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Teaching Writing with a Capital T: Rethinking Writing Workshop In the Middle

Marcy Taylor

Atwell's *Writing Workshop: Discovery and Discontent*

I began teaching middle school English in 1987, the year Nancie Atwell published the first edition of *In the Middle*. Needless to say, during those first tough years of becoming a teacher, I never read the book—who had time amid making sense of the district-mandated curricula, reading the required literary texts in the required anthologies and designing tests and writing assignments to go along with them, grading spelling tests (again, required as part of the 8th grade curriculum), and, of course, coaching girls basketball and organizing the talent show? I didn't know what "writing workshop" was, only gradually becoming aware of the philosophies that informed Atwell's practice by attending the NCTE state-affiliated conferences, participating in the area Writing Project summer workshops, and taking graduate courses. Through these experiences, I was "converted" to the promise of workshop methodology in the K-12 classroom—the promise of relinquishing control over what gets read and written so that students could make their own literate choices; the promise of participating as a listener and co-learner rather than an assigner and assessor; and the promise of working delicately and collaboratively with writers rather than barging furiously (alone) through their writings. And Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* was the Bible showing me the light of salvation.

But, as Atwell herself argues, "kids can't be the only learners in a classroom. I also had to learn. Common sense, good intentions, wide reading, and the world's best writing programs aren't enough" (*In the Middle* [1st ed.] 8). I've tried to learn about composition in the last ten years or so of teaching writing and studying my own classrooms and those of others. I began to read composition research by such teacher-researchers as Linda Rief, Timothy Lensmire and Lad Tobin, who critique and revise workshop pedagogy. I conducted a two-year study on adolescent literacy in an urban, alternative middle school, seeing first-hand how Atwell's writ-

ing workshop methodology served and *failed to serve* the specific teacher and student roles in that environment. Finally, I began teaching a writing methods course in which my preservice teachers also felt the same disorientation with workshop pedagogy. Although the reading they were doing (including our primary text, Lucy Calkins' *The Art of Teaching Writing* and selections from *In the Middle*) sounded wonderfully free and promised a different relationship to literacy than many of them experienced as elementary students, they begin to have doubts once they enter elementary writing workshops.¹ As Timothy Lensmire points out, in his wonderful ethnography of a third-grade writing workshop, "Writing workshop advocates such as Donald Graves [1983], Lucy Calkins [1986], and Donald Murray [1968] tend to tell success stories" (2); but what are we teachers to do when our own *experiences* in workshops are not successful? Based on these experiences, I gradually became less the born-again workshop proponent and more the heretic: Does writing workshop pedagogy really do all that *In the Middle* seems to promise? What does it mean to be a "writing teacher" in this model? Am I doing something wrong if the "miracles" that Calkins and Atwell describe don't happen? How has/can the writing workshop change in the years since *In the Middle* came out?

In short, I needed a writing pedagogy that acknowledged that even if a teacher creates an environment of student-centered choice and collaboration, students may *choose* not to engage. I needed a pedagogy that recognized the very real constraints teachers struggle with—district mandated curricula, achievement testing, widely-varying student abilities, assigning grades—that must be balanced with their desire to widen the possibilities for reading and writing in schools. I needed a pedagogy that fit with my philosophy of teacher education—that teachers need to be reflective practitioners who are informed, authoritative, and planful. Frankly, Atwell's *In the Middle* wasn't working. Just as I was ready to abandon the work of Nancie Atwell as being a relic of an earlier, uncomplicated view of writing and

writing process pedagogy, she publishes a new edition that promises to answer some of these questions. Her revised pedagogy—which I would describe in her phrase as “teaching with a capital T”—offers a *balanced* view of workshop that reintegrates the teacher as a central figure in the writing classroom without returning to a programmed, “traditional” (and therefore, oppressive) pedagogy. While building on the strengths of her earlier work—those features that made *In the Middle* so revolutionary and compelling—her second edition is worth reading not only because she has modified (and, in my opinion, revitalized) our conception of writing workshop, but also because the text can serve as an indicator of how our field has evolved during the ‘90s.

