



The Needle's Eye

Making a Difference in 2011

by Sarah L. Tanner-Anderson, President

This is the time of year when we are up to our eyeballs in essays, frantically entering grades, and wrapping up the first semester. Let us take a moment, however, to remember why we became educators—to make a difference in the lives of our youth. And, you know what? We do! Whether we see it evolve slowly or realize it years later, we know in our hearts that our actions, knowledge, and love of the craft transcend class periods and semesters. **We** make a difference in our students' lives and learning every day.

But what do we do for each other? Do we share our expertise with others? Do we serve as mentors? Do we make a difference in the lives of our colleagues? With the beginning of another year, I, like so many others, have made a number of resolutions. Although there are many that I admittedly may not keep (losing weight being one of them!), there is one in particular that the VATE Board and I will strive to uphold—to better serve our membership! With a number of exciting initiatives, access to new and existing resources, and an exciting conference currently in planning, I think that 2011 will be another great year for VATE!

At the 2010 conference, we held level-specific panels wherein attendees shared grade-level concerns, needs, and wants as twenty-first century English educators. From these sessions, attendees expressed ways in which VATE could become more proactive as aides to the English educator by providing more resources, opportunities, and outlets for discourse. We heard you! Here are a few ways we hope to better support our membership in the upcoming year:

- The VATE website is taking on a new look! Although we have always provided level-specific resources, we want to make the information more accessible to you. In the upcoming months, the website will showcase level-specific “homes” where you may find a plethora of resources for your classroom and professional use. Do you have a great idea? Consider submitting level-specific resources for the website!
- There are two resources currently available to you as VATE members—one, you are reading now! *Needle's Eye* is a great publication for spreading the word about what works best in your classroom, and it also serves as an outlet for reflection. We encourage you to submit articles so that we may showcase the diverse knowledge of our membership. In addition, *Virginia English Bulletin* provides a scholarly outlet for educational writing regarding English/language arts. We also encourage you to submit articles to *VEB* that delve deep into your experience as an English educator.
- Facebook is another great outlet for discussion! Be sure to “like” us on Facebook as an additional way to engage with other English/language arts educators across the Commonwealth.
- VATE offers a number of awards to recognize the accomplishments of Virginia English educators. Visit www.vate.org for a list of these awards, and consider nominating an outstanding educator this year!
- The 2012 Literacy Explosion will be an opportunity to showcase your students' talents and your expertise! Planning is currently underway—keep an eye out for more details as they become available!
- Have you ever wanted to present at an educational conference? You can do it! Submit a proposal for the 2011 VATE conference to be held in beautiful Staunton this October. Proposal applications will be available online soon. We hope to see you there!

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With all of these exciting resources, initiatives, and opportunities, VATE wants to make a difference for **YOU**, the mighty Virginia English educator, in 2011. Take advantage of what we have to offer you, and consider offering your expertise to others.

Let us make a difference together!

VATE Member Kathryn Erskine Wins National Book Award

by Chuck Miller, VATE Secretary

The Virginia Association of Teachers of English is proud to note that one of our members, **Kathy Erskine** of Charlottesville, has won the 2010 National Book Award for Young People's Literature for her YA novel, **Mockingbird**. Kathy was inspired to write **Mockingbird**, in part, by Harper Lee's classic **To Kill a Mockingbird** and also by the 2007 Virginia Tech campus shootings. The story is told from the point of view of an 11-year-old girl with Asperger's whose family and community is still coming to terms with very recent and very painful events. Newberry Award winner Sharon Creech has referred to **Mockingbird** as "...a lovely, perceptive, and poignant story."

Though she is not an English teacher by profession, Kathy feels it is important to support VATE and its mission. She appreciates teachers who encourage their students to become readers and "think for themselves." Those who attended the 2009 VATE conference in Williamsburg will remember that Kathy was part of our Writers in Action strand. She was kind enough to share her time and talent with us, and we hope that she will join us again for a future conference.

Since the award was announced in November, Kathy's life has taken on a much more hectic pace, as she is fielding a number of requests for speaking engagements. Despite her busy schedule, she was kind enough to grant an interview for **The Needle's Eye** just before she took off for a conference sponsored by the local chapter of the IRA in Guam.

Miller: First of all congratulations on winning the National Book Award for your young adult novel, **Mockingbird**. I guess my first questions are rather obvious ones. I will try to stay away from "How did you feel about winning the award?" Instead, could you please explain the process to us? How/why are books nominated for the award? How and when did you learn that your book had been nominated? Likewise how and when did you learn that **Mockingbird** had received the award? Was there some sort of ceremony? By what criteria are the books judged? I would suspect that winning the award was very affirming of your work, as well as your decision to write books for young adults. So, if you would like to discuss how it felt to win the award, please do so.

Erskine: Publishers choose the books they want to send to the National Book Foundation. I'm not sure how many are submitted, but this year the young people's literature panel of judges had 235 books that were serious contenders. Each of the five judges read all 235 books. In mid-October, I received a call from Harold Augenbraum, Executive Director of the National Book Foundation, telling me that **Mockingbird** was nominated to the short list of five. Then--this is the interesting part--on the day the award is announced, the judges meet for the first time, sit down together for lunch, and are not allowed to leave until they decide the winner. That evening, at a gala dinner event, complete with red carpet, black tie, and paparazzi (think Academy Awards for authors!), the winners are announced. The award is very special because it's a judgment by my peers, and I think authors are probably the most critical judges.

Miller: For those who will be reading this interview and who may not have had the opportunity to read **Mockingbird**, could you please give a quick idea of what the novel is about (kind of like the book talks our librarians present to encourage our students to read books)? Also, could you please tell a bit about your inspiration for the story?

