Barry Lane’s presentation on Expository Writing, for Maine ASCD’s October 22 conference, demonstrated the elements Lane advocates for teaching students. We experienced solid learning, practice, humor, compassion, participant interaction, music, movement, visual arts, film, dance, pantomime and writer’s choice of topic.

Several times Barry took out his guitar and broke into song with lyrics he wrote, such as, “Stand by Your Plan,” “When Johnny Drops Out of School” and “Superficial, Unrealistic Rigor is Atrocious” (to the tune of “Supercalifragilistic -expialidocious”!) and songs for which he wrote the lyrics and melody, such as “I’m More than a Number” and “Miss Foley.”

In discussing persuasive writing, Lane said that persuasion is leading someone to truth. He said the way to get to truth for society is to teach our students how to use facts in their writing.

How to meet English/Language Arts Common Core State Standards requirements was a theme. For example, Lane mentioned that since speaking is emphasized in the Common Core, beginning in young grades, students need opportunities to speak to audiences. A strategy he suggested is to hold “press conferences” where students present about their interests and then answer classmates’ questions.

He also described how students can interview one another to learn biographical information. The interviewer then writes a biography of the classmate. When students read to the class, the biographies they wrote, music in the background makes it even more engaging for the reader and the listeners.

Though the presentation was filled with writing instruction strategies that will strengthen students’ progress on Common Core Standards, Lane emphasized not letting the teaching of standards get in the way of relationship with students. With positive

Continued on PAGE TWO
Barry Lane, continued

Barry Lane, continued

relationships, engagement and intrinsic motivation, Lane said, best learning occurs - and dropping out is prevented.

With this in mind, Lane listed the five qualities of a quality writing classroom: courage, community, content, craft and celebration. Moreover, Lane stated that the best writing programs need time (have a regular writing time), space (both physical and curriculum) and choice. He also invited teachers to bring their special passions to their teaching. For instance, Lane’s teacher from whom he learned the most was his fourth grade teacher, Miss Foley, who brought her guitar to school and taught the children some chords.

Barry stressed letting students choose their own topics. At the same time, structure is provided with prompts. Hand-outs conference participants received contain many text structures for persuasive essays and informative essays that can be used, instead of the typical five paragraph essay format. Also included are thirty text structures that students devised.

Many specific strategies were presented and practiced by participants. For example:

. Having students use their arms and hands to portray concepts.

. Students can analyze photos for what the photos say and what they don’t say.

. Use fables to help stimulate students’ creativity.

. Use body language and pantomime to help students remember adjectives.

. Give students simulated roles such as “tour guides.” The tour guides write and present information of interest about a town.

. Students are given an “answer” and then have to write the question.

. Have students write jokes. They need to learn about and then include a set-up and a punch line.

. Using photos, students can put made up quotes in bubbles over the heads of famous people.

Barry discussed the fact that silly and funny are different. Students need to be guided towards actual humor. He said actual humor entails analysis because you must analyze something from at least a couple of angles to create humor about it.

In addition to the inspiration and many ideas for strengthening writing instruction, Barry Lane conveyed that teachers know what is best for students and teachers’ voices need to be heard.

Lee Anna Stirling

You are invited to submit a manuscript to the Journal of Maine Education. Please go to our Journal of Maine Education link for further information.