

PREFACE

The teachers come to the Holiday Inn of Iowa City, Iowa in October 1985 for the fall conference of the Iowa Writers Project.¹ They pack the hotel ballroom and wait with anticipation for the talk to begin. Onstage, at the podium, with thinning white hair and large black glasses, Donald Murray fumbles with his lapel microphone until his voice booms out over the room's PA system. Sixty-one years old and two-years away from retirement, Murray has been riding circuit, spreading the gospel of "writing process" to packed rooms of teachers since the mid 1960s. "My folks started me out in life to be a boy evangelist," he once mused in a sabbatical report. "I rejected that to find myself becoming a sort of educational evangelist" (Murray Sabbatical Report 1970).

As the audience quiets down and settles in, Murray extends comments made during his introduction about his wife, Minnie Mae, who assists him in his writing. "I would not be a writer without her," he says. "And that's something that I think is important to mention." He then tells a story about how Minnie Mae once mailed out his manuscripts when he thought they were no good and soon they were accepted and published, thus launching his freelance career. "So I really do owe everything to her," Murray says. "She's my best friend and with my writing she's all involved in it."

After a minute or so more of introductory comments, Murray gets down to business. He explains that his talk will begin with a series of dramatic performances in which he will play the part of a typical English teacher and Jim Davis, the Iowa Project's director, will play the part of a student. Together, Murray explains, they will present three brief sketches of writing conferences in order to dramatize what Murray calls a response-approach to composition pedagogy. When the dramatic element of the talk is over, Murray says, he will speak for a few minutes longer and then take questions. Having finished his preliminary comments Murray invites Davis to the stage and they begin.

In the first conference, Murray and Davis make small talk until Davis mentions that he sometimes likes to write poetry. Murray jumps at this and asks if Davis will share one of his poems. Davis says he will, but before he can begin reading Murray says, "Before you read it, I'd like to know what you think of it." Davis shrugs disinterestedly and says he is mostly pleased with the poem. Then he reads. When he's done Murray explodes with enthusiasm. "Oh, I like that!" he erupts, heaping praise on Davis. Would he (Davis) be willing to

1 The scene I describe here is drawn from a video of Murray's actual talk at the Iowa Writer's Project on October 13, 1985. Thank you to Thomas Newkirk for sharing the video with me.

share more poems at their next meeting, Murray asks. Davis says yes and the conference ends.

In the second conference, Davis shares another poem, this one unfinished. “What do you like about it?” Murray asks when Davis has finished reading it. Davis fumbles an answer and Murray listens attentively. Davis then asks Murray what he thinks of the poem, but Murray sidesteps the question and shares a story about an experience like the one Davis described in the poem. Davis persists, though, pressing Murray for a response. Murray defers but asks if he can get back to Davis with some thoughts at their next conference. Davis agrees. “What do you intend to do with the poem next?” Murray asks as they wrap up. Davis confesses he’s unsure. “Do you mind if I mess with it a bit?” Murray says. Davis nods and the second conference ends.

In the third conference, Davis shares a final poem, one he has only just begun to write. When he’s done reading it he again asks for Murray’s impressions and this time Murray takes the bait. “In some of the conferences,” he says, weighing his words carefully, “you’re worried a little bit about whether people will understand you, but when we’re first writing I think we try to tell people how to feel or worry about their feelings too much. You can’t do that. You’ve got to just get right there and let me feel it and then see what happens. Follow your eye, follow your ear.” Davis nods, pauses, and then says, “How do you become a poet?” “I guess you write poetry,” Murray replies, not missing a beat, “which you’re already doing.” Davis smiles, thanks Murray, and says he will keep working. The third conference ends.

With the dramatic element of the program concluded, Davis returns to his seat and Murray takes his place at the podium once again. “What we’ve been doing here,” he begins, “is response-teaching.” He pauses a moment, takes a drink, and continues. “My preparation for this was my own writing this morning, and my writing other mornings, and my reading this morning. And some quiet time. And seeing some human beings. And being alive.” Here, Murray pauses and then he continues. “There’s no way I can prepare for a conference,” he says. “I don’t know what the students need to know. There is no content in the traditional sense. There’s nothing that I feel I have to tell people. There’s no absolute sequence of what they need. I take the student where the student is. Listen to the student. Listen to the text. Respond as a human being as best I can.”



