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PRACTICE IN THE BELIEVING GAME

Alice M. Gillam

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things."

"I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

With these lines from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Peter Elbow begins his chapter "The Doubting Game and the Believing Game" at the conclusion of *Writing Without Teachers*. In my experience, it is practice in the believing game which makes possible writing *with* teachers. Nowhere was this more evident than in a Summer Writing Institute for teachers held at Penn State-Harrisburg, where participating teachers practiced believing in their own writing and each other's writing daily.¹ For three weeks, sixteen teachers— eight high school English teachers, three elementary teachers, one junior high science teacher, one special education teacher, and two elementary teachers-in-training—immersed themselves in writing and talk about writing. The believing game began in Elbowesque writing groups, where writers read their work aloud twice and listeners made observations and asked questions; but the game soon spilled over into the halls, the restrooms, the lunch room, and during car trips to and from the institute.

Nonwriters, blocked writers, occasional writers, closet writers, aspiring writers, all became practicing writers, at least for the duration of the institute. "What amazes me every time someone reads," said one new believer, "is how good she or he is and how effective the writing is." "Seductive!" said another. "That's what it was! All that constant writing, that

overwhelming positive reinforcement. It was enough to undermine anyone's lack of confidence."

The story of how this new belief affected the writing and subsequent teaching of participants is best told through example. In the profiles which follow, I track two teacher-writers, Beth and Jane, through their composing of a particular piece of writing and the effect these responses had on the writer's evolving text. The weekly cycle of activities for a particular piece of writing included: freewriting in response to an exercise or prompt, writing multiple drafts throughout the week, receiving writing group response to those drafts, and "oral publication" before the whole group at the end of each week.

After narrating the experiences of Beth and Jane, I offer a postscript in which they reflect on the impact of their summer experience at the institute. For although Beth and Jane had responded enthusiastically to the intensive writing and group work offered during the institute, I was curious to know whether or not these experiences had any effect on their subsequent writing and teaching. So the next fall, I called each of them to find out.

A gentle, soft-spoken woman, Beth seems well-suited temperamentally to her job of teaching 4th through 6th grade learning disabled students. As a writer, she initially described herself as "private," as one who liked to perfect her work before showing it to anyone. She said, in fact, that she preferred writing to speaking because the former allowed her to consider her words carefully: "Things can slip out when speaking." In recent years, Beth has done some freelance writing for a local newspaper, mainly profiles of local Lancaster County artists and artisans.

One of the pieces Beth worked on during the institute was an essay about her trip to Mexico. The essay began as a journal entry prompted by a class exercise on "famous firsts." The initial journal version proceeds chronologically as a travel diary might, incidents are mentioned in summary fashion, and the style is loose and conversational:

The flight down was pleasant, smooth, and short, which I was glad of, since I was full of apprehension at the ride itself, to say nothing of not being able to speak Spanish. . . . Everything worked out for the best

after only one small unpleasant experience at the airport claiming our baggage.

When she read this entry to her writing group, they responded with questions: "Can you tell me more about the pleasant plane ride?" and "What happened at the airport with the baggage?" The group's response helped Beth to see more clearly what she needed to do next: more exploratory writing. Because she had "plenty of potential material," Beth was unsure of which aspects of the trip to develop, which to telescope. As Peter Elbow would say, she had not yet discovered the piece's "center of gravity."

Several days and four drafts later, Beth was ready to read this piece to the whole class. In the intervening days, she had explored her material by developing various segments of the trip—an encounter in a restaurant and a description of men unloading ice blocks outside the hotel. In Beth's words, "I was taking a trip with this story . . . I went off on a number of tangents and then refocused and chopped." However, the turning point came when the beginning "just came" to her and with it a sense of focus. "The beginning came to me one night," explained Beth, "just flew onto the paper from the typewriter, from me, the source, I guess." The new beginning was this:

We'd been warned by friends and family and even by well-meaning strangers. "It's dirty." "Nobody works; they take siestas all day." "Don't eat any fruit you can't peel." "Whatever you do, don't drink the water." "You aren't really going to Mexico, are you?"

