Teaching Can Be a Novel Experience

by

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Good teaching is like good writing. I feel qualified to say this because, while I have been employed as a biology teacher for over three decades, I have also struggled with two novels "in progress," as the euphemism goes. In the process, I have become convinced that many of the axioms guiding a writer's effort are the same principles that direct the craft of a successful teacher. Consider the following precepts advocated by those who write books on how to write—books that most writers don't read because they are too busy writing.

Know Your Audience

The number one reason most writers get rejection slips is failure to address the piece to a specific audience. Successful writers, before pounding out a manuscript for a periodical, read several issues of the magazine. They scan the letters to the editor, look at the advertisers, and read the classified ads in the back. Until they can "see" a picture of the person who reads the magazine, they are not ready to write the piece.

Teachers, like writers, need to know their audience—something teachers, with 150 or more students each day, find difficult to do. Most do not know the students until after the first test when they have already lost those who happened to get a low score. The wise teacher makes the effort to know the audience from day one. In my first years of teaching, I was too anxious to hand out the books and get going. After all, I taught biology, the study of life, and I only had one year. We had no time to waste. However, over time I have learned to devote the whole first week, maybe a few days more, to knowing my audience and establishing some trust. Sure, after one week I was eight weeks behind the district curriculum guide, but no matter, I would catch up later. During these early days in the semester, I would ask students to write on subjects that might, to them, seem have little to do with science— their names, their typical day, their heroes and villains, and their predictions of where they might be in the year 2020. I would come to know those kids as individuals, not merely as members of the class.

I've used other writing activities to help students get comfortable in the classroom and less anxious about the subject of science in much the same way an author's preface prepares a reader to plunge into a book. They make a sketch map of the room. They select an object in the room to describe and explain how they feel about the object. They tell of any rumors they have heard about the room, me, or the course. For example, one year there was a rumor I had a self-polishing car. I had told the previous year's class that I never washed my VW van. One day they saw it all sparkling clean in the parking lot. They reminded me I never washed my car and wanted to know why it was so clean that day. I told them it must be because it is self-polishing, pointing out how far advanced German engineering is. To my amazement the story of the self-polishing van became part of the mythology of Irvington High.
As they tell their stories, I write with them, sharing rumors I have heard about them like, "You guys won't dissect frogs unless you can listen to rap music at the same time." I ask them to explain what they hope to get out of the course. I explain what I expect of them.

Sometimes I have the students pair up, each of them choosing a side to the question: Why study science? If I taught auto shop it would be, why take auto shop? One student takes the position that science is a waste of time. The other takes the position that science is the most valuable subject in school. They argue, in writing, silently passing their papers back and forth. After about ten minutes each student shares a "golden line," the line he or her opponent thinks is the best one. I use these as a basis for a class discussion. Even a minimal effort can lead to lively debate. For example, one of my students wrote, "Science sucks." His opponent chose this as the best line. In this case I was able to get a discussion going on whether science actually sucked; I was able to convince them that technically it could not. We had a great time. These students, like readers beginning a book, need to anticipate the benefits of the experience before them.

**Hook the Reader**

"Hook your reader," an article in *Writer's Digest* preaches. It's good advice. Good writers grab the reader's attention right away. A writer, we are told, needs to capture the attention of a busy editor in the first two paragraphs or the rejection slip will surely be in the mail.

If students are going to stay with you through a unit of learning, they need to be "hooked," involved. Ideally, they will be as eager to find out what happens next as any reader of a Dick Francis novel. As a biology teacher I never lacked for hooks. I could bring in anything that wiggles, bites, or makes a noise, and the kids were ready to plunge in. But what about the history teacher?

A history teacher I know hooks his students into a unit on the westward movement by showing the class a picture of some pioneers posing in front of their covered wagon. He asks each student to become one of the pioneers in the picture. What do they smell, hear, feel, touch, and see? Students write diary entries for the character they have assumed. The activity generates a whole blackboard full of questions: How far could they go in one day? Were the wagons pulled by oxen or horses? How did they cross the desert without any cokes? His students now own the unit; they are hooked.

**Build Trust**

Louis Lamour, the famous writer of western novels, built his reputation on accuracy and authentic details, assuring the reader his tale could be trusted. I live in a gold mining area and know a little about panning for gold. The following passage from his novel, *Dutchman's Flat*, convinced me he knew what he was talking about:

*With a quick glance to make sure there were no Apaches in sight, he tipped the pan slightly, to an angle of about thirty degrees so the lighter sands, already buoyed up by the water, could slip out over the side. He struck the pan several good blows to help settle the gold, if any, and then dipped for more water and continued the process.***

I remember picking up an airplane book," a book to read on the airplane and not worth carrying off the airplane. The British author opened by describing an American army major in a parachute battalion during World War II. Having myself been an American in an army parachute battalion just after the war, I realized after skimming the first paragraph that the author didn't know what he was talking about. His major was black and was carrying the wrong weapon. The Pentagon, stupidly, did not integrate the army until 1948. Although black units were often commanded by white officers, black officers were never put in command of white units. The author had not done his homework. The book never made it to the airplane. Write from your own experience, do your homework; it's a good rule for both writers and teachers to follow.

