TEACHING WRITING AS STORY

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Metaphors drive virtually every dimension of teaching writing (and English generally). Some metaphors choose us, as poets say, like the time I realized in a flash that learning to play a new piece on the piano was a lot like learning to read a challenging, unfamiliar text. Other metaphors are thrust upon us, such as when my first principal insisted that I think of my students as recruits, not "kids." Still other metaphors we deliberately choose ourselves, as Philip Eubanks does in his recent defense of the conduit metaphor (92). Like Eubanks, many teachers pay close attention to these metaphors—because they add life and color to our otherwise pedestrian language but, more importantly, because they powerfully shape how we think about our students, ourselves as teachers, and what and how we teach. As Lakoff and Johnson remark in *Metaphors We Live By*, our conceptual system is metaphorical in nature, and these metaphors "structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people" (3).

It's easy to see how important metaphors are in English studies. Frank Smith, for example, has changed the way many teachers think about literacy through his proffered metaphor for becoming literate as "joining the literacy club," that community of readers and writers whose "members" "join" because they are attracted to the "benefits" of taking part in "club activities" (*Joining*). Metaphors can help us see the whole of teaching of English in one powerful image, as when James Moffett urges us to see language teaching generally as drama: "The guts of drama is rhetoric, people acting on each other" (116). Metaphors also give us ways of making geographic sense of different approaches to composition, as Wiley, Gleason, and Phelps do when they envision the field as needing "a map of the territory of composition studies" because explorers "discover a sprawling exuberance, bewildering variety, ill-defined edges and overlaps with other fields" (1).

We often envision our particular pedagogy metaphorically too. We have the most pervasive metaphor of the last three decades in the analogy of the classroom as a workshop, which Donald Graves, Nancie Atwell, Lucy Calkins, et al., have popularized. In this metaphor, well described by Zemelman and Daniels, the students are "craftspeople [who] create finely wrought products over time, working through a series of steps and stages [and who] use various tools associated with their product"; and the teacher "is a master craftsman who . . . spends time observing, assisting, helping, and teaching the apprentices" (89).

Metaphors for the processes of writing and reading point up the hermeneutic nature of these literacy acts, as when William Stafford describes writing as fishing— "I do not wait very long, for there is always a nibble" (17)—or as swimming— "But swimmers know that if they relax on the water it will prove to be miraculously buoyant; and writers know that a succession of little strokes on the material nearest them . . . will result in creative progress" (23). Metaphors for the meaning-making nature of reading abound too, such as when Louise Rosenblatt describes the poem-as-event as an electric circuit— "'The poem' comes into being in the live circuit set up between the reader and 'the text'" (14). Reading metaphors can underscore the conversational relationship between the private and the public dimensions of reading, as Robert Probst does when he describes engagement with a text as a dialogue: "Language has both idiosyncratic and social dimensions, and meanings can, to an extent, be shared" (168).

While metaphors are important and likely unavoidable, given their intentional or inadvertent functionality in language, they can also be dangerous. Frank Smith, for example, points up five powerful metaphors that are commonly found in literacy education—information, process, skills, levels, and stages—each dangerous in its own way (94). Because metaphors draw our attention to certain analogical aspects, they "can keep us from focussing on other aspects that are inconsistent with that metaphor," warn Lakoff and Johnson (10). Thus, as Smith notes, calling writing a "skill" puts the focus on writing as a physical or manual activity with the implication that it develops with "exercise, drill, and practice" (102); yet the skill metaphor ignores not only the cognitive nature of writing but also its social aspects. As the rhetorician Chaim Perelman cautions us, "Every analogy highlights certain relationships and leaves others in the shadows" (119).

Most writing teachers (or, for that matter, most teachers of any subject), I've observed, do not consciously conceive of their work in classrooms metaphorically. But I think it's important to do so. For one thing, it makes us more thoughtful about how we envision our work: as we understand our teaching metaphorically, so do we extend the metaphor in more complex and often compelling ways. For another, controlling metaphors force us to think in more coherent terms about why we do what we do, what we ask of our students, and how we make sense of the daily events of the classroom. And while metaphors can blind us to certain things, the imagistic dimensions of a controlling metaphor (in I.A. Richards' terms, the *vehicle*) can illuminate the underlying idea, or *tenor* (96). In this essay, I will focus on one metaphor in particular that has become for me a defining metaphor for teaching writing, one that shapes not only my view of pedagogy, but also my students, and my teaching self. I will examine teaching writing (tenor) as writing a story (vehicle). Readers will note the grammar here—I refer to acts of teaching and writing, not to composition or literature as fields of study.

