

Of Maps and Miles and Metaphors: Pedaling/Peddling Thoughts on Writing Instruction

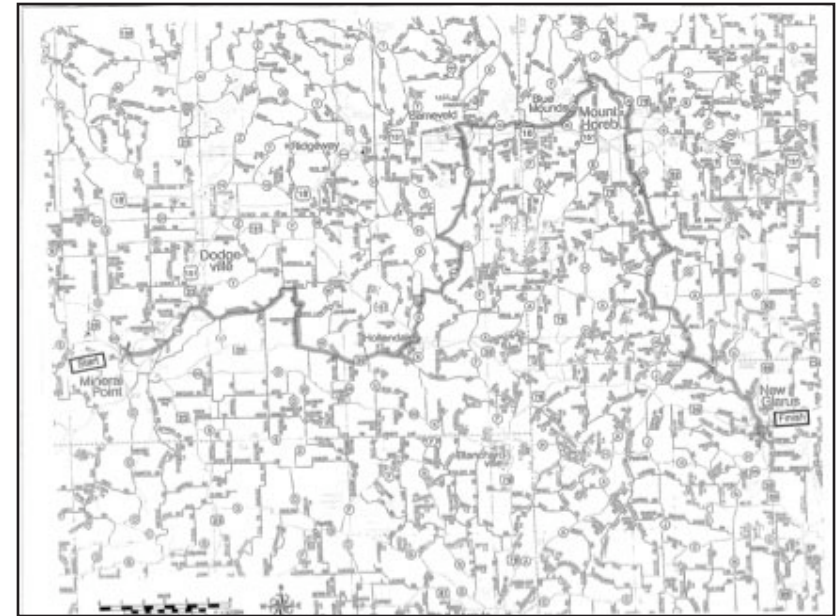
Sherri Larson

The day's first sunlight stretches across these rolling hills like a cat waking from a nap, spreading long, persistent arms through hovering mist. The fog lifts from dewy pasture grasses, and brightly colored jerseys roll on black tires, peppering the gray stripe of county road with reds, yellows, and blues. Bicycle computers reset to zero, the journey begins.

I am a “rookie” road cyclist, having just taken to the more serious side of biking in the past few months. In my short time with the Twin Cities Bicycling Club, I've learned from experienced riders some of the bicycling insider information—the value of a light-weight carbon frame, the prestige of an ultegra derailleur, the risks and benefits of clip-in biking shoes, and why cyclists wear such crazy clothing. A four-day, 246-mile Wisconsin trip in July was the test for my newly formed biking skills. It was a journey in a literal sense, as I was focused primarily on making it the roughly sixty miles from point A to point B each day. But, as any English teacher knows, metaphors abound, especially on journeys.

As I began the trip, the turn of the calendar to August loomed,

and my mind was on the upcoming school year—my sixth year as a high school English teacher. Both the timing of the ride and the time spent on my bike made maps into course outlines, cue sheets into lesson plans, and hills into key concepts. Supported by thoughts from accomplished writers and teachers in *Teaching the Neglected “R”* (Newkirk & Kent), and *Adolescent Literacy* (Beers, Probst, & Rief), I hope to peddle/pedal some ideas about writing instruction that helped me get up the hills of Wisconsin and answer the recurring question of August: “What can I do to be a better teacher?”



Day 1: Mineral Point to New Glarus, 62 miles

6:45 a.m. Admittedly, I am filled with anxiety. I am surrounded by 33 bicyclists, all of whom I am quite certain are more skilled than I. Before we leave the hotel in Mineral Point, we're told it's seventeen miles to the first rest stop at a grocery store. I've been on enough rides this spring and summer to know my legs can do this, but how about my bladder? Will the grocery store have a bathroom? Will I need a snack? Should I prevent

later dehydration by making sure I finish my water by then? What if I get separated from the good cyclists? What if I miss a turn? Will I see the arrows on the road? Enough, enough. Clip in; pedal, pedal, pedal.

