
Teaching the Elephants to Tango

by Michael J. Brien

The New Hampshire Job Training Council asked me to teach a college level composition class to AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) participants in their FIP 4 JOBS (Family Independence Program For Job Opportunities and Basic Skills) Program who were in need of such a course prior to their entering one of the Council's Tuition Assisted college degree programs. I was excited about the possibility, and was immediately drawn to the metaphor James Belasco uses in his rather slim-volumed book, *Teaching The Elephant to Dance: The Manager's Guide to Empowering Change*.

In the book, James Belasco recounts a story of a young elephant who is trained for the circus by his being shackled with heavy chains to deeply embedded stakes. As the elephant grows, he does not resist the chains even though he now has the power to break free of them. His conditioning has limited his movement.

I wanted to explore the conditioning of these welfare clients, and get them to believe that through observation and empowerment skills that could be developed by the writing process they might begin to change the way they saw themselves, and perhaps in the way case technicians, managers, and social workers, viewed them. Thus, unlike the circus elephants, they could realize the innate weakness in the flimsy manacles that they thought held them back.

Seven clients signed up for an eleven week course. Every Monday morning for three hours, they met

with me at the computer lab of the Gilford Campus of New Hampshire College. At the first class meeting, I asked them to introduce themselves and share why they chose to attend this course. Quickly, I realized that it wasn't that they did not have something to say that may have made them appear cold or unresponsive, or have their counselors question their readiness for college; it was not having someone to say it to that had limited them. One woman confided that she felt people didn't listen to her because she spoke so poorly. She stumbled through her introduction, halting often to collect and refocus her thoughts; and in that morning's first writing sample, her verbal speech patterns were repeated almost identically. As the students introduced themselves, they began to see the benefits of improving their ability to tell their stories.

Yet, what affected me almost immediately was the quality of the class discussions. These students were intensely interested in their world. They were full of opinion and comment on a wide variety of subjects ranging from domestic violence to para-psychology. They did have stories to tell.

I based the course on Fred Morgan's text, *Here and Now III, An Approach to Writing Through Perception*. It is a non-intimidating book that illustrates the techniques of focusing and bringing stories to an audience in more vivid detail. Classwork and homework assignments were designed as artist sketches where, in turn, each physical sense was explored within a particular environment. I asked them to reserve judgement on an issue until they'd smelled it, tasted it, touched it, heard it, spoken with it, and finally felt it gurgle in their gut. I insisted that they not accept generalizations with-

out supporting them with specifics.

While each participant's editing was sharpened immediately with the constant requests on each other's part for more detail, two students, at our second class meeting, wanted to discuss the notion of being wary of how much detail one would share before knowing their intended audience fully.

"Should I tell you I enjoy hosting Tupperware parties?" a determined young woman blurted out. She went on to explain to me, the class nodding in approval, that as an AFDC client she could expect to be sanctioned for not reporting any income over twenty-dollars a month. A minimum sanction period would result in a three-month reduction in her grant proportionate to the income she received above the grant amount. As a Tupperware Hostess she would have to declare as income the value of the free gifts she would have received. Because of such bureaucratic control in even this small bit of their lives, seldom did these clients report such changes in their income.

So, too, were they familiar with the distinctions between inference based on fact, and inference improperly made. Much of their lives had been spent digging out from the fall-out of improper inferences made by social workers, psychiatrists, neighbors, and society, based on limited, skewed information and opinion.

At each additional class meeting another tool in the writing process was introduced and practiced. Writing exercises expanded from being aware of their surroundings, to clearly observing a scene, getting the feel of action, observing a person, perceiving emotional attitudes, to looking at themselves and examining desires. As each student participated in these exercises, they began to employ and better understand the age-old

foundations of writing: unity, economy, coherence, emphasis, narration, contrast, qualification and argument.

Yet, I was learning as much from them as they from me. Many of them had not planned to mess up their lives; it just happened. All of them would have loved to be living the American Dream of a loving spouse, two kids, a car, and a white clapboard cape with a picket fence. However, there were physical, mental and emotional barriers that needed to be surmounted in all of their lives. For some of them these barriers had spanned generations. But messing up was not a bad thing if they could learn from it.

I had recently heard that message from Brother Blake, the master teacher in Robert Inchansti's *Spitwad Sutras: Classroom Teaching as Sublime Vocation*, who had insisted that "finding your voice, as a writer, is really just finding your authority as a person . . . Writing is, in effect, the soul seeking its context, and in finding its context, discovering itself."

This was what I was about in this course, enabling these clients to find their voice, their authority, their soul. For some it was difficult. Of the seven who began the course, three dropped out within the first four weeks of class. One got a job, another had difficulty as a single parent keeping her car running and her children protected. The third had deeper reasons which I don't think she herself has understood yet. Abused and sexually molested as a child, she still seemed stuck at eight or nine or ten years old. Her sentence structures were basic. Her vocabulary limited. Her ideas disjointed. Her frame of reference distorted. She openly admitted to her being molested, yet couldn't find the authority inside herself to commit her feelings to paper.

“It’s hard to write about somebody inside,” had been her complaint each time I asked for clarification of an idea she was presenting in an assignment.

Finally, I asked her to begin researching the topic of child molestation. I wanted her to break free of the barrier that seemed to imprison her, her feeling that it had happened only to her.

