Helen Bentley examines an award-winning book by teacher researcher Bronwyn Clare LaMay. LaMay’s work emphasizes bringing the personal into the ELA classroom to bridge academic gaps, motivate students’ writing, support the development of hope, and help students feel a stronger connection to school.

When Bronwyn LaMay, a high school English teacher in California, noticed this issue in her classroom, she determined to revise her curriculum to highlight hope and love and to intentionally invite students to share aspects of their lives during English class. This was her attempt to ameliorate the disconnect. She also decided to conduct an ethnographic study of the process of making this kind of courageous change in her practice and, ultimately, to write a book about the two years she and her students spent developing a classroom community.

**Personal Narrative, Revised:** Writing Love and Agency in the High School Classroom

Bronwyn Clare LaMay. Teachers College P, 2016.

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*Community emerges when we are willing to share the real concerns of our lives.*
—BRONWYN CLARE LAMAY, PERSONAL NARRATIVE, REVISED

**WRITING UNDER THE RIGHT CONDITIONS**

Too many students view school as being detached from, or irrelevant to, the struggles of everyday life. Students did not have “equitable access to the positive school experiences that would enable them to be goal-oriented about education for its own sake, but [would]—under the right circumstances—engage deeply in thinking and learning” (7). LaMay wanted her students to see the value in school, but recognized that cramming in lectures about the values of grades and achievement was not the way to achieve this goal” (7).

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Instead, LaMay’s hope-building curriculum guides students through an easy-to-follow, step-by-step process that begins with the exploration of a single idea—love—and culminates with the creation of three personal narratives and two academic papers. She explores what writing is and what it can do for students by examining the notion of writer identity—how people view
themselves as writers and how they embody the concept writer.

**DEFINING LOVE AND BUILDING AGENCY**

LaMay shares specific moments from her classroom to demonstrate how the curriculum worked in practice and highlights student perspectives on the lessons and activities to illustrate the depth of their engagement. In the opening pages of the book, for example, readers witness her students participating in a journal writing activity about defining love. The students voice raw, honest feelings about the concept. They discuss love as a tool of survival and “process moments in their lives when they felt like victims of troubled relationships or life circumstances that were beyond their control” (8). One student concludes, “What love is to me is a fantasy.” Another offers, “I love love” (27). This journaling exercise invited students to self-reflect, and the subsequent discussion created a space where their ideas were valued and celebrated.

LaMay also highlights the importance of writing beside students. She makes “a point to journal each entry with [her] class and to share [her] writing with them” (9), revealing details about her own life to her students. As she reads stories about her family aloud, she not only models how to write but also legitimizes bringing the personal into the classroom. Writing alongside her students allows LaMay to disrupt the notion of classroom hierarchy. She shares the joys, struggles, and frustrations of her own life, which connects her to her students on a deeper level. She shows them how embracing vulnerability can transform it into something powerful, how sharing about our lives in honest ways can change a classroom experience for the students and the teacher.

**USING MENTOR TEXTS TO ENHANCE WRITING IDENTITY**

One of LaMay’s featured approaches to teaching writing may feel familiar to many English teachers who reach for mentor texts to serve as models for student writers. She strategically employs mentor texts, such as Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, to help students “appreciate their narratives as objects of study” (28). After analyzing the mentor texts, LaMay’s students turn to their own work to enhance literary elements such as setting, plot, and theme; they are encouraged to view themselves as writers and “take their texts seriously,” treating “their writing with the same status and respect as the scholarly or ‘expert’ texts [they encounter] through the English curriculum” (28). Making connections to mentor texts, and the authors who create them, encourages agency in student writers. These affective connections breed hope, as students raise their expectations for what they are capable of and for the value of their thinking and writing.

LaMay consistently reminds us that to develop agency, students need opportunities to write about what they genuinely understand. For example, LaMay shares the story of Hazel, who wrote a poem about her relationship with her father that she later performed at the school Spring Showcase. In the poem, the speaker wonders aloud, “I was pushed so far down . . . deprived of proper relationships like a lifeless soul . . . I ask, why me?” (77). LaMay reports that through the poem and her first two narratives about love, Hazel realized something important: that “[o]nce we find the key to the initial *why*, a whole line of responding *whys* open up into consideration. It possibly even shifts you wondering, why *not* me?” (76). This kind of personal revelation opens the door to hope and possibility.

**ELIMINATING THE DISCONNECT**

It is important for us as educators to notice what makes students interested in a task and what makes them want to write. LaMay intentionally highlights methods in her work that address these issues and that are transferable to all English classrooms. She provides teachers with instructional access points within lessons to encourage students to tell stories of heartbreak, broken relationships, and loving and familial connections. LaMay acknowledges that asking students to reveal themselves through their writing can seem daunting; however, she believes that using the personal is what draws students into an assignment. During the two-year ethnographic path the book explores, LaMay’s students gained “a deeper appreciation for the value of writing and a different
Poetry Reading, Writer’s House Philadelphia

I loved the elderly woman, her baby blue shawl, her chin nodding, as if every word confirmed every word. But her chin kept nodding too-long, past pauses between poems, a perpetual “yes.” And I loved her more, this sleeper in the front row, murmur of words that kept hearts beating, offered a warm seat in a half-empty, rush hour room, rhythms finding dream chaplains ushered onto pages. What are our poets, but stand-ins for a godless world?
—MELISA CAHNMMANN-TAYLOR

Sentence Diagram Dolor
—after T. Roethke

I have known the relentless rules of grammar, walls drawn between verbs and their subjects, direct objects like trailing spouses, the burden of adjectives describing hand sizes, pricking nouns’ softened bellies, lead mistakes blurred by pink erasers’ bluster, tear of ruled paper, narrow blue lines, red cheeked errors muddled with Wite-Out, the wet waiting to reclassify. And I have winced at the confusion of phonics: “big league” or did he say “bigly” to describe tax cuts, regulations, speed by which we resign, protest, beg language to govern again, coordinate bent and broken lines to unify and rise.
—MELISA CAHNMMANN-TAYLOR

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