Teaching Writing as Story

After thirty years of teaching English in secondary and post-secondary settings, I have come to see the notion of *story* and the writing of a story (*storytelling*) as integral to my work. Indeed, my own story (history) of becoming a teacher may be likened to a character in a story with a problem (who will I become?): Out of the inner conflict between my original aspiration (become a coach) and the growing sense of a more important goal (become an English teacher), *I* developed, as characters do, eventually finding a sense of purpose in life by choosing a career teaching English. The teaching-as-writing-stories metaphor not only puts my own professional development into a perspective especially suited to me as a writer and reader, but it also gives insight into much of my classroom experience as a teacher: I view each class as if it were a short story in the making.

Thinking of teaching as writing short fiction is an apt metaphor for me, for two reasons. First, I've written fiction, and though I'm not much of a fiction writer, I do understand from the inside (i.e., as a practitioner) what it's like. Second, because I teach composition, I know teaching from the inside also. Knowing both writing and teaching from the inside enables me to understand better how much the two activities are alike, and that understanding helps me to reflect upon why some moments in teaching go so well, while others fail. That is to say, the metaphor illuminates the "great" classes as well as the painful bombs. For instance, where the tension (i.e., conflict) in my classroom was high, as when in a composition class no one could agree on what a key phrase in an essay ("hate speech") "meant," enthusiasm ran high as many students debated the multiple (and potentially threatening) meanings of each word; but the next day, when I "presented material," students' eyelids drooped as I droned on in my teacher voice. (I once actually became angry at a student whom I so bored that he fell asleep in class. It is humbling to realize one's arrogance at getting upset for boring someone to sleep.) The day before, however, that moment of engagement in that particular class had all or nearly all of the elements of a short story working, as I explain below.

How This Metaphor Illuminates Teaching

This metaphor may be best understood by examining the elements of a short story. Writers of short stories must create a dramatic and **intense effect** in what Edgar Allen Poe called "one sitting" (454). So too must teachers engage the attention of students for a brief time in a classroom, either for an entire class period of say, 40 to 80 minutes, or for an episode *within* an entire class period. Writers must **develop character** by situating people in some location, giving them some struggle or desire, and manipulating the events of the story in order to work out the consequences of action and decision. Similarly, teachers and students situate in a classroom, where teachers strive to promote student "growth" (i.e., changes in thinking or behavior) through decision and action. Good teachers create just enough challenge to move students along toward some changes in the ways they think or feel (Vygotsky called this area of movement the "zone of proximal development," which is the distance between actual developmental level and the nearest potential developmental level) (86). In the story, the events of the plot are imaginatively reconstructed by individual readers through the **cues** provided by the writer; in my teaching, I provide cues (e.g., readings, exercises, notes, questions) to the subject of the class and then help my students construct their individual understanding of that subject.

At the heart of short stories lies **conflict**, for without conflict, there simply is no story, because someone has to desire something, have that desire thwarted, and grow in some way as a result. Without conflict in the classroom—that is, illuminated tensions between, say, contradictory facts, differing opinions, conflictive ends, dueling interpretations, or multiple perspectives—we lose the vitality of learning that fuels intellectual and emotional risk taking, thoughtful curiosity, and genuine growth. "Somebody wanted something, but, and so" as the story grammar goes. So it is in teaching: characters, conflict, consequences.

Writing and Teaching: Creating Conflict in a Setting

In the short story, conflict occurs in a setting. In teaching, the setting is the classroom, a place filled with interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics such that the potential for enacting conflict—between ideas, between people, within oneself—is huge. Conflict (tension, dissonance, discord, etc.) engages readers—e.g., Will the protagonist escape harm? How will the unhappy woman resolve her dispute with her partner? Can the narrator eventually face life's truths? As it is in writing stories, so it is in teaching writing—genuine engagement thrives on genuine conflict or resolution of tension—e.g., in class, we may ask, "Is having low expectations for the cognitively disabled an example of a 'hate crime?'; or we may pose three correct ways of punctuating a sentence and wonder, "Which one is 'better'?" Both examples allow for multiple perspectives and have the potential to instigate disagreement (tension). Learner engagement in the classroom, like reader engagement in the story, depends on good conflict.

Simply posing conflictive issues does not guarantee engagement, for the metaphor is generic—it ignores cultural, gender, personal history, ability and other differences that attune some students to some issues rather than other issues. Just as we cannot expect every reader to enjoy every story, so can we not expect every student to engage with every class activity. But my point is that within the operating metaphor here, I must ask myself, what *is* the conflict inherent in this lesson? If none exists, if the "discussion," for example, amounts to nothing more than a recitation, then attending to this aspect (vehicle) of the metaphor may lend insight into the cause of a lethargic "class discussion."

