, Keith compared the elements of class discussion to those of a computer system: "We're the computer, the book's the software, and [the teacher] is the one sitting there typing in all the stuff we're supposed to remember." All three of the students felt confident that Grace knew both the questions and the answers when it came to this book. When I asked Patty where she thought those questions originated, she replied, "Well, she's had classes on this book before and probably all the questions that kids have asked previously, she uses them." Keith had a slightly different answer: "My hypothesis is that [English] teachers have something to do with ethics or morals. They had some kind of course on this, or something, and that's where she gets these questions from."

I was disappointed not to have spoken with more students individually. I think it's important that the students I did see were clearly interested in talking about the class; Grace had simply mentioned to the group that I was interested in talking with them, and these three--Michelle, Keith, and Patty--followed up on her suggestion. They are good friends and, I would guess, probably the best students in the class, although they were not the only ones to contribute regularly to discussion. It would have been interesting to hear from students who did less well on the test, but I also think it is significant that they did not choose to talk to me. I had the impression that Michelle "marched right down" to tell me the "real" story; on the other hand, I think Keith and Patty came because they had thought about and discussed the class and believed they had something valuable to offer.

One final comment about class discussion: Grace responded to students' complaints about the reading assignments by giving them more class time to read. She also changed the format of the dramatic readings a bit, to cut down on the amount of debate (or, "picking it apart"). She had planned that after each reading there would be "a lot more talking about it...I had intended to perhaps ask somebody [else] to go up and do that character's part...But I heard from them that they really didn't want to do that." She adds, "I'm hedging my bet on that because I think some of them will work [a scene] out and present it (in a dramatic production as a final project). So this was a way of saying, 'yes, I hear you, I'm listening to you. If I ask you something, what good is it if I don't listen to what you're saying? But yes, I do know more about what I'm trying to do than students do, where I'm going.' I can't just do everything they ask me to do, but I think I can have it somewhat both ways." This decision may also, ironically, have cut off the speculation that could help students to become confident interpreters, to build a community of interpreters within the walls of Room 209. "Having it both ways" may really only be another way of describing teacher authority.

A Detour: Exploring the Uses of the Camera

It seems that all of us who were a part of this project needed to find a way to deal with the presence of the camera. To think that any of us saw these classes exactly as they would have been without our presence would be foolish, and yet that doesn't necessarily mean that the cameras (or the researchers, for that matter) were a negative presence. Grace took advantage of what the camera could offer to her class and to herself as a practicing teacher. I noticed this by my second visit, as she began calling on students who had been quiet the day before. She commented in one interview that while watching the first tape she had become fully conscious of something she'd only guessed at before: that too often the same few students carried the burden of discussion for the whole class, and so she began to make an effort to bring others into the conversation.

Also by the third and fourth visits, actual classroom activities had taken a turn toward the camera. Based on earlier experiences with this group, Grace believed they would enjoy dramatizing scenes from the book, an activity which would fit neatly with her goal of trying to see into the characters. If student had to become a character, they would better understand the character. Therefore, she asked students to choose from a number of scenes which contained dialogue, to rewrite them for dramatization, and to present them to the class, "Because I really want them to hear the voice of the character and how they interpret that voice...and then...work on it and then present it and have some discussion of it, does everyone hear voices the same way, how would you read these lines, what would you emphasize." Students were enthusiastic about this lesson, and when the readings were presented, some interesting discussion ensued, revolving around the character of Biddy, in particular--her motivation and her apparent sweetness. They questioned whether Dickens had created a believable character, finding it difficult to thing that she would be so accepting of Pip rather than sarcastic or angry in her reactions to his patronizing attitude. This was just the kind of discussion for which Grace had hoped; she wanted to make the activity a part of this unit next year, as well, which is I think what prompted her on he following day (my third visit) to ask students what they had thought of or learned from the experience.

The camera played a part later in this unit as well. Each year when students have finished reading the book, Grace offers them a choice of projects ranging from research reports on Dickens' England, to an analysis and comparison of the two endings, to a list of

commandments for human conduct as Dickens might have written it. Included with these this year were the options of dramatizing scenes from the book or setting up a TV interview for one of the characters. All of the projects would be taped so that they could be reviewed by the class, including the presenters.

Patty and Kathy put on a skit of Oprah Winfrey interviewing Estella. Kathy's British-accented Estella answers Oprah's questions but finally bursts into tears as Oprah hands her tissue after tissue. The whole routine is punctuated with quick smiles at the camera (it is, after all, ninth grade). Dennis, Tom, Eric, and Jeff enacted a "This is Your Life, Pip" routine. Tom's Pip wore a little cap, of course (remember how Eric wanted to picture him at the beginning of the unit?). He greeted the people from his life, all played by Eric or Jeff. I think the image of Eric's Miss Havisham, complete with white face make-up and handkerchief over his head, will stay with me a while. (Probably longer than I'd like. It will be difficult two years from now, when he arrives in my own room as a Junior, to forget it.)

