

Remaining Seated: Lessons Learned by Writing

Every time my writing group meets, I'm working on something new. That's not because I'm such a prolific writer. It's because I'm such a prolific avoider. In the past year, I have written a first draft of an article on English language learners and literature circles, a first draft of an essay on heroism, a first draft of a piece on the potato famine. Even as I sit here now, I am avoiding revising an article on using art in the English classroom because I know that it will be hard.

Writing is hard. Professional writers will tell you that. At this moment, I am struggling to keep myself from jumping up to find quotes from Patricia MacLachlan and others to support this point. I know Don Murray's book, *Shoptalk*, will give me just what I need. But what I really need is to remain at my keyboard and write.

As a teacher of writing, I consider writing to be one of the most important things I can do for my kids. I need to put myself in their place on a continual basis so that I more fully understand what I am asking them to do. How can I know what difficulties they face if I don't face them, too? How will I know what strategies to suggest if I have not tried them first? How will I know the joy they experience when they are genuinely pleased with a draft if I have not felt the same joy? English teachers will often say that they are too busy teaching writing to write. For most, that means they are too busy grading papers to write.

What they fail to understand is that they will produce better writers if they pick up a pen for something more than evaluation. If they do, they will learn far more about teaching writing than any instructor's manual can ever tell them.

Recently, a few colleagues and I met with a new Congressman from our area to discuss continued funding for the National Writing Project. He wanted to know why taxpayers' money should be used to support professional development. Shouldn't teachers have learned all they needed to in college? I explained to him that while I had a fine undergraduate experience—one that prized writing and included a writers workshop even back in 1983—no one ever told me that teachers should be writers. The same was true of my master's program. However, in my very first National Writing Project course, the notion that teachers must also be writers was very clear. The instructors wrote, we wrote—not just to prove what we knew, but to be writers ourselves. I told the Congressman that since then, I have become a much stronger writer simply because I write. This is one of the many reasons I am most thankful I became involved in the National Writing Project. When I compare essays and stories I wrote 10 years ago with something I've completed recently, I can see the growth. I am a better teacher because of it. Here are some of the lessons I've learned.

The Power of Process

I mentioned at the start of this piece that I avoid revision the same way that I avoid my bookbag when it's time to grade papers. It's hard, it's messy, and it needs to be done. Revision is also what frees me to write what Anne Lamott calls "shitty first

drafts.” I know that I can always work on making what I write clearer, better organized, and more engaging because I can come back to it. Knowing this helps me to ease the fears of my students who are terrified by a blank sheet of paper. But because it is so hard, it also helps me to understand my students’ aversion to revision. It’s not that they are lazy. They’re scared. Because I, too, have faced a draft rife with problems, I know how daunting it is. I also know that having someone enumerate these problems for you can make you want to quit. I hope that my suggestions to student writers are not so numerous as to overwhelm them.

What I didn’t mention in the first paragraph are the number of pieces I have revised and sent out for publication. Mind you, I’m not looking to become a full-time writer. I am a teacher who writes, not the other way around. But I have “words to spend,” to steal one of Cormier’s titles, and the deadline of a call for articles helps me to spend them wisely and in a timely fashion. What I’ve learned from this is that I need deadlines to propel me to action, and my students do, too. Meeting a deadline doesn’t mean that a work is perfect, just that it’s in its best form yet. Otherwise, all the good ideas we have for writing will merely remain good intentions. I’ve also learned that writing for someone other than yourself and/or your teacher can really improve your game.

The Power of Feedback

Because my writing group meets on a regular basis, I know I can count on honest, yet supportive feedback. When I was writing a piece on my great-grandfather’s struggle to find work in nineteenth-century New York, they told me which lines resonated with them and which ones confused them. They’ve also told me when I need to do a complete overhaul of a draft, and cheered when I mailed something off to a publisher to consider. At a recent writing retreat I attended, one participant’s group performed a “writing intervention.” They confiscated her research and forbade Internet access. They told her to simply write her story. What a gift that was.

