

From Chaos to Clarity to Communication

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Perhaps you share my dilemma as I consider the question "Why teach Writing?" As a secondary English teacher, I feel besieged from all sides and points of view. Journalists, professors, school board members and parents are exhorting me to return to the basics. Students are interrogating me about why they should learn to write when many doctors, lawyers, politicians and plumbers are able to earn high salaries and/or to achieve social status without being able to write clearly. As if the bombardment weren't heavy enough, some colleagues are questioning whether our rationale for teaching writing reflects a hypocritical value system. Are we preparing students for college or for life, they ask. One self-confessed cynic points out that it must be for college alone because too few college graduates (including English teachers) continue to write once they have received their degrees.

I am not going to proclaim the importance of teaching good writing because our students must be prepared for college or because they need to know how to write clearly in order to become successful lawyers or plumbers. I'm going to discuss a reason for teaching writing which I feel is ultimately far more important. I believe that people should know how to write because it is through writing that we can validate, insure and preserve our humanity and our sanity. As we process our raw material, give it substance, name it, organize it, and inscribe it, we can exorcise demons that have haunted us, give order to our internal chaos and provide a means by which we can cope with and confront our experiences. The act of writing can provide access to the unconscious and enable the writer to communicate with the self and others. Writing is a means to know ourselves as well as to make ourselves known. We need

to facilitate this secret writing, hidden writing.

I base this conviction about the function of and necessity for writing on my sporadic attempts at composing poems, stories and journal entries as well as on my years of experience as a teacher of writing. The longer I teach and write the more convinced I become that the final written product is just one step in a complex and mysterious process through which the chaos of one's heart and mind is molded into a coherent form that can be experienced and understood by another human being.

This voyage from chaos to clarity to communication--from darkness to light--begins with an almost instinctual urge to label feelings and thoughts with words. That the ability to express oneself is essential and that the act of writing is therapeutic has been confirmed over and over again by my own students. Through writing, students can gain a knowledge of and perspective on themselves. As one student recently explained:

"Writing in my journal has taught me that I cherish childhood and am scared to death of the future."

When given an open assignment or a journal to write in regularly, my students often describe personal experiences such as the death of a parent, the failure of a relationship, an attempt at suicide, or a recovery from alcoholism. Because I have been impressed and depressed by what they feel a need to write about, I recently asked some of them to describe their encounters with writing. About the motivation to write, one student said:

"I write when I sense that I have to get a certain feeling out of my system. I guess it's my outlet to sanity."

Another responded:

"To me, writing is more than arranging letters into words. I find that writing is a way in which I can let out all that is bottled up inside of me, without saying anything out loud. Sometimes writing a letter to myself helps me to straighten out my feelings, thoughts or problems."

A third student said:

"Writing is a way in which I learn more about myself, my friends and my surroundings. It's a way in which I can sort out my thoughts and can share those thoughts with others. When I'm confused, it helps me to discover where I stand."

A fourth student added:

"Pencil and paper have shown me solutions to problems that don't seem so well defined while contained in the limits of my mind. That pencil and paper have enabled me to paint experiences without a brush and easel."

These students are describing creative writing--not the title of an elective course--but a process by which they discover and create and validate themselves with words on paper. Although they are not as articulate as Robert Frost, my students are echoing his statement that "Every poem is a momentary stay against the confusion of the world."

One student, who recently wrote her third paper about the death of her best friend, which she had witnessed two years ago, was not able to face that loss until she could read her own words that describe it. She explained:

"I kept seeing the accident in my mind and for the first time I could not write it down; it was too painful. About two months after it happened, my English teacher assigned a paper on a personal experience--writing that helped to deal with my friend's death."

This year, while writing her most recent paper, she chose to recreate that experience in detail--to vividly describe her friend being knocked down by a speeding car. Through writing she has begun to cope with that event--to detach it from herself through the use of words so that she can examine it. The experience seems less overwhelming and terrifying because she has named it, framed it and tamed it with words that she and others can read.

