THIS I BELIEVE: MODELING BELONGS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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The Rationale

Always, my goal in teaching composition is to empower my students and help them find the joy writing offers: "But when at last I wrote my first words on the page, I felt an island rising beneath my feet like the back of a whale . . . . Through language I was free . . . . My words struck in me lightning crackles of elation and thunderhead storms of grief . . . . Writing was water that cleansed the wound and fed the parched root of my heart" (Baca 530).

But, for many writers, finding something to say and saying it honestly is the most difficult task of writing. Even if students have a topic they want to write about, they don't always know how to develop that subject or organize their thoughts. They often never move beyond the "hot air" of words that have no substance. Having had great success in using poems as models when writing poetry, I began looking for the quintessential prose model to use in my college composition classroom to aid students who were grappling with these issues. The model would need to be engaging with a structure that was easily discernible.

Inspiration struck at a red light, corner of Trenton and Georgia. I was listening to my one and only favorite–National Public Radio. "This I Believe" was airing, and it hit me that this was the exemplary prose sample I had been looking for to use as a model in teaching composition. "This I Believe" has been around for over one-half a century offering people from all walks of life a forum to voice their opinions on those beliefs they are passionate

about. The structure is simple yet requires students to *think deeply*. These pieces are, after all, carefully thought out and expressed philosophical beliefs about how we choose to live: Specifically, how we choose to interact with the myriad life forces that intersect our journey. We all have an opinion or yearn for a belief; so, these essays touch us personally where we search for life's meaning. The simple structure that utilizes textual examples offers us a way to give form to our beliefs, a way to put them into practice.

Although a study done in 1992 revealed "minimal" use of reading in college composition classes, Gary Tate suggests this is akin to "telling music students that they should not listen to Bach or Mahler" (175). Charles Bazerman states, "The connection between what a person reads and what that person then writes seems so obvious as to be truistic" (156). Although acknowledging some "current" beliefs that models are "stultifying," Bazerman offers valuable benefits that derive from accessing models: recognizing discipline-specific forms in writing, increasing reading comprehension to the point where the author's goal (not just the facts of the piece) and what strategies were used to achieve that goal are discerned, and formulating personal beliefs and self-identify by assimilating or discarding a writer's ideas (159).

Ray Bradbury delightfully calls forth the value of reading models in his chapter "How to Keep and Feed a Muse." It goes to the heart of how we become who we are–that is this reading and taking in of other's ideas and expressions. It creates a "storehouse . . . to which we must return . . . to check reality against memory" (35) and helps us come to understand who we are (40). He advises we read a great variety of writers both for today and what might come out of our pen in the future. Bradbury addresses both the ideas we encounter when reading and the ways in which authors express those ideas (41).

Reading offers models to students that are more tangible than mere definitions. Young writers need to see the possibilities. I would suggest this modeling process doesn't "stultify" but in fact gives writers wings to soar. Some model benefits cannot be

argued. Nothing can explain what a commanding lead is better than some exemplary models. I've yet to show a group of students a sampling of intriguing "hooks" without having them tap into their own creative treasure chests and pen delightful openings. The same can be said of other literary elements, mode, style, and voice. In fact Ralph Fletcher believes "reading is a critical step in fostering voice" (76). He suggests reading voice-filled pieces and comparing them to sort of assembly-line type writing (he mentions encyclopedias) to help students develop a sense of voice. Like Bazerman and Bradbury, he suggests students (I would say all of us who write) stay alert to "not just . . . *what* the authors are saying but, more important, *how* they are saying it" (77).

Other modeled possibilities might need a simple voicing. I recently shared a piece and pointed out the interspersed facts about suicide in the personal story of family suicide. One student used this structure in writing about her grandmother's Alzheimer's disease. Drawing students' attention to the impact dialogue or questioning can have on a piece of writing takes little time and yields positive results in their writing. However, I've had students make use of formatting examples from models without any coaching from me: inserting visuals into a piece, setting up a piece in columns, making use of font variety to start paragraphs, using headings to separate content. When students do this on their own, they make me a better, more aware teacher who will do a better job "seeing" possibilities in the next model I present. Certainly, my guidance in studying a model gives more students an opportunity to see the possibilities for their own writing. Add to my observations, the eyes and voices of my students and our collaboration creates even vaster options for writing; yet, even alone, students will frequently recognize some of the design offered in the piece. At the very least, the model will offer background knowledge and affect the student writer's schema with change or validation. Clearly, modeling is an essential step in the writing process.

