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Essay #1

They Were More Than Just Teachers

I'd like to say my writing career began in college but, in fact, I became a writer in sixth grade. Lowville Academy is like any small-town school: students K-12 squeezing into one building, teachers' kids getting drunk on a false sense of entitlement, and the school board clutching our "Blue Ribbon" title. My teachers said I was a good writer but I joined the chorus of "uhs" when writing assignments were announced. Throughout school I studied under the direction of supportive teachers, as well as those who were less accommodating. The former taught me to own my writing and recognize my strengths. However, I was also commanded to hand over my work for peer evaluation and to *always* fulfill the length requirement. This brew of techniques gives me a window through which to reflect upon my experiences as a student, examine teaching methods, and employ these systems, or not, in my future career.

One of my fondest memories of writing is the first day of sixth grade English. My teacher was warm and friendly, but not overly so. Our first assignment was to purchase a binder and make it our own by collaging the front and inserting an introductory writing piece. The class was taken with the idea. "You mean to say that we had our own little place to store *our* writing?" In retrospect I see that she was giving us ownership of our work, quite appealing to a sixth grader. The concept of "owning" work is crucial for writers. It could be said that exceptional writing is generated by honesty; this binder created a diary-like quality to our writing practice. In addition, writing about myself established a metaphorical claim over my newly-purchased binder. I applaud this teaching technique as it marks the day I feel I became a writer.

Seventh grade English class was a bit of a disappointment by comparison. The first day consisted of doing a quick write about our summer, switching papers with a classmate, evaluating each other's work, and sharing our evaluations with the teacher. That assignment was mortifying in more than one respect. One, I generally dislike being asked about my summer because many adults find that an appropriate question for every first day of school. Two, what makes my peer qualified to judge my summer activities and how I write about them? Three, my teacher's first impression of my writing is based upon what the kid next to me thinks. As the year went on, I continued to be discouraged. My teacher that year focused on length requirement as the key to success. This not only took away from learning content, grammar, and punctuation skills, it created a class atmosphere fraught with anxiety. Nevertheless, my sixth grade teacher had taught me that determination is fundamental to becoming a great writer.

Juxtaposing these memories I see opposing teaching techniques. My sixth grade teacher began the year explaining the important connection between writers and self, while my seventh grade teacher emphasized the relationship between the writer and audience. Each lesson is essential to powerful writing, but the former approach suited my needs as a student-writer. In other words, my sixth grade teacher allowed me to cultivate a sense of tenancy over my writing and encouraged me to delve into the world of composition.

In eighth grade, I encountered a teacher who structured criticism in such a way that I recall being energized and motivated to write. As contradictory as that sounds, this teacher began and ended each student-to-teacher conversation with a compliment. I specifically remember her saying with a smile, "Your content is wonderful, but your paragraphs are much too long, some snipping and cutting will accent your well-picked topics." Her compliments prompted me to reread, revise, and reprint my essay. The compliment is a potent tool in the world of teaching. I revisit this experience nearly every time I write my college essays and think to myself, "What do

I like about this rough draft? What do I dislike? How can my strengths aid me in my weaknesses?” With this mindset, I propel forward, essay after essay.

Writing for English classes was not the only type of writing I encountered. My eighth grade social studies teacher used fear as his approach for teaching writing. As can be imagined, my grade dropped in his class and I became more and more afraid to write his assignments. This stemmed from one incident of plagiarism: My class had a mid-year project consisting of journal entries about a book we read. I completed the task and promptly had it stolen from me by a fellow student. The teacher shouted at us in the hallway saying, “It takes two people to cheat,” and called us “unethical.” I was embarrassed, confused, and terribly nervous at the prospect of handing in my next writing assignment. After meeting with the principal, the girl fessed up and I was given one after-school detention as a reminder. However, my teacher failed to make amends with me after the scene in the hallway. From that point on, he brought up cheating at every opportunity. This is a prime example of ineffective negative reinforcement. I would quietly panic before walking to his desk to ask for help or to hand in an essay. Using fear as a tactic for teaching ethical writing is, without a doubt, ineffective and damaging to a writer’s confidence.

Ninth, tenth, and eleventh grade were a jumble of mediocre English teachers so I will jump ahead to my last year of high school. I had the privilege of studying under the guidance of my AP Literature teacher. This woman, above all, aspires to ship us off ready to tackle college-level writing. She is the first teacher who bluntly told me my writing was brimming with comma splices and that I had to work hard if I wanted to succeed at SUNY Plattsburgh. Perhaps it was the urgency behind her words, or my own dread of failing, but her honesty provoked me to become serious about addressing my shortcomings. In the process, she taught me how to form a thesis, neatly brainstorm, write an outline, edit respectfully, and break the rules of writing effectively. In just two semesters, I had grown into a writer who looked forward to learning how

to cite sources and write dialogue. This teacher did not shrink from our individual problems; rather, she paired us up according to our weaknesses and met with us as a group, a strategy lesson. The year came to an end and I had to move on to other wonderful teachers that I now refer to as “professors.” Wherever my career path takes me, I intend to follow her teachings. For each student is unique and every question deserves a response.

Teachers possess the power to mold us into whatever type of writers they desire. From my experience I can say that not every teacher executes techniques with mindfulness. Fortunately, though, there are those who motivate their students to just write. My middle school teachers built a solid foundation for my entry into high school, and my twelfth grade teacher prepared me for college. I consider these teachers my founders, my advocates, and above all, my inspirations.