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On the Importance of Writing with Students

Greg Shafer

"Writing begins when teachers give their students silence and paper—then sit down to write themselves."

—Donald Murray

Teachers have known for decades about the importance of writing with their students, but I had always been rather selective about the kind of composition I did in class. Personal journals were a

favorite, but when it came to longer literary responses, short stories, or poems I tended to see my own paper load as too daunting. I simply didn't have the time.

Then came the challenge, from the third row, the second seat. It was a rather timid request from Allison, asking me to join the class in the writing of spooky stories. At first it was done with a sheepish grin and a blush, but moments later her genuine interest in my response became more evident: "Why don't you do one?" she asked. "We need an example and we want to see your work."

Allison's request was one of the best things to happen to me in my eleventh grade English class and has helped me to teach writing more sensitively and to appreciate better the symbiotic relationship between teaching and learning. Since that watershed day, I have written regularly with my students and have often engaged in the same critiques, discussions, and revisions I asked them to do. As I reflect back upon the experience, I can suggest a variety of reasons why writing with students is so important. Not only does it make teachers more perceptive writers but also allows them to become part of their students' learning community, to be a participant rather than the arbiter on the other side of the desk. Most importantly, it interweaves teaching and learning in an

interactive, democratic context that makes teachers and students partners in a real-life literacy endeavor.

Participation Breeds Democracy

To write with one's students is to learn very quickly about the special relationship that can be forged through collaborative work—the shaping and reshaping of essays, the experience of working through drafts of ideas, the individual investment of a writer's essence as he or she transforms personal feelings into sentences and paragraphs. Only days after I declared my intentions to participate in the spooky story assignment, I began to see the significance of my role as fellow writer. It began when three of my students visited me after school to read my rough draft and get feedback on their work. For many, this encounter may seem trivial, but for me it was a compelling example of how my role in the classroom had changed and expanded. Rather than being approached as the omniscient judge of successful literature, I was seen as a fellow writer who was struggling to refine my ideas and enhance my prose. Within fifteen minutes, we had formed a circle and were quietly engrossed in the reading of our drafts.

Anne, one of three students, was honest and thoughtful when she posed questions about certain paragraphs I had written. Why was I writing in the first person when I so often suggested third person omniscient? Did I feel that my protagonist was well enough developed, considering the goals of the assignment and the required length?

Moments passed quickly, the papers changed hands a second time, and the reading and discussion continued. This time I had Bart's paper and Kenneisha had mine. Again the feedback and discussion was a vigorous example of the surprising parity that seemed to exist among the four of us as we shared ideas. Kenneisha found what she felt were trite expressions and was quick to identify them with a wry smile. Because I had spent much of the first weeks of class discussing clichés and platitudes, she was more than eager to find some weaknesses in my own writing.

As I read over Bart's story, it was easy to appreciate the fluid, effortless rhythm of his writing, the transitions from scene to scene—the smooth and rich development of character. Perhaps I had noticed all of it before, but I had a sense that as a fellow writer I was better able to applaud his effort. It was truly unique.

That first session lasted an hour and established relationships that did not exist when I was not an actively engaged member of the composing being done. In some ways I felt like an accepted member of a club, an initiate who had passed his initiation. Because I was confronting the same problems and seeking the same critical response, the process had been transformed.

In his book *Empowering Education*, Ira Shor discusses the democratic class as being a sharing of power, an open forum for discussion, criticism, and change. "The democratic teacher," writes Shor, "gives up the right to dominate the discourse, to go on speaking if few are listening and many are bored" (167). Later, in a democratic context, he adds, "both teacher and students research the learning process under way, to discover how teaching and learning are progressing" (169). The dynamics of writing with students rather than being despotic overseer, of exposing a part of yourself on paper, is a powerful step toward sharing power and opening the class to other voices. For me, the chemistry of the class,

the atmosphere, seemed to change rather dramatically.

Participation Breeds Sensitivity

Two days later our complete rough drafts were due, and already my involvement in writing had changed my approach to the assignment. Where earlier I had mandated that the best stories from each group be read, I now asked that each group select an interested and willing reader—the name being unnecessary. In fact, part of my concern as to how the papers should be read came from my own trepidation as the due date began to close in on me. It is, I believe, quite natural to feel empathy for other writers but nothing breeds true compassion like a walk in that writer's shoes. As I reworked and revised my story, I became more aware of what the upcoming critique session could mean. It was a time to shine a light on certain papers, a time to check progress, and measure writing skill. As I considered my own feelings and the intimidation that some might feel, I quickly adjusted the activities so that no one would leave feeling alienated or embarrassed.

Writing with the class also opened my eyes to the possibility for competition—an aspect of education that has been promoted by conservative politicians who aspire to make our system more like the "real world." In his book *No Contest*, Alfie Kohn chronicles the regressive characteristics of competition, the deleterious effects of pitting student against student in a scenario that guarantees losers. Again, I cannot emphasize enough the unique sense of understanding that occurs when teachers are themselves writers. It was clear that I didn't want to be compared to others but that I did want cooperative sharing. Teaching without actual involvement can make us desensitized to such divisive aspects of competition.

