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*What’s Essential in Grades 3–8*
William L. Bass II and Franki Sibberson
Principles in Practice imprint
122 pp. 2015. Grades 3–8
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Many of our young students come to school with vast experience in the digital world but too often use digital tools in limited ways because they view technology as merely another form of entertainment. Educators William L. Bass II and Franki Sibberson believe that teachers can help students recognize their expertise in out-of-school digital reading and extend it into the world of school. For this to happen, we need to redefine reading to include digital reading and texts, learn how to support digital reading in the classroom, and embed digital tools throughout the elementary and middle school curriculum.

Bass, a technology coordinator, and Sibberson, a third-grade teacher, invite us to consider what is essential in integrating technology into the classroom, focusing especially on authenticity, intentionality, and connectedness. They explore the experiences readers must have in order to navigate the digital texts they will encounter, as well as the kinds of lessons we must develop to enhance those experiences. Always advocating for sound literacy practice and drawing on the NCTE Policy Research Brief *Reading Instruction for All Students*, they lead from experience—both theirs and that of other classroom teachers, grades 3–8.

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New from NCTE

Structural Kindness
Essays on Literacy Education in Honor of Kent D. Williamson

Darren Cambridge and Patricia Lambert Stock, editors
Foreword by Linda Darling-Hammond
228 pp. 2015. Grades PreK–College.

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In his role as executive director of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the late Kent D. Williamson influenced the course of literacy teaching and learning, especially in the first years of the twenty-first century. In this collection, influential scholars and practitioners pause to reflect on his intellectual leadership and the impact of his vision. Taken together, these essays document the profession’s hard-earned wisdom about the issues and challenges facing literacy educators in the current era of dramatic social, cultural, and technological change. The collection also launches the work of the newly established Kent D. Williamson Policy and Advocacy Center in Washington, DC, as it demonstrates ways in which the profession can connect literacy research, theory, and practice to educational policy and advocacy.

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CEE Awards and Grants

The Conference on English Education (CEE) offers numerous grants and awards for travel, research, and publications, all presented at the NCTE Annual Convention each November. Please see www.ncte.org/cee/awards for more information on these programs.

Richard Meade Award: The Richard Meade Award for Research in English Language Arts Education recognizes published research-based work that promotes English language arts teacher development at any educational level and in any scope and setting. Nominations for the 2016 award must be made by May 1, 2016.

Geneva Smitherman Cultural Diversity Grants: This program for first-time NCTE Annual Convention presenters offers up to two $500 awards to members of groups historically underrepresented in NCTE and CEE. Eligible NCTE members must submit an application for the 2016 grants by Monday, May 23, 2016.

Graduate Student Research Award: This new award seeks to support graduate student research that contributes to and extends CEE’s efforts to examine important issues in English education. The award provides a maximum of $2,500 to support a specific research project plus $500 for travel to the NCTE Convention to present that research. Graduate students at the master’s and doctoral level are eligible; all applicants must be members of CEE. Proposal deadline: August 8, 2016.

Research Initiative Grants: We invite proposals for research projects that advance the work of the organization as articulated through our various position statements and sponsored publications. In its seventh year, the program will fund up to four proposals, at a maximum of $2,500 each. Please see www.ncte.org/cee/research for more information. Proposals are due by August 8, 2016.

James Moffett Memorial Award: The James Moffett Memorial Award for Teacher Research is a grant (usually $1,000) offered by CEE, in conjunction with the National Writing Project, to support teacher research projects that further the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett. The application deadline is September 19, 2016.
Ubuntu: Calling in the Field

“My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours.”
—Desmond Tutu

On April 21, 2015, I attended a presentation given by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela titled “Forgiving the Unforgivable?” at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. I was aware that she was an antiapartheid activist who continued such work through the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as coordinator of victims’ public hearings in the Western Cape. As the coordinator with the TRC, post-apartheid, she mediated gross human rights violations between family members of victims and perpetrators responsible for human rights abuses during the apartheid era. The process brings both parties together to dialogue to develop bidirectional empathy. The goal of the mediation is for perpetrators to show remorse and for victims’ families to forgive the incurred traumas—thus both restoring and rehumanizing each side.

