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Passion and Craft in Writing:
Finding a Balance

John A. Ianacone

have taught high school English in an affluent district for the past 30 years. I went into teaching English because I loved to read, I loved words on paper, and I loved to write. Somewhere along the way I lost that love of writing as I taught “composition.” It’s only recently that I discovered the beauty and the power of words. It’s only recently that I really started to teach.

Like most English majors, perhaps, in college I had my favorite books and passages. I copied the latter into my own early journals. I read and re-read them for the sheer pleasure of the sound of the words and the feelings they evoked. I was motivated by Ernest Hemingway’s Moveable Feast: “All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know.” And when I started teaching, I thought it would be the greatest job in the world: to be paid to share great writing with students. We would read together wonderful lines, we would be inspired, and ourselves would write, too.

My high school students, reaching into their recent youthful, exuberant language experiences, would bring in their favorite passages, such as this from Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland, “The Lobster-Quadrille”:

“Will you walk a little faster?” said a whiting to a snail,
“There’s a porpoise close behind us, and he’s treading on my tail.
See how eagerly the lobsters and the turtles all advance!
They are waiting on the shingle—will you come and join the dance?
Will you, won’t you, will you, won’t you, won’t you join the dance?”

Somehow, instinctively, in those days we knew what Irwin Edman (1965) explains in Arts and the Man, that “Language remains at once practical and musical, logical, and melodic. Literature is fated therefore, at the outset, to go on two tangents, one poetry and one prose” (60). Students love the melodic, and so that is what we tried to write.

I brought my favorites in for sharing. I would read from William Carlos Williams’ The Farmers’ Daughters, announcing that he lived just a few miles from our school! And that he wrote things called “Paterson” and “Life Along the Passaic River”! Listen, I said, and read:

At the streets of the Dundee section of Passaic have men idling in them this summer…walking around—collars open, skinny, pot-bellied—or sitting on the steps and porches of the old-time wooden houses, looking out of place, fathers of families with their women folk around them.

He’s writing about places we know!

Always I tried to share as Stephen Spender says in The Making of a Poem, the “language of flesh and roses” (1963, 53). He explains that it is inspiration and thinking imaginatively that are at the heart of good writing, and I urged this personal expression, though we did not ignore expository prose. We read, of course, President Kennedy’s “Ask not” speech. And E. B. White’s “Here Is New York,” whose ending contained both his symbol of the city and of our efforts to write:

There is an old willow tree that presides over an interior garden. It is a battered tree, long suffering and much climbed, held together by strands of wire but beloved of those who know it. In a way it symbolizes the city: life under difficulties, growth against odds, sap-rise in the midst of concrete, and the steady reaching for the sun. (1965, 440)

This indeed became our motto: reach for the sun!

REDIRECTION I

And so we wrote and shared our writing. Sometimes it was good, but mostly it wasn’t, because most writing isn’t good. But whatever I loved about writing, I didn’t really understand the teaching of it. When student writing lacked form or direction, or had misspellings or punctuation errors, I
grew doubtful and redirected our approach. I put more structure into our lessons. I lectured on organization: the introduction, the development, the conclusion. A colleague offered help: an essay is like a baloney sandwich (bread on the top and bottom, the meat in the middle). The concept of five paragraphs took hold, then took over. Divide and conquer; teach the topic sentence. Decide what you want to say; outline it. Write an introduction. Hand it in. Formulas emerged. Remember: tell 'em what you want to say; tell 'em; tell 'em that you told them. Have three reasons for every opinion. Give three examples for each idea. It was write-by-number. Define the universe; give three examples.

We labored on. Assign a topic. Write a rough copy. Copy it over; hand it in. You have two class periods. Give me the rough copy with the final. Rough copy on yellow paper; final on white paper. Don't forget to leave margins. Top, bottom, and both sides. Don't write on the last line. Don't write on the back of the paper. Put a heading in the upper right corner. And then I read the wooden prose. I circled misspellings. I put "awk" in the margin; I commented in the margins: blood in the margin. I devised elaborate codes that carried volumes of advice: "Intro 1" meant the introduction to the paper didn't identify the main idea in the first sentence. "Intro 2" meant the last sentence didn't suggest some further thought about the topic. And so it went. Formula writing; formula grading.

