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Bringing Lessons from Homeschool to the Writing Classroom

Author(s): Carolyn Ariella Sofia

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## Bringing Lessons from Homeschool to the Writing Classroom

*A teacher uses her son's talents to teach him new skills and in the process learns something about teaching all students.*

A few years into my teaching career I was sitting in a local restaurant at sundown across the table from my five-year-old son. Having been warned several times not to touch the candle in the middle of the table, Joel could nevertheless not stop himself from leaning forward and blowing it out. Rather than look at my face for a reaction, he glanced out the window at the orange-tinged horizon and exclaimed, "The flame was the sun going down, and the smoke was like clouds." My joy at this poetic announcement was short-lived because when he entered elementary school, the poet got knocked out of him. When the class zigged right, he zagged left. He couldn't figure out what school wanted from him and therefore wanted none of it. A few weeks into first grade his private-school principal called and told me not to bring him back the next day. My son, he explained, had walked out of the school building that morning on his own and headed toward a busy street. He advised me to put him in public school where there would be more services. *Services*, we would learn, was code for "something's wrong with your son, but don't worry. We'll try to fix it." Thirty-six hours later he was back in kindergarten, this time in public school, with a one-on-one aide, a school social worker, and a psychologist following his progress. Six weeks later he was a kindergarten student with a tested IQ of 130 and a diagnosis that situated him on the edge of the autistic spectrum.

The next three years are a blur in memory except for the faces of school personnel registering disbelief when I told them that my son behaved

relatively well at home. None had answers for me about why such a bright boy was behind in reading, spelling, and math. The only topic they ever seemed to want to discuss was his unpredictable behavior. Third grade became a crisis point when one teacher assured me that throughout her decades of teaching, my son was the first child ever to refuse to comply with her directions in the classroom. One afternoon I was called to school because he had climbed to the top of the monkey bars during recess and was still there an hour later. The principal was standing in an otherwise empty playground unsuccessfully cajoling him to come down. When he heard me call his name, Joel looked at the movements of my raised hand—five fingers, four, three, two, one—and immediately climbed down. This hand signal was the transition warning he had been taught as a toddler when we visited the park and he needed to know we would be leaving soon. A few weeks later he was spinning round and round in the principal's chair when I arrived, while the principal, his teacher, and the school psychologist stood on the opposite side of the desk pleading with him to stop. I got his attention and told him to get up. He vacated her chair immediately.

Getting anyone's attention is a prerequisite for being able to hold a good conversation with him or her, as anyone who parents or works with pre-teens or teenagers knows. It is absolutely necessary with individuals on the autistic spectrum because the achievement of what is called "joint attention" (the ability of children to respond to another person's request for shared attention or to request it themselves) is one of the skill deficiencies in people

on the autism spectrum (Taylor and Hoch 377). Years of parenting taught me how to get Joel's attention about family matters, but what was happening at school highlighted the difficulties between him and his educators in ways that affected his classroom behavior. I want to share what Joel and I learned about his needs and the needs of other children because it may shed light on helpful teaching practices in middle school, high school, and beyond, not only for students on the spectrum but other students as well. The achievement of joint attention—where two people communicate together about something—lies, after all, at the heart of academic life.

Keeping the attention of an entire class is a crucial skill new teachers must learn. Every instructor from kindergarten to college knows how hard it is to manage a class well when students are marching to the sound of their own drummer. A natural desire in such a situation is to shape that out-of-step student's behavior closer to what everyone else is doing, even if, as in the case of my son, the student's nature is to be different. Unfortunately, this instinct to control can have unintended consequences. When an educator uses student compliance as the measuring stick of whether a class is successful or not, vulnerable students will pay the price because their lack of compliance will mobilize feelings of fear and anger in the teacher. Such alarm and dissatisfaction can lead to a persistent note of criticism, creating what Kris Gutierrez, Betsy Rymes, and Joanne Larson call a "counterscript" (qtd. in Wiebe Berry 495). Counterscripts are sets of unintended messages sent to students—particularly those who most need differentiated instruction. A teacher with a conscious goal of valuing each student may nevertheless unintentionally send a message that sameness counts more than individuality. This demand for sameness actually hurts students at both ends of the spectrum: gifted students can become bored because they need more variety, while students with learning disabilities can become frustrated. Some students have both exceptionalities: they are gifted but have specific learning disabilities. In this case a counterscript can develop when recognition of the gifted side brings with it a concomitant, but erroneous, belief that laziness is at the root of lackluster work rather than an undiagnosed learning disability. A teacher can give up

