If I have seen further than others, it was because I stood upon the shoulders of giants.

—Isaac Newton

Who invented “invented spelling”? Or writing as a social process? Or individual conferences about writing-in-progress? Or writers choosing their own topics? Or integrating writing, reading, and oral language? Or a writing process with multiple stages? Or publishing as a way of giving writing a purpose? Or using journals to reflect and to shape ideas? Or writing portfolios? Or writers’ workshop? Or writing in a range of forms for various purposes and audiences? Or growing a writing curriculum from the needs and interests of children? Or the use of literature in a writing program? Or peer coaching, mini-lessons, teacher researchers, and print-rich classroom environments as they pertain to writing?

Some years ago, NCTE’s Curriculum Commission, concerned that newcomers to the profession—and some not-so-new educators—too often lack a sense of professional history, sponsored a convention session with speakers assigned to various facets of the language arts. My charge was to engage in a bit of historical contextualizing for those firmly locked in the present in the teaching of writing.

Almost immediately my mind drifted to a group of scholars comprising the Reading Hall of Fame, and I wondered, why not a Writing Hall of Fame? Within minutes the names of dozens of giants upon whose shoulders I have stood, or at least leaned, were scribbled in the margins of the convention invitation—scholars I would induct into my personal, select writing society.

James Moffett, a giant among giants, who comes closer than anyone I know to a unifying theory (1968) of what we’re about as a profession. He’s a candidate for any list. Donald Graves, because he raised the consciousness of legions of elementary school teachers about the importance of writing and how it could look in their own classrooms (1983).

Kellogg Hunt, because of his pioneering analyses of writing (1965) and his efforts to define mature writing. (Does anyone remember the “t-unit”?)

James Britton, another star for all reasons. If there were a Metaphor Hall of Fame, I would nominate Britton’s (1970) poetic image of reading and writing “floating on a sea of talk.”

Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer, for their slender book Research in Written Composition (1963), a first major summary of writing research. Remember these quotes?

. . . the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing. (pp. 37–38)

Today’s research in composition, taken as a whole, may be compared to chemical research as it emerged from the period of alchemy: some terms are being defined usefully, a number of procedures are being refined, but the field as a whole is laced with dreams, prejudices, and makeshift operations. (p. 5)

George Hillocks, for his comprehensive review of research. Twenty-three years after the “Braddock Report,” Hillocks published Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching (1986), an ambitious meta-analysis involving 2,000 studies of writing conducted between 1963 and 1982.

Ken Macrorie, author of Writing to Be Read (1968), Up-taught (1970), and Twenty Teachers (1984), for his dedication to students finding their own voices, and for his concept of a teacher as an “enabler.”

Peter Elbow and Writing without Teachers (1973), for helping students get control over their writing.

Charles Read, for his monograph Children’s Categorization of Speech Sounds in English (1975). Because of Read, we understand better why young children spell as they do. I think of him when I hear the term “invented spelling.”
Donald Murray—professor, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, reporter, columnist, author of juvenile and adult nonfiction, novels, short stories, and poetry. His popular text A Writer Teaches Writing (1968), among others, inspired me along with countless other composition teachers.

Lou LaBrant, Dora V. Smith, and Ruth Strickland. As part of my homework I flipped through the first 50 volumes of Elementary English Review, then Elementary English, now Language Arts—1924–1974—to find out who was influencing the readership. If you know anything about the history of our profession and the history of NCTE, you know that these volumes were peppered with the work of LaBrant, Smith, and Strickland, all former NCTE presidents. LaBrant, for example, published in Elementary English “Writing Is Learned by Writing” (1953), a title to live by after nearly fifty years. She conducted research on the sentence structure of children’s writing, and like her eclectic colleagues, she could be in a Literature Hall of Fame for The Teaching of Literature in the Secondary School (1931) and a Language Hall of Fame for We Teach English (1951). Lou LaBrant was versatile, prolific, feisty, and long-lived—from 1888 to 1991.

