

LIVING WITH A WRITER: LESSONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

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Living with and observing a writer at work is an experience I wish all students, teachers, and teacher educators could have. Since our sophomore year in college, I have watched, questioned, taken notes on, and discussed writing with my husband, Joseph McNair, a fiction writer, and I have learned a number of lessons about the teaching of writing from living with him which might benefit others in the profession.

FIRST: WE CANNOT ALL JANE AUSTEN BE—NOR SHOULD WE WANT TO BE

Most importantly, I have learned that not all my students will be “writers.” They can develop skill in writing effectively and can appreciate the value of working to improve their written communication. But, very few of my students will be, like Joe is, a writer—a person who *defines* him or herself as someone who engages in the act of putting pen to paper (or words onto the computer monitor), a person who, if not able to write or denied the opportunity to do so, wilts and becomes heartsick, a person who needs to write in order to feel alive, a person who is compelled to write and who is morally committed to the act of writing. Joe and his friends who are poets and dramatists and novelists need to write the way the rest of us need to breathe, and I doubt very much that my students will be writers in the sense of the word I have just described. We and our students can improve as writers, as people who use writing effectively to order our worlds

and to communicate with others; however, we need not all define ourselves as writers.

On the other hand, I am reminded of the results of the assignments titled "Self as Writer" completed by my students in my "Writing as Thinking" class. Invariably, after keeping track of how, when, where, and why they wrote and summarizing their development as writers, the students made statements like "I AM a writer." The difference is, perhaps, one of definition. One can recognize the power of writing and its place in one's life without defining the need to write as the *primary* need in one's life.

Implications: Recognizing this difference has made it possible for me to focus, with students, on opportunities to use writing to communicate and to improve abilities without feeling as though every writer must be a Jane Austen or Mark Twain.

SECOND, WE DO ALL NEED RESPONDERS WHO READ FROM THE HEART AS WELL AS THE HEAD

But even writers like Joe do need a support structure, and I have gained some insight into how to be more effective as a responder to writing from years of trying to react to his pieces and of discussing with him the kinds of response he has found most helpful from editors and teachers. The concept of writing teacher as coach and fellow writer is the one which Joe finds most valid. Although his professor for senior level creative writing workshops was a poet, not a fiction writer, Joe appreciated the insights the teacher could provide as a working author, and he accepted the assignments and activities required because the teacher could talk about how these activities could help him with revision or editing or gathering ideas. Also, the professor managed to sustain the energy and interest of the class through the kinds of feedback he gave. He asked questions: "What if the character had done X instead of Y?" "Why did you choose the first person point of view?" "How else could this have ended?" "Where are you going with this piece next?"

And, the teacher acted as cheerleader. Joe was working on a novel while most of his peers wrote poems; obviously, they tended to finish, or at least produce completed drafts, more readily than Joe. He hit walls; he could not figure out where the plot was taking him, could not maintain a consistent voice, could not always manage an entire stable of characters. His professor helped

him set manageable goals, required small chunks of work rather than demanding a completed draft by the end of course. Joe did finish that piece; were he to attempt the same novel at this point in his development as a writer, he could probably handle certain technical aspects more adeptly, but the point is that he did finish it, and as a result felt he could call himself a novelist. His professor seemed to recognize his need, at that time, to work through an entire draft of a longer work in order to develop a sense of “yes, I can.”

Implications: Thus, as a teacher, I try to remember that writers need responders who attempt to “believe” in a piece of writing—readers who can communicate that they WANT to know what the writer has to say and who can ask questions and make responses useful to the writer in figuring out how to make that message clearer. I focus in conferencing with students on drawing out, with their help, what it is they are trying to say in a given piece of writing, operating on the assumption that they do, in fact, have something to say. I use Elbow’s strategies of a) summarizing what it is I think a piece is about and how it “works” or flows from point to point, b) “pointing,” telling students what words, phrases, or ideas struck me most as I read that I felt contributed to the overall effect of the piece, and c) “telling,” letting students know what it is I still want to know about, how what they have already written intrigues me and makes me want more information or detail.