on such a student, feeling the lack of progress is his fault. As a result, "many students who are gifted/LD develop low self-concepts after starting school" (Swesson 24). This dynamic happened in my son's case and caused him a great deal of pain. It was especially evident on the day he disclosed that his teacher had literally moved his desk into the hallway and left his aide to scuttle back and forth into the room to get his work. Sameness was achieved inside the classroom, but at the expense of the child in the hallway.

Because an adult's behavior toward a particular student models how other students should treat him or her, the social consequences for such actions by a teacher are severe for the child in question. Such conduct models a way for other students to exclude a learner. Ironically, my son had always been a self-motivated student. He needed someone who would listen, observe, and figure out his learning style, as well as explicitly decode the school process for him. Many students with learning disabilities, in fact, need social situations to be explicitly taught in the same way they need their lessons to be explicitly taught. Because these needs were not getting met, I decided to do something radical: In consultation with a certified teacher who would supervise us, I withdrew him from school for fourth grade. That year I became his teacher. Our relationship would end up changing my teaching style in a way that made me much more effective in my college writing classroom.

### Coming Home to School

Summer preparation for homeschooling filled our house with books, Internet research, hope, and nervousness. While my son was splashing in the community pool with his siblings, I sat under a beach umbrella perusing workbooks such as Nancy Hall's *Explode the Code* series to improve his phonemic awareness, or reading books and articles about the theoretical frameworks of John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and John Holt, the latter a seasoned professional teacher who believed that learning is less the product of teaching than the product of the activity of the student, and whose books are now considered among the founding texts of America's homeschooling movement. Under the umbrella by the pool, I plowed through material targeted explicitly for

homeschoolers and delved into articles about autism. Monitoring Internet sites of publishers who supplied the textbooks for the classrooms in our neighborhood helped me understand the norms of our school district. By the end of the summer I was mentally calling our homeschool “A Mind at a Time,” after Mel Levine’s book, which emphasizes the notion that it is better for educators to be “splitters” instead of “lumpers,” i.e., to be people who understand that “kids have more differences than resemblances” (46). My son was calling fourth grade “The Year of Our Experiment.” Personnel at the local school district office where I had to submit outlines and assessment paperwork for our plan were undoubtedly referring to it as “The Year of Living Dangerously.”

In the end, fourth grade proved to be a watershed year for my son and me. He got the undivided attention of a teacher who understood he had learning disabilities, but who also saw evidence of intellectual gifts. I got an opportunity to observe

behaviors that helped and hindered him in the classroom and to develop a new teaching metaphor that pushed my own classroom further along the continuum of inclusiveness. By taking him to my university classes and using what happened there as real-life lessons, I was able to instruct him in what is called the “hidden curriculum” in school:

**We threw out the notion of “disability” in favor of “learning differences” because, as my now 16-year-old son says, “being labeled makes people approach you in a way that limits how they see you.”**

