A MOTHER RE-ENVISIONS HER DAUGHTER'S WRITING

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The two friends, Olivia and Erin, scrambled from the school bus on an April afternoon when the temperature was so tropical that it hoodwinked the crocuses, the tulips, and the foolish young girls who rushed to slip into last summer's shorts. Into the house the ten-year-olds clamored, charging up the stairs to the linen closet where they dragged out an old patchwork quilt. Rummaging for paper, pens, and markers, satisfied that they were at last organized, down the stairs and out the front door they scurried as if urgent business awaited, a corner of the quilt dragging behind them.

The girls made a beeline down our country road to a freshly sawed stump of a huge rotting oak, felled by a farmer a few days before. Spreading the quilt over this handy outdoor easy chair, the two friends, sitting cross-legged, composed and designed an advertisement featuring their baby-sitting talents to be dropped into the mailboxes, postage-less, of prospective neighborhood clients. Their "baby-sitting brochure," as I call it, was a piece of children's stationery, folded lengthwise to resemble a pamphlet or brochure. It was adorned with a row of portly dancing brown teddy bears in pink tu-tus, standing at a ballet barre, fat furry legs held high in the air in a grande battemente presentation. Through collaboration, the two friends had accomplished a feat that would put any advertising executive to shame. Here is what they composed:

> [Front Cover]: Do You Need a baby-sitter? [Inside]: Olivia and Erin work together not separate. So if you need a baby sitter Olivia and Erin are both going to come over and babysit your child. (Children). 1 child = $1.00 2 children = $1.50 4:00

to 9:00 no later. Call Olivia Hardymon at 485-4629 or Erin Bucksot at 485-6772. *Expieriance* We took a course on taking care of a baby. If something major happens we know what to do. We are each 11 years old. [A "white" lie: they would *soon* be eleven!] P.S. We work together unless something comes up. P.P.S. thank you.

I've always thought that my daughter Olivia's writing was "cute" and nothing beyond, until as an English major working on a bachelor's, I decided to collect samples of Olivia's writing done outside of school along with samples of assignments from her language arts class. I would compare the more "relaxed" playtime writing to the "tension-filled" writing from school spilling over with red ink. Originally, my objective was to determine the function of literacy in a child's play. However, as I read, researched, and re-envisioned, I ended up with much more than I had bargained for.

As one who loves to write and is interested in all aspects of language, I have been dismayed but not particularly shocked at the numbers of children (and adults) who have mentioned to me over the last few years how much they dislike writing. I had begun to think that everyone who wasn't an English major or a professional writer hated to write. And nearly always, many of these writing haters shared horror stories concerning negative experiences from school writing. Their complaints ranged from "the teacher only graded my research paper on grammar and punctuation and didn't even mention content" to "teachers' writing assignments are boring" to "I like to write what I am interested in." The majority of responses included "I can't write anything; I wish I could." "Of course, you can write; all of you can write," I wanted so much to reassure them. They would have never believed me.

Donald Graves and Virginia Stuart, in their book *Write From The Start*, explore four myths concerning children and writing: (1) Most adults think children can't write until they can read; (2) Most adults think children can't write until they successfully complete spelling, punctuation, and grammar exercises; (3) Most adults think children can't write without assignments, pictures, "story starters," or even word lists to get them going; and (4) Above all, most adults think children don't want to write (2,3). In this paper, I will underscore myths 2, 3, and 4 as they relate to my own discoveries as I analyze my daughter's writing.

