

HOSPITALITY IN THE CLASSROOM: THE TEACHING STANCE OF THE WRITERS IN THE SCHOOLS

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Ironically, one of our biggest problems, as writing teachers, is the fact that students must join our classes to work on their writing. Outside the classroom, students have active language lives and even do a surprising amount of writing (Krupa and Tremmel). Inside, that is not always the case. One main reason is that student writers find composition classrooms uncomfortable places to be in. So, a few years ago, when I began doing research on the teaching methods of Writers-in-the-Schools,¹ I was very interested and excited to find writer-teachers who seemed able to overcome this "other worldliness" of the classroom. Time and time again I saw writers walk into organized groupings of students that I recognized as English classes and in a matter of minutes create much different environments.

What happened was that students seemed to unwind, feel more at home, and their willingness, if not ability, to write was greatly enhanced. The more I saw of this, the more I realized that what I was seeing was a case of old-fashioned hospitality that, like Sunday afternoon visits and two parent families, seems to be slipping away from us. These writer-teachers took an open, inviting stance toward their students, their students' language, and the whole teaching and writing process, and the students, for their part, reciprocated by making themselves at home and becoming active participants.

Now, many people would agree that such a stance is a natural and appropriate one to take in a poetic writing class, but that when it comes to composition a much more rigorous approach is called for. I disagree that such discrimination is necessary. The teaching success of Writers-in-the-Schools has made me believe that the value of hospitality is just as important for composition classes as it is for any other.

What is the nature of writers' hospitality? I think it comes down to two basic principles: first, writers respect their students' language, and second, writers offer students broad and flexible audience situations which support their efforts throughout the whole writing process. Just as hospitality is a simple concept, these two principles behind writers' teaching are simple and familiar. Yet, also like hospitality, they are often difficult to put into practice. What I would like to do here is explore each of these principles from both theoretical and practical views, and try to suggest how composition teachers might take advantage of writers' insights.

First, writers respect and try to maintain the connection between their students' language and the writing they do in the classroom. Phillip Lopate, tracing the history of the Teachers & Writers Collaborative, makes the point that this commitment is part of a recent tradition in American poetry we associate with Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley, Gwendolyn Brooks, Gary Snyder, and others. Lopate interprets the esthetic point of view represented by these writers as "a turn toward plainer diction, understatement, anecdote — a recovery of what William Carlos Williams called 'true American speech'" (104). In making this connection, Lopate is not trying to suggest that writers who teach subscribe artistically to this esthetic. His point is that among teaching writers, an emphasis on plain diction acts as a "possible bridge" between poetic language and "street language and the students' everyday vernacular" (104).

In practice, writers start with their students' language and try to get them to see the connection between their speech and poetic language. Barbara Esbensen, in her book *A Celebration of Bees*, makes the point this way:

When talking about poetry with children, I emphasize again and again that the poet wants to use our ordinary everyday language and in new ways; to make that language open new doors and windows for us and to let us

see old familiar things as though we'd never seen them before. (16)

Writers use several methods to help students see this connection. One is simply to let students talk before writing. Another is the class collaboration in which individual students contribute lines to a class poem by speaking them and having the writer-teacher write them down. Another is to have students transcribe their own or someone else's speech and then revise it into poetic form. Bill Zavatsky of Teachers & Writers asks students to take passages from Studs Terkel's *Working* and transform them from prose to poetry just as Terkel transformed speech to writing. Whatever method a writer uses, these or others, the goal is the same: to make students aware of the connection between their spoken language and poetic language and to emphasize that poetic forms grow out of, and are not apart from, the shapes and rhythms of a voice speaking. Here is an excerpt from an interview I had with Robert Dana, one of the first Iowa Writers-in-the-Schools, who connects this esthetic of plain diction with a broader understanding of an American oral tradition:

Then there's one other group of students. Some of them are not very good with English grammar, probably listen to more rock music than they read literature, but who come out of an oral tradition which is very lively. In fact, it's much more lively than they know. Probably if you asked them to write sonnets, they would do very badly. But if you try to get them to tell you what it's like to go around a curve on a motorcycle at a hundred and ten miles an hour, they will find a brilliant phrase for that . . . something kinetic. I suspect that there's more invention of language in a Mississippi River town tavern than there is in a lot of classrooms because with those people, storytelling is an art. You know, some guy in a tavern says, "my mother had the eyes of a pig." That is not the usual sense of one's mother. There's a kind of magic about that. And it calls up a whole world of possibilities. . . . I think that unless kids have this beaten out of them in classrooms, they are aware that it's there to be tapped, and they can recognize it in the work of other poets.