An example from my own teaching may illustrate how the metaphor has helped me understand the dynamics of some of my teaching.

In high school English and in university first-year English, students typically write a variety of essays and a research paper. Often students are allowed to choose the topic for their research papers, or they may have topics assigned by a teacher, or they may "discover" topics through the course readings or class discussions. One of my strategies for helping students select tension-filled research topics is the "*Harper's* Index" activity. *Harper's* Index (appears monthly in *Harper's Magazine*) is a compilation of related and unrelated "factoids" that simply appears as a one-page list. Some facts are thematically clustered, while others appear as individual entries. Here, for example, is a cluster from an Index:

> Number of months since Congress imposed a moratorium on hearing new ethics complaints against members: 6
>
> Number of times the moratorium has been extended since its introduction last February: 7
>
> Ratio of times a member of Congress was accused of being a "liar" in the Thea session to the times a foreigner was: 4:1
>
> Average ratio in the three previous terms: 1:2

In class, we read through one month's Index and individually or in groups note interesting juxtapositions, contradictions, or ironies that catch our attention. Within minutes of looking at an Index, many students begin to gasp, laugh, sigh, or make similar sounds that indicate an emotional reaction to apparently objective facts. These reactions open the doors to wonderings that, in turn, become the starting points for students' research paper topics. From the Index selection above, for example, the following student wonderings emerged in a recent class:

> "What criteria does Congress employ when declaring a moratorium?"
>
> "Are things so bad ethically that moratoriums are even necessary?"
>
> "Why are more Congress people being accused of dishonesty than before?"
>
> "Are they actually lying more, or are they just being attacked more by the other party?"

"What are the ethics involved in powerful decisions, such as imposing moratoriums, being made about ethics?"

As they wonder about such particular topics, students ask more pointed and engaging questions that can lead them into more substantive searching for information in order to understand the emerging complexity of the topic. Tensions grow as students realize that things are more complex and multi-dimensional than thought at first. Awareness of this complexity serves these students well in the research and the writing of the research paper because invariably they confront the need for a fuller understanding of the issue. Viewing the Index activity in terms of the short story analogy, the Index provides an opportunity for conflict to emerge among characters in a setting for a relatively short span of time, as one would find in a good short story. As the teacher, I find many students quickly and actively engage with the exercise and easily arrive at a handful of potential research topics.

But, of course, not all students can be nudged toward grasping such complexity; they bring too many personal variables into the setting to become engaged by any one activity. For them, *Harper's* Index means little. These students challenge me, keep me working at and wondering about engagement as I seek for some other way to create dissonance for them. I may have an individual conference, with an ear for a potential reflective awareness a student reveals—"My little brother has a learning disability and he gets bullied a lot—maybe that's a hate crime?" Or I will discover a conflict of values in a student's journal entry— "I know God says to love everyone, but gays are condemned in the Bible!" Like many who teach research writing, I require that students interview someone with opinions or experience opposite to theirs; I also require that students attempt to "account" for opposing views in their writing. Again, the pedagogical point here is to seek out and build up conflict, deliberately introducing potential dissonance, as in the *Harper's* activity and research interview, or distilling it from students' informal comments and writings.

Writing and Teaching: Creating Character

In fiction, we speak of character development when characters grow—perhaps to a better understanding of the problems they face, perhaps to solving those problems. Often, characters solve their problems through some kind of intelligence. By "intelligence," I don't mean a psychometric IQ, but rather, as Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner puts it, one or more of the *multiple intelligences* (MI) seen in the broad spectrum of humanity. In Gardner's MI theory, humans present in combinations of as many as nine "intelligences"[1] (1983, 1997). Complementing Gardner's theory, Daniel Goleman has given such attention to emotional intelligence, the ability to know and manage one's own emotions as well as those involved in social encounters; emotional intelligence may be thought of as a synthesis of Gardner's intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences (1996).

A character in a short story, like a student in a class, may exhibit any one or combination of these intelligences. Thus in the action story, a character like James Bond may escape physical danger by relying on his logical-mathematical talents coupled with his kinesthetic and spatial abilities while relying on his interpersonal intelligence for fulfilling his amorous desires. Or a character in an Alice Walker story may gain greater insight into her problems through emotional intelligence coupled with intrapersonal strengths. Sherlock Holmes combines logical-mathematical and intrapersonal intelligences to solve mysteries.

