

‘FINDING’ TEACHING: A LESSON IN COLLABORATION

by Ed Hara and Brenda Haney

Picture this: A writing classroom, mid-fall, community college. It is time for a lecture. You, the teacher, begin to spin facts and advice in a comfortable, almost musical groove. The information related is timeless and good, rehearsed and secure, and marches from right to left, non-stop, like a banner below a cable news show screen watched while you doze. Yet, the rest of the screen is more vivid: you imagine an impending lunch of roast chicken, last spring’s beach cabana, this afternoon’s hoped-for cadence of bicycle pedals aiming you down a brightly leaved October trail. The silent vacation tapestry, with its color and depth, begins to interest you more than the monologue flowing out of your mouth concerning the prize-winning writing of Toni Morrison and Tim O’Brien. Your energy is drawn elsewhere.

Meanwhile, as you talk, this semester’s writing students gradually blur into muddy composites of all students from all years: tattoos, afros, button-down shirts and bare midriffs all swirl into an amorphous mixture of “people out there” who, you hope, will learn what you tell them.

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Enthusiasm gradually evaporates, in both teacher and students, and you wish that it might resurface from under the dusty clutter of years and habit. Maybe, you think, someday you will give your instructional approaches a thorough cleaning and find both your enthusiasm and your individuality, dust them off, and use them to make teaching fun again.

Is this vignette too harsh? Do you, as a teacher, really take the time to know your students? What is lost in education when we never allow anything more than a soft-focus perception of the individuals receiving it?

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This article is an account of what is gained when teaching takes place in a way that allows a teacher and a student to come to know one another. It is the story of a first-year community college student and her writing instructor working together outside class to produce an essay and place it in a journal.

She was in the midst of the blur, sitting alone at a back table in an English 151 class; slightly built and quiet, she certainly did not seem to

draw attention to herself. Then she handed in her essay. Her name was Brenda. The essay draft she submitted was in response to a standard prompt: "Describe an incident that has changed your life." Her words began bringing her into focus. She began to have a voice, and this voice began telling me about her Detroit world:

I was 11-years-old, walking down the street with a girlfriend. We heard a guy holler from his parked, rusty Escort. "Hey, girls!" We looked over to see where the voice was coming from. He threw open his door, revealing that he had no pants on, and was masturbating. (At that time, I don't think I even knew what "masturbating" was. All I knew was that he had his pants off, and that the side of a city street was not the right place for nakedness. Also, that he said "Hey girls!" and smiled at us while he was sitting there with most of his clothes off seemed wrong.) "Gross!" my friend and I told each other, as we hurried up the street towards her home. It happened again, then several more times. One time, we saw a guy we thought was fishing down by the Rouge River. We immediately wondered why someone would be fishing in a river we knew contained only car parts, shopping carts, and tires. When we looked closer, we saw he wasn't fishing, just doing the same thing that the guy in the car had been doing. We ran home. We ran home a lot in that neighborhood.

As I read, the writer gradually became "Brenda," as opposed to "a writ-

ing student." And I changed just a little—from someone who was teaching according to the dictates of habit and expediency into someone who saw—once more—that students were individuals, and that they brought unique backgrounds with them to school. More than anything, Brenda's writing reawakened me to the barriers that some students encountered as they pursued an education, and to the fragility of this shared encounter in my classroom. "How are they still here?" I wondered.

Brenda moved from her neighborhood to a drug rehab meeting:

My neighborhood was Brightmoor—even then a convenient place to get your drugs, particularly crack. You don't see police there, and can't get a pizza delivered. ("What side of Telegraph Road are you on? East? Sorry!") I remember sitting on a girlfriend's porch and watching the out-of-place Cadillacs and BMWs driven by prosperous men in business suits, their car windows rolled up tightly. They'd park in front of the drug house in the street, one guy would run up to the house, spend about three minutes, then scurry back out to their waiting car. Once I went to a NA (Narcotics Anonymous) meeting with my brother. People there were happy to know I lived in Brightmoor. They were strangely familiar with the neighborhood, saying stuff like "Hey, I know that area really well!" Coming from a group of crackheads, these comments made me feel uneasy and not very proud.

