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On Reading and Writing and Becoming a Teacher

Jennifer Ochoa

I am a bookaholic. I go to book sales and buy 15 or 20 books at a time. I like "great literature" and trashy romances. I like murder mysteries and modern novels. I like books for little kids and I like books of poetry. I don't really like self-help books or informational books, but I buy them anyway—I might like them someday. I would love to own a bookstore so that I could be surrounded by books all day long.

I still have my first raggedy, torn copy of *So Big*. I can imagine when that book was store-bought new, probably a 35-cent grocery store purchase. I can also imagine my much younger mother, holding the tiny me in pink-footed pajamas, creaking open the brand new Golden Book, *So Big*. My mother's voice accompanies my memory-picture—she begins, "Look at baby. She is SO BIG!" This is when I started to read.

I don't remember the moments when the letters on the pages began to form recognizable words in my head, but I do remember "reading" before that point. I crowded my dolls and animals around me and read to them the same books my mom read to me.

My mom used to read to me all of the time. To me, her voice is the sound of reading. When we read together, she always maintained a running commentary about the story, pointing out interesting pictures or asking questions about my interpretations or predictions. She showed me that reading was an active past-time that I could become involved in. She taught me that I could think about the story and figure out what was going to happen. And she invited me to see the words on the page as more than just words; they were the paint that colored the pictures the story drew in my mind.

I don't remember the moments when the letters on the pages began to form recognizable words in my head, but I do remember "reading" before that point. I crowded my dolls and animals around me and read to them the same books my mom read to me. I repeated the words she used to narrate each picture, imitating her intonations and inflections. I even remember questioning and commenting as my mother did, only I answered the questions myself. Reading was something I did in my play time, just like my mom.

When I was five, I begged my mother to "teach me to read!" I thought reading was some magical ability, and I wanted to possess it. My mom is an elementary school teacher, so she brought home some "Dick and Jane" classics for me to practice reading from. One afternoon, the two of us sat

together to begin to go through the books. I hated them. Who cared if Dick and Jane could run? And why did they call their mom “mother?” Those books made for very boring stories. My mom didn’t understand, I wanted to READ—like she read, the way she read, the stories she read. And I wanted to be able to do it NOW! I didn’t want anything to do with those dumb old big-lettered books she brought me; I wanted to be able to know what the letters in my storybooks meant. The project was instantly abandoned and Dick and Jane were saved for an even better use—“playing school.”

Through his tales, my dad showed me how to write stories in my head.

Reading and writing did not come together in my life until much later, but my dad is responsible for my writing. My dad is not much of a writer, and would never claim responsibility for my early writing efforts which did not even include using pencil and paper. These were explorations in finding a creative voice, and in this sense my dad was my mentor. My daddy told me stories all the time. These stories exist in my sense memory. They feel warm because I was always tucked in when he told them. They look dark and shadowy because he told me stories after he turned out the lights. I see his stories against the flickering TV light that was outside my bedroom door. My daddy’s stories are soft and whispery like he made his voice, and they smell like my dad smells. But mostly these stories feel safe because even if they became scary at points, my daddy was there telling them and creating the safe endings to please my anxious little-kid imagination.

Through his tales, my dad showed me how to write stories in my head. He taught me storytelling. I used my dad’s stories as examples for stories I created myself. His stories showed me how stories should sound, that the way words are put together make sentences which express ideas that relate to plot, action, and character. He showed me that describing the way things “look”

in a story is very important so that my audience can actually “see” where action occurs. From this “apprenticeship,” I began telling stories of my own. I told them to the eager and willing audience of my dolls, to myself, and eventually, to my friends. I would make up wild tales as the neighborhood kids and I sat on my front porch. After I gave the gist of the story, we would “play” my stories, acting out the events I had detailed. As we played, I would continue to revise, essentially rewriting the drama. I would twist plots and action in different ways, and I would even create dialogue, telling each character / friend their next line as the stories unfolded. This was a great time and really the beginning of my writing career, although I never connected these activities to the books I owned and loved. I still did not understand that the words that came from my head and created stories to act out would be like my books if they were written instead of spoken. I thought books just occurred spontaneously on their own.

