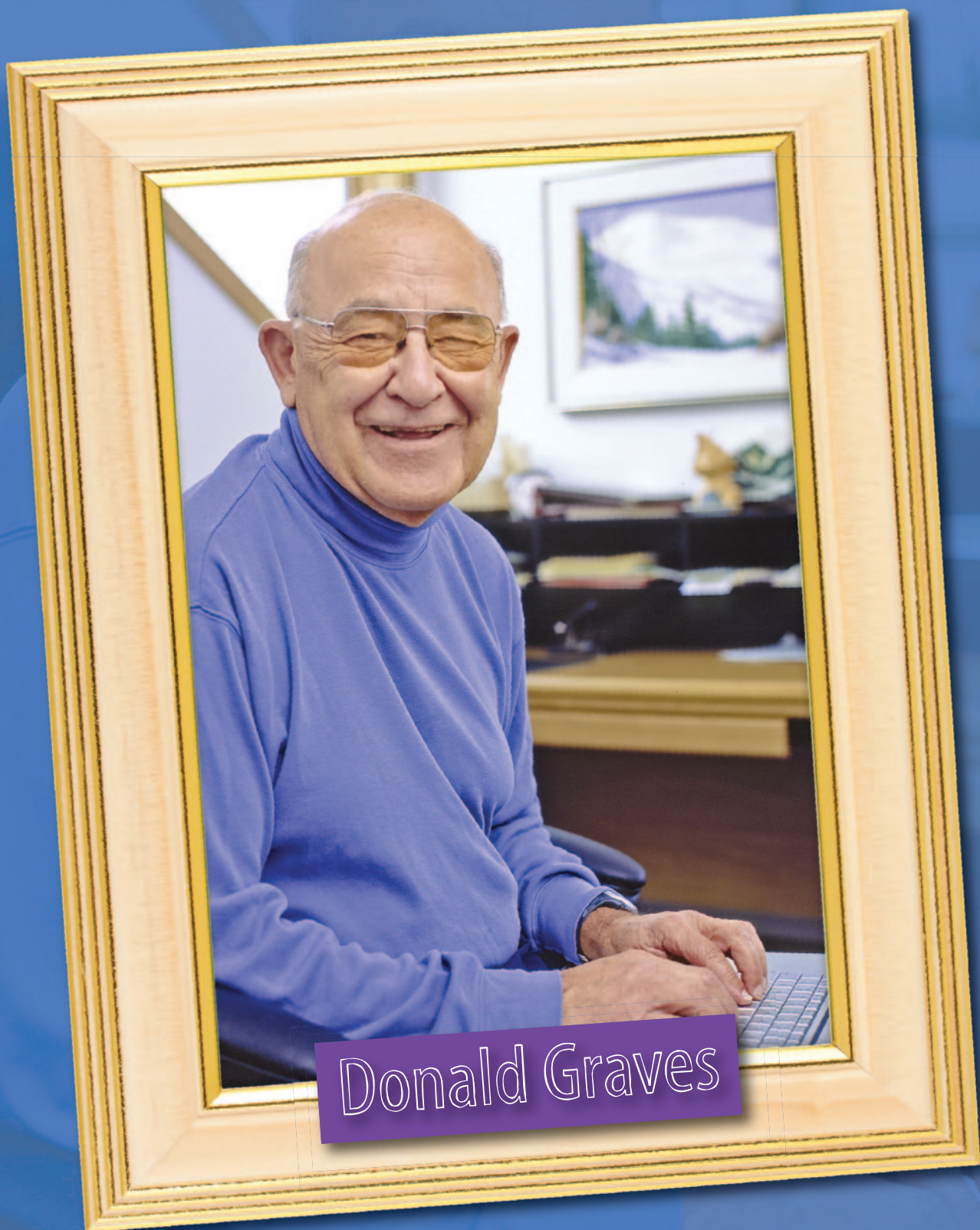


A True Friend &



Donald Graves

a Good Writer

By Nancie Atwell



I'm the teacher I've become because of Donald Graves. His influence is that direct and essential. More than thirty years after I adopted his writing workshop, its humanity, versatility, and power still feel like a blessing.

My first encounter with writing workshop did not leave me feeling blessed. A teacher of eighth-grade English at the time, I was holding on for dear life to an assignment-a-week writing program. I announced a topic every Monday, collected drafts on Wednesday and wrote advice all over them, returned them for revision on Thursday, gathered the “revised” drafts on Friday, and wrote advice all over them again.

