Writing Teachers Wear Many Hats

At last year's spring meeting in Washington, D.C., directors and TCs were treated to an unusual teacher demonstration by BAWP TC Jennifer Seibel-Trainer. To open her presentation, she asked participants to freewrite answers to the following questions: What roles do you play when responding to student writing? Why do you play them? Many participants responded directly, listing roles all writing teachers recognize: listener, responder, reader, questioner, fellow writer. A few, however, came up with unusual metaphors that not only sparked laughter, but also spurred us to consider the varied hats we wear as writing teachers:

Depending upon the focus of the writing, my role can be different. The role also depends upon the individual student. Some need hugs, while others need swift kicks. And those needs vary from one instance to another. Certainly, being a parent has provided excellent experience for measuring the roller-coaster emotional and educational needs of my students, for they cannot be separated.

As a fireman, I put out fires. As a doctor I cut, slash and close wounds. I tiptoe with grace like a ballet dancer, and as an explorer travel through terra incognita issues. —Mimi Dyer, Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project

Sometimes I believe the bottom line is I'm a hooker... I do everything possible to entice, to "hook" my students to believe in themselves as writers. I use props; I use costumes; I use soft voices, quotations, models, music, videos — you get the idea. —Barbara Knowles, Eastern Virginia Writing Project

I am a coach — I help people write for the big games, the performances, the situations in which the writing goes public: reading aloud to the class or community, publishing in class books or by putting up on walls or by placing copies in the library or by sharing in some other way with the intended audience — the self 5 years from now, parents, family, etc. I also evaluate the final performance when necessary. The roles that students play when they read each other's work depends on the students.

I'm also a mirror. I help writers see their writing. I'm a clean mirror, no streaks, about 5' by 4' with 12 light bulbs above behind a shield. —Harold Nelson, Northern Plains Writing Project

I am Mrs. Peterson, the critic, the expert, the mother, the psychologist, the student, the teacher, the reader, the writer. But mostly I am a builder, a contractor of sorts who oversees and facilities the skillful endeavors of others. Yes, with a comment or conference well placed, I critique the students' pieces. I try to focus on a few areas at a time, so as not to overwhelm. For the next paper, I address a few more components — building blocks contributing to the whole writer.

But I am simply the contractor, learning the specialized tasks of empathetic best friend and cooperative peer to my sub-contractors, my students. —Diane Peterson, East Texas Writing Project

I started as critic, evaluator and sometime executioner. After working with the Writing Project, I began to see myself as the student's coach. I had been a football coach. I needed to become a coach of biology, a coach of writing.

I often use cassette tapes to respond to students, therefore the tone is very conversational. I ask lots of questions, congratulate the student in making sense, and let the student know when something does not make sense to me. —Bob Tierney Bay Area Writing Project

My primary role is one of being a gardener. Assisting the student writer in weeding out that which chokes or prohibits the main idea from blooming.

There are many parts to the garden so it's important to nurture the sprouting ideas, provide water, light and nourishment as the writer's ideas and thoughts grow and develop.

The final stage is to trim away excesses so that the garden can flower in its glory. —Mary Weaver, Saginaw Bay Writing Project