And the students weren't writing, and I wasn't reading. I was correcting papers. They hated it; I hated it. We all felt we were really doing English, I guess. With the increase in punctuation exercises came a decrease in reading. There was no time now to read. We had grammar books to cover: participial phrases and gerunds. Now we were really doing English. You could tell by the pain.

I had fallen prey, I now realize, to the writing teacher's nemesis, the focus on minutiae: the spelling error that tainted an entire piece of writing, the comma splice that might have tripped a line of thought, indeed, but that elicited more red ink than anything well-written called forth. I had swung from too little attention to form to too much. I did not read my students' writing, I graded it. I no longer responded to their "growth against odds"; I saw only the cracks in the sidewalk. I hadn't found balance.

Time passed. Deep down I started to feel that something must be missing. I had lost my love of words. I had forgotten what it meant to be thrilled by a passage. My own writing had dried up and died.

REDIRECTION II

I read about the sorry state of writing in American schools. Sometimes I would find an article on solutions. I read about the "process" approach to writing. It seemed promising. The brainstorming, the pre-writing, and the re-writing seemed a little more honest, like something I had once known. But we still had that grammar to cover; we still had formulas and patterns to learn. We installed the process approach, but it soon became as rote as any five-paragraph system because the sequence became automatic. Something was still missing. Gradually, I took stock. I searched out the literature on teaching writing; I read from Atwell to Zinsser. I took a graduate course on writing called "Writing Process." We read articles and wrote journals and did projects and shared our writing and experimented and succeeded and failed and revised. And slowly this student realized what he had lost in trying to "teach writing": the magic and power of words to form and shape our selves and our thinking. He learned that writing is indeed first a process (not of steps of approach) but of doing. It is the process of selection and rejection. It is the process of following leads, sometimes down deserted alleys and sometimes down garden paths. Writing is the process of discovery and amazement.

And then I took "Advanced Critical Writing." We read Annie Dillard and Joyce Carol Oates and Raymond Carver and Eudora Welty. We wrote our own essays, often inspired by or modeled on those we read. We read our work aloud. And again this student rediscovered the heart of good writing: the telling detail, the senses and the value of concreteness and example. And again this student realized what he had lost: the pungent smell and soft touch of his own life in his writing. He learned that writing is physical and real and personal, if it is to be any good at all . . . that good writing is sap-rise in the midst of concrete.
Getting outside my classroom had been essential; searching for new ideas was crucial; doing my own writing again was most crucial of all. Writing returned as breathing, living love. But what of my students? What did this all mean for me as teacher? How could I bring to my students both a love for the sensuous passion in all good writing as well as the sense of order and control of expression that would let them express their feelings, their insights and their ideas to others? I knew then that as teacher I had to respect both process and product.

This is what I believe is at the heart of the dilemma about teaching writing today. In his article, “Write to the Point,” David Ruenzel writes, somewhat persuasively perhaps, about the loss of clarity, structure, and thought that he believes has followed the wholesale acceptance of the process god. He says, “At many schools... process writing and the teaching of writing are one and the same” (1995, 28). He attacks Emig, Murray, Elbow, et al., as virtual pop-ed-psychologists “enthroning writing as an expressive act... writing [that] signaled the self” (28). Certainly writing signals the self! Max Ernest, in his essay “Inspiration to Order,” talks about his artistic impulses, “I have become the amazed lover of what I have seen, wanting to identify myself with it” (1952, 65). Jose Ortega y Gasset in The Dehumanization of Art describes the artist (and we can substitute the writer) as “Starting from the world about him [but] end[ing] by withdrawing into himself” (1968, 113). In other words, it’s a two-way street. Cynthia Ozick in Art and Ardor says in her chapter on diary writing, “Identity discovered in flux is all” (1984, 56). And what is flux but the writing process? And what is identity but awareness of self! Percy Lubbock, in his classic The Craft of Fiction, writes, “But of course with every touch that [the writer] lays on his subject he must show what he thinks of it; his subject is purely the representation of his view, his judgement [sic], his opinion” (1957, 67). We could not keep the self out of our writing if we wanted to, and so that which calls on the self in the process approach is good, and surely very necessary.

