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## Developing Teacher Literacy in Appalachian Contexts: Or How I Went South and Learned a New Way of Being in the World

Marcia Ribble  
*University of Cincinnati (emeritus)*

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# Developing Teacher Literacy in Appalachian Contexts: Or How I Went South and Learned a New Way of Being in the World

Marcia Ribble

To become literate when we move from one part of the country to another with significant cultural differences, our first task is to learn the new culture so we can more effectively work with our colleagues and our students. When I moved from Bay City, MI, to Morehead, KY, there were many customs I needed to learn. Fortunately, what I learned helped me to cherish both my new colleagues and students.

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After spending most of my life in Michigan, I was not prepared for the cultural differences I would encounter when I accepted a job teaching developmental writing at Morehead State University in Morehead, Kentucky. However, in the two years I spent living in Morehead, I learned to appreciate life in the foothills of the Appalachian mountains as I developed a new kind of literacy that had less to do with reading and writing print texts and more to do with learning to read and write a different way of being in the world. I needed to learn these new literacies of being, to respect them, to communicate well with my students and colleagues, and I will confess that I didn't always exude a refined Appalachian literacy.

Like students, I was a learner, and not always graceful about it. It is strange to think of someone with a PhD as illiterate, but in many ways I was exactly that in the real world parlance and everyday languages of communication in Appalachia. I often failed to know my place, to respond politely, to fit easily into a society I did not entirely understand, even when I grew to love the people I was meeting. Students are sometimes academic outsiders, but I was every bit as much a cultural outsider.

As a Michigander, I was used to clear, cool mornings in the summer, for instance, and the low-lying fog blanketing the hollows in Eastern Kentucky took some getting used to. But those fogs carry with them an intense and personal sense of privacy as I discovered that I could easily sit on the back porch in my nightgown and drink a cup of coffee without worrying that someone would notice. There I would be, ringed by pines, by a huge crab apple tree, by a tall row of creek trees, by five large forsythia bushes, and hemmed in by the silence, but not uncomfortable, smelling that delicious first morning aroma of coffee, nestled in a much larger bed than the one I'd just left. What I didn't know until I'd been in Kentucky for awhile is that there is a certain magic to living inside the clouds that nothing else matches.

In Michigan the rain falls down from the clouds to the ground and even on a socked-in day, there was never the sense that I was inside the rain as it oozed and flowed around me. In contrast, in Kentucky, I was inside the clouds where it feels like the rain isn't so much falling as being, that it just is, and we're all part of it. There's also the delight of driving into and out of the cloud, being able to see it ahead and choosing to immerse one's self and car into that soggy wetness that surrounds us when we are inside the clouds. Snow is that way, too. But I had felt that before; it wasn't so new, so different. Snow had that delightful propensity to swirl and twirl and spiral down and around and sideways; I could belong in it when I was a child. Encountering a similar kind of rain in the mountains felt like an immense wet blessing. In a sense, that immersion was part of the Kentucky experience for me, a part of learning to read the world.

Communication always involves not just being able to "read" the messages being sent, but also to interpret them accurately whether they are interpersonal, textual, or mass-media originated. To be a literate person in a different type of environment means developing cross-cultural sensitivity not just to the words used, but also to the cultural and personal subtexts that underlie those words and give them significance that may not be obvious immediately. Those subtexts are often specific to the context and the people speaking, so when our students may use an unfamiliar subtext, it's important for teachers to seek a deeper understanding to render our response appropriate to the context of our students' lives.

It helped me to become a better teacher when I was able to feel the outsider's growth of awareness of subtexts I was unfamiliar with. That de-familiarization shook up my normally complacent belief that how I experience the world is how others experience it, an egocentrism I was well aware of intellectually, but was developing greater affective sensitivity to. Suddenly, the context no longer was one I was comfortable in, nor was I easily able to read and respond to it. My new awareness took me back to when I was a first-year student in college, very unsure of myself; I was lacking not in academic skills, but in the social and interpersonal skills some other students had already developed. Writing this is reminding me again of how uncomfortable I was in that college world, the first in my immediate family to attend college. My experience was similar to what many of our students in Appalachia were experiencing as the first in their family to become a college student.

