The Power of Student Voices: Sydney Chaffee at the Western Massachusetts Writing Project’s Annual Best Practices Conference

For Sydney Chaffee, the 2017 National Teacher of the Year, a day in the classroom is anything but humdrum. A humanities teacher at Codman Academy Charter Public School in Boston and the first Massachusetts teacher to be awarded National Teacher of the Year, her philosophy of risk-taking and using social justice as a tool for meaningful engagement touches both students and fellow teachers.

Most recently, Chaffee’s skills were on full display as the keynote speaker for Western Massachusetts Writing Project’s annual Best Practices in the Teaching of Writing Conference, hosted by UMass Amherst in South College on October 14th. A warm fall day welcomed this event with the UMass Amherst Family Weekend in full swing on campus, and as thousands of students and family enjoyed the weather outside, South College bustled with educators participating in a full day of workshops.

The first half of the day involved two sessions of workshops that tackled a diverse array of subjects, including ways to teach science literacy skills, facilitate empathy in the classroom, understand the strengths of introverted and extroverted students, and engage with history using diverse writing assignments and local sources. In the afternoon, workshops gave teachers information about the Western Massachusetts Writing Project, civic engagement, and creative writing prompts that helped participants unwind at the end of a busy day.

“Teachers who write are better teachers of writing,” said Bruce Penniman, who taught the afternoon workshop about the Western Massachusetts Writing Project. Light slanted in through the small classroom’s large windows, illuminating the busy campus families outside as he gave a rundown of WMWP’s programs to a small gathering of educators. Downstairs, teachers took a break to do some creative writing in a similarly cozy room as writing prompts such as “Five things you wish your mother had never told you” and “Write a story in which you are the villain” were projected on the board.

One of the major events of the conference was the Pat Hunter Award, given to Janie Baer-Leighton this year. The WMWP’s Pat Hunter award is given annually to honor Pat Hunter, one of the funding co-directors of the WMWP who passed away in 1999. A dedicated teacher and professional development leader in the Springfield schools, Pat Hunter’s legacy remains deeply embedded in the WMWP community, and this year it’s through Baer-Leighton’s commitment to the organization. Baer-Leighton has served as WMWP’s professional development coordinator for over six years. Described by nominators as someone with extraordinary drive and involvement, nominators attest to her as an influential mentor who’s “always positive, upbeat, and nudging [mentees] to take on roles that were just outside of [their] comfort zone[s],” an engaging and enthusiastic leader, and equally accepting of ideas, new workshops, and requests for help. She accepted the award plaque to a roomful of applause.

However, the highlight of the day came after a luncheon catered by UMass Amherst’s award-winning dining – a keynote speech by Sydney Chaffee on “The Power of Their Voices.” With a packed room in tow, she began her presentation with the poem “Words” by Anne Sexton. The struggles of combining writing and teaching is a point of unity for many of the participants. “Sometimes I fly like an eagle but with the wings of a wren.”

After Chaffee’s reading, she introduced a cornerstone of her teaching methods – collaborative projects about justice and injustice. “We often see “at-risk” students as flattened realities,” Chaffee said, on how perception can influence teachers’ effectiveness. Chaffee then presented something that she assigns to her students every year – the task of memorizing a poem and presenting it on stage, which she says helps her students learn that their voices can be powerful agents of change.

This is a difficult task for “at-risk” students, many of whom, she says, have never been on stage yet have experienced personal injustice in their lives. However, she has three essential theater rules: show up, try your best, and have a positive attitude. These are the only rules, and as Chaffee talked about how this project evolved along with her students’ gradual steps toward success, they seem to be extraordinarily effective. In fact, Chaffee emphasized that this project allows her students to participate in Poetry Out Loud, a national poetry recitation competition. It’s clear that her students’ potential is given the spotlight – one student, Omar Grey, who participated in Chaffee’s poetry recitation project became famous for his slam poem, “Slactivism,” which he ended up performing in speaking engagements around the country, capturing the attention of national policymakers. “Our students have profound and powerful stories to tell, and as educators it’s our job, it’s our responsibility, and it’s our privilege to help them reject narratives that tell them that their boundaries are predetermined,” Chaffee says.

Chaffee’s talent for audience engagement isn’t lost on fellow teachers. Her presentation includes vivid photos, other poems that made an impact on her students such as “Prohibited” by Bewketu Seyoum, and videos of her students’ success. She has a dynamic way of moving and speaking that captivates the crowd’s attention and makes one crave the process of thinking. As for her teaching, it’s obvious that teaching is a relevant art for Chaffee, who draws from a wide and deep well of thought-provoking inspiration. And she invites the same of us. “I want you to talk to one another about how you can use words to help students unlock their own power, and how you might commit to helping students develop their own voices. And I’m going to give you nowhere near enough time to talk about this.” Her audience laughed. “I’d love to hear, from three different people, one idea that you have.” Another half day of workshops would begin for the crowd of educators in just a few minutes. Friendly chatter between people from all over Massachusetts, united by their shared love of teaching and writing, continued until Chaffee asked for thoughts. In just a few moments, the room would fill with hands.

**A Conversation with Sydney Chaffee**

**So what’s your teaching philosophy?**

That’s a really big question...my teaching philosophy is that teaching has to be authentic, and the things that we’re learning in the classroom have to mean something and be relevant in some way to kids’ lives if we want the learning to last, and if we want the learning to be meaningful, and if we want the kids to believe that education matters. So, we can do that in all kinds of ways. We can do that by teaching in an interdisciplinary way, we can do that by teaching in a project-based way, we can do that by making sure that we’re tying academic skills and content to current events and real world problems, but I think we’ve got to keep that as teachers as the core of what we’re doing – really thinking about making learning feel real for students.

