

## Chapter 16. Teacher of College Writing: A Meaningful Commitment

The year I finished my doctorate, the academic job market collapsed for the first time since the post-WWII expansion of universities. My hundred letters of inquiry turned up nothing. With no money and no prospect in sight, I signed up for the summer to be on a team writing a textbook series for K-12 English. Assigned to write workbooks for kindergarten and first grade, I began developing materials and activities following what I had learned about the need to be understandable and focused on the lessons at hand, eliminating opportunities for distraction or digression, while still engaging students' experiences and imaginations. I studied children's nursery rhymes to see how they mixed rhythms with phonetics for memorable instruction. I soon ran into conflict, however, with a supervisor who had traditional expectations of classrooms, and I found my imagination blocked by her directions, so I left. The series, as it happened, never was published.

As the fall term approached, I pieced together a couple of last-minute contingent positions in New York metropolitan area colleges, teaching basic writing and first-year composition. A term later, one of them turned into a full-time tenurable position at Baruch College, City University of New York, where I spent the next two decades, teaching in the same building where my father got his business degree in the 1930s, when it was the downtown branch of City College. As a child he had taken me to see the plaque in the entrance where he was recognized for graduating Summa cum Laude, but the plaque was gone by the time I worked there. My position was specifically supported by the SEEK program (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) for students from traditionally underrepresented groups, initiated at the time of open-admissions in 1970, just a year before my arrival. This was exactly the kind of work that I was excited to participate in. Although political conflicts over open-admissions erupted at the city, university, campus, and department levels, I was able to keep my head down and work to support our new students with similarly motivated colleagues across the 18 CUNY campuses.

We were soon to form a system-wide organization, the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors (CAWS), under the leadership of Bob Lyons from Queens College and Harvey Wiener of LaGuardia Community College, sponsored by Mina Shaughnessy, who by that time had a system-wide administrative position. I was not, in fact, a writing supervisor, as at Baruch we had no distinct writing program, just many sections of required courses administered through the department chair, who was mostly interested in scheduling and staffing. Our departmental Composition Committee had no powers other than to make proposals for departmental deliberation. I was the most active member of the committee, and soon chair, and then the sole member. By default, I became our representative to CAWS because no one else from my campus was interested in

serving. For the first two years of the organization, I volunteered as secretary because I recognized that creating the record created the official history, and even more framed current commitments and actions. I organized the minutes around action items we had agreed on. I took an active role in meetings to craft language that would be acceptable to all parties and would fit the conditions of the different campuses. I excluded the detailed discussions from the minutes in order to allow us to air all views without having the differences become enshrined in official history. Later, from 1978-80 I served as co-chair of CAWS. Eventually, Baruch did get a writing program director, but by that time I had made too many enemies in fighting for the program. We hired from the outside, and that person took over Baruch's representation at CAWS.

Initially, I was not invested in research or publishing, as my graduate experience had not excited me about literary scholarship, though I did need to get publications for tenure. And I had no awareness of the potential for scholarship in the teaching of writing, which was in fact limited at the time. My total professional commitment was to the teaching of writing to underrepresented students and helping them succeed at the university. My energies went into understanding what students needed to learn, preparing materials for my classes, and commenting on their work. I imagined the students as the older cousins of the children I was recently teaching in Brooklyn, but who had managed to survive a punishing school system to gain a high school diploma. In my years at Baruch most of my teaching was split between developmental writing courses for less well-prepared students and the required two-term, first year writing sequence.

I first attended to the obvious problems students presented in their writing—grammar and syntax in the developmental courses, and coherence and elaboration in the required courses. I soon recognized, however, underlying problems in engagement, stance, sense of language, and motivation. I came to see the core challenge was to help students discover writing as a vehicle for meaning and thinking rather than a target for correction and stigmatization. I wanted to learn more about students, their processes, and their prior experiences in schooling. I needed to observe my students and listen to what other teachers were saying about them. I compared notes with teachers with whom I shared a large bull pen office, and then at CAWS we discussed practical issues such as proficiency exams and shared teaching objectives. We organized local conferences, seminars, and reading groups. These were my most engaging early professional experiences.

## Learning From Other Arts

To decompress in my spare time, I returned to avocations from my earlier years, initially chess, which I had played in junior high school, and then squash, which I played at college. With my competitive personality I enjoyed improving. Since I worked in Manhattan, it was convenient to join clubs with people far more accomplished than I was, take lessons with internationally ranked professionals, and

play in novice leagues—spending my little discretionary income on these luxuries. This was a repeated pattern throughout my life as I took up hobbies with a passion—joining groups of the more experienced, reading books on the topic, and taking lessons. From each avocational adventure I learned skills and orientations which I could apply to writing. I also observed the ways teachers of these different arts transmitted their skills and practices, which gave me new ways to think about the teaching of writing. So although I never moved beyond basic amateur in any of these, I observed how the more skilled performed, and I learned a lot from them.