THIRD, WE NEED NOT ALWAYS FINISH WHAT WE START

On the other hand, I have learned that intelligent writers do not always force themselves to finish a piece. We have three file cabinets filled with rough drafts, tiny pieces of stories, vignettes, descriptive paragraphs—filled with material that has never—and will never—be seen by eyes other than Joe’s. He used to devote a great deal of energy to stories that just did not want to be written at a particular point in time; now, he has learned to recognize and accept such messages from his work, and he will drop a piece that simply fails to move along or to reach a satisfactory conclusion. Actually, very few of his stories are ever “finished.” Some are sent out to literary magazines, but usually, if they are returned, he once more begins to tinker with them. From observing Joe

in action, I have learned the truth of the poet's statement, "A poem is never finished; it is merely abandoned."

Implications: When working with my students, then, I try to keep in mind that writing often does find its own form, and writers usually find their own paths in heading towards a goal. As teachers we need to create assignments that offer students enough structure to allow them to find their own way without limiting or putting roadblocks in their paths. I try to provide numerous options within any given assignment both in terms of content and format of genre, and I hesitate now to insist on a specific number of drafts for a given piece because some students take three or four attempts to figure out where they are going, while others work out problems in their heads and produce a final draft on the second try.

FOURTH, REVISING MEANS "RE-VISIONING," NOT EDITING

From Joe, too, I have learned the distinction between revision and editing. The novel for adolescents on which he is currently working has been through numerous drafts. Characters are pencilled in and erased out. The personality of the protagonist for a long time remained nebulous and shifting; like quicksand, she was difficult to shape. The point of view has changed, and I think that even now the plot events remain somewhat fuzzy. I lost track of the number of rewrites of the first five chapters after Joe had gone through seven. This process of experimenting with form, point of view, sequence of events, and relationships is true re-vision, true re-seeing of the possibilities inherent in a piece of writing. It may be significant, too, that at this stage in his writing, Joe seldom talks about the work; what I know about young adult novel #2 is limited to inferences gleaned from cryptic remarks heard through the office door and from scowls on his face at the dinner table. The re-visioning process, for Joe anyway, is a private one. When he has a draft ready to go public, then my services are required. I act as responder, making comments that entail revision when I say, "HOW old is she? I don't think a fourteen year old would act/feel this way." When I try to help students truly re-see a piece of writing, I try, therefore, to offer them suggestions for "playing around" with a piece, try to refrain from forcing my eyes onto their papers, and try to provide them lots of time for the tinkering they need to do.

Joe would like me to look for problems of grammar, usage, and mechanics when he first gives me a piece to read. I say “would like me to” because I am a poor editor, especially in the spelling department. Additionally, I have learned that it is very difficult, practically impossible, to read a piece “cold” and make both revising and editing comments.

Implications: As a reader in general, I try to become involved in the content; in the case of a novel, I allow myself to enter the world of the characters, and thus I do not always notice lack of parallelism or inappropriate tense shifts. To serve as editor, I really need to read again—but because of the lack of time available for reading, responding to, and ultimately grading student papers, I seldom am able to do so for writers in my classes. Thus, I have become aware of the need to help students serve as responders for each other *before* the editing stage of writing. It is only when a writer says a piece is finished and ready to go public that an editor needs to be consulted. So, I need to let students—and their parents—know that I may not “catch” every “mistake” in every paper.

FIFTH, WE NEED NOT ALWAYS REQUIRE MR. WARRINER’S EXERCISES

In addition, watching Joe at work has reinforced for me the general findings of research which indicates that a traditional, workbook approach to the teaching of grammar concepts usually does not lead to improvement in writing. Invariably when I say in the margin, “Don’t use the passive tense!” Joe replies with, “What’s that mean?” I cite a rule for using the semi-colon using terms like “independent clause” and Joe says, “Oh???” I say, “You need to use the past perfect tense in this sentence” and a mystified expression appears on Joe’s face.

Actually, there are very few “mistakes” in his writing, and, if he is concerned about whether or not he needs a comma in a certain situation, he is familiar enough with the various language handbooks we keep lying about to use them as a reference. How did he learn to write so proficiently? Again, as the research would suggest, his constant reading, throughout his life, has helped him appreciate the variety of ways in which sentences can be structured and has enabled him to determine which option best suits the effect he is trying to create or message he is trying to deliver.