## **Class Attendance**

Class attendance was something Michigan students had assumed they would need to do. Almost all of them were in class every day. So it was shocking to me when many Morehead State students failed to show up on Fridays. A tutor explained to me that in Eastern Kentucky it is assumed that family must always come first, so if students were needed at home to help with spring planting or fall harvesting, to babysit for an aunt or uncle, or to sit by the sickbed of a distant relative, attending class came second in order of importance, and being responsive to the needs of family carried greater weight. Literacy for me became a need to develop a set of lesson plans that would allow for as many as half of the students to be absent on Fridays. I needed to understand that students cared about their educations and needs in their families.

In a many academic communities, it is assumed that students come from outside and need to learn to adapt to academic ways of being. However, these students often

would face enormous familial pressures to conform that left them little energy for dealing with college coursework. I decided it would be better for me to find a way to deal with life as it is in Eastern Kentucky, to value a world in which the needs of one's family must be taken into consideration as well, alongside academic conventions and expectations.

I began to treat our Friday classes as days for one-on-one conferencing with the students who were there and for helping them with their particular and quite individualized writing problems. This worked quite nicely and allowed me to focus my attention on the students who would be in class and help them to improve their skills, which was important because most of the developmental writing students came in with ACT scores under eighteen and reading scores that were even lower. Students with scores of seventeen and under were mandated by the state to be in developmental classes and up to half of our entering classes scored at seventeen or below. That didn't mean that they all needed help with the same skills, so it was great to have time for one-on-one instruction connected with their writing assignments and their individual needs.

### **Course Assignments and Expectations**

Fortunately, I'd read Mina Shaughnessy's book *Errors and Expectations*, so I didn't fall into the trap of believing that low scores were equal to low intelligence, and I expected students to excel. I surveyed the writing faculty about their expectations for the regular composition students at the end of their introductory class, and I worked with the Composition Committee to develop new curricula for the basic writing courses that followed the tradition of Arizona State University's Stretch Program, which asks students in basic writing to do the same kinds of assignments expected in the regular composition classes and prepares students for the expectations in the next course they take. My demands, at least initially, were higher than they were for some faculty, who still believed in using grammar workbooks with a few readings and who allowed hand-written assignments.

A computer classroom had been built, and at first my classes were almost alone in using it. But that didn't last very long as other faculty members began to ask to be assigned to teach in the computer classroom. I set up workshops that demonstrated how useful those classrooms could be in helping students to learn to use computers and to revise and edit their papers, as well as to conduct online research using local library and regional library resources. Those resources allowed one student to take what would ordinarily have been a mundane or routine paper on the use of steroids in athletic contexts and to broaden and expand his topic to examine the origination of the Olympic games in Greece, discovering that those athletes also were often required to take drugs to extend their strength and durability.

### **The Subject Matter for Paper Content**

Despite their low scores, I discovered that students had diverse, deep experiences that gave them much to write about the second I stopped having them read literature about subjects they believed were irrelevant to their lives. My involvement with the group of extraordinary creative writers at Morehead State and in the surrounding area was instructive. What were they writing about? Esoteric literature of the literary tradition? No; they were following the model of literature proposed by Terry Eagleton, in his

book *Literary Theory*, which suggests that everyday folks should write about and value their lives, their environments, and their experiences. These things were the focus of those doing creative writing, and I found that basic writers not only could but would write extensively about coal mining, tobacco farming, lumbering, and other topics that had deeply connected relevance to their lives. They would conduct research on farm livestock and discover that there are hundreds of kinds of sheep. They researched the development of mining legislation designed to prevent accidents and black lung disease, but then would argue vehemently that there are too many ways around those regulations, and “somebody’s gonna be hurt.”

When students were interested in the outcomes of their research, I discovered that they worked far harder on making sure their papers were well written. They also began to demonstrate their enthusiasm in other ways. I would walk into the classroom, and the students would already be there and working on their assignments. But they weren’t assignments any longer. They were students’ owned projects, topics the students had chosen and that had deep significance for them. Often their research took on an ethnographic flavor when students consulted with local experts. The student working on the link between smoking and heart disease interviewed his family doctor. The student working on a history of the guitar spent time talking with the owner of the local guitar shop, who pointed the way to different guitar manufacturers, different experts who played guitars, and other resources outside of the books and journals she consulted. The student writing about working in the mines interviewed his coal mining uncle so he’d have the details about mining and mining legislation right, and he surprised me with the amount of money miners make today. I had thought of mining as an occupation that paid very poorly, as in the *Coal Miner’s Daughter*. But where else in Eastern Kentucky can an ordinary man make over twenty dollars an hour? That salary explains why men will do such dangerous work to feed and clothe their families.

