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*Inside Out*  
*Strategies for Teaching Writing*

THIRD EDITION

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# 1

## *Thoughts on Becoming an Effective Teacher of Writing*

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*As a young teacher, I yearned for the day when I would know my craft so well, be so competent, so experienced, and so powerful, that I could walk into any classroom without feeling afraid. But now, in my late fifties, I know that day will never come. I will always have fears, but I need not become my fears—for there are other places in my inner landscape from which I can speak and act.*

—PARKER PALMER, *The Courage to Teach*

You may be reading this book in a methods class in preparation for entering the teaching profession. You may be a novice teacher thumbing the chapters on a quiet Sunday afternoon, desperate for something to do tomorrow. You may be a crafty veteran of the classroom wars looking for encouragement or for the Life Map activity that Tom talks about in Chapter 4 that always works with your students. Whatever your purpose in reading this book, we are willing to bet that you long to feel more confident and comfortable as a teacher of writing. Maybe you've taken some composition methods courses or earned your masters at the university. Maybe you've been in a National Writing Project program and felt the pain and joy of becoming a writer. Maybe you've read a number of books on how to teach writing. Maybe you've given your heart to the writing process and your classes are going much better now. Let's hope so. But we work with many teachers in many schools, and we still see lots of teachers who remain frustrated—at least at times—about the teaching of writing.

What is it about teaching writing that is so incredibly challenging and frustrating? Maybe at its core, the teaching of writing demands that those who would succeed at it be thoroughly convinced that teaching writing is even possible. As we said in earlier editions of this book, the temptation for teachers who have tried and failed to see improvement in their students' writing is to conclude that writing just isn't for everyone. Maybe knowing how to write well is a genetic thing—it's in the DNA or it isn't. Maybe some people have been selected by God to be writers. Those creative accidents of the deity just show up in fourth-period class, all bright and articulate, and they whip out amazing texts while asking little of us as coaches. Maybe the rest

of our students, the ones who show little interest in writing and only marginal growth as writers, should just be given grammar exercises and vocabulary worksheets and condemned to functional literacy. But maybe not.

As we say numerous times throughout this book, we believe that all kids have unique and worthwhile thoughts and language in their heads. We believe that all young people, however impaired and reluctant, can learn to negotiate the difficult process of bringing that inner language to the page. We believe it is possible for teachers to learn to act as effective coaches of their students' meaning-making processes by encouraging and cajoling and questioning and nurturing the efforts of these students, however halting they might be initially.

In addition to their doubts about whether the ability to write can actually be taught and learned, many teachers tell us they have a sinking feeling that the school classroom is a poor venue for teaching the complexities of writing. For one thing, there are too damn many kids in there. You can't coach and interact with all 150 or more of your students every day, especially when some of them struggle with English because it's not their native language or they've been absent for twenty-two days so far this semester. For another thing, the curriculum is a bloated, unwieldy hodge-podge of stuff to teach, much of which the kids don't even care about learning. Besides that, "they" always interrupt your class for testing and assemblies and "Please excuse the tennis team today at 1:40." What's more, your kids are evaluated by state tests and the school scores are published in the local paper for public scrutiny.

Teaching writing takes time: time for practice and time to share writing, time to complete assignments and time to respond to and evaluate all of that writing. "Lack of time to teach writing is the problem," you say. We agree with you. The kids are tough, the curriculum is demanding, and the conventional fifty-minute class is not particularly amenable to the teaching of writing. You're frustration is justified. You're off the hook. Relax and teach *Julius Caesar* for eight weeks.

But wait. Is it possible that you're missing the joy of seeing kids discover their own voices? Is it possible that you have coaching skills and writing talent that you haven't fully explored and developed? Maybe you could find some new strategies for getting kids going as writers and keeping them going. Maybe you could find some revision and editing strategies that students could and would use. Maybe you could transform your class into some kind of community of writers. What if you gave this business of teaching writing a chance? That's where this book wants to take you. We want to help you avoid the mistakes that many teachers before you made as they tried and failed to teach writing well. More importantly, we want to build your confidence and entice you to take risks in your classes.

