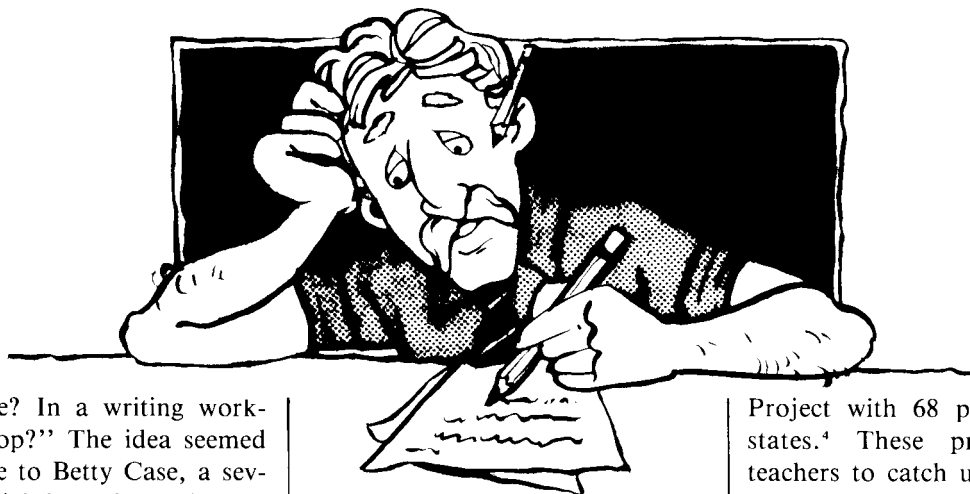


A Writer Is Someone Who Writes —And So Is a Writing Teacher!

By Beverly Beem and Susan Gardner



Write? In a writing workshop?" The idea seemed a novel one to Betty Case, a seventh- and eighth-grade teacher attending the North Pacific Union Conference Writing Workshop. "I knew it was a 'writing workshop,' but I thought that meant how to teach something, not how to do it." Actually, the workshop approached both issues—the teaching and the doing—as one inseparable concern. Instead of listening to a professor tell them how to teach writing, participants studied the writing process from the inside out. They wrote. They read one another's work. They wrote some more. And always they explored the implications of what they were doing for their teaching.

Applying the Research

In the past ten to 15 years, scholars in composition have worked intensely to understand and describe

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the writing process. But these gains in scholarship can have little effect unless teachers know and apply them in their classrooms. For instance, if writing is a way of learning,¹ how does that concept affect what teachers do in the classroom? If teachers are to emphasize the entire writing process, rather than just the final product,² how does that focus affect the way they respond to student writing? If expressive or exploratory writing is the foundation for all other kinds of writing,³ how does that belief affect the assignments teachers give? In other words, how can teachers translate the discoveries of the theorists into classroom practice to help students grow as writers?

Several programs have brought teachers in contact with the recent surge of scholarship in writing. Most prominently, the National Endowment for the Humanities has funded the National Writing

Project with 68 programs in 34 states.⁴ These projects enable teachers to catch up with current scholarship in composition, think through its implications for their teaching, and develop their own abilities as writers. The North Pacific Union Conference is sponsoring a similar writing program for its teachers. Last summer, 15 teachers from first grade through college met with Cleo Martin from the University of Iowa⁵ and Beverly Beem from Walla Walla College to reexamine their understanding of writing and how it should be taught.

Looking for "Something More"

Participants were all experienced, successful teachers who recognized the need for further study in writing. Cheri Stowers from Central Valley Junior Academy expressed her feelings this way: "I knew there must be more to writing than just having students write something and grade it and that's it." The search for that "something more" led these teachers to consider many aspects of writing,

but their central concern was always, "How can we best teach our students to write?" To answer this question, participants looked not only to the scholarship available but also to their own experience as writers and teachers.

With the hospitable atmosphere offered by a refreshment table and resource center, the first day's formal greetings gave way to laughter and friendship, an important ingredient in the intense professional discussion to follow. The time they spent together allowed teachers to learn from other successful teachers. As workshop leader Cleo Martin observed about the group, "People who are willing to give up a big chunk of their summer to do something like this are very serious professionally. That seriousness leads them to realize that things could be better. If they didn't care and if they weren't already pretty good, they wouldn't be searching for new ways."

But this exchange of ideas did not take place in a vacuum. Central to the workshop was a resource center filled with the works of well-known scholars, teachers, and writers. These, too, contributed their voices. Teachers in small or isolated schools often find themselves separated from active professional discussion. The readings offered them a chance to catch up with current research. The workshop thus blended theory with practice as participants discussed their own writing and teaching experience in the context of recent scholarship.