Returning to the "baby-sitting brochure," we see that Olivia and Erin were excited about their writing project, beginning it as soon as they returned home from school. The brochure was not an assignment—it was strictly their own idea. No English teacher had looked over their shoulders as they wrote, yet they had successfully accomplished their goal, and with only one misspelled word, "Expierience." That would probably have been corrected later, for as Olivia boldly stated: "This is just a draft, Mother." In composing this brochure, the two friends probably learned so much more than they would have in writing a "boring" assigned topic at school. What did they most likely learn? First, they learned that writing is a social activity, not one done in solitude: Writers oftentimes write collaboratively and they write to a specific audience that doesn't generally own red ink pens, much less use them. Second, they learned that writers have a distinct purpose when they write, and when a writer has a purpose—a "real" one—*it matters!* Mem Fox, who teaches at the South Australian College of Advanced Education, and who writes daily, discusses the seriousness of giving students writing assignments that are *real*:

> If . . . language develops only when it is used 'for real,' then might I suggest that we're currently wasting a lot of time by setting unreal writing tasks in our classrooms: filling-in-the-blanks exercises, copying-from-chunks-of-encyclopedias exercises, make-believe job applications, "Answer-ten-questions-on-Chapter-Six" exercises, pretend-letters-to-parents-exercises, and so on. You and I don't engage in meaningless writing exercises in real life—we're far too busy doing the real thing. And by doing the real thing we constantly learn how to do the real thing better. (Fox 114)

Unlike most all language arts assignments, this brochure was a "real" piece of writing, with a real purpose and a real audience. Because the two girls were engaged in a writing activity that was authentic, not imaginary, their excitement, even urgency, in accomplishing their writing task was apparent.

What feats of language development that children can accomplish in a few short years is nothing short of amazing. Shane Templeton, looking at language development through an historical perspective, writes that ". . . the development of the individual child (ontogeny) is similar to the development of humankind (phylogeny) over the eons" (512). Children "invent" their reality,

language, and literacy much like the human race invented language (512). Yetta Goodman has made the same observation: "There are developmental moments in the literacy development of the individual that parallel in complex ways the development of literacy for the human race" (qtd. in Templeton, 512). I am a spectator of these daring feats of language accomplishment: I noticed an inventive process in the girls' brochure.

SCHEMATA

In an interview with Olivia, I asked her whether she had gotten the idea of the brochure from her father who was at the same time a candidate in a primary race for state representative. He had had some brochures printed—our entire family had posed for photographs for the brochure. Olivia claimed that her father's brochures had not yet been printed at the time of her own creation; therefore, she could not have copied the form. She claimed: "I don't know where I ever saw one." I then asked: "But, how did you know what a brochure is supposed to look like and what kind of information should be included?" And she answered: "I don't know how I knew. I just know in my head."

Olivia's choice of the "brochure" form apparently already existed in her internal repertoires of form, or schemata. Bradley T. Peters, writing in "What Sixth Graders Can Teach Us About Form and Competence," asserts that "the more we understand about students' internal repertoires of form (i.e., 'generalized writing plans'), the better we can nurture the emergence of competent writing" (171). Hayes and Flowers have suggested that "students possess, in their long-term memories, 'generalized writing plans, perhaps in the form of a story grammar . . . or a formula such as the journalists' questions, 'who, what, where, when, why?' " (qtd. in Peters, 171). Also, George Hillocks, Jr. asserts: "We need more information about the schemata, if any, which guide writers in producing various types of discourse" (qtd. in Peters, 171). Let us examine Olivia's relatively competent brochure in order to understand the schemata that she conceivably had internalized or stored in her long-term memory.

The brochure follows the writing plan of a journalist: the *who?* is Olivia and her friend Erin; the *what?* is their offer of baby-sitting services; the *where?* is at the homes of perspective clients; the *when?* is "4:00 to 9:00 no later"; and the *why?* might be con-

ceived as the clients' advantage of (1) getting two competent sitters for the price of one; (2) getting sitters who had taken a Red Cross course on baby-sitting; and (3) the implied reason: parents of small children are always in desperate need of sitters. Another well-planned feature of the brochure is the design of the ballet-dancing bears, a very thoughtful choice for a would-be baby-sitter's advertisement because many children like teddy bears and many take dance lessons. These well-chosen graphics also connect the "sitters" to the "babies," reassuring the parents that the sitters cared enough to create that juxtaposition. Peters writes: "form points to a way in which young writers can get a sense of control over a writing task. Or rather, form may be a major component of whatever phenomenon it is that makes topics hot" (172). Returning to Graves' and Stuart's myths concerning children and writing, we discover that Olivia and Erin wrote their brochure without an assignment, pictures, "story starters," or any other writing starters to get them going, except for their own collaborative discussion—a heuristic—prior to the actual writing. The two girls participated in an inventive process, utilizing their own internalized schemata to accomplish a writing task. And let's not forget—they had fun!

