

Part I



Writing Group One: *Creating Our Professional Identities*



Writing Monster/Writing Mentor: Reading and Learning from Students' Stories of Writing

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In the university where I teach undergraduate students majoring in secondary English education, one required course is Principles of Teaching Writing. The purpose of the course is to prepare preservice teachers to be effective composition instructors at whatever secondary-school grade level they work. To reach that goal, the students and I explore developments in theory and pedagogy, and we consider the diverse backgrounds and needs of learners. We also explore ways to bring various print and nonprint texts into the classroom. We search for meaningful ways to integrate technology into a writing program, and, because we can't teach something we don't know or practice, we write. I allow students freedom of choice on a number of texts they write, but the Writing Journey is an assigned piece in which students trace their development as writers from their earliest memories to the writers they are when they begin the essay.

Originally, I included the Writing Journey in the course as a text through which students might consider themselves as writers and articulate how school experiences molded them into the writers they had become, both of which the exercise allows. But the richness of the students' tales and my cumulative reflections on the journeys have intensified the available options possible for this assignment. One unexpected but compelling outcome of the writing is that the students provide a window into their hearts when they tell their stories. As my students articulate the significance of writing in their lives, I'm privileged to hear their stories and thus learn about them in ways only writing allows. I hear about the first grader who successfully wrote his name after many failed attempts. I experience the pride of the student who won the writing contest in seventh grade, an especially poignant moment because the student's parents were locked in a divorce battle and writing was the only safe place during the evening hours. I share the pain of the young woman who suffers from an eating disorder but finds solace in writing about the anguish of the disease. And I discover in reading and learning the inner thoughts behind the printed names on the class roll that the

student stories can effectively direct me when I make suggestions and guide individuals toward the teachers they will become.

But these discoveries were not clarified after reading just one set of Writing Journeys. After several semesters of reading, I found myself nodding when I heard another student tell me that writing was a way to define self, and I was no longer surprised when students pointed to the single teacher of writing who made a difference in their writing lives. However, when it was time to write with my group for this book project, and when I realized I wanted to write about discoveries I had made in these student narratives, I had no copies of Writing Journeys to use as data. Rather than give up on the topic, I e-mailed past classes requesting a copy of their Writing Journeys and explained that I wanted to reread them and then use my findings in a piece of writing. They kindly sent copies, but to extend my research, I also went to colleagues who were teaching Principles of Teaching Writing and asked if their students might share their Writing Journeys with me. Many of those students shared their texts with me, and in their stories, I found patterns that exactly mirrored my students'.

These Writing Journeys provided a way to know student writers, but additionally they have become a tool that informs my practice and ultimately my students' practice. After reading the writing stories over several semesters, and after re-reading a broad sample in preparation for this writing task, I have discovered patterns that offer insight into the importance of the teacher in the literacy journey—potentially informing writing practice—my students' and my own. In studying students' writing journeys, I've found several elements that enrich the definition of my role as a teacher of teachers. For some students, writing is a way to express thought—it's a way to define what's inside; it's a pathway in the process of self-definition; Kirby and Liner call this bringing out what's inside, and this kind of writing often occurs outside the classroom setting. As a writer, I've experienced that self-defining moment, but reflecting upon the significance of writing as a means for my students to express thought pointed out my neglect of this critical element in guiding future writing teachers. In the class, my focus has been on teaching writing as a process, including some discussion on the outlet writing provides, but not with a well-articulated path by which the discovery of self through writing can occur. My students and I focused on the day-to-day expectations of writing instruction: grammar can be taught within the context of authentic writing, and class time must be provided so students have time to create texts. The students and I talked about the power of writing to assist the author to express thought, but the discussion was in passing and did not dwell on the significance of the writing act as an integral part in the process of self-discovery and self-definition.

As often happens when we take time to listen to our students, I learned from them; through their Writing Journeys, my students taught me that they need time and support as they write from their heart, but they also taught me that the teacher is critically important in the development of the writer.

