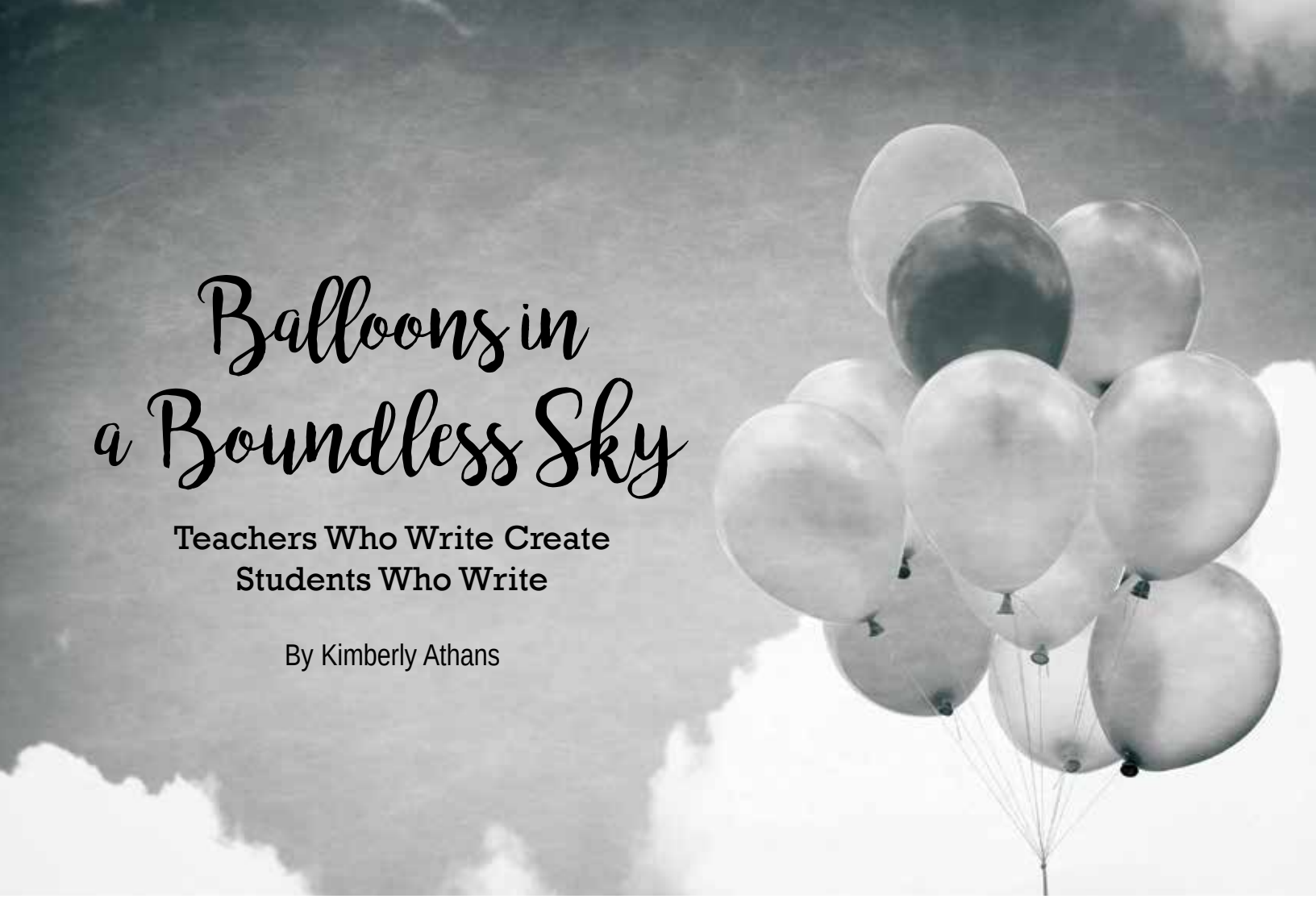

Balloons in a Boundless Sky

Teachers Who Write Create Students Who Write

By Kimberly Athans

Kimberly Athans attend the University of San Diego, where she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English, single subject credential in English, and her Master of Education degree in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in literacy. She also attended the University of Houston, where she received her Master of Arts degree in English, and Sam Houston State University, where she completed her Doctorate in Literacy Education. She has taught grades 7-12 in California, Nevada, and Texas. She has also taught writing and literature at the community college level. Her research focuses on best practices teaching writing, literacy in secondary schools, and on the legacy of the National Writing Project. She currently teaches literacy and education courses at Point Loma Nazarene University.