By October 1985 Donald Murray had been evangelizing to ballrooms of teachers like the one in Iowa City for just over twenty years. Having spent a lifetime studying the testimony of published writers and the first half of his career as a working writer, Murray was, by the standard of the day, well-qualified to speak

on the topic of writing and its making. Having spent his Depression-era childhood and adolescence struggling to succeed in school and ultimately failing out, he was similarly qualified to speak on teaching and learning, education and schooling. During his second unanticipated career as a college English professor, Murray mobilized his curious ethos as a Pulitzer Prize-winning high school dropout to work to reform not just the teaching of writing in schools but schools *themselves*. No one was more surprised by this turn of events than Murray himself. “In a lifetime,” he writes in his memoir *My Twice-Lived Life*, “I moved from being one of the dumb kids sitting in the back row, to standing behind the teacher’s desk, to teaching teachers. I have, indeed, lived an unexpected life” (141).



Over the course of the decade or so that I have been at work on this project, investigating the unexpected life and work of one of composition and rhetoric’s earliest and most prolific founders, I have learned that Donald Murray’s personal backstory is at the center of his project of educational and disciplinary reform. Murray’s is a uniquely twentieth-century American tale of class uplift and bootstrapping—a story of a difficult and complicated childhood in a working-class family south of Boston; of a quest to escape isolation and alienation at home, in the classroom, and on the playground; and of a project to remake oneself in war, college, and the newsroom. And yet, while Murray’s early years were ones of struggle, his overall life story is one largely of triumph. After becoming the youngest person at the time to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1948, Murray went on to work at *Time* magazine and then on to a successful career as a freelance writer before joining the English Department at UNH at age 39 to teach journalism. At UNH, he quickly transitioned to a new career, advancing through the ranks to become a full professor in 1968. A few years later he served as director of Freshman English and then, briefly, as English Department chair. During his years as a faculty member Murray helped establish a journalism program, a master’s degree in teaching, and two doctoral programs in composition and literacy. He was awarded emeritus status upon his retirement in 1987. Beyond campus, in hotel ballrooms, conference halls, and in the pages of the field’s journals, Murray helped found a new academic discipline during the final quarter of the twentieth century and penned what would become one of the field’s founding documents, “Teach Writing as A Process Not Product.” He published fourteen books and textbooks and countless articles and essays about writing and teaching. Murray’s life and accomplishments are nothing short of astounding. Having spent years researching him it has been difficult not to conclude that he fit more into a single lifetime than most of us could ever dream of or imagine.



Of course, Murray was not perfect. He could be rigid and inflexible, was occasionally jealous or petulant, sometimes made bad decisions, and struggled to accept criticism, including from his students, who, as their course evaluations attest, sometimes felt that he failed to understand their need for more guidance and criticism and less support and enthusiasm. “I have never met another person who is more thin-skinned than I am,” Murray once wrote of himself, and yet, he was capable of growth and change (*A Writer Teaches Writing*, 2nd ed. 237). The charismatic, larger-than-life World War II veteran and newspaperman who regularly stood before hundreds of teachers to deliver the message that they needed to teach less and listen more spent much of his later life trying to recover from a childhood in which he felt he wasn’t listened to at all. Murray was, despite his status as a product of what Neil Lerner has called composition’s “star making machine” (217), very, very human—a father, a son, a husband, a colleague, a mentor, and a friend.

More than anything else, though, Murray was an obsessive, driven, ambitious striver of a man. The year of his talk in Iowa City he published an anthology for college students, *Read to Write*, for which he also wrote a 37,000-word instructor’s manual. He completed a revised edition of another textbook (i.e., *Write to Learn*). He published five essays in edited collections and placed articles in *College Composition and Communication*, *Rhetoric Review*, and the *Iowa English Bulletin*. Six of his already-published pieces, aimed at audiences from primary school teachers to college professors, were reprinted that year. In his capacity as a writing consultant/coach, Murray gave workshops for journalists and reporters that year at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, *The Providence Journal-Bulletin*, *USA Today*, and *Time*. Within composition and rhetoric, he was elected to the executive committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and served as the chair of a committee of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). He gave fifty-two invited talks, lectures, and addresses that year to audiences from Florida to Montreal, New York City to California. He met to discuss writing with executives at CBS Publishing in San Diego, college English professors in Seattle, telephone workers in Boston, journalists and editors in Washington, D.C., junior college instructors in Des Moines, schoolteachers in Pinellas County, Florida, and a freshman English class at an Air Force base near his home in the New Hampshire seacoast. And while it may seem hard to believe, Murray’s schedule for 1985 was not unusual or atypical. Virtually every year from the time he published *A Writer Teaches Writing* in 1968 until his retirement in 1987 (and beyond) Murray crisscrossed the country, spreading the good word about process pedagogy and

response teaching. As one of his students put it on a course evaluation at UNH, “The one major problem with [Murray] is that there’s only one of him. Everybody wants a piece—myself included—and I don’t know how he holds up under the strain. He’s like money—the more you get of him, the more you want.”