In the first mile, our riding order is established. The tandems take off with every bit of the power of four legs in a rhythmic oneness; singles chat and settle gears into comfortable pace, uttering the customary “on your left” before passing slower riders. The group of bikes quickly separates into twos and threes.

We had been given a map highlighting our route. I’m energized to see the wandering line clearly reaching a town famous for its cheese and beer as our evening destination. But I am suspicious that it must take a large hill for our mid-trip stop to have earned the name “*Mount Horeb*.” It is comforting to see the route in one glance—to view both point A and point B on one sheet of paper. I remind myself that it’s a flat map, and that the large incline in the middle does not mean elevation. It’s just a line.

Even hearing the word “map” as August nears brings my mind to the way we use the term at school. Our department is creating curriculum and course “maps” this year. In my planning, I often visualize the writing process as a map, and use the language accordingly: “Begin with the end in mind”; “Stick to the course”; “Know where you’re going.” I often refer to the “steps” of the writing process as if traveling toward an endpoint. That’s the map idea—the big picture. If not comforting (for some of them are surely long!), maps are at least helpful, showing the whole route in one image and giving a sense of where one is heading.

However, the map does not show the “detours” that may slow the process, requiring more time or trouble along the way. It doesn’t show the potholes, the broken glass, the ditch-lying watchdogs or the ubiquitous roadkill. In the writing process, these hazards could be anything from a student missing a week of class with the flu, to a computer breakdown the night before a draft is due, to one’s habit of misusing commas. The learning process could be “detoured” by a fight between two students in

the back, the rain on the classroom window, or the excitement of the football game that evening. The room, and the road, is never free from distraction.

On the positive side, maps also don’t show the spectacular view at the top of the hill, the just-off-the-road Amish bakery, or the indigo bunting, zipping from branch to branch along a quiet highway. In the writing process, these surprises could be in the form of a sudden understanding of how a thesis statement helps the writing to fit together, an inspirational quote gleaned from a movie, or an idea for a brand new attention-grabbing opener. I’ll never forget one student’s vivid description of his bike accident: “I got a face full of mailbox.” That was a moment of inspiration and truth that I didn’t see on my lesson plan that day.

A map shows the big picture, but not the unexpected details. Using a map mentality must keep the beginning and end in mind. It must also allow room for discovery—for enlightenment and reflection. Paul Carney notes how this mindset of metacognition allows one to interact with one’s own writing in a meaningful and helpful way. Categorizing student writing errors as “Oops,” “Oh!”, and “Huh?” allows students to evaluate the effect of small errors on the piece as a whole. It also provides them a starting point from which to correct the error. It’s about noticing and reacting to the details, and how those details are an integral part of the process.

Map mentality must keep in mind the central question of Ellin Keane’s essay, “The Essence of Understanding.” Simply, “What does it mean to understand?” Understanding, Keane states, must go beyond remembering details just long enough to answer test questions, yet that is often the type of understanding we require of students (and, in turn, require them to demonstrate in their own writing). How do we start changing the habits of young writers with this Big-Picture-But-Be-Ready-For-And-Open-To-Anything attitude? Keep the map in mind. Appreciate everything it shows, and prepare for what it does not show—the beautiful landscape as well as the potholes.

Day 2: New Glarus to Monroe, 61 miles

Total Distance	Turn	Road	Leg
--	Start	Chalet Landhaus, New Glarus	--
0.0	Left out of parking lot	SR 39 (SR 69)	0.2
0.2	Turn right (ENE)	SR 39/ Kubly Road	0.1
0.3	Turn right (SE)	Elmer Road	0.7
1.0	Turn left (ENE)	Airport Road	1.5
2.5	Turn right (E)	Argue Road (at "t")	0.9
3.4	Turn right (SW)	Tunnel Road (at "t")	1.2
4.6	Turn right (SW)	Exeter Crossing Road (at "t")	0.2
4.8	Go straight (SSE)	Marshall Bluff Road (do not veer right onto Exeter)	2.6
7.4	Turn right (SW)	CR C (at "t")	1.5
8.7	Turn left (S)	CR C (N Main St.)	0.3
9.0	Turn right (W)	Stop—Monticello	0.0

On the back of the daily maps are the cue sheets, with written directions to the tenth mile for the whole trip. Although I like to have a look at the map for a general idea, the cue sheet is much more helpful. It reduces the trip to the smallest possible legs; with this checklist mentality, I feel rewarded at every turn. I love seeing how the short segments link so clearly and purposefully to the larger journey. My rookie questions still rumble in my head, but the cue sheet relaxes my mind and focuses my efforts. I'd expect the same effect for both teachers and students, if cue sheets were instituted as an instructional strategy.