Glenda Bissex, because of her detailed and rich case study of her son Paul, Guys at Wrk: A Child Learns to Write and Read (1980).

Marie Clay, for her many examples and observations of children’s first attempts to write in What Did I Write? (1975).

Anne Haas Dyson, whose exemplary case studies (1983) have helped us to know young talkers, drawers, and writers in their own settings.

James Kinneavy. His A Theory of Discourse (1971) systematically brought together classical and contemporary approaches to the teaching of composition and enriched our understanding of the many ways we use language.

Martha King, who showed us how children’s sense of story grows (1979) and how writing builds upon and differs from talk.

Lucy Calkins, whose writing conferences with children (1983) helped to reveal their developing notions about revision.

Paul Hanna and his 1966 spelling study that used a newfangled tool in literacy research called a computer to analyze more than 17,000 words. He and his colleagues taught us about the relationship between the sounds and written symbols of language.

James Gray, who deserves gratitude for teaching thousands of teachers to write and to teach writing better through the National Writing Project (1987).

William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White. Their thin and timeless volume The Elements of Style was rarely on my shelf because I recommended it to so many students who needed to read and reread passages like this one:

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell. (1979, p. xiv)

Janet Emig, my last nominee, for her exemplary contributions to writing scholarship. The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (1971) set a broadened methodological course for researchers and helped those who followed to think about processes of writing, not simply written products. A second reason for acknowledging Emig is her insistence that we pay homage to the giants upon whose shoulders we stand. In The Web of Meaning (1983) she writes, “It could be said that those who neither know nor acknowledge their intellectual origins are the true bastards of the world” (p. 166). More delicately stated, individual talent plays off of tradition.

After thinking of these personal nominees for my Writing Hall of Fame, I began to worry—not about those I planned to induct, but about those I forgot, or failed to adequately appreciate. Accordingly, I leave to you the pleasure of making up for my shortcomings in your own inventory of professional debts. But possible omissions were not my only worry. I was besieged with questions and doubts about what I should count as scholarship, about the number of generations through which I should attempt to document an intellectual blood line, about our certitude regarding the origins of ideas.

Good thing all of this Hall of Fame talk is only a preambule, a mind game for me and for you, to my intent to highlight a single kind of writing scholarship influential today—teachers writing about their own classrooms. Lee Shulman (1987), who has described this literature as revealing the “wisdom of practice,” expresses great hopes that from it will come improvement in teaching and learning. I take as my current exemplars of this genre of writing scholarship widely embraced books such as In the Middle by Nancie Atwell (1987, 1998), Seeking Diversity by Linda Reif (1992), and Transitions by Regie Routman (1988). Atwell, who wrote In the Middle as a middle school teacher in Maine, credits the influence of Donald Murray and Donald Graves upon her work. Reif wrote Seeking Diversity as a teacher in New Hampshire. She, too, acknowledges Donald Graves and Donald Murray as her “finest teachers.” Routman wrote Transitions as a pri-
mary grade teacher in Ohio and cites Don Holdaway’s (1979) *Foundations of Literacy* as her greatest influence. Predating not only these contemporary models but also the giants upon whose shoulders they stood were teachers who cared deeply about children and their writing, teachers whose books demonstrate the wisdom of practice. I remind you of—or introduce you to—four of them. They, too, are foremothers of those magnificent teachers about whose classrooms we are reading today, further demonstrating that we are a profession of multiple shoulders over many generations.