INTELLECTUAL VENTRILOQUISM

As Olivia's mother and a writer as well, I feel sad that she and her classmates in our community middle school are scarcely writing at all. Olivia has only written between two and four pieces during her sixth grade year—she will be out for the summer in five weeks. The following is how she responded to this assignment: "Tell about your best vacation." The piece is, naturally, entitled "My Best Vacation."

> I just couldn't wait until my friend and I went to Indiana Beach for five days!
>
> I hurried to pack. My mom drove me to my friend Amanda's house because I was going to travel with her family.
>
> When the car pulled up in front of our cabin, we ran inside and changed into our swimsuits. We went swimming and I went off the diving board many times. We also played lots of games in the water.
>
> The next day we went to the park to ride on the rides, and we rode nearly every one. There is one that I like most of all. It was called the Twister. It wasn't a roller coaster.

It was a little seat that you sit in and the person who controls the Twister twists you around so fast you can't move your head!

My friend, Amanda, got sick from riding it. That's how fun it was!

At night we would go out for pizza and play video games. I like the game where I pretended to drive a car. Amanda and I played it for an hour.

On the very last day we had to start packing to go home. We were a little sad. On the drive home, Amanda's mother said that we could go back to Indiana Beach again next year, and that's when I began to be happy again!

Olivia received a ninety-eight percent—an impressive grade for a mediocre piece that contained nothing that I would consider a "nugget." A "Personal Narrative/Analytic Scale" sheet accompanied her composition when it was returned to her. There were five categories of judgment: (1) poor; (2) weak; (3) good; (4) very good; and (5) excellent. Features of the composition that were judged were as follows: *Revising Skills*, which included "Good beginning" and "Enough details." (Interestingly, "Dialogue used" had been crossed out: the children, according to Olivia, were told not to try to use dialogue—a strange request, since dialogue makes stories interesting). The heaviest concentration of her grade involved *Proofreading Skills*, that included "Paragraphs are indented"; "Uses complete sentences"; "Words spelled correctly"; "Capitals used correctly"; and "Punctuation used correctly." The last category was *Final Copy Skills*, under which was "Neat and easy to read"; "Form correct"; and "Title capitalized correctly."

From a total of ten categories, only two,"Good beginning" and "Enough details," even begin to approach what a striving young writer should focus on. The other eight features, from indentation of paragraphs to a correctly capitalized title, develop in the context of writing. It is apparent that in my daughter's language arts class, the emphasis is, unfortunately, on grammar rules as opposed to creativity, content, freedom to write about what interests the child, and challenging, open-ended and open-minded "low-constraint" assignments. While correct spelling, punctuation, and grammatical accuracy are goals that teachers—all of us—want our children to achieve, students should be given many years to absorb these rules as they struggle with and enjoy writing about topics that excite and motivate them.

While the vacation piece, written an entire year after the baby-sitting product, is a good solid piece of writing with almost all grammatical rules obeyed to a "T," it is also lackluster; it is no more than an organized list of the author's vacation activities, all neatly placed in a row like identical sparrows perched together on a telephone line: "First, we did this; next we did this; and, by George, we liked doing these things so much that we want to go back next year and do them all over again." The problem with this "nice" piece of writing is that Olivia plausibly practiced the "intellectual ventriloquism" (105) that Donald Graves discusses. Olivia wrote precisely according to her teacher's instructions and she wrote with her *teacher's voice or the voice she imagined her teacher would use*. We do not see this phenomenon in her "brochure," written *outside of the classroom*—in fact, when I read it to other adult writers, their immediate reaction is an appreciative giggling over what I would term its genuineness, its delightful unsophistication; the readers are able to hear Olivia's writing voice. Donald Graves compels us to re-envision the meaning of a writer's voice as he aptly defines it this way:

