

Learning To Read and Write: Still a Miracle

by Norma Tilden

In 1949, I sat in the second-grade classroom of St. Joseph's School in Ashtabula, Ohio, one of 47 six-year-olds, and watched Sister Mary Caroline teach us to read. Of course, I was one of those learning to read, but, like all miracles, the reading came to me unnoticed while I was doing something else — namely, watching the transformation occur in 46 others.

Set against the tedious antics of Dick, Jane, and Spot, the teaching seemed a miracle comparable to the changing of water into wine and the multiplication of loaves and fishes I had heard about in the gospel stories. Best of all, this was a miracle a woman got to perform.

This teaching was a real trick, in that I knew the nun wasn't working alone. She had the ritual vestments and she said the magic words, but it was clear that she was only partly the agent. After making chalk marks and holding up phonics cards, mouthing the sounds, she then had to watch and wait, ready

to catch the miracle when the signs appeared.

And she had to pay close attention because the signs were slippery — different, I came to see, for each child. Some days, she missed the catch, and the best she could do was coax the wigglers back into their seats.

Then we would all tense up as the big workbook was passed overhead down the rows of children, slowly approaching one or another who, we knew, hadn't yet cracked the code. I'd watch nervously as she would call on that child to repeat the sounds she gave him—as if he could hear the sounds melting into words, as if he could read already.

And, slowly, he could.

"There," she'd say, with a sharp nod of her head, at the moment when the hard pieces of language—"duh" and "aw" and "guh"—relaxed into the word "dog" and the words began to slide along the smooth chute of the page. There. Perhaps she was checking us off her mental

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list, but it seemed to me she was pointing: "Over there. Look, Norma Jeanne. It just happened to that one." One-by-one, we were all learning to read, and at least one of us was also learning to teach.

I am still watching people learn to read and write. For 14 years now, as an adjunct instructor, I have taught a variety of literature and writing courses to Georgetown University undergraduates. For the past nine years, I have trained undergraduate tutors to teach writing to their fellow students. And, although I am now the teacher, I continue to pursue a double vision of learning that sustains both authority and receptivity, craft and calling.

I keep a small black notebook where I record odd fragments of writing, and sometimes I page through it looking for patterns and thinking about my craft.

Today, as I think about teaching, my workbook gives me what I need: an old *Far Side* cartoon that pictures an auditorium full of professors listening to a speaker who is proudly holding a duck. The others hold ducks, too, except for one worried looking man. The caption reads, "Suddenly Professor Liebowitz realizes he has come to the seminar without his duck." This is the image for me as a professor — and here's why.

To teach required writing cour-

ses to an ever-shifting stream of first-year students is to be a professor without a duck. After years of quiet preparation, lost in the scholarly abstractions of literary theory —say— or Renaissance prose, you one day find yourself set down in the center of a lively writing workshop, a craftsman surrounded by eager apprentices—a professor with nothing to profess.

The class is called composition or writing, but you are there to read. And these students, busy composing and revising themselves, are now your texts, a collection of rough, inelegant works-in-progress. Ultimately, you must teach them to read themselves in their own words—a difficult job.

More often than not, I walk into the classroom all eyes and ears, but I leave my professorial duck behind. For me, at that moment, teaching becomes a receptive act, a matter of watching and waiting. Some inner deflection keeps me at the periphery—a kind of spy, absorbing and returning information in a complicated act of *noticing*, followed by patient questions and slow reshaping.

My teaching is radically situational. I try to wait for particular truths to emerge from the particular people seated around me in the classroom. I look for patterns connecting them. I try to slow things

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down, to ask for clarification, to repeat what I hear in order to provide a resonating base for the many voices gathered in that noisy place. No duck. Sometimes I appear to relinquish expertise.

There is, of course, some danger in this sort of teaching. To follow ideas in this way is to give up a "professor's" power; a pedagogy of reading and listening requires openness and even a willingness to be vulnerable. Ultimately, the teaching life is an obscure life.

Despite the public performance of the classroom, we are what Virginia Woolf called "obscure people," finding our fullest realization only in relation to these other people — our students. In this sense, all professors are "adjunct," and those of us who teach reading and writing allow ourselves to become particularly inconspicuous.

We are drawn to secrets muffled in other people's language. We work from the shadows, straining to hear the half-spoken—the dim possibilities we instinctively perceive in our students' halting attempts to make sense.

The teacher is an opportunist, a mediator, a collaborator with her students. She helps them to see not only that they can make meaning, but that they have done it and will do it the next time without her.

This semester I began my writing workshop classes with a decep-

tively simple poem on the construction trade by William Carlos Williams: "Fine Work With Pitch and Copper."

In 18 swift lines, the poet moves gracefully toward the closing image of one workman, still chewing on his lunch, who casually "picks up a copper strip and runs his eye along it."

I asked my students to consider the gesture of the workman, the way his act of purposeful design begins with an unconscious gesture of respect for his materials. Before he begins to pound and shape, he stops to consider what this piece of copper wants to be.

Eventually, our discussion returned us to the poem's title: the paradoxical notion of construction as the "fine work" of revising and re-shaping. To have respect for language—for its possibilities to inspire, to persuade, and even to disturb us—is to have respect for its capacity to strike different people differently and to expose the inner narratives that make each of us unclassifiable and mysterious.

It occurs to me that teaching undergraduates is a similarly "fine" and difficult work, and that the craft of teaching, too, begins with just such a gesture of respect for the materials entrusted to us. ■