**SYLVIA ASHTON-WARNER**

Ashton-Warner wrote about a dozen books, including novels, an autobiography, and nonfiction about her teaching of Maori children in New Zealand. Best known in American educational circles is *Teacher* (1963). Among the shoulders upon which Ashton-Warner stood were those of Tolstoy, who opened his own school in 1859. In his diaries she found much to admire: his passionate affection for his school, his refusal to follow methods of teaching currently in use, his willingness to let pupils teach him, his practice of allowing students to make choices, and his ability to adjust his approaches to individuals. Ashton-Warner wrote, “What a dangerous activity teaching is. All this plastering on of foreign stuff. Why plaster on at all when there’s so much inside already? If only I could get it out” (p. 14). Believing the first printed words of her five-year-olds should have intense meaning for them, each morning she asked, “What word do you want?” She wrote their selections on a card, and collectively these important words were known as the child’s “key vocabulary.” She explains: “The writing of fives begins with their attempt to write their own key words, and since they have found out that these scrawly shapes mean something, they know what they are writing about more than I do” (p. 51). With this basic vocabulary they did autobiographical writing—one or two sentences, a half-page, then more than a page a day by the time they are seven. “But I don’t call it teaching: I call it creativity, since it all comes from them. They are teaching each other, far more effectively than I could teach them myself” (p. 52). Ashton-Warner did not criticize the children’s content, believing that freedom of expression was central and that her own feelings about a child’s work were irrelevant. In her view, the teacher deserves criticism if children fail to write what is on their minds, for teaching is about being a good conversationalist, about having the wisdom and patience to listen to a young writer in order to draw out and preserve that writer’s line of thought.

Think of Sylvia Ashton-Warner when you read about these topics:

- writing as a social process
- individual conferences about writing-in-progress
- writers choosing their own topics
- integrated reading and writing experiences

**NATALIE ROBINSON COLE**

In *The Arts in the Classroom* (1940) Cole wrote about five creative arts—painting, clay work, block printing, rhythmic dancing, and writing—from the vantage point of a teacher of nine- to eleven-year-olds in Los Angeles. Concerned that writing become “no tedious correcting-grammar-and-punctuation ordeal” (p. 98), Cole carefully preserved an emphasis on expression: “The writing must come as best it could and be accepted on its own merit for the thought, the feeling, the life force, the creative personal touch that it contained” (p. 99). But when the children “published” their writing on a wall newspaper, they became eager for pointers on their handwriting, spelling, and punctuation. Cole believed teachers would discover that processes underlying the creative arts are basically...
similar. “There is the same marvelous creative ability within the child and the same need of confidence and faith to set it free” (p. 137). For Cole, teachers support the creative arts by building joy and confidence in children.

Think of Natalie Cole when you read about these topics:

- the challenges of teaching children from backgrounds unlike one’s own different priorities at different stages of the writing process
- the way publishing can give writing a purpose
- the value of peer coaching
- the importance of writing from one’s own experience
- writing, reading, talk, and life as being inseparable

JULIA WEBER GORDON

Gordon taught first through eighth graders for four years at Stony Grove School in New Jersey—a tiny one-teacher school in an isolated, impoverished rural community. In an effort to help her think more clearly about ways to improve her teaching, she kept a detailed journal from 1936 until 1940 and published it in 1946 with the title My Country School Diary: An Adventure in Creative Teaching. The shoulders upon which she stood were those of Marcia Everett, her “helping teacher,” regular confidant, and coauthor of Four Years in a Country School (Dunn & Everett, 1926).

Gordon had great faith that all of us have “unused creative power within us.” She believed that children need to develop confidence, poise, and freedom through writing. “You never know what abilities are latent within a child until you have made possible all kinds of opportunities to uncover and develop them” (p. 219). Here are a few of the things children did.

- Made notebooks in which they stored their writing, as well as keeping records of problems and accomplishments and of books they had read
- Produced three issues of a multipage newspaper each year, and as a spin-off from their newspaper work wrote an elaborate, multichapter book that they presented to the county library
- Wrote scripts and dramatized them
- Created a post office and wrote letters in order to report, inquire, thank, invite, seek permission, and make plans
- Raised questions constantly and pursued answers: “Purpose,” Gordon wrote, “is at the heart of a wholesome learning experience” (p. 163). She continued, “It is no hardship for these children to learn to write. They have a purpose for writing” (p. 212).

