1999

The Road Less Traveled By: Sharing a Writing Workshop Story Not Ending in Transformation

Elizabeth Blackburn Brockman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Blackburn Brockman, Elizabeth (1999) "The Road Less Traveled By: Sharing a Writing Workshop Story Not Ending in Transformation," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 15: Iss. 2, Article 4.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1377>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

The Road Less Traveled By: Sharing a Writing Workshop Story Not Ending in Transformation

Elizabeth Blackburn Brockman

"In spite of all the scholarly talk about protocol analyses, paradigm shifts, and the making of knowledge, the history of composition is still written primarily through the stories we tell. Stories about the dreadful ways writing was taught—or not taught—when “we were in school”; stories about the miraculous changes brought about by the writing process movement, **and lately, stories about how some of those changes may not have been so miraculous after all (my emphasis)**” (1).

-Lad Tobin from “How the Writing Process was Born-and Other Conversational Narratives”

In order to create *When Children Write: Critical Re-Visions of the Writing Workshop*, Timothy Lensmire claims he could have told two different stories about his experience teaching third graders in an Atwellian writing workshop. The first story would have been the typical writing workshop story ending in *Transformation*. Transformation Stories, as we all know, begin and end in the same way. They begin with an unruly group of average or apathetic students, and they end—thanks to the courage and radical thinking of the writing teacher—with the same group of students *Transformed into Writers*. As a group, we love sharing and hearing Transformation Stories, and why shouldn't we? They reinforce everything we believe to be true about the right way to teach writing. Though Lensmire could have told a Transformation Story, he claims it would not have been the whole truth. In fact, it would have been a lie. And so he took the composition equivalent of “The Road Less Traveled By” and told a story about the “underside of workshop environment.” In this environment, “a peer culture with gender divisions and informal hierarchies of status and power shaped the production and sharing of texts” (2). The story is a painful one, at best. Though his students did write and write and write and write, they were, in the process of writing, unkind and often cruel to each other. Their behaviors and texts provide evidence of classroom hierarchies, gender biases, and social prejudices. And Lensmire himself often felt confused and angry. Lensmire chose to construct this story (instead of the other) because he believes the field needs to explore rigorously the obstacles writing workshop teachers face. By “obstacles,” however, he is not referring to traditional administrators, faculty, or parents (those whom storytellers typically cast as villains in most writing

workshop narratives). And just for the record, Lensmire also isn't referring to students numbed into submission by former faculty who reduce English classes to grammar drills and five-paragraph essays. Instead, Lensmire challenges the field to explore the complex ways adolescents themselves influence and even thwart writing workshops. To do so, he claims we must examine carefully adolescents' socially constructed values and roles.

In response to Lensmire's challenge, I offer my own writing workshop story not ending in *Transformation*. The story starts with me as a typical “early process” teacher who provides students with unlimited time and revision opportunities, as I was trained to do in the early '80s. By the end of the story, my students, like those in Lensmire's narrative, still write and write and write and write, but their socially constructed roles and values have forced me to reduce drastically the amount of time and the number of revision opportunities for each assignment.

A Writing Teacher's Journey on “The Road Less Traveled By”

As a high school writing teacher, I was thoroughly grounded in the writing process movement. My students selected their own topics and wrote in natural voices. They peer responded. They wrote to outside audiences. Their papers, which were typically composed during writing workshops in a computer lab, reflected varying purposes, audiences, paper lengths, and levels of formality. As a result, my students never wrote five-paragraph essays. And just for the record, they never wrote traditional research papers, either. Instead, my students gained access to twelve consecutive issues of a magazine from a previous decade, surveyed a featured col-

umn in the magazine, and kept a research journal comprised of article summaries and personal responses. Then, after reading and reflecting about their journal entries, my students “found” their thesis statements by seeing what naturally emerged from their writing. Talk about being recursive!

In what continues to strike me as a solid series of writing courses, I still remember the first time “it” happened. One semester, a student whom I will call Rachel, was consistently playing catch up, and we both knew why. The problem—but it didn’t feel like a problem—stemmed from an extra credit policy I had playfully called Writing Beyond the Final Draft. The policy was simple. If students weren’t satisfied with the grade for their third and final draft of any assignment, they could resubmit additional drafts, and I would replace the new grade with the old. More so perhaps than many adolescents, my students were highly grade conscious. In fact, anything below a “B” was perceived as failing. Not surprisingly, then, my students valued the extra-credit policy. Offhand, I would say that one-third of the students in each class took advantage of the policy once or maybe twice a semester.

