Gina Groover

ENG 302-03, WAL Part 2

I could hardly believe my ears! I mean, really, how many fourth graders get to meet a real live famous astronaut? It all started when Ms. Groover said she had a special announcement to make.

Our class had been studying the solar system. We used our science journals, looked at websites, and did some experiments, but we also read books that Ms. G called “trade books”. (I thought that meant we were going to read one book and then trade it with someone else in the class, but I guess “trade books” just means the kind of books you can get from the library). The books Ms. G chose helped explain the solar system in a way that made it super easy to understand.

Ms. Groover said that instead of a regular test we were going to put together a science exhibit with all kinds of projects created by the students in our class. She would invite our families and the principal to come to our exhibit. I thought that was a pretty fantastic idea. I mean, I’d rather work on a project than take a boring old test any day. So, we all chose different types of projects. Some kids wanted to make posters; others wanted to create computer presentations. A few kids wanted to make models, and several wanted to do Reader’s Responses to the trade books we read. (We’ve been practicing those during our writer’s workshop for a while now. It’s a pretty cool way to think about books and write about what they make us feel.)

Writing is a strong point for me. Ms. Groover says that if I work hard, I could be a famous author someday. She asked me if I would be willing to help her edit all the Reader’s Response submissions. After all, we don’t want our guests to think our writing is unpolished.

So, a couple of days ago, the room was filled with the busy noises of students working ... computer keys clacking, pencils scratching away on paper, markers squeaking against poster board, when Ms. Groover asked us all to stop for “an announcement of momentous occasion”. (She loves to use big words to help us improve our vocabulary). Apparently one of our school board members, Mr. Smith, grew up with Buzz Aldrin’s son, James. In case you don’t know, Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong were the first people to ever walk on the moon. Mr. Smith heard about our science exhibit and called Buzz Aldrin to see if he would like to attend our exhibit as a special guest. He said yes!!! Oh man, am I excited about this! The only problem is that now I’m worried that our projects won’t be good enough to impress Mr. Aldrin. After all, he probably saw some really amazing things in space. I need to do my absolute best as the Reader’s Response Editor.

The first person to submit a Reader’s Response was Kayla. Her favorite genre is poetry. Here’s Kayla’s submission:

“I really liked the book called *This Is Just to Say* by Joyce Sidman that Ms. Groover read as a mentor text for our poetry unit. I especially liked how some of the poems didn’t seem to be apologies at all. I thought about what I learned from *The Moon Book* by Gail Gibbons and *On Earth* by G. Brian Karas. I decided it would be funny if Earth and the moon wrote apology poems to each other that were as sarcastic as some of those poems in Sidman’s book.”

**Dear Moon**

I’m sorry for being so much bigger than you.

I didn’t mean to take all the Sun’s light

when you were on my other side.

I know you like to shine

your cratered face at me.

But sometimes,

I just don’t feel like seeing

that face full of holes.

I know it must annoy you

that I have gravity, while you have none.

I’m sorry for being so very beautiful

with my green grass and blue oceans,

when you are only a plain gray rock.

Please forgive me,

for being able to provide life.

*by Earth*

**Dear Earth**

I’m sorry

for taking away all the attention

of the people who claim to love you.

I’m sorry that they like to stare

at my beautiful shining face.

I’m sorry that people write

more songs and poems about me than you.

I’m sorry that you don’t have phases

or create tides in your blue oceans.

I’m sorry that all the people

who live on you

dream about visiting

me.

*by Moon*

Wow! I had no idea Kayla could write like that! Her poems were funny, but they also held information about the moon and Earth. I couldn’t even think of any suggestions for revising or editing those poems. Maybe we *would* be able to impress Mr. Aldrin.

The next Reader’s Response was submitted by Jake. He really liked the book *If You Decide to Go* *to the Moon* by FaithMcNulty. He said he kind of wished that the boy in the story had a name, so he named him Billy Armstrong and wrote a newspaper article about him. Jake has what Ms. G calls a “very well-developed vocabulary”, but sometimes he has trouble spelling words correctly. At first, Jake’s article had a few spelling mistakes and a few sentences that just didn’t sound right. I worked with Jake to improve his article before he showed it to Ms. Groover for her approval. Here’s his final draft:

**NASA Reveals Truth about Child Astronaut**

In a stunning announcement, NASA revealed today that a 10 year old boy was aboard the last shuttle mission to the moon.