Abstract: In this article, the author introduces the notion of the balloon metaphor, an exercise she created for preservice writing teachers, in which they reflect upon their writing mentors and their writing journey. The author also discusses three very important issues facing the field of literacy today: teachers are not taught to write, teachers of writing must write in order to teach writing well, and teachers must find the time to write with their students and other teachers in order to support writing communities in schools. The National Writing Project Summer Institute is discussed as a professional development model that transforms teachers into writers, and Louise Rosenblatt's reader response theory is mentioned as a theoretical construct of the NWP. The author concludes that teachers who write produce students who write, that all teachers are teachers of literacy, and that teachers who write and reflect upon their practice will develop students who are confident, competent writers.

Keywords: balloon metaphor, reader response theory, National Writing Project, teachers as writers, developing self-efficacy in writing, Sam Houston Writing Project, literacy, teaching writing to preservice teachers

Cazden's (2001) question posed in her text *Classroom Discourse*, "How does the observable classroom discourse affect the unobservable thinking of each of the students?" (p. 60) is one that reached in and grabbed me by the soul. As an English teacher, how many times have I paused to think about how what was being said truly affected the learning processes of my students, or about how my students were not only making sense of what was being taught, but what thoughts they may be forming and merging as a result of what I was trying to do in the classroom each day? I made a list of the activities, or episodes, I do with my students over the course of a year—the ones that I have created that are really meaningful. Then, I made a list of the writing assignments I give. Over the past 23 years of teaching, I feel like I have perfected not only the order of these assignments but also the mentor texts I use with them. I reflected on the purpose of these assignments and activities, and that contemplation led me back to a worldview notion of writing. I concluded that writing has something to do with being authentic, being a humanitarian, reading widely, trusting your own instincts, being compassionate, seizing each moment, seeking balance, keeping things in perspective, listening, living deeply,

being yourself, using power to ignite change, preserving freedoms, treating people fairly and equally, and seeking truths. One thing I know for sure: I want my students to emerge with a voice that comes out of our classroom discourse, and I want them to use that voice.

Teachers and Students Must Write

In his book *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose (1989) shared his concerns about the state of literacy in this country, stating:

> Students were coming to college with limited exposure to certain kinds of writing and reading and with conceptions and beliefs that were dissonant with those in the lower-division curriculum they encountered. And that curriculum wasn't doing a lot to address their weaknesses or nurture their strengths. They needed practice writing academic essays; they needed opportunities to talk about their writing- and their reading; they needed people who could quickly determine what necessary background knowledge they lacked and supply it in comprehensible ways. (p. 197)

Rose echoed the sentiments of many others in writing reform that change is needed, urging teachers to usurp their students' literacy knowledge and practices and fuse them with their own. He suggested writing an eclectic curriculum where the teacher considers not only their students and what they must teach, but also what they need to do to bridge the literacy gap. He argued that we must all be teachers of literacy, especially writing.

Most recently, Kelly Gallagher and Penny Kittle (2018) admonished teachers of the dangers of banal writing tasks. In *180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents*, they illustrate the tragic effects of what they call the lifeless, no-one-but-a-high-school-English-teacher-reads-it, five paragraph essay, speculating:

> Standardized thinking stifles what we most value in writers: insight, courage, creativity, and joy. We must get out of the way and let students read, write, and talk about those experiences or we risk losing them. We risk losing the power of each student's brilliant individuality, which can teach us all. (p. 222-23)

In their text, Gallagher and Kittle echo the best practices for teaching reading and writing as they call for educators to adjust their teaching to reach this new generation of students in the digital age. The suggestions they offer as they spend a year teaching, planning, and reflecting together are the same tenets of good writing instruction espoused by the National Writing Project (NWP). These educators, with 66 years of experience between them, collaborated with the goal of creating engaging literacy practices that empower all students to live literate lives. Trained teachers of writing may easily adopt the ideas inherent here, but what about all those teachers who have had no formal training in writing pedagogy?

