PLAYING WITH FICTION: DEVELOPING ADOLESCENT WRITERS AND SELVES

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When I taught middle school, my students loved playing with fiction. Never mind that they didn't know how to develop characters, or that their settings consisted of locating Dracula in *Penn*sylvania, or that their favorite plot twist was "it was all a bad dream." When we wrote fiction, they came to class. They listened, shared, argued, laughed, questioned, and revised. I learned that creative writing was a great motivator. I wondered what else it could do for them.

In graduate school, I continued my investigation into the teaching and learning of creative writing. A few voices—Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, Robert Scholes— argued for its inclusion in practice; others pushed creative writing to the margins and argued for a focus on expository writing—the starch accompaniment to the literature on the English dinner table. If served at all, creative writing was dessert—tasty and easily swallowed, but not particularly formative. "I don't have time for that kind of fluff," one high school English teacher told me, bringing to mind whipped marshmallow goo.

It turns out, however, that there is a fairly straight path to be drawn between creative writing (particularly fiction) and development, if we use an elemental construct—children's play. As psychologist Lev Vygotsky explains it, play creates a space in which children can obtain what they are denied in the real world. Entering voluntarily into play in the search of unrealizable desires, the child is free to develop his or her own imaginary environment. Fulfillment is possible in play. The child can make the impossible, possible, exploring concepts and ideas beyond his or her reach in

the real world. Consequently, it has cognitive implications as well. Children, for instance, develop abstract thinking by learning to use objects in ways that are different from their intended use. As Vygotsky puts it:

> In play, thought is separated from objects and action arises from ideas rather than from things: a piece of wood begins to be a doll and a stick becomes a horse. Action according to rules begins to be determined by ideas and not by objects themselves. This is such a reversal of the child's relation to the real, immediate, concrete situation that it is hard to underestimate its full significance. (97)

By learning how to separate the object's function from its potential meaning, the child has effectively abstracted the properties of the object to a new purpose. Vygotsky theorizes that play helps children to attain new levels of thought. Their linguistic awareness is developed, for example, because words are now flexible, unbound from the concrete objects that formerly signified them. A spaceship, for instance, can be made from *almost* anything: a cardboard box, a circle drawn on the ground, the space under a table.

The *almost* in the previous sentence is critical. Paradoxically, the freedom that is play is made possible through rules (Vygotsky 94-96). Creating an imaginary world (whether it be a physical spaceship made out of a cardboard box or a written piece of fiction about Mars travel) requires boundaries that hold it together. A piece of curling ribbon, for instance, might make a less than convincing spaceship. It would make a good antenna. A cardboard box, once named a spaceship, cannot easily transform into a swimming pool. Readers of fiction call these rules verisimilitude—a way to maintain a consistent and comprehensible story world. However, as Bruner points out, stories do not need to be literally realistic; rather, they need to feel faithful to our knowledge of what the world is or could be:

"there is a sense in which a story can be true *to* life without being true *of* life" (122 emphasis in original).

As I thought about my classroom of novice teenage writers, I began to speculate about how they play with fiction: What happens when adolescents play? How do they negotiate the rules of these imaginary worlds? How does this experience affect their development as writers? And what, as a teacher, could I do with this information? What strategies help adolescents become successful writers?

Adolescents Playing with Fiction

This exploration of play is drawn from a study of four high school creative writing elective classes in three high schools in upstate New York (Adler). Four teachers and 24 focal students (primarily seniors) helped me explore what happens when novices write fiction. I say helped because the majority of the interviews were collaborative, overt discussions about writing itself— analyzing an especially playful classroom transcript, commenting on a classmate's story, or reflecting on one's own process for a particular writing assignment. Through interviews, classroom visits, and analysis of student writing, we explored the concept of play.

