

From Innocence to Relevance:

Preservice Teachers' Reflections on Attending the 2013 ALAN Workshop

Standing in the passenger welcoming area of the Back Bay Amtrack Station in Boston on Sunday night, I took a quick scan of the room. A number of people were wearing New England Patriots gear under multiple layers of clothing waiting for a subway train that would take them to Gillette Stadium for the game to be held later in the evening against the Denver Broncos. The anticipation was thick in the station leading up to the big mid-season game that had the weight of a post-season playoff. A computerized voice announced the arrivals and departures of trains as I shook off a chill that had cut through my overcoat during the walk to the station. I had spent the last four days participating in activities and meetings related to the 2013 NCTE Annual Convention, and I was waiting at the station for six undergraduate preservice teachers from Elizabethtown College to join me on this bitterly cold night to attend the ALAN Workshop that was to follow what had already been a tremendously successful conference.

As I waited for my students to arrive, I couldn't help reflecting on

how I prepared to teach reading and writing leading up to my first job as a teacher. When I opened my first classroom, I brought along tattered copies of *Call of the Wild*, *The Pigman*, *House of Stairs*, *Freak the Mighty*, and *Touching Spirit Bear*. These texts were the highlights of my undergraduate course on young adult literature, but they were not the keystones of my preservice training. Beyond these books, I knew nothing of the rich history and traditions of YAL. The tragedy is that I did not know where to find more good books for middle school students.

There used to be a grace period given to teachers as they grew and matured into their profession. They could use this time to establish bearings in the professional landscape. However, something has happened in the last ten years. The expectations for classroom teachers have been amplified. Teachers entering the classroom must know *everything* related to their content area. They must come with a secure grip on the vast knowledgebase needed to navigate new standards and interpret the results of new standardized tests. In order

to survive in public education, they need a network of professionals representing a wide variety of expertise that can be immediately accessed when questions arise.

I suppose this is why in August I asked six of my advisees in the small Secondary English Education program that I direct for Elizabethtown College to join me at this year's ALAN workshop. My hope was that they would have an experience that would further and intensify their professional knowledge leading up to their first years in the classroom.

The computerized voice announced the arrival of the train I was waiting for. Up from the platform I watched all six students, bouncing with energy, reach the top of the steps. With large suitcases half empty for the mountains of books they were anticipating they would bring home, each arrived in Boston preparing for his or her own Super Bowl of sorts. Their big game in Boston was an opportunity to learn from the world's best authors and teachers.

For this column, I asked each student who attended the workshop to reflect, in writing, on his or

her experience. The excerpts that follow are amalgamations of the six enthusiastic reflections I received.

As stated above, the students who attended the workshop with me had several weeks to prepare for the voyage to Boston. With the help of the ALAN website (<http://www.alan-ya.org>), students were able to get a sneak peek at who would be presenting this year.

In preparation for our trip to the 2013 ALAN Workshop, I knew that I had to get both mentally and spiritually prepared. As a young teacher about to embark into the professional world of English education, the opportunity to meet authors who write for and inspire the same audience that I, too, hope to impact in a positive way seemed to me a bit inconceivable. I logged on to the ALAN website to see who would be speaking. As I looked over the lineup of workshop panelists, some of the authors—Anderson, Hopkins, Werlin, and Dessen—were already permanent fixtures on my bookshelf. Other names I was seeing for the first time. In looking up who was speaking, I went into *geek mode*, searching the Web to learn more about them.

The Sunday evening ALAN welcoming reception has become something of a family reunion for many longstanding ALAN members, and I felt it was necessary to introduce my students to the ALAN community at the reception. Fresh off of the train, the students essentially dropped their bags in their hotel rooms and raced to the grand ballroom.

The reception held Sunday night before the workshop set the tone for the entire experience. It was fun watching our college professor introduce us to various authors, colleagues, and ALAN friends. We walked into the crowded ballroom and met Chris Crutcher, Laurie Halse Anderson,

and Walter Myers, all of whom were just as interested in us as we were in them. I loved hearing how much the authors support teachers. This was unexpected.

When the main event arrived on Monday morning, I could tell the group was still abuzz from the reception the night before. They were ready to lock in for a great day at the workshop. Their reflections of their experiences leading up to the opening panel presentations speak of heightened anticipation and excitement.

At first the entire event on Monday seemed very daunting. We were walking into a huge convention center and didn't really know what to expect. Waiting in line at the registration table was like being a kid waiting in line for Santa at the mall; we couldn't wait to get to the front of the line.

Receiving the much-anticipated ALAN box was like winning the bookworm jackpot. As I flipped open the cardboard flaps, I could hardly contain my excitement and began unloading book after book, scanning the titles, authors, and cover art for the ones that looked intriguing. Looking around I noticed that many of the experienced ALAN-goers—not first-timers like me and my classmates—were stacking their books, fortress-style in front of them. This seemed like a good idea. Not only could I see what books others might want to trade, I could also easily reach for books when it came time for author signings.

