

Chapter 14. Into the World: The Social Value of Writing

In late August 1968, after a nominal and uninformative 6-week training for an emergency teaching credential, before the start of classes, I went out to Chicago to visit my college friend, drawn by word of an anti-war protest going to be staged outside the Democratic Convention. Not knowing what to expect, on the first night of the Convention Marty and I cautiously watched on TV and saw another friend being tear-gassed. On the second night, enraged, we joined the demonstrations and chanted “the whole world is watching.” Although a march through the city did not have an official parade permit, Dick Gregory told us from the stage there was nothing wrong with him inviting the thousands of us to visit his home. We joyfully began to walk until we ran into military vehicles, barbed wire, and tear gas. Filled with adrenalin we ran towards them until we could no longer. Every night for the remainder of the convention week I was on the streets, pushed by anger. This brought home to me that we were living through history, which was made by our actions as individuals and groups. I also realized this was a media event, on both sides, to display our alternate resolves and to project our points of view. The show of it became absolutely clear to me, when a couple of us retreated to a local cafeteria to recover. Some nearby tables were inhabited by the same police that had just confronted us. We all just quietly nursed our coffee now that we were off-camera and off-stage.

So visibly seeing that history unfolded through our actions, but our actions had to leave their mark, motivated me to make a transformative difference as a teacher, changing what I found oppressive, stultifying, and discriminatory about schools. I needed to do more than just hide out from the draft. Actually, teaching transformed me much more than I transformed teaching. Earlier experiences primed me, but two years teaching early grades in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn crystallized new ways of writing, acting, and relating to others. I learned to communicate with students, found ways to develop their literacies, wrote collaboratively with them, and created elementary school materials through daily writing. During those same years I did my own creative writing, took some acting lessons, appeared in a couple of off-off-Broadway productions, formed new kinds of friendships, entered therapy, and changed my orientation toward the world—finding satisfaction not in the search for meaning, but in need-fulfilling relationships. My new commitments mobilized all I had learned and focused my energies to supporting other people’s needs. I began to know why I wanted to write and to help others to learn to write.

P.S. 93K: Communicating with Young People

I was assigned to PS 93K in the heart of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, and I rented a studio apartment in Clinton Heights, a block from a Middle Eastern

neighborhood with fresh pita bakeries and cheap restaurants. I was ready to set out on an adult life. But the sixties kept happening. The first day of instruction in the fall was met with the Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike over community control of schools. New York City, as an experiment, had decentralized the assignment of principals and teachers to community boards in the largely black Ocean Hill-Brownsville district, resulting in the displacement of many union teachers. The neighboring Bedford-Stuyvesant district including PS 93K also experienced the strike which lasted almost two months. I sided with the community and was one of three teachers who “liberated the school” by using massive bolt cutters on the locked chains at the front gate. For the first few days I held a semblance of classes for the lowest grades, and then taught fourth grade for the duration of the strike. When it was over, the community took control of the school through death threats to the principal, and then appointed their own.³

While I had the support of the community, I did not enjoy the support of the returning teachers. I was assigned a third-grade class, with the students the other teachers wanted to get out of their classrooms. I had little mentoring, virtually no supplies (one ream of decomposing yellow paper), and a few ancient textbooks. I created materials every day by getting up far too early, composing stories and math exercises directly on spirit masters. I then went to the school before anyone else, entering the basement school supply room with an illicit key to run off copies of the day’s materials, using paper I had purchased on my own. I frequented my local used bookstore where I would buy children’s books for pennies each by the box (thank you, bookman Sam!) to create a class library. The classroom did have an overhead projector but I had to buy my own acetates. I haunted school materials stores and took kids on field trips through New York City by twos and threes every Saturday. It was the sixties. As a bow to conventionality, I did wear ties, but they were a mile wide and psychedelic. I tied back my shoulder length hair in a pony tail.

I was impressed by Sylvia Ashton Warner’s *Teacher* (1963), Herbert Kohl’s *36 Children* (1967), and James Herndon’s *The Way it ‘Spozed to Be* (1968)—all of which drew on children’s experiences. In my own neighborhood I met some cartoonists working on the pilot for *Sesame Street*, then also in the works. I did some trial scripts for them but wasn’t brought in, yet that too gave me ideas for an approach. The *Bank Street Readers*, the first urban focused graded reading series, appeared in 1965, but they were not available in my school—or at least not for my class. Still, the critique of white suburban readers was in the air, which led me to make my own version on daily spirit masters. My undergraduate confidence in being able to produce writing on demand, and my literary analysis of structure and community situations helped me create stories about a boy and a girl living in the same neighborhood as my students and engaging in the same daily

3. Maurice Carroll, Parents Bar Principal from School in Brooklyn. *New York Times*, November 20, 1968, p. 32

experiences of cooking, shopping, family, neighborhood problems, and getting into trouble with big kids. I drew on what kids told me and what I saw of the world that surrounded them.