Because I know the value of honest, specific

feedback, I use this analogy with my kids. I tell them that their writing is their child and that they need to seek sensible advice for caring for it. I tell them that if their 4-year-old jumped off the bed and suffered a bad fracture with bone piercing the skin (the more graphic the better with middle schoolers), they shouldn’t accept a doctor’s diagnosis of strep throat for their broken child. They should trust their knowledge of that child and their instincts about what is wrong, and demand helpful advice for the problem. The students agree, and most won’t allow the same harm to come to their writing. If a friend offers a global “It’s great!” they’ll often ask for a second opinion.

The Power of Audience

Almost 10 years ago, I participated in poetry slams. Initially, I just wanted to go hear the other poets, but the only way my husband would go with me is if I read aloud some of my own poetry. As my poetry had only been written as samples for my students, I didn’t feel very confident about it, but decided to give it a go anyway. It turns out I was competing against people who saw themselves as poets. Although I only tasted victory once, I continued to participate, mostly so I would know what my students felt when I asked them to share their writing with their classmates. Because my competitors took their poetry seriously, I worked much harder on crafting my poetry so I wouldn’t embarrass myself—a goal most eighth graders aspire to—but a small part of me hoped I’d win again.

I have always been competitive. As a five-year-old, I stole a missal from church so I could memorize my prayers faster than my brother. In writing, competition still helps to hone my skills. I wrote my first article because a friend of mine was submitting something for the same book. I thought, “If he can do it, so can I.” I had to revise it through ten drafts, but it was indeed published. A few months later, spurred by this success, I wrote another article about the poetry slams I ran at my school. As I worked on it, I read and reread articles from that journal so I would better know my audience: how many anecdotes to include, how much research I should quote, etc. Not only did I

want it accepted, I wanted it to be easily accessible to its readers. In writing it, I learned even more about audience.

The Power of Modeling

Because I have written lines, paragraphs, even whole pages that I've fallen in love with but that aren't quite right for the piece I'm working on, I know how painful it is to cut them, but cut them I must. So it is with an "I feel your pain" approach that I ask Beth to cut the paragraph about her dog from her story. When I show her that I had to discard most of what I wrote one afternoon because it didn't address the focus of the essay, she nods knowingly and ever so gently crosses out the paragraph on Boomer, the wonder dog. She trusts me because she's seen my struggle.

Beth and her classmates have seen how I employed Barry Lane's "explode a moment" technique in a piece I'd written on my first boy/girl party in eighth grade. (This technique forces a writer to freeze a moment in time and concentrate on every detail: smells, images, sounds, tastes, sensations, emotions, thoughts.) They've seen me worry my theme clear in a narrative about my Nana. They've seen me rework rhyme scheme so many times I've forgotten the original order of the alphabet. I write with them, I whine with them, I win with them, and they know it.

The Power of Thinking

Publication of professional articles not only helps teach other teachers, a guiding principle of NWP, it also informs the author about her own teaching. When I wrote an article for *Voices from the Middle* a few years ago, I thought I was simply going to explain how to set up a poetry slam in school. I discovered while writing it that my students revised far more for competition than they ever had for a grade. That "aha" moment improved

my teaching. Students no longer write for my eyes alone. Researching, or mining if you will, my own teaching leads me to the "so whats" that help to focus and refocus my efforts. Writing for an outside audience forces me to slow down and do the kind of reflective thinking that the nuisances of the school day crowd out. What twentieth-century American writer Bernard Malamud refers to as the "flowers of afterthought" are available to all of us through writing.

Because I have experienced this first-hand, I ask my students to write regularly about their reading and their writing, both in journals and through multiple drafts of polished pieces. I want them to be open to switching directions if need be, to follow their thinking where it may lead them. I ask them to push each other in conferences the way they do in literature circles to justify themselves. I want them to know in their hearts that writing is "thinking on paper."

Mary Heaton Vorse, a journalist and suffragist who lived from 1874–1966, once said, "The art of writing is the art of applying the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair." Because I remained in my chair instead of following my occasional instincts to flee, these lessons are even clearer to me. Of course, once you sit down to write, you too will learn your own lessons. Your writing and your students will be better for it.

References

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Judith M. Jester teaches English at Kennett Middle School in Landenberg, Pennsylvania, and is co-director of the Pennsylvania Writing and Literature Project at West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania. She can be reached at jmjester@yahoo.com.