My father died in 1965. Several days after the funeral, my brother and I met in the basement to divide his tools. My brother chose the Craftsman lathe and turning tools, assorted files, saws, hammers, and rulers; I took two hammers, three chisels, a jack plane, and an inexpensive Stanley block plane. Eventually I hung these tools in my own basement where, from dampness and lack of use, they rusted. This past August, when I disassembled the block plane to clean and sharpen it, I discovered the screw was broken, making it impossible to raise or lower the blade. I asked my brother, a mechanical engineer, for advice on buying a new block plane. He sent me a copy of Woodcraft, a catalogue of woodworking tools. I flipped through to the section on block planes, each with a picture, description, and price. At the end of each description was the sentence, "Honing required before use." Honing, I learned after ordering a block plane made by Lie-Nielsen in Maine, is necessary because the manufacturer shapes and sharpens the blade on a grinding stone. The new blade appears sharp, but viewed under a microscope looks like a saw. If I were to use the plane without honing, these jagged teeth would break off, leave marks in the wood, and the blade would quickly become dull.

When the plane arrived, I read Gerald Polmateer’s “New Angle on Whetstones” in Fine Wood Working, No. 101, and Tage Frid’s Joinery: Tools and Techniques, then went to work. First, I flattened the back of the blade by rubbing it on a 4000, fine-grit water stone to make it as smooth as possible. Then I checked the bevel-angle chart: low-angle planes are honed at an angle of 15 to 20 degrees for softwood, 20-25 degrees for hardwood; jack, smooth, or jointer planes, 25-30 degrees. Because I had a low-angle block plane which I planned to use on walnut, I selected an angle of 20 degrees which would stay sharper than a steeper angle of 25 or 30 degrees. I also wanted to put a secondary bevel on the blade at an added angle of one or two degrees. A secondary bevel sharpens the edge just as honing sharpens the blade. I tightened the blade in a Veritas honing guide, checked the angle with my father-in-law’s protractor, then honed the blade on an 800 grit water stone, dripping water over the stone to keep the metal particles suspended. Then I rinsed the blade and repeated the process on the reverse side of the stone (4000 grit). Finally, I adjusted the guide to 21 degrees and passed the blade lightly across the stone to get that secondary bevel. After rinsing the blade and stone, I inserted the blade in the plane, positioned it, and ran it across the edge of a piece of white pine. The pine looked and felt smooth.

To anyone who has not used a wood plane, this preparation may sound obsessive. From experience, I can tell you it is well worth the time. A sharp plane is much easier to use (less work), leaves a much smoother surface (less sanding), and is easier to control (fewer mistakes). The
saying, “measure twice ... cut once,” refers to sawing a board, but the concept of adequate preparation of tools, materials, and procedures is applicable to all woodworking.

As I honed the blade of my new plane, I thought often about “honing.” I had used the phrase “honing your skills,” but only now I appreciated the differences among shaping, sharpening, and honing. I remembered speaking to the new teacher consultants on the last day of the Institute, referring to these five weeks as a beginning. I said I wanted them to stay involved in the Project for at least a year — reading/writing groups, continuity meetings, conferences, retreats, and board meetings. In the past fifteen years of the Project, I had seen benefits to those who remained active. If participation in the Summer Institute analogously could be considered a sharpening of their writing and teaching, then continued involvement in the Project could be considered a honing of their skills.

The daily grind of teaching wears us down, and returning to the Project once again makes us sharp. How? Writing during a Summer Institute is supported by twice-a-week response groups, once-a-week read-around, an intellectual climate, and time to write. Participants are both teachers and writers during these five weeks. Come fall, teachers are flooded with classes, papers, red tape, parent conferences, back-to-school nights, meetings, and lesson preparation. Under these adverse conditions, they renew their appreciation of how difficult it is to write. They encounter problems in getting to the writing, as well as problems in the writing itself which they must solve if they are to go on. The solutions they devise for their writing enrich their teaching and their consulting.

Writing is only one of the activities which hone the skills of teacher consultants. Presenting is another. Successful presentations boost confidence and inspire. But no presenter is always successful. I vividly remember the presentation I gave to a group of elementary teachers in Loudoun County in the early 1980s. I had given my presentation several times before, then discovered what I had heard so often ... that university professors, regardless of their expertise, at times have no credibility with teachers. My presentation on correcting was irrelevant to primary teachers. My expectations had risen out of sight like a hot-air balloon; I felt humiliated.

Yes, honing can be painful. The National Writing Project believes that the best teacher of teachers is another teacher. I agree. But teaching other teachers, especially colleagues you’ve known for years, can be very difficult. Working with colleagues by slipping them pertinent articles, inviting them to enroll in inservice workshops or conferences, identifying and nominating them for the Summer Institute, sharing lessons to reach those bound to their schools, and holding discussions which challenge assumptions can set us aside and even alienate us from our fellow teachers. Such work demands enormous tact and good judgment. With each encounter we learn something about ourselves, about what we believe to be true about the teaching of writing and about the value of using writing to learn. In honing, the hardest stone produces the finest edge.

Reflection, or the more systematic teacher research, is integral to being a teacher/consultant. As opposed to traditional venting of frustration endemic to teachers’ lounges, Project meetings are an exchange of experiences considered in context, and a generous opening of files to assist one another in making sense of the enigmatic process of learning. Having Mary Budd Rowe’s research on wait-time in our files (see Pearson, 1980) is enough to remind us to go slow when we lead discussions, just as journal reflection on our teaching is enough to see recurring patterns in our students. Everyone knows that the daily grind of teaching wears us down, and returning to the Project once again makes us sharp.

Reference


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