Working Writing into a Comfortable Fit

BY KARON HENDERSON

I never considered myself a writer. As a matter of fact, I never wrote. Sure, I wrote teacher-related things—lesson plans, field trip permission slips, notes to parents—but never had I written as a writer. That is, until the summer I participated in the Central Texas Writing Project Summer Institute.

Even though I thought very little of my skills as a writer, I excused great confidence as a teacher of writing. I stood before my students expecting them to produce written works of art. My lessons were filled with activities for writing as well as ideas for publishing the resulting masterpieces. I provided ample time for my students to draft, revise, edit, and publish. I considered myself an outstanding teacher of writing, but how wrong I was.

When I agreed to participate in the Central Texas Writing Project Summer Institute, I thought that I would learn new ideas and activities to bring back to my classroom. While teacher demonstrations of writing lessons is a component of the institute, that was not what forced me to rethink the practices that were in place in my classroom. The institute transformed me from a teacher of writing to a student of writing as a process.

On the very first day of the institute, we received our instructions: "Write."

"Write what?" I wondered. "I have nothing to say." I sat there staring into space wondering what in the world I could write about. We were given 30 minutes of writing time. When you have nothing to say, this is an eternity. I think I wrote about driving in traffic. After our allotted time, Liz Stephens, the director of the Central Texas Writing Project, asked, "Did that feel like a tight pair of shoes going on or a tight pair of shoes coming off?"

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I wasn't about to contribute to that discussion. I thought I had made a huge mistake. The other 16 teachers in the room were all writers. I was in the wrong place. All I wanted was ideas, lesson plans, and activities to take back to my campus. I was not a writer. And then Liz asked if anyone wanted to share what they had written. Share my writing? I think not! Who would want to listen to what I had written anyway?

That night, I pondered this experience as well as my expectations for my students. Did I not ask them to write? Did I not ask them to share what they had written? It was at that moment that I was forever changed as a teacher of writing. I knew that I had to become a writer to teach writing. For the first time, I understood how my students must feel when they are asked to write and believe that they have nothing to say. I understood the fear of sharing their writing before their peers for fear of being judged on what they had written. It was time for me to experience writing as a writer. I was up for the challenge. Surely I must have something to say.

But the following day, the demons returned. Again I sat there, my mind blank. Not knowing what else to do, I got off-task and started talking to Cindy, a teacher sitting at my table. She told me she was going to teach fifth grade the following year. I had been teaching fifth grade for several years and assured her that she would enjoy teaching this level. I told her a humorous story about an incident that took place in my classroom and how I had handled the situation by using personal thesauruses. As I told the story, she began laughing. I liked how that laughter felt and realized that this story might be something that I could write about.

I was jolted into asking myself the same questions I ask my students. I require them to write the letters TAPP at the top of the first page of their drafts. These letters stand for topic, audience, purpose, and plan. I constantly quiz them as to their topic, audience, and the purpose of their writing as they are drafting their pieces. I realized during the summer institute that although I expected my students to know for whom they were writing and what the purpose of their writing was, I never practiced this.

When Cindy laughed as I told my story, I had a purpose for writing. I wanted to write about this situation to entertain my readers. I knew that I would be spending the next five weeks in a

see Working Writing, next page

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Working Writing

continued from previous page

room full of teachers and envisioned them as my audience. I finally had something to write about, an audience to write to, and a distinct purpose for writing. I started writing and writing and writing.

The Central Texas Writing Project Summer Institute gave me the opportunity to experience the process I use as a writer. By experiencing this process, I was able to feel the frustration and intimidation that my students feel when asked to write. To become effective teachers of writing, we must become writers ourselves. We need to experience and analyze our personal writing as a process. When we have done this, we will have the tools necessary to create a community of writers within our classrooms.

On the first day of the institute when Liz asked for volunteers to share what they had written, I listened intently as my cohorts shared beautifully written poetry and prose. I could hear each author’s voice, and was awed, thinking that I would never be able to write pieces such as these. I was right. I would never write like another person because I am who I am, and my voice will echo in my writing. Every student also has his or her own voice. Our job as teachers is to nurture the writer within.

At the summer institute, we were expected to write every day, and in doing so, a funny thing happened. After a while, 30 minutes was never enough time for writing. I found myself thinking of more and more things to write about. I remember driving to the institute one morning with a great idea for a story, but I couldn’t find a pen or paper. I dug around in my purse, found a dental appointment reminder card and a highlighter, and began jotting key words to help me remember the thoughts that were going through my mind while I was sitting in traffic. This is the behavior—the “writerly life”—that I will model for my students. We will write together, and we will write often.

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