Erskine: I wanted to write a book to help people understand what it's like to have Asperger's syndrome. Also, I was processing the tragic events at Virginia Tech in April 2007.



Kathy Erskine, winner of the 2010 National Book Award for Young People's Literature

Miller: What has motivated you to write books for young adults? That must have been a very big decision and quite a career switch since you were a lawyer for fifteen years. So, the question has to be asked, why give up the practice of law to be a writer, and why specifically to be a young adult writer?

Erskine: I wasn't passionate about being a lawyer but I was passionate about writing. I always figured I'd write when I retired. When my mom died in her 60's, I realized that I'd better start writing now. I write for young people because I feel it's important to let them know how valuable they are and how much they have to offer. I remember being that age--it's a tough age--and I want to give them all the hope and support I can.

Miller: Though you are not a teacher by profession, you have chosen to join our professional organization, the Virginia Association of Teachers of English, which, as executive secretary, I appreciate very much. But, why did you choose to join VATE?

Erskine: I want to support teachers, communicate with them, and be part of a forum that shares information about reading and writing, since that's my passion. I think there's a symbiotic relationship between teachers of English and the authors who can provide books for their students. As a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), we have a column in our newsletters about the types of books librarians see a need for and would like us to write. I think it's great to hear from professionals who work with kids about what they and the kids are wanting.

Miller: I have been fortunate enough to receive an advance copy of your latest novel, *The Absolute Value of Mike*, set to be released in June. I have read the first several chapters of the book and feel a lot of empathy for the main character who suffers from dyscalcula. I was quite relieved back in college when I took a required math course and noticed that my classmates included the starting quarterback and half of the basketball team. I also have noticed that each chapter has as its title, a math or engineering term along with a brief definition of the term, and the term, of course, has something to do with what occurs in the chapter, which I found a lot of fun. As with *Mockingbird*, could you tell a bit about your new book and your inspiration for it?

Erskine: As always, I'm processing issues that speak to me. I know a lot of bright, capable kids with learning disabilities, and it saddens me when they're teased or think less of themselves just because their brains work a little differently. They tend to be very astute in areas outside of their disability. So, I wrote about a boy who has great social and emotional intelligence but sees himself as a bit of a failure because he focuses on what he's not good at. Meanwhile, everyone else, including the reader, can see his great strengths. I wanted readers, whether or not they have learning disabilities--I'm sure they all know somebody who does--to realize, "Dude, who cares if you suck at math? You're awesome!"

Miller: In some of the promotional materials for your works, I have noticed that one of your earlier novels, *Quaking*, was chosen by YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association) as one of its Top Ten Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers. I have also observed that when "reluctant" readers in my classroom pick up either *Quaking* or *Mockingbird* from my bookshelf, they find themselves reluctant to put the book down. Is there any special reason why your books strike such a chord with reluctant readers? As you write, is there anything in particular that you intentionally do to make a connection with reluctant readers?

Erskine: I write reality. I do a great deal of research and really care about my characters. I use a lot of dialogue, which helps the story flow and makes it more fun to read. And, even in the toughest subjects, I think humor is incredibly important.

Kathy's other YA novels include *Quaking* and *Ibhubesi: The Lion*. A fourth book, *The Absolute Value of Mike*, is currently in the works.

2011 VATE Conference Planned for Staunton

by Julie Singleton-Smith, VATE President-elect

Staunton's scenery and Shakespeare Center are sure to be big draws to VATE's Annual Fall Conference in October 2011. This year's conference will be held at the Stonewall Jackson Inn and Conference Center. The 21st century will meet the past as part of the conference's theme to incorporate strategies for today's learners using the voices of our rich literary heritage.

The site of the conference, the Stonewall Jackson, also looks for ways to bring the past to the present. One of the ways the hotel does this is to incorporate Green Meetings, meaning the use of recycled materials, consideration for the environment by using infused water instead of water bottles, recycling, and growing its own herbs and produce on the

rooftop garden. Winner of the Virginia Green award, the hotel strives to limit the Inn's impact on the environment by using rain water and condensation from the hotel's mechanical systems.

This year's keynote speaker will also be focusing on ways to bring the literature of the past to the classrooms of today. Carol Jago, the head of the California Reading and Literature Project at UCLA, has experience in the classroom, which she will bring to the conference. Jago taught middle school and high school English for 32 years. Jago's influence has extended beyond the classroom as she has served as a past president of NCTE. Jago has also served as the AP Lit content advisor for the College Board and serves on the English Academy Advisory Committee. She has published six books: *With Rigor for All* and *Papers, Papers, Papers* through Heinemann. Four of her books focus on contemporary multicultural authors as part of NCTE's high school literature series. She has also served as an Education columnist of the *LA Times*, published articles in *English Journal*, *Language Arts*, and *NEA Toda*, and has presented at NCTE since 1988.

Also presenting at this year's conference are members of the Norfolk 17. Patricia Godbolt White, the first African-American female to graduate from Washington College on Maryland's Eastern Shore, taught in Norfolk schools and retired in 2007. Delores Johnson Brown, also presenting, graduated from Norfolk high schools and then went on to attend what is now Norfolk State University. She taught and retired from teaching in Norfolk Public Schools in 1996.

In February 1959, 17 African-American teenagers entered six previously all-white public schools in Norfolk, Virginia. These schools had been closed for five months as part of Virginia's massive resistance to avoid the desegregation mandated by the *Brown v. Board of Education*. The "Norfolk 17," as they were called, endured much suffering in order to integrate Norfolk Public Schools so that other students could have more integrated educational opportunities. The African-American community had decided to work towards desegregation by having African-American students attend previously segregated schools. After months of testing and interviews, by September 1958 only 17 remained. When the governor ordered the Norfolk schools closed in order to prevent desegregation, Johnson and Godbolt, and the other 15 students, had to find other ways to continue their schooling.