While this topic is near and dear to my heart, related to events that happened to me in my past, I was unaware of the depth and breadth of her work until she identified what I thought to be unforgivable and unimaginable atrocities and extreme acts of violence against innocent individuals. While sitting in the audience and listening to her introduce her presentation and her brief mention of a story she would share later in her talk about Amy Biehl, a string of words kept echoing in my head: “courage, compassion, healing, forgiveness.” I was inwardly silenced and humbled by her palpable level of selflessness and by her resilience to work with and attempt to repair what seems irreparable. Yet, for her, this work was guided by a higher calling that was instilled in her soul, like a strand of DNA, dating back centuries. This guiding belief was not something she developed, it was something she was.
That night, she ended her talk by ever-so-casually referring to this work as a state of *ubuntu* (see video clip for pronunciation practice).

Without need for explanation, I observed ubuntu as a human quality, a virtue, of care beyond the self, and an imperative to be called in, to truly hear another’s pain as a means for healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Desmond Tutu, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, described this state of being in his book *No Future without Forgiveness* (2000) as a state of high praise. It is to say, “My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours” (as in Varty, para. 5). This embodiment is also observed in the beloved South African leader Nelson Mandela (who passed December 5, 2013) through his never-ending fight to end apartheid and in his openhearted love and respect of the people and terrain of South Africa. *Ubuntu*, which loosely translates in Western civilization as “I am; because of you,” suggests that “I am what I am because of who we all are” (Gbowee, 2012).

Since that night, my focus as an activist, researcher, and educator has been wobbly. Something inside me shifted, something deep in my subconscious was rattled, and yet my passion and fire to combat injustice was validated and renewed. Ubuntu had forever redefined my focus in life.

**Ubuntu: Definitional History**

Ubuntu, a Xhosa (see video clip for correct pronunciation) and Zulu philosophy, derivative of the South African Buntu language, is considered to be a dispositional quality of human virtue based on connection, community, and mutual caring for each other. It is the belief that sharing a universal bond connects all of humanity. Sharing, as an embodied action, allows for recognition of others’ uniqueness and differences, and supports the process to bring others along.

According to Gade (2011), the origins and study of ubuntu as philosophy are still debated. It was likely first used around 1950 in the writing of Jordan Kush Ngubane in *African Drum* magazine. At the time, it was a form of humanism found in Blacks and not Whites. Then, the Africanization of the philosophy was taken up in the 1960s by political thinkers during decolonialization and the first specific publication on the topic was in *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy* (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). Later, in the 1990s, the philosophy moved into South Africa under Black majority rule as the country moved away from apartheid (for detailed history, see Gade, 2011). Ubuntu became the philosophy that guided democratic rule under Mandela.
Ubuntu and English Education

Returning to Tara’s and my (2015) editorial in the first issue of the journal, we say that we are living in “shitty times” (p. 9), referring to its ubiquitous and lexical use in myriad contexts. Surprised by its frequency, we were especially intrigued by the term scholarshit that I’d heard Donna Ford (2015) use in her address at AERA. In our research, we discovered that Herbert Marcuse coined the word to mean a type of writing that forecloses the opportunity to engage in democratic banter. In retrospect, when I consider the work of Gobodo-Madikizela, who worked on reconciliation and forgiveness as doorway to transformation, I draw parallels to our field and all those coming into it as enveloped by and embodying ubuntu as anything but shitty. I see ubuntu calling us in to be mindful and purposeful so that our collective remains strengthened as defensible against the “shitty” conglomerates who want to corporatize education. Ubuntu is a possible remedy to scoop up and throw away the shit.

