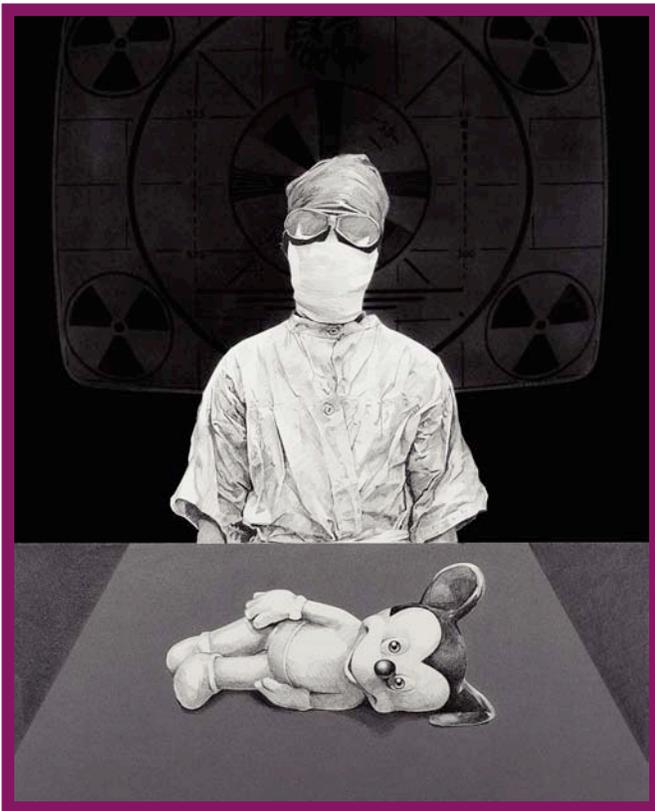


Working Together

by Cathy Cirimele

I had already been teaching for 25 years when I became a summer fellow in the San Joaquin Valley Writing Project. I was an experienced teacher who had attended over the years numerous conferences and workshops that focused on teaching writing as a process. I was also an active member of the California Literature Project. So it wasn't as though I was a young teacher who was absorbing for the first time the instructional strategies being demonstrated on a daily basis. In fact, I don't think I learned many new techniques about teaching writing from attending the summer institute. But what I did learn was even more significant: I learned what it felt like to sit in a response group and listen to your peers criticize your writing. When I look back to my writing project summer, what I remember most vividly is that I finally felt like one of my own students.

I was a literature major in college. I wrote all of my essays in solitude. I never took a workshop class that focused on writing of any kind. All of my writing was analytical and based on research and reading. But intuitively I knew that the workshop was an important tool. When I began teaching composition at both the high school and college levels, I insisted that my students make response groups an integral part of their writing process. It was not until I was actually part of that process, however, that I really understood how truly valuable it was.



Shown here: *The Great Manipulator* (12 "x 16", graphite/charcoal, by Robert L. Nelson

Like all of the revision groups in the summer institute, mine was diverse. There were five of us in the group: two high school English teachers, a university early education professor, a middle-school teacher and an elementary school teacher. Each of us had some knowledge of writing, but most of our experience was in the academic arena. Because our first assignment was a personal essay, there was a measure of discomfort. It is, after all, difficult to share personal thoughts and ideas with people you barely know. But we had done some pre-writing before drafting the essay, as well as some discussion in the group, so we were somewhat prepared for the ordeal. And we were a casual group: we joked around and did our best to make each other comfortable with a fairly stressful situation.

"None of you will repeat any of this to my family, will you?"

"No. We are sworn to secrecy."

"That's good because some hearts could be broken, if you did."

"And, I hope you will remember that I was very young when this happened. OK?"

"Yeah, yeah. We've heard that story before."

I came prepared with some writing I had done with my students. I was pretty confident that my group was going to be astonished by the sensitivity and skill demonstrated in my essay. After all, my students were dazzled when I read it to the class. How wrong could they be? The piece I picked was one that I had revised several times over the course of two or three years. The essay was called "Thistle" and it described the last trip my family took together before teenage *angst* and then divorce split us apart. The essay incorporated the techniques that I asked my students to use: interweaving narrative and reflection with specific descriptive passages. I was proud of that essay. The structure was complex and sophisticated and the description was specific and concrete. It was a challenge to write both emotionally and intellectually.

But I was feeling lucky. I liked everyone in the group. They were all good writers and each of them chose a topic that was interesting and enjoyable. As I responded with my peers about each of the essays, I gained surety about my own writing. I had chosen a topic that was emotional but my essay was well-constructed and I knew that it would connect with my audience. It was more than another essay about the chaos of divorce.

Finally it was my turn to read. I muttered something incoherent and, I thought, funny then began. As I read, I kept eye contact with my group members searching for clues about how they were reacting. They seemed engaged: laughing and sighing at all of the appropriate places. I knew that the essay was doing what I intended: my audience was responding in all of the right ways. My confidence was building with every word and every reaction.

