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Affirmations: How to Inspire Students to Revise

Spring 2008 / Focus

by **Carol Hawkins**, Mount Ida College

Building communities of mutual respect in the writing center and the classroom

Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.

— Thomas Edison

Edison's wisdom reveals itself in the order of his thoughts. The 1% inspiration is the spark to everything that follows. He knew that one is not willing or able to exert enough energy to perspire if not inspired.



Carol Hawkins

A product of creative thinking, inspiration is a sudden moment of clarity. Many students lack clarity when asked to write in school—particularly those whose color, gender and economic class place them on the outside looking into the classroom. Language differences are primary concerns, and I don't mean just English as a Second Language. Those who grow up female, poor, or nonwhite may find their ways with words at odds with expectations on how to write in school. They need affirmations to inspire them to sweat over a draft, not to mention face the fear of writing in school. Think about it. If you were a student who struggled to write, regardless of the reason, all through school, what would help you to write and want to do it? Positive feedback is my guess.

Not really just a guess, I've spent a lot of time thinking about my own struggles with literacy even though I consider myself a good writer. The darn grammar used to get in my way, especially if I had a teacher who read for grammar first.

I also had problems with organizing my thoughts. I needed the freedom to explore my ideas on the page, and I was never short on ideas to write about. I'd always get into trouble if the teacher made me do an outline first. To make matters worse, I had to learn a new way with words because my way was judged as colloquial or quaint or slang.

Readers in the writing center learn to offer guidance by initiating dialogue with writers. Talk is an important part of the writing process; consequently, writing centers buzz with talk.

When I took my work to a writing center, I didn't have to worry about grammar, organization, or spelling, at least not initially, because readers read without judgment and then initiated dialogue by telling me what was working in the draft. Because of these conversations, I gained confidence that I could meet a reader's need without stifling my own voice. I was motivated to revise.

bell hooks and other feminist writers emphasize a need to "come to voice" (see *Talking Back* and *Teaching to Transgress*), but one struggles if not encouraged. Unlike the classroom and its conflicting objectives that need to be "covered and assessed," the writing center's objective is to guide revision. Readers in the writing center learn to offer guidance by initiating dialogue with writers. Talk is an important part of the writing process; consequently, writing centers buzz with talk.

Facing the Page

Kind Ear

When I look back on my first writing experience at a community college, I recall my fear and insecurity. I was a nontraditional student—older, barely graduated from high school, married young, and never questioning my choices, of course, until my first writing assignment in a freshmen composition class—to write a personal narrative and reflect on *what I'd learned from where I'd been*. Taken from Georgia O'Keefe's autobiography, this question led me back to Cleveland, during the 1960s, and high school where my husband and I met and fell in love. Fast-forward to children, two girls (he wanted boys) and moving around from place to place, state to state, in search of a better life, like the Joads from the *Grapes of Wrath*, only to discover that we took our problems with us—mainly a steady supply of Budweiser beer and a childhood full of hurt. We ended our marriage many days and miles later, in Montana, when we couldn't carry the load anymore.

I inherited my father's dream of a college education, a dream he never fulfilled. My father's regrets, my failed marriage, and the need to support my children gave me the courage to try to earn a degree, even though I was much older than most students in my classes. Fortunately one of my first courses became my favorite: freshmen composition.

The way I see it, the language of school was not that different from the language [my advisor] used at home, but for many of us, it's a different story.

I remember my first writing conference. The composition teacher met with me to discuss the personal narrative assignment. She held my paper in her hand and looked me in the eyes. She handed my paper back to me while saying, "You've had quite the life. You're very courageous."

I felt confused. What was so courageous about me? My life seemed quite ordinary. Doesn't everyone struggle? I know my students do. I find that many of my students, like me, are more than willing to share very personal things in their writing. My friend, Dorothy, who teaches first-year writing at another college, says, "It is as if that faceless audience won't ever actually know it is us—even though our peers and instructors really aren't faceless." I suppose I felt safe enough to write my narrative without censorship. I suppose I wasn't even thinking about my readers but my own need to express myself. Fortunately, my teacher listened and validated my writing. She showed me respect.

The Shut Down

Critical Advisor

My writing atrophied some years later when I was trying to finish my dissertation. My advisor and I had a strained relationship. He was a well-published, award-winning, respected scholar in the field of composition. I wanted a chance to work with him. I recall his first response to my writing. I was taking a course where we had to read a book on writing relationships. I strongly objected to the voice and tone of the writer when describing his interactions with a young female student who cried during a writing conference. I felt defensive when I read the author's thoughts about the student, which sounded to me as if he were making fun of her feelings. In response, I wrote that his lack of empathy made him a poor source for guidance on how to form writing relationships. Little did I know at the time that the author was a former student of my advisor and they worked together on the book. Talk about putting my foot in my mouth.