In addition, the length of the papers grew as students began to uncover more information than would fit in the length I’d assigned. I loved that after years of hearing that basic writing students don’t write very much. Well, they may not write much when they don’t have much they want to say, but they write a great deal when they have much to talk about. Two page papers grew to four pages. Four page papers grew to six, seven, even twelve pages in length.

What the length of those papers and their quality gave our students was a way to convince themselves that our basic writing classes were no longer “Writing for Dummies 101” classes but real, legitimate college writing courses. This was not high school or grade school writing, like the old days of some basic writing courses when the texts, the workbooks, were the same as grammar schools used. Instead, basic writing was a space for adult discourse about adult topics, written by students who were able to see themselves as adults writing about topics that their teacher and classmates found interesting. There is a joy involved in the discovery that one’s life has value to others, because that evokes a sense of legitimacy and respect for that life.

### **Literacy for the Teacher Means Respecting the Culture of Our Students**

Students could and often did read Victorian literature from England, but they also loved their Kentucky hills and valleys, their precious hollows, and I mean that word in its most respectful instantiation. One reason that many of the students could not even

begin to imagine why on earth someone would want to live any place but rural Eastern Kentucky, despite the endemic poverty, the lack of jobs, and the struggles to make a living, was because they all were taught from infancy not to want to live above their raising. But that way of thinking is about much more than just not making more money than their daddies had made. I began to appreciate what they saw in the mornings with mist among the trees in the hollows.

For example, in the hollows you can watch as the first tender leaves of spring appear down in the warmer hollows and hundreds of shades of green sweep up the sides of the mountains as the weeks go by, only to be joined by the soft shimmering beauty of thousands of redbud trees. In the fall, that process is reversed as the trees at the top of the hills turn blazing red and gold and those colors slide down the hills till the bottom lands of the hollows are

burnished with color and the trees at the top are losing their leaves and becoming bare. Where would one go to repeat that experience, to relive the startling beauty, to smell the earth greening up in spring and bedding down for winter?

When the creative writers in the Morehead area wrote about Eastern Kentucky and its hollows, it was easy to spot how deeply the land had imprinted itself on their psyches. Unless you have seen and grown to love the huge, lacy pink heads of Joe-Pye Weeds, you wouldn't understand their fascination. The flowers are as much as eighteen inches tall, almost a foot wide, and they grow on stems as high as eight feet. They grow in enormous clusters and, despite their size, are incredibly delicate. I first saw them growing on a rocky hillside where the soil was too poor to be growing anything, but there were those Joe-Pye Weeds wildly, recklessly flowering anyway.

They remind me of the people who settled in Eastern Kentucky and whose art, music, and writing have that same intense vigor, that same unwillingness to allow sometimes barren conditions of life to prevent them from blooming. Scratch Kentuckians and one of the first things that runs out of their veins isn't blood, but poetry expressed in all the ways beauty can be expressed. How else would one explain the determination to build fiddles and mouth harps and dulcimers and banjos miles from the nearest big city and to play them with abandon? How else would one explain the tight vocal harmonies or the incessant telling of stories? How else would one explain the growth of bluegrass on the national scene as others learn to appreciate it?

## **A Language of Their Own**

I might have looked down my nose at Appalachian dialect except for the clerk I encountered at Wal-Mart. Soon after I moved to Morehead, and before I was in contact with students, I called Wal-Mart to ask if they had a product I needed. They directed me to the outdoor shop, which was not where what I wanted was located. When I got there, I asked the woman at the cash register where this product was in the store and told her about the misinformation I'd received. "Oh, honey," she told me, "it's your accent. They just couldn't understand you."

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The realization that I was the one with the accent created a perceptual difference that helped me to respect the ways those in Morehead and the surrounding area spoke and wrote. Language is used many different ways by many different folks. It was instructive to learn that there isn't just one Appalachian dialect but many of them. Educated folks tend to speak in a dialect closer to Standard American English, while those with less education tend to speak in a more regional dialect (which my linguistics prof in grad school reminded us frequently could nonetheless accomplish any necessary communicative goals).

