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Writing Testing Reading

Doreen is a 48-year-old Jamaican woman who works as a maid for a wealthy family and who, one evening each week, works on her writing with me at the New York Public Library. She comes to the program because she wants to make changes in her life—her plan is to get a GED certificate and a better job.

Of all the people I have worked with at the library, it is Doreen who is the writer. Although she had only written letters before, during the past year she has produced a number of lengthy stories about her life—narratives entitled, "Taking My Son Home," "Living on a Sugar Estate," "A Make-Believe Grandma," "Sisters-in-Law," "Going to Belgium." Now she is working on a piece called "My First Novel." She's writing it in response to all the reading she's doing now in her reading group at the library. "After I read a few of those books," she told me, "I said to myself, 'I can do this!' So I am doing it."

But in spite of her engagement with writing, when Doreen took the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), she scored only 3.3. If I had not seen her writing happen, I would not have been surprised. As a young girl in Jamaica, she often missed school because her asthma made it impossible to leave her house. Her condition was bad enough to cause her to be hospitalized repeatedly. She remembers that the announcement of examinations made it worse. This combination of sporadic education and early test anxiety has contributed to Doreen's current problems with the TABE. She fears its officiality—the bubbles she must darken, the printed booklets, the time pressure. She deliberates interminably over the multiple choices, uncertain about what makes one answer more correct than another. When she finds passages difficult, she gives up. She was out of school too often to learn about tests.

TABE vs. Writer

The 3.3 score does not represent the Doreen I know. At the same time that she is paralyzed by the TABE, she is steadily growing more confident as a writer. The novel that Doreen is writing is a peculiar thing. Unlike her memory pieces, which are rich in details from her own and her family's lives, "My First Novel" happens outside Doreen's experience. It is a story of the rich and privileged—people who own private planes and huge engagement rings; children who, if victims of tragedy, like Oliver Twist are restored to their proper place in the upper class and reunited with those who love them. For Doreen, fiction is the "not true," and so she creates a story line very different from her personal narratives. Although I have told her that she can use her own life experiences as the basis for fiction, and that other authors do the same, "My First Novel" is Doreen's deliberate departure from her own life story, the result of her desire to write what she doesn't know, to try unfamiliar territory: "Write about a man who does the deed and leaves the woman to have her baby on her own? I know how to do that. That is just what Danny's father did to me. I want to try something else." She knows how her memory pieces will end as she writes them. But this—a novel—provides her with the wonder of watching something take on a life of its own.

Doreen "writes" while she is at her job. While she is ironing or cleaning, she thinks about her

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characters, imagines their dialogue, tests out the twists in the plot that she wants to include. Then, when she has a break, she transcribes what she had written in her head while she was working. In a job in which almost no literacy is required of her by her employers, Doreen has included it for herself. Lately, she has even begun showing parts of her novel to the people she works for. She needs more response than she can get from me in two hours a week at the library.

It could be that the composition of "My First Novel" signals another stage in Doreen's development as a reader and writer, a stage that the TABE is not picking up. The TABE tests vocabulary, reading comprehension, and familiarity with simple references (table of contents, dictionary headings, and so on). Although the vocabulary is tested in a context of sorts ("pitch the ball"), and the answers to the reading comprehension questions can be found within the context of the passages, the test items on the TABE often do not make sense within the contexts of the test-takers' lives. In fact, the test is extremely decontextualized for the people taking it. This distancing from Doreen's interests and own knowledge is a major problem she faces when she attempts the TABE. There is no reason that Doreen should be made to read about geographical variations in Mexico, except that the passage was chosen to be on the test. Doreen's new-found interest is in narrative, but no narratives ever appear on the TABE, only voiceless details about erosion or wheat, or bizarre logic problems dealing with members of "Mrs. Bowen's acting class," in which groups of students are called "casts," members of the same cast are called "mates," and students reading for the same part are called "companions." In the vocabulary section, Doreen is surprised to learn that "nice" is the wrong choice for "a normal day." In Jamaica, she reasons, a nice day is normal.

Reading and Writing

In a way, "My First Novel" is Doreen's own test of her knowledge of reading and writing, demonstrating what she has learned of the writer's craft from the books she has begun to read. The TABE does not test her sophisticated skills. Through her own writing she shows that she knows what a novel is, what characters do and say in a book, how narration moves a plot along, how through a character's actions a reader can infer his intentions, how readers may react to a line or an event.

