

A Conversation Through the Looking Glass

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When I first undertook to write this essay, my idea was to re-visit some of my early writing, writing I had produced when I was an undergraduate student myself, and then conceive from that a dialogue between myself today and that eighteen year-old woman I found on the page.

I would like to tell you that I did that, and I would like to proceed to the dialogue, but instead I have to confess that I cannot. I've looked at the writing, all right. I've tried to allow it to call forth another me. But for me, the shift of vision that has occurred in the intervening years is too radical. Mary Ann the writing teacher has nothing to say to Mary Ann the student writer.

I suppose it would be more honest to say that Mary Ann the writing teacher has *too much* to say to Mary Ann the student writer. She might begin with a commentary on the evident enthusiasm, but equally evident lack of reflection and revision, in her younger counterpart's work. She would acknowledge that thinking had taken place, but note that it wasn't done with a great deal of care or an eye toward the reader during or after the composing stage. She might comment on the overuse of the intensifier "very," which indicates that the text was not read with an editor's eye. Were these rather lengthy sentences *ever* read aloud? Was time spent reflecting on

the focus of the piece, and was effort expended to sharpen, polish, and clarify? That would be Mary Ann the pedant's response to Mary Ann the student writer.

The brutal truth is that I haven't much patience with Mary Ann the student writer because I recall too much about her writing practice. I recall dramatic sessions in which she dictated whole essays to a patient friend at the keyboard. (All this in the days before personal computing. Nothing can keep Mary Ann of today away from a keyboard.) Mary Ann could type, but just a little in those days; in spite of her family's encouragement, she had resisted "office skills" courses in high school, except for a one semester personal typing course. Her friend would watch her type (the night before the paper was due, of course) and grow so impatient that she would offer to take over, allowing Mary Ann to wax eloquent over her shoulder as she put words on paper.

Thus Mary Ann's essays went right from her busy head to the typewritten page on many occasions. As she progressed through her undergraduate education, however, there developed a stage in which she would sit at the kitchen table and surround herself with materials—other texts, instructions, notes. Here she would craft a kind of ur-document, with scribbles and arrows, squares and circles. It generally looked like the diagram of a complicated football play, or a blueprint for a Rube Goldberg device. Though it was nothing like a preliminary draft, it made enough sense to get Mary Ann started on the typewriter, where composing took place.

Toward the end of her undergraduate days, Mary Ann came much closer to preparing a complete handwritten preliminary draft, giving herself enough time to let it rest, and revising it with more care than she ever did that tumultuous freshman year. But she *never* showed her preliminary work to other writers, let alone discussed it with her teachers. She never visited the writing center, and, in fact, did not *know* there was a writing center until she became a tutor there as a graduate student.

Mary Ann enjoyed writing. She felt great confidence as a writer, and she took pleasure in the act. She just didn't pay much attention

after that. She didn't take pleasure in the reading, the crafting, the thinking further. All that came to her through the crucible of teaching.

So, now, it is impossible to give fair voice to Mary Ann the younger. Why would she have given so little attention to her writing, after the first flush of composing? Why didn't she read and revise? Her thinking was interesting, and the reading itself would have given her pleasure. Why didn't she talk about her work in progress with other writers? I don't understand Mary Ann the student writer. I can't give voice to her views of writing. It's like the chicken trying to talk about what the egg felt, or asking the rain puddle to talk about the cloud.

I feel entirely out of touch with the eighteen year-old writer I was, except, of course, for the fact that I spend every day in writing classrooms with undergraduate student writers who are not entirely unlike that earlier version of me. Like any reader, I seek a version of myself in their texts, hoping to participate in a meeting of minds, working to build new information on familiar ground. Sometimes I see myself too clearly in ways I did not expect.

I don't think Mary Ann the student writer would be happy in the writing courses I teach today. I would be writing in the margins of her work, "Mary Ann, this is an interesting idea that could serve as a focus. Do you think it would work better earlier in the essay?" and "Mary Ann, do you need quite so many 'very's' here? Try to let the adjectives do their work without unnecessary amplification," and Mary Ann the younger would be wondering what all that mattered, now that the paper was written and over with. And I might write "Good!" and Mary Ann the younger would be wondering what I meant by that. And I might write, "I certainly agree with you here! Well-put!" and Mary Ann the younger would ask me to decipher my handwriting, certain that there must be something more to my response than just agreement and support.

That may not be true—I liked to see an "Excellent" or a "Good" in the margin in those days and that is probably why I try to give so many to others when I respond to writing. It was the lengthy—

often substantive—comments that actually honored my writing with thoughtful reflection that I found mysterious. Why write a long note on a paper? The paper is done, it's over—let's have a conversation, certainly, but a conversation on paper? It did not make sense to me. The curtain had rung down. We were on our way to the next writing assignment—why think any further about this one?

I wasn't *inhabiting* my writing in those days. I was passing through it briefly and then moving on to. . . I don't know, I suppose I was inhabiting a student's array of communicative events, a round of reading, listening, note-taking, essay-writing tasks and speaking occasions I hoped would add up to a good performance. The end was not marked by a text in which I felt invested, but instead by . . . well, why not admit it, a grade. I wasn't *trying* for a grade. I had developed a personal philosophy that grades did not matter. I went through a long period of not even opening grade reports. I took care of my intellect, and the grades followed. But the writing was still a path to a grade. It was not an important manifestation of my thoughts. It was just—a kind of passing through.

Today, of course, I *do* inhabit my writing. I spend long stretches of time inside it, expanding it, sorting it out, making it work, and enjoying it. I walk away and return to see it more clearly. I allow it to develop over time. I share it with others.