Blending Theory and Practice

In blending the worlds of theory and practice, teachers hashed out the principles of writing that were applicable in any grade and subject. Their concerns went far deeper than sharing individual

assignments or discussing "what I did last Thursday." Rather, they were establishing a philosophical base for what they do day by day, a means for determining what to do on Thursdays.

Project groups focused on three particular questions. One group examined the writing process from beginning to end, asking "What do good writers actually do when they write?" By analyzing the writing practices of the group and participating in skits portraying classroom conditions, they discussed what a writer needs to do to produce good writing, and how a teacher can nurture an environment conducive to good writing.

Another group looked at ways of generating student writing. They discussed the opportunities teachers give students to write and how to make assignments that elicit a student's best work. A third group looked at different ways of responding to student writing. They examined the effect of different responses on a writer, and by modelling successful and unsuccessful responses, these teachers evaluated their own responses to student writing.

By examining their teaching in the light of composition research, teachers joined theory with practice. However, a third element must be present to make this union complete. Teachers of writing must be writers themselves. This concept became the organizing principle of the workshop. The mornings' theoretical discussions gave way to the afternoons' "writer's workshop." There, teachers wrote and looked at the writing process as writers.

Participants wrote their autobiographies, reflecting on their experiences in writing, their attitudes toward writing, and their goals as writers. Though all were there as writing teachers, many confessed

to not having written much themselves, at least not the kinds of writing they would like to do. "I haven't written since college," one participant said, and another added, "In school I wrote only term papers."

Most felt uneasy at first, half suspecting that everyone else in the room was a great writer, probably working on the next best seller. But the writing autobiographies soon put that illusion to rest. All were suffering from the problems that keep most people from writing: time pressures, inertia, and lack of an audience. Most confessed to doing only the utilitarian writing required in their jobs. Several cited horror stories of being cut to shreds by a teacher in the past. Virginia Young from Walla Walla Valley Academy said, "When I was in college, I wanted to be a writer. I've always been able to write, but when I wrote for a class, it seemed that what I wrote wasn't what the teacher wanted or something. The papers came back with so much red on them that I wondered why I ever even had the idea that I could write."

Needed—Time, Space, and Audience

The teachers in this workshop were writers all, but writers who wrote mostly from outside pressures. To write from the inside, to produce a work that gives the writer pride in the writing and the reader pleasure in the reading, a writer needs time and space and an audience. The workshop provided these elements.

Central to the workshop was the Collection Box. Participants were invited to write whatever they wanted and whenever they wanted. Journal entries, poetry, stories, letters, essays, sketches, questions, reactions—all appeared at one

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faculty, and the running of campuses still go on as though we were largely in the business of teaching only the traditional student. If we are to recognize the changed face of higher education today and to shift our programs to include the entire posthigh-school population, we need to educate administrators, faculty, and constituents to think in new ways about Adventist higher education. □

Writing Teachers

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time or another in the Collection Box. Every piece received an encouraging and specific response from the directors and sometimes the entire group. Cleo Martin pointed out that "People can get to be better writers by writing, and by getting response from careful readers." In her response to the writing of the group, she modelled a positive approach that focuses on a writer's excellences in writing and leads to revision.

Participants noted several effects of this intense, detailed, and encouraging response. Millie Windemuth from Grants Pass SDA School observed, "I know that what I write will be responded to positively, and I can take risks that

I would never have taken in writing before."

Dan Baker from Tri-City Junior Academy noted that people felt free to explore different kinds of writing. He commented, "I didn't expect to be writing any poetry because I had never really considered that means of expression as being my best means, but for some reason, it seemed to fit." Anita Molstead from Sandpoint Junior Academy said, "I've always wanted to see myself as 'teacher, writer' but that seemed like climbing Mt. Everest. But after three weeks of positive comments on my writing, I realize that I indeed can be 'teacher, writer.'"

Surprising Results

Bringing together a group of writers, giving them the time and place to write, and demonstrating the motivating force of positive response can only result in good writing. And good writing resulted, sometimes to the writer's surprise, since participants seemed to be experienced chiefly in the more formal, academic kinds of writing.

Susan Gardner from Walla Walla Valley Academy expressed her misgivings thus: "You give me scholarly essays to write, and I can

go with them, but creative writing like stories; well, I am not a creative writer." During this workshop, however, she completed two short stories and had to revise her own opinion. "I learned that I can write in different forms, and I found that I could indeed be a creative person. It freed my mind to think in different channels."

The retreatlike atmosphere of the workshop provided the time and place for participants to totally immerse themselves in writing without distractions or the pressure of other duties. But just as important, the workshop provided an audience. Participants formed a community of writers, reading and responding to one another's work. Finding a knowledgeable and caring audience to read one's work and offer suggestions can have a powerful effect on a writer. And since writing is meant to be read, sharing one's work with that audience is also a natural part of the writing process.

