

Teaching Writing While Standing on One Foot

Robert Danberg



A spoon goes in the lunchbox
A spoon falls behind the curtain
And although I washed spoons
For all I can think now, I may as well have rinsed them
And filled the little basket on the dish rack with suds that
One day, I looked and counted only two in the drawer, altho
As I drove to work, I considered whether the problem was sp
I discovered a discipline which regards the loss of spo
As "keyholes" to the "Yet And Never" the bro

Your object is caught
Then...

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Robert Danberg

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For Anne Sklov

“A book in the family wouldn't be such a bad thing”.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Acknowledgements | ix |
| Teaching Writing While Standing on One Foot | 1 |
| Commentary: Tell the Story of Your Life as a Writer | 15 |
| Enfolded Knowledge | 17 |
| Commentary: Imagine the Story You Told of Your Life as a Writer as a Wide Sea | 39 |
| Commentary: Start with Something You Do | 40 |
| This Ability | 41 |
| Commentary: Gifts | 57 |
| Commentary: The Listener | 59 |
| Commentary: How Do You Know You are Done? | 60 |
| Commentary: Name Your Materials, Name Your Tools | 61 |
| Four Things | 63 |
| A User's Manual | |
| Idling at an Intersection | 67 |
| Something from Nothing: The Writing Teacher's Work | 69 |
| The Kitchen Classroom | 75 |
| Commentary: Think of Your Classroom as a Point that a Line Passes Through | 77 |
| An Image of Expertise | 79 |
| Commentary: That Just Sounds Like Writing | 81 |
| The Empty Room | 83 |
| Commentary: All I kept thinking | 85 |

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| The Dining Room Classroom | 87 |
| Commentary: The Host Must Always Choose the Goat | 88 |
| Commentary: Consider the Shape of Time | 89 |
| Four Principles and a Fifth | 91 |
| Commentary: What Persists | 101 |
| Commentary: Ellen Schmidt | 102 |
| Some Rules of My Thumb | 105 |
| Share the Recipe and Teach the Meal | 109 |
| Hats without Rabbits | 111 |
| Making the Class | 115 |
| Imagine the Following | 117 |
| Works Consulted and Relied Upon | 125 |

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**TEACHING WRITING WHILE
STANDING ON ONE FOOT**

When people ask me what I do, I always say “I’m a writing teacher.” I say “writing teacher” for the same reason that when I was a kid and people asked me what my father did, I’d say “He’s in the garment industry.” Like the garment industry for my father, the classrooms, colleagues, and students involved in the business of teaching and learning writing make up a culture built around a purpose: teaching and learning writing. I’ve taught freshman composition and basic writing classes, GED classes, adult education in “welfare to work” programs, and English as a Second Language classes in a jobs program for recent immigrants. I’ve taught adults to read and helped dissertation writers get started (or finish). In the last ten years, I’ve taught academic writing and workplace writing. I’ve also trained teachers. I’ve taught writing in large and small colleges, four-year and community colleges, private and public institutions. “Writing” hasn’t always meant the same thing. It could mean a grocery list, a letter home, a book report, a college essay, or a dissertation. Or at least, that’s what writing means when classes begin. If the work goes well, by the end of class, “writing” will become a way: “a way to say what I what I want to say in the words I want to use” and “a way to discover what I think and feel” and “a way to know and remember.” Whether the student is a seventy-year-old woman making her first written sentence into her first story, an adult returning to college after struggling to write her first paper, an eighteen-year-old in freshman writing class, or a stumped dissertation writer, it’s always the same: “writing” begins as a thing and ends as a way.

Despite the ostensible differences in the subject matter of those classes, the students have been similar in ways as important as the ways they were different. College writers come in as experts on what high school requires and then have to learn what a professor wants. Workplace writing students are experts on what professors want and have to learn what a boss expects. Graduate students have to learn to make dissertations, a genre that thrives in one habitat only, the graduate school. Then they have to learn how to write for a professional public.

The literacy students want to learn to read the words they know, but also learn how to read words they may have never heard spoken. The students I've taught often come to class and rely on a narrow set of strategies that worked for them in the past and now work against them. Adult literacy students often equate reading with pronunciation. Reading becomes laborious and frustrating when the primary strategy for coping with an unfamiliar word is to sound it out syllable by syllable. She may stall over at a word and ignore context clues that might help her.