How adept students will be at recognizing aspects of a model to emulate will be determined by their ability for *reading as a*

writer. Reading as a writer means straddling the line between Atwell's "in the zone" (where we are enraptured by the words and the message) and that place where we can stand back just enough to see how the writer is pulling us into the zone (20). Fletcher speaks of "abstract[ing] the various techniques being used in a piece: humor, rhyme, myth/truth, question/answer, diagrams, interview, fantasy" (77). My students would add to that repetition, surprise, dialogue, description, narrative, flashback, analogies, fun words, graphics, formatting. It is simply a matter of teacher and students sharing where and how the writing speaks to them in a way that nudges the words off the page and pushes them into the reader's face.

My students fall into two groups: those who had previously completed a remedial writing class (17 or lower on the ACT) or had scored an 18 on the ACT and were students at Louisiana Tech University; and those who were ESL English majors in a Chinese University (The lesson is applicable over many ages, ability levels, and language backgrounds).

The Process

I started in my Louisiana classroom by asking my students to brainstorm items, events, people, and ideas that they ascribe value to, use as a roadmap for life, can't live without–anything that has relevance to or impacts the writer's life is a possibility. In essence, they were asked to contemplate their personal credos. We shared those words with each other, listing them on the board.

Next, I introduced them to NPR's "This I Believe" and handed out copies of an essay from NPR. Together we analyzed the piece–what did each paragraph accomplish and what kind of information helped communicate the message? My students were familiar with *reading as writers* and had practice in picking out strategies and elements that make for a more inviting text, and they quickly saw the overall plan used in composing these particular essays: a statement of belief, a text to self-related story, a text to text-related story, and a closing that took the belief out to the world–opened up to the world so to speak.

Then students chose a topic from the list on the board (or another topic that had since come to them) and began free writing starting with "This I believe. I believe. . . ." *Because they could borrow strategies from another writer, students discovered ways to intersect with their chosen topic.* (Remember, they also had in their writing arsenal a list of techniques garnered from earlier readings.) Pens ran across pages–sometimes easily, swiftly; sometimes haltingly, slowly. As always, I, too, joined my students in writing. After students who were willing to share had read their pieces, I shared mine. Then, I went to the board to write out a "plan of action" for my essay. I came up with some personal stories and textual connections I could make in each of the sections of my essay. I ask the students if they had any ideas or questions for me (writers help each other) and added their ideas to my plan.

I gave student writers about five minutes to come up with a skeleton "plan of action" of their own. I didn't give a lot of time because their topic was still so fresh–I didn't think they had given enough thought to it or been able to process their ideas enough to have a great deal to put into their plan. Next, students worked in groups of three or four talking about their ideas and getting advice from each other. We must not underestimate the importance of talk in our classrooms. As Bruffee tells us, "Writing instruction reflects a growing appreciation of the value of talk . . . getting students to 'talk through' the task of writing is a form of collaborative learning that is essential" (qtd. in Herrmann 2).

Bruffee's "Consensus Groups" asserts "conversation . . . prepares students to write better . . . by giving them an opportunity to rehearse and internalize appropriate language." Valuing talk in the classroom also addresses community benefits because dialogue will "foster in students the responsibility to contribute . . . to respect . . . to help meet the needs of other members" (103).

There is a synergy when putting talk into the writing process both with intra and interpersonal benefits. When we talk about our writing, we often answer our own questions, spawn new ideas, and recognize problems. At the same time what we say

elicits ideas or questions from classmates. The dialogue impacts both speaker and listener's cognition of the topic as well as awareness of problems with *how* the piece is communicating those ideas. It is a powerful way to enrich understanding and own our ideas. Peter Elbow states, "If you are stuck writing or trying to figure something out, there is nothing better than finding one person, or more, to talk to. If they don't agree or have trouble understanding, so much the better" (49). He goes on to explain that dialoguing works the way brainstorming works. That is with the back and forth of ideas, we are either nudged along or find we must stop and do some "restructuring" of our ideas (49-50).