Like those I had observed in my middle school classes, these adolescent writers were eager to play. They wanted to write fiction and particularly sought opportunities to use their own life experience as material. This finding was consistent across schools, classes, achievement levels, socio-economic levels, and gender. Some students used real incidents, people, and places as entry points to step into the story—finding in these real events the seeds for plots, characters, and settings. For example, Damien[i] set his story in Staten Island, a place familiar from his childhood. Others used fiction as a vehicle to learn about their own life, applying a different outcome to an incident they had experienced or looking at a situation from a different point of view. As Veronica explained, "Some of the situations...were...things that have happened, but it was just fun to make them more interesting and

have them really...turn out the way I wished they would've, but they didn't, really." By giving themselves permission to play with—and alter—real events, these students gained some measure of control over them. As Vygotsky puts it in a slightly different context, "*The child sees one thing but acts differently in relation to what he sees. Thus, a condition is reached in which the child begins to act independently of what he sees*" (96-97 emphasis in original).

Students engaged in imaginary play with emotional, social, academic, and personal aspects of their real lives; this kind of play is perhaps particularly appropriate for adolescents, whose lives are in flux—approaching the gates of adulthood while still legally being considered children. Sadie explained that creative writing served as "an outlet for my anger and my issues." Matthew used fiction, combined with sports, to help himself cope with the anger he felt after his parents' divorce. Others spoke of a desire to see one's abilities in a positive light. As Jack put it, "I am not a very agile person so I always dream about being very fast and very hero-ish. Like Indiana Jones or James Bond or something like that." Across town at a different high school, Janice also used fiction to rewrite reality. Feeling that her own life was "incredibly boring," Janice explained that she liked to make characters "act the way you wish they were at Sanger [High] and they're not."

Yet in crossing boundaries into fiction, students were playing a game in which they didn't know the rules—they were especially unsure about when, and how, to craft those real experiences into developed pieces of fiction. Some, like Susan, suspected that real writers wrote purely from imagination: "It's a creative writing class, so I figure you have to make a story out of the whole thing." Her thoughts were seconded even by more experienced writers like Julianne, who seemed to think that using personal experience was cheating: "Everything that I write has been sparked by something that I did or affected me. So what I need to try to do is just do something totally different and just make stuff up, I guess." Kevin took the opposite perspective—that writing about your own experiences can produce bad fiction. As a reader, he

explained, "You don't always want to read about things that are that trite." Julianne countered, "I think that some pieces just need to be told for the author's sake as much as for the reader's sake," adding, "all life is not that dramatic."

Although these seniors seemed to be unaware of it, they were engaged in a writing process that was akin to what professional writers do on a regular basis. Yet writers do not simply write about what they know. Rather, they use what they know to, in Grace Paley's words, "write into what you don't know" (qtd. in Murray 57). The students I interviewed, who spoke of using familiar settings or characters as a starting point, were helping themselves to "keep one foot in the circle of familiarity while reaching out with the other" (Minot 153). Minot's expression highlights the balance needed to two-step in two worlds, releasing one while learning and developing the other. This balance pays off for the reader as well: ultimately, I found that those students who learned how to balance their imaginary play with their knowledge of the real world wrote better fiction.

In the sections that follow, I provide two examples of ways that writers accomplished this balance. Each highlights a particularly effective teaching strategy; elements from the writing workshop approach (Atwell) appeared to be the most effective in helping these novice writers to traverse the boundaries between the real and imaginary worlds. Each example also demonstrates a pivotal element of play: it is serious work. The enjoyment of play does not necessarily come from frivolity or lightheartedness; rather, it comes from the satisfaction, growth, and intense desire gained by fleshing out an imaginary space we can nevertheless recognize as our own. This sense that play is hard (though pleasurable) work may help to contradict the image of creative writing as dessert, for it is much more integral to sustenance than sugar, and its effects more lasting.