The results were unflinching. A handful of kids took my idea and did something cool and creative with it, the great lump in the middle satisfied the requirement, and the rest struggled to guess what I was after. My students wrote like students.

At Atkinson Academy, the public elementary school in New Hampshire where Don conducted his groundbreaking work, students wrote like writers. First through fourth graders developed topics and purposes, set their own paces, talked with the teacher and classmates about their drafts, and revised, edited, and published pieces of writing that were voiced, diverse, and meaningful. Don and his research associates, Lucy Calkins and Susan Sowers, published their discoveries in the NCTE journal *Language Arts*. The school where I was teaching hired Susan as a consultant.

My learning isn't always pretty. After Susan's visit I raged about the anarchy sure to be unleashed in the classroom of any teacher benighted enough to attempt writing workshop. In truth, I was comfortable making the decisions in my classroom, not to mention anxious about what my role would be if I weren't busy assigning and assessing. Worse, I didn't trust that kids had ideas as writers. But I did have one thing going for me: good intentions. I wanted the best for my students. Don's work challenged my definition of *best*.

On a Monday in March 1980, I closed the door to my classroom and leveled with my students: children at a school in New Hampshire are acting as real writers. Do you want to give writing workshop a try? Yes. Every class voted yes.

So in we plunged. Kids wrote and wrote—it turned out they had ideas they were eager to express. I began to figure out how to support and teach what real writers do and to understand the subtleties and possibilities of writing as a process, versus the crude lockstep I'd been mandating. I never looked back.

The following November, at an NCTE convention, I found standing room in Don's session: the most joyous, *hopeful* report on research

DON GRAVES IN THE FOREWORD TO NANCIE ATWELL'S *IN THE MIDDLE*

Back in May of 1984 Nancie Atwell demonstrated with middle school students before a gallery of teachers at the International Reading Association convention in Atlanta, Georgia. I remember her words as she emerged from the demonstration. “Gosh,” she said, “This stuff works anywhere.” That was the first time she'd tried her approaches with students outside of Boothbay Harbor. What happened was no accident. She brought the same open, intense, literate engagement to her student conferences. Soon the students from Atlanta were sharing their stories, writing, and telling about how they composed. Through this book we can find as she did that informed, caring literacy works anywhere.

For professionals who wish to bring that same intensity to their own reading and writing, and then to the classrooms, this book will be an adventure in learning. There's plenty of common sense here. I remember being struck by her simple decision to have students read in school. She reasoned that if they read in school they'd read outside of school. When I taught I always assigned reading for homework.

Her students are known for their travel to book stores in other towns in search of good books to read. Not surprisingly, they read an average of 35 books a year. Again, the intensity. She shows how adolescents need to write and read books in order to grow at a precarious time in their lives. I think she answers the greatest question for teachers and students today: “Why would anyone want to read and write?”

Teachers will meet their own adolescents on these pages and be able to help them. There is enough detail in classroom description and student text to do that. Because *In the Middle* was written from the inside by a teacher who understands the perplexities of erratic development, we are able to apply her recommendations for planning, mini-lessons in reading and writing, response to texts, grading, and organizing a classroom. We can make these translations not because of methodologies, but because these practicalities are joined with the principles of literate development within the lives of real students.

Donald H. Graves



As a teacher, I miss his leaps of imagination. His most significant, writing workshop, gave teachers and students a scaffold—a structure to support authentic self-expression.

I ever heard. Afterward, I waited at the end of a long line of teachers. When it was my turn, I described how the workshop had transformed my students as writers, and I thanked him. Don said he wasn't aware that anyone had pushed writing workshop into the middle grades. "Write to me," he suggested. I did. It was the start of our friendship and my career as a writer.

I'm one of many teachers who began to write because Donald Graves said, "You have a story to tell." His respect for practice and practitioners was generous and unwavering. Although I was never Don's student, because he shared so much of his writing and thinking, he was always my teacher. In turn, Don looked to the people on the front lines to teach him.