Encouraging students to work from their own language and to write about things that matter to them does not require the unstructured approach that many teachers mistrust. Writ-

ers, who sometimes do like to be unstructured, can be just as successful with structured patterns and assignments that involve formal constraints. Here is an example from Esbensen. This is a piece written by a thirteen-year-old student after looking at some reproductions of old funny papers:

Me and my brother finally get the funnies. I grab Flash to see if he kills the monster and saves the princess. But he's captured by the mad Dr. Zin and is held by a secret force that Dr. Zin invented. Shucks! got to wait till tomorrow to find out, doggonit. (73)

This monologue, a fictional account of reading the funny papers at home, retains many characteristics of spoken language: informal usage, slang, and casual structure. Here, for comparison, is a haiku written by the same student based on the same subject matter:

Way Back When
Wonder what happened
to Flash Gordon and Tarzan
and Sunny Sundays. (Esbensen 74)

This revision is no longer in the form of talk, although it still seems true to the writer's language and experience — real and imagined. The writer has transformed it by adopting the conventions of a poetic form.

Perhaps one piece of wisdom composition teachers might take from this brief example is that formal constraints do not preclude beginning with students' own language. This is true, I believe, for both poetic and transactional forms. Here is what Robert Dana had to say on the subject in the interview I had with him:

It is far more important to give a student exercises that free him to deal with his personal experience, social experience, daily life, because this is the stuff out of which poems are made. . . . One of the values of the form is that it is capable of containing and formulating the experience. It is the experience that validates the form.

At this point one must think of James Britton. In Britton's idea of language functions, the starting point for all discourse is spoken language, which he terms expressive. The first subject matter for writing is experience. And it is the natural melding of the two, expressive language and experience,

he tells us, that give humans insight and control over their lives.

Britton and the Writers-in-the-Schools agree on such an expressive starting point and that the more specialized forms grow out from there. The example of the comic section Haiku suggests only one way writers make this happen. The first piece, while a performance of sorts, is close to the student's speech and is primarily expressive. The haiku, though, has moved along a continuum from expressive toward poetic. As the writing shifts from informal to more formal, the range of experience, for writer as well as reader, shifts accordingly.

This shift from the spoken form works similarly in the opposite direction on the other side of the continuum just as well, moving from expressive to transactional (81).

TRANSACTIONAL————EXPRESSIVE————POETIC

The research paper, for example, instead of being conceived of as an exercise in working with unfamiliar material in an alien tongue, can just as easily become a reconstruction and elaboration of experience, building formally outward from what the student knows and cares about and what he or she has to say about it. One student I was fortunate to have in a composition class began his semester's work by writing personal accounts of growing up in Sioux County in Northwest Iowa. He wrote expressively of such things as taking his motorcycle out for the first time in the spring and going downtown for coffee at the local cafe. The more of this writing he did, the more interested he became in the lives and values of the people that made up his heritage. He ended the semester with an incredible account — a research paper and much more — of the settlement, history, and current character of the Dutch culture that forms the basis for life in that part of Iowa.

Two composition teachers who offer us approaches to the revision of expressive into transactional forms are Peter Elbow and Gene Krupa. Elbow's free writings encourage writers to begin by putting their own experience, understanding, and feelings into their own language. Once this initial drafting is complete and the writer has gained a foothold, then the process of forming and revising take place — whether towards persuasion, research, or some other end.² Krupa develops a similar pattern, though in a much different way, in *Situational Writing*, which is made up of interwoven sequences of writing assignments that begin with expressive, experi-

ence-centered writing, and progress systematically, through explanation and persuasion. Unlike Elbow's informal approach, Krupa's book is very precisely structured.

The second principle underlying the Writers-in-the-Schools' hospitality requires that teachers have a finely developed sense of audience. Writers play a variety of audience roles in order to meet students' needs at particular points in their development and at different occasions in the writing process. Writers do not always "play teacher" in the traditional sense. Instead, writers tend to prefer more informal working relationships with their students. Writers often share their own work with students as well as their thoughts and feelings, and they encourage their students to reciprocate.