I also led the class in collaborative story and script writing, based on TV shows and movies they were familiar with as well as their everyday lives—people on their block, how to fix cars, how to fish. We then used these as regular reading activities. At first we created short pieces of a few sentences, but eventually we wrote a five page play based on a then popular TV cartoon show *Crusader Rabbit*. Composing and producing it took us several weeks. Events and lines were initially quite random as children excitedly yelled out ideas, and I remember the chaos of trying to bring some coherence and closure to the plots. The transcribed versions showed signs of that chaos, but all managed to somehow to get to “The End.” Bringing some semblance of order to these chaotic collaborative composing sessions taught me how to organize discussions as a teacher, provide productive responses to student writing, and move creativity forward. These experiences with young children first taught me how to tap into the perspectives and interests of authors, giving them their space, while providing guidance that would allow them to express their thinking more fully and to open up higher levels of thinking. Working with unruly eight-year-olds prepared me well to later lead faculty meetings and to pull together editorial projects. One thing I learned was that general directives to the whole group were usually futile, and I needed to address people individually and specifically: Dari, please be quiet. Joseph please be quiet. . . . Professor Jones, please organize the committee. Bill, could I see that draft by January 15.

I also learned to be more clearly communicative. To write on the chalk board and on overheads legibly I became self-conscious about handwriting, and I developed legible block printing. I adopted simple sentence structure and narrative sequencing for my classroom materials and newsletters to parents. In my tasks and instructions, I attempted to remove anything that would distract students from the learning and practice at hand. I eliminated anything that might stand between students and the targeted learning.

The first year of teaching was stressful and exhausting given the situation, the size of classes, and lack of materials, leaving me little energy for creative work beyond the classroom. I did keep a small journal, especially documenting my excursions through the city with students. In my files are only a handful of attempts at poems during this year, but these also became simpler in syntax and narrative. When I had any energy left, I continued to read through the literary canon and translated the lengthy Middle English “Pearl Poem” as I was particularly fascinated by its unusual stanzaic form. In this way I was able to stay in touch with my grad student identity, despite my unhappiness the previous year. It was hard to imagine myself as anything other than an academic, even though I was finding there was more to life.

The school year finally ended and I had summer off with a very little bit of money (my annual pay was just under \$7,000 and I spent a lot of that on books

and materials for the class). Through the intervention of the community which supported me because I had supported them in the strike, I also had a job for the next year, despite attempts by the returned teachers to have me removed. So in the summer of '69, in the spirit of the times, I decided to discover America, and drove my convertible across country. I passed through farming communities across the Midwest enjoying local family restaurants, though I got strange looks and cold shoulders as the hippy outsider. Several times pickup trucks with gun racks trailed me to the county line. I also enjoyed the great national parks across the North and into Canada. I was overwhelmed by the grandeur of the Rockies, and realized how small we humans were. I shared the mind-enhancers offered by my hitchhikers. I got out to San Francisco just in time to see the moon landing televised on the ceiling of the Fillmore West during a Joe Cocker and Country Joe and the Fish concert. "Far out, man. Like really far out." The movie *Easy Rider* was released just two days before I left, but I only saw it when I got back home. Though my trip was not nearly so dramatic as the movie, there was enough for me to identify with and feel part of the times that were a-changin'. I didn't do a lot of writing on the trip, but did come back with a greater opening to risk and even less attachment to conventionality.

That fall I was part of a team, teaching first grade students identified as having emotional difficulties. The small class gave me lots of opportunity for individual interaction with troubled and demanding students, though I had no professional knowledge of psychology to make sense of what was going on with them. Since the materials and curricula were well established (though I was hardly enamored with them) and responsibility was shared among the team, there was little work to take home and I had more energy and leisure to devote to my personal relationships and other activities. I started writing poems more regularly, in a more direct, personal style. I wrote a few short stories and opening chapters of novels, though never getting further. I read at open mic nights at bars and poetry circles. I began drama classes and by the end of the year was in a couple of productions at a progressive theatre in Brooklyn Heights. Among the many things I learned from acting was transposing my own memories and experience into the meaning I was communicating and drawing strength and inspiration from my fellow actors in unfolding situations. I also became aware of my physical presence, location on stage, and what I would look like from the audience's perspective. All of these intersected with what I was simultaneously learning from therapy. They also were ultimately applicable to writing.

Interpersonal Psychotherapy; Communicating with Adults

The second fall of my teaching I fell in with a group of people who were in psychotherapy following the interpersonal principles of Harry Stack Sullivan. I formally

entered therapy with Tony Gabriele when my girlfriend at the time, tiring of my novice self-analysis, complained “I’m not your shrink.” While the therapy was directed towards improving my interactions and communications in daily face-to-face relations, I believe it had deep impact on my writing, as I was coming to understand writing relationships as an extension of face-to-face relationships, only being played out on a more distant stage.

