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Jennifer Pisha-Rude

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“Breathing” with Ralph Fletcher

BY JENNIFER PISHA-RUDE

On March 20, 2006, I had the distinct honor of personally meeting and interviewing someone whom I consider to be a master of the craft of writing—Ralph Fletcher. After attending his morning session on teaching the qualities of writing, I got to discuss some of my own personal thoughts, ideas, experiences, and questions about writing with him. Later in the day, I attended his session on keeping a writer’s notebook. My interview took place between these two sessions. From my first impressions to hearing what’s next from Ralph Fletcher, I share this experience from the annual MRA conference.

First Impressions

At 8 o’clock Monday morning, before his first session was to begin, I sat in a large, empty conference room. Surrounded by 50 round tables and chairs, I sat and thought, “Wow, this is really an exciting opportunity for me. I can’t wait to ask Mr. Fletcher his opinions on some of the dilemmas I’ve run into with regards to both my own, and my students’ writing.”

Minutes later, the room began to fill with people who wanted to hear what Fletcher had to say. As I chatted with other teachers at my table and glanced around the room, I saw an ordinary, down-to-earth looking man. I realized this was Ralph Fletcher and he’s anything but ordinary; he’s extraordinary!

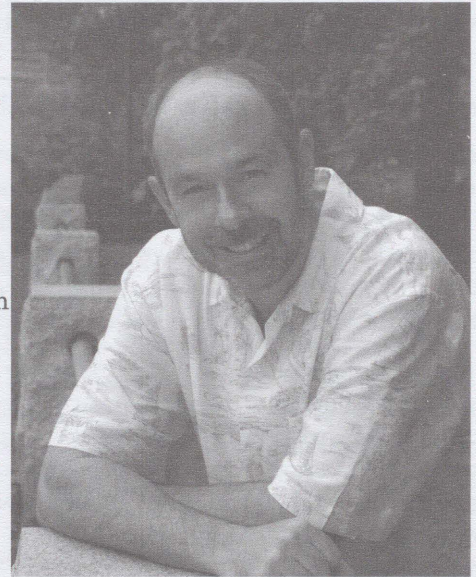
Ralph Fletcher on ... Teaching the Qualities of Writing

Fletcher has written books for both children and writing teachers. His first hour-long session was devoted to the topic of teaching the qualities of writing. As a middle school reading and writing teacher, my goal is to get all of my students not only to write, but to *enjoy* writing. Early in the session, he seemed to sum up how I feel about my students writing in one succinct sentence: “Let’s try to make school and our writing classroom a place where all kids can be successful.”

Throughout the session, he offered these 11 tips on teaching craft:

1. Take advantage of micro-texts.
2. Use literature kids already know.
3. Note what they are already doing.
4. Build on class talk about craft.
5. Break down general advice.
6. Design a spiral of craft mini-lessons.
7. Create “Book-Ends.”
8. Create an “After-Image.”
9. Teach kids how to reread their writing.
10. Make revisions as concrete as possible.
11. “Squeeze it once and let it go.”

Our interview began over coffee and muffins after his first session ended.



Fletcher

Jennifer Pisha-Rude teaches sixth-grade reading and language arts in the Warren Consolidated School District.

Ralph Fletcher on ... Revising

One of the largest obstacles with my middle school students is that they don't particularly like to revise their work. I constantly hear, "I wrote it, I'm done." Even when I give them a purpose and bring to their attention specific aspects of writer's craft they say, "It's done." I was curious to hear whether Fletcher had strategies for helping my students see both the benefits and value of revising.

When it comes to the topic of revision, Fletcher says, "There is no easy answer." He told me to be realistic when making revisions and to help my students make realistic choices for revising. It's important not to expect students to revise everything in any one draft. He suggested starting each day with a mini-lesson. The mini-lesson would then be that day's focus for revision. This would provide my students a clear focus. He cautioned me that some children will still choose not to revise their piece that day but may incorporate the revision technique into their next piece of writing.

This led to his next suggestion to give my students choice in whether or not to revise. It should be clear to students that they will have to go back and revise *some* of their pieces but not *every* piece they write has to be revised. He quoted Will Stafford: "When I write something that interests me I go back. If it doesn't interest me I go on." Fletcher feels we, as teachers, need to revise our own definitions of revising as well.