*Figure 16.1. Downtown City College where my father graduated around 1937, second in the class, later redesignated Baruch College where I worked 1971-1990. Photo by Lester Ali.*

From immersing myself in chess I thought about how to balance strategy with tactics, connecting details with the big picture in order to choose the strongest move. Large intentions needed to be built on small decisions. Even good plans could collapse without accurate execution. A principle taught to beginners is that the order and timing of moves were crucial; two good moves could be disastrous if done in reverse. At the same time, good plans needed to attend to the opponent's plans. Interesting games were a collaborative art. I learned the value of building positions and then at the right moment of converting one kind of strength into another—an advantage in space, for example could then improve position and coordination of pieces, which would later support dynamic conflicts and ultimately material gain. Each of those moments of conversion changed the character of the game and center of action. The game also gave me more practice in listening to my inner voice—at the end of rational assessment of the moves, you still needed to let the pieces speak to you to make the final choice. The game continued to build my concentration and ability to call on it on demand—as well as to play with focus despite uncertainty and anxiety.

All of these were lessons I remember consciously applying to writing. I also applied some of the techniques of chess teaching to the teaching of writing, such as highlighting the commitments made in opening moves (or essay openings), and pushing students to have sharp but accurate follow-through on those commitments, paying close attention to order and timing of statements. I came to believe that every move in writing was taking a risk, making a bet on what would work—and that you had no other option than go with your best sense of what your best bet was. You needed to put yourself on the line.

I didn't get as far in squash, but I learned the importance of habituation through practice, and muscle memory—pointing out the good shot and recognizing how that felt rather than being overconcerned with the bad shots. Strategically I learned how important it was to recognize where your center was (which for squash was a physical location at the intersection of lines on the court floor, a bodily balance, and a concentrated attention) and how to keep returning to it.

In individual instruction in these and other activities, I came to appreciate the power of the instructor's one-on-one attention to the novice's practice. This reconfirmed my own sense of the value of working individually with students, giving close attention to how they worked and what they were trying to do. Whenever possible I have scheduled individual consultation with students about work in progress. I have also engaged in extended dialogs in the classroom with individual students over their emerging projects so other students could observe and think about how the issues we discuss might apply to their own work. For such reasons I have come to believe that working as a tutor in a writing center is one of the best apprenticeships for becoming a writing teacher, revealing the individuality and complexity of student thinking.

Three decades later, as I began voice lessons, I started to think of public dialog with students about their work as similar to master classes, where the more

experienced musician coaches the novice to a higher level of performance while others would observe the process. Learning to perform music made me more aware of the long slow process of mastery and the importance of nurturing goal setting by teachers—just challenging enough, but not beyond the current scope of the student. I also saw the teacher's role in building confidence to perform the piece with comfort and then to perform in public. These are good lessons to think about with writing.

From music lessons I also thought a lot about the relation between expressiveness and technical skill, which depends on the role of practice, scales and other exercises to work on precision, clarity, beauty of tone, and proper production. Yet every lesson and every practice session need to include practicing repertoire, playing real music—enjoying not just the technical improvement of the sound, but experiencing the expressive beauty and play of the music. Playing music, joining with others, and performing are all essential to keep the learner motivated and engaged, making all the scales and exercises worthwhile. In the teaching of writing, we seem to separate the technical from the expressive, the work from the pleasure, rather than keeping them in balance, feeding each other.

Locating the music hidden in the inked notes on the written score is also an important lesson for literacy, as transcribed notes are incomplete indicators of the composer's sense of the music which the performer must then reconstruct. To play is to interpret, to animate the music. In the same way writing is to give clues about our intended meaning and the force we hope to inspire in the readers, who must perform the words as an engaging meaning, making the words come alive for themselves. This does not mean that readers, any more than musicians, should follow their unfettered fancy. Music teaches us the more deeply we enter the written notes, the more we discover the resources, nuances, and beauties placed there by the composer. The process of learning a piece is a path of discovery at the intersection of what the composer offers and what the performer brings technically and emotionally, in the same way as actors animate the playwright's script. Writers also need to make their words performable by their readers and in that performance make the writers' meanings come alive. The writer has the task of engaging, inspiring the reader's resources, even while drawing the reader into the meanings one hopes to convey. But the readers then must take up their responsibility in creating meaning from the words.

Finally, music is a temporal experience, even though a score can be looked at synchronously as an architecture. It is performed and heard over time; to be interesting the piece must evolve over time, bringing the listener to new places, constantly reengaging the listener's ears, drawing on what came before to enrich and add to the experience. Writing also is temporal, usually read sequentially over time, with the reader building meaning and going to new places as the writer leads them. Even if the text is skimmed or read out of sequence to find specific pieces of anticipated information, that too is done over time and the writer must design the text to deliver rewards in a timely way to keep the reader engaged. The

journey into the text moves forward, where even digressions need to be understood as advancing the journey. The conclusion, even if it reprises the beginning, must do it in an enriched and deepened way, revealing the discoveries of the journey, recognizing where you have come to.

At the same time the work is architectural and the reader gains by recognizing where they are on the constructed path through the work, even if only intuitively by noticing familiar markers or signposts. The better the audience or reader comes to know the text or the musical piece, the better they also come to know the architecture more explicitly and analytically, thereby providing a frame for the unfolding meaning, attuning them to a fuller experience. The writer as much as the composer can guide the reader into a greater synchronic sense of the whole that frames the temporal movement through the space.

These are the kinds of things I learn from studying arts other than writing. These other arts are never quite the same as writing with their particularities of pleasures, crafts, meanings, and play—but they also teach me about writing, and they represent important parts of how I became the writer and teacher I have become.