Like the books she has been reading, Doreen's novel is a bittersweet love story with a happy ending (so far). She has been anxious to get reactions to the parts she has written. "I want you to read the first part," she whispered one Tuesday night, rustling a fistful of papers.

"Why don't you read it to all of us," I suggested. Three other members of our writing group were there.

"All right. Now I want all of you to know that I added some surprises in this story for you."

"Some surprises?"

"Yes. Like the ones we talked about. The ones that writers put in to keep us guessing about what will happen next."

"What Doreen calls 'surprises' are her interpretation of how writers invite their audiences to make predictions and construct meaning when they read."

And so Doreen read her first page. A young girl, Patty, sat in an airport with her parents' lawyer, waiting for a plane that would take her to America. The group asked a number of questions. Where was Patty leaving from? Why was she with the lawyer? How old was Patty? Doreen smiled and read on. It became apparent that Patty's parents had died in a car crash and she was being sent to Maria, her mother's best friend in America. Well. One member of our group, Mr. Weeks, was surprised by these developments in the story. He thought that Patty's parents had gotten divorced--not that they were dead. Another group member, Marjorie, had assumed that the lawyer was taking Patty to her parents. "I will have more surprises later," Doreen said, satisfied.

What Doreen calls "surprises" are her interpretation of how writers invite their audiences to make predictions and construct meaning when they read. We have discussed this in the group and demonstrated the connections between predictions and meaning through a piece of my writing in progress and through some poems we read together. By consciously building "surprises" into her writing,
Doreen demonstrates that she understands what happens to herself when she reads, has observed the same phenomena in others, and makes the manipulation of her reader-audience part of her craft as a writer.

**Revision**

Her understanding of readers' responses to texts has had dramatic effects on Doreen's desire to revise. At one early point, she and I talked briefly about some revision strategies—making carets to insert phrases and words, cutting and retyping paragraphs in new arrangements. We practiced on "Sisters-in-Law," reading it aloud until Doreen came to a part which she realized was unclear. We discussed how she might revise the piece; I offered scissors, tape, paper, and a green marker pen for inserts.

But when she brought in the early sections of "My First Novel," neatly written in longhand on legal paper with no crossings-out or other marks on it, I wondered whether she had understood what I had been trying to show her about revision; I even began to wonder if she had written the piece herself. Was this clean, even writing really her first draft? Then she explained that she had rewritten the piece for neatness, and pulled the original draft out of her purse. It was on long and short paper, slips sometimes only three inches long. Some of it was taped in so many places that it unfurled like a proclamation. Carets pointed up and down throughout. I almost fainted.

"Doreen, would you like to explain what you've done here?" She settled into her chair, rocking side to side, slightly like a schoolgirl. "Sure," she said. "After I wrote about Patty, I wanted to tell about her mother. I didn't know how to do it. I was writing about Patty but I wanted to tell some things that happened before she was born. So I went back to the part where Patty is flying to America and I added a sentence to have Maria, who is waiting at the airport in America, thinking about herself and Yola, Patty's mother."

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**Adding and Changing**

"So you needed to make a bridge between the Patty section and the flashback." We talked for a while about flashbacks—how they work in movies and books. Then Doreen directed me to a taped section. "When I was reading it over, I kept seeing more places to change the writing. At this section I thought to myself, 'Marcie's going to say, what happened at college?' But I had already written the next part about the wedding. So I cut the tape, cut off the wedding part, wrote about Maria and Yola at college, and taped it in."

She showed me the additions:

At the airport waiting room in the U.S. Maria Morris her mothers friend waited her eyes were bright with unshed tears of joy because today she would see the beautiful little baby she placed in her friends arms so-long-ago, her mind drifted back to the days when she was so young and childish she though he was the only man she would every love he was so young and handsome and he made her feel beautiful. The happiest night of ther life was when he ask her to become his wift, after he took her home kissed her goodnight and drove away she danced into her apartment and round the livingroom to the telephone and dial her friends number and waited for her to answer. It was just a few short weeks ago Yola got married and moved out, They were room mates in college. Yola had known famely so she had to work her way through college.

