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Lessons Learned: Reflections in Voice and Writing

NANCY PATTERSON AND DALE SCHRIEMER

Nancy Patterson and Dale Schriemer are both professors at Grand Valley State University. But because they teach on different campuses and in different colleges within the university, their paths were unlikely to cross. Dale chairs the Vocal Performance program in the Music Department. Nancy teaches in the Literacy Studies program in the College of Education.

When Nancy, who initially majored in voice when she first went to college, began her position at GVSU, she decided she wanted to study voice again. She asked a music major who she should contact and the student gave her Dale's name. Nancy made an appointment with Dale, and for the past 10 years has been meeting with him once a week for an hour-long lesson. Over the past ten years Nancy and Dale have discovered that there are interesting parallels between vocal and writing pedagogy, something neither of them realized before. Because of their conversations, they have deepened their own intentions as teachers. In this article they talk about their schooling as a singer and as a writer and how their school experiences shaped their identity as, for one, a singer, and for the other, a writer. These conversations uncovered deeper truths about the nature of teaching and thus fostered an intentionality that has nurtured their roles as teachers.

Nancy as a Writer

By the time I finished sixth grade, I knew how to make an outline for a report I would write later. I could find the subject and verb of any sentence. I knew where a sentence ended, where to put commas, how to conjugate lots of irregular verbs, and even how to vary my sentence structure. When I wasn't being lazy, I could write a report with no misspelled words. Writing in school was tedious and was more about trying to escape a sea of red marks on my paper than learning how to be a writer.

But there were nights when I would sit in my grandfather's old captain's chair in my bedroom under the eaves, my legs tucked underneath me. The years of encrusted buttermilk paint, chipped and worn, pressed interesting patterns into my arms and legs as I wrote poetry. That attic room with its knotty pine walls and red linoleum floor hummed with the rhythm of language. It wasn't a meter that I was attuned to but a rise and fall deeper than rhythm. And I sensed a voice in me decades before I knew what voice meant in writing. I loved playing with language. I loved painting pictures with words. I loved experiencing the world through language. It would bubble up through me and out my yellow Esterbrook fountain pen in the peacock blue ink that I used when I wanted to write.

Mrs. Marshall, my fourth grade teacher, never allowed us to use peacock blue ink on our school reports or spelling and penmanship tests, only blue or black ink. In those days, we all had fountain pens that had a little lever on the side that, when pulled, drew ink into a bladder inside the pen. Jars of blue and black ink sat on a table in front of the classroom where we filled our pens. In Mrs. Marshall's classroom we could cross out a word on a final paper with a single tidy line drawn through it. In my grandfather's chair I could obliterate whole words in a sea of peacock blue ink that would bleed through to the back of the paper. In school I had to obey every punctuation and spelling rule. At home I found the rules liquid as the ink I used in my pen.

It was Mrs. Marshall who first said I was a good writer. But I didn't know what that meant. Was she talking about my penmanship, I wondered? She kept a wooden box on the windowsill and every time any of students wrote or spoke something she thought was grammatically incorrect they had to put their names in the box. I never did, so I wondered if my absence of "mistakes" meant I was a good writer.

And though I would hear from later English teachers that I was a good writer, not one of them told me what about my writing was good or what could make it better. The writ-

ing I did when I sat in my grandfather's chair was very different from the writing I did in school.

In my first year college composition class I learned to write a 500 word essay every week, and I learned that my instructor thought my writing was "loose." I wasn't sure what "loose" meant, but I knew it wasn't good. I could write complex sentences, though, and I knew where to put the punctuation. And, in the days before word processing programs, I learned how to quickly figure out how many words I'd written and, once the required 500 words had been achieved, end my paper, usually a half hour before it was due.

Writing for that instructor was about making an argument in 500 words, but I had no clue what kind of thinking I needed to do in order to make a logical argument. At the end of the semester he told me my writing was "tighter." But I didn't know what that meant either.

And though I knew I could hang a sentence together, I did not see myself as a writer until, years later, I attended a week-long writing workshop for teachers. It was during that week that I crafted a piece of writing without writing an outline first, where I listened once again to the rhythm of the language inside me, and wrestled with intent and voice. For the first time in my life I had the opportunity to get feedback about a piece of writing that was in process. A writing center had been set up and all the teacher-participants were invited to drop in at anytime to share emerging drafts and get. feedback. It was there that I talked about my plans for the piece, got advice about those plans, wrote, made the wrong decisions, shared my failed attempts and listened to suggestions for rethinking. For the first time in my life I felt like a writer. And I knew I wanted my students to experience the same intensity. That week-long writing workshop changed my life. I was no longer someone who knew the rules and could hang a sentence together. I was a writer. And I was determined to be a teacher of writers, not of students who wrote.

Dale as Singer

I learned what music was from my mother who was a very kind, beautiful, and humble person. I'd watch her sit at our piano, her wavy brown hair cupping her face, her long fingers busy at the keys, and envy the beauty she created. She could read music and play by ear classical, early 1940's tunes, and hymns that she sang in her lovely liquid soprano voice. It was her peace. Making music, she said, was like spending time with friends.

