

📅 40th Anniversary

# Breaking New Ground

## A Classroom Teacher's View of T&W

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"AND," OUR PRINCIPAL INTONED, "here's Phillip Lopate, from Teachers & Writers Collaborative." Looking up I saw a slim man, with a thick drooping mustache and long brown hair, slightly bookish-looking. I don't remember exactly what Phillip said, after all that was in the early '70s, but I still smile when I think of the slightly mocking, jocular tone he took with our principal, who usually evoked fear in most of us with his unpredictable outbursts of temper. That was my introduction to the most exciting staff development program in which I've ever been fortunate enough to engage.

T&W was not billed as a staff development program; it was a program earmarked for children. Writers, filmmakers, artists were going to flock to our school to nurture the creative abilities of all children. Teachers were to remain in the room to support the artist, and Phillip was to be the liaison between T&W and the school's teachers, parents, and children.

Who knew at that time where T&W's work with us at P.S. 75, on Manhattan's Upper West Side, would lead? Who knew that Phillip's creative energy would range from starting a ham radio station in the school, to putting on *West Side Story*? I don't think even he visualized what would happen at our school, where the program fostered revolutionary shifts in the way some of us thought about our work and inspired many of the children who participated to pursue careers in the arts.

But what I want to write about is the impact the program had on me, my development as a teacher, and the new paths I forged as a result of that collaboration.

"Writing," I thought, "I'd like my children to write better, perhaps Teachers & Writers can give me some pointers."

The first point of dissonance came while reading the "published" writing of second-graders, and being astounded at all the misspelled words. Some stories ended in incomplete sentences or simply rambled on and on. It seemed as if "they" accepted everything children wrote. How could "they" allow misspellings to occur, as well as all of the jumbled sentences? What in the world were "they" doing? What kind of writing teachers were *they* anyway?

Well, first off I was told they weren't writing teachers, not in the ordinary sense, anyway. They were artists, with a view towards what made writing exciting for

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write authentically meant that their voices needed to come through. He reassured me that in the beginning of this process, it was okay to allow some misspellings. If children stopped to ask for spelling words their train of thought was easily lost. That idea seems most logical now, but in the early 70s, it was transformational. Thinking about that, I reexamined the ways I taught spelling. Soon I left those abstract spelling lists behind and focused on the common words kids needed. I re-thought all the ways I expected children to write, and discovered how many blocks I inserted in the path between what children wanted to say and my “rules” about how they “should” say it.

From time to time I would watch Phillip at work. In one class he was reading a poem he termed a city poem, written by a city poet; poets who walked the city. These poems were written in the vernacular of the city, and their language was so readily available to children. Then he and the class talked about it, underlining the lines they liked, focusing their writing on the style of writing used by that particular poet. That made sense to me. Before long I was working with a book of poems about the city, and used them to model writing for my class of fifth- and sixth-graders. I asked them to write about the city they knew and we brainstormed possible ideas. The kids challenged me to write as well and that became the standard; everyone wrote!

We read and talked about what we liked in each other’s poems. We began to compare styles, looked at different ways of saying the same thing, experimented with words we hardly knew the meaning of, but liked how they sounded. I began to notice an interesting phenomenon during our writing time. If we had a full discussion about the piece of writing I read to the class, and then really looked at the mechanics of writing—how that particular author crafted this piece—and modeled our writing on that author, then the class’ writing became rich and interesting. When I didn’t, only the more gifted writers in the class “got” how that particular writer wrote. Incorporating discussion of style, word usage, sentence structure, and the overall meaning of the piece resulted in more children being able to join the class’ group of writers. It was the discussion and modeling that helped most of the children with their writing abilities, and established a common framework of understanding.

I was the kind of teacher who planned down to the very last minute of the day. In that way I exercised teacher control. Slowly, I learned to be spontaneous. If children were writing and needed more time, I went with that. In doing so, I began to see my students’ individual strengths emerge, and learned who needed more support, who needed to know something more about grammar or sentence structure. Lessons—I called them “nuts and bolts”—were built around their writing. I reasoned that it made no sense to slavishly follow a language arts text, so I adapted it as a resource and pulled out the lessons kids needed at that time. I didn’t know I was helping them to “learn in context,” it just made sense to me.


adults as well as for children. They had some ideas about that, which were novel, to say the least; considering the time, ground-breaking would be more like it.

Phillip was very kind in his explanation about the ways he worked with children. He reasoned that getting children to

My development as a teacher happened organically, evolving according to need, and it mirrored the kids' process. We were all learners in that classroom, and that's what made it so exciting. In reforming my preconceived notions about kids' writing, I re-thought the way I taught. Slowly, the classroom evolved to become child-centered, and many of the class' work projects grew from their interests. Their writing was everywhere! They developed comic books and storyboards, illustrated story books, wrote short stories, poetry, diaries, and journals. And through it all, I was rediscovering my own interest in writing.

Phillip offered to run a workshop for parents and teachers after school on Monday nights. We wrote together in much the same way he worked with kids. Our combined stories and poems were published by T&W in a book called *Monday Nights*. Participating in those workshops sensitized me to the writer's process, and put me in a deeper empathetic relationship with the children I taught.

Connecting children to their own creativity, allowing them the space and time to develop, and giving them the needed discipline to see it through were probably the most important lessons I learned from this experience.

When I left P.S. 75 to become a school director, these lessons gave me a sense of mission. I knew I wanted kids and teachers to work side by side with gifted artists, and I wanted teachers to collaborate in that dynamic learning process. I understood that to support the learning of children, and to help them achieve a measure of success, required finding that spark, that interest, and building on that. And oh, the surprises that blazed forth from those encounters were so wonderfully life-affirming! 

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