I'm still not exactly sure how someone can say, "I was going far to the fair, but got stopped by the fire," and have all those fars, fairs, and fires sound exactly the same to my Northern ears. Pins, pens, and pans sound pretty much alike to me, too. But, Appalachian natives use these words and others understand each other, even if I don't. There must be an inflection or a way of stressing or not stressing the sounds that my ears just don't get.

What I began to find was that those with more standard speech patterns and accents frequently looked down on those with less standard dialects, even though I might be charmed by them. And they expected me not to do or say anything that might be interpreted as judging those with Appalachian dialects negatively, while they went right ahead and judged them negatively.

As a creative writer, I wanted to be able to reproduce dialects but not judge them at all. It's a lesson learned from Mark Twain, as Huck Finn gets "outed" as a boy because he didn't try to catch the yarn in his skirt. Twain reminds us that there are social dialects of all kinds that are imprinted on us all and that create impressions in our listeners. Thus, I worked with my students to visualize differences in sounds and meanings so they would spell words correctly for their demanding academic audience looking for conformity to expected academic standards. It took hard work to help students to retain respect for their own ways of speaking, including slang terms and nonstandard constructions, while developing linguistic tools that would allow them to compete in the marketplace.

### **Appalachian Folks Care**

Go to the doctor, the dentist, the grocery store, anywhere in town—I learned I'd better allow an extra twenty minutes or longer for waiting. Oh, not that anyone would thoughtlessly make me wait; it's just that there were important conversations that needed to occur.

"How's your Mama?"

"I heard your Uncle Joe had a heart attack. How's he doing?"

Conversations like these embellished any and all business transactions, as people caught up with one another's lives.

"Did you hear that Becky Lou had twins? We're going up to Lexington to see the babies on Saturday. Want to come with us?"

"Oh, darn, I have to work. Got any pictures? Bet they are just beautiful. I always did want twins but never had any. You stop by on your way up to Lexington, and I'll have you carry over some pies for Becky Lou. Don't suppose she has time for baking with twins to look after."

There is a literacy to how the conversations flow, one that requires conversational partners to demonstrate concern for the welfare of others and act on that concern. I experienced being on the receiving end of that concern many times over big and small issues. The first time it happened, I was at the CCCCs conference in Chicago and a Morehead colleague came up to me saying, “Marcia, sit down; your house has been flooded.”

She had received a cell phone message on her way to Chicago from another colleague who knew my home was located in an area of town that had flooded. We went up to her room, and she enlisted another colleague to go over and look in the windows to see if I had water in the house. The water had gotten up on the three porches that were covered with several inches of mud. When I returned home, three of the neighboring families sent over the fathers to check it out.

“Take off your shoes and walk around in your socks,” they said. And I knew that I’d be able to feel wet carpeting through my socks. All through my little house were huge muddy footprints. I went back to the door to tell them, “Someone’s been in my house.”

“Yeah, we had the sheriff break in to check out the house and see if you were sleeping when they ordered the evacuation. We knew you weren’t from around here and might not have heard the order to evacuate. We looked in your mailbox to get your name. We didn’t know your name, but we know it now.”

After that night, I’d be out shoveling mud with a snow shovel, and someone would come along and sit on the edge of the porch with me, and they’d cry about their beautiful kitchen cupboards that had to be ripped out, about finding out that a husband had canceled the flood insurance, about clothes in the trees and lost items that floated away on the flood and didn’t return. When Easter arrived, they couldn’t make colored eggs because their kitchens had been gutted. So I made colored eggs for their children, and the moms and I cried together about how a person stands it when everything is gone. Sometimes we laughed about the craziest things, like when my next door neighbors went to pull up their vinyl in the bathroom and the whole darn room collapsed into the crawl space, sink, tub, toilet, and all. That’s one way the big connections between folks in Appalachia are formed, as responses to unbearable loss and tragedy that require sharing whatever we have with those who have less or nothing at all.

Then there are the little things, which after all take on an equivalent level of importance. Take Merle, for instance. Merle is a genius of the hair cutting world. Go in to Merle for a haircut, and he’s watching a show about growing plants or dishing with the customers about Oprah or some other star. A customer can sit down to wait her turn and Merle’s dog jumps up on her lap for a snuggle. She’s a little dog, a Yorkie. When a customer gets into the chair, any pressures she is feeling disappear as Merle massages her head and neck. Not just a quick massage, either. He spends a good ten minutes making his customers feel like goddesses. The talk always comes around to gardens and gardening.

