

Editors' note: The Quarterly editors asked Sheridan Blau to write a few words about the process of writing and publishing a book. Below is his response.

On the Experience of Writing *The Literature Workshop*

BY SHERIDAN BLAU

I completed a first and second draft for the book that became *The Literature Workshop* during a five-month sabbatical in France, when I wrote over three hundred new pages of prose, most of which survived subsequent revisions. Such productivity may not be unheard of for some writers, but for me it was the most productive period of my writing life. I had never before written so fast, so steadily, or—given how much I felt I was discovering and articulating for the first time in my writing—so well.

My extraordinary productivity during this period I now attribute to a number of enabling conditions that I more or less deliberately created for myself as a writer. The first of them was my decision (or my yielding to my wife's wisdom) to spend our sabbatical in a rural French village, not so much for the beauty of the place but for its distance from my office. The distance protected me from all the distractions of my ordinary professional responsibilities, and most especially my responsibilities as a writing project site director (which were handled brilliantly by our co-directors). I even shunned email, going online only once a month.

I also succeeded in my writing because I made a tactical rhetorical decision early in my

sabbatical about the form and voice I would employ for most of the chapters of my book. I decided to write each chapter as a dramatization of an actual workshop that I had been regularly conducting for teachers. This meant that I knew my audience very well and could trust at the outset that I knew how to speak to them and even knew pretty much what I was going to say and what each chapter would cover. I made the decision to write in dramatic form hesitantly and fearfully at first. Could a book in such a form be taken seriously as a contribution to professional knowledge in my field? Could I manage to explore theoretical issues in sufficient depth within the structure of a dramatized workshop?

I'll let others answer the first question, but the answer to the second is that the dramatic form of my chapters was more of a stimulus than a constraint in allowing me to address difficult ideas and explore them productively in my writing. The dramatic form invited soliloquies where I could step aside to comment on what had just transpired in the drama and offer reflections and theoretical speculations that were lengthier than anything I ever would or could say under the constraints of limited time that obtain during an actual inservice workshop. And the opportunity to reflect and speculate at some length yielded new and unanticipated insights for me, taking me beyond anything I had thought before in any of my workshops or

classes. In this way, my writing process was not merely one of re-creating what I had already experienced with teachers and students, but a process of discovering fresh ideas and questions and confusions, making the act of writing an act of constant discovery and illumination and making my book as valuable for me and, I trust, for my readers, as I had ever dared to imagine.

This brief note does not allow me the space to describe the other conditions that conspired to make my sabbatical so remarkably productive. Nor do I want to excite the envy of my readers by describing my daily three-mile walks through the local vineyards, our trips to ever-fascinating village markets, the meals, the wine, the changing seasons of southern Provence. I cannot think that I deserved such a gift of time, pleasure, and productivity, but my prayer for my colleagues is that we should all be blessed with such a sabbatical opportunity at least once in our professional lives.

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