

CASE STUDY 6.1

Brenda Forester

Brenda Forester slowly closed her notebook and reached behind her for her backpack and jacket. She waited until the crowd thinned around Dr. Garrison and watched as the professor gathered her material and packed her briefcase.

This language arts methods class was the third education course Brenda had taken with Ellen Garrison. It featured many of the characteristics Brenda had appreciated about Dr. Garrison's earlier classes: a participative format, group activities, animated class discussions, and rigorous standards. Students were expected to be responsible for their own learning. In this class there would be no tests; students were to do the reading on their own and respond to it and to their field placement experiences using various types of journal entries. But the course was certainly atypical for a methods class. Rather than focusing on how to teach the scope and sequence of the state language arts curriculum or how to write lesson plans, Ellen Garrison's students were practicing the writing process by using class time to write, to share their work, and to work in groups to revise their writing. Dr. Garrison had made it clear that this would *not* be a course on how to teach handwriting, spelling, grammar and sentence structure, or written prose and poetry forms. To Brenda, this course was not going to help her teach language arts in an elementary school.

Dr. Garrison turned to Brenda as she shrugged into her coat. "You didn't say a word in class. What's wrong?"

"I'm frustrated. I don't see how this will work."

"This? You mean the writing process?"

"Yes. Both of our textbooks focus exclusively on writing, but neither book tells *how* to teach language arts."

Dr. Garrison nodded. "Go on."

Brenda looked uncomfortable. "Well, that's it. I really don't see how you can teach all of the stuff covered in language arts through writing. When I hear you talk about it, it sounds great, but I don't think it will work in practice."

By now, they had reached Ellen Garrison's building. "Do you have time to continue this conversation now, Brenda, or should we make an appointment?"

"I have about ten minutes before I'm due at work."

"Well, come in, and we'll talk until you have to go."

Brenda followed the professor down the hall and into her office. Dr. Garrison indicated a chair for Brenda and they both sat down. “Tell me why you think the process won’t work in a classroom.”

“Well, maybe it will work for gifted kids, or kids from wealthy homes where they already have the language skills so they can write. But I don’t see how it will work for most children, particularly the kinds I see in field placements.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think they will work independently. The kids I see aren’t self-directed at all. They won’t come up with topics, or change their work once they’ve written something down. And they’ll never learn to spell, or write in full sentences, or organize their thoughts in paragraphs unless someone teaches them how to do it.”

“Is that it?”

“No. I also don’t think it’s possible to do this with little kids. In our reading methods course we learned that writing comes after reading. Students can’t write what they can’t read.”

“But if you read the books for this course, then . . .”

“I know. And it sounds fine when Graves or Calkins talk about how first graders publish their own books. I just don’t think it will happen in a regular classroom with really heterogeneous kids.”

“Fair enough. It *is* a radical idea, given what’s going on in classrooms right now. But think back to your elementary school years. How did you learn to write? Did you love spelling class? Doing workbook pages that didn’t relate to anything? Having your essays come back full of red ink, corrected by the teacher?”

“Maybe that’s part of my problem. I did love all that. I always won the spelling bees, and my essays were hung up, and ditto sheets and workbooks were fun for me.” Brenda had the grace to duck her head from the blow she knew was coming.

Dr. Garrison didn’t disappoint her. “Easy for you overachievers. You learned to write despite the system, so you figure everyone can. It won’t work like that, Bren. I see too much rotten writing, and I have too many students who hate to write, for me believe the current system works, except for students who would have been good writers anyway.”

Brenda did not give up, however. “But how are poor writers going to learn if no one teaches them? I just don’t think writing without teacher direction or correction is enough. And I’m worried I’m not going to learn how to teach language arts in your class.”

“You want me to focus on spelling ideas for different grades, and handwriting techniques, and methods for punctuation rules . . .”

“Yes,” Brenda responded eagerly. “And different kinds of poems, and ideas for language arts units, and developing a lesson to teach, things like that.”

Dr. Garrison shook her head. “You’ve got me worried. If one of my best students wants a traditional course, what must the other students want?”

“The same thing,” Brenda replied.

Dr. Garrison started to laugh. “No, Brenda, you misunderstood. That was a rhetorical question. I know what the other students want. I just don’t think it’s what they need to be effective teachers.”

Privately, Brenda thought, “Maybe I should switch to the other section.” Aloud, she said, “You know, in my four field placements, I’ve never seen a teacher use the writing process.”

“Do you think it would make a difference if you did?”

“Maybe.”

“Do you have your field placement for this semester yet?”

Brenda nodded. “I asked to go back to Grandview School in Littleton. I’ve been there before. It’s close to my house.”