As I finished, they gave me a small round of applause and some praise. I took out my notebook and pen ready to write down their

notes all the time thinking: “I won’t have to write anything down but at least I can look humble and pretend that they have criticism for me.” Then they began. It went something like this:

“I really liked the topic but I felt that you didn’t quite spend enough space on your daughters. In fact you don’t even mention their names.”

“Yes. I noticed that too. Also I would like to suggest that you work on the organizational structure a little more. Shifting back and forth from your childhood to the trip then into the future is a little confusing in places.”

“I noticed that you repeated some words in your description and I don’t think you did that to create a certain effect, did you?”

It took me a few moments to regain my composure. I wasn’t expecting any criticism, let alone comments that were as detailed as these. What had happened here? They seemed to like the essay and now they were criticizing it? How could that be? As they continued their analysis, my mind churned with confusion. First of all, I was shocked that they would find anything wrong with my writing. After all, I had been teaching writing, successfully I thought, for a very long time. If I could teach writing then I should be able to write well myself. Mixed in with this thought was a little anger, not to mention some embarrassment and a tinge of guilt. I was so grateful that I had not revealed my confidence to them; I was now practicing my best poker face struggling to look attentive and accepting. It was difficult to hide the hurt feelings.

But then everything shifted. As they continued with their comments, I looked at my piece more closely. I noted their comments in the margins and circled areas that needed improvement. I actually found myself responding to their criticism without being defensive. “Well, I hadn’t noticed that my daughters’ names were not in the essay. Are you talking about using “magical” three times in the last paragraph? Thanks. I didn’t see that before. Can you tell me what is confusing about the time shifts? I think it’s important to have them but I want it to work for the reader.” Their suggestions were not only accurate; they were useful.

Finally, they made some concluding comments:

“This is a good essay, Cathy. I look forward to reading it when you’ve revised it. It really connects with the reader and, with some adjustments, it’s going to be really good.”

“Yes, I also liked it. Once the organization is a little more structured, I think it will be really powerful.”

“Thanks for sharing your story with us. This must have been difficult to write but I’ll bet it was a kind of therapy for you. I think that’s what writing is initially. Now you can get past the emotion and see how to make it better.”

They were good. They gave me explicit ways to make the piece better and patted me on the back for the effort.

In five minutes, they taught me what I had been trying for years to teach my students about peer response groups: be specific, be gentle but be constructive. I could hardly wait to get home and start revising. Their suggestions were wonderful; by the time I presented my second draft, I knew that the essay was greatly improved. And so did they.

Before attending the summer institute, I had read Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird* (Lamott, 1994). The title is a metaphor for writing: take it step by step. It comes from her own experience counting birds with her father when she was a child and his insistence that she must learn to practice patience when tackling a task that requires concentration and effort. The book is basically Lamott’s story of learning to write, with some valuable tips for anyone who wants to be a writer. One chapter is called “Shitty First Drafts.” Although I loved the book and that chapter in particular, I don’t think I really understood what Lamott meant until I sat in a revision group for the first time. I forgot that, no matter how many times I wrote that essay, it was still in draft form. I had also forgotten that there is always work to be done on a piece of writing. I don’t think any writer is ever completely satisfied with what they have written, even after it is published.

As a teacher of writing, the feeling first of frustration and then of accomplishment that I experienced in a revision group is what I relate to my students when I talk to them about writing. Until I felt it myself, I don’t think I realized how frightening it could be. Nor did I understand how powerful it was. I never miss an opportunity to relate my own experience to students when we begin forming revision groups. I remind them that my own group was kind but critical: that was their job. If their group does its job, the students will understand the value of working in a revision group. And with each revision, their essays will get better and better.

In addition, because of my own struggles, I gained an appreciation for the personal essay. Although I often brought non-fiction texts into the classroom as models for students, this experience encouraged me to use more essays for analysis. There are so many good writers who use the essay for both expression and communication. Essay writers like Francis Bacon and Jonathan Swift are both intellectual and amusing, as are contemporary writers like Malcolm Gladwell and Annie Dillard. Because of the summer institute, using essays to teach critical thinking as well as good writing soon became an important part of my curriculum in all of my classes.