Maybe it's important for you to know that we are still working on our skills as writing coaches even as we author this text. We confess that, after years of teaching writing and English, we still have to confront our doubts and uncertainties about our teaching abilities on a daily basis. We still experiment, alter strategies, devise new materials, and learn as we teach. Don Murray, whose name you will hear mentioned in this text many times, has been one of our gurus; he is an incredibly successful

teacher of writing. One of the singularly most helpful things Don ever said was, “I am apprenticed to two crafts I can never master: writing and teaching” (1989). So, we write this book as teachers who continue to learn to coach writing, as teachers who continue to read, experiment, and grow; and we think that’s a good thing because we think that ceasing to learn is personal and professional death.

Becoming a successful teacher of writing is a journey. As Parker Palmer points out in the opening quotation, it’s a journey that never ends. We want you to join us in slouching our way toward proficiency as writing teachers. Parts of this book should serve as cheerleading and encouragement as you try to become a strong teacher of writing. Most of this book is an attempt to share our successes in teaching (and some of our failures so you can avoid them), the philosophy and beliefs that guide us as teachers, and the strategies that we have used to work with *all* of the kids who show up in classes every day to learn whatever it is that we have to teach them.

When Dan and Tom wrote the first edition of this book in 1981, they felt the need to argue for a developmental view of writing growth. At that time, writing instruction was often insensitive to the ways in which young people learned language. Teaching writing was primarily correcting writing. Assignments were owned by the teachers. Student work seldom measured up. The teaching of composition was largely a plantation-like enterprise with students at the bottom of pecking order. Dan and Tom were possessed by some kind of crusader mentality (maybe by other things as well) to advance the premise that written language could be learned similar to the ways in which children learn oral language. They admonished writing teachers to put away their red pens and support and respond to students’ writing in much the same way in which parents respond to a young child’s first efforts with speech. They pointed out that when a young child asked for “Wa-wa,” the parent didn’t say, “I’m sorry, there will be no *water* [enunciating clearly and emphatically] given to children in this house until they learn to say *that* word correctly.” Dan and Tom called for an acceptance of writers’ approximations of language and for moving away from a deficit model that emphasized what kids couldn’t do. They suggested that what young writers needed most was freedom to render experience into words in whatever ways they could muster and adults who would offer strong support and encouragement for those efforts.

So much has happened in the teaching of writing since the early 80s when this book was first published. Thanks to an impressive body of continuing research on language development and writing, a growing acceptance of a constructivist learning theory, the success of the National Writing Project, a growing body of outstanding texts for teachers on writing methods, and the institutionalization of writing-process pedagogy, that original argument about adopting a developmental stance toward teaching writing seems superfluous, dated. We say hurrah for enlightenment!

If you’re a soon-to-be teacher or a novice, you have probably missed out on four decades of composition wars. If you have never read the “Orange Book” or the “Blue Book” (as fans of *Inside Out* refer to the first and second editions) or the works of Jim Moffet, Ken Macrorie, Anne Berthoff, Don Murray, Donald Graves, Janet Emig, Peter Elbow, James Britton, Nancy Martin, or other pioneers, we hope that you might have

opportunity to visit the writings of those scholars who remain so influential in contemporary thinking about teaching writing. Knowing the roots and origins of what you're doing every day in your classes can ground you as a teacher, giving you ammunition for the critics and helping you expand your ideas for instruction.

So, in the age of enlightenment, what does it take to create a positive environment for the teaching of writing? What are the essentials? What are our basic beliefs and values about how to create growth in our classrooms?