John

Gail Goodwin, a high school English teacher, took an eclectic approach to the teaching of creative writing. Although she did not

draw on many of the components of the traditional writer's workshop approach, she did make use of one element that was particularly successful for one of my case study students. The topic generation activity is a staple of the writing workshop approach popularized by Nancie Atwell. In it, a teacher takes students through a variety of prompts (your favorite song…a time you felt embarrassed…somebody you wish you could see again). As the students listen to the prompts, they write down something related to the prompt from their own lives ("Stairway to Heaven"…the time I tripped on stage…my grandmother). Since the writing workshop approach does not typically provide topics for writing assignments, students use this self-generated list as a source for ideas. Topic generation doesn't take a long time—it took Goodwin 40 minutes—yet it can become a powerful tool for student discovery, motivation, and, as with John, self-directed play. As Goodwin's students jotted down their possible topics in response to her prompts, she asked them to pay particular attention to their "obsessions," noting that strong feelings can create good possibilities for character development. Students were asked to use the list as the basis for story ideas to explore in their writing journal.

To that point, John, an experienced writer with an interest in journalism, had produced adequate but perfunctory assignments. In an assignment to describe his room, for instance, he wrote such pedestrian sentences as, "There's a red rug at the foot of the bed." Yet the topic generation session changed things; John explained that this single session became fuel for writing in both his creative writing and English classes. He explained, "It's the first list I've actually used. We made them almost every year since like elementary school…yeah, and I've just never needed it. I'd just sit down and write." I asked him to speculate about why he used this list particularly, when previous attempts at topic generation had fallen flat. He answered, "I don't know. I think maybe because it has more on it. I think I've changed and grown up a lot in the last couple years. When I look back on it there's a lot of material I can work with."

This conversation suggests that all topic generation activities are not alike. John was finally at the right place and time to understand how his own experiences could be fertile ground, or "material," for fiction. The particular prompts offered—so closely identified with the kind of emotion and conflict central to many adolescent lives—helped, too. After the page of writing topics, which John marked with a star and the word "IDEAS," John's writing changed. He used his journal to explore real situations he had been in, writing it with an eye to particular details that were interesting and that revealed much about the situation. Here is his description of a concert he attended at the end of the summer:

> Adam sat, motionless, with his face hidden in his hands. I leaned back, and rested on my elbows. Casey saw me do this, and she did the same. We both leaned slightly towards each other, so that we could hear each other's voices behind Adam's back. We talked little, though.

Here we see John, in Vygotsky's terms, acting differently in relation to what he sees. He is no longer John, a teenager attending a concert; he is John the writer, crafting that experience independently. In doing so he recreates the experience for himself from a more distant vantage point, and he also fashions a scene for the reader.

Over the course of the semester, John learned how to extend his scope beyond real situations, using details from the real world to help him enter and explore imaginary situations. In his final story, an assigned mystery, John created a main character with a sense of confidence that echoed John's own. His protagonist, for instance, introduces himself as "Julio. With a 'j' sound, no 'h'." Although he invented a complex plot replete with red herrings and surprising twists, John chose a familiar setting that he knew would work for the genre. As he explained, "I work at a grocery store, so I've been there all times of the day--it's a 24 hour store--it's pretty freaky at night. So I decided to set it in the grocery store late at night." He also used a friend who appears frequently in his

journal, a certain girl with strawberry blond hair, as a character. His resulting work, as Goodwin noted, showed a lot of growth: "He's gotten stronger, he's gotten more vivid." She particularly noted his unique ability to capture "little nuances, little things that people do," suggesting that John had learned how to infuse realistic details into his writing by playing with real events in his journal. Although John may well have developed these abilities on his own, the topic generation activity was an excellent strategy to concentrate and focus his skills. The activity works because it gives students permission—and more importantly, overt instruction— in ways to play with, and ultimately craft, life experiences into fiction.

Kurt

Kurt's teacher, Matt Phillips, used a more comprehensive writing workshop approach, largely following Atwell's and Graves' models. Consequently, most of the writing students did was self-selected. Class also included a fair amount of unstructured writing time, and students were required to engage in peer workshops and extensive revisions. Not everything was graded; students simply had to select two pieces (one long and one short) per quarter. Because I wanted to look at play in the hands of different kinds of writers, I selected a writer very different from John. Kurt did not identify as a writer, preferring to draw and work on cars in his free time. Yet surprisingly, Kurt's writing developed in ways that were strikingly similar to John's. Through the support of the writing workshop, Kurt learned how to make the balancing act work for him—becoming more adept at playing by the rules.