I suppose what I'm trying to do is develop that fully-formed writer who cares and attends to her text at more than one level and across more than one writing session in each of my students. I see myself in their work, of course. One couldn't help but do so. As Charles Bazerman observes, "In reading student papers, we watch people coming and going, hiding and faking, being and becoming, and sometimes those people are ourselves."¹ I am impatient with my students as I am with the memory of Mary Ann the younger, and as I am sometimes impatient with myself during revising. I am impatient for them to become more patient with themselves. I want to rush them into spending more time inside their writing. Though I am their teacher, I want them to know more than I know and lead me through the text, reducing me to helpless, wordless, awed sur-

render to their voices. I want them to change, as I changed through the multi-layered experience that the teaching of writing is. I want them to change now, in the span of a semester.

I want my students to achieve a shift of vision that has taken me years to achieve in myself. I give them many tools and aids to this shift that I did not enjoy until I began teaching, and of which I have the benefit again and again, every time I teach. I make my students read each other's work, for example. I never had to read anyone else's writing in process until I became a teacher myself. I make them respond sincerely and in detail, as I was encouraged to do as a beginning teacher, and as I gradually learned to do as I read more student writing. I create circumstances in which meaningful, detailed response is required to get through the moment, the class session, the course. I put more pressure on them than anyone ever put on me as a student writer. In truth, they respond well to this pressure. Yet I'm still not satisfied. In fact, my ultimate desire is that they be as little satisfied as I am.

I want them to be transformed as I was. I want the chicken to come out of the egg and start laying eggs herself; I want the rain to fall and soak the ground and make the grass grow all at once, immediately, or at least in fifteen weeks.

As quickly as possible, I want my students to approach that almost exquisite intolerance of irregularity and error that all beginning teachers go through (I couldn't read the newspaper for a while because of the unlovely syntax that glared at me from the page) and *then* I want them to pass through that to a real appreciation of linguistic structures and choices. (I want them to care, but not obsess, about the surface of the text. They must entirely understand the nuanced difference between care and obsession before I am satisfied. I'm obsessed with their achieving the right *degree* of caring.) I want them to become as expert at describing the anatomy of their writing as many of them are at describing human anatomy. I want them to see the skeleton and the musculature of a text, note how it works when it is in action, and feel the force of its movement of thought.

I want them to savor clarity and precision. I want them to appreciate everything there is to notice about a written text—revise and craft it, yes, but then really appreciate it, the way one sits down to appreciate a well-cooked meal one has prepared oneself. Of course, they should also appreciate the appreciation of others, the way one enjoys the pleasure of guests invited to share the meal.

I want them to be rhetoricians, too, of course, and I call them rhetoricians to get them to think of themselves as such. (I don't think anyone called me a rhetorician before I was thirty years old.)

I want all of these things for my writing students, and I think they think of me, as Mary Ann the younger would have, as rather demanding, somewhat eccentric, and probably a little crazy. I'm on the other side of the mirror; I can see clearly where I want them to travel and how far they have to come, but, as I was at their time of life, they are unaware that the journey is necessary.

Tilly Warnock says "In our written and oral responses to students and their texts, we are not telling the truth about the text or about ourselves. We are primarily responding to a situation, to questions posed not only by the individual student but also by the context—of the class, the situation, and the culture."² To this I would add, "the history," as I am an aggregate of all my past experiences with writing and reading, and I bring my history to my student's work. That's what I am supposed to do, and the reason I am a valuable reader. I am encrusted with experience. I look for an aggregate like myself in students' texts; I want to hear a rich voice, loaded with detail, heavy and smooth with confidence. When I hear a voice, I say, in the manner of a stage director, "That's good, but make it richer. Make it deeper. Be confident and assertive. Drag me forward by the lapels." I want to be able to enjoy great writing in my students' work, or writing that is as great as it can be at the moment and in the circumstances it is produced. The students have to determine that level for themselves as writers, but that does not prevent me from always encouraging them to move a little bit further forward.

Warnock describes her desire to learn and be otherwise affected

by her student's writing by saying, "I want to explore and demystify my strategies and style and those of other writers, for myself and for students. I want to knock our socks off with our language so that we stand barefoot on the ground. . . ." ³ The thing is that Warnock and I have been wearing our socks longer; we've had them knocked off more times in the past in more different ways than our students have. We are familiar with the intense pleasure of standing barefoot and we know where it will take us. Our students still need to be persuaded, coaxed, and sometimes enjoined out of their socks; they may not be aware of the wonderful condition of being immersed in written language. My desire is that they have that experience, at least once, in the course of my writing classes. It is a desire to which I am completely committed, and a desire I will never compromise.

So I suppose I have to ask myself if the shift of vision I hope for in my students is a reasonable expectation, or if I have to accept that people come into their writing in their own time and their own way. My answer is that I want both. I want my students to develop in their own time and their own way, but I also want my courses to be transformative. If I did not have a radical shift of vision in mind, I wouldn't be much of a writing teacher.

Endnotes

¹ Charles Bazerman, "Reading Student Texts: Proteus Grabbing Proteus," *Encountering Student Texts*, Ed. Bruce Lawson, Susan Sterr Ryan and W. Ross Winterowd (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989) 139.

² Tilly Warnock, "An Analysis of Response, Dream, Prayer, and Chart," *Encountering Student Texts*, Ed. Bruce Lawson, Susan Sterr Ryan and W. Ross Winterowd (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989) 63.

³ Warnock, 63.