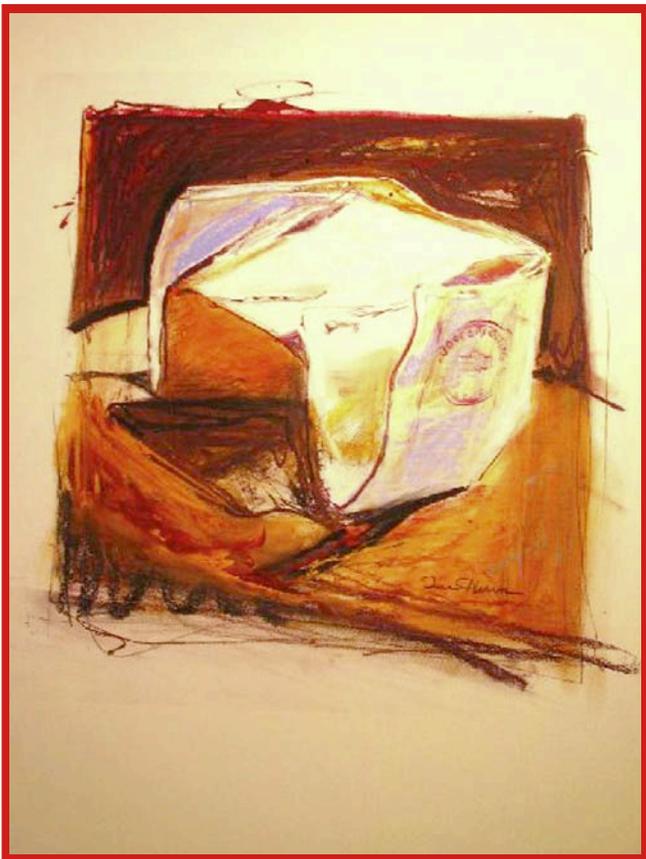
Since the summer institute, I have rewritten my “Thistle” essay



Shown here: *Three Loquats* (16" x 6", color pencil/paper, by Irina Gronborg

over and over again: I am constantly changing words and sentences or adding some reflection that I have since gained. The luxury that Lamott and other professional writers have is to have an editor. For those of us who write without the aid of a publishing company, we must rely on those who were prepared to read what we have written: our relatives, our friends, our colleagues, and even our students. Each person who looks at our writing gives us important information that can be used to make it even better. I know that my essay will probably never be perfect, but it does become closer to what I want it to be every time I revise it. That is because I have people who are willing to help me by looking at the essay and making suggestions. My revision group is now any one of a number of people who enjoy writing enough to give me the time necessary to help me with my writing.

Learning to work with a revision group encouraged me to experiment with a variety of writing genres. Ultimately, I found myself participating in writing-project seminars that focused on publishing. As a result, I contributed several essays to three books on teaching strategies published by the San Joaquin Valley Writing Project. Two of those books, one on writing strategies and one on vocabulary exercises, were then published by the Pearson Group. In addition, I formed a writing group and experimented with personal essays, short stories and poetry. I'm even tinkering with an idea for a novel and collaborating with someone on children's stories. I like



Shown here: *Karla's Cap Drawing* (12" x 12", mixed media drawing by Therese Cipiti Herron

to write and I like to share what I have written.

Old habits are hard to break, however. When I sat down at my computer to write this essay, I felt inspired. I knew exactly what I wanted to write. I took a few notes but essentially wrote the essay in a kind of stream of consciousness. I sent it off to our writing group leader fairly satisfied with the result. I knew I would have to make some changes but I didn't expect there to be many. Then our group met to discuss our drafts. Luckily, my years of experience with revision groups helped me with the process. As the group made suggestions, I dutifully took notes and asked questions for clarification. I had learned to leave my ego at the door. All the while, I thought to myself: "Guess this was a first draft, after all. And, to paraphrase Anne Lamott, a shitty one at that."

After working with my writing group and revising several drafts, I submitted this essay. It's not finished; it will never be finished. Even now I can see things that I would like to change. But the deadline looms and it's time to stop. I'm sure all writers are faced with the same dilemma: sooner or later you have to turn it in. This is another piece of wisdom that I pass on to my students. Turning an essay in doesn't mean that there will be no opportunity to go back and revise. The important thing is to seize that opportunity if it is offered to you. But after all of the drafting and revision, the reality is that, whether you are satisfied with it or not, the piece must ultimately be turned in for publication of one sort or another. The key is to put real work into your drafting and revision, with as much support and conversation as you can get, so that your completed piece is as good as it can be at that particular time.

No piece of writing is ever perfect; well, with the exception of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Shakespeare's sonnets and . . . Well, you grasp the point. But, it is the challenge of attempting to reach perfection, like Sisyphus climbing that mountain, that makes writing both frustrating and exhilarating. Working with a revision group creates a journey that is less lonely and even a little easier. That is an asset for any writer. After my experience with the summer institute, I was able to demonstrate to my students every day and in very specific and significant ways what I had learned during my summer vacation.

Works Cited:

Lamott, Anne. (1994). *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Pantheon Books.

About the Author:

Cathy Cirimele graduated with the class of 2008 and retired from teaching English after 35 years. She spends her time gardening, volunteering, reading, traveling, writing and doing whatever she wants whenever she wants.