

On Joy, Teaching, and the Deep Satisfaction of Writing

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I remember sitting on my deck revising “Writing Giants, Columbine, and the Queen of Route 16.” I had a first draft typed and printed, pen in hand. I wrote over my first words with better ones, then wrote over those, again and again, rereading and working the piece with a mixture of joy and intensity that mesmerized me. Hours later the increasing chill of evening forced me inside.

My coming-to-write story appeared in front of me, expansive and detailed, like a city does from ten thousand feet when you break through the clouds to land. It felt good to tell the truth, to confess just how flawed I was as a teacher of writing. My ideas shook out into sentences, some great, some awful, but I stayed with them, fastening, tightening, and shaping. I had to get that piece right. When coeditor Sara Kajder asked me to revisit a piece I published for this anniversary edition of *Voices from the Middle*, I knew it had to be that one. You never forget your first time: I felt heard and understood when NCTE found my words worthy of sharing.

I’ve learned much about using my writing to teach in the sixteen years since that publication. I understand better what to model with my writing and why. I’ve moved from “I’m writing with you” to “Let me show you *this* and *this* and *this*.”

When I first wrote with students, I shared only what I had labored over. I carved out time in the evenings or early morning and wrote in the genre my students were writing. I shaped my writing to be a mentor text. I knew I could not sustain that additional work in my busy teaching life, but I also learned it wasn’t what my students needed from me. I had plenty of published mentor texts to choose from; my students needed a model of getting writing started and working to organize and shape it. Now I demonstrate the process I want my students to learn: how to find an idea among the scraps of thinking in a notebook; or how to expand on one indelible moment, following its threads across pages and

pages. I believe in the power and importance of show-don’t-tell teaching, so my students see me writing with them almost every day in class. What has changed is how little I prepare my work ahead of time. I try to stand where they are, in the moment of discovering an idea or coming up blank. I work to show them how the spark to start writing emerges from listening to beautiful words in a spoken word poem or a short text we read together. I put my notebook under the document camera and write. Some days I struggle, just like they do.

I know what matters in teaching writing only because I labor over the art of crafting language to share ideas. But I’ve learned there is also a danger in demonstration. Writing can feel antiseptic, and frankly, unimportant when teachers model only word order or punctuation. There is art in writing, and creating art is emotionally satisfying. I’m in love with writing: with sentences, with phrases, with the just-right word. Teachers are, first, mentors of passion—of why anyone would spend time reading and writing when you don’t have to.

I show students that writing is difficult, but also rewarding. I seek a moment of intensity with every student: working with an idea to unearth its core and then shaping that in the best way possible. Have you ever known anybody to turn away from something they found compulsively engaging?

Writing allows us to be broken or angry or despairing as well as giddy and grateful and simply astonished by the beauty of this world and our small portion of it. In my demonstrations, I’ve written about cancer; I’ve written about the birth of my son. I’ve written rants about school policies and gotten tangled in line breaks while trying to write a poem of visiting my brother’s grave. I’ve written a tribute to my best friend, to my dog, to my love of dark chocolate. Struggling with my writing has opened up space for my students to struggle, but doing a fist pump when a paragraph works the way

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I want it to model an essential truth as well: writing is fun! There is a reason I often write at home with headphones on, dancing in my seat. Words are worth chasing, sorting, and then celebrating when they finally align the way you want them to.

I tell students: I call you in from the halls of slamming locker doors and the crush of people into a space that is alive with words and images and your individual view of the world. A classroom that seeks diversity, as Donald Murray famously said, instead of proficient mediocrity. You are going to fall in love, I tell them, with books, with words, with writing and with working to make that writing sing and shout and whisper. What I teach is simply so fabulous that it will have a hold on you forever.

And I believe this.

Teachers write to better understand what we teach, of course. We confer and guide students from confusion to clarity through a deep understanding of writing. I tried this, we might say, and then show how to find an ending amidst threads of thinking. We find the words to confer effectively in the moment we need them, simply because we have lived their truth in our own process of developing an idea. We experience not only

the constraints, but the low expectations of formula in writing when we attempt to trap our thinking into five paragraphs. We teach from a deep understanding of how writing works, which increases our confidence and our effectiveness.

But we also must make writing less scary. Less serious. Less about judgment and more about discovery. We must make our passion for writing public. I say this to encourage any of you who are not yet writing, to invite you into the very joy of it, the joy your students need to believe in.

I'm thrilled at the way teacher writing has exploded in the last decade. Teachers detail their beliefs and experiences in blogs and tweets and podcasts, and I often read those words and feel a little less lonely in this relentless, but wonderful work. Let us live a love of poetry and stories and letters and songs and images and our ideas, not only as teachers, but as creative spirits who want to share our lives with the world.

Write with your students, yes. But mostly, write for *you*.

And share.

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