Dr. Garrison looked at her watch and stood up. “Tell you what, Brenda. I’ll give you some traditional language arts texts, so you’ll have a source for practical information. But if you see the process in action, maybe you’ll change your mind.”

Brenda was still skeptical, but she agreed, knowing she didn’t want to switch sections if she could help it. She thanked Dr. Garrison for her time and started out the door. Before she could leave, Ellen Garrison had one more comment. “You know, Brenda, this isn’t about writing; it’s about teaching. It’s about what kind of teacher you want to be, what kind of classroom you want to have.”

Brenda nodded thoughtfully. She walked quickly from the building to her car.

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A cool autumn breeze tousled Brenda’s hair as she closed her car door and walked toward the entrance of Grandview Elementary School on a Monday afternoon in late September. This was the third time she had been placed at Grandview for the half day a week fieldwork assignment that accompanied her education courses. She was looking forward to getting back into an elementary school setting after her long summer vacation.

Brenda thought the administration and teaching staff at Grandview were always pleasant, but there were things about the school that bothered her whenever she spent time here. As she headed for the office to check in, she saw that one thing had not changed over the summer: the wide hallways were practically bare. The vast, gray concrete wall space showed little evidence that the students had been involved in any creative projects. As she peeked into the few classrooms she passed on the way to the office, she noticed that they were very quiet and seemed to be teacher-directed. Once

again Brenda reflected that Grandview elementary was too traditional for her taste. The teachers Brenda had worked with were intelligent, compassionate individuals, yet each of them seemed to be bound to organizing the classroom space into rows, separating reading groups by ability, using basal textbooks and premade ditto sheets, and creating daily routines of teacher-directed lessons and independent seat work. Throughout their daily activities, the students were not encouraged to be creative, to express themselves in verbal or written work, or to work cooperatively in small groups without teacher direction. None of this jibed with most of the educational theory Brenda was learning in her course work or with the notion that school could be an exciting, innovative environment for children.

However, over the years, teachers she had met both in her field placements and in other settings had assured her that teaching as practiced in real classrooms would not resemble what she was being exposed to in her college education classes. So she found herself in the uncomfortable position of being skeptical of what she was learning (could these ideas actually be implemented in an elementary classroom?) *and* skeptical of what she was observing (couldn't the classroom be more student-centered and less traditional?). This semester, with her concerns about her language arts course, she found herself more on the side of the traditionalists than she had ever been before.

Thinking about this dilemma, Brenda finally reached the main office, where she was welcomed by Alex McGovern, the assistant principal. "Good morning, Brenda," Mr. McGovern greeted her. "It's nice to have you with us again."

Brenda pulled herself out of her reverie and extended her hand. "Thanks, Mr. McGovern. I'm glad to be back."

Mr. McGovern shuffled through a folder of papers he had in his hand and then motioned to Brenda to follow him. "I got a call from Professor Garrison about your placement this semester, so I'm putting you with Ms. Henden, one of our fourth-grade teachers. This is her second year at Grandview. I think her class will provide the experience your professor wants you to have."

Brenda followed Mr. McGovern down the main hallway and up the stairwell that led to the second floor. Brenda had been scanning the walls, looking for any evidence of student work, without much success. Then she noticed a section of wall space filled with leaf impressions and pressings, each labeled with the name of the tree from which the leaf came. Just to the right of the leaf displays were creative stories and poems about autumn. Each of the writing samples was unique.

To Brenda's delight, this pathway of creativity led straight to Janet Henden's classroom door. Mr. McGovern opened the door, allowing Brenda to enter first. A tall, attractive woman in her late thirties was standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by a horseshoe of student desks. When she heard the door open, she motioned to her students that she would be right with them and walked toward Brenda with her right hand extended. "You

must be Brenda Forester,” she said with a cheerful smile. “Mr. McGovern tells me you will be spending some time with my class this semester. My students and I are looking forward to working with you.”

Brenda immediately felt comfortable with this teacher. “Thank you very much,” she said, taking Ms. Henden’s hand.

Mr. McGovern left the classroom, closing the door behind him. Ms. Henden quickly moved to the front of the room, motioning for Brenda to follow. “Students, this is Ms. Forester. She will be spending some time working with us every Monday afternoon. I know that you will show her what a wonderful class I have. Now, I would like everyone to put your science work away and get ready for Writer’s Workshop.”

Brenda watched as the students put their books away and moved to the right rear corner of the classroom, which was sectioned off from the rest of the room by bookshelves. She could feel immediately a certain energy in this classroom that she had not observed previously in this school.

Ms. Henden turned to her. “Brenda, please make yourself comfortable wherever you wish. Right now, we are about to begin Writer’s Workshop. Each Monday after science is the time for the students to write. We use ideas from the writing process. Are you familiar with this method?”