The ideas generated from the "plan of action" conversation were used to aid students in turning their free writing into a complete draft. Continued instructor and peer reader response aided students in making revisions and bringing their essay to fruition. Peter Elbow points out the power that comes from having a reader for our words: "She sent words out into the darkness and heard someone shout back. This made her want to do it again, and this is probably the most powerful thing that makes people improve their writing" (130).

At the close of the process, students were encouraged to "publish" their essay in our class (share with an audience)–that is, to send out their beliefs just as the NPR "This I Believe" writers do. Katie believes in love: "This I believe. I believe in love. . . . It beats through your heart, burns through your skin and encompasses your conscious and subconscious mind." She uses a variety of textual connections and techniques to explore love: the legend of the blue moon, the Biblical admonition to love others, personal memories of puppy love and regrets over the time she withheld love from a little boy named Stephen whose "clothes were tattered, his hair was uncut and messy, and he looked like he was 'poor.'" She continues, questioning love. "What makes a person feel love for someone and have hatred against another?" and contemplating our over-use of the word "love," ending with a Valentine story that brought tears to her eyes, "How wonderful love is!"

All in all a successful lesson because it did prompt sincere and satisfying writing and gave fledgling writers a path to follow.

If Only I Had

But in retrospect, I realized opportunities I had missed to take my students farther with this lesson.

- I should have spent some time discussing the content of the essays from NPR because they touched on current news items highlighting problems with cultural and religious barriers. Talking about these issues would allow students to verbalize opinions on important issues, hear other's perspectives, and in so doing evolve.
- I should have brought in the audio files and let the students hear the voice of the writers themselves. The audio and written files are available at NPR.org. Research unequivocally illustrates the importance of hearing a text: it increases enjoyment, comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar skills (Trelease 39, 37, 41). The combination of hearing and seeing meets the needs of both visual and auditory learners. It offers a clear voice that many readers have not developed–in the case of ESL students, hearing the pronunciation, inflection, pacing, and language anomalies (i.e., articles for Chinese learners) is critical to their advancement. Ironically in the case of ESL, Jim Trelease equates hearing the story aloud to "learning a second language"(41). Finally, our vocabulary growth starts with hearing a word, and we internalize grammar in our earliest years by hearing the spoken word. But why is the author voice so important? Why couldn't any good passionate reader do the job? Because in using the writer, we are honoring the author just as we will honor our own student writers in our classroom. Many times students want me to read their words. They want to be heard but are too shy. I oblige them but remind them

there is something magical about hearing writers speak and something potent claimed by writers who voice their own work. I have felt it myself; I have had students express this truth. And, who better can present the words as passionately, emphasizing the right words, pausing at just the right places, than the one who penned the story?

- I should have allowed more time both for the added components of the lesson and for "back burner contemplation." Students particularly complained that they were not ready to come up with a plan of action so quickly. Writing needs time–time to mull over our thoughts and our options, time to move away from one perspective long enough to disengage and approach with new eyes, time to dig deep into our "storehouse" and make discoveries that are just perfect for the present writing task.
- I should have encouraged students to submit their essays to NPR, saying loudly to them that they have something valuable to say and are capable of moving us with their expression.

Back To The Drawing Board

So, in spite of the success, I had acute *back-to-the-drawing-boarditis*. A much repeated lament in my vocabulary is *Let me try again . . . I know I can do it better.* So, recently, I took what I had gleaned from my reflection and went back into the classroom. This time my students were ESL English majors at Lishui University in Zhejiang Province, China. They were second year students at the intermediate to advanced level taking a composition course. One of the major problems I was having was getting them to go beyond empty platitudes–helping them find a way to bring in meaningful examples and details to support their ideas. They had the flower bud (the Chinese education system

inundates students with vast amounts of information that they are expected to memorize). They just couldn't make it bloom.

A main strategy they use in language acquisition is to memorize a plethora of phrases and sentences that can be plugged into a conversation or a piece of writing. This does not help them write with honesty or with voice. They were not investing anything *personally* in their pieces. The Chinese culture honors privacy–especially family privacy–and still holds stigmas against discussing certain topics. This offers an additional challenge when encouraging students to break away from a script of voiceless examples of various social engagement letters (from their text). Carefully chosen models can show students how personal stories can be and are used honorably and how to broach new subjects. Sometimes the models are phrases or sentences from previous student work that celebrate individual voice–samples that may not always be wholly correct but expound personality or illustrate technique.