Teachers of Writing Are Not Taught to Write

There is a bigger fissure in this literacy gap of students in the digital age, and that is of the teachers who invite them into the discourse community. President of the National Council of Teachers of English, Carol Jago (2016) suggests, "Teachers want to teach more writing. They know it is important. They believe in it. But they don't always have the support or direction available to properly teach the sort of in-depth writing now expected of students" (as quoted in Will, 2016, p. 2). Additionally, Dabrowski (2016) claimed, "Teachers are hungry for guidance. They want examples of lessons that meet the [state] standards" (as quoted in Will, 2016, p. 2). Furthermore, schools and colleges may not be preparing teachers to write and are not teaching writing to preservice teachers. According to a national survey on teaching writing to high school students, "Seventy-one percent [of teachers] indicated that they received either no or minimal formal preparation to teach writing in their college teacher education program" (Kiuhara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009, p. 153). As a result of the lack of teacher's interest or confidence in teaching writing, many students may have fragmented, diverse experiences in high school English classes that either support them as writers and create writers out of them, or cause them to abhor writing and feel that they can't write. Too often, writing is assigned rather than taught. The survey also found that most writing assignments given by high school teachers are mere short answers and summaries. This results in unprepared high school graduates who are rudely awakened to the rigor of college composition classes. Wheeler & Carrales (2012) posited, "If high school students are told that research papers only involve reading books and then writing about what they have read, they will be shocked to learn that college students are being asked to put different texts into conversation with one another, and that they will be expected to make claims based on other forms of collecting data" (p. 25). Today's teachers must model for students that writing is thinking, and that the mastery of it allows for entrance into a larger discourse community, one where students can use their knowledge and their voice for a myriad of purposes, rather than for a grade or a test score.

The Balloon Metaphor

Learning to write is a lifelong process, one in which writing becomes a journey. It often begins before we can speak or articulate words in the form of scribbling, and it is a vital component of our emergent literacy. As writers, we are influenced by other writers by the nature of our reading. Additionally, teachers often influence our conception of ourselves as writers and can have positive or negative lasting effects on our writing psyche. I call this "writing baggage" and attempt to unpack this baggage with my students at the beginning of the year when I ask them to reflect on three essential questions: "How did I learn to write?", "What makes good writing?", and "Who am I as a writer?" To get students to think metacognitively about themselves as writers, I front-load writing courses with metaphors and philosophical questions before we begin the real act of trudging through patterns of discourse in an effort to find their own writing voice and stance. Therefore, it makes sense that an academic writer who also uses metaphors and philosophical questions to probe, nudge, and engage her readers spoke to me.

In her article "Places to Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition," Bishop (1999) lamented the writer-teacher teacher-writer binary in a philosophical probing of composition theory and the *real* writer's place in it all. She concluded with the ironic notion that although literature professors are the gods at the top of the academic mountain, if it weren't for creative writing professors and writers in general, they would have nothing to write about. One kernel of wisdom that she shared grabbed hold of me, both as a writer and a scholar, and that is the insightful balloon metaphor.

Using the balloon metaphor, I began to conceive of my writing life, my writing history, and my writing muse as a Macy's Day Parade of sorts. In this image (see Figure 1), I envisioned each professor who taught me a little bit about writing, and a lot about myself as a

writer, as balloons floating down the path, which I see as my writing journey. The visual I imagined is conveyed in a balloon bouquet, with each writing teacher who inspired me given his or her own balloon, and the string that holds the balloon inscribed with the gift each gave me as a writer. I could also do this with mentor texts as well as writers both in composition theory and classical literature or popular culture who pulled me into the written word and made me wistful to write a few words of my own, but I felt it more fitting to illustrate what inspired me to become a student of literature, an English teacher, a scholar, and a writer.