“the do’s and don’ts [that] are not spelled out for everyday behavior, but somehow everyone knows about them” (Bieber, qtd. in Myles and Simpson 280). Needing to teach explicitly the social expectation that a student should not talk to another student when the teacher is talking seems ridiculous to a person who can intuit social rules, but a child like him actually needed someone to teach this rule. Then we threw out the notion of “disability” in favor of “learning differences” because, as my now 16-year-old son says, “being labeled makes people approach you in a way that limits how they see you.” In significant ways he is right. Professors of education Ray McDermott and Hervé Varenne phrase our complaint more academically: “Common sense allows that persons unable to handle a

difficult problem can be labeled ‘disabled.’ Social analysis shows that being labeled often invites a public response that multiplies the difficulties facing the seemingly unable. Cultural analysis shows that ‘disability’ refers most precisely to inadequate performances only on tasks that are arbitrarily circumscribed from daily life. Disabilities are less the property of persons than they are moments in a cultural focus. Everyone in any culture is subject to being labeled and disabled” (324). Our work that year therefore involved learning about the “powers of culture to disable” (327). All of us know that not only social expectations but also intellectual ideas must be taught explicitly for some students; left on their own they will not intuit what we want them to notice and learn. This idea became most clear to me in math, as I saw how poor Joel’s number sense was and how some institutional practices had worked to keep it that way.

### Assumptions about Learning

As we worked together, I began to wonder why number and time lines in our country traditionally run east and west instead of north and south. How confusing this was for a child who had east/west confusion even with letters: by fourth grade Joel still confused *b* with *d* and *p* with *q*. So we read together about the history of number lines and found out that ancient Egyptian builders had left evidence of early number lines as marks chiseled at cubit intervals above and below a zero point reference line. After the invention of the printing press, however, number lines presented in books were drawn on an east/west axis. Number lines going left and right, in other words, made a lot of sense in a world where text was read and printed on a horizontal plane. However, it should not have been surprising that the north/south orientation made more sense to my son. East/west number lines, after all, do not always mirror real life. The concept of *more* or *less* is probably learned along a vertical axis. Consider the scene of a parent holding a pitcher of juice in front of a toddler’s cup and asking “More?” A young child with even minimal language comprehension will expect that if she signals “yes” to the question, then the liquid in the glass will move upwards, not down, and certainly not horizontally as the parent refills the cup. It was hard not to conclude that part

of Joel's math issues derived from the fact that math teaching is couched within a tradition of literacy based on the horizontal position of printed reading lines, and that Joel was the kind of child who could not intuit the change from the vertical axis he understood. Number lines that fit well in textbooks work for a majority of children, but not all. If a teacher wants to ensure that the concept of *more* and *less* reaches all students, then the vertical number line should be taught. Real life models should be taught, in other words, before abstract concepts.

There are related examples in English language arts. Mind maps (organizational tools in early grades that look like spiny fish or windmills, and end up as plain circles and lines in middle school and high school) help most young students see closeness or distance relationships between or among ideas. These simplified mind maps accomplish this goal in a two-dimensional format, however—one that may not appeal to all youngsters, especially those with difficulty in theorizing about abstract concepts. In writing classes we talk about supporting arguments, but “support” is harder to teach or visualize on a flat surface. However, by developing a metaphor based in three-dimensional life and claiming that an argument is like a stool—the claim sits on top and the supporting claims are the legs that hold it up—almost any student who has ever sat down on a wobbly stool will viscerally understand the meaning of support. Such a metaphor mimics students’ developed understanding of how their bodies move through space, thereby linking what they already know to something they are trying to learn, an effective technique for anyone.

### Collaboration and Visual Thinking

Capturing the attention of a student also involves, to a large extent, a collaborative model of learning. Because of the miserable time he had in school, Joel and I decided our learning would have to be fun and of high interest for him, a principle in the theory of “unschooling” as taught by John Holt. Unschooling starts from the premise that all children want to learn, and a parent-as-teacher role in this process is simply to provide them with an educationally enriched environment and then follow their lead. Joel was angry about what had happened in third grade, so we read books in tandem that poked

fun at school such as Roald Dahl’s *Matilda* and Dav Pilkey’s *Captain Underpants*. Joel thought in pictures, as many individuals on the autistic spectrum do, and could create compelling narratives with cartoon strips. Instead of telling him that drawing was inappropriate, as he had been told frequently in school when he drew on the margins of worksheets, I encouraged him to draw pictures to accompany various lessons. He then produced a set of pencil drawings to accompany our tandem reading of George Selden and Garth Williams’s *The Cricket in Times Square*.

