

First Silence, Then Paper

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I came to teach at The Wyoming Writing Project in Gillette, and John Warnock told me to shut up, sit down, and write.

I was in the right place. Writing begins when teachers give their students silence and paper--then sit down to write themselves.

That isn't all there is to teaching writing, a demanding craft that is backwards to most traditional teaching.

We have to create an environment in which our students can become authors--authorities--on a subject by writing about it. Then they may learn to write by teaching us their subject, listening to our reaction to it, and revising their text until we are taught.

It isn't easy for me to be a student to my students' writing. I want to be the authority, to initiate learning, to do something--anything--first, to be a good old American take-charge guy. I keep having to re-educate myself to get out of the way, be patient, wait, listen, behave as I was commanded to behave in Wyoming.

This attitude, of course, is what I have to re-teach myself day after day, year after year as a writer: to create quiet, to listen, to be ready if the writing comes. I am a writer and a teacher, and those of us who are, each day, both teacher and learner have to teach ourselves what we teach our students. We experience the difficulty of learning at the writing desk what so glibly can be said behind the teacher's desk--"be specific," "show, don't tell," "give examples," "make it flow."

It is our job as writers to create a context in which we can write, and it is our

job as teachers of writing to create a context that is as appropriate for writing as the gym is for basketball. To do that I think we must consider seven elements.

Silence

Emptiness. Writing begins when I feel the familiar but always terrifying "I have nothing to say." There is no subject, no form, no language. Sometimes as I come to the writing desk, I feel trapped in an arctic landscape without landmarks, an aluminum sky with no East or West, South or North. More often I feel the emptiness as a black pit without a bottom and with no light above. No down, no up. Soft furry walls with no handholds. Despair.

That's the starting point for good writing, an emptying out of all we have said and read, thought, seen, felt. The best writing is not a parroting of what others have said--or what we have said--before. It is an exploration of a problem we have not solved with language before. I have circled this question the editor of forum placed before me, "What are the contexts in which effective writing can take place?" I write this text to solve that problem, first of all, for myself. I wonder if I have anything to say; I fear I do not, but I start making notes. I do not look so much at what others--and I--have said before, but what I find being said on my own page. The emptiness began to disappear when John Warnock gave me the gift of silence. I sat. I waited. The well began to fill.

We must begin our personal curriculum and our classroom curriculum with John Warnock's gift of silence. How rare it is that we encourage--even allow--our stu-

dents freedom from busyness, moments of stillness, relief from the teacher's voice--quackity, quackity, quackity.

How rare it is we allow ourselves stillness. I try to start each day with fifteen minutes in which I just stare vacantly out of the window into myself, notebook open, pen uncapped. My vacant staring must be as disturbing to others as a class of students looking out of the windows to themselves is to some administrators. It must seem a sign of mental illness, evidence of an acute cranial vacuum, proof you have left the company of those around you and become, in fact, a space shot. When my mother-in-law lived with me, she took such staring as a social signal that conversation was needed. When I visit in other homes, or people visit mine, my early morning vacuity (indication to me that I am having my most productive moments of the day) causes others to leap into social action--quackity, quackity, quackity.

We must begin our writing curriculum with quiet, an unexpected and terrifying but productive, essential nothingness.

Territory

Emptiness can not be maintained. The silence will fill and, if we filter out what is trivial, what we have succeeded at before, what we know, we will see and hear what surprises us. In the writing course the student is surprised at what he or she is in the process of knowing.

Again we have to turn our curriculum away from what is traditional and even may be appropriate in other subjects but is not appropriate for the learning of writing. In most courses our students come to us knowing they are ignorant of the subject matter, and we work hard to convince them of that ignorance. In the writing course our students come to us thinking they have nothing to say, and it is our responsibility to help them discover that they have plenty to say that is worth saying.

The beginning point is, again, a kind of nothingness, a responsible irresponsibility

on the part of the teacher. No talk before writing, no assignments, no story-starters, no models, no list of possible topics--nothing that reveals you think the student has nothing worth saying and makes the student dependent on you for subject matter. Students will, of course, plead for a life preserver--a topic, any topic, even what I did on my summer vacation--but if you toss it to them they will not learn how to find and develop their own subjects, the basis of the writing process.

Instead of assignments--our assignments--the student is challenged to find his or her own assignments. We may have to help by drawing out of our students, in class and in conference, what they know. We may have to have our students interview each other, and then tell the class about the subjects on which the person interviewed is an authority. We may have to have our students list the subjects on which they are authorities, including jobs and out-of-class activities. But those are all crutches we use when we can not stand the silence. It is far more responsible if we have the courage to wait.

Time

Waiting means time, time for staring out of windows, time for thinking, time for dreaming, time for doodling, time for rehearsing, planning, drafting, restarting, revising, editing.