Not so with Rachel. Though I don’t recall her first paper, Rachel obviously earned a “C” or lower because she opted to write Beyond the Final Draft. In the meantime, though, she also submitted second-assignment drafts along with her classmates, but she was more interested in raising her grade for the first assignment. In fact, she admitted to not getting serious about the second assignment until Beyond the Final Draft, so she took advantage of the extra-credit policy again. By this time, however, Rachel’s classmates were naturally focused on the third assignment, and Rachel also submitted third-assignment drafts, but she was focusing primarily on her second paper, so her final draft grade for the third assignment wasn’t stellar. And then the cycle repeated again and again all semester long.

Even now, I recall chuckling with Rachel over the way my extra-credit policy was enabling her, but I still believed in it. After all, I was a Writing Process Teacher and, therefore, most interested in helping Rachel and her classmates become better writers by guiding them through their writing processes. If students were willing to put forth the extra effort, an additional draft struck me then and even now as a rigorous and legitimate means of raising grades. Equally important, the policy acknowledged my students’ lives beyond my classroom borders. Each one had a special set of circumstances at home and at school. Each one had a particular way of completing writing tasks. By instituting a policy giving students the freedom to write beyond the final drafts, I was giving them respect. I be-

lieved I was treating them like adults, and I had always claimed that when teachers treated students like adults, they responded like adults.

Sadly enough, my theory started to fall apart within a year after my encounter with Rachel. Unlike Rachel, who valued the opportunity to revise but recognized the problems associated with constantly playing catch up, a significant number of students were suddenly banking on and exploiting the Revising Beyond the Final Draft extra-credit option. I knew it was over when a student unwittingly told me what she had relayed to a friend:

If you’re really busy with other classes and stuff, don’t even worry about the first, second, or third drafts of the writing assignments. You can easily blow them off, and Brockman will still give you extra drafts. You pull up your grade that way. It’s cake.

It felt strange to eliminate this revision opportunity, but I still wasn’t a writing process traitor because my students continued to select their own topics, to write in natural voices to outside audiences, and to peer respond. Above all, my students continued to write their way through the recursive stages of their composing processes, from topic selection to publication, time and time again in my class. Then a new problem arose. As I previously mentioned, students generally wrote three drafts of each assignment, the assumption being students would in good faith fully engage in each and every draft. In other words, students would write the very best rough draft they could, and then they would write the very best second draft, and so on. And many of my students did, but a growing number didn’t.

When this growing number of students started not taking seriously initial drafts, two problems emerged for me as a writing workshop teacher. Most important of all, students weren’t benefiting from the defining feature of the class. More specifically, I believed my most important task was to help students grow as writers by guiding them through their writing processes. If students truncated that process, the theoretical underpinnings and the primary purpose behind the class were gone. Second, my course was what we call a “straight composition” class; that is, the sole activity was writing, and students often had the entire class period for writing workshops in the computer lab. If students weren’t taking initial drafts seriously, they weren’t taking class time seriously. And to put it euphemistically, classroom management became “an issue.”

I considered grading drafts, but this method ran counter to my “writing process” principles, so I experimented with a participation grade, defining participation as primarily behavior during writing

workshops. In other words, if students fooled around during workshop time, their grades reflected it. Even then, though, I felt angry and betrayed. Workshop time was designed to help students become better writers, but if they weren't willing to meet me halfway, what was I to do? And after wasting class time, what right did students have to become angry with me when their grades slipped from the acceptable "A" or "B" range into the dreaded "C" or "D" range? That's not to suggest I had mutiny on my hands, because I didn't. It's not to say my classes were spiraling downward, because they weren't. I could, nevertheless, too often count on a handful of students who simply resisted, and often in alarming ways,—ways the "early process" textbooks never, never mention.

In my last two years at the secondary level, my students still benefited by writing multiple drafts within a writing workshop environment, but I drastically changed the drafting procedures. Rather than freely granting three drafts to all students, I placed serious limitations on students' drafting opportunities. Each student was required to write two drafts for each assignment, but only students whose drafts provided evidence of *writer engagement* were allowed to write a third or fourth. And how did students provide evidence of writer engagement? They could easily do so primarily by taking into account assignment guidelines, writing complete drafts, and revising substantially. In other words, they could do so by being accountable. Even now, this change in procedure strikes me as severe and savvy. That's because I have always agreed with Kitty O. Locker who claims that most writers need roughly three drafts for complex and unfamiliar writing tasks. I didn't see any point, however, in allotting writing workshop time for three drafts if students were perfunctorily drafting. On the other hand, I didn't want to punish students who were fully engaged in their writing. The third-draft incentive was a valid compromise because it rewarded the "right" group of students. On top of that, some of my less-committed students were more likely to take drafting seriously because they knew they had only two drafts to produce a final draft. In short, the third-draft incentive worked. In fact, it worked very well.