Using a cue sheet for writing instruction could help teachers frame assignments with more certainty of purpose. Cue sheets show how each step is critical. A cue sheet not only lists the turns, but tells the distance between legs and the culminating distance of the trip. What would that be like for a large writing assignment? Teachers can ease the anxiety of embarking on a long assignment by dividing that process into "legs" punctuated with rest breaks for refueling/redirection/clarification. Of course, teachers already use lessons within units and mini-lessons within larger lessons, but modeling that process even more after the cue

sheet is something I'm going to try in my classroom this year.

The cue sheet mentality can be used at several points in the writing process. Brainstorming, researching, developing a thesis, searching for supporting facts, organizing, crafting, editing—to a new writer, each of these might feel insurmountable. A cue sheet could help "divide and conquer" by dividing the process into purposeful and necessary "legs" in the longer journey. This can change the perception of the writing process for students in the same way as the cue sheets provided me with the mental burst of "can do" attitude.

Too often, I find that students rush into an assignment without much thought about the topic. For a heavily-weighted persuasion paper, good topic selection is critical to success. Adding a cue sheet to the brainstorming process could help students narrow and refine their topic ideas. Students could complete a series of brainstorming exercises around their topics—bubble diagrams, outlines, computer-generated visuals, charts, etc. Being mindful of research strategies such as Bloom's taxonomy, I could design the "legs" to require more complex thinking and reflection in order to build comprehension and draw out the intricacies of the topic.

Later in the writing process, a cue sheet might be used for students to select an outline or organizational methods. Students could experiment with different structures to see how their writing would change—what effect it might have to go back and forth between opposing views versus frontloading all of their information.

A cue sheet might be used to integrate a multi-genre approach to a larger research project. Or (my favorite), students could create several first paragraphs ala Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Cue sheets are about reducing the larger assignment to the smallest single task, not just for simplicity's sake, but also to allow for reflection and several points of success and completion.

Whether map or cue sheet, the challenge is the same: get students to write. Fill them with a sense of purpose, a hopeful attitude, and confidence in their ability to complete

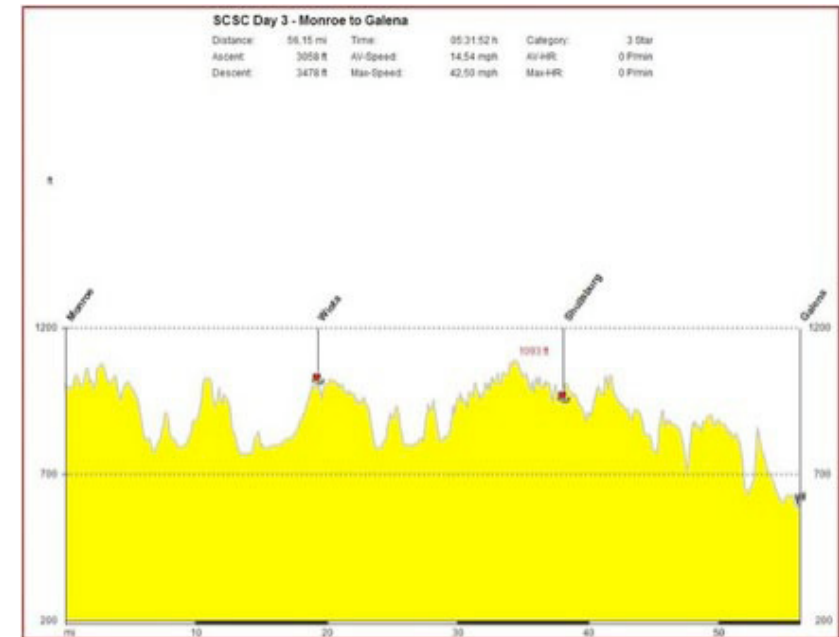
the assignment. Create what Nancie Atwell calls a “literate environment...a place where people read, write, and talk about reading and writing; where everybody can be student and teacher; where everybody can come inside” (130).