I seem, to some of my colleagues, prolific, yet most of my writing evolved over years. Some of the things I am writing this year have written roots in my files that go back for ten or twenty years. The psychic roots go deeper. We can not give our students years within an academic unit that is measured in 4 to 14 weeks, but we must find ways to give them as much time as possible. This means fewer assignments, in most courses, with frequent checkpoints along the way to make sure that time is being used.

Students need, as writers need, discipline applied to their time. There

should be a firm deadline for the final copy--announced in advance--and then deadlines along the way, perhaps for proposals, research reports, titles, leads, ends, outlines, first, second, third or even fourth drafts. There may be a quantity demand: a page a day, or five pages a week, but pages that may be notes, outlines, drafts, false starts, edits, revisions, as well as final copy.

Time for writing must be fenced off from all other parts of the curriculum. This is not easy, because we have so many pressures on us, and we try to double or triple up. Many teachers are still trying to assign a paper on a reading, correct the first draft for grammar, and say they are teaching literature, writing, and language. Writing should, of course, be used to test our students' knowledge of literature, but that is only one form--a limited, schoolbook form of writing.

We must encourage writing that isn't bound by the limits of someone else's text and isn't restricted to a single form. Students must find their way to a subject worth exploring, and find their way to use language to explore it. Dr. Carol Berkenkotter of Michigan Technological University, used me as a laboratory rat in a 2-1/2 month naturalistic protocol. She discovered that more than 60% of my time--sometimes much more--was used for planning. We must give our students a chance to sniff around a potential subject, reminding ourselves of what Denise Levertov said, "You can smell the poem before you see it." We need time for this essential circling, moving closer, backing off, coming at it from a different angle, circling again, trying a new approach.

This circling means that the writing curriculum is failure-centered. If failure is not encouraged we will only have meaningless little essays plopped out like fast-food patties into our explicit measure.

Good writing is an experiment in meaning that works. The experiment that works is

the product of many experiments that fail. The failure is essential, because through trying, failing, trying, failing, we discover what we have to say.

Need

Out of time and territory need will arise. Too often, as writing teachers, we use words such as, "intention" or "purpose" too early with our students, as if such matters could, all of the time, be clarified early on with a formal strategy and specific tactics established before we know what we want to say and to whom we want to say it. The need to write on a subject at the beginning is much less than obvious purpose. It is an itch, a need to wonder about, to consider and reconsider, to mull over, to speculate.

As we give ourselves space and time we find we experience what can only be described as a sort-of-a-sensation, or a pre-sensation similar to the aura that precedes the migraine.

My mind fills by coming back to clustering specifics. Everything I read, see, overhear begins to relate itself to a particular concern. This concern is certainly not yet a thesis statement or a solution or an answer. It isn't even a hypothesis, a problem or a question. But as I give it words in my head and on my notebook page it begins to become a vision. I see a shadowy outline of a mountain range I may choose to map. I begin to have questions, I begin to define problems that may be fun to try to solve.

I have begun to be my own audience. I write to read what I have written not so much to find out what I already know, but to find out what I am knowing through writing. It is an active process. Dynamic. Kinetic. Exciting. This is what motivates the writer and the writing student: the excitement of learning and that peculiarly wonderful, significant, ego-centric experience of hearing the voice you did not know you had.

Writing also satisfies the need to make. Years ago I wrote a story on General

Foods and discovered they had created mixes that were too simple and fool-proof. They had to back up and, as one executive said, "allow the housewife to put herself into the mix." A strange image, and perhaps a sexist one, but their marketing research revealed the need of making. Writing is a particularly satisfying kind of making, because we can make order out of disorder, meaning out of chaos; we can make something solid out of such powerful and amorphous materials as fear, love, hate, joy, envy, terror.

This brings us to another fundamental need, one we all, as teachers of writing, normally avoid. Beside my own typewriter is a quotation from Graham Greene: "Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation." The need to write above all else comes from the need to reveal, name, describe, order, and attempt to understand what is deepest and darkest in the human experience.

Process

The need demands process. There has to be a way to deal with the volume of information and language that crowds the writer's head and the writer's page. Quantity itself is both a problem and an opportunity--an abundance of information allows us to select and order meaning.

Too often students are forced to write without information or with just a few stray fragments of information they attempt to string together with a weak glue of stereotypes and cliches. It isn't easy to write without information. When students collect an abundance of information, however, they need to make distinctions between pieces of information--to decide what is significant and what is not--and then to follow the flow of the important information towards meaning.

It is of little value to teach skills and techniques, the processes of others, to

students who do not put them into use in significant ways. Students who need techniques will develop them, and will start to share their tricks of the trade with other students who need them. Then the waiting composition teacher can pounce.

The teacher sees one student making a significant word choice, and the instructor broadcasts that to the class during the time for a class meeting when the day's writing is done. The instructor sets up pairs and small groups of students, inviting them to share their solutions and their problems. The instructor posts or publishes evolving drafts and outlines and notes to show how members of that particular class are making writing work. The teacher writes in public, on the blackboard, or with an overhead projector, revealing the teacher's own struggle to use language to achieve meaning, and inviting help from the class along the way. The instructor, in conference and in class meeting, shares accounts, techniques, and other tricks of the trade from professional writers at the moment the student defines a problem and seeks solutions. The teacher doesn't correct or suggest one solution, but gives the student alternatives so the student will decide which way to turn.

