# Can I Keep This Book?

by
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The moments when a class is humming along are moments to treasure. At times I am as superstitious as anyone, fearing that if I speak aloud about success, it will instantly disappear. Whether such moments are a function of careful planning or good instinct, they are important to analyze. Frequently people focus on mistakes and learn from what is going wrong. But as a good friend says, “Any fool can point out what is going wrong. It takes much more concentration to see what is going right.” I recount here some of the experiences I had in the winter of 1998 when I visited several GED and ABE classes as a guest teacher. It is because so much seemed to be going right that I wanted to record what happened and explore why it worked.

In my job as a staff development resource person to ABE and GED programs in Boston, I work with teachers on curriculum and plan staff development events. When I go to classes, I often co-teach or observe or pilot a lesson from a developing curriculum. I am grateful to all the teachers who share their classes, set up the class to welcome me, and spontaneously take whatever role suits them and the moment. In 1998, my motivation for visiting was to publicize the “Readers Talk to Writers” Series co-sponsored by the A.L.R.I. and the Boston Public Library. The BPL’s literacy services coordinator

and I had chosen authors whose work would be of interest to learners, but whose names were not yet household words (and therefore whose honoraria were affordable). My goal was to introduce the authors' work in a way that would entice learners to come to the readings. In preparation for the authors' visits, I worked with sixteen different classes in all, usually for an hour and a half. I brought a set of books to the classes. The library had many copies circulating, but students had to check out their own copies. The copies I brought were checked out in my name and I needed them for use with other classes. Some classes had lessons on both authors while some had lessons on only one. I worked with learners in GED, pre-GED, and multi-level ABE classes. Most students were fluent speakers of English and a majority were African-American or Afro-Caribbean. Both men and women, aged 18 to 60-plus, participated. Some but not all of the learners came to the actual readings.

The two authors invited were Lucy Jane Bledsoe and hattie gossett. (She prefers the lower-case spelling of her name.) Bledsoe teaches writing to adult new learners in California. Her book, *Working Parts* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1997), tells the story of Lori Taylor, a bike mechanic with a reading problem who is clearly attracted to women—as of the second page she is cruising the librarian in her town. Hattie gossett's poetry has been in print for over ten years. Her snapshots of urban life, her jazzy rhythms, and her observations from the perspective of tenant, waitress, Harlem resident, are funny and familiar. Both gossett and Bledsoe write about topics of interest to learners. Their writing is accessible and both can establish rapport with adult basic education students quite effectively.

Both authors also break taboos. Gossett, in her writing, observes none of the taboos against four-letter words and slang body parts that much print adheres to (most ABE texts in particular). Bledsoe's portrayal of Lori Taylor as a lesbian is forthright. When I brought these books to adult literacy classes, I was constantly on edge. Some adult learners are religious and object to four-letter words. Similarly, I knew some students might feel that homosexuality is wrong and therefore the book should not be part of the curriculum. I was nervous, waiting for a student to put the book down, to refuse to read on, to tell me how inappropriate these texts were and how she couldn't continue because her religious beliefs wouldn't allow it.

From my perspective, the texts presented different kinds of risk. My expectations of what would be problematic were very different for the two books. For example, I imagined that Lucy's book might prompt students to make derogatory comments about gays and lesbians. Would I then come out? Would I be brave enough to challenge such comments? The risk is so much greater when the material hits close to home. With hattie's book my fears were related to being embarrassed or being uncool, rather than to a sense of personal vulnerability.

If I'd invented these uncomfortable scenarios months before scheduling the class visits, I might have invited different authors. But happily, such scenes never occurred. Instead, I deem the lessons some of the most successful I ever taught. I count the lessons as wildly successful not only because they generated attendance at the readings, but because learners were genuinely interested in continuing to read the books. The hardest part was not getting through the reading but rather taking the books away at the end. What was it that led to such positive results?

### *What I Did*

When I taught both books I began by explaining a bit about what a reading is. For students who had never been to one, I was worried they would imagine that they would be called on to read. So I explained that the author had to do all the work. They could ask questions, but no one would put them on the spot. I also used going to a party for someone you don't know very well as a metaphor. How would you feel if I invited you to my friend Millie's party? You might feel a little awkward or even anxious.

You don't know Millie, you might not know anyone there. Well, a reading is like a party for an author and I might not want to go either if I didn't know the author at all. So the purpose of my workshop was to introduce students to the author. Since the authors themselves were out of state until the day of the reading, I would make the introduction through the book.