Author Sharyn McCrumb will be speaking, as well. McCrumb has taught writers' workshops on "Using History and Folklore in the Contemporary Novel." She has taught workshops for educators: *The Ballad Novels in the Classroom*. McCrumb's "Ballad Novels" use "timeless stories to present a compelling look at both the past and the present." McCrumb is no stranger to presenting at education conferences and has presented at the 2008 National Council of Teachers of English Conference. McCrumb also presented a seminar on teaching *St. Dale* in the classroom as part of a unit of study on the *Canterbury Tales*, in addition to a seminar on her Appalachian set novels at the conference. Named a "Virginia Woman of History" for 2008, an annual designation honoring eight women - past and present - who have made important contributions to Virginia and to America in the arts, law, education, and politics, McCrumb's novels include *New York Times* Best Sellers *She Walks These Hills*, *The Rosewood Casket*, *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*, *The Songcatcher*, and *Ghost Riders*.

"My books are like Appalachian quilts," says Sharyn McCrumb. "I take brightly colored scraps of legends, ballads, fragments of rural life, and local tragedy, and I piece them together into a complex whole that tells not only a story, but also a deeper truth about the culture of the mountain South."

Nestled in the Shenandoah Valley, Staunton's downtown historic district intrigues visitors with its local arts scene and multiple restaurants. The downtown area, featuring coffee shops, pubs, and antique stores, make for great walking and exploring.

The renowned American Shakespeare Center and Blackfriars Theater will allow conference goers an opportunity to enjoy a night of theater at the Blackfriars Playhouse, a re-creation of Shakespeare's famous theatre. Attendees will also have the opportunity to experience the Frontier Culture Museum, a living history museum which illustrates the daily livelihood of Shenandoah Valley's first European settlers.

Registration online will begin this spring. Be sure to book early to ensure the opportunity to obtain rooms and play tickets because this year's conference is sure to be popular with Virginia's English Teachers.

2011 National African American Read-In Activities Planned

by Janice Suppa-Friedman, VATE/NCTE Liaison

This month is the Twenty-Second National African American Read-In sponsored by the Black Caucus of NCTE and NCTE. In February 2011, you may hold an African American Read-In event any day of the month. From Tuesday, February 1 through Monday, February 28, 2011, schools, churches, libraries, bookstores, community and professional organizations, and interested citizens are urged to make literacy a significant part of Black History Month by hosting and coordinating Read-Ins in their communities.

Hosting a Read-In can be as simple as bringing together friends to share a book, or as elaborate as arranging public readings and media presentations that feature professional African American writers.

If you would like to be counted as participants, simply do the following:

- Select books authored by African Americans;
- Hold your event during the month of February; and
- Report your results by submitting the 2011 African American Read-In Report Card.

The Read-In has been endorsed by the International Reading Association. Over a million readers of all ethnic groups from the United States, the District of Columbia, the West Indies, African countries, and more have participated. The goal is to make the celebration of African American literacy a traditional part of Black History Month activities.

Download an African American Read-In Packet from the NCTE web site, www.ncte.org/action/aari/packetinfo.

You can print the PDF version of the African American Read-In packet. It includes a News Release, Host Invitation, and information on how to submit the Report Card.

You need not register in advance. The **Host Report Card** is to be submitted after your Read-In event.

NCTE also has suggested reading lists available from the **Selected Black Caucus Recommended Booklist** and **Supplemental List for Young Children**.

For any questions on the African American Read-In, please contact one of the following:

Linda Walters

Administrative Liaison Specialist

NCTE

800-369-6283, ext. 3632

Founder & National Director

Dr. Jerrie Cobb Scott

University of Memphis

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Memphis, TN 38132

901-678-5490

There are links to all of the above on the NCTE web site from which this was taken. Encourage your colleagues to participate in this annual event in order to promote an awareness of Black History. VATE would like to hear stories about the books you share with your students and their responses to them. What have you and they learned from this activity? Please share your experiences with other VATE members by submitting an article to the *Virginia English Bulletin* or the *Needle's Eye*.

Reflections on Receiving the NCTE Leadership Development Award

by Christina Frierman

In November, I was honored to receive the NCTE Leadership Development Award for the state of Virginia. Attending the NCTE Convention for the first time and receiving such a prestigious honor was both a wonderful experience and a time for reflection. I met so many wonderful people, was overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of English/Language Arts teachers, and even saw--believe it or not--several familiar faces. Of course, the venue was a wonderful background to all of it. I have a secret: this was my first trip to Orlando! I was like a kid in a candy store. Having never been to Orlando before, I did manage to sneak in some fun by visiting Sea World, where I actually got to hug a dolphin, going on a safari ride at Busch Gardens Tampa, and seeing the princess castle at Disney World.

While all the glitter and excitement of being in a place I had only dreamed of visiting threatened to overwhelm me and monopolize my thoughts and time, I was led to that place of reflection and thoughtfulness at the Affiliate Breakfast Sunday Morning.

Keith Gilyard, the Vice President of NCTE, began the morning with a review of NCTE's history and mission. He spoke of the connective thread that weaves its way through K-12 education and binds that history with the college classroom. As I sat there and listened, I have to admit that my mind wandered—wandered down the food chain from NCTE to VATE to my local affiliate, VBATE. My mind pondered the role of writing/composition instruction in the K-12 classroom and the connection it has to composition instruction in the college lecture hall. Is there a tether that truly binds the kindergarten classroom to the college lecture hall, a spider web of sorts that spreads out to encompass all composition writing at all levels?