How does a person learn to impose order and coherence upon what David Holbrook, a teacher and writer, calls "the secret places of the soul?" Some learn to write well because they must; others learn that they must and can because they are given opportunities, encouragement and instruction by their teachers. A few experiences with the agony and the ecstasy of creating oneself with words can be enough to transform a student who writes to fulfill a requirement into a person who writes to fulfill him or herself.

We teachers must provide these experiences through assignments and supportive critical feedback which enable students to discover the power of, and therefore the necessity for, acquiring the ability to write. The following 12th grader's tribute to his teacher should reinforce all of us who have struggled with the question of why teach writing when it is

so time consuming for the teacher and may not be required beyond a college Freshman Composition Course.

"In eleventh grade I had a teacher who at worst was supportive and at best was technically helpful. She accepted my most sloppy and nebulous poems, despite their disorder, because she knew there was something in them. She took my journal, my wild array of scattered pencil marks on paper, and poems written every which way, and helped me to make sense out of them. She commented, criticized and sent me whirling in a new direction; it was fabulous. After that, writing became very dear to me. My pen and paper were often my closest companions. I would often isolate myself and spend my time writing poetry instead of watching t.v., sleeping or partying. I realized how exhilarating it is to just sit down, write and see what happens."

With our help, students can progress from chaos to clarity and finally to comfort with external communication. As they determine the phrases, the organization, and the mode of discourse to be used, student writers can move toward a polished final product that captures and elucidates on paper a state of mind or a train of thought. Involvement in the writing process can also facilitate an awareness of writing as reading. Struggling to find the right word and the right form can sensitize students to the style and structure of the books, stories, poems and essays they read. Some are amazed and delighted to realize that a novel was once someone's creative writing that had to be revised and revised and revised before it was set in type and captured between two hard or soft covers.

To those students who besiege me with questions about why they should learn to compose and to those adults who entreat me to go back to the basics, I will answer that writing is basic. Without the ability to transform chaotic bits and pieces of thoughts and feelings into coherent forms, individuals will be haunted seekers of words instead of inspired creators and receivers of communication. To those teachers who would ask me why they should teach writing, I will quote David Holbrook in the foreword to his book The Secret Places. He writes:

We need to be in touch with the secret places of the soul; it is there that order may be found, and by what flourishes there potentialities may be released . . . The teacher seeks to help children to grow up into adults who have developed creative attitudes to life and who have a sense of order and meaning in

their experience. To train effective and efficient young people, we must foster their deeper needs.

One of these is for a rich imaginative contemplation of the nature of human experience with the consequent gaining of insight, understanding and satisfaction. By their imaginative culture they may grow to become good lovers, good parents, good workers and creative people in the community, able to let their sympathy flow, to become sustained by self-respect, and possessed of a sense of purpose.

It is the ability to name and impose order on experience--to clarify and to communicate--that we must preach, practice and teach. Let us do for all our students what that aforementioned eleventh grade teacher did for hers; let us show them how to whirl in fabulous new directions and encounter that exhilaration that accompanies self-discovery and creation.

Watching People Move in Their Sleep

People who make strange sounds in their sleep
as though someone is awake in them,
waging war or making love
or saying yes to hands that wave goodbye
or play with the hair of children.
How slowly they breathe!

Perhaps they have slid down the map
from Minnesota to Oklahoma or Louisiana,
regardless of rivers and mountains.

Whose arms do they put around themselves
in their sleep? Who do they tiptoe to avoid walking?
What food could keep them moving like this?

Perhaps it is a grave they are moving in.

Perhaps they have grown extra breasts
to suckle themselves.

Oh, what frightening music comes out
of the churches there! Oh, what people dare
to say to their mothers!

They mention flowers, and someone says No.
They rock themselves and chase each other
around each other. What laughter!

How they love to touch themselves
and each other with their hair.

They uncover their heads and become children
playing at giving each other flowers
and messages from important people.

No one ever sleeps alone. No one
ever comes all the way back.

JOHN REZMERSKI