Throughout the day, I was able to visit with each student as his or her stack of signed books began to grow. A theme that was expressed throughout all of their conversations with me and in their written reflections was a sense of *belonging*. Many felt as though they arrived in Boston that bitterly cold Sunday night as college students,

but they were leaving as teachers and writers.

Early on I felt like I didn't belong. As I was talking to Lauren Myracle, she told me that student teachers are just as important and that it was great that I was already getting my foot in the door. She was right; I did belong. People at the workshop treated you like a real person—not a preservice teacher or a college student. While waiting in the lines to meet the authors, I got a chance to chat with some of the other teachers. It was an honor to meet so many people from all over the country and to learn a little bit about their classroom practices.

The authors and panelists validated the connection between educators and writers, and now we share a common goal of encouraging literacy and engaging young people in reading, writing, and discussion. Hearing the authors speak so passionately about the goals of their work made me want to find ways to share those works with my future students. As a writer and avid reader, I loved hearing about the other writers' motivations and challenges. My pen could not fly fast enough to keep up with the amount of notes I wrote, useful information that I just did not want to risk forgetting. I took a lot away from what they said and even got a chance to ask a few questions face-to-face with the authors. I was even inspired to jot down several of my own ideas for a future YA novel.

We were able to stay for only one day at the 2013 workshop, but it is clear to me that these pre-service teachers encountered an opportunity to learn and grow into their professional practice. The next day we returned to the Back Bay station to board our train bound for Pennsylvania. I looked about this group of promising young people and a smile crept across my face. Each was reading a brand new book from their box, flipping

pages frantically, annotating in the margins. In the conclusion of their reflections, my students had the following to share.

I truly feel like the ALAN Workshop has prepared me more in becoming a better classroom teacher. From listening to the panels and breaking off into small group sessions, I really feel like I was able to pull some great resources for my students. I loved the workshop of authors talking about their books and how they are geared toward helping kids discover who they are and what they have to offer. From the websites they shared, to the personal stories, I feel like I can really help my future students and give them more resources than I could have before the workshop.

The whole experience helped me realize that I am not alone in my practice and will not be alone when I graduate. A big component of what I learned from the workshop was how willing authors are to help teachers teach. They care about what they write about, but even more, they care about the audience they write for. Attending the ALAN workshop has affirmed my belief in teaching from texts instead of textbooks. Every time I read a book now, I think, "How could I teach this?" or "How might this story be relevant to students?" With the rise of standardization, there may be pressures on what to teach, but the fact of the matter remains that the art of the profession comes from the how.

Prior to attending the ALAN Workshop I had this silly notion that networking was for business and political science majors. But being able to meet and talk with authors at the conference whose books I might someday teach opened

up so many possibilities for me as a preservice teacher. The authors were open to discussing their books and generally expressed a desire to work with teachers. Being surrounded by professionals from a variety of backgrounds who shared the same love literature and learning was a truly enriching experience. It is, at its core, a community of intellectuals, and I was humbled to be in their company.

The ALAN Workshop is a phenomenal venue for preservice teachers to learn about the very best books, the most interesting authors, and to become a member of a passionate community dedicated to the advancement of good literature and great teachers. Attendance at the workshop and membership in ALAN come with many benefits. Sure, there is the instant joy that follows the opening of the big box of new books. And, yes, there are multiple opportunities to meet with and talk to famous authors. However, the real benefit in this case may be the newfound confidence these young people will now wield in front of the classroom.

***Matt Skillen** is an assistant professor of English at Elizabethtown College in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. His research interests include online learning, young adult literature, and narrative inquiry.*

***Nate Blunk** is a senior English/Secondary Education major at Elizabethtown College. On top of his studies,*

Nate plays on the Club Ultimate team [Frisbee] at Elizabethtown and is a trainer in a first-year mentor program. He is excited for what awaits him after graduation and in the years to come.

***Shanna Kirgan** is a senior English/Secondary Education major and Creative Writing minor at Elizabethtown College. She plans to teach literature at the high school level and to someday share her knowledge of the English language with students abroad. Shanna has been named a 2014-15 Fulbright US student award winner.*

***Rebecca Orr** is a senior English/Secondary Education major at Elizabethtown College. In Fall 2013, she completed her student teaching fieldwork at Hershey Middle School in Hershey, PA. She hopes to work in an urban school district after she graduates in May 2014.*

***Kaitlyn Pellegrino** is a junior at Elizabethtown College pursuing an English/Secondary Education major with a minor in Creative Writing.*

***Lexy Viscardi** is a senior English/Secondary Education major at Elizabethtown College. She enjoys reading young adult literature and writing short fiction stories.*

***Matt Walters** is a junior English/Secondary Education major at Elizabethtown College. He is also pursuing a minor in music.*