What follows in this draft is a movement from the early experiences which seemed to confirm the naysayers' predictions—a stubbed toe in the airport in Texas, failing to get change from the airport porter in Mexico City—to the overwhelmingly positive experiences which dominated the trip—the spotless hotel room; the courtyard cafe with rose-colored bougainvillea tumbling from flower boxes; the busy, scurrying women making tortillas; the polite treatment on the subway. The class applauded her new version and reinforced her sense of focus. "Your piece changed my mind about traveling in Mexico," said Betty. "You dispelled many myths that I had. You include the smell of clean laundry along with the spotless hotel room to contradict the myth that Mexico

is ugly and dirty." Val observed, "You stubbed your toe. The cab ride. The hotel looked boarded up. Your friends were probably right. But— the flowers were a hint— the next day when you opened the door, I felt the sunlight and the wonderful surprise."

These responses can be described as what Sondra Perl and Nancy Wilson call "say back": "Writers who hear what they have written reflected in others' words are enabled to develop their ideas: to see where they have not yet expressed their meaning and to create, from what is still implicit in their writing, something explicit" (6-8). Testifying to the value of this kind of response, Beth said that even though she knew she was finally on the right track, she had not explicitly identified the focus to herself until she heard it reflected back in the comments of other class members. This confirmation and conscious identification of a focus guided subsequent revisions.

One result of the summer experience, according to Beth, is that she is less private about her writing. In an article she completed the next fall on a local basket weaver, Beth allowed her editor to see and comment on her work in progress. On the first day of the school year, she posted all of her versions of "Trip to Mexico" on the bulletin board to show the class the messiness of her process and her tendency to leave out and misspell words just like they did. "I realized," she said, "that I wasn't modeling enough for these kids, and learning disabled kids really need that." Now she writes with them continually, showing them how to revise by physically cutting up their drafts and rearranging the parts. She has discovered that it is important for them to "handle their writing, to hold sentences and paragraphs in their hands and move them around." She has also found that writing collaboratively and composing on the computer inspire confidence in these students who so desperately need it. In the past, she confesses, she felt overwhelmed by her students' difficulties with writing and blinded by their errors. "I've learned the importance of a supportive environment," she says, "where there's the sense that most of what you do is good and right. The way I teach writing has transferred to the way I teach other subjects."

Like Beth, Jane came to the summer institute already committed to her own writing. In fact, because Jane was such an experienced writer, she admitted that she was skeptical at first about the value of writing groups and "oral publication." Since most of the other teachers were less experienced writers than she, she expected to get little substantive help with her writing. However, despite long-term journal-keeping and years of writing short fiction

and poetry, Jane has had little time in recent years to finish pieces and send them off. In her tenth grade English class, she uses even mundane occasions like vocabulary tests to indulge her love of word play.

Like Beth's "Trip to Mexico," Jane's essay, "First Child to College" (later shortened to "First Child"), began with the "famous firsts" exercise. Jane's first version of the piece staked out the parameters of her story line, which began with the car trip from Pennsylvania to Michigan, where Jane's eldest child, Portia, was to attend college, and ended with a dialogue between Jane and Portia. In subsequent versions, Jane added little new information; however, as she re-worked her narrative, she tried to get closer and closer to a recreation of the emotional content involved in this experience.

In her first version, Jane referred to herself as "the woman":

"They were alone in the car for hours. . . . Portia was entering the University of Michigan, Emily [her youngest child] was entering kindergarten, and the woman was entering the high school, returning to her teaching career."

Reflecting on the story later, Jane said, "I had told this story many times before and made light of how awful it was. I wanted to retell it and resolve something in it. Maybe that was why I wanted to put myself in third person." When Jane read this first version to her writing group, their responses were positive—"It sounds like a story waiting to be told;" "I want to hear where this ends"—but offered little guidance for revision, though Jane herself circled "the woman" and made a marginal note to herself, "mother, not woman."

In the second draft, Jane tried referring to herself as "the mother," but this did not resolve the problem of perspective. At some points it seemed that it was Portia's story; for example, there are references to "her father" and "her roommate," meaning Portia's. At other points, however, it seemed to be the mother's story in terms of emotional content:

"I'm going to miss you terribly, terribly," the mother says.
"Remember to always lock your doors and don't ride with strangers and look five ways before you cross the street."