Bill read aloud his letter to freshmen, ending with his own comment on the book: "Great Expectations is at first a real neat book. The beginning is good and toward the end it's excellent. But at the middle you almost want to ditch it. Nothing happens. You have to wade through this stuff. If the book could keep up the intensity it starts with, it would be a great book. But when you are done, you are glad you are done with the book." I think he spoke for most of the class.

Grace was happy with the projects. She said, "I was very pleased with it as a way for them to get into the book and demonstrate to me...their understanding of it. And what I basically saw was, they did, and they understood the characters and their motivations, and I got from them after the project, that it was fun, and made the effort of reading the book worthwhile....They enjoyed watching each other when they played back the tape....Even when they got into comedy, as they did, it was a comedy based on a real understanding." The success of these projects is due largely to an experienced teacher's ability to recognize a serendipitous combination of elements and use them to her--and students'--advantage. Certainly these activities allowed students to demonstrate that they had, indeed, come to an understanding of character and plot and background, but also encouraged them to use that knowledge to create something new, something of their own. It's for that reason, I'm sure, that all of the students I interviewed believed that the projects were the best part of the unit.

The Return Home: A Time for Reflection

When we sat down to evaluate our few days' experience together, Grace summed up her satisfaction with the way the unit went: "I think they hear the name Great Expectations so many times and now they're going to know the name Charles Dickens forever...and Estella. And they're going to have visions of them. One of the little scenes they did, with Oprah Winfrey and Estella, with Estella losing her temper and throwing her Kleenex at Oprah, they're going to remember. And I don't know if you can say that about a lot of books that we teach." Probably not.

She added what I think is an especially important point for her: "To me it's the use of culture: beginning right now, I have a shared cultural experience with my fellow classmates, and we can use it for drama, we can use it for understanding." The fact of the book as a part of Western Culture, as a "literary classic" is inescapable for Grace, and now her students have

gained entrance into that larger literary world. At one point during their study, a review of William Kennedy's Quinn's Book appeared in The New York Times. In it, the writer alluded to famous literary characters, among them, Estella. Grace was thrilled to find it and brought it into class "so that they see the benefits of having this, we talked about it as cultural heritage and understanding."

As part of the ninth grade final in June, these students were asked to write an essay defining the term "literary classic" and explaining which of the books they had read during the year were or would become classics. A majority of students chose Great Expectations. One student described a classic this way: "It must catch the reader's attention so when they pick it up they just want to read the whole thing right there and then," but there were more predictable definitions offered, too. Among the characteristics of a classic, the fact that it had "survived," had been around a long time, that it dealt with popular subjects such as "love, mystery, humor, or crime," that it had a particular style or writing, or that it helped the reader understand the time period it portrayed. All of these, of course, were ideas associated with the class reading of Great Expectations, and probably, the other books that year, too: The Yearling, The Outsiders, Romeo and Juliet. I can't help questioning some of these answers, though. Have students heard similar comments so many times that they actually believe them? It is important to Grace that students accept this book as part of their literary heritage, that they view it as a vehicle for transcendent human values. Their final exam essays demonstrated that they have learned how to write the correct answer within a given context. What I did not see demonstrated, however, was any awareness on any student's part that this book was historically situated, a product of a particular culture, a particular writer, and therefore, reflective of the age. Students recognized the difference between Dickens' language and modern English; they discussed the differences they saw in marriage practices and the status of doctors, but the ideas of the book--the values, if you will--were not seen as part of that perspective; they were, in fact, presented as "universal" and "unchanging."

It was at least refreshing to read one student's description of one of the works they'd read during the year: "If you are a serious reader, this would be a good book to read. I would not suggest giving it to freshmen unless they are very serious readers."

In this room, I was in a new light; in the dynamics of teaching a long and complicated novel to some very serious readers and some not-so-serious ones, I watched an experienced teacher find ways to balance her own goals for her students with their needs and desires, as she consciously questioned both, trying to shape the best experience for all. I used to think that I would eventually find the way to that best experience; I would discover the best order in which to teach specific literary works, the best way to present those assignments, the best way to evaluate student work. But every year is different. Traveling to another's room, being allowed to eavesdrop for awhile on another's conversation and pressures and doubts and successes has confirmed that difference. Not only is every year different, but every experience in every room is individual. Each student--and each teacher--travels through alone, unique as to the experience our school becomes for that person. The attention in Room 209 is on the student. Grace creates an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable expressing their feelings and exploring their values, and there are wonderful benefits from being a part of that kind of experience. The books she chooses are about young people and the common issues they face, which adds to the student-centered focus.