I was also honored to meet Sarah Brown Wessling, the National Teacher of the Year. By the way, I want to be her when I grow up. Sarah also contemplated the role of writing instruction and the perceptions of writing instruction nationwide. One politician complained to Sarah, "My daughter is 17 and doesn't know how to write in cursive." Is this all we are--handwriting instructors and coaches? Is this the perception that the nation has of English/Language Arts instruction? Finally, Sarah ended with an anecdote about one of her rare evenings at home. As she was hugging her daughter Lauren one evening, she asked Lauren if she could see. Lauren replied, "If you don't let go, I can't see." As I heard those words, I thought "out of the mouths of babes."

As a high school English teacher I fear that though there is a connection between writing instruction in the K-12 classroom and the college lecture hall, it is tenuous, frayed, and in desperate need of triage. It is so easy to become embroiled in the day to day minutia that consumes our lives when we walk into our school building. It is all too easy to forget to "let go" so "[we] can see"--see the bigger picture--see that we are all connected--connected by our passion for young people, by our love of literature and writing, by our desire to have a lasting impact on just one student.

Teachers serve many roles--teacher, mentor, researcher, councilor, mediator, tear wiper, fear calmer, pillar of support, guide, and parental surrogates--just to name a few. These roles are not relegated to the K-12 classroom teacher. All of us who have been called to serve in the educational arena, whether it is in an elementary school, middle school, high school, or college/higher learning classroom do so because it is our passion! It is what we were meant to do. It is our destiny.

That love, that drive, that zeal is all too easily forgotten in the day-to-day chores and tasks that accompany our chosen path. Attending the NCTE Convention reminded me that I need to "let go . . . so I can see," see why I became a teacher, see why I love my job so much, see why I get up every morning before dawn and come home every night after dark. I need to let go of the day-to-day grind that threatens to wear me down and wear me out. I need to allow myself to gaze into the future and see that, though it may not always seem like it, what I do--what we do--matters.

We are so much more than handwriting instructors. Who cares if a 17 year old can write in cursive? Can she think critically? Can he communicate his thoughts and ideas clearly? Can they work collaboratively to solve problems? English/Language Arts instruction is so much more than a perfectly, neatly formed letter on a page. It is passion. It is love. It is the bedrock of our future. We must go back--back to the future--back to take a longer, deeper look at why we choose to be teachers and why we choose to be English teachers.

I can only speak for myself. If truth be told, I didn't choose to be a teacher. Teaching English chose me. Now, it is up to me to choose what I do with it. It is up to all of us to choose what we do with our talents, our passions, and our knowledge. Do we choose to see the students only as they appear in our classroom? Or do we choose to see what they can be and help them realize their dreams? We are living ours. For many of us, it was a teacher who believed in us that led us to choose the path we are on. We owe it to the young minds and hearts that pass through our doors every day to wipe their tears, calm their fears, and give them the tools to find their dreams.

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

UPCOMING NCTE AWARD DEADLINES

Do you know someone who deserves to be recognized for their outstanding service as an English educator? VATE encourages members to nominate exemplary candidates to receive national recognition for a variety of awards. If you feel that you know of a candidate who may be honored, please visit www.ncte.org/awards/educators for more information and contact Sarah Tanner-Anderson (stanner.anderson@gmail.com) with your nominees. Deadlines are quickly approaching!

<http://www.ncte.org/affiliates/awards/leadership>

A Review of New YA Novel, *Across the Universe*

by Tiffany Bennett, John F. Kennedy Middle School, Suffolk Public Schools

This isn't your grandmother's English class. Gone are the days where teachers can simply choose a book from off the recommended reading list provided by the school district and force their students to read it, hoping they will somehow comprehend the themes of the novel. Over the past decade, the English classroom has changed dramatically. No longer can teachers assume students will read a novel simply because the teacher assigned it to them. In a society where students are becoming more and more engrossed in the technology around them, teachers are responsible for reminding their students just how fun reading can be.

How is this done? There are two ways teachers can encourage their students to set down their phones and game systems and pick up a book --- modeling and choosing high interest books for the classroom. This might mean you have to venture into the Young Adult section at your local bookstore and pick up a book you always thought was too silly for you to read. The reality is today's YA offers countless tales of high interest and extremely well written literature. And nothing is hotter right now than all things Dystopian. Why not pair the teaching of a novel such as Lowry's *The Giver* with a more contemporary tale like Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Games*? Dystopian literature offers readers a narrative where the protagonist must search out his or her identity in a world where he or she doesn't understand the rules in place, rules that threaten to snuff out any sense of individuality. These dystopic tales speak of the teenage experience.

Beth Revis' novel, *Across the Universe*, is a new dystopian tale that could make its way into the high school classroom. The novel tells the story of Amy, a girl who agrees to being literally frozen for over three hundred years, so she may join her parents on a very important mission ---travel across the universe and colonize a new planet. When Amy is mysteriously yanked from her sleep before the ship lands she finds herself aboard a ship where a new and seemingly perfect society has been created. Consumed with memories of what her life used to be, Amy struggles to understand a society where difference is a sin and free thought is dangerous.

Revis' novel has a lot to offer both male and female readers. The novel provides a rich blend of sci-fi action and mystery combined with a slew of thought provoking questions regarding conformity and self-actualization. The novel lends itself to discussions concerning some of the biggest issues faced by teens today, ranging from overbearing parental figures to issues of sexuality. It's a high-interest read that doesn't talk down to its reader and a perfect book to show students that literature is more than archaic tales that they feel they could never relate to. The English classroom continues to change, and we need to change with it.

Readers can find more YA reviews and teaching ideas on Tiffany Bennet's blog Novel Novice at www.novelnovice.com

A Day of Shakespeare Mixed with Hometown Comfort: Attending *The Taming of the Shrew* at the American Shakespeare Theater in Staunton, Virginia

by Chris Woods, a VATE Past President

On Sunday, November 28th my family and I braved the post-Thanksgiving traffic to attend the final 2010 performance of *The Taming of the Shrew* at the American Shakespeare Theater. When we arrived in Staunton, I was pleased to find that parking was a breeze in the garage which serves the Stonewall Jackson Hotel as well as the theater. We walked a block from the garage, a nifty brick street behind a few historic-looking stores and offices, to the theater. My daughters commented that it felt "old-timey" already.