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Those in composition who are not familiar with Donald Murray or know little about him may see only the stereotype, the kindly, paternal “expressivist” whose ideas about writing and teaching sometimes seem outdated, antiquated—remnants of an earlier and bygone era in the field. As I will show, however, Murray was complex and multifaceted. He was

- a crusader on behalf of education’s marginalized—the daydreamers, the misunderstood, the inaccurately labeled, the square pegs who forever fail to fit into education’s round holes;
- an innovator whose outsider status in higher education allowed him to imagine and propose solutions to problems in the teaching and researching of writing that others failed to recognize or even understand;
- a collaborator who drew others, and especially those on the disciplinary margins of English, to his side to upend the status quo of the disciplinary applectart;
- a reformer who, despite his writerly accomplishments, deputized as Writer anyone and everyone who approached him to talk about the craft;
- an enemy of snobbery, elitism, arrogance, and privilege, all of which he found in too-great evidence in college English departments (including his own);
- a generous and supportive colleague whose exhaustive service to his institution went far beyond that of the typical college professor; and
- a poet who quietly published on his major themes (i.e., family and childhood, school and war, parenting and old age) throughout his career.

Most importantly and despite what you may have heard, Murray was a pragmatist, unattached to dogma, open to new evidence, arguments, and answers to the two questions that interested him most: what is writing and how should it be taught? “Too often,” he writes in a late reconsideration, “I have given the false impression that [when we write] we do one thing, then another, when in fact we do many things simultaneously” (“Response of a Lab Rat” 172). In this instance and in others like it, Murray modeled a scholar who is never fully formed, forever open to new information, always still in the process of becoming.



Despite attempts to categorize Murray in ways that have caused several generations of writing teachers and scholars to treat him with skepticism, at best, and an attitude of casual dismissal, at worst, Donald Murray has endured.² In composition and rhetoric his publications are still cited, although less frequently than they once were. Beyond the immediate borders of our field (and nation) we can find considerable evidence of the persistence of Murray's arguments and ideas in numerous areas of scholarship, including teacher education (Daniels and Beck; Graham; Kerbs; Pasternak et al.), pedagogies and theories of agency and empowerment (Young; Zugnoni), instructional strategies for revision (Coomber), adult learning pedagogies (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg), approaches and methods of conference teaching (Anderson), pedagogies of health/healing (Bird; Bird & Wanner), pedagogies of reflection (Zugnoni), and ESL/EFL instruction (Imelda et al.; Mayes). Many of those who draw on Murray's work today hail from regions far beyond our U.S. borders, with researchers and teachers from Japan (Coomber), Brazil (ÉBida), Indonesia (Imelda et al.), Saudi Arabia (Almutared), and Libya (Al Sabiri & Ersel Kaymakamoğlu) citing Murray's books and articles in their work.

Closer to home, in U.S. composition and rhetoric, Murray's writing still appears in key anthologies and collections used to socialize newcomers to the field (i.e., *CrossTalk*, *The Norton Guide to Composition Studies*) and is still cited by scholars working in various sub-areas including writing technology (Palmeri), history (Peary), and disciplinary identity formation (Combs). Many of Murray's books and textbooks are still in print and with the recent inclusion of various of his essays within curricula aimed at first-year students, his ideas now find currency among a new generation of young writers. A quick google search of certain of his titles included in Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle's textbook *Writing about Writing* reveals that college students are reading and writing about Murray a good deal these days, sharing their thoughts about his ideas and arguments in blog posts, on discussion forums, and in Prezi's. In all these ways, Murray lives on. Sixteen years after his death, thirty-plus years after his retirement from teaching, and fifty or more years after he published the "rallying cry" (McLeod 67) that inspired an entire generation of writing teachers and administrators to rethink their approach to composition pedagogy, Donald Murray still speaks to us about writing and its teaching if we are willing to listen.

This book is my attempt to help us do so.

² For readers unfamiliar with Murray's writing or wishing to get a fuller sense of it I suggest Thomas Newkirk and Lisa Miller's excellent edited collection, *The Essential Donald Murray: Lessons from America's Greatest Writing Teacher*.