

On Coaching the Writer

BY JON APPLEBY

Content

The writer is sixteen, soft-spoken, shy. She has been working on the same story, her story, for the first five months of school. The tale is of a pregnancy, the death of the child in the womb, an induced childbirth, and the funeral. It is the story of a young woman trying to deal with her personal pain.

So I, English teacher, read her writing and try to help her with it. I know that the lessons of writing, paragraphing, repeated phrases, clarity, are not the first issues here. I marvel that she cares about those at all, and I wonder if she cleans her prose the way other people in mourning clean their closets or scour their kitchens.

She is not technically my student. I am one of three teachers she has shown the manuscript to. The second is her classroom English teacher, and he has given her the freedom to deal with this work until it is done. The third is also a current teacher, who is now pregnant with her first child and who is disturbed to the point of nightmares by the content.

The writer chose to change the story to a mix of first- and third-person scenes — literally distancing herself from the events of her own life by changing her voice on the page. I am struck by the sophistication and the absolute appropriateness of the technique (I think of *Steps* by Jerzy Kosinski). She and I talk about first- and third-person narratives as the immediate and the remembered, about distance in writing that controls the emotional impact of powerful stories. As we speak, I wonder about her health, and about the personal nature of all writing, no matter how “objective” it may seem.

Words are extensions of ourselves. They live as limbs, at least for a while. Across the distance of time and intervening events and ideas, our words seem less a part of ourselves, less and less sensitive.

Do we do more harm than good, with wooden assignments and “cool” comments about the texture of the prose? Are we, with our writing standards, really just trying to make our workplace impersonal and easier?

I watch this young woman write of the dangerous, possibly fetus-lethal anesthesia she had before a tonsillectomy, before she had any idea she might be pregnant. She writes of shopping for an outfit small enough to bury her lost child in. She writes of the funeral and ends with a line about having to get ready for school.

While the story hurts, I love the first- and third-person mixture. Her other (pregnant) teacher wants her to put it all in first person. I tell the writer that it's her story, her call. It's as if I am watching the creation of a memorial. I can see experience crystallizing in specific, reflected memories.

She wonders aloud what she will write about next. I know she means that she does not know what else might be as important to her. I tell her she will figure it out.

Although every young writer's story is not as compelling as this one, every writer takes an emotional risk when setting down his or her thoughts for the teacher to see. Writing here is experience itself. There is no

literature as powerful as her own story. Her learning is real and authentic and unavoidably painful. I support the learning she must master by accepting her story, and yet, out of habit as deep as the Atlantic, I mark each little imperfection with a pencil mark and a suggestion.

She teaches me to beware of my objective standards, to weigh pointing out a run-on against the greater needs of the writer. She reminds me that, even as I try to have students write where their passions take them, most of my teacherly comments and notations are really spirit-killers.

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Imagine the task of her regular classroom teacher when he sits down to come up with her grade.

Form

Another writer, Rebecca, wrote almost nothing but poetry her freshman year, and most of the poetry sorted out her troubles with boys. She has been coded with organizational problems. In her sophomore year, we worked together in a small group setting on her writing, especially her prose. To help her organize, we made oversized outlines on poster paper and taped them to the wall. While ideas in this writer's work sometimes seem separate, even disjointed, on every page there are strong sentences that compress ideas and emotions into vivid passages.

She enjoys the literature of the Beat generation. She understands the emotional

and often non-rational transitions of Ginsberg and Kerouac, probably because they don't follow conventional ideas of diction, grammar, and story. I find those writers difficult for the very reasons that Rebecca feels a kinship.

As teachers, we often claim to admire the maverick writers, but we teach to the conventional, don't we? I know I do. I enforce the rules of connecting two sentences properly, and only two. I correct spelling. I applaud good ideas — the ideas that I understand.

In my junior English class this year, Rebecca wrote two spirited short essays, one on her philosophy and the other on art. Given her organizational problems, there is no doubt in my mind that short works are her natural form.

For her writing seminar, she did a three-page paper on Marilyn Monroe and what society did to her. The teacher made many clinical notes and summed up her comments like so: "This is all over the place and never makes an argument." Rebecca had written with passion, and with her characteristic shifting focus, her language more like poetry than prose. She came to me, near tears, to talk. She had no idea what that comment meant. Based on every objective standard held dear by the guardians of English, it was certainly accurate. Yet I knew that a year earlier, Rebecca would never have been able to produce a work of that length at all. I had a choice: to defend the teacher, or to try to recharge the injured writer.

I tried to do both. I talked with her quite honestly about her writing progress, and where I saw her in the panorama of writers

and writing. I told her that her gifts far outweighed her failings for me, and that, at least in the Marilyn piece, the opposite seemed to be true for the other teacher. The difference, I told her, might be that the teacher did not know her.

This student may never deliver conventional forms, not out of obstinacy or rebelliousness. She simply thinks in her own way. She wants to write and express herself passionately, and we keep throwing up roadblocks to her passion. We assume that grammatical notions about writing come first. Rebecca signed up for writing seminar because she loves to write. After one assignment, she was discouraged enough to talk about withdrawing. Should she be ineligible because her writing is raw, flawed, and undeveloped? Or because the way she thinks makes it extremely difficult for her to go by our rules?

