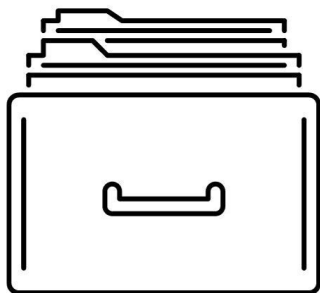


# My Filing Cabinets



**Reflections on Thirty-One Years of Teaching High School English**

*Marilyn Forrest*





MARILYN FORREST

## My Filing Cabinets

*Reflections on Thirty-One Years of Teaching High  
School English*

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## Preface

After thirty-one years of teaching I decided to retire. The daunting task of cleaning out my filing cabinets, a total of ten, four drawers each, packed full with files from all my years of teaching high school English, lay before me. I did not know, however, this tedious task would engender meaningful reflection about my years of teaching and about the teaching profession in general. For what it's worth, I am sharing these reflections here.

Marilyn Forrest

June 2017

## Reflection 1

One Thursday in January after a long day of teaching essay writing, I opened the first cabinet and started sorting and discarding years of curriculum and lessons. I looked at some worksheets in horror, unbelieving that I ever implemented such simplistic, boring lessons. I knew through the years I had grown as a teacher, but staring at these old purple dittos made me realize just how much. Thirty-one years later I had indeed transformed and added to my teaching repertoire. Growth is key to good teaching—complacency, its enemy. Teaching is an art, a craft, and to do the same lessons year after year is being a singer who sings the same old songs; its Picasso stagnating in his Blue Period. Teachers must return to the canvas of the classroom each day, blending colors, changing brush strokes until the painting is right.

I remember early in my teaching career listening to some teachers pridefully bragging about how they had everything copied in August for the entire year before ever meeting their students. Initially, I marveled at their organizational skills, but in time I learned how this was almost malpractice. Teachers must adapt their lessons to the students sitting in front of them. They must alter lessons based on their formative assessment of what their students can and cannot do yet. How does the



aforementioned teacher implement lessons based on current events? When I taught rhetorical devices the year President Obama was elected, it was out with the old lesson and in with the new. Old lesson plans analyzing historical speeches changed into new ones analyzing the oratory skills of our current president.

## Reflection 2

**A**s January progressed, my sorting continued, and I also found several binders about the pedagogical trends that came and went throughout my years of teaching: The Bay Area's Writing Project, Writer's Workshop, The California Literature Project, The Reading Apprenticeship Program, just to name a few. While many great ideas for my classroom emerged from these programs, I share a cautionary note. A teacher can never become "born again" on the latest pedagogical trend.

The pendulum swings, and if one does not learn to duck, she gets whacked in the head. There are no silver bullets. Desperate, frustrated teachers are always looking for one and often fall prey to the latest teaching fad, thinking, "Yes, this will fix everything!" A teacher must develop her own voice and never succumb fully to one approach or strategy. I know this is heresy, especially to companies and organizations selling this training to districts, but giving into one philosophy at the expense of others, leads to teaching schizophrenia. I remember sitting in a meeting with a district administrator who admonished me for saying such. Of course, he worked in our district for two years, upset the curriculum marveled, and moved on when implementing his ideas, based on one of these trends, became a challenge.

A teacher must be open to change, but also listen to her voice, her gut. A teacher cannot keep throwing out what she knows works just to be pure and true to the latest trend. I am grateful for my stubborn insistence on maintaining what worked in my classroom while still incorporating new approaches and strategies. It can be done and done well. Sacrilegious, I know, but so be it.

## Reflection 3

January turned into February and the cleaning of my old, grey filing cabinets continued. Inside I discovered the most beautiful artistic, symbolic student responses to literature: a symbolic puzzle to represent the novel, *Beloved*, and all the main character represents, an artistic representation of the symbolic meaning of John Steinbeck's title, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and a piece of surreal art depicting the Vietnam War based on *The Things They Carried*. I wanted to cry at the beauty and the emotion rising from these beautiful pieces of art often created by students who did not necessarily read or write well. The trend of artistic representations of literature became passe after the California Literature Project was cast aside for "better" ways of teaching reading. However, I rejected this idea. I continued assigning artistic responses to literature. Looking at these amazing works of art affirmed my belief that allowing students to create art as a medium for expressing their intellectual and emotional understanding of their reading was a valuable teaching strategy. Ideas in these pieces were so sophisticated and insightful, ideas that may have never emerged in writing or in objective testing.