The Importance of Sharing Power

With students in groups of three, we began the critique process. As with previous sessions, students were asked to exchange papers and complete an informal response which focused on the ways the stories could be improved. In this context, as in the one previous, my own engagement in writing tended to alter and enhance the

atmosphere for meaningful learning. For instance, it was clear from the start that my role as writer and fellow participant had made the classroom a much more empowering setting for a truly open discussion. With their teacher at a desk, sitting with other writers, many students felt more liberated to engage actively and forcefully in the oral discussion that followed the student critiques. As students volunteered to step to the front to read their drafts and reflect upon the responses of their peers, my authority gradually dissipated and I became another participant in the class.

Later, when I shared my piece of prose, the students again took the initiative in addressing valid concerns about my paper. As a writer who had enjoyed years of being the official authority of quality writing, it was edifying and even uncomfortable to be relegated to the place of fellow writer. It had been five years since I had been in a situation where my writing was openly criticized, where my judgments were questioned, and where people felt no reservations about recrafting my self-proclaimed masterpiece. It was, to put it simply, an extremely revealing experience. If I felt nettled by obvious lack of appreciation these students seemed to have for my paper—and I did—how, then, did they feel after months of my directives and commands and monolithic prescriptions for revision? Did I take the time to consider their goals and personal aspirations when they presented a composition to me? To become a writer in one's writing class is to delve into such questions of personal expression and to understand the need for humanism.

Like artillery fire, the comments came at me from virtually every part of the room. Katie wondered why I had ended the story so abruptly and contended that my main character still seemed vague. From the middle of the room came Andrew's request that I add more detail to the final scene. He too believed the ending was rushed.

As David reiterated the class's confusion about the narrator's transformation from storyteller to villain and suggested I work more into her development, I began to feel both frustrated and enlightened. I also, as a practitioner, began to feel like I had rediscovered something valuable about the teaching of writing and my place as a professional whose job is to nurture a love of the written

word. How much criticism—even positive, constructive criticism—was too much? Were my suggestions for revision truly a catalyst for growth, or was I depositing information into beaten receptacles as Paulo Freire discusses?

That first critique session, and my volatile feelings toward it, made me realize how much personal investment is involved in writing and how sensitive we must be in becoming a part of that literacy event. Clearly, it was not a lesson I would have considered as a non-writer. It came from standing in front of the class and exposing my craft to the students as they did theirs. It came from a democratic context that made me vulnerable. It highlighted the symbiotic relationship between teaching and learning.

Empowering Through Full Participation

As a writing teacher, the experience also allowed me to turn a corner, one that I knew I had to pursue. I knew that beyond the class critique stood a glaring truth about student autonomy and reflective thought. "As teachers," writes Robert Probst, "we should strive not to keep our students out, but to help them get in, and we do that by participating with them in the transactional process of making meaning linguistically" (77). I knew that the experience had changed my policy toward process. No longer would my suggestions be elevated over other students. No longer would the writing process be a linear set of easy, cook-book-like steps that were based only on my suggestions. Now I would write my comments with other students.

The experience also generated a new approach to how I evaluated my students' papers. Rather than collecting final drafts and writing my responses, I devised a portfolio system which demanded the cooperative effort of the students. All papers could be revised within two weeks of the end of any marking period. No papers would be graded and every piece of writing would be kept in a manila folder for a semester-ending conference. Instead of writing comments separate from other students, I would add my reactions to theirs and then release writers... to choose their own direction. In the end, the final grade would be a collaborative negotiation between the writer and

me after a discussion about progress, change, and the evolution of their work.

In addition, I would also require students to include a final reflection of their collective work, the revisions done, and the overall progress made. "What is important in the teaching of writing," contends Robert Probst, "is to transfer power to the student. The power for making judgments about the quality of their work must become the student's" (76). Probst's words seemed especially accurate in light of my own experience with the spooky story and the feedback I had garnered from students.

Conferencing and Self-Reflection

Thus, the conferences I had with students who came to see me about their semester grades were both amiable and productive. Instead of being a debate over marks and comments, much of the talk centered on the decisions made by the students and their self-reflection. What was their response to revisions done, to the evaluation of certain work, and the suggestions made by certain students?

Sara, one of many students who joined me for a portfolio conference, was quick to delve into the complexities of her work, pointing to her tendency to write about depression and use flowery metaphors. With such insight, it was easy to suggest strategies for further growth. Also significant was our ability to transcend teacher-driven prescriptions and explore Sara's personal aspirations as an artist who took her craft seriously.

For others, the discussions needed more input from me to nurture confidence and introspection. For Jenny, I needed to raise several open-ended questions concerning patterns in her writing. Over time, however, she became less reticent about her portfolio and her vision for her own writing.

How valuable is the conference to portfolios? I agree with Robert Tierney in his suggestion that:

Conferences may be among the most vital means of supporting self-assessment. Conferences offer a unique means of supporting self-assessment. Unlike more formal self-evaluation procedures, conferences can follow the lead of the student and offer support

or feedback necessary to prompt as well as guide reflections. (119)

For my new direction, the conferences were a priceless way to engender confidence and sincerity. In many ways, they seemed a natural part of the democratic class.

It has been five months since I first picked up a pen, accepted the invitation of an intrepid young lady, and joined my class in composing and revision. Since that time, I have learned a great deal about my writing and a great deal more about the teaching of composition. Language is, in the end, a very social and personal act. As Sharon Crowley argues, it cannot be "isolated from its contexts which are myriad" (38). In writing with my students, I altered that context and enhanced the way writing was perceived. It is a contextual and philosophical change that all English teachers should explore as they make their classrooms more student-centered and celebrate the natural confluence of teaching and learning.

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