With both books, we spent a long time on the front cover and with *Working Parts* we also read the back cover. *Working Parts*' covers are perfect for a predicting activity. The picture and the title are a little ambiguous. What kinds of things come to mind when you hear the words "working parts"? The students brainstormed: bikes, can openers, cars, our bodies. The cover has a picture of a bike but also a headless, nude human figure. The class generally reached consensus that the figure was a woman. There are also some handwritten cursive words fading into the background. We talked some about that: maybe it's a letter or a journal. How do we know that? Because it's not typewritten. It doesn't have anything that makes it look legal or like an inter-office memo, say with an official stationery heading or a "To:" and "From:" header.

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Going over the back cover of *Working Parts* turned out to be the most strenuous reading. In six sentences the themes and the plot are discussed, the characters introduced. It's dense, with phrases like "they negotiate the rough ride of personal growth" and "dangerous emotional territory." The banner reads: "A story of personal revolution"—what does that *mean*? "Dangerous emotional territory" is my favorite phrase to explain because students recognize the boundaries of this territory intuitively. If someone crosses the line into dangerous emotional territory, it's common to say, "You don't even want to go there." After rereading this paragraph, I asked students to work in pairs to make a list of five facts that they already knew about the book and five questions they had that they hoped to learn the answers to. With some initial prompting everyone got at least a couple in each category. When some students got the hang of it, they just kept going and going. For example, facts were: The story is about a bike mechanic. She can't read. Questions included: Why can't she read? Why did she drop out of high school? What is the dangerous emotional territory? Who taught her how to fix bicycles? One or two of the students read ahead, noticing on the back cover that Bledsoe is called "an intelligent, deeply perceptive lesbian voice for the 90s." They generated questions from this information, which was fine. If they mentioned it at all explicitly, it was to me quietly. I affirmed that they were right, but downplayed it—saying that we would get to that.

In each class I made a long list of many of the facts and questions. Learners shouted theirs out and, particularly when we got to their questions, I couldn't keep up. Chuckling, they appeared tickled to be so far ahead of me. This moment was pivotal; they began having a relationship with the book that wasn't dependent on me.

I read aloud the first few paragraphs and then we talked about the setting—a public library. Lori has a flashback to her days in high school and this is when we talk about all the senses that Bledsoe appeals to in her writing. What does it sound like in high school? What does it smell like? Together we read a little more aloud—just until Lori winks at the librarian and Lori lets us know, "Women and machinery were my specialties." In every class this got some reaction. Some students were quick to conclude that Lori must be a lesbian. Of course they didn't say this aloud. "She's a…you know," was often as close as they got, even when I encouraged them, "Yeah, you're right. Say it." Once I said "lesbian" aloud, it freed them to say the word. Others remembered that she was in the library because of Mickey and *his* grin, "the one that showed he loved me, the one that made me love him, the reason I came in the first place" (p.4). They inferred that she was bisexual. For most students, this new information seemed to build their interest in the book. They began reading immediately, getting absorbed in the book and staying that way, their eyes moving from one side of the page to another.

In most classes (ABE 2 level), I told students to read silently for about 10 minutes, but, more often than not, it became 20 minutes. It was interesting to see that students were engaged enough to keep going. I feel lazy when students are reading independently, but reading silently is the kind of practice many of them need, especially since their reading rates are relatively slow. I reread the chapter and watched their eyes move across the page.

I took a different tack when introducing hattie gossett's *Presenting...Sister No Blues* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988). We talked about the front cover briefly: a woman dressed in African jewelry and dreds with her mouth open, her finger pointed. Next we perused the table of contents. Actually, I asked a student to read aloud the section headings. I didn't volunteer myself or anyone else to read the names of every poem. But as we looked over the page and discussed the kind of poems that might be in each section, students inevitably noticed the hot-button words; for example, the introduc-

tion is entitled "born into this life the child of houseniggahs" and in the third section, there is a poem called "colored pussy." In a few classes one student noticed and pointed it out to others. If I felt the tenor of the class was about to dissolve into middle school giggle fits, I'd remind everyone we were grownups and that we could handle this. As in middle school classes, saying the words aloud dissipates the tension.

