

Becoming Your Own Expert—Teachers as Writers

By: Tim Gillespie

Publication: The Quarterly, Vol. 8, No. 1

"Write with the children," writing expert Donald Graves says. Noted author Frank Smith says it, too: Teachers should be writing with their students. In fact, most of the experts in writing say so.

But not everyone is so sure. I was recently explaining the Oregon Writing Project to a testy school administrator. He didn't want to hear about the experts. He wanted to make sure the money his district was spending to send teachers to the Oregon Writing Project wasn't being wasted. He was a very direct fellow.

"Did I understand correctly that you're going to have my teachers write?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied. "They'll do a lot of it, in fact."

"Look," he said, "With all due respect, I'm a little tired of all this creative experience stuff. I don't give a damn if my teachers can write a pretty little poem or story; I want them to know how to *teach* writing."

I know some good arguments for teachers writing; I shared them with him:

When teachers write, we provide a positive model for our students. Our example says we value writing and find it useful, more so than when we sit and correct papers while the students write.

When teachers write, we give ourselves a chance to test our own writing assignments. I never understood why students didn't seem to enjoy more wholeheartedly my "Imagine You're a Hypnotist" topic—until I tried it myself.

When teachers write, we help demystify the act of writing. Students often think that experienced writers find writing easy or have some magic ability to "get it right the first time." If we share our projects or write in front of our students, they can see what a sloppy, difficult act writing is for all writers.

When teachers write, we learn empathy for our students. Writing can be a struggle, and this fact is easy to forget if we don't wrestle regularly with it ourselves. (I worked once with a teacher who thought this a poor reason, saying, "I don't need to break my arm to sympathize with a student who has a cast." I find this resistance understandable, since writing can seem at times like breaking an arm.)

When teachers write, we become partners in a community of writers, full participants in our classroom writing workshop.

I don't know how convincing this all was to the administrator. It sounded pretty good to me, but he still had that skeptical look in his eye. He wanted better reasons. I wish I had known then what I've learned since.

During this past summer's Oregon Writing Project session, I discovered another reason for writing with my students—perhaps the best one yet, from the administrator's perspective, because it directly addresses our skills as writing teachers. Here it is: Writing makes us experts on teaching writing. This discovery came thanks to my friend and teaching partner, Portland poet and essayist Kim Stafford. He said off-handedly one day, in response to a thorny question, "Whenever I can't find the answer to a student or classroom writing problem in an expert's book, I try to find it in my own writing."

This simple insight reaffirmed for me the value of teachers writing with students. Our reflective interaction with our own writing efforts informs and animates our interactions with our student writers. Writing is the best way for us to establish our own expertise, to be able to figure out our own answers to the difficult issues of teaching writing. For example, here are some things I know, not just because I read them in a book or heard them at a workshop, but because I write:

I know that if I don't write daily, I lose a lot of steam. It takes me longer to get prepared to write, to build momentum, if I'm not doing it regularly. I know, thus, that my students have more barriers to break through if they're not writing frequently.

I know that writings I'm forced to do (such as reports for work) are harder to sustain and less gratifying to complete than writings I choose to do (such as this article). I know that my students likewise need to have opportunities to choose their own topics and projects.

I know writing takes time. I can't finish pieces quickly. I work, get a burst of energy, come to a dead end. I put the piece away, return to it later, and putter with the words again and again. As an extreme example, I had an essay published in a magazine last spring that I started seven years ago. I know, therefore, that my students need some sustained time to write and to work and rework a composition.

I know that I often discover what I'm going to write as I write, that I often surprise myself with a new insight or image or idea. Drafting is a powerful act during which I often find, as the bassist Willie Ruff says about jazz, "something created during the process of delivery." The learning that takes place as I write helps me know that students need to be encouraged and allowed to do multiple drafts of a paper and that they also need to be able to write often without the constraints of preordained topics, forms, or outlines.

I know I never think about mechanics during early drafts. For me there's a kind of forgetting at first, a spilling forth of words independent of the concerns of handwriting, punctuation, spelling, form, organization, and so on. This outpouring of language comes first, and as a result the early copies are usually a mess. I wouldn't want anyone to see my early drafts. Thus I know that I need to help my students be freed of all concerns except their message on early drafts. I also know that it is extremely limiting to student growth to grade single-draft papers.

I know that I am a better writer for the responses I get to my early drafts from conversations with my wife, friends, and colleagues. I know I will be helping my students by trying to provide similar sorts of quality responses to their writings by organizing my classroom for writing conferences and student response groups.

I know I use a lot of tools and resources for proofreading—dictionary, thesaurus, scissors and stapler, style guides, grammar handbook, friends' advice. I know students also need to have access to such tools when they are in the final proofing stage of their work.

I know I don't like vague written comments on my writing, like a rejection slip I recently collected. It only said that the work had promise and I should try again, but sorry this time. "Is that all?" I chafed. What part had promise? What was weak? I was frustrated. I knew, then, that those broad, generalized written comments ("Good job," "I enjoyed this") or a mere letter grade on paper will leave my student writers similarly dissatisfied with not learning anything.

Thus, as a writer paying attention to my own work, I learn to be more keenly attentive to my students' work. My careful observation and listening to them is enriched by my careful observation and listening to myself as I write.

The conclusion is this: When we write, our classroom writing program and our interactions with our young writers can be based on knowledge we have earned ourselves rather than received from others. We don't need to give up our curriculum to the experts. We can just watch ourselves write.

About the Author TIM GILLESPIE, in his 35th year as an educator, currently teaches English at Lake Oswego High School in Oregon. He has long been affiliated with the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis and Clark College and has served as its co-director. Commenting on his own life as a teacher-writer, Gillespie has said, "With the evening's distance and the quiet plink of a keyboard, I can mull over the day's challenges, savor small victories, tinker with problems . . . and gain a bit of perspective on the daily triumphs and despairs of teaching." Currently working on a book for Stenhouse Publishers about teaching literary criticism, he uses another part of his brain when he plays harmonica in the Big Blind Blues Band.