Student Voices

Although not part of the class objectives, the writing journeys revealed the significance of the writing act as a vehicle for self-definition and discovery. Laura, one of the students who articulates the way writing allowed her to discover self, says in her journey that, “Much of what I write seems to be from a deep place in my heart, and I am always afraid that people will think it is stupid or worthless. So, I keep everything to myself for now. It is enough of a consolation for me that I have it written down, but I am not ready to share that with anyone quite yet.” When I read Laura’s description of writing’s significance in capturing her inner self, I was surprised. She is a student I thought I knew I well; she’s outgoing and talks easily in and out of class. She appears confident and she seems to share her thoughts and questions easily, but she explains that some of who she is remains hidden from the world. She needs writing to interact with that self, but that person, defined through writing, is private, not part of the public world, including school and school writing.

Another student, Kari, says that when she began writing poetry, “Sometimes the words on the paper made sense to the outside reader, [but] some of the words only made sense to me. But what mattered most at that time was that it was mine all mine, and no one could take that away from me.” Like Laura, Kari writes for herself and does not connect the writing that defines and reflects self with school writing. Both demonstrate the importance of the written word as a means to represent inner thought, but each uses her writer self as audience and intuits that a school audience could strip away the personal definitive nature of the writing act.

And yet, Laura, who talked about writing as a means to private self discovery, extends the idea of self discovery when discussing her journal. Although most of her personal writing was for private introspection, Laura says that when she was 12, she and her mother began a shared journal that allowed them to exchange thoughts and feelings. “[T]his journal was the buffer that we both used to record the thoughts and the statements we couldn’t quite put into words.” For this student, like Kari, writing provided a way to place the interior conversation on paper, but unlike Kari, Laura shares portions of her personal writing with a limited audience.

I discovered, after reflecting on students' writing journeys, that beyond the need to define self and to make initial connections to others, writing provides writers with a way to escape from and come to terms with difficult day-to-day realities. For Lana, who "wrote herself through the grief process" after her brother's death, the act of writing provided a way to distance herself from the harsh reality of loss while gaining control of life's situations because "for a few moments [her] opinion mattered."

Kari wrote for herself and used writing as a means to "escape from [a] life that I was forced to endure day in and day out. I could escape deep inside myself to a place even those closest to me would never know existed." Another student, Martin, confronted his mother's devastating illness through writing, but his personal writing was done in school. "I needed to release what I felt, . . . [and] in my stories, nobody was ever abandoned or hurt. Little boys and girls did not have shattered homes and a mother who talked to imaginary friends and wrote scary letters from God knows where." Rather, he goes on to say, life's hurts could be soothed because "writing was an aspirin for the ache of life; . . . [it] became my firewall."

Certainly, not all students who describe their writing journey are so passionate about the role of writing in their lives, but for some, writing provides a way to make sense of and deal with life's difficulties. In reflecting on these students' stories, I found the significance of writing and a desire for time to write, both in and out of school, but curiously, I never talked to my students about my discoveries. As I look back, I suspect I had not fully articulated the importance of writing for self with support from the teacher; but as I continued reading and reflecting on writing journeys, a striking discovery was that almost all the students focused on an individual teacher who made a difference in how they perceived writing and themselves as writers. Rarely did students tell of the cumulative effects of writing teachers. Jana's freshman English teacher, for example, had the students read classic literature, but "the most shocking of all was that we wrote everyday, day in and day out. We did peer readings, small group discussions and individual conferences. For a young person who loved to...write, it was manna from heaven." Jana further says that the emphasis on time for writing allowed her to pursue writing when other English classes failed to do so, and she praises her teacher for providing direction in and time for writing.

Laura echoes the desire for writing instruction but goes on to say that the teacher who did not "water down anything" provided the environment for her to "realize the [importance] of [the writing] struggle." Nancy says that "enthusiastic high school teach[ing] significantly enhanced my love of [writing]," and Mari Anne says that her writing was inspired by a teacher

who “awaken[ed] in [students] a passion for writing.” These are encouraging words for those who teach writing because each of these writers was inspired by a teacher who provided time and support for students training as writers.

As would be expected, just as individual teachers engage student writers, they also discourage them. Linda makes this point clear when she says, “One negative comment from a teacher can overshadow dozens of positive comments.” Another student, Jana, reiterates this point when she describes her experience in an advanced poetry writing class that her friends urged her to take because the teacher, they promised, was outstanding. Jana, who writes for herself and had one teacher who ignited her desire to write, explains her poetry writing classroom experience.

I walked into class that first day, excitement driving my feet through the hallways, . . . bringing me to class thirty-minutes early. SHE was already there. After a moment she demanded, “Show me your portfolio of poetry,” and began skimming through it.

