

THROW AWAY THE FISH, EAT THE PLANK: DEVELOPING THE WRITER THROUGH THE TEXT

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For the past semester I have been teaching a course called "Methods and Materials in the Teaching of English." As part of a seven week project, the class members (all preservice teachers) were responsible for presenting a series of lessons on subjects of interest to teachers of secondary English. Today was Sarah's turn. To begin her presentation on response groups in the teaching of writing, Sarah presented us with two poems. "These two poems have been written by a college student," Sarah said. "Respond to them in writing and be ready to share your responses."

We took turns commenting. "Well, in my opinion, there are so many poems about alcoholism. Seems to me the topic is pretty trite. In fact, I wouldn't even attempt a poem on that topic, since so many poets have done it better." "I think the poem is pretty juvenile and overly dramatic. I guess it's the word 'mommy' in the second stanza. It sounds . . . I don't know . . . schmaltzy. It turns me off to the whole thing." One student said, "The second poem was just downright confusing. I was never sure whether the author meant that this person had gotten better and was taken home from the hospital, or had died or what?" At that moment, Sarah stepped in. "Why don't you ask her? These are my poems."

I'm not going to write about the kind of ethical situation Sarah found herself and her classmates in. I know it was a profound,

painful experience, however enlightening, for all of us. I'm also not going to blame my students or myself for our seemingly insensitive responses, because our years of training as literary critics have taught us to respond to texts and not to writers. I'm sure that if I had thought about its full ramifications beforehand, I would have stopped Sarah from doing this. I'm glad I didn't. After the shock began to settle in, we decided to consider the question of whether, as English teachers, we were in the business of producing good writing or good writers.

We listed attributes of good writers and good writing on the board. As the lists began to form, we realized that they were interchangeable. The very things we were saying about good writers ("clear," "articulate," "concise," "communicative") could be and have been said about good writing. It struck me that, despite our professed concern for placing the writer at the center of the writing process, whenever a text is put in front of us, we begin to depersonalize it, to concentrate on the qualities of the writing rather than the human struggle behind it. What is this attitude that good writers exist to produce good writing and not the other way around?

We began to explore the notion that there are really two very distinct approaches to writing: the approach practiced by literary critics and scholars of literature, and the approach that is followed or should be followed by teachers of writing.

Literary critics, it could be argued, ultimately exist to produce good writing in that criticism shapes the character of literature through the ages. There is a fundamental quality of literary criticism that is concerned with writing and not writers. Critics are in the business of influencing a whole body of texts called "literature." The writer exists as a distant entity—one who started the whole process rolling, one who must stand against whatever critical onslaught the writing has evoked, but one who is rarely considered in the process of literary criticism.

This literary critical stance is the very one most of us bring to our writing classrooms. Few of us, after all, have had a program of college courses in writing. For the most part, we have written about texts. And we have learned this distancing act all too well; it is the very business that often allows us to feel justified in producing, above all, good writing, and only incidentally, as an afterthought, good writers.

So, what are writing teachers to do? Are we to stop thinking

about writers and texts as interchangeably “clear, concise, articulate, communicative?” What’s left if we take the text out of the center of writing? What’s left, of course, is the writer. What if we stopped thinking of texts as ends and began to consider them as means to one basic end: the development of good writers? James Britton (in Cooper & Odell) tells us there are three major contexts for discourse: expressive, transactional, poetic. Let’s, for a moment, consider how these discourse contexts can be used to produce good writers.

What is good expressive writing? Consider the purposes of expression: to vent and explore emotions, to articulate ideas, more importantly, to shape ideas “at the point of utterance,” (Britton in Cooper & Odell, 24) to clarify, expand, question, doubt, believe, wrestle with, and create uncertainty. Good expressive writing is that which promotes growth in writers, in thinking, feeling, and acting. For if learning can be defined as change, then the extent to which writers are changed by their expressive writing is the extent to which they have produced good expressive texts. Expressive writing allows writers to construct what Donald Schon calls “virtual worlds”—contexts for exploring what life would be like if. . . . This constructive act enables writers not only to express, but to discover what they think. The extent to which expressive writing promotes a love, and more importantly, a need for writing in one’s lifetime is also a measure of good expressive writing, as well as the likelihood that student writers will become adult writers and use writing as they fall in love, create thought, or work out feelings. These too are measures of good expressive writing.

But what about not-so-good expressive writing? It is fake expression created for classrooms. It’s that lip service some of us pay to expression that goes something like this: “In your journals write a comparison-contrast of the personalities of MacBeth and Lady MacBeth,” or “Write anything you want. I promise not to grade your essays, only to check mechanics and spelling.” These fake invitations to expression may promote good writing (I doubt it), but, as a consequence, they often produce detached writers. At the farthest extreme, they may be responsible for those who never pick up a pen after high school except, perhaps, to make a shopping list. My conversations with groups of adult writing teachers have convinced me that, for many, the shopping list constitutes a far more meaningful encounter with writing than all those comparison-contrast essays they wrote in high school!

If good expressive writing promotes growth in writers, good transactional writing promotes healthy transactions among people. Through transactional writing, writers learn to influence, to persuade, to share knowledge, to find a place in a culture, to create a social image, to experience the interpersonal consequences of their words. Writers learn to *transact* through good transactional writing. They see how words influence others, but more importantly, how the reactions of others can influence them. And in that learning, they discover how to construct texts of experience that enable them to fit within, and sometimes, stand against the social order. Good transactional writing helps writers to step outside themselves and enter into the worlds of others.