### **Belief 1: Writing Is Social and Is Best Taught in a Collaborative and Communal Setting**

This belief is shamelessly constructivist. For many years the act of writing was characterized as a mysterious, solitary, even lonely enterprise. The myth was that semi-drunken writers worked alone in clean, well-lighted places. In the 70s, when writers began to come out of the closet and confess that indeed they needed to share their writing with others and that they thrived on response and feedback, the paradigm began to shift. A decade or so later, constructivist learning theorists began to insist that all learning was both personal *and* social. Those theorists pointed out that learners and writers needed to construct personal versions of the world around them, but then they also needed to submit those unique versions to peers for response, negotiation, and confirmation. Viola! Writing response groups became both a sound instrument for learning and growth and acceptable composition pedagogy.

The hard truth for many teachers was that living this belief meant altering conventional and even comfortable classroom structures to provide greater opportunities for students to work together, share their writing, and support and coach each other's work. Many high-school teachers tell us that modifying the classroom to allow for more collaboration remains problematic. They find themselves spending more time on crowd control and playing the group cop. Elementary- and middle-school cultures seem more supportive of flexible instructional structures. Centers and flexible groupings and collaborative effort are more often the norm there. High-school folks report that their students tend to misuse opportunities to work in smaller groups. Chapter 8 should give you more ideas on how to maximize student-to-student learning. Workshops, literature circles, and studios can serve as models for classroom organizations that facilitate the kinds of interactions that are necessary to maximize growth in writing. Learning to manage and feel comfortable in more interactive structures takes time and some resolve, but the payoff in student growth is worth the pain of change; and the constructivists are right.

### **Belief 2: Coached Practice Is Essential**

Writing is complex, high-level human behavior. It cannot be crowded into hurry-up quarter courses or left to one grade level or relegated to one day a week. Proficiency

in writing requires consistent practice. But just letting them write, mere practice, isn't the answer. If students are to grow as writers through practice, that practice must be coached. Someone who knows something about writing must interact before, during, and after the practice.

As novice teachers of writing, we were often intimidated by poorly written student texts. Our first reaction to some of the really bad papers we received was, "There's something wrong with this paper, but I don't know exactly what it is." It all seemed pretty lame. So we hid behind written comments on their papers and correction marks like *Awk* and *Frag* and *Needs work*. We didn't know how to help kids improve those texts, and we lacked a vocabulary to talk about writing with our students. Fortunately, there were mentors for us. As Karen points out in Chapter 16 on Resources, there were a host of angels and saints whose workshops and writings informed our practice and encouraged us to persevere until we could improve as writing teachers. We learned from the likes of Don Murray and Ken Macrorie that we didn't have to be an expert writer to interact with student work. We learned from Peter Elbow that our students' writing could improve if we got better at enticing them to work together as collaborative writers. We learned to ask leading questions of the writer. We learned to point to places in the piece of writing where we were confused or where we wondered if elaboration might be appropriate. We learned how to ask writers what they planned to do next with the piece.

In short, we learned that time for writing and talking and sharing were more important than lectures and advice-giving and marking their papers. We came to understand that practice was not just asking kids to work quietly at their desks, but was rather a rich interactive process.

### **Belief 3: Begin Working with Fluency First**

That formulaic, freshman composition style of teaching writing in which we worked almost exclusively on forms—the expository essay, the comparison and contrast essay, the persuasive essay—has mercifully been altered by process pedagogy that fosters the use of writing workshops in many middle- and high-school English classes. But we still see lots of emphasis on the structure of the essay as promoted by mundane assessment instruments and formula pedagogy with steps and color-coded paragraphs. These shortcuts and trivial exercises teach students little about writing. We still see lots of too-tense teachers of writing who are preoccupied with correctness and the "we-don't-write-like-we-talk" syndrome. Such preoccupation with format and correctness often pushes teachers to hammer away at the feeble attempts of their students to approximate the demands of form, even when the students have neither read that sort of piece nor written it before.