During that year the two of us also became collaborators in a book about vowels: I wrote text to help him visualize letter positions and Joel provided illustrations. His developing sense of humor is evident in the frame for an illustration called “Oscar English wrote a Poem,” which he created on a computer paint program (see fig. 1). Joel accompanied me to my college writing classes that year. What is wonderful about this drawing is the way it shows how he internalized the values of my classroom. By the placement of his hand on his chin and the expression on his face, Oscar is obviously deep in thought. He has several quills at the ready for his work and clearly knows that prewriting and revision are part of the writing process—witness the pile of scrap parchment filling the wastebasket and spilling onto the floor. All those crumpled papers on the floor, Joel told me, were evidence that Oscar wanted to make his writing as good as possible.

As my son engaged himself in this type of work, he began to enjoy learning again. This mood change was due in part, I think, to the fact that the collaborative work on the book about vowels moved Joel into what is called an “island of competence,” an area of comparative strength in a person’s life in which the person acts from a base of confidence

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(LaVoie, qtd. in Myles and Simpson 283). It is illogical to think that any student who gets essay after essay back with red-letter corrections is going to enjoy writing or build up a desire to work harder on it. The vowel book, however, gave Joel a chance to collaborate meaningfully in a language arts task in which he could develop a sense of pride. "Sketching, drawing, or graphing developing ideas gives students who can visualize images an opportunity to use that talent productively," states Patricia Dunn in *Talking, Sketching, Moving: Multiple Literacies in the Teaching of Writing* (66). Indeed, his talents in drawing were admired by other students in school later on, so there were positive social outcomes waiting for him in any class that let him showcase his artistic side. In a writing class, a student cannot be left to draw all the time, but an "on occasion" basis is not only fair, it is realistic: in an Internet-controlled world, we more and more need individuals who think visually and who can tie text and illustrations together.

Joel and I visited local museums and children's theaters. When he accompanied me to my university classes, he sat quietly doing workbook pages, reading books, or drawing after he was finished. He never interrupted, and, as the year progressed, he actually began to raise his hand occasionally to answer a question. In the numerous talks we had about how school worked, I explicitly decoded the social situation for him, explaining the needs of the teacher as well as the students to help him develop theory of mind, the ability to see another person's point of view. One day he told me that he wanted to come to college when he was grown up. Asked why, he replied simply that at college no one ever slammed him into the wall, a poignant reminder of what elementary school had been like.

Joel returned to a different public school in our district for fifth grade with a sense that he had talents worth developing. He understood that it was possible to have learning disabilities yet still be gifted. He understood that different people had different roles in the classroom. His difficulties in math and spelling hadn't vanished, but having his needs as a learner met genuinely for a year made him ready to join the learning community in his class. Readiness of this type is an absolute prerequisite for school success.

FIGURE 1. Joel's sketch of Oscar English.



### What I Learned from Homeschool

Our year of homeschool taught me several lessons that pertain to writing instruction in middle school, high school, and in my first-year composition classes at the university. A few of these lessons target only students with learning disabilities, but most seem relevant to all students. First, I discovered that freewriting as a preplanning tool for longer essays works only with certain populations. My son, like many learning disabled students, did not belong to this population. "It's good for talking about emotions," he says, but for school it makes him feel "scatterbrained." The conclusion of research on college students supports what he is saying, calling freewriting "devastating" for learning disabled students: "Writing in this unstructured manner might be their weakest point, since it does not provide explicit ideas about what to write. That is, when these students do not know where the writing is heading, the writing exercise might be of little benefit" (Li and Hamel 38). What works better, say the authors, is the planning of writing "through directed conversations or writing conferences" (38). This technique allows students to capitalize on their verbal skills and, therefore, encourages them to figure out how much they already know, facts that often get lost in anxiety as they stare at a blank page. If individual conferences are not feasible because of class size, the directed conversation could take place between student peers if they have a questionnaire to help elicit information.