Billy Armstrong, the grandson of Neil Armstrong, is the only child to have ever made the journey to space. Although critics warned that the mission was too risky for a child, the Armstrong family felt strongly about allowing Billy to make the journey to commemorate the historic *Apollo 11* mission made by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin.

Billy spent months preparing for his space travels. In addition to standard astronaut training, Billy spent time weighing the risks of bringing his favorite toys to entertain him on the trip. He also chose which foods to bring along. In an exclusive interview, Billy commented that he was happy to see that broccoli and spinach were not on his list of approved astronaut foods. He also commented that astronaut ice cream is not nearly as good as the real thing.

Billy spoke about the darkness of space. “Grandpa Neil always told me how black it was out there until you get closer to the moon. Boy, was he right! I’m really glad I brought my flashlight along.”

Fortunately, Neil also warned his grandson about the importance of keeping his spacesuit on while on the moon. “Grandpa Neil said that he got kind of hot bouncing around the moon with no gravity, but he knew he would freeze or burn up if he took off his suit. He also knew he needed it to breathe. Now I know what he meant. It really does get hot inside that suit. It sure is fun bouncing around though! I could even see the footprints that Grandpa Neil and Mr. Buzz left behind. Maybe someday my grandson will see my footprints there.”

Sadly, Neil Armstrong is not alive to hear about his grandson’s history-making mission, but the Armstrong family believes that he kept a watchful on Billy as he became the world’s first child astronaut.

by Jake Z.

I’m pretty sure Mr. Aldrin will be happy that Jake mentioned him in his newspaper article. I hope he brings some real articles that were written about his space missions to share with us. Maybe I should suggest that idea to Ms. Groover. Reading these responses and seeing all of the other projects kids are working on is making my excitement grow a little more every day!

Maria really likes to write letters to her grandparents in Mexico. She moved here from Mexico two years ago. She’s learned a lot of English, but she needs help sometimes. She said the book *What Makes Day and Night* by Franklyn M. Branley helped her understand how Earth’s rotation causes day and night. Maria thought she might like to write a letter from day to night. It was fun for me to ask her what the Spanish words in her letter mean. (Ms. Groover always lets her include some Spanish in her writing and then teach us what those words mean in English). I don’t know if Mr. Aldrin speaks Spanish, so I helped Maria add English translations.

*Querida Noche* (Dear Night),

*Madre Tierra* (Mother Earth) keeps turning, never stopping. She turns on her axis as she spins her way around *el sol* (the sun). *Siempre* (always), I hope that she will slow down enough for us to meet. I want to see your beautiful dark face and hear your quiet sleeping noises. People speak of your *estrellas brillantes* (bright stars) and the soft glow of *la luna* (the moon).

I try so hard to catch up to you, but I cannot move fast enough. Maybe it is because *Madre Tierra* moves so quickly. Did you know that she moves about 1,000 miles per hour? *No es una sorpresa* (it is no surprise) that we have not met. No matter how hard I try to move faster than *Madre Tierra,* the sun always sets before I can reach you. Then, my time has passed, and the hours that remain are yours. I must move on, to a different part of Mother Earth so that you can lull the people into *dulces sueños* (sweet dreams) with your soft blackness.

On *la luna* we both last much longer, as long as two weeks on Earth. *La luna* is a wise old woman. She knows that she does not need to move so quickly. She does not have people and plants that need the warmth of *el sol* to help them live. Maybe I can run faster than *la luna* and catch up to you, *querida noche*, if only I try harder.

Look for me as I wave goodbye to you at sunset and peek at you at sunrise. Know that I would stay to play with you, if only I could. I wait and I hope, *querida noche*, for the day when we can become *amigos* (friends).

*Hasta Luego* (Until Later),

*El Día* (Day)

With a letter like that, Mr. Aldrin won’t believe that Maria only spoke a few words of English when she first moved here.