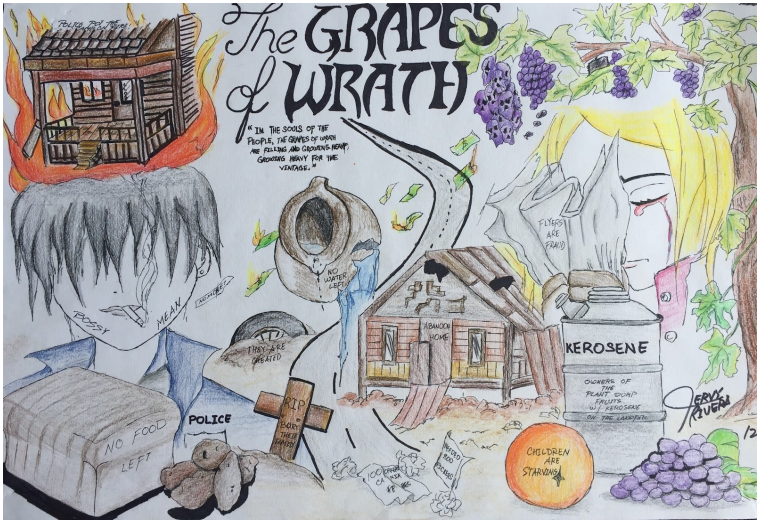
Beloved visual

I have a recollection of a conversation with an administrator who proclaimed, “No more pictures, no more art.” I did not have the courage to say, “The hell with you. You’ll be gone soon. I know this works. My student art speaks volumes. I will listen to my voice. I will continue allowing my students to be artists.” Looking at these pictures on a cold February day as the rain fell outside my classroom window, affirmed my conviction.

REFLECTION 3



*The Things They Carried* visual



Grapes of Wrath visual

## Reflection 4

**I**n March as I dug through the bowels of these file drawers, I discovered more teaching gold: small folded up notes, cards, letters and journals from students from many years ago. Their words expressed gratitude for having been a student in my classroom, for what they learned, but more importantly, for how I treated them, valued them, and understood them.

In one letter, a student donated her journal to serve as a model for other students in my class. She wrote:

Mrs. Forrest -

My sweat and blood from junior year English ... donated to Mrs. Forrest to help benefit the years to come. (Although no other journal could ever compare :-)) This was a fun year and I will never forget it, nor the lessons you have taught me. You put your whole life into your teaching and I could never thank you enough for that. I have grown so much as a person over the past few years and I am glad that I had you in my life to help me along. You have had such a huge impact on my life, and I don't think you could ever even comprehend how much you mean to me. There will always be a special place in my heart just



for you ... your songs, and your cartwheels!  
Don't tell Mr. Forrest, but you have always been  
my favorite.

Love Always,

In another letter, a student wrote:

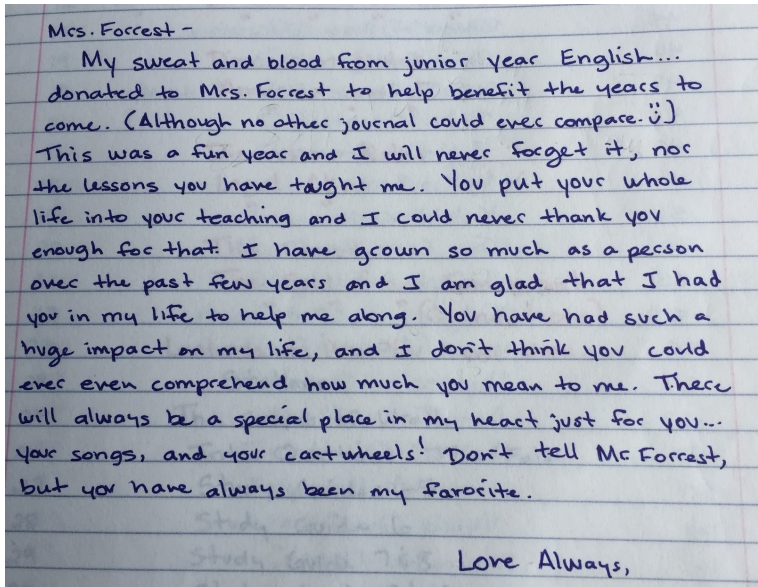
Mrs. Forrest -- you ... are ... AWESOME. I don't know where to begin on how AWESOME you are. I mean, you don't understand how it feels to be in my position. When I think how much I have learned and grown these past four years, it completely boggles my mind. And to know that I have learned so much from the mind of one person, it sends the "boggling" to a whole new level -- a whole new level of amazement and thankfulness. The atmosphere you created in your classroom was so warm and unique; it was an atmosphere of fun and learning that only a caring teacher like you can create. Honestly, I don't even like English that much. I don't like to write, I don't like to read, I don't enjoy deep thinking about symbols and whatnot -- but yet I always tried to impress you. I always tried to give you the deepest and most thought out essays. I always tried to bring you the most artistic literature projects. Basically, I'm just trying to explain how inspiring and AWESOME you are, and how much I loved having you as a teacher. When it came to English, YOU brought out the best in me. On top of everything, I've always felt that I could tell you anything and I've always felt you cared about me. I can't put into words the expressions of thankfulness I can give you a hug, but once again thank you, thank you, thank you, for everything you have done for me.