Maria's parents was in the restaurant business and lived in New York, her mother would send home made cookies each month for Maria and each month she would toss them on Yol's bed.

Maria was short and fat right up until college, then she put her foot down and desided she would go on a diet, by next yeas she was beautiful, Yola was tall, slim and very lovely and she could eat anything and never get fat. Maria some times thought "I wonder what Mom would do if she should meet Yola and try to fatten her, and could not do it? Mom would go mad, I know she would."

After college they both got jobs in Town and desided to get an apartment together. Soon after Yola met a young Frenchman...."
I was surprised at how quickly she had taken to the physical strategies for revision, but I was even more struck by her claim that the revisions were prompted by problems in her text which she noticed because she thought I would notice. She thought that parts of her piece would violate a reader's sense of story, and recognized that revision can assist a writer in shaping her meaning for an audience. She saw beyond her own intimate involvement with the piece to the potential response of a more distanced reader. She herself became a more distanced reader of her own writing—deciding when I would question the writing, and thereby seeing the gaps and possibilities herself.

Of course, these awarenesses bring some pain—the struggles and difficulties writers face when their creations refuse to be born the way they want them to. Doreen now knows the misery of writing oneself into a corner; she knows how awful it is to have a problem in a piece that resists being solved. In the section before Patty is born, Maria and her new husband Robert take off for their honeymoon in Rome:

_The comershall jet was filld with happy people, when suddenly the singe came on. Please return to your seat and fastin your seat belts we are having some tmuble with one of our engeen. Then the plane started shaking hearder and header. The st__ were bjeez passing our life jackit and helping the people to put them on suddenly the plane started going down faster and faster people were screaming and fighting to stay in there seats Robert and Maria huged each other and Maria prayed. faster and faster the plane went dow Maria closed her eyes... _

The plane crashes; Robert is killed. Maria is in the hospital for a year and then Patty is born. How? So far, none of her solutions have worked.

**Writing vs. GED**

I frequently beg Doreen to let me kick her out of the group and place her in a GED program. I think her 3.3 is a fluke, a terrible joke. She doesn't believe me, and doesn't want to leave. "I didn't know before I came here that I could write," she says. "I want to stay a bit longer, work on my stories, and get my reading up. Then we can talk about a GED. But for now, I still have to build up my confidence. I'm not ready."

Both of us realize that sooner or later, Doreen will have to face the TABE again. Although the body of work that she has produced in the past year shows what she has learned, no measures of literacy have been developed yet which would reveal her knowledge and ability. This is a shame. Many adult basic education students learn to love reading for the first time by reading and discussing stories. As with Doreen, the skills that they develop in this process are evident in their writing—in word choice, revisions, structure, and dialogue. An analysis of the writing of students in adult literacy programs, coupled with periodic interviews with them, would uncover these achievements and would provide a broader view of the students' literacy, something that the TABE does not do. But until such alternative measures are implemented and widely accepted, the TABE will remain the official arbiter of progress, and its value to participants in literacy programs will remain significant: without a score higher than 3.3, a GED and the future it symbolizes will be impossible.

I'll be sorry to lose Doreen, yet I can't wait to see her go. I'm urging her to take the test again soon. As someone who has only just learned to love literacy, maybe she expects too much from the TABE. I keep telling her that she should not expect to enjoy it; she should not expect to learn from it; she should not expect that it will resemble the reading she likes to do. This test is not designed to provide her with "surprises." I am confident that somehow Doreen will prevail, that her score will go up, she will enroll in a GED class, and set other goals for her future. That will be fine, and important, but I can't help thinking that Doreen's ability to achieve on the TABE is but the smallest slice of her success. Literacy teachers, GED program directors, employers will know Doreen only by a grade-level number. If they read Maria's mad scene, which Doreen researched by interviewing a psychologist and struggling through parts of _I Never Promised You a Rose Garden_, or the diary entry she included after she began reading _Diary of Anne Frank_, or the sex scene; if they saw the revisions...! If they read the novel, they would discover the real Doreen—the reader, the writer.

Marcie Wolfe is with the New York City Writing Project. This article was reprinted from the New York City Writing Project Newsletter with the author's permission.