Boy! Our class is really cranking out those projects. Josh, the kid with the wildest imagination in all of fourth grade, asked me to edit his science fiction story. He wrote it as a response to *Sun* by Steve Tomecek. Sometimes Josh gets so excited about his crazy stories that he forgets all about good writing techniques. It took a while, but I think his final draft is phenomenal!

**Dr. Beaker’s Plan to Rule the World** by Josh M.

Dr. Beaker’s evil green eyes gleamed as she backed away from her high-power telescope. For years, she had been studying the surface of the sun in an attempt to learn how she could use its power for her own wicked purposes. At last, she had discovered the truth about solar flares!

Most scientists thought solar flares were just random bursts of hot gas shooting from the sun out into space, but Dr. Beaker knew otherwise. She had studied solar flare patterns for the last seven years and discovered that there was a huge solar flare on the third day of the third month of every season. Although she had not discovered a reason for these flares, they happened like clockwork.

All the other scientists made fun of Dr. Beaker for the amount of time she devoted to studying solar flares. They never invited her to their movie parties or asked her to watch the Super Bowl with them. Her cell phone sat silently in her purse…no ringing calls, no buzzing texts; no one seemed to want to talk to Dr. Beaker. “I’ll show them!” she thought. Her studies had shown that electrical devices, like TV’s and cell phones, often didn’t work right during solar flares. Now, if she could use that knowledge to her advantage, her fellow scientists would respect her at last.

Dr. Beaker’s arch-nemesis was the beautiful Dr. Zodiac. She had long, sunny blonde hair and eyes as bright as the Caribbean Sea. She was the first person invited to every party, and her cell phone was busier than Wal-Mart on Christmas Eve. Everyone talked about how smart she was for discovering a new dwarf planet. “Dr. Zodiac this, Dr. Zodiac that…blah, blah, blah!” thought Dr. Beaker. “If only I could destroy her cell phone service, I could rule the scientific world!”

Experiment after experiment failed. Then, just when Dr. Beaker was about to give up, she found that if she attached a super-strength mirror to her telescope lens, she could reflect a solar flare in any direction she chose. She aimed for the nearest satellite. Bam! Out went TV service in New York. She added a second mirror at a different angle and knocked out all Internet service in the Midwest. Her head began to whirl as she thought of the possibilities. “Forget the scientific world; I’ll rule the whole world!” she thought as she imagined Dr. Zodiac’s face when she had to bow down to her new queen, Dr. Beaker.

Dr. Beaker had just added a third mirror to her powerful weapon when the rear door to her lab opened quietly. She was so caught up in her evil musings that she didn’t hear Dr. Zodiac sneaking up behind her. Just as she aimed for the biggest cell tower in town, Dr. Zodiac tackled her and pinned her to the floor. “I guess you should have learned how to turn on your cell phone ringer” she said. “Maybe if you had come to one of our Super Bowl parties you would have known how to block that tackle.”

Now that is a hilarious story! Leave it to Josh to find a way to fit the Super Bowl into a science fiction story about solar flares. I hope my Reader’s Response sounds that good.

Uh-oh! Wait! I’ve been so busy as Reader’s Response Editor that I forgot all about writing my own response. Oh no! What am I going to do? We only have a few days left until our science exhibit. Can I possibly write my own Reader’s Response and finish editing all the others too? Why do things like this always happen to me? I’d better talk to Ms. G right away; she’ll have some ideas for me.

Well, Ms. G reminded me that I knew I was accepting extra responsibility when I agreed to be the Reader’s Response Editor. She said she has complete confidence in me, and she knows I can handle all the work. I think I’ll try writing a rap about *Sun* by Steve Tomecek:

In the days we have sun

gettin’ stuff done

gettin’ stuff done

in the big bright sun.

Oh man! That is terrible! I guess I’m not cut out for rap. Now what am I supposed to do? I have to edit Julia’s piece before I can concentrate on my own response. She said *The Planets* by Gail Gibbons was kind of boring, but it helped her see how the planets in our solar system are different from each other. She was fascinated when Ms. G told us that Pluto isn’t considered a planet anymore. It’s a dwarf planet now. Julia thought maybe Pluto (the planet) should have an obituary. It didn’t really die, but she thought people might want to mourn its loss. (I know – morbid, right?)