Once at the theater, we were greeted by Sarah Enloe, their director of education. Sarah took us on a personal tour of the theater explaining the construction process and the various benefactors and researchers who helped make the theater as similar to the Globe as possible. Looking at drawings of 16th century maps, we learned about the original location of the Globe in London as well as interesting trivia such as where the bear-baiting was done prior to the opening of plays at the original Globe and about costuming concerns and issues.

We encountered many surprises on our tour. My girls and I were delighted to discover that the actors were also there practicing for *A Christmas Carol* to be performed later that day. Sarah allowed us a sneak-peek downstairs to see below the stage and the trap door the actors use for various entrances or exits during the plays. From the moment we arrived, it was clearly evident that everyone there, actors or visitors, loved the theater and was having

fun. The girls got quite a kick out of the wrestler with Shakespeare's likeness hanging out in the prop door. Though we were not permitted to photograph the actors, they were certainly friendly and engaging with us as they prepared for their show.

The actors' dressing room and practice area along with the costuming room with all the patterns and fabrics were so inspiring. The actors seemed larger than life as they sang and danced around in the practice room among all the instruments and props; two of the actors in the break room offered the girls some holiday cookies! My girls were in awe.



We had to conclude our tour about an hour and a half before our play so that the actors had enough time to prepare their performance. During that time, we walked over to Emilio's Italian Restaurant for a delicious meal in a quaint, yet modern downtown store-front restaurant. It was a Sunday, so not all the stores were open, but a few coffee houses and antique stores were. We watched the shoppers and sight-seers as we enjoyed our meals. We found Staunton to be a charming town that is easy to navigate with plenty to experience.



Once we returned to the theater, the audience was arriving and the theater was filling up quickly with people and anticipation. Sarah left us in capable hands as we browsed the souvenir shop and mingled with the crowd. As a nice touch, the theater offers wine, beer, soft drinks, and light snacks, which can be purchased in the lobby pre-show, once you are allowed to be seated, and again during intermission. A caution, be sure to keep time during intermission, or you could find yourself caught up in the act onstage once the actors burst out for the second half of the show. My oldest daughter will never, ever forget being scolded for running back to her seat across the stage by an irritated, improvising Kate to the delight of the audience!

I cannot say enough about how much we enjoyed the liveliness and originality of the actors and play, the atmosphere of the theater, and Staunton itself. From the moment you exit your vehicle, you will feel transported to an older, more magical time. I guarantee you will become so engaged in the play that you won't want it to end. Blackfriars is not only performing Shakespeare as it was meant to be, it brings Shakespeare's world to life with you as a key player. Our VATE 2011 Fall Conference with all its speakers and presentations coupled with the American Shakespeare theater promises to be a great weekend of inspiration, relaxation, and just flat-out fun! See you all there.

What I Know for Sure

by Robin D. Smith, English education professor, Longwood University

I got so angry last week I thought I'd explode. I'm becoming more and more aware of the need to understand things on a visceral level for the knowledge to be usable or meaningful to me. Last week's gut-wrenching experience gave me that understanding.

I've been aware of this resolution of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (1972) since I began teaching high school English; for a long time, I've believed intellectually that we must honor students' home languages: *We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language -- the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.*

I know being able to use Edited American English (EAE) is of enormous educational and economic importance to our students, and I've known for decades what instructional practices foster that ability. Research (Taylor 1991; Cumming 1997; Fogel and Ehri 2000; Rickford 2004) clearly shows that students exposed to traditional methods of grammar instruction (i.e., having their use of dialect corrected and marking their "errors") actually *increase* their use of the vernacular and *decrease* their use of EAE. Moreover, Taylor's 1991 study demonstrated that using contrastive analysis and code-switching, which honor and explore the home dialect, can produce a 59.3 percent *decrease* in the use of home dialect features in students' writing (Wheeler & Swords, 2004, p. 61). Students taught code-switching and contrastive analysis retain—and are proud of—their home language but are able to employ EAE when the rhetorical situation calls for it.

I know all of this, and I've been teaching university students in my grammar and writing pedagogy classes about code-switching and contrastive analysis because I think they're important, but last week I witnessed an incident that made me understand on a visceral level what happens when we don't honor students' home languages in our classrooms.

Last week I saw a well-meaning English teacher denigrate a student's language. The student, a bright seventh grader, made a comment to the girl next to her, using the word *ain't*. The teacher whipped around and said, "We don't use ghetto language in here. This is an *English* classroom."

"I'm *not* from no ghetto. You *know* where I live," retorted the student, who is from a rural area.

"Well, you're *using* ghetto language," the teacher repeated, "and we don't use it in this classroom."

"I'm *not* using ghetto language," the girl replied. "I'm using *my* language!"

I don't think I've ever been so publicly dismissive of a student, but have I inadvertently made students feel that their home dialect—and they, by extension—are somehow worthless simply by the way I wield a green or purple pen in the margins of a paper? This teacher is honestly well-meaning; she is from the same area and wants her students to have the advantages that depend on being able to use EAE. After seeing that girl's reaction, I now *feel* the importance of honoring students' home dialects. I must assure that my student teachers *have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language*—and assure that they feel it in their guts, too. There is knowing, and there is knowing.

Wheeler, R., & Swords, R. (2006). *Code-switching: Teaching standard English in urban classrooms*. Urbana, IL; NCTE.

What Do You Know for Sure?