EXPERIENCING THE REAL PROCESS OF WRITING
My students, therefore, also had to experience the real process of writing as I had rediscovered it. To start with, I could no longer assign only the “transactional” writing which forms so much of the college-bound student’s work. We had to experiment with all types of writing: free journal writing, response writing, mood pieces, character sketches, and writing about our writing. We had to write analysis and exposition, of course. And we had to read our writing to each other. As Barry Sanders says in A Is for Ox, being able to write “is being able to rearrange and reorder experience [which] means something crucial to everyday life; it suggests that a person has choices” (1994,68).

In addition, writing had to become a daily habit. Students had to turn to writing as easily as they turned to talk. The first and/or last five minutes of class often became the “Write Time.” Sometimes before starting the study of a poem or a short story, we would “branch” and free-write on our topic; sometimes we would do so after we listened to the poem. And finally, writing had to be, at least frequently enough, student-centered and reader-based. That is, students could not write from fear of failure. I tried to reward what was good and to build on the strengths.

I felt rejuvenated as a teacher of writing. I felt that I had found the beginning of a new balance. If in my earliest days I over-valued personal observation and expression, I felt now that my approach was more complete. I felt that if in the past I had resorted to formulaic, write-by-number five-paragraph excessiveness, I now knew that students must bring themselves to a piece of writing.

Yet the process that is founded on the self must also meet the criteria of “published” writing. Change did not occur overnight, but, like the gradual brightening at dawn, I altered the way my classes functioned. Student notebooks that previously held math and science material were banished. Each student was required to have a three-ring binder dedicated only to English. We divided this into five sections: Vocabulary, Language, Literature, Nonfiction, and Writing. My lesson planning now focused on what students would do in their notebook, not on what I would do in front of the class. I kept my own notebook, doing virtually all the assignments and exercises along
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with the students. This was essential! I was still the teacher, still in charge, but I also had to be a participant. I learned from participating just how difficult some assignments were, how long some took, how confusing some of my directions can be! I learned that teaching writing is a process, too.

Because of my new class structure, certain other parts of the typical English class had to change. Vocabulary books and pre-made word lists were returned to the bookroom. Each student now constructed his or her own vocabulary lists from class reading (see Lanacone 1993). Grammar books were also returned to the bookroom; now grammar study came out of common problems that surfaced in our writing. We covered all the usual stuff (verb-subject agreement, usage errors, tense sequence, etc.) but we did it as part of making our writing clearer, not as something separate from actual writing. In our notebooks we called it language; each student recorded his or her own noted errors (just a few for each piece of writing) plus common errors I illustrated on the chalkboard. We included here notes on word choices, connotations of words, generalizations and abstractions, and so forth. Always the 10- or 15-minute lesson came from student writing.

The literature section of our notebooks included identifying information on each poem, short story, play, or novel we used. Personal responses, photocopied excerpts of selected passages that merited detailed study, tentative interpretations and analyses of character, critical commentary, or drama reviews were all included here. Each work did not get equal treatment, but all titles were represented. From this material came more formal assignments that asked for comparison essays, character analyses, symbol explanation and so forth.

USING MODELS IN WRITING

The most important sections, however, were the Nonfiction and Writing sections. As I thought about my students and their writing, I realized that so much of their school reading was in textbooks. What fiction they read in English was limited by time, and the textbook nonfiction in social studies and science was certainly no model of passion or craft. To balance our re-orientation to writing, I had also to provide models that excited and challenged.