The model I chose to share is an NPR essay written by a Chinese American, Yinong Young-Xu, entitled "Potential for Brutality." Following vocabulary, reading, and discussion, we unearthed "the path" the writer had taken that we could follow: statement of belief, textual connections (personal stories and references to literature, history, science . . .), and closing. By the time I had delivered the lesson to my four composition classes, I had honed my model and discovered the critical ingredients:

- Choose a model that speaks to the students: Content must engage the reader. In this case the writer shared my students' Chinese background and was writing about events during the Cultural Revolution. They were interested.
- The dance of **discourse** begins early by accessing students' prior knowledge about the topic of the essay.
- Consider vocabulary: Go over those words that students would not be familiar with before reading the essay. Also, allow students to clarify other unknown words

after reading. This first reading can be done slowly paragraph by paragraph checking for understanding along the way.

- Let the students hear the writer speak: Play the audio recording.
- The dance continues. ESL students in particular, but I would argue any students, benefit from small group or paired **discourse** prior to whole group discussions. This ensures greater participation and gives students a chance to think, perhaps re-read, formulate ideas, and practice language thereby eliminating some of the apprehension that can accompany speaking out in class, especially in a second language. Writing down reactions or questions about the piece can also help students struggling with expression.
- The analysis of the writer's path was done by moving through the piece paragraph by paragraph taking note of the *how* of communicating the message. Bring the students into this **discussion**. What components make up the essay? List these on the board in a simple way that sets out a path for the students to walk down.
- **Brainstorm** topics and allow small group **discussion** of the potential and possibilities of topics of interest before the first free write.
- Give ample time: Students need more time to process their feelings and thoughts and discover the words they can use to express themselves. My students were placed in groups whose purpose was to meet and offer support outside of class each week. These groups functioned as readers who gave feedback and also offered English speaking practice beyond the limited class time, again giving even the most reticent student a smaller, safer environment in which to risk mistakes. These **discussions** propelled writers from draft to draft.
- Teacher response can come at several junctures

depending on student needs and growth. These can take several forms but, when possible, one-on-one conferencing where writers **talk** about their piece while teachers mostly listen is wonderful. Try it yourself with your next piece of writing. (I had over 300 Chinese students and did not do this; however, I have used this in my American classrooms both on the high school and college level. It is one of my favorite teaching tasks.)

- Publication: Students want to be heard.

Harvesting Treasures

My students shared beautiful, inspiring, and sometimes sad personal stories. Ke Yaoyao remembers a story told "at [her] mother's knee" about a sparrow who turns into a phoenix. "'I am that sparrow', I said to myself. . . . 'On the way to becoming a phoenix, the sparrow has to endure countless tortures. Like the sparrow I will face up to all these unpredictable setbacks. . . .'"

Xie Xinbei learned at the bedside of her dying grandmother to "seize the day." She writes, "I came forward to say goodbye, and she told us that she was regretful that she hadn't yet done a lot of things that she always intended to; she didn't take advantage of the time when she was alive. . . . This I believe. I believe we should seize the day."

Lei Ting shares a memory that changed her life and her attitude. "I heard the bad news that one of my friends caught cancer. . . . I spent everyday I [could] to get together with her: going shopping together . . . telling the happy incidents to make her laugh . . . listen[ing] to music, just like we did in the past. I never treat her as a patient. She is happy with me. . . . Though she died at last, I am certain that her memory is nice. . . . You can live or die happily. It depends on your attitude! That's my belief, attitude is everything."

Chu Linfei tells how a little love impacted her life when her father's illness brought her very close to losing the opportunity to attend school. But for the little demonstrations of love from her

fellow students and teachers in the way of clothes, a book, a small amount of money, her life would have taken a different road, "To them, it was just a very little thing. But, for me . . . my life had been greatly changed."

