

A Better Way to Teach Writing



Photo by Rebecca Rowe

By Julie Mariouw

I spent a good deal of my life writing — and teaching — *from the neck up*. I received an excellent grade school/high school education, earned a B.A. in English from the University of Michigan, and studied teaching at Eastern Michigan University. I wrote well-formed essays, taught students how to read and write, and thought I had a pretty good understanding of the English language. Until one day I learned that I had missed the point entirely.

I came up against my own personal brick wall: the coping mechanisms that I had been using to deal with unprocessed childhood trauma — overuse of alcohol, food, etc. — came back to bite me, and I realized that I had to stop assuaging my symptoms and focus more deeply on my underlying wounds. It isn't that I hadn't been working in therapy prior to this — I had — but suddenly my attempts to kill the pain did not work; my deeper self broke open, and I was taken to a different place within. It became more painful for me to stay the way I was than to change — so I changed.

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I began using my daily writing in a way that I never had before. I let go of some of the previous tight control and let the writing lead me. My notebook became my refuge and my classroom, a literal home. It was a mirror reflecting me to myself, teaching me about my behavior patterns, my emotions, and my unhealed wounds. It was a place for me to practice being me, a cocoon of sorts, in which I could safely develop until I was ready to be launched out into the world again, in a new form.

Unhealed emotional wounds, I have found, will always come back to haunt you, and that can be one of the greatest gifts you can ever receive. This has certainly been the case for me. I knew that if I continued to cooperate with this writing process, I would be led to where I needed to go, and it became clear to me that my true calling — besides writing for myself — was to help other interested people experience a transformation, in their own way, in their own time, through writing. I felt that I had become, as Pat Schneider states in her book *Writing Alone and with Others*, “[a midwife] to that which was already within [my] students.”

Since that day seven years ago, it has been my mission to create a space where new writing can be born, where a writer's authentic voice can surface and be nurtured, and where workshop participants can come together and hold each other up to the light. My first task in accomplishing this was to create a journaling group — Women Writing for Recovery — in which women recovering from alcoholism

could learn to use writing to further their personal growth. One of the things I witnessed while leading this group was the miraculous way in which each writer was led directly to what she needed in order to heal. The only thing that could interfere with this process was if the writer attempted to control the outcome. So my job became to help people put aside what they had learned in school about writing — making an outline, using correct grammar, etc. — and to teach them to let go.

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I was reading quite a bit during these years, searching for books that seemed to fit what I was trying to accomplish — *Writing from the Body* by John Lee; *Writing the Natural Way* by Gabriele Rico, PhD; *Reclaiming the Wild Soul: How Earth's Landscapes Restore Us to Wholeness* by Mary Reynolds Thompson; and finally, *Writing Alone and with Others* by Pat Schneider.

While reading Pat Schneider's book, I became intrigued with the teaching method she had developed — the Amherst Writers & Artists Workshop Method — and realized that it was much like what I had already been trying to do in my workshop. I signed up for the 40-hour training certification program that was offered, and I became certified in this method. The training was a great

experience, in that it gave structure to some of the things I had been trying to do on my own. For instance, I had wanted to move more toward fiction writing rather than journaling in my workshops, and part of what Schneider proposes in the Amherst Writers & Artists Teaching Method is that all workshop writing be treated as fiction (unless the writer specifically states that the writing is autobiographical). This “keeps the focus on the writing rather than on the writer; it allows members to gain access to, and then express, thoughts and emotions that may be too powerful, painful, embarrassing or surprising to expose otherwise.”

Another aspect of the workshop that I consider essential is that I (the leader) write along with the participants and share my work; this is important for bringing about equality of risk-taking and building of trust. And, as Schneider has said, “the last thing people want is another ‘expert’ standing up there behind a lectern, telling everyone, ‘Do it like me.’” Instead they want, “...someone who will extend the courtesy of listening, rather than lecturing, who will say, don't let me get in the way, this is all about you and your journey.”

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During the workshop, participants are given the opportunity to share their newly-written work, and I guide the remaining members in their responses. No criticism, suggestion, or question is directed toward the writer, but instead we comment on what we found strong in their writing, what was memorable and powerful for us, and what we will take with us from the work. In the workshop we deal with just-born writing — the writer does not even know what they've written yet — and as such, this writing is not ready for editing.

When people's work is honored and supported in the ways that I have been describing, authentic writing voices emerge, self-esteem and self-confidence grow; people become willing to experiment with new writing techniques, and they begin to know each other in deeper than average ways. The whole process feels to me like a breath of fresh air and like we are moving along some invisible highway, being guided to new healing and growth. In my eight years of experience teaching this way, I have watched people open like flowers, revealing layer upon layer of what has been trapped inside them for years. I consider it a great privilege to be able to witness and support such transformations, and I look forward to continuing to do so.

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