Putting fluency first means *easing* into new, unfamiliar forms. It means offering students many opportunities to read examples of the forms they will eventually write. It might mean deconstructing a form to understand its elements and how they work together within the piece. It means devoting a good deal of time to the *early* stages

of writing a piece, namely idea-finding, drafting, and experimenting. Oversimplified formulas don't encourage experimentation; instead, they stress getting the *form* right. When developing writers are required to focus on forms, they learn to plug lifeless words and mundane ideas into the formula; they don't learn to create unique expressions and to figure out the form in which the writing might work best.

In writing, all of us probably expect too much too soon. In contrast to the ideas of the late 1800s, we now know that children are not, developmentally, miniature adults; similarly, we also now know that inexperienced writers don't write as do adults, nor should they be expected to do so. Their thinking, sentence patterns, and vocabulary all need time and practice to develop. We shouldn't expect young writers to have all of the elements of form mastered from the beginning.

We suggest that when you begin teaching writing to a new group of students, you declare a moratorium on concerns about rigidly defined forms and structures of writing. Emphasize fluency. Use expressive and reflective forms of writing that offer maximum opportunity for your students to get a feel for producing text without the pressure to meet all of the constraints of a well-defined form. Encourage them to write about themselves and their own experiences first and to value and interact with those pieces of writing. Developing writers need time to experiment with their ideas and words and the connections between the two. Practice in rendering the tangled web of their emotions and imaginations into written language will help writers learn to express their ideas clearly, precisely, and fluently. Let them write and let the forms emerge.

Don't rely on finished pieces as the only evidence of students' abilities to write. Trust that not every piece of writing must go through the full-blown processes of prewriting, drafting, and revising. Provide writing experiences in the classroom that help students build a repertoire of strategies they can use *in progress*. Students will discover their own strategies as they work. They'll find ways to get writing generated, drafted, revised, and edited that we've not considered before. The truth is that we'll borrow their ideas to help other writers if we are keen-eyed and responsive to what they show us.

#### **Belief 4: In Writing, the Whole Is More Than the Sum of Parts**

Schools have always been pretty good at teaching parts and not so good at helping students see the big picture and create wholes. Part-to-whole, word-to-sentence, that deductive mindset seems so logical: Begin with the word, next the sentence, then the paragraph; then, when students get *real good*, they get to write a whole five-paragraph theme. Wow! Master the parts, get those labels straight; memorize those ten transitional words to plug relentlessly into every accordion paragraph. It all adds up.

Except that it doesn't. Unfortunately, in writing, the whole is far more than the sum of parts. By fragmenting instruction and drilling on one part or one structure at a time, we kill motivation and destroy the very processes we're trying to develop.

Our thinking has changed a bit since Dan and Tom wrote the first edition of this book. Then, Dan and Tom proposed a developmental sequence moving students from

simple to complex forms, from personal to objective subject matter. They offered examples from simple poems to extended analogy, or from simple short stories emphasizing a straight narrative line to highly involved stories using more varied narrative techniques. In the past two decades, however, we have seen genres blur and lose their clear boundaries. We have seen the emergence of narrative technique in all forms of writing. Now, we read memoirs by Terry Tempest Williams or Janisse Ray that record both their deeply personal and reflective interactions with nature and also attend to factual, scientific, and historical details of the natural world. We see short stories by Bobbie Ann Mason or Rick Bass that are as complex and artfully tuned as any novel. We consume the stunning essays of Annie Dillard and Barbara Kingsolver and are amazed at their ability to weave simple and complex forms together with personal and objective ideas to create highly readable and interesting texts. Newly emerging forms such as literary memoir, and even novels in poetic form, convince us that there is more to writing than our traditional emphasis on argumentation, formatted poems, or complex short stories. Even the simplest of poems requires control of language and vision. Intensity and vividness may be more difficult in a short piece than it will be in a fleshier piece of extended analogy. It's all very individual. Each piece has its own challenges. We don't look at a student's one-page story or two-stanza poem with disdain. Length doesn't equate with effort.