The authors in this issue practice an embodiment of ubuntu in different ways as buttresses against the tar of standardized testing that is trying to sink our field. Susanna L. Benko considers the role teacher educators can play to both support and engage our preservice teachers to wrestle with the complexities about how to teach cognitively demanding writing tasks so that students can meet the rigor and demand to produce high-quality writing. Taking a unique pathway in preparation for preservice students to take the edTPA, Kelly Chandler-Olcott, Sarah M. Fleming, and Janine L. Nieroda introduce how reading, writing, and poetry can assist candidates and teacher educators to cope with and wrestle with high-stakes testing prior to the assessment. Then, showing remorse, Judson Laughter describes his struggles to prepare one of his strongest former preservice students to handle the quagmire of standardized testing. Through poetic reflection back to Laugher, Jeff Spanke reminisces about his journey through teaching and its pathways, lined with the unexpected expectations of testing, which made him also question himself and the educational testing system in which we are all stuck. These voices call out to the field collectively to remind us how interconnected our work is and how our humanity (and that of our students) depends on the inexorable strength about coming together to push back when we are challenged to do so. Drawing on Gobodo-Madikizela’s words as the philosophy of ubuntu becomes a reminder to us all that our fortitude must prevail.
From Murder to Healing

The night I sat listening to Gobodo-Madikizela, I knew life could never be the same. Not only did a transaction happen between her words and myself, but something noticeable also happened in the audience. A glance around the room showed eyes aglow, mouths agape, and tears streaking down cheeks. This was what it meant to be part of a collective. We were all in some way connecting to her story by listening, developing empathy, and understanding to the best we could how the process of forgiveness can lead toward healing. She shared that when perpetrators, victims, and survivors are connected through the sharing of pain, are validated by and through each other’s stories, it opens up space for empathy. When moved by empathy, perpetrators, victims, and survivors can reclaim their worth. Claiming self-worth can heal the brokenness of community. When community is repaired, an integration ensues.

I want to offer a personal account of how I came to understand ubuntu without any prior knowledge of it as a virtue until I heard Gobodo-Madikizela speak. While it may be difficult for some to forgive when they’ve lost someone to unjust violence, an event made this issue a reality when I was a first-year student attending UC Berkeley.

I was close with the Biehl family from Santa Fe, New Mexico, and attended Santa Fe High School with the siblings. Each was endowed with superb athletic, academic, and humanitarian gifts. I played soccer with them, swam with them, spent time at their home, took mini-vacations with them—they were extended family.

Amy, one of the Biehls, attended Stanford across the Bay from me, and as an antiapartheid activist she won a 10-month Fulbright exchange to the Western Cape Community Law Center in Cape Town to help rebuild destroyed communities and restore voter registration in the first-ever national all-race election. After some time in Cape Town and three days before planning to return to the United States to begin graduate school at Rutgers and marry her fiancé, the unthinkable happened. While driving three Black colleagues back to Cape Town, a group of frustrated youths who’d just left a Pan African Congress Party meeting descended on her car. The youths, who’d been encouraged to take direct action to make the country ungovernable (there was great civil unrest while the country was moving from apartheid to a democracy), saw the White of Amy’s skin and began to pellet the car with stones until it was forced to stop (“South,” para. 2). According to the report, “Dozens of young men then surrounded the car repeating the militant chant,
‘One settler [White person], one bullet!’” Amy was then pulled from the car, struck in the head with a brick, and beaten and stabbed to death (“South,” para. 2). Amy was 26. She did not make it home.

Amy’s story has haunted me for almost 27 years. I did not understand such violence or why such a kind soul could lose her life while offering humanitarian aid. As I was sitting and listening to Gobodo-Madikizela, she brought up a TRC experience that changed her life: the murder of Amy Biehl. Initially, I thought I misheard her, and then she said the Biehl family wanted to forgive the mob who’d killed their daughter by going to the TRC in Cape Town. I sat up, completely in shock and dumbfounded, still thinking I’d misunderstood. With my heart racing, body perspiring, and tears of confusion spewing out like a dormant volcano, this is what I heard.