The theory of multiple intelligences illuminates and extends my understanding of fiction as well as of learning and learners. Just as a writer endows characters with certain forms of intelligence for their problem-solving activities, so can I promote learning by providing opportunities for learners to succeed through their multiple ways of knowing. A case in point would be Dan, a high school teacher and student in a graduate course, "Critical Thinking and the Teaching of Writing and Literature."

Dan kept a learning journal in the course, recording his reactions to the readings and relating them to his daily teaching. In the first six weeks of the course, Dan produced 14 journal entries, an average of 2.3 pages per week. Dan's journal for the first 6 weeks of the course embodied a verbal form of intelligence—typed text that covered the page except for a wide right-hand margin where, in dialectical journal fashion (Berthoff), he hand wrote reflective responses to his journal entries (a sample page in Appendix A). What I did not know at the time was that Dan was apparently struggling with purely verbal journaling, as he explained in an end-of-semester note to me: " . . . my own personal journals and writing I've realized are painfully laborious, the writing often mechanical—it just takes too much effort & time to supply the proper grammatical backbone to a piece of writing, dotting all the i's, etc." For my part, I never saw Dan struggle; he never let on. He seemed to be a pretty good writer, one who had a way with words and for whom writing was anything but a struggle. That was a side of this "character" that he did not reveal until the class had nearly ended. In this sense, he was much like many of my students whose complex motivations and silent challenges remain hidden, only infrequently intimating to us their "development."

At the eighth week in the course, after we had read and discussed excerpts from Gardner about his theory of multiple intelligences, the form of Dan's learning journal changed—gone was the right-hand vertical divider and the familiar form of prose stretching across the page. Dan began to doodle and write about the readings and his reactions to them (see Appendix B). Throughout the rest of the course, Dan continued to draw and write in his journal, sometimes adding right-margin self-reflective commentary/drawings, sometimes not, as he took ownership over the form itself, using both his visual and verbal intelligences to engage with the readings (Appendix C). In the first six weeks of the course, Dan had produced 14 journal entries, an average of 2.3 pages per week. In contrast, in the second six weeks he produced 41 pages, a weekly average of 5.8 pages and more than 2 1/2 times as much. While I'm tempted to link greater output with the incorporation of graphic conceptualizations into the prose journal, I realize that other variables may account for this phenomenon, such as more interest in the latter readings, more ease with the social context of the class, etc. Nonetheless, there is a part of me that remains convinced that Dan simply developed, albeit unusually, as a writer by moving beyond the conventional form of writing that was expected in an English class and creating his own.

In that end-of-semester note to me, Dan commented on how "Graphic Journals (Pictionary with a Purpose)" gained significance for him during the semester:

> A graphic symbol for me became: A THING DOING SOMETHING . . . They were good discussion starters when other students saw them . . . Forcing me to explain the graphics helped me articulate what I thought to other people, which I have used since as a teaching tool. . . . I use it all the time now:
>
> listening for the concepts
> choosing the most important ones
> representing them graphically
> articulating my understanding by referring to the graphic.

Exercising control over his own learning through multiple intelligences empowered Dan as a learner. When I first saw the graphics in his journal, I remember thinking, "Hmm, interesting. Let's see where this goes." In terms of story, Dan became, for me, a character whom I observed and whose development I began to follow. Thinking of him as a character made me watch to see "what would happen."

Like a writer whose characters take on a life of their own (as many fiction writers report is one dimension of the heuristic power of fiction writing) and teach the writer, so too did I observe this learner changing as a result of the setting and situation of the class, and so too did I grow in my understanding of learning and learners. What Dan taught me is that, like a character in a short story, he solved his problem through personal growth—from difficulty as a learner relying on one form of intelligence to success as a learner by drawing on multiple forms of intelligence. His growth in this understanding of himself forced my growth as well as I began to "read" his journal drawings as closely as his words. What Dan also taught me is that I must be conscious of multiple ways of learning and I must do something about it in the classroom, such as providing visual ways of representing ideas (spatial intelligence), movement to express ideas (kinesthetic intelligence), social interaction (interpersonal intelligence) to explore ideas, or quiet, reflective time (intrapersonal intelligence) to understand ideas, to name a few.

If I think of my work the way fiction writers think of theirs, then my classroom can become far more interesting as I begin to grapple with the complexity of character growth, productive conflict, setting, resolution, etc. The characters (including ourselves, by the way, since teachers also appear in the setting of the "story") become dynamic and multi-dimensional as they meet challenge and, hopefully, grow. These characters all look for resolution of conflict because that is the essential human quest on which we thrive; without tension we become bored—the story stops being a story, learning stops being learning.