I also noticed that Joel's performance in writing during our homeschool year changed considerably depending on the topic given. That was not a surprise, given that autistic spectrum students often have to be

engaged via their personal areas of interest. However, when I extrapolated what I learned from his situation to my classes, I found the same to be true for all students. Switching from traditional research papers to the I-Search type of inquiry-based research originally proposed by Ken Macrorie for middle school and high school classrooms dramatically improved students' engagement with and willingness to learn the research process. The inquiry-based philosophy of I-Search papers set exactly the right tone for university life. Of particular importance to students like my son, I-Search papers seem to fit the notion of "whole language philosophy" (Li and Hamel 40), a teaching practice valued at Landmark College, a two-year institution with a student body comprised entirely of students with learning disabilities. Landmark's classes involve offering students "topics that are mostly self-selected, meaningful, and authentic, which motivates [them] to write for their own purposes" (Li and Hamel 40). Tenured professors always work on topics that are self-selected, meaningful, and authentic. Why would we deny this opportunity to young students?

The ability or inability to participate in sustained conversation was another issue that arose during our homeschool year. Joel had an above average vocabulary but was a tangential thinker. He tended to lose the conversational focus, an obvious disadvantage he and children with attention-deficit challenges share. To address this problem, we created a game with colored chips—two colors, in our case, since two people were conversing. The game we played had one rule: whoever was speaking could put a chip in the common bowl only if the ideas spoken fit into the agreed-on topic. At the end, it was easy to see who had stayed focused. Since the game quality lent the exercise a quotient of fun, Joel was willing to practice. As a result, he was a much better conversationalist by the end of the year. In class this game could be practiced for conversation and for writing meant to be shared. After a while, the chips can be discarded and a simple question asked about whether what was just said deserved, say, a blue chip or not.

Such focused conversation is a precursor to academic discussion. In fact, conversation is so important in academic life that I think it should be practiced in writing before students ever arrive at college. Middle school is not too young to start. It is better for a student to arrive in college not sure of

citation styles than to arrive not understanding what Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein call the "They Say/I Say" component of academic discourse. By this phrase they mean the fundamental concept that academic writing involves figuring out who are the experts in the topic at hand and learning how to introduce one's own thoughts into the conversation. It also touches on the notion of plagiarism and why avoiding it is important. These skills are fundamental learning tasks of college writers. Students who come to college underprepared in this area, even if they know how to cite resources, can struggle mightily in their composition courses.

Mostly what I learned from a year in homeschool with my son is that it is critical to get to know students as individuals—their likes and dislikes, their learning styles—to create a harmonious relationship with them. The process sounds overwhelming only if a teacher doesn't realize that all students are experts on their own lives. Especially as they get into higher grades, students can—and should—be asked how a lesson plan is working, i.e., does a vertical number line or a horizontal one make more sense to you? Or, would you like to read by yourself or in tandem with another student? How can our class benefit from what you do well? This sense of individual empowerment, of being heard by the teacher, is often the difference between an engaged student and one who is metaphorically turning round and round in the principal's chair as a way of saying, "Notice me." 

**Tenured professors always work on topics that are self-selected, meaningful, and authentic. Why would we deny this opportunity to young students?**

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**Carolyn Ariella Sofia** has been teaching writing at Stony Brook University since 1991. Besides composition studies, her academic interests center on 19th- and 20th-century American literature. Holding a master's degree in social work, she is currently analyzing the rhetoric of trauma in the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski. Email her at [csafia@notes.cc.sunysb.edu](mailto:csafia@notes.cc.sunysb.edu).

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