"Come on, Mom," replies Portia. "It's a little late for that now. You know I'll be on probation for doing drugs within a week, don't you? And there isn't a stranger within the city limits who'd be safe with me."

Her writing group's response to the next draft, her third version, triggered Jane's breakthrough with this essay. Here she tried yet another approach; she called herself "Kate." When she read this version to her group, they finally put their finger on the problem: "Is the 'her' Portia or Kate? I get confused." "Why do you call yourself Kate?" "Who's telling this story?" Further evidence that the central consciousness in the story needed to be Jane's was the section she had added to the end of this draft:

She pulled her grown-up daughter into her arms and kissed the softness of her neck. She and her husband had marveled at the strength and independence of that neck the first time they'd held her. Babies' necks are supposed to be vulnerable, their weak spot, but Portia's had only been soft and beautiful, never even wobbly.

With the problem of perspective resolved, Jane proceeded to revise by representing herself in the story as "Jane," thus allowing her some emotional distance but making it her story. Moreover, she juxtaposed the "mothering" gestures which came unbidden, out of habit, with incidents which illustrated the imminent separation and loss. To keep the piece from being maudlin, Jane undercut the sadness of the occasion with humor:

A concerned Portia says, "You're too tired to drive back home tonight."

"I've done longer stretches than this," replies Jane.

"But you're old now. You have an adult daughter attending the University of Michigan," teases Portia.

"Scum," retorts Jane.

By the fifth draft, the only problem which remained was the conclusion, and Jane asked her writing group for suggestions. Sharon thought Jane should get herself safely home in the conclusion, but Jane found that every

time she tried to do this, it just didn't seem to work. Like Beth's beginning, the conclusion came to Jane late one night:

The parking lot was almost empty, but Jane waited until Portia had crossed the street and let herself into one of the huge glass doors before she turned on the air conditioner and rolled up the window.

As Jane put it, "I knew when I was done." What she didn't consciously realize until someone else in the class pointed it out, however, was that the ending echoed the beginning. In both cases, she is encapsulated in the car with the outside world blocked out by the sound of the air conditioner.

Jane, who originally had her doubts about the value of writing groups, has become a confirmed advocate. In fact, she has been a key participant in the ongoing writing group which grew out of the summer workshop. She describes the monthly group meetings as a "very important Saturday in the month for me. Even though the intensity varies, it doesn't seem to matter. I find that I have a new appreciation for the writing of others, even those whose personalities and writing I didn't like much at first." Though she sent her "First Child" essay out twice and received two rejections, she plans to work on it some more and send it out again. "My students," she says, "work in groups regularly, and they don't seem to hate writing like they used to. I'm gentler in my responses; I try very hard to be supportive."

In the cases of these two mature writers, the writer maintained authorial control, allowing, as Eudora Welty puts it, "each story to teach the writer how to write it." The members of their writing groups were companions in the process. And it is this experience, writing in the company of supportive others, that confirmed or re-confirmed their belief in the power of the writing process and in the importance of response. So far, practice in the believing game is carrying over into their teaching, but sustaining this belief is not easy, and the all-too-pervasive influence of the doubting game is strong. It is harder to believe in students' developing process than it is to believe in the process of a professional peer; it is more difficult to suspend preconceived notions about Ideal Texts when the text in hand contains distracting discrepancies between intention and effect. Nevertheless, teaching writing requires such belief.

In *Through Teachers' Eyes*, Sondra Perl and Nancy Wilson report the results of their four-year study of Writing Project trained teachers and their students. They conclude that specific teaching techniques are less important than repeated "invitations to become writers": "What seems essential . . . is that teachers embody the belief that students, in their eyes, are already writers" (259). I would argue that such belief can begin with belief in one's own writing capacities and in the power of peer response. As Beth and Jane's comments suggest, the opportunity to write intensively and to receive regular response to their writing transformed not only their writing attitudes and practices, but also their teaching attitudes and practices. For these teacher-writers, practice in the "believing game" made them believers in the power of writing and response, not only for themselves but also for their students.

1. I wish to thank all of the wonderful teachers who participated in the 1986 Summer Institute at Penn State-Harrisburg, especially my co-teachers, Betty Beck and Paula Bresler, and the writers whose work is cited in this essay, Beth Schulz and Jane Krebs.

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