**How do you think your philosophy can be applied to the humanities?**

In my school humanities is just an interdisciplinary study of English and history, so it perfectly dovetails with my philosophy of education and teaching because it’s already built-in that I’m teaching in an interdisciplinary way, and I’m teaching, in my course, world history through the lens of justice and injustice, and world history looking at case studies of times when colonialism caused injustice and people then resisted that injustice. And so there are all sorts of built-in ties to current events, to modern-day protest and resistance movements, and it’s a really awesome class to teach – the sort of thing fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds can get really excited about because they’re naturally really interested in thinking about what’s just and unjust, and how people fight for their rights. So I got really lucky to teach in a school where that’s the way we approach teaching English and history.

**That’s very cool. I was only fifteen, what, three years ago, so I feel like I would have enjoyed that a lot. So have you faced any opposition to your approach? I know you said your school does it that way, but has there been any resistance against your creativity?**

Yeah, I mean, there are folks who think that I’m trying to indoctrinate kids with, you know, liberal, leftist ideas. I’ve been told that I should just stick to teaching reading and writing and not talk about social justice, and that’s… I understand where that criticism comes from, but I reject that because I think that the role of teachers is to, again, make learning real, and kids are in tune with what’s happening in the world – they see injustice in the world. And to open up spaces in the classrooms where they can grapple with that stuff and practice the skills that they’ll use when they’re adults to do something about [the injustice] is incredibly important. It’s also incredibly important for me to not just push my ideas on kids and to really think about, how do I create a space where they’re the ones driving the ideas and they’re the ones deciding what’s unjust in our world and what they think are appropriate ways to deal with that, et cetera. So there are certainly some issues that I will take a stand on in front of my class and say, no, this is what I believe. For example, when the current president announced the travel ban, I went into class the next day and we talked about discrimination, we talked about xenophobia, we talked about racism, and we talked about how in our school and in our classroom we accepted everyone, and we were not in support of that travel ban, and then I opened up a space for kids to talk about what they thought about it and very much share their ideas, questions, and thoughts. But I wanted to make it really clear to the kids who were sitting in that classroom who were Muslim, or who were immigrants, that they’re welcome, and that I don’t support that position taken by the administration. So I think it’s a fine line and there will always be people who don’t necessarily agree with the ways that I teach, but that’s a risk that’s worth taking for me.

**Wow, that’s really great. I mean, I went to one of the top high schools in New York City, and as you know it’s very liberal there, but I know we only talked about Trump and the travel ban in personal conversations, in the hallways. It was only ever vaguely brought up by the actual school, so I think [what you’re doing] sounds great. So what’s the best conversation you’ve had in your classroom?**

It’s hard to say, because I think when my classroom is running well, when things are going the way I want them to, we’re having great conversations all the time, so… I’m trying to think of an example of one that was really good… I think that one conversation I look forward to every year is when we’re learning about apartheid in South Africa. We get to this moment where, in history, people in South Africa had to decide – activists had to decide – whether to stick with non-violent civil disobedience, or whether they were going to turn to using violence and militants. And we have a class discussion, a debate in class every year where we say, okay, so what do you think? If you were there at that time, would you have stuck with civil disobedience and why, or would you have used militant resistance and why? And that conversation is always really interesting. That’s one where the students very much want to know what I think, and I won’t tell them because I think it’s important for them to decide on their own and not be swayed by what I believe. And they really grapple with it; they argue with one another, they start pulling in analogies from other periods of history that we’ve studied, and sometimes we’ll, you know, midway through a kid will realize, oh, that’s a really good point, and they’ll change their mind, which I always love to see. So yeah, that’s an example of, again, a way that the learning is becoming really real for them, because a lot of times they’ll make connections and say, well, in our country people are using civil disobedience when they’re protesting what happened in Ferguson, Missouri, and other people are using militants when they do this, and which one do I think I would use – it’s not ancient history. They really are grappling with how they might want to work towards justice. So that’s a conversation I always look forward to.

**Sound great. This is the last question: What’s the best risk you’ve ever taken?**

That’s a really good question. Because I think that taking risks has to be part of what we do as teachers, and it has to happen every day. Because that’s when we discover the stuff that’s really valuable and that’s when we push ourselves beyond our comfort zones so we learn and grow. So the best risk I’ve ever taken…I don’t know, I guess I would say I graduated from college, and I hadn’t studied education, I had no background in education, but I had realized that I wanted to be a teacher, so I needed to find a job, and there was no school that was gonna hire me because I had no background in education, I had to credentials. And so I found this job at this place called Citizen Schools in Boston, which was an academic, out-of-school-time program for middle schoolers, and they were looking for people who hadn’t necessarily studied education but wanted to get into the field. It was a two-year fellowship, but I didn’t know anyone in Boston. I was a little bit scared of middle schoolers. I was a little bit scared of working for that organization because I didn’t know them and I wasn’t quite sure how it was going to be, but I decided to take the risk and move to Boston right after I graduated and take that job and know I was committing for two years. And of course it was the best risk because I’ve stayed there and I still teach there – I teach down the street from where I taught in that program, and teaching there solidified my career path. And I knew, that, yeah, this was what I wanted to do, this was where I wanted to go.