After heavy revision and rethinking, this is what she turned out for her fifth writing assignment:

At one point I wanted to put all men in jail. My mother was an alcoholic and couldn’t see or acknowledge that I was being abused by uncles and my grandmother’s friend. I felt that if these men hurt me that all men would. I can remember the day I went to my first foster home. My foster mother brought me with her to pick up my foster father. He looked in the back to say hi, and I jumped back from him because I was scared of men. Now my attitude has changed. Since I am in FIP 4 JOBS training, I realize that I can have more confidence in men. The education I am receiving has taught me that all men aren’t evil.

It also makes me feel that I don’t have to be an alcoholic or child abuser. I can make sure my kids have more opportunity than I had when I was a child. I can continue to go to school and get some training so I can help others that have been in the same position that I have been in.

She had promised to continue to practice her new-found writing craft this past autumn on a tutorial basis. But she has dropped out of the program. I have not heard from her in months. While I feel that the seed

of hope has been planted, I also realize that to produce a long-lasting effect, the nurturing must continue. For me, that may be the greatest benefit in Writing Across the Curriculum programs—that the inherent nurturing of writing, body communicating with soul, must be holistic.

Two of the four remaining students have enrolled in certificate programs at an area Technical College. Another has undergone more intensive testing and training through Vocational Rehabilitation to better prepare him for college. The remaining student had taken the course as a measure of her self-improvement.

That's a fifty-seven percent completion rate. While it's only the beginning of a continuing journey towards successfully leaving the welfare roles, it's not a bad start for a group of citizens society has often written off.

One of the final assignments of the course was to define and determine as accurately as they could the process of the writer discovering another person's attitude, the rationale behind their actions. Narration, storytelling, maintaining unity in the piece, and deeper understanding of others, were my hoped-for results of the assignment. Here is what one writer shared with us:

I sat in the room thinking to myself, "This feud has been going on in the family for as long as I could remember." It was always something, either someone did this or someone did that and it never ended, just one thing after another.

I am older now, and I would like to think that I'm beyond the petty bickering over insignificant bullshit that really didn't matter very much in the first place.

I don't mean to mislead you, or say that I'm better than anyone else, because I'm not. All I'm really trying to say is that I too used to think that way when I was younger, until one day my father told me a story that would forever change the way that I would treat others. It was a story about not caring about others' feelings, and the price one may pay as a result of one's actions.

I came out of my bedroom, sat down at the kitchen table, and started to prepare breakfast when I looked up to see my Dad sitting at the head of the table just staring down at the table surface in front of him. So I said, "Good morning. What's for breakfast?"

He just sort of glanced up, nodded and grumbled acknowledgement. Then he looked at me for a moment and asked, "Do you remember your Uncle?"

"No," I said, "not really. I remember you talking about him, why?"

He paused for a moment thinking about it. Then he started to speak in the reverent whisper he always used when he wanted to make a point or when he wanted to have you learn something. "That's ok. It was a long time ago and you were still very young. But let me tell you about your uncle. He was a good man at heart but he didn't treat people very well."

"So why did he treat people so badly?" I asked.

"I think it was because he was unhappy about something. Maybe because he had done something wrong a long time ago and the guilt of what he had done was making him unhappy."

Then his face started to change. It had the look of someone in thought, like someone trying to remem-

bersomething deep and shrouded in a mist of the past.

“Well the point is that he didn’t treat people well and so after a while people stopped trying to be around him. Now this went on for a long time until about a week and a half before his death, when he started doing something uncharacteristic. He started going around apologizing to all the people he had treated badly over the years.” He paused for a moment, then continued. “It was like he knew he was going to die and he wanted to make amends to all the people he had treated wrongly in his life before he was to pass on. He even tried to find me, but I was gone that day and so he never got to see me before he passed on.”

Then this strange look came over his face like someone who was remembering something painful to them and he said, “He just came downstairs one day, sat down at the breakfast table, looked at his wife lovingly and told her he had always loved her and always would. Then he crossed his forearms on the table in front of him and put his head down on his arms like a child at school trying to rest at their table, and was gone.”

He paused in deep thought for what felt like a long time, and in that time several looks crossed his face; pain, regret, loss, puzzlement, and then he continued.

“I think the point I’m trying to make is that if you treat people badly you will someday have to answer for your actions. And this is the same for all things. Whatever you do, you will someday have to answer for it. If not to yourself, to someone or something else. You see I think your uncle had

only a limited amount of time to settle the affairs of his life, and sadly, I don't think he accomplished his task. I have thought about this over the years and I don't think I would want to have all those wrongs on my conscience either."

Then he looked at me, arose without a word, and walked away. Leaving me to ponder the story he had just told me.

I was thrilled. Not only had the writer investigated the attitude of one individual, but he had managed to explore the issues of the soul affecting three men in this family, an uncle, a father and a son. I did not teach this. At most I enabled it to happen; maintaining the physical comfort of the room, the encouragement and peer editing of fellow students, and my gentle prodding, permitted this writer's seed to sprout. As these students walked away after the last class, I pondered the stories they had left with me. I realized that I had not changed their world for them. But I had helped them to recognize that the chains that once held them as young elephants to deeply embedded stakes of a welfare cycle could be broken. They could now trumpet their own freedom. We, as instructors committed to a Writing Across the Curriculum program in the varied disciplines we share with our 17-70 year old college students, must ask our students to sound similar calls to freedom, and in an even more essential role, we must prepare that nurturing place in our hearts that will hear their calls.