Many college students spend an inordinate amount of time on the first paragraph of an essay. They tell me that once they figure out the first paragraph, they know what to say. Then, they go on to write the paper, and as they write, learn more about what they want to say, and then never return to the opening, even though that opening no longer pertains to the essay they wanted to write. The last paragraph they write, the one they call the conclusion, often turns out to make a good beginning. When they try to write the opening paragraph before writing much else, they try to do two very different things at once that work at cross purposes: discovering what they mean, and crafting a rhetorical strategy that will hook a reader. Figuring out what they mean requires a maximal approach to making pages; to figure out the best way to bring a reader into a piece, a writer labors over a few sentences that take only a few seconds of a reader's time. All the students I've met, new reader to dissertation writer share misconceptions about what "good writers" do, and these misconceptions become convictions that hobble them. They believe good writers require few drafts. They believe good writers don't solicit the feedback of friends and colleagues. They believe good writers don't have to plan or rewrite. Many of these beliefs stem from the fact that we learn to write under performance conditions. When we practice writing in grade school, middle school, and high school, we are graded.

When I tell people I'm a college writing teacher, they often ask me if my students write "worse" than they did when I began teaching. By "worse" they mean "Are your students' spelling, grammar, and punctuation worse than they were twenty-five years ago?" and "Why can't they write sentences that make sense?" Many people confide

in me that they can't write. They say that they labor over even the briefest workplace email. Some confess that they hated classes like mine and resented them, but occasionally some say how important the class turned out to be.

Some tell me how much they love to write. They might not write much now but they used to write poems or keep a journal. A few tell me they keep diaries. The most common story I hear is about the time they felt hurt or shamed by a teacher or a friend they shared their writing with. They thought that person would like it, or they believed they were done and were happy with it, or they just wanted someone to read it. I understand. There was that time in Ms. Johnson's twelfth grade AP English class when I worked so hard and felt such a deep need to impress her that I volunteered for her to read my paper aloud. I remember the precise sentence when the class burst out laughing, and where I was sitting, and the hot shame. There was that time I gave my favorite professor a sheaf of poems and he said—well, it doesn't matter. I also remember the careless, arrogant thing I said to my friend Jessica almost thirty years ago. I remember her hurt and anger so well that I can remember exactly where we were and what time of night it was and what I said. My casual dismissal of her writing embarrasses me almost as much as anything has ever embarrassed me.

So when I teach, I always remember: *At least cause no shame.*

I hear a lot about frustration with other people's writing. A food scientist I sit next to at my son's Little League games works at a laboratory that tests food products for snack companies. She describes what happens when a freshly minted PhD, a young scientist, submits his first memos and reports. She says these new hires write their reports as if the goal is to express what they think or to produce an academic essay rather than to communicate findings. My brother complains about lengthy emails and verbose memos that he needs to cut and turn around for revision. He wants bulleted lists, concise sentences, and short paragraphs.

What frustrates my friend and my brother most is that they find themselves showing people what they think those people should already know. I asked them how they handled their frustration. The food scientist reviews those first reports sentence by sentence and

meets with the employee. She explains how the report she wants differs from the one the new employee submitted. My brother tells his employees what he wants and demonstrates what he expects. Each of them steps into an employee's writing life at a moment when direct instruction from an experienced writer matters most, when learning from experience is impossible to avoid, and when learning to write matters.

I've told my friend and my brother that they are excellent teachers. Respectful and direct, they intervene precisely when help is needed. Those are the moments when instruction makes the most sense. Writing teachers work hard to create these moments in the classroom. I've heard complaints like my friend's and my brother's from colleagues as well. They are baffled by weak thesis statements, sentences containing basic errors of expression, and organizational schemes that fail at the level of the paragraph and the paper. As often as I've heard colleagues dismiss students and their writing, I've heard colleagues—not writing teachers, but teachers in disciplines like history, philosophy, and the sciences—tell me how they've made changes in their classes to encourage the writing they'd like to read. They've changed their approaches to writing and how they express their assignments. One history teacher devotes class periods in a junior seminar to going over the style she expects and how to rewrite for it. But whether the teacher believes she has a role to play in her students' writing or she dismisses their writing as beyond help, the lament is the same: they have to teach what students should know already, and what's worse, the students don't know they don't know or don't seem to care.

These students are *my* students. My class is the class that teaches "writing" to the people who go on to work for my brother and friend and take courses with my colleagues. But I wonder if what is missing is something else. Although some might not know or care, perhaps it's not that these students don't know how to produce what their teachers expect. They don't use what they know or don't pay enough attention to what they don't know.