In the past, I’ve too often acted as a magician, hiding the “tricks” of the process, only to unveil them when necessary. That mindset creates anxiety and frustration in students, not unlike the anxiety I felt on the first day of our trip. Worse, withholding information can fuel apathy and negativity. I’ve decided to show students a few more of the answers and tricks ahead of time. Why not show them how to string a main theme by using a quote at the beginning of the text and at the end? Why not demonstrate how sentences of the same exact construction can be so tedious to a reader? Why not show them two or three strategies to change up the SVO order? Give a list of active verbs; discuss effective paragraphing; require particular sentence structures; examine how a short sentence can be as or more powerful as a long one; teach them the semi-colon? There’s no reason not to let students in on a few “secrets.” As the short segments of the cue sheet make the journey accessible, knowing a few insights about writing as a craft can turn the big job of editing into a list of do-able tasks.

Day 3: Monroe to Galena, IL, 56 miles

I’ve just learned about the elevation maps. It’s a good thing I didn’t know yesterday that it was the largest ascent day, at 3393 feet; I would have been discouraged. Today it’s a 3058 foot ascent, but with a rewarding 3478 foot descent. I’ll have to keep that in mind when I’m on what our leader likes to call “rolling hills” between Wiota and Shullsburg. They look like a lot of climbing.

I’ve learned a simple lesson these first days in hilly Wisconsin: every pedal stroke is progress. Clicking up to the highest gear down a long downhill stretch is an amazingly productive feeling, when every pedal stroke covers more distance in great speed with less effort. Similarly, I will move forward even using “granny gear” at a slower-than-walking pace



up the steepest hills, even if I have to hum Abba songs to keep my legs moving. It’s impossible to go backwards on a bicycle.

And so it is with writing. I like to think that every keystroke is progress, even if it is almost immediately deleted. Sometimes my fingers type unbelievably fast, clicking down a thought that builds for pages, constructing a complex assortment of sentences and ideas. And sometimes it’s slow-going, but still with precision and clarity. Either way, it’s always one letter at a time. But sometimes I wander with the cursor, hitting the delete key as if in a video game, a PacMan eating “dots” of drivel, a gun taking on a shower of space invaders, taking out as many words as possible. Of course, at times I feel like I can’t write, and I take on the attitude of Karen Brennan in her essay, “Laissez-Faire Writing”: “You write, it either sucks or thrills you, you can either work on it or not. I take a lot of naps.” The process, whether likened to a bike ride, a video game, or to Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow,” is forward moving. Even dead ends go *somewhere*. As a writer and a biker, I have to have that hope.

Back to the elevation chart. I’ve made two goals for these

hills: 1) don't get off the bike to walk and 2) don't cry. As the two will certainly go hand in hand, I shift down as low as possible for the hills. In the lowest gear, I can keep pedaling, even if I'm exhausted.

I've often heard teachers use the term "switch gears" in the classroom, but they usually mean changing topic or direction. But what if teachers provided the "gears" for assignment completion as a bicyclist does for hill-climbing? The goal is the same (reaching the top of the hill/ completing the writing assignment), but teachers can allow students to choose the "gear" to reach the goal. This mindset frames what we're already doing (differentiation and individualized instruction) into something more unified and focused. Gear-changing allows the individual to choose the technique, but it does not change the desired product.

Considering gears would also help pace instruction appropriately, as different writing tasks certainly require different paces. For example, consider "gear switching" for a computer research process in preparation for a persuasion paper. Preparatory lessons and discussions, such as introducing how to use academic web data bases, how to judge credibility of a web site, how to locate and search the archives of the *New York Times*, will be key to success. Students will need instruction on how to find usable data within a web site, how to compare and contrast. They will need examples of how writers present contradictory information effectively, while still firmly holding the persuasive voice. These are all "low gear" processes, and students and teachers will benefit from the slow pace.

