

Collaborative Writing

R. BAIRD SHUMAN

Much writing is a solitary enterprise. Many successful writers lock themselves up and practice their art totally removed from the outside world. Perhaps the image of remote writers toiling away in their drafty garrets has made young people feel that writers are a special breed of people with whom they do not wish to be identified.

Writing can be a collaborative effort, however, particularly the kinds of writing many of our students do when they leave school, such as grant proposals, committee reports, sets of instructions, and other utility writing. If English teachers can help their students find ways to cooperate in their writing efforts, they may be doing them more good than they would by giving them individual assignments.

The most spirited school writing

The image of remote writers toiling away in drafty garrets has made young people feel writers are a special breed of people with whom they do not wish to be identified.

often takes place in workshop situations. Ken Kesey proved this when he had his creative writing class collaborate on writing a novel, which has subsequently been published.¹

Although such a triumph is not possible at every level or for every class, the collaborative effort is possible in any writing workshop.

Wendy Bishop tells of a simple, initial step she tries. She hands each of her students a sheet of paper with one sentence written at the top. Such sentences can come from a variety of sources — the first lines of novels, poems, or songs, found lines like the one a student uttered from which Robert Anderson derived the title of one of his plays: "My rooming house is dank, but the landlady is kind and she has me down frequently in the late afternoons for tea and sympathy."

After each student writes for two or three minutes, using the line as the impetus, all the students stop writing and pass their papers to the person beside them, who takes up the writing where they left off. The exchanges continue for as long as they seem fruitful. After that, students read aloud the papers.²

Bishop's method is excellent to use with students who can't get started or who are intimidated at the thought of writing anything. Informal collaborations result in nonthreatening writing situations, yet the spirit of competition gives these situations the kinds of creative tension they require if they are to succeed.

Another resourceful teacher, applying methods she was introduced to at the Bread Loaf School of English, encourages parent/student writing collaborations. She arranges situations in which students and their parents come to her house one evening a week for a month and write together about topics of

mutual interest.

To get the writing started, she simply asks for reflections on first childhood memories. She poses questions that elicit specific detail such as "Who was there? What were you doing? Where were you? What made it memorable?"³ The initial writing

Although human communication is a natural act, writing can be a most unnatural one.

lasts for only 10 minutes until everyone has gained confidence. This approach helps parents understand something about what their children are doing in school and cements school/community relations.

Although human communication is a natural act, writing can be a most unnatural act. Teachers who realize this will understand that the support students can gain from collaborative writing experiences will bolster their confidence and help them to write more easily and freely than ever before.

¹For a description of how Kesey's students wrote *Caverns*, see "Ken Kesey Weaves His Magic Spell, Turns Graduate Students of Creative Writing at University of Oregon into Published Novelists." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, (January 17, 1990), A15, 22-23; and D. Weddle, "Ken Kesey's Eclectic Writing Acid Test," *Rolling Stone*, (October 5, 1989), 122-123, 153.

²W. Bishop, (1991). *Released into Language: Options for Teaching Creative Writing*, (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English).

³P. A. Davis, (April 1991). "Parents Writing with Students," *English Journal* 80: 62-64.

R. Baird Shuman is Professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign, Box 1687, Champaign, IL 61824-1687

Copyright © 1992 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.