Revising Workshop Pedagogy: The New Edition of Atwell's *In the Middle*

Section One, aptly entitled “Always Beginning,” outlines Atwell’s theoretical positions. Chapter One, “Learning How to Teach Writing,” describes the evolution of Atwell’s writing workshop, taking the story of her transformation *into* a workshop proponent that she told in the beginning of the first edition and adding her transformations since publishing the first edition. Atwell argues that her earlier version of writing workshop was a necessary liberation, a “revolution.” “But,” she argues, “something happened to me that happens often in revolutions. As part of my transformation I embraced a whole new set of orthodoxies. As enlightened and child-centered as the new rules were, they had an effect similar to the old ones: they limited what I did as an English teacher, but from a different angle” (17). This second edition is her attempt to show specifically how she has broken free of these “orthodoxies,” in the process creating not only a very different version of the writing teacher than we see in the earlier edition, but also managing to provide more practical and detailed explanation of pedagogy while avoiding what she calls “the formulas and jargon that made it possible to read the first edition of *In the Middle* as a cookbook: one teacher’s collection of recipes for whipping up a writing workshop” (16).

In the second edition, Atwell highlights the developments in her thinking “about my role as a teacher in the workshop and new questions for the sleepless nights in August” (22). I am struck by how much these questions resemble those that my colleagues, my preservice teachers, and I have been asking over the past few years:

- When do assignments from a teacher who writes help young writers engage and grow?
- What else can happen in minilessons besides me minilecturing?

- How do I talk to-and collaborate with-kids in conferences so that I’m showing them how to act on their intentions, not hoping they can find their way on their own?
- How important are specific expectations for productivity and experimentation? What should I ask young writers to produce over the course of a year, in terms of quantity and range of genres?
- How do I teach about genre without trotting out tired old English-teacher clichés that don’t get to the heart of what makes good fiction or poetry or exposition?
- What behaviors do I want to see in the workshop? How do I encourage them? Which should be mandated?
- How and when do I demonstrate my own knowledge of writing? To what ends? (23)

These questions illustrate the shift in Atwell’s thinking: as she says, she has become a “teacher with a capital T,” as opposed to, say, teacher as “facilitator” or “coach,” metaphors which seemed to dominate early process literature. These questions are so striking because they clearly interrogate the most well-known maxims of the first edition, such as “Don’t look at or read students’ writing during conferences,” “Don’t tell writers what they should do or what should be in their writing,” and “Tell kids editorial issues don’t matter until the final draft” (2nd ed. 17). In the rest of this introductory chapter, she briefly outlines these changes: she *does* assign writing sometimes; minilessons vary more in length and form; and conferences are more specific—she is more straightforward in her approach to kids (*telling* them what to do and what her expectations are). Besides shifts in her thinking about her role as writing teacher, she has also redefined student responsibilities. She describes her expectations at the end of this opening chapter: “As their teacher with a capital T, I also expect students to experiment with specific genres, attempt professional publication, produce minimum pages of draft each week and finished pieces each trimester (Rief 1992), attend to conventions as they draft, take notes on minilessons (Rief 1992), be quiet, and work as hard in writing workshop as I do” (25).

While I have been highlighting the *theoretical* shift represented by Atwell’s opening section, I don’t want to give the impression that the practical suggestions of the first edition are lost in the second. After Atwell explains her new theoretical underpinnings in Section One, she moves on to more practical concerns in Sections Two (“Writing and Reading Workshop”) and Section Three (“Teaching

with a Capital T"). This edition is even more practically useful than the first, primarily because Atwell has had over ten years to refine her pedagogy, collect student work to illustrate it, and write numerous books and articles articulating it. Teachers want practical advice and demonstrations—just what beginning writers want!—and Atwell doesn't disappoint us in this second edition. What she says of herself as a teacher of *writing* could also be said of her as a teacher of *teachers of writing* (substitute "teaching" or "teacher" for "writing" or "writer" in the following quote): In her refined pedagogy, she wants to serve "as a *mentor* of writing, a *mediator* of writing strategies, and a *model* of a writer at work" (21). In Sections Two and Three of the new edition, Atwell serves as mentor, mediator and model.

It is these two sections that are the most different organizationally from the first edition. Whereas in the first edition Atwell had separate sections devoted to "Writing Workshop" and "Reading Workshop," with a tiny third section ("Connecting Writing and Reading"), here Atwell integrates reading and writing workshop in Section Two, using six chapters that cover the elements and the implementation of reading and writing workshops. Atwell describes her purpose in the opening of Chapter Four ("Getting Ready"): "The workshop isn't an add-on; it is the English course—here, everything that can be described as language arts is taught as sensibly as it can be taught, in the context of whole pieces of students' writing and whole literary works" (97). While the ideal of *choice* is still a major value in her pedagogy—for instance, in her chapter entitled "Making the Best of Adolescence," she waxes rhapsodic about the wonderful things that happen when adolescents "can choose"—there is much more of a sense of teacher direction and expectation in this edition. I think that the unpredictability and chaos allowed for by the somewhat utopian devotion to student choice is exactly what teachers reacted against in the earlier version, particularly new teachers looking for something visible and measurable. If one weren't a magical teacher (as we assumed Atwell was), one couldn't pull off the program she described. One of the most useful changes in this edition, then, is the great amount of detail with which Atwell spells out her expectations and rules for behavior in the workshop, along with the addition of a very detailed description of the notebooks, folders, handouts and record-keeping strategies she uses in her workshop. While Atwell argues that she doesn't want this book to serve as a "recipe" for workshop, there is the sense that a teacher could take these elements as a starting point and play around with the ingredients to achieve a program with his or her own unique flavor.

