

# ELA in the 21st Century Old Ways, New Days: What My Grandmother Taught Me About Teaching in the Modern World

by Philippe Ernewein



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*"In retelling stories, it's clear to listeners—my children in this case—who the speakers are, or who the story concerns. Obvious advantages of oral storytelling are the expression of the teller, the responses of the participants, and the gestures as well as the inflections in the voices. Although many of the stories or jokes that are told can be translated and relayed fairly well in written form, the clear sense of voices and characters is diminished in some ways, so that even though it's obvious when I tell a story orally that I'm not the protagonist or other person, the reader of a story may interpret it otherwise (xiii)."*

Luci Tapahonso, *Blue Horses Rush In*

## Flashback: First-year Teacher Blues

During my first week of teaching, nineteen years ago this August, I remember preparing for a lesson on creative writing for a high school language arts class. I thought that part of my introduction should include a personal story where I could model details, symbols, and metaphors. I rehearsed telling the story in front of a mirror and jotted notes down to make sure I hit the objectives.

After the bell rang for second period, the students picked up their writing folders from their classroom mailboxes. I thought things were really going smoothly. The lesson was off to a great start.

Then I said, "Today, I'd like to start class by telling a story." I distinctly remember that this was all I said before the interruption. Immediately after my opening statement, one of my students, Nadia, blurted out something between a question and a statement, "You are going to tell us a story." With her inflection at the end of the sentence I took it as a question and said, "Yes."

Nadia replied loudly with the following announcement, more directed towards the class than to me, "A story is a lie, so you are telling us that you are going to lie to us."

Pandemonium broke out. Other students joined Nadia's chorus, "Oh no, what kind of teacher are you, telling us lies?"

I was in Louisiana. In my students' collective and cultural background and vernacular, telling a story was equated with telling a lie. I should have done my homework a bit more thoroughly and been more aware of the possible implications of my word choice. My classroom management needed work as well.

But Nadia was displaying excellent critical thinking skills. Even before she heard my story, she wanted to know if it was true, if it was valid; she was wondering how she would categorize and make sense of the story. She was actively engaged in trying to make sense of the words, ideas, assumptions and narratives that constructed her worldview. How would my worldview match with hers; what would be different or similar and what would that sound and feel like?

I wish she would have elected to pursue this inquisitive, truth-seeking track in a manner that didn't create total mutiny during my first week of teaching, but nonetheless, I valued her critical thinking.

## This is a True Story: Irene & Lloyd

Irene stepped on a boat, *SS Aquitania*, in Antwerp, Belgium in 1946 and headed West to a new world. Right after the war, she had married a Canadian soldier, who was part of the liberation of Belgium, and was going to live with him in Ontario. His name was Lloyd. Irene had just turned twenty-two; she was a war bride. She spoke no English and Lloyd, no Flemish;



Lloyd and Irene, 1945

love, admiration, romance and youth were the language they both spoke fluently.

As was common in Europe during times of invasion and occupation, Irene's formal education had ended when Germany invaded Belgium in May 1940.

In a letter about those first days of German occupation in Belgium, Irene wrote:

The Germans came marching and singing into Turnhout; we didn't know at the time, but in a village nearby, they had killed eight men. They put them against the wall and shot them. We stood watching the German soldiers march into our town. I still don't understand why we didn't stay inside to make them feel that they were not welcome.

During the war Irene hid in the basement of a monastery near her home with twenty others. They told jokes, shared stories and most importantly shared news they had gathered from radio, newspapers, neighbors and those who had returned from active war zones and political prisons. After a few days a man arrived from a nearby town and said all men under forty years old were being taken to Germany. Irene's father, Josef, was born in 1899. He and a few other men left on their bikes in the middle of the night. They pedaled as far as the coast and stayed away for seventeen days. Along the way they hid in barns, ditches and churches; they avoided being captured during this round-up.

Eventually life had to go on. Irene and her family returned home with her elderly grandmother transported in a wheelbarrow pushed by the sixteen year old boy in the group. They had made a plan prior to leaving the monastery that if they saw airplanes or heard bombs on the road back to town they would seek cover and hide in the ditch next to the road. When the bombs did drop, they just ran like hell.

### **Journal Excerpt: March 2013, Turnhout, Belgium**

Moeke, after the invasion, how did you get your news and how did you know which sources you could trust? She answered me in Flemish with beautiful endearing language that a 90 year-old grandmother uses with her grandson, "Ja jongen, dat wisten wij gewoon." Loosely translated as, "Well dear one, we simply knew."

And I wonder, what do we simply know today and how do we know it to be true when so much of our news comes to us through a singular medium: a screen.

