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Julie A. Devers

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BECOMING A WRITING TEACHER: FROM CONFUSION TO CONFIDENCE

By Julie A. Devers

"I am a literature teacher, not a writing teacher." This was the concern I voiced to almost anyone who would listen to me when, in 1984, I found myself teaching college composition to a group of students enrolled in a word processing/secretarial program. My undergraduate English classes had prepared me to teach literature, not writing, and although I had written countless papers myself, I could not remember any pertinent instruction I had received which had taught me how to write. I felt totally unprepared.

A review of the Report of the CCCC Task Force on the Preparation of Teachers of Writing reveals why I felt so unprepared. The Task Force lists eight areas that should be part of the writing teacher's background:

1. Experiencing a wide range of writing situations.
2. Reading and responding to the writing of peers.
3. Learning to be perceptive readers of our own work.
4. Studying writing as a process.
5. Experiencing writing as a way of learning.
6. Learning to assess the progress of writers.
7. Studying research on the teaching of writing.
8. Studying writing in relation to other disciplines.

My exposure to these eight areas was minimal. Most of the writing I did in college was analytic in nature as I responded to the literature covered in each course. In a couple of classes, I did some journal writing, but this, too, was in response to literature. Journal writing, though, did give me a chance to respond in a variety of forms; it was the closest I came to creative writing (a class I purposely avoided since I do not consider myself very creative). I did experience writing

as a way of learning; I interpreted, analyzed, synthesized, evaluated, and asserted--usually in connection with a piece of literature but occasionally in response to happenings in the real world. I did not, however, experience the majority of suggestions on the list issued by the task force.

I realized soon after I began teaching composition that I was not helping most of the students. I was using the textbook to show them models of good writing; I was explaining the rules of punctuation and assigning exercises; I was teaching grammar, again with exercises from the text; and, of course, I was assigning essays for them to write. But none of this was helping them. Many of my students lacked confidence in their own ability to write, and I needed to find ways to prove to them that they had that ability.

My uncertainties drove me to enroll in the Writing Workshop for Teachers, a graduate English class. I was disappointed the first night of class, though, when I heard that the emphasis was going to be on our own writing processes. I thought I had registered for the wrong class since I didn't see how my writing papers was going to help my students. My skepticism soon disappeared, however, and I slowly began to discover ways to help people improve their writing. That class plus the next two writing classes I took opened up new avenues for me in the teaching of writing. I have been exposed to so many ideas, theories, and strategies for the teaching of writing that, while I realize there is not a simple outline to follow, I feel confident in my ability to help my students.

Most important on my path of discovery was learning to view writing as a process--a process (not necessarily linear) that includes prewriting, planning, writing drafts, revising, and proofreading/editing. In the past, I was concerned mainly with a student's finished product. Once in a while, someone would show me a rough draft, and I would offer advice or grant approval, but the emphasis was on the finished paper, which I dutifully corrected by marking the errors and pointing out the weaknesses. I did make a conscious effort to say

something positive on each paper, but, in many cases, this was a minor part of my comments.

As I began to view writing as a process which can be taught, I began to alter my goals as a teacher. Where I once felt pointing out errors one of my main tasks, I now see marking errors as a very minor part of my instruction. At the beginning of a term, my main goal is to get my students to write and write and write--so much that they finally realize they can write, they do have something to say, they can actually communicate in writing.

I have discovered several effective ways to encourage students to produce an abundant amount of writing. Free writing works well for some people. Students do not have to be concerned with topic sentences, punctuation, grammar, and other rules of correctness since the only stipulation is to keep writing. Some students discover that they can indeed write--much more than they ever had before; moreover, they are sometimes able to take an idea expressed in their free writing and turn it into a composition. This re-working also promotes the idea of revision, an important part of the writing process.

Journal writing is another way to encourage students to express themselves in writing. In two of my grad classes I used a journal to react to assigned readings and class discussions. My journal also became a place to work through concerns I had about teaching writing. This experience taught me that journals can be different things for different people. I especially like having my students use this mode because journals can provide the opportunity for a genuine writer/reader relationship to develop between student and teacher; furthermore, a student who might be hesitant about expressing feelings or views in class may feel free to put those thoughts in writing.

In my most recent graduate class, I became intrigued with the idea of writing as a means of learning, and I would like to experiment with this. Since I now teach adult basic education which includes several content areas, I am considering having my students use journal entries

to record their understanding of new concepts as they are introduced. For example, a student could discuss what she has learned about adding fractions, including anything that still seems confusing. I see two possible results (besides practice in writing) from this type of entry. One, since the student would be putting a concept into her own words, she may understand the new information better. Two, as I am scanning the entries, I should be able to see if the student understands the new material. This could be very helpful since math is individualized, with each student working at his own pace.

Assigning personal experience essays is another means of encouraging students to express themselves through writing. I have watched students become very involved in re-creating an experience--searching for the precise words to describe a feeling or an event. Once people begin to realize they have had experiences worth writing about, they gain confidence in both their ability to discover new topics and their writing skills.

Along with encouraging students to write more, I now expose my students to strategies for getting started, finding a focus, organizing material, and evaluating their own work. Besides free writing, I introduce my students to brainstorming (which can be accomplished in class or individually), listing (quickly jotting down ideas, examples, and details that might be incorporated into a paper), and cubing (looking at a topic from several angles by describing, comparing, associating, analyzing, applying, and arguing for or against the subject). I tell them to ask questions, not only the reporter's six questions--who, what, when, where, why, and how--but also questions directed to themselves about their pieces: What main idea do I want to convey? Does my paper illustrate this idea? Is this example clear to my reader, or do I need specific details? I show them how to use an outline as a means of mapping out a proposed paper, and also how to outline as a means of checking to see if a finished paper is balanced and well-organized. As an alternative to the outline, I introduce the technique of using an issue tree--diagramming a paper using the main idea or topic as the center and drawing branches from this idea,

inserting sub-topics or subordinate ideas which connect to the central point. These and other aides are available, and I try to make the students aware of the many methods at their disposal so they may choose whatever works best for them but also so they will be able to draw upon these strategies when what they usually use does not work.