Before actually looking at the book of poetry, I'd mention the similarities between poetry and music. People think poetry is like novels or biographies. It comes between covers in a book. It's written with letters, but it has a lot more in common with music. "What kind of music do you listen to? What do you listen to music for?" I'd ask. And I heard the range. Students said, "I listen to gospel, R&B, jazz, country. I listen to set a mood, to relax, for the beat, for the words, for the message." These are all the ways you can listen to poetry. Maybe the message isn't clear to you right away, but you can listen for the beat. Maybe some of the words sound good to your ears. And there's one more way to enter into a poem. It doesn't generally work with prose or music. With a poem you can look at the picture it makes on the page. Some poets are so careful, like artists, about where they put the marks. Pay attention to what these might mean.

By the time we turned to the first poem I wanted to read with the group, I could say, listen for the rhythm. This poem is part of a series called "the subway poems." In music if you want to express something that moves fast, you can speed up the way the instruments play, but how can you do that with words? Watch for that as I read to you. The subway poems belong to the section called "just a hit or 2/sketches & polaroids from everyday." It's a poem anyone who takes public transportation in the city can relate to, especially anyone who has ridden when kids are just out of school and their voices and conversation echo up and down the platform.

We discussed the rhythm, look and message of the poem. Some lines are long, some are short. Some words are mooshed together, the "yellowredorange bell pepper," for example, that the kids are bouncing up and down the platform. So the words are a blur, like the pepper. Then I asked participants to choose a word or a phrase that they liked the best. Then we read those aloud in turn, with no break, basically composing a different poem from the words on the page. This activity, called text-rendering, worked well in some classes, not so well in others. But all of these activities set the stage for making poetry a social experience. In the next segment of the class, I invited students to read a poem or poems of their choosing. They could flip through the book, look back at the table of contents, they could stop in the middle and start a new one—whatever. But by the end of the time, they had to have a line that they liked to share with others and a reason why they liked that line. Everyone found something to share. Most times, after we read some of the poem aloud, the student gave a short synopsis, read the line, and either asked a question about what it meant or made a connection to his or her own life. For example, the poem "soul looks back in wonder" describes Caribbean women. It was a top choice, reminding students of their home countries. The poem "dear landlord" was another popular choice, with students laughing appreciatively when the tenant withheld the rent because it was raining in her apartment.

After reading and discussing, I asked students to brainstorm questions they might want to ask the author. Then I collected my books. The big surprise for me was when students asked if they could keep the books. Yes, magazine articles and newspaper clippings absolutely have an up-to-the-minute relevance that a novel or poetry can't compete with, but in all the years I've taught with that type of material, learners have never swamped me asking for more. Sure, one or two students might be captivated or convinced, but not to this degree.

### *Why Did It Work?*

What kept students engaged? What advice can I offer to others? I have a few theories. The first is that literature which breaks taboos is a draw. Much of the motivation for reading comes from curiosity. Taboos fuel curiosity. Text that breaks taboos gives us a peephole into a forbidden world, the way Bledsoe's writing about Lori Taylor gave straight students a window into one lesbian's world. Taboo language can add a surprise, especially for new readers who are hesitating over words. The shock of finding a swear word can turn to delight at finding such a coarse word in a challenging selection. This reward encourages persistence in reading.

Recommending texts with street language or with explicit gay or lesbian content or characters opens difficult questions for teachers. Where do we draw the line? In the wake of the Clinton/Lewinsky/Starr scandal, many of us have found public discourse breaking so many taboos that we would prefer to reinstate them rather than break some more. If pornography engages students in reading, do we bring that in too? Besides entertaining extreme questions like this, in adult education we need to ask ourselves why the commercially available short story collections and anthologies of longer work are "clean" versions. What makes a taboo and whom does it protect?

I set a tone that downplayed the taboo subjects. Instead of using the subject matter to shock students or to sensationalize the class, I pretty much waited for them to get it. They made their own discoveries. Then I left some space for people to deal with the intensity privately. I didn't dwell on lesbianism, asking "What do you think? What are synonyms for…? Have you ever…?" I began to see this situation as very loaded. Many times it's difficult, especially for young adults, but often for older adults as

well, to express curiosity about lesbian and gay issues without getting labeled. Whereas students might have the inclination to be open-minded or at least curious, even in classroom situations they might be hesitant to reveal that for fear of being called names themselves. Letting the topic be just part of a landscape enabled students to read on and to learn about the feelings, perspectives, and world of a lesbian without so much risk. One character in a novel isn't terribly threatening.

