THE PROCESS JOURNAL, THE WRITING AUTOBIOGRAPHY, AND THE TEACHER

Writing teachers can pick up a professional journal today and easily find accounts of students’ composing processes. Although these accounts have led to a greater understanding of how students write, we do not find as many accounts of how teachers write or any consistent proof that after reading the accounts of students’ composing processes, teachers then examine their own.

We have enough evidence from professional writers’ accounts to know that writers describe their methods of working and their attitudes toward writing for different reasons. In expressive modes—the diary, journal, and notebooks not intended for publication—professional writers tend to focus on how certain problems are being worked out in a specific piece of writing. But more formal accounts addressed to an audience tend to become retrospective, and the possible time lag between the actual writing and the description of the writing often leads to inaccuracies of recall.

Many teachers, of course, are familiar with the idea of using journals to record observations about a process; science teachers, for example, often ask students to maintain process journals while conducting a long-term experiment. Samples of such journal writing, both in science and other disciplines, abound in Writing and Learning Across the Curriculum by Nancy Martin and others (London: Ward Lock Educational, 1976), as well as in other sources. But using process journals to describe their own experiences in writing is new to many teachers.

In an effort to obtain a clearer understanding of their own composing processes during the five week summer Writing Institute for the West Kentucky Writing Project, summer Fellows keep process journals to record their observations about their writing habits and the influences which have shaped their present composing processes. As a preliminary to their writing in the journals, Fellows discuss some of the different areas they might explore. A helpful stimulus for this discussion is the clustering activity W. Ross Winterrowd describes in his second edition of The Contemporary Writer (Chapter 3, Harcourt, 1981). The purpose of the clustering is to identify different aspects of the writing process, possible props necessary for the writing, the best conditions under which writing can take place, and the attitudes toward writing which the individual holds; the clustering activity, which is really only a form of brainstorming, gives each person a way of focusing on his or her own processes. A sample clustering after a discussion might look like the following:
The Fellows also are encouraged to spend time recalling some of their earliest memories of writing; although these may be colored somewhat by the passage of time, simply recalling the experiences and feelings engendered by them can be helpful in making teachers more conscious of what effects different writing experiences may have on their own students. These memories are recorded in as much detail as possible in the process journals, and often Fellows are able to link some of these experiences with existing writing problems or successes. Even though some of the participants may have read accounts of writing habits practiced by professional authors, the Fellows often are still amazed at how similar their problems are to those of accomplished writers.

Fellows devote much space in their journals to exploring the feelings which they have about writing and their efforts to come to terms with those feelings. Here are some samples:

As I sit down to write, I feel not unlike John Boy Walton. Week after week I watched "The Waltons" and wondered how that boy had the discipline to sit down and write in his journal every night. I don't have that kind of discipline. I also don't have that much freedom. I can't just sit down and write something down and not worry about it being letter perfect. This writing is driving me crazy right now because it seems to be rambling.

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This is about the most honest attempt I have ever made at an assignment and although it was really fun to let myself go like that, it's still a little frightening. It seems easier to write in someone else's voice; that way when someone criticizes it, they aren't really attacking you because you're not in it.

Not all of the entries, of course, focus on feelings alone but instead reveal the actual processes which the writer follows when attempting a writing task. Many of these entries suggest the writers' surprise at the discoveries they make, such as in the following:

I seem to consider the audience more than I ever realized. Somewhere along the line I got the notion that all professors wanted scholarly sounding baloney and that is what I learned to produce. God! I hope I'm not giving my students that impression.

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One of the things I hate most about writing is having to type the stuff. "Typo" is my middle name. Most of the time when I sit down at the typewriter, I sit there as a reviser and editor too. This causes problems because some of the parts I change usually need more changing.

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I've found that writing everything out once helps tremendously. I've never done it before. It's like straightening out tangled hair. You just keep brushing until it shines.

(Continued on page 20)
When the concept of the process journals is introduced to the summer Fellows, no attempt is made to dictate a format for entries, and the journals themselves usually range from flowered looseleaf notebooks to steno pads. The WKWP staff reads the journals twice during the Institute, once after the second week and then at the conclusion of the five weeks. Although such reading may create a slight audience problem for the writers, they have the option of not sharing their journals if they wish. In most cases, however, a dialogue between the journal writer and the reader springs up. The feedback, though, comes only in terms of seeking clarification or suggesting resources for problems the writers raise. Fellows also are encouraged to use the journals for trying out parts of new pieces and even to record thoughts gained from Institute readings and discussions which seem to shed light on their writing processes.

The final application of the process journal comes with the last writing experience which Fellows complete in the Institute. They are asked to read through their process journals and, using whatever material they want from their journals, construct a writing autobiography. The Fellows may reach beyond their process journals to focus on a particular incident which they feel shaped their present behavior and attitudes or they may focus on the present and provide an account based solely on their writing process as perceived during the five weeks of the Institute. Most Fellows choose to combine a bit of both in their autobiographies. The results of this assignment are usually not full scale autobiographies but highly focused autobiographical sketches. The synthesizing called for by the assignment often helps the writers to express their philosophies about writing and to acknowledge—often for the first time—exactly how these philosophies developed. After completing both the process journal and the writing autobiography, Fellows usually express amazement at what they have discovered about themselves as writers and vow to have a greater sympathy and sensitivity for the writing processes of their students.

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