Then she continues with more specifics about receiving news during a time of war. The radio broadcasts from England were the best, but it was a crime under the new German laws to listen to that broadcast. She makes a point to tell me that didn't stop her from listening. Newspapers were trusted depending on where they came from and who controlled them. Other news came from people who had been picked up and arrested and came back to tell their stories. She said some of the stories were so sinister and

horrific that she almost could not believe them when she first heard them. "But of course we believed them because we had known these people our entire lives." After the war, in newspapers and newsreels, they found out their stories of crimes against humanity were true.

"The news coming from across the channel was the best news and we always hoped it was true." She punctuates this last sentence with a kind of loving cross-generational, check for understanding, "Ge weet wel wat ik bedoel, eh?" (You know what I'm talking about, right?).

Yes Moeke, I will never forget it.

### **High School Language Arts Classroom: "Never Again"**

With my grandparents being directly impacted by World War II, I have frequently selected a memoir from that time period among the various texts that I read with my students in language arts classes. The stories written about Europe 1933 - 1945 are loaded with important lessons, opportunities for critical thinking skills and connections to modern day life. Along with books by Elie Wiesel, Victor Frankl and Art Spiegelman, I also use excerpts from newspapers, publications from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and passages from Albert Speer's *Inside the Third Reich*.

While I use only snippets from Speer's lengthy memoir, the passages often lead to amazing discussions and insight with both middle school and high school students. Speer's memoir was partly written while he was in prison after the Nuremberg Trials. One passage in particular highlights the important role of school, and more importantly what happens when school is just a place of obedience and memorization.

### **Excerpt: from Albert Speer's *Inside the Third Reich***

Reflecting on his decision-making process:

As an intellectual I might have been expected to collect documentation with the same thoroughness and to examine various points of view with the same lack of bias that I had learned to apply to my preliminary architectural studies. This failure was rooted in my inadequate political schooling. As a result, I remained uncritical, unable to deal with the arguments of my student friends, who were predominantly indoctrinated with the National Socialist ideology. (19)

When I think about my current and future role as a teacher in the modern world, I see part of the answer in Speer's reflection about his own schooling. He remained uncritical. Unable to argue, persuade, offer counterpoints or ask clarifying questions. I don't mean to imply that simply teaching and practicing critical thinking skills could prevent an atrocity like the Holocaust. Nor do I mean that this is

our one and only role as teachers in the modern world. However I do see critical thinking skills as an essential ingredient for a healthy democracy and an actively engaged citizenry. As educators in the modern world, we must be the caretakers not only of the content of our subject areas, but also the skills sets needed to think critically about the information, stories, theories, histories, and screens that our students will encounter.

### The Meaning TEST: A Critical Thinking Tool

For a number of years I have been following the work of Dr. Richard Paul. He is the Director of Research and Professional Development at the Center for Critical Thinking and Chair of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking. At Denver Academy, we have adapted some of Dr. Paul's strategies to be used in elementary, middle and high school classroom. One of my favorite strategies is the Meaning TEST. Along the lines of a traditional Socratic Method, this strategy for analyzing, questioning, evaluating and synthesizing is a simple and practical way to incorporate critical thinking skills into our everyday lessons.

The Meaning part of the slogan leads off with a series of suggested questions to pose at the beginning of a discussion or exploration of a topic. The acronym TEST follows with further specific lines of clarifying questions that help to more completely and accurately understand the issue, topic or problem being discussed.

Meaning: what do you mean by this? Can you tell me more? It seems to me you are saying \_\_\_\_\_. What is your main point? What do you think was meant by that remark? Can someone summarize what is being discussed? What is your point of view?

T: Is this true? What are you assuming? Is this always true? What could we assume instead? You seem to have this point of view. How would other groups respond? What would someone who disagrees say?

E: Evidence. How do you know? What would be an example? Is there good evidence to believe this? Are these reasons adequate? Can someone give evidence to support this?

S: So what? So what are the implications and inferences? What are you implying? What effect would that have? Would that necessarily happen or probably happen?

T: Take a look at conclusions and possible alternatives explanations. How could we settle this question? Who can we find out? Are there alternative explanations?

### Postscript: With Gratitude

Nadia was my teacher as much as my student.

Irene is Moeke, my grandmother.

Lloyd was a decorated soldier in the Canadian army and my grandfather; he died before I was born. I dedicate this story to him.

### Works Cited

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Speer, Albert. *Inside the Third Reich*. New York: Macmillan, 1970.

For more information about Dr. Richard Paul, Director of Research and Professional Development at the Center for Critical Thinking, visit [www.criticalthinking.org](http://www.criticalthinking.org).



Lloyd & Irene on motorcycle, 1946