When the occasional misplaced modifier appears, all I need to do, generally, is to say, “Do you really mean that the man is flying?” He looks at the sentence, realizes the error, and corrects it. Completing an entire Warriner’s exercise on misplaced modifiers would not do the trick. Thus I remain firmly convinced that such activities are not the best use of my students’ time. What they need is someone to ask the questions or to point out that a sentence is confusing to a reader because of its lack of punctuation or required element.

Joe went through honors English classes in high school and then graduated from a prestigious university as an English major—and yet he can no more define the “subject” or the “predicate” of a sentence than can our cat. Nor, have I discovered, does he need to be able to do so. What he can do is articulate, without recourse to technical terms, what seems to be missing from a sentence or what is confusing about its syntax. This sensitivity is a result of playing with the language and constantly reading—not of trying to work through the exercises in a grammar text. Joe also says that his skill in manipulating language has grown as a result of practice in responding to and editing others’ work; he has developed, through such practice, a better eye and ear for sentences that do and do not work, and he now participates in a writers’ group primarily to sharpen that ability to see and hear language.

Implications: How does this realization affect what I do as a teacher? I try to keep in mind that writers may have problems with certain aspects of standard English, problems with aspects of grammar, mechanics, or usage. But inundating them with terminology to be memorized and exercises to be completed for their own sake may frustrate more than assist the struggling writer. Conferencing and responding as a reader who has some insight into how sentences should and can work helps the writer in a more tangible way, as does helping the writer become adept at using resources and handbooks to solve problems. Again, I try to provide them with time to write and write some more, time spent developing fluency and a sense of automaticity with language in the process. And, I provide many opportunities for students to respond to each others’ work (and to the work of published authors) in order to help them appreciate, as readers, the ways in which language must be used in order to create meaning—a skill they eventually begin to transfer into the reading of their own writing.

SIXTH, ENGLISH TEACHERS SHOULD HAVE THE TOOLS OF THEIR TRADE AT THEIR COMMAND

Let me digress here for a moment. I am NOT saying that pre and inservice English teachers need not have the vocabulary and understanding of traditional grammar or of more modern approaches at their disposal. Those concepts, to a certain extent, are the tools of our trade. When I take my car to a mechanic, I am concerned if he or she cannot articulate, using the appropriate terminology, what is wrong and what needs to be done to fix the machine. However, I want that mechanic to be able to explain the problem and solution to me in terms I can understand, and, if possible, want to be shown the hole in the muffler or the broken fan belt as visual reinforcement. As English teachers, I do believe that we should be able to diagnose and prescribe in similar fashion; however, we need to be able to translate from English-teacherese into language the writer can understand why what is written does not work, and then we need to be able to ask the appropriate questions that will allow the writer to “fix” the piece.

SEVENTH, WE DO NEED TO READ, READ, READ— IN A VARIETY OF AUDIENCES

The importance of reading constantly as a way to develop a sensitivity to language and how it can be manipulated has been discussed by many researchers and theorists such as Frank Smith and the Goodmans. From Joe, I have also learned how important reading is to the understanding of the craftsmanship involved in various genres. During the summer and fall of 1988, Joe participated in a unique MFA program, a course of study designed to provide aspiring fiction writers and poets with a semi-structured curriculum and much individual response by published professionals. After an intensive ten-day workshop on campus, consisting of readings, individual conferences, and classes on certain elements of craft, each student goes home and writes and writes, and reads, and reads, and writes some more, corresponding every three weeks with the assigned tutor. Joe and his tutor identified a writing problem on which he wanted to work, namely that of sustaining tension and using humor to carry along a piece of writing. Based on that assessment, the tutor designed a reading list of works to be analyzed for ways that other writers create tension and use humor. Joe read and critiqued three books from this standpoint

every three weeks during the semester, and also worked on drafting and revising his own work. By mid-October, he was depressed. Yes, he was enjoying the reading, and yes, he was doing very well, academically speaking, in analyzing the writers' craft. However, Joe has written, and wants to continue to write, for adolescents. He was finding the novels and short stories he was reading both more and less sophisticated than was helpful to him in writing novels for teenagers. What Gustav Flaubert or William Trevor could do when writing for adults might be too cognitively (and/or emotionally) demanding for younger readers, or these writers might have the luxury of space and time unavailable to someone writing for adolescents.