Most important, however, is the testimony from student writers who are writing well. The instructor calls attention to those pieces of writing that are working, and invites the student to tell the instructor, and the class, the process that produced the effective writing.

The case histories, first of all, instruct the writer. Usually the student has written by instinct, but when the student is asked to tell what he or she did the student discovers that the writing was a rational process. It can be described and shared. And, of course, as the student describes the process that produced effective writing to others, the student reinforces that process.

Now students begin to work in a context of shared success. The students who

write well are teaching themselves, each other, and the teacher how writing is made effective. They practice different styles of thinking and of working. They write in diverse voices and discover alternative solutions to the same writing problem. They find there is not one way to make writing work buy many.

These solutions and skills flow into a coherent process. There are some things that are especially helpful when planning a text, others to help produce a text, still others to make the text clear. These techniques overlap and interact, because writing is a complex intellectual act, but the class discovers that underneath the contradictions there is a rational reason for most writing acts--don't be too critical in the beginning or you won't discover what you have to say, don't be too sloppy at the end or the reader won't be able to figure out what you've said.

It is vital that the process is drawn out of the class experience so the class learns together that each writer is capable of identifying and solving writing problems. Learning will not stop with this class. This class will not be dependent on this teacher; this class will graduate individuals who know, through their own experience, that they can respond, rationally and skillfully, to the demands of the writing task they will face in the years ahead.

Text

The principal text--and this from the author of writing texts--of the writing course should be the student's own evolving writing.

We have the responsibility to free our students from the tyranny of the printed page. They have been taught there is a right text, and it is printed in a book. They have been taught that the teacher has the code that will reveal the meaning of that text.

Writing is not like that. There is no text; there is a blank page, and then,

with luck and work, a messy page. Language is trying to discover its meaning. The writer writes not knowing at first what the writer's own text is meaning, and then has to perceive the potential meaning in the confusion of syntax, misspelling, poor penmanship, and disorganized, searching thought.

Decoding a messy, evolving student text is a frightening challenge for most teachers, because they are untrained for this task. But writing teachers and their students have to learn to read unfinished writing. The use of finished models by far more talented writers is of little help unless the students see their early drafts, their clumsy and awkward sentences, their false sense, their early drafts that document how badly they had to write to write well.

Students publish their drafts in small group and whole class workshops where the writer is asked, "How can we help you?" I prefer to publish only the best drafts from the class to show good writing being made better. The text in the writing course is not what was once written, but what is being written.

Response

The writer needs response when it can do some good, when the writing can be changed, but in school we too often respond only when the writing is finished, when it's too late.

Professionals seek out writers who can help them when it counts. I call Don Graves, Chip Scanlan, or others, for I am blessed with many good writing colleagues--or they call me. We read a paragraph or two over the phone that needs a test reader right now. Not for criticism, not even for confirmation, but mostly for sharing.

Experienced writers need test audiences early on, and it is the challenge of the writing teacher to become the person with whom the student wants to share work that is still searching for meaning. It is

also the responsibility of the writing teacher to create a community within the class that makes such sharing contagious. And as the drafts move towards a completed meaning, the writer needs test readers who can become more critical and still supportive.

Writers need colleagues who share the same struggle to make meaning with words. As we write--student and professional--we practice a lonely craft, and we need writer friends who can reassure us, remind us of past successes, suggest possible alternatives, give us a human response to a changing text. Sometimes the writer's needs are specific--will this lead make you read on? do you understand my definition of photosynthesis? have I gone off track on page 4?--but most of the time the writer simply needs to hear, by talking at someone else, what the writer, himself or herself, has to say about the text. The writer, after all, every writer, is continually teaching himself or herself to write.

Teachers should not withhold information that will help the student solve a writing problem. The most effective teacher, however, will try by questioning to get the student to solve the problem alone. If that fails the teacher may offer three

or more alternative solutions, and remind the student to ignore any of them if a solution of the writer's own comes to mind.

Central to the whole business of response is faith and trust. The teacher must have faith that the student can be the student's own most effective teacher, and must trust that student will find a way through the lonely journey that leads to effective writing. The student will feel that faith and trust. It will goad, support, challenge, comfort the student. And faith and trust given may be returned, especially to teachers who reveal their own lonely journeys as they use language to discover meaning.

These standards are high. The teacher believes you can write far better than you ever believed you could write. There is pressure on the student, and there are standards. At the end of the unit there is a delayed but meaningful evaluation. Students are graded on their final work of their own choice. The grades are based on accomplishment. The students have worked within contexts that allowed them to work well. Now their work is ready for measure. The private act of writing--born of silence--goes public.