A core element of the therapy was learning to recognize anxiety while continuing to pursue important needs and activities without digression or distraction, despite the anxiety. Writing, of course, is fraught with anxiety, and also open to digression, distraction, or even avoidance. This learning to recognize anxiety while continuing to act helped give stronger direction to my writing and helped me deal with the avoidance and procrastination that plague even the most skilled of writers, particularly when the task is emotionally challenging. Understanding how anxiety could distract and disrupt spontaneous impulses also helped me locate the things that I really wanted to say and write rather than those words that would protect me from anxious feelings.

Second, I came to understand more clearly that personal interaction was aimed at collaboration and mutual need satisfaction rather than protecting self-esteem or impression management. I came to understand my writing as communicative, aimed at successful participation in activities. This gave me different criteria for setting my goals, elaborating my meanings, and revising my writing. I came to look for different satisfactions from my writing—in getting things done, in being effective, in making the situation work.

Third, I learned to recall, recount, and analyze in detail how interactions unfolded and how they were disrupted by anxious behaviors. In my weekly sessions I was asked to report on how interactions evolved second by second, and how my interactions would have looked if I were observing from a corner of the room. Even more difficult, I was asked to observe what I did without controlling or consciously directing spontaneous behavior. This ultimately led to changed spontaneous behavior, as I came to perceive situations differently and to be less distracted by anxiety into counter-productive behavior. I began to understand how interactions evolved, with each response, no matter how minute, influencing what happened next. In my writing this attuned me to how each word in a text affected the reader to engage or disengage with what followed—and to build meaning and response temporally.

Further, as part of the self-discovery process, I wrote more about myself and my emotions—through autobiography, dream journals, dream poems, expressive poems. My dreams were vivid and plentiful. Writing was bursting forth from me, even as I was also occupied with teaching, acting, friendships, and relationships. I have more drafts, notebooks, and files from that one year than ever before. Some of my poetry and a short story from the period were published in small journals. That productive energy continued afterward, though to be invested in my professional work.

Self in Society

Finally, I was introduced to interdisciplinary social theory about how individuals developed within social worlds. I read Sullivan's books and discovered his connection with an interdisciplinary group of scholars of his time, such as Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Edward Sapir, Gregory Bateson, W. I. Thomas, and Harold Lasswell.⁴ This started me thinking socially. This was a time of much mental rearrangement on my part as I faced new situations, became more participatory in more collaborative relationships, and learned more about the people around me and how they interacted. These experiences were more mind-bending than any of the theme enhancements which I soon left behind.

The theory world I started to become familiar with also helped crystallize a rationale behind the values I had been developing. As I came to understand the deeply social nature of human life and needs, and the impulses toward sociality embedded in our biological and cultural evolution, I no longer wondered about the loss of divine warrant for ethical social behavior, the desire to do good for others, and the satisfactions of cooperation for human betterment, local and global. My questions about a meaningful life were put to rest and purely secular answers were more than satisfactory to give my life direction.

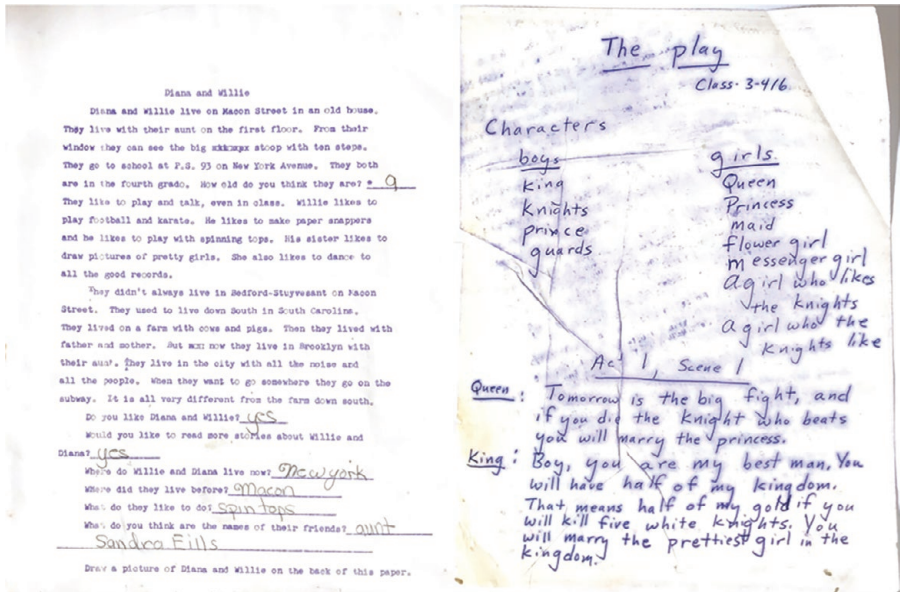


Figure 14.2. Writing in third grade. Photo courtesy of Charles Bazerman.

4. I was later to put together my understanding of Sullivan's work and that of his group in a study of his journal *Psychiatry* (see Bazerman 2005f). In another pair of studies I explored the connection between his work and that of Vygotsky (see Bazerman 2001a, 2001d)