Implications: Joe is a fiction writer, yet he found it difficult to transfer from writing fiction for one audience to writing for another, and he found it necessary to read in the appropriate genre to learn about how to write for his chosen audience. How much more difficult it is for public school students to take what they learn about writing descriptive paragraphs and transfer those skills to the writing of lab reports or history research papers! What I have learned, therefore, is that I need to help students develop some metacognitive skills about their writing process. I need to help them articulate the demands of writing in a specific genre, for a specific audience, and then I need to help them apply what they already know to that new task. For instance, if students have been practicing observation skills as they generate detail to use in descriptive paragraphs, I ask them how these same skills are useful in writing lab reports. We then may make a Venn diagram of the similarities and differences between descriptive paragraphs and lab reports, and then, having made explicit for the students ways in which skills can transfer, they tackle writing a lab report using those skills they have previously practiced in a different context. Some of the research on the transference of thinking skills as outlined in Costa's *Developing Minds* has helped me on this point, as has some of the work being done by Walvoord and others on the nature of discourse communities.

The point of Joe's experience seems to be that as teachers, we need to make certain of the appropriateness of the models we provide our students. In many cases, allowing them to read and critique excellent student pieces, as opposed to professional examples, may provide more insight and more encouragement to student writers. Also, we need, at times, to stretch our students

by encouraging them, through the provision of structured opportunities, to play across Moffett's entire "spectrum of discourse" so that they do begin to see how the demands of a genre must be juggled while trying to use that genre to convey a particular message. Note, too, that while reading is a valuable activity in which good writers engage, the insights about the craft of writing Joe derives from reading occur because he discusses that reading with a tutor, with a fellow writer, or with another practiced, skilled responder. Thus I now try very hard to combine the teaching of literature with the teaching of writing, try to help students make the connection between what they read and what they write not just from the standpoint of content but of craft.

EIGHTH, WE ARE ALL DIFFERENT AS WRITERS; THERE IS NOT ONE PROCESS BUT MANY

I mentioned earlier that Joe seldom talks about a work in progress. On those rare occasions that he does, I used to shower him with suggestions I had tried with students, suggestions for helping him "write to learn." I would illustrate graphic organizers, talk about brainstorming, tell him to just write through to the end in order to discover what the novel wanted to be about. However, having worked with enough students in courses on teaching composition and having done enough observing in writing classrooms, I now understand why my well-meant suggestions fell on deaf ears. Joe as writer both violates and confirms what I have learned about the writing process from reading Macrorie, Moffett, Emig, Perl and others. His writing IS recursive; he must often travel backwards in order to go forwards with a piece. But, techniques like freewriting or clustering do not work for him. Not for him Kirby and Liner's adage, "You have to get it down before you get it right." Perhaps because he is now a more experienced writer, Joe tends not to put words on the paper (or computer screen) until he is sure about them. He does use the delete key as he tries to find the word with the right connotation or to find the appropriate order for words in a sentence, but he will not go on to the next word, sentence, or paragraph until the one on which he is working is satisfactory. I am the opposite and will write and write and write, discovering in the process what I want to say and then going back to the beginning to tighten, focus, and guide the writing to that end. He will take a break, go swimming, rotate

the tires on the car, or fix the humidifier on the furnace, if he is stuck—but he does not, ever, “write to learn.”

Implications: The message for me as teacher is that I can not require or impose a single approach to generating a piece of writing or to developing it. I can not even impose the idea of “writing to learn.” Writers may need a break from a piece; they may need to put a piece away and not finish it. The intelligent writer recognizes when a piece just does not want to go anywhere. And, “invention” as a concept needs to be broadened to include time for Elbow’s “cooking and growing” processes. Not every student needs to do a web, make an outline, do a free write; some need to go off for a walk, to shoot baskets, to do their algebra homework instead.