> Voice is the imprint of the person on the piece. It is the way in which a writer chooses words, the way in which a writer orders things toward meaning. As writers compose, they leave their fingerprints all over their work. (37)

Graves also speaks about the way teachers criticize their students' writing. If our children are always reminded of their mistakes, then it is no wonder that they protect themselves against hurt and disillusionment by writing in a "voiceless" fashion. Graves writes:

> One of the reasons adolescents give you the grunt-and-shoulder-twitch routine is so that they can't get hurt . . . gradually, from first grade on, we start to knock children's writing voices out of them. By the time they're seniors in high school, they whimper, or talk in a monotone, or say nothing—just generalities. Generalities are nice insulation against insult. (39)

Mem Fox asks teachers of writing two provocative questions: "Are we aware of how much our students dread having their writing knocked back? Do we trample on their vulnerability when they

limp in, unarmed, from the battlefield?" (118). Perhaps we should consider putting away our red ink pens—the "bloody swords"—and stop "injuring" our young writing students, those same students who will later grow up, adamantly claiming how that they hate writing, insisting that they cannot write anything at all.

The following piece is a very brief story written by Olivia—again, outside of the classroom, as a fifth-grader. Let us compare her writing voice in this story with her voice in the "vacation" piece.

An Adventure to Remember

One day my friends were walking through a woods. We heard a large booming noise. We didn't know what to do! So, we stood by a tree and then a little door opened and a quiet voice said "Come in, or he will get you." So they went in and saw a ugly witch! They screamed and tried to get out, but the witch put them in a glass case so they couldn't get out.

The witch was getting ready to turn them in [to witches] so they could catch other little kids. *NEXT BOOK* Do the kids get turned into ugly witches? Find out in the next book, *An Adventure to Remember II.*

Interestingly, Olivia has adapted a form that the Victorian writers utilized: they wrote serialized stories that appeared in newspapers or magazines. She had actually stopped short on the completion of her story because she ran out of time, and she was smart enough to utilize an effective ploy to keep her audience hooked until she finished her story. I speculate that she internalized this form from serialized television programs, such as the (soporific) "soaps" or programs like *Knot's Landing.*

Olivia has left her own "fingerprints" in the form of phraseology like "a large booming noise" and specifically in the serial format she adapted. What is also reasonably unique is the part where the "quiet voice" compels the children to enter the tree; the faceless voice says: "Come in, or he will get you," not the usual "Get in here quick!" or "Hurry up, come inside!" This phrase with its vaguely familiar rhythm reminded me at once of a similar quiet, faceless voice that spoke to Kevin Costner in the film *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, he will come." Since our family had seen this film close to the time of her writing the story, I think it plausible that Olivia had also internalized this expression and, in her process of heuristics or incubation, had subconsciously decided

to transform the haunting phrase to suit her own story-telling purposes. However, Olivia denies that her phrase is in any way connected to the film!

NUGGETS

The next piece was assigned by her sixth-grade language arts teacher, and I thought it a good writing assignment because of the freedom of choice that it offered young writers. The assignment: persuade someone to do something, to agree with you, etc. Here is how Olivia handled this "low-constraint" assignment, one that approaches "real" writing:

April 22, 1991

Dear Conductor:

The Mount Vernon Middle School Sixth Grade Band would like your permission to play with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. It would be a pleasant experience for the children to play in the orchestra. Many of the children, including me, would like to become musicians when we grow up. However, if we just had this one chance to actually feel like we are part of a real orchestra, we would be thrilled!

This experience would be good for our education and we would play our instruments better, and take our instruments more seriously. We would also have fun playing our instruments with you. Of course, we would have to bring our own music to play because we are not experienced enough to play at your level.