I have never had any reluctance to use models in my teaching; it never occurred to me that there could be any harm. And here I fully agree with David Ruenzel, ‘‘One of my tasks as a teacher is to have my students become aware of greatness, providing them with a range of models of greatness so they’ll become aware of it’’ (29). It was, after all, my own reading that inspired me to try to write; it is also a truism that you will never be a writer if you are not a reader. You simply cannot do (or, at least, cannot do well) what you’ve never seen done. Can you imagine a Little Leaguer never watching a baseball game? A painter never looking at paintings? I have absolutely no fear that the insights and examples provided by models will ever stifle the student’s own voice; we, each of us, will always do things our own way. And anyway, as Ruenzel points out, students will ‘‘appropriate models from popular culture’’ (29). Do we really want advertising copy and teen magazine writing to be the only words our students ever read? As Sidney Cox sums it up in his book Indirections, ‘‘In everything we learn to do there is emulation’’ (1962, 4).

If expression of personal feelings, then, can be called the first type of writing, and if interpretation of literary works is the second type, perhaps the third form is explanation of ideas and issues. The nonfiction section of our notebooks contained a wide variety of excellent expository writing. Here is where the simplest technology vitally liberates the English teacher from the stolid and the archaic: the photocopier allows us flexibility and timeliness. I have used Op-ed pieces from the New York Times and many other newspapers; I have used longer articles from The Atlantic Monthly and Harper’s to The Village Voice and Teen magazine. Topics have ranged from angst (teenage variety) to sexism in schools to contemporary zeitgeist. Sometimes choices were made to complement literature being read, sometimes to allow us typicality, and sometimes just because the author had a particularly interesting idea.

We use these readings for several purposes. First, each stood as a ‘‘well-written’’ essay. Regardless of the topic, therefore, one of our earliest steps was always to identify the focus and the thesis of the work, to note where the thesis was placed, whether it was
persuasive or explanatory, whether it was expressed or implied. We then identified exactly the support the author used: factual, anecdotal, appeal to authority, etc. We examined the opening and the conclusion: effective? Why or why not? We looked for metaphors, for over- or understatement, for irony, for particularly vivid expression, for tone, and for other rhetorical devices. Students were directed to underline and note these directly on their copies of the essays.

We would, of course, also discuss the ideas being expressed. Students were expected to keep notes on the discussions. At the end of discussion, whether it took one class or several, everyone was expected to write a rough copy of his or her agreement or disagreement with the author's argument. Students were to incorporate at least one idea (pro or con) taken from class discussion. Furthermore, and here is where emulation comes in, the student writer is encouraged to try to use one rhetorical device noted and discussed in any previous article used in class. These writings were collected in the "Writing" section of our notebooks.

USING STUDENT NOTEBOOKS AND TEXTS

My rejuvenation as a teacher of writing is deeply connected to these student notebooks. As the days and weeks passed each student was producing a personal class text, what we called our source book or source folder. I have found that the usual "college prep" class consists of a wide range of interest and ability levels. These notebooks allowed each student to concretely, in writing, show his or her personal involvement with the material of the class. I collected each notebook one or more times during each marking period; I skimmed for completeness, and read one or two entries somewhat carefully, remembering that these were rough copies. It took less time than at first I thought it would.

For the conscientious student (and not all were conscientious, of course), these personal class texts produced a considerable amount of writing each marking period, writing that also had a variety of purposes. But the primary function of each student's notebook was to serve as a repository of already-started essays. At appropriate times during the marking period, I would ask students to select one of their rough copies of any analytic or explanatory essay based on the topic literature we had used, and revise and edit it into a final essay. For variety and for fun, I would occasionally ask for a "creative" piece. This is where the process approach to writing allowed the self to get involved, yet at the same time the need to hand in a final copy of revised and edited writing made demands on all the conventions of form and format. The balance was not always perfect, but it has come closer than anything I did in the first half of my teaching career.