Using Steven Schreiner's Critique to Understand the Journey

Throughout my high school teaching career, I wanted my students to grapple with their emerging texts by devoting extensive time to their work and by being fully engaged from topic selection to final draft. And though many of my students were, others simply weren't.

And the question, of course, is why.

And the answer, of course, is that I don't

know why. At least not exactly. But I do know how easy it would be automatically to blame me, the classroom teacher. When, for example, Lad Tobin "first confessed [to] problems and failures with small-group work to strong advocates of peer editing, they insisted that the problem was not with the method but with [the teacher]" (*Writing Relationships* 128). And Joseph Harris, former editor of *College Composition and Communication* and author of *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*, says that "early process" theorists have created a genre he dubs "what-those-damn-teachers-do-to-kids stories" (62). In these stories, a classroom teacher is always the scapegoat, always the culprit—even if it means failing to tell the whole truth.

Rather than automatically pointing an accusing finger at myself, however, I'll begin by introducing Steven Schreiner's "Portrait of the Student as Young Writer," which is a critique of Janet Emig's 1971 landmark *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*. Unlike others who with hindsight unfairly criticize Emig's research design, Schreiner explores the *writing process model* she consciously or unconsciously used to evaluate her subject. The inquiry is fair. After all, Emig judged her subjects' writing processes as truncated and linear, so it's reasonable to identify and analyze the criteria in her evaluation. In other words, whose composing processes served as Emig's touchstone? By tracing Emig's early research and the literature review of *Composing Processes*, Schreiner determines Emig's ideal composing process is based upon those of early Twentieth Century literary artists. These artists' time-consuming and angst-ridden composing processes reinforce three basic values: (1) that writing is difficult, (2) that writers are more important than readers, and (3) that writers write alone (Schreiner 87). As Schreiner explains, the writing process model Emig used as the basis of her study eventually became THE composing process model the field adopted as *the way all writers are supposed to act*. In other words, expecting students to behave as artists laboriously struggling with themselves and their texts became a "given," as if no other composing model existed. And guided by this "given," writing workshop teachers everywhere began creating liberal revision policies so that students would have the time to laboriously struggle. And I was no exception.

Treating my students as artists justifiably raised their classroom status, but it also clouded an important issue. More specifically, just as Lensmire's third graders in *When Children Write* weren't "only the Romantic, innocent little beings that appear in the stories of workshop advocates" (1), my students weren't *only* artists. Had they been *only* artists, endless time and revision opportuni-

ties would have worked well. In fact, it would have been ideal. But adolescents can't be defined in such a one-dimensional way as *only* artists. Equally important, it's unfair to impose an *only* artist's composing process upon them because they are social beings. Like their adult counterparts, adolescents inherently play multiple, intersecting, shifting, and even conflicting roles, roles they can't and won't temporarily abandon when they walk through our classroom doors and/or when they sit down to write. No small wonder, then, that in a highly competitive, academic climate which characterized my high school, savvy and sophisticated students, as well as stressed and scattered ones, took advantage of my liberal revision policies, in spite of or perhaps because of my best intentions as a writing teacher.

Conclusions and Implications

My writing workshop story most obviously calls into question the practice of granting students unlimited time and revision opportunities. Though *carte blanche* might be ideal for *only* artists, it ultimately became a loophole and then a stumbling block for my over-tasked students. I can't emphasize enough that this phenomenon doesn't cast a negative light on my former students, whom I adored, or the fine school where I taught. It simply reinforces the common sense notion that adolescents are socially constructed beings. When I finally took this truth into serious consideration, I started conducting not perfect, but decidedly more effective, writing workshops.

But on a larger level, what does the story signify? What can new and veteran writing workshop teachers learn from a walk with me down "The Road Less Traveled By"?