Past President Adria Merritt noted, "Reflection is a powerful tool educators possess. It allows us to question our instructional choices as we strive to engage our students in the learning process, while further developing their reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. Reflection often yields surprising results, like much of what we are already doing really is working despite the barrage of "new, improved" methods and strategies that overwhelm some practitioners compelling them to throw out the tried and true for the next best thing. Reflection also pushes us to make simple, yet profound changes." **What I Know for Sure** is a regular column in *Needle's Eye*. We encourage members to reflect on their classrooms and beliefs and share their thoughts with us. Please email your contributions to szeek@bcps.k12.va.us.

An Invitation to W.R.I.T.E. for K-12 Teachers

by Kirk Dolson, VATE Vice President

As we begin another year, it's amazing to me that plans are already underway for this year's conference in October. It is going to be a conference to remember as we explore linking the past to the present through our collegial interactions and an intimate opportunity to experience Shakespeare's work in person. Staunton, Virginia, has so much to offer and is a perfect setting for us to collaborate and share our latest teaching successes.

As the W.R.I.T.E. (Writing Relevance in Teaching English) program coordinator for the conference, I am pleased to announce that we already have some amazing authors from around the Commonwealth willing to interact with your students. Attendees at this year's conference should plan to register to win the opportunity for one of the talented authors to spend a day at your school offering writing-centered workshops. Such a "prize" may afford your students the encouragement to continue expanding and honing their writing skills when they have the experience of personally interacting with our Commonwealth's finest writers. For a chance to win such an opportunity, make plans to attend this year's conference in Staunton, Virginia, and enter your name in the W.R.I.T.E. program contest.

Looking forward, one of our VATE Board goals this year is to improve our visibility to our members. That being said, allow me to update you on my newest professional endeavor, which actually occurred immediately after the last VATE conference. Currently, I am an assistant principal at Potomac Falls High School in Sterling, Virginia. For the past five years, I served as Loudoun County's School Assistance and Remediation Programs Coordinator at the district level. I love being back in a school directly working with teachers and students, for it is here that I see the immediate fruits of my labor.

Although my educational experience may be infantile in comparison to some of our VATE members, what I can say is that my experiences (student, teacher, school administrator, district administrator) have all taught me that building relationships with those whom you work is invaluable. Therefore, I look forward to fostering more relationships with students, teachers, parents, and, of course, VATE members from around the commonwealth as we collaborate in making learning meaningful and memorable.



Professional Development with the VWP! *by KaaVonja Hinton-Johnson, VATE VWP Liaison*

Sites throughout Virginia are offering workshops/conferences in early 2011. Earn recertification points and gain tons of knowledge about teaching writing through the Virginia Writing Project.

The Fourth International Conference on Writing Research will be held on February 17-20, 2011, at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. The focus of the conference is on writing development across the lifespan, including:

- The impact of new technologies on learning to write;
- Early acquisition of writing;
- Writing across grade levels (K-20);
- Writing in the disciplines and professions; and
- Writing in the workplace, community, and institutional settings.

The conference program and registration form are available at <http://www.writing.ucsb.edu/wrconf11/>

The Tidewater Writing Project's Open Institute at Old Dominion University will be held on March 26, 2011, and April 2, 2011. The focus of the Open Institute is on "Writing to Learn" in all grades and all subject areas. Participants will...

- Try new strategies;
- Experiment with technology;
- Go on a writing marathon; and
- Network with colleagues in the area.

Contact Kaa Hinton-Johnson at khintonj@odu.edu to share information about regional writing project activities with VATE.

Cost: \$60

Hours: 9:00am-2:00pm

Dates: March 26, 2011 and April 2, 2011

Registration form: Please e-mail Tina.vermitco@cps.k12.va.us

Creature and Character Creation: Taking a Cue from Well-Known Authors

A lesson plan by Brooke Bias, Fellow, Appalachian Writing Project, 2010

Last year, as I taught alongside a fifth grade language arts teacher, I realized that every good piece of writing needs an exceptional starting point. As the fifth grade writing S.O.L. closed in on us, we handed out prompts, we showed the students how to make four squares, we modeled topic sentences and brainstorming, and I continuously monitored students throughout the prewriting process. Nonetheless, we were still confronted every day with one single and ongoing complaint from students: "I don't know what to write about." At that point, I began to ask myself, where should writing begin? Should students simply be given a prompt and commanded to write, as they are during the Standards of Learning? Where do ideas for writing come from? How can I get my students to have something to write about? In response to these questions, I developed a project to encourage students to become more invested in the writing process.

"Creature and Character Creation" is a unique writing project. I begin it with a three-minute molding activity that triggers the prior knowledge of students and appeals to hands-on learners. Each student is given a jar of Play-Doh, and I explain to them that they must make a creature that does not really exist. I firmly tell my students that their molds cannot resemble creatures from media sources.

I believe that the act of creating a creature is one of most powerful aspects of this writing project, for it gives students ownership over their writing. Lesley Roessing, author of "Building a Community of Stories and Writers: Lake Wobegon Comes to the Classroom," completed a project where students made up their own towns and characters. Roessing found this prewriting activity to be successful, and she attributes the success to "personal ownership of the story" (6).

The next step is to guide students in shaping the details of their creature. I distribute a questionnaire which gets students to focus in on the appearance, habitat, and lifestyle of their creature. I also use this handout as an opportunity to direct students on what genre their creature might fall into.

I spend the next portion of class having students partner up to share both their Play-Doh creation and their questionnaire. I tell every student they must make at least one suggestion to improve the creature of their partner. I also tell them that if any questions were left blank they must work with their partner to complete them.

After this collaboration, students spend time drawing and coloring their creature, which I use as a cover sheet for their writing piece. Drawing their own creature helps students to visualize the imagery they will need to construct for their audience. It also engages visual learners.