This is, of course, is what it's all about. Without relationships, there is no teaching and learning. Day one in the classroom building relationships must begin. First, learn student names. I prided myself on learning all of my student names on day one. I have to say this is quite an accomplishment given that there were years when I taught over 180 students in one day. What's in a name? Everything. Once I knew my students' names, they knew they were individuals to me, not a conglomerate of thirty some bodies in a room. Build the relationships one day a time, one student at a time.

On the first day of school, I always gave my students a "Getting to Know You" questionnaire with a few questions about their interests, how they spend their time outside of school, favorite songs, colors, foods, books, and movies. The first day of school after the final bell, I sat at my desk and combed over these surveys. The last and most important question on the survey, "What do I need to know about you to help you learn better in my classroom?" provided invaluable information about my students and how I might begin to build relationships with them. The "tough" looking ones wanted me to know they were afraid to be called upon to answer questions aloud; some wrote about bad and good experiences with previous teachers; some asked me to change their seats (they wanted to sit in front but did not want others to know they wanted to sit there). Some wrote "nothing" and that answer told me how those students had given up on themselves and the system. I would have to tread lightly there. As the first few weeks of school progressed, I used the information on these surveys (when appropriate) as conversation starters with my students—the message to them—she reads what I turn into her and she cares about who I am. This seemingly small gesture reaped a million benefits that lasted

throughout the year.

As teachers go, I would say I was a rigorous one. But, I always balanced the rigor with fun. I sang when a relevant song came to mind. I did cartwheels when my students did something amazing, and along with the hard work, we laughed. There is an old adage about Teachers “not smiling until Christmas” in order to maintain classroom control. I say smile, sing, do cartwheels and expect the best from your students—they will go along for the ride.



Letter from student

## Reflection 5

The excavation of my filing cabinets slowed down one day in April when a drawer became stuck—something plastic was jammed on its side. What I pulled out was an old, crumpled overhead transparency. On it was a written rap on the Realism Movement. Until this moment, I had completely forgotten I ever wrote this. Years ago I assigned my students to work in groups to create a performance to represent the ideas of one of the literary movements reflected in American literature. I decided to create a model, as I often did, to show my students how to approach this assignment. Here it is:

### REALISM RAP

From the Civil War-- to the century's turn  
A new school of thought-- begins to burn

This new age of writers -- makin' things real  
Faithful to reality -- now here's the deal.

Depicting strugglin' workers--warriors and more  
Graphic detail- - transports you into war

Immi -gra -tion, indust-rial- i- zation, ur-ban-

i-zation

Books now written-- depict our changin' nation

Veri- simil- tude-- let's break down this name  
The root "veri" means real-- "simul" means same

Same as real-- now that's what I mean  
Not about your fantasies-- or what you dream

Not about Romanticism---those ideas- -passé  
Listen readers--listen-- to what I have to say

Howell-- Kirkland-- James and Twain  
Writers makin' fiction and reality the same

Diction is natural-- or matter-of-fact  
Not archaic ---or poetic--no--no- not that

Events are plausible--they really could take place  
Even though it's not true--it will take you to a space

Where you feel like your livin'-- in the pages of the  
book

Real--ism gives the reader a closer look

Pullin' you in---to the character's life  
Imagery's so real--it makes you feel his strife

Characters complex--not flat-- hey-- they're round  
You're gonna feel it--- when they hit the ground

Back to reason---say good-bye to the ideal  
Because this new way of writin'-- is 'bout makin'  
things real

I fondly recalled the day I performed this rap for my students. A standing ovation followed. How often does a teacher get one of those at the end of lesson? It's so important to be a writer, to make yourself vulnerable to your students, to provide models. Doing so gives a teacher credibility when she shows she is able to do her own assignments with passion and enthusiasm. A teacher must be the master of the craft she is teaching to her students.