NINTH, WRITERS DO NEED A WRITING COMMUNITY

Although he does not often discover what he means by writing, Joe will acknowledge that a reader may find something in his work which he had not consciously planned. He is then willing to revise either to make more clear his own vision of the story and its characters or to allow more readily for the reader’s response. What I am trying to say through all this description of Joe’s writing process is that a) the process of writing is very individualistic and good writers find their own ways of going about writing, and b) again, even good writers need, at some point, the response of a caring, reasonably articulate reader. Joe’s first novel for adolescents, *Commander Coatrack Returns*, appeared on the market in April of 1989, and he eagerly—albeit nervously—awaited the response of a real audience to the fruits of a year’s worth of work. He was thrilled to see, finally, the cover design, to recognize through studying it how his words had been interpreted by a visually-oriented reader. Now, as he conducts workshops with middle school students, he says he learns from them a great deal about how his words act to create their response—lessons he uses as he continues to write for this audience.

Several times a year Joe spends an hour or so on the phone with one of several fellow writers. They discuss agents, their frustrations with their current efforts, their responses to current fiction and even movies and their analyses of how these responses were consciously or unconsciously created by the authors and directors.

Implications: Students, too, need time to talk to each other about what they are trying to do; they need to participate in writing groups at all stages of their writing process. Also, they need, to repeat myself, time to talk about others' craft, to analyze how others use words to create images and mood—and then time to reflect on their own writing in light of what they learn from their reading.

TENTH, WRITERS DO NEED TO “GO PUBLIC” SOMETIMES

Although it has been said many times, I would repeat that a writer needs to have a piece published and read by a real audience. For one thing, watching Joe deal with his first adolescent novel as it moved from idea in his head to draft on paper, to agent, to editor, who first suggested revisions, to copy editor, who suggested editorial changes, to proofing of the galleys, to the stage of production copy, and soon, to hardback book available in libraries and bookstores has emphasized the nature of the writing process as it is usually outlined—prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, publishing—all with recursive elements. Secondly, the sense of accomplishment that comes from having something ready for a real audience is something even student writers can experience. Experiencing the sense of having written something that may have an impact is the best incentive for a writer to continue to write and hone the skills involved in the art and craft of writing.

Implications: I hope that teachers will continue to provide opportunities for their students to share, at least occasionally, in that sense of delight publication brings. We need to learn about all the places students can publish, such as journals of student writing like *Merlyn's Pen*, and we need to devise opportunities within our classrooms and our schools for students to publish. We need to have students write to parents, administrators, school board members, younger students, older students. We need to have them attempt to write letters to the editor of the local paper, to write books for the school library both individually and collectively, and to write material for the local historical society or other “public” places.

ELEVENTH, LEARNING ABOUT THE WRITING PROCESS IS ITSELF AN ONGOING PROCESS, AND WE CAN LEARN FROM OUR OWN EFFORTS AS WRITERS HOW TO HELP OUR STUDENTS

It has taken the better part of twelve years for me to articulate all that I have learned—and continue to learn—from watching Joe at work. As I reflect on what I have written here, I find some additional lessons embedded in pieces of other lessons. Not only is learning about the writing process a life-long process, learning to write is as well. Joe says that once he feels he has mastered a certain aspect of his profession, he finds another problem to tackle, especially since any given piece has its own demands. That statement leads to another “lesson,” a comforting one for me as a teacher of writing—writing can be taught and it can be learned. From analyzing how Joe has come to improve as a writer over the years, I realize I have learned from him strategies for coaching, for using peer response groups, for providing many opportunities to write in a variety of genres to a variety of audiences, and so forth, which do help my students improve. And, I realize, too, that while I am not a writer to the same extent that Joe is, I do, in fact write—and I am probably a better teacher of writing because I have gained some of his insight about the nature of writing as a discipline.

Implications: Looking at the world of the working writer, we teachers of writing need to consider how writers function before we impose artificial assignments and activities on our students. A friend of Joe’s called long-distance from Florida last year, frustrated with the freshman composition class he was teaching at a community college to earn needed money to pursue his chosen profession of poet. He said, “Lois, you’re supposed to know about this teaching stuff. I gave them the topic and forty minutes to write *IN CLASS* and yet the results were disorganized and the papers full of mistakes. What’s wrong?” I replied with one question: “Tom, what do you do, what happens, when you’re trying to write a poem?” There was a moment of silence, and then he said, “Oh—I get it!” And, he hung up the phone.

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