When she played and sang I felt she was finding satisfaction within herself. I'd stand stock still in the living room and stare at her. I think she was completely unaware that she made this wonderfully free music. She used to say that when she was a girl and it was time to go to bed, she would beg her mother for just a few more minutes with Beethoven or Chopin. This time with the music made her feel beautiful inside and that beauty transcended her.

I wanted to express myself and find that beauty, too, to give voice to my spirit. That's why at age four I begged my mother to give me piano lessons. She said I was too young and that I should wait until I was five. So, my first piano lessons began when I went to kindergarten.

Even at that early age I could see myself concertizing, see myself creating a moment of beauty with someone who shared my innermost understanding of music. I envisioned myself on a stage at a piano with my imagined wife on the violin, and us speaking to each other through and with the music. I continued playing the piano, and I also sang in choirs. My piano teachers, though, simply did not inspire me. In high school I wanted to be the accompanist for the school choir, but the choir director needed male singers so I sang instead.

Something, however, was missing.

I realized what it was when I was asked to play Fagin in my high school's production of Oliver!. For me, finding the character and being on stage was the self-expression that I had been wanting from my piano playing. I spent hours imagining Fagin's voice, his expressions, his feelings, his relationships. I saw Fagin as someone who was merely trying to train young boys to pick pockets so he could survive. I didn't judge him. I didn't think of him as bad or good. When I delivered the line to one of the boys saying, "Shut up and drink your gin!" I got a big laugh and I was surprised.

I realize now that my time delving into Fagin was natural, naive, and engaging. My process of focused exploration was right. Unfortunately, though, there was no one who could understand or affirm the process I was using. I was making stuff up on my own without a clear confirmation that I was on the right track. My classmates and their parents applauded my work. But I honestly didn't know what I did that made my character or my other singing come so alive for them. Without validation from a knowledgeable person, there was no way for me to value what I was doing and to build on it.

When I went to college, I thought, "Now I can learn to sing and act – after all I'm going to a major University". And though I had initially intended to major in English, I signed

up for voice lessons through the music department. My first voice teacher was a baritone like myself who had had a career in Germany. He was a kind and insightful man and he paid attention to me. That suggested to me that he thought I had promise as a singer. But during my lessons he concentrated on my "OH" vowel. I spent the better part of my half hour lesson singing five note descending scales on the "OH" vowel. Though I took it all seriously and focused to the best of my ability on what I thought was the goal, I was never really sure what the goal was. I remembered my experience playing Fagin, but nothing in my "OH" vowel singing connected to my experience with Fagin. I kept searching in my mind. And somehow I trusted that my teacher's process would yield me the results that I hoped for.

At one point I asked my teacher if I have the stuff that would allow me a career as an opera singer? He gave a vague reply that didn't support or deny me my ambition. I wasn't sure what he wanted, or what I could accomplish.

Oddly, just as I was going through this doubt, I was cast in the music school's production of Iolanthe by Gilbert and Sullivan. As Lord Mountarrarat I performed with my peers, created some of the stage movement for a duet I was not part of, and just dug in. I was immersed in staging and character and music. My voice teacher gave me two puny little physical gestures for my hands at a specific point in the music. Lord Montarrarat was a broadly drawn braggart. The gestures my professor gave me visually contradicted what the character was saying.

This clarity of the contradiction between what the character sang and did created a comic moment. The production was a huge hit. People were standing, cheering, and yelling during the ovation. And still I didn't understand what I should or could do as a singer. I wondered what the cheering meant? Did I do something that had specific content that could help me build a career in performance? I didn't know if my process had validity. None of my peers or professors could tell me. And so I didn't know how to manage my own voice except when I created a character. I didn't know how to bring life to a song unless I was in a production and playing a character. While this can be useful to a singer, if I were to have a career as a performer, I needed more.

So I kept looking for more guidance from my peers. But by the end of my sophomore year, I knew I wasn't in a program that could help me reach my goals. So I found another school where I hoped I could find the right amount of mentorship necessary for my artistic growth. I needed to know that I was making progress and that I was on the right path. But it remained an unanswered question.

But it was ultimately through performance that I learned my craft. A few years after I graduated from college I was hired by the Minnesota Opera where I sang a number of different roles over the course of several years. In one performance, I played Judas in Bach's Passion of St. Matthew, a beautifully staged production that moved it out of a choral piece and into a vivid performance where the chorus in Byzantine head pieces sang in silhouette behind a scrim and the soloists sang in full view of the audience. The persona that I created on stage was so powerful that the director eventually asked me to perform facing the chorus rather than the audience. This crystalized for me the power of performance and showed me that my creative process had value. But it was so ephemeral. I wanted someone to help me name my process so that I could make it intentional.

Why Do Our Stories Matter?