The teacher must assure the students from the first day of class that he knows his stuff and can be trusted to treat them fairly and with respect. In my class I would build some trust and respect by writing my autobiography as a scientist as students wrote their own science autobiographies. While they told stories of how their eighth grade science teacher was carrying an aquarium across the room and the bottom dropped out, I recounted my own ups and downs as a student of science. I told them that as a biology student at Oakland Tech High School I never did see anything under the microscope that Miss Hawk said we should see. I just copied whatever Marsha drew. I ended the piece by concluding, "I am now certain Marsha never saw anything either." The science autobiography assignment gave me a sense of what my students had studied in science and, more importantly, how they...
felt about the subject. Further, by writing my own science autobiography, I could convince the students that I knew something about biology and that I empathized with their role as science students.

rolling on the berm in rhythm with the incoming waves. MacNeil’s “showing” writing provoked these sensations even though I am a hundred miles from a beach. Good teachers also show rather than tell. A former student, now in her forties, recently told me the most impressive memory she took from my biology class was the spider dance. The dance came about one day when, on the spur of the moment, I decided to show, not tell, the class the mating dance of the male tarantula. Pasting eight masking tape eyes to my bald head I proceeded to do the dance as accurately as I could with only half the number of needed appendages. The students roared with laughter, but they never forgot the plight of the pitiful male tarantula who eventually gets devoured by his mate. The spider dance became a yearly command performance.

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Of course, showing and not telling can be overdone. I remember a football coach I worked with getting exasperated with the feeble attempts of the team to block a punt in practice. He decided to show them how it was done. He blocked the punt, but while the bruises from the belly flop he took impressed many of the players, the price, he belatedly recognized, was too high.

Show, Don’t Tell

Good writers do not write lines like, “We walked on the beach in the winter.” They take the reader with them. Robert MacNeil, describing his boyhood, writes:

We enjoyed the beaches as often on gray, cloudy days with a fresh wind blowing as on days when the sand reflected a dazzling sun with no wind. More typically, there was wind and a strong lungful of breath-taking freshness lasting of iodine and seaweed clean enough to eat. (1989)

Reading these words, I am placed on the wet sand of Dillon Beach where I spent several summers. My nostrils are filled with the odor of uprooted kelp.

Be Kind to Your Reader

John Trimble (1975) urges writers to be kind to their readers: Write with clarity. Don’t show off your vocabulary; don’t talk over the head of the reader, but don’t talk down either, Trimble says.

I have caught myself showing off with a stimulating biological discourse filled with terms and concepts like volvocales, coenobium, and siphonous forms. Some students sit there, eyes glazed. A few scribble feverishly, without understanding, in their notebooks. Many have a, “May I go see my counselor now?” look on their faces. The students are intimidated, put off by my self-perceived brilliancy. But I also have erred in the other direction, insulting a class of “reluctant learn-
ers" by giving them a lesson about fossils which included their having to cut out paper forms to assemble a dinosaur. I got the idea from Learning magazine. It was designed for third graders. It took months to regain their trust. Be kind to the student; respect the student as a good writer respects his reader.

**Revise, Revise, Revise**

Ernest Hemingway said he wrote the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* 39 times because he couldn’t seem to get the words right. I know as soon as I drop this piece in the mailbox I will wish I had at least one more chance to revise it. Good teachers, like good writers, constantly revise their lessons. Bad teachers teach the same lesson thousands of times.

The curriculum guide for my “reluctant learners” required me to teach a unit on how to read a map. The first year we opened our books, read the chapter, did some map drills and answered some questions in the back of the chapter. This, of course, was followed by a test which most of them flunked. My lesson definitely needed revision.

The next year I started the unit by bringing in topographical maps of our local area, some overlay paper, compasses, string, and rulers. I formed students into groups and told them we were going to build a road. Each group represented a construction company attempting to get a contract from the state. The idea was to build a road from point A on the map to point B. I gave them a cost sheet which included the cost of digging a tunnel, moving a house, paving each mile, labor costs, etc. I made up the figures. The group that submitted a sealed bid to build the best road for the least cost won the contract. Of course, before they could start building the road they had to submit an environmental impact study and a complete written description of the route they proposed to take.

It took three weeks, but it was three weeks of student groups hovering over their maps, using their compasses, learning about contour lines, map symbols, calculating expenses, and writing reports as they traced the route they were sure would win the contract. We finished the unit with the principal opening the sealed bids and announcing the winner. The winning group got Payday candy bars. That class did much better on the test than the previous class. If I had to revise that lesson again, I would bring in somebody from the State Transportation Department to give them a talk.

**Know Your Craft**

Becoming a good writer takes lots of practice. Good writers learn from other writers; most writers I know are avid readers. Jack London sat in his room copying the works of authors he considered to be the masters until he had a sense of the rhythm, the voice, and a feel for the words used by the great ones. The best teachers of writing are those who are themselves writers. All teachers should be aware that their use of the language — the syntax, the grammar, even the handwriting they place on the board — represents a model for the student.

Forty years ago student teaching was called practice teaching. It bothered me. Did it mean when we finally got hired we didn’t need to practice anymore? The craft of teaching, like writing, is an art that can never be truly mastered. Teaching the perfect lesson is as unattainable as finding the bottom of a black hole, but the striving for it can be an exhilarating lifetime challenge. Good teachers never stop growing with the profession. They attend, not necessarily enjoy, workshops. They are researchers in their own classrooms; they share what they have learned with colleagues. Like good writers they burn up — not out.

For many years now I have used my understanding of the link between teaching and writing to enrich my professional life. I expect I will soon read another good novel and, in the process, learn something about teaching. And as I am reflecting on my teaching, I may decide to give one of those “in-progress” novels one more try.

**References**


Bob Tierney, a teacher consultant with the Bay Area Writing Project, now lives in Poker Bar, CA, and is currently writing a book about fly-fishing.