“This one,” she proclaimed.

“Yes,” I sighed. “That is the best work I have ever done.”

“May I share it with the class?”

“Yes, of course.”

I could feel wings of joy and anticipation beating at my heart. Pride filled my thoughts, and I began dreaming of what she might say about my work. After covering the preliminaries and giving us time to write, [the professor] reached for my poem and began to read.

“This,” she began, reaching into her pocket, “is a piece of crap. If you plan to write like this, Jana, I want you to get out of my class. You’re not worth my time.” I sat, horrified, as she struck the flint on her Bic lighter, setting my poem aflame, unceremoniously dumping my dreams into a gray metal trash can.

Fortunately, this harsh treatment did not occur during high school, for if it had, this student says she might never have returned to her writing, but because Jana is strong, she has continued writing, although she says that for a time, “I never wrote another poem.” As the pain of the incident faded, Jana decided to return to school, this time to train to be a teacher, and, she says,

a strange thing has happened. . . . I feel free to . . . write poetry, and share my writing again, including poetry. It’s exciting and daring to pull out [old books], dust them off, and sink into a deep chair and remember why I have always loved to read

and write, why I have always wanted to teach. Reading and writing are the foundations of my spiritual home, and I, at last, have found my way back.

A teacher caused Jana to abandon writing for a season, but she is a writer, and she returned to writing. Jana's teacher caused no lasting damage, but she might have.

Martin, who wrote about his mother's illness, had a teacher who gave life to writing. He says, "middle school provided praise for my writing. I developed a voice that was resonant with pain yet unafraid to move forward. My teacher saw potential in me...and taught me as if I were her only student." Martin ends his writing journey by reflecting on how writing, inspired and supported by a special teacher, allowed him to find himself as an adult.

I was in an airport when the urge to write hit with such a force it took my breath away. The simple action of writing words and creating the dialogue with myself brought me back to myself. Writing has shown me the path on which to navigate my soul. It has provided me with a window to this world, a world I make better, I believe, because I write.

Connection to Reflection

In reflecting on these writing journeys, I've come to realize the significance of the writing act in defining lives. It acts as a vehicle for exploration of personal experience through internal analysis (Elbow), and it provides a way to regain some sense of control in a confusing world. I've also come to understand the significance of the teacher in the writing experience—often only one teacher rather than what I assumed would be the cumulative significance of many teachers.

Yet, while reviewing these journals as I talked with members of my writing group, I have also learned that neither reflection nor discoveries that result from reflection guarantee changed practice. And, I also realized, but only after reflecting with my group, that my process of teaching self-discovery mirrors my students' personal self-discovery. When we have support and guidance from an informed reader—the teacher in the case of my students, the informed writing group in the case of the practicing teacher we are open to discover what we might never see if left to navigate our writing process privately.

In graduate school I took a semester course on reflective practice, and I wholeheartedly embraced the concept and now guide my students to reflect on their developing practice. Methods students are required to examine

and rebuild pedagogical choices based on discoveries made after analyzing and rethinking implemented units of instruction; but as I consider the reflective process I set up for them, I realize they work in teams, and they are accountable to each other and to me for reconsidering practice—a strategy I selected because I thought their reflective process would be more meaningful if they talked about and shared experiences. In contrast, when reflecting on the reality of my teaching process in conjunction with the writing group I worked with during the development of this chapter, I discovered that when I consider my day-to-day practice, I have no accountability measures in place to support—or demand—the restructuring of my practice. This disheartening finding motivated me to reread some texts I initially encountered in graduate school. Although specifically describing the reflective stance of the student teacher, Cinnamond and Zimpher spoke against my solitary reflection when they said that the reflective act requires “active dialogue with the various groups that exist within the context of the school as a social system” (59). This reflective process is not to be done alone, they say, but that’s how I have engaged the process. Clandinin and Connelly say that we teachers must “move into another place on the professional knowledge landscape[; we] must leave the safe secrecy of the classroom and enter a public place on the landscape” (14). Again, the emphasis is on a process that requires input from and responsibility to other professionals.