I'm sure that you will like this idea and we hope that you will let us come and play in your orchestra. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Olivia Hardymon
Mount Vernon Middle School
Sixth Grade Band Member

"I just *love* the word 'consideration,' " remarked Olivia, after composing this piece. I noticed that her writing voice changed appropriately to fit the author's purpose for writing: a symphony orchestra conductor demanded a greater sophistication of tone. Again, no one instructed Olivia that this piece of writing should be treated in a more formal manner than would a note to a

friend—she knew this on her own. She perhaps did not know *how* she knew, but the fact is, she did know. The most remarkable if not outrageous! aspect of this piece is the idea itself: that a sixth grade band would request to play with a professional orchestra. This is an example of what many teachers call a "nugget." Eileen Tway, in her article "How to Find and Encourage the Nuggets in Children's Writing," urges teachers to encourage the nuggets that children leave behind in their writing. Olivia's idea is "fresh," and she supports her case well. Olivia chose a subject that interests *her*: Indeed, she is a good flute-player in her sixth-grade band. To her, sharing musical talent with a symphony orchestra was not out of the question—it would work. Tway writes about the ability of children to view the world differently from adults:

> Children view the world with senses that are not yet jaded by the familiar, the routine, the everyday aspects of the world. Their writing often reflects an originality or freshness based on a first look at something that is quite ordinary to the adult . . . When these nuggets are present in stories and other forms of writing, they should be cherished and encouraged. (299)

When we compare this "persuasion" assignment with the "vacation" assignment, we find that Olivia wrote more successfully in the persuasion assignment which gave her more personal choice. Equally as important, this piece of writing was "real" to Olivia, i.e., the idea was plausible. In her mind's eye, she was writing to a real audience, and therefore, felt a sense of purpose. The fewer the constraints posed on our young writers, the more we hear their individual writing voices, the more we see their unique "fingerprints." Olivia did stew, fret, make lists, and incubate for several days prior to the assignment—but that is good. The burden of the writing responsibility should be placed on the student writer; while this burden might be troublesome the first time or even the one hundred and first time—students think that they want or need an instructor to "tell" them exactly how to write an assignment so they won't have to think—he or she will, in the end, write a much better piece, a piece that is fresh, one that does not "echo" the teacher's voice.

"MOM, I NEED ANOTHER NOTEBOOK!"

One of Graves' and Stuart's' myths, the myth that children don't like to write, could not be further from the truth, in my experience. I discovered that my daughter and her best friends fill notebook after notebook with writing that reflects what they feel or think about their world on any given day. Author Ruth Hubbard, writing in "Unofficial Literacy in a Sixth-Grade Classroom," describes sixth-graders as ". . . a complex society which relies heavily on an 'unofficial literacy' as a means of coping with the social hierarchy—and social conflicts—of home, school, parents, teachers, and friends" (126).

In her study of a group of sixth-graders, Hubbard noted that written notes are an "important component" of their daily lives. She places the notes into three categories: social, informational, and "silly." In looking at notes written by my own daughter, I, too, found that her notes fit into these same three categories; however, I also discovered another category that I call "sibling rivalry." Here is one example of many that I frequently find at my place at the breakfast table on school mornings:

Mom and Dad—

You know what your retard son did? He spilt orange juice all over my placemat and he covered knives over so we couldn't see it! And guess what? I had to clean it up!!

Your well behaved daughter,

Olivia Christine Hardymon

P.S. Don't you think you should give him to someone else?
P.P.S. I do!

While this note about her brother Jeremy is also a "silly" note, I still found that "sibling rivalry" is a distinctive genre for Olivia.

The following is a brief "social" note written to Olivia's friend Amanda:

Dear Amanda:

I'll ask if you can spend the night? OK?
yes____ or NO____
P.S. Write Back

Here is an "information" note written to me:

Mom—

Is it ok if I use that stuff for my face tomorrow? Tonight I washed my face I dabbed reten A on the pimple and I put that stuff on my face. But I didn't put it over my pimple(s). Well, better go!

Love ya—C-ya—Olivia

"Silly" notes, according to Hubbard, are often scribbled off hurriedly and many times reflect the writer's boredom (131). Here is one such note that meets that criterion:

DON'T HATE ME BECAUSE I'M BEAUTIFUL!!!!!