Ralph Fletcher on ... Poetry

Poetry seems to be the most difficult genre for my students to write in. So many of my students have difficulty opening up and putting their feelings down on paper. I was hoping Fletcher would have some suggestions for helping my students take that leap out of their comfort zone to freely express their thoughts and emotions through poetry. Once again, he gave me excellent ideas that I'm just dying to try out with some of my writers!

He first shared his view on the importance of "marinating" kids in different kinds of writing. Children first need to be repeatedly exposed to the genre before they can write in it. Exposing children to more poetry will familiarize them with the genre and may help them to take that leap out of their comfort zone. He went on to say that teachers should also share

good examples of student writing with their class. "Nothing motivates students better than examples of other student writing."

To help students practice their writing, he advises teachers to let students play in a writer's notebook. Ralph says that the writer's notebook should be "private places to practice, and to try stuff out in. There is value in practicing that." These notebooks provide a safe place to experiment with writing. Using a writer's notebook is the one thing that I really can't wait to try out with my students, especially my reluctant writers.

Ralph Fletcher on ... Effective Writing Teachers

I've often wondered how to judge my effectiveness as a writing teacher. So, the next big question I asked was, "In your opinion, what makes an effective writing teacher?"

Fletcher responded by saying teachers must have a "deep profound knowledge of the subject." As a teacher, you have to write even if it's scary. You need to think about what you know about writing, what you know about the age of your students, and what you know about specific students. Finally, you must "Teach the writer, not the writing." When it comes to making writing powerful, he shared, "Nouns make pictures. Verbs make the pictures move."

Some Advice

As I ponder the advice I give my students, I wonder how similar it is to that an expert would give. When asking Fletcher what single piece of advice he would give to young writers, he replied "Get a notebook, write in it daily, read a lot, and read a lot of different genres as well."

In concluding our interview, I asked what advice he would give to all writers about how to move their writing from the dull, boring stage to what he calls "live writing." His reply: "Read a lot, find writers you admire, and give yourself chances to write." He went on to say that we "fine tune our taste buds" in what we choose to read and write. We should give ourselves and our students chances to write every day; minimally, three times a week. An advocate for reading texts multiple times to get the most out of them, he believes, "Deeper connections come from rereading the text."

Ralph Fletcher on ... the Writer's Notebook

Ralph Fletcher is probably best known for his writing about the writer's notebook. I had heard of the writer's notebook but wasn't exactly sure of its purpose. Was it similar to a journal? I learned that a writer's notebook is much more than a journal. "The notebook's place is where writer's can stand in front of the mirror and try stuff on."

The afternoon session focused specifically on the writer's notebook. In just 2 hours, he engaged us in writing and shared examples of student writing from their writer's notebooks. I was absolutely amazed!

When writers are given freedom and allowed to make choices related to their own writing, their writing is incredible. Fletcher feels that "kids should learn the rules, know the rules, but selectively and strategically can break the rules." Kids should be allowed and encouraged to experiment with their writing and try out different styles of writing. He pointed out that writing tests (for example, the writing portion of the MEAP) discourage such experimentation.

Fletcher refers to the notebook as a place for "breathing in" and "breathing out." He explained that the writer's notebook serves as a way to "breathe in" the world. This "breathing in" refers to noticing and then writing down things that move you, things you wonder about, things you simply notice, seed ideas or "triggers," small details, memories, lists, saving artifacts, and noting writing that inspires you. Using a writer's notebook is also a way to "breathe out."

"Breathing out" refers to rereading what you've written and "digging out the crystals," experimenting and playing with words, trying something new, and trying out a set piece. It provides a place to write badly, a place where writing scrapes at the heart, and a place for writing about writing. Considering everything, the writer's notebook provides a place for writers to feel safe writing.

Fletcher led each of us to "breathe" onto the page in this session. He enticed us to reminisce about how we were named, to remember nicknames we have endured, and to wander around the page exploring the histories of our names. Several volunteers then shared their drafts, and we all listened to the delightful stories that emerged during this quick write. Figure 1. on page 37 shows original responses by principal Maria Guadalupe and teacher Sandy

Flanigan Zull, who each combine a humorous voice with an engaging twist.