Not-so-good transactional writing is writing with no audience, or worse yet, a pretend audience. "Write a (graded) letter to your congressperson about some issue you (teachers) feel strongly about." "Write an argument (to teacher-as-examiner) for or against abortion." "Write an expository essay about Existentialism incorporating the ideas of Camus and Sartre." It's writing intended for one-and-only one transaction: pupil to examiner. The results of this transaction are not responses from intended readers, but evaluations from teacher-interceptors, judging texts and not writers.

Surely poetic writing exists as a literary attempt by writers and should be judged by literary critical standards! Britton says, for example, that writers in the poetic context begin to direct attention from self toward the words themselves. Writers become spectators in the production of poetic texts. Along with this distancing process, however, is an emotional catharsis involved in the writing and reading of poetry. So, what is good poetic writing? It's writing about gives writers a sense of the simple beauty and power of words. Good poetic writing evokes good poets—writers who create and find the aesthetic pleasure (as both readers and writers of their own texts) that will hook them into writing for life and will allow them to see themselves as writers. A few months ago, a nine-year-old student named Becky was invited to visit our class of inservice writing teachers. When we asked what kind of writing she liked best, Becky said, "Poetry. I like poetry because it takes a special kind of talent to write it. When I write a poem I feel . . . special."

Perhaps if we and they are lucky, their experiences as poets will give students like Becky the insight and impetus to become

teachers of writing themselves, so perpetuating and extending the love of writing handed down from teacher to student through time. Through the power of their successes as poets, student-and teacher-writers explore the concept of writing as vocation, avocation, and evocation.

Just as in the theatre “there are no small parts, only small actors,” in the writing classroom there are no bad poets or bad poetry, there are only bad invitations to poetry—experiences which promote literary snobbishness or attention to form in the absence of substance. All those instructions to “Write a sonnet in AABB form on the topic of ‘death’ ” are good examples. Or perhaps even more compelling is the lack of poetic or imaginative writing in British and American classrooms noted by Britton and Applebee. The fact that very few students are ever invited to write poetry may be evidence of a sort of “gatekeeper mentality” about poetic discourse, passed down to us from all those literature courses we took as undergraduate and high school students.

As I write this I realize I’m beginning to sound heavy-handed about the influence of our literary training on the teaching of writing. In fact, some of the most striking successes I’ve witnessed with my own high school students came when, in their own struggles as writers they began to appreciate a T. S. Eliot or a Robert Frost all the more. It’s the obsession with texts and the neglect of student writers I find most disconcerting. Instead of treating writers as means to an end (good writing), we should be using texts as springboards and training aids for the development of students as both writers and human beings.

Peter Elbow writes:

Think of the famous recipe for cooking grandfather sturgeon: nail it to a cedar plank, roast it for fourteen hours, throw away the fish, eat the plank. We think of writing as output—as a movement of information from the writer to the world. The mental event disappears but the writing remains for others to read. But it helps also to think of writing as input or as a movement of information from the world to the writer. You can throw away the writing and keep the mental event. The writing isn’t the point, the point is to produce a change inside the writer’s head: to help her understand or remember something better or to see something from

a different point of view. When you care more about the mental event than the writing, the writing suddenly gets much easier. (in Stock 234)

The road to developing your student writers should be littered with texts—texts that failed and those that succeeded, but in only one pursuit—the growth of the writer who produced them. As a first step in your commitment to producing good writers through good writing, ask yourself these questions:

1. What proportion of time is spent in your classroom on expressive, transactional, and poetic writing? Are you neglecting one type of discourse in favor of another?
2. What are *your* criteria for good writers and good writing? In your classes how much emphasis is placed on the text and how much on the writer?
3. How much time do you provide in class for writers to grapple with and discover what they think through writing? Do you insist, for instance, that every text be polished and brought to completion, or do you allow for (encourage) false starts and dead ends?
4. Do you have a sense of how often your students write outside the classroom, for compelling reasons and the sheer exhilaration of personal expression?
5. Do you *correct* or do you *respond to* journals? Do you require that students write on specific topics or use a specific style in journals? Do you feel that every piece of writing must be graded?
6. How many real transactions do you invite your students to enter into in their writing? Are you the only audience, or do you seek out and encourage other audiences for student writing? How often do you send out or “publish” student writing?
7. When you are the primary audience for student writing, do you offer a variety of roles beyond that of examiner (trusted adult, co-learner)?
8. How often do your students attempt poetic discourse? Does their appreciation of literature deepen as they encounter real-life problems as writers?
9. In your estimation, how many of your students will write willingly and with pleasure after they leave the classroom?

If your answer falls short of 100%, what can you do to change this situation before your students graduate?

Now, do one more thing, if you haven't already done so. Go to a class tomorrow. Put a piece of your own writing up for criticism and see what it feels like to be treated as a text and not a writer. Then ask your students to talk to you about writing they've done that has truly touched their lives and changed them in some way. Look at those writing experiences and see how many of them might have been created by you, in your class, or how many of them might have happened surreptitiously outside your class. Ask yourself if those "personally meaningful" experiences you've had with writing have come out of someone else's classroom, and how that was accomplished. Most of all, begin to think about integrating your love of writing and your teaching of writing. Ask your students how to do this. They'll teach you as mine have taught me. And in the process of finding good writers, we should all begin to encounter some pretty good writing along the way.

*This article is dedicated to Cyndy Cowan, Kristie Bliss, Cathy McColl, Camille Bersani, Jonna Kerst, Tim Shumer, Kate Grant, Kris Christlieb, Pam Kursman, Pat Abdo, and Janice Pauls for "being a fool" along with me. Above all, it's dedicated to Raymond ("Da") Brolley, my very first "teacher" of writing.

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