But perhaps it is not enough simply to label a method "student-centered." As I

mentioned earlier, these students seemed less confident or comfortable as interpreters, preferring in class, at least, to defer to Grace. And so, there must be other kinds of student-centeredness in addition to the one I saw Grace so successfully create; for example, one in which students are authorized to initiate interpretation of the texts they read. Other tensions will surface, of course: the teacher will need to decide how to encourage, receive, and accept student readings of texts. Or, in another example, students might be allowed to choose books the class would study; the teachers would then need to manage the issues that method would create. Given a choice, Patty told me she would pick "books of today," but she also predicted the problems that might arise were a class to study her favorite writer, Stephen King. Ownership of the reading experience and the interpretive process would give students a genuine place, an active role, in the literary culture which Grace so wants them to join. None of these methods, however, would eliminate the balance of tensions which necessarily exist whenever two groups of people of unequal power and authority meet together to accomplish work. The power of the individual teacher--in this case, the one who chooses the books, designs and assigns activities to make those books meaningful, and even, I guess, decides exactly what "meaningful" means--is immense, but a teacher who questions that role and its implications, will find ways to balance that power with students' needs.

Students themselves participate in this balancing act: I saw kids who actively tried to read the book for themselves as well as for Grace, conscious that each of those readings was different (I wonder that more students aren't schizophrenic). They each balanced their own needs for discussion with those of the 12 other students in the class, and they struggled to keep up with assignments which competed with work in other classes and extra-curricular and personal commitments. Add to that the presence of some stranger with a camera, balancing her needs as a researcher with her commitment to her own students and teaching.

The complete picture echoes in a way the chaos I described in the opening paragraph. But it is, at that, a wonderful kind of chaos. From it, we grow. So, is that why we teach literature? As experienced teachers, we hold collectively if not individually a sense of what we are doing here, the result over the years of our being in a certain place at a certain time with a certain group of students reading together a particular book. I add to that, now, the experience of traveling outside my own room to a world other than my own, of being allowed for a time to join and think about another world, to question it, reflect on it.

Did I learn a new lesson to try on Monday morning? No. But what I did was begin a new relationship with a colleague, develop a new perspective on my students' needs, and gain a fresh insight into my own teaching goals and decisions. The old shoes may not be so comfortable now, but maybe the extra mileage gives them a quality they didn't have before. At the beginning of this project I was hoping to find answers to some questions about teaching that have been with me for awhile. Of course, I don't have any more answers now than I did before, but maybe some more interesting questions. Enough, certainly, to keep me teaching and researching for a few more years at least.

Videotape Studies of Classroom Discussion (a series of reports). Six teacher-researchers, working collaboratively with university faculty, videotaped literature lessons of English teachers perceived by their colleagues to be outstanding. Subsequently, the researchers wrote interpretive analyses of their observations. Each narrative is available separately.

2.2 Teaching Literature in High School: A Teacher Research Project.
Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch, $3.00.

This paper develops the theoretical framework for the teacher-research projects, and justifies such projects as an essential part of educational inquiry.

2.3 Taking the Fear Away from Learning.
Ann Connolly, $4.00.

In this case study of an all female classroom in a private school setting, Connolly describes instructional experiences that differ considerably from those experienced in her own public school classroom.

2.4 A Journey of Great Expectations: Charles Dickens Meets the Ninth Grade: A Teacher-Researcher Discovers Life in Another Classroom.
Tricia Hansbury, $4.00.

In this case study, Hansbury discusses the delicate balancing act every teacher undertakes in accommodating the needs and eccentricities of a diverse mix of students while still attempting to reach them all with the same class materials.

2.5 Being There with Kevin Tucker.
Carol Forman-Pemberton, $4.00.

This report discusses the subtle ways in which teachers size up their classes and distinguish among first, second, and third string students in the game of class discussion.

CS 2.6 The Heart and Soul of the Class.
David Marhafer, $4.00.

This report describes a teacher-researcher's struggle to understand why a teacher whose approaches are vastly different from his own is nonetheless successful.

2.7 Classroom as Text: Reading, Interpreting, and Critiquing a Literature Class.
CS Roseanne DeFabio, $4.00.

This report explores one teacher's conviction that guided response to literary texts ultimately makes students better independent readers.

2.8 The Teacher as Mentor-Guide: Joe Allen on Antigone.
Doris Quick, $4.00.

This teacher-researcher describes how the seemingly trivial or obvious questions students ask each other in a nondirected peer group discussion actually constitute a valid and valuable learning experience.