



WHAT I'VE LEARNED ABOUT WRITING

PAUL MARASHIO

Who would believe that I, a curriculum coordinator, would write poetry from my own abstract painting? Well, I did, at the Exeter Writing Project.

Writing has become a lost art. English teachers con themselves into thinking grammar teaches writing. Learning grammar doesn't result in good writing; neither will the occasional term paper make students better writers. The problem is that students don't write in school. They should be submerged in the writing process: write, edit, revise, discuss, revise, final draft.

Since teachers are not trained in writing, many don't know where to begin. To help teachers learn how to teach writing, projects around the country, modeled on the Bay Area Writing Project in San Francisco, invite Fellows to join a writing community to discuss and teach the intricacies, dynamics, and latest methods.

Writing at Exeter

From my hands-on experiences during four weeks in the Exeter Writing Project in New Hampshire, a clear picture emerged for me of how the writing process works with students. In one exercise, each of the 21 Fellows was provided with a white piece of paper and a tray filled with

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water. Cups of oil-based paints were placed on the front table. Each Fellow poured three colors into the water, stirred, then placed the paper on top of this mixture. An abstract painting emerged and from this abstraction we wrote haiku. A sense of pride rushed through me at my first attempt to think poetically.

One presenter asked us to list words that please us. We then selected two words from our lists and wrote down more specific words. From the second list, we then each

*Before they can
teach students
to write, teachers
must learn
how to do it.*



wrote a paragraph which we read to the class. Another presenter held up pictures of athletes and action posters of current heroes and heroines. We quickly jotted down the action verb that best described the scene.

Later in the project, a Fellow brought in junior high students to give us their side of writing. They discussed how they evolved as writers, and how, as time went on, they enjoyed writing and sharing their work with their classmates.

Each day, as we faced new writing assignments, our enthusiasm remained high. We taught each other writing techniques to use in the classroom and helped each other improve writing skills.

Assigned readings and guest speakers dealt with peer conferenc-

ing, inventive spelling, when to begin teaching writing, grammar's role, and grading, and challenged our thinking about writing. Author Mina Shaughnessy, for example, feels students can write without formal instruction in grammar. People inherently structure their thinking into proper grammar, she feels, and many student errors in grammar and spelling fall into patterns. She suggests that once the teacher recognizes the patterns, the teacher can concentrate on them and then move on to more difficult problems.

The Rhythm of Writing

Rough drafts, conferences, revisions, and final drafts were the rhythm of the Exeter Writing Project. As we shared our writing with each other, our input resulted in better understanding of writing in the curriculum and teaching writing in the classroom. Our original views about writing were reinforced, strengthened, or expanded, and we all gained from the experience.

Writing is mechanical, a craft; constant writing helps students improve. Students need to know it is not a sin to revise and rework. They need to know we all need help from others to point out our blind spots. Professional writers go through this process. Everyone, at some time or another, goes through a prewriting stage which will either be discarded or reworked or refocused. If teachers are aware of the process of writing, they will view writing positively and the result will be better student writers. ■

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