With the advent of school, reading was still important in my life, as was imagining, but I never associated my storybooks and neighborhood-kid melodramas with the reading groups and book reports for school. We wrote short stories in third grade and poetry in sixth grade—I did a fair job at both. And I was always in the highest reading group, whatever the grade, but these were not important events in my life; they were merely the stuff school was made of. As I progressed as a student, junior high school marked the beginning of my love/hate relationship with writing. It was there that my stories became a chore, a task that was demanded of me. My stories no longer belonged to after-school play hours. They belonged to my teachers and became part of my grade, but I felt like they didn’t belong to me.

I liked my journal at home, and my verbose (another vocabulary word) poetry. I was simply a student in Advanced English class; I was a writer at home.

In junior high school, I was always in special English classes for accelerated readers and writers. Great things were expected of our accelerated minds, and in turn, great and wonderful English activities were presented by our teacher. However, we diminished the importance of her English teacher assignments by looking at them as mere dribble to put up with. We were smart and we were fourteen; we had no need for assignments. One of the things we *had* to do was keep a weekly journal. I wrote in a personal journal daily, with strict regularity. I wrote about many important things, like who I liked and who liked my friends. My personal journal also included anguished poems. I wrote about the loss of love and unrequited (a new vocabulary word) love. It was much more real than the journal we had to keep for English class. That journal had assigned topics. That journal was for a grade. My teacher always commented in my journal about my fine writing skills. I never paid attention, and continued to pump writings out in the nick of time to meet the deadline. I never worked very hard at my school journal or any writing that was for school. I liked my journal at home, and my verbose (another vocabulary word) poetry. I was simply a student in Advanced English class; I was a writer at home.

One of the journal assignments at school was to write a piece—a poem, story, essay, whatever we chose—to enter into the Scholastic Writing Awards Contest. Yeah, yeah, Sunday night before journals were due, I slopped out a story to satisfy the assignment. This story changed my entire view of myself in terms of writing and became my connection between reading and writing.

When the issue of the magazine containing my story arrived, I had a profound experience. I remember very clearly looking at the magazine-print version of my story next to the scribbled journal version.

When my teacher returned my journal, the only note beside my story read, "Good job! Revise and type for entry to contest." At that point in my life, revising meant rewriting my rough draft in ink, and since I was typing the story for entry, there was no need for my usual revision. I sort of fixed spelling and grammar errors, typed it and sent it off. I was fairly surprised when the letter declaring my story was a "finalist" arrived, but I didn't give it a second thought. A month after the finalist letter arrived, my teacher came running into my social studies class where we were having a test on World War II screaming, "You did it! You did it!" And she hugged me. I was quite shocked, more because my usually undemonstrative, "all business" type teacher was screaming in school than because I won the contest. It was also hard to believe that my stupid little story won out of more than 10,000 entries in my category. All I could think of was that I certainly didn't deserve this; the small-town fame that accompanied the event was equally as strange.

I didn't like my own writing, and I didn't understand what they were asking me to write.

When the issue of the magazine containing my story arrived, I had a profound experience. I remember very clearly looking at the magazine-print version of my story next to the scribbled journal version. The words written in my fat, rounded handwriting were the same as the professional magazine print. And these words came from my head. And other people would read these words who would never know that I was the person who wrote them. The one comment I remember most distinctly amidst the "congratulations" and the "terrific jobs" was the one made by my little Mexican, broken-English-speaking grandma. She asked, "How can you just put those words together and make them come out like that?" I honestly didn't know, but I did know one thing. Expectations came with this supposed triumph, expectations I did not want to fulfill. That is when I began to hate writing.

Tenth grade brought me to composition class. Yuck! I could not comprehend the triangles and rectangles my teacher drew on the board. The five-paragraph essay was beyond my reach, and I hated the looks I got from teachers. Questioning looks that mixed pity with dismay. Looks that said, "She's supposed to be great, what happened?" What happened was I hated writing. I didn't like doing it for myself anymore, and I certainly wasn't going to do it for my teachers. I didn't like my own writing, and I didn't understand what they were asking me to write. I took the minimalist approach and barely got C's.

