The Temptations of Tobacco and Other Stories: Reaching Students Through Modeling

by

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I know many writing teachers who don’t write. They have their reasons. They are overworked, attending site-based meetings, organizing portfolios, sponsoring clubs, integrating units, calling parents, reading papers. Teaching English is taking over their lives. While they have too much to do, they are also tired of skimpy portfolios and frustrated by assignments that don’t work. What I have to say to these teachers is that writing with students is worth the effort.

I began writing with my ninth graders after becoming part of the Louisville Writing Project network in the summer of 1989. This strategy had been modeled with us, and I was eager to try it out with my own students. Since then I’ve found few methods of teaching the writing process as effective as teacher modeling.

One of the most compelling reasons teachers should write with students is that it motivates the students. When we share events in our lives and our own struggle with the writing process, we dignify not only our students but their learning process as well. I write honestly from my own experience and often the people and events I write about mirror circumstances and conflicts in students’ lives. As we guide adolescents toward more mature writing tasks, encouraging them to take risks with new forms, we must create a safe environment. Many young people need reassurance that their thoughts and experiences are valid and worthy.

Adolescence is a time of disconnection and isolation. Many teens spend their free time talking on the telephone with peers, watching television and avoiding a world which demands personal accountability — one in which friends and family fall short of the teens’ youthful egocentric expectations. Ninth graders characteristically set unreasonable standards, then blame the world or themselves when life doesn’t measure up. Such young people find it hard to write because writing from experience means making oneself vulnerable, and they are often intensely shy and embarrassed. They haven’t learned the coping skills enabling them to distance themselves from their disappointment and to laugh at personal idiosyncrasies and foibles.

As I share my own successes and failures, students gain insight and perspective of their own. For example, discussing internal conflict, I tell about the first time I was offered a cigarette. (I was eleven years old, had just moved, and was desperate to fit in.) My classes brighten up at this point. I’ve read pages of tobacco stories eagerly written and shared not only by teacher-pleasers but also by reluctant writers who normally sit at the back of the room, heads bowed, wearing Harley tee shirts or denim jackets reeking of cigarette smoke. And I’ve had students who confessed to experiences with other temptations, some more humorous than remorseful, like this ninth grader:

I remember it like it was yesterday. It was the last period of the day. I was in the eighth grade. My art class was going on a field trip to the square in Elizabethtown. My friends and I got off the bus and ran around the corner
of the building. I told my friend to give me a dip of Kodiak. I had a mouthful of dip. I was sketching a building and spitting black, juicy spit out over the sidewalk. I had just finished sketching the building when Mrs. Jones said, "Get on the bus everyone."

Well, I got on the bus, but I had forgot to spit the Kodiak out of my mouth. When I got to school I couldn't spit it out because the teacher was near me and would have seen me spit it out. We got to the classroom and she replied, "Class we are going to have a breath check."

I freaked because I still had the dip in my mouth. Jason told me not to rat on him if I got caught. I told him that I wasn't that way. She was almost to me, so I put my head down on the beige table. I got a lot of spit in my mouth and swallowed all of the black, juicy spit with little cut strands of tobacco in it. I was next. She said, "Breathe in my face."

I replied, "That is very bad manners."

She came back with, "It is bad manners for students to break school rules."

I said, "Well ... my breath is stinkin'."

She said, "The rest of the classes breath doesn't smell too kind."

I finally gave up and barely breathed in her face.

She replied, "That isn't good enough."

I did it again she replied the same, so I really breathed in her face really hard. She said, "Thanks."

She went on around the class. I was feeling sick. She told us she would report the trouble students to the office and we would know something Monday. I didn't get in trouble but I sure did learn a very important lesson. It was I would never dip in school again. I was sick to my stomach the whole weekend.

I am convinced that my willingness to tell my own story prodded this amusing confession.

When we do character sketches, I share "Doc" with the students. This is the sketch I wrote to describe my father who refused to raise crybabies and was perfectly agreeable to giving them something to cry about, but who cried when I left home. They learn about his two-pack-a-day non-filter KOOLs habit, his ritual of sending me after a cold beer calling, "Turn your cap around so I think you're coming back," his big stomach that he justified with hundreds of transparent excuses and that shrunk to nothing before he died, his skinny milk-white bird legs, his unreasonably high expectations and his unfailing reminder, "It's great to be your daddy." I end the sketch by saying that he hoped I wouldn't forget that, and I haven't.

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Drawing on my perspective, my students look for concrete word pictures of their own, their voices no longer choked off because the people in their lives don't measure up to the bland, superficial images of middle class mediocrity they see on television. Nor do they feel compelled to hide behind the slick, trite put-downs they learn from modern sitcoms. Student self-esteem rises as they honestly confront the "real" world, finding deeper truths. Their writing becomes more focused with authentic mood and tone, with real beginnings and endings emerging naturally. Because I refuse to write artificial pieces starring a perfect teacher in a perfect world, my students develop trust.

Teachers who write with their students enhance the repertoire of strategies they teach. Writing to my own assignments, I often use techniques I might not otherwise have introduced. For example, in the sketch about my father I ended each paragraph with the phrase "It's great to be your daddy," weaving it through the paper, reinforcing his love and support, adding an elegiac quality. I encourage students to look for a characteristic phrase and use it if it works.