Fletcher concluded this session by saying, "Writing is looking for the poetry and poignancy in everyday moments." He says to keep in mind that, "The bigger the issue, the smaller you write." A writer's notebook is the place to write down what really moves you.

Some Interesting Tidbits on ... Ralph Fletcher

I am always interested in what writers are really like, so throughout our interview, I asked questions to get to know him better. Here are some tidbits I found interesting;

- I was curious about his drafting process. He said it varies. Usually, he begins by writing in his notebook and working on a piece until it achieves a "fullness" before beginning an actual draft. Lately, however, he has found himself more and more going straight to the computer.
- He indicated his favorite genre to write in is narrative and feels he's good at poetry.
- His biggest "ah ha" moment as a writer came when he was in graduate school. It was when he realized that he didn't have to make stuff up and that he could simply draw on his own experiences when writing.
- Since writing and breathing seem to be synonymous for him, I asked "Do you ever feel suffocated?" Interestingly enough, he responded, "I don't get writer's block."
- At a young age, Fletcher received a lot of negative attention at school because of his handwriting skills. Later in life, he realized that he would have to let go of the dream of writing the great American novel, at least temporarily.
- I was curious about the books and authors that inspired him and those he considers favorites. Fletcher told me he does not really have an all-time favorite book or author. He likes to read books that "grab him." Two favorites he mentioned were *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Stones in the River*.
- And how did he feel the moment he found out his first book had been published? He said

Figure 1

Lupe - Lupi

Maria Guadalupe - great, traditional Mexican name. I loved it—in Mexico. Guadalupe becomes Lupe or Lupita for endearment.

6 yrs. Old—in the U.S. Lupe becomes Lupi—I hate it. This becomes a source of torture for my brother—

“Hey Loopeeeee”

“Hey Stupeee Lupi”

“Hey Poopey Stupi Lupi.”

“Shut-up! It’s Guadalupe! Mom!”

“Okay—

“Wad-a-lupi!”

This is more than I can endure. I want to change my name.

Why can’t I just have a “normal” name? A name American I can pronounce.

* Better yet, why can’t I change my brother? I’d change him into a mute!

took Flanigan

dropped middle name

have swiss german?

Loved Flanigan don't like Zull

Sandy (Mrs. Z)

Zull

Sandy was always the perfect nickname because I had sandy colored hair and freckles. I was me. People would ask my real name and I when I answered them Sandra, they responded with a surprised, “Oh.” I liked that. It was me, and again, me.

Flanigan was the best part of my name. I loved being Irish in a Germanic town. It fit Sandy perfectly—although my cousins, Pat & Mike were definitely more authentic. Sandy Flanigan was a good, warm, smiling name.

It's a good thing I liked it because it didn't change until I was 35. I married a Zull (rhymes with dull). I knew at the time I was getting the raw end of that deal. But, women keeping their own names was a pretty new thing at that time and way too radical for the place I came from. If I had children did I want people to think the poor babies had no father present? Or, to think I was not their mother? Or, that I wasn't their mother?

As you can see, what other people think is a powerful force where I came from. That was a long time ago. Now I go by Sandy Flanigan Zull.

Lupe—Lupi

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it was like having a first baby. Special, yet very scary. Scary because when you write, you are always in danger of offending people. He went on to say, "You have a right to write about things the way you see it."

- Fletcher writes every day. On average, he writes about 500 words a day. If he writes 750 words in a day, he says it's a "great day," and 1,000-plus words is "heroic."
- On his own writer's notebook, Fletcher reported that he typically goes through about one per year. He says he probably has about 30 writer's notebooks.
- What still puzzles him about writing? He noted that there are still some things about writer's workshop that puzzle him. He is currently curious about what, exactly, is the best way is to get boys engaged in writing.

What's Next?

At the moment, an entry for the *About the Author* series is in the works along with three other books. He is working on a novel titled *Jazzy and Me*, geared towards upper elementary students. A book of poetry titled *Moving Day*, is filled with poems about this life event. His third book under way is titled *How to Write Your Life Story*. He anticipates this book will be on the shelf in about a year. I'm counting the days and holding my breath, just waiting to get my hands on his next book!

For more information on Ralph Fletcher, visit www.ralphfletcher.com