The art of writing short stories lies in creating and heightening this tension for a brief period and then leaving the reader with a resolution. At least part of the art of teaching also lies in creating this effect through staging (or opening oneself to) a conflictive event, the experience of which is that learners strive to end tension, though I'm not one to favor swift resolution of tension in the classroom—because as long as tension continues, learners strive to resolve it. The best teachers in my schooling, those who consciously or unconsciously understood the teaching power of tension, seldom gave me the comfort of completely resolving conflict; they'd end class with yet one more question, one more wondering.

Ways of Thinking about Teaching Writing as Story

The metaphors we take on for our individual acts of teaching must work for us in providing that illumination, that potential understanding of what works and what doesn't. For those who wish to adopt this particular metaphor for teaching writing, they must consider the classroom as they would a short story *in the crafting* by asking at least the following questions:

1. Does the **setting** "work"—e.g., Should rows be eliminated in favor of other configurations and to what desired effect? Should we ask to have three students standing at all times and to what desired effect? What if we as teachers sit in the back of the room to "teach?" In other words, what effect does setting have on the action?

2. Where is the **conflict** and what can we do to create conflicts that affect as many students as possible? How can we plan for multiple conflicts in order to engage as many learners as possible, given all the histories and differences they bring to the classroom? How do we open ourselves to conflicts that arise spontaneously and do something with them for teachable moments? For example, when I plan a discussion of an argumentative reading for class or when we examine an essay written by a former student, I create prereading anticipation guides of various sorts to set up expectations and relationships between the readings and students' lives; these guides set up values conflicts as well as competing hypotheses (for examples of anticipation guides, see *Guiding Readers Through Texts: A Review of Study Guides* and *Content Area Reading).*

3. What **cues** should we provide learners so that they can engage with subject matter inductively, slowly building up suspense and anticipation in the way readers do? For

example, I often start class by putting on the board 5–7 seemingly unrelated terms that by the end of the class will, if all goes as hoped for, make sense in the context of that day's class. For me, this kind of **cue planting** is an essential part of lesson planning.

4. What indications are students giving us that they are **developing** (as characters)? Should we try to further that development? Since we most often cannot predict where that development may lead, should we encourage it even if it seems odd? Most importantly, what do we stand to learn about our students—e.g., That they have "baggage" associated with English classes or with particular aspects of English? That they do not learn the ways we learn? That they have cultural differences that constrain their development *on our terms*? And then what do we do with that learning? In the case of Dan, I learned the limitations of my predominantly linguistic orientation to "English" and that changed my approaches to teaching dramatically.

For me, every class session is a short story, and the entire semester is an anthology of stories, some much better than others. Deliberately building upon conflict, I plan and try to orchestrate each class-as-story—setting up tensions among ideas or, in class, manipulating the setting and events so that the students must encounter conflict, providing degrees of intellectual and emotional safety so that students can feel confidence in stating opinions or solving problems; providing cues (information such as readings, exercises, anomalies) that seek to engage learners; observing and validating growth among the learners; and doing all this in "one sitting." When it all works, life is great. When it fails, I feel like the writer whose manuscript is returned in the mail with, yes, the rejection letter. And, like the writer with rejection letter in hand, I begin to question what went wrong. Was the conflict weak (i.e., unengaging)? Was the setting (e.g., seats in rows) wrong? Were the cues too obscure (i.e., over their heads), or too simple (below their level)? Did the characters grow too little (i.e., not change)? Through this reflection, I revise for the next submission, the next class, hoping to resolve the tension I now face as a character in my own story.

Notes

[1] In his 1983 book, *Frames of Mind*, Gardner identified the first seven intelligences. He has recently added the naturalist intelligence, suggesting that there may be an "existential" intelligence as well. Gardner summarizes these nine intelligences succinctly in the September, 1997 issue of *Educational Leadership*, which I paraphrase here:
-Linguistic intelligence is the capacity to use language to express ideas and to understand others.
-Logical-mathematical intelligence refers to understanding the underlying principles of a causal system such as science, or to manipulating numbers and quantities.
-Spatial intelligence is the ability to represent the spatial world mentally, whether in the arts (sculpture) or the sciences (anatomy).
-Kinesthetic intelligence is the capacity to use one's body to solve problems or create something.
-People with musical intelligence are able to think in music, to hear and produce musical patterns.
-Interpersonal intelligence refers to understanding other people.
-Intrapersonal intelligence means having a profound understanding of oneself.
-Naturalist intelligence is the ability to discriminate among living things and to be sensitive to features of the natural world.
-Existential intelligence refers to one's inclination to ask significant questions about one's existence.

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