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And then to her family, including her brother:

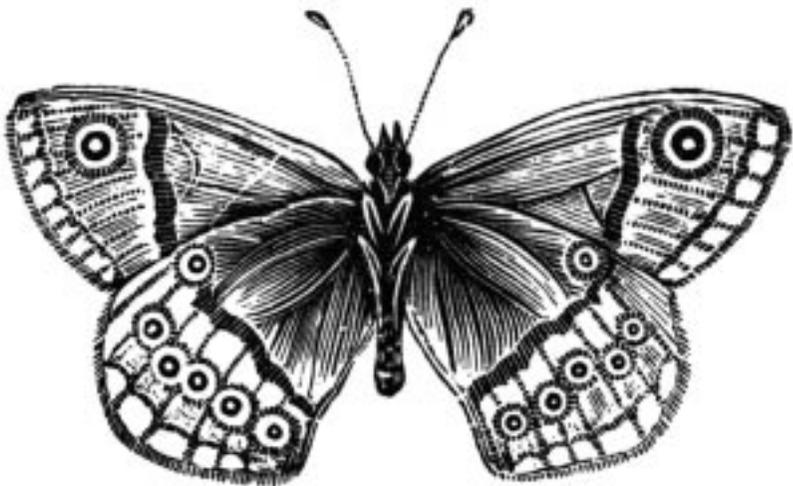
Always a momma's boy, he was seven years older than me. He'd come home from school cut up, sometimes missing a new pair of shoes, because he'd been beaten up and robbed just for being who he was.

When he was eighteen, he started using crack. I don't think that I knew he was doing it until he was sentenced to boot camp for his first B and E charge. The information became clear to me—and I was twelve, remember—as my parents used to explain why he needed to steal. I had before only known he smoked pot when he babysat me. Only later did he explain why he was awake before me that one Christmas: He was high on acid, enjoying the Christmas tree lights all night. This was my family when I needed them most.

Brenda, through her writing, was rapidly absorbing me into her gritty world, and as she did so, any problems I had faded into the background. As I neared retirement, I was in the midst of the usual set of questions: “What—if anything—have I accomplished? What am I going to do with the rest of my life? Does anything I do or say really matter?” About at this time in my reading of Brenda’s draft, I realized that this *was* what I did best—responding carefully and sensitively over the semesters to students—and here and now was the time to respond the best I knew how. Why? Because what I said to her might really matter, and because out of everyone, Brenda might be most desperately in need of my help. You see, her world became much worse:

I’m twelve years old. It’s pitch-black night, and Brightmoor is finally as quiet as it’s going to get. There are no car horns, shouts, swearing, and neighbors’ fights . . . I feel the pinch on my left temple, while he kisses me on the right. I am frozen in shock, unable to move. The man is not my father. He is not a friend of my father, nor anyone that I recognize. He orders me “Take off your pants!” I keep quiet and stay frozen. I had gone to bed on top of the covers in my jeans and sweater, after a long afternoon of watching television. I’m so scared.

I really don’t know what is happening to me, just that it is painful and that it is bad. I try not to scream, but I groan anyway. The sex hurts. I make noises, and he presses the knife harder into the side of my face.



There is blood, there is an unsuccessful search for the rapist, there is a depressed little girl who has trouble functioning at home and at school. Brenda tries razors and she tries pills. She starts staying away from her middle school.

Reading Brenda's story is wrenching. I am not watching *NYPD Blue*. I am not reading the *Detroit Free Press*. More importantly, I am not teaching writing to a statistic. Brenda is not an actor or a number or even "just a student." Credits will not roll after class and I will not get up from my recliner to look in the refrigerator. No, Brenda is a real person—a real person who needs my help.

I decided that my help should derive from my background as a professional educator—a writing teacher. In my mid-fifties, after over 30 years in English classrooms, I believed in several axioms. First, that students have individual stories to tell. Second, that they sometimes need help articulating their stories.

And finally, they thrive on establishing an individual voice that is honest and gains positive recognition and approval from others.

So I decided to help Brenda articulate her story. My demanding teaching schedule was soon—for one semester, anyway—to change for the better. I had been granted a short sabbatical in which I was to undertake a workplace literacy project. But there was a little time left around the edges of this project when Brenda and I could work together.