As soon as the "all clear" is given for such a computer research assignment, most students will fly into high gear and the fast pace they seem so driven to seek on computers. Their efforts will be more rewarding and successful because they have purpose and focus, as developed by the slower-paced introductory material. The key is to take full advantage of the benefits of the given "gear." The teacher must know when it's best to utilize the low resistance, slower pace required for a complex task, and when it's fruitful and necessary to challenge

the writer by requiring some muscle.

Day 3: Galena, IL to Mineral Point, WI, 64 miles

I am learning by observation. Today, the crazy tandem cyclists seemed to play cat and mouse with the rest of us, starting out later than others, passing us all, taking long breaks, then passing the whole group again. The back rider gleefully takes pictures of us as they pass. These first few days, it has been my goal to stay seated on my bike, using only gears to ease my going. It seemed to me that to stand up and pedal shows weakness and inexperience—perhaps making me look too much like a 14-year old baggy-pants boy on his dirt bike. But here come the tandems again, standing and pedaling, and certainly not looking "weak." I hear one of them say, "Oh, look at this awesome hill!" as they begin their ascent. They're not only good at it; they *enjoy* it. They take off with amazing speed up the steep incline. They sure make the hills look easy. Is there something to this standing thing?

Sure enough, there is. Though I may move from this strategy later in my biking career, I make it through Day Four by letting myself stand and pedal. I notice immediately that it uses different muscles—the burning in my legs is definitely changing location—and that it gives me some momentum, both physically and mentally. I also notice that it requires me to pedal differently, using my clip-in bike shoes to their full benefit. I can pull up as well as push down with every stroke. It's amazing the difference it makes to divide the pedaling effort. I never pass the tandems, but I later thank them for the inspiration. Observing them has opened my mind to possibilities.

In an interview about writing in the changing world, author Jeffrey Wilhelm states, "I think there is a widespread notion that if you just get kids reading or get them writing a lot, they'll become better readers and writers. I've become convinced that this is absolutely not the case. They'll get better at reading and writing the kinds of things they already know how to read and write" (11). Wilhelm's quote provides a strong link for

me between cycling and teaching. Observing others and using different strategies challenged me, both mentally and physically, and the adjustments improved my biking. I could have biked as I'd always biked, and I probably would have made it. But having the mind of an intentional learner allowed me to change and improve. The adjustments came one lesson at a time, in small steps, which is what Wilhelm suggests in his essay. Good writing instruction requires explicit instruction of sentence structure, grammar, paragraphing, genre, persuasive techniques, voice, etc. Sheer volume of writing will only cause students to write how they already write. Improvement comes through specific and focused lessons to unpack the tools of writing.



At the top of one of the final hills today, I hoist my bicycle over my head in victory. I made it! And I did it all by pedaling. That's the best metaphor of all: Keep pedaling! My metaphoric musings during the ride and since have reminded me of the critical role I play as a teacher and leader and encourager.

Thomas Newkirk discovered by digging into past writing instruction philosophy that the trick to good writing instruction

hasn't altered much, even with the changing times: "...the challenge of the twenty-first century is likely to resemble the challenge of the twentieth: to cut through the sheer curricular clutter that causes us to lose sight of the real goal of writing instruction—to truly engage students in purposeful acts of composing (2). My goal for this year—to answer the recurring August question—is to do what I can to bring students to success in the writing process. I'm going to make maps and cue sheets to help build the confidence and hope in my students. I'll gear up as high as I must in order to keep the students interested, focused, and engaged; I'll gear down low when necessary to make sure everyone makes it to the rest stop. I want to create an environment that makes students open to new strategies, so that students can change and improve as writers. I have an entirely new appreciation for the idea of "hills and valleys," the challenges, rewards, and tricks of each, and I look forward to helping students see the strategies and possibilities of writing.

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