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The Urge to Write

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‘Sharing one’s writing can be like revealing one’s soul. It is risky business. It can be embarrassing and threatening. But how can we expect our students to write if we don’t write?’

Rebecca Olness, *Using Literature to Enhance Writing Instruction*

A Cambodian man was very poor in his youth. He had barely enough money for food, let alone paper on which to write. Unfortunately he had fallen in love with a young woman from a neighbouring village. He longed to be able to write to her and share his feelings. Every morning he would get up before sunrise, sneak down to the riverbank and write love letters in the wet sand. When the young woman came down to the river to wash clothes later in the morning she would read his words of love ...

A young girl from the Bronx in New York was given a writing assignment for homework. After school she walked home to her family’s apartment only to discover

that the electricity supply had been cut off because the account had not been paid.

It was wintertime in New York and darkness arrived early. The urge to write was strong and so the girl walked out into the street and sat under a street light to complete her homework as requested. The girl had the perfect excuse for not writing, but the writer within refused to be denied.

Writers write – in notebooks, on scraps of paper, in the wet sand if necessary.

Memories of Red Pen People

...

‘Real writers choose their own topic; therefore children should be allowed to do the same.’

Mem Fox, *Radical Reflections: Passionate Opinions on Teaching, Learning and Living*

I still hold strong memories of my year-five teacher imposing a weekly writing topic on the class. Every Thursday afternoon she would announce: ‘Get ready for composition.’ We would obediently take an exercise book labelled ‘Composition’ from our desks and sit waiting silently for the topic to be announced. She would draw herself up to her full height and announce, ‘Today, I want you to write a story called “Autobiography of an Ant”.’

That was all the explanation we were given. No discussion, no questioning, no modelling – just the huge shadow of this imposing adult towering over us as she prowled the room urging us to ‘Start writing!’ Followed quickly by, ‘Hurry up lazybones. Get a wriggle on!’ This was the only encouragement that was forthcoming.

We wrote in silence for the next twenty-five minutes. When she slipped by your desk without bothering you, it was as

if a shark had glided past and you had been spared a chomping. The silence was occasionally punctuated by the teacher bellowing: ‘That’s not how you write it, you foolish child. Don’t you remember anything I’ve taught you about subject and predicate?’ We would brace ourselves for the ruler slam that often followed such an outburst of displeasure.

At the end of our writing time we braced ourselves for the command ‘STOP WRITING NOW!’ Every pen in the room would freeze. We would then pass our books over the heads of the student seated in front of us to the front row desk. Our teacher would then collect them. They would sit, piled high on the teacher’s desk, monuments to our unnatural pain and suffering. There are many among us today, particularly politicians, who laughably refer to this time as the golden era of education. I am not among them.

Almost a week would pass before our composition books were returned to us. Opening them was yet another dreaded moment in our miserable writing lives. Heart rates would quicken in anticipation of the teacher's appraisal of our writing efforts. There was no other feedback apart from a mark out of ten. We only found out what was wrong with our writing. There was never any attempt to build on what we knew about writing. All that written effort was largely a waste of time.

We hated the red ink invasion of our work. We hated the comments in the margin which informed us how inadequately we had presumably performed. We hated the crossing out of our hastily-attempted words, and we dreaded the mark out of ten circled at the bottom of the page. There it glowed for the entire world to see. The saddest thing of all was that we had begun to turn off the idea of writing. Many pages looked like blood had been spilt. Our teacher knew little about how to support developing writers, and subsequently pillaged the pages of our books with that rampaging red pen.

And so it continued throughout my fifth year. The teacher handed out the writing topic and we did our best to survive. One week she gave us the topic 'My Life as a Pen'. I thought about my teacher's pen, the much feared red one, and for a moment I figured I might write about it. Then I thought about my safety and how much my family might miss me. I eventually decided to write about an anonymous fountain pen that ran out of ink and gave up trying to write.

In the end we all survived that year, but I have never forgotten what was done to us and what was done to writing. I was determined that if I ever became a teacher I would never treat my students the way we were treated. I would never approach writing that way. I also resolved that I would never use a red pen to make such scarring marks on my students' work.

A lifetime later, and more than four decades spent as an educator myself, has never daunted my determination to be the antithesis of this type of teacher. I guess you could say that for me, my year-five teacher was unforgettable – an inspiration, in fact! I doubt that all my former classmates walked away with the same outlook.

My early experiences as a writer are what motivate me to provide explicit feedback and support at every stage of the writing process. Young writers need to feel that their efforts to develop as writers will be valued. By doing this, each child is more likely to achieve what they set out to do when they commence writing. Mem Fox, in her book *Radical Reflections: Passionate Opinions on Teaching, Learning and Living*, implores teachers to ache with caring. If we do, says Mem, we are more likely to create classrooms in which writing matters, because it's done for authentic purposes by young writers who ache for a real response.