
On Becoming a Composition Student

by Robert S. Miller

As part of my sabbatical work during the fall 1993 semester, I took the course EN 120 Composition with Meg Peterson-Gonzalez. I did this because I wanted to become a writing teacher. Imagine my surprise, when I became a writer instead.

In the past several years as I have gotten deeply involved in our WAC program, now as its coordinator, I have become increasingly interested in the related questions of how students develop as writers and how writing teachers help them do so. These questions are actually psychological ones, and so it seemed appropriate to me, in applying for sabbatical leave from the Psychology Department, to make them the focus of my proposal. Taking the course EN 120 was not originally a part of the proposal, however. That came about almost accidentally.

One day last spring I was talking to Barbara Blaha in the Reading/Writing Center, where I volunteer as a writing consultant. We were discussing different methods of writing facilitation. I decided to take the risk of confiding to her a secret desire I had recently developed. “You know,” I said, “what I’d really like to do some semester is teach a section of Composition.” She did laugh, but not as hysterically as I had feared she might. In fact, she made an encouraging and supportive suggestion: that I audit the course before I try teaching it. Not a bad point. It had, after all, been 28 years since I’d taken a composition course. It just might help to brush up.

I realized the upcoming sabbatical would be the time to do this. I asked Barbara who the best composition teachers were. Later I asked Sally Boland and Roy Andrews the same question. One of the names that was on everyone’s list was

Meg Peterson-Gonzalez. Getting into the student role right away, I rushed to the *Time and Room Schedule* to see whether her section of the course had a desirable meeting time. It did, which I took as a signal from the Divine that I should enroll.

Meg hesitated only momentarily. I know the dilemma—it's not the easiest thing to have a faculty member taking your class. I told her I would play whatever role would make her most comfortable: passive observer to full participant. She quickly declared that the only way I would get anything out of this experience would be to do the same writing as the students. I told Meg I was sure I could pass for an 18-year old freshman. She did laugh hysterically. I decided, therefore, I would try to pass as a nontraditional student.

I planned to do all the assignments, but as the course started, I was still thinking that I was really there to observe. Everyone said how good Meg was. I'd been told she used the process approach, which I expected would contrast with the approach I vaguely remembered in Freshman Composition at Amherst College 28 years ago. I had heard that Meg ran Composition as a writing workshop. That would be new to me. I went into the course planning to watch carefully and see how this woman worked her magic. I never expected she'd work it on me.

The evening after the first class meeting, I wrote a lengthy entry in my personal journal recording several initial reactions to the course. First, I was much impressed with how involved Meg got us that first day. She had us freewrite about writing, divided us into groups to discuss what we had written, and then led a full-class discussion which was remarkably lively. Second, I was surprised to discover how ill at ease I was in the nontraditional student role. I kept having to hold myself back. I wanted to answer every question. In my small group, I couldn't help being the leader, even though I tried not to be.

But the strongest reaction was to the syllabus, which Meg

distributed near the end of the meeting. In my journal I wrote:

Then she distributed the syllabus and discussed the course. From the student side of the room I was much more aware, than I am as instructor, of how much tension suddenly filled the place. Some of it was mine. The idea of having to turn in five pages of writing every Thursday is scary. Though I suspect freedom to choose topics is good, I immediately experienced my old What-will-I-write-about? panic.

I realize now that my reaction to the syllabus hints at how real the student role was to become for me, but for a while longer I clung to the security of thinking of myself as an infiltrator from the faculty, there to observe how to teach writing.

In the next week I wrote additional journal entries, each about what Meg was doing to make the course like a workshop. On Tuesdays we were to spend about half the class in our five-person discussion groups talking about pieces of writing we had read, and the other half writing or reading each other's drafts. On Wednesdays each of us had a scheduled 10-minute individual conference with Meg to discuss whatever we were writing to turn in on Thursday. Thursdays were to begin with an opportunity to read to the class the pieces we were turning in, and to end with a lesson usually based on assigned reading in Murray's *Write to Learn*, which was the text for the course.

That first week I wrote about how skillfully Meg was drawing the students into each of these experiences. Meanwhile I was keeping to myself, trying to maintain a low profile in class, and brooding about what I would write about. The workshop model made me decide my audience for these pieces was the other students in the class. Therefore I didn't want to write about anything that would reveal my true

identity as a faculty member. I particularly didn't want to write about my real reason for taking the course. So obsessed was I with that thought that, of course, it ended up being my chosen topic for the first paper.