Every writing course answers the question, “What does a writer know?” Sometimes I tell students that writers have two kinds of knowledge, stuff I can tell them and stuff they can only learn for themselves. This book concerns the stuff they can only learn for themselves. By that I don’t mean the development of skill through practice, although that is part of what I mean, since the knowledge I have in mind is often only evident in the act of writing itself. Writers show what they understand by writing, not through formal responses to direct questions. For example, say I insist to my students that rhetorical analysis is crucial to writing successfully. When I assign them an essay, I give them a handout that asks them to answer questions about the audience for the piece, their stance with respect to that audience, the subject matter, the writing context, and the purpose of the essay. Many students will be able to answer those questions. Only a few students will show that they understand them in the essay they submit. Sometimes we call that stuff intuitive knowledge or experiential knowledge. It’s what we mean when we say “eye” or “ear” or “feel.”

This kind of knowledge presents a particular challenge to me as a writing teacher. Often this knowledge is only available to the student through the act of writing itself. It’s immune to direct instruction, although I can describe it or gesture towards it. In fact, gestures are often the most efficient form of direct instruction available to a writing teacher. I can always tell when someone has begun to experience writing as a journey toward clarity that begins in uncertainty, rather than the reproduction of models or adherence to rules of correctness in response to a direct question. She leans into the page between us like she’s trying to find something she knows is there. When I point to a sentence, her eyes go there. Then she takes the paper back and turns to a passage to show me what I’ve missed and explains her plan.

Students are often confused about this aspect of a writer’s knowledge. They crave rules and recipes. Yet, many have been enriched by the practice of creation, often privately, away from school, from home, on the field, in the studio, in the kitchen, among friends. They recognize

the complex interplay between rehearsal and performance, practice and game when the subject is the next concert or the next meet, but set aside what they know about this kind of learning when the subject is writing. Their early encounters with writing and drawing seem to be all rehearsal and play, but by the time students reach high school, we've spent most our schooling in writing trying to "get it right," often uncertain what our teachers mean by "right" or even what "it" is supposed to be. How many of us could learn to hit a baseball if they only practiced during games, when the pitcher's goal is to strike them out? To acquire the kind of knowledge I am trying to describe here, writers must fail. Good teachers create the likelihood of failure and good classrooms create the conditions for failure so that later, all of what the writer has been told and practiced flows into a single moment of contact.

Sometimes, people describe this kind of knowledge by saying they want their students to "Think like." I asked a biologist what she hoped the non-majors who took "Introduction to Biology" took away from the class. She answered me with a story. A former "Intro" student picks up the *Pennysaver* in her hometown grocery store. She flips to the Letters to the Editor and reads a letter claiming that global warming does not exist. The letter writer bases her claim on a study she read about which shows that global temperatures haven't changed significantly over the last ten years. Instead of "Wow, I didn't know that," the biologist wants her student to think: "Is ten years enough time to make a claims about the existence of global warming?" My colleague wants her former student in some modest way to think like a scientist, which in this case means that when her student hears a claim based on a study, she asks the study's sample size, methods, and relevance to the claim.

A student doesn't have to become a scientist to learn how scientists think, nor does she need to be a scientist to think like one. But, when we say someone thinks like a biologist, a historian, or a writer, we mean something in addition to what that person knows about taxonomy, the Louisiana Purchase, or the difference between an informal and an academic style. We recognize in her actions a constellation of attributes that includes what she sees, feels and knows. When we say someone thinks like a writer, we expect her to sense what a writer senses, attend

to what a writer attends to, and feel a certain kind of urgency that comes when a writer looks for the right way to say what she means. We also mean that she behaves like a writer behaves when confronted with a particular problem or situation. She recognizes when she needs to use what she knows and uses that knowledge. Often, when we say someone thinks like a biologist or an historian or a writer, we mark what she has *begun* to do. A biologist would never say it of another biologist. But when she observes a student making assured and skillful choices or asking certain questions or speculating in specific way, essentially demonstrating behavior characteristic of a scientist, she might say to her student, “Now you’re thinking like a scientist.”

When people try to explain how teachers don’t teach students what students need to know, they tend to emphasize a failure to transmit knowledge, not a failure to create situations through which students can acquire “the stuff we can’t tell them.” We know what the elements of good writing look like. We have handbooks full of instructions, tips, examples, rules, and strategies. We can show models, make corrections, demonstrate, lecture, and assess. We can organize knowledge into hierarchies that lead students from the ‘building blocks’ on to complex edifices, or de-engineer complex edifices so that we can regard their components. Since we can compare a student’s essays and processes to our models of them, we ought to be able to trace what is missing back to a place in instruction where that missing piece can be found, then tell the student what she ought to have done instead.

In school, we watch how others succeed and fail. We come to know our successes, failures, limitations, and habits. That intimacy with our own failures and successes humbles some of us and makes others of experts in what humbles others.