First of all, I hope my story encourages English teachers to continue teaching writing as a process and conducting writing workshops regardless of the obstacles they may encounter. As my story shows, I am a strong writing process and writing workshop advocate at both the beginning and the ending of my story. Throughout the narrative, my students continue to write papers reflecting a variety of purposes, audiences, page lengths, and levels of formality. They continue to select their own topics, to write in natural voices, and to peer respond. Most important of all, they continue to work their way through the recursive stages of their writing processes. The only difference between the beginning and ending of the story is that I eventually learned to not give my students unlimited time and revision opportunities for their writing—even though doing so violated ingrained values I had inherited from first-generation composition leaders. I'm convinced that most writing workshop obstacles are like the one I faced. More specifically, I'm convinced

that most workshop obstacles can be overcome if writing teachers have the courage to challenge "early process" axioms and ingrained values, to stop being *only* facilitators, and to begin—as Nancie Atwell, herself, proudly proclaims to be doing— "Teach[ing] with a Capital T" (Atwell 16).

Second, I hope that my story encourages *LJMJ* readers to consider reading and reflecting upon the work of second-generation compositionists who are thoughtfully critiquing the "early process" movement. For starters, I recommend for all the obvious reasons Lensmire's *When Children Write*, and Schreiner's "Portrait of a Student as a Young Artist," which together serve as the backdrop for this essay. In addition, I especially recommend two texts written by Lad Tobin (see Works Cited for bibliographic citations). The first, from which my opening quote is taken, is "How Process Began and Other Conversion Narratives," and the second is *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Classroom*. So that readers have a sense of Tobin's work, here is an excerpt taken from *Writing Relationships*:

I remember the day it hit me. There I was during peer editing time frozen in my chair . . . and I was thinking, "What am I doing? Why am I sitting here watching my students waste time?" I looked around: one group was sitting in total silence, each person staring off into space; in another group all three members were very deliberately gathering up their coats and books and staring up at the clock in preparation for a dash out the door when the class officially ended; and three other students were hunched over an essay, the two talking animatedly, gesturing, all three leaning in to listen. I moved a few steps closer, hoping to catch these peer reviewers hard at exciting work, " . . . he had been trying to scoop her all night, all semester really, but they were both so blitzed, I don't think she even recognized him . . ." "NO. You're kidding! I thought he was still with Susan . . ."

. . . How had it come to this? . . . Didn't these students know anything about the power of peer review? Didn't they know that when I divided them into groups of three, when I invited them to collaborate, to construct knowledge socially, to brainstorm together, when I told them that we would learn from one another in this class, I expected them to do it? Hadn't they read Ken Bruffee? Didn't they know about the Festschrift honoring Ann Berthoff? Didn't they want to become a community of writers? (127-8)

Though Tobin teaches college students, the classroom concerns he raises are clearly relevant to writing teachers K-12. And it's important to note, too, that a defining feature of his writing style is its conversational quality and humorous observations.

Perhaps most important of all, I hope that, like Lensmire's *When Children Write*, my story encourages writing teachers to take "The Road Less Traveled By" and share their own writing workshop stories not ending in *Transformation*. As we all know, stories are powerful ways of making knowledge in our field.

The word *story* can be traced to the Greek *eidenai*, which means "to know." [Readers] look to stories to help [them] understand and give meaning . . . [Writers] tell stories so [they] may understand, teaching [themselves] and trying to teach others through the actions and reactions of those "people on the page." (Atwell 3)

And when we hear, reflect upon, and retell these new stories, as Stephen North claims English teachers are bound to do, let's not point accusing fingers of blame at the storytellers, assuming they are process teachers in name alone or traitors to the process movement. Instead, let's treat these storytellers as insiders and reasonably assume that we, during the second generation of the process movement, can make the process movement stronger only by constructing new narratives, ones which take into account students' multiple roles and socially constructed values.

Works Cited

- Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1998.
- Harris, Joseph. *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997.
- Lensmire, Timothy J. *When Children Write: Critical Re-Visions of the Writing Workshop*. New York: Columbia University Teachers College Press, 1993.

- Locker, Kitty O. *Business and Administrative Communication*. Homewood, IL: Irwin, 1998.
- North, Stephen. *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1989.
- Schreiner, Steven. "Portrait of the Student as a Young Writer." *College Composition and Communication* 48.1 (1997): 86-104.
- Tobin, Lad. "How the Writing Process Was Born—and Other Conversation Narratives." In *Taking Stock: The Writing Process Movement in the '90s*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1994. 1-14.
- _____. *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1994.

About the Author

Elizabeth Blackburn Brockman, earned a Ph.D. in English from Ohio State while she was a full-time English teacher for Bexley High School. She is currently an assistant professor of English at Central Michigan University.