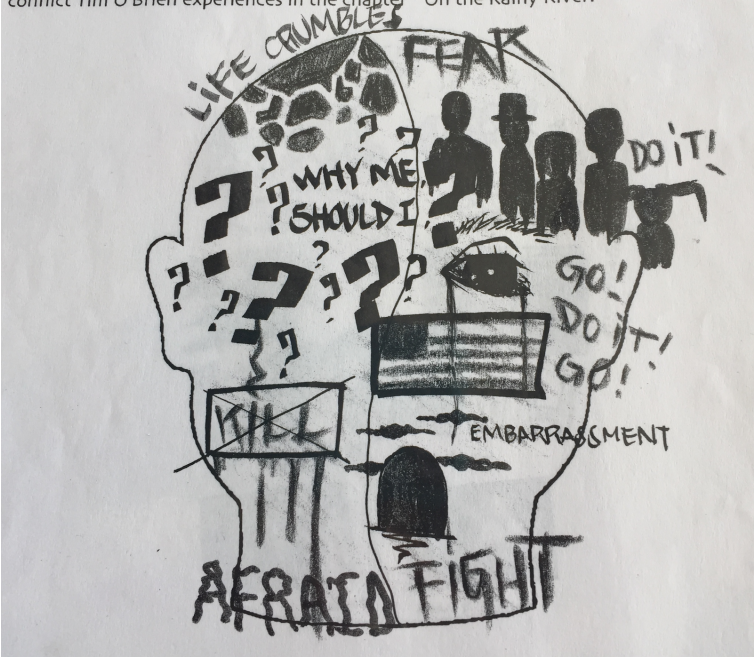
## Reflection 6

Variety matters. As I sorted units related to over twenty books I taught through the years: poetry, art, music, photographs, Cd's with songs from the 1960's, videos, short stories, essays, and nonfiction articles came flooding out in an endless stream from the file drawer containing the curriculum for Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* about the Vietnam War. I was always in search for the next powerful piece to augment my literary units.

Just one lesson from this unit would start with listening to and then discussing "Fortunate Son" by Creedence Clearwater, then reading the chapter on "The Rainy River" where Tim O'Brien says, "Those who vote to go to war should put their own precious fluids on the line." Next, students would create a visual representation to show Tim O'Brien's internal conflict about what to do about his draft notice. Students then watched a 20 minute video about a man named Stephen Gunbar who tells about his internal conflict the day he received his draft notice. Finally, students read my own reflective essay called "The Draft Notice" - my own memory of the day my brother received his draft notice to Vietnam.

REFLECTION 6

**Task Four: Self Expressive** Create a visual, symbolic representation to show the inner conflict Tim O'Brien experiences in the chapter "On the Rainy River."



*Student visual of The Things They Carried*

Music, literature, art, video and an essay were all part of one lesson for one chapter in this book. Teaching a theme across genres is so powerful and makes learning so interesting and memorable for students.

Years ago some of my former students from San Jose State nominated me for "The Dorothy Wright Award". This award is given to high school English teachers who influenced and impacted college students who were majoring in English. Also in my filing cabinets, I found an envelope containing the student



nomination forms for this award. One student commented, “Of all the books I ever read in school, I will never forget the ones I read in Mrs. Forrest’s class. They will always remain vivid in my mind. She made them come alive. She made us live alongside the characters. She connected us to literature and why these stories matter.”

## Final Reflection

**A**s the cabinets thinned out and the recycling bins filled, I found several teaching awards, plaques and certificates, I received through the years: House Teacher of the Year, Logan Teacher of the Year, District Teacher of the Year, Alameda County Teacher of the Year, The Dorothy Wright Award, and National Board Certification. I felt pride in having received these awards, but honestly through my career I sometimes felt embarrassed and undeserving. Often new teachers asked if they could come and watch me teach. Sometimes I feared they hoped to see some scene out of a Hollywood movie, and even though I was known to sometimes do a cartwheel or bust out into song, that was not what would regularly occur in my classroom. Teaching is about perseverance, it is about relationships, it is about what we build with our students over time. Its power lies not in what we do on a few select days where we happen to deliver an award winning performance, but in the collective effort we put into teaching our students period after period, day after day, week after week, quarter after quarter, semester after semester, and year after year. It's about the climb, about never relenting even when you feel like slipping backwards. I have been lucky to have been awarded and acknowledged for my contribution to the teaching profession, but the main rewards of teaching

arrive a little at a time, not in one climactic scene.

At the end of May, two weeks before the end of my final teaching year, I wheeled the last recycling bin from my room and then sent out an email to the teaching staff that there were several empty filing cabinets up for grabs in room 107. Then, I cried- not because I had regrets about retiring. I was ready. These were cathartic tears. I had given all I had to give. My filing cabinets contained the archeological record of my teaching life and upon reflection, I concluded, it was a life well lived.



## About the Author

Marilyn Forrest taught English at James Logan High School for thirty-one years. Among her many awards, she was New Haven Unified School District's Teacher of the Year and Alameda County's Teacher of the Year in 2000. She was also in the very first group of English teachers in the Bay Area to achieve National Board Certification.