I sure did love reading, though. I read everything I could, in all the time I could spare. So I came to college, and I appropriately chose English as a major. I was an avid reader of books. I had no time to read, and a writer of last-minute papers. I did not keep a journal for personal satisfaction—my scorn for writing had become complete. However, when I came to college and the five-paragraph essay ceased to exist, writing fell into place for me. I could go on for three pages explaining my point. I still hated writing, but my writing got me 4.0's, so I trudged along, writing papers as my payment so that reading could be my major. I tried to make the activity of writing as entertaining as I could, so I played games with words. I forgot terms like "thesis" or "topic sentence," and instead tried to find the most interesting combination of words to say the most ordinary things. I still didn't revise, and I still composed in the absolute last minutes available, but I didn't feel as much hatred towards the concept of writing. I didn't consider myself a writer, though. I did, however, realize that writing came naturally to me.

At this time, I realized that there was a connection between the early storytelling lessons of my father and whatever I wanted to write down. I understood that writing was as simple as putting the words that I spoke onto the page with my pen. At this time, I realized the connection between the combined gifts of my mother's reading and my father's telling. When I read, I heard my mother's voice reading the words to me, and now, when I wrote, I heard my own voice speaking the words

as they were recorded in ink. So for me, reading and writing start as oral activities.

...Beginning writers should not be weighted down with unfair expectations about their ability, either positive or negative.

Although I loved reading and writing for myself, I did not always want to be a teacher. Being an English major teaches you to read books and write papers on them. Since the job market is not filled with positions demanding these qualifications, I became a teacher. I could not wait to be an English teacher. I wanted to help students discover themselves as readers and writers. I wanted to help these readers and writers appreciate and find the tremendous versatility and beauty in words and what can be created with words. I developed ideas and methods that would help students become writers of good writing—writing not stilted and stifled by a teacher's authoritarian red pen—but writing that comes from a student's own natural voice.

I believe that composing is an activity that needs to be taught because a piece needs to be written with the thought that it will be read. Readers should also be helped to understand that books are written by people who create the ideas and word combinations in their heads. I think, therefore, that students should be taught that these same readers can become writers of what other people read. Emerging writers should be given confidence in their ability to produce good writing and be given guidance towards that end. Beginning writers should not be weighted down with unfair expectations about their ability, either positive or negative. If a student does not possess mature writing skills, that student should be afforded opportunities to succeed without having to meet a teacher's expectations of failure. Likewise, a student who shows some promising writing skills, as I did, should not be pushed or expected to perform continually. Beginning writers need latitude to find their own unique voice, and I think teachers should accept that voice.

I do not believe a prescribed formula for writing is appropriate or even possible. Every writer has a different process of composition and reading and writing have different definitions in everyone's mind. What needs to be given to writers is the help to find a process that they can work with comfortably to produce quality writing of all kinds. Reading also should be included as part of the writing process. Had I never seen my own writing in print, I never would have associated it with reading. Thus the stories my dad told me were just as much a guide in my road to literacy and writing as the stories my mother read.

Readers and writers are born by being shown that reading and writing are worthwhile activities,...

One of the clearest lessons teachers can present to students to show that reading and writing are valuable activities is to read and write themselves. If students see teachers reading, especially for pleasure, they will see that reading is an activity used for more than just school purposes. And if they see teachers writing, students will better understand that it is an activity that is done for reasons other than just "getting a

grade." Only through these kinds of demonstrations can students see reading and writing as valuable beyond the classroom. I also think teachers should model the writing process through their own writing. Once students have experienced this kind of guidance from teachers, they can then explore the writing process themselves. After teachers offer students their own models of reading and writing processes, they can allow students to explore their own variations and differences in approaching these processes.

Formulas teachers give beginning writers often make no sense and have no meaning in the real world of writing. Since the real world is where students need to survive, it seems to make sense to prepare them for it. Readers and writers are born by being shown that reading and writing are worthwhile activities, and they become good at these activities only by doing them. Good English teachers know the difference between helping students become readers and writers and teaching the mechanics of reading and writing.

Editors' Note: This piece, which reflects Jennifer's hopes and aspirations for herself as a teacher, was written when she was a college senior. Now in her second year of high school teaching, she will write a column for LAJM beginning with the spring issue, in which she will explore the frustrations and joys of being a new teacher.