**Planet Pluto, Age 76**

Pluto, the ninth planet of the solar system, passed away on Aug. 24, 2006. Born on Feb. 18, 1930, Pluto was the youngest planet in our solar system, discovered only with the use of a very high-power telescope. He is survived by his brothers, Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune; his sisters, Venus and Earth; five moons; and Father Sun.

Pluto was best known for his extremely cold temperature, due to the frozen gases that made up his surface, and his oddly shaped orbit. Unlike his siblings, Pluto did not clear his orbit of debris, leading to failure to become the dominant body in his orbital path. Pluto’s failure to grow to an acceptable size led to his untimely death as a planet.

Planet Pluto will be sorely missed by space fans worldwide, as now we must study his replacement, Dwarf Planet Pluto.

Memorial contributions may be made to the Hubble Telescope.

I have to admit, although I thought Julia’s idea was a little strange at first it actually turned out pretty good. It’s definitely creative. She needed a ton of help revising and editing, which took a whole class period. Our exhibit is in two days. I still have one more response to edit, and I have to finish my own response. Can I pull it off? Will Mr. Aldrin be blown away by our scientific knowledge and creativity? Stay tuned for the exciting conclusion! (Sorry, I got a little carried away there.)

At last, Drew submitted the final Reader’s Response that I need to edit. Drew is all about cooking. He loves to watch all those crazy cooking shows on the Food Network, and he’s planning to go to culinary school when he’s older. He says that someday we’ll all be buying amazing food with his name on the package. Drew’s favorite trade book was *If You Decide to Go to the Moon* by Faith McNulty. He came up with a recipe for the moon.

**Munchable Moon Melt**

Ingredients:

20,000 cups small rocks

8,000 cups large boulders

150,000 gallons silvery dust

3-50,000 oz. pkgs assorted craters

1-small pinch gravity

40 dozen large astronaut footprints

1-American flag

In the oversized black bowl of space, mix all ingredients except footprints and flag thoroughly. Form into a large ball. Sprinkle liberally with astronaut footprints. Decorate with American flag. Allow to bake in the sun’s heat. Cool in the blackness of deep space. Rotate counterclockwise and revolve around Earth once every 29.5 days. Enjoy this tasty treat in small slivers or all at once. Serves: billions

Note: Do NOT add wind, sound, or clouds as this will ruin the texture of the moon.

I don’t know a whole lot about how recipes are supposed to look, so I had to ask Ms. Groover for assistance with Drew’s submission. It seemed like she truly enjoyed reading it. In fact, it seems like she’s enjoyed *all* of the Reader’s Responses so far. She says that using all those mentor texts and spending time in Writer’s Workshop is really paying off because our writing skills have grown tremendously in the last few months.

I’m so nervous about my response! I still can’t believe I forgot to work on it! I think the poem I finally wrote sounds okay, but the real test will be when Mr. Aldrin, Principal Keegin, Mr. Smith, and all our parents come to the science exhibit. What if they hate my poem? What if they laugh at it? Or worse, what if no one has any feelings about it? Ms. Groover says that words are powerful because they can make people feel things they might not feel otherwise. If no one has any feelings about my poem, then that means my words aren’t powerful after all. Tomorrow’s the big day! How will I ever get to sleep? I know! I’ll count cows jumping over the moon. One, two, three, four…Zzzzzz!

Well, here I am at last, dressed in my best clothes on a Tuesday night. My parents are hovering nearby with their camera as usual. Ms. Groover’s cheeks are pink and her eyes are all sparkly, like stars. I think she’s as excited about meeting Mr. Aldrin as we are. Before tonight, she was the only person who saw my poem. It looks so fancy, all typed up. I chose blue paper to print it on and decorated it with green grass, trees, and flowers. I think it looks pretty good! My parents said it proved that I *am* an author, but they’re supposed to say things like that.

Mr. Aldrin is slowly making his way around all the projects. I didn’t think he would spend so much time looking at them. His smile is a good sign, unless he’s secretly laughing at us. He seems like a nice guy, though. I don’t think he would laugh at us, even if he didn’t like our work. Wait, he’s heading over to my poem. I can’t watch! Ok, maybe I can peek a little. Hey! He’s smiling really big now. Either he’s getting ready to laugh, or he actually likes my poem. What’s that he’s saying? He wants to know who wrote it? He thinks it’s extraordinary? Yes! Score one for the future poet, author of a poem inspired by G. Brian Karas and his book *On Earth.*

**On Earth**

On Earth we go flying,

spinning and tilting through space.