I mark up Rebecca's text like crazy. I am trying to clean up the surface before she has a confident hold on the greater truths: that writing is personal and requires courage.

Do we want Rebecca's work to look like everyone else's? We want her to have voice, but only in the confines of our conventions. I am as guilty of this hypocrisy as anyone. I want students to find new ways to do old things, but when a student attempts to do something different that does not feel polished and successful, when a student like Rebecca develops late as a writer, I hold that difference against her or him. I mark up the text like crazy. I am trying to clean up the

surface before the writer really has a confident hold on the greater truths: that writing is personal and requires courage.

Rebecca thinks differently than I do. She writes and protests as the Beats did, against people like me. Currently she is working in an office through a school-to-careers program. Now, seeing the need, she is working on her spelling and grammatical errors.

Surface

Eugene misses a lot of classes. It took me three months to get him to talk to me about his reading and writing. English class scares the hell out of him. When I assigned the long research paper required of all juniors in our school, I finally learned that he can't get two consecutive sentences out of his head onto the page without something interfering with the process. On the surface, I am a good English teacher — I demand the appropriate work from all students in the most democratic fashion. I am the American way. I coach, offer to help, ask how the work is going. But underneath, in this case, I know I am demanding work that Eugene cannot do.

I have taken a dozen literature courses, but I know next to nothing about diagnosing reading problems. And I have yet to have a university course seriously offer to teach me how to get readers and writers who are far behind grade level to catch up. But I am stubborn, and I bull right along.

Eugene is able to tell me out loud what he means to say. He writes down the first of two thoughts accurately; then, he nearly always makes a list of three things that support his first idea. That list of things somehow melts into his second statement,

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disturbing verb tenses and pronouns and all the mechanical things that make one sentence relate to the next. What comes out is very jumbled, and although he writes a page or two, the ideas are incoherent.

Eugene may very well have a learning disability. He has successfully ducked his teachers, skipped school, and kept his mouth shut as he sits in classes like mine. The process of having him coded would take most of the rest of the year. By default, I may be the best help he can get.

I make a deal with him. I'll give him an incomplete, the gift of time, if he'll meet me at least once a week. I reassure him that his ideas are fine, even excellent; it's just the translation that needs practice and work.

With Eugene I am always talking about surface. I give him small topics, coaching him on how to look at and fix each sentence before trying to connect them. Good clean sentences that hit like punches, I tell him. Forget the combinations until the job is there. I try not to preach, but I preach all the time: how important it will be someday to say the right things well on a job application. He knows. He is very patient with me. I am just unconventional enough for Eugene to begin to trust me.

When we first began to talk, I told him openly that he was nearly impossible to get to know, and that I suspected he did not know how to do the work. "Okay, so you can't write yet," I said. "But it took me this long to really talk to you, so I can't teach. Which problem do you think will be easier to fix?"

Metaphor

Writing here is really a metaphor for all student work, for all contact between

teachers and students. If work is genuine, that is, if it has purpose and meaning, then it is personal. It counts. We want to hear we do good work, not out of deep love for the work, but because we need to hear we are good ourselves.

Why as teachers are we such slaves to the surface of writing? Is it safer to talk about commas, dangling clauses, and usage than to get involved personally with the writer? There's no apparent emotion in those little flaws from *Warriner's*; the work is detailed and impersonal. But isn't the polishing of the surface a later stage in the development of a writer?

As long as we care more about the surface — the requirements, rules, and details of academic work — than about the person writing an individual work and the larger contexts and meanings, we will continue to limit our student writers. Their writing, like every act of writing, is a performance. Only when students start with something they care about, and know that they will share their writing with an audience they care about, will they begin to see the value in a polished surface for their work.

Standards

Lately I have been worried by the emphasis in the educational literature on standards for student work. While one part of my thinking applauds and says yes, we need to be clearer about what we expect from kids, another part of my brain worries that without the personalization of our teaching — finding the time to reach and work with individual students like the ones I have described — then we will still just be using standards to sort kids into categories. We will be serving the kids who have had the early advantages far better than the kids who are currently struggling with problems

we often don't see. Eugene is where he is because teachers just marked him absent, wrote little notes on his writing, and failed him either for nonattendance or for his inability to adhere to Strunk and White.

My concern is not only for students who seem to have fallen behind. I could list twenty fair-to-good students who do their work mechanically and lifelessly. They ignore my little comments in the margins. In a world of slick media and pressures toward early adulthood, these students don't see the point in the details because they don't feel connected to the learning on any basic level. And if I keep making my little unread notes on the surface of their writing without dealing personally with each of them, I may as well find another profession.

Can we create standards that are open-ended enough, like the essential questions we have been using to organize and model thinking, to meet the needs of people, not just the list of skills that businesses seek? I'm skeptical. We teachers hide in the impersonal details of curriculum, don't we? It's far easier than facing the students who don't learn. The failures of those students are our failures, and that's personal.

Maybe what we really need are standards for the personalized school.

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