We've studied the components of good writing extensively, and have worked at coaching writing for many years. We consider ourselves writers who have a sense of good writing when we see it. Writers fashion subjects in individual ways. We assist student writers by designing occasions that help them rehearse their skills and techniques through a variety of writing experiences. We coach them by providing a third eye or ear. We avoid writing exercises taken out of an authentic context, and we make careful judgments about when and how to intervene in students' writing processes.

It is unrealistic to expect students to drill on the parts of the language or the parts of a composition for years—especially when such instruction occurs out of the context of real language and real writing—in anticipation of some far-off future when they can begin to use the parts to explore the options of discourse.

At eight years old, Dan's older daughter, Mindy, bugged him about taking guitar lessons. He, of course, preferred a less frivolous instrument like the piano or the cello. She took guitar lessons. Dan remembers how excited Mindy was after her first lesson. She couldn't wait to share "her song." She strummed those two monotonous chords and sang her song. She smiled. She was pleased with her song. That pride in producing a *whole* composition of her own was her motivation to continue and practice. Had her guitar teacher given her a quiz over the parts of the guitar? Had he told her to learn the names of the strings or to practice a chord until she got it right? No. One strums a guitar to produce a song. The song's the thing, no matter how simple. So must it be with writing. The piece is the thing—and we must learn to help young writers produce an authentic piece every time they write. There is technical knowledge to be learned, but writing is first to be read and communicated. No approach to writing that forgets the joy of singing your own song will work with novice writers.

## **Belief 5: Assessment Must Support Growth**

Let's be honest here. We have assessed writing too early, too often, and in contexts that are too artificial to be informative about how real writing occurs. Some of our grading has been punitive, some of it shamelessly crowd control. Many of our assessments tell us little about the writing skills our students do or don't possess. Grading, assessment, and testing practices are, in many cases, an anathema to the very kinds of teaching strategies that we know work best with developing writers. Most teachers believe that not every piece of writing has to be fully processed and completely finished and graded. Most teachers lament that students pay only passing attention to the careful marking of their papers. Most teachers hold little credence in students' scores on mandated assessments of writing. Most teachers know that standards-driven assessments of writing are often one-shot samples of a student's writing at a particular moment in time with very few assurances that such a sample represents the student's best work. And yet most teachers continue to spend an inordinate amount of time alone with student papers, meticulously marking them. What's even worse, the preparation and class time that teachers must expend on mind-numbing state-mandated tests consume their energies and rob them of more valuable time that could (and should) be spent coaching and responding to student writing.

What's to be done about this dilemma? Is there a twelve-step program around for compulsive graders? Will politicians and ideologues give up their wrong-headed notions about accountability and testing? Will pigs ever fly?

Rather than succumbing to teaching to tests that foster a stilted, stylized, five-paragraph theme or accordion paragraph-kind of prose, we have found that following a curriculum that stresses authentic writing in a range of forms and for a variety of purposes and audiences leads to improved student performances in writing. Real language used in real ways for authentic purposes that matter to the writer promote writing that matters, that others want to read and discuss, and that students value enough to work on and revise. Incidentally, such writing practice raises students' scores on standardized and high-stakes tests as well. When writing and the written word live inside a classroom as part of the intellectual conversation each day, writing and thinking flourish, as will test scores. When we as teachers grade fewer papers and take seriously our responsibility to coach writing that is meaningful to students and demonstrate effective strategies for improving content, appearance, and structures, students and their learning benefit.

## **Belief 6: Growth in Writing Takes Time**

Even in this age of instructional enlightenment, the chronicle of many children's experiences with writing in the schools remains a fitful series of stops and starts. Too often, writing instruction is a patchwork of writing short stories this week, short essays next week, and critiques the week after that, and of delving into literature with no writing at all for the following six weeks. In other words, writing instruction too

often consists of a sporadic pattern of quantum leaps and long silences. In too many schools and school districts, we continue to fail to provide enough consistent instruction and practice to reap the rewards of better writers and writings. As we have seen in the schools where we work, just because it's in the curriculum guide doesn't mean it gets taught. And just because it gets taught doesn't mean it's taught well.

