Two or Three Things I Know For Sure About Teaching Writing

BY ASHLEY MARTIN

Dorothy Allison named her memoir Two or Three Things I Know For Sure after something her aunt told her once: "Lord, girl, there's only two or three things I know for sure. Only two or three things. That's right. Of course it's never the same things, and I'm never as sure as I'd like to be." That's how I feel about teaching writing.

Here at the end of my five weeks as a fellow in the Northern Virginia Writing Project Summer Institute at George Mason University are two or three things I know for sure:

The story becomes the thing needed. I wish I had said that first, but Dorothy Allison did. I agree with her. The stories that I have written and shared with my writing group, the topic of my presentation—those are the stories I needed. Poems I have written during the institute about my sister and grandmother are ones I needed to help me understand those relationships better. My presentation about altering genres in order to understand texts better helped me think about what worked in my classroom last year and why and how I might continue to build on that. That success story in my classroom and that questioning is something I needed in order to help me have confidence in myself as a teacher and to help me begin thinking of myself as a teacher-researcher.

With this idea of the story becoming the thing needed in mind, I want to change some things in my classroom this year. I want to give my students more time and space to write and read the stories they need. Last year, I gave my ninth grade students a choice in their reading, which I believe created space for them to discover the stories they needed, but I didn't do such a good job with giving them time and space to discover the stories they needed to write. And I really didn't give my eleventh graders time and space to read or write based on their own choice. Jody Nagao, another fellow in the institute, reminded me in her presentation of the importance of giving students time for personal writing so that they can find the stories they need.

You can't write without reading. So read everything you can find by writers whose work you love. Don't be afraid to imitate them if you want to. Eventually you will come to sound not like them anymore, but like yourself. I wish I had said that first, but the writer X.J. Kennedy did. This is a quotation I found that resonates with truth for me. While I was giving my presentation at the summer institute, I realized that I wasn't just sharing a story about having my students turn a short story into a radio play, but what I was really talking about was finding your own voice when you are reading, the voice in your

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head that appears to be “in a literary sense the sound of the [author's] voice” but that is really “the sound of your voice” (from Thomas Lux’s poem “The Voice You Hear When You Read Silently”). I think writing while reading is a way to try to find that voice within one’s own head. That has been true in my own experiences as a reader and a writer, in what I observed in my students’ experiences with rewriting a story as a radio play, and in what I have observed in some of the other participants in the institute.

I often copy down poems I love in my notebook, ones that give me ideas of topics I’d like to write about and ways that I’d like to use language. While my students were rewriting a short story as a radio play, they tried to adapt the author’s style to a different genre, and in doing so, many of them came to express in their own voices multiple meanings of the original text. In my writing group that met twice each week during the institute, one of the members, Bob Ingalls, experimented with writing fiction. He shared that he read some of his favorite short stories by Flannery O’Connor one night when he was feeling like he didn’t know where to go with his own story. In her presentation, fellow Natalie Reis shared how she reads aloud excerpts of writing she loves from adult and children’s books to her elementary school students as models for them of descriptive writing. All of these experiences show how important the relationship between reading and writing are in discovering one’s own voice.

In my classroom, I hope to do a better job of helping students see the connection between their writing and their reading. Last year, I often asked my students to write in response to what they read, but rarely did I ask them to imitate a writer’s style, to think about the authors we read as writers, and to think about themselves as reading like writers. Opening Texts by Kathy Andrasick and Creating the Story by Rebecca Rule and Susan Wheeler have also helped me see the importance of reading like a writer and how imitating a text can help students do this.

Writing really a lively communal activity.

Again, I wish I had said that first, but Karen Spear did in her book Sharing Writing. Being in a writing group this summer and sharing our writing with partners and with the whole group during presentations has reminded me of the importance of the communal aspect of writing. Don Murray points out in Crafting a Life that writing involves contradictory needs of solitude and community. Too often, I write in solitude. Being in a writing group this summer for five weeks and committing to this group for the rest of the year, though we won’t meet as frequently as we did this summer, has brought to life the importance of audience for me in a deeper, practical way.

When I read aloud my writing to my group, I notice things about it that didn’t appear to me when I was reading it alone. Hearing from my group what stands out, how they understand certain lines, and what questions they have, help me get a sense of what is effective and what is not effective in my writing. Sometimes I wish they would just make huge generalizations like “this is good” or “this is boring” or tell me what to fix and where to go next, but ultimately those are my decisions to make and meeting with this live audience regularly holds me accountable for making those decisions.

I’ve also become more attuned to group dynamics and group processes. Watching my group’s relationship evolve has reminded me of how important regular meeting times and being with the same people can be in forming a sense of a writing community. I want to do a better job of creating a sense of a writing community in my classroom this year, and I believe having students form reading/writing groups that meet together for an extended period of time, not just one class period, is a step toward making that happen. Several presentations during the institute also helped me think about the importance of enlarging one’s writing community through publishing in print or on the Internet. This is another idea I’ve thought was a good one in theory, but these presentations pushed me to think about publishing for myself and for my students more seriously.

Despite what Dorothy Allison’s aunt said about how the things she knows for sure change, I can say there is one thing I know for sure that doesn’t change: I would not have come to know these two or three things I know for sure about teaching writing by working alone in my classroom. During the past year, my colleagues at school began to make me think daily about what I know for sure about teaching and helped me have the confidence to begin articulating those things. I’m thankful to have the community of followers and staff at the summer institute and now the larger community of the National Writing Project as a safe place to continue this thinking and talking about the teaching of writing for years to come.

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Dates to Remember

May 18–20
Mid-Atlantic Writing Projects Regional Retreat, Lake Chautauqua, New York

May 30–June 3
NWP Directors Retreat, Estes Park, Colorado

June 21–24
NWP Summer Writing Retreat, Santa Fe

July 7–12
NWP/CSA Social Action Summer Institute, Santa Fe

July 14–19
NWP/CSA Social Action Summer Institute, Baltimore

September 14
New site proposal deadline

November 15–18
NWP/NCTE Annual Meeting, Baltimore

For information about National Writing Project events, please contact the NWP office at (510) 642-0963, or email nwp@writingproject.org.