But we rarely have a complete grasp of how we learned to read and write. We remember what makes an impression on us. What we remember, I think, are the times we were told something or when something was demonstrated to us, perhaps on a blackboard, or shown to us in a book. We remember the moment we demonstrated command, which might come at the end of a long, vaguely understood process. I remember the fold-out bed in the living room where my mother read *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish* to me and my younger brother.

I know I couldn't have been older than five, and I might have been as young as four. Many people identify those moments of competence with the process of learning itself.

While we often neglect to account for knowledge that only shows itself through the act of creation, we recognize it and have ways of talking about it. Eliot Eisner, the noted philosopher of education, observes that we praise a uniquely talented chef, mechanic, or teacher by calling her an *artist*. When we call a plumber or a doctor an artist, we look past the craft to the situations that face them and what they make of them. A physician recognizes symptoms that she cannot associate with a familiar disease. A mechanical engineer designs a structure he must invent tools to build. An arithmetic teacher, listening to a child's question, tries to figure out what her student's confusion says about what her student understands.

The students who take my writing classes do not come as artists-to-be. Some of my students may become writers, in the sense that they may write poetry or screenplays or technical manuals or grants. Almost all will become something other than writers. Some may want make something beautiful from words, but most simply wish to make something true out of them, and by true, I mean in the way a carpenter planes a door so that it swings in the door frame. For the purposes of my First Year Writing Class or Introduction to Professional Writing class, I define a writer as someone who makes things with words in a way that shows skill, intelligence, and sense of form. She needs to be flexible, sensitive to the demands of a situation, able to adapt what she knows to new demands, eager to learn as she goes. The competent writer produces what a situation calls for and she corrects her course based on the feedback she receives. And she consistently produces well organized writing, free of lapses in correctness.

Interestingly, while it's common to say "my mechanic is a real artist," it's equally as common to hear artists use some form of the verb *to make* when they describe how they created something. For example, I hear painters say they *made a picture*, rather than *painted a painting*. I've heard Peter Martins, the choreographer and dancer, and Robert Wilson, the theatre artist, describe how they *made* a dance. When we identify expertise with artistry we call attention to finesse,

ingenuity, or skillfulness. When a painter, dancer, or poet calls himself or herself a *maker*, what does she mean us to pay attention to? Work, mostly. Tools, materials, rehearsal, practice. When an artist uses some form of the verb *to make*, she shifts our attention from the apparent mysteries of inspiration to the work of the studio or the rehearsal hall where things are tried and cast off; where tables, walls, and floors are scattered, hung, and littered with ideas.

When the artist calls herself a *maker*, she's thinking of the tried and true, the craft she's come to rely on that allows her to cope with the uncertainty of creation. She's talking about mere work. But work is the path through which students will acquire the knowledge they need to learn to think like writers. It's through work with materials that artists discover, clarify, and come to understand the piece they want to create. Writing classes appear to be organized around activities, themes, genres, readings, and revision, but they are really organized around work with materials. We teach our students how to do their work. Work with materials can seem like a loose collection of discrete activities. All that problem solving, analysis, drafting, and revising gathered into a rough process defined as a beginning, middle, and end is usually assigned according to what the calendar demands and not necessarily the internal energy of the project. Simply put, you can never really say in a writing class, *I'm not done yet*. Part of what a writer needs to learn is how to be done when she needs to be. By working with materials, students learn how and when a technique might be useful, how to orchestrate a process of discovery, and how to adapt common procedures to new and unique demands. Every solution that fails provides the student with an alternative.

When we distinguish a technically competent writer from one whose work is skillful and imaginative, we don't point to how well the writer adheres to rules and standards. A "technically" perfect performance is often considered weak when compared to one that is skillful and imaginative but technically weaker. I once tutored two servicemen who were struggling in school. One had been a private, a clerk. He described how until college "writing" meant filling out reports based on information he'd been given. Essentially, he completed forms. It's likely there were many kinds of forms. Army bureaucracy can ship

thousands of soldiers and tons of equipment around the world in hours. As he explained it, however, completing these forms was a simple routine. The second student was an officer at work on a master's degree. His writing had been more elaborate and more a product of his own insights and observations, but he was clear that the writing he did was also a kind of form. From the way they explained their work in the past and what they didn't know how to do now, they struck me as thoughtful writers.

Sometimes students come to class expressing a wish for a recipe, rule, or method. They picture a writer's knowledge organized like the handbooks they are required to buy but rarely consult. Perhaps unconsciously they imagine that a writer recognizes a situation, then searches for the appropriate response the way I always consult the Fannie Farmer Cookbook when I want to make cookies, even though I've made them many times before. Or maybe they picture a long list of instructions that they can take up one element at a time. It may be that since these soldiers were in their thirties or forties when they returned to school, they understood that while there was much I could teach them, the information I could offer was limited. They knew that they need to be flexible, open to change, and willing to adapt. They needed knowledge about conventions, and instruction in craft, but they also needed the kinds of knowledge they could only acquire—or even become aware of—through experience. Without that knowledge all those rules and forms and procedures would be like a string of lights with one dead bulb.