Boy, did that paper suck! My conflict about the topic came through in every paragraph. I am much impressed with how encouraging Meg managed to be in the comment she wrote: "The voice is unified and the tone consistent. . .the piece is very accessible to a lay audience." She did, however, admit confusion as a reader: "I found myself arguing with the piece. . . I wasn't sure how serious you were being." And, of course, that was exactly the problem. Meg wasn't sure as a reader, because I wasn't sure as a writer. I needed a new topic.

At the end of one of my first-week journal entries is the single sentence, "Maybe I should write about Cliff Conant." The second week I decided to do so.

That decision was a turning point for me in the course, and I wish I could remember all the factors that contributed to it. One was that the first week Meg read her own piece (she does the same writing she asks of the students), and it was based on a personal experience. Another was that in my first conference with Meg, we talked about how personal writing can be therapeutic, if it is honest. And another was that our first lesson had been to think of writing as storytelling. I had a personal story to tell about Cliff Conant, and I suspected doing so might be therapeutic.

It was a challenging assignment I set for myself: telling a complicated story, pieces of which were spread out over a period of 25 years, a story that could easily be sentimentalized. I had known Cliff Conant in college. We had had a brief, but intense, friendship. I had lost track of him until I read two years ago in the *Amherst Alumni News* that he had died of AIDS. The obituary hinted that he had led a conflicted and lonely life. This summer I had found copies of letters I wrote

to Cliff right after college. They had made me realize now, as I don't think either of us had then, that we had been in love. Each too conflicted about our sexuality to act on what we were feeling, we had simply drifted apart. Finding those letters had thrown me into a state of regret and grief that was still ongoing the first weeks of Composition.

I put the story through about five drafts, working on it several hours a day for several days. Writing about this deeply personal matter, but for an audience I did not know very well, somehow made me consciously aware of my writing process. I began to notice, as I wrote, what I was doing, what worked, and what didn't. Meg had told me in conference that the secret of good writing is honesty. I tried to reduce the Cliff story to what I knew was true. That seemed to keep me away from sentimentality, and I discovered when I was done that I understood the story in a way I had not when I began. Furthermore, I liked what I had written. So did Meg. So did the two students who read it the day Meg asked us to circulate something for others to read.

I realized I had other stories to tell, other matters to resolve. Meg encouraged me to continue with this kind of personal writing, and as I did so, her honest, open responses to what I was writing—what worked for her, what didn't, what questions remained—helped me focus and revise. So did the feedback I got from Nancy Hill and Roy Andrews at the Reading/Writing Center, where I occasionally took an early draft. Over the next several weeks, I wrote a series of papers that together constitute my coming-out story as a gay man. I found myself spending two to three hours a day writing. After weekends when I left town and therefore my word processor, I found myself hurrying home to write.

One day it occurred to me with stunning suddenness that it had been four weeks since I had written in my journal about what Meg was doing in the Composition course. It had been

that long since I had really noticed. Just a week into the course I had abandoned my observer role and had become a student. My focus had shifted from the question of how to teach writing to the question of how to write.

It took a while longer, however, for me to feel fully integrated into the writing workshop the class was meant to be. I was at first reluctant to share the coming-out pieces with the first-year students. Learning to trust them enough to do so was complicated by the fact that eight weeks into the course, I was still trying for acceptance as a nontraditional student and hiding my identity as a faculty member. However, during the ninth week one of my classmates finally asked me who I really was, and once I had answered his question honestly, word quickly got out. I noticed I was more warmly accepted as a faculty member than I had been as a nontraditional student, but that may have been because I was more comfortable not having to keep the secret.

The next week I decided to get rid of my other secret as well. We were discussing a short piece Meg had assigned us to read. It was a gay man's account of the development of his awareness of AIDS. I told the class, "I relate strongly to this story, because it is my story too." I know nothing quite so liberating as the sound of the closet door slamming behind me. The next week I circulated one of my coming-out pieces and got supportive and helpful responses from my fellow student writers. At last I was a member of the workshop.

My experience in Meg Peterson-Gonzalez's course was one of becoming. I became a student. I became a member of the writing workshop. I became a writer. I became aware of my writing process and of the fact that writers must be honest.

My process of becoming was well underway by mid-semester when we submitted portfolios to Meg for evaluation: our three best polished pieces, plus supporting materials. That week our individual conferences expanded to 30 minutes. During these Meg discussed with each of us our writing processes and our goals for the rest of the semester. When she asked me my goal, I replied without hesitation, "To write fiction." I had long harbored a secret desire to contribute to