“You need to have yellow and blue flowers in the yard, for Morehead State’s colors,” he told me one afternoon, and then took me outside when my hair was done and he wrapped up several bunches of perennials for me to plant in my garden from his own. In the fall he’d gather seed pods for me, so I could try some new species he’d had success with. I met Merle’s wife, his sister-in-law, his father, and others who were both his customers and his friends. There was always time enough for getting acquainted and making friends at Merle’s beauty shop attached to his home and his garden.



## The Class System

There is a class system in Morehead, and all kinds of snobbery if anyone cares to look for it, but it's a small city and most of the people are connected by birth, marriage, divorce, remarriage, shacking up, politics, religion, education, crime, or death to one another. Literacy in such a small community consists of learning to refrain from any but the most caring kinds of gossip, because unless you've lived there your whole life, you will not know who you may be offending with negative comments. It's fine, for example, to speak about so-and-so who is going through a rough patch and who could use a little help, but not to behave as though you are smarter than or better than the person lowest on the social scale. Read the works of rural Kentuckians, and you'll begin to understand why.

Tuck yourself into a blanket on the sofa on a cold winter's day and listen as Silas House demonstrates his love for the ordinary folks of *Clay's Quilt*, *A Parchment of Leaves*, and *The Coal Tattoo*. Read Rebecca Bailey's Kentuckian characters as they journey through the West in search of their lives in *The Only Road There Is*. Ride with Gurney Norman as he creates stories out of rural Kentucky in *Kinfolks*. Allow George Eklund to dip his pen into soul ink for his poetry in *Assemblage Without Technique*. What you will hear in all of their work is an abiding respect and love for those who live, work, and struggle in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky. Their characters are never stick figures, but always human in the most profound ways possible as they search for life's tender meanings.

## Religion

I knew that I was starting to be accepted into the community when one of students asked me the following question: "Dr. Ribble, have you been saved?" The question is not considered impertinent, nor nosy, nor is it an indication of the feeling of the

questioner that I must surely have needed to be saved. The question is often a conversational opener that creates a space for invitations to church. It may be the first step toward a declaration that the speaker has been saved by attending the First Baptist Church, whose pastor has saved many in the community and would be willing to save me too, if I'd consider attending church there.

I learned that in a small community like Morehead, many people's tightest social networks exist not simply with their

human families but also with their spiritual (church) families. The church family offers a second level of protection when family and friends aren't enough to meet one's needs. One of my colleagues told about sitting in a hospital with a young unwed mother whose family had rejected her. Five or six of the women in the church made it their responsibility to support this young woman and help her, not just through labor and childbirth, but also through the struggle to support herself and her child. They became her mothers, aunts, grandmothers who could provide the necessary advice every young mother

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needs, along with bags of groceries and diapers and other necessities, and likely a small loan now and then if the situation warranted it. This young woman would not be forced to go to apply for welfare alone, because one or more of the older women would go with her, playing the same role a family member would play in more intact families.

Because religion is so deeply integrated into people's lives, students often wanted to use the Bible in their argument papers as a source of truth regarding morals. This created an interesting opportunity to discuss the different kinds of truth we use in arguments without asking students to reject what they have been taught at home and at church. We were able to discuss the differences in the types of proof demanded in personal beliefs, community beliefs, poetic truth, rhetorical truth, and scientific truth. This allowed us to examine the differences between faith, opinion, fact, and inference and to look at truth as permeable and changeable over time. We were able to look at the differences between academic, governmental, secular, and religious values, and see how each set of values is different. Although many of the Morehead students came from relatively isolated communities, with fewer contacts with the diversity of American life than some of students in other colleges have had, they were still able to grasp and work with the issues raised by a diverse world.

## Food and Community

If a young church woman didn't know how to cook, the older women would give her recipes for soup beans, black eyed peas, red-eye gravy, biscuits, shuckey beans, cornbread, hot brown, grits, and collard greens. She would be taught to save her bacon grease, which is one of the essentials for cooking. She'd be shown that one of the best ways to dry shuckey beans is to put them in the back window of the car and let them dry there. She'd learn to make jam cake, seventeen variations of cobbler, and red velvet cake. All of what she'd be taught would take ingredients readily available and make the resulting dish better than it ought to be, all things considered.