In addition to the benefits of integration and

specificity in this section, Atwell also has chosen to add two new chapters—one devoted to minilessons and one to evaluation—and they are wonderfully detailed. I use the minilessons chapter in its entirety in my writing methods course to show the range of strategies one can teach in minilessons (for each type of minilesson, Atwell includes a long list of possible topics, very useful particularly for the preservice or first-year teacher). Her shifts in thinking regarding *directing* writers more and using her authority as an expert writer/reader has influenced her choice to elaborate this section on minilessons—the part of the workshop where whole-class, direct teaching takes place. She says that since writing the first edition, she has "reconceptualize[d] the minilesson as a practice that serves many purposes" (150)—as a forum for sharing her authority and as a forum for establishing a communal frame of reference, for students to share what they know. So, you will notice that not only is she more specific about the strategies and topics of minilessons, but she also no longer sees them as constrained to 3-5 minute minilectures; they are longer and more interactive. The other addition is the chapter entitled "Valuing and Evaluating" (perhaps following the lead of Linda Rief in *Seeking Diversity* [1992]). Again, by creating a separate chapter on evaluation, Atwell is able to go into more detail than in the first edition. Evaluation is a reality of public school teaching, yet workshop proponents have been tellingly reticent about discussing it. For example, my preservice elementary teachers complain mightily about the way that Calkins (1994) manages to discuss assessment without ever mentioning actually *assigning grades*. Atwell provides some help in this area (although a teacher/teacher-to-be will still have to translate her advice about using portfolios and self-evaluation to determine the degree of progress students make toward their goals into an actual letter-grade on a report card).

Section Three, entitled "Teaching with a Capital T," is brand new and extremely useful in answering the question *but what does it mean to intervene in students' writing development?* Here, Atwell includes chapters on direct teaching; she has chapters on demonstrating writing and on ways of reading and writing specific genres (memoir, fiction, poetry, and nonfiction). Here, Atwell makes perhaps the central point of her new book: as teachers of writing, we have to be writers ourselves; as experienced writers, we have to discover ways of *showing* students how we go through the process of making the choices writers make. Atwell argues:

We need to find ways to reveal to students what adult, experienced writers do—to reclaim the tradition of demonstration that allows young people to apprentice them-

selves to grown-ups. Observing adults as they work is an activity of enormous worth and power when it illumines what is possible. When we, as English teachers, demonstrate the uses of writing in our lives, we answer the most important question of all about writing: Why would anyone want to write? We give our students another taste of the complexities and satisfactions of composing a life. (369)

That is, rather than simply creating the perfect environment for writing to happen, we also have to make it happen by offering our expertise (gained through experience and through research). Each chapter in this section contains practical, accessible ways of talking about the considerations and decisions of writers (and a large number of resource materials for us teachers to use to research on our own). This section allows us to extend our understanding of what we are to do as “mentors, mediators, and models.”

The final section is the Appendices. Atwell has expanded this section as well, providing more inclusive lists of ideas for publication, genres, and materials for the writing workshop. Three features distinguish this set of Appendices from the first:

- 1) Rather than “manifestos” based on the very local conditions of Boothbay (see Appendices I and J in the first edition)-Atwell includes resources, allowing for a more inclusive and more conditional sense of “what works” that teachers will discover as they use and adapt the materials to their own specific needs. She provides a wider range of “forms” and “handouts” that she uses to organize students’ work and to facilitate evaluation. Forms such as Appendix D: Writing Survey, Appendix E: Reading Survey, and Appendix F: Student Writing Record can be used as “pull-outs,” which is why the copyright information appears printed at the bottom of each individual form;
- 2) Rather than a list of Atwell’s “Top 10 YA Titles” (see Appendix G: Favorite Adolescent Literature in the first edition), in the second, she has greatly expanded this list, splitting it into Appendix L: Favorite Adolescent Literature and Appendix M: Favorite Collections of Poetry;
- 3) Finally, the most important addition to the Appendices is Appendix Q: Recommended Resources for Teachers of Middle School Writing, Reading, and Literature, which includes professional literature, grouped by topic, for teachers to explore as references. This addition signals

Atwell’s commitment to literacy research and to teachers’ ongoing professional development.