In order to reinforce revision as a part of the process of writing, I have shown my students some of my work, including my many drafts complete with arrows and numbers to indicate organizational changes. I try to emphasize that revision does not mean simply proofreading and recopying neatly. To illustrate revision, I use a set of papers which includes two drafts by the same person on the same topic. The final product is very different from the earlier draft yet it addresses many of the same ideas. We discuss how the author of this piece completely changed it in order to communicate his or her purpose. This leads easily into a discussion of how we should have our purpose clearly in mind as we write. But I also emphasize that our purpose can change as we write, for we may discover that we want to move in a different direction.

One of the biggest changes I have made in the classroom is to have students write during class time. My previous pattern was to discuss the assignment, do a little brainstorming to help the students get started, and expect that most of the writing would be done outside of class. This perpetuated the idea that the finished product was all that I was interested in--all that mattered. Having the students write during class time gives me the opportunity to stress the process of writing. I can help students who are having problems getting started. I might suggest that they try free writing again or that they make a list of examples or details they could use in their papers. I can have mini-conferences with the students as they are writing, and during the conferences I can ask them questions to lead them in the right direction, and they can ask me questions. I am there while they are composing--when they need help.

Another change involves audience. Audience is something I never thought of as I wrote my own papers through the years. I wrote solely to complete an assignment, with the teacher viewed as my only reader. Providing student writers with an audience can be an important motivating factor. If students know their work will be read by others, they may be encouraged to try to make their writing clear and interesting. They may also see the importance of proofreading their work.

I often have the students share their work with one or two other students. On occasion, I have had students read their work to the class. This provides an audience other than the teacher for their writing. The communication becomes real rather than an artificial exercise designed to evaluate abilities. But I see further benefit to the students sharing their work: By reading or hearing what others have written, the students are given the opportunity to see how other people tackled the assignment. They are exposed to different methods of development and different styles of writing. I think this is important because it can provide the stimulus for a student to try something new with his or her own work.

Using peers as an audience is just one way to provide people with readers for their compositions. I have included students' work in a class newsletter and encouraged them to write letters to the editor. In the future, I plan to display work on a bulletin board or wall, publish collections of students' writing in booklets, and encourage the writing of letters to local officials and any other people with whom the students want to communicate.

I have also discovered that evaluating students' writing is an important part of the writing process and that it can be used as an instructional tool. Evaluation has been a major concern for me. Previously, I concentrated on errors. Now, as I read a student's composition, one question helps me put the evaluation process in its proper perspective: Does the paper accomplish what the writer set out to do? This question encourages me to look at the content, organization,

and supporting details in a paper. If weaknesses are present, I decide to what extent these weaknesses interfere with the message of the paper. I use the same system for mechanics, determining how the errors disrupt the flow of the piece.

I also now respond as a genuine reader, not simply a teacher. I no longer write "vague" or "need details" as responses. Instead, I ask questions: "Can you think of an example to support this?" "Do **all** people believe this way?" Or if the focus is not clear, I might write, for example, that I am confused about which point the student wants to discuss; and if the organization is weak, I might tell the student that I cannot distinguish in which order the events occurred. In this way, I believe I am encouraging the students to develop the topic and think logically. I finally feel comfortable with my ability to evaluate written work.

Not only have I learned to assess my students' writing in a manner that encourages better writing, but I have also found a way to make the teaching of mechanics more relevant to their needs. The students' own work becomes the basis for lessons in mechanics. I take sentences with errors and reproduce them using the chalkboard, handouts, or transparencies. We all look at the sentences and decide how the errors can be corrected. This not only provides a means for discussing punctuation or grammar but also introduces the students to sentence combining techniques. They are able to see that there are many ways to express the same ideas. They can experiment with conjunctions and punctuation, with phrases and clauses. I would like to expand this method of using the students' writing as the basis for lessons and reproduce, for example, paragraphs that are poorly organized and discuss what is needed and look at well-written essays and talk about what it is that makes them work.

After three graduate writing classes, I feel at ease teaching writing. I have gained many insights into this complex task of teaching people to write; however, I also realize that important research is taking place in this field, so I will continue to keep myself informed

by attending classes and workshops, scanning research results, and reading articles written by others who teach writing. But I now feel informed and prepared, and I am excited about my newfound knowledge and eager to share it with my students. I am confident that I can help people improve and feel better about their writing skills. I understand that if one strategy does not work, other strategies exist. And I can say with assurance, "I am a writing teacher."

Julie Devers teaches at Tri-City SER.

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Attorney General Edwin Meese, on whether suspects who are innocent of a crime should have the protection afforded by the **Miranda** decision:

Suspects who are innocent of a crime should. But the thing is, you don't have many suspects who are innocent of a crime. That's contradictory. If a person is innocent of a crime, then he is not a suspect Its [the **Miranda** decision's] practical effect is to prevent the police from talking to the person who knows the most about the crime--namely, the perpetrator **Miranda** only helps guilty defendants. Most innocent people are glad to talk to the police. They want to establish their innocence so that they're no longer a suspect.

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From the U.S. Air Force:

A cruise missile "impacted with the ground prematurely."

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From the head of a statewide organization of high school football coaches:

"They're not failing; they're deficient at a grading period."