In 1994, the four youths convicted of murder were sentenced to prison for 18 years. In 1998, they were given amnesty by the TRC after serving only five years of their sentences—a decision not only supported by Amy’s parents, Linda and Peter, but also made while in attendance at the hearing. Gobodo-Madikizela was their mediator. Linda and Peter went to the hearing, drawing on Amy’s actions as inspiration. They deeply wanted to understand the circumstances that led to her death. At the hearing, Peter read from an editorial Amy had written for the Cape Times: “‘The most important vehicle of reconciliation is open and honest dialogue,’” he said. “‘We are here to reconcile a human life which was taken without an opportunity for dialogue. When we are finished with this process we must move forward with linked arms’” (“Forgiveness,” para. 3). At the end of the hearing, and away from bystanders, they shook hands with the perpetrators and their families.

A year later, two of the formerly convicted men, Easy Nofemela and Ntobeko Peni, wanted to meet the Biehls in a different way and share the work they were doing with youth in Guguletu Township, where Amy had been killed. The Biehls accepted their invitation because they knew that understanding what had happened could lead to a sense of healing. They took the men to dinner, each talked about their lives, and they purposefully didn’t reflect on the past. The Biehls were there to forgive and to move into the future. Peter stated, “I can’t look at myself as a victim—it diminishes me as a person” (“Forgiveness,” para. 8).

Coming face-to-face was healing not only for the Biehls but also for Nofemela and Peni. Neither man understood that White people were human beings too. They’d been socialized to believe that all Whites wanted to come to South Africa and demand capital punishment for Blacks. Therefore, like many others, to protect their families and themselves, they joined the Azanian People’s Liberation Army, the armed wing of the Pan Africanist Congress.
At dinner that night, they had a different experience of Whites. The Biehls shared that they understood that the youths of the township were collectively fighting for their liberation: to protect, to defend, and kill if needed.

In the end, it became clear that healing is not linear, nor predictable, and much like loss and pain, it finds a place to rest when it is ready. For both parties, understanding, empathy, and forgiveness through healing had occurred. For Nofemela and Peni, they realized that some Whites could be trusted, and for the Biehls, they came to see that the men didn’t see themselves as killers. Through this reconciliation, each party was released and given back his or her personal freedom. In the end, Nofemela told Peter “that it’s one thing to reconcile what happened as a political activist, quite another to reconcile it in your heart” (“Forgiveness,” 2010, para. 8). Forgiveness led to the liberation of each party and the restoration of their humanity.

Amy’s murder had catapulted into national news, and due to the Biehls’ acts of forgiveness, they were asked to appear on numerous news and TV shows. After her death, the Amy Biehl Foundation was created to develop and empower youth living in vulnerable communities within the Western Cape, and two charter schools focusing on the intersection of academic and activism were formed in Amy’s native New Mexico. Nofemela and Peni now work for the Amy Biehl Foundation in Cape Town.

The Role of Restoration in English Education

Ubuntu, as I understand it, is a critical disposition that we as a profession of English educators are called to live by out of collective necessity. We are called to care for each other, to listen to each other’s voices, triumphs, tensions, and even pain. We are called together by mutual interests, challenging myriad inequities, shifting educational contexts, and for standing up in the face of adversity. We are chosen family, and families can find ways to navigate through tensions around academic and personal fatigue. In this face of common struggle, though we might falter, we must be relentless in our care for the well-being of each other, because our survival as English educators is only as strong as the individuals within the collective. In drawing upon ubuntu, our collective has infinite possibility to support and cultivate a more compassionate society by resisting victimhood, through our outreach to preservice teachers and their influence on youth.