My advisor also found my narratives too emotional. I wrote gut-wrenching stories, mostly about inner-city high school students who struggled in school and who I worked with as a research assistant on a portfolio project. The portfolio asked them to answer the question, "who am I" with artifacts and reflections that they placed inside their portfolios. I found their stories meaningful because they were direct and honest. They pulled me into their worlds by writing down thoughts, emotions, and experiences as real as the narrative I wrote for my first-year composition teacher. However, my advisor told me that I "romanticized" America's underclass. I would respond by referring him to a book I read by Michele Fine entitled *Framing Dropouts* that helped me to better understand students' resistance and my own toward school. I knew that the longer one has to travel between home and school, the greater the struggle. This distance is not measured in miles but according to one's place. Again, my advisor disagreed and thought Dr. Fine romanticized the nation's underclass as well.

[T]eachers and writing center tutors must be vigilant as readers, to keep our own prejudices, biases, and assumptions in check.

My advisor also challenged my resistance to "academic discourse," a language I found foreign when I entered graduate school. He questioned whether "academic discourse" even existed. I'd respond that I felt some kind of barrier, thinking to myself how I would keep hitting the wall whenever *I wrote for him*, but my advisor never affirmed these thoughts and feelings. If I wanted affirmations, I would have to look elsewhere. I realized that if I wanted to get my advisor's approval, I needed to conform. I had to pull back the passion and quiet my own voice. I did so reluctantly, but I was not going to let him stop me

from getting that “damn piece of paper,” a term my father used in frustration when referring to a college degree. My advisor became my gatekeeper.

To be fair, my writing was often messy. I burst ideas onto the page. I was taught by Donald Murray to write big and revise later, inventing my topics as I went (see Murray “Writing Before Writing”). I quickly realized, however, that I best not take any messy drafts into my advisor’s office. He had neither the time nor the patience to deal with that sort of word entanglement.

I remember one day when I asked my advisor about his writing process. I was feeling embarrassed about a paragraph or two that sounded lovely to me but were “overdone” and “unnecessary” to him.

“I bet you get the words down right the first time, don’t you?”

He responded, “The sentences come out the way I want them to most of the time.”

The way I see it, the language of school was not that different from the language he used at home, but for many of us, it’s a different story. I left my graduate program believing that he was the real writer and I was an imposter. Later I would read about a condition called “The Imposter Syndrome,” coined by Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes, where many females seemed unable to internalize their accomplishments, particularly those who were first generation college students like me (see *The Imposter Phenomenon Among High Achieving Women*). I needed those affirmations, but that didn’t make me needy. All students need affirmations, particularly those who struggle with writing.

Facing the Page

Kind Ear

I recall one of my lunch meetings with Donald Murray, in a small restaurant in Durham. I could not believe my good fortune, to come to the University of New Hampshire where he taught and wrote many of his books on writing. He welcomed me as a graduate student, and I enjoyed many a chef’s salad with him while talking about writing.

I devoured all Murray’s books and articles before I began teaching and was anxious to share his words on writing in my sections of composition, especially *Crafting a Life*, one of my favorites. My students and I read his insights and actually got to discuss them with the author. He often agreed to come to my classes and speak, even though he was retired from teaching. The joy of meeting him, talking to him, and asking him questions about writing boosted our confidence. We needed live authors to inspire us to write. “A writer teaches writing,” Murray always said.

Our classrooms and writing centers must become communities based on mutual respect, if we hope to inspire thoughtful interaction and engagement in the writing process.

Donald Murray was a humble yet confident writer. He would admit to many false starts and rewrites, yet he had just enough confidence to face the page. He wrote about teaching writing as he told stories about his life as a troubled boy who grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Boston. He too felt insecure. He advised my students and me to write fearlessly and to “always follow the surprise.”

My own writing hadn’t produced any surprises in quite some time. In the past I

would call Don and ask him if he would be willing to talk to me about my writing. He agreed but I was foolish to think that I was special. Donald Murray accepted an invitation for lunch to talk about writing with every graduate student. I will never forget what he said about my dissertation one day at lunch when I was stalled and feeling insecure with my advisor. While I was crunching down a toasted crouton from my chef's salad, he said, "Carol, you have to write with authority. You are the expert on your topic."

Authority? Expert? How could I write with authority, as an expert, when I felt defeated and insecure after disappointing sessions with my advisor, who had all the authority in our writing conferences?

The Role of Readers

Respectful Response

Donald Murray once wrote, "All writing is autobiographical" (66-74). I would add that all response is autobiographical. How a reader responds to a student's writing is pivotal and reflects the values and judgments of the reader. Therefore, teachers and writing center tutors must be vigilant as readers, to keep our own prejudices, biases, and assumptions in check. We must offer rigor with a dose of care. We must suspend judgment and listen. Whether teacher or tutor, readers must begin with affirmations, letting writers know what's working in their drafts, before they move to questions and collaborations on revision.

All writers need readers, but how that reader responds to a student's draft can make or break a writer. Mutual respect is vital. The writer's need to express authentic voice and the reader's need for clarity are of equal importance. This reciprocity was lacking in my writing relationship with my advisor. Our classrooms and writing centers must become communities based on mutual respect, if we hope to inspire thoughtful interaction and engagement in the writing process.

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