In one ABE class with a wide range of levels, students began identifying with Lori right away. They agreed with their teacher: she's like me, she's smart and she can't read; or she's good with her hands but she can't read; or she's good with people but she can't read. It was more difficult in this class when students found out Lori specializes in women. A student verbalized her negative feelings about homosexuality when she got to this line. I said, does that change how you feel about Lori? She said, "a little." Looking back I realize that I luckily asked the right question. I didn't say, "How do you feel about reading the book?" because then I might have learned that she didn't want to read it anymore. I was surprised and pleased that even though her personal views were strong, she could still maintain some openness toward the character.

In spite of the fact that the books were unusual texts for literacy classrooms, what I asked students to do was very familiar. We did tons of pre-reading and I asked obvious questions and listened to their answers. There was nothing threatening in these pre-reading activities. In fact, for some they were a little boring. I offered a context that is recognizably school-like. Perhaps this allowed students to accept very untraditional texts.

Some teachers shy away from topics that are touchy because they are worried about how to handle them. Once I realized that I was dealing with risky/risqué texts, I had no choice but to live up to the situation. I modeled handling the words "lesbian," "niggah," "pussy" forthrightly. Maybe I blushed a little, but I provided a counterbalance to the nervous giggling. Even when we ask students what they want to learn about, I wonder if this question is so open as it seems. In my experience, students wanted to read a story about a lesbian bike mechanic with a reading problem.

Books themselves turned out to be a drawing card. Part of the explanation has to lie in the pacing. Short stories and magazine or newspaper articles peak. They come to closure, wrapping up their points. There really isn't an appeal to the reader—come along for the ride—enticing one to read just a little bit more. While poetry doesn't work in the same way novels do, hattie gossett's poems do group together in series like the subway poems or "butter #1, butter #2, 3, and 4." Further, with her poetry, I had the distinct feeling that the humor kept students wanting more. By the end of class, they knew they could handle the material on their own. My sense was that they had confidence that they could read on their own and that it would be rewarding. Any well chosen whole book could heighten students' interest in reading.

I traveled with a set of ten books, but at times I taught classes with twice as many people. I felt awful when I taught hattie's poetry to larger classes or combined groups, because I never had enough books to go around. Looking back I realize that these were the classes with the highest energy level. Sharing a book, deciding what to read first and second, reading aloud together in a pair before reading to the group, these all added to the social experience of poetry. Although reading can be a solitary experience, many people derive enjoyment from talking about what they are reading. In the classroom discussions about

reading often have an instructional agenda. A discussion for the purposes of building comprehension has a different flavor. Both are important. Students can benefit from both.

Another variable I had working in my favor was that I was a one-time teacher. Maybe students were more indulgent and more willing to be flexible, perhaps because they knew I was a special guest. The next class or the next hour would be a return to the usual curriculum. As the primary text, *Working Parts* might have bored students whose interests lay in spy novels, murder mysteries, or science fiction. As a textbook, *Presenting…Sister No Blues* would have faced strong resistance from students who see texts with street language as a waste of their school time. As one student said, "We know street language already."

The obstacles I've listed sound daunting, but the pay-off makes facing them worthwhile. As a literacy teacher, it is certainly gratifying to see students forming their own questions, reading silently and laughing because they appreciate the humor. Apart from the pay-off in reading interest, breaking taboos can have an additional benefit. Teachers have the opportunity to model risk-taking and, in doing so, to create a dynamic of equality within the classroom. Much of the time teachers ask students to take risks while we stay in our zone of comfort, teaching from our strengths. A true risk brings about personal growth. Is it right to "subject" students to a process which might be very personal? Making students a party to this kind of risk is a delicate decision. I take this question very seriously and use as my guide a saying I've heard in storytelling circles. "If your audience cries when you tell a story, they should pay you, but if you cry when your tell your story, you should pay them." If the answer to the question "Who grows from this risk?" is "Everyone," then I'd encourage it.  Of course, if the answer is, "Me, the teacher," then the classroom is not the ideal place to take this risk.

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I must acknowledge many people who had a hand in the success of this venture. Boston Public Librarians Priscilla Howell and Ellen Graf arranged for the programs. The students and teachers who took risks with me deserve special mention. They co-create classrooms where an openness to new learning experiences is a given. Yet I give the largest chunk of credit to the authors. Both women know how to write! But I don't want to leave the impression that this approach could only work in Boston with these books. In every one of the 16 situations, some activities worked and some didn't. But the main thing was, even if I didn't connect with the group, even if they thought the activities were childish, even if they were frustrated by the pace of class at the beginning, the texts spoke to them. I highly recommend the use of these books in the classroom. I highly recommend taking a risk. Break a taboo! And strategize with other program staff at your center about how you can supply books students can keep! •