Brenda, when I suggested we collaborate on her essay, readily agreed. We then embarked on this project, with these main goals:

- To tell her story, completely and well, and
- To place it in a journal or periodical.

Soon, we began our series of weekly meetings—in my office, around my computer, taking turns writing, brainstorming, questioning, and drawing details and organization out of Brenda's memories. As we worked, the question arose: Was this collaboration legitimate? In other words, was the essay we were producing still the product of Brenda's individual voice? Was my contribution, as her teacher, a strengthening factor, or did it dilute the quality of the finished product? Some reflection on these issues is found in the professional literature.

Writing is arguably a social act, from initial conception of the idea for writing to completion. In reality, single authorship is often tempered by the practices of the modern writing classrooms, such as peer review,

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teacher-student conferences, and classroom discussion.¹ Even though “most people think of writers as solo performers,”² the writing classroom as enacted by process-educated instructors likely features collegial brainstorming, successive drafts read to classmates, and revisions made on suggestions from peers, teacher, tutors, and others. So, “working together” on a paper is not an alien activity.

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Yet, collaboration outside the classroom, especially between teacher and student, like Brenda and me, is comparatively rare, “affected by a number of differences, among them those of gender, race, class, and discipline.”³ Some reasons for this contrast between classroom practice and the outside-classroom reality include the practical (“I just don’t have time!”), the historical (“This stuff just isn’t done!”), and the professional (“What could I possibly gain by working with a mere student?”).

Additionally, teacher-student collaboration involves authority issues. Moving from a classroom in which the traditional authority is the teacher, just how does one set up a working relationship that is “dialogic,” in which “one person may occupy multiple and shifting roles”?⁴ Can the student assume more power and authority than she usually displays, while the teacher relinquishes his? Could Brenda learn to “speak up,” and could I learn to “shut up”—a stark reversal of the usual roles in a lecture-heavy classroom?

However, recent high-profile demonstrations—including the collaborative format of Linda Hutcheon’s 2000 Modern Language Association Presidential Address, as well as the actual content of this address—encourage a “strategy of *thinking with* as a common practice.” (Emphasis added.) And common sense argues that some of the most gratifying collaboration might result from a dialogic relationship between student and teacher. Both of them might well look at life in a new light: “Synergy” might help produce “things together” that “neither could have accomplished alone.”⁵ In fact, this collaboration between a 22-year-old community college student from a depressed part of Detroit and her suburbia- and career-ensconced teacher might indeed become “an essential part of the production” of an essay.

Consider what each of us brought to the dialogue: Brenda had real-life experiences, symbolized by the 10-year-old scars on her wrists. I, as her teacher, had experience writing, as well as a long history of helping stu-

dent writers in my classroom. These roles Reither and Vipond call those of “dictator” and “enabler/gatecrasher,” respectively. Brenda brought rich experiences and characters, and I contributed extensive reading of authors and publications, along with an understanding of audiences and publishing.⁶ This collaborative dynamic resulted in our enhanced capacity to write and publish an essay—a capacity that far exceeded what each of us possessed independently.

This collaboration resembled that of a “dictated autobiography.”

Sanders points out that in this type of “dynamic and often conflictive creation process . . . the dictator controls the substantive content of the autobiography, the pragmatic events of a life, and to some extent the interpretations of these events,” whereas the enabler “fully controls the form that content must assume.”⁷ Typically, Sanders says, the enabler might feel an obligation to reorganize, reemphasize, or reshape the dictator’s content, modifying characteristics better suited

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for oral storytelling into those better-suited (or conventionally used) for successful written narrative.

In short, the teacher half of this collaborative writing team was enacting, in brief, the philosophy that has motivated him (and most teachers) for most of his professional life. He was trying to provide access for his students, not only to the “better life” that education, generally, should facilitate, but specifically to one student’s recognition that her voice and life *matter*. My job as a “gatecrasher,” then, was to help Brenda write in a way that would be recognized and accepted by potential readers.