Recently, Dan met with the writing committee of a middle school with a reputation as a strong school. The committee was a volunteer group of the school's most enthusiastic and knowledgeable teachers of writing. The meeting was ostensibly to shape goals and plans for the coming year since students were to be tested for the first time on a state-mandated assessment in the spring. As teachers talked about what kinds of writing they required of their students, it became apparent that most were following their own version of the district's framework for writing instruction. Indeed, several teachers were even unaware of the existence of such a district document. Others confessed that the pressure to raise reading scores had been so intense that they had given up time for writing altogether. The teachers were a bit embarrassed to realize that none of them were teaching writing in consistent and thoughtful ways.

For writing instruction to produce good writers, it must not only be well-articulated in curriculum guides, textbooks, and in-service workshops, but it must also be practiced by a community of professional teachers who interact with each other to build proficiency over time.

## **From Belief to Action**

How do the beliefs that we have shared become realized as classroom practice? How do teachers translate values and ideals into reflective and successful practice? What do we need to tell ourselves in order to implement our beliefs? First, we need to clarify and examine our beliefs. A good deal of research on teachers' classroom practice has documented that most teachers make instructional decisions based on tacit belief structures. That is, they act from unexamined beliefs some of which are conflicting and inconsistent. We have found it helpful periodically, perhaps before each new school year or as we begin preparing to teach a new class, to reexamine and restate our beliefs about how kids learn best in that context. We actually explore those beliefs in writing, considering whether we still believe them. Once we're satisfied that we have a solid set of belief statements, we construct a set of ideal teacher practices that are consistent with those beliefs. We challenge ourselves with these practice statements. They serve as ideals, aims, and goals to which we aspire. Because teaching is complex intellectual activity in which we sometimes lose our way, these practice statements serve as mile markers, as directional lights, and as boundaries. They are concrete, specific, and personal. They serve as reminders to keep us from falling into the trap of blaming others for our failings and shortcomings.

Dan calls his lists of ideal practices "Notes to Myself as a Writing Teacher." He considers and reformulates these notes each time he begins a new writing class. The

following are the notes he wrote this past summer as he prepared to teach a writing workshop class.

1. My primary role as a teacher of writing is not to make assignments or correct papers but to “coach practice.”
2. As a teacher, I am a reader and a writer, modeling the life of a literate person.
3. I lower my standards for works in progress and have higher standards for finished products.
4. I rely on students to help each other, teaching them how to work together to support each other’s writing practice, so that they become a community of thinkers, responders, and writers.
5. I create time for extensive writing practice: many shorter writings and few large completed works.
6. Reading supports writing in my class. I use multiple short excerpts as examples to illustrate what professional writers do.
7. I offer students a wide variety of literature to illustrate multiple perspectives of culture, language, age, and gender.
8. I use genre-based writing strategies to teach students how to read and write new forms.
9. I teach writing as a craft that can be learned, offering students a repertoire of revising, crafting, and editing strategies.
10. I hold regular conferences with my students to engage them in discussions about their work, listening to their ideas and concerns to better direct my coaching efforts.
11. My assessment and evaluation strategies value both process and product. My students help develop the rubrics we use to evaluate completed products.

It has taken Dan thirty-seven years of teaching to believe and seek to implement these statements. We don’t suggest that you take his list and walk into your class and try to implement these beliefs all at once. These are the values that Dan holds for his class. We want your reading of *Inside Out* and other significant sources to help you begin a journey to your own statements of belief. We encourage you to read this book with a pen and a notebook in hand or to use your computer to construct an electronic notebook. Before you read further, construct a set of your personal belief statements about teaching writing. Be prepared to amend and revise those beliefs as you interact with this text. Begin to keep lists of teaching practices and specific activities you want to think about and consider using in your classes. See what you like in this book and what you think will work for your students. Think, create, reflect. That, after all, is what teaching is all about.

## **Works Cited**

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