The National Writing Project

For me, the balloon that most significantly continues to inform my practices as both teacher and writer had to be the National Writing Project. As a doctoral student, I had the good fortune to participate in the Sam Houston Writing Project, an experience that not only enriched my classroom teaching and assessment of writing but reignited my passion to write by inspiring me to write for myself and for publication as often as I can. The opportunity to participate as a writing project fellow has been vital in developing my persona as a writer and as a teacher of writing, helping me to understand my pedagogical theories about teaching writing, and assisting me in serving my school and community to develop a writing program which implements the ideas espoused by the legacy of the National Writing Project. I found myself immersed in the celebration of the written word. Every day we wrote, shared our writing, read mentor texts and articles, modeled lessons, listened to others present and tell stories, workshopped, and shared ideas with our colleagues. The greatest gift I took away from that experience is that I am a writer, and that the model of teachers teaching teachers is the best mode of professional growth and development.

The NWP model serves as a guide for the kind of professional learning community that has proven effective in a high school and college setting, and "is one of the most successful networks of teachers creating opportunities for teacher growth" (Votteler, 2007, p. 51). Its focus is on teachers teaching teachers and teachers as writers. All activities were designed to put theory to practice, and what emerged was a sense of community, support, respect, and value placed on the written word. People come together when they share writing. There is something about the unveiling of our thoughts, dreams, fears, wishes, and desires on the page that connects us as a community of writers.

In the NWP, we learned to read like writers and write like readers. "Reading . . . is a 'composing' activity, while the very act of writing involves reading" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 185). This theory is easily observed in the day-to-day activities of the NWP Summer Institute. Every day our director had us write to a prompt; then read an article, story, or excerpt; then write a response and share it with our colleagues. There is something that is quite invigorating about granting yourself the freedom and time to write in solace each morning, then to read, share, and write some more. In fact, what I enjoyed most as a participant in the NWP was writing every morning and sharing my writing with my colleagues. I will cherish the journal I created and our class book forever, and I have since then began journaling weekly and writing more extensively alongside my students.

When teachers share their writing and ideas with their colleagues, they gain new perspectives and a sense of agency about what they know and the value of their experience and expertise. They also may glean new insights when discussing beliefs they hold that may differ from those they work with in their teacher groups. "We are used to thinking of the text as the medium of communication between author and reader. Perhaps we should consider the text as a more general medium of communication *among* readers" (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 146-147). Rosenblatt described the benefits of this transaction as being the clarification of ideas and misinterpretations, validation in interpretation, gained insights, consensus, and a sense of self-awareness. It is safe to assume that each one of these benefits can be observed at some point or another in the interactions between teachers in the NWP.

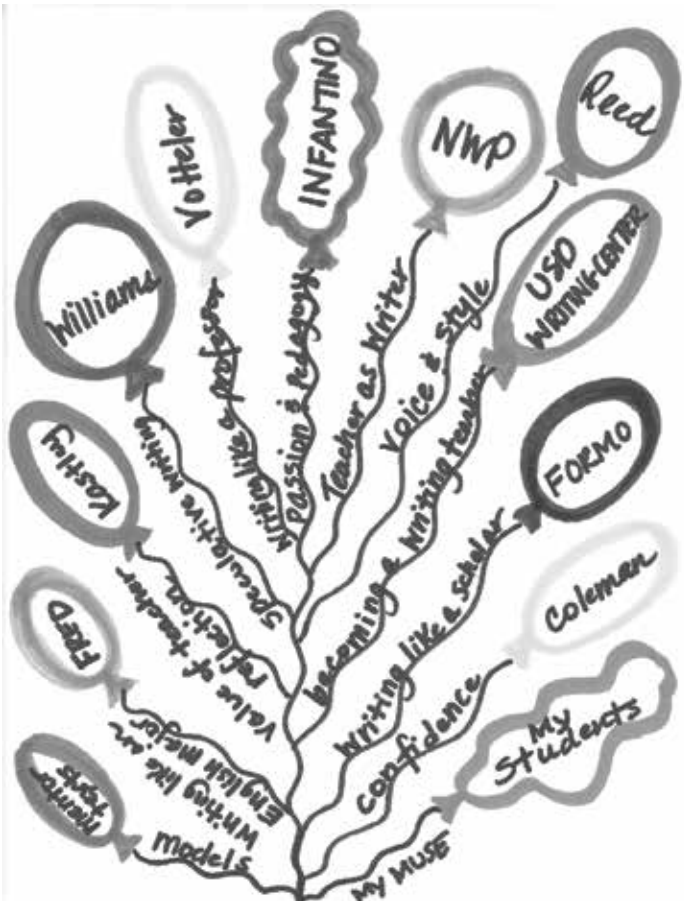

Figure 1: My writing journal as a balloon metaphor.