“Yes,” Brenda answered. “That’s what we’re studying in my Language Arts Methods class.”

Ms. Henden smiled. “Wonderful! Now you’ll get to see it in action.”

Janet Henden moved to the back of the room and sat in a chair before her students, who were all sitting in a semicircle on the floor. “I’ve been looking through your stories in their many different drafting stages and you are all making good progress. However, I have asked myself if you are all telling the very best stories that you can. That is today’s topic for our minilesson. Now, to illustrate what I mean by that, I would like to read you a story that I wrote about a trip I took to Cape Cod this summer.”

Ms. Henden read her short story to the students, most of whom listened attentively. When she reached the end, she asked, “Did everyone understand what happened in my story?” The students nodded. “What was it about my story that helped you to understand it?”

A handful of students raised their hands. “Yes? Ben?”

“I noticed that you had different parts in your story and they were all in order.”

“Good observation, Ben,” Ms. Henden responded. “Class, Ben just illustrated the fact that I told my story in chronological order, which we talked about last week. Who remembers what that means?” Several students’ hands went up. “Jennifer?”

“It’s important to tell the story in the order it happened, or it’ll be confusing.”

Ms. Henden nodded and then called on a girl whose hand was waving in the air just before her. “Sandra, would you like to add something?”

Sandra looked at Brenda and said, "I liked your story."

Ms. Henden smiled. "Thanks, Sandra. Can you tell me *what* about the story you particularly liked?" Sandra shook her head, so Ms. Henden said, "The point I want to emphasize this afternoon is what happens to a story when we add details." Ms. Henden paused for a moment. "Eric, would you like to answer that question?"

Eric, who seemed to Brenda to be shy, shrugged his shoulders. Ms. Henden urged him to respond. "Just give it a try. I'm sure you know the answer." Eric didn't reply and Brenda noticed some of the students getting restless.

Ms. Henden turned to address the entire group. "Does anyone know what happens to a story if we add details?" Only Jennifer's hand went up.

"They make the story interesting," Jennifer responded.

"That is absolutely correct," Ms. Henden replied. "I want each of you to try and write the most interesting stories, that you possibly can by including many details. When you add details to your stories, you give them life. Then, when you read your story to your conference partner or to the class, those who are listening can picture all the events in their heads."

Salika called out, "Ms. Henden, what if I'm still working on my story and other kids are going on to other things, like their final drafts, or even publishing?"

Ms. Henden glanced at Brenda, whose attentive posture revealed her particular interest in this issue. "Good question. I want each of you to concentrate on your own stories. It's not important where other students are. Each of you must work at your own pace in order to produce the very best story that you can. Remember, each of you is an author. You must understand that authors take very different amounts of time to write their books. It took Colleen McCullough, who is a famous author, ten years to write her book on Rome." Brenda noticed some of the students' eyes widen with amazement as the teacher presented them with that fact. "But during that same period of time, Stephen King, another famous author, wrote many, many books. However, that in no way means that Stephen King is a better author than Colleen McCullough. Each of you is an individual author and you must write your stories, however long or short, at your own pace."

Ms. Henden asked her students if they had any more questions. When no one did, she told them to get to work. As the students broke from the circle and scattered like billiard balls, Ms. Henden joined Brenda. "Feel free to circulate and to discuss their work with the students," she invited. "Since you're familiar with the writing process, you'll be an asset."

Not confessing that she was as yet unconverted, Brenda nodded her thanks and watched the class. What had seemed random movement, she now realized, was purposeful and organized, as students took turns at a large crate marked "Writing Folders" and then dispersed to different areas in the

classroom. Some students sat at their desks alone, some sat on the floor in groups, some sat at the large table by the side windows, and two stood conversing near the chalkboard.

As Brenda strolled around the room she noticed that the students were at different stages in their stories. The first student Brenda observed was scanning a page in his folder entitled “Topics to Write About.”

“Hi. I’m Ms. Forester. What are you doing?”

The boy glanced up at Brenda. “I just finished the final copy of my first story, so I’m looking at the list of topics I wrote down to find something new to write about.”

Brenda looked down at the list and smiled encouragingly. “It looks like you have some interesting ideas there,” she said, resisting the temptation to help him choose. This was an example of one of her concerns. How long would that child sit there, thinking about a topic and not writing? Wouldn’t it be better if she sat with him and urged him to make a choice and start writing? She felt the weight of Dr. Garrison whispering in her ear, “It will be *his* product only if *he* chooses.” Instead, she asked if she could look at his finished story. The student handed her his work, and at a glance, Brenda noticed that it had several spelling errors and no paragraph breaks. Brenda was sure that students were supposed to know how to use paragraphs by the fourth grade. Hiding her concern, she handed the work back with a smile and continued to walk around the room.