I remember when he guest-lectured at Bread Loaf, where I was a grad student. He arrived with the manuscript of *Writing: Teachers & Children at Work*,¹ the book that emerged from the Atkinson study, and asked me to critique it. I stayed up all night making notes on index cards and, in the morning, reviewed with him what I appreciated, couldn't understand, wanted more of. I cringe now at my audacity, but I was convinced of his confidence in me—he took teachers that seriously. Later, when I produced a manuscript of my own, Don critiqued it and asked if he could write a foreword. *In the Middle*² owes everything to him.

I treasure my personal memories of Don—his cackle of a laugh, repertoire of bird calls and Spanish folk songs, extreme toe-tapping when it looked like he might not eat dinner at 5:00 sharp, passion for high-tech gadgetry, feats of athletic prowess, and love for Betty, their children and grandchildren, and a succession of yellow Labs. As a teacher, I miss his leaps of imagination.

His most significant, writing workshop, gave teachers and students a scaffold—a structure to support authentic self-expression. Don's focus on regular time for writing, child intentionality, and teacher

initiative continues to challenge methods and standards that bypass the purposes and processes of writers and the observations of teachers. I'm longing for his voice right now, as the Common Core Standards—based on zero research, invented behind closed doors by bureaucrats and test makers, and never field-tested anywhere—threaten to strip child writers of their childhoods. Poetry is banished in the CCS, and literary analysis institutionalized as a K–8 genre.

Don understood that engagement doesn't negate rigor. Tempted by a wealth of opportunities to craft ideas, feelings, experiences, and information, instructed by teachers who write and read across genres, students in the workshop challenge themselves to develop as writers. He would have appreciated a letter I received from Colleen, a second-year law student, about how the poems and stories she composed in my writing workshop prepared her to write as an attorney.

We were required to write an appellate brief for one of our classes, and the process included peer editing. I was astonished to see the drastic differences between my writing and my classmates'. Certainly mine warranted heavy correction by the professor, but the fundamental difference I noticed was that I was taught from a young age to

love writing and practice regularly and passionately. I never considered that others didn't have the same experience. It wasn't until I realized this that I began to appreciate your unique, successful methods. It wasn't only about teaching us how to write professionally and effectively, but also to bestow the deeper appreciation and satisfaction that one derives from writing well. I approach writing today much the same way you instructed me, with an eye for creativity and analysis, and relentless dedication.

Colleen recognized that writing workshop taught her *how to write, period*. Like other students who've grown up to become lawyers, advertising copywriters, editors, academics, engineers, and business owners—adults who work at careers in which they write every day—Colleen benefited from a child-centered curriculum that gave her the experience, advice, and tools she needs to think on paper and communicate her ideas to others.

Writing workshop teaches children how to work as writers. Choosing their own topics and exploring their ideas in authentic, kid-friendly ways motivates them, invites a sense of purpose, and leads to excellence. Don understood this before anyone did. His belief in the craft of writing, intelligence of children, and professionalism of teachers dignified all three. Today, more than ever, writing teachers need to know, conserve, and champion his work.

In his best-known book, E.B. White wrote "It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both." So was Donald Graves.

1. Graves, Donald H. 1983. *Writing: Teachers & Children at Work*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
2. Atwell, Nancie. 1987. *In the Middle*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

A teacher since 1973, **Nancie Atwell** is one of the most respected educators in the United States. Her classic *In the Middle* has inspired generations of teachers. Her recent DVDs *Writing in the Middle* and *Reading in the Middle* give teachers a seat in her writing and reading workshops and a firsthand view of her lessons, conferences, and literary relationships with middle-school students. Nancie is also the author of *Lessons That Change Writers*, a year's worth of practical, powerful minilessons straight from her classroom file cabinets, and *Naming the World: A Year of Poems and Lessons*, a teaching anthology that invites students to unpack, appreciate, and be influenced by the language and themes of the mother genre.

Nancie is the first classroom teacher to receive the major research awards in English language arts, the MLA Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize and the NCTE David H. Russell Award. In 2011 she was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of New Hampshire.

In 1990, Nancie founded the Center for Teaching and Learning, a K–8 demonstration school in Edgecomb, Maine, where, until her retirement this year, she taught seventh- and eighth-grade writing, reading, and history. Her new project from Heinemann, a book and DVD entitled *Systems to Transform Your Classroom and School*, describes the culture of engagement and excellence that Nancie and her colleagues created at CTL by combining smart practices, innovative solutions to common problems of teaching, humane and rigorous school policies, and traditions that build community.

To continue to engage with Nancie on this topic, go to www.heinemann.com/pd/journal.