Can’t feel ourselves moving

but movement makes change.

Movement creates seasons,

starry moonlit nights,

and bright sun on our faces.

Different times and temperatures

in Earth’s many places.

Earth is like a space ride,

as we keep floating so free.

Green grass, fuzzy animals, cool water

On Earth we are so very, very lucky.

**Metacognitive Commentary**

This paper began as a chore and ended up as a labor of love. When I first contemplated how I could possibly form interesting responses to non-fiction picture books about the solar system, I knew that it would take creativity and passion for the art of writing.

I mulled over various ways to tie my paper together before I stopped to think about why I had chosen these particular picture books for my WAL project. Working with children of different abilities and at different grade levels has shown me the importance of supplementing one’s instruction with a variety of materials. Not all children will learn from a grade-level textbook, and some won’t learn much from any written text. The solar system is studied at multiple grade levels and is an ideal topic for picture books, which offer the benefit of adding a visual element to help children form images of the material. I frequently use picture books with my special needs students to enhance the classroom curriculum. However, I don’t advocate limiting the use of picture books, or any other trade books, to special needs children.

Once I had examined my reasons for selecting picture books about the solar system, I needed to decide on a theme that would fuse my various response pieces into a cohesive whole. I spend enough time in fourth grade classrooms to know how fourth graders speak and write. Yet, the range of language usage in any fourth grade classroom is astounding. I thought that it would be entertaining to use an anonymous fourth grade narrator to bind my response pieces together. My narrator sounds alternately child-like and sophisticated because that is the type of speech I hear from real fourth graders. One student went from telling me about his “awesome new bike” to telling me that he felt “overwhelmed by all of his obligations”.

I considered the core standards and how their implementation has pushed teachers to make writing a cross-curriculum focus. Writing is no longer segregated to a small compartment within each day. I have watched some teachers struggle to find ways to bring writing into their science and social studies instruction. They want to cling to the traditional worksheets and tests that many students find either frustrating or boring.

As someone who holds a progressive, constructivist view of education, I want to give my students many opportunities to express their knowledge creatively and to take ownership of their own learning. I thought, “What better way to encourage students to show what they can do than to plan a special exhibit and let them choose the type of project they would like to create?” Thus, the science exhibit idea was born. I still needed to events, a problem, a climax, and a solution. My newspaper article about “Billy Armstrong” led me to think about having a real astronaut attend the exhibit to add to the drama. Since Neil Armstrong is dead, I thought it would be interesting to have Buzz Aldrin come to the children’s exhibit. The fourth graders I know would certainly be excited to meet him! The ultimate affirmation for my anonymous, uncertain fourth grade narrator was when Buzz Aldrin called the poem “extraordinary”.

The daunting task of responding to non-fiction picture books in creative ways became a process I thoroughly enjoyed. I stretched my literary wings a bit in writing some of my pieces. I have never written science fiction or a newspaper article before. I wrote my first draft of the newspaper article during class, thinking that I probably wouldn’t use it. I was surprised to discover that I liked my article and wanted to polish it up for my WAL.

I wanted to include a piece that demonstrated the importance of encouraging ELL students to bring their culture into their writing. Maria’s letter brought the language, speech patterns, and cultural beliefs of her native Mexico to my imaginary classroom. Her fellow students would learn quite a bit about her heritage from her writing, making them more globally cognizant students.

The writing of an obituary is usually a heart-wrenching task. I helped my father to write my mother’s obituary. All I remember is that good writing was the farthest thing from my mind at the time. I wanted to turn that solemn ordeal into a whimsical expression of one student’s scientific knowledge.

Lastly, I should mention that all four of my own children are incorporated into my WAL project in one way or another. They have shaped my outlook on life for over twenty years now, as I have absorbed the way they speak, write, learn, and live. My recipe for a Munchable Moon Melt was inspired by my daughter, whose endeavors as a culinary student never fail to entertain me.

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