Wang Feng writes of a father's love: "Everything is changing, yet I still believe love and being love[d] have been and will be the main reason for human beings to live [on] this planet. With love, sadness will be willing to smile. I've struggled in this world for 23 years during which I saw some of my best loved people fade before my eye and . . . accepted some unknown people as my intimate people. . . . What apparently seems to be sad may turn out to be happy at last; what seems to be happy may end up sad. . . ." He goes on to explain how a simple statement of concern from his loving father affected him: ". . . 'my son is all I care [about].' Simple as this statement is, it worked on me magically. I was the luckiest son in the world. . . . Without love, happiness will sob. . . ." He closes with, "We work to survive, but the real reason for living is to be loved and love."

They found a variety of rich textual connections. They told me stories about Wang Mien, who overcame poverty to become a painter, and the famous poet Li Bai, who came across the determined woman who was grinding an iron rod into a needle. I learned of a poor scholar who had no money to buy candles for his late night study. So, he poked a hole in the wall and used the neighbor's light!

Zhang Minhua told me about General Zhu De repaying parents for their loving care. "With old age, his mother became . . . incontinent and . . . bedridden. Everyday, Zhu De rubbed his mother's body and washed his mother's dirty clothes. Some people asked him why he didn't employ a nurse. He said, 'It's my duty to look after my mother and she is happy that I take care of her myself.'"

Zhou Liuping talked about Newton: "[He] chose to think when an apple hit him, therefore he found the rule of gravitation." The accomplishments of Galileo, Newton, and Neil Armstrong were cited as examples of the power of creativity: "All these could

never happen without creativity," according to Lin Xiaoli who closes with, "I believe in creativity and I pursue creativity."

Ye Dandan believes in the luck that opened a door that "was closed tightly" to her. A teacher's mistake allowed her to study in a class that was "every student's dream." She contrasts her luck to the unlucky Li ShangYin, a "talented" poet "who died sadly because of his failure in politics. The government didn't want to use him just because he was the son-in-law in a big family who was disliked by some governors . . . if someone is unlucky the success seems a star in the sky; he can see it but can't reach it."

Sometimes, they delightfully veered slightly off the path. Zhou Jingjing writes, "Once I believed . . . but soon I found that was not true. . . ."

And GuYun avoids the sentimental topics to write, "This I believe. I believe money is important. Money can't get you everything, but without [it] you'll get nothing." She goes on to make a perfect connection to the Tang Dynasty and a gifted poet who, despite his "brilliance," could not earn enough money to save his son from starving. She uses a quote from one of his poems: "The meat of the noble's dogs has gone bad/but there are [frozen] bodies in the road."

Jin Yefei writes, "I didn't believe in miracles even though there are so many marvelous wonders happening one after another. . . . I'm a person without a miracle." That all changes when Yefei meets her own miracle in a college friend who is disabled from a car accident and encourages her: "'Believe in miracles. . . . God will kiss you even when you are sleeping in the midnight.'" His support and his belief helped Yefei to find her own miracle and find success at a speech competition where she "defeated other contestants, myself as well."

These young writers found words and strategies to illustrate their ideas because they were mentored. Their excerpts illustrate how successfully they grasped the power of dialogue, repetition, and historical and personal narrative in expressing their beliefs. After all, modeling is just another way of offering students mentors in the way of proven and qualified published writers.

Reading good work and reading it *as a writer* can be a rich source of mentoring.

What Next?

Even now in the dog days of summer, my thoughts turn to a new year, a new group of students–this time 11th grade American high school students. I wonder what I will learn from my students and how we will help each other grow. Already I am searching old and new books on a quest for exemplary models to excite our brain and fill our writing arsenals. The hunt will have to include a visit to NPR. This next year's "This I Believe" will include even more discourse, borrowing from a successful writing project completed at the end of the 2007-2008 school year. Using a document camera, the class looked at each writer's topic and offered suggestions on content and sometimes structure–after reading several models including excerpts from my students' work. In fact, looking at the variety of rich textual connections my Chinese students made should be a strong impetus for my American students who sadly lack this wealth of information and will need to research to find their gems. When students move into the peer editing phase, they will read their work aloud to a partner or small group. Writers will talk about their own writing process, what their piece says, and what problems remain. And, they will be encouraged to submit their writing to NPR and the local paper. And so the learning continues, the lesson evolves.

If Peter Elbow is correct in asserting good writing is writing that people want to read (Myers 22) then my Chinese students were most successful following the "This I Believe" model. It was a joy to read the personal and literary connections they made to their credos. And, it strengthened my belief that modeling does indeed belong in the composition classroom.

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