Espontaneos Writing

One ongoing requirement for my students was to write three "Espontaneos" each marking period. The word espontaneos is Spanish and is defined as "the sudden impulse to jump into the bullring and fight the bull." For our purposes it refers to any sudden welling up of feeling or insight that demands to be written about. Some of the best writing I have ever received has come from this assignment. I believe this is because the topic chooses the student. Not every "Espontaneos" is a gem, but more per set of papers seemed to be. Students wrote about issues and feelings that touched them where they lived. Some wrote about moving to the suburbs from the inner city, the sudden death of a grandparent, or mother-daughter tensions; others wrote with humor about funny friends and siblings, about their difficulties learning English; some speculated about the future, about change and their ability to adjust. Always the topics chose the writer, and often the results were outstanding.

Listen to the details that Mike used to set the scene as he watched his cat chase a mouse in the backyard:

The other day a cool autumn breeze blew across my backyard. It blew through the dried cornstalks in the garden and across the long grass which I had forgotten to cut. The breeze opened and closed the white picket gate which prevented the dog from running out of the yard when the back door was left open. The door was open now, but no chubby beagle darted out. Instead an all-white kitten ran from the confining space of the house into the quiet yard.

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Or listen to Nicole reflect on her father, who works 7 days a week. She concludes her essay:

He does not understand that [time] is all I have ever wanted from him. Years down the road when he stops and thinks about me, what will he remember? What will be the first thought that will linger in his mind? Will he try to imagine my face, and see nothing? Will he even care?

A student wrote of her dog’s death, bracketing each thought with “It’s late.” She recounted each hour of the day before she was to put her dog to sleep. Her last paragraph sang:

It’s late. Tomorrow I have to say goodbye. I wish I could tell her what she’s meant to me. But it’s too late. It’s too late to give her a last walk. It’s too late to brush her hair. It’s too late just to sit with her. It’s too late to do all this without feeling guilt of taking her presence for granted.

Finding Balance
No teacher can “teach” these styles. No lesson could pick their topics. For the topics must sometimes come from within; that is where the passion lives. The style comes from developing an inner ear, and that comes from alert and wide reading—the open reading and discussion we do again and again in class. Yet our goal is no less than learning both how to go through the process and how to produce a product. It is indeed a balancing act.

We teachers of writing must find and keep this balance. We must not lose sight of the power of words as we fixate on spelling; we must not lose the meaning, the passion. This is not to say that everything written is good; that everything and anything goes. Quite the contrary. If it’s important to you, I tell my students, make it become important to your reader. Revise! Revise! Revise! Craft it, and strive for Hemingway’s “one true sentence.” Reach for the sun.

CONCLUSION
Listen to this passage from Christopher Nolan’s Under the Eye of the Clock: “Christmas-timed, the young boy’s gossamer gift snuggled still in his cubbyholed mine. He slyly hugged himself and his secret. Tingling sounds hesitated but malice rein-tight grip on his boy’s bondring” (1987, 43).

Under the Eye of the Clock is the true story of an Irish boy rendered mute and crippled by an extreme spastic condition. He can neither speak nor walk; he cannot feed himself or control the erratic movements of his body. But through a “unicorn” stick and with help of his mother’s hands holding his head steady, he has written his story. Words on paper have given him life.

Our students can find that same power. They can find the tingling sounds that tell their secrets. And, perhaps, once they have felt the power of words, and heard the rhythm of their own lives sing out, and see others respond to their arguments, then, and only then, can they become the confident writers, and indeed the confident people, we teachers want them to become.

Works Cited


John A. Ianacone teaches at Indian Hills High School in Oakland, New Jersey. He writes, “I am a 30-year veteran who when I see the great variety of new writers coming into the canon, the advent of photocopying and computers as a teaching tool, and the insights into learning styles and formats, I wish I were starting all over again. Teaching is more exciting now than it has ever been.”