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A Transformed Traditionalist or What I Learned in the Writing Project

Patricia Short

When I received acceptance into the Third Coast Writing Project, I was elated. I had a whole month to devote to reading, research, discussion, reflection, and writing about how I could alter my classroom approach to teaching writing and how I could help my colleagues across the curriculum do the same.

Thirty days later after reading 2,438 pages, talking more than any husband, friend, or fellow wanted to hear about process versus product, spending sleepless nights in imaginary conversations with other teachers, and writing 17 drafts of my new, clearly articulated statement about how one translates one's thoughts onto paper, in third person objective and in thesis statement form, I can proclaim with the ringing passion of a transformed traditionalist, "I don't know."

I've learned from Donald Murray in *Expecting the Unexpected* that writing is thinking. I already knew that. It's the struggle that my students have and, now that I too write, the struggle I have to "find and shape meaning on the page" (Lane 2) that I need to address. How could I help my students stop struggling? I've discovered that I can't. Moreover, I've discovered through reading the confessions of other writers, watching the struggles of my fellows, and experiencing the struggle myself that this is as much part of the mystery called writing as it is a part of life.

So now I'm bouncing around someplace in the writing loops of the MDE/MCTE Writing Framework. Where's my center of gravity? It's probably not, for me as a writer obviously, in the center of a seven-step process named **Draft** with nice, neat brainstorming, mapping, freewriting first and revising, clarifying, and editing after (Lane 3).

Maybe I should try to articulate what I believe teaching writing is not. It's not teaching structures and conventions out of context. It's not teaching the four aims and how modes fit neatly under each aim. It's not teaching the forms of writing so prescriptively that even in front of a firing squad the student writer could tell where a thesis always goes in an expository essay or beg for mercy in third-person voice. It's not valuing the product and even the process more than the writer. It's not writing ideas all over a student writer's paper in blood-red ink. It's not being the talker in the writing conference.

So, I know a lot about what teaching writing isn't, but faced with a class of Advanced Placement seniors sweating class rank and grade point average, I had better be able to articulate what it is, or I'm going back to teaching what it isn't. Old paradigms remain unless replaced by new ones. Somewhere in those 2,438 pages I read that, and somewhere in my 196 pages of notes I've written it. But right here in my head I know it's an inevitable truth.

How do I achieve this new paradigm? I don't; they do. I'm no longer the center of the classroom with the responsibility of delivering good writing—changing, correcting, reorganizing, commanding their meaning and voice so that the piece will get them “ready for college.” My students dutifully tolerate this model like kidney patients do dialysis. But, neither will I be just a facilitator allowing students to make all the decisions absent any dialogue with me.

What I hope to become is a Lucy Calkins' coach. I'll let them show me and themselves what they've got and start from there. Then, we'll assess what fundamentals they know, and I'll applaud them. But, I'll also applaud their discovery of what they don't know. I'll look not just at what they do but how they do it. I'll ask questions which will help them become aware, on a conscious level, of their processes. I'll offer process-specific strategies that may assist them in developing new skills or solve persistent problems, but always in the context of their own performance. Most of all, I will celebrate “that peculiarly wonderful, egocentric experience” (Murray 24) of do-

ing it right their way. And then I'll watch them take off—risking, growing, enjoying.

Well, Christ wandered in the wilderness for 40 days; 30 days is definitely not enough. My “center of gravity” is not one nice, solid theory; it's an amorphous cloud, shifting as I continue to read, write, discuss, reflect. Peter Elbow in *Writing Without Teachers* was right: “Truth is a mess” (147). I don't know where I'll end up yet, but I do know it won't be where I started, and it will be better than where I was...and am.

Works Cited

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