The next vital step in utilizing this project is selecting an excerpt to use as a model. I use chapter 8 from Louis Sachar's *Holes* because it describes and characterizes a lizard creature. In this manner, students begin to see that what they read can be a model for what they write.

To wrap up this project, I utilize graphic organizers to arrange ideas for writing and then guide students to complete both a rough draft and a final draft, with organized peer tutoring. With this project, students have shown spectacular success in developing both descriptive paragraphs and short stories. "Creature and Character Creation" can also lead to successful poems, obituaries, articles, and dramas. The ultimate result of this project is students being more willing to write, knowing what to write about, and writing with detail.

Works Cited

Roessing, Lesley. "Building a Community of Stories and Writer: Lake Wobegon Comes to the Classroom." *National Writing Project. The Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4. 2004. <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2147>.
Sachar, Louis. *Holes*. New York: Yearling, 1998. Print.

Interested in Attending an Invitational Summer Institute?

by KaaVonia Hinton-Johnson, VATE VWP Liaison

The four or five week Summer Institute (SI) offered at six sites throughout the state is dynamic. If you don't believe me, read these first-hand accounts from Teacher Consultants (TCs) who recently attended.

Norma Coto, Northern Virginia Writing Project at George Mason University

I attended the 2010 SI, but I have to admit that I didn't know what I was getting myself into. My colleague had taken a class with Don Gallehr, the director of the project, and said that he was wonderful. She had heard this was a good experience. I thought, what the heck, I will apply. I was accepted and when I received the list of course requirements I thought, oh no, what have I gotten into? There goes my summer!

The summer of 2010 was easily the best summer I've had in a long time. I did not want it to end, despite the work. I went in thinking that I would get some great new ideas for my classes, but I learned so much more. I grew not only as an English teacher, but as a writer and professional. I looked at myself and my career in a whole new light. I left renewed and energized, and each time I pull out a book or lesson associated with the SI, I smile and feel that rush of excitement, knowing that I'm going to bring a great lesson to my students. It is a program that I would recommend to every teacher, English or not. Every teacher can grow in this environment of support and professionalism that the Writing Project provides.

Lisa Hillian, Tidewater Writing Project at Old Dominion University

The SI brought back my love of writing. I met the director at ODU's Big Read Haiku Contest, in which I won second place, and I thanked her for bringing me back to my love: writing. I applied to the SI, and I was admitted. It was the best decision I made. I learned how to control my writing and produce a product for readers to really enjoy! Additionally, I went back to

my school and shared ideas with teachers wanting a change of pace for their students. I love being a TC!! Thank you Tidewater Writing Project!

Lindsey Brauzer, Northern Virginia Writing Project at George Mason University

The SI this past summer was the most amazing professional development experience I've been able to attend. I had heard so many good things about the SI, so when I was accepted, I was elated. Unfortunately, my county would not pay for my tuition and I found out I would have to pay, but Don was able to get donations from former SI attendees and my whole tuition was paid!

I can't even begin to describe what I learned in those five weeks. I thought I would not be able to use any of the elementary school teachers' information for my high school English classes, but I was sadly mistaken. I was able to take at least something out of each TC's demonstration and apply it to my own classroom this school year. Already I am seeing an increase in writing and writing grades from my 9th and Pre AP 10 students! I was so thrilled with the SI that I agreed to be a part of the Continuity Team for our SI section to keep everyone involved. I've met some of the most amazing teachers who love their jobs and love to share what they do to help students be better readers and writers. I'm having coffee with one of my SI friends next week, I went to the NCTE conference with three of my SI friends, and met up with others there. We are constantly sharing ideas to make our students be better writers and learn how to apply their writing to their future lives. The SI was single-handedly one of the best experiences of my professional and personal life!

Mark Reeves, Tidewater Writing Project at Old Dominion University

I have to confess that my primary reason for applying to the SI was to get my recertification points. What I experienced was a summer filled with great teaching, engaging discussions, and, of course, writing. I entered the SI being very tentative about my writing skills; I left with a newfound excitement and enthusiasm for the writing process. I have taken this enthusiasm back to my classroom and am engaging my students with new writing strategies that I learned.

Though I only teach one English class, Photojournalism, I am also using new strategies in my 9th grade Instructional Transition class. When the weather is nice, my students love to go outside with me and take part in mini "Writing Marathons" for the journal portion of the class. I have been amazed by some of the things they have written and look forward to future sessions when the warmth returns. Regularly, I go to my SI notebook to check for more activities I can incorporate into my classes. My teaching methodology and philosophy have been greatly impacted because of my time at the SI. I speak about it with great excitement to my fellow teachers in hope that they will take advantage of this great resource.

The VWP has six sites dedicated to the following aims:

- to attract teachers, of all subject areas K-12, who are interested in improving student writing in their schools;
- to enable those teachers to come together for several weeks in the summer to explore research on the teaching of writing, various approaches to writing instruction, and alternative models for evaluating writing;
- to assist teachers in improving their own writing; and to develop a corps of teacher consultants—representative of all subject areas—in the writing project who will help other teachers in school districts across Virginia work toward improving student writing in all school subjects;
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- to assist teachers in improving their own writing; and to develop a corps of teacher consultants—representative of all subject areas—in the writing project who will help other teachers in school districts across Virginia work toward improving student writing in all school subjects.

The Virginia Writing Project (VWP) is a part of The National Writing Project (NWP), a network of sites across the United States, and in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, that provides professional development opportunities for teachers across grade levels and content areas.

Trees Teach Language Arts Lessons with Dominion's *Project Plant It!*

This spring, third-grade English teachers around Virginia will partner with Dominion's *Project Plant It!* program to help more than 30,000 students improve their reading and writing skills, while also improving the environment. *Project Plant It!* was developed by Dominion to educate children and plant trees to celebrate Arbor Day. In January, participating teachers received a comprehensive kit packed with creative lesson plans, posters, stickers and certificates. In April, each student receives a tree seedling. The kit and tree seedlings are provided by Dominion at no cost to the schools.