Phil Hey's work is outstanding in this regard and is representative of many writers. Phil's first object is to gain his students' interest and trust. He does this by reading to them from his own work and the work of other poets. In the process he talks to them directly about himself, his life, and his work. He then gives them a chance to reciprocate by sharing their work with him. He rewards their trust by showing a serious interest in their work and by giving them an opportunity for success. The manner in which he worked with one junior high student's poem is particularly interesting. Here is the poem:

Water skiing is an excitement
of gliding untroubled through the splitting
water. Skiing has the
thrill of taking a spill
at your will. Skiing makes
your face damp and your muscles
cramp. But it's quite a big
fright when you take a big wipe.

Phil read this to the class, giving it a better reading than anyone would have thought possible. Then he acted as first audience by praising the opening lines with unrestrained enthusiasm. "Skiing is an excitement of gliding untroubled through the splitting water." He said absolutely nothing about the rest of the poem. Later on, though, in working with other poems, he praised the way rhyming was "not forced" and he talked with the students about how he and other writers try to use rhyme. In the course of the discussion he was careful to inquire after and acknowledge his students' views. What he tried to do was enter into a dialogue with them, one writer speaking to others about a problem of craft, while he let his

initial role of encourager modulate into the role of colleague. The talk in the classroom was of revision, and was not unlike talk among peers — a writer's workshop in other words.

Phil's teaching, in addition to illustrating this evolving pattern in the writer's audience role, points to another characteristic of the way writers teach. In the writer's classroom, though the writer may be the first, he or she is never the last audience. If there is one thing that Writers-in-the-Schools agree on 100%, it is that students benefit from sharing their work with their classmates. This sharing may take one of many different forms that are familiar to composition teachers. One favorite, which I might mention in passing, is reading aloud, an activity which emphasizes the oral connections of written language.

Indeed, the use of peer audiences may be at the center of the writer's teaching. Even if a teacher could, why would he or she want to keep students from reading each others' writing? Such a stance toward sharing between students — formally and informally — creates a unity, a sense of community that I found highly valued by writers. Students who read each other's work pull together. Even if they don't particularly like each other, they do get to know each other in a way classmates rarely get the chance to. And it goes without saying that they learn from each other as well.

Nor do writers' ideas about audience stop there. Wherever writers go they leave behind them trails of posters, bulletin boards, dittoed sheets, and literary journals. Writers give their students opportunities to publish, and there is no real need, I would think, to elaborate on the positive effects publishing has on writers.

These approaches, taken together, constitute a natural audience sequence moving from a single supportive individual through publication. One way to understand that sequence is to turn again to Britton and his breakdown of audience categories. Beyond the self as audience, Britton sees three main audience categories: "teacher as audience," "wider audience," and "writer to his public." The teacher category includes "child to trusted adult," and "pupil to teacher in a particular relationship." The wider audience category includes the peer audience (66). Clearly, these categories, along with publication, represent the roles and situations adopted by Writers-in-the-Schools. Both the writers and Britton see the need, first of all, for students to be exposed to a

supportive, familiar audience and then to move from that foundation to wider audiences and publication.

It is at this point where the ideas of Britton and the writers touch closely on recent research in the composing process being conducted by Donald Graves, Nancy Sommers, Mimi Schwartz, and others. Although a full examination of such connections is the subject of another paper, these researchers stress the need for a congenial environment and enlightened audience response for students to make gains in their ability and willingness to engage in writing and revising tasks. What the Writers-in-the-Schools, along with the researchers, are telling us is that without a comfortable place to write in and an audience that will fulfill a range of needs and purposes — without some hospitality, in other words — there may be little chance for students to develop a full sense of the writing process.

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NOTES

¹In the mid-1960's a series of meetings was held in which educators, government officials, and writers discussed language instruction and the teaching of writing in the schools. These meetings gave rise to the idea that writers are the ones most qualified to teach writing and that a program should be established to get poets and fiction writers into the schools. Actually two programs resulted from this decision. One was the Teachers & Writers Collaborative in New York City, an independent organization that is still flourishing today. The other was the Writers-in-the-Schools Program, established under the stewardship of the National Endowment for the Arts and State Arts Councils. Today the Writers-in-the-Schools Program is part of the National Endowment's Artists-in-Education-Program that sponsors school residencies for actors, dancers, graphic artists, folk artists, and musicians as well as writers.

²See, for instance, Peter Elbow.

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