The work we are here to do—to reach youth—is well within our reach as we hold ourselves accountable to our own beliefs, questions, and responses. Even while some may push our boundaries, we are summoned, rather than to judge, to listen carefully and with compassion because of our care for each
other’s perspectives. Through those efforts, we will grow stronger, more self-aware, more accountable, and more equipped to make a sustainable difference in the lives of those here and beyond. We need each other; we need each other’s compassion and love, and we need to support each other in all of our intersectional identities. As we deepen our support for each other, it can expand our self-awareness and better prepare us to conduct ourselves in and with our communities to further our understanding of humanity.

Ubuntu: “My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours.”
—Desmond Tutu

After the presentation, I was fortunate to have dinner with Pumla because of a mutual colleague, Dennis Francis, who happened to be visiting me from Bloemfontein, South Africa. During the meal, I asked her about her time working with the Biehls and Nofemela and Peni. I will never forget what she shared over her vegetarian meal: the humanity of all involved was bound up in the other. Through those words, through taking in the echoes since that evening, through developing empathy for all parties involved, part of my humanity was restored that night—I had experienced ubuntu.

A lesson I take away from this story is that we cannot give up on people—even those who we otherwise might consider abandoning. I am guilty of this and suspect many of us are. Yet, through Gobodo-Madikizela’s words, when perpetrators see what they see now, they revalidate the victim and give back to the victim both life and humanity. In such moments between perpetrator and victim, both are rehumanized; the perpetrator is rehumanized when the victim forgives, and when the victim forgives they, too, become rehumanized. This act restores in both that they are capable of making change. Such a lesson is a reminder that the tensions and strife we might experience with each other and even with those who want to deny the important work we know to be effective in English teacher education can be a source of strength as we work together on solutions. The beauty of this work is that we both simultaneously rehumanize and lift up the other.

Today, I call in all academics from whom we need suggestions and answers, responses that can guide us, and diverse beliefs and perspectives that will advance our collective understandings. I now have faith that my wobbliness can be directed toward being of deeper service to my communities and to the overall greater good of humanity. I truly look forward to learning more from, and with, each of you, and whether or not we have resolutions, we will have resolve. Ubuntu is working through us all of the time, it takes on a life of its own, but for it to serve us and for us to serve it, we must nurture
it as much as it nurtures us. And, even in those quiet moments of stillness, even when we feel that change is idling, ubuntu is revealed.

**Postscript: Where Are They Now?**

Since Peter’s death in 2002, Linda continues her activism with the Foundation in Cape Town and now in the United States, working on and developing reconciliation projects.

Through their work with the Biehl Foundation, Nofemela and Peni have become peace and social activists in their community and reach more than 1,500 schoolchildren each week.

Nofemela, outspoken and gregarious, is married and has three beautiful girls, and opened a laundry at his house. Peni, more reserved and pensive, is dedicated to justice and restoration in his community.

Linda, Nofemela, and Peni are still in touch and consider each other close friends and family.


**Ubuntu. Ubuntu. Ubuntu.**

**Notes**

1. For more about Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, see http://traumareconcil.ufs.ac.za/content.aspx?id=1.

2. Desmond Tutu founded the TRC in 1997 to deal with the horrors of apartheid.

3. To learn how to pronounce ubuntu see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPXELm5hU0.

4. To learn how to pronounce Xhosa, an official language in South Africa, one must make a click in the back of the mouth. If done correctly, it will sound like “keh” (to practice the term, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51zzMb5U0iY).

5. In spite of extensive research, I was unable to find any information on the lives of the other two convicted murderers, Mongesi Christopher Manqin and Vusumzi Samuel Ntamo.

6. For more on the Amy Biehl Foundation, see http://www.amybiehl.org and http://www.amybiehl.co.za.

7. See a photo of Linda Biehl with Easy Nofemela and Ntobeko Peni, the two forgiven men who now work for the Amy Biehl Foundation, at http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/linda-biehl-easy-nofemela-south-africa/.

**References**