We teachers complain of not having time or place for professional dialogue, but Clandinin and Connelly further urge us to find ways to make conversations occur when they say that “[d]ialogue with the other participants is necessary for appropriate understanding and reflection” (59). But, they also say, even when we force the conversation, we may not find a “hospitable place for telling teaching stories” (Clandinin and Connelly 14) because, as Trimmer points out, we may have “difficulty trusting stories about our teaching, since we do not trust them to ‘convey knowledge’” (x). Although these observations are true, if we are to move our profession forward, we must begin trusting our reflections and stories, and I would add that if we want to mature as teachers, we must not simply reflect and tell stories alone or even in groups; we must hold each other accountable for improved practice—and a writing/reflecting group like the one I encountered while creating this text demanded that professional accountability. As these thoughts converge around the reflective process and community I encountered through my writing group, I’ve come to believe that my professional inaction, my unchanged practice—even though considered—was the result of working alone and being accountable to no one.

During the process of writing this text—a process that initially examined my students’ writing for what it said about the teaching of writing but

eventually led to community analysis of my teaching story and practice, leading to a recognition of how to improve my practice—I began a new stage in the development of my teaching: I started thinking of my practice in the same way I want students to think of theirs, which includes public analysis with public input in the redesign of curriculum. With input from the writing group, I found myself thinking differently about the Writing Journey texts students produce. I made some discoveries about student writing from the reading of many Writing Journeys, but when I was forced to explain my discoveries to others, I was also forced to do something about them. But, allowing students time to make these discoveries, which I had not done in the past, demands eliminating parts of the course. So I must ask myself—and fortunately, my writing group—what I might leave out when I teach the course again. As I consider that question, I am mindful that students may be wary of expressing personal experiences with the school audience, and I am not sure I know how to deal with that issue; but the dilemma becomes a shared quest when my writing group joins my reflective process, and finding a solution becomes a real possibility that might include writing groups where members are accountable to each other, a writing experience modeled after the one that has been instrumental in my self-discoveries.

I will probably be a better writing teacher because of my involvement with the writing/reflecting group. Additionally, my definition of reflection has changed—the process is not singular; rather, it involves a community and accountability to the community and eventually to future students. As part of a defined teaching community, I've come to trust my teaching stories, and I've learned that my students need to hear those stories; I must explore with students the importance of good writing instruction and of teaching possibilities that grow from work done with colleagues.

Reflection

My husband and I had friends visit recently. Anne and I raised our children at the same time, and now that they are grown, we spend hours sharing children stories. Our husbands talk of tractors and building shops with elaborate vacuum systems and space for wide screen televisions. Their children and ours went to the same elementary, middle, and for a year, the same high school, and then my family and I moved. Sometimes friends evaporate during that process, but not this couple. They came to our daughter's wedding; we went to their twenty-fifth anniversary party. When I try to explain to myself why these people have remained close, I can articulate a few reasons, but they don't capture the essence of our friendship. Likewise, when I try to describe the importance of working collaboratively, the attempt falls short of adequately explaining the significance of the process.

Outside the collaborative process, the writing of this piece would not have occurred. I am a speaker more than a writer; most of my publications come in the form of presentations—in front of an audience where I can immediately judge responses and adjust content and delivery according to perceived audience needs. As a student I was too often traumatized by a teacher's red pen to willingly submit at this stage in life, but writing in a reflective, collaborative environment has caught me unaware; the experience has provided the setting from which I've begun to overcome my writing insecurities, thus allowing and encouraging me to complete the writing process on paper rather than at the podium.

Once I signed on to the project that produced my writing, my small writing community has been a voice I could not cast aside, and as I have worked with them, I've come to depend on their feedback. Their honest interest in my research project has propelled me and given me confidence in my topic. I can see in their eyes, like I can see in my audience's eyes when I am at the podium, whether my work is moving properly, but I can also see their genuine concern when it is not, and I have grown—in this safe, professional environment—to desire their guidance when things aren't progressing well. When I initially wrote about my students' stories of school writing experiences, I wondered if they might be too personal to share. My writing group took my concerns seriously and acted as an informed audience guiding me to see the significance of the collective voice these students represented. In their responses I saw a genuine interest in assisting, so that as the group process unfolded, I found—to my great surprise—I coveted response and direction. I wanted to hear positive and negative comments so that I could improve both my piece and my writing, and I've come away from this reflective process wondering about the powerful nature of constructive feedback on the writer and on writing. Like my students who frequently found one teacher who made a difference in their writing, I've learned the significant influence a caring, informed voice can have on writing, and I am forever changed as a writer.

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