As teachers, Ashton-Warner, Cole, and Gordon were neither perfect nor problem-free. Gordon’s school, for example, was plagued by management problems originating outside the school—poverty, feuding among families, hygiene. She made mistakes, admitted them, found alternatives, and moved on.

Consult Julia Weber Gordon if you want to know more about these topics:

- knowing children better through observation
- creating a learning environment of great variety and richness
- making school a part of the real world
- growing a writing curriculum from the needs and interests of children
- making connections with the home
- writing as a process and writing workshop
- writing conferences and writing portfolios
- writing in a range of forms, for various purposes and audiences
• writing across the curriculum
• reflecting and shaping ideas in journals
• learning actively and collaboratively

**ALVINA TREUT BURROWS**

Burrows wrote the first edition of *They All Want to Write: Written English in the Elementary School* in 1939 in collaboration with fellow classroom teachers in the Bronxville, New York, schools. The giant upon whose shoulders they stood was Hughes Mearns, whom they acknowledge in their preface: “As we have continued to study and to experiment, we have grown increasingly aware of our debt to Hughes Mearns. He . . . turned our steps into a new way marked by a signpost that read: ‘This path leads to a heightened respect for each individual and an abiding faith in his innate power.’ It is because we followed where Hughes Mearns led that the substance of this book came to be” (p. xi). Mearns, influenced in turn by John Dewey, wrote *Creative Youth* (1929) and later *Creative Power* (1958).

From the age of six, Burrows wanted to be a teacher. After completing a two-year normal-school training program, she began teaching in a one-room school in Maryland in 1923 where she taught 49 pupils in seven grades. The oldest was 17; Burrows was 18. Despite receiving a salary of only $1,600 a year, she saved money and attended Teachers College, eventually becoming a professor at New York University for 35 years.

*They All Want to Write* is situated between the one-room school in Maryland and the NYU professorship. Its aim, to teach children to write well and to enjoy writing, was attained through testing many methods in the classroom and discarding those that proved ineffective or that led children to dislike writing. In this book by teachers and for teachers, Burrows and her collaborators studied classes over several years and developed case studies of individual growth illustrated with concrete teaching procedures.

Get to know Alvina Burrows if you want to know more about these topics:

• how teacher-researchers function
• the need to experiment and to fumble as a writer
• writing conferences and writing folders
• a multistage writing process and writing workshop
• opportunities for children to hear, see, and talk about each other’s work
• the importance of literature in a writing program
• print-rich classrooms
• concrete experiences that give writing practical value
• mini-lessons

• the recursive nature of writing
• skill learning driven by need
• choosing topics for writing
• writing across the curriculum in a variety of forms

Each of us looks back with all the benefits of our contemporary vantage point. In these pages I have intended neither to diminish the unique and valuable contributions of present-day teacher authors nor to portray Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Natalie Robinson Cole, Julia Weber Gordon, and Alvina Treut Burrows as ideals for the 21st century. But in important ways, the work of each of these teachers, born at the dawn of the twentieth century, is timeless in its pedagogy. Their work continues to instruct and motivate us today by achieving the following accomplishments:

• revealing great enthusiasm and sense of purpose
• standing for personal meaning in students’ writing
• rising to the challenges of difficult educational circumstances
• aiming to preserve the uniqueness of each child
I hope I have persuaded the time-bound among you that both inspiration and wisdom can be gained by looking back even while moving ahead. Burrows (1955) herself observed, “How rich is our bounty....We are indeed the heirs of a glorious tradition” (p. 385).

Author’s Note

The content of this paper was originally presented November 21, 1997, at the Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English in Detroit, Michigan. In a session titled “On the Shoulders of Giants: People Who Made a Difference,” Sarah Hudelson spoke about language, Richard Beach spoke about literature, and I spoke about writing. I want to thank Edmund J. Farrell, the best writer I know, for reading an earlier version of this paper and many other papers that came before it.

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