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In Memoriam: Nancy Martin

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# Nancy Martin



On June 20, 2003, my friend Nancy Martin passed away as she sat sleeping in the sunshine in her front garden at #7 Shepherds Close, Shepherds Hill, London. I first met Nancy in 1981 when I was a rural high school English teacher from Virginia, enrolled in two courses at the Bread Loaf School of English in Vermont. In August 2003, I had planned to sit with her again in her garden.

My teaching and sense of self were significantly changed during the five summers I studied at Bread Loaf. Two decades later, I still trace much of what I do as a teacher educator and who I am as a person to the influence of Nancy Martin.

In the twenty-two years of our friendship, Nancy visited me in Virginia and Pennsylvania several times; I made many trips to her home in the north of London. One time when we were driving in Virginia and our conversation had thinned, I broke into the comfortable silence. "Nancy, you are such a student of history, but you never talk about your personal past." Her response was telling: "Well, it doesn't interest me very much. I am much more interested in what is going on now—and in the future." Looking toward the future was a habit of mind that Nancy Martin sustained through her ninety-four years of life. Her sparkling curiosity about everything around her was, perhaps, the quality most treasured by those who knew her.

Nancy Martin was a colleague and friend of British researcher Jimmy Britton for more than fifty years. They taught together at the Harrow Weald School in London before World War II, along with another longtime colleague, Harold Rosen. When

Jimmy returned from his tour of duty with the RAF, Nancy was already a lecturer at the Institute of Education of the University of London. Britton and Rosen soon joined Nancy on the institute's English faculty.

Working and researching together, the three formed a theoretical framework for language and learning that first gained the recognition of British and American educators at the 1966 Dartmouth Conference. Their continued work in the Schools Council Project on Written Language of 11–18 Year Olds (Britton et al.) and their writings from that project transformed the teaching of English in the United Kingdom, the United States, and other English-language countries.

Martin and Britton were keenly interested in the writings of the late Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Through their work, they brought Vygotsky's ideas about literacy acquisition to the English-teaching world and shared the implications of Vygotsky's theories with teachers.

Nancy Martin was especially interested in the role that writing can play in the mastery of all school subjects. It was she who first coined the phrase "writing across the curriculum" as she sat with members of the Schools Council Project, discussing how to frame their beliefs about the central role of language in learning. Others argued for the slogan "language across the curriculum," but Nancy felt strongly that the enactive nature of writing made it uniquely suited to learning all subjects.

After hearing Nancy talk about students' sense of "personal purpose" in their learning, I began negotiating curriculum with my students and having

Photo courtesy of Louann Reid.

them assess their achievement. I embraced the belief that talk is central to learning. I challenged myself to take multiple perspectives on whatever I might encounter in literature and life. I learned to help my students explore classroom interactions from multiple views. Prospective teachers now learn with me to metaprocess all that they do and see.

Though the impact of Nancy's life and teachings is, admittedly, quite personal, they have been significant for many others as well. Her ideas—and those that Jimmy Britton and she developed together—have permeated much of what has been written about language and learning in the past three decades.

An English-subject advisor from South Africa was a participant in the Southcentral Pennsylvania Writing Project 2003 Summer Institute. In his demonstration lesson, "Writing across the Curriculum," Themba Langa quoted from Tom Romano's *Clearing the Way*—a passage in which Tom had quoted Nancy Martin. At least three professional generations later, Nancy's (and Tom's) words captured perfectly what Themba wanted his colleagues to understand about the value of personal purpose and of writing in their learning:

{O}nly when students are able to somehow "put themselves in the picture" are they "likely to perceive the significance of the facts at their disposal" (86). To put students in the picture, teachers may ask them to adopt a persona and write a first-person narrative from that point of view. A student might become a drop of gasoline as it travels through an engine, a volleyball sick and tired of being used by nincompoops who won't abide by the rules of the game, a fine piece of oak in the hands of a master woodworker, a water molecule in a piece of chicken placed in a microwave oven. Such writing assignments provide students with a refreshing, imaginative jolt. They must leave their narrow, too-comfortable perspective and consider concepts from a new one. They must close their eyes to their familiar way of seeing and open them to a new way. (33)

In 1987, Tom Romano had conveyed Nancy's passion for writing assignments that place students inside their learning. In 2003, Themba Langa will take Romano's ideas, drawn from the passion of Nancy Martin, to South Africa where he will help teachers and their students get inside their learning.

The legacy of Nancy Martin lives on in classrooms where teachers understand the importance of writing across the curriculum; where students write to discover and make meaning from their texts and from their lives; where teachers value student talk as part of the learning process; and where teachers value students' having a say in what they learn, how they learn it, and how they take stock of their progress.

What Nancy gave to me and to countless others who have been influenced by her work is what Tom Romano called an "imaginative jolt"; she has nudged all of us from our "narrow, too-comfortable perspective[s]" (33).

Tony Burgess wrote in Nancy's obituary for the July 7, 2003, London *Guardian*, "Teachers working with her received—in equal measure—sustained interrogation and vigorous encouragement, and most ended up as friends" (par. 10).

For the past twenty-two years, I have been fortunate to call Nancy Martin my friend. I shall miss sitting in the sunshine and talking with her. English teachers everywhere—and I—have benefited from her many years as our teacher, our mentor, and our colearner.

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