For both of us, there is a complicated joy associated with our chosen academic fields: Dale as a singer who now teaches singers and Nancy as a writer who now helps teachers implement effective writing practices in their classrooms.

Our experiences as students, the fact that so much of our schooled lessons did not help us become better at our crafts, has had a huge impact on how we now approach our individual disciplines in our own classrooms. We both try to be what Maxine Greene (1977) calls the "wide awake teacher." We try to make our intentions clear, not only to our students, but to ourselves. We look for a clear connection between what we are asking our students to do and our ultimate goal of helping them become better performers and teachers. That means we have to embrace the creative processes in all their messiness. Greene argues that often in our misguided attempts to simplify complex processes, we engage our students in what philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (cited in Greene, 1977), calls "civilizational malaise." We dull our own expectations and fill our instructional time with tasks that ultimately have little impact on more substantive goals.

Kelly Gallagher (2009) calls it "readicide," the systematic killing of the love of reading through unfortunate instructional practices and misplaced attention to anything that essentially moves students away from authentic experiences as readers. Dale experienced "singicide" when his teachers focused on such things as the OH vowel and spent weeks making him sing a series of descending scales. Nancy's teachers,

through their insistence on creating outlines before writing and on word length mandates, committed "writicide." We know because of our own experiences that we should not kill the very thing we want students to embrace. If we want children to be joyfully literate, then we must be ever mindful of the ways we can feed that joy. To do otherwise is to, at best, trivialize what we do as teachers.

The simple truth is that neither singing nor writing can take place without attending to the needs of an audience. Dale, because of his early joy-filled memories of his mother playing the piano and a deep desire to create that joy in others, held fast to his dream to perform. It would take Nancy decades to experience the complicated joy of writing.

Our two classrooms are not entertainment centers and our goals are not to entertain our students. We do not search for "fun ways" to teach grammar or learn how to sing vowels correctly. But we acknowledge that when meaningful work takes place in our classrooms, students engage in the difficult tasks that allow them to experience a type of joy that mechanized skill-based lessons cannot create. Such lessons move both the singer and the writer away from the act of addressing the needs of an audience. And, they increase the likelihood that the audience, too, will not experience a complicated joy. A performance that is technically correct may not necessarily be satisfying for an audience. Correct writing is not necessarily good writing. The complicated joy for the audience, that feeling of satisfaction that individuals are involved in an experience, becomes less likely.

It is the decontextualized work on skills that can kill the artist that lives inside all of our students. We believe that joy comes, not through easy over-simplifications, but through discipline, feedback, and skill development over time.

It is the decontextualized work on skills that can kill the artist that lives inside all of our students. We believe that joy comes, not through easy over-simplifications, but through discipline, feedback, and skill development over time. Make no mistake. Skills are important. We want to make sure that is clear. We want singers to sing correctly, and we want writers to use the conventions of written language in ways that will help their audiences. But the pathway to understanding the choices that singers and writers make cannot be littered with exercises that divert energy from the very processes we need to employ. Skills must be taught in a larger context. And that context has to be meaningful for our students so that they, in turn, can help their audience experience a complicated joy that only happens when its needs have been addressed.

Peter Elbow (1973) acknowledges that writing can be "unusually mysterious to most people" (p. 11). It is easy, he says, to rationalize that some people are simply more talented than others, or more inspired, or have a better work ethic. And so we hammer at such things as subject/verb agreement or crafting topic sentences, or, in Dale's case, singing an OH vowel on descending scales, in the hopes that those with talent will somehow internalize skills and apply them to some future endeavor. This is what Janet Emig (1971) calls magical thinking—the notion that the lessons we teach will be the lessons students find useful. Magical thinking for teachers happens when they do not connect their instruction to a logical outcome. In writing instruction magical thinking happens when we teach students how to find the subject and verb of a sentence with the assumption that they will use that knowledge to write good sentences. Or, when we make students write a topic sentence for every paragraph, or compose essays according to a prescribed formula.

We are talking about something deeper and richer. If the goal of singing is to give the audience an experience, then voice lessons should focus on how that experience happens. What do singers need to know and do that will help their audience engage in the experience the singer wants them to engage in. If the goal of writing is to address the needs of an audience for a particular purpose, then our writing lessons must focus on the choices that writers have in their attempts to do that.

Both writers and singer asks, "What are the needs of an audience? What emotional and factual content do I need to convey? How and when do I convey that? What do I need to know about my audience and its expectations in order to be successful?"

The thinking that must take place in order to answer those questions is complex. And in order for our students to truly engage in those questions, they must be immersed in situations that call upon them to constantly ask those questions and act on their ever-growing knowledge about their craft. It is in the decisions we make as singers and writers that true learning takes place. It is the feedback that we as teachers give our apprenticing singers and writers that becomes so important. There is no magic here, no perfect curriculum, no manufactured lesson. Our instruction must provide the fertile earth that nourishes our students' identities as writers, as singers, as learners.

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