All of the teaching materials align with the state SOLs for Language Arts, science, math and social studies. Instructional materials of special interest to English teachers include:

- Tree Reading List
- Tree Crossword Puzzle
- Tree Terminology Word Search
- Tree Book Report
- Tree Poems and Stories



The website, www.ProjectPlantIt.com, features videos about trees, an interactive vocabulary game and a fun tree trivia quiz. Also, an online Activity Guide is filled with family-friendly projects to get children out of the house or classroom and into the dirt!

Since 2007, Dominion has distributed more than 100,000 tree seedlings through *Project Plant It!* That's equivalent to 250 acres of new forestland according to the Virginia Department of Forestry. For more information, visit www.ProjectPlantIt.com.

Members Can Participate in NCTE Survey

Dr. Lisa Scherff (University of Alabama) and Dr. Leslie Rush (University of Wyoming), co-editors of *English Education*, are collecting data via a survey regarding middle and high school English/Language Arts teachers with 0 to 5 years of teaching experience. Since *English Education* is a publication of the National Council of Teachers of English, and VATE is a state affiliate of NCTE, members who are in the target audience of the survey are encouraged to "support the mother ship" and participate in the survey. Follow this link for the survey: <http://tiny.cc/zdr8j>

Wanted: Webmaster for VATE

- Job description: Update and maintain VATE's web site at www.vate.org
- Pay: Yearly stipend from VATE

CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

***Virginia English Bulletin* Spring / Summer 2011, Vol 61, #1**
Themed Issue on the Virginia Affiliates of the National Writing Project

From National to Neighborhood: The Homegrown Pedagogy of Virginia's Affiliates of the National Writing Project.

This special themed issue is meant to highlight the outstanding work being done throughout the state of Virginia by our affiliates of the National Writing Project. For this special themed issue we invite participants from across the state to submit research articles related to their work with the NWP on both a national and regional level. Additionally, we invite the directors of each of Virginia's NWP affiliates to share their experiences and goals with their respective colleagues from across the state. While the goal of this issue is to highlight the work of our state affiliates of the NWP, we will gladly consider submissions outside of the scope of the NWP dealing with the teaching of writing at all levels.

The state of Virginia is a true microcosm of our nation as a whole. Few states offer the diversity of culture and traditions as found in our state. And yet, the Virginia affiliates of the NWP find a common ground in the continued study and improvement of issues related to the teaching of writing. No matter their location, teachers across the state are working toward the singular goal of improving students' writing. Regardless of the region, the importance of students being able to write not only for communication, but even more so for self-expression, is the shared goal of members of the NWP statewide. This issue is devoted to the work of all of those members who dedicate their time and energy to improving the lives and opportunities of all of our students.

Virginia English Bulletin is a fully refereed journal. In addition to publishing full length articles on English language arts teaching and learning, we feature teaching ideas in our Great Teaching ideas column.

Deadline: May 15, 2010

Authors should submit their articles electronically as e-mail attachments, preferably Microsoft Word or Corel WordPerfect; however, other formats and word processing programs are acceptable. We do not accept simultaneous submissions. **Please include your mailing address, as well as a short biographical sketch including the name of your school, position, courses taught, and a brief statement about your professional life; also include a statement of submission noting that the work has not been submitted elsewhere simultaneously for publication.**

Send to drwoods@radford.edu, for the attention of Daniel Woods, Radford University, P.O. Box 6935, Radford, Virginia 24142. The editor reserves the right to modify manuscripts to fit length and language considerations. Please include "VEB Submission" in the "Subject" line of your e-mail. Alternately, interested individuals may call the Editor at 540.831.6266.



VATE welcomes Daniel Woods as the new editor of the *Virginia English Bulletin*. Woods received his PhD from Virginia Tech, majoring in Curriculum and Instruction with a focus on English Education. Before pursuing his PhD, Woods taught middle and high school English in Roanoke City and Montgomery County. He earned M.A.Ed. from Virginia Tech, as well as a BS and MA in English from Radford University. His research interests include teacher education, critical literacy, and social justice. As of August 2011, he will be an Assistant Professor of English Education at Radford University.

Save the date! Mark your calendar!
"Technology Show and Tell—Past and Future"

PATE/VATE

District P of the
Virginia Association of Teachers of English

will hold its 5th annual
mini-conference on

Tuesday, March 29

4:30 - 6:30

Hidden Valley Middle School

Roanoke, VA

Presenters will be local fellow educators who have a passion for using technology in the classroom. Amazing ideas will be shared in small group sessions so each participant gets a close-up view. You will leave wanting to get "plugged in".

Join us for refreshments and door prizes.

You can earn professional development credit too!



PATE serves the districts of Alleghany, Botetourt, Craig, Franklin, and Roanoke County, and the cities of Covington, Salem, and Roanoke. You can join PATE/VATE for \$25.

Applications are online at www.vate.org. Please send the application and check to Treasurer, Amy Hodges at HVMS, 4902 Hidden Valley School Road, Roanoke, VA 24018.

Regardless of membership, the meeting is open to ALL English teachers in the region.

Please contact

Wendy Bryant (wbryant@rcps.info) for more information or if you would like to be a presenter.



Virginia Association of Teachers of English

Please contact Chuck Miller at cmillercrz@roadrunner.com to update your email and post office address so that you will not miss a publication or announcement. Encourage others to join VATE online at www.vate.org.

The Needle's Eye

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The Virginia Association of Teachers of English is committed to enhancing the quality of the teaching of English and language arts in the Commonwealth.