She approached the pair at the chalkboard, surprised that Ms. Henden permitted casual conversation during writing time, and then realized that they were conferencing about one student’s draft. But when she eavesdropped on two other girls presumably holding a story conference, Brenda found they were talking about the latest additions to their Barbie doll wardrobes.

Weighing the evidence, Brenda felt her ambiguity return. She was in the midst of what appeared to be a self-sufficient group of heterogeneous 9-year-olds, many of whom were doing what she had assumed could not be done. Ms. Henden’s Writer’s Workshop seemed to be student-directed and most of the students were engaged in writing. Yet there were enough students off task to support some of her concerns. Brenda couldn’t judge how productive any of the writing activities were. As she continued to look at the students’ work, she noticed lots of spelling and punctuation errors, but the children seemed interested and involved in their work. The classroom she was observing was far from perfect, but she had not been in another class at Grandview where the children were as actively involved as they were here.

After about twenty minutes Ms. Henden walked to the back of the room. “Everyone please stop what you are doing and come back here for group share. Jill is ready to read her story to the class.”

Brenda watched as most of the students put their work in progress into their folders, returned the folders to the crate, and scurried to the back of

the room. Ms. Henden urged the students still at their desks to put their work away and join the group. Eventually, everyone was sitting on the floor, and Jill stood up in front and began to read her story.

“One morning I woke up and I knew that it was going to be a bad day,” she began. Almost all of her classmates were listening raptly. Her story was about the day her older brother accidentally knocked her front tooth out. Brenda thought the story was delightful, yet certain areas were a bit confusing. Also, Brenda wasn’t sure how much Jill was reading and how much she was making up as she stood there. She was curious to hear the students’ comments.

When Jill completed her reading, Ms. Henden clapped and the students followed. “Thanks for sharing that, Jill. I can see that you have been working very hard on that story. Now, does anyone have questions or comments for Jill?”

A boy wearing an oversized soccer jersey raised his hand. “I thought Jill’s story was really good. There was a lot of action in it.”

A group of students in the front of the group chimed in. “Yeah, it was really good.”

Ms. Henden waited a few seconds and then added. “Class, I want you to think about Jill’s opening. She began by saying that one morning she woke up and knew it was going to be a bad day. How do you feel about that?”

Adam quickly raised his hand and blurted out his response before being called on. “How did she know she was going to have a bad day? She needs to include more details.”

Ms. Henden glanced at him, half smiling. “OK, Adam, good comment, but will you try to wait until I call on you before you answer next time? Jill, do you think you need more details?”

Jill shook her head. “There’s no more to tell.”

Ms. Henden nodded and asked for other comments. When there were none, she stood up and said, “OK, that’s it for today. It’s nearly time for gym. If anyone has any more suggestions for Jill, please make sure you let her know during our next Writer’s Workshop.” Brenda could not believe that the teacher was going to leave the discussion of Jill’s story without helping the student add more details.

As Ms. Henden began walking toward the front of the room, a group of students surrounded her, asking if they could read during group share next time. She wrote their names down as she lined the students up to go to gym class.

Walking back from the gym, Ms. Henden turned to Brenda. “So, what did you think of your first visit with us?”

“I had a wonderful time,” Brenda responded. “To tell the truth, I’m pretty skeptical about the writing process, but I liked what I saw in your class. Sometimes, it was as if the words in my textbook came to life! The students seemed to enjoy what they were doing.”

Ms. Henden nodded. "It's good to be skeptical. I'm glad you saw what you did. I really think writing process is a powerful tool."

"Is this a fairly mixed group, ability-wise?" wondered Brenda.

"Very," her new mentor replied. "Maybe eight of the twenty are well above average; most are in the middle; and at the other end, I have four students who use the resource room for various disabilities. But it's important to me that all of my students learn how to use written language to freely express their feelings and emotions. Most of them have never been allowed to do that until now. Mostly, teachers have told them exactly what to write about and exactly how it should be written."

Brenda didn't feel she knew Ms. Henden well enough to risk challenging her, but she felt skepticism return. "Maybe there's a reason why the other teachers don't do this," she thought. "How do you know that it's good for the students? How do they learn the skills of language arts in this way? What about the students who weren't working? What did Jill learn from sharing her story? It had the same problems after she read it as before. And what am I missing, with Garrison and Henden singing out of the same hymnal and me not learning how to teach language arts?"

Brenda thanked Ms. Henden and slowly left the building. She knew that Dr. Garrison would tell her she was asking the wrong questions. Ellen Garrison wanted Brenda to think about classroom environments and student involvement. Brenda thought, "I'm more interested in teaching students some skills. Does that mean I have to have a traditional classroom?"