Karen Bungard from San Diego Academy commented, "I have not had the audience before that I have had here to share my personal creative material with. Here I have an audience who will be accepting, yet helpful and who will give suggestions for improvement." Rick Jordan from Anchorage Junior Academy stated, "I learned some self-confidence in sharing my writing, and I think that's important to take back to my students. I can show them how to be more self-confident in sharing their writing."

Why Write?

There are many reasons for writing teachers to write. Of course, their writing improves as they practice their craft. But by writing, teachers also develop an enthusiasm and love of writing that is contagious. They can then, as Leah

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Rae Holmes from Milton-Stateline School observed, "teach my children about the joys of writing."

To be good guides through the writing process, teachers need to understand both theoretically and experientially what it means to be a writer. They need to know the writing process in all its complexity. They can then encourage young writers, speaking from their theoretical knowledge of the writing process and their own experiences as writers. They can say to their students, "I know what you mean. On my last piece, I too . . ." When teachers model good writing, they show by their own example the importance that writing has for them both personally and professionally. They are an active part of the community of writers that they are establishing in the classroom. In short, they are teaching students to write because they are writers themselves.

The community of writers in the workshop crossed barriers of level and discipline. Elementary, secondary, and college teachers worked together; some were specialists in English, some were not. As they focused their attention on writing, any self-consciousness over these differences faded away. They began to see one another as writers and colleagues.

"I think one of the surprises of the workshop was," as Ann Jaramio from Laurelwood Adventist Academy put it, "how well we've been able to learn from each other." After all, teachers all deal with the same writing process and the same students—just at different times in their lives.

A writing workshop does not end when the participants pack up their pencils and go home. Its influence is only beginning. Bringing teachers in contact with current scholarship fosters a sense of pro-

fessionalism. Having teachers work as colleagues on common professional concerns develops a spirit of collaboration. The effect of this professionalism and collaboration will be seen in revitalized teaching and ultimately in improved student writing.

The participants in this workshop look forward to a spring postsession where they can discuss and evaluate their experiences during the school year. Their need for an audience for their own writing as well as a forum for their professional concerns continues. Exciting days lie ahead as scholarship and teaching practice blend in these teachers' lives. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ Janet Emig, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," *College Composition and Communication*, 28:2 (May, 1977), 122-28; Janet Emig, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*. NCTE Research Report No. 13 (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971).

² Donald M. Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968).

³ James Britton, et al. *The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18*. Schools Council Research Series (London: Macmillan Education, 1975).

⁴ A special issue of the *Arizona English Bulletin* entitled *Writing Projects* (Vol. 22) describes several of these programs. It is available from the National Council of Teachers of English. Another program sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the University of Iowa is the Institute on Writing. In a five-year program, 42 colleges and universities, including Walla Walla College, developed comprehensive writing programs involving a freshman writing course, staff development, and writing across the curriculum. A report of this program entitled *Courses for Change in Writing: A Selection from the NEH/Iowa Institute*, edited by Carl H. Klaus and Nancy Jones has been published by Boynton/Cook.

⁵ Cleo Martin is director of the Rhetoric Program at the University of Iowa. For several years, she has directed the State of Iowa Writing Project, and now her participants are returning for a second and even a third session.

Functional School Buildings

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and practice. Steeb indicated that the proper use of educational specifications would probably increase as the various states require by law and policy the use of such procedures.⁹ The use of educational specifications is increasing;

however, they are still not required by all states nor is the format or content of such specifications consistent among the states that do require them.

The Need for Educational Specifications in SDA Schools

The term *educational specifications* has been defined by a number of people and in varying ways. A general consensus suggests the following brief definition: Educational specifications itemize for an architect what is needed for a proposed educational facility to implement a particular educational program in the most efficient and effective way.

It should be noted first that educational specifications are not the same as master plans, which require a study of an entire school system with regard to facilities needed in the future, particularly until such a time that all land in the community is developed and there is no longer any significant growth anticipated in the school population.† A complete master plan provides a basis for developing educational specifications for each existing and proposed school in the community by describing the number of pupils to be housed and the philosophy and program of learning to be implemented. The master plan is not, however, a substitute for educational specifications.

Furthermore, educational specifications are not the same as building specifications. Building specifications are a technical supplement to and explanation of architectural drawings. Unfortunately, in many Seventh-day Adventist school and church building committees, the difference among these three different facets of the overall planning and

†Dr. Edward Streeter describes master plans in more detail elsewhere in this issue of the JOURNAL.