The Appendices as a whole offer very detailed examples to illustrate the theories Atwell develops in the body of the text. While not as extensive as Rief’s or Routman’s, they do provide the kind of “practical application” of concepts that teachers at all levels will find enormously helpful in conceptualizing ways to make workshop pedagogy concrete.

Because this issue of *LJMJ* is devoted to writing instruction, and because I am a writing specialist, I am concentrating in this review on *In the Middle* as a writing text. However, as the cover states, the second edition contains “more than 70% new material,” including discussion of reading workshops and the integration of her writing and reading program. Like her shifts in the writing program, over time Atwell began to make changes in her reading program. In the introductory chapter, “Learning How to Teach Reading,” she says that she began to feel that students were eating the same meal over and over again: “I saw that getting students to read well and love books was one thing. If they were to grow beyond enthusiasm and use literature as a prism for viewing and participating in the adult world, I had to figure out how to inspire them to higher, deeper purposes” (45). For my writing methods course, I tend to pick and choose sections of the book that deal specifically with writing workshop; this was easier to do in the first edition, where Atwell tended to separate the reading and writing in distinct chapters (as I mention earlier in this review). However, by blending reading and writing workshop techniques in this edition, Atwell demonstrates the reality of middle school English classrooms, and she represents a more complicated, balanced view of teaching the language arts.

Balancing Act: Writing Workshop in the New Millenium

This notion of *balance* is the primary value Atwell’s new edition offers. It is a productive metaphor for rethinking our roles as writing teachers, an act that this special issue of *LJMJ* encourages. At the end of his study of 3rd grade writing workshops, Lensmire summarizes what he learned:

What I have struggled to express here is what my students and I struggled for in the writing workshop: some sort of balance. We must recognize that children need room to talk and act in order to learn and develop. We must also recognize that children’s talk and actions can be turned to worthy and less worthy ends, and that as teachers we have the responsibility to push for worthy ones. (159)

This sense of intervention marks the key philosophical shift in Atwell's thinking and one of the main reasons why returning to Atwell's *In the Middle* is so important. It recognizes that teaching writing always involves the "responsibility to push for worthy [ends]," as Atwell states in her article "Cultivating Our Garden": "That I teach what matters to me may seem the most obvious declaration ever made by a teacher, except that not so long ago I wanted to view English teaching as a value-neutral act. My goal in writing and reading workshop was to downplay my tastes under the misapprehension that this was how students would discover their own" (47). Atwell has created a way to balance student discovery with her own responsibility to shape and guide that discovery. In perhaps the most direct statement of her revised role, Atwell argues, "Bottom line, what [students] need is a Teacher. Today I'm striving for the fluid, subtle, *exhilarating* balance that allows me to function in my classroom as a listener *and* a teller, an observer *and* an actor, a collaborator and a critic and a cheerleader" (21).

In the introduction to *Taking Stock: The Writing Process Movement in the '90s*, Lad Tobin writes that "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" (1). As we approach the 21st century, language arts teachers at all levels (preservice elementary and secondary teachers through college-level instructors) should reflect on these stories of the field of writing instruction to see where we have come from and where we are going (not coincidentally, the themes of both the MCTE Fall Conference and the CCCC 2000 Conference in the spring focus on this kind of retrospective and prospective rethinking of the field). Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* serves as a window into the field, clearly revealing one version of the story of our field as it has developed during the 1990s. The second edition shows a very practical revision to a story that needed changing, and thus it provides a happy, if somewhat complicated ending: "The power of teaching in a workshop grows from making a place where students and a teacher can say 'I don't know' and feel 'I think I can find out.' The tension of knowing and not knowing—writing, reading, my students, myself—becomes a continuous adventure and a source of inspiration for a lifetime" (484). This "knowing and not knowing" is at the heart of teaching writing. As *In the Middle* attests, it constitutes that "exhilarating balance" that makes writing workshop so powerful.

Notes

¹In the methods course I teach, Eng 315: Teaching Writing in the Elementary Schools, students participate in a 10-week midtier field experience. They spend approximately two hours a week working in an elementary classroom during their designated writing time. My students participate in a variety of ways—conferring, teaching mini-lessons, assisting with publication, occasionally designing writing projects or units, providing one-on-one tutoring, and so on.

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