As I was doing my job, I thought that it was important—to Brenda, to me, to anyone who reads this essay—to emphasize healing and recovery. This aspect of Brenda’s rape seemed to be important to her well-being and her embracing the strength needed to continue living and succeeding. Also, anyone reading her essay would probably be curious, and want to know how she survived. We talked of the rape’s aftermath, and wrote of Cathy, a neighbor who offered friendship and survival strategies:

It started with Cathy’s just being someone to talk to. Eventually, I ended up at her house nearly every day. She was my teacher and my therapist. Her lessons included how to take \$10 to the Salvation Army store and get enough clothes to get myself by, and that my family life wasn’t my fault. She taught me to make baklava, and not to feel guilty that I could-

n't figure out why I had been raped. Most importantly, Cathy taught me to garden, a lesson that would help me create a fresh life out of rich dirt and water.

Once I started, I couldn't stop. I started planning for every inch of Mom's backyard. I became familiar with the shovel, trowel, and lengths of irrigating hose. My new friends were the level and cans of Miracle Gro. Soon I stood back, looked out, and saw plants growing everywhere. Two higher

beds had nothing but vegetables and herbs, cucumbers and onions and strawberries. The two rock gardens—one in shade, one in sun—grew Cathy's pansies, purple and white, and her chamomile. Beds along the fence line showed tiger lilies, roses, dahlias, euonymus. Birds and squirrels got the word, too: That now my backyard was a healthy place to be, with plenty of food, water, and pretty, pretty plants. Cathy told me that I should encourage cats to visit, also. They would keep the rats away.

After a semester of working together, we had something tangible to show for our efforts.

Brenda and I completed the essay, then sent it off. After a short time, it was accepted and published by *Iris*, a publication of the Women's Center at the University of Virginia. It looked good in print! *Iris* is a polished magazine, with excellent artwork and writing, strengthened by our essay and Brenda's photograph of the beautiful garden she created in the middle of Brightmoor. So, after a semester of working together, we had something tangible to show for our efforts. However, we learned some less-tangible lessons also. Brenda wrote later some of her insights:

(I've learned) that it is possible to work with and relate to a teacher outside the classroom. That there is more to a student/teacher than just a name. I have learned how to be a better writer and listener. I have learned how to accept rejection, recognize errors as soon as I type them, and to keep working on a single piece. I have learned that working with a teacher can be a great experience. I have learned that writing can be very personal and opening up to tell can be hard but at the same time part of a continuous healing process.

And I, a year from retirement, learned some valuable things, also:

That "students" come to class carrying a complex mosaic of individual experiences. That hurtful, tragic things can happen to a young girl. That young girls and women appear to recover, over time, and that a texture of friends and teachers can aid in that recovery. That collaborating with a

student—across age, experience, and educational levels—reminds me that we can learn forever. That students and teachers can collaborate to get thoughts on paper, and that together we can succeed. That enabling *voice* in students is an almost religious experience. That education can occur in collaborations, and that subtle learning takes place about work, hope, taking chances, and audience, as well as writing, that might not occur during a regular classroom session.

An important conclusion is that student/teacher collaboration in writing and publishing is possible, and it proves to be a powerful alternative to the usual business of education. It offers tangible evidence that the teacher is enabling voice in someone who might have continued in silence.

A corollary—easy to overlook—is that having students write (and talk) is necessary to a teacher’s coming to know the students. With students producing words and essays, the classroom becomes a site of two-way communication—common to writing classrooms, but maybe not so common in other disciplines. This knowledge of one’s students helps not only in assessment, but in designing instruction that is appropriate for a specific group at a specific time.

The student, through collaboration, gains modeling and knowledge—both formal and informal—not only about writing, but about character and values needed for success in the workplace and in academia.

Also important, however, is that this collaboration helped me relocate those two qualities—an enthusiasm for the teaching/learning process and my place in it coupled with an appreciation for the individuals “out there” in a class—that had become lost under layers of years, student numbers, and administrative requirements. Many of our students—like Brenda—need us, and we, as teachers, need very much to help them. Schools function better, I think, if we realize this. 

ENDNOTES

1. Ede and Lunsford, “Collaboration and Concepts,” 354.
2. Gere, “Writing Groups,” 56.
3. Ede and Lunsford, “Collaboration and Concepts,” 363.
4. Ede and Lunsford, *Singular Texts*, 133.
5. Reither and Vipond, “Writing as Collaboration,” 858.
6. *Ibid.*, 859.
7. Sanders, “Theorizing the Collaborative Self,” 446.

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