The National Writing Project model of teachers as writers and teachers teaching teachers is vital to the success of all classroom teachers of writing. As a NWP trained teacher of writing, I adopted practices which I know will enhance the learning and writing of my students, such as teaching them to write in various modes of discourse and genres, showing them how to research topics and incorporate evidence into their writing, creating a nurturing and inviting environment that fosters confidence in themselves as writers and supports peer review and writing groups, using portfolios and multiple authentic assessments, adhering to the writing process and teaching them how to find their own process, using conferencing, modeling, mentor texts, literature and inquiry circles, and publication to motivate and inspire them to write. Most importantly, I write along with them and alongside them so that I can better understand their experience as a writer in my classroom and so that they feel the collaborative and constructive presence of a teacher who is also a writer and part of the community of writers in our class.

Not Enough Time to Write

Each year teaching writing, as well as finding time to write, becomes more challenging. The mandates placed on teachers by administration and district leaders leave very little time for reflection, introspection, writing, and the assessment of writing. Newkirk (2009) discussed the hauntingly elegiac truth of the absence of writing in the life of a classroom teacher in his lament, "The life of the classroom is often so hectic, the teacher's attention so consumed by minute to minute decisions, that there is no time of support for reflection, no opportunity to stand back and think" (p. 39). Conversely, writing teacher Donald Murray preached the mantra of "never a day without a line" (Murray, Newkirk, & Miller, 2009, p.1). This sentiment was lauded by Murray and his colleagues Don Graves and Tom Newkirk as being the divine truth for writing teachers. Write first, then teach your students to write, then write with them and for them. Write for each other. That truth is an albatross around the necks of teachers in the digital age. They want to write for and with their students, if there was only world enough and time. Jago (2016) acknowledged this reality, stating, "Many of the best practices [in writing instruction] come crashing down around what's possible. . . . Teachers who have 40 students in each of their five classes can't possibly grade 200 papers every day. Students need to write much more than any teacher could possibly read. . . . Teachers need to figure out how to multiply themselves" (p. 3). How are teachers able to find time to write a line (or more for that matter) in a day crammed with all of this responsibility? There may be a secret to finding time, and it runs much deeper than the daily to-do lists of teachers. Rather, it runs through the veins of teachers. It is so inherent to who they are as educators that they cannot conceive of teaching without it. It is the writing teacher who writes.

Teaching Teachers to Write Produces Students Who Write

Rose, Gallagher, Kittle, Jago, Liberman, Wood, Newkirk, Graves, and Murray, among others, all have one aim in common: building confidence, self-efficacy, and agency in student writers, as well as in *teachers* of writing. They themselves are the fatherly and motherly balloons Bishop refers to—balloons, floating above classrooms all over the country, the strings of which are being clutched by the classroom teachers of today. In order to help my students understand their literacy journeys, I have them create balloon metaphors on the first night of class in the same way that I did for my own intrinsic understanding of who I am as a writer and as a teacher who writes. This exercise is therapeutic and transformative because it enables students to reflect upon how they became the writer and teacher they are today. In thinking about their balloons, they think about their classroom and school experiences, how they were taught, what practices they have adopted, and how they want to teach their future students. I run my literacy courses like an NWP Summer Institute. We share our writing, discuss best practices in teaching writing, and read mentor texts that echo voices down the corridor of those who came before us. Adrienne Rich wrote in a poem, "You must write, and read, as if your life depended on it" (http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/540t). It is as necessary as the air we breathe. We can't call ourselves writers unless we WRITE, and we can't call ourselves writing teachers unless we write along with our students. Teachers who write produce students who write.

When I teach future teachers, I echo my own paternal balloons. When my students write with and for their students and share their journeys with them, maybe they will reflect my teachings. Whatever pedagogical stance they adopt, as a teacher who writes, they will offer their students a balloon and will invite them to use their voice as they negotiate their own world view. They will nurture them in a community of writers who write not for a grade or an assignment, but for an audience of peers who will listen and for a teacher who lets them float beyond the four walls of their classroom to as far away as that balloon will take them.

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