Amanda

I'm bored aren't you? Well, I like the cover [a project they shared] very much! It's like totally aws-E-ome!!! Ha! Ha! You are retard. I am smiling Ha! He! You are a nerd You are a jerk Mrs. Kelly-O better not take our notebook! If she does, I will kill her! The bell is going to ring in about 2 seconds. 1 one thousand 2 one thousand BEEP! HA!

P.S. Hasn't that bomb blew up yet I put in your trapper? HA!

Silly notes are oftentimes insulting and crude, but most have disclaimers (131) as we find when Olivia writes "I am smiling." (Ruth Hubbard has noticed how similar the notes of sixth-grade students are to those of graduate students at boring lectures!)

What about this "social writing" that I have discovered is so necessary to Olivia and to her gaggle of friends? Can it be useful, educationally speaking? Could it be used in the classroom? Mem Fox thinks so. "First," she writes, "I wonder how often we demonstrate our crazy, private note writing to our students?" She continues: "Wouldn't it make the classrooms come alive if kids giggled and shrieked in the open about writing that was written in the open, instead of underground?" (122). Even in what we adults might term "frivolous note writing" might it be possible that kids are *learning* from one another? Grammar and punctuation (sans the tedious, boring exercises that don't teach); the sharing of sixth-grade philosophies of life; ideas for later stories, poems, expository writing; and most importantly, learning to communicate with one's peers.

Every few weeks Olivia will ask me to buy her a new notebook, and I used to reply: "But, I just bought you one a couple weeks ago!" That was prior to my discovery that she and her friends

pass notebooks back and forth every day at school, filling them with messages from their amazing secret gardens. Even though Olivia doesn't write as much as I think she should be writing in school, perhaps through her social writing she will become the empowered adult woman that I feel I have become in the process of my academic training in writing. Templeton writes that "The tragedy of history and of schooling, however, is that all too often individuals do not realize they can be so empowered. It is as true for children as it has been historically true for humankind" (516).

Indeed, we cheat our children if we don't see to it that they learn to write, and to write well. Mem Fox puts it like this: "I use the power of my own writing regularly, to manipulate the world into granting my wishes. Such power doesn't come from nowhere. It comes from practicing writing for real reasons" (123).

Templeton reminds us of the work of Piaget: how he "underscored the realization that children *really* understand only what they have invented for themselves" (513). How can we as teachers/parents create an atmosphere that fosters this inventive process? First, as Mem Fox maintains, if we teach writing, then we must write, too. "Teachers of writing who have been soldiers themselves, engaged in a writing battle, *must* be able to empathize more closely with the comrades in their classrooms than teachers who are merely war correspondents at the hotel bar, as it were, watching the battle from a safe distance, declining to get in there and write themselves" (118). Once that writing intimacy—I write; therefore, I understand what you are feeling—has been established, then it is time to retire the "bloody sword" that I spoke of earlier. Grammar and punctuation should be worked on a point or two at a time, and should not be corrected for the student with a red pen. Students learn grammar through the context of writing. Only after the student has had the opportunity to express freely his/her thoughts on paper, should the question of proper grammar be dealt with—one or two rules at a time. The student should be allowed to make the corrections on his/her own, after a general understanding of the problem has taken place.

As Mem Fox and others strongly suggest, make writing assignments as "real" as possible—real enough that the students could possibly get a real response from their target audience. Create situations whereby students "always own the investment in their writing" (Fox 124). I have shared with you the real piece of writing that Olivia and Erin created on their own. It was directed to a

specific audience—parents with young children—who would, the girls hoped, respond to the brochure by calling them with baby-sitting opportunities. Also, the persuasion letter meets the objective of a real reason for writing.

As teachers of writing, and as parents of young writers, let us lay before our children a clean, clear plain free of constraints, harsh criticism, tiresome exercises in grammar rules, and most importantly, a plain that the child writer may landscape with rose bushes or a weeping willow tree, soft green clover or tall, imposing cacti—it will be his or her choice.

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