Insight often begins with confusion and disappointment. There is an old Jewish legend about the necessity for uncertainty when it comes to learning something for ourselves.

One day, a nonbeliever approaches the great sage Shammai.

“Teach me the whole of Torah while I stand on one foot, and I'll convert.”

Shammai chases him off with a carpenter's rod, a sturdy measuring stick one cubit long. If you want to build an ark like Noah, you need a cubit-long carpenter's rod.

Next, the nonbeliever approaches the great sage Hillel.

“Teach me the whole of the Torah while I stand on one foot.”

That's when Hillel utters the line that makes the legend famous: "That which is hateful to you do not do to others. The rest is commentary; go and learn it."

A friend who practices yoga tells me that in yoga, standing on one foot is a posture of balance and stability. But in this story—and this is why it appeals to me as a writing teacher—standing on one foot evokes instability. The lesson is over before the nonbeliever has barely been on one foot. Unknowingly, he puts himself at risk to learn. Many students come to writing class like the nonbeliever: they dare me to teach them. But a successful writing class persuades students to put themselves at risk to learn. It's hard to take on the role of a beginner. Yet I know from experience that learning anything when I am unwilling to take on risk, I improve the least. When I'm attached to the way I've done things, or am unwilling to revise a particular lesson, rule or principle I've followed in the past, I stand my ground. But it's a small patch of ground. When a student believes she has no ground to defend, all the ground is hers. The act of writing is no longer her adversary. When a student tells me how stressful it is to figure out what to write, or how unsure she is of where to start or which idea to choose, or is worried that no matter what she does, it will be wrong, I always answer, "You're so lucky. Why don't you just make a strong choice, do what you think, and then we'll have something to discuss." Or when the student comes to class and says she didn't do last night's writing because she wasn't sure what she was supposed to do, I say "The only wrong answer is not to give an answer. Make a strong choice and commit." Or a fretful student might tell me that she has no idea what to do, as if she's made out of wrong answers, and I say, "That's not a problem, that's writing. Welcome to the tribe."

Another friend admitted to me that for years she thought Hillel was supposed to stand on one foot, not the student. That misreading appeals to me, too. In writing class, I often find myself facing my students on one foot. A writing class is only an idea about what writers need to know until everyone shows up. When what a writer learns depends on doing work, knowledge appears when she writes. What she does defines her as much as what she knows. When I listen to my brother, my friends, and my colleagues, I wonder if the problem isn't that their

employees and students don't know what they need to do, it's that they don't use what they know; or perhaps they don't even recognize that there is something to learn.

Many of my students come to class believing that writing starts when they open a file on their computers and begin the first paragraph. However, I know it will be easier for them in the long run if I show them other ways to find material that can help them think and plan. There are drafts, but there can also be models, storyboards, and journal entries that trigger insights and advance the process. Sometimes students ask me where good ideas come from; I think they should be asking *when* do ideas come.

I stand on one foot in front of the class sure of the choices I've made, but uncertain about the ones they will make. There's that moment when I read their drafts and get a familiar sinking feeling. A whole month organized around the production of this draft: instruction, practice, reflection, time to write, time to talk, time to reflect. And...this. Even though I know what to expect, I always wonder: Have the choices I've made been good ones, Will the student's work *get better*? Can I make a difference? What is the right word to say? The right note to give? When should I ask questions? When should I just tell the student, "Do this. Move this paragraph here and see what happens."

In a letter to Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher and educator Franz Rosenzweig observed that our attention usually goes to the first part: *That which is hateful to you do not do to others*. But Rosenzweig thought the second part held the key. Hillel doesn't mean, "The rest is only commentary." To simply follow precepts is not to know, or at least not to entirely know, Torah.

To know Torah is to know the lesson, but also to participate in an ongoing conversation, an inquiry really, into the lesson's value.

Writing classes are full of lessons, rules, principles and resources, methods and handbooks, but they teach the commentary.

COMMENTARY: TELL THE STORY OF YOUR LIFE AS A WRITER

Tell the story of your life as a writer.

Complete it in one sitting.

Choose a length of time you instantly feel is “too short.”

Do not exceed a half an hour.

Include “everything.”

Interpret “everything” to include “anything.”

No matter where you are in the last five minutes, end in the present.

Tell it backwards.