Like John, Kurt's early writing was perfunctory, especially when assigned. In the absence of personal experiences or knowledge that could have helped him flesh out scenes, he relied on cliché's and "telling language," such as in an assigned story about an interrupted wedding, in which

a young woman burst into the church… wearing an attractive red dress that left very little to the imagination. She came in yelling, 'Stop, I love you, you're making a big mistake!'

Kurt's experience here is typical of other student writers in the study—when writing on unfamiliar (assigned) topics, especially when working within narrow time constraints, students borrowed liberally from popular culture, rather than their own knowledge, to flesh out scenes or add dialogue. When Kurt tried writing about events in his own life, his words rang truer, as in this description of the day he found out his family was moving across the country:

I came in from swimming in the lake, and everyone in my family was seated around the dinner table. They were not speaking, and the looks on their faces were like none I had ever seen before. I could tell there was mixed emotions in them. I was confused, I had no idea of what was going on. I hesitated to ask, but did so. What I heard destroyed me.

Although Kurt is writing at a level of abstraction—we don't see his family's looks, for instance, or how it destroyed him—he is sharing honest writing about something that matters. Phillips, in reading a draft of this, suggested among other things that Kurt might want to "tell it more like a story." Since he had the flexibility to choose his next assignment, and a captive audience of peer readers, Kurt did revise the piece into a story, changing it into third person. This gave him that all-important distance; moving into the fictional world enabled him to release his concrete hold on actual events to play with them, changing them and crafting them for his readers. His resulting piece is four times longer and much more elaborated:

John came in through the beachside door. He was a thin, some would say scrawny, teenager. He had brown hair and

was wearing a towel around his neck with green swimming trunks. He was still drying his hair as he walked in. Halfway in he realized he hadn't washed the sand off his feet...His whole family was seated around the dinner table. They were all looking at him as he tried to hide sandy feet. He thought he was going to get in trouble, but instead of yelling at him, he parents told him to sit down...

Here Kurt is taking the time to let the reader be in the moment, to see and feel what is happening—and even to foreshadow some conflict through the sandy feet. Like John, Kurt moved even further in his development by the end of the semester, when he took a topic he knew a great deal about—football—and used it to write a piece of fiction. Phillips reflected that the football piece initially "wasn't working very well, and I asked him to take readers inside the game, stop telling because you're doing too much of it, and take [the readers] with you." With his teacher's guidance, this overt instruction, and his peer readers waiting, Kurt created a story that gained verisimilitude from the credible details he supplied. Phillips noted, "He literally put [readers] inside the head of his character, and through description and detail, breathed life into that piece, and did great stuff with it." Equally important to Kurt, his classmates liked it too, one writing, "You really captured a football season and the mindset of a player."

Teaching Strategies

The writers workshop model used by Phillips was the most helpful of the many approaches used by the four teachers to address the complexity of the process novice writers go through when they straddle the boundaries of reality and fiction. It contains within it key elements to help writers play productively: a topic generation strategy that focuses on developing one's own ideas for writing, time to play with different ideas and develop the most promising ones, an audience to test out a story's verisimilitude on readers, and the incorporation of revision to

produce further development in thinking. It also establishes student choice as an important element in the writing process.

With the pressures of high stakes testing in our current culture, the writing workshop strategy—and the encouragement of creative play in writing—has all but disappeared from many school districts. Yet more than a curriculum element is at stake. By encouraging students to play with reality in fiction, teachers gain numerous opportunities to facilitate both personal and cognitive growth. On a personal level, adolescent writers in a pivotal stage of social and emotional development benefit from the satisfaction of exploring situations both real and fictional. It's a testament to the power of play that this personal satisfaction extends naturally to cognitive development. As students play, they must constantly construct the rules of that play and use those rules to shape the written world they inhabit as writers and readers. Consequently, students engage in conversations that matter—overtly discussing the choices they make as writers—and the effect those choices have on readers. The resulting benefits carry nutrients that work in concert with those in the other foods on the English dinner table, complementing the proteins and starches with a balance of variety and flavor.

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i All names are pseudonyms.