One tenth grader wrote the following about her grandfather, who was always in no particular hurry:

"I'll Get There When I Get There"

My grandpa was a dreamer. He couldn't imagine a world without dreams or his family. "I'll get there
when I get there.” He would always use that special line when ole grandma (that’s what he called his wife) would hurry him. He said, “I might trip over myself if I hurry. I’ll get there when I get there.” …

My grandpa took his walk to the misty stars just a few short years ago. We all had part of us die with him like a furious star dying like a camp fire grabbing onto the last hot-coated ember. “I’ll get there when I get there.” …

The whole family took a part of him with them. I just wish when I am of that age I’ll be just like him. “I’ll get there when I get there.”

Students have focused pieces around such epithets as “Work first, then play,” “Trust in the Lord,” “You’ll always be my baby,” “Someday you’ll learn, only the hard way,” as well as lyrics from songs they found appropriate for their character. “For sentimental reasons,” “Everything I do, I do for you,” “When a man loves a woman,” are a few examples of phrases students have used effectively.

Teacher models needn’t be perfect. I rarely polish anything I write before I bring it into class. Not only does this conserve my valuable time, but students learn more when they help with revision. I do, however, always include a lead, ending, and a title as these are difficult for many ninth graders. Some things I bring in are better than others. Teens find reassurance in learning that even for their teacher some topics or types of writing are challenging. I usually put copies of my pieces on the overhead projector and read them aloud. I then invite students into the writing process by pointing out places that I think need work or where I’ve made some careless error. Reluctant at first, classes soon warm to revision.

One of the best ways I’ve found to reinforce the difference between poetic and prose wording is with a few poems I wrote several years ago. One poem is about an old high school sweetheart. Students know him through journal entries I’ve shared with them well before I bring in the poem. I explain to students that I’m not very good at writing poetry and show them the following piece.

**Course**

*You were a roadway in the night.*

*Twisting*

Curving

Winding

Weaving

You doubled back and changed directions,

Following your lead, I found myself alone.

With little coaching my students understand that this poem is unfinished. I ask for their help as readers and together we improve it. One class went something like this:

“This must be about that boy you dated…”

“Yes, the one who dated me for a while and then my best friend and then me and then her again.”

“Why did you title it ‘Course?’”

“Because the boy was not only a course in relationships for me, but he was also like a rally or road course, one step ahead of me keeping me confused.”

“Why don’t you call it ‘The Course’? That gets the point across better.”

“Yeah, Miss Perry. That’s better.”

“Suppose I strike out … these?”

“Yeah, that’s more … dramatic.”

“There are too many I’s and You’s.”

“Why don’t you make it a winding road or a country road? Roadway sounds too straight like highway, too boring.”

**The Course**

*Like a country road in the night.*

*Curving*

*Winding*

Doubling back you always changed directions.

The journey with you was solo.
It's still isn't a very good poem, and never will be; but because their teacher had written it and the students knew the story behind it, they were intensely involved. Students usually read a finished product first then later find out why or how the author wrote it. When teachers model writing, we begin with a reason to write and move logically through the process of making meaning together. Reading as writers, rewriting as readers, students feel the impact of focused, meaningful communication. Often before I'm finished with class discussion, heads are bent over journals, writers scribbling out lines trying and retrying new techniques, eager to create.

I've read wonderful pieces resulting from this particular poetry lesson. Cars crashing, garden walls crumbling, friendships compared to never-ending books, flower petals crushed by careless shoes, bright precious gems hidden in heirloom boxes. One girl described her dying grandmother as an “hour glass running out of time as each grain squeezed through the long skinny neck and all hope disappeared.” Another wrote the following.

Betrayal
Like an ocean you were
calm,
enticing,
I felt your vastness rise.
Monstrous waves crashing
upon me.
When I whispered my secrets,
you roared them into the wind
for all to hear.
Now you are calm.
I've pulled my boat ashore.

When students see their teachers write, they begin to adjust their concepts of appropriate time on task, to develop ideas, and to intensify their concentration level by adjusting their own behavior to the model they observe. I have often been busily scribbling my journal only to look up and ask, “Am I the only one still writing?” “No,” some answer. Others comment that “although I started to stop, when I looked at you, I thought of more stuff to say.” Still others will say, “This is all I can think of.” As the year progresses, so does the quality of student work.

Not every example we share with our classes has to be written especially for them. I've shared letters of adjustment to insurance companies, pointing out that you don't skip the heading if you want credibility with the adjuster, or that a single line in a letter can remind a clerk that a real person wrote the letter, not another machine. Sharing the writing we do for real in our lives validates the importance of acquiring solid writing skills. Some situations cannot be corrected by telephone conversations sprinkled with pleas of “What I really mean is…”

Current performance-based test scores offer two unmistakable arguments for writing in class with students. First, too many students growing up in this modern “effortless” age of fast food, calculators, fax machines, crash diets, instant cash, remote controls, overnight mail and three-day love affairs, have little concept of development. These teens still look for the easy way out. If it doesn't come instantly, if it isn't all fun, they truly believe something is wrong. Because they've never had to focus their attention long enough to accomplish complex tasks, they don't understand process. They have little perception of the amount of time required to fully develop a piece of quality writing. Throw it away, tear it up, think about something else.

Writing is a multistep, multifaceted process. However, when teachers are willing to plunge in and write themselves, everyone is more likely to become engaged in the process and satisfied with the result. Modeling is a strategy that works.

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