One of my mom's rules was invaluable when it came to eating the beloved foods of Eastern Kentucky. She always said, "It's okay not to like some foods, but you need to try them before you make a judgment." So I did. I tried grits, cornbread, and other everyday foods and learned to like them. I tried okra and found out that sometimes I like it and sometimes I don't like it even a little. I tried green beans cooked with bacon or fatback or a hambone and they're fine, but I like them better cooked young in plain water, and with a little butter melted on them after the water is drained. I still like fish better when it's pan-fried with just a light coating of flour, salt, and pepper than when it's dunked in flour, egg, cornmeal and deep-fried. I'm in Cincinnati now, and one of the questions I'm frequently asked is whether I've had Skyline Chili yet. I have and it's fine, but I like the chili I grew up with better.

I make my cornbread with a can of creamed corn and little chunks of whatever melty cheese I happen to have in the refrigerator. I like it with dill havarti, with cojack, with mozzarella. I eat spinach and swiss chard, but resist mustard greens. I like cheesy grits and milk grits with sugar and butter and a hint of vanilla (like a grits rice pudding). And I love biscuits with sausage gravy and make my own with a nice white sauce and a little onion in it. Ham biscuits are great with a little mustard. When one is in another culture, one of the delights to be found is different ways of cooking. I could

talk with students about the foods they liked best and ask them how to cook dishes I hadn't been exposed to yet.

## Conclusion

When I approached students as a learner as well as a teacher, they found it fun to know things I didn't know and to be able to teach me about their lives, their traditions, their beliefs and values. When we encounter students believing both teacher and students have a wealth of information to share, the exchange can be rich. Students taught me, using content they found familiar and comfortable. I taught them, using content that felt familiar and comfortable to me. Respect passed in both directions rather than in only one direction—from student to teacher. This is a lesson that has been known about teaching in Appalachian regions since the development of the schools there, but it is one that bears repeating, because coming to our tasks as teachers is almost always improved when we approach students believing they have much they can teach us, too.

I am still working to help students to become observers of their own environments, their own cultures, so they can report on aspects of their cultures they believe are important. This term we begin by reading a short book on Native American Ojibwa/Chippewa culture by George Cornell and Gordon Henry, Jr. We're then going to read Gordon Henry, Jr.'s book *The Light People*. After weeks of discussion about the various elements of culture Cornell and Henry talk about and Henry tells stories about, my students will then bring together observations about their own neighborhood cultures as ethnographers who can acknowledge value in the worlds they grew up in, worlds not always recognized as having value from an academic perspective. This is similar to the Appalachian valuing of a world not always seen as having academic value, and it cannot be done unless, and until, the teacher has learned to find value there.

My first inspiration in learning to teach this way, by allowing my students to value their worlds and teach me about them, came from my friend Wilma Romatz, who grew up in Kentucky and introduced me to the thinking of Eliot Wigginton, editor of the *Foxfire* books. I shall be forever grateful. I am also grateful to Diane Brunner who introduced me to a number of important ethnographers, including Wendy Bishop, who argued that all people have a right to their own stories, and Clifford Geertz, who argued that all knowledge is first and foremost local. And to the colleagues who suggested that I read George Hillocks, Jr.'s book on the need to reflect on one's teaching. Years after reading the *Foxfire* books, I encountered the scholarly work of John L. Puckett, who argued most cogently that the work begun in Rabun Gap had not ever finished, particularly not the work of valuing students' own lives as able to supply them with vast amounts of knowledge, as the textbooks from which learning could and should often begin. He cites Eliot Wigginton as saying, "My high school students had no experience through which those [high school] texts could come to life, and thus they remained gray and lifeless in their hands" (204). The more I learned about Appalachian culture from my students, other colleagues, and friends in Appalachia, the more I realized just how important it was for me to learn what my students already knew about their communities, families, religions, and cultures, so I could help them bring those vibrant texts to life.

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Marcia Ribble is an Assistant Professor at the University of Cincinnati, where she teaches in the Center for Access and Transition in the Humanities, Media, and Cultural Studies Department of the College of Applied Science. Her PhD, from Michigan State University, is in English, Rhetoric and Composition, with a specialization in